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**The Pursuit of the House-Boat
Being Some Further Account of
the Divers Doings of the
Associated Shades, under the
Leadership of Sherlock Holmes,
Esq.**

John Kendrick Bangs

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TO

A. CONAN DOYLE, ESQ.

WITH THE AUTHOR'S SINCEREST REGARDS AND THANKS
FOR THE UNTIMELY DEMISE OF HIS GREAT DETECTIVE
WHICH MADE THESE THINGS POSSIBLE

Contents

- CHAPTER
 1. THE ASSOCIATED SHADES TAKE ACTION
 2. THE STRANGER UNRAVELS A MYSTERY AND REVEALS HIMSELF
 3. THE SEARCH-PARTY IS ORGANIZED
 4. ON BOARD THE HOUSE-BOAT
 5. A CONFERENCE ON DECK
 6. A CONFERENCE BELOW-STAIRS
 7. THE "GEHENNA" IS CHARTERED
 8. ON BOARD THE "GEHENNA."
 9. CAPTAIN KIDD MEETS WITH AN OBSTACLE
 10. A WARNING ACCEPTED
 11. MAROONED
 12. THE ESCAPE AND THE END

- **ILLUSTRATIONS**

- “DR. JOHNSON’S POINT IS WELL TAK-
EN”
- “WHAT HAS ALL THIS GOT TO DO
WITH THE QUESTION?”
- “POOR OLD BOSWELL WAS PUSHED
OVERBOARD”
- “THE STRANGER DREW FORTH A BUN-
DLE OF BUSINESS CARDS”
- “THREE ROUSING CHEERS, LED BY
HAMLET, WERE GIVEN”
- A BLACK PERSON BY THE NAME OF
FRIDAY FINDS A BOTTLE
- “THE HARD FEATURES OF KIDD WERE
THRUST THROUGH”
- “HERE’S A KETTLE OF FISH,’ SAID
KIDD”
- MADAME RÉCAMIER HAS A PLAN
- “EVERY BLOOMIN’ MILLION WAS REP-
RESENTED BY A CERTIFIED CHECK, AN’ PAYA-
BLE IN LONDON”
- QUEEN ELIZABETH DESIRES AN AXE
AND ONE HOUR OF HER OLDEN POWER
- “THE COMMITTEE ON TREACHERY IS
READY TO REPORT”
- “YOU ARE VERY MUCH MISTAKEN, SIR
WALTER”

- "IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT SHYLOCK
HAD STOLEN UP THE GANG-PLANK"
- JUDGE BLACKSTONE REFUSES TO
CLIMB TO THE MIZZENTOP
- SHEM IN THE LOOKOUT
- CAPTAIN KIDD CONSENTS TO BE
CROSS-EXAMINED BY PORTIA
- KIDD'S COMPANIONS ENDEAVORING
TO RESTORE EVAPORATED PORTIONS OF HIS
ANATOMY WITH A STEAM-ATOMIZER
- "HE TOLD US WE WERE GOING TO PAR-
IS"
- "YOU ARE A VERY CLEAR-HEADED
YOUNG WOMAN, LIZZIE,' SAID MRS. NOAH"
- "THAT OUGHT TO BE A LESSON TO
YOU"
- "THE PIRATES MADE A MAD DASH
DOWN THE ROUGH, ROCKY HILL-SIDE"
- "NOW, MY CHILD,' SAID MRS. NOAH,
FIRMLY, 'I DO NOT WISH ANY WORDS"
- "A GREAT HELPLESS HULK TEN FEET
TO THE REAR"

The Pursuit of the House-Boat

I

The Associated Shades Take Action

Return to Table of Contents

The House-boat of the Associated Shades, formerly located upon the River Styx, as the reader may possibly remember, had been torn from its moorings and navigated out into unknown seas by that vengeful pirate Captain Kidd, aided and abetted by some of the most ruffianly inhabitants of Hades. Like a thief in the night had they come, and for no better reason than that the Captain had been unanimously voted a shade too shady to associate with self-respecting spirits had they made off with the happy floating clubhouse of their betters; and worst of all, with them, by force of circumstances over which they had no control, had sailed also the fair Queen Elizabeth, the spirited Xanthippe, and every other strong-minded and beautiful woman of Erebean society, whereby the men thereof were rendered desolate.

“I can’t stand it!” cried Raleigh, desperately, as with his accustomed grace he presided over a special meeting of the club, called on the bank of the inky Stygian stream, at the point where the missing boat had been moored. “Think of it, gentlemen, Elizabeth of England, Calpurnia of Rome, Ophelia of Denmark, and every precious jewel in our social diadem gone, vanished completely; and with whom? Kidd, of all men in the universe! Kidd, the pirate, the ruffian—”

“Don’t take on so, my dear Sir Walter,” said Socrates, cheerfully. “What’s the use of going into hysterics? You are not a woman, and should eschew that luxury. Xanthippe is with them, and I’ll warrant you that when that cherished spouse of mine has recovered from the effects of the sea, say the third day out, Kidd and his crew will be walking the plank, and voluntarily at that.”

“But the House-boat itself,” murmured Noah, sadly. “That was my delight. It reminded me in some respects of the Ark.”

"The law of compensation enters in there, my dear Commodore," retorted Socrates. "For me, with Xanthippe abroad I do not need a club to go to; I can stay at home and take my hemlock in peace and straight. Xanthippe always compelled me to dilute it at the rate of one quart of water to the finger."

"Well, we didn't all marry Xanthippe," put in Cæsar, firmly, "therefore we are not all satisfied with the situation. I, for one, quite agree with Sir Walter that something must be done, and quickly. Are we to sit here and do nothing, allowing that fiend to kidnap our wives with impunity?"

"Not at all," interposed Bonaparte. "The time for action has arrived. All things considered he is welcome to Marie Louise, but the idea of Josephine going off on a cruise of that kind breaks my heart."

"No question about it," observed Dr. Johnson. "We've got to do something if it is only for the sake of appearances. The question really is, what shall be done first?"

"I am in favor of taking a drink as the first step, and considering the matter of further action afterwards," suggested Shakespeare, and it was this suggestion that made the members unanimous upon the necessity for immediate action, for when the assembled spirits called for their various favorite beverages it was found that there were none to be had, it being Sunday, and all the establishments wherein liquid refreshments were licensed to be sold being closed—for at the time of writing the local government of Hades was in the hands of the reform party.

"What!" cried Socrates. "Nothing but Styx water and vitriol, Sundays? Then the House-boat must be recovered whether Xanthippe comes with it or not. Sir Walter, I am for immediate action, after all. This ruffian should be captured at once and made an example of."

"Excuse me, Socrates," put in Lindley Murray, "but, ah—pray speak in Greek hereafter, will you, please? When you attempt English you have a beastly way of working up to climatic prepositions which are offensive to the ear of a purist."

"This is no time to discuss style, Murray," interposed Sir Walter. "Socrates may speak and spell like Chaucer if he pleases; he may

even part his infinitives in the middle, for all I care. We have affairs of greater moment in hand."

"We must ransack the earth," cried Socrates, "until we find that boat. I'm dry as a fish."

"There he goes again!" growled Murray. "Dry as a fish! What fish I'd like to know is dry?"

"Red herrings," retorted Socrates; and there was a great laugh at the expense of the purist, in which even Hamlet, who had grown more and more melancholy and morbid since the abduction of Ophelia, joined.

"Then it is settled," said Raleigh; "something must be done. And now the point is, what?"

"Relief expeditions have a way of finding things," suggested Dr. Livingstone. "Or rather of being found by the things they go out to relieve. I propose that we send out a number of them. I will take Africa; Bonaparte can lead an expedition into Europe; General Washington may have North America; and—"

"I beg pardon," put in Dr. Johnson, "but have you any idea, Dr. Livingstone, that Captain Kidd has put wheels on this House-boat of ours and is having it dragged across the Sahara by mules or camels?"

"No such absurd idea ever entered my head," retorted the Doctor.

"Do you then believe that he has put runners on it, and is engaged in the pleasurable pastime of taking the ladies tobogganing down the Alps?" persisted the philosopher.

"Not at all. Why do you ask?" queried the African explorer, irritably.

"Because I wish to know," said Johnson. "That is always my motive in asking questions. You propose to go looking for a house-boat in Central Africa; you suggest that Bonaparte lead an expedition in search of it through Europe—all of which strikes me as nonsense. This search is the work of sea-dogs, not of landlubbers. You might as well ask Confucius to look for it in the heart of China. What earthly use there is in ransacking the earth I fail to see. What we

need is a naval expedition to scour the sea, unless it is pretty well understood in advance that we believe Kidd has hauled the boat out of the water, and is now using it for a roller-skating rink or a bicycle academy in Ohio, or for some other purpose for which neither he nor it was designed."

"Dr. Johnson's point is well taken," said a stranger who had been sitting upon the string-piece of the pier, quietly, but with very evident interest, listening to the discussion. He was a tall and excessively slender shade, "like a spirt of steam out of a teapot," as Johnson put it afterwards, so slight he seemed. "I have not the honor of being a member of this association," the stranger continued, "but, like all well-ordered shades, I aspire to the distinction, and I hold myself and my talents at the disposal of this club. I fancy it will not take us long to establish our initial point, which is that the gross person who has so foully appropriated your property to his own base uses does not contemplate removing it from its keel and placing it somewhere inland. All the evidence in hand points to a radically different conclusion, which is my sole reason for doubting the value of that conclusion. Captain Kidd is a seafarer by instinct, not a landsman. The House-boat is not a house, but a boat; therefore the place to look for it is not, as Dr. Johnson so well says, in the Sahara Desert, or on the Alps, or in the State of Ohio, but upon the high sea, or upon the waterfront of some one of the world's great cities."



"DR. JOHNSON'S POINT IS WELL TAKEN"

"And what, then, would be your plan?" asked Sir Walter, impressed by the stranger's manner as well as by the very manifest reason in all that he had said.

"The chartering of a suitable vessel, fully armed and equipped for the purpose of pursuit. Ascertain whither the House-boat has sailed, for what port, and start at once. Have you a model of the House-boat within reach?" returned the stranger.

"I think not; we have the architect's plans, however," said the chairman.

"We had, Mr. Chairman," said Demosthenes, who was secretary of the House Committee, rising, "but they are gone with the House-boat itself. They were kept in the safe in the hold."

A look of annoyance came into the face of the stranger.

"That's too bad," he said. "It was a most important part of my plan that we should know about how fast the House-boat was."

"Humph!" ejaculated Socrates, with ill-concealed sarcasm. "If you'll take Xanthippe's word for it, the House-boat was the fastest yacht afloat."

"I refer to the matter of speed in sailing," returned the stranger, quietly. "The question of its ethical speed has nothing to do with it."

"The designer of the craft is here," said Sir Walter, fixing his eyes upon Sir Christopher Wren. "It is possible that he may be of assistance in settling that point."

"What has all this got to do with the question, anyhow, Mr. Chairman?" asked Solomon, rising impatiently and addressing Sir Walter. "We aren't preparing for a yacht-race that I know of. Nobody's after a cup, or a championship of any kind. What we do want is to get our wives back. The Captain hasn't taken more than half of mine along with him, but I am interested none the less. The Queen of Sheba is on board, and I am somewhat interested in her fate. So I ask you what earthly or unearthly use there is in discussing this question of speed in the House-boat. It strikes me as a woful waste of time, and rather unprecedented too, that we should suspend all rules and listen to the talk of an entire stranger."



“WHAT HAS ALL THIS GOT TO DO WITH THE QUESTION?”

“I do not venture to doubt the wisdom of Solomon,” said Johnson, dryly, “but I must say that the gentleman’s remarks rather interest me.”

“Of course they do,” ejaculated Solomon. “He agreed with you. That ought to make him interesting to everybody. Freaks usually are.”

“That is not the reason at all,” retorted Dr. Johnson. “Cold water agrees with me, but it doesn’t interest me. What I do think, however, is that our unknown friend seems to have a grasp on the situation by which we are confronted, and he’s going at the matter in hand in a very comprehensive fashion. I move, therefore, that Solomon be laid on the table, and that the privileges of the—ah—of the wharf be extended indefinitely to our friend on the string-piece.”

The motion, having been seconded, was duly carried, and the stranger resumed.

“I will explain for the benefit of his Majesty King Solomon, whose wisdom I have always admired, and whose endurance as the husband of three hundred wives has filled me with wonder,” he said, “that before starting in pursuit of the stolen vessel we must select a craft of some sort for the purpose, and that in selecting the pursuer it is quite essential that we should choose a vessel of greater speed than the one we desire to overtake. It would hardly be proper, I

think, if the House-boat can sail four knots an hour, to attempt to overhaul her with a launch, or other nautical craft, with a maximum speed of two knots an hour."

"Hear! hear!" ejaculated Cæsar.

"That is my reason, your Majesty, for inquiring as to the speed of your late club-house," said the stranger, bowing courteously to Solomon. "Now if Sir Christopher Wren can give me her measurements, we can very soon determine at about what rate she is leaving us behind under favorable circumstances."

"'Tisn't necessary for Sir Christopher to do anything of the sort," said Noah, rising and manifesting somewhat more heat than the occasion seemed to require. "As long as we are discussing the question I will take the liberty of stating what I have never mentioned before, that the designer of the House-boat merely appropriated the lines of the Ark. Shem, Ham, and Japhet will bear testimony to the truth of that statement."

"There can be no quarrel on that score, Mr. Chairman," assented Sir Christopher, with cutting frigidity. "I am perfectly willing to admit that practically the two vessels were built on the same lines, but with modifications which would enable my boat to sail twenty miles to windward and back in six days less time than it would have taken the Ark to cover the same distance, and it could have taken all the wash of the excursion steamers into the bargain."

"Bosh!" ejaculated Noah, angrily. "Strip your old tub down to a flying balloon-jib and a marline-spike, and ballast the Ark with elephants until every inch of her reeked with ivory and peanuts, and she'd outfoot you on every leg, in a cyclone or a zephyr. Give me the Ark and a breeze, and your House-boat wouldn't be within hailing distance of her five minutes after the start if she had 40,000 square yards of canvas spread before a gale."

"This discussion is waxing very unprofitable," observed Confucius. "If these gentlemen cannot be made to confine themselves to the subject that is agitating this body, I move we call in the authorities and have them confined in the bottomless pit."

"I did not precipitate the quarrel," said Noah. "I was merely trying to assist our friend on the string-piece. I was going to say that as

the Ark was probably a hundred times faster than Sir Christopher Wren's—tub, which he himself says can take care of all the wash of the excursion boats, thereby becoming on his own admission a wash-tub—"

"Order! order!" cried Sir Christopher.

"I was going to say that this wash-tub could be overhauled by a launch or any other craft with a speed of thirty knots a month," continued Noah, ignoring the interruption.

"Took him forty days to get to Mount Ararat!" sneered Sir Christopher.

"Well, your boat would have got there two weeks sooner, I'll admit," retorted Noah, "if she'd sprung a leak at the right time."

"Granting the truth of Noah's statement," said Sir Walter, motioning to the angry architect to be quiet—"not that we take any side in the issue between the two gentlemen, but merely for the sake of argument—I wish to ask the stranger who has been good enough to interest himself in our trouble what he proposes to do—how can you establish your course in case a boat were provided?"

"Also vot vill be dher gost, if any?" put in Shylock.

A murmur of disapprobation greeted this remark.

"The cost need not trouble you, sir," said Sir Walter, indignantly, addressing the stranger; "you will have carte blanche."

"Den ve are ruint!" cried Shylock, displaying his palms, and showing by that act a select assortment of diamond rings.

"Oh," laughed the stranger, "that is a simple matter. Captain Kidd has gone to London."

"To London!" cried several members at once. "How do you know that?"

"By this," said the stranger, holding up the tiny stub end of a cigar.

"Tut-tut!" ejaculated Solomon. "What child's play this is!"