

My Awful Aunts*

*The Thrilling Mis-Adventures Which Grew Out of a
Practical Joke*

By Sam Davis

A FEW weeks before the meeting of the Christian Endeavor Society in San Francisco last fall I was honored with an invitation from two maiden aunts, residing in Hartford, Conn., to act as their chaperon in San Francisco during the convention.

It had been many years since I had met my aunts in the land of steady habits, and my recollection of them were based mainly upon the occasion of my visit to their home when a boy. I could not recall either of them with a kindly feeling, as they had made me attend church when I was in no mood for religion, and the eldest had spanked me soundly with her formidable slipper for some sort of childish imperitence the exact nature of which I have forgotten.

Still, when I got their letter, a feeling of forgiveness came over me and bridged the years which had elapsed since my childhood days. Next I began to take a sort of pride in the fact that I was to entertain my aunts in the big city. I knew what intensely respectable people they were, and I determined to show them how intensely respectable I could be when occasion demanded the sacrifice.

They were to spend a week or so with my mother in Lower California, and then I was to take them in charge and guide them about San Francisco.

I replied in a feeling letter, and told them how happy I would be to attend such a notable gathering in their company, and soon began to experience a lively anticipation of pleasure as I contemplated the event.

But this feeling of pleasure presently gave way to a sense of the enormous responsibility I was about to undertake.

I had begun life with considerable Christianity in my vicinity, my father having been a Congregational clergyman of the most orthodox sort, and a man whose daily walk in life, I feel proud to say, stood above reproach,—in distinct and monumental variance to my own, which at times showed a sad forgetfulness of the early teachings of my religious sire.

I was trained at a church school, and had studied for the ministry, but the college authorities had not held out much hope to my father that I would shine as a teacher of the Gospel, and so I had drifted by slow stages into journalism.

I had spent six or seven years in San Francisco as a reporter on the daily papers, and this occupation had brought me in contact with a most varied class of associates. I was quite intimate with the leading clergymen of the city, and I had frequently taken lunch with the Episcopal bishop at his residence. I was on the best of terms with the Salvation Army people, and I recall with pride that I was once invited by them to make a talk at the Rescue Home. The Sisters of Charity always had a pleasant smile for me on the street, and the ladies of the leading temperance organizations of the city frequently called on me to smite the cohorts of the liquor traffic in the city with my righteous indignation and fearless pen.

I cite these things as evidence of the fact that I was on a level with the better element and in touch with ultra-respectable society.

Of course, on the other hand, the exacting requirements of my profession brought me in contact with some rather queer people.

My term of service on the "late watch" of a morning paper had given me quite a choice list of criminal acquaintances. I had once interviewed a pickpocket known in police circles as the Wharf Rat, and he had insisted in keeping up the acquaintance after his release from the clutches of the law, on a technicality. I found him quite a useful man to know, for when it became necessary for me to go down through Barbary Coast at night after an item, I could thread the mazes of vice and crime with impunity when piloted by the pickpocket. Often, when in the midst of the worst band of thieves and cut-throats in the city, a signal from my companion of the deft fingers would render my life and pocketbook as safe as if I were in the Chamber of Commerce reporting one of its sessions.

I learned to acquire quite a liking for this strange character, and I also noted the fact that, whenever I loaned him money, he invariably returned it on the day and date specified, although I often felt pretty certain that he had to explore some one else's pocket beside his own to meet the maturity of the obligation.

On one occasion he told me that he had been compelled to relieve one of my reportorial associates of ten dollars in order to pay me what he had borrowed the day before, and when he mentioned the name of his victim I did not counsel him to return it, for the man whose pocket he had picked had owed me that amount for nearly a year.

When I told him this, he replied, with perfect seriousness:—

"Give me a list of the people who owe you money, and I will see that you get every cent of it."

Then, again, I feel bound to admit that the pickpocket was by no means the worst of my acquaintances. I knew all the pugilists in the city, the cock and dog fighters, the ward heelers, ballot-box stuffers, grafters, and the miscellaneous rag-tag and bobtail following of rascals who hang on the ragged edge of politics in San Francisco.

I did not associate with these men from choice, but was continuously thrown in their way by the city editor of the journal on which I was employed as an all-around reporter. He always insisted that I had the qualities that made me congenial to the toughs, and could get more out of them than any other man on the staff.

With the theatrical profession I was also on a familiar footing, was always welcome behind the scenes, and seldom overlooked in those after-theater suppers which sometimes follow a successful initial performance. In short, I had, to the best of my ability, lived up to one precept inculcated by my Biblical training—that of being all things to all men.

Such was the Jekyll and Hyde character who was to guide two unworldly dames through the mazes of their first sojourn in the metropolis of the Pacific coast.

They arrived late Saturday afternoon, and I met them at the Oakland Ferry, and conducted them to the Occidental Hotel, where I had already secured apartments. I chose this particular caravansery because it was noted for the quiet and retired character of its guests. The Episcopal bishop of California roomed there, and the place was assiduously avoided by the turf element, the Rainey "push," and the deleterious crowd of shady politicians who trained with Buckley's "lambs." When, therefore, my aunts and I occupied adjoining rooms at the Occidental, I felt a just pride in their moral surroundings as well as my own.

As good luck would have it, no sooner were we seated in the dining room for our first meal, than there appeared

on the scene the Reverend Doctor Caulding, who had been my tutor at college. He was now the honored rector of St. Stephen's Church, and was accompanied by the bishop of the diocese. They greeted me warmly, for the clergy were not indifferent to a good notice in a secular paper, and needed no urging to join us at dinner, and afterwards to adjourn with us to my aunts' parlor, where we spent an evening in profitable discourse. Meantime, convinced that this was only the forerunner of events equally felicitous, I had found time to indite a note to my friend Billy Blinn, who, like myself, walked with the godly for the sake of public show, but who, also like myself, was a sad moral hypocrite, and fonder of the world, the flesh, and the devil than the straight path of rectitude. This note which I dispatched that evening by special messenger read as follows:—

Dear Billy:—I have to ask you a special favor. I have at present two aunts in this city who are domiciled with me at the Occidental. They hail from Hartford, Conn., and come of strict Puritan stock. Now, I know that you have a pew in the First Congregational Church, and as your wife—the only member of your family who ever occupies it—is away, I want the loan of it for next Sunday, so that I can take my aunts to church, and give them the sweet impression that I am a regular attendant. You see the point? I enclose my card, and wish that you would kindly fasten it near the hymn-book rack in such a way as to indicate that the pew is my own.

Carry out the scheme in good shape, and I will do as much for you some day when you get in another tight hole and need my services. I know where the pew is, as your wife lugged me in there one morning, about a year ago, when she caught me on the way to Harbor View to a Sunday clambake. Then I thought I should never get over the agony of those two hours, but now I bless your wife for having

diverted my irreverent steps. Now don't fail me.

Yours as ever,

CHARLIE.

On the following morning I informed my aunts that, knowing their religious convictions, I had planned that we should attend the service at the First Congregational Church, and when they began making arrangements for an early start, I told them carelessly that they need not hurry, as I had a pew there which I maintained the year around.

The look of pleasure that beamed from their faces at this statement was enough to quiet any qualms of conscience.

The service had just begun when we walked majestically up the aisle, headed by the sexton—whose palm I had quietly crossed with a dollar—and, amid the soft strains of the most entrancing devotional music I had ever heard, we floated into the pew.

As we entered I peered anxiously to see whether Billy had followed out my instruction. A casual glance showed me that he had, and I breathed an inward hallelujah. But no sooner had I seated myself at the head of the pew, with the air of a confirmed church-goer, than a nearer view of the card sent a warm and cold wave of perspiration breaking over me alternately. I was even seized with a vain desire to tear that fatal piece of paste-board from its place before my aunts should have finished their devotions. Billy, always an incorrigible joker, had planned this affair with diabolical ingenuity. He had figured that I would send my aunts into the pew ahead; and to the right of the hymn-book rack, beyond my reach, just where it would meet the eyes of my two relatives, he had fastened securely with small brass-headed tacks a card that bore in neatly executed lettering the following inscription:—

ROBERT FITZSIMMONS,

Champion of the World.

CHARLES JOHNSON

Well, the music rose and swelled, the congregation prayed and sang by turns, the preacher exhorted the worshippers; and my aunts rose, and sat, and sang, just as decorously as though every movement didn't give them a new view of that awful combination of the name of their sister's son with that of the champion pugilist of the world. But their furtive but meaning glances toward that fateful card, and their far-away air of shocked propriety were worse than reproaches. I even longed to have them call me names or in some way break the ice of their dignity. But throughout the service they never deigned to look at me except when Aunt Fannie inquired in a freezing tone whether the other lessee of the pew would arrive,—a question which the opportune giving out of a hymn saved me from answering.

Nor did they cease to hold themselves with the mutely reproachful aloofness of two Christian martyrs when, the service ended, we joined the procession in the aisle. With that dignified but independent gait that marks the New England spinster, they made their way to the door, never once casting a glance at their relative, who loitered in the rear like a guilty schoolboy.

That was why, when at the door a counter current met us, my revered relatives were carried on into the street, and I was left stranded on the stone steps. That was why, also, from my point of vantage I saw a curiously familiar figure apparently fall against my eldest aunt, and recover himself only by seizing the skirt of her coat. It was the Wharf Rat, and in his manoeuvre he had adroitly picked my Aunt Fannie's pocket!

At the risk of crippling various citizens for life, I managed to push through the crowd and, stretching over, to touch the Rat on the shoulder just as he was about to effect a retreat. He turned, with the look a hare might have cast on a hound; but as he saw me his face underwent a kinetoscopelike series of changes, ranging from surprised recognition to knowing acquies-

cence as I signified by a meaning look that the ladies were with me.

In a second he had placed the purse in my side coat pocket, and was sliding out of the crowd—as I hoped, unobserved. But some fearful intuition sent my aunt's hand into her pocket just as the Rat and I parted company, and she turned exactly in time to find me exchanging impressive farewells with a gentleman of unprepossessing, not to say suspicious personality.

Whether she connected the disappearance of her purse with the appearance of one whom I then and there eulogized as a pillar of the Congregational Church, and a teacher in its Sunday school, I did not attempt to decide. I simply took it as a matter of course that the purse had been left in the church, and after absenting myself for a proper period of time in that ill-fated edifice, returned waving the lost article with an air of well-simulated triumph.

But if my respected relatives dragged "Charlie's strange friend" into the conversation once during the afternoon they did a dozen times. When finally they took up my other friend, the champion of the world, it was a positive relief. After we had attended church again in the evening—at St. Stephen's this time, in order, as I explained, to give my aunts a broad and liberal view of the San Francisco clergy—I pleaded a headache—and had it, too—and went to bed early, assuring them that we would devote the next day to sight-seeing. It was in vain that they remonstrated that I was a busy man, that they must not intrude on my time.

In a devoted touring about town I saw my chance to reconstruct my crumbling reputation, and I insisted that my time was their time while they stayed.

But once more I had reckoned without the unforeseen; for at the breakfast table the next morning I received a telegram that left me no choice but to take the 9 o'clock train to a place seventy miles inland. "On a matter of life and death," the message read, and as the name signed was that of an old friend

and host, there was nothing for me to do but to break the matter to my relatives. Break, though, is hardly the term to describe the conveying of information that my aunts received with that lofty self-containedness as characteristic of the New England spinster as it is of the caste of Vere de Vere. They repeated that they hadn't expected to intrude on my time, insisted that it was the mission of Christian Endeavorers to carve out their own paths, asked me scornfully if I supposed they'd lived in the land of superfluous women all their days to need an escort now. Finally they produced in triumph a map of San Francisco, with the places of interest all neatly picked with colored ink—which they'd prepared before they left the East. By means of this document I laid out a route for them to the Cliff House, advised them to spend the day there sniffing the breezes of the Pacific, and departed, promising to meet them at the hotel that evening. As a parting joke I suggested that if any of my friends arrived in my absence they might do the honors.

It took me over two hours to reach, via a branch road, the rural station that is the jumping-off place for my friend's ranch. It took an hour more, after I'd satisfied myself that no carriage was coming to meet me, to plod three uphill miles to Skyland Ranch, there to be greeted with the paralyzing news that my friend was in San Francisco, and hadn't been heard of for a fortnight.

But it took only a few minutes of hard thinking after my arrival to come to the decision that there was a game in progress and that I was it.

As to the afternoon that I spent at Skyland Ranch—there was no train back until 6.30 o'clock—I needn't dwell upon that. In times past I had enjoyed some of the happiest hours of my life fishing and hunting in that very place; but then I was not at the wrong end of the fishline.

It is enough to say that it was half past 8 that night when I walked into the hotel and humbly asked the clerk for my key. He gave it to me with some news.

"Your aunts made a short stay, didn't they?" he inquired casually. "I see they went off on the 6.30 train.

"Say, they had lots of callers while you were away."

I didn't stop to hear anything more, but rushed up to the apartments that had lately sheltered my respected relatives. As the clerk had said, they were gone, but on the center table, placed where it would attract my attention, was a note in which they expressed regret at their sudden departure, and stated that they would write from Los Angeles. As I laid the letter wearily back on the table another document caught my eye. It was written in a familiar handwriting on a sheet of hotel paper, and read as follows:

THE DAY'S DOINGS OF CHARLES JOHNSON'S AUNTS

9.30 A. M. Curtain rises with preparation of aunts to depart on their expedition.

9.55 A. M. Appearance of bellboy, bringing cards of Misses Kitty Clyde and Annie Murphy to see Mr. Johnson.

10-10.30 A. M. Reception of the Misses Clyde and Murphy in their gayest war paint and feathers, and presenting as introduction this advertisement in the morning Press:

"WANTED. CHORUS GIRLS.—Fifty good-looking chorus girls desiring positions may hear of same by applying in person today, between 10 A. M. and 5 P. M., to Charles Johnson, Occidental Hotel."

10.30-11 A. M. Spent in silent meditation.

11 A. M. Aunts send bellboy for time-tables of street car routes.

11.10 A. M. Aunts receive call from Mr. Timothy O'Brien, dog fancier, who carries a large market basket containing a bull pup which he says he has brought in response to a letter from Mr. Johnson.

11.35 A. M. More chorus girls. Not received.

11.40 A. M. Aunts send downstairs for two cups of malted milk.

11.50 A. M. Aunts are seen in street attire about to emerge from their room,

but are met at the door by a boy with message marked urgent. As the envelope is unsealed they read the enclosure, which invites "Charlie" to witness a little sparring match at Point Lobos that afternoon, and are seen to retire to their room, dismissing boy with verbal answer that Mr. Johnson is out of town for the day.

12 P.M. A large, new consignment of chorus girls send up their cards, but are not received.

12-12.15 P. M. Aunts not heard from.

12.15-1.15 P. M. Aunts lunch in their room.

1.15 P. M. More chorus girls. Not admitted.

1.30 P. M. Aunts once more come from room in street dress, but this time are stopped at the elevator by a mysterious person in loud checks, who wishes to see Mr. Johnson at once on very important private business. On being escorted to Mr. Johnson's apartment he represents himself as a turfman, who in return for past favors is going to give his friend Charlie a tip on a coming event.

2 P. M. Chorus girls. Turned down.

2.15-2.45 P. M. Aunts again detained — by a mysterious Chinaman, come to bring back Mr. Johnson's opium pipe.

2.45 P. M. Aunts send for a pot of tea.

3-4 P. M. Aunts, once more sallying out for their expedition, receive call from a person of Semitic feature, who produces a promissory note, signed Charles Johnson, which he insists must be settled before sundown. Finally he departs, muttering that he will not be put off by Charlie's women folks.

4.15 P. M. Aunts ring for hotel clerk, and interview him concerning trains to Los Angeles.

4.30 P. M. Peter Haley, the star Irish comedian, calls for Mr. Johnson, and being received by aunts, leaves pass to private box at the Gaiety Comique for "Charlie and his lady friends."

5 P. M. Aunts order cab for 6.30 train to Los Angeles.

5-5.45 P. M. Packing and writing note.

5.45-6 P. M. Lunch in room.

6 P. M. Aunts walk majestically from hotel to cab. As they are starting the hook-nosed person reappears and, running along on the curbstone, shouts that Charlie's friend must pay up on the due bill if they wish to keep Charlie out of the cooler.

Curtain to slow music.

As I laid down this diabolical document, what sounded like a suppressed chuckle drew my attention to the doorway. Standing there in an attitude of brazen effrontery, his head cocked saucily on one side, his thumbs stuck into the armholes of his vest, stood Billy Blinn.

"Yes," he returned, to my accusing glance, "I did it. Sent the telegram, made out the program, engaged the performers. Thought you'd like a day off from entertaining your aunts, and I knew I could furnish them with a little excitement and put them dead on to some of the ways of their nephew. But to see that no harm came to the wanderers from home, I hired the room opposite and, leaving the door ajar, saw to it that everything went off as per schedule."

Now it has always been my boast not only that I could appreciate a practical joke, but that I could pay one off every time; but as I stood there helpless, utterly confounded, all desire or hope to get even was crushed out of me. I felt as though I was an ir retrievable outcast from home and family forever—that the wires were down between me and all my kin.

I still felt that way when, twenty-four hours later, I recognized my Aunt Fannie's handwriting on an envelope post-marked Los Angeles.

And this is what I read:

Dear Nephew:—You will pardon us for leaving so unceremoniously, but circumstances over which we had no control seemed to point to our immediate departure. We have told your mother, who is daily growing more feeble, that we left because we were un-

accustomed to the foggy weather, and because we preferred her company to the excitement of a great city. We also explained to her that you have remained on account of a pressing engagement with Bishop Williams to visit him for a week and write up the Christian Endeavor Conference, under his special instructions.

Trusting that our hasty departure will not be misconstrued as a lack of appreciation of your hospitality, and with thanks for all your attentions, we remain

Your affectionate aunts,
FANNIE and ELLEN.

As I finished this letter, I am not ashamed to confess that I pressed it to my lips, reflecting remorsefully on the sweet kindness with which those dear creatures, once the terror of my boyhood days, had overlooked all of my seeming irregularities, and at home had

covered the knots and cracks in my character with the veneering of charity, in order to give my aged mother an additional good opinion of her son.

With a pang of contrition, I remembered how for years I had referred to them as "my awful aunts." Now they appeared in a new and glorified light, crowning their enforced flight from the city with full forgiveness, and casting the warm mantle of charity over all my moral delinquencies.

It is needless to say that, in the light of this revelation, I at once sat down and wrote them a letter, in which I assured them that they were "perfect bricks," and all the term implied.

To further show that I appreciate their good offices in my behalf, I have turned over a new leaf—to the sorrow of the city editor, who remarks that I am fast losing my prestige with the tough element in the city.



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