BEASLEY'S CHRISTMAS PARTY

By Booth Tarkington

Illustrated By Ruth Sypherd Clements

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TO

JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY

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I

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 this metropolis, 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 purlieus 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 overleaped 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 hitch your horse 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 would be on the table often; where one called “the hired man” (and named either Abner or Ole) would crack walnuts upon a flat-iron 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 roof 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 that he meant to attract my attention; that something might be wrong; that perhaps some one 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 doors; one of these was opened, and revealed in silhouette the tall, thin figure of a man in a long, old-fashioned dressing-gown.

“Simpledoria,” he said, addressing the night air with considerable severity, “I don’t know what to make of you. You might have caught your death of cold, roving out at such an hour. But there,” he continued, more indulgently; “wipe your feet on the mat and come in. You’re safe NOW!”

He closed the door, and I heard him call to some one up-stairs, as he rearranged 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.

II

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 misplacements seemed to me not inharmonious with the library, a cheerful and pleasantly shabby apartment down-stairs, where I found (over a substratum of history, encyclopaedia, 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 odd volumes of Victor Hugo, of the elder Dumas, of Flaubert, of Gautier, and of Balzac; Clarissa, Lalla Rookh, The Alhambra, Beulah, Uarda, Lucile, 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 Miss 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 severely, 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 mannered 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 consternation in the little company. The 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 now 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?”

“Ninety-four cents,” 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 unravelled the skein of their relationships, alliances, feuds, and private wars—a precept not unlike the classic injunction:

> “Yes, my darling daughter.
> Hang your clothes on a hickory limb,
> But don’t go near the water.”

However, in my confusion I warmly regretted my failure to follow it, and resolved not to blunder again.

Mr. Dowden thanked me for the information for which he had no real desire, and, the elderly ladies again taking up (with all too evident relief) their various mild debates, he inquired if I played bridge. “But I forget,” he added. “Of course you’ll be at the ‘Despatch’ office in the evenings, and can’t be here.” After which he immediately began to question me about my work, making his determination to give me no opportunity again to mention the Honorable David Beasley unnecessarily conspicuous, as I thought.

I could only conclude that some unpleasantness had arisen between himself and Beasley, probably of political origin, since they were both in politics, and of personal (and consequently bitter) development; and that Mr. Dowden found the mention of Beasley not only unpleasant to himself but a possible embarrassment to the ladies (who, I supposed, were aware of the quarrel) on his account.

After lunch, not having to report at the office immediately, I took unto myself the solace of a cigar, which kept me company during a stroll about Mrs. Apperthwaite’s capacious yard. In the rear I found an old-fashioned rose-garden—the bushes long since bloomless and now brown with autumn—and I paced its gravelled paths up and down, at the same time favoring Mr. Beasley’s house with a covert study that would have done credit to a porch-climber, for the sting of my blunder at the table was quiescent, or at least neutralized, under the itch of a curiosity far from satisfied concerning 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. "Spinsterhood" 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 1830 attempt at gallantry pass without other 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.”

“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’?”

“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 seating ourselves upon a bench beyond the rose-beds 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.

“One explanation might be just barely possible,” I said. “If it is, it is the most remarkable case of somnambulism on record. Did you ever hear of Mr. Beasley’s walking in his—”

She touched me lightly but peremptorily on the arm in warning, and I stopped. On the other side of the board fence a door opened creakily, and there sounded a loud and cheerful voice—that of the gentleman in the dressing-gown.

“HERE we come!” it said; “me and big Bill Hammersley. I want to show Bill I can jump ANYWAYS three times as far as he can! Come on, Bill.”

“Is that Mr. Beasley’s voice?” I asked, under my breath.

Miss Apperthwaite nodded in affirmation.

“Could he have heard me?”

“No,” she whispered. “He’s just come out of the house.” And then to herself, “Who under heaven is Bill Hammersley? I never heard of HIM!”

“Of course, Bill,” said the voice beyond the fence, “if you’re afraid I’ll beat you TOO badly, you’ve still got time to back out. I did understand you to kind of hint that you were considerable of a jumper, but if—What? What’d you say, Bill?” There ensued a moment’s complete silence. “Oh, all right,” the voice then continued. “You say you’re in this to win, do you? Well, so’m I, Bill Hammersley; so’m I. Who’ll go first? Me? All right—from the edge of the walk here. Now then! One—two—three! HA!”

A sound came to our ears of some one landing heavily—and at full length, it seemed—on the turf, followed by a slight, rusty groan in the same voice. “Ugh! Don’t you laugh, Bill Hammersley! I haven’t jumped as much as I OUGHT to, these last twenty years; I reckon I’ve kind of lost the hang of it. Aha!” There were indications that Mr. Beasley was picking himself up, and brushing his trousers with his hands. “Now, it’s your turn, Bill. What say?” Silence again, followed by, “Yes, I’ll make Simpledoria get out of the way. Come here, Simpledoria. Now, Bill, put your heels together on the edge of the walk. That’s right. All ready? Now then! One for the money—two for the show—three to make ready—and four for to GO!” Another silence. “By jingo, Bill Hammersley, you’ve beat me! Ha, ha! That WAS a jump! What say?” Silence once more. “You say you can do even better than that? Now, Bill, don’t brag. Oh! you say you’ve often jumped farther? Oh! you say that was up in Scotland, where you had a spring-board? Oho! All right; let’s see how far you can jump when you really try. There! Heels on the walk again. That’s right; swing your arms. One—two—three! THERE you

go!" Another silence. "ZING! Well, sir, I'll be e-tarnally snitched to flinders if you didn't do it THAT time, Bill Hammersley! I see I never really saw any jumping before in all my born days. It's eleven feet if it's an inch. What? You say you—"

I heard no more, for Miss Apperthwaite, her face flushed and her eyes shining, beckoned me imperiously to follow her, and departed so hurriedly that it might be said she ran.

"I don't know," said I, keeping at her elbow, "whether it's more like Alice 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 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 plain 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 Gervaise and the barricade this afternoon!”

III

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 Spencerville politics, 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 didoes 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 invoice 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 careless. He was the kind of person you LIKE to meet on the street; whose cheerful passing sends you on feeling indefinably 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 unremindful 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—

Gadzooks! 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-heelers and camp-followers 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 more 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 shivering 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, 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-day’s spree, in the closing scenes of which a couple of brickbats were featured to high, spectacular effect. One he sent through a jeweller’s show-window in an attempt to intimidate some wholly imaginary pursuers, the other he projected at a perfectly actual 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.