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HINTS ON
WRITING AND
SPEECH-MAKING

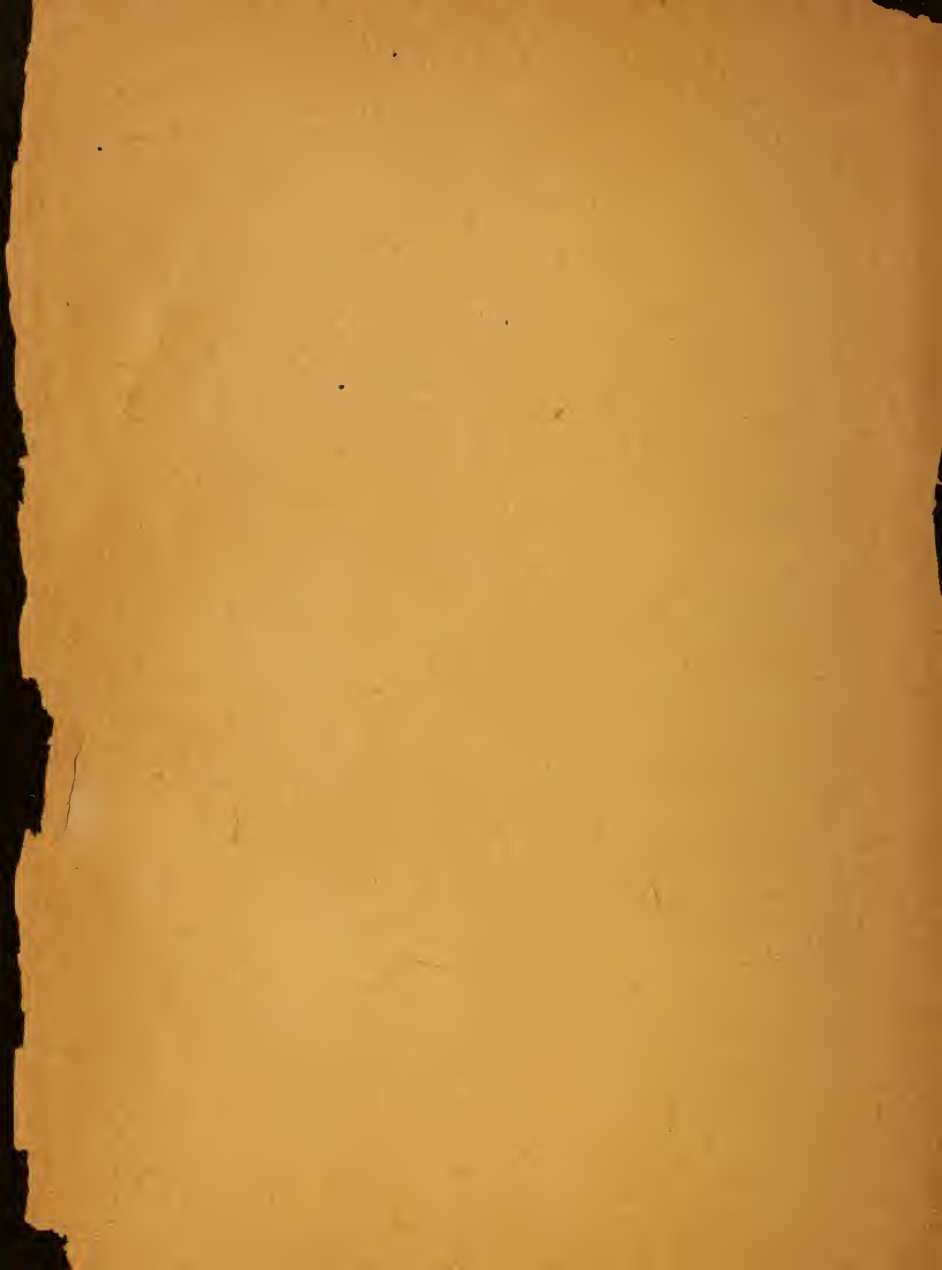
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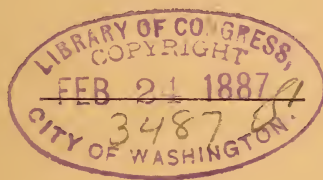
HINTS

ON

WRITING AND SPEECH-MAKING

BY

THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON



BOSTON

LEE AND SHEPARD PUBLISHERS

NEW YORK

CHARLES T DILLINGHAM

1887

PN 147
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HINTS ON WRITING

12-34115

RAND AVERY COMPANY
ELECTROTYPERS AND PRINTERS
BOSTON

Recd. a L.S. Dec. 14

PREFACE.



THE first of these two chapters appeared long since in the "Atlantic Monthly" (ix. 401), and was afterwards included in the author's volume entitled "Atlantic Essays." Teachers have several times urged that it should be separately printed as a little manual of literary composition; and I have indeed seen it used for that purpose in a college class-room. Now that similar suggestions are beginning to be made as to the other brief essay, "Hints on Speech-making," it has seemed well to present the two together in a small volume. The last-named paper appeared first in "Harper's Magazine" for November, 1886; and it is here reprinted with the consent of the publishers.

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HINTS ON WRITING AND SPEECH-MAKING.



I.

A LETTER TO A YOUNG CONTRIBUTOR.

My dear young gentleman or young lady, — for many are the Cecil Dreemes of literature who superscribe their offered manuscripts with very masculine names in very feminine handwriting, — it seems wrong not to meet your accumulated and urgent epistles with one comprehensive reply, thus condensing many private letters into a printed one. And so many of those who read the “Atlantic Monthly” have at times the impulse to write for it also, that this epistle

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will be sure of perusal, though Mrs. Stowe remain uncut, and the Autocrat go for an hour without readers.

Every author habitually measures the merits of a periodical by its appreciation of his or her last manuscript; just as a young lady is apt to estimate the management of a ball by her own private luck in respect to partners. But it is worth while at least to point out that in the treatment of every contribution the real interests of editor and writer are absolutely the same, and any antagonism is merely traditional, like the supposed hostility between France and England, or that which was once thought to exist between England and Slavery. No editor can ever afford the rejection of a good thing, and no author the publication of a bad one. The only difficulty lies in drawing the line. Were

all offered manuscripts unequivocally good or bad, there would be no great trouble; it is the vast range of mediocrity which perplexes: the majority are too bad for blessing, and too good for banning; so that no conceivable reason can be given for either fate, save that upon the destiny of any contribution may hang that of a hundred others just like it. But whatever be the standard fixed, it is equally for the interest of all concerned that it be enforced without flinching.

Nor is there the slightest authority for the supposed editorial prejudice against new or obscure contributors. On the contrary, every editor is always hungering and thirsting after novelties. To take the lead in bringing forward a new genius is as fascinating a privilege as that of the physician who boasted to Sir Henry Hallford of having

been the first man to discover the Asiatic cholera and to communicate it to the public. It is only stern necessity which compels the magazine to fall back so constantly on the regular old staff of contributors, whose average product has been gauged already; just as every country lyceum attempts annually to arrange an entirely new list of lecturers, and has often ended with no bolder experiment than that of substituting Gough and Beecher in place of the last year's Beecher and Gough.

Of course, no editor is infallible, and the best magazine contains an occasional poor article. Do not blame the unfortunate conductor: he knows it as well as you do,—after the deed is done. The newspapers kindly pass it over, still preparing their accustomed opiate of sweet praises, so much

for each contributor, so much for the magazine collectively, —like a hostess with her tea-making, a spoonful for each person, and one for the pot. But I can tell you that there is an official person who meditates and groans, meanwhile, in the night-watches, to think that in some atrocious moment of good-nature or sleepiness he left the door open and let that ungainly intruder in. Do you expect him to acknowledge the blunder, when you tax him with it? Never! — he feels it too keenly. He will rather stand up stoutly for the surpassing merits of the misshapen thing, as a mother for her deformed child; and as the mother is nevertheless inwardly imploring that there may never be such another born to her, so be sure that it is not by reminding the editor of one calamity that you can allure him into risking another.

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An editor thus shows himself to be but human, and it is well enough to remember this fact when you approach him. He is not a gloomy despot, no Nemesis or Rhadamanthus, but a bland and virtuous man, exceedingly anxious to secure plenty of good subscribers and contributors, and very ready to perform any acts of kindness not inconsistent with this grand design. Draw near him, therefore, with soft approaches and mild persuasions. Do not treat him like an enemy, and insist on reading your whole manuscript aloud to him, with appropriate gestures. His time has some value, if yours has not; and he has therefore educated his eye till it has become microscopic, like a naturalist's, and can classify nine out of ten specimens by one glance at a scale or a feather. Fancy an ambitious echinoderm

claiming a private interview with Agassiz, to demonstrate by verbal arguments that he is a mollusk! Besides, do you expect to administer the thing orally to each of the two hundred thousand, more or less, who turn the leaves of the magazine? You are writing for the average eye, and must submit to its verdict. "Do not trouble yourself about the light on your statue: it is the light of the public square which must test its value."

Therefore do not despise any honest proptiation, however small, in dealing with your editor. Look to the physical aspect of your manuscript, and prepare your page so neatly that it shall allure instead of repelling. Use good pens, black ink, nice white paper and plenty of it. Do not emulate "paper-sparing Pope," whose chaotic manuscript of the "Iliad," written chiefly on the backs of old

letters, still remains in the British Museum. If your document be slovenly, the presumption is that its literary execution is the same, Pope to the contrary notwithstanding. An editor's eye becomes carnal, and is easily attracted by a comely outside. If you really wish to obtain his good will for your production, do not first tax his time for deciphering it, any more than in visiting a millionaire to solicit a loan you would begin by asking him to pay for the hire of your carriage.

On the same principle, send your composition in such a shape that it shall not need the slightest literary revision before printing. Many a bright production dies discarded which might have been made thoroughly presentable by a single day's labor of a competent scholar, in shaping, smoothing, dovetailing, and retrenching. The revision seems so

small an affair that the aspirant cannot conceive why there should be so much fuss about it.

“The piece, you think, is incorrect; why, take it;
I’m all submission; what you’d have it, make it.”

But to discharge that friendly office no universal genius is salaried; and for intellect in the rough there is no market.

Rules for style, as for manners, must be chiefly negative: a positively good style indicates certain natural powers in the individual, but a merely unexceptionable style is only a matter of culture and good models. Dr. Channing established in New England a standard of writing which really attained almost the perfection of the pure and the colorless, and the disciplinary value of such a literary influence, in a raw and crude nation,

was very great ; but the defect of just such a standard is that it ends in utterly renouncing all the great traditions of literature, and ignoring the magnificent mystery of words. Human language may be exact and prosaic in itself, uplifted with difficulty into expression by the high thoughts it utters, or it may in itself become so saturated with warm life and delicious association that every sentence shall palpitate and thrill with the mere fascination of the syllables. The statue is not more surely included in the block of marble than is all conceivable splendor of utterance in "Worcester's Unabridged." And as Ruskin says of painting that it is in the perfection and precision of the instantaneous line that the claim to immortality is made, so it is easy to see that a good phrase may outweigh

a poor library. Keats heads the catalogue of things real with "sun, moon, and passages of Shakespeare;" and Keats himself has left behind him winged wonders of expression that were not surpassed by Shakespeare, or by any one else who ever dared touch the English tongue. There may be phrases which shall be palaces to dwell in, treasure-houses to explore; a single word may be a window from which one may perceive all the kingdoms of the earth and the glory of them. Sometimes a word will speak what accumulated volumes have labored in vain to utter: there may be years of crowded passion in a phrase, and half a life may be concentrated in a sentence.

Such being the majesty of the art you seek to practise, you can at least take time and deliberation before dishonoring it. Dis-

abuse yourself especially of the belief that any grace or flow of style can come from writing rapidly. Haste can make you slipshod, but it can never make you graceful. With what dismay one reads of the wonderful fellows in fashionable novels, who can easily dash off a brilliant essay in a single night! When I think how slowly my poor thoughts come in, how tardily they connect themselves, what a delicious prolonged perplexity it is to cut and contrive a decent clothing of words for them, as a little girl does for her doll, — nay, how many new outfits a single sentence sometimes costs before it is presentable, till it seems at last, like our army on the Potomac, as if it never could be thoroughly clothed, — I certainly should never dare to venture into print, but for the confirmed suspicion that the greatest

writers have done even thus. Do you know, my dear neophyte, how Balzac used to compose? As a specimen of the labor that sometimes goes to make an effective style, the process is worth recording.

When Balzac had a new work in view, he first spent weeks in studying from real life for it, haunting the streets of Paris by day and night, note-book in hand. His materials gained, he shut himself up till the book was written, absolutely excluding everybody but his publisher. In a month or two he emerged, pale and thin, with the complete manuscript in his hand, — not only written, but almost re-written, so thoroughly was the original copy altered, interlined, and re-arranged. This strange production, almost illegible, was sent to the unfortunate printers: with infinite difficulty a proof-sheet was

obtained, which, being sent to the author, was presently returned in a condition almost as hopeless as that of the manuscript. Whole sentences were erased, others transposed, every thing modified. A second and a third proof followed, alike torn to pieces by the ravenous pen of Balzac. The despairing printers labored by turns, only the picked men of the office being equal to the task, and they relieving each other at hourly intervals, as beyond that time no one could endure the fatigue. At last, by the fourth proof-sheet, the author, too, was wearied out, though not contented. "I work ten hours out of the twenty-four," said he, "over the elaboration of my unhappy style, and I am never satisfied myself when all is done."

Do not complain that this scrupulousness is probably wasted, after all, and that nobody

knows. The public knows. People criticise far beyond what they can attain. When the Athenian audience hissed a public speaker for a mispronunciation, it did not follow that any one of the malcontents could pronounce as well as the orator. In our own lecture-audiences there may not be a man who does not yield to his own private eccentricities of dialect, but see if they do not appreciate good English from Sumner or Phillips! Men talk of writing down to the public taste who have never yet written up to that standard. "There never yet was a good tongue," said old Fuller, "that wanted ears to hear it." If one were expecting to be judged by a few scholars only, one might hope somehow to cajole them; but it is this vast, unimpassioned, unconscious tribunal, this average judgment of intelligent minds, which is truly

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formidable. It is something more undying than senates, and more omnipotent than courts, something which rapidly cancels all transitory reputations, and at last becomes the organ of eternal justice, and awards post-humous fame.

The first demand made by the public upon every composition is, of course, that it should be attractive. In addressing a miscellaneous audience, whether through eye or ear, it is certain that no man living has a right to be tedious. Every editor is therefore compelled to insist that his contributors should make themselves agreeable, whatever else they may do. To be agreeable, it is not necessary to be amusing: an essay may be thoroughly delightful without a single witticism, while a monotone of jokes soon grows tedious. Charge your style with life, and the

public will not ask for conundrums. But the profounder your discourse, the greater must necessarily be the effort to refresh and diversify. I have observed, in addressing audiences of children in schools and elsewhere, that there is no fact so grave, no thought so abstract, but you can make it very interesting to the small people, if you will only put in plenty of detail and illustration; and in this respect grown men are not so very different. If, therefore, in writing, you find your theme to be abstruse, labor to render your statement clear and attractive, as if your life depended on it: your literary life does depend on it, and, if you fail, relapses into a dead language, and becomes, like that of Coleridge, only a *Biographia Literaria*. Toil, therefore, not in thought alone, but in utterance; clothe and reclothe

your profound conception twenty times, if need be, until you find some phrase that with its profundity shall be lucid also. And when a writer, thus laborious to do his utmost for his disciples, becomes after all incomprehensible, we can try to believe it only that inevitable obscurity which Coleridge calls a compliment to the reader.

In learning to write effectively, a newspaper-office is a capital preparatory school; for it teaches the use of materials, and compels to pungency of style. Being always at close quarters with his readers, a journalist must shorten and sharpen his sentences, or he is doomed. Yet this mental alertness is bought at a severe price: such living from hand to mouth is apt to cheapen the whole mode of intellectual existence, and it is hard for a successful journalist to get the news-

paper out of his blood, or to achieve any high literary success.

For purposes of illustration and elucidation, and even for wealth of vocabulary, much accumulated material is essential; and whether this be won by reading or by experience makes no great difference. Coleridge attended Davy's chemical lectures to acquire new metaphors; and it is of no consequence whether one comes to literature from a library, a machine-shop, or a fore-castle, provided he has learned to work with thoroughness the soil he knows. Remember, however, that copious preparation has its perils also, in the crude display to which it tempts. The object of high culture is not to exhibit culture, but its results. You do not put guano on your garden that your garden may blossom guano. Indeed, even for the proper subordi-

nation of one's own thoughts the same self-control is needed; and there is no severer test of literary training than in the power to prune out your most cherished sentence, when you find that the sacrifice will help the symmetry or vigor of the whole.

Be noble both in the affluence and the economy of your diction; spare no wealth that you can put in, and tolerate no superfluity that can be struck out. Remember the Lacedemonian who was fined for saying that in three words which might as well have been expressed in two. Do not throw a dozen vague epithets at a thing, in the hope that some one of them will fit; but study each phrase so carefully that the most ingenious critic cannot alter it without spoiling the whole passage for everybody but himself. For the same reason do not take refuge, as

was the practice a few years since, in German combinations, heart-utterances, soul-sentiments, and hyphenized phrases generally, but roll your thought into one good English word. There is no fault which seems so hopeless as commonplaceness, but it is really easier to elevate the commonplace than to reduce the turgid. How few men in all the pride of culture can emulate the easy grace of a bright woman's letter!

Have faith enough in your own individuality to keep it resolutely down for a year or two. A man has not much intellectual capital who cannot allow himself a brief interval of modesty. Premature individualism commonly ends either in a re-action against the original whims, or in a mannerism which perpetuates them. For mannerism no one is great enough, because, though in the hands

of a strong man it imprisons us in novel fascination, yet we soon grow weary, and then hate our prison forever. How sparkling was Reade's crisp brilliancy in "Peg Woffington!" — but into what disagreeable affectations it afterwards degenerated! Carlyle was a boon to the human race, amid the tameness into which English style was declining; but who did not grow tired of his favorite catch-words at last? Emerson's style promises to be read longer, for it unites something of the smoothness of the eighteenth century with the vital vigor of the seventeenth, so that it brings Sir Thomas Browne and Andrew Marvell quite as near to us as Pope or Addison.

Be neither too lax nor too precise in your use of language: the one fault ends in stiffness, the other in slang. Some one told the

Emperor Tiberius that he might give citizenship to men, but not to words. To be sure, Louis XIV., in childhood, wishing for a carriage, called for *mon carrosse*, and made the former feminine a masculine to all future Frenchmen. But do not undertake to exercise these prerogatives of royalty until you are quite sure of being crowned. The only thing I remember in our college text-book of Rhetoric is one admirable verse of caution which it quoted : —

“ In words, as fashions, the same rule will hold,
Alike fantastic, if too new or old ;
Be not the first by whom the new is tried,
Nor yet the last to lay the old aside.”

Especially do not indulge any whimsical preference for either Latin or Anglo-Saxon, the two great wings on which our magnificent

English soars and sings: we can spare neither. The combination gives us an affluence of synonymes and a delicacy of discrimination such as no unmixed idiom can show.

While you utterly shun slang, whether native or foreign born, — at present, by the way, our popular writers use far less slang than the English, — yet do not shrink from Americanisms, so they be good ones. American literature is now thoroughly out of leading-strings; and the nation which supplied the first appreciative audience for Carlyle, Tennyson, and the Brownings, can certainly trust its own literary instincts to create the new words it needs. To be sure, the inelegancies with which we are chiefly reproached are not distinctively American: Burke uses “pretty considerable;” Miss Burney says,

“I trembled a few ;” the English Bible says “reckon,” Locke has “guess,” and Southey “realize,” in the exact sense in which one sometimes hears them used colloquially here. Nevertheless, such improprieties are, of course, to be avoided ; but whatever good Americanisms exist, let us hold to them by all means. To the previous traditions and associations of the English tongue we add resources of contemporary life such as England cannot rival.

In America, political freedom makes every man an individual ; a vast industrial activity makes every man an inventor, not merely of labor-saving machines, but of labor-saving words ; universal schooling popularizes thought, and sharpens the edge of language. We unconsciously demand of our writers the same dash and the same accuracy that we

demand in railroading or dry-goods jobbing. The mixture of nationalities is constantly coining and exchanging new felicities of dialect : Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Africa, are present everywhere with their various contributions of wit and shrewdness, thought and geniality ; in New York and elsewhere one finds whole thoroughfares of France, Italy, Spain, Portugal ; on our Western railways there are placards printed in Swedish ; even China is creeping in. The colonies of England are too far and too provincial to have had as yet much reflex influence on her literature, but how our phraseology is already amplified by our relations with Spanish America ! Many foreign cities may show a greater variety of mere national costumes, but the representative value of our immigrant tribes is far greater from the very fact that

they merge their mental costume in ours. Thus the American writer finds himself among his phrases like an American sea-captain amid his crew, — a medley of all nations, waiting for some organizing mind to mould them into a unit of force.

There are certain minor matters, subsidiary to elegance, if not elegancies, and therefore worth attention. Do not habitually prop your sentences on crutches, such as *Italic-letters* and *exclamation-points*, but make them stand without aid: if they cannot emphasize themselves, these devices are but a confession of helplessness. Do not leave loose ends as you go on, straggling things, to be caught up and dragged along uneasily in foot-notes; but work them all in neatly, as Bidy at her bread-pan gradually kneads in all the outlying bits of dough, till

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she has one round and comely mass. Reduce yourself to short allowance of parentheses and dashes: if you employ them merely from clumsiness, they will lose all their proper power in your hands. Economize quotation-marks also, clear that dust from your pages, assume your readers to be acquainted with the current jokes and the stock epithets: all persons like the compliment of having it presumed that they know something, and prefer to discover the wit or beauty of your allusion without a guide-board.

The same principle applies to learned citations and the results of study. Knead these also thoroughly in, supplying the maximum of desired information with a minimum of visible schoolmaster. It requires no pedantic mention of Euclid to indicate a mathematical mind, but only the habitual use of

clear terms and close connections. To employ in argument the forms of Whately's Logic would render it probable that you are juvenile, and certain that you are tedious: wreath the chain with roses. The more you have studied foreign languages, the more you will be disposed to keep Ollendorff in the background: the proper result of such acquirements is visible in a finer ear for words; so that Goethe said the man who had studied but one language could not know that one. But spare the raw material; deal as cautiously in Latin as did General Jackson when Jack Downing was out of the way; and avoid French as some fashionable novelists avoid English.

Thus far, these are elementary and rather technical suggestions, fitted for the very opening of your literary career. Supposing

you fairly in print, there are needed some further counsels.

Do not waste a minute, not a second, in trying to demonstrate to others the merit of your own performance. If your work does not vindicate itself, you cannot vindicate it, but you can labor steadily on to something which needs no advocate but itself. It was said of Haydon, the English artist, that, if he had taken half the pains to paint great pictures that he took to persuade the public he had painted them, his fame would have been secure. Like his was the career of poor Horne, who wrote the farthing epic of "Orion" with one grand line in it, and a prose work, without any, on "The False Medium excluding Men of Genius from the Public." Do not emulate these tragedies. Remember how many great

writers have created the taste by which they were enjoyed, and do not be in a hurry. Toughen yourself a little, and accomplish something better. Inscribe above your desk the words of Rivarol, "Genius is only great patience." Most bygone literary fames have been very short-lived in America, because they have lasted no longer than they deserved. Happening the other day to recur to a list of Cambridge lyceum-lecturers in my boyish days, I found with dismay that the only name popularly remembered was that of Emerson: death, oblivion, or a professorship had closed over each of the others, while the whole standard of American literature had been vastly raised meanwhile, and no doubt partly through their labors. To this day, some of our most gifted writers are being dwarfed by the unkind friendliness of

too early praise. It was Keats, the most precocious of all great poets, who declared that "nothing is finer for purposes of production than a very gradual ripening of the intellectual powers."

Yet do not be made conceited by obscurity, any more than by notoriety. Many fine geniuses have been long neglected; but what would become of us, if all the neglected were to turn out geniuses? It is unsafe to reason from either extreme. You are not necessarily writing like Holmes because your reputation for talent began in college, or like Hawthorne because you have been before the public ten years without an admirer. Above all, do not seek to encourage yourself by dwelling on the defects of your rivals: strength comes only from what is above you. Northcote, the painter, said, that in observ-

ing an inferior picture, he always felt his spirits droop with the suspicion that perhaps he deceived himself, and his own paintings might be no better than that ; but the works of the mighty masters always gave him renewed strength, in the hope that perhaps his own had in their smaller way something of the same divine quality.

Do not complacently imagine, because your first literary attempt proved good and successful, that your second will doubtless improve upon it. The exact contrary sometimes happens. A man dreams for years over one projected composition, all his reading converges that way, all his experience helps : it is the net result of his existence up to a certain time, the cistern into which he pours his accumulated life. Emboldened by success, he mistakes the cistern

for a fountain, and instantly taps his brain again. The second production, as compared with the first, costs but half the pains, and attains but a quarter part of the merit; a little more of fluency and facility perhaps, — but the vigor, the wealth, the originality, the head of water, in short, are wanting. One would think that almost any intelligent man might write one good thing in a lifetime, by reserving himself long enough: it is the effort after quantity which proves destructive. The greatest writer has passed his zenith, when he once begins to cheapen his style of work, and sink into a book-maker: after that, though the newspapers may never hint at it, nor his admirers own it, the decline of his career has begun.

Yet the author is not alone to blame for this, but also the world, which first tempts

and then reproves him. Goethe says, that, if a person once does a good thing, society forms a league to prevent his doing another. His seclusion is gone, and therefore his unconsciousness and his leisure; luxuries tempt him from his frugality, and soon he must toil for luxuries; then, because he has done one thing well, he is urged to squander himself and do a thousand things ill. In this country especially, if one can learn languages, he must go to Congress: if he can argue a law-case, he must become agent of a factory. Out of this comes a variety of training which is very valuable, but a wise man must have strength to call in his resources before middle life, prune off divergent activities, and concentrate himself on the main work, be it what it may. It is shameful to see the indeterminate lives of many of our gifted

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men, unable to resist the temptations of a busy land, and so losing themselves in an aimless and miscellaneous career.

Yet it is unjust and unworthy in Marsh to disfigure his fine work on the English language by traducing all who now write that tongue. "None seek the audience, fit, though few, which contented the ambition of Milton, and all writers for the press now measure their glory by their gains," and so indefinitely onward, — which is simply cant. Does a man who honestly earns his annual ten thousand dollars by writing dime novels, take rank as head of American literature by virtue of his salary? Because the profits of true literature are rising, — trivial as they still are beside those of commerce or the professions, — its merits do not necessarily decrease, but the contrary is more likely to

happen ; for in this pursuit, as in all others, cheap work is usually poor work. None but gentlemen of fortune can enjoy the bliss of writing for nothing and paying their own printer. Nor does the practice of compensation by the page work the injury that has often been ignorantly predicted. No contributor need hope to cover two pages of a magazine with what might be adequately said in one, unless he assumes his editor to be as foolish as himself. The Spartans exiled Ctesiphon for bragging that he could speak the whole day on any subject selected ; and a modern periodical is of little value, unless it has a Spartan at its head.

Strive always to remember — though it does not seem the plan of the universe that we should quite bring it home to ourselves — that “To-day is a king in disguise,” and

that this American literature of ours will be just as classic a thing, if we do our part, as any which the past has treasured. There is a mirage over all literary associations. Keats and Lamb seem to our young people to be existences as remote and legendary as Homer; yet it is not an old man's life since Keats was an awkward boy at the door of Hazlitt's lecture-room, and Lamb was introducing Talfourd to Wordsworth as his own only admirer. In reading Spence's "Anecdotes," Pope and Addison appear no farther off than these; and wherever I open Bacon's "Essays," I am sure to end at last with that one magical sentence, annihilating centuries, "When I was a child, and Queen Elizabeth was in the flower of her years."

So few men in any age are born with a marked gift for literary expression, so few of

this number have access to high culture, so few even of these have the personal nobleness to use their powers well, and this small band is finally so decimated by disease and manifold disaster, that it makes one shudder to observe how little of the embodied intellect of any age is left behind. Literature is attar of roses, one distilled drop from a million blossoms. Think how Spain and Portugal once divided the globe between them in a treaty, when England was a petty kingdom of illiterate tribes!—and now all Spain is condensed for us into Cervantes, and all Portugal into the fading fame of the unread Camoens. The long magnificence of Italian culture has left us only *I Quattro Poeti*, the Four Poets. The difference between Shakespeare and his contemporaries is not that he is read twice, ten times, a hundred times as

much as they : it is an absolute difference ; he is read, and they are only printed.

Yet, if our life be immortal, this temporary distinction is of little moment, and we may learn humility, without gathering despair, from earth's evanescent glories. Who cannot bear a few disappointments, if the vista be so wide that the mute inglorious Miltons of this sphere may in some other sing their *Paradise as Found*? I fancy that in some other realm of existence we may look back with a kindly interest on this scene of our earlier life, and say to one another, "Do you remember yonder planet, where once we went to school?" And whether our elective study here lay chiefly in the fields of action or of thought will matter little to us there, when other schools shall have led us through other disciplines.

II.

HINTS ON SPEECH-MAKING.

THE number of graduates going forth each year from our American colleges must be several thousand, since the number of undergraduates is more than twenty thousand. If we add those who are graduates of academies — those who have, as Mr. Poore generously puts it in his “Congressional Record,” “received an academical education” — the figures will be greatly swelled. The majority of all these graduates will be called upon, at some time or other during their lives, to make a speech, as will also thousands of young Americans who have never

seen the inside of college or academy. Perhaps a few hints on speech-making may not be unavailing, when addressed to this large class by a man much older — one who has made so many speeches that the process has almost ceased to have terror to him, whatever dismay it may sometimes cause to his hearers. Certainly there are a few suggestions to be made which are not to be found in the elocutionary manuals, and which would have saved the present writer much trouble and some anguish, had any one thought of offering them to him when he left college.

The first requisite of speech-making is of course, to have something to say. But this does not merely mean something that may be said; it means something that must be said — that presses on the mind uncomfortably until uttered. Kinglake, in his “His-

tory of the Crimean War," declares it to be essential to a general that he should have some taste for fighting; for, he says, there are almost always as many good reasons for postponing an engagement as for risking it, and unless the general has sufficient love of fight to turn the scale, no battle will ever take place. Whether this would be an intolerable calamity is another question, though Kinglake clearly thinks that it would. Be this as it may, there are always so many good reasons for not making a speech, that, unless a speaker has a real desire to make it, the thing never will be done; and nothing so creates and intensifies this desire as an earnest purpose. Some people speak from loquacity or from habit: I knew men in the Massachusetts Legislature who could not go by a bill to regulate the breadth of wagon-

wheels, without being inspired with a "little amendment;" but, after all, the crotchet of the little amendment was what propelled the speech, so that even these men talked under the pressure of something that they had very much at heart. As a general rule, it may be assumed that most of the speeches on a given question—in a town-meeting, for instance—are by those who speak because they "have a message to deliver," as Carlyle would say. And that is the oratory most effective. The words which almost always command most attention in any legislative body are those coming from men who have never before opened their lips there, but who have some matter that thoroughly possesses them,—usually a local question, or a question of their particular trade or business,—on which they utter themselves with a force

such as the members who pass for "orators" can rarely bring to bear. It is almost invariable that such a man, being modest, goes first to some more conspicuous member, and tries to get him to make the speech, and he is almost always told that it will be tenfold more effective if he makes it himself. Pole, in his new rules for whist-playing, says that only two things can excuse a man from following his partner's lead of trumps — sudden illness, or the fact that he has not a single trump in his hand. So the only thing that can really excuse a man for transferring to anybody else the task of making a speech on a subject that he has mastered, is either sudden illness, or the fact that he has changed his opinion, and has no speech to make. The first rule for public speaking, therefore, is, *Have something that you desire very much to say.*

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The second rule is, *Always speak in a natural key, and in a conversational manner.* The days of pompous and stilted eloquence are gone by, and it was perhaps Wendell Phillips more than anybody else who put an end to it in this country, and substituted a simpler style. I remember a striking instance of this change of manner at a Harvard Commencement dinner. The late George S. Hillard of Boston, a man of much local fame, now rapidly fading, was in my youth considered almost the model orator for such an occasion—acute, well trained, skilful, and in his way even persuasive. For many years, however, he absented himself, partly through political antagonism, from the college gatherings. At last, some ten years ago, he re-appeared, and gave one of his old and highly elaborated speeches. After he

had sat down, amid courteous but not ardent applause, my classmate, the late Dr. Edward H. Clarke, who sat by me, said, in a whisper, "Is the change in Hillard, or in me? I remember the time when that speech would have seemed to me the perfection of oratory. Now it utterly fails to move me." Curiously enough, I had been myself making the same reflection; and Dr. Clarke himself, being afterward called upon, made a plain, telling, straightforward statement about the condition and needs of the medical school, which took a hearty hold of those present, although the "classic orator" had failed to reach them. There is no question that within thirty years our American public speaking has been pitched upon a far more natural key.

But how to reach that easy tone is the

serious question. Many a man has risen with the best intention to speak naturally, and has been swept away into a false or constrained manner before he has fairly said, "Mr. President and gentlemen." It is hard, therefore, to answer the question how to make sure of the desired attitude. The best way, of course, is to be natural without effort, if one only could. In that delightful book about children by Mrs. Diaz, called "William Henry's Letters," the simple-hearted boy cannot quite comprehend the necessity of being sent to dancing-school "in order to know how to enter a room," as his fastidious aunts have advised. "I told her I didn't see any thing so very hard about entering a room. I told 'em, 'Walk right in!'" But the dancing-school is meant to re-assure boys less frank than William

Henry, and so all suggestions as to beginning a speech are for those to whom it is not easy to walk right in.

Tennyson says of manners:—

“Kind nature is the best: those manners next
That fit us like a nature second-hand,
Which are indeed the manners of the great.”

If people are shy and awkward and conscious about their speeches, how shall they gain an easy and unconstrained bearing? That is, how shall they begin their speeches in that way?—for after the beginning, it is not so hard to go on.

There is one very simple method,—as simple as to swallow a mouthful of water slowly to cure one’s hiccough, —and yet one which I have seldom known to fail. Suppose the occasion to be a public dinner.

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You have somebody by your side to whom you have been talking. To him your manner was undoubtedly natural; and if you can only carry along into your public speech that conversational flavor of your private talk, the battle is gained. How, then, to achieve that result? In this easy way: Express to your neighbor conversationally the thought, whatever it is, with which you mean to begin your public speech. Then, when you rise to speak, say merely what will be perfectly true, "I was just saying to the gentleman who sits beside me, that" — and then you repeat your remark over again. You thus make the last words of your private talk the first words of your public address, and the conversational manner is secured. This suggestion originated, I believe, with a man of inexhaustible fertility in public speech,

Rev. E. E. Hale. I have often availed myself of it, and have often been thanked by others for suggesting it to them.

In the third place, *Never carry a scrap of paper before an audience.* If you read your address altogether, that is very different; and some orators, especially the French, produce remarkable effects by speaking from manuscript. It is the combination that injures. So long as a man is absolutely without notes, he is not merely thrown on his own resources, but his hearers see and know that he is; their sympathy goes along with him; they wish him to go triumphantly through. But if they once see that he is partly relying on the stilts and leading-strings of his memoranda, their sympathy languishes. It is like the difference between a man who walks a tight-rope boldly, trusting wholly to his

balance-pole, and the man who is looking about every moment for something by which to steady himself. What is the aim of your notes? You fear that without them you may lose your thread, or your logical connection, or some valuable fact or illustration. But you may be sure that neither thread nor logic nor fact nor argument is so important to the audience as that they should be kept in entire sympathy with yourself, that the magnetic contact, or whatever we call it, should be unbroken. The chances are, that nobody will miss what you leave out, if you forget any thing; but you will lose much if you forego the continuous and confiding attention given to a speaker who is absolutely free.

The late Judge B. R. Curtis once lost a case in court of which he had felt very sure

—one in which John P. Hale of New Hampshire, a man not to be compared with him as a lawyer, was his successful antagonist. When asked the reason, he said, “It was very curious: I had all the law and all the evidence, but that fellow Hale somehow got so intimate with the jury that he won the case.” To be intimate with your audience is half the battle, and nothing so restricts and impedes that intimacy as the presence of a scrap of paper.

Then comes the question, How shall you retain your speech in your head? Shall you write it, and commit it to memory, or merely note down the points? Some of the most agreeable public speakers known to me, as, for instance, Ex-Governor Long of Massachusetts, habitually write their speeches, and yet deliver them with such

ease that you would think them embarked without previous preparation on an untried sea, which they are riding with buoyant safety. Wendell Phillips rarely made special preparation : his accumulated store of points and illustrations was so inexhaustible that he did not need to do any thing more than simply draw upon it when the time came. Yet I remember that after hearing his Phi Beta Kappa oration, in which he had so carried away a conservative and critical audience that they found themselves applauding tyrannicide before they knew it, I said to him, "This could not have been written out beforehand," and he said, "It is already in type at the 'Advertiser' office." I could not have believed it.

Nevertheless, in the long-run, it is essential that one who speaks much, or even who

speaks little, should acquire command enough of himself to say what has not been written down. In this case the fourth rule must be, *Plan out a series of a few points, as simple and orderly as possible.* They should be simple, both for the convenience of the audience and for your own, since otherwise you may lose yourself in subtleties and metaphysics. They should be orderly, if only that you may remember them by the method of natural succession, each one suggesting the next, and thus putting as little tax as possible on the memory. Where the points are wholly detached, you can substitute an artificial order, perhaps fixing each in your mind by some leading word that will suggest it, and then arranging these alphabetically; the object being always to tax your memory as lightly as possible, that it may do its work

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the better. You have now the points of your speech planned and provided — so many stepping-stones to carry you safely across the stream.

But points alone are not enough. You must hold your audience; and this must be done, not by lowering yourself in any way, but by giving that audience variety of food, and reaching their minds by facts, fancy, and wit, as well as logic. Therefore the fifth rule is, *Plan beforehand for one good fact and one good illustration under each head of your speech.* One is enough, for the chance is that the impulse of the occasion will give you more. The fact may be from your own experience or from a book; but it must be brief, clear, and telling. The illustration may be grave or gay, from poetry or from the newspaper corner, Shakespeare or Arte-

mus Ward: no matter, so that it hit the mark. Most people have a sense of humor, high or low: all people have more or less imagination, however concealed by the stolid habits of daily life. George Herbert says,

“A verse may find him who a sermon flies;”

and if he had written “jest” in place of “verse,” it would have been quite as true. But my present aim is to help the inexperienced speaker; and it is therefore well to repeat the rule, to fortify one’s self beforehand with at least one good fact and one good illustration or anecdote for each main point of the discourse. You will thus make sure of distributing your reasoning and your relief all through the speech, and will not put all the dough in one pan, and all the yeast in another.

And by way of closing admonition, I should give this sixth and final rule: *Do not torment yourself up to the last moment about your speech, but give your mind a rest before it.* To combine ample preparation with a state of mental clearness and freshness—that is the problem. Who does not know how clear the mind is when we wake in the morning, how we solve problems and think out perplexing questions while bathing and dressing, although the previous night the mind was inert and dead? That is what is meant by mental freshness; and what we need is to bring this precise quality—this oxygen of the mind—into our speeches. The students at Oxford and Cambridge in England, after preparing for the severe examinations for honors,—far severer than any of ours, though the ordinary “pass” examinations

for the mere academical degree are not so hard as ours, — make it a rule not to work at all on the day before the ordeal, but to spend that time, if possible, out of doors and away from books. They thus refresh their minds, and get rid of that terrible feeling of expectancy.

I have been told by clergymen who enjoyed the actual process of preaching, that no one could describe the mental depression they felt on Saturday evening, and even on the morning hours of Sunday, in looking forward to that exercise, not knowing whether they should succeed or fail. There is a rather apocryphal story of Carlyle, that he was once driven to despair by the noise of some neighboring peacocks. “But,” said the neighbor, “they do not scream more than twice in twenty-four hours.” — “Perhaps

not," said Carlyle, "but consider the agonies that I undergo in waiting for that scream!" It is not the public speaking that wears upon a man, it is the waiting for it. Look at the faces of the after-dinner speakers at a public dinner: how woe-begone till their time comes! how cheerful afterwards! To make your speeches successful, therefore, learn the art of completing your preparation beforehand, and then indulging in entire rest—newspapers, Mark Twain, exercise, any thing you please—until the important moment comes.

These are all very simple rules—almost too simple, it may seem, to put on paper. Compared with the elaborate counsels of the books on rhetoric, how trivial they are! Yet I am sure, from observation and experience, that there is a good deal of help in

them; and while they may not secure for any man the power to make a great speech, they will at least aid him to avail himself of his own gifts, such as they are, and bring him up to a fair average of successful execution. The power of public speaking is probably the most transitory of all kinds of intellectual influence, for it dies with the death of its individual auditors, whereas a good book keeps on. But it is, on the other hand, the most concentrated and telling of all forms of mental action, the most stimulating to those who hear it, and, by reflex action, to the speakers themselves. No writer has any echo so intoxicating as the applause of a visible audience: no writer can elicit from himself sparks so brilliant as those which seem to be struck out between your eyes and the answering eyes of your hearers.

The best things in any speech are almost always the sudden flashes and the thoughts not dreamed of before. Indeed, the best hope that any orator can have is to rise at favored moments to some height of enthusiasm that shall make all his previous structure of preparation superfluous; as the ship in launching glides from the ways, and scatters cradle-timbers and wedges upon the waters that are henceforth to be her home.

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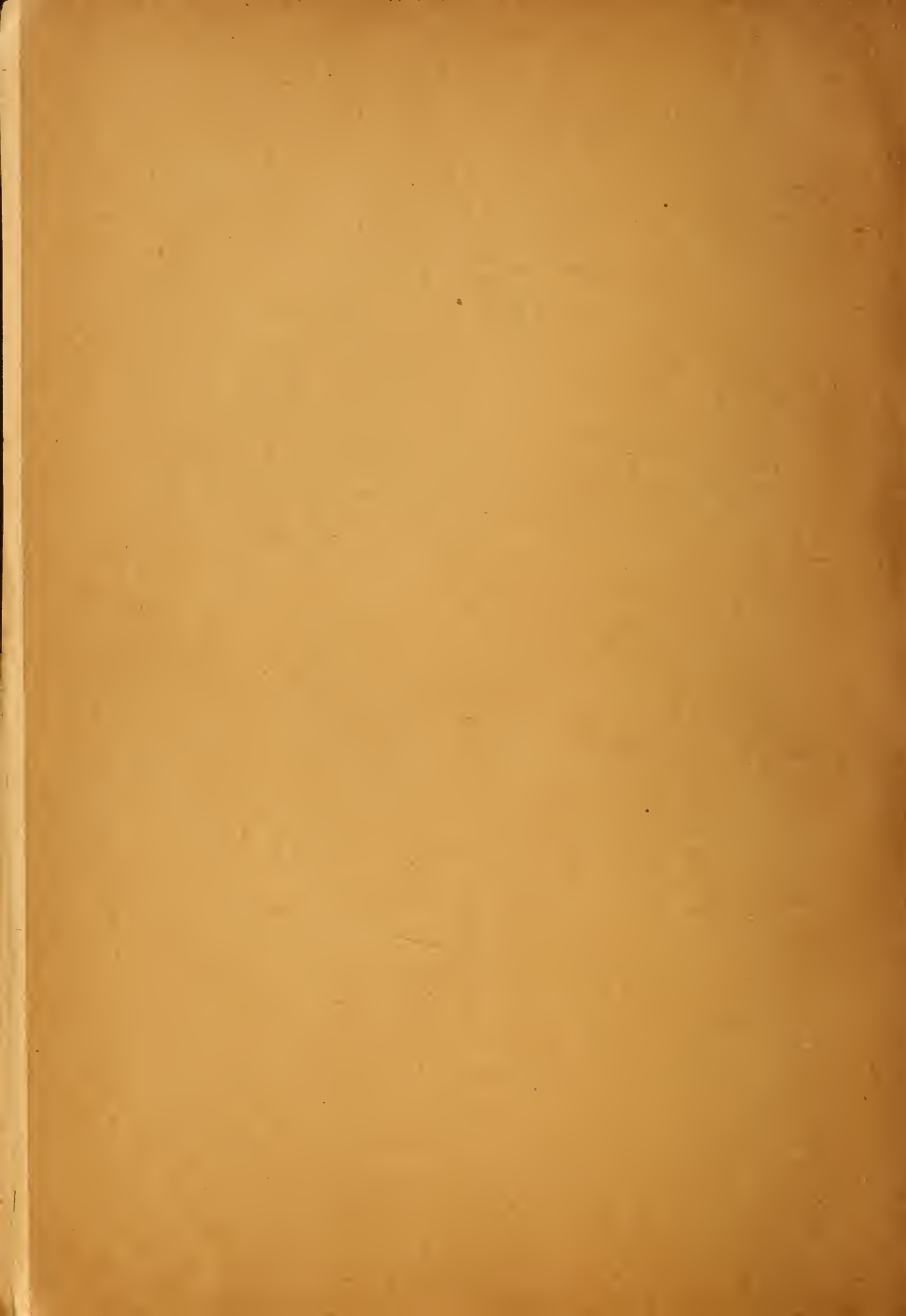
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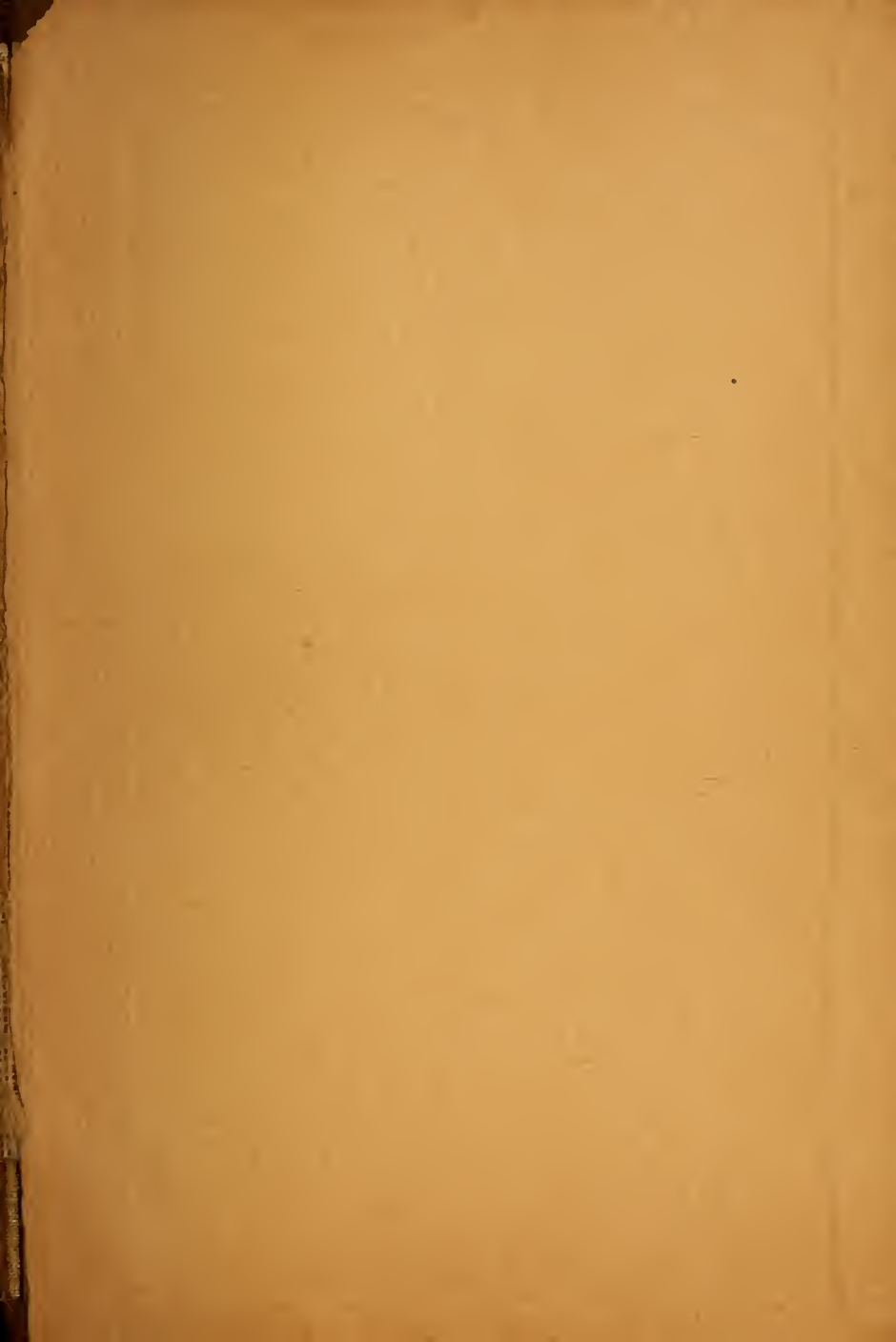
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