

BANGS JOHN KENDRICK

ANDIRON TALES

John Bangs
Andiron Tales

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CHAPTER I

Tom and the Andirons

It was perfectly natural in one respect, anyhow. There was really no reason in the world why Tom should not lie upon the great bear-skin rug in front of the library fire those cold winter nights if he wanted to, nor need anyone be surprised that he should want to. It was indeed a most delightful place to lie in. The bear-skin was soft and in every way comfortable and comforting. The fireplace itself was one of those huge hospitable affairs that might pass in some apartment houses in our narrow cooped-up city streets for a butler's pantry or small reception room—in fact in the summer time Tom used to sit in the fireplace and pretend he was in his office transacting business with such of his sister's dolls as could be induced to visit him there; giving orders to imaginary clerks and bookkeepers and keeping an equally fanciful office boy continually on the run. And then apart from the rug and the fireplace it was a beautiful room in which they were. Tom's father was very fond of books, and, although he was a great many years older than Tom, he had not forgotten how to enjoy the very same kind of books that Tom liked. He was not ashamed to have one little niche of his library filled with the stories which had delighted him in his boyhood days, and which still continued to please him, and, of course, this lent an additional charm to the library in Tom's eyes. It held his heroes, and on some of those drowsy nights when the only sounds to break the stillness of the room were the scratching of his father's pen, the soft humming of some little tune by his mother sitting and sewing by the evening lamp, and the fierce crackling of the burning logs, Tom could almost see these heroes stepping down from the shelves and like so many phantoms flitting in and about the room. In fact, upon one occasion, Tom is convinced he did see these very people having a dance upon the great tiled hearth—but of that you shall hear later.

There were many other things in the library beside his heroes that interested Tom. There was a little Japanese ivory god that used to sit up on the mantel shelf and gaze wisely at him, as much as to say, "Dear me, boy, what a lot I could tell you if I only would!" Then, too, there was a very handsome vase on top of one of the book-cases that had two remarkable dragons climbing up its sides, the tail of one of them so fixed that if anyone chose to use the vase for a pitcher the tail would make a very convenient handle, at which the other dragon always appeared to be laughing heartily, which he had no reason to do, because his own tail was not arranged any too gracefully. But the things that, next to Jack the Giant Killer, and Beauty and the Beast, and Tom Thumb and his other heroes and heroines, Tom liked the most, were two great brazen Andirons that stood in the fireplace. To Tom these Andirons, though up to the night when our story begins he had never seen them move, seemed almost to live. They had big, round, good-natured faces, that shone like so much gold. Their necks were slight and graceful, but as they developed downward toward their handsome feet the Andirons grew more portly, until finally they came to look very much like a pair of amiable sea serpents without much length. Tom's uncle said they looked like cats, with sunflowers for heads, swan necks for bodies, and very little of the cat about them save the claws. This description made Tom laugh, but the more he thought about it the more truthful did it seem to him to be.

For so long a time as Tom could remember, summer and winter, those Andirons had sat staring stolidly ahead in their accustomed place, and not until that December night had they even so much as winked at him—but on that occasion they more than made up for all their previous silence and

seeming unsociability. Tom was lying on the rug, as usual, and I am afraid was almost asleep. The logs were burning fiercely and at first Tom thought that the words he heard spoken were nothing but their crackling and hissing, but in a minute he changed his mind about that for the very good reason that the "Lefthandiron"—as Tom's uncle once called it—winked his eye at Tom and said:

"Hullo, Sleepyhead."

Tom only returned the wink. He was too much surprised to say anything.

"His name isn't Sleepyhead," said the Righthandiron, with a grin. "It's Thomas D. Pate."

"What's the D for?" asked the other.

"Dozy—Thomas Dozy Pate," exclaimed the Righthandiron. "His ancestors were Sleepyheads on his mother's side, and Dozy Pates on his father's side."

"Tisn't so at all!" cried Tom, indignantly. "My mama wasn't a Sleepyhead, and my name isn't Dozy Pate."

"He's such a Sleepyhead he doesn't know his own name," said the Lefthandiron.

"That's a curious thing about the Sleepyheads and the Dozy Pates. They very seldom know their own names—and even when they do they always deny that they are what they are. Why I really believe if I told Tom here that he was a Dormouse he'd deny it and say he was a boy."

"I am a boy," said Tom, stoutly, "and I'm not a Dormouse."

Both of the Andirons laughed heartily at this, and the Righthandiron, dancing a little jig, sang over and over again this couplet:

"He can't be very smart, I wis,
If he can't see that's what he is."

"Get him a mirror," said the Lefthandiron. "We can't blame him for thinking he is a boy, because everybody has told him he is a boy except ourselves, and being a Sleepyhead he believes as a rule what he is told if it is pleasant to believe."

"Well, I can't see why he objects to being a Dormouse," said the Righthandiron. "I think Dormice are very handsome and just too sweet and amiable to live. They are much pleasanter mice than Windowmice and Stairmice—don't you think so?"

"Indeed I do," returned the Lefthandiron, "and Tom is about the finest Dormouse I ever saw, and I wish he'd let us get acquainted with him."

"So do I," said the other, "but if he doesn't it's his own loss. You and I can go off to Santa Clausville by ourselves and have quite as good a time, if not better, than if he were along with us. I've noticed one thing, my dear Lefty, two's best anyhow."

"Two people in an omnibus
Where there's but one settee,
Can both be seated with less fuss
Than if the twain were three.

"If there is candy for but four,
This maxim still holds true,
Each one will get so much the more
If there are only two.

"Two boys upon a teeter board
Can have just twice the fun
That any seesaw can afford
If there's another one.

"So I say, what if he doesn't come? You and I will enjoy ourselves just as much. There'll be more candy for us, we won't have to divide the good time we have up into more than two parts, and, what is more, neither of us will have to carry the Dormouse."

Here the two Andirons gave a sidelong glance at Tom, and saw that he was smiling.

"What are you laughing at?" asked the Righthandiron. "Eh, Dormouse?"

"If I'll be a Dormouse will you take me off on your good time with you?" asked Tom.

"Certainly, but we can't take anybody who denies that he is what he is or who says that his name doesn't belong to him."

"But I can't tell a story," said Tom.

"Nobody asked you to," returned the Righthandiron. "All we ask is that you'll say nothing about it. If we say your name is Sleepyhead you needn't try to make people think we don't know what we are talking about by saying that your name isn't Sleepyhead, but Tommy Wideawake, or Billy Lemonstick, or something else; and when we choose to state that you are a Dormouse we want you to be a Dormouse and not go crying out through the street, 'I am a huckleberry.' In the countries we visit people think we are the wisest of the wise, and what we say no one ever dares dispute."

"So, you see, my dear Dormouse," said the other, "we couldn't possibly take you off with us unless you fall in with our plans and submit to our calling you anything we please."

"I don't see why you are not willing to admit that I am a boy, though," insisted Tom, who, although he was extremely anxious to go off with the Andirons, did not really like to lose sight of the fact that he was a boy. "What good does it do you or me or anybody else for me to admit that I am a Dormouse, for instance?"

"A little tail which I will wag for you," said the Righthandiron, "will explain how that is. Did you ever know a boy named Ebenezer J. Carrotop?"

"No, I never heard of any person with such an absurd name as that," returned Tom.

"Well, you are very fortunate not to have been one of Ebenezer's particular friends," said the Righthandiron. "If you had been, the story I am going to tell you would have made you very unhappy. As it is, not having known Ebenezer, and, having in fact taken a dislike to him because of his name, the story will amuse you more than otherwise."

"Good," said Tom; "I like to be amused."

"That being the case," said the Andiron, "I will proceed at once to tell you the story of Ebenezer."

CHAPTER II

The Story of Ebenezer

"Ebenezer was a boy very much like yourself in several ways," resumed the Righthandiron. "He wasn't one of the Sleepyhead or Dozy Pate families, but he was next thing to it. He was nephew of Senator Takeanap, and a grandson of old General Snoraloud—but he'd never admit it. He used to get just as angry when we reminded him that he was quite as much of a Snoraloud as a Carrottop, as you were when we called you Sleepyhead, and when my brother Lefty here said to him, 'Hullo, Weasel,' he didn't like it a bit better than you did when we said you were a Dormouse. He insisted that he was a boy, and for all we could do we couldn't get him to admit that he was a Weasel—"

"He was the most persistent lad
That I have ever seen.
He'd always say that bad was bad,
That blue could not be green.

"We couldn't get him to deny
That white was always white,
And though we'd try and try and try
He'd say that he was right,"

interrupted the Lefthandiron.

"And wasn't he?" asked Tom.

"That isn't a part of the story," snapped the Righthandiron, "and if you don't stop interrupting me I'll never speak to you again."

"I didn't mean to," said Tom apologetically.

"That's just the worst part of it," snapped the Andiron. "You are an interrupter by nature, and that is the most incurable kind. But, as I was telling you, Ebenezer was bound to be a boy, and no amount of talk on our part could convince him that he was a Weasel. Well, Lefty and I were very young then, and up to the time of which I am speaking we had always made our little trips in the Fairy Country or in Giantland all by ourselves, and we had lots of fun together I can warrant. This time, however, we decided to take Ebenezer with us to Giantland, which was a place he had often heard us tell about, and concerning which he was very curious. We told him that it would never do for him to visit Giantland, because the Giants were always very hungry, and liked nothing better to eat than a boy like himself. It would be dangerous for him to go, we said, unless he would promise to obey us in everything we told him to do, and to admit that he was whatever we chose to call him."

"You see, my dear Tom," said the Lefthandiron in explanation, "the Giants had such confidence in us that they accepted as true anything we said, so that if we should happen to meet a hungry ogre and he should want to eat Ebenezer because he was a boy, all that would be necessary for us to do to save Ebenezer was to say, 'Hold on. He is not a boy. He is a Weasel.' Then Ebenezer would be all right, because Giants do not eat Weasels."

"I see," said Tom, nodding his head.

"Ebenezer promised that he would obey us and wouldn't deny that he was a Weasel if we told the Giants he was one, and we took him off with us," resumed the Righthandiron. "We went straight to Giantland and had a perfectly lovely time until about an hour before it was time to return, when

we encountered a huge Giant named Skihigh—and my, how hungry he was! He was hungrier than Lefty's friend, who went into a restaurant and ordered

"Thirty-seven pounds of cake,
Sixty-four lamb chops,
Eighteen portions of beefsteak,
Forty ginger pops;
Seventeen vanilla puffs,
Twenty fresh-caught dabs,
Thirty-eight rich raisin duffs,
Ninety soft-shell crabs.

"Let those go for course the first;
Let the second be
Shrimps and oysters till I burst,
Thirteen quarts of tea.
Then a dozen sugared hams,
One small cabbage head,
Ninety dozen pinky clams,
Sixty loaves of bread.

"Seven quarts of French canned pease,
And a pound or two
Of your Gorgonzola cheese
For my lunch will do."
Then the waiter standing by
In the usual way
Asked him: 'Won't you also try
Our hot mince today?'"

"I don't want to interrupt," said Tom, "but it seems to me that man must have been awful rich."

"No, he wasn't," returned Lefty. "He was going to eat the dinner, you know, and then die without paying for it. He wasn't a very good man."

"No," remarked the story-teller. "But he was a very hungry man, in which respect he was just like the Giant I am trying to tell you about. And my, how the Giant roared with glee when he caught sight of Ebenezer.

"Good!" he cried, 'that's just what I wanted for my lunch. A nice fat boy.'

"Then he reached down," said the Righthandiron, "and grabbed Ebenezer by the arm, and was about to eat him just as he would a piece of asparagus, when Lefty here cried out:

"Avast there, Skihigh! That isn't a nice fat boy. That is only a miserable Weasel.'

"Pah!" said Skihigh, with a face such as you put on when you take a horrid tasting medicine. 'Pah! I can't eat Weasels.'

"And with that he put Ebenezer down on the road again and was about to walk along about his business when what did that foolish little Ebenezer do but up and deny that he was a Weasel!

"I'm not a Weasel," he yelled. 'And I am a boy—and a fine boy at that!'

"Skihigh stopped short, whirled about and rushed back to where Ebenezer was standing.

"What's that you say?" he said eagerly.

"I say I am not a Weasel, but a fine fat boy," said the vainglorious Ebenezer stoutly.

"Then my friends, the Andirons have deceived me, have they?" roared the Giant.

"'Yes,' replied Ebenezer. 'But I can't stand being called a Weasel.'

"With that," said the Righthandiron, "Skihigh clapped Ebenezer into his market basket and then turned on Lefty and me. Lefty managed to get away, but I was caught."

"What did he do to you?" asked Tom, trembling with excitement.

"He tried to bite my head off," said Righty, with a laugh. "See those two dents on either side of my neck?"

Tom looked, and sure enough there were the dents—not very deep, but quite large enough to be seen.

"His teeth broke when he got that far," said Righty. "I'm pretty hard—but you see it needn't have happened at all if Ebenezer had only kept quiet about his not being a Weasel."

"Was he eaten by Skihigh?" asked Tom.

"I don't know," replied Righty. "Lefty and I didn't wait to find out, and we have never been back there since. I don't believe he did eat him, for two reasons. One is that after trying to bite my head off Skihigh hadn't teeth enough left to eat anything with, and the other reason is that I saw Ebenezer two years afterwards on his way to school one beautiful spring morning. I noticed him particularly because, although it was a lovely clear morning, he had his umbrella up and positively declined to put it down and carry it closed, because, he said, an umbrella couldn't possibly be a cane, and he wasn't going to try to make anybody suppose it was a cane."

"I don't see anything in that story to make me unhappy, even if I were a chum of Ebenezer's," said Tom, as the Andiron finished.

"You don't? Don't you think it was sad that the Giant couldn't eat a boy who'd behave in that way?" asked Righty, with a scornful glance at Tom.

"It was very sad, Tom," said the Lefthandiron. "So don't deny it—especially if you want to go off on our trip to the stars."

"Are you really going to the stars?" gasped Tom, breathless at the very idea and forgetting all about Ebenezer.

"Perhaps," returned the Andiron.

"And may I go with you?" whispered Tom.

"You may if you will do whatever we tell you, and admit that you are a Dormouse," said Righty.

"All right, I'll obey," said Tom.

"And what did you say your name was?" asked Lefty.

"Sleepyhead Dozy Pate Dormouse," said Tom, with a laugh.

"You'll do," returned the Righthandiron, stepping lightly out of the fireplace. "Now sit astride of my back and take hold of Lefty's right claw."

Tom did as he was told, and in an instant he was flying up through space toward the stars.

CHAPTER III

Off in the Clouds

"Now the point to be decided," said the Lefthandiron, after he and his companions had been flying through space for some time, "is where we are going. There are two or three things we can do, and Tom can have his choice as to which it shall be."

"Subject, of course, to my advice," said the Righthandiron, with a bow to Tom. "You can go where you please if I please. See?"

"Yes," said Tom. "I see. I can have my way as long as it is your way."

"Precisely," said the Righthandiron, with an approving nod. "And as you may have heard, precisely means exactly so. You can have your way as long as it is my way, which shows how generous I am. Fond of my way as I am, I am willing to divide it with you."

"All right," returned Tom. "I'm very much obliged. What are the two things we can do?"

"Well," said the Lefthandiron, scratching his head softly, "we can fly up a little higher and sit down and watch the world go round; we can take the long jump, or we can visit Saturn."

"What was the first?" asked Tom.

"To fly up a little higher, where we can get a better view; to sit down there and watch the world go round. It is an excellent way to travel. It's awfully easy—in fact, it isn't you that travels at all. It's the world that does the traveling, while all you've got to do is to sit down there and keep an eye on it. It's like a big panorama, only it's real, and any time you see a place going by that you think you'd like to see more of, all you've got to do is to fly down there and see it."

"When you get up higher and sit down," said Tom, "what do you sit on?"

"You sit on me and I sit on my hind legs, of course," said Lefthandiron. "Don't you know anything?"

"Of course I do," said Tom, indignantly. "I know lots of things."

"Then I can't see why you ask such silly questions," retorted the Lefthandiron. "What do we sit on? Why, you might just as well ask a dog what he barks with, or a lion what he eats his breakfast with—and that would be as stupid as the Poker's poem on Sandwiches."

"Did the Poker write a poem on Sandwiches?" asked Tom.

"Eight of 'em," returned the Lefthandiron. "The first of them went this way:

"He sat upon a lofty hill,
And smoked his penny pipe.
'Ha!' quoth a passing whip-poor-will,
'The oranges are ripe.'"

"The other seven went like this," observed the Righthandiron:

"The day was over, and the six-
Teen little darkies then
Found they were in a dreadful fix,
Like several other men."

"There isn't anything about Sandwiches in those poems," said Tom, with a look of perplexity on his face.

"No. That's where the stupidity of it comes in. He wrote those poems and called 'em all Sandwiches just to be stupid, and it was stupid."

"But what did he want to be stupid for?" asked Tom.

"Just his vanity, that's all," said the Righthandiron. "The Poker is a very vain person. He thinks he is superior to everybody else in everything. If you say to him, 'the gas fixture is bright tonight,' he'll say, 'Oh, yes—but I'm brighter.' Somebody told him once that the kindling wood that started the fires was stupid, and he wouldn't even stop his bragging then. 'Oh, yes,' he said, 'but I'm a great deal stupider than the kindling wood and I'll prove it.' So he sat down and wrote those verses and called 'em all Sandwiches, and everybody agreed that he was the stupidest person going."

"You only told me two of 'em," said Tom.

"No—the whole eight were there. To make it more stupid the Poker said that the first one was number five and the second was the other seven."

Tom smiled broadly at this and made up his mind to cultivate the acquaintance of the Poker. He was boy enough to like stupidity of that sort because it made him laugh.

"I'd like to meet the Poker," he said. "He must be lots of fun."

"He is," said the Lefthandiron. "Tenacre lots of fun. You'll meet him soon enough because we shall join him shortly. We never go off on any of our trips without him. He is a great help sometimes when we get into trouble just because he has so many sides. If we fall into a pit through some misstep the Poker comes along and pries us out of it. If we fall into the hands of some horrible creature that wants to hurt us, the Poker talks to that creature as stupid as he knows how, which makes the other so drowsy that he can't possibly keep awake, and then, of course, we escape."

"There he is now," cried the Righthandiron, putting his right forepaw up to his ear and listening attentively. "I can hear him singing, can't you?"

The Lefthandiron stopped short and Tom strained his ears to hear the Poker's song. For a moment he could hear nothing, but then a slight buzzing sound like the hum of a bee, came to his ears and in another minute he could distinguish the words of the song. It was a song showing that the singer was one of those favored beings who are satisfied with what the world has given them—as you will see for yourself when you hear it. These are the words as they came to Tom's ears, sung to a soft little air which the Poker made up as he went along, thereby showing that he was a musician as well as a Poker:

"Oh, I am a Poker bold and free,
And I poke the livelong day.
I love the land and I hate the sea,
But the sky and the clouds are there for me.

I dote on the Milky Way.
The clouds are as soft as a fleecy rug,
And as cool as cool can be.
The skies fit into my figure snug,
And they make me feel so blithe and smug
That I am glad Fate made me Me.
Oh Me!
Ah Me!
'Tis a lovely fate
And a mission great
To be
Like me
And to love the skies,

And the clouds to prize,
And to hate the turbulent sea,
He—he—
So I lift my voice
And I loud rejoice
That the Fates have made me Me."

"Hullo!" cried the Righthandiron.

"Halloa!" called the Lefthandiron.

"That's not my name," came the voice of the Poker from behind a cloud just above Tom's head.

"But I know who you mean, so I answer Halloa yourself."

"Where are you?" cried Lefty.

"Here," called the Poker.

"No, you're not," called Righty. "You're there. We are here."

"Well, that's neither here nor there," retorted the Poker, poking his head out through the cloud.

"Hullo! Who have you got there? That isn't Tom, is it?"

"No—it's Sleepyhead D. Dormouse," laughed Lefty.

"Good," said the Poker, advancing and shaking Tom by the hand. "I was afraid it was Tom. Not that I dislike Tom, for I don't. I think he is one of the nicest boys I know—but he weighs a good fifty-seven pounds, and so far we haven't been able to get a cloud strong enough to support more than fifty-six. If Tom were to come up here and sit on a cloud he'd fall through, and if he fell through, you know what would happen."

"No, I don't," said Tom, to whom the Poker's remarks were addressed. "What would happen?"

"Well, in the first place, it would spoil the cloud, and in the second place, if he tumbled into the sea he'd have to swim ashore," said the Poker, sagely. "That's why I am glad you're young Mr. Dormouse, and not Tom. Dormice can sit on the flimsiest clouds we have and not break through."

"What is a Dormouse anyhow?" asked Tom, to whom it now occurred for the first time that he had never seen a Dormouse.

"Ho!" jeered Righty, as Tom asked the question. "The idea of not knowing what a Dormouse is!"

"He's a mouse with a door to him, of course," said Lefty.

"Which he keeps closed," said the Poker, "so that he will not be disturbed while he is asleep."

Tom tried to imagine what a creature of that sort looked like, but he found it difficult. Not liking to appear stupid he accepted the explanation.

"Oh!" he said. "It must be a very pretty animal."

"Oh, yes!" said the Poker. "But he isn't as pretty as I can be when I try. My, how pretty I can be—but say, Andies, where are we bound this trip?"

"We've left that to Sleepyhead to decide," said Lefty.

"In the usual way of course?" queried the Poker.

"Oh, yes! He can't decide except as we want him to and have it go as a real decision. We've given him his choice of watching the world go round, going to Saturn or taking the long jump."

"And which will it be, Dormy?" asked the Poker.

"I sort of think I'd like to sit up here and watch the world go round," said Tom.

"Nope," said Righty.

"Then let's go to Saturn," suggested Tom.

"Oh, no!" said Righty. "Not that."

"Then there's only one thing left," said Tom, with a sigh, "and that's the long jump—whatever that is."

Tom's three companions roared with laughter.

"Absurd!" cried Righty. "The idea. The long jump the only thing left! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Perfect nonsense," laughed Lefty. "I never thought Dozy Pate could be so dull."

"Well, he isn't anything like as dull as I can be when I try," said the Poker. "He's pretty dull, though."

"I don't see where the joke comes in," snapped Tom, who did not at all like the way the Andirons and the Poker were behaving. "If there are only three things we can do and you won't do two of them there's only one left."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lefty.

"Poor dull Dormouse," said Righty, with a smile that was half of mirth and half sympathy.

"You are evidently a Dormouse with very little education, Dormy," said the Poker. "If there are three apples on a plate, one red, one green and one white and you are told to take your pick of the lot there are four things you can do, not three."

"What are they?" asked Tom, meekly.

"You can take a red one, a white one, a green one, or all three. See?"

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