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George Hugo, with his exquisite wife—a bright, elegant triumph crowd, moving in a frame of luxury amidst the homages of the elect of London. The rooms overflowed with floral tributes, the great names of England rang out in the corridors. All here was pleasure and satisfaction and success. I met here for the first time many of the foremost writers in London, to whom I was presented by Alphonse Daudet in terms which illuminated my obscurity. I was included, as his friend, in many invitations which would have opened the best houses in London to me. The ball was at my feet.

Yes, the ball was at my feet, but it was a ball chained to my ankle—such a ball as unhappy men used to drag after them in the bagnios of Brest and Toulon. And my bagnio was the poor home in Oakley Street. I was never happy when I was away from it, and I know that I took more pleasure in fetching and carrying for my poor

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friend's needs than in parading Piccadilly on mundane errands with the elegant courtiers of the man who was just then the talk of London.

I had been unjust to Daudet. He did sympathise, and deeply, not only with me in my distress, but in the awful case of Oscar Wilde. When we were alone together in his room in the hotel, I pacing the room feverishly, with the ill-disguised longing to hurry away, he, sitting on the sofa, both with cigarettes lighted, his beautiful face used to light up under the grey shadow of his constant pain ; and, "Now, my son," he would say, "speak to me of your friend." Ah, then the time seemed to drag no longer. Yet he always reverted to the fact that I had no comprehension of the evil, and this I admitted ; and I once told him that the very wickedest man in the world, in conversation with me, had displayed the same ignorance of horrors with which the smallest elf of the

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London gutter seemed to be familiar. He was deeply interested in my accounts of my friend's moral state from day to day, and once, I remember, he expressed great satisfaction at something that Oscar Wilde had said. What it was I forget, but a day or two later, when I had recorded some flippancy, he burst out angrily, "Oh, voilà. The other day, when disaster was imminent, he aroused himself. Now that he thinks he has weathered the rocks, he becomes *un imbecile* once more."

I longed to bring the two together, but I did not dare to suggest it to Daudet, because the only possible place for the meeting would have been Daudet's rooms. He was too ill to go out, and could not have borne the fatigue of a drive to Chelsea. And he would never have consented to receive Wilde where his children might have met him. Had he been able to go to Chelsea, I think I could have prevailed on him to come and

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bring to the stricken soul the sunny comfort of his words. Alphonse Daudet was a worldly man, but his knowledge of the world, united to the great tenderness of his large heart, made him as a father-confessor to those in stress of circumstance or of conscience.

I used to speak of him in Oakley Street at first, but I soon saw that it distressed my friend. Perhaps it suggested to him what part he would have played under other circumstances in the social reception of the great French novelist. Perhaps it reminded him of the things in which he had once rejoiced, and which now were dead to him.

I have said that Daudet pitied my distress, and this is the proof he gave me of this. One day he said to me, "I cannot go out much with the others, and you, my friend, seem to be losing your taste for work. Let us do a book together."

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“A collaboration with Alphonse Daudet?”
I cried.

“Yes. In a way it will be a collaboration,” he said. “I will tell you a story of my youth, and you will take notes, and you will ask me questions, and the book will be a kind of *roman-interview* — something quite novel. We will divide whatever it brings, as I did with Hugues Leroux with the book we wrote together, and later on I will write it over again for myself in French.”

At any other time such an offer, coming from such a man, would have filled me with joy and pride. Coming then, it came when I felt that nothing could console me. However, I accepted it, with expressions of gratitude.

When I mentioned the suggestion that Daudet had made to me, in Oakley Street that night, Wilde exclaimed, “What a discontented fellow you are, Robert! A high honour has been done to you, and you speak

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never hoped for a moment that the trial would be otherwise than fatal to him.

I have no recollection of the impressions of those days, save that they were days of shifting hopes and fears. The town was placarded with his name; and one night, alluding to this, I said, "Well, you have got your name before the public at last." He laughed and said, "Nobody can pretend now not to have heard of it."

I did not read the papers, and all I knew of the progress of the trial was what I gathered from the announcements on the posters and what little was said in Oakley Street when the accused returned home. But there was nothing to encourage me, and what I dreaded most was the effect he would produce when placed in person in the witness-box. I feared his bent for flippancy and paradox would dispose the jury against him; but what disturbed me most was, that he was obviously in no state of health to



OSCAR WILDE, ÆSTHETIC PERIOD, ABOUT 1884.
(R. W. Thrupp, Photographer, Birmingham.)

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defend himself effectively. His nerve was all gone, and I feared that his physical collapse would be construed as a sign of the consciousness of guilt. He himself dreaded this ordeal. "I shall break down," he said, the evening before. "I know that I shall break down." I understood, however, from those that were present, that he acquitted himself with courage and dignity.

There was one evening when everybody was glad, and when I was pointed at as a prophet of evil and a foolish counsellor. It was the evening of the day on which the judge had contemptuously pitchforked back on to the dungheap, from which it had exuded, a certain part of the Evidence.

On the eve of the fatal last day, however, everybody seemed resigned for the worst. He was very fine, and I admired him greatly. His old serenity had come back to him. His face was calm ; all traces of nervousness had gone ; there was a manliness in his

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bearing which years of self-indulgence had masked till then. He spent his last evening in arranging for his mother's needs in the event of a forced separation, and disposed of the few trinkets of which he had not been plundered, as souvenirs to his friends. He retired early, taking leave of those assembled in turn. I put my arms round his neck and embraced him, and I said, "God bless you, Oscar," for I thought that I should never see him again. Apart from my conduct, which was prompted by my great sorrow and a weakness of nerve which bordered on hysteria, that farewell-taking was not lacking in dignity. And the cruelty of it was, that but for the charge against him, his attitude that night in the face of imminent danger would have authorised his friends to proclaim the man a hero.

I had thought that I should never see him again. But as that dreadful Saturday dragged on, the impulse grew stronger and

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stronger within me to go to him, so as to be with him at the end. In the afternoon then, meeting Ernest Dowson, I asked him to accompany me to the Old Bailey. We drove there, and as we alighted in front of the court-house, a shout arose from the rabble that thronged the street, "Here are some more aristocrats! Here are some more of them!"

I said to Dowson, as we passed through the doorway which leads into the little yard between the court-house and Newgate, "That shout explains that much of the popular execration of our friend proceeds from class hatred. He represents the aristocrat, poor fellow, to them, and they are exulting in the downfall of an aristocrat."

We found a few friends in the passage from which judge and barristers by one staircase, and witnesses by another, reach the court-room, and I heard that after a deadly summing-up the jury had retired,

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There could be no hope of a favourable verdict. I was fully prepared for this news, but none the less it came as a shock. A friend diverted my thoughts by pointing to something on the other side of the yard—a something that was seated on a bench,—a multiple something that was giggling and chatting and smoking cigarettes. It was The Evidence. After awhile, a friend came out of the Court and told me that if I cared to come in, there was a place for me. I entered, and found the room by no means as crowded as I had expected, and amongst those present very few faces that I recognised. My friend was sitting in the dock, covering a sheet of paper with innumerable Deltas. I saluted him, but he only acknowledged my greeting with the faintest inclination of the head. I sat down on the bench behind the counsel for the Crown, and next to a barrister who was a friend of mine. He whispered to me that all chance was

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gone. Still, the jury were a long time in discussion, and each minute strengthened hope. After a long while we heard a bell, an usher came bustling in, and a great silence fell upon the buzzing Court. It was the silence of a beast of prey which, to seize its victim, opens a yawning mouth, and perforce suspends its roar. But it was a false alarm. The jury had sent a question to the judge.

"That means an acquittal," said the Treasury counsel.

"No, no, no," said Sir Edward, shaking his head.

"Thus do they compliment each other," I whispered to my neighbour. The Treasury counsel overheard my whisper, and turned round, with a mighty face suffused with joviality. It was like a sudden sun in a very evil mist, and it quite cheered me to see that my friend's adversary was such a pleasant gentleman. And still the minutes went by. "There may be another disagreement," said

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my friend. But whilst he yet spoke the die had been cast.

I noticed that the judge's hand shook as in a palsy as he arranged his papers on the desk. As to the jury, a glance at their faces was sufficient. Six questions had been put to them, and "Guilty" was the answer to each. Such was the foreman's enthusiasm of conviction, that to the question "Is that the verdict of you all?" he answered with another "Guilty,"—a piece of overweight—a bonus to public opinion. I had laid my head down on my arms at the first "Guilty" and groaned, and each fresh condemnation, like a lash on my back, drew from me an exclamation of pain.

I could not look at my friend. Amongst all those eyes turned on him in that moment, he should not notice mine. But I looked at him when the judge was passing sentence, and the face is one I shall never forget. It was flushed purple, the eyes protruded, and over

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all was an expression of extreme horror. When the judge had finished speaking, and whilst a whirr of satisfaction buzzed through the Court, Wilde, who had recovered himself, said, "And I? May I say nothing, my lord?" But the judge made no answer—only an impatient sign with his hand to the warders. I jumped up, to do what or say what I cannot fancy, but was pulled down by my friend the barrister. "You'll do no good," he said, "and you'll be sent to Holloway."

Warders touched my poor friend on the shoulder. He shuddered and gave one wild look round the Court. Then he turned and lumbered forward to the head of the stairs which led to the bottomless pit. He was swept down and disappeared.

As I staggered down the steps to leave the court-house, I dimly heard the cries of exultation which those crowding down with

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me were uttering. But this fiendish joy in the ruin of a life was to be impressed upon me still more vividly. For when the verdict and the sentence on 'the aristocrat' reached the rabble in Old Bailey, men and women joined hands and danced an ungainly farandole, where ragged petticoats and yawning boots flung up the London mud in *feu de joie*, and the hideous faces were distorted with savage triumph. I stood and watched this dance of death for a few minutes, regretting that Veretschagin was not by my side; and whilst I was standing there, I saw The Evidence, still laughing and smoking cigarettes, being driven off in cabs. And I said to Dowson, "This is a trial in which, out of nine people incriminated, eight have been admitted to act as Queen's Evidence." Then we walked on—I as in a dream.

That evening I went to see Daudet. He said, "This is a fine country. I admire a country where justice is administered as it is

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here, as is shown by to-day's verdict and sentence."

I said nothing, for there was nothing to say, and there was nothing to do but to bend under the inevitable. I dined with the Daudets and a Lord Somebody that night, and the dinner was a luxurious one. But every mouthful I took had a strange savour, for I was thinking of what poor Wilde might at that moment be scooping out of a greasy pannikin with a wooden spoon, and the thought flavoured all the sauces of that dinner.

I know little of his prison life, for I never spoke to him on the subject after his release, and what I do know is from hearsay only, but it appears that that first evening in Wandsworth Gaol was to him one of terrible suffering—indeed, that he revolted when he was told to enter a filthy bath in which other prisoners had preceded him. But his experiences cannot have been worse than I pictured them.

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Daudet was very kind to me all the evening; and when I was leaving, he invited me to come early on the morrow, so that we might have a long time at our book; "For," he said, "it is in work only that you will find consolation."

"Ah, yes," I answered; "but when the mainspring is broken and one can work no longer——"

It was on the following day, I think, that I said to him, "I want to write a story, *maître*, which I shall call "The Misanthrope by Philanthropy,"—the story of a man who becomes a hermit because he has a tender and a susceptible heart, and wishes to escape the certain suffering which would fall to his lot, if he lived in the world, and formed attachments and grew fond of friends."

XVII

AFTER my friend's definite ruin had been consummated, it seemed to me, though still a young man in the full tide of success, that my life was finished. I had received from fate one of those crushing blows, under the first impact of which one hopes not to recover. My mental and moral condition resembled those of the unhappy youth in that pitiful story of poor Guy de Maupassant, "Garçon! Un Bock." I had no heart for my work, although at last, after years of struggle, I had descended from the seventh floor garret in the Rue de Castiglione, where my literary career commenced, to the opulence of a boulevard *deuxième*, with a country-house for relaxation, and an income

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much exceeding the figure that Sir Walter Besant fixed as the tangible proof of professional success.

I could live in Paris no longer. I felt that I ought to be in the country where my friend was, so as to be near him, and able to do anything on his behalf that might present itself to be done. So, after completing with Alphonse Daudet the outline of our book, I abandoned my engagements in Paris, and returned to England, making a temporary home in a suburb where I was within easy distance of Wandsworth Gaol, where Oscar Wilde was confined. And here, in a dazed condition, I waited for the first opportunity of visiting him. This occurred in August, when he became entitled to his first quarterly visit. The ticket which was sent me from the prison would have admitted another visitor, but though I wrote to different friends of his, I could find nobody to accompany me.

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Everybody was unfortunately engaged, but I was charged with many kind messages. I have no distinct recollection of that painful interview, except of the nerve-shock that the rattle of the warders' keys and the clang of iron doors produced upon me; and for the subject on which we talked, I have to refer to an evening paper published at the time, whose reporter accosted me as I was leaving the prison. "The convict appeared well," runs this report, "and was in fair spirits, and stated that he was now entitled to read, but was only allowed one book a week, which, for an omnivorous reader, was insufficient. He had lately been reading Pater and Newman. Mr. Sherard added, with regard to Wilde, 'I was much struck by his courage and resignation, though his punishment weighs terribly upon him.'" It appears, then, that our conversation went at once to literature, the one subject of our common interest. We were

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in a vaulted room which was like the prison of a transpontine melodrama, and we were separated by a double row of stout iron bars. In the passage between stood a warder, who kept his eyes fixed on a noisy clock which hurried the spare allowance of minutes along. We both clung to the iron bars, and both for support. I noticed that his hands were disfigured, and that his nails were broken and bleeding; also that his head and face were untidy with growth of hair. And that is all that I noticed, for I looked at his face all the time, and if he was in some hideous uniform I did not see it. He was greatly depressed, and at one time had tears in his eyes. I affected a cheerfulness which I was far from feeling, and I fancy that I managed to comfort him a little, for I remember that I won a laugh from him in the end. And just then the busy clock hiccoughed out my congé, and I had to stagger away. The visiting-room is so

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badly constructed that many things said in it between 'prisoners and their friends remain inaudible. I could not help thinking of what must be the feelings of people who pay a farewell visit in that room to a man under sentence of death, and who afterwards recall the fact—that he said many things which they could not hear and may now never know.

My visit took place on August 26th, 1895, and in my papers I find a letter from the Home Office, which shows me that I was busying myself, in my coma, on his behalf.

“HOME OFFICE,

WHITEHALL, S.W.,

10th Sept. 1895.

“DEAR SIR,—I am desired by Sir Matthew Ridley, with reference to your letter to Mr. ——— requesting permission to visit Mr. Oscar Wilde, to inform you that if Mr. Wilde is due for a visit and desires to see you an order would be sent. If, however,

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you wish for one exceptional visit, it would be advisable for you to write here, stating the nature of the 'matters of most urgent importance' which you say you wish to communicate to him."

The matters, as I wrote to the Home Secretary, were the conditions under which a reconciliation could be effected between him and his poor wife. Divorce proceedings were then being urged upon her, and I felt that if she abandoned him, his ruin would indeed be complete. I had written to her repeatedly, and in the end had induced her to pardon him, and to promise to visit him in prison. It had been a matter of great difficulty, but all the trouble I had taken was amply rewarded by the following note, received some days after I had secured a fresh order to visit the gaol.

DEAR MR. SHERARD,—Your letter has only this moment reached me, but I came

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over to London last evening in the hope of getting the permission to go to Wandsworth, and found it waiting here for me. I have written to the Governor, and I expect to see Oscar some time to-morrow, so I hope you will see him on Monday.

“I am not seeing anyone at all; but if you cared to come here on Tuesday and climb many flights of stairs, should be very glad to see you.—Very sincerely yours,

“CONSTANCE WILDE.”

“I don't want anyone to know that I am in London.”

On the following day I received a second letter from her. It showed me that I had not mistaken the poor girl's beautiful heart.

“MY DEAR MR. SHERARD,—It was indeed awful, more so than I had any conception it could be. I could not see him and I could not touch him, and I scarcely spoke. Come

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and see me before you go to him on Monday. At any time after two I can see you. When I go again, I am to get at the Home Secretary through Mr. — and try and get a room to see him in and touch him again. He has been mad the last three years, and he says that if he saw — he would kill him. So he had better keep away, and be satisfied with having marred a fine life. Few people can boast of so much.

“I thank you for your kindness to a fallen friend; you are kind and gentle to him, and you are, I think, the only person he can bear to see.—Yours most truly,

“CONSTANCE WILDE.”

I hurried to see her, and from the long conversation I had with her, I learned that her heart was altogether with him still, and that once his punishment was over, he would find a home with her and his children. I was much affected as I left. She showed

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like an angel—an angel of beauty and of goodness—in the horrid night that hemmed me in. I was never to see her again; and as it came to pass, all my effort for his happiness and hers was to remain sterile.

My order from the Home Office entitled me to a long interview in one of the prison offices. I heard many uncomplimentary remarks about myself from the warders outside the waiting-room at the gate,—the gist of which was that people ought not to interest themselves in prisoners, but devise means for keeping their own persons out of gaol.

We had a long and pleasant talk together, though a warder sat with his eyes glued on my hands, lest I should pass aught of contraband. I found my friend greatly cheered by his wife's visit, and the prospect of the new life after his release. We stayed together an hour, and naturally drifted on to literature, but this topic seemed subversive

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to the warder, and he interrupted the conversation by saying that if we had finished discussing "business," the interview must be held to be terminated. Whereupon to his great horror, I put my arms round my friend and pressed him to my bosom, and so departed.

Whilst I had been working to bring the unhappy husband and wife together, I had also been busy in another direction on his behalf. I had heard from Paris that one of his friends had written an article on the subject of his aberration, which, I understood, was to be an apology for, and a glorification of, "The Greek movement." I knew that the publication of such an article would be disastrous to his interests, and that one immediate result would be that his wife's new-won amity would be irrevocably alienated. I accordingly used the influence I possessed in literary circles in Paris to prevent the publication of the article. My

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friends acted energetically, and the article, which was already in type, was withdrawn. A few days later I received from Naples, from the author, a letter, from which I extract the following passage :—

“The enclosed letter explains itself. I have written withdrawing the article. You no doubt mean what you do for the best, and you were quite justified in writing to me personally to ask me not to publish the article, though you might have worded your letter differently and less violently, with equal effect. You will allow that, immediately on receiving your letter, I wrote by return of post telling you that, as you thought what you did, I should withdraw the article. This fact should, I think, convince you that you ought not to have written as you apparently did to the editor of the Review, asking him to suppress my article. Such conduct on your part was exceedingly impertinent and in the

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worst possible taste. As to the wisdom of my originally intended course, I still adhere to my own opinion, and Oscar shall decide the matter when he comes out and reads the MS. I will now make one request of you, and that is, to say nothing whatever about this matter to Oscar. I have consented, at your request, to withdraw my article, and in return you can do this for me. No possible good can be done by worrying Oscar about it, and you are certainly not in a position to give any true and impartial account of the real scope and purport of my article."

The same friend wrote to me later, when it had become apparent that my efforts were tending to reconcile Oscar Wilde definitely to his wife, and insomuch to separate him from former associates, to say that if by any words of mine Wilde's friendship were to be lost to him in the future, he would shoot me "like a dog."

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In the meanwhile, other friends had been busy in endeavouring to secure his financial position, and when he "became due" for a visit in November, the ticket was sent to them, so that they might discuss business matters with him. But in compensation he obtained special permission from the Governor to write me a long letter. It was a great consolation to me, for its tone proved that he was coming well through his terrible ordeal.

XVIII

IF I had been of the Catholic faith, the Trappe would then, in the state of my entire discouragement with life, have seemed to me the only refuge for my wounded spirit. Daudet, than whom no better counsellor in this world's things ever lived, kept writing to me to find in work the *dictame* that I lacked. But my newspapers I had abandoned; for the rest, I imagine they were not grieved thus to determine their relations with one who had pitted his private opinion against the opinion of the public; and as to fiction, which in the past had been the source of not inconsiderable income to me, my disgust at the cowardice of these, the hypocrisy of those, and the

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many other detestable qualities of my contemporaries which this catastrophe had revealed to a nature by composition optimistic, would have disposed me rather to write about the uncleaner denizens of the Zoological Gardens than about men and women. And in this, Buffon and others had preceded me.

My notes for the Daudet book were with me, and now, when I turn over the printed pages of *My First Voyage*, I recall the many heavy hours during which I gazed, horn-eyed, at these papers, waiting for the impulse to take my pen in hand and fulfil the obligations of a sincere friendship—an impulse which only came many months after the time of which I am writing.

Whilst nursing my melancholy in a little cottage on the Westmoreland hills, I received a letter from the proprietor of a London magazine inviting my collaboration, whilst leaving me free to select my own

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subjects. It occurred to me then that in visiting, in various parts of England, the most unhappy Pariahs amongst the workers of the Kingdom, in taking up their cause against Society which oppressed them, my Calvinistic conscience might find some of that blessed relief which by other forms of penance the Church of Rome provides for her children. The suggestion was made and accepted, and in this way my book *The White Slaves of England* came to be written. The Inferno into which I now plunged, afforded me the opportunity to assure myself that the material existence of an English prisoner compares favourably with that led by many hundreds of thousands of free men and women, whose liberty, chained as they are, for a daily average of eighteen hours, these to the nailmaker's anvil, those to the slipper-last, these to the sweater's sewing-machine, has pinions more closely clipped than those of men and

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women in durance. These at least have time for exercise, some pause for recreation, and the assurance of sufficient sleep. And each sad sight, whilst it distressed, comforted me also, when I thought that the prisoner, whose sufferings never ceased to occupy my mind, was a happy, unshackled, and comfortable man, as compared to the people whose lives were now laid bare before me.

It was during this subterranean journey that I heard he had been moved to Reading Gaol, which, it appears, is a healthier prison than Wandsworth. I felt sorry to reflect on the reminiscences of his sunny youth, and the glorious and triumphant days of Oxford, which must have filled his mind when the chain-gang alighted at Reading, but I had no conception of the cruel outrage which had lent the bitterness of death to that journey. It appears that whilst the gang of prisoners to whom he was chained were waiting for their train at Wandsworth

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him well informed of current events. Dumas, a common friend, had died two days before, and he knew it. I told him I should look to him for the world's news, and I heard a laugh in the dark depths of the wire cage. I had a private communication to make to him, and I began to speak in French, but was brusquely interrupted by the warder with a "Stow that, now! No foreign tongues allowed here." But I conveyed the information all the same in a roundabout way—the name which Mrs. Wilde had adopted. It interested me, as a point of psychology, to observe with what anxiety he asked what the new name was. In his prisoner's dress, in a shameful cage, his pride remained such that he was keenly desirous to be assured that his people had not assumed a name plebeian or ill-sounding. He approved, when I had conveyed to him what the name was.

After leaving the prison, very heavy at

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heart, for his depression had seemed to me such that I began to fear for his sanity, and the dreary hours of waiting before I could take a train to London were the longest, I think, through which I have ever lived, to kill time I entered an hotel, and though the gaol air had destroyed all appetite, I allowed myself to be served with the tedious refreshments of a provincial English coffee-room. Opposite the table at which I sat was hung upon the wall the mighty carapace of the edible turtle, and on this was affixed a silver plate on which was engraved the inscription that, on such and such a date, "I" (the turtle) "had the honour of being killed and enjoyed in the form of delicious soup at a banquet of the local Conservatives, presided over by H.G. the Marquess of Salisbury, K.G." And I consoled myself with the thought that to those who desire immortality, the form it assumes should matter little.

XIX

THE charity for which I asked was what was so entirely refused to Oscar Wilde after his release. In other countries, once a man has paid his debt to Society, as the formula is, he is held quits. Whoever in France brought up against Paul Verlaine that he had suffered imprisonment in Belgium for offences against the criminal law?—Paul Verlaine, who was publicly received and fêted in England by the very people who clamoured most loudly that Oscar Wilde was dead to Society and to literature, and might never be resuscitated! In England, if a man fall, he falls never to rise again. There are in the British a certain bloodthirstiness and a certain instinctive cruelty, which not centuries of

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Protestant practice have been able to moderate. These qualities of the nation account for the facts that not only is our penal legislation the severest in the world, but that a conviction entails immediate and irreparable social death on the offender.

My remarks to the Rescue officer meant, that having paid my debt to Society, I only required that Society should have sufficient charity to allow me to ply my trade, to earn my living,—in other words, without remembering against me that I had been in prison, that it should judge my writings on their merits and market value alone, without prejudice as without favour. Oscar Wilde had all the more right to expect this of Society, that his past literary career, at least, was one of the purest of which English literature has record. I do not think that his bitterest enemies can find in any of his writings a single line which contains a

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to him the slender balance of a sum of one thousand pounds, which had been deposited on his behalf, after his conviction, by a lady who had sympathy with him. The rest had been spent during his confinement, much on behalf of his mother. He might have had in addition to this a large sum, easily earned, if, in spite of all, his high self-respect had not remained to him. On the day before his removal, for discharge, from Reading Gaol, two American journalists had waited upon the Governor, and had asked him to make the following proposal to Oscar Wilde: In return for an hour's conversation with him, in which he should relate his prison experiences, they would pay him a large sum. I have heard that the amount promised was one thousand pounds, but I imagine that it was much less. Whatever the figure of the offer may have been, his prospective needs were such that it might have tempted another man. His answer, however, to the

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Governor was a characteristic one: "I cannot understand, Sir, that such proposals should be made to a gentleman."

It has often occurred to me, that much of the bitterness manifested against him in the press, was caused by his contemptuous and unfair remarks about the profession of journalism. These were all the less excusable on his part that he knew Paris well, and had a great admiration for French litterateurs, and knew that there is not, and has not been, a single French writer of any eminence who has not passed through journalism, and always to his great advantage. I was always sorry to hear his utterances on this subject, not indeed because the profession is one I have followed, and hold can so be exercised as to be one of the noblest in the world, but because it seemed to me unworthy of him to share a prejudice, essentially English and vulgar, which arises from the fact that most

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crumbs, which might betray the awful breach of regulations of a starvation system, and bring punishment on him and on his accomplice. He seems to have ingratiated himself with the warders by helping them to solve puzzles in a competition started by a popular weekly; and the story went that, thanks to him, one of the prison officials had won a grand piano. He was always ailing, and often so ill that he had to be moved to the infirmary. Here he was ever a favourite. His conversation and wit delighted the poor prisoners, and he, on his side, was pleased to have an audience, even such an audience. At such times the colour came back to his cheeks, and his whole person revived, and, seen then, he gave the illusion of being in good health and spirits. And such he appeared to two officials who were sent down from the Home Office, in consequence of a petition for his release on the ground of his ill-health, and who,

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unknown to him, watched him through a spy-hole in the infirmary for half-an-hour. He was sitting on his bed and discoursing, and all the patients were in high delight. In consequence, the two gentlemen returned to London, and reported that C. 33 was in enviable physical and mental condition.

For the rest, he himself has related, in that wonderful article in the *Daily Chronicle* which appeared a few weeks after his release, and in which he pleaded that child-prisoners might be treated with some semblance of humanity, all the impressions of his prison life that anyone needs to know.

The two years of suffering and degradation left on him externally no trace, except a little nervous trick he had of arranging things symmetrically, if in disorder, before him. "I had to keep everything in my cell in its exact place," he said, "and if I neglected this even in the slightest, I was punished, and the punishment was so horrible

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to me that I often started up in my sleep to feel if each thing was where the regulations would have it, and not an inch either to the right or to the left. And the terror haunts me still, and involuntarily my fingers make order where anything is disarranged."

He was fond of relating an incident of a dramatic nature connected with his stay in Reading. One day, whilst tramping his round in the prison-yard at exercise, he heard the man behind him say, "A strange place in which to meet Lord Henry." He turned round at the first opportunity and recognised in the speaker, an old tramp, to whom a year or two previously, during a country walk, he had given a half-crown. It was not explained how the old beggar had acquired his knowledge of "The Portrait of Dorian Gray."

I have said that on one occasion only did I refer to his prison life. It was once in Paris, where he had piqued me by charging

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me with egotism and seeking always my own pleasure. I said, "Were those dreadful journeys to Reading and Wandsworth pleasant?" "My God, Robert," he cried, "and do you think it was pleasant for me to be in those places?"

The naïve egotism of his retort disarmed me, and I burst into a laugh.

XX

ON his release from Wandsworth, he was met by friends, and in their company on the same day crossed to Dieppe. After lodging in the town for some time, having frequently suffered affront from Englishmen who recognised him, he moved into the country, close by, and leased a villa at a seaside place called Le Petit Berneval, about nine miles from Dieppe. Here he lived under his new name, Sebastian Melmoth, a name which soon became very popular in the Berneval district, where I found it to be synonymous for lavish generosity, and also for great kindness. It was noted by the peasants that Mr. Sebastian Melmoth was particularly kind to little children.

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The hiring of an expensive villa was of course a reckless act, but it was a quite comprehensible one, after the two years of humiliation and suffering he had passed. For the rest, as long as the balance of the thousand pounds lasted, he lived so extravagantly that the various tradespeople of Berneval, from the livery-stable keeper to the hotel landlord, used to say that with only two other such customers as Monsieur Sebastian Melmoth they would have a very good summer season. This also I perfectly well understood. The only pity was that the few hundred pounds should have been so few. As long as they lasted he invited all his friends to enjoy his hospitality, and amongst others gave shelter for a long period to a young novelist who was temporarily penniless, and whom he had rescued from the clutches of an hotel harpy under circumstances similar to those in which Dr. Johnson befriended Goldsmith.

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It was from Berneval that he first wrote to me, asking me to come and visit him, and as soon as it was possible I crossed to Dieppe. I found him sitting with a number of friends outside the Café Suisse. He wore a kind of Tam o' Shanter cap, the Basque *béret*, which did not suit him at all, and which must have attracted unnecessary attention. He was very cheerful and in high spirits, and his friends were boisterous. I heard that a few days previously a delegation of young poets from Montmartre had come down from Paris to present their homages to the master on his release, and that he had entertained them at a luxurious banquet at the Café des Tribunaux. I also heard that the Sub-Prefect of Dieppe had conveyed to him that if his presence caused the least scandal he would immediately expel him from France — an unnecessary and insulting menace.

The discipline and alimentary régime of



OSCAR WILDE, 1892.
(Photo by Ellis & Walery.)

To face p. 232.

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prison life seemed to have benefited him considerably. I was particularly struck with this on the morning after my arrival at the villa at Berneval, when I accompanied him down to the beach where he was to take his morning swim. The fact that he took a swim in the sea every day was decidedly a cheerful one. For the purpose of undressing he had had a small cabin built for him on the beach, and that morning the door and the shutters had got stuck and refused to open. In the old days he would have said, "This is very tedious," and he would have sent for somebody to force the door. As it was, it was a pleasant and refreshing sight to see how Oscar Wilde, reputed an effete voluptuary, 'went for' that cabin—I can find no other word to describe his action—how brisk and vigorous he was with his hands, and with what promptitude his muscles mastered the opposition. He showed me that, from a physical

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point of view, his imprisonment had benefited him. "It had made him physically more manly. As a matter of fact, he had all the makings of an athlete in him, and this never impressed itself more strongly upon me than on the morning of which I am speaking, whilst I was watching him breasting the waves, a strong and skilful swimmer.

"I would like a photograph of him now," I said to a friend who was standing with me, "to show people in England that there's a man in him."

The life at the villa was agreeable. We used to walk out into the country and visit villages, the aspect of which has not changed since the Norman Conquest. One day, as we were on a country road, I pointed to an official notice that was painted up on a sign-post, "Mendicity is forbidden in this Commune," and I said, "Do you know, Oscar, I never see one of those notices without a *frisson*, as though it applied to

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me—as though it could apply to me.” “It has exactly the same effect upon me,” he said. We burst out laughing as we looked from the sign-board to our comfortable and elegant attire and discussed the fears, mistrust and anxiety that the artistic temperament carries with it,—a sense of insecurity and danger that haunts the artist even in the hours of greatest prosperity and brightest prospect,—an eternal fear of the corregidor, such as haunts the wandering gitano. In which connection I asked him whether in former days he had not had a presentiment of the terrible things that were to come upon him, and he answered in the affirmative. A feeling of approaching disaster had haunted him all his life. It was nothing else, I said, than that feeling we have just discussed,—the feeling that makes you and me shudder at the sight of that warning to beggars. We know that we are hopelessly improvident, and we know also the

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risk that improvidence brings with it, and we can easily fancy ourselves in a situation—only temporary, no doubt—where that notice might directly apply to us.”

I remember that on the walk home that evening I described a dinner-party I had attended in Christiania, at which Bjoernstein Bjornsen and the Ibsens had been present, and I mentioned a custom they have at dinner-parties in Norway which had struck me. On rising from table the hostess stands at the door of the dining-room, and each guest, as he passes out into the drawing-room, shakes her hand and says, “Tak for Mand,”—“Thanks for the Meal.” Wilde said nothing at the time, but later on in the evening, in the presence of numerous visitors to the villa, he denounced me for speaking ill of people. “He told me this afternoon,” he said, “that he had been at a dinner-party in Christiania, and was greatly surprised, and almost shocked, that on tak-

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ing leave of his hostess he was expected by a weird Norwegian custom to shake hands with her and to say that he had passed a pleasant evening." This was the first sign I had had that his humiliation and suffering had embittered him. It indicated what great moral and mental injury had been done him by the torture he had undergone.

A delightful study, full of books, pictures, and flowers, had been prepared on the ground-floor of the villa, but it was never used for work. He told me that his brain had been idle so long that he felt as if he could never work again. Yet, I believe, remunerative offers had been made to him after his release, and one of the leading London managers had come over to Dieppe specially to see him and to propose him some work. It was the adaptation of some French play—hack-work, in short; and I could quite understand how difficult it was for him to bend himself to such employment.

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Like all artists, the money consideration was to him only secondary; the prime reward for labour that he looked for was the reputation, the increase of fame, that it could bring. In anonymous writing, to which thenceforward, as the British public would have it, he was constrained, all stimulus to endeavour, as far as he was concerned, was wanting. He simply could not produce under conditions to which excitement was lacking. For that his former triumphs had spoiled him, and long past were the days when he used at regular hours on regular days to plod up the Strand to his city office.

At the same time, anxiety as to his future was harassing him at every moment. Beyond the few hundreds which had come to him after his release, he had no resources whatever. The persistent efforts of his wife's family to alienate her from him had been so far successful, that a humiliating

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period of probation had been imposed upon him. She would wait to see how he conducted himself before giving effect to the reconciliation which had taken place across the double row of iron bars in Wandsworth Gaol. At the same time, he was being plied with letters and telegrams by the one of his former friends whom it was most fatal for him to remember. These letters, these telegrams, petulantly clamoured for a meeting. Wilde knew that if he granted this meeting all chance of a moral rehabilitation would be lost, his wife and children definitely divorced from him, and his traducers of the past justified almost in the eyes of his very friends. During my short stay at Berneval there came from this source several telegrams, which kept my poor host in a constant tremor of irritation and perplexity. He wished for a new life, and yet there seemed no other prospect open to him but to fall back into the old associations which

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had ruined him. Society had closed every door upon him, wherever British influence extended. Thus it was not an infrequent occurrence that he was insulted in Dieppe by being refused admittance to houses of entertainment which were visited by English people, and at the request of these. On one occasion he was invited to dinner by a well known artist. There were two other guests. The artist took his three friends to the best restaurant in Dieppe. They sat down at a table and called for the waiter. The proprietor of the establishment presented himself in his place. "I much regret," he said, "but I have dinner only for three. There is dinner enough for three, but not for four." It appeared that certain English people residing in Dieppe had told the landlord that if Oscar Wilde were ever served at his establishment they would withdraw their custom. And this is only one instance of the cruel insult to which this

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unhappy and forsaken man was exposed at the hands of his countrymen.

His money was fast running out. At the time when I visited Berneval, he had come almost to the end of the few hundreds. I know that he used to complain of the carriage he had to pay on the telegrams from his friend, for Berneval is a long way from a telegraph office, and on each of these idiotic and childish messages three or four shillings had to be paid. That Oscar Wilde should have made a remark on this expense proved to me that his anxiety as to his financial position, if concealed, was very keen.

His nature revolted against the work that offered itself for him to do. "I would rather continue stitching sacks," he said. For the rest, dizzy with his new-gained liberty, and striving to forget in pleasure and excitement and a temporary luxury the suffering and privations of the past, the

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constant humiliations of the present, and the awful preoccupation of the future, he was in no state of mind for literary production. And it was to literary production alone that he could look for any income.

But for his natural dignity and a strange respect for Society, to which, although he had spent his life deriding it, he felt a deference and an obligation which his supreme delicacy could alone explain, he could have exploited to great material advantage the notoriety of his name, and the universal and considerable sympathy which in tolerant Paris the story of his terrible sufferings had won for him. In Paris he was looked upon as the victim of British hypocrisy. Culpability, even where it was admitted, was discussed with a smile, and the punishment inflicted seemed, according to French views, so enormous, that in the eyes of the Parisians a very halo of martyrdom surrounded his head.

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Had he cared to do so, he could have earned large sums of money by contributing, in his real name, to leading French newspapers and reviews. Thus, during my stay at Berneval, he was invited by Monsieur Xau, the editor of *Le Journal*, to contribute a weekly chronique, for which at least three hundred francs would have been paid.

But no. On the one hand, he was too proud, his self-respect was too great, to exploit for his profit a notoriety which haunted his every waking moment with a burning shame; and on the other hand, he felt that he owed it to Society, to British Society, to do nothing to keep alive a scandal by which that virtuous and dignified section of humanity had suffered so much in its lofty pride and spotless reputation. He would raise out of the slough into which he had been cast no beckoning hand. He had wrapped himself in a shroud as in a cloak; and though tingling with life in every fibre, contented

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himself to play the dead. No individual ever manifested a higher, a more unselfish conception of his duty towards the collectivity. He had been branded a moral leper; and although none better than himself knew how cruelly unjust was this stigmatisation, he bowed to the verdict of his countrymen, and of his own free will withdrew to the lepers' island—to the awful lazaretto where all was silence and night. And what recognition has ever been granted to him for this astounding sacrifice of self to the reputation of a country of which neither by descent, nor temperament, nor character was he a citizen? None. Prison had failed to degrade this prisoner. He left Reading Gaol improved, refined and exalted in all the qualities that distinguish the true gentleman.

During the whole time that he was in Dieppe and at Berneval, he was subjected to the espionage of private detectives in the pay of the father of the friend who was

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pestering him with applications that he should fix a meeting. A mysterious individual was ever to be seen hanging about the villa, an evident victim to nostalgia and depression. One wet evening, observing this unfortunate person from the study window, and taking pity on his draggled, muddy and abject condition, I suggested to my host that we should invite him indoors and give him a cup of tea. But such a proceeding appeared irregular to Oscar Wilde. "It would look like vulgar bravado," he said, and the detective was left to amuse himself as best as he could under the dripping hedge in a very muddy lane.

It would have interested me to read the report that he sent next day to his employer, and what account he gave of the orgies in which the abandoned men who were under his observation had so shamelessly indulged. As a matter of fact, after a long discussion on literature, we had amused ourselves

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for hours with a game which consisted in finding the names of celebrated people which begin with a given initial. There were three of us, and we took immense pleasure in this mnemonic tourney. Oscar beat us both by many points, and so excited were we that long after we had retired to our rooms our minds were occupied with the contest. Towards midnight the door of my bedroom opened and Oscar Wilde appeared in his dressing-gown.

"Xerxes," he said, and retired triumphantly.

I jumped out of bed and ran on to the landing and shouted,

"What about Xenophon?"

I was re-entering my room, when from afar a muffled laugh pronounced the words,

"Xavier de Montépin."

Although, as I saw him, he was always simple and unaffected, never by a single word or gesture recalling the Oscar Wilde

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who had irritated Alphonse Daudet, there were, it appears, times during this period when his old fondness for posturing, for "startling the bourgeois," as Baudelaire put it, returned to him. I was staying last year at a hotel in Arques-la-Bataille, where, whilst he was at Berneval, he had frequently visited Ernest Dowson, the poet, and Conder, the most exquisite of modern artists, and the most vivid souvenir that the landlord had of Mr. Sebastian Melmoth was that one night, when he had slept there, he had aroused the household in the early morning, and had demanded imperatively the immediate slaughter of all the cocks in the poultry-yard.

He said, "All these cocks must be killed at once. They are terrible bores, and they prevent me from sleeping."

I said that I presumed it was a joke on the part of Mr. Sebastian Melmoth, but the landlord insisted that he was altogether

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serious, and seemed to bear a grudge against him on this account.

But as I have said, I saw nothing of this side of his character; and when I left Dieppe, after a few delightful and most happy days, if my anxiety for his material future was disquieting, my joy was very great that degradation had not degraded but exalted him, that suffering had not greatly embittered him, and that both physically and mentally my friend had never seemed to me more alert, more capable, more serene, with the serenity of perfect power.

I did not know then what I see now, that the blow which had struck him down was a fatal one, and that his long agony had then already commenced.

XXI

AN appeal which he made to his wife to shorten the period of his probation, and to allow him to return to her and to his children, was met by her advisers with a refusal, slightly worded. The poor girl, I know, was never even consulted, and all that she heard of her husband's movements were the echoes of the stories by which the detectives at Dieppe justified their maintenance. At the same time, an offer of £3 a week was made to him by these people.

His funds had all run out, he had nowhere to go to, and all the while his friend was pleading, fretting, menacing. This young man was in receipt of a considerable allowance from his family, and in his letters he placed

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his house, a delightful villa at Posilippo, and his purse at Wilde's disposal.

And so in the end the meeting came about. It took place in a hotel in Rouen.

The consequence was the natural one, and a few days later it became known that Oscar Wilde had resumed the friendship which had brought disaster and ruin upon him.

I heard of it in London, one afternoon when I was in the smoking-room of a literary club. With no other purpose than to distress me, two men, who were both the worse for liquor, called on me there and triumphantly announced that Oscar Wilde had gone to the Villa G——, and had there taken up his permanent abode.

I said it was a great and an unfortunate mistake on his part; that his action would everywhere be misconstrued; that his traducers and enemies would be justified in the eyes of the world, and many sympathies would be alienated.

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A lying account of my words was immediately transmitted to Naples, and some days later I received from my friend a letter which distressed me greatly, for it showed me in what an unhappy state of mind he was.

“When you wish to talk morality—always an amusement,” he wrote,—“and to attack me behind my back, don’t, like a good fellow, talk so loud, as the reverberation reaches from the —— Club to Naples ; also, it is easy—far too easy—for you to find an audience that does not contain any friends of mine ; before them, play Tartuffe in the style of termagant to your heart’s content ; but when you do it in the presence of friends of mine, you expose yourself to rebuke and contempt, and of course I hear all about it.”

There were four pages in this style, which was so strange, coming from Oscar Wilde to me, that I presumed things must be going very badly with him at the Villa G——. And though I wrote him an exact account of

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what I had said, and insisted on the fact that nobody was present when I had spoken, he did not withdraw what was unkind and unjust in a letter of which I have not printed the most aggressive passages.

My presumption was the right one. Things were very bad indeed at the Villa G——. The English in Naples made the two friends feel that the past was not forgotten, and I heard sad stories of how Oscar Wilde was slighted and insulted whenever he showed himself where English people were. More than this, after the first few weeks his host's family decided to starve the young man into abandoning his friend. His allowance was stopped. On his side, Oscar Wilde was quite penniless. By selling their jewels, and even pawning their clothes, the two friends managed to prolong their resistance for a few weeks. I have heard accounts of this period, when every morning the excitable Italian chef used to clamour

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hysterically for the materials for his art, which would be humorous were not the whole story so sad.

Short as were the days of luxury that Wilde enjoyed at Posilippo, they were the last that he was to know. Thenceforward his existence was to be the squalid and hazardous life of the impecunious Bohemian of letters in Paris. After leaving Naples he came to Paris and took a room in the fourth-rate hotel in an obscure street in the Latin Quarter, where he died. It was from this address that he sent me a copy of his "Ballad of Reading Gaol." It was accompanied by a peevish letter, which showed an unhappy state of chronic irritation—one of the symptoms of the brain trouble of which he died.

"I am sending you a copy of my Ballad—first edition—which I hope you will accept in memory of our long friendship. I had hoped to give it to you personally, but I

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know you are very busy, tho' I am sorry you are too busy to come and see me, or to let me know where you are to be seen."

I could reproach myself with no neglect of him. There was, however, for me an own battle to fight. I had gone down with him. My best years had been lost—the question of mere existence now presented itself. At the time he wrote this letter I was hundreds of miles away from Paris.

On my return I went to see him, and heard of the wretchedness of his life. There were times when he suffered actual want; and on more than one occasion, his landlord having refused him admittance to his room until his bill was paid, he was actually without shelter in Paris, and but for the hospitality of friends, would have passed the night in the streets. Yet he never complained, he never accused fate or Society, or those who compassed his downfall, and to the very end his dignity maintained itself.

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His last years were supremely unhappy. Poor, lonely, abandoned, he had little company but of those who hoped to prey upon his brain. Towards me he became more and more distant; the verminous parasites that clung to him fostered his wrong idea that, sitting in judgment upon him, I had condemned him. In melancholy and solitary peregrinations on the boulevards, which fifteen years previously we had trod so triumphantly, we sometimes passed each other in silence, with only a faint wave of the hand—like two wrecked ships that pass in the night. At such times on my side there was no other feeling but one of intense regret that, allowing myself to be cast down utterly at the time of the catastrophe, I had abandoned the arms with which then I could have served him best. I ought to have been wise as the world is wise, and then he would have had at least one friend who could have helped him.

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I do not know what his resources were, but there were intermittent and brief periods of splendour, when I could hope to look up at him out of the depths, in the position to which everything entitled him. I believe he constrained himself to anonymous work, and I know for a fact that at least two plays which were produced during this period in London, and which were great successes, were almost entirely written by him. Also the last work he did before he died was a translation of Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Ce Qui Ne Meurt Pas*. The cruel irony of things! The dying man in the poor room of the poor inn writing of what never dies! The whilom apostle of Beauty constrained, as the hack of an obscure publisher, to paraphrase paradoxes on Beauty!

Of the circumstances of his death I know no more than what appeared in the papers: on the one hand, that it came mercifully, as to a child in its sleep; on the other, that of

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all the thousands who were indebted to him for delight, or kindness, for the royal largesse of his royal head and heart, there was but one man with him when he died. Also that "*un cortège nombreux ne suivit pas son deuil.*" I heard of his end by a hazard whilst in the squalid surroundings of a London slum, in the midst of the work which I took up first, as a mental relief, when he was in prison. The news came to me as a great grief, but also as a great joy. The very weariest river had wound safe to sea!

THE END.

APPENDIX

[From the *Gaulois* of Dec. 17th, 1891]

Translated by HENRY BLANCHAMP

THE day before yesterday M. Maurice Barrès had invited some friends to a dinner at Voisin's, in honour of the English poet, Oscar Wilde.

A very great French Society leader, who recently sent her portrait to the poet Oscar Wilde, wrote, in the form of a dedication, beneath the photograph of her stately person, the words : " To true art—To Oscar Wilde."

This French lady's tribute, in which appears the highest expression of refinement, will not seem at all exaggerated to those who know the fortunate being to whom the

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words were addressed, or who enjoy the advantage of being familiar with his work.

Mr Oscar Wilde, who is leaving Paris to-day, where he had come for rest after the fatigues of the London season, represents the most perfect type of the Celtic artistic temperament, to which Great Britain has owed its best writers, its greatest poets. An Irishman born, he is the son of Lady Wilde, whose *salon* is one of the most famous in London, and who, under the name of "Speranza," has accomplished for Ireland, by means of her wonderful poetry, what Krasinski and Mickiewicz tried to do for Poland.

Through her he is the grand-nephew of Charles Mathurin, the author of strange romances, and the friend of Goethe, Byron, and Walter Scott. He wrote *Melmoth*, the romance which Balzac so much liked, which brought a *frisson* to Baudelaire, himself a master of *frissons*, and was not without

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weight in the French romantic movement of 1830.

His father, Sir William Wilde, was a celebrated archæologist and distinguished man of letters.

Mr Wilde, after a brilliant course of study at Dublin, went to Oxford, where he carried everything before him.

It was from Magdalen College that he directed the æsthetic movement, which first drew public attention to him, of a rather contemptuous kind. It was, in point of fact, nothing but the protest of an essentially artistic soul against the ugliness of English life, of its deplorable accessories, and its worse than deplorable taste in everything relating to art.

* * * * *

A splendidly brilliant talker, witty sayings fly from his mouth, just as the jewels, which were deliberately ill-attached to Bucking-

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ham's glittering doublet, were scattered about him in the Court of France. And if you knew how difficult it is to be witty in English! There are people who reproach him for talking overmuch, and compare him to Wencelas, whom Balzac ranked among the "demi-artists" who are satisfied with a kind of *salon* celebrity. Some want him to work more; they go out of their way to remind him that "continual work is the law of art," and that Canova used to live in his *atelier* like Voltaire in his study. Englishmen, in particular, reckon talent by the weight, and the number of pages, *i.e.* words, in an English novel contributes greatly to the measure of its success. In fact, a writer is judged there more by the quantity than the quality of his production, the fact being that either one is a grocer, or one is not.

But although Oscar Wilde is better aware than anyone of this national weakness of his fellow-countrymen, he has never dreamt

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of reaching commercial popularity by a ladder of piled-up volumes. The only criticism that ever hurt him—and no English writer has been more virulently attacked by English critics—was a recent one in which he was termed a prolific writer. He is conscious of being far too much of a grasshopper to envy the halo of a laborious ant.

His work is among the most limited in quantity. He began with a volume of poems, six editions of which were taken up in three weeks. Such a success would have been noteworthy in Paris. It was simply marvellous in London, where there is so little demand for poetry that poets have to pass through the workhouse to arrive at Westminster Abbey. It was the more astonishing because the book, which was published in luxurious style, cost as much as a cartload of beef-steaks, whilst its contents, which were distinguished by a rare loftiness of thought, were far beyond the understanding of the

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vulgar, materialistic mob that inhabits the West End of London. The critics gave vent to those gross stupidities by which they affect to despise what they cannot understand. They asserted that Oscar Wilde's book, like the poems of all young men of average ability, revealed the unconscious plagiarism of a writer who would never have written if he had never read. In one passage they pointed out the influence of Swinburne, in another, a reminiscence of Shelley, and, partisanlike, shut their eyes to everything original in the volume, both the brilliant colouring of the style, and its lofty thoughts and profoundly generous and noble feelings.

* * * * *

It might be said that the young poet was disheartened by this exhibition of malevolence on the one hand, and of despised popularity on the other. He was silent for many years, and produced nothing but a

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few complimentary prefaces and some review articles. He married and went to live at Chelsea, that small corner devoted to the arts in the huge town devoted to bank-notes, and his house became the rendezvous of the few remarkable minds in contemporary England. He came to be considered in London as the supreme arbiter in all questions of art and elegance. Whilst duchesses were consulting him about the furnishing of their castles, and Bond Street tailors sought inspiration from him as from a new Count d'Orsay, poets, actors, and painters learnt to look upon him as the leader of the new artistic movement. You would meet at his house the *élite* of the artistic world. He was urged on all sides to break the disdainful silence he had imposed on himself. The arguments of his friends luckily prevailed, and Oscar Wilde again faced the English public and critics with his novel, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*. It embodies a

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harmony of psychology and romanticism. It is a study on Pleasure—a study, subtly delicate as the strength of a flower (to paraphrase Shakespeare), of the path by which it goes and the place to which it leads. It is a demonstration of the slow, graduated fall of a lofty soul, which the perversity of an artistic temperament devotes to the enjoyments it demands. It is a poignant satire on the unhappy condition of human life, through which an artist is ruined by means of the very things that make life endurable to him. In *Dorian Gray* there is a little of Gérard de Nerval, a little of Poe, and a good deal of Nero.

The publication of the book was like the explosion of a bombshell in a sleeping town. English hypocrisy, which seeks any pretext for working itself into a passion, raised shrieks of despair. Fancy! In the very fatherland of cant, a book was being sold on the stalls in which that abominable, that

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damnable thing called Pleasure was analysed in all its phases. The spirit of the Puritans, who once forbade dancing and flogged actresses, is still quite flourishing in England, and that spirit was mortally offended by the book. Despairingly and terribly moral though it is, that book, which might be recommended for perusal to those very Puritans in place of innumerable tracts, was denounced as immoral, the all-conquering epithet by which English imbecility exiled Byron and Shelley, besmudged Swinburne, and murdered Keats.

Happily for art in England, the public has for a considerable time showed itself somewhat rebellious against the odious tyranny of cant, and the Puritans of the Press shouted their condemnation of *Dorian Gray* to ears which were deafened by their inarticulate clamourings. The book has now taken its place in the first rank of English novels, both for its incomparable mastery of style and

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for its powerful and profound psychology. To those for whom, like M. Émile Zola, a novel is the most perfect expression of literature, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* is, and will be, an absolute masterpiece.

You must be familiar with contemporary English novels in order to appreciate at its true worth a volume which marks the dawn of the era of emancipation from that finical and insipid literature of amorous school-girls or governesses, of Anglican priests who, after having had tea and chattered through two volumes, in the third and last volume of the English novel conceive doubts about some point in their tedious faith; emancipation, in fact, from all the dull, mystical, brutalising, or bloodthirsty literature which flatters the worst qualities of the Anglo-Saxon people.

The poems, the novel, a volume of stories, and a collection of philosophical essays constitute the whole work of our "prolific" writer. For British grocerdom, it is very little;

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for art it would be enough, were it not that he who has produced those masterpieces will be able to produce more. And our literature greatly needs masterpieces if it is to keep the place and retain the respect it has won (with what difficulty, too!) in the world. For which reason everybody who has this object at heart will follow the progress of Oscar Wilde with the deepest interest.

* * * * *

And now for a few words about the man. Like all good Irishmen, he worships France. He is never so happy as when he succeeds in escaping from London, and is able to spend a few days in Paris. Everything here is sympathetic to him. He loves your poets, your painters, and your actors, and counts his best friends among French artists. Condemned as he is to clubs, he adores *cafés*. If you want to see a happy man, you should see him seated in some corner of some great

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boulevard restaurant, dining in French fashion and talking about French things with those who love France.

Exceedingly distinguished in appearance, he has a real cult for elegance, and passes for one of the best-dressed men in London, that capital of the Rubemprés. At one time he even indulged in some trifling eccentricities in this connection for which his adversaries—for he cannot have any enemies—are pleased to rebuke him. He is a confirmed, out-and-out smoker, and at his house in London always has a box of five hundred cigarettes on his desk, which is that on which Carlyle wrote his *History of the French Revolution*. Oscar Wilde would not be happy with less than five hundred. Perhaps that is the only case in which he limits himself at all, for he is as lavish with his money as with his witticisms, spending royally, and generous to excess. He loves Society, and Society loves him, and runs after him.

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To have Oscar Wilde as a guest at dinner or in a country house means an assured success for a London hostess. The English aristocracy, who hardly talk at all, are glad to listen to him. They struggle to secure his company, and, as a man of the world who is fond of elegance and refinement, he likes to associate with them. But he is especially fond of artists, and likes to say that the only people who interest him are those who are beautiful and those who make beautiful things. It is true he sometimes adds to these a third class, namely, criminals. But that is no doubt "to startle the fools," as Baudelaire, his favourite poet, replied to a prefect of police. And Oscar Wilde cultivates paradox.

ROBERT H. SHERARD.

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