

Bumped Off

ACT ONE - SCENE ONE

IT IS SUMMER. THE SCENE IS THE DRAWING ROOM OF COLONEL SIR RODNEY GUNG-HO'S COUNTRY HOUSE. LADY PHYLLIS GUNG-HO IS SEATED, READING A MAGAZINE. THE COLONEL ENTERS, CARRYING A GUN IN THE CROOK OF HIS ARM

COLONEL: Damned rabbits! They're all over the place! I should've bagged a few more.

PHYLLIS: You've been on the estate?

COLONEL: Of course. Old Bowker asked me to help him reduce the rabbit population. You can't refuse a neighbour when they're eating his crops like it was their last meal... which I suppose it was, for some of them.

PHYLLIS: Rodney, I hope you've not been swearing in front of him. It's bad enough listening to you at home. I'm sure Lord Bowker wouldn't want to hear it!

COLONEL: **(PROPPING HIS GUN IN THE CORNER AND MOVING TO THE DRINKS CABINET)** What, old Bowker? When it comes to colourful vocabulary, he's a lot more inventive than me. Almost as good as my old sergeant-major. He's a hopeless shot, so the language becomes particularly unparliamentary when he's banging away and missing. Would you like to hear a sample?

PHYLLIS: **(SHOWING DISTASTE)** Certainly not! I have quite enough of that from you without the neighbours joining in.

COLONEL: **(POURING A DRINK)** Still, understandable that he should get upset, what? **(HOLDING UP THE BOTTLE)** Drink? No? As I was saying, it's understandable. The trouble with rabbits is that they won't keep still when you're about to pull the trigger; you'd think they'd at least have the decency to stay put.

PHYLLIS: Spare me the details. Did you see anything of Lady Bowker?

COLONEL: She's away apparently, visiting her daughter. Talking of which, where's our daughter today?

PHYLLIS: You know perfectly well where she is. Caroline's gone to bring her fiancé over. He's staying here for a few days.

COLONEL: Good Lord, I forgot! The goofy padre!

PHYLLIS: Rodney! I hope you're not going to come out with that sort of snide comment when he's here. The Reverend Smithers is a very sensitive man!

COLONEL: So I believe. Mind you, he does have a lot to be sensitive about.

PHYLLIS: Rodney!

COLONEL: Sorry! I'll try to remember, no swearing or snide remarks.

PHYLLIS: I should think not. Do remember, Claude will be your son-in-law soon.

COLONEL: Oh Gawd!

PHYLLIS: I beg your pardon?

COLONEL: Er, nothing. Are you sure you wouldn't like a drink, Phyllis?

PHYLLIS: Quite sure. I must say, I'm surprised at you Rodney! Surprised and disappointed. You seem to have no enthusiasm for this young man in spite of the fact that he is a most suitable match for Caroline. His father is a bishop and the family, although I may not have mentioned this before, are extremely well-off.

COLONEL: I believe you have mentioned it. **(TO THE AUDIENCE)** Only about fifty times!

PHYLLIS: What was that?

COLONEL: Merely ruminating, Phyllis. I just wonder why Caroline is giving up a partnership in a good accountancy firm, for jumble sales and afternoon tea parties.

PHYLLIS: It's her choice, Rodney, and she *is* marrying into a very good family. Anyway, they'll be arriving soon along with the others.

COLONEL: The others?

PHYLLIS: Surely, you haven't forgotten we're having *guests* for the next few days, have you?

COLONEL: No, no, of course not! Er, how many did you say? I'm afraid my memory's not what it was.

PHYLLIS: It's not your memory that's at fault, Rodney, it's because you just don't listen. There'll be three others besides Caroline and Claude. I do hope Binge took in properly what I told him. You men are all the same!

COLONEL: Oh I wouldn't say that. Binge is a reliable fella, usually. He was my batman for three years, Phyllis, and he looked after me pretty well.

PHYLLIS: I *know* he was your batman Rodney, which is probably why he drinks so much, but we don't have to put up with that now. It's time we had a new butler.

COLONEL: (IN A RARE SHOW OF DEFIANCE) Sack old Binge? We can't do that! It's fellas like him looking after fellas like me that make the army what it is. We owe him a debt of gratitude, never mind throwing him out!

PHYLLIS: (COLDLY) Well, let us leave it for now and concentrate on the guests. Apart from Claude, there'll be Winnie Miller and her daughter Sadie who is also bringing her boyfriend. You know Winnie, of course.

COLONEL: Your American friend from university? Gets divorced every few years?

PHYLLIS: Don't exaggerate, Rodney. She's been divorced twice, and before you make any snide comment about that, she wasn't to blame. The fault was entirely her husbands'.

COLONEL: (TO HIMSELF) It would be!

PHYLLIS: Do stop muttering, Rodney! Winnie was first married to an American, and when that ended in divorce, she came over here. The second marriage didn't work out either, but by then she had a daughter, Sadie. You've met Sadie, but not the boyfriend.

COLONEL: I see. Does this boyfriend have a name?

PHYLLIS: Smooche, I believe his name is.

COLONEL: (CLUTCHING SUDDENLY AT THE BACK OF A CHAIR) Good God! Smooche?

PHYLLIS: Yes.

COLONEL: Not *Oliver* Smooche?

PHYLLIS: I believe so. You know him then?

COLONEL: Er, no, no. Of course not! Just remember someone mentioning the name, that's all.

PHYLLIS: (RISING) Well it won't be long before some of them start arriving. I really must go and make sure Binge knows what he's doing.

PHYLLIS EXITS, STAGE LEFT.

COLONEL: (POURS HIMSELF ANOTHER DRINK WITH A RATHER UNSTEADY HAND) Smooche of all people! I shall have to make myself scarce. **(BINGE ENTERS, STAGE RIGHT)**

BINGE: (FIXING AN EYE ON THE COLONEL'S DRINK) Anything *else* you require, sir?

COLONEL: (STARTLED) Binge, it's you! For one ghastly moment I thought you were Smooche. And by the way, Lady Phyllis is looking for you. She's got the warpaint on, if you know what I mean.

BINGE: Yes sir. I did see her in the distance.

COLONEL: So you took evasive action, what? Sensible fella! I intend to do the same when this Smooche arrives.

BINGE: Smooche, sir?

COLONEL: Yes, you know. The bookie. The one you've been getting to take my bets. Apparently he's arriving with the daughter of a friend of Lady Phyllis. I must avoid him at all costs, Binge, and you must help me.

BINGE: Yes, sir?

COLONEL: (LOOKS ROUND AND LOWERS HIS VOICE) Yes, Binge. You see my account with Smooche has ...er, slipped somewhat into the red.

BINGE: Really sir? You owe him money?

COLONEL: (AGITATED) Shush, not so loud! I had a rather nasty letter from him the other day. It appears I owe him **(IN A WHISPER)** nearly nine thousand pounds!

BINGE: (STRAINING TO HEAR) Sorry sir, did you say nine thousand pounds?

COLONEL: Binge! For God's sake keep your voice down! Yes, I couldn't believe it but the blighter sent me a list of all my bets since April, and I'm afraid it's true! Bad luck, of course! I should have had half a dozen winners, but the one that did manage to win, was disqualified.

BINGE: Most unfortunate, sir.

COLONEL: Too true! The trouble is, I don't have the money readily available. Lady Phyllis controls most of the finances and it's more than my life's worth to involve her. **(TAKES ANOTHER GULP OF HIS DRINK)** I've decided there's only one thing to do. Take this. **(PRODUCES A SLIP OF PAPER AND HANDS IT OVER)** Get on the phone and put this on the 2.15 at Haydock for me.

BINGE: (LOOKS AT THE SLIP IN ASTONISHMENT) Is this wise, sir? Two hundred pounds on one horse?

COLONEL: I know, but I have a feeling about this one. Look at the name, man... *Rodney's Fortune*. If that isn't an omen, I don't know what is!

BINGE: But it's fifty to one!

COLONEL: Yes, I am aware of that. I always pick outsiders.

BINGE: Possibly that has something to do with your lack of success, sir.

COLONEL: Yes, all right, Binge, but it means a win will clear my debt and leave a handy profit. You'll have to open an account with a different bookmaker, of course. Try to find one who displays a little of the milk of human kindness.

BINGE: A bookie with the milk of human kindness, sir? That might be difficult!

COLONEL: Well do what you can. I must keep out of the way while this Smooche is around. From the tone of his letter I'd say he's ready to take the shirt off my back! Well, I must be going! **(DRAINS HIS GLASS AND PICKS UP THE GUN)** I'd better take this. It might come in handy if that horse doesn't win!

THE COLONEL EXITS.

BINGE: Smooche, eh? The colonel's not the only one who owes you! **(POURS HIMSELF A DRINK, GULPS IT DOWN AND POURS ANOTHER)** Smooche! The man who used my daughter and then tossed her aside like an old sock! I've been waiting for the chance to get even with you! **(EMPTIES HIS GLASS AS VOICES ARE HEARD APPROACHING)** Blimey! It's Lady Battleaxe! I'm off! **(EXITS STAGE RIGHT AS PHYLLIS APPEARS, STAGE LEFT)**

PHYLLIS: Really, I don't know what you must think! It's too bad when one has to answer one's own front door. I don't know what's happened to Binge. **(SHE IS FOLLOWED BY WINNIE, SADIE AND OLIVER SMOOCHE)**

WINNIE: (GAZING ROUND THE ROOM) Don't worry about it, Phyllis. Gee, I'd never have guessed when we were at Uni together, that you'd do so well for yourself!

PHYLLIS: Oh, but surely, you've been here before?

WINNIE: Sure I have, but only brief visits and I never really took it in. I guess I was in a daze and too *ark*upied with marriage problems.

PHYLLIS: Of course. Now do sit down and I'll get you a drink. Would you like tea, coffee or something alcoholic? **(THE GUESTS SIT WHILE PHYLLIS GOES TO THE DRINKS CABINET)**

WINNIE: No alcohol for me, Phyllis. A glass of water would be fine. I'm on the wagon these days.

SADIE: And an orange juice for me, if you have one. I don't drink either.

OLIVER: (TO THE AUDIENCE) Stone me! What a miserable flaming lot! **(TO PHYLLIS)** A whisky and soda please, and go easy on the soda.

SADIE: Oliver, darling! It's a bit early in the day, isn't it?

WINNIE: It is too! You know, *Ar*liver, it was drink that caused my last marriage to break up!

OLIVER: Ah! So that's why you're on the wagon now?

WINNIE: (COLDLY) I meant my husband's drinking, not mine.

OLIVER: My mistake! **(TO PHYLLIS)** I'd like to meet the colonel. Is he around?

PHYLLIS: (STARTING TO HAND OUT DRINKS) I really must apologise for Rodney's absence. He's attending to some business. I'm sure he'll be here soon. **(BINGE APPEARS)**

BINGE: Excuse me madam, Miss Caroline is here with The Reverend Smithers.

OLIVER: (GETTING QUICKLY TO HIS FEET AND ADDRESSING THE AUDIENCE) Don't tell me. More members of The Temperance Society! **(TO PHYLLIS)** Do you mind if I slip out to the er...you know!

PHYLLIS: The loo? Binge will show you the way after he shows the guests in.

(BINGE STANDS TO ONE SIDE AND CAROLINE ENTERS, FOLLOWED BY CLAUDE. BINGE HOVERS IN THE DOORWAY)

OLIVER: (LOOKS AT CAROLINE IN SURPRISE - WALKS TOWARDS HER, EXTENDING A HAND) Hello! So you must be Caroline. I'm Oliver Smooche. Haven't we met somewhere before? **(TAKES HER HAND, KISSES IT AND HOLDS ON TO IT)**

CAROLINE: (TAKEN ABACK, MAKES A FEEBLE ATTEMPT TO WITHDRAW HER HAND) Oh er, I don't think so. Pleased to meet you all the same. This is Claude, my fiancé.....