

Sheener

By Ben Ames Williams

From Collier's Weekly

When he was sober the man always insisted that his name was Evans, but in his cups he was accustomed to declare, in a boastful fashion, that his name was not Evans at all. However, he never went farther than this, and since none of us were particularly interested, we were satisfied to call him Evans, or, more often, Bum, for short. He was the second assistant janitor; and whereas, in some establishments, a janitor is a man of power and place, it is not so in a newspaper office. In such institutions, where great men are spoken of irreverently and by their first names, a janitor is a man of no importance. How much less, then, his second assistant. It was never a part of Evans's work, for example, to sweep the floors. There is something lordly in the gesture of the broom. But the janitor's first assistant attended to that; and Evans's regular duties were more humble, not unconnected with such things as cuspidors. There was no man so poor to do him honor; yet he had always a certain loftiness of bearing. He was tall, rather above the average height, with a long, thin, bony face like a horse, and an aristocratic stoop about his neck and shoulders. His hands were slender; he walked in a fashion that you might have called a shuffle, but which might also have been characterized as a walk of indolent assurance. His eyes were wash-blue, and his straggling mustache drooped at the corners.

Sober, he was a silent man, but when he had drunk he was apt to become mysteriously loquacious. And he drank whenever the state of his credit permitted. At such times he spoke of his antecedents in a lordly and condescending fashion which we found amusing. "You call me Evans," he would say. "That does well enough, to be sure. Quite so, and all that. Evans! Hah!"

And then he would laugh, in a barking fashion that with his long, bony countenance always suggested to me a coughing horse. But when he was pressed for details, the man--though he might be weaving and blinking with liquor--put a seal upon his lips. He said there were certain families in one of the Midland Counties of England who would welcome him home if he chose to go; but he never named them, and he never chose to go, and we put him down for a liar by the book. All of us except Sheener.

Sheener was a Jewish newsboy; that is to say, a representative of the only thoroughbred people in the world. I have known Sheener for a good many years, and he is worth knowing; also, the true tale of his life might have inspired Scheherazade. A book must be made of Sheener some day. For the present, it is enough to say that he had the enterprise which adversity has taught his people; he had the humility which they have learned by enduring insults they were powerless to resent, and he had the courage and the heart which were his ancient heritage. And--the man Evans had captured and enslaved his imagination.

He believed in Evans from the beginning. This may have been through a native credulity which failed to manifest itself in his other dealings with the world. I think it more probable that Evans and his pretensions appealed to the love of romance native to Sheener. I think he enjoyed believing, as we enjoy lending ourselves to the illusion of the theatre. Whatever the explanation, a certain alliance developed between the two; a something like friendship. I was one of those who laughed at Sheener's credulity, but he told me, in his energetic fashion, that I was making a mistake.

"You got that guy wrong," he would say. "He ain't always been a bum. A guy with half an eye can see that. The way he talks, and the way he walks, and all. There's class to him, I'm telling you. Class, bo."

"He walks like a splay-footed walrus, and he talks like a drunken old hound," I told Sheener. "He's got you buffaloed, that's all."

"Pull in your horns; you're coming to a bridge," Sheener warned me. "Don't be a goat all your life. He's a gent; that's what this guy is."

"Then I'm glad I'm a roughneck," I retorted; and Sheener shook his head.

"That's all right," he exclaimed. "That's all right. He ain't had it easy, you know. Scrubbing spittoons is enough to take the polish off any guy. I'm telling you he's there. Forty ways. You'll see, bo. You'll see."

"I'm waiting," I said.

"Keep right on," Sheener advised me. "Keep right on. The old stuff is there. It'll show. Take it from me."

I laughed at him. "If I get you," I said, "you're looking for something along the line of 'Noblesse Oblige.' What?"

"Cut the comedy," he retorted. "I'm telling you, the old class is there. You can't keep a fast horse in a poor man's stable."

"Blood will tell, eh?"

"Take it from me," said Sheener.

It will be perceived that Evans had in Sheener not only a disciple; he had an advocate and a defender. And Sheener in these rôles was not to be despised. I have said he was a newsboy; to put it more accurately, he was in his early twenties, with forty years of experience behind him, and with half the newsboys of the city obeying his commands and worshiping him like a minor god. He had full charge of our city circulation and was quite as important, and twice as

valuable to the paper, as any news editor could hope to be. In making a friend of him, Evans had found an ally in the high places; and it became speedily apparent that Sheener proposed to be more than a mere friend in name. For instance, I learned one day that he was drawing Evans's wages for him, and had appointed himself in some sort a steward for the other.

"That guy wouldn't ever save a cent," he told me when I questioned him. "I give him enough to get soused on, and I stick five dollars in the bank for him every week. I made him buy a new suit of clothes with it last week. Say, you wouldn't know him if you run into him in his glad rags."

"How does he like your running his affairs?" I asked.

"Like it?" Sheener echoed. "He don't have to like it. If he tries to pull anything on me, I'll poke the old coot in the eye."

I doubt whether this was actually his method of dominating Evans. It is more likely that he used a diplomacy which occasionally appeared in his dealings with the world. Certainly the arrangement presently collapsed, for Sheener confessed to me that he had given his savings back to Evans. We were minus a second assistant janitor for a week as a consequence, and when Evans tottered back to the office and would have gone to work I told him he was through.

He took it meekly enough, but not Sheener. Sheener came to me with fire in his eye.

"Sa-a-ay," he demanded, "what's coming off here, anyhow? What do you think you're trying to pull?"

I asked him what he was talking about, and he said: "Evans says you've given him the hook."

"That's right," I admitted. "He's through."

"He is not," Sheener told me flatly. "You can't fire that guy."

"Why not?"

"He's got to live, ain't he?"

I answered, somewhat glibly, that I did not see the necessity, but the look that sprang at once into Sheener's eyes made me faintly ashamed of myself, and I went on to urge that Evans was failing to do his work and could deserve no consideration.

"That's all right," Sheener told me. "I didn't hear any kicks that his work wasn't done while he was on this bat."

"Oh, I guess it got done all right. Some one had to do it. We can't pay him for work that some one else does."

"Say, don't try to pull that stuff," Sheener protested. "As long as his work is done, you ain't got any kick. This guy has got to have a job, or he'll go bust, quick. It's all that keeps his feet on the ground. If he didn't think he was earning his living, he'd go on the bum in a minute."

I was somewhat impatient with Sheener's insistence, but I was also interested in this developing situation. "Who's going to do his work, anyhow?" I demanded.

For the first time in our acquaintance I saw Sheener look confused. "That's all right too," he told me. "It don't take any skin off your back, long as it's done."

In the end I surrendered. Evans kept his job; and Sheener--I once caught him in the act, to his vast embarrassment--did the janitor's

work when Evans was unfit for duty. Also Sheener loaned him money, small sums that mounted into an interesting total; and furthermore I know that on one occasion Sheener fought for him.

The man Evans went his pompous way, accepting Sheener's homage and protection as a matter of right, and in the course of half a dozen years I left the paper for other work, saw Sheener seldom, and Evans not at all.

About ten o'clock one night in early summer I was wandering somewhat aimlessly through the South End to see what I might see when I encountered Sheener. He was running, and his dark face was twisted with anxiety. When he saw me he stopped with an exclamation of relief, and I asked him what the matter was.

"You remember old Bum Evans?" he asked, and added: "He's sick. I'm looking for a doctor. The old guy is just about all in."

"You mean to say you're still looking out for that old tramp?" I demanded.

"Sure, I am," he said hotly; "that old boy is there. He's got the stuff. Him and me are pals." He was hurrying me along the street toward the office of the doctor he sought. I asked where Evans was. "In my room," he told me. "I found him on the street. Last night. He was crazy. The D. T.'s. I ain't been able to get away from him till now. He's asleep. Wait. Here's where the doc hangs out."

Five minutes later the doctor and Sheener and I were retracing our steps toward Sheener's lodging, and presently we crowded into the small room where Evans lay on Sheener's bed. The man's muddy garments were on the floor; he himself tossed and twisted feverishly under Sheener's blankets. Sheener and the doctor bent over him, while I stood by. Evans waked, under the touch of their hands, and waked to sanity. He was cold sober and desperately sick.

When the doctor had done what could be done and gone on his way, Sheener sat down on the edge of the bed and rubbed the old man's head with a tenderness of which I could not have believed the newsboy capable. Evans's eyes were open; he watched the other, and at last he said huskily:

"I say, you know, I'm a bit knocked up."

Sheener reassured him. "That's all right, bo," he said. "You hit the hay. Sleep's the dose for you. I ain't going away."

Evans moved his head on the pillow, as though lie were nodding. "A bit tight, wasn't it, what?" he asked.

"Say," Sheener agreed. "You said something, Bum. I thought you'd kick off, sure."

The old man considered for a little, his lips twitching and shaking. "I say, you know," he murmured at last. "Can't have that. Potter's Field, and all that sort of business. Won't do. Sheener, when I do take the jump, you write home for me. Pass the good word. You'll hear from them."

Sheener said: "Sure I will. Who'll I write to, Bum?"

Evans, I think, was unconscious of my presence. He gave Sheener a name; his name. Also, he told him the name of his lawyer, in one of the Midland cities of England, and added certain instructions....

When he had drifted into uneasy sleep Sheener came out into the hall to see me off. I asked him what he meant to do.

"What am I going to do?" he repeated. "I'm going to write to this guy's lawyer. Let them send for him. This ain't no place for him."

"You'll have your trouble for your pains," I told him. "The old soak is a plain liar; that's all."

Sheener laughed at me. "That's all right, bo," he told me. "I know. This guy's the real cheese. You'll see."

I asked him to let me know if he heard anything, and he said he would. But within a day or two I forgot the matter, and would hardly have remembered it if Sheener had not telephoned me a month later.

"Say, you're a wise guy, ain't you?" he derided when I answered the phone. I admitted it. "I got a letter from that lawyer in England," he told me. "This Evans is the stuff, just like I said. His wife run away with another man, and he went to the devil fifteen years ago. They've been looking for him ever since his son grew up."

"Son?" I asked.

"Son. Sure! Raising wheat out in Canada somewhere. They give me his address. He's made a pile. I'm going to write to him."

"What does Bum say?"

"Him? I ain't told him. I won't till I'm sure the kid's coming after him." He said again that I was a wise guy; and I apologized for my wisdom and asked for a share in what was to come. He promised to keep me posted.

Ten days later he telephoned me while I was at supper to ask if I could come to his room. I said: "What's up?"

"The old guy's boy is coming after him," Sheener said. "He's got the shakes waiting. I want you to come and help me take care of him."

"When's the boy coming?"

"Gets in at midnight to-night," said Sheener.

I promised to make haste; and half an hour later I joined them in Sheener's room. Sheener let me in. Evans himself sat in something like a stupor, on a chair by the bed. He was dressed in a cheap suit of ready-made clothes, to which he lent a certain dignity. His cheeks were shaven clean, his mustache was trimmed, his thin hair was plastered down on his bony skull. The man stared straight before him, trembling and quivering. He did not look toward me when I came in; and Sheener and I sat down by the table and talked together in undertones.

"The boy's really coming?" I asked.

Sheener said proudly: "I'm telling you."

"You heard from him?"

"Got a wire the day he got my letter."

"You've told Bum?"

"I told him right away. I had to do it. The old boy was sober by then, and crazy for a shot of booze. That was Monday. He wanted to go out and get pied; but when I told him about his boy, he begun to cry. And he ain't touched a drop since then."

"You haven't let him?"

"Sure I'd let him. But he wouldn't. I always told you the class was there. He says to me: 'I can't let my boy see me in this state, you know. Have to straighten up a bit. I'll need new clothes.'"

"I noticed his new suit."

"Sure," Sheener agreed. "I bought it for him."

"Out of his savings?"

"He ain't been saving much lately."

"Sheener," I asked, "how much does he owe you? For money loaned and spent for him."

Sheener said hotly: "He don't owe me a cent."

"I know. But how much have you spent on him?"

"If I hadn't have give it to him, I'd have blowed it somehow. He needed it."

I guessed at a hundred dollars, at two hundred. Sheener would not tell me. "I'm telling you, he's my pal," he said. "I'm not looking for anything out of this."

"If this millionaire son of his has any decency, he'll make it up to you."

"He don't know a thing about me," said Sheener, "except my name. I've just wrote as though I knowed the old guy, here in the house, see. Said he was sick, and all."

"And the boy gets in to-night?"

"Midnight," said Sheener, and Evans, from his chair, echoed: "Midnight!" Then asked with a certain stiff anxiety: "Do I look all right, Sheener? Look all right to see my boy?"

"Say," Sheener told him. "You look like the Prince of Wales." He went across to where the other sat and gripped him by the shoulder. "You look like the king o' the world."

Old Evans brushed at his coat anxiously; his fingers picked and twisted; and Sheener sat down on the bed beside him and began to soothe and comfort the man as though he were a child.

The son was to arrive by way of Montreal, and at eleven o'clock we left Sheener's room for the station. There was a flower stand on the corner, and Sheener bought a red carnation and fixed it in the old man's buttonhole. "That's the way the boy'll know him," he told me. "They ain't seen each other for--since the boy was a kid."

Evans accepted the attention querulously; he was trembling and feeble, yet held his head high. We took the subway, reached the station, sat down for a space in the waiting room.

But Evans was impatient; he wanted to be out in the train shed, and we went out there and walked up and down before the gate. I noticed that he was studying Sheener with some embarrassment in his eyes. Sheener was, of course, an unprepossessing figure. Lean, swarthy, somewhat flashy of dress, he looked what he was. He was my friend, of course, and I was able to look beneath the exterior. But it seemed to me that sight of him distressed Evans.

In the end the old man said, somewhat furtively: "I say, you know, I want to meet my boy alone. You won't mind standing back a bit when the train comes in."

"Sure," Sheener told him. "We won't get in the way. You'll see. He'll pick you out in a minute, old man. Leave it to me."

Evans nodded. "Quite so," he said with some relief. "Quite so, to be sure."

So we waited. Waited till the train slid in at the end of the long train shed. Sheener gripped the old man's arm. "There he comes," he said sharply. "Take a brace, now. Stand right there, where he'll spot you when he comes out. Right there, bo."

"You'll step back a bit, eh, what?" Evans asked.

"Don't worry about us," Sheener told him. "Just you keep your eye skinned for the boy. Good luck, bo."

We left him standing there, a tall, gaunt, shaky figure. Sheener and I drew back toward the stairs that lead to the elevated structure, and watched from that vantage point. The train stopped, and the passengers came into the station, at first in a trickle and then in a stream, with porters hurrying before them, baggage laden.

The son was one of the first. He emerged from the gate, a tall chap, not unlike his father. Stopped for a moment, casting his eyes about, and saw the flower in the old man's lapel. Leaped toward him hungrily.

They gripped hands, and we saw the son drop his hand on the father's shoulder. They stood there, hands still clasped, while the young man's porter waited in the background. We could hear the son's eager questions, hear the older man's drawled replies. Saw them turn at last, and heard the young man say: "Taxi!" The porter caught up the bag. The taxi stand was at our left, and they came almost directly toward us.

As they approached, Sheener stepped forward, a cheap, somewhat disreputable, figure. His hand was extended toward the younger man. The son saw him, looked at him in some surprise, looked toward his father inquiringly.

Evans saw Sheener too, and a red flush crept up his gaunt cheeks. He did not pause, did not take Sheener's extended hand; instead he looked the newsboy through and through.

Sheener fell back to my side. They stalked past us, out to the taxi stand.

I moved forward. I would have halted them, but Sheener caught my arm. I said hotly: "But see here. He can't throw you like that."

Sheener brushed his sleeve across his eyes. "Hell," he said huskily. "A gent like him can't let on that he knows a guy like me."

I looked at Sheener, and I forgot old Evans and his son. I looked at Sheener, and I caught his elbow and we turned away.

He had been quite right, of course, all the time. Blood will always tell. You can't keep a fast horse in a poor man's stable. And a man is always a man, in any guise.

If you still doubt, do as I did. Consider Sheener.

FOOTNOTE:

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