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SF PERUSALS

Samuel French Acting Edition

From Five to Five-Thirty

A Comedy in One Act

by Philip Johnson

SAMUEL FRENCH

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CHARACTERS

MRS. BOXER.

EDITH.

ALICE.

GERTIE.

MRS. TREETOPS.

The play happens in the sitting-room of Mrs. Treetops' little semi-detached villa, on the afternoon of a day in summer.

N.B.—All stage directions are given from the point of view of the audience.

FROM FIVE TO FIVE-THIRTY

The SCENE *is the sitting-room of a small semi-detached house in a suburb of a manufacturing town.*

The one window is C. *back; the door, giving admittance to the diminutive hall, is down* L.; *the fireplace is in the middle of the* R. *wall. The furniture, consisting mainly of a plush-upholstered "suite," is both uninspired and uninspiring.* C., *placed at a slight angle, is a settee, and behind this is a small round table upon which is a vase of expensive-looking flowers. A larger table is set against the* L. *wall, above the door, and upon this an embroidered table-runner and another vase of flowers. To back and* R. *of this table are plush-upholstered stiff-backed chairs. Below the door is a wickerwork armchair.* C.R., *slightly more down stage than the settee, is another member of the "suite": an easy chair. Against the back wall, to* R. *of the window, is a sideboard, and upon this are various vases, framed photographs, a cruet, a dish of apples, and another bowl of flowers. In front of the window is a very small, flimsy-looking table, supporting a large china pot in which some kind of plant copes with life. To* L. *of the window is a cabinet, and upon this another vase of flowers. The window is like a few million other suburban windows: as though to conceal unspeakable goings-on from the outside world, it is discreetly veiled with cream-coloured net. Of this prying outside world itself, little can be seen save a hazy outline of houses on the other side of the road. Above the fireplace, which is masked by a hand-painted fire-screen, is a chair upholstered with some sort of bead-work; in front of the fireplace is a fancy pouffe; below the fireplace, against the wall, is a small writing-table and chair. Upon the settee, the easy chair and the wicker-work chair are gaily-*

coloured cushions. Upon the mantelpiece is a clock and an assortment of little vases and knick-knacks. There are, however, no pictures on the walls. Other articles of furniture, provided that they contribute to the general scheme, may be added at the discretion of the producer.

When the CURTAIN *rises, it is the late afternoon of a day in summer, and a church clock outside chimes four times to sound the four quarters, then strikes the hour of five. The sole occupant of the room is a somewhat battered-looking female who rejoices in the name of* MRS. BOXER. *In the early sixties, florid-featured and inclined to be stout, she is wearing a black skirt, discoloured with age and dust and stains, and an old blouse with the sleeves rolled up and its front secured by a large gilt safety-pin. Upon her head, moored to her greying hair by several black-headed hatpins, is what was once a man's straw hat. . . . At the moment of our meeting her,* MRS. BOXER *appears to be taking it easy, for she is half-sitting, half-lying upon the settee, in her right hand a paper-backed novel. Holding this at almost arm's-length from her eyes, she is reading. Her mouth forms the words of what she is reading as the chimes complete their task.*

MRS. BOXER (*silently reading—we give the words of what she reads in order that her mouth may form them*). "With a careless gesture, Sir Wilfred flicked the ash from 'is costly cigar. Then, with a 'orrible leer that made poor Rosemary's blood run cold, 'e said, 'Come, my pretty one, let us stroll a little further into the wood, and I will tell you of the grand ball at the Castle last night, and snatch a kiss, perchance, from those cherry-ripe lips of yours.' At those bold words, Rosemary felt 'erself blushing from 'ead to foot. 'Indeed, Sir, I must not, for dear Grannie will be wondering where I am.'"

(*The hour strike finishes.*)

(*She breaks into audible speech.*) "'Do not trifle with

me, girl,' 'e snarled. 'See, 'ere is a bright 'alf-crown for your missionary-box. Come, now, a kiss!' "

(*The front-door bell rings.*)

"'No, no,' she faltered. 'I implore you, Sir, to stand aside and let me pass.' 'Never,' 'e cried. Then, bending over 'er, 'is 'ot breath fanning 'er face, 'e 'issed into 'er ear 'is ghastly threat: 'One kiss, now, this instant, you little fool, or I strangle you with the strings of your sun-bonnet, and fling your body to me pack of 'ounds.' "

(*At this point, the front-door bell rings again, more violently than before.*)

Oh, shut up, you!

(*Nevertheless, she rises, stuffs the novel behind a cushion, and starts unhurriedly for the door. Pausing there for a moment, she raises both hands to her hat, gives it a vicious jerk which tilts it at another and slightly aggressive angle, then opens the door and sails out. The slam of the front-door is heard, followed by the somewhat shrill sound of* MRS. PORTEOUS (EDITH) *speaking in querulous tones.*)

EDITH (*off stage*). I really cannot think, Mrs. Boxer, why it should take you so long to open a door. (*Entering.*) If there's one thing I dislike, it is being kept standing on a doorstep. I must have been there five minutes.

(EDITH *is forty, but thanks to a permanently soured expression, looks older. She is of medium height and build, with rather sharp features and lips. Everything about her, the dark, severely-cut costume, the black suède gloves, the "sensible" shoes, seem to be tight and strained. Even her hat, which only just misses being a toque, has a strained and compressed look about it. She is carrying a very plain handbag and a long-handled umbrella.*)

MRS. BOXER (*following her in—in a quite unapologetic tone*). Well, if you must know, Mrs. Porteous, I didn't know whether it was the front-door bell, or

a noise in me 'ead. Something chronic they've been to-day, the noises in me 'ead. I feel all no-'ow.

EDITH (*who has gone behind the settee to* R. *of it—placing her handbag on the* R. *arm of the settee and leaning her umbrella against the* R. *corner of it*). Kindly tell Mother I'm here.

MRS. BOXER (C.L., *and slightly up stage*). As to that I'd 'ave a job. For yer Ma ain't on the premises. She's gone to the pictures.

EDITH (*surprised—and by no means pleased*). Gone to the pictures ?

MRS. BOXER (*nodding*). Set off straight after lunch. It's All-ROMANCE Week at the Odeon, and she's been every day since Monday. It takes 'er out of 'erself.

EDITH. But—but I wrote to her and told her that my two sisters and I would be calling to-day. I suppose she got my letter.

MRS. BOXER. Oh, yes, and she said she'd get 'ome early. Seeing as 'ow *you'd* be 'ere, she wouldn't wait for the comic.

EDITH (*irritably*). She should have been here *now* ! It's most inconsiderate of her !

MRS. BOXER. I dunno. She's seventy years old. I reckon she can please 'erself, eh ?

EDITH (*who has moved to behind the settee—her attention suddenly distracted by the little table*). The dust on this little table, Mrs. Boxer ! I could write my name on it !

MRS. BOXER. Ah. It puts me in mind of me first place. A proper Tartar for dust, the missis was. " Katie," she'd say, " I could write me name on the pianner," she'd say. So one day I says to 'er, " I wonder you don't write something interesting, for a change." That shut 'er up, all right.

(EDITH *turns impatiently away from the table.* MRS. BOXER " *makes a face* " *towards her back, hastily re-arranging her features as* EDITH *turns towards her again.*)

And 'ow's the dear Vicar to-day ?

EDITH (*curtly*). My husband is well, I thank you.

MRS. BOXER. 'Ardly looks it, does 'e ? Last time I saw 'im, 'e looked as though you could knock 'im down with a fly's eyelash ! If you ask me, a good beef-steak's what *'e* needs !

EDITH (*icily*). My husband and I, Mrs. Boxer, are strict vegetarians.

MRS. BOXER. When it comes to food, give me something what's wagged its tail.

EDITH (*her attention again distracted*). Good gracious me, where on earth did all these flowers come from ?

MRS. BOXER. Yer ma bought 'em yesterday.

EDITH (*staring at them*). But—but they must have cost Heaven knows what !

MRS. BOXER. Ah, I expect they was a bit pricey ; but only the best's good enough for yer ma, these days.

EDITH (*half under her breath*). *Monstrous !*

(*The front-door bell rings—louder.*)

And that, Mrs. Boxer, was *not* a noise in your head.

MRS. BOXER (*not stirring*). Oh, that was the front-door, all right. I wonder 'oo it can be.

EDITH (*controlling herself with an obvious effort*). It will be one of my sisters. Will you *kindly* let her in at *once* ?

MRS. BOXER (*quite leisurely—unpinning the gilt safety-pin, shifting it slightly and pinning it again*). Anything to oblige, so long as I don't 'ave to stoop or climb or stretch or lift. As the doctor says to me only the other day, " Ladies like you," 'e says, " is delicate 'ot-'ouse plants, and should be treated according."

EDITH (*losing patience*). Mrs. Boxer, *please* ! The *door* !

MRS. BOXER. Oh !—Oh, course.

(*She goes unhurriedly towards the door, pauses, raises both hands as previously to her hat, tilts it to another*

angle, then goes out. EDITH *gives vent to an impatient exclamation. Going to up* R., *by the sideboard, she takes up the bowl of flowers, glares at them for a second, then puts it down again. Simultaneously, the front door is heard to slam.*)

EDITH (*muttering*). Not a penny less than ten shillings a bunch! Scandalous! (*As* ALICE *enters.*) Ah, Alice!

(MRS. PRESCOTT (ALICE) *is thirty-six. She is about the same height and build as her sister, but more fussily dressed: a floral-patterned frock, white gloves, and a wide-brimmed hat trimmed with marguerites and cornflowers. She is carrying a raffia shopping-basket in which are a few small parcels and her handbag.*)

ALICE. Edith! I'm not late, am I? (*Putting her basket on the table* L.) And I mustn't stay long, dear. I *think* the new nurse is all right, but I'm taking *no* risks.

EDITH (*coming down to* R. *of the settee*). How are the children?

ALICE (*starting to remove her gloves*). The chicks? Well, Lambkin was sick this morning, and of course I rang Dr. Willoughby. You know how abrupt he can be—all he said was, "It's the weather—cascara," and rang off. But Baby's *very* well, and what do you think he did just before I left?

EDITH. I've no idea.

ALICE. He looked straight at me, with the sweetest smile, and said, "Dum—dum—dum!" Quite obviously, it didn't *mean* anything, but it was the way he *said* it. (*She places her gloves on the table.*)

MRS. BOXER (*putting her head in at the door*). I don't know if you fancy a cupper tea. I could manage it in 'alf an 'our or so.

EDITH. No, thank you.

MRS. BOXER. Good.

(*She withdraws her head and disappears.*)

ALICE (*taking her handbag from her basket*). And, oh, you *must* see the new snaps of Baby and Lambkin. I popped them into my bag, especially to show you.

EDITH. Not just now—later. I wrote to you and Gertie, to meet me here, because, quite frankly, Alice, something has got to be done about Mother.

ALICE (*replacing her bag in the basket*). Is she upstairs ?

EDITH. She is not ! I wrote her that we were coming, and I arrive here to find that she has gone to the pictures.

ALICE (*moving a few paces to* C.L., *between the table and the settee*). Well, I *do* think that's thoughtless of her. Supposing she brings a germ away with her, and gives it to me, and I carry it home to the chicks.

EDITH. Mother's impossible ! She's always been irresponsible, but now, at the age of seventy, she seems to have lost her head completely.

ALICE (*going to in front of the* L. *end of the settee*). But, Edith, what *can* we do ?

EDITH. Talk to her—and let her see that *this* time we mean what we say !

ALICE. But, d'you think she'll listen ? You know, Edith, I don't think she really likes us very much. I don't even think she likes the chicks. She was *most* unsympathetic about Lambkin's adenoids.

EDITH. She'll *have* to listen ! Where would she be, if it weren't for us ? She hasn't a penny in the world of her own ! I'm sure I don't look for thanks, Alice, but at least she needn't shame us publicly ! (*Going to* R., *by the fireplace.*)

ALICE. What ?

EDITH (*by the fireplace—turning—facing* ALICE *across the room*). Yesterday morning, Arthur, if you please, was walking along High Street with two of his churchwardens. As they passed "The Market Tavern," who should come out but Mother !

ALICE (*very shocked*). No ! !

EDITH. Mother ! Wiping her lips on her handkerchief, just like—like any common woman !

ALICE. Oh, Edith! Oh, but that's *dreadful*! (*She sinks down upon the* L. *end of the settee.*)

EDITH. Shaken as Arthur was, he'd the presence of mind to pretend not to see her. But *that* didn't help. She marched straight up to him and said, "Hello, Arthur! You're a bit too late! I've just been having a sherry."

ALICE (*murmuring*). Good heavens!

EDITH. Arthur gave her a look and said, "Really? Aren't you feeling well?" And what d'you think Mother said?

(ALICE *shakes her head.*)

"I'm perfectly well; but if I felt half as washed-out as you look, I'd have had two more sherries!"

ALICE (*faintly*). Oh dear.

EDITH. Poor Arthur arrived home trembling. I have never *seen* him so upset, *never!* . . . *I* sat down and wrote to you and Gertie to meet me here.

(*The front-door bell rings.*)

That will be Gertie. (*She moves to in front of the easy chair.*)

ALICE. To *think* of Mother in a public-house! Supposing the Frobishers had seen her coming out, or the Wilkinsons, or the Drake-Westmacotts!

EDITH (*grimly*). They'll hear of it soon enough! Mother's determined, it seems, to make herself the talk of the town—and that's that!

ALICE (*tearfully—taking her handkerchief from her handbag*). It's too humiliating! It is, really! I feel I shall never, never lift my head again! (*Dabbing at her nose with her handkerchief.*)

EDITH. Now, Alice, put that handkerchief away. Crying won't help us.

(*The front-door is heard to slam.*)

ALICE (*still dabbing*). I'm thankful for one thing, anyway. (*Sniff.*) Lambkin and Baby are too young to realize—yet. (*Sniff, sniff.*)

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