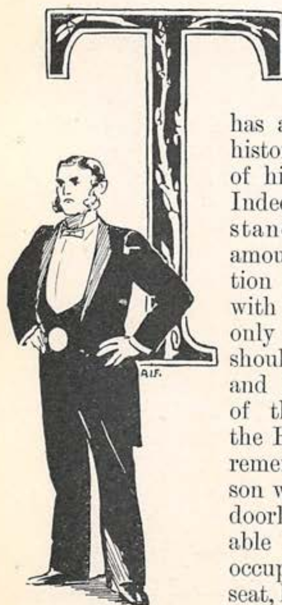
A SCHOOL OF ORATORY.

By Spencer Leigh Hughes.

Illustrated by A. J. Finberg.



TALBOT SIMPKINSON has been dead more than ten years now, and the time has arrived when the real history of the last few years of his life may be related. Indeed, so much misunderstanding and such an amount of misrepresentation have been connected with the history, that it is only right that the facts should be set forth fully and frankly. Not a few of the older members of the House of Commons will remember Talbot Simpkinson when he was the chief doorkeeper in that honourable House, and when he occupied the quaint old seat, like a sentry-box, which still stands on the right-hand side as you enter the Chamber from the Lobby. He was a man of distinguished appearance, and members were in the habit of saying that he "looked like a first-class Privy Councillor." Moreover, he was very proud of the name "Talbot," and was painfully conscious of the difference in effect between "Mr. T. Simpkinson" and "Talbot Simpkinson, Esq.," when seen on an envelope. There is no doubt he would have connected the two names by a hyphen but for the fact that he had no other Christian name to furnish a preliminary initial.

The doorkeeper in the House may, whenever he likes, pass through the swinging doors, and, standing below the bar, remain practically, though not technically, on the floor of the House; and Simpkinson made use of this privilege occasionally. But no ordinary speech or incident would tempt him inside. When a great man delivered a memorable speech, "T. S.," as he was called by members who had known him for twenty years, would look in for ten minutes. His appearance at the bar of the House made it clear to even the meanest intelligence that the occasion was one of no ordinary importance—a fact that would not always have been established by any other means. Few, indeed, were the maiden speeches to which he condescended to listen, and it was generally recognised that the man whose first speech induced "T. S." to look in for five minutes had a distinguished career before him. It was a more valuable testimonial than any number of polysyllabic compliments from either front bench — compliments which are too often "of the front bench, front benchy."

In this way Simpkinson had studied the greatest orators and the most consummate Parliamentary tacticians for a generation and a half. He had, naturally enough, amassed a valuable store of information about what is known as "procedure," a word which, in Parliament, signifies chiefly the methods by which, without breaking the standing orders, you can prevent business from proceeding. And though he had his own political predilections—being, in point of fact, a Whig of the oldest type—he would always give advice in the friendliest possible manner to any member who consulted him. When once within the precincts of the Palace, he rose above all party considerations, and more than once he had been heard to say impressively, "Partisanship in a Speaker would be sad and deplorable; in a chief doorkeeper it would be unpardonable." I happen to know—and there is no reason why I should not make the fact public now—that Simpkinson was responsible for one of the most prolonged sittings under which the House of Commons ever suffered. He merely gave a hint or two to a nimble-witted gentleman from Ireland, and the seed, having fallen on good ground, sprang up and bare fruit an hundredfold. Poor Simpkinson was nearly dead with fatigue as he sat by the door all through the night; but he experienced a feeling of satisfaction as he reflected that his hint proved to be the "straight tip," if I may use an unparliamentary vulgarism when speaking of Mr. Talbot Simpkinson.

At length, after many years' service,

Simpkinson announced his intention of retiring into private life. He was the recipient of many handsome testimonials and was granted a comfortable pension. But though no longer young, it was not infirmity nor inability to perform his duties that had led him to withdraw from Westminster. He had regarded the extension of the franchise as a lamentable experiment, and its results, so far as the *personnel* of the House was concerned, filled him with the gravest alarm. Just as the well-trained skipper can perceive the scudding squall long before the mere land-lubber suspects its approach, so one or two little eccentricities in the dress of new members startled the watchful doorkeeper. He did not live to see the incursion of cummer-bunds, cricketing-flannels, brown boots, low hats, straw hats —and even a dingy cloth cap—which the present generation has gazed upon, but his instinct enabled him to detect these alterations "singing in the upper air like

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a coming storm," and he fled before it was too late.

When he had been in retirement some six months or so, strange rumours began to be whispered about among those members who had known him best. When his name was mentioned men would look at each other searchingly, as if asking, "Are you in the know?" Or they would retire mysteriously to secluded corners, where they raised their eyebrows, whistled softly, and, in a word, signified their surprise in the usual manner. Those who were not admitted to the secret naturally suspected the worst, and even the most kindly disposed felt sure that Simpkinson was either uttering spurious coin or running an illicit still. As these rumours, and some a great deal worse, have never been properly disposed of, I think it well to state the facts of the case and thus clear the memory of an honourable man from odious imputations.

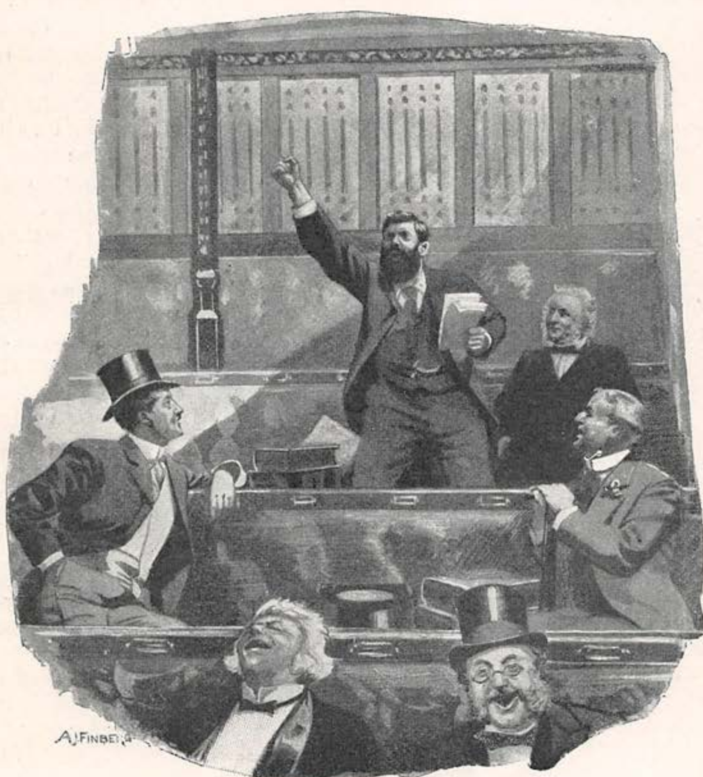
The fact is, Simpkinson had begun to give private lessons in Parliamentary oratory to new members, and to others who had never acquired the art. No mere candidates were received on any pretext whatever. Indeed, his pupils had to produce evidence that they had signed the roll and taken their seats before they were admitted to the Simpkinsonian sanctum. When once these preliminaries had been satisfactorily settled, Mr. Simpkinson welcomed his honourable friends with a courtly urbanity worthy of Mr. Speaker himself. From repeated conversations I have had with a few of those who do not mind owning that they have sat at the feet of Simpkinson, it is evident that his course of instruction followed fixed and definite lines and varied but little. He would begin, "You will soon find that it matters but little what you say in the House of Commons, while everything depends on how you say it. Acquiring what is known as 'the House of Commons style' is more than half the battle. Give 'em plenty of 'hum' and 'haw'; to 'er, er,' is human, you know" —he would invariably laugh at this ancient little jest, though he had made it a hundred times. He had great success in this part of his tuition, and the one instruction which all his pupils faithfully carried out was contained in the hint that the House of Commons was always impressed when a speaker did not appear to know what he was talking about, and had no notion what to say next. Having thus grounded the beginner in the first principles of House of Commons oratory—hesitation, a little stammering, endless repetition, a reasonable amount of self-contradiction, and any amount of "hum" and "haw"—Mr. Simpkinson would proceed to teach a few of the more necessary formulæ. How and when to remark, "I venture to say," or, "I have yet to learn," leading up by many a subtle gradation to that final climax reserved for very special occasions, "I even go so far as to venture to think"—all this was carefully explained.

"All this sort of thing," he would say, "may seem trivial to a stranger, but it makes all the difference between success and failure in the House. For instance, if you were to ask point blank, 'Will any man affirm that two and two make four?' most likely some member would call out 'Yes.' But if you put it like this, 'Will any man come down to this House, and stand up in his place, and venture to say that two and two make four?' they'll all sit mum. It impresses 'em; I don't know why, but it does. Again, supposing you say something which is not quite accurate—you know what I mean—and the other side calls out 'Oh, oh!' all you have to do is to turn to your men and say very indignantly, 'I am within the recollection of the House,' and if your side knows its business it will cheer like mad."

Having made sure that these rudimentary points had been appreciated, Simpkinson directed the attention of his friends and pupils to the question of the hat in Parliament. He had made this subject a speciality. "Let me implore you," he would say with real feeling, "never to encourage the pestilent heresy that a member should sit in his place uncovered. Wearing the hat in the House is a great privilege. Do not the police cry, 'Hats off, strangers!' every day when Mr. Speaker passes through the Lobby? That alone shows that the member may, if he likes, as a matter of privilege and right, keep his on. Disraeli was a gifted man, I grant, and Gladstone is well informed; but I have always admired Palmerston more than either—he wore his hat in the House, and they did not."

Nor were the solid advantages of the hat forgotten. The member who wishes to catch the Speaker's eye has a double chance of being successful if, in addition to jumping to his feet, he waves his hat about. And then hostile or friendly references in debate can be acknowledged by the hat being raised in an ironical or courteous salute. When pulled over the eyes it means gloomy defiance; when pushed far back it signifies that jaunty indifference which is so maddening to an assailant. All this was explained by the

experienced Simpkinson, but his chief point in this connection was the utility of the hat as an adjunct to perorations. It was a touching sight to witness a portly and worthy gentleman in Simpkinson's preparatory senate trolling forth the time-honoured phrase, "The pride of every true Briton—the envy of surrounding nations." As he uttered the word "surrounding" he turned to pick up his hat, and between the two syllables of "nations" he fixed it on his head with a bang and sat down with arms folded across his heaving chest. "That's it!" the delighted mentor would exclaim. "It encourages your men and overawes the other side. And then, when you fix your hat on as you sit down, you are sure of not sitting on it. Eloquence the most superb, services the most distinguished, a character spotless as the driven snow, are all of no avail when that most terrible of Parliamentary disasters overtakes a man."


"'Five minutes ago I had not the remotest intention of addressing the House.'"

Mr. Simpkinson devoted special attention, too, to coaching men for maiden speeches. "Always begin," he would say, "by claiming 'that kindly consideration which is never withheld from those who address the great assembly for the first time'; and assure them that five minutes before you rose you had not the least intention of intruding on their attention. It doesn't matter if you have a ream of notes, the members will greet your assurances with kindly cheers. They've all said the same sort of thing themselves."

Moreover, he never failed to impress on beginners the necessity of keeping their eyes fixed on their leaders whenever any of those great men happened to speak. "Every now and then you will see that they swing round on their toes, and facing their followers will make a rousing swoop with their arms. This is known as the 'Up-Guards-and-at-'em' movement. Whenever you see this done, you must cheer as hard as you can. I have known supercilious young men who declined to give tongue on such occasions; but mark my words—they were not invited to join the next Administration."

These are but a few of the hints which the ex-doorkeeper imparted to the budding senators. It would fill many a page if I were to go through all the details of his elaborate instructions. He neglected no point, however trivial; and if his pupils when they left him were not prepared for any emergency, from asking a supplementary and irrelevant question to bringing in a Budget, the fault was their own and not Simpkinson's.

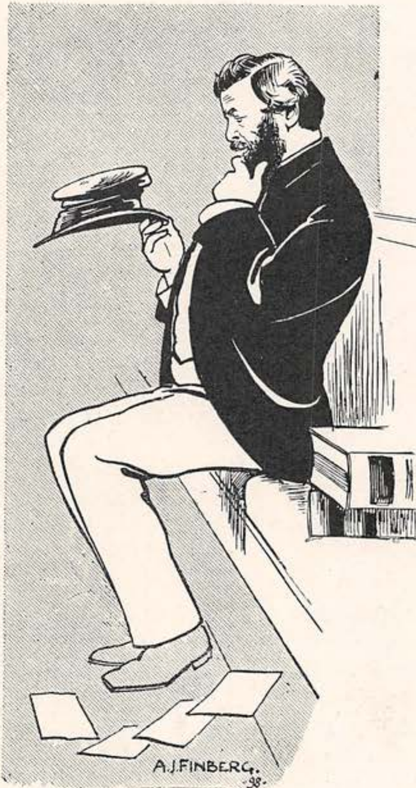
The success attending his efforts of course varied; but it gradually became apparent that "Simpkinson's men" went to the front in the House. By dint of vigorous hat-waving they caught the Speaker's eye; by the judicious use of formula and redundant phrase they made a good impression. They "joined in the groans and led the cheers," and scarcely one of them was ever known to sit on his hat. But like other founders of

schools, Simpkinson had to mourn over some who did him no credit. One in particular almost broke his heart. Mr. Mark Browne, M.P., was a gentleman with an enormous voice and an open-air style of speaking. During his first week or two in the House he had become dimly conscious that this style was not exactly the thing for his new surroundings, so he sought out Simpkinson one night and begged to be coached. When Mr. Browne was asked to make a short speech, so that the faults of his style could be detected and put right, he horrified poor Simpkinson by beginning to bellow forth a torrent of language, beating his chest with fury, gnashing his teeth, and winding up by shaking his fist savagely and roaring, "Is, then, the Magna Charta a mockery, and the Bill of Rights of none effect?"

"Oh, dear, dear!" groaned poor Simpkinson, shaking his head and throwing up his hands in despair, "that won't do at all. If there's one thing the House resents more than another, it's any reference to the Magna Charta. They simply won't stand it."

"Why?" asked the astonished and perspiring Browne.

"I scarcely know," was the reply. "It may be because the barons drew it up, and so it belongs to what is called 'another place'; but in any case you must not even hint at it."



"Ten minutes elapsed before he ventured to bring out the ruined article."

Browne eventually, though with evident reluctance, agreed to surrender that favourite phrase of his, and, indeed, to remodel his style altogether. Instead of being perfervid and strenuous, he became "stodgy" to excess, slow and solemn as the Dead March. His "hum" and "haw" business was so impressive as to fill Simpkinson with high hope, and when Browne one day announced that on the next Monday he meant to deliver his maiden speech, Simpkinson resolved secretly to get a seat in the Distinguished Strangers' Gallery and witness his promising pupil's triumph.

The House was well filled on the fateful day, as the question under discussion, though of no great importance, was one about which leading articles had been appearing for some days. Browne had made a mistake in sitting on a back seat under one of the side galleries, with a few blue books on one side and two volumes of Hansard on the other, while he clutched a heap of manuscript in his right hand. Time after time he sprang up, but tried in vain to catch the Speaker's eye. At length he uttered such a "whoop" as he shouted "Mr. Speaker," and at the same time he waved his hat with such desperate energy, that the startled Speaker looked towards him and said, "Mr. Browne." The hat was solemnly deposited on the seat behind, and poor Browne suddenly began to wonder whether he was on his head or his heels. He began in a low tone and with excessive deliberation:—

"Sir, I venture to say that I shall be in the recollection of the House—hum, haw, haw, hum—when I claim that consideration which is always extended to one who is making his maiden speech for the first time within these walls." A kindly cheer greeted this extraordinary remark, and Browne began to gain confidence. His voice soon reached the out-of-doors pitch, against which he had been warned, as he went on. "Five minutes ago I had not the remotest intention of addressing the House (a laugh); 'pon my honour, I did not even know I should be here at all." This was a little too much for those who had seen him trying for two hours to get an innings, and when he fixed his glasses on his nose and deliberately opened his monstrous sheaf of notes, they cheered and laughed noisily. This annoyed Browne, and he went on with a rush, "I have yet to

learn that any man will come down to this House and stand up in his place and with regard to the present relations subsisting between all parties go so far as to venture to think—hum, haw——," and here the roars of cheers and laughter pulled him up. He got desperate, threw down his notes, and said anything that came into his head. The noise increased, Browne nearly foamed at the mouth, and at last he became so excited that, in spite of the fact that he was on a back seat and that only the wall was behind him, he swung round on his toes and made that encouraging swoop with his arm of which Simpkinson had spoken. The members leaned back, and with their faces turned up to the glass ceiling, they bawled aloud with delight, while one voice could be heard above the din crying, "Up, Guards, and at 'em!" Browne faced the music again, and gave them his pet peroration about the Magna Charta and the Bill of Rights, at which they cheered more madly than ever. In the midst of the wild applause he sat down abruptly, and crash went his hat as flat as a Ministerial denial. The whole place shook with the resounding laughs, while poor Simpkinson was observed to put his head down on the rail in front of the gallery where he sat, as though the scene was too much for him. Browne sat quite still, hoping that no one had noticed the tragedy of the hat, and that his hideous secret was safe. Ten minutes elapsed before he ventured to bring out the ruined article and make soft attempts at repairing the damage. But the watchful members who had been waiting for this cheered him again, and Mr. Browne strode from the Chamber with stately step after a bow that would have done credit to a Lord Chamberlain.

He was crossing the Lobby gloomily to get to the quiet of the library when Simpkinson emerged from the staircase leading from his gallery. They met near the Vote Office, and the scene reminded the onlookers of the meeting of Wellington and Blucher after Waterloo. Each clasped the hand of the other. Simpkinson said not a word; Browne said only one, and that was distinctly unparliamentary.

From a photo by] [*W. H. Bunnett.*

THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT.