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### THE UNCLE MAKES HIMSELF AT HOME

'But, dash it,' said Gethryn, when he had finished gasping, 'that must be rot!'

'Not a bit,' said the self-possessed youth. 'Your mater was my elder sister. You'll find it works out all right. Look here. A, the daughter of B and C, marries. No, look here. I was born when you were four. See?'

Then the demoralized Bishop remembered. He had heard of his juvenile uncle, but the tales had made little impression upon him. Till now they had not crossed one another's tracks.

'Oh, all right,' said he, 'I'll take your word for it. You seem to have been getting up the subject.'

'Yes. Thought you might want to know about it. I say, how far is it to Beckford, and how do you get there?'

Up till now Gethryn had scarcely realized that his uncle was actually coming to the School for good. These words brought the fact home to him.

'Oh, Lord,' he said, 'are you coming to Beckford?'

The thought of having his footsteps perpetually dogged by an uncle four years younger than himself, and manifestly a youth with a fine taste in cheek, was not pleasant.

'Of course,' said his uncle. 'What did you think I was going to do? Camp out on the platform?'

'What House are you in?'

'Leicester's.'

The worst had happened. The bitter cup was full, the iron neatly inserted in Gethryn's soul. In his most pessimistic moments he had never looked forward to the coming term so gloomily as he did now. His uncle noted his lack of enthusiasm, and attributed it to anxiety on behalf of himself.

'What's up?' he asked. 'Isn't Leicester's all right? Is Leicester a beast?'

'No. He's a perfectly decent sort of man. It's a good enough House. At least it will be this term. I was only thinking of something.'

'I see. Well, how do you get to the place?'

'Walk. It isn't far.'

'How far?'

'Three miles.'

'The porter said four.'

'It may be four. I never measured it.'

'Well, how the dickens do you think I'm going to walk four miles with luggage? I wish you wouldn't rot.'

And before Gethryn could quite realize that he, the head of Leicester's, the second-best bowler in the School, and the best centre three-quarter the School had had for four seasons, had been requested in a peremptory manner by a youth of fourteen, a mere kid, not to rot, the offender was talking to a cabman out of the reach of retaliation. Gethryn became more convinced every minute that this was no ordinary kid.

'This man says,' observed Farnie, returning to Gethryn, 'that he'll drive me up to the College for seven bob. As it's a short four miles, and I've only got two boxes, it seems to me that he's doing himself

fairly well. What do you think?'

'Nobody ever gives more than four bob,' said Gethryn.

'I told you so,' said Farnie to the cabman. 'You are a bally swindler,' he added admiringly.

'Look 'ere,' began the cabman, in a pained voice.

'Oh, dry up,' said Farnie. 'Want a lift, Gethryn?'

The words were spoken not so much as from equal to equal as in a tone of airy patronage which made the Bishop's blood boil. But as he intended to instil a few words of wisdom into his uncle's mind, he did not refuse the offer.

The cabman, apparently accepting the situation as one of those slings and arrows of outrageous fortune which no man can hope to escape, settled down on the box, clicked up his horse, and drove on towards the College.

'What sort of a hole is Beckford?' asked Farnie, after the silence had lasted some time.

'I find it good enough personally,' said Gethryn. 'If you'd let us know earlier that you were coming, we'd have had the place done up a bit for

you.'

This, of course, was feeble, distinctly feeble. But the Bishop was not feeling himself. The essay in sarcasm left the would-be victim entirely uncrushed. He should have shrunk and withered up, or at the least have blushed. But he did nothing of the sort. He merely smiled in his supercilious way, until the Bishop felt very much inclined to spring upon him and throw him out of the cab.

There was another pause.

'Farnie,' began Gethryn at last.

'Um?'

'Doesn't it strike you that for a kid like you you've got a good deal of edge on?' asked Gethryn.

Farnie effected a masterly counter-stroke. He pretended not to be able to hear. He was sorry, but would the Bishop mind repeating his remark.

'Eh? What?' he said. 'Very sorry, but this cab's making such a row. I say, cabby, why don't you sign the pledge, and save your money up to buy a new cab? Eh? Oh, sorry! I wasn't listening.' Now, inasmuch as the whole virtue of the 'wretched-little-kid-like-you' argument lies in the crisp despatch with which it is delivered, Gethryn began to find, on

repeating his observation for the third time, that there was not quite so much in it as he had thought. He prudently elected to change his style of attack.

'It doesn't matter,' he said wearily, as Farnie opened his mouth to demand a fourth encore, 'it wasn't anything important. Now, look here, I just want to give you a few tips about what to do when you get to the Coll. To start with, you'll have to take off that white tie you've got on. Black and dark blue are the only sorts allowed here.'

'How about yours then?' Gethryn was wearing a somewhat sweet thing in brown and yellow.

'Mine happens to be a First Eleven tie.'

'Oh! Well, as a matter of fact, you know, I was going to take off my tie. I always do, especially at night. It's a sort of habit I've got into.'

'Not quite so much of your beastly cheek, please,' said Gethryn.

'Right-ho!' said Farnie cheerfully, and silence, broken only by the shrieking of the cab wheels, brooded once more over the cab. Then Gethryn, feeling that perhaps it would be a shame to jump too severely on a new boy on his first day at a large public school, began to think of something conciliatory to say. 'Look here,' he said, 'you'll get on

all right at Beckford, I expect. You'll find Leicester's a fairly decent sort of House. Anyhow, you needn't be afraid you'll get bullied. There's none of that sort of thing at School nowadays.'

'Really?'

'Yes, and there's another thing I ought to warn you about. Have you brought much money with you?'

"Bout fourteen pounds, I fancy,' said Farnie carelessly.

'Fourteen what!' said the amazed Bishop. 'Pounds!'

'Or sovereigns,' said Farnie. 'Each worth twenty shillings, you know.'

For a moment Gethryn's only feeling was one of unmixed envy. Previously he had considered himself passing rich on thirty shillings a term. He had heard legends, of course, of individuals who come to School bursting with bullion, but never before had he set eyes upon such an one. But after a time it began to dawn upon him that for a new boy at a public school, and especially at such a House as Leicester's had become under the rule of the late Reynolds and his predecessors, there might be such a thing as having too much money.

'How the deuce did you get all that?' he asked.

'My pater gave it me. He's absolutely cracked on the subject of pocket-money. Sometimes he doesn't give me a sou, and sometimes he'll give me whatever I ask for.'

'But you don't mean to say you had the cheek to ask for fourteen quid?'

'I asked for fifteen. Got it, too. I've spent a pound of it. I said I wanted to buy a bike. You can get a jolly good bike for five quid about, so you see I scoop ten pounds. What?'

This ingenious, if slightly unscrupulous, feat gave Gethryn an insight into his uncle's character which up till now he had lacked. He began to see that the moral advice with which he had primed himself would be out of place. Evidently this youth could take quite good care of himself on his own account. Still, even a budding Professor Moriarty would be none the worse for being warned against Gethryn's bete noire, Monk, so the Bishop proceeded to deliver that warning.

'Well,' he said, 'you seem to be able to look out for yourself all right, I must say. But there's one tip I really can give you. When you get to Leicester's, and a beast with a green complexion and an oily smile comes up and calls you "Old Cha-a-p", and wants you to swear eternal friendship, tell him it's not good enough. Squash him!'

'Thanks,' said Farnie. 'Who is this genial merchant?'



'Chap called Monk. You'll recognize him by the smell of scent. When you find the place smelling like an Eau-de-Cologne factory, you'll know Monk's somewhere near. Don't you have anything to do with him.'

'You seem to dislike the gentleman.'

'I bar the man. But that isn't why I'm giving you the tip to steer clear of him. There are dozens of chaps I bar who haven't an ounce of vice in them. And there are one or two chaps who have got tons. Monk's one of them. A fellow called Danvers is another. Also a beast of the name of Waterford. There are some others as well, but those are the worst of the lot. By the way, I forgot to ask, have you ever been to school before?'

'Yes,' said Farnie, in the dreamy voice of one who recalls memories from the misty past, 'I was at Harrow before I came here, and at Wellington before I went to Harrow, and at Clifton before I went to Wellington.'

Gethryn gasped.

'Anywhere before you went to Clifton?' he enquired.

'Only private schools.'

The recollection of the platitudes which he had been delivering, under

the impression that he was talking to an entirely raw beginner, made Gethryn feel slightly uncomfortable. What must this wanderer, who had seen men and cities, have thought of his harangue?

'Why did you leave Harrow?' asked he.

'Sacked,' was the laconic reply.

Have you ever, asks a modern philosopher, gone upstairs in the dark, and trodden on the last step when it wasn't there? That sensation and the one Gethryn felt at this unexpected revelation were identical. And the worst of it was that he felt the keenest desire to know why Harrow had seen fit to dispense with the presence of his uncle.

'Why?' he began. 'I mean,' he went on hurriedly, 'why did you leave Wellington?'

'Sacked,' said Farnie again, with the monotonous persistence of a Solomon Eagle.

Gethryn felt at this juncture much as the unfortunate gentleman in Punch must have felt, when, having finished a humorous story, the point of which turned upon squinting and red noses, he suddenly discovered that his host enjoyed both those peculiarities. He struggled manfully with his feelings for a time. Tact urged him to discontinue his investigations and talk about the weather. Curiosity insisted upon

knowing further details. Just as the struggle was at its height, Farnie came unexpectedly to the rescue.

'It may interest you,' he said, 'to know that I was not sacked from Clifton.'

Gethryn with some difficulty refrained from thanking him for the information.

'I never stop at a school long,' said Farnie. 'If I don't get sacked my father takes me away after a couple of terms. I went to four private schools before I started on the public schools. My pater took me away from the first two because he thought the drains were bad, the third because they wouldn't teach me shorthand, and the fourth because he didn't like the headmaster's face. I worked off those schools in a year and a half.' Having finished this piece of autobiography, he relapsed into silence, leaving Gethryn to recollect various tales he had heard of his grandfather's eccentricity. The silence lasted until the College was reached, when the matron took charge of Farnie, and Gethryn went off to tell Marriott of these strange happenings.

Marriott was amused, nor did he attempt to conceal the fact. When he had finished laughing, which was not for some time, he favoured the Bishop with a very sound piece of advice. 'If I were you,' he said, 'I should try and hush this affair up. It's all fearfully funny, but I think you'd enjoy life more if nobody knew this kid was your uncle. To

see the head of the House going about with a juvenile uncle in his wake might amuse the chaps rather, and you might find it harder to keep order; I won't let it out, and nobody else knows apparently. Go and square the kid. Oh, I say though, what's his name? If it's Gethryn, you're done. Unless you like to swear he's a cousin.'

'No; his name's Farnie, thank goodness.'

'That's all right then. Go and talk to him.'

Gethryn went to the junior study. Farnie was holding forth to a knot of fags at one end of the room. His audience appeared to be amused at something.

'I say, Farnie,' said the Bishop, 'half a second.'

Farnie came out, and Gethryn proceeded to inform him that, all things considered, and proud as he was of the relationship, it was not absolutely essential that he should tell everybody that he was his uncle. In fact, it would be rather better on the whole if he did not. Did he follow?

Farnie begged to observe that he did follow, but that, to his sorrow, the warning came too late.

'I'm very sorry,' he said, 'I hadn't the least idea you wanted the

thing kept dark. How was I to know? I've just been telling it to some of the chaps in there. Awfully decent chaps. They seemed to think it rather funny. Anyhow, I'm not ashamed of the relationship. Not yet, at any rate.'

For a moment Gethryn seemed about to speak. He looked fixedly at his uncle as he stood framed in the doorway, a cheerful column of cool, calm, concentrated cheek. Then, as if realizing that no words that he knew could do justice to the situation, he raised his foot in silence, and 'booted' his own flesh and blood with marked emphasis. After which ceremony he went, still without a word, upstairs again.

As for Farnie, he returned to the junior day-room whistling 'Down South' in a soft but cheerful key, and solidified his growing popularity with doles of food from a hamper which he had brought with him. Finally, on retiring to bed and being pressed by the rest of his dormitory for a story, he embarked upon the history of a certain Pollock and an individual referred to throughout as the Porroh Man, the former of whom caused the latter to be decapitated, and was ever afterwards haunted by his head, which appeared to him all day and every day (not excepting Sundays and Bank Holidays) in an upside-down position and wearing a horrible grin. In the end Pollock very sensibly committed suicide (with ghastly details), and the dormitory thanked Farnie in a subdued and chastened manner, and tried, with small success, to go to sleep. In short, Farnie's first evening at Beckford had been quite a triumph.