# MY APPRENTICESHIP TO CRIME

An
Autobiography

-by-

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CHAPTER 11.

D.D.I. Frederick Wensley.

Victor Hugo, the great French writer, wrote the story of Jean Valjean, ex-convict. The book was called Les Miserables. The two chief characters in the story are Jean Valjean, the ex-convict, who tried to become a worthy citizen, and police inspector Javert, who considered it to be his duty to send Jean Valjean back to prison and in pursuit of this object used every trick however illegal and wicked to accomplish this purpose.

The East End of London seemed to be a magnet attracting the C.I.D. officers, none wanted to be transferred to other divisions when they received promotion; so it was with The Weasel. He spent most of his 42 years in the police division known as H, which covered Shadwell, Wapping, The Highway, Whitechapel, Bethnal Green and Spitalfields. His H.Q. was at Leman Street, Whitechapel. In this small police station in the centre of his manor, D.D.I. Wensley was lord and master of all under his command.

Although it was customary for all officers to be transferred to another division or station on being promoted, F. Wensley was able through the influence of the A.C. of Police, with whom he was on friendly terms, to avoid transfer to another division. So he was able to remain at Leman Street station right through all the different ranks of the service, which I believe was a police record only equalled by his friend and colleague, Detective Sergeant Jack Stevens, known to the underworld as "Jew Boy", who also remained at Commercial Street all his service.

D.D.I. Fred. Wensley disliked me intensely and I reciprocated his feeling. I had made a complaint against him for threats which he strongly denied. I considered him a vain, bullying type of detective.

The story of his arrest of a notorious murderer single-handed was just imagination by the fiction writers. Fred Wensley was a P.C. at Leman Street at the time in question. The murderer who afterwards was hanged, threw himself from the roof of a building, in front of a large crowd of people. The murderer, who was named Seaman, was severaly injured and Wensley was one of the constables who wheeled the stretcher to the London Hospital.

Some thirty years after the events I am about to relate, he wrote a book, Detective Days. Writing of me, he wrote:

"He was a young man of great cunning and astuteness who had picked up a considerable knowledge of loopholes in the law, that had on more than one occasion been of service to him. I resolved to teach him a lesson. He had some years before made a complaint of police persecution and had even appeared before a Royal Commission on the Metropolitan Police."

In 1969, as in 1909, Bethnal Green Road is a part of the vast Sunday morning market called Club Row, where you can buy a canary or even a monkey. There is a dog market, a bird market, a bicycle market. In fact you could find anything you wanted in one of the market streets.

One day I received a warrning that the police were watching my house day and night.

This information did not disturb me, so a few days passed and then I became aware I was being followed wherever I went. One Saturday morning, I was doing some business with a firm in Finsbury when I saw Det. Sgt. Stevens, "Jew Boy", taking notes outside the firm's premises. I lost my temper and told him I would apply for a summons against him for molestation.

After my encounter with Det. Sgt. Stevens, the day before in Finsbury, I went out on the Sunday morning at 10 a.m. to meet my friends at Clarks coffee shop in Brick Lane. On leaving my home in Gibraltar Gardens, I noticed my old friend Det. Sgt. Stevens and another C.I.D. aide; they were standing

in a doorway. I did not take any notice of them because on a Sunday morning it was usual to see a large number of plain clothes police mixing with the crowds in the markets, looking for pickpockets, of whom there were always a fair number.

After leaving my home, I made my way to Brick Lane, some 200 yards away. I walked down the lane to Clarks coffee shop, a distance of some 300 yards; when I reached the corner of Hare Street, opposite Clarks, there was a sudden rush and I was seized by a complete stranger. I was on the point of throwing him to the ground when he said, "Don't start anything, you'll be sorry for, I'm a police officer. I'm arresting you as a suspected person attempting to pick pockets." I then noticed in the crowd "Jew Boy" Stevens, and his pal, and several other plain clothes men.

Some of my friends had run across from Clarks and were waiting for me to have a go. I looked at the man who had arrested me, he was fairly big, but he did not look too good in regard to his health and I decided to go quietly to the station without any trouble.

I was charged as a suspected person, attempting to pick pockets. The man was a police officer from Leman Street, and was D.D.I. Fred. Wensley's sergeant who was always in his company.

The remarkable thing about this arrest was that Sgt. Stevens did not come into the station as a witness.

Now one of the most difficult charges to refute is that of suspected person, even if the person charged is of good character. Every known thief is a suspected person and every policeman knows that a convicted person is easy target for a suspected person charge. It must be remembered I was some six or seven hundred yards from my home, that I was known to hundreds of housewives who were shopping in the market, that the market traders had known me for many years.

I appeared at Old Street police court, was remanded for a week, no bail. The following week I was charged under the Prevention of Crimes Act, penalty under "the act", 12 months H.L.

What I write now, sixty years after, with nothing to gain or lose, with the end of the journey in sight, is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. All the actors in this disgraceful episode have gone to be judged for their deeds. So be it; may they be judged.

This charge was fabricated against me. When I left home on that Sunday morning, I walked through Brick Lane where I was known to every tradesman, every stall keeper and to most of the people doing their Sunday morning shopping. I was born and bred among them. Every Sunday morning for years I had walked through the lane to Clarks coffee shop to meet my friends, the police knew this, so did D.D.I. F. Wensley, because it was given in evidence at the hearing of The Tribunal by

several witnesses.

So this lieutenant of The Weasel happened by chance to be waiting at the very spot where I would pass on that Sunday morning, and by chance at the same time and place a number of C.I.D. aides happen to be there. So I pick pockets on this Sunday morning. If I had been guilty of such foolish behaviour I should have been sent to a mental asylum not prison. Let me repeat a quotation from the book Detective Days by Wensley thirty years after. "I resolved to teach him a lesson."

Under "The Prevention of Crimes Act" of that period, it was only necessary to prove the defendant had been convicted twice on indictment. (The two indictments were 1902 stealing a sack of rags to the value of 18/-, and 1903 stealing a metal watch value 10/-). If the defendant was found in a public place without lawful excuse, the court had no alternative but to convict and sentence to 12 months, under the Act.

This Act has now become obsolete.

The police officer involved in this case was promoted to the rank of Detective Inspector. A short time after his promotion, he fell dead outside Leman Street station.

The years have passed and the utter falsity of the charge has been proved. The authors of the plan have long since passed away, but no person can be guilty of a crime to send another to prison on a perjured charge without his own conscience accusing

him. The perjurer has to live with the knowledge of how evil he is, he cannot escape from himself.

When I left "The Ville" after serving my sentence of 12 months, I was advised to go to sea. The Borstal association sent me to Cardiff on a Monday morning to find a berth on any ship. My fare was paid to Cardiff.

On arrival, I went to a house in the Tiger Bay area. I went to a house to stay until arrangements were completed for my departure from England. The house was a large boarding house of several rooms, where you could get bed and breakfast for 2/6d. Resident in the house were a number of Borstal boys who were waiting for a ship. The place was run by a man and his wife, and it was obvious that whatever ship you sailed on, the captain and crew would know you were a jailbird or Borstal boy.

The boarding house keeper received pay from the Borstal authorities or association, he also received the first three months pay in advance of the boy who went to dea. So it was a very profitable trade for the boarding house keeper. All this did not appeal to me. I could see the racket that was carried on, and I wanted no part of it.

So on the Tuesday morning, I set sail from Cardiff to London; all I had in cash was under five shillings. I was some 23 years old and fit enough to walk to London.

On the first day I reached Chepstow at about 8 p.m., having walked some thirty miles or more; being tired and hungry, I sat on a park seat in the market place and fell asleep. I was awakened by a policeman. I told him my story, and after visiting the police station and writing home for money, the police provided me with food and lodging for the night at their expense. The police also communicated with my family.

My treatment by the police at Chepstow was so kind and generous in spite of the fact that I had told them the truth about myself and why I went to Cardiff, so they helped me all they could.

I continued walking home to London, which I reached on Saturday night having received many acts of kindness, such as gifts of food from many persons on the road back to London.

Thus ended my first and last attempt to leave England and escape the fate that destiny had ordained. One may ask if I was a pickpocket, why I did not go into the market places in Cardiff and steal a few purses to get some money to pay my fare home? The answer is I was not a pickpocket and could not steal a purse from anyone.

1910. King Edward VII died in May. The Liberals were the Government. Two general elections this year. Mr. Asquith succeeded Sir H. Campbell Bannerman, as Prime Minister, in 1908. In 1909, the Old Age Pensions Act had been passed, giving old

age pensions to persons of 70 years a pension of 5/- per week. There was no pension if the claimant had an income or over 10/- a week or was a person of bad character. Let him starve or steal.

Any poor person with an income of under 10/- a week who had reached the age of 70 in 1909 must have been so rare to excite the curiosity of all social workers. My family were still living in the Gardens. Unemployment was still widespread. After the slum clearance of "The Nichol", nothing was done to find employment for the youth of Bethnal Green. The young lads who had left school were compelled to idle their days on the streets, and who would inevitably swell the prison population.

The young men I associated with had found casual employment in the docks, Spitalfields market and the other meat and fish markets. Many had married and had families. The young lads who had left school or reformatories had become Dead End Kids of Brick Lane, ready to begin their apprenticeship to crime. Unknown to the many thousands of boys, their names would not be recorded on the files of the Criminal Record Office, but on the War Office casualties lists and the War Graves Commission.

In my home, conditions had changed for the better. My eldest sister Harriet had done well with her business, which now included a money lending office. The family had now taken a

second house in the Gardens. But the best news for me was that Mother had ceased to be a habitual drunkard. We were all thankful for that mercy.

Speaking of Edward Spencer, the young man who was released with me from the "Scrubs" on the 18th January, 1903, he had become a lodger in No. 5, Gibraltar Gardens, where I lived with my mother. He was still a pickpocket and had served a term of four years for stealing a wallet.

I had been greatly disturbed mentally by the twelve months under The Prevention of Crimes Act. I had become more vicious in my behaviour. People avoided me like the plague. The police began to give me a wide berth. I started to beat up many of the villains who were regarded as "terrors".

Of the old gang, most had left the district. My special friend, Tommy, had a wide knowledge of the aliens who were bullies of the worst description who frequented the many gambling joints that existed along the Commercial Road area. In this area, there was more villainy to the square mile than in the West End.

My friend, Tommy, knew everything that was going on, so we cashed in on some of the rackets.

My reputation as a villain had become known far and wide in the underworld of London, and I was allowed to get away with it.

There were five of us working together; what was remarkable about this business was that none of the others had been in prison. When we raided a club, we were all armed; all had orders not to use any weapons unless we were attacked. When we made a raid on an alien club, we made everyone stand up, then we would take the banker's bank which was always in a box. None of the patrons were ever interfered with.

Soon the big time gamblers began to stay away from the spielers through personal fears of a shooting match. I always wondered what would happen if some of the aliens had started a fight.

In 1910, the police were alerted to a number of Russian refugees, most of whom were from Bessarabia or one of the Russian states. The Special Branch at Scotland Yard regarded them as anarchists, political refugees.

The first warning of the danger in our midst came from Tottenham, North London. Two Russian anarchists snatched a bank satchel containing some £80 and in the attempt to capture them some twenty people were shot, four fatally, including a policeman and a child of ten years, also the two gunmen who were killed.

The police failed to take the necessary steps to prevent a further occurrence of the use of armed violence in resisting the law. This outrage should have warned the police of the desperadoes in our midst who were masquerading as political refugees.

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