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Charley's Aunt



by Brandon Thomas

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE SELECTION

From the time it hit the stage, *Charley's Aunt* has been an exceptionally popular comedy. Its first production opened in London in 1892, when the costumes described in the performance notes were fashionable. The play was so popular that the theater was officially ordered not to "cause a nuisance through the assembly of crowds." Midway through its four-year London run, it opened in New York, where it enjoyed similar success. The play was translated into many languages and, almost nonstop until the mid-1930s, some production of it was running somewhere in the world.

The play became a silent movie in 1925. It was filmed with sound in 1930 and again in 1941, this time with Jack Benny as the star. In 1949, a musical version was a hit on Broadway. There have been two television productions of the farce. Even today, more than 100 years later, the original play is performed practically every year by some regional theater.

For modern audiences much of the appeal of this play lies in its old-fashioned and elegant setting, and in its charming characters. But its primary appeal is the humor of a situation shared with such modern comedies as *Some Like It Hot* and *Tootsie*: a

man awkwardly pretending to be a woman is trusted by women and courted by other men. In the passage that you will read, from the middle of Act I, the fun begins as an Oxford student is unwillingly drawn into impersonating a friend's rich aunt.

The play is set in an era when college was almost exclusively for rich young men, and when respectable single women were never in a man's rooms without an older woman as chaperone. Act I starts in the rooms of Oxford student Jack Chesney. Jack and his friend Charley Wykeham confess to each other that they are madly in love with Kitty and Amy, the ward and the niece of pompous and domineering Stephen Spettigue. Spettigue plans to take the young women to Scotland the next day, and the young men are about to leave Oxford as the school term ends. The students are desperate to find a way to have private talks with the women immediately.

Charley tells Jack that he expects the arrival, at any minute, of a rich aunt who has been in Brazil his whole life but who has been paying for his education. Jack proposes to invite Kitty and Amy to a luncheon in honor of the aunt, Donna Lucia d'Alvadorez. Jack sends invitations by messenger to the young women. Then he sends his manservant, Brassett, to invite a third student, Lord Fancourt Babberley, called Babbs, so that this "jolly, cheerful little chap" can keep Donna Lucia amused while Jack and Charley pair off with Kitty and Amy.

Babbs sends back word that he is busy with a luncheon of his own. When he comes to Jack's rooms a few minutes later to get refreshments for his expected guests. Jack and Charley explain their situation to him and appeal to him to stay. Babbs insists that he must meet that afternoon with other students involved in an amateur theatrical production he has joined. Before the others arrive, he wants to try on his costume. He explains that he is to play the role of an old lady. Unwilling to let Lord Fancourt slip out of his hands, Jack sends his manservant, Brassett, to Lord Fancourt's rooms to get the costume. Soon Babbs discovers he has been drawn into the starring role of an unplanned theatrical production.

**ABOUT THE
AUTHOR**

Brandon Thomas (1856–1914) was a British actor and dramatist who is noted for his one spectacularly successful play, the farce *Charley's Aunt*. When *Charley's Aunt* was first performed in London in 1892, Thomas played the role of Sir Francis Chesney.

**ABOUT THE
LESSONS**

The lessons that follow *Charley's Aunt* focus on the written form of a play and how it differs from other written forms of fiction. The lessons explain how playwrights use stage directions to establish mood and pacing; to explain how objects and actors should be positioned on stage; and to communicate how the actors should speak, move, and act.

**WRITING: STAGING A DAY IN YOUR LIFE**

Realistic plays—and even farces like *Charley's Aunt*—try to make what happens on the stage seem as if it were happening in real life. At the end of this unit, you will transform a few minutes of your own life into the form of a play. The following activities will help you find material for your “slice-of-life” playlet:

- At random moments over the next few days, observe your surroundings carefully. Make a mental list of objects you see. In a classroom, what is on the walls? What pieces of equipment are visible? At home, where is the television set? How large is it? What else is in that room? If you wanted to transfer one of the rooms to the stage, what scenery would you need? what objects? Look for a room that you think would present itself well enough on stage for others to recognize it. Prepare by listing the characteristics of at least three different rooms.
- During conversations, be aware of gestures and movements that you and others make. For example, if you are arguing,

do you tend to speak loudly and use hand gestures, or do you act stiff and cold? When you talk on the phone, do you twist the cord or pace? When you're excited, does your voice get high-pitched, or do you repeat yourself? Keep a list of mannerisms that you see in yourself and your friends, particularly those that indicate different attitudes and emotions.

- Continue to add to your two lists. At the end of the unit, you will decide which of your details will help to present a realistic setting and a natural-looking conversation.

AS YOU READ

Charley's Aunt involves a great deal of visual humor, for which its author provided very specific directions. You will be able to follow the action better if you relate page-by-page stage directions to the stage diagram on page 6. Note the location of these abbreviations on the diagram: R. (right), R.C. (right of center), C. (center), L.C. (left of center), and L. (left). Note also that the two doors on stage left (the right side as the audience sees the stage) are identified by the abbreviations L.I.E. (the door downstage, that is, closer to the audience) and L.U.E. (the door upstage, that is, farther from the audience).

The questions below will help you think about some of the ways in which plays are different from other types of fiction. As you read this excerpt from *Charley's Aunt*, keep these questions in mind:

- How does the form of a play differ from the form of a short story or novel? Why does it take this form?
- How does the playwright help readers imagine the arrangement of things on stage?
- How does the playwright help readers imagine the actions, attitudes, and movements of the people on stage?

from Charley's Aunt



by Brandon Thomas

CAST

Colonel Sir Francis Chesney, Bart., *late Indian Service*

Stephen Spettigue, *Solicitor*

Jack Chesney

Undergraduates at

Charles Wykeham

St. Olde's College, Oxford

Lord Fancourt Babberley

Brassett, *a college scout*

Donna Lucia D' Alvadorez, *from Brazil*

Kitty Verdun, *Spettigue's ward*

Amy Spettigue, *Spettigue's niece*

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

Commemoration Week, Oxford, 1892

ACT I

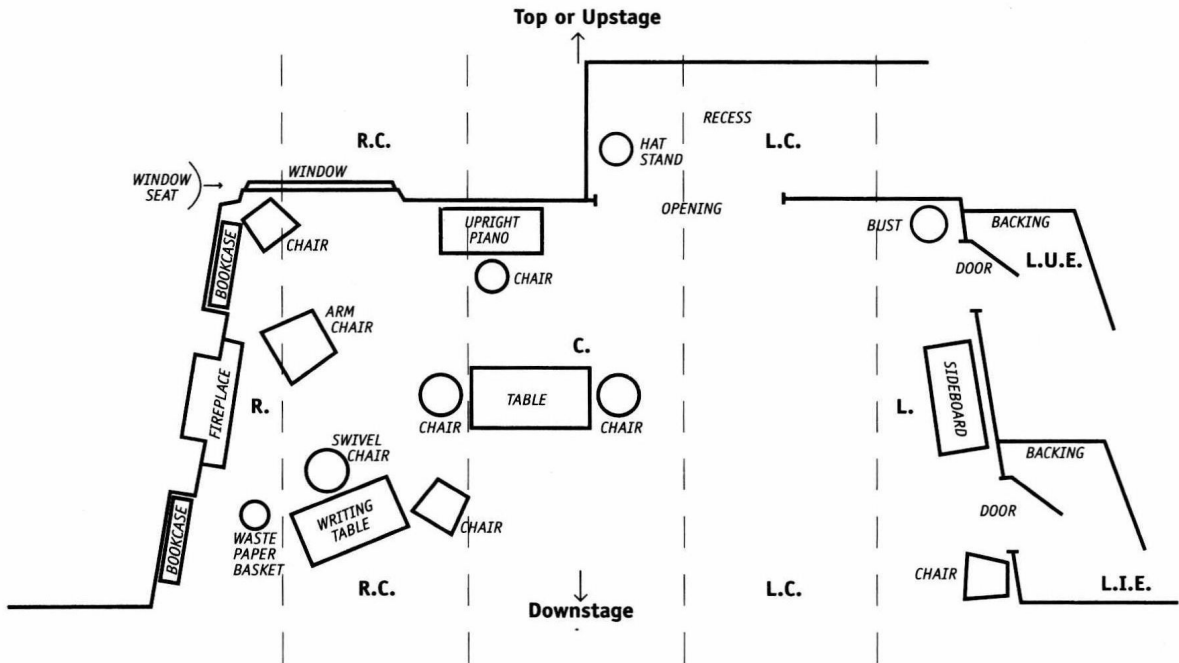
Jack Chesney's Rooms in College. (Morning)

"When pious frauds—are dispensations."—*Hudibras*

ACT II

Garden outside Jack Chesney's Rooms. (Afternoon)

"While there's tea, there's hope."—*Pinero*

ACT III**Drawing Room at Spettigue's House. (Evening)***"Dinner lubricates business."—Boswell***SETTING****ACT ONE***"When pious frauds—are dispensations."—Hudibras***SCENE:** *Interior of Jack Chesney's Rooms, St. Olde's College, Oxford. Morning.*

The walls are oak panelled or half-panelled or plain cream-washed walls with beautiful, low heraldic ceiling in cream, picked out in colour and dull gold. Door opening off, with passage backing, leading to outer door L.I.E. Door opening off to bedroom, with light backing, L.U.E. Between doors an oak sideboard with cupboard underneath. Large opening and recess with curtain to draw L.C. Long bay window R.C. with view of quad,¹ window seat with four cushions and one

¹ quadrangle, such as a square formed by several buildings on a college campus

magazine. Long red curtains. Upright piano C. with pile of music on top between window and recess. Fireplace R., looking-glass, etc., on mantel, low bookcases R. and L. of it. Saddle back armchair by fire. Table C. with ashtray and books and table cover in dark material on it, with two single chairs R. and L. of it, with sweater over back of L. chair. Writing table down R.C. by fire, with A.B.C. time table, magazine, and "Corona" cigar box. Circular hat stand inside corner of recess with boxing gloves, single sticks, etc., on it. Plaster bust of Plato on pedestal L. corner of room—angle. Clock and photographs of chorus girls and flowers on mantel shelf, more photographs and books on top of bookcases, pipes, tobacco jars, etc. Prints on walls above. Above on wall L. groups of Rowing Eights,² football teams. Six dining-room chairs arranged as follows: two R. and L. of C. table, one below door L.I.E., one at piano, one L. side of writing table, one top R. corner by window. Antique furniture, well-worn comfortable chairs. Quad is seen through window, and sunlight streams in through window.

Note: This excerpt begins as Jack and Charley are persuading Lord Fancourt to stay for luncheon. They want him to keep Charley's visiting aunt, Donna Lucia, occupied while they talk privately with the other guests, Kitty and Amy. Lord Fancourt has plans to meet fellow student actors involved in a theatrical production in which he is to play the part of an old lady. Before the meeting, he wants to try on his costume. Jack insists that Lord Fancourt (nicknamed Babbs) try on the costume at Jack's rooms and stay for the luncheon. Jack sends his manservant, Brassett, to Lord Fancourt's rooms to get the costume. As the excerpt begins, all three students are standing around the table in the center of the room.

² rowing teams

(*Re-enter Brassett with dress box, L.I.E.— a large brown cardboard box with gilt edges, like an exaggerated chocolate box.*)

Brassett. Your things, m'lord.

(*Charley goes down R., sits chair side of writing table. Jack goes R.C. front of C. table.*)

Lord Fancourt. (*taking box from Brassett*) Thank you, Brassett. You're an awfully good chap. (*crosses to Jack; aside*) I say, Jack, could you lend me half a crown?³ (*turns upstage and puts box on window seat at back*)

(*Brassett at sideboard*)

Jack. (*feels in pockets, then aside to Charley*) Charley! Have you half a crown?

Charley. (*pulling out linings of trouser pockets*) No, Jack, I haven't.

Jack. (*crossing L., aside to Brassett*) Brassett! Give me half a crown, will you?

Brassett. Yes, sir. (*takes out handful of money—gives half a crown*)

Jack. (*comes C.*) Babbs!

(*Lord Fancourt comes down R.C.*)

Jack. (*aside to Lord Fancourt*) Here you are. (*gives half-crown and crosses to Charley R.*)

Lord Fancourt. Thanks. (*crosses to Brassett, L.*) Brassett, here you are.

(*Jack and Charley see half-crown given back to Brassett and laugh. Charley collapsed in chair L. of writing table. Jack ditto into chair R. of table C. Lord Fancourt turns, puzzled, crosses to Jack. Jack whispers to him, points to Brassett, then twice to himself, then to Lord Fancourt, and then to Brassett again. Lord Fancourt joins in laughter and goes up to window seat and picks up dress box. Brassett, during this action, exits L.U.E.*)

³a silver coin formerly used in Great Britain, worth two and a half shillings, or two shillings sixpence

Jack. (to **Lord Fancourt**, *pointing to box*) What have you got there?

Lord Fancourt. Chocolates.

Charley. Chocolates? (*still seated in chair*)

Jack. Let's have a look!

Lord Fancourt. No, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll try them on after lunch while you're all in the garden.

Jack. You can't do that; we shall want you with us. Try them on now; won't take long, will it?

Lord Fancourt. Only a minute or two. (*lifts box on to his L. shoulder, crossing upstage to L.*) I've lost an awful lot of time over these theatricals. (*at door*) But next term I mean to work.

(*Exits L.U.E. Jack goes up to front of fireplace.*)

Kitty. (*off*) Oh yes, here it is; here's the name!

Amy. (*off*) Oh, so it is! "Mr. Chesney." I wonder if they're in. (*Knock*)

Jack. (to **Charley at chair**) Here they are, and your aunt's not come yet. (*rushes to mantelpiece to see the time, notices photographs, slams them face down, arranges tie, smooths hair all in a hurry, returns below table C.*)

Charley. (*rises, getting behind Jack*) Good gracious! What shall we do? (*also trying to see in mirror*)

(*Re-enter Brassett, L.U.E., goes to door L.I.E.*)

Jack. Oh, let them come in. We can explain. (*crossing L.C. below table C.*) Show them in, **Brassett**.

(*Brassett opens door, showing in Kitty and Amy, closes door and goes up back, and then exits L.U.E.*)

Jack. (*shaking hands with Kitty*) How do you do? (*shaking hands with Amy*) So kind of you to come!

Kitty. Oh, we were very pleased to be able to come. Weren't we, Amy?

(*They both cross to table R. Charley joins Amy L.*)

Amy. Oh, yes. (to **Charley**) Mr. Wykeham, are we too early?

Charley. Oh no, no!

(*They shake hands and move up to C. table together. Charley, in his nervousness, backs into the chair, then offers it to Amy; she sits in chair L. of C. table.*)

Kitty. Yes, Mr. Chesney, you didn't mention any time.

(*Jack gives chair; Kitty sits L. of writing table.*)

Jack. Oh, not at all, not at all! We're delighted! (*going to fireplace to look at clock; aside*) She'll be here soon.

(*Enter Lord Fancourt L.U.E., in his shirt-sleeves—to C. upstage, sees girls, and bolts⁴ back L.U.E. in terror the girls may see him.*)

Brassett takes tray from table C. and off through recess up L.C.)

Kitty. (*sitting*) And this is where you think and study and do all your work and everything?

Jack. Oh yes, we do a lot of that sort of thing here. (*sits*)

Kitty. You've jolly quarters here.

(*Jack and Kitty continue to talk aside.*)

Charley. (*to Amy*) I'm so glad you were able come here today. You're off to Scotland tomorrow and we shall miss you so much.

Amy. Yes, Uncle always takes us to some dreadful remote place at this time of the year, where we never see a soul, and it's so dreary.

Charley. Why does he?

Amy. I don't know.

Charley. It's a shame!

Amy. Why, are you sorry we're going?

Charley. Sorry? Why, it's put me—and Jack—into a perfect fever; that's why we were so anxious to see you here today.

Amy. It's lucky Uncle is away in town, or I don't think we could have come.

Charley. Why?

⁴ to start suddenly and run away

Amy. I don't know, but he raises such odd objections, and then you know he's so peculiar about Kitty.

Charley. Why?

Amy. She's an heiress, you know, and he's her guardian.

(They talk aside.)

Jack. *(ardently)* Miss Verdun, have you forgotten that dance the other night? I *never* shall.

Kitty. No.

Jack. No! Those stolen moments in the garden by ourselves were the very happiest of all my life, and out there in the moonlight—ah, moonlight is the true atmosphere for—for sentiment.

Kitty. I wonder how many people have said that?

Jack. *(let down a little)* Kitty, I know when you like you can be an awful plague,⁵ but today you are quite cynical.

Kitty. I know I am; I'm thinking of that man.

Jack. Of what man?

Kitty. Of my guardian—Mr. Spettigue, who hurries us away from all our best friends directly we get to know anyone really well, for fear of—

Jack. For fear of what?

Kitty. *(evasively)*. Oh, I don't know!

Jack. Why *does* he?

Kitty. *(looking up and smiling)* Because he's a selfish, wicked old man.

Jack. Are you—really—so sorry to go away?

Kitty. No, I am angry. But don't speak about it any more, or, as Amy says, "I shall cry."

Amy. *(rising and speaking to Charley as they come down L. a little)* What a dear—sweet—old lady your aunt must be, Mr.

⁵ slang of the day intended as a compliment

Wykeham! I am longing to know her. Where is she?

Charley. (*aside*) Jack! (*rapidly, in agonized aside and beckoning*

Jack, who goes R.C. to him) Where's my aunt?

(*Jack whispers something in his ear and turns away.*)

Charley. (*not catching it*) What?

(*Jack shrugs shoulders hopelessly and returns to Kitty. Kitty and Amy see nothing of this last scene, which must be played rapidly.*)

Charley. (*to Amy, hesitatingly*) Oh, why, she's hardly arrived yet.

Amy. (*surprised*) No, oh! (*crosses to Kitty*) Kitty, Mr. Wykeham's aunt hasn't come yet.

Kitty. (*rising*) Hasn't come? (*crossing to C.*) Oh—(*turning to Jack*) Then we must—we'll—run and do some shopping—and come back. Shan't be long. Good-bye!

(*Kitty crosses Amy to L.I.E. Charley has worked round to door, which he opens. Jack follows*)

Amy. (*to Jack*) Good-bye.

Jack. Good-bye.

Kitty. (*to Charley at door*) Good-bye.

Amy. (*to Charley at door—rather sadly*) Good-bye.

(*Exit L.I.E., Kitty first, then Amy*)

Charley. (*at door L.I.E.*) Good-bye! (*unconsciously taking the same tone*)

(*Slight pause. Jack and Charley look at each other blankly; both sit on C. table and shake hands.*)

Jack. See that? Off like a shot when they found your aunt wasn't here.

Charley. Makes an awful difference, doesn't it?

Jack. (*hurrying Charley off L.I.E.*) Now look here, you cut off to the station and bundle the old girl here in a fly.⁶

(*Charley picks up his hat from C. table.*)

⁶ a one-horse carriage, particularly one for hire

Charley. (*turning at door L.I.E.*) The old girl! What do you mean?

Jack. Well, your aunt—and I'll see after the lunch and keep an eye on Babbs.

Charley. (*going*) All right! (*returning*) I say, Jack, I feel happier since I've seen them, don't you?

Jack. (*impatiently*) Yes. Be off! (*going towards writing table*)

(*Exit Charley, L.I.E. Enter Lord Fancourt in shirt-sleeves and waistcoat, L.U.E., comes down L. of Jack cautiously. Jack turns and sees Lord Fancourt.*)

Lord Fancourt. I say, old chap, have you got any hairpins?

(*Enter Brassett, L.U.E., coming down L. to sideboard*)

Jack. Hairpins? Great Scot, no!

Lord Fancourt. May I send your man for some?

Jack. Yes, certainly.

Lord Fancourt. (*aside to Jack*). I say, have you got sixpence?

Jack. (*feeling hurriedly and impatiently in pockets*) No—afraid not.

Lord Fancourt. Why, you haven't got anything! (*aside to Brassett*) I say, Brassett, I gave you half a crown just now; do you mind making it two shillings⁷ and getting me sixpennyworth of hairpins?

Brassett. (*with a look*) Certainly, m'lord.

Lord Fancourt. You can keep the change. (*exit Brassett, L.I.E.*) I say, Jack, were those the girls?

(*Both C.*)

Jack. Yes. But what the deuce made you jump out like that? They might have seen you!

Lord Fancourt. I didn't know they were here.

(*Knock at outer door, L.I.E.*)

Jack. Look out! There's somebody else. (*Lord Fancourt bolts and*

⁷ a coin used in Great Britain; at the time of the play it was worth 12 pence

exits door L.U.E.) By George! There was a lot of hope in what Kitty said; in another minute I'd have told her that I—
(*going to table R., back turned to door L.I.E.*) But never mind, everything's going on splendidly. (*knock repeated*) Come in!

(*Enter Sir Francis Chesney L.I.E.*)

(**Colonel Sir Francis Chesney, Bart.**, *late Indian Service.*⁸ Tall, good-looking, smart in appearance and manners, wearing small military moustache, actually fifty-one but looking nearer forty, very smart, cheery and young in manner. Wears brown lounge suit, bowler hat, and carries gloves and Malacca walking-stick. He has just arrived from London.)

Sir Francis. Jack!

Jack. (*turning, surprised, and delighted*) Dad! (*Going C.*)

Sir Francis. My dear boy!

(*They shake hands C.*)

Jack. Dear old Dad! What brings you here! Wherever have you come from?

Sir Francis. From town, my lad. To have a chat with you and to bring you your check. (*puts hat, stick, and gloves on side-board*)

Jack. Thanks, Dad; you're a brick!⁹

Sir Francis. (*smiling*) A bit over-baked, my boy, after all my years in India. (*coming C. below table*)

Jack. A bit crisped, Dad, but a humbug pictorially.¹⁰

Sir Francis. Am I? How do you make that out?

Jack. How old are you?

Sir Francis. What do you say to fifty—

Jack. Fifty?

Sir Francis. One!

Jack. Who'd believe it?

⁸ formerly a member of the British armed forces in India

⁹ slang term meaning a solid, reliable person

¹⁰ slang of the day intended as a compliment

Sir Francis. (*cheerfully and unconcernedly*) Well, we all grow old. (*sits on C. table*)

(*Sir Francis takes out pocketbook containing check already made out to Jack and bundle of bills pinned together.*)

Jack. And as presentably as possible. Why, dear old Dad, even you at fifty—

Sir Francis. One!

Jack. Fifty years ago would have been a stout, white-haired—or bald—top-booted, domineering old boy! And instead, here you are, a smart, bang up-to-date sort of chap one can talk to like a chum! Now how have you done it?

Sir Francis. Don't know.

Jack. Do you drink?

Sir Francis. All I want.

Jack. Eat well?

Sir Francis. Never noticed.

Jack. There you are! Consequently health good, temper perfect—we're going to be great pals, Dad.

Sir Francis. (*handing check*) Here you are, my boy. There's your check to go on with. (*gives check; looking at bills*)

Jack. Thanks, Dad! (*sees amount of check—smiles to Sir Francis*) I haven't seen half enough of you.

Sir Francis. (*holding up bills*) I see your hospitality—

Jack. I hope, Dad—

Sir Francis. Never mind; same when I was a lad. (*They laugh.*

Sir Francis rises; they both move towards table R. Jack back of table. Sir Francis L. of it.) I'm very satisfied with you. It's something to go down from college with a record like yours. (*picks up cigar box and opens it*) I say, my boy, where the deuce did you get these cigars?

Jack. (*casually*) Those, Dad?

Sir Francis. (*putting box down, sits L. by writing table*) Ah! That

accounts for the bills. And now, my lad, we must begin to think.

Jack. (*sits at writing table*) Think?

Sir Francis. Now that I have come into the family title, as you know, I have also—which you don't know—come into the family debts and difficulties.

Jack. Debts!

Sir Francis. Which are far more than I expected, with the result that all the money I've been saving for you in India goes to pay them. And in short, Jack, you and I, for the next few years—will be, comparatively speaking, *poor men*.

Jack. (*rises and crosses behind desk to C*) *Poor men!* (*aside*) This settles me with old Spettigue!

Sir Francis. (*rising*) However, I'm in hopes of a small appointment for you—(**Jack turns hopefully**)—in Bengal. (*goes to fireplace*)

(*Re-enter Brassett, L.I.E.*)

Jack. Bengal! What a horrible place! (*turns, sees Brassett as he passes upstage L., to him, irritably*) What is it, Brassett?

Brassett. (*holding up, by a fine string loop, a tiny brown paper packet; to Jack*) His lordship's hairpins, sir.

Jack. Confound his hairpins!

(*Brassett exits L.U.E.*)

Jack. (*aside, recollecting*) By George! The dad'll be an odd one. I must get rid of Babbs somehow if the dad stays. (*suddenly*) Stays! Why not? (*aloud*) Dad, I've an idea. (**Sir Francis turns and comes C. to Jack.**) Couldn't this matter be settled by a wealthy marriage?

Sir Francis. No, that's the sort of thing I rather deprecate.¹¹ I don't think, Jack, I'd—

Jack. Listen. My chum—that is Charley Wykeham's aunt,

¹¹ express disapproval of