



F R A G M E N T S

FROM THE

OFFICIAL CAREER OF

JOHN DWYER

SUPERINTENDENT OF POLICE

1878 to 1921.

-----oOo-----

F O R E W O R D.

I have written these notes at the solicitation of some of my family, and having in view the dropping of the curtain.

The incidents are written from memory, with the aid of a few newspaper extracts. I never kept a diary. I was a fairly quick observer in my time, and had the knack of storing away incidents in my memory which others thought unworthy of remembering.

Although I have passed my 76th year, I can still remember things that happened 50 years ago, better even than things that happened only 10 years ago.

The morning of my Police career was rough and exacting, but as the evening drew near, and as I advanced in the Service, I had a good and interesting time of it. I retired from the Police with a satisfied conscience. I always tried to be fair, and if I could not do a man a good turn, I never went out of my way to do him a bad one.

Whatever little popularity I may have attained during my 43 years' service, I put down to the fact that I always mingled with the people.

-----oOo-----

Born in the townland of Shrone, in the parish of Listowel, County Kerry, on the 1st January, 1857 - educated at Coolard National School. This school was a quarter of a mile from Gunsborough Villa, where Lord Kitchener was born. I left home in 1878, and came to New Zealand in the Sailing Ship "City of Auckland". On reaching New Zealand, I had the misfortune to be wrecked on the Otaki Coast. There were no lives lost, but the passengers lost most of their belongings. I had the good fortune to have a generous aunt living at Patea, and she wired me £20. to the scene of the wreck. This sum, with what I had on me, made me quite independent. I was the fifth member of my family to leave Home and seek a living in a foreign land. Driven from the land of our birth, like thousands of others, by its unjust and tyrannical laws.

I went from the scene of the wreck to Napier, and after a few days there I got work on a station at Waipukarau, at 25/- week and found. In those days, the workers had to put up with any old thing. After making a few pounds, I went to Napier, and, coming from church on a Sunday night, I was introduced to Major Skully, then Inspector of Police. He invited my friend and myself to his house, and we put in an hour there. A few days after this, I met the Inspector again, and he invited me to his office, and after some talk, he put the matter to me of joining the Police, and pointed out the prospects there were in the Force for a steady, level-headed young man, and he thought, by what he saw of me, that I should fill the bill. I wrote out an application there and then, and three days thereafter, I was wired for to proceed to Wellington. I entered "Mount Cook" Barracks, after passing the medical and other examinations. After putting in a couple of months' training, I was drafted to Dunedin, and on the 19th December, 1878, I made my debut as a policeman in that city. Dunedin was then the leading city in New Zealand. Sir

Julius Vogel (Prime Minister) had spent almost all of a £10,000,000 loan in Otago, and things were then booming. There were 85 licensed hotels, besides six bottle license stores, within the city, and at this time, there were over a thousand emigrants arriving in Port Chalmers monthly.

Dunedin was a hot shop then. There was a part of the city called the "Devil's Half Acre" (The Chinese and Assyrian quarters) and there were two constables stationed there night and day to preserve order. There was more life to be seen in the streets at 2 a.m. then, than there is at 11 p.m. today. In the early hours of any morning, the wail of "German Charley" could be heard as he expounded on the merits of his condiments "Savelcys hot, all hot, steaming hot - four legs of mutton for sixpence, all meat and no bones (Sheep Trotters)."

New Year's Eve was the most disorderly night of the year, and New Year's Eve of '78 was the rowdiest on record. The Corporation put out its lamps at 2 a.m. leaving the city in darkness. The rough element came to light, and for two hours, or more, made things hum, pulling down fences, gates and shutters, and smashing windows. A companion and I were sent to protect a trio of houses in Stuart Street. My companion was knocked out with a blow of a stone, and had to be taken to hospital. I was well baptized but escaped serious injury. There were 25 arrests made during the night.

My First Important Arrest.

A young man, named Jim White, a member of a well-known criminal family, was wanted for breaking and entering and theft. The detectives reported that he had gone to Auckland, but instead, he was in hiding in Dunedin. At 1 a.m. on a Sunday morning, an arrest was made by the police, and on the way to the lock-up, they were beset by over one hundred hooligans. The police had to take the prisoner through the Royal Arcade to MacLaggan Street, where the Police Station then was. I joined in, but kept behind the crowd to see if any stones were thrown, or damage committed. The police delivered their prisoner safely, and the crowd hung round the mouth of the Arcade within view of the Police Station. I mixed with the crowd, and I spotted a man well muffled up.

I got a glimpse of his face in the light, and I saw a resemblance to his well-known sister "Sal White". I thought for a while, and then, seeing a cabman whom I knew, I spoke to him, and asked him who the man across the way, well muffled up, was, and he said "Jim White" - "I was only speaking to him a few minutes ago." Just to suit my purpose, White moved closer to the footpath. I watched my opportunity, and grabbed him by his shoulders and pushed him on to the middle of the street before he knew where he was. The crowd realised the position and then they pushed at me to rescue White, but, before they reached me, the police appeared at the door of the Police Station, and a yell from me brought them flying to my assistance. The crowd was kept at bay, enabling me to deliver my prisoner safely. I made a report of the affair, colouring the facts as well as I could, and that night my report was read on parade by the Inspector, who commented and praised the action of the young constable, and pointed out what could be done when the man had the will and the way. Three days after this I was promoted a second class Constable. This gave me my first step on the ladder. There were classes in all branches of the Service then.

The Result of a Dream.

My next case occurred very soon after the one related above.

One morning, when on duty in Princes Street, I was hailed by the proprietor of the "Old Times" Restaurant, and told that a theft had been committed in the Restaurant during the night. I investigated the complaint. It was this; two boarders occupied the same room. One had £9. in his possession when he retired to his bed, but when he got up to dress he found his money was gone. The other occupant of the room denied all knowledge of the matter, and there the affair stood. Next morning, when passing the Restaurant, the proprietor accosted me and said his housemaid wished to see me, and she would not tell him what she wanted me for. I saw the housemaid, and she whispered me aside, and said she wanted to tell me about a dream she had the previous night. She said she dreamt that the money was

planted by the suspect, Lambert, (an ex-jockey with a record) in some part of his bed. She would not tell the proprietor in case the dream would not come true. I went with her to the room, and examined every part of the bed and bed-clothes. I noticed a newly made slit in the mattress, sewn over with coarse black thread. I undid a portion of the sewing so that I could put in my hand and feel about for the plant. I found it in my first attempt. The £9. was intact. In looking round the room, I noticed a skein of black thread hanging on a nail near suspect's bed. I compared this with that used in the mattress, and they were exactly the same. I got the girl to make up the bed in the usual way, and then told her to bring the proprietor. I told him what the girl wanted me for, and told him to bring the suspect from the billiard room, where he was employed. When he arrived in the room, I was having a look round, and when I came to the skein of thread I took it in my hand, and was examining it, when he said "That is mine." I then took the bed to pieces, and when I came to the mattress, I opened up the slit with my knife, and took out the money, and then compared the used thread with the skein, and found them to be exactly the same. I then turned to the accused, and said, "You are under arrest." He said, "I took the money, and I'll plead guilty."

Offender was committed for trial at the Supreme Court, and received 18 months' imprisonment.

A few months after this, I was transferred (temporarily) to Port Chalmers, and the Sergeant (Hanlon) kept me there for over six months, and then I had to battle to get away. The principal work there was arresting and separating drunken sailors. I have seen, at one time, as many as 24 prisoners in the cells. That number would not be arrested in one year now. It was a common thing then to see ten sailing ships in the harbour at one time.

The following incident happened while I was at Port Chalmers:-

A Chinaman's Hoard.

One afternoon as I was on duty, a man rode up to the Police Station. Both horse and man seemed all but exhausted. The man asked for the Sergeant, and I told him that he was away at Portobello. He said he had ridden from St. Bathans, and this his mount was the third horse used in the journey. He was after three Chinamen, who left St. Bathans some days previously, without paying him large sums of money which they owed him for store supplies and rent of his water race, and that he suspected that they would be leaving for Sydney by the S.S."Wakatipu" about to sail. He begged of me to go with him to the ship, and said if he could see them he might be able to get some of his money. I had compassion for the man, and I went with him to the ship. I knew the officers, and as we got on board I met the Second Officer, and asked him if there were any Chinamen on board. He said there were a few, and took us down to an apartment in the Steerage, where there were about thirty returning shearers, as rough a crowd as one could see. A number of them were playing cards. There were no Chinamen about. In the room was a wide bench, and a number of swags were piled on top of each other. I spotted a leg sticking out beneath one of the swags, and on investigating I found two Chinamen hiding there. I got them out, and they were two of Mr. McConachie's debtors. One of the men playing cards spoke out and told the Chinamen not to be afraid as the policeman could not touch him. I told the fellow not to interfere, as he might find himself in trouble for obstructing the police in the execution of their duty. The Ship's Officer showed us into a room upstairs. One of the Chinamen said he would pay the store-keeper what he owed him, £180. He took off a belt that went four times round his waist, and took out 180 sovereigns, and the lot was contained in half one round of the belt. The second chinaman, who owed £40., had nothing on him, and the third Chinaman, who owed £80., could not be found. Mr. McConachie was profuse in his thanks to me, as, without my presence, he would not have recovered a farthing. When he went to Dunedin he gave an account of the affair to a reporter, and stressed the influence the presence of the uniform

had on Chinamen.

I was transferred back to Dunedin and, after putting in about six months plain clothes work, I was transferred to North Dunedin Station. At that time the City was divided into two sections. North Dunedin had its quota of police, a Sergeant in charge, two sectional Sergeants, and nine Constables.

The Cumberland Street Fire.

On the 1st July, 1882, the disastrous fire, known as the Cumberland Street fire, occurred. I was on duty at the corner of St. David and Great King Streets, when I noticed a small jet of smoke that I watched for a few seconds, and, as it increased in volume, I thought it might be a fire, so I ran across the old Caledonian Grounds to Dundas Street, when I saw clearly that it was a fire. The police were then provided with rattles and when these were sprung they almost caused the dead to rise. I sprang my rattle, and made for the burning building - a large two-storey one. The iron gate leading to the house was barred, and I had to use all my strength to force it. I ran, and with the full force of my strength and weight sent the heavy oaken door sprawling. The passages were then full of smoke, and, when going up the stairs, I had to stuff my handkerchief in my mouth. At the landing at the top of the stairs I found Mrs. Kitchener, and a child in her arms, both on fire. I took one on each arm, and rushed downstairs to the lawn, and rolled them in the damp grass, and put out the fire, and then handed them over to a Miss Robinson who had just arrived on the scene. I again entered the burning building and made upstairs, but a sudden rush of flame sent me back. I got my hair singed, and my coat caught fire. I became stupefied with smoke, and was rescued just in time by a fellow constable who had then arrived, and who was told by Miss Robinson that I was in the burning building. My comrade helped me out, and in the fresh air I soon revived. At that moment there was a scream from one of the top windows. My companion and I took off our great-coats, held them together and told the three young men at the window to jump on to the coats, one by one, and their fall would be broken, and this they did, and all landed without a

scratch. They were the two young Kitcheners and a Mr. Ash, a University student. While adjusting the young fellows, Captain Kitchener, without warning, threw himself out of one of the top windows, and came a terrible thud on the asphalt below. I have never forgotten that sight, the poor fellow's night clothes were burnt about him. He was removed to the nearest hotel for medical attention, but died there four days after, a raving maniac. Two lovely girls and a child of four perished in the flames. The child I rescued died 21 days after the fire from its burns. Mrs. Kitchener recovered, but always bore marks of the burns. On the occasion, the Fire Brigade was very slow in getting to the fire. At that time, the fire alarm system was crude to a degree. An old tower in Dowling Street, where a night watchman took up his post, and when he saw a fire he rang the bell, and the Brigade turned out. Sometimes the fire was half through before the watchman saw it.

After the fire, the Department promoted me to 1st Class Constable, and gave me a monetary reward of £10. At this time, there were classes in all branches of the Service, but these were abolished in 1898 by the "Tunbridge Police Commission."

The City Council took the matter up, as the Royal Humane Society was not then in existence. I was presented with a Silver Medal for valour. The presentation was made in the Town Hall, and the following is a copy of the newspaper report:-

"At the fortnightly meeting of the City Council last night, a letter was read from Mr. T. K. Weldon, Inspector of Police, stating that the Commissioner of Constabulary had approved of Constable John Dwyer receiving the medal which the City Council desired to present to him for his services connected with the fire at the late Captain Kitchener's residence.

The Mayor said the Council would remember it had been unanimously decided to present a medal to Constable Dwyer for the bravery he displayed at the late fire in Cumberland Street, but before making the presentation, it was necessary to obtain the sanction of the Commissioner of Police, which had now been given.

Constable Dwyer, who had been invited to attend the Council meeting, was then presented with the medal by His Worship, who, in doing so, said - Constable Dwyer, I have very much pleasure on behalf of the City Council, representing the citizens of Dunedin, in presenting you

"this medal for valour you displayed in the disastrous fire which occurred in Cumberland Street in July last. Though a very handsome testimonial, its money value is not very great. I trust you will receive it in the spirit in which it is given, not as a pecuniary reward for the very great services you rendered in saving lives, but as a mark of esteem and respect for the brave deeds you performed in risking your own life in order to save those of others. I believe I am but speaking the hope of every resident of the community when I express the wish that you may live long to wear it, and to enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that you have earned the respect and admiration of your fellow citizens. (Applause).

Constable Dwyer, in responding, said he felt highly honoured in being the recipient of the handsome present as a mark of appreciation of the services he had given at the fire referred to. The only matter he regretted in connection with the occurrence was that he had not arrived earlier at the scene of the fire, as he might then have been able to have saved some who perished in the flames. There was no necessity for him to go into the circumstances, which he knew must be fresh in the memory of everyone in the city. He thanked the Council for having considered his services of such a nature as to be deserving of the medal. (Applause.)

The medal is of silver, and is in the form of a Maltese Cross, with five bars. A circle surrounding the cross has the words "The Mayor and City Council of Dunedin, New Zealand." On one of the bars are the words, "For Valour", and in the centre of the cross is the name of the recipient, with the date."

Captain Kitchener mentioned herein was an uncle of Lord Kitchener.

The following is a copy of a letter which I received & from Mr. Ash (mentioned herein) accompanying the letter was a Diamond Scarf Pin. Mr. Ash is now a clergyman in Hobart.

I received other letters at the time, but I did not hang on to them.

Dunedin, Sept. 30th, 1882.

My Dear Sir,

I have always intended to convey to you in some tangible manner my thanks for the service you rendered me on the occasion of the recent fire at Captain Kitchener's. Had it not been for you, I am satisfied I should in all probability have sustained serious injury. Permit me, therefore, to hand you the accompanying breast-pin, not a valuable one, I must say, for my means are limited, as a memento of the occasion. The recollection of the fire will always be attended with feelings of sadness, but, as far as you are concerned, you have the great satisfaction of knowing that you were the means of doing much good, and probably of saving life, and that you did all that was in your power to prevent the misfortune - than which no man could have done more.

With best wishes for your success in life, and in your profession.

Yours faithfully,

(Signed) W. H. Ash.

About a fortnight after the fire the Inspector of Police sent for me. Mr. Hackworth, Collector of Customs, was in his office. The latter said to me, "There is a vacancy in my department, and I offer it to you if you care to accept it." I thanked him, and said my intentions were to leave the Police at the end of the year, and go to America, and join my friends. Very soon after this, something happened that completely quenched my intentions of going to America.

In January, 1885, a new Police District was created, with headquarters at Oamaru, under the charge of Inspector Andrew Thompson. The Inspector (Weldon) sent for me and asked me if I would take the clerkship to Thompson, and, as he was a hard man to get on with, he would give me a week to consider the matter. I accepted, and on February 19th I took up my new duties. Nothing worthy of note happened until the 4th May, 1886, when I lost my status of bachelorthood.

The Smoked Fish Case.

A year passed, and the first case worth noting that I was concerned in occurred.

On a Saturday afternoon, I received a telephone message from the Railway Station from the Detective (O'Brien), telling me that there was a pile of stuff dumped off the express train, now on the platform. It was labelled "Smoked Fish" and was addressed to "Christison", barber - that he dared not go near it, but he thought it was smuggled stuff. An expressman named Bree, he said, was starting to load it, and that I should go and see what became of it. I went to Christison's shop, and sat down for a hair-cut and shave. Christison was by himself, and before he was finished with me, Bree arrived with the first load of the stuff, and Christison directed him where to put it. I tarried, until I thought Bree would be returning with the second load. I then went and had a look at the stuff. I said to Christison "And what is all this stuff?" He said, "Canary Seed - you know I own a lot of canaries, and I share with the Grants." I said, "I'll have a look at it," and I cut the string of one of the bags, and out fell a box of Juno Tobacco , three-quarters of a cwt. I said, "This is smuggled tobacco, and I'll take possession of it." He received such a shock that he fell into one of