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I do not know what the book was to which the letter refers, but I think it must have been the *Duchess of Padua*, which he had finished some time before I left Paris. Indeed, I was with him at the Hotel Voltaire on the day when he heard from Mary Anderson, to whom he had sent a copy of the drama which was written for her. He telegraphed in the morning for her decision, and whilst we were talking together after lunch her answer came. It was unfavourable; yet, though he had founded great hopes on the production of this play, he gave no sign of his disappointment. I can remember his tearing a little piece off the blue telegraph-form and rolling it up into a pellet and putting it into his mouth, as, by a curious habit, he did with every paper or book that came into his hands. And all he said, as he passed the telegram over to me, was, "This, Robert, is rather tedious."

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We met again, a month or two later, by hazard in a train in London, and he asked me to come and stay in Charles Street, where he was living in rooms. The street has since been transformed, and now goes by the name of Carlos Street. The house, which was opposite the mews of the Coburg Hotel, has been pulled down. It was an old house, and the rooms on the third floor which Oscar Wilde occupied were panelled in oak, and there were old engravings in heavy black frames on the wall.

The house was kept by a retired butler and his wife, who was a very good cook, and the service was luxurious. I was accommodated with a bedroom on the ground floor, and shared Wilde's sitting-room upstairs. It was a pleasant life, and our breakfasts were after the fashion of Oxford. We often invited guests to this first meal, and over Parascho cigarettes and fine liqueurs discoursed till long after noon. During the

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first days of my stay there Oscar Wilde took me to a reception at his mother's house. Lady Wilde was living at that time in Park Street, Grosvenor Square, in a charming little house which belonged to Willy Wilde. I was presented as having a volume of poems in the press, and was graciously received. Later on, as I was standing talking to Anne Kingsford, Lady Wilde, holding some primroses in her hand, crossed the drawing-room, repeating, "Flowers for the poet! Flowers for the poet!" It was for me that they were intended, for she came up to me and decorated my coat with her posy.

It was a curious existence, this life in Charles Street, Grosvenor Square, not without humour. The fact was that, in despite of an address which implied opulence, we were both very poor. Oscar's American lectures had not been productive, and the *Duchess of Padua* had realised nothing. My friend accordingly was obliged, much against his will,

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to accept an engagement from an agency to lecture in the provinces. It was a real penance to him, and I could understand this after I had seen how his lectures were advertised in the provincial papers. But his money needs were pressing, and perforce he had to lend himself to this exploitation of the notoriety gained in the period which he had renounced.

I remained on in Charles Street and continued to write. I do not suppose that there was a poorer man in London than myself; and whenever chance now takes me to Grosvenor Square, I recall how for hours I used to walk round it in those days, trying to forget my hunger under the suspicious eyes of powdered footmen. Still I had hope, for I had just published a novel in three volumes, and a book of poems was in the press.

Oscar Wilde returned to town at intervals, and on more than one occasion pulled out of

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the pocket of his fur coat a handful of notes and gold which he had earned so distastefully in the provinces, and told me to take what I needed. "It's as much yours as mine," he said. "You know I have no sense of property."

On these occasions of his return to town we used to dine at the Café Royal, and very often Whistler was a *convive*. We used to drink *Château des Mille-Sécousses*, a claret Whistler had discovered. We were blind to the omen of its name. And though Wilde seemed to be the arbiter at these dinners, his deference towards Whistler was very marked. He seemed to take pleasure in paying him compliments. I remember his once referring to something Whistler had done or was to do, with the expression "like the fine old-Virginian gentleman that you are." I witnessed also the exchange of much correspondence between them, repartee by letter or telegram, in which Whistler's

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sayings seemed to delight my friend. I was with him, by the way, also, when the two quarrelled, but I never heard Wilde say one word, either then or later, in resentment.

During my hungry afternoons, when my friend was away, I often used to look out of the third-floor window to watch the carriages of the opulent householders of Mayfair returning from Oxford Street. There was usually a pile of volumes by my lady's side, and I watched and watched if I might recognise the covers of my *opus primus*. I watched in vain, and the truth forced itself upon me at last, in spite of my friend's encouragements, that I could not live by the production of belles-lettres in Grosvenor Square.

So, as there is no city in the world where one can starve with less discomfort than Paris, I determined to return there, to exchange my panelled sitting-room for a *chambre garnie*, and the Parascho cigarettes for *caporal ordinaire*.

VIII

IT was some time during my stay in Charles Street that Oscar Wilde told me that he was engaged to be married. He had arrived in town early one morning from Dublin, and he woke me in bed and gave me the news. I said, "I am very sorry to hear it," and turned over to resume my slumbers. He said, "What a brute you are, Robert," and that was the end of the conversation then. I know that I felt he was not likely to be happy in domestic life, and still less to make a woman happy.

At breakfast he spoke of his bride, and seemed much in love, and very joyous.

The *parti* seemed a good one, for his wife's dowry would assure a regular and

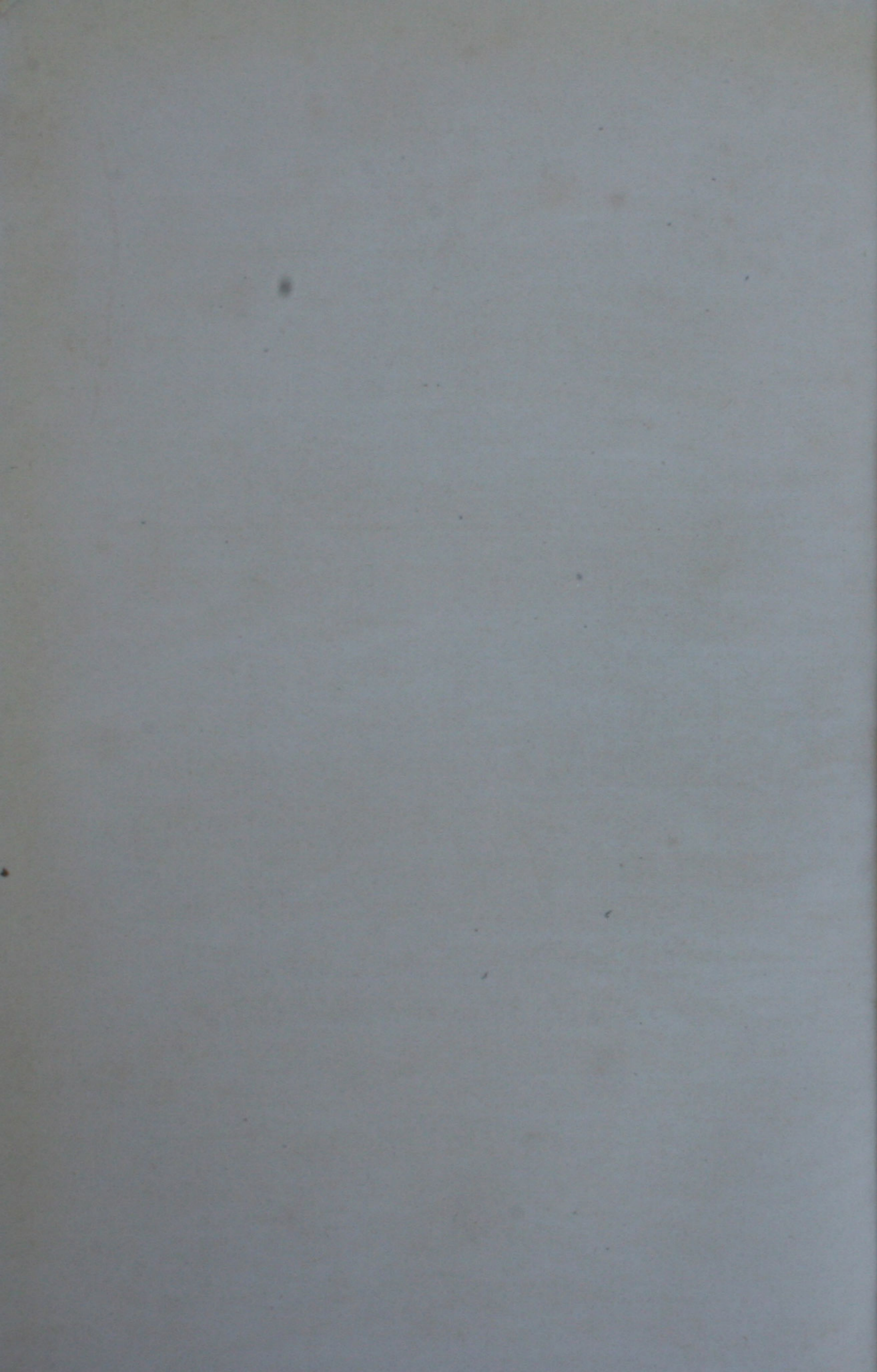
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substantial income. But I misdoubted the future, for I could not fancy him in the part of a householder and man of family. I did not then know the gentle lady whom he had elected.

I was living in Paris at the time of his wedding, but as they crossed to France the same day, I was introduced on the morrow to Mrs. Wilde. They were staying in some very pleasant rooms on one of the higher stories of the Hôtel de Wagram, in the Rue de Rivoli, and a beautiful pair they made. The lovely young wife seemed supremely happy. There was bright sunlight, as one only sees it in Paris, on the Tuileries without, yet the room where I first met her was just as gladsome. It was full of flowers and youth and laughter. I felt that my morose forebodings at the time that I first heard of the engagement were more than stultified; and as we walked out together, Oscar Wilde told me that marriage was indeed wonderful.



OSCAR WILDE, FROM A DRAWING, 1882.



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We were passing through the Marché St. Honoré at the time, and here he stopped and rifled a flower-stall of its loveliest blossoms, and sent them, with a word of love on his card, to the bride whom he had quitted but a moment before.

We all lunched together, and after dinner we drove out in an open fiacre. As we were turning into the Place de la Concorde, I said, "Would you mind, Oscar, if I threw my stick away?"

He said, "No, don't. People would see you, and it would cause a scene. Why do you want to throw it away?"

I said, "It's a swordstick; and I don't know how it is, but for the last minute I have had a wild desire to pull out the blade and run it through you. I think it's because you look too happy. Or it may be that it would be such a horrible thing to do to you on the day after your wedding."

"No, no," he said, "don't throw it away."

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Don't make a scene." Mrs. Wilde laughed and took the stick from my hand. "I shall keep this," she said; and the common little cane was for a long time, I know, one of her curiosities. In a letter which she wrote to me many years afterwards she added in a postscript, "I have still got the swordstick."

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

I think that it was during his stay in Paris at this time that he visited with me the haunts of the lowest criminals and poorest outcasts of the city, the show-places of the Paris Inferno,—Père Lunette's and the Château-Rouge, — which everybody who wishes to know the depths of darkness which exist in the City of Light goes to see.

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There were several of us. I fancy the American, Stuart Merrill, a French poet highly esteemed, was one of the party. Oscar Wilde had expressed himself delighted at the prospect of the excursion, for he said, "The criminal classes have always had a wonderful attraction for me"; to which feeling, by the way, he gave such effective expression in that masterly essay, "Pen, Pencil, and Poison," and other papers.

He was dressed that night with his accustomed elegance, and had some trinkets on his person; and knowing the habits of the customers of these houses, I once or twice interposed myself between him and some particularly notorious character, whose intentions were only too apparent to me. Referring to which afterwards, when speaking of his round of the *bas-fonds* of Paris, he used to say, "Robert was splendid, and defended me at the risk of his life."

I have one scene of the many that that

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evening brought forth, always before my eyes. At the tavern of the Château-Rouge there is a large room upstairs, or was at that time, where, by paying a halfpenny to the landlord, homeless vagabonds and beggars could sleep on the floor till closing-time at two o'clock in the morning. This room was known as the *Morgue*, or the *Salle des Morts*, and was the favourite spectacle of those seeking unhealthy emotions. We had spent some minutes in the pestilential taprooms downstairs, talking to thieves and the saddest daughters of joy, listening to the obscene songs of a frightful old, noseless hag, and watching a number of professional beggars in their display of the tricks by which they feigned infirmities. As a *bonne-bouche*, the *Salle des Morts* was proposed by the Herculean landlord. Wilde agreed, and we went upstairs, the landlord leading the way with a flickering dip.

Stretched out in every posture of pain

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and discomfort, many in the stupor of drink, many displaying foul sores, maimed limbs, or the stigmata of disease, all in filthy and malodorous rags, the sleepers of the Room of the Dead, with their white faces, immobile and sightless, showed indeed like corpses. I can see my friend's face still, his head just rising above the floor, for his feet had refused to carry him to the top of the staircase into the pestilential room. Seen under the flicker of the bully's dip, there was upon its features the horror of one who looks on the Medusa: a twinge of pity about the lips perhaps, but in the main, horror—sheer horror.

Yet not one of the poor wretches who lay there stunned by the merciful sleep of exhaustion, whose most evil fate, compared to his, was not one to be envied!

IX

His marriage did not at first improve his circumstances, so that he could devote himself entirely to belles-lettres. It became necessary for him to earn a regular income. Mrs. Wilde's fortune was in the bulk to come to her only after the death of her grandfather, who, in *articulo mortis* at the time of Oscar's engagement, "blossomed out into fresh life," as he told me, "after he had joined our hands and given us his parting blessing."

With the pathetic striving that was always part of his character, to subject his wayward nature to discipline, he joyfully accepted the duties of his new position; and the editorship of a ladies' magazine being

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offered him, accepted the distasteful employment. His post obliged him to bureau activities. He was forced to come to the City at regular hours on certain days of the week, and I remember meeting him at times in the Strand, brisk on his way to his office, a Pegasus in the plough.

It was one of the rules in the huge literary factory in which he was employed that no smoking was allowed anywhere on the premises, and that, in spite of this restriction, he had accepted the engagement, was a proof to those who knew him how earnestly he felt his responsibility in his new state. When he referred to his bureau life, he used to speak of the great pleasure that he took in the society and conversation of a brother-editor who occupied a high post in the literary factory, and whom he described as a man of great scholarship and high refinement.

It seemed to me also that he enjoyed, too,

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in some measure the dignity of editorial authority; and I remember that once in my rooms in Cecil Street, when we were speaking about the remuneration of contributors, he said, "I pay a guinea a page, whether the page is illustrated or not." There was some pride in his tone, and he seemed to have his employers' interests at heart. I recall that conversation all the better because, a little earlier, he had given me a proof that his nature really did suffer amid ugly surroundings,—a proof that his professed cultus of the beautiful proceeded from an innate feeling. I had not been able to receive him the moment he called, and he had been prayed to wait in the room below—in the awful room which in that London lodging-house gave its designation to the drawing-room floor. He had not been more than three minutes sequestered in the crimson and ormolu horrors of that apartment, with its ugly hangings, bad pictures,

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and worse ornaments, before I heard his voice calling plaintively from the landing below, "Do let me come up, Robert," he said, "or I shall have to ask to be allowed to sit on the steps. If I stay a moment longer in that drawing-room, I shall become very ill."

He was living then in his beautiful house in Tite Street, which was to be his last home. It was a very temple of lettered ease, exquisitely decorated and appointed with solid comfort. A study had been fitted up for him at the top of the house, but I do not believe that he ever wrote a line there, and what writing he did do in Tite Street, was done on Carlyle's writing-table, in the little room on the right of the entrance-passage. It was in reference to his idleness, in spite of all the inducements that his abode held out to industry, that he said to me those words of self-reproach which I have quoted: "I am not doing what I ought to do; I ought

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to be putting black upon white—black upon white.”

This was the period in his life when those who had envied the splendid notoriety of his youth, and had been dismayed by the rapidity and extent of his social success, consoled themselves with the thought that his talents had given the full of their measure, and that his fortune was on its ebb. Indeed, but for his occasional contributions to the reviews, his name was but little heard of during these first years of his married life. The editorial engagement had lapsed and had not been renewed, for Pegasus never suited ploughman yet. I did not know it then, but I heard of it afterwards, that there was in those days often real distress in the beautiful home in Tite Street. If there was, it was never apparent; the marriage seemed happy and prosperous on the many occasions when, visiting London from Paris, I called at the house. His friendliness was

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so steadfast towards me, that if my first visit on arriving in town was not to him, he used to write me a letter of reproach. One day, happening to meet me, he asked me why I had been so long in coming to Tite Street. "I came over to be married," I said.

"Oh, I see," he answered. "Now I understand why you have not been to see me."

His attitude and bearing towards his wife were at all times most courteous and deferential, and he affected a humorous solicitude to observe his social duties as her husband. "*C'est le jour de ma femme*," he used to say, in the words of poor Risler aîné, in refusing an invitation on the days when his wife received. I was once or twice present at these receptions, and admired the pains he took to entertain her visitors, although I knew how terribly bored he was under his genial exterior. On one of these afternoons the baby was brought in to be admired by a noble dame, and I remember

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that he said something to me, as he touched his little son's cheek with his fat finger, that had a ring of sadness in it—words of foreboding that the child's destiny would not be a happy one—words of commiseration for the sleeping innocent.

An act of his which about this time brought his name again before the public, and which evoked some malevolent comment in the papers, was an act of pure kindness, prompted, I think, by his friendship for me. My poor friend, John Barlas, a poet, who had been my comrade at New, had fallen into the hands of the police. His brain having given way under the stress of misery, and excited by reading Anarchist literature, he had rushed out one morning from the awful kennel in which he was living in the Lambeth Road, and making his way to Westminster Bridge, had fired off a revolver at the House of Commons, "to mark," as he explained at the police-station,

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“my contempt for the institution of Parliament.” He was remanded for inquiries, and under the circumstances the prospect was a bad one. I heard of his arrest in Paris, and being unable to come over to bestir myself on his behalf, I wrote a long letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, headed “John Barlas, Poet,” in which I told all the good things I knew of the poor fellow, and gently suggested that a few doses of bromide of potassium would be the best prescription that the honourable magistrate could ordain. Then Oscar Wilde came forward and offered himself as surety for the poet’s future good behaviour; and in the end, John Barlas was bound over to keep the peace for a period of six months, under a penalty of £50, on Wilde’s recognisance. It was a generous act on Oscar Wilde’s part, for poor Barlas’s nervous state was such that there was every probability that he might be called on to

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forfeit a sum which at that time he could very ill have afforded to lose. He was much pleased by the deference shown to him in Court. He was invited to sit next to the magistrate. But what I most often think of when I recall his account of that incident is his description of the atmosphere of the regions below the police-court—the region of the cells. The cordiality between the constables and the prisoners, the pervading joviality, the large spirit of tolerance, of comprehension of human weakness, which seemed to actuate gaolers and policemen, surprised and delighted him. I told him that the explanation was that policemen and prisoners are men of the people together, as distinct from the bourgeoisie represented by the magistrate and his textbooks, and that when an unfortunate man of the upper classes fell into those depths, he might look in vain for that cordiality and generous tolerance. Oscar Wilde said

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that I was an abominable cynic, but I know that in the event he found that I was in the right. There was so little humanity shown to him, that on the night of his arrest the reporters calling at Bow Street police-station were admitted to look into his cell and to feast their eyes on the spectacle of his agony.

X

IN the first month of 1891 I saw much of him in London. I had returned, under different circumstances, to my old rooms in Charles Street, and he used to come, to lend the glamour of his presence and of his conversation, to the gatherings of poets who used to spend the evenings with me. I remember that on one occasion John Barlas came, accompanied by an extraordinary young female, who, to show the ardour of her Anarchist convictions, was dressed in red. Oscar Wilde was civil to her, but Barlas seemed to think that he did not show sufficient deference to the comrade; and as we were walking through Berkeley Square, he indignantly separated from us.

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He said something to the effect that Wilde ought to have given the lady—the poet's comrade—his arm, which, I admit, would have afforded a strange spectacle. It was a sign of Wilde's urbanity that he showed neither annoyance nor resentment at the poor fellow's extraordinary conduct, yet nobody hated scenes in public more than he did; and again, it was hardly grateful of Barlas, after the way in which, as a stranger, he had befriended him.

During the same year we frequently met in Paris, where he had now begun to be counted, and seriously, amongst European celebrities. In December he was much fêted in the best houses, and leading litterateurs and artists crowded to his hotel. The Princess of Monaco, sending him her portrait at that time, wrote upon it: "Au vrai Art—à Oscar Wilde."

I was able then to do something towards imposing him on the attention of Paris,

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which gave him great pleasure. I contributed a long article about him and his work to *Le Gaulois*, the leading Conservative and Royalist paper in France. It was printed on the first page, and made him the topic of the day in Paris.*

I had invited him to lunch with me at Paillard's, to meet Coquelin cadet, and as we walked down the boulevard we looked at the people sitting outside the cafés, and when we saw anyone reading the *Gaulois* we both pretended to be very proud.

Coquelin cadet was not greatly impressed by my friend, and I imagine that, as a general rule, Oscar Wilde did not have much success with actors. These may have thought his affectation, harmless as it was, an infringement on their own rights—a trespass on their domain.

A pleasanter déjeuner was one at the Café Riche, to which I invited Jean Moreas

* I have reprinted this article at the end of this book.

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and Stephane Mallarmé to meet him. It was very cordial, and I think Oscar Wilde succeeded in amazing the two poets. He had been anxious to meet Mallarmé, and until we saw him come into the room we did not know whether he was coming. The telegram which he had sent me in answer to my invitation, like every piece of prose he wrote, was worded in so intricate and obscure a manner that neither Wilde nor myself had been able to get at its meaning, though we had spent the whole period of the *apéritif* puzzling over it.

A few months later, Oscar Wilde rendered me a service for which I felt very grateful. On the eve of fighting a duel, under severe conditions, I had written to a relation of mine in London about certain arrangements in the event of my mischance. The good fellow, in true friendship to me, was greatly alarmed, and was for informing the police,

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so that the duel, with what he deemed "its suicidal conditions," should be stopped. However, before doing so, he went to Tite Street to consult Oscar Wilde, who, I am glad to say, was able to dissuade him from an act which would have put me under *taboo* in Paris for the rest of my days. And after the business was over, I received a letter from Wilde, which was a great comfort to me in a moment of very sore distress. He knew the circumstances, and he wrote to approve of my conduct. I do not think that any of his letters ever gave me so much pleasure.

This was, however, I think, to be the last joy to me of our friendship—in pleasure, at least. I saw little of him during the next three years, which were the years of his splendour and success, for most of the time I was wandering about in the South of France and Spain, and I think that the only time when I visited London was when I accom-

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panied Zola there on his conquest of the English. We met once or twice in Paris, but he did not appear to me the same man. I did not think that prosperity had changed him, but the excitement of his success seemed to have intoxicated him, and he was altogether different. Renunciations of him by mutual friends began to occur, distressing me greatly, for I refused, on the strength of my long knowledge of him, to believe the evil rumours which prompted these partings. I know that in 1894, that is to say, a year before the catastrophe, he expressed the most violent anger, in my presence and that of another man, at a letter breaking off acquaintance, which a young French poet had written him. This young man, who since has stepped into the very first rank of French authors, was an intimate friend of mine, and he told me that though he had never seen in Wilde's conduct the slightest thing to justify the rumour that was spread-

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ing from London in connection with his name, this rumour was getting such a hold on society in Paris that, for his own dignity, he was obliged to cease a friendship which he should always regret. I remember Wilde's saying, "How I wish that I knew the use of arms, so that I could punish these fellows as they deserve." And I believe to this day that his anger was sincere, not feigned for the circumstance. I felt this quarrel very much, and I had begged my French friend not to countenance a rumour which he disbelieved by deserting Wilde, but he had answered that he was ambitious, and could not compromise himself. His action was prompted in the first place by something that had been said by Leon Daudet, which had been misunderstood. All that Leon Daudet had said was, that he did not like Oscar Wilde's way of dressing. And there is no doubt that what militated from the first against my friend's success in Paris was

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his disregard of French taste in this matter. For instance, he was fond of wearing gorgeous fur coats. Now, in Paris, gentlemen never wear fur coats; they are the distinctive garb of dentists and opera-singers, people with whom men of the world in France do not care to associate. He cultivated, to his detriment as far as his social success went, an air of *rastaquouérisme*, which gave the gossips a weapon against him.

I fancy that in his splendour our friendship relaxed. Possibly it was because we so rarely met. There was a feeling on my side of having been cast off, although there was little to warrant it. I can only remember that on one occasion, meeting him as he came out of the Variétés Theatre in company with a very distinguished person, he would not talk a minute, and brusquely departed. I received no letters from him during this period.

It was at Christmas that I met him last,

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before the catastrophe of 1895, and my impression was altogether a painful one. He was not the friend I had known and admired for so many years. I dined with him at Tite Street: for once there was no pleasure, but distress rather, in the occasion. He looked bloated. His face seemed to have lost its spiritual beauty, and was oozing with material prosperity. And his conversation also was not agreeable. I concluded that too much good living and too great success had momentarily affected him both morally and physically. There is an American slang-phrase which exactly describes the impression which he produced upon me. He seemed to be suffering from a swollen head! That I could understand. After the stress of years and a long period of heart-gnawing insecurity of position, he had caught the tide of unbounded prosperity. His income then exceeded £8000, and there was every prospect of a future of unrivalled brilliance.

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Very few men can maintain their serenity in the intoxication of sudden fortune, eagerly desired, but long delayed. But what grieved me was that he should deem it necessary to let me feel that under the new circumstances there was a distance between us. There was a certain aggressiveness in his tone, and in one remark he actually wounded me. He had been telling me in detail the circumstances under which *The Green Carnation* had been written; how the author of that book, which really raised the hue and cry, had introduced himself to Lord Alfred Douglas in Cairo; how he had won his way into their intimacy, and had collected his materials. He concluded by saying, "Now this, Robert, is not for publication." It was not a nice thing to say, and on his lips it had a peculiar significance, for he always professed the greatest contempt for journalists, and his manner implied that the remark was addressed to me in that capacity. He had

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been speaking in the early part of the dinner of his horror for people of that profession, and had mimicked the eagerness of a reporter who, calling at a house where a murder has been committed, begs to be allowed to examine the carpet to see if he can find blood stains.

I know that I felt indignant, and of a mind to leave the house, which I would have done but for the presence of Mrs. Wilde and other guests. And as I walked home that night, I grieved to think that the end was coming of a friendship which had for many years been the joy and the pride of my life.

XI

HE afterwards told me how he regretted that during the days that followed upon that last meeting of ours, which had seemed a final parting to both of us, he had not turned to me. "You have authority with me," he said. "I should have listened to you."

And certainly it would have been, I think, in my power to prevent him from that act of folly in laying an information against Lord Queensberry, to which he was incited by the desire of another for private vengeance. It would have sufficed to remind him that in France, whose ethics he so admired that at one time he wished to naturalise himself a Frenchman, gentlemen settle such matters between themselves, and never call in the

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police to adjust an offence. I know that he was quite reckless at the time. "I had come to think," he said, "that I could do anything I chose." But he would not have been insensible, had it been pointed out to him, to the ugliness of compassing another's ruin. I should have said to him, "It will be a fine feather in your cap if Lord Queensberry gets the seven years' penal servitude which his enemies wish for him, through your prosecution! You will not know an hour's happiness from the moment of his conviction."

I could have dissuaded him—at least so he told me—and should have tried my best to do so. I admit it would have been a hard task, in view of the evil influence that was at work, and the obvious fact that he had seized on this opportunity to silence the hundred tongues that were wagging against him.

There was a high stake to play for—his

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entire rehabilitation ; but eagerly as he must have desired this, after the repeated slights to which he had been subjected, I think he could have been brought to see that it would be too dearly purchased at the cost of disgrace and suffering to an unfortunate man, not entirely responsible, to whom life and the world had not been too clement.

But in the whirling excitement of his life at the time, the fiend alcohol beating time, the friend in Paris with his plain-speaking was forgotten, if not purposely discarded. In the blaze of his notoriety as a man long-suffering and long-slandered, who was at last about to crush calumny to the earth, he passed twice through Paris without giving me a sign of his presence.

I followed his movements, with growing wonder and regret, in the papers,—regret, because it was only too easy to gather what a bad impression he created in the rôle of prosecutor. A hotel-keeper at Monte Carlo

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had refused to receive him and his companion. I wanted to write to him, but I feared that my letter would be of no effect; that he would resent it, and write to me in such a way that I should be forced to separate myself from him. And I had the intuition that catastrophe was approaching, so that to have quarrelled with him then—having that presentiment—would have appeared to me tantamount to a desertion.

This intuition grew into a certainty after I had read in the papers the account of his cross-examination in the Queensberry trial, and that night I broke the silence of months by sending him a telegram to tell him that should he ever need me he would find me.

I was with an English journalist the following evening when *Le Temps*, the Paris evening-paper, arrived. He looked at the back page, where the latest telegrams are printed, and with a cry of exultation pushed it over to me. It contained the report of the

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collapse of the prosecution, the withdrawal of Sir Edward Clarke, and the ominous declarations of Mr. Carson.

The Englishman laughed with pleasure, his harboured spite and envy bubbling from his churning lips. "What do you say of your friendship now?" he asked.

"That it begins," I said.

At that moment my friend with some companions was sitting in a private room in the Cadogan Arms, smoking cigarettes, drinking whisky-and-soda, and waiting. What for waiting, not one of them could have said. They had set fire to a mine, and were trying to stupefy themselves into the belief and hope that it would not explode beneath them. It was reported to me that when, after an intentional delay of many hours, unable to wait any longer, the police at last moved, and a knock came at the door of that sitting-room in the Cadogan Arms, they all blanched as if under the shock of a

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sudden surprise. Not one of his friends had had the sense to explain to Wilde what was the true meaning of the warning his counsel had given at the close of his cross-examination, or to force him to realise that, if only as a matter of public policy, he should leave the country at once. As a matter of fact the warrant for his arrest was not signed until after the last day-train for Dover, carefully watched, had been seen to leave without him, and it was impossible to delay action any longer.

When I think back upon the days that followed, a numb pain at my heart reminds me of all that I suffered. The shame, the sorrow, the pity, the horror were all the more hard to bear that I could not find one single soul in all Paris who had any sympathy with me. A shout of exultation rose up around me, as of the demons rejoicing at the irrevocable ruin of a human soul. Those who knew how proud I had been of his friendship

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were careful to tax me with it in public places. I never had any prompting to deny it. On the contrary, I maintained it; and until the day of his final conviction, I refused to allow anyone in my presence to charge him with infamy. It was a battle against a big world, but I am glad to think I never flinched, though insulted, traduced, and even assaulted on many occasions.

I wrote to him at once on hearing of his arrest, and endeavoured to console him, and again each succeeding day. I forget what I said, but I know that my letters were of some comfort to him, for in the course of that dreadful week I received from London a letter from one of his friends, from which I take the following extract:

“ I saw Oscar yesterday in a private room at the police court, and he gave me your three letters, and asked me to write and tell you how deeply, deeply touched he was by your kindness and sympathy and loyalty to

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him in his terrible and undeserved trouble. He himself is so ill and unhappy that he has not sufficient strength and energy to write, and all his time has to be devoted to preparing his defence against a diabolical conspiracy, which seems almost unlimited in its size and strength. I will not add to your sorrow by telling you of the privations and sufferings he has to endure. I have seen him three times since his arrest, once through a horrible kind of barred cage, separated from him by a space of one yard, and in almost complete darkness, with twenty other people talking at the same time. This is the *ordinary* way, and one visit a day of a quarter of an hour is all he is allowed. After that, I managed to get an order from the Home Secretary to see him in a private room for three-quarters of an hour. And yesterday I contrived to have a fairly long interview with him at the police court. In spite of all the brutal and cowardly clamour of our

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disgusting newspapers, I think the sympathy of all decent men is with him, and that he will ultimately triumph, but he has much to go through first. I have determined to remain here and do what I possibly can, though I am warned on all hands that my own risk is not inconsiderable, and my family implore me to go away. I do not say this to try and gain credit for myself, for I should be a base coward if I did anything else, considering all I owe to him, and that I am in many ways the innocent cause of this horrible calamity."

It was indeed a horrible time, to be remembered by me not without a shudder for all my days. A wave of terror swept over the Channel, and the city of Calais witnessed a strange invasion. From the arcana of London a thousand guilty consciences, startled into action by the threat of imminent requitals, came fleeing South. Every outgoing steamer numbered

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amongst its passengers such nightmare faces as in quiet times one cannot fancy to exist outside the regions of disordered dreams.

My loyalty in friendship lent to misinterpretation. I saw those nightmare faces gathering around me, watching with pale eyes for sympathy, where I had nothing but revolt and horror to give. And though, from my knowledge of him, I could hold my friend guiltless, I had yet, in face of all that came to light, to seek for some justification of my conduct, even to myself, and so I wrote out in large letters and pasted on the wall of my study in my Paris home, the following axiom from the works of the great Belgian philosopher and legislator, Quetelet :

“ La société renferme en elle les germes de tous les crimes qui vont se commettre. C'est elle, en quelque sorte, qui les prépare, et le coupable n'est que l'instrument qui les

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exécute. Tout état social suppose un certain nombre et un certain ordre de crimes qui resultent comme conséquences nécessaires de son organisation."

My recollections of public school and 'Varsity morality in England, enabled me, by the light of the Belgian philosopher, to see a victim rather than a culprit.

For the rest, I was to experience in my own person how such prosecutions are established and carried out. Amongst the people who, because of my well-known friendship with the prisoner in London, insulted me publicly in Paris, was a man who, by his standing in the English colony, was a person of too much importance to be treated merely with contempt. I dragged him before the French Courts, and there, although he recanted piteously, he was sentenced to the highest money penalty allowed of by the French law. The case was maliciously reported in

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London, and it became necessary for me, in self-protection, to take action here also. A serious effort was made on behalf of the defendants to justify the abominable innuendo. My portrait was hawked round in all the London hell-holes, and every legitimate effort was made by a respectable detective to associate me with any incident which might warrant the wicked suggestion which had been made to my detriment, because I had not chosen to abandon an unhappy friend, abandoned by all. Legitimate effort having failed, we had an indication that other means were to be tried. I attach in no way blame for this, either to the honourable defendants or to their solicitors. I always supposed that the infernal manœuvre was the work of some infamous firm of detectives, who had taken up the inquiry on speculation, after it had been abandoned by the respectable agents of the defence; and if I record what was

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attempted, it is because it shows how such cases, leading to lifelong ruin and dishonour, are got up in London town. Some time before the trial of this action, I was preparing a series of articles on London by Night, and visited a number of disreputable night-clubs. To a typical one in a street off the Tottenham Court Road, I paid frequent visits. One night the barmaid at this house spoke to my solicitor, who had once or twice accompanied me on these curious journeys of exploration. She said, "Tell your friend to be very careful what he does here, and above all not to take any liquor. Last night I heard a man, who is a stranger to me, offer a girl five pounds if she could get your friend intoxicated and drugged to the point of stupefaction, and induce him to leave the club in her company." The intention towards me was only too apparent. No use was made by us of this incident when the action came

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for trial, for in bringing it I had no other motive than to justify the friendship of years, and to clear, in this association, the unhappy friend also who was then in prison.

XII

ON his arrest, almost immediate ruin followed. His sources of income dried up in one hour; his books were withdrawn from sale; the managers suspended the performance of his plays. His creditors clamoured for payment, judgments were obtained against him, and an execution was put into the house in Tite Street. From affluence he passed suddenly to dire poverty at a time when money was needed for his defence, when the utter lack of resources seemed to hold out the menace that he would be left to face the terrible charges which were being accumulated against him without the means to fee counsel or to prepare evidence.

Towards the beginning of April of that

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year, I received from him in Holloway Gaol a letter in which he described how his want of means aggravated his terrible condition, and asked me if I would help him to realise what, in the wreck of his fortune, seemed to be the only asset left.

It will be remembered that Madame Sarah Bernhardt had some time previously accepted his Biblical play, *Salomé*, which he had written in French. It was entirely his own work, for I saw him write it, though the French was revised by M. Marcel Schwob. Licence to produce the play in London had been refused by the Lord Chamberlain's office, on the ground that it was inadvisable to dramatise religious episodes, and this counter to the fact that it is from such dramatisations that the whole, glorious, English drama sprung. In his indignation at this overthrow of very high hopes, Oscar Wilde had declared his intention of leaving England and of applying

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for letters of naturalisation as a French citizen. Had he carried this intention into effect, he might be living a happy man to-day, and a terrible scandal would have been avoided.

Sarah Bernhardt had brought the play back to Paris with her, and had promised him to produce it at her own theatre of the Porte St. Martin, as soon as opportunity should permit.

In his letter, accordingly, Wilde asked me to go and see Sarah, to explain his pressing need of money, and to ask her to pay him a sum down for the acting rights of *Salomé*, instead of the royalties which would afterwards accrue to him. He suggested a sum of three or four hundred pounds, as necessary for the purposes of his defence.

I have often wondered since, where I found the nerve and the assurance necessary to execute this commission, which under ordinary circumstances, given my temperament, would have been a physical impossibility. I suppose it was thanks to

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my entire devotion to my poor friend, that I never hesitated for a moment, and that the minute after I had read his letter I was driving in a cab to the Boulevard Pereire. Perhaps if I had stopped to reflect on the errand, I should have come to the conclusion, from my knowledge of theatrical folk in general, and of the lady in question in particular, that it would be a useless one, resulting only in humiliation to myself.

I was delighted at the reception that Madame Bernhardt gave me and at the kind way in which she spoke of 'her good friend,' and deplored the calamity which had befallen him. She wrung her hands, and her wonderful eyes moistened with real emotion.

As to the business on which I had come, she put me at my ease at once by the calm way in which, in a commercial spirit, she approached the question. It was a matter of extreme delicacy, this veiled

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appeal to her purse ; and by her manner of treating it as a simple and natural piece of business, she promptly relieved me of a very uncomfortable feeling.

She declared at once that under existing circumstances it would be impossible for her to produce *Salomé*, and that therefore she would not purchase the play. "But," she added, "I am so sorry for the poor man, and should be so glad to do everything in my power to assist him, that I'll see what money I can give him, as a loan between good friends. Does he say what sum he requires?"

"He mentions a sum of from seven to ten thousand francs," I said, passing her the prison letter.

"I don't know," she said, "what I can do? I must see what money there is at the box-office first, and have a talk with my manager. The season has not been a good one, and you know that I am not a provident

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person. Well, we'll see. What I can do I will—the utmost—out of friendship for a great artist, who is also a man of good heart, and who, I am sure, is suffering most unjustly.”

I thanked her warmly, and I thought that pity and kindness had made even more wonderful the wonderful beauty of her eyes, even more enchanting, the exquisite sound of her golden voice. I could have gone down on my knees to kiss the hem of her gown. For weeks past my friendship had exposed me to insult. On every side I had heard my friend's name coupled with terms of loathing and execration, and here, before me, was a queen among women, a woman semi-divine in genius and physique, who spoke to me of him with tears in the eyes which have illuminated, and emotion in the voice which has charmed the universe.

I said, “I will telegraph to the prison, for the news of your loyalty to him, even if your hopes cannot be realised, will surely

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comfort him. And as to the money, perhaps your secretary would send it to his solicitors, whose address I will give you."

"No, no," she cried. "I want to have nothing to do with solicitors. The money must pass through you. Let me see? To-day is Saturday. Will you call on Monday about this time, and I will have ready for you whatever I am able to spare so gladly for the poor man!"

As soon as I had left the house on the Boulevard Pereire, I drove to the nearest telegraph office and sent off a long telegram to my friend in Holloway Gaol, promising him funds for the following week, and describing the sympathy and affection with which the great French actress had spoken of him. For the first time for many days I felt in some way reassured, and not without hope for the future.

On Monday, at the hour appointed, I called on Madame Bernhardt. In the meanwhile I

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had received from London instructions by telegraph as to how I was to remit the money which I was about to receive. A disappointment, however, awaited me, for Madame's little black page, who answered the door, told me that his mistress had gone out, and would not return that afternoon. No message had been left for me.

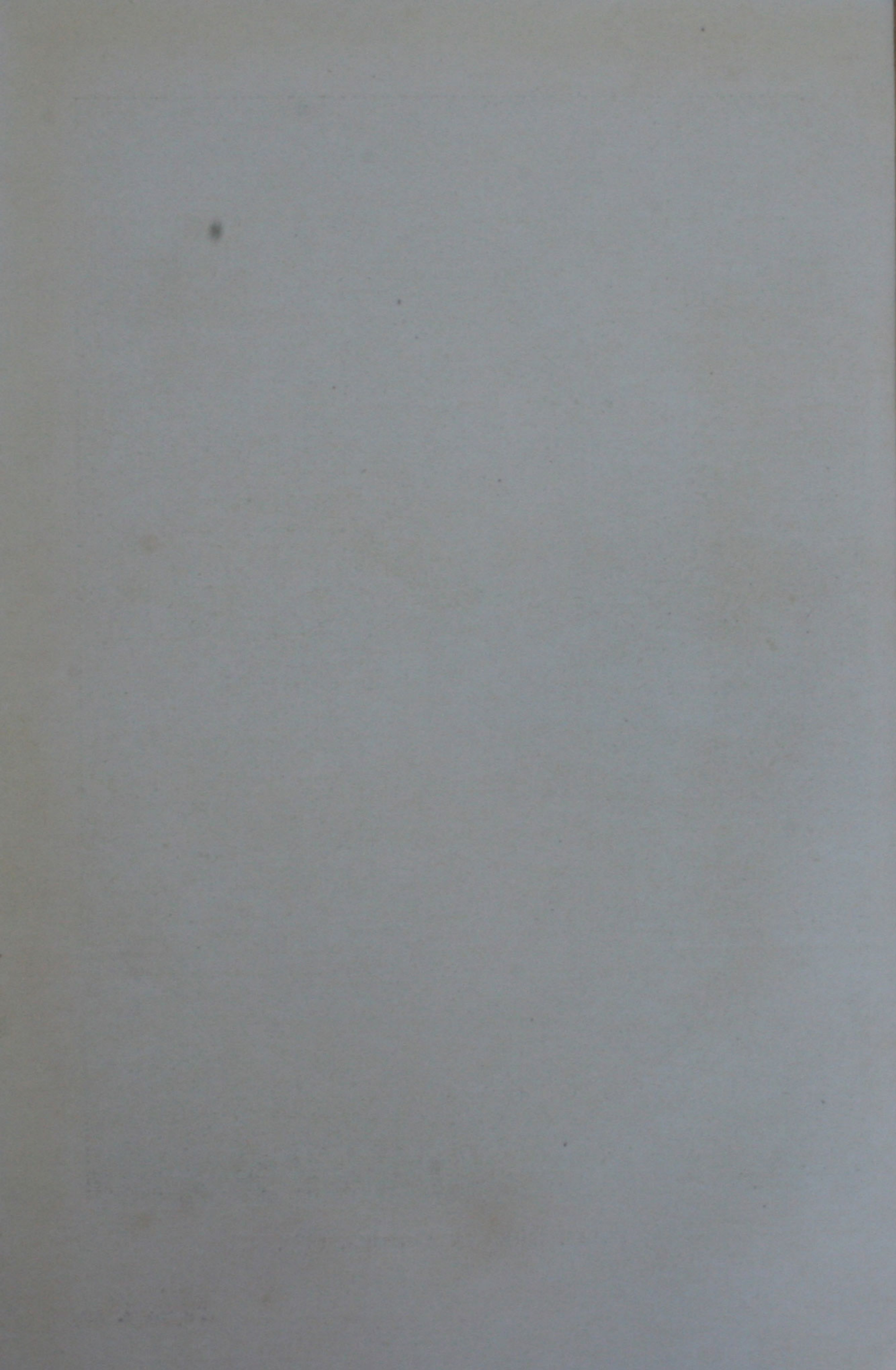
I returned on the Tuesday, and again the black page informed me that Madame was absent, nor expected to return until late at night. He grinned as he spoke, and, anticipating my question, added "and nothing has been left for you."

I felt like a detected begging impostor as I walked away. However, my own feelings had not to be consulted in the matter. I had to remember the dreadful plight in which my poor friend found himself, and all that might depend on his obtaining the promised assistance. Accordingly, on the morrow I returned to the Boulevard Pereire. Madame



OSCAR WILDE WHEN IN AMERICA, 1883.

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was again out, and no suggestion could be offered me as to where I was likely to find her. It occurred to me, however, that she very probably had gone to the Vernissage of the Salon, and I at once drove off there. I heard here that she was visiting the exhibition, and I spent a good hour in tracking her. I remember that M. Zola was one of the people of whom I asked my oft-repeated question, "Have you seen Sarah Bernhardt? Where is Sarah Bernhardt?"

At last I came up with her, and found her discoursing on an exhibition of pottery to a group of friends, who, in their turn, were surrounded by a large crowd of admiring onlookers. With the persistence of a dun, or process-server, I elbowed my way into the front rank of the crowd of which she was the centre, and as soon as she had turned in my direction I raised my hat.

She smiled very graciously, and addressing me by my name said, "I think I asked you to call on me on Monday."

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I answered in the affirmative, and added, "May I present myself to-morrow?"

She said, "Let me see? No, don't come to-morrow, but come on Friday."

I thanked her, and hurried off to send a fresh telegram to London.

On Friday I was told that Madame was engaged with her daughter-in-law, and was begged to return on the morrow. I returned on Saturday, and this time the answer given at the door was, that Madame was working at her sculpture with a model and could not be disturbed, and that I need not call again, as she would write to me.

I waited several days for the promised letter, but as nothing came, I wrote to her to say that I quite understood that circumstances might have arisen to prevent her from giving effect to her kind promises and generous offer, but that as the unhappy man in Holloway had been lured by my telegrams into false hopes, she would render me a

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signal service by causing her secretary to send me a few lines, which would serve as my discharge towards our mutual friend. My own pen having invariably been at her service for many years, and under circumstances where she had not been sorry to find a champion, I fully expected an answer which I could have sent to Wilde, so as to show him that I had not neglected his service in his general abandonment. I never received any reply to my letter. It was what one might have expected, as the world goes, but it grieved me deeply. I began to realise how deep my friend had fallen.

I explained all the circumstances in a long letter to him, in which I also related how I was being harassed. He wrote me in reply the following letter. I may be charged with a want of modesty in printing it, but my personality is of no account in this narrative, the story of an unhappy friendship.

Oscar Wilde

L.P.
C. 4

From *Wilde*,

H. M. PRISON,

HOLLOWAY,

16-4-1895.

B. 2-4
3.56.

MY DEAR ROBERT,—You good, daring reckless friend! I was delighted to get your letter, with all its wonderful news. For myself, I am ill—apathetic. Slowly life creeps out of me. Nothing but Alfred Douglas' daily visits quicken me into life, and even him I only see under humiliating and tragic conditions.

Don't fight more than 6 duels a week! I suppose Sarah is hopeless; but your chivalrous friendship—your fine, chivalrous friendship—is worth more than all the money in the world.—Yours,

OSCAR.

I have related in detail this incident because it is typical of what I had to undergo in humiliation during those dreadful

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days. For the rest, I could find consolation nowhere. By everybody who approached me, the man against whom at that time there was not the shadow of a proof was already convicted and condemned to eternal ignominy. The papers in Paris, prejudging the case, according to their invariable custom, were filled with denunciations of him. The English residents seemed to take special delight in spreading the scandal, which was really far more a discredit to their nation than to the unhappy individual who at that time might be considered an innocent man. I found not a single countryman to back me up in the demand which I repeatedly made, both in public and in private, that until after his trial my friend's guilt should not be affirmed. I was altogether alone; and though I suffered cruelly at the injustice of the world, I had at heart a secret pleasure in feeling that never once, at the bidding of social or professional

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interest, had I denied my friend. My championship of him may have been in some degree indiscreet; but in the whirl of the tragedy which enveloped me, I had lost the just perception of things.

XIII

I SHALL always remember, as one of the most painful episodes of my life, the afternoon of the day on which Oscar Wilde's first trial closed.

Dreading what news the evening might bring, I had made no arrangement to be informed of it from London, and had determined to spend those fateful hours in silence, retirement, prayer, and hope. However, soon after midday an Englishman came to my house to tell me that a telegram was expected from the Old Bailey in the course of the afternoon at an English bar in the St. Honoré Quarter, and suggested that we should go there and wait for the news.

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There are times, when one takes a perverse delight in going to meet distress of mind, possibly because one flatters oneself that he has abundant resources of courage and resistance with which to face it. I went accordingly, and, amidst pothouse surroundings, waited with the anxiety of one, the life of whose dearest friend is at stake.

A coarse crowd of Englishmen, journalists, bookmakers and racing-touts surrounded the bar, which, in the exhilaration and excitement of the hour, did excellent trade. Bets as to the verdict were freely made, though, from the odds offered, there seemed to be but little doubt of a conviction. An incomprehensible hostility animated the conversation against the prisoner, yet almost without exception those who so discoursed were past-masters in every form of vice. The lewd faces, flushed with alcohol, mouthing imprecations against the unhappy man, at that moment in such dire straits,

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suggested a picture such as Goya might have painted of a dream of the corridors of Hell. Filthy jests were bandied over the clinking tumblers. There was more deliberate vice engendered in that hour than many an unconscious madman crowds into his whole, irresponsible career.

At last the blue envelope was handed over the bar-counter—the eagerly expected telegram from the Old Bailey. It was torn open, perused with gloating eyes, and flung down with an oath of bitter disappointment. The trial was over, the jury had disagreed, and the presumption was that a soul had been snatched from perdition. In the odious clamour of baulked cruelty that arose, hope within me began to lift its head, and I hastened off to communicate with my friend, leaving the rest to discuss the chance that a fresh trial would be ordered, and that the man might yet be crushed.

It was not till the following night that I

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received news from him—a telegram—brief and ominous, “Still in Holloway. Oscar.” which seemed to confirm what I had heard in the course of the day, namely, that by the pique of the Treasury counsel, at a hasty word from the defence in the flush of its partial success, a new trial was to be proceeded with, and a fresh period of torture had opened before us.

Yet, in consolation, there was the rumour that the prison gates would soon be opened, and that, though substantial bail would be exacted, so that appearances might be safeguarded and popular clamour appeased, it would be fixed at a sum which could easily be raised by the prisoner’s friends,—which implied that the authorities, though obliged to continue the prosecution, were anxious to give the prisoner a chance to end the scandal and ensure his own safety by fleeing the country. And indeed there never has been a doubt in my mind, that if he had left

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England when he had the occasion to do so, he would have won the gratitude of every official, from the Home Secretary downwards. And I am not speaking on supposition only. The subsequent vindictiveness with which he was treated, was the reparation officially exacted from him for an attitude which was a credit to himself and an honour to his friends.

As soon as it was known in Paris that he had been released on bail, the nightmare faces which had become familiar on the boulevards were seen to peep and peer. But he gave no sign, and all one knew of his doings was from the reports in the papers, which one day placed him here, and next day showed him there. From the mendacious tales we read, a poignant feeling grew upon me that his dubious triumph had turned his head, that he was flaunting his notoriety with display, defying public opinion with an unconsciousness which was inconceivable to those who knew his real character.

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And then, late one night, I was aroused by the arrival of a telegram from some friends of his, asking me to come to London to take him into the country. I confess that it occurred to me that another service was required of me—that one preposition had been purposely substituted for another. But I did not pause to reflect. I threw a few things into a bag, and leaving my home and my occupations to console themselves for my absence in the best way they could devise, I took the early train to London. I was at the Gare du Nord fully an hour before the train started, and never did a journey appear longer to me.

I was met at Victoria, by one of the friends who had telegraphed to me, and learned from him that the message meant just what it said. Oscar Wilde was in London, and in such a state of neurosis that it was thought it would be good for him to go into the country, pending the day on which he would have

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to surrender. A companion being necessary, I had been thought of. It was suggested we should go up the river together.

It was in Chelsea again, that I met my friend, whom I had last seen, superb in prosperity and luxury, in that same quarter. But how changed, and under conditions how different!

I do not know of many incidents in the lives of distinguished men more tragic than those which occurred during the first hours of Oscar Wilde's regained liberty. I was deeply impressed by their horror, and I afterwards spoke of them to two friends, Hall Caine and Edmond de Goncourt. The English novelist found the story so horrible that I think one finds an echo of it in his account of the martyrdom of John Storm. M. de Goncourt transferred it to his diary, *Le Journal des Goncourt*, but added certain comments and details for which I disclaim all responsibility.

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On leaving the prison after his bail had been accepted, he had driven to an hotel. It was late in the evening. Two rooms were engaged for him and dinner was ordered. Just as he had sat down to table, the manager roughly entered the room and said, "You are Oscar Wilde, I believe." Then he added, "You must leave the house at once."

From this hotel he drove to another in a distant part of London, where he was not known nor recognised. He had sunk down exhausted on the bed of the room he had engaged when the landlord appeared. He had been followed from his last refuge by a band of men, prize-fighters, and had been denounced in the hall below. The landlord expressed his regret, but insisted on his leaving. "The men say they will sack the house and raise the street if you stay here a moment longer."

At last, long past midnight, Willy Wilde, in

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his mother's house in Oakley Street, heard a feeble rap at the front door. Opening it, he saw his brother, who, white as death, reeled forward into the passage. "Give me shelter, Willy," he cried. "Let me lie on the floor, or I shall die in the streets."

"He came like a hunted stag," said poor Willy, "and fell down on the threshold."

He had been there ever since—there, where he should be, with his own people, who loved him. Whilst the lying papers were inventing a Fool's Progress for him in fashionable resorts, he was waiting in utter prostration—just waiting. That awful night of the cruel chase from the prison gates to his mother's humble roof had revealed the true aspect of his position to him. I think he never hopes again.

My friend was in bed, when I reached Oakley Street, and after awhile I was shown up to his room. It was a poorly furnished room, in great disorder. He was lying on a

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small camp-bedstead in a corner between the fireplace and the wall, and in a glass on a mantelpiece was an arum lily, sere and yellow, which drooped lamentably down over his head. His face was flushed and swollen, his voice was broken, he was a man altogether collapsed. I sat down on the bed and took his hand in mine and tried to comfort him. I remember that I made him laugh by speaking of "Die Wilde Jagd,"—a stupid play of words, no doubt, which however effected its purpose of bringing some life into the apathetic face. And in reference to this German poem, I asked him if he remembered how he had beguiled the tedium of the journeys during his lecturing tour in England, by studying that language with a copy of the Reise-Bilder and a little pocket dictionary. And I added, "Has not a new Reise-Bild been suggested to you?"

He made no answer, only a gesture that

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he was too exhausted to do anything but lie inert, and after awhile he asked me, "Oh, why have you brought me no poison from Paris?" He frequently repeated this question, not only that evening but on many following days—not, I am sure, because he had really ever any wish to commit suicide, but because the alliteration of the phrase pleased his ear.

It irritated mine, under the circumstances, for I did not think the time opportune for insincerity and posturings, and one day I said, "It is very easy to make prussic acid if you really wish to kill yourself. I had a friend in Paris who distilled a mash of bitter almonds, which you can procure at any grocer's, over a spirit-lamp, with a little retort affixed. Whilst the stuff was brewing he lay on his bed and smoked cigarettes. We found the stumps of eight or nine when we broke into the room. He was dead, on the floor. However," I added, "prussic acid is by no means always so rapid in its effect as is

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generally believed. I looked the subject up on your behalf this afternoon at the club, and I find there have been cases where death has only ensued forty minutes after the absorption of this poison—forty minutes of indescribable agony.”

I visited him every day, and stayed with him almost all the time. When the subject of flight was discussed, I declared that in my opinion it was the best thing that he could do, not only in his own interests, but in those of the public also ; and I offered to take the whole care and responsibility of the evasion on my shoulders, with all the odium that would afterwards attach to me. “‘If I were accused, said Montaigne,’ I quoted, ‘of stealing the towers of Notre Dame Cathedral, the very first thing I should do would be to cross the frontier.’ You have stood one trial, and the fact that you have been released on bail shows that they want you to go.”

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As a matter of fact, he was at no time under observation, of which by various counter-police manœuvres I was able to convince myself, and could have left England in open day at any time up to the last day of his second trial.

When, to-day, I read in the fashionable gazettes of the movements of people who, involved in the same scandal, were wise enough to leave the country, or see in Piccadilly, radiant now and serene, those awful faces that flecked the boulevards then with patches of pale terror, and think of what he endured, and to what an end his endurance brought him, I do not regret that I urged upon him to avoid a second trial and to flee the country, which was mutely beseeching him to go. Yet I cannot deny that here also my egotism betrayed itself. I could not bear to face the prospect of his conviction, for I felt assured that the disgrace and the suffering of imprisonment

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would kill a friend who in his misfortune had become dearer than ever to me.

But, imitative of great men in their whims and fancies, he refused to imitate the base in acts which he deemed cowardly. I do not think he ever seriously considered the question of leaving the country, and this in spite of the fact that the gentleman who was responsible for almost the whole amount of the bail had said, "It will practically ruin me if I lose all that money at the present moment, but if there is a chance even of conviction, in God's name let him go." This young man was one of the beautiful figures in the Walpurgis-night crowd that comes up before one's eyes when one thinks of those days. I saw him last standing by the dock in the Old Bailey whilst sentence was being passed, and there were tears in his eyes. He had been in no way involved in the wretched business; he had only had a casual acquaintance with the prisoner, but

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there were reasons for which his high sense of honour prompted him to come to his side and to help him to the utmost of his power. A great name, a wife and children, and a meagre competence—he risked them all from a feeling of duty. He is in stature a little man, but he has a great heart; and at a time when humanity filled one with nausea, he showed how good, how sweet, how beautiful a man can be.

It may have been to some extent out of consideration for him that Oscar Wilde refused to forfeit his bail, but the main impulse, unless it were unconsciousness of guilt, such as characterises a number of cerebral disorders of the epileptiform variety, was self-respect or pride. "I could not bear life," he said, "if I were to flee. I cannot see myself slinking about the Continent, a fugitive from justice."

His brother Willy took up the same attitude on the question. "Oscar will not

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run away," he said. "He is an Irish gentleman, and he will stay to face the music."

In Oakley Street there were great hopes of an acquittal, based on the result of the first trial. It was not then known that on that occasion one juror alone had stood out against his eleven colleagues, who, without discussion, wished to convict. This juror, it appears, had once previously sat on a jury which had convicted an innocent man on such evidence as was brought against Wilde, and he had vowed that he never would convict upon such evidence again.

For myself, I could form no opinion. If I was able to convince myself, by what I heard on every side, that never had public hatred blazed fiercer against any man, and that it was humanly impossible to expect to find twelve men in London who would come to sit on the jury with unbiassed minds, or with the moral courage necessary to resist

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the pressure of public opinion, I felt on the other hand so incredulous of my friend's guilt—an incredulity greatly strengthened by my fresh association with him—that it seemed to me that he must produce the same impression on everybody else who saw and heard him, and that, on his trial, the jury would be incredulous also.

As to him, he never referred to the past in my presence; and the only words he said which might have been construed into an admission were these, "Fortune had so turned my head that I fancied I could do whatever I chose."

XIV

It was indeed a Walpurgis-night's crowd that flitted in and out and around of that dull Chelsea Road in the days of which I am writing. Strange faces pried at corners, and after nightfall phantom forms drifted past with the river mists. Lombroso would have exulted after a week in that London spring, and not Lombroso only, but all who are curious as to what is abnormal, and weird, and asymmetrical in mankind. There was one face which often rises up before me, a face full of the intentness of the fixed idea, the face of a man who was always hurrying from place to place with a spirit-lamp and matches in his pocket, with no other

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thought nor preoccupation in life than to rout out letters and to burn and burn. He was the unhumorous Wemmick of a tragic situation, a man whom the horror of the time had scared into a monomania of destroying documents by fire. There was another face which was always rippling with such laughter as one hears in Bedlam. There were long, gaunt, Calvinistic faces, with a strange glint in the eyes and uneasy movements of the lips. There were anxious, busy faces, with greedy eyes peering for spoil—the faces of the wreckers, who hoped in the eddy where the great ship had sunk to harpoon and draw to themselves some valuable flotsam—one an unpublished manuscript, the other a scenario, another a marketable idea. And baser plunderers yet! One would have, in the event, no use for a fur coat, and any jewellery would be a pleasing souvenir.

I do not say that these people frequented

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the house in Oakley Street—indeed, my friend's isolation was almost complete—but these were they who dodged in and out of the gloom which had settled down upon us. I have often thought that this period was in his mind when he wrote those lines in his "Ballad of Reading Gaol," in which he describes the night that preceded the trooper's execution.

Very few of his former friends came to see him. Possibly, to many it was not known that he had remained in London, or where he was to be found. I can only remember one call during that period. There may have been others, but I remember this one only.

The caller was a well known litterateur and journalist, a man in an excellent position, who then and afterwards warmly befriended Oscar Wilde, for whom he had a deep admiration. It was he who, after his release from prison, offered to take him for a

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coaching tour through France, an offer which was unfortunately refused.

He came into the room in a bright, brisk way and said, "I have come to take you out, Oscar. You mustn't mope here all day."

"Where do you think of taking him to?" asked Willy.

"To the Café Royal, if he'll come."

I cried out, "That's fine of you, ——."

But Oscar Wilde shook his head. "It wouldn't be seemly," he said, "for me to defy public opinion."

I do not think that the courage was lacking him to protest by an appearance in a public place against the unfair prejudice which condemned him, untried and unconvicted. It seemed rather to him a question of taste and delicacy. But I know that I felt a great admiration for his friend who had offered to affront this prejudice, so as to show London that he did not share it.

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I brought one visitor myself to Oakley Street, whom Oscar Wilde was very pleased to see. This was poor Ernest Dowson, the poet, who died under tragic conditions in 1900, in a poor cottage to which I had brought him, ragged, starving, and abandoned. He spent an hour or two at Oakley Street, and managed to comfort our friend by his mere presence. Dowson was a scholar and a master of English prose, and, as such, was greatly admired by Oscar Wilde.

I had thought that letters of abuse would be showered upon him, but most of his would-be correspondents no doubt ignored his address, and he was saved this annoyance at least. Not that any letter of abuse would have affected him much, for he seemed indifferent to all things. I remember an incident which occurred on the night which preceded the first day of his trial. Had I been in his position it would have gladdened me. We were sitting in the front room of

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the house in Oakley Street when we heard a cab drive up, and then there came a knock at the door. I went out to answer it, and having opened the door, saw the tall figure of a lady whose face was veiled. She thrust a packet into my hand and said, "For Mr. Oscar Wilde," and hurried down the steps. It was a horseshoe with a bouquet of violets attached, and on a piece of paper were the words "For Luck." He said nothing, but laid the guerdon aside, with a gesture of complete indifference. Nor was he in the least amused by a long letter which he received from Madrid, and which he asked me to translate to him. I think, under other circumstances, it would have made him smile. It was from the Spanish prisoner with whose missives most of us whose names figure in the papers are familiar, but in this instance the appeal for funds was based, not on the imaginary treasure, but on the community of misfortune. If I remember rightly, the

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knave endeavoured to establish some degree of blood-relationship between himself and Wilde. I did not finish the letter, for after listening to the first few passages he waved it aside.

It was pitiful to me to watch his moral agony. I sat with him sometimes for more than an hour without speaking. Now and then the oppression on his breast would relieve itself in a sigh. I could imagine the workings of that fine brain and the horrors that his fancy evoked. Hope conflicting with doubt, the awful prospect before him, the wild regret of his folly, were like so many demons that unceasingly harried him. He suffered all the tortures of brain-fever without its merciful coma. For the rest, he was in high fever all the time, as was shown by his devouring thirst. He consumed gallons of liquid daily, and I was running out time and time again to fetch lemonade and soda-water and claret from the grocery at the end of the

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street,—in connection with which errands I may record as a psychological fact, that I had great delight in doing menial work for my poor friend who had been so humbled.

When we did speak, it was, as usual, on matters of literature, but with what deep distress I observed that he spoke as a man to whom all these things, in which he had once rejoiced, were dead. I thought of a passage in Dostoievski. One evening he was bright. He had a volume of Wordsworth, and had been reading some of the sonnets with me. We came upon one in which my 'illustrious ancestor,' as Oscar Wilde used to call him, had rhymed 'shove' to 'love'; and "Robert, Robert," he said, in a tone of mock reproach, "what does this mean?" And he laughed in his old joyous, boyish way. But a few minutes later he relapsed into the awful silence that was so eloquent to me, the silence which now and again was broken by a heavy sigh.

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Yet, my admiration for the nobility of character which he displayed, helped me to bear the tragedy, long drawn out, of those cruel days. Not one word of recrimination ever passed his lips. He attached blame to no one. He sought to involve no one. He had no thought of vengeance, or even of resentment, against those who had encompassed his so formidable ruin. He bent his broad shoulders, and essayed with his sole strength to bear the crushing burden of infamy and fate. He never showed himself to me more fine than in the days when the whole world was shouting out that he was of men the vilest.

He was prepared for his punishment, although hope lingered to the last; but he flattered himself that, under the various circumstances of the case, some leniency would be shown him. "I think," he said, "that I could live through one year's imprisonment."

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I told him that it was folly to count on leniency in the state of public opinion ; and added, that if he decided to face his second trial, he must make up his mind to undergo two years' hard labour. He said, " I couldn't do it. Not two years—not two years."

I made it as clear as I could to him that there would and could be no other issue to his second trial, and I fancy that I convinced him. But not once, I feel sure, did he seriously think of flight. His courage here must be remembered by those who judge him.

XV

I HAD looked forward to the spring of that year for a visit to London under very different circumstances—for a time of real happiness.

For Alphonse Daudet, who had admitted me to his friendship, had long previously invited me to accompany him and his family on their first visit to England,—“a journey,” he said, “which I must make before I pass my musket to my left shoulder.” I could fancy for myself no more delightful holiday than one spent in such company, were it only to receive at first-hand the impressions which my native town and my countrymen might make on an observer so shrewd, from the moment of landing. But it was not to be.

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In the turmoil of my trouble, I had altogether forgotten what had been arranged between us. I had not even written to my friend when I left Paris, and it was only by the announcement of his arrival in town in the papers that I was recalled to the remembrance of the pleasures anticipated. On reading this announcement, my first impulse was to avoid his presence; for, strongly attached to him as I was, not only by his unvarying kindness to me, but also by his flattering appreciation of my work, I was more attached still to the friend of my youth, and felt strong resentment against those who could not sympathise with him in his awful fall. Now, I knew that in Daudet I should find no sympathy at all. He had expressed himself very strongly to me on the subject of the accusation against Wilde, and one of the things which, I remember, he repeated to me was, "You see, Sherard, you are not a father. If you were, you would share my

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horror and indignation." And then, here was offered me the choice between the rising and the setting sun, between London's lion and the scapegoat of England, and my faith, my nature prompted me to prefer ord and shard to wreaths and incense. It was Oscar Wilde himself who urged me to go to Dover Street, and one day, that he had gone out with a friend, I followed his advice.

I am afraid that I did not contribute to Daudet's enjoyment of his visit to London. I had the fixed idea of my friend's disaster ever in my mind. I was restless when away from Oakley Street, and at all times reproached myself when the joy of that bright assembly in Brown's Hotel overlapped the sombre melancholy of my sympathising soul. There were the glad Alphonse Daudet, filling the grey atmosphere of a London room with ripples of Southern sunshine; his beautiful wife, and the fairy daughter, Edmée, de Goncourt's godchild; the handsome sons,