

their country, into discredit, and in many cases no chance comes about for them to redeem themselves by any piece of inspired statesmanship in a great crisis. They come and go, leaving no impression and no memory behind them beyond idle gossip as to their ignorance or gaucheries.

It would be an interesting experience for the President of the United States and his Secretary of State to call together the foreign managers of the great export businesses of the United States, and ask their frank opinion of the American Department of State and its policies in the matter of appointments and in the so-called advancement of American foreign trade. It would be an equally interesting experience to have a score or more of those astute and trained diplomats who year in and year out conduct the foreign affairs of other great nations, give their real opinion of the effectiveness of America's representation at the present time. To de-

scribe modern American diplomacy as that of the "dollar," is a misnomer, for there is no profit therein either from the material or the idealistic point of view.

As suggested before, there is only the hope that the evil effects of the present system will become so manifest that the search-light of American public opinion will be turned full upon the State Department and its organization, for there is no question as to what must then happen, especially in these days when the nation is endeavoring to set its house in order. There is opportunity in Washington for a great and fearless Secretary of State, a man of executive force, wide mental horizons, and a big consciousness of international affairs. It must be realized, however, that even such a Secretary of State would be helpless without the support of a man in the White House who saw eye to eye with him in all things, and had the courage of his vision.



## WHAT SHALL WE TALK ABOUT?

BY AGNES REPPLIER

Author of "The Fireside Sphinx," etc.

THE first essential of good talk is a topic. Other things are needed, but this is the base upon which the fair fabric of speech is deftly reared. The topic antedated conversation, and stands responsible for it. "In modern life," says Laurence Housman, "the gift of speech too often means the power of saying nothing, and of saying it nicely; but what forced primeval man into becoming a speaking animal was rather the desire to say something, first anyhow, and then somehow." If our early ancestors did not feel this desire, or, rather, this pressing need of making themselves understood, they were silent. There is something rather restful in the thought.

But the power of saying nothing nicely, although an ever-useful accomplishment, is not precisely what we mean when we

speak of good talk. We have in mind, first, a subject that will support conversation, and, second, conversation that will clarify the subject. It was all very well for Montaigne to say that a fly was as fair a topic as *he* required. Nobody in Montaigne's time knew anything about flies; therefore digression was swift and facile. Nowadays it is sheer madness to mention a fly's name. It brings down upon our devoted heads the history of sanitation, with details we would fain escape. We might as well talk about tuberculosis or dentistry or our digestions. As a matter of fact, we do talk a good deal about our digestions. It is a strong and silent man who can forbear telling his diet to a sympathetic listener. It is a disciplined woman of the world who never

says why she is not eating grape-fruit at a luncheon. We fancy sometimes that these revelations are the unseemly outgrowth of modern conditions, that all of us have learned just enough about our gastric juices to rob us of reserve. We say that our grandmothers, those dim and deified grandmothers whose conversation has been comfortably forgotten, never referred to food that had been consumed. Its subsequent history was shrouded in obscurity. But when our great-grandmothers were babies, Horace Walpole visited Paris and found the Parisians as absorbed in their digestions as ever we are to-day. "There is not a man or woman here," he wrote, "who does not talk gruel and anatomy with equal fluency and ignorance."

#### FIT THE CONVERSATION TO THE FIELD OF THE GUESTS

A TOPIC arbitrarily chosen and carefully nursed will produce good talk, but not the best. It is a wise host who guides the conversation into fields where his distinguished guest is most at home, because only on these terms will the distinguished guest shine as a luminary should. To invite an actor and discuss choral services, to invite a bishop and discuss the Drama League, are wasted opportunities. Sir Robert Walpole used to say he always talked indecencies at his own table, because in them *all* his guests could join. This was considerate, but monotonous. Times and tastes have changed in the last two hundred years. As a matter of fact, they changed so swiftly that even Horace Walpole would have none of his father's jests. He hated them more stoutly than he hated gruel and anatomy.

It was one of Mme. de Staël's stupidities—and it is wonderful how stupid a clever and self-absorbed woman can be—that she never considered her company. Without meaning to embarrass or to offend, she would talk about things eminently disagreeable to her listeners, and she was not sensitive enough to observe the discomfort she caused. Therefore her contemporaries disliked her cordially. Dr. Johnson roundly accused Topham Beauclerk, whom he loved, of sinning deliberately in this regard. "You never open your mouth but with the intention of giving pain," he said with sorrowful sternness; "and you

have often given me pain, not from the power of what you said, but from seeing your intention." Jerome Cardan, in one of the most candid autobiographies ever penned, admitted that he liked to inflict this species of annoyance. "It is a singular defect in my character," he wrote blandly, "that I will talk of nothing with so much complacency as that which I know to be displeasing to my hearers." Many have sinned in the same measure since the Milanese physician wrote his "*Dè Vita Propria*," but few have made confession of their sin.

#### THE BEST TALK THE RESULT OF HAPPY ACCIDENT

IF good talk is often an artificial product, the best has always been, and always will be, a matter of happy accident—the right men snatching the right topic at the right hour, and under favoring conditions. One of these conditions is elasticity of duration. At the coffee-house or the tavern, Dr. Johnson and his friends talked their fill. The night lay before them, unfettered by restrictions. They were free men, who went home when they pleased, not because the hands of the clock pointed to ten or twelve or two. But when we dine with friends, we are under a solemn obligation to go away at the proper time, whether we want to or not. We may not leave earlier because we are bored, nor stay later because we are interested. Therefore, when the dinner has been eaten, and we are free to talk to whom we will, we find ourselves choosing migratory themes, subjects devoid of significance, which can be interrupted without injury and dropped without concern.

When, by some rare chance, there is given us, by day or night, an hour of keen and animated talk, we do well to hold on to it and enjoy it without reckoning the cost. To lose such an hour for the sake of keeping an appointment or going to bed is sheer stupidity. We have often been to bed, and we shall have many more appointments before we come to die; but who can restore to us the opportunity we have lost? It is claimed that the ever-widening current of women's interests and activities gives them plenty to talk about, and so it does; but it also takes from them the leisure for conversation. They

all have pressing engagements, a word utterly destructive of social intercourse, and they scuttle away to keep them, after a fidgety half-hour, totally devoid of serenity and of concentration. Which of them can say

"With thee conversing, I forget all time"?

Yet if they have never said it, or at least thought it, they never have conversed. It is the stolen hour, no less than the stolen fruit, which is forever sweet.

I was once visiting a friend when upon us descended, suitcase in hand, a college professor who differs from most college professors inasmuch as he can talk well upon subjects that are not his specialty. He was going to a big public dinner, and he had half an hour to spare before dressing for it. The conversation began. My friend's dinner was announced. The professor said he had plenty of time to take a plate of soup with us. Then he would go up-stairs and dress. The conversation flowed on. The soup was eaten, the dinner was served. The professor said he would dine with us, dress immediately after, and reach his own function in time for the toasts, which was all that was necessary. The conversation deepened in interest. Opposing opinions met in battle array, and were followed by sweet periods of truce. The dinner was over, the coffee appeared. The professor said he would let the other toasts go by, and would leave us in time to give his own. The conversation grew every moment keener, more rapid, more persuasive. The hands of the clock moved slowly and relentlessly. At half-past eleven the professor rose, seized his unopened suitcase, and fled for the midnight train to his suburban home. He had added one more broken engagement to his long list of derelictions. He had gained and given one evening worth the having, and the memory of it will linger while we live.

#### THE FATAL MONOLOGUE

CRABB ROBINSON, who heard much good talk, but who confessed that he himself possessed nothing beyond vivacity and an even temper; Moore, who excelled in anecdote and lively gossip; and Boswell, whose only talent lay in drawing out and recording the words of wiser men, have

all told us a great deal about the inexhaustible conversations of their day. We know that Dr. Johnson hated political discussions. "Sir, I'd as soon have a man break my bones as talk to me of public affairs." We know that the "half-literary conversation of half-learned people," which we are now accustomed to receive with respect (it seems unreasonable to ask more), was intolerable to the little group of friends who gathered about Charles Lamb's fireside. We may well believe Moore when he tells us that Miss Edgeworth was at once the least pretentious and most delightful of talkers, and that her "unaffectedness and repose" won pardon for her father's complacent volubility. And we note with pleasure that Croker was dreaded, as Macaulay was dreaded, because he always knew more than the occasion demanded, and said more than the company cared to hear. Croker was the kind of man who disputed every assertion, and who always set everybody right. He contradicted the Duke of Wellington when that experienced gentleman ventured upon a statement concerning the battle of Waterloo. He would not have hesitated, so said Lord Melbourne, to have contradicted the recording angel as to the number and nature of his sins. Lord Brougham declared Macaulay to be worse than "ten parrots and a chime of bells," and Charles Greville bears witness to the tranquillity which sweetly pervaded a country house as soon as Macaulay had departed.

These things are instructive as well as entertaining. They show us where lie the pleasant pastures, and where the pitfalls of companionship, and they prove to us the waste of misapplied talent. The contentious talker is a valuable asset if we do not have too much of him. He is like a breath of keen air blowing in upon the insipidity of a purely polite conversation. He may contend for a truth, a principle, a whim, a crotchet, it does not matter much. The whims and crotchets of our friends are apt to be indistinguishable from their principles and truths. But a man who contends for the sake of contention, or because he has acquired the pernicious habit of contradicting, is a stumbling-block in our conversational paths. If he is stupid, his contradictions insult our intelligence; if he is brilliant, they

fetter our free speech. "We derive little pleasure," said the acute Mlle. de Montpensier, "from disputing with those whom we are bound to respect." What reader of Walter Pater, for example, has not felt drawn by the singular charm of his aloofness? What reader has not speculated a little wistfully upon the manner of man who, in a pyrotechnic age, could set so high a value on reserve? But when we learn that Mark Pattison, rector of Lincoln and lover of scholars, declined vehemently to travel with Pater because "he would say the steamboat was not a steamboat, and that Calais was not Calais," we feel how good a thing it is to approach "those whom we are bound to respect" through the safe and dignified medium of print.

There is a happy mean between the irresponsible talker, the man or woman who has no real convictions, and who says smart things all around a subject, and the man or woman whose convictions are too onerous for handling. Pains-taking accuracy and contempt for truth are equally fatal to conversation. Frederick Locker said that George Eliot did not talk well because she was likely to be more in earnest than the occasion justified, which we can well believe. "She spoke as if with a sense of responsibility," and one cannot be exactly captivating when one is doing that. Mme. de Sablé might have said of her, "*Elle s'écoute en parlant.*" This congenital seriousness becomes at times disconcerting. It does not discriminate between the significant and the trivial, and it does not allow for the element of surprise which is the life-blood of ordinary conversation. The unexpected is always welcome. If we know in advance what our friends are going to say on any given subject, we care very little to hear them. They are too much like that curious family in Mr. Bernard Shaw's "Getting Married," who all represent extreme views, and who all speak in character. Such people have, as Carlyle put it, "a tur-rubble faculty for developing into bores." It takes all Mr. Shaw's genius to arrest this natural expansion, and he is only partly successful. The *Bridgenorths* do not bore us, because each in his given sphere is amusing—for an hour; but we feel they must have bored one another to the verge of desperation.

Conflicting tastes, irreconcilable opinions, variety of interests, and the wide scope of human ignorance are determining factors in conversation. It is hard to find half a dozen people who will plunge unanimously into the same current of thought. Even the weather is not a perfectly safe topic, because there are men and women who, like Dr. Pusey, never seem to know what kind of day it is, and evince no interest when told. Politics, the most vital and engrossing of themes, begets asperity if we talk, and mental confusion if we listen. I do not know whether all nations in all ages divided themselves into irresponsible optimists who believe in going ahead, no matter where you arrive, and wary pessimists who believe in standing still, and getting nowhere at all, but recorded history and personal observation have little else to reveal. It is a good blend of these contending human elements that has developed and controlled the civilizations of the world; it is their clash and clamor that forever estrange argument from conviction. The things best worth discussing are, as a rule, unwelcome subjects of conversation, because of their ungovernable vitality. "For heaven's sake, don't start Mrs. Smith on the suffrage!" "For heaven's sake, don't start Mr. Brown on the Progressive party!" "For heaven's sake, don't start Mr. and Mrs. Jones on social service!" This means that we debar Mrs. Smith and Mr. Brown and Mr. and Mrs. Jones from talking about the only subjects on which they can say anything worth hearing, and we do this because we have reason to fear that their information, like Macaulay's, will be more than the occasion demands. There is nothing in the world we so much dread as being submerged by the eloquence of our friends.

#### WHAT SHALL WE TALK ABOUT?

WHAT, then, shall we talk about? Our neighbors? A good subject, but parochial. Our servants? That is like chanting a refrain. Our children? The most popular woman I ever knew confessed to me in a moment of expansion that she owed her popularity to the fact that her only and idolized son had never said anything in his life that she was able to repeat to anybody. Books? Plays? We

are too liberally supplied with both. They take no vital hold upon us. London talked for weeks about "The School for Scandal." All the letters of the period are full of it. London and Paris talked about "Clarissa Harlowe" to that extent that Diderot said there was never any lack of animated conversation among people who had read it or were reading it. Their tongues were loosened because their hearts were stirred.

Some fair avenue of approach we must have, if we are to meet one another with mental ease and the grace of sympathetic understanding. Some courage we must have to deal with difficulties by the way. If we are always afraid of hearing too much, we shall end by hearing too little. If we shrink too fearfully from being bored, we shall grow flaccid, as do the people who shrink too fearfully from any of life's common ills. A conversational rest-cure will be our only refuge. If we wince at the pestilent wit which blights whatever it touches, we may lose our relish for the "proper wit," which lends sparkle to ordinary talk. I borrow the phrase from Sir Thomas More, who tells us it was the distinguishing quality of a lady more famed for charm than for virtue. "A proper wit had Mistress Shore, and could both rede well and write, merry in company, redy and quick in answer, neither mute nor full of babble, sometimes taunting without displeasure, and not without disport."

Was there ever a more spirited description of an agreeable woman, one who

merited a better fate than was dealt her by the rude age in which she lived? Topics for talk were never lacking in the fifteenth century, when all news traveled by word of mouth, and came filtering down, with many fair imaginings, from court to commoner, from the great ships lying in London docks to the little hamlets waiting by the highroad. Not from the printed sheet, but from the engaging and no less mendacious voice of rumor did the men and women of that day hear all that was to be known of public affairs; and as it was their custom to believe what they were told, they could never have felt Dr. Johnson's reluctance to listen.

We do not feel it now. Narcotic indifference, the rest-cure frame of mind, is alien to humanity. Every day the headlines of the newspapers rivet our attention. Every day the word they bring fills us with fresh concern. Every day we discuss the happenings of the day before; and when, the day after, we learn that these happenings did not happen, even this familiar experience lends a fresh impetus to speech. It is given to a few men to talk, and talk well, about Byzantine art or the habits of bees or the "Book of Job." It is given to all men to talk well or ill about their fellows. They may not derive satisfaction from their theme, because it is in the nature of humanity to be disappointing; but interest is not necessarily allied to enjoyment. The spectacle of life can seldom please, but it can never pall. "The world," said Walter Bagehot, "has a vested interest in itself."





# T. TEMBAROM

BY FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT

Author of "That Lass o' Lowrie's," "The Shuttle," etc.

WITH DECORATIVE PICTURES BY CHARLES S. CHAPMAN

## CHAPTER XXXVI



MISS Alicia had from necessity acquired the habit of early rising at Rowcroft Vicarage, and as the next morning was bright, she was clipping roses on a terrace before breakfast when Pearson brought her the note.

"Mr. Temple Barholm received a telegram from London last night, ma'am," he explained, "and he was obliged to take the midnight train. He had n't time to do any more than leave a few lines for you, but he asked me to tell you that nothing disturbing had occurred. He specially mentioned that everything was all right."

"But how very sudden!" exclaimed Miss Alicia, opening her note and beginning to read it. Plainly it had been written hurriedly indeed. It read as though he had been in such haste that he had n't had time to be clear.

Dear Little Miss Alicia:

I've got to light out of here as quick as I can make it. I can't even stop to tell you why. There's just one thing—don't get rattled, Miss Alicia. Whatever any one says or does, just don't let yourself get rattled.

Yours affectionately,

T. TEMBAROM.

"Pearson," Miss Alicia exclaimed, again looking up, "are you *sure* everything is all right?"

"That was what he said, ma'am. 'All right,' ma'am."

"Thank you, Pearson. I am glad to hear it."

She walked to and fro in the sunshine, reading the note and re-reading it.

"Of course if he said it was all right, it *was* all right," she murmured. "It is only the phrasing that makes me slightly nervous. Why should he ask me not to get rattled?" The term was by this time as familiar to her as any in Dr. Johnson's dictionary. "Of course he knows I do get rattled much too easily; but why should I be in danger of getting rattled now if nothing has happened?" She gave a very small start as she remembered something. "Could it be that Captain Palliser— But how *could* he? Though I do *not* like Captain Palliser," she added with a touch of finality.

Captain Palliser, her distaste for whom at the moment quite agitated her, was this morning an early riser also, and as she turned in her walk she found him coming toward her.

"I find I am obliged to take an early train to London this morning," he said, after their exchange of greetings. "It is quite unexpected. I spoke to Mr. Temple Barholm about it last night."

Perhaps the unexpectedness, perhaps a certain suggestion of coincidence, caused Miss Alicia's side ringlets to appear momentarily tremulous.

"Then perhaps we had better go in to breakfast at once," she said.

"Is Mr. Temple Barholm down?" he inquired as they seated themselves at the breakfast-table.

"He is not here," she answered. "He, too, was called away unexpectedly. Pearson has just told me that he went to London by the midnight train."

She had never been so aware of her unchristian lack of liking for Captain Palliser as she was when he paused a moment before he made any comment. His pause was as marked as a start, and the smile he indulged in was, she felt, most sin-