

*The
Importance
of Being
Earnest*

A CHAMBER OPERA IN TWO ACTS

LIBRETTO BY WILLIAM RELTON,
BASED ON OSCAR WILDE'S PLAY (1895)
MUSIC BY B. TOMMY ANDERSSON
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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST
LIBRETTO BY WILLIAM RELTON (2016)
BASED ON OSCAR WILDE'S PLAY (1895)

THE PERSONS IN THE OPERA:

JACK (JOHN) WORTHING, J.P.* (BARITONE)
ALGERNON (ALGY) MONCRIEFF (BARITONE)
REV. CANON** FREDERICK CHASUBLE, D.D.*** (TENOR)
LANE, MR MONCRIEFF'S MANSERVANT (BARITONE)
MERRIMAN, MR WORTHING'S BUTLER (BARITONE)
LADY AUGUSTA BRACKNELL (ALTO)
HON.**** GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX (MEZZO)
CECILY CARDEW (SOPRANO)
MISS LÆTITIA PRISM, GOVERNESS (MEZZO)

* J.P. = JUSTICE OF PEACE

** REVEREND CANON = PRIEST

*** D.D. = DOCTOR OF DIVINITY

**** HON. = HONOURABLE (A TITLE FOR
DAUGHTERS AND SONS OF VISCOUNTS AND BARONS)

TIME: THE 1890'S

Act one

SCENE 1

Algernon, Lane.

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.]

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.] What are your views on marriage, Lane?

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 between myself and a young person.

ALGERNON

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?

[Enter LANE.]

LANE

Mr. Ernest Worthing.

SCENE 2

Algernon, Jack.

[Enter JACK. LANE goes out.]

ALGERNON

What brings you up to town?

JACK

Oh, pleasure, pleasure! 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
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.

ALGERNON
*[JACK puts out his hand to take
a sandwich. ALGERNON 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
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.

JACK
Cecily! What on earth do you mean?
I don't know any one of the name of
Cecily.

ALGERNON
Here is a cigarette case which you
left in the smoking-room the last
time you dined here.

JACK
Do you mean to say you have had my
cigarette case all this time?

ALGERNON
But this isn't your cigarette case.
This cigarette case is a present from
some one of the name of Cecily, and
you said you didn't know any one 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.

ALGERNON
[Retreating to back of sofa.] But why
does she call herself little Cecily if
she is your aunt? And why does she

call you her uncle? [*Reading.*] 'From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack.' 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.

JACK

It's Jack.

ALGERNON

You answer to the name of Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life.

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 your Aunt Cecily calls you her dear uncle. I have always suspected you of being a confirmed Bunburyist; and I am quite sure of it now.

JACK

What on earth do you mean by a Bunburyist?

ALGERNON

I'll reveal all to you as soon as you are kind enough to inform me why you are Ernest in town and Jack in the country.

JACK

Well, give me my cigarette case first.

ALGERNON

Here it is. [*Hands cigarette case.*]

Now produce your explanation, and pray make it improbable.

[*Sits on sofa.*]

JACK

Recit:

Old Mr. Thomas Cardew, who adopted me when I was a little boy, made me in his will guardian to his grand-daughter, 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.

Aria:

As a guardian, one must adopt a high moral tone,
Oh yes indeed, a high moral tone in all matters.
It is one's duty, do you hear me.
Yes one's duty.
A high moral tone. A very high, very moral tone.

But where's the fun in that?
And so I have invented
A younger brother, named Ernest.

Ernest his name, but not his nature.
Young Ernest gads about the town
And gets into the most dreadful scrapes,

While in the country Jack maintains
His high moral tone. His very high, very moral tone.

Recit:

That, my dear Algy, is the whole

truth pure and simple.

ALGERNON

The truth is rarely pure and never simple.

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.

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.

JACK

And I strongly advise you to do the same with Bunbury, your invalid friend who has the absurd name.

ALGERNON

Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, you will be very glad to know Bunbury if you ever get married which seems to me extremely problematic.

JACK

That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, I certainly won't want to know

Bunbury. And she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry.

ALGERNON

Then your wife will. In married life three is company and two is none. You don't seem to realise this.

JACK

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

ALGERNON

My dear fellow, it isn't easy to be anything nowadays. There's such a lot of beastly competition about.

SCENE 3

Lane, Bracknell, Algernon, Gwendolen, Jack.

[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.

[Sees JACK and bows to him with icy coldness.]

ALGERNON

[To GWENDOLEN.]

Dear me, you are smart!

GWENDOLEN

I am always smart!

Am I not, 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

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, 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. *[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 crosses and hands her tea.] Thank you. I've quite a treat for you, Algernon. I am going to send you down with Mary Farquhar tonight at dinner.

ALGERNON

I am afraid, Aunt Augusta, I shall have to give up the pleasure of dining with you to-night.

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

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

Aria:

It is high time Mr. Bunbury made up his mind to live or to die.

High time, high time, high time.

This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd.

This sympathy with invalids is absurd;

Like the whole theory of modern education,

Which is radically unsound, it is absurd, absurd, absurd. Fortunately education produces no effect whatsoever.

It would prove a serious danger to the upper classes,

And probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square.

Recit:

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.

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. 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. [*Rising, and following ALGERNON.*] French songs I cannot possibly allow.

Improper! But German; thoroughly respectable!

[*LADY BRACKNELL and ALGERNON go into the music-room, JACK and GWENDOLEN remain behind.*]

SCENE 4

Jack, Gwendolen.

JACK

Charming day it has been, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN

Mr. Worthing, whenever people talk to me about the weather, I always feel quite certain that they mean something else.

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

Recit:

Yes, I am quite well aware of the fact. And I often wish that in public, at any rate, you had been more demonstrative.

[JACK looks at her in amazement.]

Aria:

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.

Oh, Ernest. Yes, Ernest.
Ideal Ernest.

There's something in that name
That inspires absolute confidence.
Oh, Ernest. Yes, Ernest.
Ideal Ernest.

I knew I was destined to love you
The moment Algernon first
mentioned to me
That he had a friend called Ernest.

And I do really love you.
Madly, passionately,
My own Ernest.

JACK

Recit:

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

JACK

Gwendolen... I think there are lots
of other much nicer names. I think
Jack, for instance, a charming name.

GWENDOLEN

Jack...? No. It does not thrill. It
produces absolutely no vibrations.
The only really safe name is Ernest.

JACK

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

GWENDOLEN

Married, Mr. Worthing?

JACK

Well... may I propose to you?

GWENDOLEN

I think it would be an admirable
opportunity. And I think it only fair to
tell you quite frankly before-hand that
I am fully determined to accept you.

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 any
one in the world but you.

GWENDOLEN

Yes, but men often propose for
practice. 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.]

SCENE 5
Jack, Bracknell, Gwendolen.

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 am engaged to Mr. Worthing, mamma.
[They rise together.]

LADY BRACKNELL
You are not engaged to any one. When you do become engaged I will inform you of the fact. *[To JACK.]* And now I have a few questions to put to you. *[To GWENDOLEN.]* Gwendolen, wait for me below in the carriage.

GWENDOLEN
[Reproachfully.] Mamma!

LADY BRACKNELL
[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.]

SCENE 6
Bracknell, 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.] Now, 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. 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. What is your income?

JACK
Between seven and eight thousand a year.

LADY BRACKNELL
That is satisfactory. What are your politics?

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

LADY BRACKNELL
Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us. Now to minor matters. Are your parents living?

JACK
I have lost both my parents.

LADY BRACKNELL
To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness. Who was your father?

JACK
I am afraid I really don't know. The fact is, 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?

JACK
[Very seriously.] Yes, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL
In what locality did this Mr. Cardew come across this hand-bag?

JACK
In the cloak-room at Victoria Station.

LADY BRACKNELL
The cloak-room at Victoria Station?

JACK
Yes. The Brighton line.

LADY BRACKNELL
The line is immaterial. Mr. Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me.

JACK
May I ask you then what you would advise me to do?

LADY BRACKNELL
I would strongly advise you 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 is over. 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!

[LADY BRACKNELL sweeps out in majestic indignation.]

JACK
Good morning!

SCENE 7
Algernon, Jack.

[ALGERNON enters cheerily.]

ALGERNON
Didn't it go off all right, old boy?

JACK
As far as Gwendolen is concerned, we are engaged. Her mother is perfectly unbearable. A monster! *[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
Oh, that's nonsense, Algy. You never talk anything but nonsense.

ALGERNON
Nobody ever does. By the way, did you tell Gwendolen the truth about your being Ernest in town, and Jack in the country?

JACK
[In a very patronising manner.]
My dear fellow, the truth isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl.

ALGERNON
But 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 a severe chill.

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.

SCENE 8

Lane, Algernon, Gwendolen, Jack.

[Enter LANE.]

LANE

Miss Fairfax.

[Enter GWENDOLEN. LANE goes out.]

ALGERNON

Gwendolen, upon my word!

GWENDOLEN

Algy, kindly turn your back.

[ALGERNON, at first reluctant, retires to the fireplace.]

JACK

My own darling!

GWENDOLEN

Ernest, from the expression on mamma's face I fear we may never

be married. But although she may prevent us from becoming man and wife, and I may marry some one 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 has naturally stirred the deeper fibres of my nature. Oh, Ernest. Yes, Ernest. Ideal Ernest. Your Christian name has an irresistible fascination. The simplicity of your character makes you exquisitely incomprehensible to me. Your town address I have. What is your address in the country?

JACK

The Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire.

[ALGERNON, 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.

JACK

My own one!

GWENDOLEN

How long do you remain in town?

JACK

Till Monday.

GWENDOLEN

Good! Algy, you may turn round now.

JACK

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

GWENDOLEN

Certainly.

[JACK and GWENDOLEN go off. 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.]

ALGERNON

A glass of sherry, Lane.

LANE

Yes, sir.

ALGERNON

I hope to-morrow 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.

ALGERNON

To-morrow, Lane, I'm going Bunburying.

[ALGERNON lights a cigarette, reads his shirt-cuff, and smiles.]

ACT DROP

Act two

SCENE 9

Prism, Cecily, Chasuble.

[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! Your German grammar is on the table.

CECILY

[Coming over very slowly.] But I don't like German.

MISS PRISM

Child, your guardian laid particular stress on your German, as he was leaving for town yesterday.

CECILY

Dear Uncle Jack is so very serious!

MISS PRISM

Cecily! 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 his brother to come down here

sometimes. [*CECILY begins to write in her diary.*]

MISS PRISM

You must put away your diary, my dear Cecily. Memory is the diary that we all carry about with us.

CECILY

I believe that Memory is responsible for nearly all three-volume novels.

MISS PRISM

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

CECILY

How wonderfully clever you are! I hope it did not end happily.

MISS PRISM

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

CECILY

And was your novel ever published?

MISS PRISM

Alas! no. The manuscript unfortunately was abandoned.

[*CECILY starts.*]

To your work, child.

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

Good morning.

PRISM

Good morning.

CHASUBLE

Good morning.

CECILY

Good morning.

CHASUBLE

How fortunate, Cecily, to be Miss Prism's pupil. I hope you are not inattentive.

CECILY

Oh, I am afraid I am.

CHASUBLE

Ah, were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips. [*MISS PRISM glares.*] 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.

MISS PRISM

I think, dear Doctor, I will take a stroll with you, if I may. I find I have a slight headache, 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, Cecily, you will read your Political Economy in my absence.

[Goes down the garden with Dr. CHASUBLE.]

SCENE 10

Cecily, Merriman.

CECILY

[Picks up books and throws them back on table.] Horrid Political Economy! Horrid Geography! Horrid German! German! It isn't at all a becoming language. I know perfectly well that I look quite plain after my German lesson.

[Enter MERRIMAN with a card on a salver.]

MERRIMAN.

Ahem. Mr. Ernest Worthing has just driven over from the station.

CECILY

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

Aria:

Mr. Ernest Worthing.

Here... here... here...

I have never met any really wicked person before.

I feel rather frightened.

We might have a good influence over him,

Miss Prism and I.

I am sure she certainly would.

With her German and Geology.

Things of that kind influence

a man very much.

Ernest is here. My Ernest.

My diary, my diary!

Within it are kept the wonderful secrets of my life.

If I didn't write them down,

I should probably forget all

about them.

[Reads diary:]

Here, 14th of February,

"Engaged to my dear Ernest."

And here, 22nd of March,

"Today I broke off my engagement with Ernest."

And here, but a few days later,

"All happily resolved. Engaged to Ernest again."

And here... and here... and here...

Ernest. Oh, Ernest.

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 debonnair.] He does!

SCENE 11 Algernon, Cecily.

ALGERNON
[Raising his hat.] You are my little cousin Cecily.

CECILY
I am not little. I believe I am more than usually tall for my age.
[ALGERNON is rather taken aback.]
But I am your cousin Cecily. You are Uncle Jack's brother, my wicked cousin Ernest.

ALGERNON
Oh! I am not really wicked at all, cousin Cecily.

CECILY
I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time.

ALGERNON
[Looks at her in amazement.] I have been rather reckless.

CECILY
I am glad to hear it.

ALGERNON
In fact, I have been very bad in my own small way. *[Unable to contain her excitement, CECILY breaks away from him.]* I want you to reform me.

You might make that your mission, cousin Cecily.

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

ALGERNON
I feel better already.

CECILY
You are looking a little worse.

ALGERNON
That is because I am hungry.

CECILY
How thoughtless of me.
Won't you come in?

ALGERNON
Thank you. Might I have a buttonhole first?

CECILY
A Marechal Niel? *[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 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.]

SCENE 12

Prism, Chasuble.

MISS PRISM

You do not seem to realise, dear Doctor, that by persistently remaining single, a man converts himself into a public temptation; 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

Maturity can always be depended on. *[Dr. CHASUBLE starts.]* My metaphor was drawn from fruits. But where is Cecily?

CHASUBLE

Perhaps she followed us to the schools.

SCENE 13

Prism, Chasuble, Jack, Algernon, Cecily.

[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! 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! 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. 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! *[A moment of reflection for all characters on what it means to die in Paris!]*

JACK

[Awkwardly.] Umm... Dr. Chasuble? I suppose you know how to christen all right? *[Dr. CHASUBLE looks astounded.]*

MISS PRISM

It is, I regret to say, one of the Rector's most constant duties in this parish.

CHASUBLE

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.

MISS PRISM

[Bitterly.] People who live entirely for pleasure usually are.

JACK

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?

JACK

I don't remember anything about it.

CHASUBLE

But have you any grave doubts on the subject?

JACK

Of course you may think I am a little too old now.

CHASUBLE

Not at all. At what hour would you wish the ceremony performed?

JACK

Oh, I might trot round at about half past five if that would suit you.

CHASUBLE

Admirably! Admirably!

[Enter ALGERNON and CECILY hand in hand. They come slowly up to JACK.]

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 I intend to lead a better life in the future. *[JACK glares at him and does not take his hand.]*

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.

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. Ernest has just been telling me 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.

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 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.

[*CHASUBLE, PRISM and CECILY exit. Enter MERRIMAN.*]

SCENE 14

Merriman, Jack, Algernon.

MERRIMAN.

I have put Mr. Ernest's luggage in the room next to yours, sir.

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 this time.

JACK

Merriman, order the dog-cart 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

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.

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, 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.*]

SCENE 15

Cecily, Algernon, Merriman.

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

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. 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? [*Tries to look at it.*] May I?

CECILY

Oh no.

ALGERNON

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. 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.*]

ALGERNON

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

Darling! And when was the engagement actually settled?

CECILY

Oh, the 14th of February last. The next day I bought this little ring in your name, and this is the little bangle with the true lover's 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.

ALGERNON

But was our engagement ever

broken off?

CECILY

Of course it was. [*She reads from the diary.*] '22nd of March. Today I broke off my engagement with Ernest. I feel it is better to do so. The weather still continues charming.'

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. 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

Yes, of course. [*Nervously.*]

CECILY

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

[*ALGERNON rises, CECILY also.*]

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 — Algernon — for instance...

CECILY

But I don't like the name of Algernon.

ALGERNON

Your Rector here is, I suppose, thoroughly experienced in the practice of all the rites and ceremonials of the Church?

CECILY

Oh, yes.

ALGERNON

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

CECILY

Oh!

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.

SCENE 16

Merriman, Cecily, Gwendolen.

[*CECILY alone in the Garden. Enter MERRIMAN.*]

MERRIMAN

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

CECILY

Pray ask the lady to come out here. And you can bring tea.

MERRIMAN.

Yes, Miss. [*Presenting GWENDOLEN.*] 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

*[After examining CECILY carefully
through a lorgnette.]* You are here
on a short visit, I suppose.

CECILY

Oh no! I live here. 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. *[Rising and
going to her.]* I am very fond of you,
Cecily, but may I speak candidly...

CECILY

Pray do!

GWENDOLEN

Well, Cecily, I wish that you were...
well, just a little older than you
seem to be...and not quite so very
alluring in appearance. In fact 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.

CECILY

Oh, but it is not Mr. Ernest Worthing
who is my guardian. His elder
brother is my guardian. *[Rather
shy and confidingly.]* Dearest
Gwendolen, there is no reason why
I should make a secret of it to you.
Mr. Ernest Worthing and I are
engaged to be married.

GWENDOLEN

My darling Cecily, I think there
must be some slight error.
Mr. Ernest Worthing is engaged
to me.

CECILY

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 certainly
very curious, for he asked me to be
his wife yesterday afternoon at 5.30.
[Produces diary of her own.]
I never travel without my diary. One
should always have something sen-
sational to read in the train.
I am afraid I have the prior claim.

CECILY

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?

CECILY

When I see a spade I call it a spade.

GWENDOLEN

[Satirically.] I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade.

[Enter MERRIMAN. He carries a salver, table cloth, and plate stand. CECILY is about to retort. The presence of the servant 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.

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. 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.

[MERRIMAN does so, and goes out. 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 with
lumps of sugar,
and 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. 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.

SCENE 17
Gwendolen, Jack, Cecily, Algernon.

[Enter JACK.]

GWENDOLEN
[Catching sight of him.] My own
Ernest!

JACK
Darling! *[Offers to kiss her.]*

GWENDOLEN
[Draws back.] May I ask if you are

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

engaged to be married to this young
lady? *[Points to CECILY.]*

JACK
[Laughing.] Of course not!

GWENDOLEN
You may! *[Offers her cheek.]*

CECILY
[Very sweetly.] Miss Fairfax,
the gentleman whose arm is at
present round your waist is my
guardian, Mr. John Worthing.

GWENDOLEN
[Receding.] John! Oh!

[Enter ALGERNON.]

CECILY
Here is Ernest.

ALGERNON
*[Goes straight over to CECILY
without noticing any one else.]*
My own love!
[Offers to kiss her.]

CECILY
[Drawing back.] May I ask if you
are engaged to be married to this
young lady?

ALGERNON
[Laughing.] Of course not!

CECILY
[Presenting her cheek to be kissed.]
You may. *[ALGERNON kisses her.]*

GWENDOLEN
Miss Cardew, the gentleman who is
now embracing you is my cousin,

Mr. Algernon Moncrieff.

CECILY

[Breaking away from ALGERNON.]
Algernon! Oh! *[The two girls move towards each other and put their arms round each other's waists as if for protection.]*

CECILY & GWENDOLEN

[Together.] A gross deception has been practised on both of us.

GWENDOLEN

[Slowly and seriously.] You will call me sister, will you not? *[They embrace.]* JACK and ALGERNON groan and walk up and down. *Gwendolen and Cecily go to the other side of the stage.]*

JACK

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

ALGERNON

Yes, and a perfectly wonderful Bunbury it is.

JACK

Your friend Bunbury is quite exploded. I must say that your taking in a sweet, simple, innocent girl like Miss Cardew is quite inexcusable.

GWENDOLEN

My poor wounded Cecily!

CECILY My sweet wronged Gwendolen!

GWENDOLEN

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

CECILY

It is not a very pleasant position for a young girl suddenly to find

ALGERNON

I can see no possible defence at all for your deceiving a brilliant, clever, thoroughly experienced young lady like Miss Fairfax.

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

How can you sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble.

ALGERNON

Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner.

JACK

Algy, I wish to goodness you would go.

ALGERNON

Don't be absurd. I have just made

herself in. Is it?

CECILY

They are eating muffins. That looks like repentance.

GWENDOLEN

[After a pause.] They don't seem to notice us at all. Couldn't you cough?

CECILY

But I haven't got a cough.

GWENDOLEN

But we will not be the first to speak.

CECILY

Certainly not.

GWENDOLEN.

Do 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?

arrangements
with Dr.
Chasuble to be
christened at a
quarter to six
under the name
of Ernest.

JACK
I made
arrangements
this morning
with Dr.
Chasuble to
be christened
myself at 5.30,
and I naturally
will take the
name of Ernest.

GWENDOLEN and CECILY
Your Christian names are still an
insuperable barrier. That is all!

JACK and ALGERNON
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!

CECILY Could
we not both
speak at the
same time?

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

JACK and ALGERNON
We are.

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

GWENDOLEN
[To JACK.] Darling!

ALGERNON
[To CECILY.] Darling!

JACK
[To GWENDOLEN.] Darling!

CECILY
[To ALGERNON.] Darling!

SCENE 18
Merriman, Jack, Bracknell,
Gwendolen, Algernon, Cecily.

*[Enter MERRIMAN. When he
enters he coughs loudly, seeing the
situation.]*

MERRIMAN.
Ahem! 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.

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... [*LADY BRACKNELL notices Algernon and Cecily.*] Algernon! Who is that young person whose hand you are now holding in what seems to me a peculiarly unnecessary manner?

JACK
That lady is Miss Cecily Cardew, my ward.

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 shiver, crossing to the sofa and sitting down.*] Is there something peculiarly exciting in the air of this particular part of Hertfordshire?! Mr. Worthing is Miss Cardew at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London? 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 grand-daughter of the late Mr. Thomas Cardew of 149 Belgrave Square, S.W.; Gervase Park, Dorking, Surrey; and the Sporrán, Fifeshire, N.B.

LADY BRACKNELL
Three addresses always inspire confidence, even in tradesmen. As a matter of form, Mr. Worthing, I had better ask you if Miss Cardew has any little fortune?

JACK
Oh! 'Bout a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds. That is all. Goodbye, 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! [*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. [*Addressing ALGERNON.*] Algernon! 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. 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.

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?

JACK

It pains me very much to have
to speak frankly to you,
Lady Bracknell, about your nephew,
but I do not approve at all of your
nephew's moral character.
I suspect him of being untruthful.

*[ALGERNON and CECILY look at
him in indignant amazement.]*

LADY BRACKNELL

Untruthful! My nephew Algernon?

JACK

I fear there can be no possible
doubt about the matter. This
afternoon, through deception,
he obtained admission to my house.
He then drank an entire bottle of
my Perrier-Jouet, he then succeeded
in alienating the affections of my
only ward, he subsequently stayed
to tea, and devoured every single
muffin. I therefore 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

No woman should ever be quite
accurate about her age. It looks so
calculating...

JACK

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

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.

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.

ALGERNON

Then what is to be done, Cecily?

CECILY

I don't know, Mr. Moncrieff.

LADY BRACKNELL

My dear Mr. Worthing, I would beg of you to reconsider your decision.

JACK

My dear Lady Bracknell, 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.]
That is out of the question.

JACK

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

LADY BRACKNELL

[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.

SCENE 19

Chasuble, Bracknell, Jack, Prism, Gwendolen, Algernon, Cecily, Merriman.

[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 irreligious!

CHASUBLE

Let us go to the church at once. Indeed, I have just been informed by

the pew-opener that Miss Prism has been waiting for me in the vestry.

LADY BRACKNELL

[Starting.] Did I hear you mention a Miss Prism?

CHASUBLE

I am on my way to join her.

LADY BRACKNELL

Is this Miss Prism a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education?

JACK

[Interposing.] Miss Prism, has been for the last three years Miss Cardew's esteemed governess and valued companion.

LADY BRACKNELL

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 Ch... *[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, you left Lord Bracknell's house in charge of a perambulator that contained a baby of the male sex. You never returned. A few weeks later the perambulator was discovered, abandoned. 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! *[Every one looks at MISS PRISM.]* Prism! Where is that baby? *[A pause.]*

MISS PRISM

Aria:

I admit with shame that I do not know.

I only wish I did.

Oh my shame, my shame.

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.

Oh my shame, my shame.

In a moment of mental abstraction,

For which I never can forgive myself,
I deposited the manuscript in the
perambulator,
And placed the baby in the hand-bag.
Which I then left in the cloak-room
— Oh my shame, my shame —
Of a larger railway station in
London.
Victoria.
The Brighton line.

[Exit JACK in great excitement.]

CHASUBLE
[To LADY BRACKNELL.]
What do you think this means?

LADY BRACKNELL
[To CHASUBLE.] I dare not
even suspect.

*[Noises heard overhead as if some
one was throwing trunks about.
Every one looks up. Big, violent
orchestral passage then absolute
silence.]*

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

MISS PRISM
[Calmly.] It seems to be mine.
Yes, here is the injury it received
through the upsetting of a Gower

Street omnibus in younger and
happier days. 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.

JACK
[In a pathetic voice.] Miss Prism,
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!

JACK
I do not deny that is a serious blow.
But, Mother, I forgive you. *[Tries to
embrace her again.]*

MISS PRISM
[Still more indignant.] Mr. Worthing.
[Pointing to LADY BRACKNELL.]
There is the lady who can tell you
who you really are.

JACK
[After a pause.] Lady Bracknell, I
hate to seem inquisitive, but would
you kindly inform me who I am?

LADY BRACKNELL
You are the son of my poor sister,
Mrs. Moncrieff, and consequently
Algernon's elder brother.

JACK

Then I have a brother after all.
I knew I had a brother! I always
said I had a brother! [*Seizes hold
of ALGERNON.*] Algy, you young
scoundrel, you will have to treat
me with more respect in the future.
[*Shakes hands.*]

GWENDOLEN

[*To JACK.*] My own! But what own
are you? What is your Christian
name, now that you have become
some one else?

JACK

Aunt Augusta, at the time when
Miss Prism left me in the hand-bag,
had I been christened already?

LADY BRACKNELL

Indeed. And 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.

JACK

His name would appear in the
Army Lists of the period! [*Rushes
to bookcase and tears the books out.*]
M. Generals . . . Mallam, Maxbohm,
Magley, what ghastly names they
have — Markby, Migsby, 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!

JACK

Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a
man to find out suddenly that all his
life he has been speaking nothing
but the truth. Can you forgive me?

GWENDOLEN

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

ALGERNON

Cecily! [*Embraces her.*] At last!

CECILY

My own! At last!

CHASUBLE

[*To MISS PRISM.*] Laetitia!
[*Embraces her*]

MISS PRISM

[*Enthusiastically.*] Frederick!
At last!

JACK

Gwendolen! [*Embraces her.*] At last!

GWENDOLEN

At last!

SEXTET OF LOVERS.

At last, at last, at last, at last!

LADY BRACKNELL

My nephew, you seem to be
displaying signs of triviality.

JACK

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

ALL

The truth is rarely pure and never
simple.

TABLEAU
ACT DROP

