MY APPRENTICESHIP TO CRIME

An
Autobiography

-by-

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CHAPTER 19.

Release, September 1920.

In April 1920, I arrived home again after some four years' absence. I was nearly thirty-four years of age, in good health and appearance.

When I reported at Scotland Yard on the day of my release, the Inspector said to me, "When I saw you come through the door I thought you had come to the wrong department. I took you for a recruit for the 'Black and Tans' In Ireland." When I left the Yard, I wondered whether it was ordained I should have more surprises, more years taken away from me.

I wondered whether this was the end of the last twenty years of fighting and trying to outsmart the police. The hatred of the police was concentrated only against those C.I.D. of H Division who had been prominent since 1902 in hounding me. My hatred was generated by the sentence of 1902.

I went back to Gibraltar Gardens, my family had prospered. Mother was running a stall for second-hand clothing. On the home front I had everything to be thankful for.

At Commercial Street police station the old C.I.D. men had

retired, except for "Jew Boy" who still lived in the Bethnal Green Road. He had been promoted to Det. Sgt. Stevens. My enemy F. Wensley had moved up to the rank of Chief Constable at Scotland Yard, and was in charge of the C.I.D. His absence from the division caused me a sigh of relief, somehow I would feel safer. All my old friends had left Brick Lane and Bethnal Green, so the old haunts would know me no more.

I fitted up a workshop at No. 3 Gibraltar Gardens, bought myself a set of tools and started to make work that I could sell, such as food safes, kitchen tables, dressers, etc. When I left Parkhurst after 4 years and 3 months, I was given a gratuity of ten shillings. Most of the time I had worked as a skilled carpenter doing work in the officers' quarters and in Scotland on a seaplane station. For all this work I received the princely sum of ten shillings.

While I was working as a cabinet maker I would be visited by Det.Sgt. J. Stevens who was the police officer in charge of my supervision. Every month I would walk into Commercial Street station and report to the officer in charge.

My old friend Spencer had been demobbed from the army and he and his mob of pickpockets were still at work, robbing people of their wallets. He had never returned to my mother's house after my conviction. The money belonging to him had been invested in War Loan for me, some £80, so what with the money

my sister had put away for me, I had no need to worry. In 1920 there was a great deal of unemployment about. We had still a long road to travel before this country of ours would become a land fit for heroes to live in, like they had promised during the war.

For my friends, I began to associate with some younger men who were customers at the same pub as I patronised. They were just working fellows without any police record. The pub we used was a few yards from Gibraltar Gardens; at weekends we would have a pub crawl up the West End. So we had been going out every weekend some four or five of us, and we had never had any trouble.

Then one fateful Saturday night it happened we were walking along Holborn; we had missed the last bus home, No. 8. Outside Gamages, there stood an empty taxi cab unattended. We looked for the driver but could not find him; one of the fellows tried to start the taxi but could not, then a man walked up and said, "What are you doing interfering with the taxi?" One of the fellows named Benny said to the stranger, "What's it to you? Mind your own business." He then hit the stranger, who blew a police whistle, and four of us were arrested because the man was a plain clothes policeman.

I being the oldest and having a police record, and the man who struck the police, were found guilty of assault and

sentenced to three months imprisonment; the other two were discharged. I was sent back to serve my unexpired ticket of leave. I was convicted because I was the only one with a police record.

I was sent to Dartmoor to finish my ticket. Before I left Dartmoor I had the pleasure of reporting a warder for persistent bullying of convicts, and also for threatening words and behaviour, so I was taken off his landing and he left me alone.

In 1923 I was released from Dartmoor for the last time, to start life afresh at thirty-six years. When I said goodbye to prison life for ever.

It was to prove the end of the long road that I had been travelling since 4th March, 1902, when P.C. 381, or give him his proper rank, Detective Sergeant Jack Stevens, C.I.D., and the law, first started me on the road that had led me to the finishing post more than twenty years later, that had stolen my youth and early manhood.

If I have learned nothing from the journey, then there was no hope for me. My life would have been in vain. I had made up my mind that good resolutions were not enough, I must have something or somebody to fight for, and what better cause can any man want than a wife and family to cherish and care for?

So I left Dartmoor with the firm determination to find myself a wife and to build a home and family.

A strange encounter took place on my journey back to London. I was wearing the same clothes I wore a year before, when I travelled down to Plymouth on the Cornish Express, only at that time I was wearing chains on my arms and was guarded by warders. The clothes I wore on that occasion were a black jacket and vest, striped trousers and black Homburg hat.

I was sitting in the carriage reading the morning paper when the guard passed through collecting tickets. The guard came into the compartment and I gave him my ticket. Now, I am not sure whether the train ticket had been given me at Princetown, but I had been given it at the prison. The guard looked at the ticket, then he got into conversation with me.

He remarked that he had seen me before and I knew he had been the guard on the train when I went back to the "Moor" a year earlier. Soon I knew he had recognised me and we were discussing the prison system and its deterrent effects on the men sent to prison.

He was a good man and wanted to help me, but I told him that I was not in need of money, so the journey back to sanity seemed to get off to a good start.

In 1923, there was a new spirit in the courts concerning the treatment of crime and criminals.

At Old Street Court in the East End presided over by a magistrate named Mr. Clarke Hall, who was the antithesis of the old Victorian magistrates. Mr. Clarke Hall was a magistrate whose memory will have lived long in the hearts of young offenders.