

How to Tell an Englishman from an American

*Originally published in the August 1946
edition of Lilliput.*

This is the funniest story in the world. I first came across it in the Green-room Club. Beerbohm Tree was present; also Nat Goodwin. He offered the following:

In a small town of the remoter districts of the Middle West a young man was standing, shuffling his feet on the sidewalk. Presently he saw coming towards him a stranger—a God-fearing, clean-living He-man, a hundred per cent. American. This man he stopped, and said, "Excuse me, Stranger, but can you tell me the way to the Post Office?" "Yes," said the other, and walked on. But he had not gone fifty yards before his heart smote him, and he said to himself: "I allow that was pretty smart of me just now; but was it Christ-like? Was it Service? I dare say that young man is a God-fearing, clean-living He-man, a hundred per cent. American, just the way I am myself, and I dare say he has not had a letter from the old folks in their lonely cottage for a long, long time, and he has tramped all the way in from the farm where he is working in the hopes of a letter, and I have to be rude to him! No Sir! The least I can do is to go back and put him right."

So he went back to the young man, who was still shuffling his feet on the sidewalk, and said to him: "Say, brother, I guess I was rude to you just now. You want to know the way to the Post Office, don't you?" "No," said the young man, and walked on. That is the story.

There were some Americans in the Club; they all laughed, but none of the English moved a muscle. At last, however, somebody asked Tree point-blank whether *he* saw anything funny in the story, and Tree, after due consideration, could do no more than pro-

nounce in his inimitable drawl: "I think they were both damned rude."