

The Portrait of Mr. W.H.

by Oscar Wilde

I had been dining with Erskine in his pretty little house in Birdcage Walk, and we were sitting in the **library over our coffee and cigarettes**, when **the question of literary forgeries** happened to turn up in conversation. I cannot at present remember how it was that we struck upon this somewhat curious topic, as it was at that time, but I know we had a long discussion about **Macpherson, Ireland, and Chatterton**, and that with regard to the last I insisted that **his so-called forgeries were merely the result of an artistic desire for perfect representation**; **that we had no right to quarrel with an artist for the conditions under which he chooses to present his work**; and that all Art being to a certain degree a mode of acting, an attempt to realise one's own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling accidents and limitations of real life, to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an ethical with an aesthetical problem.

Erskine, who was a good deal older than I was, and had been listening to me with the amused deference of a man of forty, suddenly put his hand upon my shoulder and said to me, **"What would you say about a young man who had a strange theory about a certain work of art, believed in his theory, and committed a forgery in order to prove it?"** "Ah! that is quite a different matter," I answered.

Erskine remained silent for a few moments, looking at the thin grey threads of **smoke** that were rising from his cigarette. "Yes," he said, after a pause, "quite different."

There was something in the tone of his voice, a slight touch of bitterness perhaps, that excited my curiosity. "Did you ever know anybody who did that?" I cried.

"Yes," he answered, throwing his cigarette into the fire — "a great friend of mine, **Cyril Graham**. He was very fascinating, and very foolish, and very heartless. However, he left me the only legacy I ever received in my life."

"What was that?" I exclaimed laughing. Erskine rose from his seat, and going over to a tall inlaid cabinet that stood between the two windows, unlocked it, and came back to where I was sitting, carrying a small panel picture set in an old and somewhat tarnished Elizabethan frame.

It was a full-length portrait of a young man in late sixteenth-century costume, standing by a table, with his right hand resting on an open book. He seemed about seventeen years of age, and was of quite extraordinary personal beauty, though evidently somewhat effeminate. Indeed, had it not been for the dress and the closely cropped hair, one would have said that the face, with its dreamy, wistful eyes and its delicate scarlet lips, was the face of a girl. In manner, and especially in the treatment of the hands, the picture reminded one of Francois Clouet's later work. The black velvet doublet with its fantastically gilded points, and the peacock-blue background against which it showed up so pleasantly, and from which it gained such luminous value of colour, were quite in Clouet's style; and the two masks of Tragedy and Comedy that hung somewhat formally from the marble pedestal had that hard severity of touch — so different from the facile grace of the Italians — which even at the Court of France the great Flemish master never completely lost, and which in itself has always been a characteristic of the northern temper.

"It is a charming thing," I cried; "but who is this wonderful young man whose beauty Art has so happily preserved for us?"

"This is the portrait of Mr W. H.," said Erskine, with a sad smile. It might have been a chance effect of light, but it seemed to me that his eyes were swimming with tears.

"Mr W. H.!" I repeated; "who was Mr W.H.?"

"Don't you remember?" he answered; "look at the book on which his hand is resting,"

"I see there is some writing there, but I cannot make it out," I replied.

"Take this **magnifying-glass** and try," said Erskine, with the same sad smile still playing about his mouth. I took the glass, and moving the lamp a little nearer, I began to spell out the crabbed sixteenth century handwriting. "To The Onlie Begetter Of These Insuing Sonnets." . . . "Good heavens!" I cried, **"is this Shakespeare's Mr W. H.?"**

[...]

"However, I must tell you about Cyril's acting. You know that no women are allowed to play at the **A.D.C.** At least they were not in my time. I don't know how it is now. Well, of course Cyril was always cast for the girls' parts, and when *As You Like It* was produced he played Rosalind. It was a marvellous performance. You will laugh at me, but I assure you that **Cyril Graham was the only perfect Rosalind I have ever seen.** It would be impossible to describe to you the beauty, the delicacy, the refinement of the whole thing. It made an immense sensation, and the horrid little theatre, as it was then, was crowded every night. **Even now when I read the play I can't help thinking of Cyril; the part might have been written for him,** he played it with such extraordinary grace and distinction. The next term he took his degree, and came to London to read for the Diplomatic. But **he never did any work.** He spent his days in reading Shakspeare's Sonnets, and his evenings at the theatre. He was, of course, wild to go on the stage. It was all that Lord Crediton and I could do to prevent him. **Perhaps, if he had gone on the stage he would be alive now.** It is always a silly thing to give advice, but to give good advice is **absolutely fatal.** I hope you will never fall into that error. If you do, you will be sorry for it.

"Well, to come to the real point of the story, one afternoon I got a letter from Cyril asking me to come round to his rooms that evening. He had charming chambers in **Piccadilly overlooking the Green Park,** and as **I used to go to see** him almost every day, I was rather surprised at his taking the trouble to write. Of course I went, and when I arrived I found

him in a state of great excitement. He told me that he had at last discovered the true secret of Shakespeare's Sonnets; that all the scholars and critics had been entirely on the wrong track; and that he was the first who, working purely by internal evidence, had found out who Mr W. H. really was. He was perfectly wild with delight, and for a long time would not tell me his theory. Finally, he produced a bundle of notes, took his copy of the Sonnets off the mantelpiece, and sat down and gave me a long lecture on the whole subject.

He began by pointing out that the young man to whom Shakespeare addressed these strangely passionate poems must have been somebody who was a really vital factor in the development of his dramatic art, and that this could not be said either of Lord Pembroke or Lord Southampton. Indeed, whoever he was, he could not have been anybody of high birth, as was shown very clearly by the 25th Sonnet, in which Shakespeare contrasting himself with those who are "great princes' favourites," says quite frankly:

*Let those who are in favour with their stars
Of public honour and proud titles boast,
Whilst I, whom fortune of such triumph bars,
Unlook'd for joy in that I honour most.*

And ends the sonnet by congratulating himself on the mean state of him he so adored.

*Then happy I, that love and am beloved
Where I may not remove nor be removed.*

This sonnet Cyril declared would be quite unintelligible if we fancied that it was addressed to either the Earl of Pembroke or the Earl of Southampton, both of whom were men of the highest position in England and fully entitled to be called "great princes"; [...] I listened with a good

deal of interest, for **I don't think the point had ever been made before;** but what followed was still more curious.

[...]

III.

The problem he pointed out was this: **Who was that young man of Shakespeare's day who, without being of noble birth or even of noble nature, was addressed by him in terms of such passionate adoration that we can but wonder at the strange worship, and are almost afraid to turn the key that unlocks the mystery of the poet's heart?** Who was he whose physical beauty was such that it became the very corner-stone of Shakespeare's art; the very source of Shakespeare's inspiration; the very incarnation of Shakespeare's dreams? **To look upon him as simply the object of certain love poems was to miss the whole meaning of the poems:** for **the art** of which Shakespeare talks in the Sonnets is not the art of the Sonnets themselves, which indeed were to him but slight and secret things — **it is the art of the dramatist to which he is always alluding;** and he to whom Shakespeare said —

*'Thou art all my art, and dost advance
As high as learning my rude ignorance,'* — [final couplet – sonnet 78]

he to whom he promised immortality,

'Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men,' — [final line – sonnet 81]

he who was to him the tenth 'muse' and

*'Ten times more in worth
Than those old nine which rhymers invoke,'* [sonnet 38]

was surely none other than **the boy actor** for whom he created **Viola and Imogen, Juliet and Rosalind, Portia and Desdemona, and Cleopatra herself."**

This was Cyril Graham's theory, evolved as you see **purely from the Sonnets themselves**, and depending for its acceptance not so much on **demonstrable proof or formal evidence**, but on a kind of spiritual and artistic sense, by which alone he claimed could the true meaning of the poems be discerned.

[...]

And indeed he went through all the Sonnets carefully, and showed, or fancied that he showed, that, according to his new explanation of their meaning, things that had seemed obscure, or evil, or exaggerated, became clear and rational, and of high artistic import, illustrating Shakespeare's conception of the true relations between the art of the actor and the art of the dramatist.

'It is of course evident that there must have been in Shakespeare's company some wonderful boy-actor of great beauty, to whom he intrusted the presentation of his noble heroines; for Shakespeare was a practical theatrical manager as well as an imaginative poet, and Cyril Graham had actually discovered the boy-actor's name. He was Will, or, as he preferred to call him, Willie Hughes. The Christian name he found of course in the **punning sonnets, CXXXV and CXLIII**; the surname was, according to him, hidden in the **seventh line of the 20th Sonnet**, where Mr. W. H. is described as -

A man in hew, all HEWS in his controwling.

'In the original edition of the Sonnets "Hews" is printed with a capital letter and in italics, and this, he claimed, showed clearly that a play on words was intended, his view receiving a good deal of corroboration from those sonnets in which curious puns are made on the words "use" and "usury." **Of course I was converted at once, and Willie Hughes became to me as real a person as Shakespeare.** The only objection I made to the theory was that the name of Willie Hughes does not occur in the list of the actors of Shakespeare's company as it is printed in the first folio. Cyril, however, pointed out that the absence of Willie Hughes's name from this list

really corroborated the theory, as it was evident from **Sonnet LXXXVI** that Willie Hughes had abandoned Shakespeare's company to play at a rival theatre, probably in some of Chapman's plays.

[...]

'It was a wonderful evening, and we sat up almost till dawn reading and re-reading the Sonnets. After some time, however, I began to see that before the theory could be placed before the world in a really perfected form, it was necessary to get some **independent evidence** about the existence of this young actor, Willie Hughes. If this could be once established, there could be no possible doubt about his identity with Mr. W. H.; but otherwise the theory would fall to the ground. I put this forward very strongly to Cyril, who was a good deal annoyed at what he called my Philistine tone of mind, and indeed was rather bitter upon the subject.

[...]

"[...] He answered that he had been able not merely to establish the existence in the sixteenth century of a boy-actor of the name of Willie Hughes, but to prove by the most conclusive evidence that he was the Mr W. H. of the Sonnets. He would not tell me anything more at the time; but after dinner he solemnly produced the picture I showed you, and told me that he had discovered it by the merest chance nailed to the side of an old chest. [...] Here was an authentic portrait of Mr. W. H., with his hand resting on the dedicatory page of the Sonnets, and on the frame itself could be faintly seen the name of the young man written in black uncial letters on a faded gold ground, "Master Will. Hews."

[...]

"Well, what was I to say? It is quite clear from **Sonnet XLVII** that **Shakespeare had a portrait of Mr W. H. in his possession**, and it seemed to me more than probable that here we had the very 'painted banquet' on which he invited his eye to feast; the actual picture that awoke his

heart 'to heart's and eye's delight.' It never occurred to me for a moment that Cyril Graham was playing a trick on me, or that he was trying to prove his theory by means of a forgery."

"But is it a forgery?" I asked.

"Of course it is".

[...]

V.

I went off at once to Cyril's chambers, waited there for three hours before he came in, with that horrid lie staring me in the face, and told him I had discovered his forgery. He grew very pale, and said, — 'I did it purely for your sake. You would not be convinced in any other way. It does not affect the truth of the theory.' 'The truth of the theory!' I exclaimed; 'the less we talk about that the better. **You never even believed in it yourself. If you had, you would not have committed a forgery to prove it.**' High words passed between us; we had a fearful quarrel. I daresay I was unjust, and the next morning he was dead."

"Dead!" I cried.

"Yes, he shot himself with a revolver. By the time I arrived, — his servant had sent for me at once, — the police were already there. He had left a letter for me, evidently written in the greatest agitation and distress of mind."

"What was in it?" I asked.

"Oh, that he believed absolutely in Willie Hughes; **that the forgery of the picture had been done simply as a concession to me, and did not in the slightest degree invalidate the truth of the theory;** and that in order to show me how firm and flawless his faith in the whole thing was, **he was going to offer his life as a sacrifice to the secret of the Sonnets**. [...]

he ended by saying that he intrusted to me the Willie Hughes theory, and **that it was for me to present it to the world, and to unlock the secret of Shakespeare's heart.**"

[...]

[Cyril's lie becomes contagious] Willie Hughes' abandonment of Shakespeare's theatre was a different matter, and I investigated it at great length. Finally I came to the conclusion that Cyril Graham had been wrong in regarding the rival dramatist of **Sonnet LXXX** as Chapman. It was obviously Marlowe who was alluded to. At the time the Sonnets were written, which must have been between 1590 and 1595, such an expression as "the proud full sail of his great verse" could not possibly have been used of Chapman's work, however applicable it might have been to the style of his later Jacobean plays. No; Marlowe was clearly the rival poet of whom Shakespeare spoke in such laudatory terms; the hymn he wrote in Willie Hughes' honour was the unfinished "Hero and Leander," and that "**Affable familiar ghost Which nightly gulls him with intelligence,**" [sonnet 86] was the Mephistophilis of his Doctor Faustus. No doubt, Marlowe was fascinated by the beauty and grace of the boyactor, and lured him away from the Blackfriars Theatre, that he might play the Gaveston of his *Edward II*.

[...]

Willie Hughes became a member of Lord Pembroke's company, and perhaps in the open yard of the Red Bull Tavern, played the part of King Edward's delicate minion. On Marlowe's death, he seems to have returned to Shakespeare, who, whatever his fellow-partners may have thought of the matter, was not slow to forgive the willfulness and treachery of the young actor. How well, too, had Shakespeare drawn the temperament of the stage player! Willie Hughes was one of those —

*"That do not do the thing they most do show,
Who, moving others, are themselves as stone."* [lines 2-3 sonnet 94]

VII.

Of all the motives of dramatic curiosity used by our great playwrights, there is none more subtle or more fascinating than the ambiguity of the sexes. This idea, invented, as far as an artistic idea can be said to be invented, by Lyly, perfected and made exquisite for us by Shakespeare, seems to me to owe its origin, as it certainly owes its possibility of life-like

presentation, to the circumstance that the Elizabethan stage, like the stage of the Greeks, admitted the appearance of no female performers. It is because Lyly was writing for the boy-actors of St. Paul's that we have the confused sexes and complicated loves of Phillida and Gallathea: it is because Shakespeare was writing for Willie Hughes that Rosalind dons doublet and hose, and calls herself Ganymede, that Viola and Julia put on pages' dress, that Imogen steals away in male attire. **To say that only a woman can portray the passions of a woman, and that therefore no boy can play Rosalind, is to rob the art of acting of all claim to objectivity, and to assign to the mere accident of sex what properly belongs to imaginative insight and creative energy.** Indeed, if sex be an element in artistic creation, it might rather be urged that the delightful combination of wit and romance which characterises so many of Shakespeare's heroines was at least occasioned, if it was not actually caused, **by the fact that the players of these parts were lads and young men, whose passionate purity, quick mobile fancy, and healthy freedom from sentimentality can hardly fail to have suggested a new and delightful type of girlhood or of womanhood.** The very difference of sex between the player and the part he represented must also, as Professor Ward points out, have constituted "one more demand upon the imaginative capacities of the spectators," and must have kept them from that over-realistic identification of the actor with his role which is one of the weak points in modern theatrical criticism. [...] it was to these Boy actors that we owe the introduction of those lovely lyrics that star the plays of Shakespeare, Dekker, and so many of the dramatists of the period, those "snatches of bird-like or god-like song," as Mr Swinburne calls them. **For it was out of the choirs of the cathedrals and royal chapels of England that most of these lads came, and from their earliest years they had been trained in the singing of anthems and madrigals, and in all that concerns the subtle art of music. Chosen at first for the beauty of their voices, as well as for a certain comeliness and freshness of appearance, they were then instructed in gesture, dancing, and elocution, and taught to play both tragedies and comedies in the English as well as in the Latin language. Indeed, acting seems to have formed part of the ordinary education of the time, and to have been much studied not merely by the scholars of Eton and Westminster, but also by the students at the**

Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, some of whom went afterwards upon the public stage, as is becoming not uncommon in our own day.

[...]

At this time Willie Hughes' father was dead, as we learn from Sonnet XIII, and his mother, whose remarkable beauty he is said to have inherited, may have been induced to allow him to become Shakespeare's apprentice by the fact that **boys who played female characters were paid extremely large salaries, larger salaries, indeed, than were given to grown-up actors.** Shakespeare's apprentice, at any rate, we know that he became, and we know **what a vital factor he was in the development of Shakespeare's art.** As a rule, **a boy-actor's capacity for representing girlish parts on the stage lasted but for a few years at most.** Such characters as Lady Macbeth, Queen Constance and Volumnia, remained of course always within the reach of those who had true dramatic genius and noble presence. **Absolute youth was not necessary here, not desirable even. But with Imogen, and Perdita, and Juliet, it was different.** *"Your beard has begun to grow, and I pray God your voice be not cracked," says Hamlet mockingly to the boy-actor of the strolling company that came to visit him at Elsinore; and certainly when chins grew rough and voices harsh much of the charm and grace of the performance must have gone.* **Hence comes Shakespeare's passionate preoccupation with the youth of Willie Hughes, his terror of old age and wasting years, his wild appeal to time to spare the beauty of his friend.**

[...]

Something made me feel certain that Willie Hughes had survived Shakespeare, and had fulfilled in some measure the high prophecies the poet had made about him, and **one evening the true secret of his end flashed across me.** **He had been one of those English actors who in 1611,**

the year of Shakespeare's retirement from the stage, went across sea to Germany and played before the great Duke Henry Julius of Brunswick, himself a dramatist of no mean order [...]. The Library at Cassel contains to the present day a copy of the first edition of Marlowe's *Edward II*, the only copy in existence [...]. **Who could have brought it to that town, but he who had created the part of the king's minion, and for whom indeed it had been written? [...]** We also know that *Romeo and Juliet*, a play specially connected with Willie Hughes, was brought out at Dresden in 1613, along with *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, and certain of Marlowe's plays, and it was surely to none other than W. Hughes himself that in 1617 the death-mask of Shakespeare was brought by one of the suite of the English ambassador, pale token of the passing away of the great poet who had so dearly loved him. Indeed there was something peculiarly fitting in the idea that the boy-actor, whose beauty had been so vital an element in the realism and romance of Shakespeare's art, had been the first to have brought to Germany the seed of the new culture, and was in his way the precursor of the Aufklärung or Illumination of the eighteenth century, that splendid movement which, though begun by Lessing and Herder, and brought to its full and perfect issue by Goethe, was in no small part helped on by another actor – Friedrich Schroeder – who awoke the popular consciousness, and by means of the feigned passions and mimetic methods of the stage showed the intimate, the vital, connection between life and literature. If this was so – and there was certainly no evidence against it – it was not improbable that Willie Hughes was one of those English comedians (*mimae quidam ex Britannia*, as the old chronicle calls them), who were slain at Nuremberg in a sudden uprising of the people, and were secretly buried in a little vineyard outside the city by some young men "who had found pleasure in their performances, and of whom some had sought to be instructed in the mysteries of the new art". Certainly no more fitting place could there be for him to whom Shakespeare said "thou art all my art," [sonnet 78] than this little vineyard outside the city walls [Willie Hughes as a Dionysian figure]. For was it not from the sorrows of Dionysos that Tragedy sprang? [...] At any rate, wherever he lay — whether in the little vineyard at the gate of the Gothic town, or in some dim London churchyard amidst the roar and bustle of our great city — no gorgeous

monument marked his resting place. His true tomb, as Shakespeare saw, was the poet's verse, his true monument the permanence of the drama. [...]

[...]

Week after week, I pored over these poems [...]. Finally, after two months had elapsed, I determined to make a strong appeal to Erskine to do justice to the memory of Cyril Graham, and to give to the world his marvellous interpretation of the Sonnets [...]. [...] No sooner, in fact, had I sent it off than a curious reaction came over me. It seemed to me that I had given away my capacity for belief in the Willie Hughes theory of the Sonnets, that something had gone out of me, as it were, and that **I was perfectly indifferent to the whole subject.** What was it that had happened? It is difficult to say. [...]

I must admit that this was a bitter disappointment to me. I had gone through every phase of this great romance. I had lived with it, and it had become part of my nature. How was it that it had left me? Had I touched upon some secret that my soul desired to conceal?

[...]

Suddenly, I said to myself: "I have been dreaming, and all my life for these two months has been unreal. There was no such person as Willie Hughes." Something like a faint cry of pain came to my lips as I began to realise how I had deceived myself, and I buried my face in my hands, struck with a sorrow greater than any I had felt since boyhood. After a few moments I rose, and going into the library took up the Sonnets, and began to read them. But it was all to no avail. They gave me back nothing of the feeling that I had brought to them; they revealed to me nothing of what I had found hidden in their lines. Had I merely been influenced by the beauty of the forged portrait, charmed by that Shelley-like face into faith and credence? Or, as Erskine had suggested, was it the pathetic tragedy of Cyril Graham's death that had so deeply stirred me? I could not tell. To the present day I cannot understand the beginning or the end of this strange passage in my life. However, as I had said some very unjust and bitter things to Erskine in my letter, I determined to go and see him as soon as possible, and make my apologies to him for my behaviour. Accordingly, the next morning I drove down to Birdcage Walk, where I

found him sitting in his library, with the forged picture of Willie Hughes in front of him.

"My dear Erskine!" I cried, "I have come to apologise to you."

"To apologise to me?" he said. "What for?"

"For my letter," I answered.

"You have nothing to regret in your letter," he said. "On the contrary, you have done me the greatest service in your power. You have shown me that Cyril Graham's theory is perfectly sound."

I stared at him in blank wonder.

"You don't mean to say that you believe in Willie Hughes?" I exclaimed.

"Why not?" he rejoined. "You have proved the thing to me. Do you think I cannot estimate the value of evidence?"

"But there is no evidence at all," I groaned, sinking into a chair. "When I wrote to you I was under the influence of a perfectly silly enthusiasm. I had been touched by the story of Cyril Graham's death, fascinated by his artistic theory, enthralled by the wonder and novelty of the whole idea. I see now that the theory is based on a delusion. The only evidence for the existence of Willie Hughes is that picture in front of you, and that picture is a forgery. [...]"

"I don't understand you," said Erskine, looking at me in amazement. "You have convinced me by your letter that Willie Hughes is an absolute reality. Why have you changed your mind? Or is all that you have been saying to me merely a joke?"

"I cannot explain it to you," I rejoined, "but I see now that there is really nothing to be said in favour of Cyril Graham's interpretation. [...] for heaven's sake don't waste your time in a foolish attempt to discover a

young Elizabethan actor who never existed, and to make a phantom puppet the centre of the great cycle of Shakespeare's Sonnets."

"I see that you don't understand the theory," he replied.

"My dear Erskine," I cried, "not understand it! Why, I feel as if I had invented it. Surely my letter shows you that I not merely went into the whole matter, but that I contributed proofs of every kind. **The one flaw in the theory is that it presupposes the existence of the person whose existence is the subject of dispute.** If we grant that there was in Shakespeare's company a young actor of the name of Willie Hughes, it is not difficult to make him the object of the Sonnets. But as we know that there was no actor of this name in the company of the Globe Theatre, it is idle to pursue the investigation further."

"But that is exactly what we don't know," said Erskine. "It is quite true that his name does not occur in the list given in the first folio; but, as Cyril pointed out, that is **rather a proof** in favour of the existence of Willie Hughes than against it, if we remember his treacherous desertion of Shakespeare for a rival dramatist. Besides," and here I must admit that Erskine made what seems to me now a rather good point, though, at the time, I laughed at it, "there is **no reason at all why Willie Hughes should not have gone upon the stage under an assumed name.** In fact it is **extremely probable** that he did so. We know that there was a very strong prejudice against the theatre in his day, and **nothing is more likely** than that his family insisted upon his adopting some nom de plume. The editors of the first folio would naturally put him down under his stage name, the name by which he was best known to the public, but the Sonnets were of course an entirely different matter, and in the dedication to them the publisher very properly addresses him under his real initials. [...]"

"**But what evidence have you?**" I exclaimed, laying my hand on his. "**You have no evidence at all. It is a mere hypothesis.** [...]"

[...]

We argued the matter over for hours, but nothing that I could say could make him surrender his **faith** in Cyril Graham's interpretation. **He told me that he intended to devote his life to proving the theory, and that he was determined to do justice to Cyril Graham's memory.** I entreated him, laughed at him, begged of him, but it was to no use. Finally we parted, not exactly in anger, but certainly with a shadow between us. He thought me shallow, I thought him foolish. When I called on him again, his servant told me that **he had gone to Germany.** The letters that I wrote to him remained unanswered.

[epilogue] Two years afterwards, as I was going into my club, the hall porter handed me a letter with a foreign postmark. It was from Erskine, and written at the Hotel d'Angleterre, Cannes. When I had read it, I was filled with horror, though I did not quite believe that he would be so mad as to carry his resolve into execution. **The gist of the letter was that he had tried in every way to verify the Willie Hughes theory, and had failed, and that as Cyril Graham had given his life for this theory, he himself had determined to give his own life also to the same cause.** The concluding words of the letter were these: "I still **believe** in Willie Hughes; and by the time you receive this I shall have died by my own hand for Willie Hughes' sake: for his sake, and for the sake of Cyril Graham, whom I drove to his death by my shallow scepticism and ignorant lack of faith. **The truth was once revealed to you, and you rejected it.** It comes to you now, stained with the blood of two lives, — do not turn away from it."

[...]

The letter was a week old. Some unfortunate chance had prevented my going to the club for several days, or I might have got it in time to save him. Perhaps it was not too late. I drove off to my rooms, packed up my things, and **started by the night mail from Charing Cross.** The journey was intolerable. I thought I would never arrive. As soon as I did, I drove to the Hotel d'Angleterre. **It was quite true. Erskine was dead. They told me that he had been buried two days before in the English cemetery.** [...].

Suddenly **Lady Erskine**, in deep mourning, passed across the vestibule. When she saw me she came up to me, murmured something about her poor son, and burst into tears. I led her into her sitting room. **An elderly gentleman was there, reading a newspaper. It was the English doctor.**

We talked a great deal about Erskine, but I said nothing about his motive for committing suicide. It was evident that he had not told his mother anything about the reason that had driven him to so fatal, so mad an act. Finally Lady Erskine rose and said, **"George left you something as a memento. It was a thing he prized very much. I will get it for you."**

As soon as she had left the room I turned to the doctor and said, "What a dreadful shock it must have been for Lady Erskine! I wonder that she bears it as well as she does."

"Oh, she knew for months past that it was coming," he answered.

"Knew it for months past!" I cried. "But why didn't she stop him? Why didn't she have him watched? He must have been out of his mind."

The doctor stared at me. "I don't know what you mean," he said.

"Well," I cried, "if a mother knows that her son is going to commit suicide —"

"Suicide!" he answered. "Poor Erskine did not commit suicide. He died of consumption. He came here to die."

[...]

What did it all mean? Why had Erskine written me that extraordinary letter? **Why when standing at the very gate of death had he turned back to tell me what was not true?** [...] he was simply actuated by a desire to reconvert me to Cyril Graham's theory, and he thought that if I could be made to believe that he too had given his life for it, I would be deceived by the pathetic fallacy of martyrdom. Poor Erskine! [...] No man dies for

what he knows to be true. Men die for what they want to be true, for what some terror in their hearts tells them is not true.

[...]

At that moment Lady Erskine returned to the room carrying the fatal portrait of Willie Hughes.

"When George was dying, he begged me to give you this," she said. As I took it from her, her tears fell on my hand.

This curious work of art hangs now in my library, where it is very much admired by my artistic friends [...]. [...] I have never cared to tell them its true history, but sometimes, when I look at it, I think there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare's Sonnets.