

J. M. Barrie

Quality Street

 Publio

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A Comedy

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Publio Kiadó

2013

Minden jog fenntartva!

ACT I THE BLUE AND WHITE ROOM

The scene is the blue and white room in the house of the Misses Susan and Phoebe Throssel in Quality Street; and in this little country town there is a satisfaction about living in Quality Street which even religion cannot give. Through the bowed window at the back we have a glimpse of the street. It is pleasantly broad and grass-grown, and is linked to the outer world by one demure shop, whose door rings a bell every time it opens and shuts. Thus by merely peeping, every one in Quality Street can know at once who has been buying a Whimsy cake, and usually why. This bell is the most familiar sound of Quality Street. Now and again ladies pass in their pattens, a maid perhaps protecting them with an umbrella, for flakes of snow are falling discreetly. Gentlemen in the street are an event; but, see, just as we raise the curtain, there goes the recruiting sergeant to remind us that we are in the period of the Napoleonic wars. If he were to look in at the window of the blue and white room all the ladies there assembled would draw themselves up; they know him for a rude fellow who smiles at the approach of maiden ladies and continues to smile after they have passed. However, he lowers his head to-day so that they shall not see him, his present design being converse with the Misses Throssel's maid.

The room is one seldom profaned by the foot of man, and everything in it is white or blue. Miss Phoebe is not present, but here are Miss Susan, Miss Willoughby and her sister Miss Fanny, and Miss Henrietta Turnbull. Miss Susan and Miss Willoughby, alas, already wear caps; but all the four are dear ladies, so refined that we ought not to be discussing them without a more formal introduction. There seems no sufficient reason why we should choose Miss Phoebe as our heroine rather than any one of the others, except, perhaps, that we like her name best. But we gave her the name, so we must support our choice and say that she is slightly the nicest, unless, indeed, Miss Susan is nicer.

Miss Fanny is reading aloud from a library book while the others sew or knit. They are making garments for our brave soldiers now far away fighting the Corsican Ogre.

MISS FANNY. '... And so the day passed and evening came, black, mysterious, and ghost-like. The wind moaned unceasingly like a shivering spirit, and the vegetation rustled uneasily as if something weird and terrifying were about to happen. Suddenly out of the darkness there emerged a *Man*.

(She says the last word tremulously but without looking up. The listeners knit more quickly.)

The unhappy Camilla was standing lost in reverie when, without pausing to advertise her of his intentions, he took both her hands in his.

(By this time the knitting has stopped, and all are listening as if mesmerised.)

Slowly he gathered her in his arms—

(MISS SUSAN gives an excited little cry.)

MISS FANNY. And rained hot, burning—'

MISS WILLOUGHBY. Sister!

MISS FANNY (*greedily*). 'On eyes, mouth—'

MISS WILLOUGHBY (*sternly*). Stop. Miss Susan, I am indeed surprised you should bring such an amazing, indelicate tale from the library.

MISS SUSAN (*with a slight shudder*). I deeply regret, Miss Willoughby— (*Sees MISS FANNY reading quickly to herself.*) Oh, Fanny! If you please, my dear.

(*Takes the book gently from her.*)

MISS WILLOUGHBY. I thank you.

(*She knits severely.*)

MISS FANNY (*a little rebel*). Miss Susan is looking at the end.

(*MISS SUSAN closes the book guiltily.*)

MISS SUSAN (*apologetically*). Forgive my partiality for romance, Mary. I fear 'tis the mark of an old maid.

MISS WILLOUGHBY. Susan, that word!

MISS SUSAN (*sweetly*). 'Tis what I am. And you also, Mary, my dear.

MISS FANNY (*defending her sister*). Miss Susan, I protest.

MISS WILLOUGHBY (*sternly truthful*). Nay, sister, 'tis true. We are known everywhere now, Susan, you and I, as the old maids of Quality Street. (*General discomfort.*)

MISS SUSAN. I am happy Phoebe will not be an old maid.

MISS HENRIETTA (*wistfully*). Do you refer, Miss Susan, to V. B.?

(*MISS SUSAN smiles happily to herself.*)

MISS SUSAN. Miss Phoebe of the ringlets as he has called her.

MISS FANNY. Other females besides Miss Phoebe have ringlets.

MISS SUSAN. But you and Miss Henrietta have to employ papers, my dear. (*Proudly*) Phoebe, never.

MISS WILLOUGHBY (*in defence of FANNY*). I do not approve of Miss Phoebe at all.

MISS SUSAN (*flushing*). Mary, had Phoebe been dying you would have called her an angel, but that is ever the way. 'Tis all jealousy to the bride and good wishes to the corpse. (*Her guests rise, hurt.*) My love, I beg your pardon.

MISS WILLOUGHBY. With your permission, Miss Susan, I shall put on my pattens.

(*MISS SUSAN gives permission almost haughtily, and the ladies retire to the bedroom, MISS FANNY remaining behind a moment to ask a question.*)

MISS FANNY. A bride? Miss Susan, do you mean that V. B. has declared?

MISS SUSAN. Fanny, I expect it hourly.

(*MISS SUSAN, left alone, is agitated by the terrible scene with MISS WILLOUGHBY.*)

(*Enter PHOEBE in her bonnet, and we see at once that she really is the nicest. She is so flushed with delightful news that she almost forgets to take off her pattens before crossing the blue and white room.*)

MISS SUSAN. You seem strangely excited, Phoebe.

PHOEBE. Susan, I have met a certain individual.

MISS SUSAN. V. B.? (PHOEBE *nods several times, and her gleaming eyes tell MISS SUSAN as much as if they were a romance from the library.*) My dear, you are trembling.

PHOEBE (*bravely*). No—oh no.

MISS SUSAN. You put your hand to your heart.

PHOEBE. Did I?

MISS SUSAN (*in a whisper*). My love, has he offered?

PHOEBE (*appalled*). Oh, Susan.

(*Enter MISS WILLOUGHBY, partly cloaked.*)

MISS WILLOUGHBY. How do you do, Miss Phoebe. (*Portentously*) Susan, I have no wish to alarm you, but I am of opinion that there is a man in the house. I suddenly felt it while putting on my pattens.

MISS SUSAN. You mean—a follower—in the kitchen? (*She courageously rings the bell, but her voice falters.*) I am just a little afraid of Patty.

(*Enter PATTY, a buxom young woman, who loves her mistresses and smiles at them, and knows how to terrorise them.*)

Patty, I hope we may not hurt your feelings, but—

PATTY (*sternly*). Are you implicating, ma'am, that I have a follower?

MISS SUSAN. Oh no, Patty.

PATTY. So be it.

MISS SUSAN (*ashamed*). Patty, come back, (*Humbly*) I told a falsehood just now; I am ashamed of myself.

PATTY (*severely*). As well you might be, ma'am.

PHOEBE (*so roused that she would look heroic if she did not spoil the effect by wagging her finger at PATTY*). How dare you. There is a man in the kitchen. To the door with him.

PATTY. A glorious soldier to be so treated!

PHOEBE. The door.

PATTY. And if he refuses?

(*They looked perplexed.*)

MISS SUSAN. Oh dear!

PHOEBE. If he refuses send him here to me.

(*Exit PATTY.*)

MISS SUSAN. Lion-hearted Phoebe.

MISS WILLOUGHBY. A soldier? (*Nervously*) I wish it may not be that impertinent recruiting sergeant. I passed him in the street to-day. He closed one of his eyes at me and then quickly opened it. I knew what he meant.

PHOEBE. He does not come.

MISS SUSAN. I think I hear their voices in dispute.

(*She is listening through the floor. They all stoop or go on their knees to listen, and when they are in this position the RECRUITING SERGEANT enters unobserved. He chuckles aloud. In a moment PHOEBE is alone with him.*)

SERGEANT (*with an Irish accent*). Your servant, ma'am.

PHOEBE (*advancing sternly on him*). Sir— (*She is perplexed, as he seems undismayed.*) Sergeant— (*She sees mud from his boots on the carpet.*) Oh! oh! (*Brushes carpet.*) Sergeant, I am wishful to scold you, but would you be so obliging as to stand on this paper while I do it?

SERGEANT. With all the pleasure in life, ma'am.

PHOEBE (*forgetting to be angry*). Sergeant, have you killed people?

SERGEANT. Dozens, ma'am, dozens.

PHOEBE. How terrible. Oh, sir, I pray every night that the Lord in His loving-kindness will root the enemy up. Is it true that the Corsican Ogre eats babies?

SERGEANT. I have spoken with them as have seen him do it, ma'am.

PHOEBE. The Man of Sin. Have you ever seen a vivandiere, sir? (*Wistfully*) I have sometimes wished there were vivandieres in the British Army. (*For a moment she sees herself as one.*) Oh, Sergeant, a shudder goes through me when I see you in the streets enticing those poor young men.

SERGEANT. If you were one of them, ma'am, and death or glory was the call, you would take the shilling, ma'am.

PHOEBE. Oh, not for that.

SERGEANT. For King and Country, ma'am?

PHOEBE (*grandly*). Yes, yes, for that.

SERGEANT (*candidly*). Not that it is all fighting. The sack of captured towns—the loot.

PHOEBE (*proudly*). An English soldier never sacks nor loots.

SERGEANT. No, ma'am. And then—the girls.

PHOEBE. What girls?

SERGEANT. In the towns that—that we don't sack.

PHOEBE. How they must hate the haughty conqueror.

SERGEANT. We are not so haughty as all that.

PHOEBE (*sadly*). I think I understand. I am afraid, Sergeant, you do not tell those poor young men the noble things I thought you told them.

SERGEANT. Ma'am, I must e'en tell them what they are wishful to hear. There ha' been five, ma'am, all this week, listening to me and then showing me their heels, but by a grand stroke of luck I have them at last.

PHOEBE. Luck?

(MISS SUSAN *opens door slightly and listens.*)

SERGEANT. The luck, ma'am, is that a gentleman of the town has enlisted. That gave them the push forward.