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<VOICES.>

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Far before the eyes or the mouth or the habitual gesture, as a

revelation of character, is the quality of the voice and the manner of

using it. It is the first thing that strikes us in a new acquaintance,

and it is one of the most unerring tests of breeding and education.

There are voices which have a certain truthful ring about them--a

certain something, unforced and spontaneous, that no training can

give. Training can do much in the way of making a voice, but it can

never compass more than a bad imitation of this quality; for the very

fact of its being an imitation, however accurate, betrays itself like

rouge on a woman's cheeks, or a wig, or dyed hair. On the other hand,

there are voices which have the jar of falsehood in every tone, and

which are as full of warning as the croak of the raven or the hiss of

the serpent. These are in general the naturally hard voices which make

themselves caressing, thinking by that to appear sympathetic; but the

fundamental quality strikes up through the overlay, and a person must

be very dull indeed who cannot detect the pretence in that slow,

drawling, would-be affectionate voice, with its harsh undertone and

sharp accent whenever it forgets itself.

But without being false or hypocritical, there are voices which puzzle

as well as disappoint us, because so entirely inharmonious with the

appearance of the speaker. For instance, there is that thin treble

squeak which we sometimes hear from the mouth of a well-grown portly

man, when we expected the fine rolling utterance which would have been

in unison with his outward seeming. And, on the other side of the

scale, where we looked for a shrill head-voice or a tender musical

cadence, we get that hoarse chest-voice with which young and pretty

girls sometimes startle us. This voice is in fact one of the

characteristics of the modern girl of a certain type; just as the

habitual use of slang is characteristic of her, or that peculiar

rounding of the elbows and turning out of the wrists--which gestures,

like the chest-voice, instinctively belong to men only and have to be

learned before they can be practised by women.

Nothing betrays feeling so much as the voice, save perhaps the eyes;

and these can be lowered, and so far their expression hidden. In

moments of emotion no skill can hide the fact of disturbed feeling by

the voice; though a strong will and the habit of self-control can

steady it when else it would be failing and tremulous. But not the

strongest will, nor the largest amount of self-control, can keep it

natural as well as steady. It is deadened, veiled, compressed, like a

wild creature tightly bound and unnaturally still. One feels that it

is done by an effort, and that if the strain were relaxed for a moment

the wild creature would burst loose in rage or despair--and that the

voice would break into the scream of passion or quiver down into the

falter of pathos. And this very effort is as eloquent as if there had

been no holding down at all, and the voice had been left to its own

impulse unchecked.

Again, in fun and humour, is it not the voice even more than the face

that is expressive? The twinkle of the eye, the hollow in the under

lip, the dimples about the mouth, the play of the eyebrow, are all

aids certainly; but the voice! The mellow tone that comes into the

utterance of one man; the surprised accents of another; the fatuous

simplicity of a third; the philosophical acquiescence of a fourth when

relating the most outrageous impossibilities--a voice and manner

peculiarly Transatlantic, and indeed one of the American forms of

fun--do we not know all these varieties by heart? have we not veteran

actors whose main point lies in one or other of these varieties? and

what would be the drollest anecdote if told in a voice which had

neither play nor significance? Pathos too--who feels it, however

beautifully expressed so far as words may go, if uttered in a dead and

wooden voice without sympathy? But the poorest attempts at pathos will

strike home to the heart if given tenderly and harmoniously. And just

as certain popular airs of mean association can be made into church

music by slow time and stately modulation, so can dead-level

literature be lifted into passion or softened into sentiment by the

voice alone.

We all know the effect, irritating or soothing, which certain voices

have over us; and we have all experienced that strange impulse of

attraction or repulsion which comes from the sound of the voice alone.

And generally, if not absolutely always, the impulse is a true one,

and any modification which increased knowledge may produce is never

quite satisfactory. Certain voices grate on our nerves and set our

teeth on edge; and others are just as calming as these are irritating,

quieting us like a composing draught, and setting vague images of

beauty and pleasantness afloat in our brains.

A good voice, calm in tone and musical in quality, is one of the

essentials for a physician--the 'bedside voice' which is nothing if

not sympathetic by constitution. Not false, not made up, not sickly,

but tender in itself, of a rather low pitch, well modulated and

distinctly harmonious in its notes, it is the very opposite of the

orator's voice, which is artificial in its management and a made

voice. Whatever its original quality may be, the orator's voice bears

the unmistakeable stamp of art and is artificial. It may be admirable;

telling in a crowd; impressive in an address; but it is overwhelming

and chilling at home, partly because it is always conscious and never

self-forgetting.

An orator's voice, with its careful intonation and accurate accent,

would be as much out of place by a sick-bed as Court trains and

brocaded silk for the nurse. There are certain men who do a good deal

by a hearty, jovial, fox-hunting kind of voice--a voice a little

thrown up for all that it is a chest-voice--a voice with a certain

undefined rollick and devil-may-care sound in it, and eloquent of a

large volume of vitality and physical health. That, too, is a good

property for a medical man. It gives the sick a certain fillip, and

reminds them pleasantly of health and vigour. It may have a mesmeric

kind of effect upon them--who knows?--so that it induces in them

something of its own state, provided it be not overpowering. But a

voice of this kind has a tendency to become insolent in its assertion

of vigour, swaggering and boisterous; and then it is too much for

invalided nerves, just as mountain-winds or sea-breezes would be too

much, and the scent of flowers or of a hayfield oppressive.

The clerical voice again, is a class-voice--that neat, careful,

precise voice, neither wholly made nor yet natural--that voice which

never strikes one as hearty nor as having a really genuine utterance,

but which is not entirely unpleasant if one does not require too much

spontaneity. The clerical voice, with its mixture of familiarity and

oratory as that of one used to talk to old women in private and to

hold forth to a congregation in public, is as distinct in its own way

as the mathematician's handwriting; and any one can pick out blindfold

his man from a knot of talkers, without waiting to see the square-cut

collar and close white tie. The legal voice is different again; but

this is rather a variety of the orator's than a distinct species--a

variety standing midway between that and the clerical, and affording

more scope than either.

The voice is much more indicative of the state of the mind than many

people know of or allow. One of the first symptoms of failing brain

power is in the indistinct or confused utterance; no idiot has a clear

nor melodious voice; the harsh scream of mania is proverbial; and no

person of prompt and decisive thought was ever known to hesitate nor

to stutter. A thick, loose, fluffy voice too, does not belong to the

crisp character of mind which does the best active work; and when we

meet with a keen-witted man who drawls, and lets his words drip

instead of bringing them out in the sharp incisive way that should be

natural to him, we may be sure there is a flaw somewhere, and that he

is not 'clear grit' all through.

We all have our company voices, as we all have our company manners;

and, after a time, we get to know the company voices of our friends,

and to understand them as we understand their best dresses and state

service. The person whose voice absolutely refuses to put itself into

company tone startles us as much as if he came to a state dinner in a

shooting-jacket. This is a different thing from the insincere and

flattering voice, which is never laid aside while it has its object to

gain, and which affects to be one thing when it means another. The

company voice is only a little bit of finery, quite in its place if

not carried into the home, where however, silly men and women think

they can impose on their house-mates by assumptions which cannot stand

the test of domestic ease. The lover's voice is of course \_sui

generis\_; but there is another kind of voice which one sometimes hears

that is quite as enchanting--the rich, full, melodious voice which

irresistibly suggests sunshine and flowers, and heavy bunches of

purple grapes, and a wealth of physical beauty at all four corners.

Such a voice is Alboni's; such a voice we can conceive Anacreon's to

have been; with less lusciousness and more stateliness, such a voice

was Walter Savage Landor's. His was not an English voice; it was too

rich and accurate; yet it was clear and apparently thoroughly

unstudied, and was the very perfection of art. There was no greater

treat of its kind than to hear Landor read Milton or Homer.

Though one of the essentials of a good voice is its clearness, there

are certain lisps and catches which are pretty, though never

dignified; but most of them are painful to the ear. It is the same

with accents. A dash of brogue; the faintest suspicion of the Scotch

twang; even a little American accent--but very little, like red-pepper

to be sparingly used, as indeed we may say with the others--gives a

certain piquancy to the voice. So does a Continental accent generally;

few of us being able to distinguish the French accent from the German,

the Polish from the Italian, or the Russian from the Spanish, but

lumping them all together as 'a foreign accent' broadly. Of all the

European voices the French is perhaps the most unpleasant in its

quality, and the Italian the most delightful. The Italian voice is a

song in itself; not the sing-song voice of an English parish

schoolboy, but an unnoted bit of harmony. The French voice is thin,

apt to become wiry and metallic; a head-voice for the most part, and

eminently unsympathetic; a nervous, irritable voice, that seems more

fit for complaint than for love-making; and yet how laughing, how

bewitching it can make itself!--never with the Italian roundness, but

\_câlinante\_ in its own half-pettish way, provoking, enticing,

arousing. There are some voices which send you to sleep and others

which stir you up; and the French voice is of the latter kind when

setting itself to do mischief and work its own will.

Of all the differences lying between Calais and Dover, perhaps nothing

strikes the traveller more than the difference in the national voice

and manner of speech. The sharp, high-pitched, stridulous voice of the

French, with its clear accent and neat intonation, is exchanged for

the loose, fluffy utterance of England, where clear enunciation is

considered pedantic; where brave men cultivate a drawl and pretty

women a deep chest-voice; where well-educated people think it no shame

to run all their words into each other, and to let consonants and

vowels drip out like so many drops of water, with not much more

distinction between them; and where no one knows how to educate his

organ artistically, without going into artificiality and affectation.

And yet the cultivation of the voice is an art, and ought to be made

as much a matter of education as a good carriage or a legible

handwriting. We teach our children to sing, but we never teach them to

speak, beyond correcting a glaring piece of mispronunciation or so. In

consequence of which we have all sorts of odd voices among us--short

yelping voices like dogs; purring voices like cats; croakings and

lispings and quackings and chatterings; a very menagerie in fact, to

be heard in a room ten feet square, where a little rational

cultivation would have reduced the whole of that vocal chaos to order

and harmony, and would have made what is now painful and distasteful

beautiful and seductive.