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Selected reading of Reflections; or Sentences and Moral Maxims

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Reflections;
or
Sentences and
Moral Maxims

By
Francois Duc De La Rochefoucauld,
Prince de Marsillac.

Translated from the Editions of 1678 and 1827
By J. W. Willis Bund, M.A. LL.B and J. Hain Friswell
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Abridged by Ian D. Dunkle

**Reflections;
or Sentences and Moral Maxims**

From the fifth, 1678 edition.

Our virtues are most frequently but vices disguised.

1.

What we term virtue is often but a mass of various actions and diverse interests, which fortune, or our own industry, manage to arrange; and it is not always from valour or from chastity that men are brave, and women chaste.

2.

Self-love is the greatest of flatterers.

3.

Whatever discoveries have been made in the region of **self-love**, there remain many unexplored territories there.

4.

Self-love is more cunning than the most cunning man in the world.

5.

The duration of our **passions** is no more dependent upon us than the duration of our life.

6.

Passion often renders the most clever man a fool, and even sometimes renders the most foolish man clever.

7.

Great and striking actions which dazzle the eyes are represented by politicians as the effect of great designs, instead of which they are commonly caused by the temper and the **passions**. Thus the war between Augustus and Anthony, which is set down to the ambition they entertained of making themselves masters of the world, was probably but an effect of jealousy.

8.

The **passions** are the only advocates which always persuade. They are a natural art, the rules of which are infallible; and the simplest man with **passion** will be more persuasive than the most eloquent without.

9.

The **passions** possess a certain injustice and self interest which makes it dangerous to follow them, and in reality we should distrust them even when they appear most trustworthy.

10.

In the human heart there is a perpetual generation of **passions**; so that the ruin of one is almost always the foundation of another.

11.

Passions often produce their contraries: avarice sometimes leads to prodigality, and prodigality to avarice; we are often obstinate through weakness and daring though timidity.

12.

Whatever care we take to conceal our **passions** under the appearances of piety and honour, they are always to be seen through these veils.

14.

Men are not only prone to forget benefits and injuries; they even hate those who have obliged them, and cease to hate those who have injured them. The necessity of revenging an injury or of recompensing a benefit seems a slavery to which they are unwilling to submit.

17.

The moderation of those who are happy arises from the calm which good fortune bestows upon their temper.

18.

Moderation is caused by the fear of exciting the envy and contempt which those merit who are intoxicated with their good fortune; it is a vain display of our strength of mind, and in short the moderation of men at their greatest height is only a desire to appear greater than their fortune.

19.

We have all sufficient strength to support the misfortunes of others.

20.

The constancy of the wise is only the talent of concealing the agitation of their hearts.

22.

Philosophy triumphs easily over past evils and future evils; but present evils triumph over it.

25.

We need greater virtues to sustain good than evil fortune.

27.

People are often vain of their **passions**, even of the worst, but envy is a **passion** so timid and shame-faced that no one ever dare avow her.

28.

Jealousy is in a manner just and reasonable, as it tends to preserve a good which belongs, or which we believe belongs to us, on the other hand envy is a fury which cannot endure the happiness of others.

29.

The evil that we do does not attract to us so much persecution and hatred as our good qualities.

30.

We have more strength than will; and it is often merely for an excuse we say things are impossible.

31.

If we had no faults we should not take so much pleasure in noting those of others.

32.

Jealousy lives upon doubt; and comes to an end or becomes a fury as soon as it passes from doubt to certainty.

33.

Pride indemnifies itself and loses nothing even when it casts away vanity.

34.

If we had no pride we should not complain of that of others.

35.

Pride is much the same in all men, the only difference is the method and manner of showing it.

36.

It would seem that nature, which has so wisely ordered the organs of our body for our happiness, has also given us pride to spare us the mortification of knowing our imperfections.

37.

Pride has a larger part than goodness in our remonstrances with those who commit faults, and we reprove them not so much to correct as to persuade them that we ourselves are free from faults.

38.

We promise according to our hopes; we perform according to our fears.

39.

Interest speaks all sorts of tongues and plays all sorts of characters; even that of disinterestedness.

40.

Interest blinds some and makes some see.

41.

Those who apply themselves too closely to little things often become incapable of great things.

42.

We have not enough strength to follow all our reason.

43.

A man often believes himself leader when he is led; as his mind endeavours to reach one goal, his heart insensibly drags him towards another.

44.

Strength and weakness of mind are mis-named; they are really only the good or happy arrangement of our bodily organs.

47.

Our temper sets a price upon every gift that we receive from fortune.

48.

Happiness is in the taste, and not in the things themselves; we are happy from possessing what we like, not from possessing what others like.

49.

We are never so happy or so unhappy as we suppose.

51.

Nothing should so much diminish the satisfaction which we feel with ourselves as seeing that we disapprove at one time of that which we approve of at another.

54.

The contempt of riches in philosophers was only a hidden desire to avenge their merit upon the injustice of fortune, by despising the very goods of which fortune had deprived them; it was a secret to guard themselves against the degradation of poverty, it was a back way by which to arrive at that distinction which they could not gain by riches.

55.

The hate of favourites is only a love of favour. The envy of *not* possessing it, consoles and softens its regrets by the contempt it evinces for those who possess it, and we refuse them our homage, not being able to detract from them what attracts that of the rest of the world.

56.

To establish ourselves in the world we do everything to appear as if we were established.

57.

Although men flatter themselves with their great actions, they are not so often the result of a great design as of chance.

59.

There are no accidents so unfortunate from which skilful men will not draw some advantage, nor so fortunate that foolish men will not turn them to their hurt.

62.

Sincerity is an openness of heart; we find it in very few people; what we usually see is only an artful dissimulation to win the confidence of others.

63.

The aversion to lying is often a hidden ambition to render our words credible and weighty, and to attach a religious aspect to our conversation.

66.

A clever man ought to so regulate his interests that each will fall in due order. Our greediness so often troubles us, making us run after so many things at the same time, that while we too eagerly look after the least we miss the greatest.

68.

It is difficult to define love; all we can say is, that in the soul it is a desire to rule, in the mind it is a sympathy, and in the body it is a hidden and delicate wish to possess what we love—*Plus* many mysteries.

69.

If there is a pure love, exempt from the mixture of our other **passions**, it is that which is concealed at the bottom of the heart and of which even ourselves are ignorant.

72.

If we judge of love by the majority of its results it rather resembles hatred than **friendship**.

75.

Neither love nor fire can subsist without perpetual motion; both cease to live so soon as they cease to hope, or to fear.

78.

The love of justice is simply in the majority of men the fear of suffering injustice.

79.

Silence is the best resolve for him who distrusts himself.

80.

What renders us so changeable in our **friendship** is, that it is difficult to know the qualities of the soul, but easy to know those of the mind.

81.

We can love nothing but what agrees with us, and we can only follow our taste or our pleasure when we prefer our **friends** to ourselves; nevertheless it is only by that preference that **friendship** can be true and perfect.

82.

Reconciliation with our enemies is but a desire to better our condition, a weariness of war, the fear of some unlucky accident.

83.

What men term **friendship** is merely a partnership with a collection of reciprocal interests, and an exchange of favours—in fact it is but a trade in which **self-love** always expects to gain something.

84.

It is more disgraceful to distrust than to be deceived by our **friends**.

85.

We often persuade ourselves to love people who are more powerful than we are, yet interest alone produces our **friendship**; we do not give our hearts away for the good we wish to do, but for that we expect to receive.

86.

Our distrust of another justifies his deceit.

87.

Men would not live long in society were they not the dupes of each other.

88.

Self-love increases or diminishes for us the good qualities of our **friends**, in proportion to the satisfaction we feel with them, and we judge of their merit by the manner in which they act towards us.

90.

In the intercourse of life, we please more by our faults than by our good qualities.

95.

The test of extraordinary merit is to see those who envy it the most yet obliged to praise it.

100.

Gallantry of mind is saying the most empty things in an agreeable manner.

102.

The head is ever the dupe of the heart.

103.

Those who know their minds do not necessarily know their hearts.

108.

The head cannot long play the part of the heart.

114.

We are inconsolable at being deceived by our enemies and betrayed by our **friends**, yet still we are often content to be thus served by ourselves.

115.

It is as easy unwittingly to deceive oneself as to deceive others.

116.

Nothing is less sincere than the way of asking and giving advice. The person asking seems to pay deference to the opinion of his friend, while thinking in reality of making his friend approve his opinion and be responsible for his conduct. The person giving the advice returns the confidence placed in him by eager and disinterested zeal, in doing which he is usually guided only by his own interest or reputation.

118.

The intention of never deceiving often exposes us to deception.

119.

We become so accustomed to disguise ourselves to others that at last we are disguised to ourselves.

120.

We often act treacherously more from weakness than from a fixed motive.

121.

We frequently do good to enable us with impunity to do evil.

122.

If we conquer our **passions** it is more from their weakness than from our strength.

126.

Cunning and treachery are the offspring of incapacity.

127.

The true way to be deceived is to think oneself more knowing than others.

132.

It is far easier to be wise for others than to be so for oneself.

135.

We sometimes differ more widely from ourselves than we do from others.

136.

There are some who never would have loved if they never had heard it spoken of.

137.

When not prompted by vanity we say little.

138.

A man would rather say evil of himself than say nothing.

139.

One of the reasons that we find so few persons rational and agreeable in conversation is there is hardly a person who does not think more of what he wants to say than of his answer to what is said. The most clever and polite are content with only seeming attentive while we perceive in their mind and eyes that at the very time they are wandering from what is said and desire to return to what they want to say. Instead of considering that the worst way to persuade or please others is to try thus strongly to please ourselves, and that to listen well and to answer well are some of the greatest charms we can have in conversation.

140.

If it was not for the company of fools, a witty man would often be greatly at a loss.

141.

We often boast that we are never bored, but yet we are so conceited that we do not perceive how often we bore others.

143.

It is oftener by the estimation of our own feelings that we exaggerate the good qualities of others than by their merit, and when we praise them we wish to attract their praise.

144.

We do not like to praise, and we never praise without a motive. Praise is flattery, artful, hidden, delicate, which gratifies differently him who praises and him who is praised. The one takes it as the reward of merit, the other bestows it to show his impartiality and knowledge.

145.

We often select envenomed praise which, by a reaction upon those we praise, shows faults we could not have shown by other means.

146.

Usually we only praise to be praised.

149.

The refusal of praise is only the wish to be praised twice.

150.

The desire which urges us to deserve praise strengthens our good qualities, and praise given to wit, valour, and beauty, tends to increase them.

155.

There are some persons who only disgust with their abilities, there are persons who please even with their faults.

156.

There are persons whose only merit consists in saying and doing stupid things at the right time, and who ruin all if they change their manners.

159.

It is not enough to have great qualities, we should also have the management of them.

162.

The art of using moderate abilities to advantage wins praise, and often acquires more reputation than real brilliancy.

164.

It is much easier to seem fitted for posts we do not fill than for those we do.

165.

Ability wins us the esteem of the true men, luck that of the people.

166.

The world oftener rewards the appearance of merit than merit itself.

168.

However deceitful hope may be, yet she carries us on pleasantly to the end of life.

169.

Idleness and fear keeps us in the path of duty, but our virtue often gets the praise.

173.

There are different kinds of curiosity: one springs from interest, which makes us desire to know everything that may be profitable to us; another from pride, which springs from a desire of knowing what others are ignorant of.

182.

Vices enter into the composition of virtues as poison into that of medicines. Prudence collects and blends the two and renders them useful against the ills of life.

184.

We admit our faults to repair by our sincerity the evil we have done in the opinion of others.

185.

There are both heroes of evil and heroes of good.

186.

We do not despise all who have vices, but we do despise all who have not virtues.

187.

The name of virtue is as useful to our interest as that of vice.

195.

The reason which often prevents us abandoning a single vice is having so many.

196.

We easily forget those faults which are known only to ourselves.

197.

There are men of whom we can never believe evil without having seen it. Yet there are very few in whom we should be surprised to see it.

223.

Gratitude is as the good faith of merchants: it holds commerce together; and we do not pay because it is just to pay debts, but because we shall thereby more easily find people who will lend.

224.

All those who pay the debts of gratitude cannot thereby flatter themselves that they are grateful.

225.

What makes false reckoning, as regards gratitude, is that the pride of the giver and the receiver cannot agree as to the value of the benefit.

226.

Too great a hurry to discharge of an obligation is a kind of ingratitude.

227.

Lucky people are bad hands at correcting their faults; they always believe that they are right when fortune backs up their vice or folly.

229.

The good we have received from a man should make us excuse the wrong he does us.

231.

It is great folly to wish only to be wise.

236.

It would seem that even **self-love** may be the dupe of goodness and forget itself when we work for others. And yet it is but taking the shortest way to arrive at its aim, taking usury under the pretext of giving, in fact winning everybody in a subtle and delicate manner.

237.

No one should be praised for his goodness if he has not strength enough to be wicked. All other goodness is but too often an idleness or powerlessness of will.

251.

There are people whose faults become them, others whose very virtues disgrace them.

254.

Humility is often a feigned submission which we employ to supplant others. It is one of the devices of Pride to lower us to raise us; and truly pride transforms itself in a thousand ways, and is never so well disguised and more able to deceive than when it hides itself under the form of humility.

261.

The usual education of young people is to inspire them with a second **self-love**.

262.

There is no **passion** wherein **self-love** reigns so powerfully as in love, and one is always more ready to sacrifice the peace of the loved one than his own.

264.

Pity is often a reflection of our own evils in the ills of others. It is a delicate foresight of the troubles into which we may fall. We help others that on like occasions we may be helped ourselves, and these services which we render, are in reality benefits we confer on ourselves by anticipation.

266.

We deceive ourselves if we believe that there are violent **passions** like ambition and love that can triumph over others. Idleness, languishing as she is, does not often fail in being mistress; she usurps authority over all the plans and actions of life; imperceptibly consuming and destroying both **passions** and virtues.

267.

A quickness in believing evil without having sufficiently examined it, is the effect of pride and laziness. We wish to find the guilty, and we do not wish to trouble ourselves in examining the crime.

269.

No man is clever enough to know all the evil he does.

279.

When we exaggerate the tenderness of our **friends** towards us, it is often less from gratitude than from a desire to exhibit our own merit.

281.

Pride, which inspires, often serves to moderate envy.

282.

Some disguised lies so resemble truth, that we should judge badly were we not deceived.

293.

Moderation cannot claim the merit of opposing and overcoming Ambition: they are never found together. Moderation is the languor and sloth of the soul, Ambition its activity and heat.

295.

It is well that we know not all our wishes.

304.

We may forgive those who bore us, we cannot forgive those whom we bore.

308.

Moderation is made a virtue to limit the ambition of the great; to console ordinary people for their small fortune and equally small ability.

313.

How is it that our memory is good enough to retain the least triviality that happens to us, and yet not good enough to recollect how often we have told it to the same person?

314.

The extreme delight we take in talking of ourselves should warn us that it is not shared by those who listen.

315.

What commonly hinders us from showing the recesses of our heart to our **friends**, is not the distrust we have of them, but that we have of ourselves.

319.

If we take the liberty to dwell on their faults we cannot long preserve the feelings we should hold towards our **friends** and benefactors.

328.

Envy is more irreconcilable than hatred.

350.

Why we hate with so much bitterness those who deceive us is because they think themselves more clever than we are.

354.

There are certain defects which well mounted glitter like virtue itself.

355.

Sometimes we lose **friends** for whose loss our regret is greater than our grief, and others for whom our grief is greater than our regret.

366.

However we distrust the sincerity of those whom we talk with, we always believe them more sincere with us than with others.

376.

Envy is destroyed by true **friendship**, flirtation by true love.

383.

The desire of talking about ourselves, and of putting our faults in the light we wish them to be seen, forms a great part of our sincerity.

398.

Of all our faults that which we most readily admit is idleness: we believe that it makes all virtues ineffectual, and that without utterly destroying, it at least suspends their operation.

399.

There is a kind of greatness which does not depend upon fortune: it is a certain manner what distinguishes us, and which seems to destine us for great things; it is the value we insensibly set upon ourselves; it is by this quality that we gain the deference of other men, and it is this which commonly raises us more above them, than birth, rank, or even merit itself.

404.

It appears that nature has hid at the bottom of our hearts talents and abilities unknown to us. It is only the **passions** that have the power of bringing them to light, and sometimes give us views more true and more perfect than art could possibly do.

409.

We should often be ashamed of our very best actions if the world only saw the motives which caused them.

410.

The greatest effort of **friendship** is not to show our faults to a friend, but to show him his own.

411.

We have few faults which are not far more excusable than the means we adopt to hide them.

426.

The charm of novelty and old custom, however opposite to each other, equally blind us to the faults of our **friends**.

427.

Most **friends** sicken us of **friendship**, most devotees of devotion.

428.

We easily forgive in our **friends** those faults we do not perceive.

432.

To praise good actions heartily is in some measure to take part in them.

433.

The most certain sign of being born with great qualities is to be born without envy.

434.

When our **friends** have deceived us we owe them but indifference to the tokens of their **friendship**, yet for their misfortunes we always owe them pity.

438.

There is a certain lively gratitude which not only releases us from benefits received, but which also, by making a return to our **friends** as payment, renders them indebted to us.

442.

We try to make a virtue of vices we are loath to correct.

457.

We should gain more by letting the world see what we are than by trying to seem what we are not.

458.

Our enemies come nearer the truth in the opinions they form of us than we do in our opinion of ourselves.

462.

The same pride which makes us blame faults from which we believe ourselves free causes us to despise the good qualities we have not.

463.

There is often more pride than goodness in our grief for our enemies' miseries; it is to show how superior we are to them, that we bestow on them the sign of our compassion.

473.

However rare true love is, true **friendship** is rarer.

476.

Our envy always lasts longer than the happiness of those we envy.

485.

Those who have had great **passions** often find all their lives made miserable in being cured of them.

486.

More persons exist without **self-love** than without envy.

494.

What makes us see that men know their faults better than we imagine, is that they are never wrong when they speak of their conduct; the same **self-love** that usually blinds them enlightens them, and gives them such true views as to make them suppress or disguise the smallest thing that might be censured.

503.

Jealousy is the worst of all evils, yet the one that is least pitied by those who cause it.

504.

Thus having treated of the hollowness of so many apparent virtues, it is but just to say something on the hollowness of the contempt for death. I allude to that contempt of death which the heathen boasted they derived from their unaided understanding, without the hope of a future state. There is a difference between meeting death with courage and despising it. The first is common enough, the last I think always feigned. Yet everything that could be has been written to persuade us that death is no evil, and the weakest of men, equally with the bravest, have given many noble examples on which to found such an opinion, still I do not think that any man of good sense has ever yet believed in it. And the pains we take to persuade others as well as ourselves amply show that the task is far from easy. For many reasons we may be disgusted with life, but for none may we despise it. Not even those who commit suicide regard it as a light matter, and are as much alarmed and startled as the rest of the world if death meets them in a different way than the one they have selected. The difference we observe in the courage of so great a number of brave men, is from meeting death in a way different from what they imagined, when it shows itself nearer at one time than at another. Thus it ultimately happens that having despised death when they were ignorant of it, they dread it when they become acquainted with it. If we could avoid seeing it with all its surroundings, we might perhaps believe that it was not the greatest of evils. The wisest and bravest are those who take the best means to avoid reflecting on it, as every man who sees it in its real light regards it as dreadful. The necessity of dying created all the constancy of philosophers. They thought it but right to go with a good grace when they could not avoid going, and being unable to prolong their lives indefinitely, nothing remained but to build an immortal reputation, and to save from the general wreck all that could be saved. To put a good face upon it, let it suffice, not to say all that we think to ourselves, but rely more on our nature than on our fallible reason, which might make us think we could approach death with indifference. The glory of dying with courage, the hope of being regretted, the desire to leave behind us a good reputation, the assurance of being enfranchised from the miseries of life and being no longer dependent on the wiles of fortune, are resources which should not be passed over. But we must not regard them as infallible. They should affect us in the

same proportion as a single shelter affects those who in war storm a fortress. At a distance they think it may afford cover, but when near they find it only a feeble protection. It is only deceiving ourselves to imagine that death, when near, will seem the same as at a distance, or that our feelings, which are merely weaknesses, are naturally so strong that they will not suffer in an attack of the rudest of trials. It is equally as absurd to try the effect of self-esteem and to think it will enable us to count as naught what will of necessity destroy it. And the mind in which we trust to find so many resources will be far too weak in the struggle to persuade us in the way we wish. For it is this which betrays us so frequently, and which, instead of filling us with contempt of death, serves but to show us all that is frightful and fearful. The most it can do for us is to persuade us to avert our gaze and fix it on other objects. Cato and Brutus each selected noble ones. A lackey sometime ago contented himself by dancing on the scaffold when he was about to be broken on the wheel. So however diverse the motives they but realize the same result. For the rest it is a fact that whatever difference there may be between the peer and the peasant, we have constantly seen both the one and the other meet death with the same composure. Still there is always this difference, that the contempt the peer shows for death is but the love of fame which hides death from his sight; in the peasant it is but the result of his limited vision that hides from him the extent of the evil, and leaves him free to reflect on other things.

From the First and Third Supplements

From the 1665 first edition (I), 1666 second edition (II), and posthumous 1693 edition (VI).

XIV. (I: 97)

The first impulse of joy which we feel at the happiness of our **friends** arises neither from our natural goodness nor from friendship; it is the result of self-love, which flatters us with being lucky in our own turn, or in reaping something from the good fortune of our **friends**.

XV. (I: 99)

In the adversity of our best **friends** we always find something which is not wholly displeasing to us.

XXII. (II.97)

It is a proof of little **friendship** not to perceive the growing coolness of that of our friends.

LXXXVI. (VI)

A true **friend** is the greatest of all goods, and that of which we think least of acquiring.

CXXIV. (VI)

Renewed **friendships** require more care than those that have never been broken.

Reflections on Various Subjects

IV. On Society.

In speaking of society my plan is not to speak of friendship, for, though they have some connection, they are yet very different. The former has more in it of greatness and humility, and the greatest merit of the latter is to resemble the former.

For the present I shall speak of that particular kind of intercourse that gentlemen should have with each other. It would be idle to show how far society is essential to men: all seek for it, and all find it, but few adopt the method of making it pleasant and lasting.

Everyone seeks to find his pleasure and his advantage at the expense of others. We prefer ourselves always to those with whom we intend to live, and they almost always perceive the preference. It is this which disturbs and destroys society. We should discover a means to hide this love of selection since it is too ingrained in us to be in our power to destroy. We should make our pleasure that of other persons, to humour, never to wound their self-love.

The mind has a great part to do in so great a work, but it is not merely sufficient for us to guide it in the different courses it should hold.

The agreement we meet between minds would not keep society together for long if she was not governed and sustained by good sense, temper, and by the consideration which ought to exist between persons who have to live together.

It sometimes happens that persons opposite in temper and mind become united. They doubtless hold together for different reasons, which cannot last for long. Society may subsist between those who are our inferiors by birth or by personal qualities, but those who have these advantages should not abuse them. They should seldom let it be perceived that they serve to instruct others. They should let their conduct show that they, too, have need to be guided and led by reason, and accommodate themselves as far as possible to the feeling and the interests of the others.

To make society pleasant, it is essential that each should retain his freedom of action. A man should not see himself, or he should see himself without dependence, and at the same time amuse himself. He should have the power of separating himself without that separation bringing any change on the society. He should have the power to pass by one and the other, if he does not wish to expose himself to occasional embarrassments; and he should remember that he is often bored when he believes he has not the power even to bore. He should share in what he believes to be the amusement of persons with whom he wishes to live, but he should not always be liable to the trouble of providing them.

Complaisance is essential in society, but it should have its limits, it becomes a slavery when it is extreme. We should so render a free consent, that in following the opinion of our friends they should believe that they follow ours.

We should readily excuse our friends when their faults are born with them, and they are less than their good qualities. We should often avoid to show what they have said, and what they have left unsaid. We should try to make them perceive their faults, so as to give them the merit of correcting them.

There is a kind of politeness which is necessary in the intercourse among gentlemen, it makes them comprehend badinage, and it keeps them from using and employing certain figures of speech, too rude and unrefined, which are often used thoughtlessly when we hold to our opinion with too much warmth.

The intercourse of gentlemen cannot subsist without a certain kind of confidence; this should be equal on both sides. Each should have an appearance of sincerity and of discretion which never causes the fear of anything imprudent being said.

There should be some variety in wit. Those who have only one kind of wit cannot please for long unless they can take different roads, and not both use the same talents, thus adding to the pleasure of society, and keeping the same harmony that different voices and different instruments should observe in music; and as it is detrimental to the quiet of society, that many persons should have the same interests, it is yet as necessary for it that their interests should not be different.

We should anticipate what can please our friends, find out how to be useful to them so as to exempt them from annoyance, and when we cannot avert evils, seem to

participate in them, insensibly obliterate without attempting to destroy them at a blow, and place agreeable objects in their place, or at least such as will interest them. We should talk of subjects that concern them, but only so far as they like, and we should take great care where we draw the line. There is a species of politeness, and we may say a similar species of humanity, which does not enter too quickly into the recesses of the heart. It often takes pains to allow us to see all that our friends know, while they have still the advantage of not knowing to the full when we have penetrated the depth of the heart.

Thus the intercourse between gentlemen at once gives them familiarity and furnishes them with an infinite number of subjects on which to talk freely.

Few persons have sufficient tact and good sense fairly to appreciate many matters that are essential to maintain society. We desire to turn away at a certain point, but we do not want to be mixed up in everything, and we fear to know all kinds of truth.

As we should stand at a certain distance to view objects, so we should also stand at a distance to observe society; each has its proper point of view from which it should be regarded. It is quite right that it should not be looked at too closely, for there is hardly a man who in all matters allows himself to be seen as he really is.

V. On Conversation.

The reason why so few persons are agreeable in conversation is that each thinks more of what he desires to say, than of what the others say, and that we make bad listeners when we want to speak.

Yet it is necessary to listen to those who talk, we should give them the time they want, and let them say even senseless things; never contradict or interrupt them; on the contrary, we should enter into their mind and taste, illustrate their meaning, praise anything they say that deserves praise, and let them see we praise more from our choice than from agreement with them.

To please others we should talk on subjects they like and that interest them, avoid disputes upon indifferent matters, seldom ask questions, and never let them see that we pretend to be better informed than they are.

We should talk in a more or less serious manner, and upon more or less abstruse subjects, according to the temper and understanding of the persons we talk with, and readily give them the advantage of deciding without obliging them to answer when they are not anxious to talk.

After having in this way fulfilled the duties of politeness, we can speak our opinions to our listeners when we find an opportunity without a sign of presumption or opinionatedness. Above all things we should avoid often talking of ourselves and giving ourselves as an example; nothing is more tiresome than a man who quotes himself for everything.

We cannot give too great study to find out the manner and the capacity of those with whom we talk, so as to join in the conversation of those who have more than ourselves without hurting by this preference the wishes or interests of others.

Then we should modestly use all the modes abovementioned to show our thoughts to them, and make them, if possible, believe that we take our ideas from them.

We should never say anything with an air of authority, nor show any superiority of mind. We should avoid far-fetched expressions, expressions hard or forced, and never let the words be grander than the matter.

It is not wrong to retain our opinions if they are reasonable, but we should yield to reason, wherever she appears and from whatever side she comes, she alone should govern our opinions, we should follow her without opposing the opinions of others, and without seeming to ignore what they say.

It is dangerous to seek to be always the leader of the conversation, and to push a good argument too hard, when we have found one. Civility often hides half its understanding, and when it meets with an opinionated man who defends the bad side, spares him the disgrace of giving way.

We are sure to displease when we speak too long and too often of one subject, and when we try to turn the conversation upon subjects that we think more instructive than others, we should enter indifferently upon every subject that is agreeable to others, stopping where they wish, and avoiding all they do not agree with.

Every kind of conversation, however witty it may be, is not equally fitted for all clever persons; we should select what is to their taste and suitable to their condition, their sex, their talents, and also choose the time to say it.

We should observe the place, the occasion, the temper in which we find the person who listens to us, for if there is much art in speaking to the purpose, there is no less in knowing when to be silent. There is an eloquent silence which serves to approve or to condemn, there is a silence of discretion and of respect. In a word, there is a tone, an air, a manner, which renders everything in conversation agreeable or disagreeable, refined or vulgar.

But it is given to few persons to keep this secret well. Those who lay down rules too often break them, and the safest we are able to give is to listen much, to speak little, and to say nothing that will ever give ground for regret.