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AT THE HOUSE BOAT ON THE STYX

DOINGS REPORTED BY WIRELESS TO JOHN KENDRICK BANGS

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VII.---ADAM AND HIS GREAT TASK

There was a good deal of suppressed excitement at the House-Boat on the Styx. An unusually full membership was on hand, and for the very excellent reason that the rumor had gone forth that Adam was going to be there, and as the head of the very first of the world's first families everybody wanted to be seen shaking hands with him whether they liked him or not. That is always the way in polite society. A man may be no end of a bore, or an unmitigated ass, but if he is the unquestioned head of a first family, people like to bask in the sunlight of his presence. It was a much regretted fact throughout Hades that Adam seldom went out into society, and his visits to the House-Boat on the Styx were few and far between. It was not that he was at all snobbish about his social position, nor was he averse to the companionship of kindred spirits, but on the whole he was of domestic inclination, and because of tastes acquired early in his career he preferred out-of-door to indoor life. The real reason for his seeming aloofness in matters social was wholly connected with the matter of dress. He was not exactly what you would call progressive in the matter of his personal adornment, and still clung fondly to his original style of garment, the ancient fig-leaf.

"What's the use?" he had once protested to Methuselah, who had begged him to buy a suit of clothes more in keeping with modern requirements than his one-piece suit. "I am much more comfortable just as I am, and I am blest if I can see any good reason why I should dress myself up to look like a Monday bargain sale, as Sir Walter Raleigh does, or blossom out like an animated tin can after the fashion of your shivering sons of chivalry, who lived when maids were bold and knights were cold, all at a cost of ten or twenty dollars a square inch, when all I need to do to dress in the style to which I am accustomed is to reach out of the spare bedroom window and pick all the clothes I happen to want off a tree. You boys go ahead and dress as you please, but let me alone."

"But, grampa," said Methuselah, "you ought to conform to the times."

"Why should I?" demanded the old man. "You don't. You go around in an old home-spun mother hubbard all the time. Socrates invariably appears in an old cotton night shirt. Caesar wears what he calls a toga, but is really nothing more than a highly tittivated bath robe. Raleigh and Shakespeare with their frills and furbelows look like a department store off on a hike. Warwick the King Maker has to use a can opener to go to bed at night, and as for your modern folks who come down here dressed up in boiled shirts, starched collars, looking for all the world like a collision between a conference of head waiters and a convention of undertakers—no, sirree, Methy! None of that for the founder of the family. I'll conform to the times, all right, but it'll be [illegible] times, and nobody else."

Latterly, however, the old gentleman had been disposed to make a concession or two. He had seen Daniel Webster walking up the main street of Cimmeria with a shiny stovepipe hat on his head, and he had taken a violent fancy to it as a handy sort of an arrangement to carry things in—"like apples and chestnuts," he said—and he had yielded to Eve's solicitations that he adopt the flowing gown of the chief patriarch merely to maintain the dignity of his position.

"A fig-leaf is all right for a negligee, dear," she had said, "but for full dress your dress should be a trifle fuller."

"All right," said Adam, "but if I catch cold getting overheated with a multiplicity of duds it's be your fault."

"Same old Adam, aren't you, dear?" smiled Eve. "Well, I'll take the blame as usual. That's what I was made for."

When P. D. Barnum heard that Adam was going to appear at the House-Boat he smiled broadly.

"Glad to hear it," said he. "I've often wanted to ask him how he came to name the animals so successfully that you would know them for what they are at a glance."

"And I," said Nero, "wish to ask him flatly if he agrees with Darwin that he was a monkey."

"It will be some night if you do," laughed Benjamin Franklin, "and I guess we'd better notify the police to have a couple of patrol wagons ready."

And Barnum was true to his word. Hardly had Adam got himself comfortably seated in the big arm chair they had constructed for his special use, when the great showman began:

"Say, grampa," he said, "that was a bully old stunt you pulled off when you named the animals. It nearly killed me finding the name for the egress, and the amontillado, but you—why you seemed to run the thing off as easily as though you were reading a telephone book."

"I am glad you feel that way about it, Pete," said Adam. "It wasn't quite as easy as you seem to think. Indeed, it required a lot of headwork to which I was not wholly accustomed, but on the whole I don't think I made more than two or three mistakes at the outside."

"What I've admired most about the governor's work in that matter was that he did so well with such limited material," said Noah.

"In the matter of animals?" asked Barnum.

"No, stupid, in the matter of names," said Noah. "He not only had to name the beasts, but he had to invent the language to express them in at the same time."

"O, that wasn't so very hard, Noah," laughed Adam. "You see, we worked our speechifying in those days on the true phonetic system, rather than on a philological line the way you think you do nowadays. If we hadn't a word to express a thought we could always fill up the gap by making some kind of a noise that served the purpose just as well."

"Like some after-dinner speaker?" suggested Napoleon.

"Exactly," said Adam. "When you can't think of anything to say, roar. That is what I did when the hyena came along. I didn't know what he was, and he didn't suggest anything I could connect him up with, so I just ejaculated hy—ena! Hy—ena!" said I, without any thought of the equities involved. That was clue number one."

"And a mighty good one," said Frederick, patronizingly.

"Yes," said Adam. "But that was only the first step. I next discovered that he hadn't any manners in his relation to the rest of the animal kingdom. He was a shover, pusher and a trampler. He'd destroy anything that stood in his way, and would have considered any system of etiquette that required him to be considerate of others, no matter what their sex, as a weakness unworthy of the strong. His purpose of getting through to his ultimate goal was a sufficient justification of anything he might do in violation of the amenities on the way. That was clue number two—equally good, you will see, my dear Frederick."

"It sounds fine," said Frederick.

"The third clue," said Adam, "was revealed in the thickness of his hide. It was impenetrable. You couldn't pierce it. You could beat him. You could poke him. You could lambaste him with a club for his misdeeds, and he'd never let on he knew you were there. Criticism left him unmoved, and through it all he appeared to be nothing more than a rather simple-minded, stupid, sleepy old creature, stolidly intent upon living along, seeking a nice warm place in the sun, with an occasional splash under water. And, of course, when I got these facts in hand the conclusion was inevitable. The solution was perfectly clear."

"Ha!" said Frederick, scratching his head in a puzzled sort of way. "Clear to you, perhaps—but—er—I can't quite see it."

"No, Freddy," said Adam, "I didn't think you would. But to me it was different. I saw at once that with all these characteristics so supremely developed he must have come from the Rhine, and so I named him the rhinoceros."

"Gott mitt uns!" cried Frederick, wrathfully, as the old man's trap revealed itself to him. "If you weren't an old man——"

"Well, what?" glowered Cain, rising from his chair. "I'm an old man, too, Frederick, and if you're anxious to start something with old men either with boxing gloves, gott-mittens, or plain common garden fists, let it begin right now, say I. What about it?"

"O, nothing—nothing at all," replied Frederick, with an uneasy glance at the exits. "I was only going to say that if Father Adam were not an old man, I should be less ready to accept his—er——"

"Remarkably logical conclusions," said Napoleon, trying to help Frederick out. "As a symbol of the pure egotistcus teutonicus the rhinoceros is a scream."

"You were some armadillo yourself," growled Frederick.

"Don't quarrel, gentlemen," said William Penn, in his soft, soothing manner. "Grampa doesn't come to us very often, and we mustn't spoil his evening with our own petty quarrels."

"There is no quarrel," said Frederick, as he gloomily realized how unpopular was the end of the stick he himself held, "but if there were one I think I should not be wide of the mark if I said that Grampa started it himself with that rhinoceros stuff of his."

"That's his privilege," said Noah. "He started the whole business, anyhow, Freddy, and as a starter he has the right of way always."

"O, as to that," said Adam, cheerfully, "I didn't start it. Frederick started it himself by asking me how I came to call the rhinoceros a rhinoceros, and I told him. But it's all right. He and his kind frequently start things without really knowing just where they are going to end. It's a family characteristic. Where he made his mistake was in picking the rhinoceros, instead of the hippopotamus, whose designation was purely physical, and in no sense ethnological."

"Well, you fell down there, anyhow, Adam," said Frederick. "The hippopotamus doesn't look in the least like a horse, and yet you called him the river horse."

"That wasn't my mistake," said Adam, with a grin. "That was a mistake of the Greeks, who thought I meant hippo, a horse, when I meant nothing of the sort. The word I used was hippy, not hippo. I called the beast a hippypotamus, because the first time I saw him all I could see was his hips sticking up out of the river, and besides that the poor creature always looked as if he were hipped about something, anyhow, and the name seemed to fit him fore and aft."

"Well, anyhow," interjected Penn, "you showed positive genius when you named the hen."

"Thanks, William," replied Adam, modestly. "But you mustn't give me too much credit for that. There was no genius in it. I couldn't possibly have done anything else. You see, when the first one I saw started rushing around the garden, cackling away like a house afire, prouder than Lucifer just because she'd laid an egg, an achievement she seemed to think greater than the building of the pyramids, or the discovery of wireless telegraphy, an absurd bundle of fuss and feathers, but a useful member of society for all that, I knew at once she was a hen, because nothing but a hen could think and act that way."

"Simplicity itself!" said Ananias, his eyes green with envy.

"Which gives me the chance to ask," said Dr. Johnson, "which came first, Grampa, the chicken or the egg?"

"Ladies first always," said Adam.

"Then Eve was created before you, eh?" persisted the doctor.

"There are exceptions to all rules, Samuel," said Adam. "Especially when there is a good reason for it. I preceded Eve, but only because in those pioneer days it was the man's job to go ahead and blaze the trail, so that when his wife came along he'd have things ready to begin housekeeping without unnecessary delay."

"Tell 'em about the pig, pa," said Cain.

"O, there's nothing to tell about the pig," said Adam. "The same rule prevailed with the pig as operated in respect to the hen and the rhinoceros. A study of his habits merely showed me what he was. He was a pig, and I knew it the minute I saw him."

"And you took him right into your drawing-room," said Doctor Johnson.

"No," said Adam. "I didn't like his manners, so I gave him a pen, Sam. It seemed more appropriate."

It was at this point that Nero braced himself for the fateful question.

"There's a question I'd like to ask," he said.

"Go ahead and ask it," said Adam.

"How about that notion of Darwin's, Adam? Were you a monkey?" said Nero.

A thrill of horror swept through the room. Indignation seethed from nearly everybody's face.

"Put him out! Put him out!" came a score of voices.

"Not at all, not at all," said Adam, raising his right hand to stay the tumult. "I'm glad he asked the question, for it has required an answer for a number of years, and I am not afraid to tell the truth. The answer is: No, I am not, and never was a monkey. What is more, having had a paternal ancestor, I think I may safely say that my dad wasn't one, either."

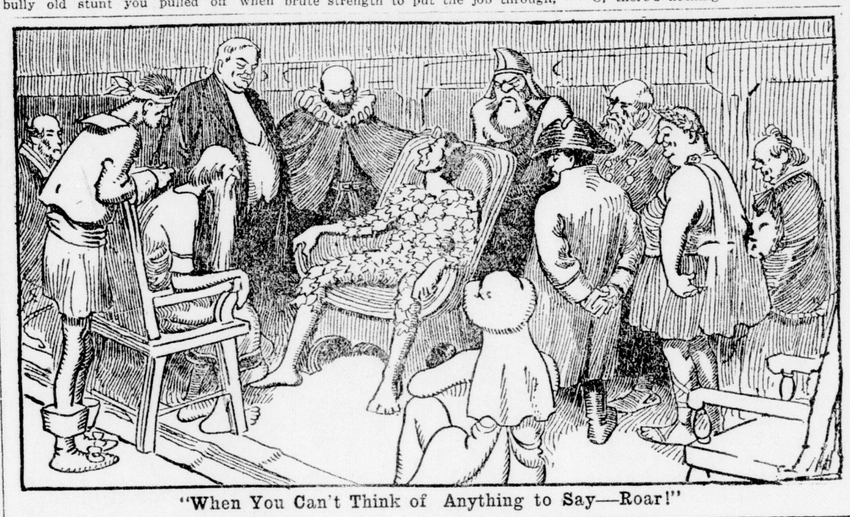
"Then Darwin's theory, lacking a tail to swing on, falls to the ground," said Doctor Johnson.

"No," said Adam, "I can't say that. I really believe there was something in Darwin's theory—I hope there was, anyhow, for as I look around the world and see what men do—men like Nero here, and Herod, and Tiberius, and Blue Beard, and Bill Hohenzollern—I like to think that two races having the semblance of man inhabit the earth, the human race and the inhuman race. As the father of the human race, I have no responsibility for the paternity of the inhuman race. I am proud of my own family, and it pleases me to think that the others do not belong to my family at all, but, as Darwin suggests, sprang from some primeval ape, whose gorilla-like instincts have been transmitted to his posterity, just as mine have been transmitted to mine. Offended by Nero's question? On the contrary—I rejoice in it as I rejoice in Darwin's theory. They help me to establish my alibi in these days of the beast!"

"By Jove!" said Napoleon, with fervor. "He's a resourceful old boy, isn't he?"

"He had to be," said Cain. "When a man starts in to float a corporation such as this world has become out in the wilderness with no capital but his fingernails to work with, I tell you, Boney, it's some stunt!"

And the cheers that followed showed that the sons of Adam were proud of their ancestry.



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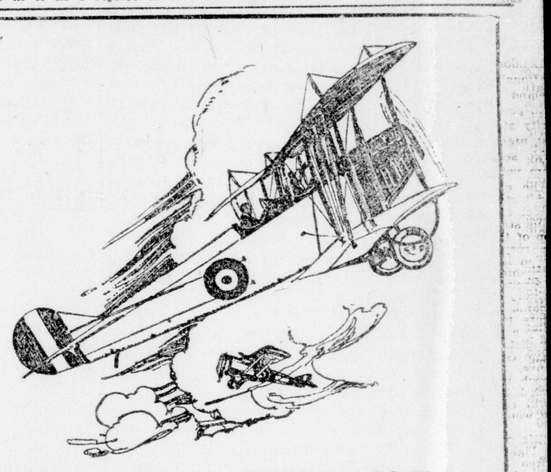

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