

it irritates me so to think of them. One infuriating manoeuvre is to correct your pronunciation. Another is to make a terrible ado about your name and address--even when it is quite a well-known name.

After I have bought things at a shop I am quite unfit for social intercourse. I have to go home and fume. There was a time when Euphemia would come and discuss my purchase with a certain levity, but on one occasion....

Some day these shopmen will goad me too far. It's almost my only consolation, indeed, to think what I am going to do when I do break out. There is a salesman somewhere in the world, he going on his way and I on mine, who will, I know, prove my last straw. It may be he will read this--amused--recking little of the mysteries of fate.... Is killing a salesman murder, like killing a human being?

THE BOOK OF CURSES

Professor Gargoyl, you must understand, has travelled to and fro in the earth, culling flowers of speech: a kind of recording angel he is, but without any sentimental tears. To be plain, he studies swearing. His collection, however, only approaches completeness in the western

departments of European language. Going eastward he found such an appalling and tropical luxuriance of these ornaments as to despair at last altogether of even a representative selection. "They do not curse," he says, "at door-handles, and shirt-studs, and such other trifles as will draw down the meagre discharge of an Occidental, but when they do begin----

"I hired a promising-looking man at Calcutta, and after a month or so refused to pay his wages. He was unable to get at me with the big knife he carried, because the door was locked, so he sat on his hams outside under the verandah, from a quarter-past six in the morning until nearly ten, cursing--cursing in one steady unbroken flow--an astonishing spate of blasphemy. First he cursed my family, from me along the female line back to Eve, and then, having toyed with me personally for a little while, he started off along the line of my possible posterity to my remotest great-grandchildren. Then he cursed me by this and that. My hand ached taking it down, he was so very rich. It was a perfect anthology of Bengali blasphemy--vivid, scorching, and variegated. Not two alike. And then he turned about and dealt with different parts of me. I was really very fortunate in him. Yet it was depressing to think that all this was from one man, and that there are six hundred million people in Asia."

"Naturally," said the Professor in answer to my question, "these investigations involve a certain element of danger. The first condition of curse-collecting is to be unpopular, especially in the East, where

comminatory swearing alone is practised, and you have to offend a man very grievously to get him to disgorge his treasure. In this country, except among ladies in comparatively humble circumstances, anything like this fluent, explicit, detailed, and sincere cursing, aimed, missile-fashion, at a personal enemy, is not found. It was quite common a few centuries ago; indeed, in the Middle Ages it was part of the recognised procedure. Aggrieved parties would issue a father's curse, an orphan's curse, and so forth, much as we should take out a county court summons. And it played a large part in ecclesiastical policy too. At one time the entire Church militant here on earth was swearing in unison, and the Latin tongue, at the Republic of Venice--a very splendid and imposing spectacle. It seems to me a pity to let these old customs die out so completely. I estimate that more than half these Gothic forms have altogether passed out of memory. There must have been some splendid things in Erse and Gaelic too; for the Celtic mind, with its more vivid sense of colour, its quicker transitions, and deeper emotional quality, has ever over-cursed the stolid Teuton. But it is all getting forgotten.

"Indeed, your common Englishman now scarcely curses at all. A more colourless and conventional affair than what in England is called swearing one can scarcely imagine. It is just common talk, with some half-dozen orthodox bad words dropped in here and there in the most foolish and illogical manner. Fancy having orthodox unorthodox words! I remember one day getting into a third-class smoking carriage on the Metropolitan Railway about one o'clock, and finding it full of rough working men. Everything they said was seasoned with one incredibly

stupid adjective, and no doubt they thought they were very desperate characters. At last I asked them not to say that word again. One forthwith asked me 'What the ----'---I really cannot quote these puerilities--'what the idiotic cliché that mattered to me?' So I looked at him quietly over my glasses, and I began. It was a revelation to these poor fellows. They sat open-mouthed, gasping. Then those that were nearest me began to edge away, and at the very next station they all bundled out of the carriage before the train stopped, as though I had some infectious disease. And the thing was just a rough imperfect rendering of some mere commonplaces, passing the time of day as it were, with which the heathen of Aleppo used to favour the servants of the American missionary. Indeed," said Professor Gargoyle, "if it were not for women there would be nothing in England that one could speak of as swearing at all."

"I say," said I, "is not that rather rough on the ladies?"

"Not at all; they have agreed to consider certain words, for no very good reason, bad words. It is a pure convention; it has little or nothing to do with the actual meaning, because for every one of these bad words there is a paraphrase or synonym considered to be quite suitable for polite ears. Hence the feeblest creature can always produce a sensation by breaking the taboo. But women are learning how to undo this error of theirs now. The word 'damn,' for instance, is, I hear, being admitted freely into the boudoir and feminine conversation; it is even considered a rather prudish thing to object to this word. Now, men,

especially feeble men, hate doing things that women do. As a consequence, men who go about saying 'damn' are now regarded by their fellow-men as only a shade less effeminate than those who go about saying 'nasty' and 'horrid.' The subtler sex will not be long in noticing what has happened to this objectionable word. When they do they will, of course, forthwith take up all the others. It will be a little startling perhaps at first, but in the end there will be no swearing left. I have no doubt there will be those who will air their petty wit on the pioneer women, but where a martyr is wanted a woman can always be found to offer herself. She will clothe herself in cursing, like the ungodly, and perish in that Nessus shirt, a martyr to pure language. And then this dull cad swearing--a mere unnecessary affectation of coarseness--will disappear. And a very good job too.

"There is a pretty department of the subject which I might call grace swearing. 'Od's fish,' cried the king, when he saw the man climbing Salisbury spire; 'he shall have a patent for it--no one else shall do it.' One might call such little things Wardour Street curses. 'Od's bodkins' is a ladylike form, and 'Od's possles' a variety I met in the British Museum. Every gentleman once upon a time aspired to have his own particular grace curse, just as he liked to have his crest, and his bookplate, and his characteristic signature. It fluttered pleasantly into his conversation, as Mr. Whistler's butterfly comes into his pictures--a signature and a delight. 'Od's butterfly!' I have sometimes thought of a little book of grace-words and heraldic curses, printed with wide margins on the best of paper. Its covers should be of soft red

leather, stamped with little gold flowers. It might be made a birthday book, or a pocket diary--'Daily Invocations.'

"Coming back to wrathful swearing, I must confess I am sorry to see it decay. It was such a thoroughly hygienic and moral practice. You see, if anything annoying happens to a man, or if any powerful emotion seizes him, his brain under the irritation begins to disengage energy at a tremendous rate. He has to use all his available force of control in keeping the energy in. Some of it will leak away into the nerves of his face and distort his features, some may set his tear-glands at work, some may travel down his vagus nerve and inhibit his heart's action so that he faints, or upset the blood-vessels in his head and give him a stroke. Or if he pens it up, without its reaching any of these vents, it may rise at last to flood-level, and you will have violent assaults, the breaking of furniture, 'murder' even. For all this energy a good flamboyant, ranting swear is Nature's outlet. All primitive men and most animals swear. It is an emotional shunt. Your cat swears at you because she does not want to scratch your face. And the horse, because he cannot swear, drops dead. So you see my reason for regretting the decay of this excellent and most wholesome practice....

"However, I must be getting on. Just now I am travelling about London paying cabmen their legal fares. Sometimes one picks up a new variant, though much of it is merely stereo."

And with that, flinging a playful curse at me, he disappeared at once

into the tobacco smoke from which I had engendered him. An amusing and cheerful person on the whole, though I will admit his theme was a little undesirable.