The Importance of Being Earnest REVISITED

A novel recreating the play by Oscar Wilde (with many added Wildean witticisms and some original material)

by

CHRISTOPHER S. NASSAAR

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST *REVISITED*

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… *Revisited*

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Christopher S. Nassaar

Woodfield

For my niece, Carla

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The Author

Christopher S. Nassaar is a professor of English literature and a well-known Oscar Wilde scholar. His book *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (Yale, 1974) was considered a breakthrough in Wilde studies. Since then, he has published several books and over 40 articles. Recently he produced two anthologies, *The English Literary Decadence* (1999) and *The Victorians: A Major Authors Anthology* (2000), and is currently preparing a second novel, a sequel to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* He holds the Distinguished Faculty Service Award from the American University of Beirut.

Acknowledgments

My great and chief debt in writing this novel is of course to Oscar Wilde himself, who is the real author: my task was to edit, rearrange, novelise and occasionally imitate his wit. How does one thank a genius for enriching our lives? I do not know, but this recreation of *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a farcical novel may be one way of saying “Thank you!”

I am also very indebted to all the other Oscar Wilde scholars who have produced excellent criticism of his work over the years, from Eric Bentley and Epifanio San Juan to Rodney Shewan, Richard Ellmann, Peter Raby, Reginia Gagnier, Sos Eltis, Karl Beckson, Ian Small, Melissa Knox, Michael Gillispie, John Sloane, Merlin Holland and many, many others whom space forbids me to mention.

The Oscar Wilde Society and its president, Donald Mead, as well as the Oscar Wilde Society of America, Wilde’s grandson Merlin Holland, and David Rose of *The Oscholars*, are especially to be thanked for their promotion of Wilde’s literature. My thanks go too to Merlin Holland for permission to use some copyrighted material from the four-act version of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to James G. Nelson, my mentor who introduced me to the complexities of Wilde many years ago and who has remained my friend and colleague ever since.

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Preface

The idea of novelising *The Importance of Being Earnest* took hold of me after I read Charles Osborne's rendering of the play as a novel. The idea was brilliant, the execution of it masterly but nonetheless disappointing.

It gradually dawned on me that what was missing from Mr. Osborne's version was the rest of Wilde's wit – all those hilarious, sparkling statements and observations that made Wilde so attractive but which did not find their way into *Earnest*. It was not enough to novelise Wilde's play. To produce a work that would attract an audience in the 21st century as strongly as the original does, it had to be expanded and rewritten as well, I felt. In brief, it had to be recreated: an *Earnest II* had to be brought into existence.

At the time I was editing a book, *The Victorians: A Major Authors Anthology*, which featured Wilde prominently. No sooner did I finish it than the temptation to recreate, expand and novelise *Earnest* became irresistible.

Only a Wilde scholar or someone who knew all of Wilde very well could do what I had in mind, and I was eminently qualified for the task, having spent the last thirty years researching Wilde and writing intermittently about him. I

started working on the project, slowly taking witty statements from Wilde's other works and weaving them into the fabric of the play, while at the same time rewriting the play in novel form. At first, I was a bit reluctant, intimidated by the audacity of the project and fearful that the approach would not work, but it soon became apparent to me that it worked extremely well.

Wilde wrote his play in about two months, and it took me two to rewrite and expand it. What began early in July 2003 ended early in September 2003, but was followed in my case by many months of revision and fine-tuning. In addition to incorporating most of Wilde's wit into the dialogue of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, I took the liberty of adding a few Wildean imitations of my own, which I hope the reader will find tolerably amusing, as well as borrowing Humpty Dumpty's famous definition of words in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass,* some Wilde-like one-liners of George Eliot's, and Tom Stoppard's redefinition of tragedy from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, a play that owes much to *Earnest*.

I like to think that Wilde would have approved of this project. I like to further speculate that he himself would have embarked on a similar project, but on a larger scale, had he lived on. He often borrowed wit from his earlier works or

reacted to them in one way or the other. In any event, I hope that this little novel will find favour with the readers who peruse it.

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~ CHAPTER ONE ~

Afternoon should not be spent in the morning-room of one's flat, Algernon Moncrieff decided as he strolled into the adjoining room and began to play the piano. After a few minutes, though, he missed the morning-room – it was so luxuriously and artistically furnished – so he perversely decided to return to it, abandoning his efforts at the piano. He did not play accurately – anyone can play accurately, he mused – but he played with wonderful expression. As far as the piano was concerned, sentiment was his forte. He kept science for life. Others, his Aunt Augusta Bracknell especially, believed it was a crime for him to come near a piano, but he did not have a high opinion of critics, although he graciously tolerated their perverse opinions. After all, in the best days of art there were no art-critics. Even today, he thought, the best critics are the purely subjective ones, artists who use their subject-matter to create new works of art unrelated to those they criticise. This was his approach to the piano.

Re-entering the morning-room, he found his butler Lane tidying up. Fishing for a compliment, he enquired: "Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?"

"I didn't think it polite to listen, sir," came the disappointing reply, but Algy covered his disappointment by saying: "I'm sorry for that, for your sake." He brooded, feeling like an unappreciated genius, then changed the subject: "Have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?" He was very good at changing a subject that disturbed him.

"Yes, sir," answered Lane, and handed them on a salver.

Algernon inspected them, sat down on the sofa, and took two. Eating them, he took another two, then another two. He was putting on weight, he knew, but this did not deter from his handsome exterior. He remembered that only last week his Aunt Augusta had said that he was very pleasingly plump. What she had said, actually, was that he used to be a pleasing man but had lately become so very plump. But Algy was not one to quibble over details or to give a phrase an unpleasant turn. He understood things as he wished.

"Oh! … by the way, Lane," he said, "I see from your cellar-book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed."

"Yes, sir," responded the butler imperturbably; "eight bottles and a pint."

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

"I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir," replied Lane, not even bothering to deny his culpability but regarding his behaviour as completely natural. "I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand."

"Good Heavens!" responded Algernon. "Is marriage so demoralising as that?"

Lane shrugged his shoulders. "I believe it *is* a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person."

Algernon looked at him languidly. "I don't think that I am much interested in your family life, Lane." He was far too self-centred to have any real interest in anyone other than himself. In fact, he was not too different from the pool Narcissus used to gaze at himself in. The story goes that, when Narcissus died, his pool changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears. When the Oreads came weeping to comfort the pool, they lamented the beauty of the dead Narcissus but were astonished to find that the pool was unaware of it. "I loved

Narcissus," the pool explained, "because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored."

"No, sir; it is not a very interesting subject," agreed the butler. "I never think of it myself."

"Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you," said Algernon, dismissing him airily.

"Thank you, sir," said Lane and withdrew.

Algernon frowned as he pondered Lane's views on marriage, which seemed very lax and contrasted sharply with the usual romantic attitude. "Really," he reflected, "if the lower classes don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility." He thought some more about the matter, then grew drowsy. Thinking always made him sleepy.

Suddenly Lane re-entered and announced Mr. Ernest Worthing. A very well-dressed, aristocratic man of about thirty, Jack Worthing was of medium height and build. His features were regular and attractive, but there was a distinct air about him of lack of seriousness. Gravity of demeanour is a major characteristic of many people, but in Jack it was completely absent. He was dedicated to the sole idea that to love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance. One could even describe him as a dandy, as one who paid too much attention to dress.

And he was indeed perfectly dressed, down to the elegant gloves he wore even in May. His clothes were light, as London was experiencing a wonderful spell of early summer weather in 1894.

“How are you, my dear Ernest?” said Algernon delightedly as Lane withdrew. “What brings you up to town?”

“Oh, pleasure, pleasure!” replied Jack, a happy smile on his face. “What else should bring one anywhere? Pleasure is Nature’s test, her sign of approval. Eating as usual, I see, Algy!”

Algernon stiffened. “I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o’clock,” he said defensively, then changed the subject: “Where have you been since last Thursday?”

Jack sat down on the sofa, at a distance from the plate of cucumber sandwiches. “In the country.”

“What on earth do you do there?” exclaimed Algernon. “I feel sure that if I lived in the country for six months, I should become so unsophisticated that no one would take the slightest notice of me. Why, they haven’t had a scandal there since Elizabethan times!”

“Which is why I take care not to stay there for any length of time,” responded Jack with a short laugh. “When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring.”

"And who are the people you amuse?" enquired Algernon.

"Oh, neighbours, neighbours," replied Jack airily.

"Got nice neighbours in your part of Shropshire?" continued Algernon.

"Perfectly horrid!" came the quick response. "Never speak to one of them."

"How immensely you must amuse them!" laughed Algernon, walking to the tea-table and taking a cucumber sandwich. "By the way, Shropshire is your county, is it not?" He was sure it wasn't but preferred to be civil. In fact, he had a strong dislike of people who always told the truth.

Jack, suddenly noticing the cucumber sandwiches, took off his gloves. "Eh? Shropshire? Yes, of course," he said distractedly. "Hallo! Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who is coming to tea?"

To Jack's great delight, Algernon replied that it was his Aunt Augusta and her daughter Gwendolen who were coming, but swiftly added that his aunt will not quite approve of Jack's presence, since Jack flirts outrageously with Gwendolen. "It is quite as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you," he said.

Jack pulled himself up. "I am in love with Gwendolen," he declared. "I have come up to town expressly to propose to her."

"I thought you had come up for pleasure. … I call that business," retorted Algernon.

"How utterly unromantic you are!" responded Jack.

But Algernon pressed his point. "I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted," he warned. "One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. Married life is merely a habit, a bad habit, and failure in life is to form habits. In fact, marriage is sometimes even a catastrophe. Why! Look at Lord Jenkins as an example. Ever since he married his childhood sweetheart two years ago, he has been utterly inconsolable. Whenever I see him at the club I offer my condolences but I really don't believe he will ever smile again. No! if ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact."

"I have no doubt about that, dear Algy," replied Jack with a cynical laugh. "The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted."

"My dear fellow, when one is in love one begins by deceiving oneself. And one ends by deceiving others. That is what the world calls a romance. The happiness of a married person depends on the people whom one has not married. But there is no use speculating on that subject," said Algernon. "Divorces

are made in Heaven--" He was about to continue that marriages are made in Hell when Jack reached out to take a cucumber sandwich. Algernon intervened immediately and stopped him: "Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered especially for Aunt Augusta, whose goodwill I absolutely require. No man has any real success in this world unless he has got women to back him. They rule society. If you have not got women on your side, my dear Ernest, you are quite over. You might just as well be a barrister or a stockbroker, or a journalist at once." He reached out, took a sandwich, and ate it.

"But you have been eating them all the time," protested Jack.

"That is quite a different matter. She is my aunt." Algernon produced another plate from the lower part of the tea-table and offered it to Jack. "Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter."

Jack advanced to the table and started eating. "And very good bread and butter it is too," he said, applying more butter to a large piece of bread. Jack too was beginning to have a weight problem, but like Algernon he considered the matter too trivial to be of concern. Like his friend, he was convinced that moderation is a fatal error, especially in eating.

"Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat it as if you were going to eat it all," protested Algernon. "Nowadays in order to get into the best society one has either to amuse people, shock people or feed people. My Aunt Augusta is impossible to amuse and frightening when shocked, so I have chosen to feed her – and that goes for Gwendolen too."

"But you must feed me as well then, since I shall soon be Gwendolen's husband," protested Jack, but Algernon expressed serious doubts about the matter.

"Girls never marry the men they flirt with," he explained. "Girls don't think it right."

"Oh, that is nonsense," retorted Jack.

""It isn't. It is a great truth, almost as great as the truth that a woman is perfectly satisfied as long as she looks at least ten years younger than her daughter. It accounts for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over the place. In the second place, I don't give my consent," declared Algernon firmly.

"Your consent!" said Jack in amazement.

"My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin," insisted Algernon as he rang for the butler. "And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily."

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~ CHAPTER TWO ~

"Cecily!" exclaimed Jack. "What do you mean? What is a Cecily? What do you mean, Algy, by Cecily? I don't know anything by the name of Cecily."

Lane entered and Algernon instructed him: "Bring me that cigarette case Mr. Worthing left in the smoking-room the last time he dined here."

"Yes, sir," said Lane, and went out.

"Do you mean you have had my cigarette case all this time?" Jack said in a tone of obvious relief. "Is this what you call a Cecily? I wish to goodness you had let me know. I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard about it. I even asked Sherlock Holmes to help me but he was busy matching wits with a Dr. Moriarty. I was very nearly offering a large reward."

"Well, I wish you would offer one," said Algernon. "I happen to be more than usually hard up. And never go to Holmes. In my experience he's a bungler. Some time ago I hired him to solve the mystery of my Aunt Augusta's ill temper, but after several weeks of trying, he failed."

"There is no good offering a large reward now that the thing is found," replied Jack.

"I think that is rather mean of you, Ernest, I must say," responded Algernon in a disappointed voice. Lane entered with the cigarette case on a salver, and Algernon grabbed it at once. The butler withdrew. "However, it makes no matter, for now that I look at the inscription inside, I find that the thing isn't yours after all."

"Of course it's mine," said Jack, moving towards him and lunging for the case. "You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case."

"Oh! it is absurd to have a hard-and-fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. It makes life so boring. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read."

"I am quite aware of the fact," responded Jack, "and I don't propose to discuss modern culture. It isn't the sort of thing one should talk of in private. Scandals belong to the public domain. I simply want my Cecily – I mean my cigarette case – back."

"Yes; but this isn't your cigarette case," insisted Algernon. "This cigarette case is a present from someone of the name of Cecily, and you said you didn't know anyone of that name. Please don't try to pretend that the cigarette case is named Cecily, moreover. That is absurd."

"Well, if you want to know, Cecily happens to be my aunt," retorted Jack, assuming an air of truthfulness.

"Your aunt!" said Algernon sceptically.

"Yes," reaffirmed Jack. "Charming old lady she is too, and quite prestigious. Lives at Tunbridge Wells." He made a grab for the cigarette case. "Just give it back to me, Algy."

Algernon retreated to the back of the sofa. "But why does she call herself little Cecily if she is your aunt and lives at Tunbridge Wells?" He reopened the cigarette case and started reading again. "'From little Cecily with her fondest love.'"

Jack moved to the sofa and knelt upon it. "My dear fellow," he said pleadingly, "what on earth is there in that? Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be exactly like your aunt! That is absurd!" He tried to grab the cigarette case but only succeeded in upsetting the sofa and falling to the floor. "For Heaven's sake give me back my cigarette case," he said, getting up and moving towards Algernon. A difference of tastes in jokes can be a great strain on the affections, he reflected as he adjusted his clothes.

Algernon retreated round the room with Jack in hot pursuit, then stood behind the tea-table and read again from the cigarette case. "Yes. But why does your aunt call you her uncle?

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

"It isn't Ernest," retorted Jack; "it's Jack."

"Secrets are a necessary part of modern life, I grant, but surely this is ridiculous. You have always told me it was Ernest," objected Algernon. "I have introduced you to everyone as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. Here is one of them." Algernon took a card from the cigarette case and showed it to Jack triumphantly. "'Mr. Ernest Worthing, B 4, The Albany.' I'll keep this as a proof your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to anyone else," said Algernon, putting the card in his pocket.

Jack looked irritated. "Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette case was given to me in the country," he blurted out.

"Yes," said Algernon, "but that does not account for the fact that your small aunt Cecily, who lives in Tunbridge Wells, calls

you her dear uncle. Come, old boy, you had much better have the thing out at once."

The sentence reminded Jack of a dental appointment he had recently missed. "My dear Algy," he said, "you talk exactly as if you were a dentist. It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn't a dentist. It produces a false impression."

"Well, that is exactly what dentists always do," replied Algernon. "Now, go on! Tell me the whole thing. I love to find out other people's secrets. I may mention that I have always suspected you of being a confirmed and secret Bunburyist; and I am quite sure of it now."

Jack looked at him, astounded. "Bunburyist? What on earth do you mean by a Bunburyist?"

"When I use a word," replied Algernon in an authoritative voice that sounded faintly like Humpty Dumpty lecturing Alice in the suburbs of wonderland, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less. However, I'll reveal to you the meaning of that incomparable expression as soon as you are kind enough to inform me why you are Ernest in town and Jack in the country. And no need to worry, dear boy. I like persons better than principles, and I like persons with no principles better than anything else in the world."

"Well, produce my cigarette case first," responded Jack.

"Here it is," said Algernon, handing him the cigarette case. He then sat on the sofa and stretched his legs. "Now produce your explanation, and pray make it improbable. I can believe anything, provided that it is quite incredible."

"My dear fellow," said Jack, "there is nothing improbable or incredible about my explanation at all. In fact it's perfectly ordinary. Old Mr. Thomas Cardew, who adopted me when I was a little boy, made me in his will guardian to his grand-daughter, Miss Cecily Cardew. Cecily, who addresses me as her uncle from motives of respect that you could not possibly appreciate, lives at my place in the country under the charge of her admirable governess, Miss Prism."

Algernon enquired about the address of Jack's country estate but Jack replied: "That is nothing to you, dear boy. You are not going to be invited. … I may tell you candidly that the place is not in Shropshire."

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

Jack sighed in exasperation. "My dear Algy," he said, "I don't know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone

on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple."

"The truth is rarely pure and never simple," responded Algernon. "Personally, I live in terror of not being misunderstood."

Jack scoffed at the idea but Algernon continued insistently: "Let me make myself quite obscure on this point: Modern life would be very tedious if the truth were pure and simple, and modern literature a complete impossibility!"

"That wouldn't be at all a bad thing," replied Jack. "Mr. Henry James writes fiction as if it were a painful duty. Mr. Rudyard Kipling is our first authority on the second-rate: his literature is a string of superb flashes of vulgarity. The characters in George Eliot's novels are like the sweepings of a Pentonville omnibus, and M. Zola's characters are much worse. Who wants to be harrowed and disgusted with an account of the doings of the lower orders? Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art."

"Literary criticism is not your forte, my dear fellow," said Algernon laughingly. "Don't try it. You should leave that to people who haven't been at a University. They do it so well in the daily papers." He took a deep breath then continued: "My own view is that literature is supremely important because it always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose. The nineteenth century, as we know it, is largely an invention of Balzac, Dickens and Thackeray. We are merely carrying out, with footnotes and unnecessary additions, the creative vision of a few great novelists."

"That is nonsense, Algy!" laughed Jack.

"On the contrary. Let me tell you this brief tale. Shortly after Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson published his terrifying psychological story of transformation, a friend of mine, called Mr. Hyde, was in the north of London, and being anxious to get to a railway station, took what he thought would be a short cut, lost his way, and found himself in a network of mean, evil-looking streets. Feeling rather nervous he began to walk extremely fast, when suddenly out of an archway ran a child right between his legs. It fell on the pavement, he tripped over it, and trampled upon it. Being, of course, very much frightened and a little hurt, it began to scream, and in a few seconds the whole street was full of rough people who came pouring out of the houses like ants. They surrounded him, and asked him his

name. He was just about to give it when he suddenly remembered the opening incident in Mr. Stevenson's story. He was so filled with horror at having realised in his own person that terrible and well-written scene, and at having done accidentally, though in fact, what the Mr. Hyde of fiction had done with deliberate intent, that he ran away as hard as he could go. He was, however, very closely followed, and finally he took refuge in a surgery, the door of which happened to be open, where he explained to a young assistant, who happened to be there, exactly what had occurred. The humanitarian crowd were induced to go away on his giving them a small sum of money, and as soon as the coast was clear he left. As he passed out, the name on the brass door-plate of the surgery caught his eye. It was 'Jekyll.'" He paused, then added: "At least it should have been."

Jack laughed immoderately. "What nonsense!" he said, "I never heard such nonsense in all my life."

"Not at all! I once asked a lady, who knew Thackeray intimately, whether he had had any model for Becky Sharp. She told me that Becky was an invention, but that the idea of the character had been partly suggested by a governess who lived in the neighbourhood of Kensington Square, and was the companion of a very selfish and rich old woman. I enquired what became of the governess, and she replied that, oddly

enough, some years after the appearance of *Vanity Fair*, she ran away with the nephew of the lady with whom she was living, and for a short time made a great splash in society, quite in Mrs. Rawdon Crawley's style, and entirely by Mrs. Rawdon Crawley's methods. Ultimately she came to grief, disappeared to the Continent, and used to be occasionally seen at Monte Carlo and other gambling places … But let us go back to our original topic. You digress so much! It is a most annoying trait in you! What you really are is a Bunburyist. I was quite right in saying you were a Bunburyist. You are one of the most advanced Bunburyists I know."

"What on earth do you mean?" queried Jack. "Is that anything like being a dentist? You know I don't like dentists."

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

"I haven't asked you to dine with me anywhere tonight," retorted Jack.

"I know," said Algernon. "You are absurdly careless about sending out invitations. It is very foolish of you. Nothing annoys people so much as not receiving invitations. You lead such an idle life!"

"And I suppose you don't?" said Jack.

"Me! of course not!" replied Algernon in a tone of shock. "Why, I ride in the Row at ten o'clock in the morning, go to the opera three times a week, change my clothes at least five times a day, and dine out every night of the season. You don't call that leading an idle life, do you? Besides, I'm dining with you tonight at Willis's."

But Jack was adamant. "You had better dine with your Aunt Augusta," he said.

"I haven't the slightest intention of doing anything of the kind," replied Algernon. "To begin with, I dined there on Monday, and once a week is quite enough to dine with one's relations. I was cornered for a full hour by tedious old Lord Harrowden, who has only two topics of conversation, his gout and his wife. I never can quite understand which of the two he is talking about. He uses the most horrible language about them both. In the second place, whenever I do dine there I am always treated as a member of the family, and sent down with either no woman at all, or two. In the third place, Aunt Augusta is always telling me that I should have some serious

purpose in life, and I don't know any girl there whom one could possibly call a serious purpose. In the fourth place, I know perfectly well whom she will place me next to, tonight. She will place me next Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner-table. She flaunts her conjugal felicity as if it were the most fascinating of indiscretions. That is not very pleasant. Indeed, it is not even decent … and that sort of thing is enormously on the increase. The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one's clean linen in public. Besides, now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburyist I naturally want to talk to you about Bunburying. I want to tell you the rules."

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

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

A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it. The one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary."

"That is nonsense," responded Jack in a serious tone, forgetting for the moment that seriousness is the only refuge of the shallow. "If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won't want to know Bunbury."

"Then your wife will," said Algy, assuming an air of wisdom. "You don't seem to realise, that in married life three is company and two is none."

"That, my dear young friend," replied Jack sententiously, "is the theory that the corrupt French drama has been propounding for the last fifty years."

"And that the happy English home has proved in half the time," Algernon thrust back.

"For heaven's sake," said Jack, "don't try to be cynical. A cynic knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. Besides, it's perfectly easy to be cynical."

"My dear fellow," laughed Algernon, "it isn't easy to be anything now-a-days. There's such a lot of beastly competition about. By the way," he added, almost as an afterthought, "have you visited our friend Podgers lately?"

"I've just come from there, actually," responded Jack. "Silly thing, clairvoyance. He studied my palm and told me that I was going to fight a terrifying beast but that I will win after a long battle. I told him that the days of the dragon were over but he simply shrugged his shoulders. Murmured something about my not being who I am and said that I can look forward to a very happy future. I don't believe a word of it, of course, but it was excessively amusing."

Algernon smiled delightedly. "I went yesterday myself," he said in an amused tone. "He said I was in danger of confronting great wrath on land or at sea, so I asked if he would advise me to live in a balloon these coming few weeks. He also said I would find a long-lost brother and congratulated me on my engagement. When I told him I wasn't engaged he was absolutely crushed. He examined my palm carefully through his magnifying glass, gave me the strangest look and fell silent. Quite hilarious, really!"

The sound of an electric bell was heard in the flat, much to Algernon's delight. He often stepped outside and rang the bell himself, simply to enjoy the sound of this marvellous new invention. Only the most modern, luxurious flats were equipped with an electric bell, so it was Algernon's pride and joy. "Ah! That must be Aunt Augusta," he said. "Only relatives, or creditors, ever ring in that Wagnerian manner. Now, if I get

her out of the way for ten minutes, so that you can have an opportunity of proposing to Gwendolen, may I dine with you tonight at Willis's?"

The idea appealed to Jack. "I suppose so, if you want to."

"Yes," said Algernon, "but you must be serious about it. I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them." He wondered at the shallowness of such people as he thought of the delicious cucumber sandwiches he had just eaten.

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