Oscar Wilde, His Life and Confessions

Frank Harris

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The crucifixion of the guilty is still more awe-inspiring than the crucifixion of the innocent; what do we men know of innocence?

INTRODUCTION

I was advised on all hands not to write this book, and some English friends who have read it urge me not to publish it.

"You will be accused of selecting the subject," they say, "because sexual viciousness appeals to you, and your method of treatment lays you open to attack.

"You criticise and condemn the English conception of justice, and English legal methods: you even question the impartiality of English judges, and throw an unpleasant light on English juries and the English public−−all of which is not only unpopular but will convince the unthinking that you are a presumptuous, or at least an outlandish, person with too good a conceit of himself and altogether too free a tongue."

I should be more than human or less if these arguments did not give me pause. I would do nothing willingly to alienate the few who are still friendly to me. But the motives driving me are too strong for such personal considerations. I might say with the Latin:

"Non me tua fervida terrent,
Dicta, ferox: Di me terrent, et Jupiter hostis."

Even this would be only a part of the truth. Youth it seems to me should always be prudent, for youth has much to lose: but I am come to that time of life when a man can afford to be bold, may even dare to be himself and write the best in him, heedless of knaves and fools or of anything this world may do. The voyage for me is almost over: I am in sight of port: like a good shipman, I have already sent down the lofty spars and housed the captious canvas in preparation for the long anchorage: I have little now to fear.

And the immortals are with me in my design. Greek tragedy treated of far more horrible and revolting themes, such as the banquet of Thyestes: and Dante did not shrink from describing the unnatural meal of Ugolino. The best modern critics approve my choice. "All depends on the subject," says Matthew Arnold, talking of great literature: "choose a fitting action−−a great and significant action−−penetrate yourself with the feeling of the situation: this done, everything else will follow; for expression is subordinate and secondary."

Socrates was found guilty of corrupting the young and was put to death for the offence. His accusation and punishment constitute surely a great and significant action such as Matthew Arnold declared was alone of the highest and most permanent literary value.

The action involved in the rise and ruin of Oscar Wilde is of the same kind and of enduring interest to humanity. Critics may say that Wilde is a smaller person than Socrates, less significant in many ways: but even if this were true, it would not alter the artist's position; the great portraits of the world are not of Napoleon or Dante. The differences between men are not important in comparison with their inherent likeness. To depict the mortal so that he takes on immortality−−that is the task of the artist.

There are special reasons, too, why I should handle this story. Oscar Wilde was a friend of mine for many years: I could not help prizing him to the very end: he was always to me a charming, soul−animating influence. He was dreadfully punished by men utterly his inferiors: ruined, outlawed, persecuted till Death itself came as a deliverance. His sentence impeaches his judges. The whole story is charged with tragic pathos and unforgettable lessons. I have waited for more than ten years hoping that some one would write about him in this spirit and leave me free to do other things, but nothing such as I propose has yet appeared.

Oscar Wilde was greater as a talker, in my opinion, than as a writer, and no fame is more quickly evanescent. If I do not tell his story and paint his portrait, it seems unlikely that anyone else will do it.

English "strachery" may accuse me of attacking morality: the accusation is worse than absurd. The very foundations of this old world are moral: the charred ember itself floats about in space, moves and has its being in obedience to inexorable law. The thinker may define morality: the reformer may try to bring our notions of it into nearer accord with the fact: human love and pity may seek to soften its occasional injustices and mitigate its intolerable harshness: but that is all the freedom we mortals enjoy, all the breathing−space allotted to us.

In this book the reader will find the figure of the Prometheus−artist clamped, so to speak, with bands of steel to the huge granitic cliff of English puritanism. No account was taken of his manifold virtues and graces: no credit

given him for his extraordinary achievements: he was hounded out of life because his sins were not the sins of the English middle−class. The culprit was in much nobler and better than his judges.

Here are all the elements of pity and sorrow and fear that are required in great tragedy.

The artist who finds in Oscar Wilde a great and provocative subject for his art needs no argument to justify his choice. If the picture is a great and living portrait, the moralist will be satisfied: the dark shadows must all be there, as well as the high lights, and the effect must be to increase our tolerance and intensify our pity.

If on the other hand the portrait is ill−drawn or ill−painted, all the reasoning in the world and the praise of all the sycophants will not save the picture from contempt and the artist from censure.

There is one measure by which intention as apart from accomplishment can be judged, and one only: "If you think the book well done," says Pascal, "and on re−reading find it strong; be assured that the man who wrote it, wrote it on his knees." No book could have been written more reverently than this book of mine.

Nice, 1910.

Frank Harris.

CHAPTER I−−OSCAR'S FATHER AND MOTHER ON TRIAL

On the 12th of December, 1864, Dublin society was abuzz with excitement. A tidbit of scandal which had long been rolled on the tongue in semi−privacy was to be discussed in open court, and all women and a good many men were agog with curiosity and expectation.

The story itself was highly spiced and all the actors in it well known.

A famous doctor and oculist, recently knighted for his achievements, was the real defendant. He was married to a woman with a great literary reputation as a poet and writer who was idolized by the populace for her passionate advocacy of Ireland's claim to self−government; "Speranza" was regarded by the Irish people as a sort of Irish Muse.

The young lady bringing the action was the daughter of the professor of medical jurisprudence at Trinity College, who was also the chief at Marsh's library.

It was said that this Miss Travers, a pretty girl just out of her teens, had been seduced by Dr. Sir William Wilde while under his care as a patient. Some went so far as to say that chloroform had been used, and that the girl had been violated.

The doctor was represented as a sort of Minotaur: lustful stories were invented and repeated with breathless delight; on all faces, the joy of malicious curiosity and envious denigration.

The interest taken in the case was extraordinary: the excitement beyond comparison; the first talents of the Bar were engaged on both sides; Serjeant Armstrong led for the plaintiff, helped by the famous Mr. Butt, Q.C., and Mr. Heron, Q.C., who were in turn backed by Mr. Hamill and Mr. Quinn; while Serjeant Sullivan was for the defendant, supported by Mr. Sidney, Q.C., and Mr. Morris, Q.C., and aided by Mr. John Curran and Mr. Purcell.

The Court of Common Pleas was the stage; Chief Justice Monahan presiding with a special jury. The trial was expected to last a week, and not only the Court but the approaches to it were crowded.

To judge by the scandalous reports, the case should have been a criminal case, should have been conducted by the Attorney−General against Sir William Wilde; but that was not the way it presented itself. The action was not even brought directly by Miss Travers or by her father, Dr. Travers, against Sir William Wilde for rape or criminal assault, or seduction. It was a civil action brought by Miss Travers, who claimed L2,000 damages for a libel written by Lady Wilde to her father, Dr. Travers. The letter complained of ran as follows:−−

Tower, Bray, May 6th.

Sir, you may not be aware of the disreputable conduct of your daughter at Bray where she consorts with all the low newspaper boys in the place, employing them to disseminate offensive placards in which my name is given, and also tracts in which she makes it appear that she has had an intrigue with Sir William Wilde. If she chooses to disgrace herself, it is not my affair, but as her object in insulting me is in the hope of extorting money for which she has several times applied to Sir William Wilde with threats of more annoyance if not given, I think it right to inform you, as no threat of additional insult shall ever extort money from our hands. The wages of disgrace she has so basely treated for and demanded shall never be given her.

Jane F. Wilde.

To Dr. Travers.

The summons and plaint charged that this letter written to the father of the plaintiff by Lady Wilde was a libel reflecting on the character and chastity of Miss Travers, and as Lady Wilde was a married woman, her husband Sir William Wilde was joined in the action as a co−defendant for conformity.

The defences set up were:−−

First, a plea of "No libel": secondly, that the letter did not bear the defamatory sense imputed by the plaint: thirdly, a denial of the publication, and, fourthly, a plea of privilege. This last was evidently the real defence and was grounded upon facts which afforded some justification of Lady Wilde's bitter letter.

It was admitted that for a year or more Miss Travers had done her uttermost to annoy both Sir William Wilde and his wife in every possible way. The trouble began, the defence stated, by Miss Travers fancying that she was slighted by Lady Wilde. She thereupon published a scandalous pamphlet under the title of "Florence Boyle Price,

a Warning; by Speranza," with the evident intention of causing the public to believe that the booklet was the composition of Lady Wilde under the assumed name of Florence Boyle Price. In this pamphlet Miss Travers asserted that a person she called Dr. Quilp had made an attempt on her virtue. She put the charge mildly. "It is sad," she wrote, "to think that in the nineteenth century a lady must not venture into a physician's study without being accompanied by a bodyguard to protect her."

Miss Travers admitted that Dr. Quilp was intended for Sir William Wilde; indeed she identified Dr. Quilp with the newly made knight in a dozen different ways. She went so far as to describe his appearance. She declared that he had "an animal, sinister expression about his mouth which was coarse and vulgar in the extreme: the large protruding under lip was most unpleasant. Nor did the upper part of his face redeem the lower part. His eyes were small and round, mean and prying in expression. There was no candour in the doctor's countenance, where one looked for candour." Dr. Quilp's quarrel with his victim, it appeared, was that she was "unnaturally passionless."

The publication of such a pamphlet was calculated to injure both Sir William and Lady Wilde in public esteem, and Miss Travers was not content to let the matter rest there. She drew attention to the pamphlet by letters to the papers, and on one occasion, when Sir William Wilde was giving a lecture to the Young Men's Christian Association at the Metropolitan Hall, she caused large placards to be exhibited in the neighbourhood having upon them in large letters the words "Sir William Wilde and Speranza." She employed one of the persons bearing a placard to go about ringing a large hand bell which she, herself, had given to him for the purpose. She even published doggerel verses in the "Dublin Weekly Advertiser", and signed them "Speranza," which annoyed Lady Wilde intensely. One read thus:−−

Your progeny is quite a pest To those who hate such "critters"; Some sport I'll have, or I'm blest I'll fry the Wilde breed in the West Then you can call them Fritters.

She wrote letters to "Saunders Newsletter", and even reviewed a book of Lady Wilde's entitled "The First Temptation," and called it a "blasphemous production." Moreover, when Lady Wilde was staying at Bray, Miss Travers sent boys to offer the pamphlet for sale to the servants in her house. In fine Miss Travers showed a keen feminine ingenuity and pertinacity in persecution worthy of a nobler motive.

But the defence did not rely on such annoyance as sufficient provocation for Lady Wilde's libellous letter. The plea went on to state that Miss Travers had applied to Sir William Wilde for money again and again, and accompanied these applications with threats of worse pen−pricks if the requests were not acceded to. It was under these circumstances, according to Lady Wilde, that she wrote the letter complained of to Dr. Travers and enclosed it in a sealed envelope. She wished to get Dr. Travers to use his parental influence to stop Miss Travers from further disgracing herself and insulting and annoying Sir William and Lady Wilde.

The defence carried the war into the enemy's camp by thus suggesting that Miss Travers was blackmailing Sir William and Lady Wilde.

The attack in the hands of Serjeant Armstrong was still more deadly and convincing. He rose early on the Monday afternoon and declared at the beginning that the case was so painful at the beginning that he would have preferred not to have been engaged in it−−a hypocritical statement which deceived no one, and was just as conventional−false as his wig. But with this exception the story he told was extraordinarily clear and gripping.

Some ten years before, Miss Travers, then a young girl of nineteen, was suffering from partial deafness, and was recommended by her own doctor to go to Dr. Wilde, who was the chief oculist and aurist in Dublin. Miss Travers went to Dr. Wilde, who treated her successfully. Dr. Wilde would accept no fees from her, stating at the outset that as she was the daughter of a brother−physician, he thought it an honour to be of use to her. Serjeant Armstrong assured his hearers that in spite of Miss Travers' beauty he believed that at first Dr. Wilde took nothing but a benevolent interest in the girl. Even when his professional services ceased to be necessary, Dr. Wilde continued his friendship. He wrote Miss Travers innumerable letters: he advised her as to her reading and sent her books and tickets for places of amusement: he even insisted that she should be better dressed, and pressed money upon her to buy bonnets and clothes and frequently invited her to his house for dinners and parties. The friendship went on in this sentimental kindly way for some five or six years till 1860.

The wily Serjeant knew enough about human nature to feel that it was necessary to discover some dramatic incident to change benevolent sympathy into passion, and he certainly found what he wanted.

Miss Travers, it appeared, had been burnt low down on her neck when a child: the cicatrice could still be seen, though it was gradually disappearing. When her ears were being examined by Dr. Wilde, it was customary for her

to kneel on a hassock before him, and he thus discovered this burn on her neck. After her hearing improved he still continued to examine the cicatrice from time to time, pretending to note the speed with which it was disappearing. Some time in '60 or '61 Miss Travers had a corn on the sole of her foot which gave her some pain. Dr. Wilde did her the honour of paring the corn with his own hands and painting it with iodine. The cunning Serjeant could not help saying with some confusion, natural or assumed, "that it would have been just as well−−at least there are men of such temperament that it would be dangerous to have such a manipulation going on." The spectators in the court smiled, feeling that in "manipulation" the Serjeant had found the most neatly suggestive word.

Naturally at this point Serjeant Sullivan interfered in order to stem the rising tide of interest and to blunt the point of the accusation. Sir William Wilde, he said, was not the man to shrink from any investigation: but he was only in the case formally and he could not meet the allegations, which therefore were "one−sided and unfair" and so forth and so on.

After the necessary pause, Serjeant Armstrong plucked his wig straight and proceeded to read letters of Dr. Wilde to Miss Travers at this time, in which he tells her not to put too much iodine on her foot, but to rest it for a few days in a slipper and keep it in a horizontal position while reading a pleasant book. If she would send in, he would try and send her one.

"I have now," concluded the Serjeant, like an actor carefully preparing his effect, "traced this friendly intimacy down to a point where it begins to be dangerous: I do not wish to aggravate the gravity of the charge in the slightest by any rhetoric or by an unconscious overstatement; you shall therefore, gentlemen of the jury, hear from Miss Travers herself what took place between her and Dr. Wilde and what she complains of."

Miss Travers then went into the witness−box. Though thin and past her first youth, she was still pretty in a conventional way, with regular features and dark eyes. She was examined by Mr. Butt, Q.C. After confirming point by point what Serjeant Armstrong had said, she went on to tell the jury that in the summer of '62 she had thought of going to Australia, where her two brothers lived, who wanted her to come out to them. Dr. Wilde lent her L40 to go, but told her she must say it was L20 or her father might think the sum too large. She missed the ship in London and came back. She was anxious to impress on the jury the fact that she had repaid Dr. Wilde, that she had always repaid whatever he had lent her.

She went on to relate how one day Dr. Wilde had got her in a kneeling position at his feet, when he took her in his arms, declaring that he would not let her go until she called him William. Miss Travers refused to do this, and took umbrage at the embracing and ceased to visit at his house: but Dr. Wilde protested extravagantly that he had meant nothing wrong, and begged her to forgive him and gradually brought about a reconciliation which was consummated by pressing invitations to parties and by a loan of two or three pounds for a dress, which loan, like the others, had been carefully repaid.

The excitement in the court was becoming breathless. It was felt that the details were cumulative; the doctor was besieging the fortress in proper form. The story of embracings, reconciliations and loans all prepared the public for the great scene.

The girl went on, now answering questions, now telling bits of the story in her own way, Mr. Butt, the great advocate, taking care that it should all be consecutive and clear with a due crescendo of interest. In October, 1862, it appeared Lady Wilde was not in the house at Merrion Square, but was away at Bray, as one of the children had not been well, and she thought the sea air would benefit him. Dr. Wilde was alone in the house. Miss Travers called and was admitted into Dr. Wilde's study. He put her on her knees before him and bared her neck, pretending to examine the burn; he fondled her too much and pressed her to him: she took offence and tried to draw away. Somehow or other his hand got entangled in a chain at her neck. She called out to him, "You are suffocating me," and tried to rise: but he cried out like a madman: "I will, I want to," and pressed what seemed to be a handkerchief over her face. She declared that she lost consciousness.

When she came to herself she found Dr. Wilde frantically imploring her to come to her senses, while dabbing water on her face, and offering her wine to drink.

"If you don't drink," he cried, "I'll pour it over you."

For some time, she said, she scarcely realized where she was or what had occurred, though she heard him talking. But gradually consciousness came back to her, and though she would not open her eyes she understood what he was saying. He talked frantically:

"Do be reasonable, and all will be right. . . I am in your power . . . . spare me, oh, spare me . . . . strike me if you like. I wish to God I could hate you, but I can't. I swore I would never touch your hand again. Attend to me and do what I tell you. Have faith and confidence in me and you may remedy the past and go to Australia. Think of the talk this may give rise to. Keep up appearances for your own sake. . . . ."

He then took her up−stairs to a bedroom and made her drink some wine and lie down for some time. She afterwards left the house; she hardly knew how; he accompanied her to the door, she thought; but could not be certain; she was half dazed.

The judge here interposed with the crucial question:

"Did you know that you had been violated?"

The audience waited breathlessly; after a short pause Miss Travers replied:

"Yes."

Then it was true, the worst was true. The audience, excited to the highest pitch, caught breath with malevolent delight. But the thrills were not exhausted. Miss Travers next told how in Dr. Wilde's study one evening she had been vexed at some slight, and at once took four pennyworth of laudanum which she had bought. Dr. Wilde hurried her round to the house of Dr. Walsh, a physician in the neighbourhood, who gave her an antidote. Dr. Wilde was dreadfully frightened lest something should get out. . . .

She admitted at once that she had sometimes asked Dr. Wilde for money: she thought nothing of it as she had again and again repaid him the monies which he had lent her.

Miss Travers' examination in chief had been intensely interesting. The fashionable ladies had heard all they had hoped to hear, and it was noticed that they were not so eager to get seats in the court from this time on, though the room was still crowded.

The cross−examination of Miss Travers was at least as interesting to the student of human nature as the examination in chief had been, for in her story of what took place on that 14th of October, weaknesses and discrepancies of memory were discovered and at length improbabilities and contradictions in the narrative itself.

First of all it was elicited that she could not be certain of the day; it might have been the 15th or the 16th: it was Friday the 14th, she thought. . . . It was a great event to her; the most awful event in her whole life; yet she could not remember the day for certain.

"Did you tell anyone of what had taken place?"

"No."

"Not even your father?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I did not wish to give him pain."

"But you went back to Dr. Wilde's study after the awful assault?"

"Yes."

"You went again and again, did you not?"

"Yes."

"Did he ever attempt to repeat the offence?"

"Yes."

The audience was thunderstruck; the plot was deepening. Miss Travers went on to say that the Doctor was rude to her again; she did not know his intention; he took hold of her and tried to fondle her; but she would not have it.

"After the second offence you went back?"

"Yes."

"Did he ever repeat it again?"

"Yes."

Miss Travers said that once again Dr. Wilde had been rude to her.

"Yet you returned again?"

"Yes."

"And you took money from this man who had violated you against your will?"

"Yes."

"You asked him for money?"

"Yes."

"This is the first time you have told about this second and third assault, is it not?"

"Yes," the witness admitted.

So far all that Miss Travers had said hung together and seemed eminently credible; but when she was questioned about the chloroform and the handkerchief she became confused. At the outset she admitted that the handkerchief might have been a rag. She was not certain it was a rag. It was something she saw the doctor throw into the fire when she came to her senses.

"Had he kept it in his hands, then, all the time you were unconscious?"

"I don't know."

"Just to show it to you?"

The witness was silent.

When she was examined as to her knowledge of chloroform, she broke down hopelessly. She did not know the smell of it; could not describe it; did not know whether it burnt or not; could not in fact swear that it was chloroform Dr. Wilde had used; would not swear that it was anything; believed that it was chloroform or something like it because she lost consciousness. That was her only reason for saying that chloroform had been given to her.

Again the judge interposed with the probing question:

"Did you say anything about chloroform in your pamphlet?"

"No," the witness murmured.

It was manifest that the strong current of feeling in favour of Miss Travers had begun to ebb. The story was a toothsome morsel still: but it was regretfully admitted that the charge of rape had not been pushed home. It was felt to be disappointing, too, that the chief prosecuting witness should have damaged her own case.

It was now the turn of the defence, and some thought the pendulum might swing back again.

Lady Wilde gave her evidence emphatically, but was too bitter to be a persuasive witness. It was tried to prove from her letter that she believed that Miss Travers had had an intrigue with Sir William Wilde, but she would not have it. She did not for a moment believe in her husband's guilt. Miss Travers wished to make it appear, she said, that she had an intrigue with Sir William Wilde, but in her opinion it was utterly untrue. Sir William Wilde was above suspicion. There was not a particle of truth in the accusation; "her" husband would never so demean himself.

Lady Wilde's disdainful speeches seemed to persuade the populace, but had small effect on the jury, and still less on the judge.

When she was asked if she hated Miss Travers, she replied that she did not hate anyone, but she had to admit that she disliked Miss Travers' methods of action.

"Why did you not answer Miss Travers when she wrote telling you of your husband's attempt on her virtue?"

"I took no interest in the matter," was the astounding reply.

The defence made an even worse mistake than this. When the time came, Sir William Wilde was not called.

In his speech for Miss Travers, Mr. Butt made the most of this omission. He declared that the refusal of Sir William Wilde to go into the witness box was an admission of guilt; an admission that Miss Travers' story of her betrayal was true and could not be contradicted. But the refusal of Sir William Wilde to go into the box was not, he insisted, the worst point in the defence. He reminded the jury that he had asked Lady Wilde why she had not answered Miss Travers when she wrote to her. He recalled Lady Wilde's reply:

"I took no interest in the matter."

Every woman would be interested in such a thing, he declared, even a stranger; but Lady Wilde hated her husband's victim and took no interest in her seduction beyond writing a bitter, vindictive and libellous letter to the girl's father. . . . .

The speech was regarded as a masterpiece and enhanced the already great reputation of the man who was afterwards to become the Home Rule Leader.

It only remained for the judge to sum up, for everyone was getting impatient to hear the verdict. Chief Justice Monahan made a short, impartial speech, throwing the dry, white light of truth upon the conflicting and passionate statements. First of all, he said, it was difficult to believe in the story of rape whether with or without

chloroform. If the girl had been violated she would be expected to cry out at the time, or at least to complain to her father as soon as she reached home. Had it been a criminal trial, he pointed out, no one would have believed this part of Miss Travers' story. When you find a girl does not cry out at the time and does not complain afterwards, and returns to the house to meet further rudeness, it must be presumed that she consented to the seduction.

But was there a seduction? The girl asserted that there was guilty intimacy, and Sir William Wilde had not contradicted her. It was said that he was only formally a defendant; but he was the real defendant and he could have gone into the box if he had liked and given his version of what took place and contradicted Miss Travers in whole or in part.

"It is for you, gentlemen of the jury, to draw your own conclusions from his omission to do what one would have thought would be an honourable man's first impulse and duty."

Finally it was for the jury to consider whether the letter was a libel and if so what the amount of damages should be.

His Lordship recalled the jury at Mr. Butt's request to say that in assessing damages they might also take into consideration the fact that the defence was practically a justification of the libel. The fair−mindedness of the judge was conspicuous from first to last, and was worthy of the high traditions of the Irish Bench.

After deliberating for a couple of hours the jury brought in a verdict which had a certain humour in it. They awarded to Miss Travers a farthing damages and intimated that the farthing should carry costs. In other words they rated Miss Travers' virtue at the very lowest coin of the realm, while insisting that Sir William Wilde should pay a couple of thousands of pounds in costs for having seduced her.

It was generally felt that the verdict did substantial justice; though the jury, led away by patriotic sympathy with Lady Wilde, the true "Speranza," had been a little hard on Miss Travers. No one doubted that Sir William Wilde had seduced his patient. He had, it appeared, an unholy reputation, and the girl's admission that he had accused her of being "unnaturally passionless" was accepted as the true key of the enigma. This was why he had drawn away from the girl, after seducing her. And it was not unnatural under the circumstances that she should become vindictive and revengeful.

Such inferences as these, I drew from the comments of the Irish papers at the time; but naturally I wished if possible to hear some trustworthy contemporary on the matter. Fortunately such testimony was forthcoming.

A Fellow of Trinity, who was then a young man, embodied the best opinion of the time in an excellent pithy letter. He wrote to me that the trial simply established, what every one believed, that "Sir William Wilde was a pithecoid person of extraordinary sensuality and cowardice (funking the witness−box left him without a defender!) and that his wife was a highfalutin' pretentious creature whose pride was as extravagant as her reputation founded on second−rate verse−making. . . . . Even when a young woman she used to keep her rooms in Merrion Square in semi−darkness; she laid the paint on too thick for any ordinary light, and she gave herself besides all manner of airs."

This incisive judgment of an able and fairly impartial contemporary (As he has died since this was written, there is no longer any reason for concealing his name: R. Y. Tyrrell, for many years before his death Regius Professor of Greek in Trinity College, Dublin.) corroborates, I think, the inferences which one would naturally draw from the newspaper accounts of the trial. It seems to me that both combine to give a realistic photograph, so to speak, of Sir William and Lady Wilde. An artist, however, would lean to a more kindly picture. Trying to see the personages as they saw themselves he would balance the doctor's excessive sensuality and lack of self−control by dwelling on the fact that his energy and perseverance and intimate adaptation to his surroundings had brought him in middle age to the chief place in his profession, and if Lady Wilde was abnormally vain, a verse−maker and not a poet, she was still a talented woman of considerable reading and manifold artistic sympathies.

Such were the father and mother of Oscar Wilde.

CHAPTER II−−OSCAR WILDE AS A SCHOOLBOY

The Wildes had three children, two sons and a daughter. The first son was born in 1852, a year after the marriage, and was christened after his father William Charles Kingsbury Wills. The second son was born two years later, in 1854 and the names given to him seem to reveal the Nationalist sympathies and pride of his mother. He was christened Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde; but he appears to have suffered from the pompous string only in extreme youth. At school he concealed the "Fingal," as a young man he found it advisable to omit the "O'Flahertie."

In childhood and early boyhood Oscar was not considered as quick or engaging or handsome as his brother, Willie. Both boys had the benefit of the best schooling of the time. They were sent as boarders to the Portora School at Enniskillen, one of the four Royal schools of Ireland. Oscar went to Portora in 1864 at the age of nine, a couple of years after his brother. He remained at the school for seven years and left it on winning an Exhibition for Trinity College, Dublin, when he was just seventeen.

The facts hitherto collected and published about Oscar as a schoolboy are sadly meagre and insignificant. Fortunately for my readers I have received from Sir Edward Sullivan, who was a contemporary of Oscar both at school and college, an exceedingly vivid and interesting pen−picture of the lad, one of those astounding masterpieces of portraiture only to be produced by the plastic sympathies of boyhood and the intimate intercourse of years lived in common. It is love alone which in later life can achieve such a miracle of representment. I am very glad to be allowed to publish this realistic miniature, in the very words of the author.

"I first met Oscar Wilde in the early part of 1868 at Portora Royal School. He was thirteen or fourteen years of age. His long straight fair hair was a striking feature of his appearance. He was then, as he remained for some years after, extremely boyish in nature, very mobile, almost restless when out of the schoolroom. Yet he took no part in the school games at any time. Now and then he would be seen in one of the school boats on Loch Erne: yet he was a poor hand at an oar.

"Even as a schoolboy he was an excellent talker: his descriptive power being far above the average, and his humorous exaggerations of school occurrences always highly amusing.

"A favourite place for the boys to sit and gossip in the late afternoon in winter time was round a stove which stood in 'The Stone Hall.' Here Oscar was at his best; although his brother Willie was perhaps in those days even better than he was at telling a story.

"Oscar would frequently vary the entertainment by giving us extremely quaint illustrations of holy people in stained−glass attitudes: his power of twisting his limbs into weird contortions being very great. (I am told that Sir William Wilde, his father, possessed the same power.) It must not be thought, however, that there was any suggestion of irreverence in the exhibition.

"At one of these gatherings, about the year 1870, I remember a discussion taking place about an ecclesiastical prosecution that made a considerable stir at the time. Oscar was present, and full of the mysterious nature of the Court of Arches; he told us there was nothing he would like better in after life than to be the hero of such a "cause celebre" and to go down to posterity as the defendant in such a case as 'Regina versus Wilde!'

"At school he was almost always called 'Oscar'−−but he had a nick−name, 'Grey−crow,' which the boys would call him when they wished to annoy him, and which he resented greatly. It was derived in some mysterious way from the name of an island in the Upper Loch Erne, within easy reach of the school by boat.

"It was some little time before he left Portora that the boys got to know of his full name, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. Just at the close of his school career he won the 'Carpenter' Greek Testament Prize,−−and on presentation day was called up to the dais by Dr. Steele, by all his names−−much to Oscar's annoyance; for a great deal of schoolboy chaff followed.

"He was always generous, kindly, good−tempered. I remember he and myself were on one occasion mounted as opposing jockeys on the backs of two bigger boys in what we called a 'tournament,' held in one of the class−rooms. Oscar and his horse were thrown, and the result was a broken arm for Wilde. Knowing that it was an accident, he did not let it make any difference in our friendship.

"He had, I think, no very special chums while at school. I was perhaps as friendly with him all through as anybody, though his junior in class by a year. . . . .

"Willie Wilde was never very familiar with him, treating him always, in those days, as a younger brother. . . . .

"When in the head class together, we with two other boys were in the town of Enniskillen one afternoon, and formed part of an audience who were listening to a street orator. One of us, for the fun of the thing, got near the speaker and with a stick knocked his hat off and then ran for home followed by the other three. Several of the listeners, resenting the impertinence, gave chase, and Oscar in his hurry collided with an aged cripple and threw him down−−a fact which was duly reported to the boys when we got safely back. Oscar was afterwards heard telling how he found his way barred by an angry giant with whom he fought through many rounds and whom he eventually left for dead in the road after accomplishing prodigies of valour on his redoubtable opponent. Romantic imagination was strong in him even in those schoolboy days; but there was always something in his telling of such a tale to suggest that he felt his hearers were not really being taken in; it was merely the romancing indulged in so humorously by the two principal male characters in 'The Importance of Being Earnest.' . . .

"He never took any interest in mathematics either at school or college. He laughed at science and never had a good word for a mathematical or science master, but there was nothing spiteful or malignant in anything he said against them; or indeed against anybody.

"The romances that impressed him most when at school were Disraeli's novels. He spoke slightingly of Dickens as a novelist. . . . .

"The classics absorbed almost his whole attention in his later school days, and the flowing beauty of his oral translations in class, whether of Thucydides, Plato or Virgil, was a thing not easily to be forgotten."

This photograph, so to speak, of Oscar as a schoolboy is astonishingly clear and lifelike; but I have another portrait of him from another contemporary, who has since made for himself a high name as a scholar at Trinity, which, while confirming the general traits sketched by Sir Edward Sullivan, takes somewhat more notice of certain mental qualities which came later to the fruiting.

This observer who does not wish his name given, writes:

"Oscar had a pungent wit, and nearly all the nicknames in the school were given by him. He was very good on the literary side of scholarship, with a special leaning to poetry. . . . .

"We noticed that he always liked to have editions of the classics that were of stately size with large print. . . . . He was more careful in his dress than any other boy.

"He was a wide reader and read very fast indeed; how much he assimilated I never could make out. He was poor at music.

"We thought him a fair scholar but nothing extraordinary. However, he startled everyone the last year at school in the classical medal examination, by walking easily away from us all in the "viva voce" of the Greek play ('The Agamemnon')."

I may now try and accentuate a trait or two of these photographs, so to speak, and then realise the whole portrait by adding an account given to me by Oscar himself. The joy in humorous romancing and the sweetness of temper recorded by Sir Edward Sullivan were marked traits in Oscar's character all through his life. His care in dressing too, and his delight in stately editions; his love of literature "with a special leaning to poetry" were all qualities which distinguished him to the end.

"Until the last year of my school life at Portora," he said to me once, "I had nothing like the reputation of my brother Willie. I read too many English novels, too much poetry, dreamed away too much time to master the school tasks.

"Knowledge came to me through pleasure, as it always comes, I imagine. . . . .

"I was nearly sixteen when the wonder and beauty of the old Greek life began to dawn upon me. Suddenly I seemed to see the white figures throwing purple shadows on the sun−baked palaestra; 'bands of nude youths and maidens'−−you remember Gautier's words−−'moving across a background of deep blue as on the frieze of the Parthenon.' I began to read Greek eagerly for love of it all, and the more I read the more I was enthralled:

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Oh what golden hours were for us
As we sat together there,
While the white vests of the chorus
Seemed to wave up a light air;
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While the cothurns trod majestic
Down the deep iambic lines
And the rolling anapaestics
Curled like vapour over shrines.
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"The head master was always holding my brother Willie up to me as an example; but even he admitted that in my last year at Portora I had made astounding progress. I laid the foundation there of whatever classical scholarship I possess."

It occurred to me once to ask Oscar in later years whether the boarding school life of a great, public school was not responsible for a good deal of sensual viciousness.

"Englishmen all say so," he replied, "but it did not enter into my experience. I was very childish, Frank; a mere boy till I was over sixteen. Of course I was sensual and curious, as boys are, and had the usual boy imaginings; but I did not indulge in them excessively.

"At Portora nine out of ten boys only thought of football or cricket or rowing. Nearly every one went in for athletics−−running and jumping and so forth; no one appeared to care for sex. We were healthy young barbarians and that was all."

"Did you go in for games?" I asked.

"No," Oscar replied smiling, "I never liked to kick or be kicked."

"Surely you went about with some younger boy, did you not, to whom you told your dreams and hopes, and whom you grew to care for?"

The question led to an intimate personal confession, which may take its place here.

"It is strange you should have mentioned it," he said. "There was one boy, and," he added slowly, "one peculiar incident. It occurred in my last year at Portora. The boy was a couple of years younger than I−−we were great friends; we used to take long walks together and I talked to him interminably. I told him what I should have done had I been Alexander, or how I'd have played king in Athens, had I been Alcibiades. As early as I can remember I used to identify myself with every distinguished character I read about, but when I was fifteen or sixteen I noticed with some wonder that I could think of myself as Alcibiades or Sophocles more easily than as Alexander or Caesar. The life of books had begun to interest me more than real life. . . . .

"My friend had a wonderful gift for listening. I was so occupied with talking and telling about myself that I knew very little about him, curiously little when I come to think of it. But the last incident of my school life makes me think he was a sort of mute poet, and had much more in him than I imagined. It was just before I first heard that I had won an Exhibition and was to go to Trinity. Dr. Steele had called me into his study to tell me the great news; he was very glad, he said, and insisted that it was all due to my last year's hard work. The 'hard' work had been very interesting to me, or I would not have done much of it. The doctor wound up, I remember, by assuring me that if I went on studying as I had been studying during the last year I might yet do as well as my brother Willie, and be as great an honour to the school and everybody connected with it as he had been.

"This made me smile, for though I liked Willie, and knew he was a fairly good scholar, I never for a moment regarded him as my equal in any intellectual field. He knew all about football and cricket and studied the schoolbooks assiduously, whereas I read everything that pleased me, and in my own opinion always went about 'crowned.'" Here he laughed charmingly with amused deprecation of the conceit.

"It was only about the quality of the crown, Frank, that I was in any doubt. If I had been offered the Triple Tiara, it would have appeared to me only the meet reward of my extraordinary merit. . . . .

"When I came out from the doctor's I hurried to my friend to tell him all the wonderful news. To my surprise he was cold and said, a little bitterly, I thought:

"'You seem glad to go?'

"'Glad to go,' I cried; 'I should think I was; fancy going to Trinity College, Dublin, from this place; why, I shall meet men and not boys. Of course I am glad, wild with delight; the first step to Oxford and fame.'

"'I mean,' my chum went on, still in the same cold way, 'you seem glad to leave me.'

"His tone startled me.

"'You silly fellow,' I exclaimed, 'of course not; I'm always glad to be with you: but perhaps you will be

coming up to Trinity too; won't you?'

"'I'm afraid not,' he said, 'but I shall come to Dublin frequently.'

"'Then we shall meet,' I remarked; 'you must come and see me in my rooms. My father will give me a room to myself in our house, and you know Merrion Square is the best part of Dublin. You must come and see me.'

"He looked up at me with yearning, sad, regretful eyes. But the future was beckoning to me, and I could not help talking about it, for the golden key of wonderland was in my hand, and I was wild with desires and hopes.

"My friend was very silent, I remember, and only interrupted me to ask:

"'When do you go, Oscar?'

"'Early,' I replied thoughtlessly, or rather full of my own thoughts, 'early to−morrow morning, I believe; the usual train.'

"In the morning just as I was starting for the station, having said 'goodbye' to everyone, he came up to me very pale and strangely quiet.

"'I'm coming with you to the station, Oscar,' he said; 'the Doctor gave me permission, when I told him what friends we had been.'

"'I'm glad,' I cried, my conscience pricking me that I had not thought of asking for his company. 'I'm very glad. My last hours at school will always be associated with you.'

"He just glanced up at me, and the glance surprised me; it was like a dog looks at one. But my own hopes soon took possession of me again, and I can only remember being vaguely surprised by the appeal in his regard.

"When I was settled in my seat in the train, he did not say 'goodbye' and go, and leave me to my dreams; but brought me papers and things and hung about.

"The guard came and said:

"'Now, sir, if you are going.'

"I liked the 'Sir.' To my surprise my friend jumped into the carriage and said:

"'All right, guard, I'm not going, but I shall slip out as soon as you whistle.'

"The guard touched his cap and went. I said something, I don't know what; I was a little embarrassed.

"'You will write to me, Oscar, won't you, and tell me about everything?'

"'Oh, yes,' I replied, 'as soon as I get settled down, you know. There will be such a lot to do at first, and I am wild to see everything. I wonder how the professors will treat me. I do hope they will not be fools or prigs; what a pity it is that all professors are not poets. . . . .' And so I went on merrily, when suddenly the whistle sounded and a moment afterwards the train began to move.

"'You must go now,' I said to him.

"'Yes,' he replied, in a queer muffled voice, while standing with his hand on the door of the carriage. Suddenly he turned to me and cried:

"'Oh, Oscar,' and before I knew what he was doing he had caught my face in his hot hands, and kissed me on the lips. The next moment he had slipped out of the door and was gone. . . . .

"I sat there all shaken. Suddenly I became aware of cold, sticky drops trickling down my face−−his tears. They affected me strangely. As I wiped them off I said to myself in amaze:

"'This is love: this is what he meant−−love.' . . . .

"I was trembling all over. For a long while I sat, unable to think, all shaken with wonder and remorse."

CHAPTER III−−TRINITY, DUBLIN: MAGDALEN, OXFORD

Oscar Wilde did well at school, but he did still better at college, where the competition was more severe. He entered Trinity on October 19th, 1871, just three days after his seventeenth birthday. Sir Edward Sullivan writes me that when Oscar matriculated at Trinity he was already "a thoroughly good classical scholar of a brilliant type," and he goes on to give an invaluable snap−shot of him at this time; a likeness, in fact, the chief features of which grew more and more characteristic as the years went on.

"He had rooms in College at the north side of one of the older squares, known as Botany Bay. These rooms were exceedingly grimy and ill−kept. He never entertained there. On the rare occasions when visitors were admitted, an unfinished landscape in oils was always on the easel, in a prominent place in his sitting room. He would invariably refer to it, telling one in his humorously unconvincing way that 'he had just put in the butterfly.' Those of us who had seen his work in the drawing class presided over by 'Bully' Wakeman at Portora were not likely to be deceived in the matter. . . . .

"His college life was mainly one of study; in addition to working for his classical examinations, he devoured with voracity all the best English writers.

"He was an intense admirer of Swinburne and constantly reading his poems; John Addington Symond's works too, on the Greek authors, were perpetually in his hands. He never entertained any pronounced views on social, religious or political questions while in College; he seemed to be altogether devoted to literary matters.

"He mixed freely at the same time in Dublin society functions of all kinds, and was always a very vivacious and welcome guest at any house he cared to visit. All through his Dublin University days he was one of the purest minded men that could be met with.

"He was not a card player, but would on occasions join in a game of limited loo at some man's rooms. He was also an extremely moderate drinker. He became a member of the junior debating society, the Philosophical, but hardly ever took any part in their discussions.

"He read for the Berkeley medal (which he afterwards gained) with an excellent, but at the same time broken−down, classical scholar, John Townsend Mills, and, besides instruction, he contrived to get a good deal of amusement out of his readings with his quaint teacher. He told me for instance that on one occasion he expressed his sympathy for Mills on seeing him come into his rooms wearing a tall hat completely covered in crape. Mills, however, replied, with a smile, that no one was dead−−it was only the evil condition of his hat that had made him assume so mournful a disguise. I have often thought that the incident was still fresh in Oscar Wilde's mind when he introduced John Worthing in 'The Importance of Being Earnest,' in mourning for his fictitious brother. . . . .

"Shortly before he started on his first trip to Italy, he came into my rooms in a very striking pair of trousers. I made some chaffing remark on them, but he begged me in the most serious style of which he was so excellent a master not to jest about them.

"'They are my Trasimene trousers, and I mean to wear them there.'"

Already his humour was beginning to strike all his acquaintances, and what Sir Edward Sullivan here calls his "puremindedness," or what I should rather call his peculiar refinement of nature. No one ever heard Oscar Wilde tell a suggestive story; indeed he always shrank from any gross or crude expression; even his mouth was vowed always to pure beauty.

The Trinity Don whom I have already quoted about Oscar's school−days sends me a rather severe critical judgment of him as a student. There is some truth in it, however, for in part at least it was borne out and corroborated by Oscar's later achievement. It must be borne in mind that the Don was one of his competitors at Trinity, and a successful one; Oscar's mind could not limit itself to college tasks and prescribed books.

"When Oscar came to college he did excellently during the first year; he was top of his class in classics; but he did not do so well in the long examinations for a classical scholarship in his second year. He was placed fifth, which was considered very good, but he was plainly not the man for the dolichos (or long struggle), though first−rate for a short examination."

Oscar himself only completed these spirit−photographs by what he told me of his life at Trinity.

"It was the fascination of Greek letters, and the delight I took in Greek life and thought," he said to me once, "which made me a scholar. I got my love of the Greek ideal and my intimate knowledge of the language at Trinity from Mahaffy and Tyrrell; they were Trinity to me; Mahaffy was especially valuable to me at that time. Though not so good a scholar as Tyrrell, he had been in Greece, had lived there and saturated himself with Greek thought and Greek feeling. Besides he took deliberately the artistic standpoint towards everything, which was coming more and more to be my standpoint. He was a delightful talker, too, a really great talker in a certain way−−an artist in vivid words and eloquent pauses. Tyrrell, too, was very kind to me−−intensely sympathetic and crammed with knowledge. If he had known less he would have been a poet. Learning is a sad handicap, Frank, an appalling handicap," and he laughed irresistibly.

"What were the students like in Dublin?" I asked. "Did you make friends with any of them?"

"They were worse even than the boys at Portora," he replied; "they thought of nothing but cricket and football, running and jumping; and they varied these intellectual exercises with bouts of fighting and drinking. If they had any souls they diverted them with coarse "amours" among barmaids and the women of the streets; they were simply awful. Sexual vice is even coarser and more loathsome in Ireland than it is in England:−−

"'Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.'

"When I tried to talk they broke into my thought with stupid gibes and jokes. Their highest idea of humour was an obscene story. No, no, Tyrrell and Mahaffy represent to me whatever was good in Trinity."

In 1874 Oscar Wilde won the gold medal for Greek. The subject of the year was "The Fragments of the Greek Comic Poets, as edited by Meineke." In this year, too, he won a classical scholarship−−a demyship of the annual value of L95, which was tenable for five years, which enabled him to go to Oxford without throwing an undue strain on his father's means.

He noticed with delight that his success was announced in the "Oxford University Gazette" of July 11th, 1874. He entered Magdalen College, Oxford, on October 17th, a day after his twentieth birthday.

Just as he had been more successful at Trinity than at school, so he was destined to be far more successful and win a far greater reputation at Oxford than in Dublin.

He had the advantage of going to Oxford a little later than most men, at twenty instead of eighteen, and thus was enabled to win high honours with comparative ease, while leading a life of cultured enjoyment.

He was placed in the first class in "Moderations" in 1876 and had even then managed to make himself talked about in the life of the place. The Trinity Don whom I have already quoted, after admitting that there was not a breath against his character either at school or Trinity, goes on to write that "at Trinity he did not strike us as a very exceptional person," and yet there must have been some sharp eyes at Trinity, for our Don adds with surprising divination:

"I fancy his rapid development took place after he went to Oxford, where he was able to specialize more; in fact where he could study what he most affected. It is, I feel sure, from his Oxford life more than from his life in Ireland that one would be able to trace the good and bad features by which he afterwards attracted the attention of the world."

In 1878 Oscar won a First Class in "Greats." In this same Trinity term, 1878, he further distinguished himself by gaining the Newdigate prize for English verse with his poem "Ravenna," which he recited at the annual Commemoration in the Sheldonian Theatre on June 26th. His reciting of the poem was the literary event of the year in Oxford.

There had been great curiosity about him; he was said to be the best talker of the day, and one of the ripest scholars. There were those in the University who predicted an astonishing future for him, and indeed all possibilities seemed within his reach. "His verses were listened to," said "The Oxford and Cambridge Undergraduates' Journal", "with rapt attention." It was just the sort of thing, half poetry, half rhythmic rhetoric, which was sure to reach the hearts and minds of youth. His voice, too, was of beautiful tenor quality, and exquisitely used. When he sat down people crowded to praise him and even men of great distinction in life flattered him with extravagant compliments. Strange to say he used always to declare that his appearance about the same time as Prince Rupert, at a fancy dress ball, given by Mrs. George Morrell, at Headington Hill Hall, afforded him a far more gratifying proof of the exceptional position he had won.

"Everyone came round me, Frank, and made me talk. I hardly danced at all. I went as Prince Rupert, and I talked as he charged but with more success, for I turned all my foes into friends. I had the divinest evening;

Oxford meant so much to me. . . . .

"I wish I could tell you all Oxford did for me.

"I was the happiest man in the world when I entered Magdalen for the first time. Oxford−−the mere word to me is full of an inexpressible, an incommunicable charm. Oxford−−the home of lost causes and impossible ideals; Matthew Arnold's Oxford−−with its dreaming spires and grey colleges, set in velvet lawns and hidden away among the trees, and about it the beautiful fields, all starred with cowslips and fritillaries where the quiet river winds its way to London and the sea. . . . . The change, Frank, to me was astounding; Trinity was as barbarian as school, with coarseness superadded. If it had not been for two or three people, I should have been worse off at Trinity than at Portora; but Oxford−−Oxford was paradise to me. My very soul seemed to expand within me to peace and joy. Oxford−−the enchanted valley, holding in its flowerlet cup all the idealism of the middle ages. (Oscar was always fond of loosely quoting or paraphrasing in conversation the purple passages from contemporary writers. He said them exquisitely and sometimes his own embroidery was as good as the original. This discipleship, however, always suggested to me a lack of originality. In especial Matthew Arnold had an extraordinary influence upon him, almost as great indeed as Pater.) Oxford is the capital of romance, Frank; in its own way as memorable as Athens, and to me it was even more entrancing. In Oxford, as in Athens, the realities of sordid life were kept at a distance. No one seemed to know anything about money or care anything for it. Everywhere the aristocratic feeling; one must have money, but must not bother about it. And all the appurtenances of life were perfect: the food, the wine, the cigarettes; the common needs of life became artistic symbols, our clothes even won meaning and significance. It was at Oxford I first dressed in knee breeches and silk stockings. I almost reformed fashion and made modern dress aesthetically beautiful; a second and greater reformation, Frank. What a pity it is that Luther knew nothing of dress, had no sense of the becoming. He had courage but no fineness of perception. I'm afraid his neckties would always have been quite shocking!" and he laughed charmingly.

"What about the inside of the platter, Oscar?"

"Ah, Frank, don't ask me, I don't know; there was no grossness, no coarseness; but all delicate delights!

"'Fair passions and bountiful pities and loves without pain,'" ("Stain," not "pain," in the original.)

and he laughed mischievously at the misquotation.

"Loves?" I questioned, and he nodded his head smiling; but would not be drawn.

"All romantic and ideal affections. Every successive wave of youths from the public schools brought some chosen spirits, perfectly wonderful persons, the most graceful and fascinating disciples that a poet could desire, and I preached the old−ever−new gospel of individual revolt and individual perfection. I showed them that sin with its curiosities widened the horizons of life. Prejudices and prohibitions are mere walls to imprison the soul. Indulgence may hurt the body, Frank, but nothing except suffering hurts the spirit; it is self−denial and abstinence that maim and deform the soul."

"Then they knew you as a great talker even at Oxford?" I asked in some surprise.

"Frank," he cried reprovingly, laughing at the same time delightfully, "I was a great talker at school. I did nothing at Trinity but talk, my reading was done at odd hours. I was the best talker ever seen in Oxford."

"And did you find any teacher there like Mahaffy?" I asked, "any professor with a touch of the poet?"

He came to seriousness at once.

"There were two or three teachers, Frank," he replied, "greater than Mahaffy; teachers of the world as well as of Oxford. There was Ruskin for instance, who appealed to me intensely−−a wonderful man and a most wonderful writer. A sort of exquisite romantic flower; like a violet filling the whole air with the ineffable perfume of belief. Ruskin has always seemed to me the Plato of England−−a Prophet of the Good and True and Beautiful, who saw as Plato saw that the three are one perfect flower. But it was his prose I loved, and not his piety. His sympathy with the poor bored me: the road he wanted us to build was tiresome. I could see nothing in poverty that appealed to me, nothing; I shrank away from it as from a degradation of the spirit; but his prose was lyrical and rose on broad wings into the blue. He was a great poet and teacher, Frank, and therefore of course a most preposterous professor; he bored you to death when he taught, but was an inspiration when he sang.

"Then there was Pater, Pater the classic, Pater the scholar, who had already written the greatest English prose: I think a page or two of the greatest prose in all literature. Pater meant everything to me. He taught me the highest form of art: the austerity of beauty. I came to my full growth with Pater. He was a sort of silent, sympathetic elder brother. Fortunately for me he could not talk at all; but he was an admirable listener, and I talked to him by the

hour. I learned the instrument of speech with him, for I could see by his face when I had said anything extraordinary. He did not praise me but quickened me astonishingly, forced me always to do better than my best−−an intense vivifying influence, the influence of Greek art at its supremest."

"He was the Gamaliel then?" I questioned, "at whose feet you sat?"

"Oh, no, Frank," he chided, "everyone sat at my feet even then. But Pater was a very great man. Dear Pater! I remember once talking to him when we were seated together on a bench under some trees in Oxford. I had been watching the students bathing in the river: the beautiful white figures all grace and ease and virile strength. I had been pointing out how Christianity had flowered into romance, and how the crude Hebraic materialism and all the later formalities of an established creed had fallen away from the tree of life and left us the exquisite ideals of the new paganism. . . .

"The pale Christ had been outlived: his renunciations and his sympathies were mere weaknesses: we were moving to a synthesis of art where the enchanting perfume of romance should be wedded to the severe beauty of classic form. I really talked as if inspired, and when I paused, Pater−−the stiff, quiet, silent Pater−−suddenly slipped from his seat and knelt down by me and kissed my hand. I cried:

"'You must not, you really must not. What would people think if they saw you?'

"He got up with a white strained face.

"'I had to,' he muttered, glancing about him fearfully, 'I had to−−once. . . .'"

I must warn my readers that this whole incident is ripened and set in a higher key of thought by the fact that Oscar told it more than ten years after it happened.

CHAPTER IV−−FORMATIVE INFLUENCES: OSCAR'S POEMS

The most important event in Oscar's early life happened while he was still an undergraduate at Oxford: his father, Sir William Wilde, died in 1876, leaving to his wife, Lady Wilde, nearly all he possessed, some L7,000, the interest of which was barely enough to keep her in genteel poverty. The sum is so small that one is constrained to believe the report that Sir William Wilde in his later years kept practically open house−−"lashins of whisky and a good larder," and was besides notorious for his gallantries. Oscar's small portion, a little money and a small house with some land, came to him in the nick of time: he used the cash partly to pay some debts at Oxford, partly to defray the expenses of a trip to Greece. It was natural that Oscar Wilde, with his eager sponge−like receptivity, should receive the best academic education of his time, and should better that by travel. We all get something like the education we desire, and Oscar Wilde, it always seemed to me, was over−educated, had learned, that is, too much from books and not enough from life and had thought too little for himself; but my readers will be able to judge of this for themselves.

In 1877 he accompanied Professor Mahaffy on a long tour through Greece. The pleasure and profit Oscar got from the trip were so great that he failed to return to Oxford on the date fixed. The Dons fined him forty−five pounds for the breach of discipline; but they returned the money to him in the following year when he won First Honours in "Greats" and the Newdigate prize.

This visit to Greece when he was twenty−three confirmed the view of life which he had already formed and I have indicated sufficiently perhaps in that talk with Pater already recorded. But no one will understand Oscar Wilde who for a moment loses sight of the fact that he was a pagan born: as Gautier says, "One for whom the visible world alone exists," endowed with all the Greek sensuousness and love of plastic beauty; a pagan, like Nietzsche and Gautier, wholly out of sympathy with Christianity, one of "the Confraternity of the faithless who "cannot" believe," (His own words in "De Profundis.") to whom a sense of sin and repentance are symptoms of weakness and disease.

Oscar used often to say that the chief pleasure he had in visiting Rome was to find the Greek gods and the heroes and heroines of Greek story throned in the Vatican. He preferred Niobe to the Mater Dolorosa and Helen to both; the worship of sorrow must give place, he declared, to the worship of the beautiful.

Another dominant characteristic of the young man may here find its place.

While still at Oxford his tastes−−the bent of his mind, and his temperament−− were beginning to outline his future. He spent his vacations in Dublin and always called upon his old school friend Edward Sullivan in his rooms at Trinity. Sullivan relates that when they met Oscar used to be full of his occasional visits to London and could talk of nothing but the impression made upon him by plays and players. From youth on the theatre drew him irresistibly; he had not only all the vanity of the actor; but what might be called the born dramatist's love for the varied life of the stage−−its paintings, costumings, rhetoric−−and above all the touch of emphasis natural to it which gives such opportunity for humorous exaggeration.

"I remember him telling me," Sullivan writes, "about Irving's 'Macbeth,' which made a great impression on him; he was fascinated by it. He feared, however, that the public might be similarly affected−−a thing which, he declared, would destroy his enjoyment of an extraordinary performance." He admired Miss Ellen Terry, too, extravagantly, as he admired Marion Terry, Mrs. Langtry, and Mary Anderson later.

The death of Sir William Wilde put an end to the family life in Dublin, and set the survivors free. Lady Wilde had lost her husband and her only daughter in Merrion Square: the house was full of sad memories to her, she was eager to leave it all and settle in London.

The "Requiescat" in Oscar's first book of poems was written in memory of this sister who died in her teens, whom he likened to "a ray of sunshine dancing about the house." He took his vocation seriously even in youth: he felt that he should sing his sorrow, give record of whatever happened to him in life. But he found no new word for his bereavement.

Willie Wilde came over to London and got employment as a journalist and was soon given almost a free hand by the editor of the society paper "The World". With rare unselfishness, or, if you will, with Celtic clannishness,

he did a good deal to make Oscar's name known. Every clever thing that Oscar said or that could be attributed to him, Willie reported in "The World". This puffing and Oscar's own uncommon power as a talker; but chiefly perhaps a whispered reputation for strange sins, had thus early begun to form a sort of myth around him. He was already on the way to becoming a personage; there was a certain curiosity about him, a flutter of interest in whatever he did. He had published poems in the Trinity College magazine, "Kottabos", and elsewhere. People were beginning to take him at his own valuation as a poet and a wit; and the more readily as that ambition did not clash in any way with their more material strivings.

The time had now come for Oscar to conquer London as he had conquered Oxford. He had finished the first class in the great World−School and was eager to try the next, where his mistakes would be his only tutors and his desires his taskmasters. His University successes flattered him with the belief that he would go from triumph to triumph and be the exception proving the rule that the victor in the academic lists seldom repeats his victories on the battlefield of life.

It is not sufficiently understood that the learning of Latin and Greek and the forming of expensive habits at others' cost are a positive disability and handicap in the rough−and−tumble tussle of the great city, where greed and unscrupulous resolution rule, and where there are few prizes for feats of memory or taste in words. When the graduate wins in life he wins as a rule in spite of his so−called education and not because of it.

It is true that the majority of English 'Varsity men give themselves an infinitely better education than that provided by the authorities. They devote themselves to athletic sports with whole−hearted enthusiasm. Fortunately for them it is impossible to develop the body without at the same time steeling the will. The would−be athlete has to live laborious days; he may not eat to his liking, nor drink to his thirst. He learns deep lessons almost unconsciously; to conquer his desires and make light of pain and discomfort. He needs no Aristotle to teach him the value of habits; he is soon forced to use them as defences against his pet weaknesses; above all he finds that self−denial has its reward in perfect health; that the thistle pain, too, has its flower. It is a truism that 'Varsity athletes generally succeed in life, Spartan discipline proving itself incomparably superior to Greek accidence.

Oscar Wilde knew nothing of this discipline. He had never trained his body to endure or his will to steadfastness. He was the perfect flower of academic study and leisure. At Magdalen he had been taught luxurious living, the delight of gratifying expensive tastes; he had been brought up and enervated so to speak in Capua. His vanity had been full−fed with cloistered triumphs; he was at once pleasure−loving, vainly self−confident and weak; he had been encouraged for years to give way to his emotions and to pamper his sensations, and as the Cap−and−Bells of Folly to cherish a fantastic code of honour even in mortal combat, while despising the religion which might have given him some hold on the respect of his compatriots. What chance had this cultured honour−loving Sybarite in the deadly grapple of modern life where the first quality is will power, the only knowledge needed a knowledge of the value of money. I must not be understood here as in any degree disparaging Oscar. I can surely state that a flower is weaker than a weed without exalting the weed or depreciating the flower.

The first part of life's voyage was over for Oscar Wilde; let us try to see him as he saw himself at this time and let us also determine his true relations to the world. Fortunately he has given us his own view of himself with some care.

In Foster's "Alumni Oxonienses", Oscar Wilde described himself on leaving Oxford as a "Professor of aesthetics, and a Critic of Art"−−an announcement to me at once infinitely ludicrous and pathetic. "Ludicrous" because it betrays such complete ignorance of life all given over to men industrious with muck−rakes: "Gadarene swine," as Carlyle called them, "busily grubbing and grunting in search of pignuts." "Pathetic" for it is boldly ingenuous as youth itself with a touch of youthful conceit and exaggeration. Another eager human soul on the threshold longing to find some suitable high work in the world, all unwitting of the fact that ideal strivings are everywhere despised and discouraged−− jerry−built cottages for the million being the day's demand and not oratories or palaces of art or temples for the spirit.

Not the time for a "professor of aesthetics," one would say, and assuredly not the place. One wonders whether Zululand would not be more favourable for such a man than England. Germany, France, and Italy have many positions in universities, picture−galleries, museums, opera houses for lovers of the beautiful, and above all an educated respect for artists and writers just as they have places too for servants of Truth in chemical laboratories

and polytechnics endowed by the State with excellent results even from the utilitarian point of view. But rich England has only a few dozen such places in all at command and these are usually allotted with a cynical contempt for merit; miserable anarchic England, soul−starved amid its creature comforts, proving now by way of example to helots that man cannot live by bread alone:−− England and Oscar Wilde! the "Black Country" and "the professor of aesthetics"−− a mad world, my masters!

It is necessary for us now to face this mournful truth that in the quarrel between these two the faults were not all on one side, mayhap England was even further removed from the ideal than the would−be professor of aesthetics, which fact may well give us pause and food for thought. Organic progress we have been told; indeed, might have seen if we had eyes, evolution so−called is from the simple to the complex; our rulers therefore should have provided for the ever−growing complexity of modern life and modern men. The good gardener will even make it his ambition to produce new species; our politicians, however, will not take the trouble to give even the new species that appear a chance of living; they are too busy, it appears, in keeping their jobs.

No new profession has been organized in England since the Middle Ages. In the meantime we have invented new arts, new sciences and new letters; when will these be organized and regimented in new and living professions, so that young ingenuous souls may find suitable fields for their powers and may not be forced willy−nilly to grub for pignuts when it would be more profitable for them and for us to use their nobler faculties? Not only are the poor poorer and more numerous in England than elsewhere; but there is less provision made for the "intellectuals" too, consequently the organism is suffering at both extremities. It is high time that both maladies were taken in hand, for by universal consent England is now about the worst organized of all modern States, the furthest from the ideal.

Something too should be done with the existing professions to make them worthy of honourable ambition. One of them, the Church, is a noble body without a soul; the soul, our nostrils tell us, died some time ago, while the medical profession has got a noble spirit with a wretched half−organized body. It says much for the inherent integrity and piety of human nature that our doctors persist in trying to cure diseases when it is clearly to their self−interest to keep their patients ailing−−an anarchic world, this English one, and stupefied with self−praise. What will this professor of aesthetics make of it?

Here he is, the flower of English University training, a winner of some of the chief academic prizes without any worthy means of earning a livelihood, save perchance by journalism. And journalism in England suffers from the prevailing anarchy. In France, Italy, and Germany journalism is a career in which an eloquent and cultured youth may honourably win his spurs. In many countries this way of earning one's bread can still be turned into an art by the gifted and high−minded; but in England thanks in the main to the anonymity of the press cunningly contrived by the capitalist, the journalist or modern preacher is turned into a venal voice, a soulless Cheapjack paid to puff his master's wares. Clearly our "Professor of aesthetics and Critic of Art" is likely to have a doleful time of it in nineteenth century London.

Oscar had already dipped into his little patrimony, as we have seen, and he could not conceal from himself that he would soon have to live on what he could earn−−a few pounds a week. But then he was a poet and had boundless confidence in his own ability. To the artist nature the present is everything; just for to−day he resolved that he would live as he had always lived; so he travelled first class to London and bought all the books and papers that could distract him on the way: "Give me the luxuries," he used to say, "and anyone can have the necessaries."

In the background of his mind there were serious misgivings. Long afterwards he told me that his father's death and the smallness of his patrimony had been a heavy blow to him. He encouraged himself, however, at the moment by dwelling on his brother's comparative success and waved aside fears and doubts as unworthy.

It is to his credit that at first he tried to cut down expenses and live laborious days. He took a couple of furnished rooms in Salisbury Street off the Strand, a very Grub Street for a man of fashion, and began to work at journalism while getting together a book of poems for publication. His journalism at first was anything but successful. It was his misfortune to appeal only to the best heads and good heads are not numerous anywhere. His appeal, too, was still academic and laboured. His brother Willie with his commoner sympathies appeared to be better equipped for this work. But Oscar had from the first a certain social success.

As soon as he reached London he stepped boldly into the limelight, going to all "first nights" and taking the floor on all occasions. He was not only an admirable talker but he was invariably smiling, eager, full of life and

the joy of living, and above all given to unmeasured praise of whatever and whoever pleased him. This gift of enthusiastic admiration was not only his most engaging characteristic, but also, perhaps, the chief proof of his extraordinary ability. It was certainly, too, the quality which served him best all through his life. He went about declaring that Mrs. Langtry was more beautiful than the 'Venus of Milo,' and Lady Archie Campbell more charming than Rosalind and Mr. Whistler an incomparable artist. Such enthusiasm in a young and brilliant man was unexpected and delightful and doors were thrown open to him in all sets. Those who praise passionately are generally welcome guests and if Oscar could not praise he shrugged his shoulders and kept silent; scarcely a bitter word ever fell from those smiling lips. No tactics could have been more successful in England than his native gift of radiant good−humour and enthusiasm. He got to know not only all the actors and actresses, but the chief patrons and frequenters of the theatre: Lord Lytton, Lady Shrewsbury, Lady Dorothy Nevill, Lady de Grey and Mrs. Jeune; and, on the other hand, Hardy, Meredith, Browning, Swinburne, and Matthew Arnold−−all Bohemia, in fact, and all that part of Mayfair which cares for the things of the intellect.

But though he went out a great deal and met a great many distinguished people, and won a certain popularity, his social success put no money in his purse. It even forced him to spend money; for the constant applause of his hearers gave him self−confidence. He began to talk more and write less, and cabs and gloves and flowers cost money. He was soon compelled to mortgage his little property in Ireland.

At the same time it must be admitted he was still indefatigably intent on bettering his mind, and in London he found more original teachers than in Oxford, notably Morris and Whistler. Morris, though greatly overpraised during his life, had hardly any message for the men of his time. He went for his ideals to an imaginary past and what he taught and praised was often totally unsuited to modern conditions. Whistler on the other hand was a modern of the moderns, and a great artist to boot: he had not only assimilated all the newest thought of the day, but with the alchemy of genius had transmuted it and made it his own. Before even the de Goncourts he had admired Chinese porcelain and Japanese prints and his own exquisite intuition strengthened by Japanese example had shown him that his impression of life was more valuable than any mere transcript of it. Modern art he felt should be an interpretation and not a representment of reality, and he taught the golden rule of the artist that the half is usually more expressive than the whole. He went about London preaching new schemes of decoration and another Renaissance of art. Had he only been a painter he would never have exercised an extraordinary influence; but he was a singularly interesting appearance as well and an admirable talker gifted with picturesque phrases and a most caustic wit.

Oscar sat at his feet and imbibed as much as he could of the new aesthetic gospel. He even ventured to annex some of the master's most telling stories and thus came into conflict with his teacher.

One incident may find a place here.

The art critic of "The Times", Mr. Humphry Ward, had come to see an exhibition of Whistler's pictures. Filled with an undue sense of his own importance, he buttonholed the master and pointing to one picture said:

"That's good, first−rate, a lovely bit of colour; but that, you know," he went on, jerking his finger over his shoulder at another picture, "that's bad, drawing all wrong . . . bad!"

"My dear fellow," cried Whistler, "you must never say that this painting's good or that bad, never! Good and bad are not terms to be used by you; but say, I like this, and I dislike that, and you'll be within your right. And now come and have a whiskey for you're sure to like that."

Carried away by the witty fling, Oscar cried:

"I wish I had said that."

"You will, Oscar, you will," came Whistler's lightning thrust.

Of all the personal influences which went to the moulding of Oscar Wilde's talent, that of Whistler, in my opinion, was the most important; Whistler taught him that men of genius stand apart and are laws unto themselves; showed him, too, that all qualities−−singularity of appearance, wit, rudeness even, count doubly in a democracy. But neither his own talent nor the bold self−assertion learned from Whistler helped him to earn money; the conquest of London seemed further off and more improbable than ever. Where Whistler had missed the laurel how could he or indeed anyone be sure of winning?

A weaker professor of aesthetics would have been discouraged by the monetary and other difficulties of his position and would have lost heart at the outset in front of the impenetrable blank wall of English philistinism and contempt. But Oscar Wilde was conscious of great ability and was driven by an inordinate vanity. Instead of

diminishing his pretensions in the face of opposition he increased them. He began to go abroad in the evening in knee breeches and silk stockings wearing strange flowers in his coat−−green cornflowers and gilded lilies−−while talking about Baudelaire, whose name even was unfamiliar, as a world poet, and proclaiming the strange creed that "nothing succeeds like excess." Very soon his name came into everyone's mouth; London talked of him and discussed him at a thousand tea−tables. For one invitation he had received before, a dozen now poured in; he became a celebrity.

Of course he was still sneered at by many as a mere "poseur"; it still seemed to be all Lombard Street to a china orange that he would be beaten down under the myriad trampling feet of middle−class indifference and disdain.

Some circumstances were in his favour. Though the artistic movement inaugurated years before by the Pre−Raphaelites was still laughed at and scorned by the many as a craze, a few had stood firm, and slowly the steadfast minority had begun to sway the majority as is often the case in democracies. Oscar Wilde profited by the victory of these art−loving forerunners. Here and there among the indifferent public, men were attracted by the artistic view of life and women by the emotional intensity of the new creed. Oscar Wilde became the prophet of an esoteric cult. But notoriety even did not solve the monetary question, which grew more and more insistent. A dozen times he waved it aside and went into debt rather than restrain himself. Somehow or other he would fall on his feet, he thought. Men who console themselves in this way usually fall on someone else's feet and so did Oscar Wilde. At twenty−six years of age and curiously enough at the very moment of his insolent−bold challenge of the world with fantastic dress, he stooped to ask his mother for money, money which she could ill spare, though to do her justice she never wasted a second thought on money where her affections were concerned, and she not only loved Oscar but was proud of him. Still she could not give him much; the difficulty was only postponed; what was to be done?

His vanity had grown with his growth; the dread of defeat was only a spur to the society favourite; he cast about for some means of conquering the Philistines, and could think of nothing but his book of poems. He had been trying off and on for nearly a year to get it published. The publishers told him roundly that there was no money in poetry and refused the risk. But the notoriety of his knee−breeches and silken hose, and above all the continual attacks in the society papers, came to his aid and his book appeared in the early summer of 1881 with all the importance that imposing form, good paper, broad margins, and high price (10/6) could give it. The truth was, he paid for the printing and production of the book himself, and David Bogue, the publisher, put his name on for a commission.

Oscar had built high fantastic hopes on this book. To the very end of his life he believed himself a poet and in the creative sense of the word he was assuredly justified, but he meant it in the singing sense as well, and there his claim can only be admitted with serious qualifications. But whether he was a singer or not the hopes founded on this book were extravagant; he expected to make not only reputation by it, but a large amount of money, and money is not often made in England by poetry.

The book had an extraordinary success, greater, it may safely be said, than any first book of real poetry has ever had in England or indeed is ever likely to have: four editions were sold in a few weeks. Two of the Sonnets in the book were addressed to Ellen Terry, one as "Portia," the other as "Henrietta Maria"; and these partly account for the book's popularity, for Miss Terry was delighted with them and praised the book and its author to the skies. (In her "Recollections" Miss Terry says that she was more impressed by the genius of Oscar Wilde and of Whistler than by that of any other men.) I reproduce the "Henrietta Maria" sonnet here as a fair specimen of the work:

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QUEEN HENRIETTA MARIA

In the lone tent, waiting for victory,
  She stands with eyes marred by the mists of pain,
  Like some wan lily overdrenched with rain:
The clamorous clang of arms, the ensanguined sky,
War's ruin, and the wreck of chivalry,
  To her proud soul no common fear can bring:
  Bravely she tarrieth for her Lord the King,
Her soul aflame with passionate ecstasy.
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O Hair of Gold! O Crimson Lips! O Face!
  Made for the luring and the love of man!
  With thee I do forget the toil and stress,
The loveless road that knows no resting−place,
  Time's straitened pulse, the soul's dread weariness,
My freedom and my life republican.
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Lyric poetry is by its excellence the chief art of England, as music is the art of Germany. A book of poetry is almost sure of fair appreciation in the English press which does not trouble to notice a "Sartor Resartus" or the first essays of an Emerson. The excessive consideration given to Oscar's book by the critics showed that already his personality and social success had affected the reporters.

"The Athenaeum" gave the book the place of honour in its number for the 23rd of July. The review was severe; but not unjust. "Mr. Wilde's volume of poems," it says, "may be regarded as the evangel of a new creed. From other gospels it differs in coming after, instead of before, the cult it seeks to establish. . . . . We fail to see, however, that the apostle of the new worship has any distinct message."

The critic then took pains to prove that "nearly all the book is imitative" . . . . and concluded: "Work of this nature has no element of endurance."

"The Saturday Review "dismissed the book at the end of an article on "Recent Poetry" as "neither good nor bad." The reviewer objected in the English fashion to the sensual tone of the poems; but summed up fairly enough: "This book is not without traces of cleverness, but it is marred everywhere by imitation, insincerity, and bad taste."

At the same time the notices in "Punch" were extravagantly bitter, while of course the notices in "The World", mainly written by Oscar's brother, were extravagantly eulogistic. "Punch" declared that "Mr. Wilde may be aesthetic, but he is not original . . . . a volume of echoes. . . . . Swinburne and water."

Now what did "The Athenaeum" mean by taking a new book of imitative verse so seriously and talking of it as the "evangel of a new creed," besides suggesting that "it comes after the cult," and so forth?

It seems probable that "The Athenaeum" mistook Oscar Wilde for a continuator of the Pre−Raphaelite movement with the sub−conscious and peculiarly English suggestion that whatever is "aesthetic" or "artistic" is necessarily weak and worthless, if not worse.

Soon after Oscar left Oxford "Punch" began to caricature him and ridicule the cult of what it christened "The Too Utterly Utter." Nine Englishmen out of ten took delight in the savage contempt poured upon what was known euphemistically as "the aesthetic craze" by the pet organ of the English middle class.

This was the sort of thing "Punch" published under the title of "A Poet's Day":

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"Oscar at Breakfast! Oscar at Luncheon!!
Oscar at Dinner!!! Oscar at Supper!!!!"
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"'You see I am, after all, mortal,' remarked the poet, with an ineffable affable smile, as he looked up from an elegant but substantial dish of ham and eggs. Passing a long willowy hand through his waving hair, he swept away a stray curl−paper, with the nonchalance of a D'Orsay.

"After this effort Mr. Wilde expressed himself as feeling somewhat faint; and with a half apologetic smile ordered another portion of Ham and Eggs."

"Punch"'s verses on the subject were of the same sort, showing spite rather than humour. Under the heading of "Sage Green" (by a fading−out aesthete) it published such stuff as this:

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My love is as fair as a lily flower.
  ("The Peacock blue has a sacred sheen!")
Oh, bright are the blooms in her maiden bower.
  ("Sing Hey! Sing Ho! for the sweet Sage Green!")
. . . . . .
And woe is me that I never may win;
  ("The Peacock blue has a sacred sheen!")
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For the Bard's hard up, and she's got no tin.
  ("Sing Hey! Sing Ho! for the sweet Sage Green!")
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Taking the criticism as a whole it would be useless to deny that there is an underlying assumption of vicious sensuality in the poet which is believed to be reflected in the poetry. This is the only way to explain the condemnation which is much more bitter than the verse deserves.

The poems gave Oscar pocket money for a season; increased too his notoriety; but did him little or no good with the judicious: there was not a memorable word or a new cadence, or a sincere cry in the book. Still, first volumes of poetry are as a rule imitative and the attempt, if inferior to "Venus and Adonis," was not without interest.

Oscar was naturally disappointed with the criticism, but the sales encouraged him and the stir the book made and he was as determined as ever to succeed. What was to be done next?

CHAPTER V−−OSCAR'S QUARREL WITH WHISTLER AND MARRIAGE

The first round in the battle with Fate was inconclusive. Oscar Wilde had managed to get known and talked about and had kept his head above water for a couple of years while learning something about life and more about himself. On the other hand he had spent almost all his patrimony, had run into some debt besides; yet seemed as far as ever from earning a decent living. The outlook was disquieting.

Even as a young man Oscar had a very considerable understanding of life. He could not make his way as a journalist, the English did not care for his poetry; but there was still the lecture−platform. In his heart he knew that he could talk better than he wrote.

He got his brother to announce boldly in "The World" that owing to the "astonishing success of his 'Poems' Mr. Oscar Wilde had been invited to lecture in America."

The invitation was imaginary; but Oscar had resolved to break into this new field; there was money in it, he felt sure.

Besides he had another string to his bow. When the first rumblings of the social storm in Russia reached England, our aristocratic republican seized occasion by the forelock and wrote a play on the Nihilist Conspiracy called "Vera". This drama was impregnated with popular English liberal sentiment. With the interest of actuality about it "Vera" was published in September, 1880; but fell flat.

The assassination of the Tsar Alexander, however, in March, 1881; the way Oscar's poems published in June of that year were taken up by Miss Terry and puffed in the press, induced Mrs. Bernard Beere, an actress of some merit, to accept "Vera" for the stage. It was suddenly announced that "Vera" would be put on by Mrs. Bernard Beere at The Adelphi in December, '81; but the author had to be content with this advertisement. December came and went and "Vera" was not staged. It seemed probable to Oscar that it might be accepted in America; at any rate, there could be no harm in trying: he sailed for New York.

It was on the cards that he might succeed in his new adventure. The taste of America in letters and art is still strongly influenced, if not formed, by English taste, and, if Oscar Wilde had been properly accredited, it is probable that his extraordinary gift of speech would have won him success in America as a lecturer.

His phrase to the Revenue officers on landing: "I have nothing to declare except my genius," turned the limelight full upon him and excited comment and discussion all over the country. But the fuglemen of his caste whose praise had brought him to the front in England were almost unrepresented in the States, and never bold enough to be partisans. Oscar faced the American Philistine public without his accustomed "claque", and under these circumstances a half−success was evidence of considerable power. His subjects were "The English Renaissance" and "House Decoration."

His first lecture at Chickering Hall on January 9, 1882, was so much talked about that the famous impresario, Major Pond, engaged him for a tour which, however, had to be cut short in the middle as a monetary failure. "The Nation" gave a very fair account of his first lecture: "Mr. Wilde is essentially a foreign product and can hardly succeed in this country. What he has to say is not new, and his extravagance is not extravagant enough to amuse the average American audience. His knee−breeches and long hair are good as far as they go; but Bunthorne has really spoiled the public for Wilde."

"The Nation" underrated American curiosity. Oscar lectured some ninety times from January till July, when he returned to New York. The gross receipts amounted to some L4,000: he received about L1,200, which left him with a few hundreds above his expenses. His optimism regarded this as a triumph.

One is fain to confess today that these lectures make very poor reading. There is not a new thought in them; not even a memorable expression; they are nothing but student work, the best passages in them being mere paraphrases of Pater and Arnold, though the titles were borrowed from Whistler. Dr. Ernest Bendz in his monograph on "The Influence of Pater and Matthew Arnold in the Prose−Writings of Oscar Wilde" has established this fact with curious erudition and completeness.

Still, the lecturer was a fine figure of a man: his knee−breeches and silk stockings set all the women talking, and he spoke with suave authority. Even the dullest had to admit that his elocution was excellent, and the manner

of speech is keenly appreciated in America. In some of the Eastern towns, in New York especially, he had a certain success, the success of sensation and of novelty, such success as every large capital gives to the strange and eccentric.

In Boston he scored a triumph of character. Fifty or sixty Harvard students came to his lecture dressed to caricature him in "swallow tail coats, knee breeches, flowing wigs and green ties. They all wore large lilies in their buttonholes and each man carried a huge sunflower as he limped along." That evening Oscar appeared in ordinary dress and went on with his lecture as if he had not noticed the rudeness. The chief Boston paper gave him due credit:

"Everyone who witnessed the scene on Tuesday evening must feel about it very much as we do, and those who came to scoff, if they did not exactly remain to pray, at least left the Music Hall with feelings of cordial liking, and, perhaps to their own surprise, of respect for Oscar Wilde." (By way of heaping coals of fire on the students' heads Oscar presented a cast of the Hermes (then recently unearthed) to the University of Harvard.)

As he travelled west to Louisville and Omaha his popularity dwined and dwindled. Still he persevered and after leaving the States visited Canada, reaching Halifax in the autumn.

One incident must find a place here. On September 6 he sent L80 to Lady Wilde. I have been told that this was merely a return of money she had advanced; but there can be no doubt that Oscar, unlike his brother Willie, helped his mother again and again most generously, though Willie was always her favourite.

Oscar returned to England in April, 1883, and lectured to the Art Students at their club in Golden Square. This at once brought about a break with Whistler who accused him of plagiarism:−−"Picking from our platters the plums for the puddings he peddles in the provinces."

If one compares this lecture with Oscar's on "The English Renaissance of Art," delivered in New York only a year before, and with Whistler's well−known opinions, it is impossible not to admit that the charge was justified. Such phrases as "artists are not to copy beauty but to create it . . . . a picture is a purely decorative thing," proclaim their author.

The long newspaper wrangle between the two was brought to a head in 1885, when Whistler gave his famous "Ten o'clock" discourse on Art. This lecture was infinitely better than any of Oscar Wilde's. Twenty odd years older than Wilde, Whistler was a master of all his resources: he was not only witty, but he had new views on art and original ideas. As a great artist he knew that "there never was an artistic period. There never was an Art−loving nation." Again and again he reached pure beauty of expression. The masterly persiflage, too, filled me with admiration and I declared that the lecture ranked with the best ever heard in London with Coleridge's on Shakespeare and Carlyle's on Heroes. To my astonishment Oscar would not admit the superlative quality of Whistler's talk; he thought the message paradoxical and the ridicule of the professors too bitter. "Whistler's like a wasp," he cried, "and carries about with him a poisoned sting." Oscar's kindly sweet nature revolted against the disdainful aggressiveness of Whistler's attitude. Besides, in essence, Whistler's lecture was an attack on the academic theory taught in the universities, and defended naturally by a young scholar like Oscar Wilde. Whistler's view that the artist was sporadic, a happy chance, a "sport," in fact, was a new view, and Oscar had not yet reached this level; he reviewed the master in the "Pall Mall Gazette", a review remarkable for one of the earliest gleams of that genial humour which later became his most characteristic gift: "Whistler," he said, "is indeed one of the very greatest masters of painting in my opinion. And I may add that in this opinion Mr. Whistler himself entirely concurs."

Whistler retorted in "The World" and Oscar replied, but Whistler had the best of the argument. . . . . "Oscar−−the amiable, irresponsible, esurient Oscar−−with no more sense of a picture than of the fit of a coat, has the courage of the opinions . . . . of others!"

It should be noted here that one of the bitterest of tongues could not help doing homage to Oscar Wilde's "amiability": Whistler even preferred to call him "amiable and irresponsible" rather than give his plagiarism a harsher attribute.

Oscar Wilde learned almost all he knew of art (confer Appendix: "Criticisms by Robert Ross.") and of controversy from Whistler, but he was never more than a pupil in either field; for controversy in especial he was poorly equipped: he had neither the courage, nor the contempt, nor the joy in conflict of his great exemplar.

Unperturbed by Whistler's attacks, Oscar went on lecturing about the country on "Personal Impressions of America," and in August crossed again to New York to see his play "Vera" produced by Marie Prescott at the

Union Square Theatre. It was a complete failure, as might have been expected; the serious part of it was such as any talented young man might have written. Nevertheless I find in this play for the first time, a characteristic gleam of humour, an unexpected flirt of wing, so to speak, which, in view of the future, is full of promise. At the time it passed unappreciated.

September, 1883, saw Oscar again in England. The platform gave him better results than the theatre, but not enough for freedom or ease. It is the more to his credit that as soon as he got a couple of hundred pounds ahead, he resolved to spend it in bettering his mind.

His longing for wider culture, and perhaps in part, the example of Whistler, drove him to Paris. He put up at the little provincial Hotel Voltaire on the Quai Voltaire and quickly made acquaintance with everyone of note in the world of letters, from Victor Hugo to Paul Bourget. He admired Verlaine's genius to the full but the grotesque physical ugliness of the man himself (Verlaine was like a masque of Socrates) and his sordid and unclean way of living prevented Oscar from really getting to know him. During this stay in Paris Oscar read enormously and his French, which had been schoolboyish, became quite good. He always said that Balzac, and especially his poet, Lucien de Rubempre, had been his teachers.

While in Paris he completed his blank−verse play, "The Duchess of Padua," and sent it to Miss Mary Anderson in America, who refused it, although she had commissioned him, he always said, to write it. It seems to me inferior even to "Vera" in interest, more academic and further from life, and when produced in New York in 1891 it was a complete frost.

In a few months Oscar Wilde had spent his money and had skimmed the cream from Paris, as he thought; accordingly he returned to London and took rooms again, this time in Charles Street, Mayfair. He had learned some rude lessons in the years since leaving Oxford, and the first and most impressive lesson was the fear of poverty. Yet his taking rooms in the fashionable part of town showed that he was more determined than ever to rise and not to sink.

It was Lady Wilde who urged him to take rooms near her; she never doubted his ultimate triumph. She knew all his poems by heart, took the strass for diamonds and welcomed the chance of introducing her brilliant son to the Irish Nationalist Members and other pinchbeck celebrities who flocked about her.

It was about this time that I first saw Lady Wilde. I was introduced to her by Willie, Oscar's elder brother, whom I had met in Fleet Street. Willie was then a tall, well−made fellow of thirty or thereabouts with an expressive taking face, lit up with a pair of deep blue laughing eyes. He had any amount of physical vivacity, and told a good story with immense verve, without for a moment getting above the commonplace: to him the Corinthian journalism of "The Daily Telegraph" was literature. Still he had the surface good nature and good humour of healthy youth and was generally liked. He took me to his mother's house one afternoon; but first he had a drink here and a chat there so that we did not reach the West End till after six o'clock.

The room and its occupants made an indelible grotesque impression on me. It seemed smaller than it was because overcrowded with a score of women and half a dozen men. It was very dark and there were empty tea−cups and cigarette ends everywhere. Lady Wilde sat enthroned behind the tea−table looking like a sort of female Buddha swathed in wraps−−a large woman with a heavy face and prominent nose; very like Oscar indeed, with the same sallow skin which always looked dirty; her eyes too were her redeeming feature−−vivacious and quick−glancing as a girl's. She "made up" like an actress and naturally preferred shadowed gloom to sunlight. Her idealism came to show as soon as she spoke. It was a necessity of her nature to be enthusiastic; unfriendly critics said hysterical, but I should prefer to say high−falutin' about everything she enjoyed or admired. She was at her best in misfortune; her great vanity gave her a certain proud stoicism which was admirable.

The Land League was under discussion as we entered, and Parnell's attitude to it. Lady Wilde regarded him as the predestined saviour of her country. "Parnell," she said with a strong accent on the first syllable, "is the man of destiny; he will strike off the fetters and free Ireland, and throne her as Queen among the nations."

A murmur of applause came from a thin birdlike woman standing opposite, who floated towards us clad in a sage−green gown, which sheathed her like an umbrella case; had she had any figure the dress would have been indecent.

"How like 'Speranza'!" she cooed, "dear Lady Wilde!" I noticed that her glance went towards Willie, who was standing on the other side of his mother, talking to a tall, handsome girl. Willie's friend seemed amused at the lyrical outburst of the green spinster, for smiling a little she questioned him:

"'Speranza' is Lady Wilde?" she asked with a slight American accent.

Lady Wilde informed the company with all the impressiveness she had at command that she did not expect Oscar that afternoon; "he is so busy with his new poems, you know; they say there has been no such sensation since Byron," she added; "already everyone is talking of them."

"Indeed, yes," sighed the green lily, "do you remember, dear Speranza, what he said about 'The Sphinx,' that he read to us. He told us the written verse was quite different from what the printed poem would be just as the sculptor's clay model differs from the marble. Subtle, wasn't it?"

"Perfectly true, too!" cried a man, with a falsetto voice, moving into the circle; "Leonardo himself might have said that."

The whole scene seemed to me affected and middle−class, untidy, too, with an un− English note about it of shiftlessness; the aesthetic dresses were extravagant, the enthusiasms pumped up and exaggerated. I was glad to leave quietly.

It was on this visit to Lady Wilde, or a later one, that I first heard of that other poem of Oscar, "The Harlot's House," which was also said to have been written in Paris. Though published in an obscure sheet and in itself commonplace enough it made an astonishing stir. Time and advertisement had been working for him. Academic lectures and imitative poetry alike had made him widely known; and, thanks to the small body of enthusiastic admirers whom I have already spoken of, his reputation instead of waning out had grown like the Jinn when released from the bottle.

The fuglemen were determined to find something wonderful in everything he did, and the title of "The Harlot's House," shocking Philistinism, gave them a certain opportunity which they used to the uttermost. On all sides one was asked: "Have you seen Oscar's latest?" And then the last verse would be quoted:−−"Divine, don't ye think?"

"And down the long and silent street, The dawn, with silver−sandalled feet, Crept like a frightened girl."

In spite of all this extravagant eulogy Oscar Wilde's early plays and poems, like his lectures, were unimportant. The small remnant of people in England who really love the things of the spirit were disappointed in them, failed to find in them the genius so loudly and so arrogantly vaunted.

But, if Oscar Wilde's early writings were failures, his talk was more successful than ever. He still tried to show off on all occasions and sometimes fell flat in consequence; but his failures in this field were few and merely comparative; constant practice was ripening his extraordinary natural gift. About this time, too, he began to develop that humorous vein in conversation, which later lent a singular distinction to his casual utterances.

His talk brought him numerous invitations to dinner and lunch and introduced him to some of the best houses in London, but it produced no money. He was earning very little and he needed money, comparatively large sums of money, from week to week.

Oscar Wilde was extravagant in almost every possible way. He wished to be well− fed, well−dressed, well−wined, and prodigal of "tips." He wanted first editions of the poets; had a liking for old furniture and old silver, for fine pictures, Eastern carpets and Renascence bronzes; in fine, he had all the artist's desires as well as those of the poet and "viveur". He was constantly in dire need of cash and did not hesitate to borrow fifty pounds from anyone who would lend it to him. He was beginning to experience the truth of the old verse:

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'Tis a very good world to live in,
  To lend or to spend or to give in,
But to beg or to borrow or get a man's own,
  'Tis the very worst world that ever was known.
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The difficulties of life were constantly increasing upon him. He despised bread and butter and talked only of champagne and caviare; but without bread, hunger is imminent. Victory no longer seemed indubitable. It was possible, it began even to be probable that the fair ship of his fame might come to wreck on the shoals of poverty.

It was painfully clear that he must do something without further delay, must either conquer want or overleap it. Would he bridle his desires, live savingly, and write assiduously till such repute came as would enable him to launch out and indulge his tastes? He was wise enough to see the advantages of such a course. Every day his

reputation as a talker was growing. Had he had a little more self−control, had he waited a little longer till his position in society was secured, he could easily have married someone with money and position who would have placed him above sordid care and fear for ever. But he could not wait; he was colossally vain; he would wear the peacock's feathers at all times and all costs: he was intensely pleasure−loving, too; his mouth watered for every fruit. Besides, he couldn't write with creditors at the door. Like Bossuet he was unable to work when bothered about small economies:−−"s'il etait a l'etroit dans son domestique".

What was to be done? Suddenly he cut the knot and married the daughter of a Q.C., a Miss Constance Lloyd, a young lady without any particular qualities or beauty, whom he had met in Dublin on a lecture tour. Miss Lloyd had a few hundreds a year of her own, just enough to keep the wolf from the door. The couple went to live in Tite Street, Chelsea, in a modest little house. The drawing−room, however, was decorated by Godwin and quickly gained a certain notoriety. It was indeed a charming room with an artistic distinction and appeal of its own.

As soon as the dreadful load of poverty was removed, Oscar began to go about a great deal, and his wife would certainly have been invited with him if he had refused invitations addressed to himself alone; but from the beginning he accepted them and consequently after the first few months of marriage his wife went out but little, and later children came and kept her at home. Having earned a respite from care by his marriage, Oscar did little for the next three years but talk. Critical observers began to make up their minds that he was a talker and not a writer. "He was a power in the art," as de Quincey said of Coleridge; "and he carried a new art into the power." Every year this gift grew with him: every year he talked more and more brilliantly, and he was allowed now, and indeed expected, to hold the table.

In London there is no such thing as conversation. Now and then one hears a caustic or witty phrase, but nothing more. The tone of good society everywhere is to be pleasant without being prominent. In every other European country, however, able men are encouraged to talk; in England alone they are discouraged. People in society use a debased jargon or slang, snobbish shibboleths for the most part, and the majority resent any one man monopolising attention. But Oscar Wilde was allowed this privileged position, was encouraged to hold forth to amuse people, as singers are brought in to sing after dinner.

Though his fame as a witty and delightful talker grew from week to week, even his marriage did not stifle the undertone of dislike and disgust. Now indignantly, now with contempt, men spoke of him as abandoned, a creature of unnatural viciousness. There were certain houses in the best set of London society the doors of which were closed to him.

CHAPTER VI−−OSCAR WILDE'S FAITH AND PRACTICE

>From 1884 on I met Oscar Wilde continually, now at the theatre, now in some society drawing room; most often, I think, at Mrs. Jeune's (afterwards Lady St. Helier). His appearance was not in his favour; there was something oily and fat about him that repelled me. Naturally being British−born and young I tried to give my repugnance a moral foundation; fleshly indulgence and laziness, I said to myself, were written all over him. The snatches of his monologues which I caught from time to time seemed to me to consist chiefly of epigrams almost mechanically constructed of proverbs and familiar sayings turned upside down. Two of Balzac's characters, it will be remembered, practised this form of humour. The desire to astonish and dazzle, the love of the uncommon for its own sake, was so evident that I shrugged my shoulders and avoided him. One evening, however, at Mrs. Jeune's, I got to know him better. At the very door Mrs. Jeune came up to me:

"Have you ever met Mr. Oscar Wilde? You ought to know him: he is so delightfully clever, so brilliant!"

I went with her and was formally introduced to him. He shook hands in a limp way I disliked; his hands were flabby, greasy; his skin looked bilious and dirty. He wore a great green scarab ring on one finger. He was over−dressed rather than well−dressed; his clothes fitted him too tightly; he was too stout. He had a trick which I noticed even then, which grew on him later, of pulling his jowl with his right hand as he spoke, and his jowl was already fat and pouchy. His appearance filled me with distaste. I lay stress on this physical repulsion, because I think most people felt it, and in itself, it is a tribute to the fascination of the man that he should have overcome the first impression so completely and so quickly. I don't remember what we talked about, but I noticed almost immediately that his grey eyes were finely expressive; in turn vivacious, laughing, sympathetic; always beautiful. The carven mouth, too, with its heavy, chiselled, purple−tinged lips, had a certain attraction and significance in spite of a black front tooth which shocked one when he laughed. He was over six feet in height and both broad and thick−set; he looked like a Roman Emperor of the decadence.

We had a certain interest in each other, an interest of curiosity, for I remember that he led the way almost at once into the inner drawing room in order to be free to talk in some seclusion. After half an hour or so I asked him to lunch next day at "The Cafe Royal", then the best restaurant in London.

At this time he was a superb talker, more brilliant than any I have ever heard in England, but nothing like what he became later. His talk soon made me forget his repellant physical peculiarities; indeed I soon lost sight of them so completely that I have wondered since how I could have been so disagreeably affected by them at first sight. There was an extraordinary physical vivacity and geniality in the man, an extraordinary charm in his gaiety, and lightning− quick intelligence. His enthusiasms, too, were infectious. Every mental question interested him, especially if it had anything to do with art or literature. His whole face lit up as he spoke and one saw nothing but his soulful eyes, heard nothing but his musical tenor voice; he was indeed what the French call a "charmeur".

In ten minutes I confessed to myself that I liked him, and his talk was intensely quickening. He had something unexpected to say on almost every subject. His mind was agile and powerful and he took a delight in using it. He was well−read too, in several languages, especially in French, and his excellent memory stood him in good stead. Even when he merely reproduced what the great writers had said perfectly, he added a new colouring. And already his characteristic humour was beginning to illumine every topic with lambent flashes.

It was at our first lunch, I think, that he told me he had been asked by Harper's to write a book of one hundred thousand words and offered a large sum for it−−I think some five thousand dollars−−in advance. He wrote to them gravely that there were not one hundred thousand words in English, so he could not undertake the work, and laughed merrily like a child at the cheeky reproof.

"I have sent their letters and my reply to the press," he added, and laughed again, while probing me with inquisitive eyes: how far did I understand the need of self−advertisement?

About this time an impromptu of his moved the town to laughter. At some dinner party it appeared the ladies sat a little too long; Oscar wanted to smoke. Suddenly the hostess drew his attention to a lamp the shade of which was smouldering.

"Please put it out, Mr. Wilde," she said, "it's smoking."

Oscar turned to do as he was told with the remark:

"Happy lamp!"

The delightful impertinence had an extraordinary success.

Early in our friendship I was fain to see that the love of the uncommon, his paradoxes and epigrams were natural to him, sprang immediately from his taste and temperament. Perhaps it would be well to define once for all his attitude towards life with more scope and particularity than I have hitherto done.

It is often assumed that he had no clear and coherent view of life, no belief, no faith to guide his vagrant footsteps; but such an opinion does him injustice. He had his own philosophy, and held to it for long years with astonishing tenacity. His attitude towards life can best be seen if he is held up against Goethe. He took the artist's view of life which Goethe was the first to state and indeed in youth had overstated with an astonishing persuasiveness: "the beautiful is more than the good," said Goethe; "for it includes the good."

It seemed to Oscar, as it had seemed to young Goethe, that "the extraordinary alone survives"; the extraordinary whether good or bad; he therefore sought after the extraordinary, and naturally enough often fell into the extravagant. But how stimulating it was in London, where sordid platitudes drip and drizzle all day long, to hear someone talking brilliant paradoxes.

Goethe did not linger long in the halfway house of unbelief; the murderer may win notoriety as easily as the martyr, but his memory will not remain. "The fashion of this world passeth away," said Goethe, "I would fain occupy myself with that which endures." Midway in life Goethe accepted Kant's moral imperative and restated his creed: "A man must resolve to live," he said, "for the Good, and Beautiful, and for the Common Weal."

Oscar did not push his thought so far: the transcendental was not his field.

It was a pity, I sometimes felt, that he had not studied German as thoroughly as French; Goethe might have done more for him than Baudelaire or Balzac, for in spite of all his stodgy German faults, Goethe is the best guide through the mysteries of life whom the modern world has yet produced. Oscar Wilde stopped where the religion of Goethe began; he was far more of a pagan and individualist than the great German; he lived for the beautiful and extraordinary, but not for the Good and still less for the Whole; he acknowledged no moral obligation; "in commune bonis" was an ideal which never said anything to him; he cared nothing for the common weal; he held himself above the mass of the people with an Englishman's extravagant insularity and aggressive pride. Politics, social problems, religion−−everything interested him simply as a subject of art; life itself was merely material for art. He held the position Goethe had abandoned in youth.

The view was astounding in England and new everywhere in its onesidedness. Its passionate exaggeration, however, was quickening, and there is, of course, something to be said for it. The artistic view of life is often higher than the ordinary religious view; at least it does not deal in condemnations and exclusions; it is more reasonable, more catholic, more finely perceptive.

"The artist's view of life is the only possible one," Oscar used to say, "and should be applied to everything, most of all to religion and morality. Cavaliers and Puritans are interesting for their costumes and not for their convictions. . . .

"There is no general rule of health; it is all personal, individual. . . . . I only demand that freedom which I willingly concede to others. No one condemns another for preferring green to gold. Why should any taste be ostracized? Liking and disliking are not under our control. I want to choose the nourishment which suits "my" body and "my" soul."

I can almost hear him say the words with his charming humorous smile and exquisite flash of deprecation, as if he were half inclined to make fun of his own statement.

It was not his views on art, however, which recommended him to the aristocratic set in London; but his contempt for social reform, or rather his utter indifference to it, and his English love of inequality. The republicanism he flaunted in his early verses was not even skin deep; his political beliefs and prejudices were the prejudices of the English governing class and were all in favour of individual freedom, or anarchy under the protection of the policeman.

"The poor are poor creatures," was his real belief, "and must always be hewers of wood and drawers of water. They are merely the virgin soil out of which men of genius and artists grow like flowers. Their function is to give birth to genius and nourish it. They have no other "raison d'etre". Were men as intelligent as bees, all gifted individuals would be supported by the community, as the bees support their queen. We should be the first charge

on the state just as Socrates declared that he should be kept in the Prytaneum at the public expense.

"Don't talk to me, Frank, about the hardships of the poor. The hardships of the poor are necessities, but talk to me of the hardships of men of genius, and I could weep tears of blood. I was never so affected by any book in my life as I was by the misery of Balzac's poet, Lucien de Rubempre."

Naturally this creed of an exaggerated individualism appealed peculiarly to the best set in London. It was eminently aristocratic and might almost be defended as scientific, for to a certain extent it found corroboration in Darwinism. All progress according to Darwin comes from peculiar individuals; "sports" as men of science call them, or the "heaven−sent" as rhetoricians prefer to style them. The many are only there to produce more "sports" and ultimately to benefit by them. All this is valid enough; but it leaves the crux of the question untouched. The poor in aristocratic England are too degraded to produce "sports" of genius, or indeed any "sports" of much value to humanity. Such an extravagant inequality of condition obtains there that the noble soul is miserable, the strongest insecure. But Wilde's creed was intensely popular with the "Smart Set" because of its very one−sidedness, and he was hailed as a prophet partly because he defended the cherished prejudices of the "landed" oligarchy.

It will be seen from this that Oscar Wilde was in some danger of suffering from excessive popularity and unmerited renown. Indeed if he had loved athletic sports, hunting and shooting instead of art and letters, he might have been the selected representative of aristocratic England.

In addition to his own popular qualities a strong current was sweeping him to success. He was detested by the whole of the middle or shop−keeping class which in England, according to Matthew Arnold, has "the sense of conduct−−and has but little else." This class hated and feared him; feared him for his intellectual freedom and his contempt of conventionality, and hated him because of his light− hearted self−indulgence, and also because it saw in him none of its own sordid virtues. "Punch" is peculiarly the representative of this class and of all English prejudices, and "Punch" jeered at him now in prose, now in verse, week after week. Under the heading, "More Impressions" (by Oscuro Wildgoose) I find this:

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"My little fancy's clogged with gush,
  My little lyre is false in tone,
  And when I lyrically moan,
I hear the impatient critic's 'Tush!'

"But I've 'Impressions.' These are grand!
  Mere dabs of words, mere blobs of tint,
  Displayed on canvas or in print,
Men laud, and think they understand.

"A smudge of brown, a smear of yellow,
  No tale, no subject,−−there you are!
  Impressions!−−and the strangest far
Is−−that the bard's a clever fellow."
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A little later these lines appeared:

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"My languid lily, my lank limp lily,
  My long, lithe lily−love, men may grin−−
Say that I'm soft and supremely silly−−
What care I, while you whisper still;
  What care I, while you smile?  Not a pin!
  While you smile, while you whisper−−
    'Tis sweet to decay!
  I have watered with chlorodine, tears of chagrin,
  The churchyard mould I have planted thee in,
    Upside down, in an intense way,
  In a rough red flower−pot, "sweeter than sin",
    That I bought for a halfpenny, yesterday!"
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The italics are mine; but the suggestion was always implicit; yet this constant wind of puritanic hatred blowing against him helped instead of hindering his progress: strong men are made by opposition; like kites they go up against the wind.

CHAPTER VII−−OSCAR'S REPUTATION AND SUPPORTERS

"Believe me, child, all the gentleman's misfortunes arose from his being educated at a public school. . . ."−−Fielding.

In England success is a plant of slow growth. The tone of good society, though responsive to political talent, and openly, eagerly sensitive to money−making talent, is contemptuous of genius and rates the utmost brilliancy of the talker hardly higher than the feats of an acrobat. Men are obstinate, slow, trusting a bank−balance rather than brains; and giving way reluctantly to sharp−witted superiority. The road up to power or influence in England is full of pitfalls and far too arduous for those who have neither high birth nor wealth to help them. The natural inequality of men instead of being mitigated by law or custom is everywhere strengthened and increased by a thousand effete social distinctions. Even in the best class where a certain easy familiarity reigns there is circle above circle, and the summits are isolated by heredity.

The conditions of English society being what they are, it is all but impossible at first to account for the rapidity of Oscar Wilde's social success; yet if we tell over his advantages and bring one or two into the account which have not yet been reckoned, we shall find almost every element that conduces to popularity. By talent and conviction he was the natural pet of the aristocracy whose selfish prejudices he defended and whose leisure he amused. The middle class, as has been noted, disliked and despised him: but its social influence is small and its papers, and especially "Punch", made him notorious by attacking him in and out of season. The comic weekly, indeed, helped to build up his reputation by the almost inexplicable bitterness of its invective.

Another potent force was in his favour. From the beginning he set himself to play the game of the popular actor, and neglected no opportunity of turning the limelight on his own doings. As he said, his admiration of himself was "a lifelong devotion," and he proclaimed his passion on the housetops.

Our names happened to be mentioned together once in some paper, I think it was "The Pall Mall Gazette". He asked me what I was going to reply.

"Nothing," I answered, "why should I bother? I've done nothing yet that deserves trumpeting."

"You're making a mistake," he said seriously. "If you wish for reputation and fame in this world, and success during your lifetime, you ought to seize every opportunity of advertising yourself. You remember the Latin word, 'Fame springs from one's own house.' Like other wise sayings, it's not quite true; fame comes from oneself," and he laughed delightedly; "you must go about repeating how great you are till the dull crowd comes to believe it."

"The prophet must proclaim himself, eh? and declare his own mission?"

"That's it," he replied with a smile; "that's it.

"Every time my name is mentioned in a paper, I write at once to admit that I am the Messiah. Why is Pears' soap successful? Not because it is better or cheaper than any other soap, but because it is more strenuously puffed. The journalist is my 'John the Baptist.' What would you give, when a book of yours comes out, to be able to write a long article drawing attention to it in "The Pall Mall Gazette"? Here you have the opportunity of making your name known just as widely; why not avail yourself of it? I miss no chance," and to do him justice he used occasion to the utmost.

Curiously enough Bacon had the same insight, and I have often wondered since whether Oscar's worldly wisdom was original or was borrowed from the great Elizabethan climber. Bacon says:

"'Boldly sound your own praises and some of them will stick.' . . . . It will stick with the more ignorant and the populace, though men of wisdom may smile at it; and the reputation won with many will amply countervail the disdain of a few. . . . . And surely no small number of those who are of solid nature, and who, from the want of this ventosity, cannot spread all sail in pursuit of their own honour, suffer some prejudice and lose dignity by their moderation."

Many of Oscar's letters to the papers in these years were amusing, some of them full of humour. For example, when he was asked to give a list of the hundred best books, as Lord Avebury and other mediocrities had done, he wrote saying that "he could not give a list of the hundred best books, as he had only written five."

Winged words of his were always passing from mouth to mouth in town. Some theatre was opened which was

found horribly ugly: one spoke of it as "Early Victorian."

"No, no," replied Oscar, "nothing so distinctive. 'Early Maple,' rather."

Even his impertinences made echoes. At a great reception, a friend asked him in passing, how the hostess, Lady S−−−−, could be recognized. Lady S−−−− being short and stout, Oscar replied, smiling:

"Go through this room, my dear fellow, and the next and so on till you come to someone looking like a public monument, say the effigy of Britannia or Victoria −−that's Lady S−−−−."

Though he used to pretend that all this self−advertisement was premeditated and planned, I could hardly believe him. He was eager to write about himself because of his exaggerated vanity and reflection afterwards found grounds to justify his inclination. But whatever the motive may have been the effect was palpable: his name was continually in men's mouths, and his fame grew by repetition. As Tiberius said of Mucianus:

""Omnium quae dixerat feceratque, arte quadam ostentator"" (He had a knack of showing off and advertising whatever he said or did).

But no personal qualities, however eminent, no gifts, no graces of heart or head or soul could have brought a young man to Oscar Wilde's social position and popularity in a few years.

Another cause was at work lifting him steadily. From the time he left Oxford he was acclaimed and backed by a small minority of passionate admirers whom I have called his fuglemen. These admirers formed the constant factor in his progress from social height to height. For the most part they were persons usually called "sexual inverts," who looked to the brilliancy of his intellect to gild their esoteric indulgence. This class in England is almost wholly recruited from the aristocracy and the upper middle−class that apes the "smart set." It is an inevitable product of the English boarding school and University system; indeed one of the most characteristic products. I shall probably bring upon myself a host of enemies by this assertion, but it has been weighed and must stand. Fielding has already put the same view on record: he says:

"A public school, Joseph, was the cause of all the calamities which he afterwards suffered. Public schools are the nurseries of all vice and immorality. All the wicked fellows whom I remember at the University were bred at them....."

If boarding−school life with its close intimacies between boys from twelve to eighteen years of age were understood by English mothers, it is safe to say that every boarding−house in every school would disappear in a single night, and Eton, Harrow, Winchester and the rest would be turned into day−schools.

Those who have learned bad habits at school or in the 'Varsity are inclined to continue the practices in later life. Naturally enough these men are usually distinguished by a certain artistic sympathy, and often by most attractive, intellectual qualities. As a rule the epicene have soft voices and ingratiating manners, and are bold enough to make a direct appeal to the heart and emotions; they are considered the very cream of London society.

These admirers and supporters praised and defended Oscar Wilde from the beginning with the persistence and courage of men who if they don't hang together are likely to hang separately. After his trial and condemnation "The Daily Telegraph" spoke with contempt of these "decadents" and "aesthetes" who, it asserted, "could be numbered in London society on the fingers of one hand"; but even "The Daily Telegraph" must have known that in the "smart set" alone there are hundreds of these acolytes whose intellectual and artistic culture gives them an importance out of all proportion to their number. It was the passionate support of these men in the first place which made Oscar Wilde notorious and successful.

This fact may well give pause to the thoughtful reader. In the middle ages, when birth and position had a disproportionate power in life, the Catholic Church supplied a certain democratic corrective to the inequality of social conditions. It was a sort of "Jacob's Ladder" leading from the lowest strata of society to the very heavens and offering to ingenuous, youthful talent a career of infinite hope and unlimited ambition. This great power of the Roman Church in the middle−ages may well be compared to the influence exerted by those whom I have designated as Oscar Wilde's fuglemen in the England of today. The easiest way to success in London society is to be notorious in this sense. Whatever career one may have chosen, however humble one's birth, one is then certain of finding distinguished friends and impassioned advocates. If you happen to be in the army and unmarried, you are declared to be a strategist like Caesar, or an organizer like Moltke; if you are an artist, instead of having your faults proclaimed and your failings scourged, your qualifications are eulogised and you find yourself compared to Michel Angelo or Titian! I would not willingly exaggerate here; but I could easily give dozens of instances to prove that sexual perversion is a "Jacob's Ladder" to most forms of success in our time in London.

It seems a curious effect of the great compensatory balance of things that a masculine rude people like the English, who love nothing so much as adventures and warlike achievements, should allow themselves to be steered in ordinary times by epicene aesthetes. But no one who knows the facts will deny that these men are prodigiously influential in London in all artistic and literary matters, and it was their constant passionate support which lifted Oscar Wilde so quickly to eminence.

>From the beginning they fought for him. He was regarded as a leader among them when still at Oxford. Yet his early writings show no trace of such a prepossession; they are wholly void of offence, without even a suggestion of coarseness, as pure indeed as his talk. Nevertheless, as soon as his name came up among men in town, the accusation of abnormal viciousness was either made or hinted. Everyone spoke as if there were no doubt about his tastes, and this in spite of the habitual reticence of Englishmen. I could not understand how the imputation came to be so bold and universal; how so shameful a calumny, as I regarded it, was so firmly established in men's minds. Again and again I protested against the injustice, demanded proofs; but was met only by shrugs and pitying glances as if my prejudice must indeed be invincible if I needed evidence of the obvious.

I have since been assured, on what should be excellent authority, that the evil reputation which attached to Oscar Wilde in those early years in London was completely undeserved. I, too, must say that in the first period of our friendship, I never noticed anything that could give colour even to suspicion of him; but the belief in his abnormal tastes was widespread and dated from his life in Oxford.

>From about 1886−7 on, however, there was a notable change in Oscar Wilde's manners and mode of life. He had been married a couple of years, two children had been born to him; yet instead of settling down he appeared suddenly to have become wilder. In 1887 he accepted the editorship of a lady's paper, "The Woman's World", and was always mocking at the selection of himself as the "fittest" for such a post: he had grown noticeably bolder. I told myself that an assured income and position give confidence; but at bottom a doubt began to form in me. It can't be denied that from 1887−8 on, incidents occurred from time to time which kept the suspicion of him alive, and indeed pointed and strengthened it. I shall have to deal now with some of the more important of these occurrences.

CHAPTER VIII−−OSCAR'S GROWTH TO ORIGINALITY ABOUT 1890

The period of growth of any organism is the most interesting and most instructive. And there is no moment of growth in the individual life which can be compared in importance with the moment when a man begins to outtop his age, and to suggest the future evolution of humanity by his own genius. Usually this final stage is passed in solitude:

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"Es bildet ein Talent sich in der Stille,
  Sich ein Charakter in dem Strome der Welt."
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After writing a life of Schiller which almost anyone might have written, Carlyle retired for some years to Craigenputtoch, and then brought forth "Sartor Resartus", which was personal and soul−revealing to the verge of eccentricity. In the same way Wagner was a mere continuator of Weber in "Lohengrin" and "Tannhaeuser", and first came to his own in the "Meistersinger" and "Tristan", after years of meditation in Switzerland.

This period for Oscar Wilde began with his marriage; the freedom from sordid anxieties allowed him to lift up his head and be himself. Kepler, I think, it is who praises poverty as the foster−mother of genius; but Bernard Palissy was nearer the truth when he said:−−"Pauvrete empeche bons esprits de parvenir" (poverty hinders fine minds from succeeding). There is no such mortal enemy of genius as poverty except riches: a touch of the spur from time to time does good; but a constant rowelling disables. As editor of "The Woman's World "Oscar had some money of his own to spend. Though his salary was only some six pounds a week, it made him independent, and his editorial work gave him an excuse for not exhausting himself by writing. For some years after marriage; in fact, till he lost his editorship, he wrote little and talked a great deal.

During this period we were often together. He lunched with me once or twice a week and I began to know his method of work. Everything came to him in the excitement of talk, epigrams, paradoxes and stories; and when people of great position or title were about him he generally managed to surpass himself: all social distinctions appealed to him intensely. I chaffed him about this one day and he admitted the snobbishness gaily.

"I love even historic names, Frank, as Shakespeare did. Surely everyone prefers Norfolk, Hamilton and Buckingham to Jones or Smith or Robinson."

As soon as he lost his editorship he took to writing for the reviews; his articles were merely the "resume" of his monologues. After talking for months at this and that lunch and dinner he had amassed a store of epigrams and humorous paradoxes which he could embody in a paper for "The Fortnightly Review" or "The Nineteenth Century".

These papers made it manifest that Wilde had at length, as Heine phrased it, reached the topmost height of the culture of his time and was now able to say new and interesting things. His "Lehrjahre" or student−time may be said to have ended with his editorship. The articles which he wrote on "The Decay of Lying," "The Critic as Artist," and "Pen, Pencil and Poison"; in fact, all the papers which in 1891 were gathered together and published in book form under the title of "Intentions," had about them the stamp of originality. They achieved a noteworthy success with the best minds, and laid the foundation of his fame. Every paper contained, here and there, a happy phrase, or epigram, or flirt of humour, which made it memorable to the lover of letters.

They were all, however, conceived and written from the standpoint of the artist, and the artist alone, who never takes account of ethics, but uses right and wrong indifferently as colours of his palette. "The Decay of Lying" seemed to the ordinary, matter−of−fact Englishman a cynical plea in defence of mendacity. To the majority of readers, "Pen, Pencil and Poison" was hardly more than a shameful attempt to condone cold−blooded murder. The very articles which grounded his fame as a writer, helped to injure his standing and repute.

In 1889 he published a paper which did him even more damage by appearing to justify the peculiar rumours about his private life. He held the opinion, which was universal at that time, that Shakespeare had been abnormally vicious. He believed with the majority of critics that Lord William Herbert was addressed in the first series of Sonnets; but his fine sensibility or, if you will, his peculiar temperament, led him to question whether

Thorpe's dedication to "Mr. W. H." could have been addressed to Lord William Herbert. He preferred the old hypothesis that the dedication was addressed to a young actor named Mr. William Hughes, a supposition which is supported by a well−known sonnet. He set forth this idea with much circumstance and considerable ingenuity in an article which he sent to me for publication in "The Fortnightly Review". The theme was scabrous; but his treatment of it was scrupulously reserved and adroit and I saw no offence in the paper, and to tell the truth, no great ability in his handling of the subject. (confer Appendix: "Criticisms by Robert Ross.")

He had talked over the article with me while he was writing it, and I told him that I thought the whole theory completely mistaken. Shakespeare was as sensual as one could well be; but there was no evidence of abnormal vice; indeed, all the evidence seemed to me to be against this universal belief. The assumption that the dedication was addressed to Lord William Herbert I had found it difficult to accept, at first; the wording of it is not only ambiguous but familiar. If I assumed that "Mr. W. H." was meant for Lord William Herbert, it was only because that seemed the easiest way out of the maze. In fine, I pointed out to Oscar that his theory had very little that was new in it, and more that was untrue, and advised him not to publish the paper. My conviction that Shakespeare was not abnormally vicious, and that the first series of Sonnets proved snobbishness and toadying and not corrupt passion, seemed to Oscar the very madness of partisanship.

He smiled away my arguments, and sent his paper to the "Fortnightly" office when I happened to be abroad. Much to my chagrin, my assistant rejected it rudely, whereupon Oscar sent it to Blackwoods, who published it in their magazine. It set everyone talking and arguing. To judge by the discussion it created, the wind of hatred and of praise it caused, one would have thought that the paper was a masterpiece, though in truth it was nothing out of the common. Had it been written by anybody else it would have passed unnoticed. But already Oscar Wilde had a prodigious notoriety, and all his sayings and doings were eagerly canvassed from one end of society to the other.

"The Portrait of Mr. W. H." did Oscar incalculable injury. It gave his enemies for the first time the very weapon they wanted, and they used it unscrupulously and untiringly with the fierce delight of hatred. Oscar seemed to revel in the storm of conflicting opinions which the paper called forth. He understood better than most men that notoriety is often the forerunner of fame and is always commercially more valuable. He rubbed his hands with delight as the discussion grew bitter, and enjoyed even the sneering of the envious. A wind that blows out a little fire, he knew, plays bellows to a big one. So long as people talked about him, he didn't much care what they said, and they certainly talked interminably about everything he wrote.

The inordinate popular success increased his self−confidence, and with time his assurance took on a touch of defiance. The first startling sign of this gradual change was the publication in "Lippincott's Magazine" of "The Picture of Dorian Gray." It was attacked immediately in "The Daily Chronicle", a liberal paper usually distinguished for a certain leaning in favour of artists and men of letters, as a "tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French "decadents"−−a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction."

Oscar as a matter of course replied and the tone of his reply is characteristic of his growth in self−assurance: he no longer dreads the imputation of viciousness; he challenges it: "It is poisonous, if you like; but you cannot deny that it is also perfect, and perfection is what we artists aim at."

When Oscar republished "The Picture of Dorian Gray" in book form in April, 1891, he sent me a large paper copy and with the copy he wrote a little note, asking me to tell him what I thought of the book. I got the volume and note early one morning and read the book until noon. I then sent him a note by hand: "Other men," I wrote, "have given us wine; some claret, some burgundy, some Moselle; you are the first to give us pure champagne. Much of this book is wittier even than Congreve and on an equal intellectual level: at length, it seems to me, you have justified yourself."

Half an hour later I was told that Oscar Wilde had called. I went down immediately to see him. He was bubbling over with content.

"How charming of you, Frank," he cried, "to have written me such a divine letter."

"I have only read a hundred pages of the book," I said; "but they are delightful: no one now can deny you a place among the wittiest and most humorous writers in English."

"How wonderful of you, Frank; what do you like so much?"

Like all artists, he loved praise and I was enthusiastic, happy to have the opportunity of making up for some earlier doubting that now seemed unworthy:

"Whatever the envious may say, you're with Burke and Sheridan, among the very ablest Irishmen . . . .

"Of course I have heard most of the epigrams from you before, but you have put them even better in this book."

"Do you think so, really?" he asked, smiling with pleasure.

It is worth notice that some of the epigrams in "Dorian Gray" were bettered again before they appeared in his first play. For example, in "Dorian Gray" Lord Henry Wotton, who is peculiarly Oscar's mouthpiece, while telling how he had to bargain for a piece of old brocade in Wardour Street, adds, "nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing." In "Lady Windermere's Fan" the same epigram is perfected, "The cynic is one who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing."

Nearly all the literary productions of our time suffer from haste: one must produce a good deal, especially while one's reputation is in the making, in order to live by one's pen. Yet great works take time to form, and fine creations are often disfigured by the stains of hurried parturition. Oscar Wilde contrived to minimise this disability by talking his works before writing them.

The conversation of Lord Henry Wotton with his uncle, and again at lunch when he wishes to fascinate Dorian Gray, is an excellent reproduction of Oscar's ordinary talk. The uncle wonders why Lord Dartmoor wants to marry an American and grumbles about her people: "Has she got any?"

Lord Henry shook his head. "American girls are as clever at concealing their parents as English women are at concealing their past," he said, rising to go.

"They are pork−packers, I suppose?"

"I hope so, Uncle George, for Dartmoor's sake. I am told that pork−packing is the most lucrative profession in America, after politics."

All this seems to me delightful humour.

The latter part of the book, however, tails off into insignificance. The first hundred pages held the result of months and months of Oscar's talk, the latter half was written offhand to complete the story. "Dorian Gray" was the first piece of work which proved that Oscar Wilde had at length found his true vein.

A little study of it discovers both his strength and his weakness as a writer. The initial idea of the book is excellent, finer because deeper than the commonplace idea that is the foundation of Balzac's "Peau de Chagrin," though it would probably never have been written if Balzac had not written his book first; but Balzac's sincerity and earnestness grapple with the theme and wring a blessing out of it, whereas the subtler idea in Oscar's hands dwindles gradually away till one wonders if the book would not have been more effective as a short story. Oscar did not know life well enough or care enough for character to write a profound psychological study: he was at his best in a short story or play.

One day about this time Oscar first showed me the aphorisms he had written as an introduction to "Dorian Gray." Several of them I thought excellent; but I found that Oscar had often repeated himself. I cut these repetitions out and tried to show him how much better the dozen best were than eighteen of which six were inferior. I added that I should like to publish the best in "The Fortnightly." He thanked me and said it was very kind of me.

Next morning I got a letter from him telling me that he had read over my corrections and thought that the aphorisms I had rejected were the best, but he hoped I'd publish them as he had written them.

Naturally I replied that the final judgment must rest with him and I published them at once.

The delight I felt in his undoubted genius and success was not shared by others. Friends took occasion to tell me that I should not go about with Oscar Wilde.

"Why not?" I asked.

"He has a bad name," was the reply. "Strange things are said about him. He came down from Oxford with a vile reputation. You have only got to look at the man."

"Whatever the disease may be," I replied, "it's not catching−−unfortunately."

The pleasure men take in denigration of the gifted is one of the puzzles of life to those who are not envious.

Men of letters, even people who ought to have known better, were slow to admit his extraordinary talent; he had risen so quickly, had been puffed into such prominence that they felt inclined to deny him even the gifts which he undoubtedly possessed. I was surprised once to find a friend of mine taking this attitude: Francis Adams, the poet and writer, chaffed me one day about my liking for Oscar.

"What on earth can you see in him to admire?" he asked. "He is not a great writer, he is not even a good writer; his books have no genius in them; his poetry is tenth rate, and his prose is not much better. His talk even is fictitious and extravagant."

I could only laugh at him and advise him to read "The Picture of Dorian Gray."

This book, however, gave Oscar's puritanic enemies a better weapon against him than even "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." The subject, they declared, was the same as that of "Mr. W. H.," and the treatment was simply loathsome. More than one middle−class paper, such as "To−Day" in the hands of Mr. Jerome K. Jerome, condemned the book as "corrupt," and advised its suppression. Freedom of speech in England is more feared than licence of action: a speck on the outside of the platter disgusts your puritan, and the inside is never peeped at, much less discussed.

Walter Pater praised "Dorian Gray" in the "Bookman"; but thereby only did himself damage without helping his friend. Oscar meanwhile went about boldly, meeting criticism now with smiling contempt.

One incident from this time will show how unfairly he was being judged and how imprudent he was to front defamation with defiance.

One day I met a handsome youth in his company named John Gray, and I could not wonder that Oscar found him interesting, for Gray had not only great personal distinction, but charming manners and a marked poetic gift, a much greater gift than Oscar possessed. He had besides an eager, curious mind, and of course found extraordinary stimulus in Oscar's talk. It seemed to me that intellectual sympathy and the natural admiration which a younger man feels for a brilliant senior formed the obvious bond between them. But no sooner did Oscar republish "Dorian Gray" than ill−informed and worse−minded persons went about saying that the eponymous hero of the book was John Gray, though "Dorian Gray" was written before Oscar had met or heard of John Gray. One cannot help admitting that this was partly Oscar's own fault. In talk he often alluded laughingly to John Gray as his hero, "Dorian." It is just an instance of the challenging contempt which he began to use about this time in answer to the inventions of hatred.

Late in this year, 1891, he published four stories completely void of offence, calling the collection "A House of Pomegranates." He dedicated each of the tales to a lady of distinction and the book made many friends; but it was handled contemptuously in the press and had no sale.

By this time people expected a certain sort of book from Oscar Wilde and wanted nothing else. They hadn't to wait long. Early in 1892 we heard that Oscar had written a drama in French called "Salome", and at once it was put about that Sarah Bernhardt was going to produce it in London. Then came dramatic surprise on surprise: while it was being rehearsed, the Lord Chamberlain refused to license it on the ground that it introduced Biblical characters. Oscar protested in a brilliant interview against the action of the Censor as "odious and ridiculous." He pointed out that all the greatest artists−−painters and sculptors, musicians and writers−−had taken many of their best subjects from the Bible, and wanted to know why the dramatist should be prevented from treating the great soul−tragedies most proper to his art. When informed that the interdict was to stand, he declared in a pet that he would settle in France and take out letters of naturalisation:

"I am not English. I am Irish−−which is quite another thing." Of course the press made all the fun it could of his show of temper.

Mr. Robert Ross considers "Salome" "the most powerful and perfect of all Oscar's dramas." I find it almost impossible to explain, much less justify, its astonishing popularity. When it appeared, the press, both in France and in England, was critical and contemptuous; but by this time Oscar had so captured the public that he could afford to disdain critics and calumny. The play was praised by his admirers as if it had been a masterpiece, and London discussed it the more because it was in French and not clapper−clawed by the vulgar.

The indescribable cold lewdness and cruelty of "Salome" quickened the prejudice and strengthened the dislike of the ordinary English reader for its author. And when the drama was translated into English and published with the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley, it was disparaged and condemned by all the leaders of literary opinion. The colossal popularity of the play, which Mr. Robert Ross proves so triumphantly, came from Germany and Russia and is to be attributed in part to the contempt educated Germans and Russians feel for the hypocritical vagaries of English prudery. The illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley, too, it must be admitted, were an additional offence to the ordinary English reader, for they intensified the peculiar atmosphere of the drama.

Oscar used to say that he invented Aubrey Beardsley; but the truth is, it was Mr. Robert Ross who first

introduced Aubrey to Oscar and persuaded him to commission the "Salome" drawings which gave the English edition its singular value. Strange to say, Oscar always hated the illustrations and would not have the book in his house. His dislike even extended to the artist, and as Aubrey Beardsley was of easy and agreeable intercourse, the mutual repulsion deserves a word of explanation.

Aubrey Beardsley's genius had taken London by storm. At seventeen or eighteen this auburn−haired, blue−eyed, fragile looking youth had reached maturity with his astounding talent, a talent which would have given him position and wealth in any other country. In perfection of line his drawings were superior to anything we possess. But the curious thing about the boy was that he expressed the passions of pride and lust and cruelty more intensely even than Rops, [sic] more spontaneously than anyone who ever held pencil. Beardsley's precocity was simply marvellous. He seemed to have an intuitive understanding not only of his own art but of every art and craft, and it was some time before one realised that he attained this miraculous virtuosity by an absolute disdain for every other form of human endeavour. He knew nothing of the great general or millionaire or man of science, and he cared as little for them as for fishermen or 'bus−drivers. The current of his talent ran narrow between stone banks, so to speak; it was the bold assertion of it that interested Oscar.

One phase of Beardsley's extraordinary development may be recorded here. When I first met him his letters, and even his talk sometimes, were curiously youthful and immature, lacking altogether the personal note of his drawings. As soon as this was noticed he took the bull by the horns and pretended that his style in writing was out of date; he wished us to believe that he hesitated to shock us with his "archaic sympathies." Of course we laughed and challenged him to reveal himself. Shortly afterwards I got an article from him written with curious felicity of phrase, in modish polite eighteenth−century English. He had reached personal expression in a new medium in a month or so, and apparently without effort. It was Beardsley's writing that first won Oscar to recognition of his talent, and for a while he seemed vaguely interested in what he called his "orchid−like personality."

They were both at lunch one day when Oscar declared that he could drink nothing but absinthe when Beardsley was present.

"Absinthe," he said, "is to all other drinks what Aubrey's drawings are to other pictures: it stands alone: it is like nothing else: it shimmers like southern twilight in opalescent colouring: it has about it the seduction of strange sins. It is stronger than any other spirit, and brings out the sub− conscious self in man. It is just like your drawings, Aubrey; it gets on one's nerves and is cruel.

"Baudelaire called his poems "Fleurs du Mal," I shall call your drawings "Fleurs du Peche"−−flowers of sin.

"When I have before me one of your drawings I want to drink absinthe, which changes colour like jade in sunlight and takes the senses thrall, and then I can live myself back in imperial Rome, in the Rome of the later Caesars."

"Don't forget the simple pleasures of that life, Oscar," said Aubrey; "Nero set Christians on fire, like large tallow candles; the only light Christians have ever been known to give," he added in a languid, gentle voice.

This talk gave me the key. In personal intercourse Oscar Wilde was more English than the English: he seldom expressed his opinion of person or prejudice boldly; he preferred to hint dislike and disapproval. His insistence on the naked expression of lust and cruelty in Beardsley's drawings showed me that direct frankness displeased him; for he could hardly object to the qualities which were making his own "Salome" world−famous.

The complete history of the relations between Oscar Wilde and Beardsley, and their mutual dislike, merely proves how difficult it is for original artists to appreciate one another: like mountain peaks they stand alone. Oscar showed a touch of patronage, the superiority of the senior, in his intercourse with Beardsley, and often praised him ineptly, whereas Beardsley to the last spoke of Oscar as a showman, and hoped drily that he knew more about literature than he did about art. For a moment, they worked in concert, and it is important to remember that it was Beardsley who influenced Oscar, and not Oscar who influenced Beardsley. Beardsley's contempt of critics and the public, his artistic boldness and self−assertion, had a certain hardening influence on Oscar: as things turned out a most unfortunate influence.

In spite of Mr. Robert Ross's opinion I regard "Salome," as a student work, an outcome of Oscar's admiration for Flaubert and his "Herodias," on the one hand, and "Les Sept Princesses," of Maeterlinck on the other. He has borrowed the colour and Oriental cruelty with the banquet−scene from the Frenchman, and from the Fleming the simplicity of language and the haunting effect produced by the repetition of significant phrases. Yet "Salome" is original through the mingling of lust and hatred in the heroine, and by making this extraordinary virgin the chief

and centre of the drama Oscar has heightened the interest of the story and bettered Flaubert's design. I feel sure he copied Maeterlinck's simplicity of style because it served to disguise his imperfect knowledge of French and yet this very artlessness adds to the weird effect of the drama.

The lust that inspires the tragedy was characteristic, but the cruelty was foreign to Oscar; both qualities would have injured him in England, had it not been for two things. First of all only a few of the best class of English people know French at all well, and for the most part they disdain the sex− morality of their race; while the vast mass of the English public regard French as in itself an immoral medium and is inclined to treat anything in that tongue with contemptuous indifference. One can only say that "Salome" confirmed Oscar's growing reputation for abnormal viciousness.

It was in 1892 that some of Oscar's friends struck me for the first time as questionable, to say the best of them. I remember giving a little dinner to some men in rooms I had in Jermyn Street. I invited Oscar, and he brought a young friend with him. After dinner I noticed that the youth was angry with Oscar and would scarcely speak to him, and that Oscar was making up to him. I heard snatches of pleading from Oscar−−"I beg of you . . . . It is not true . . . . You have no cause" . . . . All the while Oscar was standing apart from the rest of us with an arm on the young man's shoulder; but his coaxing was in vain, the youth turned away with petulant, sullen ill−temper. This is a mere snap−shot which remained in my memory, and made me ask myself afterwards how I could have been so slow of understanding.

Looking back and taking everything into consideration−−his social success, the glare of publicity in which he lived, the buzz of talk and discussion that arose about everything he did and said, the increasing interest and value of his work and, above all, the ever−growing boldness of his writing and the challenge of his conduct−−it is not surprising that the black cloud of hate and slander which attended him persistently became more and more threatening.

CHAPTER IX−−THE SUMMER OF SUCCESS: OSCAR'S FIRST PLAY

No season, it is said, is so beautiful as the brief northern summer. Three− fourths of the year is cold and dark, and the ice−bound landscape is swept by snowstorm and blizzard. Summer comes like a goddess; in a twinkling the snow vanishes and Nature puts on her robes of tenderest green; the birds arrive in flocks; flowers spring to life on all sides, and the sun shines by night as by day. Such a summertide, so beautiful and so brief, was accorded to Oscar Wilde before the final desolation.

I want to give a picture of him at the topmost height of happy hours, which will afford some proof of his magical talent of speech besides my own appreciation of it, and, fortunately, the incident has been given to me. Mr. Ernest Beckett, now Lord Grimthorpe, a lover of all superiorities, who has known the ablest men of the time, takes pleasure in telling a story which shows Oscar Wilde's influence over men who were anything but literary in their tastes. Mr. Beckett had a party of Yorkshire squires, chiefly fox−hunters and lovers of an outdoor life, at Kirkstall Grange when he heard that Oscar Wilde was in the neighbouring town of Leeds. Immediately he asked him to lunch at the Grange, chuckling to himself beforehand at the sensational novelty of the experiment. Next day "Mr. Oscar Wilde" was announced and as he came into the room the sportsmen forthwith began hiding themselves behind newspapers or moving together in groups in order to avoid seeing or being introduced to the notorious writer. Oscar shook hands with his host as if he had noticed nothing, and began to talk.

"In five minutes," Grimthorpe declares, "all the papers were put down and everyone had gathered round him to listen and laugh."

At the end of the meal one Yorkshireman after the other begged the host to follow the lunch with a dinner and invite them to meet the wonder again. When the party broke up in the small hours they all went away delighted with Oscar, vowing that no man ever talked more brilliantly. Grimthorpe cannot remember a single word Oscar said: "It was all delightful," he declares, "a play of genial humour over every topic that came up, like sunshine dancing on waves."

The extraordinary thing about Oscar's talent was that he did not monopolise the conversation: he took the ball of talk wherever it happened to be at the moment and played with it so humorously that everyone was soon smiling delightedly. The famous talkers of the past, Coleridge, Macaulay, Carlyle and the others, were all lecturers: talk to them was a discourse on a favourite theme, and in ordinary life they were generally regarded as bores. But at his best Oscar Wilde never dropped the tone of good society: he could afford to give place to others; he was equipped at all points: no subject came amiss to him: he saw everything from a humorous angle, and dazzled one now with word−wit, now with the very stuff of merriment.

Though he was the life and soul of every social gathering, and in constant demand, he still read omnivorously, and his mind naturally occupied itself with high themes.

For some years, the story of Jesus fascinated him and tinged all his thought. We were talking about Renan's "Life" one day: a wonderful book he called it, one of the three great biographies of the world, Plato's dialogues with Socrates as hero and Boswell's "Life of Johnson" being the other two. It was strange, he thought, that the greatest man had written the worst biography; Plato made of Socrates a mere phonograph, into which he talked his own theories: Renan did better work, and Boswell, the humble loving friend, the least talented of the three, did better still, though being English, he had to keep to the surface of things and leave the depths to be divined. Oscar evidently expected Plato and Renan to have surpassed comparison.

It seemed to me, however, that the illiterate Galilean fishermen had proved themselves still more consummate painters than Boswell, though they, too, left a great deal too much to the imagination. Love is the best of artists; the puddle of rain in the road can reflect a piece of sky marvellously.

The Gospel story had a personal interest for Oscar; he was always weaving little fables about himself as the Master.

In spite of my ignorance of Hebrew the story of Jesus had always had the strongest attraction for me, and so we often talked about Him, though from opposite poles.

Renan I felt had missed Jesus at his highest. He was far below the sincerity, the tenderness and

sweet−thoughted wisdom of that divine spirit. Frenchman− like, he stumbled over the miracles and came to grief. Claus Sluter's head of Jesus in the museum of Dijon is a finer portrait, and so is the imaginative picture of Fra Angelico. It seemed to me possible to do a sketch from the Gospels themselves which should show the growth of the soul of Jesus and so impose itself as a true portrait.

Oscar's interest in the theme was different; he put himself frankly in the place of his model, and appeared to enjoy the jarring antinomy which resulted. One or two of his stories were surprising in ironical suggestion; surprising too because they showed his convinced paganism. Here is one which reveals his exact position:

"When Joseph of Arimathea came down in the evening from Mount Calvary where Jesus had died he saw on a white stone a young man seated weeping. And Joseph went near him and said, 'I understand how great thy grief must be, for certainly that Man was a just Man.' But the young man made answer, 'Oh, it is not for that I am weeping. I am weeping because I too have wrought miracles. I also have given sight to the blind, I have healed the palsied and I have raised the dead; I too have caused the barren fig tree to wither away and I have turned water into wine . . . and yet they have not crucified me.'"

At the time this apologue amused me; in the light of later events it assumed a tragic significance. Oscar Wilde ought to have known that in this world every real superiority is pursued with hatred, and every worker of miracles is sure to be persecuted. But he had no inkling that the Gospel story is symbolic−−the life−story of genius for all time, eternally true. He never looked outside himself, and as the fruits of success were now sweet in his mouth, a pursuing Fate seemed to him the most mythical of myths. His child−like self−confidence was pathetic. The laws that govern human affairs had little interest for the man who was always a law unto himself. Yet by some extraordinary prescience, some inexplicable presentiment, the approaching catastrophe cast its shadow over his mind and he felt vaguely that the life−journey of genius would be incomplete and farcical without the final tragedy: whoever lives for the highest must be crucified.

It seems memorable to me that in this brief summer of his life, Oscar Wilde should have concerned himself especially with the life−story of the Man of Sorrows who had sounded all the depths of suffering. Just when he himself was about to enter the Dark Valley, Jesus was often in his thoughts and he always spoke of Him with admiration. But after all how could he help it? Even Dekker saw as far as that:

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  "The best of men
That e'er wore earth about Him."
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This was the deeper strain in Oscar Wilde's nature though he was always disinclined to show it. Habitually he lived in humorous talk, in the epithets and epigrams he struck out in the desire to please and astonish his hearers.

One evening I learned almost by chance that he was about to try a new experiment and break into a new field.

He took up the word "lose" at the table, I remember.

"We lose our chances," he said, laughing, "we lose our figures, we even lose our characters; but we must never lose our temper. That is our duty to our neighbour, Frank; but sometimes we mislay it, don't we?"

"Is that going in a book, Oscar?" I asked, smiling, "or in an article? You have written nothing lately."

"I have a play in my mind," he replied gravely. "To−morrow I am going to shut myself up in my room, and stay there until it is written. George Alexander has been bothering me to write a play for some time and I've got an idea I rather like. I wonder can I do it in a week, or will it take three? It ought not to take long to beat the Pineros and the Joneses." It always annoyed Oscar when any other name but his came into men's mouths: his vanity was extraordinarily alert.

Naturally enough he minimised Mr. Alexander's initiative. The well−known actor had "bothered" Oscar by advancing him L100 before the scenario was even outlined. A couple of months later he told me that Alexander had accepted his comedy, and was going to produce "Lady Windermere's Fan." I thought the title excellent.

"Territorial names," Oscar explained, gravely, "have always a "cachet" of distinction: they fall on the ear full toned with secular dignity. That's how I get all the names of my personages, Frank. I take up a map of the English counties, and there they are. Our English villages have often exquisitely beautiful names. Windermere, for instance, or Hunstanton," and he rolled the syllables over his tongue with a soft sensual pleasure.

I had a box the first night and, thinking it might do Oscar some good, I took with me Arthur Walter of "The

Times". The first scene of the first act was as old as the hills, but the treatment gave charm to it if not freshness. The delightful, unexpected humour set off the commonplace incident; but it was only the convention that Arthur Walter would see. The play was poor, he thought, which brought me to wonder.

After the first act I went downstairs to the "foyer" and found the critics in much the same mind. There was an enormous gentleman called Joseph Knight, who cried out:

"The humour is mechanical, unreal." Seeing that I did not respond he challenged me:

"What do you think of it?"

"That is for you critics to answer," I replied.

"I might say," he laughed, "in Oscar's own peculiar way, 'Little promise and less performance.' Ha! ha! ha!"

"That's the exact opposite to Oscar's way," I retorted. "It is the listeners who laugh at his humour."

"Come now, really," cried Knight, "you cannot think much of the play?"

For the first time in my life I began to realise that nine critics out of ten are incapable of judging original work. They seem to live in a sort of fog, waiting for someone to give them the lead, and accordingly they love to discuss every new play right and left.

"I have not seen the whole play," I answered. "I was not at any of the rehearsals; but so far it is surely the best comedy in English, the most brilliant: isn't it?"

The big man started back and stared at me; then burst out laughing.

"That's good," he cried with a loud unmirthful guffaw. "'Lady Windermere's Fan' better than any comedy of Shakespeare! Ha! ha! ha! 'more brilliant!' ho! ho!"

"Yes," I persisted, angered by his disdain, "wittier, and more humorous than 'As You Like It,' or 'Much Ado.' Strange to say, too, it is on a higher intellectual level. I can only compare it to the best of Congreve, and I think it's better." With a grunt of disapproval or rage the great man of the daily press turned away to exchange bleatings with one of his "confreres".

The audience was a picked audience of the best heads in London, far superior in brains therefore to the average journalist, and their judgment was that it was a most brilliant and interesting play. Though the humour was often prepared, the construction showed a rare mastery of stage−effect. Oscar Wilde had at length come into his kingdom.

At the end the author was called for, and Oscar appeared before the curtain. The house rose at him and cheered and cheered again. He was smiling, with a cigarette between his fingers, wholly master of himself and his audience.

"I am so glad, ladies and gentlemen, that you like my play. (confer Appendix: "Criticisms by Robert Ross.") I feel sure you estimate the merits of it almost as highly as I do myself."

The house rocked with laughter. The play and its humour were a seven days' wonder in London. People talked of nothing but "Lady Windermere's Fan." The witty words in it ran from lip to lip like a tidbit of scandal. Some clever Jewesses and, strange to say, one Scotchman were the loudest in applause. Mr. Archer, the well−known critic of "The World", was the first and only journalist to perceive that the play was a classic by virtue of "genuine dramatic qualities." Mrs. Leverson turned the humorous sayings into current social coin in "Punch", of all places in the world, and from a favourite Oscar Wilde rapidly became the idol of smart London.

The play was an intellectual triumph. This time Oscar had not only won success but had won also the suffrages of the best. Nearly all the journalist−critics were against him and made themselves ridiculous by their brainless strictures; "Truth" and "The Times", for example, were poisonously puritanic, but thinking people came over to his side in a body. The halo of fame was about him, and the incense of it in his nostrils made him more charming, more irresponsibly gay, more genial−witty than ever. He was as one set upon a pinnacle with the sunshine playing about him, lighting up his radiant eyes. All the while, however, the foul mists from the underworld were wreathing about him, climbing higher and higher.

CHAPTER X−−THE FIRST MEETING WITH LORD ALFRED DOUGLAS

Thou hast led me like an heathen sacrifice, With music and with fatal pomp of flowers, To my eternal ruin.−−Webster's "The White Devil".

"Lady Windermere's Fan" was a success in every sense of the word, and during its run London was at Oscar's feet. There were always a few doors closed to him; but he could afford now to treat his critics with laughter, call them fogies and old−fashioned and explain that they had not a decalogue but a millelogue of sins forbidden and persons tabooed because it was easier to condemn than to understand.

I remember a lunch once when he talked most brilliantly and finished up by telling the story now published in his works as "A Florentine Tragedy." He told it superbly, making it appear far more effective than in its written form. A well−known actor, piqued at being compelled to play listener, made himself ridiculous by half turning his back on the narrator. But after lunch Willie Grenfell (now Lord Desborough), a model English athlete gifted with peculiar intellectual fairness, came round to me:

"Oscar Wilde is most surprising, most charming, a wonderful talker."

At the same moment Mr. K. H−−−− came over to us. He was a man who went everywhere and knew everyone. He had quiet, ingratiating manners, always spoke in a gentle smiling way and had a good word to say for everyone, especially for women; he was a bachelor, too, and wholly unattached. He surprised me by taking up Grenfell's praise and breaking into a lyric:

"The best talker who ever lived," he said; "most extraordinary. I am so infinitely obliged to you for asking me to meet him−−a new delight. He brings a supernal air into life. I am in truth indebted to you"−−all this in an affected purring tone. I noticed for the first time that there was a touch of rouge on his face; Grenfell turned away from us rather abruptly I thought.

At this first roseate dawn of complete success and universal applause, new qualities came to view in Oscar. Praise gave him the fillip needed in order to make him surpass himself. His talk took on a sort of autumnal richness of colour, and assumed a new width of range; he now used pathos as well as humour and generally brought in a story or apologue to lend variety to the entertainment. His little weaknesses, too, began to show themselves and they grew rankly in the sunshine. He always wanted to do himself well, as the phrase goes, but now he began to eat and drink more freely than before. His vanity became defiant. I noticed one day that he had signed himself, Oscar O'Flahertie Wilde, I think under some verses which he had contributed years before to his College magazine. I asked him jokingly what the O'Flahertie stood for. To my astonishment he answered me gravely:

"The O'Flaherties were kings in Ireland, and I have a right to the name; I am descended from them."

I could not help it; I burst out laughing.

"What are you laughing at, Frank?" he asked with a touch of annoyance.

"It seems humorous to me," I explained, "that Oscar Wilde should want to be an O'Flahertie," and as I spoke a picture of the greatest of the O'Flaherties, with bushy head and dirty rags, warming enormous hairy legs before a smoking peat−fire, flashed before me. I think something of the sort must have occurred to Oscar, too, for, in spite of his attempt to be grave, he could not help laughing.

"It's unkind of you, Frank," he said. "The Irish were civilised and Christians when the English kept themselves warm with tattooings."

He could not help telling one in familiar talk of Clumber or some other great house where he had been visiting; he was intoxicated with his own popularity, a little surprised, perhaps, to find that he had won fame so easily and on the primrose path, but one could forgive him everything, for he talked more delightfully than ever.

It is almost inexplicable, but nevertheless true that life tries all of us, tests every weak point to breaking, and sets off and exaggerates our powers. Burns saw this when he wrote:

"Wha does the utmost that he can Will whyles do mair."

And the obverse is true: whoever yields to a weakness habitually, some day goes further than he ever intended, and comes to worse grief than he deserved. The old prayer: "Lead us not into temptation", is perhaps a

half−conscious recognition of this fact. But we moderns are inclined to walk heedlessly, no longer believing in pitfalls or in the danger of gratified desires. And Oscar Wilde was not only an unbeliever; but he had all the heedless confidence of the artist who has won world−wide popularity and has the halo of fame on his brow. With high heart and smiling eyes he went to his fate unsuspecting.

It was in the autumn of 1891 that he first met Lord Alfred Douglas. He was thirty−six and Lord Alfred Douglas a handsome, slim youth of twenty−one, with large blue eyes and golden−fair hair. His mother, the Dowager Lady Queensberry, preserves a photograph of him taken a few years before, when he was still at Winchester, a boy of sixteen with an expression which might well be called angelic.

When I met him, he was still girlishly pretty, with the beauty of youth, coloring and fair skin; though his features were merely ordinary. It was Lionel Johnson, the writer, a friend and intimate of Douglas at Winchester, who brought him to tea at Oscar's house in Tite Street. Their mutual attraction had countless hooks. Oscar was drawn by the lad's personal beauty, and enormously affected besides by Lord Alfred Douglas' name and position: he was a snob as only an English artist can be a snob; he loved titular distinctions, and Douglas is one of the few great names in British history with the gilding of romance about it. No doubt Oscar talked better than his best because he was talking to Lord Alfred Douglas. To the last the mere name rolled on his tongue gave him extraordinary pleasure. Besides, the boy admired him, hung upon his lips with his soul in his eyes; showed, too, rare intelligence in his appreciation, confessed that he himself wrote verses and loved letters passionately. Could more be desired than perfection perfected?

And Alfred Douglas on his side was almost as powerfully attracted; he had inherited from his mother all her literary tastes−−and more: he was already a master−poet with a singing faculty worthy to be compared with the greatest. What wonder if he took this magical talker, with the luminous eyes and charming voice, and a range and play of thought beyond his imagining, for a world's miracle, one of the Immortals. Before he had listened long, I have been told, the youth declared his admiration passionately. They were an extraordinary pair and were complementary in a hundred ways, not only in mind, but in character. Oscar had reached originality of thought and possessed the culture of scholarship, while Alfred Douglas had youth and rank and beauty, besides being as articulate as a woman with an unsurpassable gift of expression. Curiously enough, Oscar was as yielding and amiable in character as the boy was self−willed, reckless, obstinate and imperious.

Years later Oscar told me that from the first he dreaded Alfred Douglas' aristocratic, insolent boldness:

"He frightened me, Frank, as much as he attracted me, and I held away from him. But he wouldn't have it; he sought me out again and again and I couldn't resist him. That is my only fault. That's what ruined me. He increased my expenses so that I could not meet them; over and over again I tried to free myself from him; but he came back and I yielded−−alas!"

Though this is Oscar's later gloss on what actually happened, it is fairly accurate. He was never able to realise how his meeting with Lord Alfred Douglas had changed the world to him and him to the world. The effect on the harder fibre of the boy was chiefly mental: to Alfred Douglas, Oscar was merely a quickening, inspiring, intellectual influence; but the boy's effect on Oscar was of character and induced imitation. Lord Alfred Douglas' boldness gave Oscar "outre−cuidance", an insolent arrogance: artist−like he tried to outdo his model in aristocratic disdain. Without knowing the cause the change in Oscar astonished me again and again, and in the course of this narrative I shall have to notice many instances of it.

One other effect the friendship had of far−reaching influence. Oscar always enjoyed good living; but for years he had had to earn his bread: he knew the value of money; he didn't like to throw it away; he was accustomed to lunch or dine at a cheap Italian restaurant for a few shillings. But to Lord Alfred Douglas money was only a counter and the most luxurious living a necessity. As soon as Oscar Wilde began to entertain him, he was led to the dearest hotels and restaurants; his expenses became formidable and soon outran his large earnings. For the first time since I had known him he borrowed heedlessly right and left, and had, therefore, to bring forth play after play with scant time for thought.

Lord Alfred Douglas has declared recently:

"I spent much more in entertaining Oscar Wilde than he did in entertaining me"; but this is preposterous self−deception. An earlier confession of his was much nearer the truth: "It was a sweet humiliation to me to let Oscar Wilde pay for everything and to ask him for money."

There can be no doubt that Lord Alfred Douglas' habitual extravagance kept Oscar Wilde hard up, and drove

him to write without intermission.

There were other and worse results of the intimacy which need not be exposed here in so many words, though they must be indicated; for they derived of necessity from that increased self−assurance which has already been recorded. As Oscar devoted himself to Lord Alfred Douglas and went about with him continually, he came to know his friends and his familiars, and went less into society so−called. Again and again Lord Alfred Douglas flaunted acquaintance with youths of the lowest class; but no one knew him or paid much attention to him; Oscar Wilde, on the other hand, was already a famous personage whose every movement provoked comment. From this time on the rumours about Oscar took definite form and shaped themselves in specific accusations: his enemies began triumphantly to predict his ruin and disgrace.

Everything is known in London society; like water on sand the truth spreads wider and wider as it gradually filters lower. The "smart set" in London has almost as keen a love of scandal as a cathedral town. About this time one heard of a dinner which Oscar Wilde had given at a restaurant in Soho, which was said to have degenerated into a sort of Roman orgy. I was told of a man who tried to get money by blackmailing him in his own house. I shrugged my shoulders at all these scandals, and asked the talebearers what had been said about Shakespeare to make him rave as he raved again and again against "back−wounding calumny"; and when they persisted in their malicious stories I could do nothing but show disbelief. Though I saw but little of Oscar during the first year or so of his intimacy with Lord Alfred Douglas, one scene from this time filled me with suspicion and an undefined dread.

I was in a corner of the Cafe Royal one night downstairs, playing chess, and, while waiting for my opponent to move, I went out just to stretch my legs. When I returned I found Oscar throned in the very corner, between two youths. Even to my short−sighted eyes they appeared quite common: in fact they looked like grooms. In spite of their vulgar appearance, however, one was nice looking in a fresh boyish way; the other seemed merely depraved. Oscar greeted me as usual, though he seemed slightly embarrassed. I resumed my seat, which was almost opposite him, and pretended to be absorbed in the game. To my astonishment he was talking as well as if he had had a picked audience; talking, if you please, about the Olympic games, telling how the youths wrestled and were scraped with strigulae and threw the discus and ran races and won the myrtle−wreath. His impassioned eloquence brought the sun−bathed palaestra before one with a magic of representment. Suddenly the younger of the boys asked:

"Did you sy they was niked?"

"Of course," Oscar replied, "nude, clothed only in sunshine and beauty."

"Oh, my," giggled the lad in his unspeakable Cockney way. I could not stand it.

"I am in an impossible position," I said to my opponent, who was the amateur chess player, Montagu Gattie. "Come along and let us have some dinner." With a nod to Oscar I left the place. On the way out Gattie said to me:

"So that's the famous Oscar Wilde."

"Yes," I replied, "that's Oscar, but I never saw him in such company before."

"Didn't you?" remarked Gattie quietly; "he was well known at Oxford. I was at the 'Varsity with him. His reputation was always rather−−'"high,'" shall we call it?"

I wanted to forget the scene and blot it out of my memory, and remember my friend as I knew him at his best. But that Cockney boy would not be banned; he leered there with rosy cheeks, hair plastered down in a love−lock on his forehead, and low cunning eyes. I felt uncomfortable. I would not think of it. I recalled the fact that in all our talks I had never heard Oscar use a gross word. His mind, I said to myself, is like Spenser's, vowed away from coarseness and vulgarity: he's the most perfect intellectual companion in the world. He may have wanted to talk to the boys just to see what effect his talk would have on them. His vanity is greedy enough to desire even such applause as theirs. . . . . Of course, that was the explanation−−vanity. My affection for him, tormented by doubt, had found at length a satisfactory solution. It was the artist in him, I said to myself, that wanted a model.

But why not boys of his own class? The answer suggested itself; boys of his own class could teach him nothing; his own boyhood would supply him with all the necessary information about well−bred youth. But if he wanted a gutter−snipe in one of his plays, he would have to find a gutter−lad and paint him from life. That was probably the truth, I concluded. So satisfied was I with my discovery that I developed it to Gattie; but he would not hear of it.

"Gattie has nothing of the artist in him," I decided, "and therefore cannot understand." And I went on arguing,

if Gattie were right, why "two" boys? It seemed evident to me that my reading of the riddle was the only plausible one. Besides it left my affection unaffected and free. Still, the giggle, the plastered oily hair and the venal leering eyes came back to me again and again in spite of myself.

CHAPTER XI−−THE THREATENING CLOUD DRAWS NEARER

There is a secret apprehension in man counselling sobriety and moderation, a fear born of expediency distinct from conscience, which is ethical; though it seems to be closely connected with conscience acting, as it does, by warnings and prohibitions. The story of Polycrates and his ring is a symbol of the instinctive feeling that extraordinary good fortune is perilous and can not endure.

A year or so after the first meeting between Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas I heard that they were being pestered on account of some amorous letters which had been stolen from them. There was talk of blackmail and hints of an interesting exposure.

Towards the end of the year it was announced that Lord Alfred Douglas had gone to Egypt; but this "flight into Egypt," as it was wittily called, was gilded by the fact that a little later he was appointed an honorary attache to Lord Cromer. I regarded his absence as a piece of good fortune, for when he was in London, Oscar had no time to himself, and was seen in public with associates he would have done better to avoid. Time and again he had praised Lord Alfred Douglas to me as a charming person, a poet, and had grown lyrical about his violet eyes and honey−coloured hair. I knew nothing of Lord Alfred Douglas, and had no inkling of his poetic talent. I did not like several of Oscar's particular friends, and I had a special dislike for the father of Lord Alfred Douglas. I knew Queensberry rather well. I was a member of the old Pelican Club, and I used to go there frequently for a talk with Tom, Dick or Harry, about athletics, or for a game of chess with George Edwards. Queensberry was there almost every night, and someone introduced me to him. I was eager to know him because he had surprised me. At some play ("The Promise of May" was produced in November, 1882.), I think it was "The Promise of May," by Tennyson, produced at the Globe, in which atheists were condemned, he had got up in his box and denounced the play, proclaiming himself an atheist. I wanted to know the Englishman who could be so contemptuous of convention. Had he acted out of aristocratic insolence, or was he by any possibility high−minded? To one who knew the man the mere question must seem ridiculous.

Queensberry was perhaps five feet nine or ten in height, with a plain, heavy, rather sullen face, and quick, hot eyes. He was a mass of self−conceit, all bristling with suspicion, and in regard to money, prudent to meanness. He cared nothing for books, but liked outdoor sports and under a rather abrupt, but not discourteous, manner hid an irritable, violent temper. He was combative and courageous as very nervous people sometimes are, when they happen to be strong−willed−−the sort of man who, just because he was afraid of a bull and had pictured the dreadful wound it could give, would therefore seize it by the horns.

The insane temper of the man got him into rows at the Pelican more than once. I remember one evening he insulted a man whom I liked immensely. Haseltine was a stockbroker, I think, a big, fair, handsome fellow who took Queensberry's insults for some time with cheerful contempt. Again and again he turned Queensberry's wrath aside with a fair word, but Queensberry went on working himself into a passion, and at last made a rush at him. Haseltine watched him coming and hit out in the nick of time; he caught Queensberry full in the face and literally knocked him heels over head. Queensberry got up in a sad mess: he had a swollen nose and black eye and his shirt was all stained with blood spread about by hasty wiping. Any other man would have continued the fight or else have left the club on the spot; Queensberry took a seat at a table, and there sat for hours silent. I could only explain it to myself by saying that his impulse to fly at once from the scene of his disgrace was very acute, and therefore he resisted it, made up his mind not to budge, and so he sat there the butt of the derisive glances and whispered talk of everyone who came into the club in the next two or three hours. He was just the sort of person a wise man would avoid and a clever one would use−−a dangerous, sharp, ill−handled tool.

Disliking his father, I did not care to meet Lord Alfred Douglas, Oscar's newest friend.

I saw Oscar less frequently after the success of his first play; he no longer needed my editorial services, and was, besides, busily engaged; but I have one good trait to record of him. Some time before I had lent him L50; so long as he was hard up I said nothing about it; but after the success of his second play, I wrote to him saying that the L50 would be useful to me if he could spare it. He sent me a cheque at once with a charming letter.

He was now continually about again with Lord Alfred Douglas who, it appeared, had had a disagreement with

Lord Cromer and returned to London. Almost immediately scandalous stories came into circulation concerning them:

"Have you heard the latest about Lord Alfred and Oscar? I'm told they're being watched by the police," and so forth and so on interminably. One day a story came to me with such wealth of weird detail that it was manifestly at least founded on fact. Oscar was said to have written extraordinary letters to Lord Alfred Douglas: a youth called Alfred Wood had stolen the letters from Lord Alfred Douglas' rooms in Oxford and had tried to blackmail Oscar with them. The facts were so peculiar and so precise that I asked Oscar about it. He met the accusation at once and very fairly, I thought, and told me the whole story. It puts the triumphant power and address of the man in a strong light, and so I will tell it as he told it to me.

"When I was rehearsing 'A Woman of No Importance' at the Haymarket," he began, "Beerbohm Tree showed me a letter I had written a year or so before to Alfred Douglas. He seemed to think it dangerous, but I laughed at him and read the letter with him, and of course he came to understand it properly. A little later a man called Wood told me he had found some letters which I had written to Lord Alfred Douglas in a suit of clothes which Lord Alfred had given to him. He gave me back some of the letters and I gave him a little money. But the letter, a copy of which had been sent to Beerbohm Tree, was not amongst them.

"Some time afterwards a man named Allen called upon me one night in Tite Street, and said he had got a letter of mine which I ought to have.

"The man's manner told me that he was the real enemy. 'I suppose you mean that beautiful letter of mine to Lord Alfred Douglas,' I said. 'If you had not been so foolish as to send a copy of it to Mr. Beerbohm Tree, I should have been glad to have paid you a large sum for it, as I think it is one of the best I ever wrote.' Allen looked at me with sulky, cunning eyes and said:

"'A curious construction could be put upon that letter.'

"'No doubt, no doubt,' I replied lightly; 'art is not intelligible to the criminal classes.' He looked me in the face defiantly and said:

"'A man has offered me L60 for it.'

"'You should take the offer,' I said gravely; 'L60 is a great price. I myself have never received such a large sum for any prose work of that length. But I am glad to find that there is someone in England who will pay such a large sum for a letter of mine. I don't know why you come to me,' I added, rising, 'you should sell the letter at once.'

"Of course, Frank, as I spoke my body seemed empty with fear. The letter could be misunderstood, and I have so many envious enemies; but I felt that there was nothing else for it but bluff. As I went to the door Allen rose too, and said that the man who had offered him the money was out of town. I turned to him and said:

"'He will no doubt return, and I don't care for the letter at all.'

"At this Allen changed his manner, said he was very poor, he hadn't a penny in the world, and had spent a lot trying to find me and tell me about the letter. I told him I did not mind relieving his distress, and gave him half a sovereign, assuring him at the same time that the letter would shortly be published as a sonnet in a delightful magazine. I went to the door with him, and he walked away. I closed the door; but didn't shut it at once, for suddenly I heard a policeman's step coming softly towards my house−−pad, pad! A dreadful moment, then he passed by. I went into the room again all shaken, wondering whether I had done right, whether Allen would hawk the letter about−−a thousand vague apprehensions.

"Suddenly a knock at the street door. My heart was in my mouth, still I went and opened it: a man named Cliburn was there.

"'I have come to you with a letter of Allen's.'

"'I cannot be bothered any more,' I cried, 'about that letter; I don't care twopence about it. Let him do what he likes with it.'

"To my astonishment Cliburn said:

"'Allen has asked me to give it back to you,' and he produced it.

"'Why does he give it back to me?' I asked carelessly.

"'He says you were kind to him and that it is no use trying to "rent" you; you only laugh at us.'

"I looked at the letter; it was very dirty, and I said:

"'I think it is unpardonable that better care should not have been taken of a manuscript of mine.'

"He said he was sorry; but it had been in many hands. I took the letter up casually:

"'Well, I will accept the letter back. You can thank Mr. Allen for me.'

"I gave Cliburn half a sovereign for his trouble, and said to him:

"'I am afraid you are leading a desperately wicked life.'

"'There's good and bad in every one of us,' he replied. I said something about his being a philosopher, and he went away. That's the whole story, Frank."

"But the letter?" I questioned.

"The letter is nothing," Oscar replied; "a prose poem. I will give you a copy of it."

Here is the letter:

"My own boy,−−Your sonnet is quite lovely, and it is a marvel that those red rose−leaf lips of yours should be made no less for the madness of music and song than for the madness of kissing. Your slim−gilt soul walks between passion and poetry. No Hyacinthus followed Love so madly as you in Greek days. Why are you alone in London, and when do you go to Salisbury? Do go there and cool your hands in the grey twilight of Gothic things. Come here whenever you like. It is a lovely place and only lacks you. Do go to Salisbury first. Always with undying love,

Yours,

Oscar."

This letter startled me; "slim−gilt" and the "madness of kissing" were calculated to give one pause; but after all, I thought, it may be merely an artist's letter, half pose, half passionate admiration. Another thought struck me.

"But how did such a letter," I cried, "ever get into the hands of a blackmailer?"

"I don't know," he replied, shrugging his shoulders. "Lord Alfred Douglas is very careless and inconceivably bold. You should know him, Frank; he's a delightful poet."

"But how did he come to know a creature like Wood?" I persisted.

"How can I tell, Frank," he answered a little shortly; and I let the matter drop, though it left in me a certain doubt, an uncomfortable suspicion.

The scandal grew from hour to hour, and the tide of hatred rose in surges.

One day I was lunching at the Savoy, and while talking to the head waiter, Cesari, who afterwards managed the Elysee Palace Hotel in Paris, I thought I saw Oscar and Douglas go out together. Being a little short−sighted, I asked:

"Isn't that Mr. Oscar Wilde?"

"Yes," said Cesari, "and Lord Alfred Douglas. We wish they would not come here; it does us a lot of harm."

"How do you mean?" I asked sharply.

"Some people don't like them," the quick Italian answered immediately.

"Oscar Wilde," I remarked casually, "is a great friend of mine," but the super− subtle Italian was already warned.

"A clever writer, I believe," he said, smiling in bland acquiescence.

This incident gave me warning, strengthened again in me the exact apprehension and suspicion which the Douglas letter had bred. Oscar I knew was too self− centred, went about too continually with admirers to have any understanding of popular feeling. He would be the last man to realize how fiercely hate, malice and envy were raging against him. I wanted to warn him; but hardly knew how to do it effectively and without offence: I made up my mind to keep my eyes open and watch an opportunity.

A little later I gave a dinner at the Savoy and asked him to come. He was delightful, his vivacious gaiety as exhilarating as wine. But he was more like a Roman Emperor than ever: he had grown fat: he ate and drank too much; not that he was intoxicated, but he became flushed, and in spite of his gay and genial talk he affected me a little unpleasantly; he was gross and puffed up. But he gave one or two splendid snapshots of actors and their egregious vanity. It seemed to him a great pity that actors should be taught to read and write: they should learn their pieces from the lips of the poet.

"Just as work is the curse of the drinking classes of this country," he said laughing, "so education is the curse of the acting classes."

Yet even when making fun of the mummers there was a new tone in him of arrogance and disdain. He used always to be genial and kindly even to those he laughed at; now he was openly contemptuous. The truth is that his

extraordinarily receptive mind went with an even more abnormal receptivity of character: unlike most men of marked ability, he took colour from his associates. In this as in love of courtesies and dislike of coarse words he was curiously feminine. Intercourse with Beardsley, for example, had backed his humorous gentleness with a sort of challenging courage; his new intimacy with Lord Alfred Douglas, coming on the top of his triumph as a playwright, was lending him aggressive self− confidence. There was in him that "hubris" (insolent self−assurance) which the Greek feared, the pride which goeth before destruction. I regretted the change in him and was nervously apprehensive.

After dinner we all went out by the door which gives on the Embankment, for it was after 12.30. One of the party proposed that we should walk for a minute or two−−at least as far as the Strand, before driving home. Oscar objected. He hated walking; it was a form of penal servitude to the animal in man, he declared; but he consented, nevertheless, under protest, laughing. When we were going up the steps to the Strand he again objected, and quoted Dante's famous lines:

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  "Tu proverai si come sa di sale
Lo pane altrui; e com' e duro calle
Lo scendere e 'l salir per l'altrui scale."
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The impression made by Oscar that evening was not only of self−indulgence but of over−confidence. I could not imagine what had given him this insolent self− complacence. I wanted to get by myself and think. Prosperity was certainly doing him no good.

All the while the opposition to him, I felt, was growing in force. How could I verify this impression, I asked myself, so as to warn him effectually?

I decided to give a lunch to him, and on purpose I put on the invitations: "To meet Mr. Oscar Wilde and hear a new story." Out of a dozen invitations sent out to men, seven or eight were refused, three or four telling me in all kindness that they would rather not meet Oscar Wilde. This confirmed my worst fears: when Englishmen speak out in this way the dislike must be near revolt.

I gave the lunch and saw plainly enough that my forebodings were justified. Oscar was more self−confident than ever, but his talk did not suffer; indeed, it seemed to improve. At this lunch he told the charming fable of "Narcissus," which is certainly one of his most characteristic short stories.

"When Narcissus died the Flowers of the Field were plunged in grief, and asked the River for drops of water that they might mourn for him.

"'Oh,' replied the River, 'if only my drops of water were tears, I should not have enough to weep for Narcissus myself−−I loved him.'

"'How could you help loving Narcissus?' said the flowers, 'so beautiful was he.'

"'Was he beautiful?' asked the River.

"'Who should know that better than you?' said the flowers, 'for every day, lying on your bank, he would mirror his beauty in your waters.'"

Oscar paused here, and then went on:

"'If I loved him,' replied the River, 'it is because, when he hung over me, I saw the reflection of my own loveliness in his eyes.'"

After lunch I took him aside and tried to warn him, told him that unpleasant stories were being put about against him; but he paid no heed to me.

"All envy, Frank, and malice. What do I care? I go to Clumber this summer; besides I am doing another play which I rather like. I always knew that play− writing was my province. As a youth I tried to write plays in verse; that was my mistake. Now I know better; I'm sure of myself and of success."

Somehow or other in spite of his apparent assurance I felt he was in danger and I doubted his quality as a fighter. But after all it was not my business: wilful man must have his way.

It seems to me now that my mistrust dated from the second paper war with Whistler, wherein to the astonishment of everyone Oscar did not come off victorious. As soon as he met with opposition his power of repartee seemed to desert him and Whistler, using mere rudeness and man−of−the−world sharpness, held the

field. Oscar was evidently not a born fighter.

I asked him once how it was he let Whistler off so lightly. He shrugged his shoulders and showed some irritation.

"What could I say, Frank? Why should I belabour the beaten? The man is a wasp and delights in using his sting. I have done more perhaps than anyone to make him famous. I had no wish to hurt him."

Was it magnanimity or weakness or, as I think, a constitutional, a feminine shrinking from struggle and strife. Whatever the cause, it was clear that Oscar was what Shakespeare called himself, "an unhurtful opposite."

It is quite possible that if he had been attacked face to face, Oscar would have given a better account of himself. At Mrs. Grenfell's (now Lady Desborough) he crossed swords once with the Prime Minister and came off victorious. Mr. Asquith began by bantering him, in appearance lightly, in reality, seriously, for putting many of his sentences in italics.

"The man who uses italics," said the politician, "is like the man who raises his voice in conversation and talks loudly in order to make himself heard."

It was the well−known objection which Emerson had taken to Carlyle's overwrought style, pointed probably by dislike of the way Oscar monopolised conversation.

Oscar met the stereotyped attack with smiling good−humour.

"How delightful of you, Mr. Asquith, to have noticed that! The brilliant phrase, like good wine, needs no bush. But just as the orator marks his good things by a dramatic pause, or by raising or lowering his voice, or by gesture, so the writer marks his epigrams with italics, setting the little gem, so to speak, like a jeweller−−an excusable love of one's art, not all mere vanity, I like to think"−−all this with the most pleasant smile and manner.

In measure as I distrusted Oscar's fighting power and admired his sweetness of nature I took sides with him and wanted to help him. One day I heard some talk at the Pelican Club which filled me with fear for him and quickened my resolve to put him on his guard. I was going in just as Queensberry was coming out with two or three of his special cronies.

"I'll do it," I heard him cry, "I'll teach the fellow to leave my son alone. I'll not have their names coupled together."

I caught a glimpse of the thrust−out combative face and the hot grey eyes.

"What's it all about?" I asked.

"Only Queensberry," said someone, "swearing he'll stop Oscar Wilde going about with that son of his, Alfred Douglas."

Suddenly my fears took form: as in a flash I saw Oscar, heedless and smiling, walking along with his head in the air, and that violent combative insane creature pouncing on him. I sat down at once and wrote begging Oscar to lunch with me the next day alone, as I had something important to say to him. He turned up in Park Lane, manifestly anxious, a little frightened, I think.

"What is it, Frank?"

I told him very seriously what I had heard and gave besides my impression of Queensberry's character, and his insane pugnacity.

"What can I do, Frank?" said Oscar, showing distress and apprehension. "It's all Bosie."

"Who is Bosie?" I asked.

"That is Lord Alfred Douglas' pet name. It's all Bosie's fault. He has quarrelled with his father, or rather his father has quarrelled with him. He quarrels with everyone; with Lady Queensberry, with Percy Douglas, with Bosie, everyone. He's impossible. What can I do?"

"Avoid him," I said. "Don't go about with Lord Alfred Douglas. Give Queensberry his triumph. You could make a friend of him as easily as possible, if you wished. Write him a conciliatory letter."

"But he'll want me to drop Bosie, and stop seeing Lady Queensberry, and I like them all; they are charming to me. Why should I cringe to this madman?"

"Because he is a madman."

"Oh, Frank, I can't," he cried. "Bosie wouldn't let me."

"'Wouldn't let you'? I repeated angrily. "How absurd! That Queensberry man will go to violence, to any extremity. Don't you fight other people's quarrels: you may have enough of your own some day."

"You're not sympathetic, Frank," he chided weakly. "I know you mean it kindly, but it's impossible for me to

do as you advise. I cannot give up my friend. I really cannot let Lord Queensberry choose my friends for me. It's too absurd."

"But it's wise," I replied. "There's a very bad verse in one of Hugo's plays. It always amused me−−he likens poverty to a low door and declares that when we have to pass through it the man who stoops lowest is the wisest. So when you meet a madman, the wisest thing to do is to avoid him and not quarrel with him."

"It's very hard, Frank; of course I'll think over what you say. But really Queensberry ought to be in a madhouse. He's too absurd," and in that spirit he left me, outwardly self−confident. He might have remembered Chaucer's words:

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Beware also to spurne again a nall;
Strive not as doeth a crocke with a wall;
Deme thy selfe that demest others dede,
And trouth thee shall deliver, it is no drede.
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CHAPTER XII−−DANGER SIGNALS: THE CHALLENGE

These two years 1893−4 saw Oscar Wilde at the very zenith of success. Thackeray, who always felt himself a monetary failure in comparison with Dickens, calls success "one of the greatest of a great man's qualities," and Oscar was not successful merely, he was triumphant. Not Sheridan the day after his marriage, not Byron when he awoke to find himself famous, ever reached such a pinnacle. His plays were bringing in so much that he could spend money like water; he had won every sort of popularity; the gross applause of the many, and the finer incense of the few who constitute the jury of Fame; his personal popularity too was extraordinary; thousands admired him, many liked him; he seemed to have everything that heart could desire and perfect health to boot. Even his home life was without a cloud. Two stories which he told at this time paint him. One was about his two boys, Vyvyan and Cyril.

"Children are sometimes interesting," he began. "The other night I was reading when my wife came and asked me to go upstairs and reprove the elder boy: Cyril, it appeared, would not say his prayers. He had quarrelled with Vyvyan, and beaten him, and when he was shaken and told he must say his prayers, he would not kneel down, or ask God to make him a good boy. Of course I had to go upstairs and see to it. I took the chubby little fellow on my knee, and told him in a grave way that he had been very naughty; naughty to hit his younger brother, and naughty because he had given his mother pain. He must kneel down at once, and ask God to forgive him and make him a good boy.

"'I was not naughty,' he pouted, 'it was Vyvyan; he was naughty.'

"I explained to him that his temper was naughty, and that he must do as he was told. With a little sigh he slipped off my knee, and knelt down and put his little hands together, as he had been taught, and began 'Our Father.' When he had finished the 'Lord's Prayer,' he looked up at me and said gravely, 'Now I'll pray to myself.'

"He closed his eyes and his lips moved. When he had finished I took him in my arms again and kissed him. "That's right," I said.

"'You said you were sorry,' questioned his mother, leaning over him, 'and asked God to make you a good boy?'

"'Yes, mother,' he nodded, 'I said I was sorry and asked God to make Vyvyan a good boy.'

"I had to leave the room, Frank, or he would have seen me smiling. Wasn't it delightful of him! We are all willing to ask God to make others good."

This story shows the lovable side of him. There was another side not so amiable. In April, 1893, "A Woman of No Importance" was produced by Herbert Beerbohm Tree at The Haymarket and ran till the end of the season, August 16th, surviving even the festival of St. Grouse. The astonishing success of this second play confirmed Oscar Wilde's popularity, gave him money to spend and increased his self−confidence. In the summer he took a house up the river at Goring, and went there to live with Lord Alfred Douglas. Weird stories came to us in London about their life together. Some time in September, I think it was, I asked him what was the truth underlying these reports.

"Scandals and slanders, Frank, have no relation to truth," he replied.

"I wonder if that's true," I said, "slander often has some substratum of truth; it resembles the truth like a gigantic shadow; there is a likeness at least in outline."

"That would be true," he retorted, "if the canvas, so to speak, on which the shadows fall were even and true; but it is not. Scandals and slander are related to the hatred of the people who invent them and are not in any shadowy sense even, effigies or images of the person attacked."

"Much smoke, then," I queried, "and no fire?"

"Only little fires," he rejoined, "show much smoke. The foundation for what you heard is both small and harmless. The summer was very warm and beautiful, as you know, and I was up at Goring with Bosie. Often in the middle of the day we were too hot to go on the river. One afternoon it was sultry−close, and Bosie proposed that I should turn the hose pipe on him. He went in and threw his things off and so did I. A few minutes later I was seated in a chair with a bath towel round me and Bosie was lying on the grass about ten yards away, when the

vicar came to pay us a call. The servant told him that we were in the garden, and he came and found us there. Frank, you have no idea the sort of face he pulled. What could I say?"

"'I am the vicar of the parish,' he bowed pompously.

"'I'm delighted to see you,' I said, getting up and draping myself carefully, 'you have come just in time to enjoy a perfectly Greek scene. I regret that I am scarcely fit to receive you, and Bosie there;−−and I pointed to Bosie lying on the grass. The vicar turned his head and saw Bosie's white limbs; the sight was too much for him; he got very red, gave a gasp and fled from the place.

"I simply sat down in my chair and shrieked with laughter. How he may have described the scene, what explanation he gave of it, what vile gloss he may have invented, I don't know and I don't care. I have no doubt he wagged his head and pursed his lips and looked unutterable things. But really it takes a saint to suffer such fools gladly."

I could not help smiling when I thought of the vicar's face, but Oscar's tone was not pleasant.

The change in him had gone further than I had feared. He was now utterly contemptuous of criticism and would listen to no counsel. He was gross, too, the rich food and wine seemed to ooze out of him and his manner was defiant, hard. He was like some great pagan determined to live his own life to the very fullest, careless of what others might say or think or do. Even the stories which he wrote about this time show the worst side of his paganism:

"When Jesus was minded to return to Nazareth, Nazareth was so changed that He no longer recognised His own city. The Nazareth where he had lived was full of lamentations and tears; this city was filled with outbursts of laughter and song. . . . .

"Christ went out of the house and, behold, in the street he saw a woman whose face and raiment were painted and whose feet were shod with pearls, and behind her walked a man who wore a cloak of two colours, and whose eyes were bright with lust. And Christ went up to the man and laid His hand on his shoulder, and said to him, 'Tell me, why art thou following this woman, and why dost thou look at her in such wise?' The man turned round, recognised Him and said, 'I was blind; Thou didst heal me; what else should I do with my sight?'"

The same note is played on in two or three more incidents, but the one I have given is the best, and should have been allowed to stand alone. It has been called blasphemous; it is not intentionally blasphemous; as I have said, Oscar always put himself quite naively in the place of any historical character.

The disdain of public opinion which Oscar now showed not only in his writings, but in his answers to criticism, quickly turned the public dislike into aggressive hatred. In 1894 a book appeared, "The Green Carnation," which was a sort of photograph of Oscar as a talker and a caricature of his thought. The gossipy story had a surprising success, altogether beyond its merits, which simply testified to the intense interest the suspicion of extraordinary viciousness has for common minds. Oscar's genius was not given in the book at all, but his humour was indicated and a malevolent doubt of his morality insisted upon again and again. Rumour had it that the book was true in every particular, that Mr. Hichens had taken down Oscar's talks evening after evening and simply reproduced them. I asked Oscar if this was true.

"True enough, Frank," he replied with a certain contempt which was foreign to him. "Hichens got to know Bosie Douglas in Egypt. They went up the Nile together, I believe with 'Dodo' Denson. Naturally Bosie talked a great deal about me and Hichens wanted to know me. When they returned to town, I thought him rather pleasant, and saw a good deal of him. I had no idea that he was going to play reporter; it seems to me a breach of confidence−−ignoble."

"It is not a picture of you," I said, "but there is a certain likeness."

"A photograph is always like and unlike, Frank," he replied; "the sun too, when used mechanically, is merely a reporter, and traduces instead of reproducing you."

"The Green Carnation" ruined Oscar Wilde's character with the general public. On all sides the book was referred to as confirming the worst suspicions: the cloud which hung over him grew continually darker.

During the summer of 1894 he wrote the "Ideal Husband," which was the outcome of a story I had told him. I had heard it from an American I had met in Cairo, a Mr. Cope Whitehouse. He told me that Disraeli had made money by entrusting the Rothschilds with the purchase of the Suez Canal shares. It seemed to me strange that this statement, if true, had never been set forth authoritatively; but the story was peculiarly modern, and had possibilities in it. Oscar admitted afterwards that he had taken the idea and used it in "An Ideal Husband."

It was in this summer also that he wrote "The Importance of Being Earnest," his finest play. He went to the seaside and completed it, he said, in three weeks, and, when I spoke of the delight he must feel at having two plays performed in London at the same time, he said:

"Next year, Frank, I may have four or five; I could write one every two months with the greatest ease. It all depends on money. If I need money I shall write half a dozen plays next year."

His words reminded me of what Goethe had said about himself: in each of the ten years he spent on his "Theory of Light" he could have written a couple of plays as good as his best. The land of Might−have−been is peopled with these gorgeous shadow−shapes.

Oscar had already found his public, a public capable of appreciating the very best he could do. As soon as "The Importance of Being Earnest" was produced it had an extraordinary success, and success of the best sort. Even journalist critics had begun to cease exhibiting their own limitations in foolish fault− finding, and now imitated their betters, parroting phrases of extravagant laudation.

Oscar took the praise as he had taken the scandal and slander, with complacent superiority. He had changed greatly and for the worse: he was growing coarser and harder every year. All his friends noticed this. Even M. Andre Gide, who was a great admirer and wrote, shortly after his death, the best account of him that appeared, was compelled to deplore his deterioration. He says:

"One felt that there was less tenderness in his looks, that there was something harsh in his laughter, and a wild madness in his joy. He seemed at the same time to be sure of pleasing, and less ambitious to succeed therein. He had grown reckless, hardened and conceited. Strangely enough he no longer spoke in fables..."

His brother Willie made a similar complaint to Sir Edward Sullivan. Sir Edward writes:

"William Wilde told me, when Oscar was in prison, that the only trouble between him and his brother was caused by Oscar's inordinate vanity in the period before his conviction. 'He had surrounded himself,' William said, 'with a gang of parasites who praised him all day long, and to whom he used to give his cigarette−cases, breast pins, etc., in return for their sickening flattery. No one, not even I, his brother, dared offer any criticism on his works without offending him.'"

If proof were needed both of his reckless contempt for public opinion and the malignancy with which he was misjudged, it could be found in an incident which took place towards the end of 1894. A journal entitled "The Chameleon" was produced by some Oxford undergraduates. Oscar wrote for it a handful of sayings which he called "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young." His epigrams were harmless enough; but in the same number there appeared a story entitled "The Priest and the Acolyte" which could hardly be defended. The mere fact that his work was printed in the same journal called forth a storm of condemnation though he had never seen the story before it was published nor had he anything to do with its insertion.

Nemesis was following hard after him. Late in this year he spoke to me of his own accord about Lord Queensberry. He wanted my advice:

"Lord Queensberry is annoying me," he said; "I did my best to reconcile him and Bosie. One day at the Cafe Royal, while Bosie and I were lunching there, Queensberry came in and I made Bosie go over and fetch his father and bring him to lunch with us. He was half friendly with me till quite recently; though he wrote a shameful letter to Bosie about us. What am I to do?"

I asked him what Lord Queensberry objected to.

"He objects to my friendship with Bosie."

"Then why not cease to see Bosie?" I asked.

"It is impossible, Frank, and ridiculous; why should I give up my friends for Queensberry?"

"I should like to see Queensberry's letter," I said. "Is it possible?"

"I'll bring it to you, Frank, but there's nothing in it." A day or two later he showed me the letter, and after I had read it he produced a copy of the telegram which Lord Alfred Douglas had sent to his father in reply. Here they both are; they speak for themselves loudly enough:

Alfred,−−

It is extremely painful for me to have to write to you in the strain I must; but please understand that I decline to receive any answers from you in writing in return. After your recent hysterical impertinent ones I refuse to be annoyed with such, and I decline to read any more letters. If you have anything to say do come here and say it in person. Firstly, am I to understand that, having left Oxford as you did, with discredit to yourself, the reasons of

which were fully explained to me by your tutor, you now intend to loaf and loll about and do nothing? All the time you were wasting at Oxford I was put off with an assurance that you were eventually to go into the Civil Service or to the Foreign Office, and then I was put off with an assurance that you were going to the Bar. It appears to me that you intend to do nothing. I utterly decline, however, to just supply you with sufficient funds to enable you to loaf about. You are preparing a wretched future for yourself, and it would be most cruel and wrong for me to encourage you in this. Secondly, I come to the more painful part of this letter−−your intimacy with this man Wilde. It must either cease or I will disown you and stop all money supplies. I am not going to try and analyse this intimacy, and I make no charge; but to my mind to pose as a thing is as bad as to be it. With my own eyes I saw you both in the most loathsome and disgusting relationship as expressed by your manner and expression. Never in my experience have I ever seen such a sight as that in your horrible features. No wonder people are talking as they are. Also I now hear on good authority, but this may be false, that his wife is petitioning to divorce him for sodomy and other crimes. Is this true, or do you not know of it? If I thought the actual thing was true, and it became public property, I should be quite justified in shooting him at sight. These Christian English cowards and men, as they call themselves, want waking up.

Your disgusted so−called father,

Queensberry.

In reply to this letter Lord Alfred Douglas telegraphed:

"What a funny little man you are! Alfred Douglas."

This telegram was excellently calculated to drive Queensberry frantic with rage. There was feminine cunning in its wound to vanity.

A little later Oscar told me that Queensberry accompanied by a friend had called on him.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I said to him, 'I suppose, Lord Queensberry, you have come to apologise for the libellous letter you wrote about me?'

"'No,' he replied, 'the letter was privileged; it was written to my son.'

"'How dared you say such a thing about your son and me?'

"'You were both kicked out of The Savoy Hotel for disgusting conduct,' he replied.

"'That's untrue,' I said, 'absolutely untrue.'

"'You were blackmailed too for a disgusting letter you wrote my son,' he went on.

"'I don't know who has been telling you all these silly stories,' I replied, 'but they are untrue and quite ridiculous.'

"He ended up by saying that if he caught me and his son together again he would thrash me.

"'I don't know what the Queensberry rules are,' I retorted, 'but my rule is to shoot at sight in case of personal violence,' and with that I told him to leave my house."

"Of course he defied you?" I questioned.

"He was rude, Frank, and preposterous to the end."

As Oscar was telling me the story, it seemed to me as if another person were speaking through his mouth. The idea of Oscar "standing up" to Queensberry or "shooting at sight" was too absurd. Who was inspiring him? Alfred Douglas?

"What has happened since?" I enquired.

"Nothing," he replied, "perhaps he will be quiet now. Bosie has written him a terrible letter; he must see now that, if he goes on, he will only injure his own flesh and blood."

"That won't stop him," I replied, "if I read him aright. But if I could see what Alfred Douglas wrote, I should be better able to judge of the effect it will have on Queensberry."

A little later I saw the letter: it shows better than words of mine the tempers of the chief actors in this squalid story:

"As you return my letters unopened, I am obliged to write on a postcard. I write to inform you that I treat your absurd threats with absolute indifference. Ever since your exhibition at O. W.'s house, I have made a point of appearing with him at many public restaurants such as The Berkeley, Willis's Rooms, the Cafe Royal, etc., and I shall continue to go to any of these places whenever I choose and with whom I choose. I am of age and my own master. You have disowned me at least a dozen times, and have very meanly deprived me of money. You have

therefore no right over me, either legal or moral. If O. W. was to prosecute you in the Central Criminal Court for libel, you would get seven years' penal servitude for your outrageous libels. Much as I detest you, I am anxious to avoid this for the sake of the family; but if you try to assault me, I shall defend myself with a loaded revolver, which I always carry; and if I shoot you or if he shoots you, we shall be completely justified, as we shall be acting in self−defence against a violent and dangerous rough, and I think if you were dead many people would not miss you.−−A. D."

This letter of the son seemed to me appalling. My guess was right; it was he who was speaking through Oscar; the threat of shooting at sight came from him. I did not then understand all the circumstances; I had not met Lady Queensberry. I could not have imagined how she had suffered at the hands of her husband−−a charming, cultivated woman, with exquisite taste in literature and art; a woman of the most delicate, aspen−like sensibilities and noble generosities, coupled with that violent, coarse animal with the hot eyes and combative nature. Her married life had been a martyrdom. Naturally the children had all taken her side in the quarrel, and Lord Alfred Douglas, her especial favourite, had practically identified himself with her, which explains to some extent, though nothing can justify, the unnatural animosity of his letter. The letter showed me that the quarrel was far deeper, far bitterer than I had imagined−−one of those dreadful family quarrels, where the intimate knowledge each has of the other whips anger to madness. All I could do was to warn Oscar.

"It's the old, old story," I said. "You are putting your hand between the bark and the tree, and you will suffer for it." But he would not or could not see it.

"What is one to do with such a madman?" he asked pitiably.

"Avoid him," I replied, "as you would avoid a madman, who wanted to fight with you; or conciliate him; there is nothing else to do."

He would not be warned. A little later the matter came up again. At the first production of "The Importance of Being Earnest" Lord Queensberry appeared at the theatre carrying a large bouquet of turnips and carrots. What the meaning was of those vegetables only the man himself and his like could divine. I asked Oscar about the matter. He seemed annoyed but on the whole triumphant.

"Queensberry," he said, "had engaged a stall at the St. James's Theatre, no doubt to kick up a row; but as soon as I heard of it I got Alick (George Alexander) to send him back his money. On the night of the first performance Queensberry appeared carrying a large bundle of carrots. He was refused admittance at the box−office, and when he tried to enter the gallery the police would not let him in. He must be mad, Frank, don't you think? I am glad he was foiled."

"He is insanely violent," I said, "he will keep on attacking you."

"But what can I do, Frank?"

"Don't ask for advice you won't take," I replied. "There's a French proverb I've always liked: 'In love and war don't seek counsel.' But for God's sake, don't drift. Stop while you can."

But Oscar would have had to take a resolution and act in order to stop, and he was incapable of such energy. The wild horses of Fate had run away with the light chariot of his fortune, and what the end would be no one could foresee. It came with appalling suddenness.

One evening, in February, '95, I heard that the Marquis of Queensberry had left an insulting card for Oscar at the Albemarle Club. My informant added gleefully that now Oscar would have to face the music and we'd all see what was in him. There was no malice in this, just an Englishman's pleasure in a desperate fight, and curiosity as to the issue.

A little later I received a letter from Oscar, asking me if he could call on me that afternoon. I stayed in, and about four o'clock he came to see me.

At first he used the old imperious mask, which he had lately accustomed himself to wear.

"I am bringing an action against Queensberry, Frank," he began gravely, "for criminal libel. He is a mere wild beast. My solicitors tell me that I am certain to win. But they say some of the things I have written will be brought up against me in court. Now you know all I have written. Would you in your position as editor of "The Fortnightly" come and give evidence for me, testify for instance that 'Dorian Gray' is not immoral?"

"Yes," I replied at once, "I should be perfectly willing, and I could say more than that; I could say that you are one of the very few men I have ever known whose talk and whose writings were vowed away from grossness of any sort."

"Oh! Frank, would you? It would be so kind of you," he cried out. "My solicitors said I ought to ask you, but they were afraid you would not like to come: your evidence will win the case. It is good of you." His whole face was shaken; he turned away to hide the tears.

"Anything I can do, Oscar," I said, "I shall do with pleasure, and, as you know, to the uttermost; but I want you to consider the matter carefully. An English court of law gives me no assurance of a fair trial or rather I am certain that in matters of art or morality an English court is about the worst tribunal in the civilised world."

He shook his head impatiently.

"I cannot help it, I cannot alter it," he said.

"You must listen to me," I insisted. "You remember the Whistler and Ruskin action. You know that Whistler ought to have won. You know that Ruskin was shamelessly in fault; but the British jury and the so−called British artists treated Whistler and his superb work with contempt. Take a different case altogether, the Belt case, where all the Academicians went into the witness box, and asserted honestly enough that Belt was an impostor, yet the jury gave him a verdict of L5,000, though a year later he was sent to penal servitude for the very frauds which the jury in the first trial had declared by their verdict he had not committed. An English law court is all very well for two average men, who are fighting an ordinary business dispute. That's what it's made for, but to judge a Whistler or the ability or the immorality of an artist is to ask the court to do what it is wholly unfit to do. There is not a judge on the bench whose opinion on such a matter is worth a moment's consideration, and the jury are a thousand years behind the judge."

"That may be true, Frank; but I cannot help it."

"Don't forget," I persisted, "all British prejudices will be against you. Here is a father, the fools will say, trying to protect his young son. If he has made a mistake, it is only through excess of laudable zeal; you would have to prove yourself a religious maniac in order to have any chance against him in England."

"How terrible you are, Frank. You know it is Bosie Douglas who wants me to fight, and my solicitors tell me I shall win."

"Solicitors live on quarrels. Of course they want a case that will bring hundreds if not thousands of pounds into their pockets. Besides they like the fight. They will have all the kudos of it and the fun, and you will pay the piper. For God's sake don't be led into it: that way madness lies."

"But, Frank," he objected weakly, "how can I sit down under such an insult. I must do something."

"That's another story," I replied. "Let us by all means weigh what is to be done. But let us begin by putting the law−courts out of the question. Don't forget that you are challenged to mortal combat. Let us consider how the challenge should be met, but we won't fight under Queensberry rules because Queensberry happens to be the aggressor. Don't forget that if you lose and Queensberry goes free, everyone will hold that you have been guilty of nameless vice. Put the law courts out of your head. Whatever else you do, you must not bring an action for criminal libel against Queensberry. You are sure to lose it; you haven't a dog's chance, and the English despise the beaten−−"vae victis!" Don't commit suicide."

Nothing was determined when the time came to part.

This conversation took place, I believe, on the Friday or Saturday. I spent the whole of Sunday trying to find out what was known about Oscar Wilde and what would be brought up against him. I wanted to know too how he was regarded in an ordinary middle−class English home.

My investigations had appalling results. Everyone assumed that Oscar Wilde was guilty of the worst that had ever been alleged against him; the very people who received him in their houses condemned him pitilessly and, as I approached the fountain−head of information, the charges became more and more definite; to my horror, in the Public Prosecutor's office, his guilt was said to be known and classified.

All "people of importance" agreed that he would lose his case against Queensberry; "no English jury would give Oscar Wilde a verdict against anyone," was the expert opinion.

"How unjust!" I cried.

A careless shrug was the only reply.

I returned home from my enquiries late on Sunday afternoon, and in a few minutes Oscar called by appointment. I told him I was more convinced than ever that he must not go on with the prosecution; he would be certain to lose. Without beating about the bush I declared that he had no earthly chance.

"There are letters," I said, "which are infinitely worse than your published writings, which will be put in

evidence against you."

"What letters do you mean, Frank?" he questioned. "The Wood letters to Lord Alfred Douglas I told you about? I can explain all of them."

"You paid blackmail to Wood for letters you had written to Douglas," I replied, "and you will not be able to explain that fact to the satisfaction of a jury. I am told it is possible that witnesses will be called against you. Take it from me, Oscar, you have not a ghost of a chance."

"Tell me what you mean, Frank, for God's sake," he cried.

"I can tell you in a word," I replied; "you will lose your case. I have promised not to say more."

I tried to persuade him by his vanity.

"You must remember," I said, "that you are a sort of standard bearer for future generations. If you lose you will make it harder for all writers in England; though God knows it is hard enough already; you will put back the hands of the clock for fifty years."

I seemed almost to have persuaded him. He questioned me:

"What is the alternative, Frank, the wisest thing to do in your opinion? Tell me that."

"You ought to go abroad," I replied, "go abroad with your wife, and let Queensberry and his son fight out their own miserable quarrels; they are well−matched."

"Oh, Frank," he cried, "how can I do that?"

"Sleep on it," I replied; "I am going to, and we can talk it all over in a day or two."

"But I must know," he said wistfully, "tomorrow morning, Frank."

"Bernard Shaw is lunching with me tomorrow," I replied, "at the Cafe Royal."

He made an impatient movement of his head.

"He usually goes early," I went on, "and if you like to come after three o'clock we can have a talk and consider it all."

"May I bring Bosie?" he enquired.

"I would rather you did not," I replied, "but it is for you to do just as you like. I don't mind saying what I have to say, before anyone," and on that we parted.

Somehow or other next day at lunch both Shaw and I got interested in our talk, and we were both at the table when Oscar came in. I introduced them, but they had met before. Shaw stood up and proposed to go at once, but Oscar with his usual courtesy assured him that he would be glad if he stayed.

"Then, Oscar," I said, "perhaps you won't mind Shaw hearing what I advise?"

"No, Frank, I don't mind," he sighed with a pitiful air of depression.

I am not certain and my notes do not tell me whether Bosie Douglas came in with Oscar or a little later, but he heard the greater part of our talk. I put the matter simply.

"First of all," I said, "we start with the certainty that you are going to lose the case against Queensberry. You must give it up, drop it at once; but you cannot drop it and stay in England. Queensberry would probably attack you again and again. I know him well; he is half a savage and regards pity as a weakness; he has absolutely no consideration for others.

"You should go abroad, and, as ace of trumps, you should take your wife with you. Now for the excuse: I would sit down and write such a letter as you alone can write to "The Times". You should set forth how you have been insulted by the Marquis of Queensberry, and how you went naturally to the Courts for a remedy, but you found out very soon that this was a mistake. No jury would give a verdict against a father, however mistaken he might be. The only thing for you to do therefore is to go abroad, and leave the whole ring, with its gloves and ropes, its sponges and pails, to Lord Queensberry. You are a maker of beautiful things, you should say, and not a fighter. Whereas the Marquis of Queensberry takes joy only in fighting. You refuse to fight with a father under these circumstances."

Oscar seemed to be inclined to do as I proposed. I appealed to Shaw, and Shaw said he thought I was right; the case would very likely go against Oscar, a jury would hardly give a verdict against a father trying to protect his son. Oscar seemed much moved. I think it was about this time that Bosie Douglas came in. At Oscar's request, I repeated my argument and to my astonishment Douglas got up at once, and cried with his little white, venomous, distorted face:

"Such advice shows you are no friend of Oscar's."

"What do you mean?" I asked in wonderment; but he turned and left the room on the spot. To my astonishment Oscar also got up.

"It is not friendly of you, Frank," he said weakly. "It really is not friendly."

I stared at him: he was parrotting Douglas' idiotic words.

"Don't be absurd," I said; but he repeated:

"No, Frank, it is not friendly," and went to the door and disappeared.

Like a flash I saw part at least of the truth. It was not Oscar who had ever misled Douglas, but Lord Alfred Douglas who was driving Oscar whither he would.

I turned to Shaw.

"Did I say anything in the heat of argument that could have offended Oscar or Douglas?"

"Nothing," said Shaw, "not a word: you have nothing to reproach yourself with." (I am very glad that Bernard Shaw has lately put in print his memory of this conversation. The above account was printed, though not published, in 1911, and in 1914 Shaw published his recollection of what took place at this consultation. Readers may judge from the comparison how far my general story is worthy of credence. In the Introduction to his playlet, "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets," Shaw writes:

"Yet he (Harris) knows the taste and the value of humour. He was one of the few men of letters who really appreciated Oscar Wilde, though he did not rally fiercely to Wilde's side until the world deserted Oscar in his ruin. I myself was present at a curious meeting between the two when Harris on the eve of the Queensberry trial prophesied to Wilde with miraculous precision exactly what immediately afterwards happened to him and warned him to leave the country. It was the first time within my knowledge that such a forecast proved true. Wilde, though under no illusion as to the folly of the quite unselfish suit−at− law he had been persuaded to begin, nevertheless so miscalculated the force of the social vengeance he was unloosing on himself that he fancied it could be stayed by putting up the editor of "The Saturday Review" (as Mr. Harris then was) to declare that he considered "Dorian Gray" a highly moral book, which it certainly is. When Harris foretold him the truth, Wilde denounced him as a faint−hearted friend who was failing him in his hour of need and left the room in anger. Harris's idiosyncratic power of pity saved him from feeling or showing the smallest resentment; and events presently proved to Wilde how insanely he had been advised in taking the action, and how accurately Harris had gauged the situation.")

Left to myself I was at a loss to imagine what Lord Alfred Douglas proposed to himself by hounding Oscar on to attack his father. I was still more surprised by his white, bitter face. I could not get rid of the impression it left on me. While groping among these reflections I was suddenly struck by a sort of likeness, a similarity of expression and of temper between Lord Alfred Douglas and his unhappy father. I could not get it out of my head−−that little face blanched with rage and the wild, hating eyes; the shrill voice, too, was Queensberry's.

CHAPTER XIII−−OSCAR ATTACKS QUEENSBERRY AND IS WORSTED

It was weakness in Oscar and not strength that allowed him to be driven to the conflict by Lord Alfred Douglas; it was his weakness again which prevented him from abandoning the prosecution, once it was begun. Such a resolution would have involved a breaking away from his associates and from his friends; a personal assertion of will of which he was incapable. Again and again he answered my urging with:

"I can't, Frank, I can't."

When I pointed out to him that the defence was growing bolder−−it was announced one morning in the newspapers that Lord Queensberry, instead of pleading paternal privilege and minimising his accusation, was determined to justify the libel and declare that it was true in every particular−−Oscar could only say weakly:

"I can't help it, Frank, I can't do anything; you only distress me by predicting disaster."

The fibres of resolution, never strong in him, had been destroyed by years of self−indulgence, while the influence whipping him was stronger than I guessed. He was hurried like a sheep to the slaughter.

Although everyone who cared to think knew that Queensberry would win the case, many persons believed that Oscar would make a brilliant intellectual fight, and carry off the honours, if not the verdict.

The trial took place at the Central Criminal Court on April 3rd, 1895. Mr. Justice Collins was the judge and the case was conducted at first with the outward seemliness and propriety which are so peculiarly English. An hour before the opening of the case the Court was crowded, not a seat to be had for love or money: even standing room was at a premium.

The Counsel were the best at the Bar; Sir Edward Clarke, Q.C., Mr. Charles Mathews, and Mr. Travers Humphreys for the prosecution; Mr. Carson, Q.C., Mr. G. C. Gill and Mr. A. Gill for the defence. Mr. Besley, Q.C., and Mr. Monckton watched the case, it was said, for the brothers, Lord Douglas of Hawick and Lord Alfred Douglas.

While waiting for the judge, the buzz of talk in the court grew loud; everybody agreed that the presence of Sir Edward Clarke gave Oscar an advantage. Mr. Carson was not so well known then as he has since become; he was regarded as a sharp−witted Irishman who had still his spurs to win. Some knew he had been at school with Oscar, and at Trinity College was as high in the second class as Oscar was in the first. It was said he envied Oscar his reputation for brilliance.

Suddenly the loud voice of the clerk called for silence.

As the judge appeared everyone stood up and in complete stillness Sir Edward Clarke opened for the prosecution. The bleak face, long upper lip and severe side whiskers made the little man look exactly like a nonconformist parson of the old days, but his tone and manner were modern−−quiet and conversational. The charge, he said, was that the defendant had published a false and malicious libel against Mr. Oscar Wilde. The libel was in the form of a card which Lord Queensberry had left at a club to which Mr. Oscar Wilde belonged: it could not be justified unless the statements written on the card were true. It would, however, have been possible to have excused the card by a strong feeling, a mistaken feeling, on the part of a father, but the plea which the defendant had brought before the Court raised graver issues. He said that the statement was true and was made for the public benefit. There were besides a series of accusations in the plea (everyone held his breath), mentioning names of persons, and it was said with regard to these persons that Mr. Wilde had solicited them to commit a grave offence and that he had been guilty with each and all of them of indecent practices. . . ." My heart seemed to stop. My worst forebodings were more than justified. Vaguely I heard Clarke's voice, "grave responsibility . . . . serious allegations . . . . credible witnesses . . . . Mr. Oscar Wilde was the son of Sir William Wilde . . . ." the voice droned on and I awoke to feverish clearness of brain. Queensberry had turned the defence into a prosecution. Why had he taken the risk? Who had given him the new and precise information? I felt that there was nothing before Oscar but ruin absolute. Could anything be done? Even now he could go abroad−−even now. I resolved once more to try and induce him to fly.

My interest turned from these passionate imaginings to the actual. Would Sir Edward Clarke fight the case as it should be fought? He had begun to tell of the friendship between Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas; the

friendship too between Oscar Wilde and Lady Queensberry, who on her own petition had been divorced from the Marquis; would he go on to paint the terrible ill−feeling that existed between Lord Alfred Douglas and his father, and show how Oscar had been dragged into the bitter family squabble? To the legal mind this had but little to do with the case.

We got, instead, a dry relation of the facts which have already been set forth in this history. Wright, the porter of the Albemarle Club, was called to say that Lord Queensberry had handed him the card produced. Witness had looked at the card; did not understand it; but put it in an envelope and gave it to Mr. Wilde.

Mr. Oscar Wilde was then called and went into the witness box. He looked a little grave but was composed and serious. Sir Edward Clarke took him briefly through the incidents of his life: his successes at school and the University; the attempts made to blackmail him, the insults of Lord Queensberry, and then directed his attention to the allegations in the plea impugning his conduct with different persons. Mr. Oscar Wilde declared that there was no truth in any of these statements. Hereupon Sir Edward Clarke sat down. Mr. Carson rose and the death duel began.

Mr. Carson brought out that Oscar Wilde was forty years of age and Lord Alfred Douglas twenty−four. Down to the interview in Tite Street Lord Queensberry had been friendly with Mr. Wilde.

"Had Mr. Wilde written in a publication called "The Chameleon"?"

"Yes."

"Had he written there a story called 'The Priest and the Acolyte'?"

"No."

"Was that story immoral?"

Oscar amused everyone by replying:

"Much worse than immoral, it was badly written," but feeling that this gibe was too light for the occasion he added:

"It was altogether offensive and perfect twaddle."

He admitted at once that he did not express his disapproval of it; it was beneath him "to concern himself with the effusions of an illiterate undergraduate."

"Did Mr. Wilde ever consider the effect in his writings of inciting to immorality?"

Oscar declared that he aimed neither at good nor evil, but tried to make a beautiful thing. When questioned as to the immorality in thought in the article in "The Chameleon", he retorted "that there is no such thing as morality or immorality in thought." A hum of understanding and approval ran through the court; the intellect is profoundly amoral.

Again and again he scored in this way off Mr. Carson.

"No work of art ever puts forward views; views belong to the Philistines and not to artists." . . . .

"What do you think of this view?"

"I don't think of any views except my own."

All this while Mr. Carson had been hitting at a man on his own level; but Oscar Wilde was above him and not one of his blows had taken effect. Every moment, too, Oscar grew more and more at his ease, and the combat seemed to be turning completely in his favour. Mr. Carson at length took up "Dorian Gray" and began cross−examining on passages in it.

"You talk about one man adoring another. Did you ever adore any man?"

"No," replied Oscar quietly, "I have never adored anyone but myself."

The Court roared with laughter. Oscar went on:

"There are people in the world, I regret to say, who cannot understand the deep affection that an artist can feel for a friend with a beautiful personality."

He was then questioned about his letter (already quoted here) to Lord Alfred Douglas. It was a prose−poem, he said, written in answer to a sonnet. He had not written to other people in the same strain, not even to Lord Alfred Douglas again: he did not repeat himself in style.

Mr. Carson read another letter from Oscar Wilde to Lord Alfred Douglas, which paints their relations with extraordinary exactness. Here it is:

Savoy Hotel,

Victoria Embankment, London.

Dearest of all boys,−−

Your letter was delightful, red and yellow wine to me; but I am sad and out of sorts. Bosie, you must not make scenes with me. They kill me, they wreck the loveliness of life. I cannot see you, so Greek and gracious, distorted with passion. I cannot listen to your curved lips saying hideous things to me. I would sooner ('here a word is indecipherable,' Mr. Carson went on, 'but I will ask the witness') (The words which Mr. Carson could not read were: "I would sooner be rented than, etc." Rent is a slang term for blackmail.)−−than have you bitter, unjust, hating. . . . . I must see you soon. You are the divine thing I want, the thing of genius and beauty; but I don't know how to do it. Shall I come to Salisbury? My bill here is L49 for a week. I have also got a new sitting−room. . . . . Why are you not here, my dear, my wonderful boy? I fear I must leave−−no money, no credit, and a heart of lead.

Your own Oscar.

Oscar said that it was an expression of his tender admiration for Lord Alfred Douglas.

"You have said," Mr. Carson went on, "that all the statements about persons in the plea of justification were false. Do you still hold to that assertion?"

"I do."

Mr. Carson then paused and looked at the Judge. Justice Collins shuffled his papers together and announced that the cross−examination would be continued on the morrow. As the Judge went out, all the tongues in the court broke loose. Oscar was surrounded by friends congratulating him and rejoicing.

I was not so happy and went away to think the matter out. I tried to keep up my courage by recalling the humorous things Oscar had said during the cross− examination. I recalled too the dull commonplaces of Mr. Carson. I tried to persuade myself that it was all going on very well. But in the back of my mind I realised that Oscar's answers, characteristic and clever as many of them were, had not impressed the jury, were indeed rather calculated to alienate them. He had taken the purely artistic standpoint, had not attempted to go higher and reach a synthesis which would conciliate the Philistine jurymen as well as the thinking public, and the Judge.

Mr. Carson was in closer touch with the jury, being nearer their intellectual level, and there was a terrible menace in his last words. Tomorrow, I said to myself, he will begin to examine about persons and not books. He did not win on the literary question, but he was right to bring it in. The passages he had quoted, and especially Oscar's letters to Lord Alfred Douglas, had created a strong prejudice in the minds of the jury. They ought not to have had this effect, I thought, but they had. My contempt for Courts of law deepened: those twelve jurymen were anything but the peers of the accused: how could they judge him?

. . . . . .

The second day of the trial was very different from the first. There seemed to be a gloom over the Court. Oscar went into the box as if it had been the dock; he had lost all his spring. Mr. Carson settled down to the cross−examination with apparent zest. It was evident from his mere manner that he was coming to what he regarded as the strong part of his case. He began by examining Oscar as to his intimacy with a person named Taylor.

"Has Taylor been to your house and to your chambers?"

"Yes."

"Have you been to Taylor's rooms to afternoon tea parties?"

"Yes."

"Did Taylor's rooms strike you as peculiar?"

"They were pretty rooms."

"Have you ever seen them lit by anything else but candles even in the day time?"

"I think so. I'm not sure."

"Have you ever met there a young man called Wood?"

"On one occasion."

"Have you ever met Sidney Mavor there at tea?"

"It is possible."

"What was your connection with Taylor?"

"Taylor was a friend, a young man of intelligence and education: he had been to a good English school."

"Did you know Taylor was being watched by the police?"

"No."

"Did you know that Taylor was arrested with a man named Parker in a raid made last year on a house in Fitzroy Square?"

"I read of it in the newspaper."

"Did that cause you to drop your acquaintance with Taylor?"

"No; Taylor explained to me that he had gone there to a dance, and that the magistrate had dismissed the case against him."

"Did you get Taylor to arrange dinners for you to meet young men?"

"No; I have dined with Taylor at a restaurant."

"How many young men has Taylor introduced to you?"

"Five in all."

"Did you give money or presents to these five?"

"I may have done."

"Did they give you anything?"

"Nothing."

"Among the five men Taylor introduced you to, was one named Parker?"

"Yes."

"Did you get on friendly terms with him?"

"Yes."

"Did you call him 'Charlie' and allow him to call you 'Oscar'?"

"Yes."

"How old was Parker?"

"I don't keep a census of people's ages. It would be vulgar to ask people their age."

"Where did you first meet Parker?"

"I invited Taylor to Kettner's (A famous Italian restaurant in Soho: it had several "private rooms.") on the occasion of my birthday, and told him to bring what friends he liked. He brought Parker and his brother."

"Did you know Parker was a gentleman's servant out of work, and his brother a groom?"

"No; I did not."

"But you did know that Parker was not a literary character or an artist, and that culture was not his strong point?"

"I did."

"What was there in common between you and Charlie Parker?"

"I like people who are young, bright, happy, careless and original. I do not like them sensible, and I do not like them old; I don't like social distinctions of any kind, and the mere fact of youth is so wonderful to me that I would sooner talk to a young man for half an hour than be cross examined by an elderly Q.C."

Everyone smiled at this retort.

"Had you chambers in St. James's Place?"

"Yes, from October, '93, to April, '94."

"Did Charlie Parker go and have tea with you there?"

"Yes."

"Did you give him money?"

"I gave him three or four pounds because he said he was hard up."

"What did he give you in return?"

"Nothing."

"Did you give Charlie Parker a silver cigarette case at Christmas?"

"I did."

"Did you visit him one night at 12:30 at Park Walk, Chelsea?"

"I did not."

"Did you write him any beautiful prose−poems?"

"I don't think so."

"Did you know that Charlie Parker had enlisted in the Army?"

"I have heard so."

"When you heard that Taylor was arrested what did you do?"
"I was greatly distressed and wrote to tell him so."
"When did you first meet Fred Atkins?"
"In October or November, '92."
"Did he tell you that he was employed by a firm of bookmakers?"
"He may have done."
"Not a literary man or an artist, was he?"
"No."
"What age was he?"
"Nineteen or twenty."
"Did you ask him to dinner at Kettner's?"
"I think I met him at a dinner at Kettner's."
"Was Taylor at the dinner?"
"He may have been."
"Did you meet him afterwards?"
"I did."
"Did you call him 'Fred' and let him call you 'Oscar'?"
"Yes."
"Did you go to Paris with him?"
"Yes."
"Did you give him money?"
"Yes."
"Was there ever any impropriety between you?"
"No."
"When did you first meet Ernest Scarfe?"
"In December, 1893."
"Who introduced him to you?"
"Taylor."
"Scarfe was out of work, was he not?"
"He may have been."
"Did Taylor bring Scarfe to you at St. James's Place?"
"Yes."
"Did you give Scarfe a cigarette case?"
"Yes: it was my custom to give cigarette cases to people I liked."
"When did you first meet Mavor?"
"In '93."
"Did you give him money or a cigarette case?"
"A cigarette case."
"Did you know Walter Grainger?" . . . . and so on till the very air in the court seemed peopled with spectres.

On the whole Oscar bore the cross−examination very well; but he made one appalling slip.

Mr. Carson was pressing him as to his relations with the boy Grainger, who had been employed in Lord Alfred Douglas' rooms in Oxford.

"Did you ever kiss him?" he asked.

Oscar answered carelessly, "Oh, dear, no. He was a peculiarly plain boy. He was, unfortunately, extremely ugly. I pitied him for it."

"Was that the reason why you did not kiss him?"
"Oh, Mr. Carson, you are pertinently insolent."
"Did you say that in support of your statement that you never kissed him?"
"No. It is a childish question."

But Carson was not to be warded off; like a terrier he sprang again and again:

"Why, sir, did you mention that this boy was extremely ugly?"

"For this reason. If I were asked why I did not kiss a door−mat, I should say because I do not like to kiss door−mats." . . . . .

"Why did you mention his ugliness?"

"It is ridiculous to imagine that any such thing could have occurred under any circumstances."

"Then why did you mention his ugliness, I ask you?"

"Because you insulted me by an insulting question."

"Was that a reason why you should say the boy was ugly?"

(Here the witness began several answers almost inarticulately and finished none of them. His efforts to collect his ideas were not aided by Mr. Carson's sharp staccato repetition: "Why? why? why did you add that?") At last the witness answered:

"You sting me and insult me and at times one says things flippantly."

Then came the re−examination by Sir Edward Clarke, which brought out very clearly the hatred of Lord Alfred Douglas for his father. Letters were read and in one letter Queensberry declared that Oscar had plainly shown the white feather when he called on him. One felt that this was probably true: Queensberry's word on such a point could be accepted.

In the reexamination Sir Edward Clarke occupied himself chiefly with two youths, Shelley and Conway, who had been passed over casually by Mr. Carson. In answer to his questions Oscar stated that Shelley was a youth in the employ of Mathews and Lane, the publishers. Shelley had very good taste in literature and a great desire for culture. Shelley had read all his books and liked them. Shelley had dined with him and his wife at Tite Street. Shelley was in every way a gentleman. He had never gone with Charlie Parker to the Savoy Hotel.

A juryman wanted to know at this point whether the witness was aware of the nature of the article, "The Priest and the Acolyte," in "The Chameleon".

"I knew nothing of it; it came as a terrible shock to me."

This answer contrasted strangely with the light tone of his reply to the same question on the previous day.

The reexamination did not improve Oscar's position. It left all the facts where they were, and at least a suspicion in every mind.

Sir Edward Clarke intimated that this concluded the evidence for the prosecution, whereupon Mr. Carson rose to make the opening speech for the defence. I was shivering with apprehension.

He began by admitting the grave responsibility resting on Lord Queensberry, who accepted it to the fullest. Lord Queensberry was justified in doing all he could do to cut short an acquaintance which must be disastrous to his son. Mr. Carson wished to draw the attention of the jury to the fact that all these men with whom Mr. Wilde went about were discharged servants and grooms, and that they were all about the same age. He asked the jury also to note that Taylor, who was the pivot of the whole case, had not yet been put in the box. Why not? He pointed out to the jury that the very same idea that was set forth in "The Priest and the Acolyte" was contained in Oscar Wilde's letters to Lord Alfred Douglas, and the same idea was to be found in Lord Alfred Douglas' poem, "The Two Loves," (This early poem of Lord Alfred Douglas is reproduced in the Appendix at the end of this book together with another poem by the same author, which was also mentioned in the course of the trial.) which was published in "The Chameleon". He went on to say that when, in the story of "The Priest and the Acolyte," the boy was discovered in the priest's bed, (Mr. Carson here made a mistake; there is no such incident in the story: the error merely shows how prejudiced his mind was.) the priest made the same defence as Mr. Wilde had made, that the world does not understand the beauty of this love. The same idea was found again in "Dorian Gray," and he read two or three passages from the book in support of this statement. Mr. Wilde had described his letter to Lord Alfred Douglas as a prose sonnet. He would read it again to the court, and he read both the letters. "Mr. Wilde says they are beautiful," he went on, "I call them an abominable piece of disgusting immorality."

At this the Judge again shuffled his papers together and whispered in a quiet voice that the court would sit on the morrow, and left the room.

The honours of the day had all been with Mr. Carson. Oscar left the box in a depressed way. One or two friends came towards him, but the majority held aloof, and in almost unbroken silence everyone slipped out of the court. Strange to say in my mind there was just a ray of hope. Mr. Carson was still laying stress on the article in "The Chameleon" and scattered passages in "Dorian Gray"; on Oscar's letters to Lord Alfred Douglas and Lord Alfred Douglas' poems in "The Chameleon". He must see, I thought, that all this was extremely weak. Sir Edward

Clarke could be trusted to tear all such arguments, founded on literary work, to shreds. There was room for more than reasonable doubt about all such things.

Why had not Mr. Carson put some of the young men he spoke of in the box? Would he be able to do that? He talked of Taylor as "the pivot of the case," and gibed at the prosecution for not putting Taylor in the box. Would he put Taylor in the box? And why, if he had such witnesses at his beck and call, should he lay stress on the flimsy, weak evidence to be drawn from passages in books and poems and letters? One thing was clear: if he was able to put any of the young men in the box about whom he had examined Oscar, Oscar was ruined. Even if he rested his defence on the letters and poems he'd win and Oscar would be discredited, for already it was clear that no jury would give Oscar Wilde a verdict against a father trying to protect his son. The issue had narrowed down to terrible straits: would it be utter ruin to Oscar or merely loss of the case and reputation? We had only sixteen hours to wait; they seemed to me to hold the last hope.

I drove to Tite Street, hoping to see Oscar. I was convinced that Carson had important witnesses at his command, and that the outcome of the case would be disastrous. Why should not Oscar even now, this very evening, cross to Calais, leaving a letter for his counsel and the court abandoning the idiotic prosecution.

The house at Tite Street seemed deserted. For some time no one answered my knocking and ringing, and then a man−servant simply told me that Mr. Wilde was not in: he did not know whether Mr. Wilde was expected back or not; did not think he was coming back. I turned and went home. I thought Oscar would probably say to me again:

"I can do nothing, Frank, nothing."

. . . . . .

The feeling in the court next morning was good tempered, even jaunty. The benches were filled with young barristers, all of whom had made up their minds that the testimony would be what one of them called "nifty." Everyone treated the case as practically over.

"But will Carson call witnesses?" I asked.

"Of course he will," they said, "but in any case Wilde does not stand a ghost of a chance of getting a verdict against Queensberry; he was a bally fool to bring such an action."

"The question is," said someone, "will Wilde face the music?"

My heart leapt. Perhaps he had gone, fled already to France to avoid this dreadful, useless torture. I could see the hounds with open mouths, dripping white fangs, and greedy eyes all closing in on the defenceless quarry. Would the huntsman give the word? We were not left long in doubt.

Mr. Carson continued his statement for the defence. He had sufficiently demonstrated to the jury, he thought, that, so far as Lord Queensberry was concerned, he was absolutely justified in bringing to a climax in the way he had, the connection between Mr. Oscar Wilde and his son. A dramatic pause.

A moment later the clever advocate resumed: unfortunately he had a more painful part of the case to approach. It would be his painful duty to bring before them one after the other the young men he had examined Mr. Wilde about and allow them to tell their tales. In no one of these cases were these young men on an equality in any way with Mr. Wilde. Mr. Wilde had told them that there was something beautiful and charming about youth which led him to make these acquaintances. That was a travesty of the facts. Mr. Wilde preferred to know nothing of these young men and their antecedents. He knew nothing about Wood; he knew nothing about Parker; he knew nothing about Scarfe, nothing about Conway, and not much about Taylor. The truth was Taylor was the procurer for Mr. Wilde and the jury would hear from this young man Parker, who would have to tell his unfortunate story to them, that he was poor, out of a place, had no money, and unfortunately fell a victim to Mr. Wilde. (Sir Edward Clarke here left the court.)

On the first evening they met, Mr. Wilde called Parker "Charlie" and Parker called Mr. Wilde "Oscar." It may be a very noble instinct in some people to wish to break down social barriers, but Mr. Wilde's conduct was not ordered by generous instincts. Luxurious dinners and champagne were not the way to assist a poor man. Parker would tell them that, after this first dinner, Mr. Wilde invited him to drive with him to the Savoy Hotel. Mr. Wilde had not told them why he had that suite of rooms at the Savoy Hotel. Parker would tell them what happened on arriving there. This was the scandal Lord Queensberry had referred to in his letter as far back as June or July last year. The jury would wonder not at the reports having reached Lord Queensberry's ears, but that Oscar Wilde had been tolerated in London society as long as he had been. Parker had since enlisted in the Army, and bore a good

character. Mr. Wilde himself had said that Parker was respectable. Parker would reluctantly present himself to tell his story to the jury.

All this time the court was hushed with awe and wonder; everyone was asking what on earth had induced Wilde to begin the prosecution; what madness had driven him and why had he listened to the insane advice to bring the action when he must have known the sort of evidence which could be brought against him.

After promising to produce Parker and the others Mr. Carson stopped speaking and began looking through his papers; when he began again, everyone held his breath; what was coming now? He proceeded in the same matter−of−fact and serious way to deal with the case of the youth, Conway. Conway, it appeared, had known Mr. Wilde and his family at Worthing. Conway was sixteen years of age. . . . . At this moment Sir Edward Clarke returned with Mr. Charles Mathews, and asked permission of the judge to have a word or two with Mr. Carson. At the close of a few minutes' talk between the counsel, Sir Edward Clarke rose and told the Judge that after communicating with Mr. Oscar Wilde he thought it better to withdraw the prosecution and submit to a verdict of "not guilty."

He minimised the defeat. He declared that, in respect to matters connected with literature and the letters, he could not resist the verdict of "not guilty," having regard to the fact that Lord Queensberry had not used a direct accusation, but the words "posing as," etc. Besides, he wished to spare the jury the necessity of investigating in detail matter of the most appalling character. He wished to make an end of the case−−and he sat down.

Why on earth did Sir Edward Clarke not advise Oscar in this way weeks before? Why did he not tell him his case could not possibly be won?

I have heard since on excellent authority that before taking up the case Sir Edward Clarke asked Oscar Wilde whether he was guilty or not, and accepted in good faith his assurance that he was innocent. As soon as he realised, in court, the strength of the case against Oscar he advised him to abandon the prosecution. To his astonishment Oscar was eager to abandon it. Sir Edward Clarke afterwards defended his unfortunate client out of loyalty and pity, Oscar again assuring him of his innocence.

Mr. Carson rose at once and insisted, as was his right, that this verdict of "not guilty" must be understood to mean that Lord Queensberry had succeeded in his plea of justification.

Mr. Justice Collins thought that it was not part of the function of the Judge and jury to insist on wading through prurient details, which had no bearing on the matter at issue, which had already been decided by the consent of the prosecutors to a verdict of "not guilty." Such a verdict meant of course that the plea of justification was proved. The jury having consulted for a few moments, the Clerk of Arraigns asked:

"Do you find the plea of justification has been proved or not?"

Foreman: "Yes."

"You say that the defendant is 'not guilty,' and that is the verdict of you all?"

Foreman: "Yes, and we also find that it is for the public benefit."

The last kick to the dead lion. As the verdict was read out the spectators in the court burst into cheers.

Mr. Carson: "Of course the costs of the defence will follow?"

Mr. Justice Collins: "Yes."

Mr. C. F. Gill: "And Lord Queensberry may be discharged?"

Mr. Justice Collins: "Certainly."

The Marquis of Queensberry left the dock amid renewed cheering, which was taken up again and again in the street.

CHAPTER XIV−−HOW GENIUS IS PERSECUTED IN ENGLAND

The English are very proud of their sense of justice, proud too of their Roman law and the practice of the Courts in which they have incorporated it. They boast of their fair play in all things as the French boast of their lightness, and if you question it, you lose caste with them, as one prejudiced or ignorant or both. English justice cannot be bought, they say, and if it is dear, excessively dear even, they rather like to feel they have paid a long price for a good article. Yet it may be that here, as in other things, they take outward propriety and decorum for the inward and ineffable grace. That a judge should be incorruptible is not so important as that he should be wise and humane.

English journalists and barristers were very much amused at the conduct of the Dreyfus case; yet, when Dreyfus was being tried for the second time in France, two or three instances of similar injustice in England were set forth with circumstance in one of the London newspapers, but no one paid any effective attention to them. If Dreyfus had been convicted in England, it is probable that no voice would ever have been raised in his favour; it is absolutely certain that there would never have been a second trial. A keen sense of abstract justice is only to be found in conjunction with a rich fount of imaginative sympathy. The English are too self−absorbed to take much interest in their neighbours' affairs, too busy to care for abstract questions of right or wrong.

Before the trial of Oscar Wilde I still believed that in a criminal case rough justice would be done in England. The bias of an English judge, I said to myself, is always in favour of the accused. It is an honourable tradition of English procedure that even the Treasury barristers should state rather less than they can prove against the unfortunate person who is being attacked by all the power and authority of the State. I was soon forced to see that these honourable and praiseworthy conventions were as withes of straw in the fire of English prejudice. The first thing to set me doubting was that the judge did not try to check the cheering in Court after the verdict in favour of Lord Queensberry. English judges always resent and resist such popular outbursts: why not in this case? After all, no judge could think Queensberry a hero: he was too well known for that, and yet the cheering swelled again and again, and the judge gathered up his papers without a word and went his way as if he were deaf. A dreadful apprehension crept over me: in spite of myself I began to realise that my belief in English justice might be altogether mistaken. It was to me as if the solid earth had become a quaking bog, or indeed as if a child had suddenly discovered its parent to be shameless. The subsequent trials are among the most painful experiences of my life. I shall try to set down all the incidents fairly.

One peculiarity had first struck me in the conduct of the case between Oscar Wilde and Lord Queensberry that did not seem to occur to any of the numberless journalists and writers who commented on the trial. It was apparent from his letter to his son (which I published in a previous chapter), and from the fact that he called at Oscar Wilde's house that Lord Queensberry at the beginning did not believe in the truth of his accusations; he set them forth as a violent man sets forth hearsay and suspicion, knowing that as a father he could do this with impunity, and accordingly at first he pleaded privilege. Some time between the beginning of the prosecution and the trial, he obtained an immense amount of unexpected evidence. He then justified his libel and gave the names of the persons whom he intended to call to prove his case. Where did he get this new knowledge?

I have spoken again and again in the course of this narrative of Oscar's enemies, asserting that the English middle−class as puritans detested his attitude and way of life, and if some fanatic or representative of the nonconformist conscience had hunted up evidence against Wilde and brought him to ruin there would have been nothing extraordinary in a vengeance which might have been regarded as a duty. Strange to say the effective hatred of Oscar Wilde was shown by a man of the upper class who was anything but a puritan. It was Mr. Charles Brookfield, I believe, who constituted himself private prosecutor in this case and raked Piccadilly to find witnesses against Oscar Wilde. Mr. Brookfield was afterwards appointed Censor of Plays on the strength apparently of having himself written one of the "riskiest" plays of the period. As I do not know Mr. Brookfield, I will not judge him. But his appointment always seemed to me, even before I knew that he had acted against Wilde, curiously characteristic of English life and of the casual, contemptuous way Englishmen of the governing class regard letters. In the same spirit Lord Salisbury as Prime Minister made a journalist Poet Laureate simply

because he had puffed him for years in the columns of "The Standard." Lord Salisbury probably neither knew nor cared that Alfred Austin had never written a line that could live. One thing Mr. Brookfield's witnesses established: every offence alleged against Oscar Wilde dated from 1892 or later−−after his first meeting with Lord Alfred Douglas.

But at the time all such matters were lost for me in the questions: would the authorities arrest Oscar? or would they allow him to escape? Had the police asked for a warrant? Knowing English custom and the desire of Englishmen to pass in silence over all unpleasant sexual matters, I thought he would be given the hint to go abroad and allowed to escape. That is the ordinary, the usual English procedure. Everyone knows the case of a certain lord, notorious for similar practices, who was warned by the police that a warrant had been issued against him: taking the hint he has lived for many years past in leisured ease as an honoured guest in Florence. Nor is it only aristocrats who are so favoured by English justice: everyone can remember the case of a Canon of Westminster who was similarly warned and also escaped. We can come down the social scale to the very bottom and find the same practice. A certain journalist unwittingly offended a great personage. Immediately he was warned by the police that a warrant issued against him in India seventeen years before would at once be acted upon if he did not make himself scarce. For some time he lived in peaceful retirement in Belgium. Moreover, in all these cases the warrants had been issued on the sworn complaints of the parties damnified or of their parents and guardians: no one had complained of Oscar Wilde. Naturally I thought the dislike of publicity which dictated such lenience to the lord and the canon and the journalist would be even more operative in the case of a man of genius like Oscar Wilde. In certain ways he had a greater position than even the son of a duke: the shocking details of his trial would have an appalling, a world−wide publicity.

Besides, I said to myself, the governing class in England is steeped in aristocratic prejudice, and particularly when threatened by democratic innovations, all superiorities, whether of birth or wealth, or talent, are conscious of the same "raison d'etre" and have the same self−interest. The lord, the millionaire and the genius have all the same reason for standing up for each other, and this reason is usually effective. Everyone knows that in England the law is emphatically a respecter of persons. It is not there to promote equality, much less is it the defender of the helpless, the weak and the poor; it is a rampart for the aristocracy and the rich, a whip in the hands of the strong. It is always used to increase the effect of natural and inherited inequality, and it is not directed by a high feeling of justice; but perverted by aristocratic prejudice and snobbishness; it is not higher than democratic equality, but lower and more sordid.

The case was just a case where an aristocratic society could and should have shown its superiority over a democratic society with its rough rule of equality. For equality is only half−way on the road to justice. More than once the House of Commons has recognised this fundamental truth; it condemned Clive but added that he had rendered "great and distinguished services to his country"; and no one thought of punishing him for his crimes.

Our time is even more tolerant and more corrupt. For a worse crime than extortion Cecil Rhodes was not even brought to trial, but honoured and feted, while his creatures, who were condemned by the House of Commons Committee, were rewarded by the Government.

Had not Wilde also rendered distinguished services to his country? The wars waged against the Mashonas and Matabeles were a doubtful good; but the plays of Oscar Wilde had already given many hours of innocent pleasure to thousands of persons, and were evidently destined to benefit tens of thousands in the future. Such a man is a benefactor of humanity in the best and truest sense, and deserves peculiar consideration.

To the society favourite the discredit of the trial with Lord Queensberry was in itself a punishment more than sufficient. Everyone knew when Oscar Wilde left the court that he left it a ruined and disgraced man. Was it worth while to stir up all the foul mud again in order to beat the beaten? Alas! the English are pedants, as Goethe saw; they think little of literary men, or of merely spiritual achievements. They love to abide by rules and pay no heed to exceptions, unless indeed the exceptions are men of title or great wealth, or "persons of importance" to the Government. The majority of the people are too ignorant to know the value of a book and they regard poetry as the thistledown of speech. It does not occur to Englishmen that a phrase may be more valuable and more enduring in its effects than a long campaign and a dozen victories. Yet, the sentence, "Let him that is without sin among you first cast the stone," or Shakespeare's version of the same truth: "if we had our deserts which of us would escape whipping?" is likely to outlast the British Empire, and prove of more value to humanity.

The man of genius in Great Britain is feared and hated in exact proportion to his originality, and if he happens

to be a writer or a musician he is despised to boot. The prejudice against Oscar Wilde showed itself virulently on all hands. Mr. Justice Collins did not attempt to restrain the cheering of the court that greeted the success of Lord Queensberry. Not one of the policemen who stood round the door tried to stop the "booing" of the crowd who pursued Oscar Wilde with hootings and vile cries when he left the court. He was judged already and condemned before being tried.

The police, too, acted against him with extraordinary vigour. It has been stated by Mr. Sherard in his "Life" that the police did not attempt to execute the warrant against Wilde, "till after the last train had left for Dover," and that it was only Oscar's obstinacy in remaining in London that necessitated his arrest. This idea is wholly imaginary.

It is worth while to know exactly what took place at this juncture. From Oscar's conduct in this crisis the reader will be able to judge whether he has been depicted faithfully or not in this book. He has been described as amiable, weak, of a charming disposition−−easily led in action, though not in thought: now we shall see how far we were justified, for he is at one of those moments which try the soul. Fortunately every incident of that day is known: Oscar himself told me generally what happened and the minutest details of the picture were filled in for me a little later by his best friend, Robert Ross.

In the morning Mr. Mathews, one of Oscar's counsel, came to him and said: "If you wish it, Clarke and I will keep the case going and give you time to get to Calais."

Oscar refused to stir. "I'll stay," was all he would say. Robert Ross urged him to accept Mathew's offer; but he would not: why? I am sure he had no reason, for I put the question to him more than once, and even after reflecting, he had no explanation to give. He stayed because to stay was easier than to make an immediate decision and act on it energetically. He had very little will power to begin with and his mode of life had weakened his original endowment.

After the judgment had been given in favour of Queensberry, Oscar drove off in a brougham, accompanied by Alfred Douglas, to consult with his solicitor, Humphreys. At the same time he gave Ross a cheque on his bank in St. James's Street. At that moment he intended to fly.

Ross noticed that he was followed by a detective. He drew about L200 from the bank and raced off to meet Oscar at the Cadogan Hotel, in Sloane Street, where Lord Alfred Douglas had been staying for the past four or five weeks. Ross reached the Cadogan Hotel about 1.45 and found Oscar there with Reggie Turner. Both of them advised Oscar to go at once to Dover and try to get to France; but he would only say, "the train has gone; it is too late." He had again lapsed into inaction.

He asked Ross to go to see his wife and tell her what had occurred. Ross did this and had a very painful scene: Mrs. Wilde wept and said, "I hope Oscar is going away abroad."

Ross returned to the Cadogan Hotel and told Oscar what his wife had said, but even this didn't move him to action.

He sat as if glued to his chair, and drank hock and seltzer steadily in almost unbroken silence. About four o'clock George Wyndham came to see his cousin, Alfred Douglas; not finding him, he wanted to see Oscar, but Oscar, fearing reproaches, sent Ross instead. Wyndham said it was a pity that Bosie Douglas should be with Oscar, and Ross immediately told him that Wilde's friends for years past had been trying to separate them and that if he, Wyndham, would keep his cousin away, he would be doing Oscar the very greatest kindness. At this Wyndham grew more civil, though still "frightfully agitated," and begged Ross to get Oscar to leave the country at once to avoid scandal. Ross replied that he and Turner had been trying to bring that about for hours. In the middle of the conversation Bosie, having returned, burst into the room with: "I want to see my cousin," and Ross rejoined Oscar. In a quarter of an hour Bosie followed him to say that he was going out with Wyndham to see someone of importance.

About five o'clock a reporter of the "Star" newspaper came to see Oscar, a Mr. Marlowe, who is now editor of "The Daily Mail", but again Oscar refused to see him and sent Ross. Mr. Marlowe was sympathetic and quite understood the position; he informed Ross that a tape message had come through to the paper saying that a warrant for Oscar Wilde had already been issued. Ross immediately went into the other room and told Oscar, who said nothing, but "went very grey in the face."

A moment later Oscar asked Ross to give him the money he had got at the bank, though he had refused it several times in the course of the day. Ross gave it to him, naturally taking it for a sign that he had at length made

up his mind to start, but immediately afterwards Oscar settled down in his chair and said, "I shall stay and do my sentence whatever it is"−−a man evidently incapable of action.

For the next hour the trio sat waiting for the blow to fall. Once or twice Oscar asked querulously where Bosie was, but no one could tell him.

At ten past six the waiter knocked at the door and Ross answered it. There were two detectives. The elder entered and said, "We have a warrant here, Mr. Wilde, for your arrest on a charge of committing indecent acts." Wilde wanted to know whether he would be given bail; the detective replied:

"That is a question for the magistrate."

Oscar then rose and asked, "Where shall I be taken?"

"To Bow Street," was the reply.

As he picked up a copy of the Yellow Book and groped for his overcoat, they all noticed that he was "very drunk" though still perfectly conscious of what he was doing.

He asked Ross to go to Tite Street and get him a change of clothes and bring them to Bow Street. The two detectives took him away in a four−wheeler, leaving Ross and Turner on the curb.

Ross hurried to Tite Street. He found that Mrs. Oscar Wilde had gone to the house of a relative and there was only Wilde's man servant, Arthur, in the house, who afterwards went out of his mind, and is still, it is said, in an asylum. He had an intense affection for Oscar. Ross found that Mrs. Oscar Wilde had locked up Oscar's bedroom and study. He burst open the bedroom door and, with the help of Arthur, packed up a change of things. He then hurried to Bow Street, where he found a howling mob shouting indecencies. He was informed by an inspector that it was impossible to see Wilde or to leave any clothes for him.

Ross returned at once to Tite Street, forced open the library door and removed a certain number of letters and manuscripts of Wilde's; but unluckily he couldn't find the two MSS. which he knew had been returned to Tite Street two days before, namely, "A Florentine Tragedy" and the enlarged version of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H."

Ross then drove to his mother's and collapsed. Mrs. Ross insisted that he should go abroad, and in order to induce him to do it gave L500 for Oscar's defence. Ross went to the Terminus Hotel at Calais, where Bosie Douglas joined him a little later. They both stayed there while Oscar was being tried before Mr. Justice Charles and one day George Wyndham crossed the Channel to see Bosie Douglas.

There is of course some excuse to be made for the chief actor. Oscar was physically tired and morally broken. He had pulled the fair building of reputation and success down upon his own head, and, with the "booing" of the mob still in his ears, he could think of nothing but the lost hours when he ought to have used his money to take him beyond the reach of his pursuers.

His enemies, on the other hand, had acted with the utmost promptitude. Lord Queensberry's solicitor, Mr. Charles Russell, had stated that it was not his client's intention to take the initiative in any criminal prosecution of Mr. Oscar Wilde, but, on the very same morning when Wilde withdrew from the prosecution, Mr. Russell sent a letter to the Hon. Hamilton Cuffe, the Director of Public Prosecutions, with a copy of "all our witnesses' statements, together with a copy of the shorthand notes of the trial."

The Treasury authorities were at least as eager. As soon as possible after leaving the court Mr. C. F. Gill, Mr. Angus Lewis, and Mr. Charles Russell waited on Sir John Bridge at Bow Street in his private room and obtained a warrant for the arrest of Oscar Wilde, which was executed, as we have seen, the same evening.

The police showed him less than no favour. About eight o'clock Lord Alfred Douglas drove to Bow Street and wanted to know if Wilde could be bailed out, but was informed that his application could not be entertained. He offered to procure comforts for the prisoner: this offer also was peremptorily refused by the police inspector just as Ross's offer of night clothes had been refused. It is a common belief that in England a man is treated as innocent until he has been proved guilty, but those who believe this pleasant fiction, have never been in the hands of the English police. As soon as a man is arrested on any charge he is at once treated as if he were a dangerous criminal; he is searched, for instance, with every circumstance of indignity. Before his conviction a man is allowed to wear his own clothes; but a change of linen or clothes is denied him, or accorded in part and grudgingly, for no earthly reason except to gratify the ill−will of the gaolers.

The warrant on which Oscar Wilde was arrested charged him with an offence alleged to have been committed under Section xi. of the Criminal Amendment Act of 1885; in other words, he was arrested and tried for an offence which was not punishable by law ten years before. This Act was brought in as a result of the shameful and

sentimental stories (evidently for the most part manufactured) which Mr. Stead had published in "The Pall Mall Gazette" under the title of "Modern Babylon." In order to cover and justify their prophet some of the "unco guid" pressed forward this so−called legislative reform, by which it was made a criminal offence to take liberties with a girl under thirteen years of age−−even with her own consent. Intimacy with minors under sixteen was punishable if they consented or even tempted. Mr. Labouchere, the Radical member, inflamed, it is said, with a desire to make the law ridiculous, gravely proposed that the section be extended, so as to apply to people of the same sex who indulged in familiarities or indecencies. The Puritan faction had no logical objection to the extension, and it became the law of the land. It was by virtue of this piece of legislative wisdom, which is without a model and without a copy in the law of any other civilised country, that Oscar Wilde was arrested and thrown into prison.

His arrest was the signal for an orgy of Philistine rancour such as even London had never known before. The puritan middle class, which had always regarded Wilde with dislike as an artist and intellectual scoffer, a mere parasite of the aristocracy, now gave free scope to their disgust and contempt, and everyone tried to outdo his neighbour in expressions of loathing and abhorrence. This middle class condemnation swept the lower class away in its train. To do them justice, the common people, too, felt a natural loathing for the peculiar vice attributed to Wilde; most men condemn the sins they have no mind to; but their dislike was rather contemptuous than profound, and with customary humour they soon turned the whole case into a bestial, obscene joke. "Oscar" took the place of their favourite word as a term of contempt, and they shouted it at each other on all sides; bus−drivers, cabbies and paper sellers using it in and out of season with the keenest relish. For the moment the upper classes lay mum− chance and let the storm blow over. Some of them of course agreed with the condemnation of the Puritans, and many of them felt that Oscar and his associates had been too bold, and ought to be pulled up.

The English journals, which are nothing but middle−class shops, took the side of their patrons. Without a single exception they outdid themselves in condemnation of the man and all his works. You might have thought to read their bitter diatribes that they themselves lived saintly lives, and were shocked at sensual sin. One rubbed one's eyes in amazement. The Strand and Fleet Street, which practically belong to this class and have been fashioned by them, are the haunt of as vile a prostitution as can be found in Europe; the public houses which these men frequent are low drinking dens; yet they all lashed Oscar Wilde with every variety of insult as if they themselves had been above reproach. The whole of London seemed to have broken loose in a rage of contempt and loathing which was whipped up and justified each morning by the hypocritical articles of the "unco guid" in the daily this and the weekly that. In the streets one heard everywhere the loud jests of the vulgar, decked out with filthy anecdotes and punctuated by obscene laughter, as from the mouth of the Pit.

In spite of the hatred of the journalists pandering to the prejudice of their paymasters, one could hope still that the magistrate would show some regard for fair play. The expectation, reasonable or unreasonable, was doomed to disappointment. On Saturday morning, the 6th, Oscar Wilde, "described as a gentleman," the papers said in derision, was brought before Sir John Bridge. Mr. C. F. Gill, who had been employed in the Queensberry trial, was instructed by Mr. Angus Lewis of the Treasury, and conducted the prosecution; Alfred Taylor was placed in the dock charged with conspiracy with Oscar Wilde. The witnesses have already been described in connection with the Queensberry case. Charles Parker, William Parker, Alfred Wood, Sidney Mavor and Shelley all gave evidence.

After lasting all day the case was adjourned till the following Thursday.

Mr. Travers Humphreys applied for bail for Mr. Wilde, on the ground that he knew the warrant against him was being applied for on Friday afternoon, but he made no attempt to leave London. Sir John Bridge refused bail.

On Thursday, the 11th, the case was continued before Sir John Bridge, and in the end both the accused were committed for trial. Again Mr. Humphreys applied for bail, and again the magistrate refused to accept bail.

Now to refuse bail in cases of serious crime may be defended, but in the case of indecent conduct it is usually granted. To run away is regarded as a confession of guilt, and what could one wish for more than the perpetual banishment of the corrupt liver, consequently there is no reason to refuse bail. But in this case, though bail was offered to any amount, it was refused peremptorily in spite of the fact that every consideration should have been shown to an accused person who had already had a good opportunity to leave the country and had refused to budge. Moreover, Oscar Wilde had already been criticised and condemned in a hundred papers. There was widespread prejudice against him, no risk to the public in accepting bail, and considerable injury done to the accused in refusing it. His affairs were certain to be thrown into confusion; he was known not to be rich and yet

he was deprived of the power to get money together and to collect evidence just when the power which freedom confers was most needed by him.

The magistrate was as prejudiced as the public; he had no more idea of standing for justice and fair play than Pilate; probably, indeed, he never gave himself the trouble to think of fairness in the matter. A large salary is paid to magistrates in London, L1,500 a year, but it is rare indeed that any of them rises above the vulgarest prejudice. Sir John Bridge not only refused bail but he was careful to give his reasons for refusing it: he had not the slightest scruple about prejudicing the case even before he had heard a word of the defence. After hearing the evidence for the prosecution he said:

"The responsibility of accepting or refusing bail rests upon me. The considerations that weigh with me are the gravity of the offences and the strength of the evidence. I must absolutely refuse bail and send the prisoners for trial."

Now these reasons, which he proffered voluntarily, and especially the use of the word "absolutely," showed not only prejudice on the part of Sir John Bridge, but the desire to injure the unfortunate prisoner in the public mind and so continue the evil work of the journalists.

The effect of this prejudice and rancour on the part of the whole community had various consequences.

The mere news that Oscar Wilde had been arrested and taken to Holloway startled London and gave the signal for a strange exodus. Every train to Dover was crowded; every steamer to Calais thronged with members of the aristocratic and leisured classes, who seemed to prefer Paris, or even Nice out of the season, to a city like London, where the police might act with such unexpected vigour. The truth was that the cultured aesthetes whom I have already described had been thunderstruck by the facts which the Queensberry trial had laid bare. For the first time they learned that such houses as Taylor's were under police supervision, and that creatures like Wood and Parker were classified and watched. They had imagined that in "the home of liberty" such practices passed unnoticed. It came as a shock to their preconceived ideas that the police in London knew a great many things which they were not supposed to concern themselves with, and this unwelcome glare of light drove the vicious forth in wild haste.

Never was Paris so crowded with members of the English governing classes; here was to be seen a famous ex−Minister; there the fine face of the president of a Royal society; at one table in the Cafe; de la Paix, a millionaire recently ennobled, and celebrated for his exquisite taste in art; opposite to him a famous general. It was even said that a celebrated English actor took a return ticket for three or four days to Paris, just to be in the fashion. The mummer returned quickly; but the majority of the migrants stayed abroad for some time. The wind of terror which had swept them across the Channel opposed their return, and they scattered over the Continent from Naples to Monte Carlo and from Palermo to Seville under all sorts of pretexts.

The gravest result of the magistrate's refusal to accept bail was purely personal. Oscar's income dried up at the source. His books were withdrawn from sale; no one went to see his plays; every shop keeper to whom he owed a penny took immediate action against him. Judgments were obtained and an execution put into his house in Tite Street. Within a month, at the very moment when he most needed money to fee counsel and procure evidence, he was beggared and sold up, and because of his confinement in prison the sale was conducted under such conditions that, whereas in ordinary times his effects would have covered the claims against him three times over, all his belongings went for nothing, and the man who was making L4,000 or L5,000 a year by his plays was adjudicated a bankrupt for a little over L1,000. L600 of this sum were for Lord Queensberry's costs which the Queensberry family−−Lord Douglas of Hawick, Lord Alfred Douglas and their mother−−had promised in writing to pay, but when the time came, absolutely refused to pay. Most unfortunately many of Oscar's MSS. were stolen or lost in the disorder of the sheriff's legal proceedings. Wilde could have cried, with Shylock, "You take my life when you do take away the means whereby I live." But at the time nine Englishmen out of ten applauded what was practically persecution.

A worse thing remains to be told. The right of free speech which Englishmen pride themselves on had utterly disappeared, as it always does disappear in England when there is most need of it. It was impossible to say one word in Wilde's defence or even in extenuation of his sin in any London print. At this time I owned the greater part of the "Saturday Review" and edited it. Here at any rate one might have thought I could have set forth in a Christian country a sane and liberal view. I had no wish to minimise the offence. No one condemned unnatural vice more than I, but Oscar Wilde was a distinguished man of letters; he had written beautiful things, and his good works should have been allowed to speak in his favour. I wrote an article setting forth this view. My printers

immediately informed me that they thought the article ill−advised, and when I insisted they said they would prefer not to print it. Yet there was nothing in it beyond a plea to suspend judgment and defer insult till after the trial. Messrs. Smith and Sons, the great booksellers, who somehow got wind of the matter (through my publisher, I believe), sent to say that they would not sell any paper that attempted to defend Oscar Wilde; it would be better even, they added, not to mention his name. The English tradesman−censors were determined that this man should have Jedburg justice. I should have ruined the "Saturday Review" by the mere attempt to treat the matter fairly.

In this extremity I went to the great leader of public opinion in England. Mr. Arthur Walter, the manager of "The Times", had always been kind to me; he was a man of balanced mind, who had taken high honours at Oxford in his youth, and for twenty years had rubbed shoulders with the leading men in every rank of life. I went down to stay with him in Berkshire, and I urged upon him what I regarded as the aristocratic view. In England it was manifest that under the circumstances there was no chance of a fair trial, and it seemed to me the duty of "The Times" to say plainly that this man should not be condemned beforehand, and that if he were condemned his merits should be taken into consideration in his punishment, as well as his demerits.

While willing to listen to me, Mr. Walter did not share my views. A man who had written a great poem or a great play did not rank in his esteem with a man who had won a skirmish against a handful of unarmed savages, or one who had stolen a piece of land from some barbarians and annexed it to the Empire. In his heart he held the view of the English landed aristocracy, that the ordinary successful general or admiral or statesman was infinitely more important than a Shakespeare or a Browning. He could not be persuaded to believe that the names of Gladstone, Disraeli, Wolseley, Roberts, and Wood, would diminish and fade from day to day till in a hundred years they would scarcely be known, even to the educated; whereas the fame of Browning, Swinburne, Meredith, or even Oscar Wilde, would increase and grow brighter with time, till, in one hundred or five hundred years, no one would dream of comparing pushful politicians like Gladstone or Beaconsfield with men of genius like Swinburne or Wilde. He simply would not see it and when he perceived that the weight of argument was against him he declared that if it were true, it was so much the worse for humanity. In his opinion anyone living a clean life was worth more than a writer of love songs or the maker of clever comedies−−Mr. John Smith worth more than Shakespeare!

He was as deaf as only Englishmen can be deaf to the plea for abstract justice.

"You don't even say Wilde's innocent," he threw at me more than once.

"I believe him to be innocent," I declared truthfully, "but it is better that a hundred guilty men go free than that one man should not have a fair trial. And how can this man have a fair trial now when the papers for weeks past have been filled with violent diatribes against him and his works?"

One point, peculiarly English, he used again and again.

"So long as substantial justice is done," he said, "it is all we care about."

"Substantial justice will never be done," I cried, "so long as that is your ideal. Your arrow can never go quite so high as it is aimed." But I got no further.

If Oscar Wilde had been a general or a so−called empire builder, "The Times" might have affronted public opinion and called attention to his virtues, and argued that they should be taken in extenuation of his offences; but as he was only a writer no one seemed to owe him anything or to care what became of him.

Mr. Walter was fair−minded in comparison with most men of his class. There was staying with him at this very time an Irish gentleman, who listened to my pleading for Wilde with ill−concealed indignation. Excited by Arthur Walter's obstinacy to find fresh arguments, I pointed out that Wilde's offence was pathological and not criminal and would not be punished in a properly constituted state.

"You admit," I said, "that we punish crime to prevent it spreading; wipe this sin off the statute book and you would not increase the sinners by one: then why punish them?"

"Oi'd whip such sinners to death, so I would," cried the Irishman; "hangin's too good for them."

"You only punished lepers," I went on, "in the middle ages, because you believed that leprosy was catching: this malady is not even catching."

"Faith, Oi'd punish it with extermination," cried the Irishman.

Exasperated by the fact that his idiot prejudice was hurting my friend, I said at length with a smile:

"You are very bitter: I'm not; you see, I have no sexual jealousy to inflame me."

On this Mr. Walter had to interfere between us to keep the peace, but the mischief was done: my advocacy

remained without effect.

It is very curious how deep−rooted and enduring is the prejudice against writers in England. Not only is no attempt made to rate them at their true value, at the value which posterity puts upon their work; but they are continually treated as outcasts and denied the most ordinary justice. The various trials of Oscar Wilde are to the thinker an object lesson in the force of this prejudice, but some may explain the prejudice against Wilde on the score of the peculiar abhorrence with which the offence ascribed to him is regarded in England.

Let me take an example from the papers of today−−I am writing in January, 1910. I find in my "Daily Mail" that at Bow Street police court a London magistrate, Sir Albert de Rutzen, ordered the destruction of 272 volumes of the English translation of Balzac's "Les Contes Drolatiques" on the ground that the book was obscene. "Les Contes Drolatiques" is an acknowledged masterpiece, and is not nearly so free spoken as "Lear" or "Hamlet" or "Tom Jones" or "Anthony and Cleopatra." What would be thought of a French magistrate or a German magistrate who ordered a fair translation of "Hamlet" or of "Lear" to be burnt, because of its obscenity? He would be regarded as demented. One can only understand such a judgment as an isolated fact. But in England this monstrous stupidity is the rule. Sir A. de Rutzen was not satisfied with ordering the books to be burnt and fining the bookseller; he went on to justify his condemnation and praise the police:

"It is perfectly clear to my mind that a more foul and filthy black spot has not been found in London for a long time, and the police have done uncommonly well in bringing the matter to light. I consider that the books are likely to do a great deal of harm."

Fancy the state of mind of the man who can talk such poisonous nonsense; who, with the knowledge of what Piccadilly is at night in his mind, can speak of the translation of a masterpiece as one of the "most filthy black spots" to be found in London. To say that such a man is insane is, I suppose, going too far; but to say that he does not know the value or the meaning of the words he uses, to say that he is driven by an extraordinary and brainless prejudice, is certainly the modesty of truth.

It is this sort of perversity on the part of Sir A. de Rutzen and of nine out of ten Englishmen that makes Frenchmen, Germans and Italians speak of them as ingrained hypocrites. But they are not nearly so hypocritical as they are uneducated and unintelligent, rebellious to the humanising influence of art and literature. The ordinary Englishman would much prefer to be called an athlete than a poet. The Puritan Commonwealth Parliament ordered the pictures of Charles I. to be sold, but such of them as were indecent to be burnt; accordingly half a dozen Titians were solemnly burnt and the nucleus of a great national gallery destroyed. One can see Sir A. de Rutzen solemnly assisting at this holocaust and devoutly deciding that all the masterpieces which showed temptingly a woman's beautiful breasts were "foul and filthy black spots" and must be burnt as harmful. Or rather one can see that Sir A. de Rutzen has in two and a half centuries managed to get a little beyond this primitive Puritan standpoint: he might allow a pictorial masterpiece to−day to pass unburnt, but a written masterpiece is still to him anathema.

A part of this prejudice comes from the fact that the English have a special dislike for every form of sexual indulgence. It is not consistent with their ideal of manhood, and, like the poor foolish magistrate, they have not yet grasped the truth, which one might have thought the example of the Japanese would have made plain by now to the dullest, that a nation may be extraordinarily brave, vigorous and self−sacrificing and at the same time intensely sensuous, and sensitive to every refinement of passion. If the great English middle class were as well educated as the German middle class, such a judgment as this of Sir A. de Rutzen would be scouted as ridiculous and absurd, or rather would be utterly unthinkable.

In Anglo−Saxon countries both the artist and the sexual passion are under a ban. The race is more easily moved martially than amorously and it regards its overpowering combative instincts as virtuous just as it is apt to despise what it likes to call "languishing love." The poet Middleton couldn't put his dream city in England−−a city of fair skies and fairer streets:

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And joy was there; in all the city's length
I saw no fingers trembling for the sword;
Nathless they doted on their bodies' strength,
That they might gentler be.  Love was their lord.
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Both America and England today offer terrifying examples of the despotism of an unenlightened and vulgar public opinion in all the highest concerns of man−−in art, in literature and in religion. There is no despotism on earth so soul− destroying to the artist: it is baser and more degrading than anything known in Russia. The consequences of this tyranny of an uneducated middle class and a barbarian aristocracy are shown in detail in the trial of Oscar Wilde and in the savagery with which he was treated by the English officers of justice.

CHAPTER XV−−THE QUEEN VS. WILDE: THE FIRST TRIAL

As soon as I heard that Oscar Wilde was arrested and bail refused, I tried to get permission to visit him in Holloway. I was told I should have to see him in a kind of barred cage; and talk to him from the distance of at least a yard. It seemed to me too painful for both of us, so I went to the higher authorities and got permission to see him in a private room. The Governor met me at the entrance of the prison: to my surprise he was more than courteous; charmingly kind and sympathetic.

"We all hope," he said, "that he will soon be free; this is no place for him. Everyone likes him, everyone. It is a great pity."

He evidently felt much more than he said, and my heart went out to him. He left me in a bare room furnished with a small square deal table and two kitchen chairs. In a moment or two Oscar came in accompanied by a warder. In silence we clasped hands. He looked miserably anxious and pulled down and I felt that I had nothing to do but cheer him up.

"I am glad to see you," I cried. "I hope the warders are kind to you?"

"Yes, Frank," he replied in a hopeless way, "but everyone else is against me: it is hard."

"Don't harbour that thought," I answered; "many whom you don't know, and whom you will never know, are on your side. Stand for them and for the myriads who are coming afterwards and make a fight of it."

"I'm afraid I'm not a fighter, Frank, as you once said," he replied sadly, "and they won't give me bail. How can I get evidence or think in this place of torture? Fancy refusing me bail," he went on, "though I stayed in London when I might have gone abroad."

"You should have gone," I cried in French, hot with indignation; "why didn't you go, the moment you came out of the court?"

"I couldn't think at first," he answered in the same tongue; "I couldn't think at all: I was numbed."

"Your friends should have thought of it," I insisted, not knowing then that they had done their best.

At this moment the warder, who had turned away towards the door, came back.

"You are not allowed, sir, to talk in a foreign language," he said quietly. "You will understand we have to obey the rules. Besides, the prisoner must not speak of this prison as a place of torture. I ought to report that; I'm sorry."

The misery of it all brought tears to my eyes: his gaolers even felt sorry for him. I thanked the warder and turned again to Oscar.

"Don't let yourself fear at all," I exclaimed. "You will have your chance again and must take it; only don't lose heart and don't be witty next time in court. The jury hate it. They regard it as intellectual superiority and impudence. Treat all things seriously and with grave dignity. Defend yourself as David would have defended his love for Jonathan. Make them all listen to you. I would undertake to get free with half your talent even if I were guilty; a resolution not to be beaten is always half the battle. . . . . Make your trial memorable from your entrance into the court to the decision of the jury. Use every opportunity and give your real character a chance to fight for you."

I spoke with tears in my eyes and rage in my heart.

"I will do my best, Frank," he said despondingly, "I will do my best. If I were out of this place, I might think of something, but it is dreadful to be here. One has to go to bed by daylight and the nights are interminable."

"Haven't you a watch?" I cried.

They don't allow you to have a watch in prison," he replied.

"But why not?" I asked in amazement. I did not know that every rule in an English prison is cunningly devised to annoy and degrade the unfortunate prisoner.

Oscar lifted his hands hopelessly:

"One may not smoke; not even a cigarette; and so I cannot sleep. All the past comes back; the golden hours; the June days in London with the sunshine dappling the grass and the silken rustling of the wind in the trees. Do you remember Wordsworth speaks 'of the wind in the trees'? How I wish I could hear it now, breathe it once

again. I might get strength then to fight."

"Is the food good?" I asked.

"It's all right; I get it from outside. The food doesn't matter. It is the smoking I miss, the freedom, the companionship. My mind will not act when I'm alone. I can only think of what has been and torment myself. Already I've been punished enough for the sins of a lifetime."

"Is there nothing I can do for you, nothing you want?" I asked.

"No, Frank," he answered, "it was kind of you to come to see me, I wish I could tell you how kind."

"Don't think of it," I said; "if I'm any good send for me at any moment: a word will bring me. They allow you books, don't they?"

"Yes, Frank."

"I wish you would get the 'Apologia of Plato'," I said, "and take a big draught of that deathless smiling courage of Socrates."

"Ah, Frank, how much more humane were the Greeks. They let his friends see him and talk to him by the hour, though he was condemned to death. There were no warders there to listen, no degrading conditions."

"Quite true," I cried, suddenly realising how much better Oscar Wilde would have been treated in Athens two thousand years ago. "Our progress is mainly change; we don't shed our cruelty; even Christ has not been able to humanise us."

He nodded his head. At first he seemed greatly distressed; but I managed to encourage him a little, for at the close of the talk he questioned me:

"Do you really think I may win, Frank?"

"Of course you'll win," I replied. "You must win: you must not think of being beaten. Take it that they will not want to convict you. Say it to yourself in the court; don't let yourself fear for a moment. Your enemies are merely stupid, unhappy creatures crawling about for a few miserable years between earth and sun; fated to die and leave no trace, no memory. Remember you are fighting for all of us, for every artist and thinker who is to be born into the English world. . . . . It is better to win like Galileo than to be burnt like Giordano Bruno. Don't let them make another martyr. Use all your brains and eloquence and charm. Don't be afraid. They will not condemn you if they know you."

"I have been trying to think," he said, "trying to make up my mind to bear one whole year of this life. It's dreadful, Frank, I had no idea that prison was so dreadful."

The warder again drew down his brows. I hastened to change the subject.

"That's why you must resolve not to have any more of it," I said; "I wish I had seen you when you came out of court, but I really thought you didn't want me; you turned away from me."

"Oh, Frank, how could I?" he cried. "I should have been so grateful to you."

"I'm very shortsighted," I rejoined, "and I thought you did. It is our foolish little vanities which prevent us acting as we should. But let me know if I can do anything for you. If you want me, I'll come at any moment."

I said this because the warder had already given me a sign; he now said:

"Time is up."

Once again we clasped hands.

"You must win," I said; "don't think of defeat. Even your enemies are human. Convert them. You can do it, believe me," and I went with dread in my heart, and pity and indignation.

Be still, be still, my soul; it is but for a season: Let us endure an hour and see injustice done.

The Governor met me almost at the door.

"It is terrible," I exclaimed.

"This is no place for him," he answered. "He has nothing to do with us here. Everyone likes him and pities him: the warders, everyone. Anything I can do to make his stay tolerable shall be done."

We shook hands. I think there were tears in both our eyes as we parted. This humane Governor had taught me that Oscar's gentleness and kindness−−his sweetness of nature−−would win all hearts if it had time to make itself known. Yet there he was in prison. His face and figure came before me again and again: the unshaven face; the frightened, sad air; the hopeless, toneless voice. The cleanliness even of the bare hard room was ugly; the English are foolish enough to degrade those they punish. Revolt was blazing in me.

As I went away I looked up at the mediaeval castellated gateway of the place, and thought how perfectly the

architecture suited the spirit of the institution. The whole thing belongs to the middle ages, and not to our modern life. Fancy having both prison and hospital side by side; indeed a hospital even in the prison; torture and lovingkindness; punishment and pity under the same roof. What a blank contradiction and stupidity. Will civilisation never reach humane ideals? Will men always punish most severely the sins they do not understand and which hold for them no temptation? Did Jesus suffer in vain?

. . . . . .

Oscar Wilde was committed on the 19th of April; a "true bill" was found against him by the grand jury on the 24th; and, as the case was put down for trial at the Old Bailey almost immediately, a postponement was asked for till the May sessions, on the ground first that the defence had not had time to prepare their case and further, that in the state of popular feeling at the moment, Mr. Wilde would not get a fair and impartial trial. Mr. Justice Charles, who was to try the case, heard the application and refused it peremptorily: "Any suggestion that the defendant would not have a fair trial was groundless," he declared; yet he knew better. In his summing up of the case on May 1st he stated that "for weeks it had been impossible to open a newspaper without reading some reference to the case," and when he asked the jury not to allow "preconceived opinions to weigh with them" he was admitting the truth that every newspaper reference was charged with dislike and contempt of Oscar Wilde. A fair trial indeed!

The trial took place at the Old Bailey, three days later, April 27th, 1895, before Mr. Justice Charles. Mr. C. F. Gill and A. Gill with Mr. Horace Avory appeared for the Public Prosecutor. Mr. Wilde was again defended by Sir Edward Clarke, Mr. Charles Mathews and Mr. Travers Humphreys, while Mr. J. P. Grain and Mr. Paul Taylor were counsel for the other prisoner. The trial began on a Saturday and the whole of the day was taken up with a legal argument. I am not going to give the details of the case. I shall only note the chief features of it and the unfairness which characterised it.

Sir Edward Clarke pointed out that there was one set of charges under the Criminal Law Amendment Act and another set of charges of conspiracy. He urged that the charges of conspiracy should be dropped. Under the counts alleging conspiracy, the defendants could not be called on as witnesses, which put the defence at a disadvantage. In the end the Judge decided that there were inconveniences; but he would not accede to Sir Edward Clarke's request. Later in the trial, however, Mr. Gill himself withdrew the charges of conspiracy, and the Judge admitted explicitly in his summing up that, if he had known the evidence which was to be offered, he would not have allowed these charges of conspiracy to be made. By this confession he apparently cleared his conscience just as Pilate washed his hands. But the wrong had already been done. Not only did this charge of conspiracy embarrass the defence, but if it had never been made, as it should never have been made, then Sir Edward Clarke would have insisted and could have insisted properly that the two men should be tried separately, and Wilde would not have been discredited by being coupled with Taylor, whose character was notorious and who had already been in the hands of the police on a similar charge.

This was not the only instance of unfairness in the conduct of the prosecution. The Treasury put a youth called Atkins in the box, thus declaring him to be at least a credible witness; but Atkins was proved by Sir Edward Clarke to have perjured himself in the court in the most barefaced way. In fact the Treasury witnesses against Wilde were all blackmailers and people of the lowest character, with two exceptions. The exceptions were a boy named Mavor and a youth named Shelley. With regard to Mavor the judge admitted that no evidence had been offered that he could place before the jury; but in his summing up he was greatly affected by the evidence of Shelley. Shelley was a young man who seemed to be afflicted with a species of religious mania. Mr. Justice Charles gave great weight to his testimony. He invited the jury to say that "although there was, in his correspondence which had been read, evidence of excitability, to talk of him as a young man who did not know what he was saying was to exaggerate the effect of his letters." He went on to ask with much solemnity: "Why should this young man have invented a tale, which must have been unpleasant to him to present from the witness box?"

In the later trial before Mr. Justice Wills the Judge had to rule out the evidence of Shelley "in toto", because it was wholly without corroboration. If the case before Mr. Justice Charles had not been confused with the charges of conspiracy, there is no doubt that he too would have ruled out the evidence of Shelley, and then his summing up must have been entirely in favour of Wilde.

The singular malevolence of the prosecution also can be estimated by their use of the so−called "literary

argument." Wilde had written in a magazine called "The Chameleon. The Chameleon" contained an immoral story, with which Wilde had nothing to do, and which he had repudiated as offensive. Yet the prosecution tried to make him responsible in some way for the immorality of a writing which he knew nothing about.

Wilde had said two poems of Lord Alfred Douglas were "beautiful." The prosecution declared that these poems were in essence a defence of the vilest immorality, but is it not possible for the most passionate poem, even the most vicious, to be "beautiful"? Nothing was ever written more passionate than one of the poems of Sappho. Yet a fragment has been selected out and preserved by the admiration of a hundred generations of men. The prosecution was in the position all the time of one who declared that a man who praised a nude picture must necessarily be immoral. Such a contention would be inconceivable in any other civilised country. Even the Judge was on much the same intellectual level. It would not be fair, he admitted, to condemn a poet or dramatic writer by his works and he went on:

"It is unfortunately true that while some of our greatest writers have passed long years in writing nothing but the most wholesome literature−−literature of the highest genius, and which anybody can read, such as the literature of Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens; it is also true that there were other great writers, more especially in the eighteenth century, perfectly noble−minded men themselves, who somehow or other have permitted themselves to pen volumes which it is painful for persons of ordinary modesty and decency to read."

It would have been more honest and more liberal to have brushed away the nonsensical indictment in a sentence. Would the Treasury have put Shakespeare on trial for "Hamlet" or "Lear," or would they have condemned the writer of "The Song of Solomon" for immorality, or sent St. Paul to prison for his "Epistle to the Corinthians"?

Middle−class prejudice and hypocritic canting twaddle from Judge and advocate dragged their weary length along for days and days. On Wednesday Sir Edward Clarke made his speech for the defence. He pointed out the unfairness of the charges of conspiracy which had tardily been withdrawn. He went on to say that the most remarkable characteristic of the case was the fact that it had been the occasion for conduct on the part of certain sections of the press which was disgraceful, and which imperilled the administration of justice, and was in the highest degree injurious to the client for whom he was pleading. Nothing, he concluded, could be more unfair than the way Mr. Wilde had been criticised in the press for weeks and weeks. But no judge interfered on his behalf.

Sir Edward Clarke evidently thought that to prove unfairness would not even influence the minds of the London jury. He was content to repudiate the attempt to judge Mr. Wilde by his books or by an article which he had condemned, or by poems which he had not written. He laid stress on the fact that Mr. Wilde had himself brought the charge against Lord Queensberry which had provoked the whole investigation: "on March 30th, Mr. Wilde," he said, "knew the catalogue of accusations"; and he asked: did the jury believe that, if he had been guilty, he would have stayed in England and brought about the first trial? Insane would hardly be the word for such conduct, if Mr. Wilde really had been guilty. Moreover, before even hearing the specific accusations, Mr. Wilde had gone into the witness box to deny them.

Clarke's speech was a good one, but nothing out of the common: no new arguments were used in it; not one striking illustration. Needless to say the higher advocacy of sympathy was conspicuous by its absence.

Again, the interesting part of the trial was the cross−examination of Oscar Wilde.

Mr. Gill examined him at length on the two poems which Lord Alfred Douglas had contributed to "The Chameleon", which Mr. Wilde had called "beautiful." The first was in "Praise of Shame," the second was one called "Two Loves." Sir Edward Clarke, interposing, said:

"That's not Mr. Wilde's, Mr. Gill."

Mr. Gill: "I am not aware that I said it was."

Sir Edward Clarke: "I thought you would be glad to say it was not."

Mr. Gill insisted that Mr. Wilde should explain the poem in "Praise of Shame."

Mr. Wilde said that the first poem seemed obscure, but, when pressed as to the "love" described in the second poem, he let himself go for the first time and perhaps the only time during the trial; he said:

"The 'love' that dare not speak its name in this century is such a great affection of an older for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very base of his philosophy and such as you find in the sonnets of Michaelangelo and Shakespeare−−a deep spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect,

and dictates great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michaelangelo and those two letters of mine, such as they are, and which is in this century misunderstood−−so misunderstood that on account of it, I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful; it is fine; it is the noblest form of affection. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life. That it should be so the world does not understand. It mocks at it and sometimes puts one into the pillory for it."

At this stage there was loud applause in the gallery of the court, and the learned Judge at once said: "I shall have the Court cleared if there is the slightest manifestation of feeling. There must be complete silence preserved."

Mr. Justice Charles repressed the cheering in favour of Mr. Oscar Wilde with great severity, though Mr. Justice Collins did not attempt to restrain the cheering which filled his court and accompanied the dispersing crowd into the street on the acquittal of Lord Queensberry.

In spite, however, of the unfair criticisms of the press; in spite of the unfair conduct of the prosecution, and in spite of the manifest prejudice and Philistine ignorance of the Judge, the jury disagreed.

Then followed the most dramatic incident of the whole trial. Once more Sir Edward Clarke applied for bail on behalf of Oscar Wilde. "After what has happened," he said, "I do not think the Crown will make any objection to this application." The Crown left the matter to the Judge, no doubt in all security; for the Judge immediately refused the application. Sir Edward Clarke then went on to say that, in the case of a re−trial, it ought not to take place immediately. He continued:

"The burden of those engaged in the case is very heavy, and I think it only right that the Treasury should have an opportunity between this and another session of considering the mode in which the case should be presented, if indeed it is presented at all."

Mr. Gill immediately rose to the challenge.

"The case will certainly be tried again," he declared, "whether it is to be tried again at once or in the next sessions will be a matter of convenience. Probably the most desirable course will be for the case to go to the next sessions. That is the usual course."

Mr. Justice Charles: "If that is the usual course, let it be so."

The next session of the Central Criminal Court opened on the 20th of the same month.

Not three weeks' respite, still it might be enough: it was inconceivable that a Judge in Chambers would refuse to accept bail: fortunately the law allows him no option.

. . . . .

The application for bail was made in due course to a Judge in Chambers, and in spite of the bad example of the magistrate, and of Mr. Justice Charles, it was granted and Wilde was set free in his own recognizance of L2,500 with two other sureties for L1,250 each. It spoke volumes for the charm and fascination of the man that people were found to undertake this onerous responsibility. Their names deserve to be recorded; one was Lord Douglas of Hawick, the other a clergyman, the Rev. Stewart Headlam. I offered to be one bail: but I was not a householder at the time and my name was, therefore, not acceptable. I suppose the Treasury objected, which shows, I am inclined to think, some glimmering of sense on its part.

As soon as the bail was accepted I began to think of preparations for Oscar's escape. It was high time something was done to save him from the wolves. The day after his release a London morning journal was not ashamed to publish what it declared was a correct analysis of the voting of the jury on the various counts. According to this authority, ten jurors were generally for conviction and two against, in the case of Wilde; the statement was widely accepted because it added that the voting was more favourable to Taylor than to Wilde, which was so unexpected and so senseless that it carried with it a certain plausibility: "Credo quia incredible".

I had seen enough of English justice and English judges and English journals to convince me that Oscar Wilde had no more chance of a fair trial than if he had been an Irish "Invincible." Everyone had made up his mind and would not even listen to reason: he was practically certain to be convicted, and if convicted perfectly certain to be punished with savage ferocity. The judge would probably think he was showing impartiality by punishing him for his qualities of charm and high intelligence. For the first time in my life I understood the full significance of Montaigne's confession that if he were accused of stealing the towers of Notre Dame, he would fly the kingdom rather than risk a trial, and Montaigne was a lawyer. I set to work at once to complete my preparations.

I did not think I ran any risk in helping Oscar to get away. The newspapers had seized the opportunity of the trials before the magistrate and before Mr. Justice Charles and had overwhelmed the public with such a sea of nauseous filth and impurity as could only be exposed to the public nostrils in pudibond England. Everyone, I thought, must be sick of the testimony and eager to have done with the whole thing. In this I may have been mistaken. The hatred of Wilde seemed universal and extraordinarily malignant.

I wanted a steam yacht. Curiously enough on the very day when I was thinking of running down to Cowes to hire one, a gentleman at lunch mentioned that he had one in the Thames. I asked him could I charter it?

"Certainly," he replied, "and I will let you have it for the bare cost for the next month or two."

"One month will do for me," I said.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

I don't know why, but a thought came into my head: I would tell him the truth, and see what he would say. I took him aside and told him the bare facts. At once he declared that the yacht was at my service for such work as that without money: he would be too glad to lend it to me: it was horrible that such a man as Wilde should be treated as a common criminal.

He felt as Henry VIII felt in Shakespeare's play of that name:

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". . . . there's some of ye, I see,
More out of malice than integrity,
Would try him to the utmost, . . . ."
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It was not the generosity in my friend's offer that astonished me, but the consideration for Wilde; I thought the lenity so singular in England that I feel compelled to explain it. Though an Englishman born and bred my friend was by race a Jew−−a man of the widest culture, who had no sympathy whatever with the vice attributed to Oscar. Feeling consoled because there was at least one generous, kind heart in the world, I went next day to Willie Wilde's house in Oakley Street to see Oscar. I had written to him on the previous evening that I was coming to take Oscar out to lunch.

Willie Wilde met me at the door; he was much excited apparently by the notoriety attaching to Oscar; he was volubly eager to tell me that, though we had not been friends, yet my support of Oscar was most friendly and he would therefore bury the hatchet. He had never interested me, and I was unconscious of any hatchet and careless whether he buried it or blessed it. I repeated drily that I had come to take Oscar to lunch.

"I know you have," he said, "and it's most kind of you; but he can't go."

"Why not?" I asked as I went in.

Oscar was gloomy, depressed, and evidently suffering. Willie's theatrical insincerity had annoyed me a little, and I was eager to get away. Suddenly I saw Sherard, who has since done his best for Oscar's memory. In his book there is a record of this visit of mine. He was standing silently by the wall.

"I've come to take you to lunch," I said to Oscar.

"But he cannot go out," cried Willie.

"Of course he can," I insisted, "I've come to take him."

"But where to?" asked Willie.

"Yes, Frank, where to?" repeated Oscar meekly.

"Anywhere you like," I said, "the Savoy if you like, the Cafe Royal for choice."

"Oh, Frank, I dare not," cried Oscar.

"No, no," cried Willie, "there would be a scandal; someone'll insult him and it would do harm; set people's backs up."

"Oh, Frank, I dare not," echoed Oscar.

"No one will insult him. There will be no scandal," I replied, "and it will do good."

"But what will people say?" cried Willie.

"No one ever knows what people will say," I retorted, "and people always speak best of those who don't care a damn what they do say."

"Oh, Frank, I could not go to a place like the Savoy where I am well known," objected Oscar.

"All right," I agreed, "you shall go where you like. All London is before us. I must have a talk with you, and it will do you good to get out into the air, and sun yourself and feel the wind in your face. Come, there's a hansom at the door."

It was not long before I had conquered his objections and Willie's absurdities and taken him with me. Scarcely had we left the house when his spirits began to lift, and he rippled into laughter.

"Really, Frank, it is strange, but I do not feel frightened and depressed any more, and the people don't boo and hiss at me. Is it not dreadful the way they insult the fallen?"

"We are not going to talk about it," I said; "we are going to talk of victories and not of defeats."

"Ah, Frank, there will be no more victories for me."

"Nonsense," I cried; "now where are we going?"

"Some quiet place where I shall not be known."

"You really would not like the Cafe Royal?" I asked. "Nothing will happen to you, and I think you would probably find that one or two people would wish you luck. You have had a rare bad time, and there must be some people who understand what you have gone through and know that it is sufficient punishment for any sin."

"No, Frank," he persisted, "I cannot, I really cannot."

At length we decided on a restaurant in Great Portland Street. We drove there and had a private room.

I had two purposes in me, springing from the one root, the intense desire to help him. I felt sure that if the case came up again for trial he would only be convicted through what I may call good, honest testimony. The jury with their English prejudice; or rather I should say with their healthy English instincts would not take the evidence of vile blackmailers against him; he could only be convicted through untainted evidence such as the evidence of the chambermaids at the Savoy Hotel, and their evidence was over two years old and was weak, inasmuch as the facts, if facts, were not acted upon by the management. Still their testimony was very clear and very positive, and, taken together with that of the blackmailers, sufficient to ensure conviction. After our lunch I laid this view before Oscar. He agreed with me that it was probably the chambermaids' testimony which had weighed most heavily against him. Their statement and Shelley's had brought about the injurious tone in the Judge's summing up. The Judge himself had admitted as much.

"The chambermaids' evidence is wrong," Oscar declared. "They are mistaken, Frank. It was not me they spoke about at the Savoy Hotel. It was −−−−. I was never bold enough. I went to see −−−− in the morning in his room."

"Thank God," I said, "but why didn't Sir Edward Clarke bring that out?"

"He wanted to; but I would not let him. I told him he must not. I must be true to my friend. I could not let him."

"But he must," I said, "at any rate if he does not I will. I have three weeks and in that three weeks I am going to find the chambermaid. I am going to get a plan of your room and your friend's room, and I'm going to make her understand that she was mistaken. She probably remembered you because of your size: she mistook you for the guilty person; everybody has always taken you for the ringleader and not the follower."

"But what good is it, Frank, what good is it?" he cried. "Even if you convinced the chambermaid and she retracted; there would still be Shelley, and the Judge laid stress on Shelley's evidence as untainted."

"Shelley is an accomplice," I cried, "his testimony needs corroboration. You don't understand these legal quibbles; but there was not a particle of corroboration. Sir Edward Clarke should have had his testimony ruled out. 'Twas that conspiracy charge," I cried, "which complicated the matter. Shelley's evidence, too, will be ruled out at the next trial, you'll see."

"Oh, Frank," he said, "you talk with passion and conviction, as if I were innocent."

"But you are innocent," I cried in amaze, "aren't you?"

"No, Frank," he said, "I thought you knew that all along."

I stared at him stupidly. "No," I said dully, "I did not know. I did not believe the accusation. I did not believe it for a moment."

I suppose the difference in my tone and manner struck him, for he said, timidly putting out his hand:

"This will make a great difference to you, Frank?"

"No," I said, pulling myself together and taking his hand; and after a pause I went on: "No: curiously enough it has made no difference to me at all. I do not know why; I suppose I have got more sympathy than morality in me. It has surprised me, dumbfounded me. The thing has always seemed fantastic and incredible to me and now

you make it exist for me; but it has no effect on my friendship; none upon my resolve to help you. But I see that the battle is going to be infinitely harder than I imagined. In fact, now I don't think we have a chance of winning a verdict. I came here hoping against fear that it could be won, though I always felt that it would be better in the present state of English feeling to go abroad and avoid the risk of a trial. Now there is no question: you would be insane, as Clarke said, to stay in England. But why on earth did Alfred Douglas, knowing the truth, ever wish you to attack Queensberry?"

"He's very bold and obstinate, Frank," said Oscar weakly.

"Well, now I must play Crito," I resumed, smiling, "and take you away before the ship comes from Delos."

"Oh, Frank, that would be wonderful; but it's impossible, quite impossible. I should be arrested before I left London, and shamed again in public: they would boo at me and shout insults. . . . . Oh, it is impossible; I could not risk it."

"Nonsense," I replied, "I believe the authorities would be only too glad if you went. I think Clarke's challenge to Gill was curiously ill−advised. He should have let sleeping dogs lie. Combative Gill was certain to take up the gauntlet. If Clarke had lain low there might have been no second trial. But that can't be helped now. Don't believe that it's even difficult to get away; it's easy. I don't propose to go by Folkestone or Dover."

"But, Frank, what about the people who have stood bail for me? I couldn't leave them to suffer; they would lose their thousands."

"I shan't let them lose," I replied, "I am quite willing to take half on my own shoulders at once and you can pay the other thousand or so within a very short time by writing a couple of plays. American papers would be only too glad to pay you for an interview. The story of your escape would be worth a thousand pounds; they would give you almost any price for it.

"Leave everything to me, but in the meantime I want you to get out in the air as much as possible. You are not looking well; you are not yourself."

"That house is depressing, Frank. Willie makes such a merit of giving me shelter; he means well, I suppose; but it is all dreadful."

My notes of this talk finish in this way, but the conversation left on me a deep impression of Oscar's extraordinary weakness or rather extraordinary softness of nature backed up and redeemed by a certain magnanimity: he would not leave the friends in the lurch who had gone bail for him; he would not give his friend away even to save himself; but neither would he exert himself greatly to win free. He was like a woman, I said to myself in wonder, and my pity for him grew keener. He seemed mentally stunned by the sudden fall, by the discovery of how violently men can hate. He had never seen the wolf in man before; the vile brute instinct that preys upon the fallen. He had not believed that such exultant savagery existed; it had never come within his ken; now it appalled him. And so he stood there waiting for what might happen without courage to do anything but suffer. My heart ached with pity for him, and yet I felt a little impatient with him as well. Why give up like that? The eternal quarrel of the combative nature with those who can't or won't fight.

Before getting into the carriage to drive back to his brother's, I ascertained that he did not need any money. He told me that he had sufficient even for the expenses of a second trial: this surprised me greatly, for he was very careless about money; but I found out from him later that a very noble and cultured woman, a friend of both of us, Miss S−−−−, a Jewess by race tho' not by religion, had written to him asking if she could help him financially, as she had been distressed by hearing of his bankruptcy, and feared that he might be in need. If that were the case she begged him to let her be his banker, in order that he might be properly defended. He wrote in reply, saying that he was indeed in uttermost distress, that he wanted money, too, to help his mother as he had always helped her, and that he supposed the expenses of the second trial would be from L500 to L1,000. Thereupon Miss S−−−− sent him a cheque for L1,000, assuring him that it cost her little even in self−sacrifice, and declaring that it was only inadequate recognition of the pleasure she had had through his delightful talks. Such actions are beyond praise; it is the perfume of such sweet and noble human sympathy that makes this wild beasts' cage of a world habitable for men.

Before parting we had agreed to meet a few nights afterwards at Mrs. Leverson's, where he had been invited to dinner, and where I also had been invited. By that time, I thought to myself, all my preparations would be perfected.

Looking back now I see clearly that my affection for Oscar Wilde dates from his confession to me that

afternoon. I had been a friend of his for years; but what had bound us together had been purely intellectual, a community of literary tastes and ambitions. Now his trust in me and frankness had thrown down the barrier between us; and made me conscious of the extraordinary femininity and gentle weakness of his nature, and, instead of condemning him as I have always condemned that form of sexual indulgence, I felt only pity for him and a desire to protect and help him. From that day on our friendship became intimate: I began to divine him; I knew now that his words would always be more generous and noble than his actions; knew too that I must take his charm of manner and vivacity of intercourse for real virtues, and indeed they were as real as the beauty of flowers; and I was aware as by some sixth sense that, where his vanity was concerned, I might expect any injustice from him. I was sure beforehand, however, that I should always forgive him, or rather that I should always accept whatever he did and love him for the charm and sweetness and intellect in him and hold myself more than recompensed for anything I might be able to do, by his delightful companionship.

CHAPTER XVI−−ESCAPE REJECTED: THE SECOND TRIAL AND SENTENCE

In spite of the wit of the hostess and her exquisite cordiality, our dinner at Mrs. Leverson's was hardly a success. Oscar was not himself; contrary to his custom he sat silent and downcast. From time to time he sighed heavily, and his leaden dejection gradually infected all of us. I was not sorry, for I wanted to get him away early; by ten o'clock we had left the house and were in the Cromwell Road. He preferred to walk: without his noticing it I turned up Queen's Gate towards the park. After walking for ten minutes I said to him:

"I want to speak to you seriously. Do you happen to know where Erith is?"

"No, Frank."

"It is a little landing place on the Thames," I went on, "not many miles away: it can be reached by a fast pair of horses and a brougham in a very short time. There at Erith is a steam yacht ready to start at a moment's notice; she has steam up now, one hundred pounds pressure to the square inch in her boilers; her captain's waiting, her crew ready−−a greyhound in leash; she can do fifteen knots an hour without being pressed. In one hour she would be free of the Thames and on the high seas−−(delightful phrase, eh?)−−high seas indeed where there is freedom uncontrolled.

"If one started now one could breakfast in France, at Boulogne, let us say, or Dieppe; one could lunch at St. Malo or St. Enogat or any place you like on the coast of Normandy, and one could dine comfortably at the Sables d'Olonne, where there is not an Englishman to be found, and where sunshine reigns even in May from morning till night.

"What do you say, Oscar, will you come and try a homely French bourgeois dinner tomorrow evening at an inn I know almost at the water's edge? We could sit out on the little terrace and take our coffee in peace under the broad vine leaves while watching the silver pathway of the moon widen on the waters. We could smile at the miseries of London and its wolfish courts shivering in cold grey mist hundreds of miles away. Does not the prospect tempt you?"

I spoke at leisure, tasting each delight, looking for his gladness.

"Oh, Frank," he cried, "how wonderful; but how impossible!"

"Impossible! don't be absurd," I retorted. "Do you see those lights yonder?" and I showed him some lights at the Park gate on the top of the hill in front of us.

"Yes, Frank."

"That's a brougham," I said, "with a pair of fast horses. It will take us for a midnight visit to the steam yacht in double−quick time. There's a little library on board of French books and English; I've ordered supper in the cabin−− lobster a l'Americaine and a bottle of Pommery. You've never seen the mouth of the Thames at night, have you? It's a scene from wonderland; houses like blobs of indigo fencing you in; ships drifting past like black ghosts in the misty air, and the purple sky above never so dark as the river, the river with its shifting lights of ruby and emerald and topaz, like an oily, opaque serpent gliding with a weird life of its own. . . . . Come; you must visit the yacht."

I turned to him, but he was no longer by my side. I gasped; what had happened? The mist must have hidden him; I ran back ten yards, and there he was leaning against the railing, hung up with his head on his arm shaking.

"What's the matter, Oscar?" I cried. "What on earth's the matter?"

"Oh, Frank, I can't go," he cried, "I can't. It would be too wonderful; but it's impossible. I should be seized by the police. You don't know the police."

"Nonsense," I cried, "the police can't stop you and not a man of them will see you from start to finish. Besides, I have loose money for any I do meet, and none of them can resist a 'tip.' You will simply get out of the brougham and walk fifty yards and you will be on the yacht and free. In fact, if you like you shall not come out of the brougham until the sailors surround you as a guard of honour. On board the yacht no one will touch you. No warrant runs there. Come on, man!"

"Oh, Frank," he groaned, "it's impossible!"

"What's impossible?" I insisted. "Let's consider everything anew at breakfast to−morrow morning in France. If you want to come back, there's nothing to prevent you. The yacht will take you back in twenty−four hours. You will not have broken your bail; you'll have done nothing wrong. You can go to France, Germany or Siberia so long as you come back by the twentieth of May. Take it that I offer you a holiday in France for ten days. Surely it is better to spend a week with me than in that dismal house in Oakley Street, where the very door gives one the creeps."

"Oh, Frank, I'd love to," he groaned. "I see everything you say, but I can't. I dare not. I'm caught, Frank, in a trap, I can only wait for the end."

I began to get impatient; he was weaker than I had imagined, weaker a hundred times.

"Come for a trip, then, man," I cried, and I brought him within twenty yards of the carriage; but there he stopped as if he had made up his mind.

"No, no, I can't come. I could not go about in France feeling that the policeman's hand might fall on my shoulder at any moment. I could not live a life of fear and doubt: it would kill me in a month." His tone was decided.

"Why let your imagination run away with you?" I pleaded. "Do be reasonable for once. Fear and doubt would soon be over. If the police don't get you in France within a week after the date fixed for the trial, you need have no further fear, for they won't get you at all: they don't want you. You're making mountains out of molehills with nervous fancies."

"I should be arrested."

"Nonsense," I replied, "who would arrest you? No one has the right. You are out on bail: your bail answers for you till the 20th. Money talks, man; Englishmen always listen to money. It'll do you good with the public and the jury to come back from France to stand your trial. Do come," and I took him by the arm; but he would not move. To my astonishment he faced me and said:

"And my sureties?"

"We'll pay 'em," I replied, "both of 'em, if you break your bail. Come," but he would not.

"Frank, if I were not in Oakley Street to−night Willie would tell the police."

"Your brother?" I cried.

"Yes," he said, "Willie."

"Good God!" I exclaimed; "but let him tell. I have not mentioned Erith or the steam yacht to a soul. It's the last place in the world the police would suspect and before he talks we shall be out of reach. Besides they cannot do anything; you are doing nothing wrong. Please trust me, you do nothing questionable even till you omit to enter the Old Bailey on the 20th of May."

"You don't know Willie," he continued, "he has made my solicitors buy letters of mine; he has blackmailed me."

"Whew!" I whistled. "But in that case you'll have no compunction in leaving him without saying 'goodbye.' Let's go and get into the brougham."

"No, no," he repeated, "you don't understand; I can't go, I cannot go."

"Do you mean it really?" I asked. "Do you mean you will not come and spend a week yachting with me?"

"I cannot."

I drew him a few paces nearer the carriage: something of desolation and despair in his voice touched me: I looked at him. Tears were pouring down his face; he was the picture of misery, yet I could not move him.

"Come into the carriage," I said, hoping that the swift wind in his face would freshen him up, give him a moment's taste of the joy of living and sharpen the desire of freedom.

"Yes, Frank," he said, "if you will take me to Oakley Street."

"I would as soon take you to prison," I replied; "but as you wish."

The next moment we had got in and were swinging down Queen's Gate. The mist seemed to lend keenness to the air. At the bottom of Queen's Gate the coachman swept of himself to the left into the Cromwell Road; Oscar seemed to wake out of his stupor.

"No, Frank," he cried, "no, no," and he fumbled at the handle of the door, "I must get out; I will not go. I will not go."

"Sit still," I said in despair, "I'll tell the coachman," and I put my head out of the window and cried: "Oakley

Street, Oakley Street, Chelsea, Robert."

I do not think I spoke again till we got to Oakley Street. I was consumed with rage and contemptuous impatience. I had done the best I knew and had failed. Why? I had no idea. I have never known why he refused to come. I don't think he knew himself. Such resignation I had never dreamt of. It was utterly new to me. I used to think of resignation in a vague way as of something rather beautiful; ever since, I have thought of it with impatience: resignation is the courage of the irresolute. Oscar's obstinacy was the obverse of his weakness. It is astonishing how inertia rules some natures. The attraction of waiting and doing nothing is intense for those who live in thought and detest action. As we turned into Oakley Street, Oscar said to me:

"You are not angry with me, Frank?" and he put out his hand.

"No, no," I said, "why should I be angry? You are the master of your fate. I can only offer advice."

"Do come and see me soon," he pleaded.

"My bolt is shot," I replied; "but I'll come in two or three days' time, as soon as I have anything of importance to say. . . . . Don't forget, Oscar, the yacht is there and will be there waiting until the 20th; the yacht will always be ready and the brougham."

"Good night, Frank," he said, "good night, and thank you."

He got out and went into the house, the gloomy sordid house where the brother lived who would sell his blood for a price!

. . . . . .

Three or four days later we met again, but to my amaze Oscar had not changed his mind. To talk of him as cast down is the precise truth; he seemed to me as one who had fallen from a great height and lay half conscious, stunned on the ground. The moment you moved him, even to raise his head, it gave him pain and he cried out to be left alone. There he lay prone, and no one could help him. It was painful to witness his dumb misery: his mind even, his sunny bright intelligence, seemed to have deserted him.

Once again he came out with me to lunch. Afterwards we drove through Regent's Park as the quietest way to Hampstead and had a talk. The air and swift motion did him good. The beauty of the view from the heath seemed to revive him. I tried to cheer him up.

"You must know," I said, "that you can win if you want to. You can not only bring the jury to doubt, but you can make the judge doubt as well. I was convinced of your innocence in spite of all the witnesses, and I knew more about you than they did. In the trial before Mr. Justice Charles, the thing that saved you was that you spoke of the love of David and Jonathan and the sweet affection which the common world is determined not to understand. There is another point against you which you have not touched on yet: Gill asked you what you had in common with those serving−men and stable boys. You have not explained that. You have explained that you love youth, the brightness and the gaiety of it, but you have not explained what seems inexplicable to most men, that you should go about with servants and strappers."

"Difficult to explain, Frank, isn't it, without the truth?" Evidently his mind was not working.

"No," I replied, "easy, simple. Think of Shakespeare. How did he know Dogberry and Pistol, Bardolph and Doll Tearsheet? He must have gone about with them. You don't go about with public school boys of your own class, for you know them; you have nothing to learn from them: they can teach you nothing. But the stable boy and servant you cannot sketch in your plays without knowing him, and you can't know him without getting on his level, and letting him call you 'Oscar' and calling him 'Charlie.' If you rub this in, the judge will see that he is face to face with the artist in you and will admit at least that your explanation is plausible. He will hesitate to condemn you, and once he hesitates you'll win.

"You fought badly because you did not show your own nature sufficiently; you did not use your brains in the witness box and alas−−" I did not continue; the truth was I was filled with fear; for I suddenly realised that he had shown more courage and self−possession in the Queensberry trial than in the trial before Mr. Justice Charles when so much more was at stake; and I felt that in the next trial he would be more depressed still, and less inclined to take the initiative than ever. I had already learned too that I could not help him; that he would not be lifted out of that "sweet way of despair," which so attracts the artist spirit. But still I would do my best.

"Do you understand?" I asked.

"Of course, Frank, of course, but you have no conception how weary I am of the whole thing, of the shame and the struggling and the hatred. To see those people coming into the box one after the other to witness against

me makes me sick. The self−satisfied grin of the barristers, the pompous foolish judge with his thin lips and cunning eyes and hard jaw. Oh, it's terrible. I feel inclined to stretch out my hands and cry to them, 'Do what you will with me, in God's name, only do it quickly; cannot you see that I am worn out? If hatred gives you pleasure, indulge it.' They worry one, Frank, with ravening jaws, as dogs worry a rabbit. Yet they call themselves men. It is appalling."

The day was dying, the western sky all draped with crimson, saffron and rosy curtains: a slight mist over London, purple on the horizon, closer, a mere wash of blue; here and there steeples pierced the thin veil like fingers pointing upward. On the left the dome of St. Paul's hung like a grey bubble over the city; on the right the twin towers of Westminster with the river and bridge which Wordsworth sang. Peace and beauty brooding everywhere, and down there lost in the mist the "rat pit" that men call the Courts of Justice. There they judge their fellows, mistaking indifference for impartiality, as if anyone could judge his fellowman without love, and even with love how far short we all come of that perfect sympathy which is above forgiveness and takes delight in succouring the weak, comforting the broken−hearted.

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The days went swiftly by and my powerlessness to influence him filled me with self−contempt. Of course, I said to myself, if I knew him better I should be able to help him. Would vanity do anything? It was his mainspring; I could but try. He might be led by the hope of making Englishmen talk of him again, talk of him as one who had dared to escape; wonder what he would do next. I would try, and I did try. But his dejection foiled me: his dislike of the struggle seemed to grow from day to day.

He would scarcely listen to me. He was counting the days to the trial: willing to accept an adverse decision; even punishment and misery and shame seemed better than doubt and waiting. He surprised me by saying:

"A year, Frank, they may give me a year? half the possible sentence: the middle course, that English Judges always take: the sort of compromise they think safe?" and his eyes searched my face for agreement.

I felt no such confidence in English Judges; their compromises are usually bargainings; when they get hold of an artist they give rein to their intuitive fear and hate.

But I would not discourage him. I repeated:

"You can win, Oscar, if you like:−−" my litany to him. His wan dejected smile brought tears to my eyes.

. . . . . .

"Don't you want to make them all speak of you and wonder at you again? If you were in France, everyone would be asking: will he come back or disappear altogether? or will he manifest himself henceforth in some new comedies, more joyous and pagan than ever?"

I might as well have talked to the dead: he seemed numbed, hypnotised with despair. The punishment had already been greater than he could bear. I began to fear that prison, if he were condemned to it, would rob him of his reason; I sometimes feared that his mind was already giving way, so profound was his depression, so hopeless his despair.

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The trial opened before Mr. Justice Wills on the 21st of May, 1895. The Treasury had sent Sir Frank Lockwood, Q.C., M.P., to lead Mr. C. F. Gill, Mr. Horace Avory, and Mr. Sutton. Oscar was represented by the same counsel as on the previous occasion.

The whole trial to me was a nightmare, and it was characterised from the very beginning by atrocious prejudice and injustice. The High Priests of Law were weary of being balked; eager to make an end. As soon as the Judge took his seat, Sir Edward Clarke applied that the defendants should be tried separately. As they had already been acquitted on the charge of conspiracy, there was no reason why they should be tried together.

The Judge called on the Solicitor−General to answer the application.

The Solicitor−General had nothing to say, but thought it was in the interests of the defendants to be tried together; for, in case they were tried separately, it would be necessary to take the defendant Taylor first.

Sir Edward Clarke tore this pretext to pieces, and Mr. Justice Wills brought the matter to a conclusion by saying that he was in possession of all the evidence that had been taken at the previous trials, and his opinion was that the two defendants should be tried separately.

Sir Edward Clarke then applied that the case of Mr. Wilde should be taken first as his name stood first on the indictment, and as the first count was directed against him and had nothing to do with Taylor. . . . . "There are

reasons present, I am sure, too, in your Lordship's mind, why Wilde should not be tried immediately after the other defendant."

Mr. Justice Wills remarked, with seeming indifference, "It ought not to make the least difference, Sir Edward. I am sure I and the jury will do our best to take care that the last trial has no influence at all on the present."

Sir Edward Clarke stuck to his point. He urged respectfully that as Mr. Wilde's name stood first on the indictment his case should be taken first.

Mr. Justice Wills said he could not interfere with the discretion of the prosecution, nor vary the ordinary procedure. Justice and fair play on the one side and precedent on the other: justice was waved out of court with serene indifference. Thereupon Sir Edward Clarke pressed that the trial of Mr. Oscar Wilde should stand over till the next sessions. But again Mr. Justice Wills refused. Precedent was silent now but prejudice was strong as ever.

The case against Taylor went on the whole day and was resumed next morning. Taylor went into the box and denied all the charges. The Judge summed up dead against him, and at 3.30 the jury retired to consider their verdict: in forty− five minutes they came into court again with a question which was significant. In answer to the judge the foreman stated that "they had agreed that Taylor had introduced Parker to Wilde, but they were not satisfied with Wilde's guilt in the matter."

Mr. Justice Wills: "Were you agreed as to the charge on the other counts?"

Foreman: "Yes, my Lord."

Mr. Justice Wills: "Well, possibly it would be as well to take your verdict upon the other counts."

Through the foreman the jury accordingly intimated that they found Taylor guilty with regard to Charles and William Parker.

In answer to his Lordship, Sir F. Lockwood said he would take the verdict given by the jury of "guilty" upon the two counts.

A formal verdict having been entered, the judge ordered the prisoner to stand down, postponing sentence. Did he postpone the sentence in order not to frighten the next jury by the severity of it? Other reason I could find none.

Sir Edward Clarke then got up and said that as it was getting rather late, perhaps after the second jury had disagreed as to Mr. Wilde's guilt−−

Sir F. Lockwood here interposed hotly: "I object to Sir Edward Clarke making these little speeches."

Mr. Justice Wills took the matter up as well.

"You can hardly call it a disagreement, Sir Edward," though what else he could call it, I was at a loss to imagine.

He then adjourned the case against Oscar Wilde till the next day, when a different jury would be impanelled. But whatever jury might be called they would certainly hear that their forerunners had found Taylor guilty and they would know that every London paper without exception had approved the finding. What a fair chance to give Wilde! It was like trying an Irish Secretary before a jury of Fenians.

The next morning, May 23d, Oscar Wilde appeared in the dock. The Solicitor− General opened the case, and then called his witnesses. One of the first was Edward Shelley, who in cross−examination admitted that he had been mentally ill when he wrote Mr. Wilde those letters which had been put in evidence. He was "made nervous from over−study," he said.

Alfred Wood admitted that he had had money given him quite recently, practically blackmailing money. He was as venomous as possible. "When he went to America," he said, "he told Wilde that he wanted to get away from mixing with him (Wilde) and Douglas."

Charlie Parker next repeated his disgusting testimony with ineffable impudence and a certain exultation. Bestial ignominy could go no lower; he admitted that since the former trial he had been kept at the expense of the prosecution. After this confession the case was adjourned and we came out of court.

When I reached Fleet Street I was astonished to hear that there had been a row that same afternoon in Piccadilly between Lord Douglas of Hawick and his father, the Marquis of Queensberry. Lord Queensberry, it appears, had been writing disgusting letters about the Wilde case to Lord Douglas's wife. Meeting him in Piccadilly Percy Douglas stopped him and asked him to cease writing obscene letters to his wife. The Marquis said he would not and the father and son came to blows. Queensberry it seems was exasperated by the fact that Douglas of Hawick was one of those who had gone bail for Oscar Wilde. One of the telegrams which the Marquis

of Queensberry had sent to Lady Douglas I must put in just to show the insane nature of the man who could exult in a trial which was damning the reputation of his own son. The letter was manifestly written after the result of the Taylor trial:

Must congratulate on verdict, cannot on Percy's appearance. Looks like a dug up corpse. Fear too much madness of kissing. Taylor guilty. Wilde's turn tomorrow.

Queensberry.

In examination before the magistrate, Mr. Hannay, it was stated that Lord Queensberry had been sending similar letters to Lady Douglas "full of the most disgusting charges against Lord Douglas, his wife, and Lord Queensberry's divorced wife and her family." But Mr. Hannay thought all this provocation was of no importance and bound over both father and son to keep the peace−−an indefensible decision, a decision only to be explained by the sympathy everywhere shown to Queensberry because of his victory over Wilde, otherwise surely any honest magistrate would have condemned the father who sent obscene letters to his son's wife−−a lady above reproach. These vile letters and the magistrate's bias, seemed to me to add the final touch of the grotesque to the horrible vileness of the trial. It was all worthy of the seventh circle of Dante, but Dante had never imagined such a father and such judges!

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Next morning Oscar Wilde was again put in the dock. The evidence of the Queensberry trial was read and therewith the case was closed for the Crown.

Sir Edward Clarke rose and submitted that there was no case to go to the jury on the general counts. After a long legal argument for and against, Mr. Justice Wills said that he would reserve the question for the Court of Appeal. The view he took was that "the evidence was of the slenderest kind"; but he thought the responsibility must be left with the jury. To this judge "the slenderest kind" of evidence was worthful so long as it told against the accused.

Sir Edward Clarke then argued that the cases of Shelley, Parker, and Wood failed on the ground of the absence of corroboration. Mr. Justice Wills admitted that Shelley showed "a peculiar exaltation" of mind; there was, too, mental derangement in his family, and worst of all there was no corroboration of his statements. Accordingly, in spite of the arguments of the Solicitor−General, Shelley's evidence was cut out. But Shelley's evidence had already been taken, had already prejudiced the jury. Indeed, it had been the evidence which had influenced Mr. Justice Charles in the previous trial to sum up dead against the defendant: Mr. Justice Charles called Shelley "the only serious witness."

Now it appeared that Shelley's evidence should never have been taken at all, that the jury ought never to have heard Shelley's testimony or the Judge's acceptance of it!

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When the court opened next morning I knew that the whole case depended on Oscar Wilde, and the showing he would make in the box, but alas! he was broken and numbed. He was not a fighter, and the length of this contest might have wearied a combative nature. The Solicitor−General began by examining him on his letters to Lord Alfred Douglas and we had the "prose poem" again and the rest of the ineffable nonsensical prejudice of the middle−class mind against passionate sentiment. It came out in evidence that Lord Alfred Douglas was now in Calais. His hatred of his father was the "causa causans" of the whole case; he had pushed Oscar into the fight and Oscar, still intent on shielding him, declared that he had asked him to go abroad.

Sir Edward Clarke again did his poor best. He pointed out that the trial rested on the evidence of mere blackmailers. He would not quarrel with that and discuss it, but it was impossible not to see that if blackmailers were to be listened to and believed, their profession might speedily become a more deadly mischief and danger to society than it had ever been.

The speech was a weak one; but the people in court cheered Sir Edward Clarke; the cheers were immediately suppressed by the Judge.

The Solicitor−General took up the rest of the day with a rancorous reply. Sir Edward Clarke even had to remind him that law officers of the Crown should try to be impartial. One instance of his prejudice may be given. Examining Oscar as to his letters to Lord Alfred Douglas, Sir Frank Lockwood wanted to know whether he thought them "decent"?

The witness replied, "Yes."

"Do you know the meaning of the word, sir?" was this gentleman's retort.

I went out of the court feeling certain that the case was lost. Oscar had not shown himself at all; he had not even spoken with the vigour he had used at the Queensberry trial. He seemed too despairing to strike a blow.

The summing up of the Judge on May 25th was perversely stupid and malevolent. He began by declaring that he was "absolutely impartial," though his view of the facts had to be corrected again and again by Sir Edward Clarke: he went on to regret that the charge of conspiracy should have been introduced, as it had to be abandoned. He then pointed out that he could not give a colourless summing up, which was "of no use to anybody." His intelligence can be judged from one crucial point: he fastened on the fact that Oscar had burnt the letters which he bought from Wood, which he said were of no importance, except that they concerned third parties. The Judge had persuaded himself that the letters were indescribably bad, forgetting apparently that Wood or his associates had selected and retained the very worst of them for purposes of blackmail and that this Judge himself, after reading it, couldn't attribute any weight to it; still he insisted that burning the letters was an act of madness; whereas it seemed to everyone of the slightest imagination the most natural thing in the world for an innocent man to do. At the time Oscar burnt the letters he had no idea that he would ever be on trial. His letters had been misunderstood and the worst of them was being used against him, and when he got the others he naturally threw them into the fire. The Judge held that it was madness, and built upon this inference a pyramid of guilt. "Nothing said by Wood should be believed, as he belongs to the vilest class of criminals; the strength of the accusation depends solely upon the character of the original introduction of Wood to Wilde as illustrated and fortified by the story with regard to the letters and their burning."

A pyramid of guilt carefully balanced on its apex! If the foolish Judge had only read his Shakespeare! What does Henry VI say:

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Proceed no straiter 'gainst our uncle Gloucester
Than from true evidence of good esteem
He be approved in practice culpable.
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There was no "true evidence of good esteem" against Wilde, but the Judge turned a harmless action into a confession of guilt.

Then came an interruption which threw light on the English conception of justice. The foreman of the jury wanted to know, in view of the intimate relations between Lord Alfred Douglas and the defendant, whether a warrant against Lord Alfred Douglas was ever issued.

Mr. Justice Wills: "I should say not; we have never heard of it."

Foreman: "Or ever contemplated?"

Mr. Justice Wills: "That I cannot say, nor can we discuss it. The issue of such a warrant would not depend upon the testimony of the parties, but whether there was evidence of such act. Letters pointing to such relations would not be sufficient. Lord Alfred Douglas was not called, and you can give what weight you like to that."

Foreman: "If we are to deduce any guilt from these letters, it would apply equally to Lord Alfred Douglas."

Mr. Justice Wills concurred in that view, but after all he thought it had nothing to do with the present trial, which was the guilt of the accused.

The jury retired to consider their verdict at half past three. After being absent two hours they returned to know whether there was any evidence of Charles Parker having slept at St. James's Place.

His Lordship replied, "No."

The jury shortly afterwards returned again with the verdict of "Guilty" on all the counts.

It may be worth while to note again that the Judge himself admitted that the evidence on some of the counts was of "the slenderest kind"; but, when backed by his prejudiced summing up, it was more than sufficient for the jury.

Sir Edward Clarke pleaded that sentence should be postponed till the next sessions, when the legal argument would be heard.

Mr. Justice Wills would not be balked: sentence, he thought, should be given immediately. Then, addressing the prisoners, he said, and again I give his exact words, lest I should do him wrong:

"Oscar Wilde and Alfred Taylor, the crime of which you have been convicted is so bad that one has to put stern restraint upon one's self to prevent one's self from describing in language which I would rather not use the sentiments which must rise to the breast of every man of honour who has heard the details of these two terrible trials.

"That the jury have arrived at a correct verdict in this case I cannot persuade myself to entertain the shadow of a doubt; and I hope, at all events, that those who sometimes imagine that a Judge is half−hearted in the cause of decency and morality because he takes care no prejudice shall enter into the case may see that that is consistent at least with the utmost sense of indignation at the horrible charges brought home to both of you.

"It is no use for me to address you. People who can do these things must be dead to all sense of shame, and one cannot hope to produce any effect upon them. It is the worst case I have ever tried. . . . . That you, Wilde, have been the centre of a circle of extensive corruption of the most hideous kind among young men it is impossible to doubt.

"I shall under such circumstances be expected to pass the severest sentence that the law allows. In my judgment it is totally inadequate for such a case as this.

"The sentence of the court is that each of you be imprisoned and kept to hard labour for two years."

The sentence hushed the court in shocked surprise.

Wilde rose and cried, "Can I say anything, my lord?"

Mr. Justice Wills waved his hand deprecatingly amid cries of "Shame" and hisses from the public gallery; some of the cries and hisses were certainly addressed to the Judge and well deserved. What did he mean by saying that Oscar was a "centre of extensive corruption of the most hideous kind"? No evidence of this had been brought forward by the prosecution. It was not even alleged that a single innocent person had been corrupted. The accusation was invented by this "absolutely impartial" Judge to justify his atrocious cruelty. The unmerited insults and appalling sentence would have disgraced the worst Judge of the Inquisition.

Mr. Justice Wills evidently suffered from the peculiar "exaltation" of mind which he had recognised in Shelley. This peculiarity is shared in a lesser degree by several other Judges on the English bench in all matters of sexual morality. What distinguished Mr. Justice Wills was that he was proud of his prejudice and eager to act on it. He evidently did not know, or did not care, that the sentence which he had given, declaring it was "totally inadequate," had been condemned by a Royal Commission as "inhuman." He would willingly have pushed "inhumanity" to savagery, out of sheer bewigged stupidity, and that he was probably well−meaning only intensified the revolt one felt at such brainless malevolence.

The bitterest words in Dante are not bitter enough to render my feeling:

"Non ragioniam di lor ma guarda e passa."

The whole scene had sickened me. Hatred masquerading as justice, striking vindictively and adding insult to injury. The vile picture had its fit setting outside. We had not left the court when the cheering broke out in the streets, and when we came outside there were troops of the lowest women of the town dancing together and kicking up their legs in hideous abandonment, while the surrounding crowd of policemen and spectators guffawed with delight. As I turned away from the exhibition, as obscene and soul−defiling as anything witnessed in the madness of the French revolution, I caught a glimpse of Wood and the Parkers getting into a cab, laughing and leering.

These were the venal creatures Oscar Wilde was punished for having corrupted!