

CONVERSATION ON CONVERSATION.

"For every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment."

"A very solemn sermon," said Miss B., shaking her head impressively, as she sat down to table on Sunday noon; then giving a deep sigh, she added, "I am afraid that if an account is to be rendered for all our idle words, some people will have a great deal to answer for."

"Why, Cousin Anna," replied a sprightly young lady opposite, "what do you mean by idle words?"

"All words that have not a strictly useful tendency, Helen," replied Miss B.

"I don't know what is to become of me, then," answered Helen, "for I never can think of any thing useful to say. I sit and try sometimes, but it always stops my talking. I don't think any thing in the world is so doleful as a set of persons sitting round, all trying to say something useful, like a parcel of old clocks ticking at each other. I think one might as well take the vow of entire silence, like the monks of La Trappe."

"It is probable," said Miss B., "that a greater part of our ordinary

conversation had better be dispensed with. 'In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin.' For my own part, my conscience often reproaches me with the sins of my tongue."

"I'm sure you don't sin much that way, I must say," said Helen; "but, cousin, I really think it is a freezing business sitting still and reflecting all the time when friends are together; and after all I can't bring myself to feel as if it were wrong to talk and chatter away a good part of the time, just for the sake of talking. For instance, if a friend comes in of a morning to make a call, I talk about the weather, my roses, my Canary birds, or any thing that comes uppermost."

"And about lace, and bonnet patterns, and the last fashions," added Miss B., sarcastically.

"Well, supposing we do; where's the harm?"

"Where's the good?" said Miss B.

"The good! why, it passes time agreeably, and makes us feel kindly towards each other."

"I think, Helen," said Miss B., "if you had a higher view of Christian responsibility, you would not be satisfied with merely passing time agreeably, or exciting agreeable feelings in others. Does not the very text we are speaking of show that we have an account to give in the day

of judgment for all this trifling, useless conversation?"

"I don't know what that text does mean," replied Helen, looking seriously; "but if it means as you say, I think it is a very hard, strait rule."

"Well," replied Miss B., "is not duty always hard and strait? 'Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way,' you know."

Helen sighed.

"What do you think of this, Uncle C.?" she said, after some pause. The uncle of the two young ladies had been listening thus far in silence.

"I think," he replied, "that before people begin to discuss, they should be quite sure as to what they are talking about; and I am not exactly clear in this case. You say, Anna," said he, turning to Miss B., "that all conversation is idle which has not a directly useful tendency. Now, what do you mean by that? Are we never to say any thing that has not for its direct and specific object to benefit others or ourselves?"

"Yes," replied Miss B., "I suppose not."

"Well, then, when I say, 'Good morning, sir; 'tis a pleasant day,' I have no such object. Are these, then, idle words?"

"Why, no, not exactly," replied Miss B.; "in some cases it is necessary to say something, so as not to appear rude."

"Very well," replied her uncle. "You admit, then, that some things, which are not instructive in themselves considered, are to be said to keep up the intercourse of society."

"Certainly; some things," said Miss B.

"Well, now, in the case mentioned by Helen, when two or three people with whom you are in different degrees of intimacy call upon you, I think she is perfectly right, as she said, in talking of roses, and Canary birds, and even of bonnet patterns, and lace, or any thing of the kind, for the sake of making conversation. It amounts to the same thing as 'good morning,' and 'good evening,' and the other courtesies of society. This sort of small talk has nothing instructive in it, and yet it may be useful in its place. It makes people comfortable and easy, promotes kind and social feelings; and making people comfortable by any innocent means is certainly not a thing to be despised."

"But is there not great danger of becoming light and trifling if one allows this?" said Miss B., doubtfully.

"To be sure; there is always danger of running every innocent thing to excess. One might eat to excess, or drink to excess; yet eating and drinking are both useful in their way. Now, our lively young friend

Helen, here, might perhaps be in some temptation of this sort; but as for you, Anna, I think you in more danger of another extreme."

"And what is that?"

"Of overstraining your mind by endeavoring to keep up a constant, fixed state of seriousness and solemnity, and not allowing yourself the relaxation necessary to preserve its healthy tone. In order to be healthy, every mind must have variety and amusement; and if you would sit down at least one hour a day, and join your friends in some amusing conversation, and indulge in a good laugh, I think, my dear, that you would not only be a happier person, but a better Christian."

"My dear uncle," said Miss B., "this is the very thing that I have been most on my guard against; I can never tell stories, or laugh and joke, without feeling condemned for it afterwards."

"But, my dear, you must do the thing in the testimony of a good conscience before you can do it to any purpose. You must make up your mind that cheerful and entertaining conversation--conversation whose first object is to amuse--is useful conversation in its place, and then your conscience will not be injured by joining in it."

"But what good does it do, uncle?"

"Do you not often complain of coldness and deadness in your religious

feelings? of lifelessness and want of interest?"

"Yes, uncle."

"Well, this coldness and lifelessness is the result of forcing your mind to one set of thoughts and feelings. You become worn out--your feelings exhausted--deadness and depression ensues. Now, turn your mind off from these subjects--divert it by a cheerful and animated conversation, and you will find, after a while, that it will return to them with new life and energy."

"But are not foolish talking and jesting expressly forbidden?"

"That text, if you will look at the connections, does not forbid jesting in the abstract; but jesting on immodest subjects--which are often designated in the New Testament by the phraseology there employed. I should give the sense of it--neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor indelicate jests. The kind of sprightly and amusing conversation to which I referred, I should not denominate foolish, by any means, at proper times and places."

"Yet people often speak of gayety as inconsistent in Christians--even worldly people," said Miss B.

"Yes, because, in the first place, they often have wrong ideas as to what Christianity requires in this respect, and suppose Christians to be

violating their own principles in indulging in it. In the second place, there are some, especially among young people, who never talk in any other way--with whom this kind of conversation is not an amusement, but a habit--giving the impression that they never think seriously at all. But I think, that if persons are really possessed by the tender, affectionate, benevolent spirit of Christianity--if they regulate their temper and their tongue by it, and in all their actions show an evident effort to conform to its precepts, they will not do harm by occasionally indulging in sprightly and amusing conversation--they will not make the impression that they are not sincerely Christians."

"Besides," said Helen, "are not people sometimes repelled from religion by a want of cheerfulness in its professors?"

"Certainly," replied her uncle, "and the difference is just this: if a person is habitually trifling and thoughtless, it is thought that they have no religion; if they are ascetic and gloomy, it is attributed to their religion; and you know what Miss E. Smith says--that 'to be good and disagreeable is high treason against virtue.' The more sincerely and earnestly religious a person is, the more important it is that they should be agreeable."

"But, uncle," said Helen, "what does that text mean that we began with? What are idle words?"

"My dear, if you will turn to the place where the passage is (Matt.

xii.) and read the whole page, you will see the meaning of it. Christ was not reproofing any body for trifling conversation at the time; but for a very serious slander. The Pharisees, in their bitterness, accused him of being in league with evil spirits. It seems, by what follows, that this was a charge which involved an unpardonable sin. They were not, indeed, conscious of its full guilt--they said it merely from the impulse of excited and envious feeling--but he warns them that in the day of judgment, God will hold them accountable for the full consequences of all such language, however little they may have thought of it at the time of uttering it. The sense of the passage I take to be, 'God will hold you responsible in the day of judgment for the consequences of all you have said in your most idle and thoughtless moments.'

"For example," said Helen, "if one makes unguarded and unfounded assertions about the Bible, which excite doubt and prejudice."

"There are many instances," said her uncle, "that are quite in point. Suppose in conversation, either under the influence of envy or ill will, or merely from love of talking, you make remarks and statements about another person which may be true or may not,--you do not stop to inquire,--your unguarded words set reports in motion, and unhappiness, and hard feeling, and loss of character are the result. You spoke idly, it is true, but nevertheless you are held responsible by God for all the consequences of your words. So professors of religion often make unguarded remarks about each other, which lead observers to doubt the

truth of all religion; and they are responsible for every such doubt they excite. Parents and guardians often allow themselves to speak of the faults and weaknesses of their ministers in the presence of children and younger people--they do it thoughtlessly--but in so doing they destroy an influence which might otherwise have saved the souls of their children; they are responsible for it. People of cultivated minds and fastidious taste often allow themselves to come home from church, and criticize a sermon, and unfold all its weak points in the presence of others on whom it may have made a very serious impression. While the critic is holding up the bad arrangement, and setting in a ludicrous point of view the lame figures, perhaps the servant behind his chair, who was almost persuaded to be a Christian by that very discourse, gives up his purposes, in losing his respect for the sermon; this was thoughtless--but the evil is done, and the man who did it is responsible for it."

"I think," said Helen, "that a great deal of evil is done to children in this way, by our not thinking of what we are saying."

"It seems to me," said Miss B., "that this view of the subject will reduce us to silence almost as much as the other. How is one ever to estimate the consequences of their words, people are affected in so many different ways by the same thing?"

"I suppose," said her uncle, "we are only responsible for such results as by carefulness and reflection we might have foreseen. It is not for

ill-judged words, but for idle words, that we are to be judged--words uttered without any consideration at all, and producing bad results. If a person really anxious to do right misjudges as to the probable effect of what he is about to say on others, it is quite another thing."

"But, uncle, will not such carefulness destroy all freedom in conversation?" said Helen.

"If you are talking with a beloved friend, Helen, do you not use an instinctive care to avoid all that might pain that friend?"

"Certainly."

"And do you find this effort a restraint on your enjoyment?"

"Certainly not."

"And you, from your own feelings, avoid what is indelicate and impure in conversation, and yet feel it no restraint?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I suppose the object of Christian effort should be so to realize the character of our Savior, and conform our tastes and sympathies to his, that we shall instinctively avoid all in our conversation that would be displeasing to him. A person habitually indulging jealous,

angry, or revengeful feeling--a person habitually worldly in his spirit--a person allowing himself in sceptical and unsettled habits of thought, cannot talk without doing harm. This is our Savior's account of the matter in the verses immediately before the passage we were speaking of--'How can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth evil things.' The highest flow of animal spirits would never hurry a pure-minded person to say any thing indelicate or gross; and in the same manner, if a person is habitually Christian in all his habits of thought and feeling, he will be able without irksome watchfulness to avoid what may be injurious even in the most unrestrained conversation."