

TORCHY HITS A TESTY ONE

By Sewell Ford

Drawing by George Brehm

"TORCHY," says Mr. Robert to me kind of peevish, as he comes out of his private office, "who let that last person in, you or Mr. Piddie?"

"Do you mean the easy spoken gent with the smooth face and the grayish hair and the minister's tie?" says I.

"Yes, that precise one," says he.

"Why, it was me passed him in," says I. "What else was there to it when he pats me soothin' on the shoulder and asks confidential if dear Robert is down to-day? Old family friend, wa'n't he?"

"He was an old bore with a genealogy to sell," growls Mr. Robert, "and I was nearly an hour getting rid of him. Family friend! See here, Torchy, you ought to wake up!"

And, say, maybe I don't feel some undersized at that, specially with Piddie strollin' by with his ear stretched out. Small! Why, for an hour after that I was still shrinkin', and I'm so dazed I lets Piddie put over one of his mealy mouthed lectures without even so much as invitin' him to go make a noise like a squash pie. For, even if I do admit it reluctant, it ain't often these ringers get by me on a phony rain check; and when it comes to havin' Mr. Robert hand me that siesta gag—well, that was cuttin' in deep.

DO I wake up after that? Say, by the time this heavy old female party comes paddin' in and makes a stab at rushin' the brass portcullis, I'm so much roused up that I tingles all over. She ain't more'n opened the anteroom door than I've sprung the safety catch on the gate. If I hadn't blocked her some way she'd sailed right past without even so much as givin' the salute; but with me workin' the lever against her she fetches up at the rail some abrupt, just as if findin' it there was a surprise.

"Excuse me, lady," says I, "but you can't walk through them foundry fixin's that way. They're built too substantial."

And it was about then I begun to feel the first effects from that glare of hers. Say, you talk about your assault and battery stares! Well, you should have seen the double row of chilly darts that was sent my way for a minute or so. Pictured out on paper it would have looked like the diagram of a collision at sea; for them lamps of hers wa'n't exactly mates; not reg'lar crossed, you know, but one seemed to be set a little on the bias.

I can't say if it was only this catty-cornered look, or the general make-up of this old party that gave me the prickly heat sensation back of the ears; but, anyway, after one glimpse of her I felt like I ought to go out and have myself put under bonds to keep the peace.

You know how some folks can set your teeth on edge that way, with just a look. There's sour lines down each side of her mouth, scoldin' furrows between eyes that's lookin' two ways for trouble, and a tilt to her chin that suggests battles fought and won. She's built solid and lumpy, and as she carries her shoulders well back I should judge that ten feet from her toes was the nearest she could see the floor in front of her. At that she has to squint some to make me out.

"Boy," says she, sort of gaspin' it out raspy, "open that gate!"

"Sure I will," says I, "when I gets the right password; but you ain't said it yet. Now who was it you thought you wanted to see?"

"Who?" says she. "Why, Robert, of course!"

"Yes, that's what they all say," I remarks. "And what's the particular business?"

"Humph," she snorts. "Tell my business to you? Why should I do anything of the—"

"Because," says I, "if you're solicitin' funds for day nurseries or settlement work or foreign missions, you'd better back out in the alley and cross Mr. Robert's name off the list."

"Look here, young man," she pants, puffin' out her cheeks, "you—you are insolent! I'll have you know that I am—"

"There, there, Sister!" I breaks in. "I'll get you placed in a minute. Is it a church organ you're solicitin' for, or are you circulatin' one of them suffragette petitions?"

"Boy," says she, snappin' it out peppery, "I am Robert's aunt!"

If I hadn't been stung so recent, she might have got away with it too; but, then again, I ain't been knockin' around with Mr. Robert, and doin' errands up to the Ellins house, and been made almost one of the family, as you might say, for nothin'. I'd never seen or heard tell of any such aunt; so I cuts loose with some of the free and easy retorts I'd been holdin' back.

"G'wan!" says I. "You don't get by me with any subscription book. And say, Aunty, our reception day for relatives is the first Tuesday after the thirty-first. You might try 'em on the floor below, where they've got a bonehead on the door. Anyway, Aunty, it's up to you to do the fade-away before—"

BUT just then I glances up and sees Mr. Robert standin' not two feet from my elbow, with a look on his face that suggests he's sufferin' from something between a fit and a bone in his throat. The old girl sees him too; but my last few remarks has left her purple faced and puffy, and all she can do is point an accusin' finger at me and gurgle. "Do—do you hear that, Robert?"



"I'll Catch You, if It Kills Me!" Says She. "Cheer Up, Old Girl! You're Doin' Fine!" Says I.

"Why, Aunt Verona!" says he. "I had no idea that you were nearer than—"

"Well, you see I am!" snaps Aunt Verona. "And you have heard how outrageously I have been talked to by this impudent young upstart!"

"Very sorry, indeed," murmurs Mr. Robert; "but you see we—"

"Don't apologize, Robert," says the old girl. "Act! Attend to this little wretch at once! I demand it!"

"Why, of course," says Mr. Robert. Then he turns to me, scowls real stern, and motions me to get up.

"Boy," he goes on, "what is your name?"

"Clarence Claude Dillingway Smith," says I right offhand and prompt.

"Ah!" says he. "New boy, aren't you?"

"Came on at nine this morning, sir," says I.

"Huh!" says he. "Anyone depending on you for support?"

"Only a widowed grandmother and seven small children," says I. "When I left home this morning, sir, they was cryin' for bread."

That seems to choke Mr. Robert up some; but he straightens his face out stern again and remarks, "Can't help it. You were insolent to my aunt. You are discharged."

"Yes, sir," says I. "Thank you, sir."

"Here," says he, slippin' me a fivespot. "On your way home buy some bread."

"Oh, sure," says I, reachin' for my hat.

And, honest, as I strolled out I could almost feel them slantwise looks of Aunt Verona borin' into my back like a pair of cheese testers. I don't know whether she fell for that discharge guff or not; but if she did there was no sympathy got away from her. And you can bet I knew that wouldn't be the way Mr. Robert would tie the can to me if he was in dead earnest! I takes my whole half holiday, though, just as though I'd earned it.

COURSE, Mr. Robert don't do any explainin' next mornin'. He only grins reminiscent as he blows in and finds me at the desk; but later in the day we exchanges some josh on the subject. Between that, and remarks dropped by Old Hickory, I made out that Aunt Verona was a sister of Mr. Ellins' who'd been livin' abroad for the past few years, and that they'd been hoping she'd stay there.

Seems that managin' family affairs was Aunt Verona's long suit, and nobody could say she ever slighted any details. She supervised everything, from the children's clothes to makin' out wills, and nobody in the family, includin' cousins three times removed, could get engaged or married without havin' to reckon with her. For one thing, she had a lot of property that was goin' to be divided up some day; and, for another, she never hesitated about buttin' in.

You wouldn't have thought she'd had a high roller

like Mr. Robert gettin' fidgety just because she came rubberin' around; but I guess he was as much under the spell as any of 'em. Even Old Hickory acted more sore eared than ever, and once when I trots in to announce that there's a lady to see him he grabs the card nervous and then sighs, "Thank Heaven it isn't Verona again!"

"Gee!" thinks I. "She must be some tobasco in the temperament if she's got him shyin' at her."

HAVIN' doped this much out, it's some easy to frame up the situation when I hears how she's mixin' into this affair between Miss Lucy and young O'good Thayer. He's Mr. Robert's yachtin' partner, Cap'n Thayer is; does the Corinthian skipper act on one of these sixty-foot racin' sloops that him and Mr. Robert owns together. You can take it from me too that she's some of a mug lifter, bringin' home the silverware every time she's entered.

But, say, you'd never guess, lookin' casual at this Thayer chap, that he was such a classy sport as all that. Why, he's a short, chunky, mild eyed young gent, and about the quietest party I ever heard converse without makin' any noise. Honest, I was around once when him and Mr. Robert and a third party was havin' a half-hour chin, and, although he seemed mighty int'rested in what was goin' on, he never opened his head but once. Seemed like he was always on the point of sayin' something too, only he seldom got any further.

How a mummy like that could ever boss a yacht racin' crew was a mystery to me. Another puzzle about Thayer was how he happened to make good with Miss Lucy; for from all accounts she's one of the snappiest, most gingery young beauts on either side of the Ellins family. I know there was great doin's when she came out less'n a year ago, and, although I wa'n't invited with the rest of the younger set, there was nothin' to prevent me readin' about it in the papers.

As Lucy was Mr. Robert's fav'rite cousin, and as him and Thayer was such chums, I expect the boss was more or less pleased with the prospects of their makin' a match of it. Course, him and me had never talked it over any, and I wa'n't lookin' to be called in on the case; but you never can say positive what ain't goin' to happen, can you?

THERE last Saturday mornin', when I knew Mr. Robert was out of town, I'm called to the 'phone, and there he is, shoutin' through seventeen exchanges to know if this was Torchy on the wire!

"Yep, it's me," says I. "What now?"

"You know my friend Captain Thayer, don't you?" says he.

"How foolish!" says I. "Sure I do. The one that's so strong on the thinkin' parts?"

"Yes, that's Thayer," says Mr. Robert. "Now

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