Bangs John Kendrick

The Dreamers: A Club

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Bangs J.

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Содержание

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I
THE IDEA

The idea was certainly an original one. It was Bedford Parke who suggested it to Tenafly Paterson, and Tenafly was so pleased with it that he in turn unfolded it in detail to his friend Dobbs Ferry, claiming its inception as his very own. Dobbs was so extremely enthusiastic about it that he invited Tenafly to a luncheon at the Waldoria to talk over the possibilities of putting the plan into practical operation, and so extract from it whatever of excellence it might ultimately be found to contain.

"As yet it is only an idea, you know," said Dobbs; "and if you have ever had any experience with ideas, Tenny, you are probably aware that, unless reduced to a practical basis, an idea is of no more value than a theory."

"True," Tenafly replied. "I can demonstrate that in five minutes at the Waldoria. For instance, you see, Dobbsy, I have an idea that I am as hungry as a bear, but as yet it is only a theory, from which I derive no substantial benefit. Place a portion of whitebait, a filet Bearnaise, and a quart of Sauterne before me, and – "

"I see," said Dobbsy. "Come along."

And they went; and the result of that luncheon at the Waldoria was the formation of "The Dreamers: A Club." The colon was Dobbs Ferry's suggestion. The objects of the club were literary, and Dobbs, who was an observant young man, had noticed that the use of the colon in these days of unregenerate punctuation was confined almost entirely to the literary contingent and its camp-followers. With small poets particularly was it in vogue, and Dobbs – who, by-the-way, had written some very dainty French poems to the various *fiancées* with whom his career had been checkered – had a sort of vague idea that if his brokerage business would permit him to take the necessary time for it he might become famous as a small poet himself. The French poems and his passion for the colon, combined with an exquisite chirography which he had assiduously cultivated, all contributed to assure him that it was only lack of time that kept him in the ranks of the mute, inglorious Herricks.

As formulated by Dobbs and Tenafly, then, Bedford Parke's suggestion that a Dreamers' Club be formed was amplified into this: Thirteen choice spirits, consisting of Dobbs, Tenafly, Bedford Parke, Greenwich Place, Hudson Rivers of Hastings, Monty St. Vincent, Fulton Streete, Berkeley Hights, Haarlem Bridge, the three Snobbes of Yonkers – Tom, Dick, and Harry – and Billy Jones of the *Weekly Oracle*, were to form themselves into an association which should endeavor to extract whatever latent literary talent the thirteen members might have within them. It was a generally accepted fact, Bedford Parke had said, that all literature, not even excepting history, was based upon the imagination. Many of the masterpieces of fiction had their basis in actual dreams, and, when they were not founded on such, might in every case be said to be directly attributable to what might properly be called waking dreams. It was the misfortune of the thirteen gentlemen who were expected to join this association that the business and social engagements of all, with the possible exception of Billy Jones of the *Weekly Oracle*, were such as to prevent their indulgence in these waking dreams, dreams which should tend to lower the colors of Howells before those of Tenafly Paterson, and cause the memory of Hawthorne to wither away before the scorching rays of that rising sun of genius, Tom Snobbe of Yonkers. Snobbe, by-the-way, must have inherited literary ability from his father, who had once edited a church-fair paper which ran through six editions in one week – one edition a day

for each day of the fair – adding an unreceipted printer's bill for eighty-seven dollars to the proceeds to be divided among the heathen of Central Africa.

"It's a well-known fact," said Bedford – "a sad fact, but still a fact – that if Poe had not been a hard drinker he never would have amounted to a row of beans as a writer. His dreams were induced – and I say, what's the matter with our inducing dreams and then putting 'em down?"

That was the scheme in a nutshell – to induce dreams and put them down. The receipt was a simple one. The club was to meet once a month, and eat and drink "such stuff as dreams are made of"; the meeting was then to adjourn, the members going immediately home and to bed; the dreams of each were to be carefully noted in their every detail, and at the following meeting were to be unfolded such soul-harrowing tales as might with propriety be based thereon. An important part of the programme was a stenographer, whose duty it would be to take down the stories as they were told and put them in type-written form, which Dobbs was sure he had heard an editor say was one of the first steps towards a favorable consideration by professional readers of the manuscripts of the ambitious.

"I am told," said he, "that many a truly meritorious production has gone unpublished for years because the labor of deciphering the author's handwriting proved too much for the reader's endurance – and it is very natural that it should be so. A professional reader is, after all, only human, and when to the responsibilities of his office is added the wearisome task of wading through a Spencerian morass after the will-o'-wisp of an idea, I don't blame him for getting impatient. Why, I saw the original manuscript of one of Charles Dickens's novels once, and I don't see how any one knew it was good enough to publish until it got into print!"

"That's simply a proof of what I've always said," observed one of the Snobbe boys. "If Charles Dickens's works had been written by me, no one would ever have published them."

"I haven't a doubt of it," returned Billy Jones of the *Oracle*, dryly. "Why, Snobbey, my boy, I believe if you had written the plays of Shakespeare they'd have been forgotten ages ago!"

"So do I," returned Snobbe, innocently. "This is a queer world."

"The stenographer will save us a great deal of trouble," said Bedford. "The hard part of literary work is, after all, the labor of production in a manual sense. These real geniuses don't have to think. Their ideas come to them, and they let 'em develop themselves. In realistic writing, as I understand it, the author sits down with his pen in his hand and his characters in his mind's eye, and they simply run along, and he does the private-detective act – follows after them and jots down all they do. In imaginative writing it's done the same way. The characters of these ridiculous beings we read of are quite as real to the imaginative writer as the characters of the realist are to the latter, and they do supernatural things naturally. So you see these things require very little intellectual labor. It's merely the drudgery of chasing a commonplace or supernatural set of characters about the world in order to get 400 pages full of reading-matter about 'em that makes the literary profession a laborious one. Our stenographer will enable us to avoid all this. There isn't a man of us but can talk as easily as he can fall off a log, and a tale once told at our dinners becomes in the telling a bit of writing."

"But, my dear Parke," said Billy Jones of the *Oracle*, who had been a "literary journalist," as his fond grandmother called it, for some years, "a story told is hardly likely to be in the form calculated to become literature."

"That's just what we want you for, Billy," Bedford replied. "You know how to give a thing that last finishing-touch which will make it go, where otherwise it might forever remain a fixture in the author's pigeon-hole. When our stories are told and type-written, we want you to go over them, correct the type-writer's spelling, and make whatever alterations you may think, after consulting with us, to be necessary. Then, if the tales are ever published as a collection, you can have your name on the title-page as editor."

"Thanks," answered Billy, gratefully. "I shall be charmed."

And then he hurried back to his apartments, and threw himself on his bed in a paroxysm of laughter which seemed never-ending, but which in reality did not last more than three hours at the most.

Hudson Rivers of Hastings, when the idea was suggested to him, was the most enthusiastic of all – so enthusiastic that the Snobbe boys thought that, in their own parlance, he ought to be "called down."

"It's bad form to go crazy over an idea," they said. "If Huddy's going to behave this way about it, he ought to be kept out altogether. It is all very well to experience emotions, but no well-bred person ever shows them – that is, not in Yonkers."

"Ah, but you don't understand Huddy," said Tenafly Paterson. "Huddy has two great ambitions in this life. One is to get into the Authors' Club, and the other is to marry a certain young woman whose home is in Boston and whose ambitions are Bostonian. To appear before the world as a writer, which the Dreamers will give him a chance to do at small expense, will help him on to the realization of his most cherished hopes; in fact, Huddy told me that he thought we ought to publish the proceedings of the club at least four times a year, so establishing a quarterly magazine, to which we shall all be regular contributors. He thinks it will pay for itself, and knows it will make us all famous, because Billy Jones is certain to see that everything that goes out is first chop, and I'm inclined to believe Huddy is right. The continual drip, drip, drip of a drop of water on a stone will gradually wear away the stone, and, by Jove! before we know it, by constant hammering away at this dream scheme of ours we'll gain a position that won't be altogether unenviable."

"That's so," said Billy. "I wouldn't wonder if with the constant drip, drip, drip of your drops of ink and inspiration you could wear the public out in a very little while. The only troublesome thing will be in getting a publisher for your quarterly."

"I haven't any idea that we want a publisher," said Bedford Parke. "We've got capital enough among ourselves to bring the thing out, and so I say, what's the use of letting anybody else in on the profits? A publisher wouldn't give us more than ten per cent. in royalties. If we publish it ourselves we'll get the whole thing."

"Yes," assented Tom Snobbe, "and, what's more, it will have a higher tone to it if we can say on the title-page 'Privately printed,' eh? That'll make everybody in society want one for his library, and everybody not in society will be crazy to get it because it's aristocratic all through."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Billy Jones. "I've no doubt you are right, only I'd think you'd sell more copies if you'd also put on the title-page 'For circulation among the élite only.' Then every man, woman, or child who happened to get a copy would take pride in showing it to others, who would immediately send for it, because not having it would seem to indicate that one was not in the swim."

Nor were the others to whom the proposition was advanced any less desirous to take part. They saw, one and all, opportunities for a very desirable distinction through the medium of the Dreamers, and within two weeks of the original formation of the plan the club was definitely organized. Physicians were consulted by the various members as to what edibles contained the properties most likely to produce dreams of the nature desired, and at the organization meeting all but Billy Jones were well stocked with suggestions for the inauguration dinner. Hudson Rivers was of the opinion that there should be six courses at that dinner, each one of Welsh-rabbit, but varying in form, such as Welsh-rabbit purée, for instance, in which the cheese should have the consistency of pea-soup rather than of leather; such as Welsh-rabbit pâté, in which the cheese should rest within walls of pastry instead of lying quiescent and inviting like a yellow mantle upon a piece of toast; then a Welsh-rabbit roast; and so on all through the banquet, rabbit upon rabbit, the whole washed down with the accepted wines of the ordinary banquet, which experience had taught them were likely in themselves to assist in the work of dream-making.

Monty St. Vincent observed that he had no doubt that the Welsh-rabbit dinner would work wonders, but he confessed his inability to see any reason why the club should begin its labors by

committing suicide. He added that, for his part, he would not eat six Welsh rabbits at one sitting if he was sure of Shakespeare's immortality as his reward, because, however attractive immortality was, he preferred mortality in the flesh to the other in the abstract. If the gentlemen would begin the meal with a grilled lobster apiece, he suggested, going thence by an easy stage to a devilled bird, rounding up with a "slip-on" – which, in brief, is a piece of mince-pie smothered in a blanket of molten cheese – he was ready to take the plunge, but further than this he would not go. The other members were disposed to agree with Monty. They thought the idea of eating six Welsh rabbits in a single evening was preposterous, and that in making such a suggestion Huddy was inspired by one of but two possible motives – that he wished to leap to the foremost position in imaginative literature at one bound, or else was prompted, by jealousy of what the others might do, to wish to kill the club at its very start. Huddy denied these aspersions upon his motives with vociferous indignation, and to show his sincerity readily acquiesced in the adoption of Monty St. Vincent's menu as already outlined.

The date of the dinner was set, Billy Jones was made master of ceremonies, the dinner was ordered, and eaten amid scenes of such revelry as was possible in the presence of the Snobbe boys, to whom anything in the way of unrestrained enjoyment was a bore and bad form, and at its conclusion the revellers went straight home to bed and to dream.

Two weeks later they met again over viands of a more digestible nature than those which lent interest to the first dinner, and told the tales which follow. And I desire to add here that my report of this dinner and the literature there produced is based entirely upon the stenographer's notes, coupled with additional information of an interesting kind furnished me by my friend William Jones, Esq., Third Assistant Exchange Editor of *The Weekly Oracle, a Journal of To-day, Yesterday, and To-morrow*.

II
IN WHICH THOMAS SNOBBE, ESQ., OF YONKERS, UNFOLDS A TALE

The second dinner of the Dreamers had been served, all but the coffee, when Mr. Billy Jones, of the *Oracle*, rapped upon the table with a dessert-spoon and called the members to order.

"Gentlemen," said he, when all was quiet, "we have reached the crucial crisis of our club career. We have eaten the stuff of which our dreams were to be made, and from what I can gather from the reports of those who are now seated about this festal board – and I am delighted to note that the full membership of our organization is here represented – there is not a single one of you who is unprepared for the work we have in hand, and, as master of ceremonies, it becomes my pleasant duty to inform you that the hour has arrived at which it behooveth us to begin the narration of those tales which – of those tales which I am certain – yes, gentlemen, very certain – will cause the unlaid ghosts of those masters of the story-tellers' art – "

"Is this a continued story Billy is giving us?" observed Tenafly Paterson.

"No," replied Bedford Parke, with a laugh; "it is only a life sentence."

"Get him to commute it!" ejaculated Hudson Rivers.

"Order, gentlemen, order!" cried the master of ceremonies, again rapping upon the table. "The members will kindly not interrupt the speaker. As I was saying, gentlemen," he continued, "we are now to listen to the narration of tales which I am convinced will cause the unlaid ghosts of the past grand masters of the story-tellers' art to gnash their spirit teeth with anguish for that they in life failed to realize the opportunities that were theirs in not having told the tales to which we are about to listen, and over which, when published, the leading living literary lights will writhe in jealousy."

When the applause which greeted these remarks had subsided, Mr. Jones resumed:

"That there may be no question of precedence among the gifted persons from whom we are now to hear, I have provided myself with a small leathern bottle, such as is to be seen in most billiard-parlors, within which I have placed twelve numbered ivory balls. These I will now proceed to distribute among you. When you receive them, I request that you immediately return them to me, that I may arrange the programme according to your respective numbers."

Mr. Jones thereupon distributed the ivory balls, and when the returns had been made, according to his request, he again rose to his feet and announced that to Mr. Thomas Snobbe, of Yonkers, had fallen the lot of telling the first story, adding that he took great pleasure in the slightly supererogative task that devolved upon him of presenting Mr. Snobbe to his audience. Mr. Snobbe's health was drunk vociferously, after which, the stenographer having announced himself as ready to begin, the distinguished son of Yonkers arose and told the following story, which he called

VAN SQUIBBER'S FAILURE

You can't always tell what kind of a day you are going to have in town in October just because you happen to have been in town on previous October days, and Van Squibber, for that reason, was not surprised when his man, on waking him, informed him that it was cold out. Even if he had been surprised he would not have shown it, for fear of demoralizing his man by setting him a bad example. "We must take things as they come," Van Squibber had said to the fellow when he engaged him, "and I shall expect you to be ready always for any emergency that may arise. If on waking in the morning I call for a camel's-hair shawl and a bottle of Nepaul pepper, it will be your duty to see that I get them without manifesting the slightest surprise or asking any questions. Here is your next year's salary

in advance. Get my Melton overcoat and my box, and have them at the Rahway station at 7.15 to-morrow morning. If I am not there, don't wait for me, but come back here and boil my egg at once."

This small bit of a lecture had had its effect on the man, to whom thenceforth nothing was impossible; indeed, upon this very occasion he demonstrated to his employer his sterling worth, for when, on looking over Van Squibber's wardrobe, he discovered that his master had no Melton overcoat, he telegraphed to his tailor's and had one made from his previous measure in time to have it with Van Squibber's box at the Rahway station at the stipulated hour the following morning. Of course Van Squibber was not there. He had instructed his man as he had simply to test him, and, furthermore, the egg was boiled to perfection. The test cost Van Squibber about $150, but it was successful, and it was really worth the money to know that his man was all that he should be.

"He's not half bad," said Van Squibber, as he cracked the egg.

"It's wintry," said Van Squibber's man on the morning of the 5th of October.

"Well," Van Squibber said, sleepily, "what of that? You have your instructions as to the bodily temperature I desire to maintain. Select my clothing, as usual – and mark you, man, yesterday was springy, and you let me go to the club in summery attire. I was two and a half degrees too warm. You are getting careless. What are my engagements to-day?"

"University settlement at eleven, luncheon at the Actors' at one, drive with the cynical Miss Netherwood at three, five-o'clock tea at four – "

"What?" cried Van Squibber, sharply.

"At fuf – five, I should say, sir," stammered the embarrassed man.

"Thought so," said Van Squibber. "Proceed, and be more careful. The very idea of five-o'clock tea at four is shocking."

"Dinner with the Austrian ambassador at eight, opera at eleven – "

"In October? Opera?" cried Van Squibber.

"Comic," said the man. "It is Flopper's last night, sir, and you are to ring down the curtain."

"True," said Van Squibber, meditatively – "true; I'd forgotten. And then?"

"At midnight you are to meet Red Mike at Cherry Street and Broadway to accompany him to see how he robs national banks, for the *Sunday Whirald*."

"What bank is it to be?"

"The Seventeenth National."

"Gad!" cried Van Squibber, "that's hard luck. It's my bank. Wire Red Mike and ask him to make it the Sixteenth National, at once. Bring me my smoking-jacket and a boiled soda mint drop. I don't care for any breakfast this morning. And, by-the-way, I feel a little chilly. Take a quinine pill for me."

"Your egg is ready, sir," said the man, tremulously.

"Eat it," said Van Squibber, tersely, "and deduct the Café Savarin price of a boiled egg from your salary. How often must I tell you not to have my breakfast boiled until I am boil – I mean ready until I am ready for it?"

The man departed silently, and Van Squibber turned over and went to sleep.

An hour later, having waited for his soda mint drop as long as his dignity would permit, Van Squibber arose and dressed and went for a walk in Central Park. It was eccentric of him to do this, but he did it nevertheless.

"How Travers would laugh if he saw me walking in Central Park!" he thought. "He'd probably ask me when I'd come over from Germany," he added. And then, looking ahead, a thing Van Squibber rarely did, by-the-way – for you can't always tell by looking ahead what may happen to you – his eyes were confronted by a more or less familiar back.

"Dear me!" he said. "If that isn't Eleanor Huyler's back, whose back is it, by Jove?"

Insensibly Van Squibber quickened his pace. This was also a thing he rarely did. "Haste is bad form," he had once said to Travers, who, on leaving Delmonico's at 7.20, seemed anxious to catch

the 7.10 train for Riverdale. Insensibly quickening his pace, he soon found himself beside the owner of the back, and, as his premonitions had told him, it was Eleanor Huyler.

"Good-morning," he said.

"Why, Mr. Van Squibber!" she replied, with a terrified smile. "You here?"

"Well," returned Van Squibber, not anxious to commit himself, "I think so, though I assure you, Miss Huyler, I am not at all certain. I seem to be here, but I must confess I am not quite myself this morning. My man – "

"Yes – I know," returned the girl, hastily. "I've heard of him. He is your *alter ego*."

"I had not noticed it," said Van Squibber, somewhat nonplussed. "I think he is English, though he may be Italian, as you suggest. But," he added, to change the subject, "you seem disturbed. Your smile is a terrified smile, as has been already noted."

"It is," said Miss Huyler, looking anxiously about her.

"And may I ask why?" asked Van Squibber, politely – for to do things politely was Van Squibber's ambition.

"I – I – well, really, Mr. Van Squibber," the girl replied, "I am always anxious when you are about. The fact is, you know, the things that happen when you are around are always so very extraordinary. I came here for a quiet walk, but now that you have appeared I am quite certain that something dramatic is about to occur. You see – you – you have turned up so often at the – what I may properly call, I think, the nick of time, and so rarely at any other time, that I feel as though some disaster were impending which you alone can avert."

"And what then?" said Van Squibber, proudly. "If I am here, what bodes disaster?"

"That is the question I am asking myself," returned Miss Huyler, whose growing anxiety was more or less painful to witness. "Can your luck hold out? Will your ability as an averter of danger hold out? In short, Mr. Van Squibber, are you infallible?"

The question came to Van Squibber like a flash of lightning out of a clear sky. It was too pertinent. Had he not often wondered himself as to his infallibility? Had he not only the day before said to Travers, "You can't always tell in advance just how a thing you are going into may turn out, even though you have been through that thing many times, and think you do."

"I do lead a dramatic life," he said, quietly, hoping by a show of serenity to reassure her. "But," he added, proudly, "I am, after all, Van Squibber; I am here to do whatever is sent me to do. I am not a fatalist, but I regard myself as the chosen instrument of fate – or something. So far, I have not failed. On the basis of averages, I am not likely to fail now. Fate, or something, has chosen me to succeed."

"That is true," said Eleanor – "quite true; but there are exceptions to all rules, and I would rather you would fail to rescue some other girl from a position of peril than myself."

That Miss Huyler's words were prophetic, the unhappy Van Squibber was to realize, and that soon, for almost as they spoke the cheeks of both were blanched by a dreadful roar in the bushes beside the path upon which they walked.

"Shall I leave you?" asked Van Squibber, politely.

"Not now – oh, not now, I beg!" cried Miss Huyler. "It is too late. The catastrophe is imminent. You should have gone before the author brought it on. Finding me defenceless and you gone, he might have spared me. As it is, you are here, and must fulfil your destiny."

"Very well," returned Van Squibber. "That being so, I will see what this roaring is. If it is a child endeavoring to frighten you, I shall get his address and have my man chastise his father, for I could never strike a child; but if it is a lion, as I fear, I shall do what seems best under the circumstances. I have been told, Miss Huyler, that a show of bravery awes a wild beast, while a manifestation of cowardice causes him to spring at once upon the coward. Therefore, if it be a lion, do you walk boldly up to him and evince a cool head, while I divert his attention from you by running away. In this way you, at least, will be saved."

"Noble fellow!" thought Eleanor to herself. "If he were to ask me, I think I might marry him."

Meanwhile Van Squibber had investigated, and was horror-struck to find his misgivings entirely too well founded. It was the lion from the park menagerie that had escaped, and was now waiting in ambush to pounce upon the chance pedestrian.

"Remember, Eleanor," he cried, forgetting for the moment that he had never called her by any but her last name with its formal prefix – "remember to be brave. That will awe him, and then when he sees me running he will pursue me."

Removing his shoes, Van Squibber, with a cry which brought the hungry beast bounding out into the path, started on a dead run, while Miss Huyler, full of confidence that the story would end happily whatever she might do, walked boldly up to the tawny creature, wondering much, however, why her rescuer had removed his shoes. It was strange that, knowing Van Squibber as well as she did, she did not at once perceive his motive in declining to run in walking-shoes, but in moments of peril we are all excusable for our vagaries of thought! You never can tell, when you are in danger, what may happen next, for if you could you would know how it is all going to turn out; but as it is, mental disturbance is quite to be expected.

For once Van Squibber failed. He ran fast enough and betrayed enough cowardice to attract the attention of ten lions, but this special lion, by some fearful idiosyncrasy of fate, which you never can count on, was not to be deceived. With a louder roar than any he had given, he pounced upon the brave woman, and in an instant she was no more. Van Squibber, turning to see how matters stood, was just in time to witness the final engulfment of the fair girl in the lion's jaws.

"Egad!" he cried. "*I have failed!* And now what remains to be done? Shall I return and fight the lion, or shall I keep on and go to the club? If I kill the lion, people will know that I have been walking in the park before breakfast. If I continue my present path and go to the club, the fellows will all want to know what I mean by coming without my shoes on. What a dilemma! Ah! I have it; I will go home."

And that is what Van Squibber did. He went back to his rooms in the Quigmore at once, hastily undressed, and when, an hour later, his man returned with the soda mint drop, he was sleeping peacefully.

That night he met Travers at the club reading the *Evening Moon*.

"Hello, Van!" said Travers. "Heard the news?"

"No. What?" asked Van Squibber, languidly.

"Eleanor Huyler has disappeared."

"By Jove!" cried Van Squibber, with well-feigned surprise. "I heard the boys crying 'Extra,' but I never dreamed they would put out an extra for her."

"They haven't," said Travers. "The extra's about the lion."

"Ah! And what's happened to the lion?" cried Van Squibber, nervously.

"He's dead. Got loose this morning early, and was found at ten o'clock dying of indigestion. It is supposed he has devoured some man, name unknown, for before his nose was an uneaten patent-leather pump, size 9¾ B, and in his throat was stuck the other, half eaten."

"Ha!" muttered Van Squibber, turning pale. "And they don't know whose shoes they were?" he added, in a hoarse whisper.

"No," said Travers. "There's no clew, even."

Van Squibber breathed a sigh of relief.

"Robert!" he cried, addressing the waiter, "bring me a schooner of absinthe, and ask Mr. Travers what he'll have." And then, turning, he said, *sotto voce*, to himself, "Saved! And Eleanor is revenged. Van Squibber may have failed, but his patent-leather pumps have conquered."

III
IN WHICH A MINCE-PIE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR A REMARKABLE COINCIDENCE

When Mr. Snobbe sat down after the narration of his story, there was a thunderous outburst of applause. It was evident that the exciting narrative had pleased his fellow-diners very much – as, indeed, it was proper that it should, since it dealt in a veiled sort of way with characters for whom all right-minded persons have not only a deep-seated admiration, but a feeling of affection as well. They had, one and all, in common with the unaffected portion of the reading community, a liking for the wholesome and clean humor of Mr. Van Bibber, and the fact that Snobbe's story suggested a certain original, even in a weak sort of fashion, made them like it in spite of its shortcomings.

"Good work," cried Hudson Rivers. "Of course it's only gas in comparison with the sun, but it gives light, and we like it."

"And it's wholly original, too, even though an imitation in manner. The real Van Bibber never failed in anything he undertook," said Tenafly Paterson. "I've often wished he might have, just once – it would have made him seem more human – and for that reason I think Tom is entitled to praise."

"I don't know about that," observed Monty St. Vincent. "Tom hadn't anything to do with it – it was the dinner. Honor to whom honor is due, say I. Praise the cook, or the caterer."

"That's the truth," put in Billie Jones. "Fact is, when this book of ours comes out, I think, instead of putting our names on the title-page as authors, the thing to do is to print the menu."

"You miss the point of this association," interjected Snobbe. "We haven't banded ourselves together to immortalize a Welsh rabbit or a mince-pie – nay, nor even a ruddy duck. It's our own glory we're after."

"That's it," cried Monty St. Vincent – "that's the beauty of it. The scheme works two ways. If the stuff is good and there is glory in it, we'll have the glory; but if it's bad, we'll blame the dinner. That's what I like about it."

"It's a valuable plan from that point of view," said the presiding officer. "And now, if the gentleman who secured the ball numbered two will make himself known, we will proceed."

Hudson Rivers rose up. "I have number two," he said, "but I have nothing to relate. The coffee I drank kept me awake all night, and when I finally slept, along about six o'clock next morning, it was one of those sweet, dreamless sleeps that we all love so much. I must therefore ask to be excused."

"But how shall you be represented in the book?" asked Mr. Harry Snobbe.

"He can do the table of contents," suggested St. Vincent.

"Or the fly-leaves," said Tenafly Paterson.

"No," said Huddy; "I shall ask that the pages I should have filled be left blank. There is nothing helps a book so much as the leaving of something to the reader's imagination. I heard a great critic say so once. He said that was the strong point of the French writers, and he added that Stockton's *Lady or the Tiger* took hold because Stockton didn't insist on telling everything."

"It's a good idea," said Mr. Jones. "I don't know but that if those pages are left blank they'll be the most interesting in the book."

Mr. Rivers sat down with a smile of conscious pride, whereupon Mr. Tenafly Paterson rose up.

"As I hold the number three ball, I will give you the fruits of my dinner. I attribute the work which I am about to present to you to the mince-pie. Personally, I am a great admirer of certain latter-day poets who deal with the woes and joys of more or less commonplace persons. I myself would rather read a sonnet to a snow-shovel than an ode to the moon, but in my dream I seem to have conceived a violent hatred for authors of homely verse, as you will note when I have finished reading my dream-poem called 'Retribution.'"

"Great Scott!" murmured Billie Jones, with a deep-drawn sigh. "Poetry! From Tenafly Paterson! Of all the afflictions of man, Job could have known no worse."

"The poem reads as follows," continued Paterson, ignoring the chairman's ill-timed remark:

RETRIBUTION

Writ a pome about a kid.
Finest one I ever did.

Heaped it full o' sentiment —
Very best I could invent.

Talked about his little toys;
How he played with other boys;

How the beasts an' birdies all
Come when little Jamie'd call.

'N' 'en I took that little lad,
Gave him fever, mighty bad.

'N' 'en it sorter pleased my whim
To have him die and bury him.

It got printed, too, it did
That small pome about the kid,

In a paper in the West;
Put ten dollars in my vest.

Every pa an' ma about
Cried like mighty – cried right out.

I jess took each grandma's heart,
Lammed and bruised it, made it smart;

'N' everybody said o' me,
"Finest pote we ever see,"

'Cept one beggar, he got mad.
Got worst lickin' ever had;

Got my head atween his fists,
Called me "Prince o' anarchists."

Clipped me one behind my ear —
Laid me up for 'most a year.

"'Cause," he said, "my poetry
'D made his wife an' mother cry;

"'Twarn't no poet's bizness to
Make the wimmin all boo-hoo."

'N' 'at is why to-day, by Jings!
I don't fool with hearts an' things.

I don't care how high the bids,
I've stopped scribblin' 'bout dead kids;

'R if I haven't, kinder sorter
Think 'at maybe p'r'aps I'd oughter.

The lines were received with hearty appreciation by all save Dobbs Ferry, who looked a trifle gloomy.

"It is a strange thing," said the latter, "but that mince-pie affected me in precisely the same way, as you will see for yourselves when I read my contribution, which, holding ball number four as I do, I will proceed to give you."

Mr. Ferry then read the following poem, which certainly did seem to indicate that the man who prepared the fatal pie had certain literary ideas which he mixed in with other ingredients:

I bought a book of verse the other day,
And when I read, it filled me with dismay.

I wanted it to take home to my wife,
To bring a bit of joy into her life;

And I'd been told the author of those pomes
Was called the laureate of simple homes.

But, Jove! I read, and found it full of rhyme
That kept my eyes a-filling all the time.

One told about a pretty little miss
Whose father had denied a simple kiss,

And as she left, unhappy, full of cares,
She fell and broke her neck upon the stairs.

And then he wrote a lot of tearful lines
Of children who had trouble with their spines;

And 'stead of joys, he penned so many woes
I sought him out and gave him curvature 'f the nose;

And all the nation, witnessing his plight,
Did crown me King, and cry, "It served him right."

"A remarkable coincidence," said Thomas Snobbe. "In fact, the coincidence is rather more remarkable than the poetry."

"It certainly is," said Billie Jones; "but what a wonderfully suggestive pie, considering that it was a mince!"

After which dictum the presiding officer called upon the holder of the fifth ball, who turned out to be none other than Bedford Parke, who blushingly rose up and delivered himself of what he called "The Overcoat, a Magazine Farce."

IV
BEING THE CONTRIBUTION OF MR. BEDFORD PARKE

THE OVERCOAT

A FARCE. IN TWO SCENES

SCENE FIRST

Time: Morning at Boston

Mrs. Robert Edwards. "I think it will rain to-day, but there is no need to worry about that. Robert has his umbrella and his mackintosh, and I don't think he is idiotic enough to lend both of them. If he does, he'll get wet, that's all." Mrs. Edwards is speaking to herself in the sewing-room of the apartment occupied by herself and her husband in the Hotel Hammingbell at Boston. It is not a large room, but cosey. A frieze one foot deep runs about the ceiling, and there is a carpet on the floor. Three pins are seen scattered about the room, in one corner of which is a cane-bottomed chair holding across its back two black vests and a cutaway coat. Mrs. Edwards sits before a Wilcox & Wilson sewing-machine sewing a button on a light spring overcoat. The overcoat has one outside and three inside pockets, and is single-breasted. "It is curious," Mrs. Edwards continues, "what men will do with umbrellas and mackintoshes on a rainy day. They lend them here and there, and the worst part of it is they never remember where." A knock is heard at the door. "Who's there?"

Voice (*without*). "Me."

Mrs. Robert Edwards (*with a nervous shudder*). "Come in." Enter Mary the house-maid. She is becomingly attired in blue alpaca, with green ribbons and puffed sleeves. She holds a feather duster in her right hand, and in her left is a jar of Royal Worcester. "Mary," Mrs. Edwards says, severely, "where are we at?"

Mary (*meekly*). "Boston, ma'am."

Mrs. Robert Edwards.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.