

Holiday Greetings

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Beasley's Christmas Party

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

"I don't know," said I, keeping at her elbow, "whether it's more like Alice's or the interlocutor's conversation at a minstrel show."

"Hush!" she warned me, though we were already at a safe distance, and did not speak again until we had reached the front walk. There she paused, and I noted that she was trembling—and, no doubt correctly, judged her emotion to be that of consternation.

"There was no one there!" she exclaimed. "He was all by himself! It was just the same as what you saw last night!"

"Evidently."

"Did it sound to you"—there was a little awed tremor in her voice that I found very appealing—"did it sound to you like a person who'd lost his mind?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know at all what to make of it."

"He couldn't have been"—her eyes grew very wide—"intoxicated?"

"No. I'm sure it wasn't that."

"Then I don't know what to make of it, either. All that wild talk about 'Bill Hammersley' and 'Simpledoria' and spring-boards in Scotland and—"

"And an eleven-foot jump," I suggested.

"Why, there's no more a 'Bill Hammersley,'" she cried, with a gesture of excited emphasis, "than there is a 'Simpledoria!'"

"So it appears," I agreed.

"He's lived there all alone," she said, solemnly, "in that big house, so long, just sitting there evening after evening, all by himself, never going out, never reading anything, not even thinking; but just sitting and sitting and sitting—Well," she broke off, suddenly, shook the frown from her forehead, and made me the offer of a dazzling smile, "there's no use bothering one's own head about it."

"I'm glad to have a fellow-witness," I said. "It's so eerie I might have concluded there was something the matter with me."

"You're going to your work?" she asked, as I turned toward the gate. "I'm very glad I don't have to go to mine."

"Yours?" I inquired, rather blankly.

"I teach algebra and plane geometry at the High school," said this surprising young woman. "Thank Heaven, it's Saturday! I'm reading 'Les Miserables' for the seventh time, and I'm going to have a real orgy over Gertrude and the barricade this afternoon!"

I do not know why it should have astonished me to find that Miss Apperthwaite was a teacher of mathematics except that (to my inexperienced eye) she didn't look it. She looked more like Charlotte Corday!

I had the pleasure of seeing her opposite me at lunch the next day (when Mr. Dowden kept me occupied with Spencer's postiche, obviously from fear that I would break out again), but no stroll in the yard with her rewarded me afterward, as I dimly hoped, for she disappeared before I left the table, and I did not see her again for a fortnight. On week-days she did not return to the house for lunch, my only meal at Mrs. Apperthwaite's (I dined at a restaurant near the Despatch office), and she was out

of town for a little visit, her mother informed us, over the following Saturday and Sunday. She was not altogether out of my thoughts, however—indeed, she almost divided them with the Honorable David Beasley.

A better view which I was afforded of this gentleman did not lessen my interest in him; increased it rather; it also served to make the extraordinary diodes of which he had been the virtuoso and I the audience more than ever profoundly inexplicable. My glimpse of him in the lighted doorway had given me the vaguest impression of his appearance, but one afternoon—a few days after my interview with Miss Apperthwaite—I was starting for the office and met him full-face-on as he was turning in at his gate. I took as careful notice of him as I could without conspicuously glaring.

There was something remarkably "taking," as we say, about this man—something easy and genial and quizzical and carefree. He was the kind of person you like to meet on the street; whose cheerful passing sends you on feeling indefinitely a little gayer than you did. He was tall, thin—even gaunt, perhaps—and his face was long, rather pale, and shrewd and gentle; something in its oddity not unreminding of the late Sol Smith Russell. His hat was tilted back a little, the slightest bit to one side, and the sparse, brownish hair above his high forehead was going to be gray before long. He looked about forty.

The truth is, I had expected to see a cousin german to Don Quixote; I had thought to detect signs and gleams of wildness, however slight—something a little "off." One glance of that kindly and humorous eye told me such expectation had been nonsense. Odd he might have been—Gad, look! he looked it—but "queer?" Never. The fact that Miss Apperthwaite could picture such a man as this "sitting and sitting and sitting" himself into any form of mania or madness whatever spoke loudly of her own imagination, indeed! The key to "Simpledoria" was to be sought under some other mat.

As I began to know some of my co-laborers on the Despatch, and to pick up acquaintances here and there, about town, I sometimes made Mr. Beasley the subject of inquiry. Everybody knew him. "Oh, yes, I know Dave Beasley!" would come the reply, nearly always with a chuckling sort of laugh. I gathered that he had a name for "easy-going" which amounted to eccentricity. It was said that what the ward-beelers and camp-fol-

lowers got out of him in campaign times made the political managers cry. He was the first and readiest prey for every fraud and swindler that came to Wainwright, I heard, and yet, in spite of this and of his hatred of "speech-making" ("He's as silent as Grant!" said one informant), he had a large practice, and was one of the most successful lawyers in the state.

One story they told of him (or, as they were apt to put it, "on" him) was repeated so often that I saw it had become one of the town's traditions. One bitter evening in February, they related, he was approached upon the street by a ragged, whining and shiv-



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ering old reprobate, notorious for the various ingenuities by which he had worn out the patience of the charity organizations. He asked Beasley for a dime. Beasley had no money in his pockets, but gave the man his overcoat, and went home without any himself, and spent six weeks in bed with a bad case of pneumonia as the direct result. His beneficiary sold the overcoat, and invested the proceeds in a five-days' spree, in the closing scenes of which a couple of brickbats were featured to high, spectacular effect. One he sent through a jeweler's show-window in an attempt to intimidate some wholly imaginary pursuers, the other he protected at a party given by a policeman who was endeavoring to soothe him. The victim of Beasley's charity and the officer were then borne to the hospital in company.

It was due in part to recollections of this legend and others of a similar character that people laughed when they said, "Oh, yes, I know Dave Beasley."

Altogether, I should say, Beasley was about the most popular man in Wainwright. I could discover nowhere anything, however, to shed the faintest light upon the mystery of Bill Hammersley and Simpledoria. It was not until the Sunday of Miss Apperthwaite's absence that the revelation came.

That afternoon I went to call upon the widow of a second-cousin of mine; she lived in a cottage not far from Mrs. Apperthwaite's, upon the same street. I found her sitting on a pleasant veranda, with boxes of flowering plants along the railing, though Indian summer was now close upon departure. She was rocking meditatively, and held a finger in a morose volume, apparently of verse, though I suspected she had been better entertained in the observation of the people and vehicles decorously passing along the sunlit thoroughfare within her view.

We exchanged inevitable questions and news of mutual relatives; I had told her how I liked my work and what I thought of Wainwright, and she was congratulating me upon having found so pleasant a place to live as Mrs. Apperthwaite's, when she interrupted herself to smile and nod a cordial greeting to two gentlemen driving by. They waved their hats to her gayly, then leaned back comfortably against the cushions—and if ever two men were obviously and incontestably on the best of terms with each other, these two were. They were David Beasley and Mr. Dowden.

"I do wish," said my cousin, resuming her rocking—"I do wish dear David Beasley would get a new car of some kind; that old model of his is a disgrace! I suppose you haven't met him? Of course, living at Mrs. Apperthwaite's, you wouldn't be apt to."

"But what is he doing with Mr. Dowden?" I asked.

She lifted her eyebrows. "Why—taking him for a drive, I suppose."

"No. I mean—how do they happen to be together?"

"Why shouldn't they be? They're old friends—"

"They are!" And, in answer to her look of surprise, I explained that I had begun to speak of Beasley at Mrs. Apperthwaite's, and described the abruptness with which Dowden had changed the subject.

"I see," my cousin nodded, comprehendingly. "That's simple enough. George Dowden didn't want you to talk of Beasley there. I suppose it may have been a little embarrassing for everybody—especially if Ann Apperthwaite heard you."

"Ann? That's Miss Apperthwaite? Yes; I was speaking directly to her. Why shouldn't she have heard me? She talked of him herself a little later—and at some length, too."

"She did!" My cousin stopped rocking, and fixed me with her glittering eye. "Well, of all!"

"Is it so surprising?"

"The lady gave her best to the waves

again. "Ann Apperthwaite thinks about him still!" she said, with something like vindictiveness. "I've always suspected it. She thought you were new to the place and didn't know anything about it all, or anybody to mention it to. That's it!"

"I'm still new to the place," I urged, "and still don't know anything about it all."

"They used to be engaged," was her succinct and emphatic answer. I found it but too illuminating. "Oh, oh!" I cried. "I was an innocent, wasn't I?"

"I'm glad she does think of him," said my cousin. "It serves her right. I only hope he won't find it out, because he's a poor, faithful creature; he'd jump at the chance to take her back—and she doesn't deserve him."

"How long has it been," I asked, "since they used to be engaged?"

"Oh, a good while—five or six years ago, I think—maybe more; time skips along. Ann Apperthwaite's no chicken, you know." (Such was the lady's expression.) "They got engaged just after she came home from college, and of all the idiotically romantic girls—"

"But she's a teacher," I interrupted, "of mathematics."

"Yes." She nodded wisely. "I always thought that explained it: the romance is a reaction from the algebra. I never knew a person connected with mathematics or astronomy or statistics, or any of those exact things, who didn't have a crazy streak in 'em somewhere. They've got to blow off steam and be foolish to make up for putting in so much of their time at hard sense. But don't you think that I dislike Ann Apperthwaite. She's always been one of my best friends; that's why I feel at liberty to abuse her—and I always will abuse her when I think how she treated poor David Beasley."

"How did she treat him?"

"Threw him over out of a clear sky one night, that's all. Just sent him home and broke his heart; that is, it would have been broken if he'd had any kind of disposition except the one the Lord blessed him with—just all optimism and cheerfulness and making-the-best-of-it-ness! He's never cared for anybody else, and I guess he never will."

"What did she do it for?"

"Nothing!" My cousin shot the indignant word from her lips. "Nothing in the wide world!"

"But there must have been—"

"Listen to me," she interrupted, "and tell me if you ever heard anything queerer in your life. There'd been engaged—Heaven knows how long—over two years; probably nearer three—and always she kept putting it off; wouldn't begin to get ready, wouldn't set a day for the wedding. Then Mr. Apperthwaite died, and left her and her mother stranded high and dry with nothing to live on. David had everything in the world to give her—and still she wouldn't! And then, one day, she came up here and told me she'd broken it off. Said she couldn't stand it to be engaged to David Beasley another minute!"

"But why?"

"Because"—my cousin's tone was shrill with her despair of expressing the satire she would have put into it—"because, she said he was a man of no imagination!"

"She still says so," I remarked, thoughtfully.

"Then it's time she got a little imagination herself!" snapped my companion. "David Beasley's the quietest man God has made, but everybody knows what he is! There are some rare people in this world that aren't all talk; there are some still rarer ones that scarcely ever talk at all—and David Beasley's one of them. I don't know whether it's because he can't talk, or if he can and hates to; I only think the Lord he's put a few like that into this talky world! David Beasley's smile is better than acres of other people's talk. My Providence! Wouldn't anybody, just to look at him, know that he does better than talk? He thinks! The trouble with Ann Apperthwaite was that she was too young to see it. She was so full of novels and poetry and dreaminess and highfalutin nonsense she couldn't see anything as it really was. She'd study her mirror, and see such a heroine of romance there that she just couldn't bear to have a fiance who hadn't any chance of turning out to be the crown-prince of Kenosha in disguise! At the very least, to suit her he'd have had to wear a 'well-trimmed Vandylke' and coo sonnets in the gleaming, or read 'On a Balcony' to her by a red lamp."

"Poor David! Outside of his law-books, I don't believe he's ever read anything but 'Robinson Crusoe' and the Bible and Mark Twain. Oh, you should have heard her talk about it!—'I couldn't bear it another day,' she said. 'I couldn't stand it! In all the time I've known him I don't believe he's ever asked me a single question—except when he asked me if I'd marry him. He never says anything—never speaks at all!' she said. 'You don't know a blessing when you see it,' I told her. 'Blessing!' she said. 'There's nothing in the man! He has no depths! He hasn't any more imagination than the chair he sits and sits and sits in! Half the time he answers what I say to him by nodding and saying 'um-hum,' with that same old foolish, contented smile of his. I'd have gone mad if it had lasted any longer!' I asked her if she thought married life consisted very largely of conversations between husband and wife; and she answered that even married life ought to have some poetry in it. 'Some romance,' she said, 'some soul! And he just comes and sits' she said, 'and sits and sits and

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sits and sits! And I can't bear it any longer, and I've told him so."

"Poor Mr. Beasley," I said.

"I think, 'Poor Ann Apperthwaite!' retorted my cousin. 'I'd like to know if there's anything nicer than just to



"I Think, 'Poor Ann Apperthwaite!' Retorted My Cousin.

sit and sit and sit and sit with as lovely a man as that—a man who understands things, and thinks and listens and smiles—instead of everlastingly talking!"

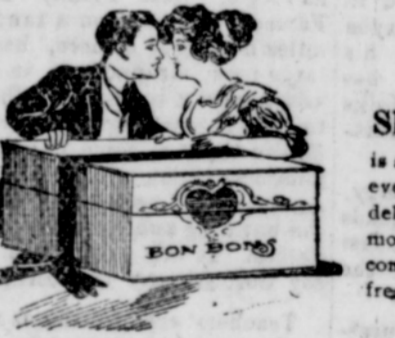
"As it happens," I remarked, "I've heard Mr. Beasley talk."

"Why, of course he talks," she returned, "when there's any real use in it. And he talks to children; he's that kind of a man."

"I meant a particular instance," I began; meaning to see if she could give me any clue to Bill Hammersley and Simpledoria, but at that moment the gate clicked under the hand of another caller. My cousin rose to greet him, and presently I took my leave without having been able to get back upon the subject of Beasley.

Thus, once more baffled, I returned to Mrs. Apperthwaite's—and within the hour came into full possession of the very heart of that dark and subtle mystery which overhung the house next door and so perplexed my soul.

(To be continued.)



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