The Inventions Of The Idiot

By John Kendrick Bangs

THE INVENTIONS OF THE IDIOT

I

The Culinary Guild

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, I don't like to criticise," said the Idiot, "but I think the heathen at home should be considered before the heathen abroad. If your congregation would have a guild to look after such heathen as the Poet and the Doctor and myself, I am convinced it would be more appreciated by those who benefited by its labors than it is at present by the barbarians who try to wear the misfits it sends out. A Christian whose plain but honest breakfast is well cooked is apt to be far more grateful than a barbarian who is wearing a pair of trousers made of calico and a coat three sizes too small in the body and nine sizes too large in the arms. I will go further. I believe that if the domestic heathen were cared for they would do much better work, would earn better pay, and would, out of mere gratitude, set apart a sufficiently large portion of their increased earnings

to be devoted to the purchase of tailor-made costumes, which would please the cannibals better, far better, than the amateur creations they now get. I know I'd contribute some of my surplus."

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

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

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

"Thank you," said the Idiot, suavely. "But I don't wish to overburden the kind ladies to whom I refer. If my costumes could be looked after I might find time to look after my customs, and, I assure you, Mr. Pedagog, if at any time you will undertake to deliver a course of lectures on Etiquette, I will gladly subscribe for two orchestra-chairs and endeavor to occupy both of them. At any rate, to return to the main point, I claim that the world would be happier and brighter and less sinful if the domestic heathen were kept mended by such a guild, and I challenge any one here to deny, even on so slight a basis as the loose suspender-button, the truth of what I say. When I arise in the morning and find a button gone, do I make genial remarks about the joys of life? I do not. I use words. Sometimes one word, which need not be repeated here. I am unhappy, and, being unhappy, the world seems dark and dreary, and in speaking impatiently, though very much to the point, as I do, I am guilty of an offence that is sinful. With such a start in the morning, I come here to the table. Mr. Pedagog sees that I am not quite myself. He asks me if I am not feeling well, an irritating question at any time, but particularly so to a man with a suspender-button gone. I retort. He re-retorts, until our converse is warmer than the coffee, and our relations colder than the waffles. Finally I leave the house, slamming the door behind me, structurally weakening the house, and go to business, where I wreak my vengeance upon the second clerk, who takes it out of the office-boy, who goes home and vents his wrath on his little sister, who, goaded into recklessness, teases the baby until he yells and gets spanked by his mother for being noisy. Now, why should a loose suspender-button be allowed to subject that baby to such humiliation, and who

can deny that, if it had been properly sewed on by a guild, such as I have mentioned, the baby never would have been spanked for the causes mentioned? What is your answer, Mr. Whitechoker?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

manner so indigestible that it were ruin to partake of it. A light-hearted cook will make light bread; a pessimistic cook will serve flour bricks in lieu thereof."

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

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

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

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

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

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

II

A Suggestion for the Cable-cars

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

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

"Humph!" said the Idiot, with difficulty repressing a yawn. "Humph! and I may add, likewise, tut! What do you take me for—an insulated sun-beam? I can't help it if shadows camp across my horizon occasionally. I wouldn't give a

cent for the man who never had his moments of misery. It takes night to enable us to appreciate daytime. Misery is a foil necessary to the full appreciation of joy. I'm glad I am sort of down in the mouth to-day. I'll be all right to-morrow, and I'll enjoy to-morrow all the more for to-day's megrim. But for the present, I repeat, this is a weary world."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thank you for the suggestion," replied the Idiot, transferring four large, porous buckwheat-cakes to his plate. "Thank you very much, but I have a pleasanter and more lingering method of suicide right here. Death by buckwheat-cakes is like being pierced by a Toledo blade. You do not realize

the terrors of your situation until you cease to be susceptible to them. Furthermore, I do not believe in suicide. It is, in my judgment, the worst crime a man can commit, and I cannot but admire the remarkable discernment evinced by the Fates in making of it its own inevitable capital punishment. A man may commit murder and escape death, but in the commission of suicide he is sure of execution. Just as Virtue is its own reward, so is Suicide its own amercement."

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

"No, not exactly," said the Idiot, with a smile, "but—it's a kind of joke on me, I suppose—I have just been stuck, to use a polite term, on a book called Roget's Thesaurus, and, if I want to get hold of a new word that will increase my seeming importance to the community, I turn to it. That's where I got 'amercement.' I don't hold that its use in this especial case is beyond cavil—that's another Thesaurian term—but I don't suppose any one here would notice that fact. It goes here, and I shall not use it elsewhere."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

already said, this is a weary world."

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

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

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

III

The Transatlantic Trolley Company

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Precisely. I said, 'Here! Most coin collectors spend their time looking for one or two rare coins, for which, when they are found, they pay fabulous prices. The result is oftentimes penury. I, on the other hand, will look for coins of a common sort which do not command fabulous prices.' So I chose United

States five-dollar gold pieces, irrespective of dates, for my collection, and the result is moderate affluence. I have between sixty and a hundred of them at my savings-bank, and when I have found it necessary to realize on them I have not experienced the slightest difficulty in forcing them back into circulation at cost."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And so practical," growled the Bibliomaniac.

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

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

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

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

thought of Darwin, he'd have thought you were guying him."

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

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

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

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

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

"Balloons for what?" retorted Mr. Pedagog.

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

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

"The trolley-wire, of course," said the Idiot. Mr. Pedagog lapsed into a

hopelessly wrathful silence for a moment, and then he said:

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

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

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

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

"Precisely," observed the Bibliomaniac.

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, I don't know," said the Idiot. "I suppose it would be a good thing if I

broke it up into smaller denominations, but I've had it so long that I have become attached to it; but there is one thing about it, there is plenty of it, so that in case any of you gentlemen find your own insufficient I shall be only too happy to give you a piece of it without charge. Meanwhile, if Mrs. Pedagog will kindly let me have my bill for last week, I'll be obliged."

"It won't be ready until to-morrow, Mr. Idiot," said the landlady, in surprise.

"I'm sorry," said the Idiot, rising. "My scribbling-paper has run out. I wanted to put in this morning writing a poem on the back of it."

"A poem? What about?" said Mr. Pedagog, with an irritating chuckle.

"It was to be a triolet on Omniscience," said the Idiot. "And, strange to say, sir, you were to be the hero, if by any possibility I could squeeze you into a French form."

IV

The Incorporation of the Idiot

"How is business these days, Mr. Idiot?" asked the Poet, as the one addressed laid down the morning paper with a careworn expression on his face. "Good, I hope?"

"Fair, only," replied the Idiot. "My honored employer was quite blue about things yesterday, and if I hadn't staved him off I think he'd have proposed swapping places with me. He has said quite often of late that I had the best of it, because all I had to earn was my salary, whereas he had to earn my salary and his own living besides. I offered to give him ten per cent. of my salary for ten per cent. of his living, but he said he guessed he wouldn't, adding that I seemed to be as great an Idiot as ever."

"I fancy he was right there," said Mr. Pedagog. "I should really like to know how a man of your peculiar mental construction can be of the slightest practical value to a banker. I ask the question in all kindness, too, meaning to cast no reflections whatever upon either you or your employer. You are a roaring success in your own line, which is all any one could ask of you."

"There's hominy for you, as the darky said to the hotel guest," returned the Idiot. "Any person who says that discord exists at this table doesn't know what he is talking about. Even the oil and the vinegar mix in the caster—that is, I judge they do from the oleaginous appearance of the vinegar. But I am very useful to my employer, Mr. Pedagog. He says frequently that he wouldn't know what not to do if it were not for me."

"Aren't you losing control of your tongue?" queried the Bibliomaniac, looking

at the Idiot in wonderment. "Don't you mean that he says he wouldn't know what to do if it were not for you?"

"No, I don't," said the Idiot. "I never lose control of my tongue. I meant exactly what I said. Mr. Barlow told me, in so many words, that if it were not for me he wouldn't know what not to do. He calls me his Back Action Patent Reversible Counsellor. If he is puzzled over an intricate point he sends for me and says: 'Such and such a thing being the case, Mr. Idiot, what would you do? Don't think about it, but tell me on impulse. Your thoughtless opinions are worth more to me than I can tell you.' So I tell him on impulse just what I should do, whereupon he does the other thing, and comes out ahead in nine cases out of ten."

"And you confess it, eh?" said the Doctor, with a curve on his lip.

"I certainly do," said the Idiot. "The world must take me for what I am. I'm not going to be one thing for myself, and build up a fictitious Idiot for the world. The world calls you men of pretence conceited, whereas, by pretending to be something that you are not, you give to the world what I should call convincing evidence that you are not at all conceited, but rather somewhat ashamed of what you know yourselves to be. Now, I rather believe in conceit—real honest pride in yourself as you know yourself to be. I am an Idiot, and it is my ambition to be a perfect Idiot. If I had been born a jackass, I should have endeavored to be a perfect jackass."

"You'd have found it easy," said Mr. Pedagog, dryly.

"Would I?" said the Idiot. "I'll have to take your word for it, sir, for I have never been a jackass, and so cannot form an opinion on the subject."

"Pride goeth before a fall," said Mr. Whitechoker, seeing a chance to work in a moral reflection.

"Exactly," said the Idiot. "Wherefore I admire pride. It is a danger-signal that enables man to avoid the fall. If Adam had had any pride he'd never have fallen—but speaking about my controlling my tongue, it is not entirely out of the range of possibilities that I shall lose control of myself."

"I expected that, sooner or later," said the Doctor. "Is it to be Bloomingdale or a private mad-house you are going to?"

"Neither," replied the Idiot, calmly. "I shall stay here. For, as the poet says,

""Tis best to bear the ills we hovNor fly to those we know not of.'"

"Ho!" jeered the Poet. "I must confess, my dear Idiot, that I do not think you are a success in quotation. Hamlet spoke those lines differently."

"Shakespeare's Hamlet did. My little personal Shakespeare makes his Hamlet an entirely different, less stilted sort of person," said the Idiot.

"You have a personal Shakespeare, have you?" queried the Bibliomaniac.

"Of course I have," the Idiot answered. "Haven't you?"

"I have not," said the Bibliomaniac, shortly.

"Well, I'm sorry for you then," sighed the Idiot, putting a fried potato in his mouth. "Very sorry. I wouldn't give a cent for another man's ideals. I want my own ideals, and I have my own ideal of Shakespeare. In fancy, Shakespeare and I have roamed over the fields of Warwickshire together, and I've had more fun imagining the kind of things he and I would have said to each other than I ever got out of his published plays, few of which have escaped the ungentle hands of the devastators."

"You mean commentators, I imagine," said Mr. Pedagog.

"I do," said the Idiot. "It's all the same, whether you call them commentors or devastators. The result is the same. New editions of Shakespeare are issued every year, and people buy them to see not what Shakespeare has written, but what new quip some opinionated devastator has tried to fasten on his memory. In a hundred years from now the works of Shakespeare will differ as much from what they are to-day as to-day's versions differ from what they were when Shakespeare wrote them. It's mighty discouraging to one like myself who would like to write works."

"You are convicted out of your own mouth," said the Bibliomaniac. "A moment since you wasted your pity on me because I didn't mutilate Shakespeare so as to make him my own, and now you attack the commentators for doing precisely the same thing. They're as much entitled to their opinions as you are to yours."

"Did you ever learn to draw parallels when you were in school?" asked the Idiot.

"I did, and I think I've made a perfect parallel in this case. You attack people in one breath for what you commiserate me for not doing in another," said the Bibliomaniac.

"Not exactly," said the Idiot. "I don't object to the commentators for commentating, but I do object to their putting out their versions of Shakespeare as Shakespeare. I might as well have my edition published. It certainly would be popular, especially where, in 'Julius Cæsar,' I introduce five Cassiuses and have them all fall on their swords together with military precision, like a 'Florodora' sextette, for instance."

"Well, I hope you'll never print such an atrocity as that," cried the Bibliomaniac, hotly. "If there's one thing in literature without excuse and utterly contemptible it is the comic version, the parody of a masterpiece."

"You need have no fear on that score," returned the Idiot. "I haven't time to

rewrite Shakespeare, and, since I try never to stop short of absolute completeness, I shall not embark on the enterprise. If I do, however, I shall not do as the commentators do, and put on my title-page 'Shakespeare. Edited by Willie Wilkins,' but 'Shakespeare As He Might Have Been, Had His Plays Been Written By An Idiot.'"

"I have no doubt that you could do great work with 'Hamlet,'" observed the Poet.

"I think so myself," said the Idiot. "But I shall never write 'Hamlet.' I don't want to have my fair fame exposed to the merciless hands of the devastators."

"I shall never cease to regret," said Mr. Pedagog, after a moment's thought, "that you are so timid. I should very much like to see 'The Works of the Idiot.' I admit that my desire is more or less a morbid one. It is quite on a plane with the feeling that prompts me to wish to see that unfortunate man on the Bowery who exhibits his forehead, which is sixteen inches high, beginning with his eyebrows, for a dime. The strange, the bizarre in nature, has always interested me. The more unnatural the nature, the more I gloat upon it. From that point of view I do most earnestly hope that when you are inspired with a work you will let me at least see it."

"Very well," answered the Idiot. "I shall put your name down as a subscriber to the Idiot Monthly Magazine, which some of my friends contemplate publishing. That is what I mean when I say I may shortly lose control of myself. These friends of mine profess to have been so impressed by my dicta that they have asked me if I would allow myself to be incorporated into a stock company, the object of which should be to transform my personality into printed pages. Hardly a day goes by but I devote a portion of my time to a poem in which the thought is conspicuous either by its absence or its presence. My schemes for the amelioration of the condition of the civilized are notorious among those who know me; my views on current topics are eagerly sought for; my business instinct, as I have already told you, is invaluable to my employer, and my fiction is unsurpassed in its fictitiousness. What more is needed for a magazine? You have the poetry, the philanthropy, the man of to-day, the fictitiousness, and the business instinct necessary for the successful modern magazine all concentrated in one person. Why not publish that person, say my friends, and I, feeling as I do that no man has a right to the selfish enjoyment of the great gifts nature has bestowed upon him, of course can only agree. I am to be incorporated with a capital stock of five hundred thousand dollars. One hundred thousand dollars' worth of myself I am to be permitted to retain; the rest my friends will subscribe for at fifty cents on the dollar. If any of you want shares in the enterprise I have no doubt you can be accommodated."

"I'm obliged to you for the opportunity," said the Doctor. "But I have to be

very careful about things I take stock in, and in general I regard you as a thing in which I should prefer not to take stock."

"And I," observed Mr. Pedagog—"I have never up to this time taken any stock in you, and I make it a rule to be guided in life by precedent. Therefore I must be counted out."

"I'll wait until you are listed at the Stock Exchange," put in the Bibliomaniac, "while thanking you just the same for the chance."

"You can put me down for one share, to be paid for in poetry," said the Poet, with a wink at the Idiot.

"You'll never make good," said the Idiot, slyly.

"And I," said the Genial Old Gentleman who occasionally imbibes, "shall be most happy to take five shares to be paid for in advice and high-balls. Moreover, if your company needs good-will to establish its enterprise, you may count upon me for unlimited credit."

"Oh, as for that," said the Idiot, "I have plenty of good-will. Even Mr. Pedagog supplies me with more of it than I deserve, though by no means with all that I desire."

"That good-will is yours as an individual, Mr. Idiot," returned the Schoolmaster. "As a corporation, however, I cannot permit you to trade upon me even for that. Your value is, in my eyes, entirely too fluctuating."

"And it is in the fluctuating stock that the great fortunes are made, Mr. Pedagog," said the Idiot. "As an individual I appreciate your good-will. As a corporation I am soulless, without emotions, and so cherish no disappointments over your refusal. I think if the scheme goes through it will be successful, and I fully expect to see the day when Idiot Preferred will be selling as high, if not higher, than Steel, and leaving utterly behind any other industrial that ever was known, copper or rope."

"If, like the railways, you could issue betterment bonds you might do very well," said the Doctor. "I think ten million dollars spent in bettering you might bring you up to par."

"Or a consolidated first-mortgage bond," remarked the Bibliomaniac. "Consolidate the Idiot with a man like Chamberlain or the German Emperor, and issue a five-million-dollar mortgage on the result, and you might find people who'd take those bonds at seventy-five."

"You might if they were a dollar bond printed on cartridge-paper," said Mr. Pedagog. "Then purchasers could paper their walls with them."

"Rail on," said the Idiot. "I can stand it. When I begin paying quarterly dividends at a ten-per-cent. rate you'll wish you had come in."

"I don't know about that," said Mr. Pedagog. "It would entirely depend."

"On what?" queried the Idiot, unwarily.

"On whether that ten per cent. was declared upon your own estimate of your value or upon ours. On yours it would be fabulous; on ours—oh, well, what is the use of saying anything more about it. We are not going in it, and that's an end to it."

"Well, I'll go in it if you change your scheme," said the Doctor. "If instead of an Idiot Publishing Company you will try to float yourself as a Consolidated Gas Company you may count on me to take a controlling interest."

"I will submit the proposition to my friends," said the Idiot, calmly. "It would be something to turn out an honest gas company, which I should, of course, try to be, but I am afraid the public will not accept it. There is little demand for laughing-gas, and, besides, they would fear to intrust you with a controlling interest for fear that you might blow the product out and the bills up—coining millions by mere inflation. They've heard of you, Doctor, and they know that is the sort of thing you'd be likely to do."

V

University Extension

"I was surprised and gratified last evening, Mr. Idiot," observed the School-master as breakfast was served, "to see you at the University Extension Lecture. I did not know that you admitted the necessity of further instruction in any matter pertaining to human knowledge."

"I don't know that I do admit the necessity," returned the Idiot. "Sometimes when I take an inventory of the contents of my mind it seems to me that about everything I need is there."

"There you go again!" said the Bibliomaniac. "Why do you persist in your refusal to allow any one to get a favorable impression concerning you? Mr. Pedagog unbends sufficiently to tell you that you have at last done something which he can commend, and you greet him with an Idiotism which is practically a rebuff."

"Very well said," observed the School-master, with an acquiescent nod. "I came to this table this morning encouraged to believe that this young man was beginning to see the error of his ways, and I must confess to a great enough interest in him to say that I was pleased at that encouragement. I saw him at a lecture on literature at the Lyceum Hall last evening, and he appeared to be interested, and yet this morning he seems to show that he is utterly

incorrigible. May I ask, sir, why you attended that lecture if, as you say, your mind is already sufficiently well furnished?"

"Certainly you may ask that question," replied the Idiot. "I went to that lecture to have my impressions confirmed, that is all. I have certain well-defined notions concerning University Extension, and I wished to see if they were correct. I found that they were."

"The lecture was not upon University Extension, but upon Romanticism, and it was a most able discourse," retorted Mr. Pedagog.

"Very likely," said the Idiot. "I did not hear it. I did not want to hear it. I have my own ideas concerning Romanticism, which do not need confirmation or correction. I have already confirmed and corrected them. I went to see the audience and not to hear Professor Peterkin exploding theories."

"It is a pity the chair you occupied was wasted upon you," snapped Mr. Pedagog.

"I agree with you," said the Idiot. "I could have got a much better view of the audience if I had been permitted to sit on the stage, but Professor Peterkin needed all that for his gestures. However, I saw enough from where I sat to confirm my impression that University Extension is not so much of a public benefit as a social fad. There was hardly a soul in the audience who could not have got all that Professor Peterkin had to tell him out of his books; there was hardly a soul in the audience who could not have afforded to pay one dollar at least for the seat he occupied; there was not a soul in the audience who had paid more than ten cents for his seat or her seat, and those for whose benefit the lecture was presumably given, the ten-cent people, were crowded out. The lectures themselves are not instructive—Professor Peterkin's particularly—except in so far as it is instructive to hear what Professor Peterkin thinks on this or that subject, and his desire to be original forces him to cook up views which no one else ever held, with the result that what he says is most interesting and proper to be presented to the attention of a discriminating audience, but not proper to be presented to an audience that is supposed to come there to receive instruction."

"You have just said that you did not listen to the lecture. How do you know that what you say is true?" put in the Bibliomaniac.

"I know Professor Peterkin," said the Idiot.

"Does he know you?" sneered Mr. Pedagog.

"I don't think he would remember me if you should speak my name in his presence," observed the Idiot, calmly. "But that is easily accounted for. The Professor never remembers anybody but himself."

"Well, I admit," said Mr. Pedagog, "that the Professor's lectures were rather

advanced for the comprehension of a person like the Idiot, nevertheless it was an enjoyable occasion, and I doubt if the fulminations of our friend here will avail against University Extension."

"You speak a sad truth," said the Idiot. "Social fads are impervious to fulmination, as Solomon might have said had he thought of it. As long as a thing is a social fad it will thrive, and, on the whole, perhaps it ought to thrive. Anything which gives society something to think about has its value, and the mere fact that it makes society think is proof of that value."

"We seem to be in a philosophic frame of mind this morning," said Mr. Whitechoker.

"We are," returned the Idiot. "That's one thing about University Extension. It makes us philosophic. It has made a stoic of my dear old daddy."

"Oh yes!" cried Mr. Pedagog. "You have a father, haven't you? I had forgotten that."

"Wherein," said the Idiot, "we differ. I haven't forgotten that I have one, and, by-the-way, it is from him that I first heard of University Extension. He lives in a small manufacturing town not many miles from here, and is distinguished in the town because, without being stingy, he lives within his means. He has a way of paying his grocer's bills which makes of him a marked man. He hasn't much more money than he needs, but when the University Extension movement reached the town he was interested. The prime movers in the enterprise went to him and asked him if he wouldn't help it along, dilating upon the benefits which would accrue to those whose education stopped short with graduation from the high-schools. It was most plausible. The notion that for ten cents a lecture the working masses could learn something about art, history, and letters, could gather in something about the sciences, and all that, appealed to him, and while he could afford it much more ill than the smart people, the four hundred of the town, he chipped in. He paid fifty dollars and was made an honorary manager. He was proud enough of it, too, and he wrote a long, enthusiastic letter to me about it. It was a great thing, and he hoped the State, which had been appealed to to help the movement along, would take a hand in it. 'If we educate the masses to understand and to appreciate the artistic, the beautiful,' he wrote, 'we need have little fear for the future. Ignorance is the greatest foe we have to contend against in our national development, and it is the only thing that can overthrow a nation such as ours is.' And then what happened? Professor Peterkin came along and delivered ten or a dozen lectures. The masses went once or twice and found the platform occupied by a man who talked to them about Romanticism and Realism; who told them that Dickens was trash; who exalted Tolstoi and Ibsen; but who never let them into the secret of what Romanticism was, and who kept them equally in the dark as to the significance of Realism. They also found the best

seats in the lecture-hall occupied by the smart set in full evening-dress, who talked almost as much and as loudly as did Professor Peterkin. The masses did not even learn manners at Professor Peterkin's first and second lectures, and the third and fourth found them conspicuous by their absence. All they learned was that they were ignorant, and that other people were better than they, and what my father learned was that he had subscribed fifty dollars to promote a series of social functions for the diversion of the four hundred and the aggrandizement of Professor Peterkin. He started in for what might be called Romanticism, and he got a Realism that he did not like in less time than it takes to tell of it, and to-day in that town University Extension is such a fad that when, some weeks ago, the swell club of that place talked of appointing Thursday evening as its club night, it was found to be impossible, for the reason that it might interfere with the attendance upon the University Extension lectures. That, Mr. Pedagog, is a matter of history and can be proven, and last night's audience confirmed the impression which I had formed from what my father had told me. Professor Peterkin's lectures are interesting to you, a school-master, but they are pure Greek to me, who would like to know more about letters. I would gather more instruction from your table-talk in an hour than I could from Professor Peterkin's whole course."

"You flatter me," said Mr. Pedagog.

"No," returned the Idiot. "If you knew how little the ignorant gain from Peterkin you would not necessarily call it flattery if one should say he learned more from your conversation over a griddle-cake."

"You misconceive the whole situation, I think, nevertheless," said Mr. Whitechoker. "As I understand it, supplementary lectures, and examinations based on them, are held after the lectures, when the practical instruction is given with great thoroughness."

"I'm glad you spoke of that," said the Idiot. "I had forgotten that part of it. Professor Peterkin received pay for his lectures, which dealt in theories only; plain Mr. Barton, who delivered the supplementary lectures, got nothing. Professor Peterkin taught nothing, but he represented University Extension. Plain Mr. Barton did the work and represented nothing. Both reached society. Neither reached the masses. In my native town plain Mr. Barton's supplementary lectures, which were simply an effort to unravel the Peterkin complications, were attended by the same people in smaller crowds—people of social standing who were curious enough to devote an hour a week to an endeavor to find out the meaning of what Professor Peterkin had told them at the function the week before. The students examined were mostly ladies, and I happen to know that in a large proportion they were ladies whose husbands could have afforded to pay Professor Peterkin his salary ten times over as a private tutor."

"As I look at it," said Mr. Pedagog, gravely, "it does not make much difference to whom your instruction is given, so long as it instructs. What if these lectures do interest those who are comparatively well off? Your society woman may be as much in need of an extended education as your factory girl. The University Extension idea is to convey knowledge to people who would not otherwise get it. It simply sets out to improve minds. If the social mind needs improvement, why not improve it? Why condemn a system because it does not discriminate in the minds selected for improvement?"

"I don't condemn a system which sets out to improve minds irrespective of conditions," replied the Idiot. "But I should most assuredly condemn a man, or a set of men, who induced me to subscribe to a bread fund for the poor and who afterwards expended that money on cream-cakes for the Czar of Russia. The fact that the Czar of Russia wanted the cream-cakes and was willing to accept them would not affect my feelings in the matter, though I have no doubt the people in charge of the fund would find themselves far more conspicuous for having departed from the original idea. Some of them might be knighted for it if the Czar happened to be passionately fond of cream-cakes."

"Then, having attacked this system, what would you have? Would you have University Extension stop?" asked the Bibliomaniac.

"Not at all," returned the Idiot. "Anything which can educate society is a good thing, but I should change the name of it from University Extension to Social Expansion, and I should compel those whose minds were broadened by it to pay the bills."

"But as yet you have failed to hit the nail on the head," persisted the Bibliomaniac. "The masses can attend these lectures if they wish to, and on your own statement they don't. You don't seem to consider that point, or, if you do, you don't meet it."

"I don't think it necessary to meet it," said the Idiot. "Though I will say that if you were one of the masses—a girl, say, with one dress, threadbare, poor, and ill-fitting, and possessed of a natural bit of pride—you would find little pleasure in attending a lecture your previous education does not permit of your comprehending, and sitting through an evening with a lot of finely dressed, smart folk, with their backs turned towards you. The plebeians have some pride, my dear Bibliomaniac, and they are decidedly averse to mixing with the swells. They would like to be educated, but they don't care to be snubbed for the privilege of being mystified by a man like Professor Peterkin, even for so small a sum as ten cents an evening."

VI

Social Expansion

"We were talking about University Extension the other day, Mr. Pedagog," said the Idiot, as the School-master folded up the newspaper and put it in his pocket, "and I, as you remember, suggested that it might better be called Social Expansion."

"Did you?" said Mr. Pedagog, coldly. "I don't remember much about it. I rarely make a note of anything you may say."

"Well, I did suggest the change of name, whether your memory is retentive or not, and I have been thinking the matter over a good deal since, and I think I've got hold of an idea," returned the Idiot.

"In that case," said the Bibliomaniac, "we would better lock the door. If you have really got hold of an idea you should be very careful not to let it get away from you."

"No danger of that," said the Idiot, with a smile. "I have it securely locked up here," tapping his forehead.

"It must be lonesome," said Mr. Pedagog.

"And rather uncomfortable—if it is a real idea," observed the Doctor. "An idea in the Idiot's mind must feel somewhat as a tall, stout Irish maid feels when she goes to her bedroom in one of those Harlem flat-houses."

"You men are losing a great opportunity," said the Idiot, with a scornful glance at the three professional gentlemen. "The idea of your following the professions of pedagogy, medicine, and literature, when the three of you combined could make a fortune as an incarnate comic paper. I don't see why you don't make a combination like those German bands that play on the street corners, and go about from door to door, and crack your jokes just as they crack their music. I am sure you'd take, particularly in front of barber-shops."

"It would be hard on the comic papers," said the Poet, who was getting a little unpopular with his fellow-boarders because of his tendency, recently developed, to take the Idiot's part in the breakfast-table discussions. "They might be so successful that the barber-shops, instead of taking the comic papers for their customers to read, would employ one or more of them to sit in the middle of the room and crack jokes aloud."

"We couldn't rival the comic papers though," said the Doctor, wishing to save his dignity by taking the bull by the horns. "We might do the jokes well enough, but the comic papers are chiefly pictorial."

"You'd be pictorial enough," said the Idiot. "Wasn't it you, Mr. Pedagog, that said the Doctor here looked like one of Cruikshank's physicians, or as if he had stepped out of Dickens's pages, or something like it?"

"I never said anything of the sort!" cried the School-master, wrathfully; "and you know I didn't."

"Who was it said that?" asked the Idiot, innocently, looking about the table. "It couldn't have been Mr. Whitechoker, and I know it wasn't the Poet or my Genial Friend who occasionally imbibes. Mr. Pedagog denies it; I didn't say it; Mrs. Pedagog wouldn't say it. That leaves only two of us—the Bibliomaniac and the Doctor himself. I don't think the Doctor would make a personal remark of that kind, and—well, there is but one conclusion. Mr. Bibliomaniac, I am surprised."

"What?" roared the Bibliomaniac, glaring at the Idiot. "Do you mean to fasten the impertinence on me?"

"Far from it," returned the Idiot, meekly. "Very far from it. It is fate, sir, that has done that—the circumstantial evidence against you is strong; but then, mercifully enough, circumstantial evidence is not permitted to hang a man."

"Now see here, Mr. Idiot," said the Bibliomaniac, firmly and impressively, "I want you to distinctly understand that I am not going to have you put words into my mouth that I never uttered. I—"

"Pray, don't attack me," said the Idiot. "I haven't made any charge against you. I only asked who could have said that the Doctor looked like a creation of Cruikshank. I couldn't have said it, because I don't think it. Mr. Pedagog denies it. In fact, every one here has a clear case of innocence excepting yourself, and I don't believe you said it, only the chain of circumstance—"

"Oh, hang your chain of circumstance!" interrupted the Bibliomaniac.

"It is hung," said the Idiot, "and it appears to make you very uncomfortable. However, as I was saying, I think I have got hold of an idea involving a truly philanthropic and by no means selfish scheme of Social Expansion."

"Heigho!" sighed Mr. Pedagog. "I sometimes think that if I had not the honor to be the husband of our landlady I'd move away from here. Your views, sir, are undermining my constitution."

"You only think so, Mr. Pedagog," replied the Idiot. "You are simply going through a process of intellectual reconstruction at my hands. You feel exactly as a man feels who has been shut up in the dark for years and suddenly finds himself in a flood of sunlight. I am doing with you as an individual what I would have society do for mankind at large—in other words, while I am working for individual expansion upon the raw material I find here, I would have society buckle down to the enlargement of itself by the improvement of those outside of itself."

"If you swim in water as well as you do in verbiage," said the Bibliomaniac, "you must be able to go three or four strokes without sinking."

"Oh, as for that, I can swim like a duck," said the Idiot. "You can't sink me."

"I fancied not," observed Mr. Pedagog, with a smile at his own joke. "You are so light I wonder, indeed, that you don't rise up into space, anyhow."

"What a delightful condition of affairs that suggestion opens up!" said the Idiot, turning to the Poet. "If I were you I'd make a poem on that. Something like this, for instance:

"I am so very, very lightThat gravitation curbs not me.I rise up through the atmosphereTill all the world I plainly see.

"I dance about among the clouds,An airy, happy, human kite.The breezes toss me here and there,To my exceeding great delight.

"And when I would return to sup,To breakfast, or perchance to dine,I haul myself once more to earthBy tugging on a piece of twine."

Mr. Pedagog grinned broadly at this.

"You aren't entirely without your good points," he said. "If we ever accept your comic-paper idea we'll have to rely on you for the nonsense poetry."

"Thank you," said the Idiot. "I'll help. If I had a man like you to give me the suggestions I could make a fortune out of poetry. The only trouble is I have to quarrel with you before I can get you to give me a suggestion, and I despise bickering."

"So do I," returned Mr. Pedagog. "Let's give up bickering and turn our attention to—er—Social Extension, is it?"

"Yes—or Social Expansion," said the Idiot. "Some years ago the world was startled to hear that in the city of New York there were not more than four hundred people who were entitled to social position, and, as I understand it, as time has progressed the number has still further diminished. Last year the number was only one hundred and fifty, and, as I read the social news of to-day, not more than twenty-five people are now beyond all question in the swim. At dinners, balls, functions of all sorts, you read the names of these same twenty-five over and over again as having been present. Apparently no others attended—or, if they did, they were not so indisputably entitled to be present that their names could be printed in the published accounts. Now all of this shows that society is dying out, and that if things keep on as they are now going it will not be many years before we shall become a people without society, a nation of plebeians."

"Your statement so far is lucid and logical," said Mr. Pedagog, who did not admire society—so called—and who did not object to the goring of an ox in which he was not personally interested.

"Well, why is this social contraction going on?" asked the Idiot. "Clearly

because Social Expansion is not an accepted fact. If it were, society would grow. Why does it not grow? Why are its ranks not augmented? There is raw material enough. You would like to get into the swim; so would I. But we don't know how. We read books of etiquette, but they are far from being complete. I think I make no mistake when I say they are utterly valueless. They tell us no more than the funny journal tells us when it says:

"'Never eat pease with a spoon;Never eat pie with a knife;Never put salt on a prune;Never throw crumbs at your wife.'"

They tell most of us what we all knew before. They tell us not to wear our hats in the house; they tell us all the obvious things, but the subtleties of how to get into society they do not tell us. The comic papers give us some idea of how to behave in society. We know from reading the funny papers that a really swell young man always leans against a mantel-piece when he is calling; that the swell girl sits on a comfortable divan with her feet on a tiger-skin rug, and they converse in epigram. Sometimes the epigram is positively rude; when it is not rude it is so dull that no one wonders that the tiger's head on the rug represents the tiger as yawning. But, while this is instructive, it teaches us how to behave on special occasions only. You or I might call upon a young woman who did not sit on a divan, who had no tiger-skin rug to put her feet on, and whose parlor had a mantel-piece against which we could not lean comfortably. What are we to do then? As far as they go, the funny papers are excellent, but they don't go far enough. They give us attractive pictures of fashionable dinners, but it is always of the dinner after the game course. Some of us would like to know how society behaves while the soup is being served. We know that after the game course society girls reach across the table and clink wine-glasses with young men, but we do not know what they do before they get to the clink stage. Nowhere is this information given. Etiquette books are silent on the subject, and though I have sought everywhere for information, I do not know to this day how many salted almonds one may consume at dinner without embarrassing one's hostess. Now, if I can't find out, the million can't find out. Wherefore, instead of shutting themselves selfishly up and, by so doing, forcing society finally into dissolution, why cannot some of these people who know what is what give object-lessons to the million; educate them in savoir-faire?

"Last summer there was a play put on at one of our theatres in which there was a scene at a race-track. At one side was a tally-ho coach. For the first week the coach was an utterly valueless accessory, because the people on it were the ordinary supers in the employ of the theatre. They did not know how to behave on a coach, and nobody was interested. The management were suddenly seized with a bright idea. They invited several swell young men who knew how things were done on coaches to come and do these things on their

coach. The young men came and imparted a realism to the scene that made that coach the centre of attraction. People who went to that play departed educated in coach etiquette. Now there lies my scheme in a nutshell. If these twenty-five, the Old Guard of society, which dines but never surrenders, will give once a week a social function in some place like Madison Square Garden, to which the million may go merely as spectators, not as participators, is there any doubt that they would fail to be instructed? The Garden will seat eight or ten thousand people. Suppose, for an instance, that a dozen of your best exponents of what is what were to give a dinner in the middle of the arena, with ten thousand people looking on. Do you mean to say that of all that vast audience no one would learn thereby how to behave at a dinner?"

"It is a great scheme," said the Doctor.

"It is!" said the Idiot, "and I venture to say that a course of, say, twelve social functions given in that way would prove so popular that the Garden would turn away every night twice as many people as it could accommodate."

"It would be instructive, no doubt," said the Bibliomaniac; "but how would it expand society? Would you have examinations?"

"Most assuredly," said the Idiot. "At the end of the season I should have a rigid examination of all who chose to apply. I would make them dine in the presence of a committee of expert diners, I would have them pass a searching examination in the Art of Wearing a Dress Suit, in the Science of Entering a Drawing-room, in the Art of Behavior at Afternoon Teas, and all the men who applied should also be compelled to pass a physical examination as an assurance that they were equal to the task of getting an ice for a young lady at a ball."

"Society would get to be too inclusive and would cease to be exclusive," suggested Mr. Whitechoker.

"I think not," said the Idiot. "I should not give a man or a woman the degree of B.S. unless he or she had passed an examination of one hundred per cent."

"B.S.?" queried Mr. Pedagog.

"Yes," returned the Idiot. "Bachelor of Society—a degree which, once earned, should entitle one to recognition as a member of the upper ten anywhere in Christendom."

"It is superb!" cried Mr. Pedagog, enthusiastically.

"Yes," said the Idiot. "At ten cents a function it would beat University Extension out of sight, and, further, it would preserve society. If we lose society we lose caste, and, worse than all, our funny men would have to go out of business, for there would be no fads or Willieboys left to ridicule."

VII

A Beggar's Hand-book

"Mr. Idiot," said the Poet one morning, as the waffles were served, "you are an inventive genius. Why don't you invent an easy way to make a fortune? The trouble with most methods of making money is that they involve too much labor."

"I have thought of that," said the Idiot. "And yet the great fortunes have been made in a way which involved very little labor, comparatively speaking. You, for instance, probably work harder over a yard of poetry that brings you in ten dollars than any of our great railroad magnates have over a mile of railroad which has brought them in a million."

"Which simply proves that it is ideas that count rather than labor," said the Poet.

"Not exactly," said the Idiot. "If you put a hundred ideas into a quatrain you will get less money for it than you would for a two-volume epic in which you have possibly only half an idea. It isn't idea so much as nerve that counts. The man who builds railroads doesn't advance any particular idea, but he shows lots of nerve, and it is nerve that makes wealth. I believe that if you literary men would show more nerve force and spare the public the infliction of what you call your ideas, you would make more money."

"How would you show nerve in writing?" queried the Bibliomaniac.

"If I knew I'd write and make my fortune," said the Idiot. "Unfortunately, I don't know how one can show nerve in writing, unless it be in taking hold of some particularly popular idiosyncrasy of mankind and treating it so contemptuously that every one would want to mob you. If you could get the public mad enough at you to want to mob you they'd read everything you'd write, simply to nourish their wrath, and you'd soon be cutting coupons for a living, and could then afford to take up more ideas—coupon-cutters can afford theories. For my own part, one reason why I do not myself take up literature for a profession is that I have neither the nerve nor the coupons. I'd probably run along in the rut like a majority of the writers of to-day, and wouldn't have the grit to strike out in a new line of my own. Men say, and perhaps very properly, this is the thing that has succeeded in the past. I'll do this. Something else that appears alluring enough in the abstract has never been done, and for that reason I won't do it. There have been clever men before me, men clever enough to think of this something that I fondly imagine is original, and they haven't done it. Doubtless they refrained from doing it for good and sufficient reasons, and I am not going to be fool enough to set my judgment up against

theirs. In other words, I lack the nerve to go ahead and write as I feel. I prefer to study past successes, with the result that I am moderately successful only. It's the same way in every line of business. Precedent guides in all things, but where occasionally you find a man courageous enough to cast precedent to the winds, one of two things happens. Either fortune or ruin follows. Hence, the thing to do if you want to make a fortune is to eliminate the possibility of ruin as far as may be. You cannot ruin a man who has nothing. He is down on bed-rock, anyhow; so for a receipt for fortune I should say, start a pauper, show your nerve, and you'll make a pile, or you won't make a pile. If you make it you are fortunate. If you fail to make it you are no more unfortunate than you were before you started."

"For plausibility, Mr. Idiot," said Mr. Pedagog, "you are to me a perfect wonder. I do not think that any one can deny, with confidence born of certainty, the truth of your premises, and it must be admitted that your conclusions are based properly upon those premises, and yet your conclusions are almost invariably utterly absurd, if not absolutely grotesque. Here is a man who says, to make a fortune become a beggar!"

"Precisely," said the Idiot. "There is nothing like having a clean slate to work on. If you are not a beggar you have something, and having something promotes caution and tends to destroy nerve. As a beggar you have everything to gain and nothing to lose, so you can plunge. You can swim better in deep water than in the shallow."

"Well," said the Doctor, "enlighten us on this point. You may not know how to show nerve as a writer—in fact, you confess that you don't. How would you show nerve as a beggar? Would you strive to enforce your demands and degenerate into a common highwayman, or would you simply go in for big profits, and ask passers-by for ten dollars instead of ten cents?"

"He'd probably take a bag of dynamite into a millionaire's office and threaten to blow him to pieces if he didn't give him a house and lot," sneered the Bibliomaniac.

"Not at all," said the Idiot. "That's cowardice, not nerve. If I went into a millionaire's office and demanded a million—or a house and lot even—armed with a bag full of newspapers, pretending it held dynamite, it might be more like nerve; but my beggar would do nothing contrary to the law. He'd simply be nervy, that's all—cheeky, perhaps you'd call it. For instance, I believe that if I were to hire in the elevated cars one of those advertising spaces above the windows, and were to place in that space a placard saying that I was by nature too lazy to work, too fond of life to starve, too poor to live, and too honest to steal, and would be placed in affluence if every man and woman who saw that sign would send me ten cents a week in two-cent postage-stamps for five weeks running, I should receive enough money to enable me to live at the

most expensive hotel in town during that period. By living at that hotel and paying my bills regularly I could get credit enough to set myself up in business, and with credit there is practically no limit to the possibilities of fortune. It is simply honest nerve that counts. The beggar who asks you on the street for five cents to keep his family from starving is rebuffed. You don't believe his story, and you know that five cents wouldn't keep a family from starving very long. But the fellow who accosts you frankly for a dime because he is thirsty, and hasn't had a drink for two hours, in nine cases out of ten properly selected ones will get a quarter for his nerve."

"You ought to write a Manual for Beggars," said the Bibliomaniac. "I have no doubt that the Idiot Publishing Company would publish it."

"Yes," said Mr. Pedagog. "A sort of beggar's Don't, for instance. It would be a benefit to all men, as well as a boon to the beggars. That mendicancy is a profession to-day there is no denying, and anything which could make of it a polite calling would be of inestimable value."

"I have had it in mind for some time," said the Idiot, blandly. "I intended to call it Mendicancy Made Easy, or the Beggar's Don't: With Two Chapters on Etiquette for Tramps."

"The chief trouble with such a book I should think," said the Poet, "would be that your beggars and tramps could not afford to buy it."

"That wouldn't interfere with its circulation," returned the Idiot. "It's a poor tramp who can't steal. Every suburban resident in creation would buy a copy of the book out of sheer curiosity. I'd get my royalties from them; the tramps could get the books by helping themselves to the suburbanites' copies as they do to chickens, fire-wood, and pies put out to cool. As for the beggars, I'd have it put into their hands by the people they beg from. When a man comes up to a wayfarer, for instance, and says, 'Excuse me, sir, but could you spare a nickel to a hungry man?' I'd have the wayfarer say, 'Excuse me, sir, but unfortunately I have left my nickels in my other vest; but here is a copy of the Idiot's Mendicancy Made Easy, or the Beggar's Don't.'"

"And you think the beggar would read it, do you?" asked the Bibliomaniac.

"I don't know whether he would or not. He'd probably either read it or pawn it," the Idiot answered. "In either event he would be better off, and I would have got my ten per cent. royalty on the book. After the Beggars' Manual I should continue my good work if I found the class for whom it was written had benefited by my first effort. I should compile as my contribution to the literature of mendicancy for the following season what I should call The Beggar's Élite Directory. This would enlarge my sphere a trifle. It would contain as complete lists as could be obtained of persons who give to street beggars, with their addresses, so that the beggars, instead of infesting the

streets at night might go to the houses of these people and collect their incomes in a more business-like and less undignified fashion. Added to this would be two lists, one for tramps, stating what families in the suburbs kept dogs, what families gave, whether what they gave was digestible or not, rounding up with a list of those who do not give, and who have telephone connection with the police station. This would enable them to avoid dogs and rebuffs, would save the tramp the time he expends on futile efforts to find work he doesn't want, and as for the people who have to keep the dogs to ward off the tramps, they, too, would be benefited, because the tramps would begin to avoid them, and in a short while they would be able to dispense with the dogs. The other list would be for organ-grinders, who are, after all, only beggars of a different type. This list would comprise the names of persons who are musical and who would rather pay a quarter than listen to a hand-organ. By a judicious arrangement with these people, carried on by correspondence, the organ-grinder would be able to collect a large revenue without venturing out, except occasionally to play before the house of a delinquent subscriber in order to remind him that he had let his contract expire. So, by slow degrees, we should find beggars doing their work privately and not publicly, tramps circulating only among those whose sympathies they have aroused, and organ-grinding only a memory."

"The last, I think, would not come about," said Mr. Pedagog. "For there are people who like the music of hand-organs."

"True—I'm one of 'em. I'd hire a hansom to follow a piano-organ about the city if I could afford it, but as a rule the hand-organ lovers are of the one-cent class," returned the Idiot. "The quarter class are people who would rather not hear the hand-organ, and it is to them that a grinder of business capacity would naturally address himself. It is far pleasanter to stay at home and be paid large money for doing nothing than to undertake a weary march through the city to receive small sums for doing something. That's human nature, Mr. Pedagog."

"I presume it is," said Mr. Pedagog; "but I don't think your scheme is. Human nature works, but your plan wouldn't."

"Well, of course," said the Idiot, "you never can tell about ideals. The fact that an ideal is ideal is the chief argument against its amounting to much. But I am confident that if my Beggar's Don't and Élite Directory fail, my other book will go."

"You appear to have the writing of a library in mind," sneered the Bibliomaniac.

"I have," said the Idiot. "If I write all the books I have in mind, the public library will be a small affair beside mine."

"And your other book is to be what?" queried Mr. Whitechoker.

"Plausible Tales for Beggars to Tell," said the Idiot. "If the beggar could only tell an interesting story he'd be surer of an ear in which to whisper it. The usual beggar's tale is commonplace. There's no art in it. There are no complications of absorbing interest. There is not a soul in creation, I venture to say, but would be willing to have a beggar stop right in the middle of his story. The tales I'd write for them would be so interesting that the attention of the wayfarer would be arrested at once. His mind would be riveted on the situation at once, and, instead of hurrying along and trying to leave the beggar behind, he would stop, button-hole him, and ask him to sit down on a convenient doorstep and continue. If a beggar could have such a story to tell as would enable him in the midst of one of its most exciting episodes to whisper hoarsely into the ear of the man whose nickel he was seeking, 'The rest of this interesting story I will tell you in Central Park at nine o'clock to-morrow night,' in such a manner as would impel the listener to meet him in the Park the following evening, his fortune would be made. Such a book I hope some day to write."

"I have no doubt," said Mr. Whitechoker, "that it will be an entertaining addition to fiction."

"Nor have I," said the Idiot. "It will make the writers of to-day green with envy, and, as for the beggars, if it is not generally known that it is I and not they who are responsible for the work, the beggars will shortly find themselves in demand as writers of fiction for the magazines."

"And you?" suggested the Poet.

"I shall be content. Mere gratitude will force the beggars to send me the magazine orders, and I'll write their articles and be glad of the opportunity, giving them ten per cent. of the profits. I know a man who makes fifty dollars a year at magazine work, and one of my ambitions is to rival the Banker-Poets and Dry Goods Essayists by achieving fame as the Boarding-house Dickens."

VIII

Progressive Waffles

"I am afraid," said Mr. Pedagog, in a loud whisper to the Bibliomaniac, "that the Idiot isn't feeling well this morning. He has eaten three fish-cakes and a waffle without opening his mouth."

The Idiot looked up, and, gazing wearily at Mr. Pedagog for a moment, shrugged his shoulders and ejaculated, "Tutt!"

"He's off," said the Bibliomaniac. "Whenever he says 'Tutt!' you can make up

your mind that his vocabulary is about to be loosed."

"If my vocabulary were as warped as some other vocabularies I might mention," said the Idiot, helping himself to another waffle modelled after the six of hearts, "I'd keep it in a cage. A man who observes that I have eaten three fish-cakes and a waffle without opening my mouth hasn't a very good command of language. He simply states as a fact what is in reality an impossibility, granting that I eat with my mouth, which I am told I do."

"You know what I mean," retorted Mr. Pedagog, impatiently. "I am so much in your society that I have acquired the very bad habit of speaking in the vernacular. When I say you haven't opened your mouth I do not refer to the opening you make for the receipt of waffles and fish-cakes, but for those massive openings which you require for your exuberant loquacity. In other words, I mean that you haven't spoken a word for at least three minutes, which is naturally an indication to us that you aren't feeling well. You and talk are synonymous as far as we are concerned."

"I have been known to speak—that is true," said the Idiot. "That I am not feeling very well this morning is also true. I have a headache."

"A what ache?" asked the Doctor, scornfully.

"A very bad headache," returned the Idiot, looking about him for a third waffle.

"How singular!" said the Bibliomaniac. "Reminds me of a story I heard of a man who had lost his foot. He'd had his foot shot off at Gettysburg, and yet for years after he could feel the pangs of rheumatism in that foot from which he had previously suffered."

"Pardon me for repeating," observed the Idiot. "But, as I have already said, and as I expect often to have to say again, Tutt! I can't blame you for thinking that I have no head, however. I find so little use for one here that in most instances I do not obtrude it upon you."

"I haven't noticed any lack of head in the Idiot," put in the School-master. "As a rule, I can agree to almost anything my friend the Bibliomaniac says, but in this case I cannot accept his views. You have a head. I have always said you had a head—in fact, that is what I complain about chiefly, it is such a big head."

"Thank you," said the Idiot, ignoring the shaft. "I shall never forget your kindness in coming to my aid, though I can't say that I think I needed it. Even with a racking headache sustained by these delicious waffles, I believe I can handle the Doctor and my bookish friend without assistance. I am what the mathematicians would call an arithmetical absurdity—I am the one that is equal to the two they represent. At present, however, I prefer to let them talk

on. I am too much absorbed in thought and waffles to bandy words."

"If I had a headache," said Mrs. Smithers-Pedagog, without, it must be said, in any way desiring to stem the waffle tide which was slowly but surely eating into the profits of the week—"if I had a headache I should not eat so many waffles, Mr. Idiot."

"I suppose I ought not to," replied the Idiot, "but I can't help it, ma'am. Waffles are my weakness. Some men take to drink, some to gaming; I seek forgetfulness of woe in waffles. Mr. Whitechoker, will you kindly pass me that steaming ten of diamonds that is wasting its warmth upon the desert air before you?"

Mr. Whitechoker, with a sigh which indicated that he had had his eye on the ten of diamonds himself, did as he was requested.

"Many thanks," said the Idiot, transferring the waffle to his plate. "Let me see —that is how many?"

"Five," said Mr. Pedagog.

"Eight," said the Bibliomaniac.

"Dear me!" ejaculated the Idiot. "Why can't you agree? I never eat less than twelve waffles, and now that you have failed to keep tab I shall have to begin all over again. Mary, bring me one dozen fresh waffles in squads of four. This is an ideal breakfast, Mrs. Smithers-Pedagog."

"I am glad you are pleased," said the landlady, graciously. "My one aim is to satisfy."

"You are a better shot than most women," said the Idiot. "I wonder why it is," he added, "that waffles are so generally modelled after playing-cards, and also why, having been modelled after playing-cards, there is not a full pack?"

"Fifty-two waffles," said Mr. Whitechoker, "would be too many."

"Fifty-three, including the joker," said Mr. Pedagog.

"What do you know about cards, John?" asked Mrs. Pedagog, severely.

The Idiot laughed.

"Did you ever hear that pretty little song of Gilbert and Sullivan's, Mr. Poet, 'Things are seldom what they seem'?" he asked.

"Why shouldn't I know about playing-cards?" said Mr. Pedagog, acridly. "Mr. Whitechoker seems to be aware that a pack holds fifty-two cards—if he, why not I?"

"I—ah—I of course have to acquaint myself with many vicious things with which I have very little sympathy," observed Mr. Whitechoker, blandly. "I regard cards as an abomination."

"So do I," said Mr. Pedagog—"so do I. But even then I know a full house—I should say a full pack from a—er—a—er—"

"Bob-tail flush," suggested the Idiot.

"Sir," said Mr. Pedagog, "I am not well up in poker terms."

"Then you ought to play," said the Idiot. "The man who doesn't know the game has usually great luck. But I am sorry, Mrs. Pedagog, that you are so strongly opposed to cards, for I was going to make a suggestion which I think would promote harmony in our little circle on waffle days. If you regard cards as wholly immoral, of course the suggestion is without value, since it involves two complete packs of cards—one cardboard pack and one waffle pack."

"I don't object to cards as cards, Mr. Idiot," said the landlady. "It is the games people play with cards that I object to. They bring a great deal of unnecessary misery into the world, and for that reason I think it is better to avoid them altogether."

"That is quite true," said the Idiot. "They do bring about much unhappiness. I know a young woman who became a victim of insomnia once because in a series of ten games of old maid she got the odd card seven times. Of course it wasn't entirely the cards' fault. Superstition had something to do with it. In fact, I sometimes think the fault lies with the people who play, and not with the cards. I owe much to the game of whist. It taught me to control my tongue. I should have been a regular talk-fiend if it hadn't been for whist."

Mr. Pedagog looked unutterable things at the Idiot.

"Are you laboring under the delusion that you have any control over your tongue?" he asked, savagely.

"Most certainly," said the Idiot.

"Well, I'll have to make a note of that," said Mr. Pedagog. "I have a friend who is making a collection of hallucinations."

"If you'll give me his address," said the Idiot, "I'll send him thousands. For five dollars a dozen I'll invent hallucinations for him that people ought to have but haven't."

"No," returned the School-master. "In his behalf, however, I thank you. He collects only real hallucinations, and he finds there are plenty of them without retaining a professional lunatic to supply him."

"Very well," said the Idiot, returning to his waffles. "If at any time he finds the supply running short, I shall be glad to renew my offer."

"You haven't unfolded your Harmony Promoting Scheme for Waffle Days," suggested the Poet. "It has aroused my interest."

"Oh, it is simple," said the Idiot. "I have noticed that on waffle days here most

of us leave the table more or less dissatisfied. We find ourselves plunged into acrimonious discussions, which, to my mind, arise entirely from the waffles. Mr. Pedagog is a most amiable gentleman, and yet we find him this morning full of acerbity. On the surface of things I seem to be the cause of his anger, but in reality it is not I, but the waffles. He has seen me gradually absorbing them and it has irritated him. Every waffle that I eat he might have had if I had not been here. If there had been no one here but Mr. Pedagog, he would have had all the waffles; as it is, his supply is limited. This affects his geniality. It makes him—"

"Pardon me," said Mr. Pedagog. "But you are all wrong. I haven't thought of the things at all."

"Consciously to yourself you have not," said the Idiot. "Subconsciously, however, you have. The Philosophy of the Unconscious teaches us that unknown to ourselves our actions are directly traceable to motives we wot not of. The truth of this is conclusively proven in this case. Even when I point out to you the facts in the case you deny their truth, thereby showing that you are not conscious of the real underlying motive for your irritation. Now, why is that irritation there? Because our several rights to the individual waffles that are served here are not clearly defined at the outset. When Mary brings in a steaming platter full of these delicious creations of the cook, Mr. Pedagog has quite as much right to the one with the six of hearts on it as I have, but I get it. He does not. Hence he is irritated, although he does not know it. So with Mr. Whitechoker. Five minutes ago he was hastening through the four of spades in order that he might come into possession of the ten of diamonds that lay smoking before him. As he was about to put the last spade in his mouth I requested him to hand me the ten of diamonds, having myself gulped down the deuce of clubs to get ahead of him. He couldn't decline to give me that waffle because he wanted it himself. He had to give it to me. He was irritated—though he did not know it. He sighed and gave me the waffle."

"I did want it," said Mr. Whitechoker. "But I did not know that I sighed."

"There you are," said the Idiot. "It is the Philosophy of the Unconscious again. If you are not conscious of so actual a thing as a sigh, how much the more unconscious must you be of something so subtle as motive?"

"And your waffle-deck?" said the Genial Old Gentleman who occasionally imbibes. "How will that solve the problem? It seems to me to complicate the problem. As it is, we have about thirty waffles, each one of which is a germ of irritation in the breast of the man whodoesn't eat it. If you have fifty-two waffles you have twenty-two more germs to sow discord in our midst."

"You would have but for my scheme," said the Idiot. "I'd have a pack of cards at the table, and I'd deal them out just as you do in whist. Each card would

represent the corresponding waffle. We'd begin breakfast by playing one hand after the manner of whist. Each man would keep his tricks, and when the waffles were served he would receive those, and those only, represented by the cards in the tricks he had taken. If you took a trick with the king of diamonds in it, you'd get the waffle with the king of diamonds on it, and so on. Every man would be clearly entitled through his skill in the game to the waffles that he ate."

"Very good," said Mr. Whitechoker. "But suppose you had bad luck and took no tricks?"

"Then," said the Idiot, "you'd have bad luck and get no waffles."

"Tutt!" said Mr. Pedagog.

And that was the sole criticism any of the boarders had to make, although there is reason to believe that the scheme had objectionable features to the majority of them, for as yet Progressive Waffles has not been played at Mrs. Smithers-Pedagog's.

IX

A Clearing-house for Poets

"How is your Muse these days, Mr. Idiot?" asked the Bibliomaniac one Sunday morning while the mush was being served.

"Flourishing," said the Idiot. "Just flourishing—and no more."

"I should think you'd be pleased if she is flourishing," said the Doctor.

"I'd rather she'd stop flourishing and do a little writing," said the Idiot. "She's a queer Muse, that one of mine. She has all the airs and graces of an ordinary type-writer with an unconquerable aversion to work."

"You look upon your Muse as you would upon your type-writer, eh?" said Mr. Pedagog.

"Yes," said the Idiot. "That's all my Muse is, and she isn't even a capable type-writer. The general run of type-writers make sense of what you write, but my Muse won't. You may not believe it, but out of ten inspirations I had last week not one of them is fit for publication anywhere but in a magazine or a puzzle column. I don't know what is the matter with her, but when I sit down to dictate a comic sonnet she turns it into a serious jingle, and vice versa. We can't seem to get our moods to fit. When I want to be serious she's flippant, and when I become flippant she's serious."

"She must be very serious most of the time," said the Doctor.

"She is," said the Idiot, innocently. "But that's only because I'm flippant most of the time. I'm going to give her warning. If she doesn't brace up and take more interest in her work I'm going to get another Muse, that's all. I can't afford to have my income cut down fifty per cent. just because she happens to be fickle."

"Maybe she is flirting with somebody else," suggested the Poet. "My Muse does that occasionally."

"I doubt it," said the Idiot. "I haven't observed any other poet encroaching upon my particular province. Even you, good as you are, can't do it. But in any event I'm going to have a change. The day has gone by when a one-muse poet achieves greatness. I'm going to employ a half-dozen and try to corner the poetry market. Queer that in all these years that men have been writing poetry no one has thought of that. People get up grain corners, corners in railway stock, monopolies in gas and oil and everything else, about, but as yet no poet has cornered the market in his business."

"That's easily accounted for," said the Bibliomaniac. "The poet controls only his own work, and if he has any sense he doesn't want to monopolize that."

"That isn't my scheme at all," said the Idiot. "You have a monopoly of your own work always if you choose to avail yourself of it, and, as you say, a man would be crazy to do so. What I'd like to see established is a sort of Poetic Clearing-house Association. Supposing, for instance, that I opened an office in Wall Street—a Bank for Poets, in which all writers of verse could deposit their rhymes as they write them, and draw against them just as they do in ordinary banks with their money. It would be fine. Take a man like Swinburne, for instance, or our friend here. Our poet could take a sonnet he had written, endorse it, and put it in the bank. He'd be credited with one sonnet, and wouldn't have to bother his head about it afterwards. He could draw against it. If the Clearing-house company could dispose of it to a magazine his draft would be honored in cash to its full value, less discount charges, which would include postage and commissions to the company."

"And suppose the company failed to dispose of it?" suggested the Poet.

"They'd do just as ordinary banks do with checks—stamp it 'Not Good,'" said the Idiot. "That, however, wouldn't happen very often if the concern had an intelligent receiving-teller to detect counterfeits. If the receiving-teller were a man fit for the position and a poet brought in a quatrain with five lines in it, he could detect it at once and hand it back. So with comic poems. I might go there with a poem I thought was comic, and proceed to deposit it with the usual deposit slip. The teller would look at it a second, scrutinize the humor carefully, and then if it was not what I thought it, would stamp it 'Not Comic' or 'Counterfeit.' It is perfectly simple."

"Very simple," said Mr. Pedagog. "Though I should have used a synonym of simple to describe it. It's idiotic."

"That's what people said of Columbus's idea that he could discover America," said the Idiot. "Everything that doesn't have dollars slathered all over it in plain view is idiotic."

"The word slathered is new to me," said the School-master; "but I fancy I know what you mean."

"The word slathered may be new to you," said the Idiot, "but it is a good word. I have used it with great effect several times. Whenever any one asks me that foolish question that is asked so often, 'What is the good word?' I always reply 'Slathered,' and the what's-the-good-word fiend goes off hurt in his mind. He doesn't know what I mean any more than I do, but it shuts him up completely, which is just so much gained."

"I must confess," said the Poet, "that I cannot myself see where there is any money for your Rhyme Clearing-house. Ordinarily I quite approve of your schemes, but in this instance I go over to the enemy."

"I don't say that it is a gold-mine," said the Idiot. "I doubt if I had every cent that is paid for poetry in a year by everybody to everybody that my income would reach one hundredth part of what I'd receive as a successful manufacturer of soap; but there would be more money in poetry than there is if by some pooling of our issues we could corner the market. Suppose every writer of a quatrain in America should send his whole product to us. We could say to the magazines, 'Gentlemen, quatrains are not quatraining as hard as they were. If you need a four-line bit of gloom and rhyme to finish off your thirty-second page, our price is twenty-five dollars instead of seventy-five cents, as of yore.' So with all other kinds of verse. We'd simply name our figure, force the editors to accept it, and unload. We might get caught on the last thirty or forty thousand, but our profits on the others would enable us to more than meet the losses."

"And would you pay the author the twenty-five dollars?" asked Mr. Whitechoker.

"Not if we were sane," replied the Idiot. "We'd pay the author two dollars and fifty cents, which is one dollar and seventy-five cents more than he gets now. He couldn't complain."

"And those that you couldn't sell?" asked the Bibliomaniac.

"We'd simply mark 'Not Good' and return to the author. That's what happens to him now, so no objection could be raised to that. But there's still another side to this matter," said the Idiot. "Publishers would be quite as anxious to help it along as the poets. Dealing through us, they would be spared the necessity of

interviewing poets, which I am informed is always painful because of the necessity which publishers labor under to give the poet to understand that they are in the business for profit, not for pleasure or mere love of sinking money in a magazine. So the publishers would keep a standing account of hard cash in our bank. Say a magazine used one hundred dollars' worth of verse in a month. The publisher at the beginning of the year would deposit twelve hundred dollars with us, and throughout the year would draw out sonnets, ballads, or pastels-in-metre just as he needed them. The checks would read something like this: 'The Poets' Clearing-house Association of the City of New York will pay to John Bluepencil, Editor, or Order, Ten Sonnets. (Signed) Blank Brothers & Co.' Or perhaps we'd receive a notice from a Southern publisher to this effect: 'Have drawn on you at sight for eight quatrains and a triolet.' Now, when you consider how many publishers there are who would always keep a cash balance in the treasury, you begin to get some notion as to how we could meet our running expenses and pay our quarterly dividends to our stockholders anyhow; and as for future dividends, I believe our loan department would net us a sufficient amount to make the stock gilt-edged."

"You would have a loan department, eh?" said Mr. Pedagog.

"That would be popular," said the Poet; "but there again I dispute the profit. You could find plenty of poets who would borrow your funds, but I doubt the security of the loans."

"All of your objections are based on misconceptions," said the Idiot. "The loan department would not lend money. It would lend poems for a consideration to those who are short and who need them to fulfil their obligations."

"Who on earth would want to borrow a poem, I'd like to know?" said the Bibliomaniac.

"Lovers, chiefly," said the Idiot. "Never having been a poet yourself, sir, you have no notion how far the mere faculty of being able to dash off a sonnet to a lady's eyebrow helps a man along in ultimately becoming the possessor of that eyebrow, together with the rest of the lady. I have seen women won, sir, by a rondeau. In fact, I have myself completely routed countless unpoetic rivals by exploding in their ranks burning quatrains to the fair objects of our affections. With woman the man who can write a hymn of thanksgiving that he is permitted to gaze into her cerulean orbs has a great advantage over the wight who has to tell her she has dandy blue eyes in commonplace prose. The commonplace-prose wight knows it, too, and he'd pay ten per cent. of his salary during courtship if he could devise a plan by means of which he could pass himself off as a poet. To meet this demand, our loan department would be established. An unimaginative lover could come in and describe the woman he adored; the loan clerk would fish out a sonnet to fit the girl, and the lover could borrow it for ten days, just as brokers borrow stock. Armed with this he

could go up to Harlem, or wherever else the maiden lived, and carry consternation into the hearts of his rivals by spouting the sonnet as nonchalantly as though he had just thought of it. So it would go on. For the following call he could borrow a ballad singing the glories of her raven locks, likening them to the beautiful night, or, if the locks were red instead of black, to the aurora borealis."

"You'd have trouble finding a rhyme to borealis," said the Poet.

"Tutt!" said the Idiot. "What's the matter with 'Glory, Alice,' 'Listen to my story, Alice,' 'I'm going to war so gory, Alice,' 'I fear you are a Tory, Alice' (this for a Revolutionary poem), or 'Come rowing in my dory, Alice'? There's no end to 'em."

"If you'll write a rhyming dictionary I'll buy a copy," was the Poet's sole comment.

"That will come later," said the Idiot. "Once get our clearing-house established, we can branch out into a general Poetry Trust and Supply Company that will make millions. We'll make so much money, by Jove!" he added, slapping the table enthusiastically, "that we can afford to go into the publishing business ourselves and bring out volumes of verse for anybody and everybody. We can deal in Fame! A man that couldn't write his own name so that anybody could read it could come to us and say: 'Gentlemen, I've got everything but brains. I want to be an author and 'mongst the authors stand. I am told it is delightful to see one's book in print. I haven't a book, but I've got a dollar or two, and if you'll put out a first-class book of poems under my name I'll pay all expenses and give you a royalty of twenty per cent. on every copy I give away!' No money in it? Bah! You gentlemen don't know. If you say fortune would not wait upon this venture I say you are the kind of men who would sell government bonds for their value as mere engravings if you had the chance."

"You certainly do draw a roseate picture," said Mr. Whitechoker.

"I do indeed," said the Idiot, "and the paint is laid on thick."

"Well, I hope it goes," said the Poet. "I'll make a deposit the first day of three hundred and sixty-seven ballads, four hundred and twenty-three couplets, eighty-nine rondeaus, and one epic about ten yards in length, all of which I have in my desk at this moment."

"Very well," said the Idiot, rising, "With that encouragement from you I feel warranted in ordering the 'Not Good' stamp at least."

X

Some Electrical Suggestions

"If I were beginning life all over again," said the Idiot, "I'd be an electrician. It seems to me that of all modern pursuits, barring architecture perhaps, electricity is the most fascinating."

"There's probably more money in it than there is in Idiocy, too, I fancy," said the Bibliomaniac, dryly.

"Well, I should think so," assented the Idiot. "Idiocy is merely an intellectual diversion. Electricity is a practical science. Idiocy cannot be said to be anything more than a luxury, while electricity has become a necessity. I do not even claim that any real lasting benefit can come to the world through Idiocy, but in electricity are possibilities, not yet realized, for which the world will be distinctly better and happier."

"It is kind of you to speak so highly of electricity," said the Doctor. "The science may now advance, knowing that you approve."

"Approve?" cried the Idiot. "Approve is not the word, sir. I enthuse—and why should I not, feeling, as I do, that in the electrical current lies the germ of the Elixir of Life! I thoroughly believe that a bottle of liquefied electricity would make us all young."

"Then don't take it!" said the School-master. "You have suffered from an aggravated case of youngness for as long a time as I have known you. Pray do nothing to intensify your youth."

"I fear I shall be forced to deny myself that pleasure, Mr. Pedagog," returned the Idiot, mildly, "for the unhappy reason that as yet the formula for the Electrical Elixir has not been discovered; that it will be discovered before I die I hope and pray, because, unlike the man in the hymn, I would live always. I'd like to be an immortal."

"An immortal Idiot! Think of it!" said the Doctor.

"I didn't expect much sympathy from you, Dr. Capsule," said the Idiot. "The man with car-horses to sell does not dote upon the trolley-car."

"The application of the allegory is not entirely apparent," said the Doctor.

"No?" said the Idiot. "I am surprised. I thought you intellectuals absorbed ideas more quickly. To deal in plain terms, since it appears to be necessary, a plan which involves the indefinite extension of mortal life and the elimination of bodily ills is not likely to receive the hearty endorsement of the medical profession. If a man could come home on a stormy night and offset the deleterious effects of wet feet by swallowing an electric pill, one containing two volts, like a two-grain quinine pill, for instance, with greater certainty than one feels in taking quinine, your profession would have to put up the shutters

and go into some such business as writing articles on 'Measles as It Used to Be,' or 'Disorders of the Ante-Electrical Period.' The fine part of it all is that we should not have to rely for our medicines upon the state of the arsenic market, or the quinine supply, or the squill product of the year. Electric sparks can be made without number whether the sun shines or not. The failure of the Peruvian Bark Crop, or the destruction by an early frost of the Castor Oil Wells, would cease to be a hideous possibility to delicate natures. They could all fail for all mankind need fear, for electricity can be generated when and wherever one has need of it. If your electric pills were used up, and the chemist too far away from your house for you to get the supply replenished at the moment, you could put on your slippers and by walking up and down your carpeted floor for ten or fifteen minutes generate enough electricity to see you through. Of course you'd have to have a pair of dynamic-storage-reservoir slippers to catch the sparks as they flew, but I fancy they'd be less costly in the long run than the medicines we have to-day."

"Why have wet feet at all if electricity is to be so all-powerful?" suggested Mr. Whitechoker. "Why not devise an electrical foot-protector and ward off all possibility of damp, cold feet?"

"You couldn't do that with men and women constituted as they are," said the Idiot. "Your foot-protector would no doubt be a good thing, but so are rubber overshoes. Nothing will ever be patented to compel a man to keep his feet dry, and he won't do it except under compulsion, but once having his feet wet he will seek the remedy. It's the Elixir of Life that I bank on most, however. I don't believe there is one among us, excepting Mrs. Pedagog, to whom twenty-five was not the most delightful period of existence. To Mrs. Pedagog, as to all women, eighteen is the limit. But men at twenty-five and women at eighteen know so much, enjoy so much, regard themselves so highly! There is nothing blasé about them then. Disillusion—which I think ought to be called dissolution—comes later. At thirty a man discovers that the things he knew at twenty-five aren't so; and as for a woman at twenty-five, if so be she is unmarried, her life is empty, and if so be she is married, she has cares in the shape of children and a husband, who as a theory was a poet, but who as a reality is a mere business machine who is oftentimes no fonder of staying at home than he was before he was married and went out to see her every night."

"What a wise little pessimist he is!" said Mr. Pedagog to the Doctor.

"Very. But I fail to comprehend why he branches off into Pessimism when Electricity was his text," said the Doctor.

"Because he's the Id—" began the Bibliomaniac, but the Idiot interrupted him.

"Don't jump fences, gentlemen, before you know whether they are made of barbed wire or not. I'm coming to the points you are bringing up, and if you

are not careful they may puncture you," he said. "I am not in any sense a pessimist. Quite the contrary. I am an optimist. I'm not old enough or cross-grained enough as yet to be a pessimist, and it's because I don't want to be a pessimist that I want this Elixir of Electricity to hurry up and have itself patented. If men when they reached the age of twenty-five, and women at eighteen, would begin to take this they might live to be a thousand and yet retain all the spirit and feelings of twenty-five and eighteen. That's the connection, Dr. Capsule. If I could be twenty-five all my life I'd be as happy as a bird—and if I were the Poet here I'd immortalize that idea in verse—

"A man's the biggest thing aliveWhen he has got to twenty-five;And as for woman, she's a queenWhose summers number just eighteen."

"That's a good idea," returned the Poet. "I'll make a note of that, and if I sell it I'll give you a commission."

"No, don't do that," said the Idiot, slyly. "I shall be satisfied to see your name in print."

The Poet having accepted this sally in the spirit in which it was intended, the Idiot resumed:

"But of course the Elixir and the Electrical Pills are as yet all in the air. We haven't even taken a step in that direction. Mr. Edison and other wizards have been too much occupied with electric lights and telephones and phonographs and transatlantic notions to pay any attention to schemes to prolong life and keep us, despite our years, perpetually young."

"I fancy they are likely to continue to do so," said the Doctor. "Whatever motive you may attribute to me for pooh-poohing your notions, I do so. No sane person wants to live forever, and if it were possible that all men might live forever, you'd soon find the world so crowded that the slighter actors in the human comedy would be shoved off the stage. There are enough people in the world now, without man's adding all future generations to their number and making death an impossibility."

"That's all nonsense," said the Idiot. "My Elixir wouldn't make death an impossibility. Any man who thought he'd had enough at the end of a thousand years could stop taking the Elixir and shuffle off the mortal coil. As a matter of fact, not more than ten per cent. of the people in the world would have any faith in the Elixir at all. I know people to-day who do not take advantage of the many patent remedies that are within their reach, preferring the mustard-plaster and catnip-tea of their forefathers. There's where human nature works again. I believe that if I were myself the discoverer of the formula for my mixture, and for an advertisement secured a letter from a man saying, 'I was dying of old age, having reached the advanced period of ninety-seven; I took two bottles of your Electrical Elixir and am now celebrating my twenty-fifth

birthday again,' ninety-nine per cent. of the people who read it would laugh and think it had strayed out of the funny column. People lack confidence in their fellow-men—that's all; but if they were twenty-five and eighteen that would all be changed. We are very trustful at twenty-five and eighteen, which is one of the things I like about those respective ages. When I was twenty-five I believed in everybody, including myself. Now—well, I'm older. But enough of schemes, which I must admit are somewhat visionary—as the telephone would have seemed one hundred years ago. Let us come down to realities in electricity. I can't see why more is not made of the phonograph for the benefit of the public. Take a man like Chauncey M. De Choate. He goes here and he goes there to make speeches, when I've no doubt he'd much prefer to stay at home cutting coupons off his bonds. Why can't the phonograph voice do his duty? Instead of making the same speech over and over again, why can't some electrician so improve the phonograph that De Choate can say what he has to say through a funnel, have it impressed on a cylinder, duplicated and reduplicated and scattered broadcast over the world? If Mr. Edison could impart what poets call stentorian tones to the phonograph, he'd be doing a great and noble work. Again, for smaller things, like a dance, Why can't the phonograph be made useful at a ball? I attended one the other night, and when I wanted to dance the two-step the band played the polka; if I wished the polka it played a waltz. Some men can only dance the two-step—they don't know the waltz, the polka, or the schottische. Now why can't the phonograph come to the rescue? In almost any hotel in New York you can drop a nickel in a slot and hear Sousa's band on the phonograph. Why not extend the principle and have a phonograph for men who can dance nothing but the two-step, charged with 'The Washington Post March,' and supplied with four tubes with receivers to put in the ears of the listeners? Make it small enough for a man to carry in his pocket; then at a ball he could go up to a young lady, ask her to dance, put two of the receivers in her ears, two in his, and trip the light fantastic toe utterly independently of what other people were dancing. It's possible. Mr. Edison could do it in five minutes, and every one would be satisfied. It might be rather droll to see two people dancing the two-step while eight others were fastened on to a lanciers phonograph, and a dozen or more other couples were dancing respectively the waltz, schottische, and Virginia reel, but we'd soon get used to that, and no man need become a wall-flower because he couldn't dance the dance that happened to be on. Furthermore, you'd be able to do away with the musicians, who always cast a pall over dances because of their superiority to the rest of the world in general and the dancers in particular."

"How about your couple that prefer to sit out the dance on the stairs?" said the Poet, who, in common with the Idiot, knew several things about dances that Messrs. Pedagog and Whitechoker did not.

"It would be particularly attractive to them," said the Idiot. "They could sit on

the stairs and wax sentimental over any dreamy air the man happened to have in his vest-pocket. He could arrange all that beforehand—find out what song she thought divinest, and go loaded accordingly. And as for the things that usually happen on stairs at dances, as well as in conservatories at balls, with the aid of a phonograph a man could propose to a girl in the presence of a thousand people, and nobody but the maiden herself would be the wiser. I tell you, gentlemen," the Idiot added, enthusiastically, as he rose to depart, "if the phonograph people only knew their power they'd do great things. The patent vest-pocket phonograph for music at balls and proposals for bashful men alone would make their fortunes if they only could see it. I almost wish I were an electrician and not an Idiot."

With which he left the room, and Mr. Pedagog whispered to Mrs. Pedagog that while he considered the Idiot very much of an idiot, there was no denying that at times he did get hold of ideas that were not wholly bad.

"That's true," said the good landlady. "I think if you had proposed to me through a phonograph I should not have had to guess at what you meant and lead you on to express yourself more clearly. I didn't want to say yes until I was fully convinced that you meant what you didn't seem able to say."

XI

Concerning Children

The Poet had been away for a week, and on his return to his accustomed post at the breakfast-table seemed but a shadow of his former self. His eyes were heavy and his long locks appeared straggly enough for a man of far more extended reputation as a singer of melodious verse.

"To judge from your appearance, Mr. Poet," said the Idiot, after welcoming his friend, "you've had a lively vacation. You certainly do not look as if you had devoted much of it to sleep."

"I haven't," said the Poet, wearily, "I haven't averaged more than two hours of sleep daily since I went away."

"I thought you told me you were going off into the country for a rest?" observed the Idiot.

"I did—and this is what comes of it," returned the Poet. "I went to visit my sister up in Saratoga County. She has seven children."

"Aha!" smiled the Idiot. "That's it, is it—well, I can sympathize with you. I've had experience with youngsters myself. I love 'em, but I like to take 'em on the instalment plan—very little at a time. I have a small cousin with a capacity for

play and impudence that can't be equalled. His mother wrote me once and asked if I thought Hagenbeck, the wild-animal tamer, could be induced to take him in hand."

"That's the kind," put in the Poet, his face lighting up a little upon discovering that there was some one at least at the board who could sympathize with him. "My sister's seven are all of the wild-animal variety. I'd rather fall in with seven tigers than put in another week with my beloved nephews and nieces."

"Did they play Alp with you?" the Idiot asked, with a grin.

"Alp?" said the Poet. "No—not that I know of. They may have, however. I was hardly conscious of what they were doing the last two days of my stay there. They simply overpowered me, and I gave in and became a toy for the time."

"It isn't much fun being a toy," said the Idiot. "I think I'd rather play Alp."

"What on earth is Alp?" asked Mr. Pedagog, his curiosity aroused. "I've heard enough absurd names for games in the last five years, but I must say, for pure idiocy and lack of suggestiveness, the name of Alp surpasses all."

"That's as it should be," said the Idiot. "My small cousin invented Alp, and anything that boy does is apt to surpass all. He takes after me in some things. But Alp, while it may seem to lack suggestiveness as a name, is really just the name for the game. It's very simple. It is played by one Alp and as many chamois as desire to take a hand. As a rule the man plays the Alp and the children are the chamois. The man gets down on his hands and knees, puts his head on the floor, and has a white rug put on his back, the idea being that he is an Alp and the rug represents its snow-clad top."

"And the chamois?" asked Mr. Whitechoker.

"The chamois climbs the Alp and jumps about on the top of it," said the Idiot. "My experience, based upon two hours a day of it for ten consecutive days, is that it's fun for the chamois but rough on the Alp; and I got so after a while that I really preferred business to pleasure and gave up playing Alp to return to work before my vacation was half over."

"How do you score in this game of Alp?" said Mr. Pedagog, smiling broadly as he thought of there being an embryo idiot somewhere who could discomfit the one fate had thrown across his path.

"I never had the strength to inquire," said the Idiot. "But my impression is that the game is to see which has the greater endurance, the chamois or the Alp. The one that gets tired of playing first loses. I always lost. My small cousin is a storehouse of nervous energy. I believe he could play choo-choo cars with a real engine and last longer than the engine—which being the case, I couldn't hope to hold out against him."

"My nephews didn't play Alp," said the Poet. "I believe Alp would have been

a positive relief to me. They made me tell them stories and poems from morning until night, and all night too, for one of them shared his room with me, and the worst of it all was that they all had to be new stories and new poems, so I was kept composing from one week's end to the other."

"Why weren't you firm with them and say you wouldn't, and let that end it?" said Mr. Pedagog.

"Ha—ha!" laughed the Idiot. "That's fine, isn't it, Mr. Poet? It's very evident, Mr. Pedagog, that you're not acquainted with children. Now, my small cousin can make the same appeal over and over again in a hundred and fifty different ways. You may have the courage to say no a hundred and forty-nine times, but I have yet to meet the man who could make his no good with a boy of real persistent spirit. I can't do it. I've tried, but I've had to give in sooner or later."

"Same way with me, multiplied by seven," said the Poet, with difficulty repressing a yawn. "I tried the no business on the morning of the third day, and gave it up as a hopeless case before the clock struck twelve."

"I'd teach 'em," said Mr. Pedagog.

"You'd have to learn 'em first," retorted the Idiot. "You can't do anything with children unless you understand them. You've got to remember several things when you have small boys to deal with. In the first place, they are a great deal more alert than you are. They are a great deal more energetic; they know what they want, and in getting it they haven't any dignity to restrain them, wherein they have a distinct advantage over you. Worst of all, down in your secret heart you want to laugh, even when they most affront you."

"I don't," said Mr. Pedagog, shortly.

"And why? Because you don't know them, cannot sympathize with them, and look upon them as evils to be tolerated rather than little minds to be cultivated. Hard a time as I have had as an Alp, I'd feel as if a great hole had been punched in my life if anything should deprive me of my cousin Sammie. He knows it and I know it, and that is why we are chums," said the Idiot. "What I like about Sammie is that he believes in me," he added, a little wistfully. "I wouldn't mind doing that myself—if I could."

"You might think differently if you suffered from seven Sammies the way the Poet does," said the Bibliomaniac.

"There couldn't be seven Sammies," said the Idiot. "Sammie is unique—to me. But I am not at all narrow in this matter. I can very well imagine how Sammie could be very disagreeable to some people. I shouldn't care much for Alp, I suppose, if when night came on Sammie didn't climb up on my lap and tell me he thought I was the greatest man that ever lived next to his mother and father. That's the thing, Mr. Pedagog, that makes Alp tolerable—it's the sugar sauce to

the batter pudding. There's a good deal of plain batter in the pudding, but with the sauce generously mixed in you don't mind it so much. That boy would be willing to go to sleep on a railway track if I told him I'd stand between him and the express train. If I told him I could hammer down Gibraltar with putty he'd believe it, and bring me his putty-blower to help along in the great work. That's why I think a man's so much better off if he is a father. Somebody has fixed a standard for him which, while he may know he can't live up to it, he'll try to live up to, and by aiming high he won't be so apt to hit low as he otherwise might. As Sammie's father once said to me: 'By Jove, Idiot,' he said, 'if men could only be what their children think them!'"

"Nevertheless they should be governed, curbed, brought up!" said the Bibliomaniac.

"They should, indeed," said the Idiot. "And in such a fashion that when they are governed, curbed, and brought up they do not realize that they have been governed, curbed, and brought up. The man who plays the tyrant with his children isn't the man for me. Give me the man who, like my father, is his son's intimate, personal friend, his confidant, his chum. It may have worked badly in my case. I don't think it has—in any event, if I were ever the father of a boy I'd try to make him feel that I was not a despot in whose hands he was powerless, but a mainstay to fall back on when things seemed to be going wrong—fountain-head of good advice, a sympathizer—in short, a chum."

"You certainly draw a pleasant picture," said Mr. Whitechoker, kindly.

"Thank you," said the Idiot. "It's not original with me. My father drew it. But despite my personal regard for Sammie, I do think something ought to be done to alleviate the sufferings of the parent. Take the mother of a boy like Sammie, for instance. She has him all day and generally all night. Sammie's father goes to business at eight o'clock and returns at six, thinking he has worked hard, and wonders why it is that Sammie's mother looks so confoundedly tired. It makes him slightly irritable. She has been at home taking things easy all day. He has been in town working like a dog. What right has she to be tired? He doesn't realize that she has had to entertain Sammie at those hours of the day when Sammie is in his best form. She has found him trying to turn somersaults at the top of the back stairs; she has patiently borne his musical efforts on the piano, upon which he practises daily for a few minutes, generally with a hammer or a stick, or something else equally well calculated to beautify the keys; she has had to interfere in Sammie's well-meant efforts to instruct his small brother in the art of being an Indian who can whoop and scalp all in the same breath, thereby incurring for the moment Sammie's undying hatred; she has heard Sammie using language which an inconsiderate hired man has not scrupled to use in Sammie's presence; she has, with terror in her soul, watched him at play with a knife which some friend of the family who admires Sammie

had given him, and has again incurred his enmity by finally, to avoid nervous prostration, taken that treasure from him. In short, she has passed a day of real tragedy. Sammie is farce to me, comedy to his father, and tragedy to his mother. Cannot something be done for her? Is there no way by means of which Sammie can be entertained during the day, for entertained he must be, that does not utterly destroy the nervous system of his mother? Can't some inventive genius who has studied the small boy, who knows the little ins and outs of his nature, and who, above all, sympathizes with those ins and outs, put his mind on the life of the woman of domestic inclination, and do something to make her life less of a burden and more of a joy?"

"You are the man to do it," said the Bibliomaniac. "An inventive genius such as you are ought to be able to solve the problem."

"Perhaps he ought to be," said the Idiot; "but we are not all what we ought to be, I among the number. Almost anything seems possible to me until I think of the mother at home all day with a dear, sweet, bright, energetic boy like Sammie. Then, I confess, I am utterly at a loss to know what to do."

And then, as none of the boarders had any solution of the problem to suggest, I presume there was none among them who knew "How To Be Tranquil Though A Mother."

Perhaps when women take up invention matters will seem more hopeful.

XII

Dreamaline

"Well, Mr. Idiot," said Mr. Pedagog, as the guests gathered about the table, "how goes the noble art of invention with you? You've been at it for some time now. Do you find that you have succeeded in your self-imposed mission and made the condition of the civilized less unbearable?"

"Frankly, Mr. Pedagog, I have failed," said the Idiot, sadly. "Failed egregiously. I cannot find that of all the many schemes I have evolved for the benefit of the human race any single one has been adopted by those who would be benefited. Wherefore, with the exception of Dreamaline, which I have not yet developed to my satisfaction, I shall do no more inventing. What is the use? Even you, gentlemen, here have tacitly declined to accept my plan for the elimination of irritation on Waffle Days, a plan at once simple, picturesque, and efficacious. With such discouragement at home, what hope have I for better fortune abroad?"

"It is dreadful to be an unappreciated genius!" said the Bibliomaniac, gruffly.

"It's better to be a plain lunatic. A plain lunatic is at least free from the consciousness of failure."

"Nevertheless, I'd rather be myself than any one else at this board," rejoined the Idiot. "Unappreciated though I be, I am at least happy. Consciousness of failure need not necessarily destroy one's happiness. If I do the best I can with the tools I have I needn't weep because I fail, and with his consciousness of failure the unappreciated genius always has the consolation of knowing that it is not he but the world that is wrong. If I am a philanthropist and offer a thousand dollars to a charity, and the charity declines to accept it because I happen to have made it out of my interest in 'A Widows' and Orphans' Speculation Company, Large Losses a Surety,' it is the charity that loses, not I. So with my plans. Social expansion is not taken up by society—who dies, I or society? Capitalists decline to consider my proposition for a General Poetry Trust and Supply Company. Who loses a fine chance, I or the capitalists? I may be a little discouraged for the time being, but what of that? Invention isn't the only occupation in the world for me. I can give up Philanthropy and take up Misanthropy in a moment if I want to—and with Dreamaline I can rule the world."

"Ah—just what is this Dreamaline?" asked Mr. Whitechoker, interested.

"That, sir, is the question which I am now trying to answer for myself," returned the Idiot. "If I could answer it, as I have said, I could rule the world—everybody could rule the world; that is to say, his own world. It is based on an old idea which has been found by some to be practicable, but it has never been developed to the point which I hope to attain."

"Wake me up when he gets to the point, will you, kindly?" whispered the Doctor to the Bibliomaniac.

"If you sleep until then you'll never wake," said the Bibliomaniac. "To my mind the Idiot never comes to a point."

"You are a little too mysterious for me," observed Mr. Whitechoker. "I know no more about Dreamaline now than I did when you began."

"Which is my case exactly," said the Idiot. "It is a vague, shadowy something as yet. It is only a germ lost in my cerebral wrinkles, but I hope by a persistent smoothing out of those wrinkles with what I might call the flat-iron of thought, I may yet lay hold of the microbe, and with it electrify the world. Once Dreamaline is discovered all other discoveries become as nothing; all other inventions for the amelioration of the condition of the civilized will be unnecessary, and even Progressive Waffles will cease to fascinate."

"Perhaps," said the Bibliomaniac, "if you will give us a hint as to the nature of your plan in general we may be able to help you in carrying it out."

"The Doctor might," said the Idiot. "My genial friend who occasionally imbibes might—even the Poet, with his taste for Welsh rarebits, might—but from you and Mr. Pedagog and Mr. Whitechoker I fear I should receive little assistance. Indeed, I am not sure but that Mr. Whitechoker might disapprove of the plan altogether."

"Any plan which makes life happier and better is sure to meet with my approval," said Mr. Whitechoker.

"With that encouragement, then," said the Idiot, "I will endeavor to lay before you my crowning invention. Dreamaline, as its name may suggest, should be a patent medicine, by taking which man should become oblivious to care."

"What's the matter with champagne for that?" interrupted the Genial Old Gentleman who occasionally imbibes.

"Champagne has some good points," said the Idiot. "But there are two drawbacks—the effects and the price. Both of these drawbacks, so far from making us oblivious to our cares, add to them. The superiority of Dreamaline over champagne, or even over beer, which is comparatively cheap, is that one dose of Dreamaline, costing one cent, will do more for the patient than one case of champagne or one keg of beer; it is not intoxicating or ruinous to the purse. Furthermore, it is more potent for good, since, under its genial influences, man can do that to which he aspires, or, what is perhaps better yet, merely imagine that he is doing that to which he aspires, and so avoid the disappointment which I am told always comes with ambition achieved.

"Take, for instance, the literary man. We know of many cases in which the literary man has stimulated his imagination by means of drugs, and while under the influence has penned the most marvellous tales. That man sacrifices himself for the delectation of others. In order to write something for the world to rave over, he takes a dose which makes him rave, and which ultimately kills him. Dreamaline will make this entirely unnecessary. Instead of the writers taking hasheesh, the reader takes Dreamaline. Instead of one man having to smoke opium for millions, the millions take Dreamaline for themselves as individuals. I would have the scientists, then, the chemists, study the subject carefully, decide what quality it is in hasheesh that makes a writer conceive of these horrible situations, put this into a nostrum, and sell it to those who like horrible situations, and let them dream their own stories."

"Very interesting," said the Bibliomaniac, "but all readers do not like horrible situations. We are not all morbid."

"For which we should be devoutly thankful," said the Idiot. "But your point is not well taken. On each bottle of what I should call 'Literary Dreamaline,' to distinguish it from 'Art Dreamaline,' 'Scientific Dreamaline,' and so on, I should have printed explicit directions showing consumers how the dose

should be modified to meet the consumer's taste. One man likes a De Maupassant story. Let him take his Dreamaline straight, lie down and dream. He'd get his De Maupassant story with a vengeance. Another likes the modern story in realism—a story in which a prize might be offered to the reader who finds a situation, an incident in the three hundred odd pages of the book he reads. This man could take a spoonful of Dreamaline and dilute it to his taste. A drop of Dreamaline, which taken raw would give a man a dream like Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, put into a hogshead of pure water would enable the man who took a spoonful of it before going to bed to fall asleep and walk through a three-volume novel by Henry James. Thus every man could get what he wanted at small expense. Dreamaline for readers sold at a dollar a quart would give every consumer as big and varied a library as he wished, and would be a great saving to the eyes. People would have more time for other pleasures if by taking a dose of Dreamaline before retiring they could get all their literature in their sleeping hours. Then every bottle would pay for itself ten times over if on awakening the next morning the consumer would write out the story he had dreamed and publish it for the benefit of those who were afraid to take the medicine."

"You wouldn't make much money out of it, though," said the Poet. "If one bottle sufficed for a library you wouldn't find much of a demand."

"That could be got around in two ways," said the Idiot. "We could copyright every bottle of Dreamaline and require the consumers to pay us a royalty on every book inspired by it, or we could ourselves take what I would call Financial Dreamaline, one dose of which would make a man feel like a millionaire. Life is only feeling after all. If you feel like a millionaire you are as happy as a millionaire—happier, in fact, because in reality you do not have to wear your thumbs out cutting coupons on the first of every month. Then I should have Art Dreamaline. You could have it arranged so that by a certain dose you could have old masters all over your house; by another dose you could get a collection of modern French paintings, and by swallowing a whole bottle you could dream that your walls were lined with mysteries that would drive the Impressionists crazy with envy. In Scientific Dreamaline you would get ideas for invention that would revolutionize the world."

"How about the poets and the humorists?" asked the Poet.

"They'd be easy," said the Idiot. "I wouldn't have any hasheesh in the mixture for them. Welsh rarebit would do, and you'd get poems so mysterious and jokes so uproarious that the whole world would soon be filled with wonder and with laughter. In short, Dreamaline would go into every walk of life. Music, letters, art, poetry, finance. Every man according to his bent or his tastes could partake. Every man could make with it his own little world in which he was himself the prime mover, and so harmless would it be that when

next morning he awoke he would be as tranquil and as happy as a babe. I hope, gentlemen, to see the day when Dreamaline is an established fact, when we cannot enter a household in the land that does not have hanging on its walls, after the manner of those glass fire hand-grenades, a wire rack holding a row of bottles labelled Art, Letters, Music, and so on, instead of libraries, picture-galleries, music-rooms, and laboratories. The rich and the poor alike may have it. The child who loves to have stories told to him will cry for it; the poor wanderer who loves opera and cannot afford even to pass the opera-house in a cable-car, can go into a drug-store, and for a cent, begged of a kind-hearted pedestrian on the street, purchase a sufficient quantity to imagine himself a box-holder; the ambitious statesman can through its influences enjoy the sensation of thinking himself President of the United States. Not a man, woman, or child lives but would find it a boon, and as harmless as a Graham cracker. That, gentlemen, is my crowning invention, and until I see it realized I invent no more. Good-morning."

And in a moment he was gone.

"Well!" said Mr. Pedagog. "That's the cap to the climax."

"Yes," said Mrs. Smithers-Pedagog.

"Where do you suppose he got the idea?" asked the Bibliomaniac.

"I don't know," said the Doctor. "But I suspect that without knowing it he's had some of the stuff he describes. Most of his schemes indicate it, and Dreamaline, I think, proves it."

THE END