



THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB



CHAPTER I

THE story of the founding of the Chicago Literary Club furnishes in some sort an historic parallel to the nursery rhyme of "Little Dickey Dilver and his bow of silver," of whom it will be remembered that

"He bent his bow to shoot a crow
And hit a cat in the window."

Under the able leadership of Mr. Francis Fisher Browne, "The Lakeside Monthly" in 1873 had attained an honorable position in the field of literature, and was struggling to maintain a high standard in spite of inadequate pecuniary recognition on the part of the public. Of the articles that appeared in its pages many of the best were written by Chicago men. With a view to stimulating further literary effort in our city, and at the same time to furnish a supply of desirable papers for his magazine, Mr. Browne conceived the idea of forming a Club somewhat similar to the Century Club of New York, which

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should accomplish this result. This is the story as told in his own words:

CHICAGO, June 3, 1892.

MY DEAR MR. GOOKIN:

Since our brief chat about the formation of the Literary Club I have refreshed my memory a little in the case, though the most of what I can recall was given you in outline.

The idea originally was to make it a sort of "Lakeside Contributors' Club,"—"The Lakeside Monthly" (of which I was editor) being at that time about five years old, and having succeeded in gaining signal recognition in foreign quarters, was beginning to attract notice among the more slowly appreciative but literary-aspiring people nearer home. Hence some of its friends thought it would be a good thing to organize a club from among its contributors and other literary people, to extend its influence and advance the claims of literature generally in the city. That was the inception. During the winter of 1873-4, several informal meetings were held in my office in the Lakeside Building, at which the project was discussed; those present being Rev. Dr. J. C. Burroughs, Hon. J. M. Binckley, Mr. C. C. Bonney, and myself,—a quartette of B's, of whom I was the youngest but not the least interested member. At one of these conferences it was decided to call a more general meeting at the Sherman House, and this was held in the spring (March or April) of 1874, those present being Rev. Dr. Burroughs, Mr. Binckley, Rev. Dr. H. N. Powers, Rev. Robert Collyer, and Mr. E. G. Mason,—all of them Lakeside contributors except Mr. Mason. I was not present at this meeting owing to serious illness,—from which cause also the magazine was, not long after, given up; and for the next few years I was absent from the city most of the time, and my membership in the club lapsed.

The early history of the club from the time of the Sherman House meeting is, I suppose, matter of record; but I have transcribed from memory these few details of its unrecorded history—now known at first hand only to myself and to Mr. Bonney, whose recollections will doubtless confirm my own as to the club's incipency and the facts that make it an emanation or outgrowth of "The Lakeside Monthly."

Very truly yours,
FRANCIS F. BROWNE.

MR. BONNEY'S RECOLLECTIONS

Mr. Browne's remembrances of what led to the formation of the club are confirmed by those of Mr. Bonney and Mr. Collyer. In August, 1892, Mr. Bonney wrote:

"I have been asked to state my recollection of the origin of the 'Chicago Literary Club.' It originated in the editorial office of 'The Lakeside Monthly,' of which Mr. Francis F. Browne was then the editor, and who talked with Dr. J. C. Burroughs, Hon. J. M. Binckley and myself in regard to the project, and we agreed with him that it would be advisable to attempt the formation of a Literary Club of the same general character as that of the Century Club of New York City. According to my remembrance, Mr. Browne was the author of the original idea and proposal. Those whom I have mentioned approved his views, and agreed to aid him in an endeavor to carry them into effect. Conferences followed with Rev. Dr. H. N. Powers, Rev. Robert Collyer, Prof. David Swing, and others; and it was finally agreed that a meeting should be called of the club room of the Sherman House for the purpose in effecting an organization. Such a meeting was held and was followed by several others, in the course of which the present Chicago Literary Club was organized. During these meetings there was much discussion in regard to a proper name, and the present name was finally chosen. Mr. E. G. Mason was made secretary of the club. According to my recollection the club owes its constitution and distinguishing characteristics chiefly to the influence, during its formative stage, of Mr. Browne, Mr. Collyer, Dr. Powers, and Mr. Binckley."

Mr. Collyer's testimony, though brief, is to the same purport:

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"The spring head of the Chicago Literary Club can be easily traced to my dear old friend F. F. Browne, who has done so much beside, of which his city,—and mine for so many years—may well be glad and not a little proud. 'The Lakeside Monthly' was then to the fore, full of good literature, though there is a tradition in my family that some things I wrote must have helped to swamp the fine adventure. Be this as it may, it is true that my friend thought such a club would bring grist to his mill and the thought was a sound one; but the mill stopped when the miller could not be at his post, to our regret; while I will venture to say that the monthly will some time be sought for and paid for at a great price.

"Then Mr. C. C. Bonney took hold of the idea, as he takes hold always, with his whole heart, and the Chicago Literary Club was organized and launched; and I want to say that no man did so much after Mr. Browne had to retire, as he did to 'make the thing go,' as we say, while the great and unexpected honor was conferred upon quite an unfit man of being elected the first president, of which he is still proud and grateful also, as well he may be."

The actual history of the club begins with the meeting held in the club room at the Sherman House at three o'clock in the afternoon of Friday, March thirteenth, 1874; and from this time forward nothing further appears to have been heard of the idea of making the club a sort of "feeder" to "The Lakeside Monthly." Seven were present at this preliminary meeting: Rev. Robert Collyer, Rev. Dr. John C. Burroughs, Judge Henry Booth, Rev. Dr. Horatio N. Powers, John M. Binckley, Edward G. Mason, and W. J. Leonard. The latter did not afterward

EDWARD MASON'S RECOLLECTIONS

join the club; indeed his presence at the meeting appears to have been a surprise to the others in attendance and to have been due to a misconception on his part growing out of a notion that the purpose of the gathering was to found some sort of a journal to be embellished with chromolithographic illustrations. In a paper read before the club on the occasion of the celebration of its twentieth anniversary, Edward G. Mason gave some recollections of this first meeting and other early meetings, and related a number of incidents concerning which the minutes in the club records, also prepared by him, are discreetly silent. He says:

"My memory goes back to a day in March, 1874, when the Reverend Dr. J. C. Burroughs asked me to attend a meeting of gentlemen interested in the formation of a club in Chicago somewhat like the Century in New York, which was to be held at the Sherman House on the afternoon of March 13, 1874. I was present at the time appointed, and found there the Reverend Robert Collyer, Reverend Dr. J. C. Burroughs, Honorable Henry Booth, Reverend Dr. H. N. Powers, Messrs. J. M. Binckley and W. J. Leonard, forming with myself the mystic number of seven, which doubtless has had a great deal to do with the fortunes of the club. We were seven, and Wordsworth's lines might be paralleled in more than one respect by the subsequent fortunes of the persons in question, two in the churchyard lie, two elsewhere dwell, and two have gone to see what they can find outside the club, at least they no longer belong to it, and I am tonight the sole representative of that part in the resident membership of the club. I knew no more of its inception then than

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the invitation which came from Dr. Burroughs, nor have I heard until very recently of anything which preceded that meeting. Strange rumors have reached me of late that the idea originated in the editorial rooms of 'The Lakeside Monthly,' a magazine then printed in Chicago, and that the first plan was to make it a sort of Lakeside Contributors' Club. I hear it stated in proof of this that of those present at the first meeting four were contributors to 'The Lakeside Monthly.' I recall furthermore that one of the persons present on that occasion was said to have come to interest the other gentlemen in some scheme not altogether unconnected with the issue of chromos. However correct these reminiscences may be, of one thing I am certain, that neither the magazine idea nor the chromo idea took any root in the club from the first, and I think the records will show that the gentlemen having these things in view before a great while ceased to have any connection with the club. I remember that when it was agreed that an association should be effected, one gentleman present produced and read a list of proposed members which seemed to have been copied from one of our newspaper articles upon Chicago millionaires. Not a local capitalist of any note was omitted, and those credited with less than a million had no occasion to apply. The reading of this remarkable roll of nominees for membership in a purely literary organization paralyzed the hearers to such an extent that it was nearly adopted by default. One of those present, however, rallied sufficiently to recollect that it had been stated to be a reason for forming the proposed club that there should be one place in Chicago where money did not count, and he

A MEMORABLE MEETING

mildly suggested that such a membership was not exactly the best way to accomplish this object. The list was tabled and another one adopted better suited to the objects of the organization. It was solemnly agreed that only those whose names appeared in the list agreed upon should be invited to attend the next meeting, but as we went out of the room Mr. Collyer remarked, 'Oh, well, I suppose if one sees another good fellow anywhere he may ask him to come in.' Although this was promptly objected to, the good Dominie for a time forgot the objection and surprised his associates by introducing friends whom he had casually met and asked to drop in upon us, and it was quite a time before Brother Collyer was persuaded to abide by the restraints of the constitution."

Some of the gentlemen thus introduced became valuable members of the club: the names of others do not appear upon its records except in the list of those attending the meetings at which they were present.

Another preliminary meeting was held at the Sherman House on March 17, 1874, at eight o'clock in the evening; and a third, at the same place on March 24, when a provisional organization was effected and a draft of a constitution and by-laws was adopted, but referred for revision to the committee which prepared and presented it. "This committee," writes Edward G. Mason, "then proceeded to elaborate and effloriate its work until a gorgeous structure was reared upon the simple foundation first laid. When we met on the evening of Tuesday, April 7, 1874, for the purpose of perfecting the organization, our busy committee of three B's presented a stately preamble and constitution to our astonished ears."

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"Over the lapse of twenty-five years," says Edward O. Brown in a paper, read on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the club, "I remember with a vividness which actually startles me, the oppressive silence which reigned around the table in the club room for several minutes after Mr. Binckley, the chairman of the committee, had finished the reading of this wondrous report."

The preamble which has fortunately been rescued from oblivion, read as follows:

"To promote the true sovereignty of letters and culture; to sustain the same by the moral and social virtues; to form and maintain a literary organization fairly representative of the intellectual rank and progress of Chicago; and to cultivate fraternal relations with other exponents of literature and art,

"We, the undersigned citizens of Chicago, convened for this purpose do ordain and establish this

"CONSTITUTION,"

and the constitution opened with the following statement of its objects:

"The business of this Association in pursuance of the objects mentioned in the preamble of this constitution, shall extend to the cultivation and enjoyment of literature in its largest sense so far as may be consistent with the nature of our organization and the limitations hereby imposed."

Mr. Mason's account of this meeting and of what occurred after the presentation of the amazing report is as follows:

"I very much regret that the whole constitution was not preserved in our records, and that the remainder of

AN AMAZING REPORT

it cannot now be found. It was unique in its way, and as a model of what the constitution of a literary club should not be was beyond all praise. I only remember now that among its other oratorical flourishes it provided in swelling and glowing terms for a chaplain, an orator, a poet, a marshal, an assistant marshal, a scribe, an assistant scribe, and other dignitaries for the club, by the side of whom plain presidents and secretaries seemed very insignificant. There were to be committees on a great variety of subjects such as 'Art in the Western States,' 'Art in the Eastern States,' 'Art in Europe,' on 'Science and Literature' in various phases; and a crowning feature of the exercises was to be a grand pageant of which the marshal was to be the major domo.

"As we listened to the rolling periods of this remarkable document, visions of waving banners, of glittering insignia, and of magnificent regalia danced before our eyes, and we were treated to a surprise even greater than that caused by the list of capitalists read at our first meeting. We all sat in silence for a time when the last notes of the reader died away, and before the complacent faces of the committee who sat together on one side of our round table it was difficult, and even cruel, to criticize their work at all. However, one bold individual whose name is now lost to fame, rose to the occasion, and remarked in a quiet conversational tone, 'The preamble impresses me as being slightly ornate. I think it must have been written by the candidate for poet; I move that the preamble be omitted.' The motion was quickly seconded and then Mr. Collyer stated it and asked for discussion, but not a word was spoken until the question

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was put. The committee sat aghast and refrained from voting, so that the decision upon the question was unanimous in its favor. Then we meandered for a while among the winding paths and flowery shades of the constitution, until we became entangled and darkened in its mazes, and there seemed to be no relief at hand. But Mr. Horace White, at that time editor of The Chicago Tribune, at last cut the Gordian knot by a motion to strike out all but the preamble. This passed with equal unanimity, the horror stricken committee making no effort to save their bantling. New members were added to the committee and the whole subject went over to the meeting of April 14, when a new constitution was presented shorn of the glories of its predecessor but better suited to the needs of such a club. This with some amendments, together with a code of by-laws, was formally adopted and the election of officers under it held April 21, 1874."

The episode just related marks only the beginning of what developed into a long struggle before the club succeeded in formulating a code of rules perfectly adapted to its needs. The vital principles, however, which have proved to be the source of strength and have kept it free from dissensions throughout the entire course of its existence, were contained in the first constitution, and in an "Order of Exercises" adopted at the meeting held on May 4, 1874. These principles may be stated thus:

1. That the literary exercises are of chief importance.
2. That the social advantages afforded by the club depend largely upon the excellence of the literary work done.

THE PRINCIPLES OF THE CLUB

3. That the general business of the club is placed in the exclusive charge of committees, so that no business other than amendments to the rules or matters of such importance as to call for general discussion and expression of opinion, comes before the club at its ordinary meetings.

4. That while the largest liberty is given to the expression of individual opinion the club itself is prohibited from having any opinion or creed and cannot be used to further any sort of propagandism however worthy it may seem.

The credit for placing the club upon this solid foundation is due to Dr. William F. Poole. He was elected a member at the first meeting of the club as such, which was held on the evening of March 31, 1874; and he attended the meeting held a week later, when John M. Binckley read the famous constitution, which, to quote Mr. Poole's words, "was the most gorgeous piece of literary composition that ever came under my notice; tropes, figures, metaphors, and rhetorical fireworks chased each other with dazzling brilliancy." Mr. Poole had recently removed to Chicago from Cincinnati where he had been a prominent member of the Literary Club of that city, which was founded in 1849 and had behind it the accumulated experience of a successful career of twenty-five years. This experience Mr. Poole declared might be drawn upon with profit; and to the suggestions made by him the club is indebted for many of the rules which have worked so admirably. Of him Mr. Mason wrote:

"He brought with him the constitution of the Cincinnati Literary Club, and although we used jokingly to

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allude to his quotations from it as the 'Cincinnati Platform' and to speak of its printed order of exercises as 'Poole's Index,' we all realized that his experience in that association was of great value to us. He took an honest pride in his early connection with the club and his placid temper was sometimes ruffled by the teasing assertion that he was not really a founder of the club because he did not join it until four meetings had been held. He used to assert with great positiveness that he was truly one of the founders of this club; and if it was necessary, in order to establish that fact, to hold that the meeting of April 7, 1874, *preceded* that of March 13 of the same year, he was ready to maintain that position. And he was right. For he was certainly one of the men who founded the Chicago Literary Club, which may well be proud to write at the beginning of its annals the honored name of William Frederick Poole."

Among those present at the memorable meeting on March 17, 1874, Dr. Poole alone appears to have had any personal experience in such an organization as they were endeavoring to form. He was, however, not alone in the yeoman service which he rendered in giving the club its initial impetus. Many of those then enrolled in its ranks contributed ideas and suggestions; but those who gave most largely of their time and energies and sound common sense were Robert Collyer and Edward G. Mason, who were on April 21, 1874, elected as the first president and secretary. The success and harmony that have marked the course of the Chicago Literary Club are largely due to the fact that it started right at the outset; and that these men helped to steer it and keep it steadily in

THE FIRST CONSTITUTION

the right direction. Mason, especially, was active in the upbuilding and in combating every attempt to introduce features which he clearly foresaw might have unfortunate consequences. For this service the club members should always cherish his name in grateful remembrance.

After the first constitution was adopted the process of amending it began. The records of the early meetings abound in proposed amendments, most of which failed of adoption. Some of them, however, were carried, and on March 6, 1876, a revised draft was adopted. Although this was again revised on January 28, 1884, and again on March 28, 1887, when the club was incorporated and the constitution became by-laws in compliance with the statutes of the State of Illinois, these several revisions involved little beyond mere verbal alterations. Indeed the only important change made in the rules at any time was that put in force November 28, 1881, by which the Electoral Committee was constituted and the election of members placed in its hands. Prior to that time the club voted upon candidates for membership on the fourth Monday evening in each month, which, under the constitution was set aside for business. As an inducement to the members to attend on these occasions it was customary to serve a collation after the business was dispatched. The success of this plan was unquestionable, though Brooke Herford stated at the annual dinner June 25, 1877, that he "found it difficult to convince outsiders of the purely literary character of the club, when one meeting in every four was devoted to 'business and collation.'" It was a report of this meeting contained in a letter from Henry W. Raymond to The Boston Globe,

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which brought forth the editorial comment on the club:

"In time it may rank with the—let us say it modestly—famous literary clubs of Boston. At present, we should judge, from the frequency of its meetings about the festive board, that it takes its literature mixed."

We can afford to laugh now at the aspersion implied in this paragraph. The collations did much to promote good fellowship among the members, who in this way were undoubtedly stimulated to give to the club their best literary efforts. The wine, too, that flowed on these festive occasions helped to soothe the wounded feelings of those whose candidates met with defeat.

It may here be noted that the name chosen for the club had been borne by an earlier organization which does not appear to have left any visible signs of its existence save in the business directory for the year 1858, wherein it is recorded that the Chicago Literary Club met on Wednesday evenings in the rooms of the Bryant & Stratton College. Lester L. Bond, a well-known lawyer of that day, was the president; W. L. Perkins was the secretary, and A. S. Seaton was the treasurer. Like its flourishing contemporary, the Joliet Literary Club of which Arba N. Waterman was then the president, its existence was probably terminated by the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861.