

Homosexual Blackmail in the 1890s: The Fitzroy Street Raid, the Oscar Wilde Trials, and the Case of Cotsford Dick

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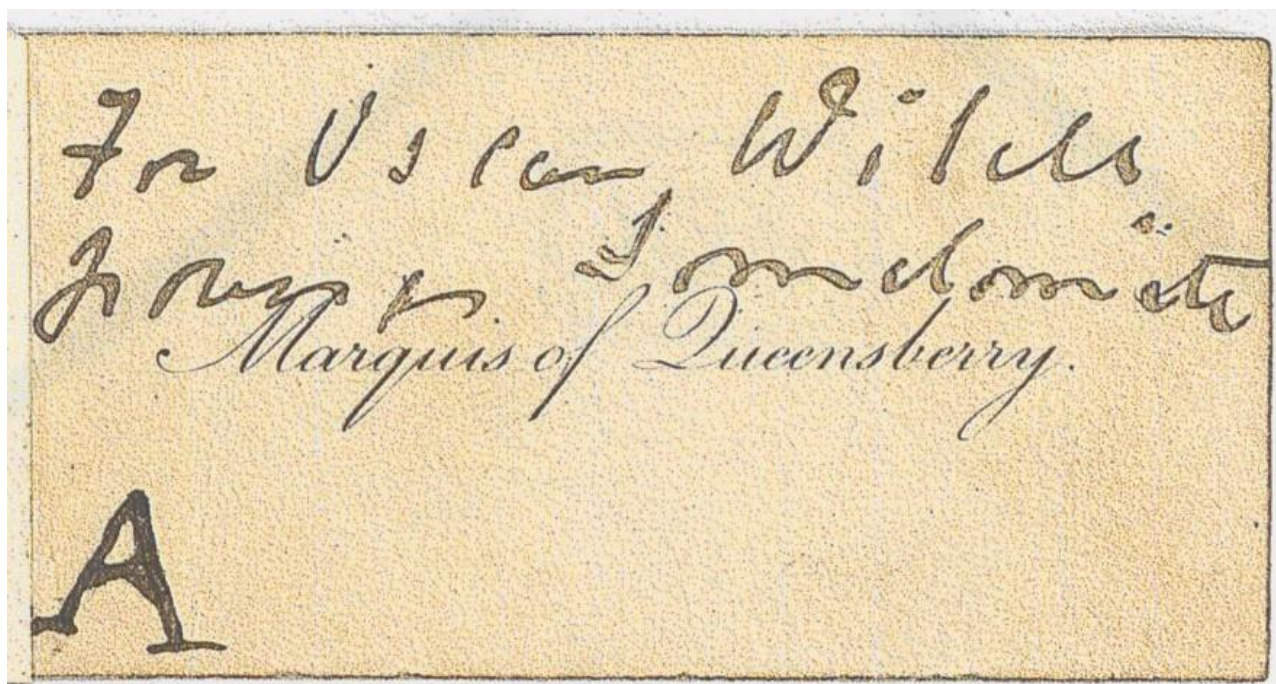


Fig. 1: Visiting card of the Marquis of Queensberry, see Fig. 5 for larger image and full details.

The Fitzroy Street Raid: Just before Midnight, Sunday, 12 August 1894

Toward the end of a midsummer evening in 1894, five police officers were keeping watch on a stream of visitors arriving in cabs at 46 Fitzroy Street (also known as Fitzroy Square) in Central London. By 11.30 pm, Detective-Sergeant Kane had observed several hansoms draw up at the property, with small groups of young and middle-aged men alighting onto the pavement and entering the building. It was a well-turned-out crowd. Some of the callers—as several provincial newspapers noted—were in “evening dress,” while others donned “boating costume” (“A London Orgie”). Eventually, at midnight a carriage containing three especially suspicious individuals made its way to the residence. As he put the passengers under scrutiny, Kane realised that the vehicle contained two males in women’s clothing, with a young man in ordinary attire sitting on their laps. Once the plainclothes youth called Harold Browne had exited the cab (he quickly occupied himself by wandering up and down the street looking at the numbers of each dwelling), Kane and his junior colleague Sergeant Keys stepped onto the footboard and declared

that the two persons inside were men in women's clothing. Immediately, the cross-dressers put their fans before the faces, as if to tantalise—in a delightfully camp manner—the policemen's stern disapproval of such impudence.

Kane duly recorded the finer points of the twenty-six-year-old Arthur Marling's feminine couture. Marling, who claimed to be a female impersonator, "was dressed in a stylishly-made yellow and black silk dress, with white lace, relieved by violet ribbons at the neck" ("A London Orgie"). "The figure," the press revealed, "was made to represent that of a lady, and the man wore the tiniest pair of ladies' evening shoes with bows on" ("A London Orgie"). According to another regional paper, the *Lichfield Mercury*, the other man wearing a frock, the twenty-one-year-old John Severs, pulled up his dress and retorted to the detective-sergeant: "You can see I am not in female attire; I have got a pair of trousers on" ("Men in Women's Clothes"). Apparently, the trousers had strategically been "turned up at the knee" ("Men in Women's Clothes"). The instant the officers shut their notebooks, Superintendent Shephard came up to Marling and Severs, and charged them under the Vagrancy Act 1824 "with being idle and disorderly persons": a provision that had long been used to put female prostitutes in custody ("Men in Women's Clothes"). Promptly, the police entered the first floor of the house. Within minutes, they arrested twenty men, ten of whom appear to have been in the flat that their host, John Watson Preston, was renting.¹ Five others were found assembled in the basement, for reasons that no report clarified. Preston's flat also contained two unidentified women—ones whom Bernard Abrahams, an attorney defending several of the arrested men, later confirmed were "[g]enuine women"—who had no charges brought against them ("Raid on a West-End 'Club'").

I begin with this disrupted summertime piece of urban revelry because it serves as a pivotal event, one that combines several closely connected elements in the thriving metropolitan world of homosexual blackmail during the 1890s. The gathering that took place at 46 Fitzroy Street, which has received little critical attention since the 1960s, brought together a largely working-class circle of gay friends and acquaintances, several of whom claimed to be unemployed when it was the case that they made a living from sex work and extortion.² We can see from Marling's and Severs' respective items of female clothing that the sprucely attired partygoers planned to

¹ The names and occupations of arrested men appeared in several press reports (though sometimes with inconsistencies with regard to the spelling of names [e.g. Marling as Marley]) as follows: Walter Pilsworth, age 32, 46 Fitzroy Street, fruiterer, unemployed; Henry Augustus Roberts, age 39, 135 Whitfield Street, sculleryman; William Wright, age 33, 135 Whitfield Street, valet, unemployed; Charles Smith, age 43, 135 Whitfield Street, butler, unemployed; William Wright, age 33, 135 Whitfield Street, butler, unemployed; Arthur Ivens, age 17, 6 Egbert Street, clerk, unemployed; George Huckle, age 43, 1 Hyde Park Gardens, butler; George Clements, age 32, 78 Finborough Road, Fulham, costumier; John Dernbach, age 18, 20 Gower Place, valet, unemployed; Harold Browne, age 28, 48 Hendon Street, tobacconist; Henry James Stephens, age 27, 39 Fernshaw Road, valet; Thomas Coombs, age 38, 78 Finborough Road, Fulham, ladies' tailor; Samuel Lee, age 23, 8 Bury Street, Fulham, fishmonger; Herbert Coulton, age 32, 3 Bolsover Street, fruiterer, unemployed; John Watson Preston, age 34, 46 Fitzroy Street, general dealer; Joseph Skinner, age 44, 155 Mayswell Road, Battersea, no occupation; John Hands, age 31, 83 Newman Street, clerk; Charles Parker, age 19, 72 Regent Street, no occupation; Alfred Taylor, age 32, 7 Camera Street, Chelsea, no occupation; Arthur Marling, age 26, 8 Crawford Street, female impersonator; John Severs, age 21, 48 Hendon Street, tobacconist's assistant ("The Raid in Fitzroy-Street").

² The raid is mentioned briefly in Cook 46, 57, 64, Croft-Cooke 277-78, McKenna 296-97, and Reed 36.

congregate around a drag performance, a form of entertainment which had for decades been central to queer culture in London. More to the point, some of the guests played noteworthy roles in widely publicised cases that featured the blackmail of prosperous gentlemen. And, as these trials also reveal, several of the attendees who were later exposed as seasoned extortionists had close ties to other criminals in the same profitable line of business. At the same time, the lawsuits that I analyse below—which involve the well-known Irish dramatist Oscar Wilde and the popular composer, writer, and society wit Charles George Cotsford Dick (1846-1911)—show that on occasion the targets of homosexual blackmail managed to foil their predators, and that blackmail did not always result in the kind of successful coercion from which some of the revellers at Preston’s flat reaped substantial rewards.

There are various aspects of the Sunday night festivities at Preston’s home that concentrate attention on the links between homosexual blackmail and the lawless circle in which this unapologetic host moved. To begin with, there were obvious reasons why this event aroused the police officers’ suspicions. The Sunday night gathering at 46 Fitzroy Street flouted the law insofar as it amounted to an unlicensed club. In two subsequent court appearances, the magistrate learned that Preston had issued tickets for 2s 6d, which covered the cost of alcoholic beverages and other refreshments. (Twenty of these documents, as the *Lichfield Mercury* observed, were found in his flat [“Men in Women’s Clothes”].) At the time, the police were told that the tickets provided entrance to a party that had occurred in his apartment on the previous evening, though later evidence revealed that the Sunday get-together also involved a fee. One of the probable reasons for the strong police presence on the Sunday evening related to the fact that the Saturday night’s entertainments had caused considerable disturbance. According to *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, once the carousing had grown unbearably loud, Arthur Leverett—a wood engraver who occupied rooms on the third floor on the building—complained to the landlord (“Men in Women’s Clothes”).³ The more salient point, however, is that the police suspected that the disorderliness and idleness among Preston’s guests was not simply connected with antisocial unruliness. That no fewer than five officers were taking careful note of the men who were entering the property suggests they presumed that some kind of illicit sexual activity was likely to transpire as the clock ticked toward the small hours. Marling’s glorious frock and Severs’ less graceful getup only reinforced these suspicions.

No one, however, was found to be practising—to use the word that preyed on the mind of officialdom—sodomy. And, from the extant reports, no one among this group of men (many of them claiming to be out of work) was found in a state of undress. During the hearings, Mr. James Hannay—the long-serving magistrate at the Great Marlborough Street police court—learned from Inspector Reed that when he and Sergeant Weatherhead apprehended the five suspects in the basement, he asked John Hands (a thirty-one-year-old clerk): “What are you doing here?” To which Hands replied: “We are only having a bit of a lark” (“Men in Women’s Clothes,” *Lichfield Mercury*). As we know from the much earlier trials of the cross-dressers and theatrical performers Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park (better known as “Fanny” and “Stella”), after they had been detained in women’s clothing on the streets of London in 1870, they, too, stated that they were simply having a “lark”: a word which to the outside world suggested a bit of fun, but

³ The *St. James’s Gazette* recorded that in court Leverett gave evidence about his complaint to the landlord (“Raid on a West-End ‘Club’”).

might also have been a subcultural euphemism for sexual mischief.⁴ Once the five men found in the basement had been bundled upstairs to join their fellows Preston declared: “I have invited my friends here for a party, as I am going to leave to-morrow” (“Men in Women’s Clothes” *Lichfield Mercury*). No sooner had Preston revealed that this was a farewell gathering than the officers took careful note of the contents of his threadbare accommodation. Reed observed that Preston’s three rooms—a front parlour, a back parlour, and a kitchen—were “heavily curtained,” a fact that clearly emphasised his desire for privacy (“Men in Women’s Clothing”). There was a mattress in the kitchen, and another was brought in from a lumber-room. It appears that the landlord had seized the bedstead earlier on the Sunday because Preston had failed to pay the rent.

In this poorly furnished space, as the *Lichfield Mercury* also noted, there were several other items that caught the officers’ attention. Besides quantities of beer, spirits, and mineral water, the police discovered various “dresses, fans, corsets, and female underclothing” (“Men in Women’s Clothes”). At the magistrates’ court, Reed produced items in evidence that were described as “a hare’s foot with rouge and powder on it, a powder puff, vaseline, glycerine, pair of curling tongs, box of powder, and pendant” (“Men in Women’s Clothes”). These articles, which indicated that Preston engaged in drag performance, were spotted “over the copper in the kitchen,” an item that presumably served as an improvised washstand (“Men in Women’s Clothes”). The copper, it appears, was where Preston and some of his pals would apply, touch up, and remove their make-up. Such particulars give the impression that the value that Preston placed upon his cosmetics and jewellery was much greater than that which he attributed to his furnishings. In any case, since Preston was about to move out of the property, he had decided that even though he was going to make an uproarious exit in straitened circumstances, he would do so in spectacular style. Had the police begun their raid a little later, Preston would have very possibly been accompanying Marling and Severs in a music-hall number or two.

Given the dispersed nature of the evidence, it proved difficult for the magistrate to commit any of the supposed culprits to trial. By the time Hannay assessed the case on Monday, 21 August 1894, he was confronted not only with Severs and Marling charged with “being idle and disorderly persons”; he also inspected the remaining eighteen, who stood before him on the broad allegation that they had been “jointly and severally assembling and associating together at Fitzroy-street for felonious purposes” (“Raid on a Club”). As he listened to Kane’s report about the two cross-dressed visitors, Hannay—according to the *Wells Journal*—immediately inquired: “Were they all made up?” “Oh, yes,” Kane replied. “I had considerable difficulty in telling them. They had wigs on, and their faces were painted.” “Have you any conception,” Hannay asked, “what their object was?” “I have, your Worship,” Kane stated bluntly, as if the crime that the two female impersonators were about to commit needed hardly any explanation (“A London Orgie”).

Even if it was clear to the powers-that-be that the police officers had done their duty by preventing a night of debauchery, it remained impossible to embark on a prosecution. Hannay informed the court that “there was nothing to justify a criminal charge against the majority of the

⁴ The various court appearances of Boulton and Park drew attention to the idea that their cross-dressing had been a “lark.” As the *Penny Illustrated Newspaper* noted with scorn: “If, as had been suggested, they were merely acting in this way for ‘a lark,’ it must be said that the lark was one of very long duration, extending over years, and carried on with a degree of systematic arrangement unusual, to say the least of it, when harmless diversion was alone in contemplation” (“Gentlemen’ in Ladies’ Costume”).

defendants” (“The Raid in Fitzroy Square”). All the magistrate could do was ask Marling and Severs, together with the five men found lurking below stairs, to find sureties and keep the peace for a specified period of one to three months. Hannay, however, conceded that—in the words of *Reynolds’s Newspaper* (the radical weekly that paid close attention to scandals of this kind)—“there seemed to be something more than suspicious against the five found in the basement” (“Men in Women’s Clothes”). He added, somewhat mysteriously, that he had received several anonymous letters stating that “among the men arrested were some of the evilest possible character” (“The Raid on a West-End Club”). Toward the end of the proceedings, Superintendent Sheppard commented drily: “They are most of them known, your worship” (“Men in Women’s Clothes”). This comment simply confirms that many of these men were understood to engage in same-sex intimacy, in ways that convinced some commentators that an “orgie” (as at least two regional papers quaintly noted in idiosyncratic orthography) was likely to occur.

There is, however, the possibility that the superintendent and his colleagues knew about some other troubling facts, ones that were not exclusively linked with sodomy: the crime that had been outlawed through a succession of laws since 1533, most recently under the sixty-first section of the Offences against the Person Act 1861 that prohibited bestiality in the same breath. By 1894, when the raid occurred, there was an aspect of the legal climate that made attending an event like this one a particularly charged act of defiance. Lively parties like Preston’s were not entirely unusual in the metropolis, and they point to the ingenuity with which queer men consolidated their social ties in the face of extreme prohibition. The raid, it is worth recalling, took place some nine years after the passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 through parliament, with its eleventh section imposing a measure the brutality of which made a stark contrast with the liberal provisions of the 1804 Code Napoleon. Under the subheading “*Outrages of decency*,” the 1885 law—which the homophobic Radical MP Henry (“Labby”) Labouchere drafted—read as follows:

Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is party to the commission of or procures (*a*) or attempts (*b*) to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency (*c*) with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour. (*The Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885* 68)

As many commentators have observed, there was no space in which male homosexual acts enjoyed any protection. Yet instead of stamping out the crime of sodomy, the eleventh section of the 1885 Act created the conditions in which men’s sexual intimacy could be exploited for further felonious purposes. As J. H. Wilson, writing under the wry pseudonym “I. Playfair,” observes in his private pamphlet *Gentle Criticisms of English Justice* (1895), this law—which became commonly known as the Labouchere Amendment—had for the best part of a decade “produced so many anomalous results, that an open consideration of its working can no longer be deferred” (Playfair 1).⁵ In Wilson’s view, “vices indictable under this Clause . . . have not been

⁵ Wilson, a writer based in Newcastle-upon-Tyne who provided an exceptionally well researched critique of the criminal prosecution of Wilde and the reports in the press, most probably succumbed to pressure from Wilde’s advocate More Adey to suppress *Gentle Criticisms*. In an undated letter, Adey informs

suppressed, and they are, in fact, universally admitted to have increased in this country during the same period” (1). In particular, what appalled Wilson was the irony involved in a law which effectively stimulated a thriving community of blackmailers. “In Piccadilly and neighbourhood,” Wilson notes of places where prostitutes congregated, “may be found 20 to 30 blackmailers, who bring accusations, under Labouchere’s Clause, against persons of wealth and distinction” (3).

Wilson was scarcely alone in his critique of this provision within the 1885 act: a hurried, and, for that reason, often poorly drafted piece of legislation, which originally set out to protect young girls from sexual trafficking, in light of the investigative journalist W. T. Stead’s famous *exposé* “The Maiden Tribute of Babylon” that had appeared—to great controversy—in the *Pall Mall Gazette* during the summer of 1885. The English homophile writer John Addington Symonds, in his correspondence with sexologist Havelock Ellis, took exception to what he characterised as “Labby’s inexpansile legislation” (*Letters* 3: 587). Symonds also remarked in his privately circulated defence of male homosexuality: “our laws encourage blackmailing upon false accusation” (*A Problem in Modern Ethics* 134). He observed, in the same publication, that the law could on occasion place “a vile weapon in the hands of unscrupulous politicians . . . to attack the government in office” (134). There is no question that clause 11 gave *carte blanche* to sundry types of opportunists. In his modern history of sexual blackmail, Angus McLaren reminds us that during the later Victorian period there were many cases in which aggrieved male employees and disgruntled patients avenged their respective masters and doctors with accusations of gross indecency. He notes as well the gangs of “blackmailing boys” who would accost complete strangers on the streets of London (*Sexual Blackmail* 20).

What needs to be stressed is that the practice of blackmail was a source of income to several members of the social group gathered at 46 Fitzroy Street. When we turn our attention to another guest at John Preston’s flat, we discover that Herbert Coulton, who in 1894 claimed to be an unemployed fruit-seller aged thirty-two, had by that time of the gathering on that Sunday night spent months persecuting Joseph Stanley Matheson, a gentleman of independent means from Braintree, Essex, with two other men. Finally, when the terrified Matheson brought a case to court (also in 1897), Coulton and his conspirators—Andrew Grant and Archibald Edward Thorpe—had extorted the hefty sum of £1,500 from him. At the Old Bailey, the jurors learned that Coulton had already served a sentence for a similar offence in 1884. During Coulton’s 1897 trial, Detective-Inspector Thomas Brockwell, who handled several cases of this type, let the court know that “the police had information that these men had blackmailed other gentlemen” (“Sentences on Blackmailers”). Together with Grant, Coulton received a life sentence, while Thorpe served fifteen years.

Besides Coulton, there were several other men at 46 Fitzroy Street who had already experienced serious brushes with the law for their direct or indirect links with blackmail. One was Alfred Waterhouse Somerset Taylor, whose full name gives some indication that he came from a class somewhat higher than that of many of the other guests at Preston’s home. A well-educated man who attended Marlborough College and had at one time held a commission in the Royal Fusiliers, Taylor was not known as a blackmailer, and he appears not to have been involved in

Wilson that he admires the “heroic sentiments” expressed in the pamphlet, but he maintains “cold reserve” about engaging with newspapers (Adey).

receiving money through selling his body. He was the bankrupted heir to a cocoa manufacturing fortune of £45,000, which—for reasons that he never properly expounded—had been squandered rapidly. His name and identity attracted immense publicity when he was successfully tried alongside Oscar Wilde, in April and May 1895, for committing acts of gross indecency (Fig. 2). (The charges led to two years of solitary confinement with hard labour.) As the lengthy criminal proceedings against Wilde revealed, Taylor was known for hosting parties in his rooms at 13 Little College Street, Westminster, and he did the same for his gay friends in his next set of lodgings at 3 Chapel Street. By September 1892, when Taylor met Wilde for the first time, the thirty-year-old had for some years been living on a small allowance from his family, which he presumably supplemented with additional sums made from procuring young men for wealthy clients. Moreover, several of his male contacts aroused the suspicions of the police.

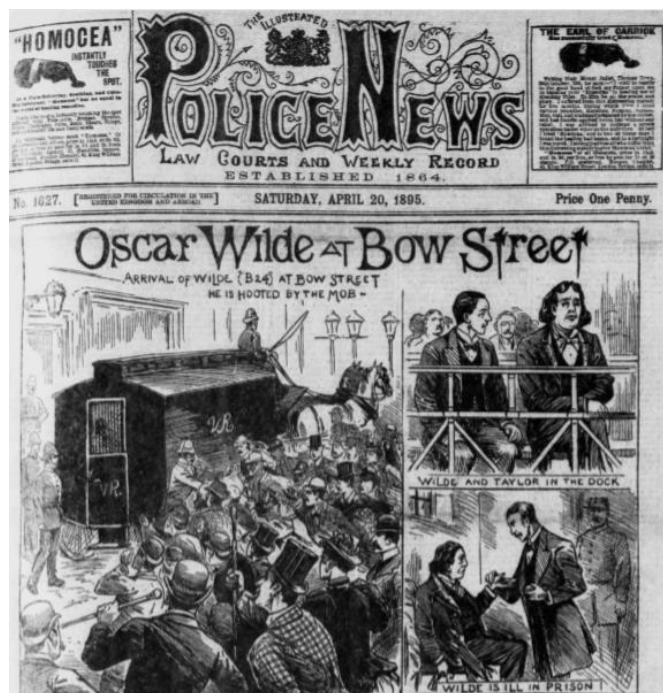


Fig. 2: “Oscar Wilde at Bow Street.” *Illustrated Police News* 20 April 1895: 1.

In May 1893, Detective-Sergeant William Harris put Taylor’s lodgings under surveillance for no fewer than seventeen or eighteen days: an exceptional amount of time for an investigation that seems not to have resulted in a single arrest. Eventually, Harris surreptitiously gained entrance to Taylor’s rooms by informing the caretaker of the building, Ellen Grant, that he was one of Taylor’s friends. The press reported that once inside Taylor’s lodgings the police officer discovered that the windows were darkened with art muslin and tapestries. At the bedroom windows, he noted, there were two large fans. The whole place, he said, was draped, both the ceilings and the walls. Exactly what else Harris found there remains unknown. But we can tell what the most likely items were from court proceedings. During Taylor’s 1895 trials, when he remained in the dock alongside Wilde for committing acts of gross indecency, Grant testified that she had seen women’s clothing and stockings. Under examination, Taylor explained to his counsel why he had female attire in his rooms: “The dress,” he informed the court, “was an Oriental costume which he brought from Constantinople for the purpose of going to a fancy-dress ball at Covent Garden” (“Wilde and Taylor”). “At Fitzroy-square,” his counsel asked, “how were you dressed?” “As I am now,” said Taylor (“Wilde and Taylor”), whose fine self-presentation was noted by journalists: “His cuffs and collar were spotlessly white; his face clean-shaven, and his hair carefully brushed” (“Oscar Wilde and Taylor at Bow Street”). Several other individuals, including a young man named Charles Parker, stated under examination that they had seen Taylor in a frock. Parker—a suborned witness who testified on behalf of the Crown prosecution against Taylor—claimed that he had seen a cross-dressed Taylor go through a mock-marriage with another man, Charles Spurrier Mason, at the Chapel Street lodgings. Parker said he had seen Taylor “dressing up as the bride” (“Wilde & Taylor”). “Parker,” the *Sun* noted,

“even had the details of the wedding breakfast” (“Wilde & Taylor”). Such disclosures, as one might imagine during the *fin de siècle*, caused a sensation in court.



Fig. 3: “Charles Parker.”
Reynolds’s Newspaper 28 April
1895: 1.

Charles Parker, as the same examination in April 1895 disclosed, was also in attendance at Preston’s party the previous year (Fig. 3). When he was hauled before the magistrate after the Fitzroy Street raid, he had claimed to be nineteen years old and without an occupation. Certainly, he had gone through periods of poverty. It was during the prosecution of Taylor and Wilde that the court learned from Parker that he—together with his older brother William—had lodged with Taylor for three weeks in 1893, apparently because they were short of cash and destitute. Although it remains hard to determine where Parker was raised (he said that his father was a horse trainer at Datchet, Berkshire), we know from the proceedings that on 3 October 1894 he enlisted with the Royal Artillery. His military career, however, did not last long, since he was subpoenaed as a

witness during the trials and then discharged shortly after Taylor and Wilde were imprisoned because of his shocking confessions about his intimacy with men. At the Old Bailey, Parker, who was carefully groomed to divulge the sexual acts that he had performed with Wilde, also nervously stated that he had received money through the extortion of funds from various gentlemen.

Like J. P. Grain, who defended Taylor, Wilde’s defence counsel Sir Edward Clarke—the highly distinguished lawyer who had previously been Solicitor-General—was also in possession of privileged information, which had been sent to him privately, about Parker’s attempts at homosexual blackmail. One such victim was a man with the last name Thurr or Burr (since it was differently recorded in the press), who most probably resided in a fashionable thoroughfare in Chelsea, London.⁶ And there was also the unnamed gentleman from whom Parker—after he had worked with two seasoned blackmailers Alfred Wood and William Allen—received £30, most probably when he served as sexual bait by taking an unsuspecting client back to his rooms in Camera Square. As was quite usual with this type of blackmailing, another member of the team burst in upon Parker and his companion, and—in the guise of the young man’s outraged cousin or uncle—roughed up, verbally abused, and made financial demands upon the horrified punter. This incident, as Parker admitted to Sir Edward, took place several weeks before the Fitzroy Street raid; Wood and Allen had subsequently managed to extort the considerable sum of £300 or £400 from the same individual.

One of Parker’s other blackmailing accomplices was the slightly younger John Dernbach (an unemployed valet who had been an inmate at the Carter Home for Destitute Boys, Clapham), who the police also arrested at 46 Fitzroy Street. The only outline of this teenager’s adult life exists in the reports of Taylor’s trial on 20 May 1895. Since Dernbach did not appear as a witness on that day, it is hard to fathom the exact nature of his relationship with Parker. It is,

⁶ Millard gives the name as Thurr (203), while the *Sun* records it as Burr (“Wilde and Taylor at the Old Bailey”).

however, clear that Taylor's defence counsel possessed information about the ways in which Parker and Dernbach together extorted funds from a man named Clarke, who was (as Parker recalled) a "silver-broker . . . or something in the silver trade" ("Wilde: Case Re-Opened Today at the Old Bailey"). "At that time," Parker told Grain, the well-off individual Clarke "was then in business with his brother-in-law in Bond-st": the West End thoroughfare known for its upmarket jewellers ("Wilde: Case Re-Opened Today at the Old Bailey"). Parker added that he had no knowledge of the silver-broker Clarke's present whereabouts. The press reports of this cross-examination at the Old Bailey indicate that Parker was accused of stealing Clarke's watch and chain. The reports also imply that Parker introduced Dernbach to Clarke for sexual favors. Clarke, it seems, compromised himself by writing amorous letters to Dernbach, and Parker subsequently demanded money from Dernbach, perhaps because Dernbach had extracted sums of money from Clarke. Somewhere along the line the police became involved, though the matter did not result in a prosecution.

What, then, of the other thirteen males whom the police placed under arrest? In the case of John Severs, who arrived in a cab wearing a Japanese robe, there are currently no available records that throw further light on his life. All that we know about him are three basic facts: he worked for his companion, the tobacconist Harold Browne, in Pimlico; he met up with Arthur Marling in Oxford Street before Preston's party; and he was discovered wearing turned-up trousers underneath a dress when the police charged him with disorderly conduct. The same obscurity applies to many of the other individuals, including Preston, whom the police officers brought before Justice Hannay. There is some possibility that the young man who claimed to be a twenty-three-old fishmonger named Samuel Lee was the same person who appeared in court as Samuel Wright in early June 1895. Even though the charge against Wright was that he had been caught stealing "some old Mechlin lace, value £50" from an altar in Brompton Oratory," the Westminster police court heard that "the prisoner was well known to the police as the intimate associate of the most discreditable witnesses of the Oscar Wilde case, and a notorious black-mailer." "He was," the report added, "arrested by the police when they raided a house in Fitzroy-square" ("London and Provincial News"). As for many of the others, they appear to have had the remarkable ability to escape detection in any official documents, such as a census or register of voters. Their elusiveness raises the question of whether some of the men arrested in the raid—even when they appeared in court—habitually operated under assumed names.

Oscar Wilde, Alfred Douglas, and Homosexual Blackmail

The Fitzroy Street raid was conducted at a time when there was a general sense that homosexual men were vulnerable to invasive policing. On the very same day that the five officers busted Preston's party, the satirist Max Beerbohm—who had several close queer acquaintances—shared a joke about two of his friends with the gay aesthete Reggie Turner. Beerbohm conjured an image of what might have happened if the police had found Oscar Wilde at party similar to Preston's bash. At the time, Wilde had for two years been involved intimately with the twenty-

three-year-old aristocrat Alfred Douglas (also known as Bosie), who had earned a reputation for his fine boyish looks, his athletic frame, and, until recently, his unapologetic promotion—through an Oxford undergraduate magazine, the *Spirit Lamp*—of a male homosexual literary culture (Fig. 4). Beerbohm, however, imagines Wilde and Bosie at a location very different from the *déclassé* one at Fitzroy Street. Instead, Beerbohm unravels a fantasy about a highly unlikely police raid in one of the salubrious venues that Wilde frequented. “Oscar,” Beerbohm kidded, “has at length been arrested for certain kinds of crime. He was taken in the Café Royal (lower room), Bosie escaped, being an excellent runner, but Oscar was less nimble” (Beerbohm 97). Evidently, Beerbohm had a good sense of the suspicions that surrounded the activities that the police assumed were likely to transpire at Fitzroy Street. Moreover, Beerbohm’s jesting also demonstrates his informed knowledge of the resourceful ways in which Wilde had developed intimate connections with young men whom he found sexually attractive. Some of these individuals, though by no means all of them, were known to the police, and two of them were among Preston’s guests.

The fashionable Café Royal on Regent Street was one of several places in which Wilde captivated these new companions, whose criminal lives—as he later recalled in jail—“were wonderful in their infamous war against life” (*Complete Letters* 759). The café was where Douglas, who enjoyed deep familiarity with London’s queer subculture, encouraged the young blackmailer Alfred Wood to meet with Wilde. It was here that Wilde was introduced to a man named Edward Harrington: a music publisher’s clerk who most probably enhanced his income through sex work. And it was also at the Café Royal that Wilde lunched with another sex worker and blackmailer, Frederick Atkins (also known, both on stage and sometimes in court, as Fred Denny), who had been developing a music-hall career as both a comedian and cross-dressed sex worker.⁷ It was there, too, that Wilde entertained respectable



Fig. 4: “Full-length seated photograph of Lord Alfred Douglas,” 4 February 1894. Photographer unknown. Wildeiana Box 15, folder 11. William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁷ That Fred Atkins used different names on the occasions when he appeared in court was noted in the *Morning*: “Fred Atkins’ was called. There answered to the requisition a somewhat burly, clean-faced young fellow, wearing a long blue Newmarket coat, which, when opened, disclosed the corduroy waistcoat much affected by ‘horsey’ people nowadays. His appearance was a revelation to some in court. He described himself as a bookmaker’s clerk; but he was quickly recognised as ‘Fred Denny,’ a low comedian of the minor music halls, and the prosecutor in a recent case in which a collateral member of a noble family and his wife were convicted of robbing him of a number of valuables, including a cigarette case. ‘Fred Atkins’ answered questions in a raucous voice” (“Oscar Wilde’s Trial”). In 1894, “Fred

youths, such as Edward Shelley: a mentally unstable clerk who worked for the publisher John Lane, whose company The Bodley Head was located in nearby Vigo Street. Shelley was also one of Wilde's sex partners. Most of these assignations took place in late 1892 or early 1893, and Wilde often followed up his liberal hospitality at the café by taking the young men out to one of his favourite restaurants—especially the Florence, Kettner's, or the Solferino—in neighbouring Soho.

If, however, the Café Royal became a regular fixture in Wilde's daily life with Bosie, it was also a venue that caused him insufferable strain. Not only did he have to cover his boyfriend's expenses (on many days, luncheon and liqueurs lasted for two hours until 3.30pm either there or at the Berkeley); he also had to contend with Douglas's pugilistic father, John Sholto Douglas, the 9th Marquess of Queensberry, who was so enraged at the idea that his youngest son was consorting in public with Wilde that he embarked on a campaign to harass them. "Your father," Wilde informed Bosie sometime during July or August 1894, "is on the rampage again—been to the Café Royal to enquire for us, with threats etc. I think now it would be better for me to have had him bound over to keep the peace, but what a scandal!" (*Complete Letters* 598). "Still," Wilde continued, "it is intolerable to be dogged by a maniac" (598).

One can begin to see both from Beerbohm's jesting with Turner and from Wilde's letter to Bosie that hostile forces were closing in upon the queer social *milieux* that brought men variously into contact for sexual intimacy, drag performance, prostitution, and of course blackmail. To Wilde, the Fitzroy Street raid was hardly a joking matter. On learning about the arrests, he wrote to Alfred Taylor's partner-in-marriage, Charles Spurrier Mason, expressing his concern: "I was very sorry to read in the paper about poor Alfred Taylor. It is a dreadful piece of bad luck" (*Complete Letters* 603). In this and a subsequent letter to Mason, Wilde explains that he does not have any money to assist Taylor. In all likelihood, Wilde recognised that Taylor needed funds to cover legal costs, and it may have been that Mason had already petitioned Wilde for financial support. The correspondence with Mason is also important because it reveals Wilde's deep acquaintance with Taylor. "I should think," he says of Taylor's family, "that *now* his people would do something for him . . . I know he is not on good terms with them" (*Complete Letters* 603). As Wilde's trials exposed in spring 1895, his friendship with Taylor had been developing for eighteen months, if not longer, and the court soon learned that the sociable man who held parties at Little College Street enabled Wilde to make contact with Charles Parker, Alfred Wood, Edward Harrington, and Frederick Atkins—four young men on whom he would at times bestow large sums of money, even when he was running short of cash. Yet the amounts with which Wilde parted were not always in response to attempts at blackmail. Nor he did give these individuals financial rewards solely for sex. A big-hearted man, Wilde—as the court proceedings demonstrate—sometimes presented these handsome youths with monies that he thought might transform their lives, in ways that suggest that he cared for their welfare.

Denny" had brought a successful prosecution against a young married couple, Eustace Clarence Cecil and Frances Cecil, for robbing him of his personal valuables. Clarke pressed Atkins on the tactics the young man used in blackmailing. The *Star* included a report that shows that Clarke asked Atkins: "Have you ever gone out into the streets in woman's dress?" ("Oscar Wilde").

Some weeks before, Wilde had consulted with his solicitors to see if it might be possible to find grounds upon which he could bring a case against Bosie's indignant parent: a man whom Douglas, in his later years, recalled as "an unmanly brute or a crazy lunatic," one who neglected his four children and "made a practice of writing [his estranged wife] brutally abusive letters" (*Autobiography* 92).⁸ Ever eager to pick a fight with his disaffected sons, the belligerent marquess on 18 February 1895 left an insulting (and infamously) misspelled visiting card at the Albemarle Club, where Wilde was a member. The card, once one has tried to decipher the scrawl, read as follows: "For Oscar Wilde, Posing as Somdomite" (Fig. 5). To Wilde, the insult was the last straw. As he informed his close friend Robert Ross: "I don't see anything now but a criminal prosecution. My whole life seems ruined by this man. The tower of ivory is assailed by the foul thing" (*Complete Letters* 634). Wilde's allusion to the Song of Solomon 7:4 indicates the depth to which Queensberry's taunts had violated him. At this point, he was convinced that he had justice on his side. Before the pre-trial hearing ahead of his libel case, Wilde went to meet Sybil Robinson, the fortune-teller who—quite mistakenly, as it turned out—"prophesied complete triumph" in the end (*Complete Letters* 636).

As students of Wilde's career know well, what the future held for him was far from triumphant, and it is unlikely that he would have pursued this libel action if he had anticipated the relentless ends to which Queensberry's defence team, led by an ambitious young lawyer Charles Russell, went in order to exonerate their client. Russell hired two former police detectives, Frederick ("Fred") Kerley and John Littlechild, who had detailed knowledge of London's sexual subcultures. Where Kerley had been instrumental in the arrest of the cross-dressing performers Boulton and Park twenty-five years earlier, Littlechild had earned fame—as his 1894 volume of memoirs shows—for his colourful police work that involved foiling the plots of "the expert forger, the ingenious swindler, and the inventive genius of roguery"—all of whom, he declared, made "very interesting studies" (12). The respect in which Littlechild was held elevated him to the first Head of Special Branch: a post he occupied from 1888 to 1893.

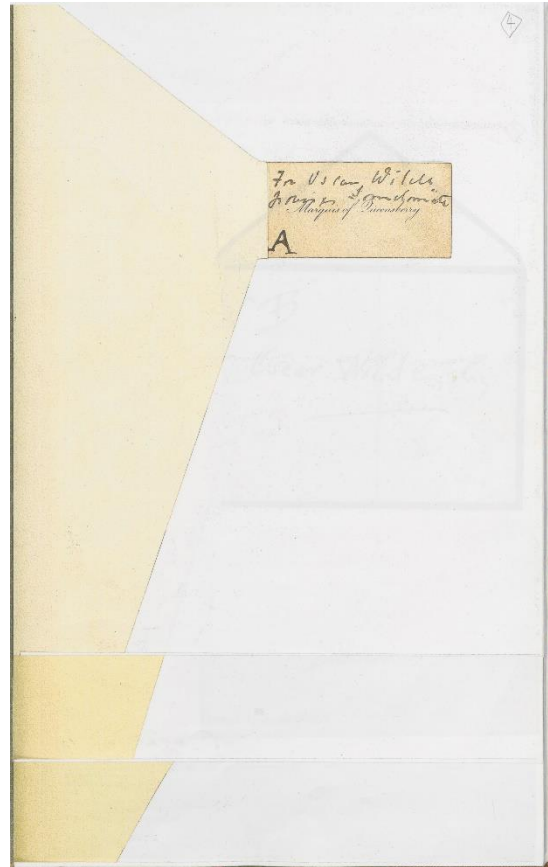


Fig. 5: Visiting card of John Sholto Douglas, 9th Marquis of Queensberry, left for Oscar Wilde, Albemarle Club, 18 February 1894. CRIM 1/41/6, National Archives (UK). The "A" in the bottom left-hand corner is the letter used to classify it as an exhibit during Wilde's libel suit. An enlargement of the text on the card appears at the top of this article.

⁸ Douglas's comment originally appeared in Harris and Douglas, *New Preface to "The Life and Confessions of Oscar Wilde"* 31, 32. The first edition of Douglas's *Autobiography* was published in 1929.

Just before Wilde's libel case against Queensberry came to trial, Kerley had an exceptional stroke of luck. He made contact with Taylor's landlady, Sophia Gray, at Chapel Street, where he learned that she had withheld one of Taylor's possessions—a leather hatbox—because he had failed to pay his rent. This item was stuffed with cheques, telegrams, and tradesmen's bills. Especially noteworthy were the communications with Wilde. As *Reynolds's Newspaper* reported, one read: "Cannot manage the dinner tomorrow; am so sorry.—OSCAR" And another one, mentioned in the same report, stated: "Obliged to see [the theatre actor-manager Herbert Beerbohm Tree] at five o'clock. So don't come to the Savoy. Let me know at once about Fred.—OSCAR" ("Wilde and Taylor").⁹ There was also a Christmas card to a young middle-class man named Sydney Mavor. With this discovery in hand, Kerley deduced that Taylor had played a central role in putting Wilde in touch with a queer social circle, and he moved at once to track down Mavor (the well-educated son of a veterinary surgeon) and Fred (the familiar name, as the courts discovered, which Wilde used for the teenage blackmailer Atkins). Russell obtained witness statements from these two and another nine young men, all of whose evidence went into Queensberry's plea of justification. The plea not only listed Wilde's acts of gross indecency with Shelley, Mavor, Atkins, Wood, and Parker; it also went on to mention his perpetration of the same crime with several other young men—Ernest Scarfe, Herbert Tankard, Walter Grainger, Alphonse Conway, and Maurice Salis Schwabe (the last of these was the well-connected nephew-in-law of the Solicitor-General, Sir Frank Lockwood). Moreover, the plea stated that Wilde was guilty of the same act with a "certain boy to the defendant unknown" (Holland 288). Most of the named individuals were subpoenaed, though it transpired that the seventeen-year-old Herbert Tankard had decamped to employment in a hotel at Calais, France, while Schwabe—whose name was so sensitive that it could only be communicated for some time through notes that the attorneys passed around the court in silence—had fled two years before, first to New Zealand and then to Australia.¹⁰

Although none of the eleven men in Queensberry's plea of justification was eventually called to give evidence during the libel trial, their names came up repeatedly throughout the proceedings. The marquess's defence attorney Edward Carson, whose rhetorical skills eventually outmatched Wilde's, drew on a wealth of carefully researched sources. "[M]ay I take it," Carson asked in reference to the connection with Taylor, "that Charles Parker was one of the ones you became friendly with?" "Oh, yes," Wilde responded (Holland 164). "How old," Carson continued, "was Parker?" To which Wilde shrewdly replied: "I don't keep a census" (Holland 164). "What about was his age?" Carson persisted. "I should say about twenty." "He was," Carson corrected Wilde, "seventeen" (Holland 164-65). In defying the authority of the official record, Wilde bore up pretty well to Carson's blitz of inquiries. "Did you take him to lunch at various places?" Carson inquired. "At how many places?" he persisted. "At the Café Royal," Wilde said, before mentioning one or two other venues (Holland 175). Carson, with great persistence, went over the places where Wilde had allegedly slept with Parker, including the luxurious Savoy Hotel on The Strand; he then elicited details about the silver cigarette case and sums of money that Wilde had bestowed on the young man.

⁹ *Reynolds's*, for the purpose of discretion, placed a dash where Tree's name was heard during Fred Kerley's cross-examination during the first criminal trial against Taylor and Wilde, which followed—as I explain below—Wilde's libel suit against Queensberry.

¹⁰ On Schwabe's journeys to New Zealand and then Australia in 1893, see Seeney.

At this juncture, Carson wanted to know if Wilde ever learned what had become of Parker since the last time they met around Christmas 1893. “Did you hear,” Carson probed, “that he and Taylor were arrested together?” “Yes,” Wilde replied, “I read it in the newspapers.” “And did you read,” Carson added, “that at the time they were arrested they were in company with several men in women’s clothes?” (Holland 180). At the risk of stating his overfamiliarity with Preston’s Sunday night party, Wilde revealed that he had followed what happened during the raid:

My recollection of what I read in the newspapers is that two men in women’s clothing drove up to the house—music hall singers it was stated—and that they were arrested outside the house, but whether there was anybody in women’s clothes at the house at this concert or entertainment, whatever it was, I don’t know. That you can verify by the newspaper reports. Don’t ask me about that. (Holland 180)

“You call it a concert?” Carson asked in astonished tones. “Did you ask Taylor about it?” he enquired (Holland 180). As we can tell from this exchange, Carson was doing his utmost to contaminate Wilde’s reputation through association with the arrests that took place at Preston’s flat. With the aid of a press report, Carson began to reel off the names and occupations of every single man whom the police apprehended during the raid. “Had you ever,” Carson wanted to know, “heard of Preston before . . . Did you ever hear of Preston in connection with the Cleveland Street scandals?” (Holland 181). Modern studies of the Cleveland Street affair (1889-1890), which involved the discovery that telegraph messenger boys were providing sexual favours for titled gentlemen at a brothel in Central London, do not elucidate Preston’s involvement with this controversy.¹¹ It does seem likely, though, that Carson had access to some record that pointed to the party host’s entanglement in a widely publicised affair. Once Carson mentioned Marling’s name, he wanted Wilde to concur that the performer was “a notorious sodomite.” “I have never,” Wilde insisted, “heard of him in my life” (Holland 181).

Faced with this barrage of questions, Wilde remained obliged to elaborate his relations with several of the young men who had given witness statements to Queensberry’s attorney under duress. On occasion, Carson released details from these statements that he hoped would be a source of embarrassment to Wilde. Of the blackmailer Atkins, Wilde was asked whether he suggested to the young man, during an all-expenses-paid visit to Paris, that he should have his hair curled. “No,” said Wilde impenitently, in phrasing that produced chuckles in the gallery, “I told him that I thought it would be very unbecoming” (Holland 189). But as Carson prepared more of these potential traps, Wilde’s bravado caught him off-guard. Of Walter Grainger, a sixteen-year-old whom Wilde employed at a large rental home in Berkshire during 1893, Carson posed a testing question: “Did you ever kiss him?” “Oh, no, never in my life,” Wilde responded in revulsion, “he was a peculiarly plain boy.” “He was what?” Carson exclaimed. “I said I thought him unfortunately—his appearance so very unfortunately—very ugly” (Holland 207-08).

If the libel proceedings showed serious lapses in Wilde’s judgment, they nonetheless revealed that he had his wits about him when confronted with threats of blackmail. This was particularly the case with Wood. Wilde met Wood, a former clerk, at Taylor’s rooms in Little College Street in January 1893, and two months later—after the seventeen-year-old had been sleeping with Alfred Douglas at the Mitre Hotel in Oxford—Wood discovered a sheaf of four letters inside a

¹¹ See Hyde and Simpson, Chester, and Leitch.

suit that Bosie had given him so that the young man could join his host for dinner. (Wood also appropriated items of correspondence from a morocco writing case that Wilde had given to Bosie.) The letters that Wood found in the clothing were items of ardent correspondence that Wilde had recently mailed to Douglas. Clarke encouraged Carson to read one of these epistles aloud in court. Here, in the first paragraph, we can see that Wilde is ruing the fact that he has suffered a bitter row with his lover, the source of which remains unclear:

Dearest of all Boys—Your letter was delightful—red and yellow wine to me—but I am sad and out of sorts—Bosie—you must not make scenes with me—they kill me—they wreck the loveliness of life—I cannot see *you*, so Greek and gracious, distorted by passion; I cannot listen to *your* curved lips saying hideous things to me—don't do it—you break my heart—I'd sooner be rented all day, than have you bitter, unjust, and horrid—horrid—(*Complete Letters* 559-60, partly qtd. in Holland 108-09)

To Carson, the allusion to being “rented” proved so puzzling that he confessed that he could not make it out and needed the witness to explicate it, even though Wilde had—much earlier in the proceedings—stated categorically that “R-e-n-t” was a “slang term” (Holland 55). In this instance, its usage—which, as Beerbohm made clear, linked sexual exploitation with keeping a roof over one’s head—referred in particular to blackmail. When Carson asked if this document was an “extraordinary letter,” Wilde quipped: “I think everything I write is extraordinary” (Holland 110). What was altogether more mundane was the way in which Wood attempted to use this and the letters that he had serendipitously discovered for the very form of “rent” that Wilde said would be preferable to the fallout with Bosie.

Wood—who struck the *Illustrated Police Budget* as the blackmailer who, if the “best educated,” had “the worst record”—made two attempts to extract money from Wilde (“Oscar Wilde at the Old Bailey” 9). First of all, he passed on Wilde’s amorous correspondence with Douglas to the experienced partners in extortion William Allen and Robert Cliburn, who promptly circulated a copy of another letter that Carson also read aloud in court, which opens with the following tribute to Wilde’s beloved Bosie: “Your sonnet is quite lovely, and it is a marvel that those rose-red lips of yours should be made no less for the music of song than for the madness of kissing” (*Complete Letters* 544, partly qtd. in Holland 105). And should such praise seem insufficient, these rapturous lines lead into the following effusion: “Your slim gilt soul walks between passion and poetry . . . Hyacinthus, whom Apollo loved so madly, was you in Greek days” (*Complete Letters* 544, partly qtd. in Holland 106). The fuller story emerged when Wood was called on to give evidence in the trials against Wilde. Wood revealed that in April 1893, the nineteen-year-old Allen, who had returned the rest of the batch to Wood, told his friend that this particular one was “quite hot enough” (“Oscar Wilde: His Second Trial at the Old Bailey”), and Allen arranged for his older business partner, the thirty-one-year old Cliburn, to confront Wilde about it at the Haymarket Theatre, where the dramatist’s play *A Woman of No Importance* was in rehearsal under the direction of Herbert Beerbohm Tree. At the time, Wilde told Cliburn that he could not be bothered to engage with him.

Undeterred, Allen then called at Wilde’s family home in Tite Street, Chelsea. “I suppose,” Wilde recalled saying to Allen on the doorstep, in phrasing that prompted some laughter in court, “you have come about my beautiful letter to Lord Alfred Douglas” (Holland 52). He told Allen that it was foolish for a blackmailer to mail a copy to Beerbohm Tree, who—as a loyal friend—had

returned the document to Wilde. Allen, it seems, retorted by stating that he had been offered £60 for the letter. Derisively, Wilde refused to be intimidated: “If you take my advice you will go to that man and sell my letter to him for sixty pounds . . . I myself have never received so large a sum for any prose work of that very small length” (Holland 53). In the end, when Allen could tell that Wilde was fearless, he declared that he “hadn’t a single penny” (Holland 53). It was typical of Wilde to part with a half-sovereign and bid Allen on his way. These events took an even more unexpected turn when Cliburn turned up five minutes later and handed the letter back to a bemused Wilde, who wanted to understand the reason for Allen’s unexpected act of generosity: “Well, he says that you were kind to him and there is no use trying to rent you” (Holland 55). Ingeniously, Wilde, who had told Allen that his letter was a “prose poem,” had already passed his own copy of the text to the poet Pierre Louÿs, who adapted one of its lines into a French sonnet. In May 1893, Louÿs’ poem, which appeared in Douglas’ *Spirit Lamp*, amplified the rather febrile tenor of Wilde’s letter. Toward the end, Louÿs’ poetic voice ecstatically declares: “*Hyacinthe adoré! hyacinthe! hyacinthe!*” (Louÿs 1).

Soon after, Wood made his own attempt at blackmailing Wilde. But, on this occasion, Wilde had to be more diplomatic in the way in which he handled the situation, though he managed to keep the potentially high costs down to size. In the libel suit, Wilde acknowledged that he had given Wood sums of £16 and £5 after the young man, in Carson’s words, had attempted “to levy blackmail” (Holland 120). Yet rather than admit that he paid Wood these amounts either for sexual favours or the threat of exposure, Wilde contended that he had made these gifts to the blackmailer for an entirely different manner. The purpose of the sum, which Wilde later claimed in court was £15, was to secure the young man safe passage to America, where his employment prospects were likely to be good. After a farewell lunch at the Florence, Wood petitioned Wilde for even more money, since the extortionist believed that fifteen pounds “would land him almost penniless in New York” (Holland 123). As a consequence, Wilde parted with another £5. Wood, as the proceedings against Wilde eventually heard from the young man himself, made his way to New York City, stayed there a month, and returned to London, only to renew his living as an extortionist.

During the libel suit, the disclosures of Wilde’s intimacy with many different young men, including criminals such as Wood, made his case untenable. In a short, undated memoir that Clarke wrote about the proceedings, it appears that by the first afternoon of the trial Wilde was taken aback that Carson had focused on the Irish writer’s homosexual intimacies. Clarke recalls that during the luncheon hour Wilde confided to him that he was growing unsettled by the defence’s line of inquiry:

“Can they examine me for instance about anything and everything they choose?” I said, “Certainly, what is it that is on your mind?” “Well, said he, “some time ago I was turned out of the Albemarle Hotel in the middle of the night, and a boy was with me, and it might be awkward if they found out about that.” (“Account by Edward Clarke”)

After this conference had taken place, it was clear that the impact of Carson’s questions—ones that had “a particularity about them” that made Clarke feel “somewhat uneasy”—would leave a deep impression on the court (“Account by Edward Clarke”). During the following afternoon, Thursday, 4 April 1895, Carson delivered a lengthy address to the jury. He hardly held back in his vituperation. He reminded the court of Wilde’s effusive letter to Lord Alfred, finding the

sentiments in it “absolutely disgusting”: “I say that to address even a sonnet to him and to talk of him as having ‘red, rose-leaf lips made no less for music of song than madness of kissing,’ is disgusting” (Holland 267-68). He proceeded to comment on Wilde’s “filthy and immoral practices” with the blackmailer Wood (Holland 271).

By the time the court adjourned at 4.30pm that afternoon, Carson’s fulminations were not over. The next day, when the court resumed its business, Carson launched once more into the most sensational details that his cross-examination had exposed. Particularly scandalous was Carson’s allusion to the recollections of a freelance masseur named Antonio Migge, who “was astonished upon going unexpectedly one morning into Mr. Wilde’s room to find a boy lying in his bed” (Holland 277). Even more deplorable in Carson’s eyes was the experience inflicted upon the hotel servants who were ready to speak about “the disgusting filth in which they found the bedclothes on more than one occasion” (Holland 277). The insinuation was that anal penetration had left faecal matter on the bed linens. Thereafter, Carson proceeded to speak at some length about Wilde’s relations with Charles Parker at the Savoy Hotel and the time he spent in the company of a teenage news vendor, Alphonse Conway, at the seaside resorts of Worthing and Brighton.

These embarrassing discoveries meant that Clarke lost confidence in pursuing the case any further, since the prospect of the defence calling witnesses might protract the already embarrassing proceedings, incurring unaffordable costs upon Wilde. In every way, this was a disastrous outcome: a failed prosecution that Douglas alleged could have been avoided. “Sir Edward Clarke,” Douglas recalled more than thirty years later, “made no attempt, as he should have done, to take the wind out of Carson’s sails by asking Wilde in his examination-in-chief the questions in a modified form which were to be expected in cross-examination (which is the supreme art of examining in chief). He left everything to Carson and his unfortunate client” (*Autobiography* 105-06). Faced with this lamentable predicament, Clarke and his junior counsel Charles (“Willie”) Mathews, just before 11.00am, retired from the court for ten minutes. Wilde’s counsel, who had informed him of their decision, took a drastic step. Clarke, according to his biographers, “had come to the conclusion that it was almost impossible, in view of all the circumstances, to induce a jury to convict of a criminal offence a father who was endeavouring to save his son from what he believed to be an evil companionship” (Walker-Smith and Clarke 249). In making this choice, Clarke mentioned to Wilde that there was no need for him to remain in the building while the libel case was withdrawn.

Once Wilde’s counsel returned to court, the atmosphere at the Old Bailey changed dramatically. “Here came,” the *Pall Mall Gazette* observed of the third day of the proceedings, “a sensational surprise. Sir Edward Clarke plucked Mr. Carson by the gown, and the indulgence of the Court was craved while counsel consulted” (“Oscar Wilde Libel Case”). After speaking confidentially with Carson, Clarke addressed Justice Collins in tones that sought to clear Queensberry and his counsel of any undue embarrassment. Moreover, Clarke tried his best to overcome the awkward situation in which the proceedings had put himself, his junior counsel, and of course his client Wilde:

My lord, I think it must have been present to your lordship’s mind that those who were representing Mr. Oscar Wilde in this case had before them a very terrible anxiety. They could not conceal from themselves that the judgement that might be formed of that

literature and of conduct which has been admitted might not improbably induce the jury to say that when Lord Queensberry used the words “posing as sodomite,” he was using words for which there was sufficient justification to entitle a father, who used those words under these circumstances, to the utmost consideration and to be relieved from a criminal charge in respect of that statement. (Holland 280)

As a consequence, Clarke petitioned the judge: “I would ask to withdraw from the prosecution” (Holland 281). At the same time, Clarke remarked that he was “prepared to submit a verdict of ‘not guilty’ having reference, if to any part of the particulars at all, to that part of the particulars which is connected with the publication of *Dorian Gray* and the publication of *The Chameleon*”: the two publications that Carson had discussed at length in order to expose, as was stated in Queensberry’s plea, the supposedly “sodomitical and unnatural habits, tastes and practices” of the Irish author (Holland, 281, 39).¹² Yet reporters, politicians, and members of the public could not repress the revelations about Wilde’s intimate knowledge of young men, which had occupied a substantial proportion of the cross-examination. No sooner had the jury returned the verdict of “not guilty” than the result, as the *Star* observed, was received with “loud applause”: “little attempt,” the reporter added, “was made to suppress it” (“Not Guilty: Sensational End of the Wilde Libel”). At 11.15am, when Queensberry was formally discharged, events began moving rapidly against Wilde.

Immediately, Queensberry, who had commissioned shorthand reports of the libel proceedings, organised a campaign to ensure the government would prosecute Wilde. He urged Russell to hand over the shorthand reports, together with Russell’s substantial set of witness statements, to the Hon. Hamilton Cuffe, Director of Public



Fig. 6: “The Arrest of Oscar Wilde.” *Illustrated Police Budget* 13 April 1895: 8.

¹² During the libel trial, Carson focused attention on parts of Wilde’s novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which first appeared in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* in July 1890; as the court learned, Wilde revised some areas of the text in the expanded single-volume edition of the novel, which appeared in 1891. Carson also asked Wilde to explain his “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young”: a list of epigrams that appeared in a literary magazine, the *Chameleon*, which the publisher Gay and Bird, aware of critical responses in the press, withdrew shortly after the first and only issue came out in December 1894. There was also some suspicion that Wilde might have been the author of a homoerotic story, “The Priest and the Acolyte,” which appeared anonymously in the magazine. (The author of the short fiction, though the identity remained unknown in court, was an Oxford undergraduate, John Francis Bloxam.) See Holland 80-103, 73-77.

Prosecutions. This wealth of documentation quickly persuaded H. H. Asquith, Home Secretary, in consultation with Sir Robert Reid, the Attorney-General, and Sir Frank Lockwood, the Solicitor-General, to issue a warrant for Wilde's arrest. The charges related to Wilde's violation of the Labouchere Amendment, although the prosecution initially attempted, only (after much wrangling) to drop, the additional charges of conspiracy. On the evening of Friday, 5 April 1895, two police officers—Detective-Inspector Charles Richards and Detective-Sergeant Allen—arrived at the upscale Cadogan Hotel in the West End of London, where Wilde had been languishing for several hours, with a warrant for his arrest (Fig. 6). As we know from Richards's subsequent testimony, he and his colleague informed Wilde of the charges: "We told the prisoner: 'Mr. Wilde, we are police officers. A warrant has been issued for your apprehension for committing some indecent offence with a male person'" ("The Oscar Wilde Case"). The arrest, which led to the first of Wilde's many nights in custody because the judiciary refused him bail, followed closely on the heels of his failed libel suit against Queensberry.



Fig. 7: "The Wilde Case." *News of the World* 14 April 1895: 7.

There was, very promptly, a lengthy pre-trial hearing, in which the young sex workers and blackmailers—Fred Atkins, Charles Parker and his older brother William Parker, and Alfred Wood—gave breathtaking testimony that indicated they, too, had been involved in a criminal universe. (None of them, since they had been given police protection, ever stood trial for their ventures into sex work and blackmailing.) Shelley, too, confessed that he had slept with Wilde at the Albemarle Hotel. (The *News of the World* captured the idea of Wilde's centrality in the lives of most of these men. See Fig. 7.) At the end of the hearing, it became clear that Taylor would be tried alongside Wilde. During the first trial, which foundered on the basis of technicalities that made it impossible to convict Taylor and Wilde on the same charges, not only was much of the evidence aired in the pre-trial hearing rehearsed one more time; the judge also permitted the whole of the transcript of the libel proceedings to be read aloud. And to make matters even more repetitive, the second trial—in which Taylor and Wilde were tried one after the other—rehearsed all of these materials once again. The only difference was that

by the end of the second trial Atkins was dismissed for perjuring himself, while Shelley's evidence, which indicated that the witness suffered from severe mental distress, was deemed undependable. In the end, the jury had to rely on the evidence of Wood and the Parker brothers as well as the word of housekeepers and a masseur at the Savoy Hotel who claimed to have seen such things as excrement stains on the bed linens and an unnamed youth on Wilde's mattress. While it is clear that Queensberry paid for the young male witnesses to appear in fine sets of clothing during the proceedings (he also bestowed monies upon them to ensure they stated what he and his counsel wanted them to say), it remains unknown whether the hotel staff were paid to

give incriminating testimony. The chances, however, given Queensberry's underhandedness, seem likely.

Although the two Crown prosecutions of Wilde and Taylor resulted in their imprisonment for twenty-four months, there is no record that shows that the extortionists who gave evidence during the trials ever suffered further consequences. This was especially true of the perjury-prone Atkins. Sir Edward Clarke, whose team had been on a fact-finding mission, asked Atkins whether the police had taken him to Rochester Row station on the charge of striking a gentleman, with whom he had been having sex, on 10 June 1891. The assault had taken place at a flat in Tachbrook Street, which Atkins shared with a seasoned blackmailer, James Dennis Burton. The landlady, presumably disturbed through the roughing-up that took place, contacted the police. Adamant that nothing of the sort ever happened, Atkins was confronted by the police officer who had taken down the statement about the assault. As a result, the judge instructed him to leave the Old Bailey. His name, as Fred Denny, appears from time to time in reports on minor music-hall productions through December 1927, where he had a role in "Scenes and Screams" at the Royal Theatre. As for Wood, he, too, disappeared from the record. The same is true of the Parker brothers. The final sighting that we have of these two young men together is recorded in Wilde's earliest biographer Robert Harborough Sherard's unpublished memoir that he completed shortly before his death in the early 1940s. Sherard recalls his absolute horror at the spectacle of the convicted Wilde, unable to let his protesting voice be heard, as he was led down to the cells of the Old Bailey: "As I turned from the exhibition, as obscene and soul-defiling as anything witnessed in the madness of the French revolution, I caught a glimpse of Wood and the Parkers getting into a cab, laughing and leering" ("Ultimate Verba").

Cotsford Dick: "I had occasion to go to the urinal."

Not everyone in Charles Parker's insubordinate circle defied the law. There was, as I point out below, one other individual at John Watson Preston's party who finally served a sentence for his involvement in extortion. In this brief conclusion, I discuss a significant instance of 1890s homosexual blackmail that once again threw into relief the activities of several persons who were central to both the summertime gathering in 1894 and the Wilde trials a year later. The case in question reveals, too, that there were other individuals who were exploiting for profit the vulnerability of gay men. There was, for example, a twenty-three-year-old married bricklayer, Harry Saunders, who on 19 December 1897 assaulted Cotsford Dick on the Thames Embankment. After failing to extract the money he demanded from the well-known composer, Saunders stripped his victim—who was evidently a well-acquainted gay man—of a luxurious Astrakhan-lined topcoat, a turquoise-and-diamond scarf-pin, a gunmetal watch, a gold chain, a pocketbook, a case containing visiting cards, and various other precious items, including a sovereign. The assault occurred, as the *Illustrated Police News* reported, after Dick noticed that Saunders was following him and petitioning for money because "it was getting on for Christmas" and he needed funds "to take him home" to the country ("The Embankment Robbery").

Once Saunders had seized Dick's belongings, he made his way with his brother-in-law Robert Hine in a cab to escape being (as he put it in court) "*pinched*"—that is, apprehended—by the law ("Henry Saunders, Arthur Marling, Violent Theft"). Thereafter, the two felons made contact with Allen and Cliburn, who had to be sought to blackmail Wilde, as well as a twenty-four-year-old

named Robert Woollams. In the series of four trials that resulted from the assault, the evidence given at the Old Bailey revealed that Woollams had been lodging, near Oxford Street, with Arthur Marling, who had in August 1894 appeared in a stunning frock at the Great Marlborough Street police court. Marling, who rented his rooms under the assumed name of Goff, worked in concert with extortionists like Allen and Cliburn by receiving the goods they had stolen and passing them along to pawnbrokers. This is exactly what happened to Dick's personal possessions. As Inspector John MacCarthy disclosed in court: "in Marling's room I found twenty-eight pawn-tickets in different names and addresses, mostly relating to such property as men carry with them" ("Henry Saunders, Arthur Marling, Violent Theft").

Although it is not possible to trace here in detail the series of prosecutions that followed the robbery, one issue that emerges from the court proceedings is that the fifty-year-old victim—who was largely known for his sentimental ballads—had most probably been soliciting for sex just prior to Saunders' assault. This matter is important to note, since it divulged information that might have inculpated the plaintiff. Under cross-examination, Dick mentioned that on the day of the theft he "got off an omnibus at Victoria Station, about 7.30pm," and noticed a man following him and begging. "I made my way to the Embankment," Dick added; a little later on, he said: "I had occasion to go to the urinal" ("Henry Saunders, Arthur Marling, Violent Theft"). This would have been an innocent enough remark had Saunders not made the following comment during the courtroom exchanges: "Mr. Dick did make one indecent proposal to me before I robbed him." Saunders stated that Dick invited the bricklayer to come to the composer's home. "Come with me," Saunders claimed Dick had assured him, "and I will get you a few shillings." This exchange, Saunders declared, prompted an altercation. "Is that," Saunders recalled saying to Dick, "the job you want me for?" and "if that is the job you want me for I will lock you up" ("Henry Saunders, Arthur Marling, Violent Theft"). At this juncture, Saunders stated, he decided to rob the older man.

Saunders was handed a five-year sentence. Marling, too, went to jail for the same period because he had handled Dick's stolen goods. It took two more months before William Allen admitted to his involvement in extorting funds from Dick, which led—on 3 May 1897—to a year-and-a-half period in jail. In the trial against Robert Cliburn on 8 March 1898, the court learned that, shortly after the robbery, Allen had met the composer (who was accompanied by a friend) outside Charing Cross Station, where he extracted £10 in return for "certain duplicates" of the pawnbrokers' tickets that had Marling's name on them ("Robert Cliburn, Theft"). Dick, who refused to be intimidated, wisely contacted his attorney, who arranged an interview with a police detective, which set in motion the investigations that eventually revealed that Allen had used Dick's money to repay a debt of £10 to Cliburn. This payment came through the offices of Bernard Abrahams, who had for some time been managing an allowance that one of Cliburn's victims had agreed to pay at set periods to the blackmailer. Douglas, who called Abrahams "a well-known lawyer and notorious blackmailer," claimed that at the time of the Wilde trials this scoundrel "was employed by Lord Queensberry's solicitors to carry out the dirty work" (*Oscar Wilde* 25). The proceedings also revealed that, at the time of his arrest, Cliburn was found playing billiards with the otherwise elusive Dernbach.¹³ In the end, when Cliburn pleaded guilty to a previous felony, dating from December 1890, under the name of Robert Henry Harris, he received—in light of his combined crimes—a total of seven years' penal servitude. Some of

¹³ Dernbach's name appears as "Dornbach" in the records ("Robert Cliburn, Theft").

these blackmailers, from what we can gather, continued their lives after they had served their sentences. By 1906, Marling held employment as a valet in the Vauxhall Bridge Road. Many years later, in 1921, Cliburn—who was almost fifty at the time—earned a living as a billiards supplier in Vancouver, Canada. Meanwhile, on his release in December 1898 Allen (whose real name, the courts insisted, was Pea) gave a tell-all *exposé* to *Reynolds's Newspaper*, where he revealed the techniques that he had used with accomplices for a period of ten years to entrap homosexual men, especially in the vicinity of “the Piccadilly buffets” from “eleven to 12.30pm” (“Blackmailing”). “On any night, Saturday for preference,” Allen recalled, “I would undertake to pick out round the ‘West-end’ a couple of hundred so-called ‘men’ who go in for nothing but their own sex” (“Blackmailing”). Allen would fix a date for a rendezvous, ensuring that his partner-in-crime was lying in wait. Once the victim arrived at Allen’s rooms, a man such as Cliburn would suddenly appear, pretend to be Allen’s outraged cousin, rough up the unsuspecting victim, force the man to strip down to his undergarments, and seize his valuables. These episodes, Allen made clear, involved a great deal of playacting, which entailed many ploys to extort large sums, such as persuading the quarry to part with monies that would enable the young man to “send . . . his [young] ‘cousin’ [i.e. Allen] abroad away from further temptation” (“Blackmailing”). “The police,” Allen told the newspaper, “are well aware of all these facts.” But, as the journalist noted, even though Allen supplied “a list of names that would astonish the public were we at liberty to publish them,” the authorities still failed to take any action (“Blackmailing”).

All three events, the Fitzroy Street raid, the Wilde trials, and the case of Cotsford Dick, reveal how integral blackmailing networks were to the queer subculture of 1890s London, in ways that were more widespread than the historical record allows. All that we know about these extortionists’ lives can be glimpsed only at those moments when intermittent investigations and prosecutions took place. For the most part, whatever became of these “gilded snakes” (as Wilde imaginatively styled them) still dwells to this day in the deeper shadows of the metropolitan past (*Complete Letters* 759). It is very clear, however, that this was a highly developed *milieu* that interwove the lives of working-class, bourgeois, and privileged men, whose encounters involved pleasurable parties, sexual services, physical threats, and trafficking in stolen goods. During the 1890s, the risks that these activities entailed were considerable, with potentially hazardous legal consequences, especially for those respectable individuals, who—through their contact with determined young blackmailers—remained in peril should the law decide to expose their homosexuality.

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