

UNIVERSITY GAZETTE.

VOL. IV.—NEW SERIES.

MONTREAL, MARCH 16, 1878.

No. 9.

PUBLIC SPEAKING.

(*Essay read before the University Literary Society by C. H. STEPHENS, Esq., B.C.L., December, 1877.*)

It will be admitted, I think, that the chief aim of this Society is to cultivate the art of public speaking; and as several ideas have occurred to me in connection with this subject which I have not seen or heard elsewhere, I have made them the groundwork of this essay.

Every one has remarked how easy it seems to be to do that which we see another do; and every one, it may be, has also remarked that in almost every art, excepting perhaps that of a juggler, the more skillfully a thing is performed the more perfect is the delusion. You hear Brignoli sing, and you can scarce believe that notes as beautiful and clear will not flow from your own lips if you do but open your mouth. You read the charmed verses of Byron or Moore, and you cannot understand why you should not be able to put together language as skillfully and well. And so it is with all the rest. But of all arts none is perhaps so delusive to the untried as that of public speaking. It would not, perhaps, be too much to say that there is scarcely any man, of any education, who has never tried his hand at addressing an audience, but thinks that were the occasion to arise he could fascinate his hearers, both with the force of his ideas and the eloquence of his style. I remember when a boy it was my pet ideal of greatness to stand on a public platform with a roll of paper in my hand, after the manner of the pictures of the Roman Senators: which we see in the books, and captivate a large audience by my eloquence (and I have no doubt that many of you, gentlemen, have experienced the same flattering vision); but when the opportunity came these veritable chateaux d'Espagne soon vanished into air. And so I have often seen it with others. As soon as the occasion arises the man who attempts to address an audience for the first time experiences most forcibly the truth of the proverb—*Omnia vanitas*. He rises to his feet and as by a turn of the kaleidoscope everything is changed. He may not see stars, it is true, but he sees in imagination many things of which he had no conception before. A new world is opened to his view; new thoughts, feelings and emotions throng his bewildered brain. Like the man described, I think by Goldsmith, who having put his head under water, imagined himself in an unknown land, surrounded by strange sights and sounds and in that position passed a lifelong experience in a single moment, so with our deluded orator the first time he lets himself forth. Another *cosmos* surrounds him; insuperable difficulties which he had

not thought of, rise like mountains before him. His ideas, if he have any, lack arrangement, lack words, lack everything; and, in a great majority of instances he sinks into his seat convinced that public speaking is not so easy a thing as he had imagined it to be.

There is then a secret to learn in this art as in all others, and our chief business here is to find it out.

It will be manifest, I think, to everyone that there are two principal elements which enter into the making of a good public speaker, viz., natural talents and cultivation. The first is possessed by few. The latter everyone can attain to in a greater or less degree. Where both are combined, the result is what the world calls a good speaker, an "orator," or what you will; but it is a mistaken notion, I think, to suppose that good public speakers, like poets, are born such; that a person who has a natural talent for addressing public audiences, for making what is called "a speech," is beyond the need of cultivation, and is possessed of all that is necessary to distinguish himself in that particular line. A consideration not only of those who have distinguished themselves as public speakers, from Demosthenes down to the present time, but of the attempts we see around us every day, go, I think, to prove this. We may very properly vary the couplet of Pope a little, and say,

"True ease in speaking comes by art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance."

And this leads me to another mistake which people sometimes make, to another delusion under which the untried and inexperienced often labor, and which is perhaps more fatal to its possessor than the first. It is exemplified in the man whose sublimed self-confidence and self-possession rise entirely superior to the terrors of the situation; but having no digested ideas, and being unaccustomed to think on his feet, pours forth a torrent of words in a loud voice under the impression that he is making a speech. This latter delusion, as I have said, is perhaps more dangerous than the first, and for this reason: the person laboring under the first, if determined to be a speaker, will set about discovering wherein his difficulty lies, and overcome it, if possible; but the second, who sees no difficulty, will, in a great measure, continue in his delusion to the end. It is not uncommon to hear a speaker of this class mentioned as possessing a fine command of language, when in fact it is the language which has a fine command of him. He follows a train of words rather than of ideas, and his speech, though delivered it may be in an impassioned or declamatory style, is "all sound and fury, signifying nothing."

There is nothing, perhaps, so hard to define as true eloquence. We can imagine it to ourselves, we can recognize it when we hear it or read it, but we cannot