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ARTICLE III.

THE ART OF CONVERSATION.

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IF things are to be valued according to their use, very few arts are to be more diligently sought or desired than the art of conversing well. Speech is the distinguishing faculty of man ; it is the utterance of reason ; and it is the medium by which reason imparts her light and increases it. Adequately to communicate our thoughts is a most important faculty, and in constant demand. The art of agreeable conversation renders a man very pleasing, and helps him forward in life ; it is the channel, too, of doing good. Other arts may be of rare application, but there is a constant demand for the faculties of the man whose conversable powers are like a torch in a dark cell, which, if it reveals some deformity, puts the darkness to flight.

There is such a thing as perfection in this line, and it is likely a perfection that has never yet been seen. The sweetest rose formed by nature may have been blown ; the brightest sun may have imparted his beams ; but it is likely the best talker remains yet to be born. When we look around the world we find very few attain the highest or even a remarkable excellence. There are croakers, and grumblers, and dumbfounders, and murmurers, and groaners, and brawlers, and weepers, but very few real talkers. It requires a combination of gifts, each one in their separation rather rare : wit, wisdom, reading, memory, promptness, confidence, modesty, fertility of resources, and felicity in using them. We must have a confidence in ourselves and a respect for our company, and all these improved by cultivation and practice. Men are often good in one line : some tell stories well, but they tell too many ; some repeat their good things too often ; some are too severe, too proud, too ill-

natured ; and some too yielding. Some are too egotistical, and some usurp all the talk to themselves ; for as the surface of a flower-garden amidst its bed of verdure and beauty must have walks of barren gravel, so a good converser must have his intervals of silence, and become an animated listener while he permits others to speak.

An art so delightful, and yet so seldom learned, may receive a few assisting observations.

Let us consider, first, the nature of conversation ; secondly, how acquired, and thirdly, its principal faults and imperfections.

First, then, conversation has several distinct parts, of which the principal are, small talk, discussion, anecdotes or telling stories, telling news, especially bad news, flattery, apophthegm and repartee, and, lastly, religious conversation.

To begin, then, with small talk, very necessary to a small creature like man, and very useful when it cements friendship and leads to something better. Though the Saviour says, "for every idle word we speak we must give an account in the day of judgment," yet there is some small talk that is not to come into the definition of idle words, for it is sanctioned by the permission of scripture itself. It is natural, and almost necessary to our social intercourse. We are told (2 John 10): "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed." God speed! A remarkable expression ; the current mode of salutation. The original signifies health to you ; may you enjoy your health. So the apostles also began their epistles by the common mode of salutation, showing that their high mission did not impair their politeness. When Moses met his father-in-law in the wilderness, *they asked each other of their welfare*, and it was not until they came into the tent that Moses told his father-in-law *all that the Lord had done unto Pharaoh* (Ex. xviii. 7, 8). These practices are founded in nature ; we follow them to this day. When we meet each other in the street we are in haste to tell each other what each must have known before : It is a

fine day ; it is very cold ; it is a dry time ; it is a warm summer ; how the canker-worms disfigure the trees ; the philosophy of all which is, I will say something to which you must agree ; I will not have a dispute with you in the outset ; and if a person depart from these conventional rules he appears abrupt. It is said when Dr. Alexander passed through New England in the beginning of this century, he called on Dr. Strong of Hartford, who, before he had hardly shut the door, said to his guest : “ Dr. Alexander, what is the origin of evil ? ” Dr. Alexander’s reply was : “ Is it necessary for us to begin there ? Or is *that* the first thing ? ” Small talk is like the cement that binds the bricks together, or it is like the leaves on the tree, which indicate the vegetable life which gives ripeness to the fruit. It is the side path that leads to the main road. I pity the man that has no small talk ; and I pity him still more that has nothing better. A bat makes a miserable bird, because he can never fly higher than his own level on his wicker wing.¹

But discussion is an important ingredient in conversation ; and by discussion I mean not the debates of the schools, but the discussion of the parlor. Some people conceive an everlasting opposition between politeness and earnest discussion. Politeness consists, they think, in always saying, Yes, yes, to your opponent ; always agreeing to the proposed opinion, however absurd or unlimited. Thus, if a man in company should say that the moon is made of green cheese, you must reply, according to some : “ Why, yes sir, there is a great deal in what you say ; your opinion is very plausible, I am sure ; I have seen the moon look like a skim-milk cheese, with a half circle dug out of the centre. Appearances are wholly in your favor.” This opposition between politeness and discussion is wholly imaginary. It is one of the greatest arts in conversation to contradict without offence. This was the great skill of Socrates. When he seemed most to agree with a companion there was no knowing where he was coming

¹ *Aeneid*, Book vii. line 478 (Dryden’s translation).

out. He often either contradicted him at last, or made him contradict himself.

Discussion is a most delightful mode of conversation, if the company are *up to it*, and the more earnest the better. Then you drop the mask ; then you lay bare the heart ; then your opinions, like the pebbles on the shore, under the action of the advancing or receding wave, are worn into smoothness and polished into beauty. Then mind meets mind, and your most sober conclusions are brought into sympathy with all mankind. You are improved for the moment, and you carry your improvement into the solitude of reflection. It is a stimulus to memory, and you cannot take up a book without feeling the influence of free discussion.

What a beautiful description has Rousseau given of the conversation in Paris. "Their conversation," says he, "consists neither in dissertation or epigram ; they reason without argumentation ; they have pleasantry without punning ; they associate with skill, genius and reason, maxims and flashes of wit, sharp satire and severe morality. They run through all subjects, that each one may have something to say ; they exhaust no subject, for fear of tiring their hearer ; they propose their themes casually ; they treat them rapidly, and precision leads to elegance. Each one delivers his opinion and supports it briefly ; no one attacks with heat that of another, nor defends obstinately his own ; they examine in order to enlighten, and stop before it becomes a dispute. Each is both instructed and amused, and all are pleased ; even the sage himself bears away recollections worthy of his meditation in the silence of retreat."¹ Now as the French are the best conversers in the world, and Rousseau one of the best witnesses both of their beauties and defects, we may regard this description as a compendious portrait of what parlor discussion should be.

It is sad to think how few, even of educated men, are qualified for agreeable and profitable discussion. It is not every red cow that gives good milk ; and the fault is not

¹ *New Heloise*, vol. ii. pp. 95, 96.

so much in want of ability, as of frankness, openness, sincerity, superiority to egotism and care of reputation — that *abandon* which the critic of the stage speaks of, which is the best preparation for excellence either in public or private speaking. Give me the man that is not passion's slave, and I will not only wear him in my heart of hearts, but I will welcome him to my room; and what delight can be greater than such a circle? I have sometimes thought that hearing a consummate orator is one of the greatest pleasures of our sublunary life. But no — I recant — I recall the opinion. There is one still greater: it is the evening when you sit up till three o'clock in the morning, sometimes jumping up from your chair, sometimes sitting down again; winding your pocket handkerchief around your knees — tying your legs together; knocking your opponent's chair over, as well as his arguments; sometimes talking loud, and then in a subdued key — running through all the notes of the gamut; lost in some discussion, where the mortification and the triumph strangely meet to temper each other, and both combine to seal an advancement on your memory, whose light is to be extinguished only by closing the eye in death.

Telling the news is a frequent part of pleasant conversation. Every one has felt the pleasure of being the first to communicate some important tidings: you seemed to grow an inch taller in discharging your office. The best direction is, be simple and brief; do not keep your hearer too long in suspense. If your news is really important no language that you can invent can possibly adorn it. The shortest and simplest way of telling the story is always the best. Do not circulate false rumors; do not tell the news until you believe it to be true; do not add to the story; do not increase the miracle, nor color the adornments; be accurate as well as true, — tell the event just as it was. Do not first excite and then torture curiosity, like the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*:

Juliet.

All this I knew before.

What says he of our marriage? What of that?

"Nurse. Lord how my head aches! what a head have I!

It beats as it would fall in twenty pieces.

My back o' t'other side — oh my back, my back!

Beshrew your heart for sending me about,

To catch my death with jaunting up and down.

"Juliet. I' faith, I'm sorry that thou art not well.

Sweet, sweet nurse, sweet nurse, tell me, what says my love?

"Nurse. Your love says, like an honest gentleman,

And a courteous, and a kind, and a handsome,

And, I warrant, a virtuous, — Where is your mother?"

So she tortures the curiosity of her mistress, and gives her an opportunity of showing her good-nature. Bad news must also be told. When you are the messenger of very painful tidings, what is the best method? After much reflection, I must conclude that the shortest and simplest way of communicating the facts is the best. Here nature and philosophy meet; here our last experience confirms our first practice. You have to impart to an affectionate mother the death of her son who was drowned at sea. How shall it be done? Nature teaches; art can add nothing more: "O lady, I have sad news to impart; your son, on such a day, fell from the yard, and was drowned. He has left us." This is the way in which they communicated things of old. So Homer (*Iliad*, xviii. 20, 21), when the tidings is brought to Achilles of Patroclus's death: "Patroclus is down; they are fighting around his naked corpse, and his armor is held by the plume-waving Hector." So the Romans when they lost the battle of Trasimenus. The people assembled in the Forum in the utmost agitation; the Pretor, M. Pomponius, announced: *Pugna, inquit, magna victi sumus*, (*Livy* xxii. sect. 7). A striking instance is found in British history. When General Burgoyne surrendered at Saratoga, the rumor (very indefinite) one morning had reached the house of Commons. Every one was alert to hear, when Lord North arose slowly in his place, and with a solemn voice, said: "General Burgoyne and his whole army are prisoners to the Americans"; and a dead silence of several minutes followed. How different is this from the shuffling and equivocations in

which in modern times we disguise our defeats ! The same method is sanctioned in the Bible. When Eli sat trembling for the ark of God, he heard the dreadful news : " And the messenger answered and said, Israel is fled before the Philistines ; and there hath been a great slaughter among the people ; and thy two sons Hophni and Phinehas are dead ; and the ark of God is taken " (1 Sam. iv. 17). What condensed language ; and every word laded with sorrow. No wonder that the effect followed : " And it came to pass when he made mention of the ark of God, that he fell from off the seat backward, by the side of the gate, and his neck break, and he died ; for he was an old man and heavy ; and he had judged Israel forty years."

Flattery is a form of conversation that sometimes emerges in our social circles. Some suppose that this kind of speech is always unchristian ; that there are no occasions on which the voice of commendation ought to be heard. But I think we have examples of it in the Bible. How does Paul commend the Corinthians before he reproves them : " In everything ye are enriched by us in all utterance and in all knowledge ; so that ye come behind in no gift." The truth is, flattery may be good in its place ; and there is a place for it. It is a very bad kind of wisdom when it employs falsehood for its instrument, and is applied to deceive mankind. But suppose a very discouraged youth preaches in my pulpit : he is very low-spirited, and has the meanest estimate of his powers. May I not tell all the good things that appeared in his discourse ; all that is commendable in his spirit, voice, and manner ? May I not put the best construction on his defects, and reveal to his encouragement those capacities which need only to be exercised to ripen into use ? There is another spot where a little flattery is useful — to temper reproof. We have a beautiful example in Cicero's Oration of Thanks to Caesar for the pardon of Marcellus. This oration has sometimes been quoted as an instance of the servility with which Cicero offered incense to the successful dictator. But surely such critics can never have read the whole speech with suf-

ficient care. How many counsels he suggests. What a future course he points out to the conqueror. What reproof he immingles with his highest praise! What a bed of roses he prepares for his pupil, with none of the thorns extracted; and how delicately does he suggest to him that the only lasting praise of his life is to be merited by deeds yet to be done. Certainly it required some courage to be such a flatterer as Cicero was before such a master; he seems to insinuate that the only lasting laurel was to be won by restoring freedom to Rome. If this praise did not make Caesar a patriot, it probably had some influence in preparing a victim. It was a condiment to his advice which *ought* to have made it more efficacious. There is a beautiful example of monitory complimenting in the closing lines of Dr. Young's first book of Night Thoughts. But we must explain a little. It is well known that Dr. Young and Pope were contemporaries. Pope had then just published his Essay on Man; and it is well known that, amidst all the fine ethics of that splendid essay, there is a wonderful absence of all religious motive. The doctrine of immortality is not once recognized; and Dr. Young, as a Christian divine, must have seen and lamented this significant omission. With these facts before us, may we not say that there is a delicate compliment mixed with a more delicate reproof contained in these splendid lines? After speaking of him who made Mæonides our own, that is, translated Homer, he proceeds,—

“Man too he sung — immortal man I sing.

O had he pressed his theme, pursued the track
Which opens out of darkness into day;
O had he mounted on his wing of fire,
Soared where I sink, and sung immortal man,—
How had he blessed mankind! and rescued me.”

Sir James Mackintosh gives us a fine example in a remark on Southey: “These are the just and the beautiful reflections of a fine writer, who should have transplanted into his writings more of the benevolence of his nature and his life.”

There are three cases, then, when flattery is allowable — at

least commendation : first, to discouraged youth ; secondly, as a seasoning to reproof, to make it more efficacious ; and thirdly, to promote general good-will. We say so many bad things behind each other's backs, that if we did not say some good things to each other's faces, the world would become a den of lions.¹

Even self-praise is tolerated and forgiven when the exquisite manner of displaying it hides its deformity. A fine example is found in the closing lines of Pope's Rape of the Lock :

“ Not all the tresses that fair head can boast
 Shall raise such envy as the lock you lost ;
 For, after all the murders of your eye,
 When, after millions slain, yourself shall die ;
 When those fair suns shall set, as set they must,
 And all those tresses shall be laid in dust, —
 This lock the muse shall consecrate to fame,
 And midst the stars inscribe Belinda's name.”

Not Belinda's name is inscribed amidst the stars, but the name of Belinda's poet, Alexander Pope. Homer, Virgil, and Cervantes have something of this manoeuvre.²

¹ After all, it must be confessed that our Saviour gives us some striking instances of the frustration of expected flattery. Take the example in John xiii. 39. After Peter had said he would lay down his life for his master, no doubt he expected that Jesus would pat him on his back, and commend his zeal and fidelity. But oh what a contrast was the reply ! “ Wilt thou lay down thy life for my sake ? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, the cock shall not crow till thou hast denied me thrice.”

² The instances Pope has copied are these : first, Homer's Iliad, Lib. vi. lines 357, 358, where the poet makes Helen say to Hector :

*Οἶσιν ἐπὶ Ζεὺς θῆκε κακὸν μῦθον, ὃς καὶ ὀπίσσω
 Ἀνθρώποισι πελάμεθ' ἄοιδιμοι ἐσσομένους.*

which Cowper translates :

“ Whom the gods ordain
 Sad themes for song in ages yet to come.”

Virgil in his fifth Eclogue has these lines :

*Tale tuum carmen nobis, divine poëta,
 Quale sopor fessis in gramine, quale per aestum
 Dulcis aquae saliente sitim restinguere rivo.*

And Cervantes makes Cardenio say (see Don Quixote, Jarvis's translation, Vol. ii. Chap. iii.) that Don Quixote's character is so rare that “ I much question

Apophthegms and repartees are sometimes important items in conversation. The wise man tells us that "a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver." How often is it the case that a man throws his whole character into a single speech, as when Erasmus said: *Non amo contentiosam veritatem*; or when Caesar said, he had rather be the first man in a village than the second at Rome. What a beautiful testimony did the late Dr. Pierce of Brookline unconsciously give to his own bland and genial character, when he said that he was never insulted but once in his life, and that was by a drunken man. How completely did King William III. reveal his maxims of government, when, being told there was a man in England that was ready to die a martyr if he had a chance: "I am determined," said the king, "in my reign, he shall never have a chance." Or when Louis XIV. was pouring his victorious troops into Holland, and the Dutch were repeatedly defeated; the patriot king said: One thing we can do, and that is to die in the last ditch. The speech of John Adams when he returned from England, and learned, after the formation of the Constitution, that Washington was nominated for President, indicated both Washington's character and his own. He at first seemed a little disappointed that the warrior had overtopped the statesman; but finally recovering and consoling himself, said: "Well, Washington always knew how to keep his mouth shut." The shrewd farmer in Newbury made something of a characteristic speech. When the news of peace with Great Britain came in 1815, and the whole country was intoxicated with joy, he said, stroking his face: "I am glad of the peace; but I am sorry I sold my oats when I did." Here we learn two things: first, that oats were rising, and second, that the man's patriotism, being weak in its origin, was falling before the price. It is not unusual for a sharp saying to do more in a debate than a long argument (how much did his keen

whether, if one had a mind to dress up a fiction like it, any genius could be found capable of succeeding in it." The more incidental the remark, the more artful is the self-praise.

replies do for the late Dr. Beecher, whether in the private circle or on the platform); and if they concentrate truth they always make it more efficacious.

But I must hasten on to a more important theme — religious conversation. We have a deep conviction that among the possibilities of life and the gifts of God there is an ideal of excellence in religious conversation which has never been realized in fact since the days of Paul and of Christ. It is a treasure yet buried beneath the ground. It is a sea-moss of a more exquisite beauty than the ocean, with all its rollings, has ever yet cast up. Now, as in ancient Greece, the first thing in order to pave the way for improvement in statuary or architecture, was to seize those ideal forms of perfection which the artist was to approach as near as he could, so in religious conversation we must form some conception of what should be arrived at, and what we may hope to approach, if not to attain. It gleams before us like a fixed star, which wants nothing but approximation to blaze into a sun. You may say, to be sure, that religious conversation is a spontaneous emotion of the heart; it is the immediate voice of purified nature. True; but nature always needs direction. The fairest wind will not bring the vessel into port without a man at the helm. Think of Paul — who more spontaneous? And yet he tells the Corinthians: “being crafty, I caught you with guile.” O holy craft! O honest guile! Multiply, O thou God of truth, in all thy children such blessed obliquity! Or, without the raptures of devotion, let us wish and pray that the highest impulse of benevolence may be under the direction of the severest wisdom.

The apostle illustrates the principle in his own case. We know little of his personal conduct, though it is fair to presume that he exemplified his own exhortation: “Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how to answer every man” (Col. iv. 6). But we know how he managed his public addresses. What could be more skilful? The fervor of his zeal never disturbed his knowledge of human nature. His address at Athens (Acts xvii.),

his plea before king Agrippa (Acts xxvi.), his first Epistle to the Corinthians, his Epistle to the Hebrews (if he be the author), are examples of the most exquisite address. Now I allow that some men are good talkers in public who are dumb in the private circle. But I suspect it was not so with Paul. I should like to know what that soldier that was chained to him in his own hired house at Rome said of him to his companions in after times. If he did not become a Christian, I can imagine him saying: "After all, that fanatic was a most remarkable man. I never saw such a prisoner before. Why he would talk even to me; and I had no need to watch him, for I was sure if I loosened the chain he would not run away."

The gaoler of Socrates was astonished at the conversation of his prisoner, and charmed with his serenity. I am *almost* sorry that the sacred writers, in the abundance of their materials, could afford to throw away the testimony of the sentinel who wore the social chain.

Religious conversation must not be insulated from all conversation; it ought to be a silent stream, winding through the meadow of life, flowing according to the inclination of the surface, and always ready to pause, or turn in any profitable direction. A Christian should always be civil, and always ready to improve a companion, without ostentation. In the society of worldly men he needs caution, and the direction of special grace. There is no impression among worldly people more common than that pious people are assuming, self-righteous, dictatorial, and think themselves a great deal better than the mass of mankind; in short they are apt to confound the Christian with the Pharisee; and hence they are watchful lest they should invade their pleasures, and usurp over them an unpermitted authority. The great object of the benevolent conversationist is to abate this suspicion and get around this obstruction. He must hear with patience, rebuke with meekness, be severe with gentleness, be fixed without dogmatism, and be a teacher even when he seems most to be a common disciple. He must try

to get rid of all formality and restraint, and must speak from the fulness of his own heart. We love to see a water-trough overflow. In all places and each society we must desire to carry with us a full head and a warm heart.

One of the most difficult tasks is administering consolation in scenes of deep distress. Nothing can be done at first. Grief must have time to exhaust its violence before the hour of help can come. The silence of a tear is better than the wisdom of any words. There is force in the example of Job's friends (however uncharitable they were afterwards), when they sat down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him ; for they saw that his grief was very great (Job. ii. 13). But the calmer hour will come. As in a heated and laborious day to the most busy laborer who tills the soil, the descending sun brings the twilight, the hour of rest, but not of sleep — the sweet interval when neither noon-day toil nor midnight rest exercises or stupefies us ; so to calamity comes the time of reflection ; then the mind is attentive and the heart is tender ; then is the time to speak ; then the condition of the sufferer gives meaning to the provision of the gospel, and the mind can relish sober conversation ; we must drop the balm of Gilead into the heart, and point to the great physician. The superiority of private talk over the declamation of the pulpit is, that in such a case, it can be better directed. You have only the individual before you ; you understand his case ; he can tell you all his sorrows and all his wants. The preacher must always address a class ; you have the man and the hour ; and it is a glorious, golden opportunity to show your skill, to honor your God, to raise a friend from depression, and perhaps to save a soul from death.

For this office some good men have been eminently prepared by their own experience. Our sorrows are the monitors that prepare us eminently for the work of consolation. They will not allow us to be formal ; they show us the unspeakable value of sincerity and truth.

In religious conversation, one of the most disagreeable

parts is reproof. We are called upon by apostolic authority "to reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with all long-suffering and doctrine." Here the good man has occasion for all his skill; he may tinge the brim of the cup with a circle of honey, but he must not increase the sweetness until it destroys the force of his medicine. Yet there is a best way; there is a medium; there is a compound in which all the best ingredients meet. The fact that we are all sinners is a memento that we should look down on none. When Paul, who was a perfect gentleman, called the high priest "a whited wall," there was a reason for his extraordinary severity. Generally, reproof must be tempered by moderation. It must come at the right time and the right place, or as another apostle says: "And of some have compassion, making a difference; and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire." It is my happiness to know a man who is himself an example of the greatest skill in this line, and who has the highest power of conversation, who on a certain occasion exemplified all I mean. It was in former times, when we rode in stages, and the driver, who was a ferocious looking fellow, was awfully profane in his language, and our friend determined to get outside of the carriage, take a part of the driver's seat, and administer to him a little friendly advice. He began by talking about his horses, which happened to be very fine ones; and our friend was no bad judge of horse-flesh. He inquired where they were raised, and how they were fed, and what was their price, and so proceeding from theme to theme, he won the fellow's esteem and confidence, until finally he touched on the subject, long-suspended and never lost sight of—the unhappy habits to which our occupation might lead us, the evils of the tongue. It was a most complete success. If it were merely fiction, I should say it was the means by which the man was converted to Christianity and never swore any more; and for aught I know it might be so; but I shall relate only what I know. The man received his admonition with apparent gratitude, and confessed the folly and sin of the practice; and our friend was rewarded at once

with the pleasure of a free conversation with a new acquaintance, and the consciousness of lodging in his memory a kind admonition never to be forgotten.

But, after all, there is a general ideal of religious conversation which we must strive to fill up; a common ground where all its excellences meet; a garden blooming with every flower, shaded by every tree, and watered by a confluence of all the crystal streams of social delight. A point

“Where thought meets thought ere from the lips it part,
And each warm wish springs mutual from the heart.”

Such occasions do not wholly depend upon human volition. They turn up; they are gifts of a gracious Providence in a benignant hour. To their success all the compartments of felicity must concur, — intelligence, cultivation, civility, confidence in ourselves and each other, a clear head, a sound heart, a mixture of taste and utility, and a light which, like the coruscations of the northern sky, flames without burning, and flashes, but does not blind us with its excess. One reason why some parties waste their time at cards, or some other game, is their mental barrenness. They really have nothing to discuss; they are incapable of it. An intelligent Christian does not resign these things from self-denial; it is the last thing to think of. He is in pursuit of a nobler gratification. He can say without poetic exaggeration:

“Cards were superfluous here, with all the tricks
That idleness has ever yet contrived
To fill the void of an unfurnished brain;
To palliate dullness, and give time a shove —
Time as he passes us has a dove's wing,
Unsoiled, and swift, and of a silken sound.”

We have thus endeavored to give some of the elements of conversation: first, the small talk, which, like cement in a tower, binds the more solid parts together; secondly, earnest discussion, the most difficult and the most happy attainment of cultivated life; thirdly, the more pleasing art of relating anecdotes, and of putting them in the right place, and, I may add here, not repeating them too often;

fourthly, relating the news and bringing bad tidings ; fifthly, the power of an apophthegm and repartee ; and, lastly, the luxury and improvement of a rightly-adjusted and well-sustained religious conversation. I will not pledge myself that these are *all* the parts of conversation ; but these are specimens.

It is time now to say a word on the question how this divine art is to be acquired. It is unfortunate that at the best time of learning, it is hardest to receive the lesson. Youth is the best time ; but youth is sensitive ; youth is timorous and bashful. How often is it the case that in our first attempts to sustain our parts in the dialogue of society we go home abashed and confounded. We fly to solitude ; we blush in midnight darkness ; we cover our heads beneath the bed-clothes ; we sink into despair, and sadly suppose that our character is ruined forever. And, after all, what have you done ? Have you violated the ten commandments ? No ; but perhaps you were in a party, and stooped suddenly down to pick up a lady's fan, and pitched over at her feet—it may be tore her dress, and set your own nose a bleeding ; or the minister came to see you, and, in sitting closely around the tea-table, in handing him the cream-pitcher with a trembling hand, you turned the contents into his lap, on his silk vest, or his black pantaloons, and the whole table was in confusion ; towels were brought ; women screamed ; chairs were shoved back ; and you stood aghast, thinking, Oh if this earth would only open and swallow me up forever ! But after all, my young friend, be comforted. All those squalls will blow over, and sunshine will come at last. I should not wonder if the very girl at whose feet you fell, and set your nose a bleeding, should marry you at last. Stranger things than that have happened in this strange world ; at any rate, this is the discipline by which we sometimes learn to talk ; and oftentimes the sensibilities from which we suffer so keenly become the very monitors by which we are prompted to excel. Who would give it away for clownish indifference ? Who would barter a blushing modesty for a brazen face ?

In order to learn this celestial art we must have a social disposition and a benevolent heart. We must recollect our Saviour's maxim: "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." We must try to furnish ourselves with abundance. We must have a storehouse, and keep it always full. Think what a wonderful power language is; what a long line of improvement it has gone through; what an implement of pleasure; what an image of reason; what a magical power of expressing all the shades of thought! Recollect the most happy expressions you have ever heard. It has not probably reached its consummation. We must be free also; we must lay aside that skittish prudence, that selfish economy, which leads a man, when going into company, to think only of his own reputation. We must be willing to learn as well as to teach, and mingle our silence with our vocal activity. We must consider the rôle which the great author of the drama of life intended us to fill. Though the general rule may be, not to be austere, yet if that is the shape of your nature, be so to a degree. Act well your part, and know what your part is; and shape the image of your conversation according to the wood or marble of which the original form was composed. You must learn principally from practice, accompanied with attention and observation, and a constant desire to excel.

The last thing suggested was the faults of this social art. They are many; they are constantly occurring; we cannot even sketch them. One of the chief is nothingism, or rather barrenness; a company where there is neither wit nor wisdom; neither imagination nor reason, curiosity nor improvement; one of those parties where nothing was said which you would even wish to remember; where not only nonsense filled the time, but undelightful nonsense. Suppose a person were to point out to me a heap of stones and ask me, Is it handsome? No. Is it homely? No. Is it indifferent? No; it is hardly that. What is it? Why, it is nothing. Now there are a great many conversations that are like a heap of stones. They have just about as much beauty, and just about as

much taste; for if you touch your tongue to one of the stones it is neither bitter nor sweet. Avoid then this dismal barrenness. I need not say avoid scandal, and indeed all private character. Do not spend your time like a bevy of surgeons in a hospital, in dissecting the carcass of a murdered reputation. Do not even carry into company a dismal tone, a discontented accent. Speak at least with a cheerful voice; do not aim to say smart things; do not let your wit, like the pump of an artesian well, draw up its clay-colored water from a depth that no one ever sounded before or ever wishes to sound again. It is a sad misfortune to have the reputation of a wit. In all companies he meets the ghost of his own reputation. It makes the victim a force-pump to throw out the blackest water that ever flowed through society. I have often thought that Sidney Smith must have been an unhappy man. If I remember right Shuter, the famous comic-actor, was once serious, and went to hear Whitefield preach, and frequently conversed with him; and among other things, he alluded to this very thing, — the burden of being obliged in all companies to make them laugh. If a good man ever says a pleasant thing, it must be in company where there are no expectations. Pleasant things rise up in conversation like bubbles on a pure stream, winding beneath the shades, and free in its winding.

It is a great fault to talk too much. "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak," is a rule supported by divine authority. If you will put your hands up, you will find that you have two ears and but one tongue. And if you go into company and see three chairs arranged side by side and you take the middle one, and two ladies are seated beside you, one on your right hand and one on your left, you will find you have an ear for each of them, and you have but one tongue, while they together have two, and it would be very strange if both their tongues could not run, to say the least, as fast as your one. This seems to be an indication of Providence that you should be full as ready to hear as to speak. Do not, then, occupy the time that belongs to others.

Dr. Johnson was not a good *private* converser; he was only tolerable when in the chair of instruction. The same may be said of Coleridge. He never talked; he only preached. Do not go into society to soliloquize; do not be violent; do not attitudinize; do not be surly; do not wound any one's feelings; do not growl like a lion, nor chatter like a monkey. Never play the mimic, certainly not in general company. In a word, maintain your ease without letting down your dignity; be playful, but not vulgar; sweet, but not insipid; copious, but not overflowing; learned without pedantry, and serious without gloom. For the most opposite excellences do not imply by their combination an impossible perfection.

There are few people that touch the summit of excellence in the art of conversation. Just as among the swallows that fly around a steeple, it is only a part of the number that settle on the vane. Various reasons may be suggested for this. Men of copious minds do not always pour out their effusions in a crystal stream. Some are irritable, some sullen; some have lost their tongues over their folios; some are sensitive; some tremblingly alive to their own reputation, and hazard nothing without preparation. But one of the most common causes why a man of ability fails in conversation is a double surface to his heart and a double tone to his tongue. He is like a tree that gives its fading blossoms before its flourishing fruit. He talks from a superficial consciousness, that is, he rattles away without the least effort, pouring out his first thoughts in his first language. Goldsmith was an example. Everybody that had read his books, was disappointed when they heard him talk. It was said of him, "he wrote like an angel, and talked like a parrot." Some could not believe that he was the author of his own "Traveller." It was a wonder that a man could have been so wise and so silly. The phenomenon is easily accounted for: he went into company in his mental undress. His reputation as an able man was secure; he could not talk *that* away. Most of us are kept straight by a regard to our reputation. If we talk like fools we shall be treated like fools. But

Goldsmith had no trouble on that score. He was like an eminent beauty among the ladies, whose conversation is saved by her face. Webster had something like this. He delighted to whistle and talk like a boy. John Adams was another example. I have a strong impression, if, in the days of Queen Elizabeth, you could have overtaken the bard of Avon going up from Stratford to London, and could have heard his conversation, as he rode on his nag with his wife on a pillion behind him, had you not known by a previous introduction, you would never suspect you were in the presence of the immortal Shakespeare. How do you know this? I reply, I do not know. We have few traditions of the peculiarities and personalities of the great bard whose delineations of all other characters are so well known; and yet I never had a conviction so deeply rooted without positive proof as that Shakespeare did not talk up to his reputation. Why? First, the relaxed temper of his mind; secondly, the supreme carelessness of his best effusion; thirdly, the depths of his inner consciousness show that it must have had an outer rind; and, finally, analogy. We find many dramatic writers who have this superficial folly, which covers up and dares not indicate the thoughts it conceals. Sheridan was in some degree an example. How like a fool he acted in his convivial pleasantries. He hardly degenerated when he was drunk.

We have scanned our subject, leaping over many chasms. It is sad to reflect that, with such ideal excellence, the vast majority fall so far short. Only to think what conversation might be and what it is! We are told by Steele that Addison, though by no means a good converser in general company, was delightful in the society of a few of his select friends. He was then like the night-blooming cerues, pouring out his blossoms, which fell as fast as they opened. Tradition has preserved the memory of a sister of this unrivalled man, who was as remarkable for a woman as he was for a man. She had his wit, his virtue, and more extensive powers in conversation. She was twice married, and was the

delight of every circle in which she moved. Her distinguishing excellence was a kind of forbearing wit, which, while it could make the object of her satire supremely ridiculous, was yet governed by good-nature and pointed only to reformation. All this was found in her brother. But what a delightful woman she must have been! carrying wisdom, hilarity, and instruction into every circle she was called to enter. Such heroes have been found; such characters have illustrated the paths of private life. Excellent things have been spoken, which were never printed; leaves have trembled in the air, beautified the branches, mingled with the blossoms, discharged their office, and perished by the next autumnal frost, whose only fame was to rustle for a while on the ground.

It is a counterbalancing consolation to reflect that, if millions of envious, bitter, and idle words have been spoken, and have escaped forever from every record but the dreadful book of God's remembrance, we may call to mind the good things that have perished — the pearls that time has cast away, and no transcriber has collected. Let us think of the conversations of Addison's sister, and all the daughters of wisdom that have followed her example.¹

¹“Of the sisters of Addison two died young; the third, Dorothy, was first married to Dr. Satre, refugee French minister from Montpellier, who became a perbendary in Westminster, and afterwards to Daniel Combes, Esq. Swift has described her “as a kind of wit, and very like her brother.” — Lucy Aikin.