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A Play

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AN IDEAL HUSBAND

A PLAY

BY

OSCAR WILDE

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METHUEN & CO. LTD.

36 ESSEX STREET W.C.

LONDON

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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\_.

THEATRE ROYAL, HAYMARKET

\_Sole Lessee\_: \_Mr. Herbert Beerbohm Tree\_

\_Managers\_: \_Mr. Lewis Waller and Mr. H. H. Morell\_

\_January\_ 3\_rd\_, 1895

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.

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.

LORD GORING. I wonder who dropped it.

MABEL CHILTERN. It is a beautiful brooch.

LORD GORING. It is a handsome bracelet.

MABEL CHILTERN. It isn’t a bracelet. It’s a brooch.

LORD GORING. It can be used as a bracelet. [\_Takes it from her\_, \_and\_,

\_pulling out a green letter-case\_, \_puts the ornament carefully in it\_,

\_and replaces the whole thing in his breast-pocket with the most perfect

sang froid\_.]

MABEL CHILTERN. What are you doing?

LORD GORING. Miss Mabel, I am going to make a rather strange request to

you.

MABEL CHILTERN. [\_Eagerly\_.] Oh, pray do! I have been waiting for it

all the evening.

LORD GORING. [\_Is a little taken aback\_, \_but recovers himself\_.] Don’t

mention to anybody that I have taken charge of this brooch. Should any

one write and claim it, let me know at once.

MABEL CHILTERN. That is a strange request.

LORD GORING. Well, you see I gave this brooch to somebody once, years

ago.

MABEL CHILTERN. You did?

LORD GORING. Yes.

[LADY CHILTERN \_enters alone\_. \_The other guests have gone\_.]

MABEL CHILTERN. Then I shall certainly bid you good-night. Good-night,

Gertrude! [\_Exit\_.]

LADY CHILTERN. Good-night, dear! [\_To\_ LORD GORING.] You saw whom Lady

Markby brought here to-night?

LORD GORING. Yes. It was an unpleasant surprise. What did she come

here for?

LADY CHILTERN. Apparently to try and lure Robert to uphold some

fraudulent scheme in which she is interested. The Argentine Canal, in

fact.

LORD GORING. She has mistaken her man, hasn’t she?

LADY CHILTERN. She is incapable of understanding an upright nature like

my husband’s!

LORD GORING. Yes. I should fancy she came to grief if she tried to get

Robert into her toils. It is extraordinary what astounding mistakes

clever women make.

LADY CHILTERN. I don’t call women of that kind clever. I call them

stupid!

LORD GORING. Same thing often. Good-night, Lady Chiltern!

LADY CHILTERN. Good-night!

[\_Enter\_ SIR ROBERT CHILTERN.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. My dear Arthur, you are not going? Do stop a

little!

LORD GORING. Afraid I can’t, thanks. I have promised to look in at the

Hartlocks’. I believe they have got a mauve Hungarian band that plays

mauve Hungarian music. See you soon. Good-bye!

[\_Exit\_]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. How beautiful you look to-night, Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN. Robert, it is not true, is it? You are not going to lend

your support to this Argentine speculation? You couldn’t!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Starting\_.] Who told you I intended to do so?

LADY CHILTERN. That woman who has just gone out, Mrs. Cheveley, as she

calls herself now. She seemed to taunt me with it. Robert, I know this

woman. You don’t. We were at school together. She was untruthful,

dishonest, an evil influence on every one whose trust or friendship she

could win. I hated, I despised her. She stole things, she was a thief.

She was sent away for being a thief. Why do you let her influence you?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Gertrude, what you tell me may be true, but it

happened many years ago. It is best forgotten! Mrs. Cheveley may have

changed since then. No one should be entirely judged by their past.

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Sadly\_.] One’s past is what one is. It is the only

way by which people should be judged.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. That is a hard saying, Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN. It is a true saying, Robert. And what did she mean by

boasting that she had got you to lend your support, your name, to a thing

I have heard you describe as the most dishonest and fraudulent scheme

there has ever been in political life?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Biting his lip\_.] I was mistaken in the view I

took. We all may make mistakes.

LADY CHILTERN. But you told me yesterday that you had received the

report from the Commission, and that it entirely condemned the whole

thing.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Walking up and down\_.] I have reasons now to

believe that the Commission was prejudiced, or, at any rate, misinformed.

Besides, Gertrude, public and private life are different things. They

have different laws, and move on different lines.

LADY CHILTERN. They should both represent man at his highest. I see no

difference between them.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Stopping\_.] In the present case, on a matter of

practical politics, I have changed my mind. That is all.

LADY CHILTERN. All!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Sternly\_.] Yes!

LADY CHILTERN. Robert! Oh! it is horrible that I should have to ask you

such a question—Robert, are you telling me the whole truth?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Why do you ask me such a question?

LADY CHILTERN. [\_After a pause\_.] Why do you not answer it?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Sitting down\_.] Gertrude, truth is a very

complex thing, and politics is a very complex business. There are wheels

within wheels. One may be under certain obligations to people that one

must pay. Sooner or later in political life one has to compromise.

Every one does.

LADY CHILTERN. Compromise? Robert, why do you talk so differently

to-night from the way I have always heard you talk? Why are you changed?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I am not changed. But circumstances alter things.

LADY CHILTERN. Circumstances should never alter principles!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. But if I told you—

LADY CHILTERN. What?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. That it was necessary, vitally necessary?

LADY CHILTERN. It can never be necessary to do what is not honourable.

Or if it be necessary, then what is it that I have loved! But it is not,

Robert; tell me it is not. Why should it be? What gain would you get?

Money? We have no need of that! And money that comes from a tainted

source is a degradation. Power? But power is nothing in itself. It is

power to do good that is fine—that, and that only. What is it, then?

Robert, tell me why you are going to do this dishonourable thing!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Gertrude, you have no right to use that word. I

told you it was a question of rational compromise. It is no more than

that.

LADY CHILTERN. Robert, that is all very well for other men, for men who

treat life simply as a sordid speculation; but not for you, Robert, not

for you. You are different. All your life you have stood apart from

others. You have never let the world soil you. To the world, as to

myself, you have been an ideal always. Oh! be that ideal still. That

great inheritance throw not away—that tower of ivory do not destroy.

Robert, men can love what is beneath them—things unworthy, stained,

dishonoured. We women worship when we love; and when we lose our

worship, we lose everything. Oh! don’t kill my love for you, don’t kill

that!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN. I know that there are men with horrible secrets in their

lives—men who have done some shameful thing, and who in some critical

moment have to pay for it, by doing some other act of shame—oh! don’t

tell me you are such as they are! Robert, is there in your life any

secret dishonour or disgrace? Tell me, tell me at once, that—

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. That what?

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Speaking very slowly\_.] That our lives may drift

apart.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Drift apart?

LADY CHILTERN. That they may be entirely separate. It would be better

for us both.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Gertrude, there is nothing in my past life that you

might not know.

LADY CHILTERN. I was sure of it, Robert, I was sure of it. But why did

you say those dreadful things, things so unlike your real self? Don’t

let us ever talk about the subject again. You will write, won’t you, to

Mrs. Cheveley, and tell her that you cannot support this scandalous

scheme of hers? If you have given her any promise you must take it back,

that is all!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Must I write and tell her that?

LADY CHILTERN. Surely, Robert! What else is there to do?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I might see her personally. It would be better.

LADY CHILTERN. You must never see her again, Robert. She is not a woman

you should ever speak to. She is not worthy to talk to a man like you.

No; you must write to her at once, now, this moment, and let your letter

show her that your decision is quite irrevocable!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Write this moment!

LADY CHILTERN. Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. But it is so late. It is close on twelve.

LADY CHILTERN. That makes no matter. She must know at once that she has

been mistaken in you—and that you are not a man to do anything base or

underhand or dishonourable. Write here, Robert. Write that you decline

to support this scheme of hers, as you hold it to be a dishonest scheme.

Yes—write the word dishonest. She knows what that word means. [SIR

ROBERT CHILTERN \_sits down and writes a letter\_. \_His wife takes it up

and reads it\_.] Yes; that will do. [\_Rings bell\_.] And now the

envelope. [\_He writes the envelope slowly\_. \_Enter\_ MASON.] Have this

letter sent at once to Claridge’s Hotel. There is no answer. [\_Exit\_

MASON. LADY CHILTERN \_kneels down beside her husband\_, \_and puts her

arms around him\_.] Robert, love gives one an instinct to things. I feel

to-night that I have saved you from something that might have been a

danger to you, from something that might have made men honour you less

than they do. I don’t think you realise sufficiently, Robert, that you

have brought into the political life of our time a nobler atmosphere, a

finer attitude towards life, a freer air of purer aims and higher

ideals—I know it, and for that I love you, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Oh, love me always, Gertrude, love me always!

LADY CHILTERN. I will love you always, because you will always be worthy

of love. We needs must love the highest when we see it! [\_Kisses him

and rises and goes out\_.]

[SIR ROBERT CHILTERN \_walks up and down for a moment\_; \_then sits down

and buries his face in his hands\_. \_The Servant enters and begins

pulling out the lights\_. SIR ROBERT CHILTERN \_looks up\_.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Put out the lights, Mason, put out the lights!

[\_The Servant puts out the lights\_. \_The room becomes almost dark\_.

\_The only light there is comes from the great chandelier that hangs over

the staircase and illumines the tapestry of the Triumph of Love\_.]

ACT DROP

SECOND ACT

SCENE

\_Morning-room at Sir Robert Chiltern’s house\_.

[LORD GORING, \_dressed in the height of fashion\_, \_is lounging in an

armchair\_. SIR ROBERT CHILTERN \_is standing in front of the fireplace\_.

\_He is evidently in a state of great mental excitement and distress\_.

\_As the scene progresses he paces nervously up and down the room\_.]

LORD GORING. My dear Robert, it’s a very awkward business, very awkward

indeed. You should have told your wife the whole thing. Secrets from

other people’s wives are a necessary luxury in modern life. So, at

least, I am always told at the club by people who are bald enough to know

better. But no man should have a secret from his own wife. She

invariably finds it out. Women have a wonderful instinct about things.

They can discover everything except the obvious.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Arthur, I couldn’t tell my wife. When could I have

told her? Not last night. It would have made a life-long separation

between us, and I would have lost the love of the one woman in the world

I worship, of the only woman who has ever stirred love within me. Last

night it would have been quite impossible. She would have turned from me

in horror . . . in horror and in contempt.

LORD GORING. Is Lady Chiltern as perfect as all that?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Yes; my wife is as perfect as all that.

LORD GORING. [\_Taking off his left-hand glove\_.] What a pity! I beg

your pardon, my dear fellow, I didn’t quite mean that. But if what you

tell me is true, I should like to have a serious talk about life with

Lady Chiltern.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. It would be quite useless.

LORD GORING. May I try?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Yes; but nothing could make her alter her views.

LORD GORING. Well, at the worst it would simply be a psychological

experiment.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. All such experiments are terribly dangerous.

LORD GORING. Everything is dangerous, my dear fellow. If it wasn’t so,

life wouldn’t be worth living. . . . Well, I am bound to say that I think

you should have told her years ago.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. When? When we were engaged? Do you think she

would have married me if she had known that the origin of my fortune is

such as it is, the basis of my career such as it is, and that I had done

a thing that I suppose most men would call shameful and dishonourable?

LORD GORING. [\_Slowly\_.] Yes; most men would call it ugly names. There

is no doubt of that.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Bitterly\_.] Men who every day do something of

the same kind themselves. Men who, each one of them, have worse secrets

in their own lives.

LORD GORING. That is the reason they are so pleased to find out other

people’s secrets. It distracts public attention from their own.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. And, after all, whom did I wrong by what I did? No

one.

LORD GORING. [\_Looking at him steadily\_.] Except yourself, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_After a pause\_.] Of course I had private

information about a certain transaction contemplated by the Government of

the day, and I acted on it. Private information is practically the

source of every large modern fortune.

LORD GORING. [\_Tapping his boot with his cane\_.] And public scandal

invariably the result.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Pacing up and down the room\_.] Arthur, do you

think that what I did nearly eighteen years ago should be brought up

against me now? Do you think it fair that a man’s whole career should be

ruined for a fault done in one’s boyhood almost? I was twenty-two at the

time, and I had the double misfortune of being well-born and poor, two

unforgiveable things nowadays. Is it fair that the folly, the sin of

one’s youth, if men choose to call it a sin, should wreck a life like

mine, should place me in the pillory, should shatter all that I have

worked for, all that I have built up. Is it fair, Arthur?

LORD GORING. Life is never fair, Robert. And perhaps it is a good thing

for most of us that it is not.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Every man of ambition has to fight his century with

its own weapons. What this century worships is wealth. The God of this

century is wealth. To succeed one must have wealth. At all costs one

must have wealth.

LORD GORING. You underrate yourself, Robert. Believe me, without wealth

you could have succeeded just as well.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. When I was old, perhaps. When I had lost my

passion for power, or could not use it. When I was tired, worn out,

disappointed. I wanted my success when I was young. Youth is the time

for success. I couldn’t wait.

LORD GORING. Well, you certainly have had your success while you are

still young. No one in our day has had such a brilliant success.

Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs at the age of forty—that’s good

enough for any one, I should think.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. And if it is all taken away from me now? If I lose

everything over a horrible scandal? If I am hounded from public life?

LORD GORING. Robert, how could you have sold yourself for money?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Excitedly\_.] I did not sell myself for money. I

bought success at a great price. That is all.

LORD GORING. [\_Gravely\_.] Yes; you certainly paid a great price for it.

But what first made you think of doing such a thing?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Baron Arnheim.

LORD GORING. Damned scoundrel!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. No; he was a man of a most subtle and refined

intellect. A man of culture, charm, and distinction. One of the most

intellectual men I ever met.

LORD GORING. Ah! I prefer a gentlemanly fool any day. There is more to

be said for stupidity than people imagine. Personally I have a great

admiration for stupidity. It is a sort of fellow-feeling, I suppose.

But how did he do it? Tell me the whole thing.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Throws himself into an armchair by the

writing-table\_.] One night after dinner at Lord Radley’s the Baron began

talking about success in modern life as something that one could reduce

to an absolutely definite science. With that wonderfully fascinating

quiet voice of his he expounded to us the most terrible of all

philosophies, the philosophy of power, preached to us the most marvellous

of all gospels, the gospel of gold. I think he saw the effect he had

produced on me, for some days afterwards he wrote and asked me to come

and see him. He was living then in Park Lane, in the house Lord Woolcomb

has now. I remember so well how, with a strange smile on his pale,

curved lips, he led me through his wonderful picture gallery, showed me

his tapestries, his enamels, his jewels, his carved ivories, made me

wonder at the strange loveliness of the luxury in which he lived; and

then told me that luxury was nothing but a background, a painted scene in

a play, and that power, power over other men, power over the world, was

the one thing worth having, the one supreme pleasure worth knowing, the

one joy one never tired of, and that in our century only the rich

possessed it.

LORD GORING. [\_With great deliberation\_.] A thoroughly shallow creed.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Rising\_.] I didn’t think so then. I don’t think

so now. Wealth has given me enormous power. It gave me at the very

outset of my life freedom, and freedom is everything. You have never

been poor, and never known what ambition is. You cannot understand what

a wonderful chance the Baron gave me. Such a chance as few men get.

LORD GORING. Fortunately for them, if one is to judge by results. But

tell me definitely, how did the Baron finally persuade you to—well, to do

what you did?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. When I was going away he said to me that if I ever

could give him any private information of real value he would make me a

very rich man. I was dazed at the prospect he held out to me, and my

ambition and my desire for power were at that time boundless. Six weeks

later certain private documents passed through my hands.

LORD GORING. [\_Keeping his eyes steadily fixed on the carpet\_.] State

documents?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Yes. [LORD GORING \_sighs\_, \_then passes his hand

across his forehead and looks up\_.]

LORD GORING. I had no idea that you, of all men in the world, could have

been so weak, Robert, as to yield to such a temptation as Baron Arnheim

held out to you.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Weak? Oh, I am sick of hearing that phrase. Sick

of using it about others. Weak? Do you really think, Arthur, that it is

weakness that yields to temptation? I tell you that there are terrible

temptations that it requires strength, strength and courage, to yield to.

To stake all one’s life on a single moment, to risk everything on one

throw, whether the stake be power or pleasure, I care not—there is no

weakness in that. There is a horrible, a terrible courage. I had that

courage. I sat down the same afternoon and wrote Baron Arnheim the

letter this woman now holds. He made three-quarters of a million over

the transaction.

LORD GORING. And you?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I received from the Baron £110,000.

LORD GORING. You were worth more, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. No; that money gave me exactly what I wanted, power

over others. I went into the House immediately. The Baron advised me in

finance from time to time. Before five years I had almost trebled my

fortune. Since then everything that I have touched has turned out a

success. In all things connected with money I have had a luck so

extraordinary that sometimes it has made me almost afraid. I remember

having read somewhere, in some strange book, that when the gods wish to

punish us they answer our prayers.

LORD GORING. But tell me, Robert, did you never suffer any regret for

what you had done?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. No. I felt that I had fought the century with its

own weapons, and won.

LORD GORING. [\_Sadly\_.] You thought you had won.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I thought so. [\_After a long pause\_.] Arthur, do

you despise me for what I have told you?

LORD GORING. [\_With deep feeling in his voice\_.] I am very sorry for

you, Robert, very sorry indeed.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I don’t say that I suffered any remorse. I didn’t.

Not remorse in the ordinary, rather silly sense of the word. But I have

paid conscience money many times. I had a wild hope that I might disarm

destiny. The sum Baron Arnheim gave me I have distributed twice over in

public charities since then.

LORD GORING. [\_Looking up\_.] In public charities? Dear me! what a lot

of harm you must have done, Robert!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Oh, don’t say that, Arthur; don’t talk like that!

LORD GORING. Never mind what I say, Robert! I am always saying what I

shouldn’t say. In fact, I usually say what I really think. A great

mistake nowadays. It makes one so liable to be misunderstood. As

regards this dreadful business, I will help you in whatever way I can.

Of course you know that.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Thank you, Arthur, thank you. But what is to be

done? What can be done?

LORD GORING. [\_Leaning back with his hands in his pockets\_.] Well, the

English can’t stand a man who is always saying he is in the right, but

they are very fond of a man who admits that he has been in the wrong. It

is one of the best things in them. However, in your case, Robert, a

confession would not do. The money, if you will allow me to say so, is

. . . awkward. Besides, if you did make a clean breast of the whole

affair, you would never be able to talk morality again. And in England a

man who can’t talk morality twice a week to a large, popular, immoral

audience is quite over as a serious politician. There would be nothing

left for him as a profession except Botany or the Church. A confession

would be of no use. It would ruin you.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. It would ruin me. Arthur, the only thing for me to

do now is to fight the thing out.

LORD GORING. [\_Rising from his chair\_.] I was waiting for you to say

that, Robert. It is the only thing to do now. And you must begin by

telling your wife the whole story.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. That I will not do.

LORD GORING. Robert, believe me, you are wrong.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I couldn’t do it. It would kill her love for me.

And now about this woman, this Mrs. Cheveley. How can I defend myself

against her? You knew her before, Arthur, apparently.

LORD GORING. Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Did you know her well?

LORD GORING. [\_Arranging his necktie\_.] So little that I got engaged to

be married to her once, when I was staying at the Tenbys’. The affair

lasted for three days . . . nearly.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Why was it broken off?

LORD GORING. [\_Airily\_.] Oh, I forget. At least, it makes no matter.

By the way, have you tried her with money? She used to be confoundedly

fond of money.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I offered her any sum she wanted. She refused.

LORD GORING. Then the marvellous gospel of gold breaks down sometimes.

The rich can’t do everything, after all.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Not everything. I suppose you are right. Arthur,

I feel that public disgrace is in store for me. I feel certain of it. I

never knew what terror was before. I know it now. It is as if a hand of

ice were laid upon one’s heart. It is as if one’s heart were beating

itself to death in some empty hollow.

LORD GORING. [\_Striking the table\_.] Robert, you must fight her. You

must fight her.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. But how?

LORD GORING. I can’t tell you how at present. I have not the smallest

idea. But every one has some weak point. There is some flaw in each one

of us. [\_Strolls to the fireplace and looks at himself in the glass\_.]

My father tells me that even I have faults. Perhaps I have. I don’t

know.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. In defending myself against Mrs. Cheveley, I have a

right to use any weapon I can find, have I not?

LORD GORING. [\_Still looking in the glass\_.] In your place I don’t

think I should have the smallest scruple in doing so. She is thoroughly

well able to take care of herself.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Sits down at the table and takes a pen in his

hand\_.] Well, I shall send a cipher telegram to the Embassy at Vienna,

to inquire if there is anything known against her. There may be some

secret scandal she might be afraid of.

LORD GORING. [\_Settling his buttonhole\_.] Oh, I should fancy Mrs.

Cheveley is one of those very modern women of our time who find a new

scandal as becoming as a new bonnet, and air them both in the Park every

afternoon at five-thirty. I am sure she adores scandals, and that the

sorrow of her life at present is that she can’t manage to have enough of

them.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Writing\_.] Why do you say that?

LORD GORING. [\_Turning round\_.] Well, she wore far too much rouge last

night, and not quite enough clothes. That is always a sign of despair in

a woman.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Striking a bell\_.] But it is worth while my

wiring to Vienna, is it not?

LORD GORING. It is always worth while asking a question, though it is

not always worth while answering one.

[\_Enter\_ MASON.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Is Mr. Trafford in his room?

MASON. Yes, Sir Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Puts what he has written into an envelope\_,

\_which he then carefully closes\_.] Tell him to have this sent off in

cipher at once. There must not be a moment’s delay.

MASON. Yes, Sir Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Oh! just give that back to me again.

[\_Writes something on the envelope\_. MASON \_then goes out with the

letter\_.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. She must have had some curious hold over Baron

Arnheim. I wonder what it was.

LORD GORING. [\_Smiling\_.] I wonder.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I will fight her to the death, as long as my wife

knows nothing.

LORD GORING. [\_Strongly\_.] Oh, fight in any case—in any case.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_With a gesture of despair\_.] If my wife found

out, there would be little left to fight for. Well, as soon as I hear

from Vienna, I shall let you know the result. It is a chance, just a

chance, but I believe in it. And as I fought the age with its own

weapons, I will fight her with her weapons. It is only fair, and she

looks like a woman with a past, doesn’t she?

LORD GORING. Most pretty women do. But there is a fashion in pasts just

as there is a fashion in frocks. Perhaps Mrs. Cheveley’s past is merely

a slightly décolleté one, and they are excessively popular nowadays.

Besides, my dear Robert, I should not build too high hopes on frightening

Mrs. Cheveley. I should not fancy Mrs. Cheveley is a woman who would be

easily frightened. She has survived all her creditors, and she shows

wonderful presence of mind.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Oh! I live on hopes now. I clutch at every chance.

I feel like a man on a ship that is sinking. The water is round my feet,

and the very air is bitter with storm. Hush! I hear my wife’s voice.

[\_Enter\_ LADY CHILTERN \_in walking dress\_.]

LADY CHILTERN. Good afternoon, Lord Goring!

LORD GORING. Good afternoon, Lady Chiltern! Have you been in the Park?

LADY CHILTERN. No; I have just come from the Woman’s Liberal

Association, where, by the way, Robert, your name was received with loud

applause, and now I have come in to have my tea. [\_To\_ LORD GORING.]

You will wait and have some tea, won’t you?

LORD GORING. I’ll wait for a short time, thanks.

LADY CHILTERN. I will be back in a moment. I am only going to take my

hat off.

LORD GORING. [\_In his most earnest manner\_.] Oh! please don’t. It is

so pretty. One of the prettiest hats I ever saw. I hope the Woman’s

Liberal Association received it with loud applause.

LADY CHILTERN. [\_With a smile\_.] We have much more important work to do

than look at each other’s bonnets, Lord Goring.

LORD GORING. Really? What sort of work?

LADY CHILTERN. Oh! dull, useful, delightful things, Factory Acts, Female

Inspectors, the Eight Hours’ Bill, the Parliamentary Franchise. . . .

Everything, in fact, that you would find thoroughly uninteresting.

LORD GORING. And never bonnets?

LADY CHILTERN. [\_With mock indignation\_.] Never bonnets, never!

[LADY CHILTERN \_goes out through the door leading to her boudoir\_.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Takes\_ LORD GORING’S \_hand\_.] You have been a

good friend to me, Arthur, a thoroughly good friend.

LORD GORING. I don’t know that I have been able to do much for you,

Robert, as yet. In fact, I have not been able to do anything for you, as

far as I can see. I am thoroughly disappointed with myself.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. You have enabled me to tell you the truth. That is

something. The truth has always stifled me.

LORD GORING. Ah! the truth is a thing I get rid of as soon as possible!

Bad habit, by the way. Makes one very unpopular at the club . . . with

the older members. They call it being conceited. Perhaps it is.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I would to God that I had been able to tell the

truth . . . to live the truth. Ah! that is the great thing in life, to

live the truth. [\_Sighs\_, \_and goes towards the door\_.] I’ll see you

soon again, Arthur, shan’t I?

LORD GORING. Certainly. Whenever you like. I’m going to look in at the

Bachelors’ Ball to-night, unless I find something better to do. But I’ll

come round to-morrow morning. If you should want me to-night by any

chance, send round a note to Curzon Street.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Thank you.

[\_As he reaches the door\_, LADY CHILTERN \_enters from her boudoir\_.]

LADY CHILTERN. You are not going, Robert?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I have some letters to write, dear.

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Going to him\_.] You work too hard, Robert. You seem

never to think of yourself, and you are looking so tired.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. It is nothing, dear, nothing.

[\_He kisses her and goes out\_.]

LADY CHILTERN. [\_To\_ LORD GORING.] Do sit down. I am so glad you have

called. I want to talk to you about . . . well, not about bonnets, or

the Woman’s Liberal Association. You take far too much interest in the

first subject, and not nearly enough in the second.

LORD GORING. You want to talk to me about Mrs. Cheveley?

LADY CHILTERN. Yes. You have guessed it. After you left last night I

found out that what she had said was really true. Of course I made

Robert write her a letter at once, withdrawing his promise.

LORD GORING. So he gave me to understand.

LADY CHILTERN. To have kept it would have been the first stain on a

career that has been stainless always. Robert must be above reproach.

He is not like other men. He cannot afford to do what other men do.

[\_She looks at\_ LORD GORING, \_who remains silent\_.] Don’t you agree with

me? You are Robert’s greatest friend. You are our greatest friend, Lord

Goring. No one, except myself, knows Robert better than you do. He has

no secrets from me, and I don’t think he has any from you.

LORD GORING. He certainly has no secrets from me. At least I don’t

think so.

LADY CHILTERN. Then am I not right in my estimate of him? I know I am

right. But speak to me frankly.

LORD GORING. [\_Looking straight at her\_.] Quite frankly?

LADY CHILTERN. Surely. You have nothing to conceal, have you?

LORD GORING. Nothing. But, my dear Lady Chiltern, I think, if you will

allow me to say so, that in practical life—

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Smiling\_.] Of which you know so little, Lord Goring—

LORD GORING. Of which I know nothing by experience, though I know

something by observation. I think that in practical life there is

something about success, actual success, that is a little unscrupulous,

something about ambition that is unscrupulous always. Once a man has set

his heart and soul on getting to a certain point, if he has to climb the

crag, he climbs the crag; if he has to walk in the mire—

LADY CHILTERN. Well?

LORD GORING. He walks in the mire. Of course I am only talking

generally about life.

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Gravely\_.] I hope so. Why do you look at me so

strangely, Lord Goring?

LORD GORING. Lady Chiltern, I have sometimes thought that . . . perhaps

you are a little hard in some of your views on life. I think that . . .

often you don’t make sufficient allowances. In every nature there are

elements of weakness, or worse than weakness. Supposing, for instance,

that—that any public man, my father, or Lord Merton, or Robert, say, had,

years ago, written some foolish letter to some one . . .

LADY CHILTERN. What do you mean by a foolish letter?

LORD GORING. A letter gravely compromising one’s position. I am only

putting an imaginary case.

LADY CHILTERN. Robert is as incapable of doing a foolish thing as he is

of doing a wrong thing.

LORD GORING. [\_After a long pause\_.] Nobody is incapable of doing a

foolish thing. Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing.

LADY CHILTERN. Are you a Pessimist? What will the other dandies say?

They will all have to go into mourning.

LORD GORING. [\_Rising\_.] No, Lady Chiltern, I am not a Pessimist.

Indeed I am not sure that I quite know what Pessimism really means. All

I do know is that life cannot be understood without much charity, cannot

be lived without much charity. It is love, and not German philosophy,

that is the true explanation of this world, whatever may be the

explanation of the next. And if you are ever in trouble, Lady Chiltern,

trust me absolutely, and I will help you in every way I can. If you ever

want me, come to me for my assistance, and you shall have it. Come at

once to me.

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Looking at him in surprise\_.] Lord Goring, you are

talking quite seriously. I don’t think I ever heard you talk seriously

before.

LORD GORING. [\_Laughing\_.] You must excuse me, Lady Chiltern. It won’t

occur again, if I can help it.

LADY CHILTERN. But I like you to be serious.

[\_Enter\_ MABEL CHILTERN, \_in the most ravishing frock\_.]

MABEL CHILTERN. Dear Gertrude, don’t say such a dreadful thing to Lord

Goring. Seriousness would be very unbecoming to him. Good afternoon

Lord Goring! Pray be as trivial as you can.

LORD GORING. I should like to, Miss Mabel, but I am afraid I am . . . a

little out of practice this morning; and besides, I have to be going now.

MABEL CHILTERN. Just when I have come in! What dreadful manners you

have! I am sure you were very badly brought up.

LORD GORING. I was.

MABEL CHILTERN. I wish I had brought you up!

LORD GORING. I am so sorry you didn’t.

MABEL CHILTERN. It is too late now, I suppose?

LORD GORING. [\_Smiling\_.] I am not so sure.

MABEL CHILTERN. Will you ride to-morrow morning?

LORD GORING. Yes, at ten.

MABEL CHILTERN. Don’t forget.

LORD GORING. Of course I shan’t. By the way, Lady Chiltern, there is no

list of your guests in \_The Morning Post\_ of to-day. It has apparently

been crowded out by the County Council, or the Lambeth Conference, or

something equally boring. Could you let me have a list? I have a

particular reason for asking you.

LADY CHILTERN. I am sure Mr. Trafford will be able to give you one.

LORD GORING. Thanks, so much.

MABEL CHILTERN. Tommy is the most useful person in London.

LORD GORING [\_Turning to her\_.] And who is the most ornamental?

MABEL CHILTERN [\_Triumphantly\_.] I am.

LORD GORING. How clever of you to guess it! [\_Takes up his hat and

cane\_.] Good-bye, Lady Chiltern! You will remember what I said to you,

won’t you?

LADY CHILTERN. Yes; but I don’t know why you said it to me.

LORD GORING. I hardly know myself. Good-bye, Miss Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN [\_With a little moue of disappointment\_.] I wish you were

not going. I have had four wonderful adventures this morning; four and a

half, in fact. You might stop and listen to some of them.

LORD GORING. How very selfish of you to have four and a half! There

won’t be any left for me.

MABEL CHILTERN. I don’t want you to have any. They would not be good

for you.

LORD GORING. That is the first unkind thing you have ever said to me.

How charmingly you said it! Ten to-morrow.

MABEL CHILTERN. Sharp.

LORD GORING. Quite sharp. But don’t bring Mr. Trafford.

MABEL CHILTERN. [\_With a little toss of the head\_.] Of course I shan’t

bring Tommy Trafford. Tommy Trafford is in great disgrace.

LORD GORING. I am delighted to hear it. [\_Bows and goes out\_.]

MABEL CHILTERN. Gertrude, I wish you would speak to Tommy Trafford.

LADY CHILTERN. What has poor Mr. Trafford done this time? Robert says

he is the best secretary he has ever had.

MABEL CHILTERN. Well, Tommy has proposed to me again. Tommy really does

nothing but propose to me. He proposed to me last night in the

music-room, when I was quite unprotected, as there was an elaborate trio

going on. I didn’t dare to make the smallest repartee, I need hardly

tell you. If I had, it would have stopped the music at once. Musical

people are so absurdly unreasonable. They always want one to be

perfectly dumb at the very moment when one is longing to be absolutely

deaf. Then he proposed to me in broad daylight this morning, in front of

that dreadful statue of Achilles. Really, the things that go on in front

of that work of art are quite appalling. The police should interfere.

At luncheon I saw by the glare in his eye that he was going to propose

again, and I just managed to check him in time by assuring him that I was

a bimetallist. Fortunately I don’t know what bimetallism means. And I

don’t believe anybody else does either. But the observation crushed

Tommy for ten minutes. He looked quite shocked. And then Tommy is so

annoying in the way he proposes. If he proposed at the top of his voice,

I should not mind so much. That might produce some effect on the public.

But he does it in a horrid confidential way. When Tommy wants to be

romantic he talks to one just like a doctor. I am very fond of Tommy,

but his methods of proposing are quite out of date. I wish, Gertrude,

you would speak to him, and tell him that once a week is quite often

enough to propose to any one, and that it should always be done in a

manner that attracts some attention.

LADY CHILTERN. Dear Mabel, don’t talk like that. Besides, Robert thinks

very highly of Mr. Trafford. He believes he has a brilliant future

before him.

MABEL CHILTERN. Oh! I wouldn’t marry a man with a future before him for

anything under the sun.

LADY CHILTERN. Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN. I know, dear. You married a man with a future, didn’t

you? But then Robert was a genius, and you have a noble,

self-sacrificing character. You can stand geniuses. I have no character

at all, and Robert is the only genius I could ever bear. As a rule, I

think they are quite impossible. Geniuses talk so much, don’t they?

Such a bad habit! And they are always thinking about themselves, when I

want them to be thinking about me. I must go round now and rehearse at

Lady Basildon’s. You remember, we are having tableaux, don’t you? The

Triumph of something, I don’t know what! I hope it will be triumph of

me. Only triumph I am really interested in at present. [\_Kisses\_ LADY

CHILTERN \_and goes out\_; \_then comes running back\_.] Oh, Gertrude, do

you know who is coming to see you? That dreadful Mrs. Cheveley, in a

most lovely gown. Did you ask her?

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Rising\_.] Mrs. Cheveley! Coming to see me?

Impossible!

MABEL CHILTERN. I assure you she is coming upstairs, as large as life

and not nearly so natural.

LADY CHILTERN. You need not wait, Mabel. Remember, Lady Basildon is

expecting you.

MABEL CHILTERN. Oh! I must shake hands with Lady Markby. She is

delightful. I love being scolded by her.

[\_Enter\_ MASON.]

MASON. Lady Markby. Mrs. Cheveley.

[\_Enter\_ LADY MARKBY \_and\_ MRS. CHEVELEY.]

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Advancing to meet them\_.] Dear Lady Markby, how nice

of you to come and see me! [\_Shakes hands with her\_, \_and bows somewhat

distantly to\_ MRS. CHEVELEY.] Won’t you sit down, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY. Thanks. Isn’t that Miss Chiltern? I should like so much

to know her.

LADY CHILTERN. Mabel, Mrs. Cheveley wishes to know you.

[MABEL CHILTERN \_gives a little nod\_.]

MRS. CHEVELEY [\_Sitting down\_.] I thought your frock so charming last

night, Miss Chiltern. So simple and . . . suitable.

MABEL CHILTERN. Really? I must tell my dressmaker. It will be such a

surprise to her. Good-bye, Lady Markby!

LADY MARKBY. Going already?

MABEL CHILTERN. I am so sorry but I am obliged to. I am just off to

rehearsal. I have got to stand on my head in some tableaux.

LADY MARKBY. On your head, child? Oh! I hope not. I believe it is most

unhealthy. [\_Takes a seat on the sofa next\_ LADY CHILTERN.]

MABEL CHILTERN. But it is for an excellent charity: in aid of the

Undeserving, the only people I am really interested in. I am the

secretary, and Tommy Trafford is treasurer.

MRS. CHEVELEY. And what is Lord Goring?

MABEL CHILTERN. Oh! Lord Goring is president.

MRS. CHEVELEY. The post should suit him admirably, unless he has

deteriorated since I knew him first.

LADY MARKBY. [\_Reflecting\_.] You are remarkably modern, Mabel. A

little too modern, perhaps. Nothing is so dangerous as being too modern.

One is apt to grow old-fashioned quite suddenly. I have known many

instances of it.

MABEL CHILTERN. What a dreadful prospect!

LADY MARKBY. Ah! my dear, you need not be nervous. You will always be

as pretty as possible. That is the best fashion there is, and the only

fashion that England succeeds in setting.

MABEL CHILTERN. [\_With a curtsey\_.] Thank you so much, Lady Markby, for

England . . . and myself. [\_Goes out\_.]

LADY MARKBY. [\_Turning to\_ LADY CHILTERN.] Dear Gertrude, we just

called to know if Mrs. Cheveley’s diamond brooch has been found.

LADY CHILTERN. Here?

MRS. CHEVELEY. Yes. I missed it when I got back to Claridge’s, and I

thought I might possibly have dropped it here.

LADY CHILTERN. I have heard nothing about it. But I will send for the

butler and ask. [\_Touches the bell\_.]

MRS. CHEVELEY. Oh, pray don’t trouble, Lady Chiltern. I dare say I lost

it at the Opera, before we came on here.

LADY MARKBY. Ah yes, I suppose it must have been at the Opera. The fact

is, we all scramble and jostle so much nowadays that I wonder we have

anything at all left on us at the end of an evening. I know myself that,

when I am coming back from the Drawing Room, I always feel as if I hadn’t

a shred on me, except a small shred of decent reputation, just enough to

prevent the lower classes making painful observations through the windows

of the carriage. The fact is that our Society is terribly

over-populated. Really, some one should arrange a proper scheme of

assisted emigration. It would do a great deal of good.

MRS. CHEVELEY. I quite agree with you, Lady Markby. It is nearly six

years since I have been in London for the Season, and I must say Society

has become dreadfully mixed. One sees the oddest people everywhere.

LADY MARKBY. That is quite true, dear. But one needn’t know them. I’m

sure I don’t know half the people who come to my house. Indeed, from all

I hear, I shouldn’t like to.

[\_Enter\_ MASON.]

LADY CHILTERN. What sort of a brooch was it that you lost, Mrs.

Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY. A diamond snake-brooch with a ruby, a rather large ruby.

LADY MARKBY. I thought you said there was a sapphire on the head, dear?

MRS. CHEVELEY [\_Smiling\_.] No, lady Markby—a ruby.

LADY MARKBY. [\_Nodding her head\_.] And very becoming, I am quite sure.

LADY CHILTERN. Has a ruby and diamond brooch been found in any of the

rooms this morning, Mason?

MASON. No, my lady.

MRS. CHEVELEY. It really is of no consequence, Lady Chiltern. I am so

sorry to have put you to any inconvenience.

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Coldly\_.] Oh, it has been no inconvenience. That will

do, Mason. You can bring tea.

[\_Exit\_ MASON.]

LADY MARKBY. Well, I must say it is most annoying to lose anything. I

remember once at Bath, years ago, losing in the Pump Room an exceedingly

handsome cameo bracelet that Sir John had given me. I don’t think he has

ever given me anything since, I am sorry to say. He has sadly

degenerated. Really, this horrid House of Commons quite ruins our

husbands for us. I think the Lower House by far the greatest blow to a

happy married life that there has been since that terrible thing called

the Higher Education of Women was invented.

LADY CHILTERN. Ah! it is heresy to say that in this house, Lady Markby.

Robert is a great champion of the Higher Education of Women, and so, I am

afraid, am I.

MRS. CHEVELEY. The higher education of men is what I should like to see.

Men need it so sadly.

LADY MARKBY. They do, dear. But I am afraid such a scheme would be

quite unpractical. I don’t think man has much capacity for development.

He has got as far as he can, and that is not far, is it? With regard to

women, well, dear Gertrude, you belong to the younger generation, and I

am sure it is all right if you approve of it. In my time, of course, we

were taught not to understand anything. That was the old system, and

wonderfully interesting it was. I assure you that the amount of things I

and my poor dear sister were taught not to understand was quite

extraordinary. But modern women understand everything, I am told.

MRS. CHEVELEY. Except their husbands. That is the one thing the modern

woman never understands.

LADY MARKBY. And a very good thing too, dear, I dare say. It might

break up many a happy home if they did. Not yours, I need hardly say,

Gertrude. You have married a pattern husband. I wish I could say as

much for myself. But since Sir John has taken to attending the debates

regularly, which he never used to do in the good old days, his language

has become quite impossible. He always seems to think that he is

addressing the House, and consequently whenever he discusses the state of

the agricultural labourer, or the Welsh Church, or something quite

improper of that kind, I am obliged to send all the servants out of the

room. It is not pleasant to see one’s own butler, who has been with one

for twenty-three years, actually blushing at the side-board, and the

footmen making contortions in corners like persons in circuses. I assure

you my life will be quite ruined unless they send John at once to the

Upper House. He won’t take any interest in politics then, will he? The

House of Lords is so sensible. An assembly of gentlemen. But in his

present state, Sir John is really a great trial. Why, this morning

before breakfast was half over, he stood up on the hearthrug, put his

hands in his pockets, and appealed to the country at the top of his

voice. I left the table as soon as I had my second cup of tea, I need

hardly say. But his violent language could be heard all over the house!

I trust, Gertrude, that Sir Robert is not like that?

LADY CHILTERN. But I am very much interested in politics, Lady Markby.

I love to hear Robert talk about them.

LADY MARKBY. Well, I hope he is not as devoted to Blue Books as Sir John

is. I don’t think they can be quite improving reading for any one.

MRS. CHEVELEY [\_Languidly\_.] I have never read a Blue Book. I prefer

books . . . in yellow covers.

LADY MARKBY. [\_Genially unconscious\_.] Yellow is a gayer colour, is it

not? I used to wear yellow a good deal in my early days, and would do so

now if Sir John was not so painfully personal in his observations, and a

man on the question of dress is always ridiculous, is he not?

MRS. CHEVELEY. Oh, no! I think men are the only authorities on dress.

LADY MARKBY. Really? One wouldn’t say so from the sort of hats they

wear? would one?

[\_The butler enters\_, \_followed by the footman\_. \_Tea is set on a small

table close to\_ LADY CHILTERN.]

LADY CHILTERN. May I give you some tea, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY. Thanks. [\_The butler hands\_ MRS. CHEVELEY \_a cup of tea

on a salver\_.]

LADY CHILTERN. Some tea, Lady Markby?

LADY MARKBY. No thanks, dear. [\_The servants go out\_.] The fact is, I

have promised to go round for ten minutes to see poor Lady Brancaster,

who is in very great trouble. Her daughter, quite a well-brought-up

girl, too, has actually become engaged to be married to a curate in

Shropshire. It is very sad, very sad indeed. I can’t understand this

modern mania for curates. In my time we girls saw them, of course,

running about the place like rabbits. But we never took any notice of

them, I need hardly say. But I am told that nowadays country society is

quite honeycombed with them. I think it most irreligious. And then the

eldest son has quarrelled with his father, and it is said that when they

meet at the club Lord Brancaster always hides himself behind the money

article in \_The Times\_. However, I believe that is quite a common

occurrence nowadays and that they have to take in extra copies of \_The

Times\_ at all the clubs in St. James’s Street; there are so many sons who

won’t have anything to do with their fathers, and so many fathers who

won’t speak to their sons. I think myself, it is very much to be

regretted.

MRS. CHEVELEY. So do I. Fathers have so much to learn from their sons

nowadays.

LADY MARKBY. Really, dear? What?

MRS. CHEVELEY. The art of living. The only really Fine Art we have

produced in modern times.

LADY MARKBY. [\_Shaking her head\_.] Ah! I am afraid Lord Brancaster

knew a good deal about that. More than his poor wife ever did.

[\_Turning to\_ LADY CHILTERN.] You know Lady Brancaster, don’t you, dear?

LADY CHILTERN. Just slightly. She was staying at Langton last autumn,

when we were there.

LADY MARKBY. Well, like all stout women, she looks the very picture of

happiness, as no doubt you noticed. But there are many tragedies in her

family, besides this affair of the curate. Her own sister, Mrs. Jekyll,

had a most unhappy life; through no fault of her own, I am sorry to say.

She ultimately was so broken-hearted that she went into a convent, or on

to the operatic stage, I forget which. No; I think it was decorative

art-needlework she took up. I know she had lost all sense of pleasure in

life. [\_Rising\_.] And now, Gertrude, if you will allow me, I shall

leave Mrs. Cheveley in your charge and call back for her in a quarter of

an hour. Or perhaps, dear Mrs. Cheveley, you wouldn’t mind waiting in

the carriage while I am with Lady Brancaster. As I intend it to be a

visit of condolence, I shan’t stay long.

MRS. CHEVELEY [\_Rising\_.] I don’t mind waiting in the carriage at all,

provided there is somebody to look at one.

LADY MARKBY. Well, I hear the curate is always prowling about the house.

MRS. CHEVELEY. I am afraid I am not fond of girl friends.

LADY CHILTERN [\_Rising\_.] Oh, I hope Mrs. Cheveley will stay here a

little. I should like to have a few minutes’ conversation with her.

MRS. CHEVELEY. How very kind of you, Lady Chiltern! Believe me, nothing

would give me greater pleasure.

LADY MARKBY. Ah! no doubt you both have many pleasant reminiscences of

your schooldays to talk over together. Good-bye, dear Gertrude! Shall I

see you at Lady Bonar’s to-night? She has discovered a wonderful new

genius. He does . . . nothing at all, I believe. That is a great

comfort, is it not?

LADY CHILTERN. Robert and I are dining at home by ourselves to-night,

and I don’t think I shall go anywhere afterwards. Robert, of course,

will have to be in the House. But there is nothing interesting on.

LADY MARKBY. Dining at home by yourselves? Is that quite prudent? Ah,

I forgot, your husband is an exception. Mine is the general rule, and

nothing ages a woman so rapidly as having married the general rule.

[\_Exit\_ LADY MARKBY.]

MRS. CHEVELEY. Wonderful woman, Lady Markby, isn’t she? Talks more and

says less than anybody I ever met. She is made to be a public speaker.

Much more so than her husband, though he is a typical Englishman, always

dull and usually violent.

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Makes no answer\_, \_but remains standing\_. \_There is a

pause\_. \_Then the eyes of the two women meet\_. LADY CHILTERN \_looks

stern and pale\_. MRS. CHEVELEY \_seem rather amused\_.] Mrs. Cheveley, I

think it is right to tell you quite frankly that, had I known who you

really were, I should not have invited you to my house last night.

MRS. CHEVELEY [\_With an impertinent smile\_.] Really?

LADY CHILTERN. I could not have done so.

MRS. CHEVELEY. I see that after all these years you have not changed a

bit, Gertrude.

LADY CHILTERN. I never change.

MRS. CHEVELEY [\_Elevating her eyebrows\_.] Then life has taught you

nothing?

LADY CHILTERN. It has taught me that a person who has once been guilty

of a dishonest and dishonourable action may be guilty of it a second

time, and should be shunned.

MRS. CHEVELEY. Would you apply that rule to every one?

LADY CHILTERN. Yes, to every one, without exception.

MRS. CHEVELEY. Then I am sorry for you, Gertrude, very sorry for you.

LADY CHILTERN. You see now, I was sure, that for many reasons any

further acquaintance between us during your stay in London is quite

impossible?

MRS. CHEVELEY [\_Leaning back in her chair\_.] Do you know, Gertrude, I

don’t mind your talking morality a bit. Morality is simply the attitude

we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike. You dislike me. I

am quite aware of that. And I have always detested you. And yet I have

come here to do you a service.

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Contemptuously\_.] Like the service you wished to

render my husband last night, I suppose. Thank heaven, I saved him from

that.

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_Starting to her feet\_.] It was you who made him write

that insolent letter to me? It was you who made him break his promise?

LADY CHILTERN. Yes.

MRS. CHEVELEY. Then you must make him keep it. I give you till

to-morrow morning—no more. If by that time your husband does not

solemnly bind himself to help me in this great scheme in which I am

interested—

LADY CHILTERN. This fraudulent speculation—

MRS. CHEVELEY. Call it what you choose. I hold your husband in the

hollow of my hand, and if you are wise you will make him do what I tell

him.

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Rising and going towards her\_.] You are impertinent.

What has my husband to do with you? With a woman like you?

MRS. CHEVELEY [\_With a bitter laugh\_.] In this world like meets with

like. It is because your husband is himself fraudulent and dishonest

that we pair so well together. Between you and him there are chasms. He

and I are closer than friends. We are enemies linked together. The same

sin binds us.

LADY CHILTERN. How dare you class my husband with yourself? How dare

you threaten him or me? Leave my house. You are unfit to enter it.

[SIR ROBERT CHILTERN \_enters from behind\_. \_He hears his wife’s last

words\_, \_and sees to whom they are addressed\_. \_He grows deadly pale\_.]

MRS. CHEVELEY. Your house! A house bought with the price of dishonour.

A house, everything in which has been paid for by fraud. [\_Turns round

and sees\_ SIR ROBERT CHILTERN.] Ask him what the origin of his fortune

is! Get him to tell you how he sold to a stockbroker a Cabinet secret.

Learn from him to what you owe your position.

LADY CHILTERN. It is not true! Robert! It is not true!

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_Pointing at him with outstretched finger\_.] Look at

him! Can he deny it? Does he dare to?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Go! Go at once. You have done your worst now.

MRS. CHEVELEY. My worst? I have not yet finished with you, with either

of you. I give you both till to-morrow at noon. If by then you don’t do

what I bid you to do, the whole world shall know the origin of Robert

Chiltern.

[SIR ROBERT CHILTERN \_strikes the bell\_. \_Enter\_ MASON.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Show Mrs. Cheveley out.

[MRS. CHEVELEY \_starts\_; \_then bows with somewhat exaggerated politeness

to\_ LADY CHILTERN, \_who makes no sign of response\_. \_As she passes by\_

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN, \_who is standing close to the door\_, \_she pauses for

a moment and looks him straight in the face\_. \_She then goes out\_,

\_followed by the servant\_, \_who closes the door after him\_. \_The husband

and wife are left alone\_. LADY CHILTERN \_stands like some one in a

dreadful dream\_. \_Then she turns round and looks at her husband\_. \_She

looks at him with strange eyes\_, \_as though she were seeing him for the

first time\_.]

LADY CHILTERN. You sold a Cabinet secret for money! You began your life

with fraud! You built up your career on dishonour! Oh, tell me it is

not true! Lie to me! Lie to me! Tell me it is not true!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. What this woman said is quite true. But, Gertrude,

listen to me. You don’t realise how I was tempted. Let me tell you the

whole thing. [\_Goes towards her\_.]

LADY CHILTERN. Don’t come near me. Don’t touch me. I feel as if you

had soiled me for ever. Oh! what a mask you have been wearing all these

years! A horrible painted mask! You sold yourself for money. Oh! a

common thief were better. You put yourself up to sale to the highest

bidder! You were bought in the market. You lied to the whole world.

And yet you will not lie to me.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Rushing towards her\_.] Gertrude! Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Thrusting him back with outstretched hands\_.] No,

don’t speak! Say nothing! Your voice wakes terrible memories—memories

of things that made me love you—memories of words that made me love

you—memories that now are horrible to me. And how I worshipped you! You

were to me something apart from common life, a thing pure, noble, honest,

without stain. The world seemed to me finer because you were in it, and

goodness more real because you lived. And now—oh, when I think that I

made of a man like you my ideal! the ideal of my life!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. There was your mistake. There was your error. The

error all women commit. Why can’t you women love us, faults and all?

Why do you place us on monstrous pedestals? We have all feet of clay,

women as well as men; but when we men love women, we love them knowing

their weaknesses, their follies, their imperfections, love them all the

more, it may be, for that reason. It is not the perfect, but the

imperfect, who have need of love. It is when we are wounded by our own

hands, or by the hands of others, that love should come to cure us—else

what use is love at all? All sins, except a sin against itself, Love

should forgive. All lives, save loveless lives, true Love should pardon.

A man’s love is like that. It is wider, larger, more human than a

woman’s. Women think that they are making ideals of men. What they are

making of us are false idols merely. You made your false idol of me, and

I had not the courage to come down, show you my wounds, tell you my

weaknesses. I was afraid that I might lose your love, as I have lost it

now. And so, last night you ruined my life for me—yes, ruined it! What

this woman asked of me was nothing compared to what she offered to me.

She offered security, peace, stability. The sin of my youth, that I had

thought was buried, rose up in front of me, hideous, horrible, with its

hands at my throat. I could have killed it for ever, sent it back into

its tomb, destroyed its record, burned the one witness against me. You

prevented me. No one but you, you know it. And now what is there before

me but public disgrace, ruin, terrible shame, the mockery of the world, a

lonely dishonoured life, a lonely dishonoured death, it may be, some day?

Let women make no more ideals of men! let them not put them on alters and

bow before them, or they may ruin other lives as completely as you—you

whom I have so wildly loved—have ruined mine!

[\_He passes from the room\_. LADY CHILTERN \_rushes towards him\_, \_but the

door is closed when she reaches it\_. \_Pale with anguish\_, \_bewildered\_,

\_helpless\_, \_she sways like a plant in the water\_. \_Her hands\_,

\_outstretched\_, \_seem to tremble in the air like blossoms in the mind\_.

\_Then she flings herself down beside a sofa and buries her face\_. \_Her

sobs are like the sobs of a child\_.]

ACT DROP

THIRD ACT

SCENE

\_The Library in Lord Goring’s house\_. \_An Adam room\_. \_On the right is

the door leading into the hall\_. \_On the left\_, \_the door of the

smoking-room\_. \_A pair of folding doors at the back open into the

drawing-room\_. \_The fire is lit\_. \_Phipps\_, \_the butler\_, \_is arranging

some newspapers on the writing-table\_. \_The distinction of Phipps is his

impassivity\_. \_He has been termed by enthusiasts the Ideal Butler\_. \_The

Sphinx is not so incommunicable\_. \_He is a mask with a manner\_. \_Of his

intellectual or emotional life\_, \_history knows nothing\_. \_He represents

the dominance of form\_.

[\_Enter\_ LORD GORING \_in evening dress with a buttonhole\_. \_He is

wearing a silk hat and Inverness cape\_. \_White-gloved\_, \_he carries a

Louis Seize cane\_. \_His are all the delicate fopperies of Fashion\_.

\_One sees that he stands in immediate relation to modern life\_, \_makes it

indeed\_, \_and so masters it\_. \_He is the first well-dressed philosopher

in the history of thought\_.]

LORD GORING. Got my second buttonhole for me, Phipps?

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord. [\_Takes his hat\_, \_cane\_, \_and cape\_, \_and

presents new buttonhole on salver\_.]

LORD GORING. Rather distinguished thing, Phipps. I am the only person

of the smallest importance in London at present who wears a buttonhole.

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord. I have observed that,

LORD GORING. [\_Taking out old buttonhole\_.] You see, Phipps, Fashion is

what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear.

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING. Just as vulgarity is simply the conduct of other people.

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING. [\_Putting in a new buttonhole\_.] And falsehoods the truths

of other people.

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING. Other people are quite dreadful. The only possible society

is oneself.

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING. To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance,

Phipps.

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING. [\_Looking at himself in the glass\_.] Don’t think I quite

like this buttonhole, Phipps. Makes me look a little too old. Makes me

almost in the prime of life, eh, Phipps?

PHIPPS. I don’t observe any alteration in your lordship’s appearance.

LORD GORING. You don’t, Phipps?

PHIPPS. No, my lord.

LORD GORING. I am not quite sure. For the future a more trivial

buttonhole, Phipps, on Thursday evenings.

PHIPPS. I will speak to the florist, my lord. She has had a loss in her

family lately, which perhaps accounts for the lack of triviality your

lordship complains of in the buttonhole.

LORD GORING. Extraordinary thing about the lower classes in England—they

are always losing their relations.

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord! They are extremely fortunate in that respect.

LORD GORING. [\_Turns round and looks at him\_. PHIPPS \_remains

impassive\_.] Hum! Any letters, Phipps?

PHIPPS. Three, my lord. [\_Hands letters on a salver\_.]

LORD GORING. [\_Takes letters\_.] Want my cab round in twenty minutes.

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord. [\_Goes towards door\_.]

LORD GORING. [\_Holds up letter in pink envelope\_.] Ahem! Phipps, when

did this letter arrive?

PHIPPS. It was brought by hand just after your lordship went to the

club.

LORD GORING. That will do. [\_Exit\_ PHIPPS.] Lady Chiltern’s

handwriting on Lady Chiltern’s pink notepaper. That is rather curious.

I thought Robert was to write. Wonder what Lady Chiltern has got to say

to me? [\_Sits at bureau and opens letter\_, \_and reads it\_.] ‘I want

you. I trust you. I am coming to you. Gertrude.’ [\_Puts down the

letter with a puzzled look\_. \_Then takes it up\_, \_and reads it again

slowly\_.] ‘I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you.’ So she has

found out everything! Poor woman! Poor woman! [ \_Pulls out watch and

looks at it\_.] But what an hour to call! Ten o’clock! I shall have to

give up going to the Berkshires. However, it is always nice to be

expected, and not to arrive. I am not expected at the Bachelors’, so I

shall certainly go there. Well, I will make her stand by her husband.

That is the only thing for her to do. That is the only thing for any

woman to do. It is the growth of the moral sense in women that makes

marriage such a hopeless, one-sided institution. Ten o’clock. She

should be here soon. I must tell Phipps I am not in to any one else.

[\_Goes towards bell\_]

[\_Enter\_ PHIPPS.]

PHIPPS. Lord Caversham.

LORD GORING. Oh, why will parents always appear at the wrong time? Some

extraordinary mistake in nature, I suppose. [\_Enter\_ LORD CAVERSHAM.]

Delighted to see you, my dear father. [\_Goes to meet him\_.]

LORD CAVERSHAM. Take my cloak off.

LORD GORING. Is it worth while, father?

LORD CAVERSHAM. Of course it is worth while, sir. Which is the most

comfortable chair?

LORD GORING. This one, father. It is the chair I use myself, when I

have visitors.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Thank ye. No draught, I hope, in this room?

LORD GORING. No, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM. [\_Sitting down\_.] Glad to hear it. Can’t stand

draughts. No draughts at home.

LORD GORING. Good many breezes, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Eh? Eh? Don’t understand what you mean. Want to have

a serious conversation with you, sir.

LORD GORING. My dear father! At this hour?

LORD CAVERSHAM. Well, sir, it is only ten o’clock. What is your

objection to the hour? I think the hour is an admirable hour!

LORD GORING. Well, the fact is, father, this is not my day for talking

seriously. I am very sorry, but it is not my day.

LORD CAVERSHAM. What do you mean, sir?

LORD GORING. During the Season, father, I only talk seriously on the

first Tuesday in every month, from four to seven.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Well, make it Tuesday, sir, make it Tuesday.

LORD GORING. But it is after seven, father, and my doctor says I must

not have any serious conversation after seven. It makes me talk in my

sleep.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Talk in your sleep, sir? What does that matter? You

are not married.

LORD GORING. No, father, I am not married.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Hum! That is what I have come to talk to you about,

sir. You have got to get married, and at once. Why, when I was your

age, sir, I had been an inconsolable widower for three months, and was

already paying my addresses to your admirable mother. Damme, sir, it is

your duty to get married. You can’t be always living for pleasure.

Every man of position is married nowadays. Bachelors are not fashionable

any more. They are a damaged lot. Too much is known about them. You

must get a wife, sir. Look where your friend Robert Chiltern has got to

by probity, hard work, and a sensible marriage with a good woman. Why

don’t you imitate him, sir? Why don’t you take him for your model?

LORD GORING. I think I shall, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM. I wish you would, sir. Then I should be happy. At

present I make your mother’s life miserable on your account. You are

heartless, sir, quite heartless.

LORD GORING. I hope not, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM. And it is high time for you to get married. You are

thirty-four years of age, sir.

LORD GORING. Yes, father, but I only admit to thirty-two—thirty-one and

a half when I have a really good buttonhole. This buttonhole is not . . .

trivial enough.

LORD CAVERSHAM. I tell you you are thirty-four, sir. And there is a

draught in your room, besides, which makes your conduct worse. Why did

you tell me there was no draught, sir? I feel a draught, sir, I feel it

distinctly.

LORD GORING. So do I, father. It is a dreadful draught. I will come

and see you to-morrow, father. We can talk over anything you like. Let

me help you on with your cloak, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM. No, sir; I have called this evening for a definite

purpose, and I am going to see it through at all costs to my health or

yours. Put down my cloak, sir.

LORD GORING. Certainly, father. But let us go into another room.

[\_Rings bell\_.] There is a dreadful draught here. [\_Enter\_ PHIPPS.]

Phipps, is there a good fire in the smoking-room?

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING. Come in there, father. Your sneezes are quite

heartrending.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Well, sir, I suppose I have a right to sneeze when I

choose?

LORD GORING. [\_Apologetically\_.] Quite so, father. I was merely

expressing sympathy.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Oh, damn sympathy. There is a great deal too much of

that sort of thing going on nowadays.

LORD GORING. I quite agree with you, father. If there was less sympathy

in the world there would be less trouble in the world.

LORD CAVERSHAM. [\_Going towards the smoking-room\_.] That is a paradox,

sir. I hate paradoxes.

LORD GORING. So do I, father. Everybody one meets is a paradox

nowadays. It is a great bore. It makes society so obvious.

LORD CAVERSHAM. [\_Turning round\_, \_and looking at his son beneath his

bushy eyebrows\_.] Do you always really understand what you say, sir?

LORD GORING. [\_After some hesitation\_.] Yes, father, if I listen

attentively.

LORD CAVERSHAM. [\_Indignantly\_.] If you listen attentively! . . .

Conceited young puppy!

[\_Goes off grumbling into the smoking-room\_. PHIPPS \_enters\_.]

LORD GORING. Phipps, there is a lady coming to see me this evening on

particular business. Show her into the drawing-room when she arrives.

You understand?

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING. It is a matter of the gravest importance, Phipps.

PHIPPS. I understand, my lord.

LORD GORING. No one else is to be admitted, under any circumstances.

PHIPPS. I understand, my lord. [\_Bell rings\_.]

LORD GORING. Ah! that is probably the lady. I shall see her myself.

[\_Just as he is going towards the door\_ LORD CAVERSHAM \_enters from the

smoking-room\_.]

LORD CAVERSHAM. Well, sir? am I to wait attendance on you?

LORD GORING. [\_Considerably perplexed\_.] In a moment, father. Do

excuse me. [LORD CAVERSHAM \_goes back\_.] Well, remember my

instructions, Phipps—into that room.

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord.

[LORD GORING \_goes into the smoking-room\_. HAROLD, \_the footman shows\_

MRS. CHEVELEY \_in\_. \_Lamia-like\_, \_she is in green and silver\_. \_She

has a cloak of black satin\_, \_lined with dead rose-leaf silk\_.]

HAROLD. What name, madam?

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_To\_ PHIPPS, \_who advances towards her\_.] Is Lord

Goring not here? I was told he was at home?

PHIPPS. His lordship is engaged at present with Lord Caversham, madam.

[\_Turns a cold\_, \_glassy eye on\_ HAROLD, \_who at once retires\_.]

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_To herself\_.] How very filial!

PHIPPS. His lordship told me to ask you, madam, to be kind enough to

wait in the drawing-room for him. His lordship will come to you there.

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_With a look of surprise\_.] Lord Goring expects me?

PHIPPS. Yes, madam.

MRS. CHEVELEY. Are you quite sure?

PHIPPS. His lordship told me that if a lady called I was to ask her to

wait in the drawing-room. [\_Goes to the door of the drawing-room and

opens it\_.] His lordship’s directions on the subject were very precise.

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_To herself\_] How thoughtful of him! To expect the

unexpected shows a thoroughly modern intellect. [\_Goes towards the

drawing-room and looks in\_.] Ugh! How dreary a bachelor’s drawing-room

always looks. I shall have to alter all this. [PHIPPS \_brings the lamp

from the writing-table\_.] No, I don’t care for that lamp. It is far too

glaring. Light some candles.

PHIPPS. [\_Replaces lamp\_.] Certainly, madam.

MRS. CHEVELEY. I hope the candles have very becoming shades.

PHIPPS. We have had no complaints about them, madam, as yet.

[\_Passes into the drawing-room and begins to light the candles\_.]

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_To herself\_.] I wonder what woman he is waiting for

to-night. It will be delightful to catch him. Men always look so silly

when they are caught. And they are always being caught. [\_Looks about

room and approaches the writing-table\_.] What a very interesting room!

What a very interesting picture! Wonder what his correspondence is like.

[\_Takes up letters\_.] Oh, what a very uninteresting correspondence!

Bills and cards, debts and dowagers! Who on earth writes to him on pink

paper? How silly to write on pink paper! It looks like the beginning of

a middle-class romance. Romance should never begin with sentiment. It

should begin with science and end with a settlement. [\_Puts letter

down\_, \_then takes it up again\_.] I know that handwriting. That is

Gertrude Chiltern’s. I remember it perfectly. The ten commandments in

every stroke of the pen, and the moral law all over the page. Wonder

what Gertrude is writing to him about? Something horrid about me, I

suppose. How I detest that woman! [\_Reads it\_.] ‘I trust you. I want

you. I am coming to you. Gertrude.’ ‘I trust you. I want you. I am

coming to you.’

[\_A look of triumph comes over her face\_. \_She is just about to steal

the letter\_, \_when\_ PHIPPS \_comes in\_.]

PHIPPS. The candles in the drawing-room are lit, madam, as you directed.

MRS. CHEVELEY. Thank you. [\_Rises hastily and slips the letter under a

large silver-cased blotting-book that is lying on the table\_.]

PHIPPS. I trust the shades will be to your liking, madam. They are the

most becoming we have. They are the same as his lordship uses himself

when he is dressing for dinner.

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_With a smile\_.] Then I am sure they will be perfectly

right.

PHIPPS. [\_Gravely\_.] Thank you, madam.

[MRS. CHEVELEY \_goes into the drawing-room\_. PHIPPS \_closes the door and

retires\_. \_The door is then slowly opened\_, \_and\_ MRS. CHEVELEY \_comes

out and creeps stealthily towards the writing-table\_. \_Suddenly voices

are heard from the smoking-room\_. MRS. CHEVELEY \_grows pale\_, \_and

stops\_. \_The voices grow louder\_, \_and she goes back into the

drawing-room\_, \_biting her lip\_.]

[\_Enter\_ LORD GORING \_and\_ LORD CAVERSHAM.]

LORD GORING. [\_Expostulating\_.] My dear father, if I am to get married,

surely you will allow me to choose the time, place, and person?

Particularly the person.

LORD CAVERSHAM. [\_Testily\_.] That is a matter for me, sir. You would

probably make a very poor choice. It is I who should be consulted, not

you. There is property at stake. It is not a matter for affection.

Affection comes later on in married life.

LORD GORING. Yes. In married life affection comes when people

thoroughly dislike each other, father, doesn’t it? [\_Puts on\_ LORD

CAVERSHAM’S \_cloak for him\_.]

LORD CAVERSHAM. Certainly, sir. I mean certainly not, air. You are

talking very foolishly to-night. What I say is that marriage is a matter

for common sense.

LORD GORING. But women who have common sense are so curiously plain,

father, aren’t they? Of course I only speak from hearsay.

LORD CAVERSHAM. No woman, plain or pretty, has any common sense at all,

sir. Common sense is the privilege of our sex.

LORD GORING. Quite so. And we men are so self-sacrificing that we never

use it, do we, father?

LORD CAVERSHAM. I use it, sir. I use nothing else.

LORD GORING. So my mother tells me.

LORD CAVERSHAM. It is the secret of your mother’s happiness. You are

very heartless, sir, very heartless.

LORD GORING. I hope not, father.

[\_Goes out for a moment\_. \_Then returns\_, \_looking rather put out\_,

\_with\_ SIR ROBERT CHILTERN.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. My dear Arthur, what a piece of good luck meeting

you on the doorstep! Your servant had just told me you were not at home.

How extraordinary!

LORD GORING. The fact is, I am horribly busy to-night, Robert, and I

gave orders I was not at home to any one. Even my father had a

comparatively cold reception. He complained of a draught the whole time.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Ah! you must be at home to me, Arthur. You are my

best friend. Perhaps by to-morrow you will be my only friend. My wife

has discovered everything.

LORD GORING. Ah! I guessed as much!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Looking at him\_.] Really! How?

LORD GORING. [\_After some hesitation\_.] Oh, merely by something in the

expression of your face as you came in. Who told her?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Mrs. Cheveley herself. And the woman I love knows

that I began my career with an act of low dishonesty, that I built up my

life upon sands of shame—that I sold, like a common huckster, the secret

that had been intrusted to me as a man of honour. I thank heaven poor

Lord Radley died without knowing that I betrayed him. I would to God I

had died before I had been so horribly tempted, or had fallen so low.

[\_Burying his face in his hands\_.]

LORD GORING. [\_After a pause\_.] You have heard nothing from Vienna yet,

in answer to your wire?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Looking up\_.] Yes; I got a telegram from the

first secretary at eight o’clock to-night.

LORD GORING. Well?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Nothing is absolutely known against her. On the

contrary, she occupies a rather high position in society. It is a sort

of open secret that Baron Arnheim left her the greater portion of his

immense fortune. Beyond that I can learn nothing.

LORD GORING. She doesn’t turn out to be a spy, then?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Oh! spies are of no use nowadays. Their profession

is over. The newspapers do their work instead.

LORD GORING. And thunderingly well they do it.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Arthur, I am parched with thirst. May I ring for

something? Some hock and seltzer?

LORD GORING. Certainly. Let me. [\_Rings the bell\_.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Thanks! I don’t know what to do, Arthur, I don’t

know what to do, and you are my only friend. But what a friend you

are—the one friend I can trust. I can trust you absolutely, can’t I?

[\_Enter\_ PHIPPS.]

LORD GORING. My dear Robert, of course. Oh! [\_To\_ PHIPPS.] Bring some

hock and seltzer.

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING. And Phipps!

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING. Will you excuse me for a moment, Robert? I want to give

some directions to my servant.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Certainly.

LORD GORING. When that lady calls, tell her that I am not expected home

this evening. Tell her that I have been suddenly called out of town.

You understand?

PHIPPS. The lady is in that room, my lord. You told me to show her into

that room, my lord.

LORD GORING. You did perfectly right. [\_Exit\_ PHIPPS.] What a mess I

am in. No; I think I shall get through it. I’ll give her a lecture

through the door. Awkward thing to manage, though.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Arthur, tell me what I should do. My life seems to

have crumbled about me. I am a ship without a rudder in a night without

a star.

LORD GORING. Robert, you love your wife, don’t you?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I love her more than anything in the world. I used

to think ambition the great thing. It is not. Love is the great thing

in the world. There is nothing but love, and I love her. But I am

defamed in her eyes. I am ignoble in her eyes. There is a wide gulf

between us now. She has found me out, Arthur, she has found me out.

LORD GORING. Has she never in her life done some folly—some

indiscretion—that she should not forgive your sin?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. My wife! Never! She does not know what weakness

or temptation is. I am of clay like other men. She stands apart as good

women do—pitiless in her perfection—cold and stern and without mercy.

But I love her, Arthur. We are childless, and I have no one else to

love, no one else to love me. Perhaps if God had sent us children she

might have been kinder to me. But God has given us a lonely house. And

she has cut my heart in two. Don’t let us talk of it. I was brutal to

her this evening. But I suppose when sinners talk to saints they are

brutal always. I said to her things that were hideously true, on my

side, from my stand-point, from the standpoint of men. But don’t let us

talk of that.

LORD GORING. Your wife will forgive you. Perhaps at this moment she is

forgiving you. She loves you, Robert. Why should she not forgive?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. God grant it! God grant it! [\_Buries his face in

his hands\_.] But there is something more I have to tell you, Arthur.

[\_Enter\_ PHIPPS \_with drinks\_.]

PHIPPS. [\_Hands hock and seltzer to\_ SIR ROBERT CHILTERN.] Hock and

seltzer, sir.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Thank you.

LORD GORING. Is your carriage here, Robert?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. No; I walked from the club.

LORD GORING. Sir Robert will take my cab, Phipps.

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord. [\_Exit\_.]

LORD GORING. Robert, you don’t mind my sending you away?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Arthur, you must let me stay for five minutes. I

have made up my mind what I am going to do to-night in the House. The

debate on the Argentine Canal is to begin at eleven. [\_A chair falls in

the drawing-room\_.] What is that?

LORD GORING. Nothing.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I heard a chair fall in the next room. Some one

has been listening.

LORD GORING. No, no; there is no one there.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. There is some one. There are lights in the room,

and the door is ajar. Some one has been listening to every secret of my

life. Arthur, what does this mean?

LORD GORING. Robert, you are excited, unnerved. I tell you there is no

one in that room. Sit down, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Do you give me your word that there is no one

there?

LORD GORING. Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Your word of honour? [\_Sits down\_.]

LORD GORING. Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Rises\_.] Arthur, let me see for myself.

LORD GORING. No, no.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. If there is no one there why should I not look in

that room? Arthur, you must let me go into that room and satisfy myself.

Let me know that no eavesdropper has heard my life’s secret. Arthur, you

don’t realise what I am going through.

LORD GORING. Robert, this must stop. I have told you that there is no

one in that room—that is enough.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Rushes to the door of the room\_.] It is not

enough. I insist on going into this room. You have told me there is no

one there, so what reason can you have for refusing me?

LORD GORING. For God’s sake, don’t! There is some one there. Some one

whom you must not see.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Ah, I thought so!

LORD GORING. I forbid you to enter that room.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Stand back. My life is at stake. And I don’t care

who is there. I will know who it is to whom I have told my secret and my

shame. [\_Enters room\_.]

LORD GORING. Great heavens! his own wife!

[SIR ROBERT CHILTERN \_comes back\_, \_with a look of scorn and anger on his

face\_.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. What explanation have you to give me for the

presence of that woman here?

LORD GORING. Robert, I swear to you on my honour that that lady is

stainless and guiltless of all offence towards you.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. She is a vile, an infamous thing!

LORD GORING. Don’t say that, Robert! It was for your sake she came

here. It was to try and save you she came here. She loves you and no

one else.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. You are mad. What have I to do with her intrigues

with you? Let her remain your mistress! You are well suited to each

other. She, corrupt and shameful—you, false as a friend, treacherous as

an enemy even—

LORD GORING. It is not true, Robert. Before heaven, it is not true. In

her presence and in yours I will explain all.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Let me pass, sir. You have lied enough upon your

word of honour.

[SIR ROBERT CHILTERN \_goes out\_. LORD GORING \_rushes to the door of the

drawing-room\_, \_when\_ MRS. CHEVELEY \_comes out\_, \_looking radiant and

much amused\_.]

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_With a mock curtsey\_] Good evening, Lord Goring!

LORD GORING. Mrs. Cheveley! Great heavens! . . . May I ask what you

were doing in my drawing-room?

MRS. CHEVELEY. Merely listening. I have a perfect passion for listening

through keyholes. One always hears such wonderful things through them.

LORD GORING. Doesn’t that sound rather like tempting Providence?

MRS. CHEVELEY. Oh! surely Providence can resist temptation by this time.

[\_Makes a sign to him to take her cloak off\_, \_which he does\_.]

LORD GORING. I am glad you have called. I am going to give you some

good advice.

MRS. CHEVELEY. Oh! pray don’t. One should never give a woman anything

that she can’t wear in the evening.

LORD GORING. I see you are quite as wilful as you used to be.

MRS. CHEVELEY. Far more! I have greatly improved. I have had more

experience.

LORD GORING. Too much experience is a dangerous thing. Pray have a

cigarette. Half the pretty women in London smoke cigarettes. Personally

I prefer the other half.

MRS. CHEVELEY. Thanks. I never smoke. My dressmaker wouldn’t like it,

and a woman’s first duty in life is to her dressmaker, isn’t it? What

the second duty is, no one has as yet discovered.

LORD GORING. You have come here to sell me Robert Chiltern’s letter,

haven’t you?

MRS. CHEVELEY. To offer it to you on conditions. How did you guess

that?

LORD GORING. Because you haven’t mentioned the subject. Have you got it

with you?

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_Sitting down\_.] Oh, no! A well-made dress has no

pockets.

LORD GORING. What is your price for it?

MRS. CHEVELEY. How absurdly English you are! The English think that a

cheque-book can solve every problem in life. Why, my dear Arthur, I have

very much more money than you have, and quite as much as Robert Chiltern

has got hold of. Money is not what I want.

LORD GORING. What do you want then, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY. Why don’t you call me Laura?

LORD GORING. I don’t like the name.

MRS. CHEVELEY. You used to adore it.

LORD GORING. Yes: that’s why. [MRS. CHEVELEY \_motions to him to sit

down beside her\_. \_He smiles\_, \_and does so\_.]

MRS. CHEVELEY. Arthur, you loved me once.

LORD GORING. Yes.

MRS. CHEVELEY. And you asked me to be your wife.

LORD GORING. That was the natural result of my loving you.

MRS. CHEVELEY. And you threw me over because you saw, or said you saw,

poor old Lord Mortlake trying to have a violent flirtation with me in the

conservatory at Tenby.

LORD GORING. I am under the impression that my lawyer settled that

matter with you on certain terms . . . dictated by yourself.

MRS. CHEVELEY. At that time I was poor; you were rich.

LORD GORING. Quite so. That is why you pretended to love me.

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_Shrugging her shoulders\_.] Poor old Lord Mortlake, who

had only two topics of conversation, his gout and his wife! I never

could quite make out which of the two he was talking about. He used the

most horrible language about them both. Well, you were silly, Arthur.

Why, Lord Mortlake was never anything more to me than an amusement. One

of those utterly tedious amusements one only finds at an English country

house on an English country Sunday. I don’t think any one at all morally

responsible for what he or she does at an English country house.

LORD GORING. Yes. I know lots of people think that.

MRS. CHEVELEY. I loved you, Arthur.

LORD GORING. My dear Mrs. Cheveley, you have always been far too clever

to know anything about love.

MRS. CHEVELEY. I did love you. And you loved me. You know you loved

me; and love is a very wonderful thing. I suppose that when a man has

once loved a woman, he will do anything for her, except continue to love

her? [\_Puts her hand on his\_.]

LORD GORING. [\_Taking his hand away quietly\_.] Yes: except that.

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_After a pause\_.] I am tired of living abroad. I want

to come back to London. I want to have a charming house here. I want to

have a salon. If one could only teach the English how to talk, and the

Irish how to listen, society here would be quite civilised. Besides, I

have arrived at the romantic stage. When I saw you last night at the

Chilterns’, I knew you were the only person I had ever cared for, if I

ever have cared for anybody, Arthur. And so, on the morning of the day

you marry me, I will give you Robert Chiltern’s letter. That is my

offer. I will give it to you now, if you promise to marry me.

LORD GORING. Now?

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_Smiling\_.] To-morrow.

LORD GORING. Are you really serious?

MRS. CHEVELEY. Yes, quite serious.

LORD GORING. I should make you a very bad husband.

MRS. CHEVELEY. I don’t mind bad husbands. I have had two. They amused

me immensely.

LORD GORING. You mean that you amused yourself immensely, don’t you?

MRS. CHEVELEY. What do you know about my married life?

LORD GORING. Nothing: but I can read it like a book.

MRS. CHEVELEY. What book?

LORD GORING. [\_Rising\_.] The Book of Numbers.

MRS. CHEVELEY. Do you think it is quite charming of you to be so rude to

a woman in your own house?

LORD GORING. In the case of very fascinating women, sex is a challenge,

not a defence.

MRS. CHEVELEY. I suppose that is meant for a compliment. My dear

Arthur, women are never disarmed by compliments. Men always are. That

is the difference between the two sexes.

LORD GORING. Women are never disarmed by anything, as far as I know

them.

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_After a pause\_.] Then you are going to allow your

greatest friend, Robert Chiltern, to be ruined, rather than marry some

one who really has considerable attractions left. I thought you would

have risen to some great height of self-sacrifice, Arthur. I think you

should. And the rest of your life you could spend in contemplating your

own perfections.

LORD GORING. Oh! I do that as it is. And self-sacrifice is a thing that

should be put down by law. It is so demoralising to the people for whom

one sacrifices oneself. They always go to the bad.

MRS. CHEVELEY. As if anything could demoralise Robert Chiltern! You

seem to forget that I know his real character.

LORD GORING. What you know about him is not his real character. It was

an act of folly done in his youth, dishonourable, I admit, shameful, I

admit, unworthy of him, I admit, and therefore . . . not his true

character.

MRS. CHEVELEY. How you men stand up for each other!

LORD GORING. How you women war against each other!

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_Bitterly\_.] I only war against one woman, against

Gertrude Chiltern. I hate her. I hate her now more than ever.

LORD GORING. Because you have brought a real tragedy into her life, I

suppose.

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_With a sneer\_.] Oh, there is only one real tragedy in

a woman’s life. The fact that her past is always her lover, and her

future invariably her husband.

LORD GORING. Lady Chiltern knows nothing of the kind of life to which

you are alluding.

MRS. CHEVELEY. A woman whose size in gloves is seven and three-quarters

never knows much about anything. You know Gertrude has always worn seven

and three-quarters? That is one of the reasons why there was never any

moral sympathy between us. . . . Well, Arthur, I suppose this romantic

interview may be regarded as at an end. You admit it was romantic, don’t

you? For the privilege of being your wife I was ready to surrender a

great prize, the climax of my diplomatic career. You decline. Very

well. If Sir Robert doesn’t uphold my Argentine scheme, I expose him.

Voilà tout.

LORD GORING. You mustn’t do that. It would be vile, horrible, infamous.

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_Shrugging her shoulders\_.] Oh! don’t use big words.

They mean so little. It is a commercial transaction. That is all.

There is no good mixing up sentimentality in it. I offered to sell

Robert Chiltern a certain thing. If he won’t pay me my price, he will

have to pay the world a greater price. There is no more to be said. I

must go. Good-bye. Won’t you shake hands?

LORD GORING. With you? No. Your transaction with Robert Chiltern may

pass as a loathsome commercial transaction of a loathsome commercial age;

but you seem to have forgotten that you came here to-night to talk of

love, you whose lips desecrated the word love, you to whom the thing is a

book closely sealed, went this afternoon to the house of one of the most

noble and gentle women in the world to degrade her husband in her eyes,

to try and kill her love for him, to put poison in her heart, and

bitterness in her life, to break her idol, and, it may be, spoil her

soul. That I cannot forgive you. That was horrible. For that there can

be no forgiveness.

MRS. CHEVELEY. Arthur, you are unjust to me. Believe me, you are quite

unjust to me. I didn’t go to taunt Gertrude at all. I had no idea of

doing anything of the kind when I entered. I called with Lady Markby

simply to ask whether an ornament, a jewel, that I lost somewhere last

night, had been found at the Chilterns’. If you don’t believe me, you

can ask Lady Markby. She will tell you it is true. The scene that

occurred happened after Lady Markby had left, and was really forced on me

by Gertrude’s rudeness and sneers. I called, oh!—a little out of malice

if you like—but really to ask if a diamond brooch of mine had been found.

That was the origin of the whole thing.

LORD GORING. A diamond snake-brooch with a ruby?

MRS. CHEVELEY. Yes. How do you know?

LORD GORING. Because it is found. In point of fact, I found it myself,

and stupidly forgot to tell the butler anything about it as I was

leaving. [\_Goes over to the writing-table and pulls out the drawers\_.]

It is in this drawer. No, that one. This is the brooch, isn’t it?

[\_Holds up the brooch\_.]

MRS. CHEVELEY. Yes. I am so glad to get it back. It was . . a present.

LORD GORING. Won’t you wear it?

MRS. CHEVELEY. Certainly, if you pin it in. [LORD GORING \_suddenly

clasps it on her arm\_.] Why do you put it on as a bracelet? I never

knew it could he worn as a bracelet.

LORD GORING. Really?

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_Holding out her handsome arm\_.] No; but it looks very

well on me as a bracelet, doesn’t it?

LORD GORING. Yes; much better than when I saw it last.

MRS. CHEVELEY. When did you see it last?

LORD GORING. [\_Calmly\_.] Oh, ten years ago, on Lady Berkshire, from

whom you stole it.

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_Starting\_.] What do you mean?

LORD GORING. I mean that you stole that ornament from my cousin, Mary

Berkshire, to whom I gave it when she was married. Suspicion fell on a

wretched servant, who was sent away in disgrace. I recognised it last

night. I determined to say nothing about it till I had found the thief.

I have found the thief now, and I have heard her own confession.

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_Tossing her head\_.] It is not true.

LORD GORING. You know it is true. Why, thief is written across your

face at this moment.

MRS. CHEVELEY. I will deny the whole affair from beginning to end. I

will say that I have never seen this wretched thing, that it was never in

my possession.

[MRS. CHEVELEY \_tries to get the bracelet off her arm\_, \_but fails\_.

LORD GORING \_looks on amused\_. \_Her thin fingers tear at the jewel to no

purpose\_. \_A curse breaks from her\_.]

LORD GORING. The drawback of stealing a thing, Mrs. Cheveley, is that

one never knows how wonderful the thing that one steals is. You can’t

get that bracelet off, unless you know where the spring is. And I see

you don’t know where the spring is. It is rather difficult to find.

MRS. CHEVELEY. You brute! You coward! [\_She tries again to unclasp the

bracelet\_, \_but fails\_.]

LORD GORING. Oh! don’t use big words. They mean so little.

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_Again tears at the bracelet in a paroxysm of rage\_,

\_with inarticulate sounds\_. \_Then stops\_, \_and looks at\_ LORD GORING.]

What are you going to do?

LORD GORING. I am going to ring for my servant. He is an admirable

servant. Always comes in the moment one rings for him. When he comes I

will tell him to fetch the police.

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_Trembling\_.] The police? What for?

LORD GORING. To-morrow the Berkshires will prosecute you. That is what

the police are for.

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_Is now in an agony of physical terror\_. \_Her face is

distorted\_. \_Her mouth awry\_. \_A mask has fallen from her\_. \_She it\_,

\_for the moment\_, \_dreadful to look at\_.] Don’t do that. I will do

anything you want. Anything in the world you want.

LORD GORING. Give me Robert Chiltern’s letter.

MRS. CHEVELEY. Stop! Stop! Let me have time to think.

LORD GORING. Give me Robert Chiltern’s letter.

MRS. CHEVELEY. I have not got it with me. I will give it to you

to-morrow.

LORD GORING. You know you are lying. Give it to me at once. [MRS.

CHEVELEY \_pulls the letter out\_, \_and hands it to him\_. \_She is horribly

pale\_.] This is it?

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_In a hoarse voice\_.] Yes.

LORD GORING. [\_Takes the letter\_, \_examines it\_, \_sighs\_, \_and burns it

with the lamp\_.] For so well-dressed a woman, Mrs. Cheveley, you have

moments of admirable common sense. I congratulate you.

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_Catches sight of\_ LADY CHILTERN’S \_letter\_, \_the cover

of which is just showing from under the blotting-book\_.] Please get me a

glass of water.

LORD GORING. Certainly. [\_Goes to the corner of the room and pours out

a glass of water\_. \_While his back is turned\_ MRS. CHEVELEY \_steals\_

LADY CHILTERN’S \_letter\_. \_When\_ LORD GORING \_returns the glass she

refuses it with a gesture\_.]

MRS. CHEVELEY. Thank you. Will you help me on with my cloak?

LORD GORING. With pleasure. [\_Puts her cloak on\_.]

MRS. CHEVELEY. Thanks. I am never going to try to harm Robert Chiltern

again.

LORD GORING. Fortunately you have not the chance, Mrs. Cheveley.

MRS. CHEVELEY. Well, if even I had the chance, I wouldn’t. On the

contrary, I am going to render him a great service.

LORD GORING. I am charmed to hear it. It is a reformation.

MRS. CHEVELEY. Yes. I can’t bear so upright a gentleman, so honourable

an English gentleman, being so shamefully deceived, and so—

LORD GORING. Well?

MRS. CHEVELEY. I find that somehow Gertrude Chiltern’s dying speech and

confession has strayed into my pocket.

LORD GORING. What do you mean?

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_With a bitter note of triumph in her voice\_.] I mean

that I am going to send Robert Chiltern the love-letter his wife wrote to

you to-night.

LORD GORING. Love-letter?

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_Laughing\_.] ‘I want you. I trust you. I am coming to

you. Gertrude.’

[LORD GORING \_rushes to the bureau and takes up the envelope\_, \_finds is

empty\_, \_and turns round\_.]

LORD GORING. You wretched woman, must you always be thieving? Give me

back that letter. I’ll take it from you by force. You shall not leave

my room till I have got it.

[\_He rushes towards her\_, \_but\_ MRS. CHEVELEY \_at once puts her hand on

the electric bell that is on the table\_. \_The bell sounds with shrill

reverberations\_, \_and\_ PHIPPS \_enters\_.]

MRS. CHEVELEY. [\_After a pause\_.] Lord Goring merely rang that you

should show me out. Good-night, Lord Goring!

[\_Goes out followed by\_ PHIPPS. \_Her face is illumined with evil

triumph\_. \_There is joy in her eyes\_. \_Youth seems to have come back to

her\_. \_Her last glance is like a swift arrow\_. LORD GORING \_bites his

lip\_, \_and lights his a cigarette\_.]

ACT DROPS

FOURTH ACT

SCENE

\_Same as Act II\_.

[LORD GORING \_is standing by the fireplace with his hands in his

pockets\_. \_He is looking rather bored\_.]

LORD GORING. [\_Pulls out his watch\_, \_inspects it\_, \_and rings the

bell\_.] It is a great nuisance. I can’t find any one in this house to

talk to. And I am full of interesting information. I feel like the

latest edition of something or other.

[\_Enter servant\_.]

JAMES. Sir Robert is still at the Foreign Office, my lord.

LORD GORING. Lady Chiltern not down yet?

JAMES. Her ladyship has not yet left her room. Miss Chiltern has just

come in from riding.

LORD GORING. [\_To himself\_.] Ah! that is something.

JAMES. Lord Caversham has been waiting some time in the library for Sir

Robert. I told him your lordship was here.

LORD GORING. Thank you! Would you kindly tell him I’ve gone?

JAMES. [\_Bowing\_.] I shall do so, my lord.

[\_Exit servant\_.]

LORD GORING. Really, I don’t want to meet my father three days running.

It is a great deal too much excitement for any son. I hope to goodness

he won’t come up. Fathers should be neither seen nor heard. That is the

only proper basis for family life. Mothers are different. Mothers are

darlings. [\_Throws himself down into a chair\_, \_picks up a paper and

begins to read it\_.]

[\_Enter\_ LORD CAVERSHAM.]

LORD CAVERSHAM. Well, sir, what are you doing here? Wasting your time

as usual, I suppose?

LORD GORING. [\_Throws down paper and rises\_.] My dear father, when one

pays a visit it is for the purpose of wasting other people’s time, not

one’s own.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Have you been thinking over what I spoke to you about

last night?

LORD GORING. I have been thinking about nothing else.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Engaged to be married yet?

LORD GORING. [\_Genially\_.] Not yet: but I hope to be before lunch-time.

LORD CAVERSHAM. [\_Caustically\_.] You can have till dinner-time if it

would be of any convenience to you.

LORD GORING. Thanks awfully, but I think I’d sooner be engaged before

lunch.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Humph! Never know when you are serious or not.

LORD GORING. Neither do I, father.

[\_A pause\_.]

LORD CAVERSHAM. I suppose you have read \_The Times\_ this morning?

LORD GORING. [\_Airily\_.] The Times? Certainly not. I only read \_The

Morning Post\_. All that one should know about modern life is where the

Duchesses are; anything else is quite demoralising.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Do you mean to say you have not read \_The Times\_ leading

article on Robert Chiltern’s career?

LORD GORING. Good heavens! No. What does it say?

LORD CAVERSHAM. What should it say, sir? Everything complimentary, of

course. Chiltern’s speech last night on this Argentine Canal scheme was

one of the finest pieces of oratory ever delivered in the House since

Canning.

LORD GORING. Ah! Never heard of Canning. Never wanted to. And did . . .

did Chiltern uphold the scheme?

LORD CAVERSHAM. Uphold it, sir? How little you know him! Why, he

denounced it roundly, and the whole system of modern political finance.

This speech is the turning-point in his career, as \_The Times\_ points

out. You should read this article, sir. [\_Opens\_ The Times.] ‘Sir

Robert Chiltern . . . most rising of our young statesmen . . . Brilliant

Orator . . . Unblemished career . . . Well-known integrity of character

. . . Represents what is best in English public life . . . Noble contrast

to the lax morality so common among foreign politicians.’ They will

never say that of you, sir.

LORD GORING. I sincerely hope not, father. However, I am delighted at

what you tell me about Robert, thoroughly delighted. It shows he has got

pluck.

LORD CAVERSHAM. He has got more than pluck, sir, he has got genius.

LORD GORING. Ah! I prefer pluck. It is not so common, nowadays, as

genius is.

LORD CAVERSHAM. I wish you would go into Parliament.

LORD GORING. My dear father, only people who look dull ever get into the

House of Commons, and only people who are dull ever succeed there.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Why don’t you try to do something useful in life?

LORD GORING. I am far too young.

LORD CAVERSHAM. [\_Testily\_.] I hate this affectation of youth, sir. It

is a great deal too prevalent nowadays.

LORD GORING. Youth isn’t an affectation. Youth is an art.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Why don’t you propose to that pretty Miss Chiltern?

LORD GORING. I am of a very nervous disposition, especially in the

morning.

LORD CAVERSHAM. I don’t suppose there is the smallest chance of her

accepting you.

LORD GORING. I don’t know how the betting stands to-day.

LORD CAVERSHAM. If she did accept you she would be the prettiest fool in

England.

LORD GORING. That is just what I should like to marry. A thoroughly

sensible wife would reduce me to a condition of absolute idiocy in less

than six months.

LORD CAVERSHAM. You don’t deserve her, sir.

LORD GORING. My dear father, if we men married the women we deserved, we

should have a very bad time of it.

[\_Enter\_ MABEL CHILTERN.]

MABEL CHILTERN. Oh! . . . How do you do, Lord Caversham? I hope Lady

Caversham is quite well?

LORD CAVERSHAM. Lady Caversham is as usual, as usual.

LORD GORING. Good morning, Miss Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN. [\_Taking no notice at all of\_ LORD GORING, \_and

addressing herself exclusively to\_ LORD CAVERSHAM.] And Lady Caversham’s

bonnets . . . are they at all better?

LORD CAVERSHAM. They have had a serious relapse, I am sorry to say.

LORD GORING. Good morning, Miss Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN. [\_To\_ LORD CAVERSHAM.] I hope an operation will not be

necessary.

LORD CAVERSHAM. [\_Smiling at her pertness\_.] If it is, we shall have to

give Lady Caversham a narcotic. Otherwise she would never consent to

have a feather touched.

LORD GORING. [\_With increased emphasis\_.] Good morning, Miss Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN. [\_Turning round with feigned surprise\_.] Oh, are you

here? Of course you understand that after your breaking your appointment

I am never going to speak to you again.

LORD GORING. Oh, please don’t say such a thing. You are the one person

in London I really like to have to listen to me.

MABEL CHILTERN. Lord Goring, I never believe a single word that either

you or I say to each other.

LORD CAVERSHAM. You are quite right, my dear, quite right . . . as far

as he is concerned, I mean.

MABEL CHILTERN. Do you think you could possibly make your son behave a

little better occasionally? Just as a change.

LORD CAVERSHAM. I regret to say, Miss Chiltern, that I have no influence

at all over my son. I wish I had. If I had, I know what I would make

him do.

MABEL CHILTERN. I am afraid that he has one of those terribly weak

natures that are not susceptible to influence.

LORD CAVERSHAM. He is very heartless, very heartless.

LORD GORING. It seems to me that I am a little in the way here.

MABEL CHILTERN. It is very good for you to be in the way, and to know

what people say of you behind your back.

LORD GORING. I don’t at all like knowing what people say of me behind my

back. It makes me far too conceited.

LORD CAVERSHAM. After that, my dear, I really must bid you good morning.

MABEL CHILTERN. Oh! I hope you are not going to leave me all alone with

Lord Goring? Especially at such an early hour in the day.

LORD CAVERSHAM. I am afraid I can’t take him with me to Downing Street.

It is not the Prime Minster’s day for seeing the unemployed.

[\_Shakes hands with\_ MABEL CHILTERN, \_takes up his hat and stick\_, \_and

goes out\_, \_with a parting glare of indignation at\_ LORD GORING.]

MABEL CHILTERN. [\_Takes up roses and begins to arrange them in a bowl on

the table\_.] People who don’t keep their appointments in the Park are

horrid.

LORD GORING. Detestable.

MABEL CHILTERN. I am glad you admit it. But I wish you wouldn’t look so

pleased about it.

LORD GORING. I can’t help it. I always look pleased when I am with you.

MABEL CHILTERN. [\_Sadly\_.] Then I suppose it is my duty to remain with

you?

LORD GORING. Of course it is.

MABEL CHILTERN. Well, my duty is a thing I never do, on principle. It

always depresses me. So I am afraid I must leave you.

LORD GORING. Please don’t, Miss Mabel. I have something very particular

to say to you.

MABEL CHILTERN. [\_Rapturously\_.] Oh! is it a proposal?

LORD GORING. [\_Somewhat taken aback\_.] Well, yes, it is—I am bound to

say it is.

MABEL CHILTERN. [\_With a sigh of pleasure\_.] I am so glad. That makes

the second to-day.

LORD GORING. [\_Indignantly\_.] The second to-day? What conceited ass

has been impertinent enough to dare to propose to you before I had

proposed to you?

MABEL CHILTERN. Tommy Trafford, of course. It is one of Tommy’s days

for proposing. He always proposes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, during the

Season.

LORD GORING. You didn’t accept him, I hope?

MABEL CHILTERN. I make it a rule never to accept Tommy. That is why he

goes on proposing. Of course, as you didn’t turn up this morning, I very

nearly said yes. It would have been an excellent lesson both for him and

for you if I had. It would have taught you both better manners.

LORD GORING. Oh! bother Tommy Trafford. Tommy is a silly little ass. I

love you.

MABEL CHILTERN. I know. And I think you might have mentioned it before.

I am sure I have given you heaps of opportunities.

LORD GORING. Mabel, do be serious. Please be serious.

MABEL CHILTERN. Ah! that is the sort of thing a man always says to a

girl before he has been married to her. He never says it afterwards.

LORD GORING. [\_Taking hold of her hand\_.] Mabel, I have told you that I

love you. Can’t you love me a little in return?

MABEL CHILTERN. You silly Arthur! If you knew anything about . . .

anything, which you don’t, you would know that I adore you. Every one in

London knows it except you. It is a public scandal the way I adore you.

I have been going about for the last six months telling the whole of

society that I adore you. I wonder you consent to have anything to say

to me. I have no character left at all. At least, I feel so happy that

I am quite sure I have no character left at all.

LORD GORING. [\_Catches her in his arms and kisses her\_. \_Then there is

a pause of bliss\_.] Dear! Do you know I was awfully afraid of being

refused!

MABEL CHILTERN. [\_Looking up at him\_.] But you never have been refused

yet by anybody, have you, Arthur? I can’t imagine any one refusing you.

LORD GORING. [\_After kissing her again\_.] Of course I’m not nearly good

enough for you, Mabel.

MABEL CHILTERN. [\_Nestling close to him\_.] I am so glad, darling. I

was afraid you were.

LORD GORING. [\_After some hesitation\_.] And I’m . . . I’m a little over

thirty.

MABEL CHILTERN. Dear, you look weeks younger than that.

LORD GORING. [\_Enthusiastically\_.] How sweet of you to say so! . . .

And it is only fair to tell you frankly that I am fearfully extravagant.

MABEL CHILTERN. But so am I, Arthur. So we’re sure to agree. And now I

must go and see Gertrude.

LORD GORING. Must you really? [\_Kisses her\_.]

MABEL CHILTERN. Yes.

LORD GORING. Then do tell her I want to talk to her particularly. I

have been waiting here all the morning to see either her or Robert.

MABEL CHILTERN. Do you mean to say you didn’t come here expressly to

propose to me?

LORD GORING. [\_Triumphantly\_.] No; that was a flash of genius.

MABEL CHILTERN. Your first.

LORD GORING. [\_With determination\_.] My last.

MABEL CHILTERN. I am delighted to hear it. Now don’t stir. I’ll be

back in five minutes. And don’t fall into any temptations while I am

away.

LORD GORING. Dear Mabel, while you are away, there are none. It makes

me horribly dependent on you.

[\_Enter\_ LADY CHILTERN.]

LADY CHILTERN. Good morning, dear! How pretty you are looking!

MABEL CHILTERN. How pale you are looking, Gertrude! It is most

becoming!

LADY CHILTERN. Good morning, Lord Goring!

LORD GORING. [\_Bowing\_.] Good morning, Lady Chiltern!

MABEL CHILTERN. [\_Aside to\_ LORD GORING.] I shall be in the

conservatory under the second palm tree on the left.

LORD GORING. Second on the left?

MABEL CHILTERN. [\_With a look of mock surprise\_.] Yes; the usual palm

tree.

[\_Blows a kiss to him\_, \_unobserved by\_ LADY CHILTERN, \_and goes out\_.]

LORD GORING. Lady Chiltern, I have a certain amount of very good news to

tell you. Mrs. Cheveley gave me up Robert’s letter last night, and I

burned it. Robert is safe.

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Sinking on the sofa\_.] Safe! Oh! I am so glad of

that. What a good friend you are to him—to us!

LORD GORING. There is only one person now that could be said to be in

any danger.

LADY CHILTERN. Who is that?

LORD GORING. [\_Sitting down beside her\_.] Yourself.

LADY CHILTERN. I? In danger? What do you mean?

LORD GORING. Danger is too great a word. It is a word I should not have

used. But I admit I have something to tell you that may distress you,

that terribly distresses me. Yesterday evening you wrote me a very

beautiful, womanly letter, asking me for my help. You wrote to me as one

of your oldest friends, one of your husband’s oldest friends. Mrs.

Cheveley stole that letter from my rooms.

LADY CHILTERN. Well, what use is it to her? Why should she not have it?

LORD GORING. [\_Rising\_.] Lady Chiltern, I will be quite frank with you.

Mrs. Cheveley puts a certain construction on that letter and proposes to

send it to your husband.

LADY CHILTERN. But what construction could she put on it? . . . Oh! not

that! not that! If I in—in trouble, and wanting your help, trusting you,

propose to come to you . . . that you may advise me . . . assist me . . .

Oh! are there women so horrible as that . . .? And she proposes to send

it to my husband? Tell me what happened. Tell me all that happened.

LORD GORING. Mrs. Cheveley was concealed in a room adjoining my library,

without my knowledge. I thought that the person who was waiting in that

room to see me was yourself. Robert came in unexpectedly. A chair or

something fell in the room. He forced his way in, and he discovered her.

We had a terrible scene. I still thought it was you. He left me in

anger. At the end of everything Mrs. Cheveley got possession of your

letter—she stole it, when or how, I don’t know.

LADY CHILTERN. At what hour did this happen?

LORD GORING. At half-past ten. And now I propose that we tell Robert

the whole thing at once.

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Looking at him with amazement that is almost terror\_.]

You want me to tell Robert that the woman you expected was not Mrs.

Cheveley, but myself? That it was I whom you thought was concealed in a

room in your house, at half-past ten o’clock at night? You want me to

tell him that?

LORD GORING. I think it is better that he should know the exact truth.

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Rising\_.] Oh, I couldn’t, I couldn’t!

LORD GORING. May I do it?

LADY CHILTERN. No.

LORD GORING. [\_Gravely\_.] You are wrong, Lady Chiltern.

LADY CHILTERN. No. The letter must be intercepted. That is all. But

how can I do it? Letters arrive for him every moment of the day. His

secretaries open them and hand them to him. I dare not ask the servants

to bring me his letters. It would be impossible. Oh! why don’t you tell

me what to do?

LORD GORING. Pray be calm, Lady Chiltern, and answer the questions I am

going to put to you. You said his secretaries open his letters.

LADY CHILTERN. Yes.

LORD GORING. Who is with him to-day? Mr. Trafford, isn’t it?

LADY CHILTERN. No. Mr. Montford, I think.

LORD GORING. You can trust him?

LADY CHILTERN. [\_With a gesture of despair\_.] Oh! how do I know?

LORD GORING. He would do what you asked him, wouldn’t he?

LADY CHILTERN. I think so.

LORD GORING. Your letter was on pink paper. He could recognise it

without reading it, couldn’t he? By the colour?

LADY CHILTERN. I suppose so.

LORD GORING. Is he in the house now?

LADY CHILTERN. Yes.

LORD GORING. Then I will go and see him myself, and tell him that a

certain letter, written on pink paper, is to be forwarded to Robert

to-day, and that at all costs it must not reach him. [\_Goes to the

door\_, \_and opens it\_.] Oh! Robert is coming upstairs with the letter in

his hand. It has reached him already.

LADY CHILTERN. [\_With a cry of pain\_.] Oh! you have saved his life;

what have you done with mine?

[\_Enter\_ SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. \_He has the letter in his hand\_, \_and is

reading it\_. \_He comes towards his wife\_, \_not noticing\_ LORD GORING’S

\_presence\_.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. ‘I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you.

Gertrude.’ Oh, my love! Is this true? Do you indeed trust me, and want

me? If so, it was for me to come to you, not for you to write of coming

to me. This letter of yours, Gertrude, makes me feel that nothing that

the world may do can hurt me now. You want me, Gertrude?

[LORD GORING, \_unseen by\_ SIR ROBERT CHILTERN, \_makes an imploring sign

to\_ LADY CHILTERN \_to accept the situation and\_ SIR ROBERT’S \_error\_.]

LADY CHILTERN. Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. You trust me, Gertrude?

LADY CHILTERN. Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Ah! why did you not add you loved me?

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Taking his hand\_.] Because I loved you.

[LORD GORING \_passes into the conservatory\_.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Kisses her\_.] Gertrude, you don’t know what I

feel. When Montford passed me your letter across the table—he had opened

it by mistake, I suppose, without looking at the handwriting on the

envelope—and I read it—oh! I did not care what disgrace or punishment was

in store for me, I only thought you loved me still.

LADY CHILTERN. There is no disgrace in store for you, nor any public

shame. Mrs. Cheveley has handed over to Lord Goring the document that

was in her possession, and he has destroyed it.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Are you sure of this, Gertrude?

LADY CHILTERN. Yes; Lord Goring has just told me.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Then I am safe! Oh! what a wonderful thing to be

safe! For two days I have been in terror. I am safe now. How did

Arthur destroy my letter? Tell me.

LADY CHILTERN. He burned it.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I wish I had seen that one sin of my youth burning

to ashes. How many men there are in modern life who would like to see

their past burning to white ashes before them! Is Arthur still here?

LADY CHILTERN. Yes; he is in the conservatory.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I am so glad now I made that speech last night in

the House, so glad. I made it thinking that public disgrace might be the

result. But it has not been so.

LADY CHILTERN. Public honour has been the result.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I think so. I fear so, almost. For although I am

safe from detection, although every proof against me is destroyed, I

suppose, Gertrude . . . I suppose I should retire from public life? [\_He

looks anxiously at his wife\_.]

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Eagerly\_.] Oh yes, Robert, you should do that. It is

your duty to do that.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. It is much to surrender.

LADY CHILTERN. No; it will be much to gain.

[SIR ROBERT CHILTERN \_walks up and down the room with a troubled

expression\_. \_Then comes over to his wife\_, \_and puts his hand on her

shoulder\_.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. And you would be happy living somewhere alone with

me, abroad perhaps, or in the country away from London, away from public

life? You would have no regrets?

LADY CHILTERN. Oh! none, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Sadly\_.] And your ambition for me? You used to

be ambitious for me.

LADY CHILTERN. Oh, my ambition! I have none now, but that we two may

love each other. It was your ambition that led you astray. Let us not

talk about ambition.

[LORD GORING \_returns from the conservatory\_, \_looking very pleased with

himself\_, \_and with an entirely new buttonhole that some one has made for

him\_.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Going towards him\_.] Arthur, I have to thank you

for what you have done for me. I don’t know how I can repay you.

[\_Shakes hands with him\_.]

LORD GORING. My dear fellow, I’ll tell you at once. At the present

moment, under the usual palm tree . . . I mean in the conservatory . . .

[\_Enter\_ MASON.]

MASON. Lord Caversham.

LORD GORING. That admirable father of mine really makes a habit of

turning up at the wrong moment. It is very heartless of him, very

heartless indeed.

[\_Enter\_ LORD CAVERSHAM. MASON \_goes out\_.]

LORD CAVERSHAM. Good morning, Lady Chiltern! Warmest congratulations to

you, Chiltern, on your brilliant speech last night. I have just left the

Prime Minister, and you are to have the vacant seat in the Cabinet.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_With a look of joy and triumph\_.] A seat in the

Cabinet?

LORD CAVERSHAM. Yes; here is the Prime Minister’s letter. [\_Hands

letter\_.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Takes letter and reads it\_.] A seat in the

Cabinet!

LORD CAVERSHAM. Certainly, and you well deserve it too. You have got

what we want so much in political life nowadays—high character, high

moral tone, high principles. [\_To\_ LORD GORING.] Everything that you

have not got, sir, and never will have.

LORD GORING. I don’t like principles, father. I prefer prejudices.

[SIR ROBERT CHILTERN \_is on the brink of accepting the Prime Minister’s

offer\_, \_when he sees wife looking at him with her clear\_, \_candid eyes\_.

\_He then realises that it is impossible\_.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I cannot accept this offer, Lord Caversham. I have

made up my mind to decline it.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Decline it, sir!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. My intention is to retire at once from public life.

LORD CAVERSHAM. [\_Angrily\_.] Decline a seat in the Cabinet, and retire

from public life? Never heard such damned nonsense in the whole course

of my existence. I beg your pardon, Lady Chiltern. Chiltern, I beg your

pardon. [\_To\_ LORD GORING.] Don’t grin like that, sir.

LORD GORING. No, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Lady Chiltern, you are a sensible woman, the most

sensible woman in London, the most sensible woman I know. Will you

kindly prevent your husband from making such a . . . from taking such

. . . Will you kindly do that, Lady Chiltern?

LADY CHILTERN. I think my husband in right in his determination, Lord

Caversham. I approve of it.

LORD CAVERSHAM. You approve of it? Good heavens!

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Taking her husband’s hand\_.] I admire him for it. I

admire him immensely for it. I have never admired him so much before.

He is finer than even I thought him. [\_To\_ SIR ROBERT CHILTERN.] You

will go and write your letter to the Prime Minister now, won’t you?

Don’t hesitate about it, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_With a touch of bitterness\_.] I suppose I had

better write it at once. Such offers are not repeated. I will ask you

to excuse me for a moment, Lord Caversham.

LADY CHILTERN. I may come with you, Robert, may I not?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Yes, Gertrude.

[LADY CHILTERN \_goes out with him\_.]

LORD CAVERSHAM. What is the matter with this family? Something wrong

here, eh? [\_Tapping his forehead\_.] Idiocy? Hereditary, I suppose.

Both of them, too. Wife as well as husband. Very sad. Very sad indeed!

And they are not an old family. Can’t understand it.

LORD GORING. It is not idiocy, father, I assure you.

LORD CAVERSHAM. What is it then, sir?

LORD GORING. [\_After some hesitation\_.] Well, it is what is called

nowadays a high moral tone, father. That is all.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Hate these new-fangled names. Same thing as we used to

call idiocy fifty years ago. Shan’t stay in this house any longer.

LORD GORING. [\_Taking his arm\_.] Oh! just go in here for a moment,

father. Third palm tree to the left, the usual palm tree.

LORD CAVERSHAM. What, sir?

LORD GORING. I beg your pardon, father, I forgot. The conservatory,

father, the conservatory—there is some one there I want you to talk to.

LORD CAVERSHAM. What about, sir?

LORD GORING. About me, father,

LORD CAVERSHAM. [\_Grimly\_.] Not a subject on which much eloquence is

possible.

LORD GORING. No, father; but the lady is like me. She doesn’t care much

for eloquence in others. She thinks it a little loud.

[LORD CAVERSHAM \_goes out into the conservatory\_. LADY CHILTERN

\_enters\_.]

LORD GORING. Lady Chiltern, why are you playing Mrs. Cheveley’s cards?

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Startled\_.] I don’t understand you.

LORD GORING. Mrs. Cheveley made an attempt to ruin your husband. Either

to drive him from public life, or to make him adopt a dishonourable

position. From the latter tragedy you saved him. The former you are now

thrusting on him. Why should you do him the wrong Mrs. Cheveley tried to

do and failed?

LADY CHILTERN. Lord Goring?

LORD GORING. [\_Pulling himself together for a great effort\_, \_and

showing the philosopher that underlies the dandy\_.] Lady Chiltern, allow

me. You wrote me a letter last night in which you said you trusted me

and wanted my help. Now is the moment when you really want my help, now

is the time when you have got to trust me, to trust in my counsel and

judgment. You love Robert. Do you want to kill his love for you? What

sort of existence will he have if you rob him of the fruits of his

ambition, if you take him from the splendour of a great political career,

if you close the doors of public life against him, if you condemn him to

sterile failure, he who was made for triumph and success? Women are not

meant to judge us, but to forgive us when we need forgiveness. Pardon,

not punishment, is their mission. Why should you scourge him with rods

for a sin done in his youth, before he knew you, before he knew himself?

A man’s life is of more value than a woman’s. It has larger issues,

wider scope, greater ambitions. A woman’s life revolves in curves of

emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man’s life progresses.

Don’t make any terrible mistake, Lady Chiltern. A woman who can keep a

man’s love, and love him in return, has done all the world wants of

women, or should want of them.

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Troubled and hesitating\_.] But it is my husband

himself who wishes to retire from public life. He feels it is his duty.

It was he who first said so.

LORD GORING. Rather than lose your love, Robert would do anything, wreck

his whole career, as he is on the brink of doing now. He is making for

you a terrible sacrifice. Take my advice, Lady Chiltern, and do not

accept a sacrifice so great. If you do, you will live to repent it

bitterly. We men and women are not made to accept such sacrifices from

each other. We are not worthy of them. Besides, Robert has been

punished enough.

LADY CHILTERN. We have both been punished. I set him up too high.

LORD GORING. [\_With deep feeling in his voice\_.] Do not for that reason

set him down now too low. If he has fallen from his altar, do not thrust

him into the mire. Failure to Robert would be the very mire of shame.

Power is his passion. He would lose everything, even his power to feel

love. Your husband’s life is at this moment in your hands, your

husband’s love is in your hands. Don’t mar both for him.

[\_Enter\_ SIR ROBERT CHILTERN.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Gertrude, here is the draft of my letter. Shall I

read it to you?

LADY CHILTERN. Let me see it.

[SIR ROBERT \_hands her the letter\_. \_She reads it\_, \_and then\_, \_with a

gesture of passion\_, \_tears it up\_.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. What are you doing?

LADY CHILTERN. A man’s life is of more value than a woman’s. It has

larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. Our lives revolve in

curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man’s life

progresses. I have just learnt this, and much else with it, from Lord

Goring. And I will not spoil your life for you, nor see you spoil it as

a sacrifice to me, a useless sacrifice!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Gertrude! Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN. You can forget. Men easily forget. And I forgive. That

is how women help the world. I see that now.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Deeply overcome by emotion\_, \_embraces her\_.] My

wife! my wife! [\_To\_ LORD GORING.] Arthur, it seems that I am always to

be in your debt.

LORD GORING. Oh dear no, Robert. Your debt is to Lady Chiltern, not to

me!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I owe you much. And now tell me what you were

going to ask me just now as Lord Caversham came in.

LORD GORING. Robert, you are your sister’s guardian, and I want your

consent to my marriage with her. That is all.

LADY CHILTERN. Oh, I am so glad! I am so glad! [\_Shakes hands with\_

LORD GORING.]

LORD GORING. Thank you, Lady Chiltern.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_With a troubled look\_.] My sister to be your

wife?

LORD GORING. Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Speaking with great firmness\_.] Arthur, I am

very sorry, but the thing is quite out of the question. I have to think

of Mabel’s future happiness. And I don’t think her happiness would be

safe in your hands. And I cannot have her sacrificed!

LORD GORING. Sacrificed!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Yes, utterly sacrificed. Loveless marriages are

horrible. But there is one thing worse than an absolutely loveless

marriage. A marriage in which there is love, but on one side only;

faith, but on one side only; devotion, but on one side only, and in which

of the two hearts one is sure to be broken.

LORD GORING. But I love Mabel. No other woman has any place in my life.

LADY CHILTERN. Robert, if they love each other, why should they not be

married?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Arthur cannot bring Mabel the love that she

deserves.

LORD GORING. What reason have you for saying that?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_After a pause\_.] Do you really require me to

tell you?

LORD GORING. Certainly I do.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. As you choose. When I called on you yesterday

evening I found Mrs. Cheveley concealed in your rooms. It was between

ten and eleven o’clock at night. I do not wish to say anything more.

Your relations with Mrs. Cheveley have, as I said to you last night,

nothing whatsoever to do with me. I know you were engaged to be married

to her once. The fascination she exercised over you then seems to have

returned. You spoke to me last night of her as of a woman pure and

stainless, a woman whom you respected and honoured. That may be so. But

I cannot give my sister’s life into your hands. It would be wrong of me.

It would be unjust, infamously unjust to her.

LORD GORING. I have nothing more to say.

LADY CHILTERN. Robert, it was not Mrs. Cheveley whom Lord Goring

expected last night.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Not Mrs. Cheveley! Who was it then?

LORD GORING. Lady Chiltern!

LADY CHILTERN. It was your own wife. Robert, yesterday afternoon Lord

Goring told me that if ever I was in trouble I could come to him for

help, as he was our oldest and best friend. Later on, after that

terrible scene in this room, I wrote to him telling him that I trusted

him, that I had need of him, that I was coming to him for help and

advice. [SIR ROBERT CHILTERN \_takes the letter out of his pocket\_.]

Yes, that letter. I didn’t go to Lord Goring’s, after all. I felt that

it is from ourselves alone that help can come. Pride made me think that.

Mrs. Cheveley went. She stole my letter and sent it anonymously to you

this morning, that you should think . . . Oh! Robert, I cannot tell you

what she wished you to think. . . .

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. What! Had I fallen so low in your eyes that you

thought that even for a moment I could have doubted your goodness?

Gertrude, Gertrude, you are to me the white image of all good things, and

sin can never touch you. Arthur, you can go to Mabel, and you have my

best wishes! Oh! stop a moment. There is no name at the beginning of

this letter. The brilliant Mrs. Cheveley does not seem to have noticed

that. There should be a name.

LADY CHILTERN. Let me write yours. It is you I trust and need. You and

none else.

LORD GORING. Well, really, Lady Chiltern, I think I should have back my

own letter.

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Smiling\_.] No; you shall have Mabel. [\_Takes the

letter and writes her husband’s name on it\_.]

LORD GORING. Well, I hope she hasn’t changed her mind. It’s nearly

twenty minutes since I saw her last.

[\_Enter\_ MABEL CHILTERN \_and\_ LORD CAVERSHAM.]

MABEL CHILTERN. Lord Goring, I think your father’s conversation much

more improving than yours. I am only going to talk to Lord Caversham in

the future, and always under the usual palm tree.

LORD GORING. Darling! [\_Kisses her\_.]

LORD CAVERSHAM. [\_Considerably taken aback\_.] What does this mean, sir?

You don’t mean to say that this charming, clever young lady has been so

foolish as to accept you?

LORD GORING. Certainly, father! And Chiltern’s been wise enough to

accept the seat in the Cabinet.

LORD CAVERSHAM. I am very glad to hear that, Chiltern . . . I

congratulate you, sir. If the country doesn’t go to the dogs or the

Radicals, we shall have you Prime Minister, some day.

[\_Enter\_ MASON.]

MASON. Luncheon is on the table, my Lady!

[MASON \_goes out\_.]

MABEL CHILTERN. You’ll stop to luncheon, Lord Caversham, won’t you?

LORD CAVERSHAM. With pleasure, and I’ll drive you down to Downing Street

afterwards, Chiltern. You have a great future before you, a great

future. Wish I could say the same for you, sir. [\_To\_ LORD GORING.]

But your career will have to be entirely domestic.

LORD GORING. Yes, father, I prefer it domestic.

LORD CAVERSHAM. And if you don’t make this young lady an ideal husband,

I’ll cut you off with a shilling.

MABEL CHILTERN. An ideal husband! Oh, I don’t think I should like that.

It sounds like something in the next world.

LORD CAVERSHAM. What do you want him to be then, dear?

MABEL CHILTERN. He can be what he chooses. All I want is to be . . . to

be . . . oh! a real wife to him.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Upon my word, there is a good deal of common sense in

that, Lady Chiltern.

[\_They all go out except\_ SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. \_He sinks in a chair\_,

\_wrapt in thought\_. \_After a little time\_ LADY CHILTERN \_returns to look

for him\_.]

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Leaning over the back of the chair\_.] Aren’t you

coming in, Robert?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [\_Taking her hand\_.] Gertrude, is it love you feel

for me, or is it pity merely?

LADY CHILTERN. [\_Kisses him\_.] It is love, Robert. Love, and only

love. For both of us a new life is beginning.

CURTAIN

\* \* \* \* \*

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