

## OUR SOCIETIES.

III.—FRIENDS IN COUNCIL: THE  
CHILTERN CLUB.

DEAR MR. EDITOR,—The third and last society that for the present I shall introduce to your readers is very aptly described by the title of Mr. Arthur Helps' delightful book, "Friends in Council." It sometimes goes by that name, but for convenience' sake the artificial one of "Chiltern Club," suggested merely by a local circumstance, has been given.

This Society consists of ladies and gentlemen, chiefly young, or at any rate below middle age. It meets upon Thursday evening, once every month, at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Oriel, who were its original founders, and its object is the discussion of various questions of interest—literary, social, philosophical, political. A paper is read upon the topic of the day, and a debate follows, in which the members, of both sexes, take part.

The fact that women in the mixed company express their thoughts is the only feature in this Society that has any claim to novelty. There are debating clubs, public and private, in all parts of town, and in our own immediate neighbourhood I can count no less than five others. But as a rule I believe men only speak, while women, if allowed to be present, listen in silence. There are, of course, other and more ambitious societies in London where all the members take a part, irrespective of sex; but our little gathering is the only suburban one I know of the character, and at any rate I think the mingling of speakers will present a fresh idea to a few readers of THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER.

Perhaps someone, indeed, who has borne with patience the description of the Ladies' Discussion Society, and even tolerated the idea of a Shakespeare reading, may be horrified at the notion of women making speeches in the presence of the stronger sex. There may seem something a little bold, unwomanly, obtrusive, in such an action; and at any rate the fair girl-reader may feel sure she would not open her lips under the circumstances.

I am not a champion to the fullest extent of what are usually known as "Women's Rights," and I think that a public life on platforms is not our ideal career. By striving at equal political power with men women are apt to lose what is of more worth—the gentleness, grace, and loveliness that form their strongest weapon of influence. Still, with all my power I do protest against the feminine type that has now, fortunately, almost had its day: the woman feeble in body, feeble in mind, unable to support, only able to lean; pretty, of course, and "amiable;" in other words, without any definite opinions on anything except her own need of love and shelter; absorbed in trifles, and incapable of conversation on the affairs of the great world, which goes on its stupendous course while she sits playing with toys, safely fenced off of the way; the woman of whom Amelia in "Vanity Fair" and Rosamond in "Middlemarch" are varying types. The supposition that there is anything "unwomanly" in expressing rational thoughts in the presence of men, on subjects that stir joint interest, is, believe me, a relic of this vanishing tradition.

Of course I am not maintaining that girls in their teens, who have scarcely had time to form their opinions, should hasten to air them, even in a quiet society like ours. For such it is not intended; and if women, no matter what their age may be, have nothing to say, they had better say nothing.

There is no compulsion in the Chiltern Club for anyone to speak on the subject of the hour unless he or she feels moved to do so.

After this digression, let us look into Mrs. Oriel's drawing room, which we visited once before on the occasion of the Ladies' Discussion. It is evening now; eight o'clock has struck, and the lamplight falls softly on the charming flower-painted panels of the cabinet, the old china, and the few good prints, which form the adornments of the simple, prettily furnished room. The guests are arriving—greeted by their cordial hostess, with her sweet, earnest face; and by Mr. Oriel, who is a barrister of kindly disposition and cultivated mind. He is a University man, and some of the members of the Chiltern Club are his college friends.

Mr. and Mrs. Campion come first. Mr. Campion has been introduced before as the President of the Shakespeare Society. He has not had the advantage of a University education, yet he is passionately fond of literary pursuits, and spends much of his hard-earned leisure (for he is a busy lawyer) in reading and research. A great deal of what he studies comes to him with fresh delight, just because he has not had the interest rubbed off by early association. He is no linguist, but he is at present absorbed with intense eagerness in Plato's Dialogues, which he is reading for the first time in Professor Jowett's translation. With Mrs. Campion, whom he adores more fervently than in his bachelor days, he spends many an evening of varied and delightful study, although he by no means ignores the duty of an unselfish life, and uses his talent for public speaking to good effect upon religious and philanthropic platforms. To-night he is to introduce the subject of debate.

Next, the Secretary of the Society, Mr. Harrington Ward, makes his appearance. He is a charming fellow, whom everyone likes, and whom most people call by his Christian name. He is a clerk in a Government office, and is remarkable for his kindly disposition. He does not aim after a literary reputation, but his genial common sense and Oxford training stand him in good stead, and make him one of the most popular and useful of the Friends in Council.

In quick succession follow Miss Transome and Mr. Howard. Maud Transome we have met before at the Ladies' Discussion Society. She takes a less prominent position here, yet she conquers the nervousness that besets her sufficiently to make valuable additions to the debate, brief though her remarks usually are. Mr. Howard is a formal, tall young man of the neighbourhood, who has a decided taste for earnest pursuits, and lets the Chiltern Club alternate with the gay round of balls and dinner parties that he graces with his presence. Of another type are Mr. Freeman and Mr. Thornycroft, unmarried barristers also, who lead a lonely life in chambers. Both are men of ability and readiness, but Mr. Seymour Smith, who follows them, exceeds them by his fluency and brilliancy. Miss Emmeline Graham, the sweet Scotch girl who appeared at the Ladies' Discussion, enters accompanied by her friend Miss Terriss, a picturesque, intelligent creature, in a very artistic dress, of a clinging white material, that to my mind recalls nothing but the line of Tennyson—

"Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful."

With these ladies and Miss Transome the gentlemen of the party are quickly absorbed in conversation, while the coffee cups circulate and a merry laugh breaks the hum of voices from time to time. Mr. and Mrs. Raleigh, Mr. Campion's partner and his wife, now enter. We saw him at the Shakespeare Society, as a fair-haired pleasant gentleman without much energy of manner, but with a great deal of intelligent discrimination and cultivated feeling. He

possesses no mean powers of thought under that quiet exterior, and what he says is always worth hearing. His wife is a tall, graceful woman, who is endowed with a striking gentleness and amiability of manner. She is never heard to say an unkind thing about anyone, and is deservedly a favourite.

A few other guests enter, including one or two elder ladies; then a young married couple, Mr. and Mrs. Crisp. He is a very hard-headed young man, who reads papers on such subjects as the "Abolition of the Poor Laws," and whose speeches on social topics are always marked by extreme severity. Poverty he regards as synonymous with idleness; misfortune, to his mind, is only another name for wilful providence. In reality he is very kind-hearted, and it is difficult to reconcile his professional with his actual self. Miss Brand, who is a very shrewd epigrammatic spinster, now enters; she never makes a speech, but tries to incite other ladies to take up social subjects that interest her.

Who are these appearing last of all? In the tall, slightly stooping figure of the young man, with his clear profile innocent of moustache, and mass of fair hair flung back from his brow in a cloud, we recognise instantly an æstete. He needs not to utter a word in that low thrilling monotone to our hostess to betray his character. We remember him at once, having met him in the pages of *Punch* and elsewhere, and are not surprised to hear that his name is Mr. Postlethwaite. He is accompanied by his wife, a lovely little creature in a short-waisted dress of terra cotta, with great ruffles round her neck and sleeves, and short curling hair covering her dainty head. Childlike though she may appear, she possesses plenty of intelligence and a delicious sense of humour that make her a charming companion. Her dress is, in my opinion, very much prettier and more becoming than the meaningless array of killings, pleatings, and sash ends that disfigure many women of the present day—but this is a digression.

It is time for conversation to cease and the meeting to begin. The Friends in Council place themselves as they like upon the settees that are ranged round the room, and Mr. Oriel, the president, calls upon Mr. Harrington Ward to read the minutes of the last meeting. This being over, the subject for next time comes up for decision, and it is agreed that a paper upon Robert Browning's poetry shall be read by Mr. Oriel, affirming that the poet's reputation will increase, rather than decay, with advancing time.

Mr. Campion is now called upon to read his paper, which declares no other than the astounding proposition, "That the present movement for the 'Higher Education of Women' will be fraught with serious consequences."

I can imagine that to the reader of THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER the subject will seem strangely inconsistent both with the character of the Chiltern Club and the remarks with which this description is prefaced. I may therefore explain without delay that Mr. Campion is not quite serious in advocating this side of the question. There is a great deal to be said upon it, and it seems to him that it would be well to say it for the purpose of eliciting a thoroughly good discussion; but his acting as the temporary advocate of the Conservative view does not commit him in reality to sympathy with the arguments which he now proceeds eloquently and fairly to put forward.

Mrs. Campion, who is well educated and accomplished, feels a little hot lest some members of her own sex should take her husband's remarks too much to heart. He enlarges upon the danger of over-study to

women's health, the folly of supposing that she can compete with man in the physical endurance necessary for close application; he brings instances where delicate girls have broken down from overwork, and draws an alarming picture of a future generation of under-vitalised, over-cerebrating women. He contrives slyly to exasperate the feminine part of his audience by allusions, in the hackneyed style, to woman's chief end—the good of mankind; hinting that if she makes herself attractive, useful, and agreeable to men, she has achieved the whole reason of her existence. When he has brought some of his hearers to a white heat by this style of argument, he reverts more seriously to the consequences he supposes will flow from the college education of girls—the competition in every profession with men; discontent with the quiet domestic round; and so forth. He then describes the miseries of the home where the presiding genius, though a genius in real earnest, has none of the useful, everyday acquirements that will make her husband and children comfortable. Though she can read Dante in the original, and construe Virgil and Homer, she is ignorant of the ordinary laws of health, and utterly at the mercy of incompetent domestics. After a vivid sketch of the supposed miseries that will result from such a condition of things, Mr. Campion ends up with a peroration in which the old-fashioned girl, domestic, helpful, and handy, is set forth in glowing colours, and his hearers are requested to vote that the new system of high pressure, tending to produce a different type of woman, will entail “serious consequences” on the future of England.

He has not long to wait for a reply, for Miss Despard springs instantly to her feet. She is an earnest, deeply thoughtful woman, still young, and with a fair face, full of sympathy and power. Of independent means, she devotes her time to various philanthropic schemes among the poor of London. She has not very long been a member of the society, and does not know Mr. Campion well enough to be sure what he really means. However, his speech has filled her with the deepest indignation, and she begins to answer that part of it dealing with the supposed competition between women and men which will be the result of “higher education.”

Education she defines as an educating or bringing forth of the true capacities of a human being in the best possible way. Will “education,” therefore, lead its subjects to do what they cannot fitly attempt? Rather will it not show them what they are, and what they can hope to achieve, with success and the best results to themselves and to the world around? She energetically rebuts the suggestion that it can in any way blind women to their best aims in life, and altogether makes a capital speech, proving point by point.

Mr. Seymour Smith next rises, and first of all creates a sensation by saying that he agrees with the proposition of the opener. The higher education of women will have “serious” consequences doubtless on the future of England; but he understands the word “serious” in a different sense from his friend. While half suggesting his suspicion that Mr. Campion was not thoroughly in earnest, he eloquently pleads for the right of every human creature to the very best education that can be given; and points out that some of the evils foretold were attached to unwise cramming rather than rational ‘education,’ in which the physical as well as the mental powers of the individual are developed. The best brain is of little service if there is not enough vital energy to work it, as Herbert Spencer says, and any

system of education that neglects this fact is imperfect.

Mr. Howard speaks next. He is really in sympathy with the outcry against the “higher education” of women, and shows it by his remarks, which deal with the supposition that a multitude of acquirements will make a woman discontented with the common round of life. He is so red hot against Women's Rights, and ladies who talk of a Sphere, with a capital S, that he mixes up his hostility with the question now before the society.

Mrs. Campion now rises, and says she should like to add a word or two upon the physical effects of education. If a girl chance to be overworked from the abuse of study, and to suffer in health, everyone hears of it at once, and the instance is made much of. But who, she asks, shall count the numbers whose health has failed through the lack of education? She draws a striking picture of the girl of the past in a well-to-do home, perhaps in some country place, with little occupation, without mental resources, wearying her eyes over needlework, her mind full of the rapid novel that formed her only intellectual food. What wonder if such a woman, supposing she did not marry, fell into a state of chronic lassitude, degenerating into ill health? “The little health of ladies,” Mrs. Campion believes, is even now in great measure due to this lack of mental tone and poverty of resource, as well as to the more direct cause of their ignorance of hygienic laws. The improvement in this direction, with the advancing education of the sex, is shown by the fact that self-control is on the increase among women. Formerly it was considered the correct thing for a girl to faint away or fall into hysterics immediately on hearing any tidings that were in the least disturbing; this she proved amusingly by reference to the fiction of the past generation. Now the self-control of culture has become a recognised part of the breeding of every lady. Mrs. Campion ends by urging the importance, for every woman who can appreciate and enjoy it, of intellectual resource, that she may have a sanctuary into which she may retreat to seek a refuge from the petty worries of everyday existence. Such a possession sweetens and brightens not only her own life, but the life of all who live with her.

Applause greets these remarks, and Miss Transome rises to continue the same strain. She declares that a cultivated woman will do household tasks that a half-educated one would think below her dignity, because the former has a right sense of the fitness of things, and a sense of harmony. It is an error to suppose that homely minds are the best administrators of small duties.

Mr. Oriel takes the same view. He deprecates the ancient notion that a woman should be nothing more than an excellent upper servant, and insists on the need of companionship and intelligent sympathy between women and men.

Mr. Postlethwaite now slowly rises. In a languid, long-drawn-out manner, with a peculiar thrilling intonation of every syllable, he shows his disgust at the opener's rhetoric. He does not state his views upon education nor indeed upon anything else, but contrives generally to imply that Mr. Campion is a Philistine, and that he, Mr. Postlethwaite, is a high priest of culture, while the Society generally is but little worthy of the light he condescends to diffuse upon it. It is only fair to add that when Mr. Postlethwaite speaks upon a subject in art or literature, in which he is at home, he is very well worth hearing indeed, for he is a man of real ability, and his name is not unknown as a rising author.

Other speakers rise, most of them contend-

ing for the enlightened view that the best training possible must be given to women, as to men, and that the drawbacks urged by Mr. Campion belong rather to imperfect or cramming education than to “higher education” in its true sense. Mrs. Oriel is especially emphatic in maintaining that if two households be contrasted, presided over, one by a highly educated mistress, one by the merely domestic woman, the palm, other things being equal, will belong to the former. It is well known that *the homes of herself* and Mrs. Campion are models of good and thrifty management, and this fact lends tacit support to her words, though she is not thinking of it as she speaks. Scarcely any point remains untouched when ten o'clock is reached and Mr. Oriel calls on Mr. Campion to reply.

It is perfectly evident from his few remarks that he is in sympathy with what has been said in answer to his paper. He has a boyish love of provoking opposition, and contrives to fling a parting shaft at one or two who have shown themselves specially exasperated by his words. When the question is put to the vote, the original motion is lost by an overwhelming majority. An adjournment is now made from the drawing room, and Miss Despard actually refuses laughingly to go in to supper with Mr. Campion, who is fain to content himself with a quiet elderly lady as his companion.

Now the scene changes to the dining room, where, over sandwiches, sweets, and fruit, a merry hum of conversation briskly goes on. It is a charming sight; the women are pleasant to look upon, and the men are engaged in talk with them that is not meaningless chatter. For at this Chiltern Club we really converse, and not the least delightful part of the evening is the earnest talk, on all manner of subjects, between intelligent men and women. The whole spirit of the thing is bright and informal, and the interchange of ideas is no mean pleasure.

Many questions that are discussed at these meetings are of literary or artistic interest; for instance, Mr. Matthew Arnold's estimate of Wordsworth, George Eliot's influence as a novelist, and Rossetti's pictures. Social topics are not ignored, and Mr. George's “Progress and Poverty” lately formed the theme of one debate. There is no lack of interesting subjects for discussion, and men and women take their share in contributing papers. Altogether, Friends in Council pass very happy evenings, sharpen one another's ideas, delight one another's appreciative faculties, and are not by any means too intellectual to enjoy a little refined and genuine fun.

Such societies, which form a motive for meeting without trouble, and with scarcely any expense, while the entertainment is ready furnished, provide one of the pleasantest ways of spending an evening with which I am acquainted. All the arrangements are studiously simple; the members are supposed to dine before they come, and the slightest refreshments (of tea and coffee to begin with and sandwiches and sweets at the close of the debate) are all that is necessary. The men, of course, wear evening dress, and the women, without finery, make themselves look attractive, but anything like fashionable display would be “bad form.” The talk, which is suggested and stimulated by the subject discussed, is really most delightful, and one always comes away with a sense of exhilaration and pleasure that is not invariably the result of an Evening from Home.

L. W.

