

BANGS JOHN KENDRICK

A HOUSE-BOAT ON THE
STYX

John Bangs
A House-Boat on the Styx

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=36362390

A House-Boat on the Styx:

Содержание

CHAPTER I: CHARON MAKES A DISCOVERY	4
CHAPTER II: A DISPUTED AUTHORSHIP	13
CHAPTER III: WASHINGTON GIVES A DINNER	21
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

John Kendrick Bangs

A House-Boat on the Styx

CHAPTER I: CHARON MAKES A DISCOVERY

Charon, the Ferryman of renown, was cruising slowly along the Styx one pleasant Friday morning not long ago, and as he paddled idly on he chuckled mildly to himself as he thought of the monopoly in ferriage which in the course of years he had managed to build up.

“It’s a great thing,” he said, with a smirk of satisfaction—“it’s a great thing to be the go-between between two states of being; to have the exclusive franchise to export and import shades from one state to the other, and withal to have had as clean a record as mine has been. Valuable as is my franchise, I never corrupted a public official in my life, and—”

Here Charon stopped his soliloquy and his boat simultaneously. As he rounded one of the many turns in the river a singular object met his gaze, and one, too, that filled him with misgiving. It was another craft, and that was a thing not to be tolerated. Had he, Charon, owned the exclusive right of way on the Styx all these years to have it disputed here in the

closing decade of the Nineteenth Century? Had not he dealt satisfactorily with all, whether it was in the line of ferriage or in the providing of boats for pleasure-trips up the river? Had he not received expressions of satisfaction, indeed, from the most exclusive families of Hades with the very select series of picnics he had given at Charon's Glen Island? No wonder, then, that the queer-looking boat that met his gaze, moored in a shady nook on the dark side of the river, filled him with dismay.

"Blow me for a landlubber if I like that!" he said, in a hardly audible whisper. "And shiver my timbers if I don't find out what she's there for. If anybody thinks he can run an opposition line to mine on this river he's mightily mistaken. If it comes to competition, I can carry shades for nothing and still quaff the B. & G. yellow-label benzine three times a day without experiencing a financial panic. I'll show 'em a thing or two if they attempt to rival me. And what a boat! It looks for all the world like a Florentine barn on a canal-boat."

Charon paddled up to the side of the craft, and, standing up in the middle of his boat, cried out,

"Ship ahoy!"

There was no answer, and the Ferryman hailed her again.

Receiving no response to his second call, he resolved to investigate for himself; so, fastening his own boat to the stern-post of the stranger, he clambered on board. If he was astonished as he sat in his ferry-boat, he was paralyzed when he cast his eye over the unwelcome vessel he had boarded. He stood for at least

two minutes rooted to the spot. His eye swept over a long, broad deck, the polish of which resembled that of a ball-room floor.

Amidships, running from three-quarters aft to three-quarters forward, stood a structure that in its lines resembled, as Charon had intimated, a barn, designed by an architect enamoured of Florentine simplicity; but in its construction the richest of woods had been used, and in its interior arrangement and adornment nothing more palatial could be conceived.

“What’s the blooming thing for?” said Charon, more dismayed than ever. “If they start another line with a craft like this, I’m very much afraid I’m done for after all. I wouldn’t take a boat like mine myself if there was a floating palace like this going the same way. I’ll have to see the Commissioners about this, and find out what it all means. I suppose it’ll cost me a pretty penny, too, confound them!”

A prey to these unhappy reflections, Charon investigated further, and the more he saw the less he liked it. He was about to encounter opposition, and an opposition which was apparently backed by persons of great wealth—perhaps the Commissioners themselves. It was a consoling thought that he had saved enough money in the course of his career to enable him to live in comfort all his days, but this was not really what Charon was after. He wished to acquire enough to retire and become one of the smart set. It had been done in that section of the universe which lay on the bright side of the Styx, why not, therefore, on the other, he asked.

“I’m pretty well connected even if I am a boatman,” he had been known to say. “With Chaos for a grandfather, and Erebus and Nox for parents, I’ve just as good blood in my veins as anybody in Hades. The Noxes are a mighty fine family, not as bright as the Days, but older; and we’re poor—that’s it, poor—and it’s money makes caste these days. If I had millions, and owned a railroad, they’d call me a yacht-owner. As I haven’t, I’m only a boatman. Bah! Wait and see! I’ll be giving swell functions myself some day, and these upstarts will be on their knees before me begging to be asked. Then I’ll get up a little aristocracy of my own, and I won’t let a soul into it whose name isn’t mentioned in the Grecian mythologies. Mention in Burke’s peerage and the Élite directories of America won’t admit anybody to Commodore Charon’s house unless there’s some other mighty good reason for it.”

Foreseeing an unhappy ending to all his hopes, the old man clambered sadly back into his ancient vessel and paddled off into the darkness. Some hours later, returning with a large company of new arrivals, while counting up the profits of the day Charon again caught sight of the new craft, and saw that it was brilliantly lighted and thronged with the most famous citizens of the Erebean country. Up in the bow was a spirit band discoursing music of the sweetest sort. Merry peals of laughter rang out over the dark waters of the Styx. The clink of glasses and the popping of corks punctuated the music with a frequency which would have delighted the soul of the most ardent lover of commas, all of

which so overpowered the grand master boatman of the Stygian Ferry Company that he dropped three oboli and an American dime, which he carried as a pocket-piece, overboard. This, of course, added to his woe; but it was forgotten in an instant, for some one on the new boat had turned a search-light directly upon Charon himself, and simultaneously hailed the master of the ferry-boat.

“Charon!” cried the shade in charge of the light. “Charon, ahoy!”

“Ahoy yourself!” returned the old man, paddling his craft close up to the stranger. “What do you want?”

“You,” said the shade. “The house committee want to see you right away.”

“What for?” asked Charon, cautiously.

“I’m sure I don’t know. I’m only a member of the club, and house committees never let mere members know anything about their plans. All I know is that you are wanted,” said the other.

“Who are the house committee?” queried the Ferryman.

“Sir Walter Raleigh, Cassius, Demosthenes, Blackstone, Doctor Johnson, and Confucius,” replied the shade.

“Tell ’em I’ll be back in an hour,” said Charon, pushing off.

“I’ve got a cargo of shades on board consigned to various places up the river. I’ve promised to get ’em all through to-night, but I’ll put on a couple of extra paddles—two of the new arrivals are working their passage this trip—and it won’t take as long as usual. What boat is this, anyhow?”

“The *Nancy Nox*, of Erebus.”

“Thunder!” cried Charon, as he pushed off and proceeded on his way up the river. “Named after my mother! Perhaps it’ll come out all right yet.”

More hopeful of mood, Charon, aided by the two dead-head passengers, soon got through with his evening’s work, and in less than an hour was back seeking admittance, as requested, to the company of Sir Walter Raleigh and his fellow-members on the house committee. He was received by these worthies with considerable effusiveness, considering his position in society, and it warmed the cockles of his aged heart to note that Sir Walter, who had always been rather distant to him since he had carelessly upset that worthy and Queen Elizabeth in the middle of the Styx far back in the last century, permitted him to shake three fingers of his left hand when he entered the committee-room.

“How do you do, Charon?” said Sir Walter, affably. “We are very glad to see you.”

“Thank you, kindly, Sir Walter,” said the boatman. “I’m glad to hear those words, your honor, for I’ve been feeling very bad since I had the misfortune to drop your Excellency and her Majesty overboard. I never knew how it happened, sir, but happen it did, and but for her Majesty’s kind assistance it might have been the worse for us. Eh, Sir Walter?”

The knight shook his head menacingly at Charon. Hitherto he had managed to keep it a secret that the Queen had rescued him from drowning upon that occasion by swimming ashore herself

first and throwing Sir Walter her ruff as soon as she landed, which he had used as a life-preserver.

“Sh!” he said, *sotto voce*. “Don’t say anything about that, my man.”

“Very well, Sir Walter, I won’t,” said the boatman; but he made a mental note of the knight’s agitation, and perceived a means by which that illustrious courtier could be made useful to him in his scheming for social advancement.

“I understood you had something to say to me,” said Charon, after he had greeted the others.

“We have,” said Sir Walter. “We want you to assume command of this boat.”

The old fellow’s eyes lighted up with pleasure.

“You want a captain, eh?” he said.

“No,” said Confucius, tapping the table with a diamond-studded chop-stick. “No. We want a—er—what the deuce is it they call the functionary, Cassius?”

“Senator, I think,” said Cassius.

Demosthenes gave a loud laugh.

“Your mind is still running on Senatorships, my dear Cassius.

That is quite evident,” he said. “This is not one of them, however. The title we wish Charon to assume is neither Captain nor Senator; it is Janitor.”

“What’s that?” asked Charon, a little disappointed. “What does a Janitor have to do?”

“He has to look after things in the house,” explained Sir

Walter. "He's a sort of proprietor by proxy. We want you to take charge of the house, and see to it that the boat is kept shipshape."

"Where is the house?" queried the astonished boatman.

"This is it," said Sir Walter. "This is the house, and the boat too. In fact, it is a house-boat."

"Then it isn't a new-fangled scheme to drive me out of business?" said Charon, warily.

"Not at all," returned Sir Walter. "It's a new-fangled scheme to set you up in business. We'll pay you a large salary, and there won't be much to do. You are the best man for the place, because, while you don't know much about houses, you do know a great deal about boats, and the boat part is the most important part of a house-boat. If the boat sinks, you can't save the house; but if the house burns, you may be able to save the boat. See?"

"I think I do, sir," said Charon.

"Another reason why we want to employ you for Janitor," said Confucius, "is that our club wants to be in direct communication with both sides of the Styx; and we think you as Janitor would be able to make better arrangements for transportation with yourself as boatman, than some other man as Janitor could make with you."

"Spoken like a sage," said Demosthenes.

"Furthermore," said Cassius, "occasionally we shall want to have this boat towed up or down the river, according to the house committee's pleasure, and we think it would be well to have a Janitor who has some influence with the towing company which

you represent.”

“Can’t this boat be moved without towing?” asked Charon.

“No,” said Cassius.

“And I’m the only man who can tow it, eh?”

“You are,” said Blackstone. “Worse luck.”

“And you want me to be Janitor on a salary of what?”

“A hundred oboli a month,” said Sir Walter, uneasily.

“Very well, gentlemen,” said Charon. “I’ll accept the office on a salary of two hundred oboli a month, with Saturdays off.”

The committee went into executive session for five minutes, and on their return informed Charon that in behalf of the Associated Shades they accepted his offer.

“In behalf of what?” the old man asked.

“The Associated Shades,” said Sir Walter. “The swellest organization in Hades, whose new house-boat you are now on board of. When shall you be ready to begin work?”

“Right away,” said Charon, noting by the clock that it was the hour of midnight. “I’ll start in right away, and as it is now Saturday morning, I’ll begin by taking my day off.”

CHAPTER II: A DISPUTED AUTHORSHIP

“How are you, Charon?” said Shakespeare, as the Janitor assisted him on board. “Any one here to-night?”

“Yes, sir,” said Charon. “Lord Bacon is up in the library, and Doctor Johnson is down in the billiard-room, playing pool with Nero.”

“Ha-ha!” laughed Shakespeare. “Pool, eh? Does Nero play pool?”

“Not as well as he does the fiddle, sir,” said the Janitor, with a twinkle in his eye.

Shakespeare entered the house and tossed up an obolus. “Heads—Bacon; tails—pool with Nero and Johnson,” he said.

The coin came down with heads up, and Shakespeare went into the pool-room, just to show the Fates that he didn’t care a tuppence for their verdict as registered through the obolus.

It was a peculiar custom of Shakespeare’s to toss up a coin to decide questions of little consequence, and then do the thing the coin decided he should not do. It showed, in Shakespeare’s estimation, his entire independence of those dull persons who supposed that in them was centred the destiny of all mankind.

The Fates, however, only smiled at these little acts of rebellion, and it was common gossip in Erebus that one of the trio had told

the Furies that they had observed Shakespeare's tendency to kick over the traces, and always acted accordingly. They never let the coin fall so as to decide a question the way they wanted it, so that unwittingly the great dramatist did their will after all. It was a part of their plan that upon this occasion Shakespeare should play pool with Doctor Johnson and the Emperor Nero, and hence it was that the coin bade him repair to the library and chat with Lord Bacon.

"Hullo, William," said the Doctor, pocketing three balls on the break. "How's our little Swanlet of Avon this afternoon?"

"Worn out," Shakespeare replied. "I've been hard at work on a play this morning, and I'm tired."

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," said Nero, grinning broadly.

"You are a bright spirit," said Shakespeare, with a sigh. "I wish I had thought to work you up into a tragedy."

"I've often wondered why you didn't," said Doctor Johnson. "He'd have made a superb tragedy, Nero would. I don't believe there was any kind of a crime he left uncommitted. Was there, Emperor?"

"Yes. I never wrote an English dictionary," returned the Emperor, dryly. "I've murdered everything but English, though."

"I could have made a fine tragedy out of you," said Shakespeare. "Just think what a dreadful climax for a tragedy it would be, Johnson, to have Nero, as the curtain fell, playing a violin solo."

“Pretty good,” returned the Doctor. “But what’s the use of killing off your audience that way? It’s better business to let ’em live, I say. Suppose Nero gave a London audience that little musicale he provided at Queen Elizabeth’s Wednesday night. How many purely mortal beings, do you think, would have come out alive?”

“Not one,” said Shakespeare. “I was mighty glad that night that we were an immortal band. If it had been possible to kill us we’d have died then and there.”

“That’s all right,” said Nero, with a significant shake of his head. “As my friend Bacon makes Ingo say, ‘Beware, my lord, of jealousy.’ You never could play a garden hose, much less a fiddle.”

“What do you mean my attributing those words to Bacon?” demanded Shakespeare, getting red in the face.

“Oh, come now, William,” remonstrated Nero. “It’s all right to pull the wool over the eyes of the mortals. That’s what they’re there for; but as for us—we’re all in the secret here. What’s the use of putting on nonsense with us?”

“We’ll see in a minute what the use is,” retorted the Avonian.

“We’ll have Bacon down here.” Here he touched an electric button, and Charon came in answer.

“Charon, bring Doctor Johnson the usual glass of ale. Get some ice for the Emperor, and ask Lord Bacon to step down here a minute.”

“I don’t want any ice,” said Nero.

“Not now,” retorted Shakespeare, “but you will in a few minutes. When we have finished with you, you’ll want an iceberg. I’m getting tired of this idiotic talk about not having written my own works. There’s one thing about Nero’s music that I’ve never said, because I haven’t wanted to hurt his feelings, but since he has chosen to cast aspersions upon my honesty I haven’t any hesitation in saying it now. I believe it was one of his fiddlings that sent Nature into convulsions and caused the destruction of Pompeii—so there! Put that on your music rack and fiddle it, my little Emperor.”

Nero’s face grew purple with anger, and if Shakespeare had been anything but a shade he would have fared ill, for the enraged Roman, poising his cue on high as though it were a lance, hurled it at the impertinent dramatist with all his strength, and with such accuracy of aim withal that it pierced the spot beneath which in life the heart of Shakespeare used to beat.

“Good shot,” said Doctor Johnson, nonchalantly. “If you had been a mortal, William, it would have been the end of you.”

“You can’t kill me,” said Shakespeare, shrugging his shoulders. “I know seven dozen actors in the United States who are trying to do it, but they can’t. I wish they’d try to kill a critic once in a while instead of me, though,” he added. “I went over to Boston one night last week, and, unknown to anybody, I waylaid a fellow who was to play Hamlet that night. I drugged him, and went to the theatre and played the part myself. It was the coldest house you ever saw in your life. When the audience did applaud,

it sounded like an ice-man chopping up ice with a small pick. Several times I looked up at the galleries to see if there were not icicles growing on them, it was so cold. Well, I did the best I could with the part, and next morning watched curiously for the criticisms.”

“Favorable?” asked the Doctor.

“They all dismissed me with a line,” said the dramatist. “Said my conception of the part was not Shakespearian. And that’s criticism!”

“No,” said the shade of Emerson, which had strolled in while Shakespeare was talking, “that isn’t criticism; that’s Boston.”

“Who discovered Boston, anyhow?” asked Doctor Johnson.

“It wasn’t Columbus, was it?”

“Oh no,” said Emerson. “Old Governor Winthrop is to blame for that. When he settled at Charlestown he saw the old Indian town of Shawmut across the Charles.”

“And Shawmut was the Boston microbe, was it?” asked Johnson.

“Yes,” said Emerson.

“Spelt with a P, I suppose?” said Shakespeare. “P-S-H-A-W, Pshaw, M-U-T, mut, Pshawmut, so called because the inhabitants are always muttering pshaw. Eh?”

“Pretty good,” said Johnson. “I wish I’d said that.”

“Well, tell Boswell,” said Shakespeare. “He’ll make you say it, and it’ll be all the same in a hundred years.”

Lord Bacon, accompanied by Charon and the ice for Nero

and the ale for Doctor Johnson, appeared as Shakespeare spoke.

The philosopher bowed stiffly at Doctor Johnson, as though he hardly approved of him, extended his left hand to Shakespeare, and stared coldly at Nero.

“Did you send for me, William?” he asked, languidly.

“I did,” said Shakespeare. “I sent for you because this imperial violinist here says that you wrote *Othello*.”

“What nonsense,” said Bacon. “The only plays of yours I wrote were *Ham*—”

“Sh!” said Shakespeare, shaking his head madly. “Hush. Nobody’s said anything about that. This is purely a discussion of *Othello*.”

“The fiddling ex-Emperor Nero,” said Bacon, loudly enough to be heard all about the room, “is mistaken when he attributes *Othello* to me.”

“Aha, Master Nero!” cried Shakespeare triumphantly. “What did I tell you?”

“Then I erred, that is all,” said Nero. “And I apologize. But really, my Lord,” he added, addressing Bacon, “I fancied I detected your fine Italian hand in that.”

“No. I had nothing to do with the *Othello*,” said Bacon. “I never really knew who wrote it.”

“Never mind about that,” whispered Shakespeare. “You’ve said enough.”

“That’s good too,” said Nero, with a chuckle. “Shakespeare here claims it as his own.”

Bacon smiled and nodded approvingly at the blushing Avonian.

“Will always was having his little joke,” he said. “Eh, Will? How we fooled ’em on *Hamlet*, eh, my boy? Ha-ha-ha! It was the greatest joke of the century.”

“Well, the laugh is on you,” said Doctor Johnson. “If you wrote *Hamlet* and didn’t have the sense to acknowledge it, you present to my mind a closer resemblance to Simple Simon than to Socrates. For my part, I don’t believe you did write it, and I do believe that Shakespeare did. I can tell that by the spelling in the original edition.”

“Shakespeare was my stenographer, gentlemen,” said Lord Bacon. “If you want to know the whole truth, he did write *Hamlet*, literally. But it was at my dictation.”

“I deny it,” said Shakespeare. “I admit you gave me a suggestion now and then so as to keep it dull and heavy in spots, so that it would seem more like a real tragedy than a comedy punctuated with deaths, but beyond that you had nothing to do with it.”

“I side with Shakespeare,” put in Emerson. “I’ve seen his autographs, and no sane person would employ a man who wrote such a villanously bad hand as an amanuensis. It’s no use, Bacon, we know a thing or two. I’m a New-Englander, I am.”

“Well,” said Bacon, shrugging his shoulders as though the results of the controversy were immaterial to him, “have it so if you please. There isn’t any money in Shakespeare these days, so

what's the use of quarrelling? I wrote *Hamlet*, and Shakespeare knows it. Others know it. Ah, here comes Sir Walter Raleigh.

We'll leave it to him. He was cognizant of the whole affair."

"I leave it to nobody," said Shakespeare, sulkily.

"What's the trouble?" asked Raleigh, sauntering up and taking a chair under the cue-rack. "Talking politics?"

"Not we," said Bacon. "It's the old question about the authorship of *Hamlet*. Will, as usual, claims it for himself. He'll be saying he wrote Genesis next."

"Well, what if he does?" laughed Raleigh. "We all know Will and his droll ways."

"No doubt," put in Nero. "But the question of *Hamlet* always excites him so that we'd like to have it settled once and for all as to who wrote it. Bacon says you know."

"I do," said Raleigh.

"Then settle it once and for all," said Bacon. "I'm rather tired of the discussion myself."

"Shall I tell 'em, Shakespeare?" asked Raleigh.

"It's immaterial to me," said Shakespeare, airily. "If you wish—only tell the truth."

"Very well," said Raleigh, lighting a cigar. "I'm not ashamed of it. I wrote the thing myself."

There was a roar of laughter which, when it subsided, found Shakespeare rapidly disappearing through the door, while all the others in the room ordered various beverages at the expense of Lord Bacon.

CHAPTER III: WASHINGTON GIVES A DINNER

It was Washington's Birthday, and the gentleman who had the pleasure of being Father of his Country decided to celebrate it at the Associated Shades' floating palace on the Styx, as the *Elysium Weekly Gossip*, "a Journal of Society," called it, by giving a dinner to a select number of friends. Among the invited guests were Baron Munchausen, Doctor Johnson, Confucius, Napoleon Bonaparte, Diogenes, and Ptolemy. Boswell was also present, but not as a guest. He had a table off to one side all to himself, and upon it there were no china plates, silver spoons, knives, forks, and dishes of fruit, but pads, pens, and ink in great quantity. It was evident that Boswell's reportorial duties did not end with his labors in the mundane sphere.

The dinner was set down to begin at seven o'clock, so that the guests, as was proper, sauntered slowly in between that hour and eight. The menu was particularly choice, the shades of countless canvas-back ducks, terrapin, and sheep having been called into requisition, and cooked by no less a person than Brillat-Savarin, in the hottest oven he could find in the famous cooking establishment superintended by the government.

Washington was on hand early, sampling the olives and the celery and the wines, and giving to Charon final instructions as

to the manner in which he wished things served.

The first guest to arrive was Confucius, and after him came Diogenes, the latter in great excitement over having discovered a comparatively honest man, whose name, however, he had not been able to ascertain, though he was under the impression that it was something like Burpin, or Turpin, he said.

At eight the brilliant company was arranged comfortably about the board. An orchestra of five, under the leadership of Mozart, discoursed sweet music behind a screen, and the feast of reason and flow of soul began.

"This is a great day," said Doctor Johnson, assisting himself copiously to the olives.

"Yes," said Columbus, who was also a guest—"yes, it is a great day, but it isn't a marker to a little day in October I wot of."

"Still sore on that point?" queried Confucius, trying the edge of his knife on the shade of a salted almond.

"Oh no," said Columbus, calmly. "I don't feel jealous of Washington. He is the Father of his Country and I am not. I only discovered the orphan. I knew the country before it had a father or a mother. There wasn't anybody who was willing to be even a sister to it when I knew it. But G. W. here took it in hand, groomed it down, spanked it when it needed it, and started it off on the career which has made it worth while for me to let my name be known in connection with it. Why should I be jealous of him?"

"I am sure I don't know why anybody anywhere should be

jealous of anybody else anyhow,” said Diogenes. “I never was and I never expect to be. Jealousy is a quality that is utterly foreign to the nature of an honest man. Take my own case, for instance. When I was what they call alive, how did I live?”

“I don’t know,” said Doctor Johnson, turning his head as he spoke so that Boswell could not fail to hear. “I wasn’t there.”

Boswell nodded approvingly, chuckled slightly, and put the Doctor’s remark down for publication in *The Gossip*.

“You’re doubtless right, there,” retorted Diogenes. “What you don’t know would fill a circulating library. Well—I lived in a tub.

Now, if I believed in envy, I suppose you think I’d be envious of people who live in brownstone fronts with back yards and mortgages, eh?”

“I’d rather live under a mortgage than in a tub,” said Bonaparte, contemptuously.

“I know you would,” said Diogenes. “Mortgages never bothered you—but I wouldn’t. In the first place, my tub was warm. I never saw a house with a brownstone front that was, except in summer, and then the owner cursed it because it was so.

My tub had no plumbing in it to get out of order. It hadn’t any flights of stairs in it that had to be climbed after dinner, or late at night when I came home from the club. It had no front door with a wandering key-hole calculated to elude the key ninety-nine times out of every hundred efforts to bring the two together and reconcile their differences, in order that their owner may get into his own house late at night. It wasn’t chained down to any

particular neighborhood, as are most brownstone fronts. If the neighborhood ran down, I could move my tub off into a better neighborhood, and it never lost value through the deterioration of its location. I never had to pay taxes on it, and no burglar was ever so hard up that he thought of breaking into my habitation to rob me. So why should I be jealous of the brownstone-house dwellers? I am a philosopher, gentlemen. I tell you, philosophy is the thief of jealousy, and I had the good-luck to find it out early in life.”

“There is much in what you say,” said Confucius. “But there’s another side to the matter. If a man is an aristocrat by nature, as I was, his neighborhood never could run down. Wherever he lived would be the swell section, so that really your last argument isn’t worth a stewed icicle.”

“Stewed icicles are pretty good, though,” said Baron Munchausen, with an ecstatic smack of his lips. “I’ve eaten them many a time in the polar regions.”

“I have no doubt of it,” put in Doctor Johnson. “You’ve eaten fried pyramids in Africa, too, haven’t you?”

“Only once,” said the Baron, calmly. “And I can’t say I enjoyed them. They are rather heavy for the digestion.”

“That’s so,” said Ptolemy. “I’ve had experience with pyramids myself.”

“You never ate one, did you, Ptolemy?” queried Bonaparte.

“Not raw,” said Ptolemy, with a chuckle. “Though I’ve been tempted many a time to call for a second joint of the Sphinx.”

There was a laugh at this, in which all but Baron Munchausen joined.

“I think it is too bad,” said the Baron, as the laughter subsided —“I think it is very much too bad that you shades have brought mundane prejudice with you into this sphere. Just because some people with finite minds profess to disbelieve my stories, you think it well to be sceptical yourselves. I don’t care, however, whether you believe me or not. The fact remains that I have eaten one fried pyramid and countless stewed icicles, and the stewed icicles were finer than any diamond-back rat Confucius ever had served at a state banquet.”

“Where’s Shakespeare to-night?” asked Confucius, seeing that the Baron was beginning to lose his temper, and wishing to avoid trouble by changing the subject. “Wasn’t he invited, General?”

“Yes,” said Washington, “he was invited, but he couldn’t come. He had to go over the river to consult with an autograph syndicate they’ve formed in New York. You know, his autographs sell for about one thousand dollars apiece, and they’re trying to get up a scheme whereby he shall contribute an autograph a week to the syndicate, to be sold to the public.

It seems like a rich scheme, but there’s one thing in the way. Posthumous autographs haven’t very much of a market, because the mortals can’t be made to believe that they are genuine; but the syndicate has got a man at work trying to get over that. These Yankees are a mighty inventive lot, and they think perhaps the scheme can be worked. The Yankee *is* an inventive genius.”

“It was a Yankee invented that tale about your not being able to prevaricate, wasn’t it, George?” asked Diogenes.

Washington smiled acquiescence, and Doctor Johnson returned to Shakespeare.

“I’d rather have a morning-glory vine than one of Shakespeare’s autographs,” said he. “They are far prettier, and quite as legible.”

“Mortals wouldn’t,” said Bonaparte.

“What fools they be!” chuckled Johnson.

At this point the canvas-back ducks were served, one whole shade of a bird for each guest.

“Fall to, gentlemen,” said Washington, gazing hungrily at his bird. “When canvas-back ducks are on the table conversation is not required of any one.”

“It is fortunate for us that we have so considerate a host,” said Confucius, unfastening his robe and preparing to do justice to the fare set before him. “I have dined often, but never before with one who was willing to let me eat a bird like this in silence.

Washington, here’s to you. May your life be chequered with birthdays, and may ours be equally well supplied with feasts like this at your expense!”

The toast was drained, and the diners fell to as requested.

“They’re great, aren’t they?” whispered Bonaparte to Munchausen.

“Well, rather,” returned the Baron. “I don’t see why the mortals don’t erect a statue to the canvas-back.”

“Did anybody at this board ever have as much canvas-back duck as he could eat?” asked Doctor Johnson.

“Yes,” said the Baron. “I did. Once.”

“Oh, you!” sneered Ptolemy. “You’ve had everything.”

“Except the mumps,” retorted Munchausen. “But, honestly, I did once have as much canvas-back duck as I could eat.”

“It must have cost you a million,” said Bonaparte. “But even then they’d be cheap, especially to a man like yourself who could perform miracles. If I could have performed miracles with the ease which was so characteristic of all your efforts, I’d never have died at St. Helena.”

“What’s the odds where you died?” said Doctor Johnson. “If it hadn’t been at St. Helena it would have been somewhere else, and you’d have found death as stuffy in one place as in another.”

“Don’t let’s talk of death,” said Washington. “I am sure the Baron’s tale of how he came to have enough canvas-back is more diverting.”

“I’ve no doubt it is more perverting,” said Johnson.

“It happened this way,” said Munchausen. “I was out for sport, and I got it. I was alone, my servant having fallen ill, which was unfortunate, since I had always left the filling of my cartridge-box to him, and underestimated its capacity. I started at six in the morning, and, not having hunted for several months, was not in very good form, so, no game appearing for a time, I took a few practice shots, trying to snip off the slender tops of the pine-trees that I encountered with my bullets, succeeding tolerably well for

one who was a little rusty, bringing down ninety-nine out of the first one hundred and one, and missing the remaining two by such a close margin that they swayed to and fro as though fanned by a slight breeze. As I fired my one hundred and first shot what should I see before me but a flock of these delicate birds floating upon the placid waters of the bay!"

"Was this the Bay of Biscay, Baron?" queried Columbus, with a covert smile at Ptolemy.

"I counted them," said the Baron, ignoring the question, "and there were just sixty-eight. 'Here's a chance for the record, Baron,' said I to myself, and then I made ready to shoot them.

Imagine my dismay, gentlemen, when I discovered that while I had plenty of powder left I had used up all my bullets. Now, as you may imagine, to a man with no bullets at hand, the sight of sixty-eight fat canvas-backs is hardly encouraging, but I was resolved to have every one of those birds; the question was, how shall I do it? I never can think on water, so I paddled quietly ashore and began to reflect. As I lay there deep in thought, I saw lying upon the beach before me a superb oyster, and as reflection makes me hungry I seized upon the bivalve and swallowed him.

As he went down something stuck in my throat, and, extricating it, what should it prove to be but a pearl of surpassing beauty.

My first thought was to be content with my day's find. A pearl worth thousands surely was enough to satisfy the most ardent lover of sport; but on looking up I saw those ducks still paddling contentedly about, and I could not bring myself to give them up.

Suddenly the idea came, the pearl is as large as a bullet, and fully as round. Why not use it? Then, as thoughts come to me in shoals, I next reflected, 'Ah—but this is only one bullet as against sixty-eight birds:' immediately a third thought came, 'why not shoot them all with a single bullet? It is possible, though not probable.' I snatched out a pad of paper and a pencil, made a rapid calculation based on the doctrine of chances, and proved to my own satisfaction that at some time or another within the following two weeks those birds would doubtless be sitting in a straight line and paddling about, Indian file, for an instant. I resolved to await that instant. I loaded my gun with the pearl and a sufficient quantity of powder to send the charge through every one of the ducks if, perchance, the first duck were properly hit. To pass over wearisome details, let me say that it happened just as I expected. I had one week and six days to wait, but finally the critical moment came. It was at midnight, but fortunately the moon was at the full, and I could see as plainly as though it had been day. The moment the ducks were in line I aimed and fired. They every one squawked, turned over, and died. My pearl had pierced the whole sixty-eight."

Boswell blushed.

"Ahem!" said Doctor Johnson. "It was a pity to lose the pearl."

"That," said Munchausen, "was the most interesting part of the story. I had made a second calculation in order to save the pearl. I deduced the amount of powder necessary to send the

gem through sixty-seven and a half birds, and my deduction was strictly accurate. It fulfilled its mission of death on sixty-seven and was found buried in the heart of the sixty-eighth, a trifle discolored, but still a pearl, and worth a king's ransom."

Napoleon gave a derisive laugh, and the other guests sat with incredulity depicted upon every line of their faces.

"Do you believe that story yourself, Baron?" asked Confucius.

"Why not?" asked the Baron. "Is there anything improbable in it? Why should you disbelieve it? Look at our friend Washington here. Is there any one here who knows more about truth than he does? He doesn't disbelieve it. He's the only man at this table who treats me like a man of honor."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.