

**A Woman of No Importance**

**By**

**Oscar Wilde**

# A Woman of No Importance

## THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

Lord Illingworth

Sir John Pontefract

Lord Alfred Rufford

Mr. Kelvil, M.P.

The Ven. Archdeacon Daubeny, D.D.

Gerald Arbuthnot

Farquhar, Butler

Francis, Footman

Lady Hunstanton

Lady Caroline Pontefract

Lady Stutfield

Mrs. Allonby

Miss Hester Worsley

Alice, Maid

Mrs. Arbuthnot

## THE SCENES OF THE PLAY

ACT I. The Terrace at Hunstanton Chase.

ACT II. The Drawing-room at Hunstanton Chase.

ACT III. The Hall at Hunstanton Chase.

ACT IV. Sitting-room in Mrs. Arbuthnot's House at Wrockley.

TIME: The Present.

PLACE: The Shires.

The action of the play takes place within twenty-four hours.

LONDON: HAYMARKET THEATRE

Lessee and Manager: Mr. H Beerbohm Tree

April 19th, 1893

Lord Illingworth, Mr. Tree

Sir John Pontefract, Mr. E. Holman Clark

Lord Alfred Rufford, Mr. Ernest Lawford

Mr. Kelvil, M.P., Mr. Charles Allan.

The Ven. Archdeacon Daubeny, D.D., Mr. Kemble

Gerald Arbuthnot, Mr. Terry

Farquhar, Butler, Mr. Hay  
Francis, Footman, Mr. Montague  
Lady Hunstanton, Miss Rose Leclercq  
Lady Caroline Pontefract, Miss Le Thiere  
Lady Stutfield, Miss Blanche Horlock  
Mrs. Allonby, Mrs. Tree  
Miss Hester Worsley, Miss Julia Neilson  
Alice, Maid, Miss Kelly  
Mrs. Arbuthnot, Mrs. Bernard-Beere

#### FIRST ACT

#### SCENE

Lawn in front of the terrace at Hunstanton.

[SIR JOHN and LADY CAROLINE PONTEFRACT, MISS WORSLEY, on chairs  
under large yew tree.]

LADY CAROLINE. I believe this is the first English country house  
you have stayed at, Miss Worsley?

HESTER. Yes, Lady Caroline.

LADY CAROLINE. You have no country houses, I am told, in America?

HESTER. We have not many.

LADY CAROLINE. Have you any country? What we should call country?

HESTER. [Smiling.] We have the largest country in the world, Lady Caroline. They used to tell us at school that some of our states are as big as France and England put together.

LADY CAROLINE. Ah! you must find it very draughty, I should fancy. [To SIR JOHN.] John, you should have your muffler. What is the use of my always knitting mufflers for you if you won't wear them?

SIR JOHN. I am quite warm, Caroline, I assure you.

LADY CAROLINE. I think not, John. Well, you couldn't come to a more charming place than this, Miss Worsley, though the house is excessively damp, quite unpardonably damp, and dear Lady Hunstanton is sometimes a little lax about the people she asks down here. [To SIR JOHN.] Jane mixes too much. Lord Illingworth, of course, is a man of high distinction. It is a privilege to meet him. And that member of Parliament, Mr. Kettle -

SIR JOHN. Kelvil, my love, Kelvil.

LADY CAROLINE. He must be quite respectable. One has never heard his name before in the whole course of one's life, which speaks volumes for a man, nowadays. But Mrs. Allonby is hardly a very suitable person.

HESTER. I dislike Mrs. Allonby. I dislike her more than I can say.

LADY CAROLINE. I am not sure, Miss Worsley, that foreigners like yourself should cultivate likes or dislikes about the people they are invited to meet. Mrs. Allonby is very well born. She is a niece of Lord Brancaster's. It is said, of course, that she ran away twice before she was married. But you know how unfair people often are. I myself don't believe she ran away more than once.

HESTER. Mr. Arbuthnot is very charming.

LADY CAROLINE. Ah, yes! the young man who has a post in a bank. Lady Hunstanton is most kind in asking him here, and Lord Illingworth seems to have taken quite a fancy to him. I am not sure, however, that Jane is right in taking him out of his position. In my young days, Miss Worsley, one never met any one in society who worked for their living. It was not considered the thing.

HESTER. In America those are the people we respect most.

LADY CAROLINE. I have no doubt of it.

HESTER. Mr. Arbuthnot has a beautiful nature! He is so simple, so sincere. He has one of the most beautiful natures I have ever come across. It is a privilege to meet HIM.

LADY CAROLINE. It is not customary in England, Miss Worsley, for a young lady to speak with such enthusiasm of any person of the opposite sex. English women conceal their feelings till after they are married. They show them then.

HESTER. Do you, in England, allow no friendship to exist between a young man and a young girl?

[Enter LADY HUNSTANTON, followed by Footman with shawls and a cushion.]

LADY CAROLINE. We think it very inadvisable. Jane, I was just saying what a pleasant party you have asked us to meet. You have a wonderful power of selection. It is quite a gift.

LADY HUNSTANTON. Dear Caroline, how kind of you! I think we all do fit in very nicely together. And I hope our charming American

visitor will carry back pleasant recollections of our English country life. [To Footman.] The cushion, there, Francis. And my shawl. The Shetland. Get the Shetland. [Exit Footman for shawl.]

[Enter GERALD ARBUTHNOT.]

GERALD. Lady Hunstanton, I have such good news to tell you. Lord Illingworth has just offered to make me his secretary.

LADY HUNSTANTON. His secretary? That is good news indeed, Gerald. It means a very brilliant future in store for you. Your dear mother will be delighted. I really must try and induce her to come up here to-night. Do you think she would, Gerald? I know how difficult it is to get her to go anywhere.

GERALD. Oh! I am sure she would, Lady Hunstanton, if she knew Lord Illingworth had made me such an offer.

[Enter Footman with shawl.]

LADY HUNSTANTON. I will write and tell her about it, and ask her to come up and meet him. [To Footman.] Just wait, Francis.

[Writes letter.]

LADY CAROLINE. That is a very wonderful opening for so young a man as you are, Mr. Arbuthnot.



GERALD. It is indeed, Lady Caroline. I trust I shall be able to show myself worthy of it.

LADY CAROLINE. I trust so.

GERALD. [To HESTER.] YOU have not congratulated me yet, Miss Worsley.

HESTER. Are you very pleased about it?

GERALD. Of course I am. It means everything to me - things that were out of the reach of hope before may be within hope's reach now.

HESTER. Nothing should be out of the reach of hope. Life is a hope.

LADY HUNSTANTON. I fancy, Caroline, that Diplomacy is what Lord Illingworth is aiming at. I heard that he was offered Vienna. But that may not be true.

LADY CAROLINE. I don't think that England should be represented abroad by an unmarried man, Jane. It might lead to complications.

LADY HUNSTANTON. You are too nervous, Caroline. Believe me, you

are too nervous. Besides, Lord Illingworth may marry any day. I was in hopes he would have married lady Kelso. But I believe he said her family was too large. Or was it her feet? I forget which. I regret it very much. She was made to be an ambassador's wife.

LADY CAROLINE. She certainly has a wonderful faculty of remembering people's names, and forgetting their faces.

LADY HUNSTANTON. Well, that is very natural, Caroline, is it not? [To Footman.] Tell Henry to wait for an answer. I have written a line to your dear mother, Gerald, to tell her your good news, and to say she really must come to dinner.

[Exit Footman.]

GERALD. That is awfully kind of you, Lady Hunstanton. [To HESTER.] Will you come for a stroll, Miss Worsley?

HESTER. With pleasure [Exit with GERALD.]

LADY HUNSTANTON. I am very much gratified at Gerald Arbuthnot's good fortune. He is quite a PROTEGE of mine. And I am particularly pleased that Lord Illingworth should have made the offer of his own accord without my suggesting anything. Nobody likes to be asked favours. I remember poor Charlotte Pagden making

herself quite unpopular one season, because she had a French governess she wanted to recommend to every one.

LADY CAROLINE. I saw the governess, Jane. Lady Pagden sent her to me. It was before Eleanor came out. She was far too good-looking to be in any respectable household. I don't wonder Lady Pagden was so anxious to get rid of her.

LADY HUNSTANTON. Ah, that explains it.

LADY CAROLINE. John, the grass is too damp for you. You had better go and put on your overshoes at once.

SIR JOHN. I am quite comfortable, Caroline, I assure you.

LADY CAROLINE. You must allow me to be the best judge of that, John. Pray do as I tell you.

[SIR JOHN gets up and goes off.]

LADY HUNSTANTON. You spoil him, Caroline, you do indeed!

[Enter MRS. ALLONBY and LADY STUTFIELD.]

[To MRS. ALLONBY.] Well, dear, I hope you like the park. It is said to be well timbered.

MRS. ALLONBY. The trees are wonderful, Lady Hunstanton.

LADY STUTFIELD. Quite, quite wonderful.

MRS. ALLONBY. But somehow, I feel sure that if I lived in the country for six months, I should become so unsophisticated that no one would take the slightest notice of me.

LADY HUNSTANTON. I assure you, dear, that the country has not that effect at all. Why, it was from Melthorpe, which is only two miles from here, that Lady Belton eloped with Lord Fethersdale. I remember the occurrence perfectly. Poor Lord Belton died three days afterwards of joy, or gout. I forget which. We had a large party staying here at the time, so we were all very much interested in the whole affair.

MRS. ALLONBY. I think to elope is cowardly. It's running away from danger. And danger has become so rare in modern life.

LADY CAROLINE. As far as I can make out, the young women of the present day seem to make it the sole object of their lives to be always playing with fire.

MRS. ALLONBY. The one advantage of playing with fire, Lady Caroline, is that one never gets even singed. It is the people who

don't know how to play with it who get burned up.

LADY STUTFIELD. Yes; I see that. It is very, very helpful.

LADY HUNSTANTON. I don't know how the world would get on with such a theory as that, dear Mrs. Allonby.

LADY STUTFIELD. Ah! The world was made for men and not for women.

MRS. ALLONBY. Oh, don't say that, Lady Stutfield. We have a much better time than they have. There are far more things forbidden to us than are forbidden to them.

LADY STUTFIELD. Yes; that is quite, quite true. I had not thought of that.

[Enter SIR JOHN and MR. KELVIL.]

LADY HUNSTANTON. Well, Mr. Kelvil, have you got through your work?

KELVIL. I have finished my writing for the day, Lady Hunstanton. It has been an arduous task. The demands on the time of a public man are very heavy nowadays, very heavy indeed. And I don't think they meet with adequate recognition.

LADY CAROLINE. John, have you got your overshoes on?

SIR JOHN. Yes, my love.

LADY CAROLINE. I think you had better come over here, John. It is more sheltered.

SIR JOHN. I am quite comfortable, Caroline.

LADY CAROLINE. I think not, John. You had better sit beside me.

[SIR JOHN rises and goes across.]

LADY STUTFIELD. And what have you been writing about this morning, Mr. Kelvil?

KELVIL. On the usual subject, Lady Stutfield. On Purity.

LADY STUTFIELD. That must be such a very, very interesting thing to write about.

KELVIL. It is the one subject of really national importance, nowadays, Lady Stutfield. I purpose addressing my constituents on the question before Parliament meets. I find that the poorer classes of this country display a marked desire for a higher ethical standard.

LADY STUTFIELD. How quite, quite nice of them.

LADY CAROLINE. Are you in favour of women taking part in politics, Mr. Kettle?

SIR JOHN. Kelvil, my love, Kelvil.

KELVIL. The growing influence of women is the one reassuring thing in our political life, Lady Caroline. Women are always on the side of morality, public and private.

LADY STUTFIELD. It is so very, very gratifying to hear you say that.

LADY HUNSTANTON. Ah, yes! - the moral qualities in women - that is the important thing. I am afraid, Caroline, that dear Lord Illingworth doesn't value the moral qualities in women as much as he should.

[Enter LORD ILLINGWORTH.]

LADY STUTFIELD. The world says that Lord Illingworth is very, very wicked.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. But what world says that, Lady Stutfield? It must be the next world. This world and I are on excellent terms.

[Sits down beside MRS. ALLONBY.]

LADY STUTFIELD. Every one I know says you are very, very wicked.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. It is perfectly monstrous the way people go about, nowadays, saying things against one behind one's back that are absolutely and entirely true.

LADY HUNSTANTON. Dear Lord Illingworth is quite hopeless, Lady Stutfield. I have given up trying to reform him. It would take a Public Company with a Board of Directors and a paid Secretary to do that. But you have the secretary already, Lord Illingworth, haven't you? Gerald Arbuthnot has told us of his good fortune; it is really most kind of you.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Oh, don't say that, Lady Hunstanton. Kind is a dreadful word. I took a great fancy to young Arbuthnot the moment I met him, and he'll be of considerable use to me in something I am foolish enough to think of doing.

LADY HUNSTANTON. He is an admirable young man. And his mother is one of my dearest friends. He has just gone for a walk with our pretty American. She is very pretty, is she not?

LADY CAROLINE. Far too pretty. These American girls carry off all the good matches. Why can't they stay in their own country? They are always telling us it is the Paradise of women.



LORD ILLINGWORTH. It is, Lady Caroline. That is why, like Eve, they are so extremely anxious to get out of it.

LADY CAROLINE. Who are Miss Worsley's parents?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. American women are wonderfully clever in concealing their parents.

LADY HUNSTANTON. My dear Lord Illingworth, what do you mean? Miss Worsley, Caroline, is an orphan. Her father was a very wealthy millionaire or philanthropist, or both, I believe, who entertained my son quite hospitably, when he visited Boston. I don't know how he made his money, originally.

KELVIL. I fancy in American dry goods.

LADY HUNSTANTON. What are American dry goods?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. American novels.

LADY HUNSTANTON. How very singular! . . . Well, from whatever source her large fortune came, I have a great esteem for Miss Worsley. She dresses exceedingly well. All Americans do dress well. They get their clothes in Paris.

MRS. ALLONBY. They say, Lady Hunstanton, that when good Americans die they go to Paris.

LADY HUNSTANTON. Indeed? And when bad Americans die, where do they go to?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Oh, they go to America.

KELVIL. I am afraid you don't appreciate America, Lord Illingworth. It is a very remarkable country, especially considering its youth.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. The youth of America is their oldest tradition. It has been going on now for three hundred years. To hear them talk one would imagine they were in their first childhood. As far as civilisation goes they are in their second.

KELVIL. There is undoubtedly a great deal of corruption in American politics. I suppose you allude to that?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. I wonder.

LADY HUNSTANTON. Politics are in a sad way everywhere, I am told. They certainly are in England. Dear Mr. Cardew is ruining the country. I wonder Mrs. Cardew allows him. I am sure, Lord Illingworth, you don't think that uneducated people should be

allowed to have votes?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. I think they are the only people who should.

KELVIL. Do you take no side then in modern politics, Lord Illingworth?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. One should never take sides in anything, Mr. Kelvil. Taking sides is the beginning of sincerity, and earnestness follows shortly afterwards, and the human being becomes a bore. However, the House of Commons really does very little harm. You can't make people good by Act of Parliament, - that is something.

KELVIL. You cannot deny that the House of Commons has always shown great sympathy with the sufferings of the poor.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. That is its special vice. That is the special vice of the age. One should sympathise with the joy, the beauty, the colour of life. The less said about life's sores the better, Mr. Kelvil.

KELVIL. Still our East End is a very important problem.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Quite so. It is the problem of slavery. And we are trying to solve it by amusing the slaves.

LADY HUNSTANTON. Certainly, a great deal may be done by means of cheap entertainments, as you say, Lord Illingworth. Dear Dr. Daubeny, our rector here, provides, with the assistance of his curates, really admirable recreations for the poor during the winter. And much good may be done by means of a magic lantern, or a missionary, or some popular amusement of that kind.

LADY CAROLINE. I am not at all in favour of amusements for the poor, Jane. Blankets and coals are sufficient. There is too much love of pleasure amongst the upper classes as it is. Health is what we want in modern life. The tone is not healthy, not healthy at all.

KELVIL. You are quite right, Lady Caroline.

LADY CAROLINE. I believe I am usually right.

MRS. ALLONBY. Horrid word 'health.'

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Silliest word in our language, and one knows so well the popular idea of health. The English country gentleman galloping after a fox - the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable.

KELVIL. May I ask, Lord Illingworth, if you regard the House of

Lords as a better institution than the House of Commons?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. A much better institution, of course. We in the House of Lords are never in touch with public opinion. That makes us a civilised body.

KELVIL. Are you serious in putting forward such a view?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Quite serious, Mr. Kelvil. [To MRS. ALLONBY.] Vulgar habit that is people have nowadays of asking one, after one has given them an idea, whether one is serious or not. Nothing is serious except passion. The intellect is not a serious thing, and never has been. It is an instrument on which one plays, that is all. The only serious form of intellect I know is the British intellect. And on the British intellect the illiterates play the drum.

LADY HUNSTANTON. What are you saying, Lord Illingworth, about the drum?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. I was merely talking to Mrs. Allonby about the leading articles in the London newspapers.

LADY HUNSTANTON. But do you believe all that is written in the newspapers?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. I do. Nowadays it is only the unreadable that occurs. [Rises with MRS. ALLONBY.]

LADY HUNSTANTON. Are you going, Mrs. Allonby?

MRS. ALLONBY. Just as far as the conservatory. Lord Illingworth told me this morning that there was an orchid there m beautiful as the seven deadly sins.

LADY HUNSTANTON. My dear, I hope there is nothing of the kind. I will certainly speak to the gardener.

[Exit MRS. ALLONBY and LORD ILLINGWORTH.]

LADY CAROLINE. Remarkable type, Mrs. Allonby.

LADY HUNSTANTON. She lets her clever tongue run away with her sometimes.

LADY CAROLINE. Is that the only thing, Jane, Mrs. Allonby allows to run away with her?

LADY HUNSTANTON. I hope so, Caroline, I am sure.

[Enter LORD ALFRED.]

Dear Lord Alfred, do join us. [LORD ALFRED sits down beside LADY STUTFIELD.]

LADY CAROLINE. You believe good of every one, Jane. It is a great fault.

LADY STUTFIELD. Do you really, really think, Lady Caroline, that one should believe evil of every one?

LADY CAROLINE. I think it is much safer to do so, Lady Stutfield. Until, of course, people are found out to be good. But that requires a great deal of investigation nowadays.

LADY STUTFIELD. But there is so much unkind scandal in modern life.

LADY CAROLINE. Lord Illingworth remarked to me last night at dinner that the basis of every scandal is an absolutely immoral certainty.

KELVIL. Lord Illingworth is, of course, a very brilliant man, but he seems to me to be lacking in that fine faith in the nobility and purity of life which is so important in this century.

LADY STUTFIELD. Yes, quite, quite important, is it not?

KELVIL. He gives me the impression of a man who does not appreciate the beauty of our English home-life. I would say that he was tainted with foreign ideas on the subject.

LADY STUTFIELD. There is nothing, nothing like the beauty of home-life, is there?

KELVIL. It is the mainstay of our moral system in England, Lady Stutfield. Without it we would become like our neighbours.

LADY STUTFIELD. That would be so, so sad, would it not?

KELVIL. I am afraid, too, that Lord Illingworth regards woman simply as a toy. Now, I have never regarded woman as a toy. Woman is the intellectual helpmeet of man in public as in private life.

Without her we should forget the true ideals. [Sits down beside

LADY STUTFIELD.]

LADY STUTFIELD. I am so very, very glad to hear you say that.

LADY CAROLINE. You a married man, Mr. Kettle?

SIR JOHN. Kelvil, dear, Kelvil.

KELVIL. I am married, Lady Caroline.



LADY CAROLINE. Family?

KELVIL. Yes.

LADY CAROLINE. How many?

KELVIL. Eight.

[LADY STUTFIELD turns her attention to LORD ALFRED.]

LADY CAROLINE. Mrs. Kettle and the children are, I suppose, at the seaside? [SIR JOHN shrugs his shoulders.]

KELVIL. My wife is at the seaside with the children, Lady Caroline.

LADY CAROLINE. You will join them later on, no doubt?

KELVIL. If my public engagements permit me.

LADY CAROLINE. Your public life must be a great source of gratification to Mrs. Kettle.

SIR JOHN. Kelvil, my love, Kelvil.

LADY STUTFIELD. [To LORD ALFRED.] How very, very charming those

gold-tipped cigarettes of yours are, Lord Alfred.

LORD ALFRED. They are awfully expensive. I can only afford them when I'm in debt.

LADY STUTFIELD. It must be terribly, terribly distressing to be in debt.

LORD ALFRED. One must have some occupation nowadays. If I hadn't my debts I shouldn't have anything to think about. All the chaps I know are in debt.

LADY STUTFIELD. But don't the people to whom you owe the money give you a great, great deal of annoyance?

[Enter Footman.]

LORD ALFRED. Oh, no, they write; I don't.

LADY STUTFIELD. How very, very strange.

LADY HUNSTANTON. Ah, here is a letter, Caroline, from dear Mrs. Arbuthnot. She won't dine. I am so sorry. But she will come in the evening. I am very pleased indeed. She is one of the sweetest of women. Writes a beautiful hand, too, so large, so firm. [Hands letter to LADY CAROLINE.]

LADY CAROLINE. [Looking at it.] A little lacking in femininity, Jane. Femininity is the quality I admire most in women.

LADY HUNSTANTON. [Taking back letter and leaving it on table.] Oh! she is very feminine, Caroline, and so good too. You should hear what the Archdeacon says of her. He regards her as his right hand in the parish. [Footman speaks to her.] In the Yellow Drawing-room. Shall we all go in? Lady Stutfield, shall we go in to tea?

LADY STUTFIELD. With pleasure, Lady Hunstanton. [They rise and proceed to go off. SIR JOHN offers to carry LADY STUTFIELD'S cloak.]

LADY CAROLINE. John! If you would allow your nephew to look after Lady Stutfield's cloak, you might help me with my workbasket.

[Enter LORD ILLINGWORTH and MRS. ALLONBY.]

SIR JOHN. Certainly, my love. [Exeunt.]

MRS. ALLONBY. Curious thing, plain women are always jealous of their husbands, beautiful women never are!

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Beautiful women never have time. They are

always so occupied in being jealous of other people's husbands.

MRS. ALLONBY. I should have thought Lady Caroline would have grown tired of conjugal anxiety by this time! Sir John is her fourth!

LORD ILLINGWORTH. So much marriage is certainly not becoming. Twenty years of romance make a woman look like a ruin; but twenty years of marriage make her something like a public building.

MRS. ALLONBY. Twenty years of romance! Is there such a thing?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Not in our day. Women have become too brilliant. Nothing spoils a romance so much as a sense of humour in the woman.

MRS. ALLONBY. Or the want of it in the man.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. You are quite right. In a Temple every one should be serious, except the thing that is worshipped.

MRS. ALLONBY. And that should be man?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Women kneel so gracefully; men don't.

MRS. ALLONBY. You are thinking of Lady Stutfield!

LORD ILLINGWORTH. I assure you I have not thought of Lady Stutfield for the last quarter of an hour.

MRS. ALLONBY. Is she such a mystery?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. She is more than a mystery - she is a mood.

MRS. ALLONBY. Moods don't last.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. It is their chief charm.

[Enter HESTER and GERALD.]

GERALD. Lord Illingworth, every one has been congratulating me, Lady Hunstanton and Lady Caroline, and . . . every one. I hope I shall make a good secretary.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. You will be the pattern secretary, Gerald.

[Talks to him.]

MRS. ALLONBY. You enjoy country life, Miss Worsley?

HESTER. Very much indeed.

MRS. ALLONBY. Don't find yourself longing for a London dinner-party?

HESTER. I dislike London dinner-parties.

MRS. ALLONBY. I adore them. The clever people never listen, and the stupid people never talk.

HESTER. I think the stupid people talk a great deal.

MRS. ALLONBY. Ah, I never listen!

LORD ILLINGWORTH. My dear boy, if I didn't like you I wouldn't have made you the offer. It is because I like you so much that I want to have you with me.

[Exit HESTER with GERALD.]

Charming fellow, Gerald Arbuthnot!

MRS. ALLONBY. He is very nice; very nice indeed. But I can't stand the American young lady.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Why?

MRS. ALLONBY. She told me yesterday, and in quite a loud voice too, that she was only eighteen. It was most annoying.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. One should never trust a woman who tells one her real age. A woman who would tell one that, would tell one anything.

MRS. ALLONBY. She is a Puritan besides -

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Ah, that is inexcusable. I don't mind plain women being Puritans. It is the only excuse they have for being plain. But she is decidedly pretty. I admire her immensely.  
[Looks steadfastly at MRS. ALLONBY.]

MRS. ALLONBY. What a thoroughly bad man you must be!

LORD ILLINGWORTH. What do you call a bad man?

MRS. ALLONBY. The sort of man who admires innocence.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. And a bad woman?

MRS. ALLONBY. Oh! the sort of woman a man never gets tired of.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. You are severe - on yourself.

MRS. ALLONBY. Define us as a sex.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Sphinxes without secrets.

MRS. ALLONBY. Does that include the Puritan women?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Do you know, I don't believe in the existence of Puritan women? I don't think there is a woman in the world who would not be a little flattered if one made love to her. It is that which makes women so irresistibly adorable.

MRS. ALLONBY. You think there is no woman in the world who would object to being kissed?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Very few.

MRS. ALLONBY. Miss Worsley would not let you kiss her.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Are you sure?

MRS. ALLONBY. Quite.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. What do you think she'd do if I kissed her?

MRS. ALLONBY. Either marry you, or strike you across the face with her glove. What would you do if she struck you across the face with her glove?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Fall in love with her, probably.



MRS. ALLONBY. Then it is lucky you are not going to kiss her!

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Is that a challenge?

MRS. ALLONBY. It is an arrow shot into the air.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Don't you know that I always succeed in whatever I try?

MRS. ALLONBY. I am sorry to hear it. We women adore failures. They lean on us.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. You worship successes. You cling to them.

MRS. ALLONBY. We are the laurels to hide their baldness.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. And they need you always, except at the moment of triumph.

MRS. ALLONBY. They are uninteresting then.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. How tantalising you are! [A pause.]

MRS. ALLONBY. Lord Illingworth, there is one thing I shall always like you for.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Only one thing? And I have so many bad qualities.

MRS. ALLONBY. Ah, don't be too conceited about them. You may lose them as you grow old.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. I never intend to grow old. The soul is born old but grows young. That is the comedy of life.

MRS. ALLONBY. And the body is born young and grows old. That is life's tragedy.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Its comedy also, sometimes. But what is the mysterious reason why you will always like me?

MRS. ALLONBY. It is that you have never made love to me.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. I have never done anything else.

MRS. ALLONBY. Really? I have not noticed it.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. How fortunate! It might have been a tragedy for both of us.

MRS. ALLONBY. We should each have survived.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. One can survive everything nowadays, except death, and live down anything except a good reputation.

MRS. ALLONBY. Have you tried a good reputation?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. It is one of the many annoyances to which I have never been subjected.

MRS. ALLONBY. It may come.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Why do you threaten me?

MRS. ALLONBY. I will tell you when you have kissed the Puritan.

[Enter Footman.]

FRANCIS. Tea is served in the Yellow Drawing-room, my lord.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Tell her ladyship we are coming in.

FRANCIS. Yes, my lord.

[Exit.]

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Shall we go in to tea?

MRS. ALLONBY. Do you like such simple pleasures?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. I adore simple pleasures. They are the last refuge of the complex. But, if you wish, let us stay here. Yes, let us stay here. The Book of Life begins with a man and a woman in a garden.

MRS. ALLONBY. It ends with Revelations.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. You fence divinely. But the button has come of your foil.

MRS. ALLONBY. I have still the mask.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. It makes your eyes lovelier.

MRS. ALLONBY. Thank you. Come.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. [Sees MRS. ARBUTHNOT'S letter on table, and takes it up and looks at envelope.] What a curious handwriting! It reminds me of the handwriting of a woman I used to know years ago.

MRS. ALLONBY. Who?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Oh! no one. No one in particular. A woman of no importance. [Throws letter down, and passes up the steps of the terrace with MRS. ALLONBY. They smile at each other.]

ACT DROP.

SECOND ACT

SCENE

Drawing-room at Hunstanton, after dinner, lamps lit. Door L.C.

Door R.C.

[Ladies seated on sofas.]

MRS. ALLONBY. What a comfort it is to have got rid of the men for a little!

LADY STUTFIELD. Yes; men persecute us dreadfully, don't they?

MRS. ALLONBY. Persecute us? I wish they did.