

Bangs John Kendrick

From Pillar to Post: Leaves from a Lecturer's Note-Book



John Bangs

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I

GETTING USED TO IT

"I cannot imagine a more disagreeable way of qualifying for the income tax," said one of America's most noted after-dinner speakers to me when at a chance meeting he and I were discussing the joys and woes of the lecture platform. I must admit that in a way I sympathized with him; for I knew something of the sufferings endured for days and nights prior to one's own public appearance as an after-dinner or platform speaker.

There was a time many years ago, upon which I look back with wonder that I ever came through it without nervous prostration, when I suffered those selfsame mental agonies as the hour approached for the fulfilment of one of those rash promises which men fond of the sound of their own voices make months in advance to those subtle flatterers who would lure them from the easy solitudes of silence into the uneasy limelight of after-dinner oratory. Not without reason has a certain wit, whose name is unfortunately lost to fame, referred to the chairs behind the guest table on the raised platform at revelries of this nature as "The Seats of the Mighty and Miserable."

These sufferings involve a loss of appetite for days in advance of the event; a complete derangement of the nervous system, with no chance of recovery for at least ten days preceding the emergent hour, since sleep either refuses to come to one's relief altogether, or coming brings in its train a species of nerve-racking dream which leaves the last estate of the weary slumberer worse than the first. The complication is far more difficult to handle than that involved in the maturity of a promissory note which one is unable to meet; for there are conditions under which a tender-hearted creditor will permit a renewal of the latter sort of obligation, and this thought provides some sort of rift in the cloud of a debtor's despair.

But in the matter of public speaking there is no such comforting possibility. Nothing short of inglorious flight, painful accident, or serious illness, can save the signer of that promissory note for twenty-five hundred personally conducted after-dinner words from being called upon to pay in full the moment the note falls due. He can't even plead to be permitted the payment of one paragraph on account, and the balance in thirty days.

The contract can neither be evaded, postponed, nor sublet. It is then or never with him, and while no great harm would come to the world if ninety-nine and seven-eighths per cent. of the after-dinner speeches of the ages had gone unspoken, no man of the right, forward-looking, upstanding sort, whether his speeches be good, bad, or, like the most of them, merely indifferent, may wilfully or comfortably permit a promise of that nature to go to protest.

Yes, I sympathized with that excellent gentleman. I have known him to take to his bed three days before the ordeal, tremblingly approach the banquet board, rise to his feet, his nerves taut as a G string, his knees quaking in the merciful seclusion of the regions under the table, and then, with hardly a glimmering of consciousness of what he was doing or saying, his whole being thrilled with terror, acquit himself brilliantly, to return home at the conclusion of his trial physically and nervously prostrated.

One of the happiest recollections of my platform work, nevertheless, had to do with just such a shivering, quivering condition. It was many years ago – back in the mid-'90's of the last century, that so-called crazy end-of-the-century period, which inspired Max Nordau's depressing treatise on

Degeneracy, and yet now seems so gloriously sane in contrast to what is going on in the world at the present time.

In some mysterious fashion I had succeeded in writing what the literary world is pleased to term a "best seller," and was in consequence enjoying a taste of that notoriety which inexperienced youth so often confounds with immortality. One result was a tolerably persistent demand that I exhibit myself at one of those then popular functions known as Authors' Readings. This was a form of entertainment almost as barbarically cruel as those ancient ceremonies in which Christian martyrs were thrown into an arena to demonstrate their powers in combatting irritated tigers, and such other blood-thirsty beasts of the jungle as the ingenious fancy of the management might suggest. It was, in a manner of speaking, a sort of Literary Hagenbeck Show, whither the curious among the readers of the day were lured in sweet Charity's name by the promise of a personal performance by real literary lions, with an occasional wild goose or two wearing temporarily the gorgeous plumage of the Birds of Parnassus, thrown in to make the program longer.

Invited to take part in one of these affairs, and feeling that for posterity's sake it was my duty to rivet my firm grasp upon Fame by keeping such company as my remotest great-grandchild could wish to have me known by, I carelessly accepted as if it were easy to comply, and all in the day's work of a new sun dawning upon the horizon of letters.

But when the fateful evening arrived a "change came o'er the spirit of my dream." Two dread situations arose which bade fair to drive me either into the nearest sanatorium, or to the obscurity of the deepest available jungle. Had I yielded to my immediate impulse, I should have flown as far afield as the Virginia negro who, upon being advised to leave town lest he suffer certain extreme penalties for his misdeeds, replied that he was "gwine, an' gwine so fur it'll cost nine dollars to send a postal card back."

On one side of the curtain at the great metropolitan hall where the Readings were to be held sat nearly three thousand hungry readers, waiting to see six unhappy authors prove whether or no they could read their own productions and survive; and on the other side of the curtain were five real Immortals and my sorely agitated self. My fellow sufferers that night were Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, Dr. Henry Van Dyke, William Dean Howells, the lamented Frank R. Stockton, and the ever unforgettable Mrs. Julia Ward Howe.

It was rather godlike company for a mere mortal like myself, and as I gazed upon them I realized, perhaps for the first time, the magnificent distances that lie between Yonkers-on-Hudson and Parnassus-by-Helicon. Frozen from heel to toe by the thought of having to appear before so vast and critical an audience, the complete refrigeration of my nervous system was accomplished by the thought of even temporary association with those fixed stars in the firmament of American Letters. Instead of a burning torch on the heights of Olympus, I felt myself more of a possible cinder in the public eye. One might be willing to appear before a Court of Literary Justice in the company of any one of them, but to assume equality with five such household words all at once, and especially before an audience many of whose members had from time immemorial known me as "Johnny" – well, to speak with frankness, it got on my nerves.

My condition was like that foreshadowed by a good old neighbor of mine up on the coast of Maine, who when I asked him one morning if he ever felt nervous when the thunder was roaring, and the lightning was striking viciously, replied, "No, I hain't never felt nervous: *I'm jest plain dam skeert to death!*" If the exits from the stage had not been guarded, I should have fled; but there was no escape, and while I awaited my turn to go out upon the platform I paced the back of the stage, concealed from the public gaze by a drop scene, shaking from head to foot with a nervous chill. I can scarcely even now bring myself to believe that there was a seismograph anywhere between the northern and southern poles so callous as to fail to register my vibrations.

It became evident as the moment approached that I should be utterly unable to go out upon the platform and do anything but dance: not after the graceful manner of Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Castle,

but of Saint Vitus himself. To have held a book, even so light a one as my own, in my shaking hand would have been physically impossible, and then, just as I was about to seek out the chairman of the committee of arrangements, and plead a sudden stroke of some sort, I felt a womanly arm thrust through my own, and a soft white hand was laid gently and soothingly upon my wrist. I glanced to my side, and there stood Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, her lovely eyes full of sympathy, touched with a joyous reassuring twinkle.

"Oh, Mr. Bangs," said she, with a slight catch and tremor in her voice, "do you know I am so nervous about going out before all those people to-night that I really believe I shall have to borrow some of your manly courage and strength to carry me through!"

A marvelous transformation of nervous attitude was the immediate result, a determination to rush to the aid of a lady flying a signal of distress summoning all my latent courage to her cause. A realization of the lovely tactfulness of her approach and its true significance, and the prompt response of my sense of humor, not yet quite dead, to the exact facts of the situation, made a man of me for the time being – a man who would dare the undarable, attempt the unattainable, and if need be, as the eloquent African preacher once observed, "onscrew the onscrutable." Nervousness, cowardice, muscular vibrations, and all disappeared like the mists of the night before the radiance of the dawn in the face of that gracious woman's tactful humor, and later on I went forth to my doom so brazenly, and smiling so confidently, that one critic in the next morning's newspaper intimated without much subtlety of phrasing that I enjoyed myself far more than my audience did.

It would be too much to say that Mrs. Howe's timely intervention on my behalf effected a permanent cure of my nervousness in platform work; but it has helped me much to overcome it; for many a time since, when through sheer weariness, or for some purely psychological reason, I have approached my work with uneasy forebodings, the memory of that delightful incident has come back to me, and I have invariably found relief from my fears in the smile which it never fails to bring to my lips, and to my spirit as well.

I do not know that it would be a good thing for any public speaker ever to approach the emergent hour with entire assurance and utterly calloused nerves. Such a condition might well bespeak an indifference to the work in hand which would result either in a purely mechanical delivery, or one so careless as to destroy the effect of the lecturer's most valuable asset – a sympathetic personality. I recall far back in my college days, in the early '80's of the last century, meeting at one of my fraternity conventions that inspiring publicist, the late Senator Frye of Maine. In the course of a pleasant chat, having myself to appear before the convention with a committee report the following morning, and feeling a trifle uncertain as to how I was going to "come through," I asked the senator if he was ever a victim to nervousness when making a public address, and his answer was very suggestive.

"Always, my lad," said he, "always! I have been making public speeches off and on now for twenty-five or thirty years, and even to-day when I rise up to speak in the United States Senate, or on the stump, my knees shake a little under me. And I'm glad they do, Son," he went on significantly; "for if they didn't, I should begin to feel that the days of my usefulness were over, for it would mean that I really didn't care whether I got through safely or not."

So it was that up to a certain point I sympathized with my friend the distinguished after-dinner speaker when he intimated that the lecture platform was no bed of roses. For one of his nervous organization and temperament it would be impossible. It would make a nervous wreck of him in a short while, and in the end would shorten his life, even as it has shortened the span of many another robust spirit; such as the late Alfred Tennyson Dickens, for instance, who in very truth succumbed to the exactions of travel and of a lovely hospitality that he knew not how to resist.

But for myself there is so much in the work that is inspiring, so much that is pleasing in the human relationships it makes possible, that but for the discomforts of travel I could really feed upon it spiritually, and seek no happier diet. I defy any man to be a pessimist on the subject of American character after a season or two on the lecture platform; provided of course that he is a reasonably

sympathetic man, and is so constituted in matters social that he is what the politicians call a "good mixer."

To the man who is not interested in the human animal, and insists upon judging all men by his own rigid and narrow standards, measuring souls by a yardstick, as it were, the work can never be a joy; but if he is broad enough to take people as he finds them, looking for the good that lies inherent in every human being, and judging them by the measure of their capacity to become what they were designed to be, and are honestly trying to be, then he will find it full of a living and a loving interest almost equal to that of the "joy forever."

Pasted in my spiritual hat is a little rime by one whose name modesty forbids my mentioning, running:

I can't be what Shakespeare was,
I can't do what great folks does;
But, by Ginger, I can be
ME!
And among the folks that love me
Nothin' more's expected of me.

The wandering platform speaker who will heed the intimations of that little rime, and seize the friendships in kind that surely await his coming in all parts of this great, genial country of ours, will find a wondrous store of happiness ready to his hand. If in addition to this he will cultivate the habit of looking for good in unpromising places, and of resolutely refusing to admit the power of small irritations to destroy his peace of mind, he will get along nicely. The latter of course requires resolution of a kind that is persistent in the face of unremitting annoyances. To say that these annoyances do not exist would be idle; but not half so idle as the act of giving them controlling importance in the making or the unmaking of a day's happiness.

The sooner one who travels the Platform Path learns to suspend judgment as to his fellow beings, and to suspect the fallacy of the obvious, the better it will be for him, and for his personal comfort. The first conspicuous lesson I had in this particular was out in Arizona on my first extended tour in our wonderful West in 1906. I found myself one afternoon on my way from Los Angeles to Phoenix. After having satisfied the inner man with an excellent Fred Harvey luncheon – an edible oasis always in a desert of indigestibility – I had retired to the smoking car for that spiritual refreshment which comes from watching the smoke wreaths curl upward from the end of a good cigar.

Unhappily for the quality of that refreshment, I was no sooner seated in the smoking room that I perceived that I was surrounded by men who, judging by surface indications, were hopeless vulgarians. Among them were three especially whose conversation was even lower than their brows. I think I can best describe their conversation by saying that in all probability Boccaccio's lady companions out Fiesole way, at the time of the plague that drove the Florentine Four Hundred beyond the city limits, would have fled blushing before it, taking refuge by preference in the pure, undefiled Rolloisms of the Decameron itself; while poor old Rabelais, not always a master of reticence in things better left unsaid, would, I am sure, have joined a literary branch of the I. W. W. in sheer rebellion, rather than sully the refinement of his pen by taking down any part of it.

One has to listen to a great deal of this sort of thing en route, and pending the discovery of some kind of vocal silencer that shall render such communications as noiseless as they are corrupting to good manners, or a portable muffler which the unwilling listener may place over his ears, the wandering platform performer who has not yet reached a point where he can give up his cigar and be happy must needs endure them. Indeed he is doing well if he is not lured into a shamefaced enjoyment of such talk; for it must be admitted that some of the traveling companions one meets thus by chance have rare powers as story-tellers, and pour forth at times most objectionable periods with a smiling

enthusiasm almost fetching enough to tempt a Simeon Stylites down from the top of his pillar into the lower regions of their alluring good fellowship.

Neither a prig nor a prude am I; but on this particular occasion the gross results of the conversation were so very gross as to preclude the possibility of there being any "net proceeds" of value, and I fled.

On returning to my place in the sleeper I noticed in the section directly across the aisle a handsome Englishwoman, traveling with no other companion than a little daughter, a child of about three and a half years of happy, bubbling youth. The little one was seated on her mother's lap, and was enjoying a "let's pretend" drive across country, using the maternal lorgnette chain in lieu of the ribbons wherewith to guide her imaginary steeds.

An hour passed, when a boisterous laugh from the rear of the car indicated the approach of the three barbarians of the smoker, who to my disgust a moment later settled themselves in the section directly in front of mine, and to my dismay began apparently to take a greater interest in the lady across the aisle than the ordinary usages of polite human intercourse warranted, lacking a formal introduction.

I have never posed as a Squire of Dames, and I have a wholesome distaste for such troubles as an unseeing eye enables a man to avoid; but the intrusion of these Goths, not to say Vandals, upon the lady's right to travel unmolested was so obvious that I couldn't help seeing and inwardly resenting it. The woman herself treated the situation with becoming coolness and dignity, showing only by a slight change of color, and now and then a vexed biting of the lips, that she noticed it at all; but the cooler she became the more strenuous became the efforts of the barbarians to "scrape an acquaintance."

I held an inward debate with myself as to my duty in the premises. I did not care to get into a row; but the ogling soon became so pronounced that it really seemed necessary to interfere. I reached out my hand to ring for such reinforcements as the porter and the conductor might be able to bring to our assistance, when to my astonishment the worst offender of the three rose from his seat, and stepped quickly to the lady's side – and then there was revealed to me the marvelous wisdom of the old injunction, "Judge not, that ye be not judged"; for the supposed ruffian, whom I would a moment before have willingly, and with seeming justification, thrown bodily from the train, with the manner of a Chesterfield in the rough lifted his hat and spoke.

"You will excuse me for speaking to you, ma'am," he said, and there was a wistful smile on his lips and a tenderness in his eye worthy of a seemingly better cause, "but I'm – I'm what they call a drummer, a traveling man, and I've been away from home for three months. I've got a little girl of my own at home about the same age as this kid of yours, and I tell you, ma'am, you'd ease off an awful case of homesickness if you'd let me play with the little lady just for a few minutes."

The mother's heart seemed to go right out to him, as did mine also. She smiled graciously, and handed over her little daughter to the tender mercies of that group whose presence I had fled only a short while before – and for the rest of the afternoon that Pullman sleeper was transformed into a particularly bright and joyous nursery that echoed and reëchoed to the merry laughter of happy childhood.

If there is an animal of any kind in the zoos of commerce that those men did not impersonate during the next two or three hours I do not know its name, the especially objectionable barbarian transforming himself instantly on demand into an elephant, a yak, a roaring lion, a tiger, or a leopard changing its spots as actively as a flea, and all with a graceful facility that Proteus himself might well have envied. And later, when night fell, and weariness came with it, in the dusk of the twilight it was indeed a pretty sight to me, and a sight that smote somewhat upon my conscience for my over-ready contempt of the earlier afternoon, when my gaze fell upon the figure of an exhausted drummer, his eyes half-closed, sleepily humming a tender lullaby to a tired little golden-haired stranger who lay cuddled up in his arms, fast asleep, with her head upon his breast.

I like to think that that little incident was a valuable contribution to my education in the science of brotherhood. It has not perhaps produced in my soul a larger tolerance of the intolerable in casual conversation, but it has served to warn me against the dangers of snap judgments, and has certainly broadened my sympathies in respect to my fellow man in my chance meetings with him upon the highways and byways of life, whence sometimes, in the loneliness of my wanderings, I have gathered much comfort, and reaped harvests in friendliness which otherwise I might have lost.

II

SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY

In traveling about the country, and especially in the South, I have been impressed with the wisdom of the character in Owen Wister's delightful story of "The Virginian," who when another man applied an unspeakable name to him leveled a revolver in the speaker's face, and said, "When you call me that, say it with a smile!" (I quote from memory.) A moment on the road is made cheerful or difficult by the manner in which things are said, and the wanderer's homesickness is either relieved or deepened by the manner of a chance remark, which brings cheer if it be smiling, and a deeper sense of loneliness if it be otherwise.

Throughout the South I have never felt quite so far away from home as in some parts of New England less than a hundred miles from my own roof-tree, and I think that this is due largely to the positive effort on the part of the average Southern man or woman to maintain the traditional courtesy and hospitality of the South toward the stranger within its gates. It is only semi-occasionally that one finds in some sour-natured relic of other days any other attitude than that of smiling welcome, and even with the thermometer ranging close to the zero mark I have learned why the Southland is in spirit anyhow the "Land of Roses."

It must be admitted, however, that when the departure from the attitude of cordiality is made it is done thoroughly, and with a sort of reckless truculence which the wary traveler will be wise to ascribe solely to its individual source.

In the winter and spring of 1913 there was a great deal of work cut out for me in the Southern territory, and during my travels there, which involved the crossing and recrossing of every State in the section except Kentucky, from the Atlantic coast to the Mexican border, I encountered much in the way of human experience that is delightful to remember, and very little that I would rather forget. It was upon this trip that two incidents occurred which showed very clearly the difference between a cutting retort smilingly administered and that other kind of peculiarly rasping repartee, born of a soured nature that has confirmed its acid qualities by pickling itself in a mixture of equal parts of gloomy self-sympathy over fancied wrongs, and – well, not grape juice.

There is a kind of tonic dispensed in certain of our prohibition States by licensed drugstores and carried by suffering patients in small black bottles, secreted in their hip pockets, like deadly weapons – which indeed they are (whence, possibly, we get the term "hipped" as descriptive of the ailment of the sufferer) – which does not exactly mellow the disposition of the consumer, whatever glow it may impart to his countenance.

One morning I found myself on my way from Natchitoches, in Louisiana, a lovely survival of a picturesque old French trading post, a perfect home of roses, both human and floral, which will ever remain a garden spot in my memory, to Shreveport. It was in the middle of May, and the whole country was a delight to the eye, with its lovely greens and lush spring coloring. I was returning from a lecture before the State Normal School, and while sitting in the smoking car enjoying my weed was introduced to a gentleman (I use the word carelessly, and without positive conviction) whom everybody had been calling "Judge." I am glad to say that I did not catch his last name. I do not even know whether or not he was really a judge, or, if he were, what he was a judge of. He reminded me more of the judges I have read of in fictional humor than any I have ever seen on the bench, and from his general attitude toward his fellows on the train I gained a tolerably clean-cut impression that he tried his "cases" in solitary state, rather than in that more open fashion which is such a bad example to the young, and productive of that ruinously extravagant disease known as "treating." I may be doing the man an injustice, but I am none the less trying to sketch him as I saw him. He had the manner and manners of the solitary reveler, and the generally "oily," but not suave, quality of his makeup

confirmed my impression that any love of temperance he might manifest was purely academic, or, as one of our leading statesmen might put it, "largely psychological." Desirous of starting things along pleasantly after my introduction to the judge, I remarked upon the marvelous beauty of the country.

"Everything is beautifully green about here," I said. "It is a positive pleasure to look out on those lovely fields."

"Glad you like 'em," said the judge, helping himself to a generous mouthful of tobacco.

"Well, you see," said I, "I come from Maine, Judge, and I am particularly fond of the spring, and we don't get ours until late. I guess," I added, "that in respect to that we are about a month and a half behind you people down here."

"Yes," said he explosively, "*and, by God! you are fifty years behind us in every other respect!*"

It was a kindly and tactful remark, and I was duly edified. If he had said it smilingly, I should have been happier, and would have been inclined to enter upon a half-hour of jovial banter on the subject of the respective merits of our several States; but there was a truculent self-confidence about his honor's "atmosphere" that foreshadowed little in the way of a satisfactory issue had I ventured to carry the discussion further. I simply withdrew within myself, like a turtle, finished my cigar in silence, and returned to my seat in the chair car, convinced that in whatever line of action the judge was really an expert – law, history, economics, or what-not – he at least knew how to put a cork in a bottle, and jam it in so tight that nothing could get out of it – I being the bottle.

As I sat for the rest of my journey in that chair car my mind reverted to another incident that had occurred two months earlier. The inviting causes were similar; but the party of the second part was a very different sort of individual. The judge was said to be prosperous, the owner of many acres of fertile sugar land, and had, or so I was informed, a professional income of fifteen thousand dollars a year. One would think he could have afforded to be genial under such conditions. The other was a man bent and broken under the stress of his years and his trials, coming home, after a lifetime of failure, to pass his remaining days, manifestly few in number, amid the scenes of his youth. What few locks were left him were gray, and he limped painfully when he walked. He had served on the Confederate side during the war, and still carried with him the evidences of sacrifice.

I met him on the railway platform at a little junction town in Southern Tennessee. I was en route to a small college town in Upper Mississippi. We had had a long and tedious wait upon the fast decaying station platform, hoping almost against hope that at least day before yesterday's train would come along and pick us up, whatever might be the fate of the special combination of wheezy engine and spring-halted cars due that morning. As I nervously paced the dragging hours away I noticed this old fellow limping anxiously about, making over and over again of everybody he met the same inquiry as to the probable arrival or non-arrival of our train; and now and then he would hobble with difficulty over to a small soap box, with a slatted top, which stood just outside the baggage room, in which there was imprisoned a poor, shivering, and I fancy hungry, little fox terrier, whining to be let out.

"Never mind, Bobby," the old man would whisper through the slatted top of the box. "'Taint gwine to be much longer now. We'll be home soon."

The kindly attitude of the old man toward the unhappy little animal touched me more deeply than his own poverty-stricken condition, and so, yielding to a friendly impulse, I stood by him for a moment and spoke to him.

"It's a long wait," said I.

"Oh, well," he said cheerfully, straightening himself up stiffly, "it's so near the end I ain't complainin'. I been waitin' fohty yeahs for this, Brother."

"Forty years?" I repeated.

"Yes, suh," he replied, "fohty long yeahs, suh. I ain't been home since the end o' the wah, suh. An' now I'm comin' back, an' I reckon after I git thar thar ain't a gwine to be but one mo' journey, suh, befo' I'm through."

"You mean – " I began.

"I'm comin' home to die, suh," he said. "Not that I'm a gwine to be in any hurry to do it," he added, with a winning smile, "but I'm tiahed o' wanderin', an' what's left o' my time hyah, suh, 'll pass mo' pleasantly back among the old scenes."

I endeavored to cover up my emotions by offering the old man a cigar.

"I thank you, suh," he said, taking it. "I'm very fond of a good seegyar, though I don't git 'em any too often, suh. Are you a Tennessee man, suh?"

"No," said I. "I come from Maine. That's a good way from here."

And then it came. The old fellow gave a great chuckle, and reached out his hand and seized me by mine.

"I want to shake your hand, suh," he said with rare cordiality. "*The last time I see a Maine man, suh, was durin' the wah, an' I was chasin' him with a gun. He was a darned good runner; but I ketched him, an' I'm glad I did, fo' he was a dam sight better feller than he was a runner!*"

I must confess that when later in the day I saw the old gentleman get off the train in the midst of a welcoming multitude of old friends, with his battered old suitcase in one hand, and the slatted soap box containing the yelping Bobby in the other – all his earthly possessions – I was glad to feel that he had come "home"; and as he waved a feeble but courteous adieu to me from the platform as the train drew out I knew that I had met a Southern gentleman of a peculiarly true and lovable sort.

One finds much in these little jaunts in the Southland to appeal to one's sense of humor; but after all there is much more that appeals to one's sympathies. I had the pleasure of riding once in Louisiana on a train in company with an old Confederate soldier, who made me as completely his prisoner in the shackles of affectionate regard as he might, because of his powerful build, have made me a prisoner in fact had we met face to face on the field of battle. He was a man of convictions; but he was always so thoroughly the honest-hearted gentleman in presenting his points of view that, although we differed radically upon almost every matter of present political interest, I found for the moment, anyhow, a sweet reasonableness in his principles. His manner was so calm, and gracious, and transparently sincere, that I found him wholly captivating.

His chance remark that he hoped to attend the great Confederate reunion shortly to be held at Chattanooga, or Chattanoogaogy, as he called it (there is always a soft, caressing accent in the real Southerner's discourse that changes a mere word or name into a term of endearment), naturally brought up a reference to the great conflict, and I took a certain amount of human pleasure out of the old man's present content with the general situation, as shown in the naïve statement with which he began to talk on the subject.

"You know, suh," said he, "I feel pretty well satisfied with the way things turned out, even though at the time, suh, I didn't want 'em to turn out just that a-way."

"We are undoubtedly stronger as a nation to-day than if it had turned out differently," I ventured.

"Yes, suh," he said. "If we'd got away, suh, it wouldn't ha' been long befo' the principle o' the right o' secession havin' been established, we'd all ha' been secedin' from each othah, suh; and after the States had done all the secedin' they could the parishes would ha' begun secedin' from the States; an' the towns would ha' seceded from the parishes – until the whole damn country would ha' landed in Mexico!"

"I never thought of it in that light before," I smiled; "but I guess you're right."

"An' that ain't all, neither, suh," he went on. "I'd ha' felt a great sight worse about it if we'd been licked, suh. If we'd been licked in that great fight, suh, I don't think I'd evah have got ovah it, suh."

I maintained a discreet silence; for I could not but feel that I was on the verge of a great philosophical discovery.

"When a fellah's licked, suh," the old man went on, "he just natcherly kain't help feelin' sore, suh; *but if he's merely ovahpowahed, suh – why that's very different.*"

There may be minds to which that distinction is too subtle to be either obvious or convincing; but the more I have thought it over since the more has it seemed to me to involve a profound philosophy

which would make the world happier were it more widely accepted by those suffering from reverses of fortune. To me there was a whole sermon in that brief utterance, and the difference between being "licked" and being "merely overpowered" has been one out of which I have derived no end of comfort myself in hours of difficulty. To be whipped is one thing; to be merely overcome is indeed another!

Nor was the old man's kindly feeling concerning the God of Things as They Are, as expressed in words, mere lip service; for in the course of our morning's chat other things developed which I am glad enough to put upon record for Northern eyes.

"I wish," said he, "that you might stay ovah hyah at my home a day or two, suh, and let me take you to one of our Post meetin's, suh. We'd make you more than welcome."

"Yank though I be, eh?" I laughed.

"Yes, indeed, suh," he replied. "We ain't got anything against you on that score, suh. My first meetin' with Yanks in a not strictly fightin' capacity was once when a half a dozen of 'em took me prisoner. I found myself surrounded by 'em one day durin' the wah when I was doin' picket duty, and the way they run me in was a caution, suh. They bein' six to one, I just let on that I was satisfied if they was."

"And what did they do to you?" I asked.

"They near killed me, suh, with seegyars, and mo' real food than I'd seen in six months," he said with a chuckle. "The' wasn't anything they had, from plug tobacker and seegyars up to a real meat dinner that I didn't git mo' 'n my faiah share of."

"And how long did they keep you?" I queried.

"Fo' as long as I was willin' to stay, suh," was his reply. "The minute they see I was beginnin' to feel oneasy they run me back to the line again, and turned me loose. Speakin' about Yanks," he went on, "we've got five of 'em buried in our own Confederate graveyard in the cemetery, suh; and I'm kind of afraid it won't be long befo' they's six of 'em. One of yo' old soldiers from up No'th come down here fo' his health last year; but he's gone down steadily, and I reckon it ain't for long that he'll be with us. When we heard he was an old soldier our Post sent him to the hospital, and he's dyin' there now. He seemed to feel so bad about the idee o' bein' buried in the Potter's Field that we voted to give him a grave with the rest of the boys, and when he goes he'll lie with soldiers, like he's allers wanted to do."

I could not find any words in the languages known to me, dead or alive, to express what I felt, and so I kept silent.

"He won't be forgotten, neither, after he gits there," the old fellow went on. "We have our Memorial Day, just as you have your Decoration Day, and every year we go up to the lot and decorate the graves of 'em all, Yank or Johnny, just the same. We put a little Confederate flag at the head of every grave that holds one of our own; and every one o' them Yanks has a little flag at the head of his grave too, only his is the flag he fought for, just as ours is the flag we fought for. It's a pretty sight, my friend," he added softly, "with them five little American flags flutterin' away among the sixty or seventy others."

Verily this Southern hospitality is no vain thing, no mere empty show, or ingratiating veneer to make a spurious article seem real. Personal interest may sometimes rest at the basis of a seeming courtesy. Selfishness may lie often at the bottom of a superficial graciousness of manner assumed for the moment to conceal that very selfishness; but the hospitality that leads a body of old soldiers to grant at their own cost, and to take care of with their own loving hands, a green resting place, a last sanctuary, for a former foe, that indeed is an unselfish, genuine kind of hospitality which, like the peace of God, passeth all understanding.

III

GETTING THE LEVEL

One of the more serious dangers confronting the platform speaker is the presumption that his audience will not prove sufficiently intelligent to grasp him when he is at what he thinks is his best. I use the word "presumption" advisedly; for it is sheer presumption and nothing else, and I may add that if my experience has taught me anything, it is that it does not pay to be so presuming. If there is trouble anywhere in "getting one's stuff over," as the saying is, the fault will be found in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred to be with the lecturer, and not with his audience.

My most earnest advice to those platform speakers who feel it necessary to "get *down* to the level" of an audience, instead of feeling an inward urge to climb *up* to it, is that they give up the platform altogether, and take up some other occupation where conscious superiority really counts; say that of head waiter in a New York restaurant, for instance, or possibly that of literary critic on the staff of a periodical, whose chief concern is pink socks, lavender neckties, and the mysteries of lingerie. In these occupations conscious superiority is an essential of success; but on the lecture platform the consciously superior person cannot in the very nature of things last very long: not in this country, anyhow; for, as I have studied the American people face to face for the past ten years in every State of the Union, I have learned that their capacity for pricking a bubble of pretense on sight is surpassed only by their high appreciation of a speaker who immediately gets into the atmosphere of the special occasion confronting him.

For my own part, I have come to believe that each occasion establishes its own "best," and that the chief duty confronting me is to measure up to the "best" demanded by that occasion if I can. For this reason one's lecture should be a moderately flexible affair, which can be so adjusted to each and every occasion that it fits an audience as nicely as a tailor-made garment. A lecture written out beforehand and committed to memory can never quite fulfil these requirements. It becomes not a lecture, but an essay; not platform work, but literary work; should be read, not heard; and in its delivery becomes not a sympathetic talk, man to man, but a mere recitation.

No one would be so foolish as to deny, however, that audiences do vary materially in their capacity to take in the subtler points of a lecture "fired" at them from the platform. I should not think of using the same phrases in a talk before a gathering in an East Side settlement house in New York that I would use before the ladies of a Browning Club in the vicinity of Boston, or before a body of college professors, or vice versa. But if I were fortunate enough to be asked to address all three, I should endeavor to vary the wording of my discourse according to the several needs of each, and base my notion of my "best" upon the demands of those particular needs. I confess also that if in one single audience all three classes of listeners were represented, I should not hesitate to put my thought into the language required by the capacity of the East Siders to understand, and be fairly assured of pleasing everybody; for it is my observation of the ways of ladies addicted to Browning, and of gentlemen of the academic kind, that they are after all very human, and enjoy simplicity of discourse quite as much as the other sort.

There is greater sincerity in "playing to the gallery" than most of the critics of that habit dream of, and personally I would rather fall short of the expectations of the boxes than fail in the eyes of the gallery, where reticence in the expression of critical opinion is not exactly a conspicuous virtue. To put it more plainly, I should infinitely prefer the humiliation of seeing a highborn lady falling asleep in an orchestra chair because of the bromidic quality of my talk, than be reminded of the same by flying vegetable matter consigned to me by some dissatisfied individual sitting up among the "gods."

An amusing, if somewhat radical, contrast in audiences befell my lot several years ago in the brief space of sixteen hours. In that time I successively addressed the Harvard Union at Cambridge on

a Tuesday evening, and the ladies of a Woman's Club in a Boston suburb the following morning. The audience at the Union was gathered in the wonderfully beautiful auditorium of Memorial Hall, and contained not less than twelve hundred particularly live wires, undergraduates mostly, almost fresh from the football field, or at least still under the influence of its system of expressing approval.

As I mounted the rostrum bedlam broke loose: not necessarily as a tribute to myself, but because frenzy is the modern collegiate way of making a visitor feel welcome. Thunderous noises never yet classified shook the rafters – noises ranging from the hoarse clamor of an excited populace at the finish of some great Olympian event, to the somewhat uncertain cackle of a freshman voice changing from soprano to bass. Pandemonium did not reign: it poured. Not since I visited the London Zoo and witnessed there a fight between two caged lions to the excited, clamorous interest of all the other beasts imprisoned there, have I heard such a variegated din as greeted me on that occasion, and I realized sympathetically for the first time perhaps the true significance of Theodore Roosevelt's "dee-lighted" smile when as President of the United States he took his annual stroll across the football field at a Harvard and Yale game, and listened to the "voice of the people." So contagious was it that I had all I could do to keep from joining in myself and only the necessity of saving my voice for my lecture prevented me from being myself heard above the din.

That noise was the keynote of the evening. I think I may say with due modesty that my lecture had one or two touches of humor in it – three or four, in fact – varying in character from the "scarcely perceptible subtle" to the "inevitably obvious," with other sorts sandwiched in between, and none of them was lost; although I was not permitted to finish many of my sentences. The audience seemed to get in ahead of me every time.

The situation reminded me in a way of the grandstand finish of a poor paralyzed old darky named Joe, of whom I was once told by a Pullman car porter on my way through Montana. Joe had been a famous sportsman in his day; but now misfortune had overtaken him, and he lay bedridden, wholly unable to use his legs, and awaiting the end. Several of his friends, taking pity on him, resolved to give him the joy of one last glorious coon hunt.

They put him on a stretcher and carried him out into the country where that luscious creature "abounded and abutted." The dogs were let loose, and finally showed unusual activity at the base of a tall tree; but, to the dismay of all, the game turned out to be no coon, but a particularly hungry, sore-headed, old she-bear.

As the roaring beast clambered down after her tormentors, Joe's litter bearers, terrified, dropped their burden and made off down the road in coward flight, and it was not until an hour after they had reached home in safety that they thought of the possible fate of their paralytic friend. Conscience-stricken, they resolved to go to Joe's home and break the news of their cowardly behavior to the presumable widow. The good woman met them at the door.

"What yo' niggahs want round here dis time o' night?" she demanded.

"We come to tell yo' 'bout Joe, Mis' Johnsing," said the embarrassed spokesman.

"Yo' kain't tell me nothin' 'bout Joe what Ah don' know a'ready," replied Mrs. Johnson coldly.

"Yas'm; but yo' don' know whar Joe is, Mis' Johnsing," persisted the speaker. "We done – "

"Yas, Ah do know whar Joe is," retorted the lady. "He's upstairs in he bed."

"In he bed?" echoed the astonished visitors.

"Yass," said Mrs. Johnson. "Joe come in ovah an hour ago hollerin' like a bullgine fohty yahds ahead o' de dawgs."

I think I may say without exaggeration that that Harvard Union audience even beat Joe's record; for they were twice "fohty yahds ahead o' de dawgs" all the way through, and as for "hollerin'" they were not so much like one single "bullgine" as like a whole roundhouse full of them, aided and abetted by a couple of boiler factories in full blast.

And then, only sixteen hours later, came the address at the Woman's Club ten miles out of Boston; the same lecture, in a quiet drawing room, before forty ladies who embroidered and crocheted

while I talked, and here the point that had raised the roof and shaken the foundations of the Harvard Union was greeted by the *tapping of a thimble against the wooden frame of an embroidery hoop!*

I cannot say which of the two varieties of approval pleased me more; but I will say that no idea of talking "up" or "down" to my audience occurred to me on either occasion: it was rather a matter of "getting across."

One never can tell save by the "feel" of things in the hour of action how they are going to turn out. Only this last season I found myself, through a misapprehension of the character of my engagement, standing before an audience in a New England amusement park on a Sunday afternoon. I will say frankly that if I had known that I was to be a sideshow to a Ferris Wheel and a scenic railway, with pink lemonade on tap everywhere, and "all for ten cents," I should not have accepted the engagement. While I have admired them at a respectful distance, I have never envied the wild man of Borneo or the bearded lady their opportunities for personal enrichment; but on this occasion in some way or other I had gained an impression that my date had been arranged by, and was to be under the auspices of, a combination of church interests, designed to offset the evils of Sunday afternoon idleness in a manufacturing town. It was a misunderstanding, however, that I now rejoice in; for, amusement park or not, sideshow or main ring, I found it an enjoyable and educating experience.

I approached it in fear and trembling, especially when I noticed as I was awaiting my "turn" the vast quantities of chewing gum that were being sold to my audience by the inevitable boy with the basket. There is always something disconcerting to a public speaker in the constant, simultaneous, and automatic movement of other jaws than his own, and in the face of a collective jaw, made up of sixteen hundred lowers that chewed as one, I feared that mine, singly and alone, would find the odds against it overpowering. Strange to say, however, my real fear on this occasion was not on the score of my audience, but whether I should be able to acquit myself creditably before them. I have fondly hoped that my little talk contained a message, and as I observed these seekers after pleasure slowly gathering, and taking their places on tiers of pine benches under the kindly shade of a row of noble pines, it occurred to me that if there was any fruitful soil for my message anywhere it was in the hearts of just such people as sat before me – toilers, the humbler folk, the men and women whose lives had been too busy with bread-and-butter problems for the acquirement of culture, and whose sole opportunity for amusement, uplifting or otherwise, came on these very Sunday afternoons.

There were men and boys there who under other conditions might have been idling on street corners. I counted three Chinese, several Japanese, and a half-dozen Negroes in my audience. A dozen women had their babies with them, and many a small kiddie, too young to chew gum without exposure to the peril of swallowing it, nibbled and absorbed ginger cookies as I watched them. The question became *not* were they good enough for me, but could I convince them that I was good enough for them. It was not a question of "getting down to their level," but of my own ability to climb up to the level of my opportunity. For the time being whatever superiority there was was altogether on their side, and the point was how I could prove myself the real thing, and not the artificial; how I could find the common denominator which would enable us to get on "like a house afire" together.

As I was speaking the solution came – and a mighty simple one it turned out to be; for it lay wholly in the simplest possible use of the English language. "Cut out the big words," I said to myself. "Cut out all unfamiliar terms. Get right down to good old Anglo-Saxon. Drop such jawbreakers as *differentiate*, *terminology*, *intimations*, *implications*, and *psychological*." My chief hope became that I might once more at least measure up to that condition which was clearly set forth a great many years ago by a Western chairman, at a time when I was too much of a novice to do my work even passably well, who said to me as we walked to my hotel after the lecture was over:

"We don't care so much for your lecture, Mr. Bangs; but we like you, and we're going to have you back."

Whether or not my plan was successful I shall not attempt to say; but I may be pardoned, perhaps, for recording here one of the most delightful compliments I have ever had, paid me by a

threadbare workingman who came up behind me as I was leaving the park that afternoon, and put his arm through mine as he spoke.

"Are you goin' to speak here to-night, Brother?" he said.

"No," said I. "I am hurrying off to Boston on the five o'clock train."

"Well, I'm sorry," said he. "I wanted to come out and hear ye again."

Bearing upon the cultivation, or lack of it, of the average American audience, I recall a remark made to me several years ago by a well-known poet from the shores of Britain, who had come here to lecture on the Celtic Renaissance.

"I have had a most delightful surprise," said he, "in the wonderful amount of real culture that I have found in the United States, and especially in the smaller communities. Why, do you know," he added, "when I first started in on my work I supposed that I should have to spend at least half of my time explaining to my audiences just what a Renaissance was, and the rest in consideration of the Irish movement; but I hadn't been here a week before I discovered that for the most part the people I was to talk to knew quite as much as I did about the history of the movement, and I had all I could do to shed any new light on it whatsoever."

He had, fortunately for himself, made the discovery at a critical part of the "lecture game," as some people delight to call it, that it was up to him to keep climbing, and not waste any of his valuable time trying to descend to a lower level, if he wished his discourse to be favorably regarded in this country – a discovery that I devoutly wish some of our modern editors and theatrical managers, who think they must cater exclusively to a "lowbrow" audience, as they call it, a clientele made up out of the whole cloth of their own imaginings, might make.

Our wonderful West frequently affords illuminating incidents demonstrating the real truth, as discovered by our distinguished visitor. I remember going a few years ago into a small community in Iowa, where possibly the English lecturer would have looked for very little in the way of what he would consider learning. When sitting in the office of the chairman of the lecture committee, a particularly alert young man, a lawyer, and a graduate of the Harvard Law School, the door opened, and a splendid specimen of physical manhood, a typical pioneer in appearance, stalked in. The chairman introduced me to him.

"Mr. Bangs," said he, "I want you to know my father."

The caller gave my hand a grip that even now makes my fingers ache every time I think of it. He then led me to a comfortable, leather-covered arm chair, and, after almost shoving me into its capacious depths, seated himself directly in front of me.

"Sit down, young man," said he. "I want to talk to you."

"Fire ahead!" said I. "And thank you for calling me a young man. I've been feeling a trifle old for a couple of days."

"Well, you are young compared to me," he said. "I'm eighty."

"Good Lord!" said I. "You don't look over sixty, anyhow."

"No," he smiled, "I don't – but that's Ioway. I've been farmin' out here for nigh onto seventy years, and we're all too busy to grow old. We live forever in Ioway. It's the grandest country on the footstool."

I didn't feel at all inclined to dispute him, considering his more than six feet of towering height, the fresh, healthful hardness of his weather-beaten face, the breadth of his shoulders, and depth of his chest. I contented myself with agreeing with him. And I didn't have to work hard to do that, either; for I have known magnificent Iowa as a most salubrious State for many years.

"Well, you see, sir," I said, "we can't all pick out our birthplaces. I was born in New York through no choice of my own. Some are born at birthplaces, some achieve birthplaces, and others have birthplaces thrust upon them – which last was my case."

"Same here," said he. "I was born in Ohier; but my folks moved out here when I was a babby. I've lived here ever since – and I'm glad of it. Of course I hain't had your advantages in gettin' an

edication – most o' mine's in my wife's name – but I've got some, and I've had to work so dam hard to get it that sometimes I think I appreciate it just a leetle more than you Eastern boys do who have it served to you on a silver platter. I didn't know how to read till I was twenty-five."

"I congratulate you," said I. "Considering the sort of things the greater part of our young people are reading to-day, I wish that condition might prevail a little more widely than it does."

"That's it," said he. "When a thing comes too easy we're not likely to make the best of it. When I think of how I had to sweat to learn to read you don't ketch me wastin' any o' my talents in that direction on trash."

"Then," I put in, "the chances are you've never read any of my books."

"Not many of 'em," he answered; "but one or two folks I know has read 'em, and they tell me there's nothin' deelyterious about 'em. But I tell ye it was some work for me to get the knack o' readin'; but when it come it come! Ye see, when I first come out here they wasn't any schools, and they wasn't any too much help around in those days, either. What with farmin', and diggin' food out o' the ground, and fightin' Injuns, they wasn't much spare time for children to spend in schools, even if we'd a had 'em. But along about the time I was twenty-three years old we started one. We built a little schoolhouse, and then we sent East for a schoolmarm, and when she come she boarded up at our house, and I celebrated by fallin' head over heels in love with her."

"Good work!" said I.

"You bet it was good work!" he blurted out, with an admiring glance at his son. "It was the best work I ever done, and the best part of it was she liked me, and the first thing we knew we got married. Well, sir, do you know what happened then? You're a smart man, and you won't need many guesses. It was the very thing we might ha' foreseen. The idee o' me, the husband o' the schoolmarm, not knowin' how to read – why, it – was – simply – pree – posterous!"

I don't believe Colonel Roosevelt ever put more syrupy electricity into the first syllable of his famous "dee-lighted" than that old gentleman got into the *pre* of his "preeposterous."

"Yes, sir," he ran on, "and there was no way out of it but that she should teach me to read. *And she did!* It was a tough proposition for that wonderful teacher of mine; but her patience finally pulled us through, and at the end of about a year I was ready to tackle 'most any kind of stunt in the way of a printed page. And then the burning question arose. Now that I know how, what in Dothan shall I read? That's a big problem, my friend, to a young feller that has earned his right to literature by the sweat of his brow. I wasn't goin' to waste any of my new gift on flashy stuff. What I wanted was the real thing, and one mornin' the problem was solved. A copy of a weekly paper come to the house, with an advertisement in it of a book called 'The Origin of the Species,' by a feller named Darwin, costin' two dollars and a half. That was some money in those days; but somehow or other that title sounded good and hefty, and I sent my little two-fifty by mail to the publisher, and within a week or two 'The Origin of the Species' was duly received, and I went at it."

"And what did you make out of it?" I asked, my interest truly aroused.

"Nothin' – not the first dam thing at first," said the old gentleman; "except it made me wonder if I hadn't lost my mind, or something. I sat down to read the thing, and by thunder, sir, I couldn't make head nor tail out of it! I'd always thought I knew something about the English language; but this time I was stumped, and it made me mad."

"'There's something happened to me,' I said to my wife. 'I've read this darned first page here over five times, and I'm blest if I can get a glimmer of anythin' out of it.' She smiled and advised me to try something easier; but, '*Not – on – your – life!*' says I. 'I've been through fire and famine and wind and blizzard in my day. I've seen the roof over my head burnt to a cinder by savages, and I've fit Injuns, and come nigh bein' scalped by 'em, and in all my life, my dear,' says I, 'I hain't never been stumped yit, and I don't preepose to begin now, specially by a page o' printed words, said to be writ in the English language —*not – on – your – life!*'"

"So I went at it again. I read it, and I reread it. I wrestled with every page, paragraph, and sentence in that book. Sometimes I had to put as much as five days on one page – but by Gorry, son, *when* I got it I got it good, and when it come it come with a rush – and *now*– "

The old man paused, drew himself up very straight, and squaring his shoulders he leaned forward and put his hands on my knees.

"And *now*, my friend," he said, his eye flashing with the joy of victory, "*if there's anything you want to know about Darwin's Origin of the Species – you – just – ask – me!*"

IV THE GOOD SAMARITAN

If there is any man in this wide world who doubts the beauty and heart significance of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, he need only go out upon the lecture platform to have his eyes opened. I know of no workers in the whole field of human effort this side of tramphood itself who need more often the intervention of the Good Samaritan to get them out of trouble than the followers of that same profession.

Indeed, I shall not even except the profession of the Hobo; for there is a certain license granted to this latter sort of Knight of the Road that is denied to us of the Lyceum Circuit. We are prone to forgive a hungry tramp for breaking into a casual hencoop in search of the wherewithal to satisfy the cravings of an empty stomach, and when his weary bones demand a bed there are numerous expedients to which he may resort without loss of dignity. I doubt, however, that if Dr. Hillis, or the Hon. Champ Clark, or my humble self, were ever caught red-handed with a farmer's fowls dangling by their legs from our fists, or were to be discovered stealing a nap in the soft seclusion of a convenient hayloft, we should get off quite so easily as do poor old Dusty Rhodes and his famous colleague Weary Waggles.

Even as do our less loquacious brothers who foot it across country, and earn their living by making after-dinner speeches to sympathetic farmers' wives, so also do we more advanced members of the Fraternity of Wanderers have often to throw ourselves upon the tender mercies of others to get us out of the unexpected scrapes into which the most careful of us sometimes fall. Life is ordinarily no very simple thing, even to the man who lives all his days in one spot, and knows every curve, crook, and corner of his special surroundings. How much more complicated must it become, then, to him who has to change his spots every twenty-four hours, and day after day, night in and night out, readjust himself to new and unfamiliar conditions!

For the most part our troubles, such as they are, have to do with the natural perversity of train schedules, or unexpected visitations of Nature which will disarrange the most carefully forecast calculations of men. In the machinery of our existence there are probably more human cogs involved, which require our own individual attention, than in any other known mechanism. Even the actor on the road is better looked after than are we; for he has a manager to arrange for his transportation, to look after his luggage, and to attend to all the little things that go to make or mar the comfort of travel while we of the platform go out wholly upon our own, unattended, and compelled at all times to shift for ourselves.

I have been in many a scrape en route myself; but so far none of them has found me without some personally devised expedient for my relief, or the aid of a chance Good Samaritan, whose constant nearness in the hour of need has convinced me that there are many more of his kind in existence than most people are willing to admit. I have almost gone so far at times as to believe in the "intervention of Providence," and would quite do so did I not feel the idea somewhat belittling to the Divine Intelligence that orders our goings out and our comings in.

On one occasion in the Far West I was so close to a scene of actual murder that I might readily have been held as a material witness, and escaped that great inconvenience only by pursuing the exceedingly difficult policy of holding my tongue – always an arduous proposition for a professional talker. I have faced starvation on a delayed train in Oklahoma, starvation setting in in my case after fifteen hours without food, and been suddenly relieved by the wholly chance appearance, at the tail end of the train, dropping seemingly out of the mysterious regions of Nowhere, of an Italian driving a wagonload of bananas across the track, just as the train was starting along on another interminably foodless stretch; an Italian who with remarkably quick wit – in response to the lure of a new, shining

silver dollar tossed into his wagon – heaved a bunch of his stock large enough to feed an orphan asylum on to the back platform.

I have even been threatened with complete annihilation, physical and spiritual alike, by a man big enough to carry out his threat, unless I would join him in a cocktail at six o'clock in the morning, and escaped my doom, not as a great many readers may think, by accepting the invitation, but only through the timely intervention on my behalf of the blessed gift of sleep, which descended suddenly, and without apparent cause, upon my convivial adversary before he had time to carry out his amiable intentions looking toward my removal from the face of the earth.

But there have been other times when nothing short of the sudden appearance of the Good Samaritan himself has saved me from disaster. Two of these instances I recall with feelings of gratitude, and I record them here with sincere pleasure, since it may be that my willing helpers may read what I have written about them, and learn from the record something of the lasting quality of my grateful appreciation of their courtesy.

The first of these incidents occurred in the distant city of Los Angeles on a memorable afternoon when I was to all intents and purposes stranded; not for the lack of ready money, but for the want of transportation necessary to get me from where I was to the haven where I was critically needed at that moment. It was a matter of making a train or losing a whole chain of profitable engagements, arranged in such sequence that if one were lost the others would in all probability go also.

I was due to lecture in the beautiful California city on a Wednesday evening, and was to go thence to Salt Lake City for a Friday night lecture. Unfortunately for me it happened that on Tuesday I was booked at Tucson, Arizona, and with a strange carelessness of consequences somebody had thrown a glass of water on the tracks of the Southern Pacific Railroad, and thereby completely demoralized the roadbed. I do not wish to libel that useful railway system; but at that time the casual impression of the traveler on the Southern Pacific was that its rails had been laid on water, and were ballasted with quicksand. It should be added in justification of the conditions that the irrepressible Salton Sea, a body of water that has no known parentage in the matter of sources, or real destiny in the matter of utility, and acts accordingly, had been on one of its periodic rampages, the proper handling of which had taxed to the uttermost the ingenuity of the engineers on whose shoulders the responsibility for the line rested. It was Nature who was to blame, and not the authorities.

At any rate, however, there were such serious delays on my way from Tucson to Los Angeles that, scheduled to lecture at the latter city at eight P.M. on Wednesday evening, I did not arrive there until four o'clock on Thursday morning, and even a Western audience will not submit to any such delay as that. Thanks to the quick wit of my principals, who stood to lose a considerable stake by my failure to appear, another lecture was arranged for Thursday afternoon at one o'clock, although my train for Salt Lake was scheduled to leave at two-forty-five. The plan was for me to take a carriage out to the lecture hall, about forty minutes' drive from the center of activity, to go upon the platform promptly at one o'clock, to condense my talk into one hour, to leave the platform at two, and drive hurriedly over to the San Pedro station, and catch my train with five minutes to spare.

The first part of the program was carried out to the letter, and at five minutes after two I was at the entrance of the hall ready for my drive to the station. But there was no carriage or vehicle of any other known sort in sight. Through some misunderstanding either on my part or on that of the local managers, the carriage that brought me out had not waited, and there was no substitute to be had within reach. What to do became a most embarrassing question. The succeeding dates had been arranged in such a way that if I failed to catch that train to Salt Lake City my whole tour would come down with a crash.

Fortunately there was a rather fine boulevard running in front of the hall, a rare temptation to speeders both in motors and with horseflesh; and as my managers and I were standing on the curb, expressing our opinion as to the intelligence of hackmen in general and ourselves in particular, and hopelessly scanning the horizon in search of relief, there suddenly emerged out of the gloom, coming

along at a rapid pace, a horse lover, seated in a light wagon, and driving a big bay trotter of no mean abilities. He was striking nothing poorer than a two-forty gait, and as he loomed bigger and bigger as he drew nearer he looked like a runaway avalanche; but as he came the idea flashed across my mind that here was my only salvation. I therefore sprang out into the middle of the road, directly in his path, and waved my arms violently at him. The driver drew in his reins with a jerk, and man, horse, buggy, and all came to a sliding, grinding stop. I cannot say that his first remark was wholly cordial.

"What the dash is the matter with you?" he roared.

I panted out my explanation – how my carriage had not come, how much depended on my catching my train, and how completely I had relied on him.

"Oh, that's it, eh?" he said, amiably calming down. "I thought you'd escaped from a lunatic asylum or something. Jump in. I can't take you all the way to the station, because I've got an engagement myself at two-fifteen; but I'll land you at the hotel in a jiffy."

I needed no second bidding, and in a moment we were bounding along at breakneck speed in the direction of the city. We covered the distance that had consumed forty minutes before the lecture in twelve minutes, and all seemed well – only it was not well; for, arriving at the hotel, I found myself still fifteen minutes distant from the railway station, and not a taxi or other kind of cab to be had. What was more, the electric roads were blocked by a fire or something farther up the street. I was as badly off as ever – and then entered the Good Samaritan!

As I stood there in front of the hotel making sundry observations, most of them unprintable, concerning the quality of my luck, a man of fine appearance came out of the hotel and stepped quickly across the sidewalk to a large touring car that stood awaiting him by the curb. He opened the door, and after seating himself in the tonneau leaned forward to give his instructions to his chauffeur, when I was seized with the inspiration that here indeed was truly my White Hope. Again I took my chances. I sprang forward, laid my hand gently on his arm, and blurted out:

"Excuse me, sir, but my name is Bangs – John Kendrick Bangs. I am out here lecturing, and if I don't catch that two-forty-five train for Salt Lake City I shall lose half a dozen engagements. If you have ever read any of my books and liked them, sir, you will be willing to do me a service. If you've read 'em and not liked them, you'll be glad to get me out of town. Won't you be a Good Samaritan and give me a lift to the station? *You're my only hope!*"

"Sure thing!" he answered without an instant's hesitation, opening the door. "Get in – and, James," he added, turning to the chauffeur, "the San Pedro station, and never mind the speed limit."

I clambered into the car as quickly as I could, and the car fairly leaped forward.

"It's mighty good of you," said I breathlessly as we sped along.

"Don't mention it, Mr. Bangs," said my host. "Glad to be of service to you. I read your 'House-Boat-on-the-Styx' once with a great deal of pleasure; but there's one thing about you that I like a great sight better than I do your humor."

"What's that?" I asked.

"*Your nerve, sir,*" he replied, handing out a cigar.

We caught the train with eight minutes to spare, and as it drew out of the station I realized possibly for the first time in my life that in my particular line of business *nerve* is a vastly better asset than *nerves*, and I have faithfully cultivated the one and resolutely refused to admit the existence of the other ever since, to my very great advantage.

It may not be without interest to record here that in spite of all my trials and tribulations at Los Angeles, the Salt Lake City engagement was lost. Our engine broke down in the wilds of Nevada, and we did not reach Salt Lake until long after midnight the following night. Nevertheless I kept my hand in; for in response to the request of some of my fellow passengers I delivered my lecture that night in the observation car of the stalled train in the Nevada hills, to an audience made up of fifteen fellow travelers, the train crew, and a half-dozen Pullman porters.

I hesitate to think of what might have been my fate had I employed similar tactics to get me out of such troubles in New York or Boston, or some other of our Eastern cities. The chances are that my name would have been spread upon the blotter of some police court as a disorderly person; but in our great West – well, things seem somehow very different out there. There are not so many skyscrapers in that part of the country, and the horizon of humanity may therefore be a little broader; and perhaps too the strugglers out there are closer to the period of their own trials and tribulations than we are here in the East, and become in consequence more instantly sympathetic when they see the signal of distress flying before them.

The second incident occurred nearer home. It was in Ohio, at the time of the floods that wrought such havoc in Dayton and thereabouts in the spring of 1913. I had lectured the night before at Ironton, and on my way to Cleveland was to all intents and purposes marooned at Columbus. Much doubt existed as to whether traffic out of Columbus was at all possible, so completely demoralized were all the railroads centering there. It is a cardinal principle with lyceum workers, however, to make every possible effort to get through to their engagements at whatever inconvenience or cost. So in spite of the warnings of subordinate officials I took my chances and went out on a morning train which passengers took at their own peril, through scenes of dreadful desolation, and over a disquietingly soggy roadbed, until the train reached an Ohio city which I shall not identify by name here. While I have no hard feelings against it, or against any of its citizens, I cannot bring myself to speak of it in terms of "endearment," as I should much prefer to do.

At this point our train came to a standstill, and the announcement was made that it would be impossible to get through to Cleveland because all the bridges had been washed away. Motoring over for the same reason was out of the question, and the engagement was lost. I immediately repaired to the telegraph office and sent off several despatches – to the Cleveland people, announcing my inability to get through; to my agents, telling them of my plight; and to my family, assuring them of my safety. These telegrams broke my "financial back"; for when I had paid for them I found myself with only forty cents left in my pocket, marooned possibly for days in wettest Ohio, hungry as a bear, and not a friend in sight.

I did not worry much over the situation, however; for on several other occasions when I found myself penniless in the West and in the South I had not found any trouble in getting some one to cash my check. So, after assuring myself that my train would be held there for at least two or three hours before returning to Columbus, I set off blithe-heartedly to secure the replenishment of my pocket. In the heavy rain I walked up the main thoroughfare of the little city, and to my great relief espied a national bank on one of the four corners of its square. I walked boldly in and addressed the cashier, telling him my story with a few "well chosen words."

"I thought possibly," said I, as he listened without too great a display of interest, "that in view of all these circumstances you would be willing to take a chance on me, and cash my check for twenty-five dollars."

"Why, my dear sir," he replied, "*this is a bank!*"

I restrained a facetious impulse to tell him that I was surprised to hear it, having come in under the impression that it was a butcher shop, where I could possibly buy an umbrella, or a much needed eight-day clock.

"I know," I contented myself with saying, smiling the while. "That's why I came here for money."

"Well, you've come to the wrong place," he blurted out. "*We are not running an asylum to give first aid to the injured!*"

"Thank you, sir," I replied. "You are quite right, and perhaps I should not have asked such a favor – but I'll tell you one thing," I added. "To-morrow or next day when the Governor of this State issues his appeal for aid for the stricken, as he surely will, you will find that the financial men in that part of the world where I come from are running just such institutions, and when that golden

horde for the relief of your people pours in from mine I hope it will make you properly ashamed of yourself, if you are not so already."

It was as fruitless as reading a Wordsworth sonnet on nature to a rhinoceros; for all he did was to grunt.

"Humph!" said he, and I walked out.

Another bank was soon found, where I secured not accommodation but a more courteous refusal. The president of the bank was one of the most sympathetic souls I have ever met, and would gladly cash anybody's draft for me; but my own check, that was out of the question. He was a trustee of the funds in his charge – poor chap, apparently without a cent of his own on deposit. However, he was courteous, and vocally sympathetic. He realized very keenly the difficulties of my position, and actually escorted me as far as the door to see me safely to the perils of the pave, expressing the hope that I would soon find some way out of my difficulty. I returned to the train, ate thirty cents' worth of sardines in the dining car, gave the waiter a ten-cent tip, and repaired to the smoking compartment absolutely penniless. A number of others were gathered there, and we naturally fell into discussing the day's adventures.

"Well," said I, "I've just had one of the strangest experiences of my life. I've been in all parts of the United States in the last eight years, and never until to-day have I found a place so poor in sympathy, and easy money, that I couldn't get my check cashed if I happened to need the funds. Why, I've known a Mississippi hotelkeeper who was so poor that his wife had to do all the chambermaid's work in the house, to go out at midnight to *borrow* twenty-five dollars from a neighbor to help me out; but here, with this flood knocking everything galley west, I can't raise a cent!"

And I went on and narrated my experience with the two national banks as recorded here.

"Well, by George!" ejaculated one of the men seated opposite to me, slapping his knee vigorously as I finished. "I'm an Ohio man, sir, and I blush for the State. I'll cash your check for you on your looks. How much do you want?"

"Twenty-five dollars," said I.

"All right," he said, pulling a well-filled wallet from his pocket, and counting out five five-dollar bills. "There's the stuff."

I thanked him, and drawing my check handed it over to him. He took it, and glanced at the signature.

"*What?*" he exploded. "*The Idiot?*"

This was the title of one of my books.

"Guilty!" said I.

"Here, you!" he cried, pulling his wallet again from his pocket, and holding it wide open, displaying a tempting bundle of ten-dollar bills within. "*Here – just help yourself!*"

And yet there are people in this world who ask if "literature" pays!

About the most Samaritan of the Good Samaritans I ever encountered I met in February last in one of the most flourishing of our northwestern cities. He was a Samaritan with what the modern critic would call a "kick" to him – or at least it struck me that way. As I made my way northward from Minneapolis to fill my engagement there I was seized with a terrific toothache which for the time being destroyed pretty nearly all my interest in life. The offending molar was far back in the region of the wisdom section, and inasmuch as it had been somewhat loose in its behavior for several days I decided to be rid of it. All my efforts to extract it myself were unavailing, and finally after a last desperate effort to pull it out myself I returned to my chair in the Pullman car and informed the Only Muse who upon this trip was Seeing America with me that our first duty on reaching our destination was to find a dentist and get rid of it.

"I hope you will be careful to get the right kind of a man," said she. "We can't afford any quack doctors, you know."

At this moment a charming woman seated on the opposite side of the car leaned over and said, "I do not wish to intrude, but I have seen how you were suffering, and I just overheard your remark. Now my son-in-law is a dentist, and we think he is a good one. He is coming to meet me at the station, and I think possibly he will be willing to help you."

I thanked the lady, and expressed the hope that he would.

On our arrival at the station the young man appeared as was expected, and my kindly chaperone presented the case.

"He has been suffering dreadfully, James," she said, "and I told him you would pull his tooth out for him."

"But, my dear mother," said the young man, "we are in a good deal of a hurry. We have an engagement for to-night. My office is closed, and we are not dressed for –"

"Thanks just the same," said I. "I am sure you would help me if you could – maybe you will do the next best thing. I can't lecture unless I have this confounded thing out."

"Lecture?" said he. "You are not John Kendrick –"

"Yes – I am," said I.

"Oh," said he, "that's different. You are our engagement. Come up to my office, and I'll fix you up in a jiffy."

So we marched five long blocks up to his office, where I was soon stretched out, and the desired operation put through with neatness and despatch.

"Well, doctor," said I as he held the offending molar up before me tightly gripped in his forceps, "you have given me the first moment of relief I have had all day. My debt in gratitude I shall never be able to repay, but the other I think I can handle. How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing at all, Mr. Bangs," he replied. "Nothing at all."

"Oh, that's nonsense, doctor," I retorted. "You are a professional man, and I am a stranger to you – you must charge something."

"Oh, no, Mr. Bangs," said he, smilingly. "You are no stranger to me. I have been reading your books for the past twenty years, and *it's a positive pleasure to pull your teeth.*"

V A VAGRANT POET

The inimitable and forever to be lamented Gilbert, in one of his delightful songs in Pinafore, bade us once to remember that —

Things are seldom what they seem —
Skim-milk masquerades as cream;
Highlows pass as patent-leathers;
Jackdaws strut in peacock's feathers.

The good woman who sang this song – little Buttercup, they called her – was in a pessimistic mood at the moment; for had she not been so she would have reversed the sentiment, showing us with equal truth how sometimes cream masquerades as skim milk, and how underneath the wear and tear of time what outwardly appears to be a "high low" still possesses some of the glorious polish of the "patent leather." Everywhere I travel I find something of this latter truth; but never was it more clearly demonstrated than when on one of my Western jaunts I came unexpectedly upon an almost overwhelming revelation of a finely poetic nature under an apparently rough and unpromising exterior.

It happened on a trip in Arizona back in 1906. My train after passing Yuma was held up for several hours. Ordinarily I should have found this distressing; but, as the event proved, it brought to me one of the most delightfully instructive experiences I have yet had in the pursuit of my platform labors. As the express stood waiting for another much belated train from the East to pass, the door of the ordinary day coach – in which I had chosen to while away the tedium of the morning, largely because it was fastened to the end of the train, whence I could secure a wonderful view of the surrounding country – was opened, and a man apparently in the last stages of poverty entered the car.

He was an oldish man, past sixty, I should say, and a glance at him caused my mind instinctively to revert to certain descriptions I had heard of the sad condition of the downtrodden Westerner, concerning whose unhappy lot our friends the Populists used to tell us so much. He looked so very poor and so irremediably miserable that he excited my sympathy. Upon his back there lay loosely the time-rusted and threadbare remnant of what had once in the days of its pride and freshness been a frock coat, now buttonless, spotted, and fringing at the edges. His trousers matched. His neck was collarless, a faded blue polka-dotted handkerchief serving as both collar and tie. His hat suggested service in numerous wars, and on his feet, bound there for their greater security with ordinary twine, were the uppers and a perforated part of the soles of a one-time pair of congress gaiters. As for his face – well, it brought vividly to mind the lines of Spenser —

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