

# SOME METROPOLITAN BLUFFS.

BY JAMES L. FORD.

THE PRETENDERS WHO ABOUND AND FLOURISH IN NEW YORK, AND THE MORE OR LESS INGENUOUS DEVICES BY WHICH THEY ACHIEVE UNEARNED SUCCESS IN VARIOUS SOCIAL AND INTELLECTUAL FIELDS.

NOTHING but the poverty of our language can excuse the use of slang in the title of this article. I have employed the word "bluff" simply because I know of no other term that will convey the meaning which I intend in this brief essay on a most important phase of metropolitan life.

By a bluff I mean a pretense designed to take the place of merit, to atone for inefficiency, or to cast a halo over mediocrity. The gold plate on the bar of spurious metal that the city sharper sells to the farmer as genuine is the very beau ideal of a metropolitan bluff. If the brick were of solid gold, it would not be necessary to plate it; nor does a genuine man find it necessary to assume any sort of pretense—or, to quote from the vernacular of the day, to "throw a bluff" of any description.

New York has long been a veritable paradise for bluffers of every sort. I know of no corner of the earth in which can be found such a number and variety of bluffs, or a population more easily deceived by them. Some of these bluffs are ingenious and elaborate enough to command a certain degree of respect, while others are so simple as to awaken only a pity and contempt for those who are imposed on by them.

Mr. Edgar Saltus, who has been for years a close student of metropolitan morals and manners, once told me that he regarded what he called the "tandem bluff" as one of the very best of its species. He further explained his meaning by showing me how a man

could easily win a reputation for wealth and establish his credit firmly in the principal New York hotels and shops by simply driving a pair of horses tandem up and down Fifth Avenue and through Central Park. He can drive a pair to the pole, year in and year out, without attracting any attention, but the very moment he puts one of those horses in front of the other, his acquaintances go about crying, "That man Jones is making a pile of money in Wall Street, they tell me; I saw him driving a tandem up the Avenue this afternoon in great style. No, it wasn't that pair of trotters he used to drive to his sidebar buggy; it's a tandem hitched to a high English dogcart, and he had a stunning looking girl beside him, with a bunch of violets in her belt that must have cost twenty dollars."

If Jones has no horses of his own, he can easily hire a tandem at a livery stable for two or three hours for a sum that is not worth speaking of when we consider its enormous effect on his credit. I will venture to say that no New York tailor would dare to refuse credit to a man who drove up to his shop with a tandem and groom, and came in to be measured for two suits of clothes and an overcoat.

The tandem is not the only bluff that is open to the young man who stands on the threshold of life and wishes to make a great appearance on a small outlay. To the man who has no money at all to spend in this way, I would recommend a luxuriant growth of whiskers as a means of producing a

greater impression on less outlay than any other bluff that I am familiar with. There is no doubt of the fact that to the average person in this country abundant hirsute appendages are a symbol of erudition and poise of character. When a newspaper artist draws an imaginative picture of a death bed, he invariably portrays the attendant physician as a man with a long beard, who stands with a watch in one hand and the patient's wrist in the other. The watch is not without its due effect, of course, but then the watch costs money, while the whiskers, which are the most impressive feature in the picture, cost nothing.

Whiskers lead directly to fame for another reason. The rising public man whose face is thus adorned finds his picture in the paper fully twice as often as does his smooth faced contemporary, because it is much easier to draw a whiskered face and catch its likeness than to reproduce a close shaven physiognomy.

The "wine opening bluff" ranks high as a means of making a great impression at a comparatively small expense. The bluffer strolls into some popular Broadway café, at a busy moment in the afternoon, and invites the acquaintances whom he finds there to join him in a bottle of "extra dry." While the waiter is uncorking the bottle, which should be consumed at a table and not at the bar, the bluffer must not forget to step over to the ticker and examine the tape. Should he do this before ordering the champagne, no one would pay the slightest attention to him; but the mere calling for a bottle brings him at once into the great white light of popular interest, and from that moment until the juice of the French—or Ohio—grape ceases to sparkle and bubble in the glasses, his every act is closely scrutinized.

These Broadway cafés are patronized largely by gamblers, criminal lawyers, theatrical managers, race track hangers on, and others of the so called

"sharp" class. They have achieved a reputation for extreme cunning and shrewdness, and yet a bluffer can, within the brief space of twelve hours, and at an expense of twenty five dollars, judiciously scattered between Twenty Third and Forty Second Streets, gain for himself the reputation of being a millionaire. It is true that the combined expenditures of the Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, Gould, and Astor connections for champagne in barrooms does not average forty cents a year; but that fact possesses no significance for those keen students of metropolitan life who study human nature in such temples of fashion and culture. Nor do they know that if the bluffers of the town were to change the color of their beverage, most of the champagne merchants would become bankrupt in six months.

The fur trimmed overcoat is another metropolitan bluff which does not require a large outlay. A man in possession of such a garment is always much sought after as a platform ornament at public meetings. The arrival of a citizen in a fur trimmed overcoat shortly after the exercises of the evening have begun invariably inspires the multitude with confidence, and causes all the reporters to ask his name and place it in the "among those present" list. A single season devoted to public life on platforms, and in a fur trimmed overcoat, is generally sufficient to convert the most obscure and humble character into a "prominent citizen" of undisputed standing, who is sure to have his face recognized and his name printed whenever there are any reporters present.

The golf stick—formerly the tennis racket—bluff is another form of pretense that can be recommended in the highest terms. In employing this bluff it is only necessary to carry some implement of sport, like a polo bridle, a hunting crop, or two or three golf sticks through the main thoroughfares of the town. Whenever I see this bluff doing duty I am forcibly reminded of

the Sunday morning toilet of *Mr. Tit-ileback Titmouse*, in the first chapter of "Ten Thousand a Year." It will be remembered that that young counter jumper had the effrontery to put on a pair of spurs before setting out for his morning walk in the park, although he had never been on the back of a horse in the whole course of his life.

When a man has carried any of these articles up and down Broadway or Fifth Avenue two or three times, the rumor goes abroad that he is "right in with the swell hunting set in Westchester County"—which is indeed an enviable distinction.

A simple and comparatively inexpensive bluff is that of always wearing evening dress after six o'clock. In the case of the man of good taste and leisure who dresses for dinner as a matter of habit, this is not a bluff; but it is quite another affair when a man who has no friends and is not invited out to dinner once a year gravely attires himself every night in evening clothes and prowls about the lobbies of fashionable hotels and restaurants for the purpose of making people think that he has been somewhere.

The successful employment of this most simple and common of all metropolitan bluffs generally leads to the society bluff, which is fully as simple and almost as easily worked. Nothing is easier of acquisition in New York than an acquaintance with some of the people who are to be found buzzing about the outer edge of society. A young man who is known to wear evening clothes every night of his life is held in high repute by these hangers on, and soon comes to be looked upon as a decidedly presentable person for evening receptions—and for the afternoon teas also, provided he has a frock coat. Acceptance of a few invitations to affairs of this sort eventually secures the publication of his name in the society column, thus gaining for him the enviable distinction of being a member of the Four Hundred.

He can, of course, carry his bluff still further, and penetrate into more exclusive circles of metropolitan society, but the results will scarcely repay him for his trouble and the indignities that he may be called upon to endure. The hangers on will serve his purpose even better than the most desirable people in the city, because their names are sure to be printed more frequently in the social chronicles of the day, and they are, therefore, known to a wider circle of "society page" readers than are the well bred people who shun such notoriety.

The financial bluff is an admirable one for a great many reasons, not the least of which is that it can be used, especially when backed up by a pair of imposing whiskers, with simply dazzling effect and without the slightest outlay of capital. It is very simple. It is only necessary to take an occasional brisk walk through Wall Street and around the block on which the Stock Exchange stands, pausing now and then on the curbstone to discuss the market with chance acquaintances. This must be backed up by a little work in the evenings and on Sundays, when the bluffer chats glibly and confidently about the prospects of Western Union, or the amount of his transactions in the Vanderbilt stocks. It is considered vulgar, while working a bluff of this sort, to allude to any sum less than a quarter of a million dollars, and all conversation based on these lines must be carried on with a countenance of owlsh solemnity. By thus hanging around the financial center of the town, the bluffer will at last rank, in the eyes of his acquaintances, with those kings of finance who cling to the curbstone outside the Stock Exchange door until their feet turn into prehensile claws, and who probably have less money in their pockets than any other bluffers in this city.

Another inexpensive mode of creating a financial illusion is what is known as the "house hunting bluff." This

is also simple, and consists of paying visits to unoccupied mansions and searching anxiously among all the real estate dealers for a twenty five foot house suitable for entertaining, and situated on some quiet, well paved side street, not too far up town, and not more than a block from the Avenue. A skilful and practised bluffer will frequently devote an hour or two a day for several weeks to this form of bluff, and it never fails to create an impression.

The "swell hotel bluff" is worthy of mention, because it is one out of about a thousand bluffs that could be devised by a child of eight, and yet it carries a most absurd weight in the city of New York. Every fashionable hotel contains a few very small and very uncomfortable rooms, which can be rented for a price which is moderate when compared with that charged for a comfortable and luxurious apartment under the same roof, but which is decidedly large in comparison with what is paid for infinitely better accommodation elsewhere. These rooms are always occupied, for there are plenty of men who will endure any discomfort for the sake of being able to claim some fashionable hotel as a residence. Some of these men will actually do their own washing in their rooms, and fry over the gas jet the sausages which they have smuggled up stairs under their coats. It is a pitiful bluff, this, and one which I cannot conscientiously recommend to any one of artistic tastes and methods; nevertheless, it is one that makes a great impression on weak minded people.

Of literary and artistic bluffs there are plenty, but nearly all of them cost money, for a man cannot pose very long as a book collector or buyer of pictures without making some sort of a show. The contemptible bluff of evolving from the depths of an ignorant mind worthless chatter about French painters and English writers does not even deserve mention here, and as a rule excites only pity and derision.

In thinking over the different bluffers that I have known I distinctly recall two, each one of whom was a master in his own peculiar line. One of these men was a portrait maker and a fairly good one; the other was a sort of *chevalier d'industrie*, who lived as best he could. With the first named bluffing was simply a means to an end, but the other was a bluffer, not alone for the livelihood it afforded him, but simply because of his love for it as an art. For this reason he was the superior artist of the two, and found in the practice of his profession the excitement and keenest enjoyment of his life. The painter made money, and in the course of time married a wealthy girl and returned to private life, but not until bluffing had become such a fixed habit that he is still as much addicted to it as he was in the days when it was his one mainstay. The other artist enjoyed life hugely, bluffing his way from one pleasant pasture to another, and finally died in the full possession of his powers, but without enough money in his pockets to bury him.

I have called my friend the painter a master in his own line, and he certainly was; but his line was a simple and primitive one, and it was only by following it persistently, sincerely, and shamelessly that he succeeded in winning distinction. I believe that he lived under the eaves of a large Fifth Avenue hotel, and washed his own pocket handkerchiefs in the hand basin. I know that it was impossible to enter that hotel between the hours of six and seven without seeing him scuttling about with a look of importance on his face and a broadcloth coat upon his back, or seated in the café or lobby in earnest conversation. He took everything seriously, especially his own work, and for this reason a great many people took the same view.

I don't know how he contrived to do it, but he was always in evidence. If he attended a theater party, he was sure to place himself in the most con-

spicuous corner of the box. If he attended a reception, he could be found talking learnedly to the most beautiful, the cleverest, or the most distinguished woman in the room. His bluffs were so simple and childlike that most men saw through them easily, but he made a deep impression on a great many women, who gave him orders for portraits at large prices. His bluffing not only established him in his profession—or what he called his art—but also won for him a wealthy and credulous wife, who to this very day retains that rare and agreeable blend of qualities, and still believes implicitly in him.

But the poor soldier of fortune achieved nothing but a transitory fame on upper Broadway, although it must be admitted that his life yielded him a great deal of fun. He still lives in the kindly remembrance of scores of men upon whom he levied tribute, more or less willing, but who nevertheless appreciated the humorous phases of his scheme of existence, and admired the peculiar and erratic genius that enabled him to keep afloat so many years.

A profound believer in what he called "a good front," this merry spirit placed the highest possible value on a frock coat, a shiny silk hat, and an engraved visiting card, with the words "press correspondent" in the lower left hand corner. He frequently declared that without these accessories he would find it impossible to make more than a bare living. With an outfit of this sort he would frequent cafés and hotels, where he easily made acquaintances, whom he entertained with an agreeable flood of reminiscence, for he was a shrewd fellow of wide experience, and possessed of no mean gifts of speech. All his acquaintances and friends were expected to contribute in one way or other to his support, and very few escaped. Some became embittered against him, but there were a great many more who felt that the charms of his companionship more than repaid them for what it cost.

A man of boundless resources, no misfortune could faze him, and no trap could hold him. One evening he was walking up Fifth Avenue without a dollar in his pocket, but secure in the possession of his engraved cards, his new silk hat, and his long tailed frock coat, the work of one of the very best tailors in town. The sight of Delmonico's restaurant reminded him of the fact that he needed a dinner, and then he remembered that there was to be a public banquet there that very night, at which some of the richest and most influential men of the city were to be present. Without a moment's hesitation he entered the door and made his way to the parlor in which the guests were rapidly assembling. Having placed his hat, coat, and silk umbrella in the cloak room, he sought out with unerring eye a guest who felt himself outclassed in that distinguished company, and said to him:

"May I trouble you to give me the names of some of the best known of these gentlemen, together with your own? Our artist will be here in a few moments to make the sketches, but if you can send me one of your photographs tomorrow I will take pains to have it right in the center, and have it look like you, too. I suppose you know that I am from *Harper's Weekly*, and that we are going to have a big double page of this, with a long article."

The prospect of having his picture published in *Harper's Weekly* took the outclassed citizen off his feet. He eagerly gave all the information he could, and, when the summons for dinner came, permitted the agreeable young writer, who had been taking copious notes in the mean time, to take him by the arm and march with him to the banquet table. Once seated at the board, this artistic bluffer abandoned himself completely to the joys of the occasion. He ate heartily, drank deep of whatever was placed before him, and secured a large number of expensive cigars. At a late hour he was led from



the table, and cast into outer darkness, and went howling up Fifth Avenue, the happiest man in town.

But the crowning achievement in the career of this gifted bluffer relates to the presentation of a silver testimonial to the late Mr. Gladstone at his home, Hawarden Castle. A number of well known Americans, who had been instrumental in securing subscriptions for the gift, went down from London to present it to the veteran statesman. The bluffer, who always contrived to keep himself on the very crest of the wave of popular interest, attached himself to the party, unbidden—for he was well known to all of them. At the close of the presentation ceremonies Mr. and Mrs. Gladstone and three or four of the most distinguished mem-

bers of the company assembled in a group to be photographed. The bluffer stationed himself behind an adjacent tree, and waited till the photographer put his head under the black cloth, when he darted out and planted himself, in all the glory of his high hat and frock coat, directly behind the English premier. The result was that he became one of the most dignified figures in a remarkably fine photograph, his likeness, as well as those of Mr. Gladstone and other genuine celebrities, being unmistakable.

When he returned to America he carried with him a score or more of these pictures, and they became thereafter his principal ammunition in the game of bluff that he played to the very end of his days.



#### IN CHURCH.

I NEVER mark the pastor's pose,  
His ministerial air;  
I never even note the clothes  
The congregation wear;  
Repeat the text I could not do,  
I'm deaf to every plea,  
When Prudence occupies the pew  
Across the aisle from me.

She sits a sweet divinity  
Of goodness and of grace;  
Then, is it strange naught else I see  
Of hope save in her face?  
A hope earth earthy 'tis, 'tis true,  
Yet saving grace I see,  
When Prudence occupies the pew  
Across the aisle from me.

Perhaps the pastor's fervent speech  
To his flock giveth food,  
The theme seems quite beyond my reach,  
Though well with love imbued.  
That part I grasp, and take as true,  
For mine's the mood, you see,  
When Prudence occupies the pew  
Across the aisle from me.

*Roy Farrell Greene.*