

THE IMPORTANCE
OF BEING EARNEST

AND OTHER PLAYS

MODERN



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Oscar Wilde

OSCAR WILDE

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AND
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Introduction by Terrence McNally

Notes by Michael F. Davis

LEMOYNE COLLEGE



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NEW YORK

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854. His father was a celebrated surgeon, his mother a supporter of Irish independence who presided over literary salons in Ireland and England. Although his brilliance as a classicist at Dublin's Trinity College won him a scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford, Wilde failed in his attempts at an academic career. Instead he set his sights on the literary and artistic worlds of London. Fusing the influences of Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites, Walter Pater, and Gautier's *l'art pour l'art*, he made himself the most visible manifestation of the Aesthetic movement; by 1881 a burlesque of Wilde provided the protagonist for the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Patience*. It was to exploit the popularity of the operetta, in fact, that the producer D'Oyly Carte underwrote Wilde's immensely successful lecture tour of America. Married in 1884 to Constance Lloyd, Wilde worked briefly as a magazine editor while publishing poetry, plays, fairy tales, and essays.

The Picture of Dorian Gray was commissioned by J.M. Stoddardt, the Philadelphia publisher of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. It appeared in the July 1890 issue and immediately gained certain notoriety for being "mawkish and nauseous," "unclean," "effeminate," and "contaminating." When it was published as a book the following year, Wilde greatly revised and expanded the text, filling it out with a melodramatic subplot and adding a preface that defended his aesthetic philosophy. As for the book's value as autobiography, Wilde noted in a letter that the main characters are in different ways reflections of him: "Basil Hallward what I think I am; Lord Henry what the world thinks me; Dorian what I would like to be—other ages, perhaps."

In the early nineties, Wilde was at the center of an artistic milieu characterized by *The Yellow Book*, the Rhymers' Club, and the art of Aubrey Beardsley. He wrote a poetic drama *Salomé*, in French (1892), but it was banned in England; the play was published in book form with illustrations by Beardsley in 1894. *Salomé* was produced in Paris in 1896.

However, Wilde did achieve success as a popular playwright, writing in rapid succession *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In 1895, two of his plays were on the London stage simultaneously, and he was acknowledged as a pivotal figure in English literary life, admired for his wit and eloquence.

Since at least the mid-1880s, Wilde had lived a sexual double life, and in 1893 he distanced himself from his family by taking rooms at the Savoy Hotel. He had by then embarked on a passionate relationship with the considerably younger Lord Alfred Douglas, the English translator of *Salomé* whom he had met the year after he wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In March 1895, Wilde undertook a libel action against the Marquess of Queensberry, Lord Alfred's father, who had denounced Wilde as a "sodomite" [sic]. Wilde withdrew the suit following a damaging cross-examination by the marquess's defense attorney, a former classmate of Wilde's. (Question: "Have you ever adored a young man madly?" Answer: "I have never given adoration to anybody except myself.") Shortly thereafter, Wilde was

arrested for homosexual offenses and underwent two trials before being sentenced to hard labor at Wandsworth Prison and Reading Gaol. A long recriminatory letter to Douglas written while in prison was eventually published as *De Profundis*.

Released in 1897, Wilde left for France, calling himself Sebastian Melmoth, a name taken from the gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*, written by Wilde's great-uncle. A poem based on his prison experience, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, was published in 1898.

His health destroyed, and bankrupted by legal expenses, Wilde lived in Paris for three years, making a conversion to Roman Catholicism just before his death in November 1900. He is buried in the cemetery of Père Lachaise.

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INTRODUCTION

Terrence McNally

You are holding in your hand a volume of plays by Oscar Wilde, including the funniest, most subversive play in the English language, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. More than a century after its first performance in London at St. James's Theatre on February 14, 1895, it is fresh, pertinent, and very, very rude. It is a play that calls society's bluff by naming each and every one of us a hypocrite. If it weren't so funny, we would shun its bleak view of human society. No one likes to be made a fool of for a full evening in the theatre. And yet it is precisely because it is so spectacularly uproarious that we console ourselves that surely the playwright can't be that serious. Society is not that morally bankrupt, is it? Is it?

The answer to that question is not to be found in Wilde's plays but in his life itself. Wilde's opinions on this and that subject are everywhere in his plays. They are, in fact, the entire fabric of his theatre work. Wilde the man is somewhere else. I think we glimpse him occasionally in a poem or two, but it is not until after the catastrophe of his trial on charges of "gross indecency"—a sorry and ultimately fatal episode in his short, brilliant life that was instigated by Wilde's literally thumbing his nose at his titled male lover's outraged father—and subsequent imprisonment that we meet a recognizable fellow human being. The ravaged man in Reading Gaol who gives us *De Profundis*, with its bleak indictment of the human condition, would more than likely have left *Importance*, a work of infectious and deliberate shallowness, after the first interval.

Being a great "character" came naturally to Oscar. He was a journalist's delight: he was eccentric in dress and behavior, he spoke in exquisite bon mots, he was famous for simply being Oscar Wilde before he had written anything worth reading. He had a flair for being famous. It became him and he possessed it naturally. He even seemed to welcome the tribulations that would bring about his downfall, never doubting that he would emerge from his tribulations in the dock even more famous, notorious, and adored than before.

Being a great man came with more difficulty. It came of physical suffering, public humiliation, and almost total abandonment by those who should have cared for him most. His exile in France in the final few years of his life is one of the most painful third acts in English letters.

Not surprisingly, Wilde is still more interesting as a personality than any of the characters in his plays. Many a great actress has delighted audiences with her Lady Bracknell, but no matter who the actress playing her is—Dame Maggie Smith or Edith Evans—she cannot trump the author himself. Wilde will always be the definitive Lady Bracknell—the one we take home with us when the play is over. You can be a great Wildean actor, but Oscar himself will always be the star of the evening. Chekhov and Shakespeare's plays are always about Uncle Vanya and Falstaff and never about the playwrights themselves. A volume entitled *The Philosophy of William Shakespeare* would be a very slender volume indeed. Wilde

plays, on the other hand, are about nothing *but* Oscar. This diminishes them, of course, in the pantheon of great plays (is Wilde's name ever mentioned in the same breath as the Heavyweights?), but still they burn, especially *Importance*, with a brilliant comic light that for sheer technique is unsurpassed. Line for line, there is no better example of comic writing than *Importance*.

One can soon grow weary of quoting Oscar's funniest or most pithy one-liners. There are so many of them. Indeed, there is an entire cottage industry in slender volumes calling themselves "The Wit" or "The Best" or "The Funniest" of Oscar Wilde. He is quoted almost endlessly as Shakespeare or the King James Version of the Holy Bible. "I have nothing to declare but my genius," Wilde said when he visited the United States to lecture the rubes on Aesthetics in 1882. "A little sincerity is a dangerous thing," he writes in an essay, "and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal." Such wit is clever—and cruel. Cruel about the world around him and equally lacerating to himself: "Crying is the refuge of plain women, but the ruin of the pretty ones."

One can admire Wilde's comic technique endlessly, but any attempt to emulate it is doomed to failure. Wilde is a *sui generis* genius. Only a very great fool would attempt to write like him. Verbal dexterity is the be-all and end-all of Wilde's comedy. It is the play of anagrams and wordplay with words that delights us. The situations are rather routine, in fact—no French-farce banging of doors or mistaken identities in Algernon's flat on Half-Moon Street, and the notion of physical comedy is positively alien to the Wildean spirit. Jerry Lewis or Jim Carrey would be a disaster as *Importance's* two gay deceivers.

I use "gay" in the sense of charming, witty, keeping-it-light. Wilde was a gay man, but there is not much point or fun in reading his plays as encoded depictions of his sexuality. Wilde saved that part of himself for his unflinching final pieces, written when he was imprisoned and punished by the same society he had made such a brilliant career of ridiculing.

Today, Wilde's escapades as a dandy, an aesthete, or a homosexual would still draw much media attention, but he would not end up in Reading Gaol for them. Instead, one can imagine Oscar being knighted by Her Majesty, the Queen, and certainly he would have been one of Princess Diana's favorites. Think Boy George and Elton John. This absolute turnabout in society's attitudes toward the sexual outlaw from outsider to *insider* is no small part of the legacy of Wilde's public flamboyant life.

After the disgrace of his trial and imprisonment, the producer of *Importance* took Wilde's name off billboards and out of the program. Suddenly, Wilde's brilliant West End success was an anonymously authored one. I don't know exactly when the restoration of Wilde's reputation began (it surely must have started with a producer brave enough to restore Wilde's billing in the playbill), but I do remember that his name was never once mentioned in my high school English literature course. This was in Texas in the late 1950s.

As a very young man dealing with my own sexuality, I had certainly heard rumors about this Oscar Wilde fella. There was a "reason" he wasn't read in our classroom. His name conjured up the evil of the Marquis de Sade and his scandal was the stuff wild adolescent myths are made on. When our drama club put on *Importance* I could get none of my teachers to tell me anything I wanted to know about its author. He was just a man who wrote the

very funny play, end of story. I went to the school library and looked him up in the encyclopedia, making sure no one saw who I was searching for in the “W’s.” To my disappointment, there were references to Wilde’s imprisonment on “moral” charges but nothing more specific than that. I wanted to know if Oscar Wilde slept with other men.

In college, by the time I was sleeping with other men, I think even a fifteen year old knew that Oscar Wilde was a homosexual. He was suddenly out of the closet, along with a lot of other cultural and moral shibboleths, and the world very quickly became a very different place.

The other plays in this volume are less interesting. They are chock-full of Wilde’s delicious immortal epigrams (and that is imperative enough to read and enjoy them, and sufficient reason for their continuing revivals and occasional filmings), but they rarely transcend the characters’ conventionality or the now-tedious melodramatic situations in which they find themselves. (Ibsen worked these same situations with more dramatic cunning if a good deal less humor.) If Wilde’s reputation rested solely on these other works, there would be little reason for this new edition.

As for *Salomé*, it is best read as what my teachers used to call a “closet” drama; i.e., a play that is best experienced in the study and not performed. The title role was written for the great Sarah Bernhardt, who deemed it “unplayable.” Dramatic history would seem to have proved her right.

“My name has two ‘O’s’, two ‘F’s’, and two ‘W’s,’” Wilde wrote in 1885. He had been christened Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde in Dublin in 1854. “A name which is destined to be in everyone’s mouth must not be too long,” he continued. “It comes too expensive in the advertisements All but two of my names have already been thrown overboard. Soon I shall discard another and be known as ‘The Wilde’ or ‘The Oscar.’”

It is ironic that Wilde, an Irishman, is generally thought of as some sort of *über* Englishman. Like many Irish writers, Wilde was quick to get the hell out of Ireland and never look back. But if braggadocio is an Irish trait, Wilde was Irish to his fingertips. He never doubted his genius or his success, both of which were considerable. At one point in his relatively short life (he died at forty-six), he was arguably the most famous man of letters in the world and yet he had written relatively little. His greatest play, *Importance*, was thirteen years in the future when he toured America as a personality and lecturer on the Aesthete. Jaded New Yorkers and unwashed gold prospectors turned out in record numbers to see him: Oscar Wilde was famous for being Oscar Wilde. If that isn’t the beginning of the cult of literary personality and the author as celebrity, I don’t know what is. (Truman Capote and Lillian Hellman were latecomers to that particular game.) If there had been a Blackglama Mink “What Becomes Celebrity Most?” photo-ad campaign in 1895, the year of *Importance*’s sensational premiere—just weeks before his even more sensational downfall at the hands of Lord Alfred Douglas’s enraged father, the Marquess of Queensberry—Wilde would have been the most likely candidate for this tabloid immortalization.

Instead, he was banished to anonymity for the rest of his sad life, and then some. He was reviled, forgotten, and then reviled all over again. Today, his disgrace in the courtroom would have only increased his stature as a celebrity and his drawing power at the box office.

Oscar would have had something to say about all this, of course. Something amusing.

TERRENCE McNALLY'S plays include *Love! Valour! Compassion!* and *Master Class*. In addition to four Tony Awards, McNally has received two Guggenheim Fellowships and a Rockefeller Grant among many other honors. He lives in New York City.

The text is set from the first published edition of each play. After theatre productions of the plays, Wilde had time to implement changes, often substantial ones, in time for their first publications. While *Lady Windermere's Fan* appeared in print approximately a year and a half after its stage debut, in 1893, in an edition by E. Mathews and J. Lane, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* were not published until 1899, by Leonard Smithers, as a result of Wilde's trial, imprisonment, and exile.

LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN

A PLAY ABOUT A GOOD WOMAN

To

THE DEAR MEMORY

OF

ROBERT EARL OF LYTTON

IN AFFECTION

AND

ADMIRATION

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

LORD WINDERMERE

LORD DARLINGTON

LORD AUGUSTUS LORTON

MR. DUMBY

MR. CECIL GRAHAM

MR. HOPPER

PARKER, BUTLER

LADY WINDERMERE

THE DUCHESS OF BERWICK

LADY AGATHA CARLISLE

LADY PLYMDALE

LADY STUTFIELD

LADY JEDBURGH

MRS. COWPER-COWPER

MRS. ERLYNNE

ROSALIE, Maid

LONDON: ST. JAMES'S THEATRE

Lessee and Manager: Mr. George Alexander

February 22nd, 1892

LORD WINDERMERE *Mr. George Alexander*

LORD DARLINGTON *Mr. Nutcombe Gould*

LORD AUGUSTUS LORTON *Mr. H. H. Vincent*

MR. CECIL GRAHAM *Mr. Ben. Webster*

MR. DUMBY *Mr. Vane-Tempest*

MR. HOPPER *Mr. Alfred Holles*

PARKER (*Butler*) *Mr. V. Sansbury*

LADY WINDERMERE *Miss Lily Hanbury*

The DUCHESS OF BERWICK *Miss Fanny Coleman*

LADY AGATHA CARLISLE *Miss Laura Graves*

LADY PLYMDALE *Miss Granville*

LADY J EDBURGH *Miss B. Page*

LADY STUTFIELD *Miss Madge Girdlestone*

MRS. COWPER-COWPER *Miss A. De Winton*

MRS. ERLYNNE *Miss Marion Terry*

ROSALIE (*Maid*) *Miss Winifred Dolan*

FIRST ACT

SCENE—*Morning-room of Lord Windermere's house in Carlton House Terrace. Doors C. and R. Bureau with books and papers R. Sofa with small tea-table L. Window opening on to terrace L. Table R.*

(Lady Windermere is at table R., arranging roses in a blue bowl.)

(Enter Parker.)

PARKER. Is your ladyship at home this afternoon?

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes—who has called?

PARKER. Lord Darlington, my lady.

LADY WINDERMERE. *(Hesitates for a moment.)* Show him up—and I'm at home to any one who calls.

PARKER. Yes, my lady.

(Exit C.)

LADY WINDERMERE. It's best for me to see him before to-night. I'm glad he's come.

(Enter Parker C.)

PARKER Lord Darlington.

(Enter Lord Darlington C.)

(Exit Parker.)

LORD DARLINGTON. How do you do, Lady Windermere?

LADY WINDERMERE. How do you do, Lord Darlington? No, I can't shake hands with you. My hands are all wet with these roses.

Aren't they lovely? They came up from Selby this morning.

LORD DARLINGTON. They are quite perfect. *(Sees a fan lying on the table.)* And what a wonderful fan! May I look at it?

LADY WINDERMERE. Do. Pretty, isn't it! It's got my name on it, and everything. I have only just seen it myself. It's my husband's birthday present to me. You know to-day is my birthday?

LORD DARLINGTON. No? Is it really?

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes, I'm of age to-day. Quite an important day in my life, isn't it? That is why I am giving this party to-night. Do sit down. *(Still arranging flowers.)*

LORD DARLINGTON. *(Sitting down.)* I wish I had known it was your birthday, Lady Windermere. I would have covered the whole street in front of your house with flowers for you to walk on.

They are made for you. *(A short pause.)*

LADY WINDERMERE. Lord Darlington, you annoyed me last night at the Foreign Office. I am afraid you are going to annoy me again.

LORD DARLINGTON. I, Lady Windermere?

(Enter Parker and Footman C., with tray and tea things.)

LADY WINDERMERE. Put it there, Parker. That will do. *(Wipes her hands with her pocket-handkerchief, goes to tea-table L., and sits down.)* Won't you come over, Lord Darlington?
(Exit Parker C.)

LORD DARLINGTON. *(Takes chair and goes across L.C.)* I am quite miserable, Lady Windermere. You must tell me what I did. *(Sits down at table L.)*

LADY WINDERMERE. Well, you kept paying me elaborate compliments the whole evening.

LORD DARLINGTON. *(Smiling.)* Ah, now-a-days we are all of us so hard up, that the only pleasant things to pay *are* compliments. They're the only things we *can* pay.

LADY WINDERMERE. *(Shaking her head.)* No, I am talking very seriously. You mustn't laugh, I am quite serious. I don't like compliments, and I don't see why a man should think he is pleasing a woman enormously when he says to her a whole heap of things that he doesn't mean.

LORD DARLINGTON. Ah, but I did mean them. *(Takes tea which she offers him.)*

LADY WINDERMERE. *(Gravely.)* I hope not. I should be sorry to have to quarrel with you, Lord Darlington. I like you very much, you know that. But I shouldn't like you at all if I thought you were what most other men are. Believe me, you are better than most other men, and sometimes think you pretend to be worse.

LORD DARLINGTON. We all have our little vanities, Lady Windermere.

LADY WINDERMERE. Why do you make that your special one? *(Still seated at table L.)*

LORD DARLINGTON. *(Still seated L.C.)* Oh, now-a-days so many conceited people go about Society pretending to be good, that I think it shows rather a sweet and modest disposition to pretend to be bad. Besides, there is this to be said. If you pretend to be good, the world takes you very seriously. If you pretend to be bad, it doesn't. Such is the astounding stupidity of optimism.

LADY WINDERMERE. Don't you *want* the world to take you seriously then, Lord Darlington?

LORD DARLINGTON. No, not the world. Who are the people the world takes seriously? All the dull people one can think of, from the Bishops down to the bores. I should like *you* to take me very seriously, Lady Windermere, *you* more than any one else in life.

LADY WINDERMERE. Why—why me?

LORD DARLINGTON. *(After a slight hesitation.)* Because I think we might be great friends. Let us be great friends. You may want a friend some day.

LADY WINDERMERE. Why do you say that?

LORD DARLINGTON. Oh!—we all want friends at times.

LADY WINDERMERE. I think we're very good friends already, Lord Darlington. We can always remain so as long as you don't—

LORD DARLINGTON. Don't what?

LADY WINDERMERE. Don't spoil it by saying extravagant silly things to me. You think I am a Puritan, I suppose? Well, I have something of the Puritan in me. I was brought up like that. I am glad of it. My mother died when I was a mere child. I lived always with Lady Julia, my father's elder sister you know. She was stern to me, but she taught me, what the world is forgetting, the difference that there is between what is right and what is wrong. *She* allowed of no compromise. *I* allow of none.

LORD DARLINGTON. My dear Lady Windermere!

LADY WINDERMERE. (*Leaning back on the sofa.*) You look on me as being behind the age.—Well, I am! I should be sorry to be on the same level as an age like this.

LORD DARLINGTON. You think the age very bad?

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes. Now-a-days people seem to look on life as a speculation. It is not a speculation. It is a sacrament. Its ideal is Love. Its purification is sacrifice.

LORD DARLINGTON. (*Smiling.*) Oh, anything is better than being sacrificed!

LADY WINDERMERE. (*Leaning forward.*) Don't say that.

LORD DARLINGTON. I do say it. I feel it—I know it.

(*Enter Parker C.*)

PARKER. The men want to know if they are to put the carpets on the terrace for to-night, my lady?

LADY WINDERMERE. You don't think it will rain, Lord Darlington, do you?

LORD DARLINGTON. I won't hear of its raining on your birthday!

LADY WINDERMERE. Tell them to do it at once, Parker.

(*Exit Parker C.*)

LORD DARLINGTON. (*Still seated.*) Do you think then—of course I am only putting an imaginary instance—do you think that in the case of a young married couple, say about two years married, if the husband suddenly becomes the intimate friend of a woman of—well, more than doubtful character, is always calling upon her, lunching with her, and probably paying her bills—do you think that the wife should not console herself?

LADY WINDERMERE. (*Frowning.*) Console herself?

LORD DARLINGTON. Yes, I think she should—I think she has the right.

LADY WINDERMERE. Because the husband is vile—should the wife be vile also?

LORD DARLINGTON. Vileness is a terrible word, Lady Windermere.

LADY WINDERMERE. It is a terrible thing, Lord Darlington.

LORD DARLINGTON. Do you know I am afraid that good people do a great deal of harm in this world. Certainly the greatest harm they do is that they make badness of such extraordinary importance. It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious. I take the side of the charming, and you, Lady Windermere, can't help belonging to them.

LADY WINDERMERE. Now, Lord Darlington. *(Rising and crossing R., front of him.)* Don't stir, I am merely going to finish my flowers. *(Goes to table R.C.)*

LORD DARLINGTON. *(Rising and moving chair.)* And I must say I think you are very hard on modern life, Lady Windermere. Of course there is much against it, I admit. Most women, for instance, now-a-days, are rather mercenary.

LADY WINDERMERE. Don't talk about such people.

LORD DARLINGTON. Well then, setting mercenary people aside, who, of course, are dreadful, do you think seriously that women who have committed what the world calls a fault should never be forgiven?

LADY WINDERMERE. *(Standing at table.)* I think they should never be forgiven.

LORD DARLINGTON. And men? Do you think that there should be the same laws for men as there are for women?

LADY WINDERMERE. Certainly!

LORD DARLINGTON. I think life too complex a thing to be settled by these hard and fast rules.

LADY WINDERMERE. If we had "these hard and fast rules," we should find life much more simple.

LORD DARLINGTON. You allow of no exceptions?

LADY WINDERMERE. None!

LORD DARLINGTON. Ah, what a fascinating Puritan you are, Lady Windermere!

LADY WINDERMERE. The adjective was unnecessary, Lord Darlington.

LORD DARLINGTON. I couldn't help it. I can resist everything except temptation.

LADY WINDERMERE. You have the modern affectation of weakness.

LORD DARLINGTON. *(Looking at her.)* It's only an affectation, Lady Windermere.

(Enter Parker C.)

PARKER. The Duchess of Berwick and Lady Agatha Carlisle.

(Enter the Duchess of Berwick and Lady Agatha Carlisle C.)

(Exit Parker C.)

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. *(Coming down C., and shaking hands.)* Dear Margaret, I am so pleased to see you. You remember Agatha, don't you? *(Crossing L.C.)* How do you do, Lord Darlington? I won't let you know my daughter, you are far too wicked.

LORD DARLINGTON. Don't say that, Duchess. As a wicked man I am a complete failure. Why, there are lots of people who say I have never really done anything wrong in the whole course of my life. of course they only say it behind my back.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Isn't he dreadful? Agatha, this is Lord Darlington. Mind you don't believe a word he says. *(Lord Darlington crosses R.C.)* No, no tea, thank you, dear. *(Crosses and sits on sofa.)* We have just had tea at Lady Markby's. Such bad tea, too. It was quite undrinkable. I wasn't at all surprised. Her own son-in-law supplies it. Agatha is looking forward so much to your ball tonight, dear Margaret.

LADY WINDERMERE. *(Seated L.C.)* Oh, you mustn't think it is going to be a ball, Duchess. It is only a dance in honour of my birthday. A small and early.

LORD DARLINGTON. *(Standing L.C.)* Very small, very early, and very select, Duchess.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. *(On sofa L.)* Of course it's going to be select. But we know *that*, dear Margaret, about *your* house. It is really one of the few houses in London where I can take Agatha, and where I feel perfectly secure about dear Berwick. I don't know what society is coming to. The most dreadful people seem to go everywhere. They certainly come to my parties—the men get quite furious if one doesn't ask them. Really, some one should make a stand against it.

LADY WINDERMERE. *I* will, Duchess. I will have no one in my house about whom there is any scandal.

LORD DARLINGTON. *(R.C.)* Oh, don't say that, Lady Windermere. I should never be admitted! *(Sitting.)*

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Oh, men don't matter. With women it is different. We're good. Some of us are, at least. But we are positively getting elbowed into the corner. Our husbands would really forget our existence if we didn't nag at them from time to time, just to remind them that we have a perfect legal right to do so.

LORD DARLINGTON. It's a curious thing, Duchess, about the game of marriage—a game, by the way, that is going out of fashion—the wives hold all the honours, and invariably lose the odd trick.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. The odd trick? Is that the husband, Lord Darlington?

LORD DARLINGTON. It would be rather a good name for the modern husband.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Dear Lord Darlington, how thoroughly depraved you are!

LADY WINDERMERE. Lord Darlington is trivial.

LORD DARLINGTON. Ah, don't say that, Lady Windermere.

LADY WINDERMERE. Why do you *talk* so trivially about life, then?

LORD DARLINGTON. Because I think that life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it. (*Moves up C.*)

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. What does he mean? Do, as a concession to my poor wits, Lord Darlington, just explain to me what you really mean.

LORD DARLINGTON. (*Coming down back of table.*) I think I had better not, Duchess. Now-a-days to be intelligible is to be found out. Good-bye! (*Shakes hands with Duchess.*) And now—(*goes to stage*) Lady Windermere, good-bye. I may come to-night, mayn't I? Do let me come.

LADY WINDERMERE. (*Standing up stage with Lord Darlington.*) Yes, certainly. But you are not to say foolish, insincere things to people.

LORD DARLINGTON. (*Smiling.*) Ah! you are beginning to reform me. It is a dangerous thing to reform any one, Lady Windermere.

(*Bows, and exit C.*)

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. (*Who has risen, goes C.*) What a charming, wicked creature! I like him so much. I'm quite delighted he's gone! How sweet you're looking! Where *do* you get your gowns? And now I must tell you how sorry I am for you, dear Margaret. (*Crosses to sofa and sits with Lady Windermere.*) Agatha darling!

LADY AGATHA. Yes, mamma. (*Rises.*)

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Will you go and look over the photograph album that I see there?

LADY AGATHA. Yes, mamma. (*Goes to table up L.*)

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Dear girl! She is so fond of photographs of Switzerland. Such a pure taste, I think. But I really am so sorry for you, Margaret.

LADY WINDERMERE. (*Smiling.*) Why, Duchess?

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Oh, on account of that horrid woman. She dresses so well, too, which makes it much worse, sets such a dreadful example. Augustus—you know my disreputable brother—such a trial to us all—well, Augustus is completely infatuated about her. It is quite scandalous, for she is absolutely inadmissible into society. Many a woman has a past, but I am told that she has at least a dozen, and that they all fit.

LADY WINDERMERE. Whom are you talking about, Duchess?

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. About Mrs. Erlynne.

LADY WINDERMERE. Mrs. Erlynne? I never heard of her, Duchess. And what *has* she to do with

me?

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. My poor child! Agatha, darling!

LADY AGATHA. Yes, mamma.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Will you go out on the terrace and look at the sunset?

LADY AGATHA. Yes, mamma.

(Exit through window L)

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Sweet girl! So devoted to sunsets! Shows such refinement of feeling, does it not? After all, there is nothing like Nature, is there?

LADY WINDERMERE. But what is it, Duchess? Why do you talk to me about this person?

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Don't you really know? I assure you we're all so distressed about it. only last night at dear Lady Jansen's every one was saying how extraordinary it was that, of all men in London, Windermere should behave in such a way.

LADY WINDERMERE. My husband—what has *he* got to do with any woman of that kind?

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Ah, what indeed, dear? That is the point. He goes to see her continually, and stops for hours at a time, and while he is there she is not at home to any one. Not that many ladies call on her, dear, but she has a great many disreputable men friends—my own brother particularly, as I told you—and that is what makes it so dreadful about Windermere. We looked upon *him* as being such a model husband, but I am afraid there is no doubt about it. My dear nieces—you know the Saville girls, don't you?—such nice domestic creatures—plain, dreadfully plain, but so good—well, they're always at the window doing fancy work, and making ugly things for the poor, which I think so useful of them in these dreadful socialistic days, and this terrible woman has taken a house in Curzon Street, right opposite them—such a respectable street, too. I don't know what we're coming to! And they tell me that Windermere goes there four and five times a week—they *see* him. They can't help it—and although they never talk scandal, they—well, of course—they remark on it to every one. And the worst of it all is that I have been told that this woman has got a great deal of money out of somebody, for it seems that she came to London six months ago without anything at all to speak of, and now she has this charming house in Mayfair, drives her ponies in the Park every afternoon and all—well, all—since she has known poor dear Windermere.

LADY WINDERMERE. Oh, I can't believe it!

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. But it's quite true, my dear. The whole of London knows it. That is why I felt it was better to come and talk to you, and advise you to take Windermere away at once to Homburg or to Aix, where he'll have something to amuse him, and where you can watch him all day long. I assure you, my dear, that on several occasions after I was first married, I had to pretend to be very ill, and was obliged to drink the most unpleasant mineral waters, merely to get Berwick out of town. He was so extremely susceptible. Though I am bound to say he never gave away any large sums of money to anybody. He is

far too high-principled for that!

LADY WINDERMERE. (*Interrupting.*) Duchess, Duchess, it's *impossible!* (*Rising and crossing stage to C.*) We are only married two years. Our child is but six months old. (*Sits in chair R. of L. table.*)

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Ah, the dear pretty baby! How is the little darling? is it a boy or a girl? I hope a girl—Ah, no, I remember it's a boy! I'm so sorry. Boys are so wicked. My boy is excessively immoral. You wouldn't believe at what hours he comes home. And he's only left Oxford a few months—I really don't know what they teach them there.

LADY WINDERMERE. Are *all* men bad?

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Oh, all of them, my dear, all of them, without any exception. And they never grow any better. Men become old, but they never become good.

LADY WINDERMERE. Windermere and I married for love.

DUCHESS OF BERWICKES. Yes, we begin like that. It was only Berwick's brutal and incessant threats of suicide that made me accept him at all, and before the year was out, he was running after all kinds of petticoats, every colour, every shape, every material. In fact, before the honeymoon was over, I caught him winking at my maid, a most pretty, respectable girl. I dismissed her at once without a character.—No, I remember I passed her on to my sister; poor dear Sir George is so short-sighted, I thought it wouldn't matter. But it did, though—was most unfortunate. (*Rises.*) And now, my dear child, I must go, as we are dining out. And mind you don't take this little aberration of Windermere's too much to heart. Just take him abroad, and he'll come back to you all right.

LADY WINDERMERE. Come back to me? (*C.*)

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. (*L.C.*) Yes, dear, these wicked women get our husbands away from us, but they always come back, slightly damaged, of course. And don't make scenes, men hate them!

LADY WINDERMERE. It is very kind of you, Duchess, to come and tell me all this. But I can't believe that my husband is untrue to me.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Pretty child! I was like that once. Now I know that all men are monsters. (*Lady Windermere rings bell.*) The only thing to do is to feed the wretches well. A good cook does wonders, and that I know you have. My dear Margaret, you are not going to cry?

LADY WINDERMERE. You needn't be afraid, Duchess, I never cry.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. That's quite right, dear. Crying is the refuge of plain women but the ruin of pretty ones. Agatha, darling!

LADY AGATHA. (*Entering L.*) Yes, mamma. (*Stands back of table L.C.*)

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Come and bid good-bye to Lady Windermere, and thank her for your charming visit. (*Coming down again.*) And by the way, I must thank you for sending a card to Mr. Hopper—he's that rich young Australian people are taking such notice of just at

present. His father made a great fortune by selling some kind of food in circular tins—most palatable, I believe—I fancy it is the thing the servants always refuse to eat. But the son is quite interesting. I think he's attracted by dear Agatha's clever talk. Of course, we should be very sorry to lose her, but I think that a mother who doesn't part with a daughter every season has no real affection. We're coming to-night, dear. *(Parker opens C. doors.)* And remember my advice, take the poor fellow out of town at once, it is the only thing to do. Good-bye, once more; come, Agatha.

(Exeunt Duchess and Lady Agatha C.)

LADY WINDERMERE. How horrible! I understand now what Lord Darlington meant by the imaginary instance of the couple not two years married. oh! it can't be true—she spoke of enormous sums of money paid to this woman. I know where Arthur keeps his bank book—in one of the drawers of that desk. I might find out by that. I *will* find out. *(Opens drawer.)* No, it is some hideous mistake. *(Rises and goes C.)* Some silly scandal! He loves *me*! He loves *me*! But why should I not look? I am his wife, I have a right to look! *(Returns to bureau, takes out book and examines it, page by page, smiles and gives a sigh of relief.)* I knew it! there is not a word of truth in this stupid story. *(Puts book back in drawer. As she does so starts and takes out another book.)* A second book—private—locked! *(Tries to open it, but fails. Sees paper knife on bureau, and with it cuts cover from book. Begins to start at the first page.)* “Mrs. Erlynne—£600—Mrs. Erlynne—£700—Mrs. Erlynne—£400.” Oh! it is true! it is true! How horrible! *(Throws book on floor.) (Enter Lord Windermere C.)*

LORD WINDERMERE. Well, dear, has the fan been sent home yet? *(Going R.C. Sees book.)* Margaret you have cut open my bank book. You have no right to do such a thing!

LADY WINDERMERE. You think it wrong that you are found out, don't you?

LORD WINDERMERE. I think it wrong that a wife should spy on her husband.

LADY WINDERMERE. I did not spy on you. I never knew of this woman's existence till half an hour ago. Some one who pitied me was kind enough to tell me what every one in London knows already—your daily visits to Curzon Street, your mad infatuation, the monstrous sums of money you squander on this infamous woman! *(Crossing L.)*

LORD WINDERMERE. Margaret! don't talk like that of Mrs. Erlynne, you don't know how unjust it is!

LADY WINDERMERE. *(Turning to him.)* You are very jealous of Mrs. Erlynne's honour. I wish you had been as jealous of mine.

LORD WINDERMERE. Your honour is untouched, Margaret. You don't think for a moment that ———*(Puts book back into desk.)*

LADY WINDERMERE. I think that you spend your money strangely. That is all. Oh, don't imagine I mind about the money. As far as I am concerned, you may squander everything we have. But what I *do* mind is that you who have loved me, you who have taught me to love you, should pass from the love that is given to the love that is bought. Oh, it's horrible! *(Sits on sofa.)* And it is I who feel degraded! *You* don't feel anything. I feel stained, utterly stained.

You can't realise how hideous the last six months seem to me now—every kiss you have given me is tainted in my memory.

LORD WINDERMERE. (*Crossing to her.*) Don't say that, Margaret. I never loved any one in the whole world but you.

LADY WINDERMERE. (*Rises.*) Who is this woman, then? Why do you take a house for her?

LORD WINDERMERE. I did not take a house for her.

LADY WINDERMERE. You gave her the money to do it, which is the same thing.

LORD WINDERMERE. Margaret, as far as I have known Mrs. Erlynne—

LADY WINDERMERE. Is there a Mr. Erlynne—or is he a myth?

LORD WINDERMERE. Her husband died many years ago. She is alone in the world.

LADY WINDERMERE. No relations? (*A pause.*)

LORD WINDERMERE. None.

LADY WINDERMERE. Rather curious, isn't it? (*L.*)

LORD WINDERMERE. (*L.C.*) Margaret, I was saying to you—and I beg you to listen to me—that as far as I have known Mrs. Erlynne, she has conducted herself well. If years ago—

LADY WINDERMERE. Oh! (*Crossing R.C.*) I don't want details about her life!

LORD WINDERMERE. (*C.*) I am not going to give you any details about her life. I tell you simply this—Mrs. Erlynne was once honoured, loved, respected. She was well born, she had position—she lost everything—threw it away, if you like. That makes it all the more bitter. Misfortunes one can endure—they come from outside, they are accidents. But to suffer for one's own faults—ah!—there is the sting of life. It was twenty years ago, too. She was little more than a girl then. She had been a wife for even less time than you have.

LADY WINDERMERE. I am not interested in her—and—you should not mention this woman and me in the same breath. It is an error of taste. (*Sitting R. at desk.*)

LORD WINDERMERE. Margaret, you could save this woman. She wants to get back into society, and she wants you to help her. (*Crossing to her.*)

LADY WINDERMERE. Me!

LORD WINDERMERE. Yes, you.

LADY WINDERMERE. How impertinent of her! (*A pause.*)

LORD WINDERMERE. Margaret, I came to ask you a great favour, and I still ask it of you, though you have discovered what I had intended you should never have known, that I have given Mrs. Erlynne a large sum of money. I want you to send her an invitation for our party to-night. (*Standing L. of her.*)

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