

Voice and manner have much to do with the qualifications of a pleasant talker. And here of course the ladies beat us easily. It was this that lent the irresistible charm, which all his listeners acknowledged, to the conversation of Chateaubriand. It is really not so much what is said, as how it is said, that makes the difference between the talkers of society. In public discussions, in Parliament or elsewhere, though the graces of voice and manner are valuable adjuncts to the speaker, especially in the opening of his career, he soon commands the attention of his audience, in spite of personal defects in these particulars, when it is once found that he can speak to the purpose. But all the good sense and ability in the world will not make up, in society, for a hesitating and embarrassed manner, or even for a very disagreeable voice. We may be conscious that the man has plenty to say, but we receive no pleasure from his talk.

Women have also nearly always the good taste to avoid those harangues and declamations which are really only gross interruptions of personal egotism upon the general entertainment. Those are not the faults into which women are naturally tempted; they are conscious that their force rather lies in touching a subject lightly and letting it go. But they are the pitfalls into which even sensible men continually stumble, when warmed by some favourite subject. If indulged in, they make the speaker, however well-informed in matter and felicitous in expression, an intolerable nuisance anywhere but on a platform; and public meetings have a good deal to answer for, inasmuch as they encourage a taste for these solo performances. No one who wishes that conversation should be pleasant to his neighbours as well as himself, should speak more than two or three sentences at once. However much he may have to say, it will be all the more agreeably said for giving others the opportunity of assenting, illustrating, qualifying, or even contradicting. The ball needs to be returned by the opposite player to make a lively game. It is given to very few to keep a circle of hearers charmed by a continuous monologue, as Coleridge could for an hour together; and even he was very often complained of, outside the immediate circle of his clients and worshippers, as a monopolist of the common rights of speech. His was not really conversation at all; it was, as De Quincey says, not *colloquium*, but *alloquium*. No wonder that one of his most loyal disciples tells us that "there were some whom he tired, and some whom he sent to sleep." That Ancient Mariner, who held the wedding guests fascinated by "his glittering eye" while he told the long story of his sufferings, would have been intolerable in real life even at a wedding breakfast, where talk is notoriously scarce and difficult.

But far more objectionable than calm monologue is the dogmatical talker. In the former case, so long as the stream flows smoothly and melodiously, the listener can at the worst take refuge in a dreamy repose. But the speaker who insists on continually laying down the law not only wearies but irritates. Wellbred persons of any social experience decline to answer him; and he probably stirs up at last some impetuous novice who falls an easy prey to his arms, and so encourages him the more in his self-sufficiency. Johnson must have been largely indebted both to the forbearance of one class and the folly of the other for his conversational triumphs. It was not only Boswell who set himself up continually as a nine-pin to be bowled over others made themselves victims unwillingly, after a rash and impotent struggle, as he did willingly. Fox and Gibbon are said to have been silent in his presence. It does not necessarily imply any inferiority on their parts in real conversational ability. They may have felt that their self-respect would not allow them either to battle with him in his own style, and thus draw upon themselves some of his rude and violent rejoinders—to be knocked down, as Goldsmith said, with the butt of his pistol, after his shot had missed—or to appear to yield to him a victory which was not fairly won. Any one who will be at the pains to listen impartially to a social discussion will find that it is by no means always that truth and good sense, or even real ability, remain masters of the field. These only too often give way to a loud

voice, a confident manner, and reckless assertion. It is often not worth while to put down a noisy pretender at the risk of an interminable argument (for such opponents seldom know when they are beaten), or of some disturbance to the social good humour of the company. A gentleman may have other reasons for not engaging in a street fight than because he is afraid of a man's fists. Yet it is unfortunate that mere hardihood should have in this, as in other cases, even an apparent social triumph. It is here that the conversational "arbiter," who has been already suggested, might reasonably step in, like Queen Elizabeth at the old University disputations, and bid the noisy and illogical disputant hold his peace.

Yet, after all, the art of listening is at least as important as the art of talking. Not to press the truism, that without listeners of some kind talk becomes either a Babel or a soliloquy, without an intelligent listener the best talker is at sea. Good listening is quite as popular a social quality as good talking. It is a mistake to conclude rashly that it is easier. A fool never listens, unless you put a direct question, or tell him the last current piece of gossip or scandal. Brissot left it on record of Benjamin Franklin, as one secret of his power, that he had the art of listening. "Il écoutait—entendez-vous, lecteur? Et pourquoi ne nous a-t-il pas laissé quelques idées sur l'art d'écouter?" It is a treatise which yet remains to be written. The art leaves too little room for brilliancy of display to induce many to study it. But other statesmen besides Franklin have practised it with success, and it is invaluable to all who are set in authority. In ordinary society perhaps nothing will so soon embarrass, and finally shut up, the empty talker, supposing him to have any brains at all, as to catch the eye of an intelligent listener. There is often a more mortifying conviction of his own incapacity forced upon such a person by the marked and pregnant silence of one who has evidently taken in every word that he has been saying, and from whom, in the natural course of things, he looks for a reply, than by the most emphatic contradiction. If, as we are so often told, "speech is silver, but silence is golden," in this case it may be said that, while speech might chastise him with whips, silence stings him with scorpions. The probability is, that he will flounder on with some attempt either of reiteration, explanation, or qualification, which, in the face of that attentive and merciless silence, plunges him into irremediable confusion. You may choke off the most inveterate teller of long stories by listening with an eager interest all through, and preserving a look of expectation after he has finished, as if still waiting for "point."

Not less than its polemical value in argument, is the social value of listening as an accomplishment. It is a somewhat humbling consideration, but it may be taken as undoubtedly true, that for one person in the company who wishes to listen to us (always excepting very young ladies and very deaf people), there are three who prefer that we should listen to them. Good listening, be it remembered, does not imply merely sitting still and holding one's tongue. It means attention—involving a certain amount of complimentary deference, and a skilful use of appreciative gestures and interjections. The favourable estimate which will be formed of the listener's own judgment, taste, and ability, in return for even a moderate exercise of this talent, will be a more than adequate reward. You may discourse for a whole evening, and impress no single person with any opinion of your powers; but if you can listen judiciously, and with a proper emphasis in your silence, to one or two of the talkers present, you may safely reckon on their testimony in your favour as an intelligent and agreeable man. Of course, the perfect listener should possess largely the power of abstraction. He should be able to devote his visible attention to the veriest prosa to whom he may be allotted as a captive for the time, while he is gathering in the pleasanter sounds which reach his ear from more distant quarters. There is some danger in this to the inexperienced. It incurs the risk of a sad misplacing of the needful interjections. Besides, most people listen with their eyes as well as with