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The Oracle

Jan Ord

Robert's lean, muscled body moved with the easy grace of one whose youth was spent loping for hours along the limitless expanses of the sparkling seashore of far-off Trinidad. His voice, when he spoke, still surprised me with its perfectly-modulated Oxford accent. He tucked *The Times* under his arm, picked up the leather-bound Bible, and walked toward me.

"If I tell you what I've been doing, Jan, I'm afraid you will no longer think me very spiritual."

The tone was serious, but his dark brown eyes were twinkling – his smiles always began there.

"Oh? Whatever makes you think that I think you're spiritual?"

The smile moved from his eyes, lighting up his handsome face. He pulled gently on his dark beard.

"I've been to the betting shop. Today's the Oaks, and I've not missed once in the fifteen years I've been here."

Pamela giggled, holding her knitting up to her nose, her vivid blue eyes accentuated by the bright blue yarn.

"I told you your goose'ud be cooked this weekend, luv," she chortled.

I sat down beside her on the comfortable leather settee. "Does he win or lose, Pamela?"

"What d'you think, luv? Does 'e look like a fool? Our Robert always bloody wins, of course." She giggled again. "God's on 'is side, y'know."

I turned to speak to Robert, who had taken off his suit coat, and was loosening his silk tie: "Well, tell me, damn you! Are you making money on the side this weekend, and not letting me in on it?"

"Oh, Jan, luv, I thought you'd be mad, bein' Davie Watson's sec'try and all." This time his accent was pure Geordie, causing Pamela to bury her head in the blue yarn with a squawk of mirth.

"Tell her all about it, luv. We can't come here every month for four days, and not let the cat out of the bag about your little vice, can we?"

As he sat down beside me, he put his arm around my shoulders and said, "Let me tell you about my misspent youth."

He told me about studying at London University for his bachelor's and master's degrees in engineering. But, at the same time, he had continued to follow his father's passion – the horses.

"An' 'e has a bloody good formula, Jan. He only bets when he has a good one – our Robert bought that car with what 'e's won this past three years."

As she spoke, Pamela pointed her knitting needle towards the new silver-blue Rover sitting gracefully at the curbside.

"When our Robert wins, 'e gives the money to me to put in the bank." Pamela's thin face glowed under her long, straight blonde hair.



David had been sitting in the adjoining room, listening. He swaggered into our circle. "Can you give me some tips for Wednesday? I have the York Racecourse PR account, and I'd like to go and see how it's going."

Robert's eyebrows raised as he looked at me: "Well, well, well. A convert already! Are you going with him?"

"Of course. I love to watch him spend his money."

Wednesday proved to be a fun day. Robert gave us four tips, all of which "came home." By the last race we were over 100 pounds ahead, even after paying for our gate tickets and a lobster salad and champagne lunch. He hadn't given us any tips for the final race. But I had had so much fun watching as one bet after another won, that when I saw a horse listed on the board at twenty to one, I said: "I'm putting a pound on that one."

David scowled, handing me a pound note. "You'll lose it, you silly woman. Robert said nothing about that one."

"That's because he only bets on favorites. This is my fling"

I gave my pound to the bookmaker, and one minute later the race began. I couldn't see, as we were down on the grass instead of in the stand; nor could I hear the loudspeaker clearly. But as the crowds around me jumped up and down, peering through their binoculars, I could hear the name of my horse being spoken more and more. As the race ended, a shout of amazement went up from the crowd. Then I heard the loudspeaker announcement. My twenty-to-one long shot had won!

David was mesmerized. He couldn't wait to get home to call Robert. They talked a long time, and when he came off the phone he grabbed my arm excitedly.

"I haven't told Robert yet, but I know that this is a miracle. This is how God is going to finance my ministry."

I came down to earth with a thump! But I stayed silent, listening as he outlined his plan. I figured that it would all pass over, as every other fad had. It didn't.

An amused Robert called one day while David was out and, as always, he had a theological question. When I asked him about his gambling, he just laughed.

"Don't worry about it, luv. It's just a bit o' fun."

The "bit o' fun" was serious business for David, who extracted tips for the May race meeting from Robert through frequent phone calls. When every tip paid off, he was convinced that Robert had "the word" directly from God. He began to talk about Ascot, which was just a few weeks away.

Ascot: the focal point of the European racing season! Three exciting days with high stakes and the best horses and jockies in Europe. The papers were already filled with it. Tuesday was Ladies Day – fillies only; Wednesday was the main event, as well as the fashion highlight, when the season's latest Paris fashions appeared; and Thursday was the male equivalent of Tuesday.

Robert and Pamela arrived after midnight on the Friday before Ascot. As we settled down on the thickly-carpeted living room floor with a nightcap, I looked hard into Robert's face.

"Well," I said, "Is all this stuff 'from the Lord' or not?"

Pamela, sitting cross-legged, pulled out her knitting. Robert's eyes half-closed as he gently sniffed the Cognac, and then took an appreciative sip, savoring it in his mouth before swallowing. The rhythmic clicking of Pamela's flying needles was all that broke the warm silence. As he opened his eyes, he laughed.

"Perhaps it's from the Lord, Jan luv. I'll go along with David's little game till the Lord tells me to stop."

Next morning, while we cooked a breakfast of bacon, lambs' kidneys, mushrooms, potatoes, eggs, and stewed tomatoes, David and Robert sat at the dining room table, curly black and straight mouse-brown hair almost touching, poring over racing forms.

When Pamela and I walked in with laden platters of steaming food, Robert looked up and winked at me over David's head.

"Ha. Food for the soul!" he exclaimed, pouring himself a cup of scalding-hot English coffee, and heaping his plate high with food from the platters. David reluctantly set the racing forms aside, and frowned at our beaming faces.

"Cheer up, Davie lad. And sup up." This time Robert's accent was north Yorkshire country.

As I gathered up the racing forms and put them on the sideboard, Robert looked pleadingly at me: "Don't yell at me, Jan luv. If it's the Lord's will, who am I to say not?"

Ladies Day dawned clear and bright – the kind of balmy June day that has convinced generations of English, and other people, that England is the most beautiful place in the world.

All morning, on the thick red carpet in front of the television, lay David and Robert, racing forms strewn around them. Noon finally came – opening time for the betting shop, with the first race at 12:30 p.m. Off they raced.

At 12:25 p.m. the Rover slid to a halt by the curb, and the two punters ran excitedly back into the living room, throwing themselves on the floor in front of the television set. Every race would be telecast live, so they could see and hear as their horses rode home, bringing their money with them.

The race began, and the favorite was ahead – ahead all the way, till there was only one furlong left. Then an outsider put on a burst of speed and ran past the post ahead of her. The commentator was incredulous! "What happened? This is an upsetting way to begin the day. We'll see what the experts have to say."

David snapped the television set off. Robert sat up, shaking his head.

"I've never had that happen before," Robert said quietly. "Sometimes there will be another horse that's a possibility, so I bet to win or place. This was *sure*. We only put money on her to win."

Races Two and Three were run, with the favorites winning. But Robert had had no tips for those races. Race Four was the major race of the day, and he had his winner chosen. They left for the betting shop. Pamela and I made a cup of tea.



Races Five and Six they abstained again, but Races Seven and Eight on which they bet, one for a win, the other for a win and a place, were a disaster, with the horse in Race Eight not even placing. Pamela put her arm around my shoulders as we went into the kitchen to check the roasting beef that was filling the house with a delicious aroma.

“Our David’s right. About it bein’ the Lord, I mean. But ’e just interpreted Him wrong. ’E’s plannin’ on teachin’ our David a lesson, I think.”

Robert was quiet over dinner, but David talked incessantly. What had gone wrong? When Pamela suggested that the Lord had really said “No” about this money-making scheme, he brushed it aside, looking to Robert for support.

Robert’s response was measured: “She may be right, you know. This has never happened to me before, or I would have given it up long ago.”

As he spoke, he got up from the table, walked into the adjoining room, and picked up a paper he had written on the origin of the doctrine of the Rapture.

“Come ’ere, Davie lad, and tell me if my theory on the Rapture holds water.”

Next morning was Ascot. Half-way through the afternoon, with the same story being played out as the day before, Pamela and I decided to go to the movies.

By the time Thursday’s race meeting was about to begin, both David and Robert were in a quandary. So far, in every race they bet on, the favorite failed to meet expectations – every race they kept out of came up true to form. David just saw it as Robert’s misreading of the situation, and as he still had a little money left, was determined to recoup his losses. Half-heartedly, Robert joined him in their hurried trips to the bookmakers, and their rushed returns to the living room floor to watch the outcome on television.

Pamela and I had secretly put modest amounts on some of our choices throughout the three days, and between us had won a little money. As the final day drew to a close, we decided to cheer the losers up.

“Let’s eat at the Tudor Tavern tonight,” I suggested. “We’ll treat.” The final race was being run, with the same result as the previous ones. Only David had bet this time. As I spoke, he turned the television set off, and we all headed eagerly for the car.

As the last rays of the sun filtered through the greenish bottle-glass panes of the tavern windows, we sipped schooners of Bristol Milk, and waited for our shrimp cocktails to arrive.

“Well, lad. What’e think o’ the Lord, eh?” Robert asked, once again in the country Yorkshire dialect.

David gave him a pained look, and sipped his sherry, saying nothing.

“I can’t say I *knew* that this would be the outcome,” Robert continued, this time in Oxford English, “but I can’t see the Lord risking His reputation to provide for us when we could easily go out and earn the money ourselves. I’ll put my 500 pound loss down to experience, and from now on I’ll bet just for fun.

The shrimp cocktails arrived, and we all set to eating with gusto, realizing that Robert had, once again, spoken the final word.