

Cerebral Greases

ment. Perhaps no other single talent serves so effectively to open up cerebral transit-ways, which, like the Continental roads to the Eternal City, lead straight to the Intellectual Life.

THE FAIR FLOWER— CONVERSATION

VII

“THERE grows within each heart,” says Browning, “the giant image of perfection.” It is this longing for improvement which makes pardonable the discussion of so threadbare a topic as conversation. What to say and how to say it are the only elements of the art, and all that can be written has been written about them; but just as the child is impressed by each new combination of the kaleidoscope, so comment upon this subject calls attention to it, and we thereupon make one more little step of progress.

For, indeed, that is the chief consideration: to have attention called to our slipshod methods of speech; to listen to ourselves as others hear

The Fair Flower

us; and to take thought for what we say and how we say it.

Paradoxical as the statement may seem, the how is more important than the what. One person may give me an accurate description of a landscape, while another by her beguiling language, without any description, may induce me to go to see it for myself. A person who can, in speaking of the weather or the commonplace happenings of the day, invest them with charm and a new light, stirs my emulation more than one who tells me scientific truths in an unattractive manner. I would rather have a request refused in a kindly, graceful way than granted grudgingly.

The successful converser has first of all a welcoming, good-natured, even joyous manner, which does more for her before she opens her mouth than a burst of eloquence can do afterwards. She enunciates

40

The Fair Flower

clearly, pronounces correctly, and avoids anything like screaming or shouting. She does not sit in the middle of the room or talk much about herself. She does not shuffle her feet or crack her finger joints; she looks straight into your eyes and never seems to care what others beside yourself are saying or doing. She avoids questions as a rule, thinking it better to say, "I hope you are not tired with your long walk," rather than, "Are you tired?" or, "You are musical, I suppose," rather than crudely, "Do you like music?" She listens sympathetically, and never cuts off a story with, "I know that, isn't it good?" She does not talk Europe with those who have never been there, she does not lapse into moody silence, she remembers Sidney Smith's *dictum* never to talk more than a half-minute without pausing to let others have a chance. Moreover, she has learned the forms

41

The Fair Flower

of polite speech, and uses them with discrimination. She knows when to say she will be "pleased" to do a favour, when "happy" and when "glad," in open-hearted frankness, but she is never oily or given to flattery. She tries in talking to cover her acquaintances with glory rather than to shine herself, bringing them out, giving to each the chance of expression, covering their blunders, turning the subject when it gets in a dangerous groove.

Does this seem an unattainable goal? Does not the young pianist, considering her teacher's technique and expression, feel equally hopeless? Yet care and years and practice will raise her to her level. "I made it a rule," Lord Chesterfield said, "never to utter one word, even to my valet, which was not the most apt and elegant with which the language could supply me." People cannot acquire the gift of conversa-

42

The Fair Flower

tion by practising upon it only in company. The home, the family table, the market-man, the shop-girl are all instruments upon which to practise.

Let the young aspirant, therefore, learn to think consecutively, for as she thinks so will she talk; let her persevere to acquire a fluent use of words; let her read good books and magazines and keep informed of the news of the day; let her endeavour to adapt her conversation to her listener—music to one, horses to another, bicycles to a third; let her avoid personalities and flee any disposition to whine; let her remember that she is lovelier when admiring than when criticising, and that wit at the expense of others always reacts upon one's self; and let her cultivate the humorous side of her nature without condescending to satire or unkindness. She will learn that a first advance in friendliness is usually safe;

43

The Fair Flower

that an anecdote or bit of news kept in reserve may bridge over an uncomfortable pause; and that environment has much to do with the success of a party. Charles Dudley Warner says that "talk always begins to brighten with the addition of a fresh, crackling stick to the fire," and Madame de Girardin used to insist that "an amusing conversation cannot start if the chairs are arranged symmetrically." A few trifles about the rooms to handle or examine, a cup of tea or a dish of almonds are helps which the wise often call to their service, but they all pall before the talent of fresh, stimulating and discreet conversation—the most desirable of accomplishments and the fairest flower in society.

44

OPENING DOORS

VIII

AROUND a dinner table at an Adirondack resort sat five guests who in the few days of their sojourn had found many topics of congenial conversation. One evening, however, the sixth seat was occupied by a sturdy youth with sunburned face, whose presence seemed to invoke a general silence. The widow talked in low tones to her daughter; the married couple devoted themselves to each other; and the college girl sitting next to the newcomer, regretted that she was not plain and fifty that she might have the privilege of addressing him as frankly as she would one of her own sex.

"I may at least push open a door," she resolved, "and if he has any

45

Opening Doors

gumption he will find a way to come in."

There was a pink spot on her cheek as catching the eye of the lady opposite she commented upon the absence of dogs about the hotel, gradually passing to the law prohibiting the hounding of deer. A question came up which no one seemed able to answer, and the young woman, fingering an olive, wondered if her ruse would fail.

After a slight pause the newcomer, with a glance at her, addressed the only other gentleman at the table, deftly caught the ball of conversation as it seemed falling, held it, and tossed it on to victory.

"I wanted to cry bravo," the girl exclaimed after the young hunter had left the table. "Not many fellows of twenty could have done it so well or would have even ventured. They would have preferred to hug their silence, and we should all have played

46

Opening Doors

sticks while he stays. It is so comfortable to have people enter in."

"More than that," smiled back the woman opposite, "not every young woman would have thrown open a door. It is easy to be a miser with one's social opportunities and niggardly in sharing small successes with others. Even my old age has had its hint just now." She caught the girl's hand as the group left the table, and as they passed through the office she glanced at the register.

"Did you know," she questioned, "that this young fellow belongs to one of the proudest families in the country? No, of course you did not; you would have done as much for the humblest. Go on, my dear, opening doors, and may I sometimes be there to enter in."

47

ABOUT LETTER WRITING

IX

"NOT merely a pleasant letter, but a charming letter," said the young Dean, nodding her head emphatically; "a letter which any one would hesitate to consign to the waste-basket. I should like to give the writer not only the best room in the college, and the nicest room-mate, but a seat at my own table. Girls do not appreciate, do not begin to appreciate," she went on, "the power a letter can wield. For purely selfish reasons all women ought to cultivate the art."

The young Dean was right. From selfish motives alone all women ought to cultivate the art of writing not simply a pleasant but a charming letter. Such an accomplishment gives to its possessor a power analogous to that of great personal beauty, cre-

48

About Letter Writing

ating a first impression that paves the way for almost any degree of acquaintanceship desired. One's personality may be such that she would attract no attention whatever among strangers, and her real attractions of mind and heart go unnoticed; whereas preceded by such a note as the young applicant wrote to the college Dean, she would be eagerly sought out, material advantages offered her, and the best that is in her brought to the light. A good letter-writer has a password effective as the "Open Sesame" of Ali Baba, which caused the fast-barred doors to fly open, and vast treasures to spread at his feet.

"Yes, indeed," the reader may sigh, "it is a great accomplishment. I would give anything to possess it, but letter-writers are born, not made. Put a sheet of note-paper before me and my mind instantly becomes its rival in blankness."

What is such a person to do? Stop

49

About Letter Writing

trying? But she appreciates how large a part letters play in modern life; how without them strangers whose lives might touch and enrich her own must ever run at parallel lines, acquaintances that might bring joy and inspiration into life are forgotten, and prized friendships gradually lose strength and perish. She is aware that without letters wearisome, time-taking calls and journeys are necessitated, business is impeded, carelessness is unjustly attributed, and many of the most graceful and helpful thoughts of mankind go forever unsaid. No wonder then she inquires sadly if letter-writers are indispensably "born."

Banish that thought forever. Facility comes only by practice, and if you are out of practice you must needs resort to the youthful method of rewriting and copying. There is no disgrace about such a procedure. The great Agassiz, we are told, in his

50

About Letter Writing

biography, wrote and rewrote his simplest letters to contemporary scientists, reaching a mature age before he felt able to send his first draft. The charming letter is seldom the outcome of the moment of writing. It is thought over before, while one digs in the flower-bed, perhaps, or brushes one's hair, or waits for the carriage to drive to the piazza. It never fails to refer to something definite in the earlier letter, to acknowledge the pleasure its arrival gave, to answer any questions it may have contained. Such a letter is apt in phrase and word, expresses interest in the affairs of the other, and touches more or less lightly, according to the degree of friendship upon one's own affairs and prospects. Never to mention one's self is a mistake, for usually you are the person of whom your correspondent wishes to know; but one must beware of tedious details, while criti-

51

About Letter Writing

cism and fault-finding are unpardonable.

The best reply to a letter is written soon after its arrival, when one's spirits are attuned, so to speak, with the writer's; but if a delay seems desirable, a few simple notes on the envelope, of points to be mentioned in reply, will facilitate an acceptable answer later on.

Gossip is altogether out of place in a letter. Not only is it in execrable taste, but set down in black and white it may be used to work harm to yourself and others; but pleasant comment upon those known to whom you write is most welcome. Emerson says that the very "abstaining to repeat and credit the fine remark of our friend is thievish;" and every fine remark is sure to cast reflected credit upon the one who passes it on.

To younger friends, bits of information and kindly advice, deli-

52

About Letter Writing

cately given and more or less disguised, are often of help to the recipient. "I would rather you would tell me than not," a sensitive boy once replied to his chum's elder sister, who was asking pardon for giving him so many suggestions: "for you somehow seem to say it more to yourself than to me."

So much for the "what." The "how" is not less important. "There is nothing so neat," says dear old Sir Thomas More, "that will not be made insipid by inconsiderate loquacity; so also there is nothing in itself so insipid that you cannot season it with grace and wit if you give it a little thought." Alas! too many persons fancy that thought is an unnecessary commodity in letter-writing, and that such a process as composing an attractive opening, rearranging a tumbled sentence, or rewriting an illegible clause is undignified. On the contrary facility comes by no

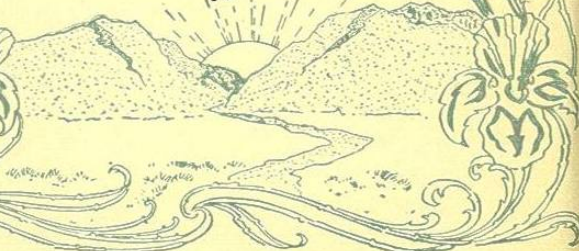
53

About Letter Writing

other means, and the person who says that she cannot write an interesting letter confesses that she is too lazy or too indifferent to her friend to give the letter just such attention.

The girl who is really anxious to cultivate this happy art should read the letters of Celia Thaxter, Scott, Cooper, Lamb; observe their style and substance and for a time imitate their forms and expression. She might, also, register a private vow that each letter she sends shall be so kind and cordial and winning, so free from anything like gossip or slander, that not only will the recipient set it apart from the common pile bound to the waste-basket, but its possible reappearance years later shall bring neither shame to the sender nor anything but renewed pleasure to the reader.

54



ON READING

X

YOU ask for suggestions upon reading, and your request reminds me of the young lady who, having a half-hour of leisure, begged Voltaire to tell her the history of the world!

You inquire if I have read a half-dozen new novels, and in the same breath you complain that you cannot cope with the piles of current literature, much less make up the old. Truly, books are in the saddle and ride the world, and you want to know what to do about it.

First, then, let me beg you to adopt some principle of selection.

Amassing flowers,
Youth sighed, "Which rose make ours?
Which lily leave?"

But be sure that, whatever you

55

