An Ideal Husband

“A Play”

OSCAR WILDE

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ABOUT AUTHOR:

Oscar Wilde, in full **Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde**, (born October 16, 1854, Dublin, Ireland—died November 30, 1900, Paris, France), Irish wit, poet, and dramatist whose reputation rests on his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and on his comic masterpieces *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). He was a spokesman for the late 19th-century Aesthetic movement in England, which advocated art for art's sake, and he was the object of celebrated civil and criminal suits involving homosexuality and ending in his imprisonment (1895–97).

Wilde was born of professional and literary parents. His father, Sir William Wilde, was Ireland's leading ear and eye surgeon, who also published books on archaeology, folklore, and the satirist Jonathan Swift. His mother, who wrote under the name Speranza, was a revolutionary poet and an authority on Celtic myth and folklore.

After attending Portora Royal School, Enniskillen (1864–71), Wilde went, on successive scholarships, to Trinity College, Dublin (1871–74), and Magdalen College, Oxford (1874–78), which awarded him a degree with honours. During these four years, he distinguished himself not only as a Classical scholar, a poseur, and a wit but also as a poet by winning the coveted Newdigate Prize in 1878 with a long poem, *Ravenna.* He was deeply impressed by the teachings of the English writers John Ruskin and Walter Pater on the central importance of art in life and particularly by the latter's stress on the aesthetic intensity by which life should be lived. Like many in his generation, Wilde was determined to follow Pater's urging "to burn always with [a] hard, gemlike flame." But Wilde also delighted in affecting an aesthetic pose; this, combined with rooms at Oxford decorated with objets d'art, resulted in his famous remark, "Oh, would that I could live up to my blue china!"

In the early 1880s, when Aestheticism was the rage and despair of literary London, Wilde established himself in social and artistic circles by his wit and flamboyance. Soon the periodical *Punch*made him the satiric object of its antagonism to the Aesthetes for what was considered their unmasculine devotion to art. And in their comic opera *Patience,* Gilbert and Sullivan based the character Bunthorne, a "fleshly poet," partly on Wilde. Wishing to reinforce the association, Wilde published, at his own expense, *Poems* (1881), which echoed, too faithfully, his discipleship to the poets Algernon Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and John Keats. Eager for further acclaim, Wilde agreed to lecture in the United States and Canada in 1882, announcing on his arrival at customs in New York City that he had "nothing to declare but his genius." Despite widespread hostility in the press to his languid poses and aesthetic costume of velvet jacket, knee breeches, and black silk stockings, Wilde for 12 months exhorted the Americans to love beauty and art; then he returned to Great Britain to lecture on his impressions of America.

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

THE EARL OF CAVERSHAM, K.G.

VISCOUNT GORING, his Son

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN, Bart., Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs

VICOMTE DE NANJAC, Attaché at the French Embassy in London

MR. MONTFORD

MASON, Butler to Sir Robert Chiltern

PHIPPS, Lord Goring's Servant

JAMES }

HAROLD } Footmen

LADY CHILTERN

LADY MARKBY

THE COUNTESS OF BASILDON

MRS. MARCHMONT

MISS MABEL CHILTERN, Sir Robert Chiltern's Sister

MRS. CHEVELEY

The action of the play is completed within twenty-four hours.

The Earl of Caversham	*Mr. Alfred Bishop*.
Viscount Goring	*Mr. Charles H. Hawtrey*.
Sir Robert Chiltern	*Mr. Lewis Waller*.
Vicomte de Nanjac	*Mr. Cosmo Stuart*.
Mr. Montford	*Mr. Harry Stanford*.
Phipps	*Mr. C. H. Brookfield*.
Mason	*Mr. H. Deane*.
James	*Mr. Charles Meyrick*.
Harold	*Mr. Goodhart*.
Lady Chiltern	*Miss Julia Neilson*.
Lady Markby	*Miss Fanny Brough*.
Countess of Basildon	*Miss Vane Featherston*.
Mrs. Marchmont	*Miss Helen Forsyth*.
Miss Mabel Chiltern	*Miss Maud Millet*.
Mrs. Cheveley	*Miss Florence West*.

FIRST ACT

SCENE

The octagon room at Sir Robert Chiltern's house in Grosvenor Square.

[*The room is brilliantly lighted and full of guests*. *At the top of the staircase stands* lady chiltern, *a woman of grave Greek beauty*, *about twenty-seven years of age*. *She receives the guests as they come up*. *Over the well of the staircase hangs a great chandelier with wax lights*, *which illumine a large eighteenth-century French tapestry—representing the Triumph of Love*, *from a design by Boucher—that is stretched on the staircase wall*. *On the right is the entrance to the music-room*. *The sound of a string quartette is faintly heard*. *The entrance on the left leads to other reception-rooms*. mrs. marchmont *and* lady basildon, *two very pretty women*, *are seated together on a Louis Seize sofa*. *They are types of exquisite fragility*. *Their affectation of manner has a delicate charm*. *Watteau would have loved to paint them*.]

mrs. marchmont. Going on to the Hartlocks' to-night, Margaret?

lady basildon. I suppose so. Are you?

mrs. marchmont. Yes. Horribly tedious parties they give, don't they?

lady basildon. Horribly tedious! Never know why I go. Never know why I go anywhere.

mrs. marchmont. I come here to be educated.

lady basildon. Ah! I hate being educated!

mrs. marchmont. So do I. It puts one almost on a level with the commercial classes, doesn't it? But dear Gertrude Chiltern is always telling me that I should have some serious purpose in life. So I come here to try to find one.

lady basildon. [*Looking round through her lorgnette*.] I don't see anybody here to-night whom one could possibly call a serious purpose. The man who took me in to dinner talked to me about his wife the whole time.

mrs. marchmont. How very trivial of him!

lady basildon. Terribly trivial! What did your man talk about?

mrs. marchmont. About myself.

lady basildon. [*Languidly*.] And were you interested?

mrs. marchmont. [*Shaking her head*.] Not in the smallest degree.

lady basildon. What martyrs we are, dear Margaret!

mrs. marchmont. [*Rising*.] And how well it becomes us, Olivia!

[*They rise and go towards the music-room*. *The* vicomte de nanjac, *a young attaché known for his*

neckties and his Anglomania, *approaches with a low bow*, *and enters into conversation*.]

mason. [*Announcing guests from the top of the staircase*.] Mr. and Lady Jane Barford. Lord Caversham.

[*Enter* lord caversham, *an old gentleman of seventy*, *wearing the riband and star of the Garter*. *A fine Whig type*. *Rather like a portrait by Lawrence*.]

lord caversham. Good evening, Lady Chiltern! Has my good-for-nothing young son been here?

lady chiltern. [*Smiling*.] I don't think Lord Goring has arrived yet.

mabel chiltern. [*Coming up to* lord caversham.] Why do you call Lord Goring good-for-nothing?

[mabel chiltern *is a perfect example of the English type of prettiness*, *the apple-blossom type*. *She has all the fragrance and freedom of a flower*. *There is ripple after ripple of sunlight in her hair*, *and the little mouth*, *with its parted lips*, *is expectant*, *like the mouth of a child*. *She has the fascinating tyranny of youth*, *and the astonishing courage of innocence*. *To sane people she is not reminiscent of any work of art*. *But she is really like a Tanagra statuette*, *and would be rather annoyed if she were told so*.]

lord caversham. Because he leads such an idle life.

mabel chiltern. How can you say such a thing? Why, he rides in the Row at ten o'clock in the morning, goes to the Opera three times a week, changes his clothes at least five times a day, and dines out every night of

the season. You don't call that leading an idle life, do you?

lord caversham. [*Looking at her with a kindly twinkle in his eyes*.] You are a very charming young lady!

mabel chiltern. How sweet of you to say that, Lord Caversham! Do come to us more often. You know we are always at home on Wednesdays, and you look so well with your star!

lord caversham. Never go anywhere now. Sick of London Society. Shouldn't mind being introduced to my own tailor; he always votes on the right side. But object strongly to being sent down to dinner with my wife's milliner. Never could stand Lady Caversham's bonnets.

mabel chiltern. Oh, I love London Society! I think it has immensely improved. It is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics. Just what Society should be.

lord caversham. Hum! Which is Goring? Beautiful idiot, or the other thing?

mabel chiltern. [*Gravely*.] I have been obliged for the present to put Lord Goring into a class quite by himself. But he is developing charmingly!

lord caversham. Into what?

mabel chiltern. [*With a little curtsey*.] I hope to let you know very soon, Lord Caversham!

mason. [*Announcing guests*.] Lady Markby. Mrs. Cheveley.

[*Enter* lady markby *and* mrs. cheveley. lady markby *is a pleasant*, *kindly*, *popular woman*, *with gray hair à la marquise and good lace*. mrs. cheveley, *who accompanies her*, *is tall and rather slight*. *Lips very thin and highly-coloured*, *a line of scarlet on a pallid face*. *Venetian red hair*, *aquiline nose*, *and long throat*. *Rouge accentuates the natural paleness of her complexion*. *Gray-green eyes that move restlessly*. *She is in heliotrope*, *with diamonds*. *She looks rather like an orchid*, *and makes great demands on one's curiosity*. *In all her movements she is extremely graceful*. *A work of art*, *on the whole*, *but showing the influence of too many schools*.]

lady markby. Good evening, dear Gertrude! So kind of you to let me bring my friend, Mrs. Cheveley. Two such charming women should know each other!

lady chiltern. [*Advances towards* mrs. cheveley *with a sweet smile*. *Then suddenly stops*, *and bows rather distantly*.] I think Mrs. Cheveley and I have met before. I did not know she had married a second time.

lady markby. [*Genially*.] Ah, nowadays people marry as often as they can, don't they? It is most fashionable. [*To* duchess of maryborough.] Dear Duchess, and how is the Duke? Brain still weak, I suppose? Well, that is only to be expected, is it not? His good father was just the same. There is nothing like race, is there?

mrs. cheveley. [*Playing with her fan*.] But have we really met before, Lady Chiltern? I can't remember where. I have been out of England for so long.

lady chiltern. We were at school together, Mrs. Cheveley.

mrs. cheveley [*Superciliously*.] Indeed? I have forgotten all about my schooldays. I have a vague impression that they were detestable.

lady chiltern. [*Coldly*.] I am not surprised!

mrs. cheveley. [*In her sweetest manner*.] Do you know, I am quite looking forward to meeting your clever husband, Lady Chiltern. Since he has been at the Foreign Office, he has been so much talked of in Vienna. They actually succeed in spelling his name right in the newspapers. That in itself is fame, on the continent.

lady chiltern. I hardly think there will be much in common between you and my husband, Mrs. Cheveley! [*Moves away*.]

vicomte de nanjac. Ah! chère Madame, queue surprise! I have not seen you since Berlin!

mrs. cheveley. Not since Berlin, Vicomte. Five years ago!

vicomte de nanjac. And you are younger and more beautiful than ever. How do you manage it?

mrs. cheveley. By making it a rule only to talk to perfectly charming people like yourself.

vicomte de nanjac. Ah! you flatter me. You butter me, as they say here.

mrs. cheveley. Do they say that here? How dreadful of them!

vicomte de nanjac. Yes, they have a wonderful language. It should be more widely known.

[sir robert chiltern *enters. A man of forty, but looking somewhat younger. Clean-shaven, with finely-cut features, dark-haired and dark-eyed. A personality of mark. Not popular—few personalities are. But intensely admired by the few, and deeply respected by the many. The note of his manner is that of perfect distinction, with a slight touch of pride. One feels that he is conscious of the success he has made in life. A nervous temperament, with a tired look. The firmly-chiselled mouth and chin contrast strikingly with the romantic expression in the deep-set eyes. The variance is suggestive of an almost complete separation of passion and intellect, as though thought and emotion were each isolated in its own sphere through some violence of will-power. There is nervousness in the nostrils, and in the pale, thin, pointed hands. It would be inaccurate to call him picturesque. Picturesqueness cannot survive the House of Commons. But Vandyck would have liked to have painted his head.*]

sir robert chiltern. Good evening, Lady Markby! I hope you have brought Sir John with you?

lady markby. Oh! I have brought a much more charming person than Sir John. Sir John's temper since he has taken seriously to politics has become quite unbearable. Really, now that the House of Commons is trying to become useful, it does a great deal of harm.

sir robert chiltern. I hope not, Lady Markby. At any rate we do our best to waste the public time, don't we?

But who is this charming person you have been kind enough to bring to us?

lady markby. Her name is Mrs. Cheveley! One of the Dorsetshire Cheveleys, I suppose. But I really don't know. Families are so mixed nowadays. Indeed, as a rule, everybody turns out to be somebody else.

sir robert chiltern. Mrs. Cheveley? I seem to know the name.

lady markby. She has just arrived from Vienna.

sir robert chiltern. Ah! yes. I think I know whom you mean.

lady markby. Oh! she goes everywhere there, and has such pleasant scandals about all her friends. I really must go to Vienna next winter. I hope there is a good chef at the Embassy.

sir robert chiltern. If there is not, the Ambassador will certainly have to be recalled. Pray point out Mrs. Cheveley to me. I should like to see her.

lady markby. Let me introduce you. [*To* mrs. cheveley.] My dear, Sir Robert Chiltern is dying to know you!

sir robert chiltern. [*Bowing*.] Every one is dying to know the brilliant Mrs. Cheveley. Our attachés at Vienna write to us about nothing else.

mrs. cheveley. Thank you, Sir Robert. An acquaintance that begins with a compliment is sure to develop into a real friendship. It starts in the right manner. And I find that I know Lady Chiltern already.