



meaning—although very often the refusal to accept a common custom passes as conveying much more than a neutral meaning. Not to say “very sorry” or “very happy” in the usual contingencies may be considered, not merely an honest avoidance of an expression of feeling beyond the literal fact, but as tantamount to an offensive declaration in so many words that we are glad at that for which civility required us to use a courtesy sorrow or sorry at that for which civility required us to use a courtesy pleasure: not to wear mourning under customary circumstances may be considered, not merely a refusal to parade a real or a regulation grief in a masquerade of doleful coats and trousers or distressed falls and furbelows, but the ostentatiously parading content or indifference under the loss to which black clothes were expected to bear their regretful testimony. To refuse to pin on the bridal rosette may be considered, not a loyal abstinence from over-expressions of belief or joy in the bliss of the bridal pair, but a surly manifestation of ill-will or ill-temper. And, as all language, of words and of things, is for the sake of him towards whom it is used as well as of him who uses it, whenever a custom, by common consent meaningless in the observance, but not by common consent meaningless in the breach, is completely harmless, we had much better accept it than hurt our friends’ feelings.

But that the custom of wearing mourning is harmless is by no means incontrovertible. It is not one which the fashionable and the wealthy can assign to themselves and leave the humble their freedom if they choose to take it. If the duchess likes to hobble herself inside “pulled-back” skirts and impart a Chinese elegance to her impeded steps, we need not waste sympathy on the washerwoman who follows suit; nothing worthy sympathy in her impels her to the imitation. But, if fashion and respectability combine to establish the rule that not to wear some particular kind or colour of dress is to do dishonour to the memory of our dead, the poorest draggletails are coerced by all they have of tender feelings and all they have left of self-respect to wear the livery of woe—at what cost God knows, and often the devil knows too. And with the victims of that coercion we ought to sympathise. And the very tribute of decency towards the dead is, where poverty comes in, a source of hideous, though unmeant, irreverence to the dying. The new dress becomes needful past waiting for, there will too probably be mourning to wear soon, so the new dress is chosen to serve for mourning and the black for the funeral hangs in a cupboard in the invalid’s room and goes out to Sunday church and pleasuring before his eyes. How else, when money for new dresses is so hard to come by and respect for him and the neighbours will require good black? If one may judge by the advertisements of a well-known mourning-dealers’ firm, this thoughtful provision of mourning beforehand is not unknown in families capable of paying Regent Street bills; for ladies are informed with bland iteration in pretty well every newspaper they can lay hands on how, in cases of sudden and unexpected mourning, special and prompt attendance to their dressmaking necessities can be afforded them by this energetic firm—the inevitable inference from the wording of the advertisements being that, where the need for mourning is *not* sudden and unexpected, the proper clothes will have been laid in at leisure beforehand. If this be the case, there must be an odd conflict of feelings at times in the minds of expecting and provident mourners—on the one hand the wish that the beloved relative should recover, on the other the sense that, if he really cannot recover, it will be very awkward if he survives long enough for the mourning dresses to get out of fashion before they can appropriately be taken into wear; and, if a modest black serge, or some such not too anguishful stuff for double duty, should get taken into wear before the bereavement, it must require considerable extra resignation to have at once to watch it growing shabby and the sufferer sinking.

All women say that mourning is very expensive. Men, in their ignorance, aware that their female relations

often wear some sort of black garment and call it economical, suppose that black under the name of mourning may easily be a cheap and serviceable costume if wilful or weak extravagance has nothing to say to its cost. If any man wants to comprehend whether and why there is a difference financially between a liberal use of black in ordinary attire and the purchase and keeping up of a head to heel black outfit in mourning materials, let him consult any woman capable of keeping accounts who has ever arrayed herself in orthodox garb of grief. But, supposing that women’s mourning were not in itself more expensive than any ordinary dress of ordinary women, that even it were less expensive, and that all mourning in a household, the men’s, the children’s, the servants’ too, were less expensive than the usual coloured clothing, what is it when all at once everybody in the household must have a new outfit, regardless of the condition of the present wardrobe? Without speaking of the homes in which actual poverty prevails, there are but a minority of homes in which the death of the husband and father does not make an immediate fall of income; in many cases the fall is from ease to penury. Perhaps the house has to be given up, the sons must be put to cheaper schools and bred to humbler professions, the grown up daughters must go out as governesses and companions, the younger ones must do without education and thrive as they may on stinted meals—but, out of the scanty funds, mourning outfits must be purchased; every consideration must give way to that. And, if the widow and children should say “We are too poor; we should have to get into debt for these things, or to make sacrifices which it is wrong to make: we will wear our old clothes, and we will try to do honour to our dead by our lives of duty,” they would bid fair to incur a scandal which would forfeit them every help and perhaps fatally damage their prospects of self-maintenance. Those who can least afford the mourning are oftenest those who can least afford to dispense with it. There might be a more charitable result from some of the well-known wealthy and fashionable women of the West-end defying impertinent comments and, for the sake of less prosperous and weaker sisters, abjuring all mourning but such as, like low dresses in winter noontays and other barbarous usages, is compulsory at court, than from untold guineas in almsgiving.

Where the grief represented by mourning is deep and real, mourning is frequently a peculiarly cruel infliction. It is an unceasing reminder, not of the loved one, but of the loss. If we love our dead we want to remember them as they were with us, we want still to keep up in our minds the associations that made them, even in absence, a part of our lives. There should be something of pleasure still in thinking of them, or what honour or graciousness is there in our memory of them at all? But we have to clothe ourselves in a symbolism which symbolises nothing but the undertaker; we may not put on so much as a glove or a necktie but it is to speak of the funeral gloom. It is thus that the dead get forgotten: from the day they depart we force their deaths, not their lives, on our minds, and the thought is too painful and we are glad when we can turn from it. It is a memory to put by with the black clothes; and it kills the brighter one that surely is the one we should all wish to be mourned by.

For such persons as have been spoken of above, those thrown on their own resources by a death, the perpetuation of, not the sorrow, only but the gloom and horror of the event, is particularly an evil. They need all their energies for their unwonted struggle with the world and they have to learn a necessary cheerfulness; to brood on their loss is to be enervated, and they must put by even wholesome sorrow for convenient seasons. To women of impressionable temperament, to those especially with the artistic susceptibility to the influences of colour and light—a susceptibility which belongs to very many women who have no artistic genius, belongs perhaps to the majority of women—the lugubrious surrounding of their own clothes is an aggravation of

mental pain which they should be forbidden for health and sanity's sake; and to any woman who needs the power of fixing her attention on other things than her misfortunes the reminder for ever in her sight is a practical mischief. Men's mourning, if not more reasonable, is less hurtful, because less obtrusive. Most men are habitually unaware of the pattern and colour of the suit they are inside; but a woman's dress is, at its skimpiest, too voluminous to escape her notice; and it is not a woman's nature not to see her dress.

As for the *reductio ad absurdum* of mourning, half-mourning—the announcement to the world by an admixture of greys and lavenders that you begin to feel resigned and hope soon to get over it—it may be left to the pleas usually put forward in its defence, “it is always such good taste in dress”—“it is so becoming.” So it is; good taste in dress, and becoming to most complexions.

### CONVERSATION.

There are people with all sorts of good points, but with whom we are surprised to find that somehow or other we are not able to get on. Not that there need be anything disagreeable or repellent about them; not that the ordinary courtesies and amenities of intercourse are difficult to practise with them, or meet with no becoming response; not even that they are necessarily wanting in intelligence. Indeed, it is just the inability we feel—one that no amount of effort will overcome—to make any progress in intimacy with some who seem to possess all the intellectual qualifications for companionship, and who mar them by no faults of temper or taste, which makes us fully conscious of that indefinable bond of comradeship which may exist in the absence of much mental affinity either of contrast or resemblance, which is wholly distinct from love and from friendship, however much it may help on both, and which faults that bar the way to both love and friendship seem not to weaken. Undoubtedly, the solidarity of human qualities is such that no one of them can quite dispense with the aid of another; and faults which are not noticed in the neutral sphere of drawing-room intercourse, or which do not affect it unfavourably, are quite able to destroy on closer knowledge this sense of companionship itself. But it takes time and closer knowledge for this to happen; and, so long as you stand to people of this sort in no relation where the homely virtues are needed, the charm they exercise will not be impaired. It is sometimes not even impaired by the clear foresight that nearer intercourse would make them unbearable. You prudently and delicately keep them at a certain distance, and taste the enjoyment of their society without the Nemesis which a further intimacy would bring with it. Conversation is the latest flower of culture. It needs, in order to come to anything near perfection, a consensus of inward and outward conditions, the absence of any one of which is fatal. The delicate exchange and alternation which it implies is impossible not only if there is not some parity of value in the thoughts exchanged, but also the tact and art of selection among them. It requires, above all things, a light hand, the power of taking up a subject easily and readily, of holding it not too tightly, of adapting the treatment of it to the interlocutor's need or point of view, of loosing it when it has ceased to serve as a mental stimulus, and of taking up another with the same readiness, to be dropped, in its turn, as soon as it has served its purpose. A thorough discussion of a subject is always out of place in a conversation—you want hints, guesses, glimpses, the suggestion of varied points of view, side-lights, the play of fancy and humour, even the ironical treatment of one's own serious interests, all coloured by a direct reference to the individual mind to which you are for the moment brought near. To dull natures a good conversationalist always looks inconsistent. His many-sidedness seems contradictory; his instinct and need to be all things to all men has an air of insincerity about it, while in fact it is only a sublimated veracity; his sense of the relativity of truths

and of their multitudinous phases, sides, shapes, and references, wears to the narrow, plodding understanding a look of sophistry and frivolity. The homely wit, which stays where it grew in its own little plot of earth, is puzzled at the vagabond instinct which sends other minds soaring and wheeling and circling in search of fresh and distant prospects.

There is a trick which at first sight looks like this conversational dexterity, but which is in fact its enemy. The true conversationalist touches lightly on his subject and then passes on, but he has touched some interesting or characteristic feature in it; the pseudo-conversationalist nibbles and pecks at any tag or corner of it which may be for the moment prominent, whether or no the point touched on stands in any vital connexion with the whole. While handling a theme easily, it is still possible to put your mind to it. It is also possible, as Dr. Johnson has it, to put your mind fairly to the mind of your companion. And this is just what the pseudo-conversationalists cannot do. They are common among the men, and still more among the women, who are introduced to one at a party as “Such a remarkably intelligent person! So much to say on all subjects!” And they certainly have a false air of intelligence, and may originally have started with a good deal of mind. A life incessantly passed in company, without the balancing effects of study and frequent solitude, always betrays itself in this peculiar quality of the talk, which we notice with most disappointment in those the externals of whose mind, so to speak, give at first sight a promise of intelligence and mental comradeship.

And in these two things—intelligence and comradeship—all the higher interest of society lies. The neutral interest in all that appeals to the intellect, and the personal interest of social fellowship, each feeding and supporting the other—personal sympathy forbidding the intellect to be pedantic or absolute, and the intellect giving a ground and a charm to personal sympathy—are the main conditions of conversation at its best. It is true that many other things go to perfect the relation between talkers—manner, appearance, dress, even—to minds sensitive to such influences, as the minds of the best conversationalists often are—the social atmosphere around, the bearing, breeding, and mental altitude of the society in which they happen to find themselves. One pushing, dogmatical interloper can mar not only a *tête-à-tête*, but the most harmonious assembly of talkers. The fact that there is an eager listener present who takes what is said otherwise than as it is meant, to whom a playful allusion passes for your last word on a great subject, or who will not let a suggestion pass till it has been anatomised into shreds, or who has not the mental quickness and fluency to keep up with the play of talk, who cannot discuss without arguing and cannot argue without wrangling, is quite enough to destroy the ease and serenity without which no conversation can advance freely. Even the presence of those whose point of view is at variance with that of the talkers, whose minds live and move on different planes, on whom what is most truly the utterance of your own nature has the effect (if it has any effect at all) of an oddity or a conundrum, even as an audience they are a disturbing element. It is true that there is abundance of social enjoyment which you may share with them, and it is a poor nature which cannot find a bond of comradeship apart from intellectual affinity; but that “nice and subtle happiness,” that full and perfect understanding which you sometimes arrive at with those whom you see once and never see again, and which you often miss in those whom you have known and been attached to all your lifetime, this is a fruit of conditions so many and so complex that no wonder it happens so seldom, that we look back upon it with gratitude as one of the lucky accidents of social experience, and forward to its recurrence as one of the redeeming possibilities of a society in which there is inevitably much that is tedious and profitless.