PC 1/1/6/8

THE WORST THING OF HIS LIFE

You never get used to absconding. I remember once we went for sixty-one days without an absconder; there were six hundred boys in the reformatory, and nearly half of them could have walked away at any time. Day after day went past of peace unbroken except for trifling offences, and you couldn't help being proud of it, though you kept your pride secret so that no hand out of the sky could strike you down for presumption. Then on the sixty-second day a boy ran away, and we were as downcast as though the sixty-one days had never happened. Somehow you never got used to it.

A time of heavy absconding was a trial of the soul. You felt as though the whole institution were cracking and breaking; you felt you were inefficient, a bungler, a theorist who had theories but no knowledge of human nature; you felt judged even by your own staff and your own boys. And you feared too, although you didn't talk about it, that some newspaper would get hold of it, and print in some careless corner the words that would bring your career to an end, and kill the faith in your heart that your way was the right one, and make you nothing in the eyes of the world and your wife and children. For the Principal of a great institution has almost divine powers, and is admired by his friends and family.

Of course if your reformatory is what they call "closed", then you can put the blame for absconding on to the perversity of human nature; you can join the public heartily when it curses your absconders. But when your reformatory is half "open", and when you yourself

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made it so, you can't blame anyone but yourself. Of course if a staff member has been negligent, you can purge yourself by rebuking him beyond reason; but then you are ashamed, and you remember how he stood by you during some trouble, so you go and apologise to him.

Half of your absconders are probably "free" boys. Their absconding worries you more than the others, because they promised you certain things when you gave them their freedom. Some abscond and stay away; some abscond, and after dark return secretly and sheepishly to your house; one got to Durban, four hundred miles away, and there gave himself up to the police.

If a "free" absconder commits some serious offence while he is at large, that is hard to bear, because you feel directly responsible. It is sometimes difficult to decide whether to make a boy free, because although his conduct is exemplary, he perhaps committed some violent offence before he came to you. You are torn in two, nbecause you wish by this encouragement to confirm him in his resolution to be law-abiding, yet you are afraid that he may endanger you and your career by some violent act.

When such a boy does abscond, and shortly afterwards some unknown person commits such an act, your mind is full of anxiety and you fear the worst. You sleep badly at night, and dread the ringing of the telephone. Sometimes hundreds of police are called out after such an offence, and you are tormented by the thought that perhaps you are responsible for all this expenditure of time and effort, and for some innocent person's suffering.

After my first five years the reformatory began to settle down

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after having been disturbed by these new experiments. As far as absconding was concerned, the new freedom was working as well as the old strict watchfulness. But the new freedom liberated not only boys, but new energies and strengths from the unprofitable task of watching; one could now turn to the real work of education. Yet though year succeeded year in comparative tranquility, the old fear was never quite banished; the ring of the telephone, especially in the sleeping hours, was enough to set the heart beating.

One night after my wife and I had gone to bed, I was awakened by the sound of footsteps on the gravel outside the window, followed by a respectful knock.

"Who's there?" I said.

"It's me, sir, Jonkers," a voice said in Afrikaans.

If I could be called the colonel of the reformatory, then Jonkers was the adjutant, the chief executive officer. It was a tough job with a heavy responsibility, and a day that began at six in the morning and ended at six at night, with the likelihood of being called out at any time thereafter. He was a simple man of no great education, but with a loyalty and devotion that no man ever surpassed; he had stood by me in all kinds of crises and troubles, and in his simple way understood what I was doing and believed in it.

His voice was low and trembling, so I made mine matter-of-fact and firm, and said, "what's the matter?"

"There's great trouble," he said.

He had never said that to me before, and I thought with pain, now it has come, just when we thought all danger was past.

/"Go.....

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"Go round to the front door", I said.

I put on my dressimg-gown and slippers, and said to my wife, "it's some trouble".

When I lef Jonkers in, I was shocked by his appearance. The big man would not look at me, but with exaggerated politeness edged himself in at the door, and did not sit down till I had asked him to.

I sat down too, and said to him with fear in my heart, "what's the trouble?"

He made no answer, but sat there trying to control himself, and I sat watching him, both of us full of misery. But I put on a brave front to him, and waited quietly for him to speak, as though I had great resources on which to draw when the need would arise. Still he did not speak, and I said to him, "take your time".

He said, with a kind of brave gratitude, "dankie, meneer". He sat there in front of me , humble and shaken, and did not know he was in fact tormenting me; he did not know he was in fact standing over me, with an axe or a club, and that I was crying out to him, "for God's sake, strike me, but don't torment me".

"You're upset," I said.

Again he gave me the look of humble thanks. He was thankin me, the principal with the great powers, for noticing his suffering, as though it were kind of me, as though I were not sitting there consumed with desperate anxiety about myself and my work.

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"I'm finished", he said.

I did not know what he meant. He might have meant he was exhausted,

all resources gone. Or he might have meant, and that would have been in character with him, that his career was finished, Because he would take the blame, I knew that. He would fear my wrath, but it would not occur to him that if he was finished, I would be finished too.

"It's the worst thing of my life", he said.

"What is?"

"Sir, I can't bring myself to tell you," he said. Then he said, "I've told the Principal some bad news in my life, but I don't know how to tell him this."

Then a car drew up outside the ~~frankxdamx~~ house, and doors banged, and men came running. And I thought, let them all come, and went out on to the stoep to meet them.

Fichardt said to me, "is Mr. Jonkers here?"

"He's here," I said.

"Thank God," he said in a low voice, "I was afraid he might do something desperate."

And I said , also in a low voice, "what's the trouble?" And I braced myself for the worst.

"It's his son, sir. He's just had a message to say his son's been arrested."

So the great fear rolled off my heart, there on the stoep. The relief was so great that my whole self had to experience it, and for a moment, no for some moments, I had no thought to spare for Jonkers and his son. Then I said quietly, "what for?"

"I don't know, sir."

Fichardt and I went into the house, where Jonkers was sitting

with his head in his hands.

"He's worried about the boy, sir," said Fichardt. Then he added with meaning, "he's worried about his job too."

I went to Jonkers.

"Are you worried about the job?" I said.

He nodded and wept openly, a public servant in danger, and a father in disgrace.

"If they take away your job," I said, "they can take away mine too."

The big man did not, could not, look at me, but I heard him saying in a broken voice, "dankie, meneer; dankie, meneer."

"I couldn't run this place without you," I said.

Even in the midst of his weeping he could not hide his pride. Then he said to me, "I'm ashamed. I'm an elder in the church. There's never been a thing like this in our family."

I was full of confidence and strength.

"We'll go to the police," I said. "It's some boy's trick. Perhaps he was showing off in a car. I'll go and get dressed."

Jonkers looked at me with gratitude. I could see that he was grateful to be going to the police with the Principal.

Fichardt went back to the car, and I went to get dressed.

"Trouble?" asked my wife.

"Trouble," I said, "but not the reformatory."

"Good," she said, and went to sleep.

When I got back to Jonkers, he was standing up waiting for me.

"Meneer," he said.

"Yes."

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"I hope I didn't frighten you," he said. "You might have thought it was trouble at the reformatory."

"Of course not," I said, "of course not."

"I told my wife," he said, "I'm down as far as a man can go, but if I go to the Principal he'll lift me up."

"That's good," I said, "let's go."

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