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Oscar Wilde Scrapbook

Vol. 6

St. James's Gazette.

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 h nself.

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:—

Of seed-time or harvest, of the reapers bending over the corn, or the grape gatherers threading through the vines, of the grass in the orchard made white with broken blossoms or strewn with fallen fruit: of these we know nothing, and can know nothing.

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 thickly-muffled glass of the small iron-barred window beneath which one sits is grey and niggard. It is always twilight in one's cell, as it is always twilight in one's heart. And in the sphere of thought, no less than in the sphere of time, motion is no more. The thing that you personally have long ago forgotten, or can easily forget, is happening to me now, and will happen to me again to-morrow.

And we learn later on that "the calendar of my daily conduct and labour that hangs on the outside of my cell-door, with my name and sentence written upon it, tells me that it is May." That is only one of an infinite number of ways in which two years' hard labour for Bill Sikes differs from two years' hard labour for Oscar Wilde: perhaps the contrast was in his mind when he writes in another place that "the prison style is absolutely and entirely wrong." To himself no drop of anguish seems to have been spared. During his term at Wandsworth, he says, he longed to die; and when, on removal to Reading, he found himself improving in health he was filled with rage: "I determined to commit suicide on the very day on which I left prison." The very dress, he complains, makes the wearers grotesque. "We are the zanies of sorrow. We are the clowns whose hearts are broken. We are specially designed to appeal to the sense of humour":—

On November 13, 1895, I was brought down here from London. From two o'clock till half-past two on that day I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress, and handcuffed, for the world to look at. 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, he says, he wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time. But there were kindnesses also:—

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.

We have mentioned these incidents, but it must not be supposed that this is in the ordinary sense a book of prison experiences. There are, indeed, almost no other references to the material side of his punishment, apart from the strangely significent admission that it was the last year of his sentence that wrought the change in his outlook. "I have," he says, "had a year longer of imprisonment, but humanity has been in the prison along with us all, and now when I go out I shall remember great kindnesses that I have received here from almost everybody."

The dominant note of these confessions is the mystic adoration of sorrow which runs through them. "There is no truth," he writes, "comparable to sorrow. There are times when sorrow seems to me to be the only truth. Other things may be 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." It was, he admits, a discovery to him, though, with a characteristic touch of egoism, he recalls that all this later knowledge was prefigured in his books. He recalls especially the phrase of the bishop in "The Young King," who says, "Is not He who made misery wiser than thou art?" admitting that when he wrote it the words "seemed to me little more than a phrase."

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Another remarkable passage follows on the reminiscence of a lady who is described as "one of the most beautiful personalities I have ever known: a woman whose sympathy and noble kindness to me, both before and since the tragedy of my imprisonment, have been beyond power and description":—

> On the occasion of which I am thinking I recall distinctly how I said to her that there was enough suffering in one narrow London lane to show that God did not love man, and that wherever there was any sorrow, though but that of a child in some little garden weeping over a fault that it had or had not committed, the whole face of creation was completely marred. I was entirely wrong. She told me so, but I could not believe her. I was not in the sphere in which such belief was to be attained to. Now it seems to me that love of some kind is the only possible explanation of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world. I cannot conceive of any other explanation. 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. Pleasure for the beautiful body, but pain for the beautiful soul.

The writer's references to his trial and punishment—for which a curious world will be agape—are candid and without bitterness. An old friend called on him to protest belief in his innocence. "I burst into tears at what he said, and told him that, while there was much among the definite charges that was quite untrue . . . still that my life had been full of perverse pleasures, and that unless he accepted that as a fact about me and realised it to the full, I could not possibly be friends with him any more, or even be in his company." Elsewhere he tells the story of his fall and of his repentance:—

> 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. I became the spendthrift of my own genius, and to waste an eternal youth gave me a curious joy. Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation. What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. Desire, at the end, was a malady, or a madness, or both. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. 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. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility.
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> I have lain in prison for nearly two years. Out of my nature has come wild despair; an abandonment to grief that was piteous even to look at; terrible and impotent rage; bitterness and scorn; anguish that wept aloud; misery that could find no voice; sorrow that was dumb. I have passed through every possible mood of suffering. Better than Wordsworth himself I know what Wordsworth meant when he said—
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> "Suffering is permanent, obscure, and dark,
> And has the nature of infinity."
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> But while there were times when I rejoiced in the idea that my sufferings were to be endless, I could not bear them to be without meaning. 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.

No passage could better indicate the great gulf fixed between the Oscar Wilde who went into prison and the Oscar Wilde who came out.

There is a large section of this book to which it is possible to refer only with some diffidence. Fifty pages are given over to what is practically a sermon—a wholly unconventional sermon, but one of supreme force, originality, and beauty—on the life and character of Christ. The very independence of his outlook—for his spiritual development left him as far as ever from any of the recognised

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"Dangerous" doctrines, no doubt, and there are some even more heretical. But the orthodoxy is as strange as the heterodoxy:—

> 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; or that as he passed by on the highway of life people who had seen nothing of life's mystery saw it clearly, and others who had been deaf to every voice but that of pleasure heard for the first time the voice of love and found it as "musical as Apollo's lute"; or that evil passions fled at his approach, and men whose dull unimaginative lives had been but a mode of death rose as it were from the grave when he called them; or that when he taught on the hillside the multitude forgot their hunger and thirst and the cares of this world, and that to his friends who listened to him as he sat at meat the coarse food seemed delicate, and the water had the taste of good wine, and the whole house became full of the odour and sweetness of nard.

But it is only one of a multitude of marvels in this book to find the typical cynic of the nineteenth century championing the authenticity of miracles.

There will, no doubt, be found some to say that the psychological problem which seems to be offered in this book does not exist; that, in fact, the author posed to the end, and that, as he had always maintained that Art was concerned with utterance and not with morals, so in this last effort of all he aimed merely at producing a beautiful piece of literature. Beautiful, supremely beautiful, it is; but that it merely represents a *tour de force* of hypocrisy is not to be believed. The solitude and the discipline of prison life are an infallible solvent of shams; and it is perhaps in anticipation of some such criticism that the author states so emphatically in his preface:—

> Prison life makes me see people and things as they really are. . . . 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.

Either, in this book, Oscar Wilde speaks face to face with realities, or else the severest punishment known to English law can at the end leave a man still grimacing at the facts of life. Of the two miracles most people will think the first the less incredible.

It is true that the book invites the question: What was the effect of these experiences on the few years that elapsed between the author's release and his death? There is no answer to the query. Oscar Wilde had no illusions on the point. "For me," he writes, "the world is shrivelled to a handbreadth, and everywhere I turn my name is written on the rocks in lead." There is pathetic significance in the fact that certain projects alluded to in this book were never carried out. He mentions specifically two topics on which he

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> Still, I am conscious now that behind all this beauty, satisfying though it may be, 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. . . . 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.

And none who read the book but will hope the prayer was heard.

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Westminster Gazette.

"DE PROFUNDIS."*

From such a work as Oscar Wilde's "De Profundis" the literary critic stands aside. It is a human document of the most tragic and poignant kind or it is nothing. Poets, novelists, and dramatists have tried to imagine for us what a man feels as he stands on the scaffold, or as he drinks to the dregs the cup of humiliation and suffering which his own sins or human justice have prepared for him. And we judge whether they have done well or ill according as they realise what our own imagination suggests to us and express it in language which appeals to our literary sense. In this case no such question arises. Here is a man reporting of himself in the actual case, writing from his prison cell, not with the halo of martyrdom about him, as Condorcet on the night before his execution, but in the depths of a squalid catastrophe which seems to have no redeeming feature. It is useless to argue whether he ought to have said this or that, or whether he has said it well or ill; we have simply the fact that he felt thus and wrote thus under the stress of an overwhelming experience and that, given the circumstances, this is the result.

This point is worth making at the outset, for otherwise we can imagine a reader taking this book in hand and saying to himself, "this passage is beautifully written," or "that is very touching," or "here he is himself," or "there he is posing," or "there he is extravagant," and "there he is profane"—in fact, applying to it the standard of what the reader thinks he ought to have written for edification in the circumstances in which he was placed. Whereas we can only accept it, the truth with the pose, the artificiality with the sincerity—if anyone chooses to employ these words—as expressing what he was under his ordeal. "Whether or not," he writes, "this letter does good to narrow natures and hectic brains, to me it has done good. I have 'cleansed my bosom of much perilous stuff.' I need not remind you that mere expression is to an artist the supreme and only mode of life. It is by utterance that we live. . . . For nearly two years I have had within a growing burden of bitterness, of much of which I have now got rid. 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 shrill green. I know quite well what they are going through. They are finding expression." Thus at the end of it all there remains what the plain man would call the "pose" of art, and after two years of Reading Gaol we have the "artist" still speaking of "mere expression" as his "supreme and only mode of life." Sorrow, he keeps saying, "being the supreme emotion of which man is capable, is at once the type and test of all great art." Religion does not help him, reason does not help him, but the "ultimate realisation" of the artistic life through sorrow, through the depth and humility which sorrow brings, is, he repeats again and again, his hope of redemption. This perpetual talk about "art" will fill the hastier kind of reader with impatience. How, he will ask, can a man go on talking thus about "art" who has had this profound experience of reality? But what the writer is driving at is not "art" as the plain man understands the word, with an implication of French impressionism and twisted patterns, but that self-culture or self-realisation of which the Greeks thought as the end of morality, and which he now conceives as being achieved through the humiliation and suffering of his two years' sentence. The words are strange and rather jarring, but no one can read far

Westminster Gazette.

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without feeling them to be sincere. Thus, and thus only, could he think about himself and about life.

"Humility in the artist is his frank acceptance of all experiences." That in a sentence is the thought of this book. Wilde describes himself as filled with "bitterness and scorn and terrible and impotent rage" during the first year of his imprisonment. And in this spirit, he says, he would have quitted his prison if he had been released at the end of his first year. But in his second year he tells us he learned humility—that humility of the artist with its "frank acceptance of all experiences"—and with it came peace. He will not even now persuade himself that his life of pleasure, with its perverse passions corresponding, as he says somewhere, to his love of paradox in literature, is to be repented of as the missioner would count repentance. Yet we need not trouble ourselves about words. There is nothing which rings truer in this book than the profound self-abasement with which he looks back upon this life of pleasure with its emptiness, its artificiality, its detachment from all the realities of life:

> This New Life, as through my love of Dante I like sometimes to call it, is, of course, no new life at all, but simply the continuance, by means of development and evolution, of my former life. I remember when I was at Oxford saying to one of my friends as we were strolling round Magdalen's narrow bird-haunted walks one morning in the year before I took my degree, that I wanted to eat of the fruit of all the trees in the garden of the world, and that I was going out into the world with that passion in my soul. And so, indeed, I went out, and so I lived. My only mistake was that I confined myself so exclusively to the trees of what seemed to me the sun-lit side of the garden, and shunned the other side for its shadow and its gloom. Failure, disgrace, poverty, sorrow, despair, suffering, tears even, the 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.

"I threw the pearl of my soul into a cup of wine. I went down the primrose path to the sound of flutes. I lived on honeycomb. But to have continued the same life would have been wrong, because it would have been limiting. I had to pass on. The other half of the garden had its secrets for me also." Though the orthodox may frown at the reason given—"because it would have been limiting"—there is no difference in their conclusion and his. He "had to pass on," and the road led through a muddy track to Reading Gaol. There is something profoundly touching in the pages in which he tells us he will cast out bitterness and rebellion, realise his whole experience, refuse to be ashamed of his penalty, and start on his "new life" a new man with a deeper and more serious character. "If one is ashamed of having been punished," he says with unusual simplicity, "one might just as well never have been punished at all." "If I am not ashamed of my punishment, as I hope not to be, I shall be able to think and walk and live with freedom." In a very admirable passage he speaks of the men who on their release "carry their prison about with them into the air, and hide it as a secret disgrace in their hearts, and at length, like poor poisoned things, creep into some hole and die. It is wretched that they should have to do so, and it is wrong, terribly wrong, of society that it should force them to do so. . . . When the man's punishment is over, it leaves him to himself—that is to say, it abandons him at the very moment when its highest duty towards him begins." This is well said, for the shunning of the convict after he has paid his penalty is perhaps the greatest cruelty that society inflicts on him. Oscar Wilde does not moralise about prison reform, but he enters a touching plea for all prisoners and captives. Here is a passage which may help to the understanding of what they feel:

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Where there is sorrow there is holy ground. Some day people will realise what that means. They will know nothing of life till they do—and natures like his can realise it. 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. It was in this spirit, and with this mode of love, that the saints knelt down to wash the feet of the poor, or stooped to kiss the leper on the cheek. I have never said one single word to him about what he did. I do not know to the present moment whether he is aware that I was even conscious of his action. It is not a thing for which one can render formal thanks in formal words. I store it in the treasure-house of my heart. I keep it there as a secret debt that I am glad to think I can never possibly repay. It is embalmed and kept secret by the myrrh and cassia of many tears. When wisdom has been profitless to me, philosophy barren, and the proverbs and phrases of those who have sought to give me consolation as dust and ashes in my mouth, the memory of that little lovely silent act of love has unsealed for me all the wells of pity: made the desert blossom like a rose and brought me out of the bitterness of lonely exile into harmony with the wounded, broken, and great heart of the world. When people are able to understand, not merely how beautiful ——'s action was, but why it meant so much to me, and always will mean so much, then, perhaps, they will realise how and in what spirit they should approach me. . . .

The friend was indeed a friend, and he deserves his tribute. And now let the reader consider this:

To each of us different fates are meted out. My lot has been one of public infamy, of long imprisonment, of misery, of ruin, of disgrace, but I am not worthy of it—not yet, at any rate. I remember that I used to say that I thought I could bear a real tragedy if it came to me with purple pall and a mask of noble sorrow, but that the dreadful thing about modernity was that it put tragedy into the raiment of comedy, so that the great realities seemed commonplace or grotesque or lacking in style. It is quite true about modernity. It has probably always been true about actual life. It is said that all martyrdoms seemed mean to the looker-on. The nineteenth century is no exception to the rule.

Everything about my tragedy has been hideous, mean, repellent, lacking in style; our very dress makes us grotesque. We are the zanies of sorrow. We are clowns whose hearts are broken. We are specially designed to appeal to the sense of humour. On November 13, 1895, I was brought down here from London. From two o'clock till half-past two on that day I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress, and handcuffed, for the world to look at. 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.

A man who has gone through that has indeed paid. We hope this passage may be pondered by the Prison Department of the Home Office and lead them to consider whether the conveyance of convicts in prison dress is not an altogether unnecessary barbarity. When prisoners have to be moved everything possible should be done to spare them unnecessary humiliation.

We will not moralise over this tragedy. What had to be said was said and done with years ago. In the slightly fanciful but touchingly written pages on the character of the Christ which are to be found in this book, the writer finds comfort, as thousands before him, in His divine pity for the outcast and sinner. Society has vindicated itself towards this sinner, and can afford to be Christian to his memory.

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The Star.

Star 27/30

"DE PROFUNDIS."*

[Published To-day.]

"Let him who is without sin. . . ." That is the word of pity and humility which washes across the tragic waste of this sorrowfully beautiful book. Silent is the croak of the Pharisee, the sneer of the self-righteous, the howl of the hypocrite; for this heart that is split with shame abashes them all, and even the voice of the Philistine is dumb. I feel that this is not a book that calls for ordinary evaluation: the moral disaster is still too near, its embers are still too hot, and the very name of the man is still too reverberant with unimaginable anguish and disgrace. The book is a spiritual document, a literary sacrament, a sacred unveiling of the broken fragments of a soul. Man is many-souled, and this man's souls were many. The ugly soul of evil in him warred against the beautiful soul of good, as it wars in us all. It conquered, but out of the ruin it wrought its rival rose, and this book is the record of that rising. It was written in prison, and I think it will take a high place in the literature of the dungeon. From John Bunyan to Oscar Wilde seems a far cry, but this new "Pilgrim's Progress" is not essentially different from the old. The modern Christian, indeed, carries the same burthen of sin, and he casts it off at the foot of the same cross.

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"I know that on the day of my release I shall be merely passing from one prison into another, and there are times when the whole world seems to me no larger than my cell, and as full of terror for me. Still 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." This book tells how he desecrated that inner world and how he purified it by gazing on Christ. Do not imagine that the story is a snivelling exercise in belated cant, although the histrionic temperament of the man dominates even his pitiful self-abasement. He is still the master of posturings, the artist in attitudes, the carver of epigrams, the blower of paradoxes. That is precisely the sharp savor of this confession—the contrast between the pain and the pose, between the trickery and the tragedy.

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For instance, the man grotesquely magnifies his own stature, not only comparing himself to Byron, but belittling Byron. The truth is that his "symbolic relations to the art and culture of his age" were largely due to Du Maurier's attacks in "Punch." Du Maurier determined to annihilate him: he only advertised him. If you want to kill a man, ignore him. Don't attack him. Abuse is the key of fame, and the more vulgar and more violent it is the better. When the "Blackguard's Magazine" told Keats to go back to his gallipots, it only rooted its infamy in his fame. Wilde owed much to Du Maurier, but I think his fame would have been ephemeral if he himself had not rooted it in infamy. This is a hard saying, but it is a true one, and this book shows that the writer bitterly realised its truth, and tried to sweeten the truth with subtle repentances and flagellations of the soul. That he succeeds is a marvellous proof of his spiritual plasticity. For repentance is a mood of the soul, a posture of the conscience, an attitude of the imagination, and this master of moods and postures and attitudes puts it on like a white robe perfumed with the fragrance of God.

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Yet the mood is, on the whole, sincere, and this book, which is its expression, is infinitely sincerer than anything he ever wrote, and infinitely lovelier. "While I see that there is nothing wrong in what one does, I see that there is something wrong in what one becomes." It is the expense of his own spirit in a waste of shame which moves him, and his only thought is its regeneration through humility. "If life be a problem to me, I am no less a problem to life." That is tragically true. Some of the noblest passages in the book are those in praise of sorrow. Indeed, the book is an "Il Penseroso" in perfect prose, and only those who have suffered will understand its graver meaning. It finds in sorrow the mystery of love behind the universe. It finds also in sin the same mystery, and that is why there is no regret in its remorse, no palinode in its repentance. "At every single moment of one's life one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been." There are many lovely and sacred things in these strange meditations, but the crown and flower of them all is the piercingly tender study of Christ as the supreme poet and the supreme artist, the precursor of the romantic movement in life. Like Mary Magdalen, he empties the vase of his shame over the feet of Jesus. His humility is wise and gentle and strong, and out of his soul's moral malady he makes a pearl. The flaming wonder of the book is its noble sweetness. There is no resentment, no rebellion, no defiance in it. He is grateful to the friend who took off his hat to him, but he does not hate the people who jeered at him for half an hour

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at Clapham-junction. He is sorry for them. "To mock at a soul in pain is a dreadful thing." Yet for a year after that he wept every day at the same hour. Indeed, the tale of his agony is like the tale of the Crucifixion told by the Penitent Thief. It is a mean tragedy ennobled by great emotions. And the most pathetic part of it is the soaring of the shattered aim, the yearning after a higher beauty of art, a yearning that fell broken outside the prison walls. His last words are these:—

> 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 where I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in 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.

He did not go to Nature: he went to Paris. When the dark end came, he could not pay a surgeon's fee, and his last words were a paradox, "I am dying beyond my means." But this book blooms like a daisy on his sombre grave.

JAMES DOUGLAS.

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Daily Mirror

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PAGES FROM THE PRISON DIARY OF OSCAR WILDE.

How He Repented of His Wasted Life, and Found Comfort in Humility.

DE PROFUNDIS. By Oscar Wilde. Methuen. [Published To-day.]

OF all the pitiful, mysterious tragedies of our time none was more miserable or harder to understand than that of Oscar Wilde.

"The Gods," as he said himself, "had given him almost everything." He had a marvellous gift of speech. His conversation was brilliant and stimulating beyond that of any man of his age. He placed himself in the very front of the movement towards beauty in every-day life, which has borne so rich a burden of fruit already. His poetry and his prose were alike accepted and valued as the work of a remarkable mind.

Yet, for some unaccountable reason, he flung down the whole fair fabric of his life to end his days in poverty and suffering, an outcast and a pitiable ruin.

Many have naturally wondered what effect prison life would have upon such a nature as his. Did it make him hard and bitter? Did he come out with rage in his heart? Or did the long, silent hours break down the walls of pride and egotism, and show him how wretchedly he had failed to fulfil the honourable promise of his early years?

In this wonderful book we find the answer to these questions. It is a kind of journal written during the latter part of his two years' imprisonment. It was written in the form of a letter to one of the few friends who stood by him in his disgrace. "Of the many, many things for which I have to thank the governor," he wrote, "there is none for which I am more grateful than for his permission to write fully to you and at as great a length as I desire."

CIRCLING ROUND A CENTRE OF PAIN.

It was the only work he wrote in prison, and the last work in prose he ever wrote; and in it he shows, in a marvellously vivid and interesting way, the change in his nature which imprisonment brought out.

At first its only effect was to fill him with despair.

> While I was in Wandsworth Prison I longed to die. It was my one desire. When, after two months in the infirmary, I was transferred here (Reading), and found myself growing gradually better in physical health, I was filled with rage. 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.

No one has ever described the appalling monotony of prison life more poignantly:—

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With us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle round one centre of pain. The paralysing immobility of a life, every circumstance of which is regulated after an unchangeable pattern, so that we eat and drink, and lie down and pray, or kneel at least for prayer, according to the inflexible laws of an iron formula; this immobile quality, that makes each dreadful day, in the very minutest detail, like its brother, seems to communicate itself to those external forces the very essence of whose existence is ceaseless change.

Of seed time or harvest, of the reapers bending over the corn, or the grape-gatherers threading through the vines, of the grass in the orchard made white with broken blossom, or strewn with fallen fruit, of these we know nothing, and can know nothing.

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 thickly-muffled glass of the small, iron-barred window, beneath which one sits, is grey and niggard. It is always twilight in one's cell, as it is always twilight in one's heart.

Then the unhappy man heard of the death of his mother. His nature broke down beneath the blow.

No-one knew how deeply I loved and honoured her. Her death was terrible to me; but I, once a lord of language, have no words in which to express my anguish and my shame. She and my father had bequeathed me a name they had made noble and honoured. . . . I had disgraced that name eternally. I had made it a low by-word among low people. I had dragged it through the very mire.

Very pitiful and pathetic, too, is the passage in which he tells of his anguish and agony of mind when he heard that the Divorce Court had given the care of his children into other hands.

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." That moment seemed to save me. I saw then that the only thing for me was to accept everything. Since then—curious as it will no doubt sound—I have been happier. It was, of course, my soul in its ultimate essence that I had reached.

A TRAGIC CONFESSION.

From this moment his mood of bitterness began to soften. He began to realise what a terrible thing the failure of his life had been, and to see that he must build it up again upon a new foundation. That foundation was, strange as it seems in the case of such a man as Oscar Wilde, humility.

I must say to myself that I ruined myself, and that nobody, great or small, can be ruined except by his own hand.

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 *flaneur*, a dandy, a man of fashion. I surrounded myself with the smaller natures and the meaner minds. . . .

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Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensations. . . . I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me and passed on. . . . I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility. . . . And the first thing that I have got to do is to free myself from any possible bitterness of feeling against the world.

Of course, he did not think that his task ended there; if it had, it would have been comparatively easy. There was much more before him.

I have hills far steeper to climb, valleys much darker to pass through. . . . 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, the harsh orders that routine seems to necessitate, the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the shame—each and all of these things I have to transform into a spiritual experience.

JEERED AT ON A RAILWAY PLATFORM.

Teaching himself this lesson day after day, schooling himself to learn again how to find happiness in life, his mind went back to many of the incidents of his disgrace. Even the most dreadful did not move him to bitterness.

On November 13, 1895, I was brought down here (Reading) from London. From two o'clock till half-past two on that day I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress, and handcuffed, for the world to look at.

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. . . . Well, now I am really beginning to feel more regret for the people who laughed than for myself.

If he could write like that of those who behaved brutally to him, imagine what tender gratitude and reverence he felt for those who gave him of their sympathy.

He tells in the most touching language how one who had known him (he does not give the name) passed him in the corridor of the Law Courts when he had been taken there from prison to be examined as a bankrupt. Before the whole crowd, whom an action so sweet and simple hushed into silence, this unnamed good Samaritan gravely raised his hat as he passed the handcuffed prisoner.

Men have gone to Heaven for smaller things than that. It was in this spirit, and with this mode of love, that the saints knelt down to wash the feet of the poor, or stooped to kiss the leper on the cheek. . . . When wisdom has been profitless to me, philosophy barren, and the proverbs and phrases of those who have sought to give me consolation as dust and ashes in my mouth, the memory of that little, lovely, silent act of love has unsealed for me all the wells of pity; made the desert blossom like a rose, and brought me out of the bitterness of lonely exile into harmony with the wounded, broken, and great heart of the world.

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A BOOK OF THE DAY.

FROM THE DEEP.

(Published To-day.)

"De Profundis." By Oscar Wilde. Methuen and Co. 5s. net.

"Out of the Deep" indeed comes this cry of despair. "It was written by my friend," says Mr. Ross in the preface, "during the last month of his imprisonment, the only work he wrote while in prison, and the last work in prose he ever wrote." The sentinel is removed which guards not only the walls of the prison, but the frontier of the human soul. One always extraordinarily candid, expressing his own emotions, here reveals a soul naked in its agonies and terrors. The play has been played. The stage is cleared away. The world of reality, so long eluded, at length has compelled attention. Sincerity in pleasure has passed into sincerity in pain. The result is one of the most tragic and pitiful confessions ever issued from the astonished mind of man.

Why It Turns To Stone.

"Prison life," says the author, "makes one see people and things as they really are. That is why it turns one to stone." Thrown back upon ultimate things, with the long hours of solitude and enforced meditation, the human soul chafes like a caged beast at the horrors of the prison and the greater horrors of the memory of an irrevocable past. "For the first year of my imprisonment I did nothing else, and can remember doing nothing else, but wring my hands in impotent despair and say: 'What an ending! What an appalling ending!'"

"There are times when the whole world seems to me no larger than my cell," he writes, "and is full of terror for me." "Suffering is one very long moment. We cannot divide it by seasons." "It is always twilight in one's cell as it is always twilight in one's heart."

A week later, I am transferred here. Three more months go over and my mother dies. No one knew how deeply I loved and honoured her. Her death was terrible to me; but I, once a lord of language, have no words in which to express my anguish and my shame. She and my father had bequeathed me a name they had made noble and honoured, not merely in literature, art, archæology, and science, but in the public history of my own country, in its evolution as a nation. I had disgraced that name eternally. I had made it a low byword among low people. I had dragged it through the very mire. 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. What I suffered then, and still suffer, is not for pen to write or paper to record. My wife, always kind and gentle to me, rather than that I should hear the news from indifferent lips, travelled, ill as she was, all the way from Genoa to England to break to me herself the tidings of so irreparable, so irredeemable, a loss.

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In the long hours he estimates the depth of his fall and the hopelessness of the future. "Terrible as was what the world did to me, what I did to myself was far more terrible still." He is completely penniless and homeless. Morality does not help him. Religion does not help him. He "cannot believe." Reason does not help him. "Everywhere I turn my name is written on the rocks in lead." In Wandsworth Prison he longed to die. Finding himself growing better in the infirmary he was filled with rage. He determined to commit suicide on the very day he left prison. It is a soul in hell, turning again and again and finding no comfort anywhere at all.

Humility and Pity.

Afterwards, from the very depths of despair, falling, as it were, through the bottom of the world, there came a new experience of hope.

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." That moment seemed to save me. I saw then that the only thing for me was to accept everything. Since then—curious as it will no doubt sound—I have been happier. It was, of course, my soul in its ultimate essence that I had reached. In many ways I had been its enemy, but I found it waiting for me as a friend. When one comes in contact with the soul it makes one simple as a child, as Christ said one should be.

"Where there is sorrow there is holy ground." Humility comes in like a great wave of healing. A single tiny action, "the raising of his hat to me by a friend as, handcuffed and with bowed head, I passed him by," is stored in the treasure-house of the heart. "The memory of that little, lovely, silent act of love, has unsealed for me all the wells of pity, brought me out of the bitterness of lonely exile into harmony with the wounded heart of the world."

He determines to free himself from any possible bitterness of feeling against the world. "Had I been released last May," he says, "I would have left this place loathing it and every official in it with a bitterness and hatred that would have poisoned my life." "I have had a year longer of imprisonment, but humanity has been in the prison along with us all."

The prison style is absolutely and entirely wrong. I would give anything to be able to alter it when I go out. I intend to try. But there is nothing in the world so wrong but that the spirit of humanity, which is the spirit of love, the spirit of the Christ who is not in churches, may make it, if not right, at least possible to be borne without too much bitterness of heart.

The Hope of the Future.

There are here long meditations on the life of Christ and the meaning of His message to the world. This strange and baffling personality, with emotion, but without will, endeavours to put itself into relation with a changed universe. "The only people I would care to be with now are artists and people who have suffered; those who know what beauty is and those who know what sorrow is."

At first he determined to "live henceforth in gloom as a king wears purple, never to smile again, to turn whatever house I entered into a house of mourning." It is the old, histrionic instinct playing its pitiful part. But these thoughts are put by. "I must learn how to be cheerful and happy," he decides.

At the end he is looking towards the escape and the taking up of the broken threads of life. All the passionate response remains to the beauty of the world. "The sea which washes away the stains and wounds of the world shall purify the soul." "We have forgotten that water can cleanse and fire purify, and that the earth is Mother to us all." A great longing turns from the raw ugliness of the prison cell to the clean world of out-of-doors, all the winds and seas to accomplish their work of healing, the loveliness of the spring flowers to bring comfort to the ruined soul.

All trials are trials for one's life, just as all sentences are sentences of death; and three times have I been tried. The first time I left the box to be arrested, the second time to be led back to the house of detention, the third time to pass into a prison for two years. 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.

So concludes this appealing cry from the soul's solitude. "The rest is silence." In a very little while the author was to be driven to face other, more awful, realities than imprisonment and pain.

Here is a magic of words which would make the book memorable were it the work of an imaginative creation. The actual history of its production ensures for it a permanent position in literature. "De Profundis" passes immediately to its place amongst those confessions in which men, through great bitterness and the experience of the raw edges of misery and shame, are able to testify to a meaning and purpose in [illegible]