ECHOES FROM THE PEOPLE.: The New Pronoun.
Maddox, C K
The Atlanta Constitution (1881-1945); Sep 26, 1884;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Atlanta Constitution
pg. 4

ECHOES FROM THE PEOPLE.

THE NEW PRONOUN.

Editors The Constitution: I notice that some of your correspondents are reaching out after a new word, the singular of the common gender and singular number. Professor Dozier suggests se, sif, sim for the singular number of such a pronoun; another writer has and him.

I strongly suspect we already have such a pronoun and have had it in daily use for ages, one, two, too, that is far preferable to those suggested. True it has not yet gotten into the grammars and dictionaries, but our grammarians and dictionary-makers are very conservative and often positively stupid.

Some years ago a little girl said to me "some body's come."

"Who is it?" said I; "man or woman?"

"I ain't going to tell you who it is; they come awhile ago."

Now this young lady did not hesitate to use "they" for the singular number and common or indefinite gender. If there was anything outre or peculiar in her usage of the word, I did not feel it. The professor would have said "some awhile ago." This he would be easily mistaken for, and would, if for no other reason, be very objectionable on that account. If any one will keep their ears open, they will find this use of "they" in daily practice among the people.

It has crept into literature, also, and its use is so natural to the genius of our language that hardly one in a hundred has noticed it as an intrusion. Mr. Pickwick once got lost in a hotel and entered another room than his own and was undressing behind the bed curtains. To Mr. Pickwick's horror, some person entered the room. Mr. Dickens, the writer, does not wish the reader to know whether the person entering was a man or a woman. That point is the climax of the story, and must be reserved to the last. So Mr. Dickens says that the person had come in so suddenly that Mr. Pickwick "had no time to oppose their entrance." After various maneuvers Pickwick got sight of the person, and it was an old maid! Richard Grant White says we need no such pronoun, but nine tenths of the enjoyment of the above story would be lost if "her" had been used in place of "they," to designate the person. Years ago persons wrote to Mr. White suggesting this use of "they." We find it in actual use in both England and America. And I think we may as well admit it into the grammars.

Our pronouns "they, them, and their," are from the Anglo-Saxon demonstrative. The forms from which "their" and "them" come are both found in the singular as well as in the plural, and in the Northumbrian dialect, the nominative singular was "the" pronounced just as "they" is now. The old Saxon was "this" in the singular. We have in English the article "the" in the singular, which is derived from the same word as "they." And I rather suspect that the people have for ages used "they" in the singular whenever they had to have a pronoun of the common gender and singular number. I have so used it twice in this article, and I doubt whether one in ten has noticed it. It is so natural that I predict it can never be supplemented by any artificial production.

C. K. MADDOX.