

Ben's Beer Barrel.

('British Workman.')

Ben Large, a carman engaged in the business of carting sand and gravel round about the northern part of Surrey, is one of the quaintest characters I have ever met; and it is entirely owing to his modesty that I do not give his address more definitely, so that those who desire it might become better acquainted with him; for if there is such a thing as a truly modest man, Ben most certainly is worthy of the name.

But he has given me permission to make his story known, and he gave that permission to me in the following words: 'Write it, sir, as you know it, and what you've seen, and don't spare me a bit in print; but don't say exactly where I live, as it wouldn't

Head,' but which we of sober turn of mind call 'The Blotch,' as it is the only speck upon our otherwise quiet and respectable road, and the only place where waste and extravagance, late hours, quarrelling, and home neglecting are carried on by license.

It is always a matter of deep regret to me to see workmen squander their money in drink. Viewed every way, it is a terrible mistake, and sooner or later a heavy penalty is paid by most of them; and here were six men—and for the most part healthy-looking fellows—bent upon taking the shortest road to their destruction.

The foreman was the worst-looking of them all, and I afterwards learned that drink was his bane, and all other desires paled before his thirst for it.

Next to him in the line of march was a man not quite so tall, but having the ap-

pearance of being the better and stronger of the two. To me he appeared to be a total abstainer, and I was sorry to see him fall in with the rest on the way to 'The Blotch Tavern.'

buy it, whichever it may be, and why do you save your beer?' Ben laughed heartily, and struck his thigh with his open hand, after the manner of men who are immensely pleased. I could make nothing of him.

'Are you married?' I asked, after a pause. 'Yes, sir,' he replied.

'And have a wife and family?'

'A wife and six children,' was his answer.

'And pray,' said I, 'what do they say to your hoarding your beer?'

'They used to talk a lot at one time, sir,' he said, 'but they don't say much now; they've got used to it.' And Ben laughed uproariously.

I was fairly puzzled. Of misers who loved gold, pictures, books, odd scraps, and even old iron, I had heard and read by the score; but a man hoarding beer was something new to me, and curiosity prompted the request I made to him.

'May I come and see your barrel?' I asked.

'Well, sir,' he said, 'I ain't over and above given to show it, not being a boaster; at the same time, I don't encourage visitors, as most of 'em—men like myself—laugh at me; but I won't say no to you. Come any weekday, after six o'clock. We like to be by ourselves on Sunday.'

'Where do you live, my friend?'

The road we stood in commanded an extensive view of the country ahead of us, and Ben, pointing southwards, asked me if I saw some cottages 'far away in front of the trees yonder.'

'Distinctly,' I replied; 'and I think I have heard they are workmen's cottages.'

'Just so,' he said; 'they are all workmen's cottages, although some that lives in 'em don't work so hard as they might do. You'll find me at home after six. I takes all my beer there.'

I promised to call upon him that very night, and although my mind was beginning to foreshadow the truth, I had still a fair amount of curiosity unsatisfied to urge me on. As I was taking leave of him, I heard the foreman inside the public-house asking who was going to stand another pint.

'That's him all over,' said Ben. 'He's begun now, and he'll keep the men there until they are nearly fuddled; and yet none of 'em will take my advice and have a barrel at home.'

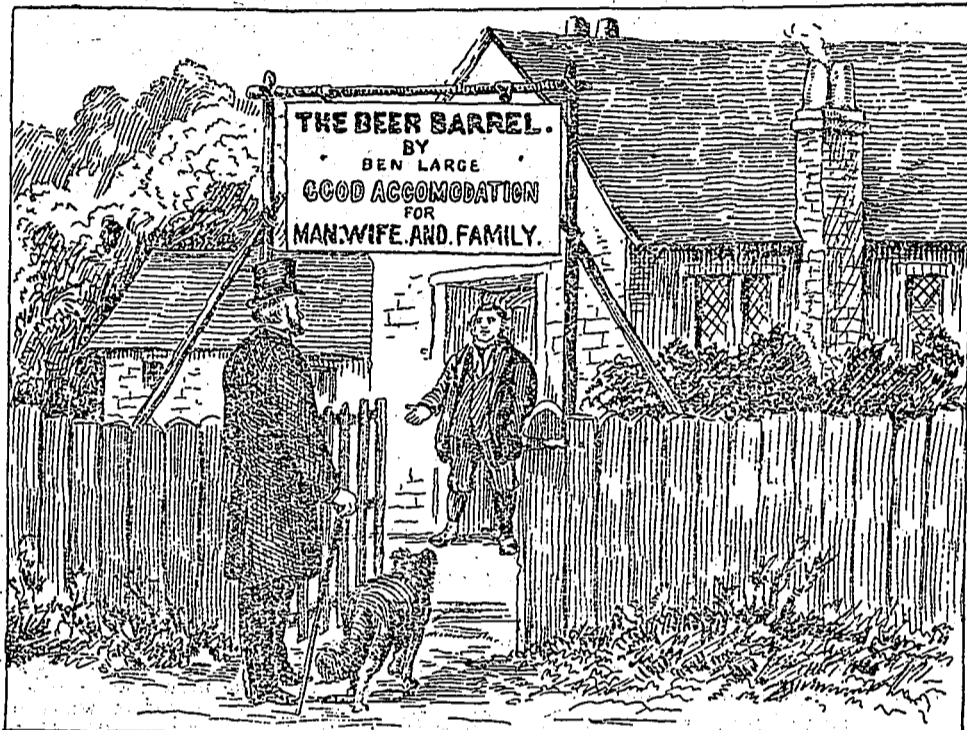
'Better have no barrel,' I said.

'I don't know,' replied Ben, shaking his head; 'if people give you beer, or money to get beer, you must put it somewhere.'

I left him, and on my way home tried to picture Ben's barrel in which he stored his beer, and the vision that came before me was a huge barrel, into which he poured the beer instead of drinking it; and this, in a measure, was correct. But there was a little more behind—the way of pouring the beer in was not the way I imagined. My visit to Ben's home made everything clear.

About half-past six I started for Ben's house, with one of my dogs, 'Juno,' a collic, at my heels. Juno is a very sensible dog, and has a great horror of a drunkard, and when she meets one, will bark and run round him in angry expostulation. On these occasions I often venture to interpret her language into something like the following:

'You a man, sir! How dare you call yourself one? I, a four-footed creature—called dumb by people who don't know any better—feel myself your superior. I am ashamed of you; and if my giving you a good shaking would not be misinterpreted, I would let you have one. But I should be called ferocious and dangerous if I gave it; and my master would be summoned before a magistrate, who, although he licenses the place that makes you what you are, would



AN OLD SIGN WITH A NEW STORY.

do any good, and might bring a lot o' people down to see a man who's got more than seven hundred gallons of beer in one barrel.'

In the last few words lies the secret of Ben's remarkable history—how he made his barrel, and how he put the beer into it; and to make the story clear, I must go back to the morning when Ben and I became first acquainted.

A neighbor of mine, with a garden, a little larger than most suburban residents are favored with, required six loads of gravel for the walks; and on the morning referred to, six carts, drawn by a horse each, and with six carmen in attendance, appeared in front of his gate. The six loads were duly shot into a great heap in the roadway (for it is no part of the duty of the sand-carmen to put it into your garden), and my neighbor having received the bill, paid the amount demanded.

Then came the usual request from the leader of the men—a big, burly fellow, with a hoarse voice, and with an air of deference and defiance mingled in his style of address—'A drop o' beer, master, if you please.'

My neighbor counted the men, and making six of them, reckoned up what a pint of beer each would amount to, and, by the ordinary arithmetical process, concluded a shilling would be sufficient to satisfy all demands. This coin he tendered, and receiving a salute by way of thanks, left the men to go their way. That way was straight to the public-house at the bottom of our road—a place bearing the sign of 'The King's

pearance of being the better and stronger of the two. To me he appeared to be a total abstainer, and I was sorry to see him fall in with the rest on the way to 'The Blotch Tavern.'

I followed to have a few words with this man, and with the others too, if they were open to reason; and as they put their vehicles together, I advanced, with the intention of pointing out how much better it would be if they kept the money and took it home to their wives; but the foreman, who seemed instinctively to know my object, cut me short at the first word.

'It's no use,' he said, 'and so don't come a-talking. I'm going to have my beer, and so we are all. The only difference is, that I and t'others drink it here, while Ben Large (pointing to the man I have particularly referred to) 'takes his home and puts it into his big barrel. Here's your tuppence, Ben.'

Ben put the money into his pocket, and took a seat upon the shafts of his cart, and the others, who were laughing at some joke which I had not yet grasped, lounged into the public-house.

'So you hoard your beer,' I said.

'Yes, sir,' replied Ben; 'it's a fancy of mine. I made a big barrel, and put into it all I can get.'

'And drink none of it?'

'Not a drop.'

'Looking at you,' I said, 'I can verily believe you never touch beer or anything intoxicating; but I am a little curious about this barrel of yours. Why did you make or