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And very popular debating societies exist in various places quite apart from schools and colleges, like the mock “parliament” at Calcutta, which is conducted on the model of the procedure of the House of Commons, and to which many of the leading citizens of the town belong.

Debating societies, properly conducted, serve several useful purposes. For one thing, they promote social intercourse. Many people who otherwise would never have met, are drawn together as members of a debating society, and thus pleasant acquaintanceships and sometimes close friendships are formed.

And what was begun as a private debating society sometimes expands into a social club, with various departments for amusement, sport, and intellectual improvement. Then a good debate is not only interesting and amusing, but it also has an educative value in sharpening men’s wits and brightening their intelligence. To be a good debater one has to learn to listen carefully, to seize an opponent’s points quickly, to be able to detect the weaknesses in his arguments, to think rapidly of telling rejoinders, and generally to be mentally on the alert.

Debating also broadens the mind and encourages tolerance of other people’s opinions, it is like reading the newspapers of the opposite political party. In a debate one is obliged to hear the other side, and understand it; and a wise man in such circumstances soon learns that there are at least two sides to every question, and that truth has many aspects. But the chief use of debating societies is that they are training schools for public speaking.

Only a few can be orators; but every citizen of a free country ought to be able to express his opinions in public, if called upon to do so, clearly and cogently.

Public speaking is an art that can be learnt only by practice. And many a public speaker has learnt the art of thinking on his feet, promptly replying to criticism, speaking impromptu, and marshalling arguments, in a private debating society.

Such practiced speakers have a great advantage over others in public life, which they become members of public committees, municipalities, conferences and congresses, and legislative assemblies. The most interesting debating societies are those in which the debates are not merely academic, but practical, and lead to definite results. Such are the parliaments and legislative assemblies of the world. Democracy has been called government by discussion; and one can imagine how exciting a discussion must be when upon it depends the fall of a government, the passage or defeat of a reform that will affect millions of people, laws that may make or mar a nation, the abolition or triumph of a great public abuse. I suppose the oldest and most venerable of all such debating societies is the British House of Commons, “ the Mother of Parliaments.”