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WOMEN'S CLUBS (No. II.)

Conducted by Mrs. Abby Morton Diaz

AND so the infant Women's Club, first of its name, duly christened, blessed with godmothers and godfathers of the highest respectability and standing, established its nursery at 3 Tremont Place,—the very heart of the Hub,—and, like other infants, began to stretch out its hands for everything it saw, and expected to get it, having this advantage over the ordinary child, that, seeing with its mind's eye,—as what other could a mind club see with?—its vision was unlimited. It saw possible parlors with comforting appliances, such as lounges for weary shoppers, desks and writing-materials for correspondence, cosy nooks for conferences or quiet chats, or more quiet meditation, or still quieter retiring into the silences. Saw bed-chambers, beautifully kept in order, for the convenience of unfortunate non-Boston-resident members. Saw lunch facilities, social gatherings, weekly assemblages for listening to papers on subjects of vital human interest, and for discussing the same. Saw an employment bureau for other "service" than *domestic*. It even saw,—this precious young thing!—a horticultural school for women, and with a quick eye to the needful, formulated a plan which its esteemed and full-grown contemporary, the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, officially approved and endorsed. Thus sanctioned, a Horticultural School for Women was established, the idea being that attendance thereat would secure to women the pleasing and healthful, as well as lucrative, occupation of raising and selling flowers, potted plants, seeds, and fruits. This school was discontinued when the Bussey Horticultural College, at West

Roxbury, gave women equal opportunities with men.

Another plan, but partly carried out, was for a Friendly Evening Association, whose purpose was to provide pleasant and comfortable rooms where homeless working women and others might come together, evenings, and, with co-operation of some Club members, join in games, find entertainment and good reading-matter, and, if they wished to, bring their sewing.

Like as to the oft-quoted infant crying for the moon, nothing seemed too far away, and soon we find our young Bostonian reaching out to General Armstrong, far down in his Hampton school, and helping him by furnishing a room in his Normal Building. It actually had the simple, childlike daring to send a letter to the Emperor of All the Russias in behalf of a Polish lady in exile! Then, skipping by heart-and-mind roads, into France, it took hold of the French fair, held in Boston in 1871; and then, passing by the same roads into Poland, it got up a Boston concert for the wherewithal to bring unfortunate Polish exiles to this country. Next, it laid hold of the New England Hospital for Women and Children, and with such a grip as in all these years to have been unable to quit hold.

Naturally, in this youthful stage of its existence, it was for ever asking questions, never getting information enough, was in a continuous state of wanting to know; and to this end it formed, not one, but "several committees of enquiry." These,—as 't was their nature to,—enquired about everything—homes for destitute children, infant asylums, co-op-

erative kitchens, homes for the poor ; the condition of needlewomen, lodging houses for women, laundries, labor schools, and for whatever seemed not advisable or practicable, to be done by the club, they established the *idea* of doing, and set thought and effort working in that direction ; and the ideal, we know, is the very entrance way to accomplishment.

Still another committee represented the Club at the Women's Congress for Peace, and got Charles Sumner to give a public address on the subject.

These numerous and varied aims are here presented in order to correct a prevalent and mistaken idea, often expressed, that women's clubs are "just a fad," "of no practical benefit ; mutual admiration societies ; a lot of women met to hear themselves talk, or to dabble in matters which do not concern them ;—good deal better be at home."

The reputation of our pioneer club for intelligence and practical wisdom became such that the profoundest thinkers and most earnest workers were glad to bring to its meetings their best thought and their highest ideals for its discussion and careful deliberation. Hon. Josiah Quincy and Dr. Bowditch came to talk about "Buildings for the Industrial Classes," and immediately was formed a Club committee for doing something about the matter, and from this *something* resulted our present "Co-operative Building Association." Rev. F. E. Hale read two papers which led to the formation of a "Committee on Coffee Houses," and another on his plan of "Seaside Homes for Poor Children." Miss Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' paper started the dress reform movement, and still another received added impetus from that of Mrs. James T. Fields on "Homes for the Poor." Here, too, came that earnest and childlike disciple of Emerson, Channing, Hegel, Froebel, and

our earliest apostle of kindergartening, Elizabeth Peabody, through whose persistent efforts Boston got its first understanding of a system so fraught with good to children, and, if to children, to the race.

And, to any who may desire further guarantee of the high standing of the Club, it need only be said that among its associate members were such men as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Rev. James Freeman Clarke, Rev. John Weiss, John G. Whittier, Samuel E. Sewall, Henry James, and George Ripley.

Very special interest was taken in education ; so much so, that to it alone was assigned one of the Monday afternoons of each month, and the fact should be strongly emphasized that from its educational committee came the first movement for placing women on the School Committee. It was a large and laborious work, that of effecting a change of such import, and so sure to excite opposition and ridicule ; but the committee entered upon it with a zeal and tact, and enthusiasm, and wisdom, and determination, proportionate to its difficulties. The city was systematically canvassed. One detachment found suitable women who were willing to serve ; another looked up ward limits, another interviewed editors, another enquired into possible legal disabilities, another secured all needful information in regard to school committees in general.

These well-planned and effective efforts resulted in the election, in 1874, of four women on the Boston School Committee,—Miss Abbey W. May, Miss Lucia M. Peabody, Miss Lucretia Crocker, and Mrs. H. C. Badger. It should be stated, as a matter of interest, that, although they had been duly elected, the School Board could not receive them as members until sure their election was constitutional, as otherwise the board proceedings would be invalidated. This question was favorably

decided by the Supreme Court, and was afterwards brought before the Massachusetts Legislature. The final legislative decision was that the board had "a right to accept such persons as were elected by the voters of a city or town," and these four women became board members in good and regular constitutional standing.

And, indeed, who should become members of such a board if not women? since girls form more than half the school attendance. And who, more than women, should be interested in educators, since child-training is declared their special vocation? Our Club Educational Committee showed its interest by inviting public school teachers to evening lectures on subjects of especial interest to their profession. Among topics thus presented were: Physiology, drawing in public schools, need of better training for teachers.

Dr. Samuel Eliot's lecture, on "The Advantages of General or Special Culture," caused discussion and agitation sufficient for forwarding a movement which resulted in the establishment of the Girls' Latin School, a measure which excited much opposition. The end was accomplished largely by a vigorous distribution of circulars, and by securing the approval of high and normal school teachers.

After asking who, if not women, should be interested in all educational proceedings, and, next, who, if not women, should serve on school committees, it comes natural to ask, who, if not women, should have voice in the election of these committees? For, is it not everlastingly thrust upon us that the home is woman's special charge? and shall not the home interests be represented in matters so vitally affecting the home? To label them *public affairs* cannot make them any less women's individual and private affair, nor free her from the responsibility of attention

thereto, and representing her own special field of work by an expression of opinion; and, when opinions are too numerous to be individually heard, it is customary to express them on paper by that way, which has been made a great *bugaboo* to women, by calling it balloting. Suppose that in a neighborhood of some half-dozen families a school was proposed. When the location, kind of building, teacher, course of study, were to be settled, would the women of the place, mothers and others, retire, voiceless and opinionless, because they were women? and the men of the place, including coachmen, serving-men, day-laborers, meet and decide the whole matter, simply because they were men? The absurdity of this is sufficiently apparent, and is just the same whether in neighborhood or city.

Our Club Education Committee felt this and began the agitation which resulted in the law of school suffrage, allowing women what some call the right, others the privilege, — though its true name is *duty*, — of co-operation in the choice of school committees; and where, indeed, should we look for intelligent voting if not from members of an organization so wise and efficient in workshops and so eager in the pursuit of knowledge, and so intent upon keeping in line with the best thought of the age? Why, a mere enumeration of the classes conducted and the subjects presented at the Monday meetings would go far toward a liberal education and would require a whole course in the Art of Memorizing. The botany class has lasted twenty years! It even became the occasion of forming a "Botanical Section" in the Massachusetts Natural History Society, women to be eligible therefor, with opportunity for proficiency in scientific work. Of other classes, can be mentioned physiology, Greek, Latin, and the European languages; politi-

cal economy, history of art, Browning, Dante, etching, architectural art, sculpture, current events; and the "Reading Groups" were said to be delightful. Addresses have been given on almost everything: Associates; charities; cremation; vacation-schools; education of deficient children; Museum of Fine Arts; Egyptian Exploration Fund; society for the protection of children; *ditto* animals; Tuskegee Institute; State care of neglected children; hospitals for women; international league for peace and liberty (by a Switzer from Swiss-land); education in the New South; classical school in Athens; coffee houses as substitutes for saloons; college settlements; women of India (by Ramaibai); physical culture for women; sloyd in the schools; American sympathy for Russian women; a zoölogical garden for Boston; Atkinson's Aladdin stove; women's standing in the literary, the decorative, scientific, mercantile, artistic, and medical fields; mutual responsibilities of employer and employed; woman's influence against crime in home, school, amusements, social intercourse, charities, reforms; restriction of immigration; high-license; idealism in every-day life, in the home, school, business, society, church; vacation, use and abuse, as viewed by the mother, the teacher, the physician; debts to home, to servants, to correspondents, to the needy, to our country; moral instruction by home, libraries, press, pulpit; management of clubs; vulnerable points in women's manners; standard of morality for men and women; over-dependence upon "Mrs. Grundy;" false economics; club manners.

Verily, a much-talked-to club has been this of No. 5 during its eight years at Tremont Place, and its subsequent years in Park Street, where it still has its habitation, while awaiting translation into the prophetic, spacious, and towering *Boston Club*

Building. And think of the *talk-ing back* at the close of the lectures! For such has ever been the exceedingly profitable custom. And it is said to be highly gratifying to speakers that a well-beloved idea, having had chance of expression, was not to be shut right up,—as one may say like a Jack-in-the-box,—but was to receive further attention; the very intelligent comments and inquiries bringing out more of its fine points, causing it to be set in new lights, thus exalting the club mind by presenting higher and higher conceptions. And, speaking of this, how, on a sort of mystical tiptoe, must have been the club mind, with Bronson Alcott discoursing on transcendentalism, and the after-talk, led by Saint Elizabeth Peabody, ever an earnest seeker for the highest truth! One can hardly help wondering if the talk is still going on between them, wherever and however they are, and what is to them, now, the transcendent! But this supplementary converse was not the only means whereby the backward were made less backward in coming forward. For it had given an assurance of concealed ideas, opinions, convictions, and knowledge, kept in obscurity by the sweet force of modesty, or the strong one of unaccustomedness, and straightway was declared the need of a "search-warrant," whereby the hidden should be revealed and brought forth for the general advantage.

This need was filled by the appointment of a discussion committee, with its own special afternoon. The subjects selected were of practical bearing, and such as easily admitted of opposing sides. The duty of opening a discussion was distributed among the members, several being selected for each afternoon's presentation of the subject in five or ten-minute papers. These were followed by a friendly *mêlée* of opinions, and in the encounter were brought forward not only opinions, but suggestions for

profitable work. For it was the evident determination of this all-alive pioneer club, even at its beginning, that it should be not only good, but good for something. Its youthful assurance in attempting so much was, doubtless, owing to the fact that, finding, then, plenty of unoccupied ground in the territory of endeavor, it entered serenely in, taking up claims according as they could be worked to human advantage. All suggested work has not been carried through, but, as has been intimated, the suggestion has often been made practical elsewhere, and the attention of those who speak slightly of women's clubs is called to the high character of this work as proposed, and as accomplished, and of the subjects presented at the afternoon meetings. These have been no ordinary gatherings. The members have come together on no inferior denominational, society, or money basis, but on the high and common ground—*table-land?*—of thought. Thought corresponds to light, and these thought-gatherings are centres for focusing and reflecting. With this idea in mind, to begin at the Club's beginning, and follow, mentally, its quarter-century course, as marked by the brightest and best thought of the times, may be likened to passing along a brilliantly illumined pathway! The widespread benefit of so much light, so much distributed, is

beyond all calculation, when we remember "how far one little candle throws its beams." For thought is more than just light. It is also power—the grand force which moves the human world. First, the ideal, then the practical, proceeding outwardly therefrom.

It must be told, however, that this very ideal and practical thought-centre has not been on every occasion intent either on lofty ideals or their embodiment in work. Truth compels the confession that it has had, that it still has, its seasons of indulgence in exhilarating nonsense, simply fun, just that it is of them, and nothing more! as can be abundantly and joyously testified by participants in its third-Monday-evening's gayeties.

But these occasions are so important in their way, so effective for good, that, after being told of, they should have justification. Also, there must be particular mention of the more serious matter of women's clubs as affecting homes. For it must not be forgotten that we traced the Club's ancestry back through "Mothers' Meetings" to the ancient New England Primer meetings, both intent on the family well-being. And, indeed, it must ever be kept in mind that all club proceedings, whether of women or of men, should be judged according as they affect—favorably or unfavorably—the home.

