

The Story of An Ideal Husband

The play begins in the home of Sir Robert Chiltern and his wife Gertrude, who are entertaining. As the butler introduces guests, the Earl of Caversham searches for his good-for-nothing son, Lord Goring and finds the charming Mabel Chiltern. Lady Markby introduces Mrs. Cheveley, just arrived in London from Vienna, and Lady Chiltern realizes she and Mrs. Cheveley attended school together. Mrs. Cheveley is eager to meet Chiltern, who works in the Foreign Office, and claims politics are her only pleasure, and mentions a mutual friend, Baron Arnheim, recently deceased. When Goring arrives, Mrs. Cheveley, a widow, is pleased to learn he is a bachelor. Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont discuss husbands before going in to supper. Left alone with Chiltern, Mrs. Cheveley mentions the Argentine Canal Company, in which she has invested heavily. Chiltern calls it a swindle. He is planning to report this to the House of Lords the next day, discouraging government investment. Mrs. Cheveley asks Chiltern to withdraw his report; she will pay him with a letter that has come into her possession, a letter Chiltern wrote to Baron Arnheim encouraging him to buy Suez Canal shares three days before the government announced its own purchase. The Baron made a fortune and Chiltern's career was launched. Mrs. Cheveley will make the letter public if Chiltern doesn't support the Argentine scheme, which will allow her to make her own fortune. Distracted, Chiltern agrees, and Mrs. Cheveley leaves. A few minutes later, Goring and Mabel find a diamond brooch, which Goring keeps, asking Mabel not to mention it to anyone. Lady Chiltern confronts her husband about supporting the Argentine scheme, telling him Mrs. Cheveley was sent away from school for being a thief. Chiltern says no one should be entirely judged by their past and his wife disagrees. She asks him if he is telling her the whole truth, rhapsodizes about his upright moral character, and claims if he were to change, she would leave him. Chiltern writes a letter to Mrs. Cheveley withdrawing his support of the Argentine scheme and Lady Chiltern praises his ideals.

The next day Chiltern discusses his predicament with Goring, explaining how Baron Arnheim lured him into revealing the Suez Canal information. Goring encourages Chiltern to fight Mrs. Cheveley, revealing he was briefly engaged to her years ago. When Lady Chiltern returns from a Women's Liberal Association meeting, Goring tells her to come to him any time for help. Goring and Mabel make a date to ride together in the morning, and Mabel complains to Lady Chiltern about Tommy Trafford, who has a bad habit of proposing marriage to her. As Mabel leaves, Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley arrive, asking about a lost brooch. After talking about their husbands and sipping tea, Lady Markby leaves Mrs. Cheveley alone with Lady Chiltern. The ladies argue and Mrs. Cheveley tells Lady Chiltern about her husband's past transgression. Lady Chiltern cannot stand to see her ideal husband revealed as a fraud, and the scene ends in disgrace, shame and tears.

Later that day, after a serious discussion about the triviality of his buttonhole, Goring receives a letter from Lady Chiltern, who says she is coming to him. When the Earl arrives to order Goring to marry at once, Goring takes him into another room, instructing his butler to expect a visit from a lady. A lady arrives and is shown into the drawing-room, where she finds a letter, which she appropriates. As Chiltern arrives, Goring gets rid of his father and learns the lady is in the next room. Goring leads Chiltern into a conversation about how much he loves his wife who Chiltern fears will never forgive him. Hearing a noise in the next room, Chiltern enters it to discover – Mrs. Cheveley. Goring tries to buy back Chiltern's letter; her price is that he marry her. Goring declines. Mrs. Cheveley mentions her lost brooch and Goring reveals he found it, which he places on her wrist as a bracelet, accusing her of stealing it from his cousin. Mrs. Cheveley cannot remove the bracelet, not knowing the secret of the clasp, and fears arrest. Goring offers to forget the matter if Mrs. Cheveley will give him Chiltern's letter. Desperate, she complies and Goring burns the letter. A triumphant Mrs. Cheveley then reveals she has the letter Lady Chiltern sent to Goring, which reads like a love letter.



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Goring goes to see the Chilterns, but finds his father instead, and promises to become engaged before lunch. The Earl praises Chiltern's speech denouncing the Argentine Canal scheme. Mabel ignores Goring, saying she will never speak to him again since he failed to meet as arranged. Goring helps Lady Chiltern deal with the stolen "love" letter and Chiltern's desire to retire from public life because of his past, then asks his friend Chiltern for a favor, which is refused on the grounds that Goring's morals are lax since he hid Mrs. Cheveley in his drawing-room. Luncheon is served as Goring becomes engaged to a woman who avows that an ideal husband would be a terrible thing to have.