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## EAVESDROPPING FOR EVERYONE

(Written for "The Listener" by E.H.W.)

OF late the gentle pastime of Collecting, once innocently devoted to sea-shells, stamps, cigarette cards and the like, has acquired a wicked uncle, Hoarding, who busies himself with Supply and Demand and Black Markets. To clear yourself from any suspicion of having truck with this villain, and yet avoid inhibiting your acquisitive instinct, it is wise to turn your attention to intangible items for your collection. So I offer the suggestion that you become a snapper up of unconsidered trifles of Conversation.

You will need no equipment beyond a ready ear. Running costs are nil. The field extends itself everywhere, and wherever two or three are gathered together you have an opportunity for enlarging your collection. It causes the

into two broad groups. (These of course may be subdivided in turn under such headings as Domestic, Anatomical, etc.)

(1) *Unfinished Snatches*: which sometimes give a frustrated feeling and have the same effect as "Kubla Khan," in that they make you want to hear before and after.

(2) *Finished Pieces*: which are complete commentaries or philosophies in themselves—gems which need no setting.

In the latter group I have placed the following items from my own collection:

(a) "After all, he's not so bad—he gives me all his money." (Location: *Tea-rooms*. Sex: *Female*. Age: *c.40*.)

(b) "Oh, don't be silly, George, 'ow the 'ell can I snub 'er when I'm always borrowin' from 'er?" (Location: *Street (pushing pram)*. Sex: *F*. Age: *c.27*.)

(c) "And I don't blame these elderly people who get married; after all, it's only for companionship." (Loc: *Tram*. Sex: *F*. Age: *c.60*.)

(d) "She's a proper cat. My Gawd, here she is... Hello, darling." (Loc: *Bargain counter*. Sex: *F*. (to be expected). Age: *c.35*.)

[T is not often, however, that your find is complete. For the most part it will be shattered from its context, and, like an archaeologist with an urn of the ninth century, B.C., you will have to piece together your fragments with loving care. Or perhaps, since most of the pieces are lost, it would be more accurate to compare the labour with that of a student of a torn eighth century MS who is forced to indulge in Conjectural Emendation. In spite of their fragmentary nature, such items are valuable in a collection and provide endless opportunity for speculation concerning the circumstances prompting them. I remember once hearing one girl say to another:

"And now I'm too scared to stop writing." (*Blackmail or just a Kind Heart?*)

Other items from this branch of my collection which may offer food for thought to you as well as to me include:

(a) "I said I will. He said You won't. I said I will. He said If you do it's War." (Loc: *Woolworths*. Sex: *F*. (as usual) Age: *c.30*.)

(Continued on next page)



"Present a somewhat detached, absent-minded front"

blood to leap when, after a dreary train journey, you hear one of your neighbours say to another,

"And, my dear, he had to bath all the men himself."

A wait in a queue may be rewarded with a treasure like the following:

"And what do you think it was? Two pickled ears!"

[F you propose to take the pastime seriously, here is some free advice.

First the matter of camouflage. Every bird-watcher knows that birds become self-conscious and suspicious if they are aware of an audience. And it is advisable when pursuing the occupation of listening to present a somewhat detached, absent-minded front to your victim. Otherwise they follow the example of the security posters and Don't Talk. It is a good plan to equip yourself with a book of Greek verbs, or some equally foreign language, bury yourself in it and emerge with an abstracted air only when you have difficulty in catching the conversation.

Of course you will have to endure much dross before you find pure gold. But out of all the half-absorbed chatter of dentists' bills and Lucy's school report and My Husband's Favourite Pudding there will sometimes emerge a lovely fragment:

"It's them parties and things that done it."

[N all serious life-works, Classification is important. I have found that, on the whole, subject-matter may be divided



"Every bird-watcher knows the value of camouflage"

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