

Saltus Edgar

Oscar Wilde: An Idler's Impression



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Years ago, in a Paris club, one man said to another: "Well, what's up?" The other shook a paper: "There is only one genius in England and they have put him in jail."

One may wonder though whether it were their doing, or even Wilde's, that put him there. One may wonder whether it were not the high fates who so gratified him in order that, from his purgatory, he might rise to a life more evolved. But that view is perhaps obvious. Wilde himself, who was the least mystic of men, accepted it. In the "De Profundis," after weighing his disasters, he said: "Of these things I am not yet worthy."

The genuflection has been called a pose. It may have been. Even so, it is perhaps better to kneel, though it be in the gallery, than to stoop at nothing, and Wilde, who had stood very high, bent very low. He saw that there is one thing greater than greatness and that is humility.

Yet though he saw it, it is presumable that he forgot it. It is presumable that the grace which was his in prison departed in Paris. On the other hand it may not have. There are no human scales for any soul.

It was at Delmonico's, shortly after he told our local Customs that he had nothing to declare but genius, that I first met him. He was dressed like a mountebank. Without, at the entrance, a crowd had collected. In the restaurant people stood up and stared. Wilde was beautifully unmoved. He was talking, at first about nothing whatever, which is always an interesting topic, then about "Vera," a play of his for which a local manager had offered him an advance, five thousand dollars I think, "mere starvation wages," as he put it, and he went on to say that the manager wanted him to make certain changes in it. He paused and added: "But who am I to tamper with a masterpiece?" – a jest which afterward he was too generous to hoard.

Later, in London, I saw him again. In appearance and mode of life he had become entirely conventional. The long hair, the knee-breeches, the lilies, the velvet, all the mountebank trappings had gone. He was married, he was a father, and in his house in Tite street he seemed a bit bourgeois. Of that he may have been conscious. I remember one of his children running and calling at him: "My good papa!" and I remember Wilde patting the boy and saying: "Don't call me that, it sounds so respectable."

In Tite street I had the privilege of meeting Mrs. Oscar, who asked me to write something in an album. I have always hated albumenous poetry and, as I turned the pages in search of possible inspiration, I happened on this: *From a poet to a poem. Robert Browning.*

Poets exaggerate and why should they not? They have been found, too, with their hands in other people's paragraphs. Wilde helped himself to that line which he put in a sonnet to this lady, who had blue eyes, fair hair, chapped lips, and a look of constant bewilderment.

As for that, Oscar was sufficiently bewildering. He talked infinitely better than he wrote, and on no topic, no matter what, could he talk as other mortals must. Once only I heard of him uttering a platitude and from any one else that platitude would have been a paradox. He exuded wit and waded in it with a serenity that was disconcerting.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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