

old Persian rule was, that every man should sit silent until he had something to say that was worth hearing. The social code in English or French society would enjoin almost the very opposite—that it would be better to say almost anything than not to talk at all. The most desperate plunge into nonsense, boldly made, is welcomed if it does but break one of those embarrassing pauses which we abhor as nature is said to do a vacuum. A silent member has his value in the House of Commons, but he is at a discount in any other society; he seems hardly to come up to the old Homeric definition of his kind,—to belong to the race of “articulate-speaking men.” It may be that this demand for talk at all hazards has helped to demoralise conversation; that the finer quality is no longer encouraged or appreciated, and therefore seldom produced; just as in the parallel case, the overwhelming influx of printed trash has made the cultivation of a true literary taste hopeless in the majority of readers.

It may be shrewdly suspected that, after all, the vaunted excellence of the conversation of older days has been considerably overrated. It has been asserted of our modern Parliamentary eloquence that it does not come up to the great powers of Fox and Sheridan. We have no Hansard of those days to refer to; but we know enough to feel sure that the popular reports of such things are never to be much depended upon. If Dr. Johnson could be accommodated under the gallery of the present House of Commons on the night of some great debate, he might have no occasion to complain of the degeneracy of real eloquence amongst our legislators, though he might miss some of the stately periods in which he thought proper to dress the speeches of his own younger days. So also we may venture to demur, on some points, to the eulogies which have been passed upon the talk which prevailed in the drawing rooms of our great-grand-mothers. If it was high art, it was certainly not the highest; for the art seems to have been nearly always patent—anything less like nature it is not possible to conceive. Elaborate and fulsome compliment, childish badinage, *double entendre* and profanity, made up a great part of it. Impromptus which had been carefully studied, remarks which passed for naïveté, but which were really consummate artifice, clever blasphemy, and the grossest thoughts veiled in the politest clothing—this is what we find the tone of good society a hundred year ago, what we are told we are to regret, and what, in those of its features which are most easily copied, it is said that in some circles there is a tendency to reproduce.

Such conversation as was not indebted for its piquancy to some of the ingredients above named, and which affected a higher intellectual range, must sometimes have been boring both to talkers and to listeners. It would certainly be so now, if we gather a fair idea of it from such notices as survive. People made believe to enjoy it, no doubt, as they do with many fashions of the present day; but they must sometimes have had to “make believe very hard.” When Lady Mary Wortley Montagu first met with the man who, as they were both aware, was meant to be her future husband, they talked together, of all things in the world, about “the Roman heroes.” Mr. Montagu mentioned some classical author, and she regretted that she had never read his works. The conversation of modern fashionable lovers would probably not make a very lively or instructive chronicle; but at least it can hardly be less natural than this. So in the days of that world-renowned circle of *Précieuses*, who met at the *Hôtel de Rambouillet*, and who have the credit of having reformed and polished the French language itself, we are told that they talked classics, discussed the private life of the Romans, and composed and read aloud for each other’s edification sonnets and epigrams. At those Saturdays of Mademoiselle de Scudéri, where so much of what held itself to be the wit and intellect of the day met for the purpose of showing what clever talk could be, the notion was much the same. Does one wonder that after such an evening a French wit of the day seized his companion’s arm as they withdrew, and said, “For heaven’s sake, my friend, come and let us talk a little bad grammar!” or that Talleyrand, fresh from the *Bureaux d’esprit* (as they were called) of a later generation, in spite of his

admiration for his fair countrymen’s fine talk, should have said that “he found nonsense singularly refreshing”? We are told of one of the Scudéri evenings in particular, which was styled “*La Journée des Madrigaux*,” when the hostess and all her party set to work to compose verses—which of course were to be full of point and liveliness, and which were the subject of mutual praise and admiration. The spirit of the hour extended itself even to the kitchen, and squires of the chamber, footmen, and ladies’ maids caught the poetic fury, and disported themselves with this literary “*High Life below Stairs*.” Collectors of literary curiosities have reason to regret that no copies of this genuine domestic poetry have been preserved. But such performances as these are not conversation in any sense; rather, they show that in the case of those who have recourse to them, either the powers or the charms of conversation are insufficient. Modern attempts of the same kind have been made even in English society. The Della Crusca Academy and the Blue Stocking Club are well known, and had their day of popularity, though we remember them now only to laugh at their pretensions. If we may estimate the quality of their talk by the samples of their written compositions which have survived, it must have been poor enough. The tales and poetry of the ‘*Florence Miscellany*,’ for instance, which the amateur authors mutually praised and admired, would hardly be admitted now into the pages of a school magazine. The same kind of thing has been revived continually from time to time, and goes on still under various designations. It befell the present writer, on one occasion, to be introduced in the character of a visitor to one of the evening meetings of a very exclusive and mysterious body, whom (not to be too personal) may here be called the Literary Rosicrucians. A subject was given out some fortnight beforehand for treatment: and on this theme every member, lady or gentleman—happily the tax was not exacted from visitors—was expected to contribute either a short tale, a poem, or an original sketch in pencil or colours. The latter productions were laid on the tables at the monthly *soirée* of the club, and examined, with a criticism more or less friendly, by the assembled members. The artists were supposed to be unknown, and so had the advantage of listening, if they pleased, under this conventional incognito, to the opinions expressed. The literary contributions (also anonymous) were collected in some way by the secretary of the evening, and by him read aloud in succession. This was the trying scene in the evening’s performances. Some, of course, were intended to be grave, and some to be humorous; but it was not always easy to distinguish, at least until the reader (a bad one of course) came to an end, which was which. And, as a rule, the production which was most clearly meant to be facetious was exactly that at which it was impossible to laugh, while the pathetic pieces were those during which it was most difficult to maintain one’s gravity. A mere outsider had naturally that kind of excuse for preserving an impassive demeanor throughout, which was pleaded by the solitary hearer who remained unmoved during a sermon which threw all the rest of the congregation into tears—that he “belonged to another parish.” But for one of the sacred band, who felt that he might be sitting next to the author of the hour, and yet was unable either to laugh or cry in the proper places—or for the authors themselves—the situation did not appear a pleasant one. If Mademoiselle de Scudéri or Mrs. Montagu’s evenings were at all like this, we need hardly regret that we did not live in that Arcadia. The thing ended with a supper, which was decidedly more artistic than any other part of the entertainment (the kitchen, fortunately not having caught the literary infection in this case), and which appeared to bring great relief and refreshment to many of the initiated, as well as to the profane guest who had been for once admitted to their mysteries.

Much complaint has been made of the conversation of men of acknowledged literary powers. Authors are accused of proving, in ordinary society, either positively dull, or unworthily frivolous. Probably instances enough might be brought forward in support of the accusation. The faculty of expressing ideas clearly and