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A CURE FOR INDIFFERENCE
A COMEDY

BY
GEOFFREY WILKINSON

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A CURE FOR INDIFFERENCE

MRS. SUSAN TILLING *A widow.*
HELEN BAINBRIDGE } *Her married nieces.*
SOPHIE FRAYLE }
NORTH *A parlour-maid.*

SCENE.—Mrs. TILLING'S *drawing-room, Bayswater.*

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A CURE FOR INDIFFERENCE

SCENE.—MRS. TILLING'S *drawing-room, Somewhere in Bayswater.*

MRS. TILLING *discovered in a comfortable armchair by the fireside, knitting.*

MRS. TILLING *is an elderly lady with a severe-looking countenance, but on second inspection there is a distinct twinkle in her eyes.*

(*Enter NORTH carrying a big dress box.*)

MRS. TILLING. Is that you, North?

NORTH. Yes, mum. I've brought down that cloak and hat which you said you wanted.

MRS. TILLING. Ah, yes—that's right, but why the box?

NORTH. Well, I thought if you were sending them by post, mum——

MRS. TILLING. But I'm not, North—still, never mind, the box will do very well. Place it over there by the window. I suppose you put the veil in?

NORTH. Oh yes, mum, the veil's there, and—and—everything.

MRS. TILLING. Thank you, North, you're a good creature and very patient with an old lady's whims and fancies. You were married once, weren't you, North?

NORTH. Yes, mum.

MRS. TILLING. Was it a success ?

NORTH. How do you mean, mum ?

MRS. TILLING. Did you love him ?

NORTH. Yes, mum.

MRS. TILLING. And did he love you ?

NORTH. Oh yes, mum.

MRS. TILLING. The real thing, I mean—he didn't grow indifferent ?

NORTH. Oh no, mum, I should hope not indeed.

MRS. TILLING. No, that's the worst of all—indifference. If you're going to be wicked, be wicked, and do it with the vengeance ; if you're going to be good, be good, and build a cathedral in Whitechapel ; if you're going to hate, hate ; and if you're going to love—well, do it properly. But never be indifferent—we can't stand that, it bends and it breaks us—it broke me—once. Indifference.

(Bell.)

Ah, there's the front door bell. Now I expect that's my niece, Mrs. Bainbridge, and I'm going to slip into the next room to let her simmer down for a moment.

NORTH. Simmer down ?

MRS. TILLING. Oh yes, she's sure to be in a rage. I'm not a soothsayer as a rule, North, but something tells me Mrs. Bainbridge will be in a fuming temper—this morning. Show her in, North, show her in.

(*She exits into a little room leading off the drawing-room while NORTH goes to the front door to let in MRS. BAINBRIDGE.*)

(*Re-enter NORTH, showing in MRS. BAINBRIDGE.*)

(*MRS. BAINBRIDGE comes in like a whirlwind. She is in a towering passion.*)

MRS. BAINBRIDGE. I thought you said Mrs. Tilling was in ?

NORTH. So she is, mum, but she's engaged for a minute or two.

MRS. BAINBRIDGE. Well! I hope she won't be long! (*Exit NORTH.*) How tiresome to be kept waiting. (*She begins to pace up and down the room. After a moment she stops, seizes the telephone from the table and takes off the receiver.*) Hullo! Hullo! 2634 Bank. Yes—yes, 2-6-3-4 Bank. Don't be impertinent, I'm sure I speak perfectly distinctly. Hullo! hullo! Is that you, Mr. Miller? I want to speak to my husband, please. It's Mrs. Bainbridge speaking. Will you put me through? Thank you. Is that you, Gerald? Don't call me that name again—I forbid it, and I've just rung up to tell you—I've done with you for ever!! That's final! What? Don't lose my temper about it? I'm not losing my temper—I was never cooler in my life—I'm simply—simply—indifferent—oh! how I hate you!! (*Slams down receiver and begins pacing the room again.*)

(*Re-enter MRS. TILLING.*)

MRS. TILLING. Ah, Helen, there you are, dear; how charming you're looking this morning.

HELEN. Am I? Well, I'm feeling anything but charming, in fact, I never felt worse in my life. I've come—

MRS. TILLING. To see me—so good of you, dear. Won't you sit down?

HELEN. No, thank you, I'd rather stand. I've—*I've come to tell you something—*

MRS. TILLING. Now that's really kind of you—that's what I like—I love people to come and tell me things. What is it about? Your new hat that Thérèse is designing for you? Gerald tells me it's going to cost quite a lot of money—so it's sure to be nice.

HELEN. It's not about my hat I've come to see you—it's—

MRS. TILLING. No? Then it's about your dress. That's more interesting still. What colour are you going to have? I always think blue suits you best.

HELEN. It's not about my dress, either. I—I——

MRS. TILLING. Of course—it's the Duchess's bridge party! How stupid of me! I quite forgot you were going there on Friday. How did you enjoy ^{ee} it?

HELEN (*exasperated*). It's got nothing to do with the Duchess's bridge party, and if you don't stop making fun of me, Aunt Susan, I'll—I'll shake you!

MRS. TILLING. Why? What have I done?

HELEN. It's much more serious than my hat, my dress, or the Duchess—it's got to do with Gerald.

MRS. TILLING. Gerald—your husband?

HELEN. Yes.

MRS. TILLING. Oh, but I thought he didn't interest you?

HELEN. Now don't start mocking me.

MRS. TILLING. But indeed, dear, last time you came to see me, you told me Gerald meant as much to you as—a leg of a table does to the drawing-room carpet, or something like that. I'm so glad you've altered your mind. I'm so glad he isn't a piece of furniture and that you've taken a fancy to him.

HELEN. I haven't—he's taken a fancy to somebody else.

MRS. TILLING. Well, that's all right—he'll be out of the way, and you needn't be bothered with him any more.

HELEN. But it isn't all right—it's all wrong.

MRS. TILLING. Then you *do* care for him—after all?

HELEN. Certainly not, I loathe him!

MRS. TILLING. I'm getting a little mixed, dear, but no doubt you're talking sense.

HELEN (*bursting out*). Oh! Do you want me to go mad?

MRS. TILLING. Not very much.

HELEN. You exasperate me beyond all words. I'm on fire—I'm raging—I'm like a Vesuvius that can't erupt.

MRS. TILLING. How very unpleasant! But what can I do?

HELEN. Give me something to smash!

MRS. TILLING. But I don't know that there's anything I want to part with in a hurry.

HELEN. It's here—itching in my fingers. I don't care what it is—man, woman, child or china—but something's got to be smashed!

MRS. TILLING. Very well, then, that cat with the green eyes on the little table; it isn't very valuable, and they say that it's unlucky.

HELEN (*picking it up and smashing it*). Thank you.

MRS. TILLING. Now do you feel better?

HELEN. Yes, that'll last me for a little time.

MRS. TILLING. Then come and sit down and tell me all about it.

HELEN. Last night, at twelve o'clock, mind you, an hour when all respectable people are in bed, Gerald was supposed to be writing. I went to his study, and as I opened one door I saw the tail of a crimson cloak disappearing round the other.

MRS. TILLING. What did you do? Scream?

HELEN. Oh no, my dear aunt—I'm not quite so stupid as that—I crept.

MRS. TILLING. Crept?

HELEN. I crept after the disappearing cloak.

MRS. TILLING. Where did it go to?

HELEN. I groped down inky staircases, slipped on abominable door-mats, wrestled with rebellious locks and ran down the darkened streets, but all in vain—the creature had evaded me, and the only thing I found was this—this ignominious fan. (*Holds up a white fan.*)

MRS. TILLING. And Gerald? What of him?

HELEN. We had words!

MRS. TILLING. I can quite believe it.

HELEN. Strong words!

MRS. TILLING. What did you say?

HELEN. I told him he was a brute and a bully, and that he qualified for the Sultan of Morocco.

MRS. TILLING. And he? What did he say?

HELEN. He thanked me for thinking it out so nicely. Oh!

MRS. TILLING. Look out, you'll break that fan if you're not careful, and really it's rather pretty.

HELEN. It isn't—it's hideous, and I hate the very sight of it; picked up at some cheap bazaar.

MRS. TILLING. Still, it's a clue.

HELEN. Exactly, and so I spent the remaining hours of last night and this morning thinking—thinking of my friends and their fans.

MRS. TILLING. So you believe it was one of your friends?

HELEN. I'm certain of it. One can't help noticing that Gerald is good looking, even if he is one's husband, and I've seen them eyeing him sometimes. At first I thought it was Kitty Morrison—she's a cat, of course, but she is smart and she wouldn't be seen about with a thing like that (*pointing to the fan*). Then I thought of Olive Gibson, but she's "brainy," you know, and would be sure to carry something *really* ugly. But who do you think it looks like?—this twopenny halfpenny fan? Can't you guess? Who's all swansdown, tinsel and nonsense?

MRS. TILLING. I've not the least idea.

HELEN. Why, Sophie!

MRS. TILLING. Your own cousin?

HELEN. My own cousin and your niece—Sophie Frayle.

MRS. TILLING. I don't believe it for a moment.

HELEN. Of course you wouldn't, you always did favour Sophie; in fact, it's quite appalling, the way you pamper her.

MRS. TILLING. I'm very fond of Sophie, certainly.

HELEN. Well, you've no right to be; she isn't respectable, running after other people's husbands.

MRS. TILLING. You haven't proved it yet, Helen.

HELEN. No, but I shall. All the world shall know. Look here, look here at this fan. Can't you see an "S" traced in the corner?

MRS. TILLING. Yes.

HELEN. And when I feel that Gerald—my husband—may have written it, I—I feel—I feel as if I could— (*Seizes a china dog, a fellow to the departed cat.*)

MRS. TILLING (*stopping her*). No—no, Helen, you killed the cat—the dog is more valuable.

(*Enter NORTH.*)

NORTH. Mrs. Frayle.

(*Enter MRS. FRAYLE, a timid little person, full of tears.*)

MRS. FRAYLE (*dolefully*). Good morning, aunt. (*Seeing HELEN.*) Oh, I didn't expect to find you here.

(*Exit NORTH.*)

HELEN (*icily*). Nor I, you.

MRS. TILLING. Well, Sophie, and what wind blows you in?

SOPHIE. A very ill one, I'm afraid, Aunt Susan.

MRS. TILLING. Why, bless you, child, you look as if you've been crying half the night.

SOPHIE. And so I have—oh, Aunt (*beginning to cry.*) I've—I've—something to tell you—

MRS. TILLING. Well, upon my soul, you're the second this morning. What is it this time? Is it your new hat—haven't they matched the ribbon properly?

SOPHIE. No, it isn't my hat, it's something far more serious.

MRS. TILLING. Then it must be your dress—it drags on the hips?

SOPHIE. No, it isn't my dress (*sobbing*); it's—
it's—it's—

MRS. TILLING. Of course, how stupid I am! It's
the Duchess's bridge party again. You weren't a
success.

SOPHIE. But I *was* a success—a great success,
and—it's nothing to do with the Duchess—it's—
it's—something quite different, it's—it's—Harold!

MRS. TILLING. But I thought he was only a
cipher?

SOPHIE. I never said so.

MRS. TILLING. Oh yes you did, you said he bored
you, and that you took him to the most crowded
receptions in the hope that you might lose him.

SOPHIE. Did I? How foolish of me. I didn't
mean it, of course—and now—and now it's too late,
and he's a mormon and a monster.

MRS. TILLING. Whatever do you mean, and how
is it too late?

SOPHIE (*breaking down*). Oh, I can't tell you now,
it's—it's—too dreadful.

HELEN (*losing patience*). For goodness' sake stop
snivelling, Sophie, and tell us what happened.

SOPHIE. I can do that without your interference,
Helen!

HELEN. The sort of remark I should have ex-
pected from you, dear.

MRS. TILLING. Now then, girls, no quarrel-
ling. Dry your eyes, Sophie, and tell us what's the
matter.

SOPHIE (*trying to begin*). Well—er—well—er—
well—

MRS. TILLING. Yes, dear, we've heard that before.

SOPHIE. Well—well—oh! (*It's no good, she has
to break down again.*)

MRS. TILLING. Quick, Helen, the smelling salts;
perhaps that will stop her.

(HELEN gets the salts, and applies them rather suddenly.)

SOPHIE. Oh! you might have told me you were going to do it—you nearly blew my head off.

MRS. TILLING. Now then, Sophie, we're waiting.

SOPHIE. It all happened last night. It was a little after twelve. I'm generally in bed at twelve, but I'd been out to the theatre with some friends. Lady Allenby was there, so it was quite all right. Well, as I was saying, it was a little after twelve—I noticed it particularly because the clock on the drawing-room mantelpiece had stopped and I looked at the one in the hall as I passed. Well! as I was saying, it was a little after twelve——

HELEN. Oh, make it one o'clock and let's get on with it.

SOPHIE (*aggrieved*). It wasn't one o'clock, and I don't intend to tell a lie about it. It was a little after twelve.

MRS. TILLING. Very well, dear, we quite agree with you, it was a little after twelve. What comes next?

SOPHIE. Harold was supposed to be writing in his study——

MRS. TILLING. And wasn't he?

SOPHIE. Oh, yes—he was there all right, and so was some one else.

HELEN. Some one else!

SOPHIE. As I opened one door, I saw a woman in a crimson cloak disappearing out of the other.

HELEN. What!

SOPHIE (*tearfully*). Yes, it's quite true—he's a mormon and a monster.

MRS. TILLING. And you? What did *you* do—creep after her?

SOPHIE. Oh no, I screamed and fainted.

HELEN. I don't believe it—she's making it up.

MRS. TILLING. Be quiet, Helen, you've not got the copyright in husbands.

SOPHIE. When I came round, I was quite alone

on the sofa, and clutched in my hand was a strange woman's handkerchief.

MRS. TILLING. A handkerchief!

SOPHIE. Yes, it must have been *her* handkerchief—the husband-snatcher's, I mean, and was most probably lying on the sofa when I swooned.

MRS. TILLING. Had it any initials on it?

SOPHIE. No, but it was simply soaked in scent.

MRS. TILLING. A clue!

SOPHIE. That's what I thought, and so for the remainder of the night I've been sitting up and thinking—thinking of my friends and their scents.

MRS. TILLING. You don't mean to say you're going about smelling everybody's handkerchief?

SOPHIE. Why not? Somebody's stolen my husband.

MRS. TILLING. Have you any idea who it is?

SOPHIE. Yes, I think I have.

HELEN. Who is it?

SOPHIE. I shouldn't like to say, Helen, in present company.

HELEN. What do you mean? You don't suggest that I——?

SOPHIE. Would you mind giving me your handkerchief, dear?

HELEN. You little vixen! You mean to say that you suspect your own cousin!

SOPHIE. If you're so sure, give me your handkerchief and prove your innocence.

HELEN. Innocence, indeed! Take my handkerchief, and in exchange give me your apologies.

SOPHIE (*smells the two handkerchiefs*). The same! The very same!

HELEN. What!

SOPHIE. You *are* the husband-snatcher, then!

MRS. TILLING. Oh, Helen!

HELEN. It isn't true—they can't be the same.

SOPHIE. Smell them, Aunt Susan, smell them.

MRS. TILLING (*smelling them*). I'm sorry, Helen, but they're undoubtedly the same.

HELEN. I don't believe it. She knows perfectly well that she went to see my husband last night, and she's making up this tale to shield herself.

MRS. TILLING. Oh! how clever, Helen.

SOPHIE. What do you mean?

HELEN. Perhaps you recognize this fan?

SOPHIE. Yes, it's mine! I lost it a few days ago.

HELEN. You hear, Aunt Susan, she owns it. Who's the husband-snatcher now?

MRS. TILLING. Oh, Sophie!

SOPHIE. I don't understand.

HELEN. Poor little Miss Innocence. You'll be surprised to hear I had a similar experience last night as you reported. I also went to my husband's study at twelve o'clock and I also saw a crimson cloak disappearing round the door, and when it had gone I found this lying on the sofa.

SOPHIE. My fan!

HELEN. Your fan—so now apologize and tell me what you mean by it.

SOPHIE. I never left it there—it must have been one of my friends.

HELEN. A pretty tale.

SOPHIE. How dare you doubt my word! Aunt Susan, you let her insult me so?

MRS. TILLING. Well, the evidence is strong against you, Sophie.

SOPHIE. And what about her handkerchief? She hasn't explained that yet!

HELEN. Lots of my friends use the same perfume as I do.

SOPHIE. No they don't. It's a very peculiar perfume.

HELEN. What! So you would call me a liar, then! Aunt Susan, I appeal to you—Am I a liar?

MRS. TILLING. Well, the evidence is strong against you, Helen.

HELEN. Oh! oh! If I were a man I'd fight you, Sophie.

SOPHIE. So would I, only I haven't got a sword.

MRS. TILLING. Well, you've both got stout umbrellas.

HELEN. A good idea. Sophie, en garde. (*Stands in a fencing position with her umbrella.*)

SOPHIE. No, no, I didn't mean it.

HELEN. She's frightened, the coward. Come on.

SOPHIE (*feebly putting out her umbrella*). Oh! She'll kill me, I know I shall be killed.

MRS. TILLING (*chuckling*). Courage, Sophie, die like an Englishwoman.

SOPHIE (*banging about with umbrella*). Oh! it isn't fair. I'm not as strong as she is, and I never had a fencing lesson in my life. (*HELEN, by a quick movement, knocks the umbrella out of her hand. SOPHIE runs, HELEN after her, waving her umbrella.*) Oh! oh! she's knocked the umbrella from my hand. Oh! oh! she'll brain me. Aunt! aunt! stop her, she's running after me. Murder! Fire!! Police!!!

MRS. TILLING (*coming between them*). Children! Children! Listen to me. Helen, desist! It's time you knew the truth.

HELEN. } The truth!
SOPHIE. }

MRS. TILLING. Yes, the cure is now complete.

HELEN. What do you mean?

MRS. TILLING. My cure for indifference, for you're both certainly no longer indifferent, whatever else you may be. You've proved that beyond a doubt, so put up your umbrellas and listen to me. Helen, the woman you saw in your husband's study wasn't Sophie. And, Sophie, the woman you saw in your husband's study wasn't Helen. She was one and the same person.

HELEN. } How do you know?
SOPHIE. }

MRS. TILLING. I happened to be there.

HELEN. You happened to be there ?

MRS. TILLING. In fact, the interesting lady in the crimson cloak, who made you both so jealous, was no less a person than your foolish old Aunt Susan.

SOPHIE. You ?

HELEN. I don't believe it.

MRS. TILLING. Lift up the lid of that dress-box, please, Sophie, and see what's underneath.

(SOPHIE *pulls off the lid, disclosing the crimson cloak, with an exclamation of recognition.*)

HELEN. The very same cloak.

SOPHIE. The hat, too.

MRS. TILLING. Exactly, and the veil.

SOPHIE (*holding up a golden wig*). And this !
What's this ?

MRS. TILLING. Oh, that's a golden-wig I bought in case either of you saw too much of me. It cost me quite a lot of money.

SOPHIE. But why did you do it, aunt ?

HELEN. What was your object ?

MRS. TILLING. To teach you both a lesson. You know, it's a very funny thing, but when one gets an old woman, one's relations and their affairs mean such a lot to one. That's the way with life. When we are young, we are so selfish that the only business that interests us is our own ; when we grow older, we become so *unselfish* that the only business that interests us is—other people's. You both interested me enormously, and I couldn't help seeing that you were making havoc of your young lives.

HELEN. Why ?

MRS. TILLING. You had grown indifferent to your husbands. You didn't care—oh, believe me, nothing is so fatal. I would rather you had hated them. So I put my old head together and tried to think how I could help, when suddenly it struck me what a splendid plan it would be to play one against the other.

SOPHIE. I see.

MRS. TILLING. So first I went and had lunch with Sophie. You remember?

SOPHIE. Last Tuesday, wasn't it?

MRS. TILLING. Yes, I think it was.

SOPHIE. The day I missed my fan.

MRS. TILLING. I stole it.

SOPHIE. Auntie!

MRS. TILLING. Then I went to dine with Helen.

HELEN. Last Wednesday.

MRS. TILLING. I had a headache, do you remember?

HELEN. Why, yes, and I went upstairs and fetched my——

MRS. TILLING. Scent bottle.

HELEN. Auntie!

MRS. TILLING. I borrowed it. Here it is (*producing scent bottle out of little bag*). Would you like it back? (*Returns it to HELEN.*) Then I saw your husbands, told them my intentions, they agreed to help me, and all was well.

HELEN. But, last night——

MRS. TILLING. I visited *your* house first, Helen, arriving there about a quarter to twelve, played my part and left again about five past. Went direct to Sophie's, reaching there a minute or two later—repeated my performance and came away, a little after twelve, Sophie! Am I forgiven?

SOPHIE. Of course, Aunt Susan, of course. Oh dear, what a foolish creature I've been! And I called him a mormon and a monster. Oh dear! Whatever shall I do. (*Begins to cry.*)

MRS. TILLING. Well, don't start that, for goodness' sake, or we shan't be able to stop you again. (*She looks up to see HELEN with the telephone in her hand.*) Why, Helen, what are you doing?

HELEN. Telephoning. Gerald! no—no, I mean Bank 2634. Hullo! hullo! Darling, darling! I'm so sorry—oh, I beg your pardon, I thought you were

my husband. Is that you, Gerald? I'm so sorry—
aunt has told me all about it. Forgive me, dearest,
forgive me, and take me out to lunch. Oh, thanks,
sweetheart—the Carlton, did you say? One-
thirty—right-o! Till then, darling! (*Puts down
receiver.*) Don't you want to 'phone, Sophie?

SOPHIE. No thank you, Helen dear, I'm much
too upset; I should cry all down the telephone and
make it wet. I must get a taxi and go to him at
once. Good-bye, Aunt Susan, good-bye, Helen.
(*Going to door.*) Oh dear, I wonder if he'll forgive
me, and I'm sure my nose is red, oh dear! (*Quite
overcome.*) And he does hate red noses so. He
told me this morning that mine scintillated. Oh
dear! And I—oh dear!—I called him a mormon
and a monster—oh dear! (*Exit.*)

HELEN. Good-bye, Aunt Susan, you're a sport.

MRS. TILLING. Thank you, Helen. I say, you
did make me run last night.

HELEN. Did I?

MRS. TILLING. I thought my old legs would drop
off. Good-bye. Send North to me, will you? I
hope you'll enjoy your luncheon.

HELEN. Oh, I'm sure to, thanks. It's the Carl-
ton, besides—I'm lunching with *him*! (*Exit.*)

(*A slight pause.*)

(*Enter NORTH.*)

MRS. TILLING. Oh, North, I'm thinking of taking
a little nap. Is my shawl there?

NORTH. Yes, mum. (*Puts it round her.*)

MRS. TILLING. Well, it's all over, North, and it
was a great success.

NORTH. What was, mum?

MRS. TILLING. The plot—oh, of course, I forgot—
you didn't know—I shall have to tell you that an-
other time, North. It'll make you laugh. How
an old woman hoodwinked her nieces.

NORTH. Yes, mum.

MRS. TILLING (*falling to sleep*). Indifference—it's the root of all evil. Never go in for it, North—never! Oh dear! I shall enjoy a quiet nap, now it's all right. Indifference—that's it—Indifference. Ah!

(*She nods.*)

CURTAIN.

Continued from second page of cover.

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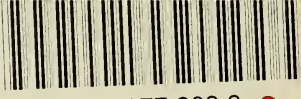
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