Uncle Dick

by Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932

Published: 1910
in »Yes or No«, London

MR. AGNEW, magnate, gave the children of lllingham, Saxby, Taunton-Newbery, and the villages about a Christmas treat at his „seat“, Illingham Park; the barn and outbuildings were transformed, there were marquees and lemonade, tents and buns, a hired conjurer, and a superior Punch and Judy show, where all the characters of that disreputable drama were respectably arrayed in the newest of clothes.

Mr. Agnew entertained because he was fond of children and because he was a magnate, and a magnate should be associated with some hobby or other. So Mr. Agnew was known throughout the length and breadth of the county as „the children‘s friend“, in which capacity his portrait appeared in the *Saxby Chronicle* on more than one occasion.

The amusing part of this present situation was Uncle Dick.

Not Mr. Agnew‘s Uncle Dick, I hasten to assure you, nor Mary Agnew‘s Uncle Dick. Mr. Agnew‘s only uncle‘s name was, of course, Reginald, and he was popularly supposed to be in heaven.

It was Clara Smith‘s Uncle Dick who was the cause of all the amusement.

Clara Smith‘s father—if you will excuse this genealogical digression—had been coachman to a great lord, and a widower. One day he drove a pair of restive horses—and little Harry Boyne was making interesting experiments with a kite on the high road—the carriage was smashed, and so was one of the restive horses. The great lord picked himself out of the debris of the wrecked brougham, and used shocking language to Coachman Smith, calling him dolt, idiot, ass, ploughboy, and the like. Coachman Smith took not the slightest potice, and offered no apology, because he happened to be lying in a ditch with his neck broken.

Whether or not Coachman Smith went to heaven like Uncle Reginald, is conjectural. He drank beer at the Coach and Horses, and had been known to make bets.

The great lord, who was a mean, stingy great lord, was all for sending the orphan, Clara, aged two years, to the workhouse; for, argued the great lord, what the devil do I pay rates and taxes for?

Despite the indignant protests of his Honourable son, there was little doubt whatever that the noble lord—his name was Fallingham of Fallingham and St. James—would have carried his threat into execution but for the intervention of Uncle Dick.

This providential uncle wrote from London offering to provide the child with a home, and that is how Clara Smith came to be the adopted child of Mrs. Jane Fairbridge, a pleasant widow of Saxby.

A ten-shilling postal order came punctually to the widow every Saturday morning. Toys, dolls, and dolls‘-houses came to Clara at ecstatic intervals.

Once or twice „Uncle Dick“ had run down to see her, and to tell her stories, and these visits were precious memories.

It happened, unfortunately, that he had timed one of these rare excursions at Christmas; so that it synchronised with Mr. Agnew‘s children‘s fête, to which Clara had been invited.

Here was a tragic problem!

To miss Uncle Dick would be unthinkable; to miss the treat unbearable.

Widow Jane Fairbridge suggested a remedy and a solution. Why not, she asked in the innocence of her heart, write a little letter and ask if Uncle Dick could come to the party?

So Clara laboriously wrote and re-wrote, her little pink tongue sticking out, and following the painful contortions of her penmanship.

Mary Agnew smiled, Mr. Agnew laughed. Of course it was unusual. Only the mothers of the children or their female relatives were invited, but he would stretch a point, yes—yes, he would stretch a point.

Mary knew something of Clara‘s history, and her generous heart had rebelled against the cynical indifference of the great lord and the wicked callousness of the great lord‘s son—now the Lord Fallingham of Fallingham himself. For the old great lord had died, and most certainly had gone to heaven, for he drank port, and had never been known to bet in any less sum than a „pony“.

So that Mary welcomed the opportunity of expressing, in a few well-chosen words, her appreciation of Uncle Dick‘s generosity in providing for his little niece so handsomely.

The day of the great fête dawned in quite an ordinary manner, the wintry sun came up over Wylie Copse as usual, and went about its business as if Mr. Agnew had never existed.

None the less, the magnate, who in some subtle fashion took credit alike for natural phenomena and solar activity, pronounced the weather suitable, and, with the coming of two hundred happy little ones, shrill or shy as the fit took them, the fête began.

„This,“ said Mary to herself, „is Uncle Dick.“

He was dressed more decently than she expected for a man of his class. He was better looking, too, than she had anticipated; clean-shaven, with grey, thoughtful eyes, and a thin, tanned face.

„So you are Uncle Dick,“ she greeted him, with the exact tincture of patronage in her voice.

This manner of hers had, under normal circumstances, the effect of hypnotising and confusing the lower classes.

„I‘m Uncle Dick,“ he said with a quiet smile.

„This,“ thought Mary rapidly, „is a forward young man who will have to be kept in his place.“ Aloud she went on, less warmly: „My father, I know, wishes to thank you for your generous care of Clara; we are very much interested in her, and think you have acted splendidly.“

„I think I have,“ said the young man gravely, and Mary gasped at the smugness of the man.

„Naturally,“ she went on, with a touch of hauteur, „you couldn‘t very well do less than you have done for your brother‘s child.“

„Naturally,“ he agreed.

Something in the solid ease of the man annoyed Mary.

„I am afraid you are missing the children‘s games,“ she said coldly.

„I don‘t mind in the least,“ he replied with great earnestness.

„If you find them dull, any one of the gardeners will direct you to the servants‘ hall,“ she went on. „There will be a cold luncheon at one o‘clock, but if you require refresh—“

„Beer?“ he interrupted eagerly. „Can I get beer now?“

She regarded him with icy disfavour.

„It Is rather early, for beer, Mr. Smith, is it not?“ she asked severely.

„I always drink beer after breakfast,“ said the young man with relish. „It‘s a fine old English custom; look at our forefathers—“

She arrested his rhapsody with a raised hand.

„I‘m sorry I haven‘t the time to go into the question,“ she said with increasing coldness.

She voted him a priggish specimen of the educated working man, and avoided him the greater part of the day.

When she again came into contact with him she was with her father.

Uncle Dick was hot and tired, having been initiated into the mysteries of blind man‘s buff.

He was lying on a bundle of straw in a secluded part of the great barn when Mr. Agnew found him.

Mr. Agnew, being a magnate, and, moreover, a member of Parliament for a manufacturing town, had a way with the British workman.

„Ha! there you are, Uncle Dick," he said, as the perspiring young man rose at his approach; „did you get your beer all right?"

Uncle Dick cast if reproachful glance at the girl—a glance which in itself (said Mary) was a gross piece of impertinence.

„Yes, thank you," said Uncle Dick.

„Had much—jolly good tuck out—what?" asked the jocose Mr. Agnew.

„I should hardly call it that," said Uncle Dick thoughtfully, „although it was very satisfying and very nicely cooked."

„Um!" said the magnate dubiously, „I'm afraid you're rather a sybarite, Mr.—er—Smith!" He added beneath his breath, „Ungrateful beggar!"

„Not a bit," said the young man. „But—oh, I beg your pardon. You think I am referring to the lunch at the Hall? I am speaking of the lunch the good Mrs. Fairbridge provided me with. You see I had no idea that you were doing us so well: we—er—parents and guardians, I mean."

Slightly mollified, the magnate was preparing a suitable pronouncement on plain fare for plain people, with a few remarks on the simple life, when a servant brought him a telegram. With a courteous apology (Mr. Agnew's patronage of the working man took the form of treating him as an equal) he opened the buff envelope, read the message with a gathering smile, looked at Uncle Dick benevolently, and said, „Excellent!"

„What is it, father?" asked the girl.

„Lord Tupping," said Mr. Agnew impressively. „Our friend Lord Tupping has telegraphed to say we may expect him." He looked at Uncle Dick with an arch smile. „I'll be bound that Uncle Dick is a Radical, a Socialist, *Down with the House of Lords!* and that sort of thing, eh?" He beamed jovially. „It will be a lesson for you." He wagged his forefinger at the proletarian. „You shall see the House of Lords in its most—"

Mary did not seem to share her father's enthusiasm.

„Indeed," thought Uncle Dick, „she appeared to be annoyed."

She interrupted her parent.

„Why on earth is he coming?" she asked in a tone of dismay.

„My dear," said Mr. Agnew, magnate, severely, „Lord Tupping is not only a personal friend, and a fellow director, but I have reasons to hope—"

Seeing the flush on the girl's face, Uncle Dick wisely turned to stare at the decorations of the barn.

He rather fancied he heard a tiny wrangle, just such a wrangle as a magnate would permit himself to engage in within hearing of a third party—and such a third party as Uncle Dick.

As is very well known to all those who mix in good society, there are two classes of wrangles—those the servants may hear, and those they may not hear.

The patient servitor may listen unchecked whilst my lord damns the tough chicken, but when it comes to „Mildred, I have had a bill from your milliner this

morning—now what the—“ it is a case of „Jane, go out, and shut the door after you.“

Uncle Dick was wondering in which class the present disagreement lay, when the sound of retreating footsteps caused him to look up from his artistic criticism, to find himself alone with the girl.

She was rather pink, and rather angry, and Uncle Dick was a little tactless, because he laughed softly but heartily.

„I think you are a most abominably rude man,“ she flamed, and would have gone, but the protesting young man, thoroughly alarmed, barred her way.

„Please, please don‘t go,“ he Implored. „I was only laughing at my thoughts.“

He was so earnest that she hesitated.

„Poor old Uncle Dick,“ he wheedled. „Don‘t be hard on Uncle Dick. It‘s Tuppy,“ he went on, with outrageous familiarity; „it‘s the thought of Tuppy that amuses me. Poor dear, he does so dislike Christmas festivities.“

She felt that it was high time that she asserted herself.

„Mr. Smith,“ she said gravely, „I hardly think you realise how exceptionally impertinent you are. I pass over your unmannerly request for beer—that is a natural requirement of your class. I will not dwell upon the familiarity that was implied in your—your look when my father referred to your refreshment, but this reference to our guest is one that I cannot overlook.“

„Poor Uncle Dick!“ he murmured.

A voice hailed her; her father was coming into the barn, and behind him walked a young man upon whose round, good-natured face was the impression of boredom,

„Here‘s Lord Tupping,“ said Mr. Agnew boisterously. „Mary, here‘s—oh, here you are.“

Mary held out her hand.

„How de do, Miss Agnew; your governor wants me to play skip-in-the-ring, at my time of life! I say—“ He stared at Uncle Dick. „Why, it‘s the Fallin‘ bird!“ he chortled, and Mr. Agnew looked round for the curiously-named fowl.

Lord Tupping seized the hand of Uncle Dick.

„Fancy, old feller,“ he begged, „skip-in-the-ring at my time of life! Go an‘ play it, old friend; be a true Fallin‘ham of Fallin‘ham, an‘ step into the breach.“

Mr. Agnew was fairly bewildered, but before Mary‘s accusing gaze Uncle Dick dropped his eyes.

„Lord Fallingham,“ she said sternly, „you are neglecting your niece.“

* * * * *

„It was very nice of you, of course,“ she said later.

The little guests had all departed, and they sat in the drawing-room, drinking grown-ups‘ tea.

„I am sorry I said such horrid things about your father.“

„It was his idea,“ lied the young man eagerly; „it was part of the dear old man‘s pose, unbending severity, and that sort of thing, and when the child was left an orphan he suggested that a relation should be found, so he wrote through my lawyers.“

What the old lord had said was: „Why the devil hasn‘t the little brat got relations—the improvidence of the working classes is too appalling!“

„But I think,“ reproved Mary, „you ought to have told us. Shall you tell the child?“

„No,“ said the young man thoughtfully. „I’ll still be Uncle Dick. It sounds nice,“ he mused. „Uncle Dick—and Aunt Mary.“

The girl changed the subject a little incoherently.