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The Weight of Angels

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PROLOGUE

Thursday, 28th February 1895

‘O listen ere the searching sun
Show to the world my sin and shame.’

— *from San Miniato*

Not since he'd had to choose between serving a bottle of vintage 1863 Moët & Chandon to Benjamin Disraeli, or risk insulting him with the lesser 1868 Veuve Clicquot, had Oscar Wilde faced such a difficult decision.

Under normal circumstances, he would never have considered walking from his home on Tite Street to Piccadilly rather than taking a carriage. It was a distance of some two miles, after all, and he felt the same way about exercise as he did about heterosexual erotica – other people might enjoy it, but it really wasn't for him. However, he was in such a quandary that he needed time to think.

It took him about an hour to reach the Albemarle Club and, by the time he arrived, he'd all but made up his mind. Still, as he was guided through the lobby towards the dining room by a young waiter whose nervous manner suggested that he was new to the role, he determined to take the soundings of his dining companions. All but one, he knew, could be relied upon to have his best interests at heart.

There were three men seated around the table but only one rose to greet him as he entered. He had met Robbie Ross almost a decade before, when he was already thirty-one and Ross seventeen, but the age difference had proved deceptive, for the younger man was already a skilled courtesan by then, while the older had been as innocent as a flower girl at a wedding.

Leaning in, Ross whispered the number eight into Oscar's ear. Following a particularly distressing encounter the previous autumn, the pair had employed a simple code to inform each other of Bosie's mood on any particular evening. A low number meant that he was in relatively good spirits, and a tantrum, while never to be entirely discounted, appeared unlikely. Closer to ten suggested that he was on the precipice

of one of his phenomenal rages and the night was unlikely to end without a scene.

Since the start of the year, that number had never fallen below a seven.

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, it was to his erstwhile lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, that Oscar initially turned his attention as he took his seat, but Bosie, who generally preferred to be the one keeping others waiting, was locked in conversation with the journalist Robert Sherard, deliberately ignoring his patron in punishment for his late arrival. His thick blond hair fell haphazardly across his forehead and as he brushed it away from those pin-prick blue eyes, Oscar noticed a new ring – rose gold, studded with pavé diamonds – adorning the third finger of his left hand and recognized it as one that the boy had admired in Heming's window a few days earlier. He'd insisted on going inside to try it on, but it cost £10, and Oscar had balked at the price, standing his ground in an uncharacteristic show of independence, which led to hours of sulking and a refusal to accompany him to dinner later that evening. In spite of his noble parentage, Bosie never had a penny to his name, of course, so he must have returned to the store later and charged the ring to Oscar's account, as he did with most of his expenses. The bill would doubtless be sent to Tite Street in due course, just as the invoice for the pocket watch strung across his waistcoat had been, not to mention that for the waistcoat itself. His trousers, shirt, jacket, even his shoes and underwear, had all been paid for by Oscar, a cause of increasing concern for the writer for although the royalties from his plays continued to roll in, they rolled out just as quickly, and his accounts were always in arrears.

'Oscar,' said Sherard, turning to greet him. 'We were just discussing—'

'Manners,' said Bosie, sitting up in his chair and reaching for his champagne glass. He tapped some ash into a silver tray and plucked a stray pinch of tobacco from between his teeth, examining it for a moment before flicking it away. 'We were discussing manners.'

'Is that so?' replied Oscar. 'I've always believed that such delicacies should fall away, like milk teeth, during one's youth. The rudest men I've ever known have sat at the very pinnacle of society, while those who sweep the streets behave with perfect courtesy. But why such a

conversation, dear boy? Has someone upset you? Show me the vagabond and I shall have him turned out into the night.'

'Only you,' said Bosie. 'Punctuality is the art of showing respect to yourself and others, wouldn't you agree?'

Oscar glanced towards the enormous clock that hung on the wall over the fireplace, noting that the hands were fast approaching the quarter hour.

'Christians,' he said, 'spoke originally of faith, hope and love as the theological virtues before later adding prudence, justice, temperance and courage to their list of insipid merits designed to sap all the joy from life. I don't recall timekeeping being included but, I confess, it has been some time since I read my Bible.'

'When I'm kept waiting,' said Bosie, 'I like to think it's because my companion has suffered some catastrophe.'

'That's kind of you,' replied Oscar with a smile. 'When I am, I hope it's because he'll arrive with a magical story to excuse his tardiness.'

'And can you offer such a thing? If so, I'm sure we'd all love to hear it. In lieu of an apology, I mean, since none seems to be forthcoming.'

'It's true that I am late to the table,' admitted Oscar, bowing his head to his companions. 'But not to the Albemarle. As it happens, I arrived promptly upon the hour but was waylaid by the most charming boy in the hallway and stopped to talk to him. He reminded me a little of you, Bosie,' he added, glancing down at his place setting and adjusting the knife so its tip pointed towards him in an accusatory fashion. 'When you were younger and more amusing, that is.'

Robbie bit his lip to stop himself from laughing while Bosie adopted a furious expression, reaching for the bottle of Krug, which revealed itself to be empty. Thrusting it upside down into the bucket, where it crunched loudly against the ice, he threw an arm in the air and clicked his fingers repeatedly to summon a waiter.

'Don't,' said Sherard, pulling his hand down. 'It's terribly rude.'

'Well, they're not fast enough,' he hissed, calling out loudly for service.

'And how was your day, Oscar?' asked Robbie. 'You were planning on seeing Waller, weren't you?'

'I was and I did,' he replied. 'I called upon him at the Haymarket to

discuss a note for *An Ideal Husband*, a piece of business that Cosmo insists upon at every performance. Have you seen it since opening night, any of you? No? Oh, but you must! Its author has clearly been touched by genius. But, playing the Vicomte, Cosmo has this absurd habit of placing both arms by his side and then flapping them repeatedly whenever he's in conversation with Mrs Cheveley. Only her; no one else. I don't know if he has designs on Florence and the poor man simply can't control his lust, but in his dinner jacket, he looks ridiculous and puts me in mind of a constipated penguin. I've spoken to him about it time and again, but he refuses to listen. Thinks he knows the character better than I do. In the end, I decided the director should take control.'

'And Waller agreed?'

'Eventually,' he replied. 'But I don't hold out much hope. After all, one doesn't so much speak with Cosmo as against him and—'

By the table, a loud report signalled the opening of a fresh bottle of champagne, and Bosie responded by pushing his glass forward.

'I do hate that sound,' continued Oscar, and the young waiter, who had been looking pleased with himself for not allowing a spume to erupt volcanically from the neck, blushed a little before scampering off again. 'There's something rather plebeian about it, I feel. A law should be passed to ensure that champagne bottles are opened in an anteroom before being carried, quietly and without ceremony, to the table.'

'I quite like it,' replied Bosie, already finishing his flute and reaching for the bottle to pour another. 'To me, it's the sound of ecstasy.'

'Or of ecstasy yet to come,' suggested Sherard.

'No, that's different. From some, the sound of imminent pleasure is the very music of sex. From others, it recalls the screeching of pigs rutting in a barn. From Oscar – as you know, Robbie—'

'My dear boy,' said Oscar, accepting the glass that had been poured for him and bringing it to his lips. 'It's a little early in the evening for such boorishness, don't you think? Conversation about *ὄργασμός*, which I assume is what you're referring to, should be withheld until the fish course.'

'Was that clever?' asked Sherard, looking around.

'Not particularly,' replied Oscar. 'But I daresay *The Strand* would give me a shilling for it. However, to return to Robbie's original question, it

pains me to say that my day has proved utterly disagreeable. When I left the theatre, I stopped here to retrieve a pair of gloves I'd left behind on my last visit. My intention was to collect them, then return home for an afternoon's reading, but my plans were thwarted for the foulest of reasons.'

'What happened?' asked Robbie, and Oscar took a deep breath before reaching into his inner pocket to retrieve a small white calling card, which he passed to his right. At its heart, in an elegant font, was inscribed the name of the sender, *Marquis of Queensberry*. Above it, in dark ink, the words, *For Oscar Wilde, posing somdomite*. Robbie read it several times before looking up in astonishment.

'He dared send this to you?' he asked.

'Ten days ago, apparently,' replied Oscar. 'The sealed letter has been languishing behind the porter's desk ever since, biding its time like a patient wolf.'

'What does it say?' asked Sherard, reaching over to take it from Robbie before scanning it quickly. 'Good Lord,' he said.

Now Bosie leaned over to read, too. His expression was difficult for Oscar to decipher, although it was the one that interested him the most.

'He is a dog,' he said eventually in a low voice, as much to himself as to his companions. 'A rabid dog that needs putting down.'

'He is also your father,' replied Oscar gently. 'Although his grasp of spelling is as refined as his manners, a topic you were rather engaged with earlier. Remind me, Robbie. Where was Queensberry educated?'

'Magdalene. Not our Magdalen, of course. Their Magdalene.'

'Uneducated, you mean,' said Bosie. 'Remember, he didn't take his degree in the end.'

'A family trait, it seems,' muttered Robbie.

'Oscar, this can't be allowed to stand,' he snapped, ignoring the barb but storing it away in his mind for future retribution.

'I admit that I was shocked when I first read it,' Oscar said. 'Its brevity is only matched by its insolence.'

'He means to provoke you.'

'Then he has succeeded.'

'His hatred for me runs so deep that he'll stop at nothing to cause pain for the people I love.'

'But this isn't about you, Bosie,' said Robbie. 'It's about Oscar. The insult is aimed in his direction, not yours.'

'When it comes to my father, everything is about me. Do you think if Oscar and I hadn't taken up together that he would have cared who he spends time with? The insults, the gossip, the chatter that rings in his ears wherever people see us. *There goes Oscar Wilde with his boy*. That's what they say, isn't it? Only he doesn't want me for Oscar's boy, does he? He doesn't want me for anyone's boy, save his own.'

'You must learn to control your emotions, my dear Bosie,' said Oscar, draining his glass and allowing Sherard to pour him another. 'There's nothing to be gained by becoming overly demonstrative. After all, we are not Italians.'

'How will you respond?' asked Robbie.

'I've spent the afternoon asking myself that very thing. It's clear that this communication brings matters to a head, but we all knew that was bound to happen sooner or later. The man follows me around London creating the most appalling scenes. You know that he came to my house not so long ago with one of his bully-boy friends, demanding that I break with Bosie? I had to turn both of them out on to the street and instruct our new maid, Nancy, never to grant them admission again. It was the poor girl's first week, too. What must she think of us? He attacks me in restaurants, books tickets for my opening nights in order to denounce me from the stalls. He would have succeeded too at *Earnest*, if word hadn't reached me in time and I was unable to have him, and his bouquet of rotten vegetables, apprehended. He won't rest until he's put me in my grave.'

'Well, it's a clear libel, Oscar,' said Sherard. 'Composed by a bully. And if I learned anything at Elizabeth, it's that bullies will continue to torment their victims until someone stands up to them. Then they fold like a cheap suit.'

'Sherard's right,' agreed Bosie. 'He's given you the ammunition you need. If you take a case against him now, you'll certainly triumph.' He offered the group a vindictive smile, only stopping short of rubbing his hands together in glee. 'I've waited years to see that monster in the dock. Humiliate him, Oscar! Destroy him!'

An uncomfortable silence fell across the table as the other diners in

the room glanced around to see why voices were being raised in such an ungentlemanly fashion and Robbie laid a hand on Bosie's arm to calm him.

'I would certainly have cause to take action,' agreed Oscar, speaking slowly and thoughtfully. 'In fact, I spent much of this afternoon determined to do that very thing. But I wanted to hear what you all thought first. Robbie, I trust your judgement. What say you?'

'I'm with Bosie on this,' he replied, lighting a cigarette to give himself time to think. 'Queensberry's boorishness increases daily. He'll never back down and his attacks on you will only grow worse if you leave them unchallenged. Your silence emboldens him. His hatred for you has, I think, become an obsession.'

'It's not Oscar he hates,' snapped Bosie. 'It's me! He simply directs that venom *towards* Oscar.'

'In this farce,' continued Robbie, ignoring the interruption, 'it seems clear that someone will eventually be destroyed. Him or you. To prevent it being the latter, you must act.'

Oscar nodded as he retrieved the card, placing it on the table before him and staring at it as if he hoped the words might magically transform into something less provocative.

'He has no evidence, of course,' he said after a moment. 'Nothing to corroborate his charge.'

'He could easily find some,' said Sherard. 'That must be considered.'

'How?'

'Oscar, don't be naïve. The boys—'

'The boys would never betray me.'

'The boys would betray their own grandmothers for a shilling. Can you really put your faith in the discretion of a gang of impoverished trulls? Piccadilly is full of renters and – I'm sorry – but you've had them all. It wouldn't be difficult for Queensberry to find a few with tongues as loose as their morals.'

'An English court would never take the word of a street boy over that of a gentleman. Especially not one whose soul has been touched by Apollo.'

'I'm not sure they take the benedictions of the Gods into account,' replied Robbie.