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MISS BURNETT PUTS ONE OVER

—BY—

ETHELYN SEXTON



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Cast of Characters

BARBARA MURRAY
MARY MARKHAM
JACQUELINE (Jack) SURRY
MARGARET GREY
MRS. MURRAY—Barbara's mother
ANN BURNETT—rich friend of Barbara's
mother

} College Girls

†

Costumes

The costumes of the girls may be light afternoon dresses, suitable for an afternoon reception. Miss Burnett, at her first entrance wears an attractive traveling suit. Her costume as Sophia should be old-fashioned and quaint, eliminating any idea of a modern, incongruous costume. Mrs. Murray wears traveling suit and carries a bag.

Miss Burnett Puts One Over

Scene—Sitting room of a suite in college dormitory. Exits, R, leading from out-of-doors; L, leading into bedroom. Sofa with pillows back center, table at right, easy chairs, ukelele leaning against table, banners and posters on walls.

Barbara, Margaret and Mary are straight characters, having no distinctive traits other than those characteristic of the college girl type. Jacqueline is abrupt, athletic and sadly addicted to slang. Care should be taken that this part be not overdone. When well acted, it is one of the most amusing features of the play. The character of Miss Burnett also offers opportunity for some excellent acting. She is a gracious woman between thirty-five and forty; fun-loving, with a keen sense of humor. Care should be taken that her part as Sophia be not exaggerated.

(Enter Jack and Mary from R. C. Take off wraps.)

Jack—Gee! Aren't receptions fierce? I despise 'em!

Mary—Yes, they are rather a bore.

Jack—(impatiently pulling off a glove and throwing it on table) I'll say they are! You stand around and shake hands with people that you'd naturally greet with a few simple words like "Hello, old scout!" And you sip frappe and wafers out of a glass and you smile—

Mary—(laughing) Wafers out of a glass! Oh, Jack!

Jack—(sitting down on sofa and slipping off her pump to feel of sore heel) Well, if your shoe hurt like mine does, you wouldn't know whether you were talking sense or nonsense. Oh, Boy!

Mary—Too bad! Spoiled the party for you, didn't it? (*Enter from I. Barbara.*) Hello, Barb, how's Margaret?

Barb.—Fast asleep. She'll be all right when she wakes up. A bad headache, I guess.

Jack—Too bad you missed the reception. Some time we had!

Barb.—I wanted to go; and you know Margaret did. But that French exam that's coming off next week settled the question for me. Believe me! I put in some good, hard work on those French verbs this afternoon. I'd know them now if I met them in darkest Africa.

Mary—(*laughing*) Jack's giving you some fine sarcasm and you're missing it. She's not fond of receptions.

Barb.—So that's it? I should have no regrets then, Jackie?

Jack—I'll tell the world you shouldn't! The senior girls were all lined up in a row and we shook hands with them solemnly as if we'd never seen them before. Then we stood around and chatted with a lot of folks we didn't want to chat with. Oh, it was thrilling!

Barb—(*laughing with Mary*) Did they have a program?

Jack—Easy. Glen Hildreth, our popular young baritone sang a song about his love being like a shining s-t-a-r, and looked straight at Mary all the time.

Mary—You goose! He didn't.

Barb.—(*laughing*) Don't blush, Mary. Oh, girls, I almost forgot to tell you! The mail came and I—(*She rises and the girls rush to table where they find mail.*)

Jack—(*waving check which she takes out*) Welcome, little friend. A check from home, girls.

Mary—Mine's an ad. (*Reads.*) Am I not interested in "our designs for clothes-pins—no, class pins?" That's what comes of being class president! You think you have a sure-enough letter, and it proves to be an ad, reminding you of your duties. (*To Barb., who is taking*

a letter from her pocket.) Why all the mystery, Babs? What did you draw in the mail?

Barb.—When you're all through, I've something to tell you; something important. Here, read this. (*Mary takes letter and reads while Jack looks over her shoulder. Barbara stands watching.*)

Mary—(*reading*) "Dear Barbara: I have just had a letter from my old friend, Ann Burnett, of whom you have heard me speak, and she writes that she is coming to make a visit to your college. She will undoubtedly call and see you, and I want you to make her very welcome, indeed. Miss Burnett is a charming person, who is greatly interested in college girls. She is a lady of considerable wealth and I think intends to bestow a goodly portion of it on some deserving college which may take her fancy. Who knows? Perhaps it may be yours. Anyway, I'm glad that you and your friends are to see and know her. Lovingly, Mother."

Barb.—Read the postscript.

Mary—(*reading*) "Miss Burnett will stop with Miss Lockwood of the faculty and will probably call upon you late Thursday afternoon or evening." Late afternoon! Why, she's likely to be here any minute!

Barb.—Of course she is. I was afraid you girls wouldn't get home before she came.

Jack—Well, she's not coming to see Mary and me. She's coming to see you. Come on, Mary. Here's where we beat it. (*Takes Mary by arm. Mary is reluctant.*)

Barb.—(*seizing her*) Indeed you don't! Here's where you stay and help out. Girls, wouldn't it be fine if she would become so interested and pleased that she would endow a new gymnasium or chapel for our college?

Mary—What sort of person is she?

Barb.—Well, to tell the truth, I don't know. Mother seems to think I know quite a bit about her, but I don't. I imagine, though, she is wonderfully keen, knows about

literature and art—and current topics—and all that sort of thing, you know.

Jack—A regular high-brow! Good-night! I'll not stay and queer things. (*Starts to go out.*)

Mary—Oh, come on, Jack, be game. Don't leave us in the lurch like this.

Jack—(*relenting*) Oh, all right. I won't be a quitter. Only if I spill the beans and throw a wrench into the machinery by my unladylike actions, as our beloved dean puts it, why, remember it's not my party.

Barb.—(*going to her and putting arm about her shoulders*) Jackie, dear; I know we're all a bit slangy; but you are about fifty per cent. worse than the rest of us. Don't you suppose you can omit a few expressions and use ordinary English while the company's here?

Mary—Yes. I imagine Miss Burnett abhors slang.

Jack—I'll do my best. But no one was ever reformed in five minutes. If we had only got wise (*Mary claps hand over mouth.*) I mean, *heard* about this a month ago, I might have memorized a few pages out of the dictionary.

Barb.—(*laughing*) Don't worry, Jackie. Come, help me put this room to right, girls. Mary, take your gloves; Jack, do put on your other shoe; or else take off the other one and encase your fairy feet in something comfortable.

Jack—Fairy feet is good!

Mary—(*sings*) "She wears a number nine! She wears a number nine!" (*Jack throws slipper at Mary, who catches it and tosses it back.*) It's the wrong slipper, Cinderella—the fairy prince—

Barb.—Girls, I have it!

Both—Have what?

Barb.—An idea!

Jack—Hang on to it.

Mary—Does it hurt?

Barb.—(sits down. Others follow example.) I read a story last summer, entitled, "My Double and How He Undid Me." It was about a minister who had so many duties and appointments that he could not attend to them all. So he found a man who looked exactly like him, taught him a few set speeches or remarks that he could use for certain occasions and when the minister merely had to be present—not make any address, you know, why this man went in his place all primed with bits of conversation.

Jack—What's that got to do with us?

Barb.—Well, I'm coming to that. Of course, our case is not exactly the same; but wouldn't it be a good scheme for each of us to know exactly what we are going to say—each be responsible for one topic, you know? It seems to me that then the conversation would be sure to run smoothly.

Mary—Great! That's fine! Don't you think so, Jack?

Jack—(doubtfully) I don't know. What kind of topics do you mean? I haven't a very large assortment.

Barb.—Why, each of us will take a subject that she is sure of—it doesn't make so much difference what it is. The idea is to keep the conversation going.

Mary—I think we should be sure to have appropriate topics, questions of the day—things that we know Miss Burnett would be interested in.

Jack—(starting for the door, L.) I'm going to get Margaret. The more there are of us, the safer I'll feel.

Barb.—Jack, you wouldn't! She's sick.

Jack—Yes, I would, too. Her headache will be gone when she wakes up. You said so yourself. Come on.

Mary—She'll throw things at us.

Jack—Oh, no, she won't. We'll reason with her. Anyway, I learned in Psychology that an idea or sudden interest would drive away pain. Perhaps this will cure her headache.

(*Exeunt. The stage is empty for a moment. The subdued voices of the girls are heard as they gently "reason" with Margaret. Then comes a knock at the door. Girls go on talking. Knock repeated. Door opens and Miss Burnett enters, looking about inquiringly. Suddenly, clearly and distinctly from the bedroom door comes Margaret's voice. Miss B. is first puzzled, then amused. At length she settles herself to hear the following conversation:*)

Margaret—I must say I don't fancy the idea! Dragging me out of bed to help entertain someone I never heard of!

Jack—Oh, you will when you hear the scheme we've cooked up—I mean, *planned*.

Barb.—How's the headache?

Margaret—Mostly gone. But I don't feel like contributing to any intellectual banquet.

Mary—It won't be hard. Barbara has a perfectly lovely scheme. It's going to be a great lark! We are each to take a certain topic and be responsible for that topic alone. Then the conversation will be smooth and—and uplifting.

Margaret—What's my topic?

Barb.—We haven't decided yet. But hurry and get dressed, that's a dear. Then we'll go out in the study and plan it all out. Please do.

Jack—It's for the good of the school, you know, old sweetheart.

Mary—And Jack will stay and help you to fix up, won't you, Jackie?

Jack—Surest thing, you know.

Margaret—All right, I'm your martyr.

Jack—We all are. Beat it out of here, you two, and plan the party. (*Miss B. has caught the significance of the conversation and, laughing softly, slips out R. just as others appear.*)

Barb.—(sitting at table) Now, let's plan it out systematically. What do you want to talk about?

Mary.—Let's see. I wrote a paper for English last month on the "Art of Tennyson." How would it do for me to take that?

Barb.—That might be all right; only how can we be sure of bringing the conversation around to Tennyson? He's not what you'd call a *live* subject.

Mary.—That's easy. I could be reminded of a quotation from Tennyson, and then I could say, "Speaking of Tennyson, that reminds me—" and then we're safe for eight or ten minutes at least. And, suppose you talk about the League of Nations or the situation in Russia.

Barb.—I'm never sure of those Russian names. Besides, I haven't read the papers for a week.

Mary.—Well, you can criticise the administration, then. People do that whether they've read the papers or not. But you gave a fine history report on Russian affairs in class last week. What's wrong with your talking on that?

Barb.—All right. Only I've forgotten about the names. Say, you, you always did know how to pronounce names. You'll have to jump in and help me out. (*Enter Jack and Margaret. Margaret sits and Jack puts finishing touches to her hair.*)

Margaret.—What's my topic?

Barb.—Well, I've been thinking that someone ought to refer to a magazine article from a really good magazine—the Literary Digest, perhaps.

Margaret.—(Looking among books on the table) Where's the last number? I haven't read anything but the jokes. Let's see— (*turns leaves, reading titles of articles*) Girls, I can't do that.

Barb.—Oh, yes, you can. Just glance through some short article. Think of *me* talking on Bolshevism.

Jack.—That's all right for you, and Mary's safe with her Tennyson spiel. But what about me?

Mary—What do you know the most about?

Jack—Search me! I'm strong for tennis and basket ball; and I know the record of the White Sox from A. to Z.

Barb.—(*laughing*) There has to be somebody who says the light things—talks about the weather and all that sort of thing. What kind of a day it is, and so forth. Suppose you do that.

Jack—(*looking hastily through papers on table*) Where's that almanac I brought up from the drug store yesterday?

Margaret—And, perhaps, if the conversation gets too serious you could spring a joke.

Jack—What kind of a joke?

Mary—A good joke, of course.

Jack—How would this do? (*Tells joke of local interest.*)

Barb.—(*laughing*) I guess you'd better stick to the weather, Jack.

Jack—I feel shaky about the whole scheme. I wish—say, girls, don't you imagine her Royal Highness would like a bit of real college spirit? How about a song? Music hath charms, you know.

Mary—Fine! We'll have that in reserve; in case everything else fails, we'll fall back on the chorus of—(*mentions popular song.*) You can play the uke, Margaret.

Margaret—Don't you imagine she'd like something from grand opera better?

Jack—(*while girls all laugh*) For the love of Mike! Who ever heard of a bunch of real, sure-enough, honest-to-goodness college girls sitting around singing grand opera? Not for mine! In the first place we can't do it. In the second place, I think the whole idea is just plain nuts.

Barb.—Well, maybe it is. But we've started, and we're going on. As far as the song goes, what's the mat-

ter with—let me see, Solomon Levi? It's good and lively and collegy, even if it is a trifle old.

Jack—Oh, no! That's not old. It was sung for the first time when Noah led the orchestra on the Ark.

Mary—And Ham played the bones!

Margaret—Well, let's sing—

Mary—Fine! That's it. Now, we're all set. Let's practice up a bit. (*One takes the ukelele and they begin singing. In a moment there comes a knock at the door. Girls start up and begin making a few hasty dashes at straightening the room. Jack shakes hands with an imaginary person, saying, "Nice weather we're having." Margaret peruses Literary Digest. Barbara says, "Is it Bolshevism or Bolshevism?" Knock repeated. Barbara goes to door and admits Miss Burnett, dressed as an old-fashioned country woman.*)

Miss B.—How de do. I got to the right room after all, didn't I? I suppose you're Ellen's girl. (*Looks at her closely.*) You favor your ma a lot but you've got your pa's nose.

Barb.—This is Miss Burnett?

Miss B.—Sophia Anne Burnett of Hickory Corners, Cherokee County.

Barb.—Let me introduce you to my chums. This is Mary Markham; and Margaret Grey; and this is Jacqueline Surry. (*Girls come to greet her. She shakes hands in "pump-handle" fashion. Jack squeezes her hand and she says, "My! You must be one of them athletes I've read about their having in colleges."*)

Barb.—Let me take your wraps. (*Takes off wraps, which girls put away.*)

Mary—(*after Miss B. is seated*) Did you have a pleasant journey?

Miss B.—Yes, I had a real pleasant trip. Real pleasant.

Jack—(*responding to frantic gestures*) Nice weather we're having.

Miss B.—Yes, it is real nice. Out our way the farmers are having fine luck gettin' in their crops.

Jack—Do you think it will last—the weather, I mean? (*Girls show dismay.*)

Miss B.—Well, now, I shouldn't be a mite surprised that it did. I've known weather to last clear on into summer.

Jack—(*desperately*) Wouldn't you like to look at the almanac? (*Presents it.*)

Miss B.—Lawsy sakes, child! I've read that almanac from kiver to kiver.

Mary—(*after awkward pause, speaks suddenly*) Speaking of spring, you know Tennyson says, "In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love." Now I think that Tennyson—

Miss B.—That's poetry, ain't it? You know I like poetry real well. But I ain't just sure that that's the kind of poetry young folks ought to be a-readin'. It's likely to put the wrong kind of idees into their heads. Now, my favorite pome is "Over the Hills to the Poor House," by Will Carleton. Couldn't you recite some of his poetry?

Mary—(*disconsolately*) I'm afraid not. (*Barb. makes sign to Margaret.*)

Margaret—Do you take the Literary Digest, Miss Burnett?

Miss B.—Lawsy, no! I most generally have no trouble at all with my digestion; but when I do, I just go down to the drug store (*use name of local store if desired*) and get a bottle of Burdock's Blood Bitters. That sets me right in no time.

Barb.—(*after pause*) I suppose you were deeply interested in the League of Nations and the reaction from the war?

Miss B.—Indeed I was. Why, my uncle, he fit in the war. He's commander of the G. A. R. down to the Corners. They meet once a month.

Mary—She means the recent war—the world war, you know. And you know it's not really over yet. Things are in a terrible state in Russia.

Barb.—(taking her cue) Oh, let me read you my history report I wrote last week. (Goes to table, gets paper and begins reading. She mispronounces words and is corrected quietly by Mary. Miss B. conceals her amusement and finally interrupts.)

Miss B.—Land sakes! You girls certainly know lots of furrin languages. I didn't know there was so many. You know I was never able to keep the names of the battles straight; but I do know there was one general that must have been a great leader. That was General Allies. There wasn't a paper that didn't tell about his winnin' a battle. (Sees ukelele.) What's that?

Margaret—That's an ukelele.

Miss B.—An uka what?

All—Lele.

Miss B.—What's that for?

Margaret—Why, to play on. It's a musical instrument used by the Hawaiians. Wouldn't you like to have us sing for you? (Girls are all seized with the same thought and one at a time say the same words, each starting a bit later than Margaret.)

Miss B.—Indeed I would. I like vocal singin'. I like piano playin', too. You know, my niece down to the Corners, she's took lessons. And she's got so she can play the Black Hawk waltz just fine.

Jack—Come on, girls. We're all set. (They sing.)

Miss B.—Well, that's real nice. But I ain't much used to them new-fangled, high-toned pieces. Don't you know "Nellie Gray," or "After the Ball"? (Girls shake heads disconsolately.)

Jack—Miss Burnett, won't you sing for us?

Miss B.—Would you really like to have me?

Girls—Indeed we would. Please do.

Miss B.—There's a piece that's been a favorite in

our family' quite a while. I'll see if I can sing that. (*Sings in quavering tones, a bit of an old piece.*)

Girls—That's fine. Won't you sing another?

Miss B.—Well, now, there's another that's always been a favorite. I'd be glad to sing that if you'd help me. It's "Love's Old Sweet Song." Do you know that?

Jack—I'll tell the world—indeed we do. (*They all sing. At end of chorus comes a knock on the door. All rise. Barbara goes to door and admits Mrs. Murray. Miss B. crosses to extreme left of stage and is for a moment unobserved by Mrs. M.*)

Barb.—Mother! (*Greets her. Girls come forward and greet her.*)

Mrs. M.—You see, I thought I'd come down and surprise you and meet Ann. (*Suddenly spies her.*) Why, Ann Burnett, have you taken leave of your senses? Where did you get those clothes?

Miss B.—(*crossing to center of stage and putting arm around Mrs. M.*) Ellen, you've interrupted one of the best larks I've had since I was in college. You see, these girls have been putting on a stunt (*glances at Jack*) and I've slipped one over on them. We're even now, don't you think?

Barb.—Oh, dear!

Mary—I can never look Tennyson in the face again.

Margaret.—The Literary Digest! (*Throws it on the table.*)

Jack—Caught with the goods! I told you the idea was nuts.

Mrs. M.—Girls, what *have* you been doing?

Miss B.—(*laughing*) Girls, I'm sure we've had a most enjoyable time. I was always fond of amateur dramatics, and that scheme of yours was surely clever. But you made a mistake. I wanted to know you just as you are. Let's see, it's Shakespeare, or is it Tennyson (*sly glance at Mary*) who says, "To thine own self be true." Just as you are. That's plenty good enough for me.

Mrs. M.—But where did you get those clothes? Whose attic have you been robbing? And will you please explain—

Miss B.—One at a time, Ellen. First let me explain to these downcast looking girls that I've decided to be the donor of a new gymnasium.

Jack—Hurray! Let's give her the old yell! (*Leads in a college yell complimentary to Miss B.*)

Miss B.—Thanks. And now in order that we may have a really and truly opportunity to get acquainted, I've obtained permission to take you all down town to dinner tonight. Ellen is going with us, and we'll tell her the whole story.

Barb.—Oh, Miss Burnett, can you ever forgive us?

Mary—It's just lovely of you!

Margaret—Splendid!

Jack—Simply ripping! (*As curtain falls, Margaret puts hand over Jack's mouth. The others stand opposite, laughing.*)



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