

“Tact”

By Sir John Lubbock (1834-1913)

For success in life tact is more important than talent, but it is not easily acquired by those to whom it does not come naturally. Still something can be done by considering what others would probably wish. Never lose a chance of giving pleasure. Be courteous to all. "Civility," said Lady Montague, "costs nothing and buys everything." It buys much, indeed, which no money will purchase. Try then to win every one you meet. "Win their hearts," said Burleigh to Queen Elizabeth, "and you have all men's hearts and purses."

Tact often succeeds where force fails. Lilly quotes the old fable of the Sun and the Wind: "It is pretily noted of a contention betweene the Winde and the Sunne, who should have the victorie. A Gentleman walking abroad, the Winde thought to blowe off his cloake, which with great blastes and blusterings striving to unloose it, made it to stick faster to his backe, for the more the Winde encreased the closer his cloake clapt to his body: then the Sunne, shining with his hot beams, began to warm this gentleman, who waxing somewhat faint in his faire weather, did not only put off his cloake but his coate, which the Wynde perceiving, yeelded the conquest to the Sunne." Always remember that men are more easily led than driven, and that in any case it is better to guide than to coerce. "What thou wilt, thou rather shalt enforce it with thy smile, than hew to't with thy sword."¹

It is a good rule in politics, "*pas trop gouverner*." Try to win, and still more to deserve, the confidence of those with whom you are brought in contact. Many a man has owed his influence far more to character than to ability. Sydney Smith used to say of Francis Horner, who, without holding any high office, exercised a remarkable personal influence in the Councils of the Nation, that he had the Ten Commandments stamped upon his countenance.

Try to meet the wishes of others as far as you rightly and wisely can; but do not be afraid to say "No." Anybody can say "Yes," though it is not every one who can say "Yes" pleasantly; but it is far more difficult to say "No." Many a man has been ruined because he could not do so. Plutarch tells us that the inhabitants of Asia Minor came to be vassals only for not having been able to pronounce one syllable, which is "No." And if in the Conduct of Life it is essential to say "No," it is scarcely less necessary to be able to say it pleasantly. We ought always to endeavour that everybody with whom we have any transactions should feel that it is a pleasure to do business with us and should wish to come again. Business is a matter of sentiment and feeling far more than many suppose; every one likes being treated with kindness and courtesy, and a frank pleasant manner will often clinch a bargain more effectually than a half per cent.

Almost any one may make himself pleasant if he wishes. "The desire of pleasing is at least half the art of doing it."² and, on the other hand, no one will please others who does not desire to do so. If you do not acquire this great gift while you are young, you will find it much more difficult afterwards. Many a man has owed his outward success in life far more to good manners than to any solid merit; while, on the other hand, many a worthy man, with a good heart and kind intentions, makes enemies merely by the roughness of his manner. To be able to please is, moreover, itself a great pleasure. Try it, and you will not be disappointed.

Be wary and keep cool. A cool head is as necessary as a warm heart. In any negotiations, steadiness and coolness are invaluable; while they will often carry you in safety through times of danger and difficulty.

If you come across others less clever than you are, you have no right to look down on them. There is nothing more to be proud of in inheriting great ability, than a great estate. The only credit in either case is if they are used well. Moreover, many a man is much cleverer than he seems. It is far more easy to read books than men. In this the eyes are a great guide. "When the eyes say one thing and the tongue another, a practised man relies on the language of the first."³

Do not trust too much to professions of extreme goodwill. Men do not fall in love with men, nor women with women, at first sight. If a comparative stranger protests and promises too much, do not place implicit confidence

in what he says. If not insincere, he probably says more than he means, and perhaps wants something himself from you. Do not therefore believe that every one is a friend, merely because he professes to be so; nor assume too lightly that any one is an enemy.

We flatter ourselves by claiming to be rational and intellectual beings, but it would be a great mistake to suppose that men are always guided by reason. We are strange inconsistent creatures, and we act quite as often, perhaps oftener, from prejudice or passion. The result is that you are more likely to carry men with you by enlisting their feelings, than by convincing their reason. This applies, moreover, to companies of men even more than to individuals.

Argument is always a little dangerous. It often leads to coolness and misunderstandings. You may gain your argument and lose your friend, which is probably a bad bargain. If you must argue, admit all you can, but try and show that some point has been overlooked. Very few people know when they have had the worst of an argument, and if they do, they do not like it. Moreover, if they know they are beaten, it does not follow that they are convinced. Indeed it is perhaps hardly going too far to say that it is very little use trying to convince any one by argument. State your case as clearly and concisely as possible, and if you shake his confidence in his own opinion it is as much as you can expect. It is the first step gained.

Conversation is an art in itself, and it is by no means those who have most to tell who are the best talkers; though it is certainly going too far to say with Lord Chesterfield that "there are very few Captains of Foot who are not much better company than ever were Descartes or Sir Isaac Newton ." I will not say that it is as difficult to be a good listener as a good talker, but it is certainly by no means easy, and very nearly as important. You must not receive everything that is said as a critic or a judge, but suspend your judgment, and try to enter into the feelings of the speaker. If you are kind and sympathetic your advice will be often sought, and you will have the satisfaction of feeling that you have been a help and comfort to many in distress and trouble.

Do not expect too much attention when you are young. Sit, listen, and look on. Bystanders proverbially see most of the game; and you can notice what is going on just as well, if not better, when you are not noticed yourself. It is almost as if you possessed a cap of invisibility. To save themselves the trouble of thinking, which is to most people very irksome, men will often take you at your own valuation. "*On ne vault dans ce monde,*" says La Bruyère, "*que ce que l'on veult valoir.*" Do not make enemies for yourself; you can make nothing worse. "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him." ⁴

Remember that "a soft answer turneth away wrath;" but even an angry answer is less foolish than a sneer: nine men out of ten would rather be abused, or even injured, than laughed at. They will forget almost anything sooner than be made ridiculous. "It is pleasanter to be deceived than to be undeceived." Trasilaus, an Athenian, went mad, and thought that all the ships in the Piræus belonged to him, but having been cured by Crito, he complained bitterly that he had been robbed. It is folly, says Lord Chesterfield, "to lose a friend for a jest: but, in my mind, it is not much less degree of folly, to make an enemy of an indifferent and neutral person for the sake of a *bon-mot.*"

Do not be too ready to suspect a slight, or think you are being laughed at – to say with Scub in the Stratagem, "I am sure they talked of me, for they laughed consumedly." On the other hand, if you are laughed at, try to rise above it. If you can join in heartily, you will turn the tables and gain rather than lose. Every one likes a man who can enjoy a laugh at his own expense - and justly so, for it shows good-humour and good-sense. If you laugh at yourself, other people will not laugh at you. Have the courage of your opinions. You must expect to be laughed at sometimes, and it will do you no harm. There is nothing ridiculous in seeming to be what you really are, but a good deal in affecting to be what you are not. People often distress themselves, get angry, and drift into a coolness with others, for some quite imaginary grievance.

Be frank, and yet reserved. Do not talk much about yourself; neither of yourself, for yourself, nor against yourself: but let other people talk about themselves, as much as they will. If they do so it is because they like it,

and they will think all the better of you for listening to them. At any rate do not show a man, unless it is your duty, that you think he is a fool or a blockhead. If you do, he has good reason to complain. You may be wrong in your judgment; he will, and with some justice, form the same opinion of you.

Burke once said that he could not draw an indictment against a nation, and it is very unwise as well as unjust to attack any class or profession. Individuals often forget and forgive, but Societies never do. Moreover, even individuals will forgive an injury much more readily than an insult. Nothing rankles so much as being made ridiculous. You will never gain your object by putting people out of humour, or making them look ridiculous. Goethe in his "Conversations with Eckermann" commended our countrymen. Their entrance and bearing in Society, he said, were so confident and quiet that one would think they were everywhere the masters, and the whole world belonged to them. Eckermann replied that surely young Englishmen were no cleverer, better educated, or better hearted than young Germans. "That is not the point," said Goethe; "their superiority does not lie in such things, neither does it lie in their birth and fortune: it lies precisely in their having the courage to be what nature made them. There is no halfness about them. They are complete men. Sometimes complete fools, also, that I heartily admit; but even that is something, and has its weight."

In any business or negotiations, be patient. Many a man would rather you heard his story than granted his request: many an opponent has been tired out.

Above all, never lose your temper, and if you do, at any rate hold your tongue, and try not to show it. "Cease from anger, and forsake wrath: Fret not thyself in any wise to do evil."⁵ For "A softer answer turneth away wrath: But grievous words stir up anger."⁶ Never intrude where you are not wanted. There is plenty of room elsewhere. "Have I not three kingdoms?" said King James to the fly, "and yet thou must needs fly in my eye."⁷

Some people seem to have a knack of saying the wrong thing, of alluding to any subject which revives sad memories, or rouses differences of opinion.

No branch of Science is more useful than the knowledge of Men. It is of the utmost importance to be able to decide wisely, not only to know whom you can trust, and whom you cannot, but how far, and in what, you can trust them. This is by no means easy. It is most important to choose well those who are to work with you, and under you; to put the square man in the square hole, and the round man in the round hole. "If you suspect a man, do not employ him: if you employ him, do not suspect him."⁸ Those who trust are oftener right than those who mistrust. Confidence should be complete, but not blind. Merlin lost his life, wise as he was, for imprudently yielding to Vivien's appeal to trust her, "all in all or not at all." Be always discreet.

Keep your own counsel. If you do not keep it for yourself, you cannot expect others to keep it for you. "The mouth of a wise man is in his heart; the heart of a fool is in his mouth, for what he knoweth or thinketh he uttereth." Use your head. Consult your reason. It is not infallible, but you will be less likely to err if you do so. Speech is, or ought to be silver, but silence is golden. Many people talk, not because they have anything to say, but for the mere love of talking. Talking should be an exercise of the brain, rather than of the tongue. Talkativeness, the love of talking for talking's sake, is almost fatal to success. Men are "plainly hurried on, in the heat of their talk, to say quite different things from what they first intended, and which they afterwards wish unsaid: or improper things, which they had no other end in saying, but only to find employment to their tongue. And this unrestrained volubility and wantonness in speech is the occasion of numberless evils and vexations in life. It begets resentment in him who is the subject of it; sows the seed of strife and dissension amongst others; and inflamed little disgusts and offences, which, if let alone, would wear away of themselves."⁹

"*C'est une grande misère,*" says La Bruyère, "*que de n'avoir pas assez d'esprit pour bien parler, ni assez de jugement pour se taire.*" Plutarch tells a story of Demaratus, that being asked in a certain assembly whether he held his tongue because he was a fool, or for want of words, he replied, "A fool cannot hold his tongue." "Seest thou," said Solomon, "Seest thou a man that is hasty in his words? There is more hope of a fool than of him."¹⁰

Never try to show your own superiority: few things annoy people more than being made to feel small. Do not be too positive in your statements. You may be wrong, however sure you feel. Memory plays us curious tricks, and both ears and eyes are sometimes deceived. Our prejudices, even the most cherished, may have no secure foundation. Moreover, even if you are right, you will lose nothing by disclaiming too great certainty. In action, again, never make too sure, and never throw away a chance. "There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip." It has been said that everything comes to those who know how to wait; and when the opportunity does come, seize it. "He that wills not, when he may; when he will, he shall have nay." If you once let your opportunity go, you may never have another. "There is a tide in the affairs of men, Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune: Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat: And we must take the current when it serves, Or lose our venture." ¹¹ Be cautious, but not over-cautious; do not be too much afraid of making a mistake; "a man who never makes a mistake, will make nothing."

Always dress neatly: we must dress, therefore we should do it well, though not too well; not extravagantly, either in time or money, but taking care to have good materials. It is astonishing how much people judge by dress. Of those you come across, many go mainly by appearances in any case, and many more have in your case nothing but appearances to go by. The eyes and ears open the heart, and a hundred people will see, for one who will know you. Moreover, if you are careless and untidy about yourself, it is a fair, though not absolute, conclusion that you will be careless about other things also.

When you are in Society study those who have the best and pleasantest manners. "Manner," says the old proverb with much truth, if with some exaggeration, "maketh Man," and "a pleasing figure is a perpetual letter of recommendation."¹² "Merit and knowledge will not gain hearts, though they will secure them when gained. Engage the eyes by the elegance and harmony of your diction; and the heart will certainly (I should rather say probably) follow."¹³ Every one has eyes and ears, but few have a sound judgment. The world is a stage. We are all players, and every one knows how much the success of a piece depends upon the way it is acted.

Lord Chesterfield, speaking of his son, says, "They tell me he is loved wherever he is known, and I am very glad of it; but I would have him be liked before he is known, and loved afterwards... You know very little of the nature of mankind, if you take those things to be of little consequence; one cannot be too attentive to them; it is they that always engage the heart, of which the understanding is commonly the bubble." The Graces help a man in life almost as much as the Muses. We all know that "one man may steal a horse, while another may not look over a hedge;" and why? because the one will do it pleasantly, the other disagreeably. Horace tell us that even Youth and Mercury, the God of Eloquence and of the Arts, were powerless without the Graces.

NOTES:

¹ Shakespeare.

² Chesterfield's "Letters."

³ Emerson .

⁴ Proverbs.

⁵ Psalms.

⁶ Proverbs.

⁷ John Selden's (1584-1654) "Table Talk."

⁸ Confucius.

⁹ Dr. Joseph Butler's (1692-1752) "Sermons."

¹⁰ Proverbs xxix. 20.

¹¹ Shakespeare.

¹² Bacon.

¹³ Lord Chesterfield .