

LORD ALFRED DOUGLAS

O S C A R
W I L D E

A SUMMING-UP

Published 1940 and reissued 1950 by The Richards Press, London

Transcribed by Ashlyn Churchill for The Wilde Douglas Project 2018

Chapter I

I HAVE used much time and much expense of spirit in preliminary wrestling with my thoughts over this book. From the first moment of its inception I have been confronted with a painful dilemma. On the one hand I have naturally wished to avoid any appearance of holding a brief for Oscar Wilde's vices, and on the other hand I have prayed to be delivered from censorious moralisings which would come very ill from my lips or my pen. My friend—and he has indeed proved himself a true friend—Mr. Bernard Shaw wrote to me not long ago, when I told him I was going to write this book, begging me to 'get as much detergent fun into the case' as I could. Mr. Shaw himself might well be capable of getting fun into a book on Oscar Wilde: he has, indeed, done something of the sort in his preface to the regrettable re-issue of the late Frank Harris's preposterous *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* for which he made himself responsible with my very reluctantly given consent. But Mr. Shaw never liked Wilde, and, though he is the kindest-hearted of men, who as I have often told him spends a great deal of his time in the St. Christopher-like employment of carrying forlorn

children over deep rivers, he remains, when all is said and done, slightly inhuman in his attitude towards life when he takes his pen in hand.

The result has been that the 'fun' he has imported into the tragedy of Oscar Wilde is not a little tainted with cruelty at the expense of poor Oscar himself and his faithful defender, admirer and friend, Robert Harborough Sherard.

The fact that Mr. Shaw has gone out of his way in that brilliant preface to Harris's clumsy farrago of lies and misrepresentations to give me a tremendous 'boost' from the literary point of view, and also to defend my character in an essentially truthful and entirely chivalrous way, cannot blind me to the obvious *parti pris* against Wilde that he exhibits. What is one to say to a man of Mr. Shaw's transcendent literary achievements who calls *The Importance of Being Earnest* a 'mechanical farce'? My own opinion about *The Importance of Being Earnest* is that it is almost on a level with the best comedies that have ever been written in the English language which I take to be the three great Shakespearian comedies, *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *As You Like It*, (and I don't mind throwing in *Man and Superman*) and that it is as much superior to anything that Sheridan ever wrote as Sheridan is himself superior to, say, Henry Arthur Jones.

Not that there is anything 'cruel' in calling

The Importance of Being Earnest a mechanical farce. Such a pronouncement is neither more nor less damaging than Mr. Shaw's similar 'attacks' on Shakespeare, whom Mr. Shaw affects to despise but whose text he 'knows backwards' and to whom he never ceases, whether he knows it or not, to pay homage in his heart.

No; the cruelty to which I am referring to is the cruelty of finding comedy or farce in the frightful tragedy of Oscar Wilde's terrible pilgrimage.

This is what Mr. Shaw says: 'Please let us hear no more of the tragedy of Oscar Wilde. Oscar was no tragedian. He was the superb comedian of his century, one to whom misfortune, disgrace, imprisonment were external and traumatic. His gaiety of soul was invulnerable : it shines through the blackest pages of his *De Profundis* as clearly as in his funniest epigrams. Even on his deathbed he found in himself no pity for himself, playing for the laugh with his last breath, and getting it with as sure a stroke as in his palmiest prime. Not so the young disciple whose fortunes were poisoned and ruined through their attachment. The tragedy is his tragedy, not Oscar's.'

But why, my dear St. Christopher, should my tragedy, which I am far from denying or repudiating, exclude or obscure Oscar Wilde's far

greater tragedy? The passage I have quoted from Mr. Shaw's preface to Harris is an example of what I call his cruelty to Wilde. There are other examples of it in the same piece of writing. Yet I am constrained to admit that between Mr. Shaw, who dislikes Wilde, and Mr. Sherard, who adores him, I find myself unable to come down quite definitely on one side or the other. If Mr. Shaw is unfair to Wilde, Sherard is perhaps even more so; quite unconsciously of course.

Sherard maintains all through his 'Life' of Wilde and his other books on the same subject that what he calls Wilde's 'cruel and devilish madness,' that is to say his homosexual activities, were the result of attacks of epileptic mania. He imagines that Wilde committed the acts for which he was convicted in periodical bouts of insanity engendered by syphilis, and that he was almost unconscious of them after he had committed them. This of course is nonsense, if I may say so without offending Mr. Sherard for whom I have the greatest respect and friendship. Shaw's account is so obviously the true one that I can hardly believe that Mr. Sherard has not by this time admitted its unanswerable cogency. Shaw says: 'I do not believe that he (Wilde) ever condescended to denials except when legal fictions were necessary. Like most similarly afflicted men of

culture, he was not only unashamed of his reversed sex instinct but proud of it, and of its association with some great names. But he never thrust it upon those of his friends to whom it was repugnant.' That is, of course, the plain truth. Sherard's attempted explanations of and excuses for Wilde's conduct would have driven Wilde to fury and exasperation, and they do indeed, to this day, irritate and exasperate Wilde's friends who know the truth about him. The fact is that Mr. Sherard in these particular regards always was and remains (to his credit I say it) of an innocence which the French would describe as *formidable*.

I myself know at least as much about all this as anyone else, and the fact that I completely changed my views on the subject nearly forty years ago, and indeed reacted violently in the opposite direction, does not obscure my knowledge and memory of the actual events and the atmosphere that surrounded them. Wilde was never in the least degree ashamed of his homosexuality. On the contrary he gloried in it and was not above attributing the same tastes to Shakespeare (utterly wrongly as I believe) and even to Plato although, since he was a Greek scholar, he must have known perfectly well that the philosopher was entirely against them.

My position throughout this short sketch of

Wilde's career is founded on the love I had for him and still have (after an interval of turning against him) whose counterpart informed the magnificent definition of friendship attributed to the schoolboy who, when required in class to give a definition of a friend, wrote, 'A friend is someone who knows all about you and still goes on liking you.' I know all about Oscar Wilde and I still go on liking him; and my love for him has even outlived the resentment and indignation I felt against him when I found out, twelve years after his death, that he had 'attacked' me in the unpublished part of his letter to me written in prison which the late Robert Ross faked up into the book called *De Profundis*.

Having thus cleared the ground by explaining my attitude towards Wilde's homosexuality, I hope I can proceed to write about him quite objectively, and with as little reference to myself and any grievances I may have had about what Mr. Shaw rightly calls my tragedy, as is compatible with the accurate narration of the events which make up his story. I hope I may be allowed to say what has to be said about Wilde's vices without it being necessary to embellish my remarks with conventional repetitions of assurances of the orthodoxy of my own sentiments in these regards. As a Christian and a Catholic I naturally and inevitably disapprove

deeply of homosexuality. As a philosopher, on the other hand, I may be able to recognise that the exaggerated horror of it which prevailed in Wilde's time and in my youth was mainly hypocritical and squared very imperfectly with the private lives of a large proportion of those people who most loudly condemned it. In any case hypocrisy and pharisaism, being spiritual sins, are worse than sins of the flesh; and at the risk of being taken to task as I recently was, very kindly and politely, in a Catholic paper for 'verging on heretical opinion' by appearing to question the universality of the moral law, I shall continue to think and say that Wilde's treatment by an English judge, and by English newspapers and English society in general, was cruel and wicked and a gross sin against charity. England is largely a pagan country, and it is in no position to lash itself into a fury of condemnation of pagan practices. Is this heresy? I greatly doubt it. An immoral action is certainly always immoral and wrong, whether it is committed in a Christian or a pagan country; but, all the same, people who live in glass houses should refrain from throwing stones, and those afflicted with beams in their eyes should moderate their holy transports on the question of notes.

I have recently been rereading Mr. Sherard's books on Oscar Wilde. I know, and it is a

source of deep satisfaction to me to know, that Mr. Sherard has entirely changed his views about the part which I myself played in the drama. He certainly wronged and misjudged me very much, and he has now made me the most handsome and generous *amende* in his latest book; but I find myself sometimes wondering whether, even now, after all that has happened, and when his former admiration for Robert Ross has turned into disgust and loathing, he realises how entirely on the wrong tack he was in his efforts to defend Wilde in the way he attempted to do it. In order to defend Wilde it is absolutely necessary to realise what Wilde's attitude was towards the accusations which were brought against him and which, broadly speaking, were established as undoubted facts.

Wilde himself never denied them at all, except, as Mr. Shaw points out, 'when legal fictions were necessary in the law courts.' Nothing annoyed, nay enraged, him more than to be assured by anyone whom he met, or who wrote to him, of a firm belief in his 'innocence'. Imagine the feelings of any man who has done something of which he is entirely proud and which he regards as a great feather in his cap, when a sympathiser and admirer says to him 'nothing in the world would ever make me believe that you were guilty of such an action.

If I were ever to bring myself to believe that you could possibly have done such a thing, it could only be because I would be convinced that you did it in an attack of epileptic mania or as the result of the ravages on your brain caused by a terrible disease.' Yet this is exactly what Mr. Sherard does.

To defend Wilde one must first of all, and above everything else, realise and admit that he was entirely guilty of what he was charged with and that he went on up till the time of his last illness doing the same things without the slightest qualm or compunction. As he was undoubtedly received into the Catholic Church on his death-bed, any Catholic—indeed any Christian, Catholic or not—is entitled, nay bound, to believe that he did ultimately realise and admit the sinfulness and wickedness of what he had been doing. I do not doubt it for a moment myself. I would no more question his conversion than I would impugn that of the penitent thief who is revered by Catholics as St. Dismas and who received a plenary absolution from Christ Himself. Wilde's conversion was the result of many days and hours of mortal agony. It was wonderful, but no more wonderful than a thousand other such death-bed conversions. No believing Christian could possibly justify disbelief in it. A Mr. Thomas Bell who was Frank Harris's private

secretary at the time of Wilde's death has written a book which contains much interesting and useful matter, particularly useful to me because it confirms and substantiates the accusation of swindling me out of two thousand pounds which I brought against Harris in my *Autobiography*. Mr. Bell now resides in California and his book has not yet found a publisher. I have read it because he sent me a typed copy of it. In this book Mr. Bell says flatly that Wilde did not become a Catholic on his death-bed. The answer to his is that Mr. Bell, who on this own showing has no first-hand information on the subject, is quite mistaken, and that, as an agnostic or an atheist, he has allowed his prejudice to commit him to a statement which one might, if one were not anxious to be polite, describe as a lie. The evidence of Wilde's conversion is overwhelming. It is contained in, amongst other books, my *Autobiography* and my last published book *Without Apology* and it has recently been confirmed and strengthened by the Right Reverend Abbot Sir David Hunter Blair in his book *In Victorian Days* published a short time ago.

It is precisely this assurance that Wilde died a Catholic that has enabled me to undertake the task of writing this book.

