Company Manners

Elizabeth Gaskell

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Victor Cousin, the French philosopher, has undertaken a new task within the last few years. Whether as a relaxation from, or a continuation of, his study of metaphysics, I do not know, but he has begun to write the biographies of some of the celebrated French women of the seventeenth century. In making out his list, he is careful to distinguish between authoresses and femnes d'esprit ranking the latter infinitely the higher in every point of view. The first of his series is Jacqueline Pascal, the sister of Blaise, known at Port Royal as the Sister Euphemia a holy, pure, and sainted woman. The second whom the grave philosopher has chosen as a subject for his biography is that beautiful, splendid sinner of the Fronde, the fair−haired Duchess de Longueville. He draws the pure and perfect outlines of Jacqueline Pascal's character with a severe and correct pencil; he paints the lovely Duchess with the fond, admiring exaggeration of a lover. The wits of Paris, in consequence, have written the following epitaph for him: "Here lies Victor Cousin, the great philosopher, in love with the Duchess de Longueville, who died a century and a half before he was born."

Even the friends of this Duchess, insignificant in themselves, become dear and illustrious to Cousin for her fair sake. It is not long since he contributed an article on Madame de Sable to the "Revue des Deux Mondes," which has since been published separately, and which has suggested the thoughts and fancies that I am now going to lay before the patient public. This Madame de Sable was, in her prime, an habitual guest at the H™tel Rambouillet, the superb habitation which was the centre of the witty and learned as well as the pompous and pedantic society of Paris, in the days of Louis the Thirteenth. When these gatherings had come to an end after Madame de Rambouillet's death, and before Moliere had turned the tradition thereof into exquisite ridicule, there were several attempts to form circles that should preserve some of the stately refinement of the Hotel Rambouillet. Mademoiselle de Scudery had her Saturdays; but, an authoress herself, and collecting around her merely clever people, without regard to birth or breeding, M. Cousin does not hold the idea of her Saturdays in high esteem. Madame de Sable, a gentlewoman by birth: intelligent enough doubtless from having been an associate of Menage, Voiture, Madame de Sevigne, and others in the grand hotel (whose meetings must have been delightful enough at the time, though that wicked Moliere has stepped between us and them, and we can only see them as he chooses us to do): Madame de Sable, friend of the resplendent fair−haired Duchess de Longueville, had weekly meetings which M. Cousin ranks far above the more pretentious Saturdays of Mademoiselle de Scudery. In short, the last page of his memoir of Madame de Sable where we matter−of−fact English people are apt to put in praise of the morals and religion of the person whose life we have been writing is devoted to this acme of praise. Madame de Sable had all the requisites which enabled her tenir un salon with honour to herself and pleasure to her friends.

Apart from this crowning accomplishment, the good French lady seems to have been commonplace enough. She was well−born, well−bred, and the company she kept must have made her tolerably intelligent. She was married to a dull husband, and doubtless had her small flirtations after she early became a widow; M. Cousin hints at them, but they were never scandalous or prominently before the public. Past middle life, she took to the process of "making her salvation," and inclined to the Port−Royalists. She was given to liking dainty things to eat, in spite of her Jansenism. She had a female friend that she quarrelled with, off and on, during her life. And (to wind up something like Lady O'Looney, of famous memory) she knew how tenir un salon M. Cousin tells us that she was remarkable in no one thing or quality, and attributes to that single, simple fact the success of her life.

Now, since I have read these memoirs of Madame de Sable, I have thought much and deeply thereupon. At first, I was inclined to laugh at the extreme importance which was attached to this art of "receiving company," no, that translation will not do! "holding a drawing−room" is even worse, because that implies the state and reserve of royalty; shall we call it the art of "Sableing"? But when I thought of my experience in English society of the evenings dreaded before they came, and sighed over in recollection, because they were so ineffably dull I saw that, to Sable well, did require, as M. Cousin implied, the union of many excellent qualities and not−to−be−disputed little graces. I asked some French people if they could give me the recipe, for it seemed most likely to be traditional, if not still extant in their nation. I offer to you their ideas, fragmentary though they be; and then I will tell you some of my own; at last, perhaps, with the addition of yours, oh most worthy readers! we may discover the lost art of Sableing.

Said the French lady: "A woman to be successful in Sableing must be past youth, yet not past the power of attracting. She must do this by her sweet and gracious manners, and quick, ready tact in perceiving those who have not had their share of attention, or leading the conversation away from any subject which may give pain to any one present." "Those rules hold good in England," said I. My friend went on: "She should never be prominent in anything; she should keep silence as long as any one else will talk; but, when conversation flags, she should throw herself into the breach with the same spirit with which I notice that the young ladies of the house, where a ball is given, stand quietly by till the dancers are tired, and then spring into the arena, to carry on the spirit and the music till the others are ready to begin again."

"But," said the French gentleman, "even at this time, when subjects for conversation are wanted, she should rather suggest than enlarge ask questions rather than give her own opinions."

"To be sure," said the lady. "Madame Recamier, whose salons were the most perfect of this century, always withheld her opinions on books, or men, or measures, until all around her had given theirs; then she, as it were, collected and harmonised them, saying a kind thing here, and a gentle thing there, and speaking ever with her own quiet sense, till people the most oppressed learnt to understand each other's point of view, which it is a great thing for opponents to do."

"Then the number of the people whom you receive is another consideration. I should say not less than twelve, or more than twenty," continued the gentleman. "The evenings should be appointed say weekly fortnightly at the beginning of January, which is our season. Fix an early hour for opening the room. People are caught then in their freshness, before they become exhausted by other parties."

The lady spoke, "For my part, I prefer catching my friends after they have left the grander balls or receptions. One hears then the remarks, the wit, the reason, and the satire which they had been storing up during their evening of imposed silence or of ceremonious speaking."

"A little good−humoured satire is a very agreeable sauce," replied the gentleman, "but it must be good−humoured, and the listeners must be good−humoured; above all, the conversation must be general, and not the chat, chat, chat up in a corner, by which the English so often distinguish themselves. You do not go into society to exchange secrets with your intimate friends; you go to render yourselves agreeable to every one present, and to help all to pass a happy evening."

"Strangers should not be admitted," said the lady, taking up the strain. "They would not start fair with the others; they would be ignorant of the allusions that refer to conversations on the previous evenings; they would not understand the what shall I call it slang? I mean those expressions having relation to past occurrences, or bygone witticisms common to all those who are in the habit of meeting."

"Madame de Duras and Madame Recamier never made advances to any stranger. Their salons were the best that Paris has known in this generation. All who wished to be admitted, had to wait and prove their fitness by being

agreeable elsewhere; to earn their diploma, as it were, among the circle of these ladies' acquaintances; and, at last, it was a high favour to be received by them."

"They missed the society of many celebrities by adhering so strictly to this unspoken rule," said the gentleman.

"Bah!" said the lady. "Celebrities! what has one to do with them in society? As celebrities, they are simply bores. Because a man has discovered a planet, it does not follow that he can converse agreeably, even on his own subjects; often people are drained dry by one action or expression of their lives drained dry for all the purposes of a 'salon.' The writer of books, for instance, cannot afford to talk twenty pages for nothing, so he is either profoundly silent, or else he gives you the mere rinsings of his mind. I am speaking now of him as a mere celebrity, and justifying the wisdom of the ladies we were speaking of, in not seeking after such people; indeed, in being rather shy of them. Some of their friends were the most celebrated people of their day, but they were received in their old capacity of agreeable men; a higher character, by far. Then," said she, turning to me, "I believe that you English spoil the perfection of conversation by having your rooms brilliantly lighted for an evening, the charm of which depends on what one hears, as for an evening when youth and beauty are to display themselves among flowers and festoons, and every kind of pretty ornament. I would never have a room affect people as being dark on their first entrance into it; but there is a kind of moonlight as compared to sunlight, in which people talk more freely and naturally; where shy people will enter upon a conversation without a dread of every change of colour or involuntary movement being seen just as we are always more confidential over a fire than anywhere else as women talk most openly in the dimly−lighted bed−room at curling−time."

"Away with your shy people," said the gentleman. "Persons who are self−conscious, thinking of an involuntary redness or paleness, an unbecoming movement of the countenance, more than the subject of which they are talking, should not go into society at all. But, because women are so much more liable to this nervous weakness than men, the preponderance of people in a salon should always be on the side of the men."

I do not think I gained more hints as to the lost art from my French friends. Let us see if my own experience in England can furnish any more ideas.

First, let us take the preparations to be made before our house, our room, or our lodgings can be made to receive society. Of course I am not meaning the preparations needed for dancing or musical evenings. I am taking those parties which have pleasant conversation and happy social intercourse for their affirmed intention. They may be dinners, suppers, tea I don't care what they are called, provided their end is defined. If your friends have not dined, and it suits you to give them a dinner, in the name of Lucullus, let them dine; but take care that there shall be something besides the mere food and wine to make their fattening agreeable at the time and pleasant to remember, otherwise you had better pack up for each his portions of the dainty dish, and send it separately, in hot−water trays, so that he can eat comfortably behind a door, like Sancho Panza, and have done with it. And yet I don't see why we should be like ascetics; I fancy there is a grace of preparation, a sort of festive trumpet−call, that is right and proper to distinguish the day on which we receive our friends from common days, unmarked by such white stones. The thought and care we take for them to set before them of our best, may imply some self−denial on our less fortunate days. I have been in houses where all, from the scullion−maid upward, worked double tides gladly, because "Master's friends" were coming; and everything must be nice, and good, and all the rooms must look bright, and clean, and pretty. And, as "a merry heart goes all the way," preparations made in this welcoming, hospitable spirit, never seem to tire any one half so much as where servants instinctively feel that it has been said in the parlour, "We must have so−and−so," or "Oh, dear! we have never had the so−and−so's." Yes, I like a little pomp, and luxury, and stateliness, to mark our happy days of receiving friends as a festival; but I do not 'think I would throw my power of procuring luxuries solely into the eating and drinking line.

My friends would probably be surprised (Some wear caps, and some wigs) if I provided them with garlands of flowers, after the manner of the ancient Greeks; but, put flowers on the table (none of your shams, wax or otherwise; I prefer an honest wayside root of primroses, in a common vase of white ware, to the grandest bunch of

stiff−rustling artificial rarities in a silver epergne). A flower or two by the side of each person's plate would not be out of the way, as to expense, and would be a very agreeable, pretty piece of mute welcome. Cooks and scullion−maids, acting in the sympathetic spirit I have described, would do their very best, from boiling the potatoes well, to sending in all the dishes in the best possible order. I think I would have every imaginary dinner sent up on the "Original" Mr. Walker's plan; each dish separately, hot and hot. I have an idea that, when I go to live in Utopia (not before next Christmas), I will have a kind of hot−water sideboard, such as I think I have seen in great houses, and that nothing shall appear on the table but what is pleasant to the eye. However simple the food, I would do it and my friends (and may I not add the Giver?) the respect of presenting it at table as well−cooked, as eatable, as wholesome as my poor means allowed; and to this end, rather than to a variety of dishes, would I direct my care. We have no associations with beef and mutton; geese may remind us of the Capitol, and peacocks of Juno; a pigeon−pie, of "the simplicity of Venus' doves," but who thinks of the leafy covert which has been her home in life, when he sees a roasted hare? Now, flowers as> an ornament do lead our thoughts away from their present beauty and fragrance. I am almost sure Madame de Sable had flowers in her salon; and, as she was fond of dainties herself, I can fancy her smooth benevolence of character, taking delight in some personal preparations made in the morning for the anticipated friends of the evening. I can fancy her stewing sweetbreads in a silver saucepan, or dressing salad with her delicate, plump, white hands not that I ever saw a silver saucepan. I was formerly ignorant enough to think that they were only used in the Sleeping Beauty's kitchen, or in the preparations for the marriage of Riquet−with−the−Tuft; but I have been assured that there are such things, and that they impart a most delicate flavour, or no flavour to the victuals cooked therein; so I assert again, Madame de Sable cooked sweetbreads for her friends in a silver saucepan; but never to fatigue herself with those previous labours. She knew the true taste of her friends too well; they cared for her, firstly, as an element in their agreeable evening the silver saucepan in which they were all to meet; the oil in which their several ingredients were to be softened of what was harsh or discordant very secondary would be their interest in her sweetbreads.

"Of sweetbreads they'll get mony an ane, Of Sable ne'er anither."

But part of my care beforehand should go to the homely article of waiting. I should not mind having none at all; a dumb waiter, pepper, salt, bread, and condiments within the reach or by the side of all. Little kindly attentions from one guest to another tend to take off the selfish character of the mere act of eating; and, besides, the guests would (or should) be too well educated, too delicate of tact, to interrupt a burst of wit, or feeling, or eloquence, as a mere footman often does with the perpetual "Sherry, or Madeira?" or with the names of those mysterious entremets that always remind me of a white kid glove that I once ate with Bechamel sauce, and found very tender and good, under the name of Oreilles de Veau a−la−something, but which experiment I never wish to repeat. There is something graceful and kindly in the little attention by which one guest silently puts by his neighbour all that he may require. I consider it a better opening to ultimate friendship, if my unknown neighbour mutely passes me the salt, or silently understands that I like sugar to my soup, than if he had been introduced by his full name and title, and labelled with the one distinguishing action or book of his life, after the manner of sonic who are rather showmen than hosts.

But, to return to the subject of waiting. I have always believed that the charm of those little suppers, famous from time immemorial as the delightful P.S. to operas, was that there was no formal waiting, or over−careful arrangement of the table; a certain sweet neglect pervaded all, very compatible with true elegance. The perfection of waiting is named in the story of the White Cat, where, if you remember, the hero prince is waited upon by hands without bodies, as he sits at table with the White Cat, and is served with that delicate fricassee of mice. By hands without bodies I am very far from meaning hands without heads. Some people prefer female waiters; foot−women, as it were. I have weighed both sides of the subject well in my mind, before sitting down to write this paper, and my verdict goes in favour of men; for, all other things being equal, their superior strength gives them the power of doing things without effort, and consequently with less noise than any woman. The quiet ease and solemn soundless movement of some men−servants is wonderful to watch. Last summer I was staying in a house served by such list−shod, soft−spoken, velvet−handed domestics. One day, the butler touched a spoon with

a fork the master of the house looked at him as Jupiter may have looked at Hebe, when she made that clumsy step. "No noise, sir, if you please"; and we, as well as the servant, were hushed into the solemn stillness of the room, and were graced and genteel, if not merry and sociable. Still, bursts and clashes, and clatters at the side−table, do disturb conversation; and I maintain that for avoiding these, men−servants are better than women. Women have to add an effort to the natural exercise of what strength they possess before they can lift heavy things sirloins of beef, saddles of mutton, and the like; and they cannot calculate the additional force of such an effort, so down comes the dish and the mutton and all, with a sound and a splash that surprises us even more than the Phillis, who is neat−handed only when she has to do with things that require delicacy and lightness of touch, not struggle of arm.

And, now I think of it, Madame de Sable must have taken the White Cat for her model; there must evidently have been the same noiseless ease and grace about the movements of both; the same purring, happy, inarticulate moments of satisfaction, when surrounded by pleasant circumstances, must have been uttered by both. My own mouth has watered before now at the account of that fricassee of mice prepared especially for the White Cat; and M. Cousin alludes more than once to Madame de Sable's love for "friandises." Madame de Sable avoided the society of literary women, and so, I am sure, did the White Cat. Both had an instinctive sense of what was comfortable; both loved home with tenacious affection; and yet I am mistaken if each had not their own little private love of adventure touches of the gipsy.

The reason why I think Madame de Sable had this touch in her, is because she knew how tenir un salon. You do not see the connection between gipsyism and the art of being a good hostess of receiving pleasantly. I do, but I am not sure if I can explain it. In the first place, gipsies must be people of quick impulse and ready wit; entering into fresh ideas and new modes of life with joyous ardour and energy, and fertile in expedients for extricating themselves from the various difficulties into which their wandering life leads them. They must have a lofty disregard for "convenances," and yet a power of graceful adaptation. They evidently have a vivid sense of the picturesque, and a love of adventure, which, if it does not show itself in action, must show itself in sympathy with other's doings. Now, which of these qualities would be out of place in Madame de Sable? From what we read of the life of her contemporary, Madame de Sevigne, we see that impromptu expedients were necessary in those times, when the thought of the morning made the pleasure of the evening, and when people snatched their enjoyments from hand to more especially if some unusual expedient had to be resorted to, giving the whole the flavour and zest of a picnic. Toasting bread in a drawing−room, coaxing up a half−extinguished fire by dint of brown sugar, newspapers, and pretty good−for−nothing bellows, turning a packing−case upside down for a seat, and covering in with a stray piece of velvet; these are, I am afraid, the only things that can call upon us for unexpected exertion, now that all is arranged and re−arranged for every party a month beforehand. But I have lived in other times and other places; I have been in the very heart and depth of Wales, within three miles of the house of the high sheriff of the county, who was giving a state dinner on a certain day, to which the gentleman with whom I was staying was invited. He was on the point of leaving his house in his little Norwegian carriole, and we were on the point of sitting down to dinner, when a man rode up in hot haste a servant from the high sheriff's came to beg for our joint off the spit. Fish, game, poultry they had all the delicacies of their own land; but the butcher from the nearest market−town had failed them, and at the last moment they had to send off a groom a−begging to their neighbours. My relation departed ignorant of our dinnerless state; but he came back in great delight with his party. After the soup and fish had been removed, there had been a long pause (the joint had got cold on its ride, and had to be re−warmed); a message was brought to the host, who had immediately confided his perplexity to his guests, and put it to the vote whether they would wait for the joint, or have the order of the courses changed, and eat the third before the second. Every one had enjoyed the merry dilemma; the ice was broken, and all went on pleasantly and easily in a party where there was rather a heterogeneous mixture of politics and opinions. Dinner−parties in those days and in that part of Wales were somewhat regulated by the arrival of the little sailing vessels, which, having discharged their cargo at Bristol or Liverpool, brought back commissioned purchases for the different families. A chest of oranges for Mr. Williams or Mr. Wynn was a sure signal that before many days were over, Mr. Williams or Mr. Wynn would give a dinner−party; strike while the iron was hot; eat while the oranges were fresh. A man rode round to all the different houses when any farmer planned such a

mighty event as killing a cow, to ask what part each family would take. Visiting acquaintances lived ten or twelve miles from each other, separated by bad and hilly roads; the moon had always to be consulted before issuing invitations; and then the mode of proceeding was usually something like this: The invited friends came to dinner at half−past five or six; these were always those from the greatest distance the nearer neighbours came later on in the evening. After the gentlemen had left the dining−room, it was cleared for dancing. The fragments of the dinner, prepared by ready cooks, served for supper; tea was ready some time towards one or two, and the dancers went merrily on till a seven or eight o'clock breakfast, after which they rode or drove home by broad daylight. I was never at one of these meetings, although staying in a house from which many went; I was considered too young; but, from what I heard, they were really excessively pleasant, sociable gatherings, although not quite entitled to be classed with Madame de Sable's salons.

To return to the fact that a slightly gipsy and impromptu character, either in the hostess, or in the arrangements, or in the amusements adds a piquancy to the charm let any one remember the agreeable private teas, that go on in many houses about five o'clock. I remember those in one house particularly as remarkably illustrating what I am trying to prove. These teas were held in a large dismantled schoolroom and a superannuated schoolroom is usually the most doleful chamber imaginable. I never saw this by full daylight; I only know that it was lofty and large, that we went to it through a long gallery library, through which we never passed at any other time, the schoolroom having been accessible to the children in former days by a private staircase that great branches of trees swept against the windows with a long plaintive moan, as if tortured by the wind that below in the stable−yard two Irish staghounds set up their musical bays to mingle with the outlandish Spanish which a parrot in the room continually talked out of the darkness in which its perch was placed that the walls of the room seemed to recede as in a dream, and, instead of them, the flickering firelight painted tropical forests or Norwegian fiords, according to the will of our talkers. I know this tea was nominally private to the ladies, but that all the gentlemen strayed in most punctually by accident that the fire was always in that state when somebody had to poke with the hard blows of despair, and somebody else to fetch in logs of wood from the basket outside and somebody else to unload his pockets of fir bobs, which last were always efficacious, and threw beautiful dancing lights far and wide. And then there was a black kettle, long ago too old for kitchen use, that leaked and ran, and sputtered against the blue and sulphur−coloured flames, and did everything that was improper, but the water out of which made the best tea in the world, which we drank out of unmatched cups, the relics of several schoolroom sets. We ate thick bread−and−butter in the darkness with a vigour of appetite which had quite disappeared at the well−lighted eight o'clock dinner. Who ate it I don't know, for we stole from our places round the fireside to the tea−table, in comparative darkness, in the twilight, near the window, and helped ourselves, and came back on tiptoe to hear one of the party tell of wild enchanted spicy islands in the Eastern Archipelago, or buried cities in farthest Mexico; he used to look into the fire and draw and paint with words in a manner perfectly marvellous, and with an art which he had quite lost at the formal dinner−time. Our host was scientific; a name of high repute; he, too, told us of wonderful discoveries, strange surmises, glimpses into something far away and utterly dream−like. His son had been in Norway, fishing; then, when he sat all splashed with hunting, he too, could tell of adventures in a natural, racy way. The girls, busy with their heavy kettle, and with their tea−making, put in a joyous word now and then. At dinner the host talked of nothing more intelligible than French mathematics; the heir drawled out an infinite deal of nothing about the "Shakespeare and musical glasses" of the day; the traveller gave us latitudes and longitudes, and rates of population, exports and imports, with the greatest precision; and the girls were as pretty, helpless, inane fine ladies as you would wish to see.

Speaking of wood fires reminds me of Madame de Sable's fires. Of course they were of wood, being in Paris; but I believe that, even if she had lived in a coal country', she would have burned wood by instinctive preference, as a lady I once knew, always ordered a lump of cannel coal to be brought up if ever her friends seemed silent and dull. A wood fire has a kind of spiritual, dancing, glancing life about it. It is an elfish companion, crackling, hissing, bubbling: throwing out beautiful jets of vivid, many−coloured flame, The best wood fires I know are those at Keswick. Making lead pencils is the business of the place; and the cedar chips for scent, and the thinnings of the larch and fir plantations thereabouts for warm and brilliant light, make such a fire as Madame de Sable would have delighted in.

Depend upon it, too, every seat in her salon was easy and comfortable of its kind. They might not be made of any rare kind of wood, nor covered very magnificently, but the bodies of her friends could rest and repose in them in easy unconstrained attitudes. No one can be agreeable, perched on a chair which does not afford space for proper support. I defy the most accomplished professional wit to go on uttering "mots" in a chair with a stiff hard, upright back, or with his legs miserably dangling. No! Madame de Sable's seats were commodious, and probably varied to suit all tastes; nor was there anything in the shape of a large and cumbrous article of furniture placed right in the middle of her room, so as to prevent her visitors from changing their places, or drawing near to each other, or to the fire, if they so willed it. I imagine, likewise, that she had that placid, kindly manner, which would never show any loss of self−possession. I fancy that there was a welcome ready for all, even though some came a little earlier than they were expected.

I was once very much struck by the perfect breeding of an old Welsh herb−woman, with whom I drank tea a tea which was not tea, after all an infusion of balm and black currant leaves, with a pinch of lime blossom to give it a Pekoe flavour. She had boasted of the delicacy of this beverage to me on the previous day, and I had begged to be allowed to come and drink a cup with her. The only drawback was that she had but one cup, but she immediately bethought her that she had two saucers, one of which would do just as well, indeed better, than any cup. I was anxious to be in time, and so I was too early. She had not done dusting and rubbing when I arrived, but she made no fuss; she was glad to see me, and quietly bade me welcome, though I had come before all was as she could have wished. She gave me a dusted chair, sate down herself with her kilted petticoats and working apron, and talked to me as if she had not a care or a thought on her mind but the enjoyment of the present time. By−and−by, in moving about the room, she slipped behind the bed curtain, still conversing. I heard the splash of water, and a drawer open and shut; and then my hostess emerged spruce, and clean, and graced, but not one whit more agreeable or at her ease than she had been for the previous half−hour in her working dress.

There are a set of people who put on their agreeableness with their gowns. Here, again, I have studied the subject, and the result is, that I find people of this description are more pleasant in society in their second−best than in their very best dresses. These last arc new; and the persons I am speaking of never feel thoroughly at home in them, never lose their consciousness of unusual finery until the first strain has been made. With their best gowns they put on an unusual fineness of language; they say "commence" instead of "begin;" they inquire if they may "assist," instead of asking if they may "help" you to anything. And yet there are some, very far from vain or self conscious, who are never so agreeable as when they have a dim, half−defined idea that they are looking their best not in finery, but in air, arrangement, or complexion. I have a notion that Madame do Sable, with her fine instincts, was aware of this, and that there were one or two secrets about the furniture and disposition of light in her salon which are lost in these degenerate days. I heard, or read, lately, that we make a great mistake in furnishing our reception−rooms with all the light and delicate colours, the profusion of ornament, and flecked and spotted chintzes, if we wish to show off the human face and figure; that our ancestors and the great painters knew better, with their somewhat sombre and heavy−tinted backgrounds, relieving, or throwing out into full relief, the rounded figure and the delicate peach−like complexion.

I fancy Madame do Sable's salon was furnished with deep warm soberness of tone; lighted up by flowers, and happy animated people, in a brilliancy of dress which would be lost nowadays against our sat in walls, and flower−bestrewn carpets, and gilding, gilding everywhere. Then, somehow, conversation must have flowed naturally into sense or nonsense, as the case might be. People must have gone to her house well prepared for either lot. It might be that wit would come uppermost, sparkling, crackling, leaping, calling out echoes all around; or the same people might talk with all their might and wisdom, on some grave and important subject of the day, in that manner which we have got into the way of calling "earnest," but which term has struck me as being slightly flavoured by cant, ever since I heard of an "earnest uncle." At any rate, whether grave or gay, people did not go up to Madame de Sable's salons with a set purpose of being either the one or the other. They were carried away by the subject of the conversation, by the humour of the' moment. I have visited &good deal among a set of people who piqued themselves on being rational. We have talked what they called sense, but what I call platitudes, till I have longed, like Southey, in the "Doctor," to come out with some interminable nonsensical word

(Aballibogibouganorribo was his, I think) as a relief for my despair at not being able to think of anything more that was sensible. It would have done me good to have said it, and I could have started afresh on the rational tack. But I never did. I sank into mane silence, which I hope was taken for wisdom. One of this set paid a relation of mine a profound compliment, for so she meant it to be; "Oh, Miss F.; you are so trite!" But as it is not in every one's power to be rational, and "trite, at all times and in all places, discharging our sense at a given place, like water from a fireman's hose; and as some of us are cisterns rather than fountains, and may have our stores exhausted, why is it not more general to call in other aids to conversation, in order to enable us to pass an agreeable evening?

But I will come back to this presently. Only let me say that there is but one thing more tiresome than an evening when everybody tries to be profound and sensible, and that is an evening when everybody tries to be witty. I have a disagreeable sense of effort and unnaturalness at both times; but the everlasting attempt, even when it succeeds, to be clever and amusing is the worst of the two. People try to say brilliant rather than true things; they not only catch eager hold of the superficial and ridiculous in other persons and in events generally, but, from constantly looking out for subjects for jokes, and "mots," and satire, they become possessed of a kind of sore susceptibility themselves, and are afraid of their own working selves, and dare not give way to any expression of feeling, or any noble indignation or enthusiasm. This kind of wearying wit is far different from humour, which wells up and forces its way out irrepressibly, and calls forth smiles and laughter, but not very far apart from tears. Depend upon it, some of Madame de Sable's friends had been moved in a most abundant and genial measure. They knew how to narrate, too. Very simple, say you? I say, no! I believe the art of telling a story is born with some people, and these have it to perfection; but all might acquire some expertness in it, and ought to do so, before launching out into the muddled, complex, hesitating, broken, disjointed, poor, bald, accounts of events which have neither unity, nor colour, nor life, nor end in them, that one sometimes hears.

But as to the rational parties that are in truth so irrational, when all talk up to an assumed character, instead of showing themselves what they really are, and so extending each other's knowledge of the infinite and beautiful capacities of human nature whenever I see the grave sedate faces, with their good but anxious expression, I remember how I was once, long ago, at a party like this; every one bad brought out his or her wisdom, and aired it for the good of the company; one or two had, from a sense of duty, and without any special living interest in the matter, improved us by telling us of some new scientific discovery, the details of which were all and each of them wrong, as I learnt afterwards; if they had been right, we should not have been any the wiser and just at the pitch 'when any more useful information might have brought on congestion of the brain, a stranger to the town a beautiful, audacious, but most feminine romp proposed a game, and such a game, for us wise men of Gotham! But she (now long still, and quiet after her bright life, so full of pretty pranks) was a creature whom all who looked on loved; and with grave, hesitating astonishment we knelt round a circular table at her word of command. She made one of the circle, and producing a feather out of some sofa pillow, she told us she should blow it up into the air, and whichever of us it floated near, must puff away to keep it from falling on the table. I suspect we all looked like Keeley in the "Camp at Chobham", and were surprised at our own obedience to this ridiculous, senseless mandate, given with a graceful imperiousness, as if it were too royal to be disputed. We knelt on, puffing away with the utmost intentness, looking like a set of elderly

"Fools!" No, my dear sir. I was going to say elderly cherubim. But making fools of ourselves was better than making owls, as we had been doing.

I will mention another party, where a game of some kind would have been a blessing. It was at a very respectable tradesman's house. We went at half−past four, and found a well−warmed handsome sitting−room, with block upon block of unburnt coal behind the fire; on the table there was a tray with wine and cake, oranges and almonds and raisins, of which we were urged to partake. In half−an−hour came tea; none of your flimsy meals, with wafer bread and butter, and three biscuits and a half. This was a grave ,and serious proceeding tea, coffee, bread of all kinds, cold fowl, tongue, ham, potted meats, I don't know what. Tea lasted about an hour, and then the cake and wine−tray was restored to its former place. The stock of subjects of common interest was getting low, and, in

spite of our good−will, long stretches of silence occurred, producing a stillness, which made our host nervously attack the fire, and stir it up to a yet greater glow of intense heat: and the hostess invariably rose at such times, and urged us to "eat another maccaroon." The first I revelled in, the second I enjoyed, the third I got through, the fourth I sighed over, the fifth reminded me uncomfortably of that part of Sterne's "Sentimental Journey" where he feeds a donkey with maccaroons and when, at the sight of the sixth, I rose to come away, a burst of imploring, indignant surprise greeted me: "You are surely never going before supper!" I stopped. I ate that supper. Hot jugged hare, hot roast turkey, hot boiled ham, hot apple−tart, hot toasted cheese. No wonder I am ~d before my time. Now these good people were really striving, and taking pains, and laying out money, to make the evening pass agreeably, but the only way they could think of to amuse their guests, was, giving them plenty to eat. If they had asked one of their children they could doubtless have suggested half−a−dozen games, which we could all have played at when our subjects of common interest failed, and which would have carried us over the evening quietly and simply, if not brilliantly. But in many a small assemblage of people, where the persons collected are incongruous, where talking cannot go on through so many hours, without becoming flat or laboured, why have we not oftener recourse to games of some kind?

Wit, Advice, Bout−rimes, Lights, Spanish Merchant, Twenty Questions every one knows these, and many more, if they would only not think it beneath them to be called upon by a despairing hostess to play at them. Of course to play them well requires a little more exertion of intellect than quoting other people's sense and wisdom, or misquoting science. But I do not think it takes as much thought and memory and consideration, as it does to be "up" in the science of good eating and drinking. A profound knowledge of this branch of learning seems in general to have absorbed all the faculties before it could be brought to anything like perfection. So I do not consider games as entailing so much mental fatigue as a man must undergo before he is qualified to decide upon dishes. I once noticed the worn and anxious look of a famous diner−out, when called upon by his no less anxious host to decide upon the merits of a salad, mixed by no hands, as you may guess, but those of the host in question. The guest, doctor of the art of good living, tasted, paused, tasted again and then, with gentle solemnity, gave forth his condemnatory opinion. I happened to be his next neighbour; and, slowly turning his meditative full−moon face to me, he gave me the valuable information that to eat a salad in perfection some one should be racing from lettuce to shalot, from shalot to endive, and so on, all the time that soup and fish were being eaten; that the vegetables should be gathered, washed, sliced, blended, eaten, all in a quarter of an hour. I bowed as in the presence of a master; and felt, no wonder his head was bald, and his face heavily wrinkled.

I have said nothing of books. Yet I am sure that, if Madame de Sable lived now, they would be seen in her salon as part of its natural indispensable furniture; not brought out, and strewed here and there when "company was coming," but as habitual presences in her room, wanting which, she would want a sense of warmth and comfort and companionship. Putting out books as a sort of preparation for an, evening, as a means for making it pass agreeably is running a great risk. In the first place, books are by such people, and on such occasions, chosen more for their outside than their inside. And in the next, they are the "mere material with which wisdom (or wit) builds"; and if persons don't know how to use the material, they will suggest nothing. I imagine Madame de Sable would have the volumes she herself was reading, or those which, being new, contained any matter of present interest, left about, as they would naturally be. I could also fancy that her guests would not feel bound to talk continually, whether they had anything to say or not, but that there might be pauses of not unpleasant silence a quiet darkness out of which they might be certain that the little stars would glimmer soon. I can believe that in such pauses of repose, some one might open a book, and catch on a suggestive sentence, might dash off again into a full flow of conversation. But I cannot fancy any grand preparations for what was to be said among people, each of whom brought the best dish in bringing himself; and whose own store of living, individual thought and feeling, and mother−wit, would be infinitely better than any cut−and−dry determination to devote the evening to mutual improvement. If people are really good and wise, their goodness and their wisdom flow out unconsciously, and benefit like sunlight. So, books for reference, books for impromptu suggestion, but never books to serve for texts to a lecture. Engravings fall under something like the same rules. To some they say everything; to ignorant and unprepared minds, nothing. I remember noticing this in watching bow people looked at a very valuable portfolio belonging to an acquaintance of mine, which contained engraved and authentic portraits of almost every possible

person; from king and kaiser down to notorious beggars and criminals; including all the celebrated men, women, and actors, whose likenesses could be obtained. To some, this portfolio gave food for observation, meditation, and conversation. It brought before them every kind of human tragedy every variety of scenery and costume and grouping in the background, thronged with figures called up by their imagination. Others took them up and laid them down simply saying, "This is a pretty face!" "Oh, what a pair' of eyebrows!" "Look at this queer dress!"

Yet, after all, having something to take up and to look at is a relief and of use to persons who, without being self−conscious, are nervous from not being accustomed to society, O Cassandra! Remember when you, with your rich gold coins of thought, with your noble power of choice expression, were set down, and were thankful to be set down, to look at some paltry engravings, just because people did not know how to get at your ore, and you did not care a button whether they did or not, and were rather bored by their attempts, the end of which you never found out. While I, with my rattling tinselly rubbish, was thought "agreeable and an acquisition!" You would have been valued at Madame de Sable's, where the sympathetic and intellectual stream of conversation would have borne you and your golden fragments away with it, by its soft, resistless, gentle force.