

FANNY AND STELLA

*The Young Men
Who Shocked
Victorian England*

NEIL MCKENNA



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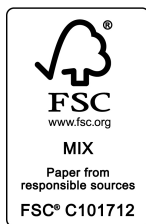
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For
Dede Smith
companion-in-arms

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There was an old person of Sark
Who buggered a pig in the dark;
The swine in surprise
Murmured: 'God blast your eyes,
Do you take me for Boulton and Park?'

The Pearl, 1879

Leading Ladies

Thursday 28th April 1870

When they were seated in the stalls,
 With their low-neck'd dresses and flowing shawls,
 They were admired by one and all,
 This pair of He-She ladies.
 The gents at them would take a peep,
 And say they are Duchesses at least,
 Lor! what a fascinating pair,
 Especially she with the curly hair.

'The Funny He-She Ladies'

Heads turned as the two strikingly handsome women swept imperiously into the pale-green and gilded foyer of the Strand Theatre and made their way to the private box, booked under the name of Mrs Fanny Graham, where two young men – Mr Hugh Mundell and Mr Cecil Thomas were the names they had given to the boxkeeper – were already waiting for them.

In the flurry of excitement, nobody noticed the three ordinary-looking, moustachioed men who had slipped quietly into the theatre on the heels of the two women and then quickly melted away into the darker recesses of the stalls and promenade.

The boxkeeper was excited. He thought that he recognised one of these two divinities as none other than the Duchess

of Manchester, the great society beauty whom the Prime Minister, Mr Gladstone, just five days earlier at a state banquet, had praised as among 'the very fairest of our land'.

But the male members of the audience at the Strand Theatre were not so easily fooled. 'The general opinion throughout the house,' one observer reported, 'was that they were two fresh stars in the firmament of the demi-monde, and that their beauty, their fascination, and their paid-for smiles would, before the London season expired, cause many a poor dupe to curse the hour in which he had been born.'

The recently rebuilt Strand Theatre was one of London's largest, and seated over a thousand people. It was famous for three things: for the quality of its air, for its burlesque productions, and for its reputation as a place of successful sexual assignments. Air quality was a prime consideration. Most theatres and music halls reeked of unwashed humanity, a hot and heady mixture of sweat, body odour, pipe and cigar smoke, cheap scent and alcohol. When it was rebuilt in 1865 the Strand was the first theatre with a purposely designed ventilation system and the first to install an industrial-sized Rimmel's Vaporiser, invented by the *parfumier* Eugene Rimmel, which released clouds of perfumed steam to sanitise and deodorise the air.

London was in the grip of a new theatrical craze for burlesques and burlettas, for light operas, comedies, farces, melodramas and pantomimes where women dressed as men and men dressed as women. The pursuit of love with all its thorny and tangled turnings, all its comic and tragi-comic complications, was the proper subject of burlesque. That young women dressed as men fell in love with young men, and young men dressed as women fell in love with young women, far from confusing the audience, seemed to add a delightful *frisson* of

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sexual excitement to the proceedings. And the Strand Theatre was the very epicentre of burlesque mania, mounting a never-ending succession of 'Grand Burlesque Extravaganzas' which guaranteed full houses night after night.

Above and beyond its technical marvels and its burlesque extravaganzas, the Strand was notorious as a place where men could meet women for sex, and had been patronised on many occasions by no less a personage than the Prince of Wales. It was, as the cartoonist Alfred Bryan slyly insinuated, one of London's 'Noted Shops for Tarts', and a crude but popular limerick made explicit reference to the Strand's erotic reputation:

There was a young man of St Paul's
Possessed of the most useless of balls,
Till at last, at the Strand,
He managed a stand,
And tossed himself off in the stalls.

If there was any lingering doubt that the two strikingly handsome women in Mrs Fanny Graham's box were expensively dressed whores, their behaviour soon put paid to such notions. They nonchalantly leaned over their box, waved their fans, twirled their handkerchiefs and 'lasciviously ogled the male occupants of the stalls'. They smoked, they giggled, they nodded and they winked as they waggled their tongues at men in such a way as to leave absolutely no doubt of their sexual intentions.

And they chirruped – so loudly that at one point some members of the audience complained that it quite drowned out the performance. Chirruping was a sucking noise, made with fluttering lips and usually reserved for babies and kittens, but

used by whores and their punters alike to signal sexual desire. Sometimes chirrupers were arrested for causing a public nuisance. One persistent chirruper taken up by the police excused himself at the Lambeth Police Court by claiming 'he thought there was no harm in it'.

After half an hour or so Mrs Fanny Graham and her companion, Miss Stella Boulton, stood up, smiled and curtsied to the gentlemen of the stalls and left their box to go to the theatre's refreshment bar, squired by Mr Mundell and Mr Thomas. Again, nobody paid the least attention to the three moustachioed men who had so unobtrusively followed them into the theatre and who now reappeared in the Strand's saloon bar looking for all the world as if they were fixtures there.

It was clear that Mrs Graham and Miss Boulton had already been drinking quite heavily, and they now proceeded to consume brandies and sherries at breakneck speed. They were immediately besieged by a gang of curious and admiring swells and gallants and some dubious and not-so-dubious gentlemen eager to sample the charms of these two dazzling demi-mondaines.

Miss Stella Boulton was seemingly the younger of the pair and was resplendent in a brilliant scarlet silk evening dress trimmed with white lace and draped with a white muslin shawl. She was more than just pretty. In the glittering, flattering, faceted lights of the Strand's saloon bar she was quite beautiful. She was tall and slender, with a narrow waist and a magnificent bosom, her finely shaped head topped by raven hair fashionably dressed in the Grecian style with coils of plaited hair held in place by a crosshatch of black velvet. Her pale face was captivating, with large liquid violet-blue eyes, just a becoming blush to her cheeks, perfect full ruby lips and pearly white teeth. She

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seemed to scintillate and shine like a star, and the men could hardly take their eyes off her. If she was indeed a whore, she was an exceptional whore. A veritable queen among whores.

By way of contrast, Mrs Fanny Graham was (and this was putting it charitably) on the plain side and was possessed of what the *Evening Standard* called, diplomatically, 'sterner features'. She seemed older, matronly and more worldly-wise, and her cascading flaxen curls seemed to sit oddly with her dark skin and dark eyes. She wore a rather unbecoming dark-green satin crinoline trimmed with black lace and a black lace mantilla. Her eyes were a little too small and closely set together, her nose a little too large, her brows a shade too heavy, and her cheeks more than a little jowly.

But Mrs Fanny Graham was withal a fine figure of a woman with an expression of great good humour and animation. She was handsome in a mannish sort of way. Her dark eyes sparkled when she spoke to her companion, whom she addressed variously as 'Stella', 'Stell', 'Sister' and 'Dear' in a loud theatrical voice which seemed to ricochet around the refreshment bar. Stella's voice, by contrast, was sweet and musical, though equally theatrical. She called her companion 'Fanny' and 'Sister dear'.

So Fanny and Stella were, it seemed, sisters both by birth and by profession, and if the men crowding around them had paused for thought, they might have reached some bracing conclusions about the cruelty of a bestowing fate which had endowed the one sister with such beauty and the other with such decided plainness. Both women were 'painted', Stella quite subtly and effectively, Fanny with considerably more artistic licence. And both wore rather a great deal of jewellery: necklaces, lockets, rings, earrings and bracelets.

Fanny and Stella were hard to fathom. They had behaved with such lewdness in their box in the stalls as to leave not the faintest shred of doubt in even the most disinterested observer that they were a pair of hardened and shameless whores. And yet, close up, Stella was revealed as a beautiful, almost aristocratic, young woman who showed flashes of an innate, and most decidedly un-whorelike, dignity and grace. One newspaper said later that she was 'charming as a star', another christened her 'Stella, Star of the Strand'. And despite all the opprobrium that would later be heaped upon her, despite all the mud that would be slung at her and all the mud that would stick to her, she never lost the mysterious aura of a great and stellar beauty.

Mrs Fanny Graham, too, was clearly a woman of some education and breeding, and was certainly very far removed from your common-or-garden whore. Here in the saloon bar, it seemed harder to reconcile their obvious quality with the ogling, tongue-wagging, chirruping lasciviousness of the stalls.

They spent half an hour or so in the refreshment bar. Before they left, Mrs Fanny Graham, unaware that she was being watched, betook herself to the Ladies' Retiring Room and asked the attendant there to pin the lace back to the hem of her crinoline where she had trodden on it. At a quarter past ten, Mr Hugh Mundell had been despatched in ringing tones by Mrs Graham to go and call for her carriage and soon afterwards the remainder of the party made a leisurely progress to the foyer and pushed their way through the noise and confusion of an emptying theatre to the waiting conveyance.

Just as the carriage was about to depart, one of the men who had been shadowing them all that evening jumped up and swung himself in through the door.

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‘I’m a police officer from Bow Street,’ he said, producing his warrant card, ‘and I have every reason to believe that you are men in female attire and you will have to come to Bow Street with me now.’

There was a moment’s pause.

‘How *dare* you address a Lady in that manner, Sir,’ Mrs Fanny Graham demanded with frigid hauteur. For a second it seemed as if she might slap his face as a reward for such impudence.

Then all hell broke loose as Mr Cecil Thomas frantically struggled past the policeman, leapt out of the carriage and ran for dear life, elbowing his way through the bewildered crowds. Fanny and Stella were also contemplating flight and were already quietly edging themselves towards the opposite door of the carriage. Quite how fast they could run and quite how far they imagined they would get in their crinolines was anybody’s guess. But their exit was firmly blocked by another burly policeman in plain clothes who appeared seemingly from nowhere. With a smart tap on the roof, the carriage set off at a rattle and a clatter away eastwards down the Strand.

The two women sat in shocked silence for a few moments. Stella looked as if she might be about to cry. Clearing her throat noisily, Fanny spoke, only this time her voice and demeanour had changed, miraculously transmuted into the voice of a well-bred young man about town.

‘Look here, old fellow,’ she said, ‘it’ll do you no good to take us to the station and if you’ll let us go we’ll give you anything you want.’

‘*Anything*,’ she repeated with a knowing look.

‘Anything you like to mention,’ Stella echoed meaningfully, staring directly at the two policemen, and arching her eye-

brows. 'Anything you like to mention, you can have.'

'I'll do nothing of the sort,' said Detective Sergeant Frederick Kerley, gruffly. 'I must take you to the station.' Detective Officer William Chamberlain sat there in impenetrable silence.

It took rather less than five minutes to drive to Bow Street where Fanny and Stella were marched firmly into the police station and placed in a wooden dock to be formally questioned.

At thirty-five, Inspector James Thompson was one of the youngest and shrewdest senior police officers in London. Unlike many of his colleagues, he was an educated man, working as a clerk before joining the Metropolitan Police ten years earlier and rising quickly through the ranks to become Inspector of 'E' Division, one of the largest sections of the force, covering Holborn and the West End. Inspector Thompson's 195 police officers patrolled an exact total of forty miles and 869 yards of streets and roads and arrested around eight thousand people every year, a thousand or so of them prostitutes plying their trade on the busy thoroughfares of the West End.

Inspector Thompson had made his own way back from the Strand Theatre after giving the signal to Detective Sergeant Kerley and Detective Officer Chamberlain to arrest the two young men in women's clothes. Fanny and Stella were of course oblivious to the fact that this rather grave dark-haired policeman had been shadowing them all evening.

Under the flaring gas jets of Bow Street Police Station, they looked a pathetic pair. Stella's make-up was stained with tears, and the pearl powder that she and Fanny had so liberally applied to their *décolletages* had been shot through with sweat, revealing rather less lustrous skin beneath. Both Fanny's flaxen curls and Stella's Grecian plaits were starting to come away

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from the complex artificial architecture of their hair, giving them a faintly tipsy look. Inspector Thompson could see that their crinolines were long past their best, the antique lace borders grimy and torn. The flounces of their petticoats peeping out from under the crinolines were stained and decidedly grubby. He noticed that their hands were a shade too large, and their feet, encased in white kid boots, looked a shade too masculine. And beneath the peeling make-up, was that the merest shadow of a beard?

‘Your name and address?’ Inspector Thompson asked, looking at Stella severely. There was no reply. ‘Your name and address?’ he repeated.

‘My name is Cecil Graham,’ mumbled Stella, ‘and I live at number 2 Bruton Crescent.’ There was silence as Thompson wrote this down, the sound of his metal nib scraping the paper.

Stella suddenly decided that there was no point in lying to the police.

‘Actually,’ she interrupted quickly, ‘my name is Ernest Boulton. I’m the son of a stockbroker and I live with my father at 23 Shirland Road, Maida Vale.’ Thompson calmly scratched out ‘Cecil Graham’.

‘And I’ve just come back from Edinburgh,’ Stella added lamely by way of an afterthought.

Inspector Thompson turned quizzically to Fanny.

‘My name is Frederick William Park,’ said Fanny wretchedly. ‘I’m a law student and I lodge at number 13 Bruton Street, Berkeley Square.’

There was a long silence as Inspector Thompson slowly surveyed the pair, taking in every detail of their appearance.

‘It seems a very extraordinary thing to me,’ Thompson said quietly and deliberately, ‘and I don’t quite understand it. Will

you give me some explanation for appearing in this dress?’

Fanny and Stella shifted about uncomfortably.

‘We *are* men,’ they mumbled miserably in unison. It had all been just ‘a lark’, ‘a spree’ that had got out of hand.

‘And we are very, very sorry.’

A few minutes later Fanny and Stella found themselves in one of the chilly outdoor cells in the yard behind Bow Street. Detective Officer Chamberlain had ordered them to strip in the glare of the gas jets. The nightmare had started to unfold. They undressed slowly, reluctantly and awkwardly as Chamberlain and a crowd of other policemen watched with fascination and horror. There were jeers, whistles and sneers, followed by gasps as Fanny and Stella’s crinolines fell to the floor revealing their undergarments.

‘There were flannel petticoats,’ Chamberlain testified later, ‘and I believe calico petticoats; there were stays, a short white skirt, very short under the stays’, and both of them had bosoms padded with wadding to make them appear ‘very full’.

There was some confusion over whether or not Stella was wearing any drawers. Chamberlain was sure that she was not, a fact that he could only have ascertained by making Stella strip until she was completely naked and revealed as a slender young man with the face of a beautiful young woman.

Mr Hugh Mundell was not under arrest but he had insisted upon coming to the station. ‘One of the police said he did not want me, that I could go,’ Mundell said later. ‘I said I had done nothing wrong.’ He felt compelled, he said, to accompany Fanny and Stella to Bow Street. ‘I did not want to desert them,’ he said nobly. ‘I wished to go and get bail for them. I thought they had been out on a lark, and that I might get bail for them.’

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When Hugh Mundell joined them in the cell a little later, arrested for refusing to give his name and address, he found them very 'downspirited' and tried 'to keep them up'. It was hard work. Fanny and Stella were shivering and crying, their hair awry, their painted faces smudged with tears. They had been allowed to keep their underwear and were desperately trying to dress themselves and rearrange the wadding in their bosoms into some semblance of normality.

Oh, was it not a cruel sell,
That night they must remember well,
When they had to pig in Bow Street cell,
What a change for them he-she ladies.

It was the first of many public and not-so-public humiliations that Fanny and Stella would have to endure, and even the hard-nosed and even harder-hearted Detective Officer Chamberlain had to concede that Fanny and Stella were being 'so brave'.