

### **ACT III THE BALL**

A ball, but not the one to which we have seen Miss Susan and Miss Phoebe rush forth upon their career of crime. This is the third of the series, the one of which Patty has foretold with horrid relish that it promises to be specially given over to devilries. The scene is a canvas pavilion, used as a retiring room and for card play, and through an opening in the back we have glimpses of gay uniforms and fair ladies intermingled in the bravery of the dance. There is coming and going through this opening, and also through slits in the canvas. The pavilion is fantastically decorated in various tastes, and is lit with lanterns. A good-natured moon, nevertheless, shines into it benignly. Some of the card tables are neglected, but at one a game of quadrille is in progress. There is much movement and hilarity, but none from one side of the tent, where sit several young ladies, all pretty, all appealing and all woeful, for no gallant comes to ask them if he may have the felicity. The nervous woman chaperoning them, and afraid to meet their gaze lest they scowl or weep in reply, is no other than Miss Susan, the most unhappy Miss Susan we have yet seen; she sits there gripping her composure in both hands. Far less susceptible to shame is the brazen Phoebe, who may be seen passing the opening on the arm of a cavalier, and flinging her trembling sister a mischievous kiss. The younger ladies note the incident; alas, they are probably meant to notice it, and they cower, as under a blow.

HARRIET ( a sad-eyed, large girl, who we hope found a romance at her next ball ). Are we so disagreeable that no one will dance with us? Miss Susan, 'tis infamous; they have eyes for no one but your niece.

CHARLOTTE. Miss Livvy has taken Ensign Blades from me.

HARRIET. If Miss Phoebe were here, I am sure she would not allow her old pupils to be so neglected.

( The only possible reply for MISS SUSAN is to make herself look as small as possible. A lieutenant comes to them, once a scorner of woman, but now SPICER the bewitched . HARRIET has a moment's hope. )

How do you do, sir?

SPICER ( with dreadful indifference, though she is his dear cousin ). Nay, ma'am, how do you do? ( Wistfully. ) May I stand beside you, Miss Susan?

( He is a most melancholic young man, and he fidgets her. )

MISS SUSAN ( with spirit ). You have been standing beside me, sir, nearly all the evening. SPICER ( humbly. It is strange to think that he had been favourably mentioned in despatches ). Indeed, I cannot but be cognisant of the sufferings I cause by attaching myself to you in this unseemly manner. Accept my assurances, ma'am, that you have my deepest sympathy.

MISS SUSAN. Then why do you do it?

SPICER. Because you are her aunt, ma'am. It is a scheme of mine by which I am in hopes to soften her heart. Her affection for you, ma'am, is beautiful to observe, and if she could be persuaded that I seek her hand from a passionate desire to have you for my Aunt Susan--do you perceive anything hopeful in my scheme, ma'am?

MISS SUSAN. No, sir, I do not.

(SPICER wanders away gloomily, takes too much to drink, and ultimately becomes a general . ENSIGN BLADES appears, frowning, and CHARLOTTE ventures to touch his sleeve. )

CHARLOTTE. Ensign Blades, I have not danced with you once this evening.

BLADES ( with the cold brutality of a lover to another she ). Nor I with you, Charlotte. ( To SUSAN.) May I solicit of you, Miss Susan, is Captain Brown Miss Livvy's guardian; is he affianced to her?

MISS SUSAN. No, sir.

BLADES. Then by what right, ma'am, does he interfere? Your elegant niece had consented to accompany me to the shrubbery--to look at the moon. And now Captain Brown forbids it. 'Tis unendurable.

CHARLOTTE. But you may see the moon from here, sir.

BLADES ( glancing at it contemptuously ). I believe not, ma'am. ( The moon still shines on. )

MISS SUSAN ( primly ). I am happy Captain Brown forbade her.

BLADES. Miss Susan, 'twas but because he is to conduct her to the shrubbery himself.

( He flings out pettishly, and MISS SUSAN looks pityingly at the wall-flowers. )

MISS SUSAN. My poor Charlotte! May I take you to some very agreeable ladies?

CHARLOTTE ( tartly ). No, you may not. I am going to the shrubbery to watch Miss Livvy.

MISS SUSAN. Please not to do that.

CHARLOTTE ( implying that MISS SUSAN will be responsible for her early death ). My chest is weak. I shall sit among the dew.

MISS SUSAN. Charlotte, you terrify me. At least, please to put this cloak about your shoulders. Nay, my dear, allow me.

( She puts a cloak around CHARLOTTE, who departs vindictively for the shrubbery. She will not find LIVVY there, however, for next moment MISS PHOEBE darts in from the back. )

PHOEBE ( in a gay whisper ). Susan, another offer [Transcriber's note: officer?] --Major Linkwater--rotund man, black whiskers, fierce expression; he has rushed away to destroy himself.

( We have been unable to find any record of the Major's tragic end. )

AN OLD SOLDIER ( looking up from a card table, whence he has heard the raging of BLADES). Miss Livvy, ma'am, what is this about the moon?

(PHOEBE smiles roguishly. )

PHOEBE ( looking about her ). I want my cloak, Aunt Susan.

MISS SUSAN. I have just lent it to poor Charlotte Parratt.

PHOEBE. Oh, auntie!

OLD SOLDIER. And now Miss Livvy cannot go into the shrubbery to see the moon; and she is so fond of the moon!

(MISS PHOEBE screws her nose at him merrily, and darts back to the dance, but she has left a defender behind her. )

A GALLANT ( whose name we have not succeeded in discovering ). Am I to understand, sir, that you are intimating disparagement of the moon? If a certain female has been graciously pleased to signify approval of that orb, any slight cast upon the moon, sir, I shall regard as a personal affront.

OLD SOLDIER. Hoity-toity.

( But he rises, and they face each other, as MISS SUSAN feels, for battle. She is about to rush between their undrawn swords when there is a commotion outside; a crowd gathers and opens to allow some officers to assist a fainting woman into the tent. It is MISS PHOEBE, and MISS SUSAN with a cry goes on her knees beside her. The tent has filled with the sympathetic and inquisitive, but CAPTAIN BROWN, as a physician, takes command, and by his order they retire. He finds difficulty in bringing the sufferer to, and gets little help from MISS SUSAN, who can only call upon MISS PHOEBE by name. )

VALENTINE. Nay, Miss Susan, 'tis useless calling for Miss Phoebe. 'Tis my fault; I should not have permitted Miss Livvy to dance so immoderately. Why do they delay with the cordial?

( He goes to the back to close the opening, and while he is doing so the incomprehensible MISS PHOEBE seizes the opportunity to sit up on her couch of chairs, waggle her finger at MISS SUSAN, and sign darkly that she is about to make a genteel recovery. )

PHOEBE. Where am I? Is that you, Aunt Susan? What has happened?

VALENTINE ( returning ). Nay, you must recline, Miss Livvy. You fainted. You have over-fatigued yourself.

PHOEBE. I remember.

(BLADES enters with the cordial. )

VALENTINE. You will sip this cordial.

BLADES. By your leave, sir.

( He hands it to PHOEBE himself. )

VALENTINE. She is in restored looks already, Miss Susan.

PHOEBE. I am quite recovered. Perhaps if you were to leave me now with my excellent aunt---

VALENTINE. Be off with you, apple cheeks.

BLADES. Sir, I will suffer no reference to my complexion; and, if I mistake not, this charming lady was addressing you.

PHOEBE. If you please, both of you. ( They retire together, and no sooner have they gone than MISS PHOEBE leaps from the couch, her eyes

sparkling. She presses the cordial on MISS SUSAN.) Nay, drink it, Susan. I left it for you on purpose. I have such awful information to impart. Drink. (MISS SUSAN drinks tremblingly and then the bolt is fired. ) Susan, Miss Henrietta and Miss Fanny are here!

MISS SUSAN. Phoebe!

PHOEBE. Suddenly my eyes lighted on them. At once I slipped to the ground.

MISS SUSAN. You think they did not see you?

PHOEBE. I am sure of it. They talked for a moment to Ensign Blades, and then turned and seemed to be going towards the shrubbery.

MISS SUSAN. He had heard that you were there with Captain Brown. He must have told them.

PHOEBE. I was not. But oh, sister, I am sure they suspect, else why should they be here? They never frequent balls.

MISS SUSAN. They have suspected for a week, ever since they saw you in your veil, Phoebe, on the night of the first dance. How could they but suspect, when they have visited us every day since then and we have always pretended that Livvy was gone out.

PHOEBE. Should they see my face it will be idle to attempt to deceive them.

MISS SUSAN. Idle indeed; Phoebe, the scandal! You--a schoolmistress!

PHOEBE. That is it, sister. A little happiness has gone to my head like strong waters.

( She is very restless and troubled. )

MISS SUSAN. My dear, stand still, and think.

PHOEBE. I dare not, I cannot. Oh, Susan, if they see me we need not open school again.

MISS SUSAN. We shall starve.

PHOEBE ( passionately ). This horrid, forward, flirting, heartless, hateful little toad of a Livvy.

MISS SUSAN. Brother James's daughter, as we call her!

PHOEBE. 'Tis all James's fault.

MISS SUSAN. Sister, when you know that James has no daughter!

PHOEBE. If he had really had one, think you I could have been so wicked as to personate her? Susan, I know not what I am saying, but you know who it is that has turned me into this wild creature.

MISS SUSAN. Oh, Valentine Brown, how could you?

PHOEBE. To weary of Phoebe--patient, lady-like Phoebe--the Phoebe whom I have lost--to turn from her with a 'Bah, you make me old,' and become enamoured in a night of a thing like this!

MISS SUSAN. Yes, yes, indeed; yet he has been kind to us also. He has been to visit us several times.

PHOEBE. In the hope to see her. Was he not most silent and gloomy when we said she was gone out?

MISS SUSAN. He is infatuate---- ( She hesitates. ) Sister, you are not partial to him still?

PHOEBE. No, Susan, no. I did love him all those years, though I never spoke of it to you. I put hope aside at once, I folded it up and kissed it and put it away like a pretty garment I could never wear again, I but loved to think of him as a noble man. But he is not a noble man, and Livvy found it out in an hour. The gallant! I flirted that I might enjoy his fury. Susan, there has been a declaration in his eyes all to-night, and when he cries 'Adorable Miss Livvy, be mine,' I mean to answer with an 'Oh, la, how ridiculous you are. You are much too old--I have been but quizzing you, sir.'

MISS SUSAN. Phoebe, how can you be so cruel?

PHOEBE. Because he has taken from me the one great glory that is in a woman's life. Not a man's love--she can do without that--but her own dear sweet love for him. He is unworthy of my love; that is why I can be so cruel.

MISS SUSAN. Oh, dear.

PHOEBE. And now my triumph is to be denied me, for we must steal away home before Henrietta and Fanny see us.

MISS SUSAN. Yes, yes.

PHOEBE ( dispirited ). And to-morrow we must say that Livvy has gone back to her father, for I dare keep up this deception no longer. Susan, let us go.

( They are going dejectedly, but are arrested by the apparition of MISS HENRIETTA and MISS FANNY peeping into the tent . PHOEBE has just time to signify to her sister that she will confess all and beg for mercy, when the intruders speak. )

Miss HENRIETTA ( not triumphant but astounded ). You, Miss Phoebe?

PHOEBE ( with bowed head ). Yes.

MISS FANNY. How amazing! You do not deny, ma'am, that you are Miss Phoebe?

PHOEBE ( making confession ). Yes, Fanny, I am Miss Phoebe.

( To her bewilderment HENRIETTA and FANNY exchange ashamed glances. )

MISS HENRIETTA. Miss Phoebe, we have done you a cruel wrong.

MISS FANNY. Phoebe, we apologise.

MISS HENRIETTA. To think how excitedly we have been following her about in the shrubbery.

MISS FANNY. She is wearing your cloak.

MISS HENRIETTA. Ensign Blades told us she was gone to the shrubbery.

MISS FANNY. And we were convinced there was no such person.

MISS HENRIETTA. So of course we thought it must be you.

MISS FANNY ( who has looked out ). I can discern her in the shrubbery still. She is decidedly taller than Phoebe.

MISS HENRIETTA. I thought she looked taller. I meant to say so. Phoebe, 'twas the cloak deceived us. We could not see her face.

PHOEBE ( beginning to understand ). Cloak? You mean, Henrietta--you mean, Fanny--

MISS FANNY. 'Twas wicked of us, my dear, but we--we thought that you and Miss Livvy were the same person. ( They have evidently been stalking

CHARLOTTE in MISS PHOEBE'S cloak . MISS SUSAN shudders, but MISS PHOEBE utters a cry of reproach, and it is some time before they can persuade her to forgive them. It is of course also some time before we can forgive MISS PHOEBE.) Phoebe, you look so pretty. Are they paying you no attentions, my dear?

(PHOEBE is unable to resist these delightful openings. The imploring looks MISS SUSAN gives her but add to her enjoyment. It is as if the sense of fun she had caged a moment ago were broke loose again. )

PHOEBE. Alas, they think of none but Livvy. They come to me merely to say that they adore her.

MISS HENRIETTA. Surely not Captain Brown?

PHOEBE. He is infatuate about her.

MISS FANNY. Poor Phoebe!

( They make much of her, and she purrs naughtily to their stroking, with lightning peeps at MISS SUSAN. Affronted Providence seeks to pay her out by sending ENSIGN BLADES into the tent. Then the close observer may see MISS PHOEBE'S heart sink like a bucket in a well . MISS SUSAN steals from the tent. )

MISS HENRIETTA. Mr. Blades, I have been saying that if I were a gentleman I would pay my addresses to Miss Phoebe much rather than to her niece.

BLADES. Ma'am, excuse me.

MISS HENRIETTA ( indignant that MISS PHOEBE should be slighted so publicly ). Sir, you are a most ungallant and deficient young man.

BLADES. Really, ma'am, I assure you----

MISS HENRIETTA. Not another word, sir.

PHOEBE ( in her most old-maidish manner ). Miss Fanny, Miss Henrietta, it is time I spoke plainly to this gentleman. Please leave him to me. Surely 'twill come best from me.

MISS HENRIETTA. Indeed, yes, if it be not too painful to you.

PHOEBE. I must do my duty.

MISS FANNY ( wistfully ). If we could remain--

PHOEBE. Would it be seemly, Miss Fanny?

MISS HENRIETTA. Come, Fanny. ( To BLADES.) Sir, you bring your punishment upon yourself.

( They press PHOEBE'S hand, and go. Her heart returns to its usual abode. )

BLADES ( bewildered ). Are you angry with me, Miss Livvy?

PHOEBE. Oh, no.

BLADES. Miss Livvy, I have something to say to you of supreme importance to me. With regard to my complexion, I am aware, Miss Livvy, that it has retained a too youthful bloom. My brother officers comment on it with a certain lack of generosity. ( Anxiously. ) Might I inquire, ma'am, whether you regard my complexion as a subject for light talk.

PHOEBE. No indeed, sir, I only wish I had it.

BLADES ( who has had no intention of offering, but is suddenly carried off his feet by the excellence of the opportunity, which is no doubt responsible for many proposals ). Miss Livvy, ma'am, you may have it.

( She has a great and humorous longing that she could turn before his affrighted eyes into the schoolmistress she really is. She would endure much to be able at this moment to say, 'I have listened to you, ENSIGN BLADES, with attention, but I am really MISS PHOEBE, and I must now request you to fetch me the implement.' Under the shock, would he have surrendered his palm for punishment? It can never be known, for as she looks at him longingly, LIEUTENANT SPICER enters, and he mistakes the meaning of that longing look. )

SPICER. 'Tis my dance, ma'am--'tis not Ensign Blades'.

BLADES. Leave us, sir. We have matter of moment to discuss.

SPICER ( fearing the worst ). His affection, Miss Livvy, is not so deep as mine. He is a light and shallow nature.

PHOEBE. Pooh! You are both light and shallow natures.

BLADES. Both, ma'am? ( But he is not sure that he has not had a miraculous escape. )

PHOEBE ( severely ). 'Tis such as you, with your foolish flirting ways, that confuse the minds of women and make us try to be as silly as yourselves.

SPICER ( crushed ). Ma'am.

PHOEBE. I did not mean to hurt you. ( She takes a hand of each and tries to advise them as if her curls were once more hidden under a cap. ) You are so like little boys in a school. Do be good. Sit here beside me. I know you are very brave--

BLADES. Ha!

PHOEBE. And when you come back from the wars it must be so delightful to you to flirt with the ladies again.

SPICER. Oh, ma'am.

PHOEBE. As soon as you see a lady with a pretty nose you cannot help saying that you adore her.

BLADES ( in an ecstasy ). Nay, I swear.

PHOEBE. And you offer to her, not from love, but because you are so deficient in conversation.

SPICER. Charming, Miss Livvy.

PHOEBE ( with sudden irritation ). Oh, sir, go away; go away, both of you, and read improving books.

( They are cast down. She has not been quite fair to these gallants, for it is not really of them she has grown weary so much as of the lady they temporarily adore. If MISS PHOEBE were to analyse her feelings she would find that her remark is addressed to LIVVY, and that it means, 'I have enjoyed for a little pretending to be you, but I am not you and I do not wish to be you. Your glitter and the airs of you and the racket of you tire me, I want to be done with you, and to be back in quiet Quality Street, of which I am a part; it is really pleasant to me to know that I shall wake up to-morrow slightly middle-aged.' With the entrance of CAPTAIN BROWN, however, she is at once a frivol again. He frowns at sight of her cavaliers. )

VALENTINE. Gentlemen, I instructed this lady to rest, and I am surprised to find you in attendance. Miss Livvy, you must be weary of their fatuities, and I have taken the liberty to order your chaise.

PHOEBE. It is indeed a liberty.

BLADES. An outrage.

PHOEBE. I prefer to remain.

VALENTINE. Nay.

PHOEBE. I promised this dance to Ensign Blades.

SPICER. To me, ma'am.

PHOEBE. And the following one to Lieutenant Spicer. Mr. Blades, your arm.

VALENTINE. I forbid any further dancing.

PHOEBE. Forbid. La!

BLADES. Sir, by what right----

VALENTINE. By a right which I hope to make clear to Miss Livvy as soon as you gentlemen have retired.

(PHOEBE sees that the declaration is coming. She steels herself. )

PHOEBE. I am curious to know what Captain Brown can have to say to me. In a few minutes, Mr. Blades, Lieutenant Spicer, I shall be at your service.

VALENTINE. I trust not.

PHOEBE. I give them my word.

( The young gentlemen retire, treading air once more . BROWN surveys her rather grimly. )

VALENTINE. You are an amazing pretty girl, ma'am, but you are a shocking flirt.

PHOEBE. La!

VALENTINE. It has somewhat diverted me to watch them go down before you. But I know you have a kind heart, and that if there be a rapier in your one hand there is a handkerchief in the other ready to staunch their wounds.

PHOEBE. I have not observed that they bled much.

VALENTINE. The Blades and the like, no. But one may, perhaps.

PHOEBE ( obviously the reference is to himself ). Perhaps I may wish to see him bleed.

VALENTINE ( grown stern ). For shame, Miss Livvy. ( Anger rises in her, but she wishes him to proceed. ) I speak, ma'am, in the interests of the man to whom I hope to see you affianced.

( No, she does not wish him to proceed. She had esteemed him for so long, she cannot have him debase himself before her now. )

PHOEBE. Shall we--I have changed my mind, I consent to go home. Please to say nothing.

VALENTINE. Nay----

PHOEBE. I beg you.

VALENTINE. No. We must have it out.

PHOEBE. Then if you must go on, do so. But remember I begged you to desist. Who is this happy man?

( His next words are a great shock to her. )

VALENTINE. As to who he is, ma'am, of course I have no notion. Nor, I am sure, have you, else you would be more guarded in your conduct. But some day, Miss Livvy, the right man will come. Not to be able to tell him all, would it not be hard? And how could you acquaint him with this poor sport? His face would change, ma'am, as you told him of it, and yours would be a false face until it was told. This is what I have been so desirous to say to you--by the right of a friend.

PHOEBE ( in a low voice but bravely ). I see.

VALENTINE ( afraid that he has hurt her ). It has been hard to say and I have done it bunglingly. Ah, but believe me, Miss Livvy, it is not the flaunting flower men love; it is the modest violet.

PHOEBE. The modest violet! You dare to say that.

VALENTINE. Yes, indeed, and when you are acquaint with what love really is----

PHOEBE. Love! What do you know of love?

VALENTINE ( a little complacently ). Why, ma'am, I know all about it. I am in love, Miss Livvy.

PHOEBE ( with a disdainful inclination of the head ). I wish you happy.

VALENTINE. With a lady who was once very like you, ma'am.

( At first PHOEBE does not understand, then a suspicion of his meaning comes to her. )

PHOEBE. Not--not--oh no.

VALENTINE. I had not meant to speak of it, but why should not I? It will be a fine lesson to you, Miss Livvy. Ma'am, it is your Aunt Phoebe whom I love.

PHOEBE ( rigid ). You do not mean that.

VALENTINE. Most ardently.

PHOEBE. It is not true; how dare you make sport of her.

VALENTINE. Is it sport to wish she may be my wife?

PHOEBE. Your wife!

VALENTINE. If I could win her.

PHOEBE ( bewildered ). May I solicit, sir, for how long you have been attached to Miss Phoebe?

VALENTINE. For nine years, I think.

PHOEBE. You think!

VALENTINE. I want to be honest. Never in all that time had I thought myself in love. Your aunts were my dear friends, and while I was at the wars we sometimes wrote to each other, but they were only friendly letters. I presume the affection was too placid to be love.

PHOEBE. I think that would be Aunt Phoebe's opinion.

VALENTINE. Yet I remember, before we went into action for the first time--I suppose the fear of death was upon me--some of them were making their wills--I have no near relative--I left everything to these two ladies.

PHOEBE ( softly ). Did you?

( What is it that MISS PHOEBE begins to see as she sits there so quietly, with her hands pressed together as if upon some treasure? It is PHOEBE of the ringlets with the stain taken out of her. )

VALENTINE. And when I returned a week ago and saw Miss Phoebe, grown so tired-looking and so poor----

PHOEBE. The shock made you feel old, I know.

VALENTINE. No, Miss Livvy, but it filled me with a sudden passionate regret that I had not gone down in that first engagement. They would have been very comfortably left.

PHOEBE. Oh, sir!

VALENTINE. I am not calling it love.

PHOEBE. It was sweet and kind, but it was not love.

VALENTINE. It is love now.

PHOEBE. No, it is only pity.

VALENTINE. It is love.

PHOEBE ( she smiles tremulously ). You really mean Phoebe--tired, unattractive Phoebe, that woman whose girlhood is gone. Nay, impossible.

VALENTINE ( stoutly ). Phoebe of the fascinating playful ways, whose ringlets were once as pretty as yours, ma'am. I have visited her in her home several times this week--you were always out--I thank you for that! I was alone with her, and with fragrant memories of her.

PHOEBE. Memories! Yes, that is the Phoebe you love, the bright girl of the past--not the schoolmistress in her old-maid's cap.

VALENTINE. There you wrong me, for I have discovered for myself that the schoolmistress in her old-maid's cap is the noblest Miss Phoebe of them all. ( If only he would go away, and let MISS PHOEBE cry. ) When I enlisted, I remember I compared her to a garden. I have often thought of that.

PHOEBE. 'Tis an old garden now.

VALENTINE. The paths, ma'am, are better shaded.

PHOEBE. The flowers have grown old-fashioned.

VALENTINE. They smell the sweeter. Miss Livvy, do you think there is any hope for me?

PHOEBE. There was a man whom Miss Phoebe loved--long ago. He did not love her.

VALENTINE. Now here was a fool!

PHOEBE. He kissed her once.

VALENTINE. If Miss Phoebe suffered him to do that she thought he loved her.

PHOEBE. Yes, yes. ( She has to ask him the ten years old question. ) Do you opinion that this makes her action in allowing it less reprehensible? It has been such a pain to her ever since.

VALENTINE. How like Miss Phoebe! ( Sternly. ) But that man was a knave.

PHOEBE. No, he was a good man--only a little--inconsiderate. She knows now that he has even forgotten that he did it. I suppose men are like that?

VALENTINE. No, Miss Livvy, men are not like that. I am a very average man, but I thank God I am not like that.

PHOEBE. It was you.

VALENTINE ( after a pause ). Did Miss Phoebe say that?

PHOEBE. Yes.

VALENTINE. Then it is true.

( He is very grave and quiet. )

PHOEBE. It was raining and her face was wet. You said you did it because her face was wet.

VALENTINE. I had quite forgotten.

PHOEBE. But she remembers, and how often do you think the shameful memory has made her face wet since? The face you love, Captain Brown, you were the first to give it pain. The tired eyes--how much less tired they might be if they had never known you. You who are torturing me with every word, what have you done to Miss Phoebe? You who think you can bring back the bloom to that faded garden, and all the pretty airs and graces that fluttered round it once like little birds before the nest is torn down--bring them back to her if you can, sir; it was you who took them away.

VALENTINE. I vow I shall do my best to bring them back. (MISS PHOEBE shakes her head. ) Miss Livvy, with your help----

PHOEBE. My help! I have not helped. I tried to spoil it all.

VALENTINE ( smiling ). To spoil it? You mean that you sought to flirt even with me. Ah, I knew you did. But that is nothing.

PHOEBE. Oh, sir, if you could overlook it.

VALENTINE. I do.

PHOEBE. And forget these hateful balls.

VALENTINE. Hateful! Nay, I shall never call them that. They have done me too great a service. It was at the balls that I fell in love with Miss Phoebe.

PHOEBE. What can you mean?

VALENTINE. She who was never at a ball! ( Checking himself humorously. ) But I must not tell you, it might hurt you.

PHOEBE. Tell me.

VALENTINE ( gaily ). Then on your own head be the blame. It is you who have made me love her, Miss Livvy.

PHOEBE. Sir?

VALENTINE. Yes, it is odd, and yet very simple. You who so resembled her as she was! for an hour, ma'am, you bewitched me; yes, I confess it, but 'twas only for an hour. How like, I cried at first, but soon it was, how unlike. There was almost nothing she would have said that you said; you did so much that she would have scorned to do. But I must not say these things to you!

PHOEBE. I ask it of you, Captain Brown.

VALENTINE. Well! Miss Phoebe's 'lady-likeness,' on which she set such store that I used to make merry of the word--I gradually perceived that it is a woman's most beautiful garment, and the casket which contains all the adorable qualities that go to the making of a perfect female. When Miss Livvy rolled her eyes--ah!

( He stops apologetically. )

PHOEBE. Proceed, sir.

VALENTINE. It but made me the more complacent that never in her life had Miss Phoebe been guilty of the slightest deviation from the strictest propriety. ( She shudders. ) I was always conceiving her in your place. Oh, it was monstrous unfair to you. I stood looking at you, Miss Livvy, and seeing in my mind her and the pretty things she did, and you did not do; why, ma'am, that is how I fell in love with Miss Phoebe at the balls.

PHOEBE. I thank you.

VALENTINE. Ma'am, tell me, do you think there is any hope for me?

PHOEBE. Hope!

VALENTINE. I shall go to her. 'Miss Phoebe,' I will say--oh, ma'am, so reverently--'Miss Phoebe, my beautiful, most estimable of women, let me take care of you for ever more.'

(MISS PHOEBE presses the words to her heart and then drops them. )

PHOEBE. Beautiful. La, Aunt Phoebe!

VALENTINE. Ah, ma'am, you may laugh at a rough soldier so much enamoured, but 'tis true. 'Marry me, Miss Phoebe,' I will say, 'and I will take you back through those years of hardships that have made your sweet eyes too patient. Instead of growing older you shall grow younger. We will travel back together to pick up the many little joys and pleasures you had to pass by when you trod that thorny path alone.'

PHOEBE. Can't be--can't be.

VALENTINE. Nay, Miss Phoebe has loved me. 'Tis you have said it.

PHOEBE. I did not mean to tell you.

VALENTINE. She will be my wife yet.

PHOEBE. Never.

VALENTINE. You are severe, Miss Livvy. But it is because you are partial to her, and I am happy of that.

PHOEBE ( in growing horror of herself ). I partial to her! I am laughing at both of you. Miss Phoebe. La, that old thing.

VALENTINE ( sternly ). Silence!

PHOEBE. I hate her and despise her. If you knew what she is----

( He stops her with a gesture. )

VALENTINE. I know what you are.

PHOEBE. That paragon who has never been guilty of the slightest deviation from the strictest propriety.

VALENTINE. Never.

PHOEBE. That garden----

VALENTINE. Miss Livvy, for shame.

PHOEBE. Your garden has been destroyed, sir; the weeds have entered it, and all the flowers are choked.

VALENTINE. You false woman, what do you mean?

PHOEBE. I will tell you. ( But his confidence awes her. ) What faith you have in her.

VALENTINE. As in my God. Speak.

PHOEBE. I cannot tell you.

VALENTINE. No, you cannot.

PHOEBE. It is too horrible.

VALENTINE. You are too horrible. Is not that it?

PHOEBE. Yes, that is it.

(MISS SUSAN has entered and caught the last words. )

MISS SUSAN ( shrinking as from a coming blow ). What is too horrible?

VALENTINE. Ma'am, I leave the telling of it to her, if she dare. And I devoutly hope those are the last words I shall ever address to this lady.

( He bows and goes out in dudgeon . MISS SUSAN believes all is discovered and that MISS PHOEBE is for ever shamed. )

MISS SUSAN ( taking PHOEBE in her arms ). My love, my dear, what terrible thing has he said to you?

PHOEBE ( forgetting everything but that she is loved ). Not terrible--glorious! Susan, 'tis Phoebe he loves, 'tis me, not Livvy! He loves me, he loves me! Me--Phoebe!

(MISS SUSAN'S bosom swells. It is her great hour as much as PHOEBE'S.)

End of Act III.