

Contents

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| The Portrait of Mr W.H. | I |
| <i>Chapter One</i> | 3 |
| <i>Chapter Two</i> | 24 |
| <i>Chapter Three</i> | 50 |
| <i>Chapter Four</i> | 62 |
| <i>Chapter Five</i> | 78 |
| <i>Note on the Text</i> | 92 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 92 |
| | |
| Extra Material | 99 |
| <i>Oscar Wilde's Life</i> | 101 |
| <i>Oscar Wilde's Works</i> | 109 |
| <i>Select Bibliography</i> | 118 |



Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)

The Portrait of Mr W.H.

Chapter One

I HAD BEEN DINING WITH ERSKINE in this pretty little house in Birdcage Walk, and we were sitting in the library over our coffee and cigarettes when the question of literary forgeries happened to turn up in conversation. I cannot at present remember how it was that we struck upon this somewhat curious topic, as it was at that time, but I know we had a long discussion about Macpherson, Ireland and Chatterton,* and that with regards to the last I insisted that his so-called forgeries were merely the result of an artistic desire for perfect representation; that we had no right to quarrel with an artist for the conditions under which he chooses to present his work; and that all art, being to a certain degree a mode of acting, an attempt to realize one's own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling accidents and limitations of real life, to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an ethical with an aesthetical problem.

Erskine, who was a good deal older than I was, and had been listening to me with the amused deference of a man of forty, suddenly put his hand upon my shoulder and said to me, "What would you say about a young man who had a strange theory about a certain work of art, believed in his theory and committed a forgery in order to prove it?"

"Ah! That is quite a different matter," I answered.

Erskine remained silent for a few moments, looking at the thin grey threads of smoke that were rising from his cigarette.

“Yes,” he said, after a pause, “quite different.”

There was something in the tone of his voice, a slight touch of bitterness perhaps, that excited my curiosity. “Did you ever know anybody who did that?” I cried.

“Yes,” he answered, throwing his cigarette into the fire.

“A great friend of mine, Cyril Graham. He was very fascinating, and very foolish, and very heartless. However, he left me the only legacy I ever received in my life.”

“What was that?” I exclaimed, laughing. Erskine rose from his seat and, going over to a tall inlaid cabinet that stood between the two windows, unlocked it and came back to where I was sitting, carrying a small panel picture set in an old and somewhat tarnished Elizabethan frame.

It was a full-length portrait of a young man in late-sixteenth-century costume, standing by a table, with his right hand resting on an open book. He seemed about seventeen years of age, and was of quite extraordinary personal beauty, though evidently somewhat effeminate. Indeed, had it not been for the dress and the closely cropped hair, one would have said that the face, with its dreamy, wistful eyes and its delicate scarlet lips, was the face of a girl. In manner, and especially in the treatment of the hands, the picture reminded one of François Clouet’s* later work. The black velvet doublet with its fantastically gilded points, and the peacock-blue background against which it showed up so pleasantly, and from which it gained such luminous value of colour, were quite in Clouet’s style; and the two masks of Tragedy and Comedy that hung somewhat formally from the

marble pedestal had that hard severity of touch – so different from the facile grace of the Italians – which even at the Court of France the great Flemish master never completely lost, and which in itself has always been a characteristic of the northern temper.

“It is a charming thing,” I cried, “but who is this wonderful young man whose beauty art has so happily preserved for us?”

“This is the portrait of Mr W.H.,” said Erskine, with a sad smile. It might have been a chance effect of light, but it seemed to me that his eyes were swimming with tears.

“Mr W.H.!” I repeated. “Who was Mr W.H.?”

“Don’t you remember?” he answered. “Look at the book on which his hand is resting.”

“I see there is some writing there, but I cannot make it out,” I replied.

“Take this magnifying glass and try,” said Erskine, with the same sad smile still playing about his mouth.

I took the glass and, moving the lamp a little nearer, I began to spell out the crabbed sixteen-century handwriting: “*To The Onlie Begetter of These Insuing Sonnets.*”

“Good Heavens!” I cried. “Is this Shakespeare’s Mr W.H.?”

“Cyril Graham used to say so,” muttered Erskine.

“But it is not a bit like Lord Pembroke,”* I rejoined. “I know the Wilton portraits very well. I was staying near there a few weeks ago.”

“Do you really believe then that the Sonnets are addressed to Lord Pembroke?” he asked.

“I am sure of it,” I answered. “Pembroke, Shakespeare and Mrs Mary Fitton* are the three personages of the Sonnets – there is no doubt at all about it.”

“Well, I agree with you,” said Erskine, “but I did not always think so. I used to believe – well, I suppose I used to believe in Cyril Graham and his theory.”

“And what was that?” I asked, looking at the wonderful portrait which had already begun to have a strange fascination for me.

“It is a long story,” he murmured, taking the picture away from me – rather abruptly I thought at the time – “a very long story; but if you care to hear it, I will tell it to you.”

“I love theories about the Sonnets,” I cried, “but I don’t think I am likely to be converted to any new idea. The matter has ceased to be a mystery to anyone. Indeed, I wonder that it ever was a mystery.”

“As I don’t believe in the theory, I am not likely to convert you to it,” said Erskine, laughing, “but it may interest you.”

“Tell it to me, of course,” I answered. “If it is half as delightful as the picture, I shall be more than satisfied.”

“Well,” said Erskine, lighting a cigarette, “I must begin by telling you about Cyril Graham himself. He and I were at the same house at Eton. I was a year or two older than he was, but we were immense friends, and did all our work and all our play together. There was, of course, a good deal more play than work, but I cannot say that I am sorry for that. It is always an advantage not to have received a sound commercial education, and what I learnt in the playing fields at Eton has been quite as useful to me as anything I was taught at Cambridge. I should tell you that Cyril’s father and mother were both dead. They had been drowned in a horrible yachting accident off the Isle of Wight. His father had been in the diplomatic service, and had married a daughter, the only daughter in fact, of old Lord

Crediton, who became Cyril's guardian after the death of his parents. I don't think that Lord Crediton cared very much for Cyril. He had never really forgiven his daughter for marrying a man who had no title. He was an extraordinary old aristocrat who swore like a costermonger, and had the manners of a farmer. I remember seeing him once on speech day. He growled at me, gave me a sovereign and told me not to grow up a 'damned Radical' like my father. Cyril had very little affection for him, and was only too glad to spend most of his holidays with us in Scotland. They never really got on together at all. Cyril thought him a bear, and he thought Cyril effeminate. He was effeminate, I suppose, in some things, though he was a capital rider and a capital fencer. In fact, he got the foils before he left Eton. But he was very languid in his manner, and not a little vain of his good looks, and had a strong objection to football, which he used to say was a game only suitable for the sons of the middle classes. The two things that really gave him pleasure were poetry and acting. At Eton he was always dressing up and reciting Shakespeare, and when he went up to Trinity he became a member of the ADC* in his first term. I remember I was always jealous of his acting. I was absurdly devoted to him; I suppose because we were so different in most things. I was a rather awkward, weakly lad, with huge feet and horribly freckled. Freckles run in Scotch families just as gout does in English families. Cyril used to say that of the two he preferred the gout; but he always set an absurdly high value on personal appearance, and once read a paper before our Debating Society to prove that it was better to be good-looking than to be good. He certainly was wonderfully handsome. People who did not like him – philistines and college tutors,

and young men reading for the Church – used to say that he was merely pretty; but there was a great deal more in his face than mere prettiness. I think he was the most splendid creature I ever saw, and nothing could exceed the grace of his movements, the charm of his manner. He fascinated everybody who was worth fascinating, and a great many people who were not. He was often wilful and petulant, and I used to think him dreadfully insincere. It was due, I think, chiefly to his inordinate desire to please. Poor Cyril! I told him once that he was contented with very cheap triumphs, but he only tossed his head, and smiled. He was horribly spoilt. All charming people, I fancy, are spoilt. It is the secret of their attraction.

“However, I must tell you about Cyril’s acting. You know that no women are allowed to play at the ADC. At least they were not in my time – I don’t know how it is now. Well, of course Cyril was always cast for the girls’ parts, and when *As You Like It* was produced, he played Rosalind. It was a marvellous performance. You will laugh at me, but I assure you that Cyril Graham was the only perfect Rosalind I have ever seen. It would be impossible to describe to you the beauty, the delicacy, the refinement of the whole thing. It made an immense sensation, and the horrid little theatre, as it was then, was crowded every night. Even now when I read the play, I can’t help thinking of Cyril; the part might have been written for him, he played it with such extraordinary grace and distinction. The next term he took his degree, and came to London to read for the Diplomatic. But he never did any work. He spent his days in reading Shakespeare’s Sonnets, and his evenings at the theatre. He was, of course, wild to go on the stage. It was all that Lord Crediton and I could do to prevent him. Perhaps, if he had gone on the stage he would

be alive now. It is always a silly thing to give advice, but to give good advice is absolutely fatal. I hope you will never fall into that error. If you do, you will be sorry for it.

“Well, to come to the real point of the story, one afternoon I got a letter from Cyril asking me to come round to his rooms that evening. He had charming chambers in Piccadilly overlooking Green Park, and as I used to go to see him almost every day, I was rather surprised at his taking the trouble to write. Of course I went, and when I arrived I found him in a state of great excitement. He told me that he had at last discovered the true secret of Shakespeare’s Sonnets; that all the scholars and critics had been entirely on the wrong track; and that he was the first who, working purely by internal evidence, had found out who Mr W.H. really was. He was perfectly wild with delight, and for a long time would not tell me his theory. Finally, he produced a bundle of notes, took his copy of the Sonnets off the mantelpiece and sat down and gave me a long lecture on the whole subject.

“He began by pointing out that the young man to whom Shakespeare addressed these strangely passionate poems must have been somebody who was a really vital factor in the development of his dramatic art, and that this could not be said of either Lord Pembroke or Lord Southampton. Indeed, whoever he was, he could not have been anybody of high birth, as was shown very clearly by Sonnet 25, in which Shakespeare contrasts himself with men who are ‘great princes’ favourites’; says quite frankly:

Let those who are in favour with their stars
Of public honour and proud titles boast,

Whilst I, whom fortune of such triumph bars,
Unlooked for joy in that I honour most;

and ends the sonnet by congratulating himself on the mean state of him he so adored:

Then happy I, that love and am beloved
Where I may not remove nor be removed.

This sonnet Cyril declared would be quite unintelligible if we fancied that it was addressed to either the Earl of Pembroke or the Earl of Southampton,* both of whom were men of the highest position in England, and fully entitled to be called 'great princes'; and he, in corroboration of his view, read me Sonnets 124 and 125, in which Shakespeare tells us that his love is not "the child of state", that it 'suffers not in smiling pomp', but is "builded far from accident". I listened with a good deal of interest, for I don't think the point had ever been made before; but what followed was still more curious, and seemed to me at the time to dispose entirely of Pembroke's claim. We know from Meres* that the Sonnets had been written before 1598, and Sonnet 104 informs us that Shakespeare's friendship for Mr W.H. had been already in existence for three years. Now Lord Pembroke, who was born in 1580, did not come to London till he was eighteen years of age, that is to say till 1598, and Shakespeare's acquaintance with Mr W.H. must have begun in 1594, or at the latest in 1595. Shakespeare, accordingly, could not have known Lord Pembroke until after the Sonnets had been written.

“Cyril pointed out also that Pembroke’s father did not die until 1601; whereas it was evident from the line:

You had a father, let your son say so,

that the father of Mr W.H. was dead in 1598; and laid great stress on the evidence afforded by the Wilton portraits which represent Lord Pembroke as a swarthy dark-haired man, while Mr W.H. was one whose hair was like spun gold, and whose face the meeting place for the ‘lily’s white’ and the ‘deep vermilion in the rose’; being himself ‘fair’ and ‘red’ and ‘white and red’ and of beautiful aspect. Besides, it was absurd to imagine that any publisher of the time – and the preface is from the publisher’s hand – would have dreamt of addressing William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, as Mr W.H.; the case of Lord Buckhurst being spoken of as Mr Sackville being not really a parallel instance,* as Lord Buckhurst, the first of that title, was plain Mr Sackville when he contributed to the *Mirror for Magistrates*, while Pembroke, during his father’s lifetime, was always known as Lord Herbert. So far for Lord Pembroke, whose supposed claims Cyril easily demolished while I sat in wonder. With Lord Southampton Cyril had even less difficulty. Southampton became at a very early age the lover of Elizabeth Vernon, so he needed no entreaties to marry; he was not beautiful; he did not resemble his mother, as Mr W.H. did:

Thou art thy mother’s glass, and she in thee
Calls back the lovely April of her prime;

and, above all, his Christian name was Henry, whereas the punning sonnets (135 and 143) show that the Christian name of Shakespeare's friend was the same as his own – Will.

“As for the other suggestions of unfortunate commentators that Mr W.H. is a misprint for Mr W.S., meaning Mr William Shakespeare; that ‘Mr W.H. all’ should be read ‘Mr W. Hall’; that Mr W.H. is Mr William Hathaway; that Mr W.H. stands for Mr Henry Willobie, the young Oxford poet, with the initials of his name reversed; and that a full stop should be placed after ‘wisheth’, making Mr W.H. the writer and not the subject of the dedication – Cyril got rid of them in a very short time, and it is not worthwhile to mention his reasons, though I remember he sent me off into a fit of laughter by reading to me – I am glad to say not in the original – some extracts from a German commentator called Barnstorff who insisted that Mr W.H. was no less a person than ‘Mr William Himself’. Nor would he allow for a moment that the Sonnets are mere satires on the work of Drayton and John Davies of Hereford.* To him, as indeed to me, they were poems of serious and tragic import, wrung out of the bitterness of Shakespeare's heart, and made sweet by the honey of his lips. Still less would he admit that they were merely a philosophical allegory, and that in them Shakespeare is addressing his Ideal Self, or Ideal Manhood, or the Spirit of Beauty, or the Reason, or the Divine Logos, or the Catholic Church. He felt, as indeed I think we must all feel, that the Sonnets are addressed to an individual – to a particular young man whose personality for some reason seems to have filled the soul of Shakespeare with terrible joy and no less terrible despair.

“Having in this manner cleared the way, as it were, Cyril asked me to dismiss from my mind any preconceived ideas I might have formed on the subject, and to give a fair and unbiased hearing to

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