CLASSICS TO GO

THE GENIAL IDIOT

HIS VIEWS AND REVIEWS

JOHN KENDRICK BANGS

THE GENIAL IDIOT

His Views and Reviews

JOHN KENDRICK BANGS

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	He Discusses Maxims and Proverbs	3
II.	He Discusses the Ideal Husband	14
III.	The Idiot's Valentine	27
IV.	He Discusses Finance	39
V.	He Suggests a Comic Opera	52
VI.	He Discusses Fame	64
VII.	On the Decadence of April-fool's-day	77
VIII.	Spring and Its Poetry	88
IX.	On Flat-hunting	100
X.	The Housemaid's Union	112
XI.	The Gentle Art of Boosting	123
XII.	He Makes a Suggestion to the Poet	135
XIII.	He Discusses the Music Cure	147
XIV.	He Defends Campaign Methods	159
XV.	On Short Courses at College	170
XVI.	The Horse-show	182
XVII.	Suggestion to Christmas Shoppers	194
XVIII.	For a Happy Christmas	205

I
HE DISCUSSES MAXIMS AND PROVERBS

GOOD!” cried the Idiot, from behind the voluminous folds of the magazine section of his Sunday newspaper. “Here’s a man after my own heart. Professor Duff, of Glasgow University, has come out with a public statement that the maxims and proverbs of our forefathers are largely hocus-pocus and buncombe. I’ve always maintained that myself from the moment I had my first copy-book lesson in which I had to scrawl the line, ‘It’s a long lane that has no turning,’ twenty-four times. And then that other absurd statement, ‘A stitch in the side is worth two in the hand’—or something like it—I forget just how it goes—what Tommy-rot that is.”

“Well, I don’t know about that, Mr. Idiot,” said Mr. Whitechoker, tapping his fingers together reflectively. “Certain great moral principles are instilled into the minds of the young by the old proverbs and maxims that remain with them forever, and become a potent influence in the formation of character.”

“I should like to agree with you, but I can’t,” said the Idiot. “I don’t believe anything that is noble in the way of character was ever fostered by such a statement as that it’s a long lane that has no turning. In the first place, it isn’t necessarily true. I know a lane on my grandfather’s farm that led from the hen-coop to the barn. There wasn’t a turn nor a twist in it, and I know by actual measurement that it wasn’t sixty feet long. You’ve got just as much right to say to a boy that it’s a long nose that has no twisting, or a long leg that has no pulling, or a long courtship that has no

kissing. There’s infinitely more truth in those last two than in the original model. The leg that’s never pulled doesn’t go short in a stringent financial market, and a courtship without a kiss, even if it lasted only five minutes, would be too long for any self-respecting lover.”

“I never thought of it in that way,” said Mr. Whitechoker. “Perhaps, after all, the idea is ill-expressed in the original.”

“Perfectly correct,” said the Idiot. “But even then, what? Suppose they had put the thing right in the beginning and said ‘it’s a long lane that has no ending.’ What’s the use of putting a thing like that in a copy-book? A boy who didn’t know that without being told ought to be spanked and put to bed. Why not tell him it’s a long well that has no bottom, or a long dog that has no wagging, or a long railroad that has no terminal facilities?”

“Oh, well,” interposed the Bibliomaniac, “what’s the use of being captious? Out of a billion and a half wise saws you pick out one to jump on. Because one is weak, all the rest must come down with a crash.”

“There are plenty of others, and the way they refute one another is to me a constant source of delight,” said the Idiot. “There’s ‘Procrastination is the thief of time,’ for instance. That’s a clear injunction to youth to get up and hustle, and he starts in with all the impulsiveness of youth, and the first thing he knows—bang! he runs slap into ‘Look before you leap,’ or ‘Second thoughts are best.’ That last is what Samuel Johnson would have called a beaut. What superior claims the second thought has over the first or the seventy-seventh thought, that it should become axiomatic, I vow I can’t see. If it’s morality you’re after I am dead against the teachings of that proverb. The second thought is the open door to duplicity when it comes to a question of morals. You ask a small boy, who has been in swimming

when he ought to have been at Sunday-school, why his shirt is wet. His first thought is naturally to reply along the line of fact and say, ‘Why, because it fell into the pond.’ But second thought comes along with visions of hard spanking and a supperless bed in store for him, and suggests the idea that ‘There was a leak in the Sunday-school roof right over the place where I was sitting,’ or, ‘I sat down on the teacher’s glass of water.’ That’s the sort of thing second thought does in the matter of morals.

“I admit, of course, that there are times when second thoughts are better than first ones—for instance, if your first thought is to name the baby Jimmie and Jimmie turns out to be a girl, it is better to obey your second thought and call her Gladys or Samantha—but it is not always so, and I object to the nerve of the broad, general statement that it *is* so. Sometimes fifth thoughts are best. In science I guess you’ll find that the man who thinks the seven hundred and ninety-seventh thought along certain lines has got the last and best end of it. And so it goes—out of the infinitesimal number of numbers, every mother’s son of ’em may at the psychological moment have a claim to the supremacy, but your self-sufficient old proverb-maker falls back behind the impenetrable wall of his own conceit, and announces that because he has nothing but second-hand thoughts, therefore the second thought is best, and we, like a flock of sheep, follow this leader, and go blatting that sentiment down through the ages as if it were proved beyond peradventure by the sum total of human experience.”

“Well, you needn’t get mad about it,” said the Lawyer. “I never said it—so you can’t blame me.”

“Still, there are some proverbs,” said Mr. Whitechoker, blandly, “that we may not so summarily dismiss. Take, for instance, ‘You never miss the water till the well runs dry.’”

“One of the worst of the lot, Mr. Whitechoker,” said the Idiot. “I’ve missed the water lots of times when the well was full as ever. You miss the water when the pipes freeze up, don’t you? You—or rather I—I sometimes miss the water like time at five o’clock in the morning after a pleasant evening with some jovial friends, when there’s no end of it in the well, but not a drop within reach of my fevered hand, and I haven’t the energy to grope my way down-stairs to the ice-pitcher. There’s more water in that proverb than tangible assets. From the standpoint of veracity that’s one of the most immoral proverbs of the lot—and if you came to apply it to the business world—oh, Lud! As a rule, these days, you never *find* the water till the well has been pumped dry and put in the hands of a receiver for the benefit of the bond-holders. Fact is, all these water proverbs are to be regarded with suspicion.”

“I don’t recall any other,” said Mr. Whitechoker.

“Well,” said the Idiot, “there’s one, and it’s the nerviest of ’em all—‘Water never runs up hill.’ Ask any man in Wall Street how high the water has run up in the last five years and see what he tells you. And then, ‘You may drive a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink,’ is another choice specimen of the Waterbury School of Philosophy. I know a lot of human horses who have been driven to water lately, and such drinkers as they have become! It’s really awful. If I knew the name of that particular Maximilian who invented those water proverbs I’d do my best to have him indicted for doing business without a license.”

“It’s very unfortunate,” said Mr. Whitechoker, “that modern conditions should so have upset the wisdom of the ancients.”

“It is too bad,” said the Idiot. “And I am just as sorry about it as you are; but, after all, the wisdom of the ancients, wise

and wisdomatic as it was, should not be permitted to put at nought all modern thought. Why not adapt the wisdom of the ancients to modern conditions? You can’t begin too soon, for new generations are constantly springing up, and I know of no better outlet for reform than in these self-same Spencerian proverbs which the poor kids have to copy, copy, copy, until they are sick and tired of them. Now, in the writing-lessons, why not adapt your means to your ends? Why make a beginner in penmanship write over and over again, ‘A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush?’—which it isn’t, by-the-way, to a man who is a good shot—when you can bear in on his mind that ‘A dot on the I is worth two on the T’; or, for the instruction of your school-teachers, why don’t you get up a proverb like ‘It’s a long lesson that has no learning’? Or if you are interested in having your boy brought up to the strenuous life, why don’t you have him make sixty copies of the aphorism, ‘A punch in the solar is worth six on the nose?’ You tell your children never to whistle until they are out of the woods. Now, where in the name of all that’s lovely should a boy whistle if not in the woods? That’s where birds whistle. That’s where the wind whistles. If nature whistles anywhere, it is in the woods. Woods were made for whistling, and any man who ever sat over a big log-fire in camp or in library who has not noticed that the logs themselves whistle constantly—well, he is a pachyderm.”

”Well, as far as I can reach a conclusion from all that you have said,“ put in Mr. Whitechoker, “the point seems to be that the proverbs of the ancients are not suited to modern conditions, and that you think they should be revised.”

“Exactly,” said the Idiot.

“It’s a splendid idea,” said Mr. Brief. “But, after all, you’ve got to have something to begin on. Possibly,” he added,

with a wink at the Bibliomaniac, “you have a few concrete examples to show us what can be done.”

“Certainly,” said the Idiot. “Here is a list of them.”

And as he rose up to depart he handed Mr. Brief a paper on which he had written as follows:

“You never find the water till the stock falls off twenty points.”

“A stitch in time saves nothing at all at present tailors’ rates.”

“You look after the pennies. Somebody else will deposit the pounds.”

“It’s a long heiress that knows no yearning.”

“Second thoughts are always second.”

“Procrastination is the theme of gossips.”

“Never put off to-day what you can put on day after to-morrow.”

“Sufficient unto the day are the obligations of last month.”

“One good swat deserves another.”

“By Jove!” said Mr. Brief, as he read them off, “you can’t go back on any of ’em, can you?”

“No,” said the Bibliomaniac; “that’s the great trouble with the Idiot. Even with all his idiocy he is not always a perfect idiot.”

II
HE DISCUSSES THE IDEAL HUSBAND

WELL, I see the Ideal Husband has broken out again," said the Idiot, after reading a short essay on that interesting but rare individual by Gladys Waterbury Shrivelton of the Woman's Page of the Squehawkett *Gazoo*. "I'd hoped they had him locked up for good, he's been so little in evidence of late years."

"Why should you wish so estimable an individual to be locked up?" demanded Mr. Pedagog, who, somehow or other, seemed to take the Idiot's suggestion as personal.

"To keep his idealness from being shattered," said the Idiot. "Nothing against the gentleman himself, I can assure you. It would be a pity, I think, once you have really found an Ideal Husband, to subject him to the coarse influences of the world; to let him go forth into the madding crowd and have the sweet idyllic bloom rubbed off by the attritions of the vulgar. I feel about the Ideal Husband just as I do about a beautiful peachblow vase which is too fragile, too delicate to be brought into contact with the ordinary earthen-ware of society. The earthen-ware isn't harmed by bumping into the peachblow, but the peachblow will inevitably turn up with a crack here and a nick there and a hole somewhere else after such an encounter. If I were a woman and suddenly discovered that I had an Ideal Husband, I think at my personal sacrifice I'd present him to the Metropolitan Museum of Art or immure him in some other retreat where his perfection would remain forever secure—say, up among the Egyptian mummies of the British Museum. We cannot be

too careful, Mr. Pedagog, of these rarely beautiful things that are now and again vouchsafed to us.”

“What is an Ideal Husband, anyhow?” asked Mr. Brief. “Has the recipe for such an individual at last been discovered?”

“Yes,” put in Mrs. Pedagog, before the Idiot had a chance to reply, and here the dear old landlady fixed her eyes firmly and affectionately upon her spouse, the school-master. “I can tell you the recipe for the Ideal Husband. Years, sixty-three—”

“Sixty-two, my dear,” smiled Mr. Pedagog, “and—er—a fraction—verging on sixty-three.”

“Years, verging on sixty-three,” said Mrs. Pedagog, accepting the correction. “Character developed by time and made secure. Eyes, blue; disposition when vexed, vexatious; disposition when pleased, happy; irritable from just cause; considerate always; calm exterior, heart of gold; prompt in anger and quick in forgiveness; and only one old woman in the world for him.”

“A trifle bald-headed, but a true friend when needed, eh?” said the Idiot.

“I try to be,” said Mr. Pedagog, pleasantly complacent.

“Well, you succeed in both,” said the Idiot.

“For your trifling baldness is evident when you remove your hat, which, like a true gentleman, you never fail to do at the breakfast-table, and, after a fifteen years’ experience with you, I for one can say that I have found you always the true friend when I needed you—I never told how, without my solicitation and entirely upon your own initiative, you once loaned me the money to pay Mrs. Pedagog’s bill over which she was becoming anxious.”

“John,” cried Mrs. Pedagog, severely, “did you ever do that?”

“Well, my dear—er—only once, you know, and you were so relieved—” began Mr. Pedagog.

“You should have lent the money to me, John,” said Mrs. Pedagog, “and then I should not have been compelled to dun the Idiot.”

“I know, my dear, but you see I knew the Idiot would pay me back, and perhaps—well, only perhaps, my love—you might not have thought of it,” explained the school-master, with a slight show of embarrassment.

“The Ideal Husband is ever truthful, too,” said the landlady, with a smile as broad as any.

“Well, it’s too bad, I think,” said the Lawyer, “that a man has to be verging on sixty-three to be an Ideal Husband. I’m only forty-four, and I should hate to think that if I should happen to get married within the next two or three years my wife would have to wait at least fifteen years before she could find me all that I ought to be. Moreover, I have been told that I have black eyes.”

“With the unerring precision of a trained legal mind,” said the Idiot, “you have unwittingly put your finger on the crux of the whole matter, Mr. Brief. Mrs. Pedagog has been describing *her* Ideal Husband, and I am delighted to know that what I have always suspected to be the case is in fact the truth: that *her* husband in her eyes is an ideal one. That’s the way it ought to be, and that is why we have always found her the sweetest of landladies, but because Mrs. Pedagog prefers Mr. Pedagog in this race for supremacy in the domain of a woman’s heart is no reason why you who are only bald-headed in your temper, like most of us, should not prove to be equally the ideal of some other woman—in