

# PERIPATETIC PHILOSOPHERS OF THIS MANY-SIDED TOWN



Modern Street Philosophers and the Philosophical Athenians Would Meet on a Common Footing.

## Neighborhoods Where the Curbstone Lecturer Holds Sway and an Ancient Athenian Would Feel at Home in a Moment.

There is Scriptural authority for the statement that the ancient Athenians were never content unless discussing some new thing. New York, all Parthenon-less as it is, is in this respect the legitimate successor of the glory that was Greece. It is the talkiest city in the world. There are more new ideas set forth to a benighted universe in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx (the Bronx especially must not be omitted) than in any area of similar size on the globe. Not only does this town of ours follow in the path of the philosophical Athenians, but they have a method of doing it which is taken straight from ancient history. We all know the Greek person who taught his disciples as they walked to and fro in a garden—if there were a classical dictionary handy we would all know where to look him up, so never mind the name. It was undoubtedly the best way of teaching that had ever been invented. The moment the lecturer became tiresome there was escape at hand, and this promoted not only greater care on the part of the speaker to preserve the interest, but did away with the feeling of hopelessness which dampens the ardor of an audience that is chained to a bench during the pleasure of some irresponsible person. It was a pity the method was ever abandoned, but fortunately it was merely sleeping, not dead, and it has been revived here in New York with the most signal success.

The peripatetic philosopher comes to New York with the flowers that bloom in the Spring. You find him, or her, in all the poorer parts of the city, more or less, but especially in three or four neighborhoods. Little groups of them dot the sidewalk all Summer long, strolling up and down, discussing art, literature, drama, Socialism, Anarchy, woman's suffrage, child labor, the nature of evil, pragmatism, restricted immigration, Milwaukee politics, and any number of other subjects to the number of seventy times seven. A few years ago the peripatetic philosophers were Russians only, and their one "garden" was East Broadway. East Broadway used to be called the Nevsky Prospect of America for that reason. But now the custom of strolling about and discussing things in the streets has spread elsewhere. The philosophers of East Broadway have gone northward to Harlem and the Bronx, and even to Brooklyn, while the custom has not been abandoned by their successors on the "Nevsky Prospect," and other nationalities are acquiring the habit. Fifth Avenue around 116th Street is even more than East

Broadway the happy hunting ground of the peripatetics. From that point down to the Park all philosophers know that the school will meet every fine day in Summer. Another school used, last year to walk along Seventh Avenue north from 125th Street. The Woman Suffrage and Women's Trades Union League people have done much to encourage this custom. The woman and her soap box opened the way for others with ideas on things in general. When the women first began to speak outside of the lower east side, which is pre-eminently the place where everybody minds his own business and you do as you choose, the right of free speech was so far from being a popular ideal that peripatetics had to seek the aid of the police when they wanted to philosophize. The woman suffrage people tell a tale of a young speaker who was prepared to address the populace for the space of fifteen minutes, and so did, but at the end of the allotted time the crowd was getting ugly and there were no police in sight. She paused, but a tug at her skirt emphasized a distracted whisper from her companion that she had better keep right on and try to prevent an outburst. She continued, her ideas evaporating as her throat grew husky. Half an hour and the orator paused again de-

sparingly. Another tug and another distracted whisper. "For heaven's sake," muttered the speaker between gestures, "run for the police so I can stop!" At the end of forty-five minutes help appeared and she rested from her labors. So fully has the idea of using the streets for discussion been accepted by the people in general that the last meat strike on the east side was engineered entirely from the sidewalks. There was not one meeting in a hall all through the women's campaign against the increase in the price of meat. Mrs. Anna Pastor, the mother of Rose Pastor Stokes, organized the strike in the Bronx, and on the lower east side the United Jewish Socialist districts managed the affair, doing everything by means of walking up and down with the women they sought to interest. The Women's Trades Union League uses much the same methods. Their enthusiasts station themselves in the way of a stream of girls pouring out

of some great factory. It is a tremendously picturesque sight, the army of girls, coming wearily, worn with work, or running gayly to their playtime, stopping here and there to listen to the plea for union and delaying to walk up and down, and discuss. Once, in such a peripatetic school, a dramatic incident occurred. The league people had been speaking with a group of women, among them a gaunt creature of 40 years or more who listened with amazed eagerness when some one talked of the worker's right to happiness. She followed the speaker's argument with shining eyes, and at the end began to talk in turn. Never, she said, had she heard one speak what had been burning in her heart for twenty years. She was a widow with three children and she earned \$6 a week. What was life to her but work all day and every day while she was well and charity when she was sick? It was not right; it must be changed—and forthwith the torrent of "twenty years' bitterness" flowed forth. Those who heard her say it was wonderful, as if the prophet's angel had touched her lips with his coal of fire. She spoke for nearly twenty minutes to a growing group of listeners, and then stopped, appalled at what she had been able to do. Street eloquence like this is comparatively rare, but all the peripatetics speak of the wayfarer's instinct for sincerity, his acute questioning, his responsiveness to idealistic appeals. Sometimes there is humor, as when a boy of 12 strode up to a woman philosopher with his hands in his pockets and called: "Say, when we give you the vote what are you going to do about municipal ownership?" The peripatetics all agree that the first question from a passer by who joins their group is always "What are you going to do about"—something. The working man or woman always has a pet idea to spring at one. They have to think for themselves since the chance of any one's thinking for them is so very remote. Peripatetic philosophy among the working people, carried on without any idea of making proselytes is especially a Jewish institution. It is not confined to that race, but it flourishes among them.

Any Jew has to struggle hard to keep from being a philosopher, and for a Russian Jew the effort is impossible. So the Jews talk and walk in their several districts, discussing different matters in different places, and passers by may listen or not as they may choose. If you know what you want to hear

talked just tell any Russian intellectual and he will direct you to the exact block where you will find what you want. The Socialists are prominent in Harlem, the Bronx, and Borough Park, Brooklyn. The peripatetics in those sections, for example, are discussing whether or not the Milwaukee experiment is a success or not. You will hear that it is a fine thing for the cause. You will hear that it is too "Fabian"—and Fabian is in some quarters the last word of damnation. How can we advance when we compromise at every step? says the Bronx. And how can we advance unless we pick and choose our way? retorts Harlem.

Again, how about Briand in France? they want to know. Is he a statesman or a Judas? And kindly prove it, whatever you say. Why did they forbid the first of May demonstration in Paris? Anybody can answer that, comrade: the last Ferrer demonstration frightened the bourgeois half to death. Thousands of workmen, organized, disciplined, orderly, singing the songs of revolution—of course it could not be permitted again. The Anarchists are always interesting. None need be bored in their com-

pany. Their talk runs to such abstract questions as they affect—the Anarchists are pre-eminently the dreamers among the peripatetics, and the topics they discuss are all remote from present-day life.

They have quaint ways of putting things, too. It was at a peripatetic Anarchist meeting that a young man remarked the other day to a woman that he wished he were not a man—a woman merely as a woman was a sufficient asset to the world, "but we men have to be perpetually seeking ideas to justify our existence." Not all peripatetics are revolutionary. Down on East Broadway the talk turns frequently on art, literature, and the drama.

Do you know Sholem Ash, reader? If you do not you had better acquaint yourself with him before attempting to walk up and down East Broadway with the philosophers. Ash wrote "The God of Vengeance," and he is a great questioner of disputes on the east side.

And Chaim Zhitlovsky, do you know him? He has an interesting theory about the Hebrew language, and it is discussed these Spring evenings all up and down the sidewalks of that queer country east of the Bowery.

Nor is the Bowery itself without its occasional philosopher. It was not long since that the present scribe walked back and forth before the ten, fifteen, and twenty-five cent lodging houses until after midnight with a few peripatetics who were holding forth on the nature of evil. It would be edify-

ing to repeat what was said on that occasion, but to be quite truthful most of the talk was above the head of the scribe. There was a lot about Goethe, anyway, and he proved the case of the young man who worked in a sweat-shop.

Moreover, can you be a Socialist and a Territorialist? That's a question to settle. Most people say no, but a good many are coming now to say yes, which is queer, because it was only six years ago that a Socialist said: "Oh, what is a Territorialist? Why, a Jew who believes that his people must have a land of their own somewhere soon—a follower of Israel Zangwill." This is a weighty question for East Broadway to discuss on Summer nights, and indeed some day the world may have to stop and listen to what East Broadway has said about it.

There is no need to dwell on the peripatetics who are absorbed in the struggle between the Shund (trashy melodrama) and the literary drama. Their name is legion on the east side. They not only philosophize, but they gather and dispense all important news, such as whether or not Sol Blumgarten, the Hebrew poet, is writing a play and whether Mrs. Kalinsky will come over. There is a group interested in such matters that peripatetics in Division Street.

So, you see, you need only to have an enthusiasm and know some one in these circles and you will find your school of philosophy awaiting you on the sidewalk. Considering how the habit has grown in the last two years, together with the fact that the custom is in a high degree practical, there is no reasonable doubt that it will spread.

For who cares, after a hard day's work, to sit in a close room and listen to a discourse, however edifying? And what is more charming than to stroll about in the open air and think high thoughts in good company?

The rich man has his clubs in which he may discuss Wall Street and such phases of present-day problems as interest him. The clubless poor man has the streets wherein to talk of wages and that part of the social structure which concerns him and his.

The rich man pays a pretty price for his privilege, and in the Winter he has the best of it.

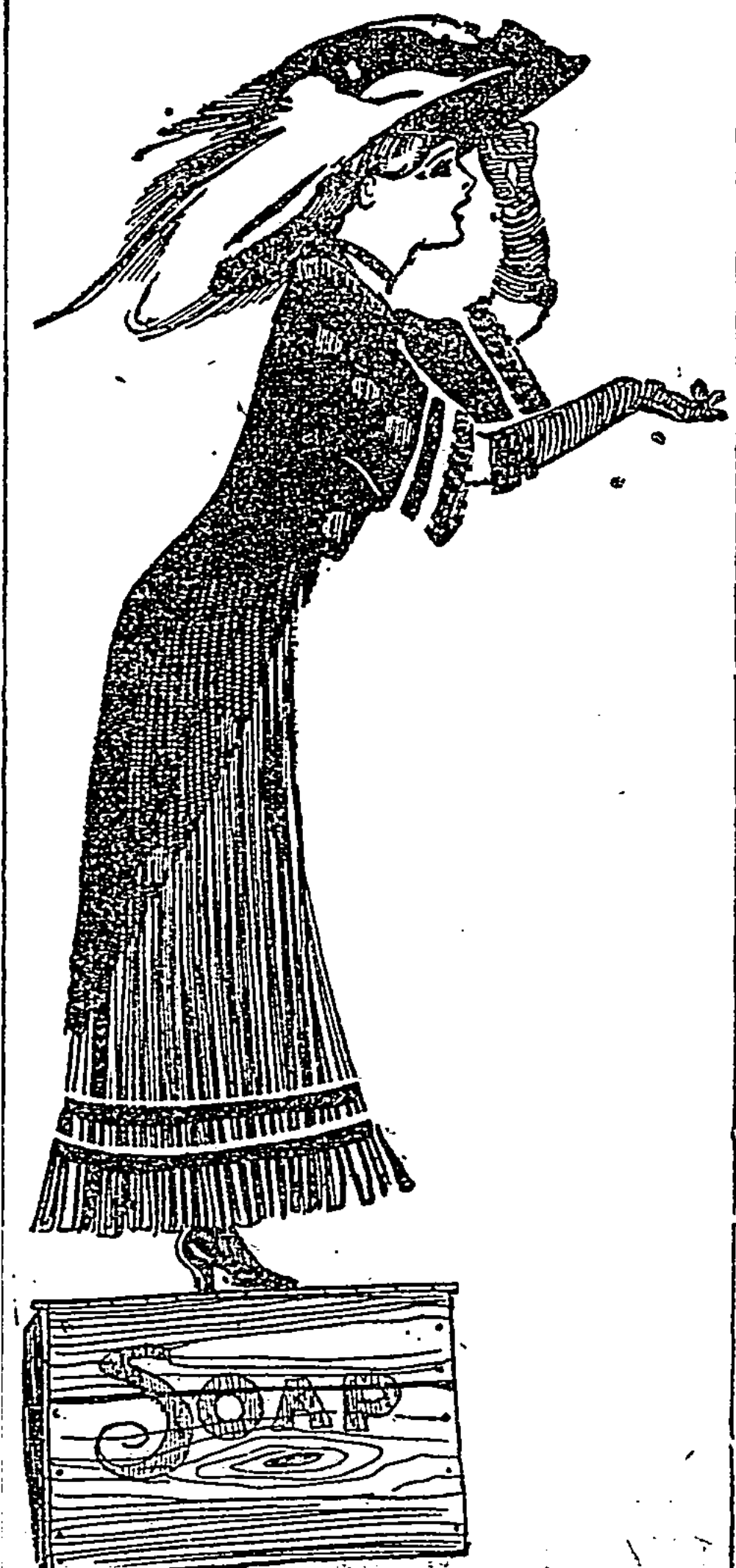
Whether the talk is more intelligent in the club or on the street it would be indiscreet to say. Only, if you want to put your wager on the peripatetics, and will choose an impartial jury, some folk who know both sides say you will have a pretty good chance for your money.



The Boy of Twelve Patronizes a Woman Philosopher.



A Torrent of Twenty Years' Bitterness Flowed Forth.



This May Reasonably be Expected in the Near Future.