

UNCLE BENJAMIN.

BY CLARA MULHOLLAND.

The discussion was exciting warm. "Uncle Benjamin is as sure as bear, if I went away just now," said Lydia, "I'd die of fright in a week in that lonely old house, with no one to speak to but Uncle Benjamin, and that sour-faced servant of his," said Rosalind. "What do you say, Lydia? Will you board the lion in his den, in the hope of securing part of his money for yourself and your family?"

Lydia stretched her feet, lazily, toward the fire, and yawned. "Not likely. I'd do a good deal for money—we all want some badly. But take care of Uncle Benjamin for a year!—read for him—even if I were sure of a fortune at the end, which, in that case, I wouldn't be! They say he has really very little left; he has speculated and lost so much."

"He's your father's only brother; he is lonely and ill," said Mrs. Hayward, sighing. "And then, he has money—I'm sure he has. Really, girls, one of you might go. A year would soon pass over, and it would be a great thing to have one less to feed and clothe during that time, as my funds are very low. Come, Belinda, brace yourself up, and go to Langdale."

Belinda looked up at her mother, indignantly, and tossed her untidy head. "I'm blessed if I will! Why, I might ruin my prospects in life, for ever, if I went away just now." Alfred West is very attentive, as you know."

"Apparently so. But I have little faith in men of his stamp. He'll desert you some day, suddenly, and marry money."

Belinda flushed angrily. "I will not go to Uncle Benjamin," she cried, and swung out of the room.

"I have it!" Rosalind exclaimed. "Send your useless little worry, Alfred."

Lydia laughed, and glanced at her mother, then across the room, at a small, delicate girl who sat, knitting, near the window.

old of its existence. She imagined herself penniless, and was grateful for the charity extended to her; and for the moment she was old enough to think for herself, she longed to get away to earn her bread. But this, Henry Hayward strenuously opposed. He used her money, keeping her as cheaply as he could, and his conscience did not reproach him, but the idea of her earning her own living made him feel guilty.

About this time Hayward went to America, on business, and then, freed from the sight of his presence, his wife and daughters gave full vent to their real natures, and treated the girl so badly that her life became unbearable.

With many tears Attracta implored God to help and strengthen her. He begged Him to give her grace to bear her cross with patience and resignation.

"If thou carry the cross willingly, it will carry thee," she would murmur. "My Jesus, I am poor and alone. Pity me! Help me!"

When she first heard mention of Mr. Benjamin Hayward's anxiety to have a niece to live with him, she wished, oh! so ardently, that she possessed a relative who would be willing to let her go to him on the best conditions. But she did not dare to suggest that she should take the place of Belinda or Rosalind. And, even when they objected to go to Langdale, she hesitated, partly from shyness, partly from a feeling that she would only be laughed at and scorned for her presumption. Then suddenly Rosalind's remarks about herself fell upon her ear. Her announcement that she ought to go surprised her, and her declaration that she was one too many in the house stung her into getting out of it, if she possibly could. And with aching cheeks and beating heart she asked if she might go to this old man, of whom she knew nothing beyond the fact that he was Henry Hayward's brother, a great invalid, and very eccentric.

Mrs. Hayward's ready acquiescence, and the evident delight of Rosalind showed the girl she had done the right thing, as far as they were concerned, and she fled away to her room to think what it all meant, and to beg God's blessing on the great step she was about to take.

"You need have no fear," he whispered. "He will soon love you very dearly."

"I hope so," Attracta blushed deeply and her eyes fell. Then she passed with a firm step into the library, laid her hands in his man's chair, laid her hands in his hand. He looked up with an expression of wondering inquiry, and his lips quivered.

"Attracta—you? And so unchanged? How is it? Why is it? He pressed her hands tightly.

"You—so young, and I—old—feeble—ill?"

"He wanders?" Attracta glanced at Alfred West.

"It is strange! Speak to him," he answered low. "His mind was quite clear just now."

"Mr. Hayward," Attracta bent toward him, then sat down on the nearest chair. "I am not your niece, but Attracta Ross. My mother first married my father, John Ross, and then your brother, Henry Hayward, and if you will allow me I will read to you and stay with you."

believe you and take your place with my uncle. Arava you glad?"

Then with a look of well-feigned surprise she held out her hand to Alfred West. "Who on earth would have thought of seeing you here?" she said.

"No one, I am sure, unless they had been told. Attracta has mentioned me in her letters. I dare say."

"Attracta" Belinda frowned, then laughed. "You surprise me. But her letters did not interest me. I never read them. And now, where is my uncle? I must see him and arrange about Attracta going back to London. We can not both be away at once. So, the fly is waiting."

Attracta gave a little cry and caught Alfred's arm. Then, quickly recovering herself, she looked at him with a sweet, bright smile, and taking Belinda's hand led her across the lawn to Mr. Hayward's chair.

The fly went back empty to the station that evening, and Belinda, on the whole, behaved extremely well. But, early next day, she received a telegram recalling her to London, and to the joy of everyone she promptly departed.

"You've won the day," she said as she bade her goodbye; "and I congratulate you. But don't be too hard on us; and, remember, that, if we had been all we ought to be, you would never have seen Alfred's wife. You owe that to our unkind treatment. Goodbye."

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