

Collateral Damage

CONSTANCE LORD HOLLAND WILDE (1858—1898)

Constance Lord Holland
Via Garibaldi, 16
Genoa, Italy

To: Cyril and Vyvyan Holland
c/o Adrian Hope, until Cyril attains twenty years of age

6 March 1898

My Dearest Boys,

If you are reading this letter, you will be at least ten years older than you are now, as I write it, and I will be ten years absent from your lives. By now you may have read your father's long letter to Lord Alfred, perhaps published (if Robbie has his way) as a book titled *De Profundis*. That long letter has inspired this one, which is too humble to be dignified with a title, too crude to be published, and, in any case, intended for no eyes but yours. It should be destroyed as soon as you have read it, lest it fall into the hands of some scandal-minded biographer who will use it to further sensationalize the memory of your father. My hope is that you will never see it, for I plan to destroy it as soon as I recover from surgery. Then I will have many years to tell you what you need to know, when you are ready to ask. At your present ages—only twelve and thirteen, and already too burdened with sadness—you are not yet ready for the facts that will correct the untruths that now surround you, some told with malice, some told with the best of intentions.

One of the reasons we have been apart so much during the past four years is—as you know—my health, the spinal injury which, despite surgery three years ago, has only worsened into what my doctor calls a “creeping paralysis,” gradually affecting all of my limbs. That is why my brief weekly letters to each of you have been composed on this new machine called the typewriter (whose keys I can punch with one or two fingers, though I can no longer hold a pen.) The surgeon hopes to relieve pressure on my spinal cord, easing my pain and restoring almost normal function to my limbs.

As you know, the operation will take place within three weeks. However, my letters did not mention the surgeon's warning: there is some risk. That is why I am using these tedious days of waiting for hospital arrangements to write to you, that is, to the men you will become, if you must, without me.

Vyvyan, during your last school holiday here, you asked me again why your father never comes to see us anymore. Cyril only frowned furiously and left the room. (My poor Cyril, old enough to

know all, but still too young to understand anything.) Remember, I responded to your question, Vyvyan, by asking you to tell me about a happy visit with your father. You recalled that, together, you and your father had read one of his fairy tales aloud. In this letter I want to remind both you and Cyril of even earlier times, when those fairy tales were not completed stories printed in a book, but were bits of scenes, images, spun like a silky web in the air, as your father sat with you in the nursery the hour before you went to sleep. They were begun for you, inspired by you, and they remain a token of your father's love that can never be lost.

I want to share with you my memories of happier days even before you were born, because those times, and who we were, your father and I, are a part of your lives that should not be lost. In fact I shall go even further into the past and start with myself, long before I met your father, when I was only about your age (your age as I write this letter, not the age at which you may read it. How complicated this is!)

My childhood was full of conflict between my mother and my father and between my mother and me. Quite simply, she disliked me. Your Uncle Otho always said that our conflict came from our both having "the Holland temper." You have heard it said that, with Holland blood on both sides of my family, this volatile "Holland temper" regularly manifests itself among us. Examples cited included my father and mother, whose quarrels, on the rare occasions when he came home, were shouted through the house day and night until he left again. My brother Otho showed little of the Holland temper when he was young and, in later years, when it surfaced, it was never directed toward us. You know how staunch and steady your Uncle Otho has been throughout our troubles.

Blaming our "Holland temper" for my conflict with my mother ignores an obvious fact: Otho was a boy, and I was a girl. He could go away to school; I must be tutored at home. He could roam the streets and go to the theatre and the races; I was forbidden to leave the house without a chaperone. Otho was to go to Oxford and learn a profession; I must stay at home and learn fancy needlework and genteel piano-pieces (more "important" to my "proper" education than the French and Italian literature I was determined to master). In short, I was to be shaped into an acceptable commodity on the marriage market, to be auctioned off to the highest bidder as soon as possible.

In his long letter to Lord Alfred, your father wrote, "Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their life a mimicry, their passions a quotation."

I refused to quote the passions and opinions assigned to "proper" women. If to rebel against restrictions was to be unwomanly, I was willing to be unwomanly. Since marriage was the only vocation open to me, I would marry for love—not for money or status or simply to escape my mother. I repeated that vow even after my father's sudden death revealed that he had gambled away all his money: my mother's income, Otho's university fees, my dowry. Poor, dear father, he could neither keep money, nor lose a friend. (The crowds at his funeral!) His side of the family, the London side, especially my dear Grandfather Horatio Lord, was open and loving like him. My mother's side—the Dublin relatives, now your guardians—were, like her, rigid and dour. (Nevertheless we must be grateful for their taking on your guardianship. I only hope that by the time you read this, you will have shrugged off the chilling effects of their narrow virtues).

But I am leaping ahead. I must not omit the most important influences of my girlhood, those that prepared me to be a woman worthy of the attention of a genius like your father.

When I was just a bit older than you are (as I write this) my mother banished me, sent me to live with Cousin Georgiana (Lady Mount Temple) at her house, Babbacombe Cliff, near Torbay. Georgiana's dearest friend was Margaret, the Raneé of Saranouk, who had left her husband in the Borneo colony he governed, ostensibly to bring their three sons to schools in England. There were other reasons for her leaving, but she never told them, nor would any friend have asked. Unhappy

wives were—and are—so common as to be taken for granted. Those, like Margaret, who could afford to make separate lives for themselves were lucky. Margaret was a fine musician. Her first act of friendship toward me was to rip up the dreadful piano pieces I had brought with me to Babbacombe Cliff, and set me to practicing Chopin and Bach. (Her most recent act of friendship was to find me this apartment near hers, and to send the devoted Cristina to care for me.)

Babbacombe Cliff was itself a work of art, the house designed by John Ruskin, decorated by William Morris, and furnished with art by Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and other talented people who came to visit Georgiana frequently. They were not so famous as they are now, but had already made their mark in the world of art.

Much fun has been made of these men, especially by musical satirists like Gilbert and Sullivan, whose “Patience” makes fun of Mr. Rossetti (not of your father, as is generally believed). But this ridicule is not deserved. Because of their influence, you two were born in a house unlike the typically dark, dreary, cluttered, and dusty houses of my London childhood. (I am reminded of an amusing epigram by Mr. Bernard Shaw, who, in a distant way, has been a good friend to me as well as to your father. “The English,” he once wrote, “think they are being moral when they are only being uncomfortable.”) Thanks to these oft-maligned and unfairly ridiculed artists of the so-called Aesthetic Movement, your childhood home was graceful, light, comfortable, its interior walls painted white and its natural wood floors exposed. We avoided heavy drapes and dust-catching clutter. Furnishings and ornaments were limited to a few lacquered Japanese cabinets, brightly colored pillows, and a few works of art—some by friends and some imported from exotic places—chosen for their simple grace. Do you remember? I hope you do.

With your father’s encouragement, I adopted “rational dress”—discarding the corsets and bustles and other unhealthy grotesqueries of women’s fashion at the time. I wore simple, flowing gowns that hung from the shoulders and followed the natural lines of the body, a mode of dress considered scandalous! But again, I am leaping ahead in my story.

It was Cousin Georgiana, and her friends Margaret and Alice, Princess of Monaco, (whom I met when Georgiana took me with her to Italy) who introduced me to true art and music, philosophy and literature. All three of them remain staunch and loyal friends to this day, and if they are still alive as you read this, you may consider them your true friends. (Vyvyan, you will surely remember Alice as the friend who, as I write this, visits you at your school near her in Monaco, and takes you home with her for an occasional weekend.)

I had lived at Babbacombe Cliff less than a year when my father died, and my mother snatched me back to London. I can’t imagine why she wanted me back, unless it was that, if she could not punish father for his having left us with drastically reduced income, she could punish me for loving him. She reminded me daily that, since I no longer had a marriage settlement, “beggars can’t be choosers” and I must take whatever offer I could get. You can imagine the scenes I caused by my answers to her on that point! (I think you two inherited my defiant streak, but created funnier, sunnier scenes, when told to do something you didn’t want to do. Remember the time your father insisted you dress as beribboned fairy-tale nymphs for a costume party, instead of the sailor suits you wanted? And when you were sent upstairs to put on your costumes and display them to a group of our friends, you came marching back down to the parlour—stark naked? How heartily your father and I laughed over that witty rebellion; and how he hastened out to buy your sailor suits!)

The sun is almost down. I can hardly see the typewriter keys. Will go on tomorrow.

7 March 1898

Back to my girlhood. As often as possible I escaped my mother's bitter looks and words. I visited Grandfather Horatio at Lancaster Gate or went to Dublin where my cousins made jolly companions, too numerous to supervise as strictly as their elders deemed proper.

By coincidence, your father's family lived near my aunt's Dublin house. I first met your Grandmother Wilde when I skated with my cousins on the great outdoor ice rink, which, every winter, became a gathering place for young and old. Lady Wilde sat at one of the little round marble tables circling the rink, drinking tea with one of my aunts. She was tall, like your father, and dramatic. Even outdoors, bundled-up against the winter chill, she trailed a vibrantly colorful scarf. She was very kind to me, said she knew that my "very nice brother Otho," was at Oxford with her son Oscar. She said she hoped they would become friends there. (They did not; even then your father's brilliance was legendary. Otho did not dare to approach him, let alone try to join his circle.) I was similarly awed by your grandmother, a highly respected poet (your father compared her to Elizabeth Barrett.) She wrote under the name Speranza, and held weekly at-homes frequented by many creative people. Your father never appeared at these gatherings in Ireland. It was later, when your grandmother moved to London, that I first encountered him at her weekly salon.

The last time I was allowed to visit your father, it was to give him the sad news that his beloved mother had died. It would have been too cruel for him to learn of her death from a casual stranger, in that terrible place. If you remember your Grandmother Wilde at all, you probably envisage an old woman, already ill and feeble. I wish you could have seen her twenty years earlier, in her most dramatic setting: her Saturday salon, curtains drawn, candle-lit rooms crowded with poets and painters, Speranza draped in crimson, purple and gold, towering over the other women like a Grecian goddess, introducing a new young poet or reading her own impassioned verses calling for Irish independence. Sometimes I think the most cruel punishment visited upon your father in these past three years is that he was not allowed to go to her when she was dying.

Again, I go back to earlier times, happier times.

Once more, my mother's aversion to me worked in my favor. She wanted to marry again, and I stood in the way of a successful courtship. Dear Grandfather Horatio had already assumed Otho's Oxford fees. Now he invited me to stay at Lancaster Gate. It seems that he liked me, unwomanly independence and all! But he did more than take me in. He gave his permission for me to rejoin Georgiana and travel to Europe with her. And more yet. He assured me that he would provide a modest but respectable marriage settlement, lifting me just out of the "beggars can't be choosers" category.

After more than two years traveling through Europe with Cousin Georgiana, I was summoned home by Aunt Mary and ordered to attend the gatherings arranged to convey the message of the "coming out" (on the marriage market) of young ladies. I obeyed, but, to the horror of several aunts, I quickly rejected the proposals of three extremely dull, prosperous, men.

I was far more interested in the people attending the salon held by your Grandmother Wilde, now that she had moved to London. I listened, intrigued, as she talked about your father, about his brilliant degree from Oxford, his travels in Greece, his apartment in the heart of London, his distinguished friends, his eloquence, which she hoped would lead to a career in Parliament. She prominently displayed his first book of poetry, already widely praised. On the day he finally appeared, she made a point of introducing him to me. (Three years later, when we married, she told me she had wanted me for a daughter-in-law long before her son and I met.)

He was better looking than the caricatures of him in *Punch* lampooning the “aesthetic movement.” Men quoted his witty epigrams while raising their eyebrows at his long hair and flowing cape, often ornamented by a large flower pinned onto it. When I met him the first time, he was wearing knee breeches, which he declared the only sensible men’s attire for the ankle-deep filth of London streets. I was neither disturbed nor impressed by his eccentric dress. I had traveled for two years throughout Europe, where men were not so concerned that a ruffle or an extra inch of hair could be interpreted as a loss of manhood. In fact they laughed at Englishmen for their stiff masculinity almost as much as they laughed at blunt Americans.

At that first meeting and on several subsequent ones, your father stood surrounded by men and women laughing at his witty paradoxes. I knew he was aware of me; occasionally he flashed a glance to see if I was amused at something he had said. His first words to me, hanging back as the others moved toward supper, were, “My mother tells me that you have read Dante in Italian. Can that be true?” I answered, “My friends tell me that you don’t mean half of what you say. Can that be true?” He threw back his head and laughed. Any attempt at humor delighted him.

The next time we met, we were at a gathering (not at your grandmother’s house) where a clairvoyant was one of the guests. It was not the famous Madame Blavatsky on that occasion, but an ordinary guest who had taken up the fashion of reading cards and palms. Your father and I spoke on that occasion about the dubious value of the insights of clairvoyants, agreeing that few were genuine. “Nevertheless,” I told your father, “the intuitive predictions of a genuine clairvoyant might act as a warning to help us avoid mistakes.” Your father suddenly dropped all playfulness and wit, murmuring darkly that no man could change his preordained destiny. I often think of that moment, those words.

In those early days, whenever we were not surrounded by an “audience” of friends to amuse, he spoke to me quite seriously and simply. He told me his father had died almost penniless, leaving his family in reduced circumstances (as my father had when he died). He bluntly warned me that his determination to live by his pen made him a poor prospect for any woman. He was leaving for a lecture tour of America because “the American audiences for Gilbert and Sullivan’s satire don’t understand what is being satirized. I’m to go there as an example, in order that the Americans should know whom to laugh at.” I asked if he did not find such an arrangement demeaning. He shrugged, “Oh, it doesn’t matter what they say about one, as long as they say something. If I am to build a career as a man of letters, I must attract attention. I must give *Punch* something more than a lily in my buttonhole to caricature, if I’m to find someone to produce my play.”

He wrote me wonderful letters from America, but, of course, all of them are lost, stolen along with everything else from our home on Tite Street—probably destroyed. While he was in America, the newspapers duly printed the epigrams he invented in order to attract their attention. “I have nothing to declare but my genius,” or “Miners in Colorado are the best-dressed men in America.” He was not mocking America. He actually adopted an elegant version of the miners’ broad-brimmed hat, the one you see in several photographs of him. He made the Americans laugh, but they—including the western miners and ranchers—loved him, because he respected their intelligence and gave them his sharpest wit.

Quoted and caricatured weekly in the newspapers, your father returned from America famous, but still penniless, and no closer to having his play produced. He paid me the compliment of asking me to read *Vera*, a play full of revolutionary passion and romantic passion, stirred together as if to appeal to the widest audience possible. The most witty of the characters—Prince Paul—was the villain. I told your father that I felt morally confused at finding evil and amusement so mixed. His

answer—like that of a patient teacher—was, “Morality is irrelevant to literature, only beauty and style matter.” In any case, and for whatever reason, the single production of *Vera* failed.

Soon he was lecturing for small fees in London and in Dublin. I saw him more frequently, at his mother’s home or at the homes of my relations both in London and Dublin. Whenever we began to talk to each other, the room gradually emptied, and we were left alone. Clearly, my relatives, on both sides of the family, had set aside their reservations and accepted him as a suitor.

He proposed quite beautifully, giving me an engagement ring he himself had designed. There are people who later said that his marriage to me was calculated, that he needed a wife with money. They were wrong. If he had wanted only money, there were other women with more money who found him fascinating. More recently they say that he needed a wife to still rumors of unmanly tendencies. To such rumors, I can only say that if I wanted to fault your father for anything, it would never be for feigning an attraction toward me that he did not feel. I still believe that at that time, only fifteen years ago, he loved me passionately and sincerely, as I loved him.

The happiest day of my life was our wedding day, 29 May 1884. Your father had designed my veil, my jeweled collar, had even chose the fabric for my pale yellow satin gown, as well as the colors for my bridesmaids. He was thirty, a good age for a man to marry; I was twenty-six, considered almost too late for a woman to find a husband. Our wedding was to be small, only family and close friends, because old Grandfather Horatio was gravely ill. However, your father was by that time so well known that crowds came, and the priest opened the doors to all.

Your father and I went to Paris for our honeymoon, a beautiful three weeks, beautiful from the first night. By the time you read this you will be old enough for me to confide in you that there was no shyness between us, no fear on my part. Cousin Georgiana, Margaret, and Alice (by that time Princess Alice of Monaco) stood strongly against the ignorance in which girls were kept, and still are today. They had long since told me the details of the physical act between a man and a woman, assuring me of its beauty for two people truly in love (sadly, neither was referring to her husband, both having married in obedience to family pressures for a proper alliance.)

Your father designed our honeymoon as he had designed our wedding, to be beautiful, from beginning to end. If you two have not married yet, I hope that you will come to your marriage knowing what your father knew instinctively—that the coldness and fear of many young wives is evoked by the coldness and fear and prudery of their husbands (who, in many cases, would have been shocked and disapproving had their wives shown enjoyment!). Your father made the consummation of our love the act of joy it should be.

One awkward moment occurred on our second or third day in Paris, when your father’s friend Robert Sherard came to call (he was staying in Paris at the time). I was in the next room when I heard your father enthusiastically describing my body to Robert. I was ready to burst into the room with a display of the “Holland Temper,” but there was no need. Robert had already interrupted your father, saying that details of our wedding night were none of his business. I still remember that your father looked like a disappointed child, unfairly rebuked, as I entered the room. Now the memory charms me. That your father’s discretion had been overruled by his astonished pleasure in our union and his desire to describe it with all the considerable eloquence at his command seems—so innocent, so much an expression of those wonderful days. Cyril, you who know too much and hurt too much as I write this, you should think of your very existence as the flower and fruit of that lovely beginning of your parents’ marriage, for it was soon evident that our love had created you.

Again weary. Pain fogs my brain, and I have hardly begun. Tomorrow I will continue.

8 March 1898

Not long after we returned to London, dear Grandfather Horatio died. When his will was read, I learned that, upon my marriage, he had added a codicil, leaving me a settled income, not lavish but adequate, with a stipulation explicitly counter to custom, and barely legal in those days. The legacy was restricted to my name only, “independent of the authority of her husband or any other person.” Was this only an extension of his fondness for me, perhaps influenced by my “ranting” (as my mother called it) about women’s rights, and my marching in suffragette parades? Or, although he was fond of your father, did he have forebodings about our future? In any case, I give thanks every day for his wise generosity, for without that legacy our situation might now be desperate.

Hardly married, we were already heavily in debt for the redecoration of the Tite Street house. Your father’s determination that it become “The House Beautiful,” the subject of some of his lectures, had carried him away. Extravagance was always a part of him, and still is. He was in debt before I knew him and remained in debt throughout our marriage, regardless of our income. Robbie tells me he still is, that he quickly spends the income I set aside for him from my annuity, then borrows as much as he can. He has always equated prudence with meanness, and made a virtue of recklessness as a necessary part of artistic freedom.

At any rate, we were young and never worried about our debts. Beside my annuity from Grandfather Horatio, we both earned money writing and editing for magazines. Above all, we shared a well-justified faith that before long your father’s writing would earn him money and fame. Meanwhile, nevertheless, we were so short of money when we came back from our honeymoon, that we were forced to spend six rent-free months in the homes of relatives while work on our Tite Street house was completed.

In 1884 Tite Street was quite respectable, a wide street of large gracious houses. But behind our house ran Paradise Alley, with stables for the horses and carriages, small dwellings for blacksmiths, laundresses, and servants working in households like ours. Unfortunately, among these good people were many temporary and permanent squatters. Pickpockets, drunkards, streetwalkers and their abandoned children drifted through the alley, stealing whatever they could sell to receivers of stolen goods—some conveniently located there as well.

To look through our large parlour windows onto such a scene would have spoiled our efforts to create a “house beautiful.” Your father devised a clever solution. All back windows of the house on the lower floors were covered with Japanese screens or stained glass. (Once, I discovered you two standing on a chair to peer through the one clear window, upstairs in the night nursery, avidly looking down on the street life behind us. I tiptoed away, never said anything, never covered the window. Our intent was to protect you from harsh realities, but never to deny their existence.)

At the time I simply enjoyed the beauty of the screens on the parlour windows, and admired your father’s ingenuity in using them. Later I thought of them as a metaphor for your father’s brilliant comedies, screening out the sad, sordid dramas of life that theatre audiences wanted to forget for an evening. Still later, in darker days, I wondered if these screens symbolized masks of respectability your father erected, then, unaccountably, felt compelled to rip away, exposing the shadowy corners of his life. (I have never spoken these thoughts, never formulated theories, as so many people who write about your father are all too willing to do.)

We were finally able to move into the Tite Street house in January of 1885. That same year saw the passage of a fateful law, which I noticed only because my friend Lady Sandhurst had advocated for this law along with Woman Suffrage. It raised the “age of consent” for young girls to sixteen, in an attempt to protect poor ten and twelve-year-olds from being sold into prostitution. Lady Sandhurst had struggled for many years to persuade Parliament change this law, and had failed over and over

again. Why? “Why! You ask, Why!” she would say indignantly. “Because so many of our esteemed MPs have a taste for violating children with impunity! And these are the men to whom we must appeal for the protection of their victims! These are the men who govern our country and our colonies!”

Her outrage kept her fighting until she wore them down, using every weapon, including the fact that their wives eagerly took tea with Lady Sandhurst, were they so fortunate as to be invited. She finally did win the needed majority. The law they passed was expanded to include young boys (whom, in my ignorance, I had not considered to be in such danger). But then a further amendment was added, making sexual acts between all males a crime, regardless of age. I hardly listened when Lady Sandhurst shook her head uneasily and told me how far beyond her intentions the law had gone. I certainly had no idea that this law could ever affect our lives.

At the time my interest lay in our hopes for your father’s rising career, and, even more, in the wondrous fruit of our love, you, Cyril. Your father instantly had your horoscope drawn. The result seemed preposterous. The astrologist predicted a military career for you, Cyril! Yet it seems that her prediction may come true after all—since the preparatory school you have chosen does indeed have a military bent. My only fear for you, dear Cyril, is that military life may not be your natural choice. I hope it is not your present suffering that pushes you toward a career considered by many to be more “manly” than others.

If our courtship and wedding created the happiest time of my life, even that happiness was surpassed during the period of your infancy, Cyril. Both your father and I were intoxicated and awed by watching you, moment by moment. Never was a father so entranced by his baby boy. I hope that by the time you read this, you have been able to recapture some breath, some glow of those early days when your father loved you as much as any man has ever loved a child.

Dearest Vyvyan, you must be confused and hurt by your father’s never mentioning you by name in his long letter to Lord Alfred. I admit that Cyril, the first born, was his favorite. You should know that this preference had nothing whatever to do with any fault in you, rather with unhappy changes in relations between your father and me. Forgive my awkwardness in writing about common-enough troubles that are seldom discussed between wife and husband, and never between mother and son.

First of all, it is an unhappy fact that the most sacred function of women—the giving of life—is, at best, attended by what society considers to be grotesque changes in her body, culminating in the life-threatening agony of birth.

It was—and still is—the habit of most women of our class to retire almost entirely from the world when it becomes evident that a child is expected. Both your father and I had refused to bow to this convention. The “rational” loose-flowing dresses I wore, against the fashion of the times, were easily adapted to changes in my body. While we awaited the birth of Cyril, I continued to go into society, only smiling at raised eyebrows as the expected day of Cyril’s birth drew near.

At the same time that women are expected to hide themselves, they are, paradoxically, told that a woman is no more beautiful than when she is expecting a child. Your father and I wanted to believe that assurance, to live it. However, from the day I first suspected your arrival, Cyril, to the day you were born, I suffered every one of the unpleasant symptoms that most women might experience only briefly—nausea, gross fatigue, headaches, sleeplessness, dullness, bloating, blotchy skin, hair loss (though I was and still am lucky in having an abundance of thick hair). My attacks of tearful melancholy I was able to conceal from your father, but not the changes in my appearance, nor the evidence of pain and illness lining my face. I hope that if such temporary changes come upon your wives, you will be able to see through them and to smile lovingly at the woman who will reappear after her ordeal, presenting you with the new life you have created together.

Your father could not bear to look at these changes and penetrate them to find me concealed by them. Beauty was so important, so vital to him, beauty as a quality of perfection, an artistic creation, untouched by harsh reality. If you have read your father's work—as I'm sure you have by now—you will remember the witty and funny treatment he gives to "nature" in the essay he forms as a dialogue between two friends, to whom he gives your names, Cyril and Vyvyan. He jokingly places art far, far above nature in the freshness and purity of its beauty. He describes an actual sunset as a "third-rate Turner." In this essay he laughs away ruthless nature that mixes life and death, beauty and ugliness, pain and joy. But I saw no amusement, only repelled fear in his occasional glance at me during the time that I was expecting Cyril.

I ignored and forgave the look on his quickly averted face. I knew that it would disappear when Cyril appeared. And I was right. I was myself again, and so was he, I thought. Our love was again beautiful, only made better by this beautiful son. And then—in the way of nature—I was soon expecting another child, you, Vyvyan.

Your father's friend Frank Harris enjoys making pronouncements on all subjects, writing them in letters to other friends (who, yes, have repeated his contemptuous dismissals of me), establishing himself as an authority, backed by quotations, sometimes real, sometimes of his own invention. In one of these letters he "quotes" your father at length on his distaste for the female body compared to the "superior beauty" of the young male body. It is conceivable that, finding me entering another period of bloated ill health, he might have said such things to Mr. Harris. But these comments should not be seen as definitive, final statements. Your father's mercurial wit was made up of paradox and self-contradiction. He was quite capable of asserting one opinion followed by its direct opposite a day, an hour, even a moment later.

However, the fact remains that when I was expecting you, Vyvyan, your father withdrew from married relations with me. I did not give him up easily. I assured him that he need not worry about my safety or yours, that, in fact, I found our physical acts of love soothing, and if he closed his eyes to my unattractive appearance, he might---whereupon your father revealed to me a secret that very nearly shocked me into losing you. In his earliest days at Oxford, he had been coaxed by other students into what seemed a daring, boyish act of initiation into manhood. He had gone with them to a house of ill repute, knowing nothing of the dangers. The worst had happened. He had contracted the terrible, incurable disease mentioned only in whispers, the disease which has destroyed so many lives, rich and poor, innocent and guilty. When he heard the doctor's verdict, he believed his life was ruined, that he would never use his talents to produce great work, that he could never marry, that he would soon sink into an ill health, madness, and early death. However, he obtained the best treatment available; his immediate symptoms disappeared, and, after two years of robust health, he was pronounced cured. "Else, I would never, never have proposed marriage, you must believe that."

But now, he told me, the disease, latent in his blood for more than a decade, was again active. A specialist had told him no one could predict the progress of the resurgent disease, but that he must consider himself a danger to me, for the rest of his life.

All I could think of, dream of, was you, Vyvyan, of the baby who might be born deformed and ill and condemned to an early death. I felt healthy, apart from the usual unpleasant symptoms of my pregnancy, but was the disease in my blood? Would it destroy you in the womb, and then slowly destroy me, leaving Cyril motherless? You can imagine my relief and joy when you were born, Vyvyan, a boy as strong and as healthy as your brother, though more quiet and shy than he, perhaps because I had helplessly and unwillingly conveyed my anxiety to you even in the womb?

Now my nightmare fears focused on your father. I watched him anxiously for signs of illness. But time passed, and your father continued robust, active. He began staying away from home for

longer and longer periods while disquieting silence, snubs, and rumors reached me. I began to wonder if the recurrence of the disease was only a story, a cruel fable, to deceive me, as his amorous interests turned elsewhere. For years I was tormented by this question.

I no longer am. Despite the sad events of those years, I refused to believe your father capable of such a cruel lie. Unhappy evidence now vindicates my faith in him. Robbie informs me that your father's health has declined, not only because of his suffering in prison, but because of the advancing disease. Furthermore, I have become convinced that some of his grievous and self-destructive behavior during the past decade arose from effects of the disease on his brain. Even before the illness itself entered his brain cells, fear, grief, regret, and—according to Robbie—guilt must have constantly assaulted his mind.

One thing I believed then and I still believe. The people who say that some men turn to other men for sensual pleasure because they have contempt for all women as a sex, did not describe your father, nor Robbie Ross either. That description fits men like your father's good and loyal friend, Mr. Frank Harris—famous for his "love" (that is, his carnal appetite) solely for women—yet a man with nothing but contempt for women's minds and souls (whose very existence he doubts).

Your father, on the other hand, was, when I met him, a staunch advocate of equality for women. The living poet he most admired was a woman, his mother. He edited a magazine whose title he had insisted on changing from "The Ladies" to "Woman's World," on the grounds that the former title was condescending. He published articles on woman suffrage (and joined me in demonstrations) as well as on rational dress for women and their children. He did not consider women inferior in intellect, only in formal education, which, he wrote, must be opened to them. I believed then, and I still believe that, in his case, (I have no opinion about other men) his turning toward the love of boys came from what I have called his fear of brutal nature, of the cruel realities of birth and death, the mixture of passion and pain, the rending of bloody flesh to bring forth life. This usually unspoken horror is common to all of us, but in a sensitive artist like your father, it must be unbearable, leading him to an idealization of young bodies that helped him to forget the realities of human pain and mortality.

Reviewing those first days of foreboding exhausts me. Enough for today.

9 March 1898

It was shortly after your birth, Vyvyan, that Robert Ross came into our lives. Robbie was a well-recommended paying guest (we always needed money) newly arrived from Canada. At the time, I did not know that he and your father had already met, and that it was with Robbie that your father had his first experience of intimate relations with a man.

Later—for a short while—when our life seemed to be torn apart, to the amusement of vicious mobs—I hated Robbie. But he has proven himself a friend to us all. I am now convinced that Robbie has never had the least desire to disrupt our family. Like me, he had—and still has—deep reverence for your father's genius, and an unwavering conviction that, however his affections might stray, the stability of home and family was essential to protect that genius.

Robbie's proclivities were obvious, and never a problem for me. Your father and I had spent a good deal of time among theatre people, even before his first successful production. I was used to meeting young men like Robbie, and women too. Some were married, some not. I considered Robbie's choice more honorable than using a probably unsuspecting wife as a screen against gossip. As for himself, Robbie recently told me, he had realized from childhood that he was different from other boys. He had never worried about that difference. Furthermore, as a devout Catholic from birth, he had never doubted that God loved him, regardless of any condemnation of his kind by his Church.

He had settled in Europe because it was easier for “different” people to live on this continent than on the American continent. He was fortunate in his mother, who had moved to London in order to give him some support of family security and stability.

After your father’s trials, Robbie told me something that might be helpful for you to know. He was convinced that your father, unlike Robbie himself, was torn by antagonistic emotions, that he inwardly believed his sexual urges to be evil, and that fully as strong as his love of beauty were his strong feelings of guilt and his need for expiation, penance, suffering. “Can you not see it in all his work?” Robbie asked me. “From the start. Only look at his ‘Happy Prince,’ look at his recurring Christ-like figures, how they all embrace suffering, even martyrdom.” The last time we spoke, Robbie called this fusion of beauty and suffering “the fatal center of his genius and of his character.” No other man said such things of your father’s art. Some deprecated his wit, and some extolled it, but none saw through its surface frivolity to a suffering, even suicidal soul.

No matter what your guardian, your Uncle Adrian, may have told you, do believe me: in no way did Robbie turn your father from us. There was bound to be some young man, and Robbie would have been the best of possible choices.

Now—I warn you—I will write something considered scandalous for a woman to utter. Looking back on the ruination of our lives makes it easier for me to say things I once would never even have allowed myself to think. I find myself wishing that Robbie had simply joined our family permanently. Perhaps we could have made up a happy family, even happier than most. We might have fulfilled our hope for the free, non-conformist life your father and I talked about before we married—granted, in a form I could never have imagined, but could have learned to accept.

No, I only indulge in wishful thinking. Robbie, and I, and you two could have made do with such a “family” arrangement. But your father was drawn toward something else, some cruel agitation or dangerous excitement or punishment. He soon found it in Lord Alfred.

Again, I wander. Be patient with me as I retrace my steps. But first I need a rest from punching this infernal writing machine.

10 March 1898

During Vyvyan’s first year, 1888, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* was published to great acclaim, compared favorably to the stories of Hans Christian Anderson.

I was proud of your father’s first real success, but I did not share the general admiration for the stories. I could not help comparing some of the written stories to their source—the fanciful, vivid images he conjured up spontaneously as he sat by Cyril’s bed. The written versions had been layered over with “Christian” sentiments, like a sickly sweet frosting. I mildly chided your father, asking how he could say that morality was irrelevant to art, yet mar the beauty of his delightful tales with all those little homilies of virtue and sacrifice. Amused, he corrected my ignorance of commerce. “Adults are the buyers of books written for children, and adults want children’s books that teach ‘proper behavior,’ ‘respectful obedience,’ and ‘Christian morality.’”

Unlike such adults, we opposed the usual restrictions on the behavior of children, restrictions which remain oppressive even today. Your father insisted on giving you two the freedom of the whole house, neither requiring you to keep certain times of silence, nor keeping you locked out of his study. I supported this view, not aware of the direction it must take. Soon your father began to talk of needing a room elsewhere, perhaps at a hotel, where he could work uninterrupted. I believed I had no right to object to anything that would nourish his genius, his needs. My only concern was money: how would we pay for a room in a fine hotel, since your father could never abide a cheap office in some dingy quarter of London. Nor did I object to the necessity for him to leave home to dine with

Robbie and other men in order “to discuss important literary questions without these beloved wild beasts crawling all over us.” Many men frequently ate at their clubs or at restaurants with other men, for business reasons.

When he stayed out, I did not languish at home. I continued to work for woman suffrage with Lady Sandhurst. I spoke publicly in favor of rational dress for women—presenting myself as an example—spoke against war and for the election of a woman to the London City Council. (My candidate won the election—but she was not allowed to serve!) When dock workers struck, I joined the picket line, (and this time I dragged your father along with me.) I also made a minor creative effort of my own. When my Grandmother Mary died, I wrote down what I could remember of the old stories she used to tell us, and published a little collection I called *Grandmother Stories*. Our few copies of it disappeared with the Tite Street looters, but some day you may find a copy in a dusty corner of some second-hand store. If you do, read the tales to your children, and think of the old, old people you never knew, but who knew you briefly before the way of life they describe in these stories disappeared.

I joined the Theosophical Society. (Mr. Frank Harris cites this fact as more evidence of my stupidity. His loyalty to your father seems to require that he despise me.) By the time I joined the Society, when you boys were age four and nearly three, Madame Blavatsky, with her dubious “astral” events and her messages from her “Tibetan Masters,” had died. What attracted me to the Theosophists was the study of eastern religions carried on by her successor, Mrs. Annie Besant, a friend of Mr. Bernard Shaw. You cannot imagine how exciting it was to hear, for the very first time, the wisdom of the East, the philosophical principles of Christ stated in words that were free of the cruel, guilt-ridden dogma infecting our Christian churches.

You may have noted that in your father’s long letter to Lord Alfred, he extols a Christianity he once viewed skeptically. Perhaps because of his unhappy circumstances while writing it, he seems to identify with the sufferings of Christ more than with the ethics he taught. For me, the opposite has always been true. The crucifixion seemed a meaningless horror, the physical resurrection a fairy tale to calm children after telling them of this horror. In Hindu and Buddhist scriptures I found Christian principles of truth free of the agony and guilt that so fascinated your father.

In time I realized that the detachment sought through the eastern philosophies suited me no better than the masochism of Christianity. Recently, I have turned toward Pagan Rome, whose philosophers stand at a point between detachment and suffering. Epictetus tells me to concern myself only with my own actions; the actions of others are outside of my power, and, therefore, none of my concern. He promises no Heaven, no nirvana, only the relief of letting the weight of judgment and pain and anger fall away.

No, no, this is not the time for a lecture on the stoics.

11 March 1898

Your father was soon staying in hotels most of the time, appearing at Tite Street once or twice a week (when he wasn’t away on the continent). I missed him. Yet, I should say that his behavior toward you two was still better than that of most other men of our class. Many fathers found their children unendurable nuisances, best left to their mothers and nurses, then send away to school until they were young men. Such fathers visited the nursery briefly, impatiently. Your father, when he did come home, rolled about on the nursery floor, your most jolly and mischievous playmate. Surely you remember some of those rollicking games and fanciful bedtime stories. Brief performances, but whole hearted.

On such evenings, after you two were put to bed, your father and I went to dine at the homes of friends. Just as your father was the best of playmates for you two, he was the most witty and entertaining guest at a friend's dinner table, a great improviser who played with the words given by others, turning them upside down, showing an opposite argument, always as light, playful entertainment. He amused everyone without ever holding forth or seizing a monopoly on attention; he would have considered such display a sign of stupidity. Some of the most amusing lines in his plays were improvised at one banquet table, then repeated and polished at another. I will admit that at times I let my mind wander when he began a story I had heard many times. But what wife has not already heard much of what her husband is likely to say in company—and with far less wit?

Vyvyan, do you remember the day you took the book of stories from my hand, and, not quite four years old, read it aloud to me? I have never forgotten how proud you were, and how proud I was of you! That is my favorite memory of 1890, the event I prefer to remember.

It was the same year *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appeared—first in a magazine, soon afterward in book form. By now you may have read this story of Dorian, the beautiful young man who wishes that his portrait, not his body, will show the tangible effects of his aging and his actions, good or evil, upon his body and soul.

Since your father no longer asked for my opinion on his manuscripts, I had not read the book before publication. If he had asked me, I would have praised the beginning of the story, in which Lord Henry speaks the playful epigrams I had heard your father improvise at dinner parties. But I would have had to tell him that the rest of Dorian's story seemed unworthy of him, a careless assemblage of cheap devices borrowed from inferior writers of sensational stories.

Yet those cheap commercial devices masked a symbolic story that well nigh broke my heart. I saw an allegory expressing his horror and despair at the still indiscernible progress of his disease. "Dorian" remains handsome and young, hiding away the pictured effects of his evil-doing. (Evil-doing? How could your father equate his youthful error with these fictional acts of cruelty and violence?) Furthermore, the sinister Lord Henry, who introduces Dorian to evil deeds, amuses everyone with your father's own jokes, in your father's voice. Finally, Dorian murders the artist who created his portrait. Was your poor father accusing himself of destroying his own artistic genius?

I soon learned that other readers chose to take the story literally, as a record of the author's sinister proclivities in vaguely sinful and shadowy haunts (which your father had obviously copied from poorly imagined gothic tales.) Many of our friends were "not at home" when I made my afternoon calls. Out walking, I saw some cross the street when they saw me approaching. Their thoughts remained closed to me. I lived in a zone of sudden silences within gathering clouds of apprehension. The growing silence was relieved only by the brightness, the sense of purpose given to me by you two.

Just the other day, I dimly heard carousel music wheezing from a traveling circus. It was the same tune, (perhaps even the same circus now passing through Genoa?) that we heard only seven or eight years ago in Piccadilly, when we rode a carousel round and round, over and over again, you, Cyril on a leaping white charger, Vyvyan on a stationery black panther, and I sitting in the chariot behind a great fat rhinoceros. Remember? That pleasure stands out among the bright moments of those days. I have learned the value of cherishing and reliving silly, trivial moments like that. I hope you have too.

During your father's first trial, I reread his novel. At that second reading, I was convinced that Lord Alfred had been the model for Dorian Gray. But Robbie has assured me that your father did not

meet Lord Alfred until 1891, the year after *Dorian Gray* was published, when he visited our home with his mother. (Proof of one of your father's favorite sayings—that "life imitates art"?)

Everyone pitied poor Lady Queensbury, wife of the famously mad Marquess of Queensbury. The Marquess had recently appeared with bouquets of rotten vegetables to throw at actors on the opening night of a play he deemed blasphemous—while he himself brought riotous drunkards and prostitutes to his family home. Lady Queensbury had left him. She gave all her attention to her beloved youngest son Alfred, whom she called by a pet name "Bosie." (This name was soon adopted by your father, and you have seen that it is used as the salutation of his long letter.) Lady Queensbury—as oblivious to the truth as I was in those early days—wrote almost daily letters to your father as she might write to an interested uncle or teacher of her son, urging him to use his mature influence on her wayward "Bosie" to make him drink less, study more, choose more worthy companions.

I saw little of your father in 1891. Between trips to the continent with Lord Alfred and other friends, he wrote plays and stories in sudden, brilliant bursts of creation. He wrote two plays that were not staged. One of them, *Salome*, fell under a law barring Biblical subjects on stage. Published as a book with illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley, *Salome* only created more dark rumors about your father. No doubt you have seen the drawings, strangely obscene in a sickly way. Your father disliked them, as he disliked any art of prurient appeal. Robbie tells me that your father loathes the pornography that has been printed and published under his name during the past two years, profiting on his continuing infamy, adding more insult to his injuries. If any of these stories should come into your hands, do not believe your father wrote any of this crude filth.

In 1892 came your father's first stage success, *Lady Windermere's Fan*. I remember the opening night. After cries of "Author! Author!" he appeared on the stage, casually smoking a cigarette, congratulating the audience on their good taste. It was the kind of playful effrontery that delighted Colorado miners and the audience in the gallery. But this manner was not entirely successful with those who sat in the higher priced seats. I remember an atmosphere similar to that at the few social occasions to which we were still invited: a surprised laugh at his audacious display of assurance, after which many lips settled into a thin, sour line.

One of your father's most assured quips comes to mind: "People will forgive a man anything except his genius." The finest men and women England produces—poets, singers, musicians, actors—must earn their bread by amusing the upper class (to which your father's family and mine cling to a place on the lower levels). Titled, rich people look upon artists almost as members of the servant class, paid to amuse their social superiors while maintaining a grateful and modest manner. When your father refused to adopt this manner, they were no longer amused.

I have never been certain whether your father was blind to the hostility aroused by his manner, or whether he perceived the irritation and amused himself by mocking it—even during his trials. Probably he never recognized the dangers inherent in envious resentment simply because he himself was totally free of petty envy. He truly never had a malicious thought or feeling. It was this innocence that made him blind to the cruel intentions of others, shocked when they fell on him, and defenseless against them.

I have wandered again. I only want to remind you—and myself—that, although your father's exploitation of children (despite his kindness and generosity toward the boys he used), although his sacrifice of us, his family, to Lord Alfred's whim were terrible sins, the truth remains that the persecution and the almost universal malice that enhanced his punishment were deeper sins—against him, against us, against human decency.

I need a longer rest before describing the downward spiral of our lives.

15 March 1898

In the summer of 1892 we took our last vacation together as a family, on the beach at Norfolk. Perhaps you remember that Lord Alfred dropped in on us “accidentally” and romped with you two on the beach while your father worked on his new play. There was no young man so charming as Bosie at his best, so full of life and high spirits, glowing as if lit by many golden suns. (I never saw the dark side of this golden brilliance, the demands, the rages, the cruelty described in your father’s letter to him.)

Your father stopped his work and came out to watch the boys at play. His eyes rested lovingly, briefly, on you two, then followed Bosie exclusively. I watched. I tried to remain calm, keeping my smile fixed. I had accepted your father’s turning sensually away from me. I was struggling to accept what I suspected was an illicit relation with Robbie. Now, was I required to accept his look of helpless passion for Bosie, a look I had never seen before, not even in our earliest days?

I sat there on the beach thinking of how blithely your father and I had rejected the rigid conventions and conformities that surrounded us, had freed ourselves of the fretting and foolishness and confusions of our class. There could be no surprises, no challenges to which we were not open and welcoming. Or so we believed. But now I thought, do the gods play a different game? Do they invent an endless number of challenges for which we cannot prepare? What was that witty saying of your father’s? “All the world’s a stage, but the play is badly cast.” Are we thrust onto the stage for the amusement of cruel gods who laugh as we stutter and stumble through our assigned role—unprepared, uncomprehending, and unable to reject it?

That day I persuaded your father to go to Cousin Georgiana at Babbacombe Cliff, where he could work undisturbed. My efforts only made things worse, for, of course, Lord Alfred soon followed him. From then on I saw little of your father. Often I did not even know the name of the hotel where he was staying.

A Woman of No Importance was the great stage event of Spring 1893. Your father was now very famous, and it seemed that he might even become very rich. He could afford to spend the rest of that year on perpetual vacation with Lord Alfred, avoiding unpleasant scenes in London, where the Marquess followed them, appearing at restaurants or other public places to create disturbances. I learned of these incidents obliquely, overhearing servants talking. There was only silence from acquaintances, who again were “not at home” when I called, and began crossing the street to avoid me. And there were more concerned letters from Lady Queensbury.

Once, during that year, when I learned that your father had returned to London, I went to his hotel with an insistent message from the producer of his forthcoming play, who had contacted me because he had received neither the play, nor answers to previous notes. I was disturbed at your father’s appearance. His body seemed bloated, his complexion puffy and sallow, his eyes red. When I delivered the message from his producer, he looked distracted, asked if you boys were well, then sent me away.

He appeared—his expression—what can I say?—not himself. Or, as my dear Genoese nursemaid Cristina would say, *invasato*, possessed. Cristina, the widow of a dock worker killed in an accident, is a devout Catholic who reveres all the saints, but still believes in the older spirits. She prays to Jesus, Mary, and Saint Catherine to protect her six children from the invisible demons who surround us, seeking a vulnerable place to enter into us and use us to do their evil. When I think about your father’s behavior during those days, Cristina’s belief in demonic possession makes more sense to me than all the pronouncements of judges or priests or doctors. If you have read his long letter to Lord Alfred, you will recall his bitter recital of that insane period of drinking, borrowing

money to entertain and reward the boys Alfred procured, enduring Alfred's frequent rages, fleeing pursuit by Lord Queensbury and his detectives.

And then, in late November 1893, without warning, your father came home. It was as if a terrible fever had broken, left him. He announced that he had ended his friendship with Lord Alfred. On no account should Alfred be admitted to the house. He intended to stay at home and finish his new play before Christmas.

That was the happiest Christmas of my life and, I think, of your childhood. Your father completed the first draft of *An Ideal Husband* and began to sketch out *The Importance of Being Ernest*. During his intense writing sessions, I took you boys out on shopping trips or, on days of icy rain, you read or played quietly in the nursery while he worked. You never entered his study. You were only six and less than five, yet, without ever being told, you had learned to respect those few hours sacred to your father's work. Perhaps, like me, you hoped to keep him at home. When he emerged from his study, you both threw yourselves at him for a noisy rough and tumble session that seemed to relax him as much as it excited you. Friends like Robbie called in the afternoon, and your father read aloud the work of that day for their criticism—or, rather, for their delight. You listened for a while too, remember? Then, if you became restless, one of the servants took you into the kitchen to make gingerbread men or Christmas tree biscuits or powdered sugar oranges. You would emerge with Arthur, all three of you carrying trays and plates to serve tea and biscuits, both of you imitating Arthur's high dignity.

(I hope that you remember our butler Arthur, who ended his own life when your father was taken away. I refuse to join in the speculation on why Arthur killed himself. I want to remember, and hope that you too will remember Arthur as the gentleman he was, an impeccably decent and loyal member of our household, a friend, another victim of the cruel persecution of your father.)

On Christmas morning you both rushed downstairs to find that Father Christmas had left everything you had asked for, and more—all carefully chosen by your father on secret trips to out-of-the-way shops where little men, who looked as old as Father Christmas himself, carved and painted and polished exquisite toys. Vyvyan, your helmeted general commanded the battalion of tiny soldiers—some in uniforms of the Swiss Guard, exactly as worn by the personal guards of the King of Savoy, some in the red coats and tall, fur helmets of Queen Victoria's royal guard—who held the stone fort against attack by fierce, kilted Scots, led in barked orders and huzzahs of victory by you, Cyril.

I let myself believe that the bad days were past and our family was restored, once and for all. Your father's joy—in you, in his work, in his popularity at the Christmas Balls where we were again welcome—seemed absolute proof that we had come through a dark night into sunlight. I never even asked myself whether Robbie's constant attendance meant a renewing of a relation between him and your father. It seemed not to matter, if only we could go on in this way.

We could not.

Epictetus writes that when something has been lost, we should tell ourselves it has only been "restored," a borrowed comfort or joy we could not expect to hold forever. I struggle to learn to accept this principle for my own life, but I could never accept it on your behalf. Where you two are concerned, I part ways with Epictetus, because your moments of childhood joy were too brief and too soon taken from you. I can only say that when you think of the lovely home we lost, of the looting even of your toy soldiers, try to put that loss aside and think of our joy in that Christmas of 1893 as something that can never be taken from you.

16 March 1898

Even in the first days of 1894, the letters from Lord Alfred began arriving. Your father threw each one aside as it was put into his hands, not caring to read them, not caring who did. I read one which I assume was typical: Lord Alfred apologized, admitted all wrong-doing, promised better behavior, begged forgiveness, threatened suicide. At length. Day after day the letters came. Your father remained indifferent—until the newspapers announced a terrible tragedy. Lord Alfred's older brother had "accidentally" shot himself with his hunting rifle. He was known as the quiet, retiring son, "the melancholy son," perhaps another form of the madness threaded through generations of that family. In this case, perhaps, depression had been made unendurable by the cruelty of his father.

Your father did the decent thing, wrote a letter of condolence to Lady Queensbury, and one to "poor old Bosie."

That one breach in his wall of silence, and it collapsed, destroying my hopes. Your father took up his life with Lord Alfred again, staying in hotels during the rehearsals of *An Ideal Husband* and the writing of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The two plays were to open almost simultaneously.

Of the two, I preferred *An Ideal Husband*. (Like Mr. Bernard Shaw, I found *The Importance of Being Earnest* "heartless"—brilliant, hollow word play.) *An Ideal Husband* could have been a great play. Do you know it? A wife discovers that the fortune and the high reputation of her husband that give meaning to their marriage—indeed, to her life—are built on a lie, gained by a criminal, traitorous act by him. Her disillusionment and his fear of exposure are all the more horrifying when played by handsome actors in lavish costumes before a luxurious set typical of your father's farces.

But, in the final act, your father retreats from this tragic theme, shifts attention to a woman whose threat to expose the husband somehow becomes a worse crime than his! A few witty coincidences lead to a happy ending for the rich and respected traitor and his wife, as if these devices erased his crime and restored his wife's respect for him. I can only imagine that your father feared offending his audience, some of whom may have gained their position and their fortune in similar ways.

Or was this play another allegory of self-accusation? Was your father the ideal husband who harbored a poisonous secret that was slowly destroying him and his marriage? Like the wife in this play, I was indeed disappointed in the husband I had idolized, but, believe me, not because of the disease he carried, not even by his recoiling from my body and his turning toward men, then boys. I had loved and could still love him first, last, and always for his genius. His decision—conscious or unconscious—to kill the true theme struggling to be born in *The Ideal Husband* was a betrayal of that genius. I wanted to tell him that he could turn back in a moment, be true to his gift, that I cared nothing for the money and fame he won by compromising it.

Of course, there was no opportunity for me to say anything of the kind. I hardly ever saw him, and never alone.

The whole of 1894 exists only as a nightmarish blur in my mind. Your father's shining success seemed to arouse more rumors, silences, and dark looks from acquaintances before they turned away from me in the street. His infrequent, sudden, homecomings were, I soon realized, brief escapes from ever-more violent quarrels with Lord Alfred. Once, Lord Queensbury came to the house accompanied by a professional fighter, both of them loudly threatening your father, who in turn threatened to shoot both of them (we did not own a gun). Queensbury left, shouting that if your father did not keep away from his son, "I will continue to pursue you everywhere, into every restaurant, every low place you frequent." That was when I sent you boys away to boarding school, to protect you from such invasions of your home, and from the rumors, now spread openly, everywhere.

The turning point came, as you must now know, soon after that incident, when Alfred's father left his card at your father's club, with his now famously misspelled accusation of sodomy. Your father's reaction to this gesture by the Marquess seemed to me then, and still seems, another sign that he was ill, unbalanced in mind. What else could have induced him to agree to Lord Alfred's demands that he bring a charge of libel against the Marquess? Advised to reconsider, not to be a pawn in Alfred's fight with his father, he refused to listen—to Robbie, to Mr. Harris, to Mr. Shaw, to how many others, I can only imagine. Bosie wanted him to sue, and Bosie must have his way. Can you doubt that your father was no longer in his right mind?

The case was lost in rumors before it ever came to court. The rumors spread so far as your school; I was asked to remove you. I sent you off to another school. Then came my accident. Those cruel pagan gods or fates or furies must have laughed as they watched me literally enact the fall of your father that carried us down with him.

In March of 1894, *The Importance of Being Ernest* had been running successfully for nearly a month. The court was to begin hearing your father's libel case the following week. Robbie came to Tite Street to beg me to attend a performance of *Ernest* accompanied by your father and Lord Alfred. It would be vital to your father's case, he said, for all of London to see his wife give this public show of support.

I dressed very carefully that night. For the first time I wore a long golden train made from a piece of shimmering fabric your father had bought for me soon after we married, but that I had found too dramatic for the simple clothes I usually wore. When I was ready, I started down our long central staircase, to wait for your father's coach near the door. Somehow my foot caught on my train, and I fell the full length of the stairway. Dear Arthur helped me to get up, to sit in a chair, and to sip some brandy. I did not feel much pain, not at first. I only felt shaken, dazed, a feeling hardly different from what I'd felt ever since I learned your father was bringing a court suit against Queensbury. After a few minutes, Arthur told me your father had arrived. I went outside with him and climbed into the coach. I didn't mention that I had fallen. I don't remember that we talked at all.

By the time we reached the theatre, I felt some pain in my legs, but I was able to walk well enough leaning on your father's arm. Many of the groups standing in the lobby stopped talking as we entered, not to smile and greet your father as they once had, but only to stare coldly. I concentrated on my struggle to hold back tears, ready, should anyone ask, to attribute them simply to my fall, to the increasing pain in my legs and my head. No one did ask.

After the performance, your father put me into a cab and spoke rapidly. Regardless of the success of both plays, he desperately needed money to pursue his court case. If necessary, I must borrow from friends and relatives, immediately. Then he instructed the cabman to take me home.

The next day I was hardly able to rise from my bed. But I knew I must, in spite of the pain. I must concentrate on borrowing money for your father, on seeking treatment, and on protecting you two from the gossip that the newspapers never tired of repeating. I heard from your father's barrister only once; he told me that my appearance at the theater had not had the desired effect, and that I should not appear in court.

It was not until two years later, during your father's second year in prison, that I could bring myself to read the transcripts of the three court actions—your father's libel suit against Lord Alfred's father, quickly followed by the two criminal trials of your father.

Perhaps you have studied these documents by now. If so, you must have been struck, as I was, by your father's testimony—displaying his complete lack of understanding of his position. Ridiculing the questions of Queensbury's barrister, making fervent avowals that could be easily refuted by facts—his every word dug a deeper trap. To my mind, this was further evidence of his disorder of

mind. How else to explain why a brilliant man like your father would so eloquently defend that line in Lord Alfred's poem, "the love that dares not speak its name" as a pure, platonic, intellectual affection of an older man for a younger. He must have known full well that the next witnesses called by the Marquess of Queensbury's barrister would be what are called "rent boys."

After a few words of testimony by these boys, (some of them not much older than you are as I write this) your father's barrister dropped the libel suit, and your father was immediately charged under the very law Lady Sandhurst had won to protect children.

He was released for a few hours, expected, allowed, tacitly encouraged by this delay, and openly urged by friends, to flee the country, Again, he seemed stunned, unable to understand his position. Instead of hastening his departure, he sat in a hotel room. I went to him. For a full hour I implored him to go with friends who stood ready to take him out of England. Mr. Harris had engaged a covered cab that would take him to the boat train. He sat there drinking—passive, silent—until the police came for him.

In his long letter to Lord Alfred, your father wrote, "The gods had given me almost everything. I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring . . . tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths." There are many more passages like this, which add weight to Robbie's assertion of your father's desire for punishment.

It was as if he condemned himself more strongly than the law, more cruelly than the worst of the envious, ignorant public. After all, during our courtship and the first year of our marriage, we were both deeply concerned with the exploitation of lower class youth. For your father to desert our ideals and become another defiler of poor boys seems to me yet another sign of a disordered mind possessed by a terrible need for self-destruction. When he turned from me to men, then to boys, he wrote (in that letter to Lord Alfred) that his pleasure was greatly enhanced by the danger. Guilt, danger, punishment—I am an ignorant woman lacking the breadth of imagination that would enable me to understand these as pleasures. Yet I believe that these self-accusations are the best parts of your father's letter, because they plumb his own depths, instead of accusing and blaming Lord Alfred (It is ironic that yesterday I overheard my dear nurse-maid Cristina warning her twelve-year-old son against one of the dangerous temptations of winter: "Those English who come down here to buy poor fisher boys!" Poor Christina does not suspect, of course, that Signora Holland is the wife of such a man.)

20 March 1898

The two trials took place in less than one month, the second ending in conviction. Your father was given the maximum sentence, two years at hard labor. I received the news at Babbacombe Cliff, where I had sought shelter with the only friend who still spoke to me. I rushed back to Tite Street only once, when I learned that bankruptcy charges had also been filed against your father, and that creditors would claim everything he owned. Like a thief, I came at night and took as many of my clothes and yours as I could fit into my carriage. The creditors—like vandals in war—followed too quickly for me to return for more. They swept through our house, taking everything, valuing nothing, selling fine art at the price of trinkets and destroying books, documents, letters, manuscripts. Again, we can thank Robbie for having removed a few manuscripts as soon as the trials began.

I regret that I left you two in the dark as events proceeded. At the time, I thought that being in schools far away, taking your holiday with our Dublin cousins, you would be protected from knowing. As if you never saw a newspaper! As if your classmates and teachers did not know who you were and who your father was! As if the dark silence of your Dublin aunts and uncles did not speak louder than words. It would have been better if you had learned the worst from someone who

deeply loved you, from your mother. I hope you can forgive my poor judgement and believe that I meant well but that I was, by this time, confused in my own mind. As I write this, you are still living with silence and lies, and, believe me, if I had been able to take over your guardianship alone, I would break that silence. As soon as I recover from the surgery, I hope to do just that.

Since I have wandered again, let me touch on one shining moment of decency from that terrible month. I never knew until I heard of it from your father later when I visited him in prison. He had been required to appear in bankruptcy court to hear the judgement that would legally license people to take the very clothes from our backs. In convict's uniform and chains he was led from the prison to a court building, down a long corridor lined with avid reporters, bitter creditors, and smirking curiosity seekers amused by the misfortunes of others, especially those who fall from great heights. As your father walked this gauntlet, one young man in the crowd stood quietly at attention; then, as your father passed him, he raised his hat with respect, an act of some courage in that crowd. It was Robbie, of course.

At the time of the bankruptcy hearing, your father's plays were still running in London—with his name removed from the marquees. Yes, people wanted both to curse him and to enjoy his plays. Theatres wanted to wipe out his name, but to gain profits from his work, and creditors, of course, were eager to take your father's royalties, as they have done during these three years, and will continue to do until all his debts are paid. Robbie tells me that he has consulted a solicitor in order to secure your father's rights to his work so that, after the creditors are paid off, the income will provide a good education for you two.

Unfortunately, your uncle Adrian, who shares guardianship with me, has vowed that, acting in your names, he will reject and renounce any money from your father or from his work. Since your father's health has suffered, and the future remains uncertain, he has agreed to allow Robbie to acquire the rights in his own name. Robbie plans to put all royalties into a fund for you, beyond Adrian's authority and power to reject them. You may trust Robbie in this matter. While not always a good influence on your father, Robbie has remained a loyal friend to him, and by extension to you. Meanwhile, I bless your great grandfather Horatio daily for the legacy which could not be taken by your father's creditors and which has provided for us (and for your father since his release.)

A few days of rest—after which I am determined to bring this account to a close.

26 March 1898

At about the time your father was taken to prison, I submitted to my first operation, after which I managed to join you in Switzerland, where you were staying between school terms. You wondered why we left our hotel so abruptly. Had you behaved badly? No, my dear boys. We were asked to leave—because the proprietor feared losing English patrons if our name were seen on the hotel register.

That was the reason for our solemn conference with your uncle and your cousins. That was why you were told to remove the name WILDE from the inner seams of all your school clothes, to remove the name from your minds. Henceforth our name would be HOLLAND.

I changed our name to spare you more unpleasantness, but I ignored the people who urged me to divorce your father. I had been very much moved by one loving and contrite letter he had written to me shortly after entering the prison. It seemed the beginnings of a return of sanity and reason. I was willing to try to make us a family again, even if, as my solicitor told me, "you'll have to live on the other side of the world."

Your father had been in prison for eight months when I went to inform him that your grandmother had died. My previous visit had been a futile torture—groups of prisoners separated

from groups of visitors by wide spaces between bars and grates, the room a bedlam of shouted conversations. I wrote to the authorities, explaining that my spinal debility made walking difficult, and standing under such conditions, impossible. Considering the sad news I must bring to the prisoner, I was granted a private room for our visit.

Your father wept upon hearing news he had expected and dreaded. We talked about you two. He agreed that I did the right thing in changing our name, and that it would be best for me to assume legal custody. He approved of your uncle Adrian as joint guardian, saying that his “severity” might be good for you, and he advised me, at length, to avoid indulging and spoiling you two “as Bosie’s mother spoiled him.” When he referred to Lord Alfred, he looked very angry. I took that to be a good sign, a sign of determination to end that connection, as well as a sign of vigor that briefly brought a hint of color into his pale, sickly face.

In the last moments before I was forced to leave, he told me that he now (after a long spell of illness) hoped to survive the starvation diet and the heavy labor. What might kill him, he said, were other deprivations: he was not allowed to speak to other prisoners, and he was not allowed to have books! I am still appalled at such cruelty. Sometimes I think it is truly a miracle that your father survived what prison authorities must have known was the most sadistic torture that could be inflicted on a man like him. If he ever tries your patience, try to imagine what he endured during that first year in prison, what irreparable damage might have been done to his soul. Your father’s situation improved, thanks to the efforts of Mr. Harris to persuade the authorities to allow him books, and thanks to the appointment of a more humane warden.

But you, my poor boys, struggled through all of 1896, sent from one school to another, your mother too ill to stay close by to monitor and intercede when necessary. I am glad the stupid schoolmasters were unable to quench the defiant spirit that resulted in your expulsion from that German school—for together attacking the master who struck Cyril. Bravi!

Nevertheless, by the end of the year, I had regretfully decided it was best to separate you in order to meet your very different needs: Cyril at the English-style school in Germany, with its stress on athletics, and Vivian with the more gentle Jesuits in Monaco. There, Princess Alice can watch over you, Vyvyan, and I can more easily reach you by train. If either of you have any unhappy memories of these schools, I hope you can forgive me—they seem the best solutions for you at this time.

I last saw your father in 1897, near the end of his imprisonment. His health had improved. He had books and writing materials. I had come with my lawyer and with papers for him to sign: relinquishing custody of you to me, jointly with your Uncle Adrian, and accepting a regular allowance from my legacy from Grandfather Horatio. I had intended to speak with him, but, at the last minute, my courage failed me. I sent the lawyer in with the papers while I watched, unseen, through a peep hole, as he signed. The least I could do was to save him the added humiliation of having me watch him sign away his authority as a husband and a father.

In any case, I expected to see him as soon as he was released, assuming he would join me here in Genoa. Or, if he preferred, at some other place, perhaps closer to Cyril’s school. As his release date came near, I found myself more and more hopeful, almost joyful. Robbie agreed to meet him at the prison, then accompany him across the channel and settle him temporarily in a hotel. Other friends would keep him company while Robbie came to help me make arrangements to join him.

When Robbie arrived, he seemed more optimistic than ever. He had left your father among friends at a hotel. He was carrying a manuscript in the form of a long letter that your father had given him at the prison gate, with instructions to have it copied. One copy was to remain with Robbie, the other to be posted to Lord Alfred, to whom the letter was addressed. Robbie said he had read through

it once quickly, found it an eloquent repudiation of his life with Lord Alfred and a deeply moving religious statement, which raised Robbie's hopes that your father would convert to Catholicism. It also raised his hopes of successful publication. Robbie was on his way to meet some friends for dinner. "One of them happens to be a publisher who is vacationing here. He may give me some advice on how to proceed." Robbie was relieved to leave the manuscript with me. "Here I know it will be safe. I'll pick it up tomorrow when we talk about arrangements for Oscar to join you."

I sat up all night reading your father's long letter to Lord Alfred, as I'm sure you have done, perhaps as the book *De Profundis*, should Robbie have succeeded in finding a publisher.

In the morning, when Robbie came, he mentioned difficulties his friend had raised. Your father's name on a book, he was told, might be a problem; the recently published plays had sold poorly. Lord Alfred, being very litigious, could be an even greater problem, unless Robbie could persuade your father to remove passages that were particularly critical of him. Furthermore, Robbie then admitted, your father had doubts about publication.

"So have I," I told him, "because of the boys."

Robbie shrugged and said the one mention of Cyril's name could easily be removed. I was annoyed that he seemed so carried away by the possibility of rehabilitating your father's career that he dismissed the way you two boys, named or unnamed, could be affected by publication of this long confessional document. He so wanted to believe that the public would embrace the passages on Christian redemption, as he did. He began reading one of these religious passages aloud. I waited silently as he read two full pages, then sighed. "Beautiful, don't you think?" I replied, bluntly, that what he had read to me sounded sanctimonious and hypocritical, especially preceded and followed by furious, self-righteous denunciations of Lord Alfred.

Robbie was shocked. After a long silence, he asked, "Then you do not see these denunciations as Oscar's purging himself, freeing himself from Bosie?"

"If writing this has set Oscar free, then why is it necessary to send it to Lord Alfred?" I took the manuscript from him, turned to the final page, and read aloud, "I will, if I feel able, arrange through Robbie to meet you in some quiet foreign town like—"

"No, no, you will not allow that," Robbie interrupted me, shaking his head. "And certainly he—"

"I will not allow that! I?" I lost patience. My voice rose. Perhaps I even sounded like my own mother at her worst. "When have I ever succeeded in persuading Oscar to do or not to do something? When did he last ask my advice? When did he last inform me of what he was doing or even of where he was?" Robbie's voice shook as he softly declared his fervent hope that I was mistaken, in fact, his certainty that I must be wrong, that if anyone could save your father from Lord Alfred's evil influence . . . and on and on. I interrupted him.

"Robbie," I said, handing the manuscript back to him, "this is a love letter." Robbie took my words in silence. He knew that to attempt to contradict me would be to insult my intelligence, which he does not estimate so low as does Mister Frank Harris.

I then told Robbie the decision I had reached at dawn. I would be willing join your father—while you two were still away at school—for three months. If, at the end of that period, I had resolved my doubts, we would reunite as a family, all four of us. Your father should let me know, through Robbie, where to meet him. I would start packing immediately.

The afternoon post brought your father's answer. He was outraged that I would dare to set conditions. After all he had suffered, how could I ask him to suffer another three months of probation? I must bring you two, he wrote, or not come at all. I stood firm, sending word that, as he rejected my conditions, I accepted his decision to remain alone until August. Then, if I felt satisfied that he had truly adopted a new life, we would join him. During these three months, I would continue

to send his monthly allowance, unless I learned that he was taking up with unsuitable people like Lord Alfred. In that case his allowance would cease, and I would obey Adrian's wish that he have no contact with our sons.

Some of your father's friends—Mr. Harris, of course—and even Robbie, hold me responsible for the events that followed. They judge me guilty of refusing to do what was best for your father. In my defense I can only say that I did what I believed was best for you.

I wrote to your father every week, telling news of you, sending photos of you, along with the weekly letters I asked you to write. We never received answers to these letters. Nevertheless, Robbie gave me hopeful news. A letter from your father had already appeared in an English newspaper, protesting the practice of putting poor children in Reading Gaol for minor mischief like stealing a rabbit—poor, starving children crying for their mothers at night. And he was at work on a long poem.

At the beginning of August, I wrote to your father, telling him how proud I was of his letter in the newspaper, how happy to hear that he was busy with a longer work. For the first time, I mentioned my spinal problems, and asked him to come to Genoa, where you two would join us. Two weeks passed. Then a curt note informed me that he planned to join Lord Alfred in Naples. (Only then did Robbie admit to me sadly that Lord Alfred and your father had been in daily contact ever since the day of his release.)

I wrote my final, very brief, very angry letter to your father. If he has kept it, you may already have seen it by now. I admit it was intemperate. In my defense, I must tell you that, at least, I did not carry out my stated intent to cut off his allowance. I arranged to have it paid to him through Robbie, and I changed my will to make sure that he will be assured of that income after my death.

That was when Epictetus became the guide I try to follow. The Buddha demands a detachment I cannot achieve while I live. Jesus demands unlimited forgiveness—even more difficult than detachment. Epictetus demands only right conduct and indifference to the conduct of others. A difficult discipline, but possible, I hope.

Robbie has remained my friend and keeps me informed. He tells me your father and Lord Alfred were together in Naples, then quarreled, parted, reunited, quarreled again and parted. Robbie lost patience and became furious with both of them (I loved him for that). But he has never abandoned your father: he has placed your father's "long poem" with a newspaper, and hopes that publication as a booklet will follow.

It was not until you joined me for the Christmas holidays that I learned your Uncle Adrian had told you a lie: that your father had died far from home. Vyvyan, I still remember the sad, stricken look on your face. While you, Cyril, seemed relieved, as if your father's death made his shame less of a burden to you. Should I have contradicted your uncle, told you your father was still alive, and where he was, and with whom? I was, by that time, hardly able to move from my bed. I hesitated to undermine the authority of the people who had taken on your care, your protection from a world that promises only more sad knowledge as you grow older. I said nothing. Forgive me if I did wrong. I promise to make it up to you as soon as I am able to take custody of you both.

Today—20 March—I received a splendid gift that made me cry with pain and joy. It was a copy of your father's long poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." Robbie brought it to me, saying that he was glad of some money from the publisher to apply to your father's debts, although he did not consider the poem to be a great work. He called it "self-consciously crude, imitative of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*." Of course, Robbie has more sophisticated taste in literature than I. What he calls "crude" I call "plain," eschewing the cleverness that made your father famous. The poem seems a

suitable dirge mourning the gray monotony of prison suffering, broken only by chills of horror at a coming execution.

The poet laments, not his own suffering, but the suffering of others, including the condemned murderer who greets with joy the narrow strip of sky he glimpses above the prison walls. The repeated refrain is comprised of seven simple, one-syllable words of regret: “Each man kills the thing he loves.” When I recite these words, tears fill my eyes. Healing tears, the gift of art, as healing as laughter.

I know this poem can never have the success won by your father’s witty plays, but it may help him to gain footing on a new path.

Robbie tells me that your father’s health has deteriorated drastically. His words confirm the fear I have suppressed—that you could lose both of your parents.

Tomorrow, when I go to the clinic to undergo surgery, I will seal this letter, address it to you two, and leave it with Margaret, with instructions to keep it for me until I return—when I will destroy it. If I do not return, she is to send it to your Uncle Adrian. Despite his determination to remove every trace of your father from your lives, I can only hope that he will follow my wishes and give the letter to Cyril when he reaches the age of twenty.

Letters like this one usually end with the advice of a loving mother to children who must grow up without her. I will follow that pattern.

I have recorded the truth behind sad losses you were too young to understand. But my advice is not—please heed this—is not a warning to you to seek a safer path than I did, to avoid my mistakes. I made no mistakes. It was not a mistake to refuse proposals by rich men in order to marry the man I loved. It was not a mistake to devote my small talents to fostering his great talent. It was not a mistake to have two beautiful sons who may carry their father’s genius in their blood. This was the path I chose, the highest path open to me.

Remember your father’s witty and wise statement: “Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their life a mimicry, their passions a quotation.” I formed and held my own opinions, felt my own passions, mimicked no one. What happened apart from my actions—as Epictetus tells us—lay outside of my power, hence is none of my concern. I have no regrets. I lived my own true life. My advice, my greatest hope for you, my two sons, is that you do the same.

Your Loving Mother,
Constance

Constance Holland Lord Wilde underwent spinal surgery in April 1898 and died one week later, at age 40. Two years later, Oscar Wilde, age 46, died of complications of tertiary syphilis and alcoholism. Only at the announcement of his death, did his sons learn that they had been misinformed about his dying three years before.

In 1906 Robbie Ross published a heavily censored edition of De Profundis, hoping to avoid being sued by Alfred Douglass. (A complete, unexpurgated edition finally appeared in 1962.) In 1907 Ross made contact with Vyvyan and Cyril, by that time aged twenty and twenty-one years. When their guardian Adrian Hope died four years later, Ross was able to assign the now lucrative rights to Wilde’s work to his sons. During World War I Robbie Ross (exempted from the military for poor

health) turned his attention to the suffering of most of his friends, and to dealing with constant legal harassment of him by Lord Alfred Douglass. Just before the 1918 Armistice, Robbie Ross died of a heart attack, at age 49.

Shortly after Wilde's Death Alfred Douglas denounced Oscar as a vicious pervert and seducer. He converted to Catholicism, married (1902) and had one son, who was mentally troubled from birth. Douglas devoted the rest of his long (1870—1945) life to writing poetry, suing people, and publishing newspapers and pamphlets noted for his attacks on anyone and everyone. (In 1923 he spent six months in jail for libeling Winston Churchill.)

Cyril became a military officer, not very popular, it was said, with his men. He was among the millions of young men killed in World War I.

Vyvyan, after a confused and depressed childhood and adolescence, survived military service. He finally married at age sixty, and had one son. At the urging of his wife, Vyvyan wrote a memoir. *Son of Oscar Wilde* (1956). In this book, he praises Robbie Ross for offering much needed friendship during Vyvyan's troubled young adulthood. According to Vyvyan, the initial reaction of many readers to publication of his memoir was surprise at learning that Oscar Wilde had had two sons.

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