

Pleasures of the Dictionary

Much Fun from Spelling and a Good Home Game

By A. B. Chappell, M.A.



SOUNDS a little comic, doesn't it?—"Pleasures of the Dictionary." Like "Delights of Dentistry" or "Raptures of Rheumatism" of "Frolics of Famine," eh? But the sober fact is that there are great possibilities of pleasure in the dictionary. Indeed, it is the very book for jaded nerves. Its stories are so short, its subjects so constantly change, its information is so cut into snippets, that it beats "The Review of Reviews" and "Titbits" all to rags. And that is true even if some people haven't found it out yet. They should have found it out, for the dictionary, by reason of these qualities, seems just the book for this age.

Come to think of it, there is a great deal of real fun in words. Some of it is none the less welcome because it is quite unintended. Certain makers of words, like Lewis Carroll, can put quaintness deliberately into their creations, and even when they have little humour in themselves they can be put together in a way bound to evoke a laugh. But by themselves, just as they can be run to earth in a dictionary many of them are inherently funny.

Some are amusing because of a very simple quality—their length. A riot of unconscious humour runs through them. A wish to hear short words, in court if not out of it, was once voiced by Mr. Justice Sim. With fine scorn of the long word, he put deadly fear into a witness with: "Please don't say 'indicated,' say 'said.' There is no need for these long words. 'Said' is such a short word and 'indicated' such a long one. Say 'he said,' and tell us as briefly as possible what he said, but do not, please, for goodness sake, keep on giving us all those useless words." Bearing such a name, Mr. Justice Sim knew the worth of the short word. What a saving it must have meant for him—and others! Easy to say and taking almost no time at all to write, it gave lips much ease and must have saved many pints of good black and red ink. Alas for the Featherstonehaughs and the rest of their kind! But "for goodness sake" was going a long way round, wasn't it? Whoever coined that phrase must have had a sense of humour.

What joy is theirs—a joy never known by the profane who let slip a foul and stupid adjective at every breath, to fill up the gaps in their thought—who have, say, a good command of German verbs! They have at will a way of oral relief of much good service on occasion. The dalliers with points and lines and angles have a like refuge. Who has not heard of Daniel O'Connell and the fishwife whose tongue he silenced? She heaped oath on oath upon him in her efforts to overcome his teasing railery; but she was quelled at last. "Hypotenuse" and "parallelipipedon" dragged her out of her depth and drowned her Billingsgate. The modern chemist, too, has similar resources, and many other of the scientific fry.

A Great Example.

BUT the palm can be borne, if they desire it, by the fond dabbles in

classic lore. As to that, take this from the journal of Dr. Adam Clarke, under the date June 27, 1811:

We proceeded to Portadown. On the way I was told the following anecdote of the late Dr. Wilson, senior Fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, who, though a very grave man himself, was very fond of quizzing and puzzling the country people who came to inquire after their friends or relations at the college. One day, seeing a man standing in the court with a letter in his hand, gaping and staring about, and not knowing where to

are likely to be put to the candidates in the spelling bee; longer than that solemn example, so eloquent of the slippered, lolling, yawning creed it describes, "latitudinarianism." Its nine-syllabled enormity is beaten easily by a word of twenty-four letters in Eupolis and by one of twenty-nine letters in Aristophanes. Turning from Greek, you will find some intentionally laughter-provoking words in Latin, as in Seneca's superlative piled on super-

them. There is Chaucer's "octogamy" for eighth marriage, a feat surely demanding some distinction for its daring. Butler invented a word for a battle between a dog and a bear, "cynaretomachy," which seems a little superfluous. Fuller, using "avunculize" for "to follow in the footsteps of an uncle," was having a poke, but the word is still remembered.

Cowper made "extraforaneous" and Carlyle "gigmanity." The first is a long word for "outdoor." Cowper wrote: "Fine weather and a variety of extraforaneous occupations . . . make it difficult for me to find opportunities for writing." Carlyle's word goes back to Thurbell's trial. A witness said: "I always thought him a respectable man." "What do you mean by respectable?" he was asked. The answer was: "He kept a gig." Carlyle was tickled by the word "gigman" and gave it frequent duty to describe persons of poor culture but some accidental advantages; finally, with a stroke of his sardonic humour he herded many of us into "gigmanity."

By the way, when looking up some of these examples, I saw "jawbreaker" in a dictionary, and that word, appropriate at the moment, is certainly comic. Slang, of course, but the slang of to-day may become the classic speech of to-morrow; dictionaries of slang, full as they are of humour, are usually very learned works.

Why Not Invent a Word?

USING a dictionary, you will acknowledge the limits of your own grasp of language; but in itself a dictionary will quaintly help you to realise the limits in language itself. To-day I tried to find the clearest verbal description of "spiral," in the sense employed when we speak of a spiral staircase. The best was this: "A curve which winds round a cylinder like a screw." Simple, isn't it? Yes, deceitfully simple, for it pre-supposes mathematical knowledge of a cylinder, and for understanding of "screw" we are thrown back upon "spiral." But can you do any better with verbal definition? Try, with your hands in your pockets or behind your back, to tell your friends what a spiral staircase is. Better—for your amusement—get some friend, to try thus to tell you.



Mrs. Daisy Basham and Mr. Arthur Briggs, a popular Auckland duo. They will be heard next from IYA on August 2.

—S. P. Andrew, photo.

go, he walked gravely up to him and inquired what he wanted.

The man answered, "Sir, can you tell me where I may find Mr. Delahunte?"

"Yes," said the doctor: "do you see that building before you?"

"Yes."

"Then crucify this quadrangle and take the diameter of the plot beyond it, enter the opening before you, and ascend the ligneous grades; then turn to your left and you will find him either peripatouncing in his cubicle, dormitating in his lectuary, or perescopouncing through his fenestra."

The poor man, who understood nothing of this and remembered not one word but the last, said: "And pray, sir, what is the fenestra?"

To which the doctor replied: "It is an orifice in an edifice to admit luminous particles."

"Oh, thank you," said the poor fellow, and walked off more perplexed than before.

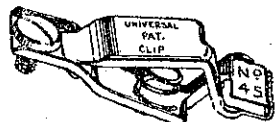
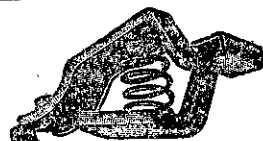
Isn't that delicious? What a name for a window, to say nothing of the rest!

The Humour of Length.

LONG words, comical in their length and structure, are found in many languages, longer, some of them, than

lative in "minimissimus" and "pessimissimus." Plautus has four or five consecutive lines of comic joinings of ill-assorted words. But let us get back to our English dictionaries. They hold many words with a laugh in them.

Some of these were not meant to be added to our language, yet they have stuck fast in it. Only in large collections of words will you find many of



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