

THE ANTIDOTE

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ON TALKING SHOP.

It is very wrong to talk shop. This is one of Society's most venerated precepts, even if it is one of the least obeyed. Not to know it, is not to know the rudimentary duty toward our neighbor, the duty of social religion; and to enforce it, as occasion may require, of course must be the duty of every self-respecting member of society, because if you fall among shop-talkers, whose shop is not the same kind as yours, you may get thrown into the back-ground. The predicament is serious.

It is not only that you may be prevented from taking part in a conversation with your accustomed cleverness, but that you may have to hold your tongue altogether; and in spite of so many compliments paid to silence by the many wise people who have wished to do all the talking themselves, people are apt to assume that when a man says nothing in company, it is because he can find nothing to say; and at any rate, no one likes to play the part of the mummy at the Egyptian banquet, to be the blank guest, whose silence conveys a protest against the whole proceedings, and concerning whom the other guests must needs feel that the best they can do for him, is to let him alone. He who finds himself in such a pass, will no more doubt that it is a vice to talk shop, than he would doubt that it is a vice not to pay one's debts, if somebody else persevered in owing him an inconveniently large sum of money.

And yet there is something to be said on behalf of shop. The rule of society no doubt is, that we should talk of what we do not know, rather than of what we do know. Still there are many men, and doubtless women also, who are absolutely unable to obey the rule—except negatively—by not talking of anything at all. Women who mix much with the world of society, readily acquire the knack of talking companionably, of what they know nothing about. A great many women indeed, seem less to acquire it than to have it as a birthright, as the poet is born, not made. Obedience to the rule sets upon them as early and as fitly as the fur-

belows and gauzes in which a man would find himself like a fly in a cobweb.

Therefore women, even women with specialties, very rarely talk shop, and talk part under the fear of those fatal terms, "blue," "gushing," "strong-minded," and partly from a sort of mental prudery—one which has its good side, but also its bad—which objects as it were to the real woman being too accurately scanned, they more usually shrink from any discussion of subjects in which they feel a close interest. But there is a large reckoning of men who never arrive at being able to talk on subjects, about which they have neither information nor concern; and the question is, whether in their case it is not worth while to relax the stringency of the rule.

Suppose a man's shop so engrosses him, that it really is the only thing he knows or cares about. He is not uneducated, perhaps not even narrow-minded, but his intellect is not of the much-embracing order, and his profession or his purpose has so absorbed his intellectual sympathies, that just as if he were some great artist, all he sees and learns gets somehow, dove-tailed or mixed up, in the one theme of his life. Whenever circumstances have led to a man's occupying his time and his thoughts, in one especial manner, with any sort of zeal, he will unconsciously acquire such a readiness in detecting everything that has the remotest affinity for his paramount topic, that it can never be quite out of his memory. There will always be the temptation to get back to it. Set him down where you will, some byway brings him back to the familiar road. Cleverness will not place him out of risk. Indeed the cleverer he is, the more likely he is to become, to this extent, the slave of his shop.

This of course is not meant of the man of genius, the many-sided man, but of the busy practical man of ordinary life. Say that he is of more than average intellect, that he has talent, and still better, a wise and honest love for his science, his art, or whatever may be the name of his work, he will be at a disadvantage, as compared with the man who, failing either in the ability or in the energy, necessary for concentration, has been enabled to learn a little plausible ignorance on a good many topics of general interest. Now such concentration may be damaging to the balance of his mind, and without doubt the concentration is detrimental to him as a conversationalist, lessening the area, over which his tongue can travel. But since the man is so badly off, that there is only class of

subjects on which he can enter readily, may there not be something gained for his associates, as well as for himself, in letting him go his own way?

If one found oneself in the company of the philosopher who has concentrated his life on the dative case, it might be better to put him to discourse on that subject, than to elicit his dullness on the weather. One might not succeed in achieving even a temporary sympathy with his fervor, but one would have at least have learned something about the dative case; and a man must be very stupid indeed, or else his listener must be very stupid, if he can talk freely and earnestly on a subject which thoroughly interests him, without the listener's becoming interested, if not in the subject, at least in the interest it has for its exponent. Nor need the listener's interest be lessened, surely if he is hearing several men, skilled and eager in some special pursuit, talking with each other, instead of only one such man talking with him.

Thus there are exceptions to every rule—even in society.

READINGS, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE.

Readings, public and private, are becoming quite fashionable again. Nym Crinkle declares that there are at least 5,000 girls in New York who have "the mark of elocution on their snowy brows." The female reader as a rule, he says, "has a book in her hand, but does not refer to it. Not to have a book would be to recite, and there is a broad line between a reciter and a reader. One is supposed to be intellectual, the other dramatic. One is literary, the other stagy. One sticks to poetry, the other strikes off a little on pantomime. As a rule husbands will put up with moderate reciters, but they will not tolerate readers. Besides the reader always has you at a disadvantage so long as she has the book in her hand. She can read the whole of Manfred or Coriolanus, and not break down, but the reciter, thank heaven, can't. There is a wise provision of nature which ordains that memory shall not be equal to misery." Young ladies, and those not so young who give readings from Faust and Childe Harold and Robert Browning are indifferent to the sufferings of the opposite sex. But after the first hour the male begins to groan. The second hour makes him hate his species. One reader in Philadelphia recently gave her audience 200 pages at one sitting, and a morning paper said that she was better acquainted with her author than her victims. We have