A question from Valerie de Lammeville, an English teacher in France:

My mind has been beset by a question for a great many years. Indeed when I studied English at university I once made a mistake which was not really explained to me by our teacher. The sentence we had to translate was the following: *il était un peu ivrogne* = he was something of a drunkard. If I’ve got it right you need **something of a** + a noun…? Something of a (or somewhat) means **a little**. But **a little** has to be followed by an adjective.

Susan Fearn answers:

Yes Valerie, you’re right to say that **something of a** is followed by a noun and here are a couple more examples:

**She seemed to be something of an expert on wine**

**He claimed to be something of a linguist**

And this expression **something of a** means **to some extent**. Now a few years ago, one British politician was describing a colleague she didn’t seem to like much and she said: ‘There was something of the night about him.’ In other words, like a vampire, like Dracula, who only went out at night, he went around frightening people! After that, cartoonists often drew this politician with big Dracula teeth and a black cloak!

In style terms, my feeling about this expression is that it’s a little bit formal – perhaps more written than conversational – perhaps a little bit old-fashioned even.

Now you also ask about the expression **a little + an adjective**, for example,
He felt a little tired so he went to bed
Or
She was a little confused so she asked the teacher for an explanation

Now this also means to some extent. If you want a word that sounds a bit closer to something you could also use somewhat and it would have the same meaning:

He felt somewhat tired
She was somewhat confused

…but this does sound, well… how shall I put it? …somewhat formal.

So what do we say in everyday spoken English then? Well, the answer is a bit. And the wonderful thing about a bit is that you can use it with both nouns and adjectives. With nouns it’s a bit of:

He’s a bit of a drunkard
or
She’s a bit of a wine expert

The other day a friend of mine was describing her new boss and she said: ‘Well he’s alright but he’s a bit of a Jack the lad.’ What she meant was he has a lot of girlfriends!

When we use a bit before an adjective, there’s no of:

He was a bit tired
She was a bit angry

So before a noun then, it’s a bit of, and before an adjective, a bit.
Apart from learning some useful expressions here, I think two points come out of this. First of all, we tend to learn English in ‘chunks’ – for example, you learn the expression **something of** followed by a noun with its special meaning. And secondly, it’s good to be aware that some expressions are more or less formal and up-to-date than others. For example **a bit** sounds conversational whereas **somewhat** sounds a bit stiff and formal.

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