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EXTEMPORANEOUS SOCIABILITY.

BY PRICE COLLIER.

THERE was published in a number of "The Nineteenth Century and After" of many months past a short article by Lord Ribblesdale on "The Art of Conversation." All that was in the article we do not remember. That there was a description therein of the methods of a certain friend of the writer who had attained to some distinction in London drawing-rooms as a conversationalist we remember very well. This gentleman, it seems, prepared himself for "tea-fights and muffin-scrambles," as we have heard them called in his country, and for other social functions of greater importance, where conversation was to be an element, by "cramming," much as does an undergraduate for an examination.

Lord Ribblesdale held this person up to ridicule, laughed at his stores of neatly assorted anecdotes, pooh-poohed at his collection of old magazine articles, and in general scoffed at the notion of preparation for sociability.

To those, however, who are much dined and teaed, and drawn often into the social labyrinths where conversation obtains as the only thread by which escape is possible, the thought of preparation, at least on the part of other people, comes as a very welcome suggestion. When a man goes to another man's house as a guest, he usually prepares himself as to everything except his mind. But he goes oftentimes as a whited sepulchre intellectually, cleansed and shining without, dull, tired, and full of the wickedness and ravening of small worries within. Nor is he in the least conscience-stricken at going thus mentally naked into the presence of his friends. Just why one should not take fifteen minutes or half an hour to collect one's self, and to prepare to drop honey here and salt there, and thus do one's share at feast or function, does not clearly appear.

If men and women were so constituted that the businesses of life could go on interminably, and thus be the staple product of conversation whenever they meet together, it were well enough to trust to "shop" for all one's social needs. But this is not so. Not even in the case of men whose pursuits are intellectual, is one sufficient unto one's self. Ben Jonson writes:

"I am no such pil'd cynique to believe
That beggarie is the only happiness,
Or with a number of those patient fooles
To sing, 'My mind to me a kingdom is.'"

It is not merely agreeable to have change and rest, it is a necessity of human existence; and wherever and whenever man or woman lifts the conversational curtain upon a new scene, or provides a new sketch of life, or leads one beside the still waters or into pastures new and fresh, there is an impetus given to life; and of the innumerable ways in which such inspiration may spend itself for the good of humanity, no one can determine to the full extent. It may not seem an heroic part to play, but wielding a sword is not so efficacious in a case of fainting, as waving a fan. Just to give a little freshness to the social air is often enough to do a very good deed in a very tired world. No one need be ashamed, therefore, we hold, to give himself a little private coaching with this end in view.

Unprepared, the beasts rush at their meals to rend and tear, to chew and swallow; but this is neither proper nor wholesome for men and women. And yet, in some households the gathering together about the table or in the drawing-room is a sullen, silent affair, no one feeling responsibility for cheerfulness; and, in consequence, the clouds and thick darkness of ill-humor settle down without a flash of social lightning, or a gleam of conversational sunshine, to break the dull dripping of the monotonous shower. We remember very distinctly, on the other hand, an establishment where from ten to fifteen members of a large family came together daily at the table, and where it would have been a mark of infamy almost upon each one not to make an effort to add to the general fund of conversation. They were busy people too,—the men busy with affairs, often of large dimensions; the women busy with the cares of a large establishment and the demands of a widely varied social life. They all had cares and disappointments, and some of them had very real sorrows; but, when they met together,

they were prepared to give, each one something, towards the promotion of the common happiness. Where had this one been during the day, what had that one done, what had been seen or read, what was on foot for the morrow, how had the new "hack" behaved on the road, and the like,—trifles light as air, but showing the endeavor of each one to lend to the other, and to meet as men and women, and not as brutes.

Indeed, this is the heart of true culture. "Information is the raw material of culture, sympathy, its subtlest essence." It is always a mark of culture, of the people who are well bred and of wide experience, that they take it for granted that there is in every life much that is hard to bear, much that breeds tears and sighs, and, therefore, they leave such matters on one side, and do loyally what they can to alleviate the wounds and worries of existence, even when they are not made visible or audible. This is the self-control of culture. The beast moans and gulps, and advertises his pains everywhere and whenever he feels hurt by them. That is why one feels that there was something of the "cad" about Byron and Shelley; while Scott, with tremendous stress and strain of physical and mental pain upon him, seems like a rare example of the finely bred gentleman, bearing much, bellowing not at all.

There is opportunity here for many people who are going far afield for some showy task to do. Why not be a knight or a lady of conversation, and take vows of self-control, gentleness, and affability, and organize, if you please, a brotherhood or sisterhood at the other extreme to the Trappists, vowed to perpetual conversational good humor? How different that next to the last dinner would have been had the old lady on our right belonged to such a sisterhood, and had she, therefore, kept her domestic misfortunes to herself, and not attempted to ride through course after course on the hard-trotting old hack of the family skeleton, spurred on by silly self-consciousness! Or that last dinner, where we gasped the last newspaper editorials about men and their manners, and war in Europe, at one another, and paddled home through the rain, with "stupid," in the dust and ashes of unprepared chatter, spelled out on our wrinkled brows!

Surely, no one need be ashamed to gather together his wits, and to make preparation to sit with his fellows for an hour or two, giving them something of interest, and ready to receive intelligently what they have to give in return. Even an old magazine

article—sufficiently, discreetly old—is better than the dregs of the day's business; and a comment on one's reading, or an abbreviated sketch of personal experience, may be a cup of cold water to men and women thirsty and dusty with their own tasks and trials.

It may, perhaps, be answered to a plea for social preparation that this cannot be altogether a matter of duty or even of personal training; that it is one of the finer arts, and so requires an aptitude, a gift in that special direction. But we are not pleading for brilliancy, but for sunshine. It is nature to communicate one's self; it is culture to receive what is communicated as it is given. It is within the possibilities of all men and women, of any social experience whatever, to keep themselves in the humor "to receive what is communicated as it is given," even if they feel themselves incompetent to furnish original matter; and, as for that, originality itself is generally only the enthusiastic discovery of old things. To come to a subject, with gracious willingness to get something out of it for one's self, and others, is often to surprise one's self, and the company also, with discoveries. "*Le choix des pensées est invention;*" and even a psalm-tune may lend itself to the exigencies of the dancer, if the performer's pulse be beating to waltz-time. The preparation of a willing heart is not a matter of exceptional ability, but of sympathetic interest. It is by no means to play a minor rôle to take that part in a general conversation which Mme. Necker assigns to women, when she writes: "*Les femmes tiennent dans la conversation la place de ces légers douvets qu'on introduit dans les caisses de porcelaine: on n'y fait point d'attention mais si on les retire, tout se brise.*" To assent graciously is more persuasive than to proclaim lustily, and often the passive part in a conversation has an influence as powerful as the active part of talking.

Indeed, nothing is more fatal to the general enjoyment of any sort of sociability than to have present an irresponsible soloist. "Ah, yes," said Sydney Smith, when some one was speaking of the sesquipedalian sententiousness, and the haughty assumption of leadership in the conversation, of Macaulay, "it is true that he overflows with wit and wisdom, and then he stands in the slops." This kind of preparation is neither needed nor wanted.

There is, however, a difference between the purely extemporaneous sociability of which we complain, and the peacock who has come prepared to spread his conversational tail as a canopy

over the whole party, and who sulks and is unhappy if his variegated display is not accepted as the sole subject of comment and admiration. Conversation is not preaching. Not infrequently, however, at a dinner or social affair of whatever kind where no "set piece" is provided for the amusement of the guests, one finds, especially among public men, those not content with what may properly be termed "conversation"; their eyes wander about, looking for an audience or for a "waiting congregation," as though to talk to one's immediate neighbors were a waste of ammunition. They watch for an opportunity to get the attention of all at the table or in the drawing-room before they consent to give their comment, or tale, or criticism. These dinner-table bullies are almost the nuisance *par excellence* of social life, and they are largely at fault in making it impossible to have a general contribution to the evening's entertainment. And when your dinner-table bully is also an anecdotalist, and a mountebank, then is one doomed to feel that he is suffering in that chamber of purgatory which is, we believe, the very next one to that where one is condemned to sit and listen to amateur elocution for charity's sake, which chamber is always pervaded by an odor of sulphur, so near is it to the imagination's infernal regions.

With the anecdotalist, one tale leads to another; and ere long no allusion, no plain statement of fact, no distressing private affliction, no public calamity, but what goes into this professional social prestidigitator's hat, to come out with the introduction, "Oh, that reminds me!" followed by an anecdote. We smile amiably; we laugh perhaps (we so often do that in the world, when we are very sad); we perjure ourselves with protestations that "we have never heard it before;" and, after a few stories, we wish that we could pay a little something and go home.

It is bad enough that the speaking at public dinners should consist so largely of the telling of irrelevant, inconsequent stories, strung one upon another without rhyme or reason; reminding one, by their entire lack of logical sequence, of the *burdens* in certain of the pre-Raphaelite poetry. But in private houses there is no explanation this side of lack of breeding, why a man should domineer by mere fecundity of memory and facility of tongue, and be allowed to spread the spoils of his anecdotal body-snatching before an imprisoned company. It is for the clown to excite the company into guffaws; it is for the professional, paid entertainer

to make his host's guests laugh; but it remains for the gentleman "to receive what is communicated as it is given," and to employ his talents for the graceful expression, not only of the unusual, but, if need be, of the commonplace.

It has been said by Goethe that "no one would talk much in society if he knew how often he misunderstood others." And, surely, if this be his disappointed conclusion, there can be little doubt of the value of prepared listening, and sympathetic attention. Perhaps the most distinctive mark of extemporaneous sociability is the tendency to be ill at ease when one is not one's self speaking *ex cathedrâ* and compelling a certain focusing of attention upon one's self. This is the great joy of the anecdotalist; it is also the personal pleasure of the specialist—the specialist, he who comes unprepared, except to exploit his technical wisdom. It may be politics, it may be Kamchatkan geography, it may be horseflesh; but, in any case, it must be of very limited interest to the majority. If the anecdotalist be the social bully, the specialist is the social butcher. He hacks and cuts his way through the disinclination and weariness of the company. A few large and vaguely understood technical words play the part of the German allies at the social Waterloo, and St. Helena seems to the others not so bad if one could be transported thither at once.

At first sight, abundance of talk may seem like preparation; but this is not true. Preparation gives one self-control, and keeps a man in mind of the fact that, though silence is *l'esprit* of the silly, it is also one of the virtues of the wise. Conversation in the small companies of social life is first to express one's self, but its hardly less important office is to tempt others to do the same; and this is accomplished neither, on the one hand, by a profusion of personal proclamations, nor, on the other hand, by supine acquiescence. It is perhaps more often true of women than of men, that they conceive affability to be concession. At any rate, it is not unusual to find a hostess busying herself with attempts to agree with all that is said, with the idea that she is thereby doing homage to the effeminate categorical imperative of etiquette, when in reality nothing becomes more quickly tiresome than incessant affirmatives, no matter how pleasantly they be modulated. Nor can one avoid one of two conclusions when one's talk is thus negligently agreed to: either the speaker is confining himself entirely to uncontradictable platitudes, or the listener has no mind

of her own; and in either case silence were golden. In this connection, it is well to recall the really brilliant epigram of the Abbé de Saint-Réal, that "*On s'ennuie presque toujours avec ceux que l'on ennue.*" For not even a lover can fail to be bored at last by the constant lassitude of assent expressing itself in twin sentiments to his own. "Coquetting with an echo," Carlyle called it. For though it may make a man feel mentally masterful at first, it makes him feel mentally maudlin at last; and, as the Abbé says, to be bored one's self is a sure sign that one's companion is also weary.

One turns about, after enumerating the faults of extemporaneous sociability, to find a social life where men and women meet together with comfort and with refreshment to themselves.

It is impossible in this connection not to recall the golden days of the French salons. One sees the dainty abbés gliding about clad in soutane and softly shod, to whom the world owed more for bodies than heaven for souls; the *petits maîtres*, whose every speech was an epigram; the *marquises*,

" Quick at verbal point and parry,
Clever, doubtless, but to marry,
No, Marquise!"

Those were the days of the apotheosis of talk; but days when culture was criticism, and when literary creation had the dry rot. History is settled forever in the twinkling of a fan; theology is rounded to an epigram; philosophy is a pretty firework with a cascade of sparks. Surely this is no proper model, nor is it even a possible social life in these democratic days, when the real aristocrat is, as he should be, the best democrat. It is hollow and artificial; it is prepared sociability gone mad. Life and reality are out of the race. Everything is so dry and flimsy that a spark sets fire to it all, and there follows the conflagration of the revolution. We would not have this if we could; still less would we have again the kind of men and women that make a revolution, if not altogether excusable, at least not to be altogether lamented now that it is irrevocable.

But there is no need to go to seek for models of a pleasant social life. It could only, at best, make the student self-conscious, and that of itself would render him useless for our purpose. It is quite sufficient to remember, in order to take one's proper part, that, at least in this department of sociology, the good of the

greatest number is that which is most to be desired. The meeting together is not a permanent arrangement, nor has it a didactic purpose; and, therefore, a declaration of principles, or a prolonged and stubborn defence of those prejudices that we often mistake for our principles, is not incumbent upon even the youngest of us. The state, the church, the home, must be founded upon certain prescribed rules and certain fixed principles; but, when we meet together, coming from different states, different churches, and different homes, we must needs efface ourselves as citizens from a province, and enroll ourselves as charitably cosmopolitan. We come together, not to combat, but to share, one another's interests; not to promulgate our own views, but to tempt others to the expression of theirs; not as erinaceous propagandists, but as gentle lovers of our kind. It is because simplicity of life is so difficult that simplicity of speech and simplicity of manners are so hard to obtain. The bully in matters ecclesiastical, the specialist in affairs political, the tyrant in the home, leaves each his coign of vantage to find himself awkward, if he be not permitted to play the same *rôle* at the dinner or in the drawing-room.

Back behind manners and speech and the formal courtesies of great or small companies is the life of the man; and "neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision, but a new creature." Charity must begin at home, or it will not continue into the company of one's fellows. Men and women can improvise, at a pinch, passable manners and polite speech; but, where the social exigency requires that they be together for three or four hours, the bucket must be sent down into the conversational well a good many times, and the contents are sure to reveal whether or no the water of life be sweet and cool.

*"Aevo rarissima nostro
Simplicitas!"*

sighs Ovid of his own time, and we can but repeat it now. If men prinked and prated, and women were self-conscious then, what must be said of men and women to-day? What must be said of a social life of which the very speech itself, the very instrument of social intercourse, is an affected misplacing of broad "a's" in effeminate imitation of a people the damp blanket of whose climate has made gutturalness a laryngeal necessity? Or what can be said of a social life of which New York's Columbus of etiquette was wont

to say that its dimensions are not a question of breeding, of intellectual training, or of wealth, but of multiples of ten? Surely one may be permitted to plead against extemporaneous sociability here, if these slanderous insinuations be true. Surely he who is interested to make life easier, and to make men and women happier, and who holds that

“No profit grows where is no pleasure ta'en,”

must see the value of giving attention to the mere mechanism, even, of our meeting together, so that we may escape the danger of permitting our social life to be a mere herding together on the one hand, or a series of Dresden china tableaux on the other.

There need be no fear that thus to prepare to go into the company of one's fellows will defeat its own end. It is the athlete who is thoroughly trained who most enjoys the scamper across country. It is the workman who is best prepared by long years of apprenticeship who—pen, or brush, or chisel in hand—goes at his task with keenest relish. And if sociability be dignified to the extent of giving it a place among the arts, even then there is more than ever reason why men should prepare themselves, if they would enjoy it to the utmost, and make others enjoy it as well.

It might be well enough as a bit of literary burlesque to suggest certain mechanical contrivances by means of which one may appear to be prepared for social intercourse; but no serious student of mankind would thus indulge himself. One man's meat is another man's poison; one woman's charm is another woman's affectation; and it is therefore impossible to do more than to describe the need, and then leave the remedy to the ingenuity and the good feeling of each one. All painters need not paint alike; but all must needs be honest. All writers need not provide themselves with a given style; but all must have distinct purposes and mental rectitude. So all men and women will find different methods best adapted to them, and will by natural endowments select to play different tunes upon the social instrument; but all will find honesty and charity and simplicity absolutely essential. We are never so grossly mistaken as when we think we know what others think of us; and the less attention we give to that kind of curiosity, and the more we strive to our own selves to be true, the less shall we need to fear either weariness for ourselves or *ennui* for others when we meet.

PRICE COLLIER.