

Cobb Irvin Shrewsbury

The Life of the Party



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Cobb I.

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I

It had been a successful party, most successful. Mrs. Carroway's parties always were successes, but this one nearing its conclusion stood out notably from a long and unbroken Carrowayian record. It had been a children's party; that is to say, everybody came in costume with intent to represent children of any age between one year and a dozen years. But twelve years was the limit; positively nobody, either in dress or deportment, could be more than twelve years old. Mrs. Carroway had made this point explicit in sending out the invitations, and so it had been, down to the last hair ribbon and the last shoe buckle. And between dances they had played at the games of childhood, such as drop the handkerchief, and King William was King James' son and prisoner's base and the rest of them.

The novelty of the notion had been a main contributory factor to its success; that, plus the fact that nine healthy adults out of ten dearly love to put on freakish garbings and go somewhere. To be exactly truthful, the basic idea itself could hardly be called new, since long before some gifted mind thought out the scheme of giving children's parties for grown-ups, but with her customary brilliancy Mrs. Carroway had seized upon the issues of the day to serve her social purposes, weaving timeliness and patriotism into the fabric of her plan by making it a war party as well. Each individual attending was under pledge to keep a full and accurate tally of the moneys expended upon his or her costume and upon arrival at the place of festivities to deposit a like amount in a repository put in a conspicuous spot to receive these contributions, the entire sum to be handed over later to the guardians of a military charity in which Mrs. Carroway was active.

It was somehow felt that this fostered a worthy spirit of wartime economy, since the donation of a person who wore an expensive costume would be relatively so much larger than the donation of one who went in for the simpler things. Moreover, books of thrift stamps were attached to the favours, the same being children's toys of guaranteed American manufacture.

In the matter of refreshments Mrs. Carroway had been at pains to comply most scrupulously with the existing rationing regulations. As the hostess herself said more than once as she moved to and fro in a flounced white frock having the exaggeratedly low waistline of the sort of frock which frequently is worn by a tot of tender age, with a wide blue sash draped about her almost down at her knees, and with fluffy skirts quite up to her knees, with her hair caught up in a coquettish blue bow on the side of her head and a diminutive fan tied fast to one of her wrists with a blue ribbon – so many of the ladies who had attained to Mrs. Carroway's fairly well-ripened years did go in for these extremely girlishly little-girly effects – as the hostess thus attired and moving hither and yon remark, "If Mr. Herbert Hoover himself were here as one of my guests to-night I am just too perfectly sure he could find absolutely nothing whatsoever to object to!"

It would have required much stretching of that elastic property, the human imagination, to conceive of Mr. Herbert Hoover being there, whether in costume or otherwise, but that was what Mrs. Carroway said and repeated. Always those to whom she spoke came right out and agreed with her.

Now it was getting along toward three-thirty o'clock of the morning after, and the party was breaking up. Indeed for half an hour past, this person or that had been saying it was time, really, to be thinking about going – thus voicing a conviction that had formed at a much earlier hour in the minds of the tenants of the floor below Mrs. Carroway's studio apartment, which like all properly devised studio apartments was at the top of the building.

It was all very well to be a true Bohemian, ready to give and take, and if one lived down round Washington Square one naturally made allowances for one's neighbours and all that, but half past

three o'clock in the morning was half past three o'clock in the morning, and there was no getting round that, say what you would. And besides there were some people who needed a little sleep once in a while even if there were some other people who seemed to be able to go without any sleep; and finally, though patience was a virtue, enough of a good thing was enough and too much was surplusage. Such was the opinion of the tenants one flight down.

So the party was practically over. Mr. Algernon Leary, of the firm of Leary & Slack, counsellors and attorneys at law, with offices at Number Thirty-two Broad Street, was among the very last to depart. Never had Mr. Leary spent a more pleasant evening. He had been in rare form, a variety of causes contributing to this happy state. To begin with, he had danced nearly every dance with the lovely Miss Milly Hollister, for whom he entertained the feelings which a gentleman of ripened judgment, and one who was rising rapidly in his profession, might properly entertain for an entirely charming young woman of reputed means and undoubted social position.

A preposterous ass named Perkins – at least, Mr. Leary mentally indexed Perkins as a preposterous ass – had brought Miss Hollister to the party, but thereafter in the scheme of things Perkins did not count. He was a cipher. You could back him up against a wall and take a rubber-tipped pencil and rub him right out, as it were; and with regards to Miss Hollister that, figuratively, was what Mr. Leary had done to Mr. Perkins. Now on the other hand Voris might have amounted to something as a potential rival, but Voris being newly appointed as a police magistrate was prevented by press of official duties from coming to the party; so Mr. Leary had had a clear field, as the saying goes, and had made the most of it, as the other saying goes.

Moreover, Mr. Leary had been the recipient of unlimited praise upon the ingenuity and the uniqueness expressed in his costume. He had not represented a Little Lord Fauntleroy or a Buster Brown or a Boy Scout or a Juvenile Cadet or a Midshipmite or an Oliver Twist. There had been three Boy Scouts present and four Buster Browns and of sailor-suited persons there had been no end, really. But Mr. Leary had chosen to appear as Himself at the Age of Three; and, as the complimentary comment proved, his get-up had reflected credit not alone upon its wearer but upon its designer, Miss Rowena Skiff, who drew fashion pictures for one of the women's magazines. Out of the goodness of her heart and the depths of her professional knowledge Miss Skiff had gone to Mr. Leary's aid, supervising the preparation of his wardrobe at a theatrical costumer's shop up-town and, on the evening before, coming to his bachelor apartments, accompanied by her mother, personally to add those small special refinements which meant so much, as he now realised, in attaining the desired result.

"Oh, Mr. Leary, I must tell you again how very fetching you do look! Your costume is adorable, really it is; so – so cute and everything. And I don't know what I should have done without you to help in the games and everything. There's no use denying it, Mr. Leary – you were the life of the party, absolutely!"

At least twice during the night Mrs. Carroway had told Mr. Leary this, and now as he bade her farewell she was saying it once more in practically the same words, when Mrs. Carroway's coloured maid, Blanche, touched him on the arm.

"'Scuse me, suh," apologised Blanche, "but the hall man downstairs he send up word jes' now by the elevator man 'at you'd best be comin' right on down now, suh, effen you expects to git a taxicab. He say to tell you they ain't but one taxicab left an' the driver of 'at one's been waitin' fur hours an' he act like he might go way any minute now. 'At's whut the hall man send word, suh."

Blanche had brought his overcoat along and held it up for him, imparting to the service that small suggestion of a ceremonial rite which the members of her race invariably do display when handling a garment of richness of texture and indubitable cost. Mr. Leary let her help him into the coat and slipped largess into her hand, and as he stepped aboard the waiting elevator for the downward flight Mrs. Carroway's voice came fluting to him, once again repeating the flattering phrase: "You surely were the life of the party!"

II

It was fine to have been the life of the party. It was not quite so fine to discover that the taxicab to which he must entrust himself for the long ride up to West Eighty-fifth Street was a most shabby-appearing vehicle, the driver of which, moreover, as Mr. Leary could divine even as he crossed the sidewalk, had wiled away the tedium of waiting by indulgence in draughts of something more potent than the chill air of latish November. Mr. Leary peered doubtfully into the illuminated countenance but dulled eyes of the driver and caught a whiff of a breath alcoholically fragrant, and he understood that the warning relayed to him by Blanche had carried a subtle double meaning. Still, there was no other taxicab to be had. The street might have been a byway in old Pompeii for all the life that moved within it. Washington Square, facing him, was as empty as a graveyard generally is at this hour, and the semblance of a conventional graveyard in wintertime was helped out by a light snow – the first of the season – sifting down in large damp flakes.

Twice and thrice he repeated the address, speaking each time sharply and distinctly, before the meaning seemed to filter into the befogged intellect of the inebriate. On the third rendition the latter roused from where he was slumped down.

"I garcia, Steve," he said thickly. "I garcia firs' time only y' hollowed s'loud I couldn und'stancher."

So saying he lurched into a semiupright posture and fumbled for the wheel. Silently condemning the curse of intemperance among the working classes of a great city Mr. Leary boarded the cab and drew the skirts of his overcoat down in an effort to cover his knees. With a harsh grating of clutches and an abrupt jerk the taxi started north.

Wobbling though he was upon his perch the driver mechanically steered a reasonably straight course. The passenger leaning back in the depths of the cab confessed to himself he was a trifle weary and more than a trifle sleepy. At thirty-seven one does not dance and play children's games alternately for six hours on a stretch without paying for the exertion in a sensation of let-downness. His head slipped forward on his chest.

III

With a drowsy uncertainty as to whether he had been dozing for hours or only for a very few minutes Mr. Leary opened his eyes and sat up. The car was halted slantwise against a curbing; the chauffeur was jammed down again into a heap. Mr. Leary stepped nimbly forth upon the pavement, feeling in his overcoat pocket for the fare; and then he realised he was not in West Eighty-fifth Street at all; he was not in any street that he remembered ever having seen before in the course of his life. Offhand, though, he guessed he was somewhere in that mystic maze of brick and mortar known as Old Greenwich Village; and, for a further guess, in that particular part of it where business during these last few years had been steadily encroaching upon the ancient residences of long departed Knickerbocker families.

The street in which he stood, for a wonder in this part of town, ran a fairly straight course. At its western foot he could make out through the drifting flakes where a squat structure suggestive of a North River freight dock interrupted the sky line. In his immediate vicinity the street was lined with tall bleak fronts of jobbing houses, all dark and all shuttered. Looking the other way, which would be eastward, he could make out where these wholesale establishments tailed off, to be succeeded by the lower shapes of venerable dwellings adorned with the dormered windows and the hip roofs which distinguished a bygone architectural period. Some distance off in this latter direction the vista between the buildings was cut across by the straddle-bug structure of one of the Elevated roads. All this Mr. Leary comprehended in a quick glance about him, and then he turned on the culprit cabman with rage in his heart.

"See here, you!" he snapped crossly, jerking the other by the shoulder. "What do you mean by bringing me away off here! This isn't where I wanted to go. Oh, wake up, you!"

Under his vigorous shaking the driver slid over sideways until he threatened to decant himself out upon Mr. Leary. His cap falling off exposed the blank face of one who for the time being has gone dead to the world and to all its carking cares, and the only response he offered for his mishandling was a deep and sincere snore. The man was hopelessly intoxicated; there was no question about it. More to relieve his own deep chagrin than for any logical reason Mr. Leary shook him again; the net results were a protesting semiconscious gargle and a further careening slant of the sleeper's form.

Well, there was nothing else to do but walk. He must make his way afoot until he came to Sixth Avenue or on to Fifth, upon the chance of finding in one of these two thoroughfares a ranging nighthawk cab. As a last resort he could take the Subway or the L north. This contingency, though, Mr. Leary considered with feelings akin to actual repugnance. He dreaded the prospect of ribald and derisive comments from chance fellow travellers upon a public transportation line. For you should know that though Mr. Leary's outer garbing was in the main conventional there were strikingly incongruous features of it too.

From his neck to his knees he correctly presented the aspect of a gentleman returning late from social diversions, caparisoned in a handsome fur-faced, fur-lined top coat. But his knees were entirely bare; so, too, were his legs down to about midway of the calves, where there ensued, as it were, a pair of white silk socks, encircled by pink garters with large and ornate pink ribbon bows upon them. His feet were bestowed in low slippers with narrow buttoned straps crossing the insteps. It was Miss Skiff, with her instinct for the verities, who had insisted upon bows for the garters and straps for the slippers, these being what she had called finishing touches. Likewise it was due to that young lady's painstaking desire for appropriateness and completeness of detail that Mr. Leary at this moment wore upon his head a very wide-brimmed, very floppy straw hat with two quaint pink-ribbon streamers floating jauntily down between his shoulders at the back.

For reasons which in view of this sartorial description should be obvious, Mr. Leary hugged closely up to the abutting house fronts when he left behind him the marooned taxi with its comatose

driver asleep upon it, like one lone castaway upon a small island in a sea of emptiness, and set his face eastward. Such was the warmth of his annoyance he barely felt the chill striking upon his exposed nether limbs or took note of the big snowflakes melting damply upon his thinly protected ankles. Then, too, almost immediately something befell which upset him still more.

He came to where a wooden marquee, projecting over the entrance to a shipping room, made a black strip along the feebly lighted pavement. As he entered the patch of darkness the shape of a man materialised out of the void and barred his way, and in that same fraction of a second something shiny and hard was thrust against Mr. Leary's daunted bosom, and in a low forceful rumble a voice commanded him as follows: "Put up your mitts – and keep 'em up!"

Matching the action of his hands everything in Mr. Leary seemed to start skyward simultaneously. His hair on his scalp straightened, his breath came up from his lungs in a gasp, his heart lodged in his throat, and his blood quit his feet, leaving them practically devoid of circulation and ascended and drummed in his temples. He had a horrid, emptied feeling in his diaphragm, too, as though the organs customarily resident there had caught the contagion of the example and gone north.

"That's nice," spake the fearsome stranger. "Now stay jest the way you are and don't make no peep or I'll have to plug you wit' this here gat."

His right hand maintained the sinister pressure of the weapon against the victim's deflated chest, while his left dexterously explored the side pockets of Mr. Leary's overcoat. Then the same left hand jerked the frogged fastenings of the garment asunder and went pawing swiftly over Mr. Leary's quivering person, seeking the pockets which would have been there had Mr. Leary been wearing garments bearing the regulation and ordained number of pockets. But the exploring fingers merely slid along a smooth and unbroken frontal surface.

"Wot t'ell? Wot t'ell?" muttered the footpad in bewilderment. "Say, where're you got yore leather and yore kittle hid? Speak up quick!"

"I'm – I'm – not carrying a watch or a purse to-night," quavered Mr. Leary. "These – these clothes I happen to be wearing are not made with places in them for a watch or anything. And you've already taken what money I had – it was all in my overcoat pocket."

"Yep; a pinch of chicken feed and wot felt like about four one-bone bills." The highwayman's accent was both ominous and contemptuous. "Say, wotcher mean drillin' round dis town in some kinder funny riggin' wit'out no plunder on you? I gotta right to belt you one acrost the bean."

"I'd rather you didn't do that," protested Mr. Leary in all seriousness. "If – if you'd only give me your address I could send you some money in the morning to pay you for your trouble –"

"Cut out de kiddin'," broke in the disgusted marauder. His tone changed slightly for the better. "Say, near as I kin tell by feelin' it, dat ain't such a bum benny you're sportin'. I'll jest take dat along wit' me. Letcher arms down easy and hold 'em straight out from yore sides while I gits it offen you. And no funny business!"

"Oh, please, please, don't take my overcoat," implored Mr. Leary, plunged by these words into a deeper panic. "Anything but that! I – you – you really mustn't leave me without my overcoat."

"Wot else is dere to take?"

Even as he uttered the scornful question the thief had wrested the garment from Mr. Leary's helpless form and was backing away into the darkness.

Out of impenetrable gloom came his farewell warning: "Stay right where you are for fi' minutes wit'out movin' or makin' a yelp. If you wiggle before de time is up I gotta pal right yere watchin' you, and he'll sure plug you. He ain't no easy-goin' guy like wot I am. You're gittin' off lucky it's me stuck you up, stidder him."

With these words he was gone – gone with Mr. Leary's overcoat, with Mr. Leary's last cent, with his latchkey, with his cardcase, with all by which Mr. Leary might hope to identify himself before a wary and incredulous world for what he was. He was gone, leaving there in the protecting ledge of shadow the straw-hatted, socked-and-slippered, leg-gartered figure of a plump being, clad otherwise

in a single vestment which began at the line of a becomingly low neckband and terminated in blousy outbulging bifurcations just above the naked knees. Light stealing into this obscured and sheltered spot would have revealed that this garment was, as to texture, a heavy, silklike, sheeny, material; and as to colour a vivid and compelling pink – the exact colour of a slice of well-ripened watermelon; also that its sleeves ended elbow-high in an effect of broad turned-back cuffs; finally, that adown its owner's back it was snugly and adequately secured by means of a close-set succession of very large, very shiny white pearl buttons; the whole constituting an enlarged but exceedingly accurate copy of what, descriptively, is known to the manufactured-garment trade as a one-piece suit of child's rompers, self-trimmed, fastening behind; suitable for nursery, playground and seashore, especially recommended as summer wear for the little ones; to be had in all sizes; prices such-and-such.

Within a space of some six or seven minutes this precisely was what the nearest street lamp did reveal unto itself as its downward-slanting beams fell upon a furtive, fugitive shape, suggestive in that deficient subradiance of a vastly overgrown forked parsnip, miraculously endowed with powers of locomotion and bound for somewhere in a hurry; excepting of course no forked parsnip, however remarkable in other respects, would be wearing a floppy straw hat in a snowstorm; nor is it likely it would be adorned lengthwise in its rear with a highly decorative design of broad, smooth, polished disks which, even in that poor illumination, gleamed and twinkled and wiggled snakily in and out of alignment, in accord with the movements of their wearer's spinal column.

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