

presided over by Oscar from his place before the chimney piece, where, in an attitude of smiling boredom, faultlessly dressed, an elbow on the mantel shelf, the large white, shapely hand supporting the Olympian chin, the other hand toying nervously with the richly jewelled charms suspended from the chain displayed across his breast, he listened to the string of compliments interlarded with sotto voce requests for favours, of his mother's guests. But he was not coerced by all that adulation of the fashionable mob seeking to see their names in print. He was too genuine a literary genius to be caught by literary chaff. And if the placid smile of literary boredom vanished in a look of real interest, it was when his eyes encountered among that chaff the leaven of literature in those distinguished contributors to the pages of the *Woman's World*, who had come to honour the gathering by their presence.

VIII

LADY WILDE'S historic Saturdays had grown so popular, and consequently so overcrowded by all sorts and conditions of people, since almost everyone felt privileged to bring one or two friends to see her or her famous son, that she was obliged to select another day, usually a Wednesday, to which she asked the select few worthy of a position as literary folk of distinction. Ouida, who possessed a great admiration for Oscar Wilde, graced one of those Wednesdays by her presence ; a decided favour on Ouida's part, as she detested society and its women. But on that occasion she was extremely amiable and delighted the few present with her brilliant conversation. She rivalled Lady Wilde in that respect, as well as by her eccentricity in dress. Her blonde hair, still bright and untouched by time, was arranged in an elaborate old-fashioned coiffure of chignon and curls, her headgear was a blending of bonnet and hat, while her mauve silk gown was elaborately flounced and covered with

costly Italian lace. She had beautiful hands, covered with rings displaying rare jewels in curious settings. She spoke in quick, disjointed sentences with a peculiar accent, and constantly referred to Oscar—in fact she directed all her conversation to him.

On another occasion the late Louise Chandler Moulton, the American poetess, was present, and recited, in her low sweet voice, some of her exquisite verses, to the delight of everyone, including the over-critical Oscar himself.

Lady Wilde had a keen appreciation of talent and an unerring faculty for discovering genius. Had she been more favoured by fortune in the way of wealth, she would have rescued many an unknown poet or writer from the oblivion and failure to which lack of means consigned their gifts. One of the prominent figures at her Saturdays was W. B. Yeats, whom she invariably greeted as "My Irish Poet!" Many, who doubted her enthusiasm then, have since learned to accord to Yeats his place as a true poet, worthy of the title.

The scoffers, alas! were not few, who met at those Saturdays. Some openly laughed in the face of Lady Wilde. Whether she was conscious of that

ill-bred ridicule is difficult to say, as she comported herself with the same stately dignity and hospitality to all. She possessed the supreme tact of appearing to ignore any *gaucherie* on the part of her guests, and she had the admirable faculty of appearing not to understand that which did not please her. She rarely corrected anyone, although on one occasion, when I introduced a well-known American singer, as remarkable for her vulgarity as she was famous for her wonderful voice, who had the temerity to say:—"Lady Wilde, you remind me of my dear old grandmother," I was gently admonished not to bring the lady again.

"But, dear Lady Wilde—" I stammered in confusion, "she is a most respectable woman."

"Respectable!" repeated Lady Wilde. "Never use that word here. It is only tradespeople who are respectable. We are above respectability!"

I did not argue with my friend, but took her strange lesson on social distinctions in all seriousness, and never attempted to introduce another *respectable* woman at her At Homes. Lady Wilde was no doubt right in her use of the word, but it was just such observations that gained her many enemies in the guise of pretended friends, one or two of

whom have most unjustly ridiculed her memory by absurd stories. I call to mind one case of a portrait artist, and a compatriot of Lady Wilde, who fairly haunted her Saturday receptions in search of subjects. Perhaps to the artist's failure in securing sitters is due the unkind facetious pen-portrait of Lady Wilde, which the artist gives in a book of "Recollections." I had, at the time of which I write, caught the prevailing craze so fashionable then, for being photographed or sketched, and was almost persuaded by Lady Wilde to have my portrait painted by the artist in question. It may be that I might have saved poor Lady Wilde that posthumous ridicule had I consented to sit for the portrait, as the artist was unfortunately unable to obtain a single commission among the many friends of Lady Wilde. Another lady, also seized with the ambition of appearing in print, has used poor Lady Wilde as a sort of literary dummy, upon which to pose a silly tale of her donning three gowns one over the other—whether as a matter of necessity or whim is not made very clear—the story being ostensibly related to illustrate Lady Wilde's Irish eccentricities. I can cap it by an instance of English eccentricity which came under

my observation during one of my voyages from New York to Southampton, in the person of an English baronet with a double name, who was the laughing stock of the entire ship, owing to the indiscreet talk of his valet, who disclosed the fact that his master wore three suits of clothes under his enormous overcoat! There was some reason for accepting the veracity of the valet, as everyone noticed the remarkable diminution in the bulk of the baronet when he disembarked at Southampton.

Poets and authors had a pretty knack of making presentation copies of their books to Lady Wilde. Her bookshelves and tables were always filled with these offerings, which she valued highly. Nothing gave her more pleasure than the sight of some young writer, book in hand, entering her rooms, and advancing, timidly or proudly as the case might be, to beg her acceptance of the volume.

“What! another book!” she would exclaim.

“Well done!”

Then the book would be passed round for inspection, and, in the case of the donor being a budding or full-fledged poet, the reading of one of the poems would form the feature of that occasion. In this

way she sought to encourage the love of the art which she adored. She took every offering seriously in her enthusiasm to help others up the perilous heights of Parnassus. Very naturally this habit of presentations overloaded her bookshelves and the inevitable happened, upon which the authors did not count—as old books must give place to the new.

T. D. O'Sullivan, the late Irish poet and patriot, who wrote "God Save Ireland," was present, when a poet, whose name is now a household word, came to Lady Wilde with a slim little book of verses.

"May it be as useful as my presentation." O'Sullivan whispered to me. Whereupon he told me the following amusing story:—

Somewhere in the fifties he presented Lady Wilde with a rare and valuable first edition and inserted his name therein. Years after, when looking through the books on sale at a second-hand book shop in London, he came upon the identical copy, still bearing his inscription to Lady Wilde. A sense of humour prompted him to buy the book and with an additional inscription, present it to her a second time. She appeared to be greatly pleased with the gift; then, with a sly smile, he asked her

to read the two inscriptions and note the dates. Lady Wilde opened the book, glanced over the dedication, and with a humour equal to his own, observed gravely :—

“ And a very useful book it proved, my friend, for it served, like Cæsar’s dust, to fill up a hole in my purse ! ”

BOOK II

I

CONSTANCE WILDE! As I write a vision of her sweet face and graceful personality seems to arise in the vista of the past. A face whose loveliness was derived more from the expression and exquisite colouring than from any claim to the regular lines that constitute beauty. Sympathy, sensitiveness and shyness were expressed in that charming womanly face, and revealed a character intensely feminine. Not a touch of masculine strength could be traced in brow or chin. It was a feminine soul that gazed forth from the windows of her clear, thoughtful eyes, a pathetic soul that lent a shade of sadness to her brightest moods. Yes, Constance Wilde was a thoroughly womanly woman. Had she been otherwise, the social tragedy that obscured her happiness and broke her heart, would have been averted. A masculine woman would have succeeded in controlling the fate of her husband

through sheer force of resolute measures, whereas she failed through the innate delicacy of her woman's heart and the feminine intellect that rendered her unable to cope with the complex problem of her husband's genius. But she was the purely normal woman, born to mate with the purely normal man, a union that constitutes the root of married happiness and the foundation of the home in its best and noblest sense. Genius should wed with genius, in order that the lesser genius should sustain and inspire the higher ; for, in marriage, as in every other partnership, there is the passive and active condition—the silent partner who is never seen, but whose influence is demonstrated by the success of the combination. The wife of the genius is the silent partner when her dowry is an equal, but passive portion of genius, since it is only genius that can understand genius, curb its vagaries and direct its course along the right road to success. The wives of many great men have possessed the priceless quality of tact, that is in itself a prerogative of genius. Tact will sometimes succeed where even genius fails. Tact is the secret of doing and saying the right thing at the right time and in the right way. Constance Wilde lacked the supreme quality

of tact that would have overruled the transformation in her character which the genius of her husband endeavoured to accomplish. She was not gifted with the dramatic instinct, and thereby failed to assume the attitude of the *poseuse* that he aimed at, by making her an exponent of his theories of art and beauty. The wife of the apostle of beauty and æsthetics, he held, should not dress like an ordinary woman. She should be a living example of his inspiration, and teach women how to conform gracefully to his startling ideals.

It was too great a test.

Constance Wilde sought bravely to meet her husband's wish, and failed ; for she was not endowed by nature with the gift of posing. She yielded weakly through her lack of that tact which would have enabled her to hold her ground, and assert herself as the sensible womanly woman that she really was, and thereby she would have proved a curb to the vagaries of the genius and held the happiness and well-being of the man with a firm hand. Her very sincerity and devotion was her undoing. She failed as to his ideals, she failed as a *poseuse*. They drifted apart through lack of sympathy or perhaps through the recoil of too great sympathy between feminine souls.

Oscar Wilde was still the affectionate husband in the ordinary sense of the word, but he was no longer the teacher, the believer in the superior qualities of his gentle wife. He pitied her lack of appreciation, her failure to sustain the character he had designed for her. He was bored and disappointed by the slow collapse of his brilliant dream of creating a social epoch in the history of the English art of dress, which the fortune of his wife, together with her youth and beauty, encouraged him to attempt. He was bored for the reason that his vanity suffered by the overthrow of his ambition. Then, in that dangerous state of reaction when he was weak and weary and starving for inspiration—the very life of his genius—a strange and dangerous element entered his career. The intoxication of a new inspiration that stimulated his supreme passion of self-worship with the wine of admiration, flattery and sensuousness. Then issued the terrible battle between his noble feminine soul and the brute force of his powerful masculine brain structure.

* * * * *

It was late in the London season—somewhere in the beginning of July when I received the long-expected card to the "At Home" of Mrs. Oscar Wilde.

I was eager to meet her, as I had been unfortunate in always just missing her on her brief appearances at Lady Wilde's Saturdays. The card announced it to be the last "At Home" and I looked forward to an interesting gathering of the literary set; but I was not prepared for the crush of fashionable folk that overcrowded the charming rooms of the unpretentious house in Tite Street. There was an air of brightness and luxury about it that was sadly lacking in that other old house in Oakley Street. A smart maid opened the door and I found myself drawn with the crowd in the wide hallway towards the dining-room. There tea was served in the most delightfully unconventional manner from a quaint shelf extending around the wall, before which white enamelled seats—modelled in various Grecian styles—were placed. By this arrangement the centre of the room was an open space, instead of being absorbed by the customary huge table laden with refreshment, and gave an impression of greater size and lightness to the room. Everything in the quaint room was carried out in a decorative scheme of white blended with delicate tints of blue and yellow, said to have been designed by Whistler. I presently found myself sitting in one of the white

Greek seats, drinking tea out of a dainty yellow cup that might have been modelled from a lotus flower, and being talked to by a young poet, while I watched the company passing in and out of that very æsthetic dining-room, that by its very simplicity, harmonised with the variegated summer costumes of the women, and the grey suits, or black frock-coats of the men.

The young poet gave me everyone's name, interlarded with a little amiable gossip, and then piloted me up the crowded staircase. We lingered a few moments in the smoking lounge at the head of the stairs, facing the drawing-room, to admire the room with its Eastern decorations, Oriental divans and Moorish casements. There we found our host smoking the inevitable cigarette and entertaining a bevy of clever-looking people who might have represented anything from the studio to the stage. He saw me, and at once rose to greet me with his kindly smile of reassurance, as I was just a little bit nervous at the informality of that ultra fashionable gathering, with no staid footman to announce me, and at the mercy of the chaperonage of my garrulous poet. Oscar Wilde's soft words of welcome placed me at my ease. "Come with me," he said, "I will find my wife. She is somewhere near."

In the drawing-room there was less crowding, and we moved about easily. I was attracted by the exceeding beauty of the ceiling, which was all I could perceive of the decorations, as everyone was standing. Oscar spoke of it with much pride as being a masterpiece of design by Whistler. After the ceiling, the next thing that arrested my gaze was a young woman arrayed in an exquisite Greek costume of cowslip yellow and apple leaf green. Her hair, a thick mass of ruddy brown, was wonderfully set off by the bands of yellow ribbon, supporting the knot of hair low on the nape of the neck, and crossing the wavy masses above the brow. The whole arrangement was exceedingly becoming to the youthful, almost boyish face with its clear colouring and full, dark eyes. There was an air of shy self-consciousness and restraint about the wearer of that fantastic yet lovely costume that gave me the impression of what is called stage fright, and I jumped to the conclusion that she was a young actress dressed up for a recital, and somewhat nervous before all the society folk present. Imagine my surprise when she was introduced to me as the hostess.

“ My wife,” said Oscar Wilde, as we paused before

her. Then he whispered, but not too low for me to hear :—

“ You are looking lovely, Constance—not a bit too tired with all these people.”

I saw her sweet face light up, and all the shyness and nervousness melt out of her eyes under those words of approval from her husband and teacher. She received me with that gentle cordiality that marked her bearing, but I could not overcome the first impression made upon me, and I was not quite at my ease in the consciousness of the secret weariness and effort that I knew lay under her smiling face and graceful bearing. I felt that she was bored and overwrought by the part she was playing before all those people—the æsthetic pose that she was not fitted to take. Perhaps something of this passed through the mind of Oscar Wilde, for he began to speak, and soon everyone was silent, and listening eagerly to all the beautiful things about art and life that he told us. His wife speedily sank into the background, completely forgotten and eclipsed by the brilliant glow of her husband's eloquence. He now occupied the place where she had stood, and posed there in an elegant and graceful attitude. When I looked about for her she had disappeared,

but I soon caught sight of her again beyond the doorway, in the crush of people in the hall, a rapt expression of love and pride on her face, while her eyes were fixed, as one magnetised, on her husband's inspired features.

There could be no doubt that, at that period of their married life, Oscar Wilde and his wife were still fondly devoted to one another. A son had been born to them, and the future was all rose-coloured. I met them frequently at the houses of mutual friends and had ample opportunity of studying the attempted metamorphosis of Constance Wilde into an artistic *poseuse*. Her gowns were startlingly original; on one occasion purely Greek, on another early Venetian, in rich tints of old rose, with gold lace, high collar, trimmings and girdles. Again I would see her arrayed in draperies after the mediæval style, of cerise and black satin with necklaces of quaint gems, all of which she wore with a shy air of depreciation, a bearing that was not in keeping with the stately, sumptuous style of dress, and seemed a silent protest to the masquerade so antipathetic to her English training and taste. It is true she had many followers among the young girls and spinsters who affected the æsthetic pose, who

might be seen at the literary evenings of well-known writers in Regent's Park, Fulham and Chelsea. It was curious to note that the limp, clinging gowns had a more or less untidy bedraggled appearance in keeping with the touselled locks of these ambitious young and old women. I recall one young woman who hailed from Birmingham and was reputed to be the owner of a handsome income derived from coal, who gave bizarre receptions at her villa in Regent's Park Crescent—posed in an indescribable get-up of draperies that not even Oscar Wilde could have classified—who cultivated a tame black snake, and had no clocks in the house—a circumstance hugely irritating to those of her guests who carried no watch. She gave delightful suppers, which compensated for the lack of clocks, the snake and the æsthetic rags, but, pitiful to relate, she could not secure the Wildes for her receptions, much as she tried, even with the influence of Lady Wilde, whose kind heart was touched by the young woman's enthusiasm. Such society as this was not the aim of Oscar's ambition. It was the exclusive set that came to his house, admired his wife and let themselves be amused by his wit that he wished to lead. However, it takes many failures to make a success

and those repeated failures drove Oscar Wilde to seek the fields wherein he achieved fame. Meanwhile he endeavoured to make a writer of his wife, but she only attained the plane of the compiler of fashion articles and the researcher of the genesis of historic costumes which she faithfully delved out of the literary treasures of the British Museum. He was bored at her lack of literary instinct, forgetting the fact that he himself was at fault, through his inability to accept her at her own value, as the charming domestic spirit of his fireside. Oscar Wilde was singularly self-centred, an observer of life and character from his own standpoint only, and deceived himself by the belief that her money could command artistic success, as it had brought him a good measure of domestic comfort and social prestige. He saw his error later, when he learned the inutility of money in the making of brains, and resigned himself to the futility of transforming his wife into a genius that would inspire the world. Nevertheless, at that period their souls were in perfect accord through their love. It was only a matter of time when those two souls would drift apart, the beautiful soul friendship that bound them broken and lost by the insidious in-

fluence of his strange beauty worship, upon which his genius was to feed at the cost of every noble, natural feeling. The approach of that dangerous influence was as slow as it was insidious.

II

ABOUT this time a wave of occultism swept over London society. Whether the study of the occult accorded well with the æsthetic tendencies of the set that affected the Wilde manner I know not, but everyone was possessed with a craze for cheiromancy, star-gazing, planet-reading and the Egyptian cult of the unseen forces of good and evil. An order devoted to the study of these fascinating pursuits had arisen, under the leadership of a clever disciple of Egyptian lore. He was also a searcher into biblical mysticism, and had written a remarkable book, that no ordinary mind could understand, on the occult science of King Solomon. The Order was a secret one, though for what reason only the adepts knew, as the aim of its studies and research was an innocent and commendable desire to cultivate the old arts of occultism and fathom the mysteries of magic both black and white, practised by the learned magicians of the mediæval times.

And here I may explain in a few words my own

theory of occultism, the result of deep and serious consideration of a subject that has attracted men and women of acknowledged mental ability and scientific reputation. Occultism is the profound instinct of the unknown and the invisible, that the soul has implanted in the brain as a defence and safeguard against those mysterious unseen forces that threaten life on every side ; the sense of premonition, the impulse of self-preservation, the fear of annihilation are the roots of this strange power called occultism, a power that the wise man of olden times did not disdain to recognise and cultivate. Superstition is ignorance, whereas occultism is knowledge—and the one should not be confounded with the other, since the one belongs to the senses and the other to the soul. Superstition weakens the will by a sense of imaginary dangers, whereas occultism is the subtle keeper of the will by cultivating the sub-consciousness of dangers that oppose it, and renders the will fearless of the unseen evil, since it gives the will confidence to cope with it by teaching the will the futility of evil, when the will is armed with good. I am referring to the true use of occultism and not to the spurious use to which it is put by the superstitious and the curious,

It was something of this spirit that influenced the founder of the Order in London. His enthusiasm was the means of drawing many clever people to his séances. The secret character of the proceedings was an attraction to the busy idlers of society, while the serious portion of the members found it more agreeable to pursue the study of the occult without running the risk of ridicule.

I was favoured by an invitation to join the Order. After some little deliberation I decided to accept, as I felt it could do me no harm and might do me good ; a decision I have never regretted, for the reason that the very serious study in Oriental and scientific subjects that I had to undertake in order to pass the various degrees, developed a habit of concentrated thought that assisted me greatly in my literary career, just then in its initial stage. The studies also brought me into closer intimacy with Constance Wilde. We were initiated into the Order at the same time ; a somewhat theatrical ceremony that would have been amusing had it not been taken so seriously. I passed the ordeal quite composedly, but not so my companion, Constance Wilde. I felt her tremble, and the hand that held mine was icy cold. Her voice faltered over the

formula of admission that we recited together—a most formidable declaration, which threatened dire calamity to those who disclosed the secret studies or proceedings of the Order. My sense of humour was secretly tried on that occasion, and I felt more inclined to laugh, although Constance Wilde's beautiful eyes were full of tears. When it was known, later, that Constance Wilde had faithfully reported the ceremony and all details to her husband, many of the members attributed the tragic events that befell her family to the breaking of her pledged word. Naturally such a conclusion was absurd for many reasons ; but yet it goes to prove how dangerous the influence of occultism can be on the shallow-minded and superstitious. I record this apparently irrelevant incident because it had for me a deeper meaning than a mere passing experience or phase in the busy life of the intellectual worker. It brought my soul in touch with the soul of Constance Wilde, through our mutual studies and interchange of thought. I learned to read in that clear mirror her noble beautiful character and discern her secret unrest and sadness, her weakness and patience under the process of disillusionment through which she was passing. I divined that she

was not serious in the pursuit of occult knowledge, that she had an ulterior object in becoming a member, and that her end was to use the curious lore for some purpose other than that intended by the Order, and that her frank, truthful spirit chafed under the deception she was practising. Not that it was a matter of much consequence as the conditions imposed were not reasonable. Nevertheless it was a breach of confidence to give away the lore so laboriously and enthusiastically acquired by the members. However, I hold that Constance Wilde was in all reason entitled to use the occult philosophy in which the Order had no copyright as it was not original. It was at this point that Oscar Wilde wrote some of his remarkable stories founded on the occult or supernatural after the manner of Edgar Allen Poe and R. L. Stevenson, and I have no doubt that his inspiration was derived from the revelations of his wife's occult studies. The story of Dorian Gray is built on the mysterious force of suggestion. The metamorphosis of the picture of Dorian Gray illustrates the occult doctrine that inanimate objects can be imbued with the good or evil influence of their possessor by the powerful magnetism of the aura or spiritual atmosphere. It is a subtle and

fascinating theory that would appeal to the imagination of Oscar Wilde, and give a spur to his genius which was ever the slave of his inspiration.

* * * * *

This was the beginning of the epoch when he lost touch with his soul. The powerful dominating masculine brain grew weary through the repeated collapse of his ambition. His failure as an æsthetic apostle—a poet, a society dandy and poseur—filled him with the desperation of despair. He lost patience, drifted away from the beautiful soul influence that was gently and surely floating him into the noble stream of pure and elevating literature—such as the “Happy Prince and Other Tales,” or “A House of Pomegranates.” He rebelled against the lofty inspiration of his feminine soul, whose power he scorned, and turned to the masculine brain for new and bizarre intellectual stimulant, and thought-impulse that would, through its sensationalism and morbidness of fancy, challenge attention and mark him as a curious and original thinker. Then ensued the battle between the feminine soul and the masculine brain, until finally the soul abandoned him, left the field clear to those unbridled impulses of the powerful, sensuous, masculine brain, and

retreated to lie in wait until the enemy had worn itself to weakness in the excesses of intellectual debauch and the time was ripe to reclaim the victory.

* * * * *

“What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world *and lose his own soul?*” quoted Ignatius Loyola, philosopher and theologian, soldier of the Faith, founder of the greatest of religious orders for men, and profound student and doctor of men’s souls. The words of the Evangelist are imbued with a deeper meaning than the mere reading of those words convey. Soul is will, thought, inspiration, imagination. Soul is unlimited in its power. Soul is the force of God that sustains the body, the brain, and lifts both above slavery of the senses. When the soul abandons the house of the intellect, which is the brain, withdraws its ballast and surrenders the body to its own devices, a prey to the merely animal instincts of the flesh, and the brain to the unbridled sway of the delirium of its unbounded fantasies, it is then that a man loses possession of his soul and becomes a vacillating being swung by the pendulum of his folly and passions. The escape of the soul is the most terrible calamity that could

befall the brain-building. Without the soul religion is powerless, art is futile, and reason unable to control and save the body. All this and more is conveyed in those immortal words,—

“ What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul ? ”

III

OSCAR WILDE lost possession of his soul, but he gained the whole world through the force of the unrestrained genius of his masculine brain. Like a torrent his ambition swept all obstacles before it, submerged his reason, his prudence and all vestige of the sway of that noble feminine soul. He found an idol of clay with the semblance of human beauty. A living idol whose worship is as old as the world. His intellect became a flame of incense to that idol, and through its fumes his brain filled with strange, grotesque, exotic visions, thoughts and fantasies, which he transformed into brilliant essays, sparkling with gems of wit and paradox. His genius was stimulated by the nervous intoxication of that worship. His idol fed the spring of his imagination with new and marvellous thought sensation. He was no longer weary, bored or discouraged over his work.

His natural indolence rebelled against the literary slavery that has given to the world such masters of the art romance, as Dickens, Alexander Dumas,

Balzac, Victor Hugo and Bulwer Lytton, and essayists such as Carlyle, Ruskin and Pater—men who derived their inspiration from the pure springs of a noble and humane observation of life and its problems. To Oscar Wilde's feverish inspiration is due, it is true, the original and brilliant collection of essays in his book "Intentions," but their morbid and far-fetched theories are a proof of the emotional stimulus that fed his inspiration. The essay "Pen, Pencil and Poison" reveals the strange intellectual excitation that possessed his brain. His clever and witty defence of Wainwright, the essayist, who found in the crime of poisoning an incentive to his literary inspiration, reveals how strongly the bizarre and horrible tendencies of Wainwright's character fascinated Wilde, as it did in fact affect in somewhat the same manner the poet Swinburne.

Wilde had lost his soul, and, in the éclat of his loss, he blindly considered himself free, and sought, through the power and magnetism of his genius, to lure the mind of his readers to his standpoint of intellectual freedom. From theory it was but a step to practice. Through his study of vice grew the desire to make acquaintance with the sensation of vice.

And yet, the soul of Oscar Wilde had not completely abandoned him, for that supreme feminine soul had left a sentinel on the field from which she retreated, and that sentinel was the conscience, a presence from which, sleeping or waking, Oscar Wilde could not escape. The subtle disquietude that reigned in his brain found expression in "The Picture of Dorian Gray" and his essay on "The Soul of Man." These were written as a sort of peace-offering, a tribute to his rebellious soul, in order to palliate his conscience and delude him into a false sense of security; for, no one knew better than Oscar Wilde himself that the day of reckoning, the hour of doom would finally come. He knew the danger of that spur of intellectual intoxication by which he sought to achieve success, as well as the drunkard knows that the demon of delirium lies in wait for him. On the other hand, who can withhold a sentiment of pity before the spectacle of that terrible battle between soul and brain, that was being waged within that house of genius which constituted the gracious, noble, brilliant personality of Oscar Wilde, or condemn the ambition that forced him to trade upon his intellectual monstrosities, as the beggar trades on

his bodily deformity? For what are paradox, epigram and retroversion of thought and expression, but monstrosities of the intellect?—glittering with the fascination of the bizarre and the original, it is true, but monstrosities all the same; unnatural problems born of a perverted literary instinct, abortions of inspiration forced into birth before they are perfected in the natural course of thought-expression.

One writer has styled Wilde a juggler of souls, but it was the reverse. It was the souls of men that juggled with his genius, and tossed it from one to the other in his pursuit of strange mental pleasures, wherein his thoughts encountered many intellectual atmospheres that left their varied impressions on his work. Just as the storm ravages the garden, or the sunshine melts it into bloom, the imagination of Oscar Wilde was influenced by the crisis through which it passed. In his essay of "Pen, Pencil and Poison," he holds that Wainwright's crimes seem to have had an important effect upon his (Wainwright's) art. Here perhaps was the seed that fructified into Oscar Wilde's desire to study the strange passions of crime. When, in the same essay, he declares that: "One can fancy an intense

personality being created out of sin," he unconsciously foreshadows his own fate. That he had a morbid admiration for Wainwright is evidenced in almost every line of that remarkable essay, and nowhere more strikingly than when he admits that—"The fact of being a poisoner is nothing against his (Wainwright's) prose." Wilde compares him with Disraeli as a dandy. He cites the admiration of two writers of such antithetical genius as De Quincey and William Blake. The latter, he asserts, wrote one of his most beautiful works specially for the gifted poisoner. Wilde dwells upon Wainwright's accomplishments as writer, artist and journalist, and declares that modern journalism owes as much to him as to any man in the early part of the century, and he quotes passages from the essays of Wainwright to support his admiration of the man's work as a writer, and gives fascinating pen-pictures of his rooms, his eccentricities in dress and his habits. All this carefully thought out and written eulogium as a tribute to the secret poisoner of three people, members of his own family, to say nothing of the "murders that were never made known judicially," as De Quincey has written! Wilde quotes the gossip of

others who talk of his life in Paris, where he is described as "skulking with poison in his pocket and being dreaded by all who knew him." Of this monster, Oscar Wilde has written in a style so brilliant that he has assisted in lending a halo of renown to the crimes of one, who, after all, was but a mediocre artist and writer who, through his notorious acts, won recognition; for, had Wainwright not exercised his terrible propensity for poisoning, his works would have been consigned to the oblivion they deserve.

Oscar Wilde himself affected a taste for the colour green, a favourite colour of Wainwright, which at that period took the place of his first affectation of the colour yellow. The sunflower was replaced by the "green carnation," an innocent fancy in itself, but which, under the circumstances, revealed a subtle affinity in the taste of the two minds—if it was not another pose on the part of the author of "Pen, Pencil and Poison."

On the heels of these remarkable essays came the novel: "The Picture of Dorian Gray," which, although Oscar Wilde declares that it was written as the outcome of a bet, bears the stamp of the influence of the study of the character of Wainwright,

moulded under another form into the personality of Dorian Gray. There is the same secret sin and crime, while he makes the picture an allegorical presentment of Dorian's conscience, just as Wainwright's conscience must have been a constant, unseen source of remorse for his secret crimes. There is, it is true, a complete change of personality, scene and time, but the motive is the same in both the fact and the fiction. Oscar Wilde leaves it to the imagination of the reader to define the sin, but that is after all the natural subterfuge of the romancer. Then, in the clever essay "The Soul of Man," in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," in "Salome," and in "The Harlot's House," we can further trace the influence of that same lurid imagination in Wilde. The seduction of passion, the glamour of vice, the startling and terrible realism of crime, seem to be the only spur that can goad his inspiration.

His brain successfully works in an atmosphere of mental narcotics that produce extraordinary and unnatural visions and theories that would elude a less powerful fancy, and vanish like the vagaries of a dreamer. But Oscar Wilde was no dreamer, he was intensely practical, and seized these brilliant vapours of his imagination and shaped them into

brilliant prose, just as Turner transfers to his canvas the strange, lurid aspects of nature. Wilde faithfully portrayed every emotion of that momentary intellectual delirium in language that ennobled and beautified the most repellant and improbable theme. He mastered the elusive and conquered the tyranny of words, blending them with the witchery of thought-suggestion, the inverse process of expression, just as the composer evolves his motif into music until the theme is so transformed and disguised that the original note seems lost in the succession of modulations, only to return with increased force and brilliancy in the end. Oscar Wilde became a juggler of words, an acrobat of expressions, that hold his readers breathless, while following the daring feats of fancy which he safely executed through the equilibrium of his mastery of irreproachable prose ; whereby he proves himself a painter in thought and a musician in words. He wisely abandoned poetry at the very outset. He turned his poetry into prose, that he might startle with greater ease. The veil of poetry was too modest for his purpose. He wished to shine by the dazzling light of terse, powerful prose, to fascinate and illude by the intricate play of words, by the

bizarre contortion of their meaning into curious paraphrase. That sur-excitation of his imagination changed, magnetised or disguised the thought material which he filched from other writers, for there is no doubt that Oscar Wilde was often addicted to plagiarism, but with his supreme arrogance of genius his brain so assimilated and digested the sources upon which it fed, that they bloomed into a new and original form. He had the power to make old sayings and situations appear fresh and sparkling, to extract from them subtle perfume and colour, of which the original writer was unconscious. This is specially proved by his dramas. In "A Woman of No Importance," for instance, we see the "School for Scandal" from another point of view, with different perspective, and vistas that reveal old characters rehabilitated, and witticisms transformed by paraphrase.

Yet, with all this inspiration imparted by the incense of his worship of the idol that he had set up, Oscar Wilde was not content. He desired a wider, grander field than that of the essayist. He aimed at emulating the great bard himself, but only succeeded in emulating one of the lesser stars in that firmament of literary immortality. He undertook

the onerous rôle of dramatist, and found at last the instant success that his ambition craved. In the hybrid realm of literature, that is called the drama, he reached his apogee. Then only did the world recognise him. London laid her homage and her money at his feet ; and America, that had jeered at him as an apostle of the æsthetic, received him with admiring acclamation as the playwright. It is a curious coincidence that, in the sphere of oral literature that is, rightly or wrongly considered, immoral, he should attain the success denied him in the purely intellectual field of poetry, romance, and the literary philosophy, of the essayist ; yet this may be easily accounted for when we consider Oscar Wilde as a master of the spoken word. He lacked the genius of imagination necessary to the romancer. He wrote but one novel—"Dorian Gray"—and that is not a novel in the perfect sense of the word, but a study built on a succession of incidents, without plot or scenario. He was also lacking in the faculty of poetic plot. What success he attained, for example in the Newdigate prize poem, was due to his marvellous descriptive resources founded on realism. He did not comprehend the purely ideal. His inspiration could

only grasp the visible in time, place and characters. He understood man and woman, but he did not understand the souls of man and woman. He loved the puppet and not the spirit. It was more wonderful to listen to his words than to read them, up to the point when he embodied his words in the living frame of the stage. To hear him speak imparted a pleasure and fascination far beyond anything he had written, because speech was his true gift and not the pen. He was a master materialist, and sought to prove the supremacy of matter over mind. He felt keenly the beauty of all visible things—colour roused in him a sensuous delight that sound could not touch, in fact he was so lacking in the appreciation of music, that his only means of describing it was by comparing it to a colour. He writes of Dvorak, as the composer of “curiously coloured things,” and of his music as “a mad scarlet thing,” although, in this, Wilde follows Franz Lizst, who, in his marvellous essays on Wagner’s music, ascribes colour to the motif and modulations of the great composer’s music.

Oscar Wilde’s personality pervaded all he wrote. He was so intensely an egoist that only in the expression of the ego could he excel. He

abandoned critical literature, "tired of it very soon," and became a creature of his own ideals. His favourite form was the dialogue. That direct, facile mode of writing was the best method for his indolent character; thereby he was saved the intellectual labour that shapes, evolves and polishes a thought into a gem of expression. He overcame the difficulty of dealing with opposite views of the same point by the use of the dialogue. It is easy to understand his sudden and surpassing success as a dramatist in the light of his facility for dialogue. He placed his words in the mouth of his puppets and let the puppets do the rest, by becoming the living description of the varying shades of expression, which he was too indolent to work out, or too lacking in imagination to present in a form equal to his dialogue. Success intoxicated Oscar Wilde to a reckless degree of mental arrogance that gradually influenced his life and mode of living. He played on the foibles of society as a musician plays on an instrument, with a dexterity and mastery of touch that no dramatist of his time has equalled. All the experiences of his failures rendered him an adept in the manipulation of satire. He lashed society

18, TITE STREET,
CHELSEA. S.W.

Dear madame de
Brimont,

must

thank you for the

nice things you say

about my book, &

for your kind offer

of your own. But

lest I should be

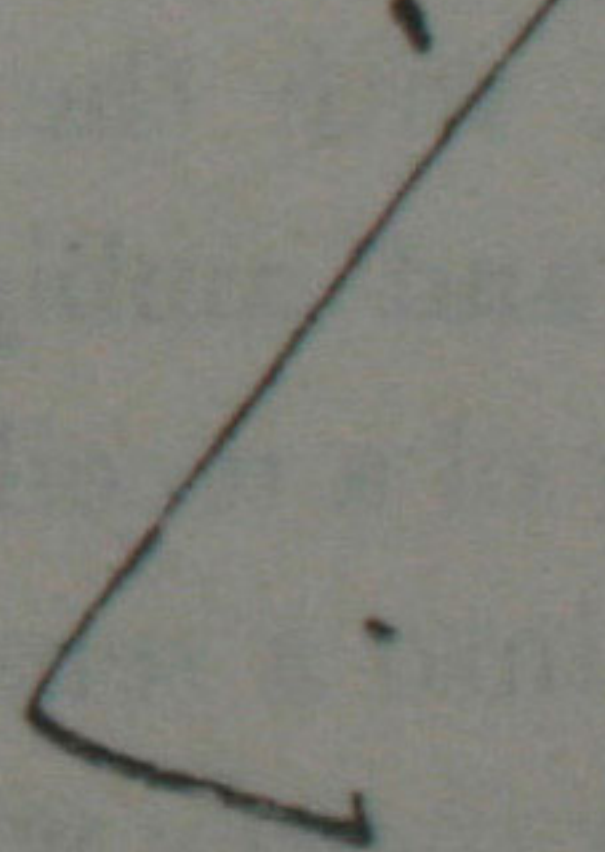
receiving it under

little, but I tried
to do it very soon,
and I do it that
I shall ever return
to it

Believe me

Yours

W. L. W.



as a *dompteur* lashes his lions and tigers, sending society through its paces with his light, delicate touch, making it dance, or laugh, or cower before him. It was a hard and bitterly-earned success, won through the throes of that splendid brain-building, completely at the mercy of his supreme self-worship, and the adoration of that strange idol of the senses, that he had set up to feed his inspiration. Nevertheless, throughout the success, as throughout the failures, Oscar Wilde was thoroughly consistent. He worked out the problem of his success according to the rules he had so boldly proclaimed in his essays. He has written that:—

“Every man of ambition has to fight his century with its own weapons.”

He fought society with its own weapons of polished vice, vanity, greed of wealth and superficial virtue, with the two-edged sword of his staccato prose and ambiguous phrases, little heeding the danger of a recoil that would destroy him. He was lulled into a sense of security by the complaisance of that society which nightly filled three theatres to laugh and be amused before the mirror he held up to it with the one hand, while, with the other, he fashioned the shackles whereby that same

society bound him, cast him into prison, and then set him adrift as an outcast, beyond the pale of its charity and forgiveness!

IV

AFTER a prolonged absence, passed in South Africa, I returned to London richer in experience and in pocket. A course of arduous journalism in Johannesburg had matured my literary work. There is no better school for the writer than the daily discipline of journalism. It braces the intellect and teaches it to summon all its forces at a moment's notice. The command of ideas, the discrimination of words and the stimulant to critical observation in the daily routine of work is a splendid brake, so to speak, on the imagination, that would often lead the young writer into excesses of style and heights of fancy only reached by the great romancers after the ordeal of vast experience in the art of literature. Yes, I would advise all young writers to take a course of newspaper drudgery, real hard work : it will banish all dilettantism, and playing at being a writer, and will either make or mar, as every writer soon finds his or her level in the whirlpool of the newspaper mill, where the romances of life,

stranger and more terrible than any fiction, are ground out with merciless speed and exactitude. I had the field all to myself in those first days of Johannesburg, and I was the only woman journalist of the Rand. It was an absorbing, and perhaps dangerous, experience. The contrast between my fashionable existence in London—interspersed with dilettante literary efforts—and the laborious life of a newspaper woman in that wild, lawless, gold camp, taught me to know myself, to rightly gauge my powers, and to look on life with the clear eyes of experience. In that strenuous existence there is no place for the dreamer—and yet the poet can find there the truest inspiration in the tragic poetry of life that the printer “pulls” off the “daily plant.” And it was in the guise of the poet that I first appeared in print, as my first book of poems appeared in Johannesburg. Therefore in more senses than one I did not return empty-handed to London. The first months after my arrival were full of work; as the fever of it had not yet been chilled by the cold atmosphere of London. And one day I wended my way to Oakley Street in search of the old house where dwelt my kindly godmother of the pen. I found Lady Wilde at home as usual, but the

Saturday receptions seemed to have lost some of their popularity. There was no crowd, only a few faithful habitués. Oh! the joy of that meeting Across the bridge of years I see again her noble face alight with pleasure, hear her deep voice thrilling with words of welcome, as I groped my way into the darkened rooms by the dim glow of those ubiquitous red-shaded lamps. I was like a harvester returning home laden with the sheaves of my labour, five books, to lay at the feet of my dear goddess of the pen!

“ Well done! Well done!” was all she could say, as she relieved me of my harvest. Then and there I had to give an account of my wanderings and the adventures of my work. I was like a literary Ulysses, to whom she played the part of chorus—repeating “ wonderful! wonderful!” at intervals during my recital of the new land of gold and its canvas city, that had sprung up in the midst of the desert of the high veldt.

When the first enthusiasm of her greeting had subsided, I was conscious of a subtle change in the atmosphere of the dim old room; something was lacking. There was no longer the joyous spirit of intellectual camaraderie that had made the dingy

146 Berkeley Street
Chelsea

Jan 30. 1890

Dear Comptroller

My sincere congratulations

on your safe arrival from

all the perils of South Africa.

I hope you have brought

home a derby thing,

found to Mrs. Charles H. H. H.

as victim of some other as

Wm. W. L. L.

I will be happy to see
you next Saturday if
your car. Miss Otis
will be home - the

moment —

I want to hear all
about your new book
that is announced
in the papers.

I am very busy find
how little business
comes on by time of
Month - so I can
only see business on
the one day. (Saturday,
a week from
Dance
Sunday)

surroundings bright with the interchange of wit. Lady Wilde no longer shone forth in her wonted brilliant manner. She said little, and more than once I fancied I heard her sigh softly. A cloud seemed to have fallen upon the house in Oakley Street. It appeared to be no longer the Mecca of literary aspirants, and the brilliant American birds of passage were conspicuous by their absence. I could not understand the change. It seemed impossible that, during the short time of my sojourn in South Africa, the popularity of Lady Wilde's Saturdays should wane so, that the crowd dwindled down to a half score of callers. Finally I ventured to ask after her son Oscar, and expressed the hope that I would see him that afternoon.

"It is not probable," Lady Wilde answered. "Oscar does not come when I have people here. He is so very much in demand everywhere, and he prefers to come when I am alone, as he has so little time now for me that he wishes to have me all to himself."

This was disappointing news to me, as I had looked forward to meeting him and showing him the fruits of my work—begun on his advice. Lady Wilde felt something of what was in my mind,

and endeavoured to palliate my disappointment. She began to relate, with much gusto and satisfaction, the successes of her son ; the great houses at which he was an honoured guest, and the visits he made to the various county seats of his admirers. I forgot my own feelings in the sympathy I felt for the mother's pride in her son. Still, my disappointment had cast a chill on my spirits, and I rose to go, but Lady Wilde pressed me to remain to sup with her. She suddenly appeared to me in the pathetic light of a lonely old woman, and much as I wished to escape from the changed atmosphere of that room, that had been formerly so interesting, I accepted the invitation. We supped on cold beef and salad, flavoured by a glass or two of white Italian wine, but I remember how I enjoyed that simple supper, seasoned by the wit and repartee of Lady Wilde, who excelled herself, and made me forget the dingy, badly lighted room, the gaucheries of the unkempt servant, and the flight of the hours under the spell of her charming talk, her observations on art and literature, her reminiscences and anecdotes. We were alone the whole evening, and, although it was late when I took my departure, I left Lady Wilde more brilliant and alert than when

I had entered that dim room in the early afternoon. She appeared no longer old, but full of the spirit and gaiety of youth. It seemed to me nothing short of marvellous—that power of recuperation under the stimulus of intellectual thought and conversation. I realised that age does not exist where the soul is young and the brain responsive to the inspiration of the youthful soul. Whatever the cloud that hung over that humble dwelling in Oakley Street, I knew that its mistress had escaped the shadow during that happy evening at least.

V

THE night of the first performance of "Lady Windermere's Fan" (Feb. 20th, 1892), I was not in London. It was from Brighton that I sent a telegram to Oscar Wilde, wherein I wished success and good-luck to his new play. I timed the telegram, so that it would reach him at the St. James's Theatre just before the curtain rose. Although I had not met Oscar Wilde for two years, during my absence in South Africa, I had kept in touch with all that concerned him through my correspondence with Lady Wilde and the works from his pen. There was, however, a still stronger influence in my interest, and that was the mysterious soul-sympathy existing between us. He gave no sign of that bond, although he knew of the progress I had made in the career he had opened up to me. Nevertheless, I was strongly moved to give him a proof of my goodwill and appreciation that I knew he would be pleased to receive, and that would touch the sensitive and delicate sentiment of his Irish heart and temperament, so naively

superstitious about luck. At that anxious moment, therefore, when his play was about to be launched on the capricious and uncertain tide of public favour, I sent the telegram to bring him luck, and thought no more about it until more than a year later when he recalled the incident on our meeting at the annual dinner of the Authors' Society. Perhaps the only function of a purely literary character to be seen in London, at that time, was this gathering of authors at the annual dinner and reception of their Society. It was a representative collection of all the greater and lesser lights in the world of letters, assembled to feast and exchange social goodwill. In fact it might have been termed the Society of Mutual Admiration. Toasts and congratulations, witty speeches and compliments, were the order of the hour, under the almost perfect conditions of a public banquet ; for the Londoner is *par excellence* the best dinner-giver and diner in the world. On this occasion there was nothing to distract the eye or the ear from the business of the moment, no musical noise in the guise of an orchestra, or prodigies of the florist's art to obstruct the view of one's vis-à-vis, while the serious application of the diners to the pleasures of the menu, gave one

the impression that it was not more than once a year that such an opportunity of feasting came the way of the majority of them. With the toasts and speeches a general spirit of good comradeship prevailed. Everyone sought to learn who his or her neighbour might be ; there was a general study of the plan of the tables, and a passing from one to the other to seek old friends or make new ones. It was in that after-dinner hour of relaxation that I could turn my attention from my guest, an old author and soldier of the mutiny, who had found that the pen was not in his case mightier than the sword, and look about for interesting people. The first one my glance encountered was Oscar Wilde. He was my vis-à-vis at the table. I was completely taken by surprise, and somewhat embarrassed to find that I had not perceived him during the dinner. At first I thought my eyes had played me a trick, that it was not Oscar Wilde I saw, but someone with a very striking, yet unpleasant resemblance to him, someone older and more blasé than Oscar Wilde could possibly have become in those short three years since I had last seen him in Tite Street. I looked away, uncertain what to do, whether to bow or speak, yet feeling strangely

uncomfortable over the encounter. I longed eagerly to find out who the person was that had such a resemblance to Oscar, and was about to consult the plan of the table, when a voice that I could not mistake addressed me, saying :—

“ Contessa ! Contessa ! ”

I knew then that it was indeed Oscar Wilde who was speaking, and addressing me by his mother's favourite name for me ! He had never used the word before when speaking to me, and I divined that it was in some subtle way an appeal, a reminder of his claim to my friendship for the sake of the deep affection I bore his mother. I felt a pang of misgiving, lest I might have, by my manner, inadvertently wounded him, and that he had used that name by way of a gentle reproof. My position was painful, as well as embarrassing, for I could not explain the change in him that had led me into the blunder of not recognising him at once. To have expressed any sort of apology would have only made matters worse. I was, furthermore, keenly disappointed that our first meeting after so many years should take such an awkward form, when I had looked forward to that meeting as a moment of modest triumph on my part and kindly praise

on his, for the success and work I had accomplished. Moreover, with this feeling of disappointment was mingled a curious sense of pity and foreboding—a premonition of disaster, and a resentment against the influences that had so changed him. My pride in his genius was hurt to the quick in beholding him only an ordinary guest at that dinner, when his rightful place should have been the chair of honour at the table allotted to the men and women who had won a distinctive celebrity by the pen. I could not speak through the stress of these conflicting emotions. And, then, a more terrible emotion than all seized me as I looked into his face—it seemed that I was gazing on one dead, for I could not see or feel his soul in the half-veiled gaze of those expressionless eyes under the lids that seemed heavy with the inexpressible weariness of boredom. That was one of the most painful moments in my life, the most swift disillusionment I have ever experienced; while disappointment, pity, sorrow, and a sort of impotent rage against fate held me mute under the steady gaze of those soulless eyes! I would have given much to have been able to answer his greeting by some conventional phrase or empty compliment, to have felt at ease in his

presence but a greater force than my will controlled me, the force within me that is called the soul, held me silent and aghast before the wreck of that other soul.

I know not whether Oscar Wilde divined all that passed through my mind in that brief moment after he spoke to me, but he evidently felt that I was disquieted, and sought to put me at my ease, with the rare tact which never failed him—by ignoring my embarrassment and silence :

“ Contessa,” he repeated in a very soft and gentle tone, “ I am delighted to meet you here. It affords me a long-neglected pleasure—the pleasure of thanking you for that very charming telegram you were good enough to send me on the first appearance of my play ! ”

He paused and regarded me with the glimmer of a smile that was the ghost of the smile I remembered. I was still mute.

“ I assure you, Contessa, I was much touched by your thoughtful good wishes. And I am certain that your telegram brought good luck to ‘ Lady Windermere’s Fan ’ ! ”

Again he paused and lit a cigarette, while I could only respond by a bow.

“ Yes,” he said, “ I believe you brought me good luck ! ”

Then he arose, and holding his hand across the table, said with a return of his weary manner :—

“ Good-night, Contessa, don't you find this dinner a bore, a most tedious affair ? I do ! Good-night ! ”

I gave him my hand as I arose. He pressed it gently and made a sign for me to be seated. Then he turned away and went slowly towards the door of the hall, followed by the two friends who had been his guests. I watched him until the doors closed after him, and then I sank into my chair, overpowered by a melancholy that not all the witty speeches and compliments in the air around me could dispel, a feeling of sadness that was not altogether due to my disappointment, but to my regret, to find Oscar Wilde so changed. The haggard eyes and bloated features, the indefinable expression that might have been weariness or some strange mental disquietude. It was true that he was faultlessly dressed and carried himself more than ever with the ease and arrogance of a supreme dandy. What was it—this change in one who had been the very impersonation of joyous manhood

and brilliant esprit? Somehow I connected the cloud hanging over the old house in Oakley Street with his metamorphosis, and again, I attributed it to his sudden and startling success. He seemed to have that sort of intellectual indigestion that comes of a surfeit of success or a surfeit of money. And once the thought came to me that the light of his soul had gone out, and left him in the outer darkness which preludes madness. But I put the thought away, little dreaming how near I was to the truth and the solution that came to me long after that memorable meeting. For the moment I suffered the keen pangs of disillusionment, and sought to derive comfort from the hope that I might yet do some work that would be worthy of his praise, something that would win the approbation of his fine and delicate criticism.

“What has Oscar been saying to make you look so sad?” said the voice of my guest, breaking in on my reverie.

“Did you not hear what he said?” I answered.

“No. I discreetly withdrew,” he replied.

Then I realised that I had not been aware of his absence, and I felt uncomfortably annoyed. “And why discreetly?” I asked. “I had nothing to

say that the whole table might not have heard."

"Of that I am aware," he said warmly. "But for certain reasons I chose to go and look up some of my old friends at the next table!"

"What reasons?" I persisted. "Did you not wish to be introduced, in case I chose to present you?"

"Oh, I know Oscar very well. I was a patient of his father, Sir William, who did me a great service in restoring the sight of my eyes that were injured in the Mutiny."

"Then why did you avoid the son of your benefactor; what grievance have you against his son?" I said with much heat.

"I have no grievance against Oscar, except that which every decent man feels in seeing another lay himself open to—well, censure."

"Censure, or no censure," I retorted hotly, "you should not have forgotten the fact that he is the son of the man who gave you back the use of your eyes."

"Perhaps you are right!" he answered quietly.

"You, a brave man," I continued with increased heat, "who risked your life for your country—and an Irishman at that, like Oscar Wilde—you

were not brave enough to risk the opinion of these people here, and say a kindly word of greeting to the son of your benefactor? Ah! I am ashamed of you!"

"You reason like a child!" he answered gently. "I am old enough to be your father, and am certainly capable of knowing the right thing to do, and it is *not* right to countenance the reckless conduct of the son of my old friend in braving public censure as he does! That was my reason for leaving the table when he addressed you."

"What had his addressing me to do with your leaving the table?" I asked in dismay; for it was the first I had heard of the rumours afloat.

"You don't understand. I had to avoid an awkward situation for your sake as well as mine."

"You would have snubbed him?" I asked.

"I am afraid I should!" he replied. "Don't ask me for any further explanation. I could not give you one."

He looked really grieved, and I did not persist, but my heart ached over that revelation of the shadow that had fallen on the name of the son of my dear and valued friend, Lady Wilde.

I understood now the reason for Oscar Wilde's

abrupt departure, and I felt somehow happy to know that he had not forgotten all I had done to win his approval, and that he was debarred from giving me a word of praise or encouragement by the action of my guest in giving him that unkind cut. I felt my eyes burn with a rush of tears to think I had inadvertently been the cause of pain to him. I regretted the invitation, given in a moment of sympathy, to the old soldier-author beside me. But for his presence I might have enjoyed a few moments of pleasure in the brilliant talk of Oscar Wilde, and also have avoided the painful explanation that my guest felt, no doubt, justified in giving me. Altogether, my evening was spoiled, and I longed to escape as soon as possible. But I was not yet through with the disagreeable results of poor Oscar Wilde's notice of me; for a writer, utterly unknown to me save through piquant and vulgar satires on society foibles in the guise of novels, approached, and taking the vacant seat beside me, said with a gusto that won my instant dislike:—

“ May I ask the name of the lady that Oscar Wilde signalled out for his attention? He did not deign to favour anyone else with even a bow of

recognition. You are no doubt very great friends."

"Yes, you are right. I am not only Oscar Wilde's friend, but proud to be his friend. If you wish to know my name, you will find it on the plan of the table." I pointed to the paper beside my glass.

"Oh! then you were his guest!" The little grey eyes glowed green with suppressed spite.

"No, Madame was not Oscar Wilde's guest," said my old soldier, rising and giving me his arm. "She is a member of the Society. Permit us to wish you good-night."

We left the discomfited writer to thoughts that were certainly not very pleasant after the snubbing of my old friend, who muttered under his breath: "That chase after copy has missed fire this time. Serves such people right!"

I was silent. I had not yet acquired the sang-froid that came with years of experience in combatting the world, to forget the words of spite as soon as they are uttered. Therefore I was silent!

VI

THE house of the soul is built of the atoms from innumerable ancestors, atoms that have survived the destruction of the body. Each atom is a heritage from those ancestors, and, like the colours on a painter's palette when blended together, form a new shade or a different colour from the original, just as violet and red blend into purple or blue and yellow into green. Hence there can be no truth in the theory of heredity, since, as each colour is a distinct hue or tone in itself, so likewise the house of the soul is a distinct structure in itself, completely independent and individual, with no obligations to its past ancestry or influence on the future distribution of the atoms in its composition. When the house is ready and the soul enters into possession, the house becomes a conscious exponent of the soul. A house of glass through which the soul shines brightly or dimly according to the disturbing influences from without or within ; for the soul cannot render the house invulnerable, since the house

is mortal, and must perish to render up its debt to the future.

One of the first lessons that the soul teaches its new companion, the house of flesh, is this knowledge of its fate, this consciousness that their sojourn together is for a short time ; though the soul does not reveal the reasons thereof, for that is the secret of death. But the soul renders that companion a house of joy or sorrow, according to the capacity of that house of flesh for assisting or resisting the influence of the soul. From the very nature of its construction the house of the soul is a free agent through the seed of free-will implanted by the hand of God in every atom descended to it from its innumerable ancestors. But this free-will is not hereditary. It is the secret of life, of vitality, that makes of it a living, breathing body, but does not in any way fashion or influence its existence. That is the duty and prerogative of the soul. Hence there can be no hereditary vice or virtue, and Oscar Wilde owed his downfall and his victory to the battle of the soul for supremacy over the genius that would dispute its right to the house of the flesh. To this soul influence alone, and not to the influence of heredity, as a recent writer claims in his

eloquent and sympathetic life of Oscar Wilde, is due the tragedy and the triumph of Oscar Wilde's fame as a man and a genius.

The theory of heredity is a dangerous, and oft-times pernicious one, as it destroys the belief in hope and self-redemption. The example of the father is oft-times the redemption of the son, whereas the criminal who believes that he was foredoomed through prenatal influences, reconciles himself to a fate that he believes to be beyond his power to control, and continues to the end in his career of crime. Oscar Wilde would have been the first to deny the theory of heredity in his case, and, as he proved himself a brave man in facing the sentence imposed upon him and serving the full period of his punishment, so he would never have permitted the stigma of his sin to blacken the memory of his father and mother by attributing the cause of that sin to hereditary influences from either of his gifted and honourable parents. The conduct of Oscar Wilde amply justifies my belief in this assertion, which I make with all due respect for the motives of the writer, already mentioned as putting forth the plea of the theory of heredity. I make this argument to show that the battle was not between Oscar