

EXPRESSIVE ENGLISH

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PREFACE

It is often held to be a sufficient description or definition of language to speak of it as "a medium of communication among intelligent beings." Language is that, indeed, and can never be less than that. But that is its lowest office. The hen calls her brood by a glad cluck to a fine bit of grain, or warns them by a terrifying note of the sweep of a hawk. But she has soon gone round the circle of ideas appropriate to her species, and the "medium of communication" has no place in the realm beyond, where for her and hers there is nothing to communicate. In all human beings, however, except the most degraded, there is a demand for communication of thought and feeling from one to another beyond what language as used by them can yet convey. With all mental advance the reach and range and delicacy of thought and feeling evermore outstrip the capacity of words to utter them. Language is under a constant impulsion to express ideas and emotions which are still beyond its power. ✓

It is true that a decaying civilization may shrivel up, as it were, within a language, until it has no use for many words and phrases which were full of meaning to men of a nobler day. Such a language is in process of becoming a "dead language," as the Greek and Latin were becoming in Europe five centuries ago. Then, if the civilization is really alive, new languages will arise to express the thought and feeling of the new time, as the languages of modern Europe arose when hu-

manity awakened out of the night of the Middle Ages. How vast and wonderful were the needs for which these new languages had to provide expression! The invention of gunpowder, changing the whole art of war; the mariner's compass, opening sure ways across the pathless seas; the Copernican system of astronomy, giving the world and man for the first time their true place in the celestial spaces; the science of chemistry in place of the superstitions of alchemy; steam and gas, electricity and magnetism, the printing-press, the railroad, the steamship, the telegraph, the telephone, photography, wireless telegraphy, and now aviation:—all these, as arts and processes of modern life, have driven every vigorous modern language into a chase for words and phrases expressive enough to keep up with the crowding thought and imagery of the life actually about us, and beyond the direct communication of ascertained facts able to utter the constantly deepening and broadening visions and longings of the expanding human soul. To urge the expressiveness of language is to exalt the supremacy of thought. The language which is chiefly occupied with its own beauties is dying or dead; the language struggling to utter what is still beyond itself is alive, and none has more of this expansive vigor than our own.

English was a young, rude dialect when Latin was old and in ornamental decay; and the circumstances of the development of the new aspirant for power have never permitted it to evolve like a potato-sprout in a cellar, white, protracted, and delicate. By the exigencies of its existence it has been thrashed into sturdiness and vigor through centuries of conflict. Ever and evermore the concentrated energy of expression of human thought and feeling has been thrust upon and through

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and through the language as the essential condition of its existence.

Foremost in colonization, at the front in industrial and commercial achievement, possessed by that impulse of actual doing in the concrete world which we call "practical," full of the enthusiasm of freedom for each individual life, and yet with that power of combination that can cement millions scattered far over land and sea into the cohesion of an empire or a world-republic, spoken by more human beings than any other tongue now or in ages past existing among men, the number of persons using it being credibly estimated at one hundred and fifty millions, the English language must beyond all others seek and attain fulness of expression. It presses close up to the foremost line of the world's advance, to be ever ready with a new word or phrase for every new thought, discovery, invention, or achievement. Voices from every range of human endeavor and every outreach of human intellect are calling the language on to express—express—express, ever more comprehensively and minutely all the shades and lines of thought and feeling, now plain and direct as a concrete highway, now toilsomely ascending as a mountain path, or yet again diversified with flower and shrub and rock and light and shade and sudden windings as a woodland road. Its ideal of utterance has come to be, not method, measure, melody, but meaning. "Fine writing," once the ideal of many young writers, is now disesteemed. The best speaking or writing of English will be done always by asking "What do I really mean to say?" or "What do I most deeply want to say?"—in other phrase, "What for my purpose can words now and here best express?"

The present author has long believed that much thor-