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Uncle Peter's Experiment

By G. B. Burgin

(Author of "The Shutters of Silence," etc.)

WELL, Aunt," said Jeremy Winthrop, not without a gleam of humour, "if I'd known you wanted to choose me a wife, of course I shouldn't have married someone else; but it's done now, and there's the baby. You can't do away with facts like that; they'd both make too much noise if you tried it."

"I want to know what is the use of being a wealthy aunt," not unreasonably demanded Miss Winthrop, with a thump of her thick stick on the floor, "if I can't dictate to my heir-at-law?"

"Wealthy aunts always do kick up a row—in fiction," said Jeremy, mournfully; "that's what they're for. Else the book wouldn't be long enough. They ought to be different in real life."

"You'll find that wealthy aunts do exist for some purpose in real life," said the irascible old lady, "and are much more thorough than people in books. In real life, they don't relent, because the baby has spasms or smiles like an angel. They go on being nasty as long as they live."

"Of course, aunt," Jeremy acquiesced, in his matter-of-fact way. "You can't help having money! What's the use of it if you can't be nasty when you want to?"

"Well, I am going to be nasty."

"You are," said the candid Jeremy. "I can see that, aunt, by the expression of your eye. It's a way of yours. No one but Uncle Peter misunderstands your eye."

"You needn't be rude. Why don't you grovel, and ask me to reconsider my decision?"

"Can't grovel, aunt; I'm an Englishman. Besides, I'd look such a boulder. You know very well, too, that if I were to grovel, it would spoil all your fun; and you don't get much fun nowadays."

"Fun!"

"Yes, fun! You oughtn't to disinherit me because I have married Maud. We had to get married just to see more of each other. Then one morning, the baby took it into her head to join the family party although she might have known she'd bankrupt us. We had our doubts about the baby at first; she squinted so much like Uncle Peter; but when she gave up squinting and had 'windy spasms,' instead, we thought you'd take to her."

"Well, I didn't. I told you I didn't. She—she didn't take to me."

"You frightened her, and she showed us out of our inheritance; but she's doing her best to let bygones be bygones. I must admit that your conduct surprised us, aunt. It's those stories again. Maud thought you'd come round in time and apologise to the baby, if we left her on your doorstep. I quite expected you'd welcome us with words of sweet forgiveness, and take in the baby. Then Maud knocked that on the head by saying that, books or no books, she wasn't going to leave her precious baby on anyone's doorstep this weather; the jury would call it wilful murder, and we should both swing for it."

"We've you right, too."

"Well, you see, aunt, there was a certain amount of reason in what Maud said, because we're both rather used to the baby, and have learned to tolerate her. I offered to take turns with Maud in watching the child from the other side of the way until you came to weep over it; but Maud said you were far too sensible to poke your nose out of doors at that time of night, unless I could hypnotise you into doing it, and that, however carefully I packed the baby in wood shavings and tied her to the knocker, the child would fall from the hamper and begin to cry. We argued until Maud threatened to go home to her mother and take the baby with her. I said I'd explain to you how we felt about this ridiculous infant, if you still persisted in being unreasonable. Shall I bring Maud and the baby to see you? It's so much more comfortable than taking liberties with our offspring and your knocker."

"I don't want to see the—the snivelling wretch," Miss Winthrop angrily exclaimed.

"She doesn't snivel—it is only a perennial dewdrop. If you won't forgive us, we shall still have to starve on two hundred a year. Well, it's rather jolly, you know. We manage to get along on it, now Maud's discovered how well pickled walnuts help down cold New Zealand mutton; and we're not going to sponge on you. You just go on being a Roman parent to us, or whatever it is, and we'll forgive you, Aunt Maria. Of course, those stories in the books don't end like that; and they mix things up so in books that I'm going my own way. When you feel better, send round for us, and we'll forgive you."

"I don't want to be forgiven," snapped the old lady.

"Of course you don't—never yet met anyone who did in real life; but then books are so misleading. You'll have to get over it, you know, aunt. We—including the baby—don't bear any malice. Leave the money to Uncle Peter."

"Peter's a fool. He says you ought to have it. I say you shan't. And after all, it's my money, not his."

"That's all right. Good-bye. I'll give your love to Maud, because she says, when you're not thinking of your money you're awfully nice to her."

"I don't want to have anything more to do with either of you or your ridiculous brat, and in no circumstances shall you finger a penny of my money."

"Well, you might have cut us off with a shilling; we could have bought another bottle of mixed pickles with it." Jeremy cheerfully declared, as he kissed her, and the old lady turned angrily away. "Give us the penny, and have all the fun you can get out of the rest of that money. Why, if I had money, I'd soon tell my chief at the bank what I think of him. He'd hear more real Anglo-Saxon from me in five minutes than he's ever come across in the rest of his life. But I must be off. Take care of your self; you're not looking at all fit."

And the handsome young fellow sauntered away as if he had not a care in the world, fully convinced that as long as Maud and the baby awaited him, nothing else mattered very greatly.

A few days later, however, he heard that Miss Winthrop had been suddenly smitten down by a paralytic stroke. Uncle Peter, who came to break the news to him, also informed Jeremy that on the night before her seizure, Miss Winthrop had declared her intention of making a will. "And now," said the penniless but good-natured old crank, beaming with pleasure, "it has occurred to me, Jeremy, that I shall get everything unless we can make an effort."

"Well, why make an effort? Don't you want to get everything? She didn't intend to leave us more than a penny. I'm awfully sorry about her, poor old dear. She might have apologised to the baby before she went away."

"Of course, I'm not going to rob the baby, Jeremy. Nothing shall convince me that your aunt didn't mean to leave you everything."

"Nothing will convince me that she meant to leave me more than a penny—that is, a farthing each for us, and a halfpenny for the baby. Besides, I call it indecent to talk about her money before she's dead, poor old thing."

"Never you mind," Uncle Peter beamed with delight. "Come round to the house with me. I've a plan in my head—a magnificent plan. Get your hat and come along."

"I'd like to see her again, poor soul!"

(Jeremy left off playing with the baby, who found his moustache very attractive), "Just to say good-bye and tell her I don't bear any malice."

When Uncle and nephew reached Miss Winthrop's house, Jeremy was greatly shocked to see the change for the worse that had taken place in his aunt's appearance. Mr. Wilson, the family solicitor, was also there, dropping sympathy and snuff in all directions. "It's unprofessional—most unprofessional on my part,"—he said to Jeremy, "but your uncle has persuaded me to allow him to make the attempt. What a thousand pities that your good aunt should be afflicted by this terrible asplasia" (he meant "aphasia") "and be unable to give instructions about her will."

Jeremy looked mystified. Uncle Peter, however, bustled joyfully into the room with a couple of packs of cards. "Life means she can't speak. Most interesting experiment," he said, to the startled Jeremy. "Haven't looked forward to such an exciting evening for a long time."

Before Jeremy could expostulate, Uncle Peter brought a card table to Miss Winthrop's bed, and sat down by it. "My dear Maria," he said to Miss Winthrop. "My dear sister, you are not in a position to make your will, so, as I know your property pretty well, I've written down on one pack of cards all the particulars, and on another pack the names of the people to whom you're sure to wish to leave it."

Jeremy made a gesture of dissent. It seemed to him perfectly monstrous that Uncle Peter's craving for originality should lead him to worry the poor old lady.

"I'm inclined to think that the Courts would uphold the validity of a will made in such circumstances," said Mr. Wilson, "provided they are satisfied of the good faith of the parties interested. It would be a dangerous precedent, of course, but, eh—I am inclined—I really am inclined—to think that the attempt might be made."

Jeremy came to the bed-side and looked at the poor old wreck propped up with pillows. After all, she had always been very good to him.

"Look here, aunt," he said sorrowfully, "this nonsense is none of my doing, and I hope you'll soon be well again. I've always thought Uncle Peter as mad as a hatter."

The old lady glared angrily at him, and Jeremy felt how much she must miss her customary freedom of expression.

"We'll begin the small things first," joyously suggested Uncle Peter, who seemed to be in his element, and already talked of his sister as "the subject." "Now, Maria, you hear me, although you can't speak? I have written the word 'brougham' on this card, and placed Dr. Parkin's card opposite it. You know you promised to give him your brougham when you no longer require it. Fortunately, it's just been done up. He'll be delighted."

Miss Winthrop gave a glinty twitch of the lips which might have meant anything.

"That signifies 'yes,'" cheerfully said Uncle Peter. "See how pleased she is." "Parkin's a greedy old humberg. I call it robbery," cried Jeremy, going into a corner. "I'll have nothing to do with it. Uncle Peter, you'll end your days in a madhouse yet, if you aren't careful."

"You are so prejudiced, Jeremy." Uncle Peter looked ten years younger at what he considered the successful issue of his experiment. "You might spare poor Parkin's the brougham without

making such a fuss about it, especially as I'm going to give you my share of everything. Pity I didn't throw in the horse; he's going lame in the foreleg, though Maria, with characteristic obstinacy, never will admit it. I think the Rev. Dacre would like the library. I've often seen him looking at it appreciatively. Shall he have the library, Maria? Here are the cards. Yes; I thought so—she's more delighted than ever. Haven't seen her look so pleased for a long time. She always disliked Dacre, and this is heaping coals of fire on his head."

"I can't stand this," said Jeremy. "She didn't mean anything of the sort. She hates Dacre, and is trying to make you understand you're all wrong about it."

"Don't you be in a hurry to jump to conclusions," said Uncle Peter. "I'm coming to you in a moment. Jere—" But Jeremy had gone into the next room. Miss Maria's rolling eyes upset him; and it was unbecoming that a dying woman should suffer anger at even the summary disposal of the goods she had to leave behind her.

"Perhaps it is just as well she should not be present," suggested Mr. Wilson. "You have no doubt of the rest of the testatrix's intentions?"

"Not the slightest," said Uncle Peter, who was enjoying himself tremendously. "Now Maria, just for form's sake, I've written on this card 'I give, devise, and bequeath, direct, limit, and appoint, all the rest, residue and remainder of my real and personal estate, whatsoever and wheresoever the same may be or consist of, unto, and to the use of my beloved nephew, Jeremy Winthrop.' Ah, I see by the expression of your eyes how I have interpreted your wishes."

If he did, he was a most sanguine man; for Miss Winthrop's eyes glared at him.

"So lucky I thought of this plan," beamed Uncle Peter. "Maria always was such a methodical woman; it would annoy her immensely to depart without settling things. If she could only express her sentiments, poor woman, I've no doubt I should be surprised at their warmth."

"I've no doubt you would," said Jeremy, re-entering the room. He came up to the bed and looked affectionately at the stricken old lady. "See Aunt, I'm not going to have you bothered in this way. Uncle Peter means well, but she's an idiot. I'm just going to tear up those nonsensical cards and send for Maud to look after you. The baby must hang on to the housemaid for a day or two."

"But you're spoiling all my pleasure," sadly interrupted Uncle Peter. "No one ever thought of such a scheme before. Besides, it doesn't hurt her. You know how fond I am of Maria, and how grateful I am for her kindness in lending herself to so interesting an experiment. I haven't had a chance of writing to the papers about anything for the last six months, and this is sure to interest everybody."

"I don't care if you don't get a chance for the next six years," said the indignant Jeremy. "It's perfectly disgraceful to go on playing cards like this when if you let her alone she might get better."

"No, she wouldn't. You don't understand your Aunt! She's so thorough. She'd never be so thoughtless as to get well and spoil my experiment. Though Maria's often said harsh things to me

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