

Britishisms of All Sorts

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

A BRITISH resident of the American metropolis recently published a letter intended to call attention to several peculiarities of speech which he had remarked in one or another American of his acquaintance. Some of these were peculiarities of enunciation and of pronunciation; and some were peculiarities of usage and of vocabulary. These peculiarities the British resident had noticed,—or, to be more accurate, what he had noticed struck him as peculiar,—because they were in some way different from what he had been accustomed to hear in his native land; and he had done what we are all of us so prone to do—he had unconsciously assumed that whatsoever he had been accustomed to hear was infallibly right and proper, and that whatsoever smote his ear as unfamiliar was inevitably wrong and improper. His letter was pleasantly phrased, and the writer was void of all wish to give offence; but he had never taken thought about the history of the English language, and it had never occurred to him to doubt the perfect propriety of every usage and of every word that he had been wont to hear in his own parish. Indeed, he would probably have been shocked into violent protest if any other correspondent had been rude enough to suggest a doubt in regard to the finality of his beliefs as to linguistic right and wrong. To cast aspersions on his parts of speech might have wounded him in the tenderest and holiest of his affections, since they would appear to reflect adversely upon the kind of training he had received at his mother's knee and at his father's table.

Yet the sentiment of this transplanted Briton in regard to the words and the usages he had disliked in the mouths of his American acquaintances, whether justifiable or unjustifiable, was only accidental; it had its origin in no certain knowledge of the laws which regulate linguistic development. It was due sim-

ply to the fact that he had been born and brought up in some part of the British Isles where these words and these usages were unknown; unfamiliarity had bred contempt. In short, what the British correspondent had done was what many Americans do in Great Britain when they first catch sight of manners and customs strange to them: he had set up his personal equation as though it was an eternal standard.

Every one of us who has ventured even a little into the fascinating field of linguistic investigation, knows that there are certain diversities of usage and certain divergencies of vocabulary between Great Britain and the United States—for example, the British say *lift* where the Americans say *elevator*, and the Londoner calls that a *keyless watch* which the New-Yorker terms a *stem-winder*. He knows also that these divergencies are really very few, and that they are of trifling importance. And he knows further that there is no short and easy way of deciding off-hand which of the conflicting usages is on the whole the better of the two. To call a habit of speech an Americanism is not to condemn it, for many Americanisms, of one kind and another, have been welcomed gladly by all the peoples that speak English. To term a word a Britishism is not necessarily to stigmatize it as noxious, for many terms and phrases now peculiar to Great Britain are certain in time to win acceptance, even in the United States, to the permanent enrichment of the English vocabulary.

The question is now no longer where certain words were born; it is rather whether they are worthy of survival. Every language must needs keep on replenishing its vocabulary; and as Mr. E. B. Tylor tersely asserted years ago, English is "in a freely growing state, and capable of adding to itself by almost any process found in any language of the

whole world, old or new." Where the needful new word arises, whether in England, Scotland, or Ireland, in America, Australia, or India, matters little compared with the necessity or the utility of the word itself; its origin is so unimportant that it is soon forgotten except by professed linguistic students.

Perhaps it would be as well to suggest here a stricter definition of *Briticism* and of *Americanism* than that carelessly given to these words in ordinary parlance. That a strange word has been employed once by some one American writer does not make it an Americanism; until this word gets into general use in the United States, it is only an individualism of the single writer who employed it. And so that is not strictly to be described as a *Briticism* which is only a peculiarity of some one British author, like *evanescent* which we find in the pages of Walter Pater, or like *mechanize* (to labor as a mechanic) which we discover in a novel of Mr. Thomas Hardy, or like *unwellness* which we note in the letters of Matthew Arnold. To speak precisely, an Americanism is a word or phrase or usage, generally accepted in the United States, but not accepted in Great Britain,—and therefore not adopted into the English language; and a *Briticism* is a word or phrase or usage, generally accepted in the British Isles or even in the whole British Empire, but not accepted in the United States,—and therefore not adopted into the English language. When the meaning of Americanism and of *Briticism* is thus clearly limited, we see that neither of them can fairly serve as a term of reproach. It is nothing in favor of a phrase or of a usage that it began life as a *Briticism* or as an Americanism. There should be no prejudice either for it or against it because it was born in Great Britain or in the United States. As Professor Kittredge put it sharply in these pages a few months ago, "accepted usage, and nothing else, is the standard of linguistic rectitude,"—the accepted usage, that is, of the whole body of English-speaking men and women. The majority of that body happens now to dwell here in the United States, it is true; but it is not a question of the majority only. It is true also that the language was brought to its noble maturity in Great Britain;

but it is not a question of the original users of the tongue. Above all, is it true that no local standard is now sufficient, even if there was any possibility of setting up such a standard at this late day.

Time was, no doubt, five hundred years ago and more, when it was not only advantageous but absolutely necessary for the future of the language that there should be a standard of speech which might fairly be called local, and that the vocabulary and the syntax of the inhabitants of the other parts of England should conform to the usage of those about the court of the King in London. But the utility of any merely local authority has long since departed with the splendid development of English in the succeeding centuries, with the evolution of its literature, with the spread of education, and with the world-wide expansion of the race.

The standard, the source of authority, is no longer in the practice of the inhabitants of any single city or of any single country; rather is it to be sought to-day in the traditions of the language itself. English does not now require the guardianship of the court or of the capital or even of the kingdom where it was nurtured in its lusty youth. It is no longer in the special charge of the inhabitants of the British Isles. Its future is secure in the custody of all those who have received it as a glorious birthright, wherever they may chance to be living, on the shores of every ocean. Words and phrases may spring up anywhere, and if they win acceptance throughout the whole English-speaking world, they will be used by millions wholly unconscious that they are employing what were formerly *Briticisms* or Americanisms. The very adoption of these words and phrases by the main body of those who speak English is strong evidence in behalf of the word or phrase thus accepted; and as Mr. Tylor said, in the essay from which quotation has already been made, "the public is, on the whole, no bad judge of point and humor; and the word or phrase which it admits to public life is apt to have its little merits."

It is because of this possible acceptance by the broad body of English-speakers of what are at first mere localisms that the collecting of Americanisms and of *Briticisms* is interesting and instructive.

These localisms may fairly be considered as knocking for admission at the portal of the language; they are on probation; and only a very few will ever gain entry. *Fad*, for example, was, first of all, a piece of British slang, which came rapidly into general use in Great Britain, and so established itself as a Britishism; but its utility has made it acceptable in the United States also, and it is coming into general use here, at least along the Atlantic coast. Very soon, apparently, *fad* will cease to be a Britishism; it will be received as a new word in good standing, though of recent origin. And so *boom* (a sudden rise) was in the beginning a bit of Western slang, promptly caught up everywhere in the United States, thus demanding recognition as an Americanism. But already has it won its way in the British Isles; and *boom*, like *fad*, bids fair in the immediate future to hold its own as an English word in good standing.

Professor Kittredge drew attention to "a queer habit which is prevalent in England, but from which we are as yet comparatively free in this country,—the employment of the plural number in the first member of compounds, as in *Grievances Committee*, for *Grievance Committee*," *Historical Manuscripts Commission*, *Irish Texts Society*, and so forth. This is a British innovation, contrary to "the fixed habits of the Indo-European tongues." It is as yet only a Britishism; but if it should ever spread to the United States, it would thereby cease to be a Britishism, having been legitimated as good English by popular vote. There are other British innovations of usage, like the limiting of *hunt* (the chasing of the fox), of *sick* (nauseated), and of *bug* (bed-bug). These are Britishisms, and they are also contrary to the traditions of the language; but none the less they may some day establish themselves here in the United States; and if that day should ever come they would be Britishisms no longer. Two other Britishisms of usage are *different to* (where logic and tradition require *different from*), and *directly for as soon as*,—e. g., "directly we arrived." At present there is little probability that either of these will spread to the United States; and they will therefore remain Britishisms, outside the pale of good English.

There is a group of related diminutives

to be found in the literary gossip of certain London weekly papers, no one of which is perhaps widely enough employed to entitle it to rank as a Britishism, although there is evidence that one or another of them may be creeping into local acceptance. They are *essayette* (used by Coventry Patmore); *sermonette*; *playette* (a little play); *leaderette* (a brief *leader*,—and *leader* is a Britishism, closely corresponding to an Americanism, *editorial*); and *storiette* or *storyette* (which has already made its appearance on this side of the Atlantic). To a sensitive ear these are painfully offensive vocables; and yet it may be in time that two or three of them will rise to the dignity of Britishisms, and one at least may finally establish itself in the language.

Perhaps sporadic innovation is not so common in Great Britain as in the United States, and yet any American visitor to London who skims the plentiful periodicals of the British metropolis is constantly discovering words and usages which are novel to him and which reveal the activity of the language in its native island. The *London Times*, for instance, in a book-review, recently asserted that the lettering on the backs of the volumes of a popular series had been *horizontalized* (made horizontal). The *Author* is in the habit of recording the fact that some novel is now being *serialized* (published as a serial), or that some writer, having completed his manuscript, is about to have it *typed* (copied on the typewriter). An account of the postponed coronation of King Edward in the *London Times* declared that the colonial troops would be *played* by one of the Guards' bands, evidently meaning that this band would furnish the music for the marching soldiers. A noble peer, writing advice for bicyclists, in a sporting magazine, counselled them to *rail* (to go by train) from London to a certain town.

The *London Field* described a method of repairing a bicycle tire, by which strips of canvas "are *solutioned* on." The *London Daily Chronicle*, discussing one of Sir Martin Conway's explorations, cited the name given by him to a "perilous pass which he successfully *negotiated*." An advertisement of a magnificently timbered residential and sporting estate asserted that it was "centrally *position-*

ed." Certain of the British railroads, having collected a charge for that portion of a traveller's baggage which is in excess of the regular allowance, certify to the payment by pasting on the trunks a label bearing the strange and startling participle "EXCESSED."

With this Britishism of the railways should be mated a Britishism of the hotels, where the bill of fare of the dinner at a fixed price sometimes informs the traveller that "a *follow* of any dish will be served without extra charge," meaning thereby that he can call for a second helping. This is simply making a noun out of a verb, and giving it an extension of meaning. Actual novelties in words are not frequent, but a few can be met with now and again. The London *Times* recently animadverted upon the "belated *electrification*" of the underground railroad, evidently meaning the equipment of this route with electric motors; and the same journal, in reviewing a book on the Origins of Christianity, asserted that much depended "on the *historicity*" of a certain narrative. The London *Spectator* not long ago made use of *continuativeness*; and the London *Athenæum* remarked that a story was "told in what might be called the *dialogical* style." In the London *Morning Post* Mr. Andrew Lang declared that if you want to write good Latin verses you must be watchful, resourceful, and *dodgy* (up to every dodge). Perhaps the most curious verbal novelty is a Britishism which has been deliberately invented to balance an imported Americanism; in the United States every lawyer is familiar with the meaning of *betterment*,—which has served as a model for *worsement*, a word apparently made out of hand by the lawyers in Great Britain.

It is only from the ignorant and from the half-educated that we now hear the shrill shriek of protest against the impending contamination of our noble tongue by the freakish vagaries of speech which make up the mass of Americanisms and of Britishisms. The most of these localisms are inept and useless; and their life is therefore very brief even in their own locality. Those which are most vigorous survive in the land of their origin; and of these some few may in time spread

abroad and strike root everywhere that English is spoken. So far from there being any real danger of the defilement of the language by the profusion of Britishisms and Americanisms, of Canadianisms and Australianisms, of New-Zealandisms,—if such exist, as no doubt they do,—English is really the most fortunate of all modern tongues in that it has so many sources of refreshment, so varied, so remote from each other. The vocabulary of every language is continually wearing itself out, and it needs to be replenished, sometimes by the adroit revival of forgotten words, sometimes by broadening the meaning of words in current use, and sometimes by the creation of wholly new words.

The German language and the French have no such proving-grounds for new verbal missiles as English has. Those who speak German are massed together in the German Empire or just outside its borders in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy; and those who speak French are within the Republic or just beyond its boundaries in Belgium and in Switzerland. But English is the native language not of one great nation only, but of two; and while the United States has within its territory more than half of those who have English for their mother-tongue, the British Empire has its stations scattered here and there all over the world. In the British Isles, in the United States, in the British colonies, we may see just so many several nurseries for the seedlings of speech. Of course, the most of these verbal variations will fail to flourish outside the local conditions of soil and climate; they will not bear transplanting. Some few will show a sturdier strength, and these will in time be acclimated throughout the English-speaking world. By such hardy growths the language will be refreshed and invigorated and kept from inanition and sterility. The purist may object to the acceptance of these useful words; he will denounce them as abhorrent novelties. But, if they are really useful, they will surely establish themselves. What the purist cannot be made to admit, or even to understand, is that growth is a condition of vitality, and that if a language should cease to grow, its decay would soon begin, and its death be not far distant.

His Guardian Angel

BY LILY A. LONG

I

BEATRICE leaned upon the railing of the balcony, and swept the once-familiar landscape with a joyous recognition, that yet was momentarily referred back to her husband for endorsement:

"Ah, isn't this air delicious! And the lake,—how *beautiful*! Aren't you glad now that we came, Owen?"

Owen turned his eyes—the cavernous eyes of a convalescent—upon his wife slowly. "I am chiefly absorbed in wondering at your courage."

"Courage?"

"I know of no more dangerous proceeding in life than to revisit the scenes of the past, especially scenes of—of sentiment. It is what the insurance companies call an *extrahazardous* risk. Beatrice, don't you realize that there is a chasm of fifteen years between us and those sweet peas blossoming yonder against the wall?"

Beatrice gave a little cry of triumph. "Ah, you too remember that there were sweet peas trained against that wall! I never supposed you had noticed such things." She went to him to adjust his travelling-rug as a screen against the wind, and made it an excuse for letting her hand linger on his shoulder. "Dear, when our present is so perfect,—so much better than the past ever dreamed of promising us,—what is there for us to fear in looking backward? I want to flaunt our happiness in the face of the past—insolently!"

The tense lines about his lips relaxed as he looked into her eyes.

"You are very sweet, and very dear," he said, lifting his hand to clasp the fingers still lingering on his shoulder. "You have been the great blessing of my life."

She flushed, and laughed shyly, like a girl. Almost she seemed to inhale the words, as one might the perfume of a

flower. She glanced swiftly across the deserted hotel-grounds that stretched between their enclosed veranda and the quiet lake, and then she swept a kiss, fleeting as a shadow, upon his lips.

"No one saw me! Don't be afraid," she laughed, with downcast eyes. "I am going to leave you for a little while, if you don't mind. You won't be lonely? And if the breeze from the lake grows too cool, you will go in at once, won't you?"

"Oh, I'm not such an invalid!" he began to protest, but stopped to catch his breath and smother a cough until she should be out of hearing.

His eyes followed her as she crossed the lawn. Her delicate air of distinction, which set her apart from the pretty women of the summer-hotel world as unmistakably as her pellucid nature set her apart from the vast ranks of the commonplace everywhere, had often given him a little thrill of gratified pride, but to-day his look held rather the serious scrutiny we give in moments of detachment to those ordinarily too near us to be seen. She was crossing now toward what of old had been the Lilac Walk. He recognized her unspoken purpose with a sudden pang that made his white face still whiter, and as he leaned back with closed eyes, the sigh that escaped his lips was almost a groan.

He did not see a woman in a rose-red gown who came slowly down the steps from the overhanging corner balcony, where she had sat for half an hour like a spectator at a play. She paused for a moment as she came opposite Owen, but after a curious, lingering glance she passed slowly on, following the path that Beatrice had taken.

Beatrice had passed the tennis-court—it had been a croquet-ground fifteen years ago—and she caught her breath with relief that was near laughter as she came in view of the lilac-bushes beyond. She had been so afraid that the Lilac Walk