

FROM BEHIND STONE WALLS

It had been some weeks since I had visited the corner pub, and I wondered if my erstwhile inhabitant of Pentridge friend, Limpy, was still in the neighborhood. But I needn't have wondered for the old man was leaning on the bar and when his eye caught mine he quickly downed a half glass and replaced it on the bar as I called for a couple.

"Where's yer ~~xxx~~ been this last month?" he asked, and, not waiting for a reply, downed his drink as if it were the last beer on earth.

He <sup>WIPE</sup>wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "I'm glad yer came in today so I could let yer know that Jimmy Hearne snuffed it out at Fitzroy yes'dy. 'E was known as Long Un out at Pentridge and 'e must 'ave got consumshun out there and never got over it. I've told yer a few yarns about 'im. 'E was a champeen bloke out there and everyone liked 'im. Did I ever tell yer about how he got pinched and finished up inside?"

Not waiting for an answer, he raised the glass which I had re-filled, drank half of it and started off on his yarn which I have again translated from prison slang.

There was a lot of gaol homage paid to the Long Un, said Limpy, and the warders generally left him alone. He had quite a facility for making flank moves when up before the visiting magistrate, which generally disconcerted the enemy and won the day. And he never missed a chance of impressing on everybody that he was innocent of the offence for which he was doing three years "hard". The Long Un's story of his conviction never varied: Me and me pal had a little walking cane-stick, which unscrewed at the top and the bottom, leaving just enough space to push in a half-sovereign. I carried the stick and left it hanging on the bar while I went outside for a minute, with me pal looking after it. One night he unscrewed the top of it and removed the half-sovereign in front of a couple of mugs, just for a laugh.

When I came back I remarked innocently enough that I never wanted to lose the stick as it was always worth a half-sovereign to me. And, bless your hearts, if the mugs didn't up and want to bet a fiver that it wasn't and me pal put up a quid too, for appearances.

I unscrewed the top and there was no coin there and didn't the mugs laugh. But when I unscrewed the bottom end of the stick to reveal a half-sovereign, they stopped laughing and called for the cops. I was charged as a confidence man, and got three years.

The Long Un had a record inside. He got five days solitary for fishing tobacco with a bent pin and cotton from his window overlooking the yard where a cobber was, and a plug of tobacco was found in a baked potato going to him in his mess-kit but, as he

pointed out, he had nothing to do with another man's generosity. Some of his most violent admirers swore that the Long Un sent out a secret note behind the glass eye of Hugh Guthrie, when the Scottie was discharged, the note being written on tissue paper!

But the Long Un's greatest trouble occurred when Warder O'Brien, suspecting that he smoked at every opportunity, determined to catch him. Being an agitator, it was decided that the Long Un should work by himself so that he could not contaminate others, so he was put in charge of the church, under the personal supervision of Warder O'Brien, and the battle commenced.

The warder knew that the Long Un smoked in the church. In the first place it was against the regulations for him at to smoke at all; he had only served nine months, and twelve months servitude was necessary before he became eligible to have tobacco. But that he smoked in church was to an O'Brien a cardinal sin, and he had his victim searched, after being stripped, every day for a fortnight, but to no avail.

And daily, Warder O'Brien, with assistance, searched the church thoroughly with no better results. O'Brien was nonplussed. He rushed in at all sorts of unexpected moments, but always found the Long Un busily employed scrubbing and cleaning and ever ready to pass a pleasant remark, which never failed to raise the ire of First-class Warder O'Brien.

One day, Father O'Connell, having broken his fast, could not perform Mass, and prayers were offered instead. During the service the priest's rosary beads slipped through his cassock on to the floor and, on the priest investigating the pocket later in the vestry, found it burnt through and smelling vilely of stale tobacco.

Next day, Warder O'Brien caught the Long Un's plant, and that worthy received six <sup>days</sup> solitary, the warder, a strict R. C. opining that he should have got another six months for sacrilege. For his inferring, Father O'Connell subsequently was not spoken to by anyone except the "faithful", and by them only when it was necessary.

Limpj drained his glass and nudged it over in my direction. 'He and the Long Un was on a Coroner's jury once inside and it cost him six days in solitary for gettin' stuck inter the old doctor we 'ad out there, not with his docks, mind yer, but with his tongue which 'urt jost as much. Like ter 'ear about it?' I nodded and Limpj took a preliminary swig at his glass.

It was when No 103 died, Limpj said. He was only a boy and he had stolen only

a matter of three quid, and it was his first time, but he got two years. His mother in the country tramped the town with a petition for his release half way because he had been a frail lad and prison was affecting his health. But the Executive in its plush office could not appreciate her struggle, only the crime, and it said "Let him serve the lot".

Then another interfered. Death proved stronger than the petition, and No.103 lay in the little dead-house, at the back of C wing, alone -- no flowers, no watchers, nothing. The door was even locked upon him as it had been during his last hard twelve months. And three ~~quid~~ quid did it all!

A hush was over the prison and even the warders seemed depressed. The Prison Act said that a prison jury shall be of six prisoners and six freeman, so they picked the Long Un and me and four others and we compared favorably with the other six, one of whom carted wood to the gaol. The library was cleared and, after viewing the body we joined the Governor, his Deputy, the Coroner and the doctor there.

Those mentioned sat at the table, we six prisoners sat on one side of the room and those who still maintained their places on the greasy path of virtue sat on the other side.

The witnesses were called. The Senior Night Warder said that the deceased had died at 11pm and he had kept him alive until the brandy had given out. A Wardsman a prisoner, gave evidence of how the prisoner had died in his arms, he being wakened a half hour earlier by his groans, and he found him alone.

Then the doctor, a fat grumpy Irishman, gave his evidence -- "Best of medical attention -- couldn't be saved -- chronic case of long standing heart-disease."

"Any questions?" asked the Governor, with a fierce look at the prisoners on the jury.

The Long Un, ignoring the Governor, got to his feet and asked the Senior Warder, "Where were you when No.103 died?" -- "At his bedside", replied the S.W. "You're a liar", said the Long Un. "Order, order", cried the Governor. The Long Un ignored him with a wave of his hand. "Doctor, when did you last see No. 103?", he asked. "Yesterday evening", said the doctor. "You're a bigger liar than the warder," said the Long Un, and sat down. After an ominous silence, the coroner charged the jury and we brought in a verdict of "Natural causes."

That night we heard the hearse arrive to take the body, which had been claimed by a widowed mother, two hundred miles away.

"A man's mother never turns dog on him", said the Long Un, as we saw the hearse drive away.