VII. THE SUBJUNCTIVE, SHALL AND WILL, AND THE POSSESSIVE

The Subjunctive

The use of the verb in this mood is not as common as formerly: at the time, for example, when the Bible was translated and the plays of Shakespeare were written. Nevertheless it is an essential part of literary English. In editing the 'Mining and Scientific Press' I do not insist upon the use of the subjunctive in articles that are contributed from the outside, but it is deemed proper in all our editorial writing. To speak plainly, the subjunctive is a mark of scholarship; it is ignored by those that are not particular in such matters, and unfortunately it is a source of perplexity to many that are entirely unfamiliar with the use of it. Therefore, as an editor, I think it well to allow the indicative mood to be used by contributors in sentences in which, to be strictly correct, the verbs should be in the subjunctive mood. The fact that most subjunctives are indistinguishable in form from indicatives is another cause of trouble to the uninitiated.* For example, the verbs in such phrases as "Suffice it to say", "So help me God", and "God save the King" are in the subjunctive. One reason why the subjunctive is becoming uncommon is the growing habit of expressing the subjunctive meaning by aid of auxiliary verbs that are coupled with the infinitive; thus: "It will suffice to say" and "May God save the King".

The subjunctive is common in subordinate clauses, and that is how it obtained its name, 'subjunctive', meaning

* The student is referred to 'A New English Grammar', by E. A. Sonnenschein, published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford. This textbook (see pp. 60–71 in Part III) discusses the subject luminously.

'subjoining'. It is used for the purpose of stating that something is to be done:

It is requested that every candidate **write** [=shall write] legibly, and that no one **leave** [=shall leave] the hall till an hour after the commencement of the examination.

Adverbial clauses expressing a supposition call for the subjunctive.

Come what may, I'll do it.
If I **were** a mining engineer, I would go to Mexico.

The use of the subjunctive to indicate an action in prospect, especially after 'until', may seem archaic:

Spare not thy spur until thou **come** to Winchester.

Today we would say:
"Do not spare the gasoline until you reach Los Angeles."
Here "reach" is in the subjunctive, although the average reader would be unaware of the fact.

We use the subjunctive to express what we think is proper, or what ought to be done.

It is time that you **cease** from quarreling.
The order of the day is that every man **take** care of himself.

In the first of these two quotations the form of the verb does not mark the subjunctive, but in the second it does. One might say:

It is time that you **should cease** from quarreling.
The order of the day is that every man **is to take** care of himself.

These versions, however, would be less literate—in short, they would be poorer English.

The past subjunctive is even more subtle; it is used to express what was to be done or what was to happen.

He urged that before any process **were chosen** the ore should be analyzed exhaustively.

The past subjunctive may be the equivalent of a present subjunctive.

It is time that the engineer **were consulted** on this matter.

Desire is expressed by the subjunctive.

See to it that you **be** ready.
Pray that God **defend** the right.
Remind him frequently, lest he **forget.**
I would I **were** the President.

The past subjunctive is used in suppositions as to the present, and the past-perfect subjunctive in suppositions as to the past:

Had we the capital, we would equip and operate the mine.
Had we but **known** that the price of silver was to rise, we would have continued at work.

The meaning of the subjunctive is not affected by adding a subordinating conjunction, as would commonly be done:

If we had the capital, we would equip the mine.
If we had known that the price of silver was to rise, we would have continued at work.

The present subjunctive is proper in stating a supposition:

It is a fault if the ball **fall** short or in the wrong court, or if it **pitch** on the top or above the side or back walls.

The perfect subjunctive is rare:

It is a fault if the ball **have fallen** short.

The subjunctive is used in dependent questions as to a matter of fact.

I wonder whether it **be** true.
I wondered if it **were** true.

To illustrate how a subjunctive meaning is expressed in modern English by means of auxiliary verbs, I quote the following:

Long live the King!
May the King **live** long!
If he had killed me, he **had done** a kinder deed.
If he had killed me, he **would have done** a kinder deed.
The order of the day is that every man **take care** of himself.
The order of the day is that every man **shall take care** of himself.
Deny it who can.
Let anyone **deny** it who can.

The authors of 'The King's English' say of the subjunctive: "These forms, with the single exception of 'were', are perishing so rapidly that an experienced word-actuary puts their expectation of life at one generation. As a matter of style they should be avoided, being certain to give a pretentious air when handled by anyone except the skilful and practised who need no advice from us . . . 'Were', however, is often right and almost necessary: other subjunctives are never necessary, often dangerous, and in most writers unpleasantly formal. The tyro had better eschew them." *

With this dictum I agree in the main. Only the experienced writer, thoroughly versed in his craft, should undertake to play with the subtleties of the subjunctive. He can adopt other ways of expressing the same meaning. Attempts to use it by the illiterate only lead to blunders. Thus a Senator writes:

If it **were** [be] good policy to present the proposal in the open; if it **were** [be] good policy to accept that proposal in principle in the open, it is equally good policy to determine finally the whole subject matter in the open.

He is speaking of the Conference at Washington in November 1921.

It **might be a question open to discussion** [is questionable] whether Government tutelage **is** [be] advisable.
Even if the results **are** negative.

If the results are known to be negative, then "if" should be replaced by 'though'. If the results are not known yet, then

* 'The King's English', p. 157.

the subjunctive should be used, the "are" being replaced by 'be'.

'Shall' and 'Will'

The idiomatic use of 'shall' and 'will' is a cause of perplexity to many writers, particularly the Scottish. Originally 'shall' and 'will' were the present tenses of two verbs; 'should' and 'would' were their pasts; one of them had the meaning of command or obligation; the other, of wish. In Old English there was no separate future.* It was natural therefore that "a future tense auxiliary should be developed out of these two verbs". 'Should' follows the same rules as 'shall', and 'would' as 'will'. When they retain their original meaning of command and of wish, respectively, both 'shall' and 'will' are used in all three persons, singular and plural.

Thou shalt not steal.
Shall I open the door?
You should not say that.
And shall this State so dishonor itself?
It should seem so.
I will have my way.
I will drown, and you shall not save me.

In plain statements about the future, the first person has 'shall', whereas the second and third persons have 'will'.

I shall be late.
You will be late.
We should have consented.
He would have consented.
It would have been better.
If he falls into the water, he will drown.

In statements that involve an expression of the speaker's intention to cause something to happen it is customary to use 'will' for the first person and 'shall' for the others.

I will tell you tomorrow.
You shall regret what you have done.
He shall have none of my money.

* ' The King's English ', p. 134.

In "I would like', the speaker's mood is expressed by "like", so that "I should like" is considered to come under the rule that applies to a plain statement of futurity.

In speech and in informal writing the distinction between 'shall' and 'will' is marked by abbreviation—the use of *'ll*. Professor Bradley refers to this matter humorously: "There can be little doubt that the use of this atonic *'ll* has been a very potent factor in bringing about the widespread use of *will* as the auxiliary of simple prediction for the first person. Grammarians have so long been in the habit of confining their attention to written or printed forms of speech and to fully pronounced words, as the only real entities in language, that they have been apt to regard as mere vulgarisms beneath their notice all such developments as this which we have been considering. While fighting desperately in front to prevent 'I will' from usurping the place of 'I shall' in simple prediction, they have entirely failed to see that their flank was being completely turned by *I'll*, which they had ignored".*

In asking a question, the choice of 'shall' or 'will' is determined by the form of the expected answer:

"Shall you be there?" anticipates "Yes, I shall".

"Should you have known?" expects "Yes, I should (or ought)".

"Should you like a bath?" is followed by "Yes, I should", or "No, I should not".

Will [Shall] you be likely to see the superintendent?

When a Harvard professor posted a notice saying, "I *will* be unable to meet my classes this week", it indicated either that his inability to do his work was a matter of his own volition or that he was unable to speak correct English.

At a conference President Harding said:

If we fail today, we will try again tomorrow.

* 'Shall and Will—An Historical Study', by Cornelius B. Bradley, Proc. Am. Phil. Ass'n., 1912.

The use of 'will' implied a definite voluntary purpose, which was what he meant; but he proceeded to say:

We **will** [shall] thus be able to mitigate these periods of depression.

His volition obviously could not determine his ability to produce the desired result; he was making a statement of futurity only, and this called for the use of 'shall'.

W. Herbert Fowler, in an advertisement, says:

I **will** [shall] be pleased to receive your inquiries relative to golf-course architecture.

A professor remarks:

Let us then imagine the time to have arrived when Americans **shall** [will] no longer be able to understand the works of Milton.

If we think right we **will** [shall] feel right.

The Possessive Case

This grammatical inflection is used too much, and carelessly. The possessive absolute should not be used as attributive to a noun that follows.

I feel sure that **yours** and my efforts will be successful.

The correct form is "your efforts and mine".

He attributes the success to **theirs,** as well as his own efforts.

Here it should be "to their efforts as well as to his own" or "to their efforts and his".

These examples I have paraphrased from 'The King's English', the authors of which say, advisedly: "It must always be remembered in this as in other constructions that the choice is not between a well-sounding blunder and an ill-sounding correctness, but between an ill- and a well-sounding correctness. The blunder should be ruled out, and if the first form of the correct construction that presents itself does not sound well, another way of putting it must be looked for; patience will always find it. The flexibility gained by habitual

selection of this kind, which a little cultivation will make easy and instinctive, is one of the most essential elements in a good style". All of which is excellent advice.

His loss will be keenly felt by the university.

This refers to the death of an honored member of the faculty; the writer meant:

"The loss of him will be keenly felt . . ."

If that sounds stilted, try another phrase that will express the meaning, such as "the loss of his engaging personality" or "the loss of his administrative ability". State the special nature of the loss and honor the memory of a useful man at least with a significant statement.

The double possessive is used:

However, that prejudice of the doctor's . . .
Another proposal was that of Hamilton's, the manager of the mine.

Such infelicities of language can be avoided, and in the avoidance of them the writer will acquire the elements of a good style. Thus:

"However, the doctor's prejudice in this matter . . ."

"Another proposal was the one made by Hamilton, the manager of the mine."

The vein has been cut off by a fault on the 400-ft. level, but a cross-cut on the 500-ft. level has encountered its continuation in depth some 200 ft. to the south.

If the vein has been cut a hundred feet deeper, it must have continued in depth to that extent at least. "Its continuation" is bad. I would say:

"On the 400-ft. level this vein has been cut off by a fault, but it has been found again on the 500-ft. level about 200 ft. southward."

A famous administrator writes:

This great body of men . . . possesses a unique understanding of many of our intricate economic problems and an influence in their solution not equalled by any other part of the community.

He had better have said, "in the solving of them".

The ore deposits in the limestone are in the form of bunches, **and their discovery** [the discovery of which] would not be furthered if enormous areas could be acquired easily by one person.

No editor can afford to be indifferent to them, or neglect any opportunity for **their** study.

It is better to write, "neglect any opportunity to study them" or "for the study of them".

Ruskin is a good exemplar in this matter; he would not say, "I ask you to note *its* beauty"; he would say "I ask you to note the beauty of it". For instance, in the passage describing the old tower of Calais he says: "The large neglect, the noble unsightliness *of it;* the record of its years written so visibly, yet without sign of weakness or decay . . . and the gray peak *of it* seen far across the sea, principal of the three that rise above the waste of surfy sand and hillocked shore—the lighthouse for life, and the belfry for labor, and this for patience and praise".

Ruskin * writes that the mountains are meant to be "maintained in magnificent eminence before the eyes of men", whereas a novice probably would say 'men's eyes'. I am tempted to quote again from the same master of our language:

What space of time was in reality occupied by the "day" of Genesis, is not, at present, of any importance for us to consider. By what furnaces of fire the adamant was melted, and by what wheels of earthquake it was torn, and by what teeth of glacier and weight of sea-waves it was engraven and finished into its perfect form, we may perhaps hereafter endeavor to conjecture; but here, as in few words the work is summed by the historian, so in few broad thoughts it should be comprehended by us; and as we read the mighty sentence, "Let the dry land appear," we should try to follow the finger of God, as it engraved upon the stone tables of the earth the letters and the law of its everlasting form; as, gulf by gulf, the channels of the deep were ploughed; and cape by cape, the lines were traced, with Divine foreknowledge, of the shores that were to limit the nations; and chain by chain, the mountain walls were lengthened forth, and their founda-

* 'Modern Painters', Vol. IV, p. 103; 1873.

tions fastened for ever; and the compass was set upon the face of the depth, and the fields, and the highest part of the dust of the world were made; and the right hand of Christ first strewed the snow on Lebanon, and smoothed the slopes of Calvary.

A newspaper reporter would be inclined to write "Christ's right hand" and "Calvary's slopes". As a writer in 'The Weekly Review' says: "The *death rate of Chicago* is not decreasing, but *Chicago's death rate* is. During the war the *hope of peace* did not disappear, but the *peace hope* did. The *lynching of negroes in Georgia* has not become unfashionable, but *Georgia's negro lynching* has. The automobile industry *in Detroit* did not suffer a relapse, but *Detroit's* automobile industry did. The opening of navigation did not occur May 1 *on the Great Lakes*, but the *Great Lakes'* navigation did. Nothing happened to the capitol *at Springfield*, but something did to *Springfield's capitol. Quousque tandem?*".

The "besetting sin of too much possessive case" is one from which we ought to pray for escape. A technical article is entitled: 'Mining Accidents and their Prevention', meaning the prevention of them. But headlines are beyond the reach of literary criticism!