

Men of Genius Deficient in Conversation

THE student who may, perhaps, shine a luminary of learning and of genius, in the pages of his volume, is found, not rarely, to lie obscured beneath a heavy cloud in colloquial discourse.

If you love the man of letters, seek him in the privacies of his study. It is in the hour of confidence and tranquillity that his genius shall elicit a ray of intelligence, more fervid than the labours of polished composition.

The great Peter Corneille, whose genius resembled that of our Shakespeare, and who has so forcibly expressed the sublime sentiments of the hero, had nothing in his exterior that indicated his genius; on the contrary, his conversation was so insipid that it never failed of wearying. Nature, who had lavished on him the gifts of genius, had forgotten to blend with them her more ordinary ones. He did not even *speak* correctly that language of which he was such a master.

When his friends represented to him how much more he might please by not disdaining to correct these trivial errors, he would smile, and say—“*I am not the less Peter Corneille!*” Descartes, whose habits were formed in solitude and meditation, was silent in mixed company; and Thomas describes his mind by saying that he had received his intellectual wealth from nature in solid

bars, but not in current coin; or as Addison expressed the same idea, by comparing himself to a banker who possessed the wealth of his friends at home, though he carried none of it in his pocket; or as that judicious moralist Nicolle, one of the Port-Royal Society, said of a scintillant wit—“He conquers me in the drawing-room, but he surrenders to me at discretion on the staircase.” Such may say with Themistocles, when asked to play on a lute,—“I cannot fiddle, but I can make a litte village a great city.”

The deficiencies of Addison in conversation are well known. He preserved a rigid silence amongst strangers; but if he was silent, it was the silence of meditation. How often, at that moment, he laboured at some future Spectator!

Mediocrity can *talk*; but it is for genius to *observe*.

The cynical Mandeville compared Addison, after having passed an evening in his company, to “a silent parson in a tie-wig.” It is no shame for an Addison to receive the censures of a Mandeville; he has only to blush when he calls down those of a Pope.

Virgil was heavy in conversation, and resembled more an ordinary man than an enchanting poet.

La Fontaine, says La Bruyere, appeared coarse, heavy,

and stupid; he could not speak or describe what he had just seen; but when he wrote he was the model of poetry.

It is very easy, said a humorous observer on La Fontaine, to be a man of wit, or a fool; but to be both, and that too in the extreme degree, is indeed admirable, and only to be found in him. This observation applies to that fine natural genius Goldsmith. Chaucer was more facetious in his tales than in his conversation; and the Countess of Pembroke used to rally him by saying that his silence was more agreeable to her than his conversation.

Isocrates, celebrated for his beautiful oratorical compositions, was of so timid a disposition, that he never ventured to speak in public. He compared himself to the whetstone which will not cut, but enables other things to do this; for his productions served as models to other orators. Vaucanson was said to be as much a machine as any he had made.

Dryden says of himself,—“My conversation is slow and dull, my humour saturnine and reserved. In short, I am none of those who endeavour to break jests in company, or make repartees.”