

Bangs John Kendrick

The Inventions of the Idiot



John Bangs

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Содержание

I	5
II	8
III	11
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	15

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I

The Culinary Guild

It was before the Idiot's marriage, and in the days when he was nothing more than a plain boarder in Mrs. Smithers-Pedagog's High-class Home for Single Gentlemen, that he put what the School-master termed his "alleged mind" on plans for the amelioration of the condition of the civilized.

"The trials of the barbarian are really nothing as compared with the tribulations of civilized man," he said, as the waitress passed him a piece of steak that had been burned to a crisp. "In the Cannibal Islands a cook who would send a piece of broiled missionary to her employer's table in this condition would herself be roasted before another day had dawned. We, however, must grin and bear it, because our esteemed landlady cannot find anywhere in this town a woman better suited for the labors of the kitchen than the blank she has had the misfortune to draw in the culinary lottery, familiarly known to us, her victims, as Bridget."

"This is an exceptional case," said Mr. Pedagog. "We haven't had a steak like this before in several weeks."

"True," returned the Idiot. "This is a sirloin, I believe. The last steak we had was a rump steak, and it was not burned to a crisp, I admit. It was only boiled, if I remember rightly, by mistake; Bridget having lost her fifth consecutive cousin in ten days the night before, and being in consequence so prostrated that she could not tell a gridiron from a lawn-mower."

"Well, you know the popular superstition, Mr. Idiot," said the Poet. "The devil sends the cooks."

"I don't believe it," retorted the Idiot. "That's one of those proverbs that haven't a particle of truth in 'em – nor a foundation in reason either, like 'Never look a gift horse in the mouth.' Of all absurd advice ever given to man by a thoughtless thinker, that, I think, bears the palm. I know a man who didn't look a gift horse in the mouth, and the consequence was that he accepted a horse that was twenty-eight years old. The beast died in his stables three days later, and the beneficiary had to pay five dollars to have him carted away. As for the devil sending the cooks, I haven't any faith in the theory. Any person who had come from the devil would know how to manage a fire better than ninety-nine per cent. of the cooks ever born. It would be a good thing if every one of 'em were forced to serve an apprenticeship with the Prince of Darkness. However, steak like this serves a good purpose. It serves to bind our little circle more firmly together. There's nothing like mutual suffering to increase the sympathy that should exist between men situated as we are; and as for Mrs. Smithers-Pedagog, I wish her to understand distinctly that I am criticising the cook and not herself. If this particular dainty had been prepared by her own fair hand, I doubt not I should want more of it."

"I thank you," returned the landlady, somewhat mollified by this remark. "If I had more time I should occasionally do the cooking myself, but, as it is, I am overwhelmed with work."

"I can bear witness to that," observed Mr. Whitechoker. "Mrs. Smithers-Pedagog is one of the most useful ladies in my congregation. If it were not for her, many a heathen would be going without garments to-day."

"Well, I don't like to criticise," said the Idiot, "but I think the heathen at home should be considered before the heathen abroad. If your congregation would have a guild to look after such heathen as the Poet and the Doctor and myself, I am convinced it would be more appreciated by those who benefited by its labors than it is at present by the barbarians who try to wear the misfits it sends

out. A Christian whose plain but honest breakfast is well cooked is apt to be far more grateful than a barbarian who is wearing a pair of trousers made of calico and a coat three sizes too small in the body and nine sizes too large in the arms. I will go further. I believe that if the domestic heathen were cared for they would do much better work, would earn better pay, and would, out of mere gratitude, set apart a sufficiently large portion of their increased earnings to be devoted to the purchase of tailor-made costumes, which would please the cannibals better, far better, than the amateur creations they now get. I know I'd contribute some of my surplus."

"What would you have such a guild do?" queried Mr. Whitechoker.

"Do? There'd be so much for it to do that the members could hardly find time to rest," returned the Idiot. "Do? Why, my dear sir, take this house, for instance, and see what it could do here. What a boon it would be for me if some kind-hearted person would come here once a week and sew buttons on my clothes, darn my socks – in short, keep me mended. What better work for one who desires to make the world brighter, happier, and less sinful!"

"I fail to see how the world would be brighter, happier, or less sinful if your suspender-buttons were kept firm, and your stockings darned, and your wardrobe generally mended," said Mr. Pedagog. "I grant that such a guild would be doing a noble work if it would take you in hand and correct many of your impressions, revise your well-known facts so as to bring them more in accord with indubitable truths, and impart to your customs some of that polish which you so earnestly strive for in your dress."

"Thank you," said the Idiot, suavely. "But I don't wish to overburden the kind ladies to whom I refer. If my costumes could be looked after I might find time to look after my customs, and, I assure you, Mr. Pedagog, if at any time you will undertake to deliver a course of lectures on Etiquette, I will gladly subscribe for two orchestra-chairs and endeavor to occupy both of them. At any rate, to return to the main point, I claim that the world would be happier and brighter and less sinful if the domestic heathen were kept mended by such a guild, and I challenge any one here to deny, even on so slight a basis as the loose suspender-button, the truth of what I say. When I arise in the morning and find a button gone, do I make genial remarks about the joys of life? I do not. I use words. Sometimes one word, which need not be repeated here. I am unhappy, and, being unhappy, the world seems dark and dreary, and in speaking impatiently, though very much to the point, as I do, I am guilty of an offence that is sinful. With such a start in the morning, I come here to the table. Mr. Pedagog sees that I am not quite myself. He asks me if I am not feeling well, an irritating question at any time, but particularly so to a man with a suspender-button gone. I retort. He re-retorts, until our converse is warmer than the coffee, and our relations colder than the waffles. Finally I leave the house, slamming the door behind me, structurally weakening the house, and go to business, where I wreak my vengeance upon the second clerk, who takes it out of the office-boy, who goes home and vents his wrath on his little sister, who, goaded into recklessness, teases the baby until he yells and gets spanked by his mother for being noisy. Now, why should a loose suspender-button be allowed to subject that baby to such humiliation, and who can deny that, if it had been properly sewed on by a guild, such as I have mentioned, the baby never would have been spanked for the causes mentioned? What is *your* answer, Mr. Whitechoker?"

"Truly, I am so breathless at your logic that I cannot reason," said the Minister. "But haven't we digressed a little? We were speaking of cooks, and we conclude with a pathetic little allegory about a suspender-button and a baby that is not only teased but spanked."

"The baby could get the same spanking for reasons based on the shortcomings of the cooks," said the Idiot. "I am irritated when I am served with green pease hard enough to batter down Gibraltar if properly aimed; when my coffee is a warmed-over reminiscence of last night's demi-tasse, I leave the house in a frame of mind that bodes ill for the junior clerk, and the effect on the baby is ultimately the same."

"And – er – you'd have the ladies whose energies are now devoted towards the clothing of the heathen come here and do the cooking?" queried the School-master.

"I leave if they do," said the Doctor. "I have seen too much of the effects of amateur cookery in my profession to want any of it. They are good cooks in theory, but not in practice."

"There you have it!" said the Idiot, triumphantly. "Right in a nutshell. That's where the cooks are always weak. They have none of the theory and all of the practice. If they based practice on theory, they'd cook better. Wherefore let your theoretical cooks seek out the practical and instruct them in the principles of the culinary art. Think of what twelve ladies could do; twelve ladies trained in the sewing-circle to talk rapidly, working five hours a day apiece, could devote an hour a week to three hundred and sixty cooks, and tell them practically all they themselves know in that time; and if, in addition to this, twelve other ladies, forming an auxiliary guild, would make dresses and bonnets and things for the same cooks, instead of for the cannibals, it would keep them good-natured."

"Splendid scheme!" said the Doctor. "So practical. Your brain must weigh half an ounce."

"I've never had it weighed," said the Idiot, "but, I fancy, it's a good one. It's the only one I have, anyhow, and it's done me good service, and shows no signs of softening. But, returning to the cooks, good-nature is as essential to the making of a good cook as are apples to the making of a dumpling. You can't associate the word dumpling with ill-nature, and just as the poet throws himself into his work, and as he is of a cheerful or a mournful disposition, so does his work appear cheerful or mournful, so do the productions of a cook take on the attributes of their maker. A dyspeptic cook will prepare food in a manner so indigestible that it were ruin to partake of it. A light-hearted cook will make light bread; a pessimistic cook will serve flour bricks in lieu thereof."

"I think possibly you are right when you say that," said the Doctor. "I have myself observed that the people who sing at their work do the best work."

"But the worst singing," growled the School-master.

"That may be true," put in the Idiot; "but you cannot expect a cook on sixteen dollars a month to be a prima-donna. Now, if Mr. Whitechoker will undertake to start a sewing-circle in his church for people who don't care to wear clothing, but to sow the seeds of concord and good cookery throughout the kitchens of this land, I am prepared to prophesy that at the end of the year there will be more happiness and less depression in this part of the world; and once eliminate dyspepsia from our midst, and get civilization and happiness controvertible terms, then you will find your foreign missionary funds waxing so fat that instead of the amateur garments for the heathen you now send them, you will be able to open an account at Worth's and Poole's for every barbarian in creation. The scheme for the sewing on of suspender-buttons and the miscellaneous mending that needs to be done for lone-lorn savages like myself might be left in abeyance until the culinary scheme has been established. Bachelors constitute a class, a small class only, of humanity, but the regeneration of cooks is a universal need."

"I think your scheme is certainly a picturesque one and novel," said Mr. Whitechoker. "There seems to be a good deal in it. Don't you think so, Mr. Pedagog?"

"Yes – I do," said Mr. Pedagog, wearily. "A great deal – of language."

And amid the laugh at his expense which followed, the Idiot, joining in, departed.

II

A Suggestion for the Cable-cars

"Heigh-ho!" sighed the Idiot, rubbing his eyes sleepily. "This is a weary world."

"What? This from you?" smiled the Poet. "I never expected to hear that plaint from a man of your cheerful disposition."

"Humph!" said the Idiot, with difficulty repressing a yawn. "Humph! and I may add, likewise, tut! What do you take me for – an insulated sun-beam? I can't help it if shadows camp across my horizon occasionally. I wouldn't give a cent for the man who never had his moments of misery. It takes night to enable us to appreciate daytime. Misery is a foil necessary to the full appreciation of joy. I'm glad I am sort of down in the mouth to-day. I'll be all right to-morrow, and I'll enjoy to-morrow all the more for to-day's megrim. But for the present, I repeat, this is a weary world."

"Oh, I don't think so," observed the School-master. "The world doesn't seem to me to betray any signs of weariness. It got to work at the usual hour this morning, and, as far as I can judge, has been revolving at the usual rate of speed ever since."

"The Idiot's mistake is a common one," put in the Doctor. "I find it frequently in my practice."

"That's a confession," retorted the Idiot. "Do you find out these mistakes in your practice before or after the death of the patient?"

"That mistake," continued the Doctor, paying apparently little heed to the Idiot's remark – "that mistake lies in the Idiot's assumption that he is himself the world. He regards himself as the earth, as all of life, and, because he happens to be weary, the world is a weary one."

"It isn't a fatal disease, is it?" queried the Idiot, anxiously. "I am not likely to become so impressed with that idea, for instance, that I shall have to be put in a padded cell and manacled so that I may not turn perpetual handsprings under the hallucination that, being the world, it is my duty to revolve?"

"No," replied the Doctor, with a laugh. "No, indeed. That is not at all likely to happen, but I think it would be a good idea if you were to carry the hallucination out far enough to put a cake of ice on your head, assuming that to be the north pole, and cool off that brain of yours."

"That is a good idea," returned the Idiot; "and if Mary will bring me the ice that was used to cool the coffee this morning, I shall be pleased to try the experiment. Meanwhile, this is a weary world."

"Then why under the canopy don't you leave it and go to some other world?" snapped Mr. Pedagog. "You are under no obligation to remain here. With a river on either side of the city, and a New York Juggernaut Company, Unlimited, running trolley-cars up and down two of our more prominent highways, suicide is within the reach of all. Of course, we should be sorry to lose you, in a way, but I have known men to recover from even greater afflictions than that."

"Thank you for the suggestion," replied the Idiot, transferring four large, porous buckwheat-cakes to his plate. "Thank you very much, but I have a pleasanter and more lingering method of suicide right here. Death by buckwheat-cakes is like being pierced by a Toledo blade. You do not realize the terrors of your situation until you cease to be susceptible to them. Furthermore, I do not believe in suicide. It is, in my judgment, the worst crime a man can commit, and I cannot but admire the remarkable discernment evinced by the Fates in making of it its own inevitable capital punishment. A man may commit murder and escape death, but in the commission of suicide he is sure of execution. Just as Virtue is its own reward, so is Suicide its own amercement."

"Been reading the dictionary again?" asked the Poet.

"No, not exactly," said the Idiot, with a smile, "but – it's a kind of joke on me, I suppose – I have just been stuck, to use a polite term, on a book called Roget's *Thesaurus*, and, if I want to get hold of a new word that will increase my seeming importance to the community, I turn to it. That's

where I got 'amercement.' I don't hold that its use in this especial case is beyond cavil – that's another Thesaurian term – but I don't suppose any one here would notice that fact. It goes here, and I shall not use it elsewhere."

"I am interested to know how *you* ever came to be the owner of a *Thesaurus*," said the School-master, with a grim smile at the idea of the Idiot having such a book in his possession. "Except on the score of affinities. You are both very wordy."

"Meaning pleonastic, I presume," retorted the Idiot.

"I beg your pardon?" said the School-master.

"Never mind," said the Idiot. "I won't press the analogy, but I will say that those who are themselves periphrastic should avoid criticising others for being ambaginous."

"I think you mean ambiguous," said the School-master, elevating his eyebrows in triumph.

"I thought you'd think that," retorted the Idiot. "That's why I used the word 'ambaginous.' I'll lend you my dictionary to freshen up your phraseology. Meanwhile, I'll tell you how I happened to get a *Thesaurus*. I thought it was an animal, and when I saw that a New York bookseller had a lot of them marked down from two dollars to one, I sent and got one. I thought it was strange for a bookseller to be selling rare animals, but that was his business, not mine; and as I was anxious to see what kind of a creature a *Thesaurus* was, I invested. When I found out it was a book and not a tame relic of the antediluvian animal kingdom, I thought I wouldn't say anything about it, but you people here are so inquisitive you've learned my secret."

"And wasn't it an animal?" asked Mrs. Smithers-Pedagog.

"My dear – my *dear*!" ejaculated Mr. Pedagog. "Pray – ah – I beg of you, do not enter into this discussion."

"No, Mrs. Pedagog," observed the Idiot, "it was not. It was nothing more than a book, which, when once you have read it, you would not be without, since it gives your vocabulary a twist which makes you proof against ninety-nine out of every one hundred conversationalists in the world, no matter how weak your cause."

"I am beginning to understand the causes of your weariness," observed Mr. Pedagog, acridly. "You have been memorizing syllables. Really, I should think you were in danger of phonetic prostration."

"Not a bit of it," said the Idiot. "Those words are stimulating, not depressing. I begin to feel better already, now that I have spoken them. I am not half so weary as I was, but for my weariness I had good cause. I suffered all night from a most frightful nightmare. It utterly destroyed my rest."

"Welsh-rarebit?" queried the Genial Old Gentleman who occasionally imbibed, with a tone of reproach. "If so, why was I not with you?"

"That question should be its own answer," replied the Idiot. "A man who will eat a Welsh-rarebit alone is not only a person of a sullen disposition, but of reckless mould as well. I would no sooner think of braving a Welsh-rarebit unaccompanied than I would think of trying to swim across the British Channel without a lifesaving boat following in my wake."

"I question if so light a body as you could have a wake!" said Mr. Pedagog, coldly.

"I am sorry, but I can't agree with you, Mr. Pedagog," said the Bibliomaniac. "A tugboat, most insignificant of crafts, roils up the surface of the sea more than an ocean steamer does. Fuss goes with feathers more than with large bodies."

"Well, they're neither of 'em in it with a cake of soap for real, bona-fide suds," said the Idiot, complacently, as he helped himself to his thirteenth buckwheat-cake. "However, wakes have nothing to do with the case. I had a most frightful dream, and it was not due to Welsh-rarebits, but to my fatal weakness, which, not having my *Thesaurus* at hand, I must identify by the commonplace term of courtesy. You may not have noticed it, but courtesy is my strong point."

"We haven't observed the fact," said Mr. Pedagog; "but what of it? Have you been courteous to any one?"

"I have," replied the Idiot, "and a nightmare is what it brought me. I rode up-town on a trolley-car last night, and I gave up my seat to sixteen ladies, two of whom, by-the-way, thanked me."

"I don't see why more than one of them should thank you," sniffed the landlady. "If a man gives up a trolley-car seat to sixteen ladies, only one of them can occupy it."

"I stand corrected," said the Idiot. "I gave up a seat to ladies sixteen times between City Hall and Twenty-third Street. I can't bring myself to sit down while a woman stands, and every time I'd get a seat some woman would get on the car. Hence it was that I gave up my seat to sixteen ladies. Why two of them should thank me, considering the rules, I do not know. It certainly is not the custom. At any rate, if I had walked up-town, I should not have had more exercise than I got on that car, bobbing up and down so many times, and lurching here and lurching there every time the car stopped, started, or turned a corner. Whether it was the thanks or the lurching I got, I don't know, but the incidents of the ride were so strongly impressed upon me that I dreamed all night, only in my dreams I was not giving up car seats. The first seat I gave up to a woman in the dream was an eighty-thousand-dollar seat in the Stock Exchange. It was expensive courtesy, but I did it, and mourned so over the result that I waked up and discovered that it was but a dream. Then I went to sleep again. This time I was at the opera. I had the best seat in the house, when in came a woman who hadn't a chair. Same result. I got up. She sat down, and I had to stand behind a pillar where I could neither see nor hear. More grief; waked up again, more tired than when I went to bed. In ten minutes I dozed off. Found myself an ambitious statesman running for the Presidency. Was elected and inaugurated. Up comes a Woman's Rights candidate. More courtesy. Gave up the Presidential chair to her and went home to obscurity, when again I awoke tireder than ever. Clock struck four. Fell asleep again. This time I was prepared for anything that might happen. I found myself in a trolley-car, but with me I had a perforated chair-bottom, such as the street peddlers sell. Lady got aboard. I put the perforated chair-bottom on my lap and invited her to sit down. She thanked me and did so. Then another lady got on. The lady on my lap moved up and made room for the second lady. She sat down. Between them they must have weighed three hundred pounds. I could have stood that, but as time went on more ladies got aboard, and every time that happened these first-comers would move up and make room for them. How they did it I can't say, any more than I can say how in real life three women can find room in a car-seat vacated by a little child. They did the former just as they do the latter, until finally I found myself flattened into the original bench like the pattern figure of a carpet. I felt like an entaglio; thirty women by actual count were pressing me to remain, as it were, but the worst of it all was they none of them seemed to live anywhere. We rode on and on and on, but nobody got off. I tried to move – and couldn't. We passed my corner, but there I was fixed. I couldn't breathe, and so couldn't call out, and I verily believe that if I hadn't finally waked up I should by this time have reached Hong-Kong, for I have a distinct recollection of passing through Chicago, Denver, San Francisco, and Honolulu. Finally, I did wake, however, simply worn out with my night's rest, which, gentlemen, is why I say, as I have already said, this is a weary world."

"Well, I don't blame you," said Mr. Whitechoker, kindly. "That was a most remarkable dream."

"Yes," assented Mr. Pedagog. "But quite in line with his waking thoughts."

"Very likely," said the Idiot, rising and preparing to depart. "It was absurd in most of its features, but in one of them it was excellent. I am going to see the president of the Electric Juggernaut Company, as you call it, in regard to it to-day. I think there is money in that idea of having an extra chair-seat for every passenger to hold in his lap. In that way twice as many seated passengers can be accommodated, and countless people with tender feet will be spared the pain of having other wayfarers standing upon them."

III

The Transatlantic Trolley Company

"If I were a millionaire," began the Idiot one Sunday morning, as he and his friends took their accustomed seats at the breakfast-table, "I would devote a tenth of my income to the poor, a tenth to children's fresh-air funds, and the balance to the education through travel of a dear and intimate friend of mine."

"That would be a generous distribution of your wealth," said Mr. Whitechoker, graciously. "But upon what would you live yourself?"

"I should stipulate in the bargain with my dear and intimate friend that we should be inseparable; that wherever he should go I should go, and that, of the funds devoted to his education through travel, one-half should be paid to me as my commission for letting him into a good thing."

"You certainly have good business sense," put in the Bibliomaniac. "I wish I had had when I was collecting rare editions."

"Collecting rare books and a good business sense seldom go together, I fancy," said the Idiot. "I began collecting books once, but I gave it up and took to collecting coins. I chose my coin and devoted my time to getting in that variety alone, and it has paid me."

"I don't exactly gather your meaning," said Mr. Whitechoker. "You chose your coin?"

"Precisely. I said, 'Here! Most coin collectors spend their time looking for one or two rare coins, for which, when they are found, they pay fabulous prices. The result is oftentimes penury. I, on the other hand, will look for coins of a common sort which do not command fabulous prices.' So I chose United States five-dollar gold pieces, irrespective of dates, for my collection, and the result is moderate affluence. I have between sixty and a hundred of them at my savings-bank, and when I have found it necessary to realize on them I have not experienced the slightest difficulty in forcing them back into circulation at cost."

"You are a wise Idiot," said the Bibliomaniac, settling back in his chair in a disgusted, tired sort of way. He had expected some sympathy from the Idiot as a fellow-collector, even though their aims were different. It is always difficult for a man whose ten-thousand-dollar library has brought six hundred dollars in the auction-room to find, even in the ranks of collectors, one who understands his woes and helps him bear the burden thereof by expressions of confidence in his sanity.

"Then you believe in travel, do you?" asked the Doctor.

"I believe there is nothing broadens the mind so much," returned the Idiot.

"But do you believe it will develop a mind where there isn't one?" asked the School-master, unpleasantly. "Or, to put it more favorably, don't you think there would be danger in taking the germ of a mind in a small head and broadening it until it runs the risk of finding itself confined to cramped quarters?"

"That is a question for a physician to answer," said the Idiot. "But, if I were you, I wouldn't travel if I thought there was any such danger."

"*Tu quoque*," retorted the School-master, "is *not* true repartee."

"I shall have to take your word for that," returned the Idiot, "since I have not a Latin dictionary with me, and all the Latin I know is to be found in the quotations in the back of my dictionary, like '*Status quo ante*,' '*In vino veritas*,' and '*Et tu, Brute*.' However, as I said before, I'd like to travel, and I would if it were not that the sea and I are not on very good terms with each other. It makes me ill to cross the East River on the bridge, I'm so susceptible to sea-sickness."

"You'd get over that in a very few days," said the Genial Old Gentleman who occasionally imbibed. "I have crossed the ocean a dozen times, and I'm never sea-sick after the third day out."

"Ah, but those three days!" said the Idiot. "They must resemble the three days of grace on a note that you know you couldn't pay if you had three years of grace. I couldn't stand them, I am afraid. Why, only last summer I took a drive off in the country, and the motion of the wagon going over the thank-ye-marms in the road made me so sea-sick before I'd gone a mile that I wanted to lie down and die. I think I should have done so if the horse hadn't run away and forced me to ride back home whether I wanted to or not."

"You ought to fight that," said the Doctor. "By-and-by, if you give way to a weakness of that sort, the creases in your morning newspaper will affect you similarly as you read it. If you ever have a birthday, let us know, and we'll help you to overcome the tendency by buying you a baby-jumper for you to swing around in every morning until you get used to the motion."

"It would be more to the purpose," replied the Idiot, "if you as a physician would invent a preventive of sea-sickness. I'd buy a bottle and go abroad at once on my coin collection if you would guarantee it to kill or to cure instantaneously."

"There is such a nostrum," said the Doctor.

"There is, indeed," put in the Genial Old Gentleman who occasionally imbibes. "I've tried it."

"And were you sea-sick?" asked the Doctor.

"I never knew," replied the Genial Old Gentleman. "It made me so ill that I never thought to inquire what was the matter with me. But one thing is certain, I'll take my sea-voyages straight after this."

"I'd like to go by rail," said the Idiot, after a moment's thought.

"That is a desire quite characteristic of you," said the School-master. "It is so probable that you could. Why not say that you'd like to cross the Atlantic on a tight-rope?"

"Because I have no such ambition," replied the Idiot. "Though it might be fun if the tight-rope were a trolley-wire, and one could sit comfortably in a spacious cab while speeding over the water. I should think that would be exhilarating enough. Just imagine how fine it would be on a stormy day to sit looking out of your cab-window far above the surface of the raging and impotent sea, skipping along at electric speed, and daring the waves to do their worst – that would be bliss."

"And so practical," growled the Bibliomaniac.

"Bliss rarely is practical," said the Idiot. "Bliss is a sort of mugwump blessing – too full of the ideal and too barren in practicability."

"Well," said Mr. Whitechoker. "I don't know why we should say that trolley-cars between New York and London never can be. If we had told our grandfathers a hundred years ago that a cable for the transmission of news could be laid under the sea, they would have laughed us to scorn."

"That's true," said the School-master. "But we know more than our grandfathers did."

"Well, rather," interrupted the Idiot. "My great-grandfather, who died in 1799, had never even heard of Andrew Jackson, and if you had asked him what he thought of Darwin, he'd have thought you were guying him."

"Respect for age, sir," retorted Mr. Pedagog, "restrains me from characterizing your great-grandfather, if, as you intimate, he knew less than you do. However, apart from the comparative lack of knowledge in the Idiot's family, Mr. Whitechoker, you must remember that with the advance of the centuries we have ourselves developed a certain amount of brains – enough, at least, to understand that there is a limit even to the possibilities of electricity. Now, when you say that just because an Atlantic cable would have been regarded as an object of derision in the eighteenth century, we should not deride one who suggests the possibility of a marine trolley-road between London and New York in the twentieth century, it appears to me that you are talking – er – talking – I don't like to say nonsense to one of your cloth, but –"

"Through his hat is the idiom you are trying to recall, I think, Mr. Pedagog," said the Idiot. "Mr. Whitechoker is talking through his hat is what you mean to say?"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Idiot," said the School-master; "but when I find that I need your assistance in framing my conversation, I shall – er – I shall give up talking. I mean to say that I do not think Mr. Whitechoker can justify his conclusions, and talks without having given the subject concerning which he has spoken due reflection. The cable runs along the solid foundation of the bed of the sea. It is a simple matter, comparatively, but a trolley-wire stretched across the ocean by the simplest rules of gravitation could not be made to stay up."

"No doubt you are correct," said Mr. Whitechoker, meekly. "I did not mean that I expected ever to see a trolley-road across the sea, but I did mean to say that man has made such wonderful advances in the past hundred years that we cannot really state the limit of his possibilities. It is manifest that no one to-day can devise a plan by means of which such a wire could be carried, but –"

"I fear you gentlemen would starve as inventors," said the Idiot. "What's the matter with balloons?"

"Balloons for what?" retorted Mr. Pedagog.

"For holding up the trolley-wires," replied the Idiot. "It is perfectly feasible. Fasten the ends of your wire in London and New York, and from coast to coast station two lines of sufficient strength to keep the wire raised as far above the level of the sea as you require. That's simple enough."

"And what, pray, in this frenzy of the elements, this raging storm of which you have spoken," said Mr. Pedagog, impatiently – "what would then keep your balloons from blowing away?"

"The trolley-wire, of course," said the Idiot. Mr. Pedagog lapsed into a hopelessly wrathful silence for a moment, and then he said:

"Well, I sincerely hope your plan is adopted, and that the promoters will make you superintendent, with an office in the mid-ocean balloon."

"Thanks for your good wishes, Mr. Pedagog," the Idiot answered. "If they are realized I shall remember them, and show my gratitude to you by using my influence to have you put in charge of the gas service. Meantime, however, it seems to me that our ocean steamships could be developed along logical lines so that the trip from New York to Liverpool could be made in a very much shorter period of time than is now required."

"We are getting back to the common-sense again," said the Bibliomaniac. "That is a proposition to which I agree. Ten years ago eight days was considered a good trip. With the development of the twin-screw steamer the time has been reduced to approximately six days."

"Or a saving, really, of two days because of the extra screw," said the Idiot.

"Precisely," observed the Bibliomaniac.

"So that, provided there are extra screws enough, there isn't any reason why the trip should not be made in two or three hours."

"Ah – what was that?" said the Bibliomaniac. "I don't exactly follow you."

"One extra screw, you say, has saved two days?"

"Yes."

"Then two extra screws would save four days, three would save six days, and five extra screws would send the boat over in approximately no time," said the Idiot. "So, if it takes a man two hours to succumb to sea-sickness, a boat going over in less than that time would eliminate sea-sickness; more people would go; boats could run every hour, and Mr. Whitechoker could have a European trip every week without deserting his congregation."

"Inestimable boon!" cried Mr. Whitechoker, with a laugh.

"Wouldn't it be!" said the Idiot. "Unless I change my mind, I think I shall stay in this country until this style of greyhound is perfected. Then, gentlemen, I shall tear myself away from you, and seek knowledge in foreign pastures."

"Well, I am sure," said Mr. Pedagog – "I am sure that we all hope you will change your mind."

"Then you want me to go abroad?" said the Idiot.

"No," said Mr. Pedagog. "No – not so much that as that we feel if you were to change your mind the change could not fail to be for the better. A mind like yours ought to be changed."

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