

Jean

30 November 1900

Paris, France

'It's finished ... he is dead.' Jean Dupoirier leaned against the door frame, wiping his nose with the back of his hand.

In the corridor Alphonse crossed himself, then squinted past the proprietor into the modest second floor room of the Hôtel d'Alsace.

Jean moved to block his view. 'Bring more soap and water, and clean sheets. No one is to enter without my permission.' He turned back into the room and closed the door.

A shaft of sun from the adjoining chamber fell on the corner table, illuminating its dusty jumble of papers, letters and books. The bowl of ashes and cigarette ends would need to be emptied. Monsieur Ross's slight figure was all activity as he removed the gruesome debris of the preceding hours. Who'd have thought inflammation of the brain could do such things to a body? Monsieur Turner hunched by the wash stand, crying openly and taking long swigs of Pernod absinthe under his moustache. The paper vines behind him curled and peeled off the walls, spreading over the scene like a rash. What had Wilde said before the delirium set in? 'Your wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One of us must go.' Jean smiled sadly and addressed the mourners.

'Gentlemen, you must be exhausted. Would you permit me the honour of washing and laying out your friend? You may use my private sitting room while you rest.'

Ross turned from his horrible offices. 'A thousand thanks Monsieur Dupoirier. We will never forget your kindness. Oscar was very fortunate to have such a compassionate *Patron*.'

Jean dipped his head and Ross placed a delicate hand on his friend's shoulder. 'Come Reggie, let us take some air before we attend to the arrangements.'

Jean stepped aside from the door to let them pass. This was no place for two gentlemen; the air was rancid with death—his tongue and nostrils were prickling with it—and the room seemed to echo with Wilde's departing rattle. The proprietor forced open the window and sucked in an icy gust from the courtyard, then turned to his

prostrate lodger.

Half an hour later, Jean stood back to regard the infamous man of letters, finally at peace after his Catholic conversion and the agonies of the last few days. He combed back a wisp of Wilde's hair, exposing the grey fleshy face, now clean and close shaven. The smooth brow and prominent nose lent an air of nobility to his countenance. He looked like a Roman emperor against the white sheets, every inch the Lord of Language Jean had attended for the past two and a half years. The removal of his gold teeth could wait.

The proprietor shook his head; serving Wilde had not always been easy. The rent was never paid on time, and Wilde's constant complaints about the 'absurd' plumbing and 'preposterous' cold, however amusingly delivered, had worn thin. What did the man expect in the centre of Paris for sixty-five francs a month? But then, as Ross pointed out, his lodger suffered deeply from the loss of life's comforts. He began on the top rung of the ladder; to start again from the lowest—living on handouts and the occasional newspaper article—was a cruel fate for such a man. It was hardly surprising he considered thrift beneath his dignity. Jean thought of Wilde's daily outings to the exclusive *Café de la Régence*, and his own frequent excursions to the *Avenue de l'Opéra*, to buy the aged Courvoisier cognac the writer drank like water. More often than not Jean paid for the brandy himself. He knew his devotion to the man drove Mathilde to distraction, but he would do the same again. What was the loss of a few francs compared to that irresistible mezzo voice, weaving its magic just for you? Five minutes of Wilde's conversation was a priceless gift; his brilliant wit, those sparkling, paradoxical tales, were precious treasures. What were a few eggs and lamb chops, or, more recently, daily injections of morphine? The man's reputation may be lost, his legacy obliterated, but there would never be another Oscar Wilde.

He selected a white shirt, green tie and maroon suit from the armoire. His lodger had worn the ensemble often of late; the suit was the least shabby in his wardrobe. Jean would pack the remaining clothes into the yellow valises marked with Wilde's assumed initials: S. M. for Sebastian Melmoth; 'A fantastic name I shall explain to you one day.' Jean touched the cool gold letters; he never did explain it.

The proprietor returned to the bed and struggled to get Wilde's arms into the jacket. He was about to call for help when he glimpsed something pale protruding

from the inside breast pocket; a small, cream-coloured triangle. Jean pulled on the edge and extracted a crudely fashioned envelope, soft with age, the folded corners partially sealed with blobs of black wax. No name or address on the front, but a collection of naïve watercolour images and handwritten lines. Crucifixes, wreaths, scrolls, and biblical quotations in English: 'God is love,' 'She rests in peace' and 'She is not dead but sleepeth.' At the top, two linked wreaths bore the initials O and I; below these the words 'My Isola's Hair; obiit Feb XXIII 1867.' Jean peered inside. Yes—there was a lock of hair about nine centimetres long, curled into a crescent. He held it up to the light; it blazed a rich, solid gold.

He sat on the chair by the bed. Isola ... the Italian name for island, a girl's name. Wilde had never mentioned it. 1867; his lodger couldn't have been more than a child that year, an adolescent at most. Was Isola his first love? A family member? Jean stroked the golden curl with his thumb. So lustrous, so pretty. What had this girl meant to Wilde, that he'd kept the remembrance so long; through all those years of fortune, fame, disgrace, prison and exile? Why did he carry her so close to his heart, at the end?