

WILDE OSCAR

AN IDEAL
HUSBAND

Oscar Wilde
An Ideal Husband

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An Ideal Husband:

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Oscar Wilde

An Ideal Husband

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 SCENES OF THE PLAY

Act I. *The Octagon Room in Sir Robert Chiltern's House in Grosvenor Square.*

Act II. *Morning-room in Sir Robert Chiltern's House.*

Act III. *The Library of Lord Goring's House in Curzon Street.*

Act IV. *Same as Act II.*

Time: *The Present*

Place: *London.*

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

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

Anglomaniā, 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.

sir robert chiltern. Really?

mrs. cheveley. Yes. She has just reminded me that we were at school together. I remember it perfectly now. She always got the good conduct prize. I have a distinct recollection of Lady Chiltern always getting the good conduct prize!

sir robert chiltern. [*Smiling.*] And what prizes did you get,

Mrs. Cheveley?

mrs. cheveley. My prizes came a little later on in life. I don't think any of them were for good conduct. I forget!

sir robert chiltern. I am sure they were for something charming!

mrs. cheveley. I don't know that women are always rewarded for being charming. I think they are usually punished for it! Certainly, more women grow old nowadays through the faithfulness of their admirers than through anything else! At least that is the only way I can account for the terribly haggard look of most of your pretty women in London!

sir robert chiltern. What an appalling philosophy that sounds! To attempt to classify you, Mrs. Cheveley, would be an impertinence. But may I ask, at heart, are you an optimist or a pessimist? Those seem to be the only two fashionable religions left to us nowadays.

mrs. cheveley. Oh, I'm neither. Optimism begins in a broad grin, and Pessimism ends with blue spectacles. Besides, they are both of them merely poses.

sir robert chiltern. You prefer to be natural?

mrs. cheveley. Sometimes. But it is such a very difficult pose to keep up.

sir robert chiltern. What would those modern psychological novelists, of whom we hear so much, say to such a theory as that?

mrs. cheveley. Ah! the strength of women comes from the fact that psychology cannot explain us. Men can be analysed,

women.. merely adored.

sir robert chiltern. You think science cannot grapple with the problem of women?

mrs. cheveley. Science can never grapple with the irrational. That is why it has no future before it, in this world.

sir robert chiltern. And women represent the irrational.

mrs. cheveley. Well-dressed women do.

sir robert chiltern. [*With a polite bow.*] I fear I could hardly agree with you there. But do sit down. And now tell me, what makes you leave your brilliant Vienna for our gloomy London – or perhaps the question is indiscreet?

mrs. cheveley. Questions are never indiscreet. Answers sometimes are.

sir robert chiltern. Well, at any rate, may I know if it is politics or pleasure?

mrs. cheveley. Politics are my only pleasure. You see nowadays it is not fashionable to flirt till one is forty, or to be romantic till one is forty-five, so we poor women who are under thirty, or say we are, have nothing open to us but politics or philanthropy. And philanthropy seems to me to have become simply the refuge of people who wish to annoy their fellow-creatures. I prefer politics. I think they are more.. becoming!

sir robert chiltern. A political life is a noble career!

mrs. cheveley. Sometimes. And sometimes it is a clever game, Sir Robert. And sometimes it is a great nuisance.

sir robert chiltern. Which do you find it?

mrs. cheveley. I? A combination of all three. [*Drops her fan.*]

sir robert chiltern. [*Picks up fan.*] Allow me!

mrs. cheveley. Thanks.

sir robert chiltern. But you have not told me yet what makes you honour London so suddenly. Our season is almost over.

mrs. cheveley. Oh! I don't care about the London season! It is too matrimonial. People are either hunting for husbands, or hiding from them. I wanted to meet you. It is quite true. You know what a woman's curiosity is. Almost as great as a man's! I wanted immensely to meet you, and.. to ask you to do something for me.

sir robert chiltern. I hope it is not a little thing, Mrs. Cheveley. I find that little things are so very difficult to do.

mrs. cheveley. [*After a moment's reflection.*] No, I don't think it is quite a little thing.

sir robert chiltern. I am so glad. Do tell me what it is.

mrs. cheveley. Later on. [*Rises.*] And now may I walk through your beautiful house? I hear your pictures are charming. Poor Baron Arnheim – you remember the Baron? – used to tell me you had some wonderful Corots.

sir robert chiltern. [*With an almost imperceptible start.*] Did you know Baron Arnheim well?

mrs. cheveley. [*Smiling.*] Intimately. Did you?

sir robert chiltern. At one time.

mrs. cheveley. Wonderful man, wasn't he?

sir robert chiltern. [*After a pause.*] He was very remarkable,

in many ways.

mrs. cheveley. I often think it such a pity he never wrote his memoirs. They would have been most interesting.

sir robert chiltern. Yes: he knew men and cities well, like the old Greek.

mrs. cheveley. Without the dreadful disadvantage of having a Penelope waiting at home for him.

mason. Lord Goring.

[Enter lord goring. Thirty-four, but always says he is younger. A well-bred, expressionless face. He is clever, but would not like to be thought so. A flawless dandy, he would be annoyed if he were considered romantic. He plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world. He is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage.]

sir robert chiltern. Good evening, my dear Arthur! Mrs. Cheveley, allow me to introduce to you Lord Goring, the idlest man in London.

mrs. cheveley. I have met Lord Goring before.

lord goring. *[Bowing.]* I did not think you would remember me, Mrs. Cheveley.

mrs. cheveley. My memory is under admirable control. And are you still a bachelor?

lord goring. I.. believe so.

mrs. cheveley. How very romantic!

lord goring. Oh! I am not at all romantic. I am not old enough. I leave romance to my seniors.

sir robert chiltern. Lord Goring is the result of Boodle's Club, Mrs. Cheveley.

mrs. cheveley. He reflects every credit on the institution.

lord goring. May I ask are you staying in London long?

mrs. cheveley. That depends partly on the weather, partly on the cooking, and partly on Sir Robert.

sir robert chiltern. You are not going to plunge us into a European war, I hope?

mrs. cheveley. There is no danger, at present!

[She nods to lord goring, with a look of amusement in her eyes, and goes out with sir robert chiltern. lord goring saunters over to mabel chiltern.]

mabel chiltern. You are very late!

lord goring. Have you missed me?

mabel chiltern. Awfully!

lord goring. Then I am sorry I did not stay away longer. I like being missed.

mabel chiltern. How very selfish of you!

lord goring. I am very selfish.

mabel chiltern. You are always telling me of your bad qualities, Lord Goring.

lord goring. I have only told you half of them as yet, Miss Mabel!

mabel chiltern. Are the others very bad?

lord goring. Quite dreadful! When I think of them at night I go to sleep at once.

mabel chiltern. Well, I delight in your bad qualities. I wouldn't have you part with one of them.

lord goring. How very nice of you! But then you are always nice. By the way, I want to ask you a question, Miss Mabel. Who brought Mrs. Cheveley here? That woman in heliotrope, who has just gone out of the room with your brother?

mabel chiltern. Oh, I think Lady Markby brought her. Why do you ask?

lord goring. I haven't seen her for years, that is all.

mabel chiltern. What an absurd reason!

lord goring. All reasons are absurd.

mabel chiltern. What sort of a woman is she?

lord goring. Oh! a genius in the daytime and a beauty at night!

mabel chiltern. I dislike her already.

lord goring. That shows your admirable good taste.

vicomte de nanjac. [*Approaching.*] Ah, the English young lady is the dragon of good taste, is she not? Quite the dragon of good taste.

lord goring. So the newspapers are always telling us.

vicomte de nanjac. I read all your English newspapers. I find them so amusing.

lord goring. Then, my dear Nanjac, you must certainly read between the lines.

vicomte de nanjac. I should like to, but my professor objects. [*To mabel chiltern.*] May I have the pleasure of escorting you to the music-room, Mademoiselle?

mabel chiltern. [*Looking very disappointed.*] Delighted, Vicomte, quite delighted! [*Turning to lord goring.*] Aren't you coming to the music-room?

lord goring. Not if there is any music going on, Miss Mabel.

mabel chiltern. [*Severely.*] The music is in German. You would not understand it.

[*Goes out with the vicomte de nanjac. lord caversham comes up to his son.*]

lord caversham. Well, sir! what are you doing here? Wasting your life as usual! You should be in bed, sir. You keep too late hours! I heard of you the other night at Lady Rufford's dancing till four o'clock in the morning!

lord goring. Only a quarter to four, father.

lord caversham. Can't make out how you stand London Society. The thing has gone to the dogs, a lot of damned nobodies talking about nothing.

lord goring. I love talking about nothing, father. It is the only thing I know anything about.

lord caversham. You seem to me to be living entirely for pleasure.

lord goring. What else is there to live for, father? Nothing ages like happiness.

lord caversham. You are heartless, sir, very heartless!

lord goring. I hope not, father. Good evening, Lady Basildon!

lady basildon. [*Arching two pretty eyebrows.*] Are you here? I had no idea you ever came to political parties!

lord goring. I adore political parties. They are the only place left to us where people don't talk politics.

lady basildon. I delight in talking politics. I talk them all day long. But I can't bear listening to them. I don't know how the unfortunate men in the House stand these long debates.

lord goring. By never listening.

lady basildon. Really?

lord goring. [*In his most serious manner.*] Of course. You see, it is a very dangerous thing to listen. If one listens one may be convinced; and a man who allows himself to be convinced by an argument is a thoroughly unreasonable person.

lady basildon. Ah! that accounts for so much in men that I have never understood, and so much in women that their husbands never appreciate in them!

mrs. marchmont. [*With a sigh.*] Our husbands never appreciate anything in us. We have to go to others for that!

lady basildon. [*Emphatically.*] Yes, always to others, have we not?

lord goring. [*Smiling.*] And those are the views of the two ladies who are known to have the most admirable husbands in London.

mrs. marchmont. That is exactly what we can't stand. My Reginald is quite hopelessly faultless. He is really unendurably so, at times! There is not the smallest element of excitement in knowing him.

lord goring. How terrible! Really, the thing should be more

widely known!

lady basildon. Basildon is quite as bad; he is as domestic as if he was a bachelor.

mrs. marchmont. [*Pressing lady basildon's hand.*] My poor Olivia! We have married perfect husbands, and we are well punished for it.

lord goring. I should have thought it was the husbands who were punished.

mrs. marchmont. [*Drawing herself up.*] Oh, dear no! They are as happy as possible! And as for trusting us, it is tragic how much they trust us.

lady basildon. Perfectly tragic!

lord goring. Or comic, Lady Basildon?

lady basildon. Certainly not comic, Lord Goring. How unkind of you to suggest such a thing!

mrs. marchmont. I am afraid Lord Goring is in the camp of the enemy, as usual. I saw him talking to that Mrs. Cheveley when he came in.

lord goring. Handsome woman, Mrs. Cheveley!

lady basildon. [*Stiffly.*] Please don't praise other women in our presence. You might wait for us to do that!

lord goring. I did wait.

mrs. marchmont. Well, we are not going to praise her. I hear she went to the Opera on Monday night, and told Tommy Rufford at supper that, as far as she could see, London Society was entirely made up of dowdies and dandies.

lord goring. She is quite right, too. The men are all dowdies and the women are all dandies, aren't they?

mrs. marchmont. [*After a pause.*] Oh! do you really think that is what Mrs. Cheveley meant?

lord goring. Of course. And a very sensible remark for Mrs. Cheveley to make, too.

[*Enter mabel chiltern. She joins the group.*]

mabel chiltern. Why are you talking about Mrs. Cheveley? Everybody is talking about Mrs. Cheveley! Lord Goring says – what did you say, Lord Goring, about Mrs. Cheveley? Oh! I remember, that she was a genius in the daytime and a beauty at night.

lady basildon. What a horrid combination! So very unnatural!

mrs. marchmont. [*In her most dreamy manner.*] I like looking at geniuses, and listening to beautiful people.

lord goring. Ah! that is morbid of you, Mrs. Marchmont!

mrs. marchmont. [*Brightening to a look of real pleasure.*] I am so glad to hear you say that. Marchmont and I have been married for seven years, and he has never once told me that I was morbid. Men are so painfully unobservant!

lady basildon. [*Turning to her.*] I have always said, dear Margaret, that you were the most morbid person in London.

mrs. marchmont. Ah! but you are always sympathetic, Olivia!

mabel chiltern. Is it morbid to have a desire for food? I have

a great desire for food. Lord Goring, will you give me some supper?

lord goring. With pleasure, Miss Mabel. [*Moves away with her.*]

mabel chiltern. How horrid you have been! You have never talked to me the whole evening!

lord goring. How could I? You went away with the child-diplomatist.

mabel chiltern. You might have followed us. Pursuit would have been only polite. I don't think I like you at all this evening!

lord goring. I like you immensely.

mabel chiltern. Well, I wish you'd show it in a more marked way! [*They go downstairs.*]

mrs. marchmont. Olivia, I have a curious feeling of absolute faintness. I think I should like some supper very much. I know I should like some supper.

lady basildon. I am positively dying for supper, Margaret!

mrs. marchmont. Men are so horribly selfish, they never think of these things.

lady basildon. Men are grossly material, grossly material!

[*The vicomte de nanjac enters from the music-room with some other guests. After having carefully examined all the people present, he approaches lady basildon.*]

vicomte de nanjac. May I have the honour of taking you down to supper, Comtesse?

lady basildon. [*Coldly.*] I never take supper, thank you,

Vicomte. [*The vicomte is about to retire. lady basildon, seeing this, rises at once and takes his arm.*] But I will come down with you with pleasure.

vicomte de nanjac. I am so fond of eating! I am very English in all my tastes.

lady basildon. You look quite English, Vicomte, quite English.

[*They pass out. mr. montford, a perfectly groomed young dandy, approaches mrs. marchmont.*]

mr. montford. Like some supper, Mrs. Marchmont?

mrs. marchmont. [*Languidly.*] Thank you, Mr. Montford, I never touch supper. [*Rises hastily and takes his arm.*] But I will sit beside you, and watch you.

mr. montford. I don't know that I like being watched when I am eating!

mrs. marchmont. Then I will watch some one else.

mr. montford. I don't know that I should like that either.

mrs. marchmont. [*Severely.*] Pray, Mr. Montford, do not make these painful scenes of jealousy in public!

[*They go downstairs with the other guests, passing sir robert chiltern and mrs. cheveley, who now enter.*]

sir robert chiltern. And are you going to any of our country houses before you leave England, Mrs. Cheveley?

mrs. cheveley. Oh, no! I can't stand your English house-parties. In England people actually try to be brilliant at breakfast.

That is so dreadful of them! Only dull people are brilliant at breakfast. And then the family skeleton is always reading family prayers. My stay in England really depends on you, Sir Robert. [*Sits down on the sofa.*]

sir robert chiltern. [*Taking a seat beside her.*] Seriously?

mrs. cheveley. Quite seriously. I want to talk to you about a great political and financial scheme, about this Argentine Canal Company, in fact.

sir robert chiltern. What a tedious, practical subject for you to talk about, Mrs. Cheveley!

mrs. cheveley. Oh, I like tedious, practical subjects. What I don't like are tedious, practical people. There is a wide difference. Besides, you are interested, I know, in International Canal schemes. You were Lord Radley's secretary, weren't you, when the Government bought the Suez Canal shares?

sir robert chiltern. Yes. But the Suez Canal was a very great and splendid undertaking. It gave us our direct route to India. It had imperial value. It was necessary that we should have control. This Argentine scheme is a commonplace Stock Exchange swindle.

mrs. cheveley. A speculation, Sir Robert! A brilliant, daring speculation.

sir robert chiltern. Believe me, Mrs. Cheveley, it is a swindle. Let us call things by their proper names. It makes matters simpler. We have all the information about it at the Foreign Office. In fact, I sent out a special Commission to inquire into the

matter privately, and they report that the works are hardly begun, and as for the money already subscribed, no one seems to know what has become of it. The whole thing is a second Panama, and with not a quarter of the chance of success that miserable affair ever had. I hope you have not invested in it. I am sure you are far too clever to have done that.

mrs. cheveley. I have invested very largely in it.

sir robert chiltern. Who could have advised you to do such a foolish thing?

mrs. cheveley. Your old friend – and mine.

sir robert chiltern. Who?

mrs. cheveley. Baron Arnheim.

sir robert chiltern. [*Frowning.*] Ah! yes. I remember hearing, at the time of his death, that he had been mixed up in the whole affair.

mrs. cheveley. It was his last romance. His last but one, to do him justice.

sir robert chiltern. [*Rising.*] But you have not seen my Corots yet. They are in the music-room. Corots seem to go with music, don't they? May I show them to you?

mrs. cheveley. [*Shaking her head.*] I am not in a mood to-night for silver twilights, or rose-pink dawns. I want to talk business. [*Motions to him with her fan to sit down again beside her.*]

sir robert chiltern. I fear I have no advice to give you, Mrs. Cheveley, except to interest yourself in something less

dangerous. The success of the Canal depends, of course, on the attitude of England, and I am going to lay the report of the Commissioners before the House to-morrow night.

mrs. cheveley. That you must not do. In your own interests, Sir Robert, to say nothing of mine, you must not do that.

sir robert chiltern. [*Looking at her in wonder.*] In my own interests? My dear Mrs. Cheveley, what do you mean? [*Sits down beside her.*]

mrs. cheveley. Sir Robert, I will be quite frank with you. I want you to withdraw the report that you had intended to lay before the House, on the ground that you have reasons to believe that the Commissioners have been prejudiced or misinformed, or something. Then I want you to say a few words to the effect that the Government is going to reconsider the question, and that you have reason to believe that the Canal, if completed, will be of great international value. You know the sort of things ministers say in cases of this kind. A few ordinary platitudes will do. In modern life nothing produces such an effect as a good platitude. It makes the whole world kin. Will you do that for me?

sir robert chiltern. Mrs. Cheveley, you cannot be serious in making me such a proposition!

mrs. cheveley. I am quite serious.

sir robert chiltern. [*Coldly.*] Pray allow me to believe that you are not.

mrs. cheveley. [*Speaking with great deliberation and emphasis.*] Ah! but I am. And if you do what I ask you, I.. will

pay you very handsomely!

sir robert chiltern. Pay me!

mrs. cheveley. Yes.

sir robert chiltern. I am afraid I don't quite understand what you mean.

mrs. cheveley. [*Leaning back on the sofa and looking at him.*] How very disappointing! And I have come all the way from Vienna in order that you should thoroughly understand me.

sir robert chiltern. I fear I don't.

mrs. cheveley. [*In her most nonchalant manner.*] My dear Sir Robert, you are a man of the world, and you have your price, I suppose. Everybody has nowadays. The drawback is that most people are so dreadfully expensive. I know I am. I hope you will be more reasonable in your terms.

sir robert chiltern. [*Rises indignantly.*] If you will allow me, I will call your carriage for you. You have lived so long abroad, Mrs. Cheveley, that you seem to be unable to realise that you are talking to an English gentleman.

mrs. cheveley. [*Detains him by touching his arm with her fan, and keeping it there while she is talking.*] I realise that I am talking to a man who laid the foundation of his fortune by selling to a Stock Exchange speculator a Cabinet secret.

sir robert chiltern. [*Biting his lip.*] What do you mean?

mrs. cheveley. [*Rising and facing him.*] I mean that I know the real origin of your wealth and your career, and I have got your letter, too.

sir robert chiltern. What letter?

mrs. cheveley. [*Contemptuously.*] The letter you wrote to Baron Arnheim, when you were Lord Radley's secretary, telling the Baron to buy Suez Canal shares – a letter written three days before the Government announced its own purchase.

sir robert chiltern. [*Hoarsely.*] It is not true.

mrs. cheveley. You thought that letter had been destroyed. How foolish of you! It is in my possession.

sir robert chiltern. The affair to which you allude was no more than a speculation. The House of Commons had not yet passed the bill; it might have been rejected.

mrs. cheveley. It was a swindle, Sir Robert. Let us call things by their proper names. It makes everything simpler. And now I am going to sell you that letter, and the price I ask for it is your public support of the Argentine scheme. You made your own fortune out of one canal. You must help me and my friends to make our fortunes out of another!

sir robert chiltern. It is infamous, what you propose – infamous!

mrs. cheveley. Oh, no! This is the game of life as we all have to play it, Sir Robert, sooner or later!

sir robert chiltern. I cannot do what you ask me.

mrs. cheveley. You mean you cannot help doing it. You know you are standing on the edge of a precipice. And it is not for you to make terms. It is for you to accept them. Supposing you refuse —

sir robert chiltern. What then?

mrs. cheveley. My dear Sir Robert, what then? You are ruined, that is all! Remember to what a point your Puritanism in England has brought you. In old days nobody pretended to be a bit better than his neighbours. In fact, to be a bit better than one's neighbour was considered excessively vulgar and middle-class. Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, every one has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues – and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins – one after the other. Not a year passes in England without somebody disappearing. Scandals used to lend charm, or at least interest, to a man – now they crush him. And yours is a very nasty scandal. You couldn't survive it. If it were known that as a young man, secretary to a great and important minister, you sold a Cabinet secret for a large sum of money, and that that was the origin of your wealth and career, you would be hounded out of public life, you would disappear completely. And after all, Sir Robert, why should you sacrifice your entire future rather than deal diplomatically with your enemy? For the moment I am your enemy. I admit it! And I am much stronger than you are. The big battalions are on my side. You have a splendid position, but it is your splendid position that makes you so vulnerable. You can't defend it! And I am in attack. Of course I have not talked morality to you. You must admit in fairness that I have spared you that. Years ago you did a clever, unscrupulous thing; it turned out a great success. You owe to it your fortune and position. And

now you have got to pay for it. Sooner or later we have all to pay for what we do. You have to pay now. Before I leave you to-night, you have got to promise me to suppress your report, and to speak in the House in favour of this scheme.

sir robert chiltern. What you ask is impossible.

mrs. cheveley. You must make it possible. You are going to make it possible. Sir Robert, you know what your English newspapers are like. Suppose that when I leave this house I drive down to some newspaper office, and give them this scandal and the proofs of it! Think of their loathsome joy, of the delight they would have in dragging you down, of the mud and mire they would plunge you in. Think of the hypocrite with his greasy smile penning his leading article, and arranging the foulness of the public placard.

sir robert chiltern. Stop! You want me to withdraw the report and to make a short speech stating that I believe there are possibilities in the scheme?

mrs. cheveley. [*Sitting down on the sofa.*] Those are my terms.

sir robert chiltern. [*In a low voice.*] I will give you any sum of money you want.

mrs. cheveley. Even you are not rich enough, Sir Robert, to buy back your past. No man is.

sir robert chiltern. I will not do what you ask me. I will not.

mrs. cheveley. You have to. If you don't.. [*Rises from the sofa.*]

sir robert chiltern. [*Bewildered and unnerved.*] Wait a

moment! What did you propose? You said that you would give me back my letter, didn't you?

mrs. cheveley. Yes. That is agreed. I will be in the Ladies' Gallery to-morrow night at half-past eleven. If by that time – and you will have had heaps of opportunity – you have made an announcement to the House in the terms I wish, I shall hand you back your letter with the prettiest thanks, and the best, or at any rate the most suitable, compliment I can think of. I intend to play quite fairly with you. One should always play fairly.. when one has the winning cards. The Baron taught me that.. amongst other things.

sir robert chiltern. You must let me have time to consider your proposal.

mrs. cheveley. No; you must settle now!

sir robert chiltern. Give me a week – three days!

mrs. cheveley. Impossible! I have got to telegraph to Vienna to-night.

sir robert chiltern. My God! what brought you into my life?

mrs. cheveley. Circumstances. [*Moves towards the door.*]

sir robert chiltern. Don't go. I consent. The report shall be withdrawn. I will arrange for a question to be put to me on the subject.

mrs. cheveley. Thank you. I knew we should come to an amicable agreement. I understood your nature from the first. I analysed you, though you did not adore me. And now you can get my carriage for me, Sir Robert. I see the people coming up

from supper, and Englishmen always get romantic after a meal, and that bores me dreadfully. [*Exit sir robert chiltern.*]

[*Enter Guests, lady chiltern, lady markby, lord caversham, lady basildon, mrs. marchmont, vicomte de nanjac, mr. montford.*]

lady markby. Well, dear Mrs. Cheveley, I hope you have enjoyed yourself. Sir Robert is very entertaining, is he not?

mrs. cheveley. Most entertaining! I have enjoyed my talk with him immensely.

lady markby. He has had a very interesting and brilliant career. And he has married a most admirable wife. Lady Chiltern is a woman of the very highest principles, I am glad to say. I am a little too old now, myself, to trouble about setting a good example, but I always admire people who do. And Lady Chiltern has a very ennobling effect on life, though her dinner-parties are rather dull sometimes. But one can't have everything, can one? And now I must go, dear. Shall I call for you to-morrow?

mrs. cheveley. Thanks.

lady markby. We might drive in the Park at five. Everything looks so fresh in the Park now!

mrs. cheveley. Except the people!

lady markby. Perhaps the people are a little jaded. I have often observed that the Season as it goes on produces a kind of softening of the brain. However, I think anything is better than high intellectual pressure. That is the most unbecoming thing there is. It makes the noses of the young girls so particularly

large. And there is nothing so difficult to marry as a large nose; men don't like them. Good-night, dear! [*To lady chiltern.*] Good-night, Gertrude! [*Goes out on lord caversham's arm.*]

mrs. cheveley. What a charming house you have, Lady Chiltern! I have spent a delightful evening. It has been so interesting getting to know your husband.

lady chiltern. Why did you wish to meet my husband, Mrs. Cheveley?

mrs. cheveley. Oh, I will tell you. I wanted to interest him in this Argentine Canal scheme, of which I dare say you have heard. And I found him most susceptible, – susceptible to reason, I mean. A rare thing in a man. I converted him in ten minutes. He is going to make a speech in the House to-morrow night in favour of the idea. We must go to the Ladies' Gallery and hear him! It will be a great occasion!

lady chiltern. There must be some mistake. That scheme could never have my husband's support.

mrs. cheveley. Oh, I assure you it's all settled. I don't regret my tedious journey from Vienna now. It has been a great success. But, of course, for the next twenty-four hours the whole thing is a dead secret.

lady chiltern. [*Gently.*] A secret? Between whom?

mrs. cheveley. [*With a flash of amusement in her eyes.*] Between your husband and myself.

sir robert chiltern. [*Entering.*] Your carriage is here, Mrs. Cheveley!

mrs. cheveley. Thanks! Good evening, Lady Chiltern! Good-night, Lord Goring! I am at Claridge's. Don't you think you might leave a card?

lord goring. If you wish it, Mrs. Cheveley!

mrs. cheveley. Oh, don't be so solemn about it, or I shall be obliged to leave a card on you. In England I suppose that would hardly be considered en règle. Abroad, we are more civilised. Will you see me down, Sir Robert? Now that we have both the same interests at heart we shall be great friends, I hope!

[Sails out on sir robert chiltern's arm. lady chiltern goes to the top of the staircase and looks down at them as they descend. Her expression is troubled. After a little time she is joined by some of the guests, and passes with them into another reception-room.]

mabel chiltern. What a horrid woman!

lord goring. You should go to bed, Miss Mabel.

mabel chiltern. Lord Goring!

lord goring. My father told me to go to bed an hour ago. I don't see why I shouldn't give you the same advice. I always pass on good advice. It is the only thing to do with it. It is never of any use to oneself.

mabel chiltern. Lord Goring, you are always ordering me out of the room. I think it most courageous of you. Especially as I am not going to bed for hours. *[Goes over to the sofa.]* You can come and sit down if you like, and talk about anything in the world, except the Royal Academy, Mrs. Cheveley, or novels

in Scotch dialect. They are not improving subjects. [*Catches sight of something that is lying on the sofa half hidden by the cushion.*] What is this? Some one has dropped a diamond brooch! Quite beautiful, isn't it? [*Shows it to him.*] I wish it was mine, but Gertrude won't let me wear anything but pearls, and I am thoroughly sick of pearls. They make one look so plain, so good and so intellectual. I wonder whom the brooch belongs to.

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