

The English of the English

BY JULIAN RALPH

THAT hackneyed American maiden who said London was a nice place if you knew the language was not a bit absurd. We speak English; but we have built up our forms of English expression upon the English of a few shires of the old country as it was spoken between two and three centuries ago, while they have been blending and changing the speech of all their home peoples during the same period. The result is that an American can hardly utter a sentence in England without calling attention to the difference between his speech and that of the people about him. Only yesterday, after eighteen months' residence in England, I rushed up to a conductor in Charing Cross Station and asked, "Which car for Bromley?" He stared at me, and I knew I had spoken a foreign tongue to him, because street vehicles like omnibuses and horse-cars are called road cars and tram cars, and there are no other cars in England.

If you ask a guest at your home in England whether he likes his meat rare, he asks what you said, because he does not understand you. He calls meat underdone when it is not thoroughly cooked. If you tell him you fear the asparagus is canned, he is at a loss again, because he would have said it was tinned. To ask him to pass the powdered sugar will again set him to wondering, for he calls it icing sugar, generally, though he knows that it is sometimes called caster or sifted sugar. And if you have candy on the table you may not call it so without betraying your foreign origin, for he calls candy "sweets," abbreviated from "sweetmeats," and used to designate all preserves, puddings, pies, candies, and jams.

To go farther along the eccentricities of English at the dining-table, most persons know, I suppose, that the beet is called beet root, corn-starch is corn flour, corned beef (or a particular cut of it) is called "silversides of beef," and napkins are serviettes.

If in a shop I say, "I want a paper of pins," the clerk says, "Thank you. A great many Americans in London, now, aren't there?" "Oh yes," I say; "I meant a packet of pins." To ask for a spool of cotton is to set a clerk to staring at you, and to speak of a baby-carriage is to speak of the unknown, because spools of cotton or silk are called reels, and baby-carriages are known as perambulators—shortened to "prams" in the speech of millions.

As to native English speech, one needs no more forcible illustration of its eccentricities than this sentence: In England, when one is going a journey, he goes to the booking-office of a railway station, buys a "first single" or a "third return," whichever his rank or means prescribe, asks which platform he is to go to for his train, sees his luggage put in the proper van, and takes his seat in the proper carriage, after which the guards slam all the doors and turn all the handles, the conductor blows his whistle, the engine-driver starts the locomotive-engine, and the train slips along the metals out of the station, passing a train of goods-vans, shunting-engines, and the narrow cutting beyond in safety because the points have all been set to open the line ahead. Perhaps the carriage passes some cleaners mounted on steps—not stepladders, as we say—to clean the window-panes of an empty carriage, while other men inside are dusting the blinds—which we call shades.

It may be that this traveller is a woman who has been to London to get a servant. In that case she would have gone to a registry office or a lady agent's to get a waitress, and may have been told that professed cooks are very hard to get, but that there are several good generals on the list, and one of these, who is now at home with her father—a cowkeeper near London—has a three years' character from her last place.

We can imagine our heroine leaving the office and giving up an hour or two to shopping. Consulting the list she has

made out to help her memory, she finds that she needs to go to a shirt-tailor's for her husband, and to stop at the breeches-maker's to see about his new bicycle suit. She then goes to one of the stores (stores being what we call department-stores, all lesser places where goods of only one sort are sold being shops) and orders the following articles: preservers, footholds, a whisk, a coal-scoop, some stuff for face-cloths, cold-cream for her little daughter's "roughs," and knickers also for the child; material for the body the sempstress is to start work upon next day, a camisole, some basque protectors, a block of paper, a box of hooks and eyes (never a paper of them), some white calico, as they call muslin, and a pepper-box of silver to match her best salt-box. She prices several layettes for a newly married lady friend—wife of the medical man next door. Being very tired and hungry, she goes to the coffee-room in the stores and has tea and cut bread (white wheat-bread) and butter and a lot of sweets. I should have said that she takes along nothing of all she buys, but orders everything sent by express-carrier, carriage paid; and as she has a book at the stores, she asks to have it made up or posted. That reminds her that she must not forget to pop into the nearest pillar-box a post-card she has written to the upholster, asking him to come and see what it will cost to newly upholster her drawing-room suite.

Now when the American reader knows that a whisk, or egg-whisk, is an egg-beater, a coal-scoop is a coal-scuttle, a face-cloth is a wash-rag, footholds are small thin rubbers, a body is slang for bodice (just as the slang of the shops and masses makes chemise into "shim"); when he learns that "the roughs" are chapped hands, a block of paper is a pad, a camisole is a corset-cover, a preserver is a dress-shield, knickers are knickerbockers, or drawers, in Americanese—then he will get a great deal of light on what this very foreign-speaking, foreign-thinking lady has been doing. She washes her hands and face by the aid of a jug and basin, because she never heard those utensils called a wash-bowl and pitcher. With some of the English the word pitcher only describes little jugs, but none of the servants I have at present ever heard the word pitcher used at all. As for a bowl, all over England it is a thing in which

to serve food. The lady of my story calls a letter-box a pillar-box, just as she calls a lamp-post a lamp-pillar; and what we call a doctor is always a medical man in her mind, though she may have heard that the Americans even apply the title doctor to surgeons and to dentists, who are plain "misters" in England.

Luggage is baggage, and luggage-labels take the place of our baggage-checks, but are not the same things. Americans habitually ask for a check in restaurants and refreshment-places, and thus astonish the English, who ask for "the bill" under the same circumstances—though I have known the words inventory and invoice to be used when many purchases have been made in a shop or store. Of course an elevator is a lift, a picture-mat is a mount, news and book stands are stalls, and men calculate their weight in stones—the measure of fourteen pounds. A man's soft hat is a squash hat, and a Derby is a bowler or billy-cock hat. The instalment plan is the hire system, and dress goods are dress materials. The American word yard, meaning the space around or beside a house, is unknown; so is our word stoop, which the Dutch lent us. Rocking-chairs are not used. The English do not understand what a pocket-book is. They understand the word *porte-monnaie*, but never use it. Purse is their word for the thing they carry money in.

One buys most dry-goods at a mercer's, cloth at a draper's, milk, butter, and eggs at a dairy or cowkeeper's; goes to the head office, instead of the headquarters, of a company; speaks of coals instead of coal; goes to the turnery department of a store for wooden-ware, and to the ironmongery department or the ironmonger's for hardware. The term green-grocer and the almost equally common term fruiterer and green-grocer explain themselves, though it needs to be said that not only fish, but usually poultry and game are to be had at the fish-shops. Chickens are not chickens, but are fowls; and all the cereals—wheat, rye, barley, etc.—are lumped together under the word "corn." When you inquire after the health of any one, he or she is always fit if in good health, and seedy if not feeling well. All stated meetings in England are called fixtures in the newspapers, factories are called works, scrub-women are char-women.

There are no low shoes, so called, in

England. Low shoes are shoes, and high shoes are boots. What we call boots they call top-boots.

Written English is, of course, the same as the spoken tongue; but it widens the difference between our speech and theirs by reason of the spelling that obtains in their island. Every one knows that wagon is spelled, as Horace Greeley spelled it once, with two g's; but the English do not explain the spelling as he did when he said to a critic, "You see, they used to build wagons heavier when I learned to spell." Curb is spelled kerb, tire is tyre, a bank-check is a cheque, and ribbon is still often spelled riband.

The American who believes, as thousands do, that to betray one's nationality is to invite overcharging and extortion in the West End shops of London, is not only hard pressed to choose the peculiar words the English employ, but he has quite as many and as deep pitfalls to avoid in the methods of pronunciation. I will not refer to the false or ignorant methods of illiterate persons, but will confine attention to some eccentricities of pronunciation of gentlemen and ladies of education, rank, and breeding. They say immejitly, injin for engine, militry, figger and figgers, clark for clerk, paytent, naytional—and so on through a long list. The peculiarities of their mode of pronouncing their own names of families, places, and things are not open to criticism, because if they may not do as they please with their own, it is hard indeed. They pronounce Berkeley barclay, Cowper is cooper, Cadogan is kerduggan, Ralph is rafe in some shires, Craven is sometimes crawveen, Derby is darby, Leveson-Gower becomes loosun-gore, Hertford is hartford, and Albany is spoken so that the first syllable shall rhyme with shall, instead of with hall, as with us. I hesitate to say that Cholmondeley is called chumly, and that Beauchamp is beecham, as every one knows these eccentricities, yet they are the most remarkable of all the liberties the English take with their language. You must say Balmoral and Trafalgar, and you must chop the following names very short: Lud-get, Ho-b'n, South-uk, and Merrybun, whenever you wish to say Ludgate, Holborn, Southwark, and Marylebone. I have heard the Prince call his own house Mober House, though we call it Marlborough House.

English people end almost every sentence with a question. Your grand lady says: "It looks like rain, doesn't it? We shall have a muddy ride, sha'n't we?" You say to the girl in the shop, "These gloves are hard to get on"; and she replies: "But all gloves are hard to get on at first, aren't they? And they soon wear easier, don't they?"

When we come to the English variations of their own speech, which are said to be so great and so many that the people of one shire are not able to understand those in all the others, we are brought to think of the cockney speech all American tourists hear more or less of in London. And I am going to be so bold as to say that Dickens, greatest celebrator of the London poor, either had no ear for even the coarsest variations of his mother-tongue, or else became so Londonese himself that he did not notice the talk all around him. What he set down as the speech of the masses I never once heard in London, and what the cockney lingo really is he gives no hint of in a single line that I can recall in all his books. Had he been dealing realistically with his characters, he could not have made Master Charles Bates say, "Pray, pray, send them back; the old lady will think I stole them," because what the thief must have said is, "Pry, pry, send," etc.; "the hold lidy will think I stole 'em." Dickens makes Bates say, "Hold me while I laugh it out," whereas we all know he must have said, "'Old me whoile I lawgh it aout." Barry Pain wrote some cockney verses on Jubilee day, and I will take one of them as illustrative of a number of the erraticisms of the cockney, especially the cockney-coster, speech:

I 'eard the guns a-rattlin' when they pawst,
 goin fawst:
 I wited from the stawtin' ter the lawst, very
 lawst;
 Fur the creams with gold postillions whort
 was wited for by millions,
 Fur 'er that sits atorp the empire vawst.

It may be a shocking thing to say, but Barry Pain knows London better than the great genius at story-telling did, for the speech which has clung to these masses missed the ear of Dickens, who not only let it go, but invented out of the whole cloth, not any dialect, but a number of methods of expression such as I never heard in use in London or anywhere else.



An Old Country House

BY RICHARD LE GALLIENNE

PERHAPS, dear reader—if you will excuse so old-fashioned a manner of address, not inappropriate in the connection—perhaps it has not happened to be one of your dreams to live in an old house. Perdita and I, however, almost as soon as we dreamed of keeping a house together at all, had agreed that, if possible, it must be an old house. Of course, to live together was the main thing, though we could afford no higher rent than that of a hollow tree in the forest; but to live together in an old house would be best. It was a dream that had to wait. Waiting is said to be good for dreams. Meanwhile we did not live in a tree in the forest, but in a little red brick box, one of a neat row of suburban cottages facing a bit of old woodland which still defied the steadily encroaching town. Things had prospered with us the year or two in the little red brick box, and the dream of the old house came back. An old house with an old garden—cut trees, a lawn of green

velvet, and a sun-dial. Already I knew that Perdita saw herself on that lawn in the spring sunshine, leading a flower by the hand, with the sun-dial and two white peacocks against the well-clipped yews.

"We must have espalier roses," said Perdita.

"Certainly," I said.

"*La France, Anna Olivier, Gloire de Dijon, Etoile de Lyon.* and, of course, *Maréchal Niel.*" said Perdita, dreamily.

"It will be like growing beautiful words," said I—"publishing little books of rose leaves."

"And we must have old brick walls, with peaches and nectarines ripening in the sun."

"And pear-trees," I said, "in a trim attitude of crucifixion."

"We shall have to look after the wasps and earwigs," said Perdita; "they are terrible with the peaches." . . .

"We must have nets," I said, vaguely.

"To keep off the birds, you mean—yes! We must have nets for the strawberries."