

¶Mind your own business.

## GOSSIP—HAVE YOU HEARD?

ONE queer thing about gossip is that often you are likely to be especially positive in statement when you are most unsure. I heard once from my hairdresser that my children were adopted. Another customer had told her so. It was interesting news to me, because I had contradictory memories of bringing those children into the world very personally. But the hairdresser said that her customer had told her exactly when and how I had adopted them and had even given in full my reasons for doing it.

Another fascinating bit of biography about myself that I picked up the other day was that I cannot write except when I am in bed, and that I often go to a hospital for months in order to get privacy to write and, I suppose, plenty of beds.

It sounds very restful, but as I always go to sleep when I touch a pillow, and my total hospitalization in four years has been three days, I honestly don't quite believe it. Still, it was told on "the best authority."

The customary defense of gossip is that it is "harmless", which means that it doesn't seriously affect the life of the

person who is talked about. But the individual who cannot keep his tongue off other people's affairs usually sharpens it upon them. That character known as a "kindly gossip" is mythical.

Candidates for high office are almost invariably accused of family and personal scandal, of extra ladies or impending divorces, and such gossip spreads like wildfire among the electorate which is least conscientious and informed. It does two kinds of harm. First, it is usually unjust to the candidate; and second, it diverts the minds of the voters from the issues which should concern them. Many people capable of fine service will not allow themselves to appear before the public in any capacity, because they know that it is increasingly hard for any prominent person to protect himself or his family from gossip or even from blackmail. Usually false gossip cannot ruin a man or a woman. But it can humiliate and enrage a person past the point of endurance, until he refuses all publicity and so drops out of useful public service.

Men and women of supposedly good taste set the coun-

try a bad example by finding newspaper gossip columns so absorbing. We laugh at the "small-town attitude," but it sometimes seems to me that people in cities are adopting the worst of the small-town attitude without the best of it, which is neighborliness. This terrible greed for personal details is nothing except gossip carried to the *n*th degree.

There are some good columns of information about people printed—those which tell the kind of fact which adds real color to the individuality of the world and do not intrude on the decent privacy of living. Knowledge of human beings is fascinating, of course. We want and we need to discuss the personalities of heroes and great men and fine women and failures and successes and criminals, because if we are to understand what makes people tick, sometimes we must take them apart. But we ought to be careful to put them together again. And if we are going to talk about people, we ought to carry both our thoughts and our conversation farther and let our talk grow from the personal subject to the impersonal one.

I know some women who are totally deaf when the conversation becomes generous or tends to praise of another per-

son. They will never, you may be sure, ask if you have heard how good Mr. Smith was to his sister or how well young Clare's recital went. No. They only want to tell you that the Leavitts have just bought another new car, and that the rumor is that those two at last are to be divorced.

But not everyone is like that. Some are deaf to *triviality*. Their ears are too full of the noises of great events, or else they are listening too closely for the sounds of real tragedy or real happenings to hear this other clatter. And these are the most restful people in the world.

I recall another comment I heard the other night after some hours of conversation. "It's been so pleasant," said one woman. "We didn't talk personalities!"

The strange thing was that we had talked personalities. We had talked about Mussolini and Hitler. We had talked about several people in Washington, very seriously and personally. We had discussed office-holders here and there. We had talked about the success of a New York play and its leading actress. But I knew what she meant.—*Margaret Cushman Banning, condensed from Ladies Home Journal.*

