

Page 50 The Importance of Being Earnest Act II

CECILY. Oh, no! I live here.

GWENDOLINE [*coldly*]. Really? Your mother, no doubt, or some female relative of advanced years, resides here also.

CECILY. Oh, no! I have no mother, nor, in fact, any relations.

GWENDOLINE. Indeed? [*Looks at her again through lorgnette.*]

CECILY. My dear guardian, with the assistance of Miss Prism, has the arduous task of looking after me.

GWENDOLINE. Your guardian?

CECILY. Yes. I am Mr. Worthing's ward.

GWENDOLINE [*jolted*]. Oh! It is strange he never mentioned to me that he had a ward. How secretive of him. He grows more interesting hourly. I am not sure, however, that the news inspires me with feelings of unmixed delight. [*Rises and moves R C.*] I am very fond of you, Cecily. I have liked you ever since I met you. But I am bound to state that, now I know that you are Mr. Worthing's ward, I cannot help expressing the wish that you were—well, just a little older than you seem to be—and not quite so very alluring in appearance. [*Moves C again.*] In fact, if I may speak candidly—

CECILY. Pray do! I think that whenever one has anything unpleasant to say, one should always be quite candid.

GWENDOLINE. Well, to speak with perfect candor, Cecily, I wish you were fully forty and more than usually plain for your age. Ernest has a strong, upright nature. He is the very soul of truth and honor. But even men of the noblest possible moral character are extremely susceptible to the influence of the physical charms of others.

CECILY. I beg your pardon, Gwendoline. Did you say Ernest?

GWENDOLINE. Yes.

CECILY. Oh, but it is not Mr. Ernest Worthing who is my guardian. It is his brother—his elder brother.

GWENDOLINE. Ernest never mentioned to me that he had a brother.

CECILY. I am sorry to say they have not been on good terms for a long time.

Start GWENDOLINE [*sitting again on settee*]. Ah, that accounts for

it. And now I think of it, I have never heard any man mention his brother. The subject seems distasteful to most men. Of course you are quite, quite sure that it is not Mr. Ernest Worthing who's your guardian?

CECILY. Quite sure. [*Pauses.*] In fact, I am going to be his.

GWENDOLINE [*inquiringly*]. I beg your pardon?

CECILY [*rather shy and confidingly, rising, crossing C, sitting beside her*]. Dearest Gwendoline, there is no reason why I should make any secret of it to you. Our little county newspaper is sure to chronicle the fact next week. [*Takes deep breath, then speaks ecstatically.*] Mr. Ernest Worthing and I are engaged to be married.

GWENDOLINE [*quite politely, rising, crossing R C*]. My darling Cecily, I think there must be some slight error. Mr. Ernest Worthing is engaged to *me*. The announcement will appear in the *Morning Post* on Saturday at the latest.

CECILY [*very politely, rising, moving R C*]. I am afraid you must be under some misconception. Ernest proposed to me exactly ten minutes ago. [*Takes diary from table and shows what she has written in it.*]

GWENDOLINE [*examining diary through her lorgnette carefully*]. It is certainly very curious, for he asked *me* to be his wife yesterday afternoon at five-thirty. If you would care to verify the incident, pray do so. I never travel without my diary. [*Produces her diary from handbag and shows her the place.*] I am so sorry, dear Cecily, if it is any disappointment to you, but I am afraid I have the prior claim. [*Shuts diary and puts it back in handbag triumphantly.*]

CECILY. It would distress me more than I can tell you, dear Gwendoline, if it caused you any mental or physical anguish, but I feel bound to point out that since Ernest proposed to *you* he has clearly changed his mind. [*Places diary back on table with a triumphant nod.*]

GWENDOLINE [*meditatively, moving L C*]. If the poor fellow has been entrapped into any foolish promise, I shall consider it my duty to rescue him *at once*, and with a *firm hand*.

CECILY [*thoughtfully and sadly, moving slowly C*]. Whatever

unfortunate entanglement my dear boy may have got into, I will never reproach him with it, *after* we are married.

GWENDOLINE [*crossing to her*]. Do you allude to *me*, Miss Cardew, as an entanglement? You are presumptuous. On an occasion of this kind, it becomes more than a moral duty to speak one's mind—it becomes a pleasure.

CECILY. Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Ernest into an engagement? How dare you? This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade.

[MERRIMAN *enters* R. *He carries a tea cloth and a salver.*
GWENDOLINE *is about to make a retort. The presence of a servant exercises a restraining influence under which both girls chafe.*]

GWENDOLINE [*satirically*]. I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different. [*With a toss of her head she moves U L C and pretends to inspect garden.*] Stop

MERRIMAN. Shall I lay tea here as usual, Miss?

CECILY [*sternly, in a clear voice*]. Yes, as usual. [MERRIMAN *crosses to table R C, clears table, placing things on table behind settee, then places tea cloth on table. Meanwhile, CECILY and GWENDOLINE glare at each other, and CECILY flounces D R.*]

GWENDOLINE [*still U L C*]. Quite a well-kept garden this is, Miss Cardew.

CECILY. So glad you like it, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLINE [*coming down to D C*]. I had no idea there were any flowers in the country.

CECILY [*moving C*]. Oh, flowers are as common here, Miss Fairfax, as people are in London.

[A SERVANT *enters* R, *carrying a tray set with tea things. He hands it to MERRIMAN, who places it on the table R C, then remains standing behind the table. The SERVANT then goes out R and re-enters with a plate of tea-cakes and one of*