

Bangs John Kendrick

The Idiot at Home



John Bangs

The Idiot at Home

«Public Domain»

Bangs J.

The Idiot at Home / J. Bangs — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

I	5
II	9
III	13
IV	17
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	20

John Kendrick Bangs

The Idiot at Home

I

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

"My dear," said the Idiot one morning, as he and his good wife and the two little ones, Mollie and Tommy, sat down at the breakfast-table, "now that we are finally settled in our new house I move we celebrate. Let's give a dinner to my old friends of Mrs. Smithers's; they were nice old people, and I should like to get them together again. I saw Dr. Pedagog in the city yesterday, and he inquired most affectionately, not to say anxiously, about the children."

"Why should he be anxious about the children?" asked Mrs. Idiot, placidly, as she sweetened her husband's coffee. "Does he suspect them of lacking completeness or variety?"

The Idiot tapped his forehead significantly.

"He didn't know whether they take after you or after me, but I relieved his mind on that score," he said. "I told him that they didn't take after anybody that either of us ever knew. They have started in on a line of Idiocy that is entirely their own. He seemed very much pleased when I said that, and observed that he was glad to hear it."

Mrs. Idiot laughed.

"It was very nice of the Doctor to ask about them, but I am a little afraid he wants to take a hand in their bringing up," she said.

"No doubt of it," said the Idiot. "Pedagog always was anxious to experiment. Many a time I have suspected him of having designs even on me."

"Mrs. Pedagog told me last year that he had devised an entirely new system of home training," observed Mrs. Idiot, "and they both regretted that they had no children of their own to try it on."

"And of course you offered to lend Tommy to them?" said the Idiot, with a sly glance at his son, who was stowing away his oatmeal at a rate that bade fair to create a famine.

"Of course," said Mrs. Idiot. "He's got to get raw material somewhere, and I thought Tommy would be just the thing."

"Well, I ain't a-goin'," said Tommy, helping himself liberally and for the third time to the oatmeal.

"My son," said the Idiot, with a mock show of sternness, "if your mother chooses to lend you to any one it is not for you to say that you 'ain't a-goin'. It may be that I shall interfere to the extent of demanding to know what security for your safe return is offered, but otherwise neither you nor I shall intervene. What your mother says is law for you as well as for me. Please understand that, Thomas."

"All right, pa," said Tommy; and then he added in an undertone, presumably to the butter, "But I ain't a-goin', just the same."

"I'll go," said Mollie, who rather liked the idea of being lent to somebody, since it involved a visit to some strange and therefore fascinating spot away from home. "Lend me to somebody, will you, mamma?"

"Yes, ma, lend Mollie to 'em," said Tommy, with, a certain dry enthusiasm, "and then maybe you can borrow a boy from somebody else for me to play with. I don't see why you don't swap her off for a boy, anyhow. I like her well enough, but what you ever wanted to buy her for in the beginning I don't know. Girls isn't any good."

"Thomas," said the Idiot, "you talk too much, and, what is more, you say vain things which some day you will regret. When you get older you will recall this dictum of yours, that 'girls isn't any good,' with a blush of shame, and remember that your mother was once a girl."

"Well, she's outgrown it," said Tommy; and then reverting to his father's choice of words, he added, "What is dictums, anyhow?"

"Pooh!" cried the little girl. "Smarty don't know what dictums is!"

"Suppose you two young persons subside for a few minutes!" interrupted the Idiot. "I wish to talk to your mother, and I haven't got all day. You'll be wanting some bread and butter to-morrow, and I must go to town and earn it."

"All right, pa," said Tommy. "I ain't got anything to say that I can't say to myself. I'd rather talk to myself, anyhow. You can be as sassy –"

"Thomas!" said the Idiot, severely.

"All right, pa," said Tommy; and with a side remark to the cream-jug, that he still thought Mollie ought to be swapped off for something, it didn't matter what as long as it wasn't another girl, the boy lapsed into a deep though merely temporary silence.

"You said you'd like to give a dinner to Mr. and Mrs. Pedagog and the others," said Mrs. Idiot. "I quite approve."

"I think it would be nice," returned the Idiot. "It has been more than six years since we were all together."

"You wouldn't prefer having them at breakfast, would you?" asked Mrs. Idiot, with a smile. "I remember hearing you say once that breakfast was your best time."

"How long is six years, pa?" asked Tommy.

"Really, Thomas," replied the Idiot, severely, "you are the most absurd creature. How long is six years!"

"I meant in inches," said Tommy, unabashed. "You always told me to ask you when I wanted to know things. Of course, if you don't know –"

"It's more'n a mile, I guess," observed Mollie, with some superiority of manner. "Ain't it, pa?"

The Idiot glanced at his wife in despair.

"I don't think, my dear, that I am as strong at breakfast as I used to be," said he. "There was a time when I could hold my own, but things seem to have changed. Make it dinner; and, Tommy, when you have deep problems to solve, like how long is six years in inches, try to work them out for yourself. It will fix the results more firmly in your mind."

"All right, pa," replied Tommy; "I thought maybe you knew. I thought you said you knew everything."

In accordance with the Idiot's suggestion the invitations were sent out. It was a most agreeable proposition as far as his wife was concerned, for the Idiot's old associates, his fellow-boarders at Mrs. Smithers-Pedagog's "High-Class Home for Single Gentlemen," had proved to be the staunchest of his friends. They had, as time passed on, gone their several ways. The Poet had made himself so famous that even his bad things got into print; the Bibliomaniac, by an unexpected stroke of fortune, had come into possession of his own again, and now possessed a library of first editions that auctioneers looked upon with envious eyes, and which aroused the hatred of many another collector. The Doctor had prospered equally, and was now one of the most successful operators for appendicitis; in fact, could now afford to refuse all other practice than that involved in that delicate and popular line of work. The genial gentleman who occasionally imbibed had not wholly reformed, but, as the Idiot put it, had developed into one who occasionally did *not* imbibe. Mr. Brief had become an assistant district attorney, and was prominently mentioned for a judgeship, and Mr. and Mrs. Pedagog lived placidly along together, never for an instant regretting the inspiration which led them to economize by making two into one. In short, time and fortune had dealt kindly with all, even with Mary, the housemaid, who was now general manager of the nursery in the Idiot's household.

The home life of "Mr. and Mrs. Idiot" had been all that either of the young people could have wished for, and prosperity had waited upon them in all things. The Idiot had become a partner in the business of his father-in-law, and even in bad times had managed to save something, until now, with two children, aged five and six, he found himself the possessor of his own home in a suburban city. It had been finished only a month when the proposed dinner was first mentioned, and the natural pride of its master and mistress was delightful to look upon.

"Why, do you know, my dear," said the Idiot one evening, on his return from town, "they are talking of asking me to resign from the club because they say I am offensive about this place, and Watson says my conversation has become a bore to everybody because the burden of my song yesterday was pots and pans and kettles and things like that?"

"I suppose clubmen are not interested in pots and pans and kettles and things," Mrs. Idiot observed. "Some people aren't, you know."

"Not interested?" echoed the Idiot. "What kind of people can they be not to be interested in pots and pans and kettles and things? I guess it's because of their dense ignorance."

"They never had the fun of buying them, perhaps," suggested Mrs. Idiot.

"Possibly," assented the Idiot. "And I'll tell you one thing, Pollie, dear," he added, "if they had had that fun just once, instead of squandering their savings on clothes and the theatre, and on horses, you'd find every blessed one of those chaps thronging the hardware shops all day and spending their money there. Why, do you know I even enjoyed getting the clothes-pins, and what is more, it was instructive. I never knew before what countless varieties of clothes-pins there were. There's the plain kind of commerce that look like a pair of legs with a polo-cap on. I was brought up on those, and I used to steal them when I was a small boy, to act as understudies for Noah and Shem and Ham and Japheth in my Noah's ark. Then there's the patent kind with a spring to it that is guaranteed to hang onto a garment in a gale if it has to let go of the rope. Very few people realize the infinite variety of the clothes-pin, and when I try to tell these chaps at the club about it they yawn and try to change the subject to things like German opera and impressionism and international complications."

"How foolish of them!" laughed Mrs. Idiot. "The idea of preferring to talk of Wagner when one can discourse upon clothes-pins!"

"I am afraid you are sarcastic," rejoined the Idiot. "But you needn't be; if you'd only reason it out you'd see at once that my view is correct. Anybody can talk about Wagner. Any person who knows a picture from a cable-car can talk with seeming intelligence on art, and even a member of Congress can talk about international complications off-hand for hours; but how many of these people know about clothes-pins?"

"Very few," said Mrs. Idiot, meekly.

"Very few, indeed," observed the Idiot. "And the same way with egg-beaters. I'll bet you a laundry-stove that if I should write to the *Recorder* to-morrow morning, and ask a question about Wagner, the musical editor would give me an answer within twenty-four hours; but with reference to egg-beaters it would take 'em a week to find out. And that's just the trouble. The newspapers are filled up with stuff that everybody knows about, but they don't know a thing about other things on the subject of which the public is ignorant."

"I think," said Mrs. Idiot, reflectively, "that that is probably due to the fact that they consider Wagner more important than an egg-beater."

"Well, then, they don't know, that's all," rejoined the Idiot, rising and walking out into the kitchen and taking the fascinating object over which he was waxing so enthusiastic from the dresser drawer. "Just look at that!" he cried, turning the cog-wheel which set the three intersecting metal loops whizzing like a squirrel in its wheel-cage. "Just look at that! It's beautiful, and some people say Wagner is more important than that."

"Well, I must say, my dear," said Mrs. Idiot, "that I have a leaning that way myself. Of course, I admit the charm of the egg-beater, but –"

"Tell me one thing," demanded the Idiot. "Can you get along without Wagner?"

"Why, yes," Mrs. Idiot replied, "if I have to."

"And can you get along without an egg-beater?" he cried, triumphantly.

The evidence was overwhelming, and Mrs. Idiot, with an appreciative ebullition of mirth, acknowledged herself defeated, and so charmingly withal, that the next day when her husband returned home he brought her two tickets for the opera of Siegfried as a reward for her graceful submission.

"I could have bought ten dozen muffin-rings for the same money," said he, as he gave them to her, "but people who know when to give in, and do give in as amiably as you do, my dear, deserve to be rewarded; and, on the whole, when you use these tickets, if you'll ask me, I think I'll escort you to Siegfried myself."

II

A LITTLE DINNER TO SOME OLD FRIENDS

Ten days later all was excitement at the Idiot's new home. Tommy and Mollie were in a state bordering upon frenzy, and gave the cook a great deal of trouble, requesting a taste of this, that, and the other thing, which she was preparing for the dinner to Mr. and Mrs. Pedagog, the Bibliomaniac, and the others. Inwardly, too, they were somewhat wrathful, for they could not understand why they were not permitted to dine with their parents as usual.

"I guess maybe it's your manners that keeps you away, Tommy," said Mollie.

"Hoh!" said Tommy. "It can't be that, because pa says I ain't got any. It's because you're too young to be introdoosed into society, and I've got to stay up-stairs and look after you. If you weren't a girl!"

Here Tommy clenched his fists and looked unutterable things. Mollie shuddered and was glad she was a girl as she imagined the awful things Tommy would do to her had she been a boy.

"Neither of 'em's it, Tommy," she said, in a conciliatory manner. "It's because they ain't got enough dining-room chairs, that's why. I know, because I counted 'em, and there's only eight, and there's nine people comin'."

"I guess maybe that's it," said Tommy, pacified somewhat. "And anyhow, I don't care. I saw that piece of paper ma gave Jennie, and she wrote down all the things they're goin' to have, and it's goin' to be two hours between the soup and the ice-cream. I couldn't ever wait that long for the ice-cream. I don't see why they don't begin with ice-cream."

"I guess maybe we're better off as it is," said Mollie. "Popper and mommer ain't likely to forget us, and, besides, we can talk."

And with this comforting reflection the little ones retired to their nursery contented in mind and spirit – and they didn't suffer a bit. Their "popper and mommer" didn't forget them. The ice-cream was excellent, and they had their share of it almost before the guests began with their oysters.

At seven o'clock Mr. and Mrs. Pedagog had arrived, and at seven-ten all the invited guests were present.

"If it hadn't been for my wife," Mr. Pedagog whispered in his host's ear, "I should have been late, too."

"Don't apologize, old man," replied the Idiot, gripping the Schoolmaster's hand warmly. "I sometimes go to dinners on time myself."

In a few moments dinner was announced, and shortly after all were seated, and in memory of old times the guests naturally waited for the Idiot to begin.

"Do you know," he said, as he squeezed the juice from a luscious lemon over an unprotesting oyster, at the same time glancing affectionately over the company, "I haven't felt so much at home for years as I do now."

"Not very complimentary to your wife," said Mr. Brief.

"Oh, I know what he means," observed Mrs. Idiot.

"And I have so many other opportunities to compliment her," said the Idiot.

"But really, Mrs. Pedagog," he added, addressing the good lady who sat at his right, "I feel absolutely contented to-night. All the good things of the past and of the present seem to be concentrated about this board – except the three up-stairs, who can't very well be here."

"Three?" asked Mr. Pedagog. "I thought there were only two –"

"Certainly," said the Idiot. "Tommy and Mollie, but there is Mary, your old housemaid. We can't very well ask them to dine with us, you know."

"I don't see why Tommy and Mollie can't be invited," said Mr. Pedagog, much to the Idiot's surprise, it seemed so like a violation of his system, as it might be presumed to be.

"You believe in having children at table, then, Mr. Pedagog?" asked Mrs. Idiot.

"Most certainly," said the Schoolmaster. Mrs. Pedagog glanced smilingly at Mrs. Idiot, as much as to say, "Oh, these men!"

"I certainly do approve of having children at table on all occasions," he continued. "How else are they to learn how to conduct themselves? The discipline of the nursery is apt to be lax, and it is my belief that many of the bad table manners of the present-day child are due to the sense of freedom which eating dinner in the nursery naturally inculcates."

"There is something in what you say," said the Idiot. "Tommy, for instance, never learned to throw a French pancake across the table at his sister by watching his mother and myself here in the dining-room, yet in the freedom of the nursery I have known it done."

"Precisely," said Mr. Pedagog. "That very little incident illustrates my point exactly. And I have no doubt that in the nursery the offence seemed less heinous than it would had it occurred in the dining-room, and hence did not meet with the full measure of punishment that it deserved."

"I have forgotten exactly what was done on that occasion," said the Idiot, calmly. "It is my impression that I compelled Thomas to eat the pancake."

"I am sure I never heard of the incident before," said Mrs. Idiot, her cheeks growing very red. "He didn't really, did he, dear?"

"By jove!" cried the Idiot, snapping his forefinger against his thumb, "what a traitor I am, to be sure. I promised Thomas never to tell, and here I've given the poor little chap away; but the boy was excusable, I assure you all – that is, he was excusable in a sense. Mollie had previously hit him in the eye with a salted almond, and –"

"It is quite evident," put in Mrs. Pedagog, her womanly sympathy leading her to rush to the aid of Mrs. Idiot, who seemed somewhat mortified over the Idiot's confidences, "that you were not at home, my dear. I have myself observed that extraordinary episodes of this nature generally happen when it is the father who is left in charge of the children."

"Quite right, Mrs. Pedagog," said the Doctor, nodding his head gravely. "I have noticed the same thing in my professional practice. As long as the mother is about discipline is maintained, but once leave the father in charge and riot is the order of the day."

"That's exactly what I was going to say," said the Idiot. "Many a time when Mrs. Idiot has gone out shopping, as she did on the day in question, and I have remained at home for a rest, I have wished before evening came that I had gone shopping and let my wife have the rest. As a matter of fact, the bringing up of children should be left to the mother –"

"Oh, but the father should have something to do with it," interrupted Mrs. Idiot. "It is too great a responsibility to place on a woman's shoulders."

"You didn't let me finish, my dear," said the Idiot, amiably. "I was going to say that the mother should bring the children up, and the father should take 'em down when they get up too high."

"My views to a dot," said Mr. Pedagog, with more enthusiasm than he had ever yet shown over the Idiot's dicta. "Just as in ordinary colonial government, the home authorities should govern, and when necessary a stronger power should intervene."

"Ideal – is it not?" laughed Mrs. Idiot, addressing Mrs. Pedagog. "The mother, Spain. The children, Cuba. Papa, the great and glorious United States!"

"Ahem! Well," said Mr. Pedagog, "I didn't mean that exactly, you know –"

"But it's what you said, John," said Mrs. Pedagog, somewhat severely.

"Well, I don't see why there can't be a division of responsibility," said the Poet, who had never married, and who knew children only as a theory. "Let the mothers look after them in the daytime, and the fathers at night."

This sally was greeted with an outburst of applause, it was so practical.

"Excuse me!" said the Idiot. "I'm not selfish, but I don't want to have charge of the children at night. Why, when Tommy was cutting his teeth I suffered agonies when night came on. I was down-town all day, and so wasn't very much bothered then, but at night it was something awful. Not only Tommy's tooth, but the fear that his mother would tread on a tack."

"That was unselfish," said Mr. Pedagog, dryly. "You weren't afraid of treading on one yourself."

"How could I?" said the Idiot. "I had all I could do trying to keep my wife from knowing that I was disturbed. It is bad enough to be worried over a crying babe, without being bothered by an irritated husband, so I simply lay there pretending to be asleep and snoring away for dear life."

"You are the most considerate man I ever heard of," said Mrs. Pedagog, smiling broadly.

"You don't mean to say," said the Poet, with a frown, "that you made your wife get up and take all the trouble and bother –"

"I'd only have been in the way," said the Idiot, meekly.

"So he kept quiet and pretended to snore like the good old Idiot that he is," put in the Doctor. "And he did the right thing, too," he added. "If all fathers would obliterate themselves on occasions of that sort, and let the mothers rule, the Tommys and Dickies and Harrys would go to sleep a great deal more quickly."

"We are rambling," said Mr. Pedagog. "The question of a father's duty towards a teething son has nothing to do with the question of a child's right to dine with his parents."

"Oh, I don't know," said the Idiot. "If we are to consider this matter scientifically we must start right. Teething is a natural first step, for if a child hath no teeth, wherewithal shall he eat dinners with his parents or without them?"

"That is all very well," retorted Mr. Pedagog, "but to discuss fire-engines intelligently it is not necessary to go back to the times of Elisha to begin it."

Mr. Whitechoker – now the Rev. Theophilus Whitechoker, D.D., for he, too, had prospered – smiled deprecatingly. There is no man in the world who more thoroughly appreciates a biblical joke than the prosperous clergyman.

"Well," said the Idiot, reflectively, "I quite agree with your proposition that children should dine in the dining-room with their parents and not up-stairs in the nursery, with a lot of tin soldiers and golliwogs. The manners of parents are no better than those of tin soldiers and golliwogs, but their conversation is apt to prove more instructive; and as for the stern father who says his children must dine in the kitchen until they learn better manners, I never had much confidence in him or in his manners, either."

"I don't see," said the genial old gentleman who occasionally imbibed, "how you can discipline children in the nursery. If they misbehave in the dining-room you can send them up-stairs to the nursery, but if they misbehave in the nursery, where the deuce can you send them?"

"To bed," said Mr. Brief.

"Never!" cried the Idiot. "Children, Mr. Brief, as I understand them – and I have known three very well; myself as a boy, and Tommy and Mollie – children, as I understand them, are never naughty for the mere fun of being so. Their wickedness grows out of their wonderful stores of unexpended and unexpendable energy. Take my son Thomas on last Saturday afternoon, for instance. It was a rainy Saturday, and Tommy, instead of being out-of-doors all morning and afternoon getting rid of his superfluous vitality, had been cooped up in the house all day doing nothing. Shortly before dinner we had a difference of opinion which lasted for more time than I like to think about. I was tired and irritable. Tommy wasn't tired, but he *was* irritable, and, from his point of view, was as right as I was. He had the best of me to the extent that I was tired and he wasn't. I had the best of him to the extent that I had authority and he hadn't –"

"And who came out ahead?" asked Mr. Pedagog.

"I did," said the Idiot, "because I was bigger than he was; but what I was going to say was this: Mr. Brief would have sent him to bed, thereby adding to the boy's stock of energy, already too great for his little mind to control."

"And what did you do?" asked Mr. Brief.

"Nothin'," said a small but unmistakably masculine voice from behind the portieres.

"Thomas!" said the Idiot, severely, as all turned to see who had spoken.

A little figure clad in white, ably supported by a still smaller figure, also clad in white, but with an additional ruffle about the neck, both of them barefooted, appeared in the doorway.

"Why, Mollie!" said Mrs. Idiot.

"We comed down to thee how you wath gettin' along," said the little girl.

"Yes, we did," said the boy. "But he didn't do a thing to me that day," he added, climbing on his father's knee and snuggling down against his vest-pocket with a sweet little sigh of satisfaction.

"Did you, pa?"

"Yes, Thomas," said the Idiot. "Don't you remember that I ignored you utterly?"

"Yes, I do," said Tommy. "But I'd rather be spanked than not noticed at all."

"I am afraid," said Mr. Pedagog a few hours later, as he and Mrs. Pedagog were returning home, "I am very much afraid that the Idiot's children are being spoiled."

"I hope they are!" returned the good lady, "for really, John, I never knew a boy or a girl to grow into man or womanhood and amount to anything who hadn't been spoiled in childhood. Spoiling is another name for the attitude of parents who make comrades of their children and who do not set themselves up as tyrants – "

"But the veneration of a child for his father and mother – " Mr. Pedagog began.

"Should not degenerate into the awe which one feels for an unrelenting despot!" interrupted Mrs. Pedagog.

The old gentleman discreetly retired from the field.

As for Mrs. and Mr. Idiot, they retired that night satisfied with the evening's diversion, and just before he turned out the light the Idiot walked into the nursery to say good-night to the children.

"You're a good old pop!" said Tommy, with an affectionate hug. "*The best I ever had!*"

As for Mollie, she was sleeping soundly, with a smile on her placid little face which showed that, "spoiled" as she was, she was happy; and what should the Idiot or any one else seek to bring into a child's life but happiness?

III

IN THE LIBRARY

The Bibliomaniac had come off into the country to spend Sunday with the Idiot, and, as fortune would have it, Mr. and Mrs. Pedagog also appeared on the scene. After the mid-day dinner the little party withdrew to the library, where the Bibliomaniac began to discourse somewhat learnedly upon his hobby.

"I am glad to see, my dear Idiot," he observed, as he glanced about the room at the well-filled shelves, "that as you grow older you are cultivating a love of good literature."

"I heartily echo the sentiment," said Mr. Pedagog, as he noted the titles of some of the volumes. "I may add that I am pleurably surprised at some of your selections. I never knew, for instance, that you cared for Dryden, and yet I see here on the top shelf a voluminous edition of that poet."

"Yes," said the Idiot. "I have found Dryden very useful indeed. Particularly in that binding and in so many volumes. The color goes very well with the hangings, and the space the books occupy, eked out by a dozen others of the same color, gives to that top shelf all the esthetic effect of an attractive and tasteful frieze. Then, too, it is always well," he added, with a sly wink at Mrs. Idiot, "to have a lot of books for a top shelf that is difficult to reach that nothing under the canopy could induce you to read. It is not healthful to be stretching upward, and with Dryden upon the top shelf my wife and I are never tempted to undermine our constitutions by taking him down."

The Bibliomaniac laughed.

"Your view is at least characteristic," said he, "and to tell you the absolute truth, I do not know that your judgment of the literary value of Dryden is at variance with my own. Somebody called him the Greatest Poet of a Little Age. Perhaps if the age had been bigger he'd not have shone so brilliantly."

"Lowell," observed Mr. Pedagog, "was responsible for that remark, if I remember rightly, and I have no doubt it is a just one, and yet I do not hold it up against Dryden. Man does not make the age. The age makes the man. Had there been any inspiring influences at work to give him a motive, an incentive, Dryden might have been a greater poet. To excel his fellows was all that could rightly be expected of him, and that he did."

"Assuredly," said the Idiot. "That has always been my view, and to-day we benefit by it. If he had gone directly to oblivion, Mrs. Idiot and I should have been utterly at a loss to know what to put on that top shelf."

The Idiot offered his visitors a cigar.

"Thank you," said the Bibliomaniac, taking his and sniffing at it with all the airs and graces of a connoisseur.

"I don't know but that I will join you," said Mr. Pedagog. "I did not smoke until I was fifty, and I suppose I ought not to have taken it up then, but I did, and I have taken a great deal of comfort out of it. My allowance is fifty-two cigars a year, one for each Sunday afternoon," he added, with a kindly smile.

"Well, you want to look out you don't get smoker's heart," said the Idiot. "When a man plunges into a bad habit as rashly as that, he wants to pull up before it is too late."

"I have felt no ill effects since the first one," rejoined Mr. Pedagog. "But you, my dear Idiot, how about your allowance? Is it still as great as ever? As I remember you in the old days you were something of a cigarette fiend."

"I smoke just as much, but with this difference: I do not smoke for pleasure any more, Mr. Pedagog," the Idiot replied. "As a householder I smoke from a sense of duty. It keeps moths out of the house, and insects from the plants."

The Bibliomaniac meanwhile had been investigating the contents of the lower shelves.

"You've got a few rare things here, I see," he observed, taking up a volume of short sketches illustrated by Leech, in color. "This small tome is worth its weight in gold. Where did you pick it up?"

"Auction," said the Idiot. "I didn't buy it by weight, either. I bought it by mistake. The colored pictures fascinated me, and when it was put up I bawled out 'fifteen.' Another fellow said 'sixteen.' I wasn't going to split nickels so I bid 'twenty.' So we kept at it until it was run up to 'thirty-six.' Then I thought I'd break the other fellow's heart by bidding fifty, and it was knocked down to me."

"That's a stiff price, but on the whole it's worth it," said the Bibliomaniac, stroking the back of the book caressingly.

"But," said Mr. Pedagog, "if you bid on it consciously where did the mistake come in?"

The Idiot sighed. "I meant cents," he said, "but the other chap and the auctioneer meant dollars. I went up and planked down a half-dollar and was immediately made aware of my error."

"But you could have explained," said Mr. Pedagog.

"Oh, yes," said the Idiot, "I *could*, but after all I preferred to pay the extra \$49.50 rather than make a public confession of such infernal innocence before some sixty or seventy *habitués* of a book-auction room."

"And you were perfectly right!" said the Bibliomaniac. "You never would have dared set your foot in that place again if you had explained. They would have made life a burden to you. Furthermore, you have not paid too dearly for the experience. The book is worth forty dollars; and to learn better than to despise the man who makes his bid cautiously, and who advances by small bids rather than by antelopian jumps, is worth many times ten dollars to the man who collects rare books seriously. In the early days I scorned to break a five-dollar bill when I was bidding, just as you refused, as you put it, to split nickels, and many a time I have paid as high as twenty-five dollars for books that could have been had for twenty-one, because of that foolish sentiment."

"I have often wondered," Mr. Pedagog put in at this point, holding his cigar in a gingerly and awed fashion, taking a puff at it between words, by which symptoms the man who seldom smokes may always be identified, "I have often wondered what was the mission of a private library, anyhow. And now that I find you two gentlemen interested in a phase of book-collecting with which I have had little sympathy myself, possibly I may, without being offensive, ask a question. Do you, for instance, Mr. Idiot, collect books because you wish to have something nobody else has got, or do you buy your books to read?"

"That is a deep question," said the Idiot, "and I do not know that I can answer it off-hand. I have already confessed that I bought Dryden for his decorative quality. I purchased my Thackeray to read. I bought my Pepys Diary because I find it better reading than a Sunday newspaper, quite as gossipy, and with weather reports that are fully as reliable. But that particular Leech I bought because of my youthful love for colored pictures."

"But you admit that it is valuable because of its rarity, and that compared to fifty dollars' worth of books that are not rare it is not to be compared with them from a literary point of view?" said Mr. Pedagog.

"I presume," said the Idiot, "that the fifty dollars I expended on that book would have provided me with a complete Shakespeare in one volume; all of Byron in green cloth and gold top; all of Dickens, Thackeray, Bulwer, and Austen in six volumes, with a margin of forty-five dollars left with which for nine years I could have paid for a subscription to the Mercantile Library, containing all the good reading of the present day and all the standard works of the past. But I rather like to have the books, and to feel that they are my own, even if it is only for the pleasure of lending them."

"Still, if a man collects books merely for their contents – " persisted Mr. Pedagog.

"He is a wild, extravagant person," said the Idiot. "He might save himself hundreds of dollars, not to say thousands. The library on that plan need not occupy an honored place among the rooms of the house. A mere pigeon-hole with a subscriber's card to a circulating library filed away in it will

do as well, or if the city or town in which he lives maintains a public library he may spare himself even that expense."

"Good for you!" exclaimed the Bibliomaniac. "That's the best answer to the critics of book-collectors I have heard yet."

"I agree with you," said Mr. Pedagog. "It is a very comprehensive reply. As for you, my dear Bibliomaniac, why do you collect books?"

"Because I love 'em as books," replied the Bibliomaniac. "Because of their associations, and because when I get a treasure I have the bliss of knowing I have something that others haven't."

"Then it is selfishness?" asked Mr. Pedagog.

"Just as everything else is," returned the Bibliomaniac. "You, sir, if I may be personal without wishing to be offensive, are wedded to Mrs. Pedagog. You take pleasure in knowing that she belongs to you and not to any one else. The Idiot here is proud of his children, and is glad they are his children and nobody else's. I am wedded to my rare books, and it rejoices my soul to pick up a volume that is unique, and to know that it belongs to me and to no one else. If that is selfishness, then all possession is selfish."

"That's about it," said the Idiot. "You collect books just as Mormons and Solomon used to collect wives. You are called a Bibliomaniac. I suppose Brigham Young and Solomon would have been known as Gamyomaniacs – though I don't suppose that age in women as in books is a requisite of value to marrying men – and they are both of them supposed to be rather canny persons."

Mr. Pedagog puffed away in silence. It was evident that the *argumentum ad hominem* did not please him.

"Well," he said, after awhile, "possibly you are right. If a man wants a library to be a small British Museum –"

"He will take better care of his rarities than the Idiot does," said the Bibliomaniac, putting the rare Leech back into its place. "If that were mine I'd put it out of the reach of my children."

"I didn't know you had any," said the Idiot, eagerly.

"Oh, you know what I mean," retorted the Bibliomaniac. "You place Dryden on the top shelf where Tommy and Mollie cannot get at him. But this book, which is worth ten larger paper editions of Dryden, you keep below, where the children can easily reach it. It's a wonder to me you've been able to keep it in its present superb condition."

"The mind of a child," said Mr. Pedagog, sententiously, "is above values, above all conceits. It is the mind of sincerity, and a rare book has no greater attraction to the boy or girl than one not so favored."

"That is not my reason," said the Idiot. "I know children pretty well, and I have observed that they are ambitious, and in a sense rebellious. They want to do what they cannot do. That is why, when mothers place jam on the top shelf of the pantry, the children always climb up to get it. If they would leave it on the dining-room table, within easy reach, the children would soon cease to regard it as a thing to be sought for. Make jam a required article of diet and the little ones will soon cease to want it. So with that book. If I should put that out of Tommy's reach, Tommy would lie awake nights to plan his campaign to get it. Leaving it where it is he doesn't think about it, doesn't want it, is not forbidden to have it, and so it escapes his notice."

"You have the right idea, the human idea," said Mr. Pedagog, and even the Bibliomaniac was inclined to agree. But just then Tommy happened in, with Mollie close after. The boy walked straight to the bookcase, and Mollie gathered up the large shears from the Idiot's table, and together they approached their father.

"Pa," said Mollie, holding up the scissors, "can I borrow these?"

"What for?" asked the Idiot.

"We want to cut the pictures out o' this," said Tommy, holding up the fifty-dollar Leech.

After all, it is difficult to lay down a cast-iron rule as to how a private library should be constructed or arranged, particularly when one's loyalty is divided between one's children and one's merely bookish treasures.

IV AS TO A SMALL DINNER

It was sad but true. Mr. and Mrs. Idiot had invited Mr. Whitechoker and Mr. and Mrs. Pedagog and the Poet to dinner, and for some reason or another the cook had taken wings unto herself and flown, and the guests were expected within two hours.

"I see now," said the Idiot, "why they call it taking French leave. Nobody who doesn't understand French understands it. If it wasn't French, or if somebody would translate it for us, we might be able to comprehend it; as it is, it is one of the mysteries, and, as usual, we must make the best of it. Life, after all, my dear, consists largely of making the best of things."

"Well, I'm sure I don't know what to do," said Mrs. Idiot, despairfully, "unless you telegraph them all not to come, and tell them why."

"It is too late to do that," said the Idiot, looking at his watch. "They've probably all left home by this time. Poets and clergymen and old people like Mr. and Mrs. Pedagog always do start an hour too early, for fear of missing their train."

"I wouldn't care so much about the Poet," said Mrs. Idiot; "he doesn't know enough about housekeeping, anyhow, to make it matter. But Mr. Whitechoker and Mr. and Mrs. Pedagog – I simply can't ask them to camp out, as it were. The very fact that Mrs. Pedagog would become sympathetic immediately she learned what had happened would in itself be unbearable."

"I thought women liked sympathy?" said the Idiot, with a proper manifestation of surprise.

"So they do; but you might just as well talk about claret as meaning one thing as of sympathy being all of the same brand," Mrs. Idiot answered. "Certain kinds of claret are insufferable – sour and heady. I suppose there are sixty different kinds."

"Sixty-two," said the Idiot, blandly. "The sixty you mean and two more whose names I have forgotten."

"I wish you would be serious for a moment," Mrs. Idiot retorted, with as near an approach to irritation as was possible to one of her amiable disposition. "And it's just the same way with sympathy," she continued; "Mrs. Pedagog will lay this whole trouble to my inexperience. Probably she never had a servant take French leave in her life on the eve of a dinner-party."

"I'll bet she didn't," said the Idiot. "And for why? Because she never gave a dinner-party in all her life. The habits of early life cling unto old age, and even as in her early days as a boarding-house keeper she never gave anything, so now she doubtless considers giving a dinner as a reckless waste of opportunity. And she is quite right. Does a lawyer invite his friends to join him in an opinion? Never. Does Mr. Tiffany request Mr. and Mrs. Idiot to accept a diamond tiara given in their honor? Not. Does a true poet, with three names on his autograph, give a poem to anybody when he can sell it? Not if he knows it. Why, then, expect a landlady, by birth and previous training, to *give* a dinner?"

"I notice," said Mrs. Idiot, severely, "that you are always willing to give your views!"

"Precisely, my dear, and that proves my point," replied the Idiot, amiably. "I am not a professional viewer, and I am not a photographer by trade. Therefore, why should I not *give* my views? But really," he added, "I wouldn't bother; it'll all come out right. I don't know just how, but I am confident we shall have the most glorious dinner of our lives. When I was down cellar this morning looking at the gas-meter I saw two big boxes full of potatoes, a can of French pease, and a bottle of sarsaparilla, and if they don't like what they get it will be because they are exacting. And I'll wager you from what I know of their manners that if you gave them dried apples, cold tongue, and milk they'd say it was the most delightful repast they ever sat down to."

"But *I'd* know they didn't mean it," said Mrs. Idiot, smiling in spite of her woe.

"And that brings up the question, why should your conscience be troubled by the insincerity of others?" said he. "Now, I'll tell you what we'll do. You fry the potatoes and I'll boil the can of pease; I think four minutes will boil them hard, like an egg, and together we'll put the sarsaparilla on ice, and bluff the whole thing through. Bluffing was always my strong point, and I have noticed, my dear, that in whatever I have tried to do since we were married you have contributed at least ninety per cent. to success. My bluff plus your efforts to make the thing a go will send our dinner to a premium."

Mrs. Idiot remained properly silent. As a matter of fact, she was not even listening. She was considering. What on earth to do was the question in her mind, and it so entirely absorbed it that she fortunately had little left for the rather easy views of the Idiot himself.

"What is a dinner, anyhow?" the Idiot added, after the silence had to his mind become oppressive. "Is it a mere meal? Do the Poet and Mr. and Mrs. Pedagog and Mr. Whitechoker come here merely to get something to eat? Or do they come for the pleasure of our society, or for the pleasure of leaving home, or what? As I understand it, people go out to dine not because they have not a sufficiency of food at home, but because they wish to meet other people. That's what I do. I can always have something better to eat at home than I can get at somebody else's house; and furthermore, it is a more natural meal. Dinners generally are made up of pretty little things that nobody likes, and have no sustenance in them. A successful dinner lies not in successful cooking, but in pleasing conversation. Wherefore, it is not the cook, but the host and hostess who make a failure or a success of a dinner."

"Then I presume if we simply spread the table and let you talk our guests will be satisfied?" said Mrs. Idiot, blandly.

"Precisely," the Idiot replied. "It will be delightful. Just think of the menu! Instead of oysters I will indulge in a few opinions as to the intellectual qualities of bivalves generally, finishing up with a glowing tribute to the man who is content to be a clam and not talk too much. In the place of *purée* we will tackle some such subject as the future of Spain. I think I could ladle out a few sound ideas on that subject that would be as clear as the purest *consommé*. Then for fish, that would be easy. A good trout story, with imagination sauce, would do very well. For the *entrée* I will give you one of my most recent poems, and the roast will be – "

"And the rest of us are to sit and twiddle our thumbs while you soliloquize?" demanded Mrs. Idiot. "I rather think not. I will provide the roast, my dear John, and it will consist largely of remarks upon the ways of cooks."

"A very proper subject for a roast," observed the Idiot, complacently, "and in your present frame of mind I think it will be not only well done, but rare as well, with plenty of crisp. And so we can simply talk this dinner through. It will be novel, certainly, and if you provide plenty of bread and butter no one need go away hungry."

"Very true," Mrs. Idiot answered. "And now that you have had your fun, suppose we put our minds on the serious aspect of the case. Two hours from now four people are coming here hungry – "

"I have it!" cried the Idiot, delightedly. "Let's *borrow* a cook! I don't believe it's ever been done before. It would be splendid, not only in getting us out of our troubles, but in establishing an entirely new principle in domestic science. What is the use of neighbors who will not be neighborly and lend you their most cherished possession?"

"None at all," sighed Mrs. Idiot, despairingly.

"Now, when we lived in our flat in New York the people up-stairs borrowed our ice," said the Idiot; "the people down-stairs borrowed our dining-room chairs; the people across the hall borrowed butter and milk and eggs, and I think we once borrowed a lemon from the people on the top floor."

"Never!" cried Mrs. Idiot.

"Yes, we did, my dear," insisted the Idiot. "At least I did. You and the children were off in the country, and one hot summer's night, two years ago, I was consumed with a desire for a glass of lemonade, and as there were no lemons in the house, or the flat, I sent out to borrow. I began at the

basement and worked up towards the roof, and ultimately got what I wanted, although, as I have said, it was the top-flat people I got it from."

"And did you ever return it?" demanded Mrs. Idiot.

"I regret to say that I didn't," said the Idiot. "But I will, and with interest. I wonder what two years' interest on a lemon is!" he added. "I suppose that a borrowed lemon compounded at the rate of six per cent. could be paid off by a lemon and one small Bermuda potato. I will send my check for both to those people to-morrow. What was their name?"

"I never knew," said Mrs. Idiot. "I never liked them, and I never called. I am sorry you are under obligations to them."

"Only for a lemon, though, dear," said the Idiot, "at six per cent."

"But what does all this prove?" demanded the poor little housekeeper.

"That the principle of lending is recognized among neighbors," the Idiot explained. "If a neighbor will lend a lemon, surely a neighbor will lend a cook. The principle involved is the same in both cases. Particularly so in this case, for my experience with cooks has been that they are, after all, for the most part nothing but human lemons. If the departed Bridget had been anything but full of sourness she would not have left us so unexpectedly."

"You don't really think for a moment, do you, that the Jimpsonberrys would lend us their cook, or that she would come, or that I would ask them?" said Mrs. Idiot.

"Well, I suppose not," said the Idiot. "I suppose not. *But I don't see why!* First, the Jimpsonberrys, as our neighbors, ought to be willing to get us out of our trouble. Second, we don't ask their cook to come for nothing. By coming she will receive an addition to her wages which will help her to endow a policeman with a moderate fortune some day when she marries him. As for your asking Mrs. Jimpsonberry to lend us her cook for a few hours, that is the main objection. When one borrows one must give collateral, and it may be that it would embarrass you to offer Mike as security for the safe return of the Jimpsonberrys' cook. Anyhow, I see weak points in my plan, and we'd better abandon it. If the Jimpsonberrys' cook is the only available incendiary in the neighborhood, we'd better stop where we are. When we dined at Jimpsonberrys' last week I went away feeling that Jimpsonberry ought to collect fire insurance on that dinner. It wasn't cooked; it was a plain case of arson."

It was at this precise moment, when poor Mrs. Idiot was beginning to despair of getting any advice of value from her husband, that the telephone-bell rang, and the Idiot rose up to answer the call.

"Hello!" he said.

"Oh! Hello, old man!" he added. "That you? Glad to see you."

"Yes," he continued, after a pause. "Of course we expect you."

"Seven o'clock sharp," he remarked, a moment later. "You'll surely be here?" Then after a second pause, he added:

"Good! You can stay all night if you wish; we've plenty of room. Good-bye."

"Who was it?" asked Mrs. Idiot, as the Idiot hung up the receiver of the telephone.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.