

7th March 2022

Mistakes

**“Let go the lure, the striving to unmake;
Behold the truth – whenever heart may ache,
There is a glory in a great mistake.”**

Nathalia Crane, Imperfection, 'Swear By Night and Other Poems' (1936)

A “spoonerism” is “a verbal error in which a speaker accidentally transposes the initial sounds or letters of two or more words, often to humorous effect”. Humorous indeed, when you hear phrases such as: “you have hissed the mystery lecture”, or you learn of a man who lived in a “flock of bats”, or the weather-forecaster who predicts “ratchy pain”, or a sea captain who gives a report on his “cattle-ships and bruisers”, or the preacher who suggests that “the Lord is my shoving leopard”.

Spooner himself is reported to have said, “I have in my bosom a half-warmed fish”, proposed a toast at a college dinner to “the queer old dean”, and – believe it or not – introduced a stage-performer with the legendary, “Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr Eddie Playbody will now pee for you”. Oh, come on, I’m sure you can work it out ...

Spoonerisms are named after the Revd William Archibald Spooner, Warden of New College, Oxford, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who was notoriously prone to make this mistake. Most of the slips-of-the-tongue could well be apocryphal, but I’m sure Revd Spooner will forgive us for putting his name to so many wonderful things that make us smile.

Mistakes, in language or anything else, can be disastrous, of course, and not at all funny. They can cause distress and have lasting detrimental effects. Don’t accident investigators often find that a mistake in a construction, or a repair, or the reading of instructions has caused damage and even death? And we all have examples of the wrong thing being said at the wrong time in the wrong way, causing hurt and confusion.

But for now, in the midst of all the distress that surrounds us, I know you’ll forgive me for inviting you to give thought for a moment to the humour caused by innocent slips of the tongue. So, though you know I’m as mean as custard, I think I’d better stop in case you accuse me of offering you a lack of pies – go help me sod!

A prayer for today

Lord, help me to smile at life when I need to, and to weep for life when I have to. Amen