

script sample

The Ballad of Hobart Jones

a play

by **Trevor Alan Chilver**

The Ballad of Hobart Jones

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JONES

Oh my, is she?

ROMSEY

Lived two doors down from father until she went to Hertfordshire.

JONES

Then how did she manage to get a place at Hatfield?

ROMSEY

She was spotted, they say, by the Marchioness upon a visit to Buckinghamshire before the election in '85. She was so taken with her tea and the service that she had them send a packet of tea with the girl to Hatfield House. But how did she come to you, old chap?

JONES

I happened to mention that I was looking for someone for my country home while I was at the Oxbridge club, after old Mrs Brentley died.

ROMSEY

The poor old dear.

JONES

Indeed. 'Twas a shame. She was awfully efficient. I've not quite had my socks folded quite right this three-month.

ROMSEY

Everyone should have a Mrs Brentley.

JONES

The country would function ever so much better, I dare say.

Pause.

JONES

Anyway, four days later, I received a note from the Hatfield housekeeper saying they have less need for staff at the country house since the Marquis and Marchionesse are spending so much time in London, and they have a maid of the highest order in need of a new position worthy of her quality, and could I assist.

ROMSEY

And so you did.

JONES

And right pleased I am, too.

ROMSEY

I should think so.

JONES

Mind yourself, Melbourne.

ADA enters and hands JONES and ROMSEY tea.

ADA

Your tea, sirs.

ROMSEY

Thank you, my dear.

JONES

Thank you, Ada.

ADA exits.

ROMSEY

Ada?

JONES

She insists.

ROMSEY

Mind yourself, Hobart.

JONES

Anyway, you didn't come to talk about my staffing, now, did you?

ROMSEY

Indeed I did not. I came to talk to you about the Society meeting.

JONES

Oh good. By the way, congratulations, Secretary Romsey.

ROMSEY

And congratulations to you too, President Jones.

JONES

Thank you.

ROMSEY

Not at all. Now, a letter has come from the colonies.

JONES

How exciting! Which one? Is it Rhodesia? I do like Rhodesia.

ROMSEY

I didn't know you'd been to Africa, Hobart.

JONES

I haven't; I just like the name.

ROMSEY

Well I'm sorry to disappoint you.

JONES

Well there's still Jamaica.

ROMSEY

No, New South Wales.

JONES

Oh. Do we know anyone in New South Wales?

ROMSEY

No. It's from a Sir Patrick Jennings.

JONES

And who is Sir Patrick Jennings?

ROMSEY

The premier¹ of New South Wales. He is preparing the colony to celebrate its centennial, and would like to commission a ballad.

JONES

Do they not have any balladeers in Sydney Town?

ROMSEY

Apparently he wishes them to collaborate. It would seem from his letter that their balladeers are somewhat contentious, and whenever he has managed to gather them, they have been less than productive. Apparently, they don't like his politics.

JONES

Well what has politics to do with poetry?

ROMSEY

That seems to be his position. He has attempted to convince them of his belief that the colony needs a ballad that will raise the spirits of the people, but laments that the balladeers are more interested in berating the premier for his politics than in writing ballads.

JONES

Is he a Catholic?

ROMSEY

He doesn't say. But he must be; either that or a Presbyterian, with a name like Jennings.

JONES

Why should an English colony have a Catholic for its premier?

ROMSEY

Yes, it seems entirely illogical to me, but the man does seem to be right about one thing.

JONES

And that is?

ROMSEY

He wants the Royal Society of Balladeers to send a representative to unite the colony's balladeers.

JONES

Oh, very wise. He's chosen the right men.

ROMSEY

He has indeed, what.

JONES

Do you think we should send someone?

ROMSEY

Oh, I do indeed.

JONES

And whom do you propose?

ROMSEY

My dear Hobart, a situation like this calls for the most accomplished balladeer in the country!

JONES

You mean Tennyson? He's an old man now, I don't think he'd survive the voyage!

ROMSEY

No, my dear Hobart, I mean you!

JONES

Me? But how would I unite the balladeers of New South Wales?

ROMSEY

You've united the Society! And after the last few years of bickering and torment, with not one of our members composing any ballads at all, that's quite remarkable!

JONES

You're right, I have indeed.

ROMSEY

So there's not a better candidate for uniting the balladeers of the colonies!

JONES

Very well, then. Should we raise it at the meeting?

ROMSEY

Of course we shall. And they shall all agree that you're the man for the job.

JONES

Except for Hopkins.

ROMSEY

Don't worry yourself about Gerard Manley Hopkins, Hobart. He's a contentious old toad.

JONES

A toad indeed.

ROMSEY raises his teacup.

ROMSEY

To New South Wales, what!

JONES chinks his teacup against ROMSEY's.

JONES

To New South Wales!

They both drink.

ROMSEY

Now, on another matter relating to the agenda. I suspect, old boy, that Hopkins intends to raise his hobby horse again. He's asked me to add "society title" to the agenda.

JONES

Oh, not again!

ROMSEY

I thought I'd pop it down the end, you see? In the hope that everyone would be too tired to give it much thought.

JONES

Not a bad idea, Romsey, but I would like to end on a positive note. Can we put the letter from New South Wales at the end?

ROMSEY

I suppose, but how shall we keep Hopkins in check?

JONES

Oh, I think the committee will do just fine with that. We usually manage to shut him up without too much trouble.

ROMSEY

Very good. Now do you have musical accompaniment for the anthem?

JONES

You know, I thought we'd sing a capella!

ROMSEY

A capella! What a splendid idea, Hobart.

JONES

Yes, I recall a fine rendition of it at Winterborne Crane some time back, when William Barnes was president of the society.

ROMSEY

Ah yes, dear old Barnesy. Such a sad day, hearing of his death, what.

JONES

Terrible pity.

ROMSEY

A loss for the Balladeers.

JONES

A loss indeed!

ROMSEY

Do you think we should have a toast?

JONES

It is the first meeting since. What a charming idea. Pop it on top of the agenda.

ROMSEY writes on his paper.

ROMSEY

So we add a toast to Barnes at the beginning, and pop Hopkins' "society title" question in before the letter from Premier Jennings at the end. What's for morning tea, old chap?

JONES

It will be a Thursday.

ROMSEY

Ah, scones. I do like scones, what.

JONES

But we're doing something a little special. Some of the scones will be served with apricot jam.

ROMSEY

Oh, splendid! I do like apricot jam!

JONES

And cook's putting sugar in the cream!

ROMSEY

Sugar in the cream! Oh! How very extravagant! You'll set a precedent, Jones.

JONES

Do you think?

ROMSEY

You'll have the entire society talking about your meetings.

JONES rings the bell.

JONES

Miss Harris!

ADA

Yes, sir?

JONES

Perhaps we should have cook omit the sugar in the cream for the meeting.

ADA

Yes, sir.

ADA exits.

ROMSEY

Oh, I didn't mean to...

JONES

No, you're quite right.

ROMSEY

But, Hobart, I think you'll secure your presidency for another year with an extravagance like that.

JONES

Do you think so, Romsey?

ROMSEY

I do.

JONES rings the bell.

JONES

Miss Harris!

ADA enters.

JONES

I'm terribly sorry, Ada, but I've changed my mind once more. Have cook put extra sugar in the cream.

ADA

Very well, sir.

ROMSEY hands ADA his empty teacup and moves towards the exit.

ROMSEY

Oh, goody. It will be a splendid meeting. Now, I must be going. I suspect there'll be a queue in my office by now, Hobart.

JONES hands ADA his teacup also.

JONES

Oh, mustn't keep them waiting too long, old chap. Thank you, Ada.

JONES and ROMSEY exit. ADA begins to rearrange the room, and remove teacups.

SCENE 2

Hobart Jones' Buckinghamshire House. The poets enter, following ROMSEY and JONES, all fatigued from too much eating.

JONES

It has been a long day, gentlemen, and there are only two items left on the agenda, but I, for one, have had too many scones and my attention is waning. I think we should ask Doctor Romsey to review our progress so far, to ensure we are all of accord, before we move on to the final items on the agenda.

ROMSEY

Thank you, Mister Jones. So, to review:

Firstly, this morning, it was determined that a new portrait of Queen Victoria, illustrating flatteringly...

BINYON

Hear, hear.

ROMSEY

...illustrating flatteringly her maturing visage, will be commissioned for the Society's meeting room at Exeter College.

BINYON

God save the queen!

ALL

God save the queen!

ROMSEY

We then discussed membership fees, and decided to raise them.