

## THE AMUSING ADVENTURES OF BEN BLAKE.

## TOO CLEVER BY HALF.

"There is no such thing as luck!" muttered Ben Blake despondently. "Here am I, reduced to my last threepence, and after that—well, there's nothing for it but work. Ugh! Looking for work is bad enough, but fancy finding it!"

This thought sent a shiver down the unhappy man's backbone, and he was forced to make his way into the "Boiled Beef and Cabbage" to spend his last threepence on restoratives.

Ben's attire, however, in no way tallied with his reduced circumstances. His clothes were far from shabby, and his soft felt hat, stuck jauntily on his well-brushed hair, gave him quite a debonaire appearance.

To a man who is a professional sharper, confidence trickster and successful crown-and-anchor manipulator, a fairly smart appearance is essential, and Ben's last coup had enabled him to rig himself out properly.

But since then his luck had been right out.

"Ah, well, never say die!" mused Ben, as he removed the contents of a glass with a practised gulp. "I guess I'll wander down to the quay and watch the American boat arrive. I might come up on some benevolent soul who would like me to mind his luggage."

He wandered from the inn, and came at last to the landing-stage.

The "Marmic" was being moored to the stage when he arrived, and the excited passengers crowded round the side of the boat were waving frantically to one or all of the people on the quay.

As Ben stood there, he caught sight of a remarkably pretty girl who was leaning over the rail of the boat, and apparently calling her father's attention to him.

"Gee whizz!" chuckled Ben inwardly. "She has evidently mistaken me for someone else. I'll keep it up; may lead to wealth without work or worry."

And, without ado, he smiled fatuously, showing his three gold teeth, and waved at the girl and her father.

"I'll be all right if they're as near-sighted when we meet," mused Ben. "It's worth risking, anyway. Who knows, I may be able to touch the old boy for a little change in the excitement of the moment?"

At length the boat was moored, and the passengers began to file down the gangway.

The pretty girl was among the first to come ashore, and she left the gangway and hastened along the quay to where Ben was standing.

Then came disaster. For even as she came within hailing distance, one of the porters, removing the luggage knocked against her, and she toppled into the water.

So startled was the young man at this sudden catastrophe that he leaned over and peered down. Then, overcome by the excitement of the moment, he too, overbalanced and fell in after the girl.

The onlookers did not see the incident properly, and at once jumped to conclusions.

"Brave man! What pluck! What presence of mind!" cried one old buffer. "Why, he jumped in after the girl almost before she reached the water!"

And as this and similarly enthusiastic remarks were being wafted about in the breeze, Ben was having a very uncomfortable few minutes.

In the height of his success as a swimmer he had never been able to swim more than a width of the local baths, and then it was at the shallow end, with the occasional assistance of one foot on the bottom.

"Great snakes!" he gurgled, as he drank down about a quart and a half of Mersey mud. "Whatever will happen to us now? For I can't even see a straw to clutch at in this mud. It looks like a wet feed-end for me!"

He looked towards the girl. He was elated to find that she was keeping up well, and was on the point of striking out for the quayside.

"Good egg! I'll make for her. Perhaps she'll be able to save me!"

He floundered towards her and grasped her firmly. Immediately a cheer went up from the crowd, and at the same instant he received a nasty buff on the nose with a life belt.

A few minutes later they were being hauled ashore, and it was a fortunate thing for Ben that the girl, at that moment, swooned in his arms.

In due course the picture of Ben clasping the fainting girl in his arms made a most effective item of interest for the local newspaper.

"My—my dear child!" cried the girl's father, pushing through the crowd and pressing all the starch out of his shirt-front with his daughter's wet form. "Thank goodness, you are safe, and but for your brave rescuer you would have been lost to me for ever!"

"Yes, dad!" agreed the girl, opening her eyes. "And fancy, he is the son of your old friend!"

The old man turned to Ben.

"Bless my soul, of course!" he cried, seizing the young man by the hand and shaking it furiously. "How are you, Dick Paine? We recognised you directly we saw you, my boy. You're exactly like your father, one of my oldest friends. Besides, a face like his couldn't happen in any other family. I hoped you would be here to meet us, but I hardly expected you to prove a first-class hero on sight!"

Although uncomfortable and wet, Ben's immersion hadn't damped his ardour for making something for nothing, and in a moment he had all his wits about him to keep up the deception.

"Of course!" he cried, a false light of recognition in his eyes. "Then you are—er—you must be—er—"

"Pomeroy Perkins!" cried the old chap heartily. "And sure glad I am to see you."

Ben decided that this was an excellent opportunity for borrowing five bob, but he managed to overcome the inclination. His well-trained brain reminded him that in a few minutes the acquaintance would ripen to the extent of ten shillings.

At this point Pomeroy Perkins gave him a hearty slap in the middle of his back which successfully shattered his thoughts.

"It won't do for you to hang around in those wet clothes, my boy!" he cried. "You'll catch your death of cold. We'll hustle along to the hotel for lunch, and I can lend you a suit while your own are being dried."

Black accepted the invitation before the old man had a chance to think better of it. He didn't intend to miss a good feed, if he could help it.

The trio were whirled away in a taxi, and at length reached the hotel, where Ben was shown into a room to change his clothes for a suit of his host's.

After careful examination, he found a piece of chewing-gum and sevenpence in coppers had been left in one of the pockets, and this cheered him considerably.

"By jingo!" chuckled Ben, as he took possession of these unconsidered articles. "This is evidently my day for jam! I must work the old boy for all he's worth. And the girl I so bravely—er—rescued, she is deucedly good-looking, and has got a few pence in the savings' bank, too, I'll wager!"

Having rigged himself up in his clothes, which seemed to fit him very late everywhere, Ben made his way to the dining-room.

Here he did himself more than proud. He went right through the menu once, and then, to make certain that he had missed nothing, he returned through it backwards, commencing with ices and finishing up with olives.

Both Pomeroy Perkins and his daughter found the young man's company interesting and amusing.

"My dear boy," cried the old man, after awhile, "you simply must pay us a visit at our new place in Yorkshire! We are off there to-morrow, and although we have only known you a short time, you are already like one of the family!"

As a matter of fact, Perkins had already decided that the young man would be a very valuable asset to the family!

For Dick Paine, the only son of Benjamin Paine, the biggest pill-maker in the British Isles, was a very desirable match for his daughter.

"If you'd care to join us at once, I'll write to your dad, tell him you're with us, and ask him to come to us, too," he suggested.

"Oh—er," stammered Ben awkwardly. "I'm afraid that wouldn't be possible!"

You see, the dear old pop is a vegetarian—

no, no, I mean, he doesn't visit now. Getting too old, you know; that is to say, he's too busy at present inventing a new corn cure, and it absorbs all his time."

So it was that, the following day, Mamie, her father and Ben Blake, the sharper, journeyed to Toorich Castle, in the Midlands.

The townsfolk, who had been informed of Ben's great rescuing act on the day before, headed by the mayor and corporation as guard of honour, came to welcome the party at the station.

At length, after a most enthusiastic reception, the trio arrived at Toorich Castle and Ben at once settled himself down as one of the family until Mamie got more than a little tired of him.

"Pop dear," she said to her father, about a week later, "Dick Paine isn't half as nice as I thought he would be! He is more like an out-of-work munition worker than a gentleman!"

"My dear—my dear!" remonstrated her father. "You mustn't say such things! Remember, Dick saved your life. Besides, it is my dearest wish that you should marry our guest!"

"Father!" cried Mamie. "But—oh, think of his face!"

"Don't be absurd! I know he's no oil painting, but he has a useful and serviceable sort of face, and moreover he is the possessor of about ten thousand pounds per annum—perhaps—not to mention the profits on the new corn cure."

From that moment Ben pressed his suit with renewed energy.

Not that he had any serious intention of becoming the sharer of Mamie's joys, sorrows, or petty cash. Not a bit of it. Old Ben knew something.

"That the stuff to give 'em," he chuckled, when he had formally popped the question and had been accepted. "This is the softest snap I've ever touched upon. Why—by the time the business is completed, I shall be able to retire on my means!"

The days sped on, with golfing, hunting, salmon snaring, and other vigorous pastimes, and altogether Ben had a merry time of it.

To add to the joys of his happy life, he always contrived to fleece his future father-in-law of a substantial sum every smiling morn, so it was small wonder that he did not care if the roof fell in!

It was two days before the wedding, and Ben took a stroll round the house, surveying the ever-swelling collection of salad bowls, soup ladles, toast-racks, and other knick-knacks that represented the gifts of the thoughtful friends of the bride.

"Splendid!" he smirked. "The happy day draws nigh, and now the business will commence in earnest."

He paused a moment and looked again at the collection.

"I don't think I shall be able to manage the job single-handed though," he went on. "If Bert Beamer has behaved himself, he should be on the outside of Wormwood Scrubbs by now, and he will only be too glad to get a finger in the pie. There's enough silver here to keep me in Woodbines and 'soft drinks' for the rest of my life. I'll wait till the last moment to give the late comers a chance of expressing their good wishes in a toasting-fork or an egg cosy. Then, with the able assistance of my old friend 'Erb, I will vamoose with the whole 'tag of tricks."

The following day after breakfast the old man asked Ben if he would care for a shot with the guns.

Ben accepted, but it was evident that his good fairy had wavered in her allegiance, for that moment commenced his downfall.

He hadn't handled a gun since he had gone in for clay-pipe and bottle smashing at Battersea in his youth, and he knew as much about shooting as he did about work.

However, he took the gun and examined it with the air of one who knew nothing about it.

Then, raising it above his shoulder, he let fly.

Bang. He missed a large bird; but managed to hit a gas-bag attached to an observation balloon, which was hovering in the distance.

There was a ripping sound, and the balloon came flopping to the ground at about a hundred miles per square minute.

The balloon and its occupants reached the ground just where the shootists were standing, and for some moments after landing the balloonists were too full for words.

At length a gentleman, with the appearance of a policeman out of work, came forward hurriedly, followed closely by a younger man.

"You couple of near-sighted bottle smashers!" he screamed, but broke off suddenly at the sight of Ben. "By jove—what a bit of luck!"

"You seem to know my friend," inter-

posed Pomeroy Perkins, turning to the new arrival.

"Know him!" echoed the man again. "I should think I do! He's Ben Blake—the confidence trickster—and I've been after him for some time!"

Ben protested vehemently, but the newcomer gripped him fiercely by the arm, and then turned to Pomeroy Perkins.

"I am Inspector Dooly," he began. "I heard on good authority that Blake was here impersonating Mr Paine, junior, so I took the liberty of coming to see if the information was correct. From all accounts we seem to have arrived in time."

There was silence for a few moments after this dramatic announcement, then Inspector Dooly turned to the man who had accompanied him.

"By the way, I think you will be glad to make this gentleman's acquaintance," he said.

Both Ben and Pomeroy Perkins stared at the young man, who stepped forward.

"Mr Richard Paine," announced the inspector, with a broad grin.

When Pomeroy Perkins learned the true identity of his late guest, and the scheme of becoming engaged to Mamie so that he could bolt with the wedding presents, it so upset the old boy that he wanted to get Ben fifty years on the spot.

At length, however, having been assured by the inspector that he would make it as warm as possible for the trickster, Ben was led away to take a long rest in a secluded country spot, where he will have time to think things over.

Ah, us; It's a funny old world!

The End.

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No matter where they're situated People get infatuated And eager scan the paper when it comes And to state the true position It's become an acquisition To the occupants of town and country homes.

The Socialist Party conference at Milan decided to adhere to the Moscow third internationale and also voted for the expulsion of moderates, including Turati Treves and Pampolini.

Two visitors from Wellington, apparently supporters of Bolshevism, attended the Hawera Workers' Educational Association class recently. The general impression of the class is that the visitors were trying to off-set or destroy the teachings of the lecturer in economics. One speaker stated that a quantity of literature from Russia had arrived in Wellington, but probably had not reached Hawera. The lecturer, the Rev. Mr Castle, of Eltham, replied to the visitors' remarks effectively. There is also in the district a Labour extremist endeavouring to organise the cheese-makers into a union, but he is meeting with much opposition.

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