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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HALF-HOURS WITH THE IDIOT ***

HALF HOURS WITH THE IDIOT

By John Kendrick Bangs

A LITTLE BOOK OF CHRISTMAS
A LINE O' CHEER FOR EACH DAY O' THE YEAR
HALF HOURS WITH THE IDIOT

HALF HOURS WITH THE IDIOT

BY

JOHN KENDRICK BANGS



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I

AS TO AMBASSADORS' RESIDENCES

"I am glad to see that the government is beginning to think seriously of providing Ambassadors' residences at the various foreign capitals to which our Ambassadors are accredited," said the Idiot, stirring his coffee with a small pocket thermometer, and entering the recorded temperature of 58 degrees Fahrenheit in his little memorandum book. "That's a thing we have needed for a long time. It has always seemed a humiliating thing to me to note the differences between the houses of our government officials of equal rank, but of unequal fortune, abroad. To leave the home of an Ambassador to Great Britain, a massive sixteen-story mausoleum, looking like a collision between a Carnegie Library and a State Penitentiary, with seven baths and four grand pianos on every floor, with guides always on duty to show you the way from your bedchamber to the breakfast room, and a special valet for each garment you wear, from sock to collar, and go over to Rome and find your Ambassador heating his coffee over a gas-jet in a hall bedroom on the top floor of some dusty old Palazzo, overlooking the garage of the Spanish Minister, is disconcerting, to say the least. It may be a symptom of American fraternity, but it does not speak volumes for Western Hemispherical equality, and the whole business ought to be standardized. An American Embassy architecturally should not be either a twin brother to a Renaissance lunatic asylum, or a replica of a four thousand dollar Ladies' Home Journal bungalow that can be built by the owner himself working Sunday afternoons for eight hundred dollars, exclusive of the plumbing."

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"You are right for once, Mr. Idiot," said the Bibliomaniac approvingly. "The last time I was abroad traveling with one of those Through Europe in Ten Days parties, I could not make up my mind which was the more humiliating to me as an American citizen, the lavish ostentation of one embassy, or the niggardly squalor of another; and it occurred to me then that here was a first-class opportunity for some patriot to come along and do his country's dignity some good by pruning a little in one place, and fattening things up a bit in another."

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"Quite so," said the Idiot, inhaling a waffle.

"And I have been hoping," continued the Bibliomaniac, "that Congress would authorize the purchase of suitable houses in foreign capitals for the purpose of correcting the evil."

"That's where we diverge, sir," said the Idiot, "as the lady said to her husband, when they got their first glimpse of the courthouse at Reno. We don't want to purchase. We want to build. The home of an American Ambassador should express America, not the country to which he is sent to Ambass. There's nothing to my mind less appropriate than to find a diplomat from Oklahoma named, let us say, Dinkelspiel, housed in a Louis Fourteenth chateau on the Champs Eliza; or a gentleman from Indiana dwelling in the palace of some noble but defunct homicidal Duck of the Sforza strain in Rome; or a leading Presbyterian representing us at Constantinople receiving his American visitors in a collection of bargain-counter minarets formerly occupied by the secondary harem of the Sublime Porte. There is an incongruity about that sort of thing that, while it may add to the gaiety of nations, leaves Uncle Sam at the wrong end of the joke. When the thing is done it ought to be done from the ground up. Uncle Sam should always feel at home in his own house, and I contend that he couldn't really feel that way in an ex-harem, or in one of those cold-storage Roman Palazzos where the Borgias used to dispense cyanide of potassium *frappé* to their friends and neighbors. He doesn't fit into that sort of thing any more than he fits into those pink satin knee-breeches, and the blue cocked hat with rooster feathers that diplomatic usage requires him to wear when he goes to make a party call on the Czar. So I am hoping that when Congress takes the matter up it will consider only the purchase of suitable sites, and then go on to adopt a standardized residence which from cellar to roof, from state salon to kitchen, shall express the American idea."

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"You talk as if there were an American idea in architecture," said the Doctor. "If there is such a thing to be found anywhere under the canopy, let's have it."

"Oh, it hasn't been evolved, yet," said the Idiot. "But it soon would be if we were to put our minds on it. We can be just as strong on evolution as we always have been on revolution if we only try. The first thing would be for us to recognize that in his fullest development up to date the real American is a composite of everything that is best in all other nations. Take my humble self for instance."

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"What, again?" groaned the Bibliomaniac. "Really, Mr. Idiot, you are worse than the measles. You can take that only once, but you—why, we've had you so often that it sometimes seems as if life were just one idiotic thing after another."

"Oh, all right," said the Idiot. "In that case, let's take you for a dreadful example. What are you, anyhow, Mr. Bib, but the ultimate result of a highly variegated international complication in the matter of ancestry? Your father was English; your mother was German. Your grandparents were Scotch, Irish, and Manx, with a touch of French on one side, and a mixture of Hungarian, Danish, and Russian on the other. It is just possible that without knowing it you also contain traces of Italian and Spanish. Your love of classic literature suggests that somewhere back in the ages one of your forbears swarmed about Athens as a member of that famous clan, the Hoi Polloi. The touch of melancholy in your nature may be attributed to overindulgence in waffles, but it suggests also that Scandinavia had a hand in the evolution of your Ego. In other words, sir, you are a sort of human *pousse-café*, a mighty agreeable concoction, Mr. Bib, though a trifle dangerous to tackle at breakfast. Now, as I wanted to say in the beginning, when you intimated that I was in danger of becoming chronic, I am out of the same box of ancestral odds and ends that you are. I am a mixture of Dutch, French, English, and Manx, with an undoubted strain of either Ciceronian Roman or Demosthenesian Greek thrown in—I'm not certain which—as is evidenced by my overwhelming predilection for the sound of my own voice."

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"That much is perfectly clear," interjected the Bibliomaniac, "though the too-easy and overcontinuous flow of your speech indicates that your veins contain some of the torrential qualities of the Ganges."

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"Say rather the Mississippi, Mr. Bib," suggested Mr. Brief. "The Mississippi has the biggest mouth."

"Well, anyhow," continued the Idiot, unabashed, "whether my speech suggests the unearthly, mystic beauty of the Ganges, or the placid fructifying flow of the Mississippi, the fact remains that the best American type is a composite of all the best that human experience has been able to produce in the way of a featherless biped since Doctor Darwin's friend, Simian, got rid of his tail, preferring to sleep quietly on his back in bed rather than spend his nights swinging nervously to and fro from the limb of a tree. Since we can't deny this, let's make a virtue of it, and act accordingly. What is more simple, then, than that a composite people should go in for a composite architecture to express themselves in marble, stone, and brick? Acting on this principle let our architecture express the glory that was Greece, the grandeur that was Rome, the utility that was England, the economy that was Scotch, the *espièglerie* that was France, the simplicity that was Holland, and the efficiency that was Germany, not to mention the philandery that was Constantinople. The problem will be how to combine all these various strains and qualities in one composite building, and that, of course, will have to be solved by architects. It isn't a thing like banking that under the theories of modern Statesmanship can be settled by chauffeurs, tobacconists, and undertakers, but will require expert handling. I don't know very much about architecture myself, but off-hand I should say that the exterior of the building might be a combination of late Victorian Queen Anne, softened somewhat with Elizabethan suggestions of neo-Gothic Graeco-Roman Classicism; with a Byzantine fullness about the eaves, relieved with a touch of Hebridean French Renaissance manifested in the rococo quality of the pergola effect at the front, the whole building welded into a less inchoate mass by a very pronounced feeling of Georgian decadence, emphasized with a gambrel roof, and the façade decorated with flamboyant Dutch fire escapes, bringing irresistibly to mind the predominance in all American art of the Teutonic-Doric, as shown in our tendency to gables supported by moorish pilasters done in Hudson River brick. Not being an architect myself I don't know that a building of that kind could be made to stand up, but we might experiment on the proposition by erecting a Pan-European building in Washington, and see whether it would stand or not. If it could stand through one extra session of Congress without cracking, I don't see why it couldn't be put up anywhere abroad with perfect confidence that it would stay up through one administration, anyhow."

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"A nightmare of that kind erected in the capital city of a friendly power would be just cause for war to the knife!" said Mr. Brief.

"Well, I have an alternative proposition," said the Idiot, "and I am not sure that it isn't far better than the other. Why not erect a Statue of Liberty in every capital abroad, an exact reproduction of that monumental affair in New York Harbor, and let our Ambassadors live in them? They tell me there's as much room inside Liberty's skirts as there is in any ordinary ten-story apartment house, and there is no reason why it should not be utilized. My suggestion would be to have all the offices of the Embassies in the pedestals, and let the Ambassador and his family live in the overskirt. There'd be plenty of room left higher up in the torso for guest chambers, and in the uplifted arm for nurseries for the ambassadorial children, and the whole could be capped with a magnificent banquet hall on the rim of the torch, at the base of the brazen flame."

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"A plan worthy of the gigantic intellect that conceived it," smiled the Doctor. "But how would you have this thing furnished, Mr. Idiot? Would that be done by the Ambassadors themselves, or would the President have to call a special session of Congress to tackle the job?"

"I was coming to that," said the Idiot. "It has occurred to me that it would be a fine thing to have forty-eight rooms in the statue, each named after one of our American States, and then leave it to each State to furnish its own room. This would lend a pleasing variety to the inside of the building that could hardly fail to interest the visitor, and would give the foreigners a very clear insight into our resources along lines of interior decorations. Think of the Massachusetts Room,

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for example—a fine old horse-hair mahogany sofa in one corner; a rosewood highboy off in another; an old-fashioned four-poster bed projecting out into the middle of the room, and a blue china wash-bowl and pitcher on a spindle-legged washstand near by; and on the wall three steel engravings, one showing John Hancock signing the Declaration of Independence, another of Charles Sumner preaching emancipation, and a third showing Billy Sunday trying to sweep back the waves of a damp Boston from the sand dunes of a gradually drying Commonwealth. Then the Michigan room would be a corker, lavishly filled with antique furniture fresh from Grand Rapids, and a bronze statuette of Henry Ford at each end of the mantelpiece for symmetry's sake, the ceiling given over to a symbolical painting entitled *The Confusion of Bacchus*, reproducing scenes in Detroit when announcement was made that the good old State had voted for grape-juice as the official tipple. Missouri's room could be made a thing of beauty and a joy forever, with its lovely wall paper showing her favorite sons, Dave Francis and Champ Clark alternately, separated by embossed hound-dogs, rampant, done in gilt bronze, and the State motto, *Show Me*, in red, white, and blue tiles over the fireplace. Really I can't imagine anything more expressive of all-America than that would be. Florida could take the Palm Room; New York the rather frigid and formal white and gold reception room; Maine as the leading cold-water State of the Union could furnish the bathrooms; California could provide a little cafeteria affair for a quick lunch in mission style, and owing to her pre-eminence in literature, the library could be turned over to Indiana with every assurance that if there were not books enough to go round, any one of her deservedly favorite sons, from George Ade to George McCutcheon, would write a five-foot shelfful at any time to supply the deficiency.

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"Murally speaking, a plan of this sort could be made historically edifying also. Florida could supply a handsome canvas showing Ponce de Leon discovering Palm Beach. In the New Jersey room the Battle of Trenton could be shown, depicting the retreat of Jim Smith, and the final surrender of Democracy to General Wilson. Ohio could emphasize in an appropriate medium the Discovery of the Oil Fields by Mr. Rockefeller. Pennsylvania could herald her glories with a mural painting apotheosizing William Penn and Andrew Carnegie in the act of forging her heart of steel in the fires of immortality, kept burning by a never-ending stream of bonds poured forth from the end of a cornucopia by Fortune herself. An heroic figure of Governor Blease defying the lightning would come gracefully from South Carolina, and Rhode Island, always a most aristocratic little State, could emphasize the descent of some of her favorite sons from Darwin's original inspiration by a frieze depicting a modern tango party at Newport, in which the preservation of the type, and a possible complete reversion thereto, should be made imperishably obvious to all beholders.

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"Then, to make the thing consistent throughout, the homes of Ambassadors having been standardized, Congress should order a standard uniform for her representatives abroad. This would settle once and for all the vexed question as to what an Ambassador shall wear when presented to King This, or Emperor That, or the Ponkapog of Thingumbob. I think it ought to be a definitely established principle that every nation should be permitted to choose its own official dud, but not the duds of others. There is no reason in the world why the King of England should be permitted to dictate the style of garments an American Ambassador shall wear. Suppose he ordered him to attend a five o'clock tea clad in yellow pajamas trimmed with red-plush fringe and gold tassels emerging from green rosettes? It would be enough to set the eagle screaming and to justify the sending of a Commission of Protest headed by Mr. Bryan over to London to slap Mr. Lloyd George on the wrist. Nor should the Kaiser be permitted to say how an American representative shall dress when calling upon him, compelling him to appear perhaps in a garb entirely unsuited to his style of beauty—something like the uniform of a glorified White Wing, for instance, decorated with peacock feathers, and wearing an alpine hat with a stuffed parrot lying flat on its back on the peak, on his head. That sort of thing does not gee with our pretensions. We are a free and independent nation, and it is time to assert our independence of the sartorial shackles those foreign potentates would fasten upon us. Let the fiat go forth that hereafter all American Ambassadors wheresoever accredited shall wear a long blue swallow-tail coat with brass buttons, and forty-eight stars, lit by electricity from a small battery concealed in the pistol pocket, appliquéd on the tails; red and white-striped doeskin trousers, skin tight, held down by straps under the boots; and an embroidered waist-coat, showing a couple of American eagles standing on their hind legs and facing the world with the defiant cry of *We Pluribus Us*; the whole topped off with a bell-crowned, fuzzy beaver hat, made of silver-gray plush, which shall never be removed in the presence of anybody, potentate or peasant, plutocrat or Cook tourist. If in addition to these items the Ambassador were compelled to wear a long, yellow chin whisker, it would be just the liverest livery that ever came down the pike of Brummelian splendor. It would emphasize the presence of the American Ambassador wherever he went, and make the effete nations of Europe, Asia, Africa, and Pan America sit up and take notice."

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"Doubtless," said the Bibliomaniac, rising impatiently. "And do you suppose the President could find any self-respecting American in or out of jail who would be willing to wear such a costume as that?"

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"Well," said the Idiot, "of course some of 'em might object, but I'll bet you four dollars and eighty-seven cents' worth of doughnuts against a Chautauqua rain check that any man who offered you seventeen thousand five hundred dollars a year for wearing those duds without having the money to back the offer up would find your name at the head of the list of his preferred creditors in less than three shakes of a lamb's tail!"

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AS TO THE FAIR SEX

"I observe with pain," said the Idiot, as he placed the Bibliomaniac's pat of butter under his top waffle, "that there is a more or less acrimonious dispute going on as to the propriety of admitting women to the Hall of Fame. The Immortals already in seem to think that immortality belongs exclusively to the male order of human beings, and that the word is really 'Him-mortality', and decline to provide even a strap for the ladies to hang on in the cars leading to the everlasting heights, all of which causes me to rejoice that I am not an Immortal myself. If the one durable joy in life, the joy that neither crocks nor fades, association with the fair sex, a diversion which age cannot wither nor custom stale its infinite variety, is something an Immortal must get along without, it's me for the tall timbers of fameless existence. I rejoice that I am but a plain, common-garden, everyday mortal thing, ready for shipment, f. o. b., for the last terminal station on the road to that well-known Irish settlement, O'Blivion."

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"I didn't know that you were such an admirer of the fair sex, Mr. Idiot," said the Doctor. "Many years' residence in a refined home for single gentlemen like this would seem to indicate that the allurements of feminine society were not for you."

"Quite the contrary," said the Idiot. "It proves rather my interest in the fair sex as a whole. If I had specialized sufficiently upon one single blessed damozel with pink cheeks, snappy brown eyes, and a pompadour that might strike a soaring lark as the most desirable nest in the world, to ask her to share my lot, and go halves with me in an investment in the bonds of matrimony, it might have been said—I even hope it would have been said—that the allurements of feminine society were not for me. Marriage, my dear Doctor, is no symptom that a man is interested in women. It is merely evidence of the irresistible attraction of one person for another. It's like sampling a box of candy—you may find the sample extremely pleasing and gobble it up ferociously, but if you were to gobble up the whole box with equal voracity it might prove hateful to you. In my case, I confess that I am so deeply interested in the whole box of tricks that it is the sample I fight shy of, and I have remained single all these years because my heart is no miserable little one-horse-power affair that beats only for one single individual, but a ninety-million horse-power dynamo that whirls madly around day and night, on time and overtime, on behalf of all. I could not possibly bring myself to love only one pair of blue eyes to the utter exclusion of black, brown, or gray; nor can I be sure that if in some moment of weakness I were to tie up irrevocably to a pair of black eyes, somewhere, some day, with the moon just right, and certain psychological conditions wholly propitious, a pair of coruscating brown beads, set beneath two roguish eyebrows, would labor in vain to win a curve of interest from my ascetic upper lip. To put it in the brief form of a cable dispatch, rather than in magazine language at fifteen cents a word, I love 'em all! Blonde, brunette, or in between, in every maid I see a queen, as Shakespeare would have said if he had thought of it."

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"That's rather promiscuous, isn't it?" asked the Bibliomaniac.

"No, it's just playing safe, Mr. Bib," said the Idiot. "It's like a man with a million dollars to invest. It isn't considered quite prudent for him to put every red cent of that million into one single stock. If he put his whole million into U. S. Hot Air Preferred, at 97-7/8, for instance, and some day Hot Air became so cheap that the bottom dropped out of the market, and the stock fell to 8-3/8 that man would practically be a busted community. But if like a true sage he divided his little million up into twenty fifty-thousand dollar lots, and put each lot into some separate stock or bond, the general average would probably maintain itself somewhere around par whether the tariff on lyonnaise potatoes was removed or not. So it is with my affections. If I could invest them in some such way as that I might have to move out of here, and seek some pleasant little domestic Eden where matrimony is not frowned upon."

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"I rather guess you would have to move out of here," sniffed Mrs. Pedagogy the Landlady. "I might be willing to forego my rules and take somebody in here with one wife, but when a man talks about having twenty—why, I am almost disposed to give you notice now, Mr. Idiot."

"Don't you worry your kindly soul about me on that score, Mrs. Pedagogy," smiled the Idiot. "With ostrich feathers at seventy-five dollars a plume, and real Connecticut sealskin coats made of angora plush going at ninety-eight dollars, and any old kind of a falal selling in the open market at a hundred and fifty per frill, there is no danger of my startling this company by bringing home one bride, much less twenty. I was only speculating upon a theoretical ideal of matrimony, a sort of *e pluribus unum* arrangement which holds much speculative charm, but which in practice would undoubtedly land a man in jail."

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"I had no idea that any of my boarders could ever bring themselves to advance a single word in favor of polygamy," said the Landlady sternly.

"Nor I," said the Idiot. "I don't believe even Mr. Bib here would advocate anything of the sort. I was merely trying to make clear to the Doctor, my dear lady, why I have never attempted to make some woman happy for a week and a martyr for the rest of time. It is due to my deep admiration for the whole feminine sex, and not, as he seemed to think, to a dislike of feminine society. The trace of polygamy which you seem to find in my discourse is purely academic, and it is clear to me that you have quite misunderstood my scheme. A true marriage, one of those absolutely indestructible companionships that we read about in poetry, involves so many more things than

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any ordinary human being is really capable of, that one who thinks about the matter at all cannot resist the temptation to speculate on how things might be if they were different. The active man of affairs these busy times needs many diverse things in the way of companionship. He needs a helpmate along so many different lines that no single daughter of Eve can reasonably hope to supply them all. For example, if a man marries a woman who is deeply interested in Ibsen and Bernard Shaw abroad, and deep thinkers like William J. Bryan and Thomas Riley Marshall at home, she no doubt makes him ecstatically happy in those solemn moments when his mind wishes to grapple understandingly with the infinite. But suppose that poor chap comes home some night worn to a frazzle with the worries and complications of his business affairs, his spirit fairly yearning for something fluffy and intellectually completely restful, do you suppose for a moment that he is going to be lifted out of the morass of his woe by a conversation with that lady of his on the subject of the Inestimable Infinitude of the Protoplasmic Suffragette as outlined by Professor Sophocles J. Plato in the latest issue of the *South American Review*? Not he, my dear Mrs. Pedagog. What he wants on that occasion is somebody to sit alongside of him while he pulls away on his old briarwood pipe, holding his tired little paddy in her soft right hand, while she twitters forth George Ade's latest Fable on 'The Flipper that Flapped', or something else equally diverting. The reverse of the picture is equally true. If there is anything in the world that drives a man to despair it is to have to listen to five o'clock tea gabble when he happens to be in a mood for the Alexander Hamilton, or Vice-President Marshall style of discourse. The facts are the same in both cases. The Bernard Shaw lady is a delight to the heart and soul in his Bernard Shaw moods. The George Ade lady is a source of unalloyed bliss in a George Ade mood, but they don't reverse readily, and in most cases they can't reverse at all. Then there are other equally baffling complications along other lines. A man may be crazy about poetry, and he falls in love, as he supposes, with a dainty little creature in gold-rimmed eyeglasses, who writes the most exquisite lyrics, simply because he thinks at the moment that those lyrics are going to make his life just one sweet song after another. He marries the little songbird, and then what happens?"

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"Never having married a canary, I don't know," said the Landlady, with a glance at her husband.

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"Well, I'll tell you," said the Idiot. "He has a honeymoon of lovely images. He feels like a colt put out to pasture on the slopes of Parnassus. Life runs along with the lilt of a patter song—and then, to indulge in a joke worthy of the palmiest days of London Punch, he comes out of Patter-Song! There dawns a day when he is full chock-a-block up to his neck with poetry, and the inner man craves the re-enforcement of the kind of flapjacks his mother used to make. One good waffle would please him more than sixty-seven sonnets on the subject of 'Aspiration.' Nothing short of a lustrous, smoking, gleaming stack of fresh buckwheats can hold him on the pinnacle of joy, and the lovely little lyricist, to whom he has committed himself, his destinies, and all that he has under a vow for life, hies herself singing to the kitchen, mixes the necessary amount of concrete, serves the resulting dishes at the breakfast table, and gloom, gloom unmitigated, falls upon that house. After eating two of her cakes poor old hubby begins to feel as if he had swallowed the corner stone of a Carnegie library. That lyric touch that Herrick might have envied and Tennyson have viewed with professional alarm has produced a buckwheat cake of such impenetrable density that the Navy Department, if it only knew about it, would joyously grant her the contract for furnishing the armor plate for the new superdreadnoughts we are about to build so as to be prepared for Peace after Germany gets through with us. While eating those cakes the victim speculates on that old problem, Is Suicide a Sin? A cloud rises upon the horizon of his joy, and without intending any harm whatsoever, his mind involuntarily reverts to another little lady he once knew, who, while she couldn't tell the difference between a sonnet and a cabriolet, and had a dim notion when she heard people speaking of Keats that Keats were some sort of a shellfish found on the rocks of the Hebrides at low tide, and much relished by the natives, could yet put together a tea biscuit so delicately tenuous of character that it melted in the mouth like a flake of snow on the smokestack of a Pittsburgh blast furnace. Thus an apparently secured joy loses its keen edge, and without anybody being really to blame, life becomes thenceforward, very gradually, but none the less surely, a mere test of endurance—a domestic marathon which must be run to the end, unless the runners collapse before reaching the finish."

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"For both parties!" snapped the Landlady, pursing her lips severely. "You needn't think that the men are the only ones to suffer—don't you fool yourself on that point."

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"Oh, indeed I don't, Mrs. Pedagog," said the Idiot. "It's just as bad for the woman as for the man—sometimes a little worse, for there is no denying that women are after all more chameleonic, capable of a greater variety of emotions than men are. A man may find several women in one—in fact, he generally does. It is her frequent unlikeness to herself that constitutes the chief charm of some women. Take my friend Spinks' wife, for instance. She's the most exacting Puritan at home that you ever met. Poor Spinksy has to toe a straight mark for at least sixteen hours out of every twenty-four. Mrs. Spinks rules him with a rod of iron, but when that little Puritan goes to a club dance—well, believe me, she is the snappiest eyed, most flirtatious little tangoer in ninety-seven counties. Sundays in church she is the demurest bit of sartorial impressiveness in sight, but at the bridge table you want to keep your eyes wide open all the time lest your comfortable little balance at the bank be suddenly transformed into a howling overdraft. I should say that on general principles Mrs. Spinks is not less than nine or ten women, all rolled into one—Joan of Arc, Desdemona, Lucrezia Borgia, Cleopatra, Nantippe, Juliet, Mrs. Pankhurst, Eve, and the late Carrie Nation. But Spinks—poor old Spinksy—there's no infinite variety about him. At most Spinks is only two men—Mr. Henpeck at home and Mr. Overworked when he gets out."

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"I suppose from all of this nonsense," said the Landlady, "that your matrimonial ideal would be

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found in a household where a man rejoiced in the possession of a dozen wives—one frivolous little Hebe for his joyous moods; one Junoesque thundercloud for serious emergencies; one capable seamstress to keep his buttons sewed on; one first-class housekeeper to look after his domestic arrangements; one suffragette to talk politics to; one blue-stocking for literary companionship; one highly-recommended cook to preside over his kitchen; one musical wife to bang on the piano all day; one athletic girl for outdoor consumption, and a plain, common-garden giggler to laugh at his jokes."

"I think I could be true to such a household, madame," said the Idiot, "but please don't misunderstand me. I'm not advocating such a scheme. I am only saying that since such a scheme is impossible under modern conditions I think it is the best thing that ever happened to my wife that she and I never met."

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"Do you think a household of that sort would be satisfied with you?" asked the Bibliomaniac.

"The chances are six to one that it wouldn't be," said the Idiot. "I'd probably get along gloriously with Hebe and the giggler, but I guess the others would stand a fair show of finding marriage a failure. Wherefore am I wedded only to my fancies, content that my days should not be subjected to the strain of trying to be all things to one woman, preferring as I do to remain one thing to all women instead—their devoted admirer and willing slave."

"Well, to come back to the Immortals," said the Doctor. "You don't really think, do you, that we have any women Immortals?"

"Of course, I do," replied the Idiot. "The world is full of them, and always has been."

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Mr. Brief, the lawyer, tapped his forehead significantly.

"I'm afraid that screw has come loose again, Doctor," he said.

"Looks that way," said the Doctor, "but we'll tighten it up again in a jiffy."

He paused a moment, and then resumed.

"Well, Mr. Idiot," he said, "of course our ideas may differ on the subject of what makes an Immortal. Now, I should say that it is by their fruits that ye shall know them."

"A highly original remark," observed the Idiot, with a grin.

"That aside," said the Doctor, coolly, "let's take up, for purposes of discussion, a few standards. In music, Wagner was an Immortal, and produced his great trilogy. In poetry, Milton was an Immortal, and produced 'Paradise Lost.' In the drama, Shakespeare was an Immortal, and produced 'Hamlet', and, coming down to our own time, let us grant the obvious fact that Edison is headed toward immortality because of his wizardry in electricity."

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"Sure thing!" said the Idiot.

"It is good to have you grant all I say so readily," said the Doctor. "Now then—let me ask you where in all history you find four women who in the matter of their achievement, in the demonstrated fruits of their labors, even measurably approached any one of these four I have mentioned?"

"Why, Doctor," grinned the Idiot, "why ask me to steal candy from a baby? Why suggest that I try to drive a tack with a sledgehammer, or cut a mold of currant jelly with the whirring teeth of a buzz saw—"

"Sparring for time as usual," cried the Doctor triumphantly. "You can't name one, and are simply trying to asphyxiate us with that peculiar variety of natural gas for which you have long been famous."

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"I'll fill the roster with examples if you'll sit and listen," said the Idiot. "I can match every male genius that ever lived from Noah down to Josephus Daniels with a woman whose product was of equal if not even greater value. Begin where you please—in any century before or since the flood, and I'll be your huckleberry—Wagner, Milton, Cromwell, Roosevelt, Secretary Daniels, Kaiser Wilhelm, Methuselah—I don't care who or what he is—I'll match him."

"All right," said the Doctor. "Suppose we begin low with that trifling little frivoler in literature, William Shakespeare!"

"Good!" cried the Idiot. "He'll do—I'll just mark him off with Mrs. Shakespeare."

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"What?" chuckled the Doctor. "Anne Hathaway?"

"No," said the Idiot. "Not Anne Hathaway, but Shakespeare's mother."

"Oh, tush!" ejaculated the Bibliomaniac impatiently. "What rot! A wholly unknown provincial person of whom the world knows about as much as a beetle knows about Mars. What on earth did she ever produce?"

"Shakespeare!" said the Idiot, in an impressive basso-profundo tone that echoed through the room like a low rumble of thunder.

And a silence fell upon that table so deep, so abysmally still, that one could almost hear the

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III

HE GOES CHRISTMAS SHOPPING

"Mercy, Mr. Idiot," cried Mrs. Pedagog, as the Idiot entered the breakfast room in a very much disheveled condition, "what on earth has happened to you? Your sleeve is almost entirely torn from your coat, and you really look as if you had been dropped out of an aéroplane."

"Yes, Mrs. Pedagog," said the Idiot, wearily, "I feel that way. I started in to do my Christmas Shopping early yesterday, and what you now behold is the dreadful result. I went into Jimson and Slithers' Department Store to clean up my Christmas list, and, seeing a rather attractive bargain table off at one end of the middle aisle, in the innocence of my young heart, I tried to get to it. It contained a lot of mighty nice, useful presents that one could give to his friends and relatives and at the same time look his creditors in the face—pretty little cakes of pink soap made of rose leaves for five cents for three; lacquered boxes of hairpins at seven cents apiece; silver-handled toothpicks at two for five; French-gilt hatpins, with plate-glass amethysts and real glue emeralds set in their heads for ten cents a pair, and so on. Seen from the floor above, from which I looked down upon that busy hive, that bargain table was quite the most attractive thing you ever saw. It fairly glittered with temptation, and I went to it; or at least I tried to go to it. I had been so attracted by the giddy lure of the objects upon that table that I failed to notice the maelstrom of humanity that was whirling about it—or perhaps I would better say the fe-maelstrom of humanity that was eddying about its boundaries, for it was made up wholly of women, as I discovered to my sorrow a moment later when, caught in the swirl, I was tossed to and fro, whirled, pirouetted, revolved, twisted, turned, and generally whizzed about, like a cork on the surface of the Niagara whirlpool. What with the women trying to get to the table, and the women trying to get away from the table, and the women trying to get around the table, I haven't seen anything to beat it since the day I started to take a stroll one afternoon out in Kansas, and was picked up by a cyclone and landed down by the Alamo in San Antonio ten minutes later."

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"You ought to have known better than to try to get through such a crowd as that these days," said the Doctor. "How are your ribs—"

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"Know better?" retorted the Idiot. "How was I to know any better? There the thing was ready to do business, and nothing but a lot of tired-looking women about it. It looked easy enough, but after I had managed to get in as far as the second layer from the outside I discovered that it wasn't; and then I struggled to get out, but you might as well struggle to get away from the tentacles of an octopus as to try to get out of a place like that without knowing how. I was caught just as surely as a fox with his foot in a trap, and the harder I struggled to get out the nearer I was carried in toward the table itself. It required all my strategy to navigate my face away from the multitude of hatpins that surged about me on all sides. Twice I thought my nose was going to be served *en brochette*. Thrice did the penetrating points of those deadly pins pierce my coat and puncture the face of my watch. Three cigars I carried in my vest pocket were shredded into food for moths, and I give you my word that to keep from being smothered to death by ostrich feathers I bit off the tops of at least fifteen hats that were from time to time thrust in my face by that writhing mass of feminine loveliness. How many aigrettes I inhaled, and the number of artificial roses I swallowed, in my efforts to breathe and bite my way to freedom I shall never know, but I can tell you right now, I never want to eat another aigrette so long as I shall live, and I wouldn't swallow one more canvas-backed tea rose if I were starving. At one time I counted eight ladies standing on my feet instead of on their own; and while I lost all eight buttons off my vest, and six from various parts of my coat, when I got home last night I found enough gilt buttons, crocheted buttons, bone buttons, filagree buttons, and other assorted feminine buttons, inside my pockets to fill an innovation trunk. And talk about massages! I was rubbed this way, and scourged that way, and jack-planed the other way, until I began to fear I was about to be erased altogether. The back breadth of my overcoat was worn completely through, and the tails of my cutaway thereupon coming to the surface were transformed into a flowing fringe that made me look like the walking advertisement of a tassel factory. My watch chain caught upon the belt buckle of an amazon in front of me, and the last I saw of it was trailing along behind her over on the other side of that whirling mass far beyond my reach. My strength was oozing, and my breath was coming in pants short enough to be worn by a bow-legged four-year-old pickaninny, when, making a last final herculean effort to get myself out of that surging eruption, I was suddenly ejected from it, like Jonah from the jaws of the whale, but alas, under the bargain table itself, instead of on the outside, toward which I had fondly hoped I was moving."

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"Great Heavens!" said the Poet. "What an experience. And you had to go through it all over again to escape finally?"

"Not on your life," said the Idiot. "I'd had enough. I just folded my shredded overcoat up into a pillow, and lay down and went to sleep there until the time came to close the shop for the night, when I sneaked out, filled my pockets full of soap, clothespins, and other knickknacks, and left a dollar bill on the floor to pay for them. They didn't deserve the dollar, considering the damage I had sustained, but for the sake of my poor but honest parents I felt that I ought to leave

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something in the way of ready money behind me to pay for the loot."

"It's a wonder you weren't arrested for shoplifting," said Mr. Brief.

"They couldn't have proved anything on me," said the Idiot, "even if they had thought of it. I had a perfectly good defense, anyhow."

"What was that?" asked the Lawyer.

"Temporary insanity," said the Idiot. "After my experience yesterday afternoon I am convinced that no jury in the world would hold that a man was in his right mind who, with no compelling reasons save generosity to stir him to do so, plunged into a maelstrom of that sort. It would be a clear case of either attempted suicide or mental aberration. Of course, if I had been dressed for it in a suit of armor, and had been armed with a battle-axe, or a long, sharp-pointed spear, it might have looked like a case of highway robbery; but no male human being in his right mind is going to subject himself to the hazards to life, limb, eye, ear, and happiness, that I risked when I entered that crowd for the sole purpose of getting away unobserved with a package of nickel-plated hairpins, worth four cents and selling at seven, and a couple of hand-painted fly swatters worth ten cents a gross."

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The Landlady laughed a long, loud, silvery laugh, with just a little touch of derision in it.

"O you men, you men!" she ejaculated. "You call yourselves the stronger sex, and plume yourselves on your superior physical endurance, and yet when it comes to a test, where are you?"

"Under the table, Madame, under the table," sighed the Idiot. "I for one frankly admit the soft impeachment."

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"Yes," said the Landlady, "but I'll warrant you never found a woman under the table. We women, weak and defenseless though we be, go through that sort of thing day after day from youth to age, and we never even think of complaining, much less giving up the fight the way you did. Once a woman gets her eye on a bargain, my dear Mr. Idiot, and really wants it, it would take a hundred and fifty maelstroms such as you have described to keep her from getting it."

"I don't doubt it," said the Idiot, "but you see, my dear Mrs. Pedagog," he added, "you women are brought up to that sort of thing. You are trained from infancy to tackle just such problems, while we poor men have no such advantages. The only practice in domestic rough-housing that we men ever get in our youth is possibly a season on the football team, or in those pleasing little games of childhood like snap-the-whip, and mumbledypeg where we have to dig pegs out of the ground with our noses. Later in life, perhaps, there will come a war to teach us how to assault an entrenched enemy, and occasionally, perhaps around election time, we may find ourselves mixed up in some kind of a free fight on the streets, but all of these things are as child's play compared to an assault upon a bargain table by one who has never practiced the necessary maneuvers. To begin with we are absolutely unarmed."

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"Unarmed?" echoed the Landlady. "What would you carry, a Gatling gun?"

"Well, I never thought of that," said the Idiot, "but if I ever tackle the proposition again, which, believe me, is very doubtful, I'll bear the suggestion in mind. It sounds good. If I'd had a forty-two centimeter machine-gun along with me yesterday afternoon I might have stood a better chance."

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"O you know perfectly well what I mean," said Mrs. Pedagog. "You implied that women are armed when they go shopping, while men are not."

"Well, aren't they?" asked the Idiot. "Every blessed daughter of Eve in that mêlée yesterday was armed, one might almost say, to the teeth. There wasn't one in the whole ninety-seven thousand of them that didn't have at least two hatpins thrust through the middle of her head with their sharp-pointed ends sticking out an inch and a half beyond her dear little ears; and every time a head was turned in any direction blood was shed automatically. All I had was the stiff rim of my derby hat, and even that fell off inside of three minutes, and I haven't seen hide nor hair of it since. Then what the hatpins failed to move out of their path other pins variously and strategically placed would tackle; and as for auxiliary weapons, what with sharp-edged jet and metal buttons sprouting from one end of the feminine form to the other, up the front, down the back, across the shoulders, along the hips, executing flank movements right and left, and diagonally athwart every available inch of superficial area elsewhere, aided and abetted by silver and steel-beaded handbags and featherweight umbrellas for purposes of assault, I tell you every blessed damozel of the lot was a walking arsenal of destruction. All one of those women had to do was to whizz around three times like a dervish, poke her head either to the right or to the left, and gain three yards, while I might twist around like a pinwheel, or an electric fan, and get nothing for my pains save a skewered nose, or a poke in the back that suggested the presence of a member of the Black Hand Society. In addition to all this I fear I have sustained internal injuries of serious import. My teeth are intact, save for two feathers that are so deeply imbedded at the back of my wisdom teeth that I fear I shall have to have them pulled, but every time I breathe one of my ribs behaves as if in some way it had got itself tangled up with my left shoulder blade. Why, the pressure upon me at one time was so great that I began to feel like a rosebud placed inside the family Bible by an old maid whose lover has evaporated, to be pressed and preserved there until his return. This little pancake that is about to fulfill its destiny as a messenger from a cold and heartless outside world to my inner man, is a rotund, bulgent, balloon-shaped bit of puffed-up convex protuberance compared to the way I felt after that whirl

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of femininity had put me through the clothes-wringer. I was as flat as a joke of Caesar's after its four thousandth semiannual appearance in London Punch, and in respect to thickness I was pressed so thin that you could have rolled me around your umbrella, and still been able to get the cover on."

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"You never were very deep, anyhow," suggested the Bibliomaniac.

"Whence the wonder of it grows," said the Idiot. "Normally I am fathomless compared to the thin, waferlike quality of my improfundity as I flickered to the floor after that dreadful pressure was removed."

"How about women getting crushed?" demanded the Landlady defiantly. "If a poor miserable little wisp of a woman can go through that sort of thing, I don't see why a big, brawny man like you can't."

"Because, as I have already said," said the Idiot, "I wasn't dressed for it. My clothes aren't divided up into airtight compartments, rendering me practically unsinkable within, nor have I any steel-constructed garments covering my manly form to resist the pressure."

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"And have women?" asked Mrs. Pedagog.

The Idiot blushed.

"How should I know, my dear Mrs. Pedagog?" replied the Idiot. "I'm no authority on the subtle mysteries of feminine raiment, but from what I see in the shop windows, and in the advertising pages of the magazines, I should say that the modern woman could go through a courtship with a grizzly bear and come out absolutely undented. As I pass along the highways these days, and glance into the shop windows, mine eyes are constantly confronted by all sorts of feminine under-tackle, which in the days of our grandmothers were regarded as strictly confidential. I see steel-riveted contraptions, marked down from a dollar fifty-seven to ninety-eight cents, which have all the lithe, lissom grace of a Helen of Troy, the which I am led to infer the women of to-day purchase and insert themselves into, gaining thereby not only a marvelous symmetry of figure hitherto unknown to them, but that same security against the bufferings of a rude outside world as well, which a gilt-edged bond must feel when it finds itself locked up behind the armor-plated walls of a Safe Deposit Company. Except that these armorial undergarments are decorated with baby-blue ribbons, and sporadic, not to say spasmodic, doodads in filmy laces and chiffon, they differ in no respect from those wonderful combinations of slats, chest-protectors, and liver pads which our most accomplished football players wear at the emergent moments of their intellectual development at college. In point of fact, without really knowing anything about it, I venture the assertion that the woman of to-day wearing this steel-lined chiffon figure, and armed with seventy or eighty different kinds of pins from plain hat to safety, which protrude from various unexpected parts of her anatomy at the psychological moment, plus the devastating supply of buttons always available for moments of aggressive action, is the most powerfully and efficiently developed engine of war the world has yet produced. She is not only protected by her unyielding figure from the onslaughts of the enemy, but she fairly bristles as well with unsuspected weapons of offense against which anything short of a herd of elephants on stampede would be powerless. Your modern Amazon is an absolutely irrefragable, irresistible creature, and it makes me shudder to think of what is going to happen when this war of the sexes, now in its infancy, really gets going, and we defenseless men have nothing but a few regiments of artillery, and a division or two of infantry and cavalry standing between us and an advancing column of super-insulated shoppers, using their handbags as clubs, their hatpins glistening wickedly in the morning light, as they tango onward to the fray. When that day comes, frankly, I shall turn and run. I had my foretaste of that coming warfare in my pursuit of Christmas gifts yesterday afternoon, and my motto henceforth and forever is Never Again!"

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"Then I suppose we need none of us expect to be remembered by you this Christmas," said the Doctor. "Alas, and alas! I shall miss the generous bounty which led you last year to present me with a cold waffle on Christmas morn."

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"On the contrary, Doctor," said the Idiot. "Profiting from my experience of yesterday I am going to start in on an entirely new system of Christmas giving. No more boughten articles for me—my presents will be fashioned by loving hands without thought of dross. You and all the rest of my friends at this board are to be remembered as usual. For the Bibliomaniac I have a little surprise in store in the shape of a copy of the *Congressional Record* for December 7th which I picked up on a street car last Friday morning. It is an absolutely first edition, in the original wrappers, and will make a fine addition to his collection of Americana. For Mr. Brief I have a copy of the New York Telephone Book for 1906, which he will find full of most excellent addresses. For my dear friend, the Poet, I have set aside a charming collection of rejection slips from his friends the editors; and for you, Doctor, as an affectionate memento of my regard, I have prepared a little mixture of all the various medicines you have prescribed for me during the past five years, none of which I have ever taken, to the vast betterment of my health. These, consisting of squills, cod-liver oil, ipecac, quinine, iron tonic, soothing syrup, spirits of ammonia, horse liniment, himalaya bitters, and calomel, I have mixed together in one glorious concoction, which I shall bottle with my own hands in an old carboy I found up in the attic, on the side of which I have etched the words, When You Drink It Think of Me!"

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"Thanks, awfully," said the Doctor. "I am sure a mixture of that sort could remind me of no one else."

"And, finally, for our dear Landlady," said the Idiot, smiling gallantly on Mrs. Pedagog, "I have the greatest surprise of all." [Pg 64]

"I'll bet you a dollar I know what it is," said the Doctor.

"I'll take you," said the Idiot.

"You're going to pay your bill!" roared the Doctor.

"There's your dollar," said the Idiot, tossing a silver cartwheel across the table. "Better hand it right over to Mrs. Pedagog on account, yourself." [Pg 65]

IV

AS TO THE INCOME TAX

"Well, Mr. Bib," said the Idiot cheerfully, as he speared a lonely prune and put it out of its misery, "have you made your return to the income tax collector yet?"

"I both rejoice and regret to say that my income is not large enough to come under the provisions of the act," said the Bibliomaniac, "and consequently I haven't bothered my head about it."

"Then you'd better get busy and send in a statement of your receipts up to January first, or you'll find Uncle Sam after you with a hot stick. For the sake of the fair name of our beloved home here, sir, don't delay. I'd hate to see a federal patrol wagon rolling up to our door for the purpose of taking you to jail." [Pg 66]

"But I am exempt," protested the Bibliomaniac. "I don't come within a thousand dollars of the minimum."

"That may be all true enough," said the Idiot. "You know that, and I know that, but Uncle Sam doesn't know it, and you've got to satisfy him that you are not a plutocrat trying to pass yourself off as a member of one of those respectable middle-class financial families in which this land is so pleasingly rich. You've got to lay a statement of your financial condition before the government whether your income is ninety-seven cents a minute or forty-seven thousand dollars an hour. Nobody is exempt from that nuisance. As I understand it, the government requires every man, woman, and child to go to confession, and own up to just how little or how much he or she hasn't got. All men stand equal in the eyes of the law when it comes to the show-down. There is no discrimination in favor of the rich in this business, and the inconvenience of having a minion of authority prying into your private affairs is as much a privilege of yours as it is of Uncle John's, or good old Brother Scramble, the Egg King. Uncle Sam is going to put his eye on every man-jack of us and find out whether we are any good or not, and if so, for how much. He will have sleuths everywhere about to estimate the cubic financial contents of your trousers' pockets, and whether you keep your money in a bank, in a trust company, in a cigar box, your sock, or your wife's name, he is going right after it, and he'll get his share or know the reason why. There isn't a solitary nickel circulating in this land to-day that can hope to escape the eagle eye of the Secretary of the Treasury and his financial ferrets." [Pg 67]

"You surprise me," said the Bibliomaniac. "If what you say is true, it is a perfect outrage. You don't really mean to tell me that I have got to give a statement of my receipts to some snoopy-nosed old government official, do you?" [Pg 68]

"Even so," said the Idiot, "or at least that is the way I understand it. You've not only got to tell how much you've got, but you must also disclose the sources of your revenue. If you found a cent on the corner of Main Street and Desdemona Alley on the fifteenth day of December, 1916, thereby adding that much to your annual receipts, you have got to enter it in your statement, and so clearly that the authorities will understand just how, when, and where it came into your possession, all under oath; and you are not allowed to deduct your current living expenses from it, either. If in stooping over to pick up that cent you busted your suspenders, and had to go and pay fifty cents for a new pair, thereby losing forty-nine cents on the transaction, you aren't allowed to make any deductions on that account. That cent is 'Net'—not 'Nit', but 'Net.' Same way if in a crowded car you put your hand into what you presumed to be your own pocket, and pulled out unexpectedly a roll of twenty dollar bills amounting to two hundred dollars in all, and then in an absent-minded moment got away with it before you realized that it belonged to the man standing next to you, you'd have to put it down on your statement just the same as all the rest of the items, under penalty of prosecution for concealing sources of revenue from the officers of the law. Oh, it's a fine mess we smart Alexanders of the hour have got ourselves into in our effort to establish a pipe line between the plutocratic pocketbook and the United States Treasury. We all hypnotized ourselves into the pleasing belief that the income tax was going to be a jolly little club with which to hit old Brother Plute on the head, and make him fork over, while we Nixicrats sat on the fence and grinned. It was going to be great fun watching the Plutes disgorge, and we all had a notion that life was going to be just one exurgitating moving picture after another, with us sitting in front row seats gloating over the Sorrows of Cræsus and his coughing coffers. But, alas for our dreams of joy, it hasn't worked out quite that way. The vexation of the blooming thing is visited upon every one of us. Them as has has got to pay. Them as hasn't has got to prove that [Pg 71]

they don't have to pay, and I tell you right now, Mr. Bib, it is going to be a terrific proposition for a lot of chaps in this land of ours who are skinning along on nothing a year, but making a noise like a ten-thousand-dollar proposition."

"I fear me their name is legion," said the Bibliomaniac.

"I know one named Smythe," said the Idiot. "If a painter were looking around for a model for Ready Money in an allegorical picture Smythe would fill the bill to perfection. You ought to see him. He walks about the streets of this town giving everybody he meets a fifteen-thousand per annum look when, as a matter of fact, he hasn't got ten cents to his name. If he was invited to a submarine masquerade all he'd have to do would be to swallow a glass of water and go as a sponge. He makes about as big a splurge on a deficit as you or I could make if our salaries were raised nine hundred ten per cent., and then some. As a weekender he is in the A 1 class. He hasn't paid for a Sunday dinner in five years, nor has he paid for anything else in earned cash for three. His only sources of revenue are his friends, the pawn-shops, and his proficiency at bridge and poker. His only hope for staving off eventual disaster is the possibility of hanging on by his eyelids until he dawns as the last forlorn hope on the horizon of some freckle-faced, red-haired old maid, with nine millions in her own right. He owes every tailor, hatter, and haberdasher in town. When he needs twenty-five dollars he buys a fifty-dollar overcoat, has it charged, and takes it around the corner and pawns it, and ekes out the deficiency with a jackpot or a grand slam, in the manipulation of both of which he is what Socrates used to call a cracker-jack. If you ever saw him walking on the avenue, or entering a swagger restaurant anywhere, you'd stop and say to yourself, 'By George! That must be Mr. Idle Rich, of whom I have heard so much lately. Gosh! I wonder how it feels to be him!'"

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"Him?" sniffed the Bibliomaniac, always a stickler for purity of speech.

"Sure thing!" said the Idiot. "You don't stop to think of grammar when you are dazzled by that spectacle. You just give way, right off, to your natural, unrestrained, primitive instincts, and speak English in exactly the same way that the caveman spoke his tongue in those glorious days before grammar came along to curse education with its artificial restraints upon ease of expression. 'Gosh! I wonder how it feels to be him', is what you'd say as old Empty Wallet passed you by disguised as the Horn of Plenty, and all day long your mind would continue to advert to him and the carefree existence you'd think to look at him he was leading; and you, with a four-dollar bill within your reach every Saturday night, would find yourself positively envying him his wealth, when, as a matter of fact, he hasn't seen a single red cent he could properly call his own for ten years."

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"Oh, well—what of it?" said the Bibliomaniac. "Of course, there are sponges and snobs in the world. What are they to us?"

"Why, nothing," said the Idiot, "only I wonder what Smythe and his kind are going to do when the income tax collector comes along and asks for his little two per cent. of all this showy exterior. It will be a terribly humiliating piece of business to confess that all this ostentatious show of prosperity is nothing but an empty shell, and that way down inside he is only an eighteen-karat, copper-fastened, steel-riveted bluff; fact is, he'll have the dickens of a time making the tax collectors believe it, and then he'll be face to face with a federal indictment for trying to dodge his taxes. And that business of dodging—that brings up another phase of this income tax that I don't believe many of us realized when we were shouting for it as a means of shackling Mr. Plute. Did you ever realize that it won't be very long before the government, in order to get this income tax fixed right, will have a lot of inspectors who will be delegated to do for you and me, and all the rest of us, what the Custom House inspectors now do for travelers returning from abroad? Every man and woman traveling upon the seas of life, Mr. Bib, will be required to enter the port of taxation and there submit a declaration of the contents of their boxes to the tax inspectors, which will be followed, as in the case of the traveler from abroad, by a complete overhauling of their effects by those same inspectors. The tessellated pave of your safe deposit companies and banks will look like the floor of an ocean steamship pier on the arrival of a big liner, only instead of being snowed under by a mass of shirts, trousers, Paris-made revelations in chiffons, silks, and brocades, necklaces, tiaras, pearl ropes, snipped aigrettes, and snowy drifts of indescribable, but in these free days no longer unmentionable, lingerie, it will be piled high with steel bonds, New Haven deferred dividends, sinking fund debenture certificates, government five eighths per cent. bonds, certificates of deposit, miscellaneous stocks, mining, industrial, railway, gilt-edged and wildcat, in one red unburial blent; while the poor owner, fearful lest in the excitement of the ordeal he may have neglected to mention some insignificant item of a million or two in Standard Oil, will sit by and sweat as the inspector tears his ruthless way through his accumulated stores for wealth."

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"It will be almost enough to make a man sorry he's rich," said the Doctor.

"Oh, no," said the Idiot, "for the rest of us will be in the same pickle, only in a more humiliating position as the intruder reveals that the sum total of our lifetime of endeavor consists chiefly in unpaid bills labeled Please Remit. The Custom House inspectors are harder on the man with nothing to declare than they are on those whose boxes are full. They slam their things all over creation, and insult the owner with the same abandon with which they greet a recognized past-mistress in the arts of smuggling. Innocence is no protection when a Custom House inspector gets after you, and it will be the same way with the new kind. None of us can hope to escape. The income tax inspectors will come here just as eagerly as they will go to that palatial mausoleum in which Mr. Rockernegie dwells on the corner of Bond Avenue and Easy Street, and they'll

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rummage through our trunks, boxes, and bureaus in search of such interest-bearing securities as they may suspect us of trying to get by with. Mr. Bib will have to dump his bureau drawer full of red neckties out on the floor to prove to Uncle Sam's satisfaction that he hasn't got a fourteen-million-dollar bond issue concealed somewhere behind their lurid glow. The Doctor will have to sit patiently by and unprotestingly watch the inspectors going through the pockets of his unrivaled collection of fancy waist-coats in a heart-breaking quest for undeclared interests in mining enterprises and popular cemeteries. Trunks, chests, hatboxes, soapboxes, pillboxes, safety razor boxes—in fact, all kinds of receptacles in this house, from Mrs. Pedagog's ice chest to Mr. Whitechoker's barrel of sermons—will be compelled to disgorge their uttermost content in order to satisfy the government sleuths that we who dwell in this Palace of Truth, Joy, and Waffles, have not a controlling interest in Standard Oil hidden away lest we be compelled to pay our due to the treasury."

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"You don't mean to say that the law so provides, do you?" said the Bibliomaniac.

"Not yet," said the Idiot, "but it will—it's bound to come. In the very nature of the beast it is inevitable. There never was a tax yet that found a warm spot awaiting it in the hearts of its countrymen. The human mind with all its diabolical ingenuity has never yet been able to devise a tax that somebody somewhere—nay, that most people everywhere—did not try to dodge, and to catch the dodgers the government is compelled to view everybody with suspicion, and treat hoi polloi from top to bottom as if they were nothing more nor less than a lot of unregenerate pickpockets, horse-thieves, and pastmasters in the gentle art of mendacity."

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"Frightful!" said Mr. Whitechoker. "And is not a man's word to be taken as a guarantee of the accuracy of his return?"

"Not so's anybody would notice it," grinned the Idiot. "When the government finds it necessary to nab leaders of fashionable society for trying to smuggle in one-hundred-thousand-dollar pearl necklaces by sewing them up in the lining of their hats, and to fine the most eminently respectable citizens in the country as much as five thousand dollars for returning from abroad portly with five or six-hundred yards of undeclared lace wound inadvertently about their stomachs, having in the excitement of their homecoming put it on in the place of the little flannel bands they have worn to ward off cholera and other pleasing foreign maladies, it loses some of its confidence in human nature, and acquires some of that penetrating inquisitiveness of mind which is said to be characteristic of the native of Missouri. It wants to be shown, and if the income tax remains in force, we might as well make up our minds that the inquisitorial inspector will soon be added to the official pay roll of the United States of America."

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"But," protested the Bibliomaniac, "that will be a plain common-garden espionage of so intolerable a nature that no self-respecting free people will submit to it. It will be an abominable intrusion upon our rights of privacy."

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The Idiot laughed long and loud.

"It seems to me," said he, after a moment, "that when Colonel John W. Midas, of the International Hickory Nut Trust, advanced that same objection against the proposed tax a year or so ago, Mr. Bib, you sat in that very same chair where you are now and vociferously announced that there was nothing in it."

"Oh, but that's different," said the Bibliomaniac. "Midas is a rich man, and I am not."

"Well, I suppose there is a difference between a prune and a Canadian melon, old man, but after all, they're both fruit, and when it comes to being squeezed, I guess it hurts a lemon just as much as it does a lime. I, for one, however, do not fear the inspector. My securities are exempt, for they all pay their tax at the source."

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"What are they, coupon bonds?" grinned the Lawyer.

"No," said the Idiot; "pawn tickets, interest on which is always paid in advance."

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V

A PSYCHIC VENTURE

"I beg your pardon, Doctor," said the Idiot, as he laid aside his morning paper and glanced over the gastronomic delights spread upon the breakfast table at Mrs. Smithers-Pedagog's high-class home for single gentlemen. "I don't wish to intrude upon this moment of blissful intercourse which you are enjoying with your allotment of stock in the Waffle Trust, but do you happen to have any A No. 1 eighteen-karat psychrobes among your patients that you could introduce me to? I need one in my business."

"Sike whats?" queried the Doctor, pausing in the act of lifting a sizable section of the eight of diamonds done in batter to his lips.

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"Psychrobes," said the Idiot. "You know what I mean—a clairvoyant, a medium, a sike—somebody in the spiritual inter-State commerce business, who knows his or her job right down to the

ground and back again."

"H'm! Why—yes, I know one or two mediums," said the Doctor.

"Strictly up-to-date and reliable?" said the Idiot. "Ready to trot in double harness?"

"Oh, as to their reliability as mediums I can't testify," said the Doctor. "You never can tell about those people, but I will say that in all respects other than their psychic indulgences I have always found those I know wholly reliable."

"You mean they wouldn't take a watch off a bureau when the owner wasn't looking, or beat a suffering corporation out of a nickel if they had a chance?" said the Idiot. [Pg 86]

"That's it," said the Doctor. "But, as I say, you never can tell. A man may be the soul of honor in respect to paying his board bill, and absolutely truthful in statements of the everyday facts of life, and yet when he goes off, er—when he goes off—"

"Psychling," suggested the Idiot. "Bully good title for a story that—'Psychling with a Psychrobe'—eh? What?"

"Fair," said the Doctor. "But what I was going to say was that when he goes off psychling, as you put it, he may, or may not, be quite so reliable. So if I were to indorse any one of my several clairvoyant patients for you, it would have to be as patients, and not as psychlists."

"That's all right," said the Idiot. "That's all I really want. If I can be sure that a medium is a person of correct habits in all other respects, I'll take my chances on his reliability as a transient." [Pg 87]

"As a transient?" repeated the Bibliomaniac.

"Yes," said the Idiot. "A person in a state of trance."

"What has awakened this sudden interest of yours in things psychic?" asked the Doctor. "Are you afraid that your position as a dispenser of pure idiocy is threatened by the recorded utterances of great thinkers now passed into the shadowy vales, as presented to us by the mediums?"

"Not at all," said the Idiot. "Fact is, I do not consider their utterances as idiotic. Take that recent report of the lady who got into communication with the spirit of Napoleon Bonaparte, and couldn't get anything out of him but a regretful allusion to Panama hats and pink pajamas, for instance. Everybody thought it was very foolish, but I didn't. To me it was merely a sad intimation of the particular kind of climate the great Corsican had got for his in the hereafter. He needed his summer clothes, and couldn't for the moment think of anything else. I should have been vastly more surprised if he had called for a pair of ear-tabs and a fur overcoat." [Pg 88]

"And do you really believe, also for instance," put in the Bibliomaniac scornfully, "that with so many big questions before the public to-day Thomas Jefferson would get off such drivel as has been attributed to him by these people, having a chance to send a real message to his countrymen?"

"I've only seen one message from Jefferson," said the Idiot, "and it seemed to me most appropriate. It was received by a chap up in Schenectady, and all the old man said was 'Whizz—whizz—whizz, buzz—buzz—buzz, whizz—whizz—whizz!' Lots of people considered it drivel, but to me it was fraught with much sad significance." [Pg 89]

"Well, if you can translate it, it's more than I can," said the Bibliomaniac. "The idea that the greatest political thinker of the ages could stoop to unmeaning stuff of that sort is to me preposterous."

"Not at all," said the Idiot. "You have not the understanding mind. Those monosyllabic explosions were merely an expression of the rapidity with which poor old Jefferson was turning over in his grave as he realized to what uses modern statesmen of all shades of political belief were putting his name. It must be a tough proposition for a simple old Democrat like Jefferson to find his memory harnessed up to every bit of entomological economic thought now issuing from the political asylums of his native land." [Pg 90]

"Pouf!" said the Bibliomaniac. "You are a reactionary, Sir."

"Ubetcha," said the Idiot. "First principles first, say I. But to come back to clairvoyants. I am very anxious to get hold of a medium, Doctor, and the sooner the better. I'm going to give up Wall Street. I can't afford to stay there any longer unless I move out of this restful paradise of food and thought and take up my abode in a Mills Hotel, or charter a bench in the park from the city. The only business we had in our office last week was a game of poker between the firm and its employes, and the firm tided itself over the emergency by winning my salary for the next six weeks. Another week of such activity would prostrate me financially, and I am going to open a literary bureau to deal in posthumous literature." [Pg 91]

"Posthumous literature is the curse of letters," said the Bibliomaniac. "It generally means the publication of the rejected, or personally discarded, manuscripts of a dead author, which results in the serious impairment of the quality of his laurels. It ought to be made a misdemeanor to print the stuff."

"I agree with you entirely as to that, Mr. Bib," said the Idiot. "This business of emptying the

pigeonholes of deceased scribes, and printing every last scrap of scribbling to be found there, whether they intended it to be printed or not, is reprehensible, and I for one would gladly advocate a law requiring executors of a literary estate to burn all unpublished manuscripts found among the decedent's papers merely as a matter of protection to a great name. But it isn't that kind of posthumous production that I am going in for. It's the production posthumously produced that I am after, and I need a first-class medium as a side partner to get hold of the stuff for me."

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"Preposterous!" sniffed the Bibliomaniac.

"Sounds that way, Mr. Bib," said the Idiot, "but, all the same, here's a lady over in England has recently published a book of short stories by the late Frank R. Stockton, which his genial spirit has transmitted to the world through her. Now, if this thing can be done by Stockton, I don't see why it can't be done by Milton, Shakespeare, Moses, and others, and if I can only get hold of a real Psyche I'm going to get up a posthumous literary trust that will stagger humanity."

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"I guess it will!" laughed the Doctor.

"Yes, sir," said the Idiot enthusiastically. "The first thing I shall do will be to send the lady after Charles Dickens and good old Thackeray, and apply for the terrestrial rights to all their literary subsequences, and, as a publisher really ought to do, I shall not content myself with just taking what they write of their own accord, but I'll supply them with subject matter. My posthumous literary trust will have a definite policy.

"Can't you gentlemen imagine, for instance, what those two men could do with little old New York as it is to-day? What glorious results would come from turning Dickens loose on the underworld, and setting Thackeray's pen to work on the hupper sukkles of polite s'ciety! If there ever was a time when the reading public were ripe for another 'Oliver Twist' or another 'Vanity Fair', that time is now, and I can hardly sleep nights for thinking about it."

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"I don't see it at all," said the Bibliomaniac. "'Oliver Twist' is quite perfect as it is."

"No doubt," retorted the Idiot, "but it isn't up-to-date, Mr. Bib. For example, think of a scene described by Dickens in which Fagin, now become a sort of man higher up, or at least one of his agents, takes little Oliver out into a Bowery back yard and makes a proficient gunman out of the kid, compelling him to practice in the flickering glare of an electric light at shooting tailor's dummies on a rapidly moving platform, with a .42-caliber six-shooter, until the lad becomes so expert that he can hit nineteen out of twenty as they pass, missing the twentieth only by a hair's breadth because it represents a man Fagin wants to scare and not kill.

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"Or think of how Thackeray would take hold of this tango tangle and expose the cubic contents of that Cubist crowd, and handle the exquisite dullness of the smart set, not with the glib brilliance of the man on the outside, who novelizes what he reads in the papers, but with the sounder satire of the man who knows from personal observation what he is writing about! Great heavens—the idea makes my mouth water!"

"That might be worth while," confessed the Bibliomaniac. "But how are you going to get the facts over to Dickens and Thackeray?"

"I shall not need to," said the Idiot. "All they'll have to do will be to project themselves in spirit over here into the very midst of the scenes to be described. As spirits they will have the entrée into any old kind of society they wish to investigate, and in that respect they will have the advantage over us poor mortals who can't go anywhere without having to take our confounded old bodies along with us. Then after I had arranged matters with Dickens and Thackeray, I'd send my psychic representative after Alexander Dumas, and get him to write a sequel to 'The Three Musketeers', and 'Twenty Years After', which I should call 'Two Hundred and Ninety Years After, a Romance of 1916', in which D'Artagnan, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis should return to modern times and try their hands on trench work, introducing the aéroplane, the submarine, and all the other appurtenances of war, from the militant brick to the dynamite bomb. Why, a good, rip-staving old Dumas tale of adventure of to-day, with those old heroes of his mixed up with the Militant Suffragettes and the Crown Prince of Germany, would be what old Doctor Johnson would have called a cracker-jack, if he had had the slightest conception of the possibilities of the English language."

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"Wouldn't interest me in the least," said the Bibliomaniac coldly, "if there is anything under the canopy that I despise it is so-called romance. Now, if you could get hold of some of the solider things, such, for instance, as Macaulay might write, or"—

"Ah!" said the Idiot, triumphantly, "it is there that my scheme would work out most beneficently. My special articles on historic events by personal participators would thrill the world.

"From Adam I would secure the first and only authentic account of the Fall, with possibly an expression of his opinion as to the validity of the Darwinian theory. From Noah, aided and abetted by Shem, Ham, and Japhet, would come a series of sea stories narrating in thrilling style the story of The Flood, or How We Landed the Zoo on Ararat. A line or two from Balaam's Ass on the subject of modern Socialism would fill the reading world with wonder. A series of papers specially prepared for a woman's magazine by Henry VIII. on 'Wild Wives I Have Wedded', edited, possibly, with copious footnotes by Brigham Young, would bring fortune to the pockets of the publishers.

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"And then the poets—ah, Mr. Bib, what treasures of poesy would this plan of mine not bring

within our reach! Dante could write a new 'Inferno' introducing a new torture in the form of Satan compelling a Member of Congress to explain the Tariff bill. Homer could sing the sufferings and triumphs of arctic exploration in a new epic entitled 'The Chilliad', or possibly expend his genius upon the story of the rise and fall of Bryan in immortal periods under the title of 'The Billiad'—

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"Or describe your progressive idiocy under the title of 'The Silliad!'" put in the Bibliomaniac.

"Ubetcha!" cried the Idiot. "Or tell the sad tale of your life under the title of 'The Seniliad.' And in addition to these wonders, who can estimate to what extent we should all profit were our more serious reviews to secure articles from Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, and old Ben Franklin on the present state of the nation! Why, an article dictated off-hand by the shade of Lincoln on the thousands who are now flattering themselves that they occupy his shoes, illustrated with those apt anecdotes of which he was a master, and pointed with his gloriously dry humor, under the title of 'Later Links', would alone make the venture worth while, even if nothing else came of it."

"Oh, well," said the Bibliomaniac, rising, "perhaps there is something in the idea after all, and I wish you success, Mr. Idiot—and, by the way, if the scheme works out as you expect it to, and you happen to come across old Æsculapius, ask him for me for an authoritative statement of the origin and proper treatment of idiocy, will you?"

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"Sure," said the Idiot, turning to his breakfast, "but it really isn't necessary to do that, Mr. Bib. Our good old friend, the Doctor here, is quite capable of curing you at any time you consent to put yourself unreservedly in his hands."

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VI

ON MEDICAL CONSERVATION

"I see by the paper this morning," said the Idiot, as he put three lumps of sugar into his pocket and absent-mindedly dropped his eyeglasses into his coffee, "that, thanks to the industry of our Medical Schools and Colleges, the world is richer by thirty thousand new doctors to-day than it was yesterday. How does the law of supply and demand work in cases of that kind, Doctor Squills?"

"Badly—very badly, indeed," said the Doctor, with a gloomy shake of his head. "The profession is sadly overcrowded, and mighty few of us are making more than a bare living."

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"I was afraid that was the case," said the Idiot sympathetically. "I was talking with a prominent surgeon at the Club the other night, and he was terribly upset over the situation. He intimated that we have been ruthlessly squandering our natural internal resources almost as riotously and as blindly as our lumbermen have been destroying the natural physical resources of the country. He assured me that he himself had reached a point in his career where there was hardly a vermiform appendix left in sight, and where five years ago he was chopping down not less than four of these a day for six days of the week at a thousand dollars per, it was now a lucky time for him when he got his pruning knife off the hook once a month."

"That vermiform appendix craze was all a fad anyhow," said the Bibliomaniac sourly. "Like the tango, and bridge, and golf, and slumming, and all the rest of those things that Society takes up, and then drops all of a sudden like a hot stick. It looked at one time as if nobody could hope to get into society who hadn't had his vermiform removed."

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"Well, social fad or not," said the Idiot, "whatever it was, there is no question about it that serious inroads have been made upon what we may call our vermiforests, and unless something is done to protect them, by George, in a few years we won't have any left except a few stuffed specimens down in the Smithsonian Institution."

"I asked my friend Doctor Cuttem why he didn't call for a Vermiform Conservation Congress to see what can be done either to prevent this ruthless sacrifice of a product that if suitably safeguarded should supply ourselves, and our children, and our children's children to the uttermost posterity, with ample appendicular resources for the maintenance in good style of a reasonable number of surgeons; or to re-seed scientifically where the unscientific destruction of these resources is uncontrollable. How about that, Doctor? Suppose you remove a man's vermiform appendix—is there any system of medical, or surgical, fertilization and replanting that would cause two vermiforms to grow where only one grew before, so that sooner or later every human interior may become a sort of garden-close, where one can go and pluck a handful of vermiform appendices every morning, like so many hardy perennials in full bloom?"

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"I'm afraid not," smiled the Doctor.

"Anybody but the Idiot would know that it couldn't be done," said the Bibliomaniac, "because if it could be done it would have been done long ago. When you find men successfully transplanting rabbits' tails on monkeys, and frogs' legs on canary birds, you can make up your mind that if it were within the range of human possibility they would by this time have vermiform appendices sprouting lushly in geranium pots for insertion into the systems of persons desiring luxuries of

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that sort."

"You mustn't sneer at the achievements of modern surgery, Mr. Bib," said the Idiot. "There is no telling how soon any one of us may need to avail himself of its benefits. Who knows—maybe a surgeon will come along some day who will be able to implant a sense of humor in you, to gladden all your days."

"Preposterous!" snapped the Bibliomaniac.

"Well, it does seem unlikely," said the Idiot, "but I know of a young doctor who without any previous experience planted a little heart in a frigid Suffragette; and though I know the soil is not propitious, even you may sometime be blossoming luxuriantly within with buds of cheer and sweet optimism. But however this may be, it is the unquestioned and sad fact that a once profitable industry for our surgically-inclined brothers has slumped; and they tell me that even those surgeons who have adopted modern commercial methods, and give away a set of Rudyard Kipling's Works and a year's subscription to the *Commoner* with every vermiform removed, are making less than a thousand dollars a week out of that branch of their work."

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"Mercy!" cried the Poet. "What couldn't I do if I had a thousand dollars a week!"

"You could afford to write real poetry all the time, instead of only half the time, eh, old man?" said the Idiot affectionately. "But don't you mind. We're all in the same boat. I'd be an infinitely bigger idiot myself if I had half as much money as that."

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"Impossible!" said the Bibliomaniac, chuckling over his opportunity.

"Green-eyed monster!" smiled the Idiot. "But speaking of this overcrowding of the profession, it is a surprise to me, Doctor, that so many young men are taking up medicine these days, when competent observers everywhere tell us that the world is getting better all the time.

"If that is true, and the world really is getting better all the time, it is fair to assume that some day it will be entirely well, and then, let me ask you, what is to become of all the doctors? It will not be a good thing for Society ever to reach a point where it has such an army of unemployed on its hands, and especially that kind of an army, made up as it will be of highly intelligent but desperately hungry men, face to face with starvation, and yet licensed by the possession of a medical diploma to draw, and have filled, prescriptions involving the whole range of the materia medica, from Iceland moss and squills up to prussic acid and cyanide of potassium.

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"It makes me shudder to think of it!" said Mr. Brief, the lawyer, with a grin at the Doctor.

"Shudder isn't the word!" said the Idiot. "The bare idea makes my flesh creep like a Philadelphia trolley car! Coxe's Army was bad enough, made up as it was of a poor, miserable lot of tramps and panhandlers, all so unused to labor as to be really jobshy; but in their most riotous moods the worst those poor chaps could do was to heave a few bricks or a dead cat through a millinery shop window, or perhaps bat a village magnate on the back of the head with a bed slat. There was nothing insidiously subtle about the warfare they waged upon Society.

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"But suppose that, laboring under a smarting sense of similar wrongs, there should come to be such a thing as old Doctor Pepsin's Army of Unemployed Physicians and Surgeons, marching through the country, headed for the White House in order to make an impressive public demonstration of their grievances! What a peril to the body politic that would be! Not only could the surgeons waylay the village magnates and amputate their legs, and seize hostile editors and cut off the finger with which they run their typewriting machines, and point with alarm with; but the more insidious means of upsetting the public weal by pouring calomel into our wells, putting castor oil in our reservoirs, leaving cholera germs and typhoid cultures under our door mats, or transferring a pair of jackass's legs to the hind-quarters of an old family horse, found grazing in the pasture, would transform a once smiling countryside into a scene of misery and desolation."

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"Poor, poor Dobbin!" murmured the Bibliomaniac.

"Indeed, Mr. Bib, it will be poor, poor Dobbin!" said the Idiot. "I don't think that many people besides you and myself realize how desperately serious a menace it is that hangs over us; and I feel that one of the first acts of the Administration, after it has succeeded in putting grape juice into the Constitution as our national tippie, and constructed a solid Portland cement wall across the Vice President's thorax to insure that promised four years of silence, should be an effort to control this terrible situation."

"You talk as if it could be done," said the Doctor doubtfully.

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"Of course it can be done," said the Idiot. "Doctors being engaged in Inter-State Commerce—"

"Doctors? Interstate Commerce?" cried Mr. Brief. "That's a new one on me, Mr. Idiot. Everybody is apparently in Interstate Commerce in your opinion. Seems to me it was only the other day that you spoke of Clairvoyants being in it."

"Sure," said the Idiot. "And it's the same way with the doctors. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, where a man passes from this state into the future state, you'll find a doctor mixed up in it somewhere, even if it's only as a coroner. This being so, it would be perfectly proper to refer the matter to the Interstate Commerce Commission for a solution.

"Anyhow, something ought to be done to handle the situation while the menace is in its infancy.

We need the ounce of prevention. Now, my suggestion would be that the law should step in and either place a limit to the number of doctors to be turned out annually, on a basis of so many doctors to so many hundreds of population—say three doctors to every hundred people—just as in certain communities the excise law allows only one saloon for every thousand registered voters; or else, since the State permits medical schools to operate under a charter, authorizing them to manufacture physicians and surgeons ad lib., and turn them loose on the public, the State should provide work for these doctors to do.

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"To this end we might have, for instance, a Bureau of Disease Dissemination, subject perhaps to the jurisdiction of the Secretary of the Interior, under whose direction, acting in coöperation with the Department of Agriculture, every package of seeds sent out by a Congressman to his constituents would have a sprinkling of germs of one kind or another mixed in with the seeds, thus spreading little epidemics of comparatively harmless disorders like the mumps, the measles, or the pip, around in various over-healthy communities where the doctors were in danger of going over the hill to the poorhouse. Surely if we are justified in making special efforts to help the farmers we ought not to hesitate to do the doctors a good turn once in a while."

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"You think the public would stand for that, do you?" queried the Bibliomaniac scornfully.

"Oh, the public is always inhospitable to new ideas at first," said the Idiot, "but after a while they get so attached to them that you have to start an entirely new political party to prove that they are reactionary. But, as the Poet says,

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"Into all lives some mumps must fall,

"and the sooner we get 'em over with the better. If the public once wakes up to the fact that the measles and the mumps are as inevitable as a coal bill in winter, or an ice bill in summer, it will cheerfully indorse a Federal Statute which enables us to have these things promptly and be done with 'em. It's like any other disagreeable thing in life. As old Colonel Macbeth used to say to that dear old Suffragette wife of his,

"If 'twere done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly.

"It's like taking a cold bath in the morning. You don't mind it at all if you jump in in a hurry and then jump out again.

"But even if the public didn't take that sensible view of it, we have legislative methods by which the thing could be brought about without the public knowing anything about it. For instance, supposing somebody in Congress were to introduce an innocent little bill appropriating five hundred thousand dollars, for the erection of a residence for a United States Ambassador to the Commonwealth of California, for the avowed object of keeping somebody in San Francisco to see that Governor Johnson didn't declare war on Japan without due notice to the Navy Department, what could be simpler than the insertion in that bill of a little joker providing that from the date of the enactment of this statute the Department of Agriculture is authorized and required to expend the sum of twenty thousand dollars annually on the dissemination, through Congressional seed packages, of not less than one ounce per package of germs of assorted infantile and other comparatively harmless disorders, for the benefit of the medical profession? Taxidermists tell us that there are more ways than one to skin a cat, and the same is true of legislation.

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"There's only one other way that I can see to bring the desired condition about, and that is to permit physicians to operate under the same system of ethics as that to be found in the plumbing business. If a plumber is allowed, as he is allowed in the present state of public morality, to repair a leak in such a fashion to-day that new business immediately and automatically develops requiring his attention to-morrow, I see no reason why doctors should not be permitted to do the same thing. Called in to repair a mump, let him leave a measles behind. The measles cured, a few chicken-pox left carelessly about where they will do the most good will insure his speedy return; and so on. Every physician could in this way take care of himself, and by a skilful manipulation of the germs within his reach should have no difficulty not only in holding but in increasing his legitimate business as well."

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"Ugh!" shuddered Mrs. Pedagog. "You almost make me afraid to let the Doctor stay in this house a day longer."

"Don't be afraid, Madame," said the Doctor amiably. "After all, I'm a doctor, you know, and not a plumber."

"I'll guarantee his absolute harmlessness, Mrs. Pedagog," said the Idiot. "We're perfectly safe here. It is no temptation to a doctor to sow the germs of disorder among people like ourselves who have reduced getting free medical advice to a system."

"Well," said Mr. Brief, the lawyer, "your plan is all right for the doctors, but why the Dickens don't somebody suggest something for us lawyers once in awhile? There were seventy thousand new lawyers turned out yesterday, and you haven't even peeped."

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"No," said the Idiot, "it isn't necessary. You lawyers are well provided for. With one National Congress, and forty-eight separate State Legislatures working twenty-four hours a day, turning out fifty-seven new varieties of law every fifteen minutes, all so phrased that no human mind can translate them into simple English, there's enough trouble constantly on hand to keep twenty million lawyers busy for thirty million years, telling us not what we can't do, but what few things

VII

THE U. S. TELEPHONIC AID SOCIETY

"Well, Mr. Idiot," said the Doctor, as the Idiot with sundry comments on the top-loftical condition of the thermometer fanned his fevered brow with a tablespoon, "I suppose in view of the hot weather you will be taking a vacation very shortly."

"Not only very shortly, but excessively shortly," returned the Idiot. "Its shortness will be of so brief a nature that nobody'll notice any vacant chairs around where I am accustomed to sit. But let me tell you, Dr. Squills, it is too hot for sarcasm, so withhold your barbs as far as I am concerned, and believe me always very truly yours, Nicholas J. Doodlepate."

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"Sarcasm?" said the Doctor in a surprised tone. "Why, my dear fellow, I wasn't sarcastic, was I? I am sure I didn't mean to be."

"To the listener's ear it seemed so," said the Idiot. "There seemed to me to be traces of the alkali of irony mixed in with the tincture of derision in that question of yours. When you ask a Wall Street man who declines to carry speculation accounts these days if he isn't going to take a vacation shortly, it is like asking a resident of the Desert of Sahara why he doesn't sprinkle a little sand around his place."

"Life on Wall Street for my kind, my good sir, of late has been just one darned vacation after another. The only business I have done in three months was to lend one of our customers a nickel, taking a subway ticket and a baseball rain check as collateral security."

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The Idiot shook his head ruefully and heaved a heart-rending sigh.

"What we cautious Wall Street fellows need," said he, "is not a VA-cation, but a VO-cation."

"Oh, well, a man of your fertility of invention ought not to have any trouble about that," said Mr. Brief. "You should be able without killing yourself to think up some new kind of trade that will keep you busy until the snow-shoveling season begins anyhow."

"Yes," said the Idiot. "Ordinary by the exercise of some ingenuity and the use of these two brazen cheeks with which nature has endowed me, I can always manage to pull something resembling a living out of a reluctant earth. If a man slips up on being a Captain of Industry he can lecture on a sight-seeing coach, or if that fails him under present conditions in this old town, by a little economy he can live on his tips."

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"And at the worst," said the Bibliomaniac, "you always have Mrs. Pedagog to fall back on."

"Yes," said the Idiot. "The state of my bill at this very moment shows that I have credit enough with Mrs. Pedagog to start three national banks and a trust company. But, fortunately for me, I don't have to do either. I have found my opportunity lying before me in the daily newspapers, and I am about to start a new enterprise which is not only going to pull a large and elegant series of chestnuts out of the fire for me but for all my subscribers as well. If I can find a good lawyer somewhere to draw up the papers of incorporation for my United States Telephonic Aid Society, I'll start in business this very morning at the nearest pay station."

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"If you want a good lawyer, what's the matter with me?" asked Mr. Brief.

"I never was any good at riddles," said the Idiot, "and that one is too subtle for me. If I want a good lawyer, what is the matter with you? Ha! Hum! Well, I give it up, but I'm willing to be what the ancients used to call the Goat. If I want a good lawyer, Brudder Bones, what IS the matter with you? I ask the question—what's the answer?"

"I don't know," grinned the Lawyer.

"Well, I guess that's it," said the Idiot. "If I want a good lawyer I want one who does know."

"But what's this new society going to do?" interrupted the Poet. "I am particularly interested in any sort of a scheme that is going to make you rich without forgetting me. If there's any pipe-line to prosperity, hurry up and let me know before it is too late."

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"Why, it is simplicity itself," said the Idiot. "The U. S. Telephonic Aid Society is designed to carry First Aid to the Professionally Injured. You have doubtless read recently in the newspapers how Damon, a retired financier, desirous of helping his old friend Pythias, an equally retired attorney, back into his quondam practice—please excuse that word quondam, Mrs. Pedagog; it isn't half as profane as it sounds—went to the telephone and impersonating J. Mulligatawny Solon, Member of Congress from the Chillicothe District, rang up Midas, Cræsus, and Dives, the eminent bankers, and recommended Pythias as the only man this side of the planet Mars who could stave off the ruthless destruction of their interests by an uncontrolled body of lawmakers."

"Yes," said Mr. Brief. "I read all that, and it was almost as unreal as a page out of the Arabian

"Wasn't it!" said the Idiot. "And yet how simple! Well, that's my scheme in a nutshell, only I am going to do the thing as a pure matter of business, and not merely to show the purity of my affection for any Pythian dependent.

"To show just how the plan will work under my supervision let us take your case first, Mr. Poet. Here you are this morning with your board bill already passed to its third reading, with Mrs. Pedagog tacking amendments on to the end of it with every passing day. Unfortunately for you in your emergent hour, the editors either view your manuscripts with suspicion or, what is more likely, refuse to look at them at all. They care nothing for your aspirations or your inspirations.

"Your immediate prospect holds nothing in sight save the weary parcel postman, with his bent form, delivering daily at your door eleven-pound packages of unappreciated sonnets. You do not dare think on the morrow, what ye shall eat, and wherewithal shall ye be clothed, because no man liveth who can purchase the necessities of life with rejection slips—those checks on the Banks of Ambition, payable in the editors' regrets."

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"By George," blurted the Poet feelingly, "you're dead right about that, old man. If editors' regrets were legal tender, I could pay off the national debt."

"Precisely," said the Idiot. "And it is just here, my dear friend, that the U. S. Telephonic Aid Society rushes to your assistance. Your case is brought to the society's attention, and I, as President, Secretary, Treasurer, and General Manager of the institution, look into the matter at once.

"I find your work meritorious. No editor has ever rejected it because it lacked literary merit. He even goes so far as to print a statement of that fact upon the slip he sends back with it on its homeward journey. Like most other poets you need a little food once in awhile. A roof to cover your head is essential to your health, and under the existing laws of society you simply must wear clothes when you appear in public, and it becomes the Society's worthy job to aid you in getting all these things.

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"So we close a contract providing that for ten dollars down and fifteen per cent. of the gross future receipts, I, or the Society, agree to secure the publication of your sonnets, rondeaux, limericks, and triolets in the Hyperion Magazine."

"That would be bully if you could only pull it off," said the Poet, falling naturally into the terminology of Milton. "But I don't just see how you're going to turn the trick."

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"On the regular 'Damon and Pythias' principle, as set forth in the newspapers," said the Idiot. "Immediately the contract between us is signed, I rush to the nearest pay station and ring up the editor of the Hyperion Magazine, and when I get him on the line we converse as follows:

"Me—Is this the editor of the Hyperion Magazine?

"Editor—Ubetcha. Who are you?

"Me—I'm President Wilson, down at the White House.

"Editor—Glad to hear from you, Mr. President. Got any more of that new Freedom stuff on hand? We are thinking of running a Department of Humor in the Hyperion, and with a little editing I think we could use a couple of carloads of it.

"Me—Why, yes, Mr. Bluepencil. I think I have a bale or two of remnants in cold storage down at Trenton. But really that isn't what I am after this morning. I wanted to say to you officially, but confidentially, of course, that my Ambassador to Great Britain has just cabled his resignation to the State Department. What with a little breakfast he gave last week to the President of France and his tips at his own presentation to the King, he has already spent four years' salary, and he does not feel that he can afford to stay over there much after the first of September.

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"Editor—I'm on. I getcha.

"Me—Now, of course, I've got to fill his place right away, and it struck me that you were just the man for the job. In the first place you are tolerably familiar with the language they speak in and about the Court of St. James's. I am told by mutual friends that you eat peas with a fork, can use a knife without cutting your lip, and have an intuitive apprehension of the subtle distinctions between a finger-bowl and a sauterne glass. It has also been brought to my attention that your advertising pages have for years been consistent advocates, in season and out, of the use of grape juice as a refreshing beverage for nervous Ambassadors.

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"Editor—That's right, Mr. President.

"Me—Well, of course, all of this makes you unquestionably *persona grata* to us, and I think it should make you a novel and interesting feature of diplomatic life along Piccadilly.

"Editor—It sounds good to me, Mr. President.

"Me—Now to come to the difficulties in our way—and that is what I have rung you

up to talk about. There seems to be but one serious objection to your appointment, Mr. Bluepencil. At a Cabinet meeting called yesterday to discuss the matter, Mr. McAdoo expressed the fear that if you go away for four years the quality of the poetry in the Hyperion Magazine will fall off. In this contention, Mr. McAdoo was supported by the Secretary of Agriculture, whose name escapes me at this moment, with the Postmaster General and the Secretary of War on the fence. Mr. Daniels was not present, having gone West to launch a battleship at Omaha. But in any event there is where the matter rests at this moment.

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"For my own part, however, after giving the matter prayerful consideration, I think I can see a way out. The whole Cabinet is very much interested in the poems of Willie Wimpleton Spody, the boy Watson. McAdoo is constantly quoting from him. The Postmaster General has even gone so far as to advocate the extension of the franking privilege to him, and as for myself, I have made it a practice for the last five years to begin every day by reciting one of his limericks before my assembled family.

"Editor—I never heard of the boob.

"Me—Well, you hear of him now, and the whole thing comes down to this: Mr. Spody will call at your office with a couple of bales of his stuff at ten o'clock tomorrow morning, and you might have something besides a pink rejection slip dripping with regrets ready for him. I don't know what his rates are, but his stuff runs about ninety pounds to the bale, and what that comes to at fifty per you can figure out for yourself.

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"Editor—How does Champ Clark stand on this thing?

"Me—He and Tommie Marshall are with us to the last tintinnabulation of the gong.

"Editor—Then I am to understand just what, Mr. President?

"Me—That you don't go to England on our account until we are absolutely assured beyond peradventure that there will be no deterioration in the quality of Hyperion poetry during your absence.

"Editor—All right. Send the guy around this afternoon. He can send the bale by slow freight. We always pay in advance anyhow."

The Idiot paused to take breath.

"Then what?" asked the Poet dubiously.

"You go around and get what's coming to you," said the Idiot. "Or perhaps it would be better to send a messenger boy for it. The more impersonal we make this business the better."

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"I see," said the Poet dejectedly. "But even at that, Mr. Idiot, when the Hyperion man doesn't get the Ambassadorship, won't he sue me to recover?"

"Oh, well," said the Idiot wearily, "you've got to assume some of the burdens of the business yourself. We can't do it all, you know. But suppose they do sue you? You never heard of a magazine recovering anything from a poet, did you? You'd get a heap of free advertising out of such a lawsuit, and if you were canny enough to put out a book of your verses while the newspapers were full of it, they'd go off like hot cakes, and you could retire with a cool million."

"And where do I come in?" asked the Doctor. "Don't I get any of these plums of prosperity your Telephonic Aid Society is to place within the reach of all?"

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"On payment of the fee of ten dollars, and signing the regular contract," said the Idiot. "I'll do my best for you. In your case I should impersonate our good old friend Andrew Rockernegie. Acting in that capacity I would ring up Mr. John D. Reddymun, and you'd hear something like this:

"Me—Hello, Reddy—is this you?

"Reddymun—Yes. Who's this?

"Me—This is Uncle Andy. How's the leg this morning?

"Reddymun—Oh, so so.

"Me—Everybody pulling it, I suppose?

"Reddymun—About the same as usual. It's curious, Andrew, how many people are attached to my limb, and how few are attached to me.

"Me—Yes, it's a cold and cruel world, John. But I'm through. I've found the way out. They'll never pull my leg again.

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"Reddymun—By George, old man, I wish I could say as much.

"Me—Well, you can if you'll only do what I did.

"Reddymun—What's that?

"Me—Had it cut off.

"Reddymun—No!

"Me—Yep!

"Reddymun—When?

"Me—Just now.

"Reddymun—Hurt?

"Me—Never knew what was happening.

"Reddymun—Who did it?

"Me—Old Doctor Squills. He charged me ten thousand dollars for the job, but I figure it out that it has saved me six hundred and thirty three million dollars.

"Reddymun—Send him around, will you?

"Me—Ubetcha!"

"And then?" said the Doctor.

"And then?" echoed the Idiot. "Well, if you don't know what you would do if you were offered ten thousand dollars to cut a man's leg off I can't teach you, but I have one piece of advice to give you. When you get the order don't go around there with a case full of teaspoons and soup-ladles, when all you need is a good sharp carving knife to land you in the lap of luxury!" [Pg 136]

"And do you men think for one single moment," cried the Landlady, "that all this would be honest business?"

"Well, in the very nature of the case it would be a trifle 'phoney'," said the Idiot, "but what can a man do these days, with his bills getting bigger and bigger every day?"

"I'd leave 'em unpaid first!" sniffed the Landlady contemptuously.

"Oh, very well," smiled the Idiot. "With your permission, ma'am, we will. You don't know what a load you have taken off my mind." [Pg 137]

VIII

FOR TIRED BUSINESS MEN

"Poor old Binks!" said the Idiot sympathetically, as he put down a letter just received from his friend and turned his attention to the waffles. "He's spending the good old Summer time in a sanitarium, just because he thinks he's got nervous prostration, and the Lord knows when he'll be back in harness again."

"Who's Binks?" asked the Lawyer. "You talk as if the name of Binks were a household word."

"Well, it is, in a way," said the Idiot. "Binks is one of those tired business men that we hear so much of these days. The kind they write comic operas and popular novels for, with all the thought taken out so that he may not have to burden his mind with anything worth thinking about. He's one of these billionaire slaves who's lost his thumb cutting off coupons and employs seventeen clerks with rubber stamps to sign his checks for him. He's succumbed to the strain of it all at last, and now the gobelins have got him. Do you approve of these sanitariums, Doctor?" [Pg 138]

"I most certainly do," said the Doctor. "Sanitariums are the greatest blessings of modern life, and, for my part, I'd like to see a law passed requiring everybody to spend a month in one of them every year of his life, where he could be under constant scientific supervision. It would add ten years to the lives of every one of us."

"Well, I hope you are right, but I don't know," said the Idiot dubiously. "Seems to me there's too much coddling going on at those places, and mighty few people get well on coddling. I've given the matter some thought, and I've known a lot of men who had nothing but a pain in their toe who got so much sympathy over it that they became hopeless invalids inside of a year. There's more truth than humor in that joke about the little Irish boy who was asked how his mother was and replied that she was enjoying poor health this year." [Pg 139]

"O, that's all tommyrot," said the Doctor. "Perfect nonsense—"

"I hope so," said the Idiot, "but after all nobody can deny that there are a great many people in this world who really do enjoy bad health who wouldn't if it weren't for the perquisites."

"Perquisites?" frowned the Bibliomaniac. "Great Heavens, Mr. Idiot, you don't mean to insinuate that there is graft in ill health, just as there is in everything else, do you?" [Pg 140]

"I sure do," replied the Idiot. "Take me, for instance—"

"I for one must decline to take you until I know whether you are a chronic disorder, or merely a temporary epidemic," grinned Mr. Brief.

"Idiocy is pretty contagious," smiled the Idiot, in reply, "but in this case I wish to be taken as a patient. Let us say, for instance, that I am off in the country at a popular hotel, and all of a sudden some fine morning I come down with a headache—"

"That's a debatable hypothesis," said the Lawyer. "Is it possible for the Idiot to have a headache, Doctor?"

"I have known similar cases," said the Doctor. "I knew an old soldier once who lost his leg at Gettysburg, and years afterward could still feel the twinges of rheumatism in one of his lost toes." [Pg 141]

"Thanks for the vindication, Doctor," said the Idiot. "Nevertheless, just to please our learned brother here, I will modify the hypothesis.

"Let us suppose that I am off in the country at a popular summer hotel, and all of a sudden some fine morning I come down with a violent pain in that anatomical void where my head would be if, like Mr. Brief, I always suffered from one. I am not sick enough to stay in bed, but just badly enough off to be able to loll around the hotel piazzas all morning and look forlorn.

"Everybody in the place, of course, is immediately sympathetic. All are sorry for me, and it is such an unusual thing for one of my volatile, not to say fluffy, nature to suffer that a vast amount of commiseration is manifested by my fellow guests, especially by the ladies." [Pg 142]

"They turn me at once into a suffering hero. As I lie listlessly in my steamer-chair they pass me by on tip-toe, or pause and inquire into the progress of my aches and show a great deal more interest in my condition than they do in bridge or votes for women. One fetching young creation in polka-dotted dimity, aged twenty-three, offers to stay home from a picnic and read Robert W. Chambers aloud to me. Another goes to her room and brings me down a little jar of mint jelly, which she feeds to me on the end of a macaroon or a lady finger, while still a third, a pretty little widow of twenty-seven summers, now and then leaves her embroidery to put a cool little hand on my forehead to see if I have any fever—"

"A most alluring picture," said the Doctor.

"It almost makes my head ache to think of it!" said the Idiot. "But to continue, this goes on all morning, and then when afternoon comes they hang a nice little hammock for me, filled with dainty sofa cushions, out under the trees, and as they gently swing me to and fro a charming creature from Wellesley or Vassar sits alongside of me and fans my fevered brow, driving away dull care, flies, and mosquitoes until twilight, when, after feeding me on more macaroons, washed down with copious libations of sparkling lemonade, a bevy of elfin maids sit around in a circle and sing 'My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean', while the aforesaid little widow comes now and then to brush my scalp-lock back from my brow with the aforesaid pink paddy." [Pg 143]

"Oh, well, what of it?" interrupted the Doctor. "I've known many a stronger man than you made a fool of—"

"What of it?" demanded the Idiot. "What of it? There's a lot of it. Do you suppose for one minute that I am going to get well under those circumstances?" [Pg 144]

"I wouldn't," said the Lawyer.

"Not on your faith in the *Materia Medica*!" cried the Idiot. "That headache would become immortal. As undying as a poet's fame. Life would become for me one blissful eternity of cerebellian suffering under those conditions. Rather than lose my job as the cynosure of all that lovely solicitude I'd hire a bellboy to come to my room in the morning with a croquet mallet and hammer my head until it split, if I couldn't get one in any more legitimate fashion.

"The quiet joy of lying off there with all those ministering angels about me, secretly enjoying the discomfiture of all the other men about the place—they nursing their wrath; their sisters, cousins, aunts, rich grandmothers, and best girls nursing me—get well? me? never, Doctor!" [Pg 145]

"But if, on the other hand, nobody came near me all day long save a horse marine of a landlady armed with a bottle of squills, with the request that I go to bed until I felt better, why then I'd be a well man in just seven and a half minutes, dancing the tango, and challenging all the rheumatically old beaux about the place to a hundred yards' dash for the fifteenth turkey trot with the little widow at the Saturday night hop."

"Yes, I admit that there is such a thing as too much coddling," said the Doctor. "There are people who are inclined to hug their troubles, and for whom too much sympathy is a positive deterrent in the process of recuperation, but after all, my dear fellow, until we find something better the sanitarium must serve its purpose, and a great many people are unquestionably helped along by its beneficent operations." [Pg 146]

"I haven't a doubt of that," said the Idiot, "and here's to them! Long may they wave! I quaff this pony of maple syrup to the health of the sanitariums of the land—but just the same, for the tired business man, and his name is not only Smith, but Legion, there should be some other kind of an institution where this coddling process is frowned upon."

"Why not devote that massive brain of yours to the working out of the idea?" suggested the

Bibliomaniac. "The great trouble with you, Mr. Idiot, is that you are prolific in thinking out things that ought to be done, but there you stop. How to do them you never tell us. Why don't you give us a constructive notion once in awhile?"

"Thank you, Mr. Bib," said the Idiot, with a grateful smile. "I've been fishing for that particular nibble for the past eighteen minutes, and I was beginning to fear the shad were shy this morning. You have saved the day, Sir. Speaking of Mr. Bib's idea that we ought to have something to take the place of the sanitarium for the tired business man, Doctor, how do you think an irritarium would pay?" [Pg 147]

"A what?" cried the Doctor, holding his waffle like Mohammed's coffin, suspended in midair.

"An irritarium," repeated the Idiot. "An institution of aggravation, where, instead of being coddled into permanent invalidism, we should be constantly irritated, provoked, exacerbated, or, as my old friend Colonel Thesaurus says in his Essay on Excitation, exasperated into a cantankerously contentious pugnacity!"

"And for what purpose, pray?" demanded the Bibliomaniac. [Pg 148]

"As an anti-coddling resource for the restoration of our pristine powers," said the Idiot. "Just take our old friend, the tired business man, for example. He has been working forty-eight hours a day all winter long, and with the coming of spring he is first cousin to the frazzle, and in the matter of spine twin brother to the jellyfish. His middle name is Flabby, and his nerve has succumbed to the superior numbers of nerves.

"He is headed straight for the Down-and-Out Club. His lip quivers when he talks, and his hand is the center of a seismic disturbance that turns his autograph into a cross between a dress pattern and a futurist conception of a straight line in the cold gray dawn of the morning after. He has prolonged fits of weeping, and when it comes to making up his mind on any definite course of action he vacillates between two possibilities until it is too late, and then decides wrong. [Pg 149]

"Now, under present conditions they railroad this poor wreck off to a sanitarium, where the very atmosphere that he breathes is the dread thing that has haunted his sleepless hours all winter long—that of retirement. He is made to believe that he is a vurry, vurry sick man, and the only real pleasure that is left to him is bragging about his symptoms to some other unfortunate incarcerated with him; and after each period of boastful exposure of these symptoms in the exchange provided for the swapping of these things in the sanitariums of the day, he goes back to his room more than ever convinced that his case is hopeless; and, confronted by the bogey of everlasting ill health, he lets go of himself altogether and a long, long, tedious period of rehabilitation begins which may or may not get him into shape again in time for the fall season." [Pg 150]

"It's the only way," said the Doctor. "Don't fight your doctor. Just let go of yourself, and let him do the rest."

"Well, I'd like to see my system tried for a while," said the Idiot. "I'll guarantee that any tired business man who will go to my irritarium will get his spine and his spunk, his nerve and his dander, back in a jiffy.

"The first morning, after giving him a first-class breakfast that fills his weary soul with peace, I'd turn him loose in a picture gallery on the walls of which are hung soft, dreamy reproductions of pastoral scenes calculated to lull his soul into an unsuspecting sense of calm, and while he is looking placidly at these lovely things I'd have a husky attendant wearing sneakers creep quietly up behind him and give him such a kick as should for a moment make him feel that the earth itself had blown up. It wouldn't be a pleasant, sympathetic little love tap calculated to make him feel that he never even wanted to get well, but a violent, exacerbating assault; utterly uncalled for and unexpected; a bit of sheer, brutal provocation. [Pg 151]

"Do you suppose for an instant that the party of the second part would throw himself down forthwith upon a convenient divan and give way to a fit of weeping? Not he, my dear Doctor. The tire of that tired business man would blow out with a report like a crash of distant thunder. All the latent business manhood in him would be aroused into instant action. Nerves would fly, and nerve would return. Spinelessness and uncertainty would give way to spunk, and a promptitude of truculent reprisal worthy of the palmiest days of his commercial pre-eminence would ensue. Worn and weary as he was when he entered the irritarium, he would be so outraged by the rank discourtesy and utter injustice of that kick that he would beat up that attendant as if he were a world's champion battling with a bowlful of cold consommé for a ten-thousand-dollar purse." [Pg 152]

"Tush!" said the Doctor. "What do you suppose the attendant would be doing all this time? You seem to think your tired business man would find beating him up as easy as mashing potatoes with a pile driver."

"It would be part of my system," said the Idiot, "that the attendant should allow himself to be thrashed, so that the tired business man, irritated into a show of spirit and deceived into thinking that he was still some fighter, would leave the place next day, his courage renewed and his confidence in himself completely restored. Instead of inoculating him with Nut chops and hot water for a weary period of six months, I'd pin the red badge of courage on him at the very start; and I miss my guess if he wouldn't go back to business the next morning as fit as a fiddle, and spend most of his time for the next two years telling everybody who would listen how he walloped the life out of one of the huskiest attendants he could find in a month of Sundays." [Pg 153]

"And you really think such brutal methods would work, do you?" asked the Bibliomaniac.

"I have eight dollars that are willing to state it is a fact to any two-dollar certificate ever printed by Uncle Sam," returned the Idiot. "Why, Mr. Bib, I had a very dear friend once who was paralyzed. So completely paralyzed was he that he couldn't move without help, and, what was worse, couldn't even talk.

"He went to a sanitarium, and for seven long and weary months he was dipped in a warm bath every morning by two attendants, an Irishman and a Dutchman. One held him by the shoulders and the other by the ankles, and day after day for nearly a year they dipped, and dipped, and dipped him. He showed no signs of improvement whatsoever until one bitterly cold winter's morning, the two attendants, having been off on a spree the night before, forgot to turn on the hot-water faucet and dipped him into a tub of ice water!

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"The effect was electrical. The patient was so mad that he impulsively broke the dam of silence that had afflicted him for so long and let loose a flow of language on those attendants that made the wrath to come seem like the twittering of a bird; and before they had recovered from their astonishment he had leaped from the tub, pinked the Irishman on the eye with a cake of soap, and, after chasing the Dutchman downstairs into the parlor, spanked him into a state of coma with a long-handled bath brush he had picked up off the floor."

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"And I suppose he is giving lessons in the tango to-day!" interjected the Lawyer, with a laugh.

"Nothing so mild," said the Idiot. "The last time I saw him he was starting off with old man Weston on his walk to Chicago. He told me he was going as far as Albany with Weston."

"Well," said the Doctor, "it might work, but I doubt it. I should have to see the scheme in operation before I recommended it to any of my patients."

"All right," said the Idiot. "Send 'em along, Doctor. Mr. Bib and I can take care of them right here."

"Leave me out," snapped the Bibliomaniac. "I don't care to be a partner in any of your idiotic nonsense."

"No, Mr. Bib," smiled the Idiot, genially. "I wasn't going to use you as a partner, but as a shining example of the effectiveness of my theory. I've been irritating you constantly for the past twenty years, and you are still able to eat your thirty-seven and a half flapjacks daily without turning a hair, and that's some testimonial."

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HALF-HOURS WITH THE IDIOT ***

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