

THE SPEECH-PERIL

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POTENTIALLY, words are the most dangerous instruments ever grasped by man; and he has handled them recklessly.

One is almost disposed to believe that speech was intended to be figured in the Eden tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Even if Adam did give names to the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air before partaking of the fatal fruit, it is implied that he was miraculously endowed and guided in so doing. There is no record of Eve's having spoken until the talking serpent appeared. She listened to its falsifyings, took a mouthful of speech, shared it with Adam, and Eden was lost. A quarrel, with recriminations, followed. Harmony and contentment fled. The door was opened to all sorts of misunderstanding. It threatens to remain ajar as long as the fruit of the forbidden tree of speech continues to be impiously tasted. Speech has been defined as the means of concealing one's thoughts,—a crude way of putting the case, however, since it contemplates nothing but plain falsification or deliberate deception. The functions of speech are much more complicated than that would imply. It does away with the *necessity* for thought. It prevents us from recognizing our own thoughts. It disguises the fact that we have no real thoughts. It is the cause of nearly all wrong thinking, and therefore of most wrong acting. It is the main source of disputes and wranglings and dissensions and quarrels. It enables men to persuade themselves that they are free, rational agents in their various spheres, when in reality they are the bond-slaves of words.

"The moment that our life begins, we all begin to die", wails the old hymn. The moment that our speech begins, we all begin to *lie*, is an equally true and far sadder fact. By the time the child becomes a man he is so enmeshed and enwrapped in a verbal tangle that, whatever may be his natural mental ability and energy, he will be fortunate indeed if he succeeds in casting off the greater part of it during the remainder of his life. The strongest minded need never hope to free himself entirely. Part of the skein is always inwoven with the very tissues of his life, and defies removal. Propagandists of various kinds are well aware of this, and take the fullest advantage of it. Fanatical sects count on reaping their harvest before the age of maturity; so, in the main, do the political parties.

After that, they have merely to gather into sheaves and systematically stook their garnerings, whose grain they can tread out and utilize for their various purposes at leisure.

What is true of the effect of teaching,—that is, of verbal imposition on children—is equally true of the influence of speech upon whole peoples or classes of people. The persistence of an idea, once firmly imbedded in the popular mind, is amazing. Primitive man almost invariably feared, and therefore worshipped, what he could not comprehend in nature. The adoration of the heavenly bodies was universal. The moon, as the nearest and most easily observed of those bodies, was regarded with especial reverence. Unmistakable traces of its former cult are conspicuous in Jewish tradition, although there is no reason to believe that they have had any direct influence on the modern mind. Open and avowed moon-worship disappeared with the infancy of the race. Yet the moon superstition prevails still over all the earth, in every land, among every people. Nor is it confined to the ignorant and unenlightened—far from it. The gravest Caucasian professor is almost as likely to talk knowingly of coming weather in terms of the moon, as the lowest African is to howl in dismay if the new moon bursts on his vision when he is unprovided with a piece of silver, or the most backward peasant to anticipate failure if he undertakes any important agricultural operation at “the wrong time of the moon”. This is simply an illustration of the effects which the word-ideas of the infancy of a civilization have on its adult life; but it helps to make more significant the influence which the speech of individual infancy must have on individual adulthood.

As good a definition as any other of a “word” is that it is the sign of an idea. This being so, it follows that the overwhelming mass of humanity must be dependent exclusively on words for their ideas. Only great and original minds can evolve ideas, and find adequate expression for them. Others must obtain ideas, in so far as they are capable of assimilating them, by means of words. Unless the chosen words are so clear, so unmistakably expressive, as to be beyond misapprehension, they are obviously at least as likely to convey wrong as right ideas to minds that are merely receptive. If they are in any degree obscure or uncertain, it is ordinarily more probable that they will transfer erroneous than exact or true ideas. Thus there is danger enough for humanity in the very nature of words. When there are always with us the many to whom words are a mere stumbling block and a rock of offence, and the more capable few who seek diversion or selfish ends by distorting them or piling them up in the way of the feeble

or unwary, it is scarcely surprising that by means of them such havoc has been wrought in men's minds.

The malignant operations of speech are not confined to the maintenance of the strongholds of existing vicious ideas, but are devoted in at least equal measure to obstructing the advent of new and wholesome ones. It must still be fresh in public remembrance how the evolutionary theory, one of the greatest of modern conceptions, was combated when first formulated by Darwin. It encountered even more virulent opposition than the earlier theory of the revolution of the earth around the sun. Similar lingual weapons were used against it, gross misrepresentation being the chief. Darwin was accused of atheism, of denying God's work of creation, and of asserting man's descent from the monkey. So wide and effective was the dispersion of this verbal poison gas, and so blighting were its effects, that even now men and women who have ceased to be orthodox in other respects are repelled by the thought that humanity developed from a primordial cell instead of springing, full-armed, not from the brain but, literally, from the hands of a Creator. The word-inspired conceptions of their youth are more sacred to them than their enlightened reason. For them, God would be less worthy of reverence should He have taken aeons to creation as we see it, and be still continuing His work, than if He had finished the work in one of the moon's quarters, thereafter going into remote and perpetual retirement.

The political history of mankind has been the record of one continuous struggle against the verbal entrenchments of privilege. The most potent weapons of the defenders have always been words—words of contempt which they have perpetually dinned into the ears of the ignorant and timid, upon whom their main dependence for support has been based. Slowly and with infinite pains men threw off their primitive social fetters. Now they are menaced by a new, and possibly greater, verbal peril. The Political Phrase has usurped the throne of the earlier personal tyrant, and bids fair to be the more destructive and insufferable despot of the two. Tennyson saw what was coming when he wrote:

Step by step we gained a freedom,
Known to Europe, known to all;
Step by step we rose to greatness,
Thro' the tonguesters we may fall.

The word "democracy" is now on every vulgar lip, and on every scheming demagogue's tongue. How many realize its meaning? How many are there who do not read into it their own envious

passions or selfish desires? How many pause to think what it connotes while howling for what, to their minds, it denotes? Yet it is a noble word, signifying government of a whole people by themselves. What could be more ideal? But what has become more sordid? It should mean a sober, thoughtful, self-restrained, united people, all for each and each for all, working out their common political destiny for the common good. It does mean, to the multitude, civil power in their own untutored hands. Those who are now mouthing it mean class rule by the most ignorant class, to the exclusion of all others.

This is only a single illustration. Let a few of the phrases which have served their evil turn, and passed of late years into world history, be recalled. There was "Splendid Isolation" in Great Britain as an excuse for the lack of rational preparation which led to almost irreparable disaster. There was "World-power or Downfall" in Germany, to stimulate a spirit of reckless, criminal covetousness for the goods of her neighbours. There was "Too proud to fight" in the United States, to cover the shame of not vindicating the nation's honour; and, at a later date, "Peace without victory," the evils born of which are still in the lap of the gods, but are none the less menacing. The "League of Nations" phrase may possibly be set down in the uncertain class, as yet. History will decide.

Whenever and wherever new human conditions arise, the ubiquitous, parasitic word or phrase is there to prey upon them, and work mischief. The invention and improvement of modern manufacturing and producing machinery made a sudden and enormous addition to the world's wealth, and greatly ameliorated the circumstances of workmen and their families. There is no comparison between the comforts, enjoyments and privileges of the workers of to-day and of their prototypes of even half a century ago. The further one goes back in history, and the poorer society is seen to be, the worse is the condition of the toiler, until he is found in a state of actual slavery, from which he emerges only by slow degrees. This would probably have been as obvious and instructive to the intelligent working man, if left to himself, as it is to others. But he was not left to himself either by men and events, or by words. At a certain stage in modern industrial expansion he found it necessary or advisable to combine and organize for protective purposes. With organization came the fatal, distinctive name, "Labour". The die was cast. Its impress was soon to be seen everywhere. It marked workmen off as a class separate and distinct from the rest of the community. It begat and of necessity fostered class prejudice and class selfishness. At first it was local and limited in its influence.

It was not so much antagonistic as exacting. Its engagements and contests were with individual "masters", and not with any social or political abstraction. Its aims were legitimate and moderate. It demanded only better wages and better working conditions. But the word "Labour" was operating duly. It soon got itself capitalized as a noun of multitude, and, to justify its new eminence, began to affect and effect great combinations on national and even international scales. In view of the extent of its new dimensions and pretensions, it no longer comported with its dignity to wage war on mere "masters"; so it transferred the hostility which it had picked up in its progress from them to their possessions. Their possessions consisted mainly of working wealth, usually known as capital. The "masters" were first transmogrified into capitalized Capitalists, and then, suddenly, not they but Capital, all in capitals, became the ruthless enemy and oppressor of *Labour*.

The Labour-Capital war was on. It is the most senseless, malignant, far-reaching and threatening struggle that has ever been precipitated on society by those fiends of error and misrule called words. There is error, misunderstanding and mischief in every syllable and letter of both words. Labour is not one and a separate class because it has assumed a distinctive and misleading name, otherwise than the world is one because its inhabitants are spoken of by the collective name of humanity. Capital is not merely not the enemy of Labour, but is actually its parent and almost its sole means of support. That where there is no capital labour perishes, is not only proved by history, but is being demonstrated before the eyes of all in Russia where Labour has put the matter directly to practical test. But knowledge and experience are alike held at bay and defied by verbal force. Labour has the power, and apparently not only the will but the determination to destroy Capital, regardless of the fact that orderly industry and civilization itself must perish with it, and that starvation will follow. The only hope would seem to be that partial starvation may come in time to check the process of destruction before it is completed.

Tennyson again read aright the signs of the times when, in the last years of his ripened experience, he bitterly cried:

Babble, babble; our old England may go down
In babble at last.

But, grossly as words and phrases have darkened and perverted counsel in the social, political and economic spheres, it is in the religious or so-called spiritual domain that they have accomplished

their perfect work of beclouding and confusing men's minds. There we pass from the more or less concrete to the purely abstract. There the difficulties of checking and correcting become insurmountable. There we are in the chosen region of Superstition, in the kingdom of hereditary Prejudice, in the grip of the Unknowable. There we are involved in an uncharted and pathless forest, in which one has to grope one's way at random towards distant and elusive light. The wordy maze of this environment is more disheartening to mankind than the original mystery. The only possible way of escape from it is by casting words aside and facing realities, or, rather, *reality*, for there is but a single reality for every human being—the personally known fact of one's own existence. All, apart from that, is inference. This is the simple truth, known to each who "knows himself." It is the truth which makes one free. The freedom from verbal bonds which it bestows is glorious and complete. It renders possible real faith and the assurances which it affords. It disperses all clouds of doubt and fear. It opens up a sure path which promises ever increasing joys, and of which there is no conceivable end. It bestows a conclusive certainty of eternity, for the now-existent being must always have existed. This fact is not to be gainsaid, whether one takes a material or a spiritual view of the universe. The life that permeated the alleged primordial cell must either have been inherent in eternal matter or infused by eternal spirit. In either case it must have existed eternally. Between that cell, or between the Adam of *Genesis* and each living being, there can have been no break of continuity. Therefore each life, up to and including consciousness, is eternal.

What of it thereafter? That question Faith must answer for each. Faith has been so strikingly, so unmistakably, defined that no dictionary can confuse its meaning. It is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Consequently, it pertains absolutely to the individual. No external testimony is admissible otherwise than as the veriest hearsay. It is what one's own consciousness affirms, and none other. It is composed of two elements, what one's ultimate self asserts, and what one's ultimate being desires. Human consciousness almost universally asserts the perpetuation of existence. Innate human longings quite as universally demand happiness. Hence the justification of any individual's confidence in the future. And no jot or tittle of evidence can possibly be adduced to shake that confidence. Evidence, properly so called, consists of statements or inferences with regard to the known or knowable. It fails absolutely with reference to internal perception. There Faith governs, supreme and alone.

In the labyrinth through which individual life has to feel its way, innumerable confusing or misleading signposts have been set up by theology. The thought of even indicating them begets a vision of as many books as gave pause to the fourth Evangelist. Outstanding among them are such words as Conscience, Soul, Faith. The very word "theology" has been a parent of delusion. For who can construct a *Science* of God? A "systematized" set of dogmas manufactured for the guidance of their fellows by men who have not even apprehended that God is an object of personal faith, and of that alone!

"Conscience" is in a different category. It is well within the human sphere, and is therefore a legitimate subject of speculation. But there is endless confusion as to its meaning. Theology has done its best to magnify it into a concrete entity, or even to endow it with personality. "Soul and Mind and Conscience", is a phrase in common use, as if they were three separate and distinct things. The popular mind has been carefully trained to regard Conscience as a judicial functionary, holding continual court in each individual, pronouncing pragmatic and quasi-infallible decrees for the individual's guidance in all the concerns of life. Many here come to regard it as forming a part of their anatomy as distinct as their livers. To it, apparently, have been assigned the didactic and hortatory functions attributed to the kidneys by the ancients, to which the Psalmist alludes when he sings of his *reins* instructing him in the night seasons.

So regarded, Conscience is potentially not only a misleading but an exceedingly dangerous conception. It is so easy to make it the scapegoat or the excuse for mental errors or deliberate offences. "Conscience", as every school-boy should know, is merely a variation of the word Consciousness, which signifies being aware of the operations of one's own mind. Morally, it is a purely relative term. Practically, it affords not the least safe guidance to anyone except with regard to one's own social environment. Its fashions of deciding change, as do our garments, with period and location and climate. It is a mere mental reflection of the individual and his surroundings. To personify and exalt it, is to do violence to common sense, and weaken personal responsibility.

The Soul has been made to serve requirements similar to those imposed on Conscience. It is probably much more iconoclastic to assail its verbal throne than even to assail that of Conscience. It has been not only personified but sanctified. It has been proclaimed as *in* but not *of* the man. Not only its exact location but its very essence has been learnedly discussed. Probably few

orthodox people think of it otherwise than as a mysterious entity quite separate and apart from themselves. Many unquestionably believe that it is capable of being degraded, or possibly destroyed, by their minds, or even by their bodies in which they imagine it to be a compulsory, temporal guest. An accepted dictionary is not above defining it as "the immaterial spirit which inhabits the body". Surely this is not a clarifying belief! It can hardly be called a superstition, for it is a comparatively modern conception, not to say a recent theological invention. Christ's warning parable did not say this day thy *soul* shall be required of thee, but thy *life*. "Soul" is an admitted mistranslation. Christ on the cross did not say to the penitent thief, to-day thy *soul* shall be with me in paradise, but to-day *thou* shalt be with *me* in paradise. And the *thou* and the *me* of His promise unmistakably meant the two beings, as each knew himself, who were then passing on, side by side. If man could be got to realize that that which he knows as *himself* is the being which will have to tread the Beyond, and be its own companion for ever, might not his life on earth be very differently lived?

"Faith", as above quoted, has been defined for us in a manner exact and beyond compare. One might reasonably have expected that it, at least, is a word which would have escaped perversion. It has suffered above all others. It has been established as synonymous with creed, which means not faith but belief—two radically different things. Faith is something wholly apart from material evidence. Belief is founded solely on testimony. A man has faith because his being compels it. He believes because he is convinced by facts. Not only has the substitution of belief for faith been deliberately effected by theologians, but they have made belief, disguised as faith, the main test of spiritual merit and the sole hope of salvation. They have formulated creeds or confessions of "faith" in accordance with their own notions, and solemnly decreed that he who "believes" them shall be saved, and that he who "believeth them not", in their entirety, shall be damned. In consequence, myriads of poor, deluded men and women have dragged out their lives, not only trying miserably to believe wholly impossible and contradictory things, but missing or not perceiving the real faith, the genuine truth which makes not only free, but glad, because it is assured.

The safeguards? There are none immediately available. The best that can be hoped is more or less protection by the slow, long process of education, which alone can finally break the verbal barriers of barbarism, and let in something worthy of being called civilization. A God has already "mingled in the game". Word-

wielders caused Him to be despised and crucified. Those whom they had taught, falsified and perverted His message. Men were thenceforth cast upon their own resources for mental and moral regeneration. They must begin by getting rid of the cult of false words from which proceed all false doctrines. The truth can only in true words be expressed. Therefore the schools should devote themselves, with the zeal of missionaries in a great cause, to the teaching of speech as it should be taught and understood and used. Thus only can humanity be emancipated from the thralldom of oppressive words and phrases. Thus only can it be fitted to govern *itself* on earth. Thus only can it secure liberty to enjoy some dim foresight of a happier and better future.

DISCIPLES

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Who is that singer, with voice so sweet—
Tones that tell of mastered art,—
Where ease and grace and power all meet,
And form to Music's soul impart?
Her name? I know not. But this I know—
She is a pupil of So-and-So.

Who is that youth, with steps so light,
Light, yet firm as a soldier's tread,
Beauty divinely matched with might,
The shapely limbs, the well poised head?
His name? It doesn't matter much—
But—he was trained by Such-and-Such.

And who is this with tact so nice,
The face aglow with joy within,
Shedding an air as of Paradise,
Turning to bloom the wastes of Sin?
His name? Her name? What matter? I say—
Pupils of Jesus Christ are they.