

Benton's Comedy.

By Frederick White.

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WHEN Benton's comedy was published in a leading magazine no one was more surprised than Benton himself. Of course he had received the editor's acceptance and a week or two later a very satisfactory check, but the full realization of what it meant did not come to him until after months of waiting he saw with his own eyes his own work under his own name. It was the first time, and Benton felt a certain responsibility.

Many a man has had the same feeling on the birth of his first child, and Benton was simply experiencing some of the pride of fatherhood. For a time he struggled with the desire to adopt literature as a profession, but as the weeks passed and he failed to find himself heralded as a genius saner thoughts prevailed. Woolen goods were in demand, and so were his services as a salesman. Some months afterward he received this note:

My Dear Mr. Benton—At the request of the Hillside Dramatic club I write to ask your permission to use your play, "Maid and Widows," at our midwinter entertainment for the benefit of the orphans' home of this place. We have all read your comedy with great interest and appreciation and think it just what we need for our purpose. Trusting that you will grant our request, believe me, very cordially yours,
ELIZABETH RANKIN VAN CLEAVE.

Benton felt very much gratified when he received this note. He was appreciated, after all. He at once indited the following reply:

My Dear Miss Van Cleave—It will afford me the greatest pleasure to give you permission to use my play for the benefit of the orphans' home. It is always gratifying to find one's work appreciated, and I assure you that the Dramatic club has my best wishes for a successful representation of "Maid and Widows." Very sincerely yours,
JOHN AUSTIN BENTON.

He wondered if the members of the club would gather about Miss Van Cleave and regard the signature of the well known author and playwright with awe, and he began to think of writing a four act tragedy. One morning he was agreeably surprised to find another letter in the handwriting of Miss Van Cleave.

"Thank you so much," she wrote, "for letting us use your play. We have had two rehearsals, and everything seems to be going nicely. Will you please tell me if Alice is supposed to fall in love with Henry at the breakfast table, or is it when they are on their way to the golf club? I am to play Alice, and I do so want to make a success of the part."

"By the way, I find my aunt, Mrs. Baker, is an old friend of your mother's. Is it not strange how small the world is after all?"

"Do you consider it necessary for Henry to kiss Alice in the last act, as the book says?"

Benton whistled as he perused this note. He remembered having heard of his mother's friend, Mrs. Baker, and this must be her niece, the beautiful Miss Van Cleave.

That evening he wrote the following letter:

Dear Miss Van Cleave—In my opinion Alice did not fall in love with Henry at the breakfast table. That would be asking too much of any girl. Eleven o'clock and the golf club is a different matter. Under the circumstances I should consider it necessary for Henry to kiss Alice. He really could not help it, you know, for Alice is a charming girl.

I am glad that the play is progressing well and wish you every success. Sincerely yours,
JOHN A. BENTON.

On Tuesday evening Benton received a note from Mrs. Van Cleave inviting



WITH A PLUNGE THEY STARTED.

him to run out to Hillsdale the following Saturday to witness the presentation of his play and also to spend Sunday with them. Mrs. Van Cleave spoke of her sister's friendship for his mother and in closing stated that he would be met at the station by some member of the family. A convenient train reached Hillsdale at 5:30 o'clock, giving him time to dress for an early dinner. Benton accepted at once and spent

the intervening hours in wondering if the author would be called upon for a speech. On Saturday afternoon he boarded the train, suit case in hand.

All the way to Hillsdale he wondered if Miss Van Cleave would be the one to meet him. It was only an hour's run from the city, and soon Benton stood upon the platform. He looked about him, noting the well kept, prosperous appearance of the place and the many handsome traps and carriages awaiting their occupants. A groom in surprisingly tight breeches came up to him and, touching his hat, inquired, "Mr. Benton?"

"Yes," said Benton. "Mrs. Van Cleave's carriage?"

"Master Harry awaits you in the dog-cart, sir," replied the man, possessing himself dexterously of Benton's luggage and leading the way across the platform. Benton followed. A boy of sixteen or so was endeavoring to calm a mettlesome cob that was trying to see how straight he could stand on his hind legs without falling over backward.

"Chuck those things in behind, Burns, and get to his head," he ordered. "How do do, Mr. Benton? Excuse my not shaking hands and climb in."

Benton waited for a moment of comparative quiet and then climbed in. He was not accustomed to a horse like this, and the boy noticed it at once.

"He hasn't been out for a week," he explained, "and he feels good. Let him go, Burns." And, with a plunge, they started, the well trained Burns clutching the rail and swinging up behind with the greatest imperturbability. Once on the straight road leading from the station the cob settled down to a good steady gait, and Benton began to enjoy himself. Young Van Cleave was surprisingly easy for one of his years and kept up a constant flow of talk.

"That's a corking good play of yours, Mr. Benton," he said. "I'm going to be James, and I'm dead letter perfect. Got my clothes last night, and Aunt Fan thought I was the new man and asked me to get her a glass of water. Say, can't James come on in the last act with a letter or something?"

Benton good humoredly said that he thought it might be arranged and inquired who was to play Henry.

"Oh, Artie Brown, and he thinks he's the whole show. Wanted to kiss 'sis' every rehearsal. Said he didn't want it to go wrong the night of the play. Sis couldn't see it and said she thought that was something a man of his experience could do without rehearsing. Rough on Artie, for he knows it all and likes to have people think he's a regular 'killer.' Whoa, boy! Easy now," to the cob as they turned into a private roadway and whirled up to the steps of a fine old colonial house.

The groom was at the cob's head before they really stopped, and Benton climbed down and followed young Van Cleave into the house. Mrs. Van Cleave welcomed him cordially and introduced him to her daughter and the members of the house party, some of whom were to take part in the play. Miss Van Cleave showed him the music room, where the performance was to be held, and exhibited the stage, which was already set for the first act.

"Do you not feel very important," she asked, "when you consider that you are really responsible for it all?"

"No," said Benton. "I cannot say that I do. After all, the real responsibility rests with the players."

"You cannot shirk your share so carelessly," she said, laughing. "Stand or fall, you are one of us in this, and I shall see that you receive your full measure of praise or blame."

"Let us hope, then, that it will be praise—for all our sakes," he said, with an admiring look at her.

"Seriously," said Miss Van Cleave, "I do hope you will not be disappointed in us, and you must not be too critical."

"I shall not be disappointed in you," he replied decidedly.

While Benton was dressing for dinner some one knocked at his door.

"It's me—Jack. Can I come in?" said that ungrammatical young man in an excited tone of voice.

Benton opened the door and inquired what the trouble was.

"Here's a go!" said Jack. "Artie Brown has busted his leg or something and can't act. Sis is having a fit, and the others are just wild. It's too late to put it off, and what are we going to do?"

"Is there no one else to take the part—no understudy?" inquired Benton.

"No one knows it except the prompter, and she's a girl. Father has just come in, and he's tearing his hair. He plays the old man, you know. Got a bald wig and whiskers, and he'll die if he can't wear 'em. Say, what can we do about it anyhow?"

Another knock at the door, and Mr. Van Cleave, Sr., appeared.

"Pardon me, Mr. Benton, for introducing myself in this unceremonious manner," he said, shaking hands, "but this is a serious matter. The tickets have been sold, and it is too late for any postponement. My daughter has suggested that possibly you are sufficiently familiar with the lines to take the part, or, failing that, to read it. It is asking a good deal, I know, but if you could possibly do it it would be a great relief to all of us, besides helping us out of a very embarrassing predicament."

had put his own individuality. Step by step and situation by situation he had made Henry act and talk as he himself would have done under like circumstances. So, while it would have been almost impossible for him to take any other part without preparation, in this case he felt that he might venture upon it without danger of absolute failure. It was a risk, but under the circumstances he did not feel justified in refusing.

"I think I might do it after a fashion," he said gravely. "I should like to have a glance at the book, and I shall have to look to you all to help me out with the business."

"You may count on us for every assistance in our power," said Mr. Van Cleave. "It is a great relief, and you are placing us under a lasting obligation."

"I hope you will be able to say as much after it is all over," said Benton, "but in any event I will do my best."

Jack brought him the clothes that the unfortunate Arthur was to have



"I SHALL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED IN YOU,"

worn, and they proved to be a very presentable fit.

Before the curtain was rung up Benton found time to go over some of the more important scenes of the play. He was very much relieved to find himself quite at home in both lines and situations.

A short time later he stood in the wings listening to the announcement of the accident and the request that the audience would kindly overlook any lack of smoothness in the part of Henry, as the gentleman who was to play it had stepped into the breach at a moment's notice. Then, after a few hurried words of direction from the stage manager, two very hurried young people took their places for the opening scene and the curtain went up.

Now, there are certain psychological processes which prevail under certain conditions. We are mystified by their apparent unaccountability. We raise our hands in helpless incredulity and exclaim, "How inexplicable!" when there is nothing strange about it if we remember that youth and propinquity work hand in hand to carry out the universal behest. One each at least of these processes and conditions confronted Benton as he stood on the lawn before the clubhouse an hour later. He had done well, and he felt strangely exalted. He knew he was John Benton, but it was a new personality that cloaked him. He was in love—in love with a girl whom he had met yesterday for the first time—or was it today? He was waiting—waiting impatiently and giving voice to his inmost thoughts in words that were strangely familiar. He saw her coming slowly through the trees and started forward to meet her. They seated themselves on the clubhouse steps. They fenced with each other lightly, but with an undercurrent of feeling. He loved her—he loved her—and in a moment he would tell her so. His heart bounded, for he knew what her answer would be.

"It is only since yesterday, but it is enough. A week, a month, a year, and it would be the same. A hundred years from now, and it will still be the same. I love you. Will you be my wife?"

She arose, and he followed her. Her eyes were cast down, and her hands hung limp by her side. He seized them in his own, and his compelling gaze forced her to raise her eyes to his.

"Answer me," he said.

"I love you," she said faintly as she swayed toward him, and he clasped her in his arms, and only his ears heard the added "dear."

He kissed her full upon the lips. There was a roar of applause. From the wings people socked upon the stage clad in golfing attire, their faces strangely red and white. Then he remembered. Still holding the girl by the hand, he led her to the front. It was his place to repeat the epilogue. The others formed a half circle behind them. He spoke:

"In what may seem a very short space Alice and Henry have met, loved and settled the question, quite to their own satisfaction. May we hope that the match and the manner of its making meet with your approbation? And as the curtain falls let these words, typifying the end of the old and the beginning of the new, close our story—and so they were married."

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