

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING CECILY, or CECIL, or PRIZZY
A comedy by Daniel Curzon

CHARACTERS: (6, with one doubling)

ALGERNON MONCRIEF, a wealthy young man about town, 25-35
LANE, a servant, nice looking, 30-45
LORD NEVILLE BRACKNELL, cordial, stiff, over 50
CECILY CARDEW, a boyish girl, 20 – 25 (played by a male or a female, preferably a male)
MISS PRIZZIN, a governess, severe, of the unbending “progressive” persuasion, over 40
CECIL CARDEW, Cecily’s older brother, 21 – 26 (should be played by the same male or female who plays Cecily)
GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX, lipstick lesbian daughter of Lord Bracknell, 25-35

ACT I

SCENE 1

SETTING: Algernon’s nicely furnished flat in Half-Moon Street, London, 1895

ALGERNON: (Enters, looks around for something, does not see it. Calls.) Lane!

LANE: (offstage) Yes, Mr. Moncrieff?

ALGERNON: What are you doing in there?

LANE: Reading smut, sir.

ALGERNON: Oh, you are forever reading smut! It is not good for you.

LANE: I suppose not, sir.

ALGERNON: You should be *living* smut, not reading it!

LANE: If you say so, sir.

ALGERNON: I do say so! You will expect far too much from reality if you read smut! You will never be happy with ordinary life. And, besides, it is keeping you from setting the table for afternoon tea.

(LANE enters.)

LANE: I’m sorry, sir. It has become quite an addiction.

ALGERNON: Did you make a mess?

LANE: No, sir.

ALGERNON: Well, be sure you don't. The least you can do, since you clean up after me, is to clean up after yourself.

LANE: You've been very indulgent of me, sir.

ALGERNON: Well, it's hard to keep good help these days.

LANE: Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.

ALGERNON: By the way, is there some sort of pornography you are especially interested in?

LANE: I'd prefer not to say, sir.

ALGERNON: Oh, bother! I just asked so that I might get you an appropriate gift this Christmas.

LANE: Thank you, sir. I will set the table for afternoon tea. (Leaves.)

ALGERNON: Oh, and my uncle is coming, did I tell you?

LANE: (offstage) You told me, sir.

ALGERNON: Indulge him, but only up to a point.

LANE: (re-entering) What "point" is that, sir? Mr. Moncrief, I hope you have told your uncle not to try to fondle me anymore.

ALGERNON: I am afraid I have not, Lane. But that is the principal goal of my meeting with him today.

LANE: Very good, sir. It's not that I mind being fondled, but your uncle tends to use his hands rather too effusively.

ALGERNON: I know. But he gets so little in life.

LANE: Perhaps he needs a companion.

ALGERNON: Oh, he does. Only Aunt Augusta would not for a moment tolerate it, even though the two of them, I'm sure, have not been "intimate" for God knows how long. She would rather maintain the "decencies" than admit their marriage is a sham, and has always been a sham.

LANE: They did producer a lovely daughter. I'll give them that.

ALGERNON: Yes, my cousin is a dear. Lovely girl. If she were not my cousin – and a girl – I would marry her!

LANE: I don't see much likelihood that you will be marrying the man of your dreams any time soon, sir.

ALGERNON: All I want is someone down to earth, of a sunny disposition, a bit of a fop, a bit of a top, yet not overly insistent about either.

LANE: Excuse me for saying so, sir, but you bottoms can be quite pushy. Indeed greedy. If I am to trust my smut.

ALGERNON: You are right, of course, Lane. You always manage to keep me clear-headed on things.

LANE: You're welcome, Mr. Moncrief.

(LANE exits.)

(Sound of a doorbell.) (Offstage sound of two male voices.)

LANE: (enters, announces) Lord Bracknell!

BRACKNELL: (entering) Thank you, Lane.

LANE: You're welcome, sir.

ALGERNON: Uncle! How delightful to see you!

BRACKNELL: And you too, dear boy!

(They shake hands cordially.)

LANE: Will that be all, sir?

BRACKNELL: No, stay for a moment, Lane. (eagerly) Tell me how you've been!

LANE: Can't complain, sir.

BRACKNELL: Has my nephew been treating you as he should?

ALGERNON: Don't answer him, Lane.

LANE: I don't mind answering. (to Bracknell) He is treating me splendidly.

BRACKNELL: I don't believe it for a moment. You're merely saying that because Algernon is standing here listening.

ALGERNON: What rubbish!

BRACKNELL: You know, Lane, that you can always leave the employ of my nephew and come and work for me. (with insinuation) You can rest assured that I will treat you ten times better.

LANE: (looking uncomfortable, directing his words toward Algernon) That's very kind of you, Lord Bracknell.

BRACKNELL: We have numerous servants already, of course, but I am sure that we can find something for you to do. Not too taxing, perhaps twice a week or so.

ALGERNON: Uncle!

BRACKNELL: What?

ALGERNON: There is something I wish to speak to you about.

BRACKNELL: Oh, and I thought I was coming for tea.

ALGERNON: We can have tea. But there is a matter I want to discuss *during* tea.

BRACKNELL: Oh, my word, that sounds ominous.

ALGERNON: You may go, Lane.

LANE: Thank you, sir. I will see to the cucumber sandwiches.

BRACKNELL: Oh, not those again! I'm afraid I can't bear the thought of yet another cucumber sandwich.

ALGERNON: I thought you adored cucumber sandwiches.

BRACKNELL: I adored them in my youth, but now that the years have moved on, I find that cucumbers give me terrible . . . dispepsia

ALGERNON: I am sure that Lane has some other food that he can substitute.

LANE: I will see what I have in the pantry or in storage, sir.

BRACKNELL: Of course I could go for a *whole* cucumber, if Lane could provide that.

LANE: Lord Bracknell!

ALGERNON: Uncle Neville, please!

BRACKNELL: What did I say?

LANE: Excuse me, Mr. Moncrief, Lord Bracknell. (He leaves a bit chagrined.)

BRACKNELL: Good heavens, what did I say?!

ALGERNON: You know what you said.

BRACKNELL: I swear I don't.

ALGERNON: Well, let us get right to it then. I had hoped to deal with this matter over a civilised afternoon tea, but apparently it won't wait.

(A pause.)

BRACKNELL: Well, *I'm* waiting.

ALGERNON: It's about the way you handle Lane.

BRACKNELL: Did I handle Lane? I'm quite certain that I didn't handle Lane.

ALGERNON: Well, you wanted to handle Lane! Every time you visit, it has become embarrassingly obvious how much you wish to handle Lane.

BRACKNELL: Has he complained?

ALGERNON: He has. He intimates that you have tried to "fondle" him from time to time.

BRACKNELL: Fondled?

ALGERNON: Don't deny it. Lane would not lie. And your longing for him virtually fills the air in the room when you are near him.

BRACKNELL: Well, he is an attractive man, in that obsequious, middle-class sort of way.

ALGERNON: Uncle Neville, every time I see you, you are less discreet. Are you aware?!

BRACKNELL: I don't know what you mean.

ALGERNON: You can't go around fondling the help! I know that you and Aunt Augusta have come to some sort of "accommodation" about that side of your life. And I have my own peccadilloes. But it's 1895 and we can't throw caution to the wind!

BRACKNELL: I apologise for apparently being so obvious. I'm rather new to this. Perhaps I am clumsy. I don't do it to all the male servants.

ALGERNON: Just to mine!

BRACKNELL: I am sorry if you have dibs on Lane.

ALGERNON: Good grief, I have no dibs on Lane. He is hardly my type. I just think it rather coarse in a lord to display your inclinations so transparently.

BRACKNELL: Forgive me, Algernon. I suppose I have become careless, now that I have accepted what I could not accept for so long. Henceforth I will certainly try to control my vulgar impulses when I am around your servants. You are quite right. It is unseemly.

ALGERNON: I appreciate that.

BRACKNELL: Of course when I was attracted to women, or said I was, I did not have to be quite so cautious in my behaviour. At least in flirtations.

ALGERNON: It is the way of the world. I have gotten quite good at it.

BRACKNELL: Don't become so good at it that you lose who you really are. Like I did.

ALGERNON: But I must marry! You know that! Otherwise is to raise suspicions and ruin my career, when I get around to getting one, to say nothing of my standing in society..

BRACKNELL: I did as you are doing, dear boy. I do not regret having had my precious Gwendolen with your aunt. She is a capital girl. And I do not even regret Augusta, at least for those first fifteen years. Alas, of late she has become an unbearable Gorgon. I can hardly stand to be in the same room with her, let alone the same bed. And if you think Augusta has somehow reached some "accommodation" with me about our sex lives, you are quite, quite mistaken. I thought over time she might lose that so-called heyday in the blood. Unfortunately, she still expects and demands a total "accommodation" to her needs at least once a day.

ALGERNON: Good God, no! Aunt Augusta?! A sex life!?

BRACKNELL: Do not, ask me, I pray you, to spell out the details. They might cause you to tear out your hair, or your eyes.

ALGERNON: At the very least.

BRACKNELL: She has told me more times than I care to count that she receives no pleasure whatsoever from the conjugal acts we perform together, but it does satisfy her that I am not running around after “other tail,” as she so elegantly puts it.

ALGERNON: Can’t you put her off? With some indisposition, or a limp member, or some such?

BRACKNELL: Alas, my member still works like a charm, even at my age. I thought I would lose the power of erection with the passing of the years. Yet, if anything, I seem to grow harder with time. It is both a blessing – and a terrible, terrible curse.

ALGERNON: Oh, Uncle, I had no idea!

BRACKNELL: Few do. The one last area in our modern times that we cannot seem to discuss honestly even with our beloved relatives and friends is the precise details of our libidos as they find their personal expressions.

ALGERNON: Too true. Such things are to be shared with our clergy. And still we must carry on as we must carry on. And that is why I still intend to ask Cecily to marry me.

BRACKNELL: Do you really think that a good idea, after all I’ve revealed to you?

ALGERNON: But Cecily is the only girl I’ve ever met who comes anywhere close to being someone I could Do That to. You haven’t met her. But she is perfect.

BRACKNELL: I believe she resides in the country.

ALGERNON: She does. She wears the most adorable shirts and trousers and boots.

BRACKNELL: How interesting.

ALGERNON: She milks her own cows! She rides. Horses!

BRACKNELL: And not side-saddle either, I’ll bet.

ALGERNON: Oh, never! She sits astride the most fiercest stallions like a . . . like a . . .

BRACKNELL: A man?

ALGERNON: I was going to say like a Joan of Arc.

BRACKNELL: I think I was close enough.

ALGERNON: I am certain that I could make a beautiful life with my darling Cecily.

BRACKNELL: Have you asked her to marry you then?

ALGERNON: Not yet. I was hoping to go down to the country this week-end and see the lay of the land.

BRACKNELL: I see.

ALGERNON: You do not approve. I can tell.

BRACKNELL: She sounds perfectly perfect – for somebody else. Perhaps for my daughter.

ALGERNON: For Gwendolen?

BRACKNELL: Yes, that is my only daughter.

ALGERNON: What are you saying about Gwendolen? Dare I ask?

BRACKNELL: You've met her, on many occasions. Haven't you noticed certain things about her?

ALGERNON: That's she is pretty. That she loves lipstick. That she speaks her mind.

BRACKNELL: And nothing more?

ALGERNON: You are not saying . . . ?

BRACKNELL: I would hardly wish to categorize my own daughter. She definitely has never told me anything about any private feelings, or longings, that she may harbour.

ALGERNON: Well, I would hope not!

BRACKNELL: Don't be such a prude, Algernon. Times are changing.

ALGERNON: I don't entirely think so, new century approaching or not. But do inform me what leads you to wonder about your daughter's "leanings"? Is that a good word for it?

(LANE enters.)

LANE: Afternoon tea is laid, Mr. Moncrief. (an after-thought) Lord Bracknell.

ALGERNON: Thank you, Lane.

BRACKNELL: Thank you, Mr. Lane. At least something is getting laid.

LANE: (uncertain) Thank you. (Exits.)

ALGERNON: So what is it about Gwendolen that leads you to say these incredible things?

BRACKNELL: Well, for one thing, she has concocted the preposterous idea that she could only be happy if she married a man named Ernest.

ALGERNON: She has? How extraordinary.

BRACKNELL: I would put that up there with strange perversions far worse than any you or I might ever engage in, except that I think she has just simply made it up to avoid dealing with most men on that level.

ALGERNON: Because most men are not named Ernest.

BRACKNELL: Very few. She won't even entertain an Ernie.

ALGERNON: Really?! Has she shown any interest whatsoever in someone of the male gender?

BRACKNELL: She went for a long walk on a beach one time with a certain "Percival" of undetermined gender. But he or she turned out to be a *gardener*!

ALGERNON: (appalled) No! Gwendolen was chaperoned of course?!

BRACKNELL: She was. Though I hardly think it was necessary. Lately she has been out riding with a tall man or woman named "Beverley." It is not his or her real name, I'm positive.

ALGERNON: Was he or she just trying to get into Gwendolen's good graces?

BRACKNELL: And perhaps into the Bracknell fortune.

ALGERNON: You ought to hire a private detective to find out his or her real name. And his or her true intentions. As well as his or her true gender.

BRACKNELL: To say nothing of his or her class.

BRACKNELL / ALGERNON: It goes without saying!

BRACKNELL: I really cannot tell if Gwendolen is serious about these "ambiguous" people or merely trying to annoy her mother.

ALGERNON: Is Aunt Augusta terribly annoyed?

BRACKNELL: She threw a croquet mallet at the one called "Beverley."

ALGERNON: No! How like Aunt Augusta. Isn't there some way you might broach the topic with Gwendolen?

BRACKNELL: You mean the way you and I did last year?

ALGERNON: It would clarify things enormously.

BRACKNELL: It would. And I'm glad you and I did, even though our secret came out with immense difficulty. But I cannot bring myself to address my daughter's sex life. I guess I am the prude!

ALGERNON: Well, you could if it were simply a predictable man that she was involved with!

BRACKNELL: Even then, I would hardly draw her a diagram!

ALGERNON: Come to think of it, now that I am at last more or less my real self, I wish *I* could come with immense difficulty. It takes me practically no time at all.

BRACKNELL: I am not entirely sure I want to know everything that you are telling me. And I most certainly do not ever wish to have a conversation like this with my daughter!

ALGERNON: I wonder if I shall ever have a daughter.

BRACKNELL: Every man should have a daughter.

ALGERNON: Why?

BRACKNELL: I don't know. It sounded like something to say at the moment.

ALGERNON: Really, Uncle Neville, you have picked up some very bad habits from Lady Bracknell. She'll say anything at any time to get her way, even if she contradicts herself.

BRACKNELL: True. But after the first twenty years or so, you stop hearing. Not just listening, hearing.

ALGERNON: I don't know whether to laugh or to cry. It sounds so sad, so cynical.

BRACKNELL: It is not cynical. What is cynical is not recognizing reality even when it slaps you across the face. Now that is *deeply* cynical.

ALGERNON: I am not sure I like these observations from you, Uncle. I suspect that I would not put up with them if you were not a relative.

BRACKNELL: Believe me, there are many things people would not put up with if they were not from relatives. Like visits at Christmas. And large family picnics. Especially picnics with ants.

ALGERNON: Picnics with *aunts*? [British pronunciation]

BRACKNELL: With *aunts* or with ants, both persistent and unbearable!

ALGERNON: Shall we go in for tea then?

BRACKNELL: You know what, dear boy. I think I will skip tea today.

ALGERNON: Oh, now I hope I have not hurt your feelings.

BRACKNELL: I gave up feelings when I married Lady Bracknell.

ALGERNON: Come along now. You need a good tea to steel you for whatever the evening may bring. (Starts to exit.)

BRACKNELL: No, I am going to demur. Perhaps we can do it next week. Or the week after that. Give my regrets to Lane for all his work. (Starts to exit.)

ALGERNON: Uncle, I hope that we have not quarreled.

BRACKNELL: Not a bit. It's probably just the thought of another cucumber sandwich that has indisposed me. I hope you will take my advice and think twice about pursuing Cecily down there in the country. I wouldn't wish my favourite nephew to have to lead a life of subterfuge, inventing sick relatives and fake brothers and God knows what else in order to live your life as you want to.

ALGERNON: In some ways, I rather enjoy the subterfuge. It can be quite thrilling.

BRACKNELL: Yes, I hear Reading Gaol is terribly thrilling.

ALGERNON: Well, I might warn you as well, Uncle. I may be still living the lie, but your new-found freedom has pitfalls of its own.

BRACKNELL: I just don't want you to wind up married to some female person merely because of the pressures society exerts. You will harm not only yourself but quite possibly the woman you marry.

ALGERNON: I do not believe that you have hurt Aunt Augusta one whit. Nothing can hurt Aunt Augusta one whit.

BRACKNELL: Your aunt has always been a formidable, even intimidating, person. But deep down inside she is . . . is . . .

ALGERNON: What? A delicate bloom, a playful kitten?

BRACKNELL: No, inside she is the same as she is outside, with the self-esteem of a Vlad the Impaler. I don't know what I was thinking there. Perhaps it is my age. Nevertheless, I wouldn't want you be like me and wind up having to fondle the male help. The unwilling male help at that. How desperate.

ALGERNON: Oh, dear, I hope it doesn't come to that!

BRACKNELL: Exactly. I will say goodbye now, Algernon. I hope the tea is satisfactory. (Exits.)

(Algernon is frustrated.)

ALGERNON: Oh, pish. How troublesome everything is!

LIGHTS OUT

SCENE 2

SETTING: The garden of the manor house, Woolton

(Tea items are set on a table, with three chairs.)

(Cecily in her boyish garb is waving a tennis racket about.)

CECILY: I think I'm getting the hang of this, finally.

(Her companion is a rather severe lady who does not approve of much.)

MISS PRIZZIN: I suppose. Of course there are starving children in India who could use a tennis racket. But don't worry yourself about them, Cecily.

CECILY: Oh, Prizzy, don't be disagreeable, at least not so late in the day. So far it has been a delicious day. Do not spoil it.

MISS PRIZZIN: I do not chose my moods by the time of day but by the appropriateness of the mood.

CECILY: I haven't even used my tennis racket once. Do you want me to pack it up and send it off to India?

MISS PRIZZIN: Far be it from me to tell you what to do.

CECILY: Oh, you tell me what to do constantly!

MISS PRIZZIN: I may make veiled suggestions. But I never impose my opinions on others.

CECILY: Do you truly believe that about yourself?

MISS PRIZZIN: Come have your tea. It's getting cold.

CECILY: Oh, I so hate tea!

MISS PRIZZIN: Perhaps if you didn't lace it with so much milk and sugar you wouldn't hate it so much.

CECILY: The reason I lace it is to hide the taste of the tea.

MISS PRIZZIN: Over time, the milk and sugar will make you fat and unhealthy, Cecily.

CECILY: Well, I'm not fat and unhealthy now! So there!

MISS PRIZZIN: Perhaps I should ask *you* not to be so disagreeable so late in the day.

(Miss Prizzin takes a sip of tea.)

MISS PRIZZIN: The tea is delightful. Plain but delightful.

CECILY: (with an edge) Don't ever, ever leave my employ, Prizzy. Will you promise me that?

MISS PRIZZIN: I promised your grandfather on his deathbed that I would never abandon you as your governess. We even signed a contract on it. I intend to honor that contract until the day I die. Or you do. Whichever comes first. And I keep that contract upon my person at all times. (She taps her chest.)

CECILY: (with an edge) Oh, that does sound so reassuring. By the way, do you mind if I enquire how much money you are paid to be my governess?

MISS PRIZZIN: Cecily, that is an impertinent question.

CECILY: Is it? It seems perfectly reasonable to me to wonder how much of my inheritance goes to you each month.

MISS PRIZZIN: It is paid yearly. I will tell you that much.

CECILY: So it would take a whole year to terminate it?

MISS PRIZZIN: Probably longer. Since I would contest any attempt to break the contract.

CECILY: You wouldn't! Not that I would dream of ending our relationship.

MISS PRIZZIN: Of course you wouldn't.

CECILY: You are so very good for me. You warn me about sugar and milk and –

MISS PRIZZIN: To say nothing of your selfishness toward the oppressed in India. Plus, I have a list of other countries. (Looks for it, finds it immediately.)

CECILY: Yes. How could I forget.

MISS PRIZZIN: I hate to praise myself, Cecily, but I am your better nature.

CECILY: I always feel so positively *good* when I'm around you, Prizzy.

MISS PRIZZIN: Someone's got to do it. In our case, that lot has fallen to me. Here is that list!
(Hands it over.)

CECILY: Lucky old me!

MISS PRIZZIN: I am pleased that you see that my efforts to improve you every day in every way in the highest principles in life, however difficult that task may be, do not go unappreciated.

CECILY: (politely) Can we change the subject, Prizzy? (Puts down the list.)

MISS PRIZZIN: If you insist. Far be it from me to impose high principles on the unwilling.

CECILY: Do you think I am unalterably selfish?

MISS PRIZZIN: If I did not believe that you can improve, I would not stay as your governess.

CECILY: (hopefully) Really?

MISS PRIZZIN: You are merely a young woman who needs the right guidance. It might take another year. It might take another twenty or twenty-five. But I am sure you can do it.

CECILY: Twenty-five years?

MISS PRIZZIN: Is that not an alluring idea? We have barely begun our lessons on sweatshop conditions among the Hmong people.

CECILY: Among the Hmong? I can barely wait.

MISS PRIZZIN: All in good time, dear Cecily. Today we must begin our lessons about fracking.

CECILY: It sounds dirty!

MISS PRIZZIN: It is a name I have made up. Fracking is indeed dirty, my dear. You have no idea. It is nothing less than the rape of our mother the Earth!

CECILY: I certainly don't want the Earth raped, dear Prizzy, but can't we have at least one conversation about something not of high principles, something even trivial?

MISS PRIZZIN: There will be time for the trivial in Hell, Cecily. It behooves us while we are on this planet to fight for only the Best Causes, every moment of every waking minute.

CECILY: I so wish that I could do it even in my sleep!

MISS PRISSIN: Now that's better. Perhaps we could set up one of these new Victrolas, as I believe they are called, and have you listen, in your hours of repose, to the higher principles I would record for you.

CECILY: Oh, yes! That would surely speed up my improvement by years!

MISS PRIZZIN: I will look into it then. Now have your tea. There are likewise some sugarless and flourless crumpets set out for you. Just there.

CECILY: Oh, goody! What would I ever do with out you, Prizzy?!

MISS PRIZZIN: I hate to think about it. (getting up) Excuse me, Cecily, I must go inside for a few moments.

CECILY: Of course.

MISS PRIZZIN: Do you know why I am going inside?

CECILY: I can guess.

MISS PRIZZIN: There is no need to guess. We are modern women. I am going for a whiz.

CECILY: Yes, the tea.

MISS PRIZZIN: There is no need to be ashamed of our bodily functions, Cecily.

CECILY: I am not ashamed. But do we have to announce them in advance?

MISS PRIZZIN: I thought that my announcement would give you a better chance of gauging how long I will be absent.

CECILY: It could have been a surprise!

MISS PRIZZIN: No modern young woman should ever be surprised. All the better to thrive.
Would you like to accompany me while I whiz?

CECILY: Thanks, I'll pass. If that's the word. Take as long as you like, Prizzy. I will occupy myself with these delicious crumpets. (She grabs one from a plate.)

MISS PRIZZIN: Very well. (She leaves.)

CECILY: (tastes a crumpet) They're horrid! (She puts it back, then notices there is a bite out of it, picks it up wondering if she should finish the crumpet. After deciding, she tosses it away, to the back. She looks guilty.) Oh, dear.

(Cecily picks up the tennis racket again and takes a few furtive swings, looking not to be caught.)

(Algernon enters unseen. He watches the boyish girl waving the tennis racket. He likes what he sees.)

ALGERNON: (after a particularly boyish move on Cecily's part) Well played!

CECILY: (startled) Oh, good heavens, there is a man in my garden!

ALGERNON: Cecily, it's me, Algernon. Don't you remember?

CECILY: Are you the young man from the Antivivisectionist Society?

ALGERNON: No.

CECILY: Are you the young man from the Progressive Party that Prizzy belongs to?

ALGERNON: No.

CECILY: Well then, are you the young interloper Prizzy introduced me to at her Women Only Suffragette group?

ALGERNON: You seem to know a great many young men, it would seem.

CECILY: It would seem, but obviously I have quite forgotten them. Just who are you then?

ALGERNON: I am Algernon Moncrief. We met at the British Museum. We were both looking at the Greco-Roman nudes.

CECILY: Was I?

ALGERNON: We exchanged some very sprightly words.

CECILY: Really? I don't remember.

ALGERNON: You said "Those nudes don't look like anybody *I* know."

CECILY: And you said, "You haven't seen *me* nude."

ALGERNON: I said no such thing!

CECILY: Oh, that must have been yet another young man. What *did* you say?

ALGERNON: I do not think it matters. Maybe what I say today will matter more.

CECILY: Oh dear, you haven't come to propose marriage to me, I hope.

ALGERNON: How extraordinary. You have intuited that already?

CECILY: Not particularly. But young men – and others – always seem to be proposing to me on a regular basis.

ALGERNON: Maybe that is because you are so completely fetching.

CECILY: Like a dog?

ALGERNON: Not in the slightest! Your charming face, your movements, your . . .

CECILY: . . . clumsiness, my terrible singing voice?

ALGERNON: Have you a terrible singing voice?

CECILY: I think so. No one has ever told me that I haven't.

ALGERNON: Even though I haven't heard it, I am sure your singing voice is exquisite.

CECILY: Oh, you're just saying that.

ALGERNON: No, it is true.

CECILY: My governess says that I should be wary of men who compliment too easily. They want just one thing.

ALGERNON: That is not true! They usually want several things.

CECILY: And none of them good, at least not for Cecily. What do you think of girls who talk about themselves in the third person? Are they especially vain?

ALGERNON: I can hardly say, unless I were to get to know them much better.

(Enter Miss Prizzin.)

MISS PRIZZIN: Here I am, the third person! Someone wants to get to know me better?

CECILY: Oh, there you are. I hope your time away from me was eventful.

MISS PRIZZIN: I see that I cannot leave you alone for long.

CECILY: Have you two not met? Mr. Algernon Moncrief, this is my governess, Miss Prizzin.

MISS PRIZZIN: And chaperone. And companion.

ALGERNON: How very nice to meet you, in all your roles.

MISS PRIZZIN: That remains to be seen. What precisely is the purpose of your visit here today?
Are you selling books door to door perhaps? Or other items?

ALGERNON: No, no books. No other items.

MISS PRIZZIN: Are you a missionary then?

ALGERNON: I have a mission, yes, yet I would not call myself a missionary.

CECILY: What position are you engaged in then?

ALGERNON: I did not mean to get into such details on my first visit.

MISS PRIZZIN: If your position as a missionary is not something of immediate import, I
wouldn't know what is.

ALGERNON: I repeat: I am not a missionary. I am not a salesman of any sort. Except possibly
to sell Miss Cecily here on the thought of meeting with me again.

MISS PRIZZIN: Alone?

ALGERNON: Yes, alone. I believe it's been known to happen of late, a man and a woman
having a luncheon or a stroll, perchance attending a symphony in side-by-side
seats.

MISS PRIZZIN: I am afraid that I do not approve of Cecily involving herself in such activities.
God knows what she might hear from some of the men around these days,
notably rich men of the idle upper class. Their opinions are invariably suspect.

ALGERNON: I am sure that Cecily can handle herself as well as any young man she finds
herself with.

MISS PRIZZIN: Cecily is still very impressionable. One wants those impressions to be of a certain elevated and moral character.

ALGERNON: Oh, does one?

CECILY: Oh, Prizzy, don't you think I ought to hear more than just you all the time? Won't that make me rather narrow?

MISS PRIZZIN: Do you think my opinions are narrow?! This is the first time I've heard that!

ALGERNON: You wouldn't have any tea by any chance, would you?

CECILY: Yes.

MISS PRIZZIN: No.

ALGERNON: Which is it?

MISS PRIZZIN: Indeed we had some tea. But now it is quite cold and impossible to serve.

ALGERNON: Is it not possible to drink cold tea?

MISS PRIZZIN: Not in England. Besides, our tea is not really cold. It's lukewarm.

ALGERNON: Lukewarm tea sounds utterly ripping, if I can have it in these wonderful surroundings.

CECILY: Let the gentleman have some tea, Prizzy. We have plenty. You can have mine. I have barely touched it.

MISS PRIZZIN: I can scarcely believe the gentleman would want your leftover tea, Cecily.

ALGERNON: I don't mind. I am sure Cecily does not have germs.

MISS PRIZZIN: I am sure that she does.

CECILY: Prizzy, what a thing to say!

MISS PRIZZIN: Of course only the proper kind of germs, the ones that help with digestion in the stomach and also in the lower colon.

CECILY: Prizzy!

MISS PRIZZIN: What? A modern woman need not be embarrassed by her bacteria!

ALGERNON: Perhaps I can serve myself? (Reaches for the teapot. It is hot.) Ouch! I thought you said it was cold, Miss Prizzin.

MISS PRIZZIN: I gather I was mistaken. Here, let me serve it to you. After all, you are a guest.

ALGERNON: Many thanks, I'm sure.

(Miss Prizzin gets up, sets him a cup, and begins to pour him a cup of tea.)

MISS PRIZZIN: (with an edge) I hope this is satisfactory.

ALGERNON: (wary) I'm sure you won't spill it on me.

MISS PRIZZIN: Why would I wish to do that?

ALGERNON: I'm sure I don't know.

MISS PRIZZIN: (when his cup is full) There! Now that wasn't dangerous, was it?

CECILY: You're quite fortunate today, Mr. Moncrief.

ALGERNON: And why is that, Miss Cardew? For getting some hot tea after all?

CECILY: For not having the hot tea scald your nether regions. I can recall at least five other occasions when that has occurred.

ALGERNON: When Miss Prizzin was pouring?

MISS PRIZZIN: I'm afraid I must confess it was me. You see, I have a kind of palsy that sometimes simply overcomes me and makes my hands shake. (Demonstrates.)

ALGERNON: How dreadful.

CECILY: But it's not permanent. It comes and goes.

MISS PRIZZIN: It does. I count my blessings.

ALGERNON: One might term it a peripatetic palsy, mightn't one?

MISS PRIZZIN: I'd more likely term it "muscular" palsy. (She all but points to her arm muscles.)

ALGERNON: And they call it the weaker sex!

MISS PRIZZIN: They used to, didn't they? Would you care for anything in your tea, Mr. Moncrief?

ALGERNON: What did you have in mind?

MISS PRIZZIN: Don't look so worried, Mr. Moncrief. I was just thinking of some sugar and whole milk.

ALGERNON: I wouldn't mind some. How kind of you.

CECILY: (alarmed) Oh, no, Mr. Moncrief, not those!

ALGERNON: What?

MISS PRIZZIN: Don't be alarmed, Cecily. Milk and sugar take *time*. Our guest is hardly in danger at the moment.

ALGERNON: Perhaps I should put a napkin on my lap.

MISS PRIZZIN: Perhaps you should.

(She hands him a napkin. She is still holding the teapot, almost as a weapon.)

ALGERNON: Have you any napkins made of galvanized burlap perchance?

MISS PRIZZIN: I'm afraid we are all out. We have had so many misfortunate opportunities to use them.

ALGERNON: I guess this one will have to do. I think I will take my tea neat, if that is the expression.

CECILY: Are you a teetotaler then?

ALGERNON: Not really, Miss Cardew. I have been known to indulge in liquids of a non-medicinal constitution, upon occasion.

MISS PRIZZIN: What sort of liquids are we talking about? Would you care to spell them out?

ALGERNON: I would not. I'm sure your lips are forever pure, Miss Prizzin.

MISS PRIZZIN: I don't believe that we were discussing me. But you and your liquids!

CECILY: Oh, dear there has been ever so much discussion of liquids today.

MISS PRIZZIN: You can never be too careful about what goes into your body, Cecily. Or what comes out.

CECILY: Sometimes I rail against the restrictions of the time we live in. But then there are other times when I rather prefer them to the . . . overly explained, shall we say.

ALGERNON: You are a study in perfection, not too much of one thing or the other.

MISS PRIZZIN: You are a student then of young girls, Mr. Moncrief?

ALGERNON: Not inordinately, Miss Prizzin. Are you?

MISS PRIZZIN: Let's just say that I have devoted my life to young girls and their pussies.

ALGERNON: I beg your pardon?

CECILY: Oh, Miss Prizzin refers to her extensive collection of embroidered cats, many of them created by the young girls whom she tutored before me. Would you like to see her collection?

ALGERNON: How very, very interesting. Were these pussies embroidered from life, Miss Prizzin?

MISS PRIZZIN: Some were.

ALGERNON: The rest from your imagination perhaps?

CECILY: I don't mean to be rude, but are we going to talk about pussies all day? Why can't we talk about something dangerous instead?! I despise cats.

ALGERNON: Really?

CECILY: They are so sneaky. And they lick their behinds where everyone can see. Moreover, they make my sinuses swell up and hurt until I literally cry. Why would I not hate cats?

ALGERNON: Then surely you must pick a husband who does not care for pussies, I mean cats, all that much either. You and he would be very compatible, it would seem.

MISS PRIZZIN: It takes more to make a marriage than an aversion to pussies, Mr. Moncrief.

ALGERNON: You are an authority on marriage then, Miss Prizzin? Perhaps you have been married several times and thus know whereof you speak?

MISS PRIZZIN: One does not have to drown in order to know what it is like. Observation of others is more than sufficient.

ALGERNON: You think marriage akin to drowning then?! I'm afraid that I have a much rosier view of the institution than you seem to possess, Miss Prizzin.

MISS PRIZZIN: As a matter of fact, I was married once, Mr. Moncrief. To a minister in the Church of England.

CECILY: Prizzy, really? This is news to me.

MISS PRIZZIN: The marriage was so sacred, and so short, that I rarely mention it.

ALGERNON: And you believe that your sacred and short marriage provides insight to others on what a marriage might be?

MISS PRIZZIN: Far be it from me, Mr. Moncrief, to dictate how others should marry. I will say, though, that the depth of the sacredness of my time with my husband was so profound that I feel completely qualified to give direction in such a life choice to those around me. Almost, I dare say, as qualified as any bachelor with a large fortune and a decided lack of apparent sacredness.

ALGERNON: I have found that “sacredness” is often in the eye of the beholder, even more than beauty is.

MISS PRIZZIN: You don’t say? How quaint.

ALGERNON: I don’t think it quaint when people mistake their own base impulses for the Word of God or other “Good Causes.”

MISS PRIZZIN: Perhaps some people’s impulses are baser than other people’s. They could be blind to themselves. Do you think?

ALGERNON: I am not as old as you, Miss Prizzin, but I have observed that far too many “holy” folk confuse their “sacred” duties, even their “sacred” connubial gyrations, for some sort of higher calling, when it is merely convenient and self-serving.

MISS PRIZZIN: I will defer to your greater understanding of what is convenient and self-serving, Mr. Moncrief. Won’t we, Cecily?

CECILY: Am I wrong, or are you two trying to talk over my head?

ALGERNON /

MISS PRIZZIN: (as one) Of course not!

CECILY: That’s odd. I had the distinct feeling that there was *subtext* in the air.

MISS PRIZZIN: I should hope not, Cecily. You know how I have warned you of the dangers of subtext. Would you like more tea, Mr. Moncrief? (Holds the teapot near him.)

ALGERNON: (jumping up) No, thank you. I have had a sufficiency of tea.

MISS PRIZZIN: From my point of view, you don’t seem to have had any.

ALGERNON: And that is more than sufficient.

CECILY: Oh, this is such fun! I'm actually having a conversation.

ALGERNON: (referring to Prizzin) Instead of a lecture?

MISS PRIZZIN: Do you need to use the facilities, Mr. Moncrief?

ALGERNON: No, I do not.

MISS PRIZZIN: Don't be afraid to ask.

ALGERNON: I find that I seldom have to use the facilities in other people's homes. I attribute it to my fine moral character.

MISS PRIZZIN: It's just that you jumped up so suddenly.

ALGERNON: No, I simply need some exercise.

CECILY: Do you play tennis?

ALGERNON: As a matter of fact, I do not, Miss Cardew.

CECILY: Oh, pity. I'm just learning.

ALGERNON: For you, I am sure that I can learn how to play.

MISS PRIZZIN: I will play tennis with you, Cecily, if you insist.

CECILY: How marvelous! Suddenly I have not one but two partners!

MISS PRIZZIN: But let us see who follows through and who is merely talk.

ALGERNON: Yes, let's do!

CECILY: Shall we play now?

ALGERNON: Right here?

CECILY: No, I meant on the court. We have one over there. (Points offstage.)

MISS PRIZZIN: Oh, do not trouble Mr. Moncrief, Cecily. He has not brought his tennis togs with him.

CECILY: He could strip down.

MISS PRIZZIN: Oh, I am sure he does not want to do that.

CECILY: Like one of those Greco-Romans.

ALGERNON: Perhaps when next I visit.

CECILY: You could wear some of my clothes. I used to be bigger.

ALGERNON: You do tempt me.

MISS PRIZZIN: Or perhaps Mr. Moncrief could wear some of your brother's clothing. I am sure he won't mind.

ALGERNON: You have a brother?

CECILY: Yes. Cecil. He is a year older than I.

ALGERNON: Is he around?

MISS PRIZZIN: He's in town on some errands.

ALGERNON: Did he ride in?

MISS PRIZZIN: I believe he walked. It is only about a half mile or so.

CECILY: Oh, yes, Cecil is very fond of walking. He often walks and then sits, mooning under the weeping willow trees by the river bank.

ALGERNON: Really? Does he by any chance write poetry?

CECILY: How strange that you should ask! He does write poetry.

MISS PRIZZIN: Amateur, of course. He has no plans to publish.

ALGERNON: Certainly. I wouldn't think so. What is the nature of Cecil's poetry? Is it Nature by any chance?

CECILY: Would you care to see some? I'm sure there is some lying about in the house or somewhere. Reams of it.

ALGERNON: No, I won't trouble you with all that.

CECILY: Cecil writes about handsome youths dying young, surprisingly often under weeping willow trees. He also has some couplets about nameless yearnings, amazingly also under weeping willow trees.

ALGERNON: He seems like a sterling young man.

MISS PRIZZIN: Oh, he is. You should meet him, Mr. Moncrief. He should be home soon.

ALGERNON: Oh, how unfortunate that I must go.

CECILY: Oh, no. Don't go!

MISS PRIZZIN: We must not keep Mr. Moncrief from departing, Cecily. I am sure that he has other calls to make of a similar nature.

ALGERNON: I hardly think so, Miss Prizzin. But I do have affairs to attend to at my home in London.

CECILY: Have you a large and busy home in London, Mr. Moncrief?

ALGERNON: Oh, it is but sixteen rooms with a French garden and extensive wildlands behind. It suits my simple, unpretentious bachelor's needs quite capitally.

CECILY: It sounds wonderful.

MISS PRIZZIN: I am sure Mr. Moncrief finds some way to share it with the indigent, Cecily. He appears to have a heart of gold.

ALGERNON: Perhaps I can send my indigent to you here, Miss Prizzin. I fail to see any on this property. Or possibly they are playing tennis over on the court.

MISS PRIZZIN: We are looking into importing some indigent to this property, Mr. Moncrief. One can never have too many indigent!

CECILY: We are? The indigent? How many are we talking about?

MISS PRIZZIN: Oh, do keep quiet, Cecily! You are tedious!

ALGERNON: How dare you speak to Miss Cardew like that?!

MISS PRIZZIN: And you keep quiet too. Who are you to me or to Miss Cardew? To tell me how I can speak to her, especially about the indigent!

CECILY: Prizzy!

ALGERNON: I do not need to know Miss Cardew to know that you think you are the boss of her and that she is to have no opinions but yours.

MISS PRIZZIN: It has been more than a delight to meet you, Mr. Moncrief, but now I think it is time for you to leave and delight us even more.

ALGERNON: I will leave when Miss Cardew says I must leave, and not until.

CECILY: Oh, dear.

MISS PRIZZIN: Well, tell him, Cecily. We no longer wish his presence amongst us.

CECILY: Must I?

ALGERNON: No, you must not, Cecily. Aren't you over twenty-one and capable of making your own decisions?

MISS PRIZZIN: Cecily will be legally permitted to make her own decisions when she reaches the age of thirty-five.

ALGERNON: Thirty-five?!

CECILY: Can you wait, Mr. Moncrief? They say time flies. I already feel as if the days are calving off like icebergs, something I have only heard about but never seen. And would very much like to. Very much!

MISS PRIZZIN: Don't bother to reply, Mr. Moncrief. It does not matter whether you can wait or not. I would like you to leave these premises and never return. Cecily has seen more than enough of you.

CECILY: I have? Have I?

MISS PRIZZIN: I say she has! Good day, Mr. Moncrief. (Points.) That is the way out.

ALGERNON: Pardon me, Cecily. Your governess seems to be in charge. I do not choose to make a stink here in your garden. So I will go.

CECILY: You may make a stink here, Algernon, if you really wish to.

MISS PRIZZIN: We are not discussing this matter. Leave, Mr. Moncrief, before I throw you out myself.

ALGERNON: Here is my card, Cecily. (Hands it to her.) With my address on it. Do feel free to visit me any time you happen to be in London.

CECILY: Oh, goody!

MISS PRIZZIN: Give me that card, Cecily, at once. (Holds out her hand.)

CECILY: Oh, dear. Must I?

MISS PRIZZIN: Far be it from me to insist, but I am afraid I must! (Insistent with her hand.)

CECILY: No! You can't have the card.

MISS PRIZZIN: I will not ask again!

CECILY: Good! I'll keep the card then. (She stuffs the card inside her clothing.) There! Poof!
The card seems to be gone.

MISS PRIZZIN: Cecily, you disappoint me greatly.

ALGERNON: I will take that as an R.S.V.P. to my invitation to visit. Good day to both of you.
Or at least one! (He storms out.)

MISS PRIZZIN: Good riddance!

CECILY: Oh, Prizzy, how could you?! I think you've just ruined my future.

(Cecily weeps and runs off in a different direction from where Algernon left.)

MISS PRIZZIN: You are quire, quite wrong, Cecily! Far be it from me to congratulate myself,
but I have just saved you from an unmitigated romantic disaster!

LIGHTS OUT

SCENE 3

SETTING: A river bank with weeping willows not far from Cecily's garden.

(Algernon enters hurriedly, angry from the recent argument.)

ALGERNON: (talking to himself) What incredible gall! That woman sent me packing. True, I wasn't exactly invited to tea there, but where would anybody go if they waited to be invited?! It seems to me that I was a superbly behaved guest. It was that self-anointed host who was the problem. Miss Prizzin indeed! She completely and utterly abuses her position as poor Cecily's governess. She must be looked into. I suspect there is some impropriety on a monumental scale in that person's background! Miss Prizzin indeed! Miss Jailer, yes! Miss Turnkey! Miss Correctional Officer! Miss Guard Dog with a teapot! To think that she has such sway over the magnificently wonderful dear Cecily. I must set her free! I must!

(There is a stir nearby.)

ALGERNON: Something stirred there, near the river bank. What ho!

CECIL: (upstage) O willow! O willow! Alack!

ALGERNON: Who's that?

(Cecil partially appears, as a girlish boy, whether played by a male or a female.)
He appears to hold two sheaves of handwritten papers.)

CECIL: 'Tis only I, a poor, sensitive poet among the weeping willows.

ALGERNON: (suspicious) What are you doing there? Are you a highwayman? I don't have any money on me.

CECIL: I don't want or need your money. I am but a melancholy lad plying his trade. Unpaid.
. . . See. That rhymes!

ALGERNON: A melancholiac? I've heard about them. One has to be so careful. They often turn.

CECIL: Would you care to hear some of my verses? They're *free*. . . . That's a pun!

ALGERNON: Let me see you better. You seem obscure somehow.

CECIL: Yes, some have accused my verses of being obscure. But let not that be said of I myself!

(Cecil reveals himself completely. He is naked.)

ALGERNON: My God, man, you're naked!

CECIL: I see that you are observant. I never wear clothes when I compose. . . . Note: That also rhymes!

ALGERNON: Yes, I noticed.

CECIL: Do you like my poetry? (He holds the sheaves of papers over his private parts.)

ALGERNON: I think I could – if I got to know it better.

CECIL: Are you sure you're just not saying that?

ALGERNON: From what I can see, you have a way with words.

CECIL: Do I, pray? (He coyly moves the sheaves of poetry around like a fan dancer.) Can you read them now?

ALGERNON: Maybe if I came closer, or you did.

CECIL: Maybe if we met in the middle?

ALGERNON: Does that mean what I think it means?

CECIL: That's what is known as a (with a very heavy French accent) *double entendre*.

ALGERNON: I am afraid my acquaintance with poetic terms is limited. You see, I graduated from university.

CECIL: I understand completely. Let me enlighten you then.

ALGERNON: Oh, do!

CECIL: One of my favorites is alliteration.

ALGERNON: Such as?

CECIL: "The willowy boy lingered languorously by the willow bank." Note the repeated "w's" and "b's."

ALGERNON: I have heard of the birds and the *bees*.

CECIL: That's a bit different. Similar but different. There is also (with heavy innuendo) *synesthesia*.

ALGERNON: It sounds fascinating.

CECIL: Synesthesia means one sense, for instead, sight, is simultaneously perceived by one or more additional senses, for example, touch. It's very sensory. (He almost touches Algernon, but pulls back.)

ALGERNON: Is it Greek?

CECIL: Very. Synesthesia comes from two Greek words, "syn,"—

ALGERNON: (intrigued) Sin?

CECIL: "S-y-n," meaning "together," and "aesthesia," meaning "perception." Therefore, synesthesia literally means "joined perception." . . . Joined. . . . Am I clear?

ALGERNON: I do not believe you could be much clearer.

CECIL: (very sexually) Wait until you hear me on metaphors, onomatopoeia, and *homonyms*!

ALGERNON: I cannot wait! How are you on assonance? (reaching for Cecil's butt.)

CECIL: I'm afraid I draw the line at assonance.

ALGERNON: (taken aback) Really?

CECIL: I don't find *assonance* all that poetic.

ALGERNON: Such a pity.

CECIL: No, near rhyme I find somewhat lazy. I am very good at metonymy, simile, and hyperbole. I'm passable at litotes and chiasmus. And I adore the couplet!

ALGERNON: What, may I ask, is "chiasmus"?

CECIL: "Chiasmus" is a form of antithesis in which the second half of an expression is balanced against the first with the parts reversed.

ALGERNON: The parts reversed? It sounds like one must be very acrobatic to do all that.

CECIL: Not at all, if one practices and practices. Poetry is, I find, all in the practice.

ALGERNON: You sound like one who knows what he is doing.

CECIL: Lounging about on weeping willow banks will do that for a person.

ALGERNON: (awkward) I truly do not know what to say next.

CECIL: Do you wish me to complete your education?

ALGERNON: What did you have in mind?

CECIL: We haven't even mentioned hexameters or iambic pentameter, the musical parts of poetry.

ALGERNON: I think I am receiving an overabundance of new information. Perhaps we ought to rest for a while?

CECIL: As you like. When it comes to poetry, I find that a caesura, or rest, can be quite welcome from time to time. Then the poem can build to its inevitable climax in a starry crescendo of passionate thought and massive visceral imagery! (as if ejaculating) Do you know what I mean?! Do you!? Wait! Wait! (suddenly climaxing) OH! OH!

ALGERNON: Oh, yes. I can't wait! YES! I know! (also climaxing)

(Now that they have crescendoed together, they begin to subside.)

CECIL: That was unimaginable.

ALGERNON: It was. Who would have thought that poetry could be so . . . so . . .

CECIL: Fulfilling?

ALGERNON: That is the word.

CECIL: Are you going to run off now?

ALGERNON: No. Why do you think that?

CECIL: Oh, I find that men usually do.

ALGERNON: How rude.

CECIL: Oh, I don't usually mind. I do it too. But somehow with you . . .

ALGERNON: You do not want to?

CECIL: I don't.

ALGERNON: I don't either.

CECIL: What do you think it means?

ALGERNON: I think I'm afraid to think too much about it.

CECIL: *That's* a paradox. Were you aware?

ALGERNON: No. What do you suppose I mean?

CECIL: That you're a poet too.

ALGERNON: A secret poet?! Me!

CECIL: You have every sign. Here, let me put on some clothes. (He starts to dress.)

ALGERNON: Oh, my God!

CECIL: What? Is someone coming?

ALGERNON: No, I don't think so. It just dawned on me who you must be.

CECIL: Who?

ALGERNON: I should have thought of it immediately, but your attire distracted me.

CECIL: Who do you think I am?

ALGERNON: You are Cecil, Cecily Cardew's older brother. Aren't you?

CECIL: You know Cecily?

ALGERNON: I was just there, having tea with her. Or trying to.

CECIL: You don't say. How did that come to be?

ALGERNON: Well, to be honest, I came down from London to . . . to . . .

CECIL: To?

ALGERNON: You see, we met at the British Museum, among the Greco-Roman nudes.

CECILY: Sounds like Cecily. And she invited you down?

ALGERNON: Well, not precisely. I took it upon myself to seek her out.

CECIL: You don't say. Are you bi-curious by any chance? That's a kind of internal rhyme!
"By," bi."

ALGERNON: I'm not sure. What does bi-curious mean exactly?

CECIL: This is getting bi-curiouser and bi-curiouser.

ALGERNON: Is that an allusion?

CECIL: I'm sure I don't know. I don't think I appreciate the fact that you came down to visit my sister and wound up with yours truly.

ALGERNON: Well, she did not know I was going to come.

CECIL: What does that have to do with anything? Neither did I!

ALGERNON: I don't know what I meant. Or what you mean. Somehow it seemed to excuse the confusion. . . . Is that internal rhyme? "Excuse," "confuse" ?

CECIL: Will you please stop using poetic devices you know nothing about!

ALGERNON: I am not trying to use them. They just keep slipping out. They are entirely natural.

CECIL: Poetry can be about Nature, but believe me it is not "natural." It is artifice, pure and simple. And that is *not* a paradox. Poetry doesn't just pour out. It emerges after careful consideration, calculation, and manipulation. Even I confess I do some re-writing!

ALGERNON: Are you jealous that I came down to see your sister?

CECIL: Hardly!

ALGERNON: Perhaps I came to see the wrong person. And stumbled upon the right one.

CECIL: Do you think that means we were made for each other?

ALGERNON: No. I think it means we just happened across each other's paths by accident. The way God intended.

CECIL: From what I can see, very few people meet except by accident. However, it seems a very unreliable way for people to form alliances.

ALGERNON: Well, they can't marry their relatives. Unless their Hawaiians or ancient Egyptians or something.

CECIL: First cousins in the UK.

ALGERNON: Really? That's a little close genetically, is it not?

CECIL: Without in-breeding I fear there can be very little good breeding.

ALGERNON: That sounds clever, but I think it bears re-examination. Something to do with genes, mutations, that sort of thing. By the way, what does your family think of you?

CECIL: My father is deceased. As is my mother. My darling sister Cecily, somewhat boyish herself, as you may have noticed, seems kindly disposed to my inclinations. Still, we have not discussed them even once.

ALGERNON: I did notice something about your sister. It is uncanny how similar you two are.

CECIL: Again, genes. You cannot argue with genes.

ALGERNON: Pardon me for being mercenary, but are you the heir or is Cecily?

CECIL: Is that what will determine your affection?

ALGERNON: Of course not! But no one but an utter fool, or an American, thinks one should not figure finances into a romantic relationship.

CECIL: Luckily, Cecily and I were each left sizeable fortunes by our parents. She is almost in control of her money. And I almost in control of mine.

ALGERNON: That all sounds fine and good, but from what I saw, it is Miss Prizzin, the so-called governess, who is in charge of most things in Cecily's life.

CECIL: You've met her then?

ALGERNON: And lived to tell the tale. Barely.

CECIL: Did she threaten you with the teapot?

ALGERNON: You did indeed! Reprehensible woman!

CECIL: Yes, she can be quite lethal.

ALGERNON: Really? I thought she merely scalded her enemies.

CECIL: I don't have absolute proof, but there was one young fellow who appeared to be after Cecily's hand and wound up with far less than he had bargained for. And I do mean from Miss Prizzin.

ALGERNON: What happened?

CECIL: She attempted her teapot spillage –

ALGERNON: (trying to make a rhyme) – in the village?

CECIL: (about the rhyme) Don't. Please.

ALGERNON: Sorry.

CECIL: When the teapot spillage missed the young would-be suitor's lap area, Miss Prizzin . . .

ALGERNON: What? I must know!

CECIL: I believe she killed him instead.

ALGERNON: No!

CECIL: With a handkerchief.

ALGERNON: She killed him with a handkerchief?!

CECIL: Wait. I may have several stories mixed up. She led him off ostensibly to show him some pamphlets about the indigent –

ALGERNON: The indigent! Yes, that rings a bell!

CECIL: And when she had him right where she wanted him – Wait! That was Miss N. Form, Cecily's first governess. She pushed the young man into a well.

ALGERNON: No!

CECIL: A wishing well.

ALGERNON: How ghastly.

CECIL: Indeed. And the young man had thrown a coin into the wishing well for good luck too.

ALGERNON: What a devil she is!

CECIL: Of course, as I pointed out, that was Cecily's *first* governess, I'm pretty sure, not Miss Prizzin.

ALGERNON: What atrocious luck poor Cecily seems to have had with governesses!

CECIL: I attribute it to all this mindless hatred of the upper class.

ALGERNON: Exactly. If people just knew how difficult being rich is, they would not want to walk in our shoes for one moment.

CECIL: Now it's coming back to me, about what Miss Prizzin did.

ALGERNON: Yes?

CECIL: After she sent Cecily and me to bed – not with each other, to our separate beds – she encouraged the young caller to have another cup of tea, and then she very deliberately and forcefully smashed his skull from behind.

ALGERNON: With the same teapot I saw today?

CECIL: No, a different teapot. She broke that other one on the man's skull. I suspect there is a long line of broken teapots.

ALGERNON: (appalled) She didn't! There isn't!

CECIL: You're right. It could have been the sugar bowl. Or possibly the creamer. I forget the murder weapon. But I most distinctly recall hearing the man's howls as she beat his brains out. And he wasn't actually the first, now that I ponder it. Let me see . . . (thinking aloud) There was . . . And there was . . . And . . .

ALGERNON: Yes? Yes?

CECIL: I come up with at least five.

ALGERNON: That Miss Prizzin creamed?

CECIL: Or sugared. Or creamed and sugared. In some cases she used more than one weapon. In one particularly cruel instance, when she broke a teapot, a creamer, and a sugar bowl on the victim's head, and he still lived, she actually resorted to cramming some granola down his throat until he expired. I think he was number four on the list.

ALGERNON: Are you saying then that Miss Prizzin is a – ?

CECIL: (with Algernon) Yes, a cereal killer!

ALGERNON: (with Cecil) – a serial killer!

CECIL: In every sense!

ALGERNON: The woman is every bit as horrible as I thought she was. And all the time pretending to care about the poor!

CECIL: Oh, none of them were poor. They were all rich.

ALGERNON: Well, they were poor in the sense of being the *poor* victims of a homicidal maniac with intense class hatred. It doesn't get any poorer than that. I've got her number! Oh God, and she has mine. Or Cecily does.

CECIL: What do you mean?

ALGERNON: I left my business card back there. Now she will know where I live. She might come after me with a teapot.

CECIL: She's a bad, bad person, but I don't believe she commits her crimes anywhere but on her own turf. She's very domestic in that way.

ALGERNON: Well, at least that is something. And yet you have said nothing, done nothing about these crimes?! Does Cecily know about them?

CECIL: I think she suspects. After all, none of the gentlemen returned. That has at least injured her self-esteem, perhaps forever. She can scarcely be expected to turn in own governess, or governesses, as the case may be, when her self-esteem is so low. And what could I, a weepy, willowy poet with spells of intense melancholy do? No one would believe us.

ALGERNON: I believe you.

CECIL: I think I can tell that you are a good person . . . ? (asking for his name)

ALGERNON: Algernon.

CECIL: What a hideous name. I hope it dies out. But never mind. No one should ever like or dislike someone because of his or her name.

ALGERNON: You are wise beyond your years, Mr. Cardew.

CECIL: Call me Cecil. After all, we have been . . . poetic together.

ALGERNON: I hope that we can meet again. Is there some way to get in touch with you without calling at your house or encountering the terrible Miss Prizzin?

CECIL: I sometimes go up to London, when I tire of my willows. Perhaps I could have your card?

ALGERNON: Certainly. (Takes out his card.) For you. (Hands it to Cecil.) Do you have a card?

CECIL: Alas, I do not.

ALGERNON: (disappointed) Oh.

CECIL: I have nothing that smacks of business.

ALGERNON: Naturally. Perhaps I can give you two of mine. (Takes out a second card.) This one has the address at my gentlemen's club.

CECIL: (Takes the card.) Thank you. Perchance I can give you one of my poems?

ALGERNON: I would love that.

CECIL: Here, let me write down the longitude and latitude of where I usually lounge on the river bank. Have you a compass?

ALGERNON: Actually, I do not. But for you I will purchase one.

CECIL: Splendid. (Takes one of his papers.) It shouldn't take me long. (Produces a quill, starts to write on the paper.)

ALGERNON: Should I add that I will seek you out to the far corners of the world?

CECIL: Well, just in case your sense of direction is as bad as mine. (about the writing) Now I believe it is 53.5500 degrees north, but is that latitude or longitude?

ALGERNON: I think that's latitude.

CECIL: You are so helpful. I like your . . . latitude. Yes, that's almost a pun. Not a very good one, I'm afraid. You have addled my head a bit.

ALGERNON: The almost-pun is precious. Moreover, I think –

MISS PRIZZIN: (calling from offstage) Cecil! Where are you? It's Prizzy here!

CECIL: My God, it's the teapot murderess!

ALGERNON: I had better flee. (Starts to run away.)

CECIL: But the directions to my weeping willow bank! (Shows them.) I've almost finished!

MISS PRIZZIN: I'm coming over there, Cecil. Make sure you are dressed!

CECIL: (calling) Wait! I'm not decent, Prizzy!

ALGERNON: (to Cecil) The latitude, the longitude! Hurry!

CECIL: Blast! I can't think of them.

MISS PRIZZIN: (calling) It's time you came home, Cecil. We are about to have an early light supper.

CECIL: (calling) Is it vegan?

MISS PRIZZIN: Of course it's vegan. You're not out here eating meat, I hope to God!

CECIL: (calling) No, Prizzy! (to Algernon) I loathe vegan!

ALGERNON: Me too. . . . I must go, Cecil!

CECIL: I'll find you! I promise! I have your card, Algernon. Your cards.

ALGERNON: So few ever follow up on a card, I suspect, even two of them.

CECIL: No, I will. I will!

MISS PRIZZIN: (closer) Cecil, are you engaged with someone over there?

ALGERNON: (to Cecil) *Adieu! Adieu!* (Waves goodbye, does not have the directions.)

CECIL: (punning) Right back *adieu!* [at you]

(Algernon runs offstage just as Miss Prizzin appears onstage, at opposite ends.)

MISS PRIZZIN: There you are, Cecil! I knew I would find you out. Are those your poems?

CECIL: (unhappily) You have indeed, Prizzy, found me out. Even your sense of direction is so very, very *good!* You are so very, very good in so very, very many ways!

MISS PRIZZIN: I am indeed! Now hand those over to me! That's enough poetry for one day!

(He tears up the page he was writing directions on so that she won't see it.)

LIGHTS OUT

SCENE 4

SETTING: A Gentleman's Club in London

(Enter Lord Bracknell with a glass of wine. He takes a sip, finds it to his liking.)

BRACKNELL: Ah! (He peruses some periodicals and newspapers that lie on a table.) What to read. What to read.

(Lane the servant enters with a tray.)

LANE: May I make a suggestion, Lord Bracknell?

BRACKNELL: Good heavens! Lane what are you doing here, at a gentlemen's club?

LANE: I work here, sir. I'm not a member.

BRACKNELL: Oh, I am sorry. I didn't mean it that way, that you're not a gentleman. I merely meant that you work for my nephew. Are you moonlighting?

LANE: I'm afraid I quit the employ of your nephew, Lord Bracknell.

BRACKNELL: Oh, I hope I didn't drive you away! Let me apologize for my behaviour again, if it isn't clear that I regret any unseemly actions on my part. I can't seem to prevent myself from faux pas toward you. Do forgive me.

LANE: Not at all, sir. I left Half-Moon Street because I thought my horizons there were rather restricted. Here I can work for more than just one person. Mr. Moncrief understood completely and even gave me his blessing.

BRACKNELL: He's a dear, dear boy. I must see him again soon.

LANE: Perhaps you will see him here. He is a member. And in good standing. I might point out that those are not always the same thing. He put in a good word for me to obtain this job.

BRACKNELL: Yes, he is a member, but our paths seldom cross here, as he is morning person and I am a bit of a night owl.

LANE: Life is like that sir, people's paths not crossing.

BRACKNELL: My, that sounds gloomy, Lane. It's just a matter of the right timing. A path here, a path there.

LANE: Perhaps you are correct, sir. I will keep looking for a path then. Is your wine satisfactory?

BRACKNELL: Oh, don't bother about me or my wine. You must get infernally bored always waiting on other people.

LANE: Actually, I rather like it, sir. If they're the right sort of people.

BRACKNELL: The right sort? I have the feeling that you are not referring to class. Are you?

LANE: I was not, sir. But don't worry about me or my "whine." I have picked my profession, or it has picked me, and I do not mind it.

BRACKNELL: Excuse me if I'm being boorish, Lane, but do you have a private life?

LANE: As little as possible, sir. I like to keep busy. That way I do not have time to brood.

BRACKNELL: That sounds very wise of you, Lane. I find that now that I have pretty much withdrawn from the profession I dallied in, I have entirely too many thoughts.

LANE: Have you read this book? (He finds a book on a shelf.) It's called *Peace Through Submission*. I highly recommend it. You might find its message a bit strange.

BRACKNELL: It sounds religious. Is it?

LANE: Not precisely, sir. It's more of an exploration of personal wants and needs.

BRACKNELL: Really?

LANE: As they express themselves in intimate settings, by certain people.

BRACKNELL: Really?

LANE: I have the feeling that it may not be your cup of tea, though. Let me put it back.

BRACKNELL: Well, I'll have a look at it. (Takes the book.)

LANE: Very good, sir. Would you care for anything else? Biscuits?

BRACKNELL: I could go for a few biscuits, as a matter of fact.

LANE: Your will, at least here, is my command, Lord Bracknell.

BRACKNELL: (uncomfortable) Yes, so it would seem.

LANE: Let me fetch those biscuits for you, sir. I won't be long.

BRACKNELL: Take your time. There's no hurry.

(Lane bows and goes out.)

BRACKNELL: Um, there may be more to Lane than meets the eye. I wonder what it is.

(Lord Bracknell sits, opens the book, and begins to read.)

BRACKNELL: (at first he is amused, laughs a bit. As he reads more, it dawns on him that it is an S&M manual. It is *not* his cup of tea.) Oh, dear! (Reads more.) Good grief! (Reads more.) Oh, my God, what are you doing that for!? (He hurriedly puts the book down, disgusted.) Oh, Lane, really now!

(Lane returns with some biscuits [cookies] on a tray.)

LANE: (as he enters) Here we go, sir!

(Lord Bracknell seizes the book again and pretends to read, so as not to hurt Lane's feelings.)

LANE: Oh, I see that you are reading the book.

BRACKNELL: Oh, yes indeed! Capital read! Amazing! I give it five stars. (Puts down the book.)

LANE: Have you read that much then?

BRACKNELL: Oh, indeed, indeed. I'm a very fast reader. In fact, I finished the book.

LANE: You did? Already?

BRACKNELL: Shall I have a go at one of those biscuits?!

LANE: Of course, sir. (Offers the tray.)

BRACKNELL: Jolly good! (Takes a biscuit and drops it.) Drat!

LANE: I'll get it, sir.

BRACKNELL: No, I'll get it. (He picks up the biscuit.)

LANE: Will there be anything else, Lord Bracknell? Anything at all?

BRACKNELL: (uncomfortable with the thought of S&M of any kind) No, nothing. Nothing at all! Here, take your biscuit away. I don't want it after all. (Places the biscuit on the tray very nervously.)

LANE: Yes, sir. There's a bell there, sir. Just ring if you want service.

BRACKNELL: Thank you, Lane. Thank you. Did I thank you? That will be all. Good night. Good night.

LANE: (bowing) Good night, Lord Bracknell. (Leaves.)

BRACKNELL: (to himself) My, that was uncomfortable. You never really know others, do you? I shall never look at a waiter the same way again! (He sees the S&M book and puts it out of sight.)

(Enter Cecil, injured.)

CECIL: Is there a doctor here, by any chance?

BRACKNELL: Are you a member?

CECIL: No, but I have a card from a member. Somewhere. (He searches for it.) They let me in when they saw it. Here it is. (Finds the card.)

BRACKNELL: This is my nephew's card!

CECIL: You are Algernon's uncle?!

BRACKNELL: I am. Lord Neville Bracknell. And you are?

CECIL: *Lord* Bracknell? Algernon didn't tell me he had a Lord in his family.

BRACKNELL: It's not the kind of thing you go around bragging about, not these days. There are far too many anarchists on the loose.

CECIL: I am a bit of a free spirit myself, but I must confess I have a thing for titles. It's not something I'm proud of.

BRACKNELL: Well, in your case, since I have a title, I forgive you. Mr. ?

CECIL: I'm Cecil Cardew.

BRACKNELL: You know Algernon? You say you need a doctor?

CECIL: I didn't tell the staff out there. I thought they might think me trying to exploit the facilities here. But I have indeed suffered an injury. You aren't a doctor as well as a Lord, by any chance?

BRACKNELL: No, I never studied medicine

CECIL: Oh, too bad. It seems such a winning combination.

BRACKNELL: I have been sick a great deal. As a consequence, I am quite conversant with numerous remedies. What seems to be the problem? Did Algernon cause it?

CECIL: Well, it is a rather private matter. Another reason I did not want the staff to know about it. They might snicker. Or worse.

BRACKNELL: Of course. Let me ring for some assistance. (Reaches for the bell.) I'm sure an actual doctor can be summoned.

CECIL: I think I'm fine now. Yes, that's better. (Suddenly yells in pain.) Oh, my God, the pain! The pain! (He crumples over.)

BRACKNELL: Good God, man. We can't let this go. You seem to be in agony.

CECIL: I am in agony. But I don't wish to make a fuss. . . . I'm British.

BRACKNELL: It's all right. We're all British here. Where exactly is the pain?

CECIL: It's . . . it's in my . . . groin.

BRACKNELL: Do tell. Would you care to be more specific?

CECIL: It's in here. (Touches one side of his groin.) Oh! (He winces.)

BRACKNELL: What happened?

CECIL: I touched it.

BRACKNELL: I know that. I meant what happened to cause the pain.

CECIL: Well, you see I dwell in the countryside ordinarily, surrounded by Nature. And by the time I got to London on the train, I was missing it terribly. When I disembarked at the station and went outside and saw a tree, I could not help myself. Overcome with emotion, I hugged that tree.

BRACKNELL: Of course you did. I can understand. But how did that injure you?

CECIL: Alas, a splinter from the tree entered the area of my groin.

BRACKNELL: No!

CECIL: I tried to put it out. But it's still there.

BRACKNELL: When you say "groin," do you really mean . . . ? (Points to Cecil's penis.)

CECIL: No, just the groin. (Touches the area again.) You thought the splinter was in my . . . ?

(Cecil and Lord Bracknell shudder in empathetic, male horror at the possibility.)

CECIL: Thank God I turned slightly to the side as I hugged the tree.

BRACKNELL: Good thinking, man. It never hurts to not to be overly demonstrative to trees. I have found that they seldom reciprocate a hug, and never call.

CECIL: You've hugged a tree then?

BRACKNELL: I've been known to. Or should I say I've not been known to. But I have. Do you catch my meaning? Of late I have become aware of all sorts of special meanings.

CECIL: I believe I do catch it. The name of this club is the Green Carnation. I think it is also code.

BRACKNELL: Really? I must have missed that. Doesn't it mean some sort of hope for the future, now that the dreaded motor car is out on the roads spewing fumes everywhere?

CECIL: Oh, I think that's Green Car Nation, not Green Carnation.

BRACKNELL: You seem to be very adept at language, Mr. Cardew.

CECIL: I am a bit of a wordsmith, a bard. Call me Cecil, won't you?

BRACKNELL: Oh, call me Neville, or Nevie. Everybody does.

CECIL: Oh, please, I much prefer *Lord* Bracknell.

BRACKNELL: Suit yourself.

CECIL: You aren't married to Lady Augusta Bracknell, are you?

BRACKNELL: Why, is she dead?

CECIL: I don't believe so. I think you might know better than I.

BRACKNELL: I'm afraid Lady Bracknell and I rarely meet except at non-festive, family functions. How do you know of the lady?

CECIL: I have been in London only a few times, and yet her name comes up continually.

BRACKNELL: I don't think she'd like to know that.

CECIL: That she is famous?

BRACKNELL: Lady Bracknell is, shall we say, very traditional. She thinks a wife and mother should take a back seat to her husband in the important matters.

CECIL: Really? That's not what I've heard about her.

BRACKNELL: Oh, yes. She merely handles Bracknell financial matters, plus any plans for a future husband for our daughter, Gwendolen, as well as the hiring and dismissal of our large staff, the buying and the selling of all our properties along with those of twenty-three of our closest neighbours.

CECIL: Amazing.

BRACKNELL: International matters with Europe, Asia, and Africa she leaves entirely to me.

CECIL: Does she ever come to this club?

BRACKNELL: I believe she was here once. It was not a success. She was mistaken for Queen Victoria. She was not amused.

CECIL: I would think she would be flattered.

BRACKNELL: Oh, no. Lady Bracknell considers Queen Victoria a bit of a *comer*, if you know what I mean. Lady Bracknell also did not find this club masculine enough. How's your splinter?

CECIL: It seems to have settled down. Perhaps it is these soothing tales of the upper class that have calmed me down. Back home, with Miss Prizzin, all Cecily and I ever get our tales about how egregious the wealthy are.

(Offstage sound of fox hunting horns.)

CECIL: Good heavens, what's that?

BRACKNELL: (Listens. More horns.) If I'm not mistaken, that would be Lady Bracknell out fox hunting. She goes out very late at night, so as to catch the fox in his den before he can get out and run.

CECIL: In London?

BRACKNELL: Yes, Lady Bracknell has introduced fox hunting to the city. She believes it is a shame to waste the sport on people who live in the country.

CECIL: She sounds very forward-thinking for someone so traditional.

BRACKNELL: I must say I find it refreshing to find a young person like yourself so favorably disposed toward the class I come from. Shall we have it out now?

CECIL: What? . . . If you like, I suppose.

BRACKNELL: I was referring to the splinter.

CECIL: Oh. Of course you were. . . . It's bigger than a splinter, you ought to realise. I took a glance at it. It's more like a log.

BRACKNELL: A log?

CECIL: A smallish log.

BRACKNELL: I find it difficult to visualise.

CECIL: Well, it's bigger than a splinter. Which is, I would venture, about this big. (Shows a tiny splinter with his fingers.) And yet smaller than, say, a log. Which is this big. (Shows a two-foot log with his fingers.)

BRACKNELL: I'm sure the size does not matter.

CECIL: Well, it does if it's sticking in you.

BRACKNELL: Perhaps we should ring for that doctor after all.

CECIL: I don't think I can wait for a doctor. Perhaps if I un-do my flies you can reach in and pluck it out?

BRACKNELL: Fortunately I do have a tweezers upon my person. (Searches his pockets.) Here they are. . . . *It is?* Is the word "tweezers" singular or plural?

CECIL: Whether singular or plural, I'm not sure tweezers will do the trick.

BRACKNELL: Well, let's at least have a go at it, shall we?

(Lord Bracknell takes the tweezers, kneels, and begins to explore Cecil's fly.)

(Enter Lane, with a tray for discarded glasses, etc. He sees Lord Bracknell and Cecil in a “compromising” position.)

CECIL: (to Bracknell) Do you see it?

BRACKNELL: (on his knees) Not yet. Let me look on the other side.

LANE: (clears his throat) Lord Bracknell?

BRACKNELL: Oh, Lane, there you are!

LANE: I was just cleaning up, sir. Is there some problem?

CECIL: Lord Bracknell was just searching for my splinter.

LANE: I see.

BRACKNELL: (getting up) Damned if I can find that thing!

LANE: Do you want me to stay, sir?

CECIL: We're fine. (He closes his fly.)

LANE: If you say so, sir. (Looks around for discarded glasses.) Are you finished with your wine, Lord Bracknell?

BRACKNELL: I've barely tasted it. But, yes, take that alcoholic thing away.

LANE: You do refer to the wine glass, I assume, sir.

CECIL: Well, really! That borders on impertinence.

LANE: Excuse me, sir. I have seen much in my short time here at this gentlemen's club, but never tweezers, at least not in conjunction with another gentleman's flies. Naturally, I assumed the presence of alcohol.

BRACKNELL: I think you may have misinterpreted me on my knees in front of this gentleman, Lane.

LANE: No doubt, sir.

BRACKNELL: I think we've got things under control now. Good night, Lane.

LANE: Very good, sir. (to Cecil) Sir.

BRACKNELL: And, Lane, I'd appreciate it if you kept what you may have thought you saw to yourself.

LANE: Of course, Lord Bracknell. Servants never gossip about their betters.

CECIL: (scoffing) Hah! In the country, where I live, the servants live entirely on gossip about their betters. In fact, there are whole newspapers and magazines devoted to the peccadilloes of their betters. No one but servants would be caught dead reading them.

LANE: You never look at them, sir?

CECIL: Only to keep up on what the servants are reading.

LANE: Of course, sir. Mr.?

BRACKNELL: This is Mr. Cecil Cardew, Lane. He is a friend of my nephew, your former employer.

LANE: (bows his head) What a small world. I am sure that I will see you here again, Mr. Cardew.

CECIL: It's entirely possible.

BRACKNELL: Lane, would there be any cigars available in the club?

LANE: I can go look, sir.

BRACKNELL: I suddenly feel like a cigar. How about you, Cecil? Cigar? Cigarette?

CECIL: Oh, I'm not allowed to smoke.

BRACKNELL: Not really! Not smoke? Who tells you that?

CECIL: My governess, Miss Prizzin, completely forbids my sister and me to smoke in any form.

BRACKNELL: How extraordinary.

CECIL: She says she is the wave of the future.

CECIL: She has disciplined the both of us for doing so, on more than one occasion.

BRACKNELL: I've never heard of such a thing. Have you, Lane?

LANE: No. But I must say this Miss Prizzin sounds like a fascinating person.

CECIL: She claims that the smoke, even in the country, kills livestock.

BRACKNELL: Well, I don't suppose smoking is actually good for us.

CECIL: Miss Prizzin likewise says that Jack the Ripper is a smoker.

BRACKNELL: Maybe it is time to tell your governess that there are some things you can choose for yourself.

CECIL: I have tried, believe me, Lord Bracknell. But the lady is beyond listening to anybody's opinions but her own. When I am thirty-five I intend to fire her ass. Excuse my French.

BRACKNELL: My word, Cecil, you do have a vocabulary! Cover your ears, Lane.

LANE: I'm afraid I already heard it, Your Lordship.

BRACKNELL: Oh, I suppose you did. Well, forget it immediately, Lane.

LANE: I will, sir.

BRACKNELL: We can't have the servant class using foul language.

LANE: I agree, sir. Foul language only sounds proper coming out of the mouths of the upper classes.

CECIL: What class do you consider yourself to be in, Lane?

LANE: I was born to a lower-class mother, a laundress, and the illegitimate son of a prince of a tiny European nation who was visiting Bristol on an extended holiday. So I think that makes me middle class, sir.

CECIL: Yes, I can tell, from your excessive politeness.

LANE: Thank you, sir.

CECIL: I didn't mean it as a compliment.

LANE: I know you didn't, Mr. Cardew. I didn't take it as one. May I point out that as a servant I am acting, sir. Acting.

BRACKNELL: Really? I had no idea.

CECIL: I am sorry that you are illegitimate, Lane. It must be a burden.

LANE: Some things matter more at certain times than others, Mr. Cardew. Like illegitimacy. And hereditary titles going to the totally undeserving merely because of silly laws. Time has a way of wearing out the worn-out, shall we say.

CECIL: I think you'd better watch this man, Lord Bracknell. Underneath the manners, I think there beats the heart of a rebel.

BRACKNELL: Is that true, Lane? Are you a rebel?

CECIL: I am too polite to say, sir. Will that be all?

BRACKNELL: Yes, I think that is all, Lane. You may go. Mr. Cardew here and I will continue to probe his splinter problem. I'm sure we will solve it on our own.

LANE: Very good, sir. Good probing! (He bows and leaves.)

CECIL: I think he suspects something between us.

BRACKNELL: Do you?

CECIL: And I don't think he approves.

BRACKNELL: Really? (Looks after Lane.) (Then turning to Cecil) But then what has he to be suspicious of? There's nothing going on between us. . . . *Is there?*

CECIL: I can't say, Lord Bracknell. Is there?

(They look quizzically at each other.)

LIGHTS OUT

INTERMISSION

ACT II**SCENE 1**

SETTING: Algernon's London flat. A few days later.

(Algernon is preparing tea for himself.)

ALGERNON: I really must hire another servant. Preparing tea is impossible! I don't know how they do it! (The doorbell rings.) Would you get that, Lane? Oh, drat! You're no longer here.

(Algernon goes offstage to the front door. We hear the sound of a woman's voice.)

(Enter Gwendolen, Lord Bracknell's pretty lesbian daughter. Algernon follows.)

ALGERNON: Do come in, Gwendolen. I was just preparing some tea.

GWENDOLEN: I don't mind if I do.

ALGERNON: I am afraid that it may be terrible tea. This is the first pot that I have ever made.

GWENDOLEN: Really? Yes, Father told me that you had lost your one servant.

ALGERNON: It is also the first time that I have ever answered a door.

GWENDOLEN: You poor boy. I hope the strain of these chores does not overtax you. I have some very important matters to discuss with you.

ALGERNON: So your note implied. I hope I am up to the occasion. By the way, how is Uncle Neville? Well, I hope. I have not seen him for some days now.

GWENDOLEN: So he said. There appears to be some tension between you two.

ALGERNON: He left here a few days ago without even having tea. I seem to have the damndest time with tea of late!

GWENDOLEN: Perhaps it is something in the air. I'm sure it will pass. My father seems to have a new friend that he met at his club. The new friend even seems to know you.

ALGERNON: Oh? Who is that?

GWENDOLEN: I believe his name is Cecil. Do you know a Cecil?

ALGERNON: (hesitant) I may.

GWENDOLEN: I didn't catch his last name. Mildew, or something like that.

ALGERNON: Cardew?

GWENDOLEN: That's it. They met at your club. Something about a splinter in some flies.
That's more than I care to know. Father and this Cardew seem to have worked out the splinter. Father talks about him all the time. I haven't met him yet.

ALGERNON: No?

GWENDOLEN: He's been staying upstairs with Father.

ALGERNON: You don't say. How is Lady Bracknell reacting to the visitor?

GWENDOLEN: Not kindly. She has not seen him either, but she says that he is a bad influence on Father. She says that if there is to be a bad influence on Father, it must come from her and no one else.

ALGERNON: Aunt Augusta always says the most amazing things.

GWENDOLEN: I get the impression that Father and Mother are drifting apart. They have had bedrooms on different floors for ages now of course. But lately Father is not even sneaking downstairs to visit.

ALGERNON: I did not know that you knew so much.

GWENDOLEN: Indeed, little escapes me, Algernon. I have paid particular attention to the marriage of my mother and father. They have been a role model for me.

ALGERNON: Really?

GWENDOLEN: Yes, about how *not* to conduct a marriage.

ALGERNON: I see. And why is that?

GWENDOLEN: I suspect that neither really wished to be wed to the other, but societal pressures demanded they marry. I suppose they did the best they could for their times.

ALGERNON: I suppose.

GWENDOLEN: However, I do not wish to emulate them in that way whatsoever. Society still dictates that someone like me must marry. But I intend to make a match much more conducive to the mutual partners in the marriage and not just to society as a whole. Call me new-fashioned, but I think I'm on to something.

ALGERNON: I cannot pretend to know what you are getting at, Gwendolen. Tea?

GWENDOLEN: Yes.

(He pours her a cup of tea.)

ALGERNON: How is it?

GWENDOLEN: (after sipping it) Unacceptable.

ALGERNON: I'm sorry. I'm hopeless.

GWENDOLEN: On the contrary, Algernon. Never get too good at menial tasks or you may wind up saddled with them for a lifetime. Your tea is so terrible I will undoubtedly never ask you to prepare another cup for me as long as I live.

ALGERNON: It can't be as bad as all that! I just poured water on the tea!

GWENDOLEN: But your cooking skills are hardly a major factor in what I have come here to discuss with you today. When we are living together, we, I'm sure, can afford a cook and several other servants. You have a handsome fortune, I understand, and I will have one too, once my dowry and all that is sorted out.

ALGERNON: What are you saying, Gwendolen?

GWENDOLEN: I'm saying that I have come here to ask for your hand in marriage.

ALGERNON: Good grief, Gwendolen. We're first cousins!

GWENDOLEN: I know. Yet, since we will never have children, how much can it matter?

ALGERNON: Has your father told you something about me?

GWENDOLEN: He has. I also long suspected, in case you want to know.

ALGERNON: I do not know if I like that or not.

GWENDOLEN: I think we both have "longings" that are non traditional. I think that we could make each other very happy.

ALGERNON: By having a sham marriage?

GWENDOLEN: Oh, I suppose if you insist we could do the nasté once in a while. Maybe even have a child or two, and hope the in-breeding will lead to nothing more than a dimwit, nothing that will impede any future marriages, like bad posture. However, I want to make it clear at the beginning that there would be no pressure in that regard, the way I am certain Mother has pressured Father all these years.

ALGERNON: I must say that I'm rather flabbergasted by this visit, Gwendolen.

GWENDOLEN: A further bonus of the arrangement I am proposing is that Father says you complained of "peaking" rather soon in carnal relations. Did you not?

ALGERNON: I may have. Bonus? Why bonus?

GWENDOLEN: Yes, don't you see? Even if we Did It, the act would be over in no time, and we could be on to other matters of more consequence to each of us. What do you say? Algernon, will you marry me?

ALGERNON: I am at a loss for words. Especially since you have not gotten down on one knee to ask for my hand. We ought to at least honour the formalities.

GWENDOLEN: Of course. What was I thinking?! (Gwendolen gets down on one knee to propose.) Take my word, it's not at all easy in these clothes.

ALGERNON: No wonder so few women propose to men.

GWENDOLEN: Algernon, will you be my husband?

ALGERNON: To be perfectly candid, Gwendolen, I was thinking of marrying someone else.

GWENDOLEN: So Father told me. That is why I am acting quickly, though I hope not precipitously. As a further incentive, I have brought along an item most would consider of great importance.

ALGERNON: What item might that be?

GWENDOLEN: Two items in fact. (Produces them.) Both an engagement ring and a wedding ring!

ALGERNON: Gwendolen, you are amazingly efficient.

GWENDOLEN: Yes, I thought it would save time. What do you say?

ALGERNON: We have barely known each other in this new capacity, don't you think? My head is spinning.

GWENDOLEN: I have always thought short engagements are best. They prevent the parties from changing their minds and ruining all sorts of other people's plans. especially the wedding planner's!

ALGERNON: Of course with a longer engagement one can head off possible future incompatibilities in the partners involved.

GWENDOLEN: Mother says that no one would ever get married if the engagement were extended indefinitely. I think she's correct. Indeed, unless people marry before they know each other completely, there will be far too many early divorces, no doubt even before there are marriage vows. Mother is invariably accurate about such things. If you question that, just ask her.

ALGERNON: Do you think that you might turn out to be like your mother?

GWENDOLEN: I am not sure I like the import of your question, Algernon. Do you not care for your own aunt?

ALGERNON: I love her, but not to the point of wishing to marry her.

GWENDOLEN: I think I have the best aspects of both my mother and my father.

ALGERNON: And what would those be, if I might ask?

GWENDOLEN: From my father I have inherited a kind and charitable nature. And from my mother I have inherited the opposite. Which makes me totally unreadable to other people. And mystery in a woman is always a blessing, is it not?

ALGERNON: Perhaps if one is Sherlock Holmes.

GWENDOLEN: You don't like mysteries then?

ALGERNON: They are so predictable. It is never the one you suspect. And the explanation of why he or she is not the villain always takes forever to unravel with far too much arcane knowledge about poisons required, to say nothing of a whole lot of twaddle in general

GWENDOLEN: Really? I adore murder mysteries.

ALGERNON: Perhaps then we are not really –

GWENDOLEN: I am prepared to overlook your lack of respect for the murder mystery, just as I will overlook your given name.

ALGERNON: I like my name. What on earth is wrong with "Algernon"?

GWENDOLEN: It is a name that one can only pray will drop out of the English language. I certainly will not name any children we might have "Algernon."

ALGERNON: That brings up a related matter, Gwendolen. I have heard from Uncle Neville that you have said you could never marry a man unless his name is Ernest. Is this true?

GWENDOLEN: It is both true and untrue. It is true because I have said it. But it is untrue because I didn't mean it for one second.

ALGERNON: It was a way of avoiding unwanted suitors then?

GWENDOLEN: It was. Now that I have a suitor that I want, I intend to never mention the name Ernest again. By the way, I am not at all pleased that Father revealed this secret of mine to you.

ALGERNON: Well, you have capitalized on secrets he and I have shared, have you not? Hence your visit here today.

GWENDOLEN: Oh, that is an entirely different matter.

ALGERNON: I don't see how.

GWENDOLEN: It just is. Moreover, I am willing to marry a man with the perfectly ugly name of "Algernon." That seems to me to more than make up for the lie I told about demanding a man named "Ernest" as well as any capitalizing on others' secrets that may have occurred.

ALGERNON: I must say that you are a piece of work, cousin.

GWENDOLEN: Thank you. I think so too. I attribute it to being a direct descendant from God's handiwork, the Biblical rib.

ALGERNON: You can trace your lineage back to Adam's rib?

GWENDOLEN: To Eve's rib. I believe the chronology of that story has been distorted over time. It's now time to *re-set* that rib, shall we say?!

ALGERNON: I suspect you are shaping and re-shaping the Bible to suit your convenience, Gwendolen.

GWENDOLEN: If I am, I am merely following the precedent of those who have gone before me. How else explain a ham for Easter? And letting cripples worship at our altars?! So, Algernon, he of the despised name, will you consent to marry me or not?

(The doorbell rings.)

ALGERNON: Excuse me, cousin. I must get that.

GWENDELON: Of course. I await your answer.

(Algernon goes offstage. We hear his voice and a woman's voice.)

ALGERNON: (leading the woman in) This way, Cecily. I have another guest as well.

(Enter Cecily. She is wearing a dress today. She is somewhat surprised to see Gwendolen.)

CECILY: Oh, who is this person?

ALGERNON: Cecily, this is my cousin, Gwendolen Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN: Daughter of Lord and Lady Bracknell.

CECILY: You don't say.

GWENDOLEN: I don't mind saying it at all.

ALGERNON: Cecily, however did you find me?

CECILY: You gave me your card. Did you forget? I stuffed it in my clothing.

ALGERNON: Yes, now I remember. I just never expected you to actually use the card. No one does.

CECILY: I would have telephoned, but the telephone is still decades away from common usage.

ALGERNON: I understand.

GWEDOLEN: I hope you will not consider me intrusive, my dear, but what exactly is the point of your calling on my cousin today, if you don't mind my asking?

CECILY: Well, Gwendolen, I do mind your asking and, furthermore, I consider it exceedingly intrusive.

GWENDOLEN: (huffy) Well, really!

ALGERNON: Cecily and I had a charming chat at her country home not long ago. We have become very good friends.

GWENDOLEN: But are you more than friends?

CECILY: Perhaps, given the nature of the visit Algernon made to see me, I should ask Gwendolen what *she's* doing here.

GWENDOLEN: I'm sure, whatever it is, it could not be more important than my visit today.

CECILY: I sincerely doubt that. My visit concerns a possible marriage.

ALGERNON: Rest assured, ladies, that I am overjoyed to see you both.

CECILY / GWENDOLEN: (together) Hush, Algernon!

GWENDOLEN: (to Algernon) Do stay out of this. It concerns us more than it does you, dear.

CECILY: I agree. . . . Did I happen to hear the use of the familiar word “dear” just now?

GWENDOLEN: I’m afraid you did. You see, Cecily, your friend Algernon and I are about to announce our engagement.

CECILY: I find that remarkable, cousin Gwendolen, as I am here to make such an announcement myself.

ALGERNON: Really? I guess the groom is always the last to know.

CECILY: Am I somehow mistaken. Algernon? Did you not propose marriage to me but recently?

ALGERNON: I thought we just got to the perimeter of the question.

CECILY: Yes, my governess interrupted the process, as she has done before. But this time I have opted to take matters into my own hands.

GWENDOLEN: As have I. And I have no doubt as to who has the more capable hands.

CECILY: I was thinking that a summer wedding would be breath-taking.

GWENDOLEN: As it is now spring, I think a spring wedding would be beyond breath-taking!

ALGERNON: Of course winter can be lovely too.

GWENDOLEN: You *will* keep interrupting, Algernon!

CECILY: Yes, where *are* your manners, Algernon!?

ALGERNON: Well, it is my wedding too! Whichever one it is!

GWENDOLEN: Don’t be –

CECILY: – ridiculous!

GWENDOLEN: A husband may appear in a wedding of course. But –

CECILY: – by no means is he –

GWENDOLEN / CECILY: (together) – important!

ALGERNON: However shall I be able to choose between these two amazing offers?!

GWENDOLEN: We'll work it out for you.

ALGERNON: What if I accepted both offers? Something for everybody. Happiness all around!

GWENDOLEN: Really, Algernon, have you no idea how marriage works? Happiness is hardly the issue.

CECILY: The more I hear from Gwendolen, the more I like her.

GWENDOLEN: Thank you, Cecily. I feel the same about you.

ALGERNON: Possibly you two should marry each other.

GWENDOLEN: Now you are talking utter nonsense, Algernon. There are some standards that have stood the test of time and will never change. Not only is a wedding meant entirely for the bride –

CECILY: But also for one woman and one man, however mismatched. Now let's make the best of it.

GWENDOLEN: I am sure that any misunderstanding that has occurred between darling Cecily and darling Algernon can be cleared up in no time, if we put our minds to it.

CECILY: Absolutely! Let us sort this out as rational human beings.

GWENDOLEN: I was thinking of a duel to settle it.

CECILY: Spot on! A duel is just the thing.

ALGERNON: Now, now, ladies.

GWENDOLEN: (ignoring him) I was thinking of foils. Tipped.

CECILY: Or pistols. Loaded.

GWENDOLEN: Then again spears might work. Or javelins.

CECILY: Or boomerangs.

ALGERNON: Aren't words sufficient?

GWENDOLEN: I like the sound of boomerangs. Sharpened.

CECILY: Or teapots!

GWENDOLEN: What?!

CECILY: I happen to be schooled by a very clever governess.

GWENDOLEN: I am sure your governess is gifted in all the arts, but I draw the line at teapots. Only because I am sure my greater experience would trump anything you may offer. I would never take undue advantage.

ALGERNON: What about counter lawsuits?

CECILY: Really, Algernon! Have you no compassion for the two of us?

GWENDOLEN: Cecily's right. To wish a lawsuit upon another person is the height of unspeakable cruelty. Have you lost all sight of civilised behaviour?

ALGERNON: I'm sorry.

GWENDOLEN: What about boxing? Pre-Marquise of Queensbury Rules, of course.

CECILY: Or wrestling. Pre-Olympic Rules!

GWENDOLEN: Or wrestling and bare-knuckle boxing combined with jiu-jitsu, kick boxing, and pound and ground?

CECILY: But how could we leave out eye gouging, hair pulling, and kidney strikes?!

GWENDOLEN: You're on, my dear girl!

(The two women square off as if to box bare-headed.)

ALGERNON: I will not be held responsible if either of you is injured.

CECILY: We don't expect you to. But do watch, Algernon. You might learn a thing or two.

ALGERNON: You are acting like men! And if I wanted to marry a man, I would find a man, not two women!

GWENDOLEN: I must say your attitude is strangely behind the times. I am fighting not only for your hand in holy matrimony but for the right of women everywhere to fight for what they want.

CECILY: Hear, hear!

ALGERNON: You're fighting for the right to fight?

GWENDOLEN: Right!

CECILY: So, Cecily, shall we fight the good fight? (Assumes a wrestling pose.)

ALGERNON: What if you both are hurt? Have you considered that?

GWENDOLEN: I may wind up with a broken nose, missing teeth, and liver damage, but for you, Algernon, no sacrifice is too great! Any scars or disfigurements I may suffer will only bring us closer, I'm sure, over the years.

CECILY: I may experience nerve impairment and never walk again, but how better to prove my eternal love?

ALGERNON: I do not approve one iota! . . . How many rounds are we talking about?

GWENDOLEN: I am prepared to go five.

CECILY: Five minutes each?

GWENDOLEN: Ten minutes each!

CECILY: Why not make it fifteen minutes each for fifteen rounds? That should prove who is the better woman!

ALGERNON: I am not going to stand here and watch this.

GWENDOLEN: We don't expect you to. You may withdraw.

CECILY: Or sit over there in that chair. (Points.)

GWENDOLEN: You can keep score.

CECILY: But no cheating! Come, Gwendolen. I am getting tired.

GWENDOLEN: That does not sound promising for you, precious Cecily.

CECILY: Are you seated yet, Algernon?

ALGERNON: (still standing) How can I sit and watch two women fighting like savages?! I don't even have a snack or a beverage.

GWENDOLEN: There's tea! (Points to it.)

ALGERNON: What can you be thinking?! Tea is entirely inappropriate in this situation.

CECILY: I fully expect to win this contest. However, should I be knocked unconscious I want Algernon to revive me with smelling salts that are non-toxic and gluten-free.

GWENDOLEN: I too fully expect to win. And if I am knocked unconscious, I, in advance, concede to Cecily my right to wed Algernon. That's what sports-womanship is all about.

CECILY: Naturally, I concede the same thing. I just didn't say it.

ALGERNON: Well, what more can I say? I find this resorting to brute skills not only disconcerting but morally reprehensible. Therefore, I must be seated in order to withstand the shock. (Pulls up a chair.) When you are ready, ladies.

(The two women assume a boxing stance again.)

ALGERNON: (to Gwendolen) Ready?

GWENDOLEN: Ready.

ALGERNON: (to Cecily) Ready?

CECILY: Ready.

ALGERNON: Fight!

(The doorbell rings.)

ALGERNON: Excuse me. I must get that. (He gets up.)

GWENDOLEN: I hope for your sake, Algernon, that it is not a third young woman seeking your hand in marriage.

ALGERNON: If it is, I am sure I do not know her and haven't even met her yet!

(He goes offstage. We then hear a woman's voice.)

ALGERNON: (offstage) What are you doing here?

(Enter Miss Prizzin quickly into the room.)

MISS PRIZZIN: Ah, there you are, Cecily, just as I suspected!

CECILY: Prizzy!

GWENDOLEN: Prizzy?

CECILY: Allow me to introduce my governess to you. . . . Gwendolen, Miss Prizzin. . . . Miss Prizzin, Gwendolen Fairfax.

MISS PRIZZIN / GWENDOLEN: (together) Charmed, I'm sure.

CECILY: How did you find me, Prizzy?

MISS PRIZZIN: It was not difficult. Mr. Moncrief's name is very fashionable in London. The first person I asked where he resides gave me directions directly here.

CECILY: Somehow I do not believe you.

MISS PRIZZIN: I also caught a glimpse of Mr. Moncrief's card before you so hastily stuffed it into your clothing.

CECILY: You didn't! How could you?!

MISS PRIZZIN: You seem to forget, Cecily, that I have uncommonly sharp eyesight, not unlike that of a falcon, of the peregrine persuasion.

CECILY: I am all too aware of that, yet I thought your sense of propriety about my privacy would have prevented your looking at anything I stuffed in my clothing – or anywhere else I may choose to stuff it!

MISS PRIZZIN: When it comes to your chastity, Cecily, or any unseemly union, there is no part of your body I would not violate with my eyes!

GWENDOLEN: There is no need to fret, Miss Prizzin, about Cecily having an unfortunate union with what's his name here. I was just about to settle her hash in that regard permanently.

CECILY: So say you!

MISS PRIZZIN: So I was correct then, Cecily. You ran off to align yourself in some way or other with this individual here. (Indicates Algernon.)

ALGERNON: The name is Algernon.

MISS PRIZZIN: The name hardly matters! The match is what matters, and this match, whether it be marriage, or sports, is not going to take place.

CECILY: It is too going to take place! Even if it means Algernon and I will have to live in sin!

ALGERNON /

MISS PRIZZIN /

GWENDOLEN: (shocked) In sin!

CECILY: (dirty) In *sin*!

MISS PRIZZIN: We'll see about that. Do not forget that I control your inheritance.

CECILY: We can live on Algernon's money.

ALGERNON: We can?

GWENDOLEN: No, Algernon and *I* will live on Algernon's money.

MISS PRIZZIN: Obviously I was called here for good reason. My superior acumen is clearly required to settle the matter.

ALGERNON: And what about what *I* want?

MISS PRIZZIN: Do be silent, Mr. Moncrief. What you want is of no importance whatsoever. And I won't brook this attempt on your part to impose patriarchal shackles on the aspirations of the three of us. (Points to herself, Cecily, and Gwendolen.)

ALGERNON: Patriarchal?

MISS PRIZZIN: That is why I am going to ask these two fine young women to leave the room while you and I finalize the marriage details – if any.

GWENDOLEN: I'm not leaving anywhere until I'm sure that my suit will receive a fair hearing. It seems evident to me that you, Miss Prizzin, would only favor Cecily's side.

MISS PRIZZIN: I do not know how you have reached that conclusion, my sweet, dearest Gwendolen. Is it not evident that I came here expressly to prevent Cecily from doing something untoward with this gentleman here? Mr. *Mongrief*.

ALGERNON: It's *Moncrief*, not *Mongrief*.

MISS PRIZZIN: What-ever!

CECILY: Then it really should be I who ought to be worried about favoritism, favoritism toward sweet, dearest Gwendolen.

MISS PRIZZIN: I assure the both of you I will be completely impartial when I discuss the matter in question with Mr. *Moncrief* here in private. You have my word as a Christian, a certified governess, and a member of the Progressive Party.

ALGERNON: I do not believe you will be impartial as to my wishes in this matter, Miss Prizzin, as you unmistakably do not like me in the slightest.

MISS PRIZZIN: As to you, sir, and your wishes, whether marital or merely carnal – whatever those might actually be in your case – I will be so impartial as to leave you out of the equation entirely. What could be more impartial than that?!

ALGERNON: Well, I guess that's . . . fair.

MISS PRIZZIN: Of course it is. Now if Cecily and Gwendolen would leave the room . . .

CECILY: I don't like it, but it might help. My arms are weary from assuming all these stances.

GWENDOLEN: Precisely. I don't like it either, but I agree we need to rest our arms. We can do that in the neighbour room. However, I do not promise that I won't eavesdrop on what is said in here!

CECILY: The same for me. Eavesdropping is the least we can do to ensure our separate causes will be addressed to our liking.

MISS PRIZZIN: Good! . . . (indicating they should leave)

GWENDOLEN: Where?

ALGERNON: (pointing off) Through there.

(Cecily and Gwendolen leave.)

MISS PRIZZIN: And now, Algernon Moncrief, if I have it right, we turn to you!

LIGHTS OUT

SCENE 2

SETTING: Algernon's London flat, continued.

(Lights up.)

ALGERNON: I appreciate your taking an interest in my affairs, Miss Prizzin; however, I have changed my mind about letting you provide "counsel" for the three of us.

MISS PRIZZIN: No, you have not changed your mind, Algernon. When you do, I will inform you of the fact. Therefore, let us start with your name.

ALGERNON: Leave my name alone!

MISS PRIZZIN: I'm very sorry I can't do that. Before we can proceed any further, you must agree to change your name.

ALGERNON: No!

MISS PRIZZIN: I realise that it is not usual for the groom to change his name when entering upon such a momentous state as marriage, but in your case I consider it mandatory. Whether there is a marriage or not, I might add.

ALGERNON: I am born an Algernon, and I will die an Algernon.

MISS PRIZZIN: Far be it from me, Algernon, to order you what to do. Just know that I will never permit Cecily to marry a man named Algernon!

ALGERNON: What about "Al"?

MISS PRIZZIN: You expect a refined young lady like Cecily to marry a man with the barbaric name of "Al"?! As if he were a handy man?

ALGERNON: I thought you admired the lower classes, Miss Prizzin. Was I perhaps mistaken?

MISS PRIZZIN: One can admire the lower classes without actually associating yourself with any of their attributes, including their names.

ALGERNON: I think possibly you contradict yourself, Miss Prizzin.

MISS PRIZZIN: I never contradict myself, Mr. Moncrief. (She takes a teapot out of a large purse, holds it in a threatening way.) And if I do, it is not well bred of you, or wise, to point it out to me.

ALGERNON: I do not think it proper, Miss Prizzin, that you appear to champion the rights of women to match the rights of men while at the same time clinging to the privileges of women.

MISS PRIZZIN: So you may say, Mr. Moncrief, but I do and I will! That is all that will be said on that topic. Now onto the romantic matter at hand. Are we to align you with Cecily or with Gwendolen? Or neither? Which is it to be?

ALGERNON: And I thought my Aunt Augusta was rigid! At least she's a relative!

MISS PRIZZIN: We're all relatives, Mr. Moncrief. It's all depends on how far back you count. Are you ready for my survey?

ALGERNON: As I'll ever be, I suppose. (He sits down opposite her.)

MISS PRIZZIN: I hope the girls are eavesdropping, as this affects both their entire futures.

CECILY / GWENDOLEN: (offstage, together) We are!

MISS PRIZZIN: Good. Now that we have agreed that you must change the name “Algernon,” what about changing the name “Moncrief”? It is equally ugly.

ALGERNON: I would rather die first.

MISS PRIZZIN: Believe me, that can be arranged, if we decide to go that route. (She touches the teapot again as a threat.) I hope, however, that it won’t come to deadly force, as a bridegroom usually walks better down the aisle alive rather than dead. Usually.

ALGERNON: I am beginning to think it doesn’t really matter.

MISS PRIZZIN: I hope this complaining on your part is not a sign of things to come in any marriage you might find yourself in, to whomever that may be. A complaining husband is like a gnawing tooth, best dealt with by yanking it out, sooner rather than later. (Touches the teapot as a warning again.)

ALGERNON: Do you always bring your own teapot when you travel, Miss Prizzin?

MISS PRIZZIN: Yes. I never travel without my very own. Does it offend you in some way?

ALGERNON: Have you a license for it?

MISS PRIZZIN: It is hardly lethal, I should think.

ALGERNON: I have heard stories.

MISS PRIZZIN: Old husbands’ tales, no doubt.

ALGERNON: Old *dead* husbands’ tales!

MISS PRIZZIN: I do trust that Cecily has not filled your head with apocryphal stories about me. She does have quite the imagination, that girl.

ALGERNON: Has she? I don’t suppose you have ever scalded anyone to death, Miss Prizzin, have you?

MISS PRIZZIN: If I have, I am afraid I have forgotten.

ALGERNON: I am sure the scalded have not.

MISS PRIZZIN: That might depend on *where* they were scalded.

ALGERNON: What do you mean? In London, or in the country?!

MISS PRIZZIN: If they were scalded in the lap, they might remember. If they were scalded in the brains, they might very well not. Sure you won't have some? (Swoops up the teapot.)

ALGERNON: (frightened) Oh, my good God, don't! (He stands up.)

MISS PRIZZIN: Take a seat, Mr. Moncrief.

ALGERNON: Don't mind if I do. Do you think I'm afraid!? (Takes a seat opposite her with the coffee table between them. He pushes it further way.)

(She puts the teapot back on the table.)

MISS PRIZZIN: Excellent!

ALGERNON: (jumping up) I think I would rather stand.

MISS PRIZZIN: Do you think you will assume some sort of superiority if you tower over me?

ALGERNON: I am sure no one could possibly tower over you, Miss Prizzin.

MISS PRIZZIN: That sounds good, but I'm not entirely sure I trust you, Mr. Moncrief.

ALGERNON: Nor I you, Miss Prizzin. And why is that, do you suppose?

MISS PRIZZIN: Why you don't trust me? I have no idea. Unless it is because I am a woman.

ALGERNON: That's preposterous. I trust women implicitly. After all, I'm engaged to two of them! I must have nothing but the highest respect for women to find myself so situated.

MISS PRIZZIN: So it would seem. But is it? I will tell you why I don't trust you, Mr. Moncrief. It is because of your sex. I have found most of your kind to be deceitful and violent. To say nothing of nasty, brutish, and tall!

ALGERNON: Surely you don't generalize about the entire male sex, Miss Prizzin.

MISS PRIZZIN: I'm afraid I do. You have a penis, I assume.

ALGERNON: I do.

MISS PRIZZIN: Enough said then.

ALGERNON: If I made such generalizations about women I have the distinct feeling that you would not put up with it. Might even try to hit me with that teapot.

MISS PRIZZIN: I have noticed that you have been watching my teapot far more than most men in my experience do. Why is that, Mr. Moncrief?

ALGERNON: I'm sure I don't know. I've always fancied having tea. It's just of late that it has become a bit of a problem. And that is a coffee table, not meant for tea at all!

MISS PRIZZIN: Let me ask you this, Mr. Moncrief. On which side of history do you wish to be?

ALGERNON: I'm sorry. I don't understand the question.

MISS PRIZZIN: In those times when great social changes are in development, a person has to choose which side to be on. Which are you on, the progressive side or the reactionary side?

ALGERNON: Must it be entirely one or the other?

MISS ALGERNON: It must!

ALGERNON: I doubt that, Miss Prizzin. I think it possible to be on both sides, or neither, depending on the issue at hand. I find myself straddling any number of issues.

MISS PRIZZIN: Really? I don't think straddlers do very well in history.

ALGERNON: I suspect they do much better than those who choose the wrong side. In any case, I seriously doubt that I personally will have any influence on history whatsoever, like most people.

MISS PRIZZIN: You don't seem to like most people, Mr. Moncrief? I can tell.

ALGERNON: I can take them or leave them. I would not claim to like people in large numbers, no. On the other hand, I cherish the few I find directly in my life. You think differently?

MISS PRIZZIN: I despise most people directly in my life, but I positively love humanity as a whole. Especially when they are in floods or typhoons in far-away locations.

ALGERNON: I am sure you would rush to their aid in a minute, Miss Prizzin.

MISS PRIZZIN: I would if I had not had so many young women to be the governess of. In my retirement I intend to spend all my time in tsunami-ravaged areas, earthquake-devastated locales, and gypsy camps.

ALGERNON: It sounds admirable. I do hope you get around to actually doing it.

MISS PRIZZIN: I detect an undertone of some kind, Mr. Moncrief, that I do not entirely appreciate. Tell me what in general do you think of minorities?

ALGERNON: Minorities? You mean like Catholics?

MISS PRIZZIN: I meant like the peoples spread out across the British Empire.

ALGERNON: I would hardly call them “minorities,” Miss Prizzin, there being so very, very many of them.

MISS PRIZZIN: But do you like them? Do you want them to emigrate here?

ALGERNON: I would think that would depend on what each of these “peoples” is like and how many of them we are actually talking about. Are they supposed to have some collective virtue?

MISS PRIZZIN: I don’t find that an acceptable answer.

ALGERNON: Are we almost finished with this inquisition?

MISS PRIZZIN: Not quite. Do you think women should be allowed to vote?

ALGERNON: (after thinking a bit) Yes.

MISS PRIZZIN: Very good. Do you think Catholics should be allowed on the throne of England?

ALGERNON: No.

MISS PRIZZIN: Good. Neither do I. Do you think women should be able to inherit property?

ALGERNON: (after thinking a bit) Yes.

MISS PRIZZIN: Better and better, Mr. Moncrief.

ALGERNON: Thank you. Anything else?

MISS PRIZZIN: Do you think women should be allowed to be the queen on England?

ALGERNON: All of them? No.

MISS PRIZZIN: Some of them. One at time.

ALGERNON: Aren’t they allowed to be now? Have I missed something?

MISS PRIZZIN: Women are allowed to rule, but not if a *male* is available instead.

ALGERNON: That doesn’t sound fair.

MISS PRIZZIN: It is not fair! It has forced many a woman to take matters into her own hands. (She touches the teapot, as a threat.) The inequality could even drive some women to drastic measures! Drastic! Tea?

ALGERNON: I'm sure any tea that may be in that pot is quite, quite cold by now.

MISS PRIZZIN: (seething with even more anger, yelling) Yes! Like the poor, cold trampled-upon bodies of endless women throughout the course of human history! Let me ask you, Mr. Moncrief, just how many, let's say plays, by women have you seen? Huh?

ALGERNON: What? That is not how I select the plays I attend.

MISS PRIZZIN: Of course it isn't! No, you pick plays because the playwrights have penises!

ALGERNON: I pick them for laughs or tears, and not because they have penises! For talent!

MISS PRIZZIN: Unlikely, sir! But wait. (forcing herself to calm down) Let us concentrate on more mundane matters, namely, your possible marriage to Gwendolen or Cecily. Shall we?

ALGERNON: I'm game. I am more than game.

MISS PRIZZIN: As to the treatment of any future bride of yours and any children that may follow, I have a few questions.

ALGERNON: (daringly) Shoot.

MISS PRIZZIN: Don't you feel that wives and children, especially female children, should be infused with the notion that they are special, clever, gifted, and incapable of error?

ALGERNON: Not unless they deserve it.

MISS PRIZZIN: I don't think I care for that answer either. It is extremely backward looking.

ALGERNON: Let me ask you a question, Miss Prizzin. Do you think a husband, or indeed any man, is entitled to opinions of his own?

MISS PRIZZIN: (after a quick thought) No. Any other questions?

ALGERNON: Yes. Is there anything you deem suitable that relates in any way to what other people, or "peoples," if you count men as people, or "peoples," might find *enjoyable*?

MISS PRIZZIN: (after a thought) No.

ALGERNON: I thought as much.

MISS PRIZZIN: I don't care for these answers, Mr. Moncrief. And I care for your questions even less. It seems to me I know more than enough to decide the question of suitable marriages for all involved here. Thank you for helping me make up my mind.

ALGERNON: If the two young ladies in the next room are going to follow your ideas religiously, I thank you for helping me make up *my* mind!

MISS PRIZZIN: Fine! (calling) Girls! You may return now. Mr. Moncrief and I have come to a conclusion. (There is no response.) Cecily? . . . Gwendolen?

(Cecily and Gwendolen emerge from the next room in S&M gear. Both have whips, and each is wearing a slightly different black hood with small eye slits.)

CECILY: (hitting Gwendolen with her whip) Take that, you nasty man, Algernon Moncrief!

GWENDOLEN: (giggling) Oh, that hurt! Now you take this, Miss Prizzin! (Hits Cecily with her whip.)

CECILY: (also giggling) (a fake cry of pain) Oh, my!

(They run around whipping one another, playfully. They can barely see because of the hoods and stumble about.)

MISS PRIZZIN: Girls! What on earth are you doing?!

GWENDOLEN: Where have you gone, you horrible old governess, you!

CECILY: I'm going to flog your penis! Flog! Flog! (She hits Gwendolen in the crotch.)

GWENDOLEN: Did you hit it yet? I didn't feel a thing!

(More giggles and running about.)

MISS PRIZZIN: This is outrageous!

ALGERNON: I agree! Those must be Lane's items. My former servant. He seems to have left them behind. Perhaps as a joke on me.

MISS PRIZZIN: (very solemnly) S/M is *not* funny! It is *serious*!

CECILY: Oh, Prizzy, *you* can't be serious. How can anyone think it serious with all this hilarious gear?!

MISS PRIZZIN: Stop! . . . Stop! (The girls stop.) I believe that Mr. Moncrief and I have arrived at a mutual decision.

CECILY / GWENDOLEN: (together) What?

ALGERNON: I find that I do not wish to be aligned with either Cecily or Gwendolen.

GWENDOLEN: You don't?

MISS PRIZZIN: An intelligent decision.

ALGERNON: If it's going to be a fake marriage, it might as well be with a man!

CECILY: A man?!

ALGERNON: A man with a penis. And no whips or hoods.

MISS PRIZZIN: I thought as much. Besides, you girls are doing it all wrong! What's the matter with you?! *Both* can't have whips and hoods! Are you mad?!

CECILY: Prizzy?

(Cecily, Gwendolen, and Algernon all turn to look at Miss Prizzin in wonder.)

MISS PRIZZIN: Stop staring at me, all of you! (Runs to get her teapot, holds it up as a threat.) Do you see this? Do you see it? I will not be thwarted! You have been warned! (Her arms begin to shake with palsy.)

LIGHTS OUT

SCENE 3

SETTING: The small living area upstairs of Lord Bracknell's home.

BRACKNELL: Are you about ready?

CECIL: Almost.

BRACKNELL: We're going to be late!

CECIL: (finishing get dressed) I am hurrying!

BRACKNELL: You look perfectly fine!

CECIL: (turning around, looking very nice) I am aware of that.

BRACKNELL: It was worth the wait.

CECIL: You look nice too.

BRACKNELL: Thank you.

CECIL: Where are we going? Have you had the carriage sent round? I'll drive.

BRACKNELL: I have a surprise.

CECIL: Oh?

BRACKNELL: I thought we would have tea! (Removes a cloth covering a high tea setting.)

CECIL: Not again! I thought we were going out. Finally.

BRACKNELL: Cecil, I know that we have been cooped up here in my quarters for several weeks now. But it just isn't safe yet.

CECIL: You aren't ashamed of me, are you?

BRACKNELL: Of course not.

CECIL: I thought we had become more than an item.

BRACKNELL: We have. I am exceedingly fond of you.

CECIL: And I of you.

BRACKNELL: But.

CECIL: I told you no butt until we are in a committed, monogamous relationship.

BRACKNELL: That's not what I meant. I was referring to . . .

CECIL: Your wife?

BRACKNELL: Yes. I'm afraid that she is still lurking outside this room.

CECIL: Still demanding her marital debt?

BRACKNELL: Too true.

CECIL: Can't you put her off somehow?

BRACKNELL: For the past two weeks, I have told her I have a headache. I don't know how long I can keep this up. She has threatened to summon a doctor.

CECIL: I thought you were "out," Neville. This looks like "in" to me. I'm tired of creeping around lest Lady Bracknell hear me.

BRACKNELL: Just a little while longer. Then I'll get a divorce.

CECIL: So you say. How much longer?

BRACKNELL: I'm sure it won't be more than two or three years.

CECIL: Two or three years? Staying in this . . . this closet for two or three years?!

BRACKNELL: Oh, you youngsters! You are so impatient.

CECIL: Lord Bracknell, I find you, even upon close inspection in these close quarters, to be an admirable person, with only a modicum of unfortunate personal noises, and I am prepared to spend my life and even eternity with you. But I don't think I can stay in this room having tea after tea after tea for one minute longer!

BRACKNELL: Let me check to see the whereabouts of Lady Bracknell. (Goes to the offstage door.) (If an onstage door is possible, use that.)

CECIL: Do you see her?

BRACKNELL: Shhh!

CECIL: Is she there?

BRACKNELL: (returning) She's at the end of the hallway, behind the large Chinese vase.

CECIL: What is she doing?

BRACKNELL: From what I could make out, she's just lurking. I think she has suspicions that you're in here.

CECIL: Lord Bracknell, this can't continue! You do realise that, don't you?

BRACKNELL: I suppose. Yet it's just so damned *hard*!

CECIL: Do you refer to some sort of lingering arousal for your wife?

BRACKNELL: I was referring to leaving this room.

CECIL: If we leave this room, you know that we are never coming back, right?

BRACKNELL: But I live here!

CECIL: Do you call this living? Cramp't up in here like two little scared rabbits?

BRACKNELL: I thought it was cozy. Don't you find it cozy?

CECIL: For two weeks it was fine. But it is fine no longer. I haven't seen a weeping willow bank in ages. I have written not a single poem.

BRACKNELL: You have plenty of time to. And here's some paper. (Gets some blank paper.)
Write me a poem. I love your poetry.

CECIL: You haven't even heard any of it.

BRACKNELL: I know. But I'm sure I will love it when it gets written.

CECIL: I need a weeping willow bank! I don't just come up with poetry in a claustrophobic, tiny room. What can you be thinking?! I haven't even written a chiasmus in forever!

BRACKNELL: You could pretend this is a willow bank. (Points to a chaise lounge.)

CECIL: A chaise lounge is hardly a willow bank!

BRACKNELL: Yes. But you could pretend.

CECIL: I'm tired of pretending. I want the sweet, real smell of mossy trees alongside a scummy body of water, the dank, harsh odor of muck!

BRACKNELL: But what if you fall into the water and expire?! It's much, much safer in here, even with Lady Bracknell breathing fire outside there.

CECIL: That's what they always say. But I have known willow banks, Lord Bracknell. Can you say the same?!

BRACKNELL: No, you're probably right. All I've known my adult life is this room, or perhaps a few stolen hours at my gentlemen's club. But it has its charms. I like to call it my man cavity.

CECIL: This is no man cavity. This is a prison, a prison guarded by a terrifying Cerberus out there. (Points.)

(There is a noise offstage.)

BRACKNELL: What's that? Is it my wife?

CECIL: Look at you trembling. A man in a man cavity does not tremble! A sheep trembles, a bandicoot trembles! . . . I think.

BRACKNELL: You're right, Cecil! A man does not tremble!

(Another noise offstage.)

BRACKNELL: (afraid) What's that? You don't think Lady Bracknell is going to break in, is she?

CECIL: Let me check. (Starts toward the door.)

BRACKNELL: Be careful!

CECIL: I will. But I will not cower. (Goes offstage.)

(A pause.)

BRACKNELL: . . . Cecil? . . . Cecil? (Creeps closer to the door.) Are you there? Are you all right?

CECIL: (re-entering) I think she saw me.

BRACKNELL: Oh, my God, no!

CECIL: She has moved closer to the door.

BRACKNELL: No!

CECIL: She looked determined.

BRACKNELL: Maybe if I went out and had sex with her, she'd be satisfied for a while.

CECIL: I thought you said you didn't satisfy your wife.

BRACKNELL: I don't think I satisfy either one of us, to tell the truth.

CECIL: There it is then! I'm going out there to confront Lady Bracknell! This cannot continue.

BRACKNELL: But it's been the way it is for so long.

CECIL: Exactly! And now at last it is going to end!

BRACKNELL: She'll have you for supper!

CECIL: Or I, her. And it won't be a high tea! I guarantee you that!

(Cecil moves closer.)

BRACKNELL: Cecil, no! Don't!

CECIL: Someone's got to do it. Sooner or later, someone's got to do it!

(Cecil rushes offstage.)

BRACKNELL: Cecil!

(There is a pause, then the sound of people throwing each other about.)

BRACKNELL: Cecil? Don't get into fisticuffs with Lady Bracknell. You'll lose!

(Another bout of offstage fight sounds.)

(There is a silence.)

BRACKNELL: Cecil?

(Finally Cecil re-enters the room. He looks bedraggled.)

BRACKNELL: You were right. She won.

BRACKNELL: No! . . . She always does.

CECIL: Damn her!

BRACKNELL: Don't swear. She doesn't like it!

CECIL: Does this mean we can never leave this room now?

BRACKNELL: Probably.

CECIL: Oh, I am not so easily defeated as that, Lord Bracknell. But this time I go armed.

BRACKNELL: Armed? Have you a gun?

CECIL: Do I look like a state militia that's well regulated?

BRACKNELL: No.

CECIL: Then of course I don't have a gun, nor should I! But I do have this! (Grabs the teapot.)

BRACKNELL: The teapot?

CECIL: Yes, the teapot. It's actually better than a gun, more accurate.

BRACKNELL: Are you going to pour water out of it onto Lady Bracknell?

CECIL: No. I thought I'd spill some tea and make her slip.

BRACKNELL: Capital idea!

CECIL: I just want you to know this, Lord Bracknell – if I don't come back this time, I did not die in vain. I died defending your right to divorce the person of your choice.

BRACKNELL: And I will never forget it. I will have a memorial built to celebrate your death – and our relationship.

CECIL: I'm very touched by that sentiment, Lord Bracknell.

(They touch hands.)

(There is an offstage noise.)

BRACKNELL: I think that's her. I recognize her movements.

(Another noise, closer to them.)

CECIL: I think she's coming in!

BRACKNELL: I think so too!

CECIL: Why don't you help me? It would be so much easier.

BRACKNELL: No, you do it. I'll join you when it's safe.

CECIL: (frowning) I'm not sure I like the sound of that. (Another offstage noise) But I dislike the sound of that even more! Here I go! (He raises the teapot and runs off.)

BRACKNELL: Go, Cecil! Go with God! I don't think God likes Lady Bracknell!

LIGHTS OUT

SCENE 4

SETTING: Algernon's flat, where it all began.

(Enter Algernon in a shirt but without pants. He is holding a pair of trousers.)

ALGERNON: (fussing over the pants) I don't know how I will ever get this tea stain out of these trousers! I do know that tea will never be served in this home again! (The doorbell rings.) Oh, drat! I am not ready! Well, I simply do not have anything else to wear that's suitable. Nor do I want to!

(He goes offstage to answer the door pantless.)

(We hear the sound of Cecil and Lord Bracknell in the hallway greeting Algernon.)

ALGERNON: Do come in, you two. I want to hear all about it.

LORD BRACKNELL: Thank you. It was harrowing. Have you any tea by any chance?

ALGERNON: (harshly) NO! Just tell me what happened. (to Cecil) How nice to see you again, Cecil. Too bad you never called.

CECIL: Yes, those things happen.

BRACKNELL: You and Algernon know each other then?

CECIL: We wrote some sort of poetry together, once, but I wouldn't say that we know each other, no.

ALGERNON: I have no hard feelings. Life has many comings and goings. Ships that bump in the night and then pass on. So what happened with Aunt Augusta?

LORD BRACKNELL: I'll let Cecil tell it. He's so much better with words than I. Perhaps even with actions.

CECIL: Not at all, not at all. Lord Bracknell in the end backed me up quite manfully.

ALGERNON: I don't want to hear about your sexual escapades right now. What happened with Aunt Augusta? I heard there was some dust-up at your residence.

BRACKNELL: Yes, the coppers ultimately had to be called.

ALGERNON: Really?

CECIL: Really. I have never liked the coppers that much. They seem to have some absurd repulsion to poets hanging out on willow banks. I have been needlessly arrested on several occasions. But in this case they came just in the nick of time. Lady Bracknell had disarmed me by taking away my teapot, almost like that, in fact! (Snaps his fingers.) She was about to stab me with the spout when they grabbed her and saved my life.

ALGERNON: Amazing.

BRACKNELL: Cecil was downright amazing indeed!

CECIL: But it was actually Lord Bracknell who turned the tide.

ALGERNON: How so? Did you pull her off Cecil?

CECIL: Not only did he pull her off me when I thought I was a goner, but he whisked her downstairs into her quarters

ALGERNON: And held it there until the coppers could arrest her?

CECIL: No, Lord Bracknell – God bless him! – had carnal relations with Lady Bracknell until I could escape our cramped quarters upstairs and explain everything to the police. . . . Well, almost everything.

ALGERNON: And they believed you?

CECIL: Probably not. But they saw the teapot and they believed that. The imprint of her hands was still embedded in the ceramic!

ALGERNON: I can understand that. Aunt Augusta is a formidable woman.

BRACKNELL: Cecil has graciously opted not to press charges against her.

ALGERNON: And how does she feel?

BRACKNELL: We had a good, long talk after our bout of carnal relations. The talk was a long time coming and mutually agreeable. If only my wife had not suddenly taken up smoking! And in bed! The cigar smoke nearly blinded me and put me off my task. However, I am pleased to say that she and I have at last come to some “accommodation” about our marriage.

ALGERNON: Which is?

CECIL: Lord Bracknell and I will get a charming little cottage in the country, where I can be close to my sister. She and I have so much in common. I have insisted on the occasional over-night stay on a weeping willow bank.

BRACKNELL: I will of course stay married to Lady Bracknell, for appearances’ sake. But she and I will cease all carnal relations, as is expected and normal anyway of people our age.

CECIL: I think we shall be quite contented.

ALGERNON: Yet there is quite a discrepancy in your ages, is there not? Might that not prove a problem?

BRACKNELL: We have discussed that very thing.

CECIL: We have indeed. We have decided that when Lord Bracknell dies, as he no doubt will, I can form another alliance after a suitable time of mourning, perhaps even with you, Algernon, if we are still both interested by then.

ALGERNON: I'll put that on my calendar.

(The doorbell rings.)

CECIL: May I use your necessary?

ALGERNON: Of course. (Points off.)

CECIL: Excuse me. (Runs offstage.)

(The doorbell rings again.)

BRACKNELL: Shall I get that? I don't know if you realise it or not, but you don't have any trousers on.

ALGERNON: I know it, and I don't care.

BRACKNELL: I'll go. I think that could be Gwendolen.

ALGERNON: You know your daughter's doorbell ring?!

BRACKNELL: I do. She has a certain panache, that girl!

ALGERNON: I don't mind answering my own doorbell. And that's not the only thing of mine I am learning to take care of myself! (He means masturbation. Goes to answer the door.)

(We hear Gwendolen's voice, Algernon's voice, followed by Cecily's voice.)

GWENDOLEN: (entering wearing her usual feminine clothing) Father! You're here too!

BRACKNELL: Darling Gwendolen! How grand to see you.

GWENDOLEN: Mother has told me everything.

BRACKNELL: Everything?

GWENDOLEN: Everything!

BRACKNELL: Well, I had hoped to explain things to you myself, my dear, but perhaps hearing it from your mother is best.

GWENDOLEN: I will of course ignore what Mother has told me and rely instead of what I know to be true of you, Father, that you have paid your dues, indeed more than your share.

BRACKNELL: Thank you, Gwendolen. I appreciate that.

GWENDOLEN: I have some news of my own, Father. I do hope you can stay as I share it with Algernon, my erstwhile fiancé.

BRACKNELL: That will probably save you from having to explain it far too many times to too many people.

GWENDOLEN: Indeed, it does get tiresome having to explain yourself all the time.

BRACKNELL: Did I hear another female voice in the hallway?

ALGERNON: (offstage) Yes, Cecily is here too! She's having just a bit of a problem with her frock!

(This will allow time or for problems while Cecil is getting dressed as Cecily.)

(Enter Cecily, dressed in a frock.)

CECILY: Oh, the dresses they make for women nowadays! How do they expect us to wear them!?

GWENDOLEN: I keep telling you that you could wear pants, Cecily.

CECILY: Sometimes I wear pants!

GWENDOLEN: And very nicely too.

(Algernon re-enters.)

ALGERNON: I think pants are entirely passé, if you ask me.

CECILY: (to Algernon) Thank you, Algernon, for assisting me when my petticoat was showing.

ALGERNON: Think nothing of it.

CECILY: Gwendolen and I have something to tell everyone here!

ALGERNON: You don't say? My flat seems to have become a public railway station.

BRACKNELL: What, pray, is your announcement, Gwendolen?

ALGERNON: Shouldn't we wait for Cecil? I'm sure he wants to hear it too.

CECILY: Oh, we can't bother about my brother. I'll tell him later. Where is he, in the necessary?
He takes forever in there!

BRACKNELL: That's quite true. (to Cecily) And you might be?

GWENDOLEN: Father, this is Cecily. My new fiancée!

BRACKNELL: Your fiancée?!

GWENDOLEN: Oh, we can't of course dream of ever getting married legally, but we consider ourselves a couple now.

BRACKNELL: (quietly to Algernon) I told you so.

ALGERNON: You did indeed.

CECILY: Gwendolen and I discovered how much we enjoy each other's company when we were here last and tried on those frightful hoods.

GWENDOLEN: Not that the hoods or the whips did the slightest thing for us. We don't mean that. Although they were amusing one time. But we did learn that we are so much alike in so many ways.

CECILY: We are!

GWENDOLEN: And there so few other well-behaved lesbians in town at the moment. (to Bracknell) Yes, Father, I'm a lesbian.

BRACKNELL: And I'm gay!

GWENDOLEN/ BRACKNELL; (embracing) Father! . . . Daughter!

CECILY: And I'm not a lesbian, but I intend to stay with Gwendolen for about three years and give her immense happiness, to say nothing of some heartache when I go off with men from time to time. And eventually, one man of course.

(The doorbell rings again.)

BRACKNELL: Who could that be? (fearful) Not Augusta having changed her mind!

ALGERNON: Let me get it.

CECILY: (calling) Hurry up in there, Cecil! I've got to use the necessary myself!

(We hear the sound of Algernon's voice, not pleased.)

MISS PRIZZIN: I can find my way in, Mr. Moncrief.

(Enter Miss Prizzin.)

(Algernon follows, perturbed.)

ALGERNON: I thought we were rid of you! I thought, after that vicious spray with the teapot, and your confession of guilt to the magistrate, you had been put away in prison, Miss Prizzin.

MISS PRIZZIN: I got out early, with time off for good behaviour.

ALGERNON: But how long did you serve? You are a murderess!

MISS PRIZZIN: I served six days. My lawyer was able to show that all the men I killed with teapots were rapists. I actually saved Cecily from that same horrible fate, not once but five times!

CECILY: I'm grateful, of course, Prizzy, but you simply can't keep expecting to use that as an excuse. Really.

MISS PRIZZIN: As part of my plea bargain and my parole, I have agreed to forswear teapots of any kind. (Opens her large purse. The others are frightened.) See! (She reveals that the purse is free of teapots.)

ALGERNON: I hope we can trust you, Miss Prizzin. After all, you did try to scald me when you were last here.

MISS PRIZZIN: As I recall, by the time I finally threw the tea on you, it was no longer hot!

ALGERNON: No, it was not hot. But it was cold! Do you know what cold water does to a man's crotch, Miss Prizzin?!

MISS PRIZZIN: I'm sure I can't guess! Besides, the tea in that teapot was lukewarm!

ALGERNON: It was cold!

MISS PRIZZIN: It was lukewarm! As the magistrate rules, it did no damage of any kind to your crotch!

ALGERNON: May I remind you, Miss Prizzin, that there is also tannic acid in tea! I am still suffering the consequences.

MISS PRIZZIN: Not in my tea, there wasn't! It had tannin, but no tannic acid! It also had polymer chains of flavonoids – antioxidants to you, Mr. Moncrief! So it was downright good for your crotch!

ALGERNON: Whatever that tea had, it has shrunk my . . . crotch by at least several centimeters!

MISS PRIZZIN: I don't believe you!

ALGERNON: Do you want me to prove it? (Grabs his underwear.)

BRACKNELL: I am positive that your crotch is second to none, Algernon, even with the recent tea attack.

ALGERNON: Thank you, Uncle. That's very kind of you to say.

MISS PRIZZIN: You men! You always stick together! All right, now I am leaving. I told my parole officer and I would come and apologize, and I have.

ALGERNON: She has? When?

CECILY: You know that I have fired you, don't you, Prizzy? You cannot come back to my country home.

GWENDOLEN: Precisely. While I admire some of your principles, Miss Prizzin, I believe it is time for Cecily to make a fresh start in life.

MISS PRIZZIN: And so do I. I think I spy enough of me in Cecily to more than satisfy the educator in me. Besides, I have plans of my own, now that I am a free woman, in every sense.

CECILY: What might those be?

MISS PRIZZIN: I intend to sail around the world in a kayak looking for natural disasters and helping the storm-tossed and the indigent when I encounter them. Later, I intend to swim the English Channel in a two-piece bathing costume.

CECILY: (shocked) No! (then forgiving) Oh, Prizzy, I will miss you so!

MISS PRIZZIN: And I too, dear, will miss you. (They embrace.)

GWENDOLEN: Okay, that's a long-enough embrace.

CECILY: I do wish Cecil would come out of the necessary. He is so selfish!

BRACKNELL: He just likes to look his best at all times.

(The doorbell rings again.)

CECILY: Could that be Cecil? Did he somehow go out the other way?

ALGERNON: I will get it. I must hire a new servant. I cannot go on like this! (Exits.)

(We hear two male voices in the hallway.)

(Enter Algernon and Lane at the same time.)

ALGERNON: (to the others) Speak of the Devil! Look who's back.

BRACKNELL: It's Lane! Good to see you, sir. (explaining to Cecily and Miss Prizzin) He's Algernon's manservant.

ALGERNON: The prodigal returned at last!

LANE: I am sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Moncrief, but, alas, I have not returned to work for you.

ALGERNON: You haven't?

LANE: No, I am here on quite a different mission today.

ALGERNON: What mission is that?

LANE: I am seeking a woman by the name of Prizzin. I have learned from her parole officer that she might be coming here, the scene of her last crime.

MISS PRIZZIN: Me? You are seeking me? Have I committed some offence already?

LANE: I think that you have not associated me in person with the man that you have been corresponding with in prison since your incarceration. I am that man!

MISS PRIZZIN: You are Dogface?

LANE: That is indeed the name I used to write to you.

MISS PRIZZIN: Yes, now that you mention it, you seem familiar. But don't be too familiar!

LANE: If you recall, in my last letter I asked for your hand in marriage. Did you not receive it? Or did you not choose to reply, my greatest fear?

MISS PRIZZIN: Oh, I got so many of those letters when I was in prison I barely had time to get through them all before I was released.

LANE: I will let that bit of information fuel my hopes. I was afraid that my poor, feeble expressions of my admiration for your many strengths had not won your approval.

MISS PRIZZIN: Yes, it's coming back to me now. Your letters, so abject, so demeaning of yourself. They did catch my attention.

LANE: Oh, wonderful! Can I dare then to hope, to dream that there is even the remotest possibility that you and I might . . . ?

MISS PRIZZIN: You wish to get married? Certainly. I can kayak later.

LANE: At last I have found a woman I can relate to!

MISS PRIZZIN: I feel a certain stirring in myself as well.

LANE: Miss Prizzin!

MISS PRIZZIN: Mr. Lane!

LANE: Call me Dogface!

MISS PRIZZIN: I will. Later.

(They embrace.)

(All the others present applaud.)

CECILY: Excuse me. I am getting that Cecil out of the toilet if it's the last thing I do!
(Runs off.)

LANE: There *is* one more thing . . .

MISS PRIZZIN: One thing more?

LANE: While I am sure that you and I will find mutual rapture in our upcoming marriage, there is still one thing that would make our relationship perfect. Even more perfect.
(He hesitates.)

MISS PRIZZIN: Out with it, Dogface! While we're young!

LANE: I have always harboured a secret yearning, deep within my bowels, to be married to a Strong woman.

MISS PRIZZIN: Are you saying that I am not a strong woman?!

LANE: No, I'm sure you are. You certainly are. It's just that I would like the woman I love to actually be named Strong.

MISS PRIZZIN: Is that your name?

LANE: No, my name is Lane. Or Dogface.

MISS PRIZZIN: Well, I'm not becoming Mrs. Dogface.

LANE: Nor would I expect you to. One Dogface in a marriage is plenty.

MISS PRIZZIN: Well, as a matter of fact, Mr. Lane, I have some good news for you.

ALGERNON: You do?

MISS PRIZZIN: It just so happens that Prizzin is my married name. I never dropped it, even after I and my first husband divorced. My maiden name is actually Strong!

LANE: So you are my Strong woman after all?!

MISS PRIZZIN: I am indeed. I am indeed.

LANE: Oh, joy, I knew it would come at last if I just was patient enough!

MISS PRIZZIN: You in most instances will henceforth call me Miss Strong, even after we are wed. That is, when you aren't calling me Ernestine. That is my first name, and you may call me by that after, let's say, the first decade.

LANE: I love it! Ernestine! It is more than I can hope for!

(Again the others applaud.)

ALGERNON: Well, at least you others here seem to have found what you want. I guess I will have to be content with self-abuse.

(The others applaud him.)

(Enter Cecil.)

CECIL: (aside to Algernon) Algernon!

ALGERNON: Yes? Cecil? It is Cecil, isn't it? Not Cecily, right?

CECILY: Oh, whether Cecily or Cecil, I may be available on some weekends, when I'm up in the city. Here's my card. I've had some made up. One just *has* to!

(Cecil hands Algernon his card.)

ALGERNON: Well, well, could it be possible that maybe at last some people around here are actually getting what they bloody, fucking *need* in their miserable little lives!?

(The others think about it, then heartily applaud Algernon. And so does the audience, one would hope.)

LIGHTS OUT

END OF PLAY