

A FAVOURITE OF FORTUNE

A Story of a Wicked Uncle

By B. A. CLARKE



TO the rule that we undervalue what comes to us free of expense, there is an exception in the case of relatives, and Mr. Tyrell never thought better of his wife's brother than when he advised that he was returning home by P and O steamer at his own charges. In the past, Richard Stoneman had often

talked of returning to England, but always with the proviso that his brother-in-law should furnish the means. On receiving one of these appeals, Mr. Tyrell would reply in a strain of optimism that must have come to the exile like a breath of ozone—so sanguine was the writer that if Dick but remained in Australia, his eventual success was assured. This periodical encouragement, combined with the absence of remittances, had had much to do with keeping Stoneman in the Antipodes.

And now the news came that Dick (poor Dick! as they had been wont to call him) had made money and was coming home to spend it. Mr. Tyrell was honestly glad to hear it, for he had never had any complaint to urge against his wife's brother beyond chronic hard-uppishness, but he expressed rather more surprise than was consistent with his prophecies.

"How your brother can have made the money," he said to his wife at the breakfast table, "I cannot imagine, and perhaps it would be better not to inquire."

It was in his mind that Dick must have engaged in some reckless speculation, justified neither by his means nor by the information before him when he made the plunge. But the boys could not read their father's thoughts, and Walter put the darkest interpretation upon the speech. He did not really, but it thrilled him to think that the words would bear such a reading. After breakfast he drew Claude on one side.

"You heard what the pater said; you know, I suppose, how money is made in Australia?"

"Cattle and wool," said Claude slowly, "and gold. Oh, Walter! might uncle Dick have been a gold-digger?"

"No," said Walter, "he mightn't, or there would be no reason why we shouldn't inquire. It is something that is a great disgrace to us," (he looked as little like one conscious of disgrace as might be)—"it is bushranging."

"Oh, rats!" said Claude.

"Why, rats? There are such people as bush-rangers, I suppose?"

"Yes, but boys like us don't have bushrangers for uncles."

"That is just where you are jolly well wrong. Some bushrangers come from better families than ours. There is a story that ran in *Soft Things*; the hero is called Lieutenant Limelight. He had lived in an ancestral home until he was ousted by a scheming cousin, called Jasper. It was this, and other things, that made him take up bushranging."

"Well, I am certain we couldn't have an uncle a bushranger."

"Why?"

"I don't know, but I am certain. You can't stuff me up. You can stuff yourself up if you like."

"Cheeky kid!" said Walter. "If you got what you deserved, I should smack your head."

But this part of a brothers' duty went undischarged, the only result of the discussion being that Walter, in sheer obstinacy, began to fancy that there really might be something in his theory—a bare possibility of truth, at any rate.

In due season Uncle Dick arrived, in the best of health and spirits, and in his best clothes. He might have been on his way to a garden party. Unlike the Tyrell men, who looked best in overcoats, he could wear clothes, and his nephews' first judgment was that there was a relation who would do them credit. The boys went to a City school, travelling to and fro by train, and the tragedies of their lives occurred when relations or family friends blundered into compartments wherein they were riding

with their schoolfellows. Max was particularly exigent in the matter of relatives; indeed, in the whole circle there was not one that reached his standard. Some were ugly, or of too generous build, while those of creditable physique broke down on the point of costume, for it is strange fact that however contentedly slovenly a lad may be himself, he cannot look his fellows in their grubby little faces if convicted of owning an adult relative guilty in dress of the most trifling solecism. Knowing that he would be expected to take his uncle about, Max had anticipated his arrival with some dismay. Coming from the Colonies, it was likely that the visitor would dress unconventionally. Max was not disposed to condemn him for this, but he doubted if he could persuade his schoolfellows to take the same tolerant view. He made the attempt, however, and succeeded beyond his hopes. In a Colonial the boys thought this free-and-easiness characteristic and praiseworthy.

"I dare say Uncle Dick won't ever wear decent hats or gloves."

"And why should he?"

"Perhaps," said Max, anxious whilst his friends were in this complacent mood to get them committed irrevocably, "perhaps he won't even wear a collar."

"That is the sort of man England wants."

"I dare say," said Max, "he may not be quite so clean as some of your uncles."

He was relieved to find that even this trait would be counted for righteousness. The modern craze for washing could so easily be overdone. Max breathed more freely. It was scarcely possible that in slovenliness his uncle could go beyond what had been thus condoned in advance. But the boys did more. They made a hero of the unknown, and Tyrell's uncle became a type to them of all that was freest and best in Colonial manhood.

"That would not suit Tyrell's uncle," they would say, when they saw a man over-dressed.

They wanted to hear how such an ideal being earned his bread. Max lent to generalities. Riding about the bush in stained riding-breeches and a flannel shirt seemed the principal thing. If he had suggested a bank or an office, his schoolfellows would have lynched him.

Until he saw his uncle, Max did not realize how he had allowed the legend to grow. Now he saw it in a flash, and the ridicule he must suffer when the boys learned that it had no foundation. He would keep the truth from them if he could, but even at that it was maddening to think that the irreproachable had arrived, the relation he had been seeking for years, and that, owing to his own foolish tongue, the paragon must be concealed like an over-stout aunt.

Walter, too, was vexed with his uncle, but for another reason. He had looked for a "dude," with an absurd eyeglass, who said "vewy," and was scared by horses, dogs and firearms, for it was under such disguise that "Lieutenant Limelight" had been wont to hide his terrifying personality. But this was forgotten in the surprise of hearing his belief confirmed—it was characteristic of Walter to be surprised when this happened.

"You have not told us yet, Dick, how you made your money?" said Mrs. Tyrell.

"In *Soft Things*," said Walter, "there is a piece called 'Fifty Ways of Making a Fortune in the Colonies.'"

Mr. Stoneman looked at him sharply. "And how long have you been a reader of *Soft Things*?" he asked.

"I began when 'Lieutenant Limelight, the Australian Duval,' started."

"Ah," said the man, "that would be about a year ago."

He looked at Walter fixedly. Not a muscle of his face moved, but the boy felt his uncle was demanding a private interview. He followed him to the spare bedroom.

The man closed the door.

"And so you read *Soft Things*, and know how I made my money?"

"Yes," said Walter nervously. Downstairs seemed very far away.

"And was it one of the fifty ways?"

The boy shook his head.

"In another part of the paper, eh?"

"I am the only one that read it," said Walter, "and I won't tell any one."

"That's a good little chap. Of course, it doesn't really matter; I have done nothing to be ashamed of, but I would sooner that your father and mother did not know."

On thinking them over, there was something in his uncle's remarks that Walter did not like. The assertion that there was nothing in his calling for regret was contrary to the best traditions. All the outlaws he had read about, from "Lieutenant Limelight" downwards, had been wont to refer to their crimes sadly, relating them, on occasion, in detail, with gusto tempered by remorse. There are stories that glorify crime, penny dreadfuls and the like, but Walter had never read of such. His knowledge was all derived from tales of good moral tone, by authors of standing, printed (when in book form) upon good paper, wherein right is right and wrong is wrong, and no excuse is accepted for criminal courses unless the perpetrator has been ruined by a sleek rascal, or some heartless woman has jilted him, thus depriving him of faith in humanity, and releasing him from all moral obligations. And even then, so hyper-self-critical are fine minds, these romantic scoundrels were not free from remorse. But Uncle Dick was without this noble trait. Might it be that he was a criminal of another class, just simply a bad man, with no justification for his misdoings?

Walter devoted himself to solving this problem. He tried his uncle at various times on the subject of women, but could evoke no outbursts of hate and scorn. Dreadful to relate, Richard Stoneman seemed to think rather highly of women. The boy was disappointed, but he gave his uncle another chance?

"Don't you hate society, uncle?" he asked. No, the man was rather partial to society, liked going to dances and tennis parties particularly.

"Oh, I don't mean that quite. What I mean is, don't you long to be revenged upon society—to do it all the injury possible?"

Far from this, Uncle Dick's feeling on the subject of society was kindly. He would like before he died to have done it some benefit.

But there was worse behind. Dick Stoneman, in the boy's presence, was talking to their father about a Melbourne banker, noted for his munificence to public charities. Stoneman's small savings had been entrusted to him, and when, being down on his luck, he had had to draw out his last sovereign, the great man had taken a personal interest in him, and had saved him from despair, acting throughout with a generosity and a delicacy that could not be mentioned without a catch in the voice.

"And I believe," said Dick Stoneman, "there are many others like him in the world."

Walter was forced to the conclusion that his uncle, with his unimpaired faith in humanity, must be an exceptionally bad man. What reason was there for not classing his robberies with acts of dishonesty? The boy could see none, or for regarding the money so acquired as anything but stolen property. This conclusion necessitated the return of some not inconsiderable tips. The young moralist did not shrink. He bought a postal order for the amount they totalled, and sent this to his uncle anonymously.

"From a friend who warns you not to return to the old haunts," was printed upon the accompanying sheet of notepaper.

Richard Stoneman was completely mystified.

Having a criminal relative was less of an advantage than one would have thought; and as Walter became fond of his uncle, he felt more keenly the peril of his position. In dreams he used to see him handcuffed and led away. But this catastrophe should not happen for lack of local knowledge. Persistently but unobtrusively he was preparing the man for the evil day. In this he was helped by the fact that Uncle Dick showed a preference for his society, mentally associating Max with dull walks, owing to the fact that the elder boy kept him to back streets, where there was small likelihood of their meeting the fellows. Walter was more catholic. Byways must be investigated if one was to know now how to baffle a hue and cry, but great thoroughfares had their uses also. Particularly

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