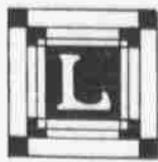


CORNERING MR. COBB

IN THE MAZES OF TURKEY TROT WITH CUPID

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LIKE THE DEVOTED BROTHER and affectionate old bachelor uncle that I am, I was naturally at hand to meet my sister and niece on their return from St. Augustine. They had been away a long time — three or four months — and I had missed them as much as might an old dog who had been left at home with the servants. They were all the family I had, and when a man is past forty and is beginning to get a little bald and gray, such ties mean more and more to him, and no acquaintance, however wide, can exactly replace them.

That Kitty had been a widow for many years had helped, I suppose, to draw us closer together than is usually the case with middle-aged brothers and sisters, and if I had had a daughter I could scarcely have loved her more than I did my only niece. When I saw Kitty and Viola coming toward me ahead of the stream of passengers, both so pretty in their different ways, and both so animated and charming, I suddenly realized how very lonely I had been without them and what a joy it was to get them back.

In the confused kissing that followed, with an impatient porter loaded down with grips, mutely urging us to expedition, I became conscious of a very tall, thin young man, whose embarrassed smile and arrested manner seemed to imply he belonged to our party.

"Mr. Cobb," said Kitty, introducing us.

"My uncle, Mr. Williams," added Viola, in what seemed to me a kinder tone than her mother's.

I shook hands with Mr. Cobb, who murmured politely that he was delighted to meet me, though his eyes all the while were on Viola's face and any transports my acquaintance may have occasioned him were somewhat concealed by the eager conversation he continued to carry on with her. I caught vaguely that he would be at the Fourth Avenue Hotel; that he would telephone at nine; that he would secure the opera seats as soon as he could get them; then, raising his hat, he suddenly departed in a long-legged way after his own porter, who was piling his things into a cab. I was about to ask who he was when Kitty touched me sharply with her elbow, and gave me a warning look to avoid the subject of Mr. Cobb before Viola.

Later, in the taxi, when Viola happened to mention his name, I was stupid enough to repeat my question, and get a second dig in the ribs that recalled my happy infancy, — in which the pokes of an elder little sister contributed so largely to my upbringing.

"A delightful young man we met at the hotel in St. Augustine," said Viola, who, fortunately, had not detected her mother's signal to me. "Oh, Uncle Hartley, I am just crazy about Mr. Cobb, and so's Mumsey! Aren't you, Mumsey doodums?"

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Mumsey doodums, with what I thought a certain evasiveness, and an ensuing jump for a fresh topic that hurried us past Mr. Cobb and left him abandoned and forgotten — conversationally. After an absence of four months this was not difficult, especially as for these two it was a home-coming, with arrears of domestic history to be brought up to date — including the re-covering of the Sheraton sofa, Mary Ann's embroilment with the janitor, the missing vacuum nozzle, the fire next door, and other items of palpitating interest. Dinner was awaiting us in the cozy little dining-room of the apartment, and here there was more kissing and enthusiasm and general rapture at being once more under their own roof-tree.

AFTERWARD, when Viola left us to run upstairs and see her chum, Isobel Latimer, who had been telephoning down repeatedly, and whose impatient ringing and ringing I had found not a little irritating, I lit a cigar and drew up a chair beside that dear sister of mine.

"It's mighty good to see you back, Kitty," I said.

"Dear old boy," she murmured, reaching out a plump hand and giving mine a squeeze. "It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Yes, indeed it has," I said, gazing at her affectionately.

"Hartley," she broke out suddenly. "I am dreadfully worried."

"Worried?" I repeated, much concerned.

"It's this Mr. Cobb," she explained, coloring faintly.

"The young man who was with you at the station?"

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

Kitty sat up.

"That's what I would give anything to know," she exclaimed. "He's a man of mystery — an enigma."

"My experience with men of mystery," I observed, "is that they usually end by letting you in for their club bills or something equally expensive or dis-



"I know who you are," I thundered "Get out of here, you cur, get out!"

agreeable. My advice, as a bald-headed brother who has had considerable experience in this vale of tears — would be to put a large piece of distance between yourself and this enigmatic Mr. Cobb."

"You don't understand," said Kitty helplessly. "Viola is awfully taken with him, and it would not surprise me any moment to hear that they were engaged." "Engaged! To a man who has no antecedents — why, Kitty, what are you saying!"

"That's why I am so worried, Hartley, it's dreadful."

"But is she satisfied to know nothing about him? — a level-headed, clear-sighted girl like Viola to take up with a perfect stranger who may be somebody's valet!"

"She's in love; they are all lunatics when they are in love; I was no better myself at her age."

"Tell me all about it," I demanded. "Right from the beginning, Kitty."

"Well, there he was at the hotel, with a big yellow motor of his own, and every appearance of being a most correct and eligible young man — and when Viola made his acquaintance at a dance and seemed to take to him tremendously, I folded my hands and thought: 'Bless you, my children.' Viola is twenty-five, and of course it must happen sooner or later, mustn't it? After that they played out together all the time. At first, quite innocently, I asked him a few questions about himself, and only realized by degrees how cleverly he slipped out of answering them. Then, when I pressed Viola about him, she flared up as girls do and almost bit my head off. They are all tiger-eats if they think you are trying to take away their young man."

"But surely she understood your natural feeling of responsibility?" I said.

"GIRLS in love never understand anything," she replied with conviction. "They pay about as much attention to fathers and mothers as a runaway horse does to a shrieking driver — the more you yell the faster they run."

"If I had been you I would traced down the person who vouched for him in the first place."

"That's precisely what I did; a Mrs. Gilbert introduced him, and she referred me back to her husband, who referred me back — to one of the hotel clerks! Then I looked over the register and found he came from Walton, Massachusetts."

"Well, that's all right. It will only take me two days to get a line on him; I will ask our credit man to —"

"But, listen, Hartley, listen."

"Yes?"