The Simple Life

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CHAPTER IV.

SIMPLICITY OF SPEECH.

SPEECH is the chief revelation of the mind, the first visible form that it takes. As the thought, so the speech. To better one's life in the way of simplicity one must set a watch on his lips and his pen. Let the word be as genuine as the thought, as artless, as valid. Think justly, speak frankly.

All social relations have their roots in mutual trust, and this trust is maintained by each man's sincerity. Once sincerity diminishes, confidence is weakened, society suffers, apprehension is born. This is true in the province of both natural and spiritual interests. With people whom we distrust it is as difficult to do business as to search for scientific truth, arrive at religious harmony or attain to justice. When one must first question words and intentions and start from the premise that everything said and written is meant to offer us illusion in place of truth, life becomes strangely complicated. This is the case today. There is so much craft, so much diplomacy, so much subtle legerdemain, that we all have no end of trouble to inform ourselves on the simplest subject and the one that most concerns us. Probably what I have just said would suffice to show my thought, and each one's experience might bring to its support an ample commentary with illustrations. But I am none the less moved to insist on this point and to strengthen my position with examples.

Formerly the means of communication between men were considerably restricted. It was natural to suppose that in perfecting and multiplying avenues of information a better understanding would be brought about. Nations would learn to love each other as they became acquainted; citizens of one country would feel themselves bound in closer brotherhood as more light was thrown on what concerned their common life. When printing was invented the cry arose, "Fiat lux!" and with better cause when the habit of reading and the taste for newspapers increased. Why should not men have reasoned thus: "Two lights illumine better than one, and many better than two. The more periodicals and books there are the better we shall know what happens, and those who wish to write history after us will be right fortunate. Their hands will be full of documents." Nothing could have seemed more evident.

Alas, this reasoning was based upon the nature and capacity of the instruments without taking into account the human element, always the most important factor! And what has really come about is this—that cavilers, calumniators and crooks, all gentlemen glib of tongue, who know better than any one else how to turn voice and pen to account, have taken the utmost advantage of these extended means for circulating thought, with the result that the men of our times have the greatest difficulty in the world to know the truth about their own age and their own affairs. For every newspaper that fosters good feeling and good understanding between nations by trying to rightly inform its neighbors and to study them without reservations, how many spread defamation and distrust! What unnatural and dangerous currents of opinion set in motion! What false alarms and malicious interpretations of words and facts! And in domestic affairs we are not much better informed than in foreign. As to commercial, industrial and agricultural interests, political parties and social tendencies or the personality of public men, it is alike difficult to obtain a disinterested opinion. The more newspapers one reads the less clearly he sees in these matters. There are days when after having read them all, and admitting that he takes them at their word, the reader finds himself obliged to draw this conclusion: Unquestionably nothing but corruption can be found any longer; no men of integrity except a few journalists. But the last part of the conclusion falls in its turn. It appears that the chroniclers devour each other. The reader has under his eyes a spectacle somewhat like the cartoon entitled "The Combat of the Serpents." After having gorged themselves with everything around them the reptiles fall upon each other, and there remain upon the field of battle two tails.

And not the common people alone feel this embarrassment, but the cultivated also; almost everybody shares it. In politics, finance, business, even in science, art, literature and religion, there is everywhere disguise, trickery, wire pulling—one truth for the public, another for the initiated. The result is that everybody is deceived. It is vain to be behind the scenes on one stage. A man cannot be there on them all, and the very people who deceive others with the most ability are in turn deceived when they need to count upon the sincerity of their neighbors.

The result of such practices is the degradation of human speech. It is degraded first in the eyes of those who manipulate it as a base instrument. No word is respected by sophists, casuists and quibblers, men who are moved only by a rage for gaining their point or who assume that their interests are alone worth considering. Their penalty is to be forced to judge others by the rule they follow themselves—say what profits and not what is true. They can no longer take any one seriously—a sad state of mind for those who write or teach! How lightly must one hold his readers and hearers to approach them in such an attitude! To him who has preserved enough honesty nothing is more repugnant than the careless irony of an acrobat of the tongue or pen who tries to dupe honest and ingenuous men. On one side openness, sincerity, the desire to be enlightened; on the other, chicanery making game of the public! But he knows not, the liar, how far he is misleading himself. The capital on which he lives is confidence, and nothing equals the confidence of the people unless it be their distrust when once they find themselves betrayed. They may follow for a time the exploiters of their artlessness, but then their friendly humor turns to hate. Doors which stood wide open offer an impassable front of wood, and ears once attentive are deaf. And the pity is that they have closed not to the evil alone, but to the good. This is the crime of those who distort and degrade speech: they shake confidence generally. We consider as a calamity the debasement of the currency, the lowering of interest, the abolition of credit. There is a misfortune greater than these—the loss of confidence, of that moral credit which honest people give one another and which makes speech circulate like an authentic currency. Away with counterfeiters, speculators, rotten financiers, for they bring under suspicion even the coin of the realm. Away with the makers of counterfeit speech, for because of them there is no longer confidence in any one or anything, and what they say and write is not worth a continental.

You see how urgent it is that each should guard his lips, chasten his pen and aspire to simplicity of speech. No more perversion of sense, circumlocution, reticence, tergiversation! These things serve only to complicate and bewilder. Be men. Speak the speech of honor. An hour of plain dealing does more for the salvation of the world than years of duplicity.

A word now about a national bias to those who have a veneration for diction and style. Assuredly there can be no quarrel with the taste for grace and elegance of speech. I am of opinion that one cannot say too well what he has to say. But it does not follow that the things best said and best written are most studied. Words should serve the fact and not substitute themselves for it and make it forgotten in its embellishment. The greatest things are those which gain the most by being said most simply, since thus they show themselves for what they are. You do not throw over them the veil, however transparent, of beautiful discourse, nor that shadow so fatal to truth called the writer's vanity. Nothing so strong, nothing so persuasive, as simplicity! There are sacred emotions, cruel griefs, splendid heroisms, passionate enthusiasms, that a look, a movement, a cry, interprets better than beautifully rounded periods. The most precious possessions of the heart of humanity manifest themselves most simply. To be convincing a thing must be true, and certain truths are more evident when they come in the speech of ingenuousness, even weakness, than when they fall from lips too well trained or are proclaimed with trumpets. And these rules are good for each of us in his everyday life. No one can imagine what profit would accrue to his moral life from the constant observation of this principle: Be sincere, moderate, simple in the expression of your feelings and opinions in private and public alike; never pass beyond bounds, give out faithfully what is within you, and above all watch—that is the main thing.

For the danger in fine words is that they live from a life of their own. They are servants of distinction that have kept their titles, but no longer perform their functions, of which royal courts offer us example. You speak well, write well, and all is said. How many people content themselves with speaking and believe that it exempts them from acting! And those who listen are content with having heard them. So it sometimes happens that a life may in the end be made up of a few well turned speeches, a few fine books and a few great plays. As for practicing what is so magisterially set forth—that is the last thing thought of. And if we pass from the world of talent to spheres which the mediocre exploit, there in a pellmell of confusion we see those who think that we are in the world to talk and hear others talk—the great and hopeless rout of babblers, of everything that prates, bawls and perorates and, after all, finds that there isn't talking enough. They all forget that those who make the least noise do the most work. An engine that expends all its steam in whistling has nothing left with which to turn wheels. Then let us cultivate silence. All that we can save in noise we gain in power.

These reflections lead us to consider a similar subject, also very worthy of attention. I mean what has been called "the vice of the superlative." If we study the inhabitants of a country we notice differences of temperament, of which the language shows signs. Here the people are calm and phlegmatic. Their speech is jejune, lacks color. Elsewhere temperaments are more evenly balanced. One finds precision, the word exactly fitted to the thing. But farther on—effect of the sun, the air, the wine perhaps—hot blood courses in the veins, tempers are excitable, language is extravagant, and the simplest things are said in the strongest terms.

If the type of speech varies with climate, it differs also with epochs. Compare the language, written or spoken, of our own times with that of certain other periods of our history. Under the old regime people spoke differently than at the time of the Revolution, and we have not the same language as the men of 1830, 1848 or the second empire. In general, language is now characterized by greater simplicity. We no longer wear perukes, we no longer write in lace frills, but there is one significant difference between us and almost all of our ancestors, and it is the source of our exaggerations—our nervousness. Upon overexcited nervous systems—and heaven knows that to have nerves is no longer an aristocratic privilege—words do not produce the same impression as under normal conditions; and quite as truly simple language does not suffice the man of overwrought sensibilities when he tries to express what he feels. In private life, in public, in books, on the stage, calm and temperate speech has given place to excess. The means that novelists and playwrights employ to galvanize the public mind and compel its attention are to be found again in their rudiments, in our most commonplace conversations, in our letter writing and, above all, in public speaking. Our performances in language compared to those of a man well balanced and serene are what our handwriting is compared to that of our fathers. The fault is laid to steel pens. If only the truth were acknowledged! Geese, then, could save us. But the evil goes deeper; it is in ourselves. We write like men possessed. The pen of our ancestors was more restful, more sure. Here we face one of the results of our modern life, so complicated and so terribly exhaustive of energy. It leaves us impatient, breathless, in perpetual trepidation. Our handwriting, like our speech, suffers thereby and betrays us. Let us go back from the effect to the cause and understand well the warning it brings us.

What good can come from this habit of exaggerated speech? False interpreters of our own impressions, we cannot but warp the minds of our fellow men as well as our own. Between people who exaggerate, good understanding ceases. Ruffled tempers, violent and useless disputes, hasty judgments devoid of all moderation, the utmost extravagance in education and social life—these things are the result of intemperance of speech.

May I be permitted in this appeal for simplicity of speech to frame a wish whose fulfillment would have the happiest results? I ask for simplicity in literature, not only as one of the best remedies for the dejection of our souls—blases, jaded, weary of eccentricities—but also as a pledge and source of social union. I ask also for simplicity in art. Our art and our literature are reserved for the privileged few of education and fortune. But do not misunderstand me. I do not ask poets, novelists and painters to descend from the heights and walk along the mountain sides, finding their satisfaction in mediocrity, but, on the contrary, to mount higher. The truly popular is not that which appeals to a certain class of society ordinarily called the common people; the truly popular is what is common to all classes and unites them. The sources of inspiration from which perfect art springs are in the depths of the human heart, in the eternal realities of life, before which all men are equal. And the sources of a popular language must be found in the small number of simple and vigorous forms which express elementary sensations and draw the master lines of human destiny. In them are truth, power, grandeur, immortality. Is there not enough in such material to kindle the enthusiasm of youth, which, sensible that the sacred flame of the beautiful is burning within, feels pity, and to the disdainful adage, "Odi profanum vulgus," prefers this more humane saying, "Misereor super turbam." As for me, I have no artistic authority, but from out the multitude where I live I have the right to raise my cry to those who have been given talents, and say to them: Labor for men whom the world forgets, make yourselves intelligible to the humble, so shall you accomplish a work of emancipation and peace; so shall you open again the springs whence those masters drew, whose works have defied the ages because they knew how to clothe genius in simplicity.

CHAPTER V.

SIMPLE DUTY.

WHEN we talk to children on a subject that annoys them they call our attention to some pigeon on the roof giving food to its little one or some coachman down in the street who is abusing his horse. Sometimes they even maliciously propose one of those alarming questions that put the minds of parents on the rack; all this to divert attention from the distressing topic. I fear that in the face of duty we are big children, and when that is the theme seek subterfuges to distract us.

The first sophism consists in asking ourselves if there is such a thing as duty in the abstract, or if this word does not cover one of the numerous illusions of our forefathers; for duty, in truth, supposes liberty, and the question of liberty leads us into metaphysics. How can we talk of liberty so long as this grave problem of free will is not solved? Theoretically there is no objection to this, and if life were a theory and we were here to work out a complete system of the universe it would be absurd to concern ourselves with duty until we had clarified the subject of liberty, determined its conditions, fixed its limits.

But life is not a theory. In this question of practical morality, as in the others, life has preceded hypothesis, and there is no room to believe that she ever yields it place. This liberty—relative, I admit, like everything we are acquainted with, for that matter—this duty whose existence we question is none the less the basis of all the judgments we pass upon ourselves and our fellow men. We hold each other to a certain extent responsible for our deeds and exploits.

The most ardent theorist, once outside of his theory, scruples not a whit to approve or disapprove the acts of others, to take measures against his enemies, to appeal to the generosity and justice of those he would dissuade from an unworthy step. One can no more rid himself of the notion of moral obligation than of that of time or space, and as surely as we must resign ourselves to walking before we know how to define this space through which we move and this time that measures our movements, so surely must we submit to moral obligation before having put our finger on its deep hidden roots. Moral law dominates man whether he respects or defies it. See how it is in everyday life—each one is ready to cast his stone at him who neglects a plain duty even if he allege that he has not yet arrived at philosophic certitude. Everybody will say to him, and with excellent reason: "Sir, we are men before everything. First play your part, do your duty as citizen, father, son. After that you shall return to the course of your meditations."

However, let us be well understood. We should not wish to turn any one away from scrupulous research into the foundations of morality. No thought which leads men to concern themselves once more with these grave questions could be useless or indifferent. We simply challenge the thinker to find a way to wait till he has unearthed these foundations before he does an act of humanity, of honesty or dishonesty, of valor or cowardice. And most of all do we wish to formulate a reply for all the insincere who have never tried to philosophize and for ourselves when we would offer our state of philosophic doubt in justification of our practical omissions. From the simple fact that we are men, before all theorizing, positive or negative, about duty, we have the peremptory law to conduct ourselves like men. There is no getting out of it.

But he little knows the resources of the human heart who counts on the effect of such a reply. It matters not that it is itself unanswerable. It cannot keep other questions from arising. The sum of our pretexts for evading duty is equal to the sum of the sands of the sea or the stars of heaven.

We take refuge, then, behind duty that is obscure, difficult, contradictory. And these are certainly words to call up painful memories. To be a man of duty and to question one's route, grope in the dark, feel oneself torn between the contrary solicitations of conflicting calls, or, again, to face a duty gigantic, overwhelming, beyond our strength—what is harder! And such things happen. We would neither deny nor contest the tragedy in certain situations or the anguish of certain lives. And yet duty rarely has to make itself plain across such conflicting circumstances or to be struck out from the tortured mind like lightning from a storm cloud. Such formidable shocks are exceptional. Well for us if we stand stanch when they come! But if no one is astonished that oaks are uprooted by the whirlwind, that a wayfarer stumbles at night on an unknown road or that a soldier caught between two fires is vanquished, no more should he condemn without appeal those who have been worsted in almost superhuman moral conflicts. To succumb under the force of numbers or obstacles has never been counted a disgrace.

So my weapons are at the service of those who intrench themselves behind the impregnable rampart of duty ill defined, complicated or contradictory. But it is not that which occupies me today; it is of plain—I had almost said easy—duty that I wish to speak.

We have yearly three or four high feast days and many ordinary ones. There are likewise some very great and dark combats to wage, but beside these is the multitude of plain and simple duties. Now, while in the great encounters our equipment is generally adequate, it is precisely in the little emergencies that we are found wanting. Without fear of being misled by a paradoxical form of thought, I affirm, then, that the essential thing is to fulfill our simple duties and exercise elementary justice. In general, those who lose their souls do so not because they fail to rise to difficult duty, but because they neglect to perform that which is simple. Let us illustrate this truth.

He who tries to penetrate into the humble underworld of society is not slow to discover great misery, physical and moral. And the closer he looks the greater number of unfortunates does he discover, till in the end this assembly of the wretched appears to him like a great black world, in whose presence the individual and his means of relief are reduced to helplessness. It is true that he feels impelled to run to the succor of these unfortunates, but at the same time he asks himself, "What is the use?" The case is certainly heartrending. Some, in despair, end by doing nothing. They lack neither pity nor good intention, but these bear no fruit. They are wrong. Often a man has not the means to do good on a large scale, but that is not a reason for failing to do it at all. So many people absolve themselves from any action on the ground that there is too much to do! They should be recalled to simple duty, and this duty in the case of which we speak is that each one, according to his resources, leisure and capacity, should create relations for himself among the world's disinherited. There are people who by the exercise of a little good will have succeeded in enrolling themselves among the followers of ministers and have ingratiated themselves with princes. Why should you not succeed in forming relations with the poor and in making acquaintances among the workers who lack somewhat the necessities of life? When a few families are known, with their histories, their antecedents and their difficulties, you may be of the greatest use to them by acting the part of a brother with the moral and material aid that is yours to give. It is true you will have attacked only one little corner, but you will have done what you could and perhaps have led another on to follow you. Instead of stopping at the knowledge that much wretchedness, hatred, disunion and vice exist in society you will have introduced a little good among these evils. And by however slow degrees such kindness as yours is emulated the good will sensibly increase and the evil diminish. Even were you to remain alone in this undertaking you would have the assurance that in fulfilling the duty, plain as a child's, which offered itself you were doing the only reasonable thing. If you have felt it so, you have found out one of the secrets of right living.

In its dreams man's ambition embraces vast limits, but it is rarely given us to achieve great things, and even then a quick and sure success always rests on a groundwork of patient preparation. Fidelity in small things is at the base of every great achievement. We too often forget this, and yet no truth needs more to be kept in mind particularly in the troubled eras of history and in the crises of individual life. In shipwreck a splintered beam, an oar, any scrap of wreckage, saves us. On the tumbling waves of life, when everything seems shattered to fragments, let us not forget that a single one of these poor bits may become our plank of safety. To despise the remnants is demoralization.

(To be continued.)