

THE TALKATIVE WOMAN

Talkativeness is a hall mark of femininity. A silent woman may be admirable but she stirs uneasiness. She is like a moon in eclipse, mysterious, and fascinating but not for daily life. The new woman bent on making over the sex is contemptuous of talkativeness. To allow the simple interests of daily life to run unconsciously and merrily off the tongue does not harmonize with the strenuous career she has planned for woman-kind. Not that she would shut her mouth. Far from it. She would make her a conversationalist, not a talker. There is the same distinction between the two that there is between the agriculturist and the farmer. There is the same term of life for while the agriculturist is an experimenter for a day, the farmer goes on for ever. For a habit which persists through the ages, in the face of censure and ridicule as woman's talkativeness has, there is a reason. Generally it lies in the depths of life where critics do not always explore. May it not be that woman's persisting habit of chattering has its reason!

One morning last spring I found myself side tracked in a Pullman sleeper. The train stood in a lovely wooded spot where birds sang and early flowers bloomed. The car was perfectly silent until there came in from breakfast a late pair - a young mother and a child possibly two years old. Scarcely were they seated when the chattering began. It was the subject matter of it which quickly caught my ear. "Wobin, wobin," shouted the child suddenly. "See, see?" "Yes the mother said - "Robin, Robin what?" Wobin wed best" promptly said the youngster. "Sing, wobin, sing" he ordered. "What's that?" asked the mother pointing to a blue bird swinging gaily on a limb near the car. He replied hesitatingly. "No, blue bird - and so it went on an excited watching and chattering over the birds that filed the trees. How a child so young could have learned to distinguish form and color in birds as this one had - how it had acquired so lively and genuine interest in them excited my curiosity to such a point that I sought an interview. Is he as young as he looks and how did you do it? was the burden of my questions. "Twenty months," the mother said - and as to how it started it was my chattering to him as I tried to amuse him with a picture book of birds. When I saw he was trying to speak the names, that he caught the colors and forms I led him on. Last winter I took him to the Natural History Museum and found he was able to distinguish several of the birds in the cases. So we've gone on. He has

knows a few notes. He's learning many words but of course what I prize are the habits of observation and of comparison he's acquiring. He is really becoming quite an attentive child.

I did not find in my bridg talks with the woman whether or not she had ever studied psychology. It did not matter, she was doing better for she was discovering the stuff from which that science is made. She had found that in the education of children, interest is at the bottom of learning and that interest comes from going over and over all the various features of the thing - letting one lead to another. Perhaps she knew already James' rule for cultivating attention. "The conditio sine qua non" if sustained attention to a given topic of thought is that we should roll it over and over incessantly and consider different aspects and relations of it in turn." Perhaps she knew that James had declared that - "an education which should improve this faculty -(that of "sustained attention") would be the education par excellence" but as I say she had something better - something that many who learn the laws and rules never know she had discovered the truth on which the laws are framed.

In this little experience is wrapped up the chief reason why talkativeness has persisted among women. One of her chief obligations has always been teaching the child to talk. It could only be done by incessant repetition, going over and over the names of things until his ear caught the sound, his tongue framed it. It is not difficult to sustain the thesis that if it were not for the chattering of women, the child would never learn to talk. It has been done with grace and wit by one of the most brilliant French contemporary writers, Remy de Gourmont. He even goes so far as to declare that this chattering of women is a more important library service than the writing of poems or philosophies.

There is no one probably that will deny that the first words a child attempts to speak are mere imitations of sounds -- that they mean no more to him than sounds do to a parrot. When he begins to imitate there is always or should be a woman besides him repeating, smiling, encouraging him. The play goes on, month in and month out. With infinite patience she chatters to him until consciousness is aroused. Then rapidly his education goes on. As it was doing in the case of my pair in the sleeper, words are attached to objects; facts about objects are perceived; their form, their color, their odor, their relations to the little learner. The words for all these perceptions are slowly gathered in. Then the child learns to compare, to distinguish values -- to remember not merely the sounds he learns but the meanings of those sounds. His mind is opened to the world, and through a woman's chattering!

"When he leaves her hands at six or seven," says M. de Gourmont he is a man; that is he talks, which is what makes a man. "The great intellectual work of women" he goes on "is teaching language." The grammarians claim that they do it, which is absurd. Children know how to talk before they go to school. They already use all the forms of the verb; all the ^{shades} of syntax easily and correctly. The school master teaches them that a certain form which they use is the imperfect of the subjunctive, but that is not teaching them language. Language is a function, grammar is the analysis of that function. It is as useless to know grammar in order

to speak a language as it is to understand physiology in order to breath with the lungs or walk with the legs. This power of language the child gets from the woman. It is her honor that later he will use it as a poet, novelist, philosopher or moralist; or to use Nietzsche's strong phrase as a "creator of values."

Take this view of it -- and who shall or can dispute its truth? -- and how infinitely more valuable to the world is the chatter of women than all the books they ever wrote or oration they ever delivered. It is of that fundamental order of things, without which cultivation, even civilization, could not go on.

But feminine talkativeness plays another role almost as important as this of teacher and preserver of human speech. It is that of entertainer and consoler. There is none other so universal and on the whole so sure of its mark -- story-telling, song-singing, sports and dancing combined have not done more in the world to break the dismal strain of fatigue, of pain, of discouragement than the gay talk of women. Here is what I mean, picked up in a hospital. A young woman was facing a dangerous operation and revolting bitterly against the situation. Her mother was sent for her. She came full of dread and anguish, Without a sign of what was in her own heart, she established herself by the bed, chattering for hours of things at home -- the amusing sayings of the new Scotch cook, the tricks of the last puppy, the of the neighborhood chatter. Yes, God send chatter based on a profound, if instructive sense of the human heart and its needs, the revolt. This sort of service is part of the daily life of women. It is one of the great consoling forces of society. It makes the daily hardships and efforts of millions of people endurable, not for any knowledge it , not for the brilliance or wisdom or importance but purely as a natural expression of the devotion , the sympathy, the affection that the chatterer feels for another.

But it is so idle, so silly, this chatter! Nothing is idle or silly which is born of an unselfish impulse to amuse, to amuse or console another. Talk becomes silly only when it is selfish, vain, pretentious, no matter what the subject; it is tedious and uninteresting when it springs from one of these roots. There never

yet was a satirist so cruel that he found material in the talk of a woman directed to teaching her child to speak, to the soothing of a worn-out husband, the consoling of a suffering friend. Their effects become beautiful and sacred because of their interest. One sees only that and thinks not at all of the things said. It is not these women who have made talkativeness a reproach. It is those who are contemplative of such common services, those who consider no talk worth while unless the subject matter is what they call "intellectual" -- that is as a rule outside of the matter of which they really know such. The satirist never had fairer game than the woman who, convinced that conversation depends for quality in subjects, sets out deliberately to gather up facts and ideas in order that she may talk about them. It has become an activity -- this of feeding for talk. There are teachers who weekly tell women what has gone on in the world in order that these women may appear to be familiar with current events. There are other teachers who make digests of books and articles for them to speak of -- others who tell them what to think of new music, new movements, new plays. They use their conscientiously gleaned information with confidence and fluency, convinced that they are elevating society. There is plenty of material in our American cities and towns to justify Don Marquis in his lively conversation of Hermione and her "Little Group of Advanced Thinkers." These serious young women feel themselves "forced to take up many things to keep abreast of modern thought." They find it hard work but reflect that it is a duty they "owe the race" "which makes the sacrifice easier." They feel it important to understand the French Revolution -- the Gaillaux trial led them to this conclusion! -- "So" says Hermione "we took it up one evening and studied it thoroughly." Heredity -- they heard of and to understand it spent an evening on sea urchins, -- at least Hermione thinks it is heredity, in connection with which they studied the sea urchin "though it may have been in connection with biology - or - or --"

Possibly Hermione is less trying, than the young woman who talked without ever having taken up any subject seriously for even one evening. It depends upon which of the two you are listening to. But all this is not saying that the woman who uses her tongue for another's benefit has no need of intellectual equipment. There is nobody needs it more. But she must have the real thing not the superficial - she cannot teach her child or console her friend with faked interest, themes hastily picked up between lunch and tea time from the lips of a purveyor of facts. She must know and feel and delight in what she talks about. Her purposes are so deep in the heart of things they cannot be reached by light-plumes. The more she really knows and sees and appreciates, the better she can do her work. All the education and cultivation she can get is none too much for one who leads a little child to consciousness, who lifts the heavy burdens of life from the shoulders of friend or mate.

It is ^{so} natural for the normal woman to talk as for the bird to sing. It is the spontaneous expression and giving of herself. It is this naturalness which gives to her talkativeness its perennial charm as well as its incaluable value in the scheme of things. The woman in the human group is much like the Monarch in Eberle Mills's delightful tale

of that name. "Why do people call me the Monarch? Why am I loved? Why always happy? Because he explains. "I always have time to talk. Without me the people around here would be bored to death, I go and come, laugh and sing, I cost nothing but a glass of wine, and a bit of supper. What do I give? I give myself." The woman gives herself.