“Hullo Beauchamp! Put down that paper and join us.... Any news to-night?”

“Oh, there’s the usual amount of politics; and these d—d agitators have got up another strike! But I saw one thing in the papers that pleased me not a little; Walters has become second in command of the 200th, so I suppose he is safe to get the regiment in another four years. He has deserved his promotion well, and will be as smart a colonel as ever sat in a saddle.”

... 

“Tell us all about it, and how Walters cut you out.”

Brigade-Surgeon Beauchamp is called away from the solitary enjoyment of his newspaper to join his friends’ chatter. His friends called on him because of his reputation as a storyteller, and the first thing his companions ask him about is the news. As he sorts through his store of knowledge, he brings up and discards political news in order to relate personal details of an absent friend. When Beauchamp gives his companions a hint of the story, they ask him to recount the entire tale, starting an evening of pleasant gossip and conversation.

At first glance, such a scene is unremarkable; a group of men gather to share a story. Yet the narrator is not telling his own story. Instead, he relates a story he heard from a friend. The humorous adventures and misadventures of Walters are told secondhand. Beauchamp is doing more than simply telling a tale; he is gossiping. He is telling a story to
entertain, and equally to prove his knowledge of army affairs, South Africa, and romantic entanglements. Members of society demonstrated their knowledge of their own community both by their ability to understand gossip and to participate in its creation. Talking with fellow club members was pleasurable in particular ways because they were peers. As communication theorists explain, the “exchange of recognition” that occurs in discussions within a peer group help construct and maintain group norms. Clubmen shared in gossip, in the process forming, and policing their community. If club elections and expulsions were about keeping men out, gossip was about forging connections among those who remained.

Scholars typically examine gossip in the context of the marginalized; it is one of the “weapons of the weak” in the words of James C. Scott. Nonliterate groups most obviously continued this tradition, as did those most marginalized by print culture. Women’s historians and those who study the underclass or dispossessed have looked at the survival of oral culture as a form of subversion, as a challenge to the dominance of print, or even a critique of mainstream authority more generally. But the gossip of rich, white men was equally important for their community. The elites maintained a thriving gossip culture, though they were by no means alienated from mainstream society. Clubmen had power and control in the world, and yet they too depended on gossip as a way to regulate and control their community. If the rise of print culture stood for democracy and modernity, the continuance of elite gossip networks stood for exclusion. Clubmen needed and used the power of exclusionary gossip to monitor behavior and, more importantly, to reinforce their sense of “insider” status.

In an age when most people had access to the same ever-expanding number of print media, oral communication continued to function at a smaller, community-based level. Just as women could use the dining room to gather artists, intellectuals, and wits to share ideas and stories that might not have been appropriate in public, men found similar spaces at their clubs. The gentlemen’s clubs of London were places where men could meet to talk among their peers in private. While some talk was of the most serious matters, most club talk was gossip, and it was the everyday stories of clubland that most bound the community together. Verbal communication was not simply a tool for the dispossessed, but an integral part of elite culture.

Gossip was an intrinsic part of clubmen’s lives, but finding records of this communication is difficult. Recordings or transcripts of conversations do not exist, and much gossip has undoubtedly been lost. However,