

warn you -

LORD WINDERMERE. Margaret, you'll ruin us!

LADY WINDERMERE. Us! From this moment my life is separate from yours. But if you wish to avoid a public scandal, write at once to this woman, and tell her that I forbid her to come here!

LORD WINDERMERE. I will not--I cannot--she must come!

LADY WINDERMERE. Then I shall do exactly as I have said. [Goes R.] You leave me no choice. [Exit R.]

LORD WINDERMERE. [Calling after her.] Margaret! Margaret! [A pause.] My God! What shall I do? I dare not tell her who this woman really is. The shame would kill her. [Sinks down into a chair and buries his face in his hands.]

ACT DROP

SECOND ACT

SCENE

Drawing-room in Lord Windermere's house. Door R.U. opening into ball-room, where band is playing. Door L. through which guests are entering. Door L.U. opens on to illuminated terrace. Palms, flowers, and brilliant lights. Room crowded with guests. Lady Windermere is receiving them.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. [Up C.] So strange Lord Windermere isn't here. Mr. Hopper is very late, too. You have kept those five dances for him, Agatha? [Comes down.]

LADY AGATHA. Yes, mamma.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. [Sitting on sofa.] Just let me see your card. I'm so glad Lady Windermere has revived cards.--They're a mother's only safeguard. You dear simple little thing! [Scratches out two names.] No nice girl should ever waltz with such particularly younger sons! It looks so fast! The last two dances you might pass on the terrace with Mr. Hopper.

[Enter MR. DUMBY and LADY PLYMDALE from the ball-room.]

LADY AGATHA. Yes, mamma.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. [Fanning herself.] The air is so pleasant

there.

PARKER. Mrs. Cowper-Cowper. Lady Stutfield. Sir James Royston.
Mr. Guy Berkeley.

[These people enter as announced.]

DUMBY. Good evening, Lady Stutfield. I suppose this will be the
last ball of the season?

LADY STUTFIELD. I suppose so, Mr. Dumby. It's been a delightful
season, hasn't it?

DUMBY. Quite delightful! Good evening, Duchess. I suppose this
will be the last ball of the season?

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. I suppose so, Mr. Dumby. It has been a very
dull season, hasn't it?

DUMBY. Dreadfully dull! Dreadfully dull!

MR. COWPER-COWPER. Good evening, Mr. Dumby. I suppose this will
be the last ball of the season?

DUMBY. Oh, I think not. There'll probably be two more. [Wanders
back to LADY PLYMDALE.]

PARKER. Mr. Rufford. Lady Jedburgh and Miss Graham. Mr. Hopper.

[These people enter as announced.]

HOPPER. How do you do, Lady Windermere? How do you do, Duchess?

[Bows to LADY AGATHA.]

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Dear Mr. Hopper, how nice of you to come so early. We all know how you are run after in London.

HOPPER. Capital place, London! They are not nearly so exclusive in London as they are in Sydney.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Ah! we know your value, Mr. Hopper. We wish there were more like you. It would make life so much easier. Do you know, Mr. Hopper, dear Agatha and I are so much interested in Australia. It must be so pretty with all the dear little kangaroos flying about. Agatha has found it on the map. What a curious shape it is! Just like a large packing case. However, it is a very young country, isn't it?

HOPPER. Wasn't it made at the same time as the others, Duchess?

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. How clever you are, Mr. Hopper. You have a cleverness quite of your own. Now I mustn't keep you.

HOPPER. But I should like to dance with Lady Agatha, Duchess.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Well, I hope she has a dance left. Have you a dance left, Agatha?

LADY AGATHA. Yes, mamma.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. The next one?

LADY AGATHA. Yes, mamma.

HOPPER. May I have the pleasure? [LADY AGATHA bows.]

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Mind you take great care of my little chatterbox, Mr. Hopper.

[LADY AGATHA and MR. HOPPER pass into ball-room.]

[Enter LORD WINDERMERE.]

LORD WINDERMERE. Margaret, I want to speak to you.

LADY WINDERMERE. In a moment. [The music drops.]

PARKER. Lord Augustus Lorton.

[Enter LORD AUGUSTUS.]

LORD AUGUSTUS. Good evening, Lady Windermere.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Sir James, will you take me into the ball-room? Augustus has been dining with us to-night. I really have had quite enough of dear Augustus for the moment.

[SIR JAMES ROYSTON gives the DUCHESS his arm and escorts her into the ball-room.]

PARKER. Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Bowden. Lord and Lady Paisley. Lord Darlington.

[These people enter as announced.]

LORD AUGUSTUS. [Coming up to LORD WINDERMERE.] Want to speak to you particularly, dear boy. I'm worn to a shadow. Know I don't look it. None of us men do look what we really are. Demmed good thing, too. What I want to know is this. Who is she? Where does she come from? Why hasn't she got any demmed relations? Demmed nuisance, relations! But they make one so demmed respectable.

LORD WINDERMERE. You are talking of Mrs. Erlynne, I suppose? I only met her six months ago. Till then, I never knew of her

existence.

LORD AUGUSTUS. You have seen a good deal of her since then.

LORD WINDERMERE. [Coldly.] Yes, I have seen a good deal of her since then. I have just seen her.

LORD AUGUSTUS. Egad! the women are very down on her. I have been dining with Arabella this evening! By Jove! you should have heard what she said about Mrs. Erlynne. She didn't leave a rag on her. . . [Aside.] Berwick and I told her that didn't matter much, as the lady in question must have an extremely fine figure. You should have seen Arabella's expression! . . . But, look here, dear boy. I don't know what to do about Mrs. Erlynne. Egad! I might be married to her; she treats me with such demmed indifference. She's deuced clever, too! She explains everything. Egad! she explains you. She has got any amount of explanations for you--and all of them different.

LORD WINDERMERE. No explanations are necessary about my friendship with Mrs. Erlynne.

LORD AUGUSTUS. Hem! Well, look here, dear old fellow. Do you think she will ever get into this demmed thing called Society? Would you introduce her to your wife? No use beating about the confounded bush. Would you do that?

LORD WINDERMERE. Mrs. Erlynne is coming here to-night.

LORD AUGUSTUS. Your wife has sent her a card?

LORD WINDERMERE. Mrs. Erlynne has received a card.

LORD AUGUSTUS. Then she's all right, dear boy. But why didn't you tell me that before? It would have saved me a heap of worry and demmed misunderstandings!

[LADY AGATHA and MR. HOPPER cross and exit on terrace L.U.E.]

PARKER. Mr. Cecil Graham!

[Enter MR. CECIL GRAHAM.]

CECIL GRAHAM. [Bows to LADY WINDERMERE, passes over and shakes hands with LORD WINDERMERE.] Good evening, Arthur. Why don't you ask me how I am? I like people to ask me how I am. It shows a wide-spread interest in my health. Now, to-night I am not at all well. Been dining with my people. Wonder why it is one's people are always so tedious? My father would talk morality after dinner. I told him he was old enough to know better. But my experience is that as soon as people are old enough to know better, they don't know anything at all. Hallo, Tuppy! Hear you're going to be

married again; thought you were tired of that game.

LORD AUGUSTUS. You're excessively trivial, my dear boy,
excessively trivial!

CECIL GRAHAM. By the way, Tuppy, which is it? Have you been twice
married and once divorced, or twice divorced and once married? I
say you've been twice divorced and once married. It seems so much
more probable.

LORD AUGUSTUS. I have a very bad memory. I really don't remember
which. [Moves away R.]

LADY PLYMDALE. Lord Windermere, I've something most particular to
ask you.

LORD WINDERMERE. I am afraid--if you will excuse me--I must join
my wife.

LADY PLYMDALE. Oh, you mustn't dream of such a thing. It's most
dangerous nowadays for a husband to pay any attention to his wife
in public. It always makes people think that he beats her when
they're alone. The world has grown so suspicious of anything that
looks like a happy married life. But I'll tell you what it is at
supper. [Moves towards door of ball-room.]

LORD WINDERMERE. [C.] Margaret! I MUST speak to you.

LADY WINDERMERE. Will you hold my fan for me, Lord Darlington?

Thanks. [Comes down to him.]

LORD WINDERMERE. [Crossing to her.] Margaret, what you said before dinner was, of course, impossible?

LADY WINDERMERE. That woman is not coming here to-night!

LORD WINDERMERE. [R.C.] Mrs. Erlynne is coming here, and if you in any way annoy or wound her, you will bring shame and sorrow on us both. Remember that! Ah, Margaret! only trust me! A wife should trust her husband!

LADY WINDERMERE. [C.] London is full of women who trust their husbands. One can always recognise them. They look so thoroughly unhappy. I am not going to be one of them. [Moves up.] Lord Darlington, will you give me back my fan, please? Thanks. . . . A useful thing a fan, isn't it? . . . I want a friend to-night, Lord Darlington: I didn't know I would want one so soon.

LORD DARLINGTON. Lady Windermere! I knew the time would come some day; but why to-night?

LORD WINDERMERE. I WILL tell her. I must. It would be terrible

if there were any scene. Margaret . . .

PARKER. Mrs. Erlynne!

[LORD WINDERMERE starts. MRS. ERLYNNE enters, very beautifully dressed and very dignified. LADY WINDERMERE clutches at her fan, then lets it drop on the door. She bows coldly to MRS. ERLYNNE, who bows to her sweetly in turn, and sails into the room.]

LORD DARLINGTON. You have dropped your fan, Lady Windermere.
[Picks it up and hands it to her.]

MRS. ERLYNNE. [C.] How do you do, again, Lord Windermere? How charming your sweet wife looks! Quite a picture!

LORD WINDERMERE. [In a low voice.] It was terribly rash of you to come!

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Smiling.] The wisest thing I ever did in my life. And, by the way, you must pay me a good deal of attention this evening. I am afraid of the women. You must introduce me to some of them. The men I can always manage. How do you do, Lord Augustus? You have quite neglected me lately. I have not seen you since yesterday. I am afraid you're faithless. Every one told me so.

LORD AUGUSTUS. [R.] Now really, Mrs. Erlynne, allow me to explain.

MRS. ERLYNNE. [R.C.] No, dear Lord Augustus, you can't explain anything. It is your chief charm.

LORD AUGUSTUS. Ah! if you find charms in me, Mrs. Erlynne -

[They converse together. LORD WINDERMERE moves uneasily about the room watching MRS. ERLYNNE.]

LORD DARLINGTON. [To LADY WINDERMERE.] How pale you are!

LADY WINDERMERE. Cowards are always pale!

LORD DARLINGTON. You look faint. Come out on the terrace.

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes. [To PARKER.] Parker, send my cloak out.

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Crossing to her.] Lady Windermere, how beautifully your terrace is illuminated. Reminds me of Prince Doria's at Rome.

[LADY WINDERMERE bows coldly, and goes off with LORD DARLINGTON.]

Oh, how do you do, Mr. Graham? Isn't that your aunt, Lady Jedburgh? I should so much like to know her.

CECIL GRAHAM. [After a moment's hesitation and embarrassment.]
Oh, certainly, if you wish it. Aunt Caroline, allow me to
introduce Mrs. Erlynne.

MRS. ERLYNNE. So pleased to meet you, Lady Jedburgh. [Sits beside
her on the sofa.] Your nephew and I are great friends. I am so
much interested in his political career. I think he's sure to be a
wonderful success. He thinks like a Tory, and talks like a
Radical, and that's so important nowadays. He's such a brilliant
talker, too. But we all know from whom he inherits that. Lord
Allandale was saying to me only yesterday, in the Park, that Mr.
Graham talks almost as well as his aunt.

LADY JEDBURGH. [R.] Most kind of you to say these charming things
to me! [MRS. ERLYNNE smiles, and continues conversation.]

DUMBY. [To CECIL GRAHAM.] Did you introduce Mrs. Erlynne to Lady
Jedburgh?

CECIL GRAHAM. Had to, my dear fellow. Couldn't help it! That
woman can make one do anything she wants. How, I don't know.

DUMBY. Hope to goodness she won't speak to me! [Saunters towards
LADY PLYMDALE.]

MRS. ERLYNNE. [C. To LADY JEDBURGH.] On Thursday? With great pleasure. [Rises, and speaks to LORD WINDERMERE, laughing.] What a bore it is to have to be civil to these old dowagers! But they always insist on it!

LADY PLYMDALE. [To MR. DUMBY.] Who is that well-dressed woman talking to Windermere?

DUMBY. Haven't got the slightest idea! Looks like an edition de luxe of a wicked French novel, meant specially for the English market.

MRS. ERLYNNE. So that is poor Dumby with Lady Plymdale? I hear she is frightfully jealous of him. He doesn't seem anxious to speak to me to-night. I suppose he is afraid of her. Those straw-coloured women have dreadful tempers. Do you know, I think I'll dance with you first, Windermere. [LORD WINDERMERE bits his lip and frowns.] It will make Lord Augustus so jealous! Lord Augustus! [LORD AUGUSTUS comes down.] Lord Windermere insists on my dancing with him first, and, as it's his own house, I can't well refuse. You know I would much sooner dance with you.

LORD AUGUSTUS. [With a low bow.] I wish I could think so, Mrs. Erlynne.

MRS ERLYNNE. You know it far too well. I can fancy a person

dancing through life with you and finding it charming.

LORD AUGUSTUS. [Placing his hand on his white waistcoat.] Oh, thank you, thank you. You are the most adorable of all ladies!

MRS. ERLYNNE. What a nice speech! So simple and so sincere! Just the sort of speech I like. Well, you shall hold my bouquet. [Goes towards ball-room on LORD WINDERMERE'S arm.] Ah, Mr. Dumby, how are you? I am so sorry I have been out the last three times you have called. Come and lunch on Friday.

DUMBY. [With perfect nonchalance.] Delighted!

[LADY PLYMDALE glares with indignation at MR. DUMBY. LORD AUGUSTUS

follows MRS. ERLYNNE and LORD WINDERMERE into the ball-room holding

bouquet]

LADY PLYMDALE. [To MR. DUMBY.] What an absolute brute you are! I never can believe a word you say! Why did you tell me you didn't know her? What do you mean by calling on her three times running? You are not to go to lunch there; of course you understand that?

DUMBY. My dear Laura, I wouldn't dream of going!

LADY PLYMDALE. You haven't told me her name yet! Who is she?

DUMBY. [Coughs slightly and smooths his hair.] She's a Mrs. Erlynne.

LADY PLYMDALE. That woman!

DUMBY. Yes; that is what every one calls her.

LADY PLYMDALE. How very interesting! How intensely interesting! I really must have a good stare at her. [Goes to door of ball-room and looks in.] I have heard the most shocking things about her. They say she is ruining poor Windermere. And Lady Windermere, who goes in for being so proper, invites her! How extremely amusing! It takes a thoroughly good woman to do a thoroughly stupid thing. You are to lunch there on Friday!

DUMBY. Why?

LADY PLYMDALE. Because I want you to take my husband with you. He has been so attentive lately, that he has become a perfect nuisance. Now, this woman is just the thing for him. He'll dance attendance upon her as long as she lets him, and won't bother me. I assure you, women of that kind are most useful. They form the basis of other people's marriages.

DUMBY. What a mystery you are!

LADY PLYMDALE. [Looking at him.] I wish YOU were!

DUMBY. I am--to myself. I am the only person in the world I should like to know thoroughly; but I don't see any chance of it just at present.

[They pass into the ball-room, and LADY WINDERMERE and LORD DARLINGTON enter from the terrace.]

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes. Her coming here is monstrous, unbearable. I know now what you meant to-day at tea-time. Why didn't you tell me right out? You should have!

LORD DARLINGTON. I couldn't! A man can't tell these things about another man! But if I had known he was going to make you ask her here to-night, I think I would have told you. That insult, at any rate, you would have been spared.

LADY WINDERMERE. I did not ask her. He insisted on her coming--against my entreaties--against my commands. Oh! the house is tainted for me! I feel that every woman here sneers at me as she dances by with my husband. What have I done to deserve this? I gave him all my life. He took it--used it--spoiled it! I am degraded in my own eyes; and I lack courage--I am a coward! [Sits down on sofa.]

LORD DARLINGTON. If I know you at all, I know that you can't live with a man who treats you like this! What sort of life would you have with him? You would feel that he was lying to you every moment of the day. You would feel that the look in his eyes was false, his voice false, his touch false, his passion false. He would come to you when he was weary of others; you would have to comfort him. He would come to you when he was devoted to others; you would have to charm him. You would have to be to him the mask of his real life, the cloak to hide his secret.

LADY WINDERMERE. You are right--you are terribly right. But where am I to turn? You said you would be my friend, Lord Darlington.-- Tell me, what am I to do? Be my friend now.

LORD DARLINGTON. Between men and women there is no friendship possible. There is passion, enmity, worship, love, but no friendship. I love you -

LADY WINDERMERE. No, no! [Rises.]

LORD DARLINGTON. Yes, I love you! You are more to me than anything in the whole world. What does your husband give you? Nothing. Whatever is in him he gives to this wretched woman, whom he has thrust into your society, into your home, to shame you before every one. I offer you my life -

LADY WINDERMERE. Lord Darlington!

LORD DARLINGTON. My life--my whole life. Take it, and do with it what you will. . . . I love you--love you as I have never loved any living thing. From the moment I met you I loved you, loved you blindly, adoringly, madly! You did not know it then--you know it now! Leave this house to-night. I won't tell you that the world matters nothing, or the world's voice, or the voice of society. They matter a great deal. They matter far too much. But there are moments when one has to choose between living one's own life, fully, entirely, completely--or dragging out some false, shallow, degrading existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands. You have that moment now. Choose! Oh, my love, choose.

LADY WINDERMERE. [Moving slowly away from him, and looking at him with startled eyes.] I have not the courage.

LORD DARLINGTON. [Following her.] Yes; you have the courage. There may be six months of pain, of disgrace even, but when you no longer bear his name, when you bear mine, all will be well. Margaret, my love, my wife that shall be some day--yes, my wife! You know it! What are you now? This woman has the place that belongs by right to you. Oh! go--go out of this house, with head erect, with a smile upon your lips, with courage in your eyes. All London will know why you did it; and who will blame you? No one.

If they do, what matter? Wrong? What is wrong? It's wrong for a man to abandon his wife for a shameless woman. It is wrong for a wife to remain with a man who so dishonours her. You said once you would make no compromise with things. Make none now. Be brave! Be yourself!

LADY WINDERMERE. I am afraid of being myself. Let me think! Let me wait! My husband may return to me. [Sits down on sofa.]

LORD DARLINGTON. And you would take him back! You are not what I thought you were. You are just the same as every other woman. You would stand anything rather than face the censure of a world, whose praise you would despise. In a week you will be driving with this woman in the Park. She will be your constant guest--your dearest friend. You would endure anything rather than break with one blow this monstrous tie. You are right. You have no courage; none!

LADY WINDERMERE. Ah, give me time to think. I cannot answer you now. [Passes her hand nervously over her brow.]

LORD DARLINGTON. It must be now or not at all.

LADY WINDERMERE. [Rising from the sofa.] Then, not at all! [A pause.]

LORD DARLINGTON. You break my heart!

LADY WINDERMERE. Mine is already broken. [A pause.]

LORD DARLINGTON. To-morrow I leave England. This is the last time I shall ever look on you. You will never see me again. For one moment our lives met--our souls touched. They must never meet or touch again. Good-bye, Margaret. [Exit.]

LADY WINDERMERE. How alone I am in life! How terribly alone!

[The music stops. Enter the DUCHESS OF BERWICK and LORD PAISLEY laughing and talking. Other guests come on from ball-room.]

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Dear Margaret, I've just been having such a delightful chat with Mrs. Erlynne. I am so sorry for what I said to you this afternoon about her. Of course, she must be all right if YOU invite her. A most attractive woman, and has such sensible views on life. Told me she entirely disapproved of people marrying more than once, so I feel quite safe about poor Augustus. Can't imagine why people speak against her. It's those horrid nieces of mine--the Saville girls--they're always talking scandal. Still, I should go to Homburg, dear, I really should. She is just a little too attractive. But where is Agatha? Oh, there she is: [LADY AGATHA and MR. HOPPER enter from terrace L.U.E.] Mr. Hopper, I am very, very angry with you. You have taken Agatha out on the terrace, and she is so delicate.

HOPPER. Awfully sorry, Duchess. We went out for a moment and then got chatting together.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. [C.] Ah, about dear Australia, I suppose?

HOPPER. Yes!

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Agatha, darling! [Beckons her over.]

LADY AGATHA. Yes, mamma!

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. [Aside.] Did Mr. Hopper definitely -

LADY AGATHA. Yes, mamma.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. And what answer did you give him, dear child?

LADY AGATHA. Yes, mamma.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. [Affectionately.] My dear one! You always say the right thing. Mr. Hopper! James! Agatha has told me everything. How cleverly you have both kept your secret.

HOPPER. You don't mind my taking Agatha off to Australia, then, Duchess?

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. [Indignantly.] To Australia? Oh, don't mention that dreadful vulgar place.

HOPPER. But she said she'd like to come with me.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. [Severely.] Did you say that, Agatha?

LADY AGATHA. Yes, mamma.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. Agatha, you say the most silly things possible. I think on the whole that Grosvenor Square would be a more healthy place to reside in. There are lots of vulgar people live in Grosvenor Square, but at any rate there are no horrid kangaroos crawling about. But we'll talk about that to-morrow. James, you can take Agatha down. You'll come to lunch, of course, James. At half-past one, instead of two. The Duke will wish to say a few words to you, I am sure.

HOPPER. I should like to have a chat with the Duke, Duchess. He has not said a single word to me yet.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. I think you'll find he will have a great deal to say to you to-morrow. [Exit LADY AGATHA with MR. HOPPER.] And now good-night, Margaret. I'm afraid it's the old, old story, dear. Love--well, not love at first sight, but love at the end of

the season, which is so much more satisfactory.

LADY WINDERMERE. Good-night, Duchess.

[Exit the DUCHESS OF BERWICK on LORD PAISLEY'S arm.]

LADY PLYMDALE. My dear Margaret, what a handsome woman your husband has been dancing with! I should be quite jealous if I were you! Is she a great friend of yours?

LADY WINDERMERE. No!

LADY PLYMDALE. Really? Good-night, dear. [Looks at MR. DUMBY and exit.]

DUMBY. Awful manners young Hopper has!

CECIL GRAHAM. Ah! Hopper is one of Nature's gentlemen, the worst type of gentleman I know.

DUMBY. Sensible woman, Lady Windermere. Lots of wives would have objected to Mrs. Erlynne coming. But Lady Windermere has that uncommon thing called common sense.

CECIL GRAHAM. And Windermere knows that nothing looks so like innocence as an indiscretion.

DUMBY. Yes; dear Windermere is becoming almost modern. Never thought he would. [Bows to LADY WINDERMERE and exit.]

LADY JEDBURGH. Good night, Lady Windermere. What a fascinating woman Mrs. Erlynne is! She is coming to lunch on Thursday, won't you come too? I expect the Bishop and dear Lady Merton.

LADY WINDERMERE. I am afraid I am engaged, Lady Jedburgh.

LADY JEDBURGH. So sorry. Come, dear. [Exeunt LADY JEDBURGH and MISS GRAHAM.]

[Enter MRS. ERLYNNE and LORD WINDERMERE.]

MRS. ERLYNNE. Charming ball it has been! Quite reminds me of old days. [Sits on sofa.] And I see that there are just as many fools in society as there used to be. So pleased to find that nothing has altered! Except Margaret. She's grown quite pretty. The last time I saw her--twenty years ago, she was a fright in flannel. Positive fright, I assure you. The dear Duchess! and that sweet Lady Agatha! Just the type of girl I like! Well, really, Windermere, if I am to be the Duchess's sister-in-law

LORD WINDERMERE. [Sitting L. of her.] But are you--?

[Exit MR. CECIL GRAHAM with rest of guests. LADY WINDERMERE watches, with a look of scorn and pain, MRS. ERLYNNE and her husband. They are unconscious of her presence.]

MRS. ERLYNNE. Oh, yes! He's to call to-morrow at twelve o'clock! He wanted to propose to-night. In fact he did. He kept on proposing. Poor Augustus, you know how he repeats himself. Such a bad habit! But I told him I wouldn't give him an answer till to-morrow. Of course I am going to take him. And I dare say I'll make him an admirable wife, as wives go. And there is a great deal of good in Lord Augustus. Fortunately it is all on the surface. Just where good qualities should be. Of course you must help me in this matter.

LORD WINDERMERE. I am not called on to encourage Lord Augustus, I suppose?

MRS. ERLYNNE. Oh, no! I do the encouraging. But you will make me a handsome settlement, Windermere, won't you?

LORD WINDERMERE. [Frowning.] Is that what you want to talk to me about to-night?

MRS ERLYNNE. Yes.

LORD WINDERMERE. [With a gesture of impatience.] I will not talk

of it here.

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Laughing.] Then we will talk of it on the terrace. Even business should have a picturesque background. Should it not, Windermere? With a proper background women can do anything.

LORD WINDERMERE. Won't to-morrow do as well?

MRS. ERLYNNE. No; you see, to-morrow I am going to accept him. And I think it would be a good thing if I was able to tell him that I had--well, what shall I say?--2000 pounds a year left to me by a third cousin--or a second husband--or some distant relative of that kind. It would be an additional attraction, wouldn't it? You have a delightful opportunity now of paying me a compliment, Windermere. But you are not very clever at paying compliments. I am afraid Margaret doesn't encourage you in that excellent habit. It's a great mistake on her part. When men give up saying what is charming, they give up thinking what is charming. But seriously, what do you say to 2000 pounds? 2500 pounds, I think. In modern life margin is everything. Windermere, don't you think the world an intensely amusing place? I do!

[Exit on terrace with LORD WINDERMERE. Music strikes up in ball-room.]

LADY WINDERMERE. To stay in this house any longer is impossible.

To-night a man who loves me offered me his whole life. I refused it. It was foolish of me. I will offer him mine now. I will give him mine. I will go to him! [Puts on cloak and goes to the door, then turns back. Sits down at table and writes a letter, puts it into an envelope, and leaves it on table.] Arthur has never understood me. When he reads this, he will. He may do as he chooses now with his life. I have done with mine as I think best, as I think right. It is he who has broken the bond of marriage--not I. I only break its bondage.

[Exit.]

[PARKER enters L. and crosses towards the ball-room R. Enter MRS. ERLYNNE.]

MRS. ERLYNNE. Is Lady Windermere in the ball-room?

PARKER. Her ladyship has just gone out.

MRS. ERLYNNE. Gone out? She's not on the terrace?

PARKER. No, madam. Her ladyship has just gone out of the house.

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Starts, and looks at the servant with a puzzled expression in her face.] Out of the house?

PARKER. Yes, madam--her ladyship told me she had left a letter for his lordship on the table.

MRS. ERLYNNE. A letter for Lord Windermere?

PARKER. Yes, madam.

MRS. ERLYNNE. Thank you.

[Exit PARKER. The music in the ball-room stops.] Gone out of her house! A letter addressed to her husband! [Goes over to bureau and looks at letter. Takes it up and lays it down again with a shudder of fear.] No, no! It would be impossible! Life doesn't repeat its tragedies like that! Oh, why does this horrible fancy come across me? Why do I remember now the one moment of my life I most wish to forget? Does life repeat its tragedies? [Tears letter open and reads it, then sinks down into a chair with a gesture of anguish.] Oh, how terrible! The same words that twenty years ago I wrote to her father! and how bitterly I have been punished for it! No; my punishment, my real punishment is tonight, is now! [Still seated R.]

[Enter LORD WINDERMERE L.U.E.]

LORD WINDERMERE. Have you said good-night to my wife? [Comes C.]

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Crushing letter in her hand.] Yes.

LORD WINDERMERE. Where is she?

MRS. ERLYNNE. She is very tired. She has gone to bed. She said she had a headache.

LORD WINDERMERE. I must go to her. You'll excuse me?

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Rising hurriedly.] Oh, no! It's nothing serious. She's only very tired, that is all. Besides, there are people still in the supper-room. She wants you to make her apologies to them. She said she didn't wish to be disturbed. [Drops letter.] She asked me to tell you!

LORD WINDERMERE. [Picks up letter.] You have dropped something.

MRS. ERLYNNE. Oh yes, thank you, that is mine. [Puts out her hand to take it.]

LORD WINDERMERE. [Still looking at letter.] But it's my wife's handwriting, isn't it?

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Takes the letter quickly.] Yes, it's--an address. Will you ask them to call my carriage, please?

LORD WINDERMERE. Certainly.

[Goes L. and Exit.]

MRS. ERLYNNE. Thanks! What can I do? What can I do? I feel a passion awakening within me that I never felt before. What can it mean? The daughter must not be like the mother--that would be terrible. How can I save her? How can I save my child? A moment may ruin a life. Who knows that better than I? Windermere must be got out of the house; that is absolutely necessary. [Goes L.] But how shall I do it? It must be done somehow. Ah!

[Enter LORD AUGUSTUS R.U.E. carrying bouquet.]

LORD AUGUSTUS. Dear lady, I am in such suspense! May I not have an answer to my request?

MRS. ERLYNNE. Lord Augustus, listen to me. You are to take Lord Windermere down to your club at once, and keep him there as long as possible. You understand?

LORD AUGUSTUS. But you said you wished me to keep early hours!

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Nervously.] Do what I tell you. Do what I tell you.

LORD AUGUSTUS. And my reward?

MRS. ERLYNNE. Your reward? Your reward? Oh! ask me that to-morrow. But don't let Windermere out of your sight to-night. If you do I will never forgive you. I will never speak to you again. I'll have nothing to do with you. Remember you are to keep Windermere at your club, and don't let him come back to-night.

[Exit L.]

LORD AUGUSTUS. Well, really, I might be her husband already. Positively I might. [Follows her in a bewildered manner.]

ACT DROP.

THIRD ACT

SCENE

Lord Darlington's Rooms. A large sofa is in front of fireplace R. At the back of the stage a curtain is drawn across the window. Doors L. and R. Table R. with writing materials. Table C. with