***Three Gaol-Cell Fantasies***

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 ***of Oscar Wilde***

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***The Royal Croquet Match***

*An amusing dream. I preside over the match*

*as the Cheshire Cat’s disembodied head.*

Who can behead a headless man?

 Because, it hardly need be said,

 You can’t decapitate a head;

Not even the Queen of Hearts can.

Instead, it is debated whether

 My body lost its head or my

 Head lost its body, and some say, *Why*

*Assume it wasn’t both together?*

The King, the Queen, their Ministers

 And all that furious rout are in

 A pickle how to wipe the grin

From my huge face, which like a curse

Hangs over them for evermore.

 It must be galling! Far from tearful,

 I’m looking positively cheerful,

And from my lips the *bon mots* pour

Down on their heads in such fine glut

 Of mocking wit and paradox,

 That they, as if on chopping blocks,

Can but submit to being cut:

They are the cards that I am holding.

 Whilst with her partner, the flamingo,

 Alice is dancing the Flamenco,

I give the Queen a proper scolding.

*You are all nothing but a pack*

 *Of cards*, I cry, and so they vanish,

 Save one whom I forbear to banish:

*Into my pocket, handsome Jack!*

\*

The execution first, this time,

 Sentence, trial and arrest, and then,

 Only *then*, ladies and gentlemen,

The shame, the terror and the crime.

***The Beggar’s Operetta***

*[Vincent O’Sullivan told me mine was an*

*essentially eighteenth-century personality.*

*In this brief regression to my Augustan*

*incarnation, I play Macheath, but in a*

*Regency-period revival of Gay’s play.]*

Set the scene in—what else?—an inn.

 The constables break down the door

 And finding in my room some store

Of goods, they seize me on the thin

Pretext of highway robbery.

 This variant upon *The Beggar’s*

 *Opera* is divine, it beggars

Description—a description he,

The brave Macheath, must answer to.—

 Well, take it all, ye constables!

 Yes, they are stolen articles,

All. Do with them what you must do

For duty’s—or for your own—sake.

 The jewels? From a Lady Jill,

 Quite rich. (She took it somewhat ill

To be relieved of them.) Come, take,

Take, take it all, go to the Devil

 A little fatter in the purse

 For all I care! Gold’s but a curse,

‘Tis an expensive, shining evil,

Better to meet one’s Maker lighter

 By every pound well- or ill-gotten.

 Peachum hath set you to this rotten

Trick, he, and Polly… I can fight her

No longer, she hath won the game. Man

 Of Law, those pewter candle-sticks

 And that fine silver crucifix

I took on Sunday from the same man

Who cheated me at whist on Friday!

 If riches are the mightiest

 Poem, say I’m a plagiarist,

No more, and something magpie-eyed, a

 Philosopher whose thoughts are in

 Plutonian Ideas invested;

 Quaint signs on paper I have wrested

From hands themselves begrimed with sin.

Constables have been known to seize

 A sturdy fellow, tall and strapping,

 For a remunerative kidnapping

Or selling to the Colonies.

I doubt but you do much desire

 The keeping of that which you take

 From me. It would your fortune make,

Prometheus of yellow fire!

What’s this? To Tyburn I am bound?

 They say a hanged man has no heirs,

 But the spared man his fortune shares.

And where that’s from, more’s to be found.

No, brave Macheath’s not for the noose.

 Odd’s bods, ‘twould be a tragedy *According to classical canons of genre.*

 If this did not end happily!

So you must simply set me loose.

There’s nothing for it. ‘Tis, you know, how

 The script is written… Lay no hand

 Upon me! Good, we understand

Each other, sir. You may all go now.

***Episodes and Escapades***

 ***Oscar of the Cove***

 *An interior narrative in my cell; I am somehow*

 *also speaking to my listeners at Père Lachaise*

 *and to the by-now long-suffering, dear Mr V.*

**PRISONER WILDE ESCAPES FROM READING**

 NATIONWIDE MANHUNT UNDERWAY

 SENSATIONAL DETAILS OF PLAY-

WRIGHT’S DARING BREAK-OUT. WHERE IS HE HEADING?

That’s up to you to guess. A thimble

 Can be honed down into a saw.

 Armour has chinks; doors and the law

Have cracks. Is this fact, or a symbol?

\*

I joined the champions of Eire,

 If you must know: we agitated

 For independence from the hated

English. Ah, what did we not dare?

‘Twas call to arms, and calls quite close

 At times: bombs smuggled, weapons cached,

 And police station windows smashed

Right under Dublin Castle’s nose.

You don’t believe a word of this,

 Do you? Something so noble *must*

 Be true! Then you’ll believe me just

A little if I speak of his,

I mean, The Oscar’s, thrilling deeds, *Music at this point, Mendelssohn’s*

 His famed great-coat, his sea-side lair, *‘Fingal’s Cave’ Overture, perhaps.*

 His wayside tavern love affair?

And how he rides in shadow, and leads

His doughty friends from episode

 To escapade in the Good Fight?

 Bane of the English in the night,

We harass them on the high road.

Great Oscar of the Cove, they call me,

 And Fighting Wilde, and Druid Bard.

 Great are my exploits, Dears, and hard

The luck and troubles that befall me.

We blow supply trains off the rails

 Then to our hideaway withdraw,

 Where, warmed by fire and usquebaugh,

We tell each other the Old Tales.

I learn the harp, and sing in Erse

 The deeds of Fingal and Oisin

 When Erin’s fields were grand and green,

Before we fell beneath the Curse. *I am what we Irish call a seanachie.*

I’m captured by the Authorities

 And sentenced to be hanged—but not

 Before a speech not soon forgot

By those who heard such words as these:

*Better to die than live in slavery!*

 Before a crowd of thirty thousand

 I shout these fiery words, to rouse and

Inspire my fellows to new bravery.

Like a great Actor’s is my stance,

 And some weep tears who came to jeer.

 *I gladly lay my life down here*

*In Emmet’s name, and Ireland’s!*

The perfect cue for my comrades

 To burst in on the scene and snatch

 Me from the noose, too fast to catch

We ride to freedom. Well done, lads!

\*

I could go far in this direction,

 Developing the noble theme

 Of fighting to bring forth a Dream…

The fact has not escaped detection,

Though, has it? that I’m in my cell

 Alone, telling myself another

 Tale of the kind that once pleased Mother

When living, ere I went to Hell.

