

## Poor Oscar

### Or Twice About Love

Part I. Chapter 10:

#### **PURPLE**

He has grown old. He is a ruin.

Fat, bloated, badly dressed, in a crumpled coat, with a cigarette in his mouth, he still keeps travelling to Italy on the money he has begged. He takes pictures with his new camera. He goes to watch the Pope in Saint Peter's Square: fabulous! Well then; if he, Sebastian Melmoth, stood in front of the Pope with a flowering twig, it would immediately turn into *an umbrella or something aqually awful*.

On fine days he sits on the terrace of cafe over a bottle of wine or a cafe gelato. How nice it is to drink a cafe gelato on the terrace of a cafe, on a fine day in Rome! C.3.3. is drinking his iced coffee, and he has enough money to pay the handsome Italian boys. His lips have swollen from their kisses; he has a fever.

He has just given up Armando, too expensive, demanding new gifts every day, shoes, shirts, ties: one couldn't walk down the street with him: he would beg, insist, demand...

Oh, if one had enough money to casually fulfil his whims, to keep him yet, to sate himself on his Belvedere Apollo's body, the body which Sebastian Melmoth studied like an archaeologist, with whom he felt as if he had been the discoverer of an excavated masterpiece...

But he gave him up, he had to, he couldn't afford it (how to admit that maybe it was Armando who rejected him), now he is with Arnoldo, Arnoldo used to live with Armando before, but now it's all over; Arnoldo is jealous (how pleasant it is, how uplifting!), but perhaps he should also give him up, that small-time thief, strolling along (dare-devil!) the Corso

in a stolen coat... Yes, he broke up with Arnaldo as well, now Omero is with him, but now the handsome Armando has forgiven him his too-thin wallet, so it's now Omero and Armando in turns, and now it's a young Greek, so beautiful, the most beautiful of all the boys he has ever introduced to, but also with him it is instantly over, a break with tears – tears and one, last kiss... So much love! Aching, bitten lips, feverish forehead and hands...

How repugnant it is to buy love and how repugnant to sell it! And yet, what purple hours one can tear out of that grey, sluggish, awkward thing which we call time!

So he falls in and out of love, suffers, weeps, kisses those beautifully sculpted lips, those slender bodies, that skin, different in each, each smelling differently, more wonderful than anything in the world... a fat English queer, too impoverished to have many purple hours, but at least a few, he has managed to tear at least a dozen or so out of time: purple!

And if Bosie had a conscience... How much better, how much sweeter life would be if Bosie had a conscience and gave him money! Yes, so that he would be able to buy new shoes for the willowy, black-haired Armandos. After all, he owes him something for his wasted life! The easiest thing is to pay with money. Lord, how happy he would be if he could pay off any injury done to someone simply with money! It would be so easy. But Bosie does not understand it, at any request for money he flies into a rage, calls him an old tart... He, because of whom one stood for half an hour at Clapham Junction, because of whom one rotted in jail for two years! He ought to be happy, that he was forgiven and the injury which nothing can ever repair and the ruination of his whole life, and the departure of love... for Bosie does not love him, does not, and maybe never did love him or maybe he stopped loving him as soon as the name of his splendid lover and protector, London's favourite, was papered over on the theatre posters, when, from having been a supplier of earthy delights, the provider of oysters and lobsters, he became a beggar... He was enjoying himself on the Riviera, while he, C.3.3. was teasing him in prison with bleeding fingers... So, if he no longer loves him, let him at least pay.

He ought to pay him. At least he should pay him with money. (*You were my enemy; an enemy such as no-one ever had. I gave you my life...*)

Bosie has come to his senses. He does not insult any more, does not curse any more. He explains: he just has no more money. He has spent it all.

How can it be checked? Maybe someone will check it, maybe someone will find out if it is true. For if it is true... Oh, if Bosie is not sending him money because he does not have any, then maybe everything is not yet lost.

For if he had not paid for the injury, with the wherewithal to pay... that would have been a proof that he had never, ever loved him, not even in London, not even in Brighton, or Algiers: that he had lied from the very first day, that he had played with him, laughed when he was transported to prison, that he enjoyed knowing that he was rotting in Reading... oh, what a humiliation that would be, what a terrible humiliation, if Bosie should not pay him, being able to pay.

But Bosie thinks like a man, he – like a woman. Forever the same division, forever the same misery. Those who do not comprehend, how one may demand money for rejected, maltreated love – prefer not to know that in fact one begs for love, not for money. They have no stirrings of conscience. For how should they? Guilt towards someone who has so humiliated himself? Injuries, which the injured has appraised for a hundred pounds – or a thousand – or sixty – are no longer injuries; that is how they think. They despise instead of consoling. But they should understand everything. They should stroke his hair, kiss his hands, and say that's right, everything is all right, that they do love, that they will, unto death and after... But they cry: *Old whore!* Or they explain coldly: *I have no money.* How can one stand it?

One cannot, cannot, cannot.

No one understands anything.

*But there were those amongst us all*

*Who walked with downcast head,*

*And knew that, had each got his due,*

*They should have died instead;*

*He had but killed a thing that lived,*

*Whilst they had killed the dead.*

Shouldn't he have been loved for that?

Doesn't he deserve sixty pounds for that?

Or at least twenty?

Or ten; let it be, just ten.

Everything comes to an end.

It is easy to despise people who give in to despair, as long you don't know despair. To despise sinners before such a shock – how many people have never experienced it? – before this terrible shock to a body, this discovery of the body, this power which nothing equals, this might which nothing can resist, before which a man grovels in mud, ready for any madness, any humiliation: someone spits in your face, and you thank God for this grace. They will kill you, and you will remain love itself. It is hard to believe – the majority does not know it. Lucky people. Wretched people. A man accepting love – every love, even the love bought for Armando, Arnaldo, Omero – with this terrible, mute cry: *Domine, non sum dignus!*... to them such a man is pitiable and despicable. He would despise himself had he not crossed the boundary. Now he knows.

And that ecstasy, that prayer, that sacrament, that great *Non sum dignus* might costs ten, twenty, sixty pounds. Instead of being totally out of reach, it might have its price – a price not likely to be paid. It may be something tangible and near, within the reach of a kindred hand – and yet unattainable. How can it be borne?

Everyone would now despise him. Everyone who does not know such love – or such calamity. A love for which a man humiliates himself, makes a fool of himself, imposes, begs, whimpers, pays or pleads for payment, so that at least something could

be – permanent. Even insults, even disaster. May **anything** last, anything persist! Either the calamity after which one ties the noose swallows the poison. Or the needle which he drives into his thighs and presses the plunger of the syringe with morphine. Or he drinks, stinking of vodka or absinthe; he drinks and buttonholes someone, anyone, in order to sob before him: *Sir, do you know what has happened to me? Such bad luck!* It happens still, it happens so easily – things which are beyond our power. Oh those happy people, those miserable people who never knew anything beyond their own strength and their own measure – neither love nor suffering!