

Anstey F.

The Brass Bottle: A Farcical Fantastic Play in Four Acts



F. Anstey

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The Brass Bottle: A Farcical Fantastic Play in Four Acts

THE FIRST ACT

The scene represents Horace Ventimore's rooms in Vincent Square, Westminster.

The sitting-room is simply but artistically furnished and decorated. Walls with a lining-paper of a pleasant green, hung with coloured prints and etchings. Fireplace at back. Down left is a large open French window, opening on a balcony, with a view beyond of the open square and some large dull-red gasometers in the distance. Above the window is a small Sheraton bookcase. On the right of fireplace is a door leading to the landing and staircase. Down on the right, another door to Ventimore's bedroom. Above this door, a small Sheraton sideboard. Near the window on left is an armchair, and by it a table, with two smaller chairs. [N.B. —Right and Left mean the spectator's Right and Left throughout.]

The time is late afternoon in summer.

When the curtain rises there is no one in the room. A knock is heard at the door on right of fireplace. Then, after a pause, Mrs. Rapkin enters. She is a pleasant, neatly dressed, elderly woman, of the respectable landlady class. She wears a cooking-apron and her sleeves are turned up. She looks round the room, and turns to the door as Professor Futvoye appears.

Mrs. Rapkin

Mr. Ventimore don't seem to be in, after all, sir. Unless he's in his bedroom. [*She comes down to the door on right, as Professor, Mrs., and Miss Futvoye enter from the other door. Professor Futvoye is elderly and crabbed; his wife, grey-haired and placid, bearing with him as with an elderly and rather troublesome child; Sylvia Futvoye, their daughter, is a pretty and attractive girl of about twenty. Mrs. Rapkin knocks at the bedroom door.*] Mr. Ventimore! A gentleman and two ladies to see you. [*She opens the door – then, to the Professor.*] No, sir, he hasn't come in yet – but he won't be long now.

Professor Futvoye

[*By the table.*] Are you *sure* of that, ma'am?

Mrs. Rapkin

Well, sir, he said as how he'd be in early, to make sure as everythink was as it *should* be. [*In a burst of confidence.*] If you *must* know, he's expecting company to dinner this evening.

[*Sylvia has moved to the window; Mrs. Futvoye stands by the table.*]

Professor Futvoye

[*Placing his hat and stick on a small shelf on the left of fireplace, and standing by table.*] I'm aware of that, ma'am. We happen to be the company Mr. Ventimore is expecting. Don't let us keep you from your cooking.

Mrs. Rapkin

[*With another burst of confidence.*] Well, sir, to tell you the truth, I 'ave a good deal on my 'ands just now.

[*She goes out by door at back.*]

Sylvia

[*After moving about and inspecting the pictures.*] I rather like Horace's rooms.

Professor Futvoye

[*Irritably.*] I wish he'd manage to be *in* 'em! I fully expected he'd be back by this time. *Most* annoying!

Mrs. Futvoye

[*Resignedly.*] I *thought* you were bringing us all this way for nothing! And when you must be quite exhausted enough as it is, after lecturing all the afternoon!

Professor Futvoye

I'm not in the least exhausted, Sophia; not in the least!

Mrs. Futvoye

Well, Anthony, if *you're* not, Sylvia and I are! [*She sits in armchair by the window.*] But *why* you couldn't wait till eight o'clock to know how Horace got on at that sale I *can't* think!

Professor Futvoye

He ought to have been back *long* ago! I can see *no* excuse for his dawdling like this. None whatever!

[*He sits on right of table.*]

Sylvia

[*Standing behind table.*] Perhaps he went back to his office?

Professor Futvoye

[*Tartly.*] He's much more likely to have dropped into his club for a rubber of Bridge!

Sylvia

Don't you think you're rather ungrateful to grumble at poor Horace like this, after he's given up a whole day's work to oblige you?

Professor Futvoye

I was not aware, my dear, that he has, or ever had, a day's work to give up! Correct me if I am wrong – but I am under the impression that nobody has employed him as an architect *yet*.

Sylvia

That isn't Horace's fault!

Professor Futvoye

Possibly – but it doesn't make him more desirable as a future son-in-law.

Sylvia

Horace is sure to succeed as soon as he gets a chance. [*Sitting on table and leaning over the Professor.*] If you would only say a word for him to Godfather, he might be able to help him.

Professor Futvoye

Wackerbath? No, my dear, I couldn't bring myself to take such an advantage of our old friendship as *that*! I've no belief in Ventimore's succeeding in life. He *may* have ability – though I'm bound to say I see little *evidence* of it – but, depend upon it, he'll never make any money!

Sylvia

How *can* you tell?

Professor Futvoye

Because he can't even take care of the little he has! Look at the money he's throwing away on this totally unnecessary dinner to-night!

Sylvia

Oh! When it's just a quiet little dinner in his own rooms! If it had been the *Carlton*, now!

Professor Futvoye

He proposed to entertain us at the Carlton at first – but I stopped *that*. It all bears out what I say – that he has absolutely *no* sense of the value of —

Mrs. Futvoye

[*Interposing calmly.*] There, Anthony, that's enough! Horace is engaged to Sylvia – and the most sensible thing we can do is to make the best of it.

Professor Futvoye

[*Rising and moving to the right.*] I *am* making the best of it, Sophia! If Ventimore was like Spencer Pringle, now! —

Sylvia

He would never have been engaged to *me*!

Professor Futvoye

[*To Sylvia.*] Pringle, my dear, is a steady, hard-working young fellow. I've a real respect and liking for *Pringle*. And if I *must* have an architect for a son-in-law, he is the man *I* should have preferred!

Sylvia

Why, he hasn't been near us for weeks and weeks – and I hope he means to stay away altogether! I always thought him a conceited prig.

[*Moving towards door at back.*

Professor Futvoye

You may come to think differently, my dear. [*Pulling out his watch.*] Nearly half-past six! Tut-tut! All this time wasted! It's useless to wait any longer for Ventimore. We may just as well go!

[*He goes to get his hat and stick.*

Mrs. Futvoye

[*Rising.*] I knew how it would *be*!

Sylvia

[*At door.*] Wait! [*Opens door and listens.*] There's Horace coming upstairs! I'm sure it's his step!

Professor Futvoye

[*Stops by table with relief.*] At last! Now I shall know!

[*Spencer Pringle enters. He is a smug, self-satisfied looking man of about thirty-five, smooth-shaven, except for small side-whiskers. He is in a light tweed suit, having just come up from the country.*]

Sylvia

[*Repressing her disappointment.*] Mr. Pringle!

Pringle

[*In doorway.*] Miss Sylvia! Mrs. Futvoye! [*Shaking hands with the Professor.*] Professor! Well! this is unexpected.

[*Sylvia comes down to right.*]

Professor Futvoye

[*Graciously.*] Glad to see you, Pringle! You are quite a stranger. Indeed, my daughter was remarking, only a little while ago, that you hadn't been near us for weeks!

Sylvia

[*In an indignant undertone.*] Father!

[*Mrs. Futvoye sits down again.*]

Pringle

[*To Sylvia, flattered.*] Delighted to think I've been missed! But my apparent – er – neglect has been quite unavoidable.

Sylvia

[*Laughing.*] So kind of you to relieve our minds, Mr. Pringle!

Pringle

[*Solemnly.*] I assure you it's the fact. I've been away constantly for the last two months, superintending work I'm doing in various parts of the country. [*With importance.*] Hardly a moment to call my own!

[*Sylvia turns with the intention of sitting down; he places a chair for her.*]

Professor Futvoye

[*Taking chair behind table.*] A busy man like *you*, my dear Pringle, has no need to make excuses.

Pringle

[*Fetching a chair for himself.*] I really have been fearfully overworked. Not that I complain of *that!* [*As he sits down between the Professor and Sylvia.*] I'd no idea we should meet *here*, though. Is Ventimore a friend of yours?

Professor Futvoye

Oh, we know him, yes. As *you* do, it seems.

Pringle

I sublet a room in my offices to him. Rather a good arrangement for him, because he gets experience by looking after any little matters that I've no time to attend to.

Sylvia

[*With suppressed resentment.*] And isn't that rather a good arrangement for *you*?

Pringle

It works fairly well – as a rule. But when I returned from the country this afternoon I found he hadn't been near the office all day!

[*He rises, takes Sylvia's parasol officiously, and places it in a corner, then returns.*]

Professor Futvoye

[*To his wife, but speaking at Sylvia.*] Not been near the office all day! I *thought* as much!

Sylvia

The reason *why* he wasn't able to help you, Mr. Pringle, is because he's been at an auction, bidding for things on father's account.

Professor Futvoye

I should have attended the sale myself but for an engagement to lecture at the Hieroglyphical on a recently inscribed cylinder.

Mrs. Futvoye

And – you'll hardly believe it, Mr. Pringle, – but, the moment the lecture was over, he hurried us off here to find out what Mr. Ventimore had got for him! It's really too ridiculous! As if his study wasn't littered up quite enough already!

Professor Futvoye

Women, my dear Pringle, can't understand the feelings of a collector. It's not *every* day, I can tell you, that a collection of such importance comes into the market.

Pringle

I didn't know Ventimore was an expert in such things. I thought you could get brokers to bid for you.

Professor Futvoye

Of course – of course. But I don't trust brokers – they know too much! And, as I gave Ventimore my own catalogue, with a tick against the lots I want and the limit I'm prepared to go, noted on the margin, he *can't* make any mistake.

Pringle

I suppose not. That is, if he's *accustomed* to auctions.

Professor Futvoye

What do you mean?

Pringle

Only that if you *aren't*, there's always a liability to lose your head in the excitement, and go beyond the margin. But I daresay Ventimore wouldn't do *that*.

Professor Futvoye

If he *has*! [*He rises excitedly.*] And he might – he *might*! With his recklessness about money, it's the very thing he *would* do! Letting me in for prices I can't afford! [*Passionately.*] No wonder he is in no hurry to show himself – no wonder!

Mrs. Futvoye

[*Rising and attempting to pacify him.*] Now, Anthony, there's nothing to work yourself up into a state for, at present. Do for goodness' sake wait till you hear all about it!

Professor Futvoye

[*Resentfully.*] It seems I shall *have* to wait, Sophia – but I'm tired of waiting *here*. [*He goes to get his hat and stick.*] And evidently he doesn't intend to —

[*Turns, as the door opens and Horace Ventimore comes in briskly. Horace is a pleasant-looking young man, with a cheery and rather boyish manner; he comes down and greets the Futvoyes without seeing Pringle for the moment; Sylvia has risen, delighted at his arrival.*

Horace

I *say!* This is jolly! [*Shaking hands.*] Wish I'd known you were coming on here after the lecture. [*Pringle rises, and waits stiffly for recognition.*] Warm work, wasn't it, Professor, lecturing on an afternoon like this? Do sit down. [*Looks at table.*] Haven't they given you any tea?

Professor Futvoye

[*Irritably.*] No, no, no. We want no tea. It's too late for tea. We merely looked in on our way home to —

Horace

[*Sees Pringle.*] And Pringle, too! [*Pats him on shoulder.*] How are you, old fellow? You been at the lecture, too?

Pringle

[*With implied rebuke.*] No, I've only just come round – as you weren't at the office, – to —

Horace

I've been engaged all day. Oh, by the bye, do you know Professor and Mrs. —

[*Is about to introduce him.*

Pringle

[*Stiffly.*] I am happy to say, my dear fellow, that I require no introduction. We are old friends.

Professor Futvoye

[*Impatiently.*] To come to the point, Ventimore, as we are rather pressed for time – about the sale? How did you get on, eh?

Horace

Oh, ah – the sale. [*Producing catalogue from pocket.*] Well, I did exactly as you told me.

Professor Futvoye

[*Snatching catalogue from him.*] Yes, yes. Let's go through it lot by lot. Lot 23, now. Did you get that?

Horace

No. Another fellow got *that*.

Professor Futvoye

[*Annoyed.*] Tssch! Well, – so long as you secured Lot 35. [*Reading from catalogue.*] "Copper bowl, engraved round rim with verse from Hafiz," you know. Come, you didn't miss *that*?

[*Sylvia is listening anxiously.*]

Horace

I did, though. It was snapped up by a sportsman in the very worst hat I ever saw in my life. He got it for sixteen guineas.

Professor Futvoye

[*Disgusted.*] What? A rare example of early Persian work like that going for only sixteen guineas! I'd willingly have paid double the money!

Horace

But your limit was seven pound ten, sir! And you warned me not to exceed it.

Professor Futvoye

You should have used your own judgment, sir! Well, well, – which of the lots I marked *did* you get?

Horace

[*Going to Sylvia, who is sympathetically distressed.*] Couldn't get one of 'em. They all fetched record prices.

Professor Futvoye

[*Violently.*] Upon my soul!.. Pringle, you were right! I ought to have employed a broker! [*To Horace.*] So you've come back with absolutely *nothing*?

Horace

Well, no. I did manage to get *one* thing.

Sylvia

I *knew* you would!

Professor Futvoye

[*To Horace.*] You did? But I understood you to say just now – !

Horace

This was a little flutter on my own account. I thought I'd stick the sale out, do you see; and near the end there was an extra lot put up – it wasn't in the catalogue. [*The Professor makes an exclamation of angry disgust.*] Well, it was being passed round for us to look at – and nobody seemed to think much of it. But it struck me, somehow, it might be a dark horse, so I made a bid – and got it for only a sovereign!

Professor Futvoye

Pah!

Sylvia

But you haven't told us yet what it *is*.

Horace

Haven't I? Oh, well, it's a sort of metal jar. Brass, the auctioneer said it was.

Professor Futvoye

Tchah! Some modern bazaar trash!

Horace

It doesn't *look* modern. I left it downstairs to be cleaned. [*Going to door right of fireplace.*] I'll go and bring it up.

[He goes out.]

Professor Futvoye

[Furious.] I've no patience with the fellow! Squandering his sovereigns like this on worthless rubbish!

Mrs. Futvoye

Don't be so fractious, Anthony! For all you can tell, he may have picked up a treasure.

Professor Futvoye

[Grimly.] He *may*, Sophia. On the other hand, he may *not*. Which, on the whole, is rather more probable.

[He retires up to the fireplace as Horace returns, carrying a large metal bottle with a long neck and bulbous body, encrusted with a thick greenish-white deposit. Pringle closes the door for him after he has entered.]

Horace

[Bringing the bottle down to right of table.] Here it is! *[The others – except the Professor, who remains aloof – gather round and examine it in dubious silence.]* It's not much to look at.

Pringle

Very dusty! *[Wipes his hand after touching the bottle.]* And you gave a *sovereign* for this, Ventimore, eh? H'm! Dear me!

Sylvia

It may look better when it's had a good scrubbing.

Mrs. Futvoye

Scrubbing, my dear! It will have to be *scraped* first!

Horace

Yes – looks as if it had been dragged up from the bottom of the sea, doesn't it? I've an idea it may be worth something. I should like to have *your* opinion, Professor.

[He smiles uneasily.]

Professor Futvoye

[*After a glance at it.*] My opinion is that you might just as well have flung your sovereign into the gutter!

Horace

I admit it was speculative – but it *may* turn out a winner. It's rather odd it should be so tightly sealed up.

Professor Futvoye

[*With more interest.*] Sealed up, is it? [*Coming down and looking at it more carefully.*] H'm – the *form* is certainly antique. It's wonderful what they can do in Birmingham!

Horace

I really think it may have something inside it. It's not so very heavy, and yet – [*tapping it*] – it doesn't sound quite as if it were empty.

Professor Futvoye

It *might* contain something. I think it most unlikely – but still, it *might*.

Sylvia

[*Laughing.*] You don't mean it might be like that jar the Fisherman found in "The Arabian Nights," with a Genius inside it?

Professor Futvoye

I did *not* mean anything so frivolous, my dear. And, if you *must* quote "The Arabian Nights," it's as well to remember in future that the more correct term is not "Genius," but "Jinnee." Singular, Jinnee – plural, Jinn.

Sylvia

I'll remember, dear. Singular, Jinn – plural, Jinnies.

Professor Futvoye

[*Instructively.*] A name applied by Arab mythology to a race of aerial beings, created of the flame of fire, but capable of assuming human form and exercising supernatural powers.

Sylvia

Oh, do let's open it now and see what *is* inside!

Professor Futvoye

Don't be childish, Sylvia, don't be childish! We've no time now for idle curiosity. If we're to dress and be back here by eight o'clock, we ought to start at once. [Mrs. Futvoye *prepares to go and moves towards door.*] Good-bye, then, Ventimore, for the present. [*He gets his hat and stick.*] It is not to be an *elaborate* entertainment, I trust? A simple ordinary little dinner is all *I* require.

Horace

[*As he opens the door for Mrs. Futvoye.*] I've tried to remember your tastes, Professor.

Professor Futvoye

I hope you have succeeded. Good-bye, Pringle. Very glad to have run across you again. Let us see more of you in future.

Pringle

[*Going to the door with him.*] You shall, Professor, you shall. [*Following Professor and Mrs. Futvoye out to landing.*] By the way, are you likely to be in next – ?

[*Horace closes door, leaving Sylvia still looking at the bottle.*]

Sylvia

[*Turning as he comes down to her.*] I'm certain there must be *something* inside that jar. And if it's anything really interesting, father will be so frightfully pleased that he won't be disagreeable all the evening!

Horace

[*Ruefully.*] Ah, I'm afraid that's too much to look forward to.

Sylvia

[*Touching his arm with a little gesture of sympathy.*] You poor dear! You're not beginning to be nervous about your dinner, are you?

Horace

N – no. Not *nervous* exactly. Something *might* go wrong. Still, I hope there won't be *much* your father can find fault with.

Sylvia

I'm sure there won't! And if he does, why, *we* won't mind, will we? We shall be together, you know!

Horace

[*Putting his arm round her.*] That's what I've been thinking of all day!

[*He kisses her as Pringle returns, unseen by them. His jaw drops as he sees them together.*]

Pringle

[*Coming forward.*] Er – [Horace and Sylvia separate.] Miss Sylvia – the Professor asked me to tell you —

Sylvia

I was just coming. [*Taking her parasol and moving to door, which Pringle has left open.*] Good-bye, Mr. Pringle. [*Stopping Horace and Pringle as they are about to see her down the stairs.*] No, you mustn't come down, either of you. [*To Horace, with an affectation of distance.*] Good-bye – Mr. Ventimore.

[*She goes out.*]

Pringle

[*By the table.*] I should like to ask you, Ventimore, have you known Miss Futvoye long?

Horace

[*Still at door, looking after Sylvia.*] A little over six weeks.

Pringle

And I have known her for as many years!

Horace

[*Closing door, and coming towards him.*] Have you, though? I noticed the Professor was uncommonly cordial to you. Look here, are you doing anything this evening?

Pringle

Er – no. That is, nothing particular. Why?

Horace

Because it would be friendly of you if you'd come and dine here. *They're* coming, you know.

Pringle

I know. [*After a moment's hesitation.*] Thanks, I don't mind if I do.

Horace

Capital! I'm sure if any one can keep the old man in a good humour, *you* can.

Pringle

[*Sourly.*] I see. You want me to engage him in conversation and leave you free to carry on your flirtation with Miss Futvoye unobserved?

Horace

Not quite that. There's nothing *underhand* about it. We're engaged, you know.

Pringle

Engaged! [*After a pause.*] And how long have you been that?

Horace

Only since the day before yesterday.

Pringle

[*Blankly.*] Oh! [*He walks down to window.*] I congratulate you; er – heartily, of course. [*Looking out of window.*] And – and when do you think of being married?

Horace

It's no use thinking of that, at present. Not till the Professor takes a rosier view of my prospects, at all events. But if, like a good fellow, you could put in a word for me, it would give me no end of a leg up!

Pringle

[*Dully, with his face still averted.*] You don't seem to realise what you're asking!

Horace

[*Suddenly understanding, with compunction.*] My dear chap! [*He puts both his hands on Pringle's shoulders.*] What a selfish brute I've been not to see! I am sorry!

Pringle

[*Stiffly.*] As a matter of fact, I'd quite made up my mind to propose to her – as soon as I'd got those country jobs off my mind. And now I find *you've* cut in before me!

Horace

Well, it's straight of you to tell me. I suppose you'd rather come and dine some *other* evening? If so —

Pringle

No. A promise is a promise. I'll come. Mind you, I don't pretend it won't be an effort – but I'll see what I can do for you.

Horace

[*Gratefully.*] You *are* a good chap, Pringle! – one of the best! Though, really, after what you've told me, I hardly like —

Pringle

Not another word. Anything I *can* say on your behalf – without *too* wide a departure from strict accuracy – I'll say with pleasure. [*Going up to door.*] Eight o'clock's the hour, isn't it? All right. [*He goes out.*]

[Horace makes a movement towards the fireplace, as if to ring the bell. Then his eye is caught by the brass bottle, which is standing in the centre of the room. He stops, looks at his watch, and decides that he has time to open the bottle. He examines the cap on its neck, then goes to sideboard and takes from it a heavy paper-weight and a champagne-opener, returns to chair on right of table and sits, holding the bottle between his knees. Using the champagne-opener as a chisel, and the paper-weight as hammer, he proceeds to chip away the deposit round the cap, whistling an air from a musical comedy as he works.]

Horace

[*To himself.*] I've loosened it. [*He seizes the cap and tries to screw it off.*] It's giving!

[Suddenly the room is in complete darkness; there is a loud report and a spurt of flame from the bottle. Horace has fallen back on the floor, with the cap of the bottle

in his hand. There is just light enough to see a tall weird figure standing with outstretched arms behind the bottle.

Horace

[*Sitting up and rubbing the back of his head; faintly.*] Hullo! Is any one there? Who's that come in?

The Stranger

[*In an attitude of supplication.*] Towbah! Yah nebbi Ullah! Anna lah amill Kathahlik ibadan! Wullah-hi!

Horace

I daresay you're perfectly right, sir – but I've no idea what you're talking about.

The Stranger

[*Repeating the Arabic sentence.*] Towbah! (&c. &c.) Wullah-hi!

Horace

[*About to raise himself, sees the figure for the first time, and falls back astonished; then, recovering himself.*] I suppose you've just taken the rooms on the ground-floor – so you *must* be able to make yourself understood in English?

The Stranger

[*The room has grown lighter, and he is seen to be in dull-green robes and a high-peaked turban. His long grey beard is divided into three thin strands; his eyes are slightly slanted, and his expression is a curious mixture of fatuous benignity, simplicity, and cunning.*] Assuredly I can speak so as to be understood of all men.

Horace

Then it's as well to *do* it. What was it you said just now?

The Stranger

I said: "Repentance, O Prophet of Allah! I will not return to the like conduct ever!"

Horace

Oh, I beg your pardon. [*Sitting up again.*] Thought you were speaking to *me*. But I say – [*looking up at him*] – how do you come to be here?

The Stranger

Surely by thine own action!

Horace

I see. You ran up to see what was the matter. Fact is, my head's still rather buzzy. I fancy I must have hit it somehow when I was trying to open that jar.

The Stranger

Then it *was* thy hand and none other that removed the stopper?

Horace

I – I suppose so. All *I* know is that *something* went off with a bang. I can't imagine what could have been *inside* the beastly thing!

The Stranger

Who else but I myself?

Horace

[*Slowly rising to his feet.*] You must have your little joke, eh? [*He reels against the table.*] Or did I misunderstand you? My head's in such a muddle!

The Stranger

I tell thee that I have been confined within that accursed vessel for centuries beyond all calculation.

Horace

You can't pull my leg like that, you know! Seriously, just tell me who you *are*.

The Stranger

Know then that he who now addresseth thee is none other than Fakrash-el-Aamash, a Jinnee of the Green Jinn.

Horace

[*Half to himself.*] Singular, "Jinnee" – plural, "Jinn." Where did I hear that? I – I shall remember presently.

Fakrash

I dwelt in the Palace of the Mountain of the Clouds in the Garden of Irem, above the City of Babel.

Horace

[*To himself.*] Why, of *course!* Sylvia! The Arabian Nights! [*To Fakrash.*] I can quite account for you *now*– but go on.

Fakrash

For a certain offence that I committed, the wrath of Suleymán, the son of Dáood – on whom be peace! – [*he salaams*] – was heavy against me, and he commanded that I should be enclosed within a bottle of brass, and thrown into the Sea of El-Karkar, there to abide the Day of Doom.

Horace

Don't think I'm *believing* in you. [*Walking round the front of the bottle, as if to test Fakrash by touching him.*] I've sense enough to know you're not *real!*

[He withdraws his hand without venturing upon the experiment.]

Fakrash

Stroke thy head and recover thy faculties! I am real, even as thou art.

[He touches Horace's shoulder; Horace recoils.]

Horace

I shall come round in time! [*By the table, to Fakrash.*] You tell me you've just come out of this bottle?

Fakrash

Dost thou doubt that it is even as I have said?

Horace

Well, I should have thought myself you'd take a bigger size in bottles. But of course, I couldn't doubt you if I saw you get *into* it again.

Fakrash

That would be the easiest of actions! [*He makes a sudden swooping movement, as though to re-enter the bottle, and then thinks better of it.*] But I should indeed be a silly-bearded one to do this thing, since thou mightst be tempted to seal me up once more!

Horace

[*Disappointed, and backing against table, half afraid.*] Too knowing an old bird to be caught like that, aren't you? But I don't mind! You'll disappear presently.

Fakrash

True, O young man of perfect qualities and good works! But I will not leave thee before I have rewarded thy kindness. For in the sky it is written upon the pages of the air: "He who doeth kind actions shall experience the like!" Therefore – [*with a lordly gesture*] – demand of me what thou wilt, and thou shalt receive!

Horace

Oh, I shall be awake so soon it's not worth while troubling you.

Fakrash

Dismiss bashfulness from thee. [*Advancing towards him.*] For by thy hand hath my deliverance been accomplished, and if I were to serve thee for a thousand years, regarding nothing else, even thus could I not requite thee!

Horace

[*Retreating in some alarm to window.*] Look here. I don't want *anything*, and – and the best thing *you* can do is to vanish.

Fakrash

[*At back of table.*] Not till thou hast told me thy name and the trade that thou followest.

Horace

Oh, you'll go *then*? [*Fakrash assents.*] Well, I'll humour you. My name is Horace Ventimore, and I'm an architect. I get my living by building houses, you know. Or rather, I *should*, if I could only get hold of a client – which I can't.

Fakrash

[*Coming down nearer bottle.*] Grant thy servant a period of delay, and it may be that I can procure thee a client.

Horace

Good old Arabian Nights again! You'd better not make the delay long – my head will be clear very soon.

Fakrash

Greater rewards by far will I bestow upon thee, most meritorious of men! But now – [*going up to right*] – I must leave thee for a season.

Horace

I *knew* I was coming round – you'll be gone directly.

Fakrash

Aye, for I must seek out Suleymán – [*salaaming*] – on whom be peace! – and obtain pardon from him.

[*He waves his arm, and the door at back flies open.*]

Horace

[*Eagerly.*] Yes – I *would*! You go and do *that*! Make haste! [*The door closes, leaving Fakrash visible through it in an unearthly light.*] Good-bye – and good luck!

Fakrash

[*Through door.*] To thee also! And be assured that I will not be unmindful of thy welfare!

[*The door becomes solid as Fakrash vanishes.*]

Horace

[*Rubbing his eyes.*] What a queer dream! [*He goes up to the door, opens it, then returns and sits by table.*] So vivid! [*He sees the brass bottle on the floor.*] Open! [*Looking inside it.*] Empty! H'm, better get it out of the way.

[*He takes the bottle in one hand and the cap in the other, and carries them into the bedroom on right. The moment he has gone there is a rush of wind, and then a heavy thud on the balcony outside, and Mr. Wackerbath, a stout, prosperous-looking, elderly gentleman, in tall hat, frock-coat, white waistcoat, &c., reels through the open window*]

into the room, and sinks into the armchair on left of tablet where he sits puffing and blowing.

Mr. Wackerbath

[*Feebly.*] Where *am* I? How did I – ? [*He takes off his hat.*] Ah, of course! I remember now. [*He rises as Horace enters from bedroom.*] Mr. – ah – Ventimore, I think? Mr. Horace Ventimore?

Horace

[*Slightly surprised.*] Yes, that's my name. [*Offering chair on right of table.*] Won't you sit down?

Mr. Wackerbath

Thank you – I will. [*He sits down.*] I – I ought to apologise for dropping in on you in this – ah – unceremonious way – but I acted, I may say – ah – on a sudden impulse.

Horace

I'm afraid I haven't much time to spare – but if it's anything of importance —

Mr. Wackerbath

[*Panting.*] You must give me a little time – till I – ah – get my wind again.

Horace

Certainly. I know the stairs here *are* rather steep.

Mr. Wackerbath

Are they? I don't remember noticing them. However! My name, Mr. Ventimore, is Wackerbath – Samuel Wackerbath, of Wackerbath and Greatrex, a firm of auctioneers and estate agents whose name may – ah – possibly be not unfamiliar to you.

Horace

[*Who has obviously never heard it before.*] Oh, of course – of course.

Mr. Wackerbath

I may tell you that for the last few years I have rented an old place – Moatham Abbey they call it – in Surrey, which is not quite as up-to-date as I could wish in the matter of modern conveniences.

Horace

That's not unusual with ancient abbeys, is it?

Mr. Wackerbath

[*Solemnly.*] Precisely. Well, to come to the point, I've lately acquired some land in the neighbourhood of Surrey and Hampshire, with a view to building a country residence. [Horace *becomes more interested, and seats himself at table on Mr. Wackerbath's right.*] You see, there's an excellent site – on a hill with a south aspect, just above the village of Lipsfield, and overlooking the valley and river —

Horace

[*Making a note.*] Well, Mr. Wackerbath – ?

Mr. Wackerbath

Well, as I was saying only a minute or two ago to a friend as we were crossing Westminster Bridge on our way to Waterloo – [*He pauses, with an endeavour to recollect.*] Where was I?

Horace

Waterloo.

Mr. Wackerbath

Ah, yes. I remarked to him: "All I require is a thoroughly capable architect." [Horace *grows alert and excited.*] And instantly *your* name flashed across my mind. So I – ah – hurried off at once, and – here I *am*!

Horace

[*With a sudden misgiving.*] May I ask – you – you weren't *recommended* to me by – by – [*he looks round at the door through which Fakrash has vanished*] – any one?

Mr. Wackerbath

[*With dignity.*] Certainly not! It was – ah – entirely my own idea. But why do you ask? [*Huffily.*] Is an introduction necessary?

Horace

[*Relieved.*] No, no – not in the least! I – I merely asked. I shall be very pleased to undertake the commission. Could you give me some idea of the amount you thought of spending on the house?

Mr. Wackerbath

Well, I don't think I could go to more than – say, *sixty* thousand pounds.

Horace

[*Half rising in his surprise.*] Sixty thousand! [*He recollects himself and sits down in assumed calm.*] Oh, not more than *that*? I see.

Mr. Wackerbath

For the house itself. But there'll be the out-buildings – and the decorations. Altogether, I sha'n't complain so long as the total doesn't exceed a hundred thousand. I take it that, for that sum, Mr. Ventimore, you could give me a country-house that I shall have no cause – ah – to feel ashamed of.

Horace

I can safely promise *that*. And now – when could I run down and have a look at the site, and go into the matter thoroughly?

Mr. Wackerbath

We must fix a day later. I'm rather in a hurry now; and besides, I must consult the wife. Perhaps you could give me an appointment here?

Horace

These are only my private rooms. I shall be at my office in Great College Street to-morrow, if you could look in then. [*Giving him card.*] Here's the address.

Mr. Wackerbath

Good! [*He rises and moves towards window, while Horace rings bell by fireplace.*] I'll look in on my way from Waterloo to the City. [*He perceives that he is walking out on to a balcony, and turns.*] How the devil did I come in? I'll be with you at eleven sharp.

[*He goes towards the bedroom door on the right.*]

Horace

[*At door to landing.*] This way, Mr. Wackerbath.

Mr. Wackerbath

[*Vaguely.*] I thought I came *that* way. [*As he goes up.*] I can see already that you're the very man for me. [*At door to landing.*] Now I must be off, or I shall miss my train to Lipsfield. [*As Horace*

offers to see him downstairs.] Don't trouble – I can find my way down. Eleven sharp to-morrow. Good evening.

[As he passes out Horace touches his back, as though half suspecting him to be another illusion. Mr. Wackerbath turns and shakes hands effusively, then goes out, and Horace closes door.]

Horace

[To himself.] He's no dream, anyhow! [With exultation.] A client! A real client of my own! At last!

Mrs. Rapkin

[Enters from landing.] Did you ring for me, sir? – or was it only to let the gentleman out? [She comes down.]

Horace

Oh, there *is* something I had to tell you. We shall be *five* at dinner, not four. You can manage all right, eh?

Mrs. Rapkin

[Comfortably.] Lor, yes, sir. *That* won't make no difference!

Horace

[In front of table.] By the way, Mrs. Rapkin, you haven't let your ground-floor yet, have you? To – to an Asiatic gentleman?

Mrs. Rapkin

Me, sir? Let to a Asiatic! No, – nor wouldn't! Why, there was Rapkin's own sister-in-law let her droring-room floor to one. And – *[darkly]* – reason she 'ad to repent of it – for all his gold spectacles.

Horace

[Relieved.] Ah, I *thought* you hadn't. *[Sits on table.]* Well, about the waiting to-night? I suppose I can depend on Rapkin for that, eh? Where *is* he?

Mrs. Rapkin

Well, sir, not to deceive you, he ain't back yet from his Public – Libery as *he* calls it.

Horace

Oh, *that's* what he calls it, eh?

Mrs. Rapkin

Whatever he's took, sir, you may rely on him to 'and the dishes without 'aving no accidents.

[A noise is heard from the street below, which gradually resolves itself into an Oriental chant.]

Horace

What's going on outside? *[He goes to window, looks out, and then starts back uneasily.]* I say. It's – it's devilish odd – but there seems to me to be a whole caravan of camels down there!

Mrs. Rapkin

[Crossing to window.] Camuels, sir?

Horace

Well, you look and see what *you* make of them!

Mrs. Rapkin

[Looking down over balcony.] Lor! They *do* look like camuels, sir – or *some*think o' that. I expect they belong to the 'Ippodrome, or else a circus.

Horace

[Relieved.] I say, what a sensible woman you are! Of course! I never thought of *that*!

Mrs. Rapkin

[Still looking out, while the chant finishes with a few shouts, as though a halt were called.] They seem to be stopping outside the 'ouse. Them camuels have folded up, and all the niggers as is with them is a kneelin' down with their noses on the kerbstone!

Horace

[Uncomfortably.] They're only *resting*. Come away and don't take any notice. They'll move on presently.

Mrs. Rapkin

[*Still at window.*] But they're *unpackin'* the camuels now! And – well, if they ain't bringing everythink in 'ere!

[*She retreats to behind the table.*]

Horace

Great Scott!

[*He comes down to left of stage.*]

Mrs. Rapkin

They wouldn't be *more* things as you've been buying at that auction, sir, would they?

[*The chant is heard now inside the house.*]

Horace

No, no. It's a mistake! It *must* be a mistake!

Mrs. Rapkin

Then I'd better go and tell them —

[*She moves towards door to landing, but before she reaches it, it flies open mysteriously. A moment afterwards a tall, fierce Oriental in turban and robes appears in doorway and salaams. Mrs. Rapkin recoils with a cry. Then a train of black slaves enter, carrying large sacks, bales, and chests, which they deposit on the table and floor, till the room is completely blocked; their chief stands down on right, with his back to the audience, and directs them by gestures.*]

Horace

Look here! I say, – you fellows! You've come to the wrong house!

[*The slaves pay no attention to him.*]

Mrs. Rapkin

'Ere! my good *men*, what are you comin' in 'ere for, bringing all your dust into my apartments?

Horace

[*Standing paralysed; to himself.*] We can't *both* be dreaming!

Mrs. Rapkin

[*Trying to remonstrate with slaves.*] This rubbish don't belong 'ere! I can't 'ave the 'ole place littered up with it! You needn't act so ridic'lous if you *are* niggers! [*To Horace.*] It ain't no use *my* talking to 'em, sir. They're not like *Christians*– they're deaf and dumb, seemingly! *You* try!

Horace

[*Going to the Head Slave, who salaams as he approaches.*] Can you understand if I ask a question? [*The Head Slave salaams again.*] Well, I – I know it seems a silly thing to ask – but – but you don't happen to be sent here by – by anybody with a name something like Fakrash? [*The Head Slave implies by a gesture that this is so.*] You *have!*.. Well, look here. *I* don't want 'em. I decline to take 'em in. You have all these things put on the camels again, and clear out! Do you see what I mean? [*By this time the other slaves have gone; the Head Slave signifies in pantomime that the things are Horace's, salaams, and goes out, the door closing behind him mysteriously.*] I don't believe that idiot understands *now!* They've gone off to fetch *more!*

Mrs. Rapkin

[*Who has returned to window.*] They've gone off altogether, sir. I can't see nothink now but a cloud of dust.

Horace

[*Sinks into chair on right of table with his head buried in his hands.*] The fools! The confounded fools!

Mrs. Rapkin

[*Comes to table and looks for Horace in vain.*] Sir! Sir! [*Sees him over the bales, &c.*] Sir! Where *are* you going to 'ave your dinner-party *now?*

Horace

[*Forlornly.*] Oh, I don't know – I don't know! Don't worry me now, Mrs. Rapkin! Go away! Can't you see I want to think – I want to *think!*

Mrs. Rapkin

[*As she goes towards door at back.*] Well, I *must* say and I *do* say that if this '*ad* to 'appen, it couldn't have come more ill-convenient! [*She goes out.*

[As soon as she has gone Horace rises and comes to an antique-looking trunk on left; he opens it, and brings out an enormous emerald and ruby, each the size of a cocoa-nut; he looks at them for a moment in dismay, and drops them back with a groan. Then he crosses to a sack on the right, opens it, and brings out an immense diamond.]

While he is doing all this, Fakrash has risen from among the bales behind the table, and watches him with benign complacency.

Horace

[*As he returns the diamond to the sack.*] Oh! damn it all!

Fakrash

My son!

Horace

[*Recoiling on sacks.*] I'm not dreaming *now*! I'm awake! And yet – all that story of yours about your being shut up in a brass bottle? I *did* dream *that*– eh?

Fakrash

Nay, it is even as I told thee.

Horace

And it *was* you who sent me all these things?

Fakrash

A few trifling gifts by no means suited to thy dignity! Thou owest me no thanks.

Horace

I – I'd rather not owe you *anything*. I mean – I can't possibly accept any presents from you.

Fakrash

Nay, they are freely thine.

Horace

I don't want to be ungracious, but I must decline to be under any obligation whatever to a – well, to a perfect stranger like yourself.

Fakrash

Hast thou not placed me under the heaviest of obligations by delivering me from a bottle of brass? To escape out of a bottle is pleasant!

Horace

So I should imagine. But, you see, I'd no notion what I was *doing* or – well, it's done *now*, and if you really wish to show your gratitude for a very trifling service, I'll tell you how you can do it. [*In a tone of earnest entreaty.*] Take back all these gifts of yours, and let me alone!

Fakrash

[*Beaming.*] Truly I am amazed by thy modesty and magnanimity!

Horace

I'm *not* magnanimous – I'm devilish annoyed! [*Exasperated.*] Hang it all! *Can't* you understand that all these things are no earthly use to *me*? You might just as well have sent me so many white elephants!

Fakrash

As thou pleasest! To send thee elephants – yea, even in abundance – will be no difficult undertaking.

[*He makes a movement as though about to summon them.*]

Horace

[*Aghast.*] Good Lord! Don't you go wasting white elephants on *me*! You take everything so literally! All *I* meant was that if these things *were* white elephants, instead of what they are, I couldn't be more embarrassed! *Now* do you see?

Fakrash

[*Coming down to right.*] Thou seemest to me to be despising riches beyond all price.

Horace

Exactly! Because they *are* beyond all price! *Look* at those sacks – bulging, simply *bulging* with diamonds and rubies and emeralds as big as ostrich eggs! Well, I can't *wear* 'em. They'd be too dressy! I can't *sell* 'em – no one could afford to buy a single one of 'em! And how am I to account for having them at all?

Fakrash

Thou canst surely say that they are presents to thee from Fakrash-el-Aamash, a Jinnee of the Green Jinn, in return for thy kindness in releasing him from a bottle of brass.

Horace

Oh, *can* I? I fancy I see myself giving that explanation! [*More mildly.*] No, Fakrash, – you meant well – but the kindest thing *you* can do is to remove all this at once —

Fakrash

This is a thing that cannot be. For to bestow gifts and receive them back disgraceth the giver.

Horace

Not when the gifts are only in the way. [*He nearly trips over a sack.*] Just *look* at this room!

Fakrash

Verily it is but a miserable apartment for a person of thy distinction!

Horace

It's quite good enough for me when it isn't lumbered up like this. I'm expecting friends to dinner this evening, and how the deuce am I to entertain them comfortably unless you make it possible for me?

Fakrash

[*Benevolently.*] Have no uneasiness. I will see that thou art enabled to entertain thy guests as is fitting.

Horace

Good! [*At window.*] Then you'll send for that caravan of yours?

Fakrash

I hear and obey.

[He goes towards door at back and waves his hand. The door flies open. The chant is heard as before. A pause, after which the Head Slave enters and salaams. Then the train of black slaves pour in noiselessly, and proceed to carry out the chests, &c., and throw the bales out over the balcony.]

Horace

[*Encouraging them.*] That's right! *All* those are to go. Put your back into it! [*To some slaves who are throwing down bales from the balcony.*] Do be careful! You nearly bowled a camel over *that* time! [*The last slave has gone out with a sack from which an immense blue jewel has rolled;*

Horace *picks it up and calls after him.*] Hi! You've dropped a little sapphire thing! [*The Head Slave takes the sapphire from him and salaams.*] Sure you've got the lot? All right! Good day! [*The Head Slave makes a final salaam and goes out, the door closing after him mysteriously; Horace approaches Fakrash.*] It's awfully nice of you not to be *offended*, old fellow, and I'm just as much obliged as if I'd *kept* the things, you know.

Fakrash

It is no matter. Thou shalt receive other rewards more to thy liking.

Horace

[*Alarmed.*] No, no! I assure you I don't want *anything*. I can get along quite well by myself. Because – of course, *you* wouldn't know it, but – [*with pride*] – I've got a client now!

Fakrash

[*Calmly.*] I know it. Was he not my first gift unto thee?

Horace

[*Staggered.*] Your first – ? No, no – don't you go taking credit for *that*! He assured me himself that he came of his own accord!

Fakrash

He knew no better. Nevertheless it was I that procured him for thee.

Horace

How?

Fakrash

[*Airily.*] In the easiest manner possible. Having remarked him upon a bridge, I transported him instantly to thy dwelling, impressing him without his knowledge with thy names and thy marvellous abilities.

Horace

[*Horrified – to himself.*] Good Lord! He *said* he came in by the window! [*To Fakrash.*] So you did *that*, did you? Then you took a confounded liberty! You'd no business to introduce clients to me in that irregular way! Don't you ever do this sort of thing again! Just attend to your own affairs in future. I *understood* you were going off in search of Suleymán. It's high time you *started*. You won't find him in *this* country, you know.

Fakrash

He is on some journey – for in Jerusalem itself could I find no sign of him.

Horace

Oh, come! You can't have flown as far as Jerusalem and back *already!*

Fakrash

Know'st thou not that, to a Jinnee of the Jinn, distance is but a trifling matter?

Horace

So much the better! You'll be back in the East all the sooner. And when you *are* there, you *stay* there. Don't get disheartened if you don't find Suleymán directly. Keep on pegging away till you *do!* Why, the mere travelling will be a pleasant change for you!

Fakrash

[*On right of table; sententiously.*] Well and wisely was it written: "In travel there are five advantages. [*Proceeding to enumerate them on his fingers.*] The first of these is – "

Horace

[*Impatiently, as he moves to his bedroom door on right.*] I know, I know! Don't you bother to run through them *now*– I've got to dress for dinner. Just you bundle off to Arabia and search for Suleymán like billy-oh. Good-bye!

Fakrash

May Allah never deprive thy friends of thy presence! Never have I encountered a mortal who has pleased me so greatly!

Horace

[*At bedroom door.*] Awfully good of you to say so!

Fakrash

Farewell! Prepare to receive a reward beyond all thine expectations!

[*He waves his arm, and for ten seconds the room is in utter darkness. There are sounds as of a rushing wind and crashes and rumblings. Then the glimmer of three Arabian hanging lanterns is seen faintly illuminating a large central arch and two smaller side ones. An immense perforated lantern hanging from the domed roof then becomes*

lit, and reveals an octagonal hall with four curtained arches, the fourth, down on the right, being where Horace's bedroom door had been. The walls are decorated in crimson, blue, and gold arabesques. Above the bedroom door is a low divan with richly embroidered cushions. Opposite to it, on the left, is a similar divan. High in the wall overhead is a window with gilded lattice-work, through which is seen a soft blue evening sky.

Horace

[*With his back to the audience.*] Great Scott! What's that old idiot let me in for *now*?

Mrs. Rapkin

[*Heard outside the arch up on right of central arch.*] Oh, whatever is it *now*? What's 'appened?
[*She enters.*] Goodness gracious! Mr. Ventimore, sir – what's *come* to the 'ouse?

Horace

Then —*you* see a difference, Mrs. Rapkin?

Mrs. Rapkin

I don't see nothink as *ain't* different. For mercy's sake, sir, 'oo's been alterin' of it like this?

Horace

Well, *I* haven't.

Mrs. Rapkin

But where are you going to 'ave your dinner-party *now*, sir?

Horace

Where? Why, *here*! There's lots of *room*.

Mrs. Rapkin

But I don't see no dinner-table, nor yet no sideboard.

Horace

Never mind – never mind! Don't *make* difficulties, Mrs. Rapkin. You must manage *somehow*.

Mrs. Rapkin

I'll try, sir, but – not to deceive you – I feel that upset I 'ardly know where I *am*.

Horace

You – you'll get used to it. [*Persuasively.*] And you're going to see me through this, I'm sure. I must go and dress now. [*Looking round the hall.*] I suppose you haven't any idea where my bedroom is?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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