

MY APPRENTICESHIP TO CRIME

An
To the Memory of my
Autobiography

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-by-

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hunger strikers on the roads making their way to London. In the London streets groups of miners from Wales sang their songs for pennies to avert starvation. They did not appeal in vain to the generous East Enders, although the London Boroughs had thousands on the CHAPTER 23.

This be The Gold Rush in England. In the thirties, I decided that people did not have the money to buy second-hand clothes. This new gold rush had started when we were forced off the Gold Standard. But instead of travelling thousands of miles to find it, the new Klondike was on our own doorstep. We had only to travel to the towns and villages of our own country, or even to the poverty-stricken streets of all great cities, to find we had the precious metal hidden away in old chests of drawers and old jewel boxes, in which we had kept our treasures in more prosperous times.

The hungry thirties were for most working class people disastrous years. Unemployment was rife, people were forced to economise by economic pressure to draw out their savings and to sell their possessions to obtain the wherewithal to live.

Gold had doubled in value and it was possible to get as much as two pounds for a sovereign in 1933. Soon after this date the price rose to much more than this, so people began to look out their old trinkets to raise money for necessities.

During this period it was a common sight to see hundreds of

hunger strikers on the roads making their way to London. In at the door, a little sort persuading and the people were the London streets groups of miners from Wales sang their glad to sell their old ornaments. The remarkable thing was songs for pennies to avert starvation. They did not appeal in that old Victorian jewellery was far more valuable than the modern stuff of the 1930s. Ladies' watches which hung on a had thousands on the dole.

This being the state of things in the thirties, I decided that people did not have the money to buy second-hand clothes. It would be more profitable to buy old gold and silver instead of clothes.

I travelled to many towns and villages in Devon and Cornwall and the rest of the West Country. I was a good judge of the value of jewellery. I carried the necessary scales to weigh any article of gold.

It was a great surprise to me when I began to realise that nearly every house had broken pieces of jewellery such as rings, watches, chains and brooches. Nearly all the old trinkets were worth money.

In the First World War 1914-1918, the workers in the munitions factories were earning big wages. They spent large sums of money on jewellery such as heavy gold chains, bracelets, rings and wrist watches, etc. All this old stuff was lying about in old boxes or drawers considered by their owners to be of little value.

So you can understand that when the old gold man called

at the door, a little soft persuading and the people were glad to sell their old ornaments. The remarkable thing was that old Victorian jewellery was far more valuable than the modern stuff of the 1930s. Ladies' watches which hung on a long chain round the neck or fastened on the dress were all of 18-carat gold, while the modern wrist watch of the war period was cheap 9-carat gold.

This business was very profitable and I soon had moved to an eastern suburb of London, where I rented a flat until I found a house. It was a nice flat and we were very happy. We had a bathroom and constant hot water, and everything we could have wished. It was good to be away from Bethnal Green. The people were very select and we had dreams of good schools for the children and a brighter future for all of us.

The year was 1934; I was nearly 48 years old and everything was going well. My family had increased to five. It was nearly twelve years since I left the dreaded prison of Dartmoor and I had learned how to live like a decent man.

I had been travelling all over the country buying old gold and silver. I could see and hear from the ordinary people that things were getting worse. The great economic depression had caused a good deal of unemployment all over the North and Midlands.

The men at Commercial Street station were nearly all new men.

Most of the old C.I.D. had retired, so I expected to be forgotten by the present C.I.D. men. I was wrong. C.R.O. sees to that. The Criminal Record Office keeps an observant eye on all ex-convicts.

When canvassing a district for the purpose of buying old gold, I always employed a man to put circulars in the houses. The circulars had my name and address, also my business address - No. 3 Gibraltar Gardens, Bethnal Green. On the circulars were the words "Licensed Dealer". These circulars were enclosed in envelopes and informed the householder why we were calling. The circulars would give the people time to rake out all the old trinkets, even the old candlesticks. The man I employed was of very good character, he had never been in trouble with the police or the law.

Today, thirty-four years after the events I am about to relate, this man can still proudly claim he has never been convicted for any offence, not even for parking, 1969.

On the day in question, a lovely August morning, we were canvassing an eastern suburb, good class houses and people; trade was fairly good. I had purchased a fair amount of jewellery and some sovereigns and half-sovereigns from the wife of a solicitor. About 2 p.m. I decided we had worked long enough, the weather being fine we decided to have a rest on the common. The grass was very tempting so we both stretched out on the green carpet. I suppose we had lain there, pointing to the houses we had been working, for thirty minutes, when my friend said, "Something is over there," pointing to the houses we had been working. I stood up and could see some uniform police officers looking towards us. I explained my business and showed him some of the jewellery we had bought. The sergeant was perfectly satisfied and went on his way. I decided to go home so we followed behind the bus to Wanstead, a detective got on the bus and asked us to get off. We did. At the side of the road was a police car. The detective constable did all the questioning. He took no part in the proceeding. The driver was operator using the horse code. The car was a police car and belonged to Hackney.

out on the green carpet. I suppose we had lain there some thirty minutes, when my friend said, "Something is doing over there," pointing to the houses we had been working.

I stood up and could see some uniform police; while we were looking a police sergeant came towards us and asked how long we had been there. We told him. He then asked what we were doing there. I explained my business, gave him a circular and showed him some of the jewellery we had bought, also my case with some broken silver, etc.

The sergeant was perfectly satisfied and went away. I decided to go home so we followed behind the police to the main road. At the bus stop we got on a bus to take us to Leytonstone. When the bus stopped at "The George", Wanstead, a detective got on the bus and asked us to get off, which we did. At the side of the road was a police car. We were asked what we were doing in the district. We gave the same account of our business and showed the contents of the attache case.

One detective constable did all the questioning; he was one of the C.I.D. aides; we will call him G. The second policeman in the car was a police sergeant wearing plain clothes; he took no part in the proceedings. The car had a driver and a wireless operator using the morse code. This was one of the first prowls cars and belonged to Hackney.