

The Campaign Against Homosexuality

WITH the brothel situation cleared up, I was sent for by Mr. Adair, the Procurator Fiscal, who had recently, and in masterly fashion, handled a particularly significant blackmail case, in which two women and no less than thirteen men were charged with blackmailing a well-known individual, cashier to a firm of solicitors, and a church official. The victim—it was alleged—had had an indecent relationship with two boys eight years earlier, and thereafter had given the youths money to go to Canada. Five years later he was stopped in the street by a man who posed as the brother of one of the boys, and who stated that his brother was very ill in Canada. Still later he called to say that his brother was now dead, and demanded £100 for expenses in connection with the death.

This was the start of a blackmailing campaign in which the unfortunate cashier was forced to part with all his savings and began to embezzle the funds of his employers.

Mr. Adair told me that he was greatly concerned over the amount of homosexuality practised in the city, which so often resulted in blackmail. He asked me if I was prepared to tackle this problem as I had the other. Strangely enough the position at that time was that, though I was chief of the Vice Squad, homosexuality did not come into my sphere, but was dealt with by the ordinary Criminal Investigation Department staff. That department was far too busy with normal crime to give this difficult problem anything like the attention it required.

Perhaps I may have grown a little swollen-headed over the successes of the brothel campaign, and I fear that I rather took the compliment from Mr. Adair in my stride, assuming that I would clear up this unpleasant business in two or three months. Indeed I

told my wife so. She had seen very little of me for too long, and I assured her that I would very soon have this special assignment cleared up, and be able to devote more time to her and our boy at home. I really thought, by this time, that I knew all there was to know about vice. I was to receive a shock. It soon became evident that in fact I knew very little about the scale or scope of homosexuality in Edinburgh.

My explorations and enquiries soon brought to light a disgraceful and hardly believable state of affairs. Nowadays, this unnatural behaviour is fairly freely spoken of, but this is a very recent development. At the time, very little was known about it, especially in view of the large numbers of people I found to be involved.

I discovered that there was a widespread and recognised traffic, consisting, of course, of the two types of men. The effeminate sort practically all used assumed names, usually of contemporary film actresses or other well-known ladies, such as Lilian Tashman, Tallulah Bankhead, Myrna Loy, Countess Betsy and so on. They were also referred to as bitches, poofs, pansies and white-hats, etc. They made a habit of frequenting public urinals, known to them as cottages, and there solicited their clients. They also haunted certain licensed premises, cafés and cinemas. As well as these places, I learned that the Calton Hill, a high open space at the east end of the city, overlooking Holyroodhouse, was much favoured by these people, and I decided to investigate for myself. The first Saturday night I discovered that the place was indeed hotching with them, and we questioned fourteen suspects, all of whom admitted that they were there for homosexual purposes, eleven of them in fact having come into Edinburgh on half-day railway excursion tickets from areas outside the city. The following Saturday we netted eleven more, ten of whom were incomers, the next week, seven out of eight. This was an eye-opener.

Not unnaturally, after my own ignorance of it all, I had difficulty in convincing my superiors, and others in authority, of the seriousness and extent of this situation. I had later to take unique action to satisfy them that what I was reporting was indeed correct, and actually took certain officials in cars to the vicinity of selected urinals, where all evening we watched homosexuals going out and in, and soliciting. Sometimes there were disturb-

ances when the approaches made by these people were resented, and in these cases the homosexuals usually made themselves scarce pretty quickly—but were soon back again.

Those revelations caused something of a stir in legal and medical circles in the city. As for ourselves, we had come to realise that instead of its being a month or two's task, there was possibly years of work ahead of us before this menace was effectively brought under control.

Now that I was more alive to what was going on, I thought when I read a report submitted to me by plain-clothes officers who had been watching a certain hotel in a very respectable part of Edinburgh, which was suspected as being conducted as a brothel, that I saw daylight. The report itself was distinctly negative, because so few women were frequenting the place. I decided to give the hotel some personal attention, and disguising myself once more, I paid a visit. As a result the watch was continued, but now we were watching for male prostitutes. I maintained this watch over an extended period in which I had to do much shadowing of these people and their clients—and learned a lot. A case was built up eventually which enabled me to obtain a warrant to raid the premises, additional evidence being necessary before a charge could have been found proved in court.

The raid provided not only evidence, but shocks. We found men there dressed in brassières, and knickers, with toenails and fingernails painted, using all types of cosmetics, and again adopting women's names—Gloria, Godiva, Blondie, Princess this and Princess that, and so on. We also found on the premises one female prostitute whom we shall call Lizzie. She was most indignant when I entered the bedroom she was using, and found her in bed with a man, demanding why she couldn't be left in peace, and why didn't we deal with the bloody poofs? Things had got so bad that a decent whore couldn't earn a living! She wanted to know who I was—I being still disguised—and on hearing my name she declared:

'You can't kid me—Merrilees is a better-looking so-and-so than ever you'll be! I'm sure if he hears of this, he'll sue you!'

We then seized love-letters in which these creatures were claiming to be engaged or married to various men. One can hardly

blame anyone for disbelieving the authenticity of these letters, but they were in fact proved genuine and used in evidence. Naturally many were of a disgusting nature, but it was obvious that many of the letter-writers were in fact more female than male, and actually thought of themselves as women. Common phrases that came into these letters were such as :

'I met a swell sheik on Saturday and I'm madly in love with him.'

'I'm in love with that chap, as I've loved nobody else.'

'He says I'm his girl, and says I've got to stick to him. He calls me Blondie.'

'See—I'll be heart-broken when he goes away. I can't help crying. You don't know how I love this chap.'

One was signed, 'Your loving sister'.

My enquiries in this case led me to different parts of the country before it was finally built up, and came before the court. The prosecution was successful and various sentences were meted out. 'Lady Godiva,' the boss, got one year; 'Annette Page' six months; 'Blondie,' who incidentally I found reading a bible at the time of the arrests, received eighteen months—this because of a previous conviction.

Now that we had convictions to our credit, I felt free to wage wholesale war on these perverts and their associates, and quite a number of arrests were made from urinals throughout the city. On these occasions many a fierce fight took place. In those fights I had the impression that most of the pugilists made for me—presumably because I was always the smallest man present. Many of the fights were real rough-houses, the people involved being not so much the homosexuals themselves as the toughs who were out to blackmail the others. I by no means got off scot-free in these affrays, frequently having my false teeth broken and receiving various injuries. I may say that when I was engaged in a scrap with any of these creatures, or other criminals, I insisted that other officers were not to interfere. I was astonished at the number of boys between the ages of fourteen and sixteen engaged in this unpleasant business, some of them effeminates, but most of them really male prostitutes. Homosexuals who used these boys were termed 'chicken chasers.'

I was sent for by the Chief Constable one day. A high-ranking

military officer had called on him, expressing concern because some of his men were known to have gold pens, gold lighters and gold cigarette cases, and he wondered if they had been stolen. Enquiries soon elicited that these were not stolen goods, but gifts from a group of men in the city who invited these young soldiers to various flats. No females were present on these occasions. There were drinks and dancing sessions. Soon after my enquiries into this matter started, a number of these men, some of them very wealthy, saw fit to leave the city.

This campaign against the haunting of urinals (of which nine had been closed) parks and houses of convenience was having an effect, but in view of the size of the problem, this was insufficient. I had learned that many of these perverts met at the Russian Baths at Infirmary Street and Glenogle Road. I decided to visit these places for myself to test the truth of the report. I first went to Infirmary Street, entered the steam compartment, and had only been there a few moments before advances were made to me. I am afraid that I forgot myself, and why I was there. My life-long fondness of swimming and all the good clean companionship that went with it, and especially the thought of all the children whom I had taught in such premises as these, overwhelmed me, and I lashed out at two of these characters, flooring them. I left at once.

I submitted to the Town Council, these being Municipal Baths, a report which was promptly described as exaggerated. I decided that there was only one way to prove my contention, and put a watch on Infirmary Street Baths the next day, which brought the following facts to light. Thirty-seven people attended, thirty-three admitted homosexual practices, many of them coming from outwith the city. The next day a similar investigation at Glenogle Road revealed seventeen attending and thirteen admitting being there for unnatural purposes. As a result the Russian Baths were closed at both establishments for a suitable period, and this type of person no longer frequents them.

Despite all this night and day work, I realised that we were still not getting to the core of homosexual activities in Edinburgh, I kept getting leads to two men who ran the Maximes dance-hall in the city. After consultation with the Procurator Fiscal, the Chief Constable and my colleagues, it was decided that we should

concentrate on these men. That it was going to be a difficult case to bring off, was obvious. These men were blatant, and convinced that they could not be brought to book, so much so that in the past they had openly stated to police officers that they could not be caught.

Their methods were to travel in cars from the dance-hall to various urinals, but never faster than fifteen to twenty miles an hour, so that following them unnoticed was impossible. Caught they must be—but we little realised that this would take us seven months. Night after night we watched, shadowed, followed in cars, set men at the various points and visited frequently thirteen to fourteen urinals. Their activities became very well known to us, but we could not get a grip of them. I decided to raid a boarding house run by one of the two men. I obtained the necessary warrant to do so, which was a difficult matter, for the place was apparently respectable.

However, the usual situation applied here, as with brothels—to secure a conviction you have actually to catch people red-handed. It was obvious that if we went to this boarding house in the middle of the night and rang the bell, there would be little hope of finding any evidence when we were admitted. On the other hand, we were well aware that the premises were well locked up at night. My subsequent action can no doubt be condemned by the purists. There was at the rear of this house a garden with a high wall between it and a lane. I took an expert with key-cutting equipment in a car up this lane. I climbed over the wall, into the garden, and entered the maid's bedroom in the basement below ground level, searched in her handbag, found her key, took it back with me and passed it over the wall, where a copy of the key was cut. I returned, and managed to replace the maid's key in her bag.

So now, at four o'clock in the morning of what was the longest day of the year, we got down to business. I went down into the basement, at the front this time, to put the key into the door, when I heard someone coming along the lobby within. I hurriedly retired up the steps, and threw myself under a stationary car at the kerbside. A man came up from the door I had just left, got into the car next to the one I was under, and drove off. At least I had chosen the right car to be under!

I proceeded with the raid, and I am glad to say that it was highly successful. We obtained all the evidence of unnatural practices that we required, and then went on to Maximes dance-hall, where we arrested the owner. Considerable time was then spent in checking up on all the people who visited the house. I had to go, with one of my colleagues, down to Carlisle, there to pose as homosexuals and friends of friends of the two accused, gaining valuable information for production at the court. I am afraid I almost left myself with a permanent lisp, so authentic was my behaviour.

At the subsequent High Court proceedings, the story we revealed was that the elder of the two men had been carrying on his horrible practices since 1917. Nightly, when the last trams had left the city centre, they used to run cars between the dance-hall and the barracks, taking soldiers back to billets. This gave them the opportunity to arrange with the soldiers to visit certain premises, then or at a later date. They were supplied with drink and invited to take part in these unpleasant activities. No doubt a great many of the soldiers refused, but not a few succumbed, for what they could get out of it. These revelations startled the High Court. We managed to bring up from the North of England many of their former associates to witness against them. I am glad to say that both were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment, and I felt that a major blow had been dealt against this taint on Edinburgh.

In bringing to trial these homosexual cases, we found difficulty at first in obtaining convictions, owing to the activities of defending psychiatrists and other so-called experts, who assured the court that accused were not really responsible for their actions, and that treatment in a nursing home was to be preferred to imprisonment. To my mind, in most cases, this was farcical. For a while there was little we could do about it.

An opportunity did crop up, however, when I had a young Jewish lad up on charges, and in this case I did feel that he was not quite normal, and reported so. He was examined by an expert of high reputation who stated that he was in fact perfectly normal with nothing wrong with him. I then approached a prominent Jewish lawyer and explained the position to him. He knew of the case and asked me what he could do in view of the charges and

psychiatrist's report. I suggested that he should, in the interests of this youth, employ another medical man of high standing for the defence. He did so, and both these experts appeared at court, to argue over the same patient, one contradicting the other. The defence won the day, and from that time onwards we were less troubled with this type of special pleading. Later, I am glad to say, Lord Cooper had some very hard things to say about evidence of this nature.

This campaign had been one of the most unpleasant in my experience. I was glad to think that it was very largely over.

Again I certainly felt that my colleagues and I had done some good for 'Auld Reekie.'

I feel that I cannot exclude from any account of homosexuality and blackmail in Edinburgh, the case of Albert Percival Gow. I knew Gow—indeed Gow was well known. He had for long spoken on Sundays at the Mound, the city's open forum off Princes Street, where he used to run down the authorities, the government, the law, indeed more or less everybody but himself. I first came against him when he was standing for election to Edinburgh Town Council, and the Procurator Fiscal asked me to give him particular attention. He had been arrested no fewer than seven times, on charges of robbery or gross indecency, but they had never been able to pin the charges on him through lack of sufficient evidence.

Accordingly I took steps. I went round the urinals, setting enquiries afoot, and from what I learned it was apparent that a watch was indeed justified on this character. He was a very strong and violent man, to my mind in fact slightly unhinged. He was watched and shadowed continually thereafter, and eventually we managed to observe him taking a man to his lodging on the fifth floor of a house in a side street at the east end of Princes Street. When I saw a light switch on in his flat, I and a colleague started to climb the Register House tower, suitably opposite. There the case nearly ended as far as I was concerned, for as I gripped the coping of the stonework to pull myself up, about eighteen inches by six of the masonry came away in my hands. I fell, rolling down the slates of the roof below, to the guttering. Fortunately this was deeper than usual, and it held me, high above the street. I man-

aged, with the assistance of my colleague and a rope, to climb back.

From our high stance, I am glad to say, we got sufficient evidence to arrest Gow. We went up to his flat, and I was first into the room. A terrific fight ensued, for as I have said, he was a violent and powerful man. However my fall on the roof, as well as shaking me, had roused my temper also, and I am afraid that I took the opportunity to give him something that I considered he deserved. Finally he was subdued and I may say he had to be taken away in an ambulance.

It is disappointing to have to report, from a police point of view, that while I was able to frame six charges based on articles found in his possession, these same articles had been likewise found in his possession when he had been arrested previously, and had been returned to him without charges. This time, however, he was prosecuted, tried and sentenced to nine months' imprisonment.

That was not the end of Albert Percival Gow, however. He was released, and soon was at his old game, frequenting urinals, behaving in a grossly indecent manner with people whom he later robbed and blackmailed. One morning I came home from a job, about 2.45 a.m. and a quarter of an hour later the telephone rang. This, strangely enough, was Gow, ringing me personally to say that he had the offer of a good job in Newcastle, but he preferred not to take it up if the police had anything against him. Was he all clear? My reply was, 'Albert, I don't know what you've been up to—but I'll very soon find out!'

Later that morning I was passing through the public office to my own room, when I heard a man talking to the constable at the counter, saying something about Newcastle. I stopped and asked the man what it was all about, and presently took him into my office and there got the full story. This man, who was employed on the railway, had gone to Newcastle for a week's holiday. The day he left Newcastle a man, who answered Gow's description, had called to see him. On reaching his home in Edinburgh, the railwayman's mother had told him that the same caller had been there, and had been brutally aggressive, demanding to see him, and threatening violence. Frightened, he had come to the police. I told him to go back home, tell his mother to say, if the

threatener called again, that he was out but would be back in ninety minutes' time, and to notify us immediately if this happened. He returned to his house, to learn from his mother that Gow had already been there, so he phoned me. Along with two officers, I hurried down, examined the place and saw that there was only one way by which I might witness any offence. By this time, the unfortunate man had confessed to me that he had earlier behaved indecently with Gow, that Gow had robbed him of his wallet and money, and he was now convinced that this was Gow going to try to blackmail him.

We arranged that I should hide in a wardrobe, that my colleague should go into another room, and that the victim should bring Gow into the bedroom where I was. At Gow's arrival all went according to plan, except that the officer who was to fix the wardrobe door so that I could see and hear, closed the door fast and hurried out. I couldn't shout to him to put the matter right, for by this time Gow was coming upstairs.

It was not long before I could hear all too plainly that Gow was attacking his victim savagely, in an indecent fashion evidently, and it was in no gentle frame of mind that I burst open the wardrobe door. The assaulted man promptly ran out of the bedroom leaving Gow and myself facing each other.

It was quite a party. Gow started it, I must insist—but I finished it. I by no means got off scot-free, but neither did Gow. Once again the ambulance was sent for, and Gow was taken to the Royal Infirmary.

We had returned to the office, when a complaint came in from an Infirmary doctor on the terrible state this poor fellow was in, and demanding the Chief Constable's attention. I went straight to the Infirmary, and saw the doctor myself. I said, 'I'm the man responsible for your patient's injuries—and you see what happened to me! There was no question of batons or weapons used. It was simply a matter of fists—though Gow tried to use his head on me, and I countered.'

The doctor seemed to find this difficult to believe.

I said, 'Well, if you come into the ward with me for a few minutes, I think I can satisfy you as to the kind of man you are dealing with.'

We went along, and there was Gow lying nicely covered with bandages.

I said to him, 'Well, Albert, you are still at your blackmailing, despite the fact that you have already caused two students to commit suicide through your blackmail.'

His reply was, 'The stupid beggars didn't need to do themselves in just because I was squeezing them!'

I am glad to say that was enough for the doctor. Gow was out of that Infirmary within the hour. He was prosecuted, and was given a stiff term of imprisonment.

I was not finished with Albert Gow yet. On another occasion a report came in to me that, at three o'clock in the morning, two policemen had been standing in a stairway in Market Street when a man rushed past them. They hurried after him, caught him—and it was our friend Gow. They brought him back to the stairway, where they found another man who claimed that Gow had robbed him of his wallet and some money. Gow was arrested once more. Albert P. Gow is now a lunatic in a mental home.

The sequel was interesting. The victim in this case happened to be the police-box cleaner, a man who had charge of a van and went round cleaning the boxes. Gow came up on this charge, was convicted, and received two years. But I had a feeling that it was perhaps time the cleaner himself had some attention. I instructed an officer to watch him, but it was reported later that all was in order.

One day, on my way to my office in the morning, I happened to notice this man standing at the corner of a street. On a hunch, I thought it might be worth while getting out of my car, slipping round the back of some gardens, and watching through the railings. Sure enough, presently the man spoke to three boys. I whipped over with the car, put the man and the three boys in, took them to the office, and as a result worked up a case wherein this police-box cleaner was charged with interfering with quite a number of boys. He was sentenced to a term, if I remember rightly, of two years' imprisonment.

It was a considerable time later that, when going to give a talk to a youth club connected with the Y.M.C.A. I was astonished to find that this same man was in fact in charge of the club. I lost no time in questioning this appointment, but could get no

satisfaction as to who was responsible. So I sent for the ex-police-box cleaner, and told him that if he didn't give up that work at once, I would go to the parents of the young people concerned and tell them what type of man he was.

He told me that he had been cured, and when I asked him how this had been done, he assured me that his minister had talked to him for about half an hour, and told him that he was now cured. I'm afraid that I took neither him nor his minister very seriously, and indeed had some rather unkind things to say about the reverend gentleman.

This in due course was repeated, and came to the ears of the Lord Advocate later to be Lord Cooper, who complained to the Right Hon. Tom Johnston, then Secretary of State for Scotland, about my conduct in this matter. I am happy to say that when I had submitted the required report, Mr. Johnston declared that he found no fault in my actions. I appreciated this verdict the more because Thomas Johnston is in my own opinion one of the greatest personalities that Scotland has produced.