

ARGUMENT

When Phoebe was yet a little girl, her tutor's aide (Ralph) was told to apprentice her to become a pilot. He heard the word incorrectly and apprenticed her to a band of *pirettes*, remaining with them himself as a man-of-all-work. Although Phoebe loathed the trade to which she had thus been bound, she dutifully served; and, as the curtain rises, her indentures are almost up and she is preparing to leave the band and devote herself to the extermination of piracy.

She urges the *pirettes* to join her in embracing a more lawful calling, but they refuse. Ralph, however, wishes to become her husband. Having seen but a few men she does not know whether he is really as handsome as he says he is; but she finally consents to take him.

Just then a group of young men, all the wards of Major General Stanley, happen upon the scene. Phoebe sees their attractiveness – and Ralph's plainness – and renounces him. Of these young men, Mervyn takes a particular interest in Phoebe, and she in him. The other young men are seized by the *pirettes* and threatened with immediate marriage. When the Major-General arrives, she can dissuade the *pirettes* only by a ruse: she tells them that she is an orphan, and so works upon their sympathies that they let her and her wards go free.

During the ensuing days and nights, however, this lie troubles the Major-General's conscience: she sits brooding over it at night in a Gothic ruin. She is consoled by her wards' sympathy and Phoebe's plan of immediately leading a band of police against the *pirettes*.

Meanwhile the *Pirette Queen* and Ralph appear at the window and beckon Phoebe: they have discovered that her indentures were to run until her twenty-first birthday, and – as she was born on February 29 – she really had as yet only five birthdays. Obeying the dictates of her strong sense of duty, she immediately rejoins the *pirettes*. She tells them of the deception that has been practiced upon them, and they seize and bind the Major-General.

But the police come to the rescue and charge the *pirettes* to yield, "In Queen Victoria's name". This they do. Ralph explains, however, that these women who appear to be lawless *pirettes* are really all "peeresses who have gone wrong", and they are pardoned and permitted to marry the Major-General's wards.