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SUMMARY

**Oscar Wilde lives!** By Arthur Craven

**Two Portraits of Oscar Wilde** By E. Lajeunesse

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## OSCAR WILDE LIVES!

It was the night of March twenty-third, nineteen-thirteen.

If I were to describe the state of my soul on that night near the end of winter, it's that those were the most memorable hours of my life. I want to present to you the strangeness of my character, the nature of my absurdities; my detestable nature, a nature that I could not change without becoming someone else, which, at the same time, always protected me from having proper conduct: it made me sometimes honest, sometimes a cheat, and vain, and modest, rude as well as distinguished. I want to allow you to predict these things so that you don't despise me, as you soon will perhaps be tempted to do when you read this.

It was the night of March twenty-third nineteen-thirteen.

Certainly we are not physically similar: my legs must be much longer than yours, my head is perched higher, happily balanced: our bust measurements differ also, which, probably, prohibits you from crying and laughing with me.

It was the night of March twenty-third, nineteen-thirteen.

It was raining. The clock had just struck 10:00. I laid in my bed fully clothed, and I hadn't bothered to light the lamp because that night I was feeling lazy toward even such a small effort. My ennui was frightful. I said, "Oh Paris, I have such hatred for you! What are you doing in this city? Ah! It's yours. Certainly, you think you have succeeded! But you need to be twenty to do this, poor dear, and if you want to attain glory, you must be ugly like a man. I cannot understand how Victor Hugo could, for forty long years, work. All literature, it's: ta, ta, ta, ta, ta, ta. Art, Art, what hinges me to Art? Shit, in the name of God!—I become very rude in those moments—and yet I feel that I can

surpass any limit, until I suffocate again. – Despite it all, I aspire to success, because I feel I funnily must provide for myself, and I find it amusing to be famous; but how do I take myself seriously? Meaning, since we exist, we cannot laugh ceaselessly. But, what a novel obstacle, I also desire a marvelous life of failure. And as the sadness mixes with pleasantry, it's: “Oh, la la!” followed quickly by: “Tra, la, la!” I think again: I'll eat my money, that will be fun! And I suppose it will pain me, because, approaching the age of forty, from all perspectives, it would ruin me. “Ohé!” I add immediately as a way of concluding these little verses; because I must laugh again. Looking for a diversion, I want to rhyme, but inspiration, which annoyingly creates a thousand detours, is a defect of mine. Digging into my brain, I find this quatrain has a known irony which disgusts me quickly enough:

*I was sleeping on my sheets*

*Like a lion lying on the sand,*

*And, for an admirable affect,*

*I let it take my arm.*

Incapable of originality, but without renouncing what I produced, I tried to give some of the luster of ancient poems, forgetting that verse is an incorrigible child! I gained more than success: it all remains equally mediocre. Finally—my last wild idea—I imagined the *prosopoem*, a thing of the future, with which I called for the execution of happy days—and how lamentable—of inspiration. It was about a piece beginning with prose which seemed insensible by the sounds—the rhyme—first distant then it approaches closer and closer, birthing pure poetry.

Then I fell back into my sad thoughts.

Those thoughts which make me the most sick tell me that I have found Paris again, I am too weak to leave; I have an apartment and some furniture—at that moment, I have already begun to light my house on fire—I was in Paris when there were the lions and giraffes; and I thought that science itself had created mammoths, and that in a thousand years a unification of all of the machines in the world could not make any more noise than: “scs, scs, scs.” That “scs, scs, scs” brightens me up easily. Here I am, on my bed, like a slug; no point could displace me from being terribly lazy, but I hate to stay like this for a long time, when our era is welcoming to traffickers and rogues; me, for whom there needs an air of violin music to give me the rage to live; me who could kill myself with pleasure, die from love for all women; who cries for all cities, I am here, *because life does not have a solution*. I then party in Montmartre and do a thousand eccentric things, because I need to; I then am pensive, pained; changing shape more and more into a sailor, gardener, or hairdresser; but, if I want to taste the pleasures of the priest, I must give light to my forty years of existence, and lose incalculable youth, during which I have become uniquely wise. Me, who dreams about catastrophes, I say: man is not so unfortunate because of a thousand souls that live in a single body.

It as the night of March 23<sup>rd</sup>, nineteen-thirteen.

In an instant, I waited for the whistle of the train, and I said, “Why are you so poetic, since you are not far from Rouen, and you are in no danger? Ah! Make me laugh, laugh, laugh like Jack Johnson!”<sup>1</sup>

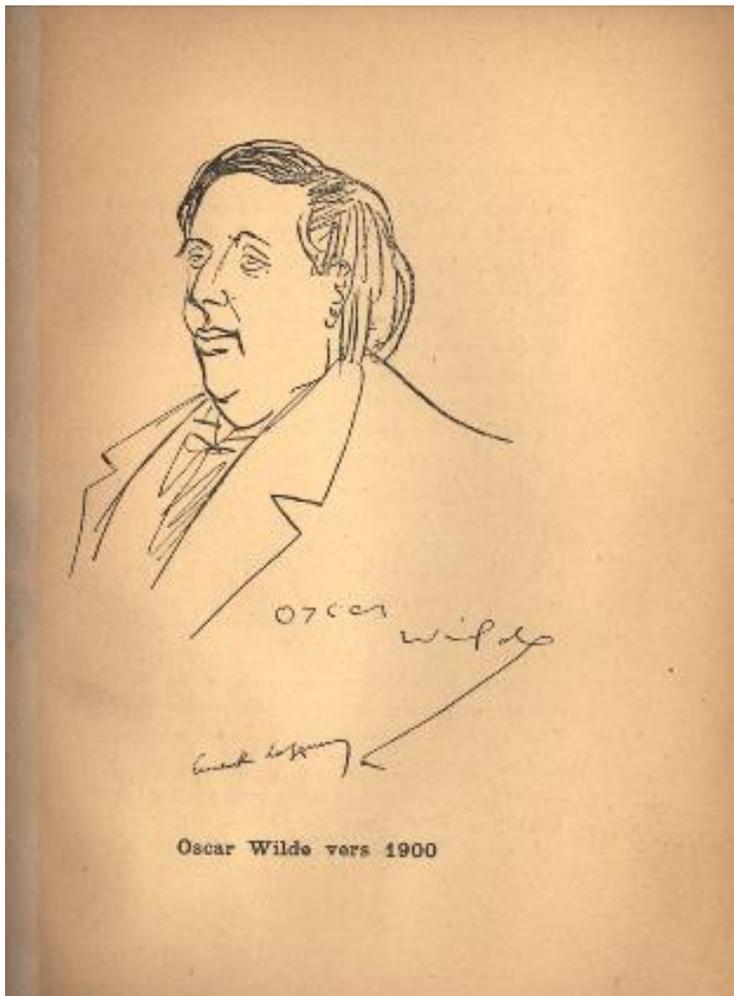
Without doubt, that night I had the soul of a fallen angel, because, I am sure, no one—since I had any friends—liked the night as much as I did: each flower transformed me into a butterfly: which was better than a sheep. I crush the grass with ecstasy; the air, oh the air! did I

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<sup>1</sup> A boxer with whom Arthur Craven fought in a rigged match in order to gain passage to the United States.

spend entire afternoons too busy to breathe? Approaching the sea, did my heart not dance like a buoy? and once I cleave open the wave my organism is but a poison. In nature, I feel leafy; my hair is green and my blood circulates green; often, I love a pebble; the Angelus<sup>2</sup> is dear to me; and I like to listen to memories when they complain like a wheeze.

I descended into my navel, and I receded into a fairy-like state; my intestines suggested it; my cells danced foolishly;



and my shoes appeared miraculous to me. This incited me again to think of the way of the I hear the light noise of a sonnet, of which the timber is ordinary, in appearance, spreads across all of my members

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<sup>2</sup> The final toll of the church bell at the end of the day for evening prayer

like a marvelous liquid. I get up slowly, then, hastily, I go to open the door, happy at the unexpected diversion. I open the door: a huge man moves toward me.

“Monsieur Lloyd.”

“It’s me,” I say, “Please do come in.”

And the stranger strode onto the doorstep with the magical air of a king or a pigeon.

“I will turn on the lights... Please excuse me that I receive you like this... I was alone and...”

“No, no, no; please, forgive me for disturbing you this way.”

I insisted.

“One last time, I beg you, tell me of the unknown. Come into the dark with me.”

Happily, I offered him an armchair, and faced him. Soon, he began:

“Can your ears hear the unheard?”

“Pardon, I babbled, a bit disconcerted, Pardon, I don’t precisely understand what you mean.”

“I said, ‘Can your ears hear the unheard?’”

This time, I simply said: “Yes.”

So, taking a bit of time, this stranger declared: “I am Sébastien Melmoth.”

I have never been able to describe what happened to me then: in a subtle but total sacrifice, I wanted to throw my arms around his neck,

kiss him like a mistress, give him something to eat and something to drink, go to bed, get dressed, find him women, and finally, give him all of the money I had in the bank and empty my pockets. The only words I could find to articulate my innumerable sentiments were, “Oscar Wilde! Oscar Wilde!” Understanding my trouble and my love, he murmured, “Dear Fabian.” Hearing him say my name so familiarly and tenderly moved me to tears. Then, spiritually changed, like an exquisite drink, I aspired to the luxuries of being one of the actors in a unique situation.

The second afterwards, a curiosity beckoned me to make him out more clearly in the darkness. And, driven by this passion, I said without discomfort, “Oscar Wilde, I want to see you; let me light up my room.”

—Sure, he replied in a very sweet, soft voice.

And so I went to the adjoining room to look for a lamp; but, when I checked how much the lamp weighed, I realized it was empty; and so I took a candle and returned to my uncle.

Then I saw Wilde’s face: an old, white-haired, bearded man, it was him!

I was hit with a strangling pain. I often wonder if Wilde was also pained. That one vision of Wilde enchanted me, which would only be accepted by mature men, where he appeared so young and triumphant. What! A poet and an adolescent, noble and rich, and not old or sad. Destiny! is it possible? Holding back tears as they approached, I hugged him. I kissed his cheek, placing my black hair next to his blonde hair, and for a long, long time, I cried.

The poor Wilde did not turn me away; on the contrary, my head in his arms was softly environed; and I pressed myself against him. He

didn't say a thing, except that, one or two times, I heard him murmur, "Oh my God! oh my God!" and "God has been so terrible!" By a strange aberration of the heart, the last word was pronounced in a strong English accent, so much that it thrust me into the abyss of my atrocious sweetness, and made me want to laugh diabolically; and, at the same time, the hot tear of Wilde rolled on my wrist, giving me a horrible overhanging feeling: "The tear of the captain!" This word woke me up from my serenity, and detached me from the hypocrisy of Wilde, and I sat down to face him.

I began to study him. I first examined his head, which was tan with deep wrinkles and almost bald. My main thought was that Wilde looked more musical than attractive. I looked at him and his outfit. He was handsome. In that armchair he seemed like an elephant, his trunk paralleling the shape of the chair; in front of his enormous arms and legs I tried with admiration to imagine the divine attributes of this physique. I considered his shoe size; his feet were relatively small, a bit flat, and they possessed the dreamy allure and cadence of the pachyderms, and, built in such a way, made a mysterious poet. I adored that he resembled a large beast; I figured he shit like a hippopotamus; and I admired this notion because of its candor and justice; because it must be hard to endure harmful climates like the Indies or Indonesia or elsewhere. Very certainly, he would want to die in the sun—perhaps in Obock—and this is somewhere political I thought about, in the folly of the African green, the flies would make music around mountains of excrement.

The silence of the new Wilde strengthened this idea, along with the fact that I was also quiet, which was becoming very idiotic but safe because Wilde had travelled to Vietnam.

Over this time, I came to better understand his heavy eyes, his few sick eyelashes, his brown eyes which, no lies, would testify their true color with a stare that didn't look at a single point but responded to a large tablecloth. Understanding my advantage, I found myself in the reflection: it was more musical than plastic; with such an appearance, I could neither be a moral nor an immoral being; I was astonished that the world could have made such a hasty opinion that that it did for such a lost man.

This puffy figure was unhealthy; his lips dry, pale, his teeth rotten and



repaired with gold fillings; a large white and brown beard—I sensed that perhaps today this last bit of color will have faded by now—which masked his chin. I pretended that his hair was silver when it wasn't, because there as something burnt about them; a tuft resembled the

silvery pigment of his skin. It formed apathetically and stretched out with Oriental ennui.

It is perhaps too late to say that my guest laughed continuously, not with European nervousness, but in an absolute. In the first place, I was interested in his clothes; I saw that he was wearing all black and he looked old, and I noticed that he didn't care about hygiene.

A radiant sun resembled the pinky finger on his left hand, which gave Wilde great prestige.

I was looking for a bottle of cherry brandy in the kitchen, after I had already poured torrents of other glasses. We smoked excessively. I began to lose my filter and became noisy; this allowed me to pose this vulgar question: "Has anyone ever recognized you?"

"Yes, a couple of times at the start, in Italy. One day, in the train, a man faced me and told me that I was hiding behind my newspaper. After escaping his curiosity, I realized that he knew that I as Sébastien Melmoth." *Wilde persisted to call himself that.* "And, more dreadfully, the man followed me when I got off the train." *I knew it was Padoue.* "He sat across from me in the restaurant and, being recruited by him, I didn't know his means, his knowledge of me; because, like me, the man was a stranger who played the horrible trick of saying my poet-name aloud, pretending to be familiar with my body of work. And, in his eyes, it all became clear to me. I didn't have the money to leave the city by night."

"I met men with deeper eyes than others, and they all clearly said with their stares: 'I salute you, Sébastien Melmoth!'"

I was greatly interested and added: "You are living, but everyone thinks you're dead; M. Davray, for example, said he touched you and that you were dead."

“I believed that I was dead,” said the visitor with a natural atrocity, “which was the reason he thought I was dead.”

“As for me, I always imagined you in the tomb between two thieves, like Christ!”

I imagined these details were charms on a charm-bracelet like the gold key of Marie Antoinette, which opened the secret door of the Petit-Trianon.<sup>3</sup>

We drank more and more, and remarkably Wilde didn't change his mannerisms, but I figured that he was drunk because he would break out in spurts of laughter and lose balance in his armchair.

I said: “Have you read the essay that André Gide—that moron—wrote about you? He didn't understand that you were mocking yourself in the parable that ended with, “And, I call myself your disciple.” The poor man, he wasn't prepared for that!

“And, later, when he met you again on the terrace of a café, did you understand the old skinflint listened to you for your charity? How much did you give him? A Louis?”

“Oh no! I had just finished writing my Memoires.” *My god, how funny.* “I already had a volume that was almost finished, and I wrote four plays for Sarah Bernhardt!” he exclaimed, laughing loudly. “I love theatre but I'm never happy with it because my characters don't have enough foundation or cause.”

“Listen to me, old man.” *I had become very familiar.* “I have a proposition which I think is a wise decision. You see, I publish a little literary review and you've already been discussed”

*Wonderful, a 'literary' review* “because I wanted your posthumous

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<sup>3</sup> A secret door in Marie Antoinette's bedroom allowed her to escape when revolutionaries came to arrest her.

works to be published, but, if you prefer, I would make you manager, and you could have a contract with me for lectures in music halls. If this doesn't interest you, I will do exotic dance or pantomime with girls instead."

Wilde became more and more amused. Then, suddenly, melancholically, he said, "And Nelly?"—she's my mother.—I had a strange, visceral response to this question because, on many occasions, I inquired about my mysterious birth without explanation; vaguely brought to light, I thought that Oscar Wilde could perhaps be my father. I recounted all I knew about her; I added, too, that Mrs. Wilde, who would die soon, had visited him in Switzerland. I mentioned Mr. Lloyd—my father?—and what he said about Wilde: "That is the *flattest* man I've ever met." To my surprise, Wilde, at this memory, looked chagrined.

I asked about his son Vivian and my family, which I thought would interest him, but I sensed that I didn't resolve the anxiety.

He only interrupted me once during my long discourse when I overstated my hatred for the trip to Switzerland. "Yes, he said, how could anyone like the Alps? To me, the Alps are only for black and white photographs. When I'm around mountains, I feel erased; I'm afraid of my sense of self; my only desire is to go far away. When I went down to Italy, little by little, I regained possession of myself; I rediscovered that I was a man.

As the conversation began to die down, he said, "Tell me about yourself."

So I told my life story; I gave a million details about my terrible childhood in all of the high schools, colleges, and trade schools of Europe, my hazardous life in America; anecdotes abounded; and Wilde

laughed gaily at my charming instincts. He continually said, “Oh dear, oh dear!”

The bottle of cherry brandy was empty, and the thug within me was born.

I brought out three liters of ordinary wine, the only drink left, but when I offered it to my guest, he raised his hand as a gesture of refusal.

“*Come on, have a bloody drink!*” I said with my American boxer accent, which shocked Wilde a bit: “In the name of God! You’ve lost your dignity!”

Finally he accepted and emptied his glass saying, “All my life, I have never had this much to drink.”

“You’re so sulky, you sober old man!” I yelled, pouring him another glass. Crossing all boundaries, I started asking him questions like, “You old carcass! Tell me where you came from; how did you find out where I live?” I yelled, “Hurry up, hurry up and respond! You haven’t finished your sham. Oh no! I’m not *your* father!” And the insults became abominable belches: “Ah! So there! You next-to-nothing comedian, ugly face, scrape off the horse manure with a shovel, you’re a public urinal filled with piss, slug, old maid, obese cow!”

I ignored how Wilde felt about this enormous joke in the spirit of the loop de loop, in an intoxicated manner which allowed me, in the middle of all of these apparent trivialities, all of his nobility. That night, without doubt, I entered into a certain self-indulgence, because, without reason, the elegance that I described proved to be notion but an intention, something so sweet that it only could have been played with by a juggler, when at the same time it won all of the prizes of simple vulgarity.

How did Wilde always respond laughing, “You are so funny! Loud Aristides, what is it that you’ve become?” Which, suddenly, made me imagine, “You speak, Charles! You said that, buffoon!”

At a given moment, my visitor would dare to say, “I am dry.” And then I poured another glass. With great effort, he would get up; but, quickly moving my forearms, I would sit him back down—that’s the best way to say it—back in his armchair. Without revolt, he sat back down: it was 3:15 in the morning. Forgetting my opinions, I would say, “Oh, Montmartre! We must make a night of it!” Wilde didn’t resist, his body was brimming with happiness, but then he would weakly say, “I can’t, I can’t.”

“I want to demolish you and bring you into bars, there I will beat you up,” and I yelled very loudly, “Oscar Wilde! Have another whiskey.” You would have been so astonished! And I would have proven to you that society has nothing against this beautiful organism. I yelled again, like Satan: “Oh, you’re not the King of Life?”

“You are a terrible boy,” said Wilde in English. “My God, I want to, but I can’t, in truth, I can’t. I have had too much to drink and I don’t want to continue. I am leaving you, Fabien, adieu.”

I didn’t oppose his departure at the start. He took my hands, took his hat which he’d left on the table, and moved toward the door. I walked him to the staircase and, a bit more lucid, I asked, “Why did you come here?”

“No reason,” staying silent for the rest of the time. At the door, he took my hands, embarrassed me, and whispered again, “You are a terrible boy.”

I looked out into the late night and, like life, each minute forced me into laughter, and I felt the need to kick Wilde.

He didn't cry, but the atmosphere became cold. I remember that Wilde didn't have any muscle beneath him, and I thought that he was a very poor being. A flood of sentimentality inundated my heart; I was sad and filled with love; I looked for consolation, I raised my eyes: the moon was too beautiful and swelled my sweetness. I thought now that Wilde could not understand my words; that he could not understand that I could not have been *serious* in causing him pain. And, like a mad man, I ran after him, and at each crossroads, I found the strength in my eyes to look into the darkness and I said, "Sébastien! Sébastien!" With all of the power in my legs, I ran through the boulevards until I knew I had lost him.

Wandering the streets, I slowed down, and I fixated my eyes on the caring moon like a stupid cunt.