

TOO MANY NOUNS ARE OFF THE JOB

As all careful users of our language are aware, English is fast working free from its grammatical resources. The whole subjective mood is as good as cast aside. In all moods the second person singular appears now only in poetry and in prayer. Ordinary usage is wearing down the useful distinction between the verbal nouns in -ing and the present participle; few speakers now show any sense of difference between such statements as "He watched the man's running" and "He watched the man running." Our mother tongue is steadily approaching a state in which the relations between a speaker's ideas are not expressed, but

are left to be guessed at from the mere order of his words. As if these damages were not enough we are rapidly blurring out the distinction between nouns and adjectives. No one raises a voice in protest, for instance, when a metropolitan journal perpetrates a clause like "Materials trust inquiry delay"—in which extraordinary arrangement the first noun modifies the second, these two the third, and all three the fourth. In names of commissions and corporations, in trade-marks, in colloquial and technical description, the destructive practice of making nouns do adjectives' work is fast spreading. The causes of this injury are plain enough: not only haste and laziness, but chiefly the free and easy genius of our language. Too many of our words have long given thought only a blanket instead of trim harness. "Iron", for instance, may be noun, verb or adjective, according to the chance of the moment. We

used to distinguish between "wood" and "wooden," as a "wood shed" and "a wooden shed"; but the day of such niceties has almost passed. We should smile at a man who said a "leathern belt" for a "leather belt"; "gold" and "silver" have long since driven "silvern" and "golden" out of use. And yet if English is some day to be the ruling speech for the people of the earth why should not every one take pains to keep it at its best—strong, sinewy, flexible, yet exact, simple yet discriminative? In the long run, no people's thoughts have been much distincter or more analytic than the grammar of the language in which they were worded. And the race that makes linguistic screwdrivers of its chisels and nail-sets of its awls, must find itself presently with no tools fit for a craftsman's use. Perhaps it is too late to save our needed subjunctive, but at least we can check the needlessly promiscuous use of nouns for adjectives



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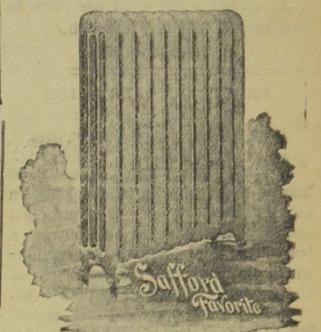
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MANY JOKES DATE BACK TO BIBLICAL TIMES

Someone once said that there are only two jokes in the world, the drunk joke and the mother-in-law joke, says the Edinburgh Cootchman. There are many varieties of the two themes, many ways of presenting the two supremely comic figures; but when we want to make each other laugh we always go back either to the drunk man or to the mother-in-law.

The statement is an exaggeration. There are other jokes. The curate's egg joke, for instance, which has nothing to do either with drunkards or mother-in-law, and the more recent Better 'Ole joke. But it remains to be seen whether either of these jokes will survive, will amuse generation after generation as the two great jokes do. For the drunk man and the mother-in-law are very old jokes. They have proved their worth by provoking laughter for thousands of years and they are still the most popular jokes there are. A comedian impersonating a drunkard is sure to laugh, and a public speaker, finding his audience is getting bored, has only to say the words "mother-in-law" to provoke full-throated merriment.

Drunk Man Joke the Older
Of the two, the drunk man joke seems to be older. The Spartans knew it, and used to make slaves drunk so that their sons, laughing heartily, might avoid the vice through fear of ridicule. The Jews knew it. Their ancient literature is singularly poor in comedy. There are not half a dozen jokes in the Old Testament, but the drunk joke is there. Isaiah, a grim old puitan of a statesman, made it, and made it in excellent form. The mother-in-law joke is not so old, but it goes back to classical times. We find it in Plutarch. "A man once threw a stone at a dog and hit his mother-in-law. 'Not such a bad shot after all,' he said." That is Plutarch's version of the joke. It is so neat and epigrammatic that I think the joke itself must have been old in his time. He could scarcely have achieved such perfect form unless he had been working on a long familiar idea. But ancient as these jokes are, they have lost none of their freshness for us. Time, it appears, cannot stale their infinite variety. We may fairly suppose that they will last as long as our race does. America may go dry, but the great comic tradition of the drunk man will survive even in Texas. The Bolsheviks may abolish marriage, but men will always remember what marriage was because they will always laugh when anyone says "mother-in-law." We may picture to ourselves the last survivors of our race shivering in icy caves while the sun smoulders to extinction. They will, no doubt, cheer the desperate hardship of their winter by inventing fresh quips about drunk men and mother-in-law.

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