

- Intelligent conversation can be a source of good information and mental improvement if its rules are observed.

THE ADVENTURE OF CONVERSATION

Words are deeds. Whenever we send syllables into the world their effect is as infallible on the people who hear them as it is on the ethereal waves. A few words can destroy happiness, and all that the Ancients have said about the bonds with which words chain our souls is true. Therefore words ought to be used with care and with a proper sense of responsibility. Our choice is between saying insignificant things, saying nothing, or reading and thinking before saying anything. The brevity of a pointed answer to a question worth our while gives us an artistic pleasure.

But how rare it is! To most people talking is what reading has become: something apart from its object, a bodily, rather than a mental, exercise. Men accuse women of talking for talk's sake. But many men are incorrigible babblers. Who sits through the long day in the smoking-

room of the train, talking, talking? Who says nothing, but says it through the hideous night in hotel-rooms or at the club? I have been the victim of extraordinary performances. Men fight for the floor and keep it without compunction or even misgivings.

Then, there are men and women whose eager faces inform you, before you have said a word, that the moment they open their mouths it will be to treat you to insufferable details about their uninteresting lives. This, I am sorry to say, happens especially in America, where there is hardly a vestige of conversation left. Worse than that, the word has ceased to have any meaning. The question so familiar in Europe: "What was the subject of conversation at dinner last night?" is never heard in the United States. A "general conversation" means one in which, no mat-

ter how many people are assembled, only one voice is heard at a time. Americans who always credit the "Latins" with vehemence and exuberance, would be surprised indeed to see how a dozen people in Rome or Madrid, or Buenos Aires, can keep their native effervescence in check to enjoy a conversation. They have a sense of absolute freedom, yet they obey two rules which were impressed upon me in childhood till they became law: *pas d'apartes et pas de monologues; no asides and no floor-holding!*

I have a vivid memory of the capacity which American women show in club deliberations, for knowing their minds and for expressing themselves tersely and courteously. Yet the same women a moment after their deliberation was over, would take their part in a brain-racking chorus of multilogues which did not seem to inconvenience them in the least. American voices are accused of being shrill, but how can anyone avoid shrillness in a bird market? When there are six people in a room in the United States there are

three conversations inevitably carried on in a high key, and dozens of times I have found that, even at a lunch party of four, it was impossible to suppress the rivalry of two voices. Reciprocal volleys are poured out as they used to be in the naval battles of yore when the guns answered one another nose to nose. Nothing is so laughable as a dinner-party of that kind given in honor of Mr. or Mrs. So-and-So. The poor lion has the look of having been caught in a trap. Sometimes a lady next to him, straining her neck to hear what he says in the confusion, signals to the other guests that this distinguished person is saying something that it is unforgivable to miss, but they look at her frankly and resume their piping or shouting.

What are the causes of this state of affairs which certainly did not exist in America 60 years ago? Why should Americans, who prove such excellent listeners at a lecture and love a serious discussion, show themselves such squanderers of words? Perhaps women, regarding a general topic as a rival, have

compelled the man next to them to act as if they should be the center of attention. Almost certainly the chief cause is the habit of giving large parties. A general conversation is not possible when 20 people sit at table but it is when only a few guests are added to the family dinner and find the father leading the conversation, as he still does in intelligent Jewish homes.

Many traveled American women resent the unjust inferiority which the hubbub habit gives to otherwise distinguished parties. One experience of real conversation is enough to make even the inveterate teller of stale stories realize that stories are the stupid man's wit. People who, even once have felt how much the magnetism of a small but select audience can add to their powers, or who simply have had the revelation that conversation is an adventure the outcome of which never can be foreseen, crave the return of the experience. I often hear regrets and, once or twice, I have seen rebellion. If I had not witnessed the scene myself I could hardly believe that

a State governor after vainly trying to put in a word which four ladies mercilessly drowned every time, lost his temper and struck the table with his fist, thundering that he "did not want to talk all the time, but wanted to talk some."

Some hostesses are bold enough to start a reaction. "Do please, listen to this" is heard sometimes in a querulous tone. A friend of mine who is a rare appraiser of good things does all she can. When the dessert comes, she institutes a sort of forum which it takes a few minutes to realize is only a conversation. It is a success every time. One feels then how many excellent things must have perished in the storm of voices still raging a minute before, and how much a campaign for conversation-dinners would do for a country which to-day has no conversation but which, however, possesses all that could make first-class conversation.

What happens is that the effusiveness and the lack of self-control created in such an atmosphere finally, bring a sensation of barrenness. It is too evident that there can

be no action through words when words are crazily let loose, for action must be premeditated, guided, and sustained. If we want our life not to be aimless, if we hate to think of our words as still-born seeds, we must never approach company without being on our guard against its sterilizing influence. Not everybody would endorse what Keats said about a room full of people distressing and exhausting his soul, but practically everybody has a vague consciousness that company expects from them not their best but their most trivial, and are tempted accordingly.

Simple remedies will be found to work. Perhaps you can remember one of the few conversations really worth

while you once had with some fellow-being. Ten minutes in the twilight with a person whom you felt really possessed of an idea, and of a passionate longing to make you believe in it, may still be alive in your memory as it is in mine. This you will not recall without a consciousness of personal dignity and an accompanying resolve not to give in and not to give up.

Indeed words can be actions, and, when they are not, they are a waste for him who says them and more or less of an insult for him who has to hear them. As Disraeli said, life is too short for us not to try to make it great. —*Abbe Ernest Dimnet, condensed from "What We Live By."*

RELIGION UNESSENTIAL

To have a positive religion is not necessary. To be in harmony with yourself and the universe is what counts, and this is possible without positive and specific formulation in words. — *Goethe.*