



C. Edward Wheaton

Adapted from the novel by Robert Hichens (1894)

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Green Carnations

SATIRE. This play is adapted from the scandalous novel by Robert Hichens (1894), which satirizes fashionable London society and figures associated with the Aesthetic Movement, most notably Oscar Wilde. Mrs. Windsor invites a group of fellow Londoners to spend a week relaxing at her countryside estate. Among them are Esmé Amarith and Lord Reginald Hastings, a couple of witty dandies who abhor bourgeois dictums and Victorian ideals of morality. Mrs. Windsor hopes to play matchmaker for her cousin Lady Locke, by introducing her to the clever, whimsical Lord Reginald Hastings. At first, Lady Locke finds Esmé and Lord Hastings' ideas original, amusing, and a study in contradictions. But as she becomes better acquainted with them, Lady Locke discovers the dandies to be as artificial as the dyed green carnations they wear in their lapels.

Performance Time: Approximately 75 minutes.

About the Play

After it was anonymously published in 1894, *The Green Carnation* was an immediate success and was recognized as an accurate portrait of the more extravagant aspects of the Aesthetic Movement in England. The character of Esmé Amarith is based on Oscar Wilde, and Lord Reginald Hastings is based on Wilde's companion Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas, both of whom were acquaintances of the author. The book was withdrawn from circulation in 1895 when the Wilde vs. Queensbury case opened at the Old Bailey in April and was one of the works used by the prosecution to convict Wilde for gross indecency. Wilde was sentenced to two years of hard labor.

Characters

(3 M, 3 F)

ESMÉ AMARINTH: 42, ample, suave in appearance; elaborate, condescending, and intentionally absurd in manner (character is based on Oscar Wilde); has thick hair parted in the middle, large shoulders, and softly gesturing hands; wears a loosely fitting light suit with a high turned-down round collar, a loosely knotted tie, a large moonstone tie clip, a straw hat, suede gloves, and brown boots; a large green carnation is prominently displayed in the buttonhole of his suit.

MRS. ELISABETH WINDSOR: Early 50s, pretty, youthful-looking woman with young cheeks and eyes full of weary sparkle.

LADY EMILY LOCKE: 28, Mrs. Windsor's cousin; attractive widow; this is her first trip back to England.

LORD REGINALD HASTINGS: 25 but looks 20, blonde, good-looking, whimsical, capricious, exceedingly clever and amusing; wears a loosely-fitting light suit with a high turned-down round collar, a loosely knotted tie, a straw hat, suede gloves, and brown boots; a large green carnation is prominently displayed in the buttonhole of his suit.

MADAME VALTESI: 60, rich theatre owner; thin, has a croaky-sounding voice that makes her sound 20 years older; somewhat blind, which causes her to constantly peer through her tortoise-shell glasses; wears a shady straw hat trimmed with pink roses, a white veil sweeps loosely round her face; she carries an attenuated mottled cane with an elaborate silver top and a black fan hangs from her waist by a thin silver chain.

HENDERSON: Mrs. Windsor's butler. Note: If more stage time is desired for this character, he can appear on stage flitting about serving the drinks, etc.

Setting

June 1894, Surrey, England. Mrs. Windsor's drawing room at her residence. The action of the play covers a time span of six days. The drawing room is spacious with décor appropriate for the period. There is an entrance CS. There is a fireplace with a bust on the mantel, a sofa, chairs, a writing table, and a table with four chairs. A serving cart sits prominently in the room from which fruit, buns, tea, etc. is served. French doors open into a garden.

Synopsis of Scenes

Scene 1: Mrs. Windsor's drawing room, Wednesday afternoon.

Scene 2: Wednesday evening after dinner.

Scene 3: Thursday morning.

Scene 4: Thursday afternoon.

Scene 5: Later that day.

Scene 6: Friday afternoon.

Scene 7: Friday night after choir practice.

Scene 8: Saturday morning.

Scene 9: Saturday afternoon.

Scene 10: Sunday morning before church.

Scene 11: Sunday afternoon.

Scene 12: Sunday, twilight.

Scene 13: Monday morning.

Props

Tea set	Letters
Teacakes and buns	White serge dress with innocent pink flowers, for Madame Valtesi
Writing table	Newspaper
Telegram	Knitting
White veil	Hand fan, for Lord Reggie
Bowl of strawberries	Gardening gloves, for Mrs. Windsor
Crystal decanter	Fireplace with mantel
Cocktail glasses	Bust for mantel
Serving cart	Crystal dish containing marmalade
Coffee cups	Sofa
Table	Armchair
4 Chairs	
2 Cigarette holders, for Esmé and Madame Valtesi	

Sound Effects

Faint music
Church bells

*"He calls it
the arsenic flower
of an exquisite life."*

—Mrs. Windsor

Scene 1

(AT RISE: Wednesday, June 1894, Surrey, England. Mrs. Windsor's drawing room. It is a comfortable afternoon. The French doors are open, and there is a slight breeze. Mrs. Windsor and Lady Locke are sitting at the table drinking tea. There is a teapot and small cakes on a tray sitting on the table.)

MRS. WINDSOR: It has been two years, and it is high time you put aside your widow's weeds and get back in circulation.

LADY LOCKE: I did enjoy the opera last night.

MRS. WINDSOR: Faust is always nice, a little threadbare though. Old operas are like old bonnets, I always think they ought to be remodeled or re-trimmed from time to time.

LADY LOCKE: I think it is comforting to know that some things remain the same. After living in the Straights Settlements for ten years, the world seems odd and altered.

MRS. WINDSOR: Odd? In what way?

LADY LOCKE: (*Sighs.*) London is not the same London it was ten years ago.

MRS. WINDSOR: The same London? I should hope not. Why, "Aubrey Beardsley" had not been invented then, and "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray" had never been written, and women hardly smoked, and—

LADY LOCKE: And men did not wear green carnations.

(*Mrs. Windsor is about to take a sip of tea and gives Lady Locke a look. Mrs. Windsor puts her cup down.*)

MRS. WINDSOR: (*Lifting her eyebrows.*) What have you against men wearing green carnations?

LADY LOCKE: I have nothing against it in particular. It just seems as strange as the men who were wearing them.

MRS. WINDSOR: Emily, what do you mean?

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LADY LOCKE: Is it a badge of some club or some society? I saw about a dozen in the opera house, and all the men who wore them looked the same. They had the same walk, or rather waggle, the same coyly conscious expression, the same wavy motion of their head. One, in particular, seemed to be the leader. They all revolved around him like satellites around the sun.

MRS. WINDSOR: Oh, that was Esmé Amarith.

LADY LOCKE: Was it he who started the fashion of the green carnation?

MRS. WINDSOR: Yes. He calls it the arsenic flower of an exquisite life. He wore it in the first instance because it blended so well with the color of absinthe. They wear it to be original.

LADY LOCKE: And can they only be original in a buttonhole way?

MRS. WINDSOR: You don't understand. They like to draw attention to themselves.

LADY LOCKE: By their dress? I thought that was the prerogative of women.

MRS. WINDSOR: Really, Emily, you are so colonial! It is quite common nowadays. Mr. Amarith dares to do anything. He is not afraid of society, or what the clergy and such unfashionable and limited people say. For instance, if he wanted to commit what copybooks call a sin, he would commit it, even if society stands aghast at him. That is what I call having real moral courage.

LADY LOCKE: (*Unconvinced.*) I suppose. (*Changing the subject.*) Tell me about this rustic week you have planned.

MRS. WINDSOR: I call it "The Surrey Week." I always spend a week here in the country in June. A week of perfect rusticity. It is like a dear little desert in the oasis. We do nothing, and we eat a great deal. Nobody calls upon us and we call upon no one. We go to church on Sunday once, just for the novelty of it. Last year's Surrey week wasn't quite up to expectations. Professor Smith had a fit. It was so

inconsiderate of him, and in the country, too, where it is so difficult to get a doctor. We had to make do with a veterinary surgeon.

LADY LOCKE: Who else is to be here?

MRS. WINDSOR: I am sure you will just love the assortment of people I have invited. The cornerstones of my week are Esmé Amaranth and Lord Reggie.

LADY LOCKE: Lord Reggie?

MRS. WINDSOR: Lord Reginald Hastings. I particularly wanted you to meet him. He is poetic, imaginative, and perfectly fearless. I am sure you and he will get along famously.

(Henderson enters.)

HENDERSON: Excuse me, madam.

MRS. WINDSOR: What is it, Henderson?

HENDERSON: This telegram just arrived for you.

(Henderson hands the telegram to Mrs. Windsor.)

MRS. WINDSOR: Thank you, Henderson. *(Henderson exits. Mrs. Windsor opens the telegram.)* Oh dear!

LADY LOCKE: What is it, Elizabeth?

MRS. WINDSOR: *(Somewhat annoyed.)* This is a telegram from Mr. Tyler. He has caught the influenza and cannot come. *(Plaintively.)* I do hope my week is not going all wrong again this year! I cannot fill his place now. Everybody is so full of engagements at this time of year. We shall be one man short.

LADY LOCKE: It will be all right, Betty. I like being a little neglected sometimes. It is restful.

MRS. WINDSOR: Do you think so? Well, perhaps you are right. Men are not always soothing. But I am sure you will love Madame Valtesi. She is so rustic in herself. She is one of the most entertaining people in London.

LADY LOCKE: I have been so out of touch. Who is she?

MRS. WINDSOR: Nobody knows who she is. I have heard that she is a Russian spy and that her husband was a courier, or a chef, or perhaps both. She has some marvelous diamond earrings that were given to her by a grand duke, and she has lots of money. She runs a theatre because she likes a certain actor. Madame Valtesi has a great deal of influence.

LADY LOCKE: In what department of life?

MRS. WINDSOR: Oh, in every department I believe.

LADY LOCKE: What about Mr. Amarinth? What is he like?

MRS. WINDSOR: He is so witty. He gives one thoughts too, and that saves me such a lot of trouble. People who keep looking about in their own minds for thoughts are always so stupid. Mr. Amarinth gives you enough thoughts in an hour to last you for a couple of days.

LADY LOCKE: I doubt if they are worth very much.

MRS. WINDSOR: He supplies half of London, I believe. There is always someone of that kind going about. And as to his epigrams, they are in everyone's mouth.

LADY LOCKE: That must make them rather monotonous.

(Voices are heard in the outer room.)

MRS. WINDSOR: There they are! The train has been punctual for once in its life. How shocked the directors would be if they knew it, but, of course, it will be kept from them. *(Madame Valtesi, Lord Reggie, and Esmé Amarinth enter. Madame Valtesi is dressed in a shady straw hat trimmed with pink roses. She peers through tortoise shell glasses and a white vale sweeps loosely round her face. She carries an attenuated mottled cane with an elaborate silver top. A black fan hangs from her waist by a thin silver chain. Lord Reginald Hastings and Esmé Amarinth are dressed very much alike. They wear loosely fitting, very light suits with high turned-down collars. The collars are round, which suggest babyhood and innocence. They wear loosely*

knotted ties, straw hats, suede gloves, and brown boots. A large, green carnation is prominently displayed in the buttonhole of their suits. They look cool and very much at ease.) Ah! Madame Valtesi, so glad to see you! This is my cousin Lady Locke. How do you do, Lord Reggie? How do, Mr. Amarith? So you all came together! This is such a mercy, as I have only one carriage down here. I told you we should have to rough it, didn't I? That is part of the attraction of the week. Simplicity in all things, you know, especially in carriages. Mr. Tyler can't come. Isn't it shocking? Influenza. London is so full of microbes. Do microbes go to parties, Mr. Amarith? Mr. Tyler lives entirely at parties. He must have caught it in society. Won't you be seated? Along with our tea, we are going to have country strawberries and penny buns made in the village, and quite hot! So rustic and wholesome. After all, it is nice to eat something wholesome just once in a while, isn't it?

MADAME VALTESI: *(In her croaky voice.)* Wholesome things always disagree with me unless I eat them at the wrong time. Now, a hot bun before breakfast in the morning, or in bed at night, might suit me admirably, but if I ate one now, I should feel miserable. Your strawberries look most original, quite the real thing. Do not be angry with me for discarding the buns. If I ate one, I should really infallibly lose my temper.

(Esmé takes a bun delicately between his fingers.)

ESMÉ: How curious. My temper and my heart are the only two things I never lose! Everything vanishes. I think the art of losing things is a very subtle art. So few people can lose anything really beautifully. Anybody can find a thing. That is so simple. A crossing sweeper can discover a sixpence lying in the road. It is the crossing sweeper who loses a sixpence who shows real originality.

MADAME VALTESI: (*Sipping her tea with an air of stony gravity.*) I wish I could find a few sixpences. Times are so very bad. Do you know, Mr. Amarinth, I am almost afraid I shall have to put down my carriage or your brother. I cannot keep them both up and pay my dressmaker's bill, too. I told him so yesterday. He was very much cut up.

ESMÉ: Poor Teddy! Have his conversational powers gone off?

MADAME VALTESI: No, he still talks rather well.

ESMÉ: I never see him. The world is so very large, isn't it?

MADAME VALTESI: (*Turns to Lady Locke.*) You know I always give him five shillings an hour—in generous moments, ten—to take me about and talk to me. He is a superb raconteur. I shall miss him very much.

MRS. WINDSOR: The profession of conversationalist is so delightful. I wonder why more people don't follow it. You are too generous, Esmé; you took it up out of pure love of the thing.

LORD REGGIE: (*Dreamily, and gazing toward Lady Locke.*) The true artist will always be an amateur, just as the true martyr will always live for his faith. Esmé is like the thrush. He always tells us his epigrams twice over, least we should fail to capture their first fine careful rapture. Repetition is one of the secrets of success nowadays. Esmé is the first conversationalist in England to discover that fact, and so he won his present unrivaled position and has known how to keep it.

MADAME VALTESI: Conversational powers are sometimes very distressing. Last winter I was having my house in Cromwell Road painted and papered. I went to live at a hotel, but the men were so slow that at last I took possession again hoping to turn them out. It was a most fatal step. They liked me so much, and found me so entertaining, that they have never gone away. They are still painting, and I suppose always will be. Whenever I say anything witty they scream with laughter, and I believe that my name has

become a household word in Whitechapel or Wapping or wherever the British workman lives. What am I to do?

ESMÉ: Read them Jerome K. Jerome's last comic novel, and they will go home at once. I find his works most useful. I always begin to quote from them when I wish to rid myself of a bore.

LADY LOCKE: But surely he is a very entertaining writer.

ESMÉ: My dear lady, if you read him, you will find that he is the reverse of Beerbohm Tree as Hamlet. Tree's Hamlet was funny without being vulgar. Jerome's writings are vulgar without being funny.

MRS. WINDSOR: I think he means well. *(Takes some strawberries.)*

ESMÉ: I am afraid so. People who mean well always do badly. They are like the ladies who wear clothes that don't fit them in order to show their piety. Good intentions are invariably ungrammatical.

LORD REGGIE: *(Fervently.)* Good intentions have been the ruin of the world. The only people who have achieved anything have been those who have had no intentions at all. I have no intentions.

LADY LOCKE: *(Laughing.)* You will at least never be involved in an action for breach of promise if you always state that fact.

ESMÉ: To be intentional is to be middle class. The great picture of this year's exhibition is intentional. The great picture of the year always is. It presents us with a pretty milkmaid milking her cow. A gallant, riding by, has dismounted and is kissing the milkmaid.

(There is a moment of silence as Madame Valtesì just stares through her glasses at Esmé.)

MADAME VALTESÌ: *(With an air of indescribable virtue.)*
What a bad example for the cow!

MRS. WINDSOR: Ah! I never thought of that! One seldom does think how easily proper cows and people are put to confusion. That is why they so often flee from the plays of London to those of Paris. They can be confused there without their relatives knowing about it.

LORD REGGIE: Why are old men who have seen the world always so proper? The other day I was staying with an old general at Malta and he took Catulle Mendez charming and delicate romance, "Mephisbopela," out of my bedroom and burnt it. Yet his language on parade was really quite artistically blasphemous. I think it is fatal to one's personality to see the world at all.

LADY LOCKE: Then I must be quite hopeless, for I have spent ten years in the Straits Settlements.

MADAME VALTESI: Dear me! Where is that? It sounds like one of the places where that geographical little Henry Jones sends the heroes of his plays to expiate their virtues.

ESMÉ: It is quite a mistake to imagine that the author or the artist should stuff his beautiful, empty mind with knowledge, with impressions, with facts of any kind. I have written a great novel upon Iceland, full of color, of passion, of the most subtle impurity, yet I could not point you out Iceland on the map. I do not know where it is, or what it is. I only know it is a beautiful name, and that I have written a beautiful thing about it. This is the age of identification, in which our god is the Encyclopedia Britannica, and our devil the fairy tale that teaches nothing. We go to the British Museum for culture and to Archdeacon Farrar for guidance. And then we think we are advancing. We might as well return to the myths of Darwin or to the delicious fantasies of John Stuart Mill. They, at least, were entertaining, and no one attempted to believe them.

LORD REGGIE: (*Rather languidly.*) We always return to our first hates.

MRS. WINDSOR: (*Rather pleadingly.*) Do have some more tea, Madame Valtesi.

MADAME VALTESI: No thank you. I never take more than one cup on principle. The principle being that the first cup is the best, like the last word. I want to take a stroll round the rose garden, if I may. Mr. Amarinth, will you come with me?

ESMÉ: I would be delighted.

(Esmé and Madame Valtesì begin to stroll out together.)

MADAME VALTESI: I always hate to see people drinking when I have finished; it makes me feel like a barmaid.

(They exit.)

MRS. WINDSOR: *(To Lord Reggie and Lady Locke.)* If you will excuse me, I will go and see about this evening's menu. *(Mrs. Windsor exits.)*

LORD REGGIE: These strawberries are very good. I should finish them, only I hate finishing anything. There is something so commonplace about it. Don't you think so? Commonplace people are always finishing off things and getting through things. I should like to have special hours for doing nothing. That would be much more original.

LADY LOCKE: You are very fond of originality then?

LORD REGGIE: Are you not?

LADY LOCKE: I don't quite know. Perhaps I have not met many original people in my life. You see, I have been out of England a great deal and out of cities. My late husband was in the army, and I have lived almost entirely among soldiers.

LORD REGGIE: Soldiers are never original. They think it unmanly. I once spent a week with the commander of one of our armies of occupation, and I never heard the same remarks so often in my life. They thought everything was an affectation. Once when I mentioned Mathew Arnold at mess they thought it was an affectation.

LADY LOCKE: Oh, surely not.

LORD REGGIE: They did, really. I explained that he had been a school inspector. I thought that might reassure them.

LADY LOCKE: And did it?

LORD REGGIE: Not in the least. They evidently did not believe me. They know nothing about anything or anybody. That would have been rather charming, only they thought they knew everything.

LADY LOCKE: I think you must have been unfortunate in your experience.

LORD REGGIE: Perhaps I was. I know I tried to be manly. I talked about Wilson Barrett. What more could I do? To talk about Wilson Barrett is generally supposed to show your appreciation of the heroic age, of course nobody thinks about him now. But I was quite a failure. I went to five dinner parties, I remember, during that week, and we all conversed about machineguns at each of them. I felt as if the whole of life was a machine gun, and men and women were all quick-firing parties.

LADY LOCKE: I suppose we are most of us a little inclined to "talk shop," as it is called.

LORD REGGIE: But we ought to talk general shop, the shop in which everything is sold from Bibles to cheap cheese. Only we might leave out the Bibles.

LADY LOCKE: You have finished the strawberries after all.

LORD REGGIE: (*Bursts out into an almost boyish laugh.*) So I have! We none of us live up to our ideals, I suppose. But really I have none. I agree with Esmé that nothing is so limited as to have an ideal.

(*Lady Locke rises.*)

LADY LOCKE: Shall we walk round the garden if you have really finished your tea? What a delicious afternoon it is, so quiet, so detached from the rest of the year. I am glad to be away from London. It is only habit that makes London endurable.

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LORD REGGIE: But surely habit makes nothing enduring.
Otherwise we should like politics and get accustomed to the
presence of solicitors in society.

LADY LOCKE: (*Laughing.*) I do like politics. (*As they exit.*)
How beautiful the roses are. (*Blackout.*)

Scene 2

(AT RISE: Wednesday evening after dinner. Everyone is sitting around sipping after-dinner drinks. A decanter is visible on the serving cart. Esmé is engaged in what he does best – talking. There is a slight breeze that comes through the open French doors.)

ESMÉ: There is nothing that should be taken seriously, except, possibly, an income, or the music halls. Yet, I have been taken seriously throughout my career. My lectures have been greatly discussed. My plays have been solemnly criticized by the amusing failures in literature who love to call themselves “the gentlemen of the press.” My poems have been boycotted by prudent publishers; and my novel, “The Soul of Bertie Brown,” has ruined the reputation of a magazine that had been successful in shocking the impious for centuries. Bishops have declared that I am a monster, and monsters have declared that I ought to be a bishop. And all this has befallen me because I am an artist in absurdity, a human being who dares to be ridiculous. I was born to be absurd. I have lived to be absurd. I shall die to be absurd; for nothing can be more absurd than the death of a man who has lived to sin, instead of having lived to suffer.

LADY LOCKE: Have you no virtues then?

ESMÉ: When I was a boy at school I had a virtue, and I was terribly ashamed of it.

MADAME VALTESI: *You* had a virtue? How extraordinary.

ESMÉ: For some unexplainable reason, I was fond of going to church.

MADAME VALTESI: Heavens! What was the attraction?

ESMÉ: I think it was the music, or the painted windows, or the presenter. He had a face like the face of seven devils, so exquisitely chiseled. He looked as if he were always seeking rest and finding none. He was really a clergyman of some importance, the only one I ever met. I was fond of going to

church, and I was in agony lest some strange expression should come into my face and tell my most horrible secret. I dreaded above all lest my mother should ever get to know it. It would have made her so happy.

MADAME VALTEST: Did she?

ESMÉ: No, never. The presenter died, and my virtue died with him.

LADY LOCKE: Why should you be ashamed of having a virtue?

ESMÉ: A virtue is very hard to live down. A virtue is like a city set upon a hill—it cannot be hid. We can conceal our vices if we care to, for a time at least. We can take our beautiful purple sin like a candle and hide it under a bushel. But virtue will out. People say Reggie and I are wicked. I do not feel wicked. (*Looks over at Lord Reggie.*) Reggie, do you feel wicked?

LORD REGGIE: Not in the least.

ESMÉ: (*Sighs.*) I wish I could, but it is only good people who can manage that. The saint always feels like a sinner and the poor sinner, try as he will, can only feel like a saint. (*Sighs.*) The stars are so unjust.

MADAME VALTESI: Life is never fair.

ESMÉ: Perhaps it is just as well for most of us that it's not.

LORD REGGIE: Bad people are, from the point of view of art, fascinating studies. They represent color, variety, and strangeness. Good people, on the other hand, exasperate one's reason; bad people stir one's imagination. To be wicked is not as easy as it appears.

[END OF FREEVIEW]