

# ERNEST WORTHING

A chamber opera

by

John Biggs

## SYNOPSIS

### ACT 1:

*Scene: Morning-room in Algernon's flat on Half Moon Street.*

Algernon Moncrief is visited by his friend Ernest Worthing, who has come up to town with the intention of proposing to Algernon's cousin, Gwendolen. As luck would have it, Gwendolen and her mother, the aristocratic Lady Bracknell (Algernon's aunt) are coming to tea that very afternoon. Ernest tells Algernon his intentions, but Algernon who is in possession of a cigarette case left by Ernest from a previous visit, and which bears the inscription "To Uncle Jack from little Cecily with her fondest love", insists that Ernest must clear up the identity of Jack and Cecily before he can give Ernest his permission to marry Gwendolen. Ernest is reluctant, but finally divulges his double identity. His real first name is John (Jack), and that is the name he uses at his country manor, where his charming eighteen year old ward Cecily calls him Uncle Jack. He explains that since his life in the country is excessively boring, he decided to invent a wicked younger brother called Ernest, who lives in London and is always getting into trouble, frequently needing his older brother's help and advice. This gives him the perfect excuse to leave the country whenever he likes. Satisfied with that, Algernon agrees to get Lady Bracknell out of the way long enough for Ernest to propose to Gwendolen. Ernest does propose, but is disturbed when Gwendolen tells him how much she loves the name of Ernest, and how she could never marry anyone who's name was not Ernest. Lady Bracknell returns just at the moment when Ernest is on his knees. Demanding that Gwendolen leave, she proceeds to interrogate Ernest about his background. Learning that he has no parents, and was in fact found in a hand-bag in the cloak-room of a railway station, she immediately puts a halt to any plans of matrimony, and leaves in disgust. Gwendolen returns to inform Ernest that the whole thing is hopeless, but will try to convince her mother to change her mind. She takes his country address and promises to write. Eavesdropping, Algernon jots down the address on his cuff. Ernest escorts Gwendolen out, and Algernon forms his plan to leave immediately for the country house, posing as Uncle Jack's wicked brother Ernest, and to meet the charming Cecily.

## ACT II

### *Scene: Garden at the Manor House*

Cecily is engaged in her lessons at the manor house with her governess, Miss Prism. The subject of Uncle Jack's brother comes up and she admits that, from what she has heard, she has always been fascinated with him. Miss Prism is shocked. Reverend Chasuble enters and entices Miss Prism to go for a walk. In their absence, the butler announces to Cecily that a Mr. Ernest Worthing has arrived. Realizing that this must be her Uncle Jack's wicked brother, she bids the butler show him in. It is love at first sight. They speak at length, then retire to the house. Miss Prism and Reverend Chasuble return and are engaged in conversation when Jack suddenly appears, earlier than expected, and dressed in mourning clothes (Not wanting Gwendolen to know about his double identity, he had decided to tell everyone in the country that his brother Ernest had died.) He tells Miss Prism and Reverend Chasuble of the death. Then, with Gwendolen's devotion to the name of Ernest ringing in his memory, arranges to be christened that afternoon by Reverend Chasuble. Having just finished this arrangement, and to his utter shock, Cecily enters with Algernon (posing as his brother Ernest) who holds out his hand in greeting. Confusion abounds. Jack realizes he's been duped by Algernon, and to save face, must accept the lie. The two are left alone. Jack begs Algernon to leave. He refuses, and Jack storms out in anger. Cecily returns and, in a long discourse with Algernon (Ernest), discloses that she had already been secretly in love with him. He proposes and she accepts saying that it had always been her wish to marry someone by the name of Ernest. Realizing that he must now change his name, he leaves in search of Reverend Chasuble to arrange a christening. Gwendolen, who has run away from home, now appears at the manor house, and is announced by the butler. Upon meeting Cecily, she is taken back by her beauty and youth and is upset that Ernest had never told her of his ward. Cecily discloses that she has just been proposed to by Mr. Ernest Worthing. Gwendolen retorts that she had just been proposed to by Mr. Ernest Worthing the day before. Upon this dispute, the two men re-enter and are forced to disclose their true names. This leaves neither man with the name of Ernest and causes both women to leave in disgust, as the men are left to argue about who will be christened when and why.

## ACT III

### *Scene: Morning room at the Manor House*

The women disgruntled; the men determined; the two couples engage in extensive soul-searching. When the women learn that both men were willing to

change their names for their sake, amends are made, and embraces are given. Enter Lady Bracknell, who had taken the night train to the country to find out just what was going on. Told that the two couples had now become engaged, she again refuses her consent and attempts to leave with Gwendolen. But upon learning that Cecily is heir to quite a fortune, changes her mind and agrees to the marriage of Algernon and Cecily. However, Jack refuses to allow his ward to marry unless Lady Bracknell agrees to his marriage with Gwendolen. Enter Miss Prism. Upon seeing Miss Prism, Lady Bracknell realizes that she is the same person who had disappeared 29 years earlier, having been in charge of her ailing sister's baby, and had never returned. Pressing further, Lady Bracknell discovers that Miss Prism had, in a moment of distraction at the train station, placed the baby in her handbag, misplaced it at the last minute, and boarded the train with the bassinette, thinking the baby was in it. Jack (Ernest) who has been listening attentively, pressed for a description of the hand-bag. Determining that it was indeed like the one he had kept all those years, he produces it for Miss Prism's inspection. She confirms its identity. Lady Bracknell explains that he was her sister's child and, consequently, Algernon's elder brother. Jack then discovers that he shared the same first name with his father - Ernest John, proving that all along he had indeed been named Ernest. Now, he finally realized the vital Importance of Being Earnest.