

A TALE OF THE PENANCE TRACK

Limpy downed the contents of his glass, replaced it on the bar, and licked his lips. His eye caught mine and obediently I pushed the necessary across to the barman for a re-fill.

Rising eighty, Limpy had spent many of his years in gaol for various offences ranging from petty larceny to burglary until, many years ago, he had had an argument with a car, when drunk, and the resultant broken hip and crippled leg of necessity ended his days of felonious entry, and he now existed on a small age pension. His fund of stories about his nefarious experiences and of his gaol mates always kept his glass full.

"Are yer interested in the ggg-gees?" he asked, after an attack on his glass. "If yer are you'll remember when Peter Pan won his second Cup about forty^{five} years ago, and if yer'd been inside with me then yer'd have seen some decent bettin' when me pal, the Long Un laid a book on it, and it finished up in a decent sort of 'blue'. Like ter hear about it?" Before I could reply Limpy finished off his glass and pushed it across towards me and started off his tale which I translate from his prison jargon.

The Long Un had a craving for tobacco but, as he hadn't done his first twelve months, he wasn't entitled to his ²wek's supply as the others were. But he was a pretty smart sort of bloke, so he decided to make a 'book' on the Cup about a month before it was run and arranged with Billy Matthews, whose term was up, to toss each week's betting list, tied around a stone, over the wall at the bottom end of the geelfarm where the farm workers would be watching for it.

After the first list came over the Long Un did brisk business and soon the amount of plugs and half-plugs he held was so great that he had to find a safe hiding place for it, so he had talk with the blacksmith, who had been a pal of his on the outside, and it was decided to hide it in the blacksmith's bellows. This appeared to be the safest place to defeat the marauding ²waders who were always on the look-out for contraband weed. The bookie's entries were made on small pieces of paper with the sharpened end of a lead pipe, for the possession of a lead-pencil in gaol was ²a deadly sin and paid as such by the authorities, and the entries went into the bellows also.

The leviathan plunger was 'Rajah' who invested five plugs on Peter Pan at ten to one and many of the punters followed him. The Long Un continually revised his

prices as the lists came over the wall and, two days before the race, he was holding more than two hundred plugs contributed by the eager punters. "Whatever wins, I'll collect fifty plugs", Long /Un told me, "and you won't be left out". I ^din't expect to be left out, ^{for}I'd often gone to the bellows for him when he'd been transferred to another gang.

But opposition cropped up - a regular anti-betting league in the person of Warder O'Reilly, eager for stripes and revenge. Months previously a plug of tobacco vanished mysteriously from O'Reilly's coat pocket when the Long /Un, famous on the outside as a "dip", was in close proximity to him. A swift search of the suspect proved unsuccessful and, as a warder is not supposed to carry tobacco, O'Reilly had no redress. But he had a long memory, he bided his time, and now the time had come.

Day after day the warder had seen the Long /Un being in great demand with his fellow-unfortunates but great concentration of his mind on the reason of his apparent popularity brought O'Reilly no ready solution, until an overheard betting transaction gave a clue and the rest was plain sailing. He told his friend Warder Guthrie about his suspicions and they never let the Long /Un out of their sight. His frequent visits to the blacksmith's shop were noted and discussed at length and plans made for a raid.

On the day before the Cup the Long /Un closed his book and, because of his big bet, 'Rajah' would be the only punter to prevent the bookie having a clean-up. But, alas, it was not to be, for that night, after lock-up, Warders O'Reilly and Guthrie took the blacksmith back to his shop and there they turned it inside out and came upon the Long /Un's hoard.

The news, started by the blacksmith, was passed around quietly next day. But there was no move to secure any of the prisoners, so everyone believed that the warders had lifted the booty for themselves, until the news filtered through that Peter Pan 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 finding 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 that he 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 the slanderer, but it was to no avail. Not only did the 'Rajah' refuse to believe that the warders had lifted the tobacco, but made further rude remarks about the Long Un and his friend the blacksmith. And then a proper sort of "blue" started. After

the 'Rajah' had been flattened for the third time, and looked like staying down, the warders managed to stop the proceedings, and the Long Un, sporting a busted eye, and his badly damaged opponent were led away and locked up.

When the visiting magistrate arrived on the following day, the 'Rajah' was charged with fighting, ^{but was let off,} for it appeared that he had been assaulted first and was only defending himself. The Long Un, for being away from his section and work, and assaulting his punter-client, received six days dark cells, with only one pound of bread and plenty of cold water, to keep him company.

Limpy reached for the glass which I had re-filled and emptied it before ~~resuming~~ ^{ending} the tale about his erstwhile companion behind bars.

"Yer know the Long Un was dead stiff", he reflected. "After getting such a great idea for grabbing some tobacco, after all the work he put in collecting the bets under the eyes of the warders and getting the prices over the wall, he's called a welsher, gets robbed by O'Reilly and Guthrie, gets a ^a _A blk eye in the fight and ends up with six days in the dark with only bread and water. But I suppose life's like that", and he pushed his glass towards me ^b _A hopefully.

Limpy was quite a philosopher.