

with a needless commentary, or deducing a too obvious moral from the tritest of stories. In addition to this unnecessary repetition, they invade what used to be the function of books and purely literary periodicals, and diurnally publish essays, often very readable, on a variety of social subjects that do not come properly within the category of current events, or diurnal history. One of the results is that those who make it a point to read the newspapers and magazines, can rarely find time to read anything else. If perchance these busy people desire to read a book, they generally prefer one that does not overtax their mental energies, or which ministers solely to their amusement, or, at the best, prevents them from falling asleep after the business of the day is concluded.

In the great and increasing army of newspaper writers, it is not to be expected that every private in the ranks is, or ever can be, a master of style, or one who can afford time to cultivate the graces of a Steele, an Addison, or a Junius. It is sufficient for the rank and file that they make themselves intelligible, and that they do not preach above the heads and the understandings of their readers. But writers may be simple and intelligible—and on a level with the intelligence of those whom they address—whilst grinding out as from a barrel-organ the old similitudes, the old and worn-out phrases of their predecessors. For a good or apt word, and a happy phrase, all readers ought to be grateful, but writers ought to beware of repeating them too often, or introducing them on all occasions relevant or irrelevant, especially if they be inferior writers—mere parrots and mocking-birds—who catch a word by the ear and use it without intelligence or necessity. Such words and phrases soon degenerate into slang.

Among these stock phrases continually employed by careless writers,

mere echoes of the sounds that others have made, are the following old acquaintances of the daily press:—

“*For a moment*.”—Thus if a thing is not to be endured, believed, tolerated, or thought of, it is inevitably added that they are not to be believed, etc., *for a moment*.

“*At large*.”—The community, the nation, society, the public, are scarcely ever mentioned in leading articles, or in speeches, without the unnecessary addendum “at large,” though each of these substantives would be sufficient without it.

“*Conspicuous by its absence*.”—This figure of speech was first made with happy effect by the late Earl Russell, in commenting upon the absence on a great occasion of one who ought to have been present. Since that day—more than twenty years ago—the phrase paradoxical though it be, but effective and intelligible, has taken the fancy of a vast multitude of ever-ready writers, and has done duty almost diurnally, to prove the penury of idea of those who habitually make use of it.

“*The irony of fate*” was an excellent phrase originally, but when employed without discretion by people who have not considered what irony means, or what fate is (the stern, the unbending, the invincible, the inevitable), it becomes a locution as idle as the parrot’s utterance of “pretty Poll.” Irony is a jest, and a mockery; but there is no jesting, no mockery in fate. Jest and mockery are human, but fate is divine.

“*History repeats itself*.”—This is an untruth, or at best a half truth, which is constantly dinned into the ears of the unthinking. The phrase is acceptable to people who would accept anything if uttered *ex cathedra* and in a loud voice of authority. But the assertion is baseless. Similar incidents occur in all ages and in all countries; but the germs of those in-