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WOMEN'S CLUBS

Conducted by Mrs. Abby Morton Diaz

THE Women's Club plant has thriven well on Massachusetts soil. It may be compared to the *Banyan*, which extends by dropping branch-tips into the ground, each starting an upspringing tree. These by the same means start others, and these others, and so on, thus forming a widely extended growth — according to the pictures in the old geographies. But alas! These are no longer a dependence. For there, too, were pictures of the *Great Maelstrom*, off Norway, which by swallowing vessels approaching too near, furnished an awful and instructive illustration of sinners venturing too near the vortex of sin. And now the *Great Maelstrom* has gone from us; swallowed itself entirely! And we have no more a William Tell, no Cherry-tree, no Little Hatchet, no Smith-saving Pocahontas! and recently even General Jackson's embattled cotton-bags which sheltered our soldiers while they shot and vanquished the British, and which we have so long rested upon as a sure foundation, — even these are taken from under us. But if there never was such a thing as a *Banyan Tree*, its picture was in the geographies, and that does just as well as an illustration, and it is a good one for the Women's Club at No. 5 — the first of its name — founded in Boston in 1868, sent forth branches which took root and started new plants. And these did the same, and this went on until now the growth extends over the State and is said to be a famous place for *birds*, — birds being the material "correspondence" for thoughts.

As Bostonians, it would greatly

interest us could we connect this 1868 formation with a very old-time company of Boston women who used to assemble at a Beacon Hill residence to confer upon the "New England Primer," that tiny, blue, thin, stiff-bound booklet, "for attaining the true reading of English," which, "for more than a century was almost exclusively the juvenile book of New England," and was supposed to contain all that was needful for learning to read, and of reading matter likewise, from the "Great Letters" — each with its rhyme and its pictures — "of the printer's own design and workmanship" — all the way through the AB's; the *spellings*; the Prayers; the "*Commandments*"; "Verses for Children"; "Short Sentences"; and the closing "*Dialogue*"; besides these, including, "Lessons for Youth," and *John Rogers'* forty-four verses of "Advice to his Children"; also a long and strong dose of unmitigated Jonathan Edwards' theology, entitled, "*Spiritual Milk for American Babes*, drawn from the breasts of both Testaments for their Souls' Nourishment, by John Cotton." All these, together with the Assembly's Shorter (!) Catechism, shortened from the Catechism of 1645, the fruits of an Assembly of "120 Divines" who "sat five and a half years."

To show that the world does move, we might imagine that our present Clubs occupying themselves with the "New England Primer" like those gatherings of long ago. The true and only (club) originals, at No. 5, led by their world-widely honored president,

settling the nice distinctions between "Sanctification, Justification, Adoption and Effectual Calling." Concerning *A's Rhymes*:

"In Adam's Fall,
We sinned all,"

and their picture of the very small tree with its four or five incredibly large "apples," and the immense "serpent" coiled around its trunk, watching Adam's ready acceptance of the apple, the query would be sure to arise, why, being man, and in that capacity created to act as woman's Guide, Protector, Counsellor, and *Law*, he did not prohibit her from eating the apple, instead of so readily taking a bite of it? It might be said that he has with alacrity prohibited her from other things—and the secretary, if no one else, would wish to be satisfied as to that "fruit" which has so disagreed with the human family; how do we know it to have been an apple, since no name is mentioned, and fruit in general is called *tempting*? And all present would declare it a thousand pities, and more, too,—half the human race pities,—that Adam set that disastrous example for so small an inducement! Since on the strength of it, Man, even to this day, while declaring himself created to be Woman's guide, protector, counsellor, and law, does most readily consent to be her partner in sin, and even incites and betrays her thereto!

The *Women's Book Review Club* having but this one "Juvenile" on its hands, and no more to follow, might stop to cavil at the bad rhyming of *W's*:

"Whales in the sea,
God's voice obey."

and they would probably discuss the naturalness of the exceedingly forcible eight-page "Dialogue be-

tween Christ, Youth, and the Devil," wherein the Youth declares his intention of having as good a time as he pleases, the Devil replying:

"The resolution which you take,
Sweet youth, it doth me merry make;
Nor be thou such a silly fool
To mind thy book, or go to school.
Fear not, I
Will straightway help you to a lie."

Christ persists in urging a contrary course, but all in vain, and finally Death appears on the scene and ends the matter by a few decisive words, beginning:

"Youth, I am come to take thy breath,
And carry thee to th' shades of death."

Our critical *Review Club* might doubt the fitness of this moral lesson, and also of the very realistic picture illustrating the burning of *John Rogers*, as witnessed by the historic group of "his wife with nine small children, and one at the breast." It might even be objected that their *ten* children could not all be "small," notwithstanding the positive assurance of the group as pictured.

"*The Women in Council Club*," formed ten years since in the interests of young mothers, would be pleased to know that:

"Young Obadiah,
David and Josias,
All were pious."

and might wonder how they became so, but not at all why

"Young Timothy
Learnt Sin to fly."

Sin being represented by a strange horned creature erect on his hind legs, his tail ending with the "sting" sin is supposed to leave behind, and his mouth gaping widely to seize, "Young Timothy" making rapid exit from the opposite corner.

Indeed, this thin and decidedly *blue* booklet would afford plenty material for "*The Thought and Work Club*," and the "*Social Science Club*," "*The Literary Club*," and the "*Elderblow*" and "*Wintergreen*" clubs (of grandmothers and those eligible for the condition), "*The College Club*," "*The Academy Club*," and others. Of these last the "*Ymerian Club*" would show by convincing cipher proof who really wrote the forty-four verses attributed to John Rogers, "*Watts' Cradle Hymn*," and Cotton's "*Spiritual Milk for Babes*," and that the closing "*Dialogue*" embodies startling events unrecorded by history, and undreamed of by the primitive Primer gatherings of Beacon Hill. Still those, too, were of "*Women in Council*," and from them, no doubt, came the *Mothers' Meetings*," where the mothers of our present *Elderblows* and *Wintergreens* met to confer on the subject nearest their hearts—how to bring up their children in all godly ways, God-fearing, God-consecrated. As helps in meeting responsibilities so solemn they made these meetings occasions for prayer and reading of the Scriptures, yet also of neighborly greeting and companionship, as well as of helpful interchange of thought, and of home experiences, and of ideas gained from the chance readings of the week.

All the old-time churches had their poor always with them, whose needs demanded help in the way of fashioning and making of garments, as likewise of supplying material. This brought women together in sewing-circles which relieved the needs of the helped, and the helpers' just as urgent needs of social intercourse. At last came the terrible and limitless war-needs, uniting all our women in the one sacred purpose—aid and comfort for the sol-

diers. Every city, town, and village had its gatherings for cutting and making, for preparing lint, for barrel-filling, for letter-writing; and even sending small tokens of sympathy. And friendliness was not forgotten. This union of effort for a common purpose marked a progressive change in the character of women's gatherings, in that they were free from limitation of sect and of social position, an advance which cannot be overestimated, for it did much to break down the barriers each church and class set around itself, as if to keep the human family apart.

The assemblages on this broad plane had proved so effective for good, and so enjoyable socially, that, when the need of them was removed, they themselves became the need. Women missed each other's companionship and the inspiration of a common purpose. Naturally enough, they sought some such purpose with view to union of interests and of effort, and by all means to the pleasures of social intercourse. Though not recognizing the fact, they were impelled to this by the great law of the universe, the law of oneness, which works by organisms and combinations, and seems to forbid separateness—though by no means individuality. This desire—shall we say instinct?—for union is so common as to escape general notice, but the fact is that from gases to people, both inclusive, there is a tendency toward *togetherness*. Every tree and plant is a union, or alliance, or league, or association, or *club*, if you will, since the derivation allows this common meaning. The same is true of water, air, minerals, and of solar systems. Thus women's clubs are simply a falling-in with the laws of the universe.

As has been intimated, need of

something of the kind was felt very soon after "*Peace*" disbanded the soldiers and the sanitary commission. This feeling found expression in Boston, largely by the efforts of Mrs. Caroline M. Severance, who from her California residence has quite recently thus written: "Often, in my Cleveland (Ohio) home, I used to talk with Mr. A. B. Alcott about the possibility of a literary and social union, and later with Mrs. S. E. Sewall and others in Boston. When I became a resident of the latter city I resolved to make an effort for this union, especially as Mr. Alcott assured me that . . . going to Boston in the hope of meeting easily and often the able New England women of whom I had heard, and some of whom I had met, would be a disappointment, as they were scattered in all circles and interests."

Her efforts found ready response, and on Feb. 16, 1868, an organization was effected at the house of Dr. Harriet K. Hunt, the pioneer "woman doctor" of Boston. The next recorded meeting was at Mrs. James Freeman Clarke's. There were other parlor meetings, and on March 10 the present constitution was adopted at the house of Miss Abby W. May, during her after life a director and leading member. Miss Lucia M. Peabody, now holding the position of secretary, dates her term of office from that meeting. The Club was to be officered and directed by women, though men might become associate members. "It was to be a voluntary association of kindred spirits, drawn together by no ties of family, neighborhood, or church." The common purpose, as stated, was a combination of the social, philanthropic, and educational, and membership included any who were in the spirit of the movement and cared to join.

Two months later rooms were hired at 3 Tremont Place (back of the Tremont House), and on May 30, anniversary week, there was held in Chickering Hall a largely attended public meeting, addressed by John Weis, O. B. Frothingham, James Freeman Clarke, Mr. Emerson, and others. The President, Mrs. Severance, stated that the objects of the Club were, "to organize the social force of the women in New England, now working nobly in small circles and solitary ways, and to economize time and strength so invaluable as theirs by making this centre of thought and action a centre, also, of comfort and convenience . . . that thus it might become a broader home for those who love and labor for the great human family, and a place where women should have the opportunity for culture in dignified and deliberate discussion, in which they are so lamentably deficient, . . . a plan involving no pledge to any special methods of action, but implying only a womanly interest in all true thought and action in behalf of women, and of social life in general, for which women are so largely responsible." Mrs. Howe suggested the "need of combining recreation with the pursuit of wisdom," and Mrs. Cheney spoke of "the comforts of the Club, and the help it might be, by sympathy, to the lonely who are toiling in seclusion."

In November of that year the Club held its first regular meeting in its rooms, with a membership of one hundred and eighteen, and seventeen associate members. Mrs. Severance, Mrs. Samuel E. Sewall, Miss May, Mrs. Howe, Mrs. Ednah D. Cheney, Miss Peabody, and Miss Lucy Goddard being, and afterwards continuing, the leading spirits.

The day they assigned for the

weekly meetings, Monday, still holds its own as club day, the work having been carried on by four committees,—Business, Art and Literature, Education, and Discussion, each taking its special Monday afternoon.

Although the Club's birthplace was Boston, it was called "The New England Women's Club," thus allowing wide extension of its privileges. The choice of name for the thing itself caused prolonged deliberation. "Club" expressed all the requisites,—union of purpose, sociability, brevity, comradeship, enough of restriction and enough of welcome. Its derivation, too, was satisfactory—Anglo-Saxon word, "*cleofan*," "to divide," "because the expenses are divided into shares"; "*clyppan*" (A. S.), "to embrace"; "*kleben*" (German), "to adhere."

But the objection was made—not pleasant to mention on account

of what it implies—that it would bring obloquy and derision upon the new enterprise at its very beginning, for the reason that it had been in use by men. It is a pity to speak of this, as there is no reason why men, on account of being men, should assemble socially for unworthy purposes. Still, it was generally understood, for they themselves had said it, that the use of the name for their assemblages had unfitted it for the use of women. But, after long and repeated discussions, amusing and otherwise, it was found to be the "sense of the meetin'" that, as the term is good in itself, and just fitted the case, they would raise it from its fallen estate, and by adopting it become its redemption.

Some things accomplished by the Club must be reserved for later mention.

