

Synopsis of  
THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST  
A trivial Comedy for Serious People

by OSCAR WILDE  
(First performed in London 14 February 1895)

The Characters

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF  
LANE. his Manservant  
MR ERNEST WORTHING, Algernon's best friend  
LADY BRACKNELL, Algernon's Aunt  
The HON GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX, Algernon's cousin.  
CECILY CARDEW, a ward of Mr Worthing's  
MISS PRISM, an elderly Governess.  
The REV CANON CHASUBLE, DD. (Dr of Divinity)  
MERRIMAN. Worthing's butler.

Act One

The Morning-room in Algernon Moncrieff's flat in Half-Moon Street, a luxurious and artistically furnished bachelor apartment. LANE, the Manservant, is arranging a table set for afternoon tea while a piano is heard playing off stage. It stops and ALGERNON enters. Helping himself to a couple of the sandwiches that have been prepared for invited guests, including his aunt, Lady Bracknell, ALGERNON invites his LANE to comment on his piano playing. His Manservant declines, saying he didn't feel that it was polite to listen. Not offended, ALGERNON admits that he doesn't play accurately, anyone can

do that, but prides himself on playing with expression. "As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life."

While consuming the sandwiches, ALGERNON mildly complains that, on the occasion when he was entertaining his friends, Lord Shoreman and Mr Worthing the other night an excessive amount of champagne was consumed, eight bottles and a pint. "Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne. I ask merely for information" "I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir." says LANE, "I have often observed that in married households, the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand."

ALGERNON deplores this demoralising effect of the marital state but, when LANE seems about to expand on his own very brief experience of it "as a consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person...", his master languidly remarks that he really isn't all that interested in Lane's family life. LANE agrees, "It's not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself."

LANE exits and reenters to announce the arrival of Mr Ernest Worthing. WORTHING, who seems to be more often known to his friends as 'JACK' appears, noting that ALGERNON is, as usual, eating. He then himself inspects the tea table and has to be warned by his host that the cucumber sandwiches are reserved for the guests due that have been invited = as JACK clearly was not. (This doesn't prevent ALGERNON from himself continuing with the sandwiches)

The two friends discuss Lady Bracknell and the other expected guest, Gwendolen, Algernon's first cousin. JACK declares himself to be in love with Gwendolen. He has come up to London from his residence in the country for the express purpose of proposing to Gwendolen.

ALGERNON is discouraging. He doubts that Gwendolen is likely to accept JACK. Gwendolen has been flirting outrageously with him but it's a well established fact that girls never marry the men that they flirt with. Girls don't think it's right. Besides before ALGERNON would give consent to the marriage, ALGERNON would insist that JACK clear up "the whole question of Cecily"

Cecily! JACK protests. "I don't know any one of the name of Cecily"

But ALGERNON, who has already rung for his manservant, instructs LANE to fetch the cigarette case which JACK left on his last visit.

Readily admitting that he has lost a cigarette case, has reported it stolen and was even thinking of offering a large reward, JACK admits ownership as soon as LANE returns with the case, presenting it on a silver platter. ALGERNON gets to it first. Opening it, ALGERNON asks his friend to explain why it has been inscribed as a present from 'Cecily'.

There is a brief exchange on the propriety of reading what has been privately written inside someone else's property before JACK demands the return of the case - a gift from an aunt by the name of Cecily "Charming old lady she is, too. Lives at Tunbridge Wells. Just give it back to me, Algy."

ALGERNON is less than convinced. "Why does she call herself little Cecily if she is your aunt and lives at Tunbridge Wells. And why 'from little Cecily with her fondest love'?"

JACK waffles. "Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt should be able to decide for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be like your aunt! That is absurd."

"Yes. But why does your aunt call you her uncle?", says ALGERNON, reading, "'From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack'. There's no objection, I admit, to an aunt being a small

aunt, but why an aunt, no matter what her size may be, should call her own nephew her uncle, I can't quite make out. Besides, your name isn't Jack at all: it is Ernest."

"It isn't Ernest: it's Jack."

WORTHING, whether he is called Jack or Ernest, is now plainly on the defensive. With much reluctance, he admits that he has found it convenient to use the name Ernest when he visits London but the name Jack when he is in the country.

Triumphant, ALGERNON declares, "I always suspected you of being a confirmed and secret Bunburyist: and I am quite sure of it now!" He returns the cigarette case to JACK who now makes a full confession. "Old Mr Thomas Cardew, who adopted me when I was a little boy, made me in his will guardian to his granddaughter, Miss Cecily Cardew. Cecily, who addresses me as her uncle from motives of respect which you could not possibly appreciate, lives at my place in the country under the charge of her admirable governess, Miss Prism." With a tone of not entirely convincing moral superiority, JACK condescends to explain to his friend that, "when one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It is one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest. who gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple."

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

It is ALGERNON's turn now to make confession and to explain at last what he means by a 'Bunburyist'

"You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order to come up to town

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

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

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

Continuing, ALGERNON expands further on the subject of the sad decline of proper manners in current London society, the people whose company one has to find some excuse for avoiding. Like the young woman who always flirts with her own handstand across the dinner table. It's not very pleasant...It looks so bad. "It is simply washing one's clean linen in public." JACK, however, while denying that he is a Bunburyist at all, remarks that in any event he is thinking that, if Gwendolen accepts him, he may kill off his fictive brother Ernest. "Cecily is a little too much interested in him. It is rather a bore. "

But ALGERNON insists that nothing would induce him to part with Bunbury. "A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it." Indeed, he advises JACK that if he doesn't want to know Bunbury, then his wife will. "You don't seem to realise that, in married life, three is company and two is none."

Presently, they are interrupted by the reappearance of LANE who announces the arrival of Lady Bracknell and Miss Fairfax.

LADY BRACKNELL, greeting ALGERNON, asks him if he is behaving well. ALGERNON replies

that he is feeling very well. His aunt points out that that's not quite the same thing: in fact the two things rarely go together.

Apologising that she is a little late, Aunt Augusta explains that she had to visit a friend, Lady Harbury, whose husband has just died, "I never saw a woman so altered: she looks twenty years younger. And now I'll have a cup of tea, and one of those nice cucumber sandwiches you promised me."

The plate of sandwiches is discovered to be empty. ALGERNON is horrified, demands an explanation from LANE. Gravely, LANE provides his master with an alibi: though he went himself to the market twice, LANE could find no cucumbers - "not even for ready money"

To change the subject, ALGERNON apologises to his aunt that he will be unable to dine with her tonight: he has just received a telegram from his poor friend Bunbury who is very ill again.

LADY BRACKNELL remarks that Mr Bunbury to suffer from curiously bad health. Isn't it high time that Mr Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. ALGERNON promises to speak to Bunbury about it and, as some recompence for his absence at her dinner party, invites her into the next room where they can look at the program of music that ALGERNON has prepared for it. Music on such occasions is a great difficulty, "You see, if one plays good music, people don't listen, and if one plays bad music people don't listen"

ALGERNON and his aunt retire. JACK, left on his own is nervous. GWENDOLEN, who is not, has to prompt him to come to the point. If he has something important to say, he should take advantage of Lady Bracknell's absence: she has a way of coming back suddenly back into a room which GWENDOLEN often has to speak to her about.

JACK again finds it difficult to get to the point. GWENDOLEN has to assist, promising that she is already aware of his admiration for her and that she is herself far from indifferent to him. "We live, as I hope you know, Mr Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits, I am told: and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest."

JACK is both astonished and delighted. Does Gwendolen really love him? "Passionately", she assures him. They embrace. Belatedly, JACK remarks that he hopes she does not mean that she could not love him if his name wasn't Ernest.

"But your name is Ernest."

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

GWENDOLEN responds glibly, "All that is metaphysical speculation, and like most metaphysical speculations has very little reference to the actual facts of real life, as we know them." Not entirely relieved, JACK urges that they should get married at once.

"Married, Mr Worthing?"

Thrown off balance, JACK reminds her that he has already declared his devotion and that she has indicated that she is not indifferent to him.

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

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

"I think it would be an excellent opportunity. And to spare you any possible

disappointment, Mr Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you."

Thoroughly enjoying herself, GWENDOLEN still insists on the formalities of which her suitor clearly has much too little experience, never having proposed to anyone before - though in her experience men often propose for practice. "What wonderful blue eyes you have, Ernest. I hope you will always look at me just like that, especially when there are other people present."

At this moment, while JACK is on his knees, LADY BRACKNELL confirms her reputation for entering rooms at an unwelcome moment.

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

GWENDOLEN protests, restraining JACK as he tries to get up, pleading to her Mama that she should retire for a moment. "Mr Worthing has not quite finished yet."

"Finished what, may I ask?"

"I am engaged to Mr Worthing, mamma."

"Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone." says LADY BRACKNELL firmly, "When you do become engaged to some one, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself..."

GWENDOLEN begins a reproachful protest, but LADY BRACKNELL cuts her off, peremptorily ordering her to leave the house and wait in the carriage. Leaving, GWENDOLEN lows a kiss to JACK behind her mother's back.

Preparing to interrogate the young man LADY BRACKNELL orders him to sit. She looks in



her pocket book for a pencil and a notebook. JACK refuses the invitation to sit, saying that he prefers to stand. Declaring that she is bound to tell him that he is not on her list of eligible bachelors, LADY BRACKNELL says that she is willing to add his name if his answers prove satisfactory. Does he smoke? JACK admits that he does. "I'm glad to hear it," says LADY BRACKNELL, "A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is." Noting that his age is twenty-nine, she agrees that this is a suitable age at which to get married, and proceeds to enquire about his education. JACK is modest, admitting his shortcomings. LADY BRACKNELL, however, is again tolerant, "The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately, in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square."

LADY BRACKNELL proceeds to more material matters. His income? Property that he owns? His political affiliations? All of them seem to be satisfactory and it is only when it comes to the question of his ancestry that a serious dilemma surfaces.

"I have lost both my parents", he says.

LADY BRACKNELL is stopped in her tracks. "To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune: to lose both looks like carelessness."

JACK is forced to an admission even more embarrassing. "The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer to the truth to say my parents seem to have lost me...I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was...well, I was found."

"Found?"

"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."

It is clear that LADY BRACKNELL is discomfited. "Where did the charitable gentleman who had a first-class ticket for this seaside resort find you?"

JACK replies with some gravity. "In a handbag", he confesses.

"A handbag?"

Very seriously, he explains, "Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a handbag - a somewhat large, black leather handbag, with handles to it - an ordinary handbag in fact."

Grimly, LADY BRACKNELL pursues the enquiry, and JACK explains. The handbag, he reports, was given to the late Mr Cardew in mistake for his own. It was left in the cloak-room at Victoria Station. The Brighton Line.

"The line is immaterial." declares LADY BRACKNELL, confessing that she feels somewhat bewildered. "To be born, or at any rate bred, in a handbag, whether it had handles or not, seems to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to?" LADY BRACKNELL puts away her notebook as she prepares to put an end to the interview. Sternly, she advises JACK to acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over, adding, "You can hardly

imagine that I or Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter - a girl brought up with the utmost care - to marry into a cloakroom and form an alliance with a parcel! Good morning, Mr Worthing!" LADY BRACKNELL's exit is majestic in its indignation.

JACK is left alone. From the next room comes the sound of Algernon's piano playing - the Wedding March! Understandably enraged that this accompaniment should be so inappropriate JACK storms to the door to summon his friend back into the room. Gwendolen's mother, he declares is a monster, a Gorgon! Remembering that she is also Algernon's aunt he apologises.

ALGERNON reassures him, "I love hearing my relations abused. It's the only thing that makes me put up with them at all." JACK's chief worry, apparently, is that Gwendolen might grow up to become someone like her mother. If that were to happen he would shoot himself. ALGERNON agrees it could be a problem, "All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his."

JACK is in no mood for his friend's efforts to be witty. Has Jack told Gwendolen the truth - explained why it is that he is known as 'Ernest' when in town and 'Jack' when he is in the country? JACK retorts, "My dear fellow, the truth isn't quite the thing that one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl. What extraordinary ideas you have about the way to behave to a woman!" As to the profligate Ernest, JACK declares, before the end of the week, Jack will have got rid of him. "I'll say he died in Paris of apoplexy. Lots of people die of apoplexy, quite suddenly, don't they?"

ALGERNON reminds JACK that his ward, Miss Cardew, was, he said, a little too much interested in your poor brother Ernest. Won't

she feel his loss a good deal? JACK reassures him: Cecily is not a silly romantic girl. She has got a capital appetite, goes for long walks and pays no attention to her lessons.

"I would rather like to see Cecily", says ALGERNON. "I will take very good care that you never do," promises JACK, "She is excessively pretty, and she is only just eighteen"

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

JACK hedges. One doesn't blurt these things out to people. Cecily and Gwendolen are perfectly certain to be extremely good friends. Half an hour after they have met, they will probably be calling each other sister. ALGERNON reminds JACK that it is time they were dressing for dinner - if they want to get a good table at Willis'.

Before they can leave, however, LANE appears to announce the return of GWENDOLEN. Greeting JACK with emotion, she asks that ALGERNON retire - or at least turn his back since she has something very personal to say to Mr Worthing. "Ernest, we may never be married...Whatever influence I ever had over mamma, I lost at the age of three. But although she may prevent us from becoming man and wife, and I may marry someone else and marry often, nothing she can possibly do can alter my eternal devotion to you...The story of your romantic origin, as related to me by mamma, with unpleasing comments, has naturally stirred the deeper fibres of nature. Your Christian name has an irresistible fascination. The simplicity of your character makes you exquisitely incomprehensible to me. Your town address

at the Albany I have. What is your address in the country?"

JACK, moved, provides it, "The Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire."

GWENDOLEN and JACK are too engrossed in each other to be aware that ALGERNON has contrived to be within earshot, listening carefully. ALGERNON smiles to himself. He writes the address on his shirt-cuff. Then he moves casually to pick up the Railway Guide.

GWENDOLEN whispers fondly to JACK, "There is a good postal service, I suppose?

It may be necessary to do something desperate. That of course will require serious consideration. I will communicate with you daily." After embracing him, GWENDOLEN gives ALGERNON leave to turn round - and to ring the bell for Lane. ALGERNON, who has already turned round, does so. As JACK escorts GWENDOLEN back to her carriage, ALGERNON accepts from LANE some envelopes that his manservant presents on a silver platter. They seem to be bills. ALGERNON tears them up. He is in good spirits.

"A glass of sherry, Lane." he announces, "Tomorrow, Lane, I am going Bunburying. I shall probably not be back till Monday. You can put up my dress clothes, my smoking jacket, and all the Bunbury suits."

JACK returns. Gwendolen, he tells his friend, is a really sensible intelligent girl, the only girl I ever cared for in my life. ALGERNON is laughing. "What on earth are you so amused at?" demands JACK.

"Oh, I'm a little anxious about Bunbury, that is all"

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

As JACK leaves, ALGERNON lights a cigarette, reads his shirtcuff again and smiles.

## Second Act

The garden of the Manor House, Jack's residence in the country. The garden, an old-fashioned one, is full of roses. Basket chairs and a table covered with school books are set out under a large yew tree.

Seated at the table is MISS PRISM, an elderly governess. In the near distance is a very pretty eighteen-year-old girl, CECILY. She is watering flowers.

MISS PRISM calls to her. Watering the flowers is the duty of the gardener; Cecily ought to be studying. MISS PRISM reopens the book at yesterday's lesson.

CECILY is bored with German. It isn't at all a becoming language, "I know perfectly well that I look quite plain after my German lesson."

MISS PRISM reminds her that, before he left for town yesterday, her guardian laid serious stress on her learning German.

CECILY remarks that dear Uncle Jack is so serious that she sometimes thinks that he cannot be quite well. No doubt he has a high sense of duty and responsibility. That's probably why he often looks a little bored when the three of them ate together. CECILY often wishes that Uncle Jack would allow that

unfortunate young man, his brother, to come down and visit them some time. She begins to write in her diary.

MISS PRISM doesn't really approve of the diary. CECILY explains, "I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. If I didn't write them down, I should probably forget all about them"

"Memory," comments MISS PRISM, "is the diary we all carry about with us."

"Yes, but it usually chronicles things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened. I believe that Memory is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels that Mudie sends us." MISS PRISM reproves her, she should not speak slightly of the three-volume novel. "I wrote one myself in earlier days", she admits.

CECILY is duly impressed. Was it ever published.

"Alas! no. The manuscript was unfortunately abandoned." As CECILY reacts, MISS PRISM says, "I use the word in the sense of lost or mislaid" Seeing someone approach, MISS PRISM instructs her pupil to concentrate on her studies while she rises, moving to greet a very dignified figure in the dress of a clergyman.

CANON CHASUBLE comes to join them, asking after MISS PRISM's health. On behalf of her governess, CECILY tells him that Miss Prism has a slight headache, suggesting that he might take her for a short stroll in the park.

"Cecily, I have not mentioned anything about a headache."

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

CECILY, we can see, is not unobservant of an interest that CANON CHASUBLE has in MISS PRISM. When they accept her suggestion to take leave of her, after once more reminding her of the need to study, CECILY vents her exasperation on the books. "Horrid Political Economy! Horrid Geography! Horrid German!" CECILY is throwing the hateful volumes on the table as MERRIMAN, the butler of the house, brings her a visiting card on a silver salver.

CECILY accepts the card. MERRIMAN explains, "Mr Ernest Worthing has just driven over from the station. He has brought his luggage with him."

CECILY reacts with delight, reading; "Mr Ernest Worthing. B 4. The Albany, W. Uncle Jack's brother! Did you tell him Mr Worthing is in town?"

"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."

Instructing the butler to invite the unexpected guest to join her and also see that the housekeeper prepares a room for him, CECILY waits till the butler is gone before declaring, "I have never met any really wicked person before. I feel rather frightened. I am so afraid he will look just like everyone else."

ALGERNON enters. He looks very gay and debonair. He raises his hat, "You are my little cousin Cecily, I'm sure"

"You are under some strange mistake. I am not little. In fact I believe I am more than usually tall for my age.", says CECILY, "You, I see from your card, are Uncle Jack's brother, my cousin Ernest - my wicked cousin Ernest."

"Oh, I am not really wicked at all



Cousin Emily. You must not think that I am wicked."

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

It's clear that both have been instantly attracted to each other. Hearing from her that Uncle Jack is not expected back until Monday afternoon, ALGERNON, not entirely convincingly, expresses disappointment, saying that is obliged to leave by the first train on Monday morning. "I have a business appointment that I am anxious ...to miss."

CECILY pleads with him to remain, since Uncle Jack is wants to speak to him "about your emigrating"

"About my what?"

"Your emigrating. He has gone up to buy your outfit." she informs him. ALGERNON declares that he certainly would not let Jack buy his outfit. "He has no taste in neckties at all"

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

"Australia! I'd sooner die!"

"Well, he said at dinner on Wednesday night that you would have to choose between this world, the next world, and Australia." ALGERNON, as he assures her, has received accounts of Australia and the next world that are not particularly encouraging. "This world is good enough for me, Cousin Cecily."

Their happy flirtation continues. ALGERNON

is making impressive headway. CECILY leads him back inside the house - possible to avoid meeting MISS PRISM and DR CHASUBLE. These two seem also to be engaged in their own form of courtship, with MISS CHISM urging the good Doctor of Divinity his duty to set a good example by getting married since "by persistently remaining single, a man converts himself into a permanent public temptation"

Both of them are taken by surprise when, from the back of the garden the owner of the house appears - dressed in deepest mourning. JACK wears a top hat with a crepe hatband and black gloves.

With a melancholy manner, he explains this garb. His brother Ernest is dead.

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

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

"No. He died abroad: in Paris, In fact I had a telegram last night from the manager of the Grand Hotel." The cause of death, adds JACK, was apparantly a severe chill. MISS PRISM expresses sympathy of a sort, "As a man sows, so shall he reap" DR CHASUBLE urges her to feel more charity. "None of us are perfect. I myself am peculiarly susceptible to draughts" He comforts JACK with the promise that next Sunday he will deliver one of his more successful sermons which can be easily adapted to any occasion, joyful, or, as in the present case, distressing - which provides JACK with an opportunity to change to another subject. "You mentioned christenings, Dr Chasuble. I suppose you know how to christen all right? I mean, of course, you are continually christening, aren't you?"

Somewhat to the astonishment of CHASUBLE, JACK presently reveals the reason for his enquiry, "The fact is, I would like to be christened myself,

this afternoon, if you have nothing better to do." DR CHASUBLE, responding to JACK's recovery from his sad bereavement, assures JACK that the ceremony is not complicated - "A sprinkling is all that is necessary, or indeed advisable. Our weather is so changeable. At what hour would you wish the ceremony performed?"

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

And at this point CECILY enters from the house. With alacrity, JACK assumes his melancholy. moving to kiss CECILY on her brow.

"Uncle Jack! Oh, I am so pleased to see you back. But what horrid clothes you have got on. Do go and change them." Then she announces, "And I've got such a surprise for you. Who do you think is in the dining room? Your brother!"

"Who?"

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

There is general confusion as everyone tries to adjust to the remarkable news. CECILY disappears and returns bringing ALGERNON whom she leads to meet her guardian. ALGERNON is solemn. Contrite.

"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"

He offers JACK his hand. JACK glares at him and does not take it.

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

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

CECILY begs her guardian to be more forgiving, telling JACK that 'Ernest' has been telling her about his poor invalid friend Mr Bunbury whom he goes down to visit so often. "Surely," she pleads, "there must be much good in one who is kind to an invalid, and leaves the pleasures of London to sit by a bed of pain."

"Oh, so he has been talking about Bunbury, has he?" explodes JACK. "Bunbury! I won't have him talking about Bunbury or anyone else. It's enough to drive one perfectly frantic"

CECILY manages to persuade JACK to accept ALGERNON's offered hand only with the threat that she will never speak to him again if he refuses. Shocked and puzzled by the whole situation, MISS PRISM manages to get CECILY to leave the two men on their own and, followed by DR CHASUBLE they all go inside the house.

The atmosphere is frigid. "Algy," warns JACK, "you must get out of here as soon as possible. I don't allow any Bunburying here."

Unfortunately, MERRIMAN, the butler, chooses this moment to return with the news that he has put 'Mr Ernest's things in the room next to his master's. "I suppose that is all right?"

"What?"

"Mr Ernest's luggage. I have unpacked it put it in the room next to your own.", explains the butler, "Three portmanteaus, a dressing case, two hatboxes and a large luncheon basket."

ALGERNON apologises, "I'm afraid I can't stay more than a week this time."

JACK explodes, "Merriman, order the dog-

cart at once. Mr Ernest has been suddenly called back to town"

Disconcerted, MERRIMAN looks from one to the other, "Yes, sir" He goes back into the house.

He leaves an acrimonious quarrel between his master and the uninvited, unwanted guest who is not in the best of good humors. In vain, JACK appeals to ALGERNOON, arguing that it is his duty as a gentleman to leave.

"My duty as a gentleman has never interfered with my pleasures in the smallest degree", promises ALGERNON. Cecily. he tells his host, is a darling. And Jack looks perfectly ridiculous "in deep mourning for a man who is actually staying for a whole week with you in your house as a guest." ALGERNON, repudiating JACK's suggestion that what JACK calls his 'Bunburying' has not been successful, points out that, to the contrary, "I'm in love with Cecily, and that is everything."

JACK, defeated goes back into the house. CECILY returns. She picks up the can and resumes watering the flowers. As ALGERNON joins her she explains that she thought he was Uncle Jack - where is Uncle Jack?

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

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

"He's going to send me away"

CECILY affects distress. "Then have we got to part?"

"I'm afraid so. It's a very painful parting." CECILY agrees "The absence of old friends one can endure with equanimity. But even a momentary separation from anyone to

whom one has just been introduced is almost unbearable."

"Thankyou' says ALGERNON tenderly as MERRIMAN reappears.

"The dog-cart is at the door, sir"

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

MERRIMAN discreetly retires. ALGERNON seizes the opportunity of pursuing his efforts to ingratiate himself with CECILY who is, he insists, the visible personification of absolute perfection. CECILY produces her diary in order to copy into it his remarks. A diary, she explains, "is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication. When it appears in volume form I hope you will order a copy."

ALGERNON's passionate declarations are, unfortunately, again interrupted by the return of MERRIMAN to repeat that the dog-cart is still waiting.

"Tell it to come round next week, at the same hour." orders ALGERNON. CECILY makes no attempt to countermand the instruction, though she does point out that Uncle Jack may be very much annoyed if he knew ALGERNON was staying on till next week, at the same hour.

Throwing all caution to the wind, ALGERNON protests that he doesn't care about Jack - doesn't care about anybody in the whole world except Cecily, "You will marry me, won't you?" he asks.

CECILY consults the diary, "You silly you! Of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months - Yes, it will be exactly three months on Thursday... Ever since dear Uncle Jack confessed to us he had a younger brother who was

very wicked and bad, you of course have formed the chief topic of conversation between myself and Miss Prism, " she explains, "On the 14th of February last, worn out by your entire ignorance of my existence, I determined to end the matter one way or another, and after a long struggle with myself I accepted you under this dear old tree here. The next day I bought this little ring in your name, and this little bangle with the true lovers's knot I promised you always to wear." ALGERNON examines it with sentimental appreciation. "And this is the box in which I keep all your dear letters..." CECILY kneels, opens the box and produces the letters tied with blue ribbon.

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

She looks at him with reproach. "You need hardly remind me of that, Ernest. I remember all too well that I was forced to write your letters for you. I wrote always three times a week, and sometimes oftener." She studies them, and checks in her diary, "Today, I broke off my engagement with Ernest. I feel it better to do so. The weather still continues charming..." It would hardly have been a really serious engagement if I hadn't broken it off at least once. But I forgave you before the week was out."

She kisses him. "You must not laugh at me, darling, but it has always been a childish dream of mine to love someone whose name was Ernest..."

ALGERNON rises. For a moment he is uneasy, hesitating, Surely she does not mean that she could not love him if he had some other name.

"But what name?"

"Oh, any name you like - Algernon, for instance...."

"But I don't like the name of Algernon."

He pleads with her, "I really can't see why you should object to the name of Algernon. It's not at all a bad name. In fact, it is a rather aristocratic name. Half the chaps who get into the Bankruptcy Court are called Algernon..."

CECILY rises, insists, "I might respect you, Ernest, I might admire your character, but I fear I would not be able to give you my undivided attention."

ALGERNON is driven to making a decision. He picks up his hat. "Your Rector here is, I suppose, thoroughly experienced in the practice of all the rites and ceremonials of the church" he enquires, "I shan't be away more than half an hour."

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

As ALGERNON dashes out, CECILY is alone for only a few moments before MERRIMAN returns.

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

Since the gentleman in question has just left in the direction of the Rectory, CECILY instructs MERRIMAN to bring the visitor into the garden. Also to bring some tea.

GWENDOLEN enters. MERRIMAN introduces her, "Miss Fairfax."

CECILY introduces herself, "My name is Cecily Cardew."

"What a sweet name." says GWENDOLEN, "Something tells me we are going to be great friends, I like you more than I can say."



My first impressions of people are never wrong."

The two young women are rather too gracious to each other. GWENDOLEN explains that her father is Lord Bracknell. Has Cecily heard of him?: Cecily has not. That is quite as it should be. GWENDOLEN produces a lorgnette, apologises for being shortsighted as she examines CECILY through them. CECILY is not offended, "I am very fond of being looked at", she says.

"You are here on a short visit, I suppose," GWENDOLEN enquires.

"Oh, no, I live here."

"Really? Your mother, no doubt, or some female relative of advanced years, resides here also?"

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

"Indeed?"

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

"Your guardian?". A slight note of scepticism has become evident under GWENDOLEN's manner. How strange it is that Jack has not mentioned that he has a ward. How secretive of him. GWENDOLEN does feel bound to state that, now that she knows that Cecily is Mr Worthing's ward, she does wish that Cecily was a little older than she seems to be. Ernest, says GWENDOLEN, is the very soul of truth and honor. Disloyalty would be as impossible to him as deception. But even men of the noblest possible character are susceptible to the physical charms of others...

CECILY, however, has picked up on the name. Did Gwendolen say 'Ernest'? CECILY is

able to correct GWENDOLEN, "It is not Mr Ernest Worthing who is my guardian. It is his brother - his elder brother."

There is a moment of chill. "Ernest never mentioned to me that he had a brother." GWENDOLEN finds it necessary to ask, "Of course you are quite, quite sure that it is not Mr Ernest Worthing who is your guardian?"

"Quite sure," A pause. "in fact, I am going to be his." CECILY offers. "There is no reason to make a secret of it. Our little country newspaper is sure to chronicle the fact that next week, Mr Ernest Worthing and I are engaged to be married."

The chill is now frigid. GWENDOLEN rises from the tea table. "My darling Cecily, I think there must be some slight error. Mr Ernest Worthing is engaged to me. The announcement will appear in the 'Morning Post' on Saturday at the latest."

From here on the civilised courtesy between the pair of them deteriorates. CECILY produces her diary. She presents it as evidence of the fact that 'Ernest' proposed to her exactly ten minutes ago. Examining the diary through her lorgnette, GWENDOLEN counters, producing another diary, her own. "It is certainly very curious, for he asked me to be his wife yesterday afternoon at 5:30. If you would care to verify the incident, pray do so....I am sorry, dear Cecily, if it is any disappointment to you, but I am afraid I have the prior claim."

With even greater bluntness, it looks for a moment as if the two young women might resort to a vulgar shouting match or worse - an unseemly scene which we are spared by the entrance of the butler, MERRIMAN who is followed by a footman.

They are bringing with them a salver, table cloth and plate stand. Their presence brings an icy silence to CECILY and GWENDOLEN.

"Shall I lay tea her as usual, miss?" asks MERRIMAN.

"Yes, as usual."

GWENDOLEN and CECILY glare at each other. GWENDOLEN manages an attempt at conversation. "Are there many interesting walks in the vicinity, Miss Cardew?"

Both of them are clearly waiting till the butler and the footman have left them. But neither of the servants does so. As MERRIMAN circulates with the tea things, the feud continues in the business of poring tea, passing sugar, sandwiches and cake. GWENDOLEN refuses the offer of sugar - and CECILY puts four lumps into her cup. Asked if she wants cake or bread and butter, GWENDOLEN opts for bread and butter - and is given a very large slice of cake. When GWENDOLEN finally explodes in protest CECILY retaliates, "It seems to me that I am trespassing on your valuable time. No doubt you have many other calls of a similar character to make in the neighborhood."

At this moment, JACK returns.

GWENDOLEN greets him with relief and emotion. "Ernest! My own Ernest!"

But as he approaches to kiss her, GWENDOLEN draws back, pointing at CECILY, "A moment! May I ask if you are engaged to be married to this young lady?"

"To dear little Cecily? Of course not!"

CECILY explains, "I knew there must be some misunderstanding, Miss Fairfax. The gentleman whose arm is at present around your waist is my dear guardian, Mr John Worthing."

Whereupon ALGERNON makes his entrance. He is introduced in turn, "Here is Ernest," says CECILY. But as ALGERNON advances, CECILY also draws back, "A moment, Ernest! May I ask - are you engaged to be married to this young lady?"

There is universal confusion. The two fiancées challenge their betrothed directly. "Are you called Algernon?" CECILY demands of ALGERNON - who cannot deny it. "Is your name really John?" accuses GWENDOLEN of JACK. JACK makes an unsuccessful attempt at dignity, "I could deny it if I liked. I could deny anything if I liked. But my name certainly is John. It has been John for years."

The two young women turn to each other in shared indignation and sympathy. It is CECILY who comes to the critical issue. "Where is your brother Ernest?", she demands of JACK. "We are both engaged to be married to your brother Ernest, so it is a matter of some importance to know where your brother Ernest is at present."

The moment of truth has come for JACK. Slowly and with hesitation, he makes his confession. "I will tell you quite frankly. I have no brother Ernest. I have no brother at all. I never had a brother in my life, and I certainly have not the smallest intention of having one in the future."

"I am afraid it is quite clear, Cecily," announces GWENDOLEN, "that neither of us is engaged to anyone,"

CECILY agrees, "It is not a very pleasant position for a young girl suddenly to find herself in. Is it?" They turn their backs scornfully on the two young men as they retire into the house.

JACK turns on ALGERNON, "This ghastly state of things is what you call Bunburying,

I suppose? Well, you've no right to Bunbury here. Well, the only satisfaction I have in this whole wretched business is that your friend Bunbury is quite exploded."

ALGERNON has his revenge, "Your brother is a bit off color, isn't he, dear Jack. You won't be able to disappear to London quite so frequently as your wicked custom was."

Recrimination does not console them for the disappointments in their love life. There seems to be as little prospect of JACK marrying Gwendolen as there is of ALGERNON marrying CECILY. Depressed, ALGERNON samples the muffins that have been left on the tea table. JACK at first protests this display of heartlessness, then decides to join him.

Presently, as they continue to discuss the collapse of their plans, including their preparations to have Dr Chasuble christen them with names more acceptable to Gwendolen and Cecily, both of them are engaged in finishing off the muffins.

It is a situation that reminds us of the scene with which the play opened - though on a more despondent note.

### Act Three

The Drawing Room of the Manor House. CECILY and GWENDOLEN are at the window, looking out into the garden where they have left Jack and Algernon. GWENDOLEN remarks that the fact that the two men have not immediately followed them into the house may indicate that they have some shame left. CECILY

notes that they have been eating muffins. Does that imply some repentance? When they see the young men returning, GWENDOLEN and CECILY decide to assume a dignified silence. Both agree that they will not be the first to speak.

But when JACK enters, GWENDOLEN challenges him at once, "Mr Worthing I have something very particular to ask you. Much depends on your answer" And CECILY simultaneously demands of ALGERNON, "Why did you pretend to be my brother's guardian"

"In order that I might have the pleasure of meeting you". ALGERNON assures her. The girls, debate whether this is a satisfactory answer. Do they believe it? They do not. On the other hand, admits CECILY, it is also a very pleasing response.

GWENDOLEN, taking a similar line, explains to JACK that she assumes that his pretence that he has a brother was merely a ruse to come up to town in order that he should visit her there. While this may or may not be true, GWENDOLEN is, on the whole, inclined to accept it since "in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing."

However, there is still the problem of sorting out their Christian names, insist the young women.

JACK and ALGERNON, in unison, declare that they have already found a solution. This very afternoon they are both going to go through the ceremony of being christened - in the names by which GWENDOLEN and CECILY would prefer to know them. Is that not a sufficient self sacrifice? Both young women accept the suggestion at once and the two couples fall into each others arms.

MERRIMAN, the butler, entering at this moment, coughs loudly to warn them of the imminent arrival of LADY BRACKNELL!

The couples separate hastily - but too late to avoid being seen by her mother.

"Gwendolen! What does this mean?", protests LADY BRACKNELL. "Merely that I am engaged to be married to Mr Worthing, mama"

LADY BRACKNELL takes immediate charge. She orders them all to sit down, and explains her abrupt appearance. Hearing from one of the maids that GWENDOLEN had absconded, LADY BRACKNELL at once bribed the servant to reveal the address and followed by baggage train. GWENDOLEN's father has not yet been told of his daughter's flight - and need not be told providing that all further communication between JACK and GWENDOLEN ceases at once. To JACK's protest that he and GWENDOLEN are now engaged, LADY BRACKNELL reacts at once. "You are nothing of the kind, sir."

Dismissing the issue of GWENDOLEN and JACK, LADY BRACKNELL turns on ALGERNON. "May I ask if it is in this house that your invalid friend Mr Bunbury resides."

ALGERNON, intimidated, stammers. No! Mr Bunbury doesn't live here. Actually he is somewhere else. In fact, ALGERNON admits, Bunbury doesn't live anywhere. He's dead.

The death, suggests LADY BRACKNELL, seems to have been rather sudden. "What did he die of?"

Not very convincingly, ALGERNON elaborates on the demise of his friend. Bunbury was found out - that is to say the doctors found out that he could not live - so he died.

LADY BRACKNELL does not appear to feel that Bunbury's passing needs greatly to be mourned. She is glad that at last Bunbury seems to have made up his mind to some definite course of action. And now that they have got rid of Mr Bunbury, LADY

turns her scrutiny on CECILY. Of JACK she demands to be told the identity of the young person whose hand her nephew ALGERNON is holding in what seems "a peculiarly unnecessary manner"

"That lady is Cecily Cardew, my ward", says JACK. LADY BRACKNELL bows coldly to CECILY. And ALGERNON summons enough courage to add, "I am engaged to be married to Cecily, Aunt Augusta"

"I beg your pardon"

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

LADY BRACKNELL shivers. She crosses to a sofa, sits down. It is fortunate, she explains, that Gwendolen's father does not know of his daughter's elopement; he has been told that she is attending a more than usually lengthy lecture at the University Extension Scheme on the Influence of a Permanent Income on Thought and Lady Bracknell does not propose to undeceive him. On one point, however, Lady Bracknell is firm: Algernon and Gwendolen are not engaged to each other and all communication between them must cease at once. "May I ask", she demands of Algernon, "if it is in this house that your invalid friend Mr Bunbury resides?"

ALGERNON stammers. "Oh, no! Bunbury doesn't live here. Bunbury is somewhere else at present. In fact, Bunbury is dead."

"Dead! When did Mr bunbury die? His death must have been extremely sudden."

Flustered, ALGERNON admits that he killed... that is, Mr Bunbury died this afternoon, Bunbury was, in a manner of speaking, exploded, er, he was found out, that is to say, the doctors found out that Bunbury could not live - so Bunbury died.

LADY BRACKNELL seems less concerned with the circumstances of Mr Bunbury's demise, more interested in the presence of the young woman to



whom she has not yet been introduced. "And now that we have got rid of this Bunbury, may I ask, Mr Worthing, who is that young person whose hand my nephew Algernon is now holding in what seems to me a peculiarly unnecessary manner?"

"That lady is Miss Cecily Cardew, my ward", admits JACK. ALGERNON expands, "I am engaged to be married to Cecily, Aunt Augusta."

"I beg your pardon."

"Mr Moncrieff and I are engaged to be married, Lady Bracknell", says Cecily.

LADY BRACKNELL shivers. She crosses to a sofa in order to sit down. It appears that there must be something in the air in this particular part of Hertfordshire which must account for a number of engagements considerably above the proper average that statistics have laid down for our guidance, she remarks. Some preliminary enquiry might not be out of place. LADY BRACKNELL challenges JACK. Is Miss Cardew at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London? "I merely desire information," LADY BRACKNELL assures him, "Until yesterday, I had no idea that there were families whose origin was a Terminus."

JACK, with much dignity, chooses to ignore the sarcasm. "Miss Cardew is the daughter of the Ger vase Park, Dorking, Surrey; and the Sporr an, Fifeshire, N.B." Noting that LADY BRACKNELL is at least impressed with the addresses, which JACK can assure her that he has authenticated, JACK informs her that Miss Cardew's family solicitors are Messrs Markby, Markby and Markby. With matching sarcasm, he declares that he has in his possession not only certificates of Miss Cardew's birth and baptism, but also whooping cough registration, vaccination, confirmation, and the measles, both the German and the English variety.

LADY BRACKNELL, looking at her watch, congratulates Miss Cardew on a life so crowded with incident. "As a matter of form, Mr Worthing, I had better ask you if Miss Cardew has any little fortune."

"Oh, about a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds. That's all", remarks JACK. He offers LADY BRACKNELL his hand. "Goodbye, Lady Bracknell. So pleased to have seen you."

LADY BRACKNELL glances at her watch, seeming to remember that it is time that she and Gwendolen were leaving. She remarks to JACK that, purely as a matter of form

LADY BRACKNELL, getting to her feet, remarks to GWENDOLEN that it is time they should be on their way back to London, adding, "As a matter of form, Mr Worthing, I had better ask you if Miss Cardew has any little fortune?"

"Oh, about a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds, That is all.", says JACK casually, "Goodbye, Lady Bracknell. So pleased to have seen you."

There is a beat of silence, LADY BRACKNELL decides that her departure is not quite as urgent as she thought it was. She sits down again and examines CECILY with new interest. "Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her." LADY BRACKNELL invites CECILY to approach her, musing to herself, "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..." To ALGERNON she comments, "There are distinct social possibilities in Miss Cardew's profile..."

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

explain to Lady Bracknell why both Mr Worthing and Mr Moncrieff have somewhat suddenly decided to ask CHASUBLE if they can be baptised at the earliest opportunity and take new names. They instruct CHASUBLE to cancel the proceedings - in spite of the fact that for the last hour Miss Prism has been waiting for them all in the vestry.

"Miss Prism!" LADY BRACKNELL is startled. "Did I hear you mention a Miss Prism?"

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

LADY BRACKNELL demands that the lady be brought to join them. JACK explains to LADY BRACKNELL that Miss Prism is a highly respected lady who has been for the last three years a governess to Cecily.

A dramatic confrontation takes place as MISS PRISM is brought in to the room. At the sight of LADY BRACKNELL she is much shaken.

"Prism!", LADY BRACKNELL's voice is severe and judicial, "Come here, Prism! Prism! Where is that baby!"

General consternation. CANON CHASUBLE starts back in horror. ALGERNON and JACK appear to be anxious to shield CECILY and GWENDOLEN from hearing the details of a terrible public scandal which LADY BRACKNELL now relates.

"Twenty years ago, Prism, you left Lord Bracknell's house, number 104, Upper Grosvenor Street, in charge of a perambulator that contained a baby, of the male sex. You never returned. A few weeks later, through elaborate investigations of the Metropolitan Police, the perambulator was discovered at midnight, standing by itself in a remote corner of Bayswater. It

contained the manuscript of a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality." MISS PRISM seems about to protest, but she is overridden, "But the baby was not there! Prism, where is that baby?"

There is a pause. "Lady Bracknell, I admit with shame that I do not know. I only wish I did. The plain facts of the case are these. On the morning of the day you mention, a day that is forever branded on my memory, I prepared as usual to take the baby out in its perambulator. I had also with me a somewhat a old but capacious handbag in which I had intended to place a work of fiction that I had written in my few unoccupied hours. In a moment of mental abstraction for which I can never forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinette, and placed the baby in the handbag."

JACK has been listening intently, "But where did you deposit the handbag?"

"Do not ask me, Mr Worthing."

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

"I left it in the cloakroom of one of the larger railway stations in London."

"What railway station?"

"Victoria." Quite crushed, MISS PRISM sinks into a chair, "The Brighton line."

JACK, in a state of emotion, begs leave of GWENDOLEN for a moment and dashes out of the room. The rest of the company remain onstage while, from upstairs come noises that sound as if someone was throwing trunks about. CHASUBLE remarks that Mr Worthing seems very emotional today. LADY BRACKNELL says that it sounds as if he was having an argument:

ALGERNON.

"Never speak disrespectfully of society, Algernon," says his aunt, "Only people who can't get into it do that." LADY BRACKNELL concentrates on CECILY, reminding her that Algernon has nothing but debts to depend on. But she adds that she does not approve of mercenary marriages, "When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way. Well, I suppose I must give my consent."

CECILY and ALGERNON are delighted. LADY BRACKNELL actually invites CECILY to kiss her and to address her as Aunt Augusta in the future.

It is left to JACK to disrupt the situation. Apologising, JACK reminds them that, as Miss Cardew's guardian, Cecily also requires his consent before she can marry. "That consent I absolutely decline to give!" To LADY BRACKNELL. JACK explains that he does not approve of Algernon's moral character. "He is untruthful" insists JACK, "This afternoon, during my temporary absence in London on an important question of romance, he obtained admission to my house by means of false pretence of being my brother. Under an assumed name he drank, I've just been informed by my butler an entire pint bottle of my Perrier-Jouet, Brut, '89: a wine I was specially reserving for myself. Continuing his disgraceful deception, he succeeded in the course of the afternoon in alienating the affections of my only ward. He subsequently stayed to tea, and devoured every single muffin. And what makes his conduct all the more heartless is, that he was perfectly well aware from the first that I have no brother, that I never had a brother, and that I don't intend to have a brother, not even of any kind. I distinctly told him myself so yesterday afternoon."

Duly impressed by JACK's indignation, LADY BRACKNELL attempts to make peace. Possibly Algernon and Miss Cardew could postpone their nuptials until the bride comes of age. How old is Cecily now? Eighteen? JACK counters; it is only fair to tell them that according to the terms of her grandfather's will Miss Cardew does not come legally of age till she is thirty five.

Could Algernon wait till Cecily was thirty five? ALGERNON assures her passionately that he could. LADY BRACKNELL remarks that London society is full of women of the very highest birth who have, of their own free choice, remained thirty five for years. Lady Dumbleton has, to Lady Bracknell's knowledge, been thirty five ever since she arrived at the age of Forty which is many years ago now.

It is CECILY herself who dissents. To ALGERNON she makes confession, "I hate waiting even five minutes for anybody. It always makes me rather cross. I am not punctual myself, but I do like punctuality in others, and waiting, even to be married, is quite out of the question."

Gloom descends on the group. Especially as JACK reveals his real motive for his refusal, declaring that, of course, the moment that Lady Bracknell consents to let Gwendolen marry him he will certainly consider allowing his ward to marry her nephew Algernon.

Deadlock.

At this point CANON CHASUBLE arrives with a happy announcement, "Everything is quite ready for the christenings"

"The christenings, sir!" LADY BRACKNELL is taken by surprise. "Is not that somewhat premature?" It takes a little time for them to

she dislikes arguments, they are always vulgar and often convincing. The noise stops abruptly.

"This suspense is terrible," says GWENDOLEN, "I hope it will last."

JACK makes a dramatic re-entrance. He is holding up a handbag of black leather. "Is this the handbag, Miss Prism," he demands. "Examine it carefully before you speak. The happiness of more than one life depends on your answer."

"It seems to be mine," says MISS PRISM. "Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier days. Here is the stain in the lining caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage, an incident that occurred in Leamington. And here, on the lock, are my initials. I had forgotten that in an extravagant mood I had had them placed there. The bag is undoubtedly mine. I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years."

In a pathetic voice, JACK assures her. "Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this handbag. I was the baby you placed in it."

"You?"

JACK moves to embrace her. "Yes...mother!"

She recoils in indignant astonishment. "Mr Worthing! I am unmarried!"

JACK is momentarily taken aback. "Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men and another for women? Mother, I forgive you."

JACK makes another attempt to embrace MISS

PRISM who is, if anything, even more indignant. MISS PRISM points dramatically at LADY BRACKNELL. "There is the lady who can tell you who you really are!"

JACK is one more at a loss. Recovering, he appeals to LADY BRACKNELL. "Lady Bracknell, I hate to seem inquisitive, but would you kindly inform me who I am."

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

It takes some time to sink in. JACK turns to confront ALGY. "Algy's elder brother! Then I have a brother after all! I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother! Cecily - how could you ever have doubted I had a brother!" In an excess of enthusiasm, JACK seems eager to embrace everyone present, seizing hold of Algernon in order to show him off to DR CHASUBLE and MISS PRISM, "Dr Chasuble, my unfortunate brother, Miss Prism, my unfortunate brother. Gwendolen, my unfortunate brother. Algy, you young scoundrel, you will have to treat me with more respect in the future. You have never behaved to me like a brother in all your life!"

GWENDOLEN interrupts the newfound brothers. Now that JACK has become someone else, who exactly is he? What, for example, is his Christian name?

JACK abruptly recalls his fiancée's concern about his name. He appeals to LADY BRACKNELL for information. "At the time when Miss Prism left me in a handbag, had I been christened already?"

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



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

"Yes, but what was my father's Christian name?"

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

JACK is irritated. He turns to his brother. "Algy! Can't you recollect what our father's name was?"

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

Fortunately, it occurs to JACK that General Moncrieff must appear in the Army lists of the period. The walls of the room around them are lined with bookcases. JACK leaps into action. He seizes a library ladder on which to climb up to the volumes on the top shelf and begins to tear out the handsomely bound books, searching frantically, "M. Generals....Mallam, Maxbohm, Magley, what ghastly names they have. Markby, Mobbs, Moncrieff! Lieutenant 1849, Captain, Lieutenant-Colonel, Colonel, General, 1869. Christian names, Ernest John..."

JACK puts down the book quietly and speaks quite calmly. "I always told you, Gwendolen, my name was Ernest, didn't I? Well, it's Ernest after all. I mean it naturally is Ernest."

LADY BRACKNELL's memory returns. She admits that she recalls that the General was called Ernest. "I knew I had some particular reason for disliking the name."

But GWENDOLEN is overjoyed, embracing JACK warmly. "Ernest! My own Ernest! I felt from the first that you could have no other name."

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

"I can," she replies, "For I feel you are sure to change." Once again, everybody is congratulating everybody else, embracing. Even DR CHASUBLE embraces MISS PRISM. LADY BRACKNELL is only mildly disapproving of these displays of triviality. "On the contrary, Aunt Augusta," insists her nephew, "I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest", announces JACK as ...

THE CURTAIN FALLS.