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A Woman's Club

Lizzie M. Holmes

1905

A group of women who live in a western city, possessing abundant leisure, yet not belonging to the upper four hundred, and not by any means drudges in the lower ten thousand, conceived the idea of forming a club of their own. It should be their very own—it should not be patronized by any of the women of the big “women’s club” nor corrupted by the membership of the common herd. They were sufficiently intellectual and aspiring to carry on a literary and social club which should vie with Capitol Hill organizations in point of interest and well conducted functions. And so the North Side Ladies’ Improvement Society was duly launched and the lady members were greatly pleased.

The first regular meeting was held at the pretty home of Mrs. Adelaide Lancaster, a wealthy widow who had once done useful service in making beds and doing up rooms in some of the best hotels in the city. While doing so she attracted the attention of an English prospector, who married her and, afterward, accommodatingly discovered a gold mine, and then died. Mrs. Lancaster was the president of the society, and her bosom friend, Miss Charlotte Graham, was the principal sec-

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retary. The various committees were filled by worthy ladies eminently fitted for their respective duties.

The first subject for a paper and discussion was given by Mrs. Archibald Henrico, entitled, "Should wives give up lap dogs at the request of husbands?" and the first literary work to be studied was Edward Bok's "Heart to Heart Talks on Sofa Pillows," and the quotations in answer to roll call were from sayings of characters in *Smart Set*. Solos and musical selections were given from Reginald de Koven's operas. Altogether, the program marked out for the day was a most correct and pleasing one, and the members, who were all either officers or members of important committees, felt highly gratified.

But there was one elderly lady with whom they scarcely knew how to reckon. She lived near Mrs. Archibald Henrico and was an old acquaintance. She possessed means, and nobody could deny that she was well informed and up to date, so she could not be kept out of the society on any legitimate grounds. But she was "so very odd." She was always bringing up shocking and unpleasant subjects, and some of her epigrams were really—well, you know—indelicate. She had been present when the club was first mentioned, and was not to be frowned down. She had come in "on the ground floor," as it were, and there was no help for it.

"She'll spoil it all for us, if there is such a thing possible," exclaimed Miss Graham. "She is always breaking in with the most inopportune remarks."

"Yes, but what can we do?" replied Mrs. Henrico; "she's the only one of us who is acquainted with Mrs. P—, the president of the Woman's Club of this city, and we might need her. Besides, her husband is a power in business circles, and we cannot afford to offend them," and so Mrs. Elizabeth Ford was admitted as member without further remarks.

The first meeting was opened. It progressed and drew near a close without friction, and Mrs. Henrico was congratulating herself. Mrs. Ford had not spoken at all, and everything seemed

harmonious. Not a vital or significant word had been uttered, and trifles float down stream very smoothly.

The discussion on the paper read by the talented and gifted authoress was over, the members generally agreeing with the lady. Under the head of "general business," the subject of public improvements had come up. It was suggested that they all do something to improve their streets. One lady thought it would be a good idea to compel every house owner to paint their front doors one color, or, at least, to follow some color-scheme in which tints and shades should be artistically blended. Another wanted all peddlars and other drivers to take their horses off their street when they fed them at noon, as grain bags hanging from the animals' noses were decidedly inaesthetic, and, besides, were nerve-wearing. One grew hysterical watching a horse vainly poking its nose after the few grains in the bottom, which, from the nature of things, he could never reach. At least, if this nuisance could not be abated, the lady urged the necessity of painting the bags a sweet, dull green, or soft, yellowish gray, like squash pie. These interesting subjects were animatedly discussed, and, finally, committees were appointed to further the carrying out of the ideas.

As the ladies were about to adjourn a minister dropped in and asked permission to say a few words. This particular minister was unique in his way and almost as much feared by the ladies as Mrs. Ford herself. He did not seem to be half as much interested in saving souls for heaven as he was in saving bodies from hunger and want in this world, and he seemed more anxious about sin that made sinners miserable and degraded in this life than he did about their strict attendance on the means of grace. It was whispered about that he was not exactly orthodox, and he certainly entertained some very queer notions. So Mrs. Lancaster was not thoroughly at ease when she granted him a few moments, with the reminder that they were about to close the session.

“Ladies,” he began pleasantly, “I presume you are organized for more than one worthy purpose. Your principal one, self-improvement, is a very laudable one. It is a mistake to think our learning days are over when we go out of the schoolroom door for the last time. Another, the furthering of public improvement, is also a good one; but your noblest and best one, no doubt, is the good you may do to your fellow-creatures. I have in my mind at this moment a case which is a most suitable one for your activities. It seems almost providential that I thought of you just as I was most perplexed as to what to do next. A few days ago a man was released from state’s prison; he has three children. Their mother, his wife, died during his imprisonment. The eldest is a girl of sixteen, has been to school and is sweet and good in her disposition; but she is friendless and alone, timid and shrinking, and, of course, she will suffer more or less under the ban her father’s fate has placed upon her. These people have secured a place to live—in the rooms above a small business block in the vicinity. The father is very penitent and desires a chance to work and live an honest and industrious life. Now, here is a chance to prove your womanhood and do a great amount of good. You can encourage and help the man in his honorable efforts to find work; you can assist and befriend the young girl and help her to make a home for her father and her little brother and sister. You can redeem and save a whole family for good citizenship, and, finally, bring them, forgiven, redeemed and glorified, an offering to the kingdom of heaven.”

The minister sat down at the close of his brief, but earnest appeal, and looked at the faces about him. They were cold and repellant. Miss Graham arose and said that she, for one, considered it the duty of the society to get the returned convict out of the neighborhood as soon as possible, before he had a chance to corrupt the youth of the community. There were societies organized, she believed, for the express purpose of taking care of such people, and, certainly, they could not be expected to

they are improving their time, their minds, their efforts in the right direction. Are they making the most of themselves and their powers? They are sacrificing something to leave home, home duties, the seclusion and peace of the domestic circle. Will the work they are doing outside be worth it all?

associate with criminals on terms of equality. As for the girl, she would no doubt soon find her proper place.

The minister arose with a stern, set face.

“Ladies,” he said coldly, “I have mistaken the character of your society and the nature of those who compose it. I imagined you were aspiring to a higher life through culture and enlightenment. I will take my errand elsewhere.” He bowed, put on his hat and left the house without another word.

The ladies were somewhat abashed, and did not look straight into one another’s faces. A moment of embarrassed silence occurred, and in that moment Mrs. Ford arose to her feet. Before the president could recover her usual cold, calm poise, and with tact prevent it, Mrs. Ford had the floor and was speaking.

“Friends and sisters,” she said, “I have hoped for some good results from the organization of this club. For many years I have watched the coming out of women from the old seclusion of home, which usually meant ignorance and servility, as well as protection and security, with a deep interest. I have wondered if woman’s new departure and her new freedom, with its concomitant of new power, would result in the reforms for which women have prayed these many years. I have watched and hoped and waited in vain. I do not see where women are moving in the right direction since they have had the power to

move at all. The poor are just as poor, the worker is as meagerly paid, and his chance of procuring work to do as meager as ever. Injustice rules as widely as before; the old, the weak, the disabled, are as miserable and uncared for as in the old days; more so, for homes are not the centers of industry they once were, and there is no place for those who might perform some labor in the home, but are not fit to go out into a struggling world and wrest a chance to live from it. The unfortunate, the frail, who may have committed one wrong act, but have within them the possibilities for greater things, are no better considered, are given no better opportunities to redeem themselves.

Wives are still dependent subjects in the majority of cases, and even where women possess the franchise the evils which inflict the greatest amount of suffering are not checked or even rebuked. Great combinations of capitalists reap the profit from labor; thousands of willing workers are deprived of the opportunity to labor and hang on to the ragged edge of existence in despair, hunger and misery. Men who are employed drudge through all the daylight hours, and then do not earn enough to live decently. Two million little children in this great, free country are wearing their young lives away in factories, mills, mines and stores, while their fathers are tramping, unable to find work. What will the next generation be? Will there be any fit fathers or mothers among these undeveloped, stunted weaklings? Suicide is on the increase because life is too great a burden to be borne under the conditions which obtain. The wealth of the world, instead of doing good and making life comfortable and happy for all, is tossed from one speculating capitalist to another in a game of "frenzied finance," and the victims are thrown up like so much driftwood on the great wreckage pile. These terrible problems are here, they confront the civilization of the twentieth century, yet they are entirely ignored by the organized, emancipated women of the country; they are put aside as not worth discussing or as unsuitable to the feminine mind. What could be more suitable to the feminine mind than the welfare of our fellow-creatures—our brothers and sisters? But, instead of giving these subjects a glance, women fritter away their time discussing embroidery patterns, art which would cause a true artist to blush, literature that a child would laugh at, the care of cats, dogs and monkeys, while there are little children dying and suffering from want; petty questions that do not matter one way or the other, or that will be readily settled when once these great economic and social problems are settled. I have blushed for my sex since they have begun to exercise a power once never dreamed of. Think what the thorough organization of the brightest and most advanced women

in the land might mean! What a power they may wield either for good or evil. And they are so careless of this power, so trifling with it, so tied to old conventional lines of thought, that they practically do nothing. If anything comes up a little out of the ordinary it is ignored, quietly brushed aside as some trifling breach of etiquette might be by a tactful company. If this does riot serve to crush it out of sight and hearing, strong denunciation and scandal will. Few women have the courage to stand up and defy the opinion of a respectable club, and when they do they are ostracised—as I am. But, my good sisters, I care more for the welfare of humanity than I do for the regard I might win by keeping quiet, behaving properly and taking my ease. A good man has come to you with a case in which you might do a great deal of good, save a whole family from a criminal life to be good citizens of your state. But you repudiate 'such tasks with scorn. No doubt you would join the rabble in the cry, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" were Christ to be nailed to the cross by legal authorities today as He was then"

"Mrs. Ford, I must call you to order!" — said Mrs. Lancaster sternly, bringing her gavel down with a tremendous rap. "We cannot allow such language against the ladies of this society, and I must ask you to take your seat. A motion to adjourn is in order!"

Several ladies made the motion and it was hastily carried. Confusion reigned immediately. Every woman rose to her feet, anxious to say something, and no one was ready to listen. Three women from out the twenty assembled together came to Mrs. Ford and, clasping her hand, told her they thought she was right and they were anxious to study into the questions she had suggested, and asked her to help them. She was enthusiastically ready, and organized the nucleus of a club for the study of economic and social subjects. The club will grow, for thoughtful people are more interested than we think in these new problems, and only await a good opportunity to take up the work. And women all over the land will do well to pause and think if