

THE
IMPORTANCE OF BEING
EARNEST

A Trivial Comedy for Serious People

First Act

Scene: Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room. Lane is arranging afternoon tea on the table and, after the music has ceased, Algernon enters [from music-room]

ALGERNON Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

LANE I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

ALGERNON I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

LANE Yes, sir.

ALGERNON And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

LANE Yes, sir. (*Hands them on a salver*)

ALGERNON (*inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa*) Oh! . . . by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreham^o and Mr Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

LANE Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

ALGERNON Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

LANE I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

ALGERNON Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?

LANE I believe it is a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding^o between myself and a young person.

ALGERNON (*languidly*) I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

LANE No, sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

ALGERNON Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

LANE Thank you, sir.

Lane goes out

ALGERNON Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.

Enter Lane

LANE Mr Ernest Worthing.

Enter Jack. Lane goes out

ALGERNON How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town?

JACK Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring me anywhere? Eating as usual, I see, Algy!

ALGERNON (*stiffly*) I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock. Where have you been since last Thursday?

JACK (*sitting down on the sofa*) In the country.

ALGERNON What on earth do you do there?

JACK (*pulling off his gloves*) When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring.

ALGERNON And who are the people you amuse?

JACK (*airily*) Oh, neighbours, neighbours.

ALGERNON Got nice neighbours in your part of Shropshire?

JACK Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them.

ALGERNON How immensely you must amuse them! (*Goes over and takes sandwich*) By the way, Shropshire is your country, is it not?

JACK Eh? Shropshire? Yes, of course. Hallo! Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who is coming to tea?

ALGERNON Oh! merely Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

JACK How perfectly delightful!

ALGERNON Yes, that is all very well, but I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't quite approve of your being here.

JACK May I ask why?

ALGERNON My dear fellow, the way you flirt with Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful. It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you.

JACK I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.

ALGERNON I thought you had come up for pleasure... I call that business.

JACK How utterly unromantic you are!

ALGERNON I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

JACK I have no doubt about that, dear Algy. The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.

ALGERNON Oh! there is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven—(*Jack puts out his hand to take a sandwich. Algeron at once interferes*) Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. (*Takes one and eats it*)

JACK Well, you have been eating them all the time.

ALGERNON That is quite a different matter. She is my aunt. (*Takes plate from below*) Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter.

JACK (*advancing to table and helping himself*) And very good bread and butter it is too.

ALGERNON Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all. You behave as if you were married to her already. You are not married to her already, and I don't think you ever will be.

JACK Why on earth do you say that?

ALGERNON Well, in the first place, girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right.

JACK Oh, that is nonsense!

ALGERNON It isn't. It is a great truth. It accounts for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over the place. In the second place, I don't give my consent.

JACK Your consent!

ALGERNON My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily. (*Rings bell*)

JACK Cecily! What on earth do you mean? What do you mean, Algy, by Cecily? I don't know anyone of the name of Cecily.

Enter Lane

ALGERNON Bring me that cigarette case Mr Worthing left in the smoking-room the last time he dined here.

LANE Yes, sir.

Lane goes out

JACK Do you mean to say you have had my cigarette case all this time? I wish to goodness you had let me know. I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard^o about it. I was very nearly offering a large reward.

ALGERNON Well, I wish you would offer one. I happen to be more than usually hard up.

JACK There is no good offering a large reward now that the thing is found.

Enter Lane with the cigarette case on a salver.° Algernon takes it at once. Lane goes out

ALGERNON I think that is rather mean of you, Ernest, I must say. (*Opens case and examines it*) However, it makes no matter, for, now that I look at the inscription inside, I find that the thing isn't yours after all.

JACK Of course it's mine. (*Moving to him*) You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case.

ALGERNON Oh! it is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

JACK I am quite aware of the fact, and I don't propose to discuss modern culture. It isn't the sort of thing one should talk of in private. I simply want my cigarette case back.

ALGERNON Yes, but this isn't your cigarette case. This cigarette case is a present from someone of the name of Cecily, and you said you didn't know anyone of that name.

JACK Well, if you want to know, Cecily happens to be my aunt.

ALGERNON Your aunt!

JACK Yes. Charming old lady she is, too. Lives at Tunbridge Wells.°

Just give it back to me, Algy.

ALGERNON (*retreating to back of sofa*) But why does she call herself little Cecily if she is your aunt and lives at Tunbridge Wells? (*Reading*) 'From little Cecily with her fondest love.'

JACK (*moving to sofa and kneeling upon it*) My dear fellow, what on earth is there in that? Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be exactly like your aunt! That is absurd! For Heaven's sake give me back my cigarette case. (*Follows Algernon round the room*)

ALGERNON Yes. But why does your aunt call you her uncle? 'From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack.' There is no objection, I admit, to an aunt being a small aunt, but why an aunt, no matter what her size may be, should call her own nephew her uncle, I can't quite make out. Besides, your name isn't Jack at all, it is Ernest.

JACK It isn't Ernest, it's Jack.

ALGERNON You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. Here is one of them. (*Taking it from case*) 'Mr Ernest Worthing, B.4, The Albany.'° I'll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to anyone else. (*Puts the card in his pocket*)

JACK Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette case was given to me in the country.

ALGERNON Yes, but that does not account for the fact that your small Aunt Cecily, who lives at Tunbridge Wells, calls you her dear uncle. Come, old boy, you had much better have the thing out at once.

JACK My dear Algy, you talk exactly as if you were a dentist. It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn't a dentist. It produces a false impression.

ALGERNON Well, that is exactly what dentists always do. Now, go on! Tell me the whole thing. I may mention that I have always suspected you of being a confirmed and secret Bunburyist; and I am quite sure of it now.

JACK Bunburyist? What on earth do you mean by a Bunburyist?

ALGERNON I'll reveal to you the meaning of that incomparable expression as soon as you are kind enough to inform me why you are Ernest in town and Jack in the country.

JACK Well, produce my cigarette case first.

ALGERNON Here it is. (*Hands cigarette case*)° Now produce your explanation, and pray make it improbable. (*Sits on sofa*)°

JACK My dear fellow, there is nothing improbable about my explanation at all. In fact it's perfectly ordinary. Old Mr Thomas Cardew, who adopted me when I was a little boy, made me in his will guardian to his granddaughter, Miss Cecily Cardew. Cecily, who addresses me as her uncle from motives of respect that you

could not possibly appreciate, lives at my place in the country under the charge of her admirable governess, Miss Prism.

ALGERNON Where is that place in the country, by the way?

JACK That is nothing to you, dear boy. You are not going to be invited. . . . I may tell you candidly that the place is not in Shropshire. 195

ALGERNON I suspected that, my dear fellow! I have Bunburyed all over Shropshire on two separate occasions. Now, go on. Why are you Ernest in town and Jack in the country?

JACK My dear Algy, I don't know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple. 200

ALGERNON The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility! 205

JACK That wouldn't be at all a bad thing.

ALGERNON Literary criticism is not your forte, my dear fellow. Don't try it. You should leave that to people who haven't been at a University. They do it so well in the daily papers. What you really are is a Bunburyist. I was quite right in saying you were a Bunburyist. You are one of the most advanced Bunburyists I know. 210

JACK What on earth do you mean?

ALGERNON You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis's tonight, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week. 220

JACK I haven't asked you to dine with me anywhere tonight.

ALGERNON I know. You are absurdly careless about sending out invitations. It is very foolish of you. Nothing annoys people so much as not receiving invitations. 225

JACK You had much better dine with your Aunt Augusta.

ALGERNON I haven't the smallest intention of doing anything of the kind. To begin with, I dined there on Monday, and once a week is quite enough to dine with one's own relations. In the second place, whenever I do dine there I am always treated as a member of the family, and sent down with either no woman at all, or two. In the third place, I know perfectly well whom she will place me next to, tonight. She will place me next Mary Farguhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner-table. That is not very pleasant. Indeed, it is not even decent. . . . and that sort of thing is enormously on the increase. The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one's clean linen in public. Besides, now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburyist I naturally want to talk to you about Bunburying. I want to tell you the rules. 235

JACK I'm not a Bunburyist at all. If Gwendolen accepts me, I am going to kill my brother, indeed I think I'll kill him in any case. Cecily is a little too much interested in him. It is rather a bore. So I am going to get rid of Ernest. And I strongly advise you to do the same with Mr. . . . with your invalid friend who has the absurd name. 240

ALGERNON Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it. 245

JACK That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won't want to know Bunbury. 250

ALGERNON Then your wife will. You don't seem to realize, that in married life three is company and two is none. 255

JACK (*sententiously*) That, my dear young friend, is the theory that the corrupt French Drama has been propounding for the last fifty years. 260

ALGERNON Yes, and that the happy English home has proved in half the time. 265

JACK For heaven's sake, don't try to be cynical. It's perfectly easy to be cynical. 270

ALGERNON My dear fellow, it isn't easy to be anything nowadays. There's such a lot of beastly competition about. (*The sound of an electric bell is heard*) Ah! that must be Aunt Augusta. Only 275

relatives, or creditors, ever ring in that Wagnerian manner. Now, if I get her out of the way for ten minutes, so that you can have an opportunity for proposing to Gwendolen, may I dine with you tonight at Willis's?

JACK I suppose so, if you want to.

ALGERNON Yes, but you must be serious about it. I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them.

Enter Lane

LANE Lady Bracknell and Miss Fairfax.

Algernon goes forward to meet them. Enter Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen

LADY BRACKNELL Good afternoon, dear Algernon, I hope you are behaving very well.

ALGERNON I'm feeling very well, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL That's not quite the same thing. In fact the two things rarely go together. (*Sees Jack and bows to him with icy coldness*)

ALGERNON (*to Gwendolen*) Dear me, you are smart!

Gwendolen I am always smart! Aren't I, Mr Worthing?

JACK You're quite perfect, Miss Fairfax.

Gwendolen Oh! I hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions. (*Gwendolen and Jack sit down together in the corner*)

LADY BRACKNELL I'm sorry if we are a little late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger. And now I'll have a cup of tea, and one of those nice cucumber sandwiches you promised me.

ALGERNON Certainly, Aunt Augusta. (*Goes over to tea-table*)

LADY BRACKNELL Won't you come and sit here, Gwendolen?

Gwendolen Thanks, mamma, I'm quite comfortable where I am.

ALGERNON (*picking up empty plate in horror*) Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them specially.

LANE (*gratefully*) There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir. I went down twice.

ALGERNON No cucumbers!

LANE No, sir. Not even for ready money.

ALGERNON That will do, Lane, thank you.

Goes out

ALGERNON I am greatly distressed, Aunt Augusta, about there being no cucumbers, not even for ready money.

LADY BRACKNELL It really makes no matter, Algernon. I had some crumpets with Lady Harbury, who seems to me to be living entirely for pleasure now.

ALGERNON I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief.

LADY BRACKNELL It certainly has changed its colour. From what cause I, of course, cannot say. (*Algernon crosses and hands tea*)

Thank you. I've quite a treat for you tonight, Algernon. I am going to send you down with Mary Farguhar. She is such a nice woman, and so attentive to her husband. It's delightful to watch them.

ALGERNON I am afraid, Aunt Augusta, I shall have to give up the pleasure of dining with you tonight after all.

LADY BRACKNELL (*frowning*) I hope not, Algernon. It would put my table completely out. Your uncle would have to dine upstairs. Fortunately he is accustomed to that.

ALGERNON It is a great bore, and, I need hardly say, a terrible disappointment to me, but the fact is I have just had a telegram to say that my poor friend Bunbury is very ill again. (*Exchanges glances with Jack*) They seem to think I should be with him.

LADY BRACKNELL It is very strange. This Mr Bunbury seems to suffer from curiously bad health.

ALGERNON Yes; poor Bunbury is a dreadful invalid.

LADY BRACKNELL Well, I must say, Algernon, that I think it is high time that Mr Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd.

Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life. I am always telling that to your poor uncle, but he never seems to take much notice... as far as any improvement in his ailments goes. I should be much obliged if you would ask Mr Bunbury, from me, to be kind enough not to have a relapse on Saturday, for I rely on you to arrange my music for me. It is my last reception, and one wants something that will encourage conversation, particularly at the end of the season when everyone has practically said whatever they had to say, which, in most cases, was probably not much.

ALGERNON I'll speak to Bunbury, Aunt Augusta, if he is still conscious, and I think I can promise you he'll be all right by Saturday. Of course the music is a great difficulty. You see, if one

plays good music, people don't listen, and if one plays bad music people don't talk. But I'll run over the programme I've drawn out, if you will kindly come into the next room for a moment.

LADY BRACKNELL Thank you, Algernon. It is very thoughtful of you. (*Rising, and following Algernon*) I'm sure the programme will be delightful, after a few expurgations. French songs? I cannot possibly allow. People always seem to think that they are improper, and either look shocked, which is vulgar, or laugh, which is worse. But German sounds a thoroughly respectable language, and indeed I believe is so. Gwendolen, you will accompany me.

GWENDOLEN Certainly, mamma.

Lady Bracknell and Algernon go into the music-room, Gwendolen remains behind

JACK Charming day it has been, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN Pray don't talk to me about the weather, Mr Worthing. Whenever people talk to me about the weather, I always feel quite certain that they mean something else. And that makes me so nervous.

JACK I do mean something else.

GWENDOLEN I thought so. In fact, I am never wrong.

JACK And I would like to be allowed to take advantage of Lady Bracknell's temporary absence....

GWENDOLEN I would certainly advise you to do so. Mamma has a way of coming back suddenly into a room that I have often had to speak to her about.

JACK (*nervously*) Miss Fairfax, ever since I met you I have admired you more than any girl... I have ever met since... I met you.

GWENDOLEN Yes, I am quite aware of the fact. And I often wish that in public, at any rate, you had been more demonstrative. For me you have always had an irresistible fascination. Even before I met you I was far from indifferent to you. (*Jack looks at her in amazement*)

We live, as I hope you know, Mr Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits I am told; and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.

JACK You really love me, Gwendolen?

GWENDOLEN Passionately!

JACK Darling! You don't know how happy you've made me.

GWENDOLEN My own Ernest!

JACK But you don't really mean to say that you couldn't love me if my name wasn't Ernest?

GWENDOLEN But your name is Ernest.

JACK Yes, I know it is. But supposing it was something else? Do you mean to say you couldn't love me then?

GWENDOLEN (*glibly*) Ah! that is clearly a metaphysical speculation, and like most metaphysical speculations has very little reference at all to the actual facts of real life, as we know them.

JACK Personally, darling, to speak quite candidly, I don't much care about the name of Ernest... I don't think the name suits me at all.

GWENDOLEN It suits you perfectly. It is a divine name. It has music of its own. It produces vibrations.

JACK Well, really, Gwendolen, I must say that I think there are lots of other much nicer names. I think Jack, for instance, a charming name.

GWENDOLEN Jack?... No, there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed. It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations... I have known several Jacks, and they all, without exception, were more than usually plain. Besides, Jack is a notorious domesticity for John! And I pity any woman who is married to a man called John. She would probably never be allowed to know the entrancing pleasure of a single moment's solitude. The only really safe name is Ernest.

JACK Gwendolen, I must get christened at once—I mean we must get married at once. There is no time to be lost.

GWENDOLEN Married, Mr Worthing?

JACK (*astounded*) Well... surely. You know that I love you, and you led me to believe, Miss Fairfax, that you were not absolutely indifferent to me.

GWENDOLEN I adore you. But you haven't proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on.

JACK Well... may I propose to you now?

GWENDOLEN I think it would be an admirable opportunity. And to spare you any possible disappointment, Mr Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you.

JACK Gwendolen!

GWENDOLEN Yes, Mr Worthing, what have you got to say to me?

JACK You know what I have got to say to you.

GWENDOLEN Yes, but you don't say it.

JACK Gwendolen, will you marry me? (*Goes on his knees*)

GWENDOLEN Of course I will, darling. How long you have been about it! I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose.

JACK My own one, I have never loved anyone in the world but you.

GWENDOLEN Yes, but men often propose for practice. I know my brother Gerald does. All my girl-friends tell me so. What wonderfully blue eyes° you have, Ernest! They are quite, quite, blue. I hope you will always look at me just like that, especially when there are other people present.

Enter Lady Bracknell

LADY BRACKNELL Mr Worthing! Rise, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture. It is most indecorous.

GWENDOLEN Mamma! (*He tries to rise; she restrains him*) I must beg you to retire. This is no place for you. Besides, Mr Worthing has not quite finished yet.

LADY BRACKNELL Finished what, may I ask?

GWENDOLEN I am engaged to Mr Worthing, mamma. (*They rise together*)

LADY BRACKNELL Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged to someone, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant° or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself. . . . And now I have a few questions to put to you, Mr Worthing. While I am making these inquiries, you, Gwendolen, will wait for me below in the carriage.

GWENDOLEN (*reproachfully*) Mamma!

LADY BRACKNELL In the carriage, Gwendolen!

Gwendolen goes to the door. She and Jack blow kisses to each other behind Lady Bracknell's back. Lady Bracknell looks vaguely about as if she could not understand what the noise was.

Finally turns round

Gwendolen, the carriage!

GWENDOLEN Yes, mamma.

Goes out, looking back at Jack

LADY BRACKNELL (*sitting down*) You can take a seat, Mr Worthing. (*Looks in her pocket for note-book and pencil*)°

JACK Thank you, Lady Bracknell, I prefer standing.

LADY BRACKNELL (*pencil and note-book in hand*). I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?

JACK Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

LADY BRACKNELL I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. How old are you?

JACK Twenty-nine.

LADY BRACKNELL A very good age to be married at. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

JACK (*after some hesitation*) I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit, touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square. What is your income?

JACK Between seven and eight thousand a year.

LADY BRACKNELL (*makes a note in her book*) In land, or in investments?

JACK In investments, chiefly.

LADY BRACKNELL That is satisfactory. What between the duties expected of one during one's lifetime, and the duties exacted from one after one's death,° land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up. That's all that can be said about land.

JACK I have a country house with some land, of course, attached to it, about fifteen hundred acres, I believe; but I don't depend on that for my real income. In fact, as far as I can make out, the poachers are the only people who make anything out of it.

LADY BRACKNELL A country house! How many bedrooms? Well, that point can be cleared up afterwards. You have a town house, I hope? A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country.

JACK Well, I own a house in Belgrave Square,^o but it is let by the year to Lady Bloxham. Of course, I can get it back whenever I like, at six months' notice.

LADY BRACKNELL Lady Bloxham?^o I don't know her.

JACK Oh, she goes about very little. She is a lady considerably advanced in years.

LADY BRACKNELL Ah, nowadays that is no guarantee of respectability of character. What number in Belgrave Square?

JACK 149.

LADY BRACKNELL (*shaking her head*) The unfashionable side. I thought there was something. However, that could easily be altered.

JACK Do you mean the fashion, or the side?

LADY BRACKNELL (*sternly*) Both, if necessary, I presume. What are your politics?

JACK Well, I am afraid I really have none. I am a Liberal Unionist.^o

LADY BRACKNELL Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us. Or come in the evening, at any rate. Now to minor matters. Are your parents living?

JACK I have lost both my parents.

LADY BRACKNELL Both? . . . That seems like carelessness.^o Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some wealth. Was he born in what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?

JACK I am afraid I really don't know. The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me. . . . I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was . . . well, I was found.

LADY BRACKNELL Found!

JACK The late Mr Thomas Cardew, an old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition, found me, and gave me the name of Worthing, because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. Worthing is a place in Sussex.

It is a seaside resort.

LADY BRACKNELL Where did the charitable gentleman who had a first-class ticket for this seaside resort find you?

JACK (*gravely*) In a hand-bag.

LADY BRACKNELL A hand-bag?^o

JACK (*very seriously*) Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a hand-bag—a

somewhat large, black leather hand-bag, with handles to it—an ordinary hand-bag in fact.

LADY BRACKNELL In what locality did this Mr James, or Thomas, Cardew come across this ordinary hand-bag?

JACK In the cloak-room^o at Victoria Station. It was given to him in mistake for his own.

LADY BRACKNELL The cloak-room at Victoria Station?

JACK Yes. The Brighton line.^o

LADY BRACKNELL The line is immaterial.^o Mr Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds^o one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? As for the particular locality in which the hand-bag was found, a cloak-room at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion^o—has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now—but it could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognized position in good society.

JACK May I ask you then what you would advise me to do? I need hardly say I would do anything in the world to ensure Gwendolen's happiness.

LADY BRACKNELL I would strongly advise you, Mr Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season^o is quite over.

JACK Well, I don't see how I could possibly manage to do that. I can produce the hand-bag at any moment. It is in my dressing-room at home. I really think that should satisfy you, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL Me, sir! What has it to do with me? You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter—a girl brought up with the utmost care—to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel! Good morning, Mr Worthing!^o

Lady Bracknell sweeps out in majestic indignation

JACK Good morning! (*Algernon, from the other room, strikes up the Wedding March. Jack looks perfectly furious, and goes to the door*) For goodness' sake don't play that ghastly tune, Algy! How idiotic you are!

The music stops and Algernon enters cheerily

ALGERNON Didn't it go off all right, old boy? You don't mean to say Gwendolen refused you? I know it is a way she has. She is always refusing people. I think it is most ill-natured of her.

JACK Oh, Gwendolen is as right as a trivet. As far as she is concerned, we are engaged. Her mother is perfectly unbearable. Never met such a Gorgon. . . . I don't really know what a Gorgon is like, but I am quite sure that Lady Bracknell is one. In any case, she is a monster, without being a myth, which is rather unfair. . . . I beg your pardon, Algy, I suppose I shouldn't talk about your own aunt in that way before you.

ALGERNON My dear boy, I love hearing my relations abused. It is the only thing that makes me put up with them at all. Relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who haven't got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die.

JACK Oh, that is nonsense!

ALGERNON It isn't!

JACK Well, I won't argue about the matter. You always want to argue about things.

ALGERNON That is exactly what things were originally made for.

JACK Upon my word, if I thought that, I'd shoot myself. . . . (A pause) You don't think there is any chance of Gwendolen becoming like her mother in about a hundred and fifty years, do you Algy?

ALGERNON All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his.

JACK Is that clever?

ALGERNON It is perfectly phrased! and quite as true as any observation in civilized life should be.

JACK I am sick to death of cleverness. Everybody is clever nowadays. You can't go anywhere without meeting clever people. The thing has become an absolute public nuisance. I wish to goodness we had a few fools left.

ALGERNON We have.

JACK I should extremely like to meet them. What do they talk about?

ALGERNON The fools? Oh! about the clever people, of course.

JACK What fools!

ALGERNON The only way to behave to a woman is to make love to her, if she is pretty, and to someone else if she is plain.

JACK Oh, that is nonsense.

ALGERNON What about your brother? What about the profligate Ernest?

JACK Oh, before the end of the week I shall have got rid of him. I'll say he died in Paris of apoplexy. Lots of people die of apoplexy, quite suddenly, don't they?

ALGERNON Yes, but it's hereditary, my dear fellow. It's a sort of thing that runs in families. You had much better say a severe chill.

JACK You are sure a severe chill isn't hereditary, or anything of that kind?

ALGERNON Of course it isn't!

JACK Very well, then. My poor brother Ernest is carried off suddenly in Paris, by a severe chill. That gets rid of him.

ALGERNON But I thought you said that . . . Miss Cardew was a little too much interested in your poor brother Ernest? Won't she feel his loss a good deal?

JACK Oh, that is all right. Cecily is not a silly romantic girl, I am glad to say. She has got a capital appetite, goes long walks, and pays no attention at all to her lessons.

ALGERNON I would rather like to see Cecily.

JACK I will take very good care you never do. She is excessively pretty, and she is only just eighteen.

ALGERNON Have you told Gwendolen yet that you have an excessively pretty ward who is only just eighteen?

JACK Oh! one doesn't blurt these things out to people. Cecily and Gwendolen are perfectly certain to be extremely great friends. I'll bet you anything you like that half an hour after they have met, they will be calling each other sister.

ALGERNON Women only do that when they have called each other a lot of other things first. Now, my dear boy, if we want to get a good table at Willis's, we really must go and dress. Do you know it is nearly seven?

JACK (irritably) Oh! it always is nearly seven.

ALGERNON Well, I'm hungry.

JACK I never knew you when you weren't. . . .

ALGERNON What shall we do after dinner? Go to a theatre?

JACK Oh no! I loathe listening.

ALGERNON Well, let us go to the Club?

JACK Oh, no! I hate talking.

ALGERNON Well, we might trot round to the Empire at ten?

JACK Oh, no! I can't bear looking at things. It is so silly. 665

ALGERNON Well, what shall we do?

JACK Nothing!

ALGERNON It is awfully hard work doing nothing. However, I don't mind hard work where there is no definite object of any kind.

Enter Lane

LANE Miss Fairfax.

Enter Gwendolen. Lane goes out

ALGERNON Gwendolen, upon my word!

Gwendolen Algy, kindly turn your back. I have something very particular to say to Mr Worthing.

ALGERNON Really, Gwendolen, I don't think I can allow this at all. 675

Gwendolen Algy, you always adopt a strictly immoral attitude towards life. You are not quite old enough to do that. (*Algeron retires to the fireplace*)

JACK My own darling!

Gwendolen Ernest, we may never be married. From the expression on mamma's face I fear we never shall. Few parents nowadays pay any regard to what their children say to them. The old-fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out. Whatever influence I ever had over mamma, I lost at the age of three. But although she may prevent us from becoming man and wife, and I may marry someone else, and marry often, nothing that she can possibly do can alter my eternal devotion to you. 685

JACK Dear Gwendolen!

Gwendolen The story of your romantic origin, as related to me by mamma, with unpleasing comments, has naturally stirred the deeper fibres of my nature. Your Christian name has an irresistible fascination. The simplicity of your character makes you exquisitely incomprehensible to me. Your town address at the Albany I have. What is your address in the country?

JACK The Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire. 690

Algeron, who has been carefully listening, smiles to himself, and writes the address on his shirt-cuff. Then picks up the Railway Guide

Gwendolen There is a good postal service, I suppose? It may be necessary to do something desperate. That of course will require serious consideration. I will communicate with you daily.

JACK My own one!

Gwendolen How long do you remain in town?

JACK Till Monday. 700

Gwendolen Good! Algy, you may turn round now.

ALGERNON Thanks, I've turned round already.

Gwendolen You may also ring the bell.

[Algeron rings bell]

JACK You will let me see you to your carriage, my own darling?

Gwendolen Certainly.

[Enter Lane]

JACK I will see Miss Fairfax out.

LANE Yes, sir.

Jack and Gwendolen go off. Lane presents several letters on a salver, to Algeron. It is to be surmised that they are bills, as Algeron, after looking at the envelopes, tears them up

ALGERNON A glass of sherry, Lane.

LANE Yes, sir.

ALGERNON Tomorrow, Lane, I'm going Bunburying.

LANE Yes, sir.

ALGERNON I shall probably not be back till Monday. You can put up my dress clothes, my smoking jacket, and all the Bunbury suits. 710

LANE Yes, sir. (*Handing sherry*)

ALGERNON I hope tomorrow will be a fine day, Lane.

LANE It never is, sir.

ALGERNON Lane, you're a perfect pessimist.

LANE I do my best to give satisfaction, sir.

Enter Jack. Lane goes off

JACK There's a sensible, intellectual girl! the only girl I ever cared for in my life. (*Algeron is laughing immoderately*) What on earth are you so amused at? 720

ALGERNON Oh, I'm a little anxious about poor Bunbury, that is all.

JACK If you don't take care, your friend Bunbury will get you into a serious scrape some day.

ALGERNON I love scrapes. They are the only things that are never serious. 725

JACK Oh, that's nonsense, Algy. You never talk anything but nonsense.

ALGERNON Nobody ever does.

Jack looks indignantly at him, and leaves the room. Algeron lights a cigarette, reads his shirt-cuff, and smiles.

ACT DROP

Second Act

Scene: Garden at the Manor House. A flight of grey stone steps leads up to the house. The garden, an old-fashioned one, full of roses. Time of year, July. Basket chairs, and a table covered with books, are set under a large yew-tree. Miss Prism discovered seated at the table. Cecily is at the back, watering flowers

MISS PRISM (*calling*) Cecily, Cecily! Surely such a utilitarian occupation as the watering of flowers is rather Moulton's duty^o than yours? Especially at a moment when intellectual pleasures await you. Your German grammar is on the table. Pray open it at page fifteen. We will repeat yesterday's lesson.

CECILY (*coming over very slowly*) But I don't like German. It isn't at all a becoming language. I know perfectly well that I look quite plain after my German lesson.

MISS PRISM Child, you know how anxious your guardian is that you should improve yourself in every way. He laid particular stress on your German, as he was leaving for town yesterday. Indeed, he always lays stress on your German when he is leaving for town.

CECILY Dear Uncle Jack is so very serious! Sometimes he is so serious that I think he cannot be quite well.^o

MISS PRISM (*drawing herself up*) Your guardian enjoys the best of health, and his gravity of demeanour is especially to be commended in one so comparatively young as he is. I know no one who has a higher sense of duty and responsibility.

CECILY I suppose that is why he often looks a little bored when we three are together.

MISS PRISM Cecily! I am surprised at you. Mr Worthing has many troubles in his life. Idle merriment and triviality would be out of place in his conversation. You must remember his constant anxiety about that unfortunate young man his brother.

CECILY I wish Uncle Jack would allow that unfortunate young man, his brother, to come down here sometimes. We might have a good influence over him, Miss Prism. I am sure you certainly would. You know German, and geology, and things of that kind influence a man very much. (*Cecily begins to write in her diary*)^o

MISS PRISM (*shaking her head*) I do not think that even I could produce any effect on a character that according to his own brother's admission is irretrievably weak and vacillating. Indeed I

am not sure that I would desire to reclaim him. I am not in favour of this modern mania for turning bad people into good people at a moment's notice. As a man sows so let him reap. You must put away your diary, Cecily. I really don't see why you should keep a diary at all.

CECILY I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. If I didn't write them down I should probably forget all about them.

MISS PRISM Memory, my dear Cecily, is the diary that we all carry about with us.

CECILY Yes, but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened. I believe that Memory is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels that Mudie^o sends us.

MISS PRISM Do not speak slightly of the three-volume novel, Cecily. I wrote one myself in earlier days.

CECILY Did you really, Miss Prism? How wonderfully clever you are! I hope it did not end happily? I don't like novels that end happily. They depress me so much.

MISS PRISM The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.

CECILY I suppose so. But it seems very unfair. And was your novel ever published?

MISS PRISM Alas! no. The manuscript unfortunately was abandoned.^o (*Cecily starts*) I used the word in the sense of lost or mislaid. To your work, child, these speculations are profitless.

CECILY (*smiling*) But I see dear Dr Chasuble coming up through the garden.

MISS PRISM (*rising and advancing*) Dr Chasuble! This is indeed a pleasure.

Enter Canon Chasuble

CHASUBLE And how are we this morning? Miss Prism, you are, I trust, well?

CECILY Miss Prism has just been complaining of a slight headache. I think it would do her so much good to have a short stroll with you in the Park, Dr Chasuble.

MISS PRISM Cecily, I have not mentioned anything about a headache.^o

CECILY No, dear Miss Prism, I know that, but I felt instinctively that you had a headache. Indeed I was thinking about that, and not about my German lesson, when the Rector came in.

CHASUBLE I hope, Cecily, you are not inattentive.

CECILY Oh, I am afraid I am.

CHASUBLE That is strange. Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips. [*Miss Prism glares*] I spoke metaphorically.—My metaphor was drawn from bees. Ahem! Mr Worthing, I suppose, has not returned from town yet?

MISS PRISM We do not expect him till Monday afternoon.

CHASUBLE Ah yes, he usually likes to spend his Sunday in London.

He is not one of those whose sole aim is enjoyment, as, by all accounts, that unfortunate young man his brother seems to be. But I must not disturb Egeria° and her pupil any longer.

MISS PRISM Egeria? My name is Laetitia, Doctor.

CHASUBLE [*bowing*] A classical allusion merely, drawn from the Pagan authors. I shall see you both no doubt at Evensong?

MISS PRISM I think, dear Doctor, I will have a stroll with you. I find I have a headache after all, and a walk might do it good.

CHASUBLE With pleasure, Miss Prism, with pleasure. We might go as far as the schools and back.

MISS PRISM That would be delightful. Cecily, you will read your Political Economy in my absence. The chapter on the Fall of the Rupee° you may omit. It is somewhat too sensational. Even these metallic problems have their melodramatic side.

Goes down the garden with Dr Chasuble

CECILY [*picks up books and throws them back on table*] Horrid Political Economy! Horrid Geography! Horrid, horrid German!

Enter Merriman with a card on a salver

MERRIMAN Mr Ernest Worthing has just driven over from the station. He has brought his luggage with him.

CECILY [*takes the card and reads it*] 'Mr Ernest Worthing, B.4 The Albany, W.'° Uncle Jack's brother! Did you tell him Mr Worthing was in town?

MERRIMAN Yes, Miss. He seemed very much disappointed. I mentioned that you and Miss Prism were in the garden. He said he was anxious to speak to you privately for a moment.

CECILY Ask Mr Ernest Worthing to come here. I suppose you had better talk to the housekeeper about a room° for him.

MERRIMAN Yes, Miss.

Merriman goes off

CECILY I have never met any really wicked person before. I feel rather frightened. I am so afraid he will look just like everyone else.

Enter Algernon, very gay and debonaire

He does!

ALGERNON [*raising his hat*] You are my little cousin Cecily, I'm sure. Cecily You are under some strange mistake. I am not little. In fact, I believe I am more than usually tall for my age. [*Algernon is rather taken aback*] But I am your cousin Cecily. You, I see from your card, are Uncle Jack's brother, my cousin Ernest, my wicked

cousin Ernest.

ALGERNON Oh! I am not really wicked at all, cousin Cecily. You mustn't think that I am wicked.

CECILY If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.

ALGERNON [*looks at her in amazement*] Oh! Of course I have been rather reckless.

CECILY I am glad to hear it.

ALGERNON In fact, now you mention the subject, I have been very bad in my own small way.

CECILY I don't think you should be so proud of that, though I am sure it must have been very pleasant.

ALGERNON It is much pleasanter being here with you.

CECILY I can't understand how you are here at all. Uncle Jack won't be back till Monday afternoon.

ALGERNON That is a great disappointment.° I am obliged to go up by the first train on Monday morning. I have a business appointment that I am anxious . . . to miss!

CECILY Couldn't you miss it anywhere but in London?

ALGERNON No: the appointment is in London.

CECILY Well, I know, of course, how important it is not to keep a business engagement, if one wants to retain any sense of the beauty of life, but still I think you had better wait till Uncle Jack arrives. I know he wants to speak to you about your emigrating.

ALGERNON About my what?

CECILY Your emigrating. He has gone up to buy your outfit.

ALGERNON I certainly wouldn't let Jack buy my outfit. He has no taste in neckties at all.

CECILY I don't think you will require neckties. Uncle Jack is sending you to Australia.

ALGERNON Australia! I'd sooner die.

CECILY Well, he said at dinner on Wednesday night, that you would have to choose between this world, the next world, and Australia.

ALGERNON Oh, well! The accounts I have received of Australia and the next world are not particularly encouraging. This world is good enough for me, cousin Cecily.

CECILY Yes, but are you good enough for it?

ALGERNON I'm afraid I'm not that. That is why I want you to reform me. You might make that your mission, if you don't mind, cousin Cecily.

CECILY I'm afraid I've no time, this afternoon.

ALGERNON Well, would you mind my reforming myself this afternoon?

CECILY It is rather Quixotic^o of you. But I think you should try.

ALGERNON I will. I feel better already.

CECILY You are looking a little worse.

ALGERNON That is because I am hungry.

CECILY How thoughtless of me. I should have remembered that when one is going to lead an entirely new life, one requires regular and wholesome meals. Won't you have a buttonhole first?

ALGERNON Thank you. Might I have a buttonhole first? I have never any appetite unless I have a buttonhole first.

CECILY A Marechal Niel?^o (*Picks up scissors*)

ALGERNON No, I'd sooner have a pink rose.

CECILY Why? (*Cuts a flower*)

ALGERNON Because you are like a pink rose, cousin Cecily.

CECILY I don't think it can be right for you to talk to me like that.

Miss Prism never says such things to me.

ALGERNON Then Miss Prism is a short-sighted old lady. (*Cecily puts the rose in his buttonhole*) You are the prettiest girl I ever saw.

CECILY Miss Prism says that all good looks are a snare.

ALGERNON They are a snare that every sensible man would like to be caught in.

CECILY Oh! I don't think I would care to catch a sensible man. I shouldn't know what to talk to him about.

They pass into the house. Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble return.

MISS PRISM You are too much alone, dear Dr Chasuble. You should get married. A misanthrope I can understand—a womanthrope,^o never!

CHASUBLE (*with a scholar's shudder*) Believe me, I do not deserve so neologistic^o a phrase. The precept as well as the practice of the Primitive^o Church was distinctly against matrimony.

MISS PRISM (*sententiously*) That is obviously the reason why the Primitive Church has not lasted up to the present day. And you do not seem to realize, dear Doctor, that by persistently remaining

single, a man converts himself into a permanent public temptation. Men should be more careful; this very celibacy leads weaker vessels astray.

CHASUBLE But is a man not equally attractive when married?

MISS PRISM No married man is ever attractive except to his wife.

CHASUBLE And often, I've been told, not even to her.

MISS PRISM That depends on the intellectual sympathies of the woman. Maturity can always be depended on. Ripeness can be trusted. Young women are green. (*Dr Chasuble starts*)^o I spoke horticulturally. My metaphor was drawn from fruits. But where is Cecily?

CHASUBLE Perhaps she followed us to the schools.

Enter Jack slowly, from the back of the garden. He is dressed in the deepest mourning, with crape hatband and black gloves

MISS PRISM Mr Worthing!

CHASUBLE Mr Worthing?

MISS PRISM This is indeed a surprise. We did not look for you till Monday afternoon.

JACK (*shakes Miss Prism's hand in a tragic manner*) I have returned sooner than I expected. Dr Chasuble, I hope you are well?

CHASUBLE Dear Mr Worthing, I trust this garb of woe does not betoken some terrible calamity?

JACK My brother.

MISS PRISM More shameful debts and extravagance?

CHASUBLE Still leading his life of pleasure?

JACK (*shaking his head*) Dead!

CHASUBLE Your brother Ernest dead?

JACK Quite dead.

MISS PRISM What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it.

CHASUBLE Mr Worthing, I offer you my sincere condolence. You have at least the consolation of knowing that you are always the most generous and forgiving of brothers.

JACK Poor Ernest! He had many faults, but it is a sad, sad blow.

CHASUBLE Very sad indeed. Were you with him at the end?

JACK No. He died abroad; in Paris, in fact. I had a telegram last night from the manager of the Grand Hotel.

CHASUBLE Was the cause of death mentioned?

JACK A severe chill, it seems.

MISS PRISM As a man sows, so shall he reap.

CHASUBLE (*raising his hand*) Charity, dear Miss Prism, charity! None of us are perfect. I myself am peculiarly susceptible to draughts. Will the interment take place here?

JACK No. He seems to have expressed a desire to be buried in Paris.

CHASUBLE In Paris! (*Shakes his head*) I fear that hardly points to any very serious state of mind at the last. You would no doubt wish me to make some slight allusion to this tragic domestic affliction next Sunday. (*Jack presses his hand convulsively*) My sermon on the meaning of the manna^o in the wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful, or, as in the present case, distressing. (*All sighs*) I have preached it at harvest celebrations, christenings, confirmations, on days of humiliation and festival days. The last time I delivered it was in the Cathedral, as a charity sermon on behalf of the Society for the Prevention of Discontent among the Upper Orders. The Bishop, who was present, was much struck by some of the analogies I drew.

235

JACK Ah! that reminds me, you mentioned christenings I think, Dr Chasuble? I suppose you know how to christen all right? (*Dr Chasuble looks astounded*) I mean, of course, you are continually christening, aren't you?

240

MISS PRISM It is, I regret to say, one of the Rector's most constant duties in this parish. I have often spoken to the poorer classes on the subject. But they don't seem to know what thrift^o is.

JACK Oh yes.

245

MISS PRISM But is there any particular infant in whom you are interested, Mr Worthing? Your brother was, I believe, unmarried, was he not?

JACK Oh yes.

250

MISS PRISM (*bitterly*) People who live entirely for pleasure usually are. JACK But it is not for any child, dear Doctor. I am very fond of children. No! the fact is, I would like to be christened myself, this afternoon, if you have nothing better to do.

CHASUBLE But surely, Mr Worthing, you have been christened already?

255

JACK I don't remember anything about it.

CHASUBLE But have you any grave doubts on the subject?

JACK I certainly intend to have. Of course I don't know if the thing would bother you in any way, or if you think I am a little too old now.

CHASUBLE Not at all. The sprinkling^o and, indeed, the immersion of adults is a perfectly canonical practice.

JACK Immersion!

260

CHASUBLE You need have no apprehensions. Sprinkling is all that is necessary, or indeed I think advisable. Our weather is so changeable. At what hour would you wish the ceremony performed?

265

JACK I don't remember anything about it.

CHASUBLE But have you any grave doubts on the subject?

JACK I certainly intend to have. Of course I don't know if the thing would bother you in any way, or if you think I am a little too old now.

270

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275

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280

JACK Oh, I might trot round about five if that would suit you.

CHASUBLE Perfectly, perfectly! In fact I have two similar ceremonies to perform at that time. A case of twins that occurred recently in one of the outlying cottages on your own estate. Poor Jenkins the carter, a most hard-working man.

275

JACK Oh! I don't see much fun in being christened along with other babies. It would be childish. Would half-past five do?

CHASUBLE Admirably! Admirably! (*Takes out watch*) And now, dear Mr Worthing, I will not intrude any longer into a house of sorrow. I would merely beg you not to be too much bowed down by grief. What seem to us bitter trials are often blessings in disguise.

280

MISS PRISM This seems to me a blessing of an extremely obvious kind.

Enter Cecily from the house

285

CECILY Uncle Jack! Oh, I am pleased to see you back. But what horrid clothes you have got on. Do go and change them.

MISS PRISM Cecily!

CHASUBLE My child! my child.

Cecily goes towards Jack; he kisses her brow in a melancholy manner

CECILY What is the matter, Uncle Jack? Do look happy! You look as if you had toothache, and I have got such a surprise for you. Who do you think is in the dining-room? Your brother!

290

JACK Who?

CECILY Your brother Ernest. He arrived about half an hour ago.

JACK What nonsense! I haven't got a brother.

CECILY Oh, don't say that. However badly he may have behaved to you in the past he is still your brother. You couldn't be so heartless as to disown him. I'll tell him to come out. And you will shake hands with him, won't you, Uncle Jack?

295

Runs back into the house

CHASUBLE These are very joyful tidings.

MISS PRISM After we had all been resigned to his loss, his sudden return seems to me peculiarly distressing.

JACK My brother is in the dining-room? I don't know what it all means. I think it is perfectly absurd.

Enter Algernon and Cecily hand in hand. They come slowly up to Jack

300

JACK Good heavens! (*Motions Algernon away*)

ALGERNON Brother John, I have come down from town to tell you that I am very sorry for all the trouble I have given you, and that

305

JACK Good heavens! (*Motions Algernon away*)

ALGERNON Brother John, I have come down from town to tell you that I am very sorry for all the trouble I have given you, and that

310

JACK Good heavens! (*Motions Algernon away*)

ALGERNON Brother John, I have come down from town to tell you that I am very sorry for all the trouble I have given you, and that

315

I intend to lead a better life in the future. (*Jack glares at him and does not take his hand*)

CECILY Uncle Jack, you are not going to refuse your own brother's hand?

JACK Nothing will induce me to take his hand. I think his coming down here disgraceful. He knows perfectly well why.

CECILY Uncle Jack, do be nice. There is some good in everyone. Ernest has just been telling me about his poor invalid friend Mr Bunbury whom he goes to visit so often. And surely there must be much good in one who is kind to an invalid, and leaves the pleasures of London to sit by a bed of pain.

JACK Oh! he has been talking about Bunbury, has he?

CECILY Yes, he has told me all about poor Mr Bunbury, and his terrible state of health.

JACK Bunbury! Well, I won't have him talk to you about Bunbury or about anything else. It is enough to drive one perfectly frantic.

ALGERNON Of course I admit that the faults were all on my side. But I must say that I think that Brother John's coldness to me is peculiarly painful. I expected a more enthusiastic welcome, especially considering it is the first time I have come here.

CECILY Uncle Jack, if you don't shake hands with Ernest I will never forgive you.

JACK Never forgive me?

CECILY Never, never, never!

JACK Well, this is the last time I shall ever do it. (*Shakes hands with Algernon and glares*)

CHASUBLE It's pleasant, is it not, to see so perfect a reconciliation? I think we might leave the two brothers together.

MISS PRISM Cecily, you will come with us.

CECILY Certainly, Miss Prism. My little task of reconciliation is over.

CHASUBLE You have done a beautiful action today, dear child.

MISS PRISM We must not be premature in our judgements.

CECILY I feel very happy.

They all go off except Jack and Algernon

JACK You young scoundrel, Algy, you must get out of this place as soon as possible. I don't allow any Bunburying here.

Enter Merriman

MERRIMAN I have put Mr Ernest's things in the room next to yours, sir. I suppose that is all right?

JACK What?

MERRIMAN Mr Ernest's luggage, sir. I have unpacked it and put it in the room next to your own.

JACK His luggage?

MERRIMAN Yes, sir. Three portmanteaus, a dressing-case, two hat-boxes, and a large luncheon-basket.

ALGERNON I am afraid I can't stay more than a week^o this time.

JACK Merriman, order the dog-cart^o at once. Mr Ernest has been suddenly called back to town.

MERRIMAN Yes, sir.

Goes back into the house

ALGERNON What a fearful liar you are, Jack. I have not been called back to town at all.

JACK Yes, you have.

ALGERNON I haven't heard anyone call me.

JACK Your duty as a gentleman calls you back.

ALGERNON My duty as a gentleman has never interfered with my pleasures in the smallest degree.

JACK I can quite understand that.

ALGERNON Well, Cecily is a darling.

JACK You are not to talk of Miss Cardew like that. I don't like it.

ALGERNON Well, I don't like your clothes. You look perfectly ridiculous in them. Why on earth don't you go up and change? It is perfectly childish to be in deep mourning for a man who is actually staying for a whole week with you in your house as a guest. I call it grotesque.

JACK You are certainly not staying with me for a whole week as a guest or anything else. You have got to leave... by the four-five train.

ALGERNON I certainly won't leave you so long as you are in mourning. It would be most unfriendly. If I were in mourning you would stay with me, I suppose. I should think it very unkind if you didn't.

JACK Well, will you go if I change my clothes?

ALGERNON Yes, if you are not too long. I never saw anybody take so long to dress, and with such little result.

JACK Well, at any rate, that is better than being always over-dressed as you are.

ALGERNON If I am occasionally a little over-dressed, I make up for it by being always immensely over-educated.

JACK Your vanity is ridiculous, your conduct an outrage, and your presence in my garden utterly absurd. However, you have got to

catch the four-five, and I hope you will have a pleasant journey back to town. This Bunburying, as you call it, has not been a great success for you.

Goes into the house

ALGERNON I think it has been a great success. I'm in love with Cecily, and that is everything.

Enter Cecily at the back of the garden. She picks up the can and begins to water the flowers

But I must see her before I go, and make arrangements for another Bunbury. Ah, there she is.

CECILY Oh, I merely came back to water the roses. I thought you were with Uncle Jack.

ALGERNON He's gone to order the dog-cart for me.

CECILY Oh, is he going to take you for a nice drive?

ALGERNON He's going to send me away.

CECILY Then have we got to part?

ALGERNON I am afraid so. It's a very painful parting.

CECILY It is always painful to part from people whom one has known for a very brief space of time. The absence of old friends one can endure with equanimity. But even a momentary separation from anyone to whom one has just been introduced is almost unbearable.

ALGERNON Thank you.

Enter Merriman

MERRIMAN The dog-cart is at the door, sir.

Algermon looks appealingly at Cecily

CECILY It can wait, Merriman... for... five minutes.

MERRIMAN Yes, miss.

Exit Merriman

ALGERNON I hope, Cecily, I shall not offend you if I state quite frankly and openly that you seem to me to be in every way the visible personification of absolute perfection.

CECILY I think your frankness does you great credit, Ernest. If you will allow me, I will copy your remarks into my diary. *(Goes over to table and begins writing in diary)*

ALGERNON Do you really keep a diary? I'd give anything to look at it. May I?

CECILY Oh no. *(Puts her hand over it)* You see, it is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication. When it appears in volume form I hope you will order a copy. But pray, Ernest, don't stop. I

delight in taking down from dictation. I have reached 'absolute perfection.' You can go on. I am quite ready for more.

ALGERNON *(somewhat taken aback)* Ahem! Ahem!

CECILY Oh, don't cough, Ernest. When one is dictating one should speak fluently and not cough. Besides, I don't know how to spell a cough. *(Writes as Algermon speaks)*

ALGERNON *(speaking very rapidly)* Cecily, ever since I first looked upon your wonderful and incomparable beauty, I have dared to love you wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly.

CECILY I don't think that you should tell me that you love me wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly. Hopelessly doesn't seem to make much sense, does it?

ALGERNON Cecily!

Enter Merriman

MERRIMAN The dog-cart is waiting, sir.

ALGERNON Tell it to come round next week, at the same hour.

MERRIMAN *(looks at Cecily, who makes no sign)* Yes, sir.

Merriman retires

CECILY Uncle Jack would be very much annoyed if he knew you were staying on till next week, at the same hour.

ALGERNON Oh, I don't care about Jack. I don't care for anybody in the whole world but you. I love you, Cecily. You will marry me, won't you?

CECILY You silly boy! Of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months.

ALGERNON For the last three months?

CECILY Yes, it will be exactly three months on Thursday.

ALGERNON But how did we become engaged?

CECILY Well, ever since dear Uncle Jack first confessed to us that he had a younger brother who was very wicked and bad, you of course have formed the chief topic of conversation between myself and Miss Prism. And of course a man who is much talked about is always very attractive. One feels there must be something in him after all. I daresay it was foolish of me, but I fell in love with you, Ernest.

ALGERNON Darling! And when was the engagement actually settled?

CECILY On the 14th of February^o last. Worn out by your entire ignorance of my existence, I determined to end the matter one way or the other, and after a long struggle with myself I accepted you under this dear old tree here.^o The next day I bought this little

ring in your name, and this is the little bangle with the true lovers' knot I promised you always to wear.

ALGERNON Did I give you this? It's very pretty, isn't it?

CECILY Yes, you've wonderfully good taste, Ernest. It's the excuse I've always given for your leading such a bad life. And this is the box in which I keep all your dear letters. (*Kneels at table, opens box, and produces letters tied up with blue ribbon*)

ALGERNON My letters! But my own sweet Cecily, I have never written you any letters.

CECILY You need hardly remind me of that, Ernest. I remember only too well that I was forced to write your letters for you. I wrote always three times a week, and sometimes oftener.

ALGERNON Oh, do let me read them, Cecily!

CECILY Oh, I couldn't possibly. They would make you far too conceited. (*Replaces box*) The three you wrote me after I had broken off the engagement are so beautiful, and so badly spelled, that even now I can hardly read them without crying a little.

ALGERNON But was our engagement ever broken off?

CECILY Of course it was. On the 22nd of last March. You can see the entry if you like. (*Shows diary*) 'Today I broke off my engagement with Ernest. I feel it is better to do so. The weather still continues charming.'

ALGERNON But why on earth did you break it off? What had I done? I had done nothing at all. Cecily, I am very much hurt indeed to hear you broke it off. Particularly when the weather was so charming.

CECILY It would hardly have been a really serious engagement if it hadn't been broken off at least once. But I forgave you before the week was out.

ALGERNON (*crossing to her, and kneeling*) What a perfect angel you are, Cecily.

CECILY You dear romantic boy. (*He kisses her, she puts her fingers through his hair*) I hope your hair curls naturally, does it?

ALGERNON Yes, darling, with a little help from others.

CECILY I am so glad.

ALGERNON You'll never break off our engagement again, Cecily?

CECILY I don't think I could break it off now that I have actually met you. Besides, of course, there is the question of your name.

ALGERNON (*nervously*)—Yes, of course.

CECILY You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love someone whose name was Ernest.

(*Algermon rises, Cecily also*) There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest.

ALGERNON But, my dear child, do you mean to say you could not love me if I had some other name?

CECILY But what name?

ALGERNON Oh, any name you like—Algermon—for instance...

CECILY But I don't like the name of Algermon.

ALGERNON Well, my own dear, sweet, loving little darling, I really can't see why you should object to the name of Algermon. It is not at all a bad name. In fact, it is rather an aristocratic name. Half of the chaps who get into the Bankruptcy Court^o are called Algermon. But seriously, Cecily... (*moving to her*) if my name was Algy, couldn't you love me?

CECILY (*rising*) I might respect you, Ernest, I might admire your character, but I fear that I should not be able to give you my undivided attention.

ALGERNON Ahem! Cecily! (*Picking up hat*) Your Rector here is, I suppose, thoroughly experienced in the practice of all the rites and ceremonies of the Church?

CECILY Oh, yes. Dr Chasuble is a most learned man. He has never written a single book, so you can imagine how much he knows.

ALGERNON I must see him at once on a most important christening—I mean on most important business.

CECILY Oh!

ALGERNON I shan't be away more than half an hour.

CECILY Considering that we have been engaged since February the 14th, and that I only met you today for the first time, I think it is rather hard that you should leave me for so long a period as half an hour. Couldn't you make it twenty minutes?

ALGERNON I'll be back in no time.

Kisses her and rushes down the garden

CECILY What an impetuous boy he is! I like his hair so much. I must enter his proposal in my diary.

Enter Merriman

MERRIMAN A Miss Fairfax has just called to see Mr Worthing. On very important business, Miss Fairfax states.

CECILY Isn't Mr Worthing in his library?

MERRIMAN Mr Worthing went over in the direction of the Rectory some time ago.

CECILY Pray ask the lady to come out here; Mr Worthing is sure to be back soon. And you can bring tea.

MERRIMAN Yes, Miss.

Goes out

CECILY Miss Fairfax! I suppose one of the many good elderly women who are associated with Uncle Jack in some of his philanthropic work in London. I don't quite like women who are interested in philanthropic work. I think it is so forward of them.

Enter Merriman

MERRIMAN Miss Fairfax.

Enter Gwendolen. Exit Merriman

CECILY (*advancing to meet her*) Pray let me introduce myself to you. My name is Cecily Cardew.

GWENDOLEN Cecily Cardew? (*Moving to her and shaking hands*)

What a very sweet name! Something tells me that we are going to be great friends. I like you already more than I can say. My first impressions of people are never wrong.

CECILY How nice of you to like me so much after we have known each other such a comparatively short time. Pray sit down.

GWENDOLEN (*still standing up*) I may call you Cecily, may I not?

CECILY With pleasure!

GWENDOLEN And you will always call me Gwendolen, won't you?

CECILY If you wish.

GWENDOLEN Then that is all quite settled, is it not?

CECILY I hope so.

A pause. They both sit down together

GWENDOLEN Perhaps this might be a favourable opportunity for my mentioning who I am. My father is Lord Bracknell. You have never heard of papa, I suppose?

CECILY I don't think so.

GWENDOLEN Outside the family circle, papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown. I think that is quite as it should be. The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? And I don't like that. It makes men so very attractive. Cecily, mamma, whose views on education are remarkably strict, has brought me up to be extremely short-sighted; it is part of her system; so do you mind my looking at you through my glasses?

CECILY Oh! not at all, Gwendolen. I am very fond of being looked at.

GWENDOLEN (*after examining Cecily carefully through a lorgnette*) You are here on a short visit I suppose.

CECILY Oh no! I live here.

GWENDOLEN (*severely*) Really? Your mother, no doubt, or some female relative of advanced years, resides here also?

CECILY Oh no! I have no mother, nor, in fact, any relations.

GWENDOLEN Indeed?

CECILY My dear guardian, with the assistance of Miss Prism, has the arduous task of looking after me.

GWENDOLEN Your guardian?

CECILY Yes, I am Mr Worthing's ward.

GWENDOLEN Oh! It is strange he never mentioned to me that he had a ward. How secretive of him! He grows more interesting hourly.

I am not sure, however, that the news inspires me with feelings of unmixed delight. (*Rising and going to her*) I am very fond of you, Cecily; I have liked you ever since I met you! But I am bound to state that now that I know that you are Mr Worthing's ward, I cannot help expressing a wish you were—well just a little older than you seem to be—and not quite so very alluring in appearance. In fact, if I may speak candidly—

CECILY Pray do! I think that whenever one has anything unpleasant to say, one should always be quite candid.

GWENDOLEN Well, to speak with perfect candour, Cecily, I wish that you were fully forty-two, and more than usually plain for your age. Ernest has a strong upright nature. He is the very soul of truth and honour. Disloyalty would be as impossible to him as deception. But even men of the noblest possible moral character are extremely susceptible to the influence of the physical charms of others. Modern, no less than Ancient History, supplies us with many most painful examples of what I refer to. If it were not so, indeed, History would be quite unreadable.

CECILY I beg your pardon, Gwendolen, did you say Ernest?

GWENDOLEN Yes.

CECILY Oh, but it is not Mr Ernest Worthing who is my guardian. It is his brother—his elder brother.

GWENDOLEN (*sitting down again*) Ernest never mentioned to me that he had a brother.

CECILY I am sorry to say they have not been on good terms for a long time.

GWENDOLEN Ah! that accounts for it. And now that I think of it I have never heard any man mention his brother. The subject seems

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distasteful to most men. Cecily, you have lifted a load from my mind. I was growing almost anxious. It would have been terrible if any cloud had come across a friendship like ours, would it not? Of course you are quite, quite sure that it is not Mr Ernest Worthing who is your guardian?

CECILY Quite sure. (*A pause*) In fact, I am going to be his.

GWENDOLEN (*enquiringly*) I beg your pardon?

CECILY (*rather shy and confusingly*) Dearest Gwendolen, there is no reason why I should make a secret of it to you. Our little county newspaper is sure to chronicle the fact next week. Mr Ernest Worthing and I are engaged to be married.

GWENDOLEN (*quite politely, rising*) My darling Cecily, I think there must be some slight error. Mr Ernest Worthing is engaged to me. The announcement will appear in the *Morning Post* on Saturday at the latest.

CECILY (*very politely, rising*) I am afraid you must be under some misconception. Ernest proposed to me exactly ten minutes ago. (*Shows diary*)

GWENDOLEN (*examines diary through her lorgnette carefully*) It is very curious, for he asked me to be his wife yesterday afternoon at 5.30. If you would care to verify the incident, pray do so. (*Produces diary of her own*) I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train. I am so sorry, dear Cecily, if it is any disappointment to you, but I am afraid I have the prior claim.

CECILY It would distress me more than I can tell you, dear Gwendolen, if it caused you any mental or physical anguish, but I feel bound to point out that since Ernest proposed to you he clearly has changed his mind.

GWENDOLEN (*meditatively*) If the poor fellow has been entrapped into any foolish promise I shall consider it my duty to rescue him at once, and with a firm hand.

CECILY (*thoughtfully and sadly*) Whatever unfortunate entanglement my dear boy may have got into, I will never reproach him with it after we are married.

GWENDOLEN Do you allude to me, Miss Cardew, as an entanglement? You are presumptuous. On an occasion of this kind it becomes more than a moral duty to speak one's mind. It becomes a pleasure.

CECILY Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Ernest into an engagement? How dare you? This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade.

GWENDOLEN (*satirically*) I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different.

Enter Merriman, followed by the footman. He carries a salver, table cloth, and plate stand. Cecily is about to retort. The presence of the servants exercises a restraining influence, under which both girls chafe

MERRIMAN Shall I lay tea here as usual, Miss?

CECILY (*sternly, in a calm voice*) Yes, as usual.

Merriman begins to clear table and lay cloth. A long pause. Cecily and Gwendolen glare at each other.

GWENDOLEN Are there many interesting walks in the vicinity, Miss Cardew?

CECILY Oh! yes! a great many. From the top of one of the hills quite close one can see five counties.

GWENDOLEN Five counties! I don't think I should like that, I have crowds.

CECILY (*sweetly*) I suppose that is why you live in town?

Gwendolen bites her lip, and beats her foot nervously with her parasol

GWENDOLEN (*looking around*) Quite a well-kept garden this is, Miss Cardew.

CECILY So glad you like it, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN I had no idea there were any flowers in the country.

CECILY Oh, flowers are as common here, Miss Fairfax, as people are in London.

GWENDOLEN Personally I cannot understand how anybody manages to exist in the country, if anybody who is anybody does. The country always bores me to death.

CECILY Ah! This is what the newspapers call agricultural depression, is it not? I believe the aristocracy are suffering very much from it just at present. It is almost an epidemic amongst them, I have been told. May I offer you some tea, Miss Fairfax?

GWENDOLEN (*with elaborate politeness*) Thank you. (*Aside*) Detestable girl! But I require tea!

CECILY (*sweetly*) Sugar?

GWENDOLEN (*superciliously*) No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more. (*Cecily looks angrily at her, takes up the tongs and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup*)

CECILY (*severely*) Cake or bread and butter?

GWENDOLEN (*in a bored manner*) Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.

CECILY (*cuts a very large slice of cake and puts it on the tray*) Hand that to Miss Fairfax.

690

Merriman does so, and goes out with footman. Gwendolen drinks the tea and makes a grimace. Puts down cup at once, reaches out her hand to the bread and butter, looks at it, and finds it is cake.

Rises in indignation

GWENDOLEN You have filled my tea^o with lumps of sugar, and though I asked most distinctly for bread and butter, you have given me cake. I am known for the gentleness of my disposition, and the extraordinary sweetness of my nature, but I warn you, Miss Cardew, you may go too far.

695

CECILY (*rising*) To save my poor, innocent, trusting boy from the machinations of any other girl there are no lengths to which I would not go.

GWENDOLEN From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariably right.

700

CECILY It seems to me, Miss Fairfax, that I am trespassing on your valuable time. No doubt you have many other calls of a similar character to make in the neighbourhood.

Enter Jack^o

GWENDOLEN (*catching sight of him*) Ernest! My own Ernest!

705

JACK Gwendolen! Darling! (*Offers to kiss her*)

GWENDOLEN (*drawing back*) A moment! May I ask if you are engaged to be married to this young lady? (*Points to Cecily*)

JACK (*laughing*) To dear little Cecily! Of course not! What could have put such an idea into your pretty little head?

710

GWENDOLEN Thank you. You may! (*Offers her cheek*)

CECILY (*very sweetly*) I knew there must be some misunderstanding, Miss Fairfax. The gentleman whose arm is at present round your waist is my dear guardian, Mr John Worthing.

GWENDOLEN I beg your pardon?

715

CECILY This is Uncle Jack.

GWENDOLEN (*receding*) Jack! Oh!

Enter Algernon

CECILY Here is Ernest.

ALGERNON (*goes straight over to Cecily without noticing anyone else*) My own love! (*Offers to kiss her*)

720

CECILY (*drawing back*) A moment, Ernest! May I ask you—are you engaged to be married to this young lady?

ALGERNON (*looking round*) To what young lady? Good heavens! Gwendolen!

CECILY Yes! to good heavens, Gwendolen, I mean to Gwendolen.

725

ALGERNON (*laughing*) Of course not! What could have put such an idea into your pretty little head?

CECILY Thank you. (*Presenting her cheek to be kissed*) You may. (*Algernon kisses her*)

GWENDOLEN I felt there was some slight error, Miss Cardew. The gentleman who is now embracing you is my cousin, Mr Algernon Moncrieff.

730

CECILY (*breaking away from Algernon*) Algernon Moncrieff! Oh!

The two girls move towards each other and put their arms round each other's waists as if for protection

CECILY Are you called Algernon?

ALGERNON I cannot deny it.

CECILY Oh!

735

GWENDOLEN Is your name really John?

JACK (*standing rather proudly*) I could deny it if I liked. I could deny anything if I liked. But my name certainly is John. It has been John for years.

CECILY (*to Gwendolen*) A gross deception has been practised on both of us.

740

GWENDOLEN My poor wounded Cecily!

CECILY My sweet wronged Gwendolen!

GWENDOLEN (*slowly and seriously*) You will call me sister, will you not?

745

They embrace. Jack and Algernon groan and walk up and down
CECILY (*rather brightly*) There is just one question I would like to be allowed to ask my guardian.

GWENDOLEN An admirable ideal! Mr Worthing, there is just one question I would like to be permitted to put to you. Where is your brother Ernest? We are both engaged to be married to your brother Ernest, so it is a matter of some importance to us to know where your brother Ernest is at present.

750

JACK (*slowly and hesitatingly*) Gwendolen—Cecily—it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind. However, I will tell you quite frankly that I have no brother Ernest. I have no brother at all. I never had a brother in my life, and I certainly have not the smallest intention of ever having one in the future.

755

CECILY (*surprised*) No brother at all?

JACK (*cheerily*) None!

760

GWENDOLEN (*severely*) Had you never a brother of any kind?

JACK (*pleasantly*) Never. Not even of any kind.

GWENDOLEN I am afraid it is quite clear, Cecily, that neither of us is engaged to be married to anyone.

CECILY It is not a very pleasant position for a young girl suddenly to find herself in. Is it?

GWENDOLEN Let us go into the house. They will hardly venture to come after us there.

CECILY No, men are so cowardly, aren't they?

They retire into the house with scornful looks

JACK This ghastly state of things is what you call Bunburying, I suppose?

ALGERNON Yes, and a perfectly wonderful Bunbury it is. The most wonderful Bunbury I have ever had in my life.

JACK Well, you've no right whatsoever to Bunbury here.

ALGERNON That is absurd. One has a right to Bunbury anywhere one chooses. Every serious Bunburyist knows that.

JACK Serious Bunburyist! Good heavens!

ALGERNON Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life. I happen to be serious about Bunburying. What on earth you are serious about I haven't got the remotest idea. About everything, I should fancy. You have such an absolutely trivial nature.

JACK Well, the only small satisfaction I have in the whole of this wretched business is that your friend Bunbury is quite exploded. You won't be able to run down to the country quite so often as you used to do, dear Algy. And a very good thing too.

ALGERNON Your brother is a little off colour, isn't he, dear Jack? You won't be able to disappear to London quite so frequently as your wicked custom was. And not a bad thing either.

JACK As for your conduct towards Miss Cardew, I must say that your taking in a sweet, simple, innocent girl like that is quite inexcusable. To say nothing of the fact that she is my ward.

ALGERNON I can see no possible defence at all for your deceiving a brilliant, clever, thoroughly experienced young lady like Miss Fairfax. To say nothing of the fact that she is my cousin.

JACK I wanted to be engaged to Gwendolen, that is all. I love her.

ALGERNON Well, I simply wanted to be engaged to Cecily. I adore her.

JACK There is certainly no chance of your marrying Miss Cardew.

ALGERNON I don't think there is much likelihood, Jack, of you and Miss Fairfax being united.

JACK Well, that is no business of yours.

ALGERNON If it was my business, I wouldn't talk about it. (*Begins to eat muffins*) It is very vulgar to talk about one's business. Only people like stockbrokers do that, and then merely at dinner parties.

JACK How you can sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble, I can't make out. You seem to me to be perfectly heartless.

ALGERNON Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them.

JACK I say it's perfectly heartless your eating muffins at all, under the circumstances.

ALGERNON When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me. Indeed, when I am in really great trouble, as anyone who knows me intimately will tell you, I refuse everything except food and drink. At the present moment I am eating muffins because I am unhappy. Besides, I am particularly fond of muffins. (*Rising*)

JACK (*rising*) Well, there is no reason why you should eat them all in that greedy way. (*Takes muffins from Algermon*)

ALGERNON (*offering tea-cake*) I wish you would have tea-cake instead. I don't like tea-cake.

JACK Good heavens! I suppose a man may eat his own muffins in his own garden.

ALGERNON But you have just said it was perfectly heartless to eat muffins.

JACK I said it was perfectly heartless of you, under the circumstances.

That is a very different thing.

ALGERNON That may be. But the muffins are the same. (*He seizes the muffin-dish from Jack*)

JACK Algy, I wish to goodness you would go.

ALGERNON You can't possibly ask me to go without having some dinner. It's absurd. I never go without my dinner. No one ever does, except vegetarians and people like that. Besides I have just made arrangements with Dr Chasuble to be christened at a quarter to six under the name of Ernest.

JACK My dear fellow, the sooner you give up that nonsense the better. I made arrangements this morning^o with Dr Chasuble to be christened myself at 5.30, and I naturally will take the name of Ernest. Gwendolen would wish it. We cannot both be christened Ernest. It's absurd. Besides, I have a perfect right to be christened if I like. There is no evidence at all that I have ever been

christened by anybody. I should think it extremely probable I never was, and so does Dr Chasuble. It is entirely different in your case. You have been christened already. 845

ALGERNON Yes, but I have not been christened for years.

JACK Yes, but you have been christened. That is the important thing. ALGERNON Quite so. So I know my constitution can stand it. If you are not quite sure about your ever having been christened, I must say I think it rather dangerous your venturing on it now. It might make you very unwell. You can hardly have forgotten that someone very closely connected with you was very nearly carried off this week in Paris by a severe chill. 850

JACK Yes, but you said yourself that a severe chill was not hereditary.

ALGERNON It isn't to be, I know—but I daresay it is now. Science is always making wonderful improvements in things. 855

JACK (*picking up the muffin-dish*) Oh, that is nonsense, you are always talking nonsense.

ALGERNON Jack, you are at the muffins again! I wish you wouldn't. There are only two left. (*Takes them*) I told you I was particularly fond of muffins. 860

JACK But I hate tea-cake.

ALGERNON Why on earth then do you allow tea-cake to be served up for your guests? What ideas you have of hospitality! 865

JACK Algernon! I have already told you to go. I don't want you here. Why don't you go!

ALGERNON I haven't quite finished my tea yet! and there is still one muffin left.

Jack groans, and sinks into a chair. Algernon still continues eating.

ACT DROP

Third Act

Scene: Morning-room at the Manor House. Gwendolen and Cecily are at the window, looking out into the garden.

GWENDOLEN The fact that they did not follow us at once into the house, as anyone else would have done, seems to me to show that they have some sense of shame left.

CECILY They have been eating muffins. That looks like repentance.

[*A pause*]

GWENDOLEN They don't seem to notice us at all. Couldn't you cough? 5

CECILY But I haven't got a cough.

GWENDOLEN They're looking at us. What effrontery!

CECILY They're approaching. That's very forward of them.

GWENDOLEN Let us preserve a dignified silence.

CECILY Certainly. It's the only thing to do now.

Enter Jack followed by Algernon. They whistle some dreadful popular air from a British Opera

GWENDOLEN This dignified silence seems to produce an unpleasant effect.

CECILY A most distasteful one.

GWENDOLEN But we will not be the first to speak.

CECILY Certainly not.

GWENDOLEN Mr Worthing, I have something very particular to ask you. Much depends on your reply. 15

CECILY Gwendolen, your common sense is invaluable. Mr Moncrieff, kindly answer me the following question. Why did you pretend to be my guardian's brother? 20

ALGERNON In order that I might have an opportunity of meeting you. CECILY (*to Gwendolen*) That certainly seems a satisfactory explanation, does it not? 25

GWENDOLEN Yes, dear, if you can believe him.

CECILY I don't. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer.

GWENDOLEN True. In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing. Mr Worthing, what explanation can you offer to me for pretending to have a brother? Was it in order that you might have an opportunity of coming up to town to see me as often as possible? 30

JACK Can you doubt it, Miss Fairfax?

Gwendolen I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. This is not the moment for German scepticism. (*Moving to Cecily*) Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory, especially Mr Worthing's. That seems to me to have the stamp of truth upon it.

Cecily I am more than content with what Mr Moncrieff said. His voice alone inspires one with absolute credulity.

Gwendolen Then you think we should forgive them?

Cecily Yes, I mean no.

Gwendolen True! I had forgotten. There are principles at stake that one cannot surrender. Which of us should tell them? The task is not a pleasant one.

Cecily Could we not both speak at the same time?

Gwendolen An excellent ideal! I nearly always speak at the same time as other people. Will you take the time from me?

Cecily Certainly. (*Gwendolen beats time with uplifted finger*)

Gwendolen and Cecily (*speaking together*) Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!

Jack and Algernon (*speaking together*) Our Christian names! Is that all? But we are going to be christened this afternoon.

Gwendolen (*to Jack*) For my sake you are prepared to do this terrible thing?

Jack I am.

Cecily (*to Algernon*) To please me you are ready to face this fearful ordeal?

Algernon I am!

Gwendolen How absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes! Where questions of self-sacrifice are concerned, men are infinitely beyond us.

Jack We are! (*Claps hands with Algernon*)

Cecily They have moments of physical courage of which we women know absolutely nothing.

Gwendolen (*to Jack*) Darling!

Algernon (*to Cecily*) Darling! (*They fall into each other's arms*)

Enter Merriman. When he enters he coughs loudly, seeing the situation

Merriman Ahem! Lady Bracknell.

Jack Good heavens!

Enter Lady Bracknell. The couples separate, in alarm.

Exit Merriman

Lady Bracknell Gwendolen! What does this mean?

Gwendolen Merely that I am engaged to be married to Mr Worthing, mamma.

Lady Bracknell Come here. Sit down. Sit down immediately.

Hesitation of any kind is a sign of mental decay in the young, of physical weakness in the old. (*Turns to Jack*) Apprised, sir, of my daughter's sudden flight by her trusty maid, whose confidence I purchased by means of a small coin, I followed her at once by a luggage train. Her unhappy father is, I am glad to say, under the impression that she is attending a more than usually lengthy lecture by the University Extension Scheme on the Influence of a permanent income on Thought. I do not propose to deceive him. Indeed I have never deceived him on any question. I would consider it wrong. But of course, you will clearly understand that all communication between yourself and my daughter must cease immediately from this moment. On this point, as indeed on all points, I am firm.

Jack I am engaged to be married to Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell!

Lady Bracknell You are nothing of the kind, sir. And now as regards Algernon! . . . Algernon!

Algernon Yes, Aunt Augusta.

Lady Bracknell May I ask if it is in this house that your invalid friend Mr Bunbury resides?

Algernon (*stammering*) Oh! No! Bunbury doesn't live here. Bunbury is somewhere else at present. In fact, Bunbury is dead.

Lady Bracknell Dead! When did Mr Bunbury die? His death must have been extremely sudden.

Algernon (*anxiously*) Oh! I killed Bunbury this afternoon. I mean poor Bunbury died this afternoon.

Lady Bracknell What did he die of?

Algernon Bunbury? Oh, he was quite exploded.

Lady Bracknell Exploded! Was he the victim of a revolutionary outrage? I was not aware that Mr Bunbury was interested in social legislation. If so, he is well punished for his morbidity.

Algernon My dear Aunt Augusta, I mean he was found out! The doctors found out that Bunbury could not live, that is what I mean—so Bunbury died.

Lady Bracknell He seems to have had great confidence in the opinion of his physicians. I am glad, however, that he made up his mind at the last to some definite course of action, and acted under proper medical advice. And now that we have finally got rid of this

Mr Bunbury, may I ask, Mr Worthing, who is that young person whose hand my nephew Algernon is now holding in what seems to me a peculiarly unnecessary manner?

JACK That lady is Miss Cecily Cardew, my ward. (*Lady Bracknell bows coldly to Cecily*)

ALGERNON I am engaged to be married to Cecily, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL I beg your pardon?

CECILY Mr Moncrieff and I are engaged to be married, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL (*with a sneer, crossing to the sofa and sitting down*)

I do not know whether there is anything peculiarly exciting in the air of this particular part of Hertfordshire, but the number of engagements that go on seems to me considerably above the proper average that statistics have laid down for our guidance. I think some preliminary enquiry on my part would not be out of place.

Mr Worthing, is Miss Cardew at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London? I merely desire information. Until yesterday I had no idea that there were any families or persons whose origin was a Terminus. (*Jack looks perfectly furious, but restrains himself*)

JACK (*in a clear, cold voice*) Miss Cardew is the granddaughter of the late Mr Thomas Cardew of 149 Belgrave Square, S.W.; Gervase Park, Dorking, Surrey, and the Sportan, Ffeshine, N.B.

LADY BRACKNELL That sounds not unsatisfactory. Three addresses always inspire confidence, even in tradesmen. But what proof have I of their authenticity?

JACK I have carefully preserved the Court Guides of the period. They are open to your inspection, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL (*grimly*) I have known strange errors in that publication.

JACK Miss Cardew's family solicitors are Messrs Markby, Markby, and Markby.

LADY BRACKNELL Markby, Markby, and Markby? A firm of the very highest position in their profession. Indeed I am told that one of the Mr Markbys is occasionally to be seen at dinner parties. So far I am satisfied.

JACK (*very irritably*) How extremely kind of you, Lady Bracknell! I have also in my possession, you will be pleased to hear, certificates of Miss Cardew's birth, baptism, whooping cough, registration, vaccination, confirmation, and the measles, both the German and the English variety.

LADY BRACKNELL Ah! A life crowded with incident, I see, though perhaps somewhat too exciting for a young girl. I am not myself in favour of premature experiences. (*Rises, looks at her watch*) Gwendolen! the time approaches for our departure. We have not a moment to lose. As a matter of form, Mr Worthing, I had better ask you if Miss Cardew has any little fortune?

JACK Oh! about a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds. That is all. Good-bye, Lady Bracknell. So pleased to have seen you.

LADY BRACKNELL (*sitting down again*) A moment, Mr Worthing. A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. Few girls of the present day have any really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and improve with time. We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces. (*To Cecily*) Come over here, dear. (*Cecily goes across*) Pretty child! your dress is sadly simple, and your hair seems almost as Nature might have left it. But we can soon alter all that. A thoroughly experienced French maid produces a really marvellous result in a very brief space of time. I remember recommending one to young Lady Lancing, and after three months her own husband did not know her.

JACK And after six months nobody knew her.

LADY BRACKNELL (*glances at Jack for a few moments. Then bends, with a practised smile, to Cecily*) Kindly turn round, sweet child. (*Cecily turns completely round*) No, the side view is what I want. (*Cecily presents her profile*) Yes, quite as I expected. There are distinct social possibilities in your profile. The two weak points in our age are its want of principle and its want of profile. The chin a little higher, dear. Style largely depends on the way the chin is worn. They are worn very high, just at present, Algernon!

ALGERNON Yes, Aunt Augusta!

LADY BRACKNELL There are distinct social possibilities in Miss Cardew's profile.

ALGERNON Cecily is the sweetest, dearest, prettiest girl in the whole world. And I don't care twopence about social possibilities.

LADY BRACKNELL Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that. (*To Cecily*) Dear child, of course you know that Algernon has nothing but his debts to depend upon. But I do not approve of mercenary marriages. When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never

dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way. Well, I suppose I must give my consent.

ALGERNON Thank you, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL Cecily, you may kiss me!

CECILY (*kisses her*) Thank you, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL You may also address me as Aunt Augusta for the future.

CECILY Thank you, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL The marriage, I think, had better take place quite soon.

ALGERNON Thank you, Aunt Augusta.

CECILY Thank you, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL To speak frankly, I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable.

JACK I beg your pardon for interrupting you, Lady Bracknell, but this engagement is quite out of the question. I am Miss Cardew's guardian, and she cannot marry without my consent until she comes of age. That consent I absolutely decline to give.

LADY BRACKNELL Upon what grounds may I ask? Algermon is an extremely, I may almost say an ostentatiously, eligible young man. He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?

JACK It pains me very much to have to speak frankly to you, Lady Bracknell, about your nephew, but the fact is that I do not approve at all of his moral character. I suspect him of being untruthful.

Algermon and Cecily look at him in indignant amazement

LADY BRACKNELL Untruthful! My nephew Algermon? Impossible! He is an Oxonian.

JACK I fear there can be no possible doubt about the matter. This afternoon during my temporary absence in London on an important question of romance, he obtained admission to my house by means of the false pretence of being my brother. Under an assumed name he drank, I've just been informed by my butler, an entire pint bottle of my Perrier-Jouet, Brut, '89,° a wine I was specially reserving for myself. Continuing his disgraceful deception, he succeeded in the course of the afternoon in alienating the affections of my only ward. He subsequently stayed to tea, and devoured every single muffin. And what makes his conduct all the more heartless is, that he was perfectly well aware from the first that I have no brother, that I never had a brother, and that I don't

intend to have a brother, not even of any kind. I distinctly told him so myself yesterday afternoon.

LADY BRACKNELL Ahem! Mr Worthing, after careful consideration I have decided entirely to overlook my nephew's conduct to you.

JACK That is very generous of you, Lady Bracknell. My own decision, however, is unalterable. I decline to give my consent.

LADY BRACKNELL (*to Cecily*) Come here, sweet child. (*Cecily goes over*) How old are you, dear?

CECILY Well, I am really only eighteen, but I always admit to twenty when I go to evening parties.

LADY BRACKNELL You are perfectly right in making some slight alteration. Indeed, no woman should ever be quite accurate about her age. It looks so calculating. . . . (*In a meditative manner*) Eighteen, but admitting to twenty at evening parties. Well, it will not be very long before you are of age and free from the restraints of tutelage. So I don't think your guardian's consent is, after all, a matter of any importance.

JACK Pray excuse me, Lady Bracknell, for interrupting you again, but it is only fair to tell you that according to the terms of her grandfather's will Miss Cardew does not come legally of age till she is thirty-five.

LADY BRACKNELL That does not seem to me to be a grave objection. Thirty-five is a very attractive age. London society is full of women of the very highest birth who have, of their own free choice, remained thirty-five for years. Lady Dumbleton is an instance in point. To my own knowledge she has been thirty-five ever since she arrived at the age of forty, which was many years ago now. I see no reason why our dear Cecily should not be even still more attractive at the age you mention than she is at present. There will be a large accumulation of property.

CECILY Algy, could you wait for me till I was thirty-five?

ALGERNON Of course I could, Cecily. You know I could.

CECILY Yes, I felt it instinctively, but I couldn't wait all that time. I hate waiting even five minutes for anybody. It always makes me rather cross. I am not punctual myself, I know, but I do like punctuality in others, and waiting, even to be married, is quite out of the question.

ALGERNON Then what is to be done, Cecily?

CECILY I don't know, Mr Monciff.

LADY BRACKNELL My dear Mr Worthing, as Miss Cardew states positively that she cannot wait till she is thirty-five—a remark

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ALGERNON Then what is to be done, Cecily?

CECILY I don't know, Mr Moncrieff.

LADY BRACKNELL My dear Mr Worthing, as Miss Cardew states positively that she cannot wait till she is thirty-five—a remark

which I am bound to say seems to me to show a somewhat impatient nature—I would beg of you to reconsider your decision. JACK But my dear Lady Bracknell, the matter is entirely in your own hands. The moment you consent to my marriage with Gwendolen, I will most gladly allow your nephew to form an alliance with my ward.

LADY BRACKNELL (*rising and drawing herself up*) You must be quite aware that what you propose is out of the question.

JACK Then a passionate celibacy^o is all that any of us can look forward to.

LADY BRACKNELL That is not the destiny I propose for Gwendolen. Algernon, of course, can choose for himself. (*Pulls out her watch*) Come, dear (*Gwendolen rises*), we have already missed five, if not six, trains. To miss any more might expose us to comment on the platform.

Enter Dr Chasuble

CHASUBLE Everything is quite ready for the christenings.

LADY BRACKNELL The christenings, sir! Is not that somewhat premature?

CHASUBLE (*looking rather puzzled, and pointing to Jack and Algernon*) Both these gentlemen have expressed a desire for immediate baptism.

LADY BRACKNELL At their age? The idea is grotesque and ridiculous! Algernon, I forbid you to be baptized. I will not hear of such excesses. Lord Bracknell would be highly displeased if he learned that that was the way in which you wasted your time and money.

CHASUBLE Am I to understand then that there are to be no christenings at all this afternoon?

JACK I don't think that, as things are now, it would be of much practical value to either of us, Dr Chasuble.

CHASUBLE I am grieved to hear such sentiments from you, Mr Worthing. They savour of the heretical views of the Anabaptists,^o views that I have completely refuted in four of my unpublished sermons. However, as your present mood seems to be one peculiarly secular, I will return to the church at once. Indeed, I have just been informed by the pew-opener^o that for the last hour and a half Miss Prism has been waiting for me in the vestry.

LADY BRACKNELL (*starting*) Miss Prism! Did I hear you mention a Miss Prism?

CHASUBLE Yes, Lady Bracknell. I am on my way to join her.

LADY BRACKNELL Pray allow me to detain you for a moment. This matter may prove to be one of vital importance to Lord Bracknell and myself. Is this Miss Prism a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education?

CHASUBLE (*somewhat indignantly*) She is the most cultivated of ladies, and the very picture of respectability.

LADY BRACKNELL It is obviously the same person.^o May I ask what position she holds in your household?

CHASUBLE (*severely*) I am a celibate,^o madam.

JACK (*interposing*) Miss Prism, Lady Bracknell, has been for the last three years Miss Cardew's esteemed governess and valued companion.

LADY BRACKNELL In spite of what I hear of her, I must see her at once. Let her be sent for.

CHASUBLE (*looking off*) She approaches; she is nigh.

Enter Miss Prism hurriedly

MISS PRISM I was told you expected me in the vestry, dear Canon. I have been waiting for you there for an hour and three quarters.

(*Catches sight of Lady Bracknell who has fixed her with a stony glare.*)

MISS PRISM grows pale and quails. She looks anxiously round as if desirous to escape)

LADY BRACKNELL (*in a severe, judicial voice*) Prism! (*Miss Prism bows her head in shame*) Come here, Prism! (*Miss Prism approaches in a humble manner*) Prism! Where is that baby? (*General consternation. The Canon starts back in horror. Algernon and Jack pretend to be anxious to shield Cecily and Gwendolen from hearing the details of a terrible public scandal*) Twenty-eight years ago, Prism, you left Lord Bracknell's house, Number 104, Upper Grosvenor Square,^o in charge of a perambulator that contained a baby, of the male sex. You never returned. A few weeks later, through the elaborate investigations of the Metropolitan police, the perambulator was discovered at midnight standing by itself in a remote corner of Bayswater. It contained the manuscript of a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality. (*Miss Prism starts in involuntary indignation*) But the baby was not there. (*Everyone looks at Miss Prism*) Prism! Where is that baby?

A pause.

MISS PRISM Lady Bracknell, I admit with shame that I do not know.

I only wish I did. The plain facts of the case are these. On the morning of the day you mention, a day that is for ever branded on my memory, I prepared as usual to take the baby out in its

perambulator. I had also with me a somewhat old, but capacious hand-bag in which I had intended to place the manuscript of a work of fiction that I had written during my few unoccupied hours. In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I can never forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinette^o and placed the baby in the hand-bag. 350

JACK (*who had been listening attentively*) But where did you deposit the hand-bag?

MISS PRISM Do not ask me, Mr Worthing. 355

JACK Miss Prism, this is a matter of no small importance to me. I insist on knowing where you deposited the hand-bag that contained that infant.

MISS PRISM I left it in the cloak-room of one of the larger railway stations in London. 360

JACK What railway station?

MISS PRISM (*quite crushed*) Victoria. The Brighton line. (*Sinks into a chair*)

JACK I must retire to my room for a moment. Gwendolen, wait here for me.

GWENDOLEN If you are not too long, I will wait here for you all my life. 365

Exit Jack in great excitement

CHASUBLE What do you think this means, Lady Bracknell?

LADY BRACKNELL I dare not even suspect, Dr Chasuble. I need hardly tell you that in families of high position strange coincidences are not supposed to occur. They are hardly considered the thing. 370

Noises heard overhead as if some one was throwing trunks about.

Everyone looks up

CECILY Uncle Jack seems strangely agitated.

CHASUBLE Your guardian has a very emotional nature.

LADY BRACKNELL This noise is extremely unpleasant. It sounds as if he was having an argument. I dislike arguments of any kind. 375

They are always vulgar, and often convincing.

CHASUBLE (*looking up*) It has stopped now. (*The noise is redoubled*)

LADY BRACKNELL I wish he would arrive at some conclusion.

GWENDOLEN This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last.

Enter Jack with a hand-bag of black leather in his hand

JACK (*rushing over to Miss Prism*) Is this the hand-bag, Miss Prism? 380

Examine it carefully before you speak. The happiness of more than one life depends on your answer.

MISS PRISM (*calmly*)^o It seems to be mine. Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street^o omnibus in

younger and happier days. Here is the stain on the lining caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage,^o an incident that occurred at Leamington.^o And here, on the lock, are my initials. I had forgotten that in an extravagant mood I had had them placed there. The bag is undoubtedly mine. I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years. 390

JACK (*in a pathetic voice*) Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this hand-bag. I was the baby you placed in it.

MISS PRISM (*amazed*) You?

JACK (*embracing her*) Yes—mother!

MISS PRISM (*recoiling in indignant astonishment*) Mr Worthing! I am unmarried! 395

JACK Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But after all, who has the right to cast a stone^o against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? Mother, I forgive you.^o (*Tries to embrace her again*) 400

MISS PRISM (*still more indignant*) Mr Worthing, there is some error. (*Pointing to Lady Bracknell*) There is the lady who can tell you who you really are.

[*A pause*]

JACK Lady Bracknell, I hate to seem inquisitive, but would you kindly inform me who I am? 405

LADY BRACKNELL I am afraid that the news I have to give you will not altogether please you. You are the son of my poor sister, Mrs Moncrieff, and consequently Algernon's elder brother.

JACK Algy's elder brother! Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother! Cecily—how could you have ever doubted that I had a brother. (*Seizes hold of Algy*) Dr Chasuble, my unfortunate brother. Miss Prism, my 410

unfortunate brother. Gwendolen, my unfortunate brother. Algy, you young scoundrel, you will have to treat me with more respect in the future. You have never behaved to me like a brother in all your life. 415

ALGERNON Well, not till today, old boy, I admit. I did my best, however, though I was out of practice.

Shakes hands

GWENDOLEN (*to Jack*) My own! But what own are you? What is your Christian name, now that you have become someone else? 420

JACK Good heavens!—I had quite forgotten that point. Your decision on the subject of my name is irrevocable, I suppose?

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JACK Lady Bracknell, I hate to seem inquisitive, but would you kindly inform me who I am?

LADY BRACKNELL I am afraid that the news I have to give you will not altogether please you. You are the son of my poor sister, Mrs Moncreiff, and consequently Algernon's elder brother.

JACK Algernon's elder brother! Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother! Cecily—how could you have ever doubted that I had a brother. (*Seizes hold of Algernon*) Dr Chasuble, my unfortunate brother. Miss Prism, my unfortunate brother. Gwendolen, my unfortunate brother. Algy, you young scoundrel, you will have to treat me with more respect in the future. You have never behaved to me like a brother in all your life.

ALGERNON Well, not till today, old boy, I admit. I did my best, however, though I was out of practice.

Shakes hands

GWENDOLEN (*to Jack*) My own! But what own are you? What is your Christian name, now that you have become someone else?

JACK Good heavens!—I had quite forgotten that point. Your decision on the subject of my name is irrevocable, I suppose?

GWENDOLEN I never change, except in my affections.

CECILY What a noble nature you have, Gwendolen!

JACK Then the question had better be cleared up at once. Aunt Augusta, a moment. At the time when Miss Prism left me in the hand-bag, had I been christened already?

LADY BRACKNELL Every luxury that money could buy, including christening, had been lavished on you by your fond and doting parents.

JACK Then I was christened! That is settled. Now, what name was I given? Let me know the worst.

LADY BRACKNELL Being the eldest son you were naturally christened after your father.

JACK (*irritably*) Yes, but what was my father's Christian name?

LADY BRACKNELL (*meditatively*) I cannot at the present moment recall what the General's Christian name was. But I have no doubt he had one. He was eccentric, I admit. But only in later years. And that was the result of the Indian climate, and marriage, and indigestion, and other things of that kind.

JACK Algy! Can't you recollect what our father's Christian name was?

ALGERNON My dear boy, we were never even on speaking terms. He died before I was a year old.

JACK His name would appear in the Army Lists of the period, I suppose, Aunt Augusta?

LADY BRACKNELL The General was essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life. But I have no doubt his name would appear in any military directory.

JACK The Army Lists of the last forty years are here. These delightful records should have been my constant study. (*Rushes to bookcase and tears the books out*) M. Generals... Mallam, Max-bohm, Magley—what ghastly names they have—Markby, Missby, Mobbs, Moncrieff! Lieutenant 1840, Captain, Lieutenant-Colonel, Colonel, General 1869, Christian names, Ernest John. (*Puts book very quietly down and speaks quite calmly*) I always told you, Gwendolen, my name was Ernest, didn't I? Well, it is Ernest after all. I mean it naturally is Ernest.

LADY BRACKNELL Yes, I remember now that the General was called Ernest. I knew I had some particular reason for disliking the name.

GWENDOLEN Ernest! My own Ernest! I felt from the first that you could have no other name!

GWENDOLEN I can. For I feel that you are sure to change.

JACK My own one!

CHASUBLE (*to Miss Prism*) Laetitia! (*Embraces her*)

MISS PRISM (*enthusiastically*) Frederick! At last!

ALGERNON Cecily! (*Embraces her*) At last!

JACK Gwendolen! (*Embraces her*) At last!

LADY BRACKNELL My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of tiviality.

JACK On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest.

TABLEAU

CURTAIN

APPENDIX

The First Scenario of *The Importance of Being Earnest*

This first scenario of *The Importance of Being Earnest* has been lost for many years. It is reproduced from a typescript in the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, Los Angeles, by permission of the library and of Mr Merthin Holland. It has previously been published in full in the *Times Literary Supplement* (20 Dec. 1991) and in Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde Rewritten* (1993); it appears in part in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 359.

Wilde wrote it in July 1894, at a time when complete plays and royalties were clearly no longer sufficient to keep his precarious finances buoyant. Alexander, the producer of Wilde's first theatrical success, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, had expressed an interest in a new comedy. Wilde rapidly composed the scenario to secure an advance, before going to Worthing, initially to spend a holiday with his family, but also to work on the play. Having received the advance, he began to backtrack, suggesting the play was too farcical for Alexander and offering him a more suitable and 'strong' outline, which eventually became, in Frank Harris's hands, *Mr and Mrs Davenport*.

The scenario clearly forms the skeleton of the play which became *The Importance of Being Earnest*, though Miss Prism alone of the prototype roles bears the same name as her eventual character. Several names come from previous plays or drafts (as was Wilde's habit in working versions): most notably, Lord Alfred Ruford, whose style inevitably suggests Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde's constant companion at this period. The 'double life' features strongly, as does the arrest for debts, which survived only in the four-act version. Miss Prism is clearly destined to act as the *deus ex machina*, though Wilde has not worked out how she will 'set all right'. Wilde had as yet not travelled down to Worthing on the Brighton line from Victoria station; and at this point, the emphasis seems to be on Bertram/George Ashton as the guardian, rather than on Jack/Ernest as the orphan or foundling.

My dear Aleck,
16, Tite Street,
S.W.

Thanks for your letter. There really is nothing more to tell you about the comedy beyond what I said already. I mean that the real charm of the play, if it is to have charm, must be in the dialogue. The plot is slight, but I think, adequate.

Act I. Evening party. 10 p.m.

APPENDIX

Lord Alfred Ruford's rooms in Mayfair. Arrives from country Bertram Ashton his friend: a man of 25 or 30 years of age: his great friend.

Ruford asks him about his life. He tells him that he has a ward, etc. very young and pretty. That in the country he has to be serious, etc. that he comes to town to enjoy himself, and has invented a fictitious younger brother of the name of George—to whom all his misdeeds are put down. Ruford is deeply interested about the ward.

Guests arrive: the Duchess of Selby and her daughter, Lady Maud Ruford, with whom the guardian is in love—fin-de-siècle talk, a lot of guests—the guardian proposes to Lady Maud on his knees—enter Duchesses—

Lady Maud. 'Mamma, this is no place for you.'

Scene: Duchess enquires for her son Lord Alfred Ruford: servant comes in with note to say that Lord Alfred has been suddenly called away to the country. Lady Maud vows eternal fidelity to the guardian whom she only knows under the name of George Ashton.

(P.S. The disclosure of the guardian of his double life is occasioned by Lord Alfred saying to him 'You left your handkerchief here the last time you were up' (or cigarette case). The guardian takes it—the Lord A. says but 'why, dear George, is it marked Bertram—who is Bertram Ashton?' Guardian discloses plot.)

Act II. The guardian's home—pretty cottage. Mabel Harbord, his ward, and her governess, Miss Prism, Governess of course dragon of propriety. Talk about the profligate George: maid comes in to say 'Mr. George Ashton'—governess protests against his admission. Mabel insists. Enter Lord Alfred. Falls in love with ward at once. He is reproached with his bad life, etc. Expressed great repentance. They go to garden.

Enter guardian: Mabel comes in: 'I have a great surprise for you—your brother is here'—Guardian, of course, denies having a brother. Mabel says 'You cannot disown your own brother, whatever he has done.'—and brings in Lord Alfred. Scene: also scene between two men alone. Finally Lord Alfred arrested for debts contracted by guardian: guardian delighted. Mabel, however, makes him forgive his brother and pay up. Guardian looks over bills and scolds Lord Alfred for profligacy.

Miss Prism backs the guardian up. Guardian then orders his brother out of the house. Mabel intercedes, and brother remains. Miss Prism has designs on the guardian—matrimonial—she is 40 at least—she believes he is proposing to her and accepts him—his consternation.

Act III. Mabel and the false brother. He proposes, and is accepted.

When Mabel is alone, Lady Maud, who only knows the guardian under the name of George, arrives alone. She tells Mabel she is engaged to George—scene naturally. Mabel retires: enter George, he kisses his sister naturally. Enter Mabel and sees them. Explanations, of course. Mabel breaks off the match on the ground that there is nothing to reform in George: she only consented to marry him because she thought he was bad and wanted

guidance—He promises to be a bad husband—so as to give her an opportunity of making him a better man; she is a little mollified.

Enter guardian: he is reproached also by Lady Maud for his respectable life in the country: a J. P.: a county-councillor: a churchwarden: a philanthropist: a good example. He appeals to his life in London: she is mollified, on condition that he never lives in the country: the country is demoralising: it makes you respectable. 'The simple fare at the Savoy: the quiet life in Piccadilly: the solitude of Mayfair is what you need, etc.'

Enter Duchess in pursuit of her daughter—objects to both matches. Miss Prism, who had in early days been governess to the Duchess, sets it all right, without intending to do so—everything ends happily.

Result Curtain

Author called.

Cigarette called.

Manager called.

Royalties for a year for author.

Manager credited with writing the play. He consoles himself for the slander with bags of red gold.

Fireworks

Of course this scenario is open to alterations: the third act, after entrance of Duchess, will have to be elaborated: also, the local doctor, or clergyman, must be brought in, in the play, for Prism.

Well, I think an amusing thing with lots of fun and wit might be made. If you think so, too, and care to have the refusal of it—do let me know—and send me £150. If, when the play is finished, you think it too slight—not serious enough—of course you have the £150 back—I want to go away and write it—and it could be ready in October—as I have nothing else to do—and Palmer is anxious to have a play from me for the States 'with no real serious interest'—just a comedy.

In the meanwhile, my dear Aleck, I am so pressed for money, that I don't know what to do. Of course I am extravagant, but a great deal of my worries comes from the fact that I have had for three years to keep up two establishments—my dear Mother's as well as my own—like many Irish ladies she never gets her jointure paid—small though it is—and naturally it falls on me—this is of course *quite private* but for these years I have had two houses on my shoulders—and of course, am extravagant besides—you have always been a good wise friend to me—so think what you can do.

Kind regards to Mrs. Aleck.

Ever,

OSCAR

EXPLANATORY NOTES

Lady Windermere's Fan

Dedication. Robert Bulwer, the first Earl of Lytton (1831-91), was the son of Bulwer Lytton, and a poet and diplomat. Wilde enlisted his support in obtaining a Civil List Pension for Lady Wilde.

The Persons of the Play. There is usually a reason behind Wilde's choice of names. For his more important characters, he tended to choose place-names, often drawn from areas he had stayed in while writing the play: he began *Lady Windermere's Fan* in the Lake District and travelled through Selby, in Yorkshire (the name of the Windermers' country house), on the same trip. (He also often reused names from previous works—a Lady Windermere featured in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*, a source also for the names Jedburgh and Plymdale.) Wilde is precise about rank and forms of address: 'Lady Agatha' is the daughter, and 'Lord Augustus' the younger son, of a duke. He was careful to avoid extant titles, but seldom employed names which would seem blatantly unrealistic. Even his 'comic' names are relatively restrained—the well-bred but intellectually limited Dumbly, for example, or the Australian Hopper. In the Clark MS version, there are a number of age indications, including 'middle-aged' (Dumbly), 'young—masher'—a dedicated lady-killer—(Graham), and 'young—go' (Lady Plymdale). Lady Jedburgh ('old') is Graham's aunt.

Cast. *George Alexander*: a fine actor who was trained under Irving at the Lyceum. He became manager of the St James's Theatre in 1891 and actively encouraged new work by English playwrights. It was Wilde's good fortune to have so accomplished and perceptive a man as producer of two of his comedies.

Ben Webster: as Cecil Graham wore a green carnation as a button-hole—as did Graham Robertson and other friends of Wilde in the first-night audience. This dandiacal touch was echoed by Wilde himself when he made his notorious curtain-speech. According to Henry James, the 'unspeakable one' appeared 'with a metallic blue carnation in his button-hole and a cigarette in his fingers'. A green flower was apparently used as a code of recognition by Paris homosexuals, though most of the London audience would not have known this.

Francis Adolphus Lane-Tempest: an actor who had the right credentials for Dumbly: Harrow and Oxford, and two failures to be elected to Parliament.

420 *Second palm tree*: the first edition has 'Third palm tree', but that must be a slip deriving from an earlier version, where the palm tree joke is extended by Mabel after she has been kept waiting by Lord Goring—'The third palm tree to the left. Not the usual palm tree.'

432 *playing Mrs Chereley's cards?*: playing Mrs Chereley's cards for her, to enable her to win the game.

441 s.d. *philosopher*: another serious speech from the supposedly trivial Lord Goring. It is clear that he is being sincere, though he is propounding principles which he himself would never follow.

484 *A man's life*: Lady Chiltern's word for word repetition has a comic impact, and Lord Goring is present as stage-manager of the resolution. 500 *your sister's guardian*: Wilde, as often, postpones or qualifies the simple ending which the plot seems to suggest.

579 *Radicals*: the more extreme section of the Liberal party. 589 *ideal husband*: ironically, the 'ideal husband' is Sir Robert; the crucial distinction is between 'ideal' and 'real'.

Curtain: Wilde experimented with a number of endings. In the Frohman version, the last s.d. is: 'Exit Caversham—Goring and Sir Robert meet C. shaking hands as Curtain falls', following a last line spoken by Lord Goring. Russell Jackson suggests that this may well have been the practice of the first production. Wilde had originally closed the play on a line for Lady Chiltern, 'There is love in it, and that is better'. In the Clark typescript, Lady Chiltern's 'Ah, there is love, and that is everything' is given to Lord Goring, and the word 'father' added, which is what appears in the Licensing Copy. Wilde's more prolonged and sentimental ending is harder to achieve, but is, perhaps, subtler than the more conventional ensemble conclusion.

The Importance of Being Earnest

Dedication: Robert Ross (1869-1918) was Wilde's most faithful friend and his literary executor.

The Persons of the Play. This set of names incorporates more allusions and connotations than usual, even by Wilde's standards.

Worthing: the seaside town in Sussex where Wilde was staying when he wrote much of the play, and an appropriately upright name for a Justice of the Peace. (The play's working title, *Lady Lancing*, and the reference to Lord Shoreham (l. 13), commemorate other Sussex seaside resorts.)

Algernon Moncrieff: in the first scenario, the comparable character was 'Lord Alfred Ruford', perhaps too blatant an echo of Lord Alfred Douglas.

Chasuble: a chasuble is a vestment worn by priests when celebrating the Eucharist, a practice of the early Church revived in the nineteenth century by the Oxford Movement. (Wilde had been drawn to High Church Anglican ceremonial at Oxford.) Like the Archdeacon in *A Woman of No Importance*, Chasuble is a Doctor of Divinity. The name suggests chastity.

Merriman, Lane: according to Max Beerbohm, Wilde threatened to name the two butlers Mathews and Lane, after his publishers at the Bodley Head, Elkin Mathews and John Lane, with whom he was at odds—they had announced the splitting of their partnership in Sept. 1894. 'The name Merriman is, I suppose, a token of forgiveness.' (Written in Max Beerbohm's copy, owned by Sir Rupert Hart-Davis.) *Lady Bracknell*: Bracknell was where the Marchioness of Queensberry, Lord Alfred Douglas's mother, lived.

Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax: Gwendolen has the courtesy title of Honourable, as daughter of a baron or viscount.

Cecily Cardew: the Cardews were friends of Wilde; their daughter, Cicely, was born in May 1893, and Wilde reportedly promised to name the heroine of his next play after her. In the 1993 Aldwych production, 'Cecily' was pronounced 'Cicely', in the late Victorian style.

Prism: this wonderfully apposite name belonged to the governess from the first scenario, with connotations of geometry and also of elocution, deriving from Mrs General in Dickens's *Little Dorrit*: 'Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes, and prism, are all very good words for the lips: especially prunes and prism.' A 'Miss Prunes and Prism' is someone very affected and precise.

Cast. Apart from Alexander, only two of the cast had appeared in a Wilde comedy before: Vincent (who was Lord Augustus Lorton in *Lady Windermere's Fan*), and Rose Leclercq (Lady Hunstanton in *A Woman of No Importance*). Violet Lyster took over the part of Cecily Cardew for some later performances.

¹ Half-Moon Street is one side of a rough rectangle, together with Piccadilly, Park Lane, and Curzon Street. The 'artistically' signifies 'in good taste', not necessarily an accompaniment to 'luxuriously'. Wilde gives no description of the furniture arrangement; there must be a sofa, at least two chairs, and a place for the sherry decanter and glasses, in addition to a table for the tea and a tiered cake-stand. Two doors are indicated, one to the adjoining music-room, one to the rest of the house. What Algernon is playing, and how, is important. In Donald Sinden's 1987 production, Ken Wynn as Lane underwent 'aesthetic torture when obliged to listen to Algernon playing the piano with more expression than accuracy' (Francis King, *Sunday Telegraph*). In the Talawa Theatre production (1989), Lane sang a different tune to the

one Algernon was tinkling off-stage. The Asquith film script stipulates Chopin's C sharp minor Waltz, played with more spirit than accuracy.

10 S.D. *Hands them on a salver*: this action sets the play's tone: the heightened, almost absurd, decorum, immediately exploded by the nonchalant, even ruthless, satisfaction of appetite.

13 *Shoreham*: the 1899 edition has 'Shoreman', but earlier drafts read Shoreham, which must be correct.

25 *misunderstanding*: presumably the marriage was undertaken because of an implied promise, though 'misunderstanding' also seems to function as a euphemism like Lady Bracknell's 'social indiscretion', l. 558.

37 S.D. *Enter Jack*: Jack brings hat, stick, and gloves with him, and shakes hands with Algernon (Alexander's s.d.), indicating the intention, at least, of a short visit. Jack and Algernon are subtly differentiated, by age, appearance, and manner: Algernon is established as younger than Jack (l. 58). Reviewing the 1982 National Theatre production, Michael Billington (*Guardian*) drew attention to the contrast between the dry formality of Martin Jarvis's whey-faced Jack, with his 'wing collar, cruel specs and severe swept back hair', and Nigel Havers's 'floppy-crowned, curly-haired, insouciant' Algernon. In the 1989 Talawa production Ben Thomas as Algernon was 'a smooth aesthete done out in a crisp moustache and cream suit' (Nicholas de Jongh, *Guardian*).

40 *Oh, pleasure, pleasure!*: French adds 'putting hat on table', the first of a series of gestures implying a more extended call.

43 *slight refreshment*: sandwiches, bread and butter, crumpets, muffins, even, in the country, cake (2. 686), might accompany the tea which was served around five o'clock. The Victorian upper classes are steadily. Dinner might not be until 8.30 p.m.

52 *Shropshire?*: a county in the west Midlands, some distance from London.

83 S.D. *interfere*: more specifically, 'Algy takes up plate and puts it on his knees' (Alexander). The obsession with food reflects Wilde's own habits. Theodore Wratistaw, staying with Wilde at Goring, recorded a bizarre 'exhibition of wrath' over a plate of biscuits, and Wilde's enormous consumption of sausages.

87 S.D. *from below*: the plates are on a tiered stand.

114 *Scotland Yard*: the Metropolitan police headquarters.

119 S.D. *Enter Lane . . . salver*: Alexander expands: 'Algy and Jack both try to take it. Algy takes it and moves down R.'

139 *Tunbridge Wells*: a spa town in Kent, traditional residence for respectable old aunts.

163 *B.4, The Albany*: Wilde originally wrote E.4, but changed the address to an unoccupied apartment. E.4 was the apartment of the homosexual

George Ives, at which Wilde met Jack Bloxam, the founder of a one-issue Oxford magazine, *The Chameleon*, which was cited during Wilde's trials. Albany, as it is usually referred to, at the other end of Piccadilly from Half-Moon Street, next to the Royal Academy, had sets of 'bachelor chambers'. Built in 1802-3, it had slightly lost its exclusive reputation by the end of the century.

184 S.D. *Hands cigarette case*: Alexander's notes indicate that Algernon helps himself to a cigarette before handing it over; Jack also takes one. They light them at significant moments—Algernon after his crucial question at l. 199, Jack as he completes his reply at l. 208.

185 S.D. *Sits on sofa*: after Jack's pursuit of Algernon, Wilde introduces a siltier stage position for Jack's explanation.

223 *Bunbury*: Wilde had a friend from Trinity College, Dublin, Henry S. Bunbury. The assonance with Bunbury makes the name vaguely disconcerting, an effect which Wilde promotes by repetition.

226 *Wills'*: this fashionable restaurant in King Street, near the St James's Theatre, famous for its cuisine, scarlet leather seats and yellow candle shades, was patronized by Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas. Some of the audience would dine there after the performance, as Wilde's friend Ada Leverton did on the first night of *Ernest*.

237 *sent down*: guests assembled before dinner in the drawing-room, upstairs. A man would be partnered with a woman, whom he would escort downstairs to the dining-room and then sit beside.

264 *French Drama*: like the French novel, French drama was thought of by the English as potentially corrupting, with frequent instances of adultery and infidelity, as in the plays of Dumas *fil.* In reality, English dramatists (including Wilde) borrowed extensively from French models, though tending to dilute the more explicit and sensational facts.

273 *creditors*: in earlier versions, Algernon's creditors hounded him through the play.

Wagnerian: when Wilde's first child was born, he commented that its style was essentially Wagnerian.

281 *Good afternoon, dear Algernon*: various editions (e.g. French) indicate that Lady Bracknell shakes hands with Algernon, while Gwendolen kisses her hand to Jack behind her mother's back.

292 *Lady Harbury*: at this point, Lane enters with a teapot (Alexander)—otherwise, the tea would be stewed—and pours a cup for Lady Bracknell. Algernon adds milk before handing it to her at l. 315. There are many variations in the s.d.s of early versions.

298 *where I am*: Gwendolen is swiftly established as having a mind of her own (as at l. 290). As the Asquith script comments, Gwendolen,

although young and pretty, has something of her mother's air and carriage'.

303 *I went down twice*: Lane is the perfect complement to Algernon, lying with elegant aplomb. He must take the empty plate from Algernon at this point.

315 S.D. *hands tea*: Alexander adds a s.d. for Jack and Gwendolen—Gwendolen 'pours out two cups, they both drink and talk'.

322 *completely out*: Algernon's absence would create uneven numbers. An equal number of ladies and gentlemen might be invited, but it was customary to invite two additional gentlemen in order that the married ladies should not be obliged to go in to dinner with each other's husbands only' (*Manners and Rules of Good Society* (1924), 103).

335 *Illness of any kind* . . . : Lady Bracknell echoes the short shift given to invalids in Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872).

341 *my last reception*: Lady Bracknell has arranged a number of receptions during the current London season.

353 *French songs*: morally suspect, like French novels and plays.

357 *German sounds a thoroughly respectable language*: the respectability of German was guaranteed by the blood ties and frequent contacts between the English and German royal families.

361 *Pray don't take to me about the weather*: 'Gwendolen comes down right, throws wrap over back of sofa then sits down-stage' (Alexander). Even her speech carries a hint of Lady Bracknell.

385 *Gwendolen?*: Jack's use of 'Gwendolen' for the first time is a declaration of love in itself. (Compare Lord Goring and Miss Mabel in *An Ideal Husband*.) Alexander adds more details—at 'Passionately', Gwendolen puts her arms round Jack's neck. At l. 386, they embrace. In the National Theatre production of 1982, Zoe Wanamaker pronounced 'Passionately' in a voice of throaty sexiness' (Billington, *Guardian*).

415 *Married, Mr Worthing?*: Gwendolen reacts crisply to Jack's presumption about getting married by returning to the formality of 'Mr Worthing', which he echoes at l. 417. French adds s.d., 'They both rise'.

438 *What wonderfully blue eyes*: Gwendolen, a modern woman, assumes the initiative, even taking over the traditionally male expressions. Alexander's stage directions extend the reversal with physical gestures: Lady Bracknell repeats 'Mr Worthing' at l. 441, but Gwendolen restrains Jack—'pushes him down with her hands on his shoulders'—and at l. 447—'I am engaged to Mr Worthing, mamma'—'lifts Jack up by placing her hand underneath his elbows'.

451 *pleasant*: after 'pleasant', Alexander points the alternative with a s.d.: 'stares at Jack, then goes l. a little, turns'.

461 S.D. *note-book and pencil*: Lady Bracknell makes notes of Jack's answers to her questions (not just as directed at l. 487). In Nicholas Hytner's 1993 Aldwych production, Maggie Smith developed the note-taking into a superb, if extended, comic routine. The MS draft indicates that Jack pulls out his cigarette case, replacing it at a glare from Lady Bracknell.

492 *after one's death*: death duties were a tax on inherited capital, introduced by the Liberal Government in the 1894 Budget to the dismay of the propertied class.

503 *Belgrave Square*: just south of Hyde Park Corner.

506 *Lady Bloxham?*: French adds 'severely'.

519 *Liberal Unionist*: Lady Bracknell would not have entertained a Liberal. Liberal Unionists voted against Gladstone's proposals for Home Rule for Ireland. Led by Joseph Chamberlain, they helped form the Conservative Government which came to power in 1895.

524 *Both? . . . That seems like carelessness*: in earlier texts, the line reads: 'Both? To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune—to lose both seems like carelessness.' Robert Ross's edition of 1908-9, which makes some slight changes to the 1899 text, reads: 'To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.' The longer versions have subsequent theatrical tradition to support them.

541 *A hand-bag?*: Edith Evans's majestic interpretation of Lady Bracknell—her 'great essay in dragonhood'—captured on film, television, and radio, must have seemed a formidable obstacle to succeeding actresses. Her rendering of this line, equally unforgettable, has entered folklore, giving rise to innumerable ghastly imitations. She herself grew to dislike the role: 'I've played her everywhere except on ice and under water' (Bryan Forbes, *Ned's Girl* (1977), 195). James Agate (*Sunday Times*, 5 Feb. 1939) wrote: 'As long as Miss Evans is on the stage one has no doubt about anything except the relative grandeur of Lady Bracknell's upholstery, and those two hats in one of which swans nest while in the other all the fowls of Rostand's "Chantecler" come to roost.' Irene Handl (Greenwich Theatre, 1975) avoided comparisons by making Lady Bracknell of German extraction. The first Lady Bracknell, Rose Leclercq, established the strong physical presence of the character: 'The handkerchief she used, the long bottle of eau-de-Cologne, the way she sat—such details marked her as the blue-blooded lady she portrayed' (Irene Vanbrugh, *To Tell My Story* (1948)—Vanbrugh was the original Gwendolen). Judi Dench's brilliant Lady Bracknell at the National Theatre, 1982, presented a much younger woman, in her forties. Michael Billington saw her as 'a woman prey to quicksilver feelings. Thus she starts the famous interview with Mr

Worthing with a voracious, note-taking delight in his financial prospects: even the news that he inhabits the unfashionable side of Belgrave Square elicits nothing more than a mercurial giggle. . . . But the shattering news of his origins is greeted not with a sub-Evans swoop but with a very slow, incredulous removal of her glasses and a sotto voce rendering of "A handbag?" in thunderous disbelief. Ostentatiously tearing up her notes, she conducts the rest of the interrogation with the hurried politeness of someone anxious to catch a train' (Billington, *Guardian*).

547 *cloak-room*: the left luggage office.

550 *The Brighton line*: some of these details may have been suggested to Wilde through his friendship with Mr Philip Cardew, as well as by his own excursions. Philip's brother Christopher, who died in Oct. 1893, was a director of the London, Brighton, and South Coast Railway, which shared the terminus of Victoria station with the London, Chatham, and Dover Railway.

551 *The line is immaterial*: French notes that Lady Bracknell rises.

555 *reminds*: the 1899 text has 'remind'.

559 *social indiscretion*: Lady Bracknell implies, of course, that the baby was illegitimate, the product of a liaison between a 'gentleman' and someone of lower rank (a situation Wilde had already explored in *A Woman of No Importance*). Lost babies are a stock motif of comedy and melodrama, but this is also a link with the reality of Victorian society.

568 *the season*: the London season was, for 'society', the traditional period for engagements.

576 *Good morning, Mr Worthing!*: so in 1899 edition, but logically 'Good afternoon'.

577 s.d. *Wedding March*: Mendelssohn's Wedding March for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

586 *Gorgon*: Greek monster, with serpents in place of hair.

591 *My dear boy*: stage tradition often has Algernon settling himself on a sofa with his feet up for this speech.

603 *make love*: as usual at this period, verbally only.

606 *only just eighteen*: girls from the upper classes 'came out' into society at 18, after which they were considered marriageable.

605 *go and dress*: people put on evening dress, even when dining at a smart restaurant, or when attending a play or opera in a box or the 'dress circle'.

662 *the Club?*: this would be one of the exclusively male clubs such as White's or Boodle's, near the St James's Theatre.

664 *the Empire*: famous music-hall in Leicester Square, whose promenade had been a notorious rendezvous for prostitutes. Mrs Ormiston Chant of the Britishwoman's Temperance Association had objected to the renewal of the Empire's licence in the autumn of 1894. If Algernon and Jack arrived at ten, they would have seen the 'Grand Ballet' featuring the *première danseuse* Helene Cornalba in 'Round the Town'.

672 *turn your back*: French has a s.d. for Gwendolen, 'turning him round'.

675 *I don't think I can allow this at all*: Algernon, who breaks all the rules when it suits him, is suggesting that he should not leave Gwendolen 'alone' with Jack, unchaperoned, even by just turning his back.

694 *The Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire*: a contemporary photograph in the *Sketch*, 20 Feb. 1895, shows Irene Vanbrugh as Gwendolen noting the address in her diary.

705 s.d. *Enter Lane*: Alexander has a s.d.: 'As Lane enters Jack and Gwendolen are kissing R.U.' As Jack looks up he turns his back and stands below door R.U.'

713 *put up*: pack.

smoking jacket: indoor jacket, often of velvet.

730 s.d. *reads his shirt-cuff*: Algernon reads Jack's address from his shirt cuff. In his copy of the first edition, Max Beerbohm adds a last comment for Algernon: 'And besides, I love nonsense!' This agrees with the four-act version. The Alexander text reads: 'Nobody ever does. Besides I love nonsense!', and continues with the address read aloud from the shirt cuff, together with the s.d. 'Drinking as curtain falls'. Beerbohm comments: 'I have a good verbal and visual memory, and I can still hear Allen Aynesworth saying these words, and see him raising his glass of sherry as he said them and as the curtain fell. I don't see why Oscar cut them from the printed version; for they surely are just right.'

2 This is a rather more detailed outdoor setting than the First Act of *A Woman of No Importance*. The opening action lightly illustrates the Wildean tension between pleasure and duty. The roses are an integral part of the setting. In the National Theatre production, this was the most commented upon of John Bury's settings. Billington reported that the designs hinted at the play's topsy-turvy, Gilbertian quality in their faint stylization: 'The second-act garden, for instance, has a glassy, reflecting surface, sporadic rose-trees (again a hint of Alice?) [*Alice in Wonderland*] and a silhouetted village background' (*Guardian*).

2 *Moulton's duty*: the gardener Moulton appeared on stage in the original draft.

14 *quite well*: French indicates that Cecily puts down her watering-can at this point.

- 29 s.d. *diary*: this is a highly literary play, full of references to manuscripts and books, the triumph of art. In addition to Cecily's and Gwendolen's diaries, there are Lady Bracknell's note-book and Miss Prism's three-volume novel, as well as the Railway Guides and Army Lists. Cecily must sit just before this action.
- 46 *Mudie*: a London circulating library.
- 57 *abandonde*: this almost submerged *double-entendre* (lost or mislaid/licitious) leads on to Chasuble's 'hang upon her hips' at l. 76, and his reference to the Pagan authors, establishing an undercurrent of licence bubbling beneath the surface decorum.
- 63 *And how are we this morning?*: Chasuble shakes hands with Miss Prism (French).
- 69 *headache*: Miss Prism sits, followed by Chasuble at l. 73. He rises at l. 83, and Miss Prism immediately after (French).
- 83 *Egeria*: the nymph who instructed Numa Pompilius, the second King of Rome, and so any wise adviser. *Laelia* (l. 84) is the Latin for 'joy, happiness'.
- 93 *Fall of the Rupee*: the Indian currency had been falling for twenty years. Max Beerbohm preferred the following last sentence of this speech, relying on his memory of the first performance: 'It is somewhat too unconventional for a young girl.'
- 98 *He has brought his luggage with him*: Frank Dyall, who played Merriman in 1895, recalled that this line received the loudest and most sustained laugh that he had ever experienced, culminating in a round of applause. When he came off, Wilde (who was backstage) said to him: 'I am so glad you got that laugh. It shows they have followed the plot' (Hesketh Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1946), 257).
- 100 *W.*: West, one of the former London postal districts.
- 106 *room*: having brought his luggage, Algernon obviously intends to stay for some while.
- 109 s.d. *Enter Algernon*: a photograph (*Sketch*, 20 Feb. 1895) shows Allen Ayresworth wearing a conspicuously checked suit and straw boater.
- 125 *I am glad to hear it*: French adds 'sitting'.
- 133 *great disappointment*: Algernon brings up a chair and sits, rising on l. 150 and the mention of Australia, a common Victorian destination for wayward younger sons (Alexander s.d.).
- 161 *Quixotic*: like Cervantes's Don Quixote, a romantic idealist.
- 170 *Martichal Niel?*: a species of yellow rose.
- 182 s.d. *Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble return*. Alexander notes that they return arm in arm.
- 184 *womanthrop*: Wilde coined this word for misogynist in 'The Critic as

- Artist'. Chasuble gives a 'scholar's shudder', l. 186, at so ill-mixed a conjunction of Old English and Ancient Greek.
- 187 *neologistic*: newly invented.
- 188 *Primitive*: early Christian.
- 197 *not even to her*: French adds 'putting his hand over hers on table'.
- 200 s.d. *Dr Chasuble starts*: Wilde's widespread use of patterning in this play extends to gestures and phrases.
- 203 s.d. *Enter Jack slowly*: one of the great entrances in theatre. It is significant that Jack enters '*slowly*'. Alexander arranged a downstage movement for Prism (right) and Chasuble (left), so that their reaction to Jack was delayed, ensuring that the audience saw him first. But Beerbohm criticized Alexander, in the 1902 revival, for 'bustling on at break-neck speed' when the situation demands 'the slowest of entries'.
- 222 *Poor Ernest!*: Jack takes out a black-bordered handkerchief and wipes his eyes (Alexander). Michael Redgrave, Jack in the Asquith film, produced the handkerchief at 'Quite dead'.
- 225 *Grand Hotel*: Wilde had stayed in this luxurious hotel in the Boulevard des Capucines in 1891.
- 237 *mannu*: the food provided miraculously for the Children of Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 16).
- 251 *thrift*: a euphemism for sexual continence.
- 267 *sprinkling*: Chasuble distinguishes baptism by sprinkling water on the forehead from baptism by total immersion, either practice being in accord with the laws and customs of the Church.
- 327 *Uncle Jack*: French has a s.d. for Cecily, 'pulling Jack across to Algie'.
- 339 *I feel very happy*: 'Algie runs L. to follow Cecily. Jack catches him by the leg with his stick and drags him back' (Alexander).
- 348 *dressing-case*: a dressing-case contained all the bits and pieces for the Victorian male's toilet: hair brushes, razors, pomade jars, etc. (Reginald Turner gave one to Wilde on his release from prison.)
- 350 *more than a week*: Algernon emphasizes his intentions by taking off his hat and putting it on the table (French).
- 351 *dog-cart*: a light carriage, with a compartment at the back for carrying sporting dogs.
- 371 *four-five train*: the five minutes past four train is clearly only one of an extremely frequent service. In the four-act version, Lady Bracknell misses eleven trains in the course of the afternoon.
- 405 s.d. *Algernon looks appealingly*: even Algernon does not feel confident enough to give orders to a servant and has to appeal to Cecily. By l. 433, in mid-proposal, he can rise to the challenge.

- 454 *On the 14th of February: 14 February is St Valentine's Day, as well as the date of the play's first performance. French adds 'Algy embraces Cecily.'*
- 457 *this dear old tree here: the whole sequence is given comic emphasis by specific objects: tree, ring, bangle, and finally the letters.*
- 509 *Bankruptcy Court: the theme of bankruptcy loomed much larger in the four-act version.*
- 544 *s.d. Enter Gwendolen: Gwendolen is carrying a parasol. The Asquith screenplay specifies 'a particularly elaborate and Londonish dress'.*
- 558 *s.d. They both sit down together: many of Cecily and Gwendolen's movements are synchronized.*
- 628 *Morning Post: the society newspaper, in contrast to The Times, as in An Ideal Husband.*
- 658 *s.d. Enter Merriman: Merriman and the footman remain throughout the following combat.*
- 673 *as people are in London: Alexander and French have a s.d. at this point, with a re-entry for Merriman with 'wicker cake stand containing cut bread and butter, plate of muffins, of tea cake, puts it down behind garden seat.' French adds a servant who makes two entries, the first with a tea-tray, the second with a wicker table on which are plates and covered dishes.*
- 691 *You have filled my tea: with the departure of the servants, the girls rise to confront each other.*
- 704 *s.d. Enter Jack: Jack has by this time changed from his mourning clothes into a less formal suit.*
- 732 *Algernon Moncrieff! Oh!: the movements here were as patterned as the verbal exchanges, as Alexander's stage directions confirm.*
- 771 *s.d. They retire into the house with scornful looks: the girls' exit is emphasized by a range of gestures in different drafts and texts. In the four-act version, the scene was set indoors: 'Jack and Algernon look at each other for a short time. Then they turn away from each other. Jack, who looks very angry, walks up and down the room. Kicks footstool aside in a very irritated way. Algernon goes over to tea-table and eats some muffins after lifting up the covers of several dishes.' In the Alexander text, the girls snort as they enter the house: 'Jack hits Algie in chest with elbow imitating girls' snort.' French has coarser business: 'Algy kicks Jack, and Jack returns it spitefully'.*
- 839 *this morning: Jack made the arrangement at 1. 279, clearly 'this afternoon', but the mistake passes unnoticed in the theatre. (In the four-act version, the Second Act was set in the morning.)*
- 3 *Morning-room: a more intimate place than the drawing-room, which was reserved for the most formal occasions.*

- 11 *s.d. some dreadful popular air: Wilde is exacting his revenge on Gilbert and Sullivan. Alexander indicates that they whistle out of tune (as Michael Redgrave and Michael Denison do in the Asquith film).*
- 33 *Can you doubt it, Miss Fairfax?: Alexander has the beginning of a long s.d. which Wilde deleted in typescript: 'Jack and Algy both move together like Siamese twins in every movement until both say "christened this afternoon." Clearly the movements of both pairs are patterned, becoming almost operatic when they speak together, and culminating in the moment when they are in each other's arms.*
- 50 *s.d. speaking together: Jack also raises his finger like a conductor (Asquith).*
- 78 *luggage train: Lady Bracknell has had to travel by a goods, rather than a passenger, train, as illustrated in the Asquith film.*
- 132 *Fifeshire, N.B.: the more normal usage was simply Fife. N.B. stands for North Britain, a common term for Scotland. The Duke and Duchess of Fife were regular first-nighters at the St James's Theatre.*
- 158 *in the Funds: government stocks, traditionally a safe investment.*
- 170 *Lady Lanning: Wilde used this as the working title of the play.*
- 180 *They are worn very high: Maggie Smith's Lady Bracknell wore her own chin particularly high and made constant adjustments to its precise angle.*
- 219 *Oxonian: like Wilde, Algernon has been at university at Oxford.*
- 225 *Perrier-Jouet, Bruu, 89: this dry champagne of a choice vintage was a favourite drink of Wilde and Douglas.*
- 252 *till she is thirty-five: 'Cecily pinches Jack's arm' (Alexander).*
- 270 *Mr Moncrieff: Cecily's formality signals that the engagement is in peril. Significantly, again, it is the women who cannot wait (cf. Gwendolen's expression of devotion to Jack, even though she may marry someone else, and marry often). French specifies the physical shift which is needed: 'C. moves up L. behind table; Algy moves to Jack.'*
- 281 *passionate celibacy: 'Jack and Algie turn arm in arm and go up to French windows. The girls turn their backs and sob' (Alexander).*
- 305 *Anabaptists: the Anabaptists insisted on a second baptism, denouncing the baptism of the established church.*
- 308 *pew-opener: someone employed to open the pews for the congregation—wealthier church-goers had their own pew (closed off by a door), for which they paid rent.*
- 319 *It is obviously the same person: French has the instruction 'thoughtfully' for Lady Bracknell—subtler than the more obvious tone of sarcasm.*
- 321 *celibate: Chasuble is ostensibly a follower of this practice of the Early*

Church. Wilde develops the role and attitudes of Chasuble in more detail in the four-act version.

332 *s.d. anxious to shield*: Algernon's and Jack's screening took the form, for Alexander, of turning the girls round with their backs to Miss Prism.

334 *Upper Grosvenor Square*: off Park Lane, to the east of Hyde Park. Bayswater (l. 335) lies to the north of the Park. H. G. Wells, in a review in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, records his memory of the first night, that the perambulator was found 'at the summit of Primrose Hill', a more remote and somehow absurd location.

351 *bosminelle*: perambulator.

382 *s.d. calmly*: the four-act text adds 'puts on her spectacles'.

383 *Gower Street*: this street, the destination of the horse-drawn omnibus, is the location of London University and the British Museum, suitable associations for Miss Prism.

385 *temperance beverage*: other drafts specify a lemonade bottle.

386 *Leamington*: Leamington Spa, Warwickshire, was a respectable and genteel town like Tunbridge Wells (l. 139).

398 *cast a stone*: stoning was the biblical punishment for adultery—Christ refused to cast the first stone. Wilde is almost parodying the language of *A Woman of No Importance*.

401 *Mother, I forgive you*: French adds 'throws bag to Dr C'.

453 *Marbohm*: a private Wilde joke, referring to his friend Max Beerbohm.

475 *Tableau*: The ending underwent a number of revisions before Wilde settled on the conventional use of the title. For the final tableau, Lady Bracknell was centre stage, Gwendolen and Jack to her right, Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble also right but further back, and Algernon and Cecily to her left (Alexander).