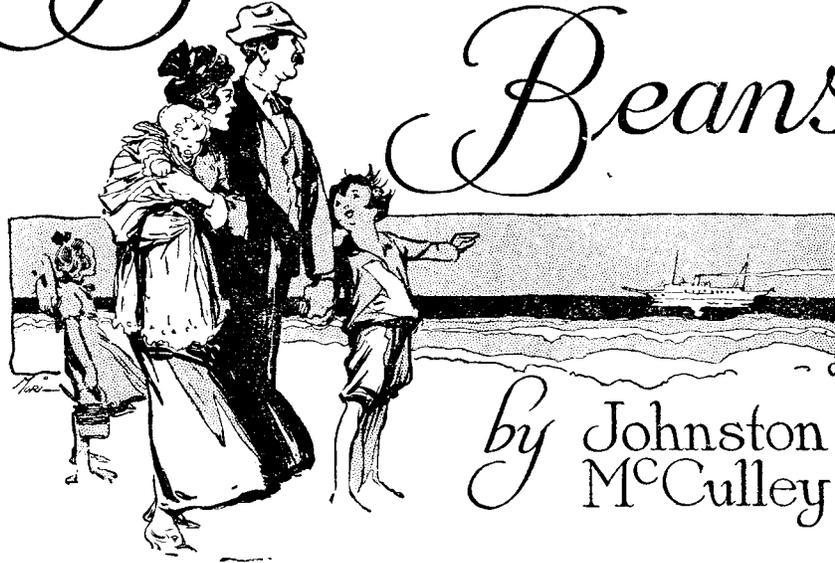


Bricks and Beans



By Johnston
McCulley

PETER SMITH worked eight hours a day, six days a week, for twenty-five cents an hour, and on the wages thus acquired he maintained himself, Mrs. Peter Smith, and three little Smiths, two of whom were old enough already to kick out shoes and wear out stockings and go to school. He lived with his brood in a two-room shack that fronted on an alley behind a factory, and, from the front door one had a wide view of old tin cans and broken bottles.

He was vitally interested in bricks and beans.

John Henry Benburker worked an average of two hours a day, six days a week—except when there was a board meeting and his hours of toil were lengthened—and enjoyed an income of about half a million a year for the two hours a day. For the extra labor of board meetings he was paid overtime with nice, new gold pieces. On this income he maintained himself, paid alimony to a lady sojourning in Italy, and kept the wolf from the door of his son, Lawrence Benburker, a

fastidious young gentleman who could tell the vintage every time after the first sip, granted that it was early enough in the day. John Henry Benburker lived in a marble mansion fronting on a broad boulevard, and a special watchman kept undesirables away.

And John Henry Benburker was vitally interested in bricks and beans.

It stands to reason that two gentlemen such as Peter Smith and John Henry Benburker, as far apart as the poles socially and financially yet having a certain interest in common, should develop a situation. They did not disappoint.

On this certain Saturday it was an hour after nightfall and a fine drizzle was falling as Peter Smith, his arms carrying a burden of bundles, hurried down the alley toward his home, stumbling over bottles as he walked, and often kicking tin cans out of his path.

Twenty yards from the shack there descended upon him from out the darkness a boy of eight and a girl of six—his son and

daughter. They always met him in this manner when he returned from work, and they always knew when he was approaching, for Peter Smith was a man who whistled when the day's labor was done.

Since his arms were full of bundles and he could not pick them up—an occurrence of each and every Saturday night—they contented themselves by clinging to the tail of his coat and shrieking their glee. This daily home-coming of their male parent was an event with young Peter Smith and little Miss Mary Smith.

They never saw him in the morning, for Peter Smith was up and away before they were awake, having made it a practice to walk the five miles to the brickyard where he worked and thus save thirty cents a week carfare.

It would have been more pleasant, of course, to have lived nearer the scene of his daily toil, but months of thought and mathematical computations had convinced Peter Smith that the difference in rent, added to the cost of moving, would outweigh the saving of car-fares and the cost of shoe leather expended. It was his joyous belief, born of necessity, that a walk of five miles every morning before beginning a day's hard work kept a man in excellent physical condition.

John Henry Benburker always was speaking of wishing to remedy his physical condition, but he never attempted following the prescription of Peter Smith. Benburker pranced around the golf links three afternoons weekly—save on those days when he felt fatigued and stopped at the ninth hole to send his caddie back for his car.

"Tanny?" demanded little Miss Mary Smith this Saturday evening, as she tugged at her father's coat-tail.

"You bet!" Peter Smith replied heartily.

"Red tanny?" she persisted.

"Red tanny and yellow tanny," Peter replied.

"Two sticks?" demanded his son and heir.

"You bet! Two big sticks of tanny, but you must let baby sister say whether she wants the red one or yellow one."

"Red!" the baby announced.

"Good enough! You'll have to wait until we get into the house."

"Got meat?" the boy demanded.

"You bet we have, son—meat for Sunday. And an egg a piece for breakfast—what do you think of that? An egg for mama and an egg for sister, and an egg for you and an egg for me. I bought four—what do you think of that?"

"Baby," suggested his young daughter.

"Babies don't eat eggs," said Peter Smith, and under his breath he added: "Thank Heaven!"

"Go ocean?" his son demanded.

Peter Smith did not answer, for two reasons; one of which was that they had reached the front door of the shack, and the other of which was that a man always likes to defer the telling of bad news. Mrs. Peter met them at the door, her face the abiding-place of smiles, for Mrs. Peter loved her husband and clung to him—something John Henry Benburker's spouse had not done.

Mrs. Peter relieved him of his bundles, putting them on a shelf in one corner of the kitchen; and while Peter removed the grime of labor from face and hands, she busied herself with the preparation of the evening meal. The baby cooed from a cot in a corner; the other two children pranced around the table and watched the food being put in place.

Ten minutes later the Smith family was busy eating. It was not to be expected, of course, that they would fare sumptuously on Saturday night. It was thoroughly understood that Saturday night's meal was composed of scraps and leavings of the week, and that was absolutely all right, since the day following always was a feast day when there was meat. Leavings and scraps can be made into a

delicious thick soup when there is an economical Mrs. Peter Smith to preside over the stove.

Supper being over, Peter Smith filled and lighted his pipe and puffed in contentment while Mrs. Peter did the dishes. The aroma that drifted from Peter's pipe might not have pleased an expert tobacco-tester, but the stuff with which the pipe was filled made smoke, and the bag it had come in bore a tobacco revenue stamp, so it must have been all right.

The baby was asleep now, and young Peter and young Mary were silent in the enjoyment of an inch of stick candy each. The grocer at the corner always gave Peter Smith two sticks of candy on Saturday night when Peter purchased the week's supplies, for Peter always paid cash. An inch of a stick on Saturday night, another inch after breakfast Sunday, and the remainder on Sunday afternoon—that was the program.

The dishes having been washed and put away, Mrs. Peter went into the front room and sat down across the table from her husband.

"Any news?" she asked.

She smiled when she voiced the question, but a close observer would have noticed that the smile was wistful.

"No news," Peter replied.

This was a part of the regular program, too. No news meant that Peter still retained his job, since there had been no cut-down on men at the brick-yard; news would have meant disaster.

"How is everything at the grocery?" Mrs. Peter asked.

Peter puffed slowly at his pipe before he replied.

"Beans," he said, finally, "are doing the skyrocket act. Beans now are thirteen cents a pound. And I can remember when my old mother used to buy them for six pounds for a quarter, and better beans at that. Meat or beans—we've got to have one or the other. I got some meat for to-morrow—you saw what

it was. Pretty poor stuff and not much juice in it, but maybe you can stew something along with it and make it do. If beans only would get cheaper—"

"Well, why don't they?" Mrs. Peter asked.

"I don't know. Maybe they're scarce—crop failed or something like that. Or else the trust is handling 'em. You never can tell. 'Tain't the grocer's fault—he has to stand a raise in price the same as we do—don't make as much profit as he used to, he says—and I believe him."

"It's pretty hard to get along," Mrs. Peter observed.

"Well, we're better off than a lot of others at that. I'm strong and can work, and the kids ain't sick, and you're all right. We got a place to live, and the kids go to school, and we eat. Of course, we could do with a lot more—but we're getting along all right."

"Things have got to get better for you some time," Mrs. Peter said.

"Sure they will!"

"I don't suppose—that is—" Mrs. Peter stammered and stopped. The children ceased eating candy and looked up in expectation. Peter Smith put his cold pipe down on the table and lowered his eyes and played with his belt.

"I'm—afraid not—not to-morrow," he said.

Mrs. Peter sighed.

"It's too bad!" she said. "But that 'll come later, I suppose."

"Sure! The summer's young yet!" said Peter.

His son plucked him by the sleeve.

"No go ocean?" he asked.

"Not to-morrow, sonny. Now don't cry about it! We'll get there some Sunday this summer, and then, sonny, we'll all have a great time. Mama will have a lunch put up, and we can all wade, and maybe I'll buy you some peanuts and some stick candy—brown and white and yellow and red stick candy. But

not tomorrow, sonny. Papa hasn't got the money to spare to-morrow."

His son turned away and remained silent for some five minutes; his young daughter, not exactly understanding, but feeling sure there was some disappointment afoot, whimpered that she was sleepy. Mrs. Peter put the children to bed and then returned to her husband.

"I do so hope we can—some Sunday this summer," she said.

"We'll do it, maw—don't worry!"

"It 'd do the children so much good—just one day at the seaside. But it costs—"

They knew what it cost. There was a dollar for fares in the first place, and certainly at least twenty cents for amusement. The summer before they had taken their son to the beach for a day—their daughter at that time had been too weak to go because of a slight illness. And their son never had forgotten it, and he wanted to go again.

And this summer they could take the daughter, too, and the baby. They felt sure that a day at the beach would do the baby a world of good.

You see, there are ways and ways for a family to spend a day at the beach. A family may go in a motor-car and sit on the veranda of a fashionable hotel, and eat an expensive dinner, and return home in the cool of a moonlight night in the motor-car. Or a family may go in a crowded train and spend the day sitting near the edge of the water in the hot sun, wading a bit now and then, eating a luncheon carried from home that is attacked by ants and sand fleas as soon as it is opened, and returning tired but happy in another jammed train.

The Smiths had gone the latter way, making the outward trip on the very first train and returning by the very last. Their son had slept all the way in. But they had remembered that day's trip with keen enjoyment.

Why, think of it! Just to have a sight of the ocean, and see the waves roll in, and watch

the breakers dash, and glimpse well-dressed gods and goddesses spending money and riding in automobiles, and read the flaring banners before sideshows and guess as to what one would see if one were rich and could enter!

That was a day. But it cost a dollar and twenty cents at least!

"The children have set their little hearts on it," said Mrs. Peter. "And it would do them so much good! We surely must manage to do it, Peter! A dollar seems such a little bit of money, and yet—"

"Now, don't get pessimistic, maw. A dollar's a dollar! We'll manage it, all right, Maybe I can get an evening's extra work somewhere—or they might raise our wages. If only beans wasn't so blamed high—"

II.

IT was two o'clock in the afternoon of Monday, and John Henry Benburker, just returned from luncheon, was wondering whether to drive out to the country club, when his son and heir was ushered in.

"'Lo, dad!" said the son and heir. "Hello, Lawrence! What's on your mind—more money? Got a new chorus girl, or is it a race-track tip?"

"Well, it's a shocker, dad!" The son and heir sat down beside his father, tossed his hat on a table near by, and deftly extracted a monogrammed cigarette from a gold case embellished with diamonds. "It's a thriller—a regular stem-winder of a jolt!"

"Not married, are you?" inquired John Henry in some alarm. He had a momentary vision of having to buy off some adventuress. He wouldn't mind the purchase price in that event, but he was afraid of notoriety.

He wasn't the stage-and-novel variety of rich parent. He never admonished his son for being a spendthrift. He had made up his mind years ago to give the boy everything that he wanted, since the boy was the only relative

he had in the world. He had formed a trust fund already for the boy, and if the boy killed himself by high living before his father died the fund would go to a university.

That boy of John Henry Benburker's could do as he pleased and have as much money as he liked to do it with!

"No, I am not married," the son and heir replied, grinning. "but I am going to be—I think."

"Not getting soft on one of those chorus girls, are you?"

"You're way off, dad. I'm thinking of a decent girl."

"Um! Been attending a religious revival, or something like that? This sure is a jolt!"

"That's only jolt the first, dad. Here's jolt the second—you know the girl and approve of her, and she's said she likes me better than any of the crowd, and I've cut out half a dozen chorus girls for her, and we're ready to tie up in about four or five months, as soon as she can have her dressmakers rush her some clothes."

"Four or five mo— *Rush* her clothes, you said? She sure must be crazy to marry you! What is all this—a joke? What's the name of the young lady?"

"Irene."

"Not—not Irene Grailey?"

"Correct, dad."

"My boy! My boy! The daughter of my old friend? The greatest little girl in town? Why, if you two marry you'll combine the two biggest fortunes in this end of the country! Great! Hah—I guess there is real stuff in the Benburkers. They've been trying to tell me you're going to Hades with your wine and your chorus girls, and that you'd not be able to pull up when you'd scattered your wild oats. How I'll gloat at 'em over this! Pulled up and reformed and going to marry the greatest little girl in town! This sure is a shocker! Shake hands, my son! I'll give a million to your first baby!"

"I'd rather have something right now, dad."

"Well, what is it? I'm in the mood to hand you almost anything this afternoon."

"It isn't just a roll of bills, dad. I—I want to buy something, and if I do I'll have to pay cash down—and it is some little sum. I never asked you for so much all in one lump."

"What do you want to buy?"

"A yacht—a little cruiser, dad. Bennie Sterner has one, and he's got to let go of it. Only had it in commission a couple of months—good as new. Got caught in the market and has to sell."

"I know something about that getting caught in the market," observed Benburker, chuckling.

"He paid seventy-five thousand for her, dad. I can get her for fifty thousand cash down. Deal must be closed by noon to-morrow. I'll fit her up a little better and name her the Irene. See? Wouldn't that be great? I could take Irene and her mother and a couple of chaperons and some of the other fellows and girls on a cruise before the wedding—and we could take-our honeymoon in her, too. But it's fifty thousand cash down, dad. I don't believe I ever asked you for that much in one lump before."

"I believe not. And you never had such a good excuse for asking it, son. Well—you can have your yacht. Tell Bennie to drift in here to-morrow morning at eleven and we'll close the deal."

"Thanks, dad. Even if you have got a few millions, that's quite a bit to ask you to pay right off like that."

"Oh, I'm not going to pay for it!"

"Wh-what?" the son and heir gasped.

"Give me your close attention, son, and I'll teach you a lesson in finance. You want a yacht and it costs fifty thousand dollars. You get the yacht, and it doesn't cost the Benburker family a cent."

"But—"

"Just a little lesson, son. Where does

your fond father get his money?"

"Stocks, bonds—"

"In the first place, son, I mean. Where do I get the money with which I purchase stocks and bonds? Where is the foundation? No wise man puts a foundation on stocks and bonds. The foundation of a fortune can be built safely of one class of things—commodities used by the great mass of people every day. Now—where do I get my money?"

"Bricks and beans!"

"Correct, son—go to the head of the class. I get my money from bricks and beans. My companies control the bean market, and my companies control the brick market in this neck of the woods. They have to come to us when they build buildings or fill their stomachs. You want fifty thousand dollars, eh? One moment."

Still chuckling, John Henry Benburker turned to his desk and figured for a moment with a gold pencil on an ivory tablet.

"Here we are, son," he said. "I have five thousand men working in my brickyards. For ten weeks I'll cut every man's wages one cent an hour, or eight cents a day—that's all. That's only forty-eight cents a week each. They'll never miss it—and the report will be spread that the retrenchment is for only a few weeks because of a poor market—rather keep all the men at a few cents less than fire a third of them and let the others have their regular wage. See? Very simple. That 'll be four dollars and eighty cents per man for the ten weeks. Five thousand men—that 'll be twenty-four thousand dollars even. There's half your yacht."

"Great guns!" the son and heir exclaimed.

"Simple little lesson. What's forty-eight cents a week? Nothing! They'll never miss it. Now for the rest of your yacht. I'll just pass the word that beans are to be raised one cent a pound until three million pounds have been sold. What's a cent a pound? Nothing! When, that amount has been sold, we'll cut

back to the old price—maybe. We'll explain that there's a shortage this year. Nothing easier! Three million pounds at a cent a pound—thirty thousand dollars.

"Add that to the twenty-four thousand from the brick yards. There you have fifty-four thousand dollars, my beloved son—your yacht and four thousand over for any little improvements on her you may desire to make. There you are! We buy the yacht, but we don't have to dig in our own bank-roll to pay for her. And the joke is that nobody is hurt. What's forty-eight cents a week to a man of ours? And what's a stingy cent a pound on beans?"

"Great guns!" said the son and heir again.

III.

THIS Saturday night there was no drizzle, and the air was balmy, and the grocer had not forgotten to give Peter Smith the two sticks of candy for his children, yet Peter Smith had to make an extra effort to whistle when he reached the mouth of the alley.

As on every evening, so this evening, boy and girl ran giggling to meet him and cling to his coat-tails.

"Tanny again!" Peter said, speaking quickly so that his offspring could not ask questions. "A yellow stick for son and a red stick for sister. And some nice corn meal for mama to make batter cakes out of! Won't that be dandy for breakfast in the morning?"

He had been walking rapidly, and now they were at the front door of the shack, and Mrs. Peter saluted her husband with a kiss and began taking the bundles from his arms. Again she prepared the supper while Peter hurried into the corner of the kitchen and began washing his face and hands.

Often during the meal Mrs. Peter glanced across the table at Peter, and she knew that something had gone wrong, and fear clutched at her heart, but she kept up a

conversation with the children until supper was ended.

Once more Peter lighted his pipe and gave the children their candy; and presently Mrs. Peter sat across the table from him.

"Any news?" she asked.

"Yes." said Peter in a hoarse voice.

"Peter! You're—you're not—?"

"No, I'm not fired." said Peter. "But they have cut wages a cent an hour for a few weeks—doing that to keep on all the men during the slack season, they say. Do you know what that means. Mary? It means forty-eight cents a week, and that's mighty close to half a dollar. And a half dollar buys us beans for a week. And beans—"

"What is it. Peter?"

"Why, beans have gone up again, Mary. They're fourteen cents a pound now, and may go higher, so the grocer says. Shortage of the crop, I guess."

"Then we can't—"

"Not—not to-morrow, Mary," Peter Smith said, and he got up and paced to the door and back, forgetting to puff at his pipe. "I'm—I'm awfully sorry."

"I know, Peter. It isn't your fault."

"And the summer is young yet," he said. "Maybe I can get something to do a couple of evenings. It'd take only a little more than a dollar, but a dollar— gosh! Wages down and beans up! I suppose it wouldn't make much difference to some folks—"

"Now, Peter! Don't you begin worrying! Everything's all right. We're lots better off than some."

The Saturday night before he had begged her not to be pessimistic, and had explained things in this same way. Now that he was downhearted for the moment, it was the wife's duty to be the cheering one. Not such a bad philosophy that.

"Go ocean?" their small son asked.

Peter turned his face away. Mrs. Peter answered the boy's question by changing the subject, telling the children stories until they

were ready for bed.

Peter's good spirits had returned by Monday morning, and he whistled as he walked his five miles to work. He was glad that a kind employer had cut wages rather than lay off a third of the men—he might have been included in the third. What fools men were to say that employers always ground employees beneath the heels of their shoes! Of course, it was bad that beans had gone up again, but there was a reason for that, too.

Why didn't the bean growers raise more? They might have known there'd be a greater demand for beans with meat so high. It was too bad there was a shortage!

Peter Smith worked through the week as usual, and only on Saturday night as he walked home did his spirits fall again—for he knew the boy would be asking the eternal Saturday-night question regarding the trip to the beach.

The children met him as usual, this time shouting with glee, and this time his attempt to keep them from asking questions availed him nothing.

"How early have we to get up?" the boy demanded.

"Goin' sea beach!" said the daughter.

"Not to-morrow," Peter said sadly.

"Mama say yes," the boy responded. "She iron sister's dress."

This was a tragedy, Peter thought. Surely Mrs. Peter had not put false hopes in the hearts of her little children! Mrs. Peter surely knew that they couldn't afford the beach trip.

They reached the door of the shack, and Mrs. Peter met them, her eyes glistening. Peter kissed her and went on into the kitchen to wash.

"Peter—I—I hope you'll not be angry," Mrs. Peter said. "I just couldn't let the children be disappointed again, and the summer is passing."

"I know, Mary—but how can we afford it? There—there! I guess we can if we

be mighty careful a couple of weeks.”

Mrs. Peter pressed a dollar and a quarter into his palm.

“There, Peter,” she said. “Now don’t be angry. It is only for just this once.”

“But how—?”

“I—I got a couple of washings to do. Peter.”

“*Mary!*”

“It didn’t hurt me a bit, Peter.”

“But I’ve told you I can’t have that, *Mary!* You haven’t been strong since the last baby—”

“I took my time, Peter, and it didn’t hurt me a bit. And I’ll not do it again. I wanted to take the babies so much.”

Peter looked down at her, and the tears were very near to coming. He kissed her awkwardly.

“All right,” he said. “We’ll make the most of it, then. We’ll talk about it this evening, so the kiddies will be anticipating, and we’ll give them the time of their lives tomorrow. I suppose we’d better get up in time to catch the first train—”

They caught the first train, and they arrived at the beach at an early hour. Hand in hand, the boy and girl stood at the edge of the

water and faced the unfathomable mystery of the ocean. Peter and Mrs. Peter sat down on the hard sand, and fixed a blanket for the baby, and drank in the stiff, sea air.

Then they had luncheon, and watched the crowds that came later, and stared at the flaring signs on the sideshows; and Peter even purchased a bag of peanuts and took the boy and girl for one ride on the merry-go-round. They had planned to make the most of this single day at the beach, to gain which Mrs. Peter had worked in the heat over a washtub, while Peter worked in the clay at the brickyard to get money to buy beans.

And toward evening a beautiful small cruising yacht steamed slowly by and anchored off one of the fashionable hotels.

“Peter! Wouldn’t it be great to own a boat like that?” Mrs. Peter gasped. “And to take a ride in it on the ocean! Oh, if only, some time, we could only get on one and just look around! Wouldn’t it be glorious?”

“Own a boat like *that?*” Peter exclaimed. “Yes, I might, in about five million years! I’ll bet she cost as much as three thousand dollars! Nope, I guess I’ll never buy a boat like that!”

Peter had purchased a part of that one, but he did not know. It was the Irene.