

OUR SOCIETIES.

I.—THE LADIES' DISCUSSION SOCIETY.

To the Editor of THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER.



EAR MR. EDITOR,—It has occurred to me that the readers of THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER might be interested in a sketch of two or three societies, the meetings of which

give a stimulus to intellectual life, and also form the *raison d'être* of pleasant social gatherings in a certain suburb of London. There is

nothing very novel or very alarmingly learned in any of the societies which I am about to describe. Yet they are helpful in many ways to girls who have learned to think, and who like to hear the thoughts of others. They also tend to develop a spirit of inquiry, and suggest the best way of satisfying it; bringing their members, in certain instances, into contact with the greatest minds of all time, and affording, by joint conversation and study, help to appreciation and understanding.

The "good old days" are fortunately growing more and more distant, when it was thought a waste of time for a girl who had "finished her education" to have a book in her hand, and the cheap and vacant occupation of needlework formed the staple of all feminine existence. I would not be understood as discouraging housewifely arts, in their proper places; far from it. I only maintain, whenever I have an opportunity of doing so, that sewing in various forms is *not* fit to be the main voluntary employment of a reasonable creature. Therefore, girls, while you acquaint yourselves with the mysteries of needlework, and practise them for a little time daily, don't, for the sake of all that is rational, fritter away your precious youth and your untired brain power in idle reverie and dreams, while your fingers move in self-inflicted mechanical toil all the indoor hours of your day.

Of course, Mr. Editor, this side remonstrance is addressed to girls who can rightfully control their time. To others, who are bound to the needle as a duty, either on account of themselves or other people, nothing can be said but an encouragement to do the best they can under the circumstances, and to get, if possible, something into their heads to think about while they stitch.

All this is a digression from the "Ladies' Discussion Society," which I intended to introduce first of all to the readers of THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER. I will do so by sketching one of its meetings.

At eleven o'clock in the morning, bright-faced girls, mingled with a few of maturer age, are thronging into a pleasant drawing-room in the house of the president. The monthly meetings are always held at her home, as the members come from various parts of town, and it is convenient to have a fixed rendezvous; but I would suggest to any country reader who may feel inclined to establish a similar society, that it might be easily held from house to house in rotation. Greetings are exchanged, and cheery talk goes on till a quarter-past the hour, when from thirty to forty members are usually assembled. I need hardly say that there are more names than this number represents upon the books, but the attendance naturally varies from month to month.

As we glance round the room many different types of womanhood meet our view. Here is Mary Thorne, a fair-haired girl, with ideas of her own on most subjects, but a great difficulty in expressing them. When she does manage to bring them to the surface they are well worth hearing, for they are never commonplace. She is engaged in earnest conversation with Clara Maitland, her next neighbour, who is a complete contrast—dark, clever, satiric, and fluent; ready to volunteer a paper on any particularly difficult subject that arises, and to show herself at home in it. A little further on Maud Transome is reclining in a low wicker chair; her eyebrows are knit, but a smile flickers round her mouth as she is evidently trying to think out something that has caught her interest. She may be described as the "Girl in Opposition." Fond of weighing both sides of a question, she instinctively tries to find something in support of a controverted point. Hence many odd and startling contributions to the debates have come from her lips; and though she may be wrong, there is generally matter for thought in her remarks. Beside her sits Phillis Grey, a frail creature, with an over-developed brain, who trembles with excitement as she presses her thought into utterance. She has no business here; it would be better for her to lead an outdoor country life for six months, and not to read a book during that period. But her weak physical health makes her an exception to the rest, who by no means look as if their intellect were too much for them. Next to her comes Emmeline Graham, a gentle, lovely girl, with dainty dress, and the faintest Scotch accent pervading her tone, as she quaintly and epigrammatically says her say. On the other side of the room is Miss Brand, a good-humoured maiden lady, with a shrewd wit and a clear insight, drawn from much practical experience. Not the least charming member is Alice Boyd, a merry, lively girl of delicious naïveté, and an amusing way of asking the most absurd questions. When put right, her errors seem to dawn gradually upon her consciousness, and she receives the revelation with a gleeful outburst of laughter.

The secretary is Mrs. Campion, who sits with her minute book by the side of Mrs. Oriel, the president and founder of the society. Both are young married ladies, who can spare time from their household cares for this and many another form of work. Mrs. Oriel's kind heart and active brain are always labouring for the good and help of others.

Her admirable tact and management are invaluable in the discussions, and her bright, helpful ways make her the adored friend of many a girl who needs advice and comfort. Her friend and helper, Mrs. Campion, has less of her active energy; she is a student by nature, and loves nothing better than to learn.

At a quarter past eleven Mrs. Oriel calls upon the secretary to read the minutes of the last meeting. When her clear report has been voted to be correct, the business of the day begins. It is usual to fix the next subject for debate at this point, but if there is any difficulty in finding one, it is adjourned, in the hope that, as frequently occurs, some interesting question will crop up in the progress of the morning's discussion.

Three of the members have papers in their hands, and the president now calls upon one of them, Miss Leigh, to open the topic of the day:—

"That development of character is more hindered by poverty than by riches."

In a clear distinct voice, and with considerable skill, Miss Leigh proceeds to state her case. She defines poverty as the sum total of limitations to human development; wealth as the sum total of facilities in that direction. Poverty, she insists, means a limited con-

dition of life, with no margin for experiment or experience. Its dull and uninteresting round confines the energies, and causes the will to be exercised merely in endurance of conditions. Wealth, on the other hand, means opportunity. She gives illustrations to prove her point, and refers to the false view of poverty taken by the ascetic school of religion. A struggle with circumstances is simply degrading when it is reduced to the effort to "keep up appearances," the form it usually assumes among women. This, and much more, Miss Leigh has to say in support of her subject.

She is followed by Edith White, an exponent of the opposite side. This young lady reads a paper in which, while stating that the mean between poverty and riches is best, she enforces her belief that of the two extremes the harder lot is more ennobling. She dwells much on the temptations to Sybaritism and selfishness inherent in wealth; instances the social conditions which led to the French Revolution in support of her point, and contrasts generally the bracing effect of poverty with the relaxing mildness of affluence.

Another paper is read by a well-known member of the society, Miss Grant. She takes the same side as her predecessor. Squalid want, she says, does not, it is understood, enter into the question; yet no circumstances can be too degrading for the growth of nobleness. She deals in historical illustrations of the enervating influence of wealth—for instance, the Roman Empire, destroyed by luxury—and points to the endurance, patience, contentment which grow out of the struggle with difficulties. Strength of character, she says, is formed and tested by the contests of life.

The president now intimates that the subject is thrown open for general discussion. The three papers have occupied about fifty minutes in reading, and as they have given plenty of food for conversation, there is no delay in complying with the announcement. So informal is the character of the proceedings, that the members do not even rise to their feet; one rule only is enforced by the president, that when a lady speaks all should have the benefit of her words. Unless this is emphasised there is a tendency to break up into eager little groups, while each member attempts to impress her views on her next neighbour. So one only may speak at once, and if the standing posture is not enforced, it is because the more timid members prefer to speak from their chairs, and the effect is thus more like a pleasant social circle. For I cannot too strongly repeat that the society is not for extraordinarily gifted or brilliant women, but for ordinary, every-day girls, who are earnest and thoughtful. It is true that many clever people do come to the little coterie, yet it is free to any who care to think and read.

Mrs. Campion suggests that the needful anxiety about ways and means in poverty is too all-absorbing to allow of harmonious development. Many objections to this view are urged from different parts of the room.

"Is not the question really a practical rather than a speculative one, and susceptible of proof?" inquires Emmeline Graham. "If we can show that the majority of eminent men have arisen from the ranks, surely the case is settled." She then instances her great countryman, Thomas Carlyle, touching upon his poverty and genius, and gives other illustrations of the same sort.

Miss Brand points out that the necessity for work acts as a stimulus, calls out all the powers of the nature, and exercises the faculty of self-denial. The spring-time of nations is always their time of struggle and effort, and the root virtues of character are those fostered by poverty. One or two members

speak in the same strain, and instance young artists and other promising people who have been ruined by having sufficient to live upon; while the inference is that, had they been forced to work, they would have done some good in the world.

Maud Transome does not approve of the turn the debate is taking, and here interposes an observation that goes back to a very early period.

"The very idea of 'development' itself owes its existence to wealth," she declares. "Until a leisure class began, through the acquisition by part of the community of enough to free them from incessant manual toil, there was no such thing as education or art in the modern sense. A leisure class sprang up; then education followed, and 'development' became a familiar idea."

This remark, which is more suggestive than may at first sight appear, is not generally taken up, probably because the members do not feel sufficiently at home in the recesses of the far past to discuss it. The controversy, therefore, is briskly waged on modern grounds. Instances are multiplied of the beneficial effect of a struggle with circumstances, while on the other hand it is argued that wealth does not necessarily mean selfish indulgence, and its opportunities for self-improvement are enlarged upon. At last, when one o'clock draws near, Mrs. Oriel calls upon Miss Leigh to reply.

This she does ably, taking up point by point the various attacks upon her paper. She points out the vices of poverty that were inherent in the great men who had been quoted, and accounts for the fact that so many heroes rise from the ranks by the consideration that the poorer classes are by far the most numerous. She has counter instances of the danger of poverty to allege against all that has been said about the evils of wealth.

When she has finished, one of the elder ladies says a few quiet words to the excited and interested gathering, touching the right sense in which to view money and every other possession as a trust to be used for the sake of others. When that is universally realised, the true social ideal will be near accomplishment.

The question is now put to the vote by Mrs. Oriel:—

"That development of character is more hindered by poverty than by riches."

Twelve hands only are held up. Twenty-two vote in the negative, so the original proposition is lost by a majority of ten.

The meeting now breaks up, and along the suburban roads groups of two and three are seen going homewards, discussing still the subject that has been brought before them.

If it be asked, "What is the good of debating an unpractical topic of that kind, which is not fit for hard and fast settlement, and which, even if settled, cannot matter to anybody?" the answer is, that anything is of use which helps people to think and express their thoughts. The idea in the meetings is not, of course, to solve questions of the kind once for all, but merely to bring the two sides before the members.

The specimen given belongs to the class of "general" questions. Another of these may be quoted, "That a regard for conventionality tends to hinder the progress of society." The debate upon this was extremely amusing and interesting. Besides these general questions, there are (2) Historical and (3) Literary subjects, which form in turn the matter for debate. Instances of the historical questions are:—

"Did the Norman Conquest help or retard the development of the liberties of the English people?"

"Should sympathy lean to the side of Becket or the King in the great controversy of Henry II.'s reign?"

"Was the timid and thrifty policy of Queen Elizabeth with regard to the Protestant cause on the Continent justified by the result?"

Many extremely able papers are contributed from time to time upon these and kindred topics, and no girl can leave the historical discussions without having gained something. If no other advantage be preserved, she will at least have had her attention turned to the Historical Method of inquiry, which does not wrest events out of their setting to look at them in an isolated form, but views them in due perspective, and takes into account all the conditions of the age and time in which they occurred.

I have left to the last the literary subjects, which usually assume the favourite form of a discussion upon one of Shakespeare's plays. No papers are read on the Shakespeare mornings, but questions, framed by our wise president in consultation with her friends, have been previously sent round to every member. These form a basis for the morning's conversation, and have given rise to some of the most delightful of all the discussions. In this way we have contrasted the poet's conceptions of Richard II. and Bolingbroke, Brutus and Cassius, Volubina and Virgilia, Hamlet and Laertes; have striven to thread the windings of Lady Macbeth's ambitious mind, and to trace the alteration in her spouse from the valiant thane to the superstitious terror-stricken king. We have debated the world-wide problem of Hamlet's madness; have pitied the fair, frail nature that failed him in his need, and have sought to comprehend the delay that ever checked him in the fulfilment of his dread purpose. In lighter mood we have wandered with Rosalind through the Forest of Arden; stood beside Prospero on his enchanted island; questioned fair Portia on her preference for Bassanio, and traced the loves of Benedick and the winsome, wilful Beatrice to their happy issue. Graver discussions have come from the consideration of Shylock's character, and the question whether he is more deserving of pity or of blame; and the vexed problem of "Political assassination: is it ever justifiable?" has arisen from the study of Julius Cæsar.

Much more might be said, for the subject is inexhaustible. But I hope this little sketch of a society which gives a great deal of pleasure and profit to its members, will be enough to induce some reader to try and form one in her own neighbourhood. Let her not despise the "day of small things."

Though few at first may come together, and little may be said, it is certain that the necessity of turning thought definitely upon some worthy subject, and expressing it intelligently when formed, will be of steady and growing benefit. And to every effort in this direction I heartily wish good speed! L. W.

VARIETIES.

A PARTICULAR BEGGAR.

A beggar asked for a bit of bread-and-butter at a house the other day, and on a couple of slices being brought to him, he indignantly refused them.

"What's the matter," asked the donor; "isn't it good bread?"

"Yes, the bread's good enough," said the beggar.

"Well, isn't the butter good too?"

"Yes, I've no fault to find with the butter."

"Well, then, what is the matter?"

"I don't like the way it's spread!" growled the fastidious mendicant.

KIND WORDS.—Kind words never blister

the tongue or lips, and we never hear of any mental trouble arising from this quarter. Though they do not cost much, yet they accomplish much. They help one's own good nature and good will. Soft words soften our own soul; angry words are fuel to the flame of wrath, and make it burn more fiercely. Kind words make other people good-natured. Cold words freeze people, and hot words scorch them, and bitter words make them bitter, and wrathful words make them wrathful. There is such a rush of all other kinds of words in one day, that it seems desirable to give kind words a chance among them. There are vain words, and idle words, and silly words, and hasty words, and spiteful words, and empty words, and profane words, and boisterous words, and warlike words. Kind words also produce their own image on men's souls; and a beautiful image it is. They soothe and quiet and comfort the hearer; they shame him out of his sour, morose, unkind feelings. We have not yet begun to use kind words in such abundance as they ought to be used.—Pascal.

DOUBLE ACROSTIC.

One of those gifted men, whom God creates
To be the bearer of His Will to man;
Constrain'd to yield as tyranny dictates,
And sign a falsehood, yet his soul abates
No faith in knowledge, which through him
began.

1. A Town in Surrey, where the river spreads
To various streams among the flowery meads;
Its Saxon name gives the conventual cause
From which the town its appellation draws.

2. Thrice Roman consul; victory's renown
Made him the first to wear the naval crown;
He built the temple for "All gods" a home,
Which, as a Christian church, still graces
Rome.

3. A flow'ring Shrub that, once a maiden bright
(If we our classic stories read aright),
Took sudden root and stay'd her headlong
flight.

4. The Patriot, who strove his land to free
From Moslem rule, but overpow'r'd was he,
And into Hungary compelled to flee.
When there, in prison thrown, he captive lay,
Till seven weary years had roll'd away,
And freedom came, too late; then pass'd his
life
Away for ever from this world of strife.

5. The sturdy Englishman who faced his king,
Unconstitutionally come to wring
The votes of members to his private views;
Firmly, respectfully did he refuse
To countenance the course the monarch tried,
Or have the *lex non scripta* set aside.

6. Threescore and twelve feet from the rock in
height,
This Tower displays its bright revolving light;
And while its granite frame the tempest
mocks,
Warns passing ships to shun its fatal rocks.

7. The philanthropic Prince, who made a home
For houseless outcasts wandering in Rome;
His noble mansion to an *hospice* turned,
And sheltered those whom others would have
spurn'd.

XIMENA.

ANSWER TO TRIPLE ACROSTIC (p. 575).

M e R i T
O d O u R
S e a S i d E
S t e v E n a g E

Moss. Rose. Tree.