

TWO ARTFUL SCHEMERS.

THE SCHEMERS.

It was not absolute destitution, nor were the two heroes afflicted with the modern pessimism that looms so largely in the literature of the day; on the contrary, Ted Delaunay, chronically hard up, always took a rosy view of his surroundings, and Jimmie Bell's methods might be described as characterised by perennial boyish vivacity; moreover, he was blessed with a happy disposition and a sunny temperament, and debts.

Mr. Edward Delaunay was in the War Office, salary £180 per annum—"perfectly ridiculous," he acknowledged, and always laughed about it; and Jimmie Bell had top-floor chambers in that funny little court off Holborn, known as Barnard's Inn. Now, if anything would damp a man's spirits and render him a prey to gloomy forebodings, a daily residence in the smoke-begrimed dinginess of Barnard's Inn ought to do it; but, bless your eyes, Mr. James Bell would sit at the open window and gaze into the little dead-alive square with the liveliest satisfaction. He used to speculate about the antique-looking houses opposite and wonder when they would fall in from old age, admire the straight simplicity of the three lamp-posts, and reason whether the stunted trees intended to have a leaf this summer—not that he cared, he said, the country was good enough for him, and when he wanted leaves he knew where they were. He was perfectly fearless about briefs—that is, he never got in a fright about any coming his way.

Like many other youthful barristers, he did press work. He had lately written an amusing though thoughtful article, entitled, "A New Way to Remove Old Wrinkles," which had been at once published in the "London Lady's Journal," a rich, influential, and widely-circulated paper. Jimmie Bell was sitting at the open window with the cheque in his pocket, smoking expensive cigars, a box of which he had ordered but had not paid for; he had also a crumpled-up note in the other pocket from the editor, saying he would be glad of another article upon the same topic. It seems there had been a run on the paper that week, and the buyers were not all women. Wrinkles are the bane of fashionable life. A Jewess had once told Bell how to get rid of them, hence his mysterious knowledge.

It never rains but it pours. The postman coming upstairs handed him a letter; it proved to be from an American editor, and contained a cheque for a hundred dollars. Bell smoothed it out on his writing table, opened a bottle of ale, and returned to the open window.

"I shall go to the country to-morrow and see if there are any leaves." This airy remark was made to Mrs. Baggs, the char-woman of the chambers, who had entered in a desultory way after the postman, and was now supposed to be sweeping up the next room. In reality she was making a frightful dust.

Mrs. Baggs was accustomed to take things literally. Her life was too hard to develop humour; she always had a tired, set expression. She was likewise inured to all and any kind of remarks from "her gentleman," and merely asked if "Mr. Bell was coming back immediately, as she might have a spring cleanin', bein' considered wholesome this time o' year, a matter of two shillins for the ole day."

"You can spring-clean all over the place, Mrs. Baggs, only don't touch my desk. I'll be away two or three days, no doubt."

To tell the truth, he had not expected to receive the American cheque so promptly; it was in payment of a long and vivacious article he had written under the remarkable title of "Royal Rabbits," which was simply a number of minute details respecting European rulers, their numerous offspring, their lives, what they did with them, and how well paid they were for living.

America, generally speaking, revels in the daily details of Royalty, the inside track of State junketings, and the bottom facts of aristocratical error, though they pretend they do no not; most amusing pretence, which their newspapers typographically deny every day.

About half past four Ted Delaunay walked in, having finished reading the "Times" at the War Office, and otherwise got through the official hours; the two men greeted each other with the informality of old friends.

"Take a cigar?" said Bell. "They're Espanolas." His friend selected one from the box.

"I was just admiring the view."

"O hang the view," said Delaunay, "do you know, Jimmie," he continued laughing, "it's most ridiculous, but I'm hard up."

"Never mind."

"No, I know it doesn't matter at all; but I've lately been thinking out a scheme to settle ourselves—it seems monstrous that you and I at our age cannot do as we like. Let's see, how old are you?"

"I'm twenty-eight."

"And how much do you consider you are worth?"

"I'm worth five thousand a year."

"Well! that's the figure I compute myself at."

"Oh, then—have you heard of the heiress?" (It will be seen by this that the conversation had turned upon an old subject of theirs.)

"I have."

"Good! how old is she?"

"An elderly forty."

"She's not fifty is she?"

"Well, you know how difficult it is to tell a woman's age."

"Is she in town, Ted?"

"No, she lives at Park Lodge, Compton-road, Eastbourne, and she's got our figure, £5,000 a year."

"Good! What are you going to do?"

"We're going to save her life."

"But it isn't in danger, is it?"

"Not yet—but that can be arranged."

"That's all very well," commented Jimmie Bell, lighting a fresh cigar, "but," talking between the pulls, "I don't see it—two men can't—pull—marry one woman."

"Now listen. You remember my cousin, Amy Tudor? Well, of course, her father has smashed; most ridiculous, all her family are out and abroad; Amy, cleverest of the lot, has gone as a companion to this Miss Carmichael of Eastbourne. Now, I should want your assistance or you would want mine, so we'll toss up who proposes for her. Lend me half-a-crown to toss with."

Bell gave him the coin.

"Whoever wins the toss goes in for the heiress, and upon the marriage day pays to the other one—that is, the loser—£1,000 cash down, in consideration of his affording the uttermost mutual help and sympathy during the courtship."

"That seems fair and reasonable," said Jimmie Bell.

"Here, Jim, you'd better toss up," exclaimed Delaunay, suddenly growing and looking comically nervous. "I made the scheme, you know, so you'd better toss."

Bell span the coin and caught it.

"Woman! Sudden death!" cried Delaunay.

"It is," remarked the spinner. "You've got her, old fellow—I'll see you through—when shall we go down?"

"Have you got anything else to drink except beer? I'd like a brandy seltzer."

"Brandy's in the cupboard—I say," raising his voice, "Mrs. Baggs, just run over and order in a dozen seltzer at once. Better bring two or three bottles with you."

Mrs. Baggs, who always worked with her bonnet on, appeared for a second, dusty and dispirited, asked if she was to pay for it, and receiving an answer in the negative, slowly clattered downstairs, along the paved passage, past the quaint Hall of the Inn, stopped a few minutes to pass the time o' day with a laundress she met with a basket of clothes; drifted into Holborn a tired speck in a hurrying throng, and got lost down a side street.

"Look here" said Jimmie Bell, looking highly elated, "we'll