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Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest

Adapted and Abridged by
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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

SCENE I

SCENE. *The morning room in Algernon Moncrieff's flat, London. The rear of the setting is formed by a large screen, about eight or ten feet high, which extends across the full width of the stage. In color this screen is soft gray, and it is ornamented with scrolls and tassels in white and deep red. The general effect should suggest the lush opulence of the Victorian era. U.C. there stands a sofa whose curved back repeats the curving lines of the screen-backing. D.R. there stands a table, at either side of which are placed Victorian parlor chairs with richly carved wooden frames. Both chairs are upholstered in gray velvet. The table cover is red velvet, edged with heavy fringe, and hangs to the floor. D.L. is placed a Victorian armchair, upholstered in red velvet; in front of it is a hassock; to L. of chair is a low table. Another low table, laden with tea things, is placed below the sofa C. An elaborate arrangement of wax flowers under a bell jar crowns the table D.R. A Victorian statuette stands upon the table D.L. Beyond the screen-backing is darkness; the scene itself is brilliant.*

AT RISE. *The sound of a piano is heard off R. LANE, a faultlessly attired manservant, with iron-gray hair and an impassive countenance, is arranging afternoon tea on the low table C. A moment after the music has ceased, ALGERNON*

enters R. *His clothes are in the soberly impeccable taste of the Victorian gentleman. He is young, but a certain tired expression, born of cynicism and ennui, does much to conceal the fact.*

ALGERNON. Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

(He moves down to a position below the chair D.R.)

LANE. *(X. to exit L.)* I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

(LANE exits L. ALGERNON X. to tea table U.C., inspects the sandwiches, takes two, seats himself on the sofa C. and proceeds to read a magazine which happens to be lying on the sofa. A brief moment later LANE enters.)

LANE. Mr. Ernest Worthing.

(JACK enters. LANE goes out.)

ALGERNON. *(Without rising; his mouth pretty well stuffed with sandwich)* How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town?

JACK. Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere? *(Moving D.L.)* 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 in chair D.L.)* In the country.

ALGERNON. *(Still nibbling)* What on earth do you do there?

JACK. Amuse people.

ALGERNON. And who are the people you amuse?

JACK. *(Airily)* Oh, neighbors, neighbors.

ALGERNON. Got nice neighbors in your part of Shrop-

shire? (*Reaching over and procuring another sandwich*) Shropshire is your county, is it not?

JACK. Eh? Shropshire? Yes, of course. (*Changing the subject*) Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? 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. (*Rising and X.R.*) 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. (*JACK rises and X. to tea table C.*) Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. (*Coming back to the tea table himself and taking a cucumber sandwich*) They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta.

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

ALGERNON. That is quite a different matter. She is my aunt. (*Passing another plate to JACK*) Have some bread and

butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter.

JACK. (*Sampling it*) And very good bread and butter it is, too.

(*He sits on sofa.*)

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. I don't give my consent.

JACK. (*In the middle of a bite*) 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.

(*He rings a tiny silver bell which he takes from the tea tray, then he passes in front of JACK to a position U.L.*)

JACK. (*With a start*) Cecily! What on earth do you mean? I don't know anyone of the name of Cecily.

(*LANE enters L.*)

ALGERNON. Bring me the cigarette case Mr. Worthing left the last time he dined here.

LANE. Yes, sir.

(*He goes out.*)

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

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

(*LANE enters with the cigarette case on a salver. ALGERNON takes it at once. LANE exits.*)

ALGERNON. (*Opening the case and examining it*) Now that I look at the inscription, I find the thing isn't yours after all.

JACK. (*Rising and X.L. to ALGERNON*) Of course it's mine. 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. Yes; but this isn't your cigarette case. (*X. JACK and moving to a position U.R.*) 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. (*Following up his inspiration*) Yes. Charming old lady she is, too. Lives at Tunbridge Wells. (*Taking a step or two R.*) Just give it back to me, Algy.

ALGERNON. (*Moving D.R.*) 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 down to chair R.C., and kneeling upon it as he faces ALGERNON across the table*) 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. (*As ALGERNON passes him crossing L.*) For heaven's sake give me back my cigarette case.

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.

(He moves upstage around table L. to a position U.L.)

JACK. *(Following him around table)* It's only that——

ALGERNON. Besides, your name isn't Jack at all; it is Ernest.

JACK. *(L. of table)* It isn't Ernest; it's Jack.

ALGERNON. *(Facing him)* You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to everyone 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. *(Taking card from case)* Here is one of them: "Mr. Ernest Worthing, B 4, The Albany." I'll keep this as a proof your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to anyone else.

(He 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. Tell me the whole thing. 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. (*Handing over the cigarette case*) Now produce your explanation.

(*He sits on the sofa.*)

JACK. It's all perfectly simple. 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.

ALGERNON. (*Lighting a cigarette*) I suspected that, my dear fellow! I have Bunburied 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, 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, (*moving down to chair D.L., and sitting*) is the whole truth pure and simple.

ALGERNON. (*Studying the smoke from his cigarette*) I was quite right in saying you were a Bunburyist. You are one of the most advanced Bunburyists I know.

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. (*Rising and moving D.L. on JACK'S L.*) If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis' tonight, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week.

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

ALGERNON. I know. You are absolutely careless about sending out invitations.

JACK. You had much better dine with your Aunt Augusta.

ALGERNON. I haven't the smallest intention of doing anything of the kind. 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.

JACK. (*Rising and X.U.R.*) I'm not a Bunburyist at all. If Gwendolen accepts me, I am going to kill my brother. In-

deed I think I'll kill him in any case; Cecily is a little too much interested in him. 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.

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. (*An ELECTRIC BELL sounds off L.*) Ah! that must be Aunt Augusta. Only 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'?

JACK. (*U.R.*) Yes, I suppose so, if you want it.

(*LANE enters L.*)

LANE. Lady Bracknell and Miss Fairfax.

(*ALGERNON moves U.L. to greet them. LADY BRACKNELL and GWENDOLEN enter L. The former, an impressive matron who carries herself with rigid erectness, is wearing a street costume of lavender with an overdress of purple velvet. The collar, sash, and ruffles at the sleeves of her tight bodice are of a purple and green striped material. The same purple and green stuff is used for trimming on her skirt with its monumental bustle. Her small flowered bonnet, trimmed with green feathers, is tied beneath her chin with a purple velvet bow. She carries a tiny parasol, and wears lace mitts. GWENDOLEN, her daughter, wears a bustle dress with a blue striped underskirt, a ruffled train of plain blue, and a tight-sleeved bodice of a flowered material having pink roses on a white ground. The same flowered material is used for drapery*

across the front of her skirt. She wears a white leghorn hat trimmed with blue ribbon and clusters of pink roses.)

LADY BRACKNELL. (*Shaking hands*) Good afternoon, dear Algernon, I hope you are behaving very well.

ALGERNON. I'm feeling very well, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL. (*Moving down to a position beside chair D.R.*) That's not quite the same thing. In fact the two things rarely go together.

(She now notices JACK, standing U.R., and bows to him with icy coldness. GWENDOLEN and JACK seat themselves upon the sofa, with GWENDOLEN on JACK'S R.)

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. (*Going to the tea table*) Certainly, Aunt Augusta.

(LANE enters L. bearing a teapot, which he brings to the 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 an empty plate in horror*) Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them specially.

LANE. (*Gravely*) 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.

LANE. Thank you, sir.

(*He goes out.*)

ALGERNON. I am greatly distressed, Aunt Augusta, about there being no cucumbers, not even for ready money. (*X. to AUNT AUGUSTA and handing her tea*) I am afraid, Aunt Augusta, I shall have to give up the pleasure of dining with you tonight, after all. I have just had a telegram to say that my poor friend Bunbury is very ill again. (*He exchanges a glance with JACK, who is busy pouring tea for GWENDOLEN and himself.*) 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. (*X. to tea table and pouring himself a cup*) Yes, poor Bunbury is a dreadful invalid.

(*He moves across to R.*)

LADY BRACKNELL. Well, I must say, Algernon, that I think it 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. I should be much obliged if you would ask Mr. Bunbury, for 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, (*JACK nearly chokes on this*) and I think I

can promise you he'll be all right by Saturday. But I'll run over the program I've drawn out, if you will kindly come into the next room for a moment.

(He casts a significant glance in JACK's direction.)

LADY BRACKNELL. Thank you, Algernon. It is very thoughtful of you.

(She places her cup on the table at her L., and rises to follow ALGERNON off R. ALGERNON has disposed of his cup on the table D.R.)

I'm sure the program will be delightful, after a few expurgations. *(Turning at the exit R.)* Gwendolen, you will accompany me.

GWENDOLEN. *(Making no move)* Certainly, mamma.

(LADY BRACKNELL and ALGERNON go off R.)

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

GWENDOELN. 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; his attention focused on his teacup)* 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; and my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of *Ernest*. *(With shaking hands, JACK manages to get his cup to the*

table.) 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. (*A tremor in his voice*) You really love me, Gwendolen?

GWENDOLEN. (*Much calmer than JACK*) Passionately! My own Ernest!

JACK. (*A bit troubled*) 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. (*Rising and moving D.R.*) But, darling, to speak quite candidly, I don't much care about the name of Ernest . . . I don't think that name suits me at all.

GWENDOLEN. It suits you perfectly. It is a divine name. It has a 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. (*Putting down her teacup with an air of finality*) Jack? (*Rising and moving D.L.*) No, there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed. It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations. The only really safe name is Ernest.

JACK. (*Moving C.*) 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. (*Sitting D.L.*) 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. (*X. to her*) 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. (*Dropping to his knees*) Gwendolen, will you marry me?

GWENDOLEN. (*Taking his hand in hers*) Of course I will, darling; but how long you have been about it! (*Studying him fondly*) 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.

(LADY BRACKNELL *enters R.*)

LADY BRACKNELL. (*Stopping dead in her tracks, then moving sternly C.*) Mr. Worthing! Rise, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture. It is most indecorous.

GWENDOLEN. Mamma! (*JACK tries to rise; GWENDOLEN restrains him.*) Mamma, 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.
(GWENDOLEN and JACK rise together.)

LADY BRACKNELL. (C.) Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged to someone, I will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise. 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.

(*She moves to chair R.C.*)

GWENDOLEN. (*Reproachfully*) Mamma!

LADY BRACKNELL. (*Seating herself*) In the carriage, Gwendolen!

(GWENDOLEN goes to the exit L. She and JACK blow kisses to each other, unseen by LADY BRACKNELL. LADY BRACKNELL looks about vaguely as if she could not understand what the noise was. Finally she turns around.)

Gwendolen, the carriage!

GWENDOLEN. Yes, mamma.

(*She goes out, looking back at JACK.*)

LADY BRACKNELL. You can take a seat, Mr. Worthing.
(*She looks in her pocket for notebook and pencil.*)

JACK. Thank you, Lady Bracknell, I prefer standing.

LADY BRACKNELL. (*Pencil and notebook in hand*) I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men. 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. What is your income?

JACK. Between seven and eight thousand a year.

LADY BRACKNELL. (*Making a note in her book*) That is satisfactory. Now to minor matters. Are your parents living?

JACK. I have lost both my parents.

LADY BRACKNELL. *Both?* That seems like carelessness. Who was your father?

JACK. I am afraid I really don't know. 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 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—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 handbag.

LADY BRACKNELL. (*Her eyes widening*) A handbag?

JACK. (*Very seriously*) Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a handbag—a somewhat large, black leather handbag, with handles to it—an ordinary handbag, in fact.

LADY BRACKNELL. In what locality did this Mr. Thomas Cardew come across this ordinary handbag?

JACK. In the cloakroom at Victoria Station. It was given to him in mistake for his own.

LADY BRACKNELL. The cloakroom at Victoria Station? Mr. Worthing, I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a handbag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life. As for the particular locality in which the handbag was found, a cloakroom at a railway station could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognized position in good society.

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

LADY BRACKNELL. (*Closing her notebook with an air of finality which suggests that the interview is over*) I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing, to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over.

JACK. (*Moving L.*) Well, I don't see how I could possibly manage to do that. (*Swinging back to LADY BRACKNELL*) I can produce the handbag at any moment. I really think that should satisfy you, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL. (*Imperiously rising*) Me, sir! You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter to marry into a cloakroom and form an alliance with a parcel? Good morning, Mr. Worthing.

(*She sweeps out L. 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 R.*)

JACK. 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? She is always refusing people; I think it is most ill-natured of her.

JACK. Oh, as far as Gwendolen is concerned, we are engaged. (X.D.L.) But her mother is perfectly unbearable. Never met such a Gorgon. (*Turning slowly as a horrible doubt assails him*) 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. (*Sitting R.C.*) That is their tragedy. (*Lighting a cigarette*) By the way, did you tell Gwendolen the truth about your being Ernest in town, and Jack in the country?

JACK. (*In a very patronizing manner*) My dear fellow, the truth isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl. What extraordinary ideas you have about the way to behave to a woman!

ALGERNON. And 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. (*Sitting D.L.*) 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 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 for long walks, and pays no attention at all to her lessons.

ALGERNON. (*Quietly*) I would rather like to see Cecily.

JACK. (*Rising and X. to tea table for another slice of bread and butter*) I will take very good care you never do. She is excessively pretty, and she is only just eighteen.

ALGERNON. (*Wisely*) 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.

(*He sits on sofa.*)

ALGERNON. Women only do that when they have called each other a lot of other things first. (*Rising and X. to JACK*) Now, my dear boy, if we want to get a good table at Willis', we really must go and dress. I'm hungry.

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

(LANE enters L.)

LANE. Miss Fairfax.

(GWENDOLEN enters. LANE goes out.)

ALGERNON. Gwendolen, upon my word.

(JACK rises.)

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.

(Nevertheless, he moves U.R. and turns his back.)

JACK. My own darling!

GWENDOLEN. Ernest, we may never be married. From the expression on mamma's face, I fear we never shall. 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.

JACK. Dear Gwendolen!

GWENDOLEN. The story of your romantic origin, as related to me by mamma, has naturally stirred the deeper fibres of my nature. Your town address at the Albany I have. What is your address in the country?

JACK. The Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire.

(ALGERNON, who has been watching over his left shoulder, smiles to himself, and writes the address on his shirt cuff.)

GWENDOLEN. (Anxiously) There is good postal service, I suppose? It may be necessary to do something desperate. I will communicate with you daily.

JACK. (Taking her in his arms) My own one!

GWENDOLEN. How long do you remain in town?

JACK. Till Monday.

GWENDOLEN. Good! (*Breaking from JACK's embrace*)
Algy, you may turn round now.

ALGERNON. Thanks, I've turned round already.

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

GWENDOLEN. Certainly.

(*JACK and GWENDOLEN go out. A second later LANE enters L. LANE presents several letters on a salver to ALGERNON. It is to be surmised that they are bills, as ALGERNON, after looking at the envelopes, tears them up, and tosses the scraps upon the tea tray. LANE busies himself at collecting the tea things and returning them to the tray.*)

ALGERNON. (*Sitting in chair R.C.*) 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.

LANE. Yes, sir.

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.

(*JACK enters L. LANE goes out.*)

JACK. (X.C.) There's a sensible, intelligent girl! The only girl I ever cared for in my life. (*ALGERNON is laughing immoderately*) What on earth are you so amused at?

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

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

ALGERNON. Oh, I love scrapes.

(JACK *looks indignantly at ALGERNON, and leaves the room.* ALGERNON *lights a cigarette, reads his shirt cuff, and smiles.*)

CURTAIN

SCENE II

SCENE. *The garden of the Manor House. A wall, broken by a gateway, extends across the rear of the stage. Peeping above the wall are the topmost branches of some flowering shrubs; beyond is an expanse of blue sky. A table laden with books is placed R.C. At either side of it stand straight-backed garden chairs. A matching garden seat, large enough to accommodate two persons, is placed L.C. The garden furniture is painted white, and is of either the ornate iron variety or the intricate woven sort with which the Victorians graced their gardens (as well as their cemeteries). There is a tub of flowering plants U.L. and U.R. The color of the wall is a soft gray, except for an occasional brick from which the paint has chipped off, revealing the warm rose coloring of the brick itself. The flower tubs pick up and repeat the pink of the bricks in the color of their painted surfaces.*

AT RISE. MISS PRISM, *a lean, boney creature with a lantern jaw, and a taste in clothing which favors somber black, is seated D.R., working upon some sort of needlework. CECILY, watering can in hand, is sprinkling the flowers in the tub U.L. CECILY is blond, eighteen, and a great deal more imaginative and emotional than JACK has pictured her. Her frock is of a delicate yellow material, embroidered with varicolored nose-gays. A big, floppy garden hat, tied under her chin with a satin ribbon, hangs part way down her back.*

MISS PRISM. (*Calling*) Cecily, Cecily! Surely such a

utilitarian occupation as the watering of flowers is rather Moulton's duty than yours? Especially at a moment when intellectual pleasures await you. Your German grammar is on the table. Pray open it at page fifteen. (*As CECILY slowly comes over to her*) You know how anxious your guardian is that you should improve yourself. 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. (*Sitting R.C.*) Dear Uncle Jack is so very serious. Sometimes he is so serious that I think he cannot be quite well.

MISS PRISM. Cecily! I am surprised at you. Mr. Worthing has many troubles in his life. 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.

(*She begins to write in her diary, which is lying on the table.*)

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. You must put away your dairy, 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 are on shelves in our circulating libraries.

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? And was your novel ever published?

MISS PRISM. (*With a sigh*) Alas! no. The manuscript unfortunately was lost or mislaid.

CECILY. (*Looking off R.*) I see dear Dr. Chasuble coming up through the garden.

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

(CANON CHASUBLE, *a rotund clergyman in the garb of the Anglican church, enters R.*)

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

CECILY. (*Solemnly*) 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.

CECILY. No, dear Miss Prism, I know that, but I felt instinctively that you had a headache.

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

CHASUBLE. With pleasure, Miss Prism, (*offering his arm*) with pleasure.

MISS PRISM. (*Passing with CHASUBLE behind the table and up to the exit C.*) 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.

(MISS PRISM and DR. CHASUBLE *exit*. CECILY *picks up the books and throws them back on the table.*)

CECILY. Horrid Political Economy! Horrid Geography! Horrid, horrid German!

(MERRIMAN, *an austere butler, enters L.*)

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

CECILY. (*Taking a calling card from the salver which MERRIMAN carries*) "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. 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. (*Exiting L.*) Yes, Miss.

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. (ALGERNON, *very gay and debonair, enters L.*) He does!

ALGERNON. (*Removing his hat*) You are my little cousin, Cecily, I'm sure.

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 musn'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. (*Looking 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. 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 not time, this afternoon.

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

CECILY. I think you should try.

ALGERNON. I will. I feel better already. (*Becoming more serious*) Cecily . . . you are the prettiest girl I ever saw.

CECILY. I don't think it can be right for you to talk to me like that. (X. ALGERNON to L.C.) Miss Prism never says such things to me.

ALGERNON. Then Miss Prism is a short-sighted old lady.

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 and ALGERNON go off L. A moment later MISS PRISM enters C., on CHASUBLE's left arm.)

MISS PRISM. You are too much alone, dear Dr. Chasuble. You should get married; you do not seem to realize, dear Doctor, that by persistently remaining single, a man converts himself into a permanent public temptation.

(JACK enters R. He is dressed in deepest mourning, with crepe hatband and black gloves.)

MISS PRISM. Mr. Worthing!

CHASUBLE. Mr. Worthing!

(JACK moves slowly C.)

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

JACK. (*Pressing MISS PRISM's hand in a tragic manner*) I have returned sooner than I expected. (*Taking CHASUBLE's hand*) 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.

CHASUBLE. Still his life of pleasure?

JACK. (*Shaking his head*) Dead!

CHASUBLE. Your brother Ernest dead?

JACK. Quite dead.

MISS PRISM. (*Moving to chair R.C. and sitting*) What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it.

CHASUBLE. 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.

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