The Devil's Dictionary

Ambrose Bierce

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THE DEVILâ€™S DICTIONARY

by Ambrose Bierce

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The Devil's Dictionary was begun in a weekly paper in 1881, and was continued in a desultory way at long intervals until 1906. In that year a large part of it was published in covers with the title _The Cynic's Word Book_, a name which the author had not the power to reject or happiness to approve. To quote the publishers of the present work:

"This more reverent title had previously been forced upon him by the religious scruples of the last newspaper in which a part of the work had appeared, with the natural consequence that when it came out in covers the country already had been flooded by its imitators with a score of 'cynic' books--_The Cynic's This_, _The Cynic's That_, and _The Cynic's t'Other_. Most of these books were merely stupid, though some of them added the distinction of silliness. Among them, they brought the word 'cynic' into disfavor so deep that any book bearing it was discredited in advance of publication."

Meantime, too, some of the enterprising humorists of the country had helped themselves to such parts of the work as served their needs, and many of its definitions, anecdotes, phrases and so forth, had become more or less current in popular speech. This explanation is made, not with any pride of priority in trifles, but in simple denial of possible charges of plagiarism, which is no trifle. In merely resuming his own

the author hopes to be held guiltless by those to whom the work is addressed--enlightened souls who prefer dry wines to sweet, sense to sentiment, wit to humor and clean English to slang.

A conspicuous, and it is hoped not unpleasant, feature of the book is its abundant illustrative quotations from eminent poets, chief of whom is that learned and ingenious cleric, Father Gassalasca Jape, S.J., whose lines bear his initials. To Father Jape's kindly encouragement and assistance the author of the prose text is greatly indebted.

A.B.

A

ABASEMENT, n. A decent and customary mental attitude in the presence of wealth or power. Peculiarly appropriate in an employee when addressing an employer.

ABATIS, n. Rubbish in front of a fort, to prevent the rubbish outside from molesting the rubbish inside.

ABDICATION, n. An act whereby a sovereign attests his sense of the high temperature of the throne.

Poor Isabella's dead, whose abdication
Set all tongues wagging in the Spanish nation.
For that performance 'twere unfair to scold her:
She wisely left a throne too hot to hold her.
To History she'll be no royal riddle--
Merely a plain parched pea that jumped the griddle.

G.J.

ABDOMEN, n. The temple of the god Stomach, in whose worship, with sacrificial rights, all true men engage. From women this ancient faith commands but a stammering assent. They sometimes minister at the altar in a half-hearted and ineffective way, but true reverence for the one deity that men really adore they know not. If woman had a free hand in the world's marketing the race would become graminivorous.

ABILITY, n. The natural equipment to accomplish some small part of the meaner ambitions distinguishing able men from dead ones. In the last analysis ability is commonly found to consist mainly in a high degree of solemnity. Perhaps, however, this impressive quality is rightly appraised; it is no easy task to be solemn.

ABNORMAL, adj. Not conforming to standard. In matters of thought and conduct, to be independent is to be abnormal, to be abnormal is to be detested. Wherefore the lexicographer adviseth a striving toward the straiter resemblance of the Average Man than he hath to himself. Whoso attaineth thereto shall have peace, the prospect of death and the hope of Hell.

ABORIGINIES, n. Persons of little worth found cumbering the soil of a newly discovered country. They soon cease to cumber; they fertilize.

ABRACADABRA.

By _Abracadabra_ we signify
An infinite number of things.
'Tis the answer to What? and How? and Why?

And Whence? and Whither?--a word whereby
The Truth (with the comfort it brings)
Is open to all who grope in night,
Crying for Wisdom's holy light.

Whether the word is a verb or a noun
Is knowledge beyond my reach.
I only know that 'tis handed down.
From sage to sage,
From age to age--
An immortal part of speech!

Of an ancient man the tale is told
That he lived to be ten centuries old,
In a cave on a mountain side.
(True, he finally died.)
The fame of his wisdom filled the land,
For his head was bald, and you'll understand
His beard was long and white
And his eyes uncommonly bright.

Philosophers gathered from far and near
To sit at his feet and hear and hear,
Though he never was heard
To utter a word
But "_Abracadabra, abracadab_,
Abracada, abracad,
Abraca, abrac, abra, ab!"
'Twas all he had,
'Twas all they wanted to hear, and each

Made copious notes of the mystical speech,
Which they published next--
A trickle of text
In a meadow of commentary.
Mighty big books were these,
In number, as leaves of trees;
In learning, remarkable--very!

He's dead,
As I said,
And the books of the sages have perished,
But his wisdom is sacredly cherished.
In _Abracadabra_ it solemnly rings,
Like an ancient bell that forever swings.
O, I love to hear
That word make clear
Humanity's General Sense of Things.

Jamrach Holobom

ABRIDGE, v.t. To shorten.

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for people to abridge their king, a decent respect for the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

Oliver Cromwell

ABRUPT, adj. Sudden, without ceremony, like the arrival of a cannon- shot and the departure of the soldier whose interests are most affected by it. Dr. Samuel Johnson beautifully said of another

author's ideas that they were "concatenated without abruption."

ABSCOND, v.i. To "move in a mysterious way," commonly with the property of another.

Spring beckons! All things to the call respond; The trees are leaving and cashiers abscond.

Phela Orm

ABSENT, adj. Peculiarly exposed to the tooth of detraction; vilifed; hopelessly in the wrong; superseded in the consideration and affection of another.

To men a man is but a mind. Who cares
What face he carries or what form he wears?
But woman's body is the woman. O,
Stay thou, my sweetheart, and do never go,
But heed the warning words the sage hath said:
A woman absent is a woman dead.

Jogo Tyree

ABSENTEE, n. A person with an income who has had the forethought to remove himself from the sphere of exaction.

ABSOLUTE, adj. Independent, irresponsible. An absolute monarchy is one in which the sovereign does as he pleases so long as he pleases the assassins. Not many absolute monarchies are left, most of them having been replaced by limited monarchies, where the sovereign's power for evil (and for good) is greatly curtailed, and by republics, which are governed by chance.

ABSTAINER, n. A weak person who yields to the temptation of

denying himself a pleasure. A total abstainer is one who abstains from everything but abstention, and especially from inactivity in the affairs of others.

Said a man to a crapulent youth: "I thought
You a total abstainer, my son."
"So I am, so I am," said the scapegrace caught--
"But not, sir, a bigoted one."

G.J.

ABSURDITY, n. A statement or belief manifestly inconsistent with one's own opinion.

ACADEME, n. An ancient school where morality and philosophy were taught.

ACADEMY, n. [from ACADEME] A modern school where football is taught.

ACCIDENT, n. An inevitable occurrence due to the action of immutable natural laws.

ACCOMPLICE, n. One associated with another in a crime, having guilty knowledge and complicity, as an attorney who defends a criminal, knowing him guilty. This view of the attorney's position in the matter has not hitherto commanded the assent of attorneys, no one having offered them a fee for assenting.

ACCORD, n. Harmony.

ACCORDION, n. An instrument in harmony with the sentiments of an assassin.

ACCOUNTABILITY, n. The mother of caution.

"My accountability, bear in mind,"
Said the Grand Vizier: "Yes, yes,"
Said the Shah: "I do--'tis the only kind
Of ability you possess."

Joram Tate

ACCUSE, v.t. To affirm another's guilt or unworth; most commonly as a justification of ourselves for having wronged him.

ACEPHALOUS, adj. In the surprising condition of the Crusader who absently pulled at his forelock some hours after a Saracen scimitar had, unconsciously to him, passed through his neck, as related by de Joinville.

ACHIEVEMENT, n. The death of endeavor and the birth of disgust.

ACKNOWLEDGE, v.t. To confess. Acknowledgement of one another's faults is the highest duty imposed by our love of truth.

ACQUAINTANCE, n. A person whom we know well enough to borrow from, but not well enough to lend to. A degree of friendship called slight when its object is poor or obscure, and intimate when he is rich or famous.

ACTUALLY, adv. Perhaps; possibly.

ADAGE, n. Boned wisdom for weak teeth.

ADAMANT, n. A mineral frequently found beneath a corset. Soluble in solicitate of gold.

ADDER, n. A species of snake. So called from its habit of adding funeral outlays to the other expenses of living.

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