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Oscar Wilde
Scrapbook

Vol. 6

"I felt it myself, and made others feel it. Byron was a symbolic figure, but his relations were to the passion of his age and its weariness of passion. Mine were to something more noble, more permanent, of more vital issue, of larger scope. The gods had given me almost everything." But now observe the difference. Here are sentences which reveal a very different state of mind, a state so absolutely alien that we read with a growing astonishment:

I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that, therefore, what one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry aloud on the housetop. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. . . . There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility. . . . Now I find hidden somewhere away in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all. That something hidden away in my nature, like a treasure in a field, is humility.

Or shall we listen to him on the teaching of sorrow?

I long to live so that I can explore what is no less than a new world to me. Do you want to know what this new world is? I think you can guess what it is. It is the world in which I have been living. Sorrow, then, and all that it teaches one, is my new world.

Or again:

There are times when sorrow seems to me to be the only truth. Other things may be the illusions of the eye or the appetite, made to blind the one and cloy the other, but out of sorrow have the worlds been built, and at the birth of a child or a star there is pain.

The last is a pretty phrase, but it is more like Maeterlinck or Emerson than Wilde. Or, take one more passage:

I wanted to eat of the fruit of all the trees in the garden of the world. . . . My only mistake was that I confined myself exclusively to the trees of what seemed to me the sunlit side of the garden, and shunned the other side for its shadow and its gloom. Failure, disgrace, poverty, sorrow, despair, suffering, tears even, and broken words that come from lips in pain, remorse that makes one walk on thorns, conscience that condemns, self-abasement that punishes, the misery that puts ashes on its head, the anguish that chooses sackcloth for its raiment and into its own drink puts gall—all these were things of which I was afraid. And as I had determined to know nothing of them, I was forced to taste each of them in turn, to feed on them, to have for a season, indeed, no other food at all.

And now this entirely new being, born in prison and cradled in sorrow, turns to very different sources of literature. He quotes largely from Dante; he knows all about St. Francis of Assisi; he refers to the doctrine of the Fathers about Accidia or lethargy; he illustrates what he writes by an allusion to High Mass; he speaks of the impossibility of anyone in revolt being susceptible of the influences of grace. As we are aware, the author became a Roman Catholic before his death, and doubtless he said much and wrote much to those who received him into the arms of Mother Church. But it would be interesting to know whether this book was in any sense edited, and who was the editor. Was it Mr. Robert Ross, or was he only the recipient of the prisoner's letters? And why has there been so much delay in publishing the manuscript?

"I felt it myself, and made others feel it. Byron was a symbolic figure, but his relations were to the passion of his age and its weariness of passion. Mine were to something more noble, more permanent, of more vital issue, of larger scope. The gods had given me almost everything." But now observe the difference. Here are sentences which reveal a very different state of mind, a state so absolutely alien that we read with a growing astonishment:

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Let us pass on to other points. One of the most significant features of the book is that, in however sketchy a manner, it contains a sort of philosophy of religion. Oscar Wilde in his prison says that he read again the four prose poems, in the original Greek, which deal with the life of Christ, and he also discusses the question whether the Founder of our religion spoke in Aramaic or in Greek. To him the main interest of the life of Christ is that the "Galilean peasant" was "the first of the Romantics"—an artist, whose life was a poem, whose justice was a poetic justice, and who waged war, like all children of light have to do in all ages, against Philistines.

"The very basis of his nature," he cries, "was the same as that of the nature of the artist, an intense and flame-like imagination. . . . Christ's place, indeed, is with the poets. His whole conception of humanity sprang right out of the imagination, and can only be realised by it. . . . Before His time there had been gods and men, and, feeling through the mysticism of sympathy that in Himself each had been made incarnate, he calls Himself the Son of the one or the Son of the other, according to his mood. . . . His miracles seem to me to be as exquisite as the coming of spring and quite as natural. I see no difficulty at all in believing that such was the charm of His personality that His mere presence could bring peace to souls in anguish, and that those who touched His garments or His hands forgot their pain. . . . Indeed, that is the charm about Christ, when all is said; He is just like a work of art. He does not really teach one anything, but by being brought into His presence one becomes something. And everybody is predestined to His presence. Once at least in his life each man walks with Christ to Emmaus."

Here, veritably, is a new gospel, a gospel fascinatingly expounded, but involving certain assumptions not always easy to accept. For instance, "Christ, through some divine instinct in Him, seems to have always loved the sinner as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of man." That is a hard saying, which one could not find even in "the Gospel according to St. Thomas," the name which Wilde gives to Renan's "Vie de Jésus." "His primary desire was not to reform people any more than his primary desire was to relieve suffering. To turn an interesting thief into a tedious honest man was not his aim. . . . But in a manner not yet understood of the world he regarded sin and suffering as being in themselves beautiful and holy things and modes of perfection. It seems a very dangerous idea. It is—all great ideas are dangerous. That it was Christ's creed admits of no doubt. That it is the true creed I don't doubt myself." In sentences like these lingers some of the old spirit of Oscar Wilde, some touch of that love of the paradoxical for its own sake which is twin brother to perversity in life and morals. Quite logically from this point of view the Founder of the Christian religion was an individualist. If he preached the duty of doing good to others, it was not because self-sacrifice was a virtue, but because self-sacrifice was a subtle way of doing good to oneself. And, naturally enough, although there may have been Christians before Christ, there have—so our author declares—been no Christians since, except St. Francis of Assisi. Are we, however, to suppose from his study of the gospels and from his recognition of the ethical value of suffering, punishment, and sorrow, that Oscar Wilde be-

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lieved in what we ordinarily call repentance? Apparently not. Here is a decisive passage:

Perhaps I may go out (of prison) with something that I had not got before. I need not tell you that to me reformations in morals are as meaningless and vulgar as reformations in theology. But while to propose to be a better man is a piece of unscientific cant, to have become a deeper man is the privilege of those who have suffered. And such I think I have become.

Nor does he in any sense regret his past experiences:

People thought it dreadful of me to have entertained at dinner the evil things of life, and to have found pleasure in their company. But then, from the point of view through which I, as an artist in life, approach them they were delightfully suggestive and stimulating. The danger was half the excitement. . . . My business as an artist was with Ariel. I set myself to wrestle with Caliban.

Lastly, if we ask to what this semi-aesthetic, semi-religious philosophy eventually comes, we find that though, above almost everyone else, the author accepted and lived in the visible world as though it were the ultimate reality, he discovers that there is something behind the show of things. "There is some spirit hidden of which the painted forms and shapes are but modes of manifestation, and it is with this spirit that I desire to become in harmony. I have grown tired of the articulate utterances of men and things. The Mystical in Art, the Mystical in Life, the Mystical in Nature—this is what I am looking for." Yes, this is what Emerson might look for, what Maeterlinck might everywhere try to suggest, but the strange thing is that Oscar Wilde should have sought to find it except in violent reaction with all his past.

"De Profundis" is a curious book—a book full of refinement of thought and phrase, instinct with a certain real poetry of its own, with flashes here and there of the old bizarre and paradoxical aphorisms, which seem strangely out of harmony with their new surroundings. And the terrible thing is that by the testimony of most of those who saw him after he came out of prison he seemed incapable of doing any work at all. Perhaps, if the right men had met him, and had held out their hands to him, it might have been different. If we may judge by the present book, his newly-learned associations and sympathies certainly involved a distinct and final severance with those of earlier years. We do not know what might have happened under certain circumstances, we can only feel the pity of what actually occurred. But turn to M. Joseph Renard, who has written from his own experiences in the current number of "La Grande Revue." The picture he draws is one which we hardly care to quote. It is assuredly one of hopeless incompetence and absolute failure, of dreadful decay. "Incapable of writing a line, with atrophied brain, he had only as listeners men who haunted the restaurants and stood him drinks. . . . There only remained to him his musical voice and his large, blue, childish eyes." So, too, speaks M. Ernest La Jeunesse, who describes how this piteous wreck asked of the sea, of Paris, of Naples a new era of fables and dramas, and asked in vain. Several young writers pressed round him with their sympathy and encouragement. He was offered the chance of a weekly article in a Parisian journal, but he refused; M. Fernand Xau made him this offer. And then came the

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sordid tragedy of his death, too terrible in its squalor, its loneliness, its ugliness, to be referred to here. At all events, he had written "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," and also these beautiful lines, which we extract as our final quotation, from the book, "De Profundis":

Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars, so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints, so that none may track me to my hurt; she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.

The man who could write that had certainly learnt the hard discipline of woe. But it is not the Wilde we knew, nor the Wilde of the Parisian boulevards.

"DE PROFUNDIS."

TO THE EDITOR OF "THE DAILY TELEGRAPH."

SIR—I have received a long and interesting letter from Mr. Robert Ross (whose name appears at the end of the preface to the above book), in reference to certain questions I ventured to ask concerning Mr. Oscar Wilde's posthumous work. The letter is a personal one, and, therefore, I do not feel at liberty to quote from it in detail. But there are certain matters of fact which I hope, in justice to himself, he will allow me to state. The manuscript was sent from Reading to Mr. Ross a couple of months before Mr. Wilde's release, and was edited by him. The entire document consists of about 65,000 words, but Mr. Ross used his own discretion (which he was fully entitled to do) in eliminating several portions. He has prepared a version for Germany, which has been translated by Dr. Max Meyerfeld, a rather longer version than the English one, with some letters added in the form of an appendix. The title "De Profundis" is Mr. Ross's own, and his original intention not to issue the book for some years was overborne by repeated applications from Germany and America. I may add that Mr. Wilde's works are held in much higher esteem in Germany than they are in England.—Faithfully yours,

Feb. 23.

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2016-03-08 University Library

DAILY CHRONICLE

A TRAGIC COMEDIAN,

DE PROFUNDIS, by Oscar Wilde. London: Methuen. 5s.
yet—published to-day.

By Edward Thomas.

There are, at any rate, two clear shining threads in the sombre texture of this book, written during the last months of his imprisonment by Oscar Wilde, the parody of the most perfect artist that ever was—I need not disclose the name of the parodist. One thread is what is called commonplace and mournful; the other is proud and gay; the one is usually named Remorse, the other is perhaps Defiance, perhaps Hope; and they are interwoven. The commonplace is piquant in the work of a man who always avoided the obvious and sometimes found the true.

On one page he speaks of "the paralysing immobility" of prison life; on another he says that "the most terrible thing about it is not that it breaks one's heart—hearts are made to be broken—but that it turns one's heart to stone." It knows nothing of seed-time and harvest: "there is only one season, the season of sorrow." It pours rich sun and rain upon all gloomy things, and they bring forth a hundredfold. "A day in prison on which one does not weep, is a day on which one's heart is hard, not a day on which one's heart is happy." For Wilde there was no possibility of oblivion without death. He had borne a noble name:—

I had disgraced that name eternally. I had made it a low by-word among low people. I had given it to brutes that they might make it brutal, and to foes that they might turn it into a synonym for folly.

When he was in Wandsworth Gaol he longed to die; he was filled with rage by improved health; he would commit suicide; or, again, he would "wear gloom as a king wears purple."

Moods and the Man.

The melancholy moods departed, only to make way for sorrow. "Where there is sorrow there is holy ground," he says; and he came into harmony with "the wounded, broken, and great heart of the world." But he had to learn "how to be cheerful and happy," especially when friends came to see him; he succeeded; a real desire for life returned:—

There is before me so much to do that I would regard it as a terrible tragedy if I died before I was allowed to complete at any rate a little of it. I see new developments in art and life, each one of which is a fresh mode of perfection. . . . Sorrow, then, and all that it teaches one, is my new world.

Then follows a fine passage on sorrow as "the supreme emotion of which man is capable." There were times when sorrow seemed to him to be "the only truth." Only through sorrow could the soul of man "reach the full stature of its perfection." Almost at the end comes

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a description of what, I suppose, was the supreme moment of his life. On November 13, 1895, he stood for half an hour in convict dress, and handcuffed, on the centre platform of Clapham Junction:—

I had been taken out of the hospital ward without a moment's notice being given to me. Of all possible objects I was the most grotesque. When people saw me they laughed. Each train as it came up swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was, of course, before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed they laughed still more. For half an hour I stood there in the grey November rain, surrounded by a jeering mob. For a year after that was done to me I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time.

For a man of wit, who never showed himself to be a humourist, that crucifixion scene must have come near to being too much. That he survived is wonderful; but that he did not die until five years after is a proof that the human heart can stand longer in the fire than steel.

Sorrow and Solitude.

In the book this thread of explicit sorrow is short; how long it was in the book which was written on his heart we shall never know. The other thread was more easily handled, for it came straight from "Intentions" and "The Soul of Man" into "De Profundis." It winds through the whole with apparent inconsistencies, due to varying health, unfavourable conditions of composition, and the no doubt tremendous task of thinking in the old way, in solitude, without friends, without applause.

He had stood "in symbolic relations to the art and culture" of his age. But he had amused himself with being "a flâneur, a dandy, a man of fashion"; he had "ceased to be lord over himself," and allowed pleasure to dominate him. But, he remembered, "to regret one's own experiences is to arrest one's own development." He found humility, which in the artist means "frank acceptance of all experiences." He would free himself from bitterness, resentment, hardness, scorn, and face the world, and "hope to be able to recreate his creative faculty." He was still seeking a fresh mode of self-realisation. "There is nothing wrong in what one does," but "something wrong in what one becomes."

The imprisonment was the second turning point in his life. Oxford was the first. He would not treat it as an accident, but as a stage in his development. He says that he had got to make everything that had happened to him good for him; to make degradation of the body into a spiritualising of the soul; to absorb into his nature all that had been done to him. If he had been ashamed of his punishment, he says finely, he would have been as bad as society which once it has punished a man shuns him as "one on whom it has inflicted an irreparable, an irredeemable wrong." Other criminals could disappear; his name was written in lead upon the rocks at every turn; yet—

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He had stood "in symbolic relations to the art and culture" of his age. But he had amused himself with being "a flâneur, a dandy, a man of fashion"; he had "ceased to be lord over himself," and allowed pleasure to dominate him. But, he remembered, "to regret one's own experiences is to arrest one's own development." He found humility, which in the artist means "frank acceptance of all experiences." He would free himself from bitterness, resentment, hardness, scorn, and face the world, and "hope to be able to recreate his creative faculty." He was still seeking a fresh mode of self-realisation. "There is nothing wrong in what one does," but "something wrong in what one becomes."

The imprisonment was the second turning point in his life. Oxford was the first. He would not treat it as an accident, but as a stage in his development. He says that he had got to make everything that had happened to him good for him; to make degradation of the body into a spiritualising of the soul; to absorb into his nature all that had been done to him. If he had been ashamed of his punishment, he says finely, he would have been as bad as society which once it has punished a man shuns him as "one on whom it has inflicted an irreparable, an irredeemable wrong." Other criminals could disappear; his name was written in lead upon the rocks at every turn; yet—

If I can produce only one beautiful work of art I shall be able to rob malice of its venom, and cowardice of its sneer, and to pluck out the tongue of scorn by the roots.

Let us hope that he succeeded in ways of which we can know nothing, and believe that he was right when he said that he had become a deeper man, though "to propose to be a better man is a piece of unscientific cant."

New Lights and Old.

But as far as this book carries us in his life, there is no change. *Mens immota manet, lacrimae voluntur inanes.* He says, indeed that he is the better for gaining "a right to share in sorrow," but one fears that though that may have been written in his heart's blood, he had to be content with having written it, as is often the fortune of artists. In his new surroundings he was the same. The world should take note of two things: first, that it cannot destroy even a man of wit, that it cannot spoil his style, his wit, his intensity; second, that affectations (for the world said he was affected) can be at least as costly and deeply rooted in the heart as respectabilities.

For the man whom society sent to prison with a groan and saluted with indecent laughter, was able to show that society had done him a good service, when it hoped to ill-treat or even suppress him. People point to Reading Gaol and say, "That is where the artistic life leads a man." Well, he says, "People whose desire is solely for self-realisation never know where they are going"; but "I hope to live long enough and to produce work of such a character that I shall be able at the end of my days to say, 'Yes! that is just where the artistic life leads a man!'" He may even have succeeded in the ingenious, glowing, fantastic study of Christ, which is one of his finest creations.

But if his spirit winds among such varied scenery that it is here impossible to trace its course, the one strong note is the looking forward to joy. The lilac and laburnum would be blooming when he left prison. He would go to the sea, and gain peace, balance, a less troubled heart. "It seems to me," he says, "that we all look at Nature too much and live with her too little." Society would have no place for him;

but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.

So the book ends. It was a brave hope. I hope it was sincere, for he was disappointed, and disappointed hope is better than satisfied despair. But the whole book seems to me a *tour de force*, a perishing actor's last ambiguous gesture of salutation to the dense triumphant world.

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OUT OF THE DEPTHS.*

A PRISON JOURNAL

By H. HAMILTON FYFE.

Among all the most intimate, most moving records of the growth of a soul, I know none that lies nearer to the source of tears than this.

When Oscar Wilde was sent to prison the calamity of a life so rich in promises lay like a dull weight upon the mind. When he died, miserably poor and suffering grievously, in Paris, a seamed and sordid curtain seemed to fall upon the tragedy of his wasted years. No one, after reading these pages which he wrote in his prison—the only pages he did write there—can ever think of him quite in that way again.

They show us that in these two years through which he ate the bread of affliction, much was made plain to him that had been hidden before. Sorrow taught him lessons that could never be learned of Pleasure. In his agony and despair of mind he chanced upon the key to the mystery of Pain. The chart of the ocean of life lay spread before him, and in his narrow cell he traced out the course he must steer for as long as his voyage lasted.

THE COMING OF HUMILITY.

At first he bitterly resented his punishment:

I longed to die. . . . I determined to commit suicide on the very day on which I left prison. After a time that evil mood passed away, and I made up my mind to live, but to wear gloom as a king wears purple; never to smile again: to turn whatever house I entered into a house of mourning: to make my friends walk slowly in sadness with me: to teach them that melancholy is the true secret of life: to maim them with an alien sorrow: to mar them with my own pain. Now I feel quite differently. . . . I must learn how to be cheerful and happy.

Not everyone will sympathise with the sentences in which he tells how, in his self-abasement, self-hatred, he found Humility, hidden away in his nature like a treasure in a field. Upon some natures they may jar. That is because Oscar Wilde, even in his "Vita Nuova," as he called it, was Oscar Wilde still. Still, above everything else, an artist in words. Still a coiner of exotic phrases. Still supremely interested in himself.

There are people, I do not doubt, who will say that he was simply posing all through the book. I am sure they are wrong. I am sure, if they will only read with pity and with charity, they will see they are wrong. There are, I admit, passages which at first, perhaps, sound insincere. This, for example:

I bore up against everything with some stubbornness of will, and much rebellion of nature, till I had absolutely nothing left in the world but one thing. I had lost my name, my position, my happiness, my freedom, my wealth. I was a prisoner and a pauper. But I still had my children left. Suddenly they were taken away from me by the law. It was a blow so appalling that I did not know what to do, so I flung myself on my knees and bowed my head and wept, and said, "The body of a child is as the body of the Lord: I am not worthy of either."

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All the more does this tend to convey an impression of theatricality from the fact that Wilde was never drawn towards the faith which makes "the body of the Lord" its holiest bond and sacrament of union. Yet, read this haunting page of confession, and say if a man capable of setting down these searing, scorching sentences could possibly be insincere either with himself or with those (not originally the public) for whom he wrote:

Terrible as was what the world did to me, what I did to myself was far more terrible still. . . . The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a flâneur, a dandy, a man of fashion. I surrounded myself with the smaller natures and the meaner minds. . . . Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation. . . . I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility.

ALL THINGS FOR GOOD.

From here the next step was natural. "The meek shall inherit the earth," Christ said. Not till we have stripped off pride and all the unlovely qualities which pride binds upon us can we realise

How fair a place to fill
Is left to each man still;

can we understand that all the events of life may make for the good of character, if only they are looked at aright.

I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me. The plank bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes shredded into oakum till one's finger-tips grow dull with pain, the menial offices with which each day begins and finishes . . . each and all of these things I have to transform into a spiritual experience. There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualising of the soul.

I could almost wish the book ended there upon that note of sorrowful simplicity. We should miss many arresting thoughts, many beautiful forms of words, for never in anything he wrote did Wilde frame more exquisite phrases than we find here. Yet we should feel more certain that he had won the true peace which passeth all understanding. The pity and the terror that cleanse our hearts would be unalloyed by any doubting whether his feet were indeed set at last upon the firm way.

The more he talks about his emotions the less real they seem. The reason of that is plain. He fancied emotion was an end in itself. He never saw at any time in his life—neither when he shot like a brilliant meteor across the social sky, nor when he saw his past years spread out before him in the loneliness of his cell—that emotion is wasted unless it helps us to live. That is why Art cannot be separated, as he tried to separate it, from faith and morals. He asks what joy can be greater than to read beautiful books. Surely, the answer is, "To lead a beautiful life." Unless beautiful things, whatever they are, help us to do that, their beauty is as Dead Sea fruit which turns to dust and ashes in the mouth.

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THE FATAL GIFT.

It was his inability to see this which prevented Wilde from understanding Christ. He makes in "De Profundis" a study of the character of Jesus. It is very moving, very tender, strangely fascinating. Yet it seems to me to be vitiated by the same fallacy which ruined Wilde as a man. He insists on regarding Christ as a supreme imaginative artist, a supreme individualist, one who valued emotions for their own sake. Here is an example of what he meant:

Christ, had he been asked, would have said—
I feel quite certain about it—that the moment the prodigal son fell on his knees and wept, he made his having wasted his substance with harlots, his swine-herding and hungering for the husks they ate, beautiful and holy moments in his life.

Could there be a more perverse parody than this!

Perversity—that was the fatal gift of the one malicious fairy at Wilde's birth. The others gave him everything that should make life pleasant and honourable. The one troubled strand in the web of his nature unravelled all the rest. He even gloried in his perversity. He would like, he wrote, to have people say that it had turned the good things of his life to evil and the evil things to good!

Well, there was much in his nature that many of us loved and envied when we knew him, and love and envy still, apart from our admiration of his mind and artistry. Those who have never guessed what this "much" was will find it here. "De Profundis" reveals the man himself more than anything else he ever wrote, and it will, I think, be read longer than anything else he ever wrote. As a piece of literature it is worthy to stand beside Bunyan's "Grace Abounding" and the "Confessions" of Rousseau.

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DAILY EXPRESS

THE PICK OF THE
BOOKSTALL."OUT OF THE DEPTHS"
AND SOME NOVELS.

"De Profundis," from the depths of Reading Gaol, comes the last book of Oscar Wilde, the man who was. They act his plays to-day, and laughing audiences wonder at the wit that cannot find its peer among living dramatists. The construction of "Lady Windermere's Fan," the humour of "The Importance of Being Earnest" still excite our admiration. The tarnished name of their author was fading into the haze with which good Father Time discreetly covers both honour and shame, both success and failure. Almost does it seem a matter for regret that his ghost should be raised once more.

Yet here "De Profundis," the book, is; and those who believe that "the proper study of mankind is man" can read and analyse, finding therein genius, eccentricity, apt phrases, emotional cloud-bursts of sorrow, and perhaps no little artificiality. Such a book indeed as might have been expected from Wilde—in Reading Gaol.

Mr. Robert Ross explains the publication. The book was placed in his possession when the author was released. It was the only work that Wilde wrote in prison, and the last in prose that he ever penned. The famous "Ballad of Reading Gaol" was composed after he had regained his liberty.

It is a book of reflections and mental analysis without any definite plan. He deals with his development under the prison rules, and explains the mood in which he intends to face the world. He knows that on the day of his release he will be merely passing from one prison to another, "and there are times when the whole world seems to me no larger than my cell and as full of terrors for me. Still," he continues, "I believe that at the beginning God made a world for each separate man, and in that world which is within us one should seek to live." Self-destruction he considered and threw aside.

Prison life he found to make for the realisation of things as they are. "That is why it turns one to stone," he explains. "It is the people outside who are deceived by the illusions of a life in constant motion. They revolve with life and contribute to its unreality. We who are immobile both see and know."

Stimulating Hope.

Hope, that blessing of the gods upon suffering humanity, was not denied even to him. Remembering his deserted death-bed, it stirs an infinite pity to read: "On the other side of the prison wall there are some poor black, soot-besmirched trees which are just breaking out into buds of an almost tender green. I knew quite well what they are going through. They are finding expression." He hoped to do great things. "I believe I am to have enough to live on for about eighteen months at any rate, so that if I may not write beautiful books I may at least read beautiful books; and what joy can be greater? After that I hope to be able to recreate my creative faculty."

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Of his life in prison he writes: "For us there is only one season, the season of sorrow. The very sun and moon seem taken from us. Outside, the day may be blue and gold, but the light that creeps down through the thick muffled glass of the small iron-barred window beneath which one sits is grey and haggard. It is always twilight in one's cell, as it is always twilight in one's heart."

Now and again he revels in phrases after his own cynical fashion. He talks of the "mechanical people to whom life is a shrewd speculation." "They start with the ideal desire of being the parish beadle, and in whatever sphere they are placed they succeed in being the parish beadle and no more. A man whose desire is to be something separate from himself, to be a member of Parliament, or a successful grocer, or a prominent solicitor, or a judge, or something equally tedious, invariably succeeds in being what he wants to be. That is his punishment. Those who want a mask have to wear it."

Dreadful Experience.

Of all his sufferings one stands out most prominently in his miserable recollection. Convicts are the "zanies of sorrow," the clowns whose hearts are broken. You can see it in their dress, especially designed to appeal to the sense of humour. When he was removed from London to Reading—"I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress and handcuffed, for the world to look at. . . . When people saw me they laughed. Each train as it came up swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was, of course, before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed they laughed still more. For half an hour I stood there, in the grey November rain, surrounded by a jeering mob."

So much, then, for this strange work, partly defence, partly appeal, partly a posture in prose. It will harm no one to read it, for the Nemesis of wrong-doing shadows every page.

One last quotation let me make from the words with which it ends. A curiously pathetic picture can imagination form of this broken genius, bankrupt, dishonoured, his children taken from him, his name a thing of scorn, sitting in his base prison cell, the floor of which he has lately scrubbed, and writing thus of his future: "Society will have no place for me; but nature, whose sweet rains fall on the unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rock where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars, so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt; she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole."

Whether these imaginings ring false or true, whether they mirror the artificiality of self-deception or are the prayer of a contrite heart, the scene in the prison cell remains equally surprising.

B. FLETCHER ROBINSON.

"De Profundis." By Oscar Wilde. (Methuen, 5s.)

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Whether these imaginings ring false or true, whether they mirror the artificiality of self-deception or are the prayer of a contrite heart, the scene in the prison cell remains equally surprising.

B. FLETCHER ROBINSON.

"De Profundis."

By Oscar Wilde. (Methuen, 8s.)

Jissen Women's University Library

The Message of Suffering.

OSCAR WILDE'S

"DE PROFUNDIS."

I have just laid aside "De Profundis" (Methuen), and was meditating upon the marvellous and almost mystic message of Oscar Wilde to his own and all succeeding generations, when I chanced to encounter those lines from Sir Lewis Morris which bear the title, "Souls in Prison." My horizon had been enlarged, my conception of human life had been deepened by those wonderful thoughts born of solitude, sorrow, and suffering in Reading Gaol. It was scarcely the moment for small thoughts and small minds, seeing that this genius had penetrated the depths of individual grief and wrested from them the eternal message of sorrow. Yet these lines I met were useful for comparison, the thoughts in "the house of retributive Law." Listen to Sir Lewis as he attempts to describe the condition of mind a sentenced man possesses:—

Till at last all longing was sunk and spent
In a lifeless, fathomless slough of content,
Not repentance, nor fear, nor grief,
Nor a belief at all, nor yet unbelief;
But a soul which skulks from itself like a
thief,

And is damned for ever, and dead.
What unrealism of feeling is here expressed! Poet's fancy is not touched with "the live coal" of human experience, hence only the rhythmic motion of the words remain. But look at this product of Reading Gaol which makes its appearance to-day. It is a human document, and more so, for one feels the anguish, one realises the degradation, one participates in the deprivation, and one rejoices in the conquest.

The New Life.

Does one shed a tear in silent recognition of obscured greatness? So be it; it is not unmanly. Temperament will out, nothing can imprison that. Sorrow is so universal that one never tries to understand it, we simply regard it as a Divine ordinance. Listen not to the words of Sir Lewis Morris now, but to the voice of one who cried out from the wilderness it may be; one who knew by experience that "suffering is one very long moment." What does he say? It is only this: "Where there is sorrow there is holy ground." Oh, what truth such a simple sentence contains. Let the poor deserted man speak again.

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the poor deserted man speak again.

When I was brought down from my prison to the Court of Bankruptcy, between two policemen — waited in the long dreary corridor that, before the whole crowd, whom an action so sweet and simple hushed into silence, he might gravely raise his hat to me, as, handcuffed and with bowed head, I passed him by. Men have gone to heaven for smaller things than that.

What recognition of noble purpose, what prodigality almost of thanks! Oscar Wilde then goes on to speak of his realisation "that nothing in the whole world is meaningless and suffering least of all." This was the last thing left to him, and probably the best, for it formed "the starting point for a fresh development." But what did this Vita Nuova involve? Primarily he was called upon to free himself "from any possible bitterness of feeling against the world." Then followed a belief and dependence in and upon himself, the creation of an intense individualism.

Sorrow, the Supreme Emotion.

Once he was filled with rage, then came the desire for death, then the determination to destroy himself, and finally the intention of distributing gloom.

Finally these haunting tendencies disappeared, and in their place came "a real desire for life," life in order to explore the new world that opened to him. This is how he puts it:—

I now see that sorrow, being the supreme emotion of which man is capable, is at once the type and test of all great art. . . . Sorrow is the ultimate type both in life and art.

The mere illusions of the eye and appetite have now lost their charm, and he, like others before him, realised that "the secret of life is suffering." He had tasted the fruits of one part of the garden, but the other half had its secrets for him also. Suffering is explained by love.

I am convinced that there is no other, and that if the world has indeed, as I have said, been built of sorrow, it has been built by the hands of love, because in no other way could the soul of man, for whom the world was made, reach the full stature of its perfection.

The cultivation and perfection of the soul through the medium of suffering and sorrow, has, alas! been only rarely realised. With exquisite reference to the Christ-life the idea is elaborated. Let me give you one:—

He knew that in the soul of one who is ignorant, there is always room for a great idea. . . . The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation.

The volume needs no gush, it is too human, too much of flesh and blood is contained therein; it is the revelation of a lonely soul, expressed in terms of poetic genius and pervasive thought. It is irresistibly fascinating and helpful.

W. T. B.

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OSCAR WILDE IN PRISON.

*De Profundis." By Oscar Wilde. (Methuen. 5s.)

[Published To-day.]

Every circumstance combines to make this book one of supreme interest. There has been no greater tragedy in literature than that which happened at the Old Bailey ten years ago, when the dazzling career of Oscar Wilde was quenched in hideous darkness. He stepped, in his own words, "from a sort of eternity of fame to a sort of eternity of infamy"; and when, three years after his release, he died miserably in Paris, destitute and forlorn, it was thought that the world had heard the last of one of its most perplexing and pathetic figures. Pathos and perplexity there still is; but to-day, for the first time, it is possible for us to say that we know something of the real Oscar Wilde. In his lifetime he had the reputation of being a poseur. He aimed at the reputation, and he gloried in it. He was the man of letters, the man of wit, the man of culture—but never the mere man. How much was affectation, how much sincerity, a delighted but bewildered public could not say. It laughed at his epigrams, crowded to his plays, and reserved its opinion as to himself.

Then the gaol doors closed behind him, and his fame was cut off clean, as by a guillotine. From that day to this nothing has been heard of him except as the author of the "Ballad of Reading Gaol," which was published shortly after his release. And now, after the world had given up the problem of his personality, when his career is so ancient a history that it is possible to revive his plays, comes this amazing volume. It was—unlike the "Ballad"—written in gaol, towards the close of his two years' imprisonment with hard labour. According to Mr. Robert Ross, to whom the letter was addressed, it was the last prose work he ever wrote. It was also the first piece of self-revelation he ever wrote.

The expression must not be misunderstood. The book is a sketch of the author's spiritual development under suffering; but, as might be imagined, that development does not precisely follow the lines approved by Dr. Torrey and General Booth. There is little of the penitent form: there is a great deal of wrestling with the Angel. Much of the book is far too sacred and intimate for comment: but perhaps what will most forcibly strike the reader is the unexpectedness of it all. It is not easy to reconcile the Oscar Wilde of popular legend with the convict who writes: "People point to Reading Gaol and say, 'That is where the artistic life leads a man.' Well, it might lead to worse places"; or this:—

The two great turning-points of my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison. I will not say that prison is the best thing that could have happened to me; for that phrase would savour of too great bitterness towards myself. I would sooner say, or hear it said of me, that I was so typical a child of my age, that in my perversity, and for that perversity's sake, I turned the good things of my life to evil, and the evil things of my life to good.

It is not, of course, that prison life was not irksome, or was made easier, to him. To such a temperament as his—pleasure-loving, undisciplined, and with a passionate love for the beautiful in Nature—the ordinary discomforts and degradations of prison must have been terribly accentuated. There is a striking passage at the beginning of the book in which he describes the "paralysing immobility" of the life:—