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Modern
English
Plays



**THE IMPORTANCE OF
BEING EARNEST**

Oscar Wilde

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

Characters

JOHN WORTHING, J.P.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

REV. CANON CHASUBLE, D.D.

MERRIMAN, *butler*

LANE, *manservant*

LADY BRACKNELL

HON. GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX

CECILY CARDEW

MISS PRISM, *governess*

Act I. Algernon Moncrieff's Flat in Half-Moon Street, W.

Act II. The Garden at the Manor House, Woolton.

Act II.. Drawing-Room of the Manor House, Woolton.

Time: The Present. Place: London.

Act 1

Morning-room in ALGERNON'S flat in Half-Moon Street. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room. (LANE is arranging afternoon tea on the table, and after the music has ceased, ALGERNON enters.)

ALGERNON

Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

LANE

I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

ALGERNON

I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

LANE

Yes, sir.

ALGERNON

And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

LANE

Yes, sir. (*Hands them on a salver.**)

ALGERNON

(*inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa*)

Oh! . . . by the way, Lane, I see from your 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.

LANE

Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

salver: tray

ALGERNON

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

LANE

I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

ALGERNON

Good Heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?

LANE

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

ALGERNON

(*languidly*)

I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

LANE

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

ALGERNON

Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

LANE

Thank you, sir. (LANE goes out.)

ALGERNON

Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.

HO (Enter LANE.)

LANE

Mr. Ernest Worthing.

(Enter JACK. LANE goes out.)

ALGERNON

How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town?

JACK

Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere?
Eating as usual, I see, Algy!

ALGERNON

(stiffly)

I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock. Where have you been since last Thursday?

JACK

(sitting down on the sofa)

In the country.

ALGERNON

What on earth do you do there?

JACK

(pulling off his gloves)

When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring.

ALGERNON

And who are the people you amuse?

JACK

(airily)

Oh, neighbours, neighbours.

ALGERNON

Got nice neighbours in your part of Shropshire?

JACK

Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them.

ALGERNON

How immensely you must amuse them! *(Goes over and takes sandwich.)* By the way, Shropshire is your county, is it not?

JACK

Eh? Shropshire? Yes, of course. Hallo! Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who is coming to tea?

ALGERNON

Oh! merely Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

JACK

How perfectly delightful!

ALGERNON

Yes, that is all very well; but I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't quite approve of your being here.

JACK

May I ask why?

ALGERNON

My dear fellow, the way you flirt with Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful. It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you.

JACK

I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her

ALGERNON

I thought you had come up for pleasure? . . . I call that business.

JACK

How utterly unromantic you are!

ALGERNON

I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

JACK

I have no doubt about that, dear Algy. The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.

ALGERNON

Oh! there is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven—(JACK *puts out his hand to take a sandwich.* ALGERNON *at once interferes.*) Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. (*Takes one and eats it.*)

JACK

Well, you have been eating them all the time.

ALGERNON

That is quite a different matter. She is my aunt. (*Takes plate from below.*) Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter.

JACK

(*advancing to table and helping himself*)
And very good bread and butter it is, too.

ALGERNON

Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all. You behave as if you were married to her already. You are not married to her already, and I don't think you ever will be.

JACK

Why on earth do you say that?

ALGERNON

Well, in the first place girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right.

JACK

Oh, that is nonsense!

ALGERNON

It isn't. It is a great truth. 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.

JACK

Your consent!

ALGERNON

My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily. (*Rings bell.*)

JACK

Cecily! What on earth do you mean? What do you mean, Algy, by Cecily? I don't know anyone of the name of Cecily.

(*Enter LANE.*)

ALGERNON

Bring me that cigarette case Mr. Worthing left in the smoking-room the last time he dined here.

LANE

Yes, sir. (*LANE goes out.*)

JACK

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

ALGERNON

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

JACK

There is no good offering a large reward now that the thing is found.

(Enter LANE with the cigarette case on a salver. ALGERNON takes it at once. LANE goes out.)

ALGERNON

I think that is rather mean of you, Ernest, I must say. *(Opens case and examines it.)* However, it makes no matter, for, now that I look at the inscription, I find that the thing isn't yours after all.

JACK

Of course it's mine. *(Moving to him.)* You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case.

ALGERNON

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

JACK

I am quite aware of the fact, and I don't propose to discuss modern culture. It isn't the sort of thing one should talk of in private. I simply want my cigarette case back.

ALGERNON

Yes; but this isn't your cigarette case. This cigarette case is a present from someone of the name of Cecily, and you said you didn't know anyone of that name.

JACK

Well, if you want to know, Cecily happens to be my aunt.

ALGERNON

Your aunt!

JACK

Yes. Charming old lady she is, too. Lives at Tunbridge Wells. Just give it back to me, Algy.

ALGERNON

(retreating to back of sofa)

But why does she call herself little Cecily if she is your aunt and lives at Tunbridge Wells? (*Reading.*) "From little Cecily with her fondest love."

JACK

(*moving to sofa and kneeling upon it*)

My dear fellow, what on earth is there in that? Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be exactly like your aunt! That is absurd! For Heaven's sake give me back my cigarette case. (*Follows ALGERNON round the room.*)

ALGERNON

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

JACK

It isn't Ernest; it's Jack.

ALGERNON

You have always told me it was Ernest. 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. (*Taking it from case.*) "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. (*Puts the card in his pocket.*)

JACK

Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette case was given to me in the country.

ALGERNON

Yes, but that does not account for the fact that your small Aunt Cecily, who lives at Tunbridge Wells, calls you her dear uncle. Come, old boy, you had much better have the thing out at once.

JACK

My dear Algy, 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.

ALGERNON

Well, that is exactly what dentists always do. Now, go on! Tell me the whole thing. 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

Bunburyist? What on earth do you mean by a Bunburyist?

ALGERNON

I'll reveal to you the meaning of that incomparable expression as soon as you are kind enough to inform me why you are Ernest in town and Jack in the country.

JACK

Well, produce my cigarette case first.

ALGERNON

Here it is. (*Hands cigarette case.*) Now produce your explanation, and pray make it improbable. (*Sits on sofa.*)

JACK

My dear fellow, there is nothing improbable 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 in my place in the country under the charge of her admirable governess, Miss Prism.

ALGERNON

Where is that place in the country, by the way?

JACK

That is nothing to you, dear boy. You are not going to be invited. . . . I may tell you candidly that the place is not in Shropshire.

ALGERNON

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

JACK

My dear Algy, 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.

ALGERNON

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

JACK

That wouldn't be at all a bad thing.

ALGERNON

Literary criticism is not your forte, my dear fellow. 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. 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.

JACK

What on earth do you mean?

ALGERNON

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

JACK

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

ALGERNON

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

JACK

You had much better dine with your Aunt Augusta.

ALGERNON

I haven't the smallest intention of doing anything of the kind. To begin with, I dined there on Monday, and once a week is quite enough to dine with one's own relatives. 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, I know perfectly well whom she will place me next to, to-night. She will place me next to Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner-table. 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.

JACK

I'm not a Bunburyist at all. If Gwendolen accepts me, I am going to kill my brother, indeed I think I'll kill him in any case. Cecily is a little too much interested in him. 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.

ALGERNON

Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.

JACK

That is nonsense. 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.

ALGERNON

Then your wife will. You don't seem to realize, that in married life three is company and two is none.

JACK

(*sententiously**)

That, my dear young friend, is the theory that the corrupt French Drama has been propounding for the last fifty years.

ALGERNON

Yes; and that the happy English home has proved in half the time.

JACK

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

ALGERNON

My dear fellow, it isn't easy to be anything now-a-days. There's such a lot of beastly competition about. (*The sound of an electric bell is heard.*) Ah! that must be Aunt Augusta. Only relatives, or creditors, ever ring in that Wagnerian manner. Now, if I get her out of the way for ten minutes, so that you can have an opportunity for proposing to Gwendolen, may I dine with you to-night at Willis's?

JACK

I suppose so, if you want to.

ALGERNON

Yes, but you must be serious about it. I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them.

(*Enter LANE.*)

LANE

Lady Bracknell and Miss Fairfax. (ALGERNON goes forward to meet them. Enter LADY BRACKNELL and GWENDOLEN.)

LADY BRACKNELL

Good afternoon, dear Algernon, I hope you are behaving very well.

ALGERNON

I'm feeling very well, Aunt Augusta.

sententiously: in a moralizing way

LADY BRACKNELL

That's not quite the same thing. In fact the two things rarely go together. (*Sees JACK and bows to him with icy coldness.*)

ALGERNON

(*to GWENDOLEN*)

Dear me, you are smart!

GWENDOLEN

I am always smart! Aren't I, Mr. Worthing?

JACK

You're quite perfect, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN

Oh! I hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in *many directions*. (*GWENDOLEN and JACK sit down together in the corner.*)

LADY BRACKNELL

I'm sorry if we are a little late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger. And now I'll have a cup of tea, and one of those nice cucumber sandwiches you promised me.

ALGERNON

Certainly, Aunt Augusta. (*Goes over to tea-table.*)

LADY BRACKNELL

Won't you come and sit here, Gwendolen?

GWENDOLEN

Thanks, mamma, I'm quite comfortable where I am.

ALGERNON

(*picking up empty plate in horror*)

Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them specially.

LANE

(*gravely*)

There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir. I went down twice.

ALGERNON

No cucumbers!

LANE

No, sir. Not even for ready money.

ALGERNON

That will do, Lane, thank you.

LANE

Thank you, sir. (*Goes out.*)

ALGERNON

I am greatly distressed, Aunt Augusta, about there being no cucumbers, not even for ready money.

LADY BRACKNELL

It really makes no matter, Algernon. I had some crumpets with Lady Harbury, who seems to me to be living entirely for pleasure now.

ALGERNON

I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief.

LADY BRACKNELL

It certainly has changed its colour. From what cause I, of course, cannot say. (ALGERNON *crosses and hands tea.*) Thank you. I've quite a treat for you to-night, Algernon. I am going to send you down with Mary Farquhar. She is such a nice woman, and so attentive to her husband. It's delightful to watch them.

ALGERNON

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

LADY BRACKNELL

(*frowning*)

I hope not, Algernon. It would put my table completely out. Your uncle would have to dine upstairs. Fortunately he is accustomed to that.

ALGERNON

It is a great bore, and, I need hardly say, a terrible disappointment to me, but the fact is I have just had a telegram to say that my poor friend Bunbury is very ill again. (*Exchanges glances with JACK.*) They seem to think I should be with him.

LADY BRACKNELL

It is very strange. This Mr. Bunbury seems to suffer from curiously bad health.

ALGERNON

Yes; poor Bunbury is a dreadful invalid.

LADY BRACKNELL

Well, I must say, Algernon, that I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life. I am always telling that to your poor uncle, but he never seems to take much notice . . . as far as any improvement in his ailments goes. I should be much obliged if you would ask Mr. Bunbury, from me, to be kind enough not to have a relapse on Saturday, for I rely on you to arrange my music for me. It is my last reception and one wants something that will encourage conversation, particularly at the end of the season when everyone has practically said whatever they had to say, which, in most cases, was probably not much.

ALGERNON

I'll speak to Bunbury, Aunt Augusta, if he is still conscious, and I think I can promise you he'll be all right by Saturday. You see, if one plays good music, people don't listen, and if one plays bad music people don't talk. But I'll run over the programme I've drawn out, if you will kindly come into the next room for a moment.

LADY BRACKNELL

Thank you, Algernon. It is very thoughtful of you. (*Rising, and following ALGERNON.*) I'm sure the programme will be delightful, after a few expurgations. French songs I cannot possibly allow. People always seem to think that they are improper, and either look shocked, which is vulgar, or laugh, which is worse. But German sounds a thoroughly respectable language, and indeed, I believe is so. Gwendolen, you will accompany me.

GWENDOLEN

Certainly, mamma. (*LADY BRACKNELL and ALGERNON go into the music-room, GWENDOLEN remains behind.*)

JACK

Charming day it has been, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN

Pray don't talk to me about the weather, Mr. Worthing. When-