



## “POOR JENNIE”

By Chris Forester

### THE JENNIE PERCY CASE

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Victorian military machine was exclusively male with many Soldiers and ordinary seamen spending many years in the service of their country. The rank & file were not allowed the luxury of matrimony until they were older and this led to obvious problems within the services. With a largely bachelor Army and Navy the military, whilst not actually condoning the use of prostitutes would generally tolerate its officers and men resorting to this outlet provided that it was not too public. Sex with no commitment was tolerated in the forces and in society generally for many years. The premise being that for men this was a natural function. What were known as vicious habits or homosexuality were rife in some quarters particularly when men were at sea or posted to remote areas for long periods. When returning on leave much leeway was given to these men however their behaviour on many occasions went beyond the bounds of respectability and civil conduct. With this random fraternization with ‘Gay Parties’ or loose women it was no surprise that venereal disease would be rife. Kipling’s poem ‘Tommy’ reminds us of when the military were viewed in less than friendly terms:

*‘Oh Its Tommy this and Tommy that and chuck in out  
the brute*

*but it’s the thin red line of ‘Eroes’ when the guns  
begin ter shoot’*

In 1862 the government was presented with figures that shocked them by the amount of venereal disease affecting the Navy and Army. Later and more accurate figures for 1864 stated that one third of all sickness in the army was due to venereal disease and hospital admissions for Gonorrhoea and Syphilis amounted to 291 per 1000 men. Losses to the navy were somewhat less and averaged 9.9 men per 1000 or 586 per day and one naval pundit commented that this figure equated to the complement of a battleship the size of the ‘Royal Oak’. The need to protect ‘Our Boys in service’ became urgent. After much debate it was decided in various parliamentary committees that whilst Prostitutes provided an outlet for heterosexual activity it was necessary to protect army health without actually discouraging prostitution. The answer was to inspect the women. This was a little hypocritical as a previous attempt to protect army health by inspecting the soldiers for symptoms of VD was abandoned as it was thought to be demoralizing to the men. The result was the introduction of the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864. This provided for the examination of women ‘thought’ to be prostitutes by a specially appointed medical officer, usually a military doctor at a Lock Hospital. If she was found to be diseased she could be detained in that hospital until the symptoms subsided. (There was no actual

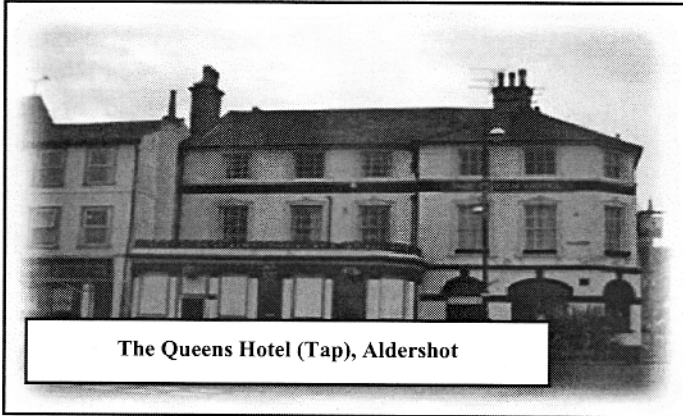
cure for Syphilis.) The enforcement of this invidious act was given to the Metropolitan Police who had taken over the policing of the Royal Dockyards and certain Barrack areas since 1860. What was effectively set up was a ‘Sanitary Police’ and the Department within the Dockyard Force who administered the provisions of the acts was the Water Police or Detective department. Officers would be detached to carry out this generally unpopular duty in plain clothes. Some officers however took the opportunity to indulge in various bullying tactics to perform their duties. One such bully was Inspector George Godfrey the incumbent at Aldershot Barracks. The town had been ‘Designated’ under the Acts in 1867 and for the purpose of the CD Acts, under the control of the Woolwich Dockyard Division of the Metropolitan Police.

A relatively young but rapidly growing military area, Aldershot was becoming a busy, rumbustuous town for the local soldiers to spend their recreational hours in. The town had many public houses that doubled as music halls, the Red White & Blue, The Queens Hotel Tap and the Pavilion to name but three. That there were loose women was apparent as census records for the Military Lock Hospital in Farnham Road testify. In 1881 there were some 38 women incarcerated there aged from 16 to 39. One woman had her 2 year old daughter with her. These figures had gone down to 14 women in 1891 after the repeal of the Acts. An interesting note was that one of the Contagious Disease Acts Officers, Constable John Macleod who was posted there as the gatekeeper in 1865 was still working there in his retirement in 1891 with his wife and daughter. Inspector George Godfrey had been posted to Aldershot to administer the provisions of the Acts within the boundaries of the town and up to 5 miles around. In March 1875 a young widow and music hall singer named Jane Percy or Jennie as she was professionally known came to his notice. Jennie Percy was the widow of Henry Percy who was noted on the 1871 census as a ‘Theatrical performer’. Some 18 years older than Jennie he being 47 and her 29 he died in 1874 leaving Jennie, her daughter, also Jennie aged 16 and two sons Harry, 5 and Douglas 3 to fend for themselves. As a widow in the 1870s she would have had to have been tough to survive. She continued as a music hall singer and achieved some distinction as a local celebrity, even more so when she introduced her pretty 16 year old daughter to the stage, also as a singer.

How she came to Godfrey’s notice is not known, probably through gossip is the guess. The Water Police needed no more evidence than an overheard chance remark to target a female. Their enquiries later revealed that Jennie was frequently seen in the company of soldiers; somewhat obvious one would think in a military town and in fact rather difficult to avoid them. Once Godfrey had enough ‘evidence’ through enquiries and surveillance, on the 11<sup>th</sup> March 1875 he went to Mrs



Percy's lodgings and served papers for her and her daughter, 16 year old Jennie to appear at the Farnham Road Lock Hospital for an intimate examination for the presence of venereal disease. Jennie was appalled and vehemently protested her innocence to the Inspector. He was implacable and insisted that if she did not



The Queens Hotel (Tap), Aldershot

appear she would be summoned by the Commissioners. She was in a cleft stick, if she went voluntarily she would be immediately branded a loose woman in everyone's eyes with the resultant risk of disgrace and no further employment in the town. Once on the register whatever the result she would become a 'Queens Woman' as they were described. If she resisted she and her daughter would be arrested and forcibly examined. She angrily threw the papers back at Godfrey refusing outright to attend, Godfrey then apparently lost his temper and shaking his fist in her face shouted that he would bring her before the magistrates and finish her in the town. The next shock was when her employer at the Red, White & Blue Music Hall, a Mr.

Salter informed her that he had had a visit from the local Hampshire Police Superintendent, Mr. Charles Stephenson who had warned him that if he continued to employ her his license would be rescinded. Jennie realising that a police net was closing returned to her lodgings in North Camp and in panic packed her few possessions taking her daughter and herself to Windsor, leaving her two young sons with friends. It was from Windsor on the 15<sup>th</sup> March that she wrote a letter to the Daily Telegraph pleading her case:

#### **CONTAGIOUS DISEASES ACTS**

(To the editor of the Daily Telegraph) Sir

*Your paper has the reputation of espousing the cause of the poor and unfortunate, as well as that of the rich and well born. I at least think so and in proof thereof I select it as the means of bringing to the notice of those persons who have thought it their duty to agitate for the repeal of the above Acts, a proceeding which I cannot but stigmatise as a shameful and high handed use of the power given to the police under its provisions. I am a professional singer and actress, who having lived in a large garrison town, where the said Act is in force, for the last twenty years. My husband*

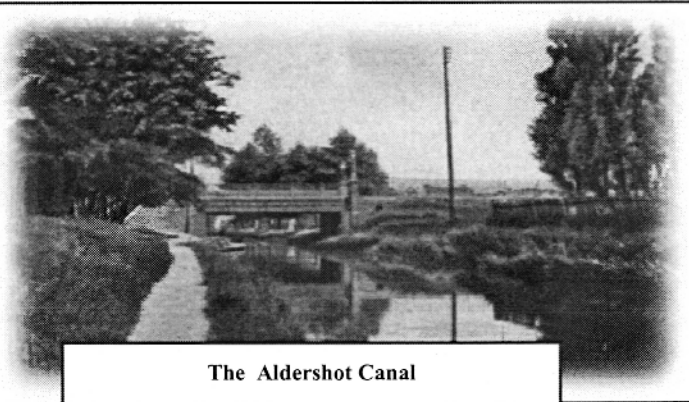
*who was also a professional and well known as a talented writer of pantomimes, burlesques etc, died twelve months ago leaving me with three children, the oldest a girl of sixteen who had been brought up with me in the profession and who has never been out of an engagement since she first appeared in public. Any one at all conversant with the habits of soldiers is perfectly aware that they are, as a rule very indulgent and gracious with those who contribute to their amusement. My calling threw me very much in their company, but would you believe it Sir, my every action has been watched by the police, my outgoing and my incoming; in fact, I have been placed under a system of surveillance which had I known of it in time I might have taken some steps to put a stop to, but I was going about my usual business in blissful ignorance, but I was destined for a rude awakening. One morning I was visited by a representative of the Commissioners? in the form of a member of the Metropolitan Police, who quietly warned me to attend the Lock Hospital next day accompanied by my eldest daughter. Do you believe it Sir? I must confess I could hardly believe my ears, and when I indignantly refused to entertain any such warning, I was coolly told I would be summoned before the Commissioners. On asking the reason for this arbitrary proceeding, I was informed that I and my daughter had been seen in company of different soldiers for some time and that two of them had stayed in my house until twelve o'clock one night. This was the excuse for ordering me to take a step which would have completely disgraced me in the eyes of all my acquaintances. Consequently I at once gave up my engagement and that of my daughter, and left the town knowing full well that I was unable to cope with the police in their high handed work. The above is precisely what has occurred, without any comment, however I leave it to your numerous readers to judge the working of this obnoxious Act from this solitary specimen.*

*I am your obedient servant A PROFESSIONAL*

Meanwhile whilst she was in Windsor she had friends who were working on her behalf back in Aldershot. Her two sons had been taken in by friends and her professional associate Edward Ritson also an actor and singer went to Godfrey to plead her case. Godfrey refused outright to drop the allegation even after Ritson offered to be the protector to her and her family. The loyal Ritson resolved to help Jennie and went to Windsor. After telling her that he had obtained work for them both at the Queens Hotel Tap he offered to live with her and protect her, he explained that he could not marry her as he was still married and that his wife had left him. Jennie gratefully accepted and together with her daughter they returned to Aldershot. Poor Jennie must have thought she was saved however things then took a turn for the worse. After a



week working at the Queens Hotel Tap she was informed that here also she was not welcome as once again Hampshire Police had warned the landlord that his license was in jeopardy if he employed both her and Edward Ritson, who had been now added to the equation. Jennie was by now almost destitute and soon after, she spoke with a friend showing her the last sixpence she possessed. The equally penurious and unemployed Edward then advised her to throw herself on the mercy of the Board of Guardians who would have to make a decision to either put her before the magistrates or assist her and her family. He wrote and gave her a letter to take to the Guardians supporting her and testifying to her good character. This put him out of favour with her and that Saturday evening in the Red, White & Blue public house they had a blazing row after Jennie got drunk and started to flirt with a soldier of the 65<sup>th</sup> regiment, Joseph Kivers. The jealous Ritson followed



The Aldershot Canal

her out and offered to take her home, to which she refused. At 11.15 she left Kivers who stated that she was the worse for drink and crying and fretting. Kivers had also offered to take her home no doubt to take advantage of her condition but was stopped from doing so by the military night pickets, probably because he also was drunk. When later questioned he stated that he had then gone to a brothel and slept the night with a prostitute. Jennie was last seen at about 10.15am on the following day Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> March 1875 walking alone along the Basingstoke Canal towpath. She was seen by Fred Davies an Army Service Corps driver who was on morning stables duty at the Transport Stables gate on the opposite side of the water. Though he recognised her he thought nothing of it at the time and went back inside. Later that afternoon Jennie was found face down in the Canal, drowned, in her pocket was her last sixpence. The matter may have ended there after an inquest; however the letter to the Daily Telegraph had been noted by many influential people. The Contagious Diseases Acts had some vigorous opponents, these included Florence Nightingale, W.T. Stead, Harriett Martineau and the redoubtable Josephine Butler. Butler had formed the Ladies National Association to fight the Acts and have them repealed soon after their inception in 1864. This event 21 years after was to her a god-sent opportunity to inflict real damage on their reputation.

Josephine Butler engaged a famous barrister, Mr Bligh to represent the now orphaned children. The Association had Jennie's daughter examined who was found to be a virgin and Mr. Bligh vigorously challenged any evidence of her supposed immoral behaviour as noted by the police. The police stuck together and local Hampshire Constabulary Superintendent, Mr Charles Stephenson supported fully the stance of the Metropolitan Police and the actions of Inspector Godfrey. A juror also stated that he refused to believe that a police officer of Mr Godfrey's rank would '*Shake his fist at a woman*'. Although the resultant inquest resulted in an 'Accidental Death', verdict this was not before the reporting press pointed out that the jury was composed of the very licensees that had been threatened with the loss of their livelihoods. The police too came in for a public hammering with both Godfrey and Stephenson being accused of collusion in Jennie's hounding and subsequent suicide. One commentator used a quote of a former Dean of St Pauls accusing Godfrey of using '*A Rope of more than the usual thickness in carrying out the law*'. Both these officer denied the charges and both went on to retire without any official blemish to their characters, Godfrey in 1895 as Chatham Dockyard Metropolitan Police Superintendent and Stephenson as Deputy Chief Constable of Hampshire. The media castigation however cast enough doubt on the verdict to impress many of the public and this case was to be an important milestone in the eventual abolition of this infamous legislation. As for the orphans, the young Jennie Percy was later taken in by Josephine Butler who later found her employment as a housemaid, of the boys nothing further is known.

In 1884 the Contagious Diseases Acts were finally repealed, sadly not soon enough to save 'Poor Jennie'.

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This article is part of a larger work on the Contagious Diseases Acts being prepared by the author.

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