

The Importance of People

Ruth Cunningham

THAT'S MEI

"GEE," said Mrs. Deems to herself, "ain't that awful, what with the world the way it is and all. Ain't that just awful, now!"



Ain't it awful!

The newspaper she was reading was weeks and weeks old. Mrs. Deems never seemed to be able to keep up with the news, but the piles of old papers on every table and chair gave testimony that her intentions were as good as her reading rate was bad.

"Gee," she muttered again, and reread the news item to make sure she'd understood it correctly. She was evidently deeply disturbed by what she read. Suddenly her face brightened.

"Ain't I the dumb one!" she exclaimed. "Here I keep a rooming house with five smart school teachers in it. Why don't I just ask *them* about this? They'll know what it means. I'll sit here with my door open and watch for 'em, then ask 'em when they come in from school."

She hadn't long to wait. Miss Sumner was the first to arrive and Mrs. Deems called to her just as she started up the stairs to her room.

"Say, Miss Sumner," Mrs. Deems started in. "I've read something here I can't make heads nor tails of. It's about this business of the UN and the South Africa affair and the speech made by the lady from India. Looks to me like it was plain being

for or *agin'* race discrim'nation, and our U. S. voted *wrong*. It came out all right because enough nations voted right, but *we*, the United States, voted *agin'* making 'em play fair with everyone in South Africa. But we're *agin'* that sort of thing, ain't we? We're for seeing to it that everyone gets the same chance, be he any color or religion and all that, ain't we? Don't our Constitution or Bill of Rights or something say we're all for equality? Then how come we voted *wrong*?"

Mrs. Deems was obviously sincere in her questions. Miss Sumner would have liked to have helped her think her problem through, but she hadn't the vaguest notion what she was talking about. Miss Sumner's news source was limited to a single weekly news magazine which had given scant attention to the affair under discussion, and had failed to mention the stand taken by the United States. So, for lack of information, she substituted habit.

"Now don't be so upset, Mrs. Deems," she said soothingly. "You must have read it wrong. You know the United States wouldn't cast a vote like that. We're the land of the free, remember? We've always stood for equality. Ours is a 'government of the people, by the people, for the people.'" (The platitudes rolled out so easily she was scarcely aware of speaking them.) "I'm sure you must be mistaken. We couldn't vote wrong on an important matter."

She gave Mrs. Deems a bright, encouraging, professional smile and went up the stairs. At the top, she paused briefly to wonder if the "lady from India" Mrs. Deems had mentioned had anything to do with a "Mrs. Pandit" Bobby Jones had tried to talk about during history class. At the time she had thought he meant "pandas," those funny animals that look like teddy bears, but Bobby had insisted

it was an Indian woman. She had finally told him he could file the news item in his notebook if he wanted to. She felt it would be out of place among his history notes, but that was one way to shut him up so the class could go on with the discussion of Hannibal crossing the Alps.

Hannibal (han'i bəl)
 Carthage (kär'thij)
 Alps



Social (?) studies

Mrs. Deems was not satisfied. Neat phrases about liberty and equality and an assumption that we're always right were not enough. She was glad when Miss Baker came in, and she could lay the situation before her.

"Yes," said Miss Baker. "I thought at the time that our action was a bit odd, but that's all water over the dam. There's nothing we can do about it now, so you'd better quit worrying about it."

Mrs. Deems was not satisfied. It didn't seem right to sit by doing nothing while wrong things happened. And if we don't do anything about things past, how can we help prevent similar unfortunate things in the future? She talked to Miss Marble next.

"Well," said Miss Marble tentatively, "it's hard to know about some of these things. We have smart statesmen, and sometimes they have to do things that look funny in order to carry out a deal about something else. Maybe they had to vote as they did on this issue to win support of some other nation for another matter. It's all pretty complex, you know."

Mrs. Deems was not satisfied. She mistrusted this horse-trading way of doing business. It was Mrs. Lake who was the next to come in and listen to Mrs. Deem's problem.

"Oh," said Mrs. Lake, "you mustn't take these things so personally. After all, South Africa is a long way off. Maybe we shouldn't be meddling in those affairs, anyway. You know we always get into trouble when we get mixed up in foreign politics. We'd better take care of our own business at home, and let the South Africans do their own worrying about theirs."

Mrs. Deems was not satisfied. She couldn't see that isolationism was the way out. And hadn't the UN been created to take care of all sorts of injustice, even if it happened to be halfway around the world? She hoped Miss Boyd would give a better answer.

"It seems to me you're on the right track, Mrs. Deems," said Miss Boyd. "I didn't like the looks of that business at all. I made a pretty careful study of it, to make sure I had the facts. I talked to a number of people about it, and we discussed it in class. I found that there were some people who sincerely disagreed with our belief that the vote cast by the United States was wrong, but I couldn't agree with the reasons they gave for their position. On the other hand, I found a number who agree with us."



On the right track

"After considerable discussion, our class at school was in pretty general agreement that the stand was wrong, and we discussed what citizens should do under such circumstances. I've followed through on these suggestions, and many of the youngsters have, too. I've written to my congressmen, and to the chairman of our UN delegation. That may sound like a very small drop in a very big bucket, but we feel we should do anything that we can that may help, even if only a little."

"I've talked about it with people in a number of groups. You know, Mrs. Deems, personal action may help, but it's even more important to get group action. I started figuring the other day, and I find I'm a member of sixteen groups that could and should take action on things like this."

These groups range from the teachers association to the adult Sunday School Class in my church. Then, of course, some organizations, such as the League of Women Voters, are at work on many problems, and they need our support.

"But most important, Mrs. Deems, is that we keep our eyes on what is happening and be interested enough to take action when it's needed. It's so easy to shirk our duty . . ."

"Ain't it the truth," thought Mrs. Deems. "Why, even school teachers can try to slide out by using pretty phrases, or by saying it ain't no use because it's over and done with, or by saying you gotta let the statesmen horse-trade with votes, or by thinking we can close the door and worry about our own problems and let the other fellow worry about his. Maybe it's because there are so many ways to slide out of duty that so many people try 'em!"

" . . . and we don't *dare* shirk our duty," Miss Boyd continued. "It's really true that our government, and our UN, and our world has to be run by *the people*. That's *us*." (Miss Boyd had a fleeting feeling that there might be something wrong with the grammar, but she was sure the logic was sound.) "The people,—that's everybody, that's you, Mrs. Deems, and that's me."

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Deems. "That's me."

Mrs. Deems was satisfied. Maybe things could be wrong, sometimes, but a body didn't need to let them stay that way. You

could do something about it. Mrs. Deems now had a program. Others might not agree with her wording, but this was the way she outlined it for herself:

1. Study on it. Sit yourself down and read and think. Get all the lowdown, and get it straight.
2. Talk to other people who know what it's all about or will study it out with you. Of course I ain't a teacher and can't talk it out with kids in a class, but I guess I could find someone that'd study with me.
3. Write letters to people like congressmen and UN delegates. Every drop in a bucket helps. My spelling ain't so good, but I guess they're smart enough to figure out what I'm aiming to say.
4. Get groups you belong with to study on it and do something about it. I'll start with the Ladies' Solidarity and the First-Monday-of-the-Month Quilting, Knitting, and Tatting Club.
5. Join some other groups that are doin' things the right way, and give 'em help. Note: find out about the League of Women Voters.
6. *Most important*, keep thinkin' and workin', and rememberin' that you're important, you're a part, because government and UN and all the world is the people, and the people,—that's *me*."



That's me!

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