

# An Undergraduate's Aunt

By F. Anstey

Francis Flushington belonged to a small college, and by becoming a member conferred upon it one of the few distinctions it could boast—the possession of the very bashfullest man in the whole university.

But his college did not treat him with any excess of adulation on that account, and, probably from a prudent fear of rubbing the bloom off his modesty, allowed him to blush unseen—which was indeed the condition in which he preferred to blush.

He felt himself distressed in the presence of his fellow men, by a dearth of ideas and a difficulty in knowing which way to look, that made him happiest when he had fastened his outer door, and secured himself from all possibility of intrusion—although this was almost an unnecessary precaution on his part, for nobody ever thought of coming to see Flushington.

In appearance he was a man of middle height, with a long neck and a large head, which gave him the air of being shorter than he really was; he had little weak eyes which were always blinking, a nose and mouth of no particular shape, and hair of no definite colour, which he wore long—not because he thought it becoming, but because he hated having to talk to his hairdresser.

He had a timid deprecating manner, due to the consciousness that he was an uninteresting anomaly, and he certainly was as impervious to the ordinary influences of his surroundings as any modern undergraduate could well be.

Flushington had never particularly wanted to be sent to Cambridge, and when he was there he did not enjoy it, and had not the faintest hope of distinguishing himself in anything; he lived a colourless, aimless sort of life in his little sloping rooms under the roof where he read every morning from nine till two with a superstitious regularity, even when his books failed to convey any ideas whatever to his brain, which was not a remarkably powerful organ.

If the afternoon was fine, he generally sought out his one friend, who was a shade less shy than himself, and they went a monosyllabic walk together (for of course Flushington did not row, or take up athletics in any form); if it was wet, he read the papers and magazines at the Union, and in the evenings after hail, he studied 'general literature'—a graceful periphrasis for novels—or laboriously picked out a sonata or a nocturne upon his piano, a habit which had not tended to increase his popularity.

Fortunately for Flushington, he had no gyp, or his life would have been a burden to him, and with his bedmaker he was rather a favourite, as a 'gentleman what gave no trouble'—which meant that when he observed his sherry sinking like the water in a lock when the sluices are up, he was too delicate to refer to the phenomenon in any way.

One afternoon when Flushington was engaged over his modest luncheon of bread and butter, potted meat, and lemonade, he suddenly became aware of a sound of unusual voices and a strange flutter of female dresses on the winding stone staircase outside—and was instantly overcome with a cold dread.

Now, although there were certainly ladies coming upstairs, there was no reason for alarm; they were probably friends of the man who kept opposite, and was always having his people up. But Flushington had one of those odd presentiments, so familiar to nervous persons, that something unpleasant was at hand; he could not imagine who these ladies might be, but he knew instinctively that they were coming to *him!*

If he could only be sure that his outer oak was safely latched! He rose from his chair with wild ideas of rushing to see, of retreating to his bedroom, and hiding under the bed until they had gone.

Too late! the dresses were rustling now in his very passage; there was a pause evidently before his inner door, a few faint and smothered laughs, some little feminine coughs, then —two taps.

Flushington stood still for a moment, feeling like a caged animal; he had thoughts, even then, of concealment—was there time to get under the sofa? No, it would be too dreadful if the visitors, whoever they were, were to discover him in so unusual a situation.

So he ran back to his chair and sat down before crying ‘Come in’ in a faint voice. He *did* wish he had been reading anything but the work of M. Zola, which was propped up in front of him, but there was no time to put it away.

Your mild man often has a taste for seeing the less reputable side of life in a safe and second-hand way, and Flushington would toil manfully through the most realistic descriptions without turning a hair; now and then he looked out a word in the dictionary, and when it was not to be found there—and it generally wasn’t—he had a sense almost of injury. But there was a strong fascination for him in experiencing the sensation of a kind of intellectual orgie, for he knew enough of the language to be aware that the incidents frequently bordered on the improper, even while it was not exactly clear in what the impropriety consisted.

As he said ‘Come in,’ the door opened, and his heart seemed to stop, and all the blood in it rushed violently up to his head, as a large lady came sweeping in, her face rippling with a broad smile of affection.

She horrified Flushington, who knew nobody with the smallest claim to smile at him so expansively as that, and he drank lemonade to conceal his confusion.

‘You don’t know me, my dear Frank,’ she said easily; ‘why of course you don’t; how should you? Well, I’m (for goodness sake, my dear boy, don’t look so dreadfully frightened, I don’t want to eat you!) I’m your aunt—your Aunt Amelia, you know me now—from Australia, you know!’

This was a severe shock to Flushington, who had not even known he possessed such a relative anywhere; all he could say just then was, ‘Oh, are you?’ which he felt at the time was not quite the welcome to give an aunt who had come all the way from the Antipodes.

‘Yes, that I am!’ she said cheerily, ‘but that’s not all. I’ve another surprise for you —the dear girls would insist upon coming up too, to see their grand college cousin; they’re just outside. I’ll call them in, shall I?’

And in another second Flushington’s small room was overrun by a horde of female relatives, while he could only look on and gasp.

They were pretty girls too, most of them, but that only frightened him more; he did not mind plain women half so much; some of them looked bright and clever as well, and a combination of beauty and intellect always reduced him to a condition of hopeless imbecility.

He had never forgotten one occasion on which he had been captured and introduced to a charming young lady from Newnham, and all he could do was to back feebly into a corner, murmuring ‘Thank you’ repeatedly.

He showed himself to scarcely more advantage now, as his aunt proceeded to single out one girl after another. ‘We needn’t have any formal nonsense between cousins,’ she said; ‘you know all their names already, I dare say. This is Milly, and that’s Jane; and here’s Flora, and Kitty, and Margaret, and this is my little Thomasina, keeping close to mamma, as usual.’

Poor Flushington ducked blindly in the various directions at the mention of each name, and then collectively to all; he had not sufficient presence of mind to offer them chairs, or cake, or anything, and besides, there was not nearly enough for that multitude.

Meanwhile his aunt had spread herself comfortably out in his only arm-chair, and was untying her bonnet-strings, while she beamed at him until he was ready to expire with embarrassment. 'I *do* think, Frankie dear,' she observed at last, that when an old auntie all the way from Australia takes the trouble to come and see you like this, the least—the very *least* you could do would be to give her one little kiss.'

She seemed so hurt by the omission, that Flushington dared not refuse; he staggered up and kissed her somewhere upon her face—after which he did not know which way to look, so terribly afraid was he that the same ceremony might have to be gone through with all the cousins, and he could not have survived that.

Happily for him, however, they did not appear to expect it, and he balanced a chair on its hind legs and, resting one knee upon it, waited for them to begin a conversation, for he could not think of a single apposite remark himself.

His aunt came to his rescue. 'You don't ask after your Uncle Samuel—have you forgotten all the beetles and things he used to send you?' she said reprovingly.

'No,' said Flushington, to whom Uncle Samuel was another revelation. 'How is the beetle—I mean, how is Uncle Samuel? Quite well, I hope?'

'Only tolerably so, Frank, thank you; as well as could be expected after his loss.'

'I didn't hear of that,' said Flushington, catching at this conversational rope in despair. 'Was it—did he lose much?'

'I was not referring to a money loss,' she said, and her glance was stony for the a moment; 'I was (as I think you might have guessed) referring to the death of your cousin John.'

And Flushington, who had begun to feel his first agonies abating, had a terrible relapse at this unhappy mistake; he stammered something about it being very sad indeed, and then, wondering why no one had ever kept him better posted as to his relations, he resolved that he would not betray his ignorance by any further inquiries.

But his aunt was evidently wounded afresh. 'I ought to have known,' she said, and shook her head pathetically; 'they soon forget us when we leave the old country—and yet I did think, too, my own sister's son would remember his cousin's death! Well, well, my loves, we must teach him to know us better now we have the opportunity. Frankie dear, the girls and I expect you to take us about everywhere and show us all the sights; or what's the use of having a nephew at Cambridge University, you know.'

Flushington had a horrible mental vision of himself careering all over Cambridge at the head of a long procession of female relatives, a fearful prospect for so shy a man. 'Shall you be here long?' he asked.

'Oh, only a week or so; we're at the "Bull," very near you; and so we can always be popping in on you. And now, Frankie, my boy, will you think your aunt a very bold beggar if she asks you to give us a little something to eat? We wouldn't wait for lunch, the dear children were so impatient, and we're all *ravenous*! We all thought, the girls and I (didn't you, dears?) that it would be such fun lunching with a real college student in his own room.'

'Oh,' protested Flushington, 'I assure you there's nothing so extraordinary in it, and—and the fact is, I'm afraid there's very little for you to eat, and the kitchens and the buttery are closed by this time.' He said this at a venture, for he felt quite unequal to facing the college cook and ordering lunch from that tremendous personage—he would far rather order it from his tutor even.

‘But,’ he added, touched by the little cry of disappointment which the girls made in spite of themselves, ‘if you don’t mind potted ham—there’s some left in the bottom of this tin, and there’s some bread and an inch of butter, and a little marmalade and a few milk biscuits and there was some sherry this morning!’

His cousins declared merrily that they were so hungry they would enjoy anything, and so they sat round the table and poor Flushington served out meagre rations to them of all the provisions he could hunt up, even to his figs and his French plums. It was like a shipwreck, he thought drearily. There was not nearly enough to go round, and they lunched with evident disillusionment, thinking that the college luxury of which they had heard so much had been sadly exaggerated.

During the meal the aunt began to study Flushington’s features with affectionate interest. ‘There’s a strong look of poor dear Simon about him when he smiles,’ she said, looking at him through her gold double-glasses. ‘There, did you catch it, girls? Just his mother’s profile! Turn your face a leetle more to the window; I want to get the light on your nose, Frankie; *now* don’t you see the likeness to your aunt’s portrait at Gumtree Creek, girls?’

And Flushington had to sit still with all the girls’ charming eyes fixed critically upon his crimson countenance, until he would have given worlds to be able to slide down under the table and evade them, but of course he was obliged to remain above.

‘He’s got dear Caroline’s nose!’ the aunt announced triumphantly, and the cousins were agreed that he certainly had Caroline’s nose—which made him feel vaguely that he ought at least to offer to return it.

Presently the youngest and prettiest of the girls whispered to her mother, who laughed indulgently. ‘Why, you baby,’ she said, ‘what do you think this silly child wants me to ask you, Frankie? She says she would so like to see how you look in your college robes and that odd four-cornered hat you all wear. Will you put them on, just to please her?’

And he had to put them on and walk slowly up and down the room in his cap and gown, feeling all the time that he was making a dismal display of himself, and that the girls were plainly disappointed, for they admitted that somehow they had fancied the academical costume would have been more becoming.

After this came a hotly-sustained catechism upon his studies, his amusements, his friends, and his mode of life generally, and the aunt—who by this time felt the potted ham beginning to disagree with her—seemed to be unfavourably impressed by the answers she obtained.

This was particularly the case when to the question ‘what church he attended,’ he replied that he attended none, as he was always regular at chapel: for the aunt was disappointed to find her nephew a Dissenter, and said as much; while Flushington, though he saw the misunderstanding, was far too shy and too miserable to explain it.

The cousins by this time were clustered together, whispering and laughing over little private jokes, and he, after the manner of sensitive men, of course concluded they were laughing at *him*, and perhaps on this occasion he was not mistaken.

He stood by the fireplace, growing hotter and hotter every second, inwardly cursing his whole race, and wishing that his father had been a foundling. What would he have to do next? take all his people out for a walk. He trembled at the idea. He would have to pass through the court with them, under the eyes of the men who were loitering about the grass plots before going down to the boats; through the open window he could hear their voices, and the clash they made as they fenced with walking-sticks.

As he stood there, dumb and miserable, he heard another tap at his door—a feeble one this time.

‘Why,’ cried his aunt, ‘that must be poor old Sophy at last—you may not remember old Sophy, Frankie; you were quite a baby when she came out to us; but she remembers you, and begged so hard to be allowed to come and see you. Don’t keep her standing outside. Come in, Sophy; it’s quite right; Master Frankie is here!’

And at this a very old person in a black bonnet came in, and was overcome by emotion at the first sight of Flushington. ‘To think,’ she quavered, ‘to think as my dim old eyes should live to see the child I’ve dandled times and again on my lap growed out into a college gentleman!’ Whereupon she hugged Flushington respectfully, and wept copiously upon his shoulder, which made him almost cataleptic.

But as she grew calmer, she became more critical, even confessing a certain feeling of disappointment with Flushington. He had not filled out, she declared, so fine as he’d promised to fill out. And when she began to drag up reminiscences of his early youth, asking if he recollected how he wouldn’t be washed unless they first put his little spotted wooden horse on the washstand, and how they had to bribe him with a penny trumpet to take his castor oil, and how fond he used to be of senna tea, Flushington felt that he must seem more of a fool than ever!

This was quite bad enough, but at last the girls began to be restless, and there being no efforts made to entertain them, amused themselves by exploring their cousin’s rooms and exclaiming at everything they saw; admiring his pipes and his umbrella rack, his buffalo horns and his tin heraldic shields, and his quaint wooden kettle-holder, until they came round to his French novel, and, as they were healthy-minded Colonial girls, with a limited knowledge of Parisian literature, they pounced upon it directly, and wanted Flushington to tell them what it was all about.

‘Yes, Frankie, tell us,’ the aunt struck in as he faltered; ‘I’m always glad for the girls to know of any nice foreign works, as they’ve really improved wonderfully in their French lately.’

There are French novels, no doubt, of which it would be practicable and pleasant to give a general idea to one’s aunt, but they are not numerous, and this particular book did not chance to be one of them.

So this demand threw him into a cold perspiration; he had not presence of mind to prevaricate or invent, and he would probably have committed himself in some deplorable manner, if just at that moment there had not happened to come another tap at the door, or rather a sharp rattle, as if with the end of something wooden.

Flushington’s head swam with horror at this third interruption; he was prepared for anything now—another aunt, say from Greenland’s icy mountains, or India’s coral strand, with a fresh relay of female cousins, or a staff of aged family retainers who had washed him in early infancy: he sat there cowering.

But when the door opened, a tall, fair, good-looking young fellow in a boating-straw and flannels, and carrying a tennis racket, burst impulsively in. ‘Oh, I say,’ he began, ‘you don’t happen to have heard or seen anything of—oh, beg pardon, didn’t see, you know,’ he added, as he noticed the extraordinary fact that Flushington had people up.

‘Oh—er—let me introduce you,’ said Flushington, with a vague notion that this was the right thing to do; ‘Mr. Lushington—Mrs. (no, I don’t know her name)—my aunt . . . my cousins!’

The young man, who had just been about to retire, bowed and stared with sudden surprise. ‘Do you know,’ he said slowly in an undertone to the other, ‘do you know that I can’t help fancying there’s some mistake—are you sure that’s not my aunt you’ve got hold of there?’

‘Oh,’ whispered Flushington, catching at this unexpected hope, ‘do you really think so? She seems so certain she belongs to me!’

‘Well,’ said the new-corner, ‘I only know I have an aunt and cousins I’ve never seen who were coming up some time this week—do these ladies happen to come from the Colonies, by the way?’

‘Yes, yes!’ cried Flushington, eagerly; ‘it’s all right, they belong to you; and, I say, *do* take them away; I can’t bear it any longer!’

‘Now, now, what’s this whispering, Frankie?’ cried the aunt; ‘not very polite, I must say!’

‘He says,’ explained Flushington, ‘he says it’s all a mistake, and—and you’re not my aunt at all!’

‘Oh, indeed, does he?’ she replied, drawing herself together with dignity; ‘and may I ask who is this gentleman who knows so much about our family—I didn’t catch the name?’

‘My name is Lushington—Frank Lushington,’ he said.

‘Then—who are you?’ she demanded, turning upon the unfortunate owner of the rooms; ‘answer me, I insist upon it!’

‘Me?’ he stammered, ‘I’m Francis Flushington. I—I’m very sorry—but I can’t help it!’

‘Why—why—then you’re no nephew of *mine*, sir!’ cried the aunt.

‘Thank you very much,’ said Flushington, with positive gratitude.

‘But,’ she said, ‘I want to know why I have been allowed to deceive myself in this way. Perhaps, sir, you will kindly explain?’

‘What’s the good of asking *me*?’ protested Flushington; ‘I haven’t an idea why!’

‘I think I see,’ put in her genuine nephew; ‘you see, there isn’t much light on the staircase outside, and you must have taken the “Flushington” over his oak to be “F. Lushington,” and gone straight in, you know. They told me at the lodge that some ladies had been asking for me, and so when I didn’t find you in my rooms, I thought I’d look in here on the chance—and here you all are, eh?’

But the aunt was annoyed to find that she had been pouring out all her pent-up affection over a perfect stranger, and had eaten his lunch into the bargain. She almost feared she had put herself in a slightly ridiculous position, and this, of course, made her feel very angry with Flushington.

‘Yes, yes, yes!’ she said excitedly, ‘that’s all very well; but why did he deliberately encourage me in my mistake?’

‘How was I to know it was a mistake?’ pleaded Flushington. ‘You told me you were my aunt from Australia; for all I know Australia may be overrun with my aunts. I supposed you knew best.’

‘But you asked affectionately after Samuel,’ she persisted; ‘you must have had some object in humouring my mistake.’

‘You told me to ask after him, and I did,’ said Flushington; ‘what else could I do?’

No, sir,’ she said, rising in her wrath; ‘it was a most ungentlemanly and heartless practical joke on your part, and—and I shall not listen to further excuses.’

‘Oh, good gracious!’ Flushington almost whimpered; ‘a practical joke! *me*, oh, it really is *too* bad!’

‘My dear aunt,’ Lushington assured her, ‘he’s quite incapable of such a thing; it’s a mistake on both sides; he wouldn’t wish to intercept another fellow’s aunt.’

‘I wouldn’t do such a thing for worlds!’ protested Flushington, sincerely enough; he would not have robbed a fellow creature of a single relation of the remotest degree; and as for carrying off

an aunt and a complete set of female cousins, he would have blushed (and, in fact, did blush) at the bare suspicion.

The cousins themselves had been laughing and whispering together all this time, regarding their new relation with shy admiration, very different from the manner in which they had looked at poor Flushington; the old nurse, too, was overjoyed at the exchange, and now declared that from the minute she set eyes on Flushington, she had felt something inside tell her that her Master Frank would never have turned out so undersized as *him*!

‘Well,’ said the aunt, mollified at last, ‘you must forgive us for having disturbed you like this, Mr. a—Flushington’ (the unfortunate man murmured that he did not mind it *now*); ‘and now, Frank, my boy, I should like the girls to see *your* rooms.

‘Come along then,’ said he. ‘Will you let me give you something to eat?—I’ll run down and see what they can let me have; and perhaps you’ll kindly help me to lay the cloth; I never can lay the thing straight myself and my old bedmaker’s out of the way, as usual.’

The girls looked dubiously at one another—they were frightfully hungry still; at last the eldest, out of pure consideration for Flushington’s feelings, said, ‘Thank you very much, Cousin Frank—but your friend has kindly given us some lunch already.’

‘Oh!’ he said, ‘has he though? That’s really uncommonly good of you, old chap.’

But Flushington’s modesty did not allow him to accept undeserved gratitude. ‘I say,’ he whispered, taking the other aside, ‘I gave them what I could, but I’m afraid it—it wasn’t much of a lunch.’

Lushington made a mental note that he would repeat his invitation when he had got his cousins outside. ‘Well, look here,’ he said, ‘will you come and help me to row the ladies up to Byron’s Pool— say in an hour from this—and we’ll all come back and have a little dinner in my rooms, eh?’

‘Yes, Mr. Flushington, do—do come,’ the girls all entreated him, ‘just to show you forgive us for taking possession of you like this.’

But Flushington wriggled out of it somehow. He couldn’t come, he said uncomfortably; he had an engagement. He had nothing of the kind, but he felt that he had had quite enough female society for one day.

They did not press him, and he was heartily glad when the last of his temporary relations had filed out of his little room, leaving him reminiscences of a terrible half-hour which caused him to be extremely careful for months after not to lunch without ascertaining previously that his outer door was securely sported. But never again did a solitary hungry aunt invade his solitude.