

Niblo George

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Sit down! Sit down! Stop right where you are! The game isn't over by a long way.

I've got a few aces up my sleeve yet, and don't you forget it!

No wonder I'm feeling tiptop! Fact is, I fancy I am feeling to-night a little like the colored brother who got religion, and filled with enthusiasm, or something more of a liquid character, expressed to the doubting parson his desire to imitate Elijah, and go to glory in a chariot of fire.

"Yes," said the parson, "I reckon, my friend, you'se just want to get acclimated-like before reachin' de end ob your journey."

Now how did that reverend gentleman know?

Why, only through circumstantial evidence, for you see he had unfortunately once been the proud owner of a flock of fowls that did not have sense enough to roost high.

However, I'm not sighing just yet to go to glory.

This gay metropolis pleases me some.

But, talking of circumstantial evidence, I know one man who would never consent to hang a suspected murderer on the strength of it.

You won't blame him, either, when you hear what his

experience in that line has I been.

He's a doctor by profession.

His learning has always been in the direction of mind troubles, and consequently I wasn't surprised when I met him the other day to learn that he is now in full charge of one of the biggest institutions in the State, for the care of the insane.

Now, it happened that recently in making a tour of inspection the doctor had occasion to enter an unoccupied cell in the ward reserved for incurables.

As he did so the iron door clicked shut, making him a prisoner in his own asylum.

While he was standing there, rattling the grating and calling for an attendant, a party of visitors came strolling his way.

"I beg your pardon," said the doctor suavely to the first man, "but I'm locked in."

"Poor fellow," replied the visitor, "so I perceive."

"I wish you would be good enough to have some one let me out," the doctor continued.

By this time a second visitor appeared.

"See," said the first, "this fellow looks quite intelligent, and asks to be released, as though he really expected it."

"Gentlemen, I see your error. I am not crazy, I assure you. I locked myself in here by accident. Really – I – why – " and the doctor felt himself smiling in the most blankly imbecile manner.

"Look at him now!" cried the second visitor. "Did you ever see a more hopelessly idiotic expression on the face of man?"

This was really too much for human nature to endure.

"See here, you scoundrels," cried the doctor, excitedly, "call an attendant or I'll have you both in here for life. I'm the superintendent."

"Come away," said one of the strangers, quickly, "we musn't get the poor devil worked up. He may do himself harm," and they passed on down the corridor.

The doctor spent a morning in that cell, and now he says he has more sympathy for his patients.

He assured me that if I ever took a notion to drop in and see him, he would do all he could to make my stay comfortable.

I wonder what he meant, and if that was a mere formula used to calm each new guest at his hotel.

Long experience has made the doctor quite an artist in that line.

Speaking of artists, there's Craigie, who has a studio on Fifth Avenue. Craigie is a friend of mine.

He paints atrocious pictures, but somehow seems to make a living out of the business.

Sometimes I go to see him, when business is bad, and I'm wondering where the money's coming from to pay the month's bill.

Between you and myself, the sight of all those daubs on the walls of his studio, which he considers masterpieces, always makes me feel better.

Misery likes company, and they certainly do look tough.

Recently, while I was lounging there in his Oriental corner, old Dr. Gregg dropped in.

I expected some fun, because the doctor has quite a caustic tongue, you know, and don't mind giving a fellow a rap.

Craigie understood why I winked at him, and I saw blood in his eye while he continued to paint.

The doctor walked around, grunting and making an occasional slurring remark that in another man might have been looked on as an insult.

But we all knew Gregg.

Finally he turned to the artist.

"I say, Craigie, these things which you exhibit on your walls, seeking a purchaser in vain, I suppose may be called failures?"

"Well," remarked the artist, "perhaps you hit the nail on the head in a commercial sense, doctor. You see, men in your profession have the advantage over us poor devils of painters, for while we are compelled to exhibit our failures on the wall, yours are safely planted underground out of sight."

When I met Craigie, after he had spent a summer abroad, he delighted me with his sketches of the many interesting things he had seen.

Among other subjects he had a picture of Monte Carlo.

It is certainly a lovely heaven on earth and I said as much. Craigie grinned at me.

"All the same," said he, "it has appeared to be a regular hades for many a poor devil."

"That's so – when a fellow has lost all his money," I admitted.

"Why," said he, "I myself experienced the tortures of the Inquisition in that room you see yonder."

"What are those affairs in sight?" I asked.

"I played roulette there, and was broken at the wheel."

Although I never went through a similar experience I could sympathize with Craigie.

Leaving out the wheel part of it, his condition has usually been a constitutional failing of mine, and was that morning when I called at the office of the Sunday paper.

Now, if there is anything I dislike it's to see an editor show his temper.

Some of them are really too provoking.

So when I happened in and found the man who runs the comic supplement frothing at the mouth I tried to soothe him.

"Christopher Columbus!" I remarked, pleasantly, after my usual way, "you seem to be out of humor this morning."

"That's all right," he snarled; "you can't sell me any."

What a husband that bear must be; not domestic, after my own fashion, for I dearly love to do errands for my wife.

Of course I sometimes make blunders in shopping, but then experience teaches one, and in time I hope to be able to hold my own with the tricky tradesmen who look upon me as a soft mark.

When the mistake is really atrocious I get a good calling down, and sometimes have to resort to strategy in order to save the day.

The lady of the house was indignant this evening when I came

home from my weary round of the newspaper offices.

"The joke is on you, George," she said.

I wondered which one, for the day had not been productive of much long green.

"What's it all about?" I asked.

"Why, that mattress I told you to buy."

"Well, I bought it all right," I protested, feebly.

"Yes, and instead of sending home a mattress of live goose feathers, you purchased one of excelsior."

"How can you blame me, my dear," I said, "when I assure you it had a placard fastened to it which read 'Marked Down'? That furniture man is a prevaricator, that's all."

Those sharks who sell furniture must have some connection with fishermen, to judge from the thundering big lies they tell.

Now, I am fond of going fishing myself.

Perhaps I take a deeper interest in the whooping big yarns spun around the blazing camp fire by a set of jolly sportsmen than in the taking of mighty strings of fish.

Still, I delight to lure the festive trout out of the wet.

I've met some fellows who like old-fashioned methods, and succeed where the rest with their expensive tackle fail.

One day I had a remarkable run of luck, and that night as we sat around the camp fire, I took occasion to say that my success was due to the superior kind of flies I had used.

"You may flatter yourself on the string you've brought in to-day," said an old fisherman who had joined our party, "but let

me tell you, mister, that I saw a Digger Indian catch more fish in one hour in this stream than you've landed all day with your fine flies."

"What bait did he use?" I asked.

"Live grasshoppers," replied the old man; "but he didn't impale them. From his head he would stoically pluck a hair, and with it bind the struggling insect to the hook. Almost upon the instant that this bait struck the water a fish would leap for it. After landing him the Indian would calmly repeat the performance of snatching a hair from his head and affixing a fresh grasshopper to the hook.

"After the Indian had landed in quick succession a mighty string of salmon trout he suddenly stopped. I called to him to go on with the exciting sport, but he merely smiled grimly and pointed significantly to his head."

"What was the matter with his head?" I asked.

"He had plucked it bald," replied the old man.

There have been some occasions when I've felt myself as though I would like to pluck my hair out, though it is generally on account of some stupidity on my part.

And if you don't mind I will tell you right here, how.

I put my foot in it the other night.

I was so provoked at my stupidity that I came near retiring to a nunnery, or taking a solemn vow not to speak a single word for a week.

Now, I haven't an unusually large mouth, and yet when I

related my unfortunate break to Charlie Parsons, the cashier of our bank, he was cruel enough to hint that perhaps some people never could open their mouth without putting their foot in it.

I call that decidedly uncharitable, don't you?

But about this stupid remark of mine.

It was a big reception you know, a mixed company, where one was apt to meet any sort of an old star.

Some famous chaps were there, too.

I honored it with my presence.

At the table I chanced to sit next to a learned professor, head of a famous college. And during the meal some fiendish spirit induced me to turn toward him and say:

"Professor, can you tell me who that uncommonly ugly lady is, opposite to you?"

He looked at me with a wicked smile.

"Sir," he said, "she chances to be my wife."

Of course I was overwhelmed with confusion, and to crawl out of the hole I did what any other person would have done under the same circumstances.

"Pardon me, professor, but I mean the lady on the right."

"And that, sir, is my daughter," he said, solemnly.

Then I flew the coop.

When I was strolling along the Bowery this evening I saw a man come jumping out of a museum that boasts of more freaks than Barnum's show.

"Where's the nearest doctor?" he cried, and from his

frightened appearance I felt positive the human snake had gulped down the bearded lady, or the living skeleton with the ossified bones wanted a tough joint pulled, or had got stuck in the wastepipe of the sink.

"What's the matter – anything wrong?" I asked.

"Wrong," he yelled, "I should say there was. Why, the sword swallower has got a pin down his gullet! Show me a doctor, quick!"

A little further along I saw an Irishman being run out of a clothing store by an irate Jew, who certainly looked as though he couldn't take a joke.

The Celt was laughing when I caught up with him.

"What's up?" I asked.

He pointed to the sign that read:

"Great Slaughter in Clothing."

"Sure," said he, "the gossoon was mad clane through because I wint in and asked to see one av thim kilt suits," and he laughed so hard that he choked half to death over a set of false teeth.

Speaking of teeth, that was pretty tough on Snyder when his little son and heir took to giving away family secrets so recklessly.

It seems that Snyder had been treating himself to a new set of teeth.

The youngster thought the event of sufficient importance to be related to the minister when he called.

And quite naturally the good dominie, much amused, asked what would become of the old ones.

"Oh, I suppose," replied little James, with a look of resignation; "they'll cut 'em down and make me wear 'em."

Snyder's wife is a good general.

She was riding in the car with her little daughter Edith, when the conductor, thinking perhaps of a half fare, asked:

"How old are you, little girl?"

"You must ask ma," she immediately replied, "'cause she always takes care of my age in a street car."

Now that was pretty cute, don't you think so?

And my youngest came up smiling recently.

Really, I am worried about that little chap, because I never know whether he is going to be a fool or a humorist.

Perhaps it doesn't matter much.

On this occasion he had had his first ride in an automobile.

A fellow around the corner bought one recently, and as he wants to get in my good graces for some reason or other, he asked Harold to go through the park with him.

That evening I heard my wife, who is very circumspect in all such matters of etiquette, say:

"Harold, did you thank Mr. Gaycrank for that lovely ride he gave you?"

Harold was reading but did not answer.

So she asked him again.

I knew he heard from the way he looked up, but was surprised that he made no reply.

"Harold!" she spoke sharply, now.

"Yes, ma," he replied.

"Did you thank Mr. Gaycrank for taking you riding? Why don't you answer me?"

"I did thank him, ma," whispered Harold, "but he told me not to mention it."

Harold was studying geography.

I saw something puzzled him.

"What's the knotty problem?" I asked him.

"They call the Mississippi the 'Father of waters,'" he said, "and I think it ought to be the 'Mother of waters.'"

"Correct, my son," I said, admiringly.

"Is Missouri the daughter of Mississippi then?" he asked.

I'm afraid I have much to answer for.

And think of it, that boy only nine years old.

What will become of us when he breaks loose at man's estate?

Just this morning he astonished me by declaring the dictionary was only an old joke book after all.

I frowned upon such levity.

The dictionary I look upon as an old and valued friend, and one deserving of the utmost respect.

It has pulled me out of many a difficulty.

"Nonsense, I'll give you a dime for every bona fide joke you show me in the dictionary," I said.

"All right, here's one already."

He pointed out the word "question."

Reading further I found this:

"To pop the question – see pop."

Well, I never begrudged that dime a bit. And my respect for that solemn old conglomeration of knowledge is now mingled with hilarity.

Since I'm in on the subject of young ones, let me tell you that I've always endeavored to impress my children with the fact that I take an interest in all they do.

That is, I want them to come to me with all their troubles, and gain by my checkered experience.

Sort of older brother confidence game, you know.

Once in a while I'm rather afraid they take advantage of my easy-going character.

There's Aleck, about sixteen, and almost ready to go to college – what d'ye think he said to me yesterday.

Catching me in a particularly good frame of mind, when a big check had just come in, he said in a serious tone:

"Will you advise me, pop?"

"Certainly – only too delighted, my son. Now, what is it you want my opinion upon?" I said, feeling particularly pleased because of this confidence.

"Well, you see, I wanted to know whether I had better strike you for five dollars or for ten?"

There's no use in telling you how much he got, for who could resist such a clever hold up?

Oh, by the way, did I ever tell you about Jackman?

Among my friends I suppose he is by long odds the most

consequential – why, he has the strut of a Lord High Admiral in a comic opera.

That is, when before the public.

Secretly, I believe he leads a sort of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde life, and that the power behind the throne is in reality his wife, a little woman with a will of her own.

This was proven to my mind the day I was out with him at his country seat.

His coachman came up, looking red in the face, as though out of humor.

"I think I must leave you, Mr. Jackman," said he.

"Why, what's wrong, Thomas?"

"I don't like to complain, sir, but really I can't stand the missus."

"Oh, is that it – she's too strict, eh?" laughed Jackman.

"Yes, sir, she keeps forgetting that I can throw up my job at any time, and bosses me around just as if I was you, sir."

I thought it good manners to get behind the stable before I allowed myself to laugh.

But Thomas went all the same.

Jackman told me Thomas had recently got religion and was about the longest-winded petitioner at prayer he ever knew. But I had been South among the darkies, and remembered one old fellow, at least, who could give him points and still win out.

This was old Uncle Mose, who looked solemn enough for a funeral when I asked him how things were going.

"I declar'," he said, "I got ter be mo' keerful in future – I sho' has!"

"What's the trouble now?" I asked.

"Well, suh, I whirled in en prayed fer rain dese two hours en a half, en bless de Lawd, dey come along a regular deluge, dat mighty nigh drown de bes' mule I had. Prov'dence am so partial ter me, dat I'se got ter be mo' keerful about overdoin' things, you see."

Uncle Mose had a son who, being a barber, puts on considerable style at times.

I'd seen him look like a howling swell.

One day, down at the post office, while waiting for the mail to be distributed, I saw this Adolphus saunter in.

Another young gamecock rubbed elbows with him.

"Hullo, 'Dolphus, you'se ain't been a wearin' dem fine patent-leather shoes ob yours no mo'. What am de matter?" I heard him ask.

"Kain't – de patent done run out," said Adolphus.

That fellow was quite good looking, and in fact I can remember quite enjoying him after a fashion.

I don't believe I've ever been called a handsome man myself.

That is, in a beauty show, the prizes wouldn't be rushing in my direction.

And yet for years I did cherish the fond belief that my face had the stamp of honesty and rectitude upon it.

Alas! I'm not so positive now.

To tell the plain, unvarnished truth, I begin to fear this business of talking on humorous subjects is beginning to leave its effect upon my frank countenance.

This is how I know.

I had engaged to do a stunt in a certain town down among the North Carolina pines.

Come to find out, there was no way of getting there except by means of a stagecoach, just as in olden days.

I was the only passenger, you see.

There had been considerable talk about a rascal who had robbed right and left, so that I was not feeling very good.

Besides, I didn't like the looks of that driver, for if ever an evil-browed mountaineer had taken to coaching, he was the man.

He kept looking back at me every little while, and somehow I got the notion into my head that he was figuring whether it would pay to make way with me.

There was an awful lonely stretch of woods between Athens and Saulsboro, and when we struck it I tell you a cold chill pranced up and down my spinal column, for it was just an ideal spot for murder.

Suddenly the driver drew in his horses.

My knees began to knock together, and my teeth rattled just like those Turkish castanets you've seen dancers use.

The worst had come, and this black-browed villain was about to finish me then and there.

I tried to get to my feet.

"Hold on there!" growled the driver.

His voice trembled, I thought, with rage.

It was the most terrible moment of my life.

"Who are ye?" he next demanded.

I told him my name.

"What ye going to Athens fur?" he asked.

I hastened to inform him that I was the funny man who had been engaged to appear, my object being to let him know I might be worth more coming away from Athens than when bound there.

He put out his big hand, quickly.

I expected to see a big pistol in it, but no, it was empty.

"How glad I am, mister, to hear that," he said. "I've been shaking in my boots all this yer time thinkin' ye was that land pirate an' meant to murder me, 'cause they say he's even an uglier cuss than me. Shake hands, mister. I declar ye've taken a mighty big load off'n my mind."

I shook hands with the delighted fellow, but lacked the nerve to tell him how badly scared I had been.

But I'm not so proud of my honest looks nowadays.

Whenever I hear a good story in connection with some person of note, I always enjoy it more if I happen to know the party.

They told me about Richard Harding Davis the other night at the club, which amused me not a little.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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