

Defects in our Public Schools.

ELOCUTION.

BY A MEMBER OF THE N. O. T. A.

Elocution is a branch of education which, if neglected in the elementary school, can but seldom be acquired in after life; for many well educated persons are poor readers, while public speaking is entirely out of the question in their case. Good speakers and readers are rarely to be met with. Let it not be supposed that our spouters on platforms and in pulpits have the smallest titles to be called good speakers. Twisting the body, cutting pretty figures, sawing the air, and all other unnatural gestures, although imposing, and often passed for eloquence, is to every sensible mind childish and wearisome. A rattling volubility, which pours forth words in torrents and whirlwind, part froth, part mud, part pathos; though frequently called magnificent, profound, clever, and so on, is among the most pitiable spectacles one can witness. Magnificent, forsooth; yes, because delivered with all the pomposity a vain mind is capable of; profound, because its sense is immeasurably little, and just as clever as any other species of quackery. If it is vile to play pranks on the platform, what can we say of them when they profane the pulpit?

" 'Tis my perfect scorn,
Object of my implacable disgust

What! will a man play tricks, will he indulge
A silly fond conceit of his fair form
And just propitiation, fashionable mien
And pretty face, in the presence of his God?
Or will he seek to dazzle me with tropes,
As with the diamond on his lilly hand,
And play his brilliant parts before my eyes,
When I am hungry for the bread of life?
He mocks his maker.

These bending, twisting, and dancing speakers and preachers, are, to all sensible people, really intolerable when their barranges are nothing but wind, or at least a few commonplace ideas given out with such an air of seriousness, that people think there is something valuable coming until they hear it. To talk of Sampson's catching three hundred foxes, with an air of awful seriousness, shows the silliest affectation and is certain to cause levity and unconcern in people accustomed to such exhibitions, even when the most solemn truths are brought before them. If few who have attempted public speaking can do it well, fewer still can read well. If they do not mumble through with scarcely any articulation at all, they rattle on without modulation or expression, that no one can understand what they read, if they understand it themselves.

The cure of this defect should be effected in the common school, for it is very few adults who can be cured of indistinctness of articulation, and trained to speak and read so as to be well understood. Most teachers seem to think that Elocution is not one of the branches in the programme of common school studies, while others more enterprising teach, *ex gratia*, something which they call elocution, in the shape of dialogues and recitations, and a miserable affair it often is. Girls as well as

boys are put up on a stand to repeat a piece of poetry as if girls were to become lecturers, and Rev. Miss Euphemia Andelusia. It is freely granted that recitations go far to secure confidence and distinctness, but it is working at the wrong end unless a sound foundation is previously laid.

It is something bordering on the ridiculous to be treated at the school examinations, as is often the case, to these wretched exhibitions of boys and girls repeating pieces of poetry and prose, the sentiments of which they do not understand, and cannot sympathize with them, consequently, they must be spoken in a halting, staggering, hesitating style, the countenance giving no indication of the sense, as should be the case, the hands moving in every direction but the right one, the whole action spiritless, or manifestly artificial—mere automata, entirely wanting the natural life.

The teaching of elocution must be commenced with the alphabet to secure good speaking and good reading. The child ought to be made to pronounce distinctly and slow, very slow indeed until he is able to read pretty well, and should not leave the second book not merely until he can pronounce his words correctly, but until he can read with some amount of correct expression. In order to succeed, he must be taught to understand what he reads; for no one, young or old, can read well what they do not understand. To read as we should speak, were the sentiments read our own, provided we did speak our thoughts well, but this rule leaves abundant work for the judicious teacher to perform.

It is often painful to listen to the reading of some, even when it is the Bible they read, there appears to be so little reverence, they drive through at such unbecoming speed, that it is rather too evident that they themselves are not much edified. Such reading is, to say the least, unbecoming, whatever book it is, but profane when one has the word of God in his hands.

Is it too much to say that the Local Superintendents should not only give all encouragement, but insist on there being decent, slow, distinct reading in the schools under their supervision, and that Boards of Education should make reading a subject of examination of candidates for certificates, and that none but good readers should obtain any certificates, for the harm bad readers, acting as teachers, do, is immense.

Although simultaneous reading has been condemned by some educationists, teachers would find a judicious use of it of considerable value, to be sure, if used exclusively, it is worse than useless, because their children trained to read by its means could not read at all out of the class, or unaided by the reading of others. When a teacher reads well himself, and able to manage his classes well, he, by simultaneous reading imparts much of his own manner, distinctness, and intonation to his pupils. Let teachers and others interested in education give their attention to this subject and the result will soon be a decided improvement.

As for the so-called professors of elocution,

they cannot confer much benefit on anybody; for should one be enabled to speak a piece learned from an elocutionist with all the ease and grace that could be desired, he becomes himself as soon as he attempts to speak or read his own composition. To squeeze people's delivery into one model is as unnatural as the Chinese fashion of placing tight shoes upon the feet of their female children, which to be sure secures uniformity, but the consequence is generally deformity. In fact, such teaching of elocution seems very much like building a house at the top. It is right enough to set up a well sculptured capital, frieze, and cornice, if the foundation, base, and columns were all raised in their proper order, otherwise decorations and polish would be of little value as the whole would topple down about the builder's hand where there is no solid foundation.

A PICTURE OF VENICE

A city of marble did I say?—nay rather a golden city paved with emerald. For truly every pinnacle and turret glanced and glowed, overlaid with gold, or bossed with jasper. Beneath, the unsullied sea drew in deep breathing, to and fro, its eddies of green wave. Deep-hearted, majestic, terrible as the sea, the men of Venice moved in sway of power and war; pure as her pillars of alabaster stood her mothers and maidens, from foot to brow, all noble, walked her knights, the low-bronzed gleaming of sea-rusted armor shot angrily under their blood-red mantle-folds. Fearless, faithful, patient, impenetrable, implacable—every word a fate—sate her Senate. In hope and honor, lulled by the flowing of waves around her isles of sacred sand, each with his name written and the cross graved at his side, lay her dead. A wonderful piece of world. Rather itself a world. It lay along the face of the waters no larger as its captains saw it from their masts at evening, than a bar of sunset that could not pass away; but for its power it must have seemed to them as if they were sailing in the expanse of heaven, and this a great planet, whose orient edge widened through ether. A world from which all ignoble care and petty thoughts were banished, with all the common and poor elements of life. No foulness, no tumult, in those tremulous streets, that filled or fell beneath the moon; but rippled music of majestic change, or thrilling silence. No weak walls could rise above them; no low-roofed cottage nor straw built shed. Only the strength as of rock, and the finished setting-stones most precious. And around them, far as the eye could reach, still the soft moving of stainless waters, proudly pure; as not the flower, so neither the thorn nor the thistle could grow in the glancing fields. Ethereal strength of the Alps, dreamlike, vanished in high procession beyond the Torcellan shore; blue islands of Paduan hills, poised in the golden west. Above, free winds and fiery clouds ranging at their will; brightness out of the north, and balm from the south, and the stars of the evening and the morning clear in the limitless light, or arched heaven and circling sea.—*Ruskin's "Modern Painters."*