A NEW ART OF CONVERSATION.

WE are all proud of belonging to the nineteenth century. We regard it with justice as being one of the most varied and brilliant epochs in the history of the world. We point with complacency to its splendid triumphs in science, in art, in literature. In our restless activity we suffer nothing to remain stationary—everything must be progressive. We are extending the bounds of education, increasing the facilities for learning, issuing, in our provident anxiety for the eager and intelligent reader, cheap editions of our great classics, reprints of rare volumes, facsimiles of obscure MSS. We disseminate knowledge in lectures, in reviews, in newspapers, in magazines. We can excuse almost anything but ignorance.

All this is, of course, very encouraging, and, regarded as a whole, very satisfactory; but in the midst of it all there presents itself one of those curious problems to which it is difficult at first to find an answer. Every careful student of history must have been constantly puzzled to account for the strange paradoxical turn to which social phenomena and historical incidents are liable. Sometimes, for instance, he will find a glorious world of chivalry and splendour, full of romance, of mysticism, and poetry, without a poet to sing or interpret it, as in the age of the Crusades. At another time he will see a magnificent world-poet springing into life out of a miserable desert of petty feuds, divided aims, narrow sympathies, and despicable interests, as Dante in the fourteenth century. Sometimes he will see blowing in a foul, polluted atmosphere, the fairest flowers of honour and purity; and sometimes he will see, where the general tone of an age is pure and lofty, a far longer and fouler series of repulsive crimes than the most iniquitous era could furnish. To waive, however, these graver illustrations of a general truth, he will often notice, pre-eminently in the career of the Italian Renaissance, how a very low standard of intellect in ordinary social life is found compatible with an extraordinary elevation of taste, acquisition, and genius in the upper walks. But of all these paradoxical problems, the most extraordinary is one that can scarcely fail to have forced itself on the attention of every reflective man who has any opportunity of observing modern social life — namely, the low standard of ordinary conversation, as contrasted with the intelligent and enlightened character of the age we live in.

A shrewd observer of men and manners lately deceased, who could look back on fifty years of social experience, pronounced that one of the most striking peculiarities of English life was the steady but rapidly increasing degeneration of conversational power. It is not that we have no wits like George Selwyn or Sydney Smith, no brilliant talkers like Macaulay or De Quincey, for that can fairly be accounted for, and perhaps dispensed with; but that there are so few persons who can keep the ball of conversation rolling at all.

Anything more dreary than nine-tenths of our *réunions*, dinner-parties, "at homes," and the like can scarcely be conceived. A few remarks about popular actors repeated and retailed to infinity, two or three trite comments on current literature, a few vague generalities and unfruitful platitudes on general topics, comprise the conversational resources of most of the heroes and heroines of our drawing-rooms. It is as uncommon to make as to hear any original and sensible opinions about anything.

A gentleman, when addressing a lady, makes a point of treating her like a child; a lady addressing a gentleman, only anxious to escape the imputation of being an eccentric or a blue-stocking, faithfully returns him inanity for inanity, silliness for silliness, and both regret it—both know they are wasting their time; but they are the victims of conventionality, and consent to remain so.

What is most extraordinary about this state of things is that everybody acknowledges and laments it, and would, to do them justice, apply a remedy. The question remains, then—is there a remedy to apply, or is the disease incurable? We believe not: the disease is remediable, and the remedy is as simple in its nature as easy in its application.

There are two great stumbling-blocks in the way of natural conversation (that conversation should be natural, we all know, is one of the conditions of its being good), self-consciousness and affectation. If a man is self-conscious, he can neither think nor talk freely, his ideas will be confused, his utterance constrained, his sympathies narrow. Everything will pivot round himself: he is nervous, embarrassed, he is afraid of being eccentric and ridiculous, and accordingly sinks to the common-place and conventional both by choice and necessity. It was this unhappy defect that notoriously ruined the conversational powers of four great men who naturally possessed every element of success in conversation—Dryden, Butler, the immortal author of "Hudibras," Addison, and Goldsmith. Not less pernicious is the kindred quality, affectation. Affectation is a more composite defect, for the affected man is usually ignorant, conceited, and shallow; like the man in Martial's epigram, he is always striving to be what he is not, and disguising what he really is. Anxious only to put himself forward, he has no re-

gard for the feelings or the opinions of others, except in so far as he can direct them to a favourable estimate of himself. This of course strikes at the very root and essence of conversation, which is nothing but the mutual interchange of ideas and impressions—the art, in fact, of building on your companion's remarks. Nor is this all. If we defined conversation to be the ability for sustained monologue, the affected man would be equally unable to fulfil the conditions requisite for success, for he has neither that fascinating *nescio quid* possessed by all great talkers, to arrest attention, nor the intellectual capacity to retain it. All reform then in conversation must commence with the relegation of self-consciousness and affectation. But the mere absence of these, though it will go a long way, is not the only qualification necessary, as many of the worthy people who weigh like an incubus on social life are neither affected nor self-conscious. Three things should be remembered by everybody—that one of the most glorious of man's faculties is speech; that all human beings, even the veriest drawing-room misses, are rational creatures; and that you may learn something from every one, as the great Pliny used to say about books, "there is no book how bad soever from which you may not acquire some knowledge if you know how to use it." There is no necessity whatever for our social gatherings to be regarded with contempt by sensible people, and for everybody to continue to complain about the insipidity of drawing-room and dinner-party conversation.

If a man were to courageously quit the ordinary conventional questions, and boldly venture into interesting conversation, it would in nine cases out of ten be appreciated, provided he artfully adapted his remarks to his companion. What, for instance, is the use of giving a poetical turn to the discourse you may be holding with a practical middle-aged lady, who you know can have no real sympathy with such topics, but who holds herself bound to keep pace with fashion, and to affect an interest which she cannot feel? You are inviting her to pour out a string of platitudes and cut-and-dried opinions, you are boring her, and she is boring you: you are both in a false position. She knows nothing and cares nothing about Tennyson and Browning, but she knows that being an educated woman she must hold her own. And so you have managed to pass a tiresome and unfruitful hour, though she really has plenty to tell you, if you could only elicit it. She may be a shrewd, observant woman of the world, with plenty of anecdotes, plenty of sensible comments, drawn from a wide experience of mode and manners; she may be a keen observer of character: you might have learned from her many a useful hint, many an interesting reminiscence. You have struck the wrong chord, and got nothing but discord for your pains. Again, your companion may be a young inexperienced girl, and you bother her with inane gallantries and ridiculous compliments, which degrade her and yourself too, whereas she would be grateful if you would talk sense, and treat her as a sensible creature. She may of course happen to be silly and affected, in which case you are justified by the rules of courtesy in suiting yourself to her humours; but remember that if she is not—and it is your duty to find that out—your frivolities and foolish speeches are little less than refined insults. It is a very great, though a very popular error, to suppose that English young ladies should be treated as children, or, to speak more properly, as pegs on which to hang idle flatteries and every other social absurdity. If you boldly turn the conversation on to topics which she can understand and which interest her, you will be rewarded for your pains. Nothing can be more delightful, as Thackeray used to observe, than to hear the free, genuine criticisms of a young girl on the justness or injustice, accuracies and inaccuracies, of novelists who have written about her sex, as most novelists have done. You may learn where they are true to nature, where untrue; you may learn much which you cannot learn elsewhere.

For one of the best pieces of criticism ever made on Tennyson's "May Queen," a leading Tennysonian commentator has told us that he was indebted to a young girl with whom he fell into conversation on the subject. What can be more delightful than the descriptions of society or scenery, reminiscences of past enjoyments and departed friends, given by a girl before she has learned to be self-conscious and affected? What keen observation, what wonderful life and freshness, what *verve* and graphic colouring! Talk to her of what she does not understand—the fascinating little talker is dull and silent, or silly and simpering, bored and boring, all because you have not the art of discovering where her strength lay. It is always good to remember that every one, however clumsy and inexpressive, has something on which they can talk. They may know little perhaps of books, of art, or literature, but they will have had experiences, adventures; they will have stumbled on something in their life's journey which it will interest you to hear, which it will please them to tell. The art of drawing people out—not a very difficult one to acquire—will save one many an hour of senseless platitudes and dreary scandals.

It would be well for the interests of social life if a little more abruptness were permitted and employed, especially among men—if, for instance, without any floundering and circumlocution, we could ask sensible men sensible questions, always allowing them the same latitude in exercising an arbitrary silence. The writer of this paper remembers meeting a man who had the most extraordinary amount of information on almost every topic, but who was plainly not a man given to books or book-learning. On expressing surprise at the man's multifarious acquisitions, the happy possessor replied, "Sir, I have always struck life at angles. Where I have been with a companion who was a scholar or an antiquarian—and I always make it my business to discover where everybody's strength lies—I boldly put it to him: 'What was the population of Rome in the time of the Empire?' 'Is the parallel between Hannibal and Napoleon Bonaparte a really striking one, or is it merely fanciful?' I am a man whose studies have not lain in those directions,

and I ask for information. Now, sir," he continued, "I have sometimes, I must confess, met with a rebuff, but very, very rarely. More generally I have found myself, without any trouble, in the midst of an animated and delightful conversation. You must take care, of course, that such abrupt questions are put to a man of sense and real learning, for a pretender is placed at once in a most embarrassing position."

The eccentric man was right, though his method of proceeding required a little more judgment and discrimination than most people anxious for improvement possess. Clever men are always willing to impart knowledge, as Chaucer says of his scholar—

"Gladly would he learn, and gladly teach;"

and nothing is more deplorable than to see such a man obliged to lock his lips, or falling in with the requirements of conventionality, descend to talk nonsense and tittle-tattle, because nobody gives him an opportunity for talking anything better. To make conversation moreover what it should be, we must provide not for the mediocre only, who have naturally not much to say even under the most encouraging circumstances, but for those who have colloquial abilities, and are seldom at a loss either for topics or words. Where they wreck themselves is in their tendency to talk for effect, to contradict what is plain and obvious, that they may substitute what is paradoxical and falsely brilliant. Now nothing is more against the genius of true conversation, and nothing more calculated to make people retire into themselves, than this. Practical, common-sense people—and in every society such people will be in the majority—despise the speaker, though they may not be able to answer him; men who can speak remain silent, for they see they must either contradict the assertions made and become polemical, or they must play into the hands of a man who is merely attempting to show off and to monopolise attention. This they are seldom willing to do, and so conversation is again brought to a dead-lock. What, then, are the requirements of a new art of conversation? First, let every one try to enlarge his sympathies and get out of himself, let him acquire broad interests, and take pleasure in what concerns and touches the rest of his fellow-creatures. Having attained this, he will be little troubled either by self-consciousness or affectation. Let him remember that the essence of conversation is a willingness to give as well as to take—in a word, the art of building on the remarks of his partner—and till this is acquired there can be no real conversation; that, to make the best of social intercourse, it is our duty to discover where the strength of our companion lies, and to adapt ourselves as much as possible to his or her capacities and interests; to rest assured that most people will be thankful to exchange empty gossip for sense and reason, but that few will naturally break through routine and conventionality if they are not encouraged to do so; that for this reason a little abruptness will be useful, and is by no means offensive; that no greater compliment can be paid to a woman than to treat her as a worthy companion and a rational creature, not as the subject for foolish remarks and fatuous compliments; that every one can talk if encouraged, and possesses experiences and opinions if they can only be elicited.

"The soul of music slumbers in the shell
Till touch'd and waken'd by the master's spell;
And feeling hearts, touch them but rightly, pour
A thousand melodies unheard before."

In these lines is condensed half the art of conversation; in their ulterior meaning, reflection may discover the other half of that art as well. J. C. C.

THE GAME OF STOOL-BALL: AN OLD PASTIME REVIVED.

WHAT with rinking and Badminton, lawn tennis and croquet, with bank holidays, with the encouragement of cricket by the rural clergy, England has pretty well regained her right to be called merry. Games are so much in the ascendency just now, that any one proposing to describe a good one ought to be welcome; and I flatter myself that I learned a capital game in the autumn, not new indeed, for it dates from the Heptarchy, but unfamiliar out of Sussex, where it has lately been resuscitated.

I was staying in that pleasant county last October with a friend, who had asked me to shoot over his woods, and as my host and myself were returning one afternoon, somewhat earlier than usual, we found an animated group of ladies and children in the Home Field, who greeted us with an invitation to come and play at—I thought they said School Board.

"School Board!" replied I; "thank you, I have tried that game a little, but——"

"Not School Board—*stool-ball*."

Any play which *is* play, and not disguised work, I am ready to make one at; and as for my host, he was bound to do what his daughters bade him. So we stacked our guns against a tree, were enlisted on opposite sides, and proceeded to take part in the game, which I want to explain clearly to you.

It may have been derived from the same source as cricket, as there are two wickets, and a bowler, and the score is made by runs from one wicket to the other. Imagine a post with a board at the top—"This House to Let," or "Trespassers Beware." Well, the wickets somewhat resemble such familiar notices, much reduced in size. The uprights should be about six feet high, and the boards nailed on to the top of them a foot square, I should say; the distance between them some ten paces. Two of the same side go in together, armed with bats of the form of battledores or racquets. The bowler stands half-way between the wickets, and tries to get the batter out by striking the square board at the top of the stick with a tennis-