

A Favourite of Fortune

(Continued from page 15)

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was Walter careful to point out the big shops that had entrances in two streets, and to show how these might be used for shaking off a spy. Starting for a walk, he liked to do so by back garden, and then down the little lane, and he made his uncle observe how by trespassing across a strip of nursery garden one could reach the heath, a splendid means of escape supposing the police had come for one by the front door.

Mr. Stoneman thought that his nephews' mind must be unsettled by bad books, and he tried to give him juster ideas.

"You talk about nothing but escaping from the police. Are you thinking of becoming a thief?"

Walter saw a chance of driving home a moral.

"Thieves," he said, "are no worse than bushrangers!"

"Bushrangers! I can tell you something about them. They are the wickedest and most miserable creatures upon God's earth."

His self-condemnation was terrible to witness.

But Walter was not relying solely, or indeed, chiefly, upon his own arguments. He had upon his side a hundred philanthropists. Until one's attention is drawn to it, one has no conception of the number and variety of leaflets distributed in the streets gratuitously. Quite a proportion of the people you brush past would have bestowed a tract upon you, had you given them the chance. Walter saw to it that his uncle accepted these opportunities. The boy did not say anything. He simply forced tracts upon his companion as a conjurer can force cards. Unfortunately they were never quite relevant. There were appeals to moderate and immoderate drinkers, leaflets of "The Sabbath Observance Society" and "The Sunday League," "Anti-Gambling Statistics," and "Words to Flesh Eaters," but no moralist seemed to concern himself with cases like Uncle Dick's.

Of course, Walter was not allowed to monopolise the visit. The cloistered walks with Max were not abandoned entirely, and it was during one of these that the blow fell. It happened upon a Wednesday half-holiday, but Walter was not told until the following afternoon. He had been kept in, and thus was later home than his brother. Max opened the door to him.

"Have you heard something about uncle—anything connected with *Soft Things*?"

"I have known it all along," Walter replied.

"Well," said Max, "I only heard it to-day, but every boy in the school will know by the end of the week!"

"However did it come out?"

"It is all that pig Latzarus. You know how close I have been keeping Uncle Dick. Well, yesterday afternoon young Latzarus met us. I pretended not to recognise him, but I could see he had twigged me. He managed to meet us again, and this time he took a good stare. The little beast spotted uncle as the man in *Soft Things*, but he had destroyed the back numbers, so what does he do in the half-hour but go round to *Soft Things* office and have them turned up! And then when he had made sure, he had the cheek to see the editor, tell him where uncle was staying, and they are sending a man round this evening."

"Have you got uncle safely out of the way?"

"I haven't told him."

"Do you mean to say that you have loafed about for two hours and done nothing? Oh, you great idiot! Where

is uncle? I must see him this minute."

"He is working in the garden."

Max was so taken aback by the vehemence of the attack upon him that he answered quite meekly.

Walter rushed through the house and found his uncle planting seeds. The young man was visibly annoyed.

"But I suppose it was bound to come out sooner or later," he said and went on planting seeds.

"Oh, don't delay, uncle! Get away while it is still possible—out by the back, the way I showed you."

"So I am to give them the slip, eh? Well, it doesn't seem a bad notion. Tell Mary, when the man comes to keep him waiting a bit, and I will get out into the lane. Then she can say truthfully that I am not at home."

"Oh, uncle, do go this very minute!"

"Why, he may not come for an hour, and I shall miss my tea. No, thank you."

It was with just such nonchalance that "Lieutenant Limelight" had faced his perils, but Walter was not pleased. He stamped with impatience. He was learning that the same things affect one differently in books and in real life. Mr. Stoneman would not be hustled; and when the tea-bell rang, he went in and began what promised to be a hearty meal.

But in the middle a strange knock came at the front door. Mr. Stoneman whispered a word to the maid and slipped out. He was gone without a word of farewell, and they might never see him again!

The knock was repeated four times before the door was opened, and then the servant was some time before she returned. She brought a letter with her.

"If you please ma'am, it was a gentleman for Mr. Stoneman. I told him Mr. Stoneman was out, and he left this note."

"Is the coast clear?" said a voice at the door, and Mr. Stoneman entered.

"Oh! why didn't you get clear away?" said Walter. "They will come back."

"That is just what this note says; and when they come, I must see them."

"You won't let yourself be taken?" cried Walter.

"It is a bore, but it has happened to me before."

Walter put his face down on the table-cloth and sobbed.

"Perhaps, Dick," said Mrs. Tyrell, a little sharply, "you will explain what all this means?"

"I will explain my own share, Annie, willingly; but I have not the least notion why Walter should cry."

"Of course, it is hardest on me," said Max.

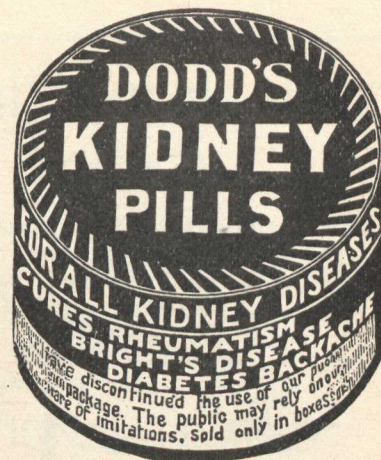
"What I do know," said Uncle Dick, "is that *Soft Things* has been told I am in England, and the editor says I must be interviewed."

"Why?"

"Because I am the winner of their mammoth prize."

"I know," said Walter, looking up and smiling through his tears; "the top-hat prize."

"Yes; Walter knew it from the first, and very well he kept the secret. And now for detail. Twelve months ago, *Soft Things*, that now has a circulation of a million weekly, was about as obscure a journal of its kind as might be. Then it was converted into a limited company, and most of the capital raised was devoted to one huge prize—I suppose the greatest ever offered—three thousand

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