

Barrie James Matthew

Quality Street: A Comedy



James Barrie

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Содержание

АКТ I	5
АКТ II	15
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	16

J. M. Barrie

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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.

(MISS SUSAN *is excited.*)

PHOEBE. A gentleman of this town enlisted? (*Eagerly*) Sergeant, who?

SERGEANT. Nay, ma'am, I think it be a secret as yet.

PHOEBE. But a gentleman! 'Tis the most amazing, exciting thing. Sergeant, be so obliging.

SERGEANT. Nay, ma'am, I can't.

MISS SUSAN (*at door, carried away by excitement*). But you must, you must!

SERGEANT (*turning to the door*). You see, ma'am —

(The door is hurriedly closed.)

PHOEBE (*ashamed*). Sergeant, I have not been saying the things I meant to say to you. Will you please excuse my turning you out of the house somewhat violently.

SERGEANT. I am used to it, ma'am.

PHOEBE. I won't really hurt you.

SERGEANT. Thank you kindly, ma'am.

PHOEBE (*observing the bedroom door opening a little, and speaking in a loud voice*). I protest, sir; we shall permit no followers in this house. Should I discover you in my kitchen again I shall pitch you out – neck and crop. Begone, sir.

(*The SERGEANT retires affably. All the ladies except MISS HENRIETTA come out, admiring PHOEBE. The WILLOUGHBYS are attired for their journey across the street.*)

MISS WILLOUGHBY. Miss Phoebe, we could not but admire you.

(PHOEBE, *alas, knows that she is not admirable.*)

PHOEBE. But the gentleman recruit?

MISS SUSAN. Perhaps they will know who he is at the woollen-drapers.

MISS FANNY. Let us inquire.

(But before they go MISS WILLOUGHBY has a duty to perform.)

MISS WILLOUGHBY. I wish to apologise. Miss Phoebe, you are a dear, good girl. If I have made remarks about her ringlets, Susan, it was jealousy. (PHOEBE and MISS SUSAN wish to embrace her, but she is not in the mood for it.) Come, sister.

MISS FANNY (*the dear woman that she is*). Phoebe, dear, I wish you very happy.

(PHOEBE presses her hand.)

MISS HENRIETTA (*entering, and not to be outdone*). Miss Phoebe, I give you joy.

(The three ladies go, the two younger ones a little tearfully, and we see them pass the window.)

PHOEBE (*pained*). Susan, you have been talking to them about V. B.

MISS SUSAN. I could not help it. (*Eagerly*) Now, Phoebe, what is it you have to tell me?

PHOEBE (*in a low voice*). Dear, I think it is too holy to speak of.

MISS SUSAN. To your sister?

PHOEBE. Susan, as you know, I was sitting with an unhappy woman whose husband has fallen in the war. When I came out of the cottage he was passing.

MISS SUSAN. Yes?

PHOEBE. He offered me his escort. At first he was very silent – as he has often been of late.

MISS SUSAN. *We* know why.

PHOEBE. Please not to say that I know why. Suddenly he stopped and swung his cane. You know how gallantly he swings his cane.

MISS SUSAN. Yes, indeed.

PHOEBE. He said: 'I have something I am wishful to tell you, Miss Phoebe; perhaps you can guess what it is.'

MISS SUSAN. Go on!

PHOEBE. To say I could guess, sister, would have been unladylike. I said: 'Please not to tell me in the public thoroughfare'; to which he instantly replied: 'Then I shall call and tell you this afternoon.'

MISS SUSAN. Phoebe!

(They are interrupted by the entrance of PATTY with tea. They see that she has brought three cups, and know that this is her impertinent way of implying that mistresses, as well as maids, may have a 'follower.' When she has gone they smile at the daring of the woman, and sit down to tea.)

PHOEBE. Susan, to think that it has all happened in a single year.

MISS SUSAN. Such a genteel competency as he can offer; such a desirable establishment.

PHOEBE. I had no thought of that, dear. I was recalling our first meeting at Mrs. Fotheringay's quadrille party.

MISS SUSAN. We had quite forgotten that our respected local physician was growing elderly.

PHOEBE. Until he said: 'Allow me to present my new partner, Mr. Valentine Brown.'

MISS SUSAN. Phoebe, do you remember how at the tea-table he facetiously passed the cake-basket with nothing in it!

PHOEBE. He was so amusing from the first. I am thankful, Susan, that I too have a sense of humour. I am exceedingly funny at times; am I not, Susan?

MISS SUSAN. Yes, indeed. But he sees humour in the most unexpected things. I say something so ordinary about loving, for instance, to have everything either blue or white in this room, and I know not why he laughs, but it makes me feel quite witty.

PHOEBE (*a little anxiously*). I hope he sees nothing odd or quaint about us.

MISS SUSAN. My dear, I am sure he cannot.

PHOEBE. Susan, the picnics.

MISS SUSAN. Phoebe, the day when he first drank tea in this house.

PHOEBE. He invited himself.

MISS SUSAN. He merely laughed when I said it would cause such talk.

PHOEBE. He is absolutely fearless. Susan, he has smoked his pipe in this room.

(They are both a little scared.)

MISS SUSAN. Smoking is indeed a dreadful habit.

PHOEBE. But there is something so dashing about it.

MISS SUSAN (*with melancholy*). And now I am to be left alone.

PHOEBE. No.

MISS SUSAN. My dear, I could not leave this room. My lovely blue and white room. It is my husband.

PHOEBE (*who has become agitated*). Susan, you must make my house your home. I have something distressing to tell you.

MISS SUSAN. You alarm me.

PHOEBE. You know Mr. Brown advised us how to invest half of our money.

MISS SUSAN. I know it gives us eight per cent., though why it should do so I cannot understand, but very obliging, I am sure.

PHOEBE. Susan, all that money is lost; I had the letter several days ago.

MISS SUSAN. Lost?

PHOEBE. Something burst, dear, and then they absconded.

MISS SUSAN. But Mr. Brown —

PHOEBE. I have not advertised him of it yet, for he will think it was his fault. But I shall tell him to-day.

MISS SUSAN. Phoebe, how much have we left?

PHOEBE. Only sixty pounds a year, so you see you must live with us, dearest.

MISS SUSAN. But Mr. Brown — he —

PHOEBE (*grandly*). He is a man of means, and if he is not proud to have my Susan I shall say at once: 'Mr. Brown — the door.'

(*She presses her cheek to MISS SUSAN'S.*)

MISS SUSAN (*softly*). Phoebe, I have a wedding gift for you.

PHOEBE. Not yet?

MISS SUSAN. It has been ready for a long time. I began it when you were not ten years old and I was a young woman. I meant it for myself, Phoebe. I had hoped that he — his name was William — but I think I must have been too unattractive, my love.

PHOEBE. Sweetest — dearest —

MISS SUSAN. I always associate it with a sprigged poplin I was wearing that summer, with a breadth of coloured silk in it, being a naval officer; but something happened, a Miss Cicely Pemberton, and they are quite big boys now. So long ago, Phoebe — he was very tall, with brown hair — it was most foolish of me, but I was always so fond of sewing — with long straight legs and such a pleasant expression.

PHOEBE. Susan, what was it?

MISS SUSAN. It was a wedding-gown, my dear. Even plain women, Phoebe, we can't help it; when we are young we have romantic ideas just as if we were pretty. And so the wedding-gown was never used. Long before it was finished I knew he would not offer, but I finished it, and then I put it away. I have always hidden it from you, Phoebe, but of late I have brought it out again, and altered it.

(*She goes to ottoman and unlocks it.*)

PHOEBE. Susan, I could not wear it. (MISS SUSAN *brings the wedding-gown.*) Oh! how sweet, how beautiful!

MISS SUSAN. You will wear it, my love, won't you? And the tears it was sewn with long ago will all turn into smiles on my Phoebe's wedding-day.

(They are tearfully happy when a knock is heard on the street door.)

PHOEBE. That knock.

MISS SUSAN. So dashing.

PHOEBE. So imperious. (*She is suddenly panic-stricken.*) Susan, I think he kissed me once.

MISS SUSAN (*startled*). You *think*?

PHOEBE. I know he did. That evening – a week ago, when he was squiring me home from the concert. It was raining, and my face was wet; he said that was why he did it.

MISS SUSAN. Because your face was wet?

PHOEBE. It does not seem a sufficient excuse now.

MISS SUSAN (*appalled*). O Phoebe, before he had offered.

PHOEBE (*in distress*). I fear me it was most unladylike.

(VALENTINE BROWN *is shown in. He is a frank, genial young man of twenty-five who honestly admires the ladies, though he is amused by their quaintness. He is modestly aware that it is in the blue and white room alone that he is esteemed a wit.*)

BROWN. Miss Susan, how do you do, ma'am? Nay, Miss Phoebe, though we have met to-day already I insist on shaking hands with you again.

MISS SUSAN. Always so dashing.

(VALENTINE *laughs and the ladies exchange delighted smiles.*)

VALENTINE (*to MISS SUSAN*). And my other friends, I hope I find them in health? The spinet, ma'am, seems quite herself to-day; I trust the ottoman passed a good night?

MISS SUSAN (*beaming*). We are all quite well, sir.

VALENTINE. May I sit on this chair, Miss Phoebe? I know Miss Susan likes me to break her chairs.

MISS SUSAN. Indeed, sir, I do not. Phoebe, how strange that he should think so.

PHOEBE (*instantly*). The remark was humorous, was it not?

VALENTINE. How you see through me, Miss Phoebe.

(*The sisters again exchange delighted smiles. VALENTINE is about to take a seat.*)

MISS SUSAN (*thinking aloud*). Oh dear, I feel sure he is going to roll the coverlet into a ball and then sit on it.

(VALENTINE, *who has been on the point of doing so, abstains and sits guiltily.*)

VALENTINE. So I am dashing, Miss Susan? Am I dashing, Miss Phoebe?

PHOEBE. A – little, I think.

VALENTINE. Well, but I have something to tell you to-day which I really think is rather dashing. (MISS SUSAN *gathers her knitting, looks at PHOEBE, and is preparing to go.*) You are not going, ma'am, before you know what it is?

MISS SUSAN. I – I – indeed – to be sure – I – I know, Mr. Brown.

PHOEBE. Susan!

MISS SUSAN. I mean I do not know. I mean I can guess – I mean – Phoebe, my love, explain. (*She goes out.*)

VALENTINE (*rather disappointed*). The explanation being, I suppose, that you both know, and I had flattered myself 'twas such a secret. Am I then to understand that you had foreseen it all, Miss Phoebe?

PHOEBE. Nay, sir, you must not ask that.

VALENTINE. I believe in any case 'twas you who first put it into my head.

PHOEBE (*aghast*). Oh, I hope not.

VALENTINE. Your demure eyes flashed so every time the war was mentioned; the little Quaker suddenly looked like a gallant boy in ringlets.

(*A dread comes over PHOEBE, but it is in her heart alone; it shows neither in face nor voice.*)

PHOEBE. Mr. Brown, what is it you have to tell us?

VALENTINE. That I have enlisted, Miss Phoebe. Did you surmise it was something else?

PHOEBE. You are going to the wars? Mr. Brown, is it a jest?

VALENTINE. It would be a sorry jest, ma'am. I thought you knew. I concluded that the recruiting sergeant had talked.

PHOEBE. The recruiting sergeant? I see.

VALENTINE. These stirring times, Miss Phoebe – he is but half a man who stays at home. I have chafed for months. I want to see whether I have any courage, and as to be an army surgeon does not appeal to me, it was enlist or remain behind. To-day I found that there were five waverers. I asked them would they take the shilling if I took it, and they assented. Miss Phoebe, it is not one man I give to the King, but six.

PHOEBE (*brightly*). I think you have done bravely.

VALENTINE. We leave shortly for the Petersburg barracks, and I go to London tomorrow; so this is good-bye.

PHOEBE. I shall pray that you may be preserved in battle, Mr. Brown.

VALENTINE. And you and Miss Susan will write to me when occasion offers?

PHOEBE. If you wish it.

VALENTINE (*smiling*). With all the stirring news of Quality Street.

PHOEBE. It seems stirring to us; it must have been merely laughable to you, who came here from a great city.

VALENTINE. Dear Quality Street – that thought me dashing! But I made friends in it, Miss Phoebe, of two very sweet ladies.

PHOEBE (*timidly*). Mr. Brown, I wonder why you have been so kind to my sister and me?

VALENTINE. The kindness was yours. If at first Miss Susan amused me – (*Chuckling.*) To see her on her knees decorating the little legs of the couch with frills as if it were a child! But it was her sterling qualities that impressed me presently.

PHOEBE. And did – did I amuse you also?

VALENTINE. Prodigiously, Miss Phoebe. Those other ladies, they were always scolding you, your youthfulness shocked them. I believe they thought you dashing.

PHOEBE (*nervously*). I have sometimes feared that I was perhaps too dashing.

VALENTINE (*laughing at this*). You delicious Miss Phoebe. You were too quiet. I felt sorry that one so sweet and young should live so grey a life. I wondered whether I could put any little pleasures into it.

PHOEBE. The picnics? It was very good of you.

VALENTINE. That was only how it began, for soon I knew that it was I who got the pleasures and you who gave them. You have been to me, Miss Phoebe, like a quiet, old-fashioned garden full of the flowers that Englishmen love best because they have known them longest: the daisy, that stands for innocence, and the hyacinth for constancy, and the modest violet and the rose. When I am far

away, ma'am, I shall often think of Miss Phoebe's pretty soul, which is her garden, and shut my eyes and walk in it.

(She is smiling gallantly through her pain when MISS SUSAN returns.)

MISS SUSAN. Have you – is it – you seem so calm, Phoebe.

PHOEBE *(pressing her sister's hand warningly and imploringly)*. Susan, what Mr. Brown is so obliging as to inform us of is not what we expected – not that at all. My dear, he is the gentleman who has enlisted, and he came to tell us that and to say good-bye.

MISS SUSAN. Going away?

PHOEBE. Yes, dear.

VALENTINE. Am I not the ideal recruit, ma'am: a man without a wife or a mother or a sweetheart?

MISS SUSAN. No sweetheart?

VALENTINE. Have you one for me, Miss Susan?

PHOEBE *(hastily, lest her sister's face should betray the truth)*. Susan, we shall have to tell him now. You dreadful man, you will laugh and say it is just like Quality Street. But indeed since I met you to-day and you told me you had something to communicate we have been puzzling what it could be, and we concluded that you were going to be married.

VALENTINE. Ha! ha! ha! Was that it.

PHOEBE. So like women, you know. We thought we perhaps knew her. *(Glancing at the wedding-gown.)* We were even discussing what we should wear at the wedding.

VALENTINE. Ha! ha! I shall often think of this. I wonder who would have me, Miss Susan. *(Rising.)* But I must be off; and God bless you both.

MISS SUSAN *(forlorn)*. You are going!

VALENTINE. No more mud on your carpet, Miss Susan; no more coverlets rolled into balls. A good riddance. Miss Phoebe, a last look at the garden.

(Taking her hand and looking into her face.)

PHOEBE. We shall miss you very much, Mr. Brown.

VALENTINE. There is one little matter. That investment I advised you to make, I am happy it has turned out so well.

PHOEBE *(checking MISS SUSAN, who is about to tell of the loss of the money)*. It was good of you to take all that trouble, sir. Accept our grateful thanks.

VALENTINE. Indeed I am glad that you are so comfortably left; I am your big brother. Good-bye again. *(Looks round.)* This little blue and white room and its dear inmates, may they be unchanged when I come back. Good-bye.

(He goes. MISS SUSAN looks forlornly at PHOEBE, who smiles pitifully.)

PHOEBE. A misunderstanding; just a mistake. *(She shudders, lifts the wedding-gown and puts it back in the ottoman. MISS SUSAN sinks sobbing into a chair.)* Don't, dear, don't – we can live it down.

MISS SUSAN *(fiercely)*. He is a fiend in human form.

PHOEBE. Nay, you hurt me, sister. He is a brave gentleman.

MISS SUSAN. The money; why did you not let me tell him?

PHOEBE *(flushing)*. So that he might offer to me out of pity, Susan?

MISS SUSAN. Phoebe, how are we to live with the quartern loaf at one and tenpence?

PHOEBE. Brother James —

MISS SUSAN. You know very well that brother James will do nothing for us.

PHOEBE. I think, Susan, we could keep a little school – for genteel children only, of course. I would do most of the teaching.

MISS SUSAN. You a schoolmistress – Phoebe of the ringlets; every one would laugh.

PHOEBE. I shall hide the ringlets away in a cap like yours, Susan, and people will soon forget them. And I shall try to look staid and to grow old quickly. It will not be so hard to me as you think, dear.

MISS SUSAN. There were other gentlemen who were attracted by you, Phoebe, and you turned from them.

PHOEBE. I did not want them.

MISS SUSAN. They will come again, and others.

PHOEBE. No, dear; never speak of that to me any more. (*In woe.*) I let him kiss me.

MISS SUSAN. You could not prevent him.

PHOEBE. Yes, I could. I know I could now. I wanted him to do it. Oh, never speak to me of others after that. Perhaps he saw I wanted it and did it to please me. But I meant – indeed I did – that I gave it to him with all my love. Sister, I could bear all the rest; but I have been unladylike.

(The curtain falls, and we do not see the sisters again for ten years.)

End of Act I

ACT II

THE SCHOOL

Ten years later. It is the blue and white room still, but many of Miss Susan's beautiful things have gone, some of them never to return; others are stored upstairs. Their place is taken by grim scholastic furniture: forms, a desk, a globe, a blackboard, heartless maps. It is here that Miss Phoebe keeps school. Miss Susan teaches in the room opening off it, once the spare bedroom, where there is a smaller blackboard (for easier sums) but no globe, as Miss Susan is easily alarmed. Here are the younger pupils unless they have grown defiant, when they are promoted to the blue and white room to be under Miss Phoebe's braver rule. They really frighten Miss Phoebe also, but she does not let her sister know this.

It is noon on a day in August, and through the window we can see that Quality Street is decorated with flags. We also hear at times martial music from another street. Miss Phoebe is giving a dancing lesson to half a dozen pupils, and is doing her very best; now she is at the spinet while they dance, and again she is showing them the new step. We know it is Miss Phoebe because some of her pretty airs and graces still cling to her in a forlorn way, but she is much changed. Her curls are out of sight under a cap, her manner is prim, the light has gone from her eyes and buoyancy from her figure; she looks not ten years older but twenty, and not an easy twenty. When the children are not looking at her we know that she has the headache.

PHOEBE (*who is sometimes at the spinet and sometimes dancing*). Toes out. So. Chest out. Georgy. Point your toes, Miss Beveridge – so. So – keep in line; and young ladies, remember your toes. (GEORGY *in his desire to please has protruded the wrong part of his person. She writes a C on his chest with chalk.*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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