

## A WHITE-WASHED UNCLE

In our small lives that day was eventful when another uncle was to come down from town, and submit his character and qualifications (albeit unconsciously) to our careful criticism. Previous uncles had been weighed in the balance, and--alas!--found grievously wanting. There was Uncle Thomas--a failure from the first. Not that his disposition was malevolent, nor were his habits such as to unfit him for decent society; but his rooted conviction seemed to be that the reason of a child's existence was to serve as a butt for senseless adult jokes,--or what, from the accompanying guffaws of laughter, appeared to be intended for jokes. Now, we were anxious that he should have a perfectly fair trial; so in the tool-house, between breakfast and lessons, we discussed and examined all his witticisms, one by one, calmly, critically, dispassionately. It was no good; we could not discover any salt in them. And as only a genuine gift of humour could have saved Uncle Thomas,--for he pretended to naught besides,--he was reluctantly writ down a hopeless impostor.

Uncle George--the youngest--was distinctly more promising. He accompanied us cheerily round the establishment,--suffered himself to be introduced to each of the cows, held out the right hand of fellowship to the pig, and even hinted that a pair of pink-eyed Himalayan rabbits might arrive--unexpectedly--from town some day. We were just considering whether in this fertile soil an apparently accidental remark on the solid qualities of guinea-pigs or ferrets might haply blossom and bring

forth fruit, when our governess appeared on the scene. Uncle George's manner at once underwent a complete and contemptible change. His interest in rational topics seemed, "like a fountain's sickening pulse," to flag and ebb away; and though Miss Smedley's ostensible purpose was to take Selina for her usual walk, I can vouch for it that Selina spent her morning rattling, along with the keeper's boy and me; while, if Miss Smedley walked with any one, it would appear to have been with Uncle George.

But despicable as his conduct had been, he underwent no hasty condemnation. The defection was discussed in all its bearings, but it seemed sadly clear at last that this uncle must possess some innate badness of character and fondness for low company. We who from daily experience knew Miss Smedley like a book--were we not only too well aware that she had neither accomplishments nor charms, no characteristic, in fact, but an inbred viciousness of temper and disposition? True, she knew the dates of the English kings by heart; but how could that profit Uncle George, who, having passed into the army, had ascended beyond the need of useful information? Our bows and arrows, on the other hand, had been freely placed at his disposal; and a soldier should not have hesitated in his choice a moment. No: Uncle George had fallen from grace, and was unanimously damned. And the non-arrival of the Himalayan rabbits was only another nail in his coffin. Uncles, therefore, were just then a heavy and lifeless market, and there was little inclination to deal. Still it was agreed that Uncle William, who had just returned from India, should have as fair a trial as the others;

more especially as romantic possibilities might well be embodied in one who had held the gorgeous East in fee.

Selina had kicked my shins--like the girl she is!--during a scuffle in the passage, and I was still rubbing them with one hand when I found that the uncle-on-approbation was half-heartedly shaking the other. A florid, elderly man, and unmistakably nervous, he dropped our grimy paws in succession, and, turning very red, with an awkward simulation of heartiness, "Well, h' are y' all?" he said, "Glad to see me, eh?" As we could hardly, in justice, be expected to have formed an opinion on him at that early stage, we could but look at each other in silence; which scarce served to relieve the tension of the situation. Indeed, the cloud never really lifted during his stay. In talking it over later, some one put forward the suggestion that he must at some time or other have committed a stupendous crime; but I could not bring myself to believe that the man, though evidently unhappy, was really guilty of anything; and I caught him once or twice looking at us with evident kindness, though seeing himself observed, he blushed and turned away his head.

When at last the atmosphere was clear of this depressing influence, we met despondently in the potato-cellar--all of us, that is, but Harold, who had been told off to accompany his relative to the station; and the feeling was unanimous, that, at an uncle, William could not be allowed to pass. Selina roundly declared him a beast, pointing out that he had not even got us a half-holiday; and, indeed, there seemed little to do but to pass sentence. We were about to put it, when Harold appeared on

the scene; his red face, round eyes, and mysterious demeanour, hinting at awful portents. Speechless he stood a space: then, slowly drawing his hand from the pocket of his knickerbockers, he displayed on a dirty palm one--two--three--four half-crowns! We could but gaze--tranced, breathless, mute; never had any of us seen, in the aggregate, so much bullion before. Then Harold told his tale.

"I took the old fellow to the station," he said, "and as we went along I told him all about the station-master's family, and how I had seen the porter kissing our housemaid, and what a nice fellow he was, with no airs, or affectation about him, and anything I thought would be of interest; but he didn't seem to pay much attention, but walked along puffing his cigar, and once I thought--I'm not certain, but I THOUGHT--I heard him say, 'Well, thank God, that's over!' When we got to the station he stopped suddenly, and said, 'Hold on a minute!' Then he shoved these into my hand in a frightened sort of way; and said, 'Look here, youngster! These are for you and the other kids. Buy what you like--make little beasts of yourselves--only don't tell the old people, mind! Now cut away home!' So I cut."

A solemn hush fell on the assembly, broken first by the small Charlotte. "I didn't know," she observed dreamily, "that there were such good men anywhere in the world. I hope he'll die to-night, for then he'll go straight to heaven!" But the repentant Selina bewailed herself with tears and sobs, refusing to be comforted; for that in her haste she had called this white-souled relative a beast.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," said Edward, the master-mind, rising--as he always did--to the situation: "We'll christen the piebald pig after him--the one that hasn't got a name yet. And that'll show we're sorry for our mistake!"

"I--I christened that pig this morning," Harold guiltily confessed; "I christened it after the curate. I'm very sorry--but he came and bow'ed to me last night, after you others had all been sent to bed early--and somehow I felt I HAD to do it!"

"Oh, but that doesn't count," said Edward hastily; "because we weren't all there. We'll take that christening off, and call it Uncle William. And you can save up the curate for the next litter!"

And the motion being agreed to without a division, the House went into Committee of Supply.