

# Beasley and the Hunchbergs

By Guy Tarkington

I HAD been anxious to know more of the Hon. David Beasley than was to be extracted from the common report of him, which was, in substance, but a wondering chuckle over his oddities; for ever since I had come to Wainwright, the middle-sized "middle Western" town which had been his home, everything I heard of him invested him, for me, with an elusive attractiveness. However, although he was a man of whom people talked, I could obtain for a long time only casual and fragmentary information; not because of any unwillingness to talk on the part of those I questioned, but because (until I struck the right man) they happened to be of the great mass who are inarticulate. "Oh, yes, I knew Dave Beasley," they would say, with a laugh. "Everybody did." And when I asked: "What was he like?" "Oh, he was all right," or "A mighty able man," or "A pretty good sort of feller." At last I met the right man, an old political friend of Beasley's, and he, sitting deep in a leather chair at the club, looked at me for some moments in silence, before he slowly removed the cigar from his mouth to say: "If I knew how much time you had—"

"I have all there is," I interrupted. "Well, then," he said, "I don't believe I could make you understand what he was like any way better than telling you the story of a Christmas ball he gave."

I saw that this was what I had been looking for, and forthwith he began: "Beasley was a quiet kind of man, yet he had a lively, pleasant, quizzical expression; the kind of person you like to meet in the street. Easy-going, plain-mannered, he was; tall and gaunt, with a smooth-shaven, thin, Spi-Smith-Russell-looking face; high forehead, hair rather sparse, his hat usually tilted a little toward the back of his head; you could tell in a glance that he was an easy thing for every fraud and beggar that ever came near him; and as for the ward heelers and camp-followers and grafters what they got out of him from one year's end to another used to make us cry! And yet he was as shrewd a man as you'll meet in a long time; he was all there in politics, and had a fine law practice besides.

He had a name for eccentricity; he wasn't a man that everybody would understand, and some people used to say that his way of giving charity did a lot of harm; that he ought to send beggars and tramps to the regular organizations where they were investigated and helped in a proper way. I remember once there was some genuine indignation about it; he took off his overcoat on the street on a cold day, and gave it and a five-dollar gold piece to a ragged old reprobate who was whining for a dime. Well, sir, within two hours the beneficiary was blind-drunk and throwing brick-bats through plate-glass show-windows in the best business street. He finished off by putting a hole through the leg of the policeman who arrested him; and there was considerable talk that Beasley was responsible. But it died down, except here and there, because, after all, when they came right down to it, people had to admit that he didn't really have any bad motive in giving away his overcoat and the gold piece. Still, such things as this—and a lot of others, too—got him quite a name for being eccentric.

He lived in a nice house half a mile up the street here, in the prettiest part of town; he spent most of his time, when he wasn't at work, right there; very seldom going out of evenings, but reading in his library, all alone. He was an old bachelor, you know, but he kept house; had an old nigger mammy to cook—and she could!—and her husband, Bob, to wait on him. Bob was an old-time nigger; played the fiddle—upside down, of course—but mighty well, and

many's the time, when I've been there, spending an evening with Beasley, that we'd have the old coon in and make him play, for I could listen to him by the hour.

Beasley had grown up with a cousin of his, named Hamilton Swift; a good man he was, too. They were boys together, went to the same school, and then to college, and I don't believe they ever had a quarrel. They seemed to get along better together than any other two men I ever knew, and it was a real blow to Dave Beasley, after they got back from college, when Swift got a chance to go into business in New York and went there to live. Still, they always managed to get together once a year, anyway; generally about Christmas time. Either Dave would go on East or Hamilton Swift would come out here, and they'd have a celebration. When it happened that Swift was here, you couldn't go by the house without hearing their laughter ringing out louder than the sleigh-bells, over some old-time joke they'd be going over—some fool thing they'd do, probably, when they were boys.

Swift stayed a bachelor until he was over forty; then his business took him to London to live, and after he'd been there a year he married an English girl, an orphan, without any kin. And then—I think it may have been about seven years after they were married—one morning I picked up the paper and saw that they had both been drowned, by the capsizing of a boat in the lake of Lucerne, where they'd gone on a vacation trip; they had left one child, the paper stated, a boy, three years old, and that was news to me, for, although I'd often talked of Hamilton Swift with Dave, the latter had never mentioned that there had been a child.

I knew what a loss the death of his cousin would mean to him, and I almost turned and went around another way, that afternoon, when I saw him coming toward me on the street; he looked so white and haggard and generally all broken up that I felt like shirking the meeting, but we stopped, and shook hands. He was on his way to the station, he told me, going straight to Lucerne as fast as trains and boats would take him.

"There's nothing else to do," he said, "for there's no one else to do it. I suppose I'll bring the poor little chap home with me."

"I didn't know there was a child," said I, "until this morning. You'd never happened to mention it."

As soon as I spoke, I saw by his ex-

pression that there had been a reason for his silence. "No," he returned, in a low voice, shaking his head; "there was something the matter with the little fellow from his birth, both structural and nervous disorganizations, and it was a great sorrow to Hamilton—naturally a terrible disappointment. Only lately they'd begun to hope he'd come around all right in time."

"I hope so," I said, knowing nothing else to say, and then, when I had stumbled over some idiotic wish that he might have a pleasant journey, he told me good-bye and went on.

Two months later he was home again, and the little boy with him; and that was the most curious child I ever saw. Curious not only in the compilation of infirmities that disturbed his tiny make-up, but in his ways and thoughts. I never did rightly know what was the matter with him; he wore a brace that must have been a pretty elaborate affair;—and—as I remember it—there was a steel-and-leather arrangement or other that seemed to support his chin; and I know that he was subject to attacks of some kind, when he would be in bed for several days and no one would see him but Beasley, the doctor and the two niggers. Beasley hated to speak of the little fellow's disorders, and nobody had the impudence to question him.

But when Hamilton Swift, junior, was able to be up and to hobble about the house and yard, he was a mighty interesting person—all the more so, I expect, on account of his misfortunes; and, strange as it is, he was as cheerful as a grass-hopper. He was undersized all over, but had a weazened little face, yellow and peaked, that lit up brighter than anything you ever saw, and his eyes were as shrewd and smart as a wicked old woman's; yet they were as trustful and full of fun as a puppy's; and he had a squeaky, piping voice that was pitiful to hear, it was so unlike what a healthy child's voice ought to be; and yet he used it to pretty good effect. I don't know what his mental condition may have been, up to the time when his parents had begun to feel more hopeful of him, but whenever I saw him (which was often, though, of course, never when he was having one of his spells), his mind was certainly active enough to keep ahead of me! And he was mighty masterful. He was interested in bears, I remember, for quite a long time, and the knew of all of Beasley's trousers were a sight, and he was hoarse in court from growling, until

Hamilton Swift, Junior, invested the Hunchbergs.

All children have make-believe companions and friends, of course; often they manufacture a special playmate; almost everybody can remember one of his own, or several, perhaps; but Hamilton Swift, Junior, had twenty or thirty of them, and the greatest of these were the Hunchbergs. Poor little cuss, he couldn't play with other children, though, for the matter of that, he never seemed to care to, or to be much interested in them; and this may have been why all his invisibles (except Simpledoria) were grown folks.

The Hunchberg family arrived all together, one sunny morning, and with them was Simpledoria, their dog. Nobody ever figured out where Hamilton Swift, Junior, got these names; they were his own; nothing in Wainwright could have suggested them, and he had been in the town a year when they came, so it hardly seemed likely that he remembered them from over the water. Beasley and I believed that he just made them up, like "old Bill Hammeysley," and "Mr Corley Lubridge," two other invisibles of his.

Beasley told me about the advent of the Hunchbergs; he had just opened the front door, one noon, home from his office, when Hamilton Swift, Junior's, voice came piping from the library, where he was lying on a little cot or wheels that had been made for him, so that he could be trundled about the house when he didn't feel able to walk. "Cousin David, come a-running come a-running!" he called. "The Hunchbergs are here!"

Beasley went at once and was introduced to the whole family, a ceremony which Bob, the nigger (who was with the boy), had previously gone through. "They like Bob," explained Hamilton—"don't you, Mr Hunchberg? Yes, he says they do—extremely." He used to say such words as "extremely"; that boy, he didn't talk like an American child, but more like a child in a book, quite correctly, as I've heard that many English children do. "And I'm sure," he went on, "that the whole family admires Cousin David Beasley. Don't you, Mr Hunchberg?"

Then he explained where Simpledoria was, so that Beasley could put him, and went almost out of his head with joy when Dave offered Mr Hunchberg a cigar and struck a match for him to light it. I met the family myself the next day when I happened to drop in; and Beasley, by that time, had got to know them so well that he helped in the introductions. There was Mr Hunchberg—evidently the child's favourite, for he was described as the possessor of every virtue and most engaging manners; and there were the Hunchberg young gentlemen; Tom, Noble, and Grandee; and Mrs Hunchberg (a lively matron), and the young ladies, Miss Queen, Miss Marble, and Miss Molanna, all exceedingly gay and

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