



Beasley's Christmas Party

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

The maple-bordered street was as still as a country Sunday; so quiet that there seemed an echo to my footsteps. It was four o'clock in the morning; clear October moonlight misted through the thinning foliage to the shadowy sidewalk and lay like a transparent silver fog upon the house of my admiration, as I strode along, returning from my first night's work on the Wainwright Morning Despatch.

I had already marked that house as the finest (to my taste) in Wainwright, though hitherto, on my excursions to these metropolises, the state capital, I was not without a certain native jealousy that Spencerville, the county-seat where I lived, had nothing so good. Now, however, I approached its portals with a pleasure in it quite unalloyed, for I was at last myself a resident (albeit of only one day's standing) of Wainwright, and the house—though I had not even an idea who lived there—part of my possessions as a citizen. Moreover, I might enjoy the warmer pride of a next-door-neighbor, for Mrs. Apperthwaite's, where I had taken a room, was just beyond.

This was the quietest part of Wainwright; business stopped short of it, and the "fashionable residence section" had overlapped this "forgotten backwater," leaving it undisturbed and unchanging, with that look about it which is the quality of few urban quarters, and eventually of none, as a town grows to be a city—the look of still being a neighborhood. This friendliness of appearance was largely the emanation of the homely and beautiful house which so greatly pleased my fancy.

It might be difficult to say why I thought it the "finest" house in Wainwright, for a simpler structure would be hard to imagine; it was merely a big, old-fashioned brick house, painted brown and very plain, set well away from the street among some splendid forest trees, with a fair spread of flat lawn. But it gave back a great deal for your glance, just as some people do. It was a large house, as I say, yet it looked not like a mansion but like a home; and made you wish that you lived in it. Or, driving by, of an evening, you would have liked to stop your car and go in; it spoke so surely of hearty, old-fashioned people living there, who would welcome you merrily.

It looked like a house where there were a grandfather and a grandmother; where holidays were warmly kept; where there were boisterous family reunions to which uncles and aunts, who had been born there, would return from no matter what distances; a house where big turkeys were on the table often; where one called "the hired man," (and named either Abner or Ole) would crack walnuts upon a flatiron clutched between his knees on the back porch; it looked like a house where they played charades; where there would be long streamers of evergreen and dozens of wreaths of holly at Christmas time; where there were tearful, happy weddings and great throwings of rice after little brides, from the broad front steps; in a word, it was the sort of a house to make the hearts of spinsters and bachelors very lonely and wistful—and that is about as near as I can come to my reason for thinking it the finest house in Wainwright.

The moon hung kindly above its level door in the silence of that October morning, as I checked my gait to loiter along the picket fence; but suddenly the house showed a light of its own. The spurt of a match took my eye to one of the upper windows, then a steadier glow of orange told me that a lamp was lighted. The window was opened, and a man looked out and whistled loudly.

I stopped, thinking he meant to attract my attention; that something might be wrong; that perhaps someone was needed to go for a doctor. My mistake was immediately evident, however; I stood in the shadow of the trees bordering the sidewalk, and the man at the window had not seen me. "Boy! Boy!" he called, softly. "Where are you, Simpledoria?"

He leaned from the window, looking downward. "Why, there you are!" he exclaimed, and turned to address some invisible person within the room. "He's right there underneath the window. I'll bring him up." He leaned out again. "Wait there, Simpledoria!" he called. "I'll be down in a jiffy and let you in."

Puzzled, I stared at the vacant lawn before me. The clear moonlight revealed it brightly, and it was empty of any living presence; there were no bushes nor shrubberies—nor even shadows—that could have been mistaken for a boy. If "Simpledoria" was a boy. There was no dog in sight; there was no cat; there was nothing beneath the window except thick, close-cropped grass.

A light shone in the hallway behind the broad front door; one of these was opened, and revealed in silhouette the tall, thin figure of a man in a long, old-fashioned dressing-gown.

mat and come in. You're safe now!" He closed the door, and I heard him call to some one up-stairs, as he arranged the fastenings:

"Simpledoria is all right—only a little chilled. I'll bring him up to your fire."

I went on my way in a condition of astonishment that engendered, almost, a doubt of my eyes; for if my sight was unimpaired and myself not subject to optical or mental delusion, neither boy nor dog nor bird nor cat, nor any other object of this visible world, had entered that opened door. Was my "finest" house, then, a place of call for wandering ghosts, who came home to roost at four in the morning?

It was only a step to Mrs. Apperthwaite's; I let myself in with the key that good lady had given me, stole up to my room, went to my window, and stared across the yard at the house next door. The front window in the second story, I decided, necessarily belonged to that room in which the lamp had been lighted; but all was dark there now. I went to bed, and dreamed that I was out at sea in a fog, having embarked on a transparent vessel whose preposterous name, inscribed upon glass life-belts, depending here and there from an invisible rail, was "Simpledoria."

Mrs. Apperthwaite's was a commodious old house, the greater part of it of about the same age, I judged, as its neighbor; but the late Mr. Apperthwaite had caught the Mansard fever of the late 'Seventies, and the building disease, once fastened upon him, had never known a convalescence, but, rather, a series of relapses, the tokens of which, in the nature of a cupola and a couple of frame turrets, were terrifyingly apparent. These romantic embellishments seemed to me not inharmonious with the library, a cheerful and pleasantly shabby apartment down-stairs, where I found over a substratum of history, encyclopedia, and family Bible) some worn old volumes of "Godey's Lady's Book," an early edition of Cooper's works; Scott, Bulwer, Macaulay, Byron, and Tennyson, complete; some old volumes of Victor Hugo, of the elder Dumas, of Flaubert, of Gautier, and of Balzac; "Clarissa," "Lalla Rookh," "The Alhambra," "Beulah," "Uarda," "Eucle," "Uncle Tom's Cabin," "Ben-Hur," "Trilby," "She," "Little Lord Fauntleroy;" and of a later decade, there were novels about those delicately tangled emotions experienced by the supreme few; and stories of adventurous royalty; tales of "clean-limbed young American manhood;" and some thin volumes of rather precious verse.

'Twas amid these romantic scenes that I awaited the sound of the lunch-bell (which for me was the announcement of breakfast), when I arose from my first night's slumbers under Mrs. Apperthwaite's roof; and I wondered if the books were a fair mirror of Miss Apperthwaite's mind (I had been told that Mrs. Apperthwaite had a daughter). Mrs. Apperthwaite herself, in her youth, might have sat to an illustrator of Scott or Bulwer. Even now you could see she had come as near being romantically beautiful as was consistently proper for such a timid, gentle little gentlewoman as she was. Reduced, by her husband's insolvency (coincident with his demise) to "keeping boarders," she did it gracefully, as if the urgency thereto were only a spirit of quiet hospitality. It should be added in haste that she set an excellent table.

Moreover, the guests who gathered at her board were of a very attractive description, as I decided the instant my eye fell upon the lady who sat opposite me at lunch. I knew at once that she was Miss Apperthwaite, she "went so," as they say, with her mother; nothing could have been more suitable. Mrs. Apperthwaite was the kind of woman whom you would expect to have a beautiful daughter, and Mrs. Apperthwaite more than fulfilled her mother's promise.

I guessed her to be more than Juliet Capulet's age, indeed, yet still between that and the perfect age of woman. She was of a larger, fuller, more striking type than Mrs. Apperthwaite, a bolder type one might put it—though she might have been a great deal bolder than Mrs. Apperthwaite without being bold. Certainly she was handsome enough to make it difficult for a young fellow to keep from staring at her. She had an abundance of very soft, dark hair, worn almost austere, as if its profusion necessitated repression; and I am compelled to admit that her fine eyes expressed a distant contemplation—obviously of habit not of mood—so pronounced that one of her enemies (if she had any) might have described them as "dreamy."

Only one other of my own sex was present at the lunch table, a Mr. Dowden, an elderly lawyer and politician of whom I had heard, and to whom Mrs. Apperthwaite, coming in after the rest of us were seated, introduced me. She made the presentation general; and I had the experience of receiving a nod and a slow glance, in which there was a sort of dusky, estimating brilliance, from the beautiful lady opposite me.

It might have been better manners

for me to address myself to Mr. Dowden, or one of the very nice elderly women, who were my fellow-guests, than to open a conversation with Miss Apperthwaite; but I did not stop to think of that.

"You have a splendid old house next door to you here, Miss Apperthwaite," I said. "It's a privilege to find it in view from my window."

There was a faint stir as of some one elderly ladies stopped talking abruptly and exchanged glances, though this was not of my observation at the moment, I think, but recurred to my consciousness later, when I had perceived my blunder.

"May I ask who lives there?" I pursued.

Miss Apperthwaite allowed her noticeable lashes to cover her eyes for an instant, then looked up again.

"A Mr. Beasley," she said.

"Not the Honorable David Beasley?" I exclaimed.

"Yes," she returned with a certain gravity which I afterward wished had checked me. "Do you know him?"

"Not in person," I explained. "You see, I've written a good deal about him. I was with the Spencerville Journal until a few days ago, and even in the country we know who's who in politics over the state. Beasley's the man that went to Congress and never made a speech—never made even a motion to adjourn—but got everything his district wanted. There's talk of him for governor."

"Indeed?"

"And so it's the Honorable David Beasley who lives in that splendid place. How curious that is!"

"Why?" asked Miss Apperthwaite.

"It seems too big for one man," I answered; "and I've always had the impression Mr. Beasley was a bachelor."

"Yes," she said, rather slowly, "he is."

"But of course he doesn't live there all alone," I supposed, aloud, "probably he has—"

"No. There's no one else—except a couple of colored servants."

"What a crime!" I exclaimed. "If there ever was a house meant for a large family, that one is. Can't you almost hear it crying out for heaps and heaps of romping children? I should think—"

I was interrupted by a loud cough from Mr. Dowden, so abrupt and artificial that his intention to check the flow of my innocent prattle was embarrassingly obvious—even to me!

"Can you tell me," he said, leaning forward and following up the interruption as hastily as possible, "what the farmers were getting for their wheat when you left Spencerville?"

"One twenty-five," I answered, and felt my ears growing red with mortification. Too late, I remembered that the new-comer in a community should guard his tongue among the natives until he has unraveled the skein of their relationships, alliances, feuds and private wars—a precept not unlike the classic injunction:

"I will tell you," I said. And I related in detail the singular performance of which I had been a witness in the late moonlight before that morning's dawn. As I talked, we half unconsciously moved across the lawn together, finally setting ourselves upon a bench beyond the rosebuds and near the high fence. The interest my companion exhibited in the narration might have surprised me had my nocturnal experience itself been less surprising. She interrupted me now and then with little, half-checked ejaculations of acute wonder, but sat for the most part with her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand, her face turned eagerly to mine and her lips parted in half-breathless attention. There was nothing "far away" about her eyes now; they were widely and intently alert.

When I finished, she shook her head slowly, as if quite dumfounded, and altered her position, leaning against the back of the bench and gazing straight before her without speaking. It was plain that her neighbor's extraordinary behavior had revealed a phase of his character novel enough to be startling.

(Continued on Page Twelve)

The interesting premises next door. The gentleman in the dressing-gown, I was sure, could have been no other than the Honorable David Beasley himself. He came not in eyeshot now, neither he nor any other; there was no sign of life about the place. That portion of his yard which lay behind the house was not within my vision, it is true, his property being here separated from Mrs. Apperthwaite's by a board fence higher than a tall man could reach; but there was no sound from the other side of this partition, save that caused by the quiet movement of rusty leaves in the breeze.

My cigar was at half-length when the green lattice door of Mrs. Apperthwaite's back porch was opened and Miss Apperthwaite bearing a saucer of milk, issued therefrom, followed, hastily, by a very white, fat cat, with a pink ribbon round its neck, a vibrant nose, and fixed, voracious eyes uplifted to the saucer. The lady and her cat offered to view a group as pretty as a popular painting; it was even improved when, stooping, Miss Apperthwaite set the saucer upon the ground, and, continuing in that posture, stroked the cat. To bend so far is a test of a woman's grace. I have observed.

She turned her face toward me and smiled. "I'm almost at the age, you see."

"What age?" I asked, stupidly enough.

"When we take to cats," she said, rising. "Spinsters we like to call it. 'Single-blessedness!'"

"That is your kind heart. You decline to make one of us happy to the despair of all the rest."

She laughed at this, though with no very genuine mirth, I marked, and let my 1880 attempt at gallantry pass without retort.

"You seemed interested in the old place yonder," she indicated Mr. Beasley's house with a nod.

"Oh, I understood my blunder," I said, quickly. "I wish I had known the subject was embarrassing or unpleasant to Mr. Dowden."

"What made you think that?"

"Surely," I said, "you saw how pointedly he cut me off."

"Yes," she returned thoughtfully. "He rather did, it's true. At least, I see how you got that impression. She seemed to muse upon this, letting her eyes fall, then, raising them, allowed her far-away gaze to rest upon the house beyond the fence, and said, "It is an interesting old place."

"And Mr. Beasley himself—" I began.

"Oh," she said, "he isn't interesting. That's his trouble!"

"You mean his trouble not to—"

She interrupted me, speaking with sudden, surprising energy, "I mean he's a man of no imagination."

"No imagination!" I exclaimed.

"None in the world! Not one ounce of imagination! Not one grain!"

"Then who," I cried—"or what—is Simpledoria?"

"Simple—what?" she said, plainly mystified.

"Simpledoria?" she repeated, and laughed. "What in the world is that?"

"You never heard of it before?"

"Never in my life."

"You've lived next door to Mr. Beasley a long time, haven't you?"

"All my life."

"And I suppose you must know him pretty well."

"What next?" she said, smiling.

"You said he lived there all alone. I went on, tentatively.

"Except for an old colored couple, his servants."

"Can you tell me—" I hesitated.

"Has he ever been thought—well, 'queer'?"

"Never!" she answered, emphatically. "Never anything so exciting! Merely deadly and hopelessly commonplace." She picked up the saucer, now exceedingly empty, and set it upon a shelf by the lattice door. "What was it about—what was that name?"

"Simpledoria?"

"Simpledoria?" she repeated, and laughed. "What in the world is that?"

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"Never in my life."

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Anna Lamper,
Administratrix of the estate of
Willem Gottfried Lamper deceased.

C. D. PURCELL,
Sandy, Oregon.
Attorney for Administratrix.
12-21-22

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