The Star-Spangled Banner

An Explanation of Why—
With the Best Will in the World—
We Cannot Sing Our National Hymn

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The poor exile from India stood in the great hall. Everybody else had risen, was stamping, shouting, cheering. He had never seen such enthusiasm; it was the next best thing to a fight. He thrilled. He was about to hear the Great American People—about 15,000 of them—sing their national hymn. Only—it didn't happen. The band played it, thunderingly; and the people were all *trying* to sing. But only now and again did the effort become articulate. He turned to his friends. He saw that they understood his perplexity, that they were distressed, even humiliated. Presently they explained it to him: they couldn't remember the words.

So the poor exile got himself a copy of the hymn and bethought him of the cause of this great misfortune. For it is nothing less. America has a tremendous tune—one of the most stirring ever written. But it's quite impossible to fit the words to it. May one offer a suggestion as to the rationale of the matter?

We have to go back a long way, all the way to Vergil and Horace and Catullus. Latin poetry has the most elaborate rules for distinguishing "long" syllables from "short." We may dwell so lightly on this theme that we barely brush it with a dove's wing; we need only say that a "long" syllable is one which takes a long time to say. Thus "scrunched" is much longer than "an", though both words are of one syllable. Try to repeat "an" fifty times; you can do it while the most fluent lady of your acquaintance gets through twenty "scrunched"s. The general rule is that it is hard work, except for Welshmen,

to pronounce more than nine consecutive consonants. Also, "long" vowels do not go so trippingly off the tongue as airier trifles. So, too, accented syllables are really "long" because one has to dwell on them to get the emphasis.

It doesn't matter very much about the fine points of this in ordinary iambic verse, such as blank verse; for the meter is very flexible. We can have a line full of "longs" like "Thoughts that do ofttimes lie too deep for tears," with no other result than the intended one of making the line slow, heavy, meditative, melancholic. But, in a tripping "dactylic" waltz-time tune, if you have long syllables where short should be, it produces the effect of dancing with a club-footed partner. Change "O mystic and subtle Dolores, Our Lady of Pain" to "O mystic, proud, reserved Dolores, Lady of our pain" and the lilt is gone altogether.

Now this is just what happened to Francis Scott Key. He wrote in the then highly popular lilt of "Know ye the land where the cypress and myrtle, are emblems of deeds that are done in their clime?" and he spoiled the whole thing—and over and over again—by putting in a long syllable where he most needed a short one.

"O, say can you see by the dawn's early light" is all right but for "dawn's early" which has to be pronounced "dawnsily" if it is to be properly sung. "O, say can you see at the dawn of the light" would go perfectly. This is not a very bad place; an effort will take you over it; but worse follows. "Whose broad stripes and bright stars" is six long syllables. "Whose stripes and whose stars" is a little better; but the "whose" is always too long, especially before a double or triple consonant. Sing it "O standard of stars" or "O banner of stars" and there would be no difficulty.

Again, the line ending "half conceals, half discloses" asks too much of the breath. You have to sing "—ceals, half discl" in the same time as you would take to sing "daintily."

"As it blows, covers up or discloses" is a good deal easier.

What a swollen-tongue-feeling one gets in trying to sing even "Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution." Always the same trouble of too many consonants. Try "The boss has amended the bad resolution" and it might be appointed for use in Tammany Hall, as a democratic rallying song.

Something of the sort occurs in nearly every line of this blessed hymn of ours, but the best choral steeplechaser ever foaled is bound to come down over the "Heaven-rescued land" fence. "Vnr" and "dl" are not happy combinations for the people who objected to the Russian offensive because it obliged them to try to say "Przemsyl." "Heavenly land" is a bit nearer the mark. This is not to say that "heavenly" is the right word to use; it is not the word, as a matter of fact, that I should use. And surely it is better to wait for a commission from the President to set this whole jumble right. Quite enough now for us to amend the sound without attention to the sense!

Observe that even "star-spangled" itself is a little difficult, especially before "banner." "Rsp" and "ngl" and "db" constitute a formidable network of barbed wire entanglements for most voices. "Star-bestrewn" would be a little better, but not much. ("Spangled" is a dreadfully tinselly word, suggesting a circus, anyhow.) Probably there isn't a perfect word with the desired meaning: English is horribly deficient in "short" syllables.

The music to which Key wrote his words, was long attributed to the London organist and composer, Dr Samuel Arnold (1740-1802). Late researches credit the music beyond dispute to John Stafford Smith (Gloucester, 1750—London, 1836), an organist of rank and a prolific composer. The music, in 6/4 time, with the words beginning "To Anacreon in heaven, where he sat in full glee," is to be found in *Collections of Popular Songs, Catches, etc.,* composed by John Stafford Smith.

A copy of this volume is in the British Museum. The melody was well known in this country during revolutionary days, and various texts were sung to it. Francis Scott Key was evidently familiar with it, and wrote his verses on the morning after the bombardment of Fort McHenry by the British fleet, September 14, 1814.

How different the whole thing becomes when one finds a really great poet, like George M. Cohan, for instance, who recently took five or ten minutes off to write his noble recruiting song entitled "Over There," a masterpiece which Miss Nora Bayes has recently made an essential part of every cultivated New Yorker's home life.

Study, if you will, the care with which the scholarly actor-poet has constructed his choral *chef d'oeuvre.* And, Miss Bayes, we can never thank you enough for thrilling us so. We hopped right up in our chair and cheered. Really, it was *too* splendid!

"Over There"
Words and music by George M. Cohan

Johnnie get your gun, get your gun, get your gun;
Take it on the run, on the run, on the run;
Hear them calling you and me,
Every son of liberty;
Hurry right away, no delay, go today,
Make your daddy glad, to have such a lad;
Tell your sweetheart not to pine,
To be proud her boy's in line.

Chorus

Over there, over there,
Send the word, send the word, over there;
That the Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming,
The drums rum-tumming, ev'rywhere.
So prepare, say a pray'r,
Send the word, send the word, to beware;

We'll be over, we're coming over,
And we won't come back till it's over,
Over there, over there.
Johnnie get your gun, get your gun, get your gun;
Johnnie show the Hun, you're a son of a gun,
Hoist the flag and let her fly,
Yankee doodle, do or die;
Pack your little kit, show your grit, do your bit;
Yankees! to the ranks, from the towns and the tanks;
Make your mother proud of you,
And the old Red, White and Blue.

Chorus

Over there, over there, etc.