

BETTER AND BRIEFER

English As It May Be

(Written for "The Listener" by E.D.)

WITH a mind fresh from the setting of such examination papers as: "What effect will the cinema and the radio have on the English language?" I pause, pen poised in air, as I write an Air Letter Card to my nephew in Ceylon. "What effect—think you—will the Air Letter (Card) have on the English language, especially the epistolary branch?" I feel its influence working on me at this very moment, and I have felt it before.

Foremost and best influence will be the ruthless pruning of the unnecessary word or words. I find myself almost writing: "I have just read your letter through again before answering." If I am to include in this letter all these important items I've jotted on a slip of paper, I'll have to go cannily on the words. "Through again before answering" I therefore delete. I eschew the prolix.



Allied to this is the pruning of the superfluous fact. Air letters will be conciser, fresher. With so little space at my disposal, I can retain only the interesting and the necessary. I learn discrimination. I find this rather fun, just as I always find it fun (sort of cross-word puzzle fun) doing a precis with my class. We are allowed one hundred and ten words: gradually, by interesting shifts, we reduce it to the one hundred and ten—professional pride demands not one word more or less. And so with my Air Letter. It is a precis; I am allowed only so many words. I see the Examiner of the Future setting a valuable question of this type: "Compose an Air Letter to your brother, giving in 'X' words, a comprehensive survey of: the school swimming sports, how you spent the summer holidays, your thoughts in the dentist's waiting room, yesterday's sunset, a visit to a factory." Multum in parvo—all the old-timer essays "crisped" up.

Back to Anglo-Saxon

Vocabulary will be simplified. The Anglo-Saxon word will return to its own. I found myself saying a moment ago: "Will that word—'function'—fit into the precious remainder of the line? No! Then find a shorter. Done!—'work'."

Inestimable will be the improvement in hand-writing. Even as the sprawled thought must go, go too must the sprawled hand. My writing, that was "worsening" with the years, is now neater,

(continued from previous page)

to indulge the ladies so far as to make them acquainted with the arcana of the State as they could not be supposed to be more capable of keeping secrets than men. Upon which they were likewise ordered to leave the House. The Duchess of Devonshire, Lady Norton, and nearly 60 other ladies, were obliged to obey the mandate.

more compact; altogether more legible—the constant pause for reflection, the all-pervading reflection, prevents the slap-dash.

Sentence structure will be improved because good structure means economy.

The new compound (proof of the language) will flourish. Instead of telling my nephew about "the zealous neighbour who is determined that I shall share her enthusiasm for gardening," I refer to her as "my gardener-neighbour."

Active for Passive

The cumbrous passive (anathema to "Q") will give place to the active. No longer will the parting employee "be made the recipient of" something. But here (stating the pros. and cons. in the manner of the good examinee) I sniff a danger—the possible spread of "got." And other dangers: the spread of the abbreviation (in this short Air Letter of mine I find "Can't, Exam., aft., geog.") and of the "Uncio" type of word. And to conserve every millimetre one might tend to abolish the paragraph—fosterer of lucidity.

But now let us return in full sail with the pros. The tendency to Victorian underlining will be checked (I use my pen warily on this thin paper). The luxuriance of the feminine exclamation marks (quaint rows of soldiers) will be lopped too.

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