



THE FIRST PRIZE

The Story of a Vivacious Pig

By FRANK HOWEL EVANS



"I WONDER whether you'd mind fetching my prize for me," said Mabel Lowne, when Harold Brand called for the eleventh time within two days to know if she had caught cold at the Maidford bazaar.

"Certainly," replied Harold delightedly, "I'll drive over this afternoon. What was it; an anti-macassar, a chair-back, or a photograph-frame? And what was it a prize for? The prettiest girl present, or—?"

"Don't be foolish, please, but listen. I went in for a half-crown raffle, and it's the sweetest little thing you ever saw."

"Couldn't be, I am sure, if you were there."

"Do be quiet. I want to know if you'll be kind enough to fetch it over this afternoon. It won't take up much room in a trap. It's a tiny little pig!"

"A pig?"

"Yes, a dear little chap with a wriggly tail and a pair of eyes that almost wink at you. I feel quite in love with it."

"A bit of a waste," ventured Harold; "but I say, what are you going to do with it? Fatten it up or what?"

"Of course," said Mabel witheringly, "that's what one does with pets, and then one eats them. I'm sorry it's too much trouble, Mr. Brand. Of course, if I'd known I shouldn't have asked you."

"Oh, don't say that. I'd fetch an elephant if I thought you wanted it. But where am I to find the brute—the creature, I mean?"

"Ask at the Rectory and they'll tell you. I should be so much obliged to you, Mr. Brand, and I shall be very grateful for any advice you may be able to give me about its food and so on. Men are so clever, they know something about everything. Good-bye, thank you so much."

Harold left the house, feeling that for Mabel's sake he would bring home a drove of wild boars and, if she wished it, would appear with them on the Music Hall stage.

But London barristers staying in the country for a few weeks only are not as a rule animal experts, and the idea that he might be called upon to advise on the prize's diet frightened him.

But the first thing was to get the animal home. So at the little inn where he was staying he borrowed the landlord's trap and set out for Maidford, five miles distant. As he passed Squire Lowne's house he saw a merry party playing tennis and Mabel cheerfully waved her racket to him.

Harold tried to take off his hat and wave his whip at the same time. But he was not a good driver, and in his efforts to be friendly executed several manoeuvres with the reins which, but for the intelligence of the aged horse, would have resulted in disaster.

When he had managed to persuade a passing labourer that he rather liked driving in a ditch and was not in need of assistance, he allowed the ancient steed to find the way out of the difficulty itself and in a few minutes was jogging along the road to Maidford.

He reached the village without any further disaster except the hair-breadth escape of an old woman who skipped nimbly from under the very wheels almost, and still had enough breath left to invoke upon the careless driver a sudden and terrible death.

"This is something awful," thought Harold, as the perspiration streamed down his face, "if I can only get back with the pig I'll never drive again. I suppose this is the Rectory."

With difficulty he turned the trap in at the gates, and extricating one wheel from a geranium bed he drove up to the house hoping that he would not be thought immoral if he asked for a drink.

He climbed down from the trap and rang the bell. A cool and fresh-looking girl with her hair not yet "up" appeared in the hall.

"Yes?" she said interrogatively.

"I've called about—a pig," stammered Harold, fuming inwardly that Mabel hadn't won a gazelle or something romantic.

"How very nice," said the girl, "but we don't do anything in pigs just now. The last two we had we gave to the bazaar, but I can let you have some nice chickens cheap."

"Thanks very much," remarked Harold, wishing that he could be equally self-possessed, "but I don't want to buy anything, I've come to fetch the pig that Miss Lowne won at the bazaar."

"Oh! Mabel's pig," said the girl coming forward. "I didn't know it was you."

"But I'm not Mabel's pig."

"Of course not. What I meant was you're Mr. Brand, aren't you—I've heard Mabel speak of—at least, I think I've seen you before. I'm Margaret Clair; my father's not in, everyone else is away, and I'm afraid I can't ask you in."

"Not at all," stuttered Harold, the anticipated cooling drink fading away like a beautiful dream, "and if you could tell me where the prize pig is I should be very much obliged, and I'll get it home quickly as I think Miss Lowne is waiting for it."

"It's Farmer Hickman's pig Mabel won. Two miles away from here on the farm, and I think you can only drive part of the way, the rest is ploughed land. You go straight down the road and then turn to the right and the house is on the hill."

"Thanks very much," said Harold climbing into the trap and nearly heading the horse through the dining-room window. "Can I give Miss Lowne any message?"

"Only my love, thanks," said Miss Clair, leading the horse in the way it should go, "no, I should pull the left rein if I were you; that path on the right leads to the cucumber frame. Straight on is the way out."

Harold nearly jumped out with an offer to present this self-possessed young lady with the equivalent value of the horse and trap if she would recommend him to some one who would take the pig contract off his hands. But the thought that Mabel had deputed him to bring the prize home restrained him and he attempted to joke over his bad driving.

"You'll have to drive better than that if you're going to marry Mabel Lowne," said Margaret Clair in a judicial manner. "She can't stand anybody that's a rotter at sport, so I suppose there must be something else in you."

"Well, of all the—" gasped Harold with purple face. "Have you ever been smacked, young lady?"

"Not for years," was the amiable reply. "Everybody thinks I'm rude, and I suppose I am—beastly. Toodle-oo!"

And this astonishing young lady turned back and waved her hand over her shoulder in a parting salute.

"If I'm going to marry Mabel," said Harold half aloud, "and I've never been even asked—well, if Miss Margaret Clair doesn't come to the gallows the law will be cheated. Of all the confounded cheek—here, come up you brute and we'll get that pig home."

Farmer Hickman's house was at the top of the hill, and Harold saw that it would be useless to try and drive up the rough cart track, so he tied the reins to the gate and walked up.

There didn't seem to be a seething mass of life in the yard, and when Harold had knocked at two doors and had disturbed a particularly unpleasant-looking dog in a kennel, a labourer appeared in what artists call the middle distance, covering an easy mile an hour.

"I've come for the pig," explained Harold, "and if you could pull the lever to full steam ahead I should be glad. You see my vacation's up in a fortnight's time."



"But the pig had other ideas and deliberately took the turn for Blakesley."

"Aye, the pig!" agreed the rustic, "it wor the pig as you said, worn't it?"

"It was indeed: Just simply a pig, not even a zebra or a leopard, but just a pig. Do you mind producing it?"

The labourer thought the matter over for what appeared to Harold's agitated mind to be one hour, and finally led the way to an outhouse.

In one sty there were two or three white pigs, and Harold thought that they looked particularly agile and wriggly, and wondered which particular bacon was his.

"I suppose this is all right?" he said at length. "If you'll point out the one I'm to take I'll have it and be off."

"I suppose as you be a man as were to call for a pig?" asked the labourer.

"I believe I do resemble a man who has called for a pig. Now kindly show me Miss Lowne's pig and I'll take it and be off."

"There 'e be, and fine critter 'e be an' all," said the intelligent rustic pointing to another sty.

"See here," said Harold indignantly, "I don't want any funny business; I want a pig, not a pony."

"But 'e be only pig as be leaving farm to-day," was the reply.

Harold went closer and looked at the huge black creature, which to his harassed mind looked indeed like a pony.

"Is that Miss Lowne's pig, won at the bazaar?" he asked incredulously.

"Ay, that be pig won at the bazaar."

That settled it. There was Mabel's pig, and home it had to be taken. So Harold mentally took off his coat and went in at it.

"Bring him out, then," he said, "and I'll take him down to the trap. Do you think there'll be room for him inside—or would he run behind?" he added as a brilliant afterthought.

The rustic made a horrible noise which Harold's keen legal mind classified as laughter, and in a few minutes the pig was led out into the open.

He was a gaunt, black creature, and Harold had for one brief moment horrid doubts as to Mabel's sanity when she spoke of this prehistoric looking pig as a "sweet little creature."

"If it's her idea of a joke, then," said Harold, "I'll show that I can take a joke, too, and I'll take the blessed thing back and let it loose in the middle of the tennis party. Here, Solomon, have you got a piece of string?"

The rustic, Solomon, had already tied what looked like a ship's cable to the pig's hind leg, and handed the end to Harold.

"'E'll go quiet enough, sir, if so be you don't 'urry 'im, and let 'im 'ave 'is own way. I'll 'elp 'ee down to the cart wi' 'im, then us can get the plank down for 'im to walk up into the cart, we'll tie the nettin' over 'im safe and sound, and it's generally two shillin's for the 'elpin'."

Harold's brain reeled at the conclusion of the long speech, especially when he gathered indistinctly that a plank and netting were required; whereas he had nothing but a small dog-cart with little space behind, and the pig could not reasonably be expected to occupy a seat next the driver.

"Look here, Solomon," said Harold, after thinking it over, "I'm sure you can do this sort of thing better than I can. You get the pig safely in the cart, and I'll give you five shillings instead of two."

Solomon, who would have loaded twenty pigs for half-a-crown, realised with bucolic cunning that he had struck an unexpected gold mine, and began to hint that his time was valuable, and that this was a large pig, and so on.

Harold promised him an extra half crown if he fixed the pig in the cart so that it could not move, and the procession started.

The pig, urged on by Solomon, who held the string, led the way, and Harold followed, chuckling to himself to think that after all they would see that a Londoner could take a joke.

"Where be cart, sir?" asked Solomon when they turned the bend in the hill.

"Straight on—tied to the gate."

"You be loiar," said Solomon, with rustic directness.

Harold rushed to the corner and looked.

The horse and trap had vanished!

Fearing all sorts of horrible complications, Harold tore like mad to the gate, and after him tore