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Oscar Wilde Scrapbook

Vol. 6

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The Anatomy of Grief.

The fact must be faced that to the majority of persons there are no very fine pleasures or very severe pains; and that the amount of enjoyment to be extracted from life depends upon the amount of anguish one is able to pay for it. A man of really sensitive mind and profound feelings does not follow the kind of existence which appealed with fatal effect to Oscar Wilde. There is in all such men a coarseness of moral fibre which protects them, after a fashion, from the worst pangs of spiritual remorse. The guilty and the mad suffer, no doubt, but they never suffer so much as the innocent and the sane can suffer for them. There were many crucifixions before the Crucifixion on Calvary, but there was never before such an Agony, and there will never again be such a Passion. And this must be the answer to all those loving and gentle souls who are perplexed and tormented by the spectacle of human sin, and the hells called up by man for each other's punishment.

> Religion does not help me. The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch, and look at. My gods dwell in temples made with hands; and within the circle of actual experience is my creed made perfect and complete; too complete, it may be, for like many or all of those who have placed their heaven in this earth, I have found in it not merely the beauty of heaven, but the horror of hell also.

The man who could write that was saved from the worst possibilities of grief. For sorrow cannot be seen, it cannot be measured, and it can never find its expression in modes of art or in terms of speech. Wilde himself did not believe in its existence till he felt tears welling in his own eyes at the squalor of a cell made by mortal hands. But the worst tears are those which are never shed, and the hardest cells are those which are invisible. There are signs in his book that he suspected this—although he did not, and would not, know it. It was his fate to miss the unseen woe, with it the unseen beauty of life; his eyes could not pierce the wall to meet the vision.

JOHN OLIVER HOBBES.

"De Profundis." By Oscar Wilde. London: 1905. Methuens. 5s. net.

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Eastern Daily Press,

THINGS SEEN.

"OUT OF THE DEPTHS."

LONDON, Saturday.

No one can read Oscar Wilde's reflections in Reading Gaol, which Messrs. Methuen publish under the title "De Profundis," without feeling much of the sadness they express. They are cries of a creature in pain, such pain as only sensitive, weak, erring souls can feel. I can imagine what his punishment cost him, for I knew him in the days when he was one of the most petted men in London, the soul of wit, fantasy, and delicate mockery. I can recal to-day meeting him at a dinner party, when he fastened on an excellent bore, and, without giving his victim so much as a dim consciousness that he was being laughed at, kept the company in riotous delight at his fun. He was a kind-hearted, weak, luxury-loving man, who denied himself nothing, and fell to the depths because, with wonderful intellectual gifts, he had no character at all. He was feted, adored, became immoderately egoistic, thought his genius would carry him anywhere, till all at once he tumbled into hopeless perdition. He was just the man whom prison would ruin beyond redemption. I once conducted an inquiry into the local prison system in London, and visited all its gaols in succession. What struck me more than anything else was the way in which the system robbed a man of all self-respect. A prisoner is treated like the dirt beneath one's feet. It is the life of a beaten animal which he leads, and he comes forth from it either a cowed or a vicious animal—more vicious than when he went in. "Does all your punishing do any good?" I once asked a well-known prison official. "I am afraid not," was the reply.

Certainly it did Oscar Wilde no good. His little book expresses the hope that a new life was dawning in him, that he would begin the world again. It was not realised. He fled over-sea after his sentence expired to the south of France, and finally settled in Paris. He lived a life of unspeakable degradation, sinking lower and lower, dwelling in the worst haunts, becoming at last incapable of all intellectual effort. The gaily decked vessel went down at last, not with colours flying, but a shattered, water-logged hulk. Let us not boast. Any man who gives the rein to a temperament like Wilde's might end the same way. Certainly, when I read the account he gives of people staring and laughing at him as he stood on Clapham Junction Station chained and attired in the vilest of dresses, I think society, which pampered and flattered him in the days of his success, had something to do with his fall. I have seen batches of prisoners similarly treated at the same railway station, and the man who would laugh at them would laugh at souls in hell.

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"De Profundis" is a profoundly melancholy book. Whether it is quite sincere is doubtful. Oscar Wilde, with his many gifts, hardly had much moral sense. Of course he felt his fall—the wreck of his genius, the ugly pitiless punishment, its horrible humiliation, the loss of everything he loved, friends, luxury, laughter, applause, that he coveted. He was kind-hearted, too, and his sins were sins of the flesh, not of malice or cruelty. But he was essentially a child, lawless, and irresponsible, and I fancy his deepest feeling about his fall was that he had been brought face to face with things that he had kept at arm's length all his life—pain, shame, sorrow, discomfort. This is the thought that constantly recurs in the course of his reflections:—

> "There was no pleasure I did not experience. 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."

And now all this gay butterfly existence—which for so pleasure-loving a soul was always delightful—was poisoned for ever. There is a terrible cry of anguish:—

> "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."

But when he begins to speak of the serious work that lay before him, and of the range of higher pleasures that belong to the saintly life, one confesses a certain scepticism. He writes almost like St. Augustine or St. Francis, so like that one is tempted to think that it is the initiative impulse of a man of genius, who could affect nearly anything without either the deepest kind of emotion or any strenuous personal effort. Of that, indeed, he was probably incapable, so soft was his nature, and if he had been the degradation of his punishment beat it out of him.

He had, however, one gift. He could write anything—in French and English—poems, plays, novels, whatever his fancy moved him to do. But he always wrote about the spirit of Christian teaching with singular beauty and insight. This weak, amiable, fallen spirit was always attracted by the stories in the Gospels of the relations between Jesus and the sinners of that day, and he said some profound things about them:—

> "Jesus . . . took children as the type of what people should try to become. He held them up as examples to their elders, which I myself have always thought the chief use of children, if what is perfect should have a use. Dante describes the soul of a man as coming from the hand of God 'weeping and laughing like a little child,' and Christ also saw that the soul of each one should be a guisa di fanciulla che piangendo e ridendo pargoleggia. He felt that

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life was changeful, fluid, active, and that to allow it to be stereotyped into any form was death. He saw that people should not be too serious over material, common interests; that to be unpractical was to be a great thing; that one should not bother too much over affairs. 'The birds didn't; why should man? He is charming when He says 'Take no thought for the morrow; is not the soul more than meat? is not the body more than raiment?' A Greek might have used the latter phrase. It is full of Greek feeling. But only Christ could have said both, and so summed up life perfectly for us.

"His morality is all sympathy, just what morality should be. If the only thing that He had ever said had been, 'Her sins are forgiven her because she loved much' it would have been worth while dying to have said it. His justice is all poetical justice, exactly what justice should be. The beggar goes to heaven because he has been unhappy. I cannot conceive a better reason for his being sent there."

Unhappy man, who could feel so truly and delicately, and yet could not himself find any way of peace. Often in this book he laments his weakness. He had ceased to be "captain of his soul"; he was himself a captive, playing with his chains. It is impossible not to connect his fall with his apostleship—perhaps it was not a very sincere apostleship—of the worship of beauty, the gospel of "art for art's sake." Sterner teachers, like Tolstoy, have created, or created the necessary reaction, against this sickly doctrine, which, indeed had a vast deal of affectation behind it. Great art is very rare, and Oscar Wilde himself, who had the artist's temperament in a singular degree, produced very little that is likely to live. He declared his intention of investigating the problem of the artistic life in its relation to conduct. But he had never treated that life as if it had any connection with conduct at all, and, so far as the conventional rules of life go, he could produce a good many witnesses—Byron, Shelley, Turner—to show that the two things are not easily reconciled. But, after all, the greatest artists of all are concerned with the most important of all subjects—how life ought to be lived, not merely with the representation of the delightful, or even the merely pretty objects in it. It was to this worship of prettiness that Oscar Wilde in his school did really tend; and as life is not at the root of it pretty, but serious and even tragic, it overwhelmed him at the last.

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The Scotsman,

De Profundis. By Oscar Wilde. 5s. net. London: Methuen & Co.

When a man looks into his own heart and tells what he finds there, he is seldom sincere. Whether he be saint or sinner, he finds it difficult to resist the temptation of making himself out better or worse than he really is. There is a good deal of this sort of insincerity in these meditations of Oscar Wilde, which we are told were writen shortly before he left prison. Yet it is vain to attempt to determine how much is genuine and how much is a pose in his protestations that this episode in his life was but to be the chrysalis stage to a fuller and fairer life which should be purged and made clean by an intimate knowledge of sorrow, and in which he should attain the ultimate realisation of the artistic life. His protestations must be read in the light of fact, and the fact was that apparently he left prison no better than he entered it, that he could do nothing, or at any rate he did nothing. Of real contrition there is hardly a trace. He leaves prison more individualistic than ever, more stubbornly attached to an individualism which kicked at every restraint of society, which recognised no obligation to his fellow-men, and was certainly the cause of his downfall. It is entirely in keeping with his view of life that he is supremely sorry for himself, but he has no sympathy to spare those who had suffered by him. That he learned something by suffering cannot be denied any more than one can fail to admire his consummate art, and his mastery of apt phrase. But literary art, however high its order, is not in itself sufficient, and though this plaint may win for its author a measure of pity its interest is too closely woven with a tale that had better be forgotten, and its appeal too morbid for it ever to rank as literature. It had better been left unpublished.

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The World,
FEBRUARY 28, 1905.

PAGES IN WAITING.

The Insanity of Genius.

There is one consideration, and one only, which fully justifies the action of those who have made themselves responsible for giving to the world the last prose work ever written by Oscar Wilde. At the first glance, it might seem that by the publication of this heartrending document, well named *De Profundis* (Methuen, 5*s.*), by the friend to whose care it was committed, a doubtful service had been rendered to the memory of its author; or, at least, that no time could have been more unhappily chosen for its appearance. The lapse of years had just begun to obliterate from public memory the details of the pitiful tragedy of which we have here the belated epilogue; and, as the name and work of this most unhappy man of genius emerged from the silence which had surrounded them since his downfall and death, there was growing up a kind of tacit understanding that, while due honour was once more rendered to his brilliant gifts and achievements, the circumstances attending the hideous wreck of his career should be allowed to rest in oblivion. Why, then, choose the present moment for reopening the whole miserable story of an almost unparalleled descent from fame and success to infamy and disgrace? What is the justification for assailing the ears of the world with an agonised echo of that very period of abysmal degradation and disaster which it would fain forget? The answer is to be found in this strange and infinitely painful, yet illuminating work itself; and it is an entirely sufficient and convincing one. It was necessary that *De Profundis* should be published, because it gives an insight into the underlying secret of its author's character and conduct such as nothing else which he said or wrote in his whole lifetime has ever afforded. It is a perfect piece of self-revelation, which puts into our hands the key by which we can read the man until we know him far better than he ever knew himself. And since the wise aphorism that "to know all is to forgive all" never applied more appositely than in this case, it follows that a truly friendly and charitable act has been performed by those who have allowed this extraordinary message from Reading Gaol to reach the eyes of the public for whom it was designed.

That which it reveals may quite possibly be missed by any who allow themselves to become absorbed in the contemplation of isolated passages or characteristics—who are specially moved to enthusiasm by its extreme beauty of literary expression, to pity by the pathetic frankness of its reminiscences of shame, or to irritation by its exasperatingly misplaced jargon of "art" at moments when the most profound and poignant of realities are claiming recognition. The thing must be studied as a whole; and as a whole it reveals, with absolute clearness, the truth that its author, with his genius, his paradoxical wit, his artistic temperament, and his fine literary and poetic endowment, was, as a matter of fact, insane, with precisely that familiar and well-defined form of insanity which causes its victims, of lower intellectual calibre, to imagine themselves kings and emperors, potentates and pontiffs. The type of mental disease which finds expression in some or other extravagant form of egomania never had a

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more hopeless victim than the writer of this most astonishing yet most enlightening of human documents. Strangely enough, there are already some who have complained of finding traces of conscious posing and studied artificiality in these wonderful pages. That is surely a mistake and a misapprehension. Passage after passage goes to strengthen the evidence that the prisoner of Reading Gaol is here acting no part, but, out of the depths of his misery and ruin, is speaking from his heart those things about himself which he honestly believes to be true. But the instructive thing is that in this broken man, weeping at his fate, lamenting his follies, and describing successive steps in the *via dolorosa* of his disgrace, we are constrained to recognise the same inveterate egomaniac whom we remember in the days of his prosperity, when it was imagined that his boundless self-worship was merely a calculated pose and affectation. Here, in the nethermost depth of his wretchedness, with the cap-and-bells of the jester-cynic fallen from his brows, we find him contemplating himself—the truth must be told—as a kind of sublime figure made perfect by suffering. His misery, he pathetically imagines, has taught him humility, and he writes: "I am one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws. . . . I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. . . . I must be far more of an individualist than ever I was. . . . Great passions are for the great of soul. . . . 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." Again and again he quotes passages from his own works as embodying the ultimate expression of philosophical wisdom; and though his gods, as he avers, "dwell in temples made with hands," he devotes page after page of exquisite verbiage to the evolution of a "romantic" and "artistic" figure of the Founder of Christianity, laboriously fashioned and modelled after his own æsthetic ideals. It is the truest charity to his memory to point to these and other abounding proofs of his obsession; for in this chronic distemper of a brilliant mind lies the explanation of all that was crooked in his life. "What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought," he says, "perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. . . . I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on." Nothing could bring out more vividly the master-fact, that it was his uncontrollable affliction of egotistical insanity which made him, in his own esteem, an exception to all laws, and led him to the catastrophe of his life. And those who appreciate his genius, and lament its melancholy extinction, will value this last prose utterance of his, not merely for its infinite pathos and singular beauty and elevation of language, but still more because it enables them to contemplate the tragedy of his career with a clearer understanding, and so with a profounder pity.

ALFRED BERLYN.

MARCH 21, 1905.

BOOKS TO BE NOTED.

This is proving an exceptionally good season for books—I mean, in so far as their quality goes. Many of the books dealing with Russia, especially Colonel Wellesley's and Mr. Villiers's, were intensely interesting and valuable; Mr. Nevison's *Books and Personalities* is being widely read and admired; while *De Profundis*, the book in which poor Oscar Wilde finally proved himself to be more of a genius than most, but more of an egomaniac than any, is in many hands.

more hopeless victim than the writer of this most astonishing yet most enlightening of human documents. Strangely enough, there are already some who have complained of finding traces of conscious posing and studied artificiality in these wonderful pages. That is surely a mistake and a misapprehension. Passage after passage goes to strengthen the evidence that the prisoner of Reading Gaol is here acting no part, but, out of the depths of his misery and ruin, is speaking from his heart those things about himself which he honestly believes to be true. But the instructive thing is that in this broken man, weeping at his fate, lamenting his follies, and describing successive steps in the *via dolorosa* of his disgrace, we are constrained to recognise the same inveterate egomaniac whom we remember in the days of his prosperity, when it was imagined that his boundless self-worship was merely a calculated pose and affectation. Here, in the nethermost depth of his wretchedness, with the cap-and-bells of the jester-cynic fallen from his brows, we find him contemplating himself—the truth must be told—as a kind of sublime figure made perfect by suffering. His misery, he pathetically imagines, has taught him humility, and he writes: "I am one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws. . . . I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. . . . I must be far more of an individualist than ever I was. . . . Great passions are for the great of soul. . . . 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." Again and again he quotes passages from his own works as embodying the ultimate expression of philosophical wisdom; and though his gods, as he avers, "dwell in temples made with hands," he devotes page after page of exquisite verbiage to the evolution of a "romantic" and "artistic" figure of the Founder of Christianity, laboriously fashioned and modelled after his own æsthetic ideals. It is the truest charity to his memory to point to these and other abounding proofs of his obsession; for in this chronic distemper of a brilliant mind lies the explanation of all that was crooked in his life. "What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought," he says, "perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. . . . I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on." Nothing could bring out more vividly the master-fact, that it was his uncontrollable affliction of egotistical insanity which made him, in his own esteem, an exception to all laws, and led him to the catastrophe of his life. And those who appreciate his genius, and lament its melancholy extinction, will value this last prose utterance of his, not merely for its infinite pathos and singular beauty and elevation of language, but still more because it enables them to contemplate the tragedy of his career with a clearer understanding, and so with a profounder pity.

ALFRED BERLYN.

MARCH 21, 1905.

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MARCH 1, 1905.

Bystander.

De Profundis
By Oscar Wilde
(Methuen and Co.: 5s. net)

The "cry of souls in pain" must always be a terrible thing to listen to, and when that cry is made with a voice trained to the highest expression of emotion, it is more terrible still. There are pages in this book, made by an outcast in a prison cell, that are as painful as any written words can be. One realises the horror, the despair, the rage, and the grief, and finally the healing conviction. "There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility," with its pitiful acceptance of sorrow as the deepest expression of life. There is a good deal in the book that appears trivial and perverse, and there are passages which seem to contradict the lessons that the writer claims to have learnt in his loneliness and pain. But the searching appeal remains, and cannot be heard without poignant emotion.

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Cheltenham Examiner,

A Lady's London Letter.

MONDAY NIGHT.

A Soul's Reclamation.

The phrase "human document" has become by constant use, almost a species of cant, but it has a very telling and deep meaning, to be known and read of all men with eyes to see and ears to hear. One such document is the life with its tragic ending of one of Ireland's brilliant sons who went under a few years ago: a story and a fate that thrilled these isles from farthest to nearest coast. A book written by him when undergoing his terrible earthly punishment is now before the public, and it will be read, I am sure, by hundreds who will reproach themselves perhaps on their harsh and hopeless judgment of the unfortunate transgressor. But I venture to think that it will prove about the most telling sermon most of us ever read or listened to, on the beautiful and sadly-neglected doctrine of charity — that charity that suffereth long and is kind, envieth not, vaunteth not, is not puffed up, thinketh no evil, beareth all things, hopeth all things, that godlike virtue which is greater even than faith or hope. The word itself means love, and some think it ought to have been so translated, but how could one ever possess charity without love? It is a beautiful old word, and speaks for itself. But if we never sinned, or perhaps could sin, as this man sinned, are we capable of loving as he loved when the bitter end came at his death? He did not lift so much as his eyes to heaven, but, as the publican, cried for mercy as a sinner. Of prison life he writes from that dreary desert, "the most terrible thing about it is, not that it breaks one's heart—hearts were made to be broken—but that it turns one's heart to stone . . . there is only one season, the season of sorrow," earth's seed-time and harvest are not for him. "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." And here, though, comes the harvest of his punishment, you can see the golden sheafs in his confession:—"I had disgraced that name (his patronymic) eternally. I had made it a low byword 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 in Wandsworth, he had longed to die, he was filled with rage when he improved in health, wished to commit suicide, or again, he "would wear gloom as a king wears purple." He wails, "it is always twilight in one's cell; it is always twilight in one's heart." The death of his mother was a terrible blow to him, for "no one knew how I loved and honoured her," but the culminating blow to the unhappy man was when he was told that the Divorce Court had given over the care of his children to other hands—"it was a blow so appalling that I did not know what to do, so I flung myself upon 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

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moment seemed to save me; I saw then that the only thing was to accept everything. The moment seemed to save me. 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," and from this was the turning point of his reclamation, his mood of bitterness began to soften, and he realised what a terrible failure he had made of his life, and to see that he must build it up again upon a new foundation, and that foundation was humility. "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 by being a *flaneur*, a dandy, a man of fashion. . . . Tired of being on the heights I deliberately went into the depths in search of new sensations. . . . I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure. . . . I ended in horrible disgrace."

To the Light.

Then he tells what he feels he must do and be towards this regeneration :—

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 existence.

In this self-training his mind went back to many incidents of his disgrace, but not with bitterness. He tells the following incident simply, and without 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.

And he then relates, in the most touching language, how one he had known in his better days, seeing him in the corridor of the Law Courts when he had been taken there from prison to be examined as a bankrupt, raised his hat gravely, as he passed the manacled prisoner, and this before the whole crowd, who viewed the action in sympathetic silence.

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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In some of the criticisms of this profoundly interesting and comforting book, a doubt is thrown on the stability of the emotions recorded. It is so difficult to realise the true repentance of any great criminal. But one article raises doubt on the score of the exquisite literature of the writing, that he was carried away by his rare gift, for there are passages in this human document that with their arresting thoughts and musical phrases are more than equal to anything this fine litterateur ever wrote. But was it necessary in recording his sensations, his repentance, to clothe his confessions in ordinary and commonplace language? Was he not to the last the exquisite artist, the fluent expressionist, the refined scholar? Vice or virtue cannot wipe these gifts out. His love of the beautiful was the dominant feeling of his better and cleaner life; in the book before me it seems to have regained its power, and to sanctify, as it were, the sordid surroundings which in memory he paints so pathetically. If "a sorrow's crown of sorrows is remembering happier things," the crown of sorrows to this man led to higher greater things. His remarkable study of Christ will be severely handled, but as literature, it, with indeed the whole volume, is worthy to take a front place in the world's classics. "And the greatest of these is charity." Let those who read the book remember these words.

Bristol Mercury

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"De Profundis," by Oscar Wilde (London: Methuen). While undergoing his punishment in Reading Prison the late Oscar Wilde wrote this remarkable monograph. We earnestly recommend it to all who can read it with charity, but beyond a word of tribute to the indescribable literary charm which pervades it, we do not propose to deal with its contents. Wilde was a great man, and the ruin he made of his life was indescribably sad.

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Sheffield Daily Telegraph,

A CRY FROM THE DEPTHS.

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"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." These words are the real explanation of this 150-page letter. The name on the title-page will arouse painful memories, and a feeling of surprise that the writer should have deliberately chosen to emerge out of that merciful oblivion that might have been his portion, in order to raise an enduring monument to his own infamy. But before the reader has got very far into these harrowing pages he will perceive that some such utterance was inevitable to a man of Oscar Wilde's temperament and artistic powers, under the crushing humiliation, and to him exquisite agony of public punishment. The letter—it was written as to his friend Robert Ross, but with the view to its ultimate publication—purports not to defend, but to explain Wilde's conduct. Yet, "explanation" the reader will look for in vain, if he expects more than a bare reference to the legal offence for which he was punished, from which we learn "that while there was much amongst the definite charges that was quite untrue, and transferred to me by revolting malice, still, my life had been full of perverse pleasures." What "perverse pleasures" are we learn from this terrible cry of the self-condemned wrong-doer:—

I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. . . . Few men hold such a position in their own lifetime, and have it so acknowledged. It is usually discerned, if discerned at all, by the historian, or the critic, long after both the man and his age have passed away. With me it was different. 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 I let myself be lured into long spells of sensual and sensuous 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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If the book explains anything it is that Wilde surrendered his whole manhood to the passion for the beautiful of all kinds except moral beauty; but that his downfall opened his eyes to that also. The reviewer is tempted to quote from almost every page, the thoughts are set down so simply, so sincerely, so sadly, and yet with such power and grace. It seems like suggesting hypocrisy and cant to state that Wilde discusses the essence of the religion of Christ with understanding and belief; but the whole work must be read to show that such suspicions are groundless. Sin, suffering, sorrow, these things he knew by experience, and we feel he has a right to speak and be heard. In any case the sheer beauty of the thoughts and of their expression will make the letter live. We can only make two extracts:—

Clergymen and people who use phrases without wisdom sometimes talk of suffering as a mystery. It is really a revelation. One discerns things one never discerned before. One approaches the whole of history from a different standpoint. What one had felt dimly, through instinct, about art, is intellectually and emotionally realised with perfect clearness of vision and absolute intensity of apprehension. 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.

This is not a conscious appeal *ad misericordiam*, but what heart can resist an emotion of pity:—

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 sorrow, but that the dreadful thing about modernity was that it put tragedy into the raiment of comedy, so that the great realities seemed common-place 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.

And he goes on to tell how he was kept standing "for the world to look at" in convict dress on the platform at Clapham Junction as train after train went by, and the people jeered at him, and jeered all the more when they knew who he was.

At least the criminal Wilde, in his nameless sufferings, was a nobler being than those who could find food for laughter in his ruin.

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Birmingham Gazette and Express
& Express.

TRAGEDY OF GENIUS

The Pathetic Story of a Soul's Travailings.*

In approaching this slight work, the only writing, so we are told, of its author during his incarceration, it is hard to put aside the prejudice naturally born of a knowledge of the sordid circumstances which brought about the conditions under which it was produced; but once one dives into its pages prejudice disappears and compassion takes its place. After all, this is but just. If Oscar Wilde's sin was great, his expiation was complete, and he is entitled to have this cry of a broken man, this exposition of his later philosophy, regarded dispassionately and with a mind cleared of cant and hatred.

Even so, one hesitates to critically discuss the subject matter of the book — which appears originally to have taken the form of a letter to a friend — and perhaps it is safer to content oneself with a few quotations and such brief commentary as may be required to present a coherent view of the scope and nature of what the writer has to say.

In an accompanying letter to Mr. Robert Ross, who is responsible for seeing the book through the Press, the author gives an indication of his motive in writing his more detailed epistle and of the spirit in which it was written in the following words:

> Whether or not the 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 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.

The Motive.

To get yet nearer to the spirit of t book it is advisable here to turn to the middle portion of it in order to give an idea of the transitions of feeling through which the author passed—from absolute despair and longing for death in the earlier stages of his imprisonment,

Birmingham Gazette & Express.

TRAGEDY OF GENIUS

The Pathetic Story of a Soul's Travailings.*

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To get yet nearer to the spirit of the book it is advisable here to turn to the middle portion of it in order to give an idea of the transitions of feeling through which the author passed—from absolute [illegible] in the earlier stages of his imprisonment,

through a period during which he was filled with a great rage at the fate that had befallen him and with the world that had punished him, to a deep and hopeless melancholy, changing at the last to a saner, healthier and more cheerful view of his situation—to a desire to live and as far as possible atone for his wasted life of the past and to yet do some of the work of the world along the lines his artist's temperament told him his calling lay.

There is always the danger in giving disconnected passages of this kind that the full tendency of the current of the writer's mind may not be accurately presented, so I preface the subjoined quotation with the assertion that it seems to me no really unbiased person, no matter how much he may differ at times from the writer's conclusions, his theology, or his presentment of philosophic propositions, can for a moment doubt his absolute candour and sincerity:

> 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: 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 see it would be both ungrateful and unkind of me to pull so long a face that when my friends came to see me they would have to make their faces still longer in order to show their sympathy; or, if I desired to entertain them, to invite them to sit down silently to bitter herbs and funeral-baked meats. I must learn how to be cheerful and happy. . . . . And that, in the views I am here shaping for myself, I am quite right is shown to me by the fact that now for the first time since my imprisonment I have a real desire for life.

Elsewhere, in different parts of the book, the writer elaborates these varying phases of his mental life and the ultimate point of thought concerning himself to which he attained. For instance, in one place he says:

> 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.