

LECTURES TO MY STUDENTS

I was becoming rather deeply experimental I was gently pulled by my coat-tail, and the old gentleman stood up in front and said, 'Now, my grandson can tell you this as a theory, but I am here to bear witness to it as a matter of practical experience: I am older than he is, and I must give you my testimony as an old man.' Then after having given us his personal experience, he said, 'There, now, my grandson can preach the gospel a great deal better than I can, but he cannot preach a better gospel, can he?' Well, gentlemen, I can easily imagine that if I had not possessed some little power of extemporaneous speech upon that occasion, I might have been somewhat ruffled; but as it was, it came as naturally as if it had been pre-arranged.

THE ACQUISITION OF ANOTHER LANGUAGE affords a fine drilling for the practice of extempore speech. Brought into connection with the roots of words, and the rules of speech, and being compelled to note the *differentia* of the two languages, a man grows by degrees to be much at home with parts of speech, moods, tenses, and inflections; like a workman he becomes familiar with his tools, and handles them as every day companions. I know of no better exercise than to translate with as much rapidity as possible a portion of Virgil or Tacitus, and then with deliberation to amend one's mistakes. Persons who know no better, think all time thrown away which is spent upon the classics, but if it were only for the usefulness of such studies to the sacred orator, they ought to be retained in all our collegiate institutions. Who does not see that the perpetual comparison of the terms and idioms of two languages must aid facility of expression? Who does not see moreover that by this exercise the mind becomes able to appreciate refinements and subtleties of meaning, and so acquires the power of distinguishing between things that differ – a power essential to an expositor of the Word of God, and an extempore declarer of his truth. Learn, gentlemen, to put together, and unscrew all the machinery of language, mark every cog, and wheel, and bolt, and rod, and you will feel the more free to drive the engine, even at an express speed, should emergencies demand it.

EVERY MAN WHO WISHES TO ACQUIRE THIS ART MUST PRACTISE IT. It was by slow degrees, as Burke says, that Charles Fox became the most brilliant

The Faculty of Impromptu Speech

and powerful debater that ever lived. He attributed his success to the resolution which he formed when very young, of speaking well or ill, at least once every night. 'During five whole sessions' he used to say, 'I spoke every night but one, and I regret only that I did not speak on that night too.' At first he may do so with no other auditory than the chairs and books of his study, imitating the example of a gentleman who, upon applying for admission to this College, assured me that he had for two years, practised himself in extempore preaching in his own room.

Students living together might be of great mutual assistance by alternately acting the part of audience and speaker, with a little friendly criticism at the close of each attempt.

Conversation, too, may be of essential service, if it be a matter of principle to make it solid and edifying. Thought is to be linked with speech: that is the problem; and it may assist a man in its solution, if he endeavours in his private musings to think aloud. So has this become habitual to me that I find it very helpful to be able, in private devotion, to pray with my voice; reading aloud is more beneficial to me than the silent process; and when I am mentally working out a sermon, it is a relief to me to speak to myself as the thoughts flow forth. Of course this only masters half the difficulty, and you must practise in public, in order to overcome the trepidation occasioned by the sight of an audience; but half way is a great part of a journey. Good impromptu speech is just the utterance of a practised thinker – a man of information, meditating on his legs, and allowing his thoughts to march through his mouth into the open air.

Think aloud as much as you can when you are alone, and you will soon be on the high road to success in this matter. The discussion and debates in the classroom are of vital importance as a further step, and I would urge the more retiring brethren to take a part in them. The practice of calling upon you to speak upon a topic drawn at random from a bowl out of a wide selection has been introduced among you, and we must more frequently resort to it. What I condemned as a part of religious worship, we may freely use as a scholastic exercise among ourselves. It is calculated to try a man's readiness and self-command, and those who fail in it are probably as much benefited as those who succeed, for self-knowledge may be as useful to one as practice to another. If the

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discovery that you are as yet a bungler in oratory should drive you to severer study and more resolute endeavours, it may be the true path to ultimate eminence.

In addition to the practice commended, I must urge upon you the necessity of being *COOL AND CONFIDENT*. As Sydney Smith says, 'A great deal of talent is lost to the world for want of a little courage.' This is not to be easily acquired by the young speaker. Cannot you young speakers sympathize with Blondin, the rope walker? Do you not sometimes feel when you are preaching as though you were walking on a rope high in the air, and do you not tremble and wonder whether you will reach the other end in safety? Sometimes when you have been flourishing that beautiful balancing pole, and watching the metaphorical spangles which flash poetry upon your audience, have you not been half regretful that you ever exposed yourself to such risks of sudden descent, or, to drop the figure, have you not wondered whether you would be able to conclude the sentence, or find a verb for the nominative, or an accusative for the verb? Everything depends upon your being cool and unflurried. Forebodings of failure, and fear of man, will ruin you. Go on, trusting in God, and all will be well.

If you have made a blunder in grammar, and you are half inclined to go back to correct it, you will soon make another, and your hesitation will involve you as in a net. Let me whisper – for it is meant for your ear alone – it is always a bad thing to go back. If you make a verbal blunder go on, and do not notice it. My father gave me a very good rule when I was learning to write, which I think of equal utility in learning to speak. He used to say, 'When you are writing, if you make a mistake by misspelling a word, or by writing a wrong word, do not cross it out and make a mess of it, but see how you can in the readiest way alter what you were going to say so as to bring in what you have written, and leave no trace of mistake.' So in speaking, if the sentence will not finish in the best way, conclude it in another. It is of very little use to go back to amend, for you thus call attention to the flaw which perhaps few had noticed, and you draw off the mind from your subject to your language, which is the last thing which the preacher should do. If, however, your *lapsus linguae* should be noticed, all persons of sense will forgive a young