

My crazy Aunt



By Julian Durham.

I, Adolphus Montgomery Vane, am, or rather was, the unfortunate possessor of an absolutely crazy Aunt! With her began and ended

all my hopes of affluence in this world, and to her alone I owe the bitterest disappointment which has crowned my life. Was she my evil genius, or only the maddest relative with which a man was ever cursed? Ah well! Peace to her bones! She can do me no further injury now. Her sardonic smile, her snarling laugh can haunt me no longer, for she and I played at a game of chance long years ago, and I—lost. There it all ended, and the magnificent aspirations of my stupendous mind, the anticipatory delights of fame and fortune which encircled me with their roseate hues, all were wrecked in an instant, shattered and sunk in the *malstrom* of an aged relative's folly.

Dear, dear, me! As I count the seasons which have come and gone since that cold November afternoon, when I stood at my Aunt's bedside for the last time, and watched the grey hue of death steal slowly over her features, I realize that I am forty-nine; but I do not look it. Oh no! Thanks to a few touches (very slight touches) of modern art, I can pass any day for twenty-nine, and then, too, I comfort myself with the truism that until a man reaches the age of fifty, he is distinctly on the upward slope of life, and not only looks, but is in reality, just as young as he feels.

Now as it happens I really am rather a good-looking fellow, only now my Aunt never could see it; but then she was a very disagreeable sort of person, in fact one of those peculiar individuals who are calculated to inspire one naturally with a shuddering aversion. She was queer, very queer, and the worst part of it was that she invariably made other people suffer by her eccentricities.

Alas! I was destined to be her favorite victim, and at the time of which I am writing, being only about twenty-two, was just at that particular age when a man feels supremely sensitive to ridicule, and most reasonably objects to spending much of his time in the society of an aged spinster "crank"; but my cracked relative, it must be remembered, was enormously rich, and I, presumably her heir; herein lay the secret of my meek submission to her exacting tyranny.

One day she invited me (I should rather say commanded me), to visit her for a few weeks, and rack my brains as I would I could find no reasonable excuse for declining her invitation. All my college duties were over for the summer, and during the next two months there was no one who had any claim whatsoever upon my society, so accordingly I arrived one balmy July afternoon at Halstead Hall, dutifully pecked at my Aunt's withered cheek, and swallowed a cup of beastly cold tea without any sugar in it (I always take four lumps), fell over the poodle, trod on the tail of Aunt Jemima's gown, and wound up by winking at the pretty maid who took my valise from me in the passage; but being surprised in this last act by my relative, who fixed her cold green eye upon me in stern disapproval, I fled upstairs to my room, and took refuge in the strictest solitude.

Did I say solitude? Ah, no, I was in perhaps interesting but very stuffy (or should I say stuffed) society. Animals to the right of me, animals to the left of me. Ye gods and little fishes! It was a perfect menagerie. My Aunt be it known had a mania for natural history, and had filled her house with specimens of rare and curious birds

and beasts; some were stuffed, some mere skeletons, but all were so lifelike in their attitudes, that I received many an unpleasant shock from them. In the hall was a *Hipogriffe* (I do not exactly know what a *Hipogriffe* is, but my Aunt seemed to think a great deal of this particular skeleton), and I distinctly remember upon one memorable occasion putting a pipe between its decayed teeth, and a tam-o'-shanter upon its mediæval brow; really it looked quite rakish when thus adorned; but I could not bring Aunt Jemima to a proper sense of the ludicrous, where this pet of hers was concerned, and consequently I fell into dire disgrace for trifling with the appearance of the precious *Hipogriffe*.

There were some very peculiar looking specimens in this museum, many of them real freaks of nature. One alligator looked as if it had sprained its ankles, whilst a rattlesnake had been so unevenly stuffed that it presented a very curious snarled appearance. I fancy that I now know exactly how Noah must have felt in the Ark. I wonder if he knows how deep is my sympathy for him. I really have the fellow-feeling for that man which makes us "wonderous kind."

The days passed, and somehow I managed in the most miraculous way to steer clear of all dangers. I admired the new acquisitions amongst the pets, and even worked up a fine show of interest in Gobo the monkey (a live one), which shared the post of prime favorite with a large green and grey parrot; but such is the perversity of human nature, that after two weeks of peaceful harmony, the spirit of mischief awoke within me, and oh dear! it makes the tears run down my cheeks



with laughter even now, as I think of all that happened.

One afternoon my Aunt announced her intention of going for a drive, and asked me to accompany her.

"Dear Aunt," I replied, "I fear I must deny myself the pleasure, having some most important letters to write." This I said with such an air of cheerful candor, that the poor old soul swallowed it wholesale, and drove off to the neighboring town, leaving me free to follow my own devices.

Strolling around the garden, and enjoying (as only a lazy man can), the sense of utter idleness, together with a cigarette, my eyes suddenly fell on Gobo, who was so tame that he was allowed to roam about the grounds unchained. In an instant an idea came to me, and without waiting to consider the consequences of my reckless escapade, I caught hold of Master Gobo and carried him quietly up to my Aunt's *boudoir*. The room was empty, and no maid being anywhere in sight, my operations began. First of all I fastened around the monkey's waist a green and white checked skirt, over this I pinned a plaid shawl, which my Aunt was particularly fond of, about the animals' shoulders; then having ransacked another cup-

board, and found a bonnet, a gorgeous erection of fruit and flowers which on Gobo's head proved a veritable crown to my labors, I took the half terrified animal in my arms and descended to the drawing-room, there placing him in Aunt Jemima's special easy chair.

The effect was superb—a few finishing touches and it would be sublime. Snatching up her spectacles I placed them upon his nose, pushed a foot-stool under the edge of the flowing skirt, and then stepped back a few paces to admire my *chef d'œuvre*.



Clang! clang! went the bell. Footsteps approached the door. Horrors of horrors! It was my Aunt who had returned fully an hour before her usual time, and now stood like an avenging fury brandishing her parasol at my devoted head.

"Dear Aunt," I gasped, and then the ludicrous side of the situation struck me so forcibly that I threw myself into the nearest chair, and laughed till I could laugh no longer. The likeness between Gobo in his present attire, and Aunt Jemima was inimitable.

"Abandoned young man! My precious Gobo," screamed the enraged old lady, "leave my presence sir, how dare you to play such pranks as these?"

I fled from the room as if pursued by all the fiends of Hades, and finished up my hilarious outburst in the back kitchen garden, where I passed the remainder of the day serenely amidst the gooseberry bushes.

This was really the last time that I ever willingly played off a practical joke on any member of the menagerie, for it certainly was not my fault that on arising one morning from my bed, I discovered therein the mangled remains of a tame lizard, on the top of which I had calmly slumbered all night. If the lizard chose to insist on sleeping with me in a bed which was only guaranteed to hold one, well—it was his own lookout if he got the worst of it, and paid for his temerity with his life.

A subdued but perpetual warfare was constantly raging betwixt me and the parrot, a hasty tempered sort of fowl, with a large stock of sarcastic speeches always on hand. Occasionally when the bird used a big, big d— (by the way, why do parrots invariably swear like troopers?) the grim horror depicted on my Aunt's face would plunge me into such convulsions of silent mirth, that once or twice I nearly strangled myself in my wild endeavors to preserve an unconcerned demeanor; but save on these rare occasions when the parrot caused me this mild diversion, I simply hated, loathed, nay absolutely abominated that fiendish bird.

It pecked at my fingers, made derisive remarks to me, and screamed with rage whenever I appeared upon the scene, but perhaps this was because I gave it a rasin full of cayenne pepper, for it is strange how very vindictive parrots can be. Sometimes my Aunt would smile a sort of smile which reminded me of funerals with a dash of vinegar, her face wearing the expression of one who is passing through a field of rotting cabbage, and in snarling tones she would say: "Adolphus, I beg you will respect the aged bird." Once I forgot that it was *apropos* of the parrot, and now of herself she made this remark, and in all innocence replied: "Yes dear Aunt, I shall always respect you in everything," and strange to say she was offended somehow at this, most unreasonably so I thought.

They tell me I was a sad dog in those days, a very sad dog—perhaps I was; but I am even a sadder and a wiser one to-day, for now I positive-