

THE ANTIDOTE

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INFALLIBILITY. (2)

There are always risks of these excellent infallible persons being compelled to make themselves disagreeable in society; there is no telling at what moment it may not be their duty to remonstrate with us; it may be in our theology or in our taste in cookery we have erred, in our conception of the Fishery Question, or in our sentiments as to blue china; in our respective appreciations of George Eliot and Miss Broughton's styles of literature, or of Miss Jones' and Miss Robinson's styles of dress. For the blame of the heresy is in differing from them, and the greater or less of the subject-matter is of no moment, so regarded. Thus they are called on to break our heads with their precious balms on a miscellaneous variety of occasions of which there is no possible forewarning for us. The part of echo is the safest one to play with them, but though a good deal may be made of it with tact and attentiveness, it cannot always be carried out in society with the requisite completeness; in the exchange of conversation the turns of the talkers inevitably get shifted, and an echo that has to speak first may too usually fail to reproduce what is going to be said to it. No matter how docile we are, sooner or later we do our echoing with a blunder; and then, of course, we have to be reprovved. The infallible people do not always lose their tempers very badly with us—sometimes they are sorry for us; and a good many of them, even if they are resentful, know how to avoid down-right rudeness; but under the most favorable circumstances reproof falls congenially on discourse. Being contradicted may be tolerable, and being argued with is rather pleasantly stimulating, but being put under discipline

of having to consider one's self reprimanded, is a social penance of an altogether aggravating character; and the necessity of inflicting it under which the possessors of infallibility labor, makes that quality decidedly less pleasant to the companions of those who possess than it is to themselves.

But it is about meaningless matters and in closest intimacy that infallible persons are most depressing to the spirits—in matters, that is, of mere personal tastes and habits. The poor creature of us all considers himself licensed to, be his own authority on those points, provided he transgresses no law or custom, or courtesy, and harms neither himself nor anybody else, but may, he believes, have his own opinion as to what is enjoyable and what is comfortable, and what amuses him. He will be guided in the great things of thought and practical life by duly constituted precedents as a prudent man should; but in the minor details of existence, those which can affect no one but himself, he will allow himself opinions of his own. But unhappily often, for domestic peace, it is just in such details that infallible people can least bear dissimilarity from their ideas. If the dissimilarity is in matters of opinion, and on large subjects, why, people are not stating their creeds, theological, political, or social, every day, nor acting upon them every day; and so there are intervals of abeyance, and the dissimilarity, not being an everlasting fret, may be forgotten for long periods, and, so being forgotten, lessen into nothing. But if the dissimilarity is in some small point of mere taste or convenience, taking visible form and of frequent repetition, there is a recurring assertion of it, an ostentation of it, as it were, in action, which, to a person of infallible temperament is infinitely aggressive.

If, for instance, your wife taking her notions for a final law, has resolved that nobody can wash in unwarmed water with impunity, and you persist in taking unwarmed baths and being the better for them, you are daily outraging her sense of right, and vexing

her with a slur on the certainty of her knowledge of what everybody ought to do. Consequently each added bath is an added wrong, and each day begins with what your wife feels to be on your part a rebellion—not a rebellion against her—for she claims no control, but against the immediate truth of things as proved by the belief in her mind.

Or, supposing it is you who are infallible, and your wife will not,—on the plea that they swell her feet and make her head ache and spoil her boots,—wear rubbers, although you think wearing rubbers would be just the thing for her health and comfort. Of course every time she went out in wet weather, protected by mere double soles and rubberless, she would be aiming a blow at your peace of mind and convincing you of her fatal unfitness and even of her irrefragable sense of things as they ought to be. More married discord comes in all probability from the infallibility of one, or still worse, of both of the partners, than from all real wrong that goes or might go to the Divorce Courts. "Incompatibility," means that both partners are infallible. It is best explained in a case not of man and wife, but of brother and sister—or perhaps of two sisters—in the simple and pregnant lines—

"Molly, my sister, and I fell out,
And what do you think it was all about?

She liked coffee, and I liked tea,
And that was the reason we could not agree."

It is evident that even if Molly and the other person—brother or sister—had only one meal a day at which they drank tea or coffee, as the case might be, the frequency of the action for reproof and recrimination between them, each infallible and bent on mending the other's taste and practice, would be as great as to alienate affection in, say, if they were very genuinely attached to begin with, two years', and once a day is too frequent for two infallible people to find each other obstinately wrong in.

The proper, but wholly uninfal-