

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XVIII

ISSUED IN JUNE 1937

NO. 6

COPYRIGHT 1937 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA



“Think of Faint Lilies”

In the late seventies and early eighties of the past century, the aesthetic wave in England, dubbed derisively the Pre-Raphaelite movement, was ebbing. The splash on the rocks was becoming a trickle among the sands. The earnestness inspired by the masters (Rossetti and Morris), no longer a fresh and vigorous force, was subsiding into a cult expressing itself in intellectual attitudinizing and eccentricities of manner.

It was not long until the humorous magazine *Punch* was leveling its shafts of satire at these vagaries in a series of amusing drawings over various titles — “Nincompoopiana” appearing conspicuously. Certain characters appeared in these drawings again and again — Jellaby Postlethwaite, the poet; Maudle, the painter; Prigsby, the critic; and the intense Mrs. Cimabue Brown — all set frequently against a background of lilies, the lily, as readers of *Punch* knew, having been affected by some of the painters of the aesthetic

brotherhood. In contrast to the long-haired and languorous males of these cartoons was the Colonel, who represented English common sense and whose function it was to leave the reader in no doubt of the ludicrous nature of his companions. There was a good deal of fun, too, with the pet phrases attributed to those satirized — “intense”, “really quite too-TOO”, “most consummately so”, and others suggesting extravagance. It was all very amusing. In the years during which *Punch* had its sport with the aesthetes, its readers were educated to understand innumerable subtle allusions to the weaknesses of its victims. “Nincompoopiana” pleased the public fancy.

Early in 1881, *Punch* reflected the popular belief that the mantle of apostle and prophet of the paradoxical and bizarre in art had been received, not unwillingly, by a talented young Irishman and publicity-lover by the name of Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde. Already, while a student at Oxford, Wilde had manifested a taste for peacock feathers and had expressed the wish that he could “live up to his blue china”. Now, in 1881, he experienced the pleasure of finding himself singled out for ridicule in *Punch*, one of the best cartoons representing his head emanating from the stalk of a sunflower, “the gaudy leonine beauty” of which, to quote his own words, gives to

the artist "the most entire and perfect joy." And in April, 1881, he was portrayed as Reginald Bunthorne, "a fleshly poet", in Gilbert and Sullivan's delightful comic opera, *Patience*, in which the affectations and the excesses of the whole aesthetic school were gently done to death and then resurrected to an immortality of pleasant laughter.

Upon the import of *Patience; or, Bunthorne's Bride*, hangs the tale of Wilde's visit to America in 1882, and, more specifically, his lecture tour in Iowa, where sunflowers were only a back-yard decoration, and where there were no languid Postlethwaites to feed soulfully upon lilies. Hence a word or two of recollection about *Bunthorne's Bride*, or, at least, about Bunthorne. He is a poet, it will be remembered, beset by "twenty love-sick maidens" whom he scorns, though to whom, with slight urging, he consents to read his latest poem. In the background, meanwhile, are the Colonel and the Heavy Dragoons. "It is", says Bunthorne of his poem, "a wild, weird, fleshly thing; yet very tender, very yearning, very precious. It is called, 'Oh Hollow! Hollow! Hollow!' . . . It is the wail of the poet's heart on discovering that everything is commonplace. To understand it, cling passionately to one another and think of faint lilies." The maidens cling, and envision

And later, when he is alone with Patience, he confides: "Patience, I have long loved you. Let me tell you a secret. I am not as bilious as I look. If you like, I will cut my hair. There is more innocent fun within me than a casual spectator would imagine. You have never seen me frolicsome. Be a good girl — a very good girl — and one day you shall. If you are fond of touch-and-go jocularity — this is the shop for it."

Unfortunately for Bunthorne, his courtship of Patience is obstructed by the rivalry of Grosvenor, "a trustee for Beauty", who writes poetry that "a babe might understand." To appreciate his verses, "it is not necessary to think of anything at all." With such competition, what chance has poor Bunthorne with his profound verse that tasks the mind to "think of faint lilies"? In this manner the story moves to its mock-pathetic ending, which must here be left to the reader's memories or to the delight of a first reading.

In London, *Patience* was a "brilliant, instantaneous success", and enjoyed a run of 408 performances. More pertinent to our tale, however, is the fact that Gilbert and Sullivan's manager, Mr. R. D'Oyly Carte, brought the comic opera to New York, where it was produced at the Standard Theatre concurrently with the London performance. Though *Patience* was successful in New

York, the satire was not fully appreciated. America lacked an aesthetic brotherhood, a Grosvenor Gallery (where the brotherhood displayed its paintings) and, above all, a jaunty pretender to artistic claims upon whose head the dunce-cap of *Patience* might fittingly be placed.

Since America had no counterparts for those satirized in *Patience*, the ingenious promoter, D'Oyly Carte, conceived the idea of importing an English specimen, displaying him to the public (for a consideration), and thereby whetting the desire to see the comic opera. It was an inspiration calculated to enhance the success of the D'Oyly Carte company. All that remained was to capture the most showy specimen available and to offer a plausible reason for his appearance in America.

Oscar Wilde was the chosen man, and a good choice for the purpose he was. To find a serious and convincing explanation for his presence in America was, however, difficult. Besides dressing in a conspicuous manner and talking charmingly in paradoxes, he had accomplished little at twenty-six. It is true that he had written a slender volume of verse ("very mediocre", said a Boston man of letters) which had had a vogue in America. But that vogue had been of a covert nature, occasioned, so it was hinted, by the titil-

lating story of Charmides. But of true accomplishment Wilde was innocent. It was, therefore, a straining of the absolute truth when the *London World*, in an article by Wilde's brother, Willie, announced that because of the "astonishing success of his 'Poems' Mr. Oscar Wilde had been invited to lecture in America." This was, perhaps, a sufficiently satisfactory statement for those unacquainted with the plans of the intrepid D'Oyly Carte.

When Wilde accepted the invitation to advertise *Patience* in America, he was, necessarily, stepping into a situation fraught with embarrassments. But he was still a young man, with a lively if not an excellent sense of humor, he was badly in need of money, and he was willing to do much to get on in the world. Bashfulness was not an element in his character. "Every time my name is mentioned in a paper," he once told a friend, "I write at once to admit that I am the Messiah. Why is Pears' soap successful? Not because it is better or cheaper than any other soap, but because it is more strenuously puffed. The journalist is my 'John the Baptist'." This friend explained that, "So long as people talked about him, he didn't care what they said". Yet there may remain the doubt that any true Messiah worthy of the name would speak in any such fashion. And had the

young man considered his course well, he might have recognized earlier that his acquiescence in permitting himself to be used to publicize the caricature of his own person would very likely end in his great discomfiture.

All might have gone well much longer had it not become known almost as soon as Wilde set foot in America that he had been brought by D'Oyly Carte. So audacious did the scheme appear that some refused to believe it. Even *Punch*, which had apparently been serious under the cover of the mild derision of "Nincompoopiana", could hardly bring itself to believe the truth. But D'Oyly Carte, when questioned by the reporters, seemed to take the situation and its discovery as a matter of no great concern. "I don't consider it anything out of the way, my bringing Wilde over here," he was reported as saying. "'Patience' is only good-natured satire." Hence America was quickly divided into two camps as to Wilde: those who accepted him for what he posed as being — an earnest lecturer on art, and those who regarded him as one who made himself "something very like a buffoon for notoriety and money."

All the reporters, however, welcomed Wilde. He was good for almost endless copy. When he arrived in New York on January 2, 1882, the

whole country knew within a few days that he had said to the customs officers, "I have nothing to declare except my genius." Everybody knew, also, that almost his first act was to attend a performance of *Patience*, and that, when the whole audience turned to look up at him when Bunthorne came on the stage, Wilde had leaned toward one of the ladies in his box and said: "This is one of the compliments that mediocrity pays to those who are not mediocre." He had not been in America a month when the sun was almost eclipsed with reports of what he had done and said — or what he was supposed to have done and said.

HUBERT H. HOELTJE