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SF PERUSALS

Fumed Oak

An Unpleasant Comedy in Two Scenes

from
Tonight at 8:30

by Noël Coward

A Samuel French Acting Edition



SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

SAMUELFRENCH.COM

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FUMED OAK

First produced at the Opera House, Manchester, and subsequently at the Phœnix Theatre, Charing Cross Road, London, W.C.2, in January, 1936, with the following cast of characters:

HENRY GOW	*Noel Coward.*
DORIS (*His Wife*)	*Gertrude Lawrence.*
ELSIE (*His Daughter*)	*Moya Nugent.*
MRS. ROCKETT (*His Mother-in-law*) . .	*Alison Leggatt.*

SCENE 1.—Morning.
SCENE 2.—Evening.

The action of the play passes in the sitting-room of the Gows' house in South London.

The time is the present day.

FUMED OAK

Produced by John C. Wilson at the National Theatre in New York City on November 27, 1936, as one of a series of nine one-act plays by Noel Coward, under the title of "TONIGHT AT EIGHT-THIRTY." The play was directed by the author and the cast was as follows:

HENRY GOW	*Noel Coward.*
DORIS (His Wife)	*Gertrude Lawrence.*
ELSIE (His Daughter) . . .	*Moya Nugent.*
MRS. ROCKETT (His Mother-in-law)	*Joyce Carey.*

SCENE I.—Morning.
SCENE II.—Evening.

The action of the play passes in the sitting-room of the Gows' house in South London.

The time is the present day.

FUMED OAK

SCENE I

The Gows' sitting-room is indistinguishable from several thousand other suburban sitting-rooms. The dominant note is refinement. There are French windows at the back opening on to a narrow lane of garden. These are veiled discreetly by lace curtains set off by pieces of rather faded blue casement cloth. There is a tiled fireplace on the L. *; an upright piano between it and the window; a fumed-oak sideboard on the* R. *and, below it, a door leading to the hall, the stairs and the front door. There is a fumed-oak dining-room set consisting of a table and six chairs; a sofa; an armchair in front of the fire; and a plentiful sprinkling over the entire room of ornaments and framed photographs.*

(See Photograph of Scene.)

When the CURTAIN *rises it is about eight-thirty on a spring morning. Rain is trickling down the windows and breakfast is laid on the table.*

MRS. ROCKETT *is seated in the armchair by the fire; on a small table next to her is a workbasket. She is a fattish, grey-looking woman dressed in a blouse and skirt and a pepper-and-salt jumper of artificial silk. Her pince-nez snap in and out of a little clip on her bosom and her feet are bad, which necessitates the wearing of large quilted slippers in the house.* DORIS, *aged about thirty-five, is seated* R. *of the table reading a newspaper propped up against the cruet. She is thin and anæmic, and whatever traces of past prettiness she might have are obscured by the pursed-up, rather sour gentility of her expression. She wears a nondescript coat-frock, a slave bangle and a necklace of amber glass beads.* ELSIE, *her*

daughter, aged about fourteen, is sitting opposite to her, cutting her toast into strips in order to dip them into her boiled egg. She is a straight-haired ordinary-looking girl dressed in a navy blue school dress with a glacé red leather waist-belt.

There is complete silence broken only by the occasional rattle of a spoon in a cup or a sniffle from ELSIE, *who has a slight head cold.*

HENRY GOW *comes into the room. He is tall and spare, neatly dressed in a blue serge suit. He wears rimless glasses and his hair is going grey at the sides and thin on the top. He sits down at the table, up stage, without a word.* DORIS *automatically rises and goes out, returning in a moment with a plate of haddock, which she places in front of him and resumes her place.* HENRY *pours himself out some tea.* DORIS, *without looking at him, being re-immersed in the paper, passes him the milk and sugar.* HENRY *stretches for toast across the table.*

The silence continues until ELSIE *breaks it.*

ELSIE. Mum ?

DORIS. What ?

ELSIE. When can I put my hair up ?

DORIS (*snappily*). When you're old enough.

ELSIE. Gladys Pierce is the same age as me and she's got hers up.

DORIS. Never you mind about Gladys Pierce, get on with your breakfast.

ELSIE. I don't see why I can't have it cut. That would be better than nothing.

(*This remark is ignored.*)

Maisie Blake had hers cut last week and it looks lovely.

DORIS. Never you mind about Maisie Blake neither. She's common.

ELSIE. Miss Pritchard doesn't think so. Miss Pritchard likes Maisie Blake a lot, she said it looked ever so nice.

DORIS (*irritably*). What ?

ELSIE. Her hair.

DORIS. Get on with your breakfast. You'll be late.

ELSIE (*petulantly*). Oh, Mum——

DORIS. And stop sniffling. Sniffle, sniffle, sniffle! Haven't you got a handkerchief?

ELSIE. Yes, but it's a clean one.

DORIS. Never mind, use it.

MRS. ROCKETT. The child can't help having a cold.

DORIS. She can blow her nose, can't she, even if she has got a cold?

ELSIE (*conversationally*). Dodie Watson's got a terrible cold, she's had it for weeks. It went to her chest and then it went back to her head again.

MRS. ROCKETT. That's the worst of schools, you're always catching something.

ELSIE. Miss Pritchard's awful mean to Dodie Watson, she said she'd had enough of it.

DORIS. Enough of what?

ELSIE. Her cold.

(*There is silence again, which is presently shattered by the wailing of a baby in the house next door.*)

MRS. ROCKETT. There's that child again. It kept me awake all night.

DORIS. I'm very sorry, I'm sure. (*She picks up the newspaper.*)

MRS. ROCKETT (*fiddling in her work basket*). I wasn't blaming you.

DORIS. The night before last it was the hot-water pipes.

MRS. ROCKETT. You ought to have them seen to.

DORIS. You know as well as I do you can't stop them making that noise every now and then.

MRS. ROCKETT (*threading a needle*). I'm sure I don't know why you don't get a plumber in.

DORIS (*grandly*). Because I do not consider it necessary.

MRS. ROCKETT. You would if you slept in my room —gurgle gurgle gurgle all night long—it's all very fine for you, you're at the end of the passage.

DORIS (*with meaning*). You don't have to sleep there.

MRS. ROCKETT. What do you mean by that ?

DORIS. You know perfectly well what I mean.

MRS. ROCKETT (*with spirit*). Listen to me, Doris Gow. I've got a perfect right to complain if I want to, and well you know it. It isn't as if I was staying here for nothing.

DORIS. I really don't know what's the matter with you lately, Mother, you do nothing but grumble.

MRS. ROCKETT. Me, grumble ! I like that, I'm sure. That's rich, that is.

DORIS. Well, you do. It gives me a headache.

MRS. ROCKETT. You ought to do something about those headaches of yours. They seem to pop on and off at the least thing.

DORIS. And I wish you wouldn't keep passing remarks about not staying here for nothing.

MRS. ROCKETT. Well, it's true, I don't.

DORIS. Anyone would think we was taking advantage of you, to hear you talk.

MRS. ROCKETT. Well, they wouldn't be far wrong.

DORIS. Mother, how can you ! You're not paying a penny more than you can afford.

MRS. ROCKETT. I never said I was. It isn't the money, it's the lack of consideration.

(ELSIE *puts her exercise book away in her satchel.*)

DORIS. Pity you don't go and live with Nora for a change.

MRS. ROCKETT. Nora hasn't got a spare room.

DORIS. Phyllis has, a lovely one, looking out over the railway. I'm sure her hot-water pipes wouldn't keep you awake, there isn't enough hot water in them.

MRS. ROCKETT. Of course, if I'm not wanted here, I can always go to a boarding-house or a private hotel.

DORIS. Catch you !

MRS. ROCKETT. I'm not the sort to outstay my welcome anywhere . . .

DORIS. Oh, for heaven's sake don't start that again . . . (*She bangs the paper down on the table.*)

MRS. ROCKETT (*addressing the air*). It seems as though some of us had got out of bed the wrong side this morning.

ELSIE. Mum, can I have some more toast ?

DORIS. No.

ELSIE. I could make it myself over the kitchen fire.

DORIS. No, I tell you. Can't you understand plain English ? You've had quite enough and you'll be late for school.

MRS. ROCKETT. Never mind, Elsie, here's twopence. (*Taking it out of her purse.*) You can buy yourself a sponge-cake at Barrets.

ELSIE (*rising and taking the twopence*). Thanks, Grandma.

DORIS. You'll do no such thing, Elsie. I'm not going to have a child of mine stuffing herself with cake in the middle of the High Street.

MRS. ROCKETT (*sweetly*). Eat it in the shop, dear.

DORIS. Go on, you'll be late.

ELSIE. Oh, Mum, it's only ten to.

DORIS. Do as I tell you.

ELSIE. Oh, all right.

(*She crosses in front of the table and goes sullenly out of the room and can be heard scampering noisily up the stairs.*)

MRS. ROCKETT (*irritatingly*). Poor little soul.

DORIS. I'll trouble you not to spoil Elsie, Mother.

MRS. ROCKETT. Spoil her ! I like that. Better than half-starving her.

DORIS (*hotly*). Are you insinuating . . .

MRS. ROCKETT. I'm not insinuating anything. Elsie's getting a big girl, she only had one bit of toast for her breakfast and she used that for her egg. I saw her.

DORIS (*rising and putting away the paper in the sideboard drawer*). It's none of your business, and in future I'd be much obliged if you'd keep your twopences to yourself. (*She returns to her seat at the table.*)

(HENRY *rises and fetches the paper out.*)

MRS. ROCKETT (*hurt*). Very well, of course if I'm to be abused every time I try to bring a little happiness into the child's life . . .

DORIS. Anyone would think I ill-treated her the way you talk.

MRS. ROCKETT. You certainly nag her enough.

DORIS. I don't do any such thing—and I wish you'd leave me to bring up my own child in my own way.

MRS. ROCKETT. That cold's been hanging over her for weeks and a fat lot you care——

DORIS (*rising and getting tray from beside the sideboard*). I've dosed her for it, haven't I? The whole house stinks of Vapex. What more can I do?

MRS. ROCKETT. She ought to have had Doctor Bristow last Saturday when it was so bad. He'd have cleared it up in no time.

DORIS (*putting tray on her chair and beginning to clear things on to it*). You and your Doctor Bristow.

MRS. ROCKETT. Nice thing if it turned to bronchitis.

(DORIS *throws scraps into the fire.*)

Mrs. Henderson's Muriel got bronchitis, all through neglecting a cold; the poor child couldn't breathe, they had to have two kettles going night and day——

DORIS. I suppose your precious Doctor Bristow told you that.

MRS. ROCKETT. Yes, he did, and what's more, he saved the girl's life, you ask Mrs. Henderson.

DORIS. Catch me ask Mrs. Henderson anything, stuck up thing. . . .

MRS. ROCKETT. Mrs. Henderson's a very nice lady-like woman, just because she's quiet and a bit reserved you say she's stuck up . . .

DORIS. Who does she think she is, anyway, Lady Mountbatten? (*She takes the cruet to the sideboard.*)

MRS. ROCKETT. Really, Doris, you make me tired sometimes, you do really.

DORIS. If you're so fond of Mrs. Henderson it's a pity you don't see more of her. I notice you don't go there often.

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