

CHARLIE'S AUNT.

A lucky fellow? Well, yes, no doubt I am. To have come into this fine place and \$15,000 a year is a bit of luck for any man. Of course, I was my aunt's nearest living relative, as it was only right that I should have succeeded to this property on her demise. Still under my uncle's will, she had an absolute power of appointment, and had she chosen to make the whole estate over to a total stranger, nobody could have prevented it. At one time, in fact, there really was a danger of this occurring. Have you heard the story? No. Then I think it will interest you, for some of its features are, I believe, quite unique.

You never saw my uncle and aunt? They are two nice old people extremely kind and good natured, but a trifle eccentric. They were not cut out at all for country people—the position in which they found themselves after my uncle, purchased this estate. My uncle, as you have doubtless heard, was a self-made man. He amassed his fortune at cotton spinning. My aunt, before she married him, was draper's assistant in Manchester; so naturally it was not to be expected that she should have the haughtiness. Nevertheless, when they took up their residence here, they went down better than you might have supposed. This, I imagine, was because neither of them was in any degree pretentious or vulgar. Indeed, two more simple, unaffected old people I have seldom met. They always remained just what they were and never pretended to be anything else. And so, being kindly, simple and natural, they soon made themselves liked by their neighbors of all classes.

I have said that my uncle and aunt were somewhat eccentric. But they had in their establishment one who was considerably more eccentric than themselves. You really should have seen John Simmonds, the butler, a dear, delightful, faithful old creature, perfectly devoted to the family, but one of the oddest men you ever saw. He was about the same age as my uncle, whom he seemed to regard as a sort of a brother, and whose interests he watched over with a more than brotherly solicitude. To say that he was familiar in his manner toward his master and mistress, would be to convey a wrong impression. For he never took a liberty or presumed on the affectionate regard with which he was treated by them. Yet he had often said to them things which, if spoken by any other servant, or in any other manner than his own, would have sounded inexcusable and even outrageous. That was just where it was. The old fellow had a way with him in this direction which somehow robbed his plain-spoken utterances of every tinge of disrespect.

"Don't thee be a fule, master!" I have often heard him say, in his broad Lancashire, to my uncle, when the latter was proposing some step of which his butler disapproved. And on one occasion—a very memorable occasion—at a big dinner party, when one of the footmen, in handing round the fruit, had dropped a grape on the carpet, my thrifty, keen-eyed old aunt, with fears for her new administer, in case the grape should be trodden into it, called the butler's attention thereto, as he passed her, by saying very subtly:

"John, there's a greep on the flure!"

John, just then busy with other matters not to be postponed for a trifle, ignored the remark.

After a little my aunt repeated it:

"John, there's a greep on the flure!"

John was handing round the wine at this juncture, and continued as if he had never heard her.

Another pause, and then my aunt said it a third time, in a louder voice:

"John, there's a greep on the flure!"

This was too much. By affecting not to hear her remark, although twice repeated, the excellent John had done his best to convey to my aunt, decorously, that her fussiness at such a time was out of place. The third repetition went beyond his patience, the worried man, momentarily, got the better of the impulsive butler. He said, severely, to my aunt:

"Don't bother!"

No more and no less. It had the requisite effect. My aunt made no further allusions to the "greep on the flure." But one, at least, of her guests, overheard the remark—a certain very reverend dean who sat at my aunt's right. He was a keen humorist. I saw his eye twinkle. Of course he was too well bred to give any other indication. He did not forget, however, to tell the story, in his own inimitable way, at other tables. And I'll wager there's hardly a resident in this neighborhood in whose repository of local anecdotes this is not included, to this day, as one of the good things.

I could tell you any number of further anecdotes about John; only space precludes. This, however, may give you some sort of an idea of what the old man

was. When my uncle died—an event that nearly broke John's heart—the faithful servant constituted himself more than ever a guardian of the family interests. He looked after my aunt almost as if she had been a child. It gradually became evident she needed some looking after too. Her intellect had begun to fail a little since my uncle's death. Not that she sank exactly into a state of dotage. But she became rather foolish and weak minded. And this weak mindedness of hers assumed a most absurd, and, for an old lady, a most incongruous form. It is bad enough when a young lady develops foolish sentimentality. When an old lady does so it is fifty times worse. This is what my aunt did. She imagined herself still susceptible of the tender passion—at 75. She discovered quite a decided penchant for flirtations. Really it was downright laughable—at first. But the time was not long in arriving when the laughable aspect of the matter became less pronounced. A serious, a disastrous consequence began to threaten. I will tell you it was.

There had lately come into my neighborhood a certain retired major, by name Mallaby, a well-kept individual, who looked 45 and was probably 65—tall handsome and of ingratiating manners and address. In due course, I called upon him, as everybody else did, and in due course he became rather a frequent visitor at my aunt's house. Anything so flagrantly absurd as an affair between my aunt and this elderly bachelor I had never imagined. And if it had not been for John my eyes would probably have remained shut until it was too late. One morning, however, John came into the library, where I was alone reading, with a very perturbed expression on his solemn face.

"Master Charlie," he blurted out, coming close up to me and dropping his voice to a low confidential pitch. "This won't do!"

"What won't do, John?" I was constrained to inquire.

"This what's going on between thy aunt and yon major."

"Oh!" I laughed lightly. "That's all?"

"And bean't it enough?" demanded John, almost fiercely.

"It's silly of poor old aunt, of course," I said; "and it makes her rather a laughing-stock. Still, it amuses her to think she's getting up a flirtation. And, after all, there's no harm done."

"Bean't there?" rejoined John, in a very significant tone; "oh, bean't there, Master Charlie?"

"What do you mean, John?" I exclaimed.

"Mean?" retorted honest John, evidently exasperated by what he considered my wilful obtuseness. "If thee cannot see thee's no better nor a fule, Master Charlie."

"You don't really mean that you think anything serious is likely to come of these foolish flirtations with Maj'r Mallaby?"

"Depends what thee calls serious. Some folk might call marriage serious. Some mightn't. That's what's coming of it, anyways."

"Pooh, man. Impossible! Why, aunt is 75."

"If she was 85 and the marrying fit took her, age wouldn't be no hindrance, as it ain't a-been to many silly old women before now," answered John, sententiously. "And I warn thee solemnly, Master Charlie, that if you or I or both of us don't interfere at once, Maj'r Mallaby will marry the mistress. Which is the same thing as saying that he'll get her to leave him the property," said John, with a troubled shake of the head; "she being in that weak, foolish state as shell do anything at the word of one who gets an influence over her."

I didn't laugh now. John's solemn words were beginning to alarm me. I knew he was a shrewd fellow, with a very keen insight into things, and by no means the sort to take fright at nothing. Besides the result which he feared, even if only a remote chance, was fraught with consequences too disastrous to be lightly disregarded. I therefore said:

"What's to be done, John? How are we to put a spoke in the major's wheel?"

John rubbed his bald head thoughtfully.

"I'd like to forbid the major the house," he said after a while. "But I doubt we can't do that very well, neither of us being the masters of the establishment."

And then, after another pause, he broke out regretfully: "Ah! Master Charlie, Master Charlie, what a pity thee'rt thee aunt's nephew, and cannot marry her thee'self. That would be a gran' way out of the difficulty, indeed, if it wasn't for the table of affinities."

"Really, John," I smiled, "even if I wasn't within the forbidden degrees, I

could hardly bring myself at my age to marry an old lady of 75."

"Then thee'd deserve to lose the property for sticking as such a mere trifle, Master Charlie," retorted the old man, with severity. "But there! there! That being impossible, it's wasting our time to discuss it. We mun think, Master Charlie—we mun think what can be done. I'll give the matter my attention, and thee mun give it thine. In the meantime," he added, "keep about the house, Master Charlie, and if the major calls, doan't on any account leave him alone with thee aunt."

With this caution and another warning shake of his bald head, he retired to attend to his household duties.

The major did call that afternoon, and I carried out John's advice, taking care to be present in the drawing room all the time. Very glad, too, I felt, that I had not neglected this precaution. For from the way the major kept looking toward me, as if he wished me at Jerico, and from the various attempts my aunt made to get me out of the room by transparent subterfuges—to which I declined to tumble—I began to fear that the danger of which John had warned me was very present and real, and I found myself wondering that I had hitherto been so completely and culpably blind to the matter.

When the major at length took his leave, I was sufficiently polite to accompany him to the front door. We shook hands. Our respective manners were civility itself. But I think he saw that I smoked the game. And I detected a lurking defiance in his eye as he bade me adieu.

That night, when John brought me my whiskey and soda into the smoke room he asked me:

"Well, Master Charlie, what did thee make of the major's manner toward mistress?"

"I didn't like the looks of things," I admitted.

"And hast thee thought of any dodge to outwit the major, Master Charlie?"

"I can't say I have. Have you John?"

"I ain't sure. Good night, Master Charlie."

Next morning he came to me again, this time with a very long, grave face. In his hand he held an open letter.

"There, Master Charlie," he said. "I've been and done what I have never done before. This letter be for the mistress, but I see it was from the major, and I opened it."

"I say! You shouldn't have done that," I remonstrated.

"Should or shouldn't I," retorted John, half defiantly. "And I'm glad I did, too. The major offers thee aunt marriage in this letter, and he's going to call for his answer this afternoon."

"Whew!" I whistled in great dismay. "What's to be done now?"

"Master Charlie," cried old John, very earnestly. "Thee aunt must be got away this very morning before the major comes."

"But how's that to be done?"

"I think it can be managed," said John with a knowing wag of his bald head. "Fortunately the doctor's coming this morning to see the mistress about her eyes. He's a real friend to the family; and I doot he disavours the major's designs near as much as you or I do. Now, if you'd see him first, Master Charlie, and confide to him the exact state of the case, who know's but what he'd find the condition of the mistress's eyes so very critical that he'd order her up to London to see a specialist this very day."

"Umpt! Sharp work, indeed, John. But I'll sound the doctor and see whether he will help us in the way proposed." I said after a brief reflection.

I did so. The doctor, a charming old fellow, who had known me ever since I was born, was divided between concern and amusement when he heard what I had to tell him.

"Hem! Infernal adventurer! I've been aground of this for months. And your aunt is such a foolish, weak-minded state that she would probably yield to him. Hem! She must see a specialist about her eyes shortly. And why not now? Yes, Charles, yes! I'll do you and her this service my lad—for, indeed, it will be a kindness to her to save her from the major. I'll see if I can't frighten her into starting for town at an hour or two's notice."

I was waiting for him in the hall when he came down after seeing my aunt.

"I've been as urgent as I could," he said, with a shrug of his shoulders. "But she declares it is impossible she can go to-day. However, I met John on the stairs, and tipped him the hint. He'll induce her to go if anybody can. Good old John, he has ruled her so long that he can make her do very much what he likes. I think he's talking to her now. You go and add your persuasions."

I ran up to the morning room; there I found John lecturing my aunt.

"I can't let thee run the risk of blindness, mistress. I tell thee, I can't permit it."

"But a day or two can make no difference, John, and—"

"The doctor said every hour would make a difference, and I reckon he ought to know."

"He considers it most urgent that you should lose no time, aunt," I struck in.

"I tell you I won't go to-day," protested

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ed my old relative peevishly. "Tomorrow if I must, but not to-day."

John, however, was equal to the occasion. He did not condescend to further argument. He took the high hand.

"If thee'll not take proper care of thee-self, mistress," he said with determination; "I shall do it for thee. I know my duty to thee and I don't forget my promises to the dear master. I'm going to telegraph to the Langham for rooms and I'm going to give Saunders orders to pack thee things, mistress. We shall leave to-day by the two o'clock train."

When faithful John assumed this dictatorial tone, it was wondered what an effect it had upon my aunt. She expostulated—shed tears—complained that she was treated like a baby—but she yielded. By the two o'clock train she left for London in company with her maid, Saunders, and the indispensable John. I stayed behind to look after the house. I saw the major when he called. He was not a little chagrined to find that my aunt had gone away. And for the first time he betrayed to me a glimpse of the disagreeable side of himself.

"Upon my word," he said to me rudely and with a half threatening air. "You nurse that aunt of yours very carefully young man, but I advise you not to make an enemy of me; I do indeed."

"I have no wish to make an enemy of you, Maj'r Mallaby," I said coldly.

"You'll regret it if you do," he retorted, as he mounted his horse and rode away.

From his manner it was evident that he felt sure of success with my aunt; else he would hardly have ventured thus to show his teeth. And his departure left me both angry and uncomfortable. My aunt had been temporarily removed from his influence, indeed. But he could easily if he wished find out her address in London, and—altogether I did not like the aspect of things.

About a week later I had a letter from John apprising me of the event which I feared. The major had found out where my aunt had gone and had followed her to town. He had actually been to call upon her that afternoon. Would I go up at once! He (John) would meet the 4.45 at Easton with the carriage.

I went up by that train very anxious and despondent. John met me as promised. I insisted on his riding inside with me, in order that he might tell me just what had happened.

"About the major, John?" I began at once with keen anxiety.

"Thee major's a-been," replied John, with a to-me somewhat irritating deliberation. "And he's—a-gone away again."

"Why! What do you mean? Has aunt refused him?"

"She has, Master Charlie."

"Good biz, indeed!" I cried. "I was afraid—I was almost sure—she—she would accept him."

"Aye! so she would have I believe if she'd been free. But she wasn't. So she couldn't."

"Not free? What do you mean, John?"

"Listen, Master Charlie," said the old man, with an air of suppressed elation. "Thee knowest I have a wunnerful power over the mistress to make her do pretty well what I likes. I've exercised that power, Master Charlie, and I've exercised it in such a way as to spoke the major's wheel for good and all."

"I thought to myself: 'Now, if I can find a man as would marry the mistress and not presume upon it, one as would be content just to be her husband in law and in nutthink else, some quiet, steady, dependable man as would thoroughly know his place and wouldn't blab—if I can find such a man,' I thought, 'and get the mistress to go through the form of marriage with him—by special license say and on the strict quiet—it would answer the purpose as nutthink else would. For then her marriage with the major would be quite impossible.'"

"I looked about for that man. I found him, Master Charlie. I made the mistress marry him."

"He's her husband now in law—though in nutthink else, nor ever will be. But he's spoked the major; and that's all he wants. Canst thee guess his name, sir?"

"Not you, John?" I cried in amazement.

"Aye, me," replied the old butler, quietly.

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