It would have been terrible if any cloud had come across a friendship like ours—would it not? Of course you are quite, quite sure that it is not Mr Ernest Worthing who is your guardian?

CECILY Quite sure. [*A pause*] In fact I am going to be his.

GWENDOLEN [*inquiringly*] I beg your pardon?

CECILY [*rather shyly and confidingly*] Dearest Gwendolen, there is no reason why I should make any secret of it to you. Our little county newspaper is sure to chronicle the fact next week. Mr Ernest Worthing and I are engaged to be married.

GWENDOLEN [*quite politely, rising*] My darling Cecily, I think there must be some slight error. Mr Ernest Worthing is engaged to me. The announcement will appear in the "Morning Post" on Saturday at the latest.

CECILY [*very politely, rising*] I am afraid you must be under some misconception. Ernest proposed to me exactly ten minutes ago. [*Shows diary*]

GWENDOLEN [*examines diary through her lorgnette carefully*] It is certainly very curious. For he asked me to be his wife yesterday afternoon at five-thirty. If you would care to verify the incident, pray do so. [*Produces diary of her own*] I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in a train. I am so sorry, dear Cecily, if it is any disappointment to you, but I am afraid I have the prior claim.

CECILY It would distress me more than I can tell you, dear Gwendolen, if it caused you any mental or physical anguish, but I feel bound to point out that since Ernest proposed to you he has clearly changed his mind.

GWENDOLEN [*meditatively*] If the poor fellow has been entrapped into any foolish promise, I will consider it my duty to rescue him at once, and with a firm hand.

CECILY [*thoughtfully and sadly*] Whatever unfortunate entanglement my dear boy may have got into, I will never reproach him with it, after we are married.

GWENDOLEN Do you allude to me, Miss Cardew, as an entanglement? You are presumptuous. On an occasion of this kind it becomes more than a moral duty to speak one's mind. It becomes a pleasure.

CECILY Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Ernest into an engagement? How dare you? This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade.

GWENDOLEN [*satirically*] I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different.

[CECILY *is about to make a retort when* MERRIMAN *enters, followed by a* FOOTMAN *with tea tray, etc. The presence of the* SERVANTS *exercises a restraining influence under which both girls chafe*]

MERRIMAN Shall I lay tea here as usual, miss?

CECILY [*sternly, in a clear voice*] Yes. As usual.

[MERRIMAN *lays tea on table close to* CECILY. *A long pause,* CECILY *and* GWENDOLEN *glare at each other*]

GWENDOLEN [*looking round*] Quite a charming room this is of yours, Miss Cardew.

CECILY So glad you like it, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN I had no idea there was anything approaching