

THE TABLE OF TRUTH

by *Hugh Kingsmill*

MUCH though I had enjoyed my talk with Oscar Wilde by the upper reaches of the River Styx, various circumstances prevented me from visiting the underworld again until I arrived there in the ordinary course of things.

On my second morning, the hall-porter in the hotel where I was staying gave me a telephone message from Mr. Desmond MacCarthy, saying that he would call for me at noon. I thought this very friendly of Mr. MacCarthy, very friendly indeed. We had met only two or three times on earth. It was most flattering.

I was in the lounge at five minutes to twelve. At ten to one Mr. MacCarthy hurried in through the swing-door, exclaimed "We are very late", and hurried out, with me in pursuit. He scrambled into a waiting car, I scrambled in after him. "Mr. Wilde" he gasped to the chauffeur, and we drove off.

"We're late . . . lunch," he said, fumbling in his breast-pocket.

"It's really most . . ." I murmured.

"Please don't misunderstand," he was looking hurriedly through some papers he had taken from his pocket. "Of course,"—he smiled a little painfully—"I should always be charmed to be your host, but, actually, I am merely conveying you to Mr. Wilde's; and it's not, strictly speaking, a social function. Ah! here we are!" He held up an invitation card. "Oh, *half-past one*! Splendid! I thought it was *one*. That gives us plenty of

time." He handed me the card, which I reproduce.

Tables of Truth.

Mr. Hugh Kingsmill.

[Section Seventy-six. (Literature)
Table No. 850,012, 764.]

At Mr. Oscar Wilde's—May 12th.
1-30 for 1-45 p.m.

First Attendance:

Mr. Noel Coward, Mr. T. S. Eliot, Mr. William Gerhardt, Mr. Hugh Kingsmill, Mr. Beverley Nichols, Mr. Evelyn Waugh.

"We shall be more than punctual," Desmond MacCarthy murmured half-aloud. "Actually *more* than punctual." For some minutes we drove on in silence. "There's a certain amount of moral training, I suppose one must call it, down here," he suddenly remarked.

"Really!"

"It's what we're here for, isn't it?" he said curtly.

"Of course, of course!"

"And they certainly let us down quite lightly."

"They?"

"The authorities."

"Oh, the authorities."

Another silence was broken by "Don't you hate imparting information? I do".

"Especially", I suggested "when the other person is anxious for it."

"Oh, of course, *that* makes it quite unbearable."

A stoutish man, a little ahead of us on the road, paused on hearing our car and turned towards us.

"Oh, dear!" Desmond MacCarthy exclaimed, "that dreadful bore! . . . He knows my car . . . He's signalling . . . I suppose we must pick him up. James, we must pick him up." The car slowed down.

"It's that wretch Theodore Dreiser," Desmond MacCarthy murmured. "Oscar calls him 'The American Tragedy'."

"Thanks for the information."

"It slipped out."

"Thanks, all the same."

"I appreciate this very keenly, Mr. MacCarthy," Theodore Dreiser panted, as he struggled into the car. "Was that your foot, sir?"

"It *was*," I sighed.

"Oh, Mr. Dreiser," said Desmond MacCarthy, "I do wish you'd tell Mr. Kingsmill all about this lunch. I'm such a bad hand at explaining anything. Will you?"

"Why, most certainly I will," said Dreiser; but as the drive lasted only another twenty-five minutes, he could not do more than clear the ground for his explanation.

On reaching Oscar Wilde's house, we were shown through to a beautiful lawn, at the far end of which, in the shade of elm and beech trees, a number of persons were talking in small groups. Two isolated figures, an old man in a shapeless wideawake and long cloak, and a small boy, stood at some distance both from each other and the nearest group. In the center of the lawn a round table was being laid for lunch. Near-by, a smaller table, also round, had already been laid for four.

"I mustn't bore you two any longer," Desmond MacCarthy said to Dreiser and me,

and flitted away towards a group which was rather noticeably composed of Mr. Winston Churchill and Lord Birkenhead. I was alone with Dreiser.

"The point which I was trying to make, Mr. Kingsmill, immediately prior to our dismounting from Mr. MacCarthy's automobile, was just this . . ." Dreiser broke off as a concealed loud speaker suddenly crooned in a golden voice, "Pray silence for Mr. Oscar Wilde!"

Gracefully disengaging himself from a group which included Sir James Barrie, Mr. Evelyn Waugh, and Mr. Beverley Nichols, Wilde stepped forward. Dreiser and I hastened across the lawn, and as we joined the others Wilde, who had been waiting for his audience to complete itself, began to speak.

"I wish my first word could have been 'Gentlemen,'" he said. "It is such a charming word, isn't it? But if I am to pass scatheless through the dreadful ordeal that waits for me at yonder table, I must preserve, unflawed by any impulse of courtesy or caprice of paradox, the mood of veracity which I have brought with me today as a man bears in his hands a bitter herb for his salvation. To create that mood has been a very painful task. I do not ask for your sympathy—you will, I know, give it to me without the asking, when you hear that for the last seven days, as time is measured by the calendar, I have not allowed myself a single deviation from the strictest accuracy of statement. Nor is that all. It is not even the worst. I have gone still further. I have forced myself to practise a gratuitous veracity: I have sought occasions to utter deliberate truths. As if it were but yesterday I remember"—he paused for a moment—"but it *was* yesterday!—how I insisted on supplying a very tedious person with absolutely correct information about the time when his train started. At least I be-

lieved it to be correct when I supplied it, and in these moral matters it is the intention alone which counts, as I explained to the person afterwards.

"If, then, I may not address you as 'Gentlemen'—and in parenthesis may I tell you how delighted I am to realize", his gaze travelled over us as he spoke, "that there is not amongst you who has interpreted my difficulty in this respect as a reflection on himself—if, I say, I may not address you as 'Gentlemen', still less, if that be possible, may I address you as '*Confrères*'. Literature is to me a very sacred thing. It is also a very rare thing. Vowed as at the moment I so unfortunately am to a relentless veracity, I cannot, I really cannot, venture to acknowledge any more specialized connection between myself and you who are now listening to me than our common humanity.

"Fellow-creatures, I have done. I have said little, but if what I have said shall have helped you to the assurance that I am not unprepared for the ordeal before me, I am content."

The silence that followed was broken by a shrill cry of distress. It was Beverley Nichols turning on Desmond MacCarthy. "You told me he would explain *everything*, and he has explained *nothing*!"

I saw a look of surprise on Wilde's face, which deepened as T. S. Eliot, taking two paces forward, said in a clear resolved voice, "Mr. Wilde . . ."

"Pray silence!" crooned the loud speaker.

For a few moments we were privileged to witness the impressive spectacle of an authoritarian grappling with an anti-authoritarian impulse. Victory was not long delayed. Bowing his head, T. S. Eliot stepped back two paces.

"Pray silence!" crooned the loud speaker again. "When the host, Mr. Oscar Wilde, has

taken his seat, guests will seat themselves in the following order, beginning on Mr. Oscar Wilde's right hand: Mr. T. S. Eliot, Sir James Barrie, Master Peter Robin, Mr. A. A. Milne, Lord Birkenhead, Mr. William Gerhardt, Mr. Hilaire Belloc, Mr. Theodore Dreiser, Mr. Winston Churchill, Mr. Desmond MacCarthy, Mr. Hugh Kingsmill, and Mr. Max Beerbohm.

"The small table is reserved for Mr. Thomas Carlyle, Mr. Noel Coward, Mr. Beverley Nichols, and Mr. Evelyn Waugh.

"Mr. Oscar Wilde will now take his seat."

Falling in behind Wilde we walked across the lawn. I found myself next to William Gerhardt. "My God, what are those robots?" he exclaimed. "They were not there before." Following his gaze, I saw a number of iron or steel figures ranged around the two tables, one behind each chair. Shaped like human beings, they were far above life-size; and the huge hollow sockets of their eyes and the sharp geometrical pattern of their frames and limbs filled me with uneasiness. "Why did not Desmond MacCarthy explain?" Gerhardt cried. "He told me he would explain everything to Noel Coward, and that Noel Coward would tell me as we drove here."

"And, I suppose . . ."

"He did not come round to Noel Coward this morning, as he had promised. He rung up at twelve-thirty instead, to say that there was some bore he had an appointment with, and he had only just remembered the appointment."

"Too bad."

"He should either remember appointments in time, or not remember them at all. Those robots—why are they there? Will they strike us?"

"Oh, I shouldn't think so. Most of the people here have been through this business

before, I think, and they've obviously not been mangled."

"They have not been mangled, but that is no proof that *others* have not been mangled. Perhaps these are the only survivors."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"You look frightened. Are you frightened?"

"No, not frightened."

"What are you then?"

"Alarmed."

The figures lost none of their menace as we drew nearer; and it was with an almost servile bow to the monster behind my particular chair that I shuffled past him and took my seat.

The plan of the two tables given below will make things clearer to the reader.

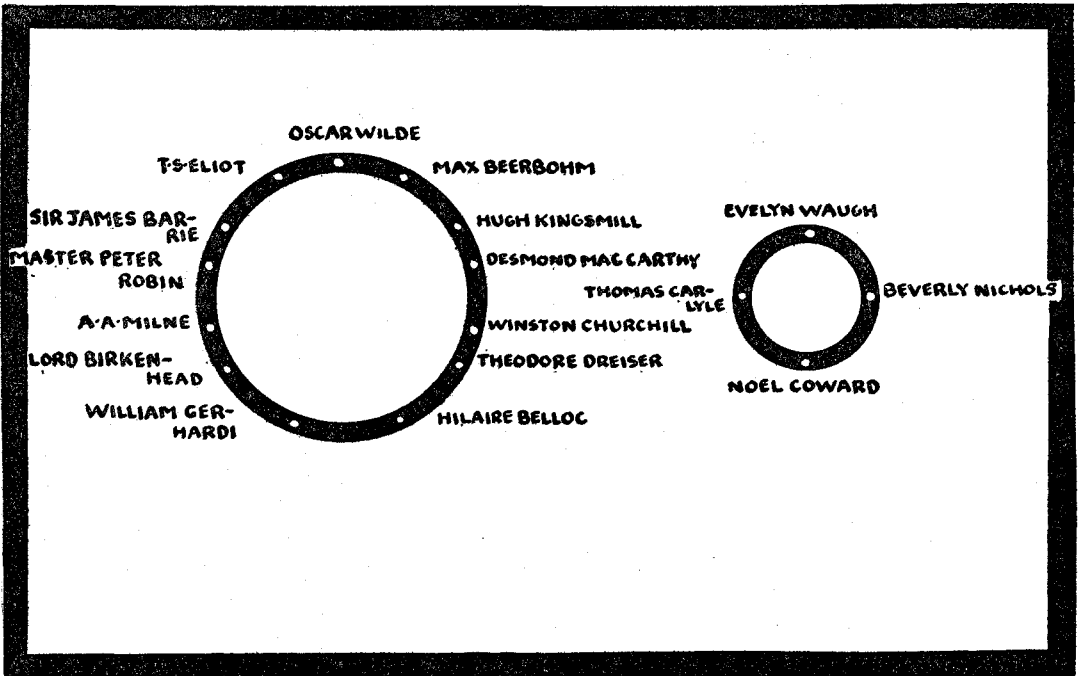
When we had taken our places, Oscar Wilde, who was looking pale, said, in a brusque hard tone: "The only drink served at this lunch is a light cider. It's in those jugs. You may help yourselves. No *hors d'œuvres*, waiter. Clear soup, please."

The meal began in a silence which was broken by Thomas Carlyle alone, who, it was plain, had preferred thick soup to clear. I had a good view of him from where I sat: he had removed neither his wideawake nor his cloak, and his expression was savage in the extreme. Having finished his soup, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He was wearing brown woollen mittens, and I could see that Noel Coward's face was working strangely.

"Dear Mr. Carlyle!" Noel Coward cried suddenly, "how quite *too* . . ."

There was a frightful clang. Noel Coward's head sank forward, his mouth fell open, and his eyes stared with idiot vacancy into space, while from the jaws of the monster behind him a metallic bray roared forth:

"DEAR MR. CARLYLE HOW QUITE TOO DIVINE THOSE MITTENS ARE WON'T YOU PLEASE TELL ME WHO YOUR GLOVER IS BUT I SUPPOSE HE'S TERRIBLY PROUD AND WOULDN'T DREAM OF WORKING A PAIR OF THOSE ADORABLE MITTENS FOR ME."



Another clang, as the jaws of the monster snapped to. The light of reason returned to Noel Coward's eyes, his mouth closed, his head went back. Drawing a silk handkerchief from his sleeve, he dabbed his face feebly, half sobbing "Oh dear! Oh dear! Oh dear!"

"Oh, that is a relief!" Oscar Wilde cried. "It's the waiting for the *first* one which is so loathsomely trying. I wonder if any of you can realize how *much* more comfortable I feel now. But how very rash of that young man after all my warnings!"

"What warnings?" William Gerhardi exclaimed. "There have not been any warnings, Mr. Wilde. No one has warned us."

"I knew there was something I had forgotten!" Wilde murmured. "How dreadfully careless of me!" He seemed about to continue, but a cautious look came into his eyes, and he remained silent.

"Perhaps you will now make good your omission," T. S. Eliot said firmly.

"But surely . . ." Wilde waved his hand towards the monsters which encircled us. "You have heard, you have seen for yourself . . ."

"I must press for an adequate explanation," Eliot insisted. The hunted look in Wilde's eyes touched me. "I think it's all perfectly clear," I said, addressing Eliot. "If we start saying anything that we know to be untrue, or even insincere, it's taken up by these . . . our attendants take it up, and complete what we were going to say, and we have to sit by looking idiotic till they've finished. It's a discipline in veracity and sincerity."

"Most lucid," Wilde murmured.

Pleased by Wilde's commendation, I leant forward, lowering my voice a little. "Mr. Carlyle's mittens for instance . . . Noel Coward was obviously not giving his real opinion of them. Of course I . . ."

Clang! My mouth fell open, my chin dropped, and my eyes were, I felt, glazed in imbecility. But no welcome stupor clouded my mind, and I shivered as the monster roared:

"OF COURSE I DON'T SUGGEST THAT HOWEVER INAPPROPRIATE MR. CARLYLE'S MITTENS MIGHT BE IF WORN BY NOEL COWARD THEY ARE OPEN TO CRITICISM AS WORN BY MR. CARLYLE OR EVEN LACKING IN A CERTAIN DISTINCTION."

Clang! The hideous bray ceased. I put out a shaking hand and poured myself a glass of cider, which I drank with lowered eyes, for I felt that the repulsive exhibition I had made of myself must have created a strongly unfavourable impression among the other guests.

"Excellent sole, this, Winston," I heard Lord Birkenhead say.

"Excellent, F. E."

"A very successful sauce, too."

"Very successful."

My self-consciousness was eased by this interchange, and I reflected on the strong practical sagacity with which these two statesmen limited themselves to a topic on which sincerity was easily attained. But why were they here, I wondered. My left-hand neighbour was Desmond MacCarthy, my right-hand Max Beerbohm. Turning to Max Beerbohm, I murmured "Why are Churchill and Birkenhead here?"

"They have written books," he answered without turning his head.

"Of course! So they have."

Clang! I jumped. My nerves were on edge. But it was only Gerhardi's monster, braying a tribute to Lord Birkenhead as an artist in prose.

Ten more minutes passed in complete silence, except for Winston Churchill's "A capital roast, this, F. E.", and Lord Birkenhead's rich assured response "Capital, Win-

ston". I was feeling increasingly curious about the small boy who sat between Sir James Barrie and Mr. A. A. Milne, but saw no way to satisfy my curiosity. His cowed dejected look was not, I thought, natural to him. In more normal circumstances he would, I imagined, be a frank, fearless little fellow, with open gaze and a clear ringing laugh. "Uncle Jim," he suddenly piped, "may I have some more beef?" Sir James Barrie, who had been sitting with his back half turned to the boy, said nothing, but his face twitched nervously. The boy turned to Mr. Milne. "Uncle Artie," he piped, on a higher note, "may I have some more beef?" Mr. Milne, who had been sitting with his back half turned to the boy, said nothing, but his face twitched nervously. The boy's eyes filled with tears. Turning towards Wilde, he gasped, half sobbing, "Uncle Oscar, *may* I have some more *beef*?"

"Certainly. Waiter, another helping of beef for Master Peter Robin."

"Why wouldn't they answer him?" I asked Max Beerbohm in a whisper.

"Nerves." Max Beerbohm looked rigidly ahead as he spoke.

"But why? Who is he?"

"A synthesis of Peter Pan and Christopher Robin. Supplied by the authorities."

"Oh, I see."

Silence again. It began to get on my nerves, and I turned a question over in my mind several times, examining each word with the utmost care. "Excuse me, Mr. Wilde," I ventured at last; "but would you explain to me how this lunch can be a training in sincerity and truthfulness when everyone's afraid to make a remark?"

"Ah, but think of the remarks which are *not* made!" Wilde answered. "That's where the training lies! Why, fifty years ago, at my first lunch," he lowered his voice, "Carlyle referred to the Eternal Verities no less than

seventeen times. I do so hope he won't forget himself today. He's been quite wonderful, so far. But he's dreadfully obstinate, dreadfully obstinate." Wilde shook his head mournfully.

"Hasn't he ever got through a lunch without a single lapse?"

"Never! I don't know who those young men at his table may be, but of course Carlyle will have been told all about them, and unless they're quite impossibly unlike what they seem to be, I'm very much afraid Carlyle will mention the Eternal Verities again. Of course, he may be frightfully rude and sincere instead. I *do* hope he will be frightfully rude and sincere instead."

"Will it be his last lunch, if he avoids the Eternal Verities?"

"Oh, I'm sure it will be. It must be. All the other great Victorians have been passed. Even Thackeray."

"What was Thackeray's special difficulty?"

"The goodness of good women. Such an absurd thing to talk about!"

"I hope you won't think me impertinent, Mr. Wilde, but it's really very delightful of you to be so sympathetic about Carlyle."

Wilde looked at me in astonishment. I realized that I had misinterpreted his anxiety about Carlyle, and was about to excuse myself for my obtuseness, when a sudden roar made us all jump.

"Ye *puir* meeserable creatures! Lap-dog Jeremiahs I call ye, daintily biting the hand that feeds ye, and verra careful not to bite too shar-r-ply!"

"Oh, I do hope he'll be wise!" Oscar murmured. Carlyle's face was distorted with some emotional conflict. He looked up at the sky, raising his hands towards it. Was he about to call upon the Eternal Verities to send down a thunderbolt for the correction of the three stupefied Jeremiahs? Slowly his

head sank, his hands descended. He had won.

"Ah-h-h-h!" It was a long sigh from Wilde. "They must pass him now. They simply *must*."

"You should try the meringue, F. E.," said Winston.

"Really good, is it?"

"Really good."

"Then I'll try it."

I formulated another question. "Excuse me, Mr. Wilde, but, if you won't think me impertinent, how is it you haven't been passed? You . . . well, you seem to be able to . . . you have clearly mastered the technique of . . ."

Wilde smiled sadly. "My difficulty is . . . charm."

"Charm?"

"The desire to say the charming thing to people, to tell them what they want to hear about themselves."

"But haven't you overcome that difficulty? Your speech before lunch . . ."

"I know, I know. But a careless moment . . . An unguarded impulse . . ."

Another long silence. I became conscious of a growing tension among my self-gagged fellow guests. Suddenly Dreiser turned towards Hilaire Belloc, speaking in low rapid tones. I could distinguish nothing, but as the monster behind Dreiser's chair remained silent, it was clear that Dreiser was relieving himself of something he really felt. He ceased, and Hilaire Belloc turned weightily on him.

"Mr. Dreiser, that you are modern in your habit of thought and practice of living, and that I am mediaeval in both, I shall not dis-

pute. I care not by what formula you express the difference between you and myself. That it exists is my sole concern, and a theme for endless thanksgiving to the God whom you deny. But when you affirm that. . . ."

Clang!

"BUT WHEN YOU AFFIRM THAT I BELLOC AM PERSONALLY HOSTILE TO THE JEWS AND WISH THEM ILL YOU LIE."

The monster's jaws snapped to.

"Who's the liar now?" cried Dreiser.

A connected account of the next few minutes is impossible. The secret tension had exploded at Dreiser's cry, and most of the guests had sprung to their feet. Eliot hurried round the table to Belloc's support. Master Peter Robin screamed with excitement. Sir James Barrie cuffed him smartly. A private war of words was engaged in between William Gerhardt and Desmond MacCarthy; and from Carlyle's table a scream rose above the general hubbub, "You nasty, disgusting, vulgar, old wretch!" It was, I think, the voice of Beverley Nichols, or perhaps of Evelyn Waugh.

A sudden clang—I turned round, and there was poor Wilde, open-mouthed, collapsed in his chair, while above him his monster brayed—

"GENTLEMEN GENTLEMEN PLEASE GENTLEMEN GENTLEMEN."

The jaws of the monster snapped to. A hush descended on the scene.

"This is fine brandy, Winston," said Lord Birkenhead. Churchill nodded.

The rest of the lunch passed in silence. When it was over, Max Beerbohm offered to drive me back. He talked wonderfully to me all the way.

IN MEMORY OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

by Margaret Bell

"... but I tell you, my lord fool, out of this nettle danger, we pluck this flower safety."

FOR ten years these words have looked out from their simple setting in a gravestone in the communal cemetery of Avon, near Fontainebleau. They had appeared in front of Katherine Mansfield's book *Bliss*. She liked them and that is why today they stand above her grave.

On the afternoon of January 9th, 1923, just ten years ago, Katherine Mansfield's husband, John Middleton Murry, went over from London to spend a week with her in Fontainebleau, where she had been living at the Gurdjieff Institute for more than two months, trying to put into practice the ideas she had had for so long, "of another and far more truthful existence", and trying to cure herself of her terrible illness. She had written him on New Year's Eve, inviting him for this time: "On the 13th, our new theatre is to be opened. It will be a wonderful experience. . . ."

She missed the wonderful experience. At ten o'clock on the night of the 9th, she was seized with a fit of coughing worse than usual. At 10:30, her long fight against disease and against the disunion she had felt everywhere around her, was at an end. She died happily. Middleton Murry writes: "I have never seen nor shall I ever see anyone so beautiful as she was on that day".

Thirty-four years old; a third of them spent in a struggle against poverty, a fifth

wasted by tuberculosis, all lived deeply and sincerely, whether in exaltation, whether in despair. The living of life to the fullest was her passion: "With all my soul I long for a real life, for truth and for real strength." The innumerable dyings one must endure in order to live anew! "I have to die to so much; I have to make such big changes. I feel the only thing to do is to get the dying over, to court it almost. . . . And then all hands to the business of being born again."

This was the conclusion of her wonderings about life and the mystery of it. Three years before, in the extremity of her suffering, she wrote in her journal: "Suffering must become Love. . . . I must pass from personal love to greater love. . . . The present agony will pass—if it doesn't kill. . . . As in the physical world, so in the spiritual world, pain does not last forever."

But the acuteness of it while it lasted was all but unbearable. And yet, when it was difficult to know where the physical agony began, where the spiritual, she was always conscious of this conviction, like a steady light gleaming, that eventually "Sorrow shall be changed into Joy". This transmutation was to be achieved through work and through a fuller yielding of herself to life: "To love more deeply, to feel oneself a part of life, not separate."

The disunion, apparent all through her youthful years and culminating with the War, was what brought such chaos of mind, what racked her spirit and laid waste her body.