

**FAMILIAR WORDS, AS  
AFFECTING THE CHARACTER  
OF ENGLISHMEN AND THE  
FATE OF ENGLAND**

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Familiar Words, as Affecting the Character of Englishmen and the Fate of England by David Urquhart

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**DAVID URQUHART**

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1837-1867  
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BY

DAVID URQUHART.

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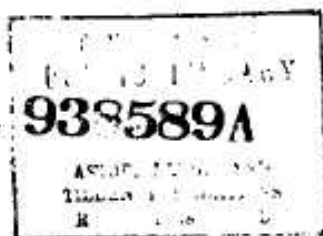
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NOTICE.

Shortly will appear the Second Part, containing those *Familiar Words* which chiefly influence the Conduct of England in 1855.

# FAMILIAR WORDS.

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## I.—PRELIMINARY.

IN no point is the contrast so striking and direct between a state in its rise, and a state in its decay, as in the estimation of speech. In the first the word of man is of all things the most solemn and sacred:\* it is reverently dealt with and sparingly used. In the last, it is devoid of power, it is a by-word of reproach,† and poured forth with endless volubility. By the condition of the language we may estimate the period of the nation.

It is by thoughts that States are built up. It is by thoughts that States are brought down. But thoughts pass through speech, and speech is a matter of habit. Just thoughts require a simple tongue: fallacious terms must bring erring thoughts. Thought cannot undergo change in itself. Speech undergoes change in itself. Nations then are changed by their speech. The soul of man is in his words; the fate of a nation in its sentences, and yet the change as it occurs is not the result of will.

To bend the mind of a nation verging to decay, to

\* In Greek and Latin "word" is singularly coupled with justice and glory—*Dico, Δίκη—Lex, Λόγος—Fama, φημι*. In the Slave tongues, "language" and "glory" are synonymous.

† "Words, words, words."—*Shakespeare*.

observe its speech, is the only chance for its recovery. To effect this in the whole people is beyond the reach of human enterprise, but some individuals may be found at once inclined to, and capable of the effort. These, by this acquired superiority, may come to direct it in the sense which it would itself follow if its vision were not confused. Whether or not, at least this is possible, that some may be benefited, and a chain of witnesses preserved for future times.

If a man be stopped by a body of running water, he does not merely wonder at the phenomenon, but forms to himself the idea of a river, rising in the summits of the earth, speeding by descent, enlarged by time, and finding no goal short of the abyss of ocean. Speech too is a running stream, descending from the generations of old; shall we not ask what lands it has traversed—what leaps it has taken—what changes undergone?

We drink language as we do water: on the purity of the one depends the health of the mind, as that of the body on the purity of the other. Our natural senses warn us against the impurity of the latter, but we have to create for ourselves the senses by which to detect the impurities of the former. When language is corrupted it intoxicates, and it is corrupted by the putrefaction of perished races which have been cast into it. All the history of the past flows in upon us in our speech—not by lessons, but by symbols. If it were not so, could nations perish? Their hour of death is the rich accomplishment of experience.

Every sentence depends on two distinct processes; the syntax of the language; the operation of the mind. To distinguish the part that belongs to each is an operation of such difficulty, that it is only in the course of many generations, that we find evidence of



the existence of an individual who has so much as thought of the distinction Syntax, which is wholly distinct from ourselves, having been taught us together with the use of words, by means of which, we think, we identify our phrases with the operations of the human mind.

Mutations arise chiefly from the introduction of new terms. These are derived from dead languages and falsely applied. They are moreover abstractions, that destroy the sense of living agency, and give to men's acts the character of vicissitudes, in which their will has no part, and over which their reason has no control.

I propose to trace the history of some of the most common words, which indeed is no less than the history of the nation in its mind. They may be classed under three heads. Those derived from the learned languages, and used in a sense in which the Romans or Greeks could never have employed them—those representing confused ideas—those applied to known things, but rendered confused by change in the objects represented.

## II.—GENERAL PROPOSITIONS.

FROM having spent much of my life in the East, I remark in ourselves, important matters which, by being common, escape observation. That which strikes me most is the reflection which an educated man gives utterance to when any particular fact is mentioned. As an Eastern I should have to infer that he wanted to get rid of the subject, but as a European I know that he is conversing upon it. In the one capacity I must conclude that he is ingeniously contriving to prevent a listener from understanding the value of the fact, but in the other I know that he is showing how dexterously he is discussing it. This process is called "*accounting for things*," and it is effected by uttering a GENERAL PROPOSITION.

General is the antithesis to particular, and to propose anything generally in reference to that which is specific, is not to explain, but to obliterate. A general proposition may be asserted or denied: consequently when any fact is merged in a generality, the discussion then proceeds to the total exclusion of the facts out of which it arises. Conversation so conducted, must be a practice, conducive to the sharpening of the wits, but fatal to sense. It is dictionaries that converse, not men.

Soon after returning for the first time from the East, in conversation with a distinguished political economist, I mentioned to him, the reflections which the hospitality there practised had suggested to me, and pointed out the social, political, and commercial effects which flowed from it, effects which we vainly

sought amongst ourselves to realize by legislation. Whilst I was expecting to see these thoughts take possession of his powerful and reflecting mind, and with some tremor anticipated the series of searching inquiries to which I should be exposed, I was confounded by "*Hospitality is an effect of Barbarism.*" Recovering however, I made a second attempt. His great field was the Poor-laws. I therefore gave him a home-thrust and said,—“In these countries pauperism is unknown.” Quick as lightning came his reply: "*Pauperism is a concomitant of Civilization!*" I then said “ye are slaves” in my heart, for my lips had not then gained sufficient courage.

According to Aristotle “generalities are the refuge of weak minds.” According to Lord Coke, it is the deceitful that have recourse to them. Both propositions are true. They are invented by the designing, and are used by the weak. There would be little art in being fallacious if not to purpose, and a nation that has allowed itself to be so imposed upon must in the end become absolutely idiotic.

Müller remarks that our ideas of what we call civilization disqualify us for judging of any ancient people. But alas! it is from judging of ourselves that we are disqualified by our modes of speech. Suppose that it was not our habit to utter general propositions what would be the effect of hearing that the blot of pauperism was not a general condition of humanity? An effort would be called for to comprehend its causes, and to devise a remedy. By the habit, we exclude the fact, and what is worse, falling into details and into statistics, give to our mental atrophy the fence of figures and the mask of science.

When the habit of uttering propositions, containing