

turns away. The other men smile at each other.]

ACT DROP.

FOURTH ACT

SCENE--Same as in Act I.

LADY WINDERMERE. [Lying on sofa.] How can I tell him? I can't tell him. It would kill me. I wonder what happened after I escaped from that horrible room. Perhaps she told them the true reason of her being there, and the real meaning of that--fatal fan of mine. Oh, if he knows--how can I look him in the face again? He would never forgive me. [Touches bell.] How securely one thinks one lives--out of reach of temptation, sin, folly. And then suddenly--Oh! Life is terrible. It rules us, we do not rule it.

[Enter ROSALIE R.]

ROSALIE. Did your ladyship ring for me?

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes. Have you found out at what time Lord

Windermere came in last night?

ROSALIE. His lordship did not come in till five o'clock.

LADY WINDERMERE. Five o'clock? He knocked at my door this morning, didn't he?

ROSALIE. Yes, my lady--at half-past nine. I told him your ladyship was not awake yet.

LADY WINDERMERE. Did he say anything?

ROSALIE. Something about your ladyship's fan. I didn't quite catch what his lordship said. Has the fan been lost, my lady? I can't find it, and Parker says it was not left in any of the rooms. He has looked in all of them and on the terrace as well.

LADY WINDERMERE. It doesn't matter. Tell Parker not to trouble. That will do.

[Exit ROSALIE.]

LADY WINDERMERE. [Rising.] She is sure to tell him. I can fancy a person doing a wonderful act of self-sacrifice, doing it spontaneously, recklessly, nobly--and afterwards finding out that it costs too much. Why should she hesitate between her ruin and

mine? . . . How strange! I would have publicly disgraced her in my own house. She accepts public disgrace in the house of another to save me. . . . There is a bitter irony in things, a bitter irony in the way we talk of good and bad women. . . . Oh, what a lesson! and what a pity that in life we only get our lessons when they are of no use to us! For even if she doesn't tell, I must. Oh! the shame of it, the shame of it. To tell it is to live through it all again. Actions are the first tragedy in life, words are the second. Words are perhaps the worst. Words are merciless. . . Oh!
[Starts as LORD WINDERMERE enters.]

LORD WINDERMERE. [Kisses her.] Margaret--how pale you look!

LADY WINDERMERE. I slept very badly.

LORD WINDERMERE. [Sitting on sofa with her.] I am so sorry. I came in dreadfully late, and didn't like to wake you. You are crying, dear.

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes, I am crying, for I have something to tell you, Arthur.

LORD WINDERMERE. My dear child, you are not well. You've been doing too much. Let us go away to the country. You'll be all right at Selby. The season is almost over. There is no use staying on. Poor darling! We'll go away to-day, if you like.

[Rises.] We can easily catch the 3.40. I'll send a wire to Fannen. [Crosses and sits down at table to write a telegram.]

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes; let us go away to-day. No; I can't go to-day, Arthur. There is some one I must see before I leave town--some one who has been kind to me.

LORD WINDERMERE. [Rising and leaning over sofa.] Kind to you?

LADY WINDERMERE. Far more than that. [Rises and goes to him.] I will tell you, Arthur, but only love me, love me as you used to love me.

LORD WINDERMERE. Used to? You are not thinking of that wretched woman who came here last night? [Coming round and sitting R. of her.] You don't still imagine--no, you couldn't.

LADY WINDERMERE. I don't. I know now I was wrong and foolish.

LORD WINDERMERE. It was very good of you to receive her last night--but you are never to see her again.

LADY WINDERMERE. Why do you say that? [A pause.]

LORD WINDERMERE. [Holding her hand.] Margaret, I thought Mrs. Erlynne was a woman more sinned against than sinning, as the phrase

goes. I thought she wanted to be good, to get back into a place that she had lost by a moment's folly, to lead again a decent life. I believed what she told me--I was mistaken in her. She is bad--as bad as a woman can be.

LADY WINDERMERE. Arthur, Arthur, don't talk so bitterly about any woman. I don't think now that people can be divided into the good and the bad as though they were two separate races or creations. What are called good women may have terrible things in them, mad moods of recklessness, assertion, jealousy, sin. Bad women, as they are termed, may have in them sorrow, repentance, pity, sacrifice. And I don't think Mrs. Erlynne a bad woman--I know she's not.

LORD WINDERMERE. My dear child, the woman's impossible. No matter what harm she tries to do us, you must never see her again. She is inadmissible anywhere.

LADY WINDERMERE. But I want to see her. I want her to come here.

LORD WINDERMERE. Never!

LADY WINDERMERE. She came here once as YOUR guest. She must come now as MINE. That is but fair.

LORD WINDERMERE. She should never have come here.

LADY WINDERMERE. [Rising.] It is too late, Arthur, to say that now. [Moves away.]

LORD WINDERMERE. [Rising.] Margaret, if you knew where Mrs. Erlynne went last night, after she left this house, you would not sit in the same room with her. It was absolutely shameless, the whole thing.

LADY WINDERMERE. Arthur, I can't bear it any longer. I must tell you. Last night -

[Enter PARKER with a tray on which lie LADY WINDERMERE'S fan and a card.]

PARKER. Mrs. Erlynne has called to return your ladyship's fan which she took away by mistake last night. Mrs. Erlynne has written a message on the card.

LADY WINDERMERE. Oh, ask Mrs. Erlynne to be kind enough to come up. [Reads card.] Say I shall be very glad to see her. [Exit

PARKER.] She wants to see me, Arthur.

LORD WINDERMERE. [Takes card and looks at it.] Margaret, I BEG you not to. Let me see her first, at any rate. She's a very dangerous woman. She is the most dangerous woman I know. You

don't realise what you're doing.

LADY WINDERMERE. It is right that I should see her.

LORD WINDERMERE. My child, you may be on the brink of a great sorrow. Don't go to meet it. It is absolutely necessary that I should see her before you do.

LADY WINDERMERE. Why should it be necessary?

[Enter PARKER.]

PARKER. Mrs. Eryllynne.

[Enter MRS. ERLYNNNE.]

[Exit PARKER.]

MRS. ERLYNNNE. How do you do, Lady Windermere? [To LORD WINDERMERE.] How do you do? Do you know, Lady Windermere, I am so sorry about your fan. I can't imagine how I made such a silly mistake. Most stupid of me. And as I was driving in your direction, I thought I would take the opportunity of returning your property in person with many apologies for my carelessness, and of bidding you good-bye.

LADY WINDERMERE. Good-bye? [Moves towards sofa with MRS. ERLYNNE and sits down beside her.] Are you going away, then, Mrs. Erlynne?

MRS. ERLYNNE. Yes; I am going to live abroad again. The English climate doesn't suit me. My--heart is affected here, and that I don't like. I prefer living in the south. London is too full of fogs and--and serious people, Lord Windermere. Whether the fogs produce the serious people or whether the serious people produce the fogs, I don't know, but the whole thing rather gets on my nerves, and so I'm leaving this afternoon by the Club Train.

LADY WINDERMERE. This afternoon? But I wanted so much to come and see you.

MRS. ERLYNNE. How kind of you! But I am afraid I have to go.

LADY WINDERMERE. Shall I never see you again, Mrs. Erlynne?

MRS. ERLYNNE. I am afraid not. Our lives lie too far apart. But there is a little thing I would like you to do for me. I want a photograph of you, Lady Windermere--would you give me one? You don't know how gratified I should be.

LADY WINDERMERE. Oh, with pleasure. There is one on that table. I'll show it to you. [Goes across to the table.]

LORD WINDERMERE. [Coming up to MRS. ERLYNNE and speaking in a low voice.] It is monstrous your intruding yourself here after your conduct last night.

MRS. ERLYNNE. [With an amused smile.] My dear Windermere, manners before morals!

LADY WINDERMERE. [Returning.] I'm afraid it is very flattering--I am not so pretty as that. [Showing photograph.]

MRS. ERLYNNE. You are much prettier. But haven't you got one of yourself with your little boy?

LADY WINDERMERE. I have. Would you prefer one of those?

MRS. ERLYNNE. Yes.

LADY WINDERMERE. I'll go and get it for you, if you'll excuse me for a moment. I have one upstairs.

MRS. ERLYNNE. So sorry, Lady Windermere, to give you so much trouble.

LADY WINDERMERE. [Moves to door R.] No trouble at all, Mrs. Erlynne.

MRS. ERLYNNE. Thanks so much.

[Exit LADY WINDERMERE R.] You seem rather out of temper this morning, Windermere. Why should you be? Margaret and I get on charmingly together.

LORD WINDERMERE. I can't bear to see you with her. Besides, you have not told me the truth, Mrs. Erlynne.

MRS. ERLYNNE. I have not told HER the truth, you mean.

LORD WINDERMERE. [Standing C.] I sometimes wish you had. I should have been spared then the misery, the anxiety, the annoyance of the last six months. But rather than my wife should know--that the mother whom she was taught to consider as dead, the mother whom she has mourned as dead, is living--a divorced woman, going about under an assumed name, a bad woman preying upon life, as I know you now to be--rather than that, I was ready to supply you with money to pay bill after bill, extravagance after extravagance, to risk what occurred yesterday, the first quarrel I have ever had with my wife. You don't understand what that means to me. How could you? But I tell you that the only bitter words that ever came from those sweet lips of hers were on your account, and I hate to see you next her. You sully the innocence that is in her. [Moves L.C.] And then I used to think that with all your faults you were frank and

honest. You are not.

MRS. ERLYNNE. Why do you say that?

LORD WINDERMERE. You made me get you an invitation to my wife's ball.

MRS. ERLYNNE. For my daughter's ball--yes.

LORD WINDERMERE. You came, and within an hour of your leaving the house you are found in a man's rooms--you are disgraced before every one. [Goes up stage C.]

MRS. ERLYNNE. Yes.

LORD WINDERMERE. [Turning round on her.] Therefore I have a right to look upon you as what you are--a worthless, vicious woman. I have the right to tell you never to enter this house, never to attempt to come near my wife -

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Coldly.] My daughter, you mean.

LORD WINDERMERE. You have no right to claim her as your daughter. You left her, abandoned her when she was but a child in the cradle, abandoned her for your lover, who abandoned you in turn.

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Rising.] Do you count that to his credit, Lord Windermere--or to mine?

LORD WINDERMERE. To his, now that I know you.

MRS. ERLYNNE. Take care--you had better be careful.

LORD WINDERMERE. Oh, I am not going to mince words for you. I know you thoroughly.

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Looks steadily at him.] I question that.

LORD WINDERMERE. I DO know you. For twenty years of your life you lived without your child, without a thought of your child. One day you read in the papers that she had married a rich man. You saw your hideous chance. You knew that to spare her the ignominy of learning that a woman like you was her mother, I would endure anything. You began your blackmailing,

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Shrugging her shoulders.] Don't use ugly words, Windermere. They are vulgar. I saw my chance, it is true, and took it.

LORD WINDERMERE. Yes, you took it--and spoiled it all last night by being found out.

MRS. ERLYNNE. [With a strange smile.] You are quite right, I spoiled it all last night.

LORD WINDERMERE. And as for your blunder in taking my wife's fan from here and then leaving it about in Darlington's rooms, it is unpardonable. I can't bear the sight of it now. I shall never let my wife use it again. The thing is soiled for me. You should have kept it and not brought it back.

MRS. ERLYNNE. I think I shall keep it. [Goes up.] It's extremely pretty. [Takes up fan.] I shall ask Margaret to give it to me.

LORD WINDERMERE. I hope my wife will give it you.

MRS. ERLYNNE. Oh, I'm sure she will have no objection.

LORD WINDERMERE. I wish that at the same time she would give you a miniature she kisses every night before she prays--It's the miniature of a young innocent-looking girl with beautiful DARK hair.

MRS. ERLYNNE. Ah, yes, I remember. How long ago that seems! [Goes to sofa and sits down.] It was done before I was married. Dark hair and an innocent expression were the fashion then, Windermere! [A pause.]

LORD WINDERMERE. What do you mean by coming here this morning?
What is your object? [Crossing L.C. and sitting.]

MRS. ERLYNNE. [With a note of irony in her voice.] To bid good-bye to my dear daughter, of course. [LORD WINDERMERE bites his under lip in anger. MRS. ERLYNNE looks at him, and her voice and manner become serious. In her accents as she talks there is a note of deep tragedy. For a moment she reveals herself.] Oh, don't imagine I am going to have a pathetic scene with her, weep on her neck and tell her who I am, and all that kind of thing. I have no ambition to play the part of a mother. Only once in my life like I known a mother's feelings. That was last night. They were terrible--they made me suffer--they made me suffer too much. For twenty years, as you say, I have lived childless,--I want to live childless still. [Hiding her feelings with a trivial laugh.] Besides, my dear Windermere, how on earth could I pose as a mother with a grown-up daughter? Margaret is twenty-one, and I have never admitted that I am more than twenty-nine, or thirty at the most. Twenty-nine when there are pink shades, thirty when there are not. So you see what difficulties it would involve. No, as far as I am concerned, let your wife cherish the memory of this dead, stainless mother. Why should I interfere with her illusions? I find it hard enough to keep my own. I lost one illusion last night. I thought I had no heart. I find I have, and a heart doesn't suit me, Windermere. Somehow it doesn't go with modern dress. It makes one look old. [Takes up hand-mirror from table and looks into it.]

And it spoils one's career at critical moments.

LORD WINDERMERE. You fill me with horror--with absolute horror.

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Rising.] I suppose, Windermere, you would like me to retire into a convent, or become a hospital nurse, or something of that kind, as people do in silly modern novels. That is stupid of you, Arthur; in real life we don't do such things--not as long as we have any good looks left, at any rate. No--what consoles one nowadays is not repentance, but pleasure. Repentance is quite out of date. And besides, if a woman really repents, she has to go to a bad dressmaker, otherwise no one believes in her. And nothing in the world would induce me to do that. No; I am going to pass entirely out of your two lives. My coming into them has been a mistake--I discovered that last night.

LORD WINDERMERE. A fatal mistake.

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Smiling.] Almost fatal.

LORD WINDERMERE. I am sorry now I did not tell my wife the whole thing at once.

MRS. ERLYNNE. I regret my bad actions. You regret your good ones--that is the difference between us.

LORD WINDERMERE. I don't trust you. I WILL tell my wife. It's better for her to know, and from me. It will cause her infinite pain--it will humiliate her terribly, but it's right that she should know.

MRS. ERLYNNE. You propose to tell her?

LORD WINDERMERE. I am going to tell her.

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Going up to him.] If you do, I will make my name so infamous that it will mar every moment of her life. It will ruin her, and make her wretched. If you dare to tell her, there is no depth of degradation I will not sink to, no pit of shame I will not enter. You shall not tell her--I forbid you.

LORD WINDERMERE. Why?

MRS. ERLYNNE. [After a pause.] If I said to you that I cared for her, perhaps loved her even--you would sneer at me, wouldn't you?

LORD WINDERMERE. I should feel it was not true. A mother's love means devotion, unselfishness, sacrifice. What could you know of such things?

MRS. ERLYNNE. You are right. What could I know of such things? Don't let us talk any more about it--as for telling my daughter who

I am, that I do not allow. It is my secret, it is not yours. If I make up my mind to tell her, and I think I will, I shall tell her before I leave the house--if not, I shall never tell her.

LORD WINDERMERE. [Angrily.] Then let me beg of you to leave our house at once. I will make your excuses to Margaret.

[Enter LADY WINDERMERE R. She goes over to MRS. ERLYNNE with the photograph in her hand. LORD WINDERMERE moves to back of sofa, and anxiously watches MRS. ERLYNNE as the scene progresses.]

LADY WINDERMERE. I am so sorry, Mrs. Erlynne, to have kept you waiting. I couldn't find the photograph anywhere. At last I discovered it in my husband's dressing-room--he had stolen it.

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Takes the photograph from her and looks at it.] I am not surprised--it is charming. [Goes over to sofa with LADY WINDERMERE, and sits down beside her. Looks again at the photograph.] And so that is your little boy! What is he called?

LADY WINDERMERE. Gerard, after my dear father.

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Laying the photograph down.] Really?

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes. If it had been a girl, I would have called it after my mother. My mother had the same name as myself,

Margaret.

MRS. ERLYNNE. My name is Margaret too.

LADY WINDERMERE. Indeed!

MRS. ERLYNNE. Yes. [Pause.] You are devoted to your mother's memory, Lady Windermere, your husband tells me.

LADY WINDERMERE. We all have ideals in life. At least we all should have. Mine is my mother.

MRS. ERLYNNE. Ideals are dangerous things. Realities are better. They wound, but they're better.

LADY WINDERMERE. [Shaking her head.] If I lost my ideals, I should lose everything.

MRS. ERLYNNE. Everything?

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes. [Pause.]

MRS. ERLYNNE. Did your father often speak to you of your mother?

LADY WINDERMERE. No, it gave him too much pain. He told me how my mother had died a few months after I was born. His eyes filled

with tears as he spoke. Then he begged me never to mention her name to him again. It made him suffer even to hear it. My father-my father really died of a broken heart. His was the most ruined life know,

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Rising.] I am afraid I must go now, Lady Windermere.

LADY WINDERMERE. [Rising.] Oh no, don't.

MRS. ERLYNNE. I think I had better. My carriage must have come back by this time. I sent it to Lady Jedburgh's with a note.

LADY WINDERMERE. Arthur, would you mind seeing if Mrs. Erlynne's carriage has come back?

MRS. ERLYNNE. Pray don't trouble, Lord Windermere.

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes, Arthur, do go, please.

[LORD WINDERMERE hesitated for a moment and looks at MRS. ERLYNNE. She remains quite impassive. He leaves the room.]

[To MRS. ERLYNNE.] Oh! What am I to say to you? You saved me last night? [Goes towards her.]

MRS. ERLYNNE. Hush--don't speak of it.

LADY WINDERMERE. I must speak of it. I can't let you think that I am going to accept this sacrifice. I am not. It is too great. I am going to tell my husband everything. It is my duty.

MRS. ERLYNNE. It is not your duty--at least you have duties to others besides him. You say you owe me something?

LADY WINDERMERE. I owe you everything.

MRS. ERLYNNE. Then pay your debt by silence. That is the only way in which it can be paid. Don't spoil the one good thing I have done in my life by telling it to any one. Promise me that what passed last night will remain a secret between us. You must not bring misery into your husband's life. Why spoil his love? You must not spoil it. Love is easily killed. Oh! how easily love is killed. Pledge me your word, Lady Windermere, that you will never tell him. I insist upon it.

LADY WINDERMERE. [With bowed head.] It is your will, not mine.

MRS. ERLYNNE. Yes, it is my will. And never forget your child--I like to think of you as a mother. I like you to think of yourself as one.

LADY WINDERMERE. [Looking up.] I always will now. Only once in my life I have forgotten my own mother--that was last night. Oh, if I had remembered her I should not have been so foolish, so wicked.

MRS. ERLYNNE. [With a slight shudder.] Hush, last night is quite over.

[Enter LORD WINDERMERE.]

LORD WINDERMERE. Your carriage has not come back yet, Mrs. Erlynne.

MRS. ERLYNNE. It makes no matter. I'll take a hansom. There is nothing in the world so respectable as a good Shrewsbury and Talbot. And now, dear Lady Windermere, I am afraid it is really good-bye. [Moves up C.] Oh, I remember. You'll think me absurd, but do you know I've taken a great fancy to this fan that I was silly enough to run away with last night from your ball. Now, I wonder would you give it to me? Lord Windermere says you may. I know it is his present.

LADY WINDERMERE. Oh, certainly, if it will give you any pleasure. But it has my name on it. It has 'Margaret' on it.

MRS. ERLYNNE. But we have the same Christian name.

LADY WINDERMERE. Oh, I forgot. Of course, do have it. What a wonderful chance our names being the same!

MRS. ERLYNNE. Quite wonderful. Thanks--it will always remind me of you. [Shakes hands with her.]

[Enter PARKER.]

PARKER. Lord Augustus Lorton. Mrs. Erlynne's carriage has come.

[Enter LORD AUGUSTUS.]

LORD AUGUSTUS. Good morning, dear boy. Good morning, Lady Windermere. [Sees MRS. ERLYNNE.] Mrs. Erlynne!

MRS. ERLYNNE. How do you do, Lord Augustus? Are you quite well this morning?

LORD AUGUSTUS. [Coldly.] Quite well, thank you, Mrs. Erlynne.

MRS. ERLYNNE. You don't look at all well, Lord Augustus. You stop up too late--it is so bad for you. You really should take more care of yourself. Good-bye, Lord Windermere. [Goes towards door with a bow to LORD AUGUSTUS. Suddenly smiles and looks back at him.] Lord Augustus! Won't you see me to my carriage? You might

carry the fan.

LORD WINDERMERE. Allow me!

MRS. ERLYNNE. No; I want Lord Augustus. I have a special message for the dear Duchess. Won't you carry the fan, Lord Augustus?

LORD AUGUSTUS. If you really desire it, Mrs. Erlynne.

MRS. ERLYNNE. [Laughing.] Of course I do. You'll carry it so gracefully. You would carry off anything gracefully, dear Lord Augustus.

[When she reaches the door she looks back for a moment at LADY WINDERMERE. Their eyes meet. Then she turns, and exit C. followed by LORD AUGUSTUS.]

LADY WINDERMERE. You will never speak against Mrs. Erlynne again, Arthur, will you?

LORD WINDERMERE. [Gravely.] She is better than one thought her.

LADY WINDERMERE. She is better than I am.

LORD WINDERMERE. [Smiling as he strokes her hair.] Child, you and she belong to different worlds. Into your world evil has never

entered.

LADY WINDERMERE. Don't say that, Arthur. There is the same world for all of us, and good and evil, sin and innocence, go through it hand in hand. To shut one's eyes to half of life that one may live securely is as though one blinded oneself that one might walk with more safety in a land of pit and precipice.

LORD WINDERMERE. [Moves down with her.] Darling, why do you say that?

LADY WINDERMERE. [Sits on sofa.] Because I, who had shut my eyes to life, came to the brink. And one who had separated us -

LORD WINDERMERE. We were never separated.

LADY WINDERMERE. We never must be again. O Arthur, don't love me less, and I will trust you more. I will trust you absolutely. Let us go to Selby. In the Rose Garden at Selby the roses are white and red.

[Enter LORD AUGUSTUS C.]

LORD AUGUSTUS. Arthur, she has explained everything!

[LADY WINDERMERE looks horribly frightened at this. LORD

WINDERMERE starts. LORD AUGUSTUS takes WINDERMERE by the arm and

brings him to front of stage. He talks rapidly and in a low voice.

LADY WINDERMERE stands watching them in terror.] My dear fellow, she has explained every demmed thing. We all wronged her immensely. It was entirely for my sake she went to Darlington's rooms. Called first at the Club--fact is, wanted to put me out of suspense--and being told I had gone on--followed--naturally frightened when she heard a lot of us coming in--retired to another room--I assure you, most gratifying to me, the whole thing. We all behaved brutally to her. She is just the woman for me. Suits me down to the ground. All the conditions she makes are that we live entirely out of England. A very good thing too. Demmed clubs, demmed climate, demmed cooks, demmed everything. Sick of it all!

LADY WINDERMERE. [Frightened.] Has Mrs. Erlynne--?

LORD AUGUSTUS. [Advancing towards her with a low bow.] Yes, Lady Windermere-- Mrs. Erlynne has done me the honour of accepting my hand.

LORD WINDERMERE. Well, you are certainly marrying a very clever woman!

LADY WINDERMERE. [Taking her husband's hand.] Ah, you're marrying a very good woman!

CURTAIN