CHAPTER FIVE

Revelations

I/V

*L’Exposition Universelle*, Paris
— Autumn, 1900 —

LADY BRACKNELL: To be born, or at any rate bred, in a handbag … seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. (Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1895)

As ever, dear Lady Bracknell, is right. However, I regret to say that at hand is the revelation of a still greater disregard for the ordinary decencies of life. Not to mention death. I gather, that is, from the Reverend Chasuble, that Messrs Moncrieff and Worthing, though gentlemen both, “have expressed a desire for immediate baptism.”

LADY BRACKNELL: The idea is grotesque — irreligious!

Quite. And no less grotesque is that here in Paris, but five years on, two more gentlemen, if that is the word, express this same morbid desire. One is a somewhat modern young man
called Herr Johannes Schad. From Basel. He is a clerk. In trade. Rubber, I believe. The other is Mr. Oscar Wilde.

OSCAR WILDE: Mr. Melmoth is my name. It is my new name.

So it is. But the tyrannous fact remains that you request the sacrament of baptism. A desire expressed from, appropriately enough, your death-bed. Whether in a semi or fully recumbent posture is not known. You are, though, undoubtedly resident at the Hotel d’Alsace, 13 Rue des Beaux Arts. Hardly a place in which to be seen, still less to die. The date in question is November 30th, and the Church to which you seek entry is that of Rome. It is, I gather, a matter of sundry oils applied, in extravagant manner, to bodily extremities. Not only hands but even feet.

OSCAR WILDE: The feet of joy.

If you insist. To proceed, however, to the case of Herr Schad, his sacramental indiscretion occurs just across the Seine. Within an obscure establishment known, to its inmates, as the Paris Tabernacle, 61 Rue Meslay. The unfashionable side. The date, in this instance, is September 30th, with baptism here taking the somewhat theatrical form of immersion.

JACK: Immersion!

Indeed, but —

DR. CHASUBLE: You need have no apprehension. Sprinkling is all that is necessary, or, I think, advisable. Our weather is so changeable.

Ah yes, the weather in England is certainly given to wilful changes of mind. However, it is no less mercurial here in Paris, and yet Herr Schad is still sufficiently abandoned to take to the waters of the Tabernacle. It is, I believe, a kind of Aquarium. Herr Schad, you see, is spiritually re-born in a water-tank. Or bath-tub. Of the overgrown variety. Such are the wonders of modern plumbing.

OSCAR WILDE: It is absurd to say the age of miracles is past.

Quite. As you yourself, Mr. Melmoth, heroically attempted to demonstrate, even at the risk of a severe chill. I have in mind the occasion, but three years ago, a week before Whitsun, I believe,
on which you sought Regeneration in the distinctly murky seawater off the Normandy coast.

OSCAR WILDE: [Ah yes,] I attended Mass … and afterwards bathed. I [thus] went into the water without being a Pagan. The consequence was that I was not tempted by Sirens or other Mermaidens. … I really think that this is a remarkable thing.

Ah, you pose, Sir, as a Baptist. No wonder your friends, such as they are, have termed you a Dissenter.

JACK: Good heavens!

Quite. But even before his reckless Normandy plunge, Mr. Melmoth has displayed a remarkable enthusiasm for baptism. He was, I gather, sprinkled not only as a babe in arms but also as an infant—the first time as a Protestant and the second a Catholic.

JACK: Good heavens!

Good heavens, indeed. Baptism is not usually deemed to be, as dear Basil Hallward might say, “a thing that one can do now and then.” Nevertheless, if we are to take Mr. Melmoth as our spiritual pattern, perhaps it is.

DR. CHASUBLE: I am grieved to hear such sentiments. … They savour [I fear] of the heretical views of the Anabaptists.

I do apologise. Anabaptists are, indeed, most heretical. Not least in their morbid inclination to redistribute wealth. In this regard, I am guided by the Church of England’s Articles of Religion. Number 38, as if an omnibus. Which advises that “The Riches and Goods of Christians are not common … as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast.” Falsely, please note.

HERR WINCKELKOPF: I had no idea that you felt so strongly about religion.

Only where property is concerned. Hence my admiration for Reverend Chasuble, who has, I gather, “refuted the views of Anabaptism” in no less than “four … unpublished sermons.” To be baptised more than the once may, he fears, have disastrous social consequences.

ALGERNON: But I have not been christened for years.

JACK: Yes, but you have been christened. That is the important thing.
ALGERNON: Quite so. So I know my constitution can stand it. Granted; however, can the constitution stand it? The political constitution? After all, this way, the way of Second Baptism, lies what the Radical papers call, I believe, Socialism. Is that not so, Lady Bracknell?

LADY BRACKNELL: Algernon, I forbid you to be baptized. I will not hear of such excesses.

Quite. To be baptized, or at any rate re-baptized, displays a contempt for the ordinary decencies of political life that reminds one, or at least myself, of the worst excesses of the Swiss Peasant Rebellion of 1653.

LADY BRACKNELL: I beg your pardon?

Forgive me, but I think, as so often, of Herr Schad’s excit-able ancestor, Uli Schad, Chief Clerk of said Peasant Rebellion. The Basel branch. All of which prompts one to wonder whether young Herr Schad also thinks of his misguided forefather even as he descends into the Aquarium bath-tub.

LORD HENRY: Explain.

Well you see, the excesses of 1653 do rather savour of the Ana-baptists. The Swiss variety. A sorry tribe who, to a man, felt sure that the New Jerusalem was to be found somewhere up one Alp, or another. For this belief, naturally, they were executed. Hung, burnt, etc. On occasion, simply drowned. The Third Baptism, as it was darkly known. To the Authorities. Such is the Law.

IVAN THE CZAR: The fearful law.

Indeed.

Pause.

I am sorry. I have digressed. Though from what I am not altogether sure. Whatever it was, my point most certainly now is this: that, here in Paris, at this particular hour, Herr Schad could hardly avoid his Fatherland’s proclivity for revolutionary outrage.

DUCHESS OF PAISLEY: Pray go on.

Why, look about you. As you will see, the Exposition Universelle rejoices in a host of delightful pavilions, one for every nation, except, that is, for dear little Switzerland. A nation which, being endowed with far more Nature than is advisable, is rep-
resented by an entire mountain village: cowbells, dancing peasants, alpine horns, cardboard mountains, etc. All regrettable enough; but, still worse, its chapel is dedicated to none other than Mr. William Tell. A man inclined not only to wear an apple upon his head (or was that his son?) but to foment revolution.

MRS. ALLONBY: I am sorry to hear it.

Indeed. And, as if this were not enough, the name of Mr. Tell was, I gather, frequently invoked by such as the combustible Uli. So, you see, young Herr Schad, in his Tabernacle tub, must surely be mindful of the very particular sin of revolution. The sin of his fathers, as it were. And if not, then he most certainly should be. Given the myriad opportunities that the *Exposition* kindly affords to part with one’s money, what could be more contemptuous of the ordinary decencies of economic life than to pass one’s time in a water-tank?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT: Nothing.

Exactly. And what, in fact, could be more contemptuous of the ordinary decencies of *philosophical* life than to receive a form of baptism that is known, to its devotees, as Conditional Baptism.

JACK: What on earth do you mean?

Why, I mean a baptism in which the officiating priest is in that most unphilosophical of all predicaments, namely that of *not* knowing. To be precise, not knowing whether or not the candidate has already been baptized. At the last, you see, the unfortunate Mr. Melmoth loses the power of both reason and speech, and so is quite unable to advise the Reverend Dunne, his hastily summoned ecclesiastic. Indeed, Mr. Melmoth’s final attempt at verbal communication is, frankly, a rather disappointing aphorism.

OSCAR WILDE: One steamboat is very much like another.

A perfectly reasonable proposition, I grant, but not exactly hilarious, and hardly, I feel, apropos. It certainly leaves poor Father Dunne none the wiser as to whether or not Mr. Melmoth has already succumbed to the Sirens of baptism. Let alone as to whether or not he desires Regeneration.
It is, I suspect, somewhat difficult to express such a desire without words, even if possessed of a rare talent for mime. Or charades. Indeed, can it be done at all? Can wordless hands, fingers or even one’s face, ever communicate a desire for salvation? Is it possible? Given, say, a face like Mr. Melmoth’s.

CECILY: [It certainly] looks like repentance.

But does it, dear Cecily? Can anything look like repentance? You refer, I believe, to the eating of muffins, which makes, I think, my point. And, even if not, we who are concerned with the fate of Mr. Melmoth’s soul have more than enough uncertainty to endure.

LORD HENRY: Explain.

Well, you see, in Conditional Baptism the conventional “I baptize you, et cetera.” is immediately followed by the aside, “If you are not already baptized.” Which, I feel, is hardly the way to effect divine sacrament. Indeed, it could be likened to solemnly announcing, “I declare you man and wife” but then casually remarking, “If you are not already married.”

DORIAN GRAY: I shudder at the thought.

Quite. Though I myself would call it a species of un-thought. The opposite of thought. Of respectable thought — the thought, that is, of certainty. In brief, thought as it should be. As laid down for our guidance by the admirably dull Herr Professor Hegel.

LORD GORING: [But] it is love and not German philosophy that is the true explanation of the world.

Ah, a delightful axiom, but I speak of this particular world. This one, in dear Paris. Here in the midst of the Exposition Universelle. It is, I accept, invariably said that the Exposition “constitute[s] the [very] synthesis of nineteenth-century philosophy”; however, if true, it is a most peculiar synthesis. One looks about and what does one see but “palpable shams”? All about us, the most disquieting improbabilities. Air Sports, for instance.

JACK: Good heavens!

Good heavens, indeed, Jack. And then there are what they call, I believe, Theatre-Phones. Not to mention Hypnotists, Wireless Telegraphy, Talking Films, and indeed (God help us)
La Maison de Rire. This last, needless to say, is by no means as comical as the Allegorical Tableaux or at least those intended for our moral improvement. I think, for instance, of “Nature Disrobing before Science.” All of Paris, it would seem, is off to the bath-tub.

Duchess of Paisley: Pray go on.

I shall. For my fear is this: that the Exposition seeks to turn the world Upside Down. In short, that its secret emblem is the altogether alarming Manoir à l’Envers, an edifice that is, of course, head-over-arse. As they say in Synod. Or is that the Music Hall? Whatever, within said Manoir, the tables and chairs etc. stand not upon the floor, as is customary, I believe. Instead, they are suspended above one’s very head. As if, I imagine, the very blade of the guillotine.

Oscar Wilde: To conclude?

Why, my conclusion is this: that if the Exposition really is the philosophical terminus of the nineteenth century, may Heaven preserve us. I need hardly remind you who it is that claimed to
up-turn Professor Hegel’s noble synthesis, to rudely turn dear Herr Hegel upside down.

MICHAEL, THE PEASANT: And who is that?

I would rather not say. Suffice it to observe that this way, lies, I fear, the excesses of yet another revolution. Here in Paris, you see, the ground itself now shifts beneath one’s feet. Quite literally so, in fact. I am thinking of those who imperil what may remain of their sanity upon the Trottoir Roulant.

THE SWALLOW: I cannot do that.

No, neither can I. Perish the thought. It is sufficiently alarming merely to observe the pavement move, let alone be moved along upon it, as if one were luggage. Paris, you see, is a city that moves, that goes, if you will. Indeed, by November, all these pavilions and palaces will go, be gone. In short, this is a fugitive city. Mr. Melmoth’s, as it were. Made in his ephemeral likeness. Would you not agree, dear Ernest?

ERNEST LA JEUNESSE: Nature [has here] … gathered together all her glories for Oscar …. In every palace … he [has] built again his … palace of fame.

Fig. 24. Photograph of the Église Baptiste de la Rue Meslay (Paris, 1899). Blocher Saillens Archive.
Exactly. Though these passing palaces speak, I fear, not only of fame but also of a yet greater vulgarity—namely, one's unfortunate need of God. I have in mind the Scriptural advice that “Here we have no continuing city.” In short, that we are not to overly invest in this present world, but rather to look unto the next. God's, that is. This world, apparently, is but a passing show.

A precept, I suspect, dear to the habitués of that dear little Tabernacle building, the Aquarium. 61 Rue Meslay is, you see, itself but a temporary arrangement. For in truth, in fact, it is merely, in origin, what is called, I gather, a warehouse. It is merely dressed up as a church: some drapery here, a curtain there, et cetera.

LADY BRACKNELL: A thoroughly experienced French maid [can] produce … a really marvellous result.

Indeed. And how appropriate it is that a tabernacle is, literally speaking, a tent. Or, at least, species thereof. With, then, its myriad fleeting castles, Paris is, these days, a whole city of tabernacles. Or, if you will, a Tabernacle City. Which is to say, a Holy City. One is, then, hardly surprised that the two who are so desirous of baptism, Messrs Melmoth and Schad, are themselves both visitors, migrants of a kind.

JACK: Is that clever?

I think so. It might even be true. Albeit, less so if Herr Schad harbours ulterior motives.

LADY BRACKNELL: I beg your pardon?

Well, what if, like both Jack and Algernon, he desires baptism merely to secure the favour of a particular young woman? One of those young women at the Aquarium. One who has herself already passed through its tap-waters. One of its most alluring naiads, sirens, mermaidens. As Mr. Melmoth reminds us, the medium of water is not without its temptations, its crimes. To speak frankly, our two baptists, both Melmoth and Schad, may yet require investigation.

MABEL CHILTERN: The police should interfere.

Precisely. And if not at the Aquarium then at least at the Hotel d'Alsace. Which will, no doubt, be already familiar to the police. Here, in Paris, I find, detectives keep an alarmingly close
eye upon hotels. One can, in fact, barely move for loitering policemen.

LORD GORING: It is what the police are for.

Quite. And how ably they do it. Ever devoted to their calling, as it were. Consider, as evidence, this photograph. Here. This one.

Yes, it is indeed of *Le Pavillon de la Grande-Bretagne* and, in particular, one of our very own brave constables. He does not, I admit, cut a particularly imposing figure; however, what he may lack in juridical air he more than compensates for in style. His left hand raised so elegantly toward, I think, his very splendid hat. Or should that be helmet?

Regardless, I am somewhat perplexed by this lifted hand. It might almost be the beginning of a salute, were it not the left. Or, perhaps, the wiping of a tear from an eye, were it not that policemen do not cry. Unlike other men. Other men I know. Could it, in fact, be that, like the unhappy Mr. Melmoth, our
nonchalant constable attempts a gesture intended to express a desire for baptism?

**JACK:** Oh, that is nonsense!

Ah, but not if it were a desire for the baptism of *another*. That is to say, a child. Or infant. Living as we do in an age of carelessness, our policemen, I gather, are not infrequently left holding mislaid infants, many of whom are felt to be in want of baptism. Indeed, according to Lady Bracknell, our London constables were once left holding, or nearly holding, an infant who would, one day, *himself* desire baptism.

**CECILY:** Jack?

The very same.

**LADY BRACKNELL:** Twenty-eight years ago, … a perambulator that contained a baby of the male sex [was], … through the Metropolitan Police, … discovered standing by itself in … Bayswater. … But, the baby was not there!

Ah, such a scene! A veritable tableau, if you will. For, herein one may discern, to one’s edification, both a Coming and a Going, Entrance and Departure. That is to say, first the Entrance, as it were, of the Law — if we may so speak of the Metropolitan Police. And then the Departure, as it were, of he-who-one-day-would-seek-to-be-baptized, the baby, the infant Jack. He, the latter, is now simply “not there!” The Law is after him, but he is gone. It is, I believe, a perfect miniature of Grace. Or, so some might say. At the Aquarium.

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II/V

The High Court, London
— May 1924 —

In 1897, one of the legal figures involved in initial preparations to divorce Oscar and Constance Wilde was the solicitor Frederick Inderwick KC. In 1924, when Johannes petitioned to annul his marriage to Marie the Registrar was, as it happens, Inderwick’s son, William.

PROBATE, DIVORCE, AND ADMIRALTY DIVISION
May 27, 1924

UPON HEARING the Solicitors for both parties I do order that Edwin Francis White FRCS of 388 Upper Richmond Road, Putney and Lennard Stokes, MRCS LRCP of Upton Cottage, Upton near Andover, Hants be appointed as Inspectors to examine the parts and organs of generation of Jean Jacques Frederic Schad the Petitioner in this Cause to report in writing whether he is capable of performing the act of generation, and if incapable whether such his Impotency can or cannot be relieved or removed by art or skill; and also to examine the parts and organs of generation of Marie Anne Schad otherwise Wheeler the Respondent in this Cause and to report in writing whether she is, or is not, a Virgin, and hath or hath not any impediment on her part to prevent the consummation of Marriage, and whether such impediment (if any) can or cannot be removed by art or skill.

W. Inderwick
Registrar
Ah, impotence, “The Importance of Impotence.” As we say, hereabouts. Not especially witty, I know. So, how about “The Impotence of Being Earnest”? Or should that be “The Impotence of Being Learned”? Of being one who merely spends his days writing, scribbling away, with little art or skill. In the far corner of the Court.

No. On the contrary, in fact. My office, though modest, is endowed with a certain authority. I do wear a crown of sorts. Albeit borrowed. So, no, I am not quite condemned to Impotency. I can instruct. Can command. As in this present Cause. Wherein, I do order and do further order etc. etc. Indeed, if necessary, I can compel. If resistance is met, if my writ does not run, my orders can always be enforced.

MR. GRISBY: I do not [myself] employ personal violence of any kind. The Officer of the Court, [however], whose function it is to seize the [accused], … is waiting … outside.

It is, you see, wise to do as I order. Even if it is to undertake the examination of a perfect stranger. Or, if one is that perfect stranger, to submit to such. Whether that is for the first or, in fact, the second time. Again, as in this present Cause. The Respondent, she has, I note, already been examined. Last month. The seventh. Indeed, a damning report it was. Damning. Quite conclusive, I would have thought. Further examinations, however, have been called for. And no one, it seems, is completely sure why. Such is the Law. Regrettable. Very. But the Court must know. Must clarify. The Crown having a perfectly legitimate interest in marriage. Every marriage. Every marriage-bed, indeed. Or bedroom. Such is the prerogative of the Crown. The State. The Polis.

OSCAR WILDE: The … “city of the sun” [is marred by] … injudicious marriages.

Exactly. And there are so many. Injudicious marriages, that is. Which is why they must, I am afraid, be identified. Made visible. Brought to the light. As must any marriage that proves, in truth, not really to be a marriage. Even if, as in the present Cause, the pale shadow thereof has lasted almost twenty years.
LORD ILLINGWORTH: Twenty years of romance make a woman look like a ruin. And twenty years of marriage?

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Twenty years of marriage make her something like a public building.

That, sir, is absurd!

OSCAR WILDE: I hope marriage has not made you too serious. Only this one, this marriage. If marriage it is. Which is why, on behalf of the Crown, the State, your City of the Sun, I have ordered that it be examined. Gone into.

ALGERNON: In married life three is company, and two is none. What, sir, do you imply? That I or anyone else in this Court is, in some way, involved in this marriage? We, the Court, simply seek to determine, and with medical exactitude, whether or not it really is a marriage.

OSCAR WILDE: The Sultan — I beg your pardon?

OSCAR WILDE: The Sultan does not know how much he is married.

You speak, Mr. Wilde, as if marriage were a matter of degree, or extent. The Court cannot allow such sophistry. To quote yourself, “This is not the moment for German scepticism.”

OSCAR WILDE: Keep your own words to yourself. Leave me mine.

But words, Mr. Wilde, may not be owned, are not faithful. They are not, as it were, the marrying kind. Not inclined to have and to hold. In short, Mr. Wilde, I believe you mistake words for persons. And it is only persons, persons made in the image of God, the One, the One-and-Only-and-Forever, who marry.

LADY MARKBY: [But] nowadays people marry as often as they can.

And how often is that?

MABEL CHILTERN: Once a week.

I beg your pardon?

MABEL CHILTERN: Once a week is quite often enough.

To marry?

MABEL CHILTERN: To propose.
But what do you say, Mr. Wilde?

Oscar Wilde: Would you repeat that question?

Cecil Graham: Have you been twice married and once divorced, or twice divorced and once married?

Lord Augustus: I really don’t remember.

Neither, I think, does Mr. Schad. Our Petitioner. It is rumoured that he already plans to marry again.

Metropolitan Police: Schad … appears to be a respectable man.

So he does. But what is known of his present domestic circumstances?

Metropolitan Police: His … sister is now keeping house for him.

Ah, a lonely house.

Pause.

Sir Robert Chiltern: God has given us a lonely house. You too?

Sir Robert Chiltern: God.

But what has God to do with a lonely house? You speak as if the Almighty were opposed to marriage.

Dr. Chasuble: The Primitive Church — Yes?

Dr. Chasuble: The Primitive Church was distinctly against marriage.

But not anymore. Both Petitioner and Respondent, when resident in Paris, belonged to what is sometimes called, I understand, the Église Chrétienne Primitive, and its adherents, it is clear, most certainly marry. Or at least attempt to. Their God, it seems, has no desire for a lonely house. Besides, what kind of God could ever desire such?

Oscar Wilde: Christ.

I am sorry?

Oscar Wilde: Christ, … [He who] … now … sits in his lone dishonoured House.

Ah, and what, Mr. Wilde, does he do, this lonely Christ of yours?

Oscar Wilde: Weeps, perchance for me.
Weeps? For you? Why should Christ weep for you? You who, with regard to holy matrimony, have led a whole nation into confusion. Or, at very least, misunderstanding.

Pause.

LADY WINDERMERE: The proper basis for marriage is … misunderstanding.

Of what kind?

LADY WINDERMERE: Mutual.

And what if the misunderstanding is not mutual? What if only one of the two misunderstand?

LANE: Yes, sir.

What do you mean, “Yes, sir”? Tell the Court, Mr. Lane, what you really think of marriage.

LANE: I believe it is a very pleasant state, sir.

Is that it? Have you nothing more to say?

LANE: I have had very little experience of it myself. … I have only been married once. [And] that was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

A young person? Which young person?

OSCAR WILDE: You read it … badly.

Read what badly?

OSCAR WILDE: My … work.

I do not care. Who is this person? This unfortunate person?

OSCAR WILDE: You read … badly[!]

I said, who is she? This person. She whose whole marriage was but a misunderstanding. Who on earth is she?

MISS PRISM: I admit with shame that I do not know.

Might she, then, be the Respondent? The woman in this present Cause? Namely, Mrs. Schad, otherwise Wheeler. Speak, Mr. Wilde. Speak to the Court.

SIR EDWARD CLARKE: My lord, … hidden meanings have been most unjustly read into the … works of my client.

Well, what else did you expect? If Mr. Wilde writes of a young person married as a result of a misunderstanding and then says nothing more of her, not a single sorry word, we are bound to ask after this poor, bewildered person. Even if she is no longer young. Even if “a woman of no importance.”
OSCAR WILDE: You read … badly.
Silence! Silence in Court.
OSCAR WILDE: May I say nothing, my lord?
No. You shall, for once, be silent. And remain so until the Crown has proceeded to put to Mrs. Schad a number of questions. Upon the answers to which much shall depend.

*Did you ever embrace him?*
Never.

*Did you ever kiss him?*
Never.

*Did you ever put your hand on his person?*
Never.

*And then bring him into your bedroom?*
Never.

*Sleep in the same bed with him all night?*
Never.

*Each of you having taken off all your clothes, did you take his person in your hand?*

(Edward Carson interrogating Oscar Wilde, The Old Bailey, Wednesday, April 3, 1895)
Once again, dear Lady Bracknell is to be heeded. The courts do indeed, on occasion, fall into error. And not only in their Guides but also, I gather, in what they admit as evidence. One here thinks, as always, in fact, or most nights, of the letter submitted to the High Court, in London, in 1924, from a certain, or possibly uncertain, Dr. Thomas G. Stevens. It is a letter detailing his examination of the unfortunate wife, or supposed wife, of Herr Schad, our man of rubber. Whatever, one’s concern is that the letter to the Court includes one or two strange orthographical errors. It would seem as if Dr. Stevens cannot spell. Or at least, cannot spell that unfortunate word, “menstruated.” Or indeed his own name. Middle name. Or initial thereof.

Is it, then, a false letter? Unlikely, one accepts, but false letters are written. In particular, they are written, it would seem, by those in Authority. This is certainly the view from Switzerland; or rather the view of the rubber gentleman’s inflammable ancestor, Uli Schad. Our rebellious man. The one on the scaffold. On a hill, Gellert Hill, just beyond the walls of old Basel. It is said that he accused the authorities of falsche Briefe. And for this, of course, he died.

Pause.

So much, however, for the view from Switzerland. Which is, naturally, of far less interest than the view of Switzerland. One thinks now of young Lady Agatha.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: Dear girl, she is so fond of photographs of Switzerland. Such a pure taste, I think.
Pure indeed; but not, I fear, a taste altogether shared by Mr. Melmoth.

**Oscar Wilde:** I don’t like Switzerland: it has produced nothing, save theologians and waiters.

But is there a difference? Perhaps there is, with regard to kissing. You are, Mr. Melmoth, an enthusiast, I hear, for kissing waiters. Less so theologians. Or at least those of the Alpine variety.

**Oscar Wilde:** The Swiss are … ugly … carved out of wood, most of them; the others are carved out of turnips.

And who among us would wish to kiss a man carved out of wood? Or turnips, for that matter. Indeed, is a man made of wood even capable of being kissed?

**Oscar Wilde:** The chastity of Switzerland has got on my nerves.

Quite. Though there is the painting, *Night*, by that Swiss fellow, Herr Hodler. I first saw it, as perhaps did Johannes, at the *Exposition*. Here there are, one feels, precious few signs of chastity. Still less of turnips. I think of the two couples, to the right and the left, respectively. How close they lie, the Swiss. *Herr und Frau, Monsieur et Madame*; even, I presume, the unfortunate Uli and Wife. Herr Uli was, you see, a married man. So had a wife to watch him slowly ascend the steps to the gallows. And swing.

**Dr. Chasuble:** Dead?
Quite dead.

MISS PRISM: What a lesson for him!

Indeed. And what a view. What a view he commanded even as he died. From the scaffold, up on Gellert Hill. From whence there is no doubting the quality of the prospect. Particularly at that time of the year. July. The seventh, to be precise.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Are you sure?

On the whole. I seldom err with respect to dates.

LORD HENRY: My wife … never gets confused over … dates.

Excellent. And tonight, neither do I. Which, in this connection, is most fortunate. July seventh is, you see, also the day on which, in 1897, Mr. Charles Wooldridge, Trooper, wife-murderer, and fellow inmate of Mr. Melmoth, is executed at Reading Gaol. Berkshire. Such a rural county. The woods, the fields, the glades.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: There is nothing like Nature, is there?

No. Thank God.

Pause.

To return, however, to this coincidence of dates, this —

OSCAR WILDE: Awful calendar of crime.

If you insist, Mr. Melmoth. I myself, in my present and confined situation, prefer to talk of the thoughtfulness of the Law. To which we have so much to be grateful. Not least with regard to the timing of our deaths.

OSCAR WILDE: I will take care not to die on the wrong date.

I am glad to hear it, Mr. Melmoth. Very glad. I must, though, point out that you carelessly allow yourself to pass away on November 30th. Now, I have no objection to dying in November, per se. It is, indeed, an eminently suitable month in which to die, what with all its failing light. Falling dark. It is just that there is no special romance, no particular vibration, attached to the 30th of November. Whilst there is to, say, the seventh, that being the death-date, on the whole, of poor Basil Hayward, dear friend of Dorian Gray. Then again, there is the thirteenth, the day on which you yourself, Mr. Melmoth, upon your way to Reading Gaol, were left exposed to comment at Clapham Junction. For
one half of an hour. As long as is the silence in Heaven, I gather. Before the Throne, of the Lamb. Once all have been judged.

I am sorry. I have digressed, grown biblical.

However, to resume my audit of November’s days of vibration, there is, I suggest, the twelfth, the very last day of the Exposition Universelle, a day of exemplary finality — cannons, drums, lights going out, and all just before midnight. What better November day on which to die? But no, you, sir, insist on living until the thirtieth, a most prosaic end for one otherwise so devoted to vibration.

Pause.

Some may, perhaps, deem it nit-picking to judge a man by his chosen day of death. But nothing, I believe, tells one more about a man. In particular, a man who dies on July seventh. Herr Uli, of course. Not to mention poor Trooper Woolridge.

DR. CHASUBLE: Were you with him at the end? Trooper Woolridge?

DR. CHASUBLE: Yes.

I do not think so, Reverend Father. But, then, who really is with a man as he hangs? As he faces the noose. Some might claim they are, such as a priest, a doctor, an executioner.

OSCAR WILDE: The Hanging Committee.

No. They hang paintings. In galleries. I am thinking, here, tonight, of the hanging of men. In particular, I am thinking that, though a fellow may say he is with the hanging man, in truth he is not. After all, such a fellow —

OSCAR WILDE: [D]oes not [himself] die a death of shame

On a day of dark disgrace,
Nor have a noose about his neck,
Nor a cloth upon his face

... He does not [himself] wake at dawn ...
To put on convict-clothes,
While some coarse-mouthed Doctor gloats, and notes
Each new and nerve-twitched pose.

...
He does not [himself] bend his head to hear
The Burial Office read,
Nor, while the terror of his soul
Tells him he is not dead,
Cross his own coffin, as he moves
Into the hideous shed.
[Nor, at last, does he] … stare upon the air
Through a little roof of glass.

Quite. Who among us really knows, as yet at least, what it is to be roughly woken at dawn? And then examined by a course-mouthed doctor. One’s final view of the world glimpsed through a filthy skylight.

Oscar Wilde: [Here] the shed in which people are hanged … [has] a glass roof, like a photographer’s studio on the sands at Margate. [Indeed,] … for eighteen months, I thought it was the studio for photographing prisoners.

An understandable error. Having one’s photograph taken in Margate would be bound to end badly. The Kentish skyline is, I gather, decidedly morbid. Certainly, if compared to that view enjoyed by Herr Uli, from his scaffold. Basel Land in all its midsummer glory.

Cecily: The weather … continues charming.

Indeed, thus ensuring poor Uli a quite invigorating prospect. Sufficient, I dare say, to make even a condemned man feel glad to be alive. Full, as it were, of vital force, the force of the blood which even as, even because, the noose is tightening, rushes at last to enliven him, stiffen him, enlarge him.

Gwendolen: Whenever people talk … about the weather … I always feel quite certain they mean something else.

I am sorry. Forgive me. Please forgive me. I am just a man. Of flesh. And blood. I am not, I confess, made in the neutral and neutered image of Switzerland. Expect, then, no impartiality from me. Not with respect to death. Nor with respect to marriage. I am, you see, no celibate scholar. Not dead from waist down. Indeed, I am barely a scholar in any regard. My university, if I still have one, is —
OSCAR WILDE: The University of Matrimony?
No. My studies, such as they are, relate to —

OSCAR WILDE: A dissertation on widows, as … the matrimonially fittest?
No. Again, no. If I could make any academic claim it would be to the title of —

ANTONIO MIGGE: Professor of Massage?
Emeritus, alas. But I keep my hand in. A quotation here, a fragment there — it is astonishing what, with a little manipulation, can be achieved. Created.

OSCAR WILDE: Criticism can recreate the past for us from the very smallest fragment of language or art, just as surely as the man of science can, from some tiny bone, call Behemoth out of his cave, and make Leviathan swim once more across the star-tled sea.

Indeed. And how adept one may become at recovering the lost or disappeared. Not least those who, like the Behemoth or Leviathan, never actually existed at all. But then —

OSCAR WILDE: The only real people are the people who never existed.
Such as Mr. Melmoth, of course. Or, indeed, possibly, Mrs. Johannes Schad. Our rubber gentleman’s wife. Or supposed wife.

MADELAINE: Johannes … turned her out.
Yes. So you say. As if he were all but a wife-murderer. To which, indeed, there is perhaps some elaborate calendrical clue. After all, as you know, his ancestor Uli shares his execution day with no other than poor Trooper Wooldridge.

Pause.
By the way, it seems to me that murdering one’s wife may, in fact, be more common than often supposed. Where else do you think that that blood on the carpet came from?

MRS. OTIS: How horrid. I don’t at all care for bloodstains in a sitting room.
But could one not make an exception for the blood of one’s wife?

LADY BRACKNELL: I beg your pardon?
MRS. UMNLEY: It is the blood of Lady Eleanore, … [she] who was murdered on that very spot by her … husband.

Exactly and, try as one might, the stain will simply not go away.

WASHINGTON OTIS: Nonsense … Pinkerton’s Champion Stain Remover … will clean it up in no time.

But alas its cleansing effect is merely temporary. The stain may go for a while, and yet in the morning, at dawn, one wakes to find the stain has returned. Every morning, again and again and again. It is a sorry state of affairs, indicative, I fear, of —

WASHINGTON OTIS: The Permanence of Sanguineous Stains. Or at least of those stains left by the blood of one’s wife.

Pause.

THOMAS STEVENS: Mrs. Schad states that she has not menstruated since November 1904.

Does she not give a particular date? Say which November day?

THOMAS STEVENS: The female mind does not lend itself readily to accurate remembrance.

But did you not ask her, probe her, enquire after the precise date and circumstances of this final issue, letting, bleeding?

THOMAS STEVENS: The female mind … will omit, from shyness or sentimentality, the important symptoms and … lead the attention away from one trouble to another.

So what does one do? How does one ever coax a woman to speak precisely, to tell the truth, to —

THOMAS STEVENS: Speak of her real trouble?

Exactly. How on earth is it done? Tell me, please.

THOMAS STEVENS: It is … necessary to lead the patient through devious channels.

Curtain.

To make disappear the stain left by the blood of one’s victim may well prove beyond the means of even the most modern detergents. However, to make the victim themselves disappear is,
I gather, not wholly impossible. Or at least not if one knows the right man, a man who might be persuaded to do what he should not. To use his expertise in ways he should not.

I think of my dear friend, Mr. Alan Campbell. 152 Hertford Street, Mayfair. He is a scientific man who, as it happens, makes an appearance in Mr. Melmoth’s peculiar novel, *Dorian Gray*. Herein, dear Campbell quite literally does away with a corpse. A fanciful episode involving the dissolution of the body by means of various “chemicals,” in particular “nitric acid.” The body in question proves, it turns out, “an admirable subject” for this “curious experiment.” One moment it is “the thing … seated … [at] the table” upstairs, “with bowed head and humped back,” and the next, by means of a little science, it is simply not there at all. “Upstairs … the thing that had been sitting at the table was gone.”

As I say, a fanciful episode, within, indeed, a fanciful novel. The episode is, however, susceptible to fine interpretation — as, indeed, a dark Allegory of Divorce. You see, *Dorian Gray* is initially published, within *Lippincott’s Magazine*, alongside a two-essay debate upon (of all things) divorce. Moreover, the debate is entitled, “The Indissolubility of Marriage.” The first essay contends that a marriage may never be dissolved; the second that, on the contrary, it may. We are thus reminded that, in this our modern age, dissolution is a possibility that haunts every man’s marriage.

Or, to be precise, every man’s *wife*. In *Dorian Gray*, you see, the dissolving of the body runs parallel to a subplot to which most scholars turn a blind eye: namely, Lord Henry Wotton’s divorce, his ridding himself of his wife. Once again, the thing, as it were, formerly seated at the table, disappears. The thing upstairs. Her. Lord Henry’s wife.

People may yet wonder where “the thing” has gone, but reasons can be imagined. Rumours can be started. Rumours like, let us say, she —

**LORD HENRY:** Fell into the Seine off an omnibus.

Indeed. As if, perhaps, seized by a desire for immediate baptism. Besides, the stairs on Paris omnibuses are so very treacher-
ous. But then, come to think of it, are not all stairs treacherous? How very steep, for example, are the stairs to the scaffold? Or baptistery? Or even the marriage bed?

_Fig. 27._ Edward Hopper, _Stairway at 48, Rue de Lille, Paris, 1906_. Oil on wood, 12 7/8 × 9 5/16 in. [32.7 × 23.7 cm]. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.1295. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art.
I have myself, as a once-married man, seen the latter stairs. Indeed, I can now reveal that I have also seen the very stairs that led young Herr Schad and his bride to their marriage bed. Or at least, I have seen the stairs that led to those stairs. Remarkable is it not? They are, you see, stairs that have been painted, depicted that is. By Mr. Edward Hopper. In 1906.

He was, Mr. Hopper, at the time, lodging within, of all places, the Église du Tabernacle, 48 Rue de Lille, the very church in which, it is said, Marie and Johannes had their marriage blessed just a year before.

GILBERT: How steep are the stairs.
Quite.

*
IV/V

A Crowded House
— Undated —

Uli Schad is currently ill in bed.
(Urs Hostettler, 1653)

Every room has five or six doors, and the characters rush in and out, ... chase each other, ... misunderstand each other, ... make scenes and tableaux, and distribute a gentle air of lunacy.
(Oscar Wilde, 1887)

There are, I think, too many doors. Tonight. And so many come and go. Tonight. God, you see, has given me a far from lonely house. Mine, indeed, is a crowded house, madhouse, sick house, Maison de Rire, Manoir à l'Envers. It may even be thought a house of ill repute.

OSCAR WILDE: Suddenly the police entered and —
Yes?
OSCAR WILDE: Arrested everybody.
Quite. This house is so easily mistaken for something else. Just like the Hanging House. The one at Reading. The one you, Mr. Melmoth, mistook for a photographer's shed. At Margate.

I wonder, by the way, if Trooper Wooldridge made the same mistake? Did he think, for a moment, even as he faced the noose, that he was in Margate? His last thought, was it: where is the damned photographer?
Poor soul.

Well, it was, I suppose, bound to happen to someone. Being executed, that is. Seeing that they arrested everybody. Not everybody in Margate, thank God. I mean Basel. Or rather, to be precise, Liestal, where Uli et al revolted. The leaders there, they all got it in the neck. Chop. Save Uli, the one that swung, the chief rouser of rabble. The rebel king. Used to jump onto the table and weep, he did. I read that. Somewhere.

OSCAR WILDE: It was a horrible thing to have a spy in one’s house.

Particularly if given to talk. As well she might have been, Nelly. Seeing, it turns out, that Herr and Madame Schad were not, perhaps, really man and wife. Not really.

LADY MARKBY: Families are so mixed nowadays. Indeed, as a rule, everybody turns out to be somebody else.

Pause.

GWENDOLEN: [So,] what is your … name?
I beg your pardon?

GWENDOLEN: What is your … name, now that you have become someone else?
I am not quite sure, but —

OSCAR WILDE: Most people are other people.

Indeed. And I am no exception. Not even here, within these far-from-thin-walls. And bent, as I am, over this book. This tome. A kind of life, or diary, I suppose. Though not my own.

OSCAR WILDE: Everyone should keep someone else’s diary. I sometimes suspect you of keeping mine.

Well, we all make mistakes, Mr. Melmoth. Grow confused. Besides, as you say, one steamboat is very much like another. Unless, of course, it is not. That is to say, unless it changes. Is transformed. Re-christened, as it were. Converted.

Pause.

ROBERT ROSS: I told [Oscar] … I should never attempt his conversion until … he was serious.

And what did he say?

OSCAR WILDE: The growth of common sense in the English Church is a thing very much to be regretted.
Then try the Aquarium, in Paris. Everybody there is sufficiently free of common sense to swear that formerly they were someone else. Someone bad.

**Miss Prism:** I am not in favour of this modern mania for turning bad people into good at a moment’s notice. Bravo.

**Dorian Gray:** [But] I should like to be somebody else. No, dear Dorian, you’d be a liability. You would —

**Lord Henry:** Go … about like … [a] revivalist.

Exactly. Or a Baptist. At the Aquarium, I hear, they hold a hundred prayer meetings a month. So much praying is surely not good for you. Say too many prayers and you might alter the world. Might even alter England.

Indeed, England, I fear, may already have been changed.

**Lord Illingworth:** You do?

Why, yes. Do you not recall the London Revival? 1905. July 1905. Exeter Hall. The Baptists, apparently, declared it a “veritable Pentecost.” Babblings, faintings, dramas. Meetings with sighs, as it were. Frightful stuff. Swift upon the heels of the wedding, it was. The wedding in Paris. Rubber-man’s wedding. If it was a wedding. If, indeed, it was a Pentecost. A visitation of the Spirit. Of God’s deposit, guarantee, earnest.


Pause.

Or should that be, any man called Johannes? John, to you and I.

**Gwendolen:** Is your name … John?

**Jack:** I could deny it if I liked.

I too, but it would be fruitless. It produces, I accept, very few vibrations. No more, in fact, than its notorious domesticity “Jack.” Moreover, I hear that —

**Oscar Wilde:** Anything may happen to a person called John. Or, indeed, to —
GWENDOLEN: Any woman who is *married* to a man called John.
Though quite *what* might happen I am really not sure.

GWENDOLEN: Any woman married to a man called John … would … never be allowed … a single moment’s solitude.

*Pause.*

Or, should that be, I wonder, any woman married to a man called *Jesus*?

LADY BRACKNELL: I beg your pardon?

OSCAR WILDE: One always thinks of [Jesus] … as —

Yes?

OSCAR WILDE: A young bridegroom.

Precisely.

*Pause.*

One question, if I may: what kind of bridegroom does one imagine Christ to be? What kind of *husband*, if you will?

LORD CAVERSHAM: Ideal.

I’m sorry?

LORD CAVERSHAM: An ideal husband.

MABEL CHILTERN: I don’t think I should like that.

Why ever not?

MABEL CHILTERN: It sounds like something in the next world.

Which next world? Heaven? Or the other one?

MAN: In Hell I have always lived.

And Heaven?

MAN: Never have I been able to imagine it.

Let us try, then, at least to imagine Hell. Come on. Someone.

In what way might we describe it?

*Silence.*

How about, as —

LORD CAVERSHAM: A lot of damned nobodies.

Excellent. And, what do they do, these nobodies?

LORD CAVERSHAM: Talk … about nothing.

How dreadful. As bad as Heaven. Which, by the way, I gather is also afflicted by the absence of marriage.

LADY BRACKNELL: I beg your pardon?
Why, it is said that in Heaven they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are as the angels. The angels in Palmers Green. In which case, if true, I fear that—

JACK: A passionate celibacy is all that any of us can look forward to.

In short, all we have yet-to-come are—

OSCAR WILDE: Un-kissed kisses.

Indeed. Un-loved love, you might say. Love that is lost. For eternity.

_Pause._

OSCAR WILDE: Love is never lost.

I beg your pardon?

OSCAR WILDE: Love is never lost.

Unlike parents, then. They can be lost.

LADY BRACKNELL: To lose one parent—

And people, people in general, they too, I fear, can be lost. For example,—

_URS HOSTETTLER:_ We hear nothing of Uli Schad these days.

Ah, him. Well, he is sick. You said so yourself. Sick even unto death. Execution. Swinging in the midsummer Basel breeze. But, you see, others too are lost. And not just by means of the noose, the drop, all of a sudden, and at but a moment’s notice. Others are lost by degrees, gradations, increments.

_MADELEINE:_ The Schads have begun a system of not eating.

It may take years but, in the end, they vanish.

_MADELEINE:_ Johannes sometimes goes from eight in the morning to seven at evening without eating.

It may be painful. But it can be done.

_MADELEINE:_ Marie has only an egg at midday.

It happens more often than you think.

_MRS. CHEVELEY:_ Not a year passes in England without somebody disappearing.

Or a Church. Baptist, that is.

LADY BRACKNELL: I beg your pardon?


_Clears throat._
“Southwark, 1887: vanished. Finsbury, 1912: vanished. Greenwich, no date: seems to have vanished.”

MRS. ARBUTHNOT: Stop!

MRS. CHEVELEY: Stop! Stop!

Pause. A certain sadness is in the air. So many having disappeared.

LADY MARKBY: Someone should arrange a proper system of assisted emigration.
Good idea.

MRS. JOYCE: The Women’s Emigration Association.
That’ll do. Just pack them off. All the unwanted ones.

LADY MARKBY: Mrs. Jekyll —
For instance.

LADY MARKBY: So broken-hearted that she went into a convent. Or on to the operatic stage, I forget which.

Easily done, the forgetting. Indeed, when someone disappears it is often hard enough just to know where they have gone, let alone remember. A church goes missing. A wife disappears. It is always bewildering. So easy to grow confused. One minute they are with you; the next, hey presto, they are gone. Much like that enigmatic Lord of yours. Jesus, Christ, the Bridegroom.

SECOND NAZARENE: He is in every place … but it is hard to find Him.

As on the road. To Emmaus. When he vanished. Just like that. On the road.

Did you kiss him on the road?
(Edward Carson interrogating Oscar Wilde, The Old Bailey, Wednesday April 3, 1895)
A Postscript, from Paris.
From Marie to Johannes.
— 1924 —

Did we kiss, Johannes? It is difficult to say. Now that —
  MISS PRISM: I am unmarried.
  Now that —
  DR. CHASUBLE: I am a celibate.
  Now that —
  LADY WINDERMERE: My life is separate from yours.
  But then —
  MRS. ERLYNNE: I prefer living in the south. London is too full of fogs.
  And, besides, Johannes, you now have her. Your new Marie.
  Pause.

  Please remember, however, that —
  OSCAR WILDE: I am still looking for you in Paris.
  And that —
  OSCAR WILDE: I am not sorry that I loved you.
  Since —
  OSCAR WILDE: Love is never lost.
She had become quite expert at sitting in [on] other people's lives.
— Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923)