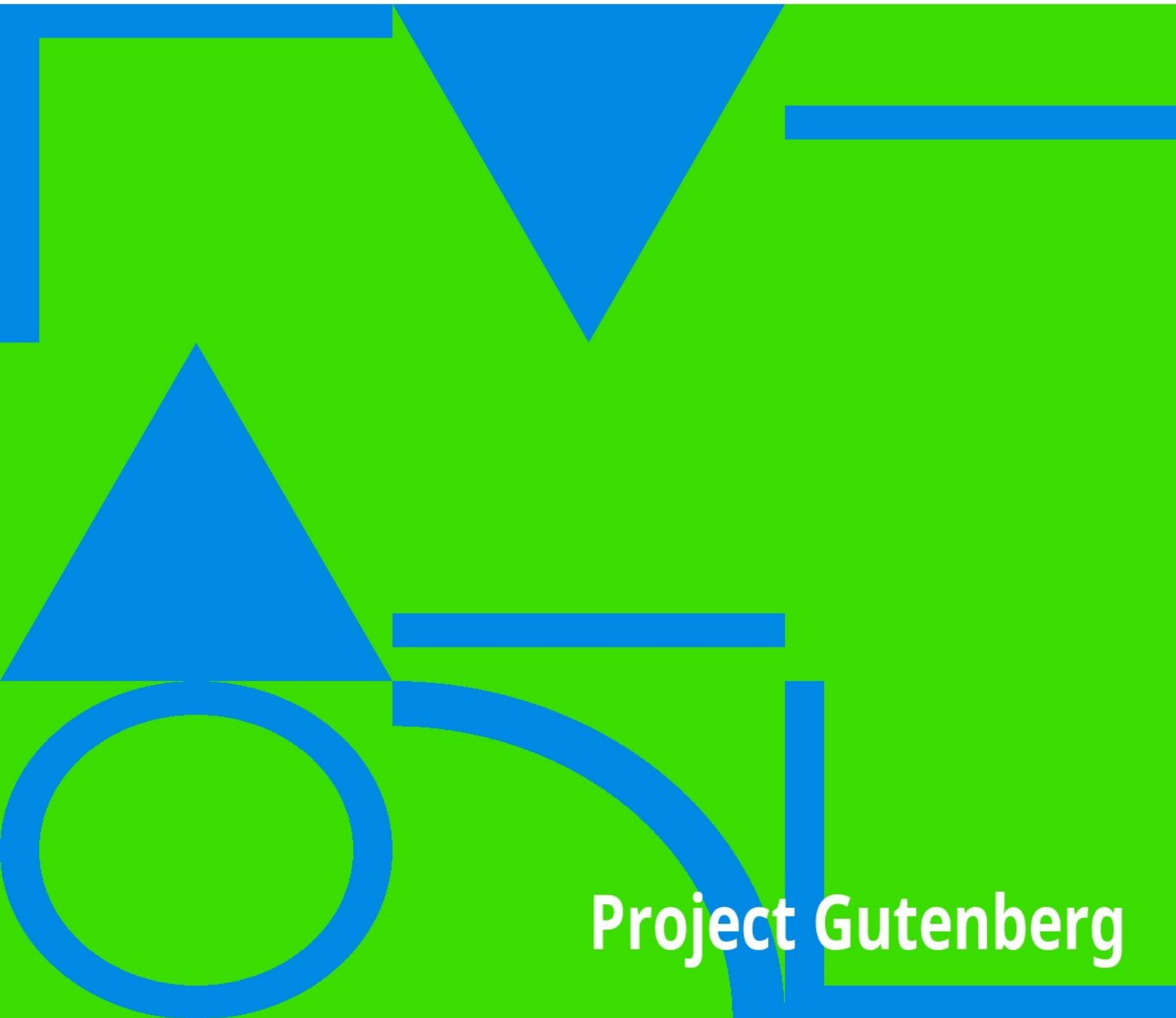
Oscar Wilde

An Idler's Impression

Edgar Saltus



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OSCAR WILDE

An Idler's Impression

BY

EDGAR SALTUS

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Oscar Wilde: An Idler's Impression

OSCAR WILDE

Y

ears ago, in a Paris club, one man said to another: "Well, what's up?" The other shook a paper: "There is only one genius in England and they have put him in jail."

One may wonder though whether it were their doing, or even Wilde's, that put him there. One may wonder whether it were not the high fates who so gratified him in order that, from his purgatory, he might rise to a life more evolved. But that view is perhaps obvious. Wilde himself, who was the least mystic of men, accepted it. In the "De Profundis," after weighing his disasters, he said: "Of these things I am not yet worthy."

The genuflexion has been called a pose. It may have been. Even so, it is perhaps better to kneel, though it be in the gallery, than to stoop at nothing, and Wilde, who had stood very high, bent very low. He saw that there is one thing greater than greatness and that is humility.

Yet though he saw it, it is presumable that he forgot it. It is presumable that the grace which was his in prison departed in Paris. On the other hand it may not have. There are no human scales for any soul.

It was at Delmonico's, shortly after he told our local Customs that he had nothing to declare but genius, that I first met him. He was dressed like a mountebank. Without, at the entrance, a crowd had collected. In the restaurant people stood up and stared. Wilde was beautifully unmoved. He was talking, at first about nothing whatever, which is always an interesting topic, then about "Vera," a play of his for which

a local manager had offered him an advance, five thousand dollars I think, "mere starvation wages," as he put it, and he went on to say that the manager wanted him to make certain changes in it. He paused and added: "But who am I to tamper with a masterpiece?"—a jest which afterward he was too generous to hoard.

Later, in London, I saw him again. In appearance and mode of life he had become entirely conventional. The long hair, the knee-breeches, the lilies, the velvet, all the mountebank trappings had gone. He was married, he was a father, and in his house in Tite street he seemed a bit bourgeois. Of that he may have been conscious. I remember one of his children running and calling at him: "My good papa!" and I remember Wilde patting the boy and saying: "Don't call me that, it sounds so respectable."

In Tite street I had the privilege of meeting Mrs. Oscar, who asked me to write something in an album. I have always hated albumenous poetry and, as I turned the pages in search of possible inspiration, I happened on this: *From a poet to a poem. Robert Browning.*

Poets exaggerate and why should they not? They have been found, too, with their hands in other people's paragraphs. Wilde helped himself to that line which he put in a sonnet to this lady, who had blue eyes, fair hair, chapped lips, and a look of constant bewilderment.

As for that, Oscar was sufficiently bewildering. He talked infinitely better than he wrote, and on no topic, no matter what, could he talk as other mortals must. Once only I heard of him uttering a platitude and from any one else that platitude would have been a paradox. He exuded wit and waded in it with a serenity that was disconcerting.

It was on this abnormal serenity and on his equally abnormal brilliance that he relied to defeat the prosecution. "I have all the criminal classes with me," he announced, and that was his one platitude, a banality that contrived to be tragic. Then headlong down

the stair of life he fell.

Hell he had long since summarised as the union of souls without bodies to bodies without souls. There are worse definitions than this which years later I recalled when, through a curious forethought of fate, he was taken, en route to the cemetery, through the Porte de l'Enfer.

But in Tite street, at this time, and in Regent street where he occasionally dined, he was gentle, wholesome, and joyous; a man who paid compliments because, as he put it, he could pay nothing else. He had been caricatured: the caricatures had ceased. People had turned to look: they looked no longer. He was forgiven and, what is worse, forgotten. Yet that tiger, his destiny, was but sharpening its claws.

At an inn where Gautier dined, the epigrams were so demoralising that a waiter became insane. Similarly in the Regent street restaurant it was reported, perhaps falsely, that a waiter had also lost his reason. But Wilde, though a three decanter man, always preserved his own. He preserved, too, his courtesy which was invariable. The most venomous thing that he ever said of anyone was that he was a tedious person, and the only time he ever rebuked anybody was at the conclusion of one of those after-dinner stories which some host or other interrupted by rising and saying: "Shall we continue the conversation in the drawing-room?"

But I am in error. That was not his only rebuke. On one occasion I drove with him to Tite street. An hour previous he had executed a variation on the "Si j'étais roi." "If I were king," he had sung, "I would sit in a great hall and paint on green ivory and when my ministers came and told me that the people were starving, I would continue to paint on green ivory and say: 'Let them starve.'"

The aria was rendered in the rooms of Francis Hope, a young man who later married and divorced May Yohe, but who at the time

showed an absurd interest in stocks. Someone else entered and Hope asked what was new in the City. "Money is very tight," came the reply. "Ah, yes," Wilde cut in. "And of a tightness that has been felt even in Tite street. Believe me, I passed the forenoon at the British Museum looking at a gold-piece in a case."

Afterward we drove to Chelsea. It was a vile night, bleak and bitter. On alighting, a man came up to me. He wore a short jacket which he opened. From neck to waist he was bare. I gave him a shilling. Then came the rebuke. With entire simplicity Wilde took off his overcoat and put it about the man.

But the simplicity seemed to me too Hugoesque and I said: "Why didn't you ask him in to dinner?"

Wilde gestured. "Dinner is not a feast, it is a ceremony."

Subsequently that ceremony must have been contemplated, for Mrs. Wilde was kind enough to invite me. The invitation reached me sometime in advance and I took it of course that there would be other guests. But on the appointed evening, or what I thought was the appointed evening, when I reached this house—on which Oscar objected to paying taxes because, as he told the astonished assessors, he was so seldom at home—when I reached it, it seemed to me that I must be the only guest. Then, presently, in the dreary drawing-room, Oscar appeared. "This is delightful of you," he told me. "I have been late for dinner a half hour, again a whole hour; you are late an entire week. That is what I call originality."

I put a bold face on it. "Come to my shop," I said, "and have dinner with me. Though," I added, "I don't know what I can give you."

"Oh, anything," Wilde replied. "Anything, no matter what. I have the simplest tastes. I am always satisfied with the best."

He was not boasting. One evening he dined on his "Sphinx." Subsequently I supped with him on "Salome."

That was in the Regent street restaurant where, apropos of nothing, or rather with what to me at the time was curious irrelevance, Oscar, while tossing off glass after glass of liquor, spoke of Phémé, a goddess rare even in mythology, who, after appearing twice in Homer, flashed through a verse of Hesiod and vanished behind a page of Herodotos. In telling of her, suddenly his eyes lifted, his mouth contracted, a spasm of pain—or was it dread?—had gripped him. A moment only. His face relaxed. It had gone.

I have since wondered, could he have evoked the goddess then? For Phémé typified what modern occultism terms the impact—the premonition that surges and warns. It was Wilde's fate to die three times—to die in the dock, to die in prison, to die all along the boulevards of Paris. Often since I have wondered could the goddess then have been lifting, however slightly, some fringe of the crimson curtain, behind which, in all its horror, his destiny crouched. If so, he braved it.

I had looked away. I looked again. Before me was a fat pauper, florid and over-dressed, who, in the voice of an immortal, was reading the fantasies of the damned. In his hand was a manuscript, and we were supping on "Salome."

As the banquet proceeded, I experienced that sense of sacred terror which his friends, the Greeks, knew so well. For this thing could have been conceived only by genius wedded to insanity and, at the end, when the tetrarch, rising and bundling his robes about him, cries: "Kill that woman!" the mysterious divinity whom the poet may have evoked, deigned perhaps to visit me. For, as I applauded, I shuddered, and told him that I had.

Indifferently he nodded and, assimilating Hugo with superb

unconcern, threw out: "It is only the shudder that counts."

That was long before the crash. After it, Mrs. Wilde said that he was mad and had been for three years, "quite mad" as the poor woman expressed it.

It may be that she was right. St. George, I believe, fought a dragon with a spear. Whether or not he killed the brute I have forgotten. But Wilde fought poverty, which is perhaps more brutal, with a pen. The fight, if indolent, was protracted. Then, abruptly, his inkstand became a Vesuvius of gold. London that had laughed at him, laughed with him and laughed colossally. A penny-a-liner was famous. The international hurdle-race of the stage had been won in a canter and won by a hack. A sub-editor was top of the heap.

The ascent was perhaps too rapid. The spiderous Fates that sit and spin are jealous of sudden success. It may be that Mrs. Wilde was right. In any event, for some time before the crash he saw few of his former friends. After his release few of his former friends saw him. But personally, if I may refer to myself, I am not near sighted. I saw him in Paris, saw too, and to my regret, that he looked like a drunken coachman, and told him how greatly I admired the "Ballad,"—that poem which tells of his life, or rather of his death, in jail. Half covering his mouth with his hand, he laughed and said: "It does not seem to me sufficiently vécu."

Before the enormity of that I fell back. But at once he became more human. He complained that even the opiate of work was denied him, since no one would handle his wares.

The Athenians, who lived surrounded by statues, learned from them the value of silence, the mystery that it lends to beauty, in particular the dignity that it gives to grief. In their tragedies any victim of destiny is as though stricken dumb. Wilde knew that, he knew everything, in addition to being a thorough Hellenist. None the less he

told of his fate. It was human, therefore terrible, but it was not the tragic muse. It was merely a tragedy of letters.

Letters, yes, but lower case. Wilde was a third rate poet who occasionally rose to the second class but not once to the first. Prose is more difficult than verse and in it he is rather sloppy. In spite of which, or perhaps precisely on that account, he called himself lord of language. Well, why not, if he wanted to? Besides, in his talk he was lord and more—sultan, pontifex maximus. Hook, Jerrold, Smith, Sheridan, rolled into one, could not have been as brilliant. In talk he blinded and it is the subsiding wonder of it that his plays contain.

In the old maps, on the vague places, early geographers used to put: Hic sunt leones—Here are lions. On any catalogue of Wilde's plays there should be written: Here lions might have been. For assuming his madness, one must also admit his genius and the uninterrupted conjunction of the two might have produced brilliancies such as few bookshelves display.

Therein is the tragedy of letters. Renan said that morality is the supreme illusion. The diagnosis may or may not be exact. Yet it is on illusions that we all subsist. We live on lies by day and dreams at night. From the standpoint of the higher mathematics, morality may be an illusion. But it is very sustaining. Formerly it was also Oscar Wilde inspirational. In post-pagan days it created a new conception of beauty. Apart from that, it has nothing whatever to do with the arts, except the art of never displeasing, which, in itself, is the whole secret of mediocrity.

Oscar Wilde lacked that art, and I can think of no better epitaph for him.

Here ends this book written by Edgar Saltus, arranged in this form by Laurence C. Woodworth, Scrivener, and printed for the BROTHERS OF THE BOOK at the press of The Faithorn Company, Chicago, 1917.

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Incipit Vita Nova

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