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LISBOA

OSCAR WILDE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

SONNETS FROM A PARISIAN BALCONY.

THE LIONESSE OF MAYFAIR.

THE DOCTOR WIFE (TRANSLATION).

LADY LILIAN'S LUCK.

WAS IT A SIN? (A SON OF AFRICA).

MRS. EVELYN'S HUSBANDS.

DAUGHTERS OF PLEASURE.

THE RAGGED EDGE (EARLY TALES OF THE
RAND).

THE GENTLEMAN DIGGER. (FIRST NOVEL
WRITTEN OF JOHANNESBURG.)

GREAT COMPOSERS.

THE WORLD OF MUSIC.

GREAT SINGERS.

GREAT VIRTUOSI.

SONNETS AND LOVE POEMS.

SONNETS OF FELICITATION (ON THE MARRIAGE
OF QUEEN MARY AND KING GEORGE V.)

CORONATION ODE TO KING EDWARD VII.

CORONATION SONNETS TO QUEEN MARY.

OSCAR WILDE
AND
HIS MOTHER

A MEMOIR

BY

ANNA, COMTESSE DE BRÉMONT

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1914

TO
THE NOBLE SOUL OF
"SPERANZA"
LADY WILDE
THE MOTHER OF OSCAR WILDE
IN
REMEMBRANCE
OF HER BEAUTIFUL
FRIENDSHIP
FOR
THE AUTHOR.

SONNET

OSCAR WILDE

HIS BODY.

Into the ocean of Life was I thrown
A rudderless barque of frail flesh and bone
To sink in life's billow, or ride life's crest.
A mariner bound on an unknown quest.
And I dipped my sail in the blood-red wine
Of the fruit from passion and pleasure's
vine.

The incense of life on my lips I burned,
Till its sweetness to bitter ashes turned.

HIS SOUL.

Out of the depths of the Infinite Past,
Into the bondage of soul was I cast.
Out of the depths thro' the merciless
throes
Of sin and repentance I purged my woes.
Out of the depths to the uttermost height
Of God's forgiveness—Fame's purified
light!

ANNA DE BRÉMONT.

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OSCAR WILDE

BOOK I

I

"*A great artist invents a type,*" wrote Oscar Wilde in his masterly essay on "The Decay of Lying." He proved his theory by inventing a type of which he was a startling representative; a protean type of such power in the realm of literature, that few have equalled him in these days when literature has become a trade, instead of the glorious profession it once was.

Of Oscar Wilde's pose and personality much has been written. But, among those whose favoured mission it is to paint immortal pen-portraits from the fascinating palette of written words, none have solved the enigma of this mysterious and perplexing genius of letters. While giving a curious and censorious world alluring pictures of him, that at once attract and repel, they have fallen far short of the real solution of a fame built on paradox.

The failure of these artists of the pen is due to the fact that they have sought to depict the material, visible aspect of Oscar Wilde, his attitudes, his words, his faults and his eccentricities, without probing deeper for the invisible mainspring of which these qualities, acts, and conditions were but the illusions, that veiled, distorted and disguised the light of his soul.

Perhaps the blame is not entirely due to the obtuseness of these friendly, or unfriendly critics, but to Oscar Wilde himself, who sacrificed his soul to his personality. And, this is easy to understand, when we consider that thought is the language of the soul, and speech, the language of the brain, that each acts independently of the other and thereby forms the seemingly paradoxical combination of saying one thing while thinking another.

Oscar Wilde grasped this problem with all the tenacity of genius and expounded it, even while realising the peril that accompanied it, when he put into the mouth of Vivian, in "The Decay of Lying," those significant words:—"*Paradoxes are always dangerous things*"—words no doubt lightly written at the time, yet, inspired by the deep sub-consciousness of the future wherein he would reap in paradox

that which he had sown in paradox, through the immortal fame that he would achieve by mortal infamy.

It is to the soul of Oscar Wilde that we must look for the solution of his paradoxical personality and genius.

When the soul and the brain are united in a natural combination we behold the normal condition of the ordinary man and woman. When the union of soul and brain is abnormal, the result is the genius. This phenomenon is due to the hybrid state wherein the soul and brain are bound in sexual antithesis. The feminine soul in the masculine brain-building creates the genius of man—while the masculine soul in the feminine brain-building creates the genius of woman. Therefore, to the soul in the wrong brain-building is due all that is great in art and wonderful in the world's progress.

Oscar Wilde possessed the feminine soul. This was the ghost that haunted his house of life, that sat beside him at the feast and sustained him in the day of famine: the secret influence that weighted down his manhood and enervated his hope: the knowledge that he possessed the feminine soul; that he was a slave to the capricious, critical, feminine

temperament, the feminine vanity and feminine weakness to temptation; the feminine instinct of adaptability, the feminine impulse of the wanton's soul, gave him the lust for strange, forbidden pleasures, and imparted to his final repentance the sublime abnegation of the Magdalene.

And yet that same feminine soul endowed him with the supreme love and appreciation of beauty in every form, the music of words, the subtle harmonies of colour, imagery in language, the coquetry of thought that veiled itself in paradoxes and the fine and delicate vision that created in him the instinct of the poet: the keen sense of feminine intuition in the analysis of character that made him the wit and dramatist of his day, and the feminine quality of vanity and appetite for flattery and praise that made him the first dandy of his time.

His secret antipathy to woman as woman, and his open admiration for man as man, was a further proof of his feminine soul. He has said:—

“The woman that would hold a man must appeal to the worst in him.”

But there are two women that he did not include in this sweeping assertion, the one was his mother, and the other his wife, both women that he well

knew appealed to the best in his protean nature. He, himself, would have been a good and noble woman had his feminine soul been in its right place ; in feminine brain-building. He was doomed before his birth, hence the strange maternal spirit of divination that urged his mother to wish that the child she was about to bring to the world would be a girl. The mother instinct sensed the feminine soul that had taken form within her.

The mothers of great men have possessed the masculine mind. The mother of Napoleon was a masculine woman who adopted male attire and rode to the war in company with her husband, and some historians claim that Napoleon was born in camp. At all events she ruled her family, including her famous son, Napoleon Bonaparte, with a firm, masculine hand. Lady Wilde had likewise the masculine courage of her political views. Her manifesto in the " NATION " roused all Ireland by its daring eloquence. She braved imprisonment during the trial of the editor of the " NATION " when she proclaimed herself the author of the seditious article in those famous words :—

" I am the culprit."

She saved the editor, but not the cause of her

beloved Ireland. If we glance back through history, by the vista of tradition, we behold the masculine-souled woman marking every age by some heroic deed, until we come to Mother Eve herself, braving the tempter and courageously shielding the father of our race from the vengeance of the Almighty.

A few years ago a German philosopher wrote a startling work in which he endeavoured to prove that woman had no soul. The problem *proved* too much for him—it drove him to madness : he died young, destroyed by his own hand, but his work lives as one of the monstrosities of literature.

It cannot be denied that the woman-genius under the sway of the masculine soul has never attained the height of perfection in art and science to which the man-genius has risen. The reason for this is found in the union of the higher feminine soul with the superior masculine brain-building. The feminine soul is sustained by the strength and virility of the masculine brain. The feminine soul is the essence of inspiration of imagination ; while the masculine brain is creative, self-posed and enduring, capable of unlimited effort, untrammelled by the natural crisis that pertains to the feminine brain-

building. The woman-genius has succeeded best in the arts of literature and the drama. Perhaps this is due to the essentially imaginative character of both arts. The masculine soul being hampered by the weakness and delicacy of the feminine brain-building finds its best expression in the imaginative and imitative field, while at the same time it renders her intrepid and fearless in action, because she possesses just enough of the masculine element of thought to enable her to become a leader among her sex. And yet she fails just at the point when she might reach the summit of fame as poet, painter and composer. This is due to her lack of boldness of execution, and fear of originality, ages of self-restraint and masculine domination having stunted her feminine brain-building and limited her powers of brain conception, hence the lack of great poets, painters and composers among women, though in the purely imitative arts of the actress and musical performer she often equals the masculine exponent in both. Woman follows readily a great ideal, although she never creates one.

And, after all, what is genius? This is a query that genius alone can answer, for it is only genius that can comprehend genius. Some claim, like

Balzac, that genius is only hard work—others declare it is that illusive quality called inspiration. And still others hold that it is only another name for opportunity. Again it has been called luck and even styled madness, but the fact is the genius is the creator of these conditions and qualities, while perfectly independent of each.

Genius is the electricity of thought engendered by the conflict between the soul and the brain, just as the visible electricity of nature is born of the clashing of opposite poles. Genius is the result of the soul's antagonism for the wrong brain-building. It is the soul's expression of revolt against the wanton freak of malicious nature that would bind it in a strange prison-house. It is not a fortunate or happy state of the soul, hence the sufferings and sadness of genius, its madness and excesses. And yet the great multitude of ordinary mankind, that is sane and healthy-minded through the conjunction of each individual soul in its proper brain-house, is jealous of the brilliant abnormal creature of genius evolved from some erratic whim of nature.

The world secretly despises genius, although the world desires to be amused at the expense of genius—whom it forces to dance to the tune of its caprice,

Thus from the sadness of genius springs the joyousness of life. To the dreamers the world owes a debt that only eternity can cancel. The genius of science has made the progress of the world. The genius of exploration has enlarged the world. The genius of music and poetry has refined and amused the world. The genius of literature has taught the world knowledge. The genius of painting and sculpture has held up the mirror wherein the world has seen its beauties reflected. All have been poorly repaid, and none more poorly than the poet. All have died poor in that which the world values and none poorer than the poet, while the unfortunate weavers of wit and spinners of fiction have toiled by day and burned the midnight oil to entertain the public and enrich the publisher.

There is nothing so weak and, at the same time, so powerful as genius. Nothing so helpless and yet helpful as genius. Nothing more selfish and less selfish than genius.

This outpouring of treasures that gold can buy, yet never create, is due to the suffering of the soul doomed to dwell in the wrong brain-building, the sorrow of the soul that seeks relief from itself in the excesses of thought that breed the delirium of genius.

But the soul is never so desperate in its revolt as when it assumes the protean mantle of the poet. The feminine soul of Oscar Wilde found its highest expression in the poet. The world—and the publishers—turned a deaf ear when he sang in verse. From disappointed hope and wounded vanity arose the feminine ingenuity that inspired him to capture public attention by assuming a pose, an attitude not displeasing, as it afforded him the opportunity of indulging his feminine love of beauty. He became the apostle of æsthetics, and the society he courted gave him the benefit of its sneers and good-natured ridicule. He suffered, but he had gained his point, and the name of Oscar Wilde was no longer unknown, but heralded as the synonym for a cult, an artistic extravaganza, a literary mountebank of the lecture platform ; an object of curiosity and newspaper chaff. It was a daring test, and it cut his pride and genius like the lash of a whip. But he accomplished his ends and leapt into notoriety at the first bound under that self-inflicted torture. A publisher was speedily found for the rejected book of poems, and wishing to benefit by the sudden and extraordinary success of his pose as the sunflower-decked champion of æstheticism he as

speedily secured a prominent manager and impresario to arrange a lecture tour that would prove a triumphal demonstration of his peculiar cult of beauty. America offered a fascinating field of possibility in the cause to which he was devoted. He would go to America and teach that delightful young nation, eager for progress and knowledge, the true cult of beauty, train the wide-awake eyes of the sons and daughters of "Uncle Sam" to new and wonderful vistas of art decoration; instruct them in the noble art of how properly to clothe themselves and give them an example of that decadent art in his own person.

II

IN the spring of 1882, when Oscar Wilde made his first public appearance in New York, on the platform of Chickering Hall, to discourse on the English Renaissance, I was unable to accept the invitation extended me, owing to a sad bereavement—tragically sudden—that occurred in my family. It was in the autumn of the same year that I first met Oscar Wilde. The occasion was peculiarly propitious. It was at a dinner party, given in honour of the apostle of æsthetics by an old friend, and former pupil, of Sir William Wilde, at his mansion in the neighbourhood of Madison Square. About twenty guests sat down at the great round table in the handsome dining-room, full of the mysterious glow of softly subdued lights and fragrant with the perfume of costly flowers, where the mirrors at either end of the room reflected the sumptuous table covered with a cloth of white satin, over which were thickly strewn loose red roses, while tall crystal vases supported exquisite white

lilies : the display of the famous sunflower being a privilege accorded only to Oscar Wilde as the guest of honour.

The company was entirely composed of ladies well-known for their beauty and wit in the society of Boston and New York ; many had donned æsthetic robes of charming design that were evidently a delight to the eye of Oscar Wilde, for his glance roamed from one to the other of his fair followers with increasing pleasure in his smile of approval.

He was himself, naturally, the centre of attraction at that very æsthetic dinner. His splendid youth and manly bearing lent a certain charm to the strange costume in which he masqueraded. He shone to far greater and better advantage amid these surroundings than he did on the lecture platform. There was a dignity and graciousness in his manner that blinded one to his eccentric appearance. The long locks of rich brown hair that waved across his forehead and undulated to his shoulders gave his fine head an almost feminine beauty. It might have been the head of a splendid girl, were it not for the muscular white throat, fully displayed by the rolling collar and fantastic green silk necktie, knotted after the fashion of an étudiant

of the Parisian studios, the broad, somewhat heavy shoulders encased in the well-fitting velvet coat with its wide lapels, the left of which bore the ubiquitous emblem, a huge and magnificent specimen of the sunflower. He sat, or rather posed, in a large, high-backed, carved chair, while, directly opposite to him, the host occupied a chair of more modest dimensions. The two prettiest women of the company were seated on the right and left of the guest of honour. One was a celebrated amateur actress and the other the daughter of one of New York's well-known millionaires, noted as much for her beauty as her wit. One of these favoured women wore an æsthetic costume of pale green satin, relieved by chains of shimmering pearls, while the other was really dazzling in a gown of yellow velvet, also of æsthetic design, with a massive necklace of topaz set in diamonds and a Greek coiffure bound with bands of topaz and diamonds. Of the other costumes I have no recollection, save that I was the only sombre note in that brilliant circle in my black evening gown and ornaments of black garnets. I sat on the left of the host, and being the youngest present, I was somewhat timid, and content to "hear, see and say nothing," like a child, although

my impressions were far from those of a child.

I remember that I was at a loss to decide whether I was amused or edified by the spectacle of that resplendent personage clad in black velvet coat and knee breeches, black silk stockings, low shoes with glittering buckles; while the gorgeous sunflower fascinated me to an embarrassing degree. Had I not known the fame of the wearer of that bizarre costume for wit and artistic genius I could have fancied I was in the midst of a party of merry masqueraders, gathered round a mediæval banquet presided over by a disguised mummer.

Nevertheless, we had assembled with all seriousness to do honour to Oscar Wilde. The dinner was one of many given him at that time by Boston and New York society as a protest to the attitude of misrepresentation and ridicule assumed by the Press. Boston had taken the lead in his defence through Mrs. Julia Ward Howe. The example of this distinguished American woman was speedily followed by the literary society of New York, a most exclusive set to which at that time brains, not money, constituted the "open sesame."

The insidious attack of one scribe, whose social position commanded attention was ably refuted by

the brave response of Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, while Oscar's social defence in New York was undertaken by many noted members of society, not always through the medium of the pen as in the case of Mrs. Howe and her distinguished poet-confrère, Joaquin Miller, but by the subtler means of courteous hospitality.

As a friend and pupil of Oscar Wilde's father, Sir William Wilde, our host was one of the foremost in the matter of Oscar's social defence. The occasion of which I write was in itself a significant rebuff to the slanders spread by the scribe already mentioned, in that it was a gathering composed entirely of ladies, the most prominent of New York's society and literary women. That we were filled with an amiable curiosity to meet the eccentric hero of the hour goes without saying, and, at the same time, we were moved to show all possible respect and admiration to the young apostle of æsthetics who had won the regard of some of our representative Americans; among whom were General Grant, Henry Ward Beecher, Oliver Wendell Holmes, General and Mrs. McClellan, Louisa Alcott and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and last though not least, the veteran poet of the Sierras, the sweet songster of the

mountain woodlands of California, Joaquin Miller.

I was filled with a naïve curiosity to behold the object of the numerous poster-caricatures that placarded and were paraded through the streets of New York or flaunted their innuendoes in the pages of "Puck" on the first appearance of Oscar Wilde.

But my surprise did not exceed that of the rich young American girl, making her court début in London, who on a notable occasion, seeing an exalted personage for the first time, naïvely exclaimed :

"Look, Mommer, he wears a garter round his neck !"

I was prepared to see Oscar Wilde in all the glory of his famous costume, but I was not simple enough to mistake the proper signification of that exotic garb and decoration. I divined at once that it was a pose by which he concealed his real personality, a pose to divert attention from his purpose, and at the same time attract attention to his object, which was to amuse, in order the better to teach his gospel of art. While I listened and observed, the consistency of his pose gradually convinced me of the wisdom of it. For is not the public invariably caught and held by a pose ? I recalled another great poseur, a celebrated preacher in whose church

choir I had been contralto soloist before my marriage—the late Henry Ward Beecher. His eloquence attracted an audience of thousands to Plymouth Church every Sunday, a vast concourse, drawn thither more by his personality as a dramatic and impressive orator than by his fame as a minister of the gospel. Mr. Beecher upheld the traditions of his family as a humanitarian whose religious views were broad and liberal. His sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, set the torch to the war brand that destroyed slavery in America, by her novel “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” It was but natural that to her brother, the difficult mission of winning over the sympathies of the English people in favour of the North should have been entrusted. Mr. Beecher was never more eloquent and impressive than when describing his experiences on that momentous tour through England. He possessed a quality of dry humour that excited the risibility of his audience while leaving him apparently unconscious of the effect he produced. That was the most potent of his many poses. He had a subtle faculty for wittily illustrating his doctrine on religion by the most seemingly opposite similes. He held his congregation breathless with emotion, and then turned their tears into

laughter, or roused them to unbounded enthusiasm. I have heard him say that, when he went to preach the cause of the American war of emancipation to the English and win their sympathies from the South, he first put his audience into a thoroughly good humour by telling them a witty anecdote or assuming a comic pose, and that when their mouths were wide open with laughter he threw the pill he wished to administer to them straight down their throats. In this way he forced his audience to listen, and, willy nilly, swallow the truths he had come to tell them.

I, who had assisted for two years at the services of Mr. Beecher, was able to divine the pose of Oscar Wilde. He, also, sought first to amuse and then instruct his listeners in his peculiar doctrines on art. But they would not swallow the pill, and why? Because Oscar Wilde was not in earnest, while Henry Ward Beecher had all the force of a serious conviction of the truth of what he said. I felt that night, as I watched and listened, that Oscar Wilde would have been as handsome, if not more handsome and manly, if he had worn ordinary evening dress. His youth and grace would have been emphasized by the assistance of the tailor's skill,

Why, then, I ask myself, does he masquerade in that girlish coiffure and the sunflower corsage bouquet setting off his décolleté collar ?

I was filled by a feeling of pity for the weakness that prompted him to approach perilously near the ludicrous. I was young, and endowed with too much of the serious spirit of youth to add my share to the admiration I could not feel.

I was not yet blasé with the fashionable experiences of freak entertainments, and could find no amusement in the eccentricity of our guest of honour. Although his voice and his wit charmed and exhilarated me, I felt a keen disapproval of the bizarre inconsistency between the man and his attitude.

It may have been my silence and air of aloofness, or my sombre gown,—I never discovered which, in the after years when I knew him well enough to ask the question—that finally drew his attention to me. Our eyes met across the expanse of that rose-decked table. He ceased speaking for an instant and gazed steadily towards me. I could distinctly see the colour of his eyes. They were a pale blue with golden flecks around the iris, that changed strangely until the light within them

seemed to turn to green, like the glow in the eyes of an animal at bay. The metaphor may seem exaggerated, but not when we consider that he was secretly at bay—fighting that proud vanity of the feminine soul within his masculine brain-house, while all his manhood suffered through the feminine rôle he was playing.

In his glance, as deep as it was brief, I read his secret. I saw his feminine soul (as we sometimes see the souls of those around us) revealed in the mirror of those strange eyes. I beheld his feminine soul, a suffering prisoner in the wrong brain-house. There was a mingled defiance and resentment in his glance. It seemed to question the presence of a critical element in that company of his admirers; then, the glance softened into an appeal that touched me infinitely, for it unconsciously revealed to me the burden of his secret. He evidently felt reassured by the sympathy in my eyes, as he abruptly resumed the subject upon which he had been speaking, and, with a return of that frivolous pose, he raised one of the roses lying on the table beside him, and pressed it to his lips, as he said dreamily, as though in answer to my thought:—

“What is the soul? It is the essence of perfect

beauty. I would inhale the soul of beauty as I do the fragrance of this perfect rose—and die upon it if need be ! ”

A murmur of admiration floated round the table, as his melodious voice chanted this significant phrase. My attention was rivetted by that coincidence of our thoughts on the soul. I have never forgotten those words.

“ The soul of woman is beauty,” he continued, “ as the soul of man is strength. If the two could be combined in the one being we should have the perfection sought by art since art began. But art cannot create a real rose though it can improve it.”

He smiled upon the company, and assumed a Bunthornian pose, a pose decidedly more graceful and fascinating than ever the puppet of Gilbert’s wit-creation could assume. He was the real Bunthorne amid a bevy of real beauties. Then he donned his cap and bells, played at being the Society jester, held up his mirror for our entertainment, and let us see therein reflected something of ourselves. But he had the good taste not to be personal, while he avoided platitudes.

“ America is a wonderful country and the most

wonderful thing in America is the American woman ! ”

A burst of subdued applause followed this sweeping tribute.

“ The American woman, ” he continued, “ is the most decorated and decorative object that I have seen in America. ”

“ America reminds me of one of Edgar Allan Poe’s exquisite poems, because it is full of belles ! ”

We were duly impressed by the wit of this happy compliment, and one of our number enthusiastically cried :—

“ Behold the tribute of the belles ! ” as she caught up the roses lying on the table before her and cast them towards him. The others round the table quickly followed her example. Roses rained upon him from every side. And I am sure there was not a thorn in all that shower of roses to judge from the smile that illumined his face as he bowed under our fragrant ovation.

That was the finishing touch to that unforgettable dinner, and I will supplement my account of it with just a few words to prove that the impression which Oscar Wilde made on the taste of the American in the matter of home decoration, was a lasting one.

To-day, the horse-hair covered furniture, the ugly wall-paper and coarse stone-ware china, the decorative fly-papers, the glaringly defective house architecture with its ungainly lines and grotesque angles, has disappeared. The useful is combined with the beautiful. Every home is a picture in itself. This is what Oscar Wilde did for the great mass of the people—the artisans, the mechanics and even the labourers. His propaganda of art was not lost, for his very eccentricities, his abuse and ridicule by the Press, spread the gospel among the people. The homely humble housewife was his faithful disciple. And, therefore, his work and his suffering were not in vain.

III

THE fabric of life is formed of multitudinous threads that Fate weaves into bright or sombre designs. Fate misses a stitch, or drops a thread, now and then, and the texture alters its pattern.

Fate silently dropped a thread in my life, that night of my first meeting with Oscar Wilde, and then as silently caught up the thread four years later, to weave it into the vision of the pen, that was to adorn and gladden my future ; enrich me far more than the tinsel thread of fortune could ever have done. I was to enter into full possession of my soul and receive the gift of expression through my meeting with the mother of Oscar Wilde.

During that interval of years I had not forgotten the impression borne in upon my soul by the soul of Oscar Wilde. Neither was I permitted to forget the personality of the man, although I never expected to see him again ; and much less that the thread of our meeting should again be woven into my life and completely alter its design. The production of his play "VERA, OR THE NIHILISTS"

revived my interest in him. I attended the *première* at the Union Square Theatre in New York on the evening of August 20th, 1883. It was an unfortunate date, as August is the off-season and the society folk that would have supported the run of the play were absent at the numerous watering places, or abroad. The consequence was that poor houses greeted the new author and his play, although the first night was sufficiently filled to welcome his work. The piece hung fire for the reason that the first performance was witnessed by a gathering of professionals, composed of actors who thronged the Rialto, as Union Square was dubbed, waiting for the usual autumn formation of touring companies; actors engaged in the rehearsals held daily by the more fortunate companies already booked for long tours, and actresses starring in "one-night-stand" combinations; journalists looking for spicy copy, and odds and ends of summer visitors to the great metropolis.

It was not an intellectual audience, and what capacity it possessed for enjoyment melted under the stress of the heat, in the stifling atmosphere of a crowded theatre on one of the hottest nights of August. Another vital drawback was the absence

of the Stock Company of the Union Square Theatre, owing to the summer closing of the regular season. It was quite out of the order of things to sub-let the theatre for fugitive performances; the audience tacitly resented the absence of the company of trained and polished actors and actresses. One thought of the delightful leading lady, Miss Rose Etying, the handsome and debonnaire Mr. Charles Thorne or Richard Mansfield, just then rising into fame, and missed the perfect stage-craft and management that would have ensured to "VERA" a brilliant success. It was like going to a performance at the *Théâtre Français*, minus its matchless company of players. Therefore, Oscar Wilde's play had not a fair chance, despite the fact that it was superbly mounted and the part of Vera admirably portrayed by Miss Marie Prescott. Or it may have been due to there being only one female character in the play, a very serious defect in the eyes of the American public, who favour the actress more than the actor, and like a good seasoning of the feminine element in their theatrical sauce. At all events the play proved a summer bubble that burst after floating a week in the uncongenial atmosphere of Union Square. It was a bitter disappointment to

Oscar Wilde, and to those of his friends who had taken the trouble to forego the delights of their seaside cottages and brave the torrid heat of an August night to assist at his success. The Press condemned the Play wholesale. There was the trail of the æsthetic prejudice in most of the criticisms, and unvarnished spite and ridicule in the remainder. It gave the impression of a combined boycott and was certainly no credit to the justice or veracity of the New York papers, but then it was the Summer Season, and the real critics, like the society folk, were no doubt away enjoying the sea breezes of Long Branch, or perhaps, nearer still, bathing and eating soft shell crabs at Coney Island. My friend, the host of that memorable dinner, was particularly wroth over the treatment Oscar Wilde received from the Press and the public. After that unfortunate episode the author and his play were soon forgotten. With me, however, it left a lingering impression of regret.

At that period my life was full of the unexpected. I was under the sway of that mysterious impulse styled by the Germans *Wanderlust*. I sought in change and travel distraction from the perpetual grief due to my bereavement ; and when, a year or

two later, a dear sister residing in London urged me to come to England for a three months' visit, I was delighted at the prospect held forth, and not the least of that pleasure was the hope of meeting Lady Wilde, whose praises my old friend was never weary of singing. Therefore when I sailed from New York on the *City of Berlin* that stormy morning of March 13th, 1886, I was happy in the possession of a letter of introduction from my old friend to Lady Wilde. I set out, like Columbus, with the joyous prospect of finding a new world in that old world across the seas; and I was not, like Oscar Wilde, disappointed with the Atlantic Ocean. Every hour of that tempestuous voyage was a source of delightful excitement, a revelation of my inborn love for the grandeur of the wide waste of waters that the hurricane of winds and mad frolic of the stormy waves could not appal. I felt the fearless spirit of my Norse ancestors stir within me; no, I was not disappointed with the Atlantic, and I must confess to a feeling of regret when the shores of England brought that unforgettable voyage to an end.

* * * * *

About a month after my arrival in London I

received the expected invitation to call on Lady Wilde in a genial little note explaining her delay. She wrote that, being in a state of transition, everything was upside down in her home, as she was removing shortly to another house, but would I waive ceremony and come the following Sunday and have tea with her? Needless to relate that I was at once flattered and nervous over her note and the prospect of meeting a woman of such literary distinction, and at the same time curious to see the mother of the man who had interested me so strangely and to whom I was so strangely antagonistic. Lady Wilde and her son Willie were then living in Park Street, Mayfair, as the cards sent me, on my arrival, announced. At that period Park Street was as smart as Park Lane, but that was before the advent of the South African millionaires had imparted the glamour of gold to the name of Park Lane.

IV

IT was before an ancient dwelling that my hansom set me down. I remember I was somewhat surprised and disappointed by the unassuming appearance of the residence of Lady Wilde. I had been accustomed to the brown stone mansions and marble palaces of our moneyed aristocrats of New York, and could scarcely credit the fact that a woman of Lady Wilde's distinction should be so simply housed. That was the first of the many disillusionments that I was to experience in romantic old London and its unromantic society. It was with some misgiving that I raised the rusty knocker on the door. The closed windows seemed a silent warning that I should find nobody at home. My fears were unnecessary, however, for the door opened with alacrity to my timid knock, and gave me an uneasy suspicion that my arrival had been observed. A servant, whose age would have been difficult to surmise, bade me enter with an accent that made up for the difficulty about her age—there was no mistaking that delicious Irish brogue united to a

friendly and ingratiating manner that, somehow, sent all my misgivings flying.

“Come in, Acushla, sure her ladyship’s expecting ye this whole blessed afternoon!” she said, from the nebulous obscurity of the gloom of the hall behind her, while my eyes still full of the sunshine could discern nothing beyond her wan face and uncouth figure.

“Mind the step!” she cried, grasping my hand to lead me. “Shure, it’s her ladyship that loves to turn daylight into candlelight.”

For the moment I could not comprehend this ambiguous reference to the taste of her mistress, but when she had guided me skilfully through the long dark hall and round an angle and opened the door of a large low-ceiled panelled room dimly illumined by red-shaded candles, I understood her quaint wit.

“Sure, here she is, my lady, the American Countess herself!”

I would have been amused over her original and unceremonious announcement, had not the majestic figure standing in the centre of the obscurity given me a sense of awe. I remained motionless, not daring to take a step forward until my eyes had grown

accustomed to the subdued light. I had the curious sensation of one crossing a bridge in the dark. I have often recalled that prophetic sensation, for my entrance into that dim old room marked a great change in my life. I left my girlhood's years of pleasure and sorrow behind me and crossed the bridge that led to the joys and consolations of intellectual life, guided by the influence of that remarkable woman awaiting me amid the shadows of her broken hopes, the woman who was to teach me out of her own intellectual struggles and failures the secret of success.

Lady Wilde greeted me with warm words of welcome in the rich, vibrating voice that was one of her greatest fascinations. As she held my hand in both of hers and drew me nearer the candles burning on the chimney-piece to take a good look at me, I saw her noble face more clearly. I was infinitely moved by the pathetic expression of her large, lustrous eyes, and the evidences of womanly coquetry in the arrangement of her hair and those little aids to cheat time and retain a fading beauty. Yet, age could not deprive the brow, nose and chin of their classic lines, and in that gracious smile there was still the eternal sweetness of youth. A woman's smile

never grows old for it is the reflection of her soul.

There was a moment of silence between us during that mutual scrutiny. Then I saw more clearly as when thought meets thought, and read the power behind those lustrous eyes and the brave spirit under that fading mask of beauty. But above all, I felt the poet's soul that reigned there. Something of this must have revealed itself in my regard—the admiration, the reverence that I felt—for her eyes grew tender with a mist of tears—poor, dear, noble spirit! My eyes are misty after all the years as I write of that moment, and I can hear again her wonderful voice, softened by emotion, saying all sorts of kind flattering words that were not insincere to me, for were we not both Irish? She by right of blood and birth and I by right of blood alone, both therefore understanding the language of sentiment as only the Irish understand! What mattered the old-fashioned purple brocade gown, the towering headdress of velvet, the long gold earrings, or the yellow lace fichu crossed on her breast and fastened with innumerable enormous brooches—the huge bracelets of turquoise and gold, the rings on every finger! Her faded splendour was more striking than the most fashionable attire,

for she wore that ancient finery with a grace and dignity that robbed it of its grotesqueness.

She posed in that dim dingy room like the *grande dame* that she was by right of intellect—nay genius and noble Irish blood. Never before, nor since, have I met a woman who was so absolutely sure of herself and of what she was. I felt an absorbing respect for her courage in being herself. I infinitely preferred her antiquated dress to the attempts of those women of literary pretensions and undecided age, who deck themselves out in cheap and gaudy up-to-date fineries, set off by wigs that change colour like the seasons, whom one meets in London society.

Lady Wilde made her surroundings subservient to her personality. That was the charm of her pose. She appeared absolutely unconscious of the incongruities around her—the dowdy maid, the poorly furnished room, the badly served tea, the dust and dinginess, the flickering candles, all were evidently matters of small importance in the light of her majestic presence and brilliant conversation. I divined whence her son Oscar had acquired his love of posing, but he possessed it with a difference and that very difference was perhaps the failure

of his pose. He did not take that pose seriously, but made his æsthetic attitude the means to an end, whereas Lady Wilde was intensely earnest in her pose ; she was not ashamed of her poverty but rather gloried in the contrast that it afforded to her personality and brilliant intellect. One accepted her at her own value, as the world invariably does, and forgot the surroundings in admiration for the woman, since even the most captious could not deny her gifts the meed of recognition, if not of admiration. She gave me from the first the impression that she it was who made the room, and not the room that made her, or in other words a *grande dame* is ever a *grande dame* whether she dwells in a palace or a hovel. Not that the old house in Park Street was a hovel by any means, for it might have been a miniature palace if the money had been there to adorn it and fill it with the treasures of art, the books and paintings that would have set off the grace and distinction of poor Lady Wilde and given her a fame worthy of her position.

* * * * *

If I digress somewhat from the account of that meeting, it is due to my desire to confute many

unkind and misleading reflections made on Lady Wilde by those who received hospitality at her hands and were assiduous in their attendance at her receptions—chroniclers of so-called autobiographies really made up of society gossip, who, for the sake of padding, no doubt, resorted to fictitious wit in the way of ridicule at her expense, forgetting—or perhaps ignorant of the fact that ridicule is not wit, and a very poor substitute for humour. Where the ridicule is at the expense of the writer, it may be amusing if not witty, but where it is at the expense of another it is in distinctly bad taste and contrary to the true art of autobiography, which should be a purely personal narrative. Assuredly it is a mark of limited intelligence and fictitious literary pretension in those chroniclers who retailed absurd stories of Lady Wilde's eccentricities in dress or bearing and overlooked her genius for the lost art of conversation and the intellectual gifts that drew to her At Homes Browning, Tom Taylor, Lady Martin, and other celebrated men and women of letters. And, moreover, that these merciless chroniclers should batten on the dead bones of poor Lady Wilde's memory in order to feed their starved

imagination and fill their vapid pages, is a disgraceful proof of woman's inhumanity to woman, to paraphrase the well-known saying.

V

“ TELL me of your wonderful country ! ” said Lady Wilde, when the tea was served.

I responded eagerly to her request, prompted by that enthusiasm for America, the land of my birth—that through all my wanderings has never abated. “ Once an American always an American,” I told her when I had finished my long and glowing account to which she listened with deep attention, for she understood the art of being a good listener as she did the art of being a good talker.

“ Ah ! ” she said with a sigh, “ the Irish people dream of America as a paradise, but some of them find the reality anything but a paradise ! ”

I knew she was thinking of the experience of her son, and I hastened to tell her all the pleasant things I had heard of him, and the interest manifested in his personality by many of the foremost American writers. I related the episode of my meeting with him at the dinner given by her old friend.

“ You have the real Irish gift of eloquence,”

was her delighted and flattering comment on my description.

“ No, Lady Wilde ! ” I protested “ I have what we Americans call the real Irish gift of the gab ! ” Upon which we both laughed.

“ You are too modest,” she added with that fine spirit of courtesy that was so characteristic of her. Then after a pause : “ Oscar could not have told it better ! ”

She gazed at me for a moment in silence. I felt that some *arrière pensée* influenced her scrutiny of my face. I was right, as she presently said : “ Will you lift your veil, that I may see your face better ? ”

Lady Wilde continued her scrutiny, and then observed in all seriousness :—

“ Yes, I was not mistaken—you have the gift of thought as well as of speech—you should be a writer. Have you ever written anything ? ”

Her words had an electric influence on my mind. They were as the flash of sun-lit shores to the straining eyes of a mariner in strange waters. I felt that I was nearing an unknown land to which I had been unconsciously drifting.

“ You flatter me ! ” I said to hide my emotion,

my hope. "It must be a very difficult thing to write well, to be worthy of recognition as a writer. I have written—childish verses that pleased my dear mother—and won prizes at the Convent for verse and essays in the rhetoric class. I am fond of writing letters—my friends do me the compliment to treasure them—but surely, you are not serious when you tell me I have the gifts necessary to make a writer?"

"Never more serious in my life," answered Lady Wilde. "Think well of it—and begin at once—come to me if you need guidance and criticism. I will help you all I can! Write as you have spoken to-day and success will follow. I am sure of it!"

Her words fell like seed on a fruitful soil. I could have knelt at her feet and reverently kissed her hands—and I might have done so, carried away as I was with mingled feelings of admiration and gratitude, in my joy, had not the door opened at that moment.

"My son, Willie," said Lady Wilde, rising to greet the new comer.

Willie Wilde's greeting was full of that breezy cordiality that contrasted so markedly with the

stately manner of his brother Oscar. He set one completely at ease. He was in his own way as brilliant a speaker and as polished a writer as his brother. But he lacked the boldness and originality of method which characterised Oscar Wilde. He adopted journalism, and much, if not all of his fine work, has been lost in the quagmire of anonymity. Oscar Wilde was difficult to understand, but not more so than Willie Wilde, who was an amiable cynic, and enjoyed mystifying the world when he was not laughing at it, as much as his famous brother did. At the moment of which I write he was a man, in the true sense of the word, working valiantly in the hardest worked profession in the world, hiding his resentment against reverses of fortune under a gallant front, and perhaps fighting hardest against himself—this is all I feel justified in recording. His faults and his failures belong to influences and adverse circumstances, and should be sacred to friend and foe alike, now that he is no longer here, but sleeps the sleep of the broken-hearted!

Willie Wilde was neither dandy nor poet. He was not possessed by the spirit of the dreamer that endowed his mother with such lofty indifference

to her surroundings. Almost his first word to me was veiled apology for the disorder reigning in the old house.

“ We are in a state of transition ! ” he said, with his ingratiating smile. “ Everything is topsy-turvy, due to the preparations for our removal to another house.”

“ Yes,” added Lady Wilde, “ we are leaving it owing to the deterioration of our landlord—he has developed commercial instincts, and is desirous of converting the place into a shop—or pulling it down to make way for a more profitable building than it is at present.”

She paused and dismissed the subject with a wave of her hand, but her son continued the sentence by saying with marked empressement :—

“ You must consider yourself quite favoured under the circumstances by mother’s little reception for you alone. We hope to receive you in our new house and have any amount of pleasant people to meet you.”

His manner was so genial that it robbed his words of just a shade of patronage that might have deceived me into the impression that he was somewhat of a snob ; but he was too frank and natural

to belong to that phase of London society so delicately defined and exquisitely satirized by Thackeray. I felt, however, that I had in my admiration for Lady Wilde prolonged my visit beyond the usual time. The appearance on the scene of her son and his friend seemed to bring me back to reality, and I arose to make my exit with as much grace as possible to hide my embarrassment. Lady Wilde bade me a cordial, I might say affectionate, goodbye, with the pressing invitation to renew our acquaintance when she would be settled in the new house. On my way home, I suddenly remembered the fact that no mention of Oscar Wilde had been made by his brother Willie, and I fell to wondering thereon.

VI

THE environment of Old Chelsea was a more congenial atmosphere for Lady Wilde than that of fashionable Mayfair. Chelsea had been for a long period the haunt of artistic and literary spirits, and sanctified by the shrine of Carlyle's house, only a few minutes' walk from Lady Wilde's door in Oakley Street. For the same reason no doubt Oscar Wilde set up his home in Tite Street, when he returned with his charming young bride from their honeymoon in Paris. Oakley Street at that time was a pleasant quiet spot; its wide roadway sweeping to the river, displayed on both sides comfortable old-fashioned buildings, some embowered in ivy—that have since given way to more pretentious houses with ornamental facades and chimneys, although the row containing Lady Wilde's house is unchanged. The street is short, beginning at the King's Road and terminating in the Embankment at the point where the fine Albert Bridge stretches its graceful structure across the

Thames. This position rendered Oakley Street very accessible, a fact to which Lady Wilde was not slow in directing one's attention. "All London comes to me by way of King's Road," she used to say in her most impressive manner. "But the Americans come straight from the Atlantic steamer moored at Chelsea Bridge"—a statement that was always hugely enjoyed by the Americans who thronged her rooms during the season when she held her weekly Saturday receptions. Much of her popularity was due to her son Oscar's fame with the cultured classes from New York and Boston. Many of the distinguished literary people who had entertained and admired Oscar Wilde during that famous lecture tour, hastened to pay their *devoirs* to his mother on their arrival in London. One of the most notable—Oliver Wendell Holmes—was given a special reception by Lady Wilde, at which some of the most distinguished literary men and women of London were present. I have not the least doubt but that the very bizarre aspect of Lady Wilde's surroundings was an attraction in itself. It was like a visible reproduction of the quaint rooms and assemblies described by Thackeray, Lever or Dickens. Ordinary people

in search of intellectual pleasure rarely notice the *ensemble* of the places they visit when a famous personage, a curiosity, a character study, great or small, is to be found there. And many have a secret antipathy to show-houses. They care little for the vagaries of the host or hostess, provided their pursuit after the intellectual and artistic is being rewarded. And, nowhere in all the world can one find a people so eager for the curious, the entertaining or the bizarre, as the people of London. Society will flock in crowds anywhere to find a new sensation or process of killing time. Witness the crowded At Homes, where people crush like sardines in a box, happy in the idea that they are enjoying themselves in proportion to the crowd. To be one of a crowd is the delight of London society folk. It was considered very intellectual to frequent Lady Wilde's crushes, just as it was considered very musical to flock to the Sunday At Homes of Mrs. R., a beautiful American, with a wonderful voice, who seldom sang herself, but gave others that privilege. The two salons were at the opposite ends of London, one in Belgravia and the other in Chelsea, and were at that time the only gatherings that could be dignified by the title of salon in the

real sense of the French word. It is true there was a third gathering that styled itself The Salon—but it was more in the nature of a Club, as it had a settled membership at the modest fee of one guinea a year, and held its evenings in a hired hall, generally a picture gallery, where the members received their friends and regaled them on claret cup, coffee and sandwiches, while they were entertained by musical or dramatic artists. And, I may add, both were of a superior order and atoned for the meagre refreshment offered. But Lady Wilde and the fair American made no such blunders—the tea and accessories were of the best at both houses, although it must be admitted there was a difference in the service! For many years the musical salon of Mrs. R. was sacred from the Press, fashionable reporters being strictly debarred. But with Lady Wilde it was quite the other way. She was at the mercy of every petty news-monger, a circumstance of which she was fully cognisant, but treated with the broad courtesy that she awarded to all who wielded the pen in the cause of the Press. It must be said for the many that her tolerance was appreciated and respected, but for the few, who took advantage of her eccentricities

to pad out accounts of her receptions in their chronicles, the obvious lack of good taste is its own criticism. Those pleasant, original and interesting private gatherings now have been swallowed up by the craze for clubs for women, the first of which was formed by a writer who frequented Lady Wilde's salon, and no doubt received the inspiration there for that which developed into a real boon for serious women-writers, dependent on their pen for a livelihood. But, unfortunately, the writer in question lacked the supreme tact of Lady Wilde, as well as her genius for leadership—for, sad to relate, she was finally ousted from the position of President of the Club by the ungrateful members, and that when the Club was fairly settled on its legs and able to look after itself. The affair created a small sensation in its way, but would be accepted as a matter of course at the present day—when women's Clubs have become so numerous, and the advanced views of the suffragette spirits have instituted the new principle out of the old—that Might is Right.

* * * * *

Lady Wilde resumed her Saturday receptions with great éclat. It was a beautiful summer afternoon, and old as well as new friends crowded the

rooms on the first floor of the house in Oakley Street. For some occult reason she never received in the drawing room. People were coming and going as I arrived, quite a long line of hansoms and broughams designated the house, and my cabman set me down without troubling to ask the number. The intelligence of the hansom cabman of those days was to me a matter of perpetual surprise. They were the most expert ready-reckoners I have ever met, while their faculty of mind reading was to me extraordinary.

The door at the top of the flight of street steps was wide open, I could see no servant of any description to announce me, so I followed the people who entered and preceded me. A rather difficult task, as those leaving the house were pushing their way out until the small and narrow hallway was quite packed. I felt thoroughly uncomfortable. It was my first experience of a London society crush. I could not avoid marking the contrast between the customs of Chelsea and Belgravia, where I had attended the previous Sunday afternoon the musical *At Home* of my fair compatriot. There all had been perfectly conducted, from the smart footman who opened the door and passed

one on to the dainty maid, who in her turn invited one to partake of the refreshment in the cool, shaded dining-room, before ascending the crimson-carpeted stairway, at the top of which the hostess awaited her guests. The house was equally small, but the order in the domestic arrangements made one quite overlook the modest proportions of the hall and staircase. The contrast in the two houses did not impress me favourably. I began to grow impatient at the pushing and jostling by a crowd of people, every one of whom might be a celebrity, but celebrities have, sometimes, sharp elbows and wear large and heavy boots. However, I found myself finally at the door of the reception room, which seemed to my eyes, filled with the sunlight of the outer air, shrouded in darkness, pierced here and there by a dimly gleaming red light. I stood there for some minutes on the threshold, unable to advance or recede in the crowd. As my eyes gradually became accustomed to the twilight of the rooms before me, I could discern faces that stood out with Rembrandtesque distinctness. It gave me the strange feeling of recovery from an attack of blindness to see those shadowy faces, while the uproar from those voices of the unseen, produced on

me quite an uncanny sensation. This, with the close atmosphere of the rooms, was making me decidedly nervous, when the sound of Lady Wilde's voice broke the unpleasant spell. She called me by name, and the people before me considerately giving way, I found myself beside her, hardly conscious of how I got there, and feeling the cordial pressure of her hand on mine. In the semi-darkness she loomed up a majestic figure, her headdress with its long white streamers and glittering jewels giving her quite a queenly air. She presented several people to me—but I managed to retreat into a corner of the room until my eyes grew accustomed to the obscurity, and I could note its occupants and study the gathering of long-haired poets and short-haired novelists, smartly dressed Press women, and not a few richly gowned ladies of fashion.

VII

A NEW arrival, for whom every one made way, relieved the scene of its monotony. It was Oscar Wilde—but how changed! As he bowed over his mother's hand I noted the up-to-date elegance of his attire—the short, crisp locks of hair, with just a suspicion of the old-time wave, brushed back from the high brow, the indefinable air of the dandy that hung around him. He was no longer the æsthetic *poseur*, but a resplendent dandy, from the pale pink carnation in the lapel of his frock-coat to the exquisite tint of the gloves and the cut of the low shoes of the latest mode. Someone brought me a cup of tea and a sandwich, and then began a one-sided conversation, in which I played the part of listener, as I was too fascinated by the metamorphosis of Oscar Wilde to respond. He spoke little, but seemed to efface himself that his mother might display her brilliant wit and hold everyone by the charm of her conversation, but his voice, in the few words of greeting he exchanged

with friends, had a triumphant note that was absent when I last heard him speak. His smile was as gracious, but more kindly. The covert sneer in it had vanished.

“Yes,” I thought, “marriage has certainly improved him.”

Gradually the crowd thinned out, and one could see and hear with some degree of comfort. It had been a great success, that first Saturday reception, and Lady Wilde was fairly sparkling with satisfaction. She espied me in my corner, and brought her son Oscar to talk with me. By this time the maid had placed numerous lamps about, and I could see his face very distinctly. If I had been surprised by the complete change in his appearance, I was startled by the change in the soul that looked out of his eyes. It was a proud, contented, feminine soul, no longer veiled by wounded vanity and resentment. It was a soul at peace with itself. A soul radiant with hope and new ambition. A happy soul that had found its mate. He sat down beside me. I waited for him to speak. That silent interchange of soul communication held me mute. I wondered if he felt how clearly I read his soul. Whatever his thoughts, he concealed them under

the mask of his smiling eyes. I could read a gentle defiance under his gaze. After an instant that seemed an eternity I felt I could endure the spell no longer. I broke it by saying timidly:—

“ You don't remember me ! ”

He bowed his head in the affirmative.

“ But we did not exchange a word ! ” I said.

“ Yes, Madame, I remember you quite well,” he said slowly, as though recalling the circumstances. “ You are the lady of the mournful attire and the joyous hair. The Niobe sans tears of that feast of roses sans thorns.”

I caught my breath between surprise and embarrassment. I resented his personal compliment to my hair. He spoke with that impersonal tone that robbed his words of flattery or sarcasm. Then he abruptly changed the subject.

“ Are you making a long stay in London. Have you met my wife ? No ? Then we must have you to tea. Constance will send you a card.”

He arose and without another word moved through the rooms to take leave of Lady Wilde, and was gone. The impression he left with me was a varied one. I did not know whether to be annoyed or indifferent at his abrupt manner. I

learnt subsequently to understand the strange restlessness that he always evinced in my presence. He was drawn to me by an intellectual sympathy and at the same time repelled by the subconscious knowledge of my power to read his soul. During the few moments of our conversation I experienced a succession of emotions—delight in his charming appearance, pleasure in the happiness revealed by his soul, flattered that he should have observed me so keenly at that memorable dinner—and then, a curious distrust—altogether I found Oscar Wilde astonishing and *difficile*, an enigma that would be worth the solving, and I awaited with much interest the card of invitation to his wife's At Home. I wished to know that other soul to which he was so gladly mated.

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I doubt if Oscar Wilde fully realised his soul at that period. He seemed nearer to the knowledge at our first meeting. Failure and ridicule was then slowly lifting the veil concealing the terrible power of the forces of that supreme feminine spirit. But, on this occasion he seemed lulled into confidence in his soul by the security ensured through his happy marriage to a rich and lovely wife. There

was no longer any need for eccentric and startling self-advertisement, no call on his resources as a literary jester, to force success and gain—to speak plainly—a livelihood; no longer the necessity of a pose to conceal his poverty. He had yet to learn that the soul is the enemy of the body, and where the body outrages the soul, the soul's revenge is the destruction of the body.

He was wrong when he wrote "Soul and body—body and soul. How mysterious they are. The senses can refine and the intellect can degrade."

He should have written:—"It is the senses that can degrade and the intellect that can refine." But he wrote those words before he came into the full communion with, and comprehension of his soul, through the throes of social disgrace.

Looking back to those pleasant hours passed at Lady Wilde's Saturday receptions, I can feel vividly, even at this time, my impression of some lurking danger, some unexpected catastrophe when Oscar Wilde was present. He would saunter in towards the end, and after saluting his mother, take a position by the chimney piece and strike a graceful pose. Whenever I was in the rooms I drew as much as possible out of his view. That curious feeling of

danger rendered me shy and nervous. I have, alas, in the light of subsequent events, discovered the meaning of my presentiments. Sherard related in his "Story of an Unhappy Friendship," a curious experience of the same prophetic instinct in the incident of the swordstick. He likewise discovered the meaning of that impulse as he writes years after it occurred:—

"I do not know if a passing madness had really put my friend in danger in one of the happiest moments of his life, but I have sometimes thought since that here was a premonition—in what mysterious manner suggested I cannot say."

At the moment of which I write I attributed my feeling to my own lack of brilliancy and wit. I feared to say anything lest I should not say it well. I had not yet found the courage of expression. Oscar Wilde was not yet famous in the eyes of the world, but to me, who divined his genius, he was already a great personage. Beneath the polished veneer of his indifferent manner he was keenly sensitive, and my avoidance of him did not very long escape his eye. He made it a point to seek me and draw me into conversation. Perhaps he would not have singled me out for those little

marks of attention had he not observed my devotion and admiration for his mother, and heard her sing my praises.

“ My mother tells me that you can write,” he said one afternoon, after a fruitless effort to lure me into talking about myself.

“ She is very kind,” I managed to say.

“ And she tells me,” he persisted, “ that you are a wonder as a talker—consequently you must be a wonder as a writer, as it takes two wonders to make a miracle—now when are you going to perform a miracle for me ? ”

“ A miracle ! ” I exclaimed indignantly. His sarcasm roused me, and I was very near losing my temper.

“ Yes, it is not a very difficult miracle,” he rejoined with a boyish laugh of amusement over the way in which he had nettled me. “ It is only a Christmas story. Will you write one for me ? You have heaps of time between now and Christmas to perpetrate a score of miracles ! ”

I was in the seventh heaven of delight—to write a Christmas story, and for the charming magazine edited by Oscar Wilde. It was really too good to believe. My eyes sought Lady Wilde. She had

evidently overheard our talk, as she nodded her head in encouragement.

“ But how ! ” I stammered.

“ That is easy enough ! ” he answered quizzingly. “ You have only got to think and then write. Come, think now—give me the plot. . . . ”

His eyes fairly danced with merriment over my being cornered so cleverly. But I was on my mettle. My imagination did not fail me. I pictured a scene in the desert of the Sahara—an Arab magician—the strange transference of thought personality—the interchange of souls through the mysterious power of life after death. Oscar Wilde regarded me curiously, and after a pause said gravely :—

“ You have imagination—but that is the least of the work. You must cheat imagination of the unreal—clothe it in the semblance of reality. You must deceive to convince. Now let me have that story soon—but remember this most essential point—never put pen to paper until you have completely built your plot and thought out every detail. Then go to work.”

I have never forgotten that simple rule, and have found it an invaluable guide in whatever form

I adopted wherein to express my inspiration.

Of the fate of that Christmas story I will not write here. The adventures of its loss would form a tale in itself—but it served to launch me into the fascinating, yet hazardous career of the writer.

Society began to take Oscar Wilde seriously when he became the editor of the *Woman's World*. He was at once a man of importance in the eyes of all those ladies who adopted a literary rôle as a pleasant pastime or a means of local celebrity. There was a flutter in the boudoirs of Mayfair and Belgravia when the *Woman's World* appeared. Lady Wilde's Saturdays were thronged. Ladies of high degree and ladies of no degree—poets and painters, artists and art critics, writers and scribblers, all eager to attain a place in the pages of the new magazine. It was a Bunthorne assembly over again, with the difference that now Oscar Wilde posed as the apostle of literature instead of æstheticism, and, where formerly the lily and sunflower reigned, sheaves of manuscript, clusters of poetical lilies, flowers of fancy in the way of sketches of pen and pencil, held sway in that feast of intellect that had superseded the feast of æsthetic beauty. Those were the gala-days of the Oakley Street receptions,