

## OF CONVERSATION

### AN APOLOGY

I must admit that in conversation I am not a brilliant success. Partly, indeed, that may be owing to the assiduity with which my aunt suppressed my early essays in the art: "Children," she said, "should be seen but not heard," and incontinently rapped my knuckles. To a larger degree, however, I regard it as intrinsic. This tendency to silence, to go out of the rattle and dazzle of the conversation into a quiet apart, is largely, I hold, the consequence of a certain elevation and breadth and tenderness of mind; I am no blowfly to buzz my way through the universe, no rattle that I should be expected to delight my fellow-creatures by the noises I produce. I go about to this social function and that, deporting myself gravely and decently in silence, taking, if possible, a back seat; and, in consequence of that, people who do not understand me have been heard to describe me as a "stick," as "shy," and by an abundance of the like unflattering terms. So that I am bound almost in self-justification to set down my reasons for this temperance of mine in conversation.

Speech, no doubt, is a valuable gift, but at the same time it is a gift that may be abused. What is regarded as polite conversation is, I hold, such an abuse. Alcohol, opium, tea, are all very excellent things in their way; but imagine continuous alcohol, an incessant opium, or to

receive, ocean-like, a perennially flowing river of tea! That is my objection to this conversation: its continuousness. You have to keep on. You find three or four people gathered together, and instead of being restful and recreative, sitting in comfortable attitudes and at peace with themselves and each other, and now and again, perhaps three or four times in an hour, making a worthy and memorable remark, they are all haggard and intent upon keeping this fetish flow agoing. A fortuitous score of cows in a field are a thousand times happier than a score of people deliberately assembled for the purposes of happiness. These conversationalists say the most shallow and needless of things, impart aimless information, simulate interest they do not feel, and generally impugn their claim to be considered reasonable creatures. Why, when people assemble without hostile intentions, it should be so imperative to keep the trickling rill of talk running, I find it impossible to imagine. It is a vestige of the old barbaric times, when men murdered at sight for a mere whim; when it was good form to take off your sword in the antechamber, and give your friend your dagger-hand, to show him it was no business visit. Similarly, you keep up this babblement to show your mind has no sinister concentration, not necessarily because you have anything to say, but as a guarantee of good faith. You have to make a noise all the time, like the little boy who was left in the room with the plums. It is the only possible explanation.

To a logical mind there is something very distressing in this social law of gabble. Out of regard for Mrs. A, let us say, I attend some festival she has inaugurated. There I meet for the first time a young person of

pleasant exterior, and I am placed in her company to deliver her at a dinner-table, or dance her about, or keep her out of harm's way, in a cosy nook. She has also never seen me before, and probably does not want particularly to see me now. However, I find her nice to look at, and she has taken great pains to make herself nice to look at, and why we cannot pass the evening, I looking at her and she being looked at, I cannot imagine. But no; we must talk. Now, possibly there are topics she knows about and I do not--it is unlikely, but suppose so; on these topics she requires no information. Again, I know about other topics things unknown to her, and it seems a mean and priggish thing to broach these, since they put her at a disadvantage. Thirdly, comes a last group of subjects upon which we are equally informed, and upon which, therefore, neither of us is justified in telling things to the other. This classification of topics seems to me exhaustive.

These considerations, I think, apply to all conversations. In every conversation, every departure must either be a presumption when you talk into your antagonist's special things, a pedantry when you fall back upon your own, or a platitude when you tell each other things you both know. I don't see any other line a conversation can take. The reason why one has to keep up the stream of talk is possibly, as I have already suggested, to manifest goodwill. And in so many cases this could be expressed so much better by a glance, a deferential carriage, possibly in some cases a gentle pressure of the hand, or a quiet persistent smile. And suppose there is some loophole in my reasoning--though I cannot see it--and that possible topics exist, how superficial and

unexact is the best conversation to a second-rate book!

Even with two people you see the objection, but when three or four are gathered together the case is infinitely worse to a man of delicate perceptions. Let us suppose--I do not grant it--that there is a possible sequence of things to say to the person A that really harmonise with A and yourself. Grant also that there is a similar sequence between yourself and B. Now, imagine yourself and A and B at the corners of an equilateral triangle set down to talk to each other. The kind of talk that A appreciates is a discord with B, and similarly B's sequence is impossible in the hearing of A. As a matter of fact, a real conversation of three people is the most impossible thing in the world. In real life one of the three always drops out and becomes a mere audience, or a mere partisan. In real life you and A talk, and B pretends to be taking a share by interjecting interruptions, or one of the three talks a monologue. And the more subtle your sympathy and the greater your restraint from self-assertion, the more incredible triple and quadruple conversation becomes.

I have observed that there is even nowadays a certain advance towards my views in this matter. Men may not pick out antagonists, and argue to the general audience as once they did: there is a tacit taboo of controversy, neither may you talk your "shop," nor invite your antagonist to talk his. There is also a growing feeling against extensive quotations or paraphrases from the newspapers. Again, personalities, scandal, are, at least in theory, excluded. This narrows

the scope down to the "last new book," "the last new play," "impressions de voyage," and even here it is felt that any very ironical or satirical remarks, anything unusual, in fact, may disconcert your adversary. You ask: Have you read the *Wheels of Chance*? The answer is "Yes." "Do you like it?" "A little vulgar, I thought." And so forth. Most of this is stereo. It is akin to responses in church, a prescription, a formula. And, following out this line of thought, I have had a vision of the twentieth century dinner. At a distance it is very like the nineteenth century type; the same bright light, the same pleasant deglutition, the same hum of conversation; but, approaching, you discover each diner has a little drum-shaped body under his chin--his phonograph. So he dines and babbles at his ease. In the smoking-room he substitutes his anecdote record. I imagine, too, the suburban hostess meeting the new maiden: "I hope, dear, you have brought a lot of conversation," just as now she asks for the music. For my own part, I must confess I find this dinner conversation particularly a bother. If I could eat with my eye it would be different.

I lose a lot of friends through this conversational difficulty. They think it is my dulness or my temper, when really it is only my refined mind, my subtlety of consideration. It seems to me that when I go to see a man, I go to see him--to enjoy his presence. If he is my friend, the sight of him healthy and happy is enough for me. I don't want him to keep his vocal cords, and I don't want to keep my own vocal cords, in incessant vibration all the time I am in his company. If I go to see a man, it distracts me to have to talk and it distracts me to hear him

talking. I can't imagine why one should not go and sit about in people's rooms, without bothering them and without their bothering you to say all these stereotyped things. Quietly go in, sit down, look at your man until you have seen him enough, and then go. Why not?

Let me once more insist that this keeping up a conversation is a sign of insecurity, of want of confidence. All those who have had real friends know that when the friendship is assured the gabble ceases. You are not at the heart of your friend, if either of you cannot go off comfortably to sleep in the other's presence. Speech was given us to make known our needs, and for imprecation, expostulation, and entreaty. This pitiful necessity we are under, upon social occasions, to say something--however inconsequent--is, I am assured, the very degradation of speech.