

# THE LITERARY DIGEST

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## ENGLISH POET TELLS HOW BRITON DIFFERS FROM AMERICAN

**A**MERICANS frequently wonder just how an Englishman's mind works. To the average person brought up in the United States some of the ways of the Briton are incomprehensible and past finding out, particularly his reluctance to exhibit any of those symptoms of friendliness which characterize every typical American from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In an article in *McClure's Magazine* entitled "That Damned Englishman," Lieut. Robert Nichols, English poet and army officer, sheds some light on the subject of this oft-repeated inquiry, coming to the conclusion finally that the chief difference between the American and the Briton is in the way each regards his freedom, the Britisher being intensely individualistic while the American is communistic. He draws two pictures, one portraying the proverbial aloofness of the typical Briton, the other giving his own personal experiences with a typical American when Lieutenant Nichols first landed in the United States. Here is his Englishman:

You come on him in the train wearing clothes of a strenuously modest cut, with a wicker suitcase set beside his feet, swathed in spats, with a hat that has no appreciable brim to it, with an unnecessary walking-stick clasped in entirely superfluous gloves, with a tie of a sobriety that is ostentatious, a mustache that is first cousin to an indestructible toothbrush, and with a manner of speech that would arouse bristles of irritation on an alligator. He surveys you with an air of meticulous boredom through a monocle, and you say to yourself: "Holy Mike! another of those damned Englishmen!"

Following a lapse of time, since after all you both speak the same language, and since silence, tho golden, is not such common currency as speech, you address to him the remark, "Fine day, eh, what?" But apparently he has not heard you. Well, it is probably deafness; so you offer him a cigar. If he can't hear, he can, at least, possibly, see.

It appears he can; but only with difficulty. The monocle comes into play. He peers at that cigar. Perhaps he doesn't like the looks of it. In another minute he will, you expect, lift it to his ear, to see if it will squeak, like a rag doll. Yet he doesn't. Instead, he turns that glassy arc upon you, and enunciates: "Eh . . . um, thank you, I don't think I will." The glass arc travels on, seeming to be looking through the back of your head, and so away to the landscape that dips past the windows of the car.



"This Peace Conference . . ." you begin. Alas! he has not heard you. For now his swivel-chair begins to turn away very slowly and majestically. Its back presents itself appallingly to you, and there is the ominous rustle of the opened newspaper.

And, after a little, you feel that your pores have opened; that you are in a cold sweat; that George Washington was even greater than you imagined; that, after all, thank God, there will be a Day of Judgment, and that it is good to gather yourself together, murmuring: "Jehoshaphat, tar and feathers are too good! . . . Isn't he the damndest of all damned!"

Yet when you reach the journey's end; your neighbor, countering your scowl with a certain gentle calmness of the eyes, remarks: "Good day, sir," in a pleasant voice. "Yes. . . . The weather is remarkably fine for this time of the year."

He goes. You survey his retreating form. You shake your head. By gosh, he's a queer specimen—that damned Englishman!

Then the Lieutenant passes on to his own experiences with a custom-house official who slapped him on the back, called him "sonny," and told him many things of a confidential nature. He says:

. . . A hand fell on my shoulder, a heavy hand, and a musical bass voice intoned: "That's all right, sonny; don't you worry. I like you." Then the hand executed a series of pats.

King Alfred and the Shepherd's wife's cakes! Lady Godiva and Peeping Tom! What a sacrilege! The nerve of it! Just think of it—this official whom I had never seen before in my life, who was only a minor custom-house official, actually dared to lay his none too clean hand on the back of a member of the British Mission! 'Twas monstrous! Monstrous! The red crosses on the Union Jack turned green at it, and the British lion, folding paws over lower bosom, prepared to give way to seasickness.

Well, maybe I'm not quite such an Englishman as I used to be. War has weakened me, or perhaps (horrid thought!) I have learned something in the last four years of my terrestrial jog-trot. What would the prewar Englishman have done to one of his countrymen who dared—! He would have stood up very, very deliberately and with a good deal of modest majesty. He would have disentangled his monocle with his right hand, polished it with his left, screwed it into his eye, and surveyed that official with a rocklike stare. He would probably have said nothing; but his silence would have been more portentous than any speech. The official, had he in a state of temporary insanity ever been so bold as to commit that unpardonable indiscretion, would have remembered that stare and that silence until his life's end!



Well, I confess I was more than mildly surprized. But I knew it was to be a country of surprizes. And no Englishman must ever show surprize. Oh, never! That is unpardonable. Quiet indignation, perhaps, but not surprize. Yet I had resolved never to bring this so-famous quiet indignation into play. I pulled myself together. Perhaps unwittingly I stared. I hope not. I did my best not to. Anyway, it suddenly came to me that this official was not transgressing unwritten laws. He was doing two things. First, he was obeying some natural inclination, which was to be big and friendly—and, thank Heaven, in this country there is no written or unwritten law against that; secondly, a certain dignity in his bearing assured me of this: he was being an official. In his own person, as a functionary of the custom-house of the United States of America, he was welcoming me to the States. It was his way of saying: "Stranger, first as a big, friendly human, enjoying equal rights in this country with anybody else, be he millionaire or my mouse-trap vender, I bid you welcome. Secondly, I bid you welcome in the name of my country—you who have landed here as a foreigner. Between ourselves, I think you're lucky to have struck these States, where I have, by my own unaided powers, risen to a certain official position, carrying with it responsibilities and, I am glad to say, a pension, and where I hope you will, by the practise of similar true citizen virtues, also perhaps rise to such a position, or one corresponding to it. If you should happen to do so, remember that it is chiefly owing to the Constitution of this country, where everybody has a chance, where we are as brothers, and where I was the first to bid you welcome in my own name and in the name of the state."

That was my impression. If you come to think of it, it is very flattering to a stranger. Things being so, I endeavored to rise to these heights, a task of not such difficulty as it first appeared, because the official was so big and so friendly that I liked him as one likes a St. Bernard dog or a Great Dane, dogs whose friendship, if perhaps a trifle intrusive or persistent, is nevertheless very ingenuous and real. That official was a gentleman, that is—a a man who is gentle. And I hope I shall always be able to recognize one when I meet him. So we began to talk. He told me how he was the father of three children, that his wife had just had the grippe, but was now becoming quite a lively body again; how he had arrested several Huns in midendeavor to fly the country. I in turn told him how I had been scrapping with others of the same kidney, but how my real taste was for the milder forms of literature; how I had written one book of poems which went "Phut!" and another which didn't; and how I was getting on quite nicely, thank you, for a young man.



A most interesting exchange it was. We parted, I like to think, the best of friends. I gave him a book, an act I should never have dared to venture upon with an Englishman at a first meeting.

Perhaps when I go back, he will wave from the wharf a not unaffectionate farewell. I hope so.

Follows then Lieutenant Nichols's discussion of the difference between the American and the British concepts of freedom. The Briton, in his opinion, considers himself free because he is an Englishman and practises his freedom as he has learned it. Being possess of both isolation and freedom, of the English kind, he has become an individualist. The American's concept of his freedom, on the other hand, is based on the principle that all men are free, and that lets him in on the assumption that he is a man. This view, according to Lieutenant Nichols, has made the American a communist. He proceeds:

Such is his passion for liberty that each Englishman considers himself a state within himself. And just as no state would send even the friendliest soldiers across another's border, so no Englishman would place his hand on the shoulder of another whom he had not known for at least ten years. It would be, as we say, "cheek." It would be interfering with the other fellow's freedom. Similarly, he wouldn't tell me that he was the father of three children, and that his wife had had the grippe. You see, I, in my besotted love of freedom, might not want to be burdened with these confidences. For, in a way, it might seem to be implied that I ought to do something about it. Certainly no Englishman would tell me about the Huns whose machinations he had so gloriously succeeded in thwarting, for that is to presuppose, to some extent, that I have done nothing, that the custom-house official is a better man than I—and that assumption is an unwarranted reflection on me, and as such, an infringement of my liberty. What is more, to tell me these things, takes up my time and attention, which is again an infringement of my liberties. . . . So we come down to perhaps a final way of putting this matter of the psychological curiosities between our two nations in this matter of freedom. Both countries are free, and, therefore, in both countries a man is to his fellow citizens as a brother. In this country it is, therefore, possible to treat any man as you can treat a brother—that is, to tell him everything. In my country, it is, therefore, usual to treat any man as one does usually treat a brother—that is, to tell him nothing.