

Feeds Now Comfortably
And
LUNCH ROOM

The Holiday Spirit Caught
and Held Before Your Eyes

Beasley's Christmas Party

BY
BOOTH TARKINGTON

BOOTH TARKINGTON



SYNOPSIS

PART I—Newcomer in a small town, a young newspaper man, who tells the story, is amused by the unaccountable actions of a man who, from the mansion of a fine house, apparently lives a life of ease with invisible persons, particularly mentioning one Simple-doria. The young man goes to the house, the home of Mrs. Apperthwaite, next door to the scene of the strange proceedings, bewildered.

PART II—Next morning he discovers his strange neighbor is the Hon. David Beasley, prominent politician, and, universally respected. Being of his own night's experience, he is markedly interrupted by a fellow boarder, a Mr. George Dowden. Later, with Miss Apperthwaite, he is an unseen witness of a purely imaginary jumping contest between Beasley and a "Bill Hammersley." Miss Apperthwaite appears deeply concerned there apparently being no possible explanation of the strange proceedings.

PART III—The reporter learns that Beasley and Miss Apperthwaite had at one time been engaged, and that the young lady had broken the engagement because of Beasley's "lack of imagination."

PART IV—The "mystery" of "Simples-doria" and "Bill Hammersley" is explained by Mr. Dowden. Beasley is caring for a simple boy, Hamilton Swift, Junior, a helpless invalid bodily though more than ordinarily bright mentally, the son of dear friends who are dead, and "Simples-doria" and "Bill Hammersley" are creatures of Beasley's and the small boy's imagination. Beasley honors the little sufferer by the "play acting."

PART V—The reporter becomes acquainted with David Beasley and invited to his home, where he meets Hamilton Swift, Junior, and his circle of "Invisibles," which Beasley and George Dowden have made very real to the child.

PART VI—Beasley is a strong candidate for his party's gubernatorial nomination. His chief enemy being one Simon Peck, a small, soured, mean-thinking individual. The reporter is sent by his city editor to see Peck, who declares he is "something on Beasley." Peck and a number of his cronies, with two reporters, set out for Beasley's home, which Peck declares is the spot of "Christmas activities to which Beasley has not designed to invite his party's workers, to whom, however, he looks for support in his political aspirations. Assured of his coming triumph, Peck invites George Dowden, as Beasley's closest personal and political friend, to join the party, taunting him with the fact of his not being considered good enough socially to be entertained by Beasley. Warned from the outside, they see Beasley and his colored servant Bob, though apparently alone in a brightly illuminated room, with a magnificently decorated Christmas tree, and, entertaining a large number of guests. Miss Apperthwaite has invited Peck's party, and, considerably gratified, they await developments. The dear David Beasley (Dowden declares, for the first time in his life) makes a speech, and, after a particularly long and tedious talk, as if addressing a large gathering, follows the speech by Beasley, by himself, dances a waltz with a young girl, and finally to detail and a full complement of invisible persons. Peck is indignant, insisting that Beasley is crazy and that he will have the "game" all over town tomorrow. Miss Apperthwaite is bewildered. The dance concluded, the waiter here for the first time, to come across the presence of Hamilton Swift, Junior, and all realize that David Beasley, in Miss Apperthwaite's opinion a man of no imagination, as he invited the whole scheme to give place to the "play acting" ward. The reporter promises Peck the story will be "all in a moment's notice," and that individual, very much gratified, the human interest of the story will strengthen Beasley's position with the "party," and the young reporter, in his turn, the admiration of "just one foot. It's Christmas time!"

thing; and he's got ideas and ways that I never saw the best of. He was born sick, as I understand it—his bones and nerves and insides are all wrong, somehow—but it's supposed he gets a little better from year to year. He wears a pretty elaborate set of braces, and he's subject to attacks, too—I don't know the name for 'em—and loses what little voice he has sometimes, all but a whisper. He had one, I know, the day after Beasley brought him home, and that was probably the reason you thought Dave was carrying on all to himself about that 'bumping-match out in the back yard. The boy must have been lying there in the little wagon they have for him, while Dave cut up shins with 'Bill Hammersley.' Of course, most children have make-believe friends and companions, especially if they haven't any brothers or sisters, but this lonely little fellow's got his people worked out in his mind and carried out beyond any I ever heard of. Dave got well acquainted with 'em on the train on the way home, and they certainly are giving him a lively time. He got 'em up at four in the morning."

Mr. Dowden's birth overcame him for a moment; when he had mastered it, he continued: "Simples-doria—now where do you suppose he got that name?—well, anyway, Simples-doria is supposed to be Hamilton Swift, Junior's, St. Bernard dog. Beasley has a bath for him the other day, he told me. And Bill Hammersley is supposed to be a boy of Hamilton Swift, Junior's own age, but very big and strong; he has rosy cheeks, and he can do more in athletics than a whole college track team. That's the reason he out-jumped Dave so far, you see."

V.
Miss Apperthwaite was at home the following Saturday. I found her in the library with "Les Miserables" on her knee when I came down from my room a little before lunch time; and she looked up and gave me a smile that made me feel sorry for any one she had caused to smile upon.

"I wanted to tell you," I said, with a little awkwardness but plenty of truth, "I've found out that I'm an awful fool."

"But that's something," she returned encouragingly—"at least the beginning of wisdom."

"I mean about Mr. Beasley—the mystery I was almost enough to find in 'Simples-doria.' I want to tell you—"

"Oh, I know," she said; and although she laughed with an effect of carelessness, that look which I had thought "far away" returned to her eyes as she spoke. There was a certain inscrutability about Miss Apperthwaite sometimes. It should be added, as if she did not like to be too easily read, "I've heard all about it. Mr. Beasley's been appointed trustee of something for poor Hamilton Swift's son, a pitiful little invalid boy who invents all sorts of characters. The old ducky from over there told me so about Bill Hammersley and Simples-doria. So, you see, I understand."

"I'm glad you do," I said.
A little hardness—one might even have thought it bitterness—became apparent in her expression. "And I'm glad there's somebody in that house, at last, with a little imagination."

"From everything I have heard," I returned, summoning sufficient boldness, "it would be difficult to say which has more—Mr. Beasley or the child."

Her glance fell from mine at this, but not quickly enough to conceal a sudden, half-startled look of trouble (I can think of no other way to express it) that leaped into it; and she rose, for the luncheon was ringing.

"I'm just finishing the death of Jean Valjean, you know, in 'Les Miserables,'" she said, as we moved to the door. "I'm always afraid I'll cry over that. I try not to, because it makes my eyes red."

And, in truth, there was a vague rumor of tears about her eyes—not as if she had shed them, but more as if she were going to—though I had not noticed it when I came in.

That afternoon, when I reached the Despatch office, I was commissioned to obtain certain political information from the Honorable David Beasley, an assignment I accepted with eagerness, notwithstanding the commiseration it brought me from one or two of my fellows in the reporter's room. "You won't get anything out of him!" they said. And they were true prophets.

I found him looking over some documents in his office; a reflective, unlighted cigar in the corner of his mouth; his chair tilted back and his feet on a window-sill. He nodded, upon my statement of the affair that brought me, and without shifting his position, gave me a look of slow but wholly friendly scrutiny over his shoulder, and bade me sit down. I began at once to put the questions I was told to ask him—interrogations (he seemed to believe) satisfactorily answered by slowly and rudimentarily stroking the left side of his chin with his two long fingers of his right hand, the while he smiled in broad contemplation of a tarred roof beyond the window. Now and then he would give me a mild and drawing word or two, not brilliantly illuminative it may be remarked. "Well—about that—" he began once, and then came immediately to a full stop.

would be but too fluent and copious upon any subject in the world except the one particular point.

I never met anybody else who looked so pleasantly communicative and unaged to say so little. In fact, he didn't say anything at all; and I guessed that this faculty was not without its value in his political career, disastrous as it had proved to his private happiness. His habit of silence, moreover, was not cultivated; you could see that "the secret of it" was that he was born quiet.

My note-book remained needless, and finally, at some odd evasion of his, accomplished by a monosyllable, I laughed outright—and he did, too! He joined exclamations with me, cheerily, and with a twinkling quietness that somehow gave me the idea that he might be thinking (rather prophetically) to himself: "Yes, sir, that old Beasley man is certainly a mighty funny critter!"

When I went away, a few moments later, and left him still intermittently chuckling, the impression remained with me that he had some such deprecatory and surreptitious thought.

Two or three days after that, as I strolled downtown from Mrs. Apperthwaite's, Beasley came out of his gate, bound in the same direction. He gave me a look of gay recognition and offered his hand, saying, "Well! Up in this neighborhood!" as if that were a matter of considerable astonishment.

I mentioned that I was a neighbor, and we walked on together. I don't think he spoke again, except for a "Well, sir!" or two of genial surprise at something I said, and now and then, "You don't tell me!" which he had a most eloquent way of exclaiming; but he listened visibly to my own talk, and laughed at everything that I meant for funny.

I never knew anybody who gave one a greater responsiveness; he seemed to be with you every instant; and how he made you feel it was the true mystery of Beasley, this silent man who never talked, except (as my cousin said) to children.

It happened that I thus met him, as we were both starting down town, and walked on with him, several days in succession; in a word, it became a habit. Then, one afternoon, as I turned to leave him at the Despatch office, he asked me if I would drop in at his house the next day for a cigar before I started. I did; and he asked me if I would come again the day after that. So this became a habit, too.

A fortnight elapsed before I met Hamilton Swift, Junior; for he, poor little fellow of dream-children, could be no spectator of track events upon the lawn, but lay in his bed upstairs. However, he grew better at last, and my presentation took place.

We had just finished our cigars in Beasley's airy, old-fashioned "sitting-room," and were rising to go, when there came the faint creaking of small wheels from the hall. Beasley turned to me with the apologetic and monosyllabic chuckle that was distinctly his alone.

"I've got a little chap here—" he said; then went to the door. "Bob!"

The old ducky appeared in the doorway pushing a little wagon like a reclining-chair on wheels, and in it sat Hamilton Swift, Junior.

My first impression of him was that he was all eyes; I couldn't look at anything else for a time, and was hardly conscious of the rest of that wizen, peaked little face and the under-sized wisp of a body with its pathetic adjuncts of metal and leather. I think they were the brightest eyes I ever saw—so keen and intelligent as a wicked old woman's, withal as trustful and cheery as the eyes of a setter pup.

"Ho-o-ay!"
Thus the Honorable Mr. Beasley, waving a handkerchief thrice around his head and thrice cheering.

And the child, in that cricket's voice of his, replied:

"Ho-o-ay!"
This was the form of salutation familiarly in use between them. Beasley followed it by inquiring, "Who's with us today?"

"The Misses Swift," chirped the little fellow, "Mister Swift, if you please, Condn David Beasley."

Beasley extended a formal bow. "There is a gentleman here who'd like to meet you." And he pressed me with some grave phrases commendatory of my general character, addressing the child as "Mister Swift"; whereupon Mister Swift gave me a ghostly little hand and professed himself glad to meet me.

"And besides me," he added, to Beasley, "there's Bill Hammersley and Mr. Corley Linbridge."

A faint perplexity manifested itself upon Beasley's face at this, a shadow which cleared at once when I asked if I might not be permitted to meet these personages, remarking that I had heard from Dowden of Bill Hammersley, though until now a stranger to the fame of Mr. Corley Linbridge.

Beasley performed the ceremony with intentional elegance, while the boy's great eyes swept glowingly from his cousin's face to mine and back again. I bowed and shook hands with the air, once to my left and once to my right.

"And Simples-doria!" cried Mister Swift. "You'll enjoy Simples-doria."
"Above all things," I said. "Can he shake hands? Some dogs can."

in this wise was my initiation into the beautiful old house and the cordiality of its inmates completed; and I became a familiar of David Beasley and his ward, with the privilege to go and come as I pleased; there was always gay and friendly welcome. I always came for the cigar after lunch, sometimes for lunch itself; sometimes I dined there instead of down town; and now and then when it happened that an errand or assignment took me that way in the afternoon, I would run in and "visit" awhile with Hamilton Swift, Junior, and his circle of friends.

There were days, of course, when his attacks were upon him, and only Beasley and the doctor and old Bob saw him; I do not know what the boy's mental condition was at such times; but when he was better, and could be wheeled about the house and again receive callers, he displayed an almost depressing activity of mind—it was active enough, certainly, to keep far ahead of my own. And he was unworldly; still, Beasley and Dowden and I were never directly chidden for insubordination, though made to wince painfully by the look of troubled surprise that met us when we were not quick enough to catch his meaning.

The order of the day with him always began with the "Ho-o-ay" and "Ho-o-ay" of greeting; after which we were to inquire, "Who's with us today?" Whereupon he would make known the character in which he elected to be received for the occasion. If he announced himself as "Mister Swift," everything was to be very grown-up and decorous indeed. Formalities and distances were observed; and Mr. Corley Linbridge (an elderly personage of great dignity and distinction as a mountain-climber) was much



Dowden, Beasley and I All Slid Down the Banisters on One of the Hamilton Swift, Junior, Days.

of us included in the conversation than Bill Hammersley. If, however, he declared himself to be "Hamilton Swift, Junior," which was his happiest mood, Bill Hammersley and Simples-doria were in the ascendant, and there were games and contests. (Dowden, Beasley and I all slid down the banisters on one of the Hamilton Swift, Junior, days, at which really picturesque spectacle the boy almost cried with laughter—and old Bob and his wife, who came running from the kitchen, did cry.) He had a third appellation for himself—"Just little Hamilton"; but this was only when the creaky voice could hardly chirp at all and the wizen face was drawn to one side with suffering. When he told us he was "Just little Hamilton" we were very quiet.

Once, for ten days, his Invisibles all went away on a visit: Hamilton Swift, Junior, had become interested in bears. While this lasted, all of Beasley's trousers were, as Dowden said, "a sight." For that matter, Dowden himself was quite hoarse in court from growling so much. The bears were dismissed abruptly: Bill Hammersley and Mr. Corley Linbridge and Simples-doria came trooping back, and with them they brought that wonderful family, the Hunchbergs.

Beasley had just opened the front door, returning at noon from his office, when Hamilton Swift, Junior's, voice came piping from the library, where he was reclining in his wagon by the window.

"Cousin David Beasley! Cousin David, come a-running!" he cried. "Come a-running! The Hunchbergs are here!"
Of course Cousin David Beasley came a-running, and was immediately introduced to the whole Hunchberg family, a ceremony which old Bob, who was with the boy, had previously undergone with courtly grace.

"They like Bob," explained Hamilton. "Don't you, Mr. Hunchberg? Yes, he says they do extremely!" (He used such words as "extremely" often; indeed, as Dowden said, he talked "like a child in a book," which was due, I dare say, to his English mother.) "And I'm sure," the boy went on, "that all

know what our folks are like, yet? If St. Paul lived in Wainwright, do you suppose he could run for constable without some of his near neighbors getting out to try and down him?"

The head and front (and backbone, too) of the opposition to Beasley was a close-fisted, hard-knuckled, risen-from-the-soil sort of man, one named Simon Peck. He possessed no in-

I met the Hunchberg family, myself, the day after their arrival, and Beasley, by that time, had become so well acquainted with them that he could remember all their names, and helped in the introduction. There was Mr. Hunchberg—evidently the child's favorite, for he was described as the possessor of every engaging virtue—and there was that lively matron, Mrs. Hunchberg; there were the Hunchberg young gentlemen, Tom, Noble and Grandee; and the young ladies, Miss Queen, Miss Marble and Miss Molanna—all exceedingly gay and pretty. There was also Colonel Hunchberg, an uncle; finally there was Aunt Cooley Hunchberg, a somewhat decrepit but very amiable old lady. Mr. Corley Linbridge happened to be calling at the same time; and, as it appeared to be Beasley's duty to keep the conversation going and constantly to include all of the party in its general flow, it struck me that he had truly (as Dowden said) "enough to keep him busy."

The Hunchbergs had lately moved to Wainwright from Constantinople, I learned; they had decided not to live in town, however, having purchased a fine farm out in the country, and, on account of the distance, were able to call at Beasley's only about eight times a day, and seldom more than twice in the evening. Whenever a mystic telephone announced that they were on the way, the child would have himself wheeled to a window; and when they came in sight he would cry out in wild delight, while Beasley hastened to open the front door and admit them.

They were so real to the child, and Beasley treated them with such constant seriousness, that between the two of them I sometimes began to feel that there actually were such people, and to have moments of half-surprise that I couldn't see them; particularly as each of the Hunchbergs developed a character entirely his own to the last peculiarity, such as the aged Aunt Cooley Hunchberg's deafness, on which account Beasley never forgot to raise his voice when he addressed her. Indeed, the details of actuality in all this appeared to bring as great a delight to the man as to the child. Certainly he built them up with infinite care. On one occasion when Mr. Hunchberg and I happened to be calling, Hamilton remarked with surprise that Simples-doria had come into the room without kicking his hand as he usually did, and had crept under the table. Mr. Hunchberg volunteered the information (through Beasley) that upon his approach to the house he had seen Simples-doria chasing a cat. It was then debated whether chastisement was in order, but finally decided that Simples-doria's surreptitious manner of entrance and his hiding under the table were sufficient indication that he well understood his baseness, and would never let it happen again. And so, Beasley having coaxed him out from under the table, the offender "sat up," begged, and was forgiven. I could almost feel the splendid shaggy head under my hand when, in turn, I patted Simples-doria to show that the reconciliation was unqualified.

VI.
Autumn trailed the last leaves behind her flying brown robes one night; we woke to a flurry of snow next morning; and it was winter. Down town, along the sidewalks, the merchants set lines of poles, covered them with evergreen, and ran streamers of green overhead to encourage the festive shopping. Salvation Army Santa Clauses stamped their feet and rang bells on the corners, and pink-faced children fixed their noses immovably to display-windows. For them, the season of seasons, the time of times, was at hand.

To a certain new reporter on the Despatch the stir and gaiety of the streets meant little more than that the days had come when it was night in the afternoon, and that he was given fewer political assignments. This was annoying, because Beasley's candidacy for the governorship had given me a personal interest in the political situation. The nominating convention of his party would meet in the spring; the nomination was certain to carry the election also, and thus far Beasley showed more strength than any other man in the field. "Things are looking his way," said Dowden. "He's always worked hard for the party; not on the stump, of course," he laughed; "but the boys understand that there are more important things than speechmaking. His record in Congress gave him the confidence of everybody in the state, and, besides that, people always trust a quiet man. I tell you if nothing happens he'll get it."

"I'm for Beasley," another politician explained, in an interview, "because he's Dave Beasley! Yes, sir, I'm for him. You know the boys say if a man is only for you, in this state, there isn't much in it and he may go back on it; but if he's for you, he means it. Well, I'm for Beasley!"
There were other candidates, of course; none of them formidable; but I was surprised to learn of the exat-

considerable influence, I heard; was a hard worker, and vigorously seconded by an energetic lieutenant, a young man named Grist. These, and others they had been able to draw to their faction, were bitterly and eagerly opposed to Beasley's nomination, and worked without ceasing to prevent it.

I quote the invaluable Mr. Dowden again: "Grist's against us because he had a quarrel with a clerk in Beasley's office, and wanted Beasley to discharge him, and Beasley wouldn't; Sim Peck's against us out of just plain wrongheadedness, and because he never was for anything nor for anybody in his life. I had a talk with the old nut-head the other day; he said our candidate ought to be a farmer, a 'man of the common people,' and when I asked him where he'd find anybody more 'a man of the common people' than Beasley, he said Beasley was 'too much of a society man' to suit him! The idea of Dave as a 'society man' was too much for me, and I laughed in Sim Peck's face, but that didn't stop Sim Peck! 'Just look at the style he lives in!' he yelled. 'Ain't he fairly lapped in luxury? Look at that big house he lives in! Look at the way he goes around in that big car of his—and a alger to drive him, half the time!' I had to holler again, and, of course, that made Sam twice as mad as he started out to be; and he went off swearing he'd show me, before the campaign was over. The only trouble he and Grist and that crowd could give us would be by finding out something against Dave, and they can't do that because there isn't anything to find out."

I shared his confidence on this latter score, but was somewhat less sanguine on some others. There were only two newspapers of any political influence in Wainwright, the Despatch and the Journal, both operated in the interest of Beasley's party, and neither had "come out" for him. The gossip I heard about our office led me to think that each was waiting to see what headway Sim Peck and his faction would make; the Journal especially. I knew, had some inclination to coquette with Peck, Grist, and Company. Altogether, their faction was not entirely to be despised.

Thus, my thoughts were a great deal more occupied with Beasley's chances than with the holiday spirit that now, with furs and bells and wreathing mists of snow, breathed good cheer over the town. So little, indeed, had this spirit touched me, that, one evening when one of my colleagues, standing before the grate-fire in the reporter's room, yawned and said he'd be glad when tomorrow was over, I asked him what was the particular trouble with tomorrow.

"Christmas," he explained, languidly. "Always so tedious. Like Sunday."

"It makes me homesick," said another, a melancholy little man who was forever bragging of his native Duluth.

"Christmas," I repeated—"tomorrow!"
It was Christmas eve, and I had not known it! I leaned back in my chair in a sudden loneliness, what pictures coming before me of long-ago Christmas eves at home—old Christmas eves when there was a Tree. . . .

My name was called; the night city editor had an assignment for me. "Go up to Sim Peck's, on Madison street," he said. "He thinks he's got something on David Beasley, but won't say any more over the telephone. See what there is in it."

I picked up my hat and coat, and left the office at a speed which man-

Continued Next Week