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White Slaves and Alien Prostitutes: Trafficking, Protection and Punishment in the Early Twentieth Century

In the winter of 1910, nineteen-year-old Lydia Rhodda Harvey was working as a photographer’s assistant in Wellington, New Zealand. She had moved there a few years before, leaving her impoverished family in the small town of Oamaru on the South Island. Like many single young women in the city, she was living in a boarding house, and one night was approached by a man, who offered to introduce her to someone who could help her travel. This had always been a dream of Harvey’s: she accepted, and met a man named Aldo Cellis and a woman named Marie, who called herself his wife. The pair asked Harvey to come with them to Buenos Aires, and made no secret of the kind of work that she would be expected to undertake once there, work for which the woman posing as Cellis’s wife (whose real name was Marie Vernon) was well known in Wellington. Harvey was given high red plush boots and silk underwear, and told that she would ‘not want for anything and be quite happy’. She was warned not to speak to the police and asked to lie to her parents. ‘I was surprised when Mrs. Celli [sic] told me the life I was going to lead,’ Harvey admitted, ‘but she said I should have an easy life with nice dresses and it was that that induced me to go with them and I was also glad to be able to travel.’ Her crossing with Vernon was arranged shortly thereafter, and Cellis met them in South America.¹

Once in Buenos Aires, Vernon bought Harvey a dress and a hat, bleached her hair and took her to the casino to look for men. The commercial sex market in Argentina was booming alongside its agriculture, mining and export industries, and Aldo Cellis and Marie Vernon were joined by a large community of foreign labourers, including no small number of pimps and prostitutes, hoping to make good in Argentina’s ‘golden age’.² Once ensconced in the capital’s commercial sex scene, Harvey became sexually involved with Cellis, and his demands on her became more coercive. Marie Vernon was
called upon to teach her how to perform oral and anal sex, and to train her in how to solicit men. But Harvey was not successful at the casino; ‘I was thinking too much of home,’ she said. Soon, alone in a tumultuous foreign country with no money, possessions or knowledge of the local language, she was forced by Vernon and Cellis to take clients, men whom she described as ‘old, dirty and very repulsive to me’. Vernon would not let Harvey keep the money the men gave her, saying that she owed Cellis for her clothes and her passage on the ocean liner, that voyage she had always dreamed of taking.3

When the Argentine authorities began to notice his activities, Cellis set his sights on London, and Harvey, who was now suffering from genital warts and gonorrhoea, spent her next journey across the Atlantic locked in their small cabin, because Cellis feared her presence above deck would alert the authorities. They arrived in the metropolis in May 1910.

While Lydia Harvey found herself alone in a London Lock Hospital bed, Cellis busied himself with reconnecting with his old business partner, Alec Berard, in the cafés of Soho. The two men had lived off women’s earnings in prostitution together in their native Italy, had outstanding warrants for brothel-keeping in Australia, and had also organized the business in New Zealand. It was not long before the worldly pair had infiltrated themselves into a small pimping and trafficking ring that operated out of High Street.4

After signing responsibility for Harvey over to another member of the group and telling her she was damaged goods, Cellis and Berard left for France in search of new women. They found seventeen-year-old Mireille Lapara, whom Berard met on a walk in the Tuileries Gardens, eighteen-year-old Marguerite Besçancon, who was working in a café near their hotel, and twenty-two-year-old Victoria Bricot, who was staying in furnished rooms close by. With varying measures of romantic coaxing and frank economics, they encouraged the women to come with them to England.5

The Metropolitan Police were not blind to the men’s activities, and had for several months been tracking the movements of the loosely affiliated Soho gang as they circled Piccadilly Circus, Shaftesbury Avenue, Great Windmill Street and Brewer Street on their nightly solicitation beats; as they negotiated their street-level finances at pawn shops; and as they socialized in the cafés, restaurants and pubs of turn-of-the-century Soho. Among this bustling society police noticed new arrivals: the three young French women, who were under the watch of two well-dressed men. When they arrested Cellis and Berard on suspicion of procuring the women, police connected Lydia Harvey to the men and called her to be a witness in the case.

As police officers prepared their prosecution, and tried to sort out what to do with the women who had been brought to London, newspaper articles about the case, complete with sketches emphasizing the Italian profiles of Cellis and Berard, graced the pages of the London dailies.6 These articles were joined by stories of more dubious veracity that were flooding the metropolis in the early 1910s. Newspapers spoke of men who patrolled