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DESIGNING UNCLE JOHN

We were a thriftless family; we were always in debt; we were badly clothed, badly housed, badly fed, and we children were badly educated—and all owing to Uncle John. We children called him uncle. The real fact is that he was our great uncle, and my father was entitled to the reversion of £8,000 on his death. It was like the house that Jack built; if it hadn't been for Uncle John and the reversion, my father would have consented to work like the rest of mankind. If he had submitted to the common lot I should have had a proper education, my fate might have been different and happier. My great uncle never did anything for any of us. My father used to go to see him occasionally, and when he came back he was always very much depressed for several days. "Uncle John is looking younger than ever; I shall never come into that money, my boy," he would say to me in a melancholy tone. "Low diet and hope deferred, my boy, have made a wreck of me," (He might have added laziness, and whiskey and water.) "He'll outlive me, my boy; I'm sure he will. But you've got a fine constitution, and bar accidents, you'll come into it after all."

And so in due course my father died and I was left an orphan. On his deathbed he gave me my Uncle John's address. "It's all I can do for you, Joseph, my boy," he said, "and it isn't much." And as soon as the breath was out of my father's body the landlord came in and seized the furniture; and I, having no other home in the world, proceeded to seek out my only living relative, Uncle John. I had never seen my Uncle John. He received my father once a year, as has been stated; but though I had never seen him, I knew all about him. "He's all hair and spectacles," my father had said, "and he wears a cap with flaps to it."

Now, some six or seven years prior to my father's death, Uncle John had married his cook. When my father heard of that event, he was overjoyed. "That's the last straw, Joseph, my boy," my father said to me; "that'll settle him. Why, she's a regular horse grenadier." My father was out in his calculations. On his next visit to my Uncle John, he declared that the old man was "gaining flesh"; and then he quarrelled with the horse grenadier. Of course, it was over the annual £5 note, which was over the annual £5 note, which was all that my father ever succeeded in extracting from his relative. The fact is that it was to the cook's interest to keep Uncle John alive; for besides the £8,000 that was to come to us on his death there was nothing but his furniture and his savings. As Uncle John's widow, the cook's position would be a precarious one; but, with one bed-ridden old man to keep out of £350 a year, as Uncle John's wife, the cook, had a very good bargain.

It was a fine morning in June when I screwed my courage up to the sticking point, and in the interest of my three sisters, whom I had to keep on 30 shillings a week, I determined to call on my Uncle John and try and extract the annual "five." My Uncle John's house was in Araminta terrace, Hoxton. I knocked gently at the door, lest I should disturb my bed-ridden uncle; a slatternly girl opened it on the chain and asked my business.

"I've called to see Mr. Worleybone, my uncle," I replied. As soon as I had said the words, a look of terror passed across the girl's face. "Can't you call in an hour?" said the girl; "the old gentleman's asleep, I think."

"If you don't mind, I think I'd like to come in and see my aunt," I replied. "Mother's out," said the slatternly girl, "but I'll step up and ask the old gentleman."

She didn't let me in, though; she left me waiting on the door-step, and she left the door upon the chain. She wasn't gone long; and when she returned she opened the door slowly enough, and ushered me into a little front parlor, she said: "Will you please take a chair, and Mr. Worleybone will see you in a minute or two."

I did as I was told. I sat down and I waited. The houses in the Araminta terrace are little two-story dwellings, masterpieces of the jerry-builder's art. I could hear a great running about on the floor above and the tramping of heavy footsteps, which, if I hadn't known that Mrs. Worleybone was out, I should have taken for those of my aunt, the horse grenadier. "Will you step up, please," said the

slatternly girl, as she flung the door open, and I followed her to the first floor front, my uncle's bedroom. As I entered the room, I detected a strong odor of spirits. The Venetian blinds were drawn down, and, in addition, there were heavy curtains to the window, which made the room unpleasantly dark.

"I hope I find you well, Uncle John," I said, walking towards the bed, and a husky voice answered me from the pillows. "I ain't long for this world, Joseph. Please to take a chair."

Now, for the last ten years I knew perfectly well that my Uncle John had been in the habit of replying to my father's inquiries after his health in these very words. At first I had not been able to see my Uncle John, but as my eyes grew accustomed to the dim religious light of my uncle's bedroom, I perceived that my uncle John was as my father had described him, a venerable old man, all white hair and spectacles, wearing a flapped cap.

"My sisters sent their duty and respects, sir," I said. "And then my uncle gave a short grunt. "Don't you find the room a little dark, Uncle John," I remarked. "It's on account of my poor eyes," replied my Uncle John in the hoarse whisper that seemed natural with him, "that's why I'm forced to wear these green spectacles," he said.

How stupid I was to have forgotten Uncle John's weakness of vision. Then there was a long silence, which was broken by my Uncle John. "You ain't thinking of marrying, Joseph, are you?" said my uncle. "Why, bless me, no, uncle," I replied. "I've only 30 shillings a week, and there are four of us."

"But if she was a heiress, Joseph?" croaked my uncle. "I'm open to an heiress," I replied. "That was a likely girl that opened the door to you, Nephew Joseph," said my Uncle John. "I'm very fond of that likely girl," he went on, "and she's an heiress," added my uncle mysteriously, "and she's sort of a girl as 'ud make any young man happy."

I didn't quite see myself how the slatternly girl was calculated to make any young man happy, but I remembered that she was my uncle's stepdaughter; so I remarked inanely, "She's a spanking young woman, sir."

"She's all that, nephew," croaked out my uncle. "She's the very image of her blessed mother, and look how happy that woman has made me. Don't you think you'd like to walk out with her, Nephew Joseph? Don't you think you'd like to take her to the Crystal Palace?" said the tempter, my uncle.

"One can't afford to take girls to the Crystal Palace, uncle," I replied, "on 30 shillings a week."

"But suppose I was to stand Sam," said my uncle, "Joseph," continued my uncle, mysteriously, "she's a puttin' on her Sunday clothes. You wait till you see her when she's dressed." Here was a horrible situation. My uncle was about to propose that I should take the slatternly girl to the Crystal Palace in her Sunday clothes, and all the time I was engaged to Sophia, but I didn't dare to say anything about Sophia to my Uncle John.

"That likely girl that's a-dressing herself up for you, Nephew, in the next room, 'll have 300 golden shillings the day she marries, and I've been saving her up for you, Nephew Joseph, ever since my wedding day. There's a £5 note on the mantel for you, Joseph, and there's a sulfering inside. Take her to the palace, nephew, and let me hear you've squared it between you when you bring her home. Don't you spare expense, Joseph; treat her to swings and merry-go-rounds, take her on the switch-back railway; and mind you travel first class, Joseph, there's nothing fetches a young girl like traveling first-class. I was young once myself, Joseph," added my uncle with a sigh. "She's a real high-stepper is Polly."

There was nothing else for it, I had to express my delight; and as I did so the real high-stepper entered the room. I shouldn't have known her. She was appalling—that's the only word for it.

"She's a blessed angel," said my uncle with enthusiasm, "and the very image of her dear mother. Heaven bless you, my children! Don't be later than 9, Joseph. Good-bye, children!" he said. And then I and the real high-stepper started for the Crystal Palace.

I draw a veil over my sufferings at that place of amusement. Polly clung to my arm till I felt as if we were Siamese twins; and she made warm love to me upon the switchback railway. "You're the first young man I've ever walked out with," she said to me ingeniously while the fire works were going on. I was no philanderer and I was desperately in love with Sophia; but I couldn't afford to quarrel with my uncle, so I pretended to make love to Polly. I dissembled, and I made it as like the real thing as possible; and when we reached Araminta terrace I felt like the villain of a melodrama. Miss Polly opened

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the door with a latch key. We went straight up to my uncle's bedroom, where the old gentleman was still lying in state. If possible his room smelt more strongly than ever of brandy.

"You're very late, Joseph," said my uncle, reprovingly; "but young people will be young people. I was a young person once."

My uncle is getting a little mixed, I thought. "How did you enjoy yourself, Polly?" croaked my uncle. "It was just heavenly, mother," cried the girl; and then the cat was out of the bag. Here was Polly's mother masquerading as my Uncle John. Horrible thoughts flashed through my mind. Perhaps they had murdered him and buried him in the coal cellar. I seized the poker. I shouted "Police!" I rushed upon my supposed Uncle John and seized his long white beard. It, his venerable wig, his hairy face, his flapped cap and his green spectacles came away in my hand, and I saw a fat, red-faced woman, perfectly bald, and with huge sham eyebrows of white hair.

"Ain't you ashamed of yourself, you young rascal, to treat your great aunt in this way, and me a lone widow? Oh, Mr. Joseph," cried the woman, as she bounced out of bed and flung herself upon her knees, "Worleybone's been dead these three months and we ain't provided for, and I was doing my best for Polly, which is my daughter, being my bounden duty. Oh, Mr. Joseph, spare the widow and her orphan child!" "Down on your marrow bones!" cried the frightened woman to her daughter; "if it hadn't been for you, you hussey, he'd never, never have found me out"; and Miss Polly, the high-stepper, dropped on her knees at her mother's side.

Of course I forgave them; of course I came in on the £8,000, of course I married Sophia, and equally of course I have never said a word to her of the fearful day at the Crystal Palace with the high-stepping Polly, or my subsequent terrific adventure at Araminta terrace, Hoxton.—St. James Budget.

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