

**COBB IRVIN  
SHREWSBURY**

ONE THIRD OFF

Irvin Cobb  
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**Cobb I.**

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# Irvin S. Cobb

## One Third Off

### CHAPTER I

#### *Extra! Extra! All About The Great Reduction!*

The way I look at this thing is this way: If something happens to you and by writing about it you can make a bit of money and at the same time be a benefactor to the race, then why not? Does not the philanthropic aspect of the proposition more than balance off the mercenary side? I hold that it does, or at least that it should, in the estimation of all fair-minded persons. It is to this class that I particularly address myself. Unfair-minded persons are advised to take warning and stop right here with the contemporary paragraph. That which follows in this little volume is not for them.

An even stronger motive impels me. In hereinafter setting forth at length and in detail the steps taken by me in making myself thin, or, let us say, thinner, I am patterning after the tasteful and benevolent examples of some of the most illustrious ex-fat men of letters in our country. Take Samuel G. Blythe now. Mr. Blythe is the present international bant-weight champion. There was a time, though, when he was what the world is pleased to call over-sized. In writing on several occasions, and always entertainingly and helpfully, upon the subject of the methods employed by him to reduce himself to his current proportions I hold that he had the right idea about it.

Getting fat is a fault; except when caused by the disease known as obesity, it is a bad habit. Getting thin and at the same time retaining one's health is a virtue. Never does the reductionist feel quite so virtuous as when for the first time, perhaps in decades, he can stand straight up and look straight down and behold the tips of his toes. His virtue is all the more pleasant to him because it recalls a reformation on his part and because it has called for self-denial. I started to say that it had called for mortification of the flesh, but I shan't. Despite the contrary opinions of the early fathers of the church, I hold that the mortification of the flesh is really based upon the flesh itself, where there is too much of it for beauty and grace, not merely upon the process employed in getting rid of it.

Ask any fat man—or better still, any formerly fat man—if I am not correct. But do not ask a fat woman unless, as in the case of possible fire at a theater, you already have looked about you and chosen the nearest exit. Taken as a sex, women are more likely to be touchy upon this detail where it applies to themselves than men are.

I have a notion that probably the late Lucrezia Borgia did not start feeding her house guests on those deep-dish poison pies with which her name historically is associated until after she grew sensitive about the way folks dropping in at the Borgia home for a visit were sizing up her proportions on the bias, so to speak. And I attribute the development of the less pleasant side of Cleopatra's disposition—keeping asp's around the house and stabbing the bearers of unpleasant tidings with daggers and feeding people to the crocodiles and all that sort of thing—to the period when she found her anklets binding uncomfortably and along toward half past ten o'clock of an evening was seized by a well-nigh uncontrollable longing to excuse herself from the company and run upstairs and take off her jeweled stomacher and things and slip into something loose.

But upon this subject men are less inclined to be fussy, and by the same token more inclined, on having accomplished a cure, to take a justifiable pride in it and to brag publicly about it. As I stated a moment ago, I claim Mr. Blythe viewed the matter in a proper and commendable light when he took pen in hand to describe more or less at length his reduction processes. So, too, did that other notable of the literary world, Mr. Vance Thompson. Mr. Thompson would be the last one to deny that once upon a time he undeniably was large. The first time I ever saw him—it was in Paris some

years ago, and he was walking away from me and had his back to me and was wearing a box coat—I thought for a moment they were taking a tractor across town. All that, however, belongs to the past. Just so soon as Mr. Thompson had worked out a system of dieting and by personal application had proved its success he wrote the volume *Eat and Grow Thin*, embodying therein his experiences, his course of treatment and his advice to former fellow sufferers. So you see in saying now what I mean to say I do but follow in the mouth-prints of the famous.

Besides, when I got fat I capitalized my fatness in the printed word. I told how it felt to be fat.

I described how natural it was for a fat man to feel like the Grand Cañon before dinner and like the Royal Gorge afterwards.

I told how, if he wedged himself into a telephone booth and said, "64 Broad," persons overhearing him were not sure whether he was asking Central for a number or telling a tailor what his waist measurements were.

I told how deeply it distressed him as he walked along, larding the earth as he passed, to hear bystanders making ribald comments about the inadvisability of trying to move bank vaults through the streets in the daytime. And now that, after fifteen years of fatness, I am getting thin again—glory be!—wherein, I ask, is the impropriety in furnishing the particulars for publication; the more especially since my own tale, I fondly trust, may make helpful telling for some of my fellow creatures? When you can offer a boon to humanity and at the same time be paid for it the dual advantage is not to be decried.

## CHAPTER II

### *Those Romping Elfin Twenties*

It has been my personal observation, viewing the matter at close range, that nearly always fat, like old age or a thief in the dark, steals upon one unawares. I take my own case. As a youngster and on through my teens and into my early twenties—ah, those romping elfin twenties!—I was, in outline, what might be termed dwindly, not to say slimmish. Those who have known me in my latter years might be loath to believe it, but one of my boyhood nick-names—I had several, and none of them was complimentary but all of them were graphic—was Boney. At sixteen, by striping myself in alternate whites and blacks, I could have hired out for a surveyor's rod. At twenty-one I measured six feet the long way, and if only mine had been a hook nose I should have cast a shadow like a shepherd's crook.

My avocation in life was such as to induce slenderness. I was the city staff of a small-town daily paper, and what with dodging round gathering up items about people to write for the paper and then dodging round to avoid personal contact with the people I had written the items about for the paper, I was kept pretty constantly upon the go. In our part of the country in those days the leading citizens were prone to take offense at some of the things that were said of them in the public prints and given to expressing their sense of annoyance forcibly. When a high-spirited Southern gentleman, regarding whom something of a disagreeable nature had appeared in the news columns, entered the editorial sanctum without knocking, wearing upon his crimsoned face an expression of forthright irritation and with his right hand stealing back under his coat skirt, it was time for the offending reporter to emulate the common example of the native white-throated nut-hatch and either flit thence rapidly or hunt a hole.

Since prohibition came in and a hiccup became a mark of affluence instead of a social error, as formerly, and a loaded flank is a sign of hospitality rather than of menace, things may have changed. I am speaking, though, of the damper early nineties in Kentucky, when a sudden motion toward the right hip pocket was a threat and not a promise, as at present. So, what with first one thing and then another, now collecting the news of the community and now avoiding the customary consequences, I did a good deal of running about hither and yon, and kept fit and spry and stripling-thin.

Yet I ate heartily of all things that appealed to my palate, eating at least two kinds of hot bread at every meal—down South we say it with flours—and using chewing tobacco for the salad course, as was the custom. I ate copiously at and between meals and gained not a whit.

## CHAPTER III

### *Regarding Liver-Eating Watkins and Others*

It was after I had moved to New York and had taken a desk job that I detected myself in the act, as it were, of plumping out. Cognizant of the fact, as I was, I nevertheless took no curative or corrective measures in the way of revising my diet. I was content to make excuses inwardly. I said to myself that I came of a breed whose members in their mature years were inclined to broaden noticeably. I said to myself that I was not getting the amount of exercise that once I had; that my occupation was now more sedentary, and therefore it stood to reason that I should take on a little flesh here and there over my frame. Moreover, I felt good. If I had felt any better I could have charged admission. My appetite was perfect, my digestion magnificent, nay, awe-inspiring.

To me it seemed that physically I was just as active and agile as I had been in those 'prentice years of my professional career when the ability to shift quickly from place to place and to think with an ornithological aptitude were conducive to a continuance of unimpaired health among young reporters. Anyhow—thus I to myself in the same strain, continuing—anyhow, I was not actually getting fat. Nothing so gross as that. I merely was attaining to a pleasant, a becoming and a dignified fullness of contour as I neared my thirtieth birthday. So why worry about what was natural and normal among persons of my temperament, and having my hereditary impulses, upon attaining a given age?

I am convinced that men who are getting fat are generally like that. For every added pound an added excuse, for each multiplying inch at the waistline a new plea in abatement to be set up in the mind. I see the truth of it now. When you start getting fat you start getting fatuous. With the indubitable proof of his infirmity mounting in superimposed folds of tissues before his very gaze, with the rounded evidence presented right there in front of him where he can rest his elbows on it, your average fattish man nevertheless refuses to acknowledge the visible situation. Vanity blinds his one eye, love of self-indulgence blinds the other. Observe now how I speak in the high moral tone of a reformed offender, which is the way of reformed offenders and other reformers the world over. We are always most virtuous in retrospect, as the fact of the crime recedes. Moreover, he who has not erred has but little to gloat over.

There are two sorts of evidence upon which many judges look askance—that sort of evidence which is circumstantial and that sort which purely is hearsay. In this connection, and departing for the space of a paragraph or so from the main theme, I am reminded of the incident through which a certain picturesque gentleman of the early days in California acquired a name which he was destined to wear forever after, and under which his memory is still affectionately encysted in the traditions of our great Far West. I refer to the late Liver-Eating Watkins. Mr. Watkins entered into active life and passed through a good part of it bearing the unilluminative and commonplace first name of Elmer or Lemuel, or perhaps it was Jasper. Just which one of these or some other I forgot now, but no matter; at least it was some such. One evening a low-down terra-cotta-colored Piute swiped two of Mr. Watkins' paint ponies and by stealth, under cover of the cloaking twilight, went away with them into the far mysterious spaces of the purpling sage.

To these ponies the owner was deeply attached, not alone on account of the intrinsic value, but for sentimental reasons likewise. So immediately on discovering the loss the next morning, Mr. Watkins took steps. He saddled a third pony which the thief had somehow overlooked in the haste of departure, and he girded on him both cutlery and shootlery, and he mounted and soon was off and away across the desert upon the trail of the vanished malefactor. Now when Mr. Watkins fared forth thus accoutered it was a sign he was not out for his health or anybody else's.

Friends and well-wishers volunteered to accompany him upon the chase, for they foresaw brisk doings. But he declined their company. Folklore, descending from his generation to ours, has it that

he said this was his own business and he preferred handling it alone in his own way. He did add, however, that on overtaking the fugitive it was his intention, as an earnest or token of his displeasure, to eat that Injun's liver raw. Some versions say he mentioned liver rare, but the commonly accepted legend has it that the word used was *raw*. With this he put the spur to his steed's flank and was soon but a mere moving speck in the distance.

Now there was never offered any direct proof that our hero, in pursuance of his plan for teaching the Indian a lesson, actually did do with regard to the latter's liver what he had promised the bystanders he would do; moreover, touching on this detail he ever thereafter maintained a steadfast and unbreakable silence. In lieu of corroborative testimony by unbiased witnesses as to the act itself, we have only these two things to judge by: First, that when Mr. Watkins returned in the dusk of the same day he was wearing upon his face a well-fed, not to say satiated, expression, yet had started forth that morning with no store of provisions; and second, that on being found in a deceased state some days later, the Piute, who when last previously seen had with him two of Mr. Watkin's pintos and one liver of his own, was now shy all three. By these facts a strong presumptive case having been made out, Mr. Watkins was thenceforth known not as Ezekiel or Emanuel, or whatever his original first name had been, but as Liver-Eating, or among friends by the affectionate diminutive of Liv for short.

This I would regard as a typical instance of the value of a chain of good circumstantial evidence, with no essential link lacking. Direct testimony could hardly have been more satisfactory, all things considered; and yet direct testimony is the best sort there is, in the law courts and out. On the other hand, hearsay evidence is viewed legally and often by the layman with suspicion; in most causes of action being barred out altogether. Nevertheless, it is a phase of the fattish man's perversity that, rejecting the direct, the circumstantial and the circumferential testimony which abounds about him, he too often awaits confirmation of his growing suspicions at the hands of outsiders and bystanders before he is willing openly to admit that condition of fatness which for long has been patent to the most casual observer.

Women, as I have observed them, are even more disposed to avoid confession on this point. A woman somehow figures that so long as she refuses to acknowledge to herself or any other interested party that she has progressed out of the ranks of the plumpened into the congested and overflowing realms of the avowedly obese, why, for just so long may she keep the rest of the world in ignorance too. I take it, the ostrich which first set the example to all the other ostriches of trying to avoid detection by the enemy through the simple expedient of sticking its head in the sand was a lady ostrich, and moreover one typical of her sex. But men are bad enough. I know that I was.

## CHAPTER IV

### *I Become The Panting Champion*

Month after month, through the cycle of the revolving seasons, I went along deceiving myself, even though I deceived none else, coining new pleas in extenuation or outright contradictions to meet each new-arising element of confirmatory proof to a state of case which no unprejudiced person could fail to acknowledge. The original discoverer of the alibi was a fat man; indeed, it was named for him—Ali Bi-Ben Adhem, he was, a friend and companion of the Prophet, and so large that, going into Mecca, he had to ride on two camels. This fact is historically authenticated. I looked it up.

In the fall of the year, when I brought last winter's heavy suit out of the clothes-press and found it now to hug o'ersnugly for comfort, I cajoled my saner self into accepting a most transparent lie—my figure had not materially altered through the intervening spring and summer; it was only that the garments, being fashioned of a shoddy material, had shrunk. I owned a dress suit which had been form fitting, 'tis true, but none too close a fit upon me. I had owned it for years; I looked forward to owning and using it for years to come. I laid it aside for a period during an abatement in formal social activities; then bringing it forth from its camphor-ball nest for a special occasion I found I could scarce force my way down into the trousers, and that the waistcoat buttons could not be made to meet the buttonholes, and that the coat, after finally I had struggled into it, bound me as with chains by reason of the pull at armpits and between the shoulders. I could not get my arms down to my sides at all. I could only use them flapper fashion.

I felt like a penguin. I imagine I looked a good bit like one too.

But I did not blame myself, who was the real criminal, or the grocer who was accessory before the fact. I put the fault on the tailor, who was innocent. Each time I had to let my belt buckle out for another notch in order that I might breathe I diagnosed the trouble as a touch of what might be called Harlem flatulency. We lived in a flat then—a nonelevator flat—and I pretended that climbing three flights of steep stairs was what developed my abdominal muscles and at the same time made me short of wind.

I coined a new excuse after we had moved to a suburb back of Yonkers. Frequently I had to run to catch the 5:07 accommodation, because if I missed it I might have to wait for the 7:05, which was no accommodation. I would go jamming my way at top speed toward the train gate and on into the train shed, and when I reached my car I would be 'scaping so emphatically that the locomotive on up ahead would grow jealous and probably felt as though it might just as well give up trying to compete in volume of sound output with a real contender. But I was agile enough for all purposes and as brisk as any upon my feet. Therein I found my consolation.

Among all my fellow members of the younger Grand Central Station set there was scarce a one who could start with me at scratch and beat me to a train just pulling out of the shed; and even though he might have bested me at sprinting, I had him whipped to a soufflé at panting. In a hundred-yard dash I could spot anyone of my juniors a dozen pairs of pants and win out handily. I was the acknowledged all-weights panting champion of the Putnam division.

If there had been ten or twelve of my neighbors as good at this as I was we might have organized and drilled together and worked out a class cheer for the Putnam Division Country Club—three deep long pants, say, followed by nine sharp short pants or pantlets. But I would have been elected pants leader without a struggle. My merits were too self-evident for a contest.

But did I attribute my supremacy in this regard to accumulating and thickening layers of tissue in the general vicinity of my midriff? I did not! No, sir, because I was fat—indubitably, uncontrovertibly and beyond the peradventure of a doubt, fat—I kept on playing the fat man's game of mental solitaire. I inwardly insisted, and I think partly believed, that my lung power was too great for the capacity of

my throat opening, hence pants. I cast a pitying eye at other men, deep of girth and purple of face, waddling down the platform, and as I scudded on past them I would say to myself that after all there was a tremendous difference between being obese and being merely well fleshed out. The real reason of course was that my legs had remained reasonably firm and trim while the torso was inflating. For I was one who got fat not all over at once but in favored localities. And I was even as the husband is whose wife is being gossiped about—the last person in the neighborhood to hear the news.

As though it were yesterday I remember the day and the place and the attendant circumstances when and where awakening was forced upon me. Two of us went to Canada on a hunting trip. The last lap of the journey into camp called for a fifteen-mile horseback ride through the woods. The native who was to be our chief guide met us with our mounts at a way station far up in the interior of Quebec. He knew my friend—had guided him for two seasons before; but I was a stranger in those parts. Now until that hour it had never occurred to me that I was anywhere nearly so bulksome as this friend of mine was. For he indubitably was a person of vast displacement and augmented gross total tonnage; and in that state of blindness which denies us the gift to see ourselves as others see us I never had reckoned myself to be in his class, *avoir-dupoisefully* speaking. But as we lined up two abreast alongside the station, with our camp duffel piled about us, the keen-eyed guide, standing slightly to one side, considered our abdominal profiles, and the look he cast at my companion said as plainly as words, "Well, I see you've brought a spare set along with you in case of a puncture."

But he did not come right out and say a thing so utterly tactless. What he did say, in a worried tone, was that he was sorry now he had not fetched along a much more powerful horse for me to ride on. He had a good big chunky work animal, not fast but very strong in the back, he said, which would have answered my purposes first rate.

I experienced another disillusioning jolt. Could it be that this practiced woodsman's eye actually appraised me as being as heavy as my mate, or even heavier? Surely he must be wrong in his judgments. The point was that I woefully was wrong in mine. How true it is that we who would pluck the mote from behind a fellow being's waistcoat so rarely take note of the beam which we have swallowed crosswise!

Even so, a great light was beginning to percolate to my innermost consciousness. A grave doubt pestered me through our days of camping there in the autumnal wilderness. When we had emerged from the woods and had reached Montreal on the homeward trip I enticed my friend upon a penny-in-the-slot weighing machine in the Montreal station and I observed what he weighed; and then when he stepped aside I unostentatiously weighed myself, and in the box score credited myself with a profound shock; also with an error, which should have been entered up a long time before that.

Approximately, we were of the same height and in bone structure not greatly unlike. I had figured that daily tramping after game should have taken a few folds of superfluous flesh off my frame, and so, no doubt, it had done. Yet I had pulled the spindle around the face of the dial to a point which recorded for me a total of sixteen pounds and odd ounces more than his penny had registered for him.

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