

John Banville

THE GOLD STANDARD



Gallery Books

Characters

JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES (JMK), (30s)

VANESSA BELL (mid 30s), painter

VIRGINIA WOOLF (early 30s), VANESSA BELL's sister

LYTTON STRACHEY (mid 30s), aesthete and historian

DUNCAN GRANT (late 20s), painter, JMK's lover

VIVIAN HILL (late 20s), scientist, JMK's brother-in-law

LYDIA LOPOKOVA (early 20s), ballerina

CLIVE BELL (early 30s), Vanessa Bell's husband

MARGARET HILL (20s), JMK's sister and Vivian Hill's wife

FRANCIS ST GEORGE NELSON, (late teens)

BASIL BLACKETT (30s), Treasury official

DAVID LLOYD GEORGE (50s), Chancellor of the Exchequer /
British Prime Minister

SIR FELIX SCHUSTER

SIR EDWARD HOLDEN

LORD CUNLIFFE

SIR WALTER LEAF

MRS ANDERSON (early 40s)

WOODROW WILSON, US President

GEORGES CLEMENCEAU, French President

LOUIS-LUCIEN KLOTZ, France's Finance Minister,

DR CARL MELCHIOR, banker, and adviser to the German
government

VITTORIO ORLANDO, Italian Prime Minister

WALTHER RATHENAU (mid 50s)

GEORGI CHICHERIN (40s), Russian Foreign Minister

POLLY HILL (20s), JMK's niece and secretary

HARRY DEXTER WHITE (50s)

HARRY HOPKINS (50s)

ACT ONE

Scene One

Cambridge, England, 1 August 1914.

The stage is dark. A spotlight picks out the head and shoulders of JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES (31), standing. He seems to address the audience.

JMK (*Light tone*) Money is the root of all happiness. We, who live in painted rooms in tall houses on handsome squares, prize love, friendship, art, the passions of the flesh and of the intellect. The poor look at all this and see: money, and their lack of it. Dough. Lolly. The readies. Big bucks. We hardly give a thought to the stuff — they think of little else. And they hate us for our disregard. They hate how we think, how we talk, how we dress. They hate our dinner parties. Our picnics on the banks of the Cam. Our evenings at the ballet. Our outings to Paris, Vienna, Monte Carlo, Kathmandu. Our books, our pictures, our poems, our love affairs — our love *letters*! All that delightful, stylish, negligent, graceful way of life — how they loathe it. They would tear down the entire edifice of civilization, our civilization, had they but the power. Happily, they have not. And this is how it should be. There must always be an elite, to foster and promote the beautiful things of life, and to care for those who are less fortunate than we are, in pocket and in spirit. Without us, there is disorder, anarchy, chaos.

As this speech progresses the stage lights gradually come up, leaving one corner dark, stage left. (Note: 'stage right' and 'stage left' are set by the actors' point of view, facing out. So 'stage right' is our 'left', and 'stage left' our 'right'.)

The scene is JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES's spacious rooms in King's College, Cambridge. A Saturday afternoon party. Sunlight streams in at tall windows stage right. Music from Tchaikovsky's Sleeping Beauty is playing on a gramophone at low volume. The guests are a mixture of academics, artists, students, casual visitors. JMK, standing, is addressing five of the leading lights of the Bloomsbury set, also standing: the painter VANESSA BELL (mid-30s) and her sister, the novelist VIRGINIA WOOLF (early 30s); the aesthete and historian LYTTON STRACHEY (mid-30s); JMK's lover, the painter DUNCAN GRANT (late 20s); and JMK's brother-in-law, the scientist VIVIAN HILL (late 20s). All with glasses of wine. VIRGINIA WOOLF is affectedly smoking a cigarette.

VANESSA You know, Maynard, you really are becoming terribly pompous.

JMK Authoritative, would you not say?

He sketches a few gangly dance steps in time to the music.

Authorita-tivita-tive, tra-la.

DUNCAN Are we an elite?

JMK The elitist of the elite, Duncan my darling. (To VIRGINIA) What do you say, Virginia?

VIRGINIA The advantage, or otherwise, of being a mad-woman, as I am, is that I see into the future.

JMK And what do you see there?

VIRGINIA (Smiling) Catastrophe.

Pause.

LYTTON Personally, I have nothing against pomposity. It lends a certain dash.

VANESSA Oh, yes, our late dear Queen, Her Magisterial

Pomposity, was famously dashing.

LYTTON She was very keen on bed, mind you. Fucked poor Prince Albert into an early grave. (Comic German accent) Aber Vicki, meine Liebe, sometimes even our dear son Bertie removes his cigar from between his lips, you know.

All chuckle, except VIVIAN HILL.

VIVIAN (To LYTTON) You have a vile mind, Strachey, and a vile tongue to go with it.

He strides away.

LYTTON (To JMK) That brother-in-law of yours is such a prude. How does your poor sister put up with him?

JMK My poor sister is one of life's born putter-uppers. I love her dearly. She used to be queer like us, you know, then she married — (Gestures towards VIVIAN HILL) — the boffin. He's all right — and brilliant, in his quiet way.

He sees, beyond HILL, Vanessa's husband, CLIVE BELL (early 30s), entering, accompanied by the ballerina LYDIA LOPOKOVA (early 20s). Pause.

(To VIRGINIA) Catastrophe?

VIRGINIA And slaughter. As in the *Iliad* — men cutting other men down like sheaves of wheat.

LYTTON Maynard, ducky . . .

JMK is still watching CLIVE and LYDIA. They have paused where a group of students, male and female, are sitting in a circle on the floor, engaged in noisy debate.

JMK (Vaguely) Mm?