

An Open Letter to General White

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Sir: In reply to your invitation I presented myself at 280 Broadway on the morning appointed by you.

After a brief pause for embarrassment, a young and very charming officer addressed me and my fellow-loyalists as follows:

"Haw. Haw. Awfly sorry, you chaps, dontyerknow, but the fact is we aren't ready. We put it in the newspapers, of course, but some rotten blighter's let us down. No rooms to undress in, haw, haw; no forms, no stationery, what."

My name and address was then taken, to save trouble; I was to be summoned when they did get ready.

I did not get this summons; so I went down again in a week or so. This time I was examined by a "doctor," one of the funniest men I ever saw. Without making the necessary tests – I happen to be a doctor myself – he pronounced a diagnosis which had the merit of being totally at variance with that of the best opinions of Harley Street. He then promised to mail a certificate of exemption, which I have not yet received.

Yesterday I told my troubles to an American. He said: "You are lucky to get off so easily. How many of your friends are lying dead at Gallipoli, in Mesopotamia, on the Somme, and so on, just because of the mutton-headed incompetence of these gold-braided dummies? It's all of a piece."

I stopped him there with a short hook to the jaw.

Was I right? And what should I do now?

I have the honor to be, Sir, in undying loyalty to the Empire, your most humble and obedient servant.

BRITON

P.S. – I cannot but think it an error to employ the insulting neologism “Britisher” in addressing Britons.

It is bad logopoiesis to try to construct a noun from an adjective by adding “er.” You can make a word like “mucker” from “muck,” to mean “one who mucks things”; “stinker” from “stink,” to mean “one who makes a stink”; for “er” added to a noun or a verb gives the idea of agency. But “er” tacked on to an adjective gives the idea of increase: it is the sign of the comparative; as “stupider” from “stupid.”

Briton is a noble word, a word consecrated to us by the use of generations, as by the genius of Dibdin. Britisher is no word at all; it is simply a term of abuse and contempt invented by the American sea-captains when they felt that way. To use it to us as a term of endearment is just one more instance of the muddle that is risking the loss of the war.

I almost think that it has been a mistake to distrust the few men of brains that we possess. Sir Richard Burton got into trouble for furnishing his superiors with full and accurate information of the Indian Mutiny two years before the outbreak at Meerut; Consul Litton was banished to Teng-Yueh because he offered to give the Ambassador complete details of the Boxer organizations while they were still inchoate: Sir William Butler lost his reputation because he predicted the Boer War: Sir Bampfylde Fuller was dismissed because he told the truth about India. Why do you so hate and fear intelligence when we who happen to possess it are willing to offer it single-heartedly to our country?