Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

ARE WOMEN WORTH TALKING TO?

Count Tolstoi, invited to lecture in the United States before audiences largely of women, gave as a reason for refusing that he had always held three things highly foolish:

Useless Travel - Playing Cards - and

TALKING TO WOMEN!

Talking "to", not "with" women, notice. The great Russian could hardly have written "Anna Karenina", one of the profoundest studies of woman's nature that we have, had he never talked with the Annas and their sisters!

But as it is, Tolstoi attacks in his remark a widespread and flourishing American activity. Talking to women is a business in this country, and listening by women is an organized occupation. Is it all foolishness, as Tolstoi declares? Are women worth talking to? If they are not, sooner or later the bottom is going to drop out of a big national industry, for today the major part of the speakers of the country depend on women for their audiences. And these speakers run into many hundreds - men - women - usually college people, often of more or less professional achievement - giving the bulk of their time and strength to talking. They train for the work and enroll themselves for the practice with agencies

established for the purpose of handling them, and their clienteles are built up like those in other professions.

As for the women, they are organized locally and nationally to listen. There is hardly a community too small to have a group of organized listeners - a woman's club - a branch of this or that "society" or "association. The highest ambition of these groups is to "have somebody come to talk". If they are rich and exclusive, it must be the celebrity of the hour! - whether that be author, painter, politician or visiting foreigner. In the years since the war it has been the last and Womens' Clubs from New York to San Francisco have strained their resources to "bring on" men and women who have hardly made a speech in their lives, to talk to them - often in a voice that could not be heard beyond the fifth row,- of things in which they were little interested or concerned, because the owner of the voice was a famous foreigner - somebody.

It was such groups of women who two years ago paid "Margot" Asquith a thousand dollars a night for a subtilly disdainful talk which most of them detested without knowing quite why. It was a pity, for they wanted so much to be enthusiastic over her and so many of them did not dare confess they were not!

But it is not the famous who do most of the talking. The women cannot often afford them. The groups usually are listening to local speakers - men and women who travel a district - a state - in the interest of causes, of education, of various forms of propaganda, organizing, exhorting, raising funds.

The big corporations take a hand in catering to their

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

eagerness to listen and through the Middle West particularly, you will run into elaborate free lectures with moving pictures and music accompanying them - really sound, sparkling, useful, talk and illustration - given to the community by a big generous and shrewd corporation, intent on elevating folks to the point where they will buy more of their goods! The smallest town does not escape them. Getting up Meetings for these peripatetic advocates of everything under the sun seems to be the specialty of a few women. They have a talent for it and have to exercise it, so that speakers arriving on even short notice find audiences waiting for them.

When one comes to the larger towns, 25,000 - 50,000 - 100,000 - the listening groups multiply - a dozen a day at the least, as one can see from the club column or page of the daily paper; and then there are always numbers of women who make it a matter of pride to hear as many different speakers as the day permits. They hurry from one group of listening women to another - less concerned about the subject than the fame of the name of the speaker. Music overlaps politics; mysticism, domestic economy - a bewildering hodge-podge of ideas they must carry home at night.

If all audiences of women were like them, Count Tolstoi would be right - talking to women would be foolishness. Indeed, a speaker must be a hardened cynic, interested only in fees to endure their blinking eyes - their hurried flutterings - their rather pitiful efforts to find enough of what it is all about to be able to say a word of appreciation to him. without mixing him up with the speaker who went before or the one that comes after.

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

But while this class brings disrepute on our hoards of listening women, they are really but a fraction of the great whole. That whole is essentially sound in its determination to be talked to. It is made up of women who have neither time, money or opportunity to listen often to speaking. They are in the main women busy with affairs of their own. When they go to a lecture they go in the hope of getting something they think worth while.

What do they hope to get?

They seek relief from a life crowded with personal responsibilities and often hard labor - their job to which they are devoted usually, but which nevertheless is always in danger of losing savour because of the sameness and isolation.

A new person to look at - a new voice to hear - a new thought or an unusual presentation of an old one, comes as a refreshment to women whose duties hold them close to the house or desk; and to the same set of people. The speaker is justified if he does nothing more thanbring a little sense of something different to the women who are bearing the brunt of the battle keeping society steady and growing.

And the women who listen are justified if it gives them anything of the change they have learned to look on as a tonic to the depressing effect of too much sameness on their tempers and their spirits.

But it is not merely change they seek, it is contact with the outside world - something which brings them a little closer to what those they read about, hear about, admire, envy perhaps, are

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

doing and thinking. They want to "keep in touch" they say; feel that they are not "out of things". Often they bring in a speaker because "he talked in the city", just as they put in traffic regulations that may be a nuisance, not a convenience, because "that is the way they do in the city. The world must not escape them.

It isn't foolish to talk to women who are intent on keeping a grip on a flying world; although you may think you see methods by which they might do it more effectually.

But there is also a precious possibility - in the talking - which is worth all it costs a speaker: it is the chance that he may give to some sinking or unawakened individual a spur, a stimulus, a suggestion.

One cannot face a group of listening women any where in the country, outside of the purely social and exclusive groups, without seeing in at least a few faces a profound searching for something more than they are getting from life. The young women carry a direct and often a scornful challenge in their eyes. What can you tell me caught here in this dull corner of the world?

The older carry the question but there is courage, endurance and often humor in their eyes. You sense how much they have learned and are humble before their brave acceptance of life.

The speaker who can give such women the faintest spur to more courage, fresh seeking, is not in a foolish business.

No. Tolstoi was only one-tenth right - hardly that. Talking to some women is foolish - so is talking to some men - but there is

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

a great mass who are listening because of the needed change it gives their day, because they want to keep pace with the world's quick changes and most important - because a few of them seek guidance. They know they are headed for something - they are not quite sure what - can the speaker give them a lift?

Such women are worth talking to - worth even Count Tolstoi's time. Nobody is too good for them.

We must not forget that women are in a state of transition-revaluing all things. The most hopeful thing about the present stage is that they are so willing to be talked to. You can depend on them in the long run - the big mass at least - to find who is worth listening to just as speakers find the groups it is foolish to talk to. More and more the question is going to be not - Are women worth talking to? - but - Is the speaker worth listening to?

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.