

Choosing Words

Jack scratched out the few lines he had written, sat back and sighed.

His father was in an armchair reading, but remarked, 'Sounds as though you've got a problem.'

'Yes,' said Jack, 'It's fitting two words in.'

'This is the piece you've got to write containing some chosen words? To be handed in tomorrow?'

'Yes,' said Jack abstractedly.

'What are the words?'

' 'Fickle ' and 'sumptuous'.'

Dad thought it over, 'Mmm, they are rather restrictive, aren't they? They suggest a fickle woman living in sumptuous surroundings.'

'It could be a cat who sleeps on a silk cushion and is fussy about its food. But the words do strongly flavour the story; a rather boring story.'

'The fickle woman could sit on the cat by mistake – real live drama!'

Jack gave his Dad a despairing look.

His Dad asked, 'How tolerant is your English master?'

'Oh, he's pretty good so long as you do something original.'

'Could you use words that rhyme with the awkward ones? Like 'pickle' or 'tickle'?

'What rhymes with 'sumptuous?' asked Jack.

'Not much. What about 'bumptious' or 'scrumptious'?

'Or 'gumptious'?

'I've never heard that one,' said his Dad.

'I'm being Shakespearean, making up a word. It's the adjective from 'gumption'.' He thought for a moment, 'I'll try something using rhymes. It'll have to be short, I haven't much time.'

'It's a bit odd, but would you like to see it, Dad?'

'Of course. Hand it over.' He took the page and read:

The stage manager Philip was worried. From the wings he could see that Martin was not well, but bravely continuing with the three-cornered argument; he had to hold on to a chair to keep steady. As soon as the curtain fell at the end of Act One, Philip hurried to help the actor off the stage and get him to his

dressings room. There, Martin just slumped into a chair, his eyes almost closed. Philip turned to his assistant and said, 'Better warn the understudy.'

'No,' mumbled Martin, 'I'll be OK. Get smelling salts.'

Martin looked questioningly at his assistant, who went off to search. A minute or two later he came back holding a bottle, 'No salts, but the doorkeeper has these pickled onions. They've got a pretty strong smell.'

'Well, we can try,' said Philip, opening the jar and waving it under Martin's nose. This began to do the trick; Martin began to revive, and after a minute or two he was awake and said, 'Can I have one?' He took hold of the jar and fished out an onion and crunched it up; 'Scrumptious,' he said. Then he took another, clearly enjoying the refreshment; he ended up by eating about half the onions in the jar. Then he set the jar down and said, 'Better get ready for Act Two.'

'Can you manage?' asked Philip.

'Yes. I'm fine.' He took off his coat and exchanged it for a cardigan, and went off to continue his performance.

Act Two got under way with Martin on stage, getting fairly affectionate with an attractive girl. They moved closer to each other, and when their lips were within half an inch of meeting, Martin suddenly let out a loud and prolonged vinegar and onion burp.

The girl proved herself a true actor: she turned her head towards the audience, fluttered her eyelashes and said, 'He loves me.'

Dad laughed and said, 'That'll do; certainly original!'

Roy Chisholm