A Difference of Temperament

By J. D. Beresford

The differences between ‘young’ Royce and ‘old’ Bunnett had a dramatic quality that stirred even the wearied indifference of Stamp and Co.’s counting-house to simple efforts in psychological analysis.

Young Royce was dark, square, and determined; a reasoned boaster, who verified his boasts by action. When he made what sounded like a very rash assertion, it was bad policy to contradict, and quite fatal to bet against him.

Old Bunnett was tall and thin, fair, drooping, and despondent. He seldom committed himself to a confident statement of opinion, but gravely, almost voluptuously, hoped for the worst on every possible occasion. He was, by the office’s classification, of the same breed as “old Robinson,” who had come into the firm as a boy of fourteen and had now served his employers faithfully for fifty-one years.

Royce found a delight in marking that likeness. “Bunny, my boy,” he used to say, “you’ve come here to stop. When I come back here in twenty years’ time I shall find you still at the same old grind. You’ll never get out of it.”

“Not so sure as I want to,” was Bunny’s single form of defence against this impeachment of his powers of initiative—that and a sniff. The sniff was his characteristic comment on life; a long and thoughtful substitute for speech. He was not more than ordinarily susceptible to colds in the head; and his sniff was less a physical function than a vehicle of mental expression.

Young Royce, however, wanted and meant to leave the firm “directly he could see his way,” as he put it. He had a vein of prudence, or it may have been merely shrewdness, that was sometimes overlooked by those who had come a little to dread the threat of his boasting. The one consolation afforded to those who suffered under his implication of their feeblenesss was the reflection that he would almost certainly “go to the bad one of these days.” Bunny, alone, was pessimist enough to admit that Royce would “get on.” He had been known to add, “Sure to; he’s the sort that gets on.”

The office as a whole jealously disagreed with him; and in their vehement denouncement of Bunny’s pessimism failed to recognise that underlying all the violent and obvious contrasts between Royce and Bunnett there was at least one point of likeness, inasmuch as they both believed in Royce. (The only likeness conceded by the office was the coincidence that both men were born in the same month of the same year, and had come into the firm of Stamp and Company on the same day.)

Royce had actually left the firm on the Saturday afternoon that first introduced him to Bunnett’s mother on Hampstead Heath. He had “seen his way” as far as a job at Capetown—a very risky and uncertain affair, in the office’s opinion.

He had a streak of romantic sentiment hidden away somewhere, and he had come up to the Spaniards’ Road to “take a last look at London.” He was leaning over the railings looking down across the Vale of Health, when he became aware of an arrested Bunnett sniffing profoundly at the back of a bath-chair.

“My mother,” Bunnett said, by way of introduction, and then in a half-aside, “she’s a bit of an invalid, but she’s been a little better lately, ain’t you, mother? This is the Mr. Royce I was telling you about. Just going out to South Africa.”

Mrs. Bunnett pinched her mouth into a line of sympathetic disapproval. “It’s a long way to go,” she remarked—and sniffed thoughtfully.

She and her son were, Royce thought, as exactly alike as a couple of old sheep.

The job in Capetown proved even more uncertain than the office had hopefully predicted, and Royce presently migrated to Melbourne. Thence he drifted across to Hobart. A year later he had found a temporary post in Ceylon, then worked his way up the Bay of Bengal to Calcutta, and stayed there a month before he took ship to Tientsin. It was in 1909, seven years after he had left London, that he first put foot in America, landing at San Francisco, after crossing the Pacific from Yokohama by way of Hawaii.

In those seven years he had suffered and learnt many things, but if the staff of Stamp and Co.’s counting-house had met “young Royce” on his landing in California they would have found no difference in him. He came ashore with the boast that he meant to make money in America.

And, indeed, his apparent failure to win any financial success during those years of wandering was due rather to that streak of imaginative romance in him than to any weakness of character. It had been necessary for him to satisfy some lust for adventure and experience before he could settle down to achieve a worldly ambition. He knew himself well enough to recognise his own quality. He had a perfect confidence in his ability to make money eventually. And just as he had made good his boasts in the old days, so now he made good his determination to seek another form of romance in America.

It would be superfluous to trace the means of his ascent. He was so obviously the successful type that readily finds employment and opportunity in the United States. He had determination combined with initiative and imagination. It is doubtful if even the deliberate, conservative methods of Stamp and Co. could have overlooked his ability if he had elected to stay in the employ of that stately English concern.

He became an American Citizen in 1913, but he did not revisit London until the autumn of 1917, when he came over on business as a representative of the Steel Trust. Arthur H. Royce had become a person of considerable importance and influence. He stayed at the Carlton Hotel during the progress of his negotiations with the English Government Department, the methods of which he ridiculed as being founded on the same principles as those familiar to him in the counting-house of Messrs. Stamp and Co.

But the old streak of romance showed itself again on the last Saturday of his stay in England. He had not called on the partners or employees of his old office. He had come to boast in action now, and the boast of language had become futile and unnecessary. He went up to the Spaniards’ Road solely to satisfy some need for self-approval that he hoped to find in the contrast between his present condition and that in which he had last looked down over the hazy prospect of London, fifteen years before.

He was leaning over the rail in much the same place and when he saw, with a strange thrill, the once familiar figure of old Bunnett coming towards him, pushing his invalid mother in what was surely the same bath-chair.

Royce straightened himself, and turned to meet them. He wondered if they would recognise him. There was something of the old self-conscious boast in his attitude as he held out his hand and said;

“Hullo! Bunny. Still here, then?”

Bunnett and his mother sniffed in concert, a deep and melancholy comment on life.

“Still here,” agreed Bunnett, and his mother added, “So you’re back in London, Mr. Royce?”

“For a few days,” Royce admitted.

“South African job turn out all right?” Bunnett asked.

Royce hesitated. In one swift flash of retrospect he looked back on those full and varied adventures that had begun for him with the voyage to Capetown, and knew that though he stood there talking and boasting for a week, he could not convey to old Bunnett and his mother one-hundredth part of the romance and wonder that had glorified his existence for fifteen years..

“Oh! yes; all right,” he said; “and you? Still with Stamps?”

And Bunnett, too, hesitated as if there were something he also lacked power to describe before he answered “Yes, still there.”

The conversation seemed to offer no further possibilities. For a moment they stood awkwardly, and then Bunnett said, “My mother’s a bit of an invalid, but she’s been a little better lately.” He sniffed thoughtfully.

As Royce made his way back to his hotel he modestly thanked God that he was not as some other men.

He had, however, missed one small observation. He had been standing on Bunnett’s right side as they talked, and had not noticed that he had lost his left arm.