

TALES FROM WITHIN THE WALLS

Limpy, after many years spent behind the prison walls, was something of a philosopher and, although not in the same league as Lord Russell, made many interesting observations on the behaviour of the unfortunates with whom he had associated in that grim place, especially when ^{he} had downed a few at the expense of his listeners.

On entering my favorite pub one day I found him at the bar, gazing ^{sadly} into an empty glass, but his eyes lit up when he saw me, and the glass was pushed in my direction invitingly. I did the right thing, for my friend was always ready with a yarn, and today was no exception.

"Yer meets a lotter different sorts of blokes in clink, yer know. Some shrewdies, who throw their weight about, especially them doin' long stretches, but mostly ordinry jokers, like me, who ain't got much nanny. And the life made a lot of men a bit queer. Did I ever tell yer about Billy Matthews? 'E finished up real queer". His glass came across again and I gave the barman the nod.

It was a run of bad luck for No. 23, who was Billy. (Limpy's gaol slang has been translated.) He and his brother got two years each for horse-stealing and the brother, who had T.B., had been sent to the gaol hospital, from where he sent word to 23 that he wanted a "chew" of tobacco.

~~Ma~~ Billy was in the paint-shop, which looked out on the back gate of the hospital, so, after "muster", he dextrously avoided the eye of Warder Lanigan and slipped a quarter slug under the hospital gate, knowing that one of the consumptive's pals would be waiting for it. This done he cheerfully went about his business unaware that the eagle eye of Warder O'Shea on the balcony of the workshop, overlooking the hospital gate, had seen his move. Billy was promptly locked up, to await the arrival of the visiting "beak".

The spirit of generosity was promptly stangled in gaol in those days, said Limpy, for a prisoner caught in the act of distributing any surplus "indulgences" (1½oz of tobacco, 4oz tea and 1lb of brown sugar, which he received weekly after serving twelve months) was placed in lock-up cells and charged with "Trafficking". The fact that the donor ^{re}ceived no reward for his gift did nothing to invalidate the charge, for philanthropy is a crime, punishable under a special rule.

Billy was a moody sort of bloke and thought a bit queer on occasions by some of his companions. This was an occasion when he had every right to feel a bit queer, for on the day prior to his trial on a charge of breach of prison discipline,

all the poultry belonging to the visiting magistrate had been stolen, and it was a very sour "beak" who sentenced No. 23 to seven days "dark cells" -- and dark they were, as black as pitch.

Some time previously to Billy's trouble, a medical student, doing a stretch at the same gaol, had promulgated a theory that occupation for the mind during dark cell treatment, could always be obtained by tossing a button into the inky darkness and then getting down on all-fours and searching for it. The idea had served to preserve the mental balance of many doomed to serve in the black hole.

Billy had met some of those who had tried it, so he removed a button from his trousers and thus spent many hours busily employed in ~~the~~ retrieving the small bone object. For six days the button was tossed in the air hundreds of times and found, the hunter joyfully searching across the stone cell floor on hands and knees.

On the morning of the seventh day, again the button was thrown into the air but this time No. 23 did not hear it return. Fifty times he felt over every inch of the cold floor, and fifty times he found nothing.

Now, imagination lies in the pit of the stomach, and dry bread and cold water are hardly a sufficient weight to put upon it, so Billy began to think things. He rushed at the cell door and kicked again and again, but two doors were between him and the nearest sleepy warder, so no good resulted.

Then someone laughed in the corner of the dark cell, and all was up. No 23 shrieked, kicked at the door and upset the water pot; the waves of curse-encrusted darkness welled up from the corners and smothered him. Invisible hands, clammy with horror-sweat, grasped at his throat and choked him. When the sleepy warder called him into the corridor for the Governor's inspection, it was too late.

Months afterwards, when an enlightened prison official suggested the abolition of dark cells as a punishment, and they were converted into ordinary cells, a workman found a trousers button securely entangled in a festoon of cobwebs against the ceiling of No. 23's cell.

In the criminal ward of a nearby lunatic asylum, Billy still searched for that button, *but the poor fellow never found it, said Limpy.*

"Are yer interested in the gee-gees" ^{he} asked, ~~Limpy~~, after he had polished off his glass and pushed it over for a re-fill. "A wek-end TAB double is my only interest nowadays", I replied, as I slid two twenties across the bar for the re-fills.

"Well, if yer'd bin inside with me when Sweet Nell won the Cup, yer'd 'ave seen some bettin' when the Long Un run a book on it and it finished in a decent sort er blue. Like ter 'ear about it?". Limpy started off his tale before I could reply, and again I translate his prison jargon for the reader.

The Long Un had a praving for tobacco, but as he hadn't done his first twelve months he wasn't entitled to a week's supply like others were, and so he decided to run a book on the Cup.

"The Rajah", who had just come ⁱⁿ for a second term, provided the betting list which he had heard outside, and there were many plunges. Soon the amount of tobacco wagered in plugs and half plunges was so great that the Long Un had to find a safe plant and he decided on the blacksmith's bellows as the safest place to defeat the marauding tactics of the warders, who were always on the look-out for "cotrⁿaband" weed.

The boogie's entries were made on small pieces of paper with the sharpened end of a piece of lead pipe, because the possession of a lead pencil in gaol was a deadly sin, and paid by authority as such, and the Long Un took as few risks as possible.

Bets came from all quarters, but "The Rajah" was the leviathan plunger. He accepted ten to one Sweet Nell for ten large plugs and the betting list was revised continually as new arrivals were able to provide reliable figures. Sometimes occasional scraps of paper were blown over the walls, and promptly secreted. If the scraps contained, as they always did, a betting list, it showed a nice discrimination on the part of the wind for which the imprisoned "Ikey Mo" was duly grateful.

But an opposition cropped up, a regular anti-betting league in the person of Warder Riley, eager for stripes and revenge. Months previously, a half plug of tobacco belonging to Riley mysteriously disappeared while the Long Un was in close proximity to him. A smart search of the suspect proved unsuccessful and, as a warder is not supposed to have tobacco in his possession inside the gaol, Riley had no redress.

But Warder Riley bided his time in patience and now the time had arrived. The greatest penetration his mind could bring to bear had not solved the mystery of the Long Un being in such great demand, day after day, among his fellow unfortunates,

but an overheard betting transaction gave the clue, and the rest was plain sailing. Riley told his friend, ^{an} ~~W~~arder Hennessy, of his suspicions and they kept a close watch on the Long Un, with the result that his frequent visits to the blacksmith's shop were noted and discussed at length with Chief Warder Salter.

On the night before the Cup, the Long Un closed his book, and was holding the enormous total of 290 plugs in all shapes and sizes and, because of The Rajah's large bet, Sweet Nell was the only horse overlaid. On the same night, after lock-up, the Chief Warder, accompanied by Riley and Hennessy, turned the blacksmith's shop inside-out and came upon the Long Un's hoard.

The news, started by the blacksmith, was passed around ⁱⁿ quietly next day. No move was made to secure any of the prisoners, but everyone believed that the warders had lifted the booty, until the news filtered through that Sweet Nell had won the Cup.

"The Rajah" worked on the wood heap and the Long Un in the tinsmith's shop, but the news travelled fast. "The Rajah" asserted in a loud voice that the story of the warders discovering the tobacco was a yarn got up by the Long Un, with the help of the blacksmith, and that the Long Un had the "swag", and was a low welsher.

The Long Un was very annoyed when "The Rajah's" rude remarks concerning his character were reported to him and he hastened to the wood heap to expostulate with him, but it was to no avail. A decent sort of blue then started and, when "The Rajah" was flattened for the second time, the warders were able to stop the fight, and the bookmaker and his badly damaged client were locked up.

"The Rajah" was discharged by the visiting magistrate as it appeared that he had been assaulted and had only been defending himself. The Long Un, for being away from his section and work, and assaulting his client, received seven days cells (16 oz of bread and any amount of water per day.)

The Long Un was fair dinkun stiff, said Limpy. After all his work collecting bets, and getting the prices, he's slandered, robbed by the warders, gets a black eye and then seven days, bread and water. Yet a greedy punting public says the "Ikey Mos" always get the best of it. Strewth!

By this time Limpy had run out of breath and beer but, after downing a couple of glasses in nothing flat, he resumed his story of his favorite companion of other days behind the bars.

After his experience as a bookie, it didn't take the Long Un long to do something about getting tobacco. He'd taken a plug or two from the betting stakes but that didn't last long and he was keen for more, and this time he took me in with him.

We were working in the outside garden gang, who tilled the ten acres near the gaol walls. Here they produced the gaol's supply of vegetables; at least the others did, me and the Long Un doing small jobs or talking to third-class warder Bill Hayes, who carried a gun all day and cursed the whole gaol service day and night.

Hayes was discontented and the shrewd Long Un fanned the discontent, thereby receiving a few chews of tobacco, for there is no surer way of gaining a man's goodwill than by telling him he is wasting his abilities in a paltry position. As a result of our good work on Hayes, we did pretty much as we pleased.

A small creek wound its way along the bottom of the garden and Hayes one day awoke from his usual daydream of future greatness when he saw us washing sand on the edge of the creek with two empty jam tins. "I think there's gold here, Mr Hayes", said the Long Un, in an awe-stricken voice, and he washed away vigorously. Soon he held up a small yellow piece about the size of a pin's head.

Hayes gasped, and words failed him. If the whole of the garden gang had chosen that moment to make their escape, Warder Hayes would not have seen them, for his eyes were staring at the speck in the palm of his hand, while the Long Un's washing continued. Small specks began to appear frequently as Hayes sat down to watch the operation and to receive them as I picked them out of the tin.

Presently it was time for dinner-muster and the Long Un played his artful game. Pointing to the considerable number of specks in the warder's palm, he said "This stuff ain't no good to us blokes for we ain't getting out for a long while, and we can't hide it with you screws always romping us going in and out, so what do you say to a few cakes of weed for it, eh?"

"Right-oh", said Hayes and a new cake he had bought that morning changed hands as did two more which he borrowed from two other warders supervising the gang, and the gardeners and gold-diggers went off to dinner.

The Long Un got the Chief Overseer to transfer us to the wood-heap gang next morning, where ^{we} ~~they~~ had a far easier time than ^{we} ~~they~~ would have outside under a fuming Warder Hayes, who was out three plugs of tobacco.

One of our mates, "Pincher" Wilson, employed in the brass shop, smoked good tobacco for a week afterwards, for, you see, the "Pincher" in civilian life had learned something of ~~metallurgy~~ metallurgy, *and brass looks like gold, don't it?*

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