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Poems in Prose

by Oscar Wilde

The Doer of Good

It was night-time and He was alone.

And he saw afar-off the walls of a round city and went towards the city.

And when He came near He heard within the city the tread of the feet of joy, and the laughter of the mouth of gladness and the loud noise of many lutes. And He knocked at the gate and certain of the gate-keepers opened to Him.

And He beheld a house that was of marble and had fair pillars of marble before it. The pillars were hung with garlands, and within and without there were torches of cedar. And He entered the house.

And when He had passed through the hall of chalcedony and the hall of jasper, and reached the long hall of feasting, He saw lying on a couch of sea-purple one whose hair was crowned with red roses and whose lips were red with wine.

And He went behind him and touched him on the shoulder and said to him, «Why do you live like this?»

And the young man turned round and recognised Him, and made answer and said, «But I was leper once, and you healed me. How else should I live?»

And He passed out of the house and went again into the street.

And after a little while He saw one whose face and raiment were painted and whose feet were shod with pearls. And behind her came, slowly as a hunter, a young man who wore a cloak of two colours. Now the face of the woman was as the fair face of an idol, and the eyes of the young man were bright with lust.

And He followed swiftly and touched the hand of the young man and said to him, «Why do you look at this woman and in such wise?»

And the young man turned round and recognised Him and said, «But I was blind once, and you gave me sight. At what else should I look?»

And He ran forward and touched the painted raiment of the woman and said to her, «Is there no other way in which to walk save the way of sin?»

And the woman turned round and recognised Him, and laughed and said, «But you forgave me my sins, and the way is a pleasant way.»

And He passed out of the city.

And when He had passed out of the city He saw seated by the roadside a young man who was weeping.

And He went towards him and touched the long locks of his hair and said to him, «Why are you weeping?»

And the young man looked up and recognised Him and made answer, «But I was dead once and you raised me from the dead. What else should I do but weep?»

The Disciple

When Narcissus died the pool of his pleasure changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, and the Oreads came weeping through the woodland that they might sing to the pool and give it comfort.

And when they saw that the pool had changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, they loosened the green tresses of their hair and cried to the pool and said, «We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he.»

«But was Narcissus beautiful?» said the pool.

«Who should know that better than you?» answered the Oreads. «Us did he ever pass by, but you he sought for, and would lie on your banks and look down at you, and in the mirror of your waters he would mirror his own beauty.»

And the pool answered, «But I loved Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored.»

The Master

Now when the darkness came over the earth Joseph of Arimathea, having lighted a torch of pinewood, passed down from the hill into the valley. For he had business in his own home.

And kneeling on the flint stones of the Valley of Desolation he saw a young man who was naked and weeping. His hair was the colour of honey, and his body was as a white flower, but he had wounded his body with thorns and on his hair had he set ashes as a crown.

And he who had great possessions said to the young man who was naked and weeping, «I do not wonder that your sorrow is so great, for surely He was a just man.»

And the young man answered, «It is not for Him that I am weeping, but for myself. I too have changed water into wine, and I have healed the leper and given sight to the blind. I have walked upon the waters, and from the dwellers in the tombs I have cast out devils. I have fed the hungry in the desert where there was no food, and I have raised the dead from their narrow houses, and at my bidding, and before a great multitude of people, a barren fig-tree withered away. All things that this man has done I have done also. And yet they have not crucified me.»

The House of Judgment

And there was silence in the House of Judgment, and the Man came naked before God.

And God opened the Book of the Life of the Man.

And God said to the Man, «Thy life hath been evil, and thou hast shown cruelty to those who were in need of succour, and to those who lacked help thou hast been bitter and hard of heart. The poor called to thee and thou didst not hearken, and thine ears were closed to the cry

of My afflicted. The inheritance of the fatherless thou didst take unto thyself, and thou didst send the foxes into the vineyard of thy neighbour's field. Thou didst take the bread of the children and give it to the dogs to eat, and My lepers who lived in the marshes, and were at peace and praised Me, thou didst drive forth on to the highways, and on Mine earth out of which I made thee thou didst spill innocent blood.»

And the Man made answer and said, «Even so did I.»

And again God opened the Book of the Life of the Man.

And God said to the Man, «Thy life hath been evil, and the Beauty I have shown thou hast sought for, and the Good I have hidden thou didst pass by. The walls of thy chamber were painted with images, and from the bed of thine abominations thou didst rise up to the sound of flutes. Thou didst build seven altars to the sins I have suffered, and didst eat of the thing that may not be eaten, and the purple of thy raiment was broidered with the three signs of shame. Thine idols were neither of gold nor of silver that endure, but of flesh that dieth. Thou didst stain their hair with perfumes and put pomegranates in their hands. Thou didst stain their feet with saffron and spread carpets before them. With antimony thou didst stain their eyelids and their bodies thou didst smear with myrrh. Thou didst bow thyself to the ground before them, and the thrones of thine idols were set in the sun. Thou didst show to the sun thy shame and to the moon thy madness.»

And the Man made answer and said, «Even so did I.»

And a third time God opened the Book of the Life of the Man.

And God said to the Man, «Evil hath been thy life, and with evil didst thou requite good, and with wrongdoing kindness. The hands that fed thee didst wound, and the breasts that gave thee suck thou didst despise. He who came to thee with water went away thirsting, and the outlawed men who hid thee in their tents at night thou didst betray before dawn. Thine enemy who spared thee thou didst snare in an ambush, and the friend who walked with thee thou didst sell for a price, and to those who brought thee Love thou didst ever give Lust in thy turn.»

And the Man made answer and said, «Even so did I.»

And God closed the Book of the Life of the Man, and said, «Surely I will send thee into Hell. Even into Hell will I send thee.»

And the Man cried out, «Thou canst not.»

And God said to the Man, «Wherfore can I not send thee to Hell, and for what reason?»

«Because in Hell have I always lived,» answered the Man.

And there was silence in the House of Judgment.

And after a space God spake, and said to the Man, «Seeing that I may not send thee into Hell, surely I will send thee unto Heaven. Even unto Heaven will I send thee.»

And the Man cried out, «Thou canst not.»

And God said to the Man, «Wherfore can I not send thee unto Heaven, and for what reason?»

«Because never, and in no place, have I been able to imagine it,» answered the Man.

And there was silence in the House of Judgment.