

The Treatment AND The Cure

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THE BULLETIN

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THE TREATMENT AND THE CURE

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THE TREATMENT

1

Down a long road all sun and shadowy with trees overhead and a slow look from cows across a fence and you're there. You see buildings with barred windows and a few people in old grey clothes. There's the Main Kitchen. There are trucks outside being loaded with steel dixies for the wards and a reek tells you that today must be stew or cabbage. Then you see a nurse in a blue dress leading a little flock of inmates beside the road. They're all small, like little boys or shrivelled old men, and are shambling and dribbling after her in a single file strung out for fifty yards. She turns and shouts for them to mind the car. One of them is right on the road. You see his face, all red and crumpled like a monkey's, coming closer through the windscreen. He's grinning. He likes the car, as though it's a big friendly animal coming to sniff him. Your driver toots, then stops.

"Johnny Bodley! Get off the road this instant!" the nurse shouts. When he doesn't move she walks back and takes him to one side. As you go past you can't help your eyes flickering over her legs and the swell of her chest. After the months at the gaol the sight stabs you. And now she might be the last woman you'll ever see.

The car gathers speed up around a winding curve past other ward buildings and you seem to be going

away from the hospital again. There is dry scrub and yellow dirt with ant-mounds. Your stomach is watery with fear. Whatever you're going to is very close now. A high brick wall is just ahead. The car stops at an iron gate and the guard next to the driver presses a bell. A man in grey uniform comes out and unlocks, then holds the gate open.

"G'day," your driver says as we go through.

"G'day," the grey-uniformed man answers.

The car goes along a bit then stops outside a low sprawling building with barred windows. There is a door with an iron grid on the front. Your guards start to get out and motion for you to get out too. You'd rather not. It was so nice in the car, looking out the window, listening to the guards' small talk, knowing nothing much could happen to you until you got to where you were going. Now you'd got there.

There is a rattle of keys from inside and the door is opened by a grey-haired man in a grey uniform. Your guards exchange greetings with him while he unlocks the iron grid.

"How ya goin'?"

"Not bad. How's yerself?"

"Hot enough for ya?"

"Too bloody hot."

"Cool change due, they reckon."

"Yeah, hope so."

The talk has nothing to do with you. They seem to have forgotten you. We all step inside. The room is a pantry, with sinks and stainless steel and a big dishwashing machine and several dixies on a table. There are two more grey-uniformed men there, one of them wearing an apron, and three other men who must be inmates, also with aprons. They look at you and you don't know whether to look back or look away or what.

You try to feel as though you belong with the guards, as though you're just one of a bunch of friends who've dropped by for a minute and will be going shortly.

The grey-haired man leads us down a corridor to an office. You catch a glance of a long verandah beyond a glass partition and several faces pressed against the glass, looking at you. For the first time the grey-haired man appears to notice you. He motions to a chair and you sit down. He is still talking with the guards and one of them is leaning over the desk, signing a paper. Then the grey-haired man signs a paper and the guard arranges it in a folder he carries.

"Well, we'd better get moving," the guard says. They all shake hands with the grey-haired man and move towards the corridor. You feel panic. You feel like begging them to take you back into the car to drive some more, even just for another hour. It was so good in the car, so safe, looking out the window, hearing the small talk, knowing nothing much could happen. As the guards go out they say goodbye. One of them gives a thumbs-up sign and says: "You'll be right, mate."

You grin at him and nod. You want to believe him. He was a good bloke. They were all good blokes. They know about these places and you tell yourself that you can believe what they say.

The grey-haired man comes back from seeing them down the corridor and sits at the desk. He arranges some papers in front of him. It's your file, the one the guards brought. You can see your name on the cover. The grey-haired man is looking at the file and also looking at you as though he's weighing you up.

"What's your name, lad?" he asks.

You are surprised. Surely he knows your name?

"Len, er, Len Tarbutt," you answer.

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"Height?"

"Er, about five foot ten I think."

"What colour hair would you say you've got?"

"Um, blond I suppose."

"No, more brown I'd say."

You feel a clutch of apprehension. You feel you've said something wrong. That you'd been caught out in a lie, somehow. Then you realise that you haven't been calling him "Sir". That was enough to make them hit you, back at the gaol. Not calling them "Sir" was a Breach. You recall the time at the gaol when one of the men forgot to call the warder "Sir". The warder went up and put his arm round the man's shoulder, as if he felt very friendly, and said: "My friend, you know you've committed a Breach, don't you?" The man didn't really know. He probably didn't even realise about the "Sir". But he smiled and agreed. His mouth was trembling while he was smiling. Then the warder hit him in the face and he fell down.

The grey-haired man is looking at you. You're afraid he's thinking about the "Sir", or that you lied about your hair. Your throat feels so thick you can hardly speak.

"Um, my hair's blond when the sun shines on it, Sir." You realise how stupid that sounds and that he might think you're being insolent. Your heart is thumping. He looks at you for a while longer. Then he closes up the file.

"I think that'll be all for now," he says. "You can go out with the others."

He leads you out of the office and unlocks a door and you go through. You're on the long verandah. It's closed in with wire mesh on the open side and there are rows of benches set along the wall. There are a whole lot

of men, some pacing up and down like at the gaol, some playing cards, some talking, some lying very still along the benches with little columns of smoke rising from their cigarettes. But the main thing you see is the view spread out in the distance. There is a big lake going right away for maybe two or three miles to a green haze of shore on the far side and green bush all around that comes right up to the high outer wall of this place. The ground slopes downwards from the verandah right down to the water so that you look clean over the top of the wall from here. It's beautiful, especially because you didn't expect anything like that. It's the sort of view that rich people have from their patio, except for the wire mesh. Outside the mesh is a yard about twenty feet wide. It's bounded at the edge by a mesh fence with barbed wire on top. Beyond that, and still sloping down, are vegetable gardens and then the main wall. To one side of the vegetable gardens is a lovely-looking tiled swimming pool, shining all white and blue and cool. The water is shimmering in the sunlight.

You stand gazing out over everything, partly because it's so beautiful and partly because you don't know what else to do. Some of the men are staring at you. You don't know whether to look back at them or not. Men at the gaol had warned you about these madhouse inmates.

If you offended them, or even if you didn't, they might suddenly attack you. Madmen have the strength of ten. That's what you heard anyway. While you're standing there a little dark man, one of the ones pacing up and down, bumps against you. He is staring straight ahead and muttering: "Shut-up, shut-up, shut-up, shut-up. . ." over and over. You edge away, pretending you haven't noticed him.

"Hey, Len!" someone calls. It's one of the men

playing cards. You look carefully. You recognise a face. Bill Greene! You suddenly feel much better. You knew Bill Greene only slightly at the gaol, but now you feel he's your long-lost brother.

"Hi Bill, how ya goin'?" you cry, overflowing with goodwill. Your brain's ticking now and you make a big show of greeting Bill so the other men will see you've got a mate here who'll probably back you up if anyone starts anything.

"Jeez, Bill, I didn't know you were here."

"Been 'ere two months."

"Yeah? What's it like?"

"Better than gaol, mate."

"Listen mate, what's the drum?"

You're feeling so relieved now that you almost laugh to hear yourself using terms like "What's the drum?". It's part of the hearty-matey pose you need to use at first, to show you're one of the blokes and not just some innocent kid. Someone might be sizing you up. Still, it sounds so funny you almost laugh.

"Give us the oil, mate," you say.

"Aw, there isn't much to it," Bill Greene says. "It's pretty easy really."

"What're the screws like?"

"Most of 'em are all right. There's a few cunts, though."

"What about biffings?"

"Pretty rare."

"Yeah? Dinkey di?"

"Yeah, they don't have to biff much. They've got other ways. Like shock treatment."

"Christ! What d'you have to do to get shock treatment?"

"Play up. Act mad. Anything really. It just depends on the screws and the doctor."

"Who's the doctor?"

"Ward doctor. He comes round every coupla days. He likes giving shock. 'Electric Ned' they call him."

"Real cunt, is he?"

"Aw, he's all right in some ways. He just likes giving shock whenever he can."

"Have you had it?"

"No, but I've come close a few times."

You're not feeling so cheerful now, with this talk of shock treatment. You start to think how it was all too good to be true. Now you're finding out about the bad thing, the thing you knew had to be here though you didn't know exactly what it would be. Shock treatment! It had a very bad ring to it. Especially the word "treatment". When they biffed you it was pretty bad, but at least you knew they were doing something they shouldn't be doing. They knew it too. There was always a chance they'd get into trouble for biffing. Not much of a chance, but a chance. Also, some screws didn't agree with biffing and they'd try to stop other screws who did it. But "treatment" was different . . . they could do it with a clean conscience because they were just trying to help you.

"Who's the grey-haired bloke in the office?" you ask Bill Greene.

"That's Arthur, the Charge Nurse."

"Is that what you call him? Arthur?"

"Yeah, you call the screws by their first names here."

So you go on talking to Bill Greene while he's playing euchre with three other inmates. And while you're looking around the verandah you start to recognise a few other faces you remember from the gaol. There's Nick, a little Italian. And Dave Lamming. And Barry Clarke who went to court the same day you did

and got life for killing his girlfriend and shoving a broom-handle up her. Barry was famous at the gaol. His jury stayed out only nine minutes. That was supposed to be a record, at least for a murder. You think about saying hello to him, but he looks peculiar, shuffling along like a drunk man and his face all loose and his mouth dribbling.

"What's the matter with Barry Clarke?" you ask Bill.

"He's on medication. That's another thing here. They whack medication into you and some of it's pretty bad."

"What does it do to you?"

"Have a look at Barry."

"He's like a zombie."

"That's what it does. Shock does the same thing." You decide you'd like to change the subject.

"What do you actually *do* here?"

"Most of the blokes work in the vegetable garden. A few have jobs inside the ward. Pantry work. Stuff like that."

"Do you have a choice in what you do?"

"Sometimes you do. Just depends."

"What's the best job?"

"The gardening's all right. Gets you out in the open a bit. Inside jobs have more lurks — like pantry workers get extra food. Stuff like that."

Then you ask the question you've been waiting to ask.

"Does anyone ever, sort of, go berserk? Is there anyone you have to watch out for?"

"Aw, not really."

Bill's casual tone is very reassuring.

"You hear talk at the gaol about this place. They reckon blokes go berserk all the time, and how you have

to be careful or you get your throat ripped out or something."

"That's mostly shit, mate. Someone might go off now and again, but nothing much."

So you let Bill Greene go on with his euchre while you sit and think about what he's told you. On the whole it doesn't sound too bad. Except for the shock treatment. Except for the medication. Those two things.

A screw calls out that lunch's ready and the inmates all get up and move toward the door of the dining room. You follow them into the room and see eight tables. The others sit down at their places and you stand waiting for someone to tell you where to sit. A screw waves you to a chair. There is a glass of orange juice and a spoon at each place. The dining room is connected to the pantry by a servery cut in the wall and you see somebody's hands pushing plates of food through. Three screws in aprons are taking the plates and bringing them to the tables like waiters. You feel uneasy about this, as though it's wrong for screws to be waiting on you. The food makes you uneasy too. It's so good, better than any gaol food, even the gaol food on Christmas Day when they give you a piece of plum duff with custard. You eat carefully, with your eyes down, as if you want to show that you understand the food is too good for the likes of you and that you don't deserve to be waited on and that you aren't gloating about it or anything.

There's a lot of noise coming from the pantry, laughing and yelling and banging of plates and dixies. The dining room is quieter with just the clink of spoons and eating noises. You're at a corner table with five other men who are all very messy with their food. They all look drugged. One of them is Barry Clarke and he

can hardly eat. His mouth is slobbering and his tongue's poking out and getting in the way of the spoon and he is making a gurgling sound in his throat and spilling the food down his jacket. A screw keeps coming over to him.

"For Christ's sake Barry, don't be such a bloody pig."

He takes the spoon and tries to show Barry how to put it in his mouth, but as soon as he takes his hand away the spoon goes crooked against Barry's tongue and the food spills.

"Bloody sure you won't be invited to Government House!" the screw says.

Barry is mumbling something with his thick tongue. The screw takes a while to understand what he's saying. Barry wants to go for a piss.

"No, be bugged!" says the screw. "You can wait."

A minute later there is a trickling sound under the table and you feel your foot getting wet. Barry is pissing. You try to pull your foot back out of the way. The screw notices the piss and throws up his hands in disgust.

"Jeeeesus!" he says. He goes for a mop.

The rest of the afternoon you stand looking out through the verandah wire at the lake. Now that you're here, actually here, and you've seen and heard enough to make you think that maybe you'll survive all right, you start to remember the other thing, the Life sentence, and the hollowness comes back into your stomach. You're doing Life. That means seventeen or even twenty years in this State. Fifteen if you're very lucky. But that's when you're doing the time in gaol. Doing it here, well, who knows? Being here means you're Criminally Insane, a psychopath, and they don't let psychopaths out if they can help it. You look along the verandah and think that this is for fifteen or twenty

years, or maybe until you're an old man. Just this verandah and the outside yard and the dining room and the vegetable garden stretching on for probably twenty years at least. You feel the way you did when you were a little kid lost in Woolworths big store and you just stood there crying until some kind lady bent down and asked you what the matter was and then took you by the hand and found your mummy for you. Then your mummy gave you a big hug and you cried some more, but differently, because the fright was over. But now there weren't any kind ladies and no mummy, and crying wouldn't help.

There are some men down in the vegetable gardens working with spades and mattocks. Some of them are bare to the waist and brown from the sun. They're working slowly, and you can hear the soft sound of the mattocks hitting the earth and a faint sound of the talking and sometimes a shout or a joke. Screws are standing around on the high ground watching the men, or strolling among them. One screw's listening to the mid-week races on a transistor radio. Across the wall, the lake is a different colour from before lunch, darker blue and all ruffled by a lovely breeze that you can feel on your face.

At three o'clock two pantry workers carry a big tea-urn and a tin of biscuits down to the garden workers, then come back and bring another urn and more biscuits out to the verandah. You line up with some other men for a cup of the tea and a biscuit. The tea has milk and sugar in it. You begin to feel cheerful again, thinking that, anyhow, this is better than gaol.

At six o'clock the men start gathering near two heavy doors at each end of the verandah where the cells are. All the screws are there with their bunches of keys. The men go through the doors and start undressing and

putting on pyjamas. Each man has a little plastic cup of water and some of them have a book or magazine too. Then a screw leads each man to his cell and locks him in. Your cell is half-way down the row. It has pale yellow tiles on the walls and the floor is some kind of rubber. It has a bed and an open rubber tub like the gaol tubs for pissing in. You can shit in them too, but they're so small it's hard to squat over them properly, and the shit smell fills up the cell all night.

When everybody's locked up, the screws go away. You sit on your bed and look around the cell. It has a window with a sort of steel lattice over it. You can see the main wall a few yards away, and along to the left you can see part of the main gate. There's a rose bush growing under the window, but you can only see the top of it because of the angle of the sill. It's very quiet, with only a cough or squeak of bedsprings from the other cells. You can faintly hear a television set from another part of the ward where five men are sitting up till nine-thirty. You've been told about the roster for sitting up, and that you've been put on the roster for another night. All the cell lights are left on till the rostered men are locked in their cells. The light in your cell seems awfully bright, with the bare bulb over your head and the reflection from the yellow tiles. A low rhythmic sound of moving bedsprings comes from one of the cells.

"Hey Don!" a voice calls.

"What?" another answers.

"Stop fucking yer fist!"

"Get stuffed!"

After a while the night screws come down the row of cells, trying all the locks and looking through the narrow peephole in each door. You see an eye looking at you.