

CLASSICS TO GO
HALF-HOURS
WITH THE IDIOT



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Half-Hours with the Idiot

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I

AS TO AMBASSADORS' RESIDENCES

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

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

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

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

"That's where we diverge, sir," said the Idiot, "as the lady said to her husband, when they got their first glimpse of the courthouse at Reno. We don't want to purchase. We want to build. The home of an American Ambassador should express America, not the country to which he is sent to Ambass. There's nothing to my mind less appropriate than to find a diplomat from Oklahoma named, let us say, Dinkelspiel, housed in a Louis Fourteenth chateau on the Champs Eliza; or a gentleman from Indiana dwelling in the palace of some noble but defunct homicidal Duck of the Sforza strain in Rome; or a leading Presbyterian representing us at Constantinople receiving his American visitors in a collection of bargain-counter minarets formerly occupied by the secondary harem of the Sublime Porte. There is an incongruity about that sort of thing that, while it may add to the gaiety of nations, leaves Uncle Sam at the wrong end of the joke. When the thing is done it ought to be done from the ground up. Uncle Sam should always feel at home in his own house, and I contend that he couldn't really feel that way in an ex-harem, or in one of those cold-storage Roman

Palazzos where the Borgias used to dispense cyanide of potassium *frappé* to their friends and neighbors. He doesn't fit into that sort of thing any more than he fits into those pink satin knee-breeches, and the blue cocked hat with rooster feathers that diplomatic usage requires him to wear when he goes to make a party call on the Czar. So I am hoping that when Congress takes the matter up it will consider only the purchase of suitable sites, and then go on to adopt a standardized residence which from cellar to roof, from state salon to kitchen, shall express the American idea."

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

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

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

"Oh, all right," said the Idiot. "In that case, let's take you for a dreadful example. What are you, anyhow, Mr. Bib, but the ultimate result of a highly variegated international complication in the matter of ancestry? Your father was English; your mother was German. Your grandparents were Scotch, Irish, and Manx, with a touch of French on one side, and a mixture of Hungarian, Danish, and Russian on the

other. It is just possible that without knowing it you also contain traces of Italian and Spanish. Your love of classic literature suggests that somewhere back in the ages one of your forbears swarmed about Athens as a member of that famous clan, the Hoi Polloi. The touch of melancholy in your nature may be attributed to overindulgence in waffles, but it suggests also that Scandinavia had a hand in the evolution of your Ego. In other words, sir, you are a sort of human *pousse-café*, a mighty agreeable concoction, Mr. Bib, though a trifle dangerous to tackle at breakfast. Now, as I wanted to say in the beginning, when you intimated that I was in danger of becoming chronic, I am out of the same box of ancestral odds and ends that you are. I am a mixture of Dutch, French, English, and Manx, with an undoubted strain of either Ciceronian Roman or Demosthenesian Greek thrown in—I'm not certain which—as is evidenced by my overwhelming predilection for the sound of my own voice."

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

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

"Well, anyhow," continued the Idiot, unabashed, "whether my speech suggests the unearthly, mystic beauty of the Ganges, or the placid fructifying flow of the Mississippi, the fact remains that the best American type is a composite of all the best that human experience has been able to produce in the way of a featherless biped since Doctor Darwin's friend, Simian, got rid of his tail, preferring to sleep quietly on his back in bed rather than spend his nights swinging nervously to and fro from the limb of a tree. Since we can't deny this, let's make a virtue of it, and act accordingly. What is more simple, then, than that a