

WORDS AND IDEAS.*

BY G. L. DOUGHTY.

I have been trying to ascertain the cause of this painful, strained, and sometimes laughable effort to talk learnedly by using high-sounding words to express small ideas. It is said the ancient Spartans never considered themselves men until they could whip their mother. Young America never thinks himself a scholar until he can confound his parents with prodigious words. A mother says to her son: "John, if you don't stop spitting tobacco juice on the floor I will whip you!" The son replies: "Mother, why don't you talk properly? why did you not say, My son, if you do not cease ejecting the saliva of the Virginia weed upon the promenade, I will administer unto you a severe castigation?"

A wise divine has said: "Fine clothes do not make a man, but they help the looks of him amazingly after he is made." Words can not make ideas, but when nicely chosen and well fitted they give them a good appearance and increase their effect. But as we mistake clothes for men—feathers for birds—so bombastic phrases and high-flown language are often mistaken for scholarship. If a quack should say saccharine substance instead of sugar, or *agua pura* instead of pure water, there are many who would say, "That is a learned doctor—hear what wise words he uses!" Such learning is show without substance, "sounding brass and tinkling cymbal." This is encouraged by a very grave error in teaching. An overloaded stomach produces flatulency; when the food is not properly converted into elements of nutrition, there accumulates in and passes from the stomach a quantity of gas. So when the intellect is filled with indigestible matter, it gives off gas, words without ideas—blank cartridges. The boy just mentioned was a victim of mental dyspepsia.

The error in teaching is this: *tasking the memory with a mass of indigestible stuff, words, names, and rules not understood—and permitting pupils to study sciences beyond their age and capacity.* It is possible to pronounce words correctly and read fluently, and even recite (by tongue, not "by heart" or by head even) whole pages satisfactorily (to the teacher who reads the questions of the book), without grasping a single idea. It is quite common for pupils to commit every rule

in grammar to memory without being able to parse a single sentence. Boys spout forth whole pages of Clay and Webster who have a kind of *feeling* that they are declaiming something weighty, but really *know* but little more about it than the parrot that repeats, "Pretty Polly!" This, instead of making the mind a reservoir of ideas—a fountain of thought—converts it into a funnel for others' thought to pass through; however, this is better than nothing, because even a funnel will smell of the wine that has passed through it.

Ambitious parents wish to make their children men and women, in scientific attainments, before they cease to be boys and girls. Not only must the mind be stuffed with indigestible material (metaphorically speaking), but if too small it must be stretched. Instead of permitting the teacher to teach the young idea *how* to shoot, he is expected to teach it *when* to shoot, and to *make* it shoot even before there is an idea *to* shoot. An Irishman once took a board to an artist's studio and asked that his little boy's portrait be painted on it, full length, life size. The artist took the board, looked at it, and told the father it was too small for such a size picture, being barely large enough for the bust of the boy. "But," says Patrick, "faith, and can't you paint his legs hanging off the board?" Now for parents to demand that a child be made efficient in sciences beyond its capacity, is demanding what Patrick did—an utter impossibility.

Children trained by this practice of stuffing and stretching, when arrived at years of maturity often manifest but little interest in reading, because habituated to reading and reciting without comprehending and appreciating. I have in mind persons who were celebrated at school for good recitations, because apt at committing to memory words, rules, and names, and who were considered accomplished in the common branches of an English education, who can not now solve the most common problem in practical business without referring to the book and rule, and who do not show enough interest in reading to subscribe for a weekly newspaper.

This error in teaching is encouraged by erroneous views of mental science and what a German philosopher terms the "Laws of Exercise." In attempting to cultivate the powers of the understanding by simply memorizing words, *we proceed upon the theory that one mental faculty may be increased by exercising another;*

when, in fact, each faculty to grow, must be exercised for itself alone. No sane man would attempt to increase the muscular power of his left arm by holding it in a sling and exercising only his right arm; neither would he attempt to render the sense of sight more acute by exercising only the sense of touch. Yet teachers commit this blunder. They essay to develop that power of the intellect which recognizes *the thing itself* by coming into action or exercising only that power which recognizes *the name of the thing*, thus mistaking a knowledge of words or names for a knowledge of things. It is possible to know a dozen or more names for any one person, place, principle, or thing, without knowing any of the properties or peculiarities of that person, place, principle, or thing. An English writer tells us of a monk in a European convent who had studied the dead languages and knew the name of a horse in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, and yet was unable to tell whether the horse ate meat or grass. We may study anatomy and be able to call the names of the 208 bones of the human body and yet be entirely ignorant of the shape and size of each of these bones. In this, it will be observed, we call into action our faculty of language alone, while that faculty which recognizes the *shape* of an object, and that which recognizes the *size* of an object, remain inactive. Thus we may worm through a whole circle of sciences exercising only a few faculties while a greater number remain comparatively dormant, and therefore undeveloped. And thus it is we substitute profuse verbiage for practical knowledge—confound words with ideas—mistake the name of an object for the object itself—and stuff one mental faculty while we starve a dozen.

ONE DROP AT A TIME.—Have you ever watched an icicle as it formed? You noticed how it froze one drop at a time until it was a foot long or more. If the water was clean the icicle remained clear, and sparkled brightly in the sun; but if the water was but slightly muddy, the icicle looked foul, and its beauty spoiled. Just so our characters are forming. One little thought or feeling at a time adds its influence. If each thought be pure and right, the soul will be lovely, and will sparkle with happiness; but if impure and wrong, there will be final deformity and wretchedness.

....."A laugh," says Charles Lamb, "is worth a hundred groans in any state of the market."

* Extract from Lecture delivered at Shelby Co. (Ill.) Teachers' Association.