

The Backsliding of Miss Mindy

By Mrs. Clark Dooley.

"Sister Baker will lead us in prayer," announced the preacher's wife, and the members of the Fairview South Methodist Swing Circle knelt down before their respective chairs, and moved painfully and uneasily from knee to knee while Sister Baker, a short, stout person, with a most astonishingly deep voice, proceeded to give the Lord explicit information concerning the affairs and financial limitations of the Circle, closing with fervent supplications for each sister that she might never depart from the straight and narrow way, and earnestly petitioning that none of the members of this devoted band would ever, however innocently, be the means of causing a weaker brother or sister to offend.

With a smothered sigh of relief the good sisters heard her stertorian "Amen," and scrambled to their feet, stepping on their dresses, and roisily dropping scissors and thimbles as they did so.

Timid Sister Gaylord, gathering up her apronful of carpet rags, tip-toed over to the preacher's wife, who was President, and anxiously whispered in her ear, while the Circle sat in solemn silence.

"I think as the idea is yours, Sister Gaylord, you should put it before the Circle yourself," said the preacher's wife—a cheerful soul, to whom parliamentary rules were as manna in the wilderness.

"Oh, no!" gasped Sister Gaylord, in terror. "I wouldn't so much as mind jest sittin' in my chair and tellin' you all about it, but when I hev to stan' up and 'second' things, and 'move' 'em, and call you 'Mrs. President,' I'm scared plumb stiff, and I feel like I never seen none of you before. You tell, Sister Allen; you don't mind speakin' out."

Sister Gaylord's face, with its surprised eyebrows and irresolute mouth, assumed an expression of devout thankfulness as the preacher's wife assented smilingly to the whispered appeal, and proceeded, to the admiration of the sisters, to lay before the Circle, in the most approved manner, the fact that the two Misses Brown had no heating stove in their tiny house, and had been obliged to sit by their kitchen fire all the bitter winter; that a good stove was for sale at the hardware store for five dollars, and that just that sum to the credit of the Circle was in the bank; and the President demanded a vote as to whether or no this money should be used for this purchase.

"We all know," continued the cheery President, "that the Misses Brown are worthy souls who have seen better days, and are forced to be somewhat dependent on charity during the winter, when both suffer severely from rheumatism. This kindly plan of providing for their comfort next winter originated not with me, I regret to say, but with Sister Gaylord. The question is now open for discussion."

This last remark sufficed to throw the entire Circle into a cold perspiration, as either sister racked her brains to remember the correct parliamentary language in which to express her opinion.

Silence reigned, broken only by the sound of falling scissors or spools, which, in accordance with the natural perversity of such articles as the last named, invariably rolled under the organ or bed, and were only fished out with much exertion and the broom by flushed and exasperated owners. Several sisters hitched uneasily on their chairs, but no one spoke, until the President taking in the situation, came to the rescue, and announced that the question was before the meeting for informal discussion.

The effect was magical. Each sister dropped her work, opened her mouth and began to talk at one and the same moment, and this is what they said:

"That there stove ain't worth over four— . . . Mindy told me she like to froze last winter— . . . Costs a heap to run two fires— . . . Only two rooms in their house— . . . Seems like one

stove would heat— . . . Took all the Circle's money last winter to buy wood for one— . . . Susan Brown is a good, industrious soul, but Mindy is too sot in her way and uppish— . . . Behind with the furren missionary money— . . . Charity begins at home— . . . Mindy don't mean a thing by her queer ways— . . . Bought a percale gown for twelve cents when them as went without themselves and give to her had to wear five-cent caliker— . . . Mighty improvident and wasteful— . . . Good hands in sickness when they's well themselves— . . . A shame for two good souls like them to be cold nights— . . . Wood only a dollar a cord— . . . And with their rheumatism, no wonder they can't work much cold days— . . . Five dollars is a good deal to spend— . . . Hope they'll appreciate their blessings— . . . Always did have my suspicions about Mindy's orthodoxy— . . . Susan allers does what Mindy tells her— . . . Comin' warm weather, and they won't need no heatin' stove till fall— . . . Stove might be gone by then, or the money used up— . . . Mindy's so high falutin' 'bout things as is given her— . . . Hes cake and fresh meat oftener 'an I can— . . . Takes poor folks to be wasteful— . . . Seen better days, and are good souls— . . . Mebby the man would knock off fifty cents, seein' it's fer charity— . . ."

The President, slightly disturbed, rapped smartly for order, and, awe-struck and guilty, silence fell upon the Circle as they realized they would have to vote upon the subject and had forgotten what they must do, and certain nervous sisters felt cold and creeping sensations in the regions of their spines, and secretly wondered how on earth congressmen and representatives could go through with such business day in and day out and seem to like it.

"The vote will be by ballot," announced the President, and a hurried scramble for paper, followed by a frantic search for a pencil, unearthed a stub, minus any point whatever, but speedily whittled into the semblance of one with a case knife, and the ballot was at length taken, the "ayes" being nine to the "noes" five.

After the adjournment of the meeting, the fourteen determined women filed in a procession down to the hardware store to assist in the purchase of the stove, and to jew the hardware man down fifty cents, besides throwing in a poker and two lengths of pipe, all of which they triumphantly accomplished.

A committee of the ladies, armed with stove legs and pipe wrapped in paper, and accompanied by the resigned hardware man, who abjectly trundled the stove in a wheelbarrow, having been bullied into delivering it and putting it up, marched in imposing array to the tiny house where the Misses Brown lived, and assisted at the final ceremonies.

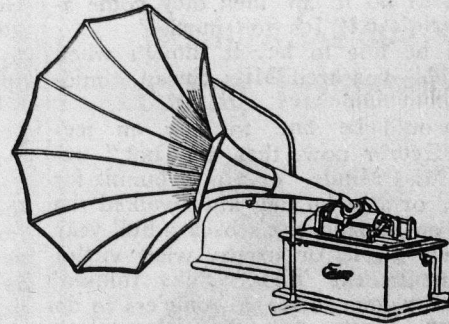
Singly and collectively, they gave their opinions as to which way the stove should set; singly and collectively, they instructed the man about putting up the pipe; and singly and collectively, they afterwards mentioned, with raised eyebrows and bated breath, the word he whispered when the pipe wouldn't fit and slipped and jammed his fingers.

"It's mighty fine to hev such a heater, ain't it, Mindy?" ventured Miss Susan Brown, eyeing her sister uncertainly, as the two women put their little house in order after the invaders had left.

"I reckon so," snapped Miss Mindy, putting the chairs in their places with a vigorous thump, "but it looks to me that screens to keep these here pesky flies out would be a heap more to the purpose in June than a heater. Not but what it's kind of them, of course, an' mebby we'll get the screens for Christmas. No; I s'pose it ain't Christian-like to talk that-a-way," she continued, in answer to her sister's mild remonstrance; "but it does make me plumb hot to hev Eliza Goodrich an' Sarah Snow come here givin' us stoves in charity, when every one in the hull town knows that we're poor as Job's turkey

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