



American pioneer in industrial medicine, ALICE HAMILTON took her medical degree at the University of Michigan at a time when women doctors were as scarce as hen's teeth, did graduate work in Germany and at Johns Hopkins, and then enlisted under Jane Addams at Hull-House. Her mission was the protection of workers in the dangerous trades. And her life, as she told it in her autobiography, Exploring the Dangerous Trades, is a valiant record of a twentieth-century pioneer. Dr. Hamilton now lives in retirement at Hadlyme, Connecticut.

WORDS LOST, STRAYED, OR STOLEN

by ALICE HAMILTON, M.D.

WORDS have always been of great interest to me, and their misuse gives me a sense of more than discomfort: of actual indignation, as if a friend were being mistreated. I cannot claim to be a writer, but then a music critic is not a musician, nor an art critic a painter. I am a reader, so I feel I have a right to criticize authors, journalists, editorial writers, who, to my mind, are doing violence to the English language by surrendering precious words to base uses or by substituting cheap words for valuable ones.

Take some of the lost words. It is hard to see why the useful and simple "because," "since," "owing to," should have been lost, but apparently they have been pushed out by the would-be elegant "due to." This is no longer an adjective and does not have to qualify a noun; it is a preposition on its own, and its queer new use increases all the time, invading even the highbrow weeklies and the "slick" magazines. "Due to the fact that" is bad enough — such a cumbersome substitute for a simple "because" or "owing to" — but what are we to say to such sentences as these, which I have been picking up for a long time? "There were no homeless children due to a local wave of adoption." "He lost time from work due to drinking." "No accident can happen due to glaring headlights." "The amount of undernourishment is not large due to past plenty." "The man died soon after help came due to the injuries." Somehow "because" and "since" are rejected as lowbrow. The educated say "due to the fact that"; the uneducated, "on account."

Among the stolen words are some valuable ones, such as "advice" and "advise" — and that does seem a pity, when we have the perfectly good word "inform." We even have "tell," though I suppose no businessman's secretary could use words as simple as "tell" or "say." "Yours of the 14th

instant received and contents duly noted. In reply would advise . . ." But what shall we use when "advise" is completely surrendered to the business world? "Counsel"? But how formal. Business is also stealing another good word which it does not need but which we do. To be "interested" now is to be induced to buy or subscribe to something.

"Middle" seems to have strayed away, and its place is being taken by its brother "midst," which for some mysterious reason seems to impress itself on writers as more elegant. Webster says that "midst" implies a number of enveloping objects, as, in the midst of a forest; while "middle" is the part of an object which surrounds the center. But we do not keep to this rule, and "midst" is more and more pushing into the places formerly held by "middle," so that now we continually come across queer things such as these: "in the midst of the session"; "in the midst of the controversy"; even "in the midst of his life." Shall we come finally to "the midst years"?

"Satisfied" is straying, is pushing into the place long filled properly by "convinced" or even the lowly "sure." The result is sometimes startling. For instance: "The man's family is satisfied that he was murdered." Of course that may be literally true, but the family did not mean to tell the world so. Apparently the reporter who wrote about Bernt Balchen's unsuccessful rescue mission did not realize how callous was his statement that "Balchen is satisfied that none of the missing men is still on the ice."

The journalists have stolen another useful word which they do not need at all. "Argument" has a definite meaning and a dignified one. Then why make it take the place of "quarrel," "dispute," or even a "drunken brawl"? "The murder followed an argument in the saloon." What are we to use, for instance — if "argument" is lost — when scien-

tists disagree about the atom bomb, or economists about a depression?

More amusing is the increasing rejection of "believe" and "think" in favor of "feel." Notice how often statesmen, journalists, commentators, tell you what the "feeling" is in the State Department, the Foreign Office, the Pentagon. Both American and English public men seem now to depend on their "feelings" about the most controversial questions. Does it show that we accept the dictum of the newer psychology that all our decisions are based on emotion, not on thought?

It is to me especially irritating to see the word "sick" straying so far into limbo, though it is not yet irreparably lost. Here we are slavishly following the English in rejecting it for "ill." The English seem to be too modest to use such coarse words as "vomit" or even "throw up," and to be "sick" in England is to do just that. I came across an amazing sentence in an English medical article. "The man was plainly very ill, but had not yet been sick." And just the other day I found this in an English novel: "I think I'm going to be sick. It's not anything I ate. It's that I have a delicate nervous system. Excitement makes me feel ill. I get sick with it." — "I should go and get it over." — "Be sick, you mean?" — "Yes, it's a wonderful feeling."

The trouble with "ill" is that it has so many bad associations: ill will; an ill wind; ill luck; ill used; "ill fares the land" and Annie of Lochroy's tragic cry, "Oh woe betide my ill mother. An ill death may she die!" Yet more and more our newspapers avoid the vulgar "sick" and substitute "ill." Do not we all shrink a little when we read "an ill baby," "an ill woman"? And even the English could hardly say "a love-ill swain."

The word "obscene" has a definite meaning and there is no other word to take its place, but it is being stolen and made to serve as a simple hate-word. It is used to describe extreme cruelty, such as that of Buchenwald and Auschwitz, or the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto, even the Ku Klux Klan, the deliberations of the Politburo, the Dies Committee. Edna St. Vincent Millay used it to describe the Sacco-Vanzetti case; Borgese, the Fascist salute; Waldo Frank, the members of the Reichstag; the *Nation*, the Horst Wessel song. Mencken wrote that the Scopes trial was "so farcical it was almost obscene." Now, however detestable all these may be, we have no right to call them obscene and thereby rob ourselves of a useful word when we have no other to take its place.

English-speaking people have long prided themselves on having the word "home" in their language, while the Latins have to use some weak substitute like *chez soi*. But now we are letting "home" stray into low company so far that we

are in danger of losing it altogether. This is because of our inveterate belief that if we put a nice word in the place of one we dislike ("mortician," for instance, the man who takes charge when we "pass away") we thereby change the thing we dislike to a likable thing. So we call an undertaker's establishment a "funeral home"; and all sorts of institutions for the sick, the insane, the delinquent, are called "homes" when there is and can be nothing homelike about them. When I lived at Hull-House, "home" was far from being a beloved word. A poor widow said to me, "I'll work my fingers to the bone before I'll let my children go to a home." The once beautiful word "asylum" is straying along the same down-path.

That brings us to the wickedest of steals, "disinterested." Think what a valuable word that is and how irreplaceable. The quality of disinterestedness is one of the finest of which human beings are capable, and there is no way to describe it in a single word except just that one. Yet out of sheer laziness we are letting it substitute for the perfectly adequate "uninterested," and this crime is being committed, not by the uneducated or the business world, but by "intellectuals" who know better. Editors ought to join a crusade against this unscrupulous steal and reject any manuscript that contains such outrages as: "The statement met with complete disinterest on the part of the assembly." "Unfortunately the man was disinterested and I came away depressed."

I will not go into the many forms of gobbledegook — legal, medical, business, sociological — that plague us. Bad as they are, they are read mostly by professionals only; they do not often invade literature. My own profession is pretty bad, but certainly less so than the legal. However, it is hard to understand why it has given up the good word "fever" and taken to using "temperature." You will hear not only a layman but a doctor ask, "Has he a temperature?" Well, if he has not he must have been dead a number of hours. And why should a patient be "ambulatory" instead of "up and about"? Why should we give up that convenient old word "bedfast"? Social workers have their own dialect and have rejected "poor." We may still use it provided it does not deal with physical poverty, but we must no longer speak of "the poor" except when we quote the Bible. We must say "underprivileged" instead — not "a poor child" but "an underprivileged preadolescent."

Changes in language that lead to greater clarity or conciseness or vividness — as some of our American slang does — are to be welcomed, but that is not true of any of the examples I have given. Maybe we need an "Académie américaine" to call a halt and rescue our lost, strayed, or stolen words.