

freer atmosphere. The business man is not to take his business out to dinner with him, nor the physician his patients, nor the parson his parish, nor the officer his regiment, nor the lawyer his briefs. But this rule has its limits. Of all vices which infest conversation, none is more fatal than talking of what we do not understand. Now understanding, in every one's case, is limited; whereas modern society very much affects universal knowledge. The result is that a good deal of nonsense is talked, of a very different kind from the nonsense which Talleyrand enjoyed—the nonsense which passes for sense. The talkers rush in with their opinions, positive and emphatic, upon subjects of the day, which wiser men are at their wit's end to find the true bearings of. Many men who would be worth listening to on some special subject, with which circumstances have made them well acquainted, insist on enlightening you on some point about which they know simply nothing. Sir Walter Scott said that he never failed to get amusement and information of some kind from every person with whom he was accidentally thrown into company. He talked to them about their special business and occupation; here at least they were on their own ground, and had something to say which might be worth hearing. Locke had, long before, attributed much of his own extensive information to a habit of the same kind; he had made it a rule, he said, throughout his life, to talk to all sorts of people on the subjects with which their own business or pursuits had made them most familiar. Very often, in what claims to be refined society, this dread of seeming to "talk shop" is carried to an extreme, and it is thought bad taste to talk of the things which every one knows the speaker must understand. It is the same sort of feeling which sometimes leads a painter to pride himself especially, not on his acknowledged powers in his own line, but upon some trick of indifferent rhyming; which makes the barrister affect the sportsman, and the scientific man the *flâneur* of fashionable life. We might listen with pleasure to an Indian officer's anecdotes of the Delhi campaign, though the political opinions which he melts down for us from his yesterday's 'Times' or 'Standard' are wearisome in the extreme. Even the Rector's views on the agricultural labour question will commonly be better worth listening to than his criticisms on the pictures in the last Exhibition. If he is but gifted with common observation, he ought to have something original to tell us about a class whom he has special opportunities of becoming acquainted with; while his judgment in the fine arts is only endurable when we are sure it is second-hand. A courteous and sensible host, who wishes to have all his guests show themselves at their best, never fails to remember and take advantage of their specialities. He does not allow them to flounder long in the stream of general talk, in which that which is really in them may never find an utterance; but he draws them out upon some point on which he knows they have something to say, and the courtesy finds its own reward in the transformation of a dull and silent guest into a pleased and animated talker. To do this well, the master of the house should be himself, as they say the complete barrister should be, well armed at all points of knowledge: or it may chance that he comes to some grief himself in the laudable endeavour to lead the conversation. And since we cannot always expect to find in the host of the day these great qualifications—it would be hard indeed for society if none but modern Grichans were allowed to entertain—it might be well if the company were permitted to elect a leader of conversation, in the same way as the ancients, at their symposia, elected an *arête bibendi*. As some struggling aspirants, who hang on with difficulty to the outskirts of high life, submit the list of their guests to some fashionable friend for revision, or even leave the invitations altogether to much more experienced hands; so those who are conscious that they are more hospitable than brilliant might depute some accomplished friend to direct "the feast of reason and the flow of soul," contenting themselves to be responsible for the more material entertainment. Awkward blunders result sometimes from the laudable attempt of the master of the house to talk all things to all men. An Oxford tutor, a very sensible man, once invited a party of

undergraduates—good fellows enough, but not the reading set in the college. With a praiseworthy desire to suit his talk to his guests, he took up the papers of the day and looked at the names and position of the favourites for the Derby, to be run next day. Among them was one rejoicing in the name of "Ugly Buck"—why so called is best known to his breeder and owner. The tutor had just been reading Hans Andersen's charming fable of the Ugly Duck, which was much more in the line of his own taste than race-horses. To break a pause rather longer than usual, he turned to a "horsy" looking youngster who sat next him, and bringing to bear, as he thought, his innocent "cram" of the morning, asked him, in the off-hand tone of one to whom such speculations were familiar, what he thought of the chances of Ugly Duck for the Derby? The boys had too much respect for him to laugh—much; but he felt ever afterwards that it had been safer for him to have started the most abstract literary discussion, or even confined himself to the familiar ground of plucks and passes, at all risks of his talk being considered "shoppy."

Another protest has been raised, chiefly by transcendentalists, against the teller of good stories as one of the natural pests of conversation. De Quincey, among others, has hurled his anathema against him. But Mr. de Quincey, like many other clever men, was fond of hearing his own voice; it was disagreeable to him, no doubt, to find the attention of the circle, who ought to have been listening to some of his finer fancies, drawn off by a commonplace anecdote. But the objection is too widely taken. It is not the man who tells a good story well, but he who inflicts on us one which is tedious and pointless, or, still worse, who tells a good story badly, who is the unpardonable offender. Really good story tellers are few. But, with all respect to Mr. De Quincey, they are very valuable contributors to the social circle, and are listened to with perhaps even too flattering attention. The clever raconteur is as popular a character now as in the days when he was the oral novelist of the non-reading audience. Only the conditions of excellence in the art have changed; for us moderns he must be brief, pithy, epigrammatic; whereas for those old winter evenings, when lights and books were scarce, and readers scarcer, he could hardly be too elaborate and descriptive. The drawback naturally is that they are apt to repeat themselves to the same audience. A good story is a good thing if you have never heard it before. Some will bear being told twice very fairly; but a third and fourth repetition is too much. There is no reason, of course, why a man should not tell the same half-a-dozen times over in different companies; but in very few cases is the narrator's memory accurate enough to remember every individual who was present at the last telling. It would be very desirable if all who are really good story-tellers could endorse some mental memoranda upon each, as preachers are understood to do upon their sermons, to record when and in whose presence it was last delivered. The want of some such safeguard is the real explanation of the reproaches which have fallen upon story-tellers in general of being social bores. The great art here, as in other cases, is to conceal the art, and to let the story come in naturally as an illustration of some particular point in the conversation. And perhaps the worst use to which a story can be put is to bring it out to "cap," as it were, another which has just been told. If the first was anything of a good one, the second will be apt to fall flat: especially as the capability of being amused, in the case of grown-up and grave members of society, will commonly be found very limited indeed. On the other hand, if the first story was poor, and the second is evidently brought out to beat it, the teller is convicted of what is admitted to be bad taste in any company above that of the tap-room—of purposely displaying his own abilities in the way of triumph over others.

Our gay neighbours the French are commonly supposed to be far more ready than ourselves in at least the lighter artillery of talk. Yet, if we may trust a keen observer among themselves, French society is getting too lazy to do its own talking. Alphonse Karr has laid the scene of the following amusing *jeu d'esprit* in