I Won a Bet*

Lady Randolph Churchill

At a particularly pleasant luncheon-party given by Lady de Grey I remember once meeting, among others, M. Jules Claretie of the Français, Mlle. Bartet, the gifted actress, Lord Riddlesdale, and Mr. Oscar Wilde, than whom a more brilliant talker did not exist – that is, when he was in the mood for it. An argument arose between him and Lord Ribblesdale on after-dinner speeches, Mr. Wilde declaring that there was no subject on which he could not speak at a moment's notice. Taking him at his word, Lord Ribblesdale, holding up his glass, said 'The Queen.' 'She is not a subject,' answered Wilde, as quick as lightning. Once, having been accused of misquoting from 'The Importance of Being Earnest,' I appealed to Mr. Wilde, telling him I had made a bet on my accuracy, and that if I found I was right, he should receive from me a beautiful penholder. This was his answer:

THE COTTAGE, GORING-ON-THAMES.

'DEAR LADY RANDOLPH' –

"The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past and that every sinner has a future!" That, of course, is the quotation.¹ How dull men are! They should listen to brilliant women, and look at beautiful ones – and when, as in the present case, a woman is both beautiful and brilliant, they might have the ordinary common sense to admit that she is verbally inspired.

'I trust your bet will be promptly paid, as I want to begin writing my new comedy, and have no pen!

'Believe me,
'Yours sincerely,
'OSCAR WILDE'

As I had won, the pen was duly sent him.

* Extracted from *Reminiscences* (London: Edward Arnold, 1908) pp. 216–17. Editor's title.

NOTES

Jennie Jerome (1854–1921) married (1874) Lord Randolph Churchill, the third son of the seventh Duke of Marlborough; mother of Sir Winston Churchill.

1. *A Woman of No Importance*, Act III.