OSCAR WILDE

Robert H. Sherard

Fernando Pessoa.

OSCAR WILDE

Epigram Books
By Mr Monkshood.

WOMAN AND THE WISE.

WOMAN AND THE WITS.

THE CYNIC'S POSY.

WIT AND WISDOM OF EDGAR SALTUS.

THE WORLDLING'S WIT.

Oscar Wilde

OSCAR WILDE

The Story of An Unhappy Friendship

BY

ROBERT H. SHERARD
Author of
"Emile Zola: A Biography,"
"Alphonse Daudet: A Biography," etc., etc.

. . . Nessun maggior dolore
Che ricordarsi del tempo felice
Nella miseria . . . .

"I have saved the bird
in my bosom."
—Last Words of Sir Hugh Percy.

POPULAR EDITION

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153

To

R. R.

In Remembrance
of His Noble Conduct
Towards The Unhappy Gentleman
Who is The Subject of This Memoir, Whom
In Affliction He Comforted, In Prison He Visited,
and In Poverty He Succoured, Thus Showing
an Elevation of Heart and a Loyalty
of Character

This Book is Dedicated

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

AUTOGRAPHED PORTRAIT OF OSCAR WILDE, 1892, *Frontispiece*

PORTRAIT OF OSCAR WILDE WHEN AT OXFORD, ABOUT 1878 . . . . . *To face page* 48

PORTRAIT OF OSCAR WILDE, FROM A DRAWING, ABOUT 1882 . . . . *To face page* 92

PORTRAIT OF OSCAR WILDE WHEN IN AMERICA, ABOUT 1883 . . . . . *To face page* 140

PORTRAIT OF OSCAR WILDE IN ÆSTHETIC DRESS, ABOUT 1884 . . . . *To face page* 184

PORTRAIT OF OSCAR WILDE, 1892 . *To face page* 232

PREFATORY NOTE

TO ORIGINAL EDITION

PRIVATELY PRINTED

The discreet method of publication which has been adopted for this book will, it is hoped, be accepted as deference to its opinion by that section of the public who, because in a man of genius the allied madness once got the upper hand, would consign him and the works which that genius created to the eternal night of eternal oblivion. A more weighty consideration still, which dictated this course, was to afford no opportunity, by causing a public revival of attention to his name, for those unjust reprisals upon his kinsfolk to which humanity, in this, as in every similar case, needs but the pretext of an incitement. My first chapter explains why the book was written. In this note I wish to point out that my plea for the fairer consideration of my friend —one of the brightest geniuses of the last century— is delivered á huis-clos, *so that none but those invited need listen to it. If any eavesdropper cry "* Scandal, *" he himself will be the cause of it.*

ROBERT HARBOROUGH SHERARD.

Walcote, Upper Norwood, S.E.,
August 7th, 1902.

Oscar Wilde

I

I WAS not by him in the poor room of the poor inn where he died. I had not the consolation of following to the nameless grave the lonely hearse which had no flowers on its pall.

But, as many hundreds of miles away, I read of his solitary death, and heard of the supreme abandonment of him by those to whom also he had always been good, I determined to say all the things that I knew of him, to tell people what he really was, so that my story might help a little to a better understanding of a man of rare heart and rarer genius.

In years to come, people reading his works

will want to know more about him than the evil tradition which his name will evoke; and the student of literature, amazed at the splendour of his art, may be glad that at least one of those who were his friends thought fit to put on record a story which goes to prove the eternal truths that no man who is a true artist can be a bad man at heart, and that an innate love of beauty will always keep alive in the mysterious recesses of the soul a hatred for what is base, a striving for what is noble.

Of the aberration which brought this fine life to shipwreck so pitiful, I have nothing to say. I leave to the physiologists to classify it, to the psychologists to wrangle with the makers of laws over the degree of responsibility which it involves. It is a question altogether in the domains of pathology, and my task is with the artist and the friend alone.

I can disregard, in writing of him, the

cruel and devilish madness which, as people said and to their satisfaction proved, at times actuated him, with all the greater ease, that during the sixteen years of our friendship, by not one word of his, by not one gesture, by not the fleeting shadow of one evil thought, did it betray itself to me in the radiant and splendid gentleman that he was.

I can say now what, in a letter to Sir Edward Clarke at the time of his trial, I offered to say in the Court of the Old Bailey, that during twenty years of communion with the world, of commerce, by profession and standing, with men and women in every rank of life, in many parts and places, I never met a man more entirely pure in conversation, nor one more disdainful of vice in its vulgarity and uncomeliness.

Never there came the faintest suggestion of an unclean thought from those eloquent and inspiring lips; no coarse word ever

soiled them; and if behind the wonderful eyes a demon was indeed crouching, madness here too allied itself with such supreme cunning of dissimulation, that for me, till the very end, he remained the *beau idéal* of a gentleman in all that that word implies of lofty and serene morality.

Men together, after wine, the world over, hasten with delight in conversation to a certain class of pleasantry. The topic is the same over the Turkish cigarette and the white curaçoa as over the clay pipe and the pint of beer, if the language differ. In Oscar Wilde's presence it was understood amongst his friends that who should so jest would commit an unpardonable offence.

It was his supreme delicacy of tongue and manner that won him amongst women such devoted friendships. It is the misfortune of the writer that it is not possible to bring evidence of these many friendships,

but the fact remains that his memory will live long in many a gentle breast as that of a man most chivalrous, whose gallantry inspired him with that profound respect which is to all women their most grateful tribute.

A great French actress once said to me, speaking of him, "What attracted me to Oscar Wilde was that he showed me from the very first that his many kindnesses were not rendered to me for the sake of establishing a claim on my favour, as is the case with nearly every man who comes near us. I found a comrade in him, not a suitor, and a deep and real friendship was possible. It is rarely so between a woman and a man."

These words recurred to me, years later, when, in a smcking-room in a country mansion, I heard a certain noble person who had discovered a copy of Wilde's first book of poems on our host's shelves cry out in horror, and ask to be allowed to

throw it into the fire, "as," he said, "most certainly ought to have been done with the man himself." He was a noble person in a tartan smoking-jacket, a man who, high in royal favour, was eagerly listened to; and during the previous half-hour, in language of which his pestering pipers would have been ashamed, he had discussed the morals of half the women of his set, with illustrations from his own experience of their several frailties.

Oscar Wilde, as I knew him, was the purest man in word and deed that I have ever met. I wished to say this aloud to his judges at a time when it might have served him. I say it now to other judges. And I knew him for sixteen years.

In the copy of "A Ballad of Reading Gaol" which he sent me, he wrote—"In Memory of an old and noble Friendship." These words were the incitement to this book, as they are its justification.

II

As Alphonse Daudet, in telling me a story of his youth, once said to me, so must I say in relating the tale of this my friendship. As in a forest of pine-trees in Southern France there are great black, burnt-up patches, so too in my memory. I have no dates to write by, and of documents only a very few. I can pretend to no biographical exactness. I can give no complete picture; only the picture of him as he impressed himself upon me in the many scenes that rise up before me.

What year was it in which I first met him? I do not know. All I can say is, that it was some long time before the day on which Victor Hugo died, and not long after the

visit of Swinburne to the poet's house. For I remember that I took Wilde to my friend, Madame Lockroy, for presentation to her father-in-law, and was present when the two met. How long ago! Jeanne Hugo was then a little girl, who sat on her grandfather's knee, and the bearded George of to-day was a blushing boy.

I can recall nothing of this meeting, and deduce from this that, as usual in his last days, Victor Hugo, drowsy with incense, did not otherwise distinguish his visitor, and that the words exchanged were the exaggerated commonplaces familiar to the spot. For the rest, the peculiar brilliancy of Oscar Wilde's conversation, as I remarked on many an occasion, appealed far less to Frenchmen of intellect than it did to English folk; and the reason of this is, that the richest wealth of English brilliancy appears to the Frenchman but the small change of wit. I never have met an Englishman yet who

could distinguish himself in a Parisian salon. I have seen many try to do so, and have noted their failure. Phrases on which they seemed to count for certain effect passed as commonplaces, and no one who reads the French dramatists, from Molière to Lavedan, can wonder at this.

Oscar Wilde, who appeared to me the most wonderful talker that the world had ever seen, achieved in this respect no notable success in Paris. Conscious, no doubt, of the great difficulty of the task, he forced the note, o'ervaulted himself, and left an impression of insincerity. Still, when he talked in Paris of literature or art in England, he was readily listened to, and with marked deference. I remember that, that evening at Victor Hugo's house, an eager group surrounded him whilst he discoursed on Swinburne. Vacquerie was most attentive, and other familiars, amongst whom was a Russian princess who was translating

Swinburne's poems into French, hung on his lips in a way which may have reminded him of Mayfair. Victor Hugo, however, was asleep by the fire.

I can also recall a picture of the radiant youth in the house of de Nitis, the exquisite painter of the beauties of the streets of Paris. I can see him leaning against the tapestried wall under the flambeaux, talking of pictures to a number of men, amongst whom were Degas, Cazin, and the Pizarros. Alphonse Daudet, with his wife in a group of ladies, was talking also. I went from one to the other. Many years later it fell to me in London again to leave one for the other. Under what tragic circumstances, I will tell in its place.

A gross Philistine in those days, I could not understand nor appreciate the things that Wilde was saying about pictures to masters who have painted some of the noblest. Did I even listen to them? All that I remember

is with what pleasure I noted from my friend's face and manner, and the attitude of the listeners, that he felt that he was speaking well, and that they were interested.

"I was quite amazing," he said to me, as we walked down the Avenue de Villiers together that night. In different periods of his life he had different catchwords. 'Amazing' was his word in those first days to describe anybody or anything that pleased him. For the contrary, he used the word 'tedious.' 'Rather tedious,' applied to a man or a thing, was the extreme of his condemnation.

If I do not remember the year or the day on which I first met him, the occasion and the circumstances are very fresh in my memory. Before our meeting I felt hostile towards him, with a petty spirit of trade jealousy, *jalousie de boutique*, for which the only excuses that I can find are that I was

very young and very ambitious. I considered that his reputation and success had been won by unworthy artifices, although in my heart of hearts I longed for the ingeniousness and the daring to force attention to myself by similar methods, and fretted that to the ox is not allowed what to Jupiter is conceded.

Of this petty and contemptible feeling I made full confession to my friend in the first days of our acquaintance. "That was very wrong of you," he said, with a laugh ; and with geniality and bonhomie he gave me, by the things he said, my first lesson in the acquirement of that serenity of tolerance towards one's fellows without which the life of a man of letters is one of constant fretfulness. To delight in the successes of others as a gain to the commonwealth, to love art for art's sake, and not for the valuations of the *bourgeois*, to console oneself in obscurity with the radiance of brother-artists—to these

things he pointed as the true viaticum on the literary way.

Such, however, was my spite at that time against him, that on receiving an invitation to dine at a house in the Avenue de Ségur at which he was to be present, my first act was to cry out "I certainly shall not go." My second was to write out a telegram of acceptance.

He had recently returned from America, and was then in what he described as his second period. His eccentricities of dress and coiffure had been discarded in accordance with the evolution. He delighted in the elegances of a Lucien de Rubempré, and modelled the arrangement of his hair after a bust of Nero in the gallery of the Louvre. He was then twenty-eight years of age. His affectation of effeminacy, the keynote of his first period, had been thrown aside, with its strange accoutrements. Tall and graceful, one could imagine the athlete behind the

dandy; and though in detail his clean-shaven face was not altogether comely, there was such beauty in the blazing intelligence of his fine eyes that if the first impression he produced was to startle, the second was one of entire admiration.

When he entered the drawing-room of that house in the Avenue de Ségur and was addressing to our hostess, a beautiful Greek artist, the usual compliments, I was taken with a desire of hysterical and irrepressible laughter, and crossed to a corner where John Sargent, the portrait painter, was in conversation with Paul Bourget, to seek a necessary diversion.

It was bad form, certainly, and a gesture from the polished American artist compelled me to master my nerves.

To-day, when I recall the emotion which beset me on entering on a friendship which went nigh to wreck my life, I think of that hero of Beaumarchais who made

haste to laugh lest he should be forced to weep. In my case the solace was unconsciously attained. The tears came later.

We spoke little at dinner. We listened eagerly. He had been received at many houses of prominent artists and writers in Paris, and had delightful things to say. His conversation was as exhilarating as wine; his presence diffused a stimulating atmosphere; we felt ourselves exalted by his joyous enthusiasms.

I had been silent throughout the meal, but at the close I made a remark, blunt, surly, and Philistine, which attracted his attention. He had been speaking of the Louvre, and describing, with what sincerity I cannot say, the sheer physical delight which the Venus of Milo caused him, and I said, "I have never been to the Louvre. When that name is mentioned, I always think of the Grands Magasins du Louvre, where I can get the cheapest ties in Paris."

"I like that," said Oscar Wilde; "that is very fine."

It was above all very foolish, and perhaps not altogether true, but it appeared that the psychology of the second period delighted in materialism as opposed to ideality, and a silly paradox lured one who was abler than anyone else in the setting of these snares.

He thus engaged me in conversation, and attached himself to me for the rest of the evening. Before he left he invited me to dine with him on the morrow at the Hotel Voltaire.

"From your appearance," he afterwards said to me, "your long hair and so forth, I fancied you were Herr Schultze on the violoncello. When you bluntly disclaimed all artistic interests, I discovered that you had scientifically thought out a pose that interested me."

III

The hotel where Oscar Wilde was living, the Hotel Voltaire, on the Quai Voltaire, was in those days in one of the most charming spots in Paris. That was before the Government had ravaged the quays on the left bank, felling the trees, and chasing away booksellers and bookhunters from their open-air market.

"The Quai Voltaire," said Alphonse Daudet to me, in the last conversation I had with him, "is the writer's true quarter in Paris. The happiest hours of my youth were spent there."

Oscar Wilde had a suite of rooms on the second floor, with a fine view over the Seine and of the Louvre.

I remarked upon the beauty of the sight.

"Oh," said he, "that is altogether immaterial, except to the innkeeper, who, of course, charges it in the bill. A gentleman," he added, "never looks out of the window."

"It was a pity for the Huguenots," I said, after awhile, pointing to a certain window in the palace over the water, "that Charles, ninth of the name, did not remember that."

In the daytime, when he was at work, he dressed in a white dressing-gown fashioned after the monkish cowl that Balzac used to wear at his writing-table. At that time he was modelling himself on Balzac. Besides the dressing-gown, he had acquired an ivory cane with a head of turquoises—turkis-stones we used to call them—which was a replica of the famous walking-stick which Honoré de Balzac used to carry when love had transformed the recluse into a fop, and he went a-wooing his Polish wife—"La Canne de Monsieur de Balzac," in short, about which

Delphine Gay was so very pleasant in her husband's gazette.

But he was not borrowing from the master these foibles of toilette alone. I think that at that time he was striving in earnest to school himself into labour and production. He was sated with social success, and had fixed a high ambition to carve out for himself a great place in English letters, the place which he surely might have won had adversity come to him much earlier and in a different form. He had inspired himself with that passage in *La Cousine Bette* in which Balzac declares that constant labour is the law of art as it is the law of life, for art is creation idealised, and points to the fact that all great artists have been unresting workers such as Voltaire in his study and Canova in his studio.

Oscar Wilde was making a real effort to imitate in his industry and devotion to his art, the great worker whose fopperies he

played with. I do not think, however, that his resolution maintained itself, for I remember that, reading *La Cousine Bette* at that time, I came across a passage which follows close on the one in which Balzac lays down the law of art, which seemed to me altogether to apply to my new friend—the passage where Balzac describes those semi-artists *qui passent leur vie à se parler.* Yet, then and in later life, he had the desire of industry, if not the power of enforcing discipline of self. He has often said to me regretfully, after speaking of pleasures and triumphs, "I ought not to be doing this. I ought to be putting black upon white—black upon white." The last time on which he said this to me was in his study in Tite Street, where a notable article of furniture was Carlyle's writing-table. I doubt not that when he bought it, it was with the hope that the sight of it, recalling memories of Titanic labour, might help his wavering

resolution. In the great pathos of his life and death, I have few remembrances more pathetic than that of this dressing-gown and that writing-table, symbols of a self-confessed weakness, for were they not used as fetishes against idleness by one who knew only too well the real fetish to use?

Amongst the books strewed about the room on the Quai d'Orsay were biographies of Balzac, books of the gossipy class, full of personalia, "Balzac in Slippers," and so forth—text-books with which to study a part.

On his writing-table, which was decorated with flowers, was, for an ash-tray, a large porcelain bowl, for the cigarette never left him. A pile of sheets of costly paper, covered with delicate penmanship, showed that he had been working. On the mantel-piece was a photogravure of that picture by Puvis de Chavannes which shows the nude, meagre, nut-breasted form of a young girl sitting up on her unravelled shroud, her eyes

wide open in startled wonder,—a village graveyard indicated on a remote mountain-side. Hope was it?—or a Resurrection?

He gave me this engraving, and on the mounting wrote a favourite device, a paradox also, "*Rien n'est vrai que le beau.*" He told me in detail how it should be framed, in grey, with a narrow line of vermilion. I noticed how he mouthed the word 'vermilion' with the keen enjoyment of a man tasting Imperial Tokay, who rolls the wine on his tongue, and lingers with delight upon its perfumed gold. For he always had a very evident sensuality for coloured and sonorous words. Also, as is the case with many artists in letters, there were words which caused him real physical annoyance—those neologisms, for instance, which end in 'ette.'

When I think over his life, I feel assured that the days when I first met him were the happiest days he lived. He was free from material care, he was in full physical and

mental vigour, and, under the mild discipline which he had laid upon himself, he was working at his best. During the time that he spent at the Hotel Voltaire he finished his play "The Duchess of Padua," and wrote those two wonderful poems "The Harlot's House" and "The Sphynx." I was with him all the time that they were being elaborated. I heard him fashion the lines, often repeating, as we walked abroad, passages that had pleased him in their writing. He was agreeably taken with the sound of the words—

"Am I not Duchess here in Padua?"

—from his play, and he often quoted them.

I remember that for "The Sphynx" he asked me for a rhyme in 'ar' for a lagging verse. I can recall the accent with which he often repeated his request, and chid me with the question "Why have you brought me no rhyme from Passy?" It recurred to

me when, after his calamity, first meeting him, he said in a similar tone and with like insistance, "Why have you brought me no poison from Paris?—poison from Paris—poison from Paris?"

On the day when I had found 'nenuphar' for the wanting rhyme, I was made as proud by his thanks as though I had achieved great things in literature. We may have been precious and ridiculous on the occasion but I know that we were very much in earnest. Neither for him nor for me was there anything outside of literature. We had desire for nothing but literary achievement. It seemed the one thing to be coveted. He was twenty-eight and I was twenty-two.

I had dressed for that first dinner to which he had invited me. He had desired me to do so, although we were to dine at a restaurant. He had spent an hour that evening at a hairdresser's, as was his daily

custom, and I found him curled and resplendent. This delight in beautifying himself proceeded entirely from the most innocent joyousness of life. It was a token of triumph in happy vitality, and in somewise also the defiance of an artist to the moneyed *bourgeoisie.* To show amazingly, was to impress the Philistines with due respect for letters, ragged and pitiable no longer, but curled and scented, and in costly raiment.

We dined in luxury at Foyot's in the Rue de Tournon, and at the outset of the dinner we agreed that one should speak of yellow wine, not white. What our conversation was I have no recollection, but I fancy that he must have launched some paradoxes in connection with the psychology of the second period, which found interest, and hence beauty, in everything,—paradoxes which aroused my surliness, for I remember rubbing my cigar-end into the coffee in my

saucer, and asking him bluntly if he saw any beauty in the mess before him.

He said, "Oh, yes. It makes quite an effective brown," quite pleasantly; but in his eyes there was iust a glint of ill-humour at my implied doubt of his sincerity—the warning, *Ne touchez pas à la reine.*

For the rest, that was one of the very rare occasions during the whole course of our long amity in which even the shadow of a dissension fell between us. Indeed, I can remember only one instance when he spoke to me with irritation, and that was once at the Café Royal in London, when inadvertently I spoiled a story he was telling by suggesting its dénouement.

After the dinner at Foyot's we went to the cafés of the Latin Quarter, and afterwards we walked about Paris. Our conversation was of literature only. At one time in the night we were standing opposite Notre Dame, admiring the wonderful sight of the cathedral

under moonlight. The monstrous gargoyles seemed affrighted by its clearness, and the symbol suggested such reflections to the poet that I felt that conscience was very strong within him.

Again, we were walking past the dismantled palace of the Tuileries, and here he said too, "There is not there one little blackened stone which is not to me a chapter in the Bible of Democracy."

I left him at two o'clock in the morning at the door of his hotel, and we were loth to part. It was agreed between us that we were to be good friends, and we fixed a meeting for the early morrow.

IV

In the sequence, and during the six weeks which preceded my departure for London, my whole time almost was spent in his company. It was for me a new and joyous life, an unending feast of the soul, and each day my admiration for my new friend grew more enthusiastic. By nature, heredity, and environment, disposed to melancholy, viewing mankind and life as Calvin may have viewed them, this joyous Celt showed me the gladness of things, suggested the possibility of great and buoyant happiness in the world, and with his exuberant vitality scattered the black butterflies that enclouded my spiritual vision. It was perhaps because we were altogether so dissimilar that we were from

the very first so attracted one to the other; and I may say that he professed for me the same friendship, and in some degree also the same admiration, that I most truly felt for him. Yet I made as little attempt to conceal my faults, to tone down the asperities of my individuality in his presence, as though, in reputation, gifts and qualities, we had been altogether equal. Nor did I ever flatter him in his views and tendencies, where these were divergent from mine. It was this quality, perhaps, that attracted him to me.

I remember saying to him one day, "Your faults and your weaknesses are so apparent, that it would almost be more profitable to be your enemy than your friend. It would be so easy to attack you, and could be done to such good purpose."

To-day, when I think of him as he always was, I wonder what can have been the foibles which suggested that remark to me,

for I cannot recall a single point in his character which could inspire or foster enmity; and when catastrophe came upon him, what most of all astounded me was the volume of the base rancour that in so many breasts, lying upgathered, then burst forth upon him. For I cannot conceive that he excited jealousy. His superiority was so evident that rivalry could not surely raise its head on his path; and the success he won, as contrasted with what, by his parts, he might have achieved, was such as to inspire condolence rather than envy. Yet, jealousy of the most mean and petty order can alone have prompted the bitter hate that when the statue fell blazed up from beneath its feet. I am speaking, of course, of those who had known him, who had pretended friendship for him, and to whom his aberration had been no secret.

In considering him, even in his most prosperous days, mediocrity could console

itself with the thought that had he chosen to exert himself, there was, for a man of his presence, physique, facundity, and brain, nothing in the field of honour and rewards to which he might not have aspired. Yet he satisfied himself with that mere *gloire de salon* of which Balzac speaks; and like Balzac himself, harassed throughout life by debt, he never had the fill of his desires.

"I could have become anything," he said once to me, when we were speaking of his ambition. And he added, "But have I not chosen the better part?"

I know that when I first met him his ambition was a very lofty one. Although he never defined it to me, he once described its amplitude. We were speaking of a whilom friend of his who had thought fit to turn upon him, because he feared that the ridicule which Oscar Wilde's extravagances in the sunflower days excited amongst those who did not understand his

motives, might extend to him as his friend, and injure his prospects in life with a statesman who was his patron.

"What he says," said Oscar Wilde, referring to the letter in which his friend closed their relationship, "is like a poor little linnet's cry by the roadside, along which my immeasurable ambition is sweeping forward."

I used to feel that he would achieve wonderful things; and when I felt world-weary and tired of life, would say to myself that life was worth waiting out, if only to see him realise his splendid destiny. Well might unexplainable laughter shake my frame at the moment when I saw him first!

The man who was afterwards branded as a corrupter of youth exerted on me, as a young man, an influence altogether beneficial. If he had taught me nothing but the great value and happiness of life,

I should still owe him an unpayable debt, for my disposition tended to that *tædium vitæ* which makes existence pure misery. In which connection I recall, that telling him that the idea of suicide often haunted me, he answered "Suicide is the greatest compliment that one can pay to society," a suggestion which should stir even the most despondent individualism into resistance. I repeated his own words to him at a time when he spoke to me of suicide as the only possible issue from a terrible fate impending, but I am certain that he never needed any stimulus to courage.

The example of his purity of life in such a city as Paris, of his absolute decency of language, of his conversation, in which never an improper suggestion intruded, the loftier ideals that he pursued, the elegance and refinement which endowed him, would have compelled even the most perverse and dissolute to some restraint. The companion-

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ship of Oscar Wilde, in the days in which I lived in his intimacy, would have made a gentleman, at least outwardly, of a man of bad morals and unclean tongue.

But his friendship did more than this. It taught one what friendship ought to mean,—a friendship which, going beyond the purse, is ready to lay down reputation itself. On more than one occasion had he so sacrificed himself for friends who afterwards turned upon him; and I remember a dramatic story which he told me of how he had saved a famous draughtsman (since dead) from penal servitude, at the risk of the same to himself. He was goodheartedness embodied. His money was his friends' money, he had no heed of it. He would exert himself for a friend in a way which, had the exertion been for himself, would have appalled his idleness. He would find publishers for unknown poets and managers for aspiring playwrights, even when he was called upon to stand the risks

himself. Not a few contemptible faces rise up before me as I write of men who, so helped by him, were the first to deny him.

A week after we had first met he spent a whole day walking and driving about Paris to find a rare little book, Delvau's Life of Gerard de Nerval, which he wished me to read. "Literary men in England," he said, "often talk about Gerard de Nerval, but nobody really knows anything about him. He has become a classic, you see, and classics are what everybody talks about, but nobody reads. With this little book you will be able to write an article which will be welcomed, and which may help your reputation." And though just that day his purse was nearly empty, he paid the high price that was asked for this little book when he found it.

For we interested ourselves in Gerard de Nerval, and the children of sorrow who, like him, trod the path of letters to a very evil

goal—Chatterton, Poe, and Baudelaire; and I do not think that a day passed on which we did not speak, and long, of these unhappy poets. The very horror of their fates seemed to heighten for us the splendour of their genius, to call for our greater admiration and enthusiasm.

We walked about Paris one night trying to trace the tragic footsteps of Gerard de Nerval, that hopeless lover of the Queen of Sheba, on his way to Old Lanthorn Street, where one early morning he was found hanging from the iron railing of an evil house. We were glad when we found the inn—the sign at least, if not the actual house—where this dainty aristocrat in letters used to drink deep with the outcasts of the *halles*. And I felt that Oscar Wilde was sincere in the interest which he professed for a story most pitiful among the many pitiful stories of the accursed race of poets. I think that if our sympathy was so strongly

enlisted, it was because each of us felt a wonder, mixed with fear, whether, like Gerard de Nerval, our sightless souls might not stray to some red hell like his.

And as we walked along, Oscar Wilde repeated the poet's lines:

> "Où sont nos amoureuses?
> Elles sont au tombeau.
> Dans un sejour plus beau,
> Elles sont plus heureuses.
> Elles sont près des anges,
> Au fond du ciel bleu,
> Où elles chantent les louanges
> De la Mère de Dieu.

The radiant dandy, upon whom people looked back as he passed, was hastening to no coarse festival. It was a poet on a pilgrimage to a ragged poet's place of death, and on his lips was the poet's elegy.

The story of Baudelaire's life enthralled us even as his poetry enchanted. I owe it altogether to Oscar Wilde that I became

familiar with the most wonderful verse which was written in France in the nineteenth century. And though, with ill-masked insincerity, he professed to prefer in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the horrid realisms of *The Carcase*, and *The Murderer's Wine*, he taught me to admire, with some degree of his own enthusiasm, the organ swell of *La Musique*, the stately sweep of the unknown woman in deep mourning, to love also Diana in gallant equipage.

The maladive interest which he showed in Baudelaire's slow self-destruction, on which an end waited far more appalling than Gerard de Nerval's short struggle in the strangling rope, may have proceeded from his inwit of tendencies with him which might lead him to the same end. That at least was spared to him and us.

Yet his imitativeness, one of the marked traits in his character, prompted him at least to dally with the poisons that crushed

Baudelaire into an inert, voiceless, if sentient mass; and as he had borrowed from Balzac his monkish cowl, from Victor Hugo the form of his paper, so from Baudelaire he took absinthe; and if he did not take haschish also, it was because he could procure it nowhere. But here his refinement saved him. It was not in his nature to yield to excess, and having played with poisons, he cast them aside.

I have spoken of the insincerity of his admiration for *La Charogne.* Was he altogether insincere? There was at that time living in Paris the poet Maurice Rollinat, who in those days was laying hands upon his perishable body and his immortal soul much in the same way as Baudelaire did, whose acknowledged pupil in poetry he was. It was drugs, drugs with him morning and night, drugs for food and drugs for sleep; cerebral excitement all the time. The result as we saw it was a terrible one, and we could

fancy the nerve-wreck of Charles Baudelaire before the bow snapped, from the ravaged picture before us. To the possible joy of the angels and to the certain gain of France, this exquisite poet and musician, Maurice Rollinat, went only so far and no further. He checked himself ere it was too late, and fled to the remotest countryside, and flung himself, a shattered and diseased man, at the feet of Nature, our kindly mother, that she might help him to undo what poison had done. And Nature was good to him, for after some years of silence we could rejoice in the resurrection of the lost soul. Paris resounded with the echoes of his muse.

The joy that Oscar Wilde took in the ravaged personality of the poet, who at that time seemed to be tottering, like a man on a tight-rope, between lunacy on one side and death on the other, seemed to me sincere, and mingled with admiration rather than pity. He invited him to dinner at the

OSCAR WILDE WHEN AT OXFORD, 1878.

(J. Guggenheim, Photor, Oxford.)

To face p. 48.

Hotel Voltaire, and entertained him royally, and after dinner prayed of him to recite certain of his verses. Rollinat gave us his terrible Ballad of Troppmann, a gruesome and terrifying poem, to which the nervous excitement of its author, as he repeated it with wild gestures, lent additional horror. It was a very revel of the morbid. Poe would have crossed the ocean to be present. Oscar Wilde expressed a supreme satisfaction.

On me, that evening produced a feeling of deep melancholy. I passed a sleepless night, and I wondered whether my friend had not felt, in Rollinat's presence and at the aspect of his state, a prompting to say a word, to hold out a hand, to offer help. From a man of his presence, with the authority of his reputation and position, an attempt at interference would not have been resented, and might have helped. His silence, nay, his approval, before a spectacle of self-destruction which to my Calvinistic conscience seemed the

sin which can never be pardoned, were in my mind when, next day, as we were crossing the Pont des Arts, I asked him :

"If you saw a man throw himself into the river here, would you go after him ?"

"I should consider it an act of gross impertinence to do so," he said. "His suicide would be a perfectly thought-out act; the definite result of a scientific process, with which I should have no right whatever to interfere."

V

THERE was no selfishness in this assumed indifference. Oscar Wilde was at once a supreme egotist and the least selfish of men,—that is to say, that he combined complete individualism with a large and generous altruism. He had not the masked selfishness of self-sacrifice where his strong nature rebelled against the victimization of himself.

He could not go against his nature to oblige another. He would not have divided his last shilling with a friend, but, what is infinitely more rare, he was always ready to give away his superfluity. This requires a higher generosity. The benefactor of the popular image after all,

sacrifices a sixpence only. Now, I have known Oscar Wilde, who never invested a penny, give away hundreds of pounds. His comfort had to be assured; and he made no pretence, as some do, of philanthropy which imposed privation on himself. And no one who knew him, who had watched his physical life, could expect it of him, or blame as selfishness what was only egotism. In his intense joy of life, asceticism was impossible to his nature. It was a pleasure to watch his enjoyment at table, his delight in comfortable clothes, the bounding gratitude of all his being for all the good things of existence. I remember the childlike glee with which he once put on a new overcoat. He hugged himself for pleasure in its comfortable folds and said, "So nice and warm." It seemed absolutely the right of this nature to have all it wanted, and it was a real satisfaction to see its enjoyment of the sensualities of

life, — a spectacle which was a most refreshing relief in these days of sham Puritans and the bogus self-denials of the sorriest Tartuffes. His faults of sensuality, if they may so be styled, were open and undisguised. You might watch them as you might have watched a King of France at Versailles, for he feasted in public.

But there was nothing coarse or gross in his sensualism. He was a man of too much refinement to overstep the line. I never once saw him drink to excess; and that he always held a whiphand over his habits was shown to me by the ease with which he adapted himself to the prison regulations. On hearing of his arrest, I had fancied that the privation of tobacco would be torture to him, for he was an incessant smoker of cigarettes. He used to order these by the thousand, and I have seen him in Tite Street carrying with him, as he moved from one room to

another, a box of cigarettes of the size of a large biscuit-tin. I remembered that once in Charles Street, where I was living in the same house as he, my cigarettes having given out in the night, I was driven to get up and go to the sitting-room where we had spent the evening, to grope in the fender and fireplace for any cigarette ends which we had thrown away. Whilst I was so engaged, the door opened stealthily, and Oscar Wilde came in, with a look of much concern on his face. He had, he confessed, come on the same errand as myself.

Accordingly, I imagined he must be suffering badly in Holloway Gaol, and out of sympathy, laid the penance of abstinence from tobacco for as long on myself also. When I met him after his release on bail, I asked him if the privation had tortured him as much as many prisoners of whom one has heard, and he

said, "No. You make up your mind that you cannot smoke, and you resign yourself to the inevitable with ease." He was not the helpless slave to his passions that he has been represented to be.

He had the sheer horror of physical ugliness, and avoided the society of those who appeared to him ill-favoured. This explains a fatal answer he made in cross-examination during Lord Queensberry's trial, an answer on which the worst construction was put. This repulsion was an idiosyncrasy—a part and parcel of his artistic temperament. It has been observed, without arousing comment, in other prominent men.

I have heard him refuse to meet people who were ugly, however sympathetic to him, because of the real distress which their appearance caused to him. I have heard him excuse himself on such occasions in accents which left no doubt of his

sincerity. "I cannot do it—I really cannot."

So it was, that high as was his admiration for Paul Verlaine, his first conversation with him was the last also. The two poets met at the Café François Premier, where Verlaine used to go for absinthe, and the distressful impression which poor Lelian, of the satyr's face, produced upon Oscar Wilde, was such that he could not bear to meet him again. "It was too dreadful," he said to me. Poor Lelian, by the way, carried off from this interview no other impression than that the English poet had an abundant stock of superior cigarettes, whilst he had to content himself with a penny screw of inferior tobacco. I suppose that all the brilliant things that Wilde said were lost upon the simple Verlaine, that child with the head of a Socrates, whose interests in life were reduced to their most material expression.

He paid no heed to his brother-poet's outpourings of eulogy. His little twinkling eyes leered now at the emptying glass and now at the silver cigarette-case. His visitor, in his enthusiasm, forgot for once his natural hospitality.

Oscar Wilde made no attempt to hide his antipathy for physical defects.

"Ugliness," he used to say, "I consider a kind of malady, and illness and suffering always inspire me with repulsion. A man with the toothache ought, I know, to have my sympathy, for it is a terrible pain. Well, he fills me with nothing but aversion. He is tedious. He is a bore. I cannot stand him. I cannot look at him. I must get away from him."

I once tried to enlist his sympathies on behalf of a poor old Englishman whom I had found starving in Paris, and whom I had befriended for years. I took him round to the hotel at which Oscar Wilde

was staying, but after a minute's conversation Wilde pretended a sudden indisposition, and hurried out of the room.

"How could you bring that man here," he said afterwards, "with such a dreadful complaint?" (my poor friend had some chronic skin disfigurement). "I could not bear the sight of him. It made me ill." And though nothing would induce him to meet my friend again, he did much to alleviate his position.

I was surprised, after what he had told me about his aversion to the ill-favoured, that he should wish for my society.

"Oh, you are wonderful, Robert," he said. "It is the head of a Roman emperor of the decadence—the head of an emperor who reigned but for one day—a head found stamped upon a base coin."

He had addressed me almost from the first by my Christian name, and had desired me to do the same towards him.

I confess I had some difficulty at first in doing so, and this in spite of the fact that I had lived much abroad, and notably in Southern Italy, where friends invariably use this form of address.

"You mustn't call me Wilde," he said. "If I am your friend, my name to you is Oscar. If we are only strangers, I am Mr. Wilde."

My Anglo-Saxon reserve, however, revolted against this Celtic expansiveness, and it was some time before I could acquiesce in such familiarity. It was, I know, all innocence and warmness of heart on his side towards his friends, and this also I offered to say in Court when this habit of his friendship was raised up, in its turn, into a charge against him.

Although he never said ill things of the absent, he had an openness of expression towards his friends which never disguised anything that displeased him. Much of the

fierce hatred that blazed up round him when he fell, was fed no doubt by rancorous remembrances of lessons in manners and taste, unhesitatingly delivered, and at the time accepted with sycophantic silence and submission. Yet he never spoke ill of people, even of bitter enemies, who were not present to hear him. I cannot recall any more biting remark from his lips than a humorous answer he made to me on the second day of our friendship. Referring to one of the guests who had been present at the dinner-party, I mentioned that he was the son of a famous lady-pianiste.

"Well," said Oscar Wilde, "I am glad to see that he has managed to survive it."

With regard to his enemies, he had a serenity, a tolerance in speaking of them that alone would have sufficed to rank him in my mind amongst natures of election. During his career he was often attacked and ridiculed, but I never heard him speak of

those who had sought to cause him pain except in condonation. He never had one bitter word for the many friends who betrayed him. This admirable quality reached to heroism in his tragic days. In the abyss into which he was plunged, never once did a word of recrimination pass his lips. He sought to devolve on no one any fragment of his responsibility, he blamed no one for the horror of his fate, he essayed in nowise to lessen the crushing fardel of his infamy, by shifting on to other shoulders any portion of its burden.

But if one said or did anything in his presence that displeased his sense of *bienséance*, he was not slow to reprove it. Such reproofs were delivered with so much dignity and mansuetude, that I cannot fancy natures base enough to have harboured rancour, having accepted them at the time. But circumstances exposed many such pitiful minds.

I myself was once or twice called to order by him, and I have no feeling in this connection but one of gratitude for the lesson. Like many young men who, while ambitious, are of insecure position, I sought assurance in boasting. "Anything approaching self-aggrandisation," he said to me on more than one occasion, "is vulgar. You must avoid it."

He never relinquished what he must have considered the prerogative of his superior nature; and in the days after his fall, when some might fancy he would have been desirous to conciliate people, he was as intolerant as ever towards laches of conduct in his presence. I remember how at Berneval, shortly after his release from prison, he lectured, in my presence, a very wealthy Irish poet, who had been brought to his house by a publisher, on certain points of good breeding, which he had seemed to ignore.

VI

Had his influence indeed been for evil, it was to certain destruction that that meeting in the house of the Avenue de Ségur would have doomed me, for I surrendered to it entirely. The delight that I took in this friendship proceeded as much from my nature as from the circumstances under which I was living when we first met. I had laid a severe discipline on myself and had been living in almost absolute solitude in a cottage, surrounded by high walls, in a remote part of Passy. Here I wrote, with no companionship but that of my many dogs, and with no visitors but one strange old woman, a Marquise, who had been famous for her beauty during the Second Empire, who professed great admira-

tion for some poor verse of mine, and tried to prove it by coming to render menial services in the poet's neglected house. In her old imperial days a royal admirer had compared her to the girl in "La Cruche Cassée" of Greuze, and indeed she resembled her. Clesinger had hewn her bust in marble. Yet she delighted to cook for me and to sweep my house, and I found her once darning my hose.

To be taken out of this hermit's existence into the gladdest society was to me like a draught of strong wine. I let myself drift on the whirling current of this new life, but never once did anxiety beset me as to whither it might bear me. I felt that his friendship was all for good; and disastrous as in wounded sympathy it proved to be, nothing ever came, from first to last, to belie that feeling.

Except on the occasions when he was invited out, the whole of our waking hours during those days in Paris were spent together

I used to call at the Hotel Voltaire at noon, and rarely returned to Passy before three o'clock in the morning. He would not come out to the wilds of my retreat after one visit.

"Passy," he said, "is a dreadful place to get to. It is so far off that one's cabman keeps getting down off his box to ask for something on account of his *pourboire*."

I think it was rather my dogs who frightened him away. He had a curious dislike to animals. "Dogs are so fussy," he said, "that they become tedious." This *badinage* concealed a real physical aversion, which I afterwards found in Alphonse Daudet also.

On the one occasion when he came to my house, he lunched with me. The poor Marquise had prepared the dinner, and for the most part waited on us. But she found no favour in his eyes in spite of her kindness, and that evening he rated me for associating with a person whom old age had so disfigured.

We often went to Lavenue's, near the Gare Montparnasse, a house of call in those days for artists of the brush and of the pen. Paul Bourget used to be there, and one day John Sargent sketched the three of us into the wonderful album which was one of the curiosities of the house. A year or two ago, happening that way, I entered this café, and asked for the book, hoping to revive for a few moments the radiant past. But the landlord of those days was landlord no longer. He had retired, and had taken his albums with him.

The Café d'Orsay, on the Quai d'Orsay, often attracted us on our way to the Hôtel Voltaire, and here we also used to meet Bourget. He was then in penurious days, and seemed as depressed and reticent as Wilde was exuberant and talkative. I think at times of these two as they then were in the race, and as they were twelve years later, Bourget in the palm-embroidered coat of the Academy, Wilde in the . . .

I was then living too much out of the world, to be able to say what impression he produced in Parisian society, or what successes he achieved. I fancy, though, that these were less than at the time I imagined, and as was reported in London. He seems to have attracted the attention of de Goncourt, who refers to the English poet in his diary, and quotes some of the stories he told of his experiences in America. I have described his visits to Victor Hugo and to de Nitis. I also accompanied him on two occasions to Sarah Bernhardt, who showed great liking and admiration for him. On the first occasion we called on her at the Vaudeville Theatre, during the performance of one of Sardou's plays, in which she was acting. We were received in the little salon adjoining her dressing-room; and Sarah, who was in evident déshabille, changing dresses for her part, put her head out between the dividing curtains to welcome Oscar Wilde with her

most cordial smiles. Jean Richepin and other men were in the little drawing-room—the author of *Les Blasphèmes* with his arms folded—and it seemed to me that our visit, no less than Sarah's evident pleasure in it, was somewhat resented.

Some days later we went to her house on the Avenue de Villiers, and on the way Oscar Wilde purchased from a street hawker a large heap of wallflowers, which he presented to her. It was a poor offering, but she seemed delighted with it. We found Alexandre Parodi in her studio, who showed much deference to Oscar Wilde, and called him "cher maître." Parodi was the author of that tragedy *Rome Vaincue*, in which Sarah secured her first real stage-triumph at the Comédie Française. I was much gratified by his attitude towards my new friend, for I knew Parodi's own worth ; but Oscar Wilde found him rather tedious, and the fact was that Parodi, who had fallen on evil

days, was very depressing in his conversation.

Wilde appeared to be sought after by English people who were visiting Paris, but he did not very willingly accept their invitations. There was an amusing person staying at the Hôtel du Rhin—I believe she was a woman of great wealth—with whom he dined on several occasions. One night he had appointed me to meet him in the Place Vendôme at ten o'clock, but it was past eleven before he came out of the Hôtel du Rhin, and I complained of the hundreds of times I had had to walk round the square whilst awaiting him. He said, "Good Heavens, do you think I have been enjoying myself?" and gave me a little glimpse of the egotism to which I have referred. He then spoke of his hostess as a woman who had a mania for associating the name of any person she was introducing either with some accomplishment, or, in default, with some incident

connected with him which might arouse interest.

"She introduced a young man to-night as Mr. John ——, whose uncle, poor Sir William, had his legs so shamefully mangled on the underground railway the other day."

The advances which were made to him by distinguished people in Parisian society had been carefully attracted by himself. He was not disdainful of the indispensable arts for fostering social advancement. On his arrival in Paris he had sent copies of his volume of poems, with letters, to various artists and authors. At the time of his arrest I saw in more than one literary salon, laid out as curios of actuality, the volume, with its dedication and its accompanying letter, written twelve years previously. The shrewdness in the management of his affairs which this betokened confirmed me in the opinion that in their final mismanagement he was never for a moment a responsible man,

and this, as will be seen later, was his wife's opinion also.

I have said that our conversation was almost entirely about literature. He talked to me much of Walter Pater and of Swinburne. For these two his admiration was supreme. But he interested me, perhaps, more when he spoke of Carlyle's *History of the French Revolution*, of which he knew many passages by heart, and it was wonderful to hear how beautiful they sounded from his lips. For at that time I was affecting an admiration for the sanguinary scoundrels of the Revolution. I had not then watched the Republic at work, and the answer of Enjolras, "Citoyen, ma mère, c'est la Republique," seemed to me a divine utterance. Also, when Oscar Wilde, writing to me at Passy, used to address his letters to the "Citoyen Robert Sherard," I was as pleased with the envelope as with its contents.

When he talked about himself, it was

literature also. His sayings always seemed witty to me, and I used to note down in an interleaved copy of de la Rochefoucauld the *bons mots* I had heard from him during the day. I think that the saying of which just then he was most proud was where he had expressed his disappointment with the Atlantic to an interviewer in New York. And he related also, with much gusto, how in a country-house he had told his host one evening that he had spent the day in hard literary work, and that, when asked what he had done, he had said, "I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning and took out a comma." "And in the afternoon?" "In the afternoon—well, I put it back again." There was also his remark to a hostess who reproved him for coming late. "What, madam, do you think that that little clock knows of what the great golden sun is doing?"

He spoke little of his American tour, and I gathered that it had not been a source of much satisfaction to him, and that the ugliness of American cities had distressed him. The only incident which he related with pleasure was that he had discovered in Chicago a young sculptor of Irish extraction, who was poor, friendless, ignored, and unhappy; and that by speaking of him and his work in the course of one of his lectures in that city, he had drawn attention to him, with the result that his position had been greatly improved. The sculptor afterwards came to Europe, but I did not see him by Wilde's side when the catastrophe had come.

Of colours, magenta, of places, Bayswater, were his horror. At least, so he said. A Bayswater view of life meant, from his lips, a severe condemnation for mediocrity. That staid London district afforded him an attributive of almost universal application. And the same may be said of the word 'chromo-

lithographic.' With reference to the colour magenta, he declared that the sight of it gave him real pain. He was delighted to hear that a bitter enemy of my youth had been a boy whom I knew only as "the Magenta Cad" from a bag he carried, and with whom I had fought many battles. I remember that Oscar Wilde composed a verse "to render the colour impossible." It ran something like this:

> "Put yellow lilies in your hair,
> But wear not the magenta zone,
> For that would make you out of tone,
> I could not love you if you were."

I heard little of his school or University days, but when we spoke together of Oxford there was enthusiasm on his side. His years at Magdalen seemed to him at that time to have been the happiest period of his life. I always fancied that the fact that I did not take my degree seemed to him to draw a line between us. There were certain subjects on which he would not listen to me; and when

other graduates were present, a vague feeling of exclusion from his confidence communicated itself to me.

He spoke of his parents with high admiration, but I noticed with some misease that, with reference to his father, he seemed to have the middle-class contempt for the title of knighthood. He would refer to it apologetically, yet for more sonorous prefixes he had a certain admiration. He introduced me at various times to noblemen, and each time I noticed with what pleasure he pronounced their names. These things were the only indications, and those of the very faintest, that he had risen to a place in society which was not his *milieu* by birth.

For Speranza he had a sheer veneration, and the beauty of his conduct towards her to the very end, must arrest admiration and respect from those who most severely condemn him. In all the bitterness of his punishment, nothing can have pained his

noble heart more than that he could not be with her when she died. In France, a condemned murderer, his mother lying at death's door, would be allowed, under escort certainly, to go to her bedside, but in England the prison regulations are framed with no such humanity. During the whole day of February 3rd, 1896, I had the spectacle before my eyes of the unhappy man in his cell in Reading Gaol, knowing that each moment might be his mother's last.

He spoke of her to me often in those radiant early days, and with such enthusiasm that for it alone I could not but have admired him. Her serenity towards life was one of the points he insisted upon with most pride, and there was a tragic story he used to tell of how, when his mother was nursing his father on his dying bed, each morning there came into the sick-room the veiled and silent figure of a woman who sat and watched but never spoke, and at nightfall went away, to

return next morning. Her serenity was to stand Lady Wilde in good stead in the last days; her resignation spared her much bitter suffering. When the final verdict was communicated to her, and she knew that she would see him no more, she only turned over on her side in bed and said, "May it help him!"

He was a good son. When he was in London, he never let a day pass without visiting his mother. In spite of his extravagance and generosity to his friends, and the precariousness of his income, he contributed to her support largely and with a regularity most meticulous. Nor did he limit himself to this allowance. On arriving at the house, his first steps used to carry him to the rack by the side of the fireplace where unpaid bills were put, and if he ever went away without leaving the money to discharge them, it was because he had bestowed it elsewhere. And though he might not follow his mother to her grave, he had at least in

his prison-cell the consolation of the thought that her sumptuous and honourable funeral was paid for out of the poor remnant of his fallen fortune.

He spoke to me also with much affection and admiration of his brother Willy, and told me stories of their boyish comradeship which showed a warm heart here also. And though in later years the ways of the two brothers deviated, and a gulf seemed to divide them, he maintained his admiration for Willy's brilliant cleverness to the end, and in the bottom of his heart the old boyish affection also. I heard him once after Willy's death scourge a man who had spoken somewhat slightingly of his brother, as I had never heard him speak before.

His ingenuousness, his simplicity, showed themselves in his story of an incident of their nursery days. "I had given Willy a toy bear of mine, of which I was very fond," he said, "and whenever afterwards I got angry

with him, I used to threaten him with an 'I shall take back my bear, Willy.' It was a saying with us till we were men." He laughed heartily at this remembrance.

When he spoke, as he often did, of the sister who was dead, his wondrous eyes softened. "She was like a golden ray of sunshine dancing about our home." It was she of whom he wrote in his poems:

> "Coffin-board, heavy stone,
> Lie on her breast.
> I vex my heart alone,
> She is at rest."

The beautiful child "who hardly knew

> She was a woman,
> So softly she grew"

Yes, under the posturing and the persiflage, under the scented curls and the cynicism, under the native sensuality and the assumed worldliness, there was in my friend the tender heart of an affectionate little child. Nor did adversity any more harden it than triumph.

It was so to the last as it had always been.

All these are the impressions which my memory recalls, as I think back on the days in which the friendship dawned. When I left Paris, he remaining behind, I railed against the circumstances which were separating us.

VII

THE regret for this separation followed me to London, and grew so strong that on my arrival there I determined to abandon a project, which, if I had carried it out, would have taken me for years to the East, and perforce have interrupted a communionship which had invested life for me with a new and warm interest.

I wrote to him to tell him so, for he had long tried to dissuade me from leaving Europe, where, he said, I could find my true career.

He shortly afterwards came to London, and hearing that I had gone to meet the spring in Westmoreland, he telegraphed to me at the cottage where I was living to ask me if I could receive him there. I told him

in my answer of the narrow things at home, and warned him that for all the daffodils and violets of my hillside he would find the rough North living intolerable. In the end he decided not to come, but we maintained an active correspondence.

His letters were a constant delight to me, and I found them so beautiful that, as I remember, making my will at that time, I bequeathed my collection of them to the woman I reverence most of all women in the world. I will add this, that when that lady heard that I was writing this story of my friendship, she wrote to ask me if I had preserved those beautiful letters which my friend had written to me in those days.

I mention this because, in letters of his, similar in tone and style, evil was found, so true is it that any man can be hanged on two lines of his writing. I give one of these letters, written to me in Ambleside, after I had known him for about three months.

"DEAR ROBERT,—Your letters are charming, they are iridescent, and everything you see or hear seems to become touched with colour and tinged with joy. I think of you often wandering in violet valleys with your honey-coloured hair, and meditating on the influence of paradoxes on the pastoral mind; but you should be here. One can only write in cities, the country hanging on one's walls in the grey mists of Corot, or the opal mornings that Daubigny has given us: not that I have written here—the splendid whirl and swirl of life in London sweeps me from my Sphynx. I am hard at work being idle; late midnights and famishing morrows follow one another. I wish I was back in Paris, where I did such good work. However, society must be amazed, and my Neronian coiffure has amazed it. Nobody recognises me, and everybody tells me I look young: that is delightful, of course.

"My book you will have next week—it is

a great pleasure to give it to anyone so sympathetic as you—poet to poet. I give you my work because your joy in it makes it more dear to me.

"Who is your young man who likes what I said of the primrose?

"My pen is horrid, my ink bad, my temper worse.—Write soon, and come soon to London. "OSCAR."

If the extravagance of his address had evoked from me anything but a smile, I might have gone as far as to cry out, "*Quel blagueur!*" I cannot conceive how even the most perverted mind could find wrong in such letters. I was willing, and offered, to bring these early letters of his into Court, to show that long before suspicion attainted him, at a time when his sanity could not be called in question, he used the imagery of his pen to beautify his letters to all his friends, seeking similes to flatter and please them,