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Preface to
The Devil's Dictionary of 1911

The Devil's Dictionary was begun in a weekly paper in 1881, and was continued in a desultory way and 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 nor the 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 disfavour 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 humour and clean English to slang.

THE DEVIL'S DICTIONARY

A conspicuous, and it is hoped not unpleasing, 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.

The Devil's Dictionary

Key to abbreviations

<i>a.</i>	Active
<i>adj.</i>	Adjective
<i>adv.</i>	Adverb
<i>exc.</i>	Exclamation
<i>fem.</i>	Feminine
<i>n.</i>	Noun
<i>pl.</i>	Plural
<i>p. p.</i>	Past participle
<i>pron.</i>	Pronoun
<i>v.</i>	Verb
<i>v. i.</i>	Verb – intransitive
<i>v. t.</i>	Verb – transitive



A. The first letter in every properly constructed alphabet. It is the first natural utterance of the human vocal organs, and is variously sounded, according to the pleasure and convenience of the speaker. In logic, A asserts and B denies. Assertions being proverbially untrue, the presumption would be in favour of B's innocence, were it not that denials are notoriously false. In grammar, A is called the indefinite article – probably because, denoting a definite number, it is so obviously a numeral adjective.

ABACOT, *n.* A cap of state wrought into the shape of two crowns, formerly worn by kings. Very pretty monarchs had it made in the shape of three crowns.

ABACTOR, *n.* One who steals a whole herd of cattle, as distinguished from the inferior actor who steals one animal at a time – a superior stock actor, as it were.

ABACUS, *n.* In architecture, the upper part of a column, upon which, in all good architecture, sits the thoughtful stork pondering unutterable things.

ABADA, *n.* An African animal having three horns, two on the head and one on the nape of the neck by which to hang up the carcass after the head has been removed. In those varieties that are not hunted by man, this third horn is imperfectly developed or wholly wanting.

ABADDON, *n.* [1.] A certain person who is much in society, but whom one does not meet. A bad one. [2.] The adversary of souls, considered under one of his many charming aspects. A bad one.

ABANDON, *v. t.* [1.] To confer the advantage of being rid of you. To recant.

Thank Heaven, I have abandoned the follies of youth for those of age.*

CHAUNCEY DEPEW*

- [2.] To correct an erring friend or admonish a needy one. Of women the word “abandoned” is used in the sense of “indiscreet”.
- 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.* [1.] Embarrassing circumstances placed outside a fort in order to augment the coy reluctance of the enemy. [2.] Rubbish in front of a fort, to prevent the rubbish outside from molesting the rubbish inside.
- ABATTOIR, *n.* A place where cattle slaughter kine. It is commonly placed at some distance from the haunts of our species, in order that they who devour the flesh may not be shocked by the sight of the blood.
- ABAT-VOIX, *n.* A sounding brass above a tinkling cymbal.
- ABBA, *n.* A father who has made a vow not to be a husband.
- ABBESS, *n.* A female father.
- ABDERIAN, *adj.* Abderian laughter is idle and senseless laughter – so called because Democritus, an idle and senseless philosopher, is said to have been born at Abdera, whence the word was hardly worth importing.
- ABDEST, *n.* The Mohammedan ceremony of inspiring water through the nose before expiring prayer from the stomach.
- ABDICATION, *n.* [1.] The surrender of a crown for a cowl, in order to compile the shin-bones and toenails of saints. The voluntary renunciation of that of which one has previously been deprived by force. The giving up of a throne for the purpose of enjoying the discomfiture of a successor. For these several definitions we are indebted to Spanish history. [2.] 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.* [1.] A shrine enclosing the object of man's sincerest devotion. [2.] 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.

ABDUCTION, *n.* [1.] In law, a crime; in morals, a punishment. [2.] A species of invitation without persuasion. See KIDNAP.

“You act as if you were given,” said she,
“To abduction – but pray do not kidnap me.”
“Oh, well,” said that bold and impenitent chap,
“You're the kind of kid I should like to nap.”

ABELIANS, *n.* A religious sect of Africa who practised the virtues of Abel. They were unfortunate in flourishing contemporaneously with the Cainians,* and are now extinct.

ABERRATION, *n.* Any deviation in another from one's own habit of thought, not sufficient in itself to constitute insanity.

ABET, *v. t.* To encourage in crime, as to aid poverty with pennies.

ABHORRENCE, *n.* One of the degrees of disapproval due to what is imperfectly understood.

ABIDE, *v. i.* To treat with merited indifference the landlord's notification that he has let his house to a party willing to pay.

ABILITY, *n.* [1.] That rare quality of mind to which monuments are erected by posterity above the bones of paupers. [2.] 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.

OBJECT, *adj.* Innocent of income; without estate; devoid of good clothing.

OBJECTLY, *adv.* In the manner of a poor but honest person.

OBJURE, *v. t.* To take the preliminary step towards resumption.

ABLATIVE, *adj.* A certain case of Latin nouns. The ablative absolute is an ancient form of grammatical error much admired by modern scholars.

ABNEGATION, *n.* Renunciation of profitable pleasures or painful gains.

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 towards a straiter resemblance to the average man than he hath to himself. Whoso attaineth thereto shall have peace, the prospect of death and the hope of hell.

ABOMINABLE, *adj.* The quality of another's opinions.

ABORIGINES, *n.* [1.] Considerate persons who will not trouble the lexicographer of the future to describe them. [2.] Persons of little worth found cumbering the soil of a newly discovered country. They soon cease to cumber – they fertilize.

ABRACADABRA

By *Abacadabra* 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 mountainside.
 (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.
 Oh, 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 a 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

ABRIDGEMENT, *n.* A brief summary of some person's literary work, in which those parts that tell against the convictions of the abridger are omitted for want of space.

ABROAD, *adj.* At war with savages and idiots. To be a Frenchman abroad is to be miserable; to be an American abroad is to make others miserable.

ABRUPT, *adj.* Sudden, without ceremony, like the arrival of a cannon shot and the departure of the soldier whose interests are mostly affected by it. Dr Samuel Johnson beautifully said of another author's ideas that they were "concatenated without abruption".*

ABRUPTION, *n.* Dr Johnson said of a certain work that the ideas were "concatenated without abruption". In deference to that great authority we have given the word a place.

ABSCOND, *v. i.* [1.] To be unexpectedly called away to the bedside of a dying relative and miss the return train. [2.] 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

ABSENCE, *n.* That which "makes the heart grow fonder" – of absence. Absence of mind is the cerebral condition essential to success in popular preaching. It is sometimes termed "lack of sense".

ABSENT, *adj.* [1.] Exposed to the attacks of friends and acquaintances; defamed; slandered. [2.] Peculiarly exposed to the tooth of detraction; vilified; 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. Oh,
 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.* [1.] In philosophy, existing without reference to anything, and for a purely selfish purpose. Absolute certainty is one of the possible degrees of probability. Absolute monarchy is a form of government in which the chief power is vested in a gentleman who is near his end. [2.] 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.

ABSTEMIOUS, *adj.* Thoughtfully deferential to one's overtaxed capacity.

ABSTRUSENESS, *n.* The bait of a bare hook.

ABSURDITY, *n.* [1.] The argument of an opponent. A belief in which one has not had the misfortune to be instructed. [2.] A statement or belief manifestly inconsistent with one's own opinion.

- ABUNDANCE, *n.* A means, under Providence, of withholding alms from the destitute.
- ABUSE, *n.* [1.] Unanswerable wit. [2.] The goal of debate. Abuse of power is the exercise of authority in a manner unpleasant to ourselves.
- ACADEME, *n.* An ancient school where morality and philosophy were taught.
- ACADEMY, *n.* [1.] Originally a grove in which philosophers sought a meaning in nature; now a school in which naturals seek a meaning in philosophy. [2.] (From academe.) A modern school where football is taught.
- ACCEPT, *v. t.* In courtship, to reap the whirlwind after sowing the wind. To accept office is to take with decent reluctance the reward of immodest avidity. To accept a challenge is to become a sincere believer in the sanctity of human life.
- ACCIDENT, *n.* An inevitable occurrence due to the action of immutable natural laws.
- ACCLIMATED, *p. p.* Secured against endemic diseases through having died of one.
- ACCOMMODATE, *v. t.* To oblige; to lay the foundation of future exactions.
- ACCOMPLICE, *n.* [1.] Your partner in business. [2.] 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.
- ACCOUCHEUR, *n.* The devil's purveyor.
- 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

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