

LB
RIS

We know
books

Oscar Wilde

An Ideal Husband

Introduction, notes and activities by **James Butler**
and **Maria Lucia de Vanna**

LBRIS

We know
books

Contents

Oscar Wilde	5
British Theatre at the Time of Oscar Wilde	6
Characters	7
Themes and Interpretations	7
Summary of <i>An Ideal Husband</i>	8

<i>An Ideal Husband</i>	11
ACT I	13
ACTIVITIES	41
ACT II	49
ACTIVITIES	74
ACT III	79
ACTIVITIES	100
ACT IV	105
ACTIVITIES	123
Overview of the Play	126



These symbols indicate the beginning and end of the listening passages.

LIBRIS

We know
books



Oscar Wilde

An Ideal Husband

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*). ¹ 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.

¹ **lorgnette** [lɔ:n'jet] : a pair of eyeglasses held by a long handle.

LADY BASILDON. What martyrs we are, dear Margaret!

MRS MARCHMONT (*Rising*). And how well it becomes us, ¹ 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 ² of the Garter. ³ A fine Whig ⁴ type. Rather like a portrait by Lawrence.

LORD CAVERSHAM. Good evening, Lady Chiltern! Has my good-for-nothing ⁵ 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 ⁶ life.

MABEL CHILTERN. How can you say such a thing? Why, he rides in the Row ⁷ 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 ⁸ in his eyes*). You are a very charming young lady!

1 **it becomes us** : makes us look elegant.

2 **riband and star** : medal.

3 **the Garter** : title of honour awarded for services to the country.

4 **Whig** : member of political party in favour of political and social reforms.

5 **good-for-nothing** : useless.

6 **idle** : lazy, indolent.

7 **the Row** : Rotten Row, an area of one of the London parks where fashionable people gathered to see and be seen by each other.

8 **twinkle** : gleam.

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. ¹ 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. ² 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 gray 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. Gray-green eyes that move restlessly. She is in heliotrope, ³ with diamonds. She looks rather like an orchid, and makes great demands on one's curiosity. ⁴ 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 towards 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.

1 milliner : hat maker.

2 quite by himself : of his own.

3 heliotrope : a light purple colour.

4 makes great demands on one's curiosity : makes one very curious about her.

LADY MARKBY (*Genially*). ¹ 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, ² 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*). ³ 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!

MRS CHEVELEY. Not since Berlin, Vicomte. Five years ago!

VICOMTE DE NANJAC. And you are younger and more beautiful than ever. How do you manage it?

MRS CHEVELEY. By making it a rule only to talk to perfectly charming people like yourself.

VICOMTE DE NANJAC. Ah! you flatter me. You butter me, ⁴ as they say here.

MRS CHEVELEY. Do they say that here? How dreadful of them!

VICOMTE DE NANJAC. Yes, they have a wonderful language. It should be more widely known.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN *enters*. *A man of forty, but looking somewhat younger. Clean-shaven, with finely-cut features, dark-haired and dark-eyed. A*

1 **genially** : cheerfully.

2 **race** : family blood.

3 **superciliously** : arrogantly.

4 **You butter me** : the correct expression is 'You butter me up', meaning 'You are flattering me excessively.'



Julia Neilson as Lady Cheveley in the first performance of *An Ideal Husband*
at the Haymarket Theatre, January 1895.

personality of mark.¹ Not popular – few personalities are. But intensely admired by the few, and deeply respected by the many. The note² of his manner is that of perfect distinction, with a slight touch of pride. One feels that he is conscious of the success he has made in life. A nervous temperament, with a tired look. The firmly-chiselled mouth and chin contrast strikingly³ with the romantic expression in the deep-set eyes. The variance is suggestive of an almost complete separation of passion and intellect, as though thought and emotion were each isolated in its own sphere through some violence of will-power. There is nervousness in the nostrils, and in the pale, thin, pointed hands. It would be inaccurate to call him picturesque. Picturesqueness cannot survive the House of Commons. But Vandyck would have liked to have painted his head.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Good evening, Lady Markby! I hope you have brought Sir John with you?

LADY MARKBY. Oh! I have brought a much more charming person than Sir John. Sir John's temper since he has taken seriously to politics has become quite unbearable. Really, now that the House of Commons is trying to become useful, it does a great deal of harm.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. I hope not, Lady Markby. At any rate we do our best to waste the public time, don't we? But who is this charming person you have been kind enough to bring to us?

LADY MARKBY. Her name is Mrs Cheveley! One of the Dorsetshire Cheveleys, I suppose. But I really don't know. Families are so mixed nowadays. Indeed, as a rule, everybody turns out to be somebody else.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Mrs Cheveley? I seem to know the name.

LADY MARKBY. She has just arrived from Vienna.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Ah! yes. I think I know whom you mean.

LADY MARKBY. Oh! she goes everywhere there, and has such pleasant scandals about all her friends. I really must go to Vienna next winter. I hope there is a good chef at the Embassy.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. If there is not, the Ambassador will certainly have to be recalled.⁴ Pray⁵ point out Mrs Cheveley to me. I should like to see her.

1 **mark** : note.

2 **note** : expression.

3 **strikingly** : strongly.

4 **recalled** : dismissed from his post.

5 **Pray** : a courteous and old-fashioned way of saying 'please'.