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Oscar Wilde
Scrapbook

Vol. 6

I.

“Character,” said Schopenhauer, “is indelible,” and “De Profundis” may be regarded as one of the most remarkable exemplifications of that great truth ever written by the hand of man. There are people to whom the whole world is as a stage-play, and Oscar Wilde was one of them. He was his own dramatist, his own star actor, he posed behind the foot-lights of his own self-consciousness. He was his own clique, and his own most indulgent critic. An acquaintance of mine, who was for some years his close personal friend, said, while Wilde was yet in prison, that he was perfectly sure that, however poignantly he might suffer, he would find a subtle pleasure in the fact of his own degradation. I cannot lay my finger on any individual passage in “De Profundis” to illustrate that utterance, but it is borne out by the book as a whole, and borne out most strongly by those pages which, at first sight, might seem most finally to contradict it. Wilde was a dilettante in emotions, and seems, as it were, to have got outside himself to contemplate his own sensations. He suffered horribly, no doubt, and his anguish was at moments so strong as to conquer his dilettantism. But the mood of introspection, the trick of examining and dissecting his own sensations, always returned. Perhaps the passage of the entire book which shows him at his best is the following:—

Everything about my tragedy has been hideous, mean, repellent, lacking in style; our very dress makes us grotesque. We are the zanies of sorrow. We are clowns whose hearts are broken. We are specially designed to appeal to the sense of humour. On November 13, 1895, I was brought down here from London. From two o'clock till half-past two on that day I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress, and handcuffed, for the world to look at. I had been taken out of the hospital ward without a moment's notice being given to me. Of all possible objects I was the most grotesque. When people saw me they laughed. Each train as it came up swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was, of course, before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed they laughed still more. For half an hour I stood there in the grey November rain surrounded by a jeering mob.

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. To those who are in prison tears are a part of every day's experience. 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 who laughed than for myself. Of course when they saw me I was not on my pedestal, I was in the pillory. But it is a very unimaginative nature that only cares for people on their pedestals. A pedestal may be a very unreal thing. A pillory is a terrific reality. They should have known also how to interpret sorrow better. I have said that behind sorrow there is always sorrow. It were wiser still to say that behind sorrow there is always a soul. And to mock at a soul in pain is a dreadful thing. In the strangely simple economy of the world people only get what they give, and to those who have not enough imagination to penetrate the mere outward of things, and feel pity, what pity can be given save that of scorn?

I write this account of the mode of my being transferred here simply that it should be realised how hard it has been for me to get anything out of my punishment but bitterness and despair. I have, however, to do it, and now and then I have moments of submission and acceptance. All the spring may be hidden in the single bud, and the low ground nest of the lark may hold the joy that is to herald the feet of many rose-red dawns. So perhaps whatever beauty of life still remains to me is contained in some moment of surrender, abasement, and humiliation. I can, at any rate, merely proceed on the lines of my own development, and, accepting all that has happened to me, make myself worthy of it.

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II.

That record of a moment of intense suffering is done with the hand of a master. It is a page that deserves to be remembered, and to be noted with particular attention by our prison authorities. Wilde was sentenced to imprisonment, and we are in the habit of believing that the pillory is no longer in use as an instrument of correction in England. That it was Oscar Wilde, gentleman and poet, who suffered so horrible an infliction, is not the real gist of the matter. Had he been the lowest born and most intellectually contemptible criminal who ever wore prison uniform, the outrage would have been as gross. Such a gratuitous and purposeless degradation as that he describes should not be possible, and is an indelible disgrace on the authorities who permit it.

III.

The passage cited above, though perhaps the most poignant in the book, is by no means the only one in which, under the sting of suffering, Wilde wrote just and memorable things. No man could write of such experiences as those he endured without frequently striking the right note. But there are parts of the book which are frankly insufferable. Many pages are occupied by a disquisition on the character and influence of Christ. The following passage may be taken as a sample:—

I had said of Christ that he ranks with the poets. That is true. Shelley and Sophocles are of his company. But his entire life also is the most wonderful of poems. For "pity and terror" there is nothing in the entire cycle of Greek tragedy to touch it. The absolute purity of the protagonist raises the entire scheme to a height of romantic art from which the sufferings of Thebes and Pelops' line are by their very horror excluded, and shows how wrong Aristotle was when he said in his treatise on the drama that it would be impossible to bear the spectacle of one blameless in pain. Nor in *Æschylus* nor *Dante*, those stern masters of tenderness, in *Shakespeare*, the most purely human of all the great artists, in the whole of Celtic myth and legend, where the loveliness of the world is shown through a mist of tears, and the life of a man is no more than the life of a flower, is there anything that, for sheer simplicity of pathos wedded and made one with sublimity of tragic effort, can be said to equal or even approach the last act of Christ's passion. 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 so as to betray 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 orthodox rending his raiment in wrath, and the magistrate of civil justice calling for water in the vain hope of cleansing himself of that stain of 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 of 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 swathed in Egyptian linen with costly spices and perfumes as though he had been a King's son. When one contemplates all this from the point of view of art alone one cannot but be grateful that the supreme office of the Church should be the playing of the tragedy without the shedding of blood: the mystical presentation, by means of dialogue and costume and gesture even, of the Passion of her Lord; and it is always a source of pleasure and awe to me to remember that the ultimate survival of the Greek chorus, lost elsewhere to art, is to be found in the servitor answering the priest at Mass.

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This has—to me at least—an aspect of unedifying buffoonery, of dilettantism gone mad. Wilde, in common with most thoughtful and instructed people of his generation, was an Agnostic. I do not say that the terrible experiences he underwent should necessarily have convinced him of the Godhead of Christ, but I *do* say that, since he felt impelled to write at all about the most beautiful Personality that ever blessed earth, he might have written, not merely with more reverence, but with more understanding. That Christ, in common with other dominant personalities, is a fit subject for artistic treatment, is not merely true—it is a truism. He has undergone artistic treatment at the hands of many great poets—notably Milton and Elizabeth Barrett Browning—and the beauty and pity of His character will never fail to attract the artist. But a man in the conditions occupied by Oscar Wilde at the moment he wrote the passage I have quoted should either have left such a personality alone, or have treated it in another fashion. To the prisoner and the captive, Christ—“the benignant elder brother of all suffering men”—should be something other than a puppet on which to hang festoons of rhetoric. It is rather singular that a man of Wilde's keen sense of humour should not have seen how utterly absurd was the pose in which he framed this lamentable passage, which is, in spirit and in essence, so flat a contradiction of the braggart proclamation with which the volume opens. “I find,” he writes, “somewhere hidden away in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all. That something hidden away in my nature, like a treasure in a field, is Humility.”

IV.

Wilde was essentially a poseur, and it is always difficult to say when he was really in earnest—if ever. But in the “Ballad of Reading Gaol” he reached to a height of artistic expression—if of nothing better—lacking in “De Profundis.” The supreme tragedy of criminal life did veritably, I can but think, shake him out of his otherwise permanent mood of self-admiration, and in writing of the agony of a fellow-creature he was stirred to the depths of his being. It was not of Christ as an object of “art” that he was thinking when he wrote the penultimate verses of that terrible and lurid poem.

And every human heart that breaks
 In prison cell or yard,
 Is as that broken box that gave
 Its treasure to the Lord,
 And filled the unclean leper's house
 With the scent of costliest nard.

Ah! happy they whose hearts can break
 And peace and pardon win!
 How else may man make straight his plan
 And cleanse his soul from sin?
 How else but through a broken heart
 May Lord Christ enter in?

And he of the swollen purple throat,
 And the stark and staring eyes,
 Waits for the holy hands that took
 The thief to Paradise;
 And a broken and a contrite heart
 The Lord will not despise.

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It matters little—little even to the conventional believer—that Wilde was not dogmatically a Christian. These verses express the true inwardness of the beautiful creed Christ taught. They sanctify a human memory which, had they not been written, could only have been recalled with sentiments of shame and despair. They are beautiful—and would still be beautiful were their verbal form less perfect—because they were intensely felt by their author while he wrote them. Once or twice in his life Oscar Wilde forgot to pose, and it is on those brief and all-too-few moments that his hopes of remembrance repose.

HENRY MURRAY.

*"De Profundis." By Oscar Wilde. (London: Methuen.)

TO-DAY

NO one can read Oscar Wilde's prison testament *DE PROFUNDIS* (Methuen, 6s.) without pain. Even some of the fantastic beauties that it possesses are overpowered by the personality of the man. Try as I would, I could not read the book without having in my mind's eye the figure of poor Wilde—the intellectual and social butterfly of so many brilliant circles and so many London seasons—sitting there in his pitiless cell, clad in the unbeautiful garb of servitude, and a prey to his morbid fits of hysteria. I doubt if the book should have been published; it is too pitifully personal. The incoherence of the thoughts to which it gives expression is not merely the result of a long-drawn-out personal confession spread over the course of many weary months, but the product of a mind partially unhinged. At one moment he is plunged in an outburst of self-accusation; at another he is posturing "on his pedestal," as he himself calls it. "I need not tell you," he says, at one moment, "that to me reformations in morals are as meaningless and vulgar as Reformations in theology." At another he gives way to an outburst of self pity. Then he plans his future. He will come out of the horrible prison, where he is dressed as a zany and a clown, a deeper man, a man who has discovered a wonderful secret, the secret of humility. It is this humility that is to be the inspiration of his new life. He will go out and gain peace and balance, and a less troubled heart, and a sweeter mood. Alas! he went out to the world and found neither peace nor balance. Only at the last there came to him, by the same means which we commonplace folk employ, through those very tracts of dreary theology which he despised, the less troubled heart and the sweeter mood. In spite of the beautiful elucidation of Christ's character contained in it, the book is one of the saddest in the world. More terribly than any other expression of a man's mind that I know of, it has caught the echo of the tragic might-have-been of humanity for ever voices.

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Irish Independent.

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The Standard.

MARCH 7, 1901

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MARCH 9, 1905.

The New Age.

De Profundis.

I have been deeply moved by reading the spiritual and literary outpourings of an artist nature broken and outraged by our stupidly barbaric system of punishment. The offence for which the writer of "De Profundis" was condemned to torture is one that we may diagnose and judge as we should a disease; and then with scientific skill, and with humane care, we should isolate and tend the patient for the term of his natural life. But we should no more wreak social revenge and grotesque cruelty on the sufferer than we should on a smallpox or typhoid patient. Over and over again there occur passages in the book which denote the insistent symptoms of a sick soul; and in more than one instance scattered through the exquisite prose there are subtle symptoms of mental deterioration, the effect of the combined physical, mental, and moral torture to which prison routine subjected him—a torture which in the case of coarser and less highly developed natures, too often leads to the pauper lunatic asylum. All women should read this book, for it will help them in the bringing up of their sons, and in their understanding of "poor humanity," with its weaknesses, back-slidings, aspirations, degradations, and supreme triumphs. All who are interested in prison reform should study it, for it is written in the life-blood of a prisoner broken on the daily wheel of a life which can only make for hardness or destruction, never for healthy regeneration and normal renewing of life. I must confine myself to one quotation: "The poor are wiser, more charitable, more kind, more sensitive, than we are. In their eyes prison is a tragedy in a man's life, a misfortune, a casualty, something that calls for sympathy in others. They speak of one who is in prison as of one who is 'in trouble' simply. It is the phrase they always use, and the expression has the perfect wisdom of love in it. With people of our own rank it is different. With us prison makes a man a pariah. I, and such as I am, have hardly any right to air and sun. Our presence taints the pleasures of others. We are unwelcome when we reappear. To revisit the glimpses of the moon is not for us. Our very children are taken away. Those lovely links with humanity are broken. We are doomed to be solitary while our sons still live. We are denied the one thing that might heal us and keep us, that might bring balm to the bruised heart, and peace to the soul in pain. . . ." There are in the book three allusions to women; his mother, who, he acknowledges, strove to be his good angel; his wife, "always kind and gentle"; and a noble woman friend, "whose sympathy and noble kindness, both before and since the tragedy of my imprisonment, have been beyond power and description." Sorrow and suffering made the vibrating artist soul understand the compelling forces of poverty and of womanhood, and put into his heart the hidden meaning of the fact that "at the birth of a child, or a star, there is pain."

DORA B. MONTEFIORE.

MARCH 9, 1905.

The New Age.

De Profundis.

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Methodist Times,

Books and Bookmen.

Undoubtedly the book of the week, for the preacher and the student of man, for the artist and even for the *dilettante*, is Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*. To those of us who remember that strange and fantastic figure, that wayward genius posturing on a pedestal amid the laughter of many who were not entire Philistines, and who remember also the lurid end, the utter catastrophe and squalid wreck, this book will be full of awe and wonder. It is no use repeating the ghastly tale of moral decadence, of entire social calamity and general infamy. It has been known for some time that Wilde had left a kind "Testimony." The world was naturally curious to discover what effect the prison house had had upon such a piquant and modern nature. Here then the story is told, and the malefactor upon his cross unbosoms his very heart. Whether he was anxious to be known for a penitent or no, he was certainly anxious to be known as a great artist. His craving for what he called "expression" is poignant enough. The poor soul evidently wants to utter himself, to cleanse his bosom of much perilous stuff. He is sure this is the end of all being—self expression. Does this mean that a man must, with any dish-clout or, stimulant scour out the very dregs of his heart and rack the last fibre of his soul and illuminate and display what he may find—that *that* way lies salvation of humanity? Is there nothing in us of which we need to be ashamed, no ape and tiger that need to die? So far as I have been able to gather the meaning of self-expression these questions must not be answered by a negative. That he has written finely there is no doubt. It is frantically good English.

* * *

I have seen it stated "this is not sorrow but dexterously-constructed counterfeit." *The Times* so says. *The Times* is not the last judge of morals, and at no time have I been much impressed by its sympathy for the fallen. It is a poor bit of needless cruelty to set forth such a theory. But the book certainly needs a theory. Here is a complex and baffling personality, elusive and subtle, self-conscious and unmoral, poetic and lacrymose in the "fell clutch of a circumstance." Certainly his head is "bloody," is it "unbowed"? There are many ways of the bowed head. The writer looks upon the method of his life as right enough, but incomplete. He only ate of the fruit of the trees on the sunny side of the path of life and he ought to have taken also the fruit that grew in the shade. Nothing should have been left undone, only this also he ought to have done. His sin is a sin of omission. It must be admitted that sins of omission are serious enough. A man may stand by and see his mother burned in a slow fire, it is only a sin of omission to let her burn. The fruit of the sun has this quality, it gives the eater an aversion to all else. But then is not the whole figure a delusion? Are we here to eat of any fruit? Is the business of life ever done by those who only sit down to a feast or gather fruit from either side, in narrow birdy walks? Wilde does not ever seem to have had any single Christian instinct. It may or it may not be a hard thing to say, but there is the fact. For all we can gather, from his mother's arms, he knew nothing but the cult of them that find life full and varied and, having fulness of bread, go softly to gather a nosegay for their soul.

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He cannot conceive it possible that he may have been mistaken in his theory of life. Everything that is wrong with him is a detail. Out of details you may pile up the tragedy of a Lear and the tragedy shall be all the more tragic for the small beginning. But this tragedy is not to be accounted for after that fashion. If this book only adds to the gloom of the tragedy, it must be because there comes from its pages the revelation that a brilliant man was given over to a strong delusion. So strong had the delusion become that it cast out from his personality all but itself. He followed his theory over the logical precipice. And yet was it so? I can find no surety. There are most pathetic and wailing passages in this story of a derelict adrift upon grey and desolate seas, not merciful enough to be stormy, passages that I cannot think are "a dexterously-constructed counterfeit." Out and up from the depth of the man, now and again, there comes an instinct and a yearning that is strangely akin to the primal impulses of a saint. We are fearfully and wonderfully made, and it would appear to be clean impossible, in this life, to quench the Spirit in its last flicker. Now and again you say, or your Christian heart says, "Now he has got it," and before the paragraph has concluded the good angel flutters and is gone. It is all very bewildering and nothing is more bewildering than the amazing exposition of the Christ. Once, only once, the writer almost patronises Jesus, but for the rest he worships. But the worship has this peculiar quality—that the Christ he worships is a reflection of his own theory of life. It is amazing what men find in Christ. The hungry-hearted find their hunger appeased, almost always. The words of Jesus are so manysided that, by selection, He is what all men are. If in Christ you take what your heart aches for and only that, even Christ may be no Saviour of your soul. I cannot understand the praise that has been given to this bewildering study of the Son of Man. That the prisoner in his condemned cell falls down before Jesus there is no sort of gainsaying. But is his head 'bowed' even then? There is little sign. Yet here, if anywhere, one who yearns after the prodigal's return may gather reasons that mitigate despair of this one.

* * *

Only in one regard can a Christian reader find himself in full sympathy with this cry from the depths. This man, who lost everything, felt that to allow bitterness within his heart was a hell more intolerable than any he had yet discovered. That is somewhat. He will take all that has come, and out of it crush some healing balsam. Not against any must he allow himself in rancour and hate. He must find the soul of goodness in these his evil things. To this hope and passion he returns again and yet again. It is the one streak of clear shining amid all the pitiless rain: "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, for the world to look at. . . . I write this account of the mode of my being transferred here simply that it could be realised how hard it has been for me to get anything out of my punishment but bitterness and despair. I have, however, to do it, and now and then I have moments of submission and acceptance." Before a spirit like that one can only feel a yearning from the very depth and cry to God that the stricken man may be mightily helped. And yet before the paragraph is ended the poor soul is back again upon the black rock where he split and foundered—expression. What shall we say of it all? Nothing but just this: It is He that hath made us and not we ourselves.

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A. B. C.

CHRISTIAN LEADER .

A CAUSERIE.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS.*—I.

It is interesting to recall how many books have been written in prison. One remembers the Apostle Paul and the epistles he wrote, so full of hope and courage, during his imprisonment. Professor Ramsay has been pointing out to us lately that John was probably a convict labourer on the Isle of Patmos when he wrote the Book of Revelation. Of this fact, if it be a fact, there is scarcely a trace to be found in the book; it breathes, from the first word to the last, an assurance of triumph that no suffering can shake, and shows the amazing detachment of one whose mind is so intently fixed on the victory of Christ's cause that he can spare no thought for the pain which he himself has to endure. Something of the same spirit and the same lofty imagination we find in our own John Bunyan, who was imprisoned for conscience's sake, and who during his confinement wrote "The Pilgrim's Progress." As far as the book itself gives any indication, it might have been written anywhere—

"As I walk'd through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place, where was a Den, and I laid me down in that place to sleep: and as I slept I dreamed a Dream."

That is all: only the grim suggestion of the word "Den"—not a hint of protest or complaint. Prison walls enclosed him, but his soul was free to wander as Christian over the plains and mountains and valleys of the world; he could see as far as the Celestial City.

Raleigh was not a very patient prisoner, though he began "The History of the World" in his prison. Coming to modern days, we meet the case of Dostoevsky, the famous Russian novelist. When a young man he was arrested because he had taken part in some political conspiracy, just as Gorky was arrested the other day. He heard himself sentenced to death; he was taken out to be shot, and only on the place of execution did he learn that his sentence was commuted to four years' imprisonment in Siberia, with hard labour in the mines. As he was being taken to Siberia a charitable lady handed to each of the convicts a copy of the Bible. This was a new book to Dostoevsky, who found himself strangely attracted by it, and spent much time in studying it. It may be imagined that his

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

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opportunities of reading were not many. All day he toiled hard in the mines; at night he lay down, utterly wearied in body, with the other convicts; and one can figure him eagerly choosing for his repose the place nearest the poor oil-lamp, and during many hours of night poring over these wonderful pages, until the spirit of them possessed him utterly. The diary of his imprisonment, which he has published, lets us see that he came out a better man than he went in—a result which does not happen very often:—

“Such as sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, being bound in affliction and iron, because they rebelled against the words of God and contemned the counsel of the Most High: therefore, He brought down their heart with labour; they fell down, and there was none to help. Then—they cried unto the Lord.”

When they cry He hears; but they do not always cry.

The story recalled by this book† is one of “old, unhappy, far-off things.” It is a book that is being, and will be, very widely read; it is, therefore, worth while indicating the good points, and the one tremendous demerit of the book. In one point the writer recalls Dostoievsky:—

“Of late I have been studying with diligence the four prose poems about Christ. At Christmas I managed to get hold of a Greek Testament, and every morning, after I had cleaned my cell and polished my tins, I read a little of the Gospels, a dozen verses taken by chance anywhere. It is a delightful way of opening the day.”

This is a truth which many who are not prisoners do not always realise. And we observe that in the course of his reading this poor prisoner learnt many of the lessons of life, and had opened to him some of the deeper secrets of the soul. “Nobody great or small can be ruined except by his own hand.” “I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character. . . . I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it.” That is what preachers have been declaring ever since the world began, but men will not heed. “There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility.” Of this humility he says:—“Had it been brought to me, I would have refused it. As I found it, I want to keep it. I must do so. It is the one thing that has in it the elements of life, of a new life, a *vita nuova* for me. . . . One cannot acquire it, except by surrendering everything that one has.” Here is a fine saying, well worth pondering: “If one is ashamed of having been punished, one might just as well never have been punished at all.” Again, on pain:—“The secret of life is suffering. It is what is hidden behind everything.” And so at last he is, as it were, driven back on the explanation that after all is the Christian solution. “Now, it seems to me that love of some kind is the only 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.”

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Pall Mall Gazette.

It is curious that the appearance of "De Profundis" should coincide with that of the green carnation. When, on a memorable occasion, the author of "The Importance of Being Ernest" took his call, he appeared with a green carnation in his button-hole. That carnation was green all over; the present has not attained such perfect viridity. But, then, it is the result of cross-breeding, whereas the other, it turned out, was the result of a diet of aniline dye.

Glasgow Herald

Glasgow Herald,

"De Profundis." By Oscar Wilde. 5s.
(London: Methuen & Co.)

This book can only be rightly understood by those who are able to recall the painful circumstances connected with the tragedy of the author's life. From the nature of the case it is inexpedient to say much regarding it here. "De Profundis," as we learn from a prefatory note, was written during the last months of Oscar Wilde's imprisonment in Reading Jail. It professes to show, amid some distressing details of his prison life, that Wilde had schooled himself into regarding his disgrace and its consequent punishment as a sort of starting point in the evolution of a new phase in his character and his intellectual attitude towards life. There is no attempt at defending his conduct. There is an attempt to explain it, but the explanation hardly squares with the average healthy-minded individual's sense of what is right and wrong. The author recalls how he once remarked to Andre Gide, as they sat together in a Paris cafe, that "while metaphysics had but little real interest for me, morality had absolutely none." And yet here, in this book, there is a glowing eulogy of the life and teaching of Christ! One feels it to be doubtfully sincere and terribly out of place; and indeed, in regard to many passages in the book, perhaps the most kindly criticism to apply is Wilde's own confession that his thoughts were as unstable as his emotions. It must be allowed, at any rate, that "De Profundis" renders vividly, and very painfully, the effect of social debacle and imprisonment on a highly intellectual and artificial nature. If they take it seriously, it will give many readers a different impression of a witty, and certainly a delightful, writer.

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"De Profundis." By Oscar Wilde. 5s.
(London: Methuen & Co.)

This book can only be rightly understood by those who are able to recall the painful circumstances connected with the tragedy of the author's life. From the nature of the case it is inexpedient to say much regarding it here. "De Profundis," as we learn from a prefatory note, was written during the last months of Oscar Wilde's imprisonment in Reading Jail. It professes to show, amid some distressing details of his prison life, that Wilde had schooled himself into regarding his disgrace and its consequent punishment as a sort of starting point in the evolution of a new phase in his character and his intellectual attitude towards life. There is no attempt at defending his conduct. There is an attempt to explain it, but the explanation hardly squares with the average healthy-minded individual's sense of what is right and wrong. The author recalls how he once remarked to Andre Gide, as they sat together in a Paris cafe, that "while metaphysics had but little real interest for me, morality had absolutely none." And yet here, in this book, there is a glowing eulogy of the life and teaching of Christ! One feels it to be doubtfully sincere and terribly out of place; and indeed, in regard to many passages in the book, perhaps the most kindly criticism to apply is Wilde's own confession that his thoughts were as unstable as his emotions. It must be allowed, at any rate, that "De Profundis" renders vividly, and very painfully, the effect of social debacle and imprisonment on a highly intellectual and artificial nature. If they take it seriously, it will give many readers a different impression of the delightful, writer.

THE CHURCH TIMES.
MARCH 10, 1905.

THE WAYFARER.

Sunt lacrimae rerum.—VERGIL.

It would be hard to find a sadder book than that which Oscar Wilde wrote in Reading Gaol, *De Profundis*. The sadness grows as the pages become more cheerful; for the tragedy deepens. There are some who refuse to take the book seriously. One critic has said that Wilde never was in the deep, was incapable of it, and therefore could not cry out of the deep. To me, as I read, sincerity speaks from every page. But the adverse judgment is not surprising. It is quite in the way of the Philistine to refuse to believe in the artist's sincerity. And this fellow, above all! This inveterate practitioner in the art of pose! Here he is, posing to himself as usual in his prison-cell, and writing himself down, as soon as he has the privilege of paper and ink, that he may afterwards pose before the world. It is a facile judgment.

For there is much of pose in the book. But then all that would be odiously artificial and insincere in the good stolid Philistine is the natural expression of this man's innermost self. I call him an artist. He was a true artist. Such writing as he gave to the world, when at his best, is consummate art. It was marred, to be sure, by an occasional catastrophic lapse from good taste, which is one of the puzzles of his character; he flings an ornament just where perfect simplicity is needed. But what ornament it is! And how lightly it rides, even when least in place, on the surface of thought; how perfectly it fits, when it is in place at all, the thought underlying! He was a true artist. But his failure lay where he least suspected it, in the fact that he was not an artist all through. Art is never self-centred. The artist looks out of himself to something far greater than himself, seizes it as no other man can, and gives it expression both for himself and for other men. Many great artists have been notably small and mean in themselves; had they turned their attention on themselves, their art would have been small and mean—nay, there would have been no art at all, but only a dreary presentment of dreary nature. I do not think we should care much for a portrait of himself, unidealised, by Burns; there is enough and to spare in "Willie brewed a peck o' maut." Imagine Turner painting his own surroundings. Now Oscar Wilde was more interested in himself than in anything else in the world.

Posing was therefore natural to him, and did not in the least hinder sincerity. But what about art? Having great artistic powers, he made the intolerable mistake of directing them upon himself. His cry out of the deep begins with the recognition of this blunder. He had

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tried to make his own life a work of art, and the result was utter failure. It is true that he does not recognise more than a small part of the reason for the failure, but the fact is borne in upon him irresistibly. He had meant to make his life a harmony of refined pleasures. To accentuate them he had made experiment of the grossly sensual, but he hints—and the hint is full of interest—that he had handled this lightly, not in the vulgar way that his accusers imagined: it was the tentative discord that was to be resolved, the muck, if you will, out of which the blossom of a flower-like life was to spring. He was to stand before the world a symbolic man, the eponymous master of a consummate culture. Such was his aim. Now picture this man on a certain day as he describes himself: handcuffed, in hideous convict-garb, standing under a November drizzle on the platform at Clapham Junction, where for one whole half-hour frequent trains disgorge their vulgar load, first to look with gaping curiosity at the gaol-bird and then, when it is buzzed about who he is, to break out into open jeers. What is wanting to the agony? The place, the sky, the circumstances, are all perfectly adapted to make his misery extreme. Say that this man was not in the deep!

A year passes over him; a year of prison life, or rather of death—a death that will not be ended. His one consuming desire has been for that end. Why has he not forced it? Surely the means are not wanting. Of this he tells nothing; but I venture on a conjecture. That reverence for the human body as the most beautiful thing in the world, which was so marked a feature of his artistic creed—a reverence utterly unlike that which honours the temple of the Holy Ghost, but having affinities even with this, and better at least than the hatred of the fakir for his tortured frame—this reverence may have stayed the hand of destruction. I could as soon imagine Oscar Wilde breaking an exquisite vase, because it had been put to some vile use, as destroying his own body because of its vile surroundings. He survived one year of unutterable misery. Then comes a change, and he begins to find utterance. Months afterwards he receives the boon of paper, and he begins to write down, first in disjointed periods, afterwards with increasing fluency and sustained development, the thoughts which were clamorous for speech.

And what is the change? He discovered something in himself. It was a great thing. He was not himself great; he was vastly smaller even than he supposed, for he clung pathetically to the idea that he was a great personage in literature; but by a paradox familiar to some, though strange to him, he found within himself a thing far greater than himself. It was Humility.

He describes the discovery in words of exquisite grace, and, as I declare, of perfect sincerity. He found that he had no quarrel with the world, none with the society which had trampled him underfoot, none with himself—here the deeper tragedy begins—save on

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the one score that when attacked in the first instance he had appealed to social law for protection, he who had lived to defy social law. Even so he bowed to the justice of the result; the social law struck him down. His contentment was not a contentment of pride, for it began with gratitude for an act of kindness. I do not envy the man who can read with dry eyes the story of the prisoner brought to the Bankruptcy Court for his public examination, and of the friend who took his stand in that dreary corridor "that, before the whole crowd, whom an action so sweet and simple hushed into silence, he might gravely raise his hat to me as, handcuffed and with bowed head, I passed him by."

The contentment was not then of pride; it was of humility. And this was a new thing to Oscar Wilde. The word had no meaning for him before; now he knew the reality. And he found it wrapped up with suffering. This again was a thing which he knew indeed after a fashion, but which he had resolutely put away from himself as ugly and shameful. Now he discovered it to be of supreme beauty. To suffer with humility is to know the good of life.

Hence a marvel. I have said that an artist's work must be cramped and small, poor and mean, if he be intent on himself. Now this work of Oscar Wilde, this cry *de profundis*, deals wholly with himself, and yet it is an almost flawless work of art. How can this be? It is because he is intent, not upon himself for himself, but upon himself as the shrine of that far greater thing than himself—humility in suffering. Do not imagine that you are to find here a conversion. The thought occurs to him that some reader may be expecting this, and he shrinks from the vulgarity. Do not expect to find a new style in the man; his artistic method was long since formed, and remains intact. You must look for a graceful impertinence of phrase, and you will find it. He has a new subject, but he treats it in the old way. His new experience leads him to study with new interest a personality which had long before fascinated him. Christian, bear with him; have patience with the Oscar Wilde of old days who always considered "the young Galilean peasant" one of the most charming figures of romance, delighting above all in Renan's "Fifth Gospel," and finding in the Sermon on the Mount the most delicate suggestions of the artistic temperament. Bear with him, I say; for he has hold of one thread in the strand of truth, and you will not be surprised to find that in his prison cell he makes a new discovery of the Man of Sorrows. Have patience with him still; for he cannot speak even now without a flavour of impertinence. The man and the style are one. If he wrote otherwise, you might begin to doubt his sincerity. You will have need of all your patience. And yet you may read not without profit.

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He grows cheerful in his humility. And now begins the tragedy in grim earnest. We have had only the prologue so far. It would seem that this most artistic man is to have his life cast in the end into artistic mould. He is to enact a tragedy. And according to the law of tragedy he must be unconscious of the approaching catastrophe; he must meet it with renewed hopes. He builds a whole palace of expectation out of his new discovery. He has found in himself the material for consummate works of art. He has discovered the meaning, the beauty of life. He is not converted; he scorns the thought. He is still himself; his artistic powers are returning in full flood: he can find expression. And now he has what he never had before, something worthy of expression. He has found it in the deep. He is content. To him there is no crying of deep to deep: there is no answering height. Religion has no meaning for him, he says with growing cheerfulness; if such things must be, he would have a religion especially designed for those who cannot believe, an altar without tapers, where a priest without hope shall minister unconsecrated bread and a wineless cup. Morality has no meaning for him either. He does not regret anything that he has done, save that unlucky appeal to the social law. He is a born antinomian, he says, and knows that nothing that he does matters, but only what he is. Has he then forgotten that shrewd discovery of the earlier days of sorrow, "that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that what one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry aloud on the housetop." It seems to be fading away before his new cheerfulness. During his first year in prison he could do nothing else but wring his hands in impotent despair, crying, "What an ending, what an appalling ending!" Now he cried, "What a beginning, what a wonderful beginning!" Men had pointed to him as showing whither the artistic life led: he would do such work in the future, carved out of his sufferings, that he might cry in triumph, "Yes! this is just where the artistic life leads a man."

Did no voice cry to him, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee!" After his imprisonment, Oscar Wilde wrote the Ballad of Reading Gaol, and then died. Ring down the curtain; let us go in silence.

VIATOR.

*Methuen and Co.

See Vol II p. 181, 208,
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In his preface to this book Mr. Robert Ross says: "For a long time considerable curiosity has been expressed about the manuscript of 'De Profundis,' which was known to be in my possession, the author having mentioned its existence to many other friends." Mr. Ross also assures us that this is the only work Wilde wrote while in prison, and the last work in prose he ever wrote. The "Ballad of Reading Gaol," it appears, was not planned or even composed until he had regained his liberty. As Oscar Wilde died in November, 1900, three-and-a-half years after his release from Reading Gaol, it would be interesting to know why "De Profundis" has been withheld from publication for about nine years. The book is either a human document or it is not. If the former neither time nor any other influence, however unfavourable, need have been feared. Most likely those entrusted with the responsibility of publication felt alarmed at the book being something more than the ordinary human document with which the world is familiar. When at Oxford Oscar Wilde longed "to eat of the fruit of all the trees in the garden of the world," and he went out of Magdalen College with that passion in his soul. "I threw the pearl of my soul into a cup of wine," he exclaims. "I went down the primrose path to the sound of flutes. I lived on honeycomb." But he confined himself exclusively to the trees of what seemed to him the sun-lit side of the garden; he shunned the other side for its shadow and its gloom; and his own folly, he acknowledges, brought "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." There is the whole burden of a book that suggests a death-bed confession in the full glare of the lime-lights.

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