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His Negotiable Aunt

Alec Bruce turned around slowly on the piano stool and faced the five girls.

"Probably you girls are not aware of it, but our friend, Jack, has been adopted."

Jack Hawarden's honest fact clouded.

"Don't, Alec!" he protested.

"Jack," said Alec solemnly, "we are bidden not to hide our light under a bushel—you're trying to hide yours in a pill-box, and I shall tell the girls the whole story."

"I came to see Miss Gray," said Jack, rising. "I will find her upstairs, I think."

As he passed Bruce he whispered fiercely: "For heaven's sake, Alec, keep that thing to yourself."

Alec smiled and nodded, but as soon as Jack had disappeared he continued seriously: "It's a thing you ought to know, girls, and I'm detrimed you shall. Jack is too modest—an unusual trait in an Englishman," he added thoughtfully.

"Forget that you're Scotch and let's have the story," cried the girl who wrote stories.

"Sure, I'll begin right in the middle so as to reach the denouement sooner. Our Jack is in love—"

Laughing exclamations of incredulity from the listening girls.

"He is—honest. His soul is tuned to sweet accord with peerless strains of—"

"Never mind his soul," interrupted Kathleen again, "tell us the story."

"This isn't a wild Irish story, Miss Clyde," he returned, with an air of impatience, "this is the story of a slow-moving and particularly slow-speaking Englishman. He hasn't told his love, because the young lady is earning a fine salary and is seemingly happy in her work, and his position was far from satisfactory. But the first of the year he was promoted, with a generous increase. He was screwing up his courage" (here Alec paused and made a strenuous imitation of a person using a screw-driver) "when he received a message from the immigration authorities that changed all his plans."

The wily story-teller stopped as if the narration were complete.

"Do go on," cried some one, impatiently; "that surely isn't the end?"

"What could the immigration authorities want of Mr. Hawarden?" exclaimed another.

After much urging, Alec continued: "When Jack went to the immigration office he found a clean, decent-looking old English woman, who fell upon his neck, and called him her dear nephew, and announced to the officers that he was the living image of her dear dead brother 'Jock.' Now, Jack hasn't a living relative, and never had an aunt, and he tried to explain this to the old lady and to the officers. But she would have none of it, and the officers told him very gruffly that if he didn't intend to support his aunt to say so at once, for in that case the woman would have to be deported. She broke down at this, and cried in the most pitiful way, and, well, it ended with Jack's taking her away with him. He has a room for her in the house where he's boarding, and is doing his best to make her comfortable. He spends most of his evenings with her, and the old creature is as happy as can be."

"Jack's a brick!" exclaimed Kathleen, excitedly.

"It is certainly very noble of him," said the editor, warmly.

"Can't he find the real nephew?" asked the artist.

"No. He has visited every Hawarden in the city, and none has any knowledge of the old lady. He has found the record of the death of a John Hawarden who came from England 20 years ago, and who died shortly after his arrival."

"That was undoubtedly the real nephew," said the girl with the violin; "an old person does not realize the change there would be in a young man. She would expect her nephew to look as he did when he left England, and almost any big, blonde young Englishman would correspond to the picture she has carried in her memory all these years."

"What does Jack intend to do?" asked Miss Fairlie.

"Take care of her as long as she lives—it can't be very long, poor soul, and she hasn't a cent. Jack says Providence has sent him an aunt, and he shall do his duty by her. She admitted a day or two ago that perhaps she might not be his real aunt, but she was his 'negotiable h'aunt.' Of course the poor old lady hasn't the slightest idea of the meaning of 'negotiable,' but under the circumstances—the way she has transferred herself

to Jack—you'll admit it's funny. He's upstairs now asking Mrs. Gray to go to see the old lady."

He turned abruptly to the music teacher, who had remained silent. "What do you think of Jack's Quixotism, Miss Stuart?"

"I—I think Mr. Hawarden is doing right," she said softly, "only he ought—" She stopped, with flushed cheeks and shining eyes, for Jack Hawarden stood in the doorway.

The Englishman's comprehension was quick enough this time to take in the whole situation.

"Alec!" he cried reproachfully, turning to his friend, "you've told!"

"Jack," returned Bruce, spreading out his hands tragically, "I have—all except about the pill-box—and that I'm going to tell now."

"Alec!" protested Jack, desperately, "you're really going too far—you've no right—"

"That's where your ideas of right differ from mine," said Alec, coolly. "I have my instructions from the 'negotiable h'aunt' herself, and I intend to carry them out. You see," he continued, turning to the interested little group, "I've called frequently on the old lady, and she has taken a great fancy to me as the friend of her dear 'Jock.' Last night she gave me this little box, and asked me to give it to the young lady of Jack's choice, with the request that she make use of it in furnishing a home."

He took from his vest pocket a tiny, flat box of tin, hardly more than an inch square, and held it out on the palm of his hand. It was sealed by having a thin strip of paper pasted over the joining of the box and its cover.

"I suppose it never occurred to the old lady that a great, big, hulking leatherhead," lingering lovingly over the words, "like Jack had not dared to tell the young lady—"

No one spoke. Hawarden sat in horrified silence. Finally Kathleen Clyde broke out earnestly: "It's a will, of course, leaving Mr. Hawarden a fine estate in England, and—"

Hawarden pulled himself together and came to Bruce's side, trying to smile.

"There's no one to leave me an estate, Miss Clyde. I really haven't a relative in the world, and my parents were poor people. I think the old lady is not in her right mind. I fancy that what Alec calls a box is really a sort of tin locket, and probably contains a portrait of her lost nephew."

He paused as if to gather courage to go on, and his face paled.

"I'm sorry, you know," he said, slowly, "that Alec has told the story, but there is only one truthful way for me to finish it."

He took the box from Bruce's hand and passed it to Miss Stuart, saying only, "Will you open the box?"

Her beautiful eyes filled with tears, and, with trembling hand, she tried to break the seal. Peace Gray handed her a palette knife, and as the cover flew off they all crowded around.

"It's nothing but a postage stamp," cried Kathleen, indignantly, "the horrid old woman! I'd like to throw it into the fire!"

Miss Stuart dropped the box and ran from the room, and if anyone noticed that Hawarden followed her, no one was silly enough to speak of it.

"Give me that stamp, Kathleen, quick," commanded Miss Fairlie. "The old lady's mind is all right," she added after a careful examination, "and so is her gift. This is a four-cent blue Mauritius of the issue of 1847, and is worth at least seven thousand dollars. The 'negotiable aunt' has made Jack an easily negotiable gift."

Hawarden heard the joyous exclamations that followed Miss Fairlie's announcement and came in, holding Miss Stuart, blushing and embarrassed, by the hand.

"Are you sure, Miss Fairlie?" he asked anxiously.

"Perfectly sure," she answered, with the confidence born of knowledge, "one was sold a few weeks ago in London for \$7,250."

"Er—I thought—" he stammered, "it is only right that our friends here should be the first to know that Edith and I are engaged."

"Two souls with but a single stamp," quoth Alec, with mock solemnity, but the unfeeling remark was lost in a shower of good wishes and congratulations.—Tacoma Ledger.

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