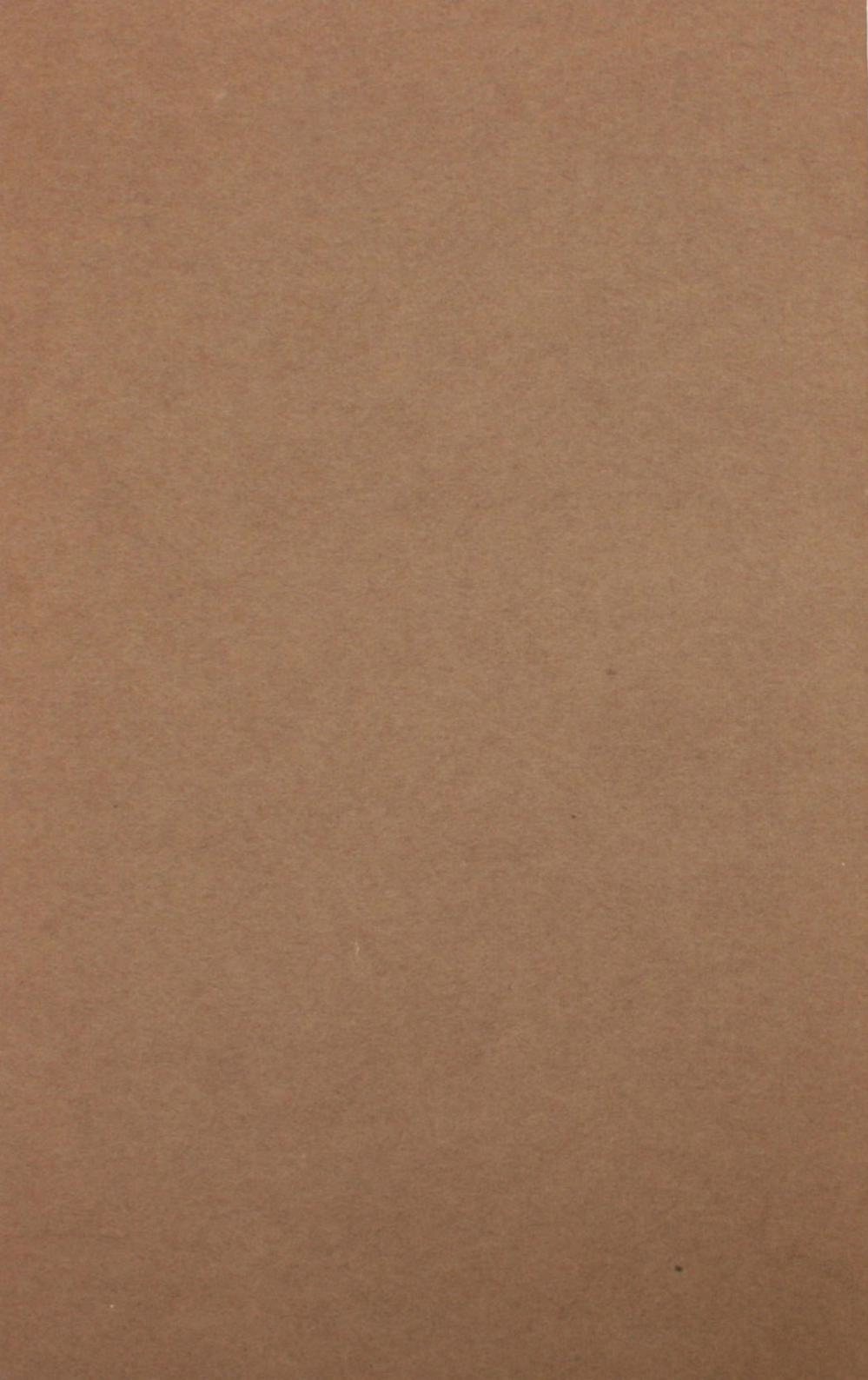


THE FIRST STONE
BY T. W. H. CROSLAND
ON READING
THE UNPUBLISHED PARTS
OF 'DE PROFUNDIS'



The First Stone

*'Sometimes a horrible marionette
[Comes] out and [smokes] its cigarette
Upon the steps like a live thing.'*

THE HARLOT'S HOUSE.

*'Grief is noble or the reverse, according to the dignity
and worthiness of the object lamented, and the grandeur
of the mind enduring it.'*

MODERN PAINTERS.

The First Stone

By

T. W. H. Crosland

On Reading
The Unpublished Parts
Of 'De Profundis'

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Foreword

‘**D**E PROFUNDIS’ is everybody’s book. One’s opinion of it does not alter the fact that it is read and admired by people who have nothing but loathing for ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray,’ and little but amused contempt for ‘Intentions.’ It was put before the world as an ‘explanation’ and accepted more or less as an expression of contrition. With the exception of a very occasional row of periods, there is nothing about it to indicate that it is a fragmentary or incomplete work, or that it has been edited into its present form by the simple process of omitting quite half of what the author really wrote. In his preface Mr. Robert Ross, Wilde’s literary executor, says, ‘I have only to record that it was written by my friend during the last months of his imprisonment, that it was the only work he wrote while in prison, and the last work he ever wrote.’ The parts which have been printed are supposed in the main to be creditable to Oscar Wilde. Of the parts cut out it is charity to say that they are sufficiently discreditable to render the

whole ignominious. Posterity can arrive at no other view. The blame, if any, must attach to Wilde rather than to his friends or publishers, who, as they tell us, have acted upon his clear wishes.

My justification for printing the following pages will be more than apparent when 'De Profundis' sees the light of day, complete and unexpurgated. We are told that the complete work is not 'for this generation.' Until the race of men get rid of the last vestige of moral sense it ought not to be for any generation. I have read every word of it and shuddered as I read. A blacker, fiercer, falser, craftier, more grovelling or more abominable piece of writing never fell from mortal pen. It may be held shameful in me that I rake it up at all. I admit that in ordinary circumstances common decency would have prevented me. Wilde is dead; let his crowning devilry die with him—yes, Mr. Robert Ross, I say, devilry!

But the 'De Profundis' we know passes for a work of edification. Its introducer ventured to hope that it would 'give many readers a different impression of the witty and delightful author.' Nobody with his eyes open can doubt that this wish is being abundantly realised. The 'revulsion of feeling' for which Wilde's friends have laboured with such tender assiduity is actually occurring, and 'De Profundis' has helped it on mightily. Oscar Wilde is nowadays to figure among the 'improving' authors whom he affected so to despise!

Roughly speaking we are invited to say of him, 'Thy sins which were many are forgiven thee ; because at the end thou madest a "beautiful," tearful book for the Sunday Schools.' The criticism of the time, which is always a few lengths ahead of the public sentiment or prejudice, commends us even to a more perilous and preposterous complaisance.

Is it not time that somebody with a trifle of power over printer's ink spoke out? I think it is, and, accordingly, I seem to have said my say. I shall be told to remember that Wilde was a man of genius, and that he is dead. In view of what is happening under our noses, I refuse to forget that he is fearfully alive, that his genius belonged essentially to the stews, and that he spent his last literary strength on the deliberate production of a work which is disgraceful to humanity.

T. W. H. C.

The First Stone

ON READING THE UNPUBLISHED PORTIONS OF
OSCAR WILDE'S 'DE PROFUNDIS.'

THOU,
The complete mountebank,
The scented posturer,
The flabby Pharisee,
The King of Life,
The Lord of Language
With the bad teeth;
The whining convict
And Prince of Hypocrites,
That slouchest
Out of the shameless slime,
Shamelessly
To the prison penitent form,
Licking pious chops,
And saying texts
For the pleasuring

And sweet approval
Of tract-distributors ;
Who hast wept and wept,
And wept and wept and wept,
Like a man ;
For whom there was nothing left
But 'absolute Humility'
And Love ;
And who withal might observe,
Ever so airily,
In the very act and motion
Of delivering stab on stab
With a dirty butcher's knife
At the unguarded breast
Of one who out of her pain
Had trusted thee,
'There is something
So exquisite
About Christ !'

Behold in dark places
They light tapers for thy picture
And range thee about
With sorrowing angels ;
And gibe and gibber
And make swift trips to Dieppe,

When they think the police
May call...
In open daylight
At the street corners
Wherever five shillings net
Is nimbly to be compassed
We are to hear
Squeaky accounts
Of thine 'artistry,'
Thy 'consummate' wit,
Thy 'intolerable' griefs,
Thy 'heroic' fortitude,
Thy 'dignified' penitence,
Thy Humility
And Love;
And they murmur 'Requiescat'!
And 'Let us draw a veil'!
And 'Who shall cast the first stone?'...
O, fleeing Falseness,
Though this my little stone
Bar me from Mercy
It is for thee.

So, where thou lurkest
Drenched in stale tears
And very sorry for thyself,

‘In the lowest mire
Of Malebolge
Between Gilles de Retz
And the Marquis de Sade’
(Of a verity
Thou knewest thy destined place!)
So, where thou lurkest
Playing gracefully with ideas
In the delicious
Impudent Oxford manner
(Albeit still damp
With the aforesaid sour tears),
Or nobly regretting
‘The clear turtle soup,
The luscious ortolans
In crinkled Sicilian vine leaves,
The wonderful *pâtes*
Procured directly from Strasbourg,
The Perrier Jouet,
The Dagonet 1880,
And the marvellous liqueur brandy
Served always
At the bottom
Of great bell-shaped glasses,’
Not to mention
Certain fine feather-beds ;
Or steeping the gew-gaw pearl
Of thy indecent soul

In the elegant Brummagem cup
Which thy schoolfellow with the brogue
Rather put out of shape
At the Central Criminal Court,
Here's for thee!

'De mortuis!' thou shalt cry
Who cried of old with rouged lips
'Love,' and who wept every day
'For the same space of time,'
'Half an hour,' to wit,
Because a critic of parts
Clothed like a labouring man,
Spat in thy tallowy face,
Seeing what none had yet seen,
Namely the Judas heart
Wrapped in thy coward hide.

Dost thou forget, O thou
Of the fragrant April memories
Who went down the primrose path
To the thin sound of flutes,
And down the Old Bailey stairs
To the sound of unwashed hisses,
Dost thou forget

A bilious canting knave,
The weeper for his own woes,
Convict C 33,
Who having meekly obeyed
The excellent prison rules,
And having omitted to cause
The excellent prison staff
A single moment's pain,
Was given the use of ink ?
'Behold,' he cried, 'a boon !
I have ink to spill and spare,
By *Narcisse*, I have ink !
Now for a ravishing job
Which will put the Devil to blush
And teach the race of men
To wince when you call them men...

'There was a friend of mine
Gat in my tuft-hunting days
When I was yet no more
Than "the Bohemian Wilde,"
The apothecary's son,
James Whistler's lickspittle,
A foolish, middling poet,
A "busy" journalist,
And the puling lecturer

On ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay Art:
From October 10th to 13th
Of 1894'
(Think of the glittering soul
Thus tragically seared
With unimportant dates!)
'My dear young friend lay ill
Of a terrible cold in the head.
An influenza cold,
At Brighton, in an hotel:
I, the great and the good,
Nursed and tended him,
Not merely with luxuries
Of fruit and flowers and books,
But with fond solicitude
And singular affection;
I got "special grapes from London,"
Invented things to please him
And remained at his bedside
To quiet and amuse him...
Under my kindly care
In a day or two, of course,
He recovered, and "went for drives."
Then *I* feel extremely ill,
A terrible fever attacks me,
I had caught my friend's influenza!
Oh yes, I had, I had!
And how did he treat me? Sweet Jove!

Help me to cry my wrongs !
It was not a question of grapes,
Flowers and charming gifts,
It was a question, alas !
Of common necessities ;
I could not get the milk
The Doctor had ordered me ;
Lemonade—lemonade
Was pronounced impossible,
And when I begged my friend
To purchase a book for me
At a neighbouring bookseller's shop,
He actually didn't !
For this black treachery
I reproached him in scathing terms
And bade him leave the room ;
But, when I lifted my head
From the downy pillow in which
I had carefully buried it,
Believe me or not, as you will,
My friend was still there—and he laughed,
A brutal common laugh,
Laughed at me, Oscar Wilde,
Oscar O'Flahertie Wilde,
The intensive genius,
The Lord of Language and Life,
The Symbol of my Age—
Told me I drank too much

And that I ought to eat less,
And turned on his wicked heel!

‘By Tuesday the fever had gone,
And so “I dined downstairs.”
(You may judge of the horrible state
In which I had been, from the fact
That the day before, I dined
And also supped, *upstairs*!)
Next day was Wednesday, my birthday.
Epistles of congratulation
Showered on me through the post,
One of them, need I remark,
Was a letter from my friend:
Did he express his regret
For the ugly scene he had caused?
Oh dear me no! Did he say
“Many happy returns”?
Probably so; perhaps not;
Any way there were parts
Of this hideous letter of his
Which flicked me on the raw,
As Plato might have put it,
Or Longinus possibly,
Or Pliny, or Dante, or Bion,
Or Aeschylus, if you will.
Especially loathsome and foul

Were my friend's concluding words
Which, for his shame, I set down,
 " When you are not on your pedestal
 You are not interesting.
 The next time you are ill
 I will go away at once " !

‘ Ah ! what coarseness of fibre
Does that reveal. What entire
Lack of imagination . . .
How often have these words
Come fearfully back to me
In the wretched solitary cell
Of the various prisons
I have been sent to (*sic*).
I have said them to myself
Over and over again . . .
For him to write thus to me
When the very illness and fever
From which I was suffering
I had caught from tending him
Was of course revolting
In its coarseness and crudity ;
And for any human being
In the whole wide world to write thus
To another would be a sin
For which there is no pardon ;

Were there any sin
For which there is none.

‘ But let me keep Love in my heart,
You, who outraged me thus,
Let me keep love in my heart,
Lest I falter and fail
And lose the trick of tears
Which we in prison must use
Or feel unhappy all day ;
For love of you my friend,
Out of sheer love, I indite
Forty-six thousand words
Of livid chattering rage,
Hate and malice and spite :
Let down with piety,
Humility and tears,
And I do this inasmuch
As you who laughed at me
Are happy and at large
In Paris, at Naples, or Rome,
In golden Sicily,
Or where the Cyprian palms
Climb from the sea to the sun ;
You have books and flowers and friends,
Meat and drink of the best,
Purple and fine linen,

Money and all it can buy,
You who have written naught
But a few undergraduate poems ;
While I blubber here forlorn
In a latrine called a cell,
Clothed with the felon's garb,
A common convict, a "lag"
Doing his bitter "stretch"—
I whose engaging plays
Beat Congreve for brilliancy,
For philosophy, Dumas *fits*
And
I suppose
Everybody else
For every other quality ;
I, Oscar Wilde, lie prone
Mid the wreck of my wonderful life ;
Crushed by anguish,
Bewildered with terror,
Dazed through pain,
" *Multa gemens ;*"
With nothing before me but ink,
And nothing inside me but Love !

Give me my Testament,
My Christmas Greek Testament,
Let me weep a bit more,

Tears are the supreme virtue,
Niobe must have known
What we feel who are pent
In the hideous prison house :
Every morning of late
After I polish my tins
I read the Gospels in Greek ;
It is such a delightful way
Of opening the day ;
Every one, my dear friend,
Even in a turbulent life
Should read the Greek Testament,
It is like going into a garden
Of lilies, my dear young friend,
Out of some narrow, dark house.
And, while I remember it,
Does it occur to you
That each rich dish you ate
When you lunched or dined with me,
Each glass of amber champagne
You swallowed at Willis's Rooms
Where you were often my guest,
Cost me a lot of money ?
Of course, in the vulgar, low,
Undistinguished, profane
Circles in which you move
Such a question would not
Be considered quite good style ;

But think it over and try
To discern what a beautiful thought
This is, which I now propound
In the simple Socratic form ;
When you lay aside your mask
To get a little breath
Which you surely must do sometimes,
Try to perceive with pain
That when a man of parts,
A man of supreme parts,
The symbol of his age,
Asks another man to sup,
The man of supreme parts
Is expected to foot the bill :
This is what Dante meant
When he wrote " Abandon hope
All ye who enter here,"
That is to say " All ye
Who enter Willis's Rooms ;"
St. Francis of Assisi
Had the same thought,
And it runs
Like a thread of purple and gold
Through my " Picture of Dorian Gray "
And through my " Soul of Man "
And all my other works.
Perhaps in after life
It will dawn upon your slow

And darkened intellect
That a sorrow's crown of sorrow
Is remembering what one paid
For other people's lunches,
As Tennyson somewhere says.
Pray excuse me for a moment,
I must a little indulge
In the prisoner's prerogative
Of tears.

'Then again—
This will wound your vanity,
But I want to wound it,
And thus bring you
In some way nearer
To a proper appreciation
Of the Oxford temperament
And my own flawless Art,
Which you never understood
Or sufficiently admired ;
Has it occurred to you
That while you go free and at large
Happy and indolent
In Paris, at Naples or Rome,
Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera,
I the damp prisoner,
The Democritus of the gaols,

The Lord of Language and Life,
The Symbol of my Age,
Am really suffering
My terrible, terrible sentence
And public obloquy
Because of my friendship for you?

‘ You start with horror. Ah!
Look at yourself in the glass,
The author of my disgrace,
The ruin of my house.
Out of my love, I say
You and yours are to blame
For all that has happened to me;
Love you know is the first
Secret of this sad world,
Love is a Sacrament
That one should take kneeling, my friend:
And I—I love you. Ah yes
I insist on loving you
Whether you like it or not...
As I was saying, the Law,
Your stupid English law,
Pretended to send me here
Because of my infamies
With certain unkempt clods;
Swine, who nevertheless

Being approached by me,
The dainty "artist in life,"
Were simply "Ariels,
Delightfully suggestive
And most stimulating."
It is quite true that my life
Has been foul with perversities,
And that I more than deserve
My terrible punishment;
(He who will not admit this
And realise it to the full
Must never lay claim to the grace
And honour of friendship with me.)
I don't regret what I did,
I merely explain it and weep,
For where there is sorrow, my friend,
There clearly is holy ground;
But I say to myself every day
"If I had never met you,
Never allowed you to force
Your way into a life
So big with wonder and joy,
I could have gone my gait,
My mellow, spicy gait,
Undisturbed, unabashed,
Unassailed, and unhurt.
Flauntingly impudent,
Grinningly callous,

Puffed out with *Saumur*,
And full of ortolans,
Down to the day of my death."

'Of course, I don't blame you,
Oh no, oh no, no, no;
Though you will see what I mean.
Besides, if it wasn't you
Who was it? Your father prepared
With a guileless carrot or so
Thrown at "my actors," the trap,
The idiot booby-trap,
Which tangled up my feet
And brought me from my fame
To this damp infamy,
Your father—I borrow a phrase
From the poor thieves and rogues
Who harbour with me here—
Your father "did me in";
If you had never been born,
He wouldn't have troubled himself,
And if he had never been born
And his father hadn't been born
And *his* father hadn't, why then
Your father, my dear young friend,
Would not have interfered,
And I (don't you see?) should be free

It is equally true, of course,
That if *my* father hadn't been born,
I should not have been born
And couldn't have come to grief;
But that is scarcely the point,
So we won't labour it;
I wish to show you how love
Helps us to grasp the truth,
How "the cassia and myrrh of tears"
Shed copiously every hour
Lift us out of the rut
Of vulgar reasoning,
And "creeping common sense,"
And put us on the heights
Where we perceive great truths
And learn to love and forgive.'

Here, O ineffable Lord
Of the cynical inky arts
And the split infinitive,
Here is the drift and gist
Of thy forty-six thousand words
Thy *ouvrage de longue haleine*
And deft apologia,
Thy congregation of hints,
Whispers and monkey rage,
Whereby thou wouldst 'put thyself right'

And the friend thou lovedst all wrong ;
This is the gracious yield
Of the humble, contrite heart
Writ magnificently
On paper stamped 'Reading Gaol.'
With the cheap prison ink,
And given to trusty hands
Not to burn but to hold.

'When I am dead my dearest
(And not till I am dead)
Publish the pious parts,
The holy parts about Love,
And Pity and Kindness and Tears,
So that I figure no more
As the super-fatted goat
With emeralds round his neck
And stercoraceous hooves,
Who tore the lilies down
And scattered the young vines,
But rather as the dove
Brooding in innocent joy,
Or the kindly pelican
Who keepeth a bleeding breast
For love of her young things ;
So that in obscure time
I may be seen to belong

Not to the smirking fops
And sexless demireps
Whose fleers made hideous
The Cities of the Plain,
But to the company
Of the untroubled saints
Whose sins though scarlet were washed
Milk-white with fire and tears,
And who, in that they became
As little children, might walk
In the green fields with Christ:
As for my friend... the parts
About my friend... I think...
'Twere well... on the whole, 'twere well:
Furnish a secret drawer
And keep them—for my friend;
And he will live me out
And never dream, good fool,
How we have trussed him up
A-teaching of him love:
But I shall know... and you.
And when he dies—why then
We take our chance of print!

O Treachery! O damned
And furtive Plotter! Thou
Of whom the filthiest fiend

Might wish to wash his hands.
By whom Iago pales
Into a gentleman
And Wainwright shines snow-white ;
If any echo or hail
Of this world reaches thee
Deep in thy lampless lair
Harken ! The dubious dust
Hidden in *Père la Chaise*
Beneath the Epstein stone
Is not thou ; and that stone
Is not thy monument,
Nor for thy memory :
But on a Rock called Shame
Sunken in letters of lead
Which may not be effaced
Till the slow clocks of Time
Shall strike the ages out,
Men read :—

OSCAR FINGAL

O'FLAHERTIE WILLS WILDE

WHOSE SOUL WAS ALL A SIN,
WHOSE HEART WAS ALL A LUST,
WHOSE BRAIN WAS ALL A LIE.

