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# I. Dark Plottings at Blandings Castle

## I

At the open window of the great library of Blandings Castle, drooping like a wet sock, as was his habit when he had nothing to prop his spine against, the Earl of Emsworth, that amiable and boneheaded peer, stood gazing out over his domain.

It was a lovely morning and the air was fragrant with gentle summer scents. Yet in his lordship's pale blue eyes there was a look of melancholy. His brow was furrowed, his mouth peevish. And this was all the more strange in that he was normally as happy as only a fluffy-minded man with excellent health and a large income can be. A writer, describing Blandings Castle in a magazine article, had once said: 'Tiny mosses have grown in the cavities of the stones, until, viewed near at hand, the place seems shaggy with vegetation.' It would not have been a bad description of the proprietor. Fifty-odd years of serene and unruffled placidity had given Lord Emsworth a curiously moss-covered look. Very few things had the power to disturb him. Even his younger son, the Hon. Freddie Threepwood, could only do it occasionally.

Yet now he was sad. And – not to make a mystery of it any longer – the reason of his sorrow was the fact that he had mislaid his glasses and without them was as blind, to

use his own neat simile, as a bat. He was keenly aware of the sunshine that poured down on his gardens, and was yearning to pop out and potter among the flowers he loved. But no man, pop he never so wisely, can hope to potter with any good result if the world is a mere blur.

The door behind him opened, and Beach the butler entered, a dignified procession of one.

‘Who’s that?’ inquired Lord Emsworth, spinning on his axis.

‘It is I, your lordship – Beach.’

‘Have you found them?’

‘Not yet, your lordship,’ sighed the butler.

‘You can’t have looked.’

‘I have searched assiduously, your lordship, but without avail. Thomas and Charles also announce non-success. Stokes has not yet made his report.’

‘Ah!’

‘I am re-despatching Thomas and Charles to your lordship’s bedroom,’ said the Master of the Hunt. ‘I trust that their efforts will be rewarded.’

Beach withdrew, and Lord Emsworth turned to the window again. The scene that spread itself beneath him – though he was unfortunately not able to see it – was a singularly beautiful one, for the castle, which is one of the oldest inhabited houses in England, stands upon a knoll of rising ground at the southern end of the celebrated Vale of Blandings in the county of Shropshire. Away in the blue distance wooded hills ran down to where the Severn gleamed like an unsheathed sword; while up from the river rolling parkland, mounting and dipping, surged in a green wave almost to the castle walls, breaking on the terraces in

a many-coloured flurry of flowers as it reached the spot where the province of Angus McAllister, his lordship's head gardener, began. The day being June the thirtieth, which is the very high-tide time of summer flowers, the immediate neighbourhood of the castle was ablaze with roses, pinks, pansies, carnations, hollyhocks, columbines, larkspurs, London pride, Canterbury bells, and a multitude of other choice blooms of which only Angus could have told you the names. A conscientious man was Angus; and in spite of being a good deal hampered by Lord Emsworth's amateur assistance, he showed excellent results in his department. In his beds there was much at which to point with pride, little to view with concern.

Scarcely had Beach removed himself when Lord Emsworth was called upon to turn again. The door had opened for the second time, and a young man in a beautifully-cut suit of grey flannel was standing in the doorway. He had a long and vacant face topped by shining hair brushed back and heavily brilliantined after the prevailing mode, and he was standing on one leg. For Freddie Threepwood was seldom completely at his ease in his parent's presence.

'Hallo, guv'nor.'

'Well, Frederick?'

It would be paltering with the truth to say that Lord Emsworth's greeting was a warm one. It lacked the note of true affection. A few weeks before he had had to pay a matter of five hundred pounds to settle certain racing debts for his offspring; and, while this had not actually dealt an irretrievable blow at his bank account, it had undeniably tended to diminish Freddie's charm in his eyes.

‘Hear you’ve lost your glasses, guv’nor.’

‘That is so.’

‘Nuisance, what?’

‘Undeniably.’

‘Ought to have a spare pair.’

‘I have broken my spare pair.’

‘Tough luck! And lost the other?’

‘And, as you say, lost the other.’

‘Have you looked for the bally things?’

‘I have.’

‘Must be somewhere, I mean.’

‘Quite possibly.’

‘Where,’ asked Freddie, warming to his work, ‘did you see them last?’

‘Go away!’ said Lord Emsworth, on whom his child’s conversation had begun to exercise an oppressive effect.

‘Eh?’

‘Go away!’

‘Go away?’

‘Yes, go away!’

‘Right ho!’

The door closed. His lordship returned to the window once more.

He had been standing there some few minutes when one of those miracles occurred which happen in libraries. Without sound or warning a section of books started to move away from the parent body and, swinging out in a solid chunk into the room, showed a glimpse of a small, study-like apartment. A young man in spectacles came noiselessly through and the books returned to their place.

The contrast between Lord Emsworth and the

newcomer, as they stood there, was striking, almost dramatic. Lord Emsworth was so acutely spectacle-less; Rupert Baxter, his secretary, so pronouncedly spectacled. It was his spectacles that struck you first as you saw the man. They gleamed efficiently at you. If you had a guilty conscience, they pierced you through and through; and even if your conscience was one hundred per cent pure you could not ignore them. 'Here,' you said to yourself, 'is an efficient young man in spectacles.'

In describing Rupert Baxter as efficient, you did not overestimate him. He was essentially that. Technically but a salaried subordinate, he had become by degrees, owing to the limp amiability of his employer, the real master of the house. He was the Brains of Blandings, the man at the switch, the person in charge, and the pilot, so to speak, who weathered the storm. Lord Emsworth left everything to Baxter, only asking to be allowed to potter in peace; and Baxter, more than equal to the task, shouldered it without wincing.

Having got within range, Baxter coughed; and Lord Emsworth, recognising the sound, wheeled round with a faint flicker of hope. It might be that even this apparently insoluble problem of the missing pince-nez would yield before the other's efficiency.

'Baxter, my dear fellow, I've lost my glasses. My glasses. I have mislaid them. I cannot think where they can have gone to. You haven't seen them anywhere by any chance?'

'Yes, Lord Emsworth,' replied the secretary, quietly equal to the crisis. 'They are hanging down your back.'

'Down my back? Why, bless my soul!' His lordship tested the statement and found it – like all Baxter's statements – accurate. 'Why, bless my soul, so they are! Do you know,

Baxter, I really believe I must be growing absent-minded.' He hauled in the slack, secured the pince-nez, adjusted them beamingly. His irritability had vanished like the dew off one of his roses. 'Thank you, Baxter, thank you. You are invaluable.'

And with a radiant smile Lord Emsworth made buoyantly for the door, en route for God's air and the society of McAllister. The movement drew from Baxter another cough – a sharp, peremptory cough this time; and his lordship paused, reluctantly, like a dog whistled back from the chase. A cloud fell over the sunniness of his mood. Admirable as Baxter was in so many respects, he had a tendency to worry him at times; and something told Lord Emsworth that he was going to worry him now.

'The car will be at the door,' said Baxter with quiet firmness, 'at two sharp.'

'Car? What car?'

'The car to take you to the station.'

'Station? What station?'

Rupert Baxter preserved his calm. There were times when he found his employer a little trying, but he never showed it.

'You have perhaps forgotten, Lord Emsworth, that you arranged with Lady Constance to go to London this afternoon.'

'Go to London!' gasped Lord Emsworth, appalled. 'In weather like this? With a thousand things to attend to in the garden? What a perfectly preposterous notion! Why should I go to London? I hate London.'

'You arranged with Lady Constance that you would give Mr McTodd lunch tomorrow at your club.'

‘Who the devil is Mr McTodd?’

‘The well-known Canadian poet.’

‘Never heard of him.’

‘Lady Constance has long been a great admirer of his work. She wrote inviting him, should he ever come to England, to pay a visit to Blandings. He is now in London and is to come down tomorrow for two weeks. Lady Constance’s suggestion was that, as a compliment to Mr McTodd’s eminence in the world of literature, you should meet him in London and bring him back here yourself.’

Lord Emsworth remembered now. He also remembered that this positively infernal scheme had not been his sister Constance’s in the first place. It was Baxter who had made the suggestion, and Constance had approved. He made use of the recovered pince-nez to glower through them at his secretary; and not for the first time in recent months was aware of a feeling that this fellow Baxter was becoming a dashed infliction. Baxter was getting above himself, throwing his weight about, making himself a confounded nuisance. He wished he could get rid of the man. But where could he find an adequate successor? That was the trouble. With all his drawbacks, Baxter *was* efficient. Nevertheless, for a moment Lord Emsworth toyed with the pleasant dream of dismissing him. And it is possible, such was his exasperation, that he might on this occasion have done something practical in that direction, had not the library door at this moment opened for the third time, to admit yet another intruder – at the sight of whom his lordship’s militant mood faded weakly.

‘Oh – hallo, Connie!’ he said, guiltily, like a small boy



caught in the jam cupboard. Somehow his sister always had this effect upon him.

Of all those who had entered the library that morning the new arrival was the best worth looking at. Lord Emsworth was tall and lean and scraggy, Rupert Baxter thick-set and handicapped by that vaguely grubby appearance which is presented by swarthy young men of bad complexion, and even Beach, though dignified, and Freddie, though slim, would never have got far in a beauty competition. But Lady Constance Keeble really took the eye. She was a strikingly handsome woman in the middle forties. She had a fair, broad brow, teeth of a perfect even whiteness, and the carriage of an empress. Her eyes were large and grey, and gentle – and incidentally misleading, for gentle was hardly the adjective which anybody who knew her would have applied to Lady Constance. Though genial enough when she got her way, on the rare occasions when people attempted to thwart her she was apt to comport herself in a manner reminiscent of Cleopatra on one of the latter's bad mornings.

'I hope I am not disturbing you,' said Lady Constance with a bright smile. 'I just came in to tell you to be sure not to forget, Clarence, that you are going to London this afternoon to meet Mr McTodd.'

'I was just telling Lord Emsworth,' said Baxter, 'that the car would be at the door at two.'

'Thank you, Mr Baxter. Of course I might have known that you would not forget. You are so wonderfully capable. I don't know what in the world we would do without you.'

The Efficient Baxter bowed. But, though gratified, he

was not overwhelmed by the tribute. The same thought had often occurred to him independently.

‘If you will excuse me,’ he said, ‘I have one or two things to attend to . . .’

‘Certainly, Mr Baxter.’

The Efficient One withdrew through the door in the bookshelf. He realised that his employer was in fractious mood, but knew that he was leaving him in capable hands.

Lord Emsworth turned from the window, out of which he had been gazing with a plaintive detachment.

‘Look here, Connie,’ he grumbled feebly. ‘You know I hate literary fellows. It’s bad enough having them in the house, but when it comes to going to London to fetch ’em . . .’

He shuffled morosely. It was a perpetual grievance of his, this practice of his sister’s of collecting literary celebrities and dumping them down in the home for indeterminate visits. You never knew when she was going to spring another on you. Already since the beginning of the year he had suffered from a round dozen of the species at brief intervals; and at this very moment his life was being poisoned by the fact that Blandings was sheltering a certain Miss Aileen Peavey, the mere thought of whom was enough to turn the sunshine off as with a tap.

‘Can’t stand literary fellows,’ proceeded his lordship. ‘Never could. And, by Jove, literary females are worse. Miss Peavey . . .’ Here words temporarily failed the owner of Blandings. ‘Miss Peavey . . .’ he resumed after an eloquent pause. ‘Who *is* Miss Peavey?’

‘My dear Clarence,’ replied Lady Constance tolerantly, for the fine morning had made her mild and amiable, ‘if

you do not know that Aileen is one of the leading poetesses of the younger school, you must be very ignorant.'

'I don't mean that. I know she writes poetry. I mean who *is* she? You suddenly produced her here like a rabbit out of a hat,' said his lordship, in a tone of strong resentment. 'Where did you find her?'

'I first made Aileen's acquaintance on an Atlantic liner when Joe and I were coming back from our trip round the world. She was very kind to me when I was feeling the motion of the vessel . . . If you mean what is her family, I think Aileen told me once that she was connected with the Rutlandshire Peaveys.'

'Never heard of them!' snapped Lord Emsworth. 'And, if they're anything like Miss Peavey, God help Rutlandshire!'

Tranquil as Lady Constance's mood was this morning, an ominous stoniness came into her grey eyes at these words, and there is little doubt that in another instant she would have discharged at her mutinous brother one of those shattering comebacks for which she had been celebrated in the family from nursery days onward; but at this juncture the Efficient Baxter appeared again through the bookshelf.

'Excuse me,' said Baxter, securing attention with a flash of his spectacles. 'I forgot to mention, Lord Emsworth, that, to suit everybody's convenience, I have arranged that Miss Halliday shall call to see you at your club tomorrow after lunch.'

'Good Lord, Baxter!' The harassed peer started as if he had been bitten in the leg. 'Who's Miss Halliday? Not another literary female?'

'Miss Halliday is the young lady who is coming to Blandings to catalogue the library.'

‘Catalogue the library? What does it want cataloguing for?’

‘It has not been done since the year 1885.’

‘Well, and look how splendidly we’ve got along without it,’ said Lord Emsworth acutely.

‘Don’t be so ridiculous, Clarence,’ said Lady Constance, annoyed. ‘The catalogue of a great library like this must be brought up to date.’ She moved to the door. ‘I do wish you would try to wake up and take an interest in things. If it wasn’t for Mr Baxter, I don’t know what would happen.’

And with a beaming glance of approval at her ally she left the room. Baxter, coldly austere, returned to the subject under discussion.

‘I have written to Miss Halliday suggesting two-thirty as a suitable hour for the interview.’

‘But look here . . .’

‘You will wish to see her before definitely confirming the engagement.’

‘Yes, but look here, I wish you wouldn’t go tying me up with all these appointments.’

‘I thought that as you were going to London to meet Mr McTodd . . .’

‘But I’m not going to London to meet Mr McTodd,’ cried Lord Emsworth with weak fury. ‘It’s out of the question. I can’t possibly leave Blandings. The weather may break at any moment. I don’t want to miss a day of it.’

‘The arrangements are all made.’

‘Send the fellow a wire . . . “unavoidably detained”.’

‘I could not take the responsibility for such a course myself,’ said Baxter coldly. ‘But possibly if you were to make the suggestion to Lady Constance . . .’

‘Oh, dash it!’ said Lord Emsworth unhappily, at once realising the impossibility of the scheme. ‘Oh, well, if I’ve got to go, I’ve got to go,’ he said after a gloomy pause. ‘But to leave my garden and stew in London at this time of the year . . .?’

There seemed nothing further to say on the subject. He took off his glasses, polished them, put them on again, and shuffled to the door. After all, he reflected, even though the car was coming for him at two, at least he had the morning, and he proposed to make the most of it. But his first careless rapture at the prospect of pottering among his flowers was dimmed, and would not be recaptured. He did not entertain any project so mad as the idea of defying his sister Constance, but he felt extremely bitter about the whole affair. Confound Constance! . . . Dash Baxter! . . . Miss Peavey . . .

The door closed behind Lord Emsworth.

## 2

Lady Constance meanwhile, proceeding downstairs, had reached the big hall, when the door of the smoking room opened and a head popped out. A round, grizzled head with a healthy pink face attached to it.

‘Connie!’ said the head.

Lady Constance halted.

‘Yes, Joe?’

‘Come in here a minute,’ said the head. ‘Want to speak to you.’

Lady Constance went into the smoking room. It was

large and cosily book-lined, and its window looked out on to an Italian garden. A wide fireplace occupied nearly the whole of one side of it, and in front of this, his legs spread to an invisible blaze, Mr Joseph Keeble had already taken his stand. His manner was bluff, but an acute observer might have detected embarrassment in it.

‘What is it, Joe?’ asked Lady Constance, and smiled pleasantly at her husband. When, two years previously, she had married this elderly widower, of whom the world knew nothing beyond the fact that he had amassed a large fortune in South African diamond mines, there had not been wanting cynics to set the match down as one of convenience, a purely business arrangement by which Mr Keeble exchanged his money for Lady Constance’s social position. Such was not the case. It had been a genuine marriage of affection on both sides. Mr Keeble worshipped his wife, and she was devoted to him, though never foolishly indulgent. They were a happy and united couple.

Mr Keeble cleared his throat. He seemed to find some difficulty in speaking. And when he spoke it was not on the subject which he had intended to open, but on one which had already been worn out in previous conversations.

‘Connie, I’ve been thinking about that necklace again.’

Lady Constance laughed.

‘Oh, don’t be silly, Joe. You haven’t called me into this stuffy room on a lovely morning like this to talk about that for the hundredth time.’

‘Well, you know, there’s no sense in taking risks.’

‘Don’t be absurd. What risks can there be?’

‘There was a burglary over at Winstone Court, not ten miles from here, only a day or two ago.’

‘Don’t be so fussy, Joe.’

‘That necklace cost nearly twenty thousand pounds,’ said Mr Keeble, in the reverent voice in which men of business traditions speak of large sums.

‘I know.’

‘It ought to be in the bank.’

‘Once and for all, Joe,’ said Lady Constance, losing her amiability and becoming suddenly imperious and Cleopatrine, ‘I will *not* keep that necklace in a bank. What on earth is the use of having a beautiful necklace if it is lying in the strongroom of a bank all the time? There is the County Ball coming on, and the Bachelors’ Ball after that, and . . . well, I *need* it. I will send the thing to the bank when we pass through London on our way to Scotland, but not till then. And I do wish you would stop worrying me about it.’

There was a silence. Mr Keeble was regretting now that his unfortunate poltroonery had stopped him from tackling in a straightforward and manly fashion the really important matter which was weighing on his mind: for he perceived that his remarks about the necklace, eminently sensible though they were, had marred the genial mood in which his wife had begun this interview. It was going to be more difficult now than ever to approach the main issue. Still, ruffled though she might be, the thing had to be done: for it involved a matter of finance, and in matters of finance Mr Keeble was no longer a free agent. He and Lady Constance had a mutual banking account, and it was she who supervised the spending of it. This was an arrangement, subsequently regretted by Mr Keeble, which had been come to in the early days of the honeymoon, when men are apt to do foolish things.

Mr Keeble coughed. Not the sharp, efficient cough which we have heard Rupert Baxter uttering in the library, but a feeble, strangled thing like the bleat of a diffident sheep.

‘Connie,’ he said. ‘Er – Connie.’

And at the words a sort of cold film seemed to come over Lady Constance’s eyes: for some sixth sense told her what subject it was that was now about to be introduced.

‘Connie, I – er – had a letter from Phyllis this morning.’

Lady Constance said nothing. Her eyes gleamed for an instant, then became frozen again. Her intuition had not deceived her.

Into the married life of this happy couple only one shadow had intruded itself up to the present. But unfortunately it was a shadow of considerable proportions, a kind of super-shadow; and its effect had been chilling. It was Phyllis, Mr Keeble’s stepdaughter, who had caused it – by the simple process of jilting the rich and suitable young man whom Lady Constance had attached to her (rather in the manner of a conjurer forcing a card upon his victim) and running off and marrying a far from rich and quite unsuitable person of whom all that seemed to be known was that his name was Jackson. Mr Keeble, whose simple creed was that Phyllis could do no wrong, had been prepared to accept the situation philosophically; but his wife’s wrath had been deep and enduring. So much so that the mere mentioning of the girl’s name must be accounted to him for a brave deed, Lady Constance having specifically stated that she never wished to hear it again.

Keenly alive to this prejudice of hers, Mr Keeble stopped after making his announcement, and had to rattle his keys



in his pocket in order to acquire the necessary courage to continue. He was not looking at his wife, but he knew just how forbidding her expression must be. This task of his was no easy, congenial task for a pleasant summer morning.

‘She says in her letter,’ proceeded Mr Keeble, his eyes on the carpet and his cheeks a deeper pink, ‘that young Jackson has got the chance of buying a big farm . . . in Lincolnshire, I think she said . . . if he can raise three thousand pounds.’

He paused, and stole a glance at his wife. It was as he had feared. She had congealed. Like some spell, the name Jackson had apparently turned her to marble. It was like the Pygmalion and Galatea business working the wrong way round. She was presumably breathing, but there was no sign of it.

‘So I was just thinking,’ said Mr Keeble, producing another *obbligato* on the keys, ‘it just crossed my mind . . . it isn’t as if the thing were a speculation . . . the place is apparently coining money . . . present owner only selling because he wants to go abroad . . . it occurred to me . . . and they would pay good interest on the loan . . .’

‘What loan?’ inquired the statue icily, coming to life.

‘Well, what I was thinking . . . just a suggestion, you know . . . what struck me was that if you were willing we might . . . good investment, you know, and nowadays it’s deuced hard to find good investments . . . I was thinking that we might lend them the money.’

He stopped. But he had got the thing out and felt happier. He rattled his keys again, and rubbed the back of his head against the mantelpiece. The friction seemed to give him confidence.

‘We had better settle this thing once and for all, Joe,’ said Lady Constance. ‘As you know, when we were married, I was ready to do everything for Phyllis. I was prepared to be a mother to her. I gave her every chance, took her everywhere. And what happened?’

‘Yes, I know. But . . .’

‘She became engaged to a man with plenty of money . . .’

‘Shocking young ass,’ interjected Mr Keeble, perking up for a moment at the recollection of the late lamented, whom he had never liked. ‘And a rip, what’s more. I’ve heard stories.’

‘Nonsense! If you are going to believe all the gossip you hear about people, nobody would be safe. He was a delightful young man and he would have made Phyllis perfectly happy. Instead of marrying him, she chose to go off with this – Jackson.’ Lady Constance’s voice quivered. Greater scorn could hardly have been packed into two syllables. ‘After what has happened, I certainly intend to have nothing more to do with her. I shall not lend them a penny, so please do not let us continue this discussion any longer. I hope I am not an unjust woman, but I must say that I consider, after the way Phyllis behaved . . .’

The sudden opening of the door caused her to break off. Lord Emsworth, mould-stained and wearing a deplorable old jacket, potted into the room. He peered benevolently at his sister and his brother-in-law, but seemed unaware that he was interrupting a conversation.

‘*Gardening as a Fine Art*,’ he murmured. ‘Connie, have you seen a book called *Gardening as a Fine Art*? I was reading it in here last night. *Gardening as a Fine Art*. That is the title. Now, where can it have got to?’ His dreamy eye

flitted to and fro. 'I want to show it to McAllister. There is a passage in it that directly refutes his anarchistic views on . . .'

'It is probably on one of the shelves,' said Lady Constance shortly.

'On one of the shelves?' said Lord Emsworth, obviously impressed by this bright suggestion. 'Why, of course, to be sure.'

Mr Keeble was rattling his keys moodily. A mutinous expression was on his pink face. These moments of rebellion did not come to him very often, for he loved his wife with a dog-like affection and had grown accustomed to being ruled by her, but now resentment filled him. She was unreasonable, he considered. She ought to have realised how strongly he felt about poor little Phyllis. It was too infernally cold-blooded to abandon the poor child like an old shoe simply because . . .

'Are you going?' he asked, observing his wife moving to the door.

'Yes. I am going into the garden,' said Lady Constance. 'Why? Was there anything else you wanted to talk to me about?'

'No,' said Mr Keeble despondently. 'Oh, no.'

Lady Constance left the room, and a deep masculine silence fell. Mr Keeble rubbed the back of his head meditatively against the mantelpiece, and Lord Emsworth scratched among the bookshelves.

'Clarence!' said Mr Keeble suddenly. An idea – one might almost say an inspiration – had come to him.

'Eh?' responded his lordship absently. He had found his book and was turning its pages, absorbed.

‘Clarence, can you . . . ?’

‘Angus McAllister,’ observed Lord Emsworth bitterly, ‘is an obstinate, stiff-necked son of Belial. The writer of this book distinctly states in so many words . . . ?’

‘Clarence, can you lend me three thousand pounds on good security and keep it dark from Connie?’

Lord Emsworth blinked.

‘Keep something dark from Connie?’ He raised his eyes from his book in order to peer at this visionary with a gentle pity. ‘My dear fellow, it can’t be done.’

‘She would never know. I will tell you just why I want this money . . . ?’

‘Money?’ Lord Emsworth’s eye had become vacant again. He was reading once more. ‘Money? Money, my dear fellow? Money? Money? What money? If I have said once,’ declared Lord Emsworth, ‘that Angus McAllister is all wrong on the subject of hollyhocks, I’ve said it a hundred times.’

‘Let me explain. This three thousand pounds . . . ?’

‘My dear fellow, no. No, no. It was like you,’ said his lordship with a vague heartiness, ‘it was like you – good and generous – to make this offer, but I have ample, thank you, ample. I don’t *need* three thousand pounds.’

‘You don’t understand. I . . . ?’

‘No, no. No, no. But I am very much obliged, all the same. It was kind of you, my dear fellow, to give me the opportunity. Very kind. Very, very, very kind,’ proceeded his lordship, trailing to the door and reading as he went. ‘Oh, very, very, very . . . ?’

The door closed behind him.

‘Oh, *damn!*’ said Mr Keeble.

He sank into a chair in a state of profound dejection. He thought of the letter he would have to write to Phyllis. Poor little Phyllis . . . he would have to tell her that what she asked could not be managed. And why, thought Mr Keeble sourly, as he rose from his seat and went to the writing table, could it not be managed? Simply because he was a weak-kneed, spineless creature who was afraid of a pair of grey eyes that had a tendency to freeze.

*'My dear Phyllis,'* he wrote.

Here he stopped. How on earth was he to put it? What a letter to have to write! Mr Keeble placed his head between his hands and groaned aloud.

'Hallo, Uncle Joe!'

The letter-writer, turning sharply, was aware – without pleasure – of his nephew Frederick, standing beside his chair. He eyed him resentfully, for he was not only exasperated but startled. He had not heard the door open. It was as if the smooth-haired youth had popped up out of a trap.

'Came in through the window,' explained the Hon. Freddie. 'I say, Uncle Joe.'

'Well, what is it?'

'I say, Uncle Joe,' said Freddie, 'can you lend me a thousand quid?'

Mr Keeble uttered a yelp like a pinched Pomeranian.

### 3

As Mr Keeble, red-eyed and overwrought, rose slowly from his chair and began to swell in ominous silence, his nephew raised his hand appealingly. It began to occur to

the Hon. Freddie that he had perhaps not led up to his request with the maximum of smooth tact.

‘Half a jiffy!’ he entreated. ‘I say, don’t go in off the deep end for just a second. I can explain.’

Mr Keeble’s feelings expressed themselves in a loud snort.

‘Explain!’

‘Well, I can. Whole trouble was, I started at the wrong end. Shouldn’t have sprung it on you like that. The fact is, Uncle Joe, I’ve got a scheme. I give you my word that, if you’ll only put off having apoplexy for about three minutes,’ said Freddie, scanning his fermenting relative with some anxiety, ‘I can shove you on to a good thing. Honestly I can. And all I say is, if this scheme I’m talking about is worth a thousand quid to you, will you slip it across? I’m game to spill it and leave it to your honesty to cash up if the thing looks good to you.’

‘A thousand pounds!’

‘Nice round sum,’ urged Freddie ingratiatingly.

‘Why,’ demanded Mr Keeble, now somewhat recovered, ‘do you want a thousand pounds?’

‘Well, who doesn’t, if it comes to that?’ said Freddie. ‘But I don’t mind telling you my special reason for wanting it at just this moment, if you’ll swear to keep it under your hat as far as the gov’nor is concerned.’

‘If you mean that you wish me not to repeat to your father anything you may tell me in confidence, naturally I should not dream of doing such a thing.’

Freddie looked puzzled. His was no lightning brain.

‘Can’t quite work that out,’ he confessed. ‘Do you mean you will tell him or you won’t?’

‘I will not tell him.’

‘Good old Uncle Joe!’ said Freddie, relieved. ‘A topper! I’ve always said so. Well, look here, you know all the trouble there’s been about my dropping a bit on the races lately?’

‘I do.’

‘Between ourselves, I dropped about five hundred of the best. And I just want to ask you one simple question. *Why* did I drop it?’

‘Because you were an infernal young ass.’

‘Well, yes,’ agreed Freddie, having considered the point, ‘you might put it that way, of course. But why was I an ass?’

‘Good God!’ exclaimed the exasperated Mr Keeble. ‘Am I a psychoanalyst?’

‘I mean to say, if you come right down to it, I lost all that stuff simply because I was on the wrong side of the fence. It’s a mug’s game betting on horses. The only way to make money is to be a bookie, and that’s what I’m going to do if you’ll part with that thousand. Pal of mine, who was up at Oxford with me, is in a bookie’s office, and they’re game to take me in too if I can put up a thousand quid. Only I must let them know quick, because the offer’s not going to be open for ever. You’ve no notion what a deuce of a lot of competition there is for that sort of job.’

Mr Keeble, who had been endeavouring with some energy to get a word in during this harangue, now contrived to speak.

‘And do you seriously suppose that I would . . . But what’s the use of wasting time talking? I have no means of laying my hands on the sum you mention. If I had,’ said Mr Keeble wistfully. ‘If I had . . .’ And his eye strayed

to the letter on the desk, the letter which had got as far as '*My dear Phyllis*' and stuck there.

Freddie gazed upon him with cordial sympathy.

'Oh, I know how you're situated, Uncle Joe, and I'm dashed sorry for you. I mean, Aunt Constance and all that.'

'What?' Irksome as Mr Keeble sometimes found the peculiar condition of his financial arrangements, he had always had the consolation of supposing that they were a secret between his wife and himself. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, I know that Aunt Constance keeps an eye on the doubloons and checks the outgoings pretty narrowly. And I think it's a dashed shame that she won't unbuckle to help poor old Phyllis. A girl,' said Freddie, 'I always liked. Bally shame! Why the dickens shouldn't she marry that fellow Jackson? I mean, love's love,' said Freddie, who felt strongly on this point.

Mr Keeble was making curious gulping noises.

'Perhaps I ought to explain,' said Freddie, 'that I was having a quiet after-breakfast smoke outside the window there and heard the whole thing. I mean, you and Aunt Constance going to the mat about poor old Phyllis and you trying to bite the gov'nor's ear and so forth.'

Mr Keeble bubbled for a while.

'You – you listened!' he managed to ejaculate at length.

'And dashed lucky for you,' said Freddie with a cordiality unimpaired by the frankly unfriendly stare under which a nicer-minded youth would have withered; 'dashed lucky for you that I did. Because I've got a scheme.'

Mr Keeble's estimate of his young relative's sagacity was not a high one, and it is doubtful whether, had the latter caught him in a less despondent mood, he would have



wasted time in inquiring into the details of this scheme, the mention of which had been playing in and out of Freddie's conversation like a will-o'-the-wisp. But such was his reduced state at the moment that a reluctant gleam of hope crept into his troubled eye.

'A scheme? Do you mean a scheme to help me out of – out of my difficulty?'

'Absolutely! You want the best seats, we have 'em. I mean,' Freddie went on in interpretation of these peculiar words, 'you want three thousand quid, and I can show you how to get it.'

'Then kindly do so,' said Mr Keeble; and, having opened the door, peered cautiously out, and closed it again, he crossed the room and shut the window.

'Makes it a bit fuggy, but perhaps you're right,' said Freddie, eyeing these manœuvres. 'Well, it's like this, Uncle Joe. You remember what you were saying to Aunt Constance about some bird being apt to sneak up and pinch her necklace?'

'I do.'

'Well, why not?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, why don't you?'

Mr Keeble regarded his nephew with unconcealed astonishment. He had been prepared for imbecility, but this exceeded his expectations.

'Steal my wife's necklace!'

'That's it. Frightfully quick you are, getting on to an idea. Pinch Aunt Connie's necklace. For, mark you,' continued Freddie, so far forgetting the respect due from a nephew as to tap his uncle sharply on the chest, 'if a husband pinches