

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

and After...

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~Oscar Wilde~

by

Gilbert Coleridge

PERHAPS there is no figure so strange, arresting, pathetic, and yet so symbolic of the latter end of the nineteenth century as that of Oscar Wilde. I say symbolic advisedly, for, though he would have claimed that he alone taught the public the value of art, it is nevertheless true that the fallow ground had been broken up beforehand, and had already received the seed of culture. The influence of the Brownings, Matthew Arnold, Watts, Morris, and the like, the autotype process which brought Michael Angelo and the great Italians into our homes, and the improvement of architecture had induced people already to regard early Victorian ideals as old-fashioned, and to welcome those of greater originality and beauty. Thus Wilde found his self-imposed apostleship of art an easy task.

He was an arresting figure in person, of commanding height, with a clean-shaved oval face. The latter was marred by a weak mouth, from which poured, with fascinating languor sometimes, torrents of paradox, quaint wit, perverse and startling epigrams, all spoken in a tone which left the listener wondering whether the speaker was really in earnest, or only talking for effect. With this conversational equipment, he soon found himself the centre of any given assembly, and people flocked to hear the brilliant persiflage of this young Oxonian. Those who knew him well, or who took care to think over some of his apparently casual utterances, and weigh them apart from their face value, would discern an occasional truth of great price, but the difficulty was to remember exactly the *entourage* of the saying, and then to analyse it correctly. He had a half-suggestive, half-mocking way of throwing out his paradoxes which was very baffling. The result was that the public at large failed to recognise the serious side of his character—for he had a serious side, which was well nigh swamped by the trivialities of his existence—and they thought that he was always poking fun. Let a man once gain a reputation for the cap and bells, he is lost; he must act up to it for the rest of his natural life and never attempt to be serious again. It would not be surprising if the pupils of Mr. Stephen Leacock found his lectures on political economy stuffed with humour. Laughter is always

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contagious. As for Wilde, he found the motley too picturesque a costume to be discarded for a teacher's robe.

His happy pursuit of brilliant trifles most truly reflected the close of the nineteenth century. Everything was safe; class distinctions were still realities; Labour had not stepped into the political arena; and, although a distant murmur came floating up from South Africa, no one dreamed of a big European war after so long a peace. The sole ambition of many young men of a certain class was to inherit a fortune sufficient to enable them to live in comfort without responsibilities, and to swell the idle band of men about town who paraded in the Park of a morning in polished tall hats and immaculate trousers. In their eyes to work for one's living was rather a commonplace, middle-class thing to do. In reading *Lady Windermere's Fan*, one recognises the trivialities of Lord Augustus Lorton and Mr. Dumby as being true because they are true of any frivolous society, but the Duchess of Berwick dates the play as distinctly as the elaborate diction dates those of Sheridan and Goldsmith. She is as extinct as the dodo.

And just as beneath the surface of light jest there ran a current of seriousness which he seldom showed to the public, so behind all his self-conceit, which was so childish that it gave offence to none, there lay a strain of humility which none would have suspected had he not fallen on evil days. "Owe not thy humility to humiliation from adversity, but look humbly down in that state when others look upwards upon thee," says Sir Thomas Browne. Wilde's humility lay dormant till the hour of adversity. Then, instead of shining nobly, it glimmered sadly through a mist of pathos.

It was said that he could only be brilliant to an audience. So little was this true that I have known more than once a friend meet him casually in the street and bear him off in triumph to dine at home with his wife, and then Wilde would keep them absorbed till the small hours with his sparkling conversation. It is much to be regretted that he had no Boswell to chronicle the moods of his exquisite fancy, for he was a most fascinating talker, and a worthy antagonist to the author of *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*. His plays, poems, and stories we have, but somehow they do not come up to his conversation as we knew it. Like many another, he borrowed unblushingly, and we constantly recognise loans here and there in his writings, a familiar theme, some thought or saying moulded by his incomparable style, an old scene touched in with a masterly hand; but when in talk he drew on his fancy or his gigantic memory—it mattered not which so it sang in the mouth—it issued with the spontaneity and the natural sparkle of a clear mountain stream. Unlike Whistler, his gibes rarely, if ever, carried a sting, and I have seen him refuse to

answer fools according to their folly when he might have wounded them with his tongue when the temptation must have been great.

That he was a conscious hedonist was his great defect. He deliberately chose the flowery path, and ignored the existence of pain and sorrow in this world, passing by on the other side like the Levite and the Priest, and drying up the fountains of his pity. He lived in a world of his own creation and shunned the ugly and the disagreeable, and from want of experience he lost many beautiful and fruitful things. He was wont to talk prettily enough of gardens and the country, but his sympathies were elsewhere. He never let fresh air into his soul, and consciously chose the midnight symposium and the curtained room. Had he gone out into the open and battled with the gale, had he really considered the lilies of the field, how they grow, or sat down before the majestic hills, he would have seen that it is from throes of pain and suffering that Nature achieves her beauty, and that the soul is not perfect that has not known anguish. Sorrow and pain were to him ugly interferences with the joy of life, and, therefore, he never let them come between the wind and his nobility. A walking tour might have saved him, but he would have scarce endured the discomfort of a wetting. His fur was too sleek for that. His morbid tendencies kept egging him on to push each wayward impulse to the very act, so that his keen sensuousness grew into sensuality. Then the crash came. He had laid himself open to the criminal law, and he fondly hoped that he could weather a public trial. But the law is no respecter of persons; the evidence was clear, and it was rightly determined that an example should be made of this well-known public man to prevent repetitions of the offence, and to rid society of an evil influence.

The sentence of two years' hard labour to a man of Wilde's temperament and constitution was a savage one. The wonder is that he who had been the centre of brilliant gatherings, the pet of West End drawing-rooms, should have survived the solitary confinement, the coarse food which always made him ill, and the mental and moral degradation of prison life. Out of this furnace of pain, shame, and bitterness trickled such gold as was still in the man, and we have in *De Profundis* a human document, a tragic heart cry, each word of which should help us to a more profound pity for the shipwrecks of life. Apart from its moral value, it is interesting from the psychological point of view to note the effect of such severe punishment on a nature like Wilde's.

The result was simply to confirm his symbolic relation to the art and culture of his time. He reflected a prevalent attitude of mind which existed, a view all the more pathetic because it was genuine, a view accompanied by the shame—I had almost said the contrition—for the offence he had committed. If ever torture

wrung the truth from a man it was now. Morality appealed not to him who had none, and religion was no aid to the sceptic, and, since a man reduced to such a pass must needs cling to something outside and beyond himself, he erected a little altar to art, and lay weeping beside it, reading into this poor substitute many attributes of religion. He recognised at last the value of sorrow and suffering, but was still unrepentant for his deliberate choice of hedonism. 'I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure.' 'I threw the pearl of my soul into a cup of wine.' In other words, 'I went too far in following this path to its logical conclusion.' He perceived that Pater's attempt to blend art and religion into a system in *Marius the Epicurean* had failed, owing to the utter detachment of the writer and his hero, so he proceeded to blend the Gospels according to Renan with his own philosophy of life till it almost looked like a religion. It was a pretty mixture stirred by a master hand, but how inadequate and pathetic! Just as though a priest of Dionysos should attempt to explain Buddha to his fellow-men! He borrows a Greek Testament, which he had probably not opened since he left Oxford, reads it anew, and, with Ernest Renan peering over his shoulder, gives us his estimate of Christ as the supreme artist, the great romanticist and poet! The story of the Passion appealed to him merely as a fine tragedy on the stage in which the chief actor was a man of genius. It was just a dramatic close to a life which had been an 'idyll,' in which Christ was the 'leader of all the lovers,' and dominated and fascinated artistic souls in a way that no Greek god had ever succeeded in doing. In pursuing this idea he goes so far as to read Christ into *Romeo and Juliet*, into *Beaudelaire's Fleurs du Mal*, and the poems of Paul Verlaine, and to assert that when Christ uttered His pity for sinners He really admired them in His heart as being the nearest approach to the perfection of man. 'To turn an interesting thief into a tedious honest man was not his aim. He would have thought little of the Prisoners' Aid Society and other modern movements of the kind.' Christ's view of the prodigal son, he is quite certain, was that the fact of the prodigal's weeping for his sins converted those sins into 'beautiful and holy moments in his life.' In other words, the beauty of vice was enhanced by contrition.

This morbid and false creed was, no doubt, an exaggeration, but it jumped with the humour of the time. There was much singing of the scarlet sins of the flesh among the minor poets; Burne Jones and Rossetti had immortalised the charm of anæmia and sluggishness; Morris had darkened our chambers in his campaign against crude colours; decadent ideas, which found a notable exponent in Aubrey Beardsley in his saner moments, were floating in the air; and people readily took the line of least resist-

ance. Among many who considered themselves cultured and superior it was thought absurd and silly to believe in anything strongly, or to admire or hate anyone passionately, except, perhaps, Mr. Gladstone. An echo of this habit of mind was reflected by a brilliant group of writers under the guidance of Henry Harland in the *Yellow Book*, and there we seem to lose it.

After the frightful catastrophe of the war we can scarce call to mind the tranquil disbelief and cheerful Agnosticism at the end of the long Victorian peace. We have now lost, and haply gained, so much by our experience, both morally and spiritually, that most of us believe more than we did. I do not mean in mere creeds and formulæ which are outworn and losing value every day, but that which each man holds to be true he holds with a greater tenacity. Who would nowadays discourse about the 'charm' of Christ, and liken Him to a work of art? We know what Wilde meant quite well, but such could not be our view. Since those days we have drawn the sword and spilt our blood in a just cause; life is something more than an attempt to live beautifully, and we have learned to love and to hate passionately.

It is an idle speculation, but one is tempted to wonder what effect the war would have had upon Oscar Wilde. It would have been no surprise to see his towering form voluntarily drilling with other gentlemen of light and leading in various open spaces, for he was no coward, and probably had that grain of pugnacity which lies at the root of the Irish character. It might have given him the one thing he needed most, namely discipline. His big frame, backed by his genius, had pushed its way through the world with too great ease. Care had never ruffled that serene brow. So little was he accustomed to opposition and so secure in his own conceit that, when the crash came, he could not be persuaded, in spite of the clearest evidence against him, that the authorities really intended to push home his prosecution. It is one of the mysteries of human nature that his crime, at which the sane and healthy shudder, should be shared by so many men of ability and refinement with no such marked hereditary taint in the blood as he had, and yet one would hesitate to relegate his case entirely to the category of disease.

But, whatever the springs of his crime, he remains a fascinating and monstrous symbol of late Victorianism, a great, kindly, and *debonnaire* personality, piping himself down the paths of pleasure, wasting his eternal youth with a too curious joy, hymning beauty as he went, and forgetting the soul of man in his pride, till overtaken at last by his pathetic and ignominious fate. Such a figure will always remain interesting, not only because of his genial inhumanity and strange career as a man, but also because he was an exaggerated type of the serene and happy age in which

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he lived. The day for magnifying his offence with loud anathemas is over. In spite of the natural repulsion and abhorrence caused by it, to those who shared his friendship and listened to his brilliant and refreshing wit his memory will carry something kindly, and when they think on the story of his end they will sigh and exclaim, ' Alas ! the pity of it ! '

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