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WILDE IN PARIS by A.RANSOME

T.P.'s MAGAZINE

ume 1911 No.

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T.P.'s MAGAZINE

Date June 1911 No.

Oscar Wilde in Paris

By Arthur Ransome

As the years pass by there seems to be an increasing interest in everything connected with the brilliant but ill-starred career of Oscar Wilde. In the following article, Mr. Arthur Ransome recounts the details of Wilde's life in France, the country that he loved so well and with whose people he found so deep an affinity. After the poet was released from prison, he went to the little seaside place called Berneval, some eight miles from Dieppe, and there, with Ernest Dowson, and occasionally other visitors, he spent a number of quiet and happy days. He is remembered in Berneval by residents to this day as a kindly, generous man, who was fond of bathing in the sea and of taking lonely walks along the beach. As Berneval is so little known to the British public, I have thought it advisable to illustrate this article with photographs of some of its most characteristic scenes which will ever be associated with the name of one of the greatest British geniuses.

Oscar Wilde.
From a pen drawing by Toulouse-Lautree.
From the "Hyperion Almanack

THIS is in no sense an article on Wilde's work, nor is it an estimate or character of the man. The utmost it attempts is to show how intimately Paris was connected with his life, to put into English some anecdotes still told by the Frenchmen who remember him, and, incidentally, to set right an error of fact about the writing of *Salomé,* an error into which a statement true in itself has led even the most competent of his English biographers.

Oscar Wilde's relations with Paris divide into three periods, before, during, and after his term of imprisonment. He had travelled in France as a boy, grew up with an excellent knowledge of French, wrote *The Sphinx* in Paris in 1874, and in May ten years later took his bride to Paris for their honeymoon. He almost became a French man of letters, and, when the Censor refused to license Madame Sarah Bernhardt's performance of *Salomé,* already in rehearsal at the Palace Theatre, he threatened to change his nationality. He was always at home in Paris, and he died there. On the background of that city, rather than of London, the drama of his life stands out, cleared of side issues, far enough away to be seen by us, with its lighthearted, exuberant beginning, its moment of glory, when he could say with Traherne :—

> "I was as high and great
> As Kings are in their seat :
> All other Things were mine,"

its catastrophe, which he turned into a momentary renaissance, its defeat and sombre end.

The Man who carried a Sunflower.

Long before his more general success, Wilde had projected on the screen of notoriety that is observed by the public a flamboyant caricature of himself. He did this partly for his own amusement, partly as a means of expression, partly also as a passport to celebrity. His essay on Wainwright, that startles again and again those who know the story of its author, as well as of his subject (the essay called "Pen, Pencil, and Poison"), con-

tains a sentence of characterisation that may, almost without change, be fitted to himself. "Like Disraeli, he determined to startle the town as a dandy, and his beautiful rings, his antique cameo breast-pin, and his pale lemon-coloured kid gloves, were well known, and indeed were regarded by Hazlitt as being the signs of a new manner in literature, while his rich curly hair, fine eyes, and exquisite white hands gave him the dangerous and delightful distinction of being different from others." Wilde also possessed and emphasised this distinction. He was known for his dress before he was known for his genius, and he waved before a multitude of empty eyes the cap and bells and punchinello of his always decorative eccentricities. He created a legend of himself, and did not leave it behind him when he came to Paris in the years of his success. Stuart Merrill wrote in a French paper:—"Certain hansom-cabmen even say that they have seen him about the hour of cats and poets, walking with an enormous lily in his hand." He was able to add: "Oscar Wilde rejects, as if regretfully, their testimony, in replying that legend is often truer than the truth." In 1883, before this time, when he came to Paris after his lecturing tour in America, he carried a jewelled walking stick, in imitation of the stick that pleased Balzac by setting the whole town talking of its owner and itself. And, in 1891, when André Gide met him, "some compared him to an Asiatic Bacchus, others to a Roman Emperor, others to Apollo himself." Wilde was "the man who walked the streets with a sunflower in his hand," and everybody wanted to see him, if only to look for the sunflower. He was also "the man who smoked cigarettes with gold tips," a luxury of Oriental magnificence in London at that time, and still more remarkable in Paris in those days before the *bureaux de tabac* had begun to sell Muratti's little tin boxes beside the paper packets of the State.

He became known as a talker. André Gide writes of a dinner: "Nous étions quatre, mais Wilde fut le seul qui parla." His talk was the subject of argument. He was accustomed to fit it to his widely-varying audiences, and, sometimes, he miscalculated. There are still legends in Paris that make him a large over-confident man, whose conversation was very disappointing. Some accuse him of lack of taste in his anxiety to startle and amuse. But mistakes were rare with him, and the main tradition is of an entertainer, the charm of whose talk was only equalled by that of his personality.

An Uncomfortable Dinner.

There are many records of the dinners at which Wilde was supreme. Let me notice one at which he suffered a discomfiture only conspicuous because of its contrast with his usual success. One of Wilde's friends was Jean Moréas, the Greek, whose death on March the 30th last year deprived French literature of one of her most interesting poets. They used frequently to dine together and to drink at the *café* by the Odéon facing the gardens of the Luxembourg, a *café* that has since become a *bureau de tabac*. Their youthful admirers used to stand in the street to see the silhouettes of the two masters on the *café* window. Moréas was the founder of the Ecole Romane, a school of poetry that Anatole France, holding him for its Ronsard, called a New Pléiade. When Wilde was at the height of his glory, Moréas gave a rather ceremonious dinner, at which were present, beside himself and Wilde, Raynaud, La Tailhède, and Du Plessys, three of his disciples, and Stuart Merrill, who tells the story. It is in perfect contrast with the dinner of four, at which Wilde was the only speaker.

"At dessert, Wilde bent his tall body towards Moréas, and asked him to recite some verse. 'I never recite,' replied Moréas, 'but if you would like it, our friend Raynaud will recite us something. Raynaud stood up, and, resting his redoubtable fists on the table, announced 'Sonnet to Jean Moréas.' He received our applause, and then Wilde again pressed Moréas to recite. 'No; but our friend La Tailhède. . . .' In his turn La Tailhède rose, and, his eyeglass fixed, launched in a clear voice: 'Ode to Jean Moréas." Wilde grew visibly unquiet at the worship paid to its chief by

Berneval le Grand.
The quaint Normandy village some two miles from Berneval sur Mer where Wilde stayed after his release from prison.

the Ecole Romane; none the less, he continued, by courtesy, his insistence. 'Du Plessys, let us hear your latest verses,' commanded the master. Leaping up, Du Plessys trumpeted in vibrant tones, 'The Tomb of Jean Moréas.' Oscar Wilde, choked, conquered, routed, he who had silence about him in the *salons* of London, asked for his hat and coat, and fled into the night. It was certainly the first time that all the incense round a dinner table had not been reserved for himself."

There is a feeling of amused hostility in that story, read by itself, which is not present in the man who tells it. Stuart Merrill, it is well to remember, not only loved Wilde well enough to laugh at him, but was also the moving spirit in the petition for Wilde's release that was projected in Paris a few years later.

Wilde and his Fairy-tales.

At this time Wilde preferred telling stories to talking. They were fairy tales, like that of "The Fisherman and his Soul," or parables, like that of "Narcissus." In 1894 a few of these parables were printed in *The Fortnightly Review*, and all those that André Gide mentions in his little book were so published. I suspect that when Gide heard them they had already been written, and that, wonderfully as he improvised in English, Wilde did not choose to risk the hesitations of new compositions in French. Stuart Merrill, the American-French poet, who tells the anecdote of the dinner with Moréas' disciples, remembers the sonorous, unhurried movement of these tales, and the powerful music of the narrator's voice. André Gide, whose account of them is the best published, is a little too reticent. I have heard that Wilde's narrative was the main thread of a melody whose accompaniment was made by Gide, then very young and very impressionable, sobbing distractedly into his plate. That is all to the credit of Monsieur Gide, and it is a pity he has not chosen to remember it himself, as it

is also sad that Pierre Louys, in a wonderful article in *Vers et Prose,* should have to remind him of his desperate silence in the presence of Verlaine, when the two young writers of twenty years ago visited the old bandit in the hospital. Théophile Gautier, for the trembling of his knees, had to sit down on the stairs when he was taken to be introduced to Victor Hugo. Such tales are all to the honour of the ashamed.

Fantastic French.

There are slight disagreements about Wilde's knowledge of French. He did not know the language as well, for example, as Mr. Arthur Symons, of whom Frenchmen say that he can talk for an hour without letting them suspect that he is not one of themselves. André Gide says that "he knew French admirably, but pretended to have to look for the words for which he intended his audience to wait. He had almost no accent, or, at most, only what it pleased him to retain, to give a new and strange aspect to his words. He pronounced *scepticisme, skepticisme* on purpose." On the other hand, Stuart Merrill writes of his speaking French with a fantasy that, pleasant enough in conversation, would have produced a deplorable impression in the theatre. For example, Wilde ended one of his tales with this delightful example of what du Maurier would almost call *Inglefrank*: "Et puis, alors, le roi il est mouru."

A Literary Tragedy.

All this should be remembered when we come to the question of the composition of *Salomé. Salomé* among the plays, and *The Sphinx* among the poems, as well as much else of Wilde's work, were written in Paris. *The Sphinx,* perhaps written as early as 1874 at the Hotel Voltaire, and published after much revision in 1894, is dedicated to Marcel Schwob, whose proof-reading of *Salomé* was later to cause the misconception I have already mentioned. Marcel Schwob was a writer of subtle criticism and unfathomable erudition, whose early death shattered the lamp he was about to light in the darkness of the fifteenth century. He had spent many years in preparing a life of Villon, and, in the knowledge that that book was building about him, the vagabond poet seemed almost to have become less mysterious. He seemed, at least, sure of eventual clarity. With Schwob's death he disappeared again into the dusk. There are tragedies of books as of men, and this is surely one, that the notes of Marcel Schwob, the whole material for his book, so written as to be only legible by himself, must remain a mass of inarticulate paper.

Now, Marcel Schwob, who was a close friend of Wilde, passed the proofs of *Salomé* for press, and made only two corrections. This is quite true, but a false deduction has been drawn from it. Correction in proof does not preclude correction in manuscript. *Salomé* was written in Paris, in French, but not in the French that now stands as the text, not in the French that Marcel Schwob corrected as it went to press. The French of *Salomé* is not the language of a Frenchman, but it is better than the French of Wilde, whose fantasy in conversation would have earned harder names in print. It is worth while to inquire into the facts.

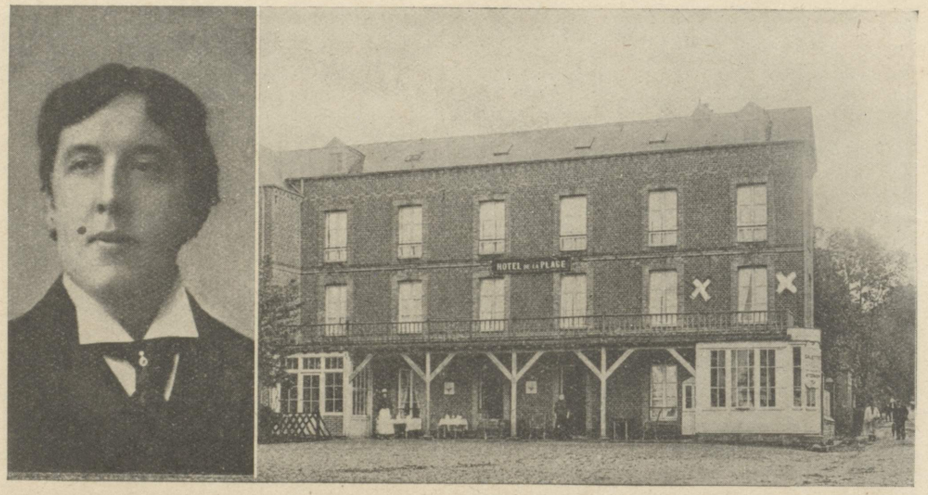
Who Wrote Salomé ?

The truth, as it is accepted in Paris to-day, among the people who could not help knowing at the time, is as follows. Wilde wrote the play in the French he talked, perhaps in French even less careful. He wrote it swiftly and without revision. It was a princess clothed in the fine gold of very simple speech, and in the tattered rags of colloquialism. He took it to Stuart Merrill and asked his help in removing these accidental disfigurements. Merrill corrected the French, eliminating, for example, such expletives as "enfin," with which it was too liberally decorated. Almost all the speeches, he says, began with "enfin." Wilde, in writing his play rapidly in a foreign language, would naturally use any short cut he could find in carrying the body of the tragedy to the paper. "Enfin" is an easy way of getting into a speech. He would use it to get on with his play, knowing that it would not be difficult to obliterate it in revision. But Stuart Merrill, although one of the most delightful of modern French poets, is American by birth. Perhaps it was because of this that Wilde lost confidence in his corrections. He took the play away, and gave it, on Merrill's advice, to Adolph Retté, then a Symbolist and Anarchist, since become a poet of nature and a Catholic. Retté went on with the work of revision. The play was probably at this stage when it was read at the Théatre de l'Œuvre (originally the Théatre d'Art) to my very dear friend Paul Fort, the founder of this theatre, where it was eventually to be played. It was not performed at this time, and Wilde came to distrust Retté's criticism as much as Merrill's, and took the play to Pierre Louys, the celebrated author of *Aphrodite,* who, as Merrill says, gave it the last touches of the file. After all this, it was published in Paris and London, by the "Librairie de l'Art Indépendant" and Messrs. Elkin Mathews and John Lane, when, in reading the proofs for press, Marcel Schwob contributed his two corrections. That, so far as I have been able to discover, is the true story of the writing and revision of *Salomé.*

The Village Church at Berneval, where Oscar Wilde had a Pew.
The curé of this church was one of the poet's truest friends during his stay in Normandy.

Petition for Wilde's Release from Gaol.

Salomé was published in 1893. The first period, the flamboyant magnificent period, of Wilde's visits to Paris was nearly at an end. The second period was when he lay in Reading Gaol. The news of his condemnation roused a ferment in Paris. At no time had he more loyal French admirers and friends, although in Paris, as in London, many who had benefited by his acquaintance did not wait the second crowing of the cock before denying him. There were many whose acquaintance in the sunshine became friendship under the clouds, and they opened a Quixotic and hopeless campaign for his release. Merrill and Deschamps, ignorant of the immutability of our laws, for-



The Hotel de la Plage, Berneval, near Dieppe, where Oscar Wilde stayed. Here he was joined by the poet, Ernest Dowson. Inset is a striking and characteristic portrait of the great dramatist and wit at the height of his fame. The crosses mark the rooms occupied by Wilde.

getful that the Anglo-Saxons share at least one characteristic with the Orient in their resemblance to the Medes and Persians, drew up a petition on Wilde's behalf :—

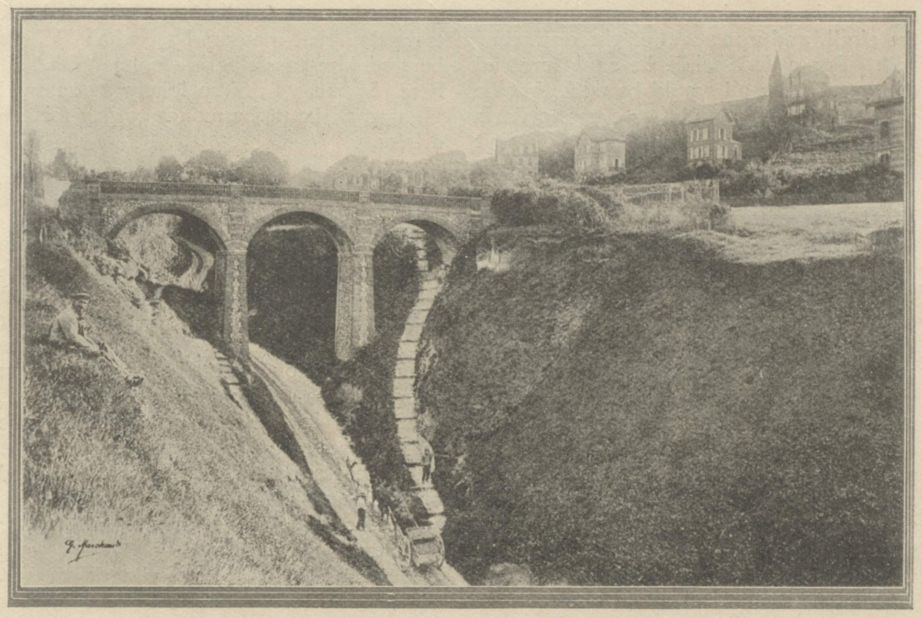
"(1) In the name of humanity, because public and private witness shows that M. Oscar Wilde is seriously ill;

"(2) In the name of art, because his possible death would deprive letters of works whose value is sufficiently guaranteed by the literary past of the author."

The appeal to sign this manifesto brought curious answers. Sardou, the writer of successful vaudevilles, replied, "C'est une boue trop immonde, pour que je m'en mêle, de quelque façon que soit." Alphonse Daudet wished to know in what company he was asked to protest. Zola suggested that it was an attempt at advertisement to which he did not wish to lend his name. The younger men, among whom were many since become famous and then not without renown, were proud to sign.

Guilt at First Incredible.

Those who had known him in Paris could not believe that Wilde was guilty of the offence for which he was condemned. They remembered the man who had told them fairy stories round the dinner table, the man whose courtesy was characteristic even among a courteous people, the man whose kindness many had experienced, the man who could not suffer without disgust the ordinary licentious anecdotes of the smoking room. The trial with its result seemed a fantastic nightmare. When the indiscretions of his friends convinced them of the truth, they replied immediately with other truths, that Wilde was mad, that there are few men without a private madness of their own, and that there are no laws for men of genius. Henri de Regnier, the poet and novelist, who has just been elected a member of the French Academy, defended him eloquently and in vain. Merrill and Deschamps were indefatigable without success. The Théatre de l'Œuvre put *Salomé* upon the stage, Lugne-Poë playing the part of Herod, and Wilde wrote from prison: "It is something that at a time of disgrace and shame I should still be regarded as an artist: I wish I could feel more pleasure, but I seem dead to all emotions except those of anguish or despair. However,



Berneval-sur-Mer.
The tiny gorge leading down to the beach where Oscar Wilde spent many happy hours.

please let Lugne-Poë know that I am sensible of the honour he has done me. He is a poet himself." In that time, when English journalists only stopped abusing him to close their lips over his name, when English mothers forbade all mention of the man or the writer, when admiration of his books was become a secret thing, like a half-ashamed religion, if there is any truth in the saying that we are where we are loved, then Oscar Wilde may indeed be said to have been in Paris.

A Fatal Tracheotomy.

As soon as Wilde left prison, he crossed the Channel to Dieppe, and settled in an inn at the little village of Berneval, where he lived as Sebastian Melmoth. André Gide saw him there, and has preserved a most valuable conversation, in which Wilde stated, as directly as in *De Profundis,* his conception of what he had to do with his life. "Prison has completely changed me," he said. "I counted on it for that. . . . One must never take up the same existence. . . . My life is like a work of art; an artist never begins the same thing over again . . . unless he has failed in it." And again, "The public is so terrible that it never knows a man except by the last thing he has done. If I returned to Paris now, they would only see in me the condemned. I do not want to reappear before I have written a play. Until then I must be left in peace."

At Berneval he took a little chalet, and wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol.* But he could not write his play in spite of the two subjects he had invented in prison. He was loved by everyone. The curé offered him a stall in the choir, and he felt adopted by the place. He found that the customs-officers were bored, and lent them the novels of Dumas *père.* On the day of the Queen's Jubilee in 1897, he gave a feast to forty children from the school with their master. But these pleasures were like the hallucinatory interests that a man takes in insignificant things when recovering from an operation.

The operation had been serious and

successful: a tracheotomy, an opening of the skull, and a removal of the organs of will. For a little while he could pretend to himself that all would be well, that he could write a play and then come to Paris and "be again the King of Life." But his will was gone. He could only talk of his projects, and he came to Paris with his play unwritten.

"I am so Lonely."

Various friends tried desperately to give him confidence. Stuart Merrill gave a dinner in his honour, but some of the guests did not appear, and Wilde was made, perhaps, more miserable by their absence than if the dinner had not taken place. It is hard for a King to become a knight, and Wilde's power of leadership was gone. With him it was always the throne or nothing, and when some who had known him closed their doors on him, he would call on no one for fear of a similar rebuff. Gide and a friend passed him sitting before a *café*. He ordered drinks for them, and Gide was sitting down in front of him with his back towards the passers-by, when Wilde begged him to sit beside him. "Oh! sit here, by me. I am so lonely just now." He was without the money to pay for the drinks.

"Afin de Finir ma Semaine."

In spite of his poverty, for though he had an allowance, he was frequently penniless (Merrill has a pathetic note from him asking for a very little sum "afin de finir ma semaine"), he refused in any way to profit by his condemnation. Fernand Xau offered him a weekly article to write. His messenger imprudently said, "After the noise of your condemnation you are sure of a great success." Wilde straightened himself, and replied, "Thank you. My successes before the condemnation are sufficient for me."

He went to Italy, to Switzerland, and to the South of France, returning always to Paris. During the Paris exhibition he used to spend two or three evenings a week in the exhibition grounds. Paul

Berneval-sur-Mer.
The beach, cliffs, and casino.

Fort and Madame Fort (the Suzon of the "Ballades"), who were his companions on some of these occasions, speak of him with tears in their eyes. Wilde seemed to them very gentle, not outwardly unhappy, and interested in everything. The depths of the man, they felt, had come much nearer to the surface.

Died "beyond his Means."

On November 30th, 1900, he died. He had been turned out of an hotel, a couple of years before, because he could not pay his bill, when the landlord of the Hotel d'Alsace, 13 Rue des Beaux Arts, took him in, paid what was owing, and recovered his luggage for him. He made this house his home in Paris, until he died, as he put it, "beyond his means." His health failed, and he drank and hurried the failure. Mr. Robert Ross nursed him, and brought a priest to ease his dissolution. It so happened that neither he nor any other close friend was with Wilde when he died. Paul Fort saw him just before his death and just after. He describes the small, dingy hotel, the passages, and the smell of disinfectants about the room where Wilde lay. He was one of the few who followed Wilde's coffin.

In Paris, where he had moved in glory as a Roman Emperor, or a Bacchus of the East, the remains of Wilde headed a pitiful procession. Of those who filled the two cabs of which it was composed, several went about their business before reaching the cemetery. No bell tolled. The church hung no mourning curtains round its entrance, and admitted the body by a small side door. When Wilde came to Paris the boulevards fluttered with his name. When at last he left, his departure was almost unnoticed. A *sergent-de-ville* saluted the coffin with magnificence; he did not know whose body it contained.

Oscar Wilde was buried in the cemetery at Bagneux on December 3rd, 1900. On July 20th, 1909, his coffin was removed to Père-Lachaise, where a monument, on which Mr. Jacob Epstein is already working, will eventually be erected over his grave.

A. R.

SOME IDEAS FROM OSCAR WILDE

Cynicism is merely the art of seeing things as they are, instead of as they ought to be.

Three addresses always inspire confidence, even in a tradesman.

Women spoil every romance by trying to make it last for ever.

In literature mere egotism is delightful.

It is difficult not to be unjust to what one loves.

Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

A man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies.

The man who can call a spade a spade should be compelled to use one.

The Tragedy of "Medusa" at the Berlin Modern Theatre. This picture shows in a striking manner how effective can be the modern ideas of stage setting which are being adopted by Continental playhouses.