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Oscar Wilde  
Scrapbook

Vol. 6

So he finished his book, as he began and continued, with the one dominating thought of himself. Natural enough perhaps. And yet was not this the lack from which he suffered, the power of the abandonment of self, and was selflessness the one characteristic of the divine man of whom he writes, the beauty of which he failed to see? There is sad irony in that thought, just as there is bitter irony in this, that the greatest paradox of his life was, long after his death, to set all the forces of the literary world writing of him in this strain.

\* "De Profundis." By Oscar Wilde. (Methuen.)

### Modern Society,

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The last work of the late Oscar Wilde, "De Profundis," written during the closing months of his imprisonment, contains many moving passages. But here is the most pathetic. On November 13th, 1895, he stood for half-an-hour in convict dress, and handcuffed, on the centre platform of Clapham Junction. "I had been taken out of the hospital ward without a moment's notice. Of all possible objects I was the most grotesque. When people saw me they laughed. Each train as it came up swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was, of course, before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed they laughed still more. For half-an-hour I stood there in the grey November rain, surrounded by a jeering mob. For a year after that was done to me I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time." It was unfair; it was not in the sentence. But let those tears atone!

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## LONDON OPINION.

## A SOUL'S AGONY.\*

By G. H. NORTHCROFT.

*"Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord!"—PSALM cxxx.*

IN the world of letters, at least, this is an age of self-revelation. The causes and the uses of it we may not now discuss. The fact is abundantly plain. Letters, real and anonymous, autobiographies more intimate than ever in their disclosures, and quite personal touches in works usually impersonal, are presented weekly for public purchase and consideration. Illustrations of many kinds occur to the memory at once. It is the day of the Human Document.

But nothing quite like this little book has been written in living memory.

**A Unique Epistle.**

We have heard other voices calling from the prison cell; but this tone is new and touching even to tears. And the cause of it is to be found in the eternal instinct of the artist-nature. The writer puts it thus in a letter to his friend, Robert Ross, who introduces his last book to a new public; for Oscar Wilde's old public has passed away.

"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."

This accounts for the book as a piece of literary craftsmanship. But what will sufficiently account for the circumstances under which it was born? I am not thinking of the causes that bore its author to prison, but of the fact that it was born in Reading Gaol. As to the former, he speaks thus—

"I ruined myself, and nobody, great or small, can be ruined except by his own hand. . . . This pitiless indictment I bring without pity against myself. . . . There are many things of which I was convicted that I had not done; but then there are many things of which I was convicted that I had done, and a still greater number of things in my life for which I was never indicted at all."

This is not an *apologia*, it is an acknowledgment as fine in its reticence as in its humility. For no reason need the book be shunned; for many reasons it should be studied. An important one is indicated thus—

"Terrible as was what the world did to me, what I did to myself was far more terrible still."

**Our Method of Punishment.**

It is probably eight years since these words were written. Not a few events have since then raised a question as to the wisdom, the value, of our method of dealing with criminals. Is it a complete answer to a passage such as the following to say, "It was his own fault; serve him right"?

"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 was done to me I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time. That is not such a tragic thing as possibly it sounds to you. 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 the criminal in question was he of whose first volume of poems Swinburne said—so an intimate friend of Wilde tells me—that it was the most promising first volume since Keats. Well may he write on an earlier page—

"Society takes upon itself the right to inflict appalling punishment on the individual, but it also has the supreme vice of shallowness, and fails to realise what it has done. When the man's punishment is over, it leaves him to himself, it abandons him at the very moment when its highest duty towards him begins. It is really ashamed of its own actions, and shuns those whom it has punished as people shun one on whom they have inflicted an irreparable wrong."

When will science, to say nothing of human sympathy, make our system of punishment a wiser means to the gracious end of individual recovery rather than a wooden system perpetuating it?

So much at least must be said of the circumstances under which this record of a spirit in prison was penned.

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**The Treasure of the Lowly.**

But there is another side—the inward, spiritual significance of it—to be considered. Rage, stoicism, selfish grief—he passed through all these phases. And then he found it.

"Now I find hidden in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all. That something hidden away in my nature, like a treasure in a field, is Humility."

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Society has no place for the return of the Prodigal. Its corporate instinct of self-preservation is too strong. And the absence of such a refuge is at once the measure and the condemnation of our Christianity. But there is a Place. Did Wilde find it? I will make his words my answer.

"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."

The experience is sufficiently convincing, but the explanation of it is not. He says he found his soul. Rather, I should say, he heard—as did another criminal, hearing long ago in shame and agony, the just punishment of his sin—a Voice which spake Peace to his soul. So by the thorny road of Penitence he reached the Place of Refuge.

#### Lessons of Suffering.

When to Wilde's intense artistic temperament and culture was added the discipline of pain, and after he had found the treasure of penitence, many fine flashes of insight and expression became possible. It is these which, even to the casual reader, make this book notable.

"Clergymen and people who use phrases without wisdom sometimes talk of suffering as a mystery. It is really a revelation."

Later he says—

"It seems to me that love is the only possible explanation of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world. 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."

Here are other stars that shine from a sombre sky—

"Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation—"

a lesson, surely, to be learned only in solitude; and there are few places of utter quiet left to the modern worldling except a prison.

"Christ did not say, 'Live for others,' but He pointed out that there was no difference at all between the lives of others and one's own life."

Perhaps the finest thing in the book is his characterisation of Christ, and his exposition of some of His sayings.

"He does not really teach one everything, but by being brought into His presence one becomes something."

And the last paragraph of all in this haunting book will be quoted and copied all over the world, so tender, so poignant is its beauty; hardly ever has the solace of Nature been more exquisitely expressed.

One hopes, and almost is convinced, that none will hearken to this voice from the depths and fail to be assured alike of the sincerity as of the pathos of its message.

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## OUTLOOK

## OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

DE PROFUNDIS. By Oscar Wilde. London: Methuen. 5s.

Two simple impressions were left on my mind when I had read the history of his soul in prison, written by Oscar Wilde. One was that it was poignantly touching, the other that it was extraordinarily and profoundly interesting. A man to whom applause was a primary need of life, acutely sensitive to beauty, impatient of any control, had fallen in squalid ruin, amidst common execration, and was condemned to two years of, perhaps, the most hideous and unlovely life ever devised by man for his fellows. How far he deserved it all is here an irrelevant consideration. It is relevant to remember that if we can put aside that for which he suffered, he was very far from being a man with whom sympathy was impossible. It is the callous, the mean, the vindictive, with whom we find it hard to sympathise. This was a humane man, generous to his friends, placable to his enemies. His books and plays had given thousands delightful moments of thought and fun. Well, such a man had to suffer such a punishment. He had to find himself again in it, some sort of tolerable relation he had to find between himself and life, some meaning in it all not utterly unbearable. Inevitably, however, being an artist, one to whom expression was necessary in a degree the average man can never understand, he had to put this meaning into words, for the world or not, at least for himself. Any record of all this must have been touching; the actual record is profoundly interesting. These, as I said, were the two simple impressions on my mind. They seemed to need no qualification. But when I heard the book discussed and read other people's opinions about it, I found that to many its interest was qualified, i. not vitiated, by what they thought its insincerity. I think this criticism shallow, and it will help me to express how the book is significant to me if I explain why I think so.

It is said that the writing of the book, with its fine phrases and coloured imagery, is not that of a man who truly felt distress of soul, as apart from physical hardship. I am not thinking, of course, of writers to whom all manners of writing but their own slovenly verbiage are hateful, just as there are people who hate all speech that has not a cockney accent. To them Oscar Wilde's style is "affected," and there's an end of the matter. But people who heartily admire his style, so limpid and graceful, so brilliant in its unforced elegance and adornment, think that here the use of it is a token of insincerity. Surely, rather, its absence would have been. It had grown into his nature; he could not write differently without an effort. The humility of spirit he says he had gained was not needful to change his manner, if changed it could have been: his physical sufferings and privations, the reality of which, at least, no one can deny, would have done that. But it was unchangeable, and so far

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from finding its use insincere, I think it merely another thing to touch one—that to the setting forth of the sad doctrine now dominant in his mind he brought so naturally and instinctively the gift of his poetry and eloquence, sometimes even of his wit. Again, it is said that he lived for three years when he was free and showed no sign that the mood and determination professed in this letter *De Profundis*, persisted in him. It may have been so. It was a thousand pities, a grievous waste. Pathologically considered, it was surely inevitable. A life-long indulgence of the senses, followed by a sudden, complete, and prolonged starving of them, must have put a tax on the brain which none but the very greatest could bear. The sentence of two years' hard labour was a sentence of death to his mental energy. But how does that make *De Profundis* insincere? There is no sign in it even that he foresaw the second tragedy of failure which awaited him, or mistrusted his power to live his "new life," still less that he did not mean to do his best. The event was pitiable. The determination was fine and was nobly expressed, and to confuse with it the weakness of fulfilment which awaited it is shallow and unjust.

He did not determine to be a better man; that, he says characteristically, would have been "a piece of unscientific cant." But "to have become a deeper man is the privilege of those who have suffered. And such I think I have become." He wanted to live so that he might explore the "new world" of sorrow in which he had been living. "If I can produce only one beautiful work of art I shall be able to rob malice of its venom, and cowardice of its sneer, and to pluck out the finger of scorn by the roots." That was a natural human resolve, and this work of art, it is clear, was to be the expression of that fuller and deeper life which sorrow had taught him. It is extraordinarily interesting. The man who all his life had been the prophet of joy, shunning all gloom and distress as a "mode of imperfection," was to preach the gospel of sorrow, how it is "the ultimate type both in life and art." Oscar Wilde had a brilliant imagination and a power of thought both subtle and at times profound, but he was no philosopher with a system impervious to logic and analysis; it was, perhaps, an unlucky vanity that made him think himself one. In the complete philosophy of this gospel of sorrow, as he sketches it, there

are inconsistencies and exaggerations. It goes back to old, insoluble mysteries. But he had arrived through bitterness and tears at a truth which clearly he had realised in all its force; the truth that as men are, as the world is, only those who have known sorrow, sorrow bitter and in itself hopeless, are complete, that the most amicable natures that always have lived in the sunshine must lack tenderness and the deeper moods of love. For "behind joy and laughter there may be a temperament coarse, hard, and callous; but behind sorrow there is always sorrow." Oscar Wilde was not a philosopher. In his fashion he was a prophet, and prophets to be of any use in the world must be extreme. The interesting thing is that this one had preached one extreme,

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There are many fine thoughts in this book, many pieces of charming prose which I might quote. But anyone who cares to read what I think of this *De Profundis* will have read the book itself and admired, as I have, the strength of an artistic nature that moved towards beauty so inevitably, even over the most hideous obstacles—admired the bold statement and the gracious ornament, the unfailing sense of words and cadences, and such a finely-sustained study as that, daring, sometimes whimsical, but always justified by feeling, of the human Christ. Nor is it an occasion for any attempt to define Oscar Wilde's place in English literature ; the book before me is too acutely personal for that. Some day, I hope, a critic fit for the task will succeed in clearing his mind from all evil associations and give us a clear and full appreciation of the written achievements. Much there is, again, in the book about which I might argue, or assert opposing opinions. But I think it would be an impertinence at the moment, and am content to have expressed my sense of the book's significance, being, as it is, the work, tragically written, of a genius whose ruin was one of the saddest tragedies in my lifetime.

G. S. STREET.

and was on his way to preach the opposite. Had his intellect and energy endured he might have ended by seeing some way for the hedonist and the mystic to walk together ; then, indeed, he would have been a philosopher at last.

There are many fine thoughts in this book, many pieces of charming prose which I might quote. But anyone who cares to read what I think of this *De Profundis* will have read the book itself and admired, as I have, the strength of an artistic nature that moved towards beauty so inevitably, even over the most hideous obstacles—admired the bold statement and the gracious ornament, the unfailing sense of words and cadences, and such a finely-sustained study as that, daring, sometimes whimsical, but always justified by feeling, of the human Christ. Nor is it an occasion for any attempt to define Oscar Wilde's place in English literature ; the book before me is too acutely personal for that. Some day, I hope, a critic fit for the task will succeed in clearing his mind from all evil associations and give us a clear and full appreciation of the written achievements. Much there is, again, in the book about which I might argue, or assert opposing opinions. But I think it would be an impertinence at the moment, and am content to have expressed my sense of the book's significance, being, as it is, the work, tragically written, of a genius whose ruin was one of the saddest tragedies in my lifetime.

"BUT YET THE PITY OF IT! THE PITY OF IT!"

DE PROFUNDIS. By Oscar Wilde. London: Methuen. 5s. net. THE words which I have chosen for the title of the reflections which I am allowed to make on the wrecked career of a genius—the despairing cry of Othello to his tormentor Iago—seem to me well fitted to express what ought to be the comment of Manhood—not to say Charity—on Oscar Wilde. Very different, I regret to say, has been the verdict of the World. It is, for the most part, that of the passengers who came into Clapham Junction on November 13, 1895; I give it in his own pathetic words (*De Profundis*, p. 131):

"From two o'clock till half-past two on that day I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in prison dress and handcuffed for the world to look at. When people saw me they laughed. Each train as it came up swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed they laughed still more. For half an hour I stood there in the grey November rain surrounded by a jeering mob. For a year after that was done to me I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time. 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.

"Well, now I am really beginning to feel more regret for the people that laughed than for myself. They should have known how to interpret sorrow better. To mock at a soul in pain is a dreadful thing."

The hapless writer of these words has stood in the pillory ever since. It has been accounted a breach of manners even to mention the name of this victim of a strange pathological perversion, which ought to be the object of pity rather than punishment, which ought to be treated by isolation, like some noisome disease, but not by persecution. His plays by their outstanding merit have won their way back to the stage, but I do not think the name of the author has yet been given on a play-bill. He is called a "wretched creature" when he is mentioned at all. Wretched, indeed, he was in one sense.

This is the only work that Oscar Wilde wrote in prison. The *Ballad of Reading Gaol* was not composed, or even planned, until he had regained his liberty. He never essays to defend himself. He writes (in Hood's sad words):

"Owning his weakness,  
His evil behaviour,  
And leaving with meekness  
His sins to his Saviour."

Nor does he remind us of De Quincey, whom Carlyle, with characteristic brutality, likened to the beggar who exposes his sores to catch the pennies of the public. He only craves the relief of expression to

"Cleanse the bosom of the perilous stuff  
That weighs upon it."

In a pretty passage, characteristic in its application of the attribute of *shrillness* to an object of the sight, he writes:

"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."

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There is very little autobiography in *De Profundis*. He refers in language of affection and respect to his father and his mother, and sounds the bass note of humiliation for the way in which he has trailed an honoured name in the dust. He makes his going to Oxford the great crisis in his life. He seems to have there tasted fully of the many developing and refining influences which that great institution so successfully brings to bear on the mind of Young England. But he fell into a state of Hedonism not, I think, characteristic of Oxford. If anyone desires to have a very powerful picture of the primrose path of determined Hedonism, he should read Ranger Gull's *Hypocrite*. It, together with the career of the hapless Oscar Wilde, sounds a terrible note of warning. Thus Wilde describes its genesis in his soul:

"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 exclusively to the trees of what seemed to me the sunlit side of the garden, and shunned the other side for its shadow and its gloom. . . . I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. 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."

His rapid rise to the great position which he attained in the literary and dramatic world—as sudden as his tragic fall—is without a parallel in modern times. Rudyard Kipling broke somewhat suddenly on the English world, but he had been for years building up a solid reputation in India. Wilde, when he took up his residence in London, had done nothing beyond some very brilliant little poems which appeared in the magazine *Kottabos* of Trinity College, Dublin, where he had a highly distinguished career before he went to Oxford. The poems showed him to be the possessor of an exquisite faculty, quite comparable to that of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, for reproducing the quaint cadence and sincerity of mediæval poetry. Beside these there were some splendid translations from Æschylus and Euripides, and some fine sonnets in a manner quite his own. Of the first vein a good specimen is:

"A ring of gold and a milk-white dove  
Are goodly gifts for thee,  
And a hempen rope for your own love  
To hangen upon a tree.

"For you a house of ivory  
(Roses are white in the rose bower),  
A narrow bed for me to lie,  
(White, O, white, is the hemlock flower).

"For you three lovers of your hand  
(Green grass where a man lies dead),  
For me three paces on the sand,  
(Plant lilies at my head)."

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Of his more characteristic manner this is a fine specimen :

Two crownèd kings; and one that stood alone  
With no green weight of laurels round his head,  
But with sad eyes as one uncomforted  
And wearied with man's never-ceasing moan  
For sins that neither prayer nor priest atone,  
And sweet long lips with tears and kisses fed.  
Clothed was he in a garment black and red,  
And at his feet I mark'd a broken stone  
Which sent up lilies dove-like to his knees.  
Now at their sight my heart did burn as flame:  
The she who lay beside me "Who are these?"  
And I made answer knowing well each name,  
'Æschylus first, the second Sophocles,  
The last (wide stream of tears!) Euripides."

When *Lady Windermere's Fan* appeared there were many who pronounced it the wittiest play since the plays of Sheridan. His papers on criticism were exquisitely finished and full of a gentle wit. I remember one which began with the words, "Meredith is a prose Browning, so is Browning." There is much fine and subtle criticism in *De Profundis*. The whole spirit of this intensely interesting posthumous work is in this eloquent passage :

"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."

R. Y. TYRRELL.

HORSE AND HOUND

Horse & Hound

"*De Profundis*, the little book by Oscar Wilde that has just been allowed to see the light, has been already so much reviewed and discussed that it is hardly necessary to make any further mention of it here. Possibly, however, this paragraph may be seen by some who have not yet read the book; if so, let me suggest to them that they get it at once. It is a book to buy, not one to order from the circulating library,

for it is a book to read not once, but many times. It was written in prison, but it is not, I think, a "human document," nor is it the grief-stricken outpouring of a penitent soul. It is a deliberately manufactured work of art, to which the prison surroundings lend form and colour, and in which beautiful thoughts find perfect expression. It is a literary gem, written by one who most truly described himself as "a lord of language," one who, had he lived, and had his brilliant brain been preserved from that unfortunate twist which brought him to disaster, might have proved himself worthy to rank with the immortals.

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## Saturday Review,

## VOX CLAMANTIS.\*

I KNEW him and admired his gifts. Most people now recall his wit, his humour, brilliancy, his poetry, his prose, his errors, triumphs and his fall. I most remember his great kindness. It is the greatest quality in man. Without it, all the talents, all the virtues, lack somewhat; with it all errors, even crimes, can be condoned. Few books in any language, treating of prisons and of prison life, are comparable with this. Generally (and this your doctor knows) a man in prison is sustained either by consciousness of innocence, by pride, indifference, or by the thought that on emerging from his malebolge, he has a home in which to hide himself.

He had none of these to help him as he picked the oakum, paced round and round the yard, stood in the prison chapel bawling the hymns, or worst of all sat idle in his cell in the long winter afternoons before they light the gas, or performed the dreary round of duties which only those who have performed them estimate. Some men have tamed a mouse. Others wait as a youth waits for his sweetheart, till a robin comes to the window-sill to peck at crumbs.

Nothing (to prisoners) can ever make the prison flower ridiculous, or hackneyed, in spite of sentimental books.

He had no mouse or robin, only his soul to tame, so sitting down he has depicted for us how it beat itself against the bars, until at last it fought no more, and he and it had peace. But the peace he had was not of the kind those have who throw themselves into the arms of some religion, which till then they have refused. Only the peace that comes to all men when they have learned as he did that sun and moon and stars, the seasons, tides, the equinoxes, the flowers and trees and Nature will be as much theirs even in sorrow, as they ever were in joy. So by degrees he learned to bear it all, even though from the outside world nothing but sorrow came to heap the mass of sorrow growing in his heart. His mother's death moves him to such abasement that but to read it makes oneself ashamed to be a man.

Hardly in any literature does such a great and bitter cry pierce to the heart, as does this anguish of the poor soul, dressed like a zany as he says himself, ridiculous in grief, a clown of sorrows, as miserable as is the plaint of an old woman outraged by drunkards and then scorned. Well does he say, that in most martyrdoms, to those who heaped the logs or lit the straw, the sufferer must have appeared a fool, and without dignity or style. Had Cranmer written in his cell after his great refusal, and before the fire had purified, his outpourings would surely have been near akin to Wilde's. But he redeemed himself, whereas the writer of the book had no such luck.

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Cranmer written in his cell after his great refusal, and before the fire had purified his outpourings, would surely have been near akin to Wilde's. But he redeemed himself, whereas the writer of the book had no such luck.

Therefore, the charitable man, if there be such in this the age of self-sufficiency, must take his book for expiation and in it find his martyrdom, and read it as a thing that might have happened to himself. This done it is a scripture for our learning. Written of course in gall, with a pen made of hyssop, but truly written and as such more valuable than all the books of all the moralists. Each man can see what he likes in it, and to some it may seem mystic, to others philosophic, and again to certain minds, a reconciliation, but to me what most attracts is that the point of view is still unchanged.

There was about the man a curious courage, rarer perhaps than that of those who rush on death (with a side-glance at glory as they run), or those who do their duty all their lives from temperament or fear. This as it seems to me is shown in every line of the whole book, and most of all when he dwells on his fits of weeping in the cell, in such a way that though one sees his weakness, at the same time you feel his strength. He has a sort of absence of what the French call "respect humain", such as one sees in Arabs, and withal a certain dignity, like a fallen angel to whom at times celestial music echoes still, but distantly.

Surely he is right to say that punishment wipes out the offence, for, if it does not, those who punish cannot be judges, but mere torturers?

Right through the book reflections such as this must make the Philistine, whom as he rightly says is the sworn foe of all repentance, wince not a little beneath his armour of self-righteousness.

Scattered about the book are flashes of his old humour, as when he calls "La Vie de Jésus" a gospel by S. Thomas, or talks about an order to be founded for all those who have no faith, and this I find would hope sustained him, for when all is lost, even to honour, it is the only stay. Perhaps it is philosophy made manifest to those brought low, and to whom consolation is denied.

No degradation seems to have killed his love of beauty for itself, and it is brave of him to say that he does not regret his previous life.

All his reflections upon Christ remind one of an educated pagan, who admired whilst not believing, but yet are true and just, so just, one wonders why one never thought them for oneself. Who but himself writing in anguish in his cell would have written "To turn an interesting thief into a tedious honest man was not his [Christ's] aim". And yet how true it is, for God could not deny imagination to his Son. In the letter which his faithful friend and editor prefixes to the book, the writer says that "prison life makes me see people and things as they really are". That is true to some extent as when he dwells upon the frank contempt of Christ for mere material success, but that the saying is but true in part he gives the proof himself. The mystical in art, in life, and nature was what he says on his re-entrance to the world shall be his goal. Now mysticism is a temperament born in a man as are his hair or eyes, no one can cultivate it, like faith it is a quality which must grow alone, and he had neither. Thus it may be by straining after what he had not, that he lost what he had, and his expression, which was everything, never returned to him.

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The book is beautiful in all its misery, and worth a million of the dishonest self-revelations of the men who write about their souls as if their bodies were mere pillow-cases. One reads with indignation how he stood soaking in the rain, handcuffed and dressed in prison clothes, whilst a mob jeered him at a railway station. Had he been twice as guilty as he was and of a serious crime as cheating or the like, or cruelty, human respect should not have been thus outraged, for the man condemned by law is surely sacred, as we have taken from him all means of defence. Judges and postmen and all public servants ought to understand that whilst we pay them and place our correspondence and our property, more or less in their hands, they should execute their offices with due discretion, and not allow a letter or a soul to fall into the mud, for fools to stamp upon, for on them may be written things more sacred than themselves. With the exception perhaps of Morris and of Parnell, when he was alive, no one bulked greater in the public eye than Wilde, and when the paltry politician, even although he rest his boots upon the table of the House from the green benches of the salaried crew that forms a Government, is long forgotten, the unhonoured poet in his dishonoured grave will be remembered, and his works read by every man of taste. Reading the beautiful but miserable book, some things console one, first that he had a friend who both in evil and good repute stood by him to the last. When the poor wretch, condemned to hell before his time, records with tears how it consoled him only to have received a brief salute in passing, one thinks better of mankind, and if rewards were ever given to desert, the faithful friend has his. He who brings comfort to a soul in pain is better far than he who, himself sinless, dies without sympathy, for by that sin devils have fallen to a lower depth.

All through the book there is a vein of tenderness, not that false tenderness which sorrow sometimes gives, but real and innate. The love of flowers, of children, of the trees, the sun and moon and the stars in their courses, call to us from this crying voice, for pardon. His joy of life, and all the sufferings which to such a man those two fell years must have entailed, speak for him to us, asking us now, after his death to pardon, and when we speak of him, to call him by his name, to make no mystery of his fall, and to regard him as a star which looking at its own reflection in some dank marsh, fell down and smirched itself, and then became extinct ere it had time to soar aloft again.

R. B. CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM.

\* "De Profundis." By Oscar Wilde. London: Methuen. 1905. 6s.

The book is beautiful in all its misery, and worth a million of the dishonest self-revelations of the men who write about their souls as if their bodies were mere pillow-cases. One reads with indignation how he stood soaking in the rain, handcuffed and dressed in prison clothes, whilst a mob jeered him at a railway station. Had he been twice as guilty as he was and of a serious crime as cheating or the like, or cruelty, human respect should not have been thus outraged, for the man condemned by law is surely sacred, as we have taken from him all means of defence. Judges and postmen and all public servants ought to understand that whilst we pay them and place our correspondence and our property, more or less in their hands, they should execute their offices with due discretion, and not allow a letter or a soul to fall into the mud, for fools to stamp upon, for on them may be written things more sacred than themselves. With the exception perhaps of Morris and of Parnell, when he was alive, no one bulked greater in the public eye than Wilde, and when the paltry politician, even although he rest his boots upon the table of the House from the green benches of the salaried crew that forms a Government, is long forgotten, the unhonoured poet in his dishonoured grave will be remembered, and his works read by every man of taste. Reading the beautiful but miserable book, some things console one, first that he had a friend who both in evil and good repute stood by him to the last. When the poor wretch, condemned to hell before his time, records with tears how it consoled him only to have received a brief salute in passing, one thinks better of mankind, and if rewards were ever given to desert, the faithful friend has his. He who brings comfort to a soul in pain is better far than he who, himself sinless, dies without sympathy, for by that sin devils have fallen to a lower depth.

All through the book there is a vein of tenderness, not that false tenderness which sorrow sometimes gives, but real and innate. The love of flowers, of children, of the trees, the sun and moon and the stars in their courses, call to us from this crying voice, for pardon. His joy of life, and all the sufferings which to such a man those two fell years must have entailed, speak for him to us, asking us now, after his death to pardon, and when we speak of him, to call him by his name, to make no mystery of his fall, and to regard him as a star which looking at its own reflection in some dank marsh, fell down and smirched itself, and then became extinct ere it had time to soar aloft again.

R. B. CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM.

MARCH 11, 1905.

Saturday Review 131a

DE PROFUNDIS.

To the Editor of the SATURDAY REVIEW.

SIR,—Alive with sympathy as is Mr. Cunninghame Graham's notice of "De Profundis", he yet seems to me to have omitted to mention the most significant point in the book. Perhaps, indeed, he has omitted it deliberately as a thing too painful on which to dwell. And yet for the reader it will remain the most haunting memory of this revelation of a man's soul. In prison Oscar Wilde discovered, and in this volume he reveals something hitherto hidden away in his nature "like a treasure in a field"—Humility. It needed poignant suffering to develop this trait in his character, and what seems to me to be most significant and most powerful in the volume is the realisation by Wilde of the necessity for a nature such as his undergoing the fiery ordeal. So soon as he realised that his sufferings were not "without meaning", that they constituted a necessary part of his mental and spiritual development, he was freed from any bitterness of feeling against the world.

Mr. Cunninghame Graham states that what attracts him most in the book is that the "point of view is still unchanged". This is in a sense true. Oscar Wilde was an individualist to the last. To him expression was "the only mode under which he can conceive life at all". But granting that his nature remained unchanged throughout, surely the "point of view" of the man in "De Profundis" is utterly different from that manifested at any other period of his existence. When he wrote—"I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease . . . 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 house-top. I ceased to be lord over myself. I allowed pleasure to dominate me . . . I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility"—he struck a note that appears in no other of his works. Who could imagine that Oscar Wilde, to whom visible things meant always so much, could write "the external things of life seem to me now of no importance at all"? Or who would have expected from him the confession "Terrible as

what the world did to me, what I did to myself was more terrible still"? "Sorrow", says Dante, "re-marries us to God", and it was through sorrow that Oscar Wilde, at the time of writing at least, entered upon the "New Life". "There are times", he wrote, "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 clog the other, but out of sorrow have the worlds been built, and at the birth of a child or a star there is pain". Surely here as throughout the book the reader acquainted with Oscar Wilde's other work must detect the most significant of changes. He had indeed, as he himself admitted, "cleansed his mind of much perilous stuff".

Yours truly,  
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A. E. MANNING-FOSTER.

MARCH 5, 1905.

Sunday Sun 132

Sunday Sun.

OUR BOOK OF THE WEEK.

THE LEGACY OF OSCAR WILDE.\*

The world is wide,  
But fettered limbs go lame!  
And once, or twice, to throw the dice  
Is a gentlemanly game,  
But he does not win who plays with Sin  
In the secret house of Shame.  
"Ballad of Reading Gaol."

Few indeed are the literary documents which can compare in sadness with this last legacy of the most unfortunate man of genius of the nineteenth century. It is a sadder book than even its predecessor, from which the lines which head this article are taken, and that principally because it stands upon an altogether lower moral plane. "De Profundis" was written in prison; "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" some months later, when its author had regained his liberty. There is a nameless, incommunicable taint about the first-named book, a whiff of prison air seems to have breathed over its pages, the rust of the prison bars had eaten into the very heart of the writer. It is, from end to end, a cry of self-pity, natural enough in the dreadful circumstances in which it was written, but inexpressibly distressing. Now that what was, as it seems only so brief a while ago, a poignant actuality, has faded into the background of history, and that the brilliant and erratic protagonist of the tragic story is at rest in his grave, it may be admitted that Oscar Wilde suffered unduly, and had some just causes of complaint. The Procrustean law, which takes no count of such things as social position, personal idiosyncrasy, culture, and the hundred other peculiarities which divide man from man, fell heavily upon him. That he was a gentleman, a scholar, a man of genius; that the public stood indebted to him for much delicate and beautiful artistic work, availed him nothing, or rather, tended directly to his more complete undoing. Had he been a common and ordinary criminal he would, by the mere force of public indifference regarding him, have received fairer treatment. The sentence under which he suffered was vindictively heavy, the manner in which his case was pre-judged by certain powerful organs of public opinion was a flagrant outrage on the best traditions of English journalism. The mere bald facts of the case were sufficiently damnatory; there was little need for gratuitous mud-throwing.

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