

[illegible]



tredition was established in 2006 by Sandra Latusseck and Soenke Schulz. Based in Hamburg, Germany, tredition offers publishing solutions to authors and publishing houses, combined with worldwide distribution of printed and digital book content. tredition is uniquely positioned to enable authors and publishing houses to create books on their own terms and without conventional manufacturing risks.

For more information please visit: www.tredition.com

TREDITION CLASSICS

This book is part of the TREDITION CLASSICS series. The creators of this series are united by passion for literature and driven by the intention of making all public domain books available in printed format again - worldwide. Most TREDITION CLASSICS titles have been out of print and off the bookstore shelves for decades. At tredition we believe that a great book never goes out of style and that its value is eternal. Several mostly non-profit literature projects provide content to tredition. To support their good work, tredition donates a portion of the proceeds from each sold copy. As a reader of a TREDITION CLASSICS book, you support our mission to save many of the amazing works of world literature from oblivion. See all available books at www.tredition.com.



Project Gutenberg

The content for this book has been graciously provided by Project Gutenberg. Project Gutenberg is a non-profit organization founded by Michael Hart in 1971 at the University of Illinois. The mission of Project Gutenberg is simple: To encourage the creation and distribution of eBooks. Project Gutenberg is the first and largest collection of public domain eBooks.

Oscar Wilde, His Life and Confessions Volume 2

Frank Harris

Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: Frank Harris

Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin – Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany

ISBN: 978-3-8424-8264-7

www.tredition.com

www.tredition.de

Copyright:

The content of this book is sourced from the public domain.

The intention of the TREDITION CLASSICS series is to make world literature in the public domain available in printed format. Literary enthusiasts and organizations, such as Project Gutenberg, worldwide have scanned and digitally edited the original texts. tredition has subsequently formatted and redesigned the content into a modern reading layout. Therefore, we cannot guarantee the exact reproduction of the original format of a particular historic edition. Please also note that no modifications have been made to the spelling, therefore it may differ from the orthography used today.



Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas About 1893

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED

CONTENTS

- XVII. Prison and the Effects of Punishment
- XVIII. Mitigation of Punishment; but not Release
- XIX. His St. Martin's Summer: His Best Work
- XX. The Results of His Second Fall: His Genius
- XXI. His Sense of Rivalry; His Love of Life and Laziness
- XXII. "A Great Romantic Passion!"
- XXIII. His Judgments of Writers and of Women
- XXIV. We Argue About His "Pet Vice" and Punishment
- XXV. The Last Hope Lost
- XXVI. The End
- XXVII. A Last Word
- The Appendix
- Shaw's "Memories" A1

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas About 1893
- "Speranza": Lady Wilde as a Young Woman

BOOK II

CHAPTER XVII

Prison for Oscar Wilde, an English prison with its insufficient bad food [1] and soul-degrading routine for that amiable, joyous, eloquent, pampered Sybarite. Here was a test indeed; an ordeal as by fire. What would he make of two years' hard labour in a lonely cell?

There are two ways of taking prison, as of taking most things, and all the myriad ways between these two extremes; would Oscar be conquered by it and allow remorse and hatred to corrupt his very heart, or would he conquer the prison and possess and use it? Hammer or anvil — which?

Victory has its virtue and is justified of itself like sunshine; defeat carries its own condemnation. Yet we have all tasted its bitter waters: only "infinite virtue" can pass through life victorious, Shakespeare tells us, and we mortals are not of infinite virtue. The myriad vicissitudes [Pg 322] of the struggle search out all our weaknesses; test all our powers. Every victory shows a more difficult height to scale, a steeper pinnacle of god-like hardship — that's the reward of victory: it provides the hero with ever-new battle-fields: no rest for him this side the grave.

But what of defeat? What sweet is there in its bitter? This may be said for it; it is our great school: punishment teaches pity, just as suffering teaches sympathy. In defeat the brave soul learns kinship with other men, takes the rub to heart; seeks out the reason for the fall in his own weakness, and ever afterwards finds it impossible to judge, much less condemn his fellow. But after all no one can hurt us but ourselves; prison, hard labour, and the hate of men; what are these if they make you truer, wiser, kinder?

Have you come to grief through self-indulgence and good-living? Here are months in which men will take care that you shall eat badly and lie hard. Did you lack respect for others? Here are men who will show you no consideration. Were you careless of others' sufferings? Here now you shall agonize unheeded: gaolers and governors as well as black cells just to teach you. Thank your stars then for every day's experience, for, when you have learned the lesson of it

and turned its discipline into service, the prison shall transform itself into a hermitage, the [Pg 323]dungeon into a home; the burnt skilly shall be sweet in your mouth; and your rest on the plank-bed the dreamless slumber of a little child.

And if you are an artist, prison will be more to you than this; an astonishing vital and novel experience, accorded only to the chosen. What will you make of it? That's the question for you. It is a wonderful opportunity. Seen truly, a prison's more spacious than a palace; nay, richer, and for a loving soul, a far rarer experience. Thank then the spirit which steers men for the divine chance which has come to you; henceforth the prison shall be your domain; in future men will not think of it without thinking of you. Others may show them what the good things of life do for one; you will show them what suffering can do, cold and regretful sleepless hours and solitude, misery and distress. Others will teach the lessons of joy. The whole vast underworld of pity and pain, fear and horror and injustice is your kingdom. Men have drawn darkness about you as a curtain, shrouded you in blackest night; the light in you will shine the brighter. Always provided of course that the light is not put out altogether.

Hammer or anvil? How would Oscar Wilde take punishment?

We could not know for months. Yet he was [Pg 324]an artist by nature—that gave one a glimmer of hope. We needed it. For outside at first there was an icy atmosphere of hatred and contempt. The mere mention of his name was met with expressions of disgust, or frozen silence.

One bare incident will paint the general feeling more clearly than pages of invective or description. The day after Oscar's sentence Mr. Charles Brookfield, who, it will be remembered, had raked together the witnesses that enabled Lord Queensberry to "justify" his accusation; assisted by Mr. Charles Hawtrey, the actor, gave a dinner to Lord Queensberry to celebrate their triumph. Some forty Englishmen of good position were present at the banquet—a feast to celebrate the ruin and degradation of a man of genius.

Yet there are true souls in England, noble, generous hearts. I remember a lunch at Mrs. Jeune's, where one declared that Wilde was at length enjoying his deserts; another regretted that his punish-

ment was so slight, a third with precise knowledge intimated delicately and with quiet complacency that two years' imprisonment with hard labour usually resulted in idiocy or death: fifty per cent., it appeared, failed to win through. It was more to be dreaded on all accounts than five years' penal servitude. "You see it begins with starvation and solitary con [Pg 325]finement, and that breaks up the strongest. I think it will be enough for our vainglorious talker." Miss Madeleine Stanley (now Lady Middleton) was sitting beside me, her fine, sensitive face clouded: I could not contain myself, I was being whipped on a sore.

"This must have been the way they talked in Jerusalem," I remarked, "after the world-tragedy."

"You were an intimate friend of his, were you not?" insinuated the delicate one gently.

"A friend and admirer," I replied, "and always shall be."

A glacial silence spread round the table, while the delicate one smiled with deprecating contempt, and offered some grapes to his neighbour; but help came. Lady Dorothy Nevill was a little further down the table: she had not heard all that was said, but had caught the tone of the conversation and divined the rest.

"Are you talking of Oscar Wilde?" she exclaimed. "I'm glad to hear you say you are a friend. I am, too, and shall always be proud of having known him, a most brilliant, charming man."

"I think of giving a dinner to him when he comes out, Lady Dorothy," I said.

"I hope you'll ask me," she answered bravely. "I should be glad to come. I always admired [Pg 326]and liked him; I feel dreadfully sorry for him."

The delicate one adroitly changed the conversation and coffee came in, but Miss Stanley said to me:

"I wish I had known him, there must have been great good in him to win such friendship."

"Great charm in any case," I replied, "and that's rarer among men than even goodness."

The first news that came to us from prison was not altogether bad. He had broken down and was in the infirmary, but was getting better. The brave Stewart Headlam, who had gone bail for him, had visited him, the Stewart Headlam who was an English clergyman, and yet, wonder of wonders, a Christian. A little later one heard that Sherard had seen him, and brought about a reconciliation with his wife. Mrs. Wilde had been very good and had gone to the prison and had no doubt comforted him. Much to be hoped from all this....

For months and months the situation in South Africa took all my heart and mind.

In the first days of January, 1896, came the Jameson Raid, and I sailed for South Africa. I had work to do for *The Saturday Review*, absorbing work by day and night. In the summer I was back in England, but the task of defending the Boer farmers grew more and more arduous, and I only heard that Oscar was going on as well as could be expected.

Some time later, after he had been transferred to Reading Gaol, bad news leaked out, news that he was breaking up, was being punished, persecuted. His friends came to me, asking: could anything be done? As usual my only hope was in the supreme authority. Sir Evelyn Ruggles Brise was the head of the Prison Commission; after the Home Secretary, the most powerful person, the permanent official behind the Parliamentary figure-head; the man who knew and acted behind the man who talked. I sat down and wrote to him for an interview: by return came a courteous note giving me an appointment.

I told him what I had heard about Oscar, that his health was breaking down and his reason going, pointed out how monstrous it was to turn prison into a torture-chamber. To my utter astonishment he agreed with me, admitted, even, that an exceptional man ought to have exceptional treatment; showed not a trace of pedantry; good brains, good heart. He went so far as to say that Oscar Wilde should be treated with all possible consideration, that certain prison rules which pressed very hardly upon him should be interpreted as mildly as possible. He admitted that the punishment was much more severe to [Pg 328]him than it would be to an ordinary criminal, and had nothing but admiration for his brilliant gifts.

"It was a great pity," he said, "that Wilde ever got into prison, a great pity."

I was pushing at an open door; besides the year or so which had elapsed since the condemnation had given time for reflection. Still, Sir Ruggles Brise's attitude was extraordinary, sympathetic at once and high-minded: another true Englishman at the head of affairs: infinite hope in that fact, and solace.

I had stuck to my text that something should be done at once to give Oscar courage and hope; he must not be murdered or left to despair.

Sir Ruggles Brise asked me finally if I would go to Reading and report on Oscar Wilde's condition and make any suggestion that might occur to me. He did not know if this could be arranged; but he would see the Home Secretary and would recommend it, if I were willing. Of course I was willing, more than willing. Two or three days later, I got another letter from him with another appointment, and again I went to see him. He received me with charming kindness. The Home Secretary would be glad if I would go down to Reading and report on Oscar Wilde's state.

"Everyone," said Sir Ruggles Brise, "speaks [Pg 329]with admiration and delight of his wonderful talents. The Home Secretary thinks it would be a great loss to English literature if he were really injured by the prison discipline. Here is your order to see him alone, and a word of introduction to the Governor, and a request to give you all information."

I could not speak. I could only shake hands with him in silence.

What a country of anomalies England is! A judge of the High Court a hard self-satisfied pernicious bigot, while the official in charge of the prisons is a man of wide culture and humane views, who has the courage of a noble humanity.

I went to Reading Gaol and sent in my letter. I was met by the Governor, who gave orders that Oscar Wilde should be conducted to a room where we could talk alone. I cannot give an account of my interviews with the Governor or the doctor; it would smack of a breach of confidence; besides all such conversations are peculiarly personal: some people call forth the best in us, others the worst.

Without wishing to, I may have stirred up the lees. I can only say here that I then learned for the first time the full, incredible meaning of "Man's inhumanity to man."

In a quarter of an hour I was led into a bare room where Oscar Wilde was already stand [Pg 330]ing by a plain deal table. The warder who had come with him then left us. We shook hands and sat down opposite to each other. He had changed greatly. He appeared much older; his dark brown hair was streaked with grey, particularly in front and over the ears. He was much thinner, had lost at least thirty-five pounds, probably forty or more. On the whole, however, he looked better physically than he had looked for years before his imprisonment: his eyes were clear and bright; the outlines of the face were no longer swamped in fat; the voice even was ringing and musical; he had improved bodily, I thought; though in repose his face wore a nervous, depressed and harassed air.

"You know how glad I am to see you, heart-glad to find you looking so well," I began, "but tell me quickly, for I may be able to help you, what have you to complain of; what do you want?"

For a long time he was too hopeless, too frightened to talk. "The list of my grievances," he said, "would be without end. The worst of it is I am perpetually being punished for nothing; this governor loves to punish, and he punishes by taking my books from me. It is perfectly awful to let the mind grind itself away between the upper and nether millstones of regret and remorse without respite; with books my life would be livable—any life," he added sadly.

[Pg 331]

"The life, then, is hard. Tell me about it."

"I don't like to," he said, "it is all so dreadful—and ugly and painful, I would rather not think of it," and he turned away despairingly.

"You must tell me, or I shall not be able to help you." Bit by bit I won the confession from him.

"At first it was a fiendish nightmare; more horrible than anything I had ever dreamt of; from the first evening when they made me undress before them and get into some filthy water they called a

bath and dry myself with a damp, brown rag and put on this livery of shame. The cell was appalling: I could hardly breathe in it, and the food turned my stomach; the smell and sight of it were enough: I did not eat anything for days and days, I could not even swallow the bread; and the rest of the food was uneatable; I lay on the so-called bed and shivered all night long.... Don't ask me to speak of it, please. Words cannot convey the cumulative effect of a myriad discomforts, brutal handling and slow starvation. Surely like Dante I have written on my face the fact that I have been in hell. Only Dante never imagined any hell like an English prison; in his lowest circle people could move about; could see each other, and hear each other groan: there was some change, some human companionship in misery...."

[Pg 332]

"When did you begin to eat the food?" I asked.

"I can't tell, Frank," he replied. "After some days I got so hungry I had to eat a little, nibble at the outside of the bread, and drink some of the liquid; whether it was tea, coffee or gruel, I could not tell. As soon as I really ate anything it produced violent diarrhoea and I was ill all day and all night. From the beginning I could not sleep. I grew weak and had wild delusions.... You must not ask me to describe it. It is like asking a man who has gone through fever to describe one of the terrifying dreams. At Wandsworth I thought I should go mad; Wandsworth is the worst: no dungeon in hell can be worse; why is the food so bad? It even smelt bad. It was not fit for dogs."

"Was the food the worst of it?" I asked.

"The hunger made you weak, Frank; but the inhumanity was the worst of it; what devilish creatures men are. I had never known anything about them. I had never dreamt of such cruelties. A man spoke to me at exercise. You know you are not allowed to speak. He was in front of me, and he whispered, so that he could not be seen, how sorry he was for me, and how he hoped I would bear up. I stretched out my hands to him and cried, 'Oh, thank you, thank you.' The kindness of his voice brought tears into my eyes. Of course I was punished [Pg 333]at once for speaking; a dreadful punishment. I won't think of it: I dare not. They are infinitely cunning in

malice here, Frank; infinitely cunning in punishment.... Don't let us talk of it, it is too painful, too horrible that men should be so brutal."

"Give me an instance," I said, "of something less painful; something which may be bettered."

He smiled wanly. "All of it, Frank, all of it should be altered. There is no spirit in a prison but hate, hate masked in degrading formalism. They first break the will and rob you of hope, and then rule by fear. One day a warder came into my cell.

"Take off your boots,' he said.

"Of course I began to obey him; then I asked:

"What is it? Why must I take off my boots?"

"He would not answer me. As soon as he had my boots, he said:

"Come out of your cell.'

"Why?' I asked again. I was frightened, Frank. What had I done? I could not guess; but then I was often punished for nothing: what was it? No answer. As soon as we were in the corridor he ordered me to stand with my face to the wall, and went away. There I stood in my stocking feet waiting. The [Pg 334]cold chilled me through; I began standing first on one foot and then on the other, racking my brains as to what they were going to do to me, wondering why I was being punished like this, and how long it would last; you know the thoughts fear-born that plague the mind.... After what seemed an eternity I heard him coming back. I did not dare to move or even look. He came up to me; stopped by me for a moment; my heart stopped; he threw down a pair of boots beside me, and said:

"Go to your cell and put those on,' and I went into my cell shivering. That's the way they give you a new pair of boots in prison, Frank; that's the way they are kind to you."

"The first period was the worst?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, infinitely the worst! One gets accustomed to everything in time, to the food and the bed and the silence: one learns the rules, and knows what to expect and what to fear...."

"How did you win through the first period?" I asked.

"I died," he said quietly, "and came to life again, as a patient." I stared at him. "Quite true, Frank. What with the purgings and the semi-starvation and sleeplessness and, worst of all, the regret gnawing at my soul and the incessant torturing self-reproaches, I got weaker and weaker; my clothes hung on me; I could scarcely move. [Pg 335] One Sunday morning after a very bad night I could not get out of bed. The warder came in and I told him I was ill."

"'You had better get up,' he said; but I couldn't take the good advice.

"'I can't,' I replied, 'you must do what you like with me.'

"Half an hour later the doctor came and looked in at the door. He never came near me; he simply called out:

"'Get up; no malingering; you're all right. You'll be punished if you don't get up,' and he went away.

"I had to get up. I was very weak; I fell off my bed while dressing, and bruised myself; but I got dressed somehow or other, and then I had to go with the rest to chapel, where they sing hymns, dreadful hymns all out of tune in praise of their pitiless God.

"I could hardly stand up; everything kept disappearing and coming back faintly: and suddenly I must have fallen...." He put his hand to his head. "I woke up feeling a pain in this ear. I was in the infirmary with a warder by me. My hand rested on a clean white sheet; it was like heaven. I could not help pushing my toes against the sheet to feel it, it was so smooth and cool and clean. The nurse with kind eyes said to me:

[Pg 336]

"'Do eat something,' and gave me some thin white bread and butter. Frank, I shall never forget it. The water came into my mouth in streams; I was so desperately hungry, and it was so delicious; I was so weak I cried," and he put his hands before his eyes and gulped down his tears.

"I shall never forget it: the warder was so kind. I did not like to tell him I was famished; but when he went away I picked the crumbs off the sheet and ate them, and when I could find no more I pulled myself to the edge of the bed, and picked up the crumbs

from the floor and ate those as well; the white bread was so good and I was so hungry."

"And now?" I asked, not able to stand more.

"Oh, now," he said, with an attempt to be cheerful, "of course it would be all right if they did not take my books away from me. If they would let me write. If only they would let me write as I wish, I should be quite content, but they punish me on every pretext. Why do they do it, Frank? Why do they want to make my life here one long misery?"

"Aren't you a little deaf still?" I asked, to ease the passion I felt of intolerable pity.

"Yes," he replied, "on this side, where I fell in the chapel. I fell on my ear, you know, and I must have burst the drum of it, or injured [Pg 337]it in some way, for all through the winter it has ached and it often bleeds a little."

"But they could give you some cotton wool or something to put in it?" I said.

He smiled a poor wan smile:

"If you think one dare disturb a doctor or a warder for an earache, you don't know much about a prison; you would pay for it. Why, Frank, however ill I was now," and he lowered his voice to a whisper and glanced about him as if fearing to be overheard, "however ill I was I would not think of sending for the doctor. Not think of it," he said in an awestruck voice. "I have learned prison ways."

"I should rebel," I cried; "why do you let it break the spirit?"

"You would soon be broken, if you rebelled, here. Besides it is all incidental to the *System*. The *System*! No one outside knows what that means. It is an old story, I'm afraid, the story of man's cruelty to man."

"I think I can promise you," I said, "that the *System* will be altered a little. You shall have books and things to write with, and you shall not be harassed every moment by punishment."

"Take care," he cried in a spasm of dread, putting his hand on mine, "take care, they may punish me much worse. You don't know [Pg 338]what they can do." I grew hot with indignation.

"Don't say anything, please, of what I have said to you. Promise me, you won't say anything. Promise me. I never complained, I didn't." His excitement was a revelation.

"All right," I replied, to soothe him.

"No, but promise me, seriously," he repeated. "You must promise me. Think, you have my confidence, it is private what I have said." He was evidently frightened out of self-control.

"All right," I said, "I will not tell; but I'll get the facts from the others and not from you."

"Oh, Frank," he said, "you don't know what they do. There is a punishment here more terrible than the rack." And he whispered to me with white sidelong eyes: "They can drive you mad in a week, Frank." [2]

"Mad!" I exclaimed, thinking I must have misunderstood him; though he was white and trembling.

[Pg 339]

"What about the warders?" I asked again, to change the subject, for I began to feel that I had supped full on horrors.

"Some of them are kind," he sighed. "The one that brought me in here is so kind to me. I should like to do something for him, when I get out. He's quite human. He does not mind talking to me and explaining things; but some of them at Wandsworth were brutes.... I will not think of them again. I have sewn those pages up and you must never ask me to open them again: I dare not open them," he cried pitifully.

"But you ought to tell it all," I said, "that's perhaps the purpose you are here for: the ultimate reason."

"Oh, no, Frank, never. It would need a man of infinite strength to come here and give a truthful record of all that happened to him. I don't believe you could do it; I don't believe anybody would be strong enough. Starvation and purging alone would break down

anyone's strength. Everybody knows that you are purged and starved to the edge of death. That's what two years' hard labour means. It's not the labour that's hard. It's the conditions of life that make it impossibly hard: they break you down body and soul. And if you resist, they drive you crazy.... But, please! don't [Pg 340]say I said anything; you've promised, you know you have: you'll remember: won't you!"

I felt guilty: his insistence, his gasping fear showed me how terribly he must have suffered. He was beside himself with dread. I ought to have visited him sooner. I changed the subject.

"You shall have writing materials and your books, Oscar. Force yourself to write. You are looking better than you used to look; your eyes are brighter, your face clearer." The old smile came back into his eyes, the deathless humour.

"I've had a rest cure, Frank," he said, and smiled feebly.

"You should give record of this life as far as you can, and of all its influences on you. You have conquered, you know. Write the names of the inhuman brutes on their foreheads in vitriol, as Dante did for all time."

"No, no, I cannot: I will not: I want to live and forget. I could not, I dare not, I have not Dante's strength, nor his bitterness; I am a Greek born out of due time." He had said the true word at last.

"I will come again and see you," I replied. "Is there nothing else I can do? I hear your wife has seen you. I hope you have made it up with her?"

"She tried to be kind to me, Frank," he said in a dull voice, "she was kind, I suppose. She [Pg 341]must have suffered; I'm sorry...." One felt he had no sorrow to spare for others.

"Is there nothing I can do?" I asked.

"Nothing, Frank, only if you could get me books and writing materials, if I could be allowed to use them really! But you won't say anything I have said to you, you promise me you won't?"

"I promise," I replied, "and I shall come back in a short time to see you again. I think you will be better then...."