

“I wouldn’t have let you,” said Alfie equably. “That would have been very unkind to the cast. When you and I were in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, how would you have felt if someone had walked out?”

“I would have assumed they had been called away to a family emergency,” said Oscar. “You and I were excellent. And we weren’t on Segways.”

Alfie had first met Oscar in that amateur production. It was an unlikely friendship: Alfie, the self-made man, brought up by a single mother in London’s East End; Oscar de Linnet, languidly aristocratic, who had only ever lived a life of privilege. Oscar had no hesitation in indulging his eccentricities, and only ever had phone conversations on a landline to avoid the problem of a mobile signal breaking up.

Alfie also suspected that this 21st-century Oscar thought of himself as a reincarnation of

Oscar Wilde. Perhaps a Wildean quote might be a way of getting through to him right now.

“When a man is old enough to do wrong, he should be old enough to do right also,” Alfie remarked.

Oscar quirked an eyebrow. “I sense an implied rebuke, my friend.”

“Perhaps you could sip your wine instead of swigging it?”

Oscar made a show of raising his glass to the light in order to study the colour, before swirling the liquid round and round.

“And now to assess the bouquet,” he said, taking a deep sniff. He paused. “Ah.” He took a delicate mouthful of wine, and carefully replaced the glass on the table. “I say, Alfie, that really is rather special.”

Oscar signalled to the wine waiter who came over with obvious reluctance.

“Another bottle, sir?”

“Absolutely not,” said Oscar. “This is a wine to be savoured, not downed like lemonade. I wanted to apologise. I mistreated it. It’s no excuse, but I was recovering from a most traumatic experience.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, sir. I hope all is now well.”

“It’s not the sort of behaviour you expect from the queen of Egypt - ”

“Everything’s fine,” Alfie broke in. “We’re very happy with the wine. Thank you.”

The wine waiter left, looking confused, as a waitress arrived with the Wagyu beef. She was young, like many of her Bunburry counterparts, but unlike them had no visible piercings or tattoos. She was perfectly groomed, wearing her uniform as though it was haute couture, and she presented the plates as though they were the latest treasures in the British Museum.

“The finest steak in the world,” said Oscar enthusiastically. “Don’t you agree?”

Alfie, pretending to concentrate on chewing, inclined his head in a way he hoped signalled agreement. But the truth was he didn't agree. He had travelled the world – had eaten Wagyu beef in Japan – and the finest steak in the world was definitely served in the Drunken Horse Inn, Bunburry.

He glanced round at his plush surroundings, velvet drapes, monogrammed plates, original art on the walls, a battalion of waiting staff. It couldn't be more different from the Horse, a traditional English pub, some of whose wooden chairs were distinctly rickety. But the Horse's lovingly prepared, locally sourced food was better than the meal in front of him, which cost at least five times more than anything in Bunburry.

But the latest phone call from the village had revealed that the Horse had changed since his return to London three months ago.

“You remember Edith?” he asked.

Oscar laid down his knife and fork. “Ah, the redoubtable Edith, the first person to greet me when I came to visit. My dear fellow, I could win Mastermind with the inhabitants of Bunburry as my specialist subject. Edith, mother of William, who is landlord of the Drunken Horse, and mother-in-law of the tempestuous Carlotta. Engaged in a perpetual battle to serve traditional English fare to the Horse’s patrons in preference to Carlotta’s fine Italian cooking, which Edith describes as ‘foreign muck’.”

He picked up his fork again and made inroads on the fondant potatoes. “I overheard huge praise for Carlotta’s braised rabbit pappardelle – though never in Edith’s hearing, obviously. I’m sorry I didn’t have the chance to try it.”

“And now you’ve missed your chance completely,” said Alfie. “Carlotta’s gone vegan.”