Vizelly

Let's Look it Up in the Dictionary

By SPENCER ARMSTRONG

ILLUSTRATED BY WYNCIE KING

HIGH above the bedlam of one of Manhattan's busiest thoroughfares, and just around the corner from the beautiful little plaza of Madison Square, is our word shop. It isn't very pretentious, our little shop; I know of many others whose artistic appointments and decorative graces are far more alluring. We have no velvet curtains as a back drop for our wares. They are merely words. No suave clerk will usher you across deep carpets to overstuffed divans. Your heels will click against nude concrete floors, and the rustle of paper is the nearest approach to the swish of silks and satins.

You might imagine from this that our word shop is a barren little abode. But it isn't. It is the rendezvous of the romances of time. It is the trysting place of almost all the hopes, hates, conquests and accomplishments of mankind. Into our little shop, at every sweep of the clock, pour the doings of the day from every point of the compass.

Instead of the walls of our shop being tinted in the latest fashion's decree, they are lost in tiers of books, stacks and stacks of books, worn and seasoned, some by hands that have been cold and rigid for centuries. But though their appearance may be ragged, within the oft tattered covers is almost the gamut of human knowledge. And here, when the shutters of the word shop are thrown back in the morning, convenes one of the high courts of the English Language.

As a tribunal of review, every word candidate desiring admittance into permanent speech must pass before the justices.

The court convenes.

"Here's a new word," announces a clerk.

"No, that's not a new word," interjects one of the justices. "It was well known about London in Queen Elizabeth's time."

"Been seen much since?" asks the chief justice.

A perusal of the files reveals slight usage.

"Once or twice," the clerk responds.

"Much too lazy. To the wastebasket with it! Next!"

"'Flapper' is the next candidate for entry into the dictionary," the clerk continues. "We have a record of her appearance in England about 1690, but she wasn't very popular. Her modern counterpart is a very pretty sprite, however, bubbling with pep and enthusiasm, and most popular. We have found her smiling at us from the covers of all the magazines, preening in the advertisements, using up miles of columns in the public prints, and the heroine of many of the best sellers."

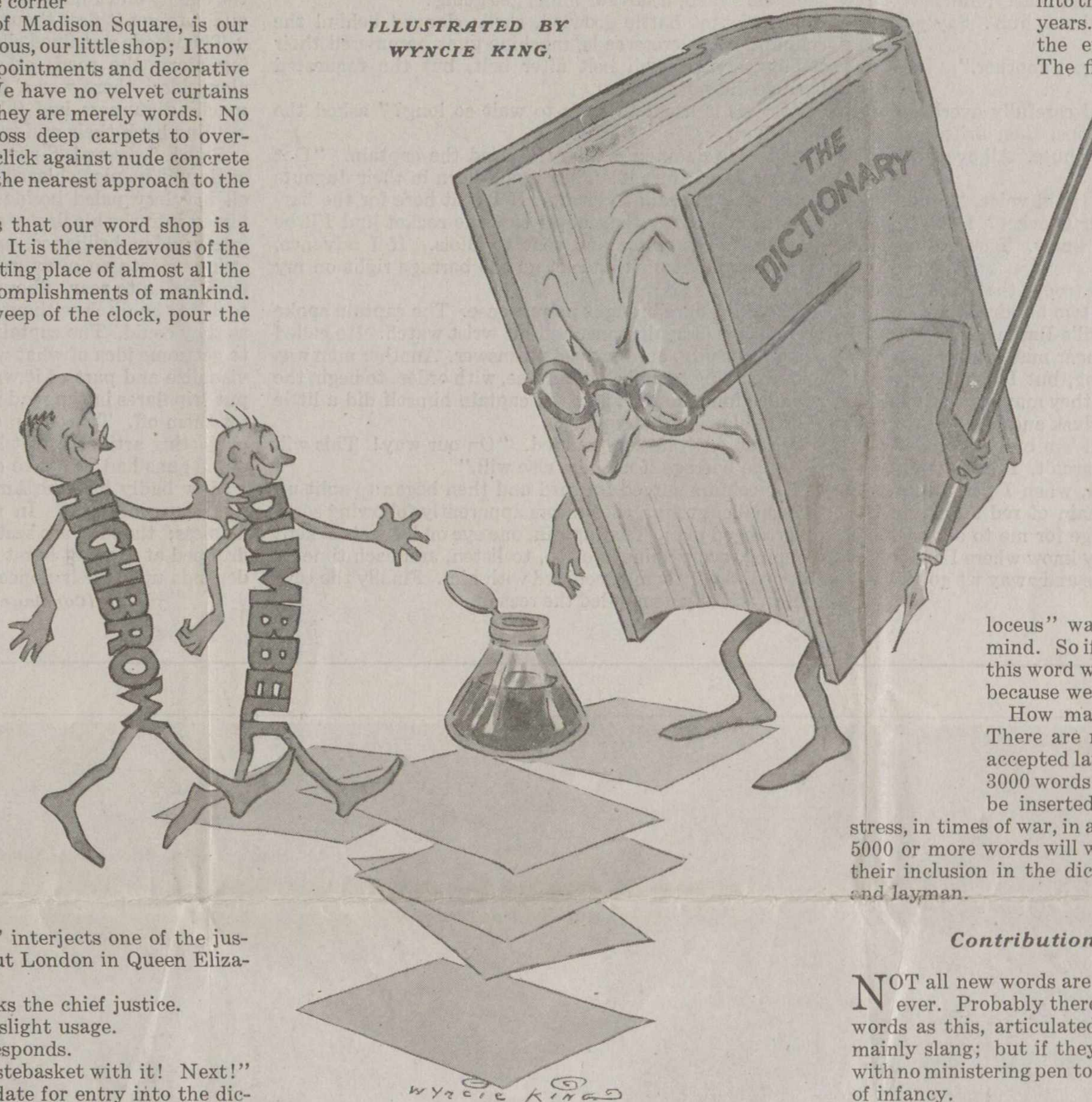
But before the chief justice has an opportunity to ask for a decision, a chorus of ayes rips the cloak of dignity that is purported to enmantle the bench.

Of course, it really isn't a court. It's just a word shop with judicial functions, filled with desks and files and telephones and typewriters like any other office, peopled by lexicographers, readers, stenographers and clerks; only, our business is to hunt for and pass upon new words, to keep the dictionary up to date.

Good Little Words That Never Arrive

A STAFF of readers and correspondents is continually searching the press of the English-speaking world, the newspapers, magazines, technical periodicals and books for virgin words. When an apparent new one is discovered the first task is to ascertain if it is actually new. We first seek its pedigree in Cockeram's Interpreter of Hard English Words, published in 1623; in Blount's Glossographia, of 1656; or perhaps in Samuel Johnson's famous dictionary of the vintage of 1755.

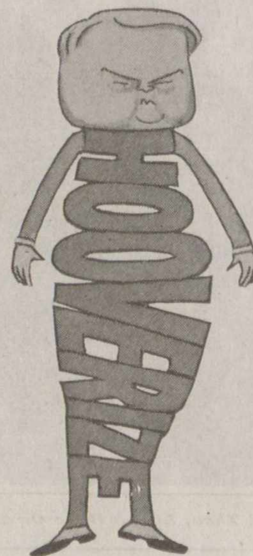
Unfound in any of the many English lexicons of the past, we deem it may be of foreign extraction. For this purpose we have dictionaries in Sanskrit, Maori, Hausa, Hebrew, Urdu, Afrikander, besides those of modern languages from French to Japanese. We have, too, complete dictionaries embracing lace making, draperies, politics, petroleum, ethics, botany and a myriad other specific subjects. Then also there are encyclopedias from almost every nation, English-speaking and alien. So it is a foxy word, parading as a new one in an attempt to elude its past, that can escape the net of this investigation.



Yet Some Slang Terms May Enter the Dictionary—in Time. "Dumb-Bell" and "Highbrow," for Instance, Seem Sure to be Recorded

But if the new word is bona-fide, freshly minted, we take it into our care for five years, place it on file. We watch its use by the people and tally this against its record during the probationary period. Also, in this interim, numerous letters will arrive at our office asking for the meaning of the intruder into the language. At the end of the interval the record of the neophyte is computed, and if its score shows a popular demand, the new word is awarded a place in the dictionary.

Incorporation in the dictionary, though, is no signal for a word to become indolent. It must work. We have a list of more than 50,000 words now in our word shop that have shown little or no activity in the language for a long time. We keep a tally on these words, too, that have been abandoned by the public, for possible ejection. It is a sort of waiting list—waiting for the ax. Infrequency of use means deletion from the dictionary.



Not all new words have to wait five years to get into the dictionary, however. Sometimes the acclaim of a new vocable is so universal and widespread that its inclusion is assured at once. "Flapper," for instance.

Then again some good words never become popular. We have a pet in our shop, orphaned by the world of letters, that has been hungering for admission into the dictionary for more than twenty years. It is a charming little word with the euphonious title of "meloceus." The first and last time we have been able to discover "meloceus" in literature is in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray.

It seems to be a name for a precious gem capable of detecting criminals. If so, in this one word is a theme for a series of detective yarns that might shake the laurels of a Sherlock Holmes. But nowhere can we find it repeated—never used again.

We have searched the lapidary's lexicons of all ages, we have combed the encyclopedias of many countries, we have sought the assistance of gem lovers from Johannesburg to Maiden Lane; but to no avail. Always we receive the negative answer—unknown. The lips that might offer enlightenment are now still, and we can only suppose that "meloceus" was the coinage of an imaginative mind. So if any writer feels inclined to foster this word waif, we shall be more than happy, because we must soon abandon it.

How many words are coined annually? There are no figures. In normal times the accepted language grows at the rate of about 3000 words a year—of sufficient currency to be inserted in the dictionary. In days of stress, in times of war, in an era of discovery and invention, 5000 or more words will win the favor of the public so that their inclusion in the dictionary is demanded by scholar and layman.

Contributions to the Language

NOT all new words are recorded in the dictionary, however. Probably there are at least three times as many words as this, articulated or printed, minted every year, mainly slang; but if they are not stillborn, they soon die with no ministering pen to aid them through the vicissitudes of infancy.

Who coins these new words? Today most of the orthodox new words emanate from the research laboratories where men are toying in crucibles of thought to conceive a new idea. Once born, it needs a name and forthwith a new word arises. The medical, chemical and electrical fraternities sponsor the greatest galaxy of freshly minted speech. Nor are these words all technical.

Radio, for one branch of electricity alone, has fattened the dictionary with more than 5000 new words and compounds. The fan chats of neutrodyne and audiofrequency as glibly as a technician, and the dictionary must contain them.

Discovering something previously unknown to man, the scientists inadvertently enrich the language. If the find proves extraordinary the name of the inventor or discoverer is frequently used to commemorate the deed in our speech. Well-known examples of this cognizance in the realm of electricity are "ohm," "watt" and "ampere." In other fields are "hooverize," "galvanize," "bessemerize," "gerrymander" and "spoonerism," celebrating in lay speech the doings of Messrs. Hoover, Galvan, Bessemer, Gerry and Spooner.

There have been many exponents of this art of creating expressive terminology. They have come from almost every station in life, but naturally those who command the public spotlight have their mental offspring registered sooner.

Theodore Roosevelt, reflecting the explorer in his character, minted new words with an agility that kept lexicographers ever on the *qui vive*. His best-known contribution to the language perhaps was "chinafy," coined to express the complete helplessness to which pacifism would reduce America. He could have used the synonymous adjectival root, sinetic, already in the language; but he created the more forceful term that would catch on quicker. When the Government was building the Panama Canal he commanded much space in the press crusading to "sanitate" the Zone. This was heralded as a new word, but upon investigation we found that it had been introduced into speech as early as 1811, though used infrequently since.