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The Persons of the Play

THE EARL OF CAVERSHAM, K.G.
VISCOUNT GORING, *his son*
SIR ROBERT CHILTERN, *Bart, Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs*
VICOMTE DE NANJAC, *Attaché at the French Embassy in London*
MR MONTFORD
MASON, *Butler to Sir Robert Chiltern*
PHIPPS, *Lord Goring's servant*
JAMES, *Footman*
HAROLD, *Footman*
LADY CHILTERN
LADY MARKBY
THE COUNTESS OF BASILDON
MRS MARCHMONT
MISS MABEL CHILTERN, *Sir Robert Chiltern's sister*
MRS CHEVELEY

The Scenes of the Play

Act I: the Octagon Room in Sir Robert Chiltern's house in Grosvenor Square

Act II: Morning-Room in Sir Robert Chiltern's house

Act III: the Library of Lord Goring's house in Curzon Street

Act IV: same as Act II

Time: the present

Place: London

The action of the play is completed within twenty-four hours

FIRST ACT

Scene: the Octagon Room at Sir Robert Chiltern's house in Grosvenor Square.

The room is brilliantly lighted and full of guests. At the top of the staircase stands LADY CHILTERN, *a woman of grave Greek beauty, about twenty-seven years of age. She receives the guests as they come up. Over the well of the staircase hangs a great chandelier with wax lights, which illumine a large eighteenth-century French tapestry – representing the Triumph of Love, from a design by Boucher – that is stretched on the staircase wall. On the right is the entrance to the music-room. The sound of a string quartette is faintly heard. The entrance on the left leads to other reception-rooms.* MRS MARCHMONT *and* LADY BASILDON, *two very pretty women, are seated together on a Louis Seize sofa. They are types of exquisite fragility. Their affectation of manner has a delicate charm. Watteau would have loved to paint them.*

MRS MARCHMONT. Going on to the Hartlocks' tonight, Margaret?

LADY BASILDON. I suppose so. Are you?

MRS MARCHMONT. Yes. Horribly tedious parties they give, don't they?

LADY BASILDON. Horribly tedious! Never know why I go. Never know why I go anywhere.

MRS MARCHMONT. I come here to be educated.

LADY BASILDON. Ah! I hate being educated!

MRS MARCHMONT. So do I. It puts one almost on a level with the commercial classes, doesn't it? But dear Gertrude Chiltern is always telling me that I should have some serious purpose in life. So I come here to try to find one.

LADY BASILDON (*looking round through her lorgnette*). I don't see anybody here tonight whom one could possibly call a

serious purpose. The man who took me in to dinner talked to me about his wife the whole time.

MRS MARCHMONT. How very trivial of him!

LADY BASILDON. Terribly trivial! What did your man talk about?

MRS MARCHMONT. About myself.

LADY BASILDON (*languidly*). And were you interested?

MRS MARCHMONT (*shaking her head*). Not in the smallest degree.

LADY BASILDON. What martyrs we are, dear Margaret!

MRS MARCHMONT (*rising*). And how well it becomes us, Olivia!

They rise and go towards the music-room. The VICOMTE DE NANJAC, *a young attaché known for his neckties and his Anglomania, approaches with a low bow, and enters into conversation.*

MASON (*announcing guests from the top of the staircase*). Mr and Lady Jane Barford. Lord Caversham.

Enter LORD CAVERSHAM, *an old gentleman of seventy, wearing the riband and star of the Garter. A fine Whig type. Rather like a portrait by Lawrence.*

LORD CAVERSHAM. Good evening, Lady Chiltern! Has my good-for-nothing young son been here?

LADY CHILTERN (*smiling*). I don't think Lord Goring has arrived yet.

MABEL CHILTERN (*coming up to* LORD CAVERSHAM). Why do you call Lord Goring good-for-nothing?

MABEL CHILTERN *is a perfect example of the English type of prettiness, the apple-blossom type. She has all the fragrance and freedom of a flower. There is ripple after ripple of sunlight in her hair, and the little mouth, with its parted lips, is expectant, like the mouth of a child. She has the fascinating tyranny of youth, and the astonishing courage of innocence. To sane people she is not reminiscent of any work of art. But she is really like a Tanagra statuette, and would be rather annoyed if she were told so.*

LORD CAVERSHAM. Because he leads such an idle life.

MABEL CHILTERN. How can you say such a thing? Why, he rides in the Row at ten o'clock in the morning, goes to the Opera three times a week, changes his clothes at least five times a day, and dines out every night of the season. You don't call that leading an idle life, do you?

LORD CAVERSHAM (*looking at her with a kindly twinkle in his eye*). You are a very charming young lady!

MABEL CHILTERN. How sweet of you to say that, Lord Caversham! Do come to us more often. You know we are always at home on Wednesdays, and you look so well with your star!

LORD CAVERSHAM. Never go anywhere now. Sick of London Society. Shouldn't mind being introduced to my own tailor; he always votes on the right side. But object strongly to being sent down to dinner with my wife's milliner. Never could stand Lady Caversham's bonnets.

MABEL CHILTERN. Oh, I love London Society! I think it has immensely improved. It is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics. Just what Society should be.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Hum! Which is Goring? Beautiful idiot, or the other thing?

MABEL CHILTERN (*gravely*). I have been obliged for the present to put Lord Goring into a class quite by himself. But he is developing charmingly!

LORD CAVERSHAM. Into what?

MABEL CHILTERN (*with a little curtsey*). I hope to let you know very soon, Lord Caversham!

MASON (*announcing guests*). Lady Markby. Mrs Cheveley.

Enter LADY MARKBY *and* MRS CHEVELEY. LADY MARKBY *is a pleasant, kindly, popular woman, with grey hair à la marquise and good lace.* MRS CHEVELEY, *who accompanies her, is tall and rather slight. Lips very thin and highly-coloured, a line of scarlet on a pallid face. Venetian red hair, aquiline nose, and long throat. Rouge accentuates the natural paleness of her*

complexion. Grey-green eyes that move restlessly. She is in heliotrope, with diamonds. She looks rather like an orchid, and makes great demands on one's curiosity. In all her movements she is extremely graceful. A work of art, on the whole, but showing the influence of too many schools.

LADY MARKBY. Good evening, dear Gertrude! So kind of you to let me bring my friend, Mrs Cheveley. Two such charming women should know each other!

LADY CHILTERN (*advances toward* MRS CHEVELEY *with a sweet smile. Then suddenly stops, and bows rather distantly*). I think Mrs Cheveley and I have met before. I did not know she had married a second time.

LADY MARKBY (*genially*). Ah, nowadays people marry as often as they can, don't they? It is most fashionable. (*To* DUCHESS OF MARYBOROUGH.) Dear Duchess, and how is the Duke? Brain still weak, I suppose? Well, that is only to be expected, is it not? His good father was just the same. There is nothing like race, is there?

MRS CHEVELEY (*playing with her fan*). But have we really met before, Lady Chiltern? I can't remember where. I have been out of England for so long.

LADY CHILTERN. We were at school together, Mrs Cheveley.

MRS CHEVELEY (*superciliously*). Indeed? I have forgotten all about my schooldays. I have a vague impression that they were detestable.

LADY CHILTERN (*coldly*). I am not surprised!

MRS CHEVELEY (*in her sweetest manner*). Do you know, I am quite looking forward to meeting your clever husband, Lady Chiltern. Since he has been at the Foreign Office, he has been so much talked of in Vienna. They actually succeed in spelling his name right in the newspapers. That in itself is fame, on the continent.

LADY CHILTERN. I hardly think there will be much in common between you and my husband, Mrs Cheveley!

Moves away.

VICOMTE DE NANJAC. Ah! chère Madame, quelle surprise! I have not seen you since Berlin!