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LITERATURE

Conversation.

(Concluded.)

There can be no doubt that, as a rule, the readiness of women in conversation is much greater than that of men. The renowned Mrs. Poyser, speaking as the advocate of her sex as against those "poor tongue-tied creatures" the men, thanks Providence that "when she has anything to say she can mostly find words to say it in." But in this she surely does the ladies less than common justice. So much as this might be said in behalf of a fair proportion of those whom she regards as the more helpless half of society. It is when they have *nothing* to say that women show their immense superiority in saying it. They can create conversation, which is the great social difficulty. Give a man a subject that he knows anything about, and unless he be really a fool or morbidly reticent, he can talk about it so as to make himself fairly intelligible, and perhaps interesting, to those for whom the subject has any interest. Those who are prophets of very stammering lips indeed, in the general course of social talk, become almost eloquent when their feeling or enthusiasm is excited. Men throw off the slowness and hesitation which cramps all their powers in society, just as they throw off the physical infirmity of stuttering (which is a well-known fact) under the influence of some awakening theme or some strong sympathy. But the power of conversation in some women, and not always those of remarkable ability, is the very art of making bricks without straw. They will talk to one by the hour about nothing that is, on no particular subject and with no particular object and talk coherently and not foolishly, and very pleasantly, all the time. It would be very difficult perhaps for the listener to

carry away with him any mental notes of what has been said: he may not be conscious of having gained any new ideas, or of having had his old ones much enlarged; but he will rise and go his way as one does after a light and wholesome meal, sensibly cheered and refreshed, but retaining no troublesome memories of the ingredients which have composed it. Nothing showed the morbid condition of William Hazlitt's mind more remarkably than the confession from a man of his unquestioned ability, that he "found it difficult to keep up conversation with women." It is very well to call the talk of women trifling and frivolous; if it is pleasant and graceful, it is all that can be desired. Conversation should be the relaxation, not the business, of life; and the moralists who require that it should always be of an "improving" character have no true idea of its proper social uses. Improving! have we not sermons, good books, lectures, institutions, athanæums, and a complicated educational machinery enough of all kinds to improve us all off the face of the earth, if nature did not oppose a little wholesome duncehood to this sweeping tide of instruction? Must the schoolmaster still follow us into our little holiday? If the "queens of society" will only give us talk which shall be bright without ill-natured sharpness, playful without silliness—if they will show us that affection, vanity, jealousy, and slander are no necessary ingredients in the social dialogue, but that rather they give an ill savour to the wittiest and the cleverest play of words—if they will remember that good-humour, sympathy, and the wish to please for the sake of giving pleasure will lend a charm to the most common place thoughts and expressions,—their conversation will "improve" us, perhaps, quite as much as most popular lectures and some popular sermons. The talk which puts you in good-humour with yourself and with your neighbours is not wholly profitless. If it has but made half an hour pass pleasantly which with a less agreeable companion would have been spent in gloomy silence, broken by spasmodic efforts, resulting in disgust at your own and his or her stupidity, it will have effected one of the ends for which speech was given us. To be always seeking to make conversation profitable is to take a very commercial view of the transaction, of which none but a true Briton could be capable. The poet's graceful warning against utilitarianism was not altogether unneeded for the men of his generation:—

"Oh! to what uses shall we put
The wild weed flower that simply blows?
And is there any moral shut
Within the bosom of the rose?"