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*John M. White*

A MODERN MR. MALAPROP

*Then Sir, she should have a supercilious knowledge in accounts;— and as she grew up, I would have her instructed in geometry, that she might know something of the contagious countries;—but above all, Sir Anthony, she should be mistress of orthodoxy, that she might not mis-spell and mis-pronounce words so shamefully as girls usually do; and likewise that she might reprehend the true meaning of what she is saying. —This, Sir Anthony, is what I would have a woman know; —and I don't think there is a superstitious article in it.*

(Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan's *The Rivals*, 1775)

THE SPIRIT of Mrs. Malaprop, that artful twister of words, is still very much alive, even after almost two centuries. In all parts of the country and from all walks of life, you can find her devotees still carrying on her elegant tradition of finding the right word for the wrong place. H\*Y\*M\*A\*N\*K\*A\*P\*L\*A\*N with his inimitable choice of “woids” was such a follower: “So de doctor insulted odder doctors and dey took him in Mount Sinai Hospital. He had double demonial! So dere vas spacial noises, an' fromm all kinds maditzins de bast, an' an oxen tant, he should be able to breed. Even blood confusions dey gave him! An' dey shot him in de arm, he should fallink aslip. Dey gave him epidemics.” (*The Education of Hyman Kaplan* by Leonard Ross, 1937.)

Gracie Allen and Chico Marx used to be masters at the art of substituting the wrong words for the right ones on radio and TV. Jimmy Durante can still fling a mean malapropism to get laughs. Witness his “Am I disconfabulated!” Yogi Bear, in television cartoons, talks of a convention of “wood peppers.” The examples are many. The art of Mrs. Malaprop is not dead. Far from it. The other day a lady said to me, “I was simply nonpulsed, absolutely nonpulsed.”

The chief exponent of Mrs. Malaprop's art among my personal acquaintances is Nacio, who has been my neighbor for the last twenty years. He talks about excavating (evacuating) people in chem-

ical welfare (warfare) and freshlights for flashlights. He refers to a snooze (for a snort) of rum. When a man gets drunk, he's got a snoozeful.

His daughter is "imbedded" to him, he points out, adding that she's real "shark" (sharp) at times. Anaesthetic and antiseptic are words that he uses interchangeably. The other day, he told me someone had been "officiated" for asphyxiated.

Nacio is not exactly a young squirk, as he would say. He's been a jack-of-all-trades—carpenter, plumber, electrician—for most of his fifty-odd years. So when he says he's going to do the walls of his den in nutty pine, with rock-to-wall carpeting, you know he'll do a real shark job of it. The object in the middle of the table may be a centerpiece for most folks, but to Nacio it's a masterpiece.

Dogs are a favorite topic of conversation with my friend. He likes Colliers and Spiegels and sometimes Cocker Spaniards. His dog has lots of punk and has to be kept on a leech. He doesn't want his mug (mutt) to be contaminated with other mugs. And he feeds his pugs (pups) Wagon Train dog food. He says the food helps his dogs to follow their accent.

Nacio says his grandfather became a neutralized citizen after he had lived in this country twenty years. He died after brewing over his wife's death. And he never elected his family.

As a good churchgoer, Nacio follows his fate (faith). He wanted his daughter to marry within the Church so that he won't be excriminated. He's going to leave her a legacy of some chairs in the bank. He bought his grandson a baskinette.


When he says he's going to raise his salary, Nacio is referring to celery in his garden. And when he mentions barkley, he means broccoli. Smashed potatoes are his favorite vegetable.

The other day, he told me he saw the Harem Globetrotters on his Zinnia television set. He didn't feel so good because he's eaten some tribes (tripe), but after he'd shaved off his whispers he felt better and went for a drive. The engine of his car just purred along.

One of the chief weed pests in Nacio's lawn is nutgrass, but when he talks about it, it comes out like Snodgrass, the name of one of our pioneer families. With typical transposal of consonants, he talks about boats when he means votes and vice versa. His "sheeken" for "chicken," and "shursh" for "church," also follow some unwritten Grimm's law. A castoff is a "kidsoff" (or maybe it's "kissoff"), for some reason known only to Nacio.

Here are some other Nacio-isms that pop out so fast sometimes that you can't remember them unless you write them down on the spot: "British slang" for the accent of an Englishwoman; "igloo" for gigolo; "magician" for musician; "chlorinator" for coordinator; "gargles" for gurgles; "addimatically" for automatically; and "shattered" plane for chartered plane.

This is the art of malapropism at work. Like Hyman Kaplan, Nacio has the advantage of knowing English as a secondary tongue. It seems to help if you know a second language that you can mix up with the first one.

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