

## 1900: Two Queens



A one act chamber opera

Music by Robert Ely

Libretto by Peter Scott-Presland

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## TWO QUEENS

*A short musical prologue.*

*Slow lighting reveals the room is sparse; an old bed, a bedside table.*

*Wilde is lying in bed on his back, dying. His mouth is wide open, his breathing is laboured and heavy.*

### MUSICAL SCENE 1

*Attended by a Page Boy carrying a small hand-bell and a tin, VICTORIA appears suddenly at the doorway in her bath chair. Her reticule in her lap, a walking stick tucked in at her side.*

VICTORIA:           *[Declamatory]* Mr Wilde! Mr Wilde!

*[The Page pushes her part way into the room.]*

Rise, sir, from that recumbent posture.

*[WILDE wakes. He is very groggy, disorientated.]*

*The Page moves VICTORIA closer to the bed side. He fusses over her before placing the hand bell and tin in her lap. From his pocket he produces an embroidered napkin and tucks it into her collar, smoothing it out down her front.*

*WILDE clears his throat, coughing and 'phlegmy'.]*

WILDE:               Where's Robbie? Where's Reggie?

*[VICTORIA dismisses the page boy, who leaves closing the door behind him. WILDE becomes more lucid and aware that he is not alone.]*

VICTORIA:           Your young friends have gone.  
Everyone's gone.

WILDE:               *[realising who it is he struggles to rise...]*

Majesty! It is a signal honour.

*...but fails and collapses to a seated position on the bed. VICTORIA doesn't notice his deference]*

VICTORIA: We heard of your parlous state.  
Your poverty, your operation...  
How is your poor ear?

*[WILDE self-consciously places a hand over the bandaged ear]*

WILDE: I bear it with what fortitude I can.

*[He takes his hand away]*

Having had some abatement.

*[He brightens somewhat - almost childlike]*

I have been out in a carriage with my friends.

VICTORIA: We hope you have been behaving very well

WILDE: I have not been feeling very well.

VICTORIA: In that case you likely have.  
Behaving well and feeling well rarely go together.

WILDE: I am dying, Majesty.

VICTORIA: And have been for some weeks.

*[Exhausted, he relaxes back to lying on the bed. VICTORIA leans closer and gently lays a hand on his shoulder for a moment then takes her hand away]*

We really think it is high time  
That you made up your mind  
Whether you are going to live or to die.  
This shilly-shallying is absurd.

WILDE: The doctor says I cannot live

VICTORIA: Then we hope that you will act  
On his medical advice.  
Our doctors say much the same  
And we intend to follow  
Their guidance unquestioningly.  
*[Darker]* We shall not be long after you.

*[Her mood brightens]*

You had the last rites, we believe.

*[Wilde brightens and struggles to a sitting position]*

WILDE: Oh yes. It was a comfort  
When the Catholic Church received me in.

VICTORIA: We are glad to hear it.  
A man should always have an occupation  
Of some kind.

*[He struggles to get out of bed]*

WILDE: I will not live out the century.  
The English people would not stand for it.

*[Having failed to stand, he sits on the edge, trying to put his shoes on]*

VICTORIA: No need for shoes for you now!

*[He throws the shoes aside... looks at her, then shrugs]*

WILDE: Do you *have* any cigarettes?

VICTORIA: Certainly not. We only smoke opiates.

WILDE: Perhaps a glass of absinthe?

VICTORIA: Mr Wilde, absinthe is a drink

For Bohemians and anarchists.  
It is not a fitting beverage for a queen

*[WILDE double-takes the audience]*

## MUSICAL SCENE 2

*[VICTORIA rummages under her voluminous skirts and brings out a hip flask]*

VICTORIA: You may partake of this.

*[She passes the flask to WILDE who takes the flask somewhat dubiously]*

Just a little, mind -

*[He removes the stopper and sniffs the contents]*

A cocktail of claret, scotch and laudanum  
I swear by it.  
I never go anywhere without it.

*[He takes a drink and finds it to his liking.]*

*VICTORIA has another rummage and produces a cream cake. She appears childishly happy]*

VICTORIA: Mr Wilde,  
We heard how you honoured us  
On our Diamond Jubilee.  
A party for the children of Berneval

*[She bites the cake greedily, cream goes round her mouth]*

WILDE: I love children.  
*[Deep sorrow]* I have not seen my own for six years -  
I miss them dreadfully

VICTORIA: Children are the price one pays  
For the pleasures of congress.

Sometimes we look at ours  
And ask if it was worth it

*[She considers another bite...*

Look what childbirth has done to our figure.

*...but drops the cake into her lap, picks up the handbell and rings it delicately.]*

WILDE: Children are an avoidable pleasure

*[The page enters with a folded cloth over his arm and respectfully cleans around her mouth]*

VICTORIA: *[She splutters]* Mr Wilde!  
Do you imagine  
That we would form an alliance  
With a prophylactic?

*[The page picks up the cake, removes the napkin, attempts to remove the tin which she holds on to. She waves the page away; he leaves]*

WILDE: You are right. Majesty  
One should never avoid a pleasure

VICTORIA: *[sighs]* And it was a pleasure.  
Such a pleasure.  
*[sighs]* Oh Albert.

*[VICTORIA dozes]*

## INTERLUDE 1

*[WILDE drinks more of the elixir. Slowly the alcohol and drugs take hold. He sits up and attempts to get up...but fails. He takes another drink. He attempts to get up again, successfully this time, he stands a little a little unsteadily at first. He takes another sip, becoming more stable, appearing to be more like his arrogant older self.]*

*WILDE coughs deferentially. VICTORIA slowly awakens. She turns her chair slightly towards WILDE.]*

### MUSICAL SCENE 3

WILDE:           To my party in your honour  
                      I invited local schoolboys  
                      And their teacher Monsieur Hossein  
                      And the postman, and the curé.  
                      All devoted to your Majesty.

*[He bows exaggeratedly]*

                      There were union flags  
                      The little children sang the Marseillaise  
                      And then God Save the Queen

VICTORIA:       How charming!

*[She brightens suddenly]*

                      We hear you had a giant cake

BOTH:            With *Jubilé de la reine Victoria*

WILDE:           Iced in pink and green.

*[VICTORIA opens her tin and pulls out a chocolate]*

                      We love cake in all its forms  
                      Did you have chocolates too?

*[She attempts to bite the chocolate but fails, it is too hard. She replaces it and closes the tin]*

WILDE:           Yes, and grenadine  
                      And strawberries and cream

VICTORIA:       Cream too! We love cream.  
                      Chocolate, cake and cream

You seem to have lived entirely for pleasure

*[WILDE returns to his bed and sits, forlorn]*

WILDE: Pleasure has been my downfall

VICTORIA: Mr Wilde, tell me frankly:  
Was it true, what was said at your trials?

*[In despair, he puts his head in his hands.... ..then straightens up, lifting his head]*

WILDE: I denied it always.

#### MUSICAL SCENE 4

VICTORIA: That was not what we asked.  
To lose one trial may be regarded as a misfortune  
To lose three seems like carelessness.  
Or guiltiness.

*[WILDE stands (not guilty)]*

WILDE: Well, your majesty, I must confess  
Beauty in all its forms  
Has always attracted me.

VICTORIA: You need not be so mealy-mouthed.  
We have read Krafft-Ebing.  
You mean you are bisexual?

WILDE: Yes, your majesty *[Mockingly, he half bows]*

VICTORIA: Oh, they count as heterosexuals  
They dine with us  
Or come in the evening at any rate.

WILDE: *[With irony]* You are too kind.

## MUSICAL SCENE 5

VICTORIA: We cannot say that we approve of you  
You lavished too much mockery  
Upon society, and that is vulgar  
Never speak disrespectfully of society;  
Only people who can't get into it do that.  
Mr Wilde, it may surprise you, but we like you.

*[VICTORIA holds out a limp hand. WILDE takes it gently, considers kissing it but refrains, and removes his hand.]*

According to our son, Bertie  
You are the greatest wit in Europe.

WILDE: Was the greatest wit...

VICTORIA: He came ...

WILDE: Was...

VICTORIA: ...to all your opening nights  
And laughed immoderately

WILDE: { What a talent I once had.  
All is gone.

VICTORIA: We read your plays as they were published.  
We do so like to be amused

WILDE: But I am nothing with no audience.  
So what is left but a long slow,

*[WILDE returns to his bed, and sits - forlorn once more]*

Long slow lovely suicide?

## MUSICAL SCENE 6

VICTORIA: We have been paying you a pension  
These last few years  
In thanks for our enjoyment.  
It is nothing short of scandal  
That you should be treated so.

WILDE: Oh, hypocrisy!

VICTORIA: Why? Have you been leading a double life,  
Pretending to be wicked  
And being really good all the time?  
Now, *that* would be hypocrisy.

WILDE: You say that you admire my work?  
What then has my private life to do with that?

*[He points accusingly]*

You punish me, not for what I do  
But for what I am.

VICTORIA: We punish no-one.  
The law, the judge, the juries  
Punish you.

*[WILDE jumps up]*

WILDE: You made the law, your majesty,  
That caused my downfall.

VICTORIA: I, sir?  
What has it to do with me?

WILDE: You signed it into law.  
You could have stopped it.  
You condemned me to a life of shame

VICTORIA: Shame you found thoroughly becoming  
All those secrets, all those masks.

Your work thrived on it.  
You would not have it any other way

WILDE: *[Anguished]* Not only me, many others.  
Poor Francis Douglas, my Bosie's brother,  
Shot himself the day after he got engaged  
Because of rumours of a liaison  
With your Prime Minister, Rosebery,  
Of whom you were so fond

VICTORIA: *[She is lost in her memories.]* We were.  
We used to mother him,  
Tell him he should wrap up warm.

### MUSICAL SCENE 7

WILDE: What about your own beloved grandson  
Prince Eddie?

VICTORIA: *[Jolted back]* What of him?

*[He looks at her, incredulous]*

WILDE: Because you did not stand up to Gladstone,  
You almost ruined your family.

VICTORIA: We know not what you mean -

WILDE: Does Cleveland Street mean nothing to you?

VICTORIA: A baseless allegation of the Press;  
Fake news of a radical persuasion.

WILDE: I was in France in Ninety-One.  
Your grandson had been there nine months before,  
And very red he was  
At some of the reporters' questions.  
The French press know everything  
About our royalty,  
More than we do ourselves.

It is a form of envy.

VICTORIA: *[VICTORIA, in angst, resorts to her native German accent.]*

Ach! Du Englisch!

WILDE: *[Angry]* I am not English!

VICTORIA: You are obsessed with finding fault,  
Und schniffing scandal.

*[WILDE pulls a handkerchief from a pocket to wipe his brow]*

WILDE: I am an Irish gentleman.

VICTORIA: *[She calmly returns to English]*  
You may be Irish, sir, but you are no gentlemen.  
You forfeited the right to be called a gentleman  
*[Accusing]* When you gave your poor wife  
The French disease.

WILDE: *[He flicks the 'kerchief...]* Huh!  
A baseless rumour  
*[...and returns it to his pocket]*

VICTORIA: On this point, as on all points, we are firm

WILDE: Even if true, is that worse  
Than giving your son and grandsons  
Haemophilia?

*[He sinks back to sitting on the bed.]*

VICTORIA: How were we to know?

WILDE: And how was I to know?  
I thought I was cured.

*[The lighting grows dimmer and both seem to fade in private thoughts.]*

## INTERLUDE 2

*[The Page enters carrying lit candles which he places on the side table. (brightening the room). He ensures VICTORIA is comfortable, then leaves.]*

*Gradually, WILDE seems to come back to life as ideas come to mind.]*

## MUSICAL SCENE 8

*[He leaps from the bed excitedly]*

WILDE: Prince Leopold, your youngest child,  
Your grandson, Prince Friedrich -  
Only three years old.  
There will be more...

*[VICTORIA slowly becomes quite sullen]*

...Many more.  
You have spread your fatal curse  
Across the whole of Europe.  
There will not be a royal house  
From Spain to Russia  
That will be free of your tainted blood.

VICTORIA: *[in tears]* We did not know.  
How could we know?

WILDE: Your doctors, they should have known.

VICTORIA: They did not tell us if they did.  
We did not know

WILDE: Well, you know now.

VICTORIA: Yes, we know now.  
Thank you, Mr. Wilde

*[VICTORIA pulls herself together.]*

### INTERLUDE 3

*[She fumbles in her lap for her reticule... which she accidently knocks to the floor. WILDE picks it up and holds it out to her. She ignores him, fumbling still. In a panic she grabs her bell and rings it madly.*

*The page boy enters quickly. She flaps her hands around pointing to the floor. WILDE looks to him, questioningly.*

*Seeing the reticule in WILDE's hand, the PAGE raises his hands to indicate calm, WILDE realises that VICTORIA is blind. The page boy takes the reticule from WILDE, then reaches for VICTORIA's hand, giving her the reticule.*

*VICTORIA is visibly relieved, and opens the reticule, takes out a handkerchief, dabs her eyes and mouth then returns it to the reticule. The Page boy helps her tuck the reticule in her lap, safely behind the cake tin.*

*WILDE's demeanour softens significantly.]*

WILDE: Forgive me, Majesty.

*[She looks slightly startled. The page boy calms her. WILDE, rather theatrically, goes down on one knee....*

### MUSICAL SCENE 9

*...WILDE takes her hand and places it on his head. Fear shows in her face, she pulls her hand away sharply. WILDE loses his balance, collapsing to the floor.]*

VICTORIA: Mr Wilde if you think we are going to knight you,  
You are very much mistaken  
Much though you desired it.

*[He raises himself to a sitting position.....*

*She smiles wryly to herself in self-congratulation and, with the Page's help, levers herself out of the bath chair with the aid of a walking stick, to stand; As she staggers around, unaware of where WILDE is, the Page manoeuvres the bath chair behind her.*

*...WILDE staggers to his feet, dodging VICTORIA, her bath chair and the Page.]*

VICTORIA: Well, we will forgive you.  
You have a blazing cheek –  
Which is half your function  
And all of your charm.

*[Gradually she becomes more unsteady on her feet.]*

Do you recall, you had the nerve  
To ask us for a poem  
To feature in some magazine?

WILDE: The Woman's World

*[She turns abruptly to face WILDE]*

VICTORIA: We, who could never in our whole life  
Write one line of verse  
Serious or comic  
Or even make a rhyme!

*(Even more unsteady)*

But we were flattered to be asked.  
We never showed it, but we were,  
And we liked *The Woman's World*  
Especially when your Mother wrote of us.

*[She loses her balance. WILDE catches her and helps her back into her bath chair. He steps back as the Page makes her comfortable.]*

WILDE: Do you remember when we met?

VICTORIA: We met so many...

WILDE:           A ruby set in jet.  
                  Such a regal walk.

*[VICTORIA, now much more relaxed, dismisses the Page who leaves]*

VICTORIA:       No walking now for us

### MUSICAL SCENE 10

*[WILDE begins to pace the room becoming agitated]*

WILDE:           I was unjust.  
                  It was not you who sealed my fate.  
                  It was many things.  
                  Most of all I blame myself

VICTORIA:       We blame that awful Henry Labouchère

WILDE:           Labouchère...

BOTH:           Nothing but trouble

VICTORIA:       And nothing less than a Republican

WILDE:           *[nods in agreement]* A trouble maker!

VICTORIA:       He wanted to convert the Palace  
                  Into a home for fallen women!

*[Then he nods to the in audience]*

WILDE:           A trouble maker!

WILDE:           You kept him from the Cabinet.  
                  Gladstone wanted him, but you refused.  
                  Yet you could not refuse that vicious clause,  
                  Sneaked into law when nobody was looking.

VICTORIA:       Please don't start all that again.

WILDE: He was of course an atheist.

VICTORIA: Mr Wilde, we have not much time -  
We have to go and plan my funeral.

WILDE: *[over VICTORIA]* When you deprive yourself of God

VICTORIA: The elements are all in place.

WILDE: You have to play yourself at being one.

VICTORIA: But we want some touches,  
Personal mementos in the coffin.  
Oh, how we love a proper funeral.

WILDE: I fear a pauper's grave for me

VICTORIA: You do not plan your funeral?  
Good. For men it is different.  
A funeral should come on a man as a surprise,  
Pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be.  
It is hardly a matter  
He can be allowed to arrange himself.

We strongly advise that you have a haircut.  
Locks of hair make tasteful funeral gifts  
When arranged in pretty lockets

WILDE: I fear, that I am beyond arranging anything.

VICTORIA: Quite right, for you are dead,  
And we must go.  
Strange to think we have so much in common.

BOTH: We were both outsiders.

VICTORIA: I alone with my hundred dolls  
In Kensington.

WILDE: I prancing round  
The snobbish paddocks  
Of high society.  
I worked hard to lose my accent -

VICTORIA: We never needed to -

*[WILDE returns to his bed and rests, lost in private thought]*

I was the Queen  
Geliebte Volkmutter.

#### INTERLUDE 4

*[The Page enters carrying a blanket which he, after removing the tin, bell and reticule, tucks around her lap. He replaces the bell and reticule on her lap.... then takes the tin away (off-stage), .... he returns and attend to the candles, some of which he douses.... after which he returns to VICTORIA and attempts to start to push her off stage which VICTORIA resists quite firmly, and she turns towards WILDE.]*

#### MUSICAL SCENE 11

VICTORIA: May I prevail upon you, Mr. Wilde,  
To push my bath chair?

*[Flustered, WILDE gets back up]*

WILDE: Certainly, majesty.

*[He smiles at the Page and takes over the chair. VICTORIA dismisses the Page, who leaves, returning WILDE's smile with a sickly grin.]*

VICTORIA: You know, Mr Wilde,  
We are but thirty-two days away  
From the Twentieth Century.

BOTH: I wonder what that century  
Will make of us.  
We will of course be two  
Of the most famous figures  
Of this one.  
And two of the most recognisable.

VICTORIA: And I will stand for something.

*[WILDE moves away from the chair... he becomes visibly annoyed with VICTORIA's claims.]*

Order. Stability. Empire.  
Loyalty.

WILDE: Hypocrisy

VICTORIA: Morality

WILDE: Prudery. Repression.  
Victorian values.  
A stick to beat my kind  
Down the ages.

*[VICTORIA reaches her arms out, towards WILDE]*

VICTORIA: But I was not like that.

*[Her arms slowly fall into her lap]*

WILDE: And I will stand for Art.  
The rights of Artists,  
And for courage  
In the face of persecution.

VICTORIA: Irresponsibility, dissipation  
Depravity, shallowness,  
Luxury and unreliability.

*[WILDE mirrors VICTORIA's previous arm movements]*

WILDE: But I am not like that.

*[He goes to the bed, picks up his coat, shakes it out then puts it on]*

VICTORIA: I do not say you are,  
But so you will seem.

*[He returns to push the bath chair, chastened.]*

## MUSICAL SCENE 12

*[They move towards the front of the stage.]*

BOTH: We are neither what we seem  
But what we seem is what is useful  
To set the coming century's theme  
More convenient than truthful.

*[WILDE suddenly steps away from the chair to face VICTORIA]*

WILDE: I was right, it is a world of masks

VICTORIA: I wore one just as much as you

WILDE: But I used mine to tell the truth

VICTORIA: While on mine the canker grew  
So I was trapped by mine, mine.

*[He realises that they are much the same and returns to push the bath chair.... however,...]*

## EPILOGUE

*...VICTORIA seems to have no further need of it. She stands up, without the need for her stick, and takes his arm. They come to the foot of the stage, turn to face each looking deep into their eyes.]*

BOTH:                So here we are, each behind our mask

*[They turn back towards the audience]*

And you will take our mask  
You will not want to ask  
About a truth that's complicated by  
The lie that tells the truth that's still a lie.

*[They turn and promenade... And the Page opens the door]*

And as we disappear into the past,  
You will not hear us say 'Goodbye'.  
For we are always with you  
Clichés oh so ripe  
Full-blooded stereotype

*[...until both stand in the doorway as the Page retreats]*

Nature's opposites.  
And on our shoulders sits  
The battle of the twentieth century -  
Two fat old queens

VICTORIA:        { I throw my good fat weight  
                              Upon the scales of decency

WILDE:            { I use my wit to arm  
                              The liberation of identity.

BOTH:             We are twin pillars  
                              Of the century.

You have to choose a side  
In the twentieth century.

*[They move backwards into oblivion as the door slowly closes]*

**THE END**