

the ages in waves of melody that will never cease their onward roll till with a last sigh they sob themselves to rest upon the sands of eternity. The thoughts and words of Shakespeare, Milton, Homer, that have burned their way into the hearts of men, and there inscribed themselves in characters of living fire, will continue to glow with unabated flame, till at last with the souls of mortals they sweep through the jasper portals of infinity.

No, conversation is not capable of immortality. But we have not far to seek in order to find ample consolation for this shortcoming. All men cannot be great painters, great musicians, or great poets, but all men if they do but try can become good if not great talkers; and should it happen, which is not at all improbable, that the world be blessed with another Johnson, I think we can contentedly trust that a second Boswell will also be provided to meet the emergency.

Thought is an essential element of conversation. Cowper, however, makes a distinction between talk and conversation:—

“ Words learned by rote a parrot may rehearse,  
But talking is not always to converse.”

Then where would you place and by what name would you distinguish intercourse that is neither the one nor the other—that has not even a vestige of imagination or humor, much less wit, to cover over its horrible vacuity, to excuse its empty nothingness!—a kind of intercourse that contains, perhaps, absurd compliments or ill-natured comments, but that when stripped of its flattering or scandalizing tendencies, has barely a framework of vowel sounds to rest upon or give evidence of its existence. What, I ask, would you call this? Surely not conversation!

When spending an evening abroad, how is it that we so seldom meet with a sensible, sprightly conversationalist? How is it that at such times we seem to feel a sort of obligation to give utterance to most utter nonsense? Why is it that like poor Claudius our “words fly up,” our “thoughts remain below?” We cannot surely in this age of culture, and in this Dominion of common schools, set it down to ignorance. Probably much of it arises from a want of self-confidence and a want of proper practice. We have a dread of being thought pedantic, or of falling short of some elevated standard

by which we think our friends will judge us, and in the end we either yield to the impulse of the moment and allow ourselves to join in the exchange of nonsense, or else sit apart mute and discontented and muse upon the folly of this world.

Another essential to conversation is a good listener, and we ought to cultivate not only the art of conversing but also the art of listening. A good listener is an inspiration, but a poor listener is—well, is not

Then we should not hesitate about expressing opinions diverse to those of our friends; for, as variety is the spice of life, so contrariety is the spice of conversation. Of the many things that damp the spirits and superinduce melancholy, the most potent are individuals who assent to everything you say. If you state that the most civilized people on the face of the globe are the North American Indians, they meekly reply—“so they are;” tell them the National Policy is the sublimest scheme that ever was concocted, they answer—“I’m quite sure;” expatiate on the nobility of that worn out project “blankets and top boots for the Hottentots, and they gravely murmur—“yes.” Such people are of course the exception, not the rule.

The weather must by all means be dragged in. I can hardly conceive of a meeting between two persons no matter what their age, sex, or circumstances, at the which the condition of the atmosphere, past, present and future would not be discussed. It is useless to struggle against the thing or ridicule it, for you are sure to commit yourself on the very next occasion. But when we consider, perhaps it is just as well that there is some such subject of common interest to fall back upon in an emergency, to act as a sort of extended introductory expletive, or which we can employ to relieve the solemnity of an awkward pause—and why not the weather as well as anything else? Though we cannot do without it altogether, we can at least modify its use; we can drop this subject just as soon as it has served the purpose of the moment. Some people do not know when to abandon it; they wring the “hundred-and-one” changes upon it, glance off in another direction for the space of a paragraph or so, but in a minute back they come and attack it again with the pertinacious boldness of mosquitoes, and, to the delecta-