

***Good Luck and
Poor Fortune***

Archie P. Mckishnie

Illustrated by

E. J. Dinsmore

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Title: Good Luck and Poor Fortune

Date of first publication: 1924

Author: Archie P. McKishnie (1875-1946)

Illustrator: E. J. Dinsmore (1885-1936)

Date first posted: June 7, 2022

Date last updated: June 7, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220610

This eBook was produced by: John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

Good Luck and Poor Fortune

By ARCHIE P. McKISHNIE

ILLUSTRATED BY E. J. DINSMORE

I.

Ben Fortune, proprietor of the Junction Restaurant, stood behind his counter polishing a beer-glass on his apron, when the door opened to admit a sheet of March rain—and Lennox Ballister. A scowl puckered Fortune's ebony brow, and he turned as though to beat a hasty retreat kitchenward.

Ballister's voice, tinged with a certain vague authority, stopped him.

"Hol' up a minute, Ben. Want a word er two wif yo'."

"Speak up quick an' ter p'int den," Fortune pivoted reluctantly counterward. "Got six railroad men comin' in shortly fer supper, an' waiter's down wif mumps. What yo' gotter say ter me?"

The cold, unfriendly orbs shifted as they fell on the metal badge pinned above his caller's heart.

Len rested his elbows on the counter and leaned across toward the other.

"Why, Ben," he said chidingly, "yo' shorely don' s'pose dat I come here ter rake up dat ol' score 'bout yo' cheatin' me outin sixty-fo' dollars an' fo'teen cents, in dat ice-house deal fo' years dis Spring?"

Fortune glared malevolently. "Yo' done said yo'd get eben sumday," he growled. "I don' nebber 'low myse'f off guard, an' I's watchin' yo' close an' plenty all de time, Misto Sharp Alex Ballister."

"Dat's shore what yo'd best keep doin'," Len replied. "Kas I suttinly intend ter get dat money back, wif confound interes'."

"Which shows yo' don' know Ben Fortune," the other sneered.

"Not know Ben Fortune?" Len shifted his feet to an easier position on the sawdusted floor. "I knows him fer de meanes', crookedes', double-crossin' cheat in Canada, United States an' part ob Ohio—but I ain' nowise claimin' I knows him *well*. Howsumeber," he added, "dat's needer here nor dere, jes' at dis particular time. What I drapped inter dis short-changin' j'int ob yourn dis af'ernoon fer, is ter enquire ob yo' concernin' dis."

From a pocket Len drew out a legal-looking document and waved it before Fortune's eyes.

"Dis am a warrant fer de arres' ob one Alex Smart, sworn out by yo' befo' de Greater Chatville police. Charge am dat ob obtainin' money un'er false pretensions. Now den, what I'd like ter know is—what yo're tryin' ter railway Alex inter jail fer? Whyfer are yo' ventin' yo'r serpentlike spite on dat pore man? Ain't he a crippled veternerly ob de War? An' ain't he got a sick wife an' six chilluns ter look after?"

"Dat don' concern me any 'tall," grated Fortune. "He am guilty ob what dat warrant charges, an' he's gotter pay fer it. Dat nigger got two dollars advance from me on a load ob wood he neber delibered."

"But, Ben, dat Alex ain' nowise dishones'. Wouldn' cheat a baby."

"Well, if so, he's goin' ter hab a chance ter so prove. Now yo' get outer here an' serb dat warrant. Ain' got no mo' time ter stan' here listenin' ter yo'r fool talk."

Len folded the warrant and returned it to his pocket. Then, as a door leading to the kitchen opened, he stretched his long neck and sniffed the air appreciatively.

"Ben, do my nose deceibe me, er do I smell fryin' catfish out dar?"

"Yo' smells fryin' catfish," returned Fortune darkly, "but dat's all yo'll be doin' ter 'em, ah reckon."

"Shucks' " smiled Len, "I's goin' ter stay right here an' eat. My wife's off frum hum nursin' sick sister in Chicago, Texas. Gotter git *some* meals out, so I might as well gulp one of 'em here."

He shuffled across to a table and seated himself.

"Waiter-man, bring me fish an' taters, an' be speedy 'bout dat order."

"Yo' best git out while gettin's good," threatened Fortune.

"Yo' best can dat kin' ob talk, else yo's liable ter hab yo' feedin' an' drinkin' license cancelled," Len warned. "Has a customer-diner gotter sot here all day waitin' fer yo' to serbe an order? Gallop out an' in, Nigger. Gallop out an' in!"

Fortune vanished behind the swinging doors and Len sat back and complacently twiddled his knobby thumbs. He thanked Ben mildly when he slammed the order down before him and ordered an extra helping of butter.

His meal finished, he sat back and lit a cheroot. His eyes were on the door. If his memory served him rightly, one, Bill Teeters, bosom cronie of Alex Smart, got his meals at the Junction Restaurant and it was just about his hour to arrive. As Len watched, a shadow crossed the window and the door opened to admit Teeters.

He came down the room and seeing Len, paused in wonderment. "Howde, Len, never 'spected ter see yo' here."

"Constable's dooties lead him in strange an' diver places, Bill," Len rejoined. "T'ought mebbe I might locanize Alex Smart here. Got a warrant fer his arres'."

Len was looking into his uplifted coffee cup: consequently he did not see the other's look of startled consternation at this intelligence. When he laid down the cup and wiped his mouth on his paper napkin, Teeters was just vanishing through the door.

Len chuckled. "I'll shore habe my trubbles locationating dat Alex now," he ruminated. "Bill's off ter warn him. Well, all I hopes is he fin's dat Alex ter hum."

Len arose, paid for his supper at the counter, and went out into the rainy twilight.

On his way home he stopped at the post office, bought a post card and sent this message to Jane-Ann, somewhere in Chicago.

"Dear Wife: I hope Fanny is better and you will come home soon."

He underlined the *soon* and signed, "Your loving husband, Len."

"Dat'll hold her dere couple mo' weeks anyway," he ruminated as he dropped the card into a box.

II.

It was nine o'clock and the night was wild and blustery. Before a crackling fire of hickory in the kitchen stove, socked feet on the fender, a battered banjo on his knees, sat Len enjoying all the freedom of a soul set free of petty restraint. Behind him, on the table, towered a pile of unwashed dishes. Ashes bestrewed the floor. Orinoco, the hound, lay sweetly and melodiously slumbering in Jane-Ann's sewing-chair, his brown head pillowed on a skein of fancy silk knitting-wool. It was apparent that the place lacked a woman's

gentle care. The motto above the bedroom door: “What is home without a mother?” had been turned to the wall. Beneath it hung a crayon drawing of one, Homer Hudson, champion pugilist of Chatville East.

Below the clock-shelf hung the telephone which Len had installed as soon as he had seen Jane-Ann safely on her way to visit her sick sister in the American city. He was proud of that 'phone. It lent a certain distinction to his home. Jane-Ann had always looked upon telephones as uncanny instruments of the devil, otherwise he would have had one long ago. But there was no Jane-Ann now to raise a dissenting voice. Jane-Ann was many miles away. Which was well. Very well indeed—for Len.

“A constable orter have a 'phone,” he ruminated, as he gazed at the instrument proudly. “Keeps him in tech wif headquarters an' all de big outside cities. Lor' Harry!” he broke off, “if dat 'phone ain' gibin' voice right dis minute.”

He arose and laid aside his banjo to answer the call.

“Boys am habin' li'l game down at Abe White's pool-room, mos' like, an' want me ter sot in,” he conjectured as he lifted down the receiver.

He called an expectant “Hello” then seemed to droop as the deep voice of officer Pete Dezeel came to him over the wire.

Len listened, swallowing spasmodically, and uttering an occasional “Yessah, Ossifer Dezeel Sure fing.”

Then he slowly hung up the receiver and stood gazing down abjectly into the eyes of Orinoco, who, having aroused at the shrill peal of the bell, sat up in the easy chair, staring out questioningly through a rainbow mist of yarn.

“Ossifer Dezeel, he say a gang ob rum-runners am bringin' in a load ob illegal beer ter dis town, an' fer me ter be on lookout fer 'em. What yo' fink ob dat fer a contrac', dawg?”

Apparently Orinoco wasn't thinking much about it. He sighed, turned twice about in the chair, and sank down to slumber again.

Len bent and snatched him ruthlessly from his bed of ease.



Len's feet slid from the fender. He gazed at the fear-ridden face beneath the plaid cap in stupified amazement.

“Jes’ fer yo’r contemptuous disregard ob my feelin’s, yo’ houn’ job-lot, yo’ gets pitched in de woodbox an’ stays dere jes’ de same as if Jane-Ann was here holdin’ de rulin’ reins.”

Orinoco howled, righted himself as he came into violent contact with the box’s bottom, and settled miserably down on the chips that bestrewed it. Len went slowly back to the fire and sat down. Outside in the night’s blackness the Spring wind was howling and driving the rain against the window panes.

“Hones’ ter Gawd”—Len’s voice was plaintive—“I neber know dere was so many troublous, law-breakers in de worl’ as what dis Chatville done contains. No sooner do I get fro’ detectin’ one job ob criminality, dan anudder is frowed at my head. Here I is ’bout ter leab all home comfo’ts an’ traipse off fro’ wet March snow, wi’ a warrant in my pocket fer arres’ ob a receibin’ money un’er false pretensions Nigger—him wif a sick wife an’ six chilluns on his han’s an’ like as not innocent ob dat charge—no sooner dat, dan ’long comes dis S.O.W. call from Dezeel, ter spread my dragnet fer rum-runners.”

Len heaved a sigh that sounded like the exhaust of a dying engine.

“Don’ seem dat I’s goin’ ter hab no peace ah’ quiet an’ home life at all, so long’s I bend a ear ter voice ob de law. Well, Missis Law, dis wil’ night yo’s findin’ me deefer’n I had batting in my ears. I gotter chanct ter enjoy peace an’ quiet in my home like I neber had befo’, an’ nuffin goin’ ter urge me ter pass up de joy ob troo bachlerhood. So, Dooty, on yo’r way. Ple’sure, trip fo’th an’ dance ter dis toon I’s goin’ ter pick on dis ol’ banjo.”

Len put another stick in the stove, readjusted his socked feet on the fender and struck up a song.

“Says de pie to de doughnut, ’pom my soul
Yo’ ain’ jes’ nuffin’ ’cep’ a roun’ fried hole.

Says de doughnut to de pie
Don’ yo’ worry none ’bout I—”

Len’s baritone subsided suddenly to a hoarse whisper as a low knock fell on the door.

“Come ’long,” he invited.

The door opened cautiously letting in a round, closely-cropped head adorned with a plaid cap, and a blast of moist March air.

Len’s feet slid from the fender. He gazed at the fear-ridden face beneath the plaid cap in stupefied amazement.

“Abe White!” he exclaimed. “Wha’s de matter? Yo’r pool-room been raided ag’in, er what?”

White’s voice was a mere gasp.

“Len, Dezeel am af’er me. Yo’ gotter hide me up quick an’ close.”

Len laid aside the banjo and stood up.

“Abe, what dat ossifer Dezeel af’er yo’ *fer*?”

“Why, Len, I was only jes’ mindin’ my own bisness an’ makin’ a coupla dollars, dat’s all.”

“Uh huh. Fer some time now yo’ been helpin’ Hank Barge an’ his gang git rid ob dat red moonshine dem Belgiums been sendin’ in. Dat much I knows. Ain’ dat so?”

White shifted uncomfortably.

“La, Len, what if so I hab been? Ain’ nuffin’ ill-lawish ’bout helpin’ dose what prove good frien’s in need ter me, was dere?”

“Dat ain’ de question, Abe,” Len said sternly. “Question am, what has dem good frien’s in need been payin’ yo’ fer bein’ so? Dat’s what I’m astin’ yo, now.”

White writhed like a worm that feels a boot-heel.

“I ain’ nowise obligated ter answer irreverent questions asted mebbe ter incriminal me,” he answered sullenly. “Dis ain’ no co’t ob law.”

“Needer,” said Len, “am it a hole fer a law-breakin’ fox wif law-houn’s on his spoor; ’member dat.”

“Len,” White’s voice was pleading, “it means two t’ousan’ dollar fine an’ de loss ob my pool-room bisness clean an’ mebee jail if I’s caught. Yo’ll hide me up, won’t yo’, Len?”

“Who? Me? Ain’ yo’ forgettin sumfin’, Abe?” Len asked. “Or is yo’r memory so bad dat yo’ ain’ recollectin’ dat I’s a constable an’ derefore, a guardian ob law an’ jestic? How den yo’ll expect me to hide yo’ up? Yo, who am guilty ob bootleggin’ wif bofe boots, which is contrary to law ’cordin’ to section forty-free ob de criminal code by Blacksock. How yo’ espec’ dat, I asts yo’?”

Stark fear rode hard on the soul of Abe White. His voice shook as he spoke and his hands twitched as they gropingly found and clung to Len’s.

“Lor’ Gawd! Len, ain’ yo’ got no heart? Kin yo’ stan’ by an’ see an almost brudder gaddered in by Dezeel an’ his men? Fink ob all I’ve did fer yo’. Fink!” he cried.

“*Did* is right. Yo’ve did fer one moren’ once,” Len answered unfeelingly. “More’n once, Abe. Once wif loaded dice, nudder time wif marked cyards,

an' ag'in wif doped liquor. Yo' an' Homer Hudson have had yo'r heads togedder time an' ag'in plannin' out a way ter *do* fer me, an' get my money. Yo' knows dat, don' yo', Abe?"

"But, Len," cried the miserable Abe, "dat was only jes' in fun, as yo' well knows."

"Mebbe. But now when I gets a chance ter hab a little fun back, yo' begins bleatin' like a scared sheep. It's goin' ter be a heap ob fun fer me ter see a certain bootlegger pay frow de nose fer dat privilege. Shore."

White sank down on a chair and shivered.

"Len," he offered, "I'll gib yo' fifty dollars ter hide me up a day; jes' one short day, Len. Fifty dollars, an' jes' only fer a li'l hole wif a cober is all I ast. An' de police ain' af'er me fer bootleggin' needer. Dey's af'er me fer sumfin' I did innocent—an' I swear ter dat."

Len lit his pipe. "Section sebenteen-ten ob criminal code hab dis ter say 'bout bribery, Abe. Should offer ob money or goods, or anyfing ob monetary or specivic valuation be urged by one party upon anudder in return o'—"

"Len, hush up, fer heben sake. I's not tryin' ter bribe. I's tryin' ter *hide*, dat's all. If only I was safe hid up, I'd shore feel content."

Len took a turn up and down the room. A coat and hat belonging to Jane-Ann hanging from a peg in the bedroom, mutely bespeaking the personality of the owner, came into his line of vision to remind him that Jane-Ann was many miles away, and therefore a negative quantity in any play he might make for the present and—he hoped—for the near future. The feeling of exhilaration—care-freeness and irresponsibility he had experienced earlier in the evening returned with redoubled force. He spit on the floor and lifting down the coat threw it over Orinoco who had ventured back to the easy chair. After which he turned to the fugitive.

"Abe," he decided, "I has a min' ter help yo' outer dis hole."

"Help me *inter* one wif a cober ter it, dat's all I asts," groaned White.

"Abe, yo's a guilty law-breaker," Len continued. "Fer years yo' hab run so close ter de win' yo' can't nowise sail de calm sea ob law an' order wifout tackin'. Yo're all in all about de crookedest Nigger emancipation eber sot free ter wreck a worl'. If yo' had yo'r desserts yo'd be hung, shot at daybreak an' jailed fer life all at de same time. Now den, am I right or be I?"

"I reckon yo's right, Len, if yo'll only 'gree ter help me," quavered Abe.

Len resumed the inquisition heartlessly.

“Yo’ll ’gree wif me when I says dat yo’re de mos’ unfeelin’ cheat dat eber shuffled a cyard, I hope, Abe?”

“I’s all dat, Len.”

“Also dat yo’ hab a habit ob chalkin’ up pool debts what customers don’ nowise owe; some ob em’ ’gainst *me*, eben?”

“I has done dat too,” Abe agreed miserably.

“I ast yo’ now one las’ question,” said Len. “Am yo’ er am yo’ not, de lowes’, creepin’es’ fing in all de broad erf?”

“I is,” wailed the helpless and hopeless Abe.

“An’ if I unben’ frum dooty so fur as ter sabe yo’r miserable carcass frum bein’ cast behin’ steel bars, am yo’ willin’ ter do jes’ what I advise yo’ ter do, Abe?”

“I’s willin’, Len,” Abe answered quickly. “I’ll do anyfing yo’ bid.”

“Den lissen ter me. S’pose yo’ tell me de hull troof ’bout dis fing. I knows yo’ is far too canny ter take a chance ob runnin’ wif rum-runners. Yo’ might jes’ limp ’long by yo’r ownse’f mebbe, but run wif a gang, not yo’. How den is it yo’ get in dis tangle an’ how did de police get wise ter yo’r movements? Yo’ gotter come clean as yo’ kin, Abe—which won’ be sayin’ a great deal, but some—mebbe enuf ter show me a way ob extricatin’ yo’ frum dis trubble.”

White sat deliberating. “I’ll tell yo’ de hull troof, Len,” he decided. “I’s helpless in yo’r han’s, frien’; yo’ kin make me er yo’ kin break me.”

“Den speak up.”

“It war dis way,” said White. “Ternight, when I was ’cross ter Bridgetown wif Homer fer a truck-load ob benches fer de boxin’ bouts on Saturday night, Dook Marksbey who owns de White Swan Garidge comes up ter me an’ says:

“‘Abe, yo’ wanter make a coupla dollars an’ make it easy?’

“I says I might consider sech; an’ he says:

“‘Two ob my trucks am out ob bisness an’ I done break de front axle ob de udder one ter-night, comin’ in wif a load ob star beer fer Ben Fortune who keeps de Junction restauran’. After dat I got let down in a snow-hole. I

unload de beer, hide it up in Ashby's ol' barn, an' come on here huntin' fer a truck; but dere's narry a truck in dis town ter be had, an' Ben wants dat "two-per-cent" delibered ter him right speedy.'

"I 'greed ter go get dat beer fer de price which Dook said what he'd pay. Y'see, I had my truck dere, an' I was comin' here anyways. Finked I might as well make a coupla dollars as not."

"Shore," nodded Len. "An' what happen', Abe?"

White resumed.

"Dook, he claim he couldn' go wif me, so I went out ter where he's hid de stuff alone. Homer was playin' dice an' wouldn' 'company me. I foun' dat near-beer, six cases ob it, an' I lose no time a loadin' it on my truck. Didn' like dat ghostly place nohow. Dere was a owl a-hootin' close by an' de win' in de pines soun' like a sigh in a graveyard.

"I like ter shake de lungs outer ol' Lizzy Truck gettin' 'way frum dat place. I took de ribber road back ter Chatville, on 'count ob Baldwin road bein' so full ob ruts. Jes' when I gets down' whar de road bresh de ribber, I see a lantern wavin' signal fer me ter stop. I bring up sudden, an' two men wif caps drawed down ober dere eyes step out an' one ob 'em he says ter me:

"'Who yo' are, an' whar yo' goin'?"

"I done tell him I had load ob goods fer delivery at Junction. He whispers sumfin to dat udder man, an' den says ter me:

"'How good would a ten dollar bill look to yo'?"

"'Pen's on how close a look I gets,' I says. 'Why?'"

"'Nebber yo' min' why,' he comes back. 'We's got a dead truck out on ribber ice, dar, wif a dozen cases ob stuff dat's gotter be put aboard a box car, at de junction, befo' ten o'clock ter-night. Us'll load it on yo'r truck, yo' kin deliber yo'r goods ter Junction an' slip our stuff 'cross ter car.'

"'What-all yo' mean by "stuff"?' I asts.

"'No questions,' he grits. 'No talk ob any variety. Yo' do as we says, an' get ten. Refuse ter do it, an' yo' gets—*dis!*'"

"He poke a long revolver in my face, an' I say: 'Dat's all right, sah. Might as well make li'l extra money, if so I kin.'

“Well, we load dem twelve cases on my truck, an I note dey’s mighty like de ones I has fer delibery at Ben Fortune’s, which seems sorter queer ter me.”

White wiped his perspiring brow and paused to ask.

“Is yo’ follerin’ me, Len?”

“I is,” Lennox answered. “An’ lemme remin’ yo’, Abe, yo’s burnin’ good time. Fer Ian’s sake git down ter cases, an’ make it brief. While yo’s tarryin’ on yo’r tale ob woe, dragnet ob de police am closin’ in on yo’, likely.”

Don’t wanter hear dat word ‘cases’ nebber ag’in in my hull life,” groaned Abe. “But I’s got but a word er two more ter say. I unload Ben Fortune’s ‘two-per-cent’ an’ git goin’ fer dat place dem men designation—dat box car on sidin’. I got ’bout half way dar—”

“One minute, Abe,” Len interrupted. “Was dem two men dat requisition yo’r truck wif yo’ all dis time?”

“Not so,” Abe answered. “Dem men slip off de truck jes’ befo’ I gets ter Ben Fortune’s restauran’. Seems dey didn’ wanter be seen. Said dey’d slip on ahead an’ wait at de box car.”

Len nodded sagely. “Dem two men leab yo’ jes’ befo’ yo’ reach Fortune’s, yo’ say?”

“I do,” Abe glowered. “Keep still till I get fro’.”

“Perceed.”

“Jes’ as I gets ter de elevator, ’bout half way to dat box car on sidin’, I sees de light ob a auto approachin’ fast behin’ me. No use ter tryter run fer it wif a truck. I jes’ rattles ’long an’ soon dat car turns out ter pass me. Only it don’ pass. Sumbody done hails me. It was Homer.”

Len’s mouth fell open. “Homer,” he repeated. “I fought yo’ say yo’ done lef’ Homer at Bridgetown.”

“Did,” Abe replied. “But dat was him in de auto. He leans out ob dat car an’ he says ter me:

“‘Abe, yo’ know what dat stuff is yo’ got aboard, dar?’

“‘No, an’ I ain’ carin’.’ I answers. ‘I’s gettin’ good money fer de toatin’.’

“ ‘Whose cyar dat yo’s runnin?’ I asts.

“ ‘Don’ know yit,’ Homer says. ‘Abe, dat’s *real* beer yo’ got dar, an’ yo’ve fell fer dem rum-runners right. Police am up near dat box car wif a plant ter gadder yo’ in.’

“ ‘How come yo’ know all dis, Homer?’ I asts him.

“ ‘Ain’ no time ter tell yo’ now,’ he answers. ‘Abe, yo’ turn off on Baseline road an’ feed dat ol’ girl de juice. Lose dat beer, an’ lose it *speedy*. I gatter take dis cyar back ter owner now.’ ”

“An’ yo’ took Homer’s advice, Abe?” Len questioned.

“I did—an’ I didn’,” White answered with a shudder. “I sure took dat Baseline road on two wheels, an’ made de slush fly; but, Len, I jes’ couldn’ manage ter side-track dat illegal booze nowhar’. Ebery time I’d stop ter pitch it off, I fancy I heard a police whistle. An’ so—”

White paused and shuffled uneasily on his chair.

“An’ so which, Abe?”

“I bringed it here, Len, an’ it’s out dar in yo’r barn on de truck.”

Len galvanized into action.

“Sufferin’ Mankind! Now yo’s done it fer shore. Yo’ve let me in fer all de trubble in de worl’—an’ den some. Come ’long.”

Len reached for his coat and grabbed a lantern.

“Where at?” gasped White. “Where yo’s goin’, Len?”

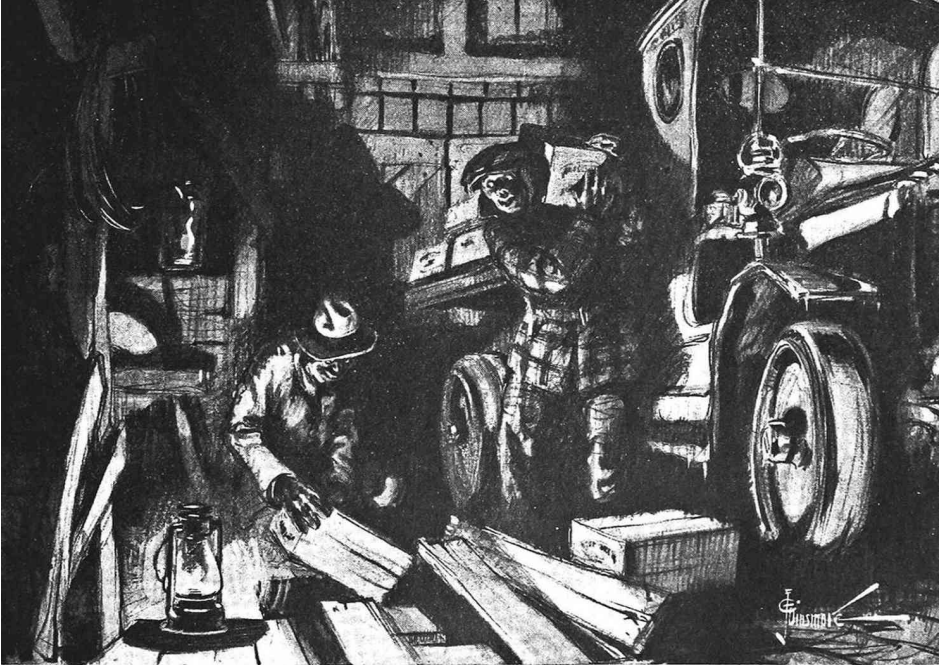
“Goin’ out an’ hide up dat beer, fool,” Len answered. “Do yo’ fink I’s goin’ ter let de police fin’ it on my premises? Bad ennuf fer one ob us ter have ter go ter jail fer life, wifout draggin’ in a innocent party.”

They fought their way through wind and rain to the barn. Len lifted the rubber cover from the truck and eyed the twelve cases of illicit beer.

“Abe, get dat crowbar an’ pry up dem centre planks ob floorin’,” he commanded. “Keerful yo’ don’ break dem two boxes ob crackers I keeps here fer ’mergency rations.”

White did as directed. Len and he speedily transferred the beer from the truck to the hole under the floor. All except the last case. Len stood eyeing

this thoughtfully. Then by the light of the smoky lantern he looked deep into the bulging eyes of Abe.



White did as directed. Len and he speedily transferred the beer from the truck to the hole under the floor.

“What yo’ fink?” he asked.

“I fink de same’s yo’ do,” Abe answered.

Len passed the lantern to White and lifted the case. “Better put dat light out while us is gettin’ up ter house,” he advised. “No use invitin’ trubble ter swoop afore her’s decided ter swoop.”

White’s eyes rolled in abject fear and dread.

“How ’bout my truck, Len? Police’ll fin’ it here, an’ it’ll look bad fer me.”

Len considered. “Am dat de truck yo’ refuse ’ter sell me fer two hunderd, las’ fall?” he asked.

White nodded.

“Too bad yo’ pass up my offer, Abe. Look what trubble yo’ been cou’tin’ wif dat same truck.”

“I’ll sell it ter yo’ now, Len,” cried Abe hopefully. “Den yo’ kin say it’s yo’rn an’ police won’ fink nuffin’, s’pose dey fin’s it here.”

Len shook his head. “Don’ know as I wan’ it now, Abe. It might get me in turrible bad. Sumbudy might hab see dat truck makin’ speedy get-away an’ took its num’er. No, I don’ want it. Not two hunderd dollars worf—anyways.”

“Less money den,” pleaded White. “One-fifty, say.”

“Time, er cash money?”

“Eeder yo’ perfer, Len.”

“Den, jes’ ter help yo’ out, I’ll buy dat truck,” decided Len. “Here’s fo’ dollars down an’ de res’ when yo’ gets outer jail.”

He stepped out toward the house, carrying the case of beer. White followed groaning and sighing.

Back again in the cheerful glow of the wood fire, Abe sank down on a chair and rocked to and fro in the very abandonment of woe. Len, searching for a corkscrew in the cupboard drawer, turned on him.

“Shet up dat wailin’, Abe,” he cried. “Fust fing yo’ knows yo’ll git Orinoco goin’ too, an’ neebers’ll fink Jane-Ann’s home ag’in an’ demandin’ explanations. Us gotter keep quiet, Abe. If so yo’ ain’ got no head yo’s’e’f, fer lan’ sakes gib sumbudy what has got one a chanct ter use it. Now I’s goin’ ter gib yo’ a drink ob real beer, an’ yo’s straightway goin’ ter drown dread an’ remorse.”

He filled two glasses, handed one of them to White, and emptied the other.

He stood smacking his lips, and gradually the rapt and expectant look faded from his face.

“Abe, yo’ findin’ de same fing missin’ in dat beer as I’s findin’?” he asked. “Yo’ taste any mule-juice dar? Any kick?”

Abe shook his head. “I’s mos’ too down-hearted ter taste sudden, Len. Let’s try few more bottles.”

A heavy knock fell on the door. Outside a voice raised in authority, cried:

“You, Len! open the door. It’s Dezeel.”

“Good-bye, life an’ hope,” murmured Len. “Caught wif de goods. Oh, Lor’ Harry!” he cast a quick look on the quailing White.

“Abe, lissen, an’ lissen clost. If yo’re too scared to buck up, yo’s gotter sham bein sick. Go an’ lay on de lounge.”

Len shuffled across to the door and opened it.

Officer Dezeel and a policeman in plain clothes entered the room.

“Ballister,” said Dezeel, “we had those rum-runners from Detroit almost corralled to-night, but the beggars give us the slip. We got all their stuff though, except a dozen cases of beer which they managed to side-track on a commandeered truck. A truck was seen beating it out this way at a fast clip. We tracked it and found it out in your barn. Know anything about it?”

Len, packing cut-tobacco home in his corncob, lit the pipe leisurely and kicked forward a couple of chairs for his visitors.

“Dat’s *my* truck, ossifer,” he said. “Misto White, here, only jes’ deliber it ter me ter-night. He’s mighty sick wif nerbous disability brought on by too great a strain, an’ so I made him tarry a while till he’s feelin’ some better.”

Dezeel gazed sternly and suspiciously at Len.

“And how about this stuff?” He lifted a bottle from the case on the floor, picked up an empty glass and sniffed it.

“Open that,” he said to the other officer passing him the bottle.

“Oh, Luck,” murmured Len deep in his leaping heart, “dere are absolutely *no* chanct, but Luck, if eber I gits clear ob dis I’ll wear my rabbit-foot cha’m an’ carry my horse-shoe all de res’ ob my days.”

He roused from his apathy at a touch on his arm.

“We thought we had it on you, Len,” Dezeel was saying, “but this stuff is only ‘star beer’ after all. I told Geoffrey here you was square. ’Tain’t my fault we’re nosing in here on you this way.”

He got up from his chair and addressed his companion gruffly.

“Come on, Mister Know-It-All. I want some sleep.”

Two thumps sounded simultaneously; the door banging behind the disgusted officers, and Abe White’s flat feet striking the floor.

“Len, fore Gawd! I deliber de wrong beer ter Fortune’s restauran’. I’s alibe still, an’ not wearin’ han’cuffs.”

Len raised a finger in warning. “Silence, Nigger, I gotter fink, an’ fink quick.”

He strode the floor emitting clouds of smoke and softly uttered exclamations. He paused at last in front of the bewildered and joyful White.

“Abe, I got it. I knows what I’s goin’ ter do. Here’s whar I make dat crooked Ben Fortune wish he was dead an’ buried deep. I been waitin’ fer dis moment fer a longtime. Time’s come. Yo’ go now and gadder up Homer an’ de gang, an’ all ob yo’ wait in yo’r pool-room till I turn up dar. Dere’s a job I’ll need done and it’ll require plenty hands.”

III.

Ben Fortune was seated in his little office, by the light of a smoky lamp totalling up the receipts of the day, when, just as the clock was striking the ghost-walking hour of midnight, a knock fell on the bolted door of the Junction Restaurant.

“Who’s dar?” he called, rising and creeping forth from his little stall.

“Dis am de law,” a stern voice answered. “Open up in dat name, er down goes dis do’.”

“Heavenly Man! But jes’ wait a minute. Ain’t nuffin here I’s gotter hide from no law. Now den.”

Fortune slipped back the bolt and opened the door wide. A gust of rain-drenched wind smote him in the eyes. He blinked and retreated mumbling, followed by constable Len Ballister.

“An’ now yo’r in, what yo’ want?” Fortune shot the question, and stood glaring at the intruder.

“Dat remains ter be seen, Misto Fortune, law-breakin’ member ob de Rum-Runners Union,” spoke Len. “But dis much I’ll say. What I wants, I *gets*—usually.”

“Are yo’ crazy er what?” grated the astounded Fortune. “What yo’ mean by ’sinuatin’ I’s wif dem rum-runners?”

“Only dis,” Len responded. “Dem same rummy-runners delibered yo’ a case ob full strength beer only ter-night, an’ yo’ got de stuff on dese

premises now.”

“Dat’s a lie,” thundered Fortune. “I ain’t got no illegal beer here. Dat was jes’ two per cent beer I got delibered. Wait, I’ll show yo’. Come up here.”

Len followed him and stood watching while Fortune plucked a bottle from one of the cases that night delivered and pried off the stopper.

“Taste dat an’ yo’ll soon find out yo’re barkin’ up de wrong tree, Misto *near-constable* Ballister,” he sneered.

“Yo’ taste it yo’ ownse’f,” Len said. “Yo’ orter be able ter judge between innocent and guilty beer, yo’s drunk ennuf ob de latter in yo’r day ter know.”

“Humph!”

Fortune raised the bottle to his lips and took a swallow or two. Then he lowered the bottle and adjusting his spectacles, read the label which adorned it, carefully. After which he tasted it again. A look of bewilderment was on his face. The hand holding the bottle shook. There was no denying it, *the beer he had tasted was real—full strength beer.*

“Now, den, Ben, yo’ goin’ ter persist in denial, er what?” Len drew closer and leaned on the counter.

“I don’ know anyfing ’bout dis stuff,” quavered the woefully subdued restaurant-keeper, “not a fings, Len. Hones’ I don’.”

“Cou’senot,” sneered Len. “But it’s goin’ ter take a lot ob persuadin’ ter make a judge fink dat. I comes here an’ fin’s yo’ wif de goods.”

Fortune glanced behind him to where a heavy thorn stick reposed on two nails.

“An’ s’posin’ I shows fight? S’posin’ I don’ ’low no long meddler of a constable ter ’res me in my own place ob bisness?” he flared.

“I got plenty help outside,” answered Len pleasantly, “an’ I got a li’l persuader behin’ dis bulge in my coat-pocket. Yo’ try reachin’ fer dat Irish argiment-settler—an’ see how quick I talks back.”

Fortune’s jaw fell. He leaned weakly against the counter. “Yo’ got it on me all ways, Len,” he said abjectly. “I knowed yo’d get eben wif me fer doin’ yo’ on ice-house deal, only, I kids myse’f yo’ wa’nt brainy ’nuff.”

“Ain’t boastin’ ’bout no brains,” Len said loftily, “ner ain’ anxious ter harbour no vengeance. I knows I lose sixty-fo’ dollars an’ fo’ten cents by yo’r crooked dealin’ free years ago, but some day I fink mebbe yo’d be glad ter pay it back ter me. But dat hope am gone now, Ben. By de time yo’ gits out ob de pen yo’ll be too ol’ ter recomember what yo’ did ter me, an’ I’ll be too ol’ ter care whever I git dat money back er not.”

“Oh, Lan’ ob Misery!” groaned Fortune. “Yo’s goin’ ter ’res’ me an’ send me ter jail?”

“Mebbe,” said Len, hopefully, “seein’s dis am yo’r fust offense in rum-runnin’ concealin’ in a boardin’-house, hotel en’ any udder public place, accordin’ ter section sebenteen ob de Criminal—”

“Len,” cried the miserable Fortune, “let me off an’—”

“Mebbe, as I was sayin’,” resumed the remorseless Len, “yo’ll be let off wif a two thousan’ dollar fine.”

“Len, I’s willin’ ter pay back dat sixty-fo’ dollars ter yo’ right now, an’ let’s be good frien’s,” pleaded Ben.

“Sixty-fo’, fou’ten,” said Len, “wid’ seben per cen’ confound interest ter date. But, I don’ fink I should do dat, Ben. I—I don’ fink—”

Apparently Len was being torn between sympathy and duty. Fortune was quick to note the hesitancy in his tones.

“Len, I’ll do anyfing else yo’ wants me ter; only fix dis t’ing up wif de police. Yo’ kin do it. Dey sent yo’ in ter search didn’ ’em?”

“Quite so,” nodded Len. “Yes, I *could* fix it all right, I guess.”

He turned sternly to Fortune.

“Count me out sixty-eight dollars an’ ’leben cents.”

“Shore, Len, shore. Come right inter de office.”

The relieved Ben hopped across to the little room and Len followed.

“Now,” said Len as he counted and pocketed the money, “dat’s dat. Now dere’s anudder li’l fing I’d sugges’ yo do. Dat’s ter wifdraw dat arres’ charge ob false pretentions from Alex Smart.”

“But how *kin* I, Len?” Fortune wailed. “It’s gone too fer now.”

“No ’tain’t. I’ll hab Alex in cou’t ter-morrer mawnin’. Case’ll be dismissed if yo’ don’ appear ag’in him.”

“I won’t appear,” Ben promised.

“So good,” Len glanced over his shoulder. “Ben, yo’ best le’ me destroy dat real, illegal beer. Dezeel jes’ might come nosin’ in here an’ fin’ it, af’er I’m gone.”

Fortune’s eyes rolled apprehensively.

“Hot dam!” he shivered. “I feels like I was sittin’ on a keg ob gunpowder wif a fire un’er it. Len, if yo’ knows how ter destroy dat stuff, go on and destroy.”

Len nodded. “Ben, I’s willin’ ter oblige. I’ll go out de back door. Yo’ slip dem cases out ter me. I got my truck outside, an’ I take dat beer ter de ribber an’ sink it fro an ice-hole.”

Half an hour later Len drew up before Abe White’s pool-room and honked his horn.

The door opened cautiously.

“Dat yo’, Len?” Abe’s voice asked guardedly.

“Me—an’ *it*, Abe. Gang all dar?”

“All here,” White answered.

“Den tell ’em ter help me unload. Us hab a big job befo’ us, Abe.”

“Job?” White’s eager steps faltered. “What yo’ mean, *job*?”

“Why destroyin’ dis beer, fool.” Len chuckled. “Reckon wif dem dry coons’ assistance us kin make dis cargo look mighty faded befo’ mawnin’.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Good Luck and Poor Fortune*, by Archie P. McKishnie]