

A Lightning Modeller.

BY FRANK HOLMFIELD.

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM PHOTOGRAPHS.



HERE are tremendous possibilities in a lump of modelling clay—when manipulated by a skilled artist.

Such will be the conclusion that must be arrived at by anyone who has witnessed, at the London Pavilion, the remarkable performance of Mr. De Bessell, before whose lissom fingers an unshapely mass of brown mud-mixture assumes, in an almost incredibly short space of time, forms and features as true to life as may be.

There is a slap-dash and "go-ahead" style about Mr. De Bessell's work which adds to his artistic performance a drollness irresistible to most people. Whilst he is always thoroughly in earnest, he manages—I will not say unconsciously—to make the most hardened cynic chuckle with mirth.

His is a truly unique entertainment. With an oblong slab of wood fitted upon an ordinary easel, and supplemented by a big lump of the necessary material and ten deftly artistic fingers, he can produce effects simply marvellous in detail, considering the wonderfully short time occupied.

The smart variety theatre "turn" known as "lightning modelling" originated with Mr. De Bessell. And he may be said to have retained a monopoly of the interesting and amusing entertainment. Of course, there are the usual crop of imitation "acts." The writer has seen some of these. But in skill, artistic effect, and humour they are simply not in the running with the original. To produce a first-class caricature in clay of, say, Mr. Kruger within a space of 100sec. is a feat not to be tackled by any save the smartest modellers. And certainly Mr. De Bessell is smart, ahead of all others.

One can't become a successful lightning modeller at a moment's notice—nor at a year's, for the matter of that! It has taken the subject of this article the greater portion of his lifetime to reach the standard of smartness and artistic completeness.

"From my very earliest schooldays," said Mr. De Bessell to me, "I always had a liking for such work. They told me, too, that my mud pies and sand castles were always eminently superior to the efforts of my most enthusiastic playfellows! I have even been complimented," went on the clay king humorously, "by one of my school teachers on the excellence of what I'm afraid was a rather rude caricature model of his own face!

"With such encouragement there was only one profession open to me!



HURLING THE CLAY AT THE MODELLING SLAB.

I went on the stage! Yes; after a great deal of study under some of the best masters in the States"—Mr. De Bessell hails therefrom—"I saw that there was an opening for such an original 'turn.' There was absolutely nothing like it. It was quite new. And you know what managers want. They are always crying out for novelty—and not often with success, so scarce has become the material to be drawn upon.



KRUGER BEFORE GETTING HIS HAT AND WHISKERS.

"It was not long before I found myself in England — by the way, what an extraordinary theatre-going nation England is! The enormous patronage given to the 'halls' particularly astonishes us Americans, even accustomed as we have been to big audiences."

Clay modelling on the stage would be rather slow under ordinary methods of manipulation. In fact, it would not "go" were there not plenty of life and dash introduced.

Mr. De Bessell's methods "fill the bill."

As soon as he has made his bow to the audience he catches up a great chunk of clay in his hands. Standing a yard or two away from the modelling slab he hurls lump after lump, with unerring aim and wonderful rapidity, at its centre, to the sound of lively orchestral tunes.

Every lump is thrown with a particular purpose, and even before the artist's fingers touch it the outline

of a face is plainly discernible. As soon as he has hurled the last lump at the slab, with a rush he has crossed to the easel and with extraordinary swiftness his fingers are darting hither and thither. A dab here, a pinch there, a rub yonder, a punch below—those deft fingers get in their work. Not a tool is

used from beginning to end, only the fingers. In and out, out and in, they twist and twirl in a truly bewildering fashion.



"DE WET'S SLIPPED THROUGH!"

In something like fifteen seconds that mass of brown clay has been pinched, punched, rubbed, and shoved into features which the spectator begins to recognise as having come within his vision somewhere at some time—he can't exactly say. Fingers and thumbs raise both eyebrows in a certain peculiar twist only known to be characteristic

of one man—"the whole discovery is now found out," as they say in the melodramas. Those eyebrows have given the necessary expression to the incomplete features. It is our old friend Kruger! But where are his famous whiskers? Wait a moment.

A few little lumps of clay are flung from the lightning modeller's hands. They form a fringe to the face—and are Kruger's whiskers in embryo. A few quick dashes of the artist's fingers, and the hirsute



THE HAT AND WHISKERS ARE ADDED.



"DE WET'S CAUGHT!"

ornamentation is complete!

Kruger's hat has played as big a part in caricature as did the collar of a famous statesman. Without his hat Kruger would be a mere nonentity. Shall this particular Kruger remain hatless? Never! Grabbing up one more lump of the pliable clay, Mr. De Bessell's fingers soon model it into the typical old "topper" of renown. Another second and it is reposing, somewhat jauntily perhaps, on the well-worn cranium. Kruger is all there. The entire operation has taken up 1min. 43 2-5sec. by Benson's chronograph.

Who has ever seen a picture of Kruger otherwise than depicting a very worried state of mind? Well, Mr. De Bessell shows us what Oom Paul would look like if he were ever persuaded to smile. The effect, however, is not particularly complimentary. Even though adorned with a smile, Kruger refuses to be beautiful. The model is now supposed to represent Kruger on hearing for the tenth time that De Wet has "slipped through."

Another movement or two of the artist's



MODELLING AN OLD WOMAN.

deft hands, and lo! we see Kruger as he will be when the sad but inevitable news arrives at last that "De Wet is captured."

The next operation of the clay shows that the venerable Boer is to be made good use of. His whiskers are whisked away; his hat decapitated and turned into an old woman's bonnet. The features are still Kruger's, but the change in accessories has transmogrified him into an old

woman in a state of intense grief. This presently changes to a different frame of mind, until a punch below the chin from the modeller's clenched fist produces a lugubrious effect on the old lady's features.

Next we are treated to another lightning production of a present-day celebrity. This is no less a personage than Li Hung Chang, who, with pig-tail, peacock's feathers and all, turns from a mass of clay to an excellent model of the wily Chinese statesman in the course of 1min. 25 3/4sec. A truly wonderful feat.

"John Bull and Jonathan," a tribute to the excellent feeling existing between the



SHE LAUGHS.



A PUNCH UNDER THE CHIN AND SHE WEEPS.



LI HUNG CHANG.

two nations, is tackled and finished in 2min. 45sec. It is a revelation to see Mr. De Bessell with both hands at work, each on a different face, at the same time!

Such an entertainment does not run for any length of time without meeting with some odd little experiences. I have referred to the hurling of the clay from Mr. De Bessell's hands on to the modelling slab. This has led to more than one little humorous episode, as the following anecdote proves—the victim might differ as to the point of the humour.

In Vienna last year the lightning modeller had begun as usual to hurl the clay upon the slab preparatory to forming a caricature. He stood about two yards away. He had barely begun to throw when the electric light throughout the theatre was accidentally turned

off. Thinking that it would be a good hit if, during the temporary darkness, he could get the caricature partly done, the modeller continued hurling the clay. Suddenly he heard an awful howl of agony. At the same



LI HUNG CHANG IS THROWN AWAY.

moment the electric light was switched on discovering the stage manager (who had rushed across the dark stage to see what had happened to the lights) endeavouring to remove from his features a huge lump of the clay, which, coming with full force from the modeller's hand, had struck him across the eyes, which were black for days afterwards.

[The writer desires to acknowledge the courtesy of Mr. Frank Glenister, the manager of the Pavilion, in enabling the accompanying photographs to be secured under difficult circumstances.—F. H.]



JOHN BULL AND JONATHAN—MODELLED SIMULTANEOUSLY, ONE WITH EACH HAND.