

Here we have a man who was contemporary with Milton, who had read and studied Chaucer and Spenser and the works of the great Shakespearian drama, calling his native tongue "*ill-chosen stone*," material that cannot last, and that must bring down into dust and nothingness any thought and skill that may have been put into it—nay, going so far as to say that an English author writes in "*sand*," and that nothing that has a chance of immortality can be written in a tongue that is "daily changing." This contempt of the literary class found its ready counterpart among the learned, who unanimously neglected the study of their native language, and who left to half-educated or utterly uneducated men the task of codifying the laws of English Grammar, and of raising a standard by which to judge between what was good and what was bad English. It is true that such men as Ben Johnson and Milton wrote English grammars for the young; but both left their books on this subject quite incomplete. For good or for evil, moreover, we have no Academy, nor do we seem likely to have one; although it is pretty plain that a learned body of this character would have made the work, both of the schoolmaster and of the pupil, more easy, more definite, and more successful. Till within forty years ago, any systematic view of the laws and organism of the English language has been left pretty much to quacks, whose ignorance and incapacity have been surpassed only by their bad taste. And even to-day, the domain of knowledge occupies only a small corner of the subject, and still leaves a wide region for individual fancy and subjective opinion to wander about in at their own sweet will. A most amusing example of this occurred not long ago. Dean Alford published, in *Good Words*, a series of unconnected notes on the English Language, under the title of "The Queen's English."

These notes were subjected to a sharp rattling fire of criticism from Mr. Washington Moon. As these two gentlemen came before the public in the attitude of authorities on a subject about which everybody thinks he knows something, and as there was no want of dogmatism or positiveness in their oracular utterances, it might have been supposed that they had made a study of the English Language, of its history, and of some of its most remarkable phases. Or it might have been expected that they were so well read in the authors of at least one period, and that their tastes and ears were so highly cultivated that they could detect a false note or an illegitimate idiom with unerring sense. Nothing of the kind. Both of these gentlemen—Arcadians both—present us with subjective prejudices instead of objective knowledge—with *I should think* and *I believe*, instead of *This is the custom* and *This phrase has always been used*; and a discussion on a noble growth like the English Language degenerates into a personal squabble between two writers in a magazine. The two following facts will enable us to form a sufficient estimate of the capabilities and claims of these gentlemen to sit in judgment on the language. The Dean, after stating that the word *its* is not to be found in the Bible, adds the following wild guess—as a substitute for a piece of information which he might have found in a dozen books that have been published within the last ten years:—"The reason, I suppose, being, that possession, indicated by the possessive pronoun *its*, seemed to imply a certain life or personality, which things neuter could hardly be thought of as having." Now the ignorance in this sentence is simply complete. I was going to say that every schoolboy knows—but it is the literal fact that many schoolboys know, for the fact is stated in several schoolbooks—that the true reason for the absence of the word *its* from our translation of the Bible is the very sufficient one that the word *its* did not exist at the time that translation was made. Mr. Moon, on the other hand, devotes a long discussion, and an appendix besides, to the question of the correctness of the phrase *It was I*, or *It was me*; and he sagaciously comes to the conclusion that, if the phrase is in answer to such a question as *Whom did you see?* and if the answer is made in the form *It was me you saw*, then *me* is rightly in the objective case, for it is governed by the verb *saw*. This is hardly credible; but it is to be read in Mr. Moon's book.

Through several pages, both of text and appendix it seems never to have entered his mind that [whom] *you saw* is a sentence of itself, and cannot govern or have anything to do with any word in the principal sentence *It was I*. Here, then, on the one hand we have ignorance that might have been cured by the reading of a book so widely known and so popular as Archbishop Trench's "*Study of Words*;" and, on the other, blundering that a village schoolmaster could have corrected,—erecting themselves into authorities, and giving forth their decisions *ex cathedra*. Of course, the narrower the field of knowledge, the wider the plain over which fancy can wander; and these gentlemen might well complain that arithmetic and geometry are no longer "*matter of opinion*," for they might then display in these regions original and imaginative powers quite as astonishing. Ignorance like this is, of course, fast disappearing; but there is still much to do. And such errors seem to keep their hold in schoolrooms and on school-books longer than anywhere else; and it requires more force to dislodge them from these haunts than from books that have a circulation among what is called the general public.

The two things usually taught in schools under the name of English, are *Grammar* and *Composition*.

I. I need not say a word about such books as those of Lindley Murray or William Lennie. I believe they still linger about in a few dark places; but the small remainder of their days is numbered, and it is hardly possible that they can trouble "*ingenuous youth*" much longer. But they have left their evil mark both upon school-books and upon teaching. They have left a heritage of ill in bad logic, stupid metaphysics, rules that are unnecessary or inapplicable, definitions that are not convertible, distinctions that are unintelligible, and divisions and subdivisions that perplex, confuse, and annoy the mind of the learner. It may fairly be doubted whether these two books have not caused more mental anguish than has been produced by the guillotine, and whether they have not weakened and disgusted very many more minds than they have educated or edified. Among other diseases, they have inoculated writers of grammars with a mania for divisions and subdivisions that leads them and their readers into the queerest labyrinths. For example, I find in a little grammar, otherwise sensible, published the other day, the following division of Adverbs into classes.—Adverbs of *time*, of *place*, of *manner*, of *causation*, of *affirmation*, and of *negation*. Very good; there is, so far, no great harm done. But we are not let off with this; the writer at once goes on to say:—"Perhaps the following classification may be more acceptable to some Teachers:—Adverbs of *quality*, of *affirmation*, of *contingency*, of *negation*, of *explaining*, of *separation*, of *conjunction*, of *interrogation*, of *pre-eminence*, of *defect*, of *preference*, of *equality*, of *inequality*, of *gradation*, of *in a place*, of *to a place*, of *toward a place*, of *from a place*, of *time present*, of *time past*, of *time future*, of *time indefinitely*, of *time definitely*, of *order*, AND of *quantity*!! This author knew his public. He well knew that Schoolmasters and Teachers are the most overpaid and underworked body of men in the kingdom; that they do next to nothing, and have almost nothing to do; and that they would welcome as mere sport the duty of drilling this array of distinctions into the brain of a lad, and of pumping them out of him again day by day—to their amusement and his profit—by an almost interminable host of "*never ending, still beginning*" questions. Another writer, more popular and more able than the last, but almost as much infatuated by this mania, who tells us in his preface that his "*work is practical rather than strictly scientific*" (as if there were even *one* man in England just now who could write a scientific grammar, still less a scientific grammar for schools), divides adverbs into nine classes, and conjunctions into sixteen. Among these are adverbs that express *manner by quality*, *manner by degree*, and *manner by affirmation*—whatever these ideas may mean. Among the conjunctions are conjunctions of *purpose*, of *condition*, of *concession*, and so on. Now, I respectfully submit to this experienced audience, whether such distinctions and divisions as these have any place in grammar at all. It seems to