

LAPSUS LINGUÆ.

ARE you, reader, one of those thrice-happy mortals whose mental machinery neither loses nor gains, but works on with uniform regularity? Can you rise to address an assembly, or sit down to your desk for more guarded utterance, with the consciousness that what you speak or write is sure to come up to a certain average, not disgracefully below your former performances? Do your thoughts never come crowding on your brain in such turbulent confusion, that before you have finished moulding one, another pushes it out, and the perplexed listener has to interpret your meaning from the heads and tails of incomplete sentences? Is your memory clear and ready, always providing you with, at all events, familiar names and words in common use? If so, it is much to be feared that you are harsh and uncharitable towards those whose minds are less happily constituted than your own; that you characterise their forgetfulness as carelessness, their abstraction as affectation, their incoherence as a sure symptom of despicable folly; for it is exceedingly difficult for an orderly mind to contemplate anything approaching to confusion or want of method with common patience; it cannot comprehend that what comes so instinctively to itself, is unattainable by a different organisation. Of course, a confused, a hesitating, or inconsequent style of speaking is a great defect; but it is one which so often arises from a redundancy rather than a lack of sentiments and illustrations, that it should be treated with leniency. Indeed, it is singular to observe how often an empty-headed man, without one original idea in his possession, can pour out well-turned sentences without hesitation, and upon every subject, by the hour together; while his intellectual superior, who has thought deeply and earnestly upon the same topics, sits by in silence, or stammers, becomes involved in his sentences, puts one word for another, and makes an exhibition of himself rather than of his opinions.

When a man combines power of thought with fluency of speech and the faculty of arranging his ideas, he is a delightful conversationalist; if, in addition, he has good lungs, an uvula which does not tickle, and sturdy tonsils, he is a born orator; let him add industry and a capacity for business, and there is your statesman.

All men who are deficient in the three first qualities—namely, thought, fluency, and order—are liable to the *lapsus linguæ*, and if they declaim much in public, will sometimes excite unintentional merriment by their blunders. How we laugh, even at the present day, at the elaborate mistakes of Sir Boyle Roche. The famous "There he stands, Mr. Speaker, like a crocodile, with his hands in his pockets, shedding false tears," may surely be considered a slip of the tongue: he would not have *written* such a sentence. He possessed a creative imagination and fluency of speech, but was entirely deficient in the power of arranging his ideas: comparisons, illustrations, invectives overflowed his brain, and came pouring out of his mouth in a heterogeneous torrent. Take, for instance: "Mr. Speaker, sir, I smell a rat; I see him floating in the air; but I will nip him in the bud!" Here are three distinct images jumbled up into a ridiculous sentence. A man with an equally fluent tongue and a brain of inferior reproductive energy, would have stuck, say, to the flower, some poisonous plant probably, would have sown it, watered it, pampered it for a quarter of an hour before the nipping process, and probably impressed his audience with the idea that he had made a very respectable speech.

The more ordinary slips of the tongue are caused either by nervousness or by the mind wandering away while the unruly member is left to trip unguided over some oft-repeated words, and the effect produced by such mistakes is sometimes very ludicrous. It is astonishing how seldom actors stumble in this way: one would fancy that men repeating the words of another, night after night, and obliged all the time to think of their actions, the expression of their faces, and, above all, their cues, would be pecu-

liarily liable to blunder; but though they often forget their parts, and are driven to "gag," it is almost always the author, not the actor, who suffers. I remember one very ridiculous *lapsus* made by an actor, however, which may not be familiar to the reader. The play was *Lear*, and the performer who represented the king got on well enough till he came to his lament over the unfilial conduct of his daughter Goneril:

Turn all her mother's pains, and benefits,
To laughter and contempt; that she may feel
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child.

Which the unhappy man rendered:

How sharper than a serpent's thanks it is
To have a toothless child.

A reading not quite so tragic as the original.

A still more terrible thing must it be for a clergyman to make a ludicrous blunder of this description while conducting the service; the more solemn the cast of our thoughts at any particular moment, the more comic does any absurdity seem, and he must have been a very serious person indeed who refrained from smiling when the officiating minister read: "He spake the word, and cathoppers came, and grasspillars innumerable." The best thing which could happen to one who made such a slip, would be not to perceive it; that is, if he were a man who found a difficulty in keeping his countenance upon trying occasions, a task, however, which the majority of clergymen seem to find simple enough.

It is a singular phenomenon of the human mind, that if a man makes a slip of the tongue without noticing it himself, or being corrected by others, in the course of a repetition or recital, the chances are that the same *lapsus* recurs on the next occasion. A friend of ours, who is one of the best gentlemen light-weight riders in England, an ardent fox-hunter, and a most melodious vocalist, has a first-rate hunting-song in his repertoire, which is always called for on convivial occasions, but in the course of singing which he as invariably as unwittingly trolls out the most fearful heresy that a sportsman could utter:

"When hounds are in cover, your place is inside"

—instead of *outside*, as, of course, it stands in the text, and as my friend fancies he sings it.

These last instances are pure slips of the tongue, as those first treated of are perhaps of the brain; but there is a description of *lapsus* in which the powers of thinking and the organs of speech seem to stumble at the same time.

The Count de Roncy, who was rather famous for these ingenious blunders, went to call upon Madame de Thianges when she was very ill.

"And how are you to-day, madame?"

"No, better, count. I cannot get a wink of sleep."

"Dear, dear; how is that?"

"It is those church-bells, that keep up one ceaseless din day and night. I do wish something could be done about it."

"Why don't you have straw laid down before the door?" cried De Roncy, his face lighting up as he thought of this ingenious expedient.

A better illustration of the compound *lapsus* I allude to, is perhaps afforded by the following anecdote of a Gascon soldier at Rome who was being lionised by some Italians, and whose patriotic soul refused to admit any superiority in St. Peter's over the churches of his own country. "That a cathedral!" he said, shrugging his shoulders: "why, in the country I come from, there is one the nave of which is a thousand yards long."

"Oh, oh, oh!" chorused the Italians.

"Fact, I assure you," insisted the Gascon; "and it is twice as broad!"

"Well, well," he said afterward to the comrades who bantered him on the slip he had made; "perhaps I did overdo it. I was going to make it square, only they took me up so sharply that I had not time to think."

This is something like the famous addition of "and a hare" of the man who did not excite sufficient surprise by dropping a leash of birds to one barrel, and exemplifies the blunder I allude to. The mind was quite clear about what it meant to say, and the tongue perfectly

ready to obey it up to the last moment; then came a confusion or obscurity of the intellect for one second, during which the tongue seemed to cut a caper.

The results of a *lapsus linguæ* are not, however, always comic; the tongue, especially of a nervous person, will sometimes blurt out what the heart most desires to conceal, though life may be forfeited by the stumble. How fearful it must be to have committed a murder or some other great crime, and to go about the world in a state of constant dread lest some chance word, some unguarded expression, should give our fellow-men the clue which they are seeking! For when the will is constantly and earnestly set to keep watch over the tongue, the little demon seems to take a malicious pleasure in thwarting such excessive pains: let persons of a certain temperament only go about long enough with the fixed thought, "Whatever happens, I must never say so and so," it is ten to one they do say it eventually.

Indeed, secrets of any kind are odious things, and the picturesque costume of the period would hardly have compensated one for living in the days of the Civil Wars and the later Stuarts, when one always had a letter or a token in one's pocket fraught with danger to hundreds, or a dear relation hiding amongst the coals or the jam-pots, or emulating the cats in gymnastic performances upon the gutter, while the emissaries of the dominant party sought for him with blazing torches, sharp swords, and shocking observations.

And then the torture! If the reader be a lady, the *question* applied to her in youth was probably mental; but the masculine student may, when a boy, have had his arm twisted round, and smart blows of cruel knuckles applied to the upper part until such time as he apologised for an offence or disclosed a secret. If so, he can form some slight idea of the struggle between a firm will, devotion to a friend or a cause, and a weak and slipping tongue, in the furnace of intense bodily suffering. Thank God, we of the present day are spared all this, save by our own fault, or in very exceptional cases; but there is a very common form of the *lapsus linguæ* which may cause us great mental pain and distress. Happy is he who has never tossed about through a sleepless night, devouring his remorse and shame, and regretting, oh! how bitterly, that he cannot at any cost or sacrifice recall words which have slipped out of his mouth in a moment of passion, of epigrammatic inspiration, or of pure inadvertence. I remember to this day with a hot feeling of shame setting that riddle about a squinting man being born in the middle of the week, looking both ways for Sunday, to a lady who had a cast in her eye, fully twenty years ago. The worst was, I saw my blunder with confusion and hesitation in the middle. Ugh! I cannot bear to think of it. I know a most amiable lady who is constantly making slips of this sort. I have heard her ask a man who had married three times, whether he thought that a widower who loved his first wife could ever bear to see a second in her place! To an officer of artillery, she put the question, whether it was true that his branch of the service was entirely composed of men rejected by the engineers? she inquired of a patriotic member of one university, why the other was so much more gentlemanly? she confided her opinion to a strange Roman Catholic in a railway carriage, that no member of his communion could possibly be truthful. I myself, who am convinced that she would not for the world intentionally hurt the feelings of the meanest creature in it, have often been staggered, and thought for the moment that she must have aimed her random shots.

The most serious *lapsus linguæ* on record is that of the sailor on the look-out who saw a rock, and called out "Larboard!" instead of "Starboard!" drowning dozens by the slip; and it was in consequence of that lamentable affair, I believe, that the word "Port" was substituted for "Larboard" in naval nomenclature.

Tyranny.—Knocking people on the head or the crime of standing upright.