

# **BANGS JOHN KENDRICK**

THE IDIOT

John Bangs

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# John Kendrick Bangs

## The Idiot

### I

For some weeks after the happy event which transformed the popular Mrs. Smithers into the charming Mrs. John Pedagog all went well at that lady's select home for single gentlemen. It was only proper that during the honey-moon, at least, of the happy couple hostilities between the Idiot and his fellow-boarders should cease. It was expecting too much of mankind, however, to look for a continued armistice, and the morning arrived when Nature once more reasserted herself, and trouble began. Just what it was that prompted the remark no one knows, but it happened that the Idiot did say that he thought that, after all, life on a canal-boat had its advantages. Mr. Pedagog, who had come into the dining-room in a slightly irritable frame of mind, induced perhaps by Mrs. Pedagog's insistence that as he was now part proprietor of the house he should be a little more prompt in making his contributions towards its maintenance, chose to take the remark as implying a reflection upon the way things were managed in the household.

"Humph!" he said. "I had hoped that your habit of airing your idiotic views had been put aside for once and for all."

"Very absurd hope, my dear sir," observed the Idiot. "Views that are not aired become musty. Why shouldn't I give them an atmospheric opportunity once in a while?"

"Because they are the sort of views to which suffocation is the most appropriate end," snapped the School-Master. "Any man who asserts, as you have asserted, that life on a canal-boat has its advantages, ought to go further, and prove his sincerity by living on one."

"I can't afford it," said the Idiot, meekly. "It isn't cheap by any manner of means. In the first place, you can't live happily on a canal-boat unless you can afford to keep horses. In fact, canal-boat life is a combination of the most expensive luxuries, since it combines yachting and driving with domesticity. Nevertheless, if you will put your mind on it, you will find that with a canal-boat for your home you can do a great many things that you can't do with a house."

"I decline to put my mind on a canal-boat," said Mr. Pedagog, sharply, passing his coffee back to Mrs. Pedagog for another lump of sugar, thereby contributing to that good lady's discomfiture, since before their marriage the mere fact that the coffee had been poured by her fair hand had given it all the sweetness it needed; or at least that was what the School-Master had said, and more than once at that.

"You are under no obligation to do so," the Idiot returned. "Though if I had a mind like yours I'd put it on a canal-boat and have it towed away somewhere out of sight. These other gentlemen, however, I think, will agree with me when I say that the mere fact that a canal-boat can be moved about the country, and is in no sense a fixture anywhere, shows that as a dwelling-place it is superior to a house. Take this house, for instance. This neighborhood used to be the best in town. It is still far from being the worst neighborhood in town, but it is, as it has been for several years, deteriorating. The establishment of a Turkish bath on one corner and a grocery-store on the other has taken away much of that air of refinement which characterized it when the block was devoted to residential purposes entirely. Now just suppose for a moment that this street were a canal, and that this house were a canal-boat. The canal could run down as much as it pleased, the neighborhood could deteriorate eternally, but it could not affect the value of this house as the home of refined people as long as it was possible to hitch up a team of horses to the front stoop and tow it into a better locality. I'd like to wager every man at this table that Mrs. Pedagog wouldn't take five minutes to make up her mind to tow this house



up to a spot near Central Park, if it were a canal-boat and the streets were water instead of a mixture of water, sand, and Belgian blocks."

"No takers," said the Bibliomaniac.

"Tutt-tutt-tutt," ejaculated Mr. Pedagog.

"You seem to lose sight of another fact," said the Idiot, warming up to his subject. "If man had had the sense in the beginning to adopt the canal-boat system of life, and we were used to that sort of thing, it would not be so hard upon us in summer-time, when we have to live in hotels in order that we and our families may reap the benefits of a period of country life. We could simply drive off to that section of the country where we desired to be. Hotels would not be needed if a man could take his house along with him into the fields, and one phase of life which has more bad than good in it would be entirely obliterated. There is nothing more disturbing to the serenity of a domestic man's mind than the artificial manner of living that prevails in most summer hotels. The nuisance of having to pay bills every Monday morning under the penalty of losing one's luggage would be obviated, and all the comforts of home would be directly within reach. The trouble incident upon getting the trunks packed and the children ready for a long day's journey by rail, and the fatigue arising from such a journey, would be reduced to a minimum. The troubles attendant upon going into a far country, and leaving one's house in the sole charge of a lot of servants for a month or two every year, would be done away with entirely; and if at any time it became necessary to discharge one of these servants, she could be put off the boat in an instant, and then the boat could be pushed out into the middle of the canal, so that the discharged domestic could not possibly get aboard again and take her revenge by smashing your crockery and fixtures. That is one of the worst features of living in a stationary house. You are entirely at the mercy of vindictive servants. They know precisely where you live, and you cannot escape them. They can come back when there is no man around, and raise several varieties of Ned with your wife and children. With a movable house, such as the canal-boat would be, you could always go off and leave your family in perfect safety."

"How about safety in a storm?" asked the Bibliomaniac.

"Safety in a storm?" echoed the Idiot. "That seems an absurd sort of a question to one who knows anything about canal-boats. I, for one, never heard of a canal-boat being seriously damaged in a storm as long as it was anchored in the canal proper. It certainly isn't any more dangerous to be in a canal-boat in a storm than it is to be in a house that offers resistance to the winds, and is shaken from roof to cellar at every blast. More houses have been blown from their foundations than canal-boats sunk, provided ordinary care has been taken to protect them."

"And you think the canal-boat would be healthy?" asked the Doctor. "How about dampness and all that?"

"That is a professional question," returned the Idiot, "which I think you could answer better than I. I don't see why a canal-boat shouldn't be healthy, however. The dampness would not amount to very much. It would be outside of one's dwelling, and not within it, as is the case with so many houses. A canal-boat having no cellar could not have a damp one, and if by some untoward circumstance it should spring a leak, the water could be pumped out at once and the leak plugged up. However this might be, I'll offer another wager to this board on that point, and that is that more people die in houses than on canal-boats."

"We'd rather give you our money right out," retorted the Doctor.

"Thank you," said the Idiot. "But I don't need money. I don't like money. Money is responsible for more extravagance than any other commodity in existence. Besides, it and I are not intimate enough to get along very well together, and when I have any I immediately do my level best to rid myself of it. But to return to our canal-boat, I note a look of disapproval in Mr. Whitechoker's eyes. He doesn't seem to think any more of my scheme than do the rest of you—which I regret, since I believe that he would be the gainer if land edifices were supplanted by the canal system as proposed by myself. Take church on a rainy morning, for instance. A great many people stay at home from

church on rainy mornings just because they do not want to venture out in the wet. Suppose we all lived in canal-boats? Would not people be deprived of this flimsy pretext for staying at home if their homes could be towed up to the church door? Or, better yet, granting that the churches followed out the same plan, and were themselves constructed like canal-boats, how easy it would be for the sexton to drive the church around the town and collect the absentees. In the same manner it would be glorious for men like ourselves, who have to go to their daily toil. For a consideration, Mrs. Pedagog could have us driven to our various places of business every morning, returning for us in the evening. Think how fine it would be for me, for instance, instead of having to come home every night in an overcrowded elevated train or on a cable-car, to have the office-boy come and announce, 'Mrs. Pedagog's Select Home for Gentlemen is at the door, Mr. Idiot.' I could step right out of my office into my charming little bedroom up in the bow, and the time usually expended on the cars could be devoted to dressing for tea. Then we could stop in at the court-house for our legal friend; and as for Doctor Capsule, wouldn't he revel in driving this boarding-house about town on his daily rounds among his patients?"

"What would become of my office hours?" asked the Doctor. "If this house were whirling giddily all about the city from morning until night, I don't know what would become of my office patients."

"They might die a little sooner or live a little longer, that is all," said the Idiot. "If they weren't able to find the house at all, however, I think it would be better for us, for much as I admire you, Doctor, I think your office hours are a nuisance to the rest of us. I had to elbow my way out of the house this morning between a double line of sufferers from mumps and influenza, and other pleasingly afflicted patients of yours, and I didn't like it very much."

"I don't believe they liked it much either," returned the Doctor. "One man with a sprained ankle told me about you. You shoved him in passing."

"Well, you can apologize to him in my behalf," returned the Idiot; "but you might add that he must expect very much the same treatment whenever he and a boy with mumps stand between me and the door. Sprained ankles aren't contagious, and I preferred shoving him to the other alternative."

The Doctor was silent, and the Idiot rose to go. "Where will the house be this evening about six-thirty, Mrs. Pedagog?" he asked, as he pushed his chair back from the table.

"Where? Why, here, of course," returned the landlady.

"Why, yes—of course," observed the Idiot, with an impatient gesture. "How foolish of me! I've really been so wrapped up in my canal-boat ideal that I came to believe that it might possibly be real and not a dream, after all. I almost believed that perhaps I should find that the house had been towed somewhere up into Westchester County on my return, so that we might all escape the city's tax on personal property, which I am told is unusually high this year."

With which sally the Idiot kissed his hand to Mr. Pedagog and retired from the scene.

## II

"Let's write a book," suggested the Idiot, as he took his place at the board and unfolded his napkin.

"What about?" asked the Doctor, with a smile at the idea of the Idiot's thinking of embarking on literary pursuits.

"About four hundred pages long," said the Idiot. "I feel inspired."

"You are inspired," said the School-Master. "In your way you are a genius. I really never heard of such a variegated Idiot as you are in all my experience, and that means a great deal, I can tell you, for in the course of my career as an instructor of youth I have encountered many idiots."

"Were they idiots before or after having drank at the fount of your learning?" asked the Idiot, placidly.

Mr. Pedagog glared, and the Idiot was apparently satisfied. To make Mr. Pedagog glare appeared to be one of the chiefest of his ambitions.

"You will kindly remember, Mr. Idiot," said Mrs. Pedagog at this point, "that Mr. Pedagog is my husband, and such insinuations at my table are distinctly out of place."

"I ask your pardon, Mrs. Pedagog," rejoined the offender, meekly. "Nevertheless, as apart from the question in hand as to whether Mr. Pedagog inspires idiocy or not, I should like to get the views of this gathering on the point you make regarding the table. *Is this your table?* Is it not rather the table of those who sit about it to regale their inner man with the good things under which I remember once or twice in my life to have heard it groan? To my mind, the latter is the truth. It is *our* table, because we buy it, and I am forced to believe that some of us pay for it. I am prepared to admit that if Mr. Brief, for instance, is delinquent in his weekly payments, his interest in the table reverts to you until he shall have liquidated, and he is not privileged to say a word that you do not approve of; but I, for instance, who since January 1st have been compelled to pay in advance, am at least sole lessee, and for the time being proprietor of the portion for which I have paid. You have sold it to me. I have entered into possession, and while in possession, as a matter of right and not on sufferance, haven't I the privilege of freedom of speech?"

"You certainly exercise the privilege whether you have it or not," snapped Mr. Pedagog.

"Well, I believe in exercise," said the Idiot. "Exercise brings strength, and if exercising the privilege is going to strengthen it, exercise it I shall, if I have to hire a gymnasium for the purpose. But to return to Mrs. Pedagog's remark. It brings up another question that has more or less interested me. Because Mrs. Smithers married Mr. Pedagog, do we lose all of our rights in Mr. Pedagog? Before the happy event that reduced our number from ten to nine—"

"We are still ten, are we not?" asked Mr. Whitechoker, counting the guests.

"Not if Mr. Pedagog and the late Mrs. Smithers have become one," said the Idiot. "But, as I was saying, before the happy event that reduced our number from ten to nine we were permitted to address our friend Pedagog in any terms we saw fit, and whenever he became sufficiently interested to indulge in repartee we were privileged to return it. Have we relinquished that privilege? I don't remember to have done so."

"It's a question worthy of your giant intellect," said Mr. Pedagog, scornfully. "For myself, I do not at all object to anything you may choose to say to me or of me. Your assaults are to me as water is to a duck's back."

"I am sorry," said the Idiot. "I hate family disagreements, and here we have Mrs. Pedagog taking one side and Mr. Pedagog the other. But whatever decision may ultimately be reached, of one thing Mrs. Pedagog must be assured. I on principle side against Mr. Pedagog, and if it be the wish of my good landlady that I shall refrain from playing intellectual battledore and shuttlecock with her husband, whom we all revere, I certainly shall refrain. Hereafter if I indulge in anything that in



any sense resembles repartee with our landlord, I wish it distinctly understood that an apology goes with it."

"That's all right, my boy," said the School-Master. "You mean well. You are a little new, that's all, and we all understand you."

"I don't understand him," growled the Doctor, still smarting under the recollection of former breakfast-table discomfitures. "I wish we could get him translated."

"If you prescribed for me once or twice I think it likely I should be translated in short order," retorted the Idiot. "I wonder how I'd go translated into French?"

"You couldn't be expressed in French," put in the Lawyer. "It would take some barbarian tongue to do you justice."

"Very well," said the Idiot. "Proceed. Do me justice."

"I can't begin to," said Mr. Brief, angrily.

"That's what I thought," said the Idiot. "That's the reason why you always do me such great injustice. You lawyers always have to be doing something, even if it is only holding down a chair so that it won't blow out of your office window. If you haven't any justice to mete out, you take another tack and dispense injustice with lavish hand. However, I'll forgive you if you'll tell me one thing. What's libel, Mr. Brief?"

"None of your business," growled the Lawyer.

"A very good general definition," said the Idiot, approvingly. "If there's any business in the world that I should hate to have known as mine it is that of libel. I think, however, your definition is not definite. What I wanted to know was just how far I could go with remarks at this table and be safe from prosecution."

"Nobody would ever prosecute you, for two reasons," said the lawyer. "In a civil action for money damages a verdict against you for ten cents wouldn't be worth a rap, because the chances are you couldn't pay. In a criminal action your conviction would be a bad thing, because you would be likely to prove a corrupting influence in any jail in creation. Besides, you'd be safe before a jury, anyhow. You are just the sort of idiot that the intelligent jurors of to-day admire, and they'd acquit you of any crime. A man has a right to a trial at the hands of a jury of his peers. I don't think even in a jury-box twelve idiots equal to yourself could be found, so don't worry."

"Thanks. Have a cigarette?" said the Idiot, tossing one over to the Lawyer. "It's all I have. If I had a half-dollar I should pay you for your opinion; but since I haven't, I offer you my all. The temperature of my coffee seems to have fallen, Mrs. Pedagog. Will you kindly let me have another cup?"

"Certainly," said Mrs. Pedagog. "Mary, get the Idiot another cup."

Mary did as she was told, placing the empty bit of china at Mrs. Pedagog's side.

"It is for the Idiot, Mary," said Mrs. Pedagog, coldly. "Take it to him."

"Empty, ma'am?" asked the maid.

"Certainly, Mary," said the Idiot, perceiving Mrs. Pedagog's point. "I asked for another cup, not for more coffee."

Mrs. Pedagog smiled quietly at her own joke. At hair-splitting she could give the Idiot points.

"I am surprised that Mary should have thought I wanted more coffee," continued the Idiot, in an aggrieved tone. "It shows that she too thinks me out of my mind."

"You are not out of your mind," said the Bibliomaniac. "It would be a good thing if you were. In replenishing your mental supply you might have the luck to get better quality."

"I probably should have the luck," said the Idiot. "I have had a great store of it in my life. From the very start I have had luck. When I think that I was born myself, and not you, I feel as if I had had more than my share of good-fortune—more luck than the law allows. How much luck does the law allow, Mr. Brief?"

"Bosh!" said Mr. Brief, with a scornful wave of his hand, as if he were ridding himself of a troublesome gnat. "Don't bother me with such mind-withering questions."

"All right," said the Idiot. "I'll ask you an easier one. Why does not the world recognize matrimony?"

Mr. Whitechoker started. Here, indeed, was a novel proposition.

"I—I—must confess," said he, "that of all the idiotic questions I—er—I have ever had the honor of hearing asked that takes the—"

"Cake?" suggested the Idiot.

"—palm!" said Mr. Whitechoker, severely.

"Well, perhaps so," said the Idiot. "But matrimony is the science, or the art, or whatever you call it, of making two people one, is it not?"

"It certainly is," said Mr. Whitechoker. "But what of it?"

"The world does not recognize the unity," said the Idiot. "Take our good proprietors, for instance. They were made one by yourself, Mr. Whitechoker. I had the pleasure of being an usher at the ceremony, yielding the position of best man gracefully, as is my wont, to the Bibliomaniac. He was best man, but not the better man, by a simple process of reasoning. Now no one at this board disputes that Mr. and Mrs. Pedagog are one, but how about the world? Mr. Pedagog takes Mrs. Pedagog to a concert. Are they one there?"

"Why not?" asked Mr. Brief.

"That's what I want to know—why not? The world, as represented by the ticket-taker at the door, says they are not—or implies that they are not, by demanding tickets for two. They attempt to travel out to Niagara Falls. The railroad people charge them two fares; the hackman charges them two fares; the hotel bills are made out for two people. It is the same wherever they go in the world, and I regret to say that even in our own home there is a disposition to regard them as two. When I spoke of there being nine persons here instead of ten, Mr. Whitechoker himself disputed my point—and yet it was not so much his fault as the fault of Mr. and Mrs. Pedagog themselves. Mrs. Pedagog seems to cast doubt upon the unity by providing two separate chairs for the two halves that make up the charming entirety. Two cups are provided for their coffee. Two forks, two knives, two spoons, two portions of all the delicacies of the season which are lavished upon us out of season—generally after it—fall to their lot. They do not object to being called a happy *couple*, when they should be known as a happy single. Now what I want to know is why the world does not accept the shrinkage which has been pronounced valid by the church and is recognized by the individual? Can any one here tell me that?"

No one could, apparently. At least no one endeavored to. The Idiot looked inquiringly at all, and then, receiving no reply to his question, he rose from the table.

"I think," he said, as he started to leave the room—"I think we ought to write that book. If we made it up of the things you people don't know, it would be one of the greatest books of the century. At any rate, it would be great enough in bulk to fill the biggest library in America."

### III

"I wish I were beginning life all over again," said the Idiot one spring morning, as he took his accustomed place at Mrs. Pedagog's table.

"I wish you were," said Mr. Pedagog from behind his newspaper. "Then your parents would have you shut up in a nursery, and it is even conceivable that you would be receiving those disciplinary attentions with a slipper that you seem to me so frequently to deserve, were you at this present moment in the nursery stage of your development."

"My!" ejaculated the Idiot. "What a wonder you are, Mr. Pedagog! It is a good thing you are not a justice in a criminal court."

"And what, may I venture to ask," said Mr. Pedagog, glancing at the Idiot over his spectacles—"what has given rise to that extraordinary remark, the connection of which with anything that has been said or done this morning is distinctly not apparent?"

"I only meant that a man who was so given over to long sentences as you are would probably make too severe a judge in a criminal court," replied the Idiot, meekly. "Do you make use of the same phraseology in the class-room that you dazzle us with, I should like to know?"

"And why not, pray?" said Mr. Pedagog.

"No special reason," said the Idiot; "only it does seem to me that an instructor of youth ought to be more careful in his choice of adverbs than you appear to be. Of course Doctor Bolus here is under no obligation to speak more grammatically or correctly than he does. People call him in to prescribe, not to indulge in rhetorical periods, and he can write his prescriptions in a sort of intuitive Latin and nobody be the wiser, but you, who are said to be sowing the seeds of knowledge in the brain of youth, should be more careful."

"Hear the grammarian talk!" returned Mr. Pedagog. "Listen to this embryonic Samuel Johnson the Second. What have I said that so offends the linguistic taste of Lindley Murray, Jun.?"

"Nothing," returned the Idiot. "I cannot say that you have said anything. I never heard you say anything in my life; but while you can no doubt find good authority for making use of the words 'distinctly not apparent,' you ought not to throw such phrases around carelessly. The thing which is distinct is apparent, therefore to say 'distinctly not apparent' to a mind that is not given to analysis sounds strange. You might as well say of a beautiful girl that she is plainly pretty, meaning of course that she is evidently pretty; but those who are unacquainted with the idiomatic peculiarities of your speech might ask you if you meant that she was pretty in a plain sort of way. Suppose, too, you were writing a novel, and, in a desire to give your reader a fair idea of the personal appearance of a homely but good creature, you should say, 'It cannot be denied that Rosamond Follansbee was pretty plain?' It wouldn't take a very grave error of the types to change your entire meaning. To save a line on a page, for instance, it might become necessary to eliminate a single word; and if that word should chance to be the word 'plain' in the sentence I have given, your homely but good person would be set down as being undeniably pretty. Which shows, it seems to me, that too great care cannot be exercised in the making of selections from our vocabu—"

"You are the worst I *ever* knew!" snapped Mr. Pedagog.

"Which only proves," observed the Idiot, "that you have not heeded the Scriptural injunction that you should know thyself. Are those buckwheat cakes or doilies?"

Whether the question was heard or not is not known. It certainly was not answered, and silence reigned for a few minutes. Finally Mrs. Pedagog spoke, and in the manner of one who was somewhat embarrassed. "I am in an embarrassing position," said she.

"Good!" said the Idiot, *sotto-voce*, to the genial gentleman who occasionally imbibed. "There is hope for the landlady yet. If she can be embarrassed she is still human—a condition I was beginning to think she wotted not of."

"She whatted what?" queried the genial gentleman, not quite catching the Idiot's words.

"Never mind," returned the Idiot. "Let's hear how she ever came to be embarrassed."

"I have had an application for my first-floor suite, and I don't know whether I ought to accept it or not," said the landlady.

"She has a conscience, too," whispered the Idiot; and then he added, aloud, "And wherein lies the difficulty, Mrs. Pedagog?"

"The applicant is an actor; Junius Brutus Davenport is his name."

"A tragedian or a comedian?" asked the Bibliomaniac.

"Or first walking gentleman, who knows every railroad tie in the country?" put in the Idiot.

"That I do not know," returned the landlady. "His name sounds familiar enough, though. I thought perhaps some of you gentlemen might know of him."

"I have heard of Junius Brutus," observed the Doctor, chuckling slightly at his own humor, "and I've heard of Davenport, but Junius Brutus Davenport is a combination with which I am not familiar."

"Well, I can't see why it should make any difference whether the man is a tragedian, or a comedian, or a familiar figure to railroad men," said Mr. Whitechoker, firmly. "In any event, he would be an extremely objec—"

"It makes a great deal of difference," said the Idiot. "I've met tragedians, and I've met comedians, and I've met New York Central stars, and I can assure you they each represent a distinct type. The tragedians, as a rule, are quiet meek individuals, with soft low voices, in private life. They are more timid than otherwise, though essentially amiable. I knew a tragedian once who, after killing seventeen Indians, a road-agent, and a gross of cowboys between eight and ten P.M. every night for sixteen weeks, working six nights a week, was afraid of a mild little soft-shell crab that lay defenceless on a plate before him on the evening of the seventh night of the last week. Tragedians make agreeable companions, I can tell you; and if J. Brutus Davenport is a tragedian, I think Mrs. Pedagog would do well to let him have the suite, provided, of course, that he pays for it in advance."

"I was about to observe, when our friend interrupted me," said Mr. Whitechoker, with dignity, "that in any event an actor at this board would be to me an extremely objec—"

"Now the comedians," resumed the Idiot, ignoring Mr. Whitechoker's remark—"the comedians are very different. They are twice as bloodthirsty as the murderers of the drama, and, worse than that, they are given to rehearsing at all hours of the day and night. A tragedian is a hard character only on the stage, but the comedian is the comedian always. If we had one of those fellows in our midst, it would not be very long before we became part of the drama ourselves. Mrs. Pedagog would find herself embarrassed once an hour, instead of, as at present, once a century. Mr. Whitechoker would hear of himself as having appeared by proxy in a roaring farce before our comedian had been with us two months. The wise sayings of our friend the School-Master would be spoken nightly from the stage, to the immense delight of the gallery gods, and to the edification of the orchestra circle, who would wonder how so much information could have got into the world and they not know it before. The out-of-town papers would literally teem with witty extracts from our comedian's plays, which we should immediately recognize as the dicta of my poor self."

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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