

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, Dec 20, 1890 to May 30, 1891)

### An Agreeable Solution of A Social Problem

One summer's day not twenty years ago I was on a steamer coming from Nantucket Island to the mainland. It was a lovely afternoon in the steamer was crowded with passengers most of whom came aboard at Martha's Vineyard or Cottage City and were of the camp meeting order, plain elderly people with many giggling loud talking girls. I wondered about the decks seeking in vain for some one to talk to. There was a young Episcopal clergyman whom I knew, with his bride of a few weeks, but I thought it unfair to intrude on their billing and cooing and saw no other familiar face in all the throng. Finally I went up in the bow where I noticed a trim figure in grey.

She had been reading but had closed her book and was looking dreamily, out over the sunlit water. Her pose was a becoming one and just then she was not unlike those trite pictures of Evangeline we see so much in the print shops, except that her hair did not droop so low over her face but was drawn back over her ears in more modern fashion. A great desire came over me to learn the burden of her thoughts and I cast about in my mind for some pretext. I have scraped acquaintances under less extenuating circumstances, but there was something in this girl's face which made me fear that she might not appreciate the proper spirit of any overtures on my part to that end. Generally speaking when people are fellow travelers there is no urgent need of refraining from speaking to each other because some third person has not mumbled over them their respective names.

If each is assured that the other is not an imposter, but just what each seems, there is supposed to be no harm in waving the formalities. I know a lady who at the outset of our acquaintance was very particular about the literal observance of all those proprieties. She was my fellow passenger in a Pullman car on a western road. Our engine ran over a cow and the train stopped; there was some confusion and the passengers male and female spoke freely to each other without embarrassment or any introductions.

After the obstruction was removed in the train was again on its way, feeling that depression which is natural after any excitement, I hesitatingly took a seat at her side with some remark about the price the company would probably have to pay for that cow which had risked all of our lives and much property, for the sake of some tempting grazing on the right-of-way. At first I thought she had not heard me, her look was so unresponsive and I tried again in a slightly louder tone, whereupon she observed coyly that if I didn't object she preferred the seat to herself to which I replied that I did object until made very sure that she had entirely recovered from the recent shock to her nerves, at which she drew herself up saying "Sir; do you mean; shall I be obliged to call the conductor?" "Certainly not" I replied, "not on my account; but I was going to tell you all about the accident."

She looked at me suddenly but seeing the fun in my eye, grew again more severe and replied, "The accident is over sir, and you have no right to address me." "But the accident

did not last long enough” said I, “now suppose it is still on in full blast what difference can it make whether I spoke to you then or spoke to you now, a few moments after it is safely over.” “No sir, it makes all the difference in the world.” Just then the air brakes were applied suddenly and with a series of irregular jerks to train again came to a stop. The young woman sprang to her feet crying “What’s the matter now!” “There seems to be some trouble” said I, “possibly it reaches the importance of another accident and if so perhaps I may be permitted to speak to you if no more than to answer your question, so soon as I can gather the necessary information.” Rising I went forward and out of the car and learning the cause of the sudden stopping of the train returned and stood before her awaiting her permission to speak.

She tried to be severe and turned and looked out of the window, but the smile could not be kept out of her eyes and she said at last, “You may sit down if you wish though I really do not think you have any right to suppose that you could speak to me before any thing happened and after the other accident was all over.” For some time we discussed the matter cheerfully and then some other subject and she helped me to pass agreeably what might have been a long and dreary day, and we thus began an acquaintance which has since been presently maintained.

But to return to the young woman in grey on the Nantucket boat. If she had seemed to be of society or the world I might have felt less hesitation about approaching her, but she evidently was not a young woman of the world. She was far above many such nor had she any affiliation with the noisy crowd from Cottage City. She was probably a schoolmistress from some New England town and all of her prior notions of propriety would be shocked if I dared to address her. I hesitated, not so much on my own account as for fear of wounding her feelings. For some time I wandered listlessly about passing near her now and then but making no further progress. I noticed that the book she had laid onto the seat beside her was Curtis' “Prue & I”, one of my favorites and my desire to talk with her became stronger. Finally I sat down beside the minister's bride and told her of my perplexity.

She laughed at me and said I was old enough to know better than to think of such a thing. Of course the girl would take offense if I ventured to speak to her; any right minded girl would. “How would you like” said she “to have a strange young man take advantage of your sister's being alone and persistently tried to scrape an acquaintance with her.” “Oh” said I, “that's always the centre shot of those who plead for this conveyance of the inevitable introduction. It's like the pro-slavery argument of “Do you want your daughter to marry a nigger?” Or the present day epithet of “free trader” applied to the tariff reformer. It goes too far beyond the real question. If the hypothetical man who might want to speak to my hypothetical sister was a gentleman and wished only the courteous intercourse of deferential conversation, I should not object to it. The only question is, does he appear otherwise than what he really is? You may say “how is she to know this?” And I answer “she is to know it by that instinct which is unerring in most women of refinement. But it is because all women have not this power of accurate judgment of the men they meet, that social usage has made a law for all, that there first must be an

introduction, which is merely the insurance of some third person that he is a man whom it is proper for her to know.

This law is like some of the other rules of society and human intercourse. It is necessary for some persons and is therefore imposed upon all.” In Europe and in some of the older and better established societies of this country, introductions in social gatherings of a limited character are very properly omitted entirely. The guests feel assured that all their fellow guests are sick persons and the intercourse is so much easier and more natural than if the host and hostess spent all of their time in making formal introductions. The introduction into the house is a sufficient introduction for all who meet therein. We in America are rather prone to make the ceremony of introduction a bore, by overdoing it. Some people are forever introducing everyone to everybody else, violently and indiscriminately without any excuse or warrant. It is much more agreeable to let an acquaintance come about naturally and voluntarily without any artificial forcing of the process. “Particularly should I think this would be the feeling of your sex” I added, “because in such cases you can be certain that your acquaintance is really sought in the outset at least.”

While we were talking, her husband, the young clergyman, came up on hearing the subject of our discussion and what had led to it, said jauntily, “where is this charming young woman. I shall have a little talk with her myself and let you know if she is all you take her to be.” “This” he added rubbing his hand over his straight cut clerical coat “is all the introduction she will want of me.” “You will find her” I said, “in the bow of the boat. There are dozens of girls there but she is the only one there at whom any man would look a second time, so you will have no difficulty in finding her.” As he started off his wife called after him, “Edward! Edward! You don't really mean to speak to her – what are you going to say to her?” “Oh, I will inquire after her spiritual welfare,” he replied gaily and disappeared in the crowd. “You don't appear to think his picking up an acquaintance is so very objectionable.” I said – “It's different” she answered. “He is a clergyman, she can see that it wants and will take no offense because she will be sure none is meant.” “Oh” said I, “that admits the truth of what I've been saying. The introduction is only necessary according to the rules of society because the average young woman can't trust to outside appearances.

In this case, the coat is the introduction. (Why should it not be a written certificate from some local Ward McAllister or other competent authority? Or why is any needed, if the man knows how to behave himself and intends to do so? In that case the girl needs the protection of no rules of propriety. It is only because all men are not fit acquaintances for young girls and because all young women are not able to classify men accurately, that this social usage has grown up. It is designed to protect girls from the advances of libertines and black legs. Like many of our rules of polite society it is one of the growths of an impure social atmosphere, or one of the products of that alleged chivalry which deemed any unprotected young woman the proper prey of all men.” “The chaperone is one of the results of the same code. The rule which makes her necessary goes hand-in-hand with the rule which requires introductions. If all young women were able to know a proper candidate for acquaintance when they saw him, no introduction would be needed. The improper applicant would be rebuffed and the proper one received as if some third

person had vouched for him. However” I added, “I fear I cannot convert you and I think I'll go and see how Edward is getting on.”

As soon as I got well forward I saw he was getting on famously with a good-looking young woman who was as unlike my girl in grey as a bird of paradise is unlike a dove. The girl he was talking with wore a bright ribbon tied about her neck with the knot behind and had a number of rings on one hand from which she had removed her glove. Without letting him see me I returned to where his wife sat. I was afraid he might want to introduce me if he saw me. “How's Edward getting on?” She asked. I feared to remind her of a want in his makeup which she must have noticed, so I did not betray his mistake and evaded her question. In a few moments Edward himself appeared radiant and pronounced her a stunner and said he thought I would have no trouble, if I wanted to make her acquaintance, and if I hesitated about going it alone he would introduce me. He had told her he had a friend aboard who was anxious to know her and described me and she said that she had noticed me but that I did not look as if I had the spunk to say boo to a goose, much less to make up to a girl.

In telling us this he poked me in the ribs and thoroughly enjoyed his apparent victory which I did not begrudge him in the least, but declined to accept his offer. Soon after we got to the The Wood's Hill where I bade him and his wife goodbye as they went on to New Bedford, and leaving the boat I pushed forward among the crowd to get a seat in the train for Boston. As I went I looked about in vain for the girl in grey and concluded that she had not left the boat, but as I was putting my satchel into the rack over the seat which I congratulated myself on securing in the train, I saw her a few seats in front of me. The car had filled up rapidly and just then a large woman with a baby in her arms crowded along the aisle and took the vacant seat by her side. The day was warm, the car was close and the large woman with the baby did not look like a comfortable neighbor. In a moment I gathered up my traps as if to do the woman with the baby a kindness gave her the whole seat which I had to myself in exchange for the one she occupied by the side of the girl in grey, and there I was at last where I had wanted to be all day and it all came about naturally and smoothly and I felt that the rest would be easy. But I was mistaken. After a few moments I offered her a copy of Life which she politely declined; then I spoke of the weather but she assented to my platitude with a motion of her head and looked out the window.

After a time I ventured to remark on the book she held in her hand saying it was a great favorite of mine, to which she deigned to say “Indeed,” and offered me the book to read, and then she arranged her head against the side of the car and went to sleep or pretended to do so. If she really did sleep it was the prettiest sleeping I ever saw. Its only effect outwardly was to throw her long dark lashes down onto her cheek, but her mouth didn't open nor did any of those other things happen which so often makes slumber uninviting. I felt very much out in the cold and went forward to the smoking car to smoke a cigarette. When I returned she was awake. As I took the seat beside her she gathered up her skirts with an air which implied a determination to continue her exclusiveness and deciding to leave my trenches and make the assault at once – I said “If you wish me to find another seat I'll try to do so, but since I have given up my seat for the sake of this one I hope you

will permit me to say a word in behalf of my continued enjoyment of it together with all of its privileges some of which have as yet been denied me.

Why should you refuse to let me talk to you merely because an empty social formality has not sanctioned our acquaintance? We have already been introduced to each other by the mutual friend who wrote the book which lies in your lap. No one could read that book without becoming his friend, and why can't we meet on that basis?" Without pausing long enough to give her time to protest, I continued in the same strain for some time, when she interrupted me saying "oh, yes, all you say is true, but why should I make an exception in your case? I do not know that you are a gentleman, although you no doubt feel so sure that you look like one, that you want me to trust to appearances, which you know are so often untrustworthy – what would I think of myself, and if you are a gentleman what would you think of me?" With this outburst she gave the first signs of her capitulating and it was not long before I should say "Well, then admitting all you say, shall I go off to find another seat? Or would you rather have me sit here without trying to make you talk to me?" The idea of such a thing was too absurd as she at last admitted and by the time our train ran into the Old Colony Station and the brakes man called out "Bawst'n" our acquaintance was on a firmer basis than a whole code of regulations could have placed it.

The time had flown and night had fallen. I found her bright, cultivated, evidently well bred and altogether charming – more so than I had imagined at a distance, which sometimes is not the result in cases where all the formalities have been observed. After agreeing to disagree as to the propriety of certain rules of social intercourse, we had talked of many things, but had not talked of ourselves nor did we feel the want of mutual friends, those never failing and inexhaustible resources of flagging conversation, and here we were in Boston and I was not ready to have our acquaintance cut off in its bloom.

As we walked with the crowd out of the station and stopped on the sidewalk amid the glare of the electric lights and the noise and confusion of shouting cabmen, rattling cabs and tinkling horse cars, she said "I wonder if that car will take me to the Fitchburg Depot?" Before I could answer, the conductor called out "Boston and Maine, Lowell and Fitchburg Depots!" and I hailed him and helping her into one of the transverse seats, got in beside her. "Oh" said she, "are you coming too?" "Yes" I answered, "I'm going to Young's and that's on the way." She evidently was at home in Boston for when we came to State Street she said "you have gone by Young's, did you know it?" "Yes," I replied, "I thought I would see you to your train if you do not object." She made no answer but when we had descended Cornhill and came in sight of the illuminated clock on the tower of the Boston Main Station, she cried suddenly "oh, I fear I shall miss my train and there is not another for two hours."

Then for the first time I asked and learn that she lived in Waltham. We got to the Fitchburg station just in time to see the green light on the end of the train going out of sight, but instead of breaking down in despair she said, "well I'm hungry and as I've lost my supper at home I think I'll have some here" pointing to the restaurant in the station, "and I thank you for your courtesy and need not detain you further." But I did not want to be dismissed quite yet and besides I began to realize that I was hungry too, and begged

permission to stay and have my supper with her. While she was demurring somewhat we had gone into the restaurant and in a moment our traps were disposed of and we were seated opposite each other at a little side table and a fresh cloth was put on, and before long she was asking me "how many lumps" as cozily as possible. After a while not because our talk had run dry, but from a real interest in the question I told her that I had a class mate who lived in Waltham, a dear friend whom I hadn't seen for years, and naming him and asked if she knew him or his family. As I pronounce the name, she looked up quickly and then dropping her eyes onto her plate answered that she knew both him and them very well. On my asking how he was doing she told me he was practicing his profession and doing very well. Those two hours slipped by as quickly as the others and when her train was announced I still was unwilling to leave her and finding on inquiry that there was a late train back to town which I could catch I suggested that I would leave my bag in the package room and see her safely home. To my surprise she not only did not object this time but proposed that I should bring my bag with me saying "you might miss the train and have to stay in Waltham and then you would need your bag" and in response to my query she added "Oh yes, there is a very good place there where you could put up for the night." The ride out to Waltham is a short one and the house she led me to was quite near the station. When our steps resounded on the wide porch, some one within came quickly to the door and in the light which streamed out I saw my classmate who after he had kissed his sister recognize me with a loud shout of welcome. I missed the late train and I was glad I had brought my bag. I do not remember that the details of the reception of my acquaintance with the sister were told in the family circle. Such explanations are tedious and needless. It was enough that we had been introduced on the train by the author of "Prue & I."

May 30th 1891 – C. B. Wiby