PREFACE

WITH the exception of the Poems in Prose this volume does not contain anything which the author ever contemplated reprinting. The Rise of Historical Criticism is interesting to admirers of his work, however, because it shows the development of his style and the wide intellectual range distinguishing the least borné of all the late Victorian writers, with the possible exception of Ruskin. It belongs to Wilde’s Oxford days when he was the unsuccessful competitor for the Chancellor’s English Essay Prize. Perhaps Magdalen, which has never forgiven herself for nurturing the author of Ravenna, may be felicitated on having escaped the further intolerable honour that she might have suffered by seeing crowned again with paltry academic parsley the most highly gifted of all her children in the last century.

Of the lectures, I have only included those which exist, so far as I know, in manuscript; the reports of others in contemporary newspapers being untrustworthy. They were usually delivered
from notes and were repeated at various towns in England and America. Here will be found the origin of Whistler's charges of plagiarism against the author. How far they are justified the reader can decide for himself. Wilde always admitted that, relying on an old and intimate friendship, he asked the artist's assistance on one occasion for a lecture he had failed to prepare in time. This I presume to be the Address delivered to the Art Students of the Royal Academy in 1883, as Whistler certainly reproduced some of it as his own in the 'Ten o'clock' lecture delivered subsequently, in 1885. To what extent an idea may be regarded as a perpetual gift, or whether it is ethically possible to retrieve an idea like an engagement ring, it is not for me to discuss. I would only point out once more that all the works by which Wilde is known throughout Europe were written after the two friends had quarrelled. That Wilde derived a great deal from the older man goes without saying, just as he derived so much in a greater degree from Pater, Ruskin, Arnold and Burne-Jones. Yet the tedious attempt to recognise in every jest of his some original by Whistler induces the criticism that it seems a pity the great painter did not get them off on the public before
he was forestalled. Reluctance from an appeal to publicity was never a weakness in either of the men. Some of Wilde's more frequently quoted sayings were made at the Old Bailey (though their provenance is often forgotten) or on his death-bed.

As a matter of fact the genius of the two men was entirely different. Wilde was a humourist and a humanist before everything; and his wittiest jests have neither the relentlessness nor the keenness characterising those of the clever American artist. Again, Whistler could no more have obtained the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek, nor have written *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and *The Soul of Man*, than Wilde, even if equipped as a painter, could have evinced that superb restraint characterising the portraits of 'Miss Alexander,' 'Carlyle,' and other masterpieces. Wilde, though it is not generally known, was something of a draughtsman in his youth.

*Poems in Prose* were to have been continued. They are the kind of stories which Wilde would tell at a dinner-table, being invented on the spur of the moment, or inspired by the chance observation of some one who managed to get the traditional word in edgeways; or they were
developed from some phrase in a book Wilde might have read during the day. To those who remember hearing them from his lips there must always be a feeling of disappointment on reading them. He overloaded their ornament when he came to transcribe them, and some of his friends did not hesitate to make that criticism to him personally. Though he affected annoyance, I do not think it prevented him from writing the others, which unfortunately exist only in the memories of friends. Miss Aimée Lowther, however, has cleverly noted down some of them in a privately printed volume.

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