

## The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde

[1]Lady Bracknell. [Sitting down.] You can **take a seat**, Mr. Worthing.

[Looks in her pocket for note-book and pencil.]

Jack: Thank you, Lady Bracknell, I prefer standing.

Lady Bracknell: [Pencil and note-book in hand.] I **feel bound** to tell you that you are not down on [5]my list of **eligible** young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?

Jack: Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

Lady Bracknell: I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There [10]are far too many **idle** men in London as it is. How old are you?

Jack: Twenty-nine.

Lady Bracknell: A very good age to be married at. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

Jack: [After some hesitation.] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

[15]Lady Bracknell: I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that **tampers** with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the **bloom** is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically **unsound**. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in **Grosvenor Square**. **What is your income?**

[20]Jack: Between seven and eight thousand a year.

Lady Bracknell: [Makes a note in her book.] In land, or in investments?

Jack: In investments, chiefly.

Lady Bracknell: That is satisfactory. What between the duties expected of one during one's lifetime, and the duties exacted from one after one's death, land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. [25]It gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up. That's all that can be said about land.

Jack: I have a country house with some land, of course, attached to it, about fifteen hundred acres, I believe; but I don't depend on that for my real income. In fact, as far as I can make out, the **poachers** are the only people who make anything out of it.

Lady Bracknell: A country house! How many bedrooms? Well, that point can be cleared up [30]afterwards. You have a town house, I hope? A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country.

Jack: Well, I own a house in Belgrave Square, but it is let by the year to Lady Bloxham. Of course, I can get it back whenever I like, at six months' notice.

Lady Bracknell: Lady Bloxham? I don't know her.

[35]Jack: Oh, she goes about very little. She is a lady considerably advanced in years.

Lady Bracknell: Ah, nowadays that is no guarantee of respectability of character. What number in Belgrave Square?

Jack: 149.

Lady Bracknell: [Shaking her head.] The unfashionable side. I thought there was something. [40]However, that could easily be altered.

Jack: Do you mean the fashion, or the side?

Lady Bracknell: [**Sternly**.] Both, if necessary, I presume. What are your politics?

Jack: Well, I am afraid I really have none. I am a Liberal Unionist.

Lady Bracknell: Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us. Or come in the evening, at any rate. [45]Now to minor matters. Are your parents living?

Lady Bracknell: Are your parents living?

Jack: I have lost both my parents.

Lady Bracknell: To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like **carelessness**. Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some **wealth**. Was he [50]born in what the Radical papers call the **purple of commerce**, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?

Jack: I am afraid I really don't know. The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me . . . I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was . . . well, I was found.

[55]Lady Bracknell: Found!

Jack: The late Mr. Thomas Cardew, an old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition, found me, and gave me the name of Worthing, because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. Worthing is a place in Sussex. It is a seaside resort.

Lady Bracknell: Where did the charitable gentleman who had a first-class ticket for this seaside [60]resort find you?

Jack: [Gravely.] In a hand-bag.

Lady Bracknell: A hand-bag?

Jack: [Very seriously.] Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a hand-bag - a somewhat large, black leather hand-bag, with handles to it- an ordinary hand-bag in fact.

[65]Lady Bracknell: In what locality did this Mr. James, or Thomas, Cardew come across this ordinary hand-bag?

Jack: In the **cloak-room** at Victoria Station. It was given to him in mistake for his own.

Lady Bracknell: The cloak-room at Victoria Station?

Jack: Yes. The Brighton line.

[70]Lady Bracknell: The line is **immaterial**. Mr. Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat **bewildered** by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to **display a contempt** for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? As for the particular locality in which the hand-bag was found, a cloak-room at a [75]railway station might serve to **conceal** a social indiscretion-has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now-but it could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognised position in good society.

Jack: May I ask you then what you would advise me to do? I need hardly say I would do anything in the world to ensure Gwendolen's happiness.

[80]Lady Bracknell. I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over.

(Act 1; part 2)

