

Frank Harris Reveals Oscar Wilde

Originally appeared in the August 1916 edition of the *International*.

Biography is a branch of biology. Mr. Frank Harris is, however, the first biographer to act on this important truth. If we look at such famous biographies as Boswell's Life of Johnson or Lockhart's Life of Scott we find little more than a collocation of details consisting principally of non-significant facts. We know that every thought, word, act of a man's life reacts upon his character; determines, so to speak, his ego. The average biographer merely records incidents as if they were sterile; Mr. Frank Harris perceives them as dynamic. In the biography before us the incidents given are comparatively few, but each one is a magical formula. Nothing is told which is unnecessary. Mr. Harris complies most formally with Othello's direction to his biographers:

" . . . Nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice. . . ."

He has been big enough to take the view that "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" is not merely the right, but the kind thing to do. All biographies of great men have been rendered worthless by the silence of the biographer upon all the most important points. The apologist for Charles I found himself forced to explain the decapitation of his hero by original sin on the part of Oliver Cromwell; he will by no means admit that the King contributed, either by weakness or by wickedness, to his own downfall. All such biographies are absolutely worthless. Not only do the omissions spoil the picture, but one feels instinctively that a man who, whatever his motives, can suppress the truth so freely as our mere knowledge of human nature assures us that he must be doing, is not reliable, even with regard to obvious facts. A man who falsifies may be inventing altogether.

We hear, for example, the histories of the great religious teachers, in which their disciples have been so anxious to prove them demi-gods that they have omitted the convincing human touch. It is much more satisfactory and credible to hear that the Buddha died of a surfeit of dried boar's meat, in spite of his alleged instructions to eat no meat at all, than to be told that in a previous incarnation he was an elephant with six tusks. There is no incident in the gospels more convincing than the

cursing of the barren fig tree. The paucity of such incidents has given color to the theories of those critics who do not believe that either Christ or Buddha ever lived.

Now, there is no more solid figure in history than that of Oscar Wilde, from the moment of the publication of Mr. Harris' biography. When we consider the partisan attempts of Sherard, Stuart Mason, and Alfred Douglas, we find such a degree of falsity that any one of them might be fiction, and precious bad fiction at that; far more convincing portraits have been painted of entirely imaginary people. But Mr. Harris' Oscar Wilde is a man "of like passions as we are" (for passion is one, though its objects may be diverse, an expression of the ultimate religious craving for unity with God), and Mr. Harris paints him "in his habit, as he lived," with the deep sense of cause and effect which is the characteristic of every great man that ever lived.

Mr. Harris has gone to the trouble of investigating the parentage of his sitter, in exactly the same spirit as that in which Zola wrote the Rougon-Macquart series of novels. He gives us portraits both of Sir William Wilde and Lady Wilde. He sees in the father cowardice and sensuality combined with ability; in the mother the romantic Irish quality, the habit of posing, and pretentiousness. Mingle these qualities, add the fulminate of genius, which comes not from father or mother, but from God only, and we obtain the explosion called Oscar Wilde. It is impossible, in a brief review, to do justice in any detail to a book of over 600 pages, every one of which is close-packed with the highest genius. It is hard to find words to express the appalling interest of these pages, where every incident is so dynamic that we seem to be reading a Greek tragedian rather than a modern English author.

In a way, this book is the greatest book of morality, in the best sense of the word, that has ever been produced. It is at least equal to Ibsen or Zola, as far as its moral effect is concerned, for its material is actual and undeniable fact. It may be called an essay upon the proverb, "Evil communications corrupt good manners," for the fall of Oscar Wilde is attributed, and rightly attributed, to one source and one source alone. Alfred Douglas had the effrontery to publish a book in which he represents himself as the innocent victim of Wilde, as the stainless virgin who never really believed in his guilt, yet who tried, as all really nice virgins should, to reform him, yet Harris proves that he was responsible from first to last for all Wilde's troubles. The mad hatred of his father was but one more

exacerbation of the notorious Queensberry insanity, and this, combined with the equally insane passion to go down to history as the Aspasia of the nineteenth century is at the root of the tragedy.

These facts are all certified by the published decisions of English courts, repeated again and again with details, but never before have they been marshalled with such damning sufficiency. We say "sufficiency" and not "completeness," for in the possession of Mr. Harris and others are authentic documents outweighing ten-fold those here reproduced. Mr. Harris may expect little thanks for his noble and fearless endeavor to eradicate the sarcoma which is rotting English society, or he may get such thanks as are usually accorded to those who tell the truth.

The forces of corruption will evidently gather together to destroy this book. They will not be able to do so. Certain hypocritical persons, who preach virtue that they may more safely practice vice, will call this book immoral. Certain shameless persons, who wish that the protagonist of their own vices, as they call Oscar Wilde, should be represented as a saint, will call this book an attack on Oscar Wilde. "When he was poor," they will say, "and needed money desperately, he had little scruple as to how he got it." Only a false friend would say such things! Mr. Harris tells us that Wilde had bad teeth, that he suffered from specific disease, that he over ate. A true friend would have given him teeth like the advertisement of a dentifrice, told us that he died in battle fighting for his country, and lived on three raisins a day!

But is this an attack — this summing up of Harris?

"Oscar Wilde's work was over, his gift to the world completed years before. Even the friends who loved him and delighted in the charm of his talk, in his light-hearted gaiety and humor, would scarcely have kept him longer in the pillory, exposed to the loathing and contempt of this all-hating world.

"The good he did lived after him, and in immortal — the evil is buried in his grave. Who would deny today that he was a quickening and liberating influence? If his life was given over-much to self-indulgence, it must be remembered that his writing and conversation were singularly kindly, singularly amiable, singularly pure. No harsh or coarse or bitter word ever passed those eloquent, laughing lips. If he served beauty in her myriad forms, he only showed in his works the beauty that was amiable and of good report. If only half a dozen men mourned for him, their sorrow was unaffected and intense, and

perhaps the greatest of men have not found in their lifetime even half a dozen devoted admirers and lovers. It is well with our friend, we say; at any rate, he was not forced to drink the bitter lees of a suffering and dishonorable old age: Death was merciful to him.

"My task is finished. I don't think any one will doubt that I have done it in a reverent spirit, telling the truth as I see it, from the beginning to the end, and hiding or omitting as little as might be of what ought to be told. Yet when I come to the parting I am painfully conscious that I have not done Oscar Wilde justice; that some fault or other in me led me to dwell too much on his faults and failings, and grudged praise to his soul-subduing charm and the incomparable sweetness and gaiety of his nature.

"Let me now make amends. When to this session of sad memory I summon up the spirits of those whom I have met in the world and loved, men famous and men of unfulfilled renown, I miss no one so much as I miss Oscar Wilde. I would rather spend an evening with him than with Renan or Carlyle, or Verlaine or Dick Burton, or Davidson. I would rather have him back now than almost any one I have ever met. I have known more heroic souls and some deeper souls; souls much more keenly alive to ideas of duty and generosity; but I have known no more charming, no more quickening, no more delightful spirit.

"This may be my shortcoming; it may be that I prize humor and good-humor and eloquent or poetic speech, the artist qualities, more than goodness or loyalty or manliness, and so overestimate things amiable. But the lovable and joyous things are to me the priceless things, and the most charming man I ever met was assuredly Oscar Wilde. I do not believe that in all the realms of death there is a more fascinating or delightful companion."

Could anything be greater-hearted than the passage that ends the book?

"He has been, indeed, well served by the malice and cruelty of his enemies; in this sense, his word in *De Profundis*, that he stood in symbolic relation to the art and life of his time, is justified.

"The English drove Byron and Shelley and Keats into exile and allowed Chatterton and Davidson and Middleton to die of misery and destitution; but they treated none of their artists and seers with the malevolent cruelty they showed to Oscar Wilde. His fate in England was symbolic of the fate of all

artists; in some degree, they will all be punished as he was punished by the grossly materialized people who prefer to go in blinkers and accept idiotic conventions because they distrust the intellect and have no taste for mental virtues.

"All English artists will be judged by their inferiors and condemned, as Dante's master was condemned, for their good deeds (*per tuo ben for*); for it must not be thought that Oscar Wilde was punished solely or even chiefly for the evil he wrought; he was punished for his popularity and his pre-eminence, for the superiority of his mind and wit; he was punished by the envy of journalists, and the malignant pedantry of half-civilized judges. Envy in his case over-leaped itself; the hate of his justices was so diabolic that they gave him to the pity of mankind forever; they it is who have made him eternally interesting to humanity, a tragic figure of imperishable renown."

I do not think that Wilde himself, inflated as he was with self-conceit, could have asked a fairer monument.

But this book is more than a biography. Mr. Harris has not confined his causality to Wilde himself. He has everywhere brought him into causal relation with the society in which he lived. That society, now visibly perishing before our eyes, was unutterable corrupt. We see the law as the mere tool of the evil prejudices and passions of the rich and great. We see prostitution, male and female, as the main key to advancement in life. We see society, contemptuous of art, careless of the stupendous discoveries of men of science, preoccupied only with vice, profligacy, gluttony, secret blackmail, sly chicanery, or open robbery. We see every abuse of which Juvenal and Petronius thundered in the hour of Rome's decay, reproduced the modern variations and intensifications in the society of London. Not very wonderful, is it, that a poet should have written in his *Carmen Saeculare*:

The harlot that men called great Babylon,
 In crimson raiment and in smooth attire,
The scarlet leprosy that shamed the sun,
 The gilded goat that plied the world for hire;
Her days of wealth and majesty are done;
 Men trample her for mire!

The temple of their God is broken down;
 Yea, Mammon's shrine is cleansed! The house of
her

That cowed the world with her malignant frown,
And drove the Celt to exile and despair,
Is bettered now—God's fire destroys the town;
London admits God's air.

It would have been very dangerous to publish such a book as Mr. Harris' ten years ago. Today, in the death agony of Britain, will the convulsions of the slain snake involve those who might have served her, had she listened to their words? The event alone can prove. May it not be that sanity will return at the shock of dissolution; that she will call to her all those whom she has exiled, starved, and tortured, because they stood for truth and justice and purity and manhood; that she will put them in her high places and pray them to direct her fate? Is there not hope that the tide of war may send the red blood pulsing again through the arteries of the nation? Perhaps she is not dying but only in danger of asphyxiation. This book will stir England to its depths. Fear will seize upon the great, as it did at the time of Wilde's trial, when every London club tried to disguise itself as the Great Arabian Desert.

Arrest poor Wilde! The creaking Channel tubs
Groan with the consternation of the Clubs.
Scared, hushed and pale, our men of eminence
Wait the result in sickening suspense.
Announced, all Mayfair shrieks its decent joy—
And, feeling safe, goes out and -

—continues as before. Those who know all, seeing how much Mr. Harris knows, will wonder how much more he knows; and in the meantime, the insistent thrust of Germany will bring the matter to a crisis. England has long been ripe for revolution. All that prevented it has been the emasculation of the people by Victorianism. War must cure that. And the warriors who return will be in no mood to put up with the robbery of the land, with the starvation of the poor, with the delay and injustice of the hired courts, with the thousand and one abominations which have made life intolerable to all but the idle and vicious.

The revolution is at hand. And this book may do much to precipitate it. Bernard Shaw has said very much the same things, but he has said them in such a way that people wanted to pay him for making them laugh. It was only "pretty Fanny's way." Frank Harris has the temperament of Isaiah. And if it

were not the hour of revolution he, too, might be sawn asunder. In any case, this book stamps him in the line of Shelley and Milton, each of whom, in their own time, brought about revolution. There is yet One other in that hierarchy. And even before the publication of this book one can already hear the cry of our Pharisees, of the parasites of our satraps, from the stews of the Suburia to the throne of Tiberius itself. "Crucify him—Crucify him!"