THE PRINCE AND THE MAIDENS THREE: BY
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Once upon a time there lived a widow with three young daughters. Their father had been a nobleman, but toward the end of his life he had staked the greater part of his estate on a cause that had failed, so that he left but little behind him. Now the widow was shrewd and she loved her daughters, so she began planning how their fortunes might be retrieved. But cudgel her brain as she might, she could think of no way to make them all rich and happy, for the reason that there was only one wealthy and handsome Prince in the whole neighborhood, and he could not marry all three. So she at last decided to make the best of a bad matter, and ensnare him for one of her daughters, in the hope that the others might have their chance later.

Unfortunately, these three daughters—Esmerelda, Dorothea, and Marguerite—had been born a little too late, for fairy godmothers had become exceedingly scarce in that country, and there was only one for all three girls. However, the mother went to her for counsel.

"I beg of thee a boon," she said. "My daughters are poor, and when I die I know not what will become of them, unless one of the three marries the Prince. Canst thou not give them such exceeding beauty that the Prince, seeing one of them, will fall in love with her, and desire her for his wife?"

The Fairy Godmother thought a long time before answering. At length she said:

"Alas, I would that I could grant thy request, for I love my godchildren; but these be lean days for fairy godmothers, as thou knowest. Formerly I should have had three wishes apiece for them, but now I have but one to go around among the three. I will make Dorothea the beautiful one, for she already has the blue eyes and the golden hair. For Esmerelda, take this ring. In it is a rare and beautiful ruby from India. Take it to Nathan, the Jew, and sell it for a great price. It will not be enough for all three daughters, but it will provide fine raiment and a dowry for one. Let Esmerelda have this, since she is the eldest."

"But what of little Marguerite?" asked the mother.

"Alas," cried the Fairy Godmother, "I have nothing to give her. But send her to me, and I will teach her such things as I can."

So the three daughters went to their Fairy Godmother, one by one. And to Esmerelda she gave the ruby ring and her blessing; and to Dorothea she gave the gift of beauty and her blessing; but to little Marguerite she gave only her blessing, and kissed her on the lips.

As the three maidens grew to womanhood, Esmerelda learned to
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dress and act like a great lady. She wore fine silks and satins and velvets and jewels, and sat upon her white palfry like a queen. Moreover, it was known that there was a comfortable dowry waiting for him who should claim her hand. So when, through the careful management of her mother, it came to pass that the rich and handsome Prince met Esmerelda, he was so taken by her queenly air and aristocratic bearing and the evidence of her affluence, that, being a man of the world, he at once became her suitor.

Meanwhile Dorothea had been growing beautiful beyond description. Being poor, she dressed simply, but this served to accentuate her beauty the more. She bathed her throat and brow with milk, and her eyes with dew from the cups of lilies, and she combed her hair seven times daily, so that it was like gold floss in its simple blue silken circlet. Her throat was like white roses, her eyes like the larkspur, and her body as lithe and graceful as the reeds in the marshes.

So when the Prince, who had come to woo Esmerelda, saw fair Dorothea, he straightway fell heels over head in love with her beauty. What were Esmerelda’s satins and jewels, he asked, compared with eyes and hair like these? Besides, he had discovered a little vertical line between Esmerelda’s eyes, and sharpness in her words. Oh, he was a shrewd Prince, and a poet as well.

But no sooner had the Prince started to court Dorothea than he began to perceive her failings. She was not perfect, either. She was heavenly to look upon, but her speech was like the cooing of doves—all softness and monotony. She had not half the wit of his mother’s serving-maid. His wooing became silent, for one cannot talk forever to a voiceless flower. The Prince found himself between the horns of a dilemma.

One day, as he was walking in the fields beside his horse, trying to decide which of the two ladies to wed, he came upon little Marguerite, playing with a hound. Now Marguerite was grown to womanhood, but she had neither Esmerelda’s queenly bearing nor Dorothea’s beauty. Her dress was plain, and there were freckles across the bridge of her funny little nose. But her eyes were bright and merry, and the Prince paused to speak to her. Before he knew it he was seated on the river bank beside her, while she talked vivaciously of Hugo, the hound, her flower garden in the orchard, the old cobbler in the village who had once been to the wars, and ever so many interesting and amusing things, speaking sometimes seriously and sometimes lightly, but always saying something worth the hearing. And the Prince, weary of Esmerelda’s haughty affectations and Dorothea’s soft inanities, enjoyed her company till sundown.

Well, the upshot of it all was, as you may have guessed, that the
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Prince married little Marguerite, and they lived happily ever after; and all because the Fairy Godmother, lacking other gifts, had taught Marguerite how to talk.

Now the moral of this tale is not how to capture a rich and handsome husband, for Princes like this one do not live nowadays, and if one did, I don’t know of three sisters who would take so much trouble to catch him. Times have changed. But it is just as true today as it was then that two-thirds of the people in the world don’t know how to talk, and never realize why wealth and beauty don’t make up for the lack of conversational ability.

EVOLUTIONISTS point with pride to the exact period in faunal development when the spine superseded the notochord, when a centralized nervous ganglion first appeared, when toes were produced on mammalian extremities. They tell us that a monkey walked erect for some reason or other, and that he came into possession of a cerebrum, a prehensile tail, and that priceless treasure, three small bones in the middle ear. Then they leap light-heartedly over the intervening gap, and lo, you have man!

The anthropologist then takes up the good work, and has a wee bit to say about the development of the artistic instinct, and other things which are vastly interesting so far as they go. But what I want to know is, who invented speech? Was it monkey, man, or monkey-man? Did some Simian mother, in a moment of anxiety, suddenly find herself able to cry out: “Here, you James Edward, come away from that crocodile!” Or did man, after he had acquired sufficient cerebral power, painfully invent the system of communicating thoughts by prearranged variations of vocal noises? I’m afraid the scientists will never tell me; but I want to know, for I want to compose a eulogy to that anthropoid ape or antediluvian genius.

Or perhaps God handed the gift to Adam ready-made. One may as well believe so. Holy Writ is authority for the theory. And Adam, I am sure, was as pleased to receive it as you or I would be if we had been born dumb. With what childlike joy he straightway rushed about the garden, saying to this creature, “You are an armadillo,” and to that flower, “You are joepye-weed,” or Edenese words to that effect.

However the gift of speech originated, it is one of the most priceless of our human possessions. For conversation is a distinctly human attribute. The beasts of the field possess it only in the most imperfect degree. Conversation belongs only to creatures with souls, and I am inclined to think that the value of our conversation is more or less indicative of the size and value of our souls. At any rate, I
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observe that neglect of conversation and neglect of our spiritual selves go hand in hand, and I believe that an improvement in our conversation will benefit our souls and so do much to enrich our individual lives.

Man is so thoroughly a social being, that if you place him on a desert island with no one to talk to he is likely to go mad. But place him in a parlor, and give him every chance in the world to develop the art of soul-satisfying conversation, and what does he do? Nine times out of ten he puts his brain to sleep, and lets his larynx utter such sounds as it will. A gorilla can do as much. His conversation is quite soulless.

Therefore, the question is sometimes asked, and not without pertinence: Is conversation coming to be a lost art in America?

Mr. John Butler Yeats, a cultured Irish artist, father of William Butler Yeats, the poet, has been in this country for some little time, studying us. He says that our conversation is vapid because we lack the critical instinct. Things are “perfectly lovely” with us, or “awful” or “grand” or “punk,” as the case may be, and we let it go at that. Detailed and thoughtful criticism we avoid as being too irksome, and so we are losing the art of conversation.

Mr. Yeats may be right. We do elide and abbreviate and seek the path of least resistance in conversation. But I am always a little suspicious of foreign criticism. For who of us is tribally unbiased? To us the Frenchman is frothy and nervous, the German heavy and coarse, the Englishman dull and stupid or foppish, and the Irishman pugnacious and tiresome. Thus we are all prone to generalize unfairly, and it may be that Mr. Yeats has not fully appreciated our style.

We must nevertheless admit that our parlor intercourse is usually not soul-satisfying; and there is surely one way in which we Americans do err most grievously. I refer to the curse of talking shop. Shop-talk has spoiled more good conversation than dull brains. It indicates a restricted intellect, a foreshortened horizon, the narrow life of the rut, the little soul. The modern science of dentistry is a wonderful thing, but think of bicuspids and bridge-work as an exclusive after-dinner topic! And the worst offenders are those who ought to know better—artists, musicians, and “litt’ry” folk. You can make any good calling a bore by talking too much about it. That’s what I don’t like about missionaries. Good people, they are, too.

I believe that this question of conversation is more important than it looks at first glance. It strikes down close to the roots of life. For the spiritual nature is man’s greatest heritage, and the quality of his speech is an indication of the quality of his soul. That
is why we abhor profanity; it is the small soul's substitute for original expression.

Conversely, training in the art of conversation is one way of benefiting the soul and enriching life. The very effort to express a thought crystallizes it, and we straightway understand it better ourselves. Your deep thinker is usually a good talker, for the exchange of ideas is a mental stimulus. More than that, it is soul exercise, and at the same time produces the food upon which the soul is nourished.

It is not the quantity of conversation but the quality that counts. Mere talk is cheap. That is why we value it so little and waste it so much. We fill our bargain counters with remnants, often tawdry or shop-worn; it's too much trouble to reach for the better grade goods on the top shelves. But the effort pays, if we will make it. Every honest attempt at good conversation is a stone in the building of character, along with the resisted temptation and the well-wrought piece of craftsmanship.

The neglect of this effort, and the slipping into slovenly conversational habits, indicates weakness of character, and an ingrowing soul, whereas the cultivation of the art is a means, ready to hand, of enriching life. For how much richer and happier is that life which is lighted by the wit and humor and subtle charm of good conversation, based on real thoughts, than that whose only soul-language is shop-talk, gossip, or drawing-room inanities!

Yes, this is surely one of the ways of getting more out of life—one of the ways of reaching up out of the rut. Just how to go about it is a question for the individual to solve, but the solution is usually not hard, and the man or woman who avoids it through slothfulness deserves only scolding.

There is one person who must not be scolded, however, and that is the one who "loses his tongue," as we say, in company. Shyness is a misfortune, not a fault, and a great stumbling-block in the way. Parents of shy children should study them carefully, and help them to learn to talk. And if you are one of those shy grown-children; if you long to open your heart and speak, but cannot; if your tongue cleaves to the roof of your mouth, and the best thoughts born within you die before they leave your lips in commonplace utterances, you have a harder task before you than your neighbor's, and the more credit to you if you conquer. Meanwhile, take courage in the thought that for purposes of soul culture, one friend is better than a parlor full of magpies. The art of conversation does not mean merely the ability to entertain brilliantly, and I doubt not that some of the world's best sayings have been uttered in quiet family circles, where no record was ever made of them save on the souls of those who spoke and listened.