

COBB IRVIN SHREWSBURY

COBB'S ANATOMY

Irvin Cobb

Cobb's Anatomy

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Irvin S. Cobb

Cobb's Anatomy

Preface

This Space To-Let to Any Reputable Party Desiring a Good Preface

TUMMIES

Dr. Woods Hutchinson says that fat people are happier than other people. How does Dr. Woods Hutchinson know? Did he ever have to leave the two top buttons of his vest unfastened on account of his extra chins? Has the pressure from within against the waistband where the watchfob is located ever been so great in his case that he had partially to undress himself to find out what time it was? Does he have to take the tailor's word for it that his trousers need pressing?

He does not. And that sort of a remark is only what might be expected from any person upward of seven feet tall and weighing about ninety-eight pounds with his heavy underwear on. I shall freely take Dr. Woods Hutchinson's statements on the joys and ills of the thin. But when he undertakes to tell me that fat people are happier than thin people, it is only hearsay evidence with him and decline to accept his statements unchallenged. He is going outside of his class. He is, as you might say, no more than an innocent bystander. Whereas I am a qualified authority.

I will admit that at one stage of my life, I regarded fleshiness as a desirable asset. The incident came about in this way. There was a circus showing in our town and a number of us proposed to attend it. It was one of those one-ring, ten-cent circuses that used to go about over the country, and it is my present recollection that all of us had funds laid by sufficient to buy tickets; but if we could procure admission in the regular way we felt it would be a sinful waste of money to pay our way in.

With this idea in mind we went scouting round back of the main tent to a comparatively secluded spot, and there we found a place where the canvas side-wall lifted clear of the earth for a matter of four or five inches. We held an informal caucus to decide who should go first. The honor lay between two of us—between the present writer, who was reasonably skinny, and another boy, named Thompson, who was even skinnier. He won, as the saying is, on form. It was decided by practically a unanimous vote, he alone dissenting, that he should crawl under and see how the land lay inside. If everything was all right he would make it known by certain signals and we would then follow, one by one.

Two of us lifted the canvas very gently and this Thompson boy started to wriggle under. He was about halfway in when—zip!—like a flash he bodily vanished. He was gone, leaving only the marks where his toes had gouged the soil. Startled, we looked at one another. There was something peculiar about this. Here was a boy who had started into a circus tent in a circumspect, indeed, a highly cautious manner, and then finished the trip with undue and sudden precipitancy. It was more than peculiar—it bordered upon the uncanny. It was sinister. Without a word having been spoken we decided to go away from there.

Wearing expressions of intense unconcern and sterling innocence upon our young faces we did go away from there and drifted back in the general direction of the main entrance. We arrived just in time to meet our young friend coming out. He came hurriedly, using his hands and his feet both, his feet for traveling and his hands for rubbing purposes. Immediately behind him was a large, coarse man using language that stamped him as a man who had outgrown the spirit of youth and was preeminently out of touch with the ideals and aims of boyhood.

At that period it seemed to me and to the Thompson boy, who was moved to speak feelingly on the subject, and in fact to all of us, that excessive slimness might have its drawbacks. Since that time several of us have had occasion to change our minds. With the passage of years we have fleshened up, and now we know better. The last time I saw the Thompson boy he was known as Excess-Baggage Thompson. His figure in profile suggested a man carrying a roll-top desk in his arms and his face looked like a face that had refused to jell and was about to run down on his clothes. He spoke longingly of the days of his youth and wondered if the shape of his knees had changed much since the last time he saw them.

Yes sir, no matter what Doctor Hutchinson says, I contend that the slim man has all the best of it in this world. The fat man is the universal goat; he is humanity's standing joke. Stomachs are the curse of our modern civilization. When a man gets a stomach his troubles begin. If you doubt this ask any fat man—I started to say ask any fat woman, too. Only there aren't any fat women to speak of. There are women who are plump and will admit it; there are even women who are inclined to be stout. But outside of dime museums there are no fat women. But there are plenty of fat men. Ask one of them. Ask any one of them. Ask me.

This thing of acquiring a tummy steals on one insidiously, like a thief in the night. You notice that you are plumping out a trifle and for the time being you feel a sort of small personal satisfaction in it. Your shirts fit you better. You love the slight strain upon the buttonholes. You admire the pleasant plunking sound suggestive of ripe watermelons when you pat yourself. Then a day comes when the persuasive odor of mothballs fills the autumnal air and everybody at the barber shop is having the back of his neck shaved also, thus betokening awakened social activities, and when evening is at hand you take the dress-suit, which fitted you so well, out of the closet where it has been hanging and undertake to back yourself into it. You are pained to learn that it is about three sizes too small. At first you are inclined to blame the suit for shrinking, but second thought convinces you that the fault lies elsewhere. It is you that have swollen, not the suit that has shrunk. The buttons that should adorn the front of the coat are now plainly visible from the rear.

You buy another dress-suit and next fall you have out-grown that one too. You pant like a lizard when you run to catch a car. You cross your legs and have to hold the crossed one on with both hands to keep your stomach from shoving it off in space. After a while you quit crossing them and are content with dawdling yourself on your own lap. You are fat! Dog-gone it—you are fat!

You are up against it and it is up against you, which is worse. You are something for people to laugh at. You are also expected to laugh. It is all right for a thin man to be grouchy; people will say the poor creature has dyspepsia and should be humored along. But a fat man with a grouch is inexcusable in any company—there is so much of him to be grouchy. He constitutes a wave of discontent and a period of general depression. He is not expected to be romantic and sentimental either. It is all right for a giraffe to be sentimental, but not a hippopotamus. If you doubt me consult any set of natural history pictures. The giraffe is shown with his long and sinuous neck entwined in fond embrace about the neck of his mate; but the amphibious, blood-sweating hippo is depicted as spouting and wallowing, morose and misanthropic, in a mud puddle off by himself. In passing I may say that I regard this comparison as a particularly apt one, because I know of no living creature so truly amphibious in hot weather as an open-pored fat man, unless it is a hippopotamus.

Oh how true is the saying that nobody loves a fat man! When fat comes up on the front porch love jumps out of the third-story window. Love in a cottage? Yes. Love in a rendering plant? No. A fat man's heart is supposed to lie so far inland that the softer emotions cannot reach it at all. Yet the fattest are the truest, if you did but know it, and also they are the tenderest and a man with a double chin rarely leads a double life. For one thing, it requires too much moving round.

A fat man cannot wear the clothes he would like to wear. As a race fat men are fond of bright and cheerful colors; but no fat man can indulge his innocent desires in this direction without grieving his family and friends and exciting the derisive laughter of the unthinking. If he puts on a fancy-flowered vest, they'll say he looks like a Hanging Garden of Babylon. And yet he has a figure just made for showing off a fancy-flowered vest to best effect. He may favor something in light checks for his spring suit; but if he ventures abroad in a checked suit, ribald strangers will look at him meaningfully and remark to one another that the center of population appears to be shifting again. It has been my observation that fat men are instinctively drawn to short tan overcoats for the early fall. But a fat man in a short tan overcoat, strolling up the avenue of a sunny afternoon, will be constantly overhearing persons behind him wondering why they didn't wait until night to move the bank vault. That irks him sore; but if he turns round to reproach them he is liable to shove an old lady or a poor blind man off

the sidewalk, and then, like as not, some gamin will sing out: "Hully gee, Chimmy, wot's become of the rest of the parade? 'Ere's the bass drum goin' home all by itself."

I've known of just such remarks being made and I assure you they cut a sensitive soul to the core. Not for the fat man are the snappy clothes for varsity men and the patterns called by the tailors confined because that is what they should be but aren't. Not for him the silken shirt with the broad stripes. Shirts with stripes that were meant to run vertically but are caused to run horizontally, by reasons over which the wearer has no control, remind others of the awning over an Italian grocery. So the fat man must stick to sober navy blues and depressing blacks and melancholy grays. He is advised that he should wear his evening clothes whenever possible, because black and white lines are more becoming to him. But even in evening clothes, that wide expanse of glazed shirt and those white enamel studs will put the onlookers in mind of the front end of a dairy lunch or so I have been cruelly told.

When planning public utilities, who thinks of a fat man? There never was a hansom cab made that would hold a fat man comfortably unless he left the doors open, and that makes him feel undressed. There never was an orchestra seat in a theater that would contain all of him at the same time—he churns up and sloshes out over the sides. Apartment houses and elevators and hotel towels are all constructed upon the idea that the world is populated by stock-size people with those double-A-last shapes.

Take a Pullman car, for instance. One of the saddest sights known is that of a fat man trying to undress on one of those closet shelves called upper berths without getting hopelessly entangled in the hammock or committing suicide by hanging himself with his own suspenders. And after that, the next most distressing sight is the same fat man after he has undressed and is lying there, spouting like a sperm-whale and overflowing his reservation like a crock of salt-rising dough in a warm kitchen, and wondering how he can turn over without bulging the side of the car and maybe causing a wreck. Ah me, those dark green curtains with the overcoat buttons on them hide many a distressful spectacle from the traveling public!

If a fat man undertakes to reduce nobody sympathizes with him. A thin man trying to fatten up so he won't fall all the way through his trousers when he draws 'em on in the morning is an object of sympathy and of admiration, and people come from miles round and give him advice about how to do it. But suppose a fat man wants to train down to a point where, when he goes into a telephone booth and says "Ninety-four Broad," the spectators will know he is trying to get a number and not telling his tailor what his waist measure is.

Is he greeted with sympathetic understanding? He is not. He is greeted with derision and people stand round and gloat at him. The authorities recommend health exercises, but health exercises are almost invariably undignified in effect and wearing besides. Who wants to greet the dewy morn by lying flat on his back and lifting his feet fifty times? What kind of a way is that to greet the dewy morn anyhow? And bending over with the knees stiff and touching the tips of the toes with the tips of the fingers—that's no employment for a grown man with a family to support and a position to maintain in society. Besides which it cannot be done. I make the statement unequivocally and without fear of successful contradiction that it cannot be done. And if it could be done—which as I say it can't—there would be no real pleasure in touching a set of toes that one has known of only by common rumor for years. Those toes are the same as strangers to you—you knew they were in the neighborhood, of course, but you haven't been intimate with them.

Maybe you try dieting, which is contrary to nature. Nature intended that a fat man should eat heartily, else why should she endow him with the capacity and the accommodations. Starving in the midst of plenty is not for him who has plenty of midst. Nature meant that a fat man should have an appetite and that he should gratify it at regular intervals—meant that he should feel like the Grand Canyon before dinner and like the Royal Gorge afterward. Anyhow, dieting for a fat man consists in not eating anything that's fit to eat. The specialist merely tells him to eat what a horse would eat

and has the nerve to charge him for what he could have found out for himself at any livery stable. Of course he might bant in the same way that a woman bants. You know how a woman bants. She begins the day very resolutely, and if you are her husband you want to avoid irritating her or upsetting her, because hell hath no fury like a woman banting. For breakfast she takes a swallow of lukewarm water and half of a soda cracker. For luncheon she takes the other half of the cracker and leaves off the water. For dinner she orders everything on the menu except the date and the name of the proprietor. She does this in order to give her strength to go on with the treatment.

No fat man would diet that way; but no matter which way he does diet it doesn't do him any good. Health exercises only make him muscle-sore and bring on what the Harvard ball team call the Charles W. Horse; while banting results in attacks of those kindred complaints—the Mollie K. Grubbs and the Fan J. Todds.

Walking is sometimes recommended and the example of the camel is pointed out, the camel being a creature that can walk for days and days. But, as has been said by some thinking person, who in thunder wants to be a camel? The subject of horseback riding is also brought up frequently in this connection. It is one of the commonest delusions among fat men that horseback riding will bring them down and make them sylphlike and willowy. I have several fat men among my lists of acquaintances who labor under this fallacy. None of them was ever a natural-born horseback rider; none of them ever will be. I like to go out of a bright morning and take a comfortable seat on a park bench—one park bench is plenty roomy enough if nobody else is using it—and sit there and watch these unhappy persons passing single file along the bridle-path. I sit there and gloat until by rights I ought to be required to take out a gloater's license.

Mind you, I have no prejudice against horseback riding as such. Horseback riding is all right for mounted policemen and Colonel W. F. Cody and members of the Stickney family and the party who used to play Mazeppa in the sterling drama of that name. That is how those persons make their living. They are suited for it and acclimated to it. It is also all right for equestrian statues of generals in the Civil War. But it is not a fit employment for a fat man and especially for a fat man who insists on trying to ride a hard-trotting horse English style, which really isn't riding at all when you come right down to cases, but an outdoor cure for neurasthenia invented, I take it, by a British subject who was nervous himself and hated to stay long in one place. So, as I was saying, I sit there on my comfortable park bench and watch those friends of mine bouncing by, each wearing on his face that set expression which is seen also on the faces of some men while waltzing, and on the faces of most women when entertaining their relatives by marriage. I have one friend who is addicted to this form of punishment in a violent, not to say a malignant form. He uses for his purpose a tall and self-willed horse of the Tudor period—a horse with those high dormer effects and a sloping mansard. This horse must have been raised, I think, in the knockabout song-and-dance business. Every time he hears music or thinks he hears it he stops and vamps with his feet. When he does this my friend bends forward and clutches him round the neck tightly. I think he is trying to whisper in the horse's ear and beg him in Heaven's name to forbear; but what he looks like is Santa Claus with a clean shave, sitting on the combing of a very steep house with his feet hanging over the eaves, peeking down the chimney to see if the children are asleep yet. When that horse dies he will still have finger marks on his throat and the authorities will suspect foul play probably.

Once I tried it myself. I was induced to scale the heights of a horse that was built somewhat along the general idea of the Andes Mountains, only more rugged and steeper nearing the crest. From the ground he looked to be not more than sixteen hands high, but as soon as I was up on top of him I immediately discerned that it was not sixteen hands—it was sixteen miles. What I had taken for the horse's blaze face was a snow-capped peak. Miss Anna Peck might have felt at home up there, because she has had the experience and is used to that sort of thing, but I am no mountain climber myself.

Before I could make any move to descend to the lower and less rarefied altitudes the horse began executing a few fancy steps, and he started traveling sidewise with a kind of a slanting bias

movement that was extremely disconcerting, not to say alarming, instead of proceeding straight ahead as a regular horse would. I clung there astraddle of his ridge pole, with my fingers twined in his mane, trying to anticipate where he would be next, in order to be there to meet him if possible; and I resolved right then that, if Providence in His wisdom so willed it that I should get down from up there alive, I would never do so again. However, I did not express these longings in words—not at that time. At that time there were only two words in the English language which seemed to come to me. One of them was "Whoa" and the other was "Ouch," and I spoke them alternately with such rapidity that they merged into the compound word "Whouch," which is a very expressive word and one that I would freely recommend to others who may be situated as I was.

At that moment, of all the places in the world that I could think of—and I could think of a great many because the events of my past life were rapidly flashing past me—as is customary, I am told, in other cases of grave peril, such as drowning—I say of all the places in the world there were just two where I least desired to be—one was up on top of that horse and the other was down under him. But it seemed to be a choice of the two evils, and so I chose the lesser and got under him. I did this by a simple expedient that occurred to me at the moment. I fell off. I was tramped on considerably, and the earth proved to be harder than it looked when viewed from an approximate height of sixteen miles up, but I lived and breathed—or at least I breathed after a time had elapsed—and I was satisfied. And so, having gone through this experience myself, I am in position to appreciate what any other man of my general build is going through as I see him bobbing by—the poor martyr, sacrificing himself as a burnt offering, or anyway a blistered one—on the high altar of a Gothic ruin of a horse. And, besides, I know that riding a horse doesn't reduce a fat man. It merely reduces the horse.

So it goes—the fat man is always up against it. His figure is half-masted in regretful memory of the proportions he had once, and he is made to mourn. Most sports and many gainful pursuits are closed against him. He cannot play lawn tennis, or, at least according to my observation, he cannot play lawn tennis oftener than once in two weeks. In between games he limps round, stiff as a hat tree and sore as a mashed thumb. Time was when he might mingle in the mystic mazes of the waltz, tripping the light fantastic toe or stubbing it, as the case may be. But that was in the days of the old-fashioned square dance, which was the fat man's friend among dances, and also of the old-fashioned two-step, and not in these times when dancing is a cross between a wrestling match, a contortion act and a trip on a roller-coaster, and is either named for an animal, like the Bunny Hug and the Tarantula Glide, or for a town, like the Mobile Mop-Up, and the Far Rockaway Rock and the South Bend Bend. His friends would interfere—or the authorities would. He can go in swimming, it is true; but if he turns over and floats, people yell out that somebody has set the life raft adrift; and if he basks at the water's edge, boats will come in and try to dock alongside him; and if he takes a sun bath on the beach and sunburns, there's so everlasting much of him to be sunburned that he practically amounts to a conflagration. He can't shoot rapids, craps or big game with any degree of comfort; nor play billiards. He can't get close enough to the table to make the shots, and he puts all the English on himself and none of it on the cue ball.

Consider the gainful pursuits. Think how many of them are denied to the man who may have energy and ability but is shut out because there are a few extra terraces on his front lawn. A fat man cannot be a leading man in a play. Nobody desires a fat hero for a novel. A fat man cannot go in for aeroplaning. He cannot be a wire-walker or a successful walker of any of the other recognized brands—track, cake, sleep or floor. He doesn't make a popular waiter. Nobody wants a fat waiter on a hot day. True, you may make him bring your order under covered dishes, but even so, there is still that suggestion of rain on a tin roof that is distasteful to so many.

So I repeat that fat people are always getting the worst of it, and I say again, of all the ills that flesh is heir to, the worst is the flesh itself. As the poet says—"The world, the flesh and the devil"—and there you have it in a sentence—the flesh in between, catching the devil on one side and the jeers of the world on the other. I don't care what Dr. Woods Hutchinson or any other thin man says! I

contend that history is studded with instances of prominent persons who lost out because they got fat. Take Cleopatra now, the lady to whom Marc Antony said: "I am dying, Egypt, dying," and then refrained from doing so for about nineteen more stanzas. Cleo or Pat—she was known by both names, I hear—did fairly well as a queen, as a coquette and as a promoter of excursions on the river—until she fleshened up. Then she flivvered. Doctor Johnson was a fat man and he suffered from prickly heat, and from Boswell, and from the fact that he couldn't eat without spilling most of the gravy on his second mezzanine landing. As a thin and spindly stripling Napoleon altered the map of Europe and stood many nations on their heads. It was after he had grown fat and pursy that he landed on St. Helena and spent his last days on a barren rock, with his arms folded, posing for steel engravings. Nero was fat, and he had a lot of hard luck in keeping his relatives—they were almost constantly dying on him and he finally had to stab himself with one of those painful-looking old Roman two-handed swords, lest something really serious befall him. Falstaff was fat, and he lost the favor of kings in the last act. Coming down to our own day and turning to a point no farther away than the White House at Washington—but have we not enough examples without becoming personal? Yes, I know Julius Caesar said: "Let me have men about me that are fat." But you bet it wasn't in the heated period when J. Caesar said that!

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