

CORNERING MR. COBB

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you think you have a right to roar about Mr. Cobb—well, roar!"

"Come, come, my dear," I protested. "Try to be polite even if we don't agree about Mr. Cobb. Even an uncle is entitled to some of the elementary courtesies."

"Oh, I hate to have him insulted!" she exclaimed, a shade apologetically. "You are all against him, and it is so aggravating to know what you are going to say before you have said it."

"I am not so sure you do," I retorted. "I may be middle-aged and commonplace, but I'm not quite a parrot. Any way, my dear, when one loves people one is entitled to be a little—official."

"Oh, you are not that, Uncle Hartley!" she said reluctantly. "I've been horrid and rude, and I beg your pardon. But both you and Mumsey are both so prejudiced against poor Mr. Cobb."

"I like poor Mr. Cobb well enough, and I think he is a very presentable young man; but if he insists on being a young man of mystery, whose fault is it that we distrust him?"

"You think I'm an awful little fool, don't you?" she remarked, with the first glimmer of a smile.

"No," I answered, "you are simply young—young and trustful, as a nice girl ought to be. But that is all the more reason to listen to the watchdog's honest bark."

"I'm listening," she said.

"BARK number one," I continued: "Tell Mr. Cobb you have a horrid, disagreeable old uncle who makes your life a burden to you with questions you can not answer. Tell him you are at your wit's end to satisfy this old ogre. Then if he is straight—"

"Of course he is straight," she interrupted, with another little flare of resentment. "Mr. Cobb is a gentleman through and through, and—"

"And what?" I asked, as she hesitated and stopped.

"He has his own reasons—very good reasons—for hiding his real name, and—"

"Good heavens," I cried out. "You mean to say he isn't named Cobb at all?"

"No," she replied. "It is all part of a very strange and romantic secret. You see, he is liable to be arrested at any moment!"

My look of consternation was more effective than all my previous reproaches.

"I promised never to tell a soul," she hurried on, as though apprehending some outburst on my part, and feverishly eager to forestall it. "But of course that meant Mumsey, who could not be expected to understand, or—make allowances. I can't have you think he is a criminal, Uncle Hartley, or anything of that sort. He's a gun-runner."

"A what?" I demanded.

"That's what they call people who run guns across the Mexican border to the rebels," she explained sweetly. "It is terribly dangerous, but very, very profitable, and he was making lots of money till finally the Federal authorities at El Paso got after him and issued a warrant for his arrest. His real name is Marion Joyce Carlisle, but he changed it to Montgomery J. Cobb for his initials on his things—to keep them the same, you know. If he were arrested he would get into the most frightful trouble, though he says in a year or two it will all blow over. But in the meantime, of course, he is in a very false position—he realizes that keenly."

"He certainly couldn't be in a worse," I said, as crossly as I felt. "But if there is a word of truth in this egregious story, why does he get away to Canada where he would be safe?"

"He would rather stay here," she replied, in some confusion. "Nearer to me—and all that, you know."

"Oh,"—I murmured. "So that's why he stays, is it?"

"Yes, that's why he stays," said Viola, as if pleased at last to find something we could agree on.

"But tell me, what was he before he took up this highly spectacular, moving-picture occupation?" I inquired. "He can't have spent his whole life in gun-running. What was he before he—gun-ran?"

The tinge in Viola's cheeks turned to scarlet.

"I—I don't know," she replied. "He's always been rather reticent about himself, and naturally I never liked to p-p-press him."

"Viola," I exclaimed, "you must drop this man like a red-hot potato—drop him quicker than scat."

"I can't," she murmured. "Or rather I mean I won't. I may as well confess that we are engaged."

"Engaged!" I cried out, aghast. "Engaged to a man with an alias, no antecedents, and escaping from the police?"

"Yes," she returned somewhat tremblingly, "and if you bother or harass him or draw Mumsey into any fuss about him I warn you it will be a very short engagement. Otherwise we intend to wait until the hue and cry is over—until the rebels become federals, and all danger is past."

I rose and took my hat and cane.

"You are twenty-five years old and legally entitled to go to the devil," I said. "Only if I were you I would make a little surer that this gentleman isn't married already. It would not be very pleasant if he were, would it?"

With that parting shot I left, after a peck at a very averted cheek.

I doubt if there is a more detestable position in the world than being related—closely related—to a young woman who is making an idiot of herself. One feels so responsible and so helpless; she is too big to spank and too unreasonable to argue with; legally she is a woman, and in reality a child. It is no pleasure, either, to become the cruel uncle of romance; to realize that one is regarded as a horrid old busybody who has no understanding of youth and love.

Of course, if my sister had been a different sort of woman, I would have regarded all this as much more her affair than mine. But Kitty is one of those impossible people who fly off the tangent at anything like a crisis, and meet it by creating another—with unlimited tears, hysterics and heart failure.

THE next morning I decided to consult a private detective I knew, named Bloomer. We had once employed him to stop a series of petty thefts in our warehouse, and he had nailed the culprits in thirty-six hours. So after telephoning for an appointment I went along to Bloomer's and unfolded my tale of woe in a dingy office overlooking Broadway. Bloomer was a grizzled, bovine personage, remotely policemanlike and Irish, with smouldering eyes and a cowering manner. He listened with hard-breathing patience; took notes in a large, greasy book and asked a number of very searching questions.

"The fellow's a crook," he said at last, in his booming voice. "The idea is to get the goods on him and run him out—scare him out. Hey, is that right?"

I said it was. Yes, that was it exactly.

"It can be done slow or fast," he went on. "Slow's cheap and fast's dear—which is it to be?"

"I want results," I said, "and the quicker the better. Money is no object if you can get results."

"I'll get them," he declared with a robust assurance that shook the office. "But understand, it means a lot of telegraphing, a lot of oiling of police ropes, a lot of money flung

away here, there and everywhere. Detective work is just like fishing. Mr. Williams—the bigger your net the surer you are of landing your fish, and the cost is in proportion."

"Go ahead," I said. "Show me results and I don't care what I pay."

A shade of misgiving suddenly appeared on those bovine features.

"Of course I don't guarantee he's a crook," he remarked. "If he ain't a crook, he ain't, and there's no more to be said. But I take it, it's his record you're wanting, even if it's clean."

"Precisely," I agreed.

"Where will you be by five o'clock," he asked, reaching for some telegraph forms. "I think I ought to be able to report something by five."

"At my club," I returned, giving him the telephone number. "I shall make a point of being there from four-thirty on."

He had already noted my hotel and business address, and now verified them again with an air of concluding the interview. He escorted me to the door, massively and ceremoniously, and a party of chattering girls, descending from a theatrical agency above, were very much impressed by the sight. I stopped in the street and looked up at the dusty windows where within the web was being stretched for Cobb. I glowed with satisfaction; I felt that the wires were already humming; best of all, it was my affair no longer, but Bloomer's.

He rang me up a little after five.

"I've got some queer news for you," he said. "There ain't any such party known at El Paso, nor is there any warrant out for him!"

"No?" I exclaimed.

"Whatever our party is running away from it certainly ain't from a Federal warrant," he continued. "There ain't a warrant, Federal, state or local out for anybody—for smuggling arms, d'ye understand? Hey, have you got that?"

I replied that I had.

"It looks like a blind," went on Bloomer in his vibrating voice. "Nearly all crooks have blinds to throw off the police. Meantime, of course, I have been trying to place the Walton our party mentioned—the town he gave on the hotel register, both here and down South. Well, and what do you think?"

I murmured my inability to do anything of the kind.

"I have covered all the Waltons in the United States and Canada, and our party, either as Cobb or Carlisle, or Marion, Montgomery or Joyce ain't to be found or recognized in any of them!"

"Perhaps my description of him was n't good enough," I said, suddenly troubled that the fault might be mine. "I am afraid it would have been better if you had seen him yourself."

BLOOMER burst out laughing.

"I guess we know pretty well what he looks like after shading him all day," he exclaimed. "Why, you were n't gone ten minutes before I had him under observation, with one of my best men reporting progress every hour. And here's another mighty queer thing, Mr. Williams."

"Yes?"

"It ain't guns he's interested in—

it's furs!"

"Furs?"

"Yes, sir, furs!" We trailed him to Efferts & Co., furriers, to W. H. Hall & Co., furriers, to Papillon Frères, furriers. At the last place he stayed a long time and then took one of the salesmen out to lunch and spent nine dollars and forty-five cents on him at Martanne's. Afterward, he strolled along Fifth Avenue and across Thirty-fourth Street to the department stores, stopping at every window where there were furs."

I expressed my astonishment,

though not as emphatically perhaps as Bloomer seemed to desire.

"But this is all negative," I said. "We are still as much in the dark as ever, aren't we?"

Bloomer laughed confidently.

"Listen," he boomed, with a jubilant note in his voice that dispelled my latent suspicion. "I was wondering about these here furs, and seeing no daylight anywhere when kerplunk, I got another line on our party that put him right under the searchlight. I can't be absolutely positive till Chicago rings me up in twenty minutes, but it's dollars to doughnuts, Mr. Williams, that we've landed our man. He's Harold Spindler, twenty-eight, married, formerly assistant cashier of the Grangers' and Drivers' Bank, now a fugitive from justice, and wanted for forgery and embezzlement. There is a thousand dollars reward for his apprehension, and as soon as we get in touch with the officers who think they have tracked him to Duluth, they'll be sent on here to arrest and extradite him!"

This was thrilling. I had a sudden strangling feeling in my throat. We always think of crime as something inconceivably remote from our commonplace, everyday life, and when it brushes against us, concretely and individually, we are stunned.

"There's Chicago calling now on my other wire," exclaimed Bloomer suddenly. "Hey, hang up a moment—I'll ring you up again as soon as they are done."

A FEW minutes later, as I waited nervously beside the switchboard operator, I was called again into the booth. It was Bloomer, resounding and triumphant.

"He's our party all right," he announced. "He's Harold Spindler for sure, and the officers will be here tomorrow with the warrant, requisition papers and fingerprints! Good work, hey? No time wasted, hey? Cobb's a smart boy, but I guess he's cornered this time, Mr. Williams."

I had hardly breath enough to ask him to keep the affair out of the newspapers.

"Sure, it will be kept out of the papers," said Bloomer. "The young lady's name has to be protected; I know that."

"Where is he now?" I asked.

"Where's Cobb now?"

"Up at your sister's apartment," said Bloomer, answering my question with a certain uneasiness. "But don't you disturb him, Mr. Williams; keep away from him, please; he'll run at the fall of a hat, and then where would we be?"

I murmured noncommittally that I would be very careful. It was beginning to dawn on me that Bloomer and I were at cross purposes as to Cobb's final fate. I had no wish whatever to have the fellow arrested, since his name could only too easily be linked with Viola's in an odious publicity. I wished for nothing better, in fact, than his complete disappearance and obliteration. But Bloomer was so much a policeman himself that I felt he would be acutely put out to fail his brother officers from Chicago. Besides, there was that thousand dollars reward, in which no doubt, my burly friend expected to share. My increasing perception of all this caused me to temporize.

I said good night and left the booth. Once outside I hurriedly called up a taxi and gave the chauffeur Kitty's address. Cobb's knell had sounded; his vile masquerade was nearing its end; vengeance, in a very stuffy red box, was swiftly moving in his direction to overtake and crush him.

The maid wanted to help me off with my overcoat, but I pushed her aside, and strode into the sitting-room just as I was.

The first person I saw was Cobb