

BURIED TREASURE

HARRY IRVINE

IN spite of its chosen title, this is no tale of a Spanish prisoner; nor am I to tell you of that far-off West Indian Isle, where some pirate buried his ill-gotten gains, leaving as clue a map written in blood on the dried skin of his latest victim—a clue that can be followed up only by a golden beetle dropped through the eye of a skull! The treasure of which I am to speak lies far more readily to hand; the only tools needed for its disinterment are the lust of the search, some little application, and—in lieu of a spade—a Dictionary. Nor is there any particular novelty in calling attention to the value of this spoil that lies so near the surface and so easy of ravishment; a book of words, synonyms, and tags of verse, to be found on the shelf of any reference library, is known by the title of “Thesaurus”, which that same dictionary will tell you is a Greek word meaning “Treasure.”

Let us consider for a moment what is the meaning of a “word”. The New English—more usually known as The Oxford—Dictionary¹ will tell us that it is “any sound or combination of sounds (or its written or printed symbol) recognized as a part of speech, conveying an idea or alternative ideas, and capable of serving as a member of, the whole of, or a substitute for, a sentence.” Like many other things that in their time were epoch-making discoveries, we now accept words as the commonplace necessities of everyday life; and if we meet a word whose meaning is unfamiliar, we turn with confidence to our unfailing authority, certain of enlightenment. For any idea that can occur to us we find an apt word ready to our hand: in the very rare cases where coinage is necessary, we proceed to combine two existing words of received meaning to make a combination symbol-sound that shall make our new meaning plain.

Yet think what fun this game of word-making and word-taking must have been in its infancy. The selection of a sound by the word-maker to convey a simple and familiar idea: the delighted applause of the word-takers as they recognized the

¹ While this article is in no sense an advertisement for that most excellent work, I will state at once that Sir James Murray's compilation is to be my final Court of Appeal.

aptness of the symbol, and adopted it for their own use; the almost inconceivable difficulty of explanation, if the new coinage was not recognized! Imagine a member of the dawn-tribe arriving breathless and minus his war-club at the tribal fire. It is evident that he has run away from something. He is greeted with a chorus of some such sound as "Funk", adopted as a symbol for the idea of fear. How is he to explain the Socratic difference between fear and prudence, or formulate such an association of ideas as:—

He who fights and runs away
Shall live to fight another day.

But such fascinating speculations will lead us too far afield. Let us rather concern ourselves with the aptness, the beauty, and the splendour, of words as we have received and know them. And of all the mines wherein to dig for this buried treasure, none can be more rich than our own English tongue. The happenings that have gone to the making of it are exactly those happenings from which have grown the character and institutions of the nation that uses it. An abnormal mixture of alien bloods, wherein were combined for practically the first time the barbarities of Northern Europe with the Mediterranean civilizations, gave at its infancy an unprecedented wealth of material. From that material a language has grown; not on any logical plan of selection, but rather in obedience to some sturdily individual sense of preference and expediency. And as the Empire has extended, so has tribute been paid by the languages of all the earth, but still with no fixed plan of taxation or homage. Let us be prayerfully thankful that it is so. One association of ideas there is, for which there is no English word: it is that concept which is known as "Americanization" to a sister hybrid nation which has learnt to worship the god of the Standard Product. Where is the logic—many would say where is the sense—of using for the tonsorial artist the word "barber" coming through the French, when the thing on which he exercises his art is known as a "beard" from the Teutonic? Yet it is just such lack of logic which makes our treasure-house so fascinating a medley of precious things.

As is most meet, our poet of Empire has recently become the bard or official praiser of the speech he serves so well. In his last book, Mr. Kipling writes:—

The miracle of our land's speech—so known
And long received, none marvel when 'tis shown!

We have such wealth as Rome at her most pride
Had not, or (having) scattered not so wide;
Nor with such arrant prodigality
Beneath her any pagan's foot let lie.
Lo! Diamond, that cost some half their days
To find, and t'other half to bring to blaze:
Rubies of every heat, where through we scan
The fiercer and more fiery heart of man:
Emerald, that with the uplifted billow vies:
And sapphires, evening remembered skies:
Pearl perfect, as immortal tears must show;
Bred, in deep waters, of a piercing woe:
And tender Turkis, so with charms y-writ
Of woven gold, Time dares not bite on it:
Thereafter, in all manners worked and set,
Jade—coral—amber—crystal—ivories—jet,
Showing no more than various fancies; yet
Each a Life's token of Love's amulet!
Which things, through timeless arrogance of use,
We neither guard nor garner, but abuse:
So that our scholars—nay, our children—fling
In sport or jest treasure to arm a King:
And the gross crowd, at feast or market, hold
Traffic perforce with dust of gems and gold.

This wealth he calls our "Birthright". Like most birthrights, it is often but lightly held, and all too often traded for a mess of pottage.

The only branch of our language that is formal, reasoned, and precise,—in which we may with some confidence postulate the form of a yet-to-be-coined word—consists of those compounds which the scientists have assembled to subserve the ends of their classifications. Naturally they borrow from the language of that civilization which made a god of analysis and classification—the Athenian Greeks. Worshippers of an imagined paganism would present to us a picture of a classical Greece entirely populated by beautiful persons in flowing garments, usually depicted as somewhat scanty but always immaculately clean, wantoning through fields and groves in a perpetual search for unsophisticated happiness and license. Yet the Greeks of whom we have actual record were immensely industrious and tirelessly analytical. In thought, their beacons were logic and philosophy pursued by the narrow paths of the Socratic Dialectic: in art, proportion and symmetry were their ideals, so that for even so irregular a thing as the human frame the perfect shape is still to be found stated in the exact measurements of a Grecian statue: sport and the instinct of play found its apotheosis in the rules and formalisms of the Olympic

games. They were always searching for some new thing, but only to pin and fix it like a butterfly in a show case. There is a village in Lancashire where on one particular day in the year, and for all the day, they play a game of football in which there are no bounds; the ball is kicked by any and all of the villagers across miles of countryside. If a Greek had invented the "gridiron" of American football, he would have died happy. Closely parallel is the divergence of spirit between our language and the Greek.

With the genius for beauty behind and through formalism which seems to have been an inseparable accident of Athenian culture, the compounded words of Greek origin achieved a vocal sonority and an intensity of imagery and symbolism that have never been excelled. I do not speak of "telephone", "telegraph", "therapeutics", and "thermometer"; but rather of the constant epithets of Homer. "Rosy-fingered" is a poor substitute for *rhododaktulos* with its connotation of the pink flush around the tips of, and between, the closed fingers of a hand with sunlight or fire-light behind it, crowning the denotation of the flame-fingers of the groping dawn. "Wine-dark" will serve for the sea; but what of *poluphloisboios*? We are driven to the periphrasis of "blown about with many winds." Among such compound words, scientific as well as beautiful, an honourable place must be given to "onomatopoeia." With due reverence for sonority it expresses the quality of the first and simplest words—those in which the sound echoes the sense. Many of them are sound names: "boom", "howl", "crack", "clash", "clatter", "tick", "hurly-burly", and the like. A particularly pleasant one is "barbarous", for a person who says only "Ba-ba-ba." You will find the noises of animals among them, as "hoot", "buzz", "twitter", "croak"; but not, as a rule, the animals themselves, except by transference and in dialect; as the "moo-cow" of child speech, or the Scottish fantasy by which the turkey that "gobbles" becomes the "bubbly" or the "bubbly-jock." As these appear to be the most natural and primitive words, one might expect a larger proportion of natural and primitive objects, such as animals, trees, grasses, and bodies of water, to possess such names; but if such names existed in primitive languages, they have not survived to our tongue. It has been fabled that Adam, at the end of a day's hard work at his task of naming the animals, took Eve by the hand, and led her forth to expound his system. She saw in the dusk a shape of beauty and terror, whose stripes blended with the herbage of a desert garden: and she said to Adam:—"Why do you call that a tiger?" To which Adam, stroking his beard, replied:—"Well, it looks like a tiger,

and I don't see what else you would call it." The story would have both more or less point if one substituted "frog" for "tiger"; and certainly the language is much enriched by Kipling's transliterated word—"oont"—so exactly expressive of the personality and general characteristics of the camel.

Words for the tactile qualities, again, are largely onomatopoeic; there are "smooth" words; "sleek" words; "furry", and even "fuzzy", words; "keen" and "cutting" words, with an "edge." But once we get outside the realm of definite sound-echo, the individual quality of words is largely a question of personal preference. We have heard of the old village woman who struggled up from her death-bed to go to church, because in the Lesson for the day there occurred that blessed word, "Mesopotamia." (Again, one may note in passing, a Greek compound). And so it is not my purpose, within the brief limits of this article, to attempt a list of beautiful words, or to indicate my own preferences in this direction. For those who seek to form their taste, I can suggest no better mentor than that supreme master, in his day, of the spoken word—Clifford Harrison. And particularly I would commend to their attention that chapter where he speaks of the Breath of God—the "spirit" and "inspiration" words; the common derivation throughout being "Spiro", "I breathe"; the primary function of life. But at this present I would rather give some slight account of a casual half-hour devoted to the hunting of buried treasure.

Very lovely among onomatopoeic words are the "murmuring", "whispering", "susurrous" words; and a perfect example of the use of the sound-echo is to be found in the lines:—

I heard the ripple washing in the reeds,
And the wild water lapping on the crag.

The most famous instance of an onomatopoeic phrase is probably the Vergilian Hexameter of the Horse:—

Quadrupedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum.

Can one even faintly catch this in translation?

Breaking the dust of the sod with the shock of a hoof-beat quadrupled.

And with the thought of hexameters comes the memory of the school rhyme—a *memoria technica* for remembering the scansion of the hexameter-pentameter couplet:—

Down in a deep dark ditch sat an old sow, munching a beanstalk:
Out of her mouth proceed *harmonious* melodies.

Intone this on your deepest bass note, with particular attention to the false accents on the last three words; and you will achieve an effect of Maeterlinckian mysticism that will surprise you.

Incidentally, it is the rigid and heavy accent or stress upon one particular syllable of an English word that, coupled with its variety and flexibility, makes the English language so suitable for metrical use. With the exception of markedly dactylic rhythms, no metrical combination seems impossible or even alien to the English tongue. Yet this very quality makes it less suitable for musical settings, except in the ballad—*ti-tum, ti-tum*—form. The language is flexible, but the individual words are not. They dictate the necessary stresses so sternly, and in the hands of a good poet vary them so frequently from line to line, that the musician is baffled. And when it comes to translation from an equi-syllabic language like the French, the difficulty becomes an impossibility. Take the line:—*Est-ce plaisir, est-ce tourment?* It translates itself. "Is it pleasure, is it torment?" But in the musical setting the musician has emphasized it:—*Est-ce plaisir, est-ce tourment?* which the French words allow. Try to sing the English words to this beat; it cannot be done. One can get over it by:—"Is it a joy, is it a woe?" But when the lines are less simple, more allusive?

Son cœur est un lúth suspendú:
Sitót qu'on le touche, il resónne.

To approximate to the meaning with any sort of poetical expression, one would have to go round about:—

Hang a lute upon the wall!
People idly passing by
Touch its strings; it will reply.
So his heart, to one and all.

As for substitutive English words for the French words, that could be sung as stressed by the music—well, try it!

But to return to our Dictionary excavation! One of the "spirit" words is "spiracle." In looking for its first—its derivative—meaning, we find to illustrate that meaning, a quotation:—"A soule is like to God a spiracle of life." For a secondary meaning, we find "a volcanic vent-hole." What a collocation of ideas! From this one word there suddenly flashes to us the marvellous message:—"A soul is a vent-hole for the volcano which is God!"

Looking down the page—and it is the torment, as well as the joy, of this hunting that it is almost impossible to follow steadily

a single trail, so many and so alluring are the by-ways—the eye falls on “spinel.” What is a spinel? Particularly, it appears, a valuable kind of ruby. Rubies are spinels or Balas—the latter being the name of the district in Samarcand whence they come. Why “spinel”? The dictionary goes no further than Old French. Greatly daring, I would hazard a connection with “spina”, a thorn. Prick your finger with a “spine”, and you have at once called to life a ruby. Again the illustrative quotation allures:—“Rings—three with spynels; oon with a crapaud.” Part of the game is trying to get ahead of the dictionary. Memories arise of a cant name, Johnny Crapaud—surely applied to a Frenchman. Compare “Froggy.” We are right: “crapaud” proves to be a toad; in our quotation, a “toadstone.”

The toad, ugly and venomous,
Bears yet a precious jewel in its head.

And suddenly we find that “The old arms of France were the three toads or crapauds.” Now is the Frenchman “Froggy” because he eats frogs, or “Crapaud” because of the ancient arms of France? Or, by a zoological confusion, have the two ideas merged? Or were the ancient arms of France a totemistic deification of a favourite article of diet?

We have spoken of “cant” or “slang”, through which so much our language grows. What is “slang”? Originally connected with “sling”, it first meant an instrument for hurling missiles—in particular, a gun otherwise known as a serpentine or culverin. Also—presumably because of the shape of a sling—“a strip of land, long and narrow.” Not till 1756 do we find the modern meaning appearing in any known writing; and it is first defined in 1774:—“There is a language we bailiffs sometimes talk in, called slang.” The language of the thief-taker, rather than of the thief! And we can trace the old meaning; for it is an essential of slang as we know it that, like a sling-shot, it should fly straight and hit the mark. Moreover, in thieves’ cant, the word “slang” means “watch-chain” or “fetters”: in both these meanings perpetuating the thongs of the parent sling.

Meaningful slang—the kind that hits the mark, survives, and ultimately achieves respectability and admission into the most serious literature—is one thing. But there is the purely foolish slang, jargon or catchword. If we are “students of the Balatronic dialect”—a dialect so called from the “Balatrons” or professional buffons who invented most of it—we shall perhaps refer to its users as:—“Blunderkins, having their heads stuffed with nought

but balderdash." And "balderdash" would appear to be a mixture of wine and milk, or of wine and beer, or even of all three,—as incorrect and offensive to the epicure as slang to the literary purist. And yet, just for once, it would be an experience to drink a "balductum": "A posset composed of hot milk curdled with ale or wine."

Let us return to our guns. Almost all the early guns were named after snakes or hawks. Most of us have seen an early cannon, with serpent jaws modelled at the end of the muzzle. Yet "serpentine" to most of us connotes curves, rather than the undeviating straightness that is a necessity of a true piece of ordnance—a straightness that is recognized in the word "cannon", derived from "canna", a rod or cane. Be that as it may, the early names are "serpent", "serpentine", "culverin"; this last from "colubrinus", a snake. There are the two "busses": the "harquebus" or "hook-gun", and the "blunderbus" or "thunder-gun"; but the very fact that these names come through the German, while England had guns at least as early as Germany, proves a later derivation. The word "gun" itself is the oldest of all, if the only derivation that can be guessed for it is right; since it was in 1330 that we read of "a great catapult (balista de cornu) which is called Lady Gunilda." The first military cannon known in England were barrels of wood, hooped with iron; they were used at the siege of Agincourt—perhaps at Crécy—and caught fire at the first discharge! If, however, "serpent" with its long round body is possible for a gun, what about "saker", "falconet", and "musket"; all different kinds of hawks? One can only suppose that, as "fowling-pieces", the smaller guns supplanted the hawks, whose chief employment had been to kill other birds for sport or food?

The "falcon" knits up with another weapon. The bird was so named from the sickle-like shape of its hooked claws. And this word "falx" for "sickle" or "reaping-hook" becomes also the curved sword known as a "falchion." So that, instead of beating their swords into ploughshares in compliance with the Scriptural precept, these mediaeval fighters twisted their reaping-hooks into swords and guns. The "musket", the smallest gun, was named after the smallest hawk—the sparrow-hawk—and this bird in turn was named from its fly-like markings: a fly being "musca" and a smaller fly "muscato." And speaking of mosquitos, we learn from Purchas, writing of the "Pilgrims" in 1625, that the natives had "their bodies all painted red to keep away the biting of the muscetos." So it was the famous New Jersey mosquito that made the Red Indian "red."

“Bomb” and “bombard” are explosive sound words. But “bombast” is the downy seed of the cotton plant—cotton-wool—stuffing or padding—and so “turgid talk.” Another kind of wool-pack or wool-sack was a “fadge”, also used for a flat loaf or bannock, or a fat individual. And the verb, “to fadge”—you will remember that Viola asks herself:—“How will this fadge?”—means to fit closely, to “cotton to” a thing or person. A variant of “fadge” is “fay”, which we now use for “fairy”; and it comes as a shock to discover that these “fays” were originally “The Fates.” Can we imagine those grim ladies flitting around on wings of gossamer?

Did you know that “dumb-bells” were reproductions of the handle used by bell-ringers to peal the chimes; and that an early form of the “daily dozen” was such dumb or silent bell-ringing? If you have ever tried to take your place in a team of skilled bell-ringers, and have lasted out for even the first fifty or so of the permutations of a Triple Bob Major, your shoulders and back will tell you that you need practice with the silent bells. Addison used this as his form of “skiamachy”; a word that translates itself exactly as “shadow-boxing.” And while we are among the D’s, what about Coleridge’s “Damsel with a Dulcimer”? This last is “a stringed instrument struck with hammers”, the earliest form of piano. It is “incorrectly used in the Bible”—O potent Dictionary, that dares to criticize the accuracy of such translators!—as the translation of a word that really means “a kind of bagpipe.” And the Greek word for this is *symphonia*! What would our Symphony Orchestras say to one who told them that they were, strictly speaking, “a kind of bagpipe”? The dulcimer is probably “dulce melos”, “sweet sound.” Yet I have a great fondness for the possibly less correct, but very imaginative, derivation from “doulz de mer”, which we may translate “sweet surf-sighing.” Incidentally—and wherefore, not even the Oxford Dictionary knows—this versatile word is a “kind of bonnet”. Early pianos bring us to the next form of that instrument; a pair of virginals. Popularly this name stands with “Virginia” and many other Elizabethan coinages as a tribute to England’s Virgin Queen; she was supposed to have been much addicted to playing on this instrument. But with an unexpected flash of humour, the dictionary gives us another connection with the high-bred delicacy that the word “virginity” connotes, when it tells us that the Virginals were “a square, *legless*, spinet of the 16th and 17th centuries.” How popular the instrument would have been with that fastidious lady who felt compelled to drape the legs of her piano!

Mark Twain, finding "carbuncle" defined as "a kind of jewel", tersely remarked:—"Humour is out of place in a Dictionary"! Yet there are not infrequent flashes. A meaning of the word, "one" is "relatively few"; and this meaning is illustrated by the saying:—"God is One." Could monotheism survive the statement that God is Relatively Few? The study of the number-words brings us to many "humorous" points, using this epithet in its Elizabethan sense, which may be roughly rendered "illogical." As ideas go, numbers are a late invention. It is said that a primitive tribe in Australia had no number-word above "five"; if there were more objects than there were fingers or toes, and that on one hand or foot alone, the primitive brain reeled before immensity, and called them simply "a lot." As soon as numbers began to be accurately perceived and computed, the science of mathematics followed; and scientific terminology is usually precise, even where the science is less exact. Yet the languages from which scientists largely derive go together for a brief space, and then diverge with startling abruptness. Greek and Latin, with their derivative tongues, including in this case the distant cousin—German—march together with "one", "two", "three." But from that point? "Tessares"; "quattuor"; "four"—"pente"; "quinque"; "five." Why this utter lack of unison? Even the scientifically constructed compound words are pulled this way and that: there are few "tetra-'s compared with "quadri-'s, but more penta-'s than "quingu-'s. The "tessera" of mosaic work, which is "non-square," is almost the only word in English that leads quite straight to the Greek word for four.

Good hunting!