

# The Coming of Uncle Byron

John Holman drew an envelope from his pocket and looked across the table at his wife. "A small surprise, my dear," he said.

"Not an unpleasant one?" John smiled a little ruefully. "It depends on the point of view." He slowly produced a letter.

"We are to have a visitor," he said. "A visitor?" she echoed.

"Yes. He says he'll come if it's convenient."

"What did you answer him?" "Nothing. He's on his way here now. He's coming in person to find out whether it's convenient."

"Who is he, John?"

"He's my great-uncle. I'd forgotten all about him, but he hadn't forgotten me. He's my mother's Uncle By, her youngest uncle."

"Uncle By?"

"Short for Byron. Uncle Byron Train."

"And what is he?"

"He neglects to say. Writes that he's been knocking around a good deal. Sort of rolling stone, I fancy. Poor, too, no doubt. Wants to renew his acquaintance with his dear nephew, and incidentally with his dear niece—if there is one."

"And where is he to sleep, John?"

"I don't think there is any necessity for worrying about that until we make up our minds whether we want him or not. He may be quite impossible."

"If he comes here, John, we are not going to turn him from the door. And I feel sure he wouldn't have written that letter if he wasn't fit to come. We'll keep him one night, anyway, John."

"You're all right, Clara," cried the young husband. "And if he doesn't prove to be too long he can sleep in the hall bedroom. And if he is too long we will have to give him our room and camp down in the hall bedroom ourselves."

"Read the letter, John."

"Sure. It isn't much to look at, but the spelling is fair and the writer seems to understand how to make himself understood. Here goes: "My dear nephew John. You may have some difficulty in recalling me, but I am your great-uncle, Byron Train, the youngest of your great-grandfather's sons. I want to come and see you, John, and if you have a wife I want to see her, too. I've been knocking around the earth for a good many years, and I want to have a little rest and get acquainted with my surviving relatives. If you can't keep me over night, John, tell me so frankly. I'm your great-uncle, and on your dear mother's account—she and I were playmates in our youthful days—I want to know you. I'll give you a call, anyway, and then you can let me know whether it is convenient or not for me to stay. So expect me most any time. Goodbye until I see you, and my regards to Mrs. John—if there is one."

Mrs. John smiled.

"Not much of an index to his character," she said. "Nor does it contain any picture of the man. We will have to see him before we pass judgment."

She was interrupted by a quick blast from the speaking tube.

"Eh?" said John Holman. "There's the man now."

"Good gracious!" cried Mrs. John as she reached for a wandering lock of hair.

John looked around.

"Is he welcome?"

"He is."

John picked up the tube.

"A gentleman to see Mr. Holman?"

John's wife cast a hurried glance about the room.

"If he's your letter reached us first," she said.

"There is something in that," John admitted.

A muffled creak and rattle from the hallway announced the stopping of the elevator. A moment later there was a light knock at the door.

"Sit down and try to look unconcerned," whispered John. Then he opened the door and extended his hand.

But the man in the doorway failed to notice this friendly overture. He was a tall man, very erect, with a white mustache and a somewhat flushed countenance. He was irreproachably dressed and in his hand he bore a silk hat.

"I beg your pardon," he said, with a slight inclination of his head. "I am looking for Mr. Holman, Mr. John Holman."

"I am Mr. Holman," said John. "Will you come in?"

The old man accepted the invitation.

"I am Mr. Cuthbert Marsh," he said. "My wife, Mr. Marsh."

The tall man bowed a little stiffly.

"I am sorry to trouble you," he said, "but my errand will be a brief one. Thank you, I will not take a chair." He hesitated a moment. "I have called to meet a guest of yours, Mr. Byron Train."

"Yes, is he here?"

"No," John replied.

"Pardon me, but have you seen him?"

"No. I have never seen him."

"Excuse my insistence. You know of his whereabouts?"

"Nothing whatever."

The tall man again hesitated.

"I am very sorry to have bothered you," he said, "I was led to believe

that Mr. Train was here. Good evening, madam. Good evening, sir." And the tall man bowed graciously through the doorway.

John closed the door and put his back against it.

"What do you think of that?" he asked.

"I think we are highly honored," Mrs. John replied. "I only hope that our neighbors across the hall saw the aristocratic Mr. Marsh when he joggled our portals."

"Be serious, Clara. What does that old blueblood want of our great-uncle?"

"You don't suppose, John, that he's done anything?"

"Well, nothing bad enough to call Cuthbert Marsh to the fifth story of an apartment house on a rainy night. They both suddenly started. "It was only the squeak of the speaking tube. John hurried to it.

"Well?" he called. Then he dropped the tube.

"I'm wanted on the house phone," he said.

"You don't suppose the coffee is on fire?"

"They wouldn't bother to tell me of it." He looked around in the doorway. "I'll bet it's some new development in the Uncle Byron mystery."

It was fully twenty minutes later when he returned to his room. There was confusion on the wires and he had trouble in finding out who had called him. Before he could leave the office he was called again.

But the time had passed rapidly with Mrs. John. Scarcely had the elevator bearing her husband gone down when a light rap at the door drew her attention.

An elderly man, confronted her on the threshold. He was a man of less than medium height, quite gray and his wrinkled face had a weather-beaten look. He was very plainly dressed, the string tie about his old style collar was out of place and the soft hat he held by the brim was such the worse for wear.

"Then there is a Mr. John," was his somewhat startling greeting.

Mrs. John suddenly laughed.

"Come in, Uncle Byron," she said, and drew him into the room and took his hat and shabby little bag.

"Uncle Byron, eh? That sounds good." He stared at Mrs. John. "Am I welcome?"

"Certainly, Uncle Byron."

"Talked it over with John, eh?"

"Yes."

"He agrees with you?"

"About you? Yes."

"Better think it over. I may want to stay."

"Stay as long as you like."

"Honest?"

Mrs. John suddenly laughed.

"Haven't I an honest face?"

"You have a very nice face, my dear. And a very nice voice. I hope John deserves you."

Mrs. John's face flushed.

"He thinks he does."

"That's different. How's John?"

"Quite well. He will be back in a few moments. Take this easy chair, Uncle Byron."

"I will. Shoo little place."

"Rather too snug. It's the best we could afford. She suddenly laughed. "I'm glad you are not taller, Uncle Byron."

"Eh, why?"

"Because we are going to put you into the hall bedroom. It's our only guest chamber."

"Rather close quarters, eh? But that's all right. I'm used to camping down anywhere. Is there a window where I can get lots of air?"

"Yes."

"Fine. How's John doing?"

"Fairly well."

"Takes good care of you, eh?"

Mrs. John was much amused.

"Do I look like an abused woman?"

"Not a bit of it. I wouldn't ask for a better recommendation for John. And you are quite sure I'm welcome?"

"Very sure."

"I'm not much to look at. You'll be ashamed of me."

"That's unkind. I hope you'll let me have a couple of dollars, my dear?"

She didn't hesitate, but opened a table drawer and drew out a little purse. He watched her closely.

"Here it is, Uncle Byron."

"I wouldn't want John to know about this," he said as he took the money.

"Then you mustn't tell him."

"Good. I like you still better, my dear. I can see that we are going to get along amazingly well. And I haven't said a word about paying back the money."

Mrs. John nodded at him.

"I'm not worrying about that." She paused with a little laugh. "I think you borrowed it just to test me?"

The old man laughed too.

"You're as sharp as tacks, my dear. But you'll never see this money again. Rest assured of that."

"Very well, Uncle Byron. Say no more about it. There, I mustn't forget to tell you that you had a caller this evening."

"A caller? Who?"

"Mr. Cuthbert Marsh."

"Oh, yes. Looking for me, is he?"

"Good."

"He seemed quite anxious to find you."

"Very likely. He wasn't home when I called. I saw Mrs. Marsh. Very impressive woman. Kept me waiting too long in her grand parlor. I told her that Cuthbert was the son of my half-brother Robert. She wasn't bit overcome by the information. It would show me to that little hall bedroom." "W. E. Wood in Cleveland Plain Dealer."

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