

MY APPRENTICESHIP TO CRIME

An
(To the memory of my
Autobiography

Grace Maria Treadwell.

-by-

ARTHUR HARDING

being armed in a court of law.

So, about 2.30 p.m. on that Saturday afternoon in December, 1911, exactly a year after the shootings in Houndsditch, we eight men were taken from the Old Bailey, which had been

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specially opened to receive the case to Wormwood Scrubs prison to serve the first part of our sentence.

So after the long months of waiting the ordeal was over; Those of you who have read the earlier pages will remember when I was released from Wormwood Scrubs prison in 1903, will remember the man named Spencer who was released from prison at the same time. And as the years rolled by, he came to live at my home in Gibraltar Gardens and between speels of a very dangerous man, the others scared of me, etc. The Judge agreed with their description of me. They were right or wrong. I was twenty-five years old and I would be getting on for thirty when I finished my sentence. I had no illusions about the others. The Judge and D.D.I. F. Wensley had publicly stated I was the leader, live at my home in Gibraltar Gardens and between speels of prison he would always return.

One night in company with Spencer and others we walked into a City pub in Bishopsgate, which was frequented by all the riff-raff of Aldgate and Whitechapel. We got involved in a brawl with several aliens who had a very bad reputation. Several were injured, resulting in hospital treatment.

This brawl led to a series of affrays in which guns were used and men shot. D.D.I. F. Wensley took charge and we were arrested and charged with several wounding charges. After prolonged court hearings, eight of my friends including myself were committed for trial at the Central Criminal Court. Eventually all of us were convicted and sentenced to terms of penal servitude. My share was nearly five years, 21 months for

being armed in a court of law.

So, about 2.30 p.m. on that Saturday afternoon in December, 1911, exactly a year after the shootings in Roundsditch, we eight men were taken from the Old Bailey, which had been specially opened to finish the case to Wormwood Scrubs prison to serve the first part of our sentence.

So after the long months of waiting the ordeal was over; we all knew what was before us. I was twenty-five years old and I would be getting on for thirty when I finished my sentence. I had no illusions about the others. The Judge and D.D.I. F. Wensley had publicly stated I was the leader, a very dangerous man, the others scared of me, etc. The Judge agreed with their description of me. They were right or one thing I am sure of, if one of the aliens had died, nothing would have saved me from the condemned cell, so I counted my blessings and stopped being sorry for myself.

The prison system was the same as 1902, nothing was different. In ten years there was no improvement. Hard fare, hard board, hard work, all these factors had made hard villains who would live hard lives.

After seventeen and a half months I was transferred to another hall where I was located among the convicts serving their separate confinement for the first few months. Now I was a convict serving a sentence of penal servitude; it was

a part of the punishment to crop the head like I first saw system in Borstall in 1903. Commissioners were years behind the times. They In ten years, I had made the grade. This was 1913; it was fitting that some ten years or more ago I had entered this prison a boy of fifteen years. Yes, I had learnt my lessons well, now I was a man. I had graduated with honours to the ranks of an old lag in a convict prison. I trust the police were proud of their work. The prison system had justified itself, they had made me a villain capable of doing some hard things. To this end did Dr. Barnardo rescue me from the evil of the London streets. While I was waiting to be sent to some convict prison, much to my surprise I was kept separated from the other convicts who were old offenders. The Governor had ordered that I was not to mix with the other convicts but kept apart. Some time in May, 1913, with some twelve other men I left Wormwood Scrubs prison for Portland convict prison. I know now that I was saying goodbye to this prison forever. I spent nearly two and a half years of my early life in this prison and I can honestly say I never saw any act of brutality or any calculated cruelty practised against any prisoner in this prison. There were many things that could have been abolished, many improvements that could have been made, but

the staff who ran the prison were not responsible for the system.

The Prison Commissioners were years behind the times. They were ex-Army and Navy officers selected for their permitted disciplinary code and family influence, not for their progressive ideas.

The men who made up the first draft of convicts had been collected from different prisons and assembled at Wormwood Scrubs to make the number up. We were a motley collection of sinners, who had been round out, nothing unusual to distinguish any of them from any ordinary group of men of the same social status, some had been to Portland before, some to Dartmoor, but none had been to Parkhurst because Parkhurst was reserved for special cases of mental instability, health reasons, Jews and elderly convicts.

In a way, the four convict prisons were classified for certain purposes: Maidstone in Kent for Star offenders, Portland for recidivists of good physique, and intermediates who could be reformed, Dartmoor for the recidivists over thirty years of age, who had no prospects of reformation. May I say, the authorities were not always right in their classification.

The escort reached Waterloo Station. We were marched through the crowded station with all eyes upon us. The ladies seemed to shrink with aversion as if we were lepers, as indeed we were, social lepers, going away to be cleansed of our ills.

A special compartment had been reserved for our party. We were all chained together by a long chain. Three warders made up our escort. It was a nice sunny day and we were permitted to talk. We had a pleasant journey down to Weymouth, then we travelled up to Portland which we reached about 4 p.m.

Portland Convict Prison, 1913.

The penal servitude Act 1857 had established Portland as a convict prison for the construction work in dockyard. The great mole of Portland Harbour was built entirely by convicts, the stone being quarried from the stone quarries where the convicts worked.

When we arrived at the prison we were taken at once to the separate cells, which was the reception centre for new arrivals. Here in this block of cells all men are located on reception and on the day of their release. On arrival each prisoner changes into the convict garb or uniform of the new prison. He is interviewed for working party, medically examined and appears before the Governor to see if he is the man he is supposed to be. To my surprise, I found that I was classed as an intermediate. The clothes we were to wear were decorated with red stripes on sleeves and cap, denoting that I was to be kept apart from the recidivists. I was to work in the carpenter's shop, so after careful consideration the authorities