

MY FIRST WORD-LIST

JOHN L. HERVEY
Chicago, Illinois

Editor's Note: This is an abridged version of an article printed in the March 15, 1907 issue of the Ardmere Puzzler. Using the pen name "Majolica", the author was a long-time member of the National Puzzlers' League, specializing in the construction of large word squares. The incident described here occurred in the early 1880s (Hervey was born about 1870), but a similar story could be related today by frustrated competitors in word competitions that attract many entrants.

To a greater or less degree - principally greater - I have always been a listomaniac. The insidious germ inoculated my adolescent system at about the same time as measles and whooping-cough. From the latter I recovered, while from the first-named I never have. My first list, so far as I can remember, was compiled not long after I was promoted from kilts to knickerbockers, and, like many present-day ones, was a syndicate affair. Need I say a word-hunt was the incitement thereto?

It was conducted by one of those enterprising monthly publications which, in that golden age, poured forth from the city of Portland, Maine, and spread over the land like unto the plague of locusts. These publications resembled that journal which an irate politician once described as having the appearance of being "set up with shingle-nails and printed on a cider-press."

The conditions of this word-hunt were seductiveness itself. The basis thereof was the shortest verse in the Bible. The first task was to find the verse. The second was to construct, from the letters of the words composing it, as many other words as possible; no words being allowable unless found in the main vocabulary of Webster's Unabridged Dictionary. To the contestant sending the longest list of bona-fide words a prize of \$50 in gold would be awarded; in case of a tie the money to be divided. Competition open only to subscribers of the publication.

While numbers of illuminated cards of which I was the proud possessor bore evidence to my regular attendance at Sabbath School and the number of Scriptural verses that I had memorized, it happened that none of the latter was the verse. My studies had been measurably profound for one of my somewhat tender years, but my catechism had not included that list of sacred conundrums said to have been devised by a pious life prisoner in a Spanish dungeon. I did not know the shortest verse; nor, I blush to state, did any member of the family, although several claimed to, only

to fail miserably when it came to the show-down. However, there was a short cut to the very important item of information of which I speedily availed myself. The parental domicile was situate directly across the street from the Baptist parsonage, and the Baptist parson, though I was not one of the lambs of his flock, was an excellent friend of mine. Our friendship, however, being based on thoroughly non-theological grounds, it was probably with some astonishment that one morning he beheld me ushered into his study in quest of assistance in Scriptural research. Had he known the lamentably sordid motive inspiring me it is possible that his response had been less pleased and enlightening than it was. But that is beside the mark. Sufficient be it to relate that in a few moments I retreated in good order with the prize in my possession.

At that date the latest revised and thoroughly up-to-date edition of the Unabridged was, I think, that of 1874. In small towns it was a rarity. I doubt if there were more than three copies in the one in which I lived. But, oh happy chance, one of those belonged to my father; and, I may remark, had been instrumental in giving him considerable literary eclat in the neighborhood. For the next few weeks that portly volume became the hub of the household universe, the center around which the entire family revolved. My complete and utter absorption in it did not long escape attention, and, one by one, from the head of the house to the culinary assistant, the obsession fastened upon each and all. The culinary assistant was the last to succumb. Of Celtic extraction, she was a devout adherent of the Church of Rome. Could anything deduced from a heretic Testament be other than a snare for the true believer? But an alarming increase in casualties to the china testified to a curiosity to which orthodoxy was not proof - and soon she, too, was whirling madly in the vortex.

How many times each separate and individual leaf of the 2000-odd in the Noachian tome was studied with rapt and absorbing care that fortnight I will not undertake to say. From morn ti'll dewy eve and far into the watches of the night the hunt went hotly on. List after list was made out, only to be cast aside when on a final checking some glaring sin of omission or commission was discovered. Again and again Ultima Thule was confidently announced to have been sighted, only to have the cry prove a false alarm. But at last - at last! - the chase ended. With the pack in full cry and every bush beaten, the kill was made. A pudgy envelope, containing The List, carefully printed in my best hand - and 50 cents for a year's subscription to the publication - was directed and posted to Portland, Maine; leaving behind it some six or seven individuals to recover, as best they might, from the various more or less complete degrees of mental and physical prostration that his production had entailed.

Announcement of the prizewinner was due in some two months. During those eight seemingly interminable weeks my sole occupation, during both my waking and my sleeping hours, was the devising of ways and means for the spending of that \$50 - in gold! Columbus was not so sure that he would beach his keel upon

the shores of a new world as was I that I would win that fifty. So sublime was my confidence that I spurned the possibility of even having to split it with some other contestant. In that remote and primitive period the devil-wagons and self-playing pianos which lexicographical research has now made common in the humblest puzzleistic homes were as yet undreamed of. It was the era of the simple life. To the best of my recollection I had never, at that date, possessed 50 cents which I had been privileged to squander as I listed in one deliriously extravagant fling. Fifty dollars - in gold! - simply stunned me with its unlimited possibilities. Like Fortunatas' purse it appeared inexhaustible. Alas, alas! Today what a difference! There are word-lists which \$50 - in gold! - cannot buy and dictionaries of which it would purchase but an instalment.

As the time drew near for the announcement of the award, the question of the hour became: Would it appear first in the pages of the publication, or would I previously be privately notified by the receipt of the \$50? The publication would come by mail, the fifty - being in gold! - by express. My existence was consumed, therefore, in halving the post and express offices. When I was not to be found at one or the other I was at both.

The publication was somewhat uncertain in its arrivals. Sometimes it came on the first of the month; sometimes, like our true puzzle publications, some time the next one. In this instance, it pursued the latter method.

Who could describe the thrill with which, at last, I received it into my trembling hands, thrust into them by a careless clerk all unconscious of the psychologicalness of that moment? Who describe the thrill with which I tore off the wrapper and saw that it was, in very fact and deed, the publication from Portland, Maine? Who describe the successive thrills with which I feverishly fumbled its pages until at the top of one, in large black letters, appeared, finally, the legends: "Our Great Word-Hunt-Prize Award"? They danced giddily before me for a moment, and then, below them, I caught sight of several columns of words in serried ranks. Intuition told me that it was my list, printed in full, to show the also-rans what a winner looked like. But hold! - what was this? Looking more closely I perceived that those serried columns were not words, but names; proper names, names and addresses. Ah! "Honorable mention," doubtless. Mine was probably printed alone, by itself, at the top.

Not so. Instead there was a brief paragraph, in very fine single-nail type, which read as follows:

Our Great Word-Hunt has proved a magnificent success, far exceeding our most sanguine expectations. Some 41,144 lists were entered in competition. Of this number no less than 2,313 each contained the largest possible number of correct words, which is exactly 1,007. According to the conditions, in case of a tie the prize was to be divided. The Committee of Award has, therefore, after mature deliberation, decided that, the number of

successful contestants being so large, as many should share in the award as seems consistently possible. To each of the senders of the first 500 correct lists there has consequently been awarded the sum of 10 cents. As gold coins of that value are not minted, we trust that the recipients will find stamps acceptable. The full list of the winners is printed herewith.

Was my name among them? It was not. I did not even look for it - for did I not know well that I had sent in but 1006 words?

Tears burst from my staring eyes. Taking the publication from Portland, Maine, between my two clenched hands I tore it slowly and deliberately into fragments, cast it to the earth and ground it beneath my heels. A choking sob rose in my throat as I turned blindly away. "O lame and impotent conclusion."

Such, fraternal and, I trust, sympathetic reader, is the history of my first word-list - and my last word-hunt.

THE EIGHTFOLD WAY

A pair of words can have the same or different spellings, pronunciations, or meanings, leading to eight possibilities. Ignoring the trivial cases of spelling-pronunciation-meaning all identical (SSS) or all different (DDD), this classification leads to homonyms (DSD), heteronyms (SDD), synonyms (DDS), spelling variants (DSS), pronunciation variants (SDS), and meaning variants (SSD). William S. Huff, a professor in the Department of Architecture at SUNY Buffalo (302 Hayes Hall, Buffalo NY 14214), has recently published a pair of booklets ("Homonyms, Homonyms, Homonyms" Part 1: Essay and Part 2: Lists) discussing these matters in detail. His nomenclature is different, for he somewhat confusingly christens the six types homophonic homonyms, heterophonic homonyms, synonyms, homophonic variants, polyphones, and homographic homonyms. Huff is rather strict with pronunciation variants, insisting that the same person must use both alternatives in appropriate contexts (as has to vs. haz no); variant pronunciations consistently used by different people (as toeMAYtoe vs. toe-MAHtoe) don't count. The booklets are available from Huff for \$6.50.