

# CURSING AND SWEARING

## A LONDON SILLY SEASON TOPIC.

WHAT AN ENGLISH NEWSPAPER IS DOING TO REFORM THE NATION'S MORALS—EXPLETIVES IN HIGH AND LOW LIFE—AMERICAN OATHS, AS WELL AS AMERICAN BEEF, IN ENGLAND.

LONDON, Aug., 28.—Many interesting subjects have from time to time been debated in the leading London newspapers during the Parliamentary and legal vacation, which is dubbed the "silly season." The topic is selected in the editorial department, and some clever member of the staff is deputed to open it in a "Letter to the Editor." The article is placed in prominent type, and in a leading position, and, if the subject is a popular one, correspondence at once flows in. The ordinary letter-writers are supplemented by judicious, professional contributions. The *Times* has thus, over a period of years, added materially to our miscellaneous knowledge of social and dramatic subjects; but it has been left to the *Telegraph* to start a series of letters on English habits, which will surely confirm the impression of "the foreigner" that the average Britisher is a coarse, profane person.

### "POPULAR WAYS AND WORDS."

The correspondence was commenced on Monday and threatens to go on for some time, percolating through innumerable columns. Offering much curious criticism of English manners, and bristling with interesting facts about a certain habit of swearing which is not confined to England, but is characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon generally, I propose to make a study of this notable newspaper contribution to wayside history. The initiatory writer complains that whereas five and twenty years ago you might have rowed on the river or walked on the banks of the Thames anywhere between Richmond and Cookham without having your ears polluted by foul language and filthy oaths, nowadays "revolting bestiality" in words salutes you at every turn. "Not only is the name of the Almighty taken in vain with the most unpardonable thoughtlessness, but words are used which, if they have any meaning at all, charge a man's companion with crimes of unutterable depravity. I cannot mention the revolting originals for whose hideous adjectival force a compromise is offered in 'sanguinary,' 'bleeding,' or 'blooming.'" This cursing and swearing, it is declared, is not confined to the lowest classes, nor to the Thames; it is common at every street corner in London, and men do not have a monopoly of this disgusting habit. The writer has heard a respectably-dressed woman addressing her infant with epithets so loathsome and abominable as to make him horrified at the future moral destiny of the child. "I would venture to say that there is not a delicate ear that is not daily outraged by the unspeakable blasphemies and hideous indecencies of London language, particularly on Sunday, when lounging, loafing, and idling are prevalent; but it says very little for our education and its refining influence when the charms of nature—the trees, the flowers, and the pleasant calm of the River Thames—cannot check this trick of foul-talking which has so grown from bad to worse that ladies are compelled to abandon the river altogether, rather than expose themselves to the indignities that are unintentionally forced upon them." This picture is a little colored, but I can indorse the general truth of it; and it is surprising that "Cato" (one of the *Telegraph* leader writers,) does not know that there is an act of Parliament under which this offense may be severely punished and is frequently dealt with, not often in London, it is true, but in country districts. The Police rarely take action against swearers in London, where, by the way, the synonym for "sanguinary" has become so common an "adjective," that it is almost used by the lower classes as a term of endearment. "Blast," which is generally thought in America to be the Englishman's favorite expletive, is not half so common nowadays as the equivalent for "sanguinary." When "Cato" talks of 25 years ago as bearing favorable comparison to the present day, I should be inclined to think he does us an injustice; for in my boyish days filthy epithets were much more common than they are now, and a century ago the newspapers printed words in full which are considered indecent now even in a whisper. I have in my possession *Berrow's Worcester Journal* of a century and a half back, in which a bestial crime was described, in large letters, in a word now only used by the filthiest and most profane swearer. The literature of the past, the novels of Fielding and his contemporaries, show that our fathers were much less particular than we are now as to their epithets, adjectives, and expletives. It is also to be remarked that some of the common people use profane, filthy, and blasphemous language thoughtlessly and without intention of wrong or offense. Some years ago, when I lived in the North of England and saw a great deal of colliery life, I heard men and women address their children in, to them, terms of affection which other ears might have interpreted into charges of abominable crimes.

### THE CHURCH AND EUROPEAN SWEARERS.

To return to the voluminous correspondence referred to, and from which I have strayed into my own experiences, (and mean to do so again, by and by,) I find a very interesting letter from "A Wanderer in Many Lands," (probably Mr. Edwin Arnold, "Cato" being Mr. Scott,) who declares that the Church originally set the fashion of indulging in bad language in the British Islands, "and our ancestors, being pious people, thought they could not do better than adopt the forcible vocabulary of their spiritual Pastors. Many of our most startling oaths are derived from the elaborate forms of excommunication put together by eminent ecclesiastics of the Middle Ages, and are animated by the comminatory and withering spirit that prompted the successors of St. Peter to execrate, as well as to persecute, all those who ventured to doubt their dogmas or disobey their decrees. It is, in reality, the *furor ecclesiasticus* that breathes such vehemence into our national swearing." This writer might have given a capital illustration in the use of the leading expletive of London regarding which "Cato" protests so well and so eloquently. It was in the old days ecclesiastical to swear "by Christ's blood and wounds," a solemn, serious, binding oath. The modern curse, so common, as I said before, that it is almost a term of endearment, is certainly a legacy from the Church. But "A Wanderer in Many Lands," declares that English blasphemy can stand no comparison, either for intensity of purpose or ingenuity of diction with that which streams in uninterrupted flow from the mouths of Italians, or Spaniards, Russians or Roumanians. "It is," he says, "notorious that Spaniards of both sexes and every social class scarcely pronounce a sentence without calling upon the name of an object which, in the days of old, was believed to be a paramount preservative against the evil eye; in all probability they have unconsciously kept up the traditions of that strange *cultus* practiced in the Iberian Peninsula. Has 'Cato,' I wonder, ever listened to a Russian policeman, speaking his mind in Russian terms to an *istvostchik*, or to a Roumanian plowman driving his bullocks over a piece of uncommonly hard ground?" Some of the correspondents defend the artisan classes of England, and give examples of their kindly dispositions; others declare that the middle classes are free from the vice of blasphemy, and a city clerk declares that his companions and the whole world of clerks rarely swear; but the majority of the writer's gloat over their experiences of the cursing capacity of the British rough, and hope, now that the subject is being stirred, something will be done to check what is nothing less than a public outrage. One man says since 1876 he has had a sign posted over his store bearing the words, "Friend, don't swear; it is a vile and sinful habit," with, he is sure, a very favorable result in his street. It will be a fresh puzzle to non-English-speaking foreigners if this new sign, like "Stick no Bills" and "Commit no Nuisance," should become popular in the English metropolis. The address sent home by the Frenchman, *Rue Stick no Bills*, is a Joe Miller, but much more probable than some of our modern anecdotes, and much more innocent. What will *amateurs* make of the legend of the moral English shop-keeper? My experience of that class of her Majesty's subjects is, that if anything is calculated to make you swear in London, it is a transaction with a London shop-keeper. Was it so common for the customers of the store-keeper in question to go out cursing, that he painted up the mild exhortation, "Friend, don't swear?"

### THE CURSE, POLITE AND HUMOROUS.

"A Philosopher" (probably Sala or Godfrey Turner) points out that foul language is bred from three thoroughly human characteristics, namely, bitter feeling, bad taste, and the desire for emphasis. The last is a dialectical and inno-

cent craving; women underline their letters; uneducated men interlard their conversation with oaths. Good society, smitten with this need of emphasis, makes use of words whose absurdity and extravagance fulfill this purpose of italicizing meaning. "Stunning," "thundering," "quite too awfully lovely," are mild instances of such semi-cultivated hunger for emphasis; and the mitigated oaths of drawing-rooms, "gracious me," "goodness gracious," "by Jove," "confound it," and the like, testify to our deep necessity for colloquial notes of exclamation. "Philosopher" then discusses the "cad," and says that in all India there is no such being to be encountered as a cad. Three thousand years of permeating culture and popular philosophies, together with the deference born from the presence of despotic powers, quite prevent the appearance of that swaggering, noisy, independent nuisance known in England as "Arry." But there is an educational process going on now through the School Boards, which is sending home in every child a missionary of good manners and clean speech. Pending this cleansing work, the writer thinks a good deal might be done by the State, the pulpit, and public opinion to put down foul and shameful expletives, and he says the Americans "seem to be on the right track by their way of adopting vague, but satisfying, terms of this sort. The wildest surprise may express itself by 'Jerusalem!' the deepest contempt pour itself forth in 'scallawag!' and other mental moods have harmless vent in such words as 'Vamoose,' 'Kafoozleum,' and 'Eternal.' We English want *Bob Acres* back to invent for us some brand-new and honest exclamations which garrulous humanity might carry like flowers between the lips, not squirt, like chewed quids, from soiled and fetid mouths." None of these numerous correspondents have drawn attention to swearing from an international point of view, as between England and America, or drawn any comparison of the cursing habits of the two countries. Now, it has often struck me as a curious fact that, whereas the English curser and swearer draws his strongest epithets from the language of crime, and his most offensive smiles from sewers and filthy objects, the American generally apostrophizes his Maker. The American "oathist" (by your leave, Mr. White,) is profane; the English curser is filthy. A popular lady, recently dead, who was well-known in America, and equally respected in England, had an oath of her own. At least, I never heard any one else use it. Perhaps it was an adaptation; for she admired America and Americans. Whenever she was greatly surprised or very angry she invariably exclaimed "Great Jones!" Another friend of mine always cries, "God-frey Daniels!" The expletive "Great Jones" always seemed to comfort poor Mrs. Howard Paul, and it seems to me that it offers at least the basis of a compromise which is not without suggestion in the Irish oath of "Tare-an-ouns." A correspondent who dates from Clapham is not willing to have the American continent set up as an example of virtue. "Philosopher," he says, never traveled in the United States or associated much with the people, "who, for the profusion of their curses, I think outstrip all competitors." It must be confessed that American oaths are rather elaborate in their construction, but I can tell the gentleman who writes from the classic regions of Clapham (have you ever been landed at Clapham Junction for the first time, en route for anywhere? That mysterious depot has ruined more souls by cursing than any institution on earth,) that you shall stand for five minutes at the corner of a London street where there is a drinking bar and hear more blaspheming and filth uttered in anger and in ordinary conversation than you could collect in New-York, Boston, or Philadelphia in a week.

### THE LITERATURE OF CURSING.

I should not wonder if some industrious press-man does not, in the midst of this outbreak against the swearing habits of Englishmen, give us a volume on oaths, their origin and practice, and such a compilation would be very interesting, dating back to the earliest ceremony of making an oath, and going through the various forms of ecclesiastical cursing, so fatally burlesqued in the "Ingoldsby Legends," so dramatically adapted in the play of "Leah." The Crusaders swearing by their sword; the Cavaliers by their mistresses; *Don Quixote* by *Dulcinea*; the old stage hero by his halidame—all offer subjects for "word pictures," and a glossary might be given for reviving, in place of the present objectionable epithets and expletives, some of the literary gems in the way of swearing to be found in old plays and novels, such as "Gad-zooks," "Zounds," and "Gad's-life." One of the *Telegraph's* student correspondents has already looked up the law of the matter and an admirable literary illustration of it. "If your readers will refer to Bickerstaff's play of the 'Hypocrite,' they will observe that in act 2, scene 1, *Mau-worm*, speaking to *Cantwell*, says: 'I believe, Doctor, you never know'd as how I was instigated one of the Stewards of the Reforming Society. I convicted a man of five oaths as last Thursday, at the Pewter Platter, in the borough, and another of three, while he was playing tap-ball in St. George's Field. I bought this waistcoat out of my share of the money.' This tends to show that even in those days of very hard swearing provision was made to abate what was found to be a public nuisance; and it also shows that the informer obtained a portion of the fines." Let me add that the act is 19 George II., chap. 21, and that on conviction, the profane curser or swearer may be fined, and in default of payment imprisoned for 10 days. When I was a boy, studying for the law, under a high provincial officer, many cases used to come under my notice, where the act was put in force. It was always a constable who either gave evidence, or "informed," and I observe that the act sets forth that the offense must be committed "in the hearing of a constable." London Police officers can hardly be acquainted with this fact, or with the further one that the fines go partly to the informer and partly to the poor. One of the most tedious, to some solemn, businesses of opening an Assize Court is the reading of the royal proclamation against vice and immorality, in which profane swearing is set forth as a degrading and punishable vice, which all good subjects are to eschew and assist to put down.

### UNSPOKEN EPITHETS AND EXPLETIVES.

Several of the writers on swearing say that it obtains in high circles, and they seem to think that it is absolutely necessary to have strong verbal outbursts to express scorn and disdain, as well as sneering and defiance. They are wrong. They have for many months in each year the finest example in the world how to curse and swear and express scorn, rage, contempt, disdain, without once using an offensive word. At St. Stephen's, the Opposition call Ministers quacks, liars, knaves, beasts in the softest and politest language imaginable; and Ministers retort on them as idiots, blackguards, gutter-snipes, idiots, and — fools, without overstepping the ordinary courtly expressions of the gentlest society. The Parliamentary form of calling people "sanguinary bleeding —s" is music itself when spoken by Gladstone, and in the mouth of Beaconsfield it is like an extract from "Chesterfield." And yet no men hit each other harder than these; and it is on record that O'Connell "shut up" a Billingsgate fish-wife by calling her a somewhat mixed scientific term. Rather than be guilty of blatant, noisy blasphemy, or, indeed, rather than offend the public ear by the semblance of a curse, would it not be better to fall back upon the facial expression of the feelings which we have inherited from our nimble brothers in the monkey-house of the Zoological Gardens? Darwin will instruct us. "Scorn and disdain," he says, "as well as sneering and defiance, may be displayed by a slight uncovering of the canine tooth on one side of the face." Or there is the smile of contempt of the Gaika and the Zulu. "The partial closure of the eyelids, as Duchenne insists, or the turning away of the eyes or of the whole body, are likewise," the Professor declares, "highly expressive of disdain," and announce plainly enough that the despised person is "not worth looking at or is disagreeable to behold." This physical form of contempt may be recommended not only to Conservatives and Liberals in England for the next general election, but also to Democrats and Republicans throughout the United States. If it is not sufficiently demonstrative, there is another silent, but equally effective, way. Darwin says a "common method of expressing contempt is by movements about the nose or round the mouth; but 'the latter movements, when strongly pronounced,' he says, also 'indicate disgust.' What more can political or literary opponents desire? The great philosopher, even, enters into technical details of the completest manner in which these emotions may be expressed. I venture to elaborate the instructions, so that there may be no excuse for those who have noses and lips not practicing facial expressions of contempt, rather than the verbal method which is found so troublesome and objectionable in London, now that nobody is in town, and "the big gooseberry," the "showers of frogs," the "three-headed sheep," and "five children at a birth," are considered to be played out. "The nose," Darwin says, "may be slightly turned up." That depends, of course, upon the strength of your contempt and the length of the organ in question. In a silent game of swearing on these lines, of course, the long and flexible nose might get the better of the short and stumpy one. But you may also "wrinkle the nose," and as "the turning of the upper lip" follows the action of the nose, the person who is perhaps a little short of nose, (as there are always compensations in nature,) may have an unusual allowance of lip.