

"HAD RATHER."

THERE is perhaps no better established form of speech in the language than this. It is certainly one of the oldest and best authorized. It occurs in the earliest writings of the language and may be traced thence through the successive stages of English literature to the present day.

It has become popular of late years to condemn this form of speech, and suggest another instead. The following from a comparatively recent and extensively used school grammar, will serve as a sample of the criticisms offered concerning it. "I had as lief cross the ocean as not." *Had* cross is evidently a corruption; for the auxiliary *had* should be combined with the participle *crossed*, and not the root of the verb *cross*. The meaning, as well as the correct form of this expression, 'I would as lief cross,' etc. Parse, therefore, as follows: *Had* cross is a corruption for *would* cross, potential mood, imperfect tense, etc. *I had* may have come thus to be confounded with *I would* in consequence of the frequent abbreviation of both expressions into *I'd*." This is plausible, and may satisfy those who know no better. But it is ridiculously erroneous and unworthy of any writer on grammar.

The latest instance of this kind of criticism that we have seen has just appeared in the January number of the *Galaxy*. Richard Grant White, in an article entitled "Language according to Sample," says: "Nothing, among the few enduring certainties of language, is more certain than that *had* expresses perfected and past possession. How, then, consistently with reason, and with its constant and universally accepted meaning in every other connection, can it be used to express future action? A perception of this incongruity and a consequent uneasiness as to the use of these phrases as [*sic*] becoming common, and it is safe to say that they will, ere long, begin to be dropped in favor of a more logical and self-consistent phraseology. *Had* rather will probably yield to *would* rather, and *had* better to *might* better. We confess we are not surprised at finding an utterance like this coming from one who professes to regard the English language as a "grammarless tongue." At the same time, it indicates that he is not altogether convinced of its grammarlessness. He wants "a more logical and self-consistent" phrase than *had* rather. Why? Because of what seems to him to be an "incongruity," a want of grammatical propriety in its use. And yet we are surprised that one who, as a grammatical critic, ought to be thoroughly acquainted not only with the principles of the language, but with the true character of apparently anomalous though well established forms which he undertakes to criticize, should indulge in such crude and inconsiderate speculations.

The whole difficulty as to the propriety of saying "had rather," "had better," "had as lief," etc., arises from regarding *had* as an "auxiliary verb" in the common acceptation of that term. In a certain sense, no doubt, it is an auxiliary. *Dare*, in the sentence "I dare do it," and *is said*, in the sentence "Hanno is said to have reached the shores of Arabia," may be called auxiliary verbs. So *had*, when used in the forms after consideration, may be said to be an auxiliary; that is, it aids to complementing the phraseology which embodies the predicate of the sentence. But this is a wider sense than that attached to the grammatical term "an auxiliary verb," which *had* in this connection is generally regarded as being. Hence, because we may not with propriety say "had go," "had leave," "had be," "had cross," these would be "logical" critics and teachers would have us avoid saying, with Sir Thomas More, "He had leuer go some other way;" or with Addison, "Had we not better leave this Utica?" or with Henry Clay, "I had rather be right than be president;" or with Junius, "I had as lief be a Scotchman," or with ninety-nine out of a hundred English-speaking Americans, "I had as lief cross the ocean as not." The meaning, in these instances, may be as well expressed by *would* or *might* or by *had*; but this is no proof that *had* is an "auxiliary," and hence illogically and inconsistently used. In the sentence, "I found that I had to do it," who ever considers *had* as an "auxiliary?" And yet we can say instead, "I found that I must do it." In like manner, "You ought to go," is equivalent in meaning to "You should go," and "He that was, and is, and is to come," equivalent to "He that was, and is, and will come." This is no proof, however, that *ought* and *is* before an infinitive, any more than *had* in the previous example, are auxiliary verbs commonly so called.

Having once supposed that *had* is an auxiliary, and that as such it cannot properly be used in connection with the root-form of another verb, the next step was to account for its introduction and misuse. Hence it was pronounced a "corruption." This, however, is a mere assumption, based upon the fact that *would* sometimes may be made to supply the place of *had* with seemingly better grammatical grace. All this assumption is countenanced by the fact that, in common parlance, both *had* and *would* are frequently pronounced as 'd. To one who has not inquired into the matter, this assumption, as we have already said, has every appearance of truth. But it is as erroneous as it is groundless. The fact that, in sentences like these, "You had better try to sleep," "We had better change our quarters," *would* cannot be substituted for *had*, ought to have awakened a doubt as to the correctness of this theory, and to have led to further investigation.

Such investigation might have been shown that neither *would*, nor even *might*, is always equivalent to *had* in this connection. In very many cases, perhaps generally, it is. But take examples like the following: 1. "The most meddling of tattling old women knows when she may venture to repeat Mrs. Grundy's opinion, and when she had better not."—*Boyd's Leisure Hours*. Here *had* better not is equivalent to *ought* not or *should* not. Neither *would* nor *might*, nor even *should*, will fill the place of *had* alone, and express the meaning. 2. "He had better not make any innovation in it."—*Prescott*. Again, neither *might* nor *would* could be substituted for *had*. *Would* do possibly might be; and yet *had* excels that in brevity and expressiveness. 3. "A lesson which requires so much time to learn, had need be early begun with."—*Government of the Tongue*. (Need here is an adverb, corresponding to *better* in the foregoing examples.) *Had* need is equivalent to *ought* or *should*. So in the following examples: "Thou hadst need [shouldst] send for more money."—*Twelfth Night*, ii, 3. And again:

"We had need [should] pray,
And heartily, for our deliverance,
Or this imperious man will work us all
From princes into pages."—*Henry VIII*, ii, 2.

Neither *would* nor *might* would answer here. Even *should* is not equivalent to *had*, but to *had* need. So in other instances. But these are sufficient to show that *had* does not always find an equivalent in *would* or *might*, and can hardly be expected to be supplanted by them.

In this connection it may be interesting to some to note the following exceptional examples, differing from the preceding both in use of *had* and in the form of the verb that follows it, but still presenting an instance of the correct use of *had* rather:

"You shall wish the fiery Dane
Had rather been your guest again."—*Marmion*, II,
xxx.

Here *had*, of course, is equivalent to *might* have. But had the poet, under the idea that *had* rather should be *would* rather, written

"You shall wish the fiery Dane
Would rather been your guest again;"

what "a logical and self-consistent phraseology" we should have had "*would* rather been!" But we are thankful that Sir Walter's instincts were more trustworthy than some people's generalizations are.

Had, says Mr. White, always "expresses perfected and past possession." Let us see. "I have *had* this cold for more than a week." Here present possession is evidently implied. But it would be the sheerest nonsense to say that possession is the present possession of a "perfected and past possession." The cold is the thing spoken of as possessed, and *have had* predicates its present as well as past existence, a possession begun in the past, but still continuing, unperfected. Without the *have*, it is true, the present continuance of that possession would not be expressed. But this is not the point. What we need to say is that, if that possession were a "perfected, past" possession, it could not be brought up into present time by the coupling with *had* of *have* or any other word. The fact that such a combination as *have had* can be made, and used to denote a possession still continuing, proves all that we claim; namely, that *had* does not of necessity, "constantly and universally" denote "perfected, past possession," a possession not consistent with or admissible in present time.