

When Oscar Was Wild

A TRUE NEWSPAPER STORY

By J. Francis Bursill (Felix Penne)



THERE are many things the boys home from the front would be glad to forget; many things they gladly remember. At one time I was able to remember well, and, in old age, I indulge in "the pleasures of memory." Here is a page from my memory book:

Years and years ago—more years than I care to remember—I was very anxious to meet Oscar Wilde. I had seen two of his wonderful plays—I had read some of his exotic, not to say erotic, poems, and I had seen his mother. It is worth while to recall a memory of his mother, for her "peculiarities" may to a large extent have accounted for the vagaries of her son. I believe in heredity.

I was for a while a literary assistant to Samuel Carter Hall, editor of the Art Journal. He wanted the words of a poem which Lady Wilde had written and I went to her house to see if she had a copy. It was a scorching hot August day when I called upon her. It was stifling, even out of doors, but I found every window of the house closed, every blind drawn down, and she saw me in a room lit by two flaming gas jets. Mrs. Samuel Carter Hall told me when I got back to Avenue Villa, Holland street, Kensington, that Lady Wilde "never faced daylight." I had not noticed her much, going in out of the sunlight to the dark room—and I was startled when the gas was lit. I was nearly blind until the short interview was over. I saw, however, that she was a remarkable looking woman.

Lady Wilde was Jane Francesca Speranza. She used the pseudonym "John Fanshawe Ellis"—and later used the name "Speranza." Some of her poems were exquisite. I met "Willie" Wilde, her son, in Fleet Street, found him a charming fellow—and my brief chat with him made me more anxious to see his gifted brother. My wish was gratified.

"Have you an hour to spare tonight," asked a "bookish" friend—in the Clapham Library.

"I will find one for anything interesting," I replied.

"Well," said Mansell, "at our Literary Society tonight Oscar Wilde will give an address on his 'Impressions of America,' he is just back from there; it is sure to be good."

It was a private gathering of about thirty. All, or nearly all, were in evening dress. Oscar Wilde wore a velvet jacket of a greenish iridescent hue, a flowing tie, ample linen, soft "Milton" collar, knee breeches, silk stockings, and buckled shoes.

His lecture fascinated us. It was a prose-poem—he described machinery as in a big factory so that we heard the rythm of the fly-wheel and the throb of the piston making the "music of industry." "The line of strength is the line of beauty," said Wilde, and he described buildings as though they were mountains, mountains he made into celestial hills, a crowd in a restaurant lived before our eyes, modern moving pictures were anticipated by his wonderful word-painting which held all spell-bound until he closed—when we burst into rapturous applause.

The weekly paper on which I worked had a front page literary article, contributed by Dr. Japp, the friend of Robert Louis Stevenson. The day following Wilde's lecture my editor said: "Dr. Japp's article has not arrived; find some literary article to make about two columns brevier" (8 point).

I had taken no notes of Oscar Wilde's lecture, but, in those days, when a speaker impressed me, I could write three or four columns from memory. I wrote two columns on "Oscar Wilde's Impressions of America." "Brilliant stuff," said my editor, John Sinclair. God rest his soul—he's dead—as true a gentleman as ever stepped.

In those days, as soon as the paper—"my" paper—was off the press on Friday afternoon (it being a weekly), I ran off to my seaside bungalow at Lancing, Sussex, and came back to Fleet Street on Tuesday morning.

When I got back, "Oh, there's a devil of a row," said Mr. Sinclair. "Oscar Wilde has been here, mad as a hatter about that article. Go up and see Mr. Henderson," the proprietor. (God rest his soul—he's dead also—a grand