

The Women's Progress Club

By Dora Sigerson Shorter

"I think it would be well if Miss Gillson called upon Mr. Westcliff; he is an influential member of Parliament, and might be willing to help our Progress Club."

A chorus of female voices interrupted, "Oh, but we have called, and he is impossible to move."

"I think Miss Gillson is a friend of his," the president continued, smiling upon the animated assembly of hats and bonnets, which might, at first sight, have been taken for a crowd of birds, so variously and wonderfully were they decorated by plumage; "otherwise I know it would be vain to send any one, even Miss Gillson, where so many charming young ladies had failed."

"He is not a friend of mine," Miss Gillson said; "I knew him when I was a young girl—slightly."

"So long ago as that," a member said absently. "Then there is not much use going to see him."

Miss Gillson flushed. "I have made up my mind to go. I have often thought of that old man living there, with his old-fashioned ideas and narrow-mindedness, and I confess it has worried me."

She rose and stood before the glass, then drew her veil down over her face after a dissatisfied glance.

A member sitting near her was toying with a crimson rose. Miss Gillson looked at her and their eyes met.

"Don't break the pretty thing," she said. There was almost a request in her voice, and the other smiled.

"Do you care to take it?" Miss Gillson blushed; she read meaning in the smile.

"To save it from destruction," she said; and took the flower, fixing it carefully in her bodice. She looked again at the glass and rearranged the angle of her hat.

"Until women cease to think of dress," the president of the Club said pointedly, "I shall not believe the old Adam—or should I say the old Eve?—is slain."

"I never heard," said a gay voice from a corner, "that Adam was much troubled by his wife's dress accounts. It's the present-day husbands that complain of that grievance."

"The present-day husbands complain of a good many grievances," a careworn woman sighed bitterly.

"And why?" said a stern-looking member in glasses. "Because their mothers spoil them first and their wives afterwards. Most of their faults are to be traced to their great selfishness—the selfishness which is natural to their sex and carefully cultivated by mothers and wives. It should be smacked out of them when babies, worked out of them when boys, and—and later, nagged out of them by wives. Mothers, in particular, should not spare the rod. However, this is not what is before the meeting. Mrs. Dickson will you read the reports."

Mrs. Dickson opened the book before her.

"You couldn't do it," she said softly; "it's quite impossible to refuse baby anything if he cries for it. It's awful to hear a child crying when it's just at the beginning of its life's journey. It's such a little thing it wants, after all, to please it."

"That's it, exactly as I say," said the member in glasses. "The mothers spoil them; it's so easy to give in: and I say it's equally easy to hold out."

"It's the hardest thing in the world," Mrs. Dickson replied as she turned a page of her book. "What I really want to tell you ladies," she continued, "is that I have no time to continue a member of the Club. You see, it was different before I married; but I find, what with baby and with my husband being at home more than formerly, that I really must resign."

"I am sure we shall all regret you very much," the president said. "I am especially sorry when married ladies leave us. They can be of so much help by converting their husbands, and through them, perhaps, other men, to a recognition of our grievances."

"I don't know why women marry," remarked a lady of uncertain age to her neighbour; "it is such a drag on them, it puts an end to all their prospects."

"I don't know, I'm sure," the other said snappishly. "I suppose because they get the chance." She looked her up and down. "That's the old maid that keeps the shop at the corner of our road," she thought; "how impertinent of her to address me!"

The other returned the glance with interest. "You are the person who keeps a lodging-house down our street," she looked; then turned her shoulder.

"Excuse me. I didn't see whom I was addressing," she said.

"It isn't a drag to have to care for a man who loves you or your own child," Mrs. Dickson continued softly. "You can't imagine what an inexplicable feeling of happiness it gives you to even put on buttons and fold away their things, and to feel that you are the person who keeps warm and cheerful the little house that contains your treasures."

"I can't, indeed," a member muttered sadly.

"We are wandering from the subject of our meeting," the president said, smiling. "Mrs. Dickson, you will have a bad effect on our members if you become sentimental. Remember all the women who have no husbands, the widows who keep houses, and unmarried ladies who do their work side by side with men, yet do not get their advantages; and, indeed, the wives who keep their husbands, as often happens in the lower classes, and sometimes in our own. Why are these not to have votes with the men—and equal chances? However, we really must get on with the business of the meeting. Miss Gillson! where is Miss Gillson? Is it possible you are still before the glass, Miss Gillson? I fear I shall never make a new woman of you, my dear."

Miss Gillson turned smiling. "It was a hook that would not hook," she said, confused. "I wasn't admiring myself, I assure you. I won't sit down, but shall go right on and try to convert Mr. Westcliff." She passed out, closing the door softly behind her.

"It wasn't the hook that kept her, it was the baiting of it," said a woman with a sour smile.

"She is a dear creature," her neighbour answered. "I should not wonder if Mr. Westcliff were an old lover, she took such pains over her appearance."

"She is, indeed," the other said, more heartily. "I always love to kiss her—her make-up has such a lovely perfume."

But Miss Gillson, all unconscious of her critics, was walking smartly along the country lane that led to George Westcliff's little house.

"It's extraordinary how I dislike this man, she muttered. "I can't account for it." She rearranged the bow beneath her chin and tried to see her face in a little stream that ran beside the road. "I wonder if I am much changed? I hope he won't think, to use a horridly feminine expression, that I have 'gone off' much."

When she reached the door she hesitated for a few moments, overcome with a sudden shyness she seldom experienced. "How will he meet me after all these years? What is the man like that I only knew as a lad?"

A slatternly servant opened the door at her knock, then shuffled off, down at the heel, to announce her. She heard the girl say, "A Miss Pilsoner to see you"; and, looking through the opened door, caught a sudden glimpse of George Westcliff. In the momentary glance she took in the whole untidy room and the desolate figure of the man. He was sitting staring through the dirty window at the grey sky beyond. The remains of his lunch were still upon the table.

When the girl spoke he started as though from sleep and turned to his visitor. When he saw her he rose quickly and gasped "Barbara!" but recovered himself and advanced with outstretched hands.

"You remember me?" she said, pleased that the years had done so well for her.

"I could not forget you," he said lightly, and you have not changed." His tone seemed a question as well as a statement.

"My opinions haven't," she said, rather coldly, "and it's about them I have come to see you.

He motioned her to be seated and seemed disappointed.

"What can I do for you," he said, "Mrs.—did the servant say 'Mrs. Pilsoner'?"

She laughed. "No; I am still Miss Gillson."

His face cleared. He moved a trifle nearer her. She thought to herself, "I am sure of his support, if he has so much sentiment left," and turned to him smiling. "I'm a member of the Women's League, and we want your help in Parliament."

"I have always been against allowing women out of their proper place—their home," he answered.

"I thought with years you would have grown less narrow-minded," she replied sharply.

"Is it a great injustice to your sex to wish them safe by their own fireside, with some one to protect them from the rough winds of the world?"

"But every one hasn't her own fireside, or the somebody," she answered, smiling. "And these are the women one wants to help."

"Yes, those are the women you want to help; and so wives neglect their husbands and children, and daughters their fathers and mothers to foster plans for those women who have no one belonging to them. I have often met such women in the world pushing into men's departments and getting hustled by men. Men can't help jostling them in the hurry of life, but it hurts me to see it."

"I think your argument very old-fashioned and stupid," Barbara said calmly. "There are so many women who have to work, widows, and girls with, perhaps, old people depending on them. But men are so selfish that they want all the good things for themselves, all their pursuits to have few rivals, and the women to stay at home and make them comfortable when they are tired of their ambitions outside."

"It isn't that they are selfish. I think"—he rose to his feet, looking around—"it's that they are so helpless without women to look after them. I am strong enough to work hard with my hands and brain all day, yet when it comes to making a home—there's something terribly wrong here"—he waved his hands as though to take in the little room—"and I don't know what it is or what to do—but I hate it!"

"It's the dust and the remains of lunch, I think," she answered; and, with a sudden rush of foolish femininity, longed to sweep and tidy. "Did you sew that button on yourself?" She was staring at his coat, where a loose button hung by a white thread.

"A man is as helpless with a needle as a woman with a gun." He smiled at her, but she had risen and was going round the room.

“The poor thing!” she laughed softly with tears in her eyes. She had come upon a sock with a large hole in the heel; there had been an attempt to draw it together by a bit of string. “I have never seen anything so pathetic.”

“You see what a man is without a woman.” He was watching her, and she froze.

“What answer am I to take back to my president?” she said.

“I’ll tell you,” he answered, “if you will come outside; it’s so untidy and dreary in here.”

“Why don’t you discharge your servant?” she said, with a laugh; “it’s the woman at home who is the cause of your discomfort.”

“I daren’t.” He smiled. “I am afraid; and if I were not I do not know who I should get in her place.”

She turned her face away from him. “Why do you not capture one of your ideal home women, and set her by your hearth?”

“I’ll tell you.” He looked keenly at her. “Because you progress women have claimed her and are too strong for me.”

Barbara shivered as with a sudden chill. She did not answer and hurried along by his side. He brought her away from the house into a little wood, and, after some seeking, led the way to the trunk of a fallen tree.

“We will sit down here,” he said, “and lean against this old oak; it makes a wonderful seat for two.”

Barbara sat beside him, her blood beginning to grow hot in her cheeks. “Does he forget this was where we used to meet long ago?” She looked around sadly, with a vague sense of something lost, Was it love or years? She looked up at him. He was regarding her quietly.

“This was once a bees’ nest.” He pointed to a deep hole in the trunk of the tree.

“Does he not remember it was our pillar-box?”

She turned away from him angrily.

“Oh, please, tell me why and how you lost the ideal woman, and won’t help us in consequence.”

“The ideal woman and I were engaged to be married,” he said, seating himself and looking away from her. “It was long ago—fifteen years ago, I think.” Barbara started and her face changed. “We used to come and sit for hours in the woods talking over our plans; we were to have a little cottage in the country with a garden full of hollyhocks.”

“Of lilies, I think,” Barbara said; then stopped confused.

“Perhaps it was lilies,” he continued, without seeming to notice her confusion. “Anyway it does not matter; neither were planted. The little cottage was built in the clouds only, and soon tumbled to ruin, leaving the man homeless and loveless during the years that followed, and they were such long years. He did not know where to go nor what to do. He was like one who had been going singing along a happy road and suddenly stumbled into night and weariness. It was like as though he had been led by happiness, so that he was blind to misfortune, and suddenly missed her hand. Then all the unseen things became visible, sorrow trod beside him, solitude echoed his footsteps, age pushed him on the shoulders, and whispered of the dreariness of his loveless years.

“And the girl?” said Barbara angrily, while she struggled to keep back her tears; “what did she do? did she suffer at all?”

“I don’t imagine she suffered,” he said, hesitating; “no, not a little bit. She was full of a great ambition to benefit her sex. She told me that if she married she must still continue to serve this ideal, and I was young and hot-headed then, and we quarrelled over it and parted.”

“It was a little thing for which to throw over a woman you loved,” Barbara said, her face crimson and her eyes studying the distance.

“A little thing!” he said hotly; “it was no little thing, that cursed ‘movement,’ that took a soft, gentle, loving woman and changed her into a hard, unforgiving, cruel one.

Barbara regarded him in angry surprise.

“They both parted to go their own ways,” she said, “the man as well as the woman.”

“But the man wrote a humble letter to the woman begging her forgiveness, asking her to come back to him, that he was miserable and wretched, that he was going abroad unless she told him to stay.”

He rose to his feet and put his hand into the hollow of the tree.

“He posted it here, and when he came for an answer the letter was gone and there was no other.” As he spoke he drew from the hole a handful of moss and dead leaves, tossing them on the ground. From amongst them a yellow piece of paper dropped. Barbara lifted it and held it in her hands. She bent her head upon it, crying bitterly.

“I never got it,” she said; “leaves must have fallen upon it. Oh, poor little letter! all these years I have been longing for you.”

George Westcliff took her hands in his; his face was the face of a young man.

“Barbara dear, Barbara,” he said, and she looked up, smiling through her tears.

“What a commonplace story after all!” she said; “I should have known there was a lost letter in it—there always is when old lovers meet and explanations follow. To think of it happening to us, though!”

He drew her, unresisting, into his arms. “What matter how commonplace it is as long as it ends happily? Barbara, my Barbara, only love me and you shall do as you like. I shall do all I can for your Women’s Progress Club, and you shall spare me only what time you choose.”

“I haven’t the faintest interest in the Women’s Progress Club,” she said, taking the lappet of his coat in her hand with a tremble that was not all laughter in her voice. “My only ambition is to sew this poor button on your jacket with black thread.”