

BANGS JOHN KENDRICK

COFFEE AND REPARTEE

John Bangs
Coffee and Repartee

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John Kendrick Bangs

Coffee and Repartee

I

The guests at Mrs. Smithers's high-class boarding-house for gentlemen had assembled as usual for breakfast, and in a few moments Mary, the dainty waitress, entered with the steaming coffee, the mush, and the rolls.

The School-master, who, by-the-way, was suspected by Mrs. Smithers of having intentions, and who for that reason occupied the chair nearest the lady's heart, folded up the morning paper, and placing it under him so that no one else could get it, observed, quite genially for him, "It was very wet yesterday."

"I didn't find it so," observed a young man seated half-way down the table, who was by common consent called the Idiot, because of his "views." "In fact, I was very dry. Curious thing, I'm always dry on rainy days. I am one of the kind of men who know that it is the part of wisdom to stay in when it rains, or to carry an umbrella when it is not possible to stay at home, or, having no home, like ourselves, to remain cooped up in stalls, or stalled up in coops, as you may prefer."

"You carried an umbrella, then?" queried the landlady, ignoring the Idiot's shaft at the size of her "elegant and airy apartments" with an ease born of experience.

"Yes, madame," returned the Idiot, quite unconscious of what was coming.

"Whose?" queried the lady, a sarcastic smile playing about her lips.

"That I cannot say, Mrs. Smithers," replied the Idiot, serenely, "but it is the one you usually carry."

"Your insinuation, sir," said the School-master, coming to the landlady's rescue, "is an unworthy one. The umbrella in question is mine. It has been in my possession for five years."

"Then," replied the Idiot, unabashed, "it is time you returned it. Don't you think men's morals are rather lax in this matter of umbrellas, Mr. Whitechoker?" he added, turning from the School-master, who began to show signs of irritation.

"Very," said the Minister, running his finger about his neck to make the collar which had been sent home from the laundry by mistake set more easily—"very lax. At the last Conference I attended, some person, forgetting his high office as a minister in the Church, walked off with my umbrella without so much as a thank you; and it was embarrassing too, because the rain was coming down in bucketfuls."

"What did you do?" asked the landlady, sympathetically. She liked Mr. Whitechoker's sermons, and, beyond this, he was a more profitable boarder than any of the others, remaining home to luncheon every day and having to pay extra therefor.

"There was but one thing left for me to do. I took the bishop's umbrella," said Mr. Whitechoker, blushing slightly.

"But you returned it, of course?" said the Idiot.

"I intended to, but I left it on the train on my way back home the next day," replied the clergyman, visibly embarrassed by the Idiot's unexpected cross-examination.

"It's the same way with books," put in the Bibliomaniac, an unfortunate being whose love of rare first editions had brought him down from affluence to boarding. "Many a man who wouldn't steal a dollar would run off with a book. I had a friend once who had a rare copy of *Through Africa by Daylight*. It was a beautiful book. Only twenty-five copies printed. The margins of the pages were four inches wide, and the title-page was rubricated; the frontispiece was colored by hand, and the seventeenth page had one of the most amusing typographical errors on it—"

"Was there any reading-matter in the book?" queried the Idiot, blowing softly on a hot potato that was nicely balanced on the end of his fork.

"Yes, a little; but it didn't amount to much," returned the Bibliomaniac. "But, you know, it isn't as reading-matter that men like myself care for books. We have a higher notion than that. It is as a specimen of book-making that we admire a chaste bit of literature like *Through Africa by Daylight*. But, as I was saying, my friend had this book, and he'd extra-illustrated it. He had pictures from all parts of the world in it, and the book had grown from a volume of one hundred pages to four volumes of two hundred pages each."

"And it was stolen by a highly honorable friend, I suppose?" queried the Idiot.

"Yes, it was stolen—and my friend never knew by whom," said the Bibliomaniac.

"What?" asked the Idiot, in much surprise. "Did you never confess?"

It was very fortunate for the Idiot that the buckwheat cakes were brought on at this moment. Had there not been some diversion of that kind, it is certain that the Bibliomaniac would have assaulted him.

"It is very kind of Mrs. Smithers, I think," said the School-master, "to provide us with such delightful cakes as these free of charge."

"Yes," said the Idiot, helping himself to six cakes. "Very kind indeed, although I must say they are extremely economical from an architectural point of view—which is to say, they are rather fuller of pores than of buckwheat. I wonder why it is," he continued, possibly to avert the landlady's retaliatory comments—"I wonder why it is that porous plasters and buckwheat cakes are so similar in appearance?"

"And so widely different in their respective effects on the system," put in a genial old gentleman who occasionally imbibed, seated next to the Idiot.

"I fail to see the similarity between a buckwheat cake and a porous plaster," said the School-master, resolved, if possible, to embarrass the Idiot.

"You don't, eh?" replied the latter. "Then it is very plain, sir, that you have never eaten a porous plaster."

To this the School-master could find no reasonable reply, and he took refuge in silence. Mr. Whitechoker tried to look severe; the gentleman who occasionally imbibed smiled all over; the Bibliomaniac ignored the remark entirely, not having as yet forgiven the Idiot for his gross insinuation regarding his friend's *édition de luxe* of *Through Africa by Daylight*; Mary, the maid, who greatly admired the Idiot, not so much for his idiocy as for the aristocratic manner in which he carried himself, and the truly striking striped shirts he wore, left the room in a convulsion of laughter that so alarmed the cook below-stairs that the next platterful of cakes were more like tin plates than cakes; and as for Mrs. Smithers, that worthy woman was speechless with wrath. But she was not paralyzed apparently, for reaching down into her pocket she brought forth a small piece of paper, on which was written in detail the "account due" of the Idiot.

"I'd like to have this settled, sir," she said, with some asperity.

"Certainly, my dear madame," replied the Idiot, unabashed—"certainly. Can you change a check for a hundred?"

No, Mrs. Smithers could not.

"Then I shall have to put off paying the account until this evening," said the Idiot. "But," he added, with a glance at the amount of the bill, "are you related to Governor McKinley, Mrs. Smithers?"

"I am not," she returned, sharply. "My mother was a Partington."

"I only asked," said the Idiot, apologetically, "because I am very much interested in the subject of heredity, and you may not know it, but you and he have each a marked tendency towards high-tariff bills."

And before Mrs. Smithers could think of anything to say, the Idiot was on his way down town to help his employer lose money on Wall Street.

II

"Do you know, I sometimes think—" began the Idiot, opening and shutting the silver cover of his watch several times with a snap, with the probable, and not altogether laudable, purpose of calling his landlady's attention to the fact—of which she was already painfully aware—that breakfast was fifteen minutes late.

"Do you, really?" interrupted the School-master, looking up from his book with an air of mock surprise. "I am sure I never should have suspected it."

"Indeed?" returned the Idiot, undisturbed by this reflection upon his intellect. "I don't really know whether that is due to your generally unsuspecting nature, or to your shortcomings as a mind-reader."

"There are some minds," put in the landlady at this point, "that are so small that it would certainly ruin the eyes to read them."

"I have seen many such," observed the Idiot, suavely. "Even our friend the Bibliomaniac at times has seemed to me to be very absent-minded. And that reminds me, Doctor," he continued, addressing himself to the medical boarder. "What is the cause of absent-mindedness?"

"That," returned the Doctor, ponderously, "is a very large question. Absent-mindedness, generally speaking, is the result of the projection of the intellect into surroundings other than those which for want of a better term I might call the corporeally immediate."

"So I have understood," said the Idiot, approvingly. "And is absent-mindedness acquired or inherent?"

Here the Idiot appropriated the roll of his neighbor.

"That depends largely upon the case," replied the Doctor, nervously. "Some are born absent-minded, some achieve absent-mindedness, and some have absent-mindedness thrust upon them."

"As illustrations of which we might take, for instance, I suppose," said the Idiot, "the born idiot, the borrower, and the man who is knocked silly by the pole of a truck on Broadway."

"Precisely," replied the Doctor, glad to get out of the discussion so easily. He was a very young doctor, and not always sure of himself.

"Or," put in the School-master, "to condense our illustrations, if the Idiot would kindly go out upon Broadway and encounter the truck, we should find the three combined in him."

The landlady here laughed quite heartily, and handed the School-master an extra strong cup of coffee.

"There is a great deal in what you say," said the Idiot, without a tremor. "There are very few scientific phenomena that cannot be demonstrated in one way or another by my poor self. It is the exception always that proves the rule, and in my case you find a consistent converse exemplification of all three branches of absent-mindedness."

"He talks well," said the Bibliomaniac, *sotto voce*, to the Minister.

"Yes, especially when he gets hold of large words. I really believe he reads," replied Mr. Whitechoker.

"I know he does," said the School-master, who had overheard. "I saw him reading Webster's Dictionary last night. I have noticed, however, that generally his vocabulary is largely confined to words that come between the letters A and F, which shows that as yet he has not dipped very deeply into the book."

"What are you murmuring about?" queried the Idiot, noting the lowered tone of those on the other side of the table.

"We were conversing—ahem! about—" began the Minister, with a despairing glance at the Bibliomaniac.

"Let me say it," interrupted the Bibliomaniac. "You aren't used to prevarication, and that is what is demanded at this time. We were talking about—ah—about—er—"

"Tut! tut!" ejaculated the School-master. "We were only saying we thought the—er—the—that the—"

"What *are* the first symptoms of insanity, Doctor?" observed the Idiot, with a look of wonder at the three shuffling boarders opposite him, and turning anxiously to the physician.

"I wish you wouldn't talk shop," retorted the Doctor, angrily. Insanity was one of his weak points.

"It's a beastly habit," said the School-master, much relieved at this turn of the conversation.

"Well, perhaps you are right," returned the Idiot. "People do, as a rule, prefer to talk of things they know something about, and I don't blame you, Doctor, for wanting to keep out of a medical discussion. I only asked my last question because the behavior of the Bibliomaniac and Mr. Whitechoker and the School-master for some time past has worried me, and I didn't know but what you might work up a nice little practice among us. It might not pay, but you'd find the experience valuable, and I think unique."

"It is a fine thing to have a doctor right in the house," said Mr. Whitechoker, kindly, fearing that the Doctor's manifest indignation might get the better of him.

"That," returned the Idiot, "is an assertion, Mr. Whitechoker, that is both true and untrue. There are times when a physician is an ornament to a boarding-house; times when he is not. For instance, on Wednesday morning if it had not been for the surgical skill of our friend here, our good landlady could never have managed properly to distribute the late autumn chicken we found upon the menu. Tally one for the affirmative. On the other hand, I must confess to considerable loss of appetite when I see the Doctor rolling his bread up into little pills, or measuring the vinegar he puts on his salad by means of a glass dropper, and taking the temperature of his coffee with his pocket thermometer. Nor do I like—and I should not have mentioned it save by way of illustrating my position in regard to Mr. Whitechoker's assertion—nor do I like the cold, eager glitter in the Doctor's eyes as he watches me consuming, with some difficulty, I admit, the cold pastry we have served up to us on Saturday mornings under the wholly transparent *alias* of 'Hot Bread.' I may have very bad taste, but, in my humble opinion, the man who talks shop is preferable to the one who suggests it in his eyes. Some more iced potatoes, Mary," he added, calmly.

"Madame," said the Doctor, turning angrily to the landlady, "this is insufferable. You may make out my bill this morning. I shall have to seek a home elsewhere."

"Oh, now, Doctor!" began the landlady, in her most pleading tone.

"Jove!" ejaculated the Idiot. "That's a good idea, Doctor. I think I'll go with you; I'm not altogether satisfied here myself, but to desert so charming a company as we have here had never occurred to me. Together, however, we can go forth, and perhaps find happiness. Shall we put on our hunting togs and chase the fiery, untamed hall-room to the death this morning, or shall we put it off until some pleasanter day?"

"Put it off," observed the School-master, persuasively. "The Idiot was only indulging in persiflage, Doctor. That's all. When you have known him longer you will understand him better. Views are as necessary to him as sunlight to the flowers; and I truly think that in an asylum he would prove a delightful companion."

"There, Doctor," said the Idiot; "that's handsome of the School-master. He couldn't make more of an apology if he tried. I'll forgive him if you will. What say you?"

And strange to say, the Doctor, in spite of the indignation which still left a red tinge on his cheek, laughed aloud and was reconciled.

As for the School-master, he wanted to be angry, but he did not feel that he could afford his wrath, and for the first time in some months the guests went their several ways at peace with each other and the world.

III

There was a conspiracy in hand to embarrass the Idiot. The School-master and the Bibliomaniac had combined forces to give him a taste of his own medicine. The time had not yet arrived which showed the Idiot at a disadvantage; and the two boarders, the one proud of his learning, and the other not wholly unconscious of a bookish life, were distinctly tired of the triumphant manner in which the Idiot always left the breakfast-table to their invariable discomfiture.

It was the School-master's suggestion to put their tormentor into the pit he had heretofore dug for them. The worthy instructor of youth had of late come to see that while he was still a prime favorite with his landlady, he had, nevertheless, suffered somewhat in her estimation because of the apparent ease with which the Idiot had got the better of him on all points. It was necessary, he thought, to rehabilitate himself, and a deep-laid plot, to which the Bibliomaniac readily lent ear, was the result of his reflections. They twain were to indulge in a discussion of the great story of *Robert Elsmere*, which both were confident the Idiot had not read, and concerning which they felt assured he could not have an intelligent opinion if he had read it.

So it happened upon this bright Sunday morning that as the boarders sat them down to partake of the usual "restful breakfast," as the Idiot termed it, the Bibliomaniac observed:

"I have just finished reading *Robert Elsmere*."

"Have you, indeed?" returned the School-master, with apparent interest. "I trust you profited by it?"

"On the contrary," observed the Bibliomaniac. "My views are much unsettled by it."

"I prefer the breast of the chicken, Mrs. Smithers," observed the Idiot, sending his plate back to the presiding genius of the table. "The neck of a chicken is graceful, but not too full of sustenance."

"He fights shy," whispered the Bibliomaniac, gleefully.

"Never mind," returned the School-master, confidently; "we'll land him yet." Then he added, aloud: "Unsettled by it? I fail to see how any man with beliefs that are at all the result of mature convictions can be unsettled by the story of *Elsmere*. For my part I believe, and I have always said—"

"I never could understand why the neck of a chicken should be allowed on a respectable table anyhow," continued the Idiot, ignoring the controversy in which his neighbors were engaged, "unless for the purpose of showing that the deceased fowl met with an accidental rather than a natural death."

"In what way does the neck demonstrate that point?" queried the Bibliomaniac, forgetting the conspiracy for a moment.

"By its twist or by its length, of course," returned the Idiot. "A chicken that dies a natural death does not have its neck wrung; nor when the head is removed by the use of a hatchet, is it likely that it will be cut off so close behind the ears that those who eat the chicken are confronted with four inches of neck."

"Very entertaining indeed," interposed the School-master; "but we are wandering from the point the Bibliomaniac and I were discussing. Is or is not the story of *Robert Elsmere* unsettling to one's beliefs? Perhaps you can help us to decide that question."

"Perhaps I can," returned the Idiot; "and perhaps not. It did not unsettle my beliefs."

"But don't you think," observed the Bibliomaniac, "that to certain minds the book is more or less unsettling?"

"To that I can confidently say no. The certain mind knows no uncertainty," replied the Idiot, calmly.

"Very pretty indeed," said the School-master, coldly. "But what was your opinion of Mrs. Ward's handling of the subject? Do you think she was sufficiently realistic? And if so, and *Elsmere* weakened under the stress of circumstances, do you think—or don't you think—the production of such a book harmful, because—being real—it must of necessity be unsettling to some minds?"

"I prefer not to express an opinion on that subject," returned the Idiot, "because I never read *Robert Els*—"

"Never read it?" ejaculated the School-master, a look of triumph in his eyes.

"Why, everybody has read *Elsmere* that pretends to have read anything," asserted the Bibliomaniac.

"Of course," put in the landlady, with a scornful laugh.

"Well, I didn't," said the Idiot, nonchalantly. "The same ground was gone over two years before in Burrows's great story, *Is It, or Is It Not?* and anybody who ever read Clink's books on the *Non-Existent as Opposed to What Is*, knows where Burrows got his points. Burrows's story was a perfect marvel. I don't know how many editions it went through in England, and when it was translated into French by Madame Tournay, it simply set the French wild."

"Great Scott!" whispered the Bibliomaniac, desperately, "I'm afraid we've been barking up the wrong tree."

"You've read Clink, I suppose?" asked the Idiot, turning to the School-master.

"Y—yes," returned the School-master, blushing deeply.

The Idiot looked surprised, and tried to conceal a smile by sipping his coffee from a spoon.

"And Burrows?"

"No," returned the School-master, humbly. "I never read Burrows."

"Well, you ought to. It's a great book, and it's the one *Robert Elsmere* is taken from—same ideas all through, I'm told—that's why I didn't read *Elsmere*. Waste of time, you know. But you noticed yourself, I suppose, that Clink's ground is the same as that covered in *Elsmere*?"

"No; I only dipped lightly into Clink," returned the School-master, with some embarrassment.

"But you couldn't help noticing a similarity of ideas?" insisted the Idiot, calmly.

The School-master looked beseechingly at the Bibliomaniac, who would have been glad to fly to his co-conspirator's assistance had he known how, but never having heard of Clink, or Burrows either, for that matter, he made up his mind that it was best for his reputation for him to stay out of the controversy.

"Very slight similarity, however," said the School-master, in despair.

"Where can I find Clink's books?" put in Mr. Whitechoker, very much interested.

The Idiot conveniently had his mouth full of chicken at the moment, and it was to the School-master who had also read him that they all—the landlady included—looked for an answer.

"Oh, I think," returned that worthy, hesitatingly—"I think you'll find Clink in any of the public libraries."

"What is his full name?" persisted Mr. Whitechoker, taking out a memorandum-book.

"Horace J. Clink," said the Idiot.

"Yes; that's it—Horace J. Clink," echoed the School-master. "Very virile writer and a clear thinker," he added, with some nervousness.

"What, if any, of his books would you specially recommend?" asked the Minister again.

The Idiot had by this time risen from the table, and was leaving the room with the genial gentleman who occasionally imbibed.

The School-master's reply was not audible.

"I say," said the genial gentleman to the Idiot, as they passed out into the hall, "they didn't get much the best of you in that matter. But, tell me, who was Clink, anyhow?"

"Never heard of him before," returned the Idiot.

"And Burrows?"

"Same as Clink."

"Know anything about *Elsmere*?" chuckled the genial gentleman.

"Nothing—except that it and 'Pigs in Clover' came out at the same time, and I stuck to the Pigs."

And the genial gentleman who occasionally imbibed was so pleased at the plight of the Schoolmaster and of the Bibliomaniac that he invited the Idiot up to his room, where the private stock was kept for just such occasions, and they put in a very pleasant morning together.

IV

The guests were assembled as usual. The oatmeal course had been eaten in silence. In the Idiot's eye there was a cold glitter of expectancy—a glitter that boded ill for the man who should challenge him to controversial combat—and there seemed also to be, judging from sundry winks passed over the table and kicks passed under it, an understanding to which he and the genial gentleman who occasionally imbibed were parties.

As the School-master sampled his coffee the genial gentleman who occasionally imbibed broke the silence.

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