

The uses of debate : being the inaugural address, delivered 11th November 1904, at the foundation of the Women's Medical Society / by G. A. Gibson.

Contributors

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Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh

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The Uses of

Being the Inaugural
Lecture of the
Foundation of the
Society, by G.
D.Sc., F.R.C.P.

EDINBURGH
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EDINBURGH:
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The Uses of Debate.

THE best way to utilise the opportunity provided by your kindness is to make an attempt to say something useful. The occasion of our gathering is indeed of much interest. We have met to inaugurate a Women's Medical Society. In the names of many friends to the medical education of women, amongst whom you have been so good as to include me, it is my duty to offer you our hearty congratulations on this new departure. It is undoubtedly a move in the right direction ; it will serve to fill up a void in the education of medical women, and therefore to round off their course of study.

The words of Bacon have become so trite that many feel a natural tendency to shun them. There is, however, probably nowhere in literature anything more apt than his remarks on reading, talking, and writing. "Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man ; and, therefore, if a man write little, he had need have a good memory ; if he confer little, he had need have a present wit ; and if he read little, he had need have much cunning, to seem to know that he doth

not." In this terse summary of the matter of studies, we have the whole substance of education. The part with which we are this evening mainly concerned is that which refers to discussion—"If he confer little, he had need have a present wit."

Now there can be no question of the profound importance of debate as one of the means of education. It is probable that some of you may at times look into the wise pages of the quaint old cynic Montaigne. One of his essays, entitled "*De l'Art de Conferer*," is devoted to the theme of discussion. In it he remarks: "*Le plus fructueux et naturel exercice de nostre esprit, c'est, à mon gré, la conference: i'en treuve l'usage plus doux que d'aucune autre action de nostre vie; et c'est la raison pourquoy, si i'estois asture forcé de choisir, ie consentiroy plustost, ce croy ie, de perdre la veue, que l'ouyr ou le parler*" It may be taken for granted that these remarks will by most of us be cordially endorsed. If that be so, there need be little tarrying over this introduction on the advantages of discussion and debate, and we may pass on to consider in some detail the uses of a medical society.

Amongst the important uses of such a society the first place must be given to the possibilities it affords of learning facts and hearing opinions. Even to its most junior member, who sits in that condition aptly defined by Seton Merri-

man as "affable silence," the progress of a discussion is fertile in lessons from the force, not so much of precept, as of example. Even those of us who have reached middle life know well how much we still learn from a well-conducted debate, and this is even more noteworthy in more tender years. Amongst the sonorous periods of that great writer Junius, there is a sentence which has, for more years than I would like to say, deeply impressed me: "Grateful, as I am, to the Good Being, whose bounty has imparted to me this reasonable intellect, whatever it is, I hold myself proportionately indebted to him, from whose enlightened understanding another ray of knowledge communicates to mine." No words of mine are needful to emphasise the importance of discussion as a means of acquiring information.

Closely related to this aspect of the question is the great value of debate in testing phenomena and theories. It is to be hoped that no one enters upon discussion with any other aim than the search for truth, and from the disputations which are the life and soul of all debating societies we learn to "prove all things." Many appearances are at first alluring, and tend to lead the observer away from the real facts of any matter under consideration; the more light thrown upon it from every side, the more likely we are to attain to the truth. The end and aim of debate

must be not to dispute, but to ascertain the absolute fact. "What Tully says of war," Pope observes, "may be applied to disputing; it should always be so managed as to remember that the only true end of it is peace; but generally true disputants are like true sportsmen, their whole delight is in the pursuit, and a disputant no more cares for truth than the sportsman for the hare." The disputant whom Pope had in his mind must have been of the type so aptly delineated by Butler in "Hudibras."

Again, one of the principal aims of an ideal society is to furnish an occasion for teaching. We may assume it as an undoubted truth that it is within the power of every one to add to the store of information. In this connection, a remark of the gifted Hugh Miller may be quoted. "It cannot," he says, "be too extensively known that nature is vast and knowledge limited, and that no individual, however humble in place or acquirement, need despair of adding to the general fund." We have been taught on high authority that the utterances even of babes and sucklings are of the greatest value, and although this has not yet been admitted as applicable without reservation to scientific results, yet we must not, we dare not, close our minds to possibilities of this kind. It is one of the chief glories of the medical branch of modern science that its members are bound by a universal code of honour to bring forward

for the general good of mankind any results or methods by which humanity may be assisted. This is as true of opinions as of facts. What says Herbert Spencer? "The highest truth the wise man sees he will fearlessly utter: knowing that, let what may come of it, he is thus playing his right part in the world—knowing that if he can effect the change he aims at—well: if not—well also; but not *so* well."

In addition to these great aims of debate there are certain other points to which your attention may well be attracted. They may be summed together under the category of methods. Beyond all question, a matter of real importance is to acquire the art of expressing ideas. It is no use to have a mind seething with the results even of a magnificent imagination if the owner of that mind is condemned by force of circumstances to sit as mute as a fish. One of the old traditions which used to linger about the Royal Medical Society in my time was that a certain distinguished man, who had for two or three years been a most diligent member of that ancient body, had never risen to his feet to address his colleagues. On one ever-to-be-remembered evening, this gentleman, with burning thoughts struggling for utterance, rose to his feet. But when he saw fifty or sixty pairs of eyes turned upon him with eager inquiry, the effect on his utterance was so inhibitory that

he carefully walked to the fireplace, seized the poker, administered a stimulating application to the embers, and quietly returned to his seat. It seems to me a duty which each of us owes to himself or herself to cultivate the art of speaking in public. Gruff old Samuel Johnson makes the remark: "For my own part, I think it is more disgraceful never to try to speak, than to try it and fail; as it is more disgraceful not to fight, than to fight and be beaten." Cicero is perfectly correct when he remarks in one of his letters to his son:—"Speech is a great power in the world." When well managed, a power of expressing ideas is of inestimable importance. In saying this, you will not misunderstand me. It is far from my intention to convey the impression that mere glibness of utterance is of any value whatsoever. Swift cannot be gainsaid when he remarks: "The common fluency of speech in many men and most women is owing to a scarcity of matter and scarcity of words." What is wanted is clearness of thought and lucidity of expression—"Non fumum ex fulgore, sed ex fumo dare lucem."

Once more, we all learn by experience the wisdom of preserving silence. "Blessed is the man," says George Eliot, "who, having nothing to say, abstains from giving us wordy evidence of the fact, from calling us to look through a heap of millet seed in order

to be sure that there is no pearl in it." One of the greatest men of last century, who was largely responsible for remodelling the map of Europe, was said to have a magnificent faculty of silence in ten languages. Carlyle, that great apostle of silence, who preached its virtues in a vast number of volumes, hits off the true aspect of the question with singular felicity in the "Latter-Day Pamphlets": "Talk, except as the preparation for work, is worth almost nothing;—sometimes it is worth infinitely less than nothing; and becomes, little conscious of playing such a fatal part, the general summary of pretentious nothingnesses, and the chief of all the curses the Posterity of Adam are liable to in this sublunary world. Would you discover the Atropos of Human Virtue; the sure Destroyer, 'by painless extinction,' of Human Veracities, Performances, and Capabilities to perform or to be veracious—it is this, you have it here.

"Unwise talk is matchless in un-wisdom. Unwise work, if it but persist, is everywhere struggling towards correction, and restoration to health; for it is still in contact with Nature, and all Nature incessantly contradicts it, and will heal it or annihilate it: not so with unwise talk, which addresses itself, regardless of veridical Nature, to the universal suffrages; and can, if it be dextrous, find harbour there till all the suffrages are bankrupt and gone to

Houndsditch, Nature not interfering with her protest till then. False speech, definable as the acme of unwise speech, is capable, as we already said, of becoming the falsest of all things. Falsest of all things:—and whither will the general deluge of that, in Parliament and Synagogue, in Book and Broadside, carry you and your affairs, my friend, when once they are embarked on it as now?"

Lastly, amongst methods comes another subject of vital interest, to learn in discussion the necessity of give and take. As might be expected, the rugged lexicographer had a somewhat crude idea of debate. You will find in Boswell's "Life," to which reference has already been made, a terse summary of the worthy doctor's views. "Talking of oratory, Mr Wilkes described it as accompanied with all the charms of poetical expression. Johnson: 'No, sir, oratory is the power of beating down your adversaries' arguments, and putting better in their place.'" Here, you observe, there is nothing of the "sweet reasonableness" which the late Matthew Arnold was never tired of inculcating. Undoubtedly one of the great results of discussion as an educative force is to teach perfect courtesy in listening to opinions that do not commend themselves to reason. Opposition is the very soul of debate, and Goethe puts the whole matter in a nutshell when he remarks to Ecker-

mann: "What we agree with leaves us negative, but contradiction makes us productive." In the admirable essay by the late Archbishop of Canterbury, entitled "The Education of the World," published long ago in the celebrated "Essays and Reviews," you will find this idea beautifully expressed: "Lastly, he learns much by contradiction. The collision of society compels him to state his opinions clearly; to define them; to modify them when indefensible; perhaps to surrender them altogether, consciously or unconsciously; still more often to absorb them into larger and fuller thoughts, less forcible, but more comprehensive." It is one of the most remarkable traits of political life in this country that the keenest opponents are often the closest friends. In the interchange of opinion, even in the hottest debate, the official and the personal aspects are kept apart. You will no doubt remember, in the memorable trial depicted by Dickens, how Pickwick was horrified because his counsel and Mr Serjeant Buzfuz greeted each other amicably on the assembling of the Court. In this Mr Pickwick is depicted rather as a child of nature than as a man of the world. In earlier states of society, the official and the personal have been more apt to become confused. On the Statute Book of the Royal Medical Society there stands a law that no further meeting on the following morning shall be

allowed to take place in consequence of any expressions used in debate. On account of its venerable antiquity, that law is cherished by the Royal Medical Society as one of its most valued possessions. If we look into a still more primitive type of society, we shall find that the conduct of discussion is often a matter of considerable delicacy. That great humorist, Bret Harte, has given expression to the difficulty of debate in his graphic description of the scientific fracas that broke up the Society upon the Stanislaus. We are all liable to become engrossed in the matters with which we are engaged, even to the length of dreaming about them.

“Atque in qua ratione fuit contenta magis
mens,
In somnis eadem plerumque videmur
obire.”

So says the immortal author of the “Nature of Things.” And when we are thus wrapped up in our ideas it comes as a shock to have them seriously assailed, mayhap overthrown. Thus it follows that frank criticism is not always grateful to the recipient, even if he be a minister of grace. There is much truth in the picture given us by the genius of Lesage; his hero, by the candid expression of his opinion of the Archbishop’s sermons, alienated his friendship. You will remember that the famous scene terminates with the forcible words of the prelate: “Adieu,

monsieur Gil Blas; je vous souhaite toute sorte de prospérités, avec un peu plus de goût."

To sum up these somewhat rambling remarks—to gather the different threads into some kind of web, let me finally remark that the supreme value of all discussion lies in the formation of character and the foundation of friendships. Learning in the storm and stress of daily discussion to turn to advantage all the possibilities of education which it holds out, you will become by degrees at once more reliant and more tolerant—stronger in defence of views you deem to be right, while gentler in listening to opinions you consider wrong. In this way you learn to shun the policy of *laissez faire*; to shrink from listless acquiescence in mere tradition; to condemn lifeless acceptance of inherited belief—in a word, you arrive, after reflection, at the great truth, "Man cannot, though he would, live chance's fool."

Again in respect of the all-important matter of friendship. In one of Emerson's most valuable and most valued essays he dwells upon this subject. "What is so excellent," he asks, "as strict relations of amity, when they spring from this deep root? The sufficient reply to the sceptic, who doubts the power and the furniture of man, is in that possibility of joyful intercourse with persons which makes the faith and practice of all reasonable men. I

know nothing which life has to offer so satisfying as the profound good understanding which can subsist after much exchange of good offices between two virtuous men, each of whom is sure of himself, and sure of his friend. It is a happiness which postpones all other gratifications, and makes politics, and commerce, and churches cheap."

Holding then such views, it is a sincere pleasure to have an opportunity to offer you the hearty congratulations of myself and of many other friends of yours who are here this evening, on the foundation of a Medical Society for Women. We know, from our experience in having had, in the past or in the present, the honour of being your teachers, with what earnestness and enthusiasm you will set about the work to which you have put your hands, and we are confident that this new movement will not only be of signal value to each and all of you personally as a means of personal education, but also of profound importance to the Medical College for Women, and to the cause of which that institution is the outward emblem. We fervently hope that ere-long the Society will take its place as one of the widely recognised academic shrines of "the grey metropolis of the north," and fondly picture to ourselves that in a few years each and all of you, looking back through the intervening vista of time, may be able to think of your meetings in somewhat

of the spirit expressed by the great Laureate :—

“ When each by turns was guide to each,
And Fancy light from Fancy caught,
And Thought leapt out to wed with
Thought
Ere Thought could wed itself with Speech ;

And all we met was fair and good,
And all was good that Time could bring,
And all the secrets of the Spring
Moved in the chambers of the blood.”



