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Oscar Wilde  
Scrapbook

Vol. 6

## CHRISTIAN.

***A Soul in  
Prison.***

One of the most tragic and pathetic things we have seen for long enough is a posthumous book just published, in which the soul of one who suffered at the hands of the law for fearful vices is laid bare. This "*De Profundis*" is the wail of a soul in prison. It is the awakening of a man to the sense of his sin and shame. All the horror of a wasted life is there; a famous name disgraced, a future mortgaged. But the saddest thing of all is that this man, awakened to the terrible nakedness and pollution of his own soul, has no Gospel that he can receive. Morality and religion have no message for him. How many more souls are there like his, all hidden from the world, yet tormented in secret! The effect of such a tragic revelation as this should be to quicken Christian sympathy and earnestness. The men who in their moments of pride repudiate the Gospel, come to a terrible hunger for it later, when they are driven to the swine. It is not in public gatherings that such men will be helped; they never frequent them. They must be sought out and helped individually.

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## SUNDAY SCHOOL CHRONICLE.

## DE PROFUNDIS.\*

This is an amazing book viewed as a confession, more amazing for the contrast it offers to all its author had written previously, most amazing of all for the situation and atmosphere in which it was conceived and composed. It adds another, and a thrilling, chapter to the tragedies of literature, for surely it is one of the saddest books in the world. We are confronted with the spectacle of genius prostituted to ignominious and debasing pleasures, wrung with anguish, turning its sting against itself, and pouring out its life-blood in passages of exquisite prose, but withal of unavailing remorse.

Oscar Wilde, the darling of many a luxurious drawing-room, the brilliant wit whose sallies stirred ripples of laughter, his epigrams repeated in every club, a writer of social comedies of such distinction as to be named with Sheridan, a brilliant essayist, however paradoxical and bizarre, above all, an unapologetic egoist—this was the man who fell under the most ignominious condemnation, and was doomed to expiate his intolerable offence in the privation, solitude, and debasement of a convicts' prison. What wonder that after two years' experience of such a fate there came forth out of the depths of his

soul the cry of anguished self-knowledge and unavailing sorrow? Yet so strong is the native egotism of the man, so inveterate his habit of seeing all conventions upside down, so natural is it for him to pose in unexpected, startling attitudes when brought face to face with current opinions and with sentiments on the gravest of subjects, that he cannot resist the temptation to paradox. Truth was, perhaps, the last thing he prized. He had sacrificed it too often in order to be sensational. It is not surprising, therefore, that the doubt should be started whether this confession is not a mere *tour de force* of his egotism, and whether he is not simulating a suffering he did not feel. But

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the spectacle he presented to those who came into contact with him after his release, when living in poverty at Paris, the loss of power, the hopeless incompetence of all his attempts to reknit the broken threads of his literary work, and the abject squalor into which he rapidly sank, show that *De Profundis* was the swan-song of his genius, and that when he came out of gaol he left his genius behind him as a memory to haunt his cell.

He tells us that his sorrow had given birth to humility. He had discovered it hidden away in his nature, like a treasure in a field, and he proposed to take this with him in the future, and explore the world of sorrow.

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

There is even a deeper note in another passage. Wilde would write Nature where another man would write God, but we can never believe that the man who could pen the following paragraph had not desecrated some gleam of the Light that was never on land or sea.

"Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on just and unjust 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."

Some of his prison hours were whiled away in reading "the four prose poems," as he calls the Gospels, in the original Greek, and the result of the study is a singular presentation of "the Galilean peasant as the Precursor of the Romantics"—an artist, whose life was a poem, whose justice was a poetic justice, sending the beggar Lazarus to Heaven to compensate him for his sufferings, and who waged war, like all children of light have to do in all ages, with the Philistines. We shall attempt no criticism of this certainly unique view of the Christ, seen through the egotistical glasses of the man who accounted himself before all

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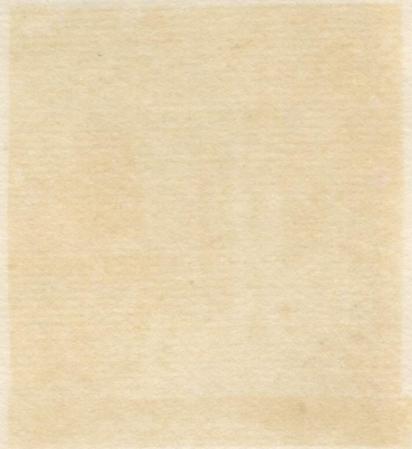
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things an artist. It reminds us of some passages in Rénan's *Vie de Jésus*, in which the gallantry natural to a Frenchman colours his representation of the Prophet of Galilee, and the offence is scarcely greater.

There is no need to point the moral of Oscar Wilde's life and fate. We close the book, saddened, pitiful, and awed. He is said to have found rest in the Roman Catholic Church, and no doubt among the ministers of that communion there are some who could furnish the key to several of the dark passages in *De Profundis*.

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**Sussex Daily News.****NEW BOOKS & NEW EDITIONS****"OUT OF THE DEEPS."**

At long intervals in the history of literature a book appears so unique in itself and in its authorship and circumstances that one feels instinctively that it belongs to the permanent things. The chorus of critical astonishment and perplexity over "De Profundis" (London: Methuen and Company) is perfectly natural, but the book would have lived without any such aid to publicity. It cannot, indeed, from the very nature of it, ever become a popular book, and it is really not desirable that it should. Such a work (it is quite short) can only be understood by experts in psychology and letters. The "man in the street" would put it aside in hopeless mental confusion. It was written by Oscar Wilde in prison, and Mr. Robert Ross, who contributes a preface, says it was the last work in prose he ever wrote. The famous "Ballad of Reading Gaol" was composed after he regained his liberty.

"I don't defend my conduct," says Oscar Wilde; "I explain it." He does not even explain it entirely; it may be that he really only understood himself when it was too late for him to speak. There is nothing in the book about the infinitely pathetic closing scene in the little room in Paris. That terrible story is known to a few, and it might have been told in this volume; it will have to be told. "Religion does not help me," Oscar Wilde cried in prison, but it did help him in the still more awful desertion at the end, when he yielded obedience to the Catholic faith. It was his only refuge when all the world had forsaken him. No localised religious system could have known what to do with such a man: it was left for Sisters of Mercy to minister to the outcast at the last, and prepare him for burial. There is nothing in all his life so wonderful as that; it is the continuance of the miraculous story of the divine touch upon the leper.

"De Profundis" makes strange and painful reading. Sometimes it is vividly true: "People whose desire is solely for self-realisation never know where they are going;" "My ruin came not from too much individualism of life, but from too little;" "I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character."

Sometimes he is both true and false. "In sublimity of soul there is no contagion. High thoughts and high emotions are by their very existence isolated." He contradicts this later when he says: "By being brought into Christ's presence one becomes something."

Oscar Wilde was a living paradox; he admired simplicity, but shunned it in his own life; he had an intense perception of beauty and he did inconceivably ugly things; he paid noble tribute to morality and scoffed at it in his life; he was a man of genius, and prostituted his brilliant gifts. It was impossible for ordinary people to comprehend so exceptional, so hectic, so paradoxical a nature, and when the conventional forces got their chance he was of course broken like a butterfly on the wheel. He had to pay the price to the uttermost; no touch of public infamy was spared him:—

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Everything about my tragedy has been hideous, mean, repellent, lacking in style; our very dress makes us grotesque. We are the zany of sorrow. We are clowns whose hearts are broken. We are specially designed to appeal to the sense of humour. On November 13th, 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.

This is a dreadful modern example of the washing of hands in the blood of scapegoats. Convicts in prison dress are frequently seen at the Brighton Central Station waiting for trains to Lewes, and surely it cannot be otherwise than a painful and barbarous sight from which every right-minded person must turn away in pity and indignation.

There are things in "De Profundis" which make the fate of its author seem still more tragically pitiful. The book contains a summary of our Lord's Passion, the adoring tenderness and beauty of which can scarcely be paralleled in modern religious literature:—

The little supper with His companions, one of whom has already sold Him for a price; the anguish in the quiet moon-lit garden; the false friend coming close to Him with a kiss; the friend who still believed in Him, and on whom as on a rock, He had hoped to build a house of refuge for Man, denying Him as the bird cried to the dawn; His own utter loneliness, His submission, His acceptance of everything; and along with it all such scenes as the high priest of orthodoxy rending his raiment in wrath, and the Magistrate of civil justice calling for water in the vain hope of cleansing himself of the innocent blood that makes him the scarlet figure of history; the coronation ceremony of sorrow, one of the most wonderful things in the whole of recorded time; the crucifixion of the Innocent One before the eyes of His mother, and the disciple whom He loved; the soldiers gambling and throwing dice for His clothes; the terrible death by which He gave the world its most eternal symbol; and His final burial in the tomb of the rich man; His body smothered in Egyptian linen with costly spices and perfumes as though He had been a king's son.

Again and again come heart-piercing cries from his soul's solitude. He lost while in prison his mother, his wife, his children. Nothing remained but a great bitterness; and yet here is the final passage in the book:—

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 let 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.

It is true, no doubt, that the man who could write like this has the last word; but he had to write it under the shadow of death.

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**British Weekly.****OBSERVATIONS.**

Like other people, I have tried over and over to keep a diary, but have never succeeded. It has occurred to me to write occasionally a diary of the week if the readers of THE BRITISH WEEKLY care to read it. Last Thursday I started at twelve o'clock in a bleak and bitter day for Surrey. I love Surrey so well that in any weather I find it the most beautiful place in the world. It has for me so many associations so many memories

"Sweet with buried Junes,  
Filled with the light of suns that are no more."

It has besides been the home of many men I like to think of. Leigh Hunt says somewhere that he could never go through Westminster without remembering Milton, or the Borough without thoughts of Chaucer and Shakespeare, or Bloomsbury-square without thinking of Steele and Akenside. When he was on congenial work his path lay through a neighbourhood in which Dryden had lived, and though nothing could be more commonplace, he refreshed heart and soul by going a little out of the way that he might pass through Gerrard-street, and so give himself the shadow of a pleasant thought.

**SURREY AND ITS ASSOCIATIONS.**

So on that angry day I looked out at the window and thought of Miss Thackeray, Mrs. Oliphant, and Mr. Morley at Wimbledon. At Ashted I remembered my first visit to Mark Rutherford and my walk by the long straight road to his house. At Epsom I thought of George Gissing. It was there that he passed through the extremes of joy and sorrow.

**DE PROFUNDIS.**

I had in my hands the little book, "De Profundis," by Oscar Wilde, just published by Methuen and Co. It was, I think, a pity to revive the miserable shame and scandal. It would have been better that the author's name should have been forgotten. I will not attempt to review the book, but one or two things may be said. It is not the book of a penitent. Up to a certain point there is a note of more than regret. He is miserable because he has brought shame on a name which his father and mother carried in honour and to honour. In a collection of prison inscriptions I once saw the following:

"There are three things that grieve my mind  
is leaving the wife, and kid, and old  
people Behind."

# British Weekly.

## OBSERVATIONS.

Like other people, I have tried over and over to keep a diary, but have never succeeded. It has occurred to me to write occasionally a diary of the week if the readers of THE BRITISH WEEKLY care to read it. Last Thursday I started at twelve o'clock in a bleak and bitter day for Surrey. I love Surrey so well that in any weather I find it the most beautiful place in the world. It has for me so many associations so many memories

"Sweet with buried Junes,  
Filled with the light of suns that are no more."

It has besides been the home of many men I like to think of. Leigh Hunt says somewhere that he could never go through Westminster without remembering Milton, or the Borough without thoughts of Chaucer and Shakespeare, or Bloomsbury-square without thinking of Steele and Akenside. When he was on congenial work his path lay through a neighbourhood in which Dryden had lived, and though nothing could be more commonplace, he refreshed heart and soul by going a little out of the way that he might pass through Gerrard-street, and so give himself the shadow of a pleasant thought.

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"There are three things that grieve my mind  
is leaving my wife and kid and old  
people Behind."

And such is the general tenour, I believe, of words written in the circumstances. But as Wilde came nearer liberation, his old nature asserted itself, and from the stories published by acquaintances in Paris, we know how his tragical career closed. There is in it, however, the unmistakable note of sharp pain, and one part of his sufferings at least might have been spared him. He tells us that when he was brought down from prison to London he had to stand half an hour on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress and handcuffed, for the world to look at. When people saw him they laughed, and when they knew who he was they laughed still more, so that he stood in the grey November rain surrounded by a jeering mob. "For a year after that was done to me, I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time." This is horrible. What right have we to brutalise our convicts, however guilty they may be? When a man has endured his punishment he ought to have a chance. In many things we are still in the savage state, and in fact behind it.

There is a great deal in the little book about Christ. Some things are said with perfect intuition. There are sentences in which this unhappy criminal reads the New Testament precisely as Spurgeon read it, and in the sense that is now contested by many Christians. But there is also much that is horrible. I see that many critics have praised the style of these passages, and they are undeniably well written. But I could point to many sermons which are very much better written, much superior as literature, and yet such is the prejudice against sermons that few critics will see it.

#### WESLEY AND LEATHERHEAD.

So musing, I came to my destination at Leatherhead. It was in that beautiful old town that John Wesley preached his last sermon. The house where he preached it is still standing, and through the great kindness of the lady who occupies it, I was permitted to go through it, and in particular to see the long, low dining-room where Wesley preached. At the most, a hundred people might have got in, and perhaps none of them dreamed that they were present on a historic occasion. I believe the name of the owner of the house in Wesley's day has not yet been discovered. Wesley and Methodism is active and thriving in Leatherhead and in Surrey generally. For various reasons Non-conformity has long been weak in Surrey, but it is everywhere reviving.

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CATHOLIC TIMES.

MARCH 3, 1903.

DE PROFUNDIS. By Oscar Wilde.  
(Methuen and Co.) 5s. net.

Like the cry of a giant in pain, or the wail of a soul suffering in the lake of fire, is this outburst of agony, which was penned by one too well known within his prison walls. It reminds us of the weird scenes of the "Inferno." The sad man lays bare his soul, and shrieks at the vision he discovers there. Nothing like it has been published for long years, and it needs little prophecy to foretell for it a wide circle of readers and a steady, perhaps enduring life. Many things are touching, more sad; wine and gall are mingled together in the cup. Yet sorrow has her victory. Says the penitent soul: "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." But the sorrow is not repentance. We read again, a little further: "I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. I did it to the full, as one should do everything that one does. 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 then came scandal, conviction, and prison fare; revolt, impatience of life, humility, submission to necessity. But not penitence; that was to follow, when the world was revisited. He dreaded his re-entering in it. "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 rock where I may hide, and sweet 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." They are the last lines of the book; their spirit did much, doubtless, to lift his soul to higher, to supernatural thoughts, and help him to direct his lonely steps to the haven of peace and rest. While human confessions interest mankind, "De Profundis" will have its readers, and may possibly be a classic. For it contains much to admire, in spite of something we must regret. But its author was groping, as one blind; groping in the dark, towards the light. And the light was hidden, as yet.

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PUBLIC OPINION.

THE book of the week has been Oscar Wilde's "De Profundis," which has attracted much attention, both on its merits and as a tragic human document. There has been a run on it, and one big West-End bookseller alone has already sold 400 copies. It is a dangerous book to put into the hands of the irresponsible who would be a moral sanction unto themselves. But it is full of pathos. "If," wrote its author, "I can produce only one beautiful work of art I shall be able to rob malice of its venom, and cowardice of its sneer, and to pluck out the tongue of scorn by the roots."

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## Black and White.

MARCH 4, 1905.

## THE BOOK WORLD\*

\* *De Profundis*. By Oscar Wilde. (Methuen, 5s. net.)

"MOST people," declares Oscar Wilde in *De Profundis*, the final prose expression of his attitude to life, "are other people." This is one of those paradoxes of which he was so fond—paradoxes full of a terrible wisdom. In the sphere of writing or of painting, as in the sphere of living itself, we are for the most part inclined to play the part of "the sedulous ape" in a degree which would have made even Stevenson in his boyhood shudder. If Wilde himself had been nothing more than an echo of Whistler and Pater, as so many declare that he was, one would not by this time be interested either in his personality or his prose. No doubt he assumed many Whistlerian attitudes and uttered many phrases that might have bloomed in that garden of beautiful words which was cultivated by Walter Pater. He had, as he himself saw, the temperament that absorbs: he compared himself in a perfect sonnet to a lute upon which all the winds could play. Still, the sensitive instrument that was capable of the strange ultimate music was himself. No mere plagiarist could have written *Lady Windermere's Fan* or the sonnet called *Hélas!* or *A Ballad of Reading Gaol*, any more than a plagiarist could have composed the music of *The Messiah*.

I am sure that what will amaze the world more than anything else in *De Profundis* is the proof it affords of the reality of Wilde's self-consciousness and egoism. That he often attitudinised for effect, and was audacious with words for the mere sake of audacity, cannot be denied. This, however, was only the comic side, the masked face, of one who loved strange and beautiful things with all his soul, and believed firmly in his own mission as a prophet of loveliness and a woe to Philistinism in life as in art. "I was a man," he declares, "who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. I had realised this for myself at the very dawn of my manhood, and had forced my age to realise it afterwards. Few men hold such a position in their own lifetime, and have it so acknowledged." "Byron," he writes further, "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 greater part of *De Profundis* consists of variations—very personal and very impressive variations—upon that theme. There are variations in every mood of self-abasement, of self-eulogy, of hysterical repentance, of the heroic and unconquerable paganism that regrets nothing. This is a sacred book that only those should read who have cast aside prejudice because they, too, have had their hearts broken. It is the testament of a rebellious angel who strove against the ugly things, and the ordinary things, and the lawful things of the world, and perished before evening through some cruel fault of fate—or through his own fault, as he asserts. Centuries hence pitiful eyes will be reading in these pages how a man aspired to steal from the gods a forbidden beauty, and to bring it down among men, and how, Prometheus like, he suffered, and in his sufferings all else will be forgotten. The world must remember the man in the light of his adoration of Christ—Christ whom he regarded as the great enemy of laws, and ceremonies, and Sabbaths and Philistinisms. There is of course, a deal of hair-splitting in Wilde's elaboration of his view that Christ was no "mere philanthropist," but the "supreme individualist." One is not concerned with the logic of the expounder, however, but with the expounder's personality. His notions, as stated here, may be wrong and mad; but they are the reflection of a rare and sincere and beautiful temperament.



Onlooker,

*A BOOK OF THE WEEK.*

De Profundis. . . Out of the depths have I called unto Thee. That has been the bitter experience of an unnumbered host of human beings, since man was man and sin was sin. All we, like sheep, have gone astray. We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. But this book,\* this pitiful echo of a shameful story, was bound, in whatever spirit it was written, to express with extraordinary force the universal cry of erring humanity. The marvel is that it was written. Except to those who knew of its existence it comes with the paralysing shock of the utterly unexpected. If ever a man, gifted with a voice of pre-eminently distinguished beauty of expression, as well as of surpassing cleverness, had passed before his death into the outer darkness of dumb oblivion, that man was the brilliant thinker and writer whose name with a swift and horrible suddenness became a byword of reproach, whose brilliant career was terminated as suddenly as though by the hangman's rope when he passed within the gateway of Reading Gaol. And yet, here is this book, this living, breathing, speaking human document, which, whether or no it is destined to live on through the ages, possesses for us who read it to-day, who call to mind the squalid tragedy of which it is the outcome, a far more striking reality than any mere literary creation, however distinguished, could possibly convey.

It is the snare of all inefficient prison chaplains, and the despair of those who are wise and earnest about their work, that it is ever the hardest villains that make the most ardent protestations of gratitude for their ministry. And at first sight it might be possible to suspect "De Profundis" of being simply a phenomenally successful example of this kind of imposture. Or, again, and for this it would be easy to argue with a much greater show of justification, the book might be looked upon as a purely artistic creation—the work of a man who, after the immediate results of the shock of his disgrace and punishment had subsided, instinctively asked himself in what way, as an artist, he could most fitly and beautifully behave himself towards the position to which he was inevitably committed. The first of these possibilities is completely dispelled by the tone of the whole book. The second is more probable. At all events, if he had asked himself that question, he could hardly have happened upon a more satisfying and complete answer. His book is not only the work of a master-artist: the sadness of it, the beauty of it, the conceit of self-abasement of it, the extraordinarily deft workmanship of it make it exactly what it ought to have been from an artistic point of view, under the altogether peculiar circumstances.

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But, allowing that this to some extent may have been the case, admitting that his subconscious self may unconsciously have been actuated by some such motives, there is in almost every page of the book a reality and genuineness of feeling which completely outweighs and redeems any pose that it may contain. As certainly as it is the creation of an artist, it is the outpouring of a man who has suffered as intensely as man can. And with what result?

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.

And again:—

Most people live for love and admiration. But it is by love and admiration that we should live. If any love is shown us we should recognise that we are quite unworthy of it. Nobody is worthy to be loved. The fact that God loves man shows us that in the Divine order of ideal things, it is written that eternal love is to be given to what is eternally unworthy. Or if that phrase seems to be a bitter one to bear, let us say that everyone is worthy of love, except he who thinks that he is. Love is a sacrament that should be taken kneeling, and *Domine, non sum dignus* should be on the lips and in the hearts of those who receive it.

And this of the suffering that came before the secret of love was learnt:—

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.

Believing, then, that self-conscious as this man was, his last book was a true revelation of himself and his thoughts, and therefore to other men a genuine reality, it seems that this crowning mercy was shown to him, that "out of the bitter came forth sweet," for others as well as for himself. His creed, as he evolved it, was, for all the beautiful words and thoughts that he has written here about the founder of the Christian religion, a pagan one. Neither religion, he writes, nor morality, nor reason could help him at all. But such as it was, and as far as it went, it was of extraordinary beauty and truth. And the conclusion is this:—

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.

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