

VICARS AND TARTS

Or the Tragi-Comic Tale of Harold Davidson, Rector of Stiffey

Stiffkey, which counterintuitively is spelled s-t-i-f-k-e-y, but was pronounced historically by its residents “stew-key”, is an unremarkable village of flint and brick houses on the north coast of the English county of Norfolk. (Wilson 315). Until the 1930s and the trial and tribulations of Harold Davidson, Stiffkey’s only claims to fame were its cockles, known as “Stewkey blues,” and the fine manor house built there by Sir Nicholas Bacon, Keeper of the Great Seal to Queen Elizabeth I and father of the philosopher and statesman Sir Francis Bacon. (Blythe 134).

Harold Davidson, the protagonist of this tale, was born July 14, 1875 in Sholing, a dreary suburb of Southampton, a major port city on England’s south coast. (Tucker 1). Davidson’s father, the Reverend Francis Davidson, was vicar of a poor parish, St. Mary’s, and the Davidsons lived in genteel poverty among Southampton’s dockworkers. (Cullen 27).

At fifteen Davidson was sent to the Whitgift Grammar School in Croydon, south London, where he academically performed poorly. (Tucker 1). But it was at Whitgift that Davidson developed an interest in the theater, and upon leaving at nineteen, he took up acting full time. (Cullen 30). His style was that of the “drawing room entertainer”, a form of light comedy popular at the time. (Cullen 31). While never a star, Davidson did reasonably well in the provinces, with his greatest success coming in a touring revival of the popular farce “Charley’s Aunt”. (Tucker 2).

The theater was not an occupation Davidson’s father would have chosen for him. (Tucker 2). Twenty-seven members of the Davidson family had taken Holy Orders, and it was expected that Davidson would follow suit. (Tucker 1). And after four years on the stage, Davidson did begin to study for the priesthood. (Tucker 3). Despite his lack of academic qualifications, Davidson was able to gain admission to Exeter College, Oxford with the assistance of family friend the Rev. Basil Wilberforce, son of a former Bishop of Oxford and grandson of the abolitionist William Wilberforce. (Cullen 31).

While at Oxford, Davidson had to continue his theatrical career to support himself, which did not help his already poor study habits. (Tucker 3). Having failed on his first two tries to pass Classical Moderations, Davidson was asked to leave Exeter College, but was allowed to continue studying for his degree by moving to Grindle’s Hall, a forcing house for Oxford students who could not pass their exams. (Cullen 34). Muddling on at Grindle’s, Davidson earned his bachelor’s degree from Oxford in five years instead of the customary three. (Tucker 3).

In addition to securing a degree at Oxford, Davidson also obtained a fiancé, Molly Saurin, a young, spirited and beautiful actress who had come to Oxford with a traveling theater troupe. (Tucker 5). A strong-willed Irishwoman, Molly hailed from the landed gentry, a fact she never tired of reminding listeners. (Cullen 42).

Because of Davidson's poor academic performance, the Bishop of Oxford was reluctant to ordain him to the priesthood, but in 1903 Davidson was ordained as a curate at Holy Trinity Church, Windsor, with a secondary duty as assistant chaplain of the Household Cavalry at Combermere Barracks (Tucker 5-6, Cullen 35).

After two years in Windsor, Davidson was transferred as assistant curate to St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, the landmark Georgian church located on the northeast corner of Trafalgar Square, London. (Tucker 6). At St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, Davidson solemnized his first wedding; the union of Gladys Sutherst and John James Dudley Stuart Townshend, the 6th Marquess Townshend. (Cullen 40). Gladys, an eighteen-year-old beauty with ambitions, had set her sights on marrying the Marquess, who was twenty years older, owned very little land, and appeared a bit unstable. (Tucker 6). But he was a peer of the realm with a stately home in Norfolk.

For his part, Townshend was all in favor of the match, believing that he was marrying the daughter of a millionaire and not, as it turned out, a bankrupt with over a quarter of a million pounds of debts. (*Id.*). To complicate matters, the Marquess' family threatened to have him certified as insane if he went through with the marriage. (Tucker 6-7). Undeterred, the couple married with Davidson officiating.

What role, if any, Davidson had in the union beyond performing the wedding is unclear at this point. But he was greatly rewarded for his services in May 1906 with his appointment as rector of the combined parishes of Stiffkey and Morston, a living in the gift of the Marquess worth initially £503 per year and increased to £800 during Davidson's incumbency. (Tucker 6-7). The living, which was a grant for life, also included a fine, twenty-room Georgian rectory and sixty acres of glebe land. (Tucker 9, 11).

With his appointment as rector, Davidson was finally able to marry Molly, which he did in October, with the Marchioness Townshend acting as a witnesses and the Lord Bishop of London officiating. (Cullen 40). Upon the couples' return from a honeymoon in Paris, Davidson took up his new post in rural Norfolk. Thereafter, children arrived at two-year intervals, starting with Sheilagh in 1907, and followed by Nugent, Patricia, and Arnold. (Tucker 11). Molly inherited a fiery temper from her father, which made life difficult for those around her. (Cullen 42). When annoyed, she would admonish her children, "Your grandfather would have horse-whipped a groom for much less." (*Id.*).

Whether the impetus was to distance himself from Molly, get out of rural Norfolk, or some other reason, Davidson soon took to spending six days out of seven in London, only being in Stiffkey and Morston for Sunday services. In London, Davidson became affiliated with the Actors' Church Union based at St. Paul's Church, Covent Garden. (Tucker 14). The A.C.U. was established at the end of the nineteenth century to bring together Christian actors and actresses, mainly by appointing chaplains to every theater in Britain. (Foulkes 182-83). Davidson seems to have been a little over-zealous ministering to the spiritual needs of London's showgirls as he was barred from a number

of theaters because of his habit of barging into the showgirls' changing rooms. (Cullen 44-45).

Between 1910 and 1913, Davidson also made regular trips to Paris, going every two weeks. (Tucker 14). A number of the trips were in connection with his A.C.U. activities for which he chaperoned newly recruited dancers to the Folies Bergère. (*Id.*). Davidson also later said that he had a friend who ran a school just outside of Paris and he would take girls there to work as maids. (*Id.*).

Davidson's London and Paris activities were interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War and his enlistment in October 1915 as chaplain with the Royal Navy. (Cullen 45). While serving on HMS *Fox*, a cruiser sailing in the Red Sea, Davidson was arrested in a police raid on a brothel in Cairo. (Tucker 14). His innocent explanation for his presence was that he was looking for a prostitute who had a severe dose of "the clap" and was infecting the men on his ship. (*Id.*).

Davidson was demobilized from the Navy in March 1919 and returned to Stiffkey to resume his duties as rector. (Cullen 45). When he arrived, he discovered that Molly was six months pregnant, and on June 21, 1919, Pamela Davidson was born, some ten months and three day after the end of the rector's last leave home. (Tucker 16). Though relations between the couple had been strained for a number of years, Molly's infidelity marked the final breakdown of the marriage, which thereafter was one in name only. (Cullen 47). Davidson quickly resumed spending six days a week in London.

Also around this time, Davidson became involved with Arthur John Gordon, a fast-talking Canadian. (Tucker 17). Gordon passed himself off as a company promoter with interests in American mining properties and patents, which were tied up in escrow and required considerable outlays of ready cash before they could be converted into untold riches. (Cullen 51). In reality, Gordon was an undischarged bankrupt and con-man. (*Id.*).

Davidson appears to have been one of Gordon's first victims, having been persuaded by Gordon to invest about £5,000 in a scheme that promptly collapsed. (Cullen 52). Gordon repaid part of Davidson's investment, only to borrow it back. (*Id.*). It was not long before Davidson began soliciting his wide circle of acquaintances to invest with Gordon. (*Id.*). As a clergyman, he had little difficulty in obtaining the trust of likely investors. (*Id.*). Davidson also held off his own creditors with tales of the riches that would flow when Gordon's schemes came to fruition. (Cullen 53-54).

Through the 1920s, Davidson's troubles mounted. He was, for example, expelled from membership in the Royal Overseas League, which had been founded by Sir Evelyn Wrench, who also founded the English-Speaking Union, as a club to foster international understanding and friendship. (Tucker 18). In the minds of some members, Davidson was taking Sir Evelyn's goal of friendship a bit too far with his persistent pestering of the League's young, female telephone receptionists. (*Id.*).

Davidson's financial condition also deteriorated, due mainly to his dealings with Gordon. By February 1925 he was deeply in debt and a warrant was issued for his arrest for non-payment of his quarterly taxes. (Cullen 57). He obtained a brief respite by obtaining a rule *nisi* from the High Court of Justice to prevent the arrest from being carried out and by borrowing money from loan sharks at an extortionate rate of interest to pay the owed taxes. (Tucker 18). Soon Davidson was in trouble with the moneylenders for failure to pay his promissory note. (*Id.*). In the seven month period ending in October 1925, Davidson was involved in seven different court actions, culminating with his filing a petition for bankruptcy with disclosed debts of £2,924, the equivalent of \$223,191 today. (*Id.*, Nye).

Davidson was now at risk under the Clergy Discipline Act of 1892. (Tucker 18). Under the Act, a priest could be prosecuted and tried in a Consistory Court for immoral acts or conduct. (*Id.*). "Immoral acts" were specified in the Act as the keeping of servile labor, drunkenness, riot, idling, gambling, adultery, swearing, ribaldry and "other wickedness." (Cullen 80). Any parishioner could bring a charge against a priest under the Act, but the bishop had the right to reject the charge. (Tucker 18).

Consistory Courts are ecclesiastical courts in which a bishop administers Church law within his diocese. (Tucker 18-19). Established by William the Conqueror, they exist in every diocese in England. (*Id.*). The officer who exercises jurisdiction in a Consistory Court is known as the chancellor and is appointed by the diocese's bishop. (*Id.*). Upon conviction, the chancellor recommends a punishment to the bishop, who will pronounce sentence in his cathedral. (*Id.*). Punishment can be a period of suspension or a complete deposition from Holy Orders. (*Id.*).

While it is debatable whether indebtedness qualified as "other wickedness" under the Act, undoubtedly if Davidson's creditors had succeeded in having him jailed for not paying his debts, he would have at least been deprived of his living and a new rector appointed to take his place in Stiffkey. (Tucker 19). A settlement, however, was eventually reached whereby Davidson surrendered half of his annual living to repay his creditors, leaving him around £400 a year with which to maintain his family in Stiffkey and his separate life in London. (Cullen 57).

By the latter 1920s, Davidson had established a set pattern of life. He spent all but Sundays, far from his family and parish, living in a string of rented rooms in the Bloomsbury area of London, between Euston Station and the British Museum. (Tucker 20). Most of his lodgings were within reasonable walking distance of the theaters, teashops, and cafés of the West End. (*Id.*).

With his persistent absence from Stiffkey and Morston, Davidson made powerful enemies in the parish. His principal nemesis was Major Philip Hamond, who had run away from school to fight with the Norfolk Regiment in the Boer War, was badly wounded, and at eighteen was the Army's youngest recipient of the D.S.O., Distinguished Service Order. (Cullen 58). Despite a total disability, Hamond fought in the First World War, participating in the earliest tank battles, winning a Military Cross,

and adding a bar to his D.S.O. (*Id.*). When the war was over, he left the Army and built Scaldbeck, a large house at Morston, where he became a pillar of the local community. (Tucker 28).

The very embodiment of moral rectitude, Major Hamond did not suffer fools gladly and he and Davidson began to clash almost at once. (Cullen 58). Davidson's great delinquency in Major Hamond's eyes was "slackness". (*Id.*). Sunday after Sunday Davidson was late and often seen pedaling his bicycle furiously along the road to Morston, sometimes arriving after the congregation had grown tired of waiting and gone home. (*Id.*). On one occasion, Davidson arrived without the bread and wine for communion and a furious Hamond ordered him to turn round and to cycle the four miles back to Stiffkey to fetch them. (Cullen 58-59).

When Davidson failed to make the Remembrance Day ceremony at the local war memorial, telegraphing that he had missed the train from London, Hamond's tolerance was at the breaking point. (Cullen 59). But it snapped when reports reached him that certain young girls Davidson had brought down to Stiffkey from London were going on nocturnal forays from the rectory to have assignations with local farm hands. (Tucker 24). Hamond spoke with a cousin who was a clergyman and the cousin suggested that the Major bring a complaint of immorality against Davidson under the Clergy Discipline Act of 1892, which he did in the middle of 1931. (Tucker 27).

After having the London-based Arrow's Detective Agency shadow Davidson on and off over six months and interview scores of people who had contact with the rector, the Lord Bishop of Norwich, Dr. Bertram Pollock, ordered charges to be laid against the rector on January 8, 1932. (Blythe 139, Tucker 30, 33). Immediately, meetings and discussions were had with Davidson. (Cullen 67). The bishop and his advisors had a clear goal: Davidson must be forced to resign his living and to submit to the bishop's discipline. (*Id.*). In so doing, the Church would avoid the scandal of a public trial which only would give comfort to its enemies. It was taken for granted that Davidson was guilty of immoral conduct; never was the possibility of the rector's innocence seriously considered. (*Id.*).

For whatever else he may have been, Davidson was a fighter, and a cunning one at that. (*Id.*). He began a campaign in the newspapers to defend himself, which created an immediate sensation. (Taylor 316). He also stormed around the country accusing the Church of hypocrisy and underhanded tactics, brining into play all the crowd-pleasing tricks he learned as a stage comic, with the result that before the trial began the press and public were firmly on the rector's side. (Tucker 32-37, Blythe 138).

At a preliminary hearing before Mr. F. Keppel North, Chancellor of the Norwich Consistory Court, Davidson's counsel applied for a postponement to allow more time to prepare the rector's defense and counsel for the bishop requested that the proceedings be heard in London rather than in Norwich to make it easier and less costly for the large number of London-based witnesses and journalists to attend. (Tucker 40-41). Chancellor North accepted both applications, on the condition that the defense did not

apply to have the case heard by a panel of assessors rather than judged solely by him. (Tucker 41). The defense agreed and the trial date was set for Tuesday, March 29, 1932 at Church House, Westminster, with Chancellor North presiding. (*Id.*).

The trial opened at 10 a.m. that day with Chancellor North seated under a richly-carved canopy of oak on the dais where the Archbishop of Canterbury presided at Church Convocations. (Cullen 81). The bewigged barristers were seated at two rows of tables in front of the dais. (*Id.*). The rector, dressed in clerical grey and carrying his papers in a cheap, cardboard attaché case, sat with his counsel. (Tucker 42).

The Bishop of Norwich brought five charges against Davidson under the 1892 Clergy Discipline Act. (Tucker 43). To each of the charges, Davidson emphatically responded: "Not guilty". (*Id.*). In substance, Davidson was charged with systematically misbehaving himself for years in London with young women, of age fifteen onwards. (Cullen 82). The issue for the Norwich Consistory Court was whether the rector's association with these young women was of an innocent or an immoral character. (*Id.*).

The opening address of Roland (later Sir Roland) Oliver KC for the prosecution lasted for over two hours. (Tucker 44). He describe Davidson's weekly routine – Sundays at his parish in Norfolk and the rest of the week in London. (*Id.*). Oliver explained that the rector's weekday life was characterized by two obsessions: (1) the ceaseless pursuit of the mysterious Mr. Gordon and (2) his keenness for associating with young women. (*Id.*). Davidson, Oliver pointed out, took his female adolescents to the theatre or cinema, paid for restaurant meals and taxis, and paid for their lodgings. (*Id.*). How, Oliver asked, did the rector pay for all this given that he had been an undischarged bankrupt since 1925, with a wife and five children to support. (*Id.*). Oliver also found it curious that the subjects of Davidson's charitable work were always young, attractive women and never, for example, young men. (*Id.*). Also significant was that the rector met these women in bedsitting rooms at all hours of the day and night; a curious place, Oliver observed, to proselytize to young women. (*Id.*).

The first witness called by the prosecution was Barbara Harris, the person on whom the entire case hinged. (Tucker 48). Barbara told the court she first met Davidson in August 1930 at the entrance to Marble Arch tube station, when he approached her – not wearing clerical dress – and told her that she looked like the American actress Mary Brian. (Cullen 94-95). Although the rector was old enough to be her grandfather Barbara, then sixteen, went willingly as the rector led the way to a restaurant across the street. (Cullen 95). This encounter marked the beginning of an association that was to last for nearly eighteen months. (*Id.*).

During the first three months, Barbara testified, Davidson was a constant visitor at her rooming-house in Alderney Street, where he introduced himself to the landlady as her uncle. (*Id.*). Later, when she moved to Macfarlane Road, he was even more pressing with his attentions, she said. (Cullen 95-96). Far from persuading her to change her way of life, the rector was always trying to make love to her, Barbara contended. "He begged me to give myself to him body and soul just once," she testified. (Cullen 97).

They had, she said, ended up in bed together at the Macfarlane Road house, but she had resisted his attempts to seduce her. (Tucker 49).

She also testified that when she repulsed the rector's advances, he had on two or three occasions "relieved himself", testimony which through self-censorship was not included in the newspaper reports of the trial. (*Id.*). In her testimony, she also described in detail an appendectomy scar on the right hand side of the rector's stomach and stated that he kept a box of what he referred to as "preventatives" in a trunk by the door of his room. (Cullen 105). These shocking for the times pieces of testimony also were omitted from all of the press reports of the trial. (Tucker 50).

According to Barbara, it was months before she discovered that Davidson was a priest and there was very little of a religious nature in their relationship. (Tucker 42). He had told her, she said, "God did not mind sins of the body, only sins of the soul, and any sins of the body would be forgiven." (Cullen 97). Barbara also testified that Davidson had also told her about Egyptian brothels and that the girls there were "very jolly". (*Id.*). "It was their religion to do that sort of thing," he told her. (*Id.*). He also said that he had visited similar places in Paris, and that Barbara "would do very well" in one of them. (*Id.*).

In his cross-examination of her, Davidson's lead counsel, Richard Levy, immediately began to focus on Barbara's promiscuity in an attempt to destroy her credibility. (Tucker 52). Without a doubt, Barbara, now seventeen, was a young woman of significant sexual experience. (Tucker 54). She admitted in court to having had around a dozen lovers over the prior two years. (*Id.*). Levy tried to paint Barbara as a "scarlet woman", preying on the upright, pure-hearted rector of Stiffkey. (*Id.*). The difficulty for Levy was that Barbara was a formidable witness. Throughout the trial, her responses were precise, unemotional, and often damning. (*Id.*).

Levy, for example, questioned her about her visits to St. George's Hospital in September 1930, to be treated for venereal disease. She acknowledged that she had been to the hospital, but asserted that she had only thought she had the disease. (Tucker 52). Seizing on this, Levy questioned her how Davidson could have been so foolhardy to pursue her sexually over a period of more than a year when he believed her to be suffering from an infectious disease. (*Id.*). She agreed that it was foolish for him to have done so, but steadfastly maintained that he had. (*Id.*).

Levy also questioned her about the rector's habit of kissing and putting his arm around people he met, even if they were strangers. (Tucker 56). Barbara agreed with Levy's description of the rector as "rather different from other people" but, as to his touchy-feely manner, her response was: "I have only seen it with girls." (*Id.*).

After nine hours and twenty-five minutes of questioning over three days, Barbara stood down. (Tucker 57). The prosecution continued on with its case, calling a number of teashop waitresses who testified about the eccentric ecclesiastic who left theater tickets under his tea-cup as tips. (Cullen 83). The essence of their testimony was the same:

the rector was a pest. (Blythe 136). He was such a pest that he had been banned from a number of teahouses. (Wilson 316). The most numerous of the prosecution witnesses were landladies, with nine in all testifying about Davidson taking girls to his room and visiting girls in their rooms at all hours. (Cullen 83).

When the prosecution's case concluded, the parties agreed to adjourn court for six weeks to give Davidson, his funds almost exhausted, time to raise more money for his defense. (Tucker 70). Davidson put out a public appeal for donations to his defense fund, which was carried in a number of newspapers. (Tucker 72). The appeal was successful, and Richard Levy opened the case for the defense speaking for more than five hours. (*Id.*). What the case came down to, he said, was that there was only one piece of direct evidence against Davidson – the testimony of Barbara Harris, and that was not believable. (*Id.*). Lacking any credible evidence, said Levy, the prosecution resorted to “suspicion, suggestion, insinuation, and prejudice” to advance their case against the rector. (*Id.*). Unquestionably, the rector was “a troublesome busybody” and a “kissing fool”, admitted Levy, but this did not mean that he made “improper suggestions” or engaged in immoral behavior. (Tucker 72-73). Indeed, claimed Levy, Davidson had helped hundreds of girls to escape poverty, homelessness, and the lure of prostitution. (Tucker 72).

When Davidson entered the witness box he was examined by Levy's junior counsel, E. Ryder Richardson, who promptly asked the rector:

Have you ever been guilty of immorality?
Have you lived in adultery with any woman?
Have you ever importuned a woman with immoral intent?

(Tucker 74). Davidson emphatically responded: “No.” “No.” “Never in my life.” (*Id.*).

When asked how many girls he had helped in the previous ten years, Davidson answered “between 500 and 1,000.” (Cullen 129). As for the shadowy Mr. Gordon, the rector testified that he met him almost every day, usually in a teahouse or one of the hotels. (Tucker 76). Because of his own frequent tardiness, Davidson explained, they would often miss each other. (*Id.*). That is why, claimed Davidson, he was always approaching teahouse waitresses: to ask them to pass messages to Gordon. (*Id.*). According to the rector, he would select a waitress who looked reliable and then attract her attention by putting his hand on her arm. (*Id.*). He was always touching people for emphasis, Davidson explained, and meant nothing improper by it. (*Id.*).

Responding to the contention of the prosecution that he chose only pretty girls, never plain ones, as the objects of his charity, the rector replied that it was the pretty ones who were in greatest need of his help. (Cullen 129-30). The plain ones, he asserted, could fend for themselves. (*Id.*).

Questioned about his relationship with Barbara Harris, Davidson said she was his “adopted niece”, an Irish custom learned from his wife. (Tucker 79). Davidson then

went on to issue a succession of categorical denials, more or less contradicting Barbara's evidence in its entirety. (Tucker 80). He admitted, for instance, that he had frequently visited her room, but emphatically denied that he had tried to seduce her. (Tucker 79). In fact, the rector claimed, Barbara had tried to force herself upon him, which he found disgusting. (*Id.*). He also was mystified by Barbara's detailed description of his appendicitis scar; evidence, if she were believed, that they had been intimate. (Tucker 80). The rector did not deny that he had such a scar, and suggested she may have peeped through the bathroom door and seen it. (Cullen 137).

Roland Oliver opened his cross-examination of Davidson with an attack on his lack of morals. (Tucker 81). The rector, Oliver asserted, was frolicking around London with his girls, paying their rent and treating them to visits to restaurants and theaters while his family lived in abject poverty in Stiffkey. (*Id.*). Davidson fervently denied that this was true. (*Id.*).

Asked by Oliver if he were especially eager to "meet girls between the age of sixteen and twenty," Davidson replied:

No, I like to get them from fourteen to twenty . . . The most impressionable ages in young girls who are going to be the mothers of the future generation are between fourteen to twenty and that is why I have always striven to get the highest principles inculcated into girls between those ages.

(Tucker 84).

On the second day of his cross-examination of Davidson, Oliver delivered a two-stage *coup de grâce*. (Tucker 87). First, he produced a post-card-sized photograph in which the rector is posed with a girl. (*Id.*). The girl in the photograph was fifteen-year-old Estelle Douglas, the daughter of Mae Douglas, one of Davidson's closest friends. (*Id.*). In response to questioning, Davidson explained that Mae was keen to get her daughter "in pictures", and had asked him to arrange a photo shoot to produce some publicity shots of the girl. (*Id.*). The shoot took place in Mae's flat, in her absence, on the day before the rector's trail for immorality involving young women began. (Tucker 88).

In the photo, Davidson gazes steadfastly at Estelle, who is wearing a black fringed Spanish shawl draped so that her left shoulder is bare. (Tucker 87). The rector has his hand on her right shoulder to prevent the shawl from slipping. (*Id.*). Then Oliver produced a second photo of Estelle and the rector. (Tucker 88-89). In it, Estelle is standing with her back to the camera and Davidson, with a glazed look, is staring straight into her eyes, with one hand on her shoulder and the other holding the shawl against her hip. (*Id.*). But now the shawl had slipped, revealing Estelle's bare back, bottom and thighs. (Cullen 153).

When handed the photograph for identification, Davidson exclaimed that he had been "framed". (Cullen 154). Oliver countered with the suggestion that Davidson had the

photographs taken for sale in other countries, particularly the United States, where the press was carrying detailed accounts of the trial. (*Id.*) Whether a witting or half-witted participant in the photographs, the trial's defining moment had arrived.

The trial continued on for another two weeks. Richard Levy's summation for the defense lasted for three and a half hours. (Tucker 96). Roland Oliver answered with a closing speech for the prosecution that spanned three days and lasted for a total of fourteen hours. (Tucker 97). With Oliver's address finally concluded, the court adjourned for a month, at which point Chancellor North would deliver his verdict. (Tucker 100). All told, the trial took twenty-five days spread over a period of nine weeks, with the court sitting on Saturdays in order to speed up the proceedings, and a total of sixty-nine witnesses testified. (Cullen 162).

The Norwich Consistory Court reconvened at Church House on Friday, July 8, to hear Chancellor North's findings. (Cullen 166). The Chancellor had already found Davidson guilty of two of the five charges when the rector, true to form late, entered the Great Hall and took his seat beside Richard Levy. (Tucker 105). The Chancellor then found the rector guilty on the remaining charges, giving his reasons in each instance; and in doing so he went out of his way to brand Davidson as a liar and a discredited witness. (Cullen 168).

And what about the credibility of Barbara Harris? "Of course, if Barbara is not speaking the truth, there is an end of the matter," the Chancellor acknowledged. (Cullen 169). Did Barbara tell the truth? "I sat side by side close to her and watched her manner for three days, while she was examined, cross-examined, recalled, further cross-examined, and further re-examined. I have come to a definite conclusion, I believe Barbara," the Chancellor intoned. (*Id.*)

Three and a half months later, on Friday, October 21, 1932, Davidson's sentence was rendered in Norwich's honey-colored, twelfth century cathedral. (Tucker 121). Shortly after 10:00 a.m. the main body of the cathedral was sealed off, and wooden chairs were arranged around a red-baize-covered table in the Beauchamp Chapel, the customary meeting place of the Consistory Court, and twelve members of the public were admitted. (*Id.*)

When 11:45 arrived and it was time to begin, there was no sign of Davidson. (*Id.*) After some minutes, the Registrar announced that the proceedings would be delayed until noon to allow Davidson time to arrive. (*Id.*) Just then, distant cheers announced the rector's arrival. (Wilson 315). Wearing full clerical garb and carrying a silk top hat, Davidson raced to the Beauchamp Chapel, where he seated himself at the table facing the bishop's throne. (Tucker 122). There was a brief lull before the Bishop of Norwich and his entourage processed into the chapel carrying their staffs and wands of office. (*Id.*)

The Apparitor then called, "Oyez, Oyez, Oyez, all persons cited and admonished to appear at this Court draw near and answer to your names as you shall be called. God

save the King.” (Wilson 315). Next came the call for Harold Francis Davidson, repeated three times, to which he replied, “Here”. (Blythe 151).

Bishop Pollock then offered a prayer to the assembly and taking back his gold and silver crozier from his chaplain began to read out the sentence, but was immediately interrupted by Davidson who asked if he might be allowed to speak before sentence was passed. (Tucker 122-23). The bishop assented, requesting Davidson be brief. (*Id.*). Looking right at the bishop, Davidson stated:

I wish before you pass sentence to say that I am entirely innocent in the sight of God of any of the graver charges that have been made against me. I have always felt throughout this trial, ..., that it is the Church authorities which were on trial and not myself, and whatever my sentence may be I shall work the rest of my life, if God gives me strength and health to do so, towards the reform of the procedure under which these Courts are conducted so that no other clergyman shall suffer who has striven to do the work which, in my opinion, every clergyman in the Church ought to do, going into the lower depths of society, leaving the ninety and nine just persons, and going for one who is lost.

(*Id.*). After Davidson sat down, Bishop Pollock rose and read out the sentence:

In the name of God, Amen. Whereas the Judge and Chancellor of the Consistory Court has notified us the Rev. Harold Francis Davidson, M.A., Clerk in Holy Orders, Rector of the parish churches of Stiffkey and Morston in our diocese, has been found guilty ... of certain immoral conduct, immoral acts, and immoral habits ... Now we Bertram, by Divine permission Bishop of Norwich ... pronounce, decree and declare the Rev. Harold Francis Davidson ought by law to be deprived of all his ecclesiastical promotions in the Diocese of Norwich, and especially of the Rectory of the parish churches of Stiffkey and Morston, of all profits and benefits pertaining to the said Rectory, and of any other ecclesiastical promotions in the Diocese of Norwich and of the glebe, fruits, tithes, rents, salaries, and all other ecclesiastical dues and rights and emoluments...

(Tucker 123). Sitting down, Pollock signed the document he had just read. (*Id.*). He then rose again and announced, “I will now move to the High Alter.” (*Id.*). With the utterance of those words, Davidson knew at once that he was not merely to be deprived, but also deposed. (*Id.*).

The Court made its way to the High Alter, with Davidson taking a seat in one of the front pews. (Tucker 124). The bishop knelt briefly at the High Alter and led prayers, which Davidson joined in. (*Id.*). Pollock then produced a document and delivered its contents:

...whereas it appears that the said Rev. Harold Francis Davidson has caused grave scandal to the Church and to his Holy Orders, and ought to

be deposed from Holy Orders. Now therefore we, Bertram, by Devine permission Bishop of Norwich ... do hereby pronounce decree and declare that the said Rev. Harold Francis Davidson ... ought to be entirely removed, deposed and degraded from the said offices of priest and deacon...

(*Id.*). Pollock recited several more prayers, raised his right hand in benediction, and then knelt silently for a time at the High Alter. (*Id.*). Rising, the bishop and his entourage reformed and solemnly processed out past Harold Davidson, ex-rector of Stiffkey and ex-priest. (*Id.*).

Even before Bishop Pollock passed sentence on Davidson, the rector, in desperate need of money, had already made his debut as a side-show attraction in Blackpool, a seaside resort on the Lancashire coast in North West England. (Tucker 127). Booked by a local impresario, Luke Gannon, the "Showman King of Blackpool", Davidson, like a modern-day Diogenes, sat in a custom-built barrel with an electric light, a padded seat, a window at the side for addressing the passing stream of gawkers, and a chimney for his cigar smoke. (Cullen 189).

After he was defrocked, Davidson became a permanent fixture of Blackpool's Golden Mile. (Tucker 129). He did not confine himself to sitting in barrels, although that was his mainstay attraction. In one variation, he was locked in a refrigerated chamber, pledging to freeze himself to shame the dark forces that had brought him to his current state. (Tucker 130). In another, he appeared to be roasting in an enclosed pit with a mechanical devil prodding his rear with a gilded pitchfork. (*Id.*).

For the 1935 season, Davidson was again in Blackpool – this time displaying himself in a glass coffin with a billboard that read: "The ex-Rector of Stiffkey claims that he will make it his Life's End and will Fast unto Death if his appeal is unheeded." (Tucker 136). Seeking to shut down the exhibition, which it viewed as tasteless, the Blackpool town council criminally prosecuted Davidson for attempted suicide. (Cullen 190).

In court, Davidson argued that he had no intention to starve himself to death and it was not his fault if his protest had been billed as a "Fast unto Death". (*Id.*). Acquitted, he promptly sued Blackpool for malicious arrest and was awarded £382 in damages. (Tucker 136). The incident, however, badly injured his credibility, for the rumor spread that during the ten days he was supposed to be fasting Davidson had lived on bananas and grapes smuggled to him in his glass coffin. (Cullen 190). Attendance fell off sharply. (*Id.*).

Davidson's Blackpool performances were limited to the summer months and in winter he worked various odd jobs, including selling books and working as a porter at London's St. Pancras Station. (Tucker 139). In November 1936, an incident occurred at London's Victoria Station. It was claimed that Davidson had accosted two sixteen-year-old girls there and offered them £5 each to audition for a part in a forthcoming West End play. (*Id.*). The girls reported him to the police and when he returned the next day he

was arrested on a charge of “trespassing on railway property”, a euphemism for importuning. (*Id.*). The magistrate at the Westminster police court fined Davidson a total of £7.8s (including costs) and ordered him to pay the full fine within a month or go to prison for fifteen days. (*Id.*).

By the winter of 1936, Davidson was seriously in debt and the Blackpool box-office receipts had fallen off drastically. So he decided to forgo Blackpool and sign with Captain Fred Rye, the owner of a menagerie, to appear at Skegness Amusement Park during the 1937 summer season in an act billed as “A Modern Daniel in a Lion’s Den”. (Cullen 193-94). Until the early 1920s, Skegness was a small, unprepossessing town on the east coast of England in Lincolnshire. (Tucker 143). Things changed in 1922, when an intense development program transformed the town into one of the country’s busiest holiday resorts. (*Id.*).

Fearful of animals, it was an act of courage on Davidson’s part to appear in a cage with a lion. (Cullen 194). First, he performed with a single lion; it was only in July that he began to perform with both a male lion called Freddie and a female named Toto. (Tucker 142-43). Davidson’s performance began outside the cage with the ex-rector giving a ten-minute speech about the wrongs of his case. (Cullen 195). Then he would enter the cage for three or four minutes. (*Id.*).

On July 21 two Skegness policemen showed up at Captain Rye’s pavilion with a warrant to arrest Davidson for non-payment of the fine imposed for the Victoria Station incident the previous November. (Tucker 144). This necessitated Davidson to go to London on July 27, arriving back in Skegness the next morning, with little or no sleep. (Tucker 144-45). He performed throughout the day, and delivered his customary lecture before entering the lions’ cage shortly before 8:00 p.m. for the last performance of the day. (Tucker 145). The cage which housed the lions measured 14 ft. by 8 ft. (Wilson 317) and had doors at either end, the right-hand door being always padlocked. (Cullen 195). Captain Rye was absent that day, but his wife, who had the key, was working the ticket-booth. (Tucker 145).

Evidently the lions were too docile for Davidson’s liking, for no sooner had he entered the cage than he began cracking his whip. (Cullen 195). Toto, who was lying at the far end of the cage, did not react. (*Id.*). But Freddie began to stalk Davidson round the cage, and suddenly reared and struck Davidson with his two front paws knocking the ex-rector over. (*Id.*). Freddie then got Davidson “by the neck and carried him round the cage like a cat would carry a mouse.” (Cullen 195-96).

At first the holiday-makers thought that Davidson’s struggle was all part of a comic lion-taming act, but as realization of the tragedy sank in the spectators fled for the exit. (Cullen 196). Seeing what was happening, Irene Somner, Captain Rye’s assistant lion tamer, dashed into the cage and beat Freddie over the head with a tree branch until the lion dropped Davidson in the far corner of the cage. (*Id.*). Irene then began shouting, “Get Mrs. Rye! Get the key from Mrs. Rye!” (*Id.*). Once unlocked, Irene dragged Davidson, his head covered in blood, to safety through the right-hand door. Daniel, the

Old Testament tells us, was rescued from the lion's den by an angel of the Lord. (*Id.*) Davidson, appropriately, was rescued from the lions' cage by Irene, a girl of sixteen. (*Id.*)

Davidson was rushed to the Skegness Cottage Hospital with injuries to his neck, shoulders and back. (Tucker 146). There is some confusion over what happened at the hospital; it having been suggested that the doctors, mistakenly thinking Davidson suffered from diabetes, administered insulin, which worsened his condition. (Tucker 147). Whatever the doctors did or did not do, Davidson fell into a deep coma and died two days after his mauling. (*Id.*)

The chief concern for the family at this point was where to bury Davidson. (Tucker 149). They could not afford to move the body to Stiffkey and were considering having him interred in Skegness when a garage owner, with an eye to the publicity, offered to transport the body to Stiffkey free of charge. (*Id.*) Thus, Davidson was buried in Stiffkey churchyard with several thousand in attendance. When the service was over and it was time to fill in the grave, it was discovered that souvenir-hunters had taken all the soil and there was nothing left with which to lay the ex-rector to rest. (Tucker 150). Two men had to be hurriedly sent off to the local quarry to fetch more dirt. (*Id.*)

Given the violent and unnatural nature of Davidson's demise, a coroner's inquest was held, as required under British law. After hearing from a number of witnesses, including Irene, Mrs. Rye, and the hospital doctors, the coroner's jury returned a verdict of "death by misadventure". (Cullen 197). Misadventure is an apt term with which to end this tale, for it as easily describes Harold Davidson's life as his death.

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