

CAUGHT UP IN A DICTIONARY

by G. R. Gilbert

I BELIEVE Samuel Johnson was responsible for the first English dictionary. Before that, people spelt more or less as the spirit moved them, and good luck to them, too. I feel that Dr. Johnson's efforts in starting something which has now standardised the spelling of the language were largely misplaced. The dictionary has placed our writing in chains—we can no longer express ourselves in our spelling. I know, for myself, that my spelling, when writing unguardedly, is decidedly irregular and is very expressive of my emotional state. But, of course, I have to tidy all that up before I can send it to anybody and I have to use a dictionary.

Once I used a modest pocket *Oxford* dictionary. It was handy, small enough to have on the table beside me, and seemed to contain all the words I ever wanted to spell. But when my father-in-law came down to live with us he brought his own dictionary with him. It was a book he swore by—all other dictionaries he maintained were inaccurate, ignorant, and misleading when compared with it.

"You use my dictionary and you'll never go wrong," Papa said to me when he found me searching through my pocket *Oxford*. "Those *Oxford* dictionaries," he continued contemptuously. "They're falsifying the whole English language!" Papa spoke in the tones of profound conviction. I admit I was impressed. If I had to use a dictionary then I would rather use the best.

"What about the size of your dictionary, though," I said rather weakly.

"The bigger the dictionary, the better it is," replied Papa firmly. "You'll

find everything you want in my Webster's. I'll bring it in."

So he brought it in to me. First, he removed the typewriter from the table to the floor and pushed the paper to one side.

"There you are," he said, laying the enormous volume down reverently. He smacked the cover with his hand. "Everything you'll ever want."

"Thank you," I said, as Papa went out, taking my pocket *Oxford* with him.

"You won't need this, now that you've got a proper dictionary," were Papa's parting words.

WELL—by stacking the Webster's in the far corner of my small table I managed to make room for the typewriter again. But, now, whenever I have spelling difficulties—which is pretty often—I have to place the typewriter on the floor and spread the dictionary out over the table top. There isn't room for the typewriter and a book which measures a foot by eighteen inches, and is eight inches through.

And I find that I'm not getting so much writing done now—but I'm spending far more time reading. The fact is, that once I have made way for the dictionary by placing everything else on the floor I feel disinclined to return to the status quo. Besides, I find Webster's Dictionary of absorbing interest. It is not only a dictionary—you could almost call it a complete reference library. I also find it comforting. It is leather bound, with the leather wearing slightly on the corners, the front cover has come adrift a little and requires careful handling, and best of all, it has that wonderful soporific smell that comes from old books.

Browsing through this magnificent old volume—2300 pages—I begin to feel

like the lotus-eaters. Time passes, work should be done, but I drift lazily from page to page discovering strange words and stranger illustrations—for the dictionary has thousands of steel engravings scattered through it.

I WILL admit it. Webster's *International Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1902, has become my drug, my happy escape from toil. There is something for every mood—if I ever determine to search immediately for a word I am always tempted into a hundred byways, I stray and am lost for hours.

There are facsimiles of the Great Seals of all the United States and Territories. I have studied those closely. Then come brightly coloured representations of the Flags of All Nations. I view these with a gentle melancholy, for so many of them are changed, indeed, many of them will never wave again—I become lost in the romantic past as I gaze dreamily at the flag of the Orange Free State, or of Serbia or Montenegro.

A little further on there is a steel engraving of the great man himself—Noah Webster. He looks a charming little man and he holds a roll of parchment in his hand.

But before I reach the dictionary proper, where the words are, I have to outflank a number of articles including a Short Life of Dr. Webster, a Short History of the English Language, a



Guide to Pronunciation (with illustrations of the vocal chords in the act of pronouncing vowels) and a list of amended spellings, none of which, I am glad to say, appear to have been adopted. It is no wonder that I rarely begin searching for the word I want until an hour or so has passed.

THE dictionary proper is a mine containing the most wonderful ores to me. The other day, being puzzled as to whether the word *inditement* had an "e" following the first "t," I consulted the Webster's. Some time later—after I had found *deopilation*, a word attributed to Sir Thomas Browne and meaning "removal of whatever stops up the passages," after I had inadvertently turned far too many pages over and discovered *smell-feast*, meaning "a feast at which the guests were to subsist on the odors of the food alone," I pulled myself together and managed to find *inditement* with a minimum loss of time. But then I strayed again. I turned back towards the end of the dictionary and spent a pleasant half hour browsing through the hundred or so pages of steel engravings of every possible subject. I lingered over the proof-reading symbols and their application, I examined the explanatory pages of musical notation, I stared at the anatomical drawings of two graceful skeletons, I gave time to consider the section illustrating "ships and nautical affairs."

Then, right at the end of the book I discovered for the first time, a couple of pages of advertisements for this, *The Australasian Edition of Webster's International Dictionary*. There were one or two well-known names listed, together with the testimonials of their owners. The Honourable W. Pember Reeves said: "The more I try the new Webster the better I like it. Complete without being cumbrous, compact yet in no way scanty, the *International Dictionary* is both sufficiently scientific for the scholar and handy enough for the hurried man of business."

Well—there you have it. That is what was thought in 1902. And, in the main, I agreed with Pember Reeves, except I considered that he must have been a very big man, physically, if he considered the dictionary to be "complete"

(continued on next page)

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

(Solution to No. 574)

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Clues Across

- A flowering garden plant.
- Equilateral but not rectangular parallelogram.
- Today brings a sycophant.
- The tortoise's rival hidden in 1 down.
- "The King's daughter is all within" (Psalm 45).
- According to the song it was used to buy chewing gum instead of a pickle.

- O! No, Sir! This is a prayer.
- With a map Nora shows a wide prospect.
- Flat-bottomed boat for transporting cows?
- Dishonest staff.
- Not at all respectable.
- Demons avert it (anag.).

Clues Down

- Hearten (anag.).
- Band of singers.
- Signs of distress from the boss.
- Hurry.
- Concerned with literature.
- Fervent.
- Chasm.
- Guardsman's head-dress.
- Study shape and adapt to pattern.
- Samuel Butler used an anagram of this word for the title of one of his books

- Tribute.
- Measured by steps.
- French term of endearment.
- In their wars against the Gods, the giants piled this mountain on top of Pelion, so that they could scale the heavens with greater ease.

No. 575 (Constructed by R.W.C.)

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