

Chapter 1: 'He Lieth for His Name is Shame'

'In all his life (Oscar) has never written me a letter that was unkind or at least unloving and to see anything terrible in his handwriting written directly to me would almost kill me.'-Lord Alfred Douglas in a letter to More Adey, 1897.

It was April 1913 and the High Court of Justice was packed and full of reporters for the sensational case 'Douglas v. Ransome and Others.' In the front row of the stalls right next to the defendant, the author Arthur Ransome, sat Wilde's friend and literary executor, Robert Ross. Douglas, who at 43 still had a surprisingly youthful appearance, was suing Ransome for libel over his *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study*. The book was, for the most part, a literary analysis of Wilde's work but it contained a reference to an unnamed youth who had lived off of Wilde, ruined him and then abandoned him when the playwright had no money. Anyone who had followed the case at all knew that the youth was Lord Alfred Douglas. Ransome's source was an unpublished portion of Oscar Wilde's prison manuscript *De Profundis*.

Sir Henry Alfred McCardie, for the defense handed Douglas a manuscript on loan from the British Museum. The manuscript consisted of twenty foolscap folios, four sides each. The first page had the header 'H.M. Prison, Reading' followed by the hand-written words 'Dear Bosie.'

'How does it come to be produced from the British museum?' asked the judge.

'It was given to the museum by Mr. Ross, the literary executor of Wilde and they accepted it,' a member of the defense team said. 'Mr. Ross published parts of it, and the unpublished parts are here.'

McCardie handed the document to Douglas and asked if he recognized the handwriting.

How could he not? It was the same hand that had written 'This is to assure you of my immortal, my eternal love for you...Those who know not what love is will write, I know, if fate is against us, that I have a bad influence upon your life. If they do that, you shall write, you shall say in your turn, that it is not so. Our love was always beautiful and noble, and if I have been the butt of a terrible tragedy, it is because the nature of that love has not been understood.'

It was the hand that had written, 'I shall be eternally grateful to you for having always inspired me with adoration and love...Let destiny, Nemesis, or the unjust gods alone receive the blame for everything that has happened. Every great love has its tragedy, and now ours had too...My passion is at a loss for words, but you can understand me, you alone.'

It was the hand that had written 'It is perhaps in prison that I am going to test the power of love. I am going to see if I cannot make the bitter waters sweet-by-the intensity of love I bear you.'

And the hand that after that test had written 'I feel that it is only with you that I can do anything at all. Do remake my ruined life for me, and then our friendship and love will have a different meaning to the world.'

Douglas acknowledged that he recognized the handwriting of Oscar Wilde and handed the document back to McCardie. McCardie then began reading from a typescript copy prepared for the trial by

Robert Ross. It was 130 pages long with annotations provided by Ross. McCardie had underlined passages to mark what he should emphasize when reading.

'Dear Bosie, After long and fruitless waiting I have determined to write you myself, as much for your sake as for mine....'

Douglas stood in the witness box and listened to a letter he had never read when Wilde was alive. He had not known of the full letter's existence until his lawyer received a copy in preparation for the trial. Until he learned otherwise in Ransome's biography, he had assumed a published version of *De Profundis* was an extract from a letter not to him but to Ross. Douglas had even written a review of that version of *De Profundis* for a motoring journal never knowing its true history.

McCardie was still reading: 'If there be in it one single passage that brings tears to your eyes, weep as we weep in prison where the day no less than the night is set apart for tears... Ah! you had no motives in life. You had appetites merely. A motive is an intellectual aim.'

Douglas remained standing as McCardie read on, '...my life, as long as you were by my side, was entirely sterile and uncreative. And with but a few intervals you were, I regret to say, always by my side..'

McCardie started to become hoarse and he passed the manuscript to Sir Charles Darling to continue the narration. Darling recounted to the riveted courtroom that Bosie ruined Wilde's ability to make art, that he was vain and reckless and brought him to financial ruin that when he thought their friendship he felt 'ashamed...It was intellectually degrading to me.'

Fifteen minutes had gone by and Douglas was visibly shaken. He asked the judge if he could sit down. The judge said he did not wonder why he wanted to do so and gave him permission.

Darling's voice too began to give out and he passed the document on to Sir James Campbell.

'But most of all I blame myself for the ethical degradation I allowed you to bring on me... my will power became absolutely subject to yours. It sounds a grotesque thing to say but it is none the less true. It was the triumph of the smaller over the bigger nature. It was a case of the tyranny of the weak over the strong..'

Douglas asked the judge if he might be excused from the court. The judge asked if he was unwell. Douglas said he was not ill, but that he did not want to hear any more. The judge ordered him to stay put. The London newspapers would all publish gleeful accounts of Douglas's discomfort on the stand the next morning.

'Do you really think that at any period in our friendship you were worthy of the love I showed you, or that for a moment I thought you were? I knew you were not... You were my enemy: such an enemy as no man ever had.'

The letter is so long that the court concluded its business for the day and scheduled a continuation of the reading for the next. As the reading continued the court was so wrapped up in the drama it was a while before the judge noticed Douglas was not in his place. He sent two wardens out to find him. Ten

minutes later they reappeared with Douglas in tow. He was clutching a Bible. The judge asked him why he had not been in court.

'I asked my council to ask you if I might go out, and he said it was not necessary to ask you and I might go,' Douglas replied.

'I suppose you did not wish to hear what was read,' said the judge.

'Yesterday you volunteered the remark after hearing the first part read, when I wanted to go out, you were not surprised that I wished to do so.'

'No I did not,' the judge snapped. 'I said I did not wonder why you wanted to sit down. Now, I may tell you this. You are the plaintiff in this case, and if you leave the court again while you are a witness I will give leave for a judgment to be entered against you.'

'I apologise.'

Douglas took his seat and McCardie continued his narration where he had left off.

McCardie asked Douglas about a passage from the letter that began 'It was only in the mire that we met' and added that their talk was only on one topic. McCardie wanted to know what that topic had been.

'Wilde wrote these things while he was in prison,' Douglas said, 'to save his face and injure me. He sat down and wrote this filthy letter. It is a farrago of lies built upon half-truths-- to curry favor with the prison authorities. It is a disgraceful thing for the government to allow it.'

Douglas listened as the ghost of Wilde mocked his 'undergraduate verse.' The poem he claimed was amateurish had been written as a love token for Oscar, and he had praised it in the most lavish terms at the time.

*But thou, my love, my flower: my jewel, set
In a fair setting, help me, or I die,
To bear Love's burden; for that load to share
Is sweet and pleasant, but if lonely I
Must love unloved, 'tis pain; shine we, my fair,
Two neighbour jewels in Love's coronet.*

As the reading went on Douglas looked down and flipped through the pages of the New Testament.

The narration dragged on and on. Eventually the jury had had enough and they asked that the reading be stopped. Speaking on behalf of Douglas, Cecil Hayes asked that the reading continue because, he said, the tone of the letter becomes less bitter as it goes on and it would become clear that Wilde was subject to dark prison moods that clouded his perception. But the judge, too, had had enough of *De Profundis* and so the reading came to an end.

Then the counsel noted that Douglas had once written about the Wilde trials and called them 'the greatest romantic tragedy of the age...and this is the man who you yesterday spoke of as a monster and

a vampire.'

'No,' the judge corrected. 'The devil incarnate.'

'Oh, but I have since read this manuscript,' Douglas said.

Campbell pressed, 'Up to that time you thought he was a splendid hero and a martyr?'

'When I read the unpublished portion of *De Profundis*, I realized he was a fiend out of hell.'

It was not true that Douglas had abandoned Wilde. He had been forced to separate from him by pressure from, among others, Robert Ross himself. Yet the only way he could prove this was by revealing love letters that would incriminate himself as a homosexual, a crime punishable by hard labor in prison. Anything too warm could make him guilty of gross indecency. Anything not warm enough proved the libel. He was paradoxically accused both of loving Wilde too much and of loving him too little. It is a tight-rope no one could walk without falling down.

Wilde's accusations from beyond the grave had to remain unanswered. The court would officially endorse the view that Douglas was an untalented, unintelligent, self-centered scoundrel who never loved anyone but himself and who lived off Wilde, ruined him in a vendetta against his father and then abandoned him when the money ran out.

Robert Ross had set it all in motion. Douglas would have his revenge.