

A Joke That Made History

by Ruth Fox Hume

LEVEL 4 SELECTION 69



“Gentlemen!” said Dr. Charles Lee. “Will you *please* give me your attention? I wish to read you a letter that I have just received from a colleague in Philadelphia.”

He was almost shouting in an effort to be

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SKILL CARD
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heard above the talking and foot shuffling of the students. The young men of Geneva College of Medicine in upstate New York were not noted for their fine manners. Most of them were country boys—good-natured but boisterous—from nearby farm villages.

“This letter,” Dr. Lee went on, “contains the most unusual request that has ever been made of this school.”

The students’ curiosity was definitely aroused now, for Dr. Lee’s voice was shaking. Seldom did he react so strongly. Even when he had received the letter from the town council, threatening to close the school if the students did not behave, he had stayed fairly calm. What could be so upsetting about a letter from some doctor in Philadelphia?

An eager silence settled over the hall as Dr. Lee read. The letter was from a Quaker physician named Warrington. He was asking Geneva College to admit as a student a young lady who was then studying privately in his office. The would-be student had applied, with no success, to nearly all the medical schools in the United States. He had suggested to her that, since Geneva was in the country, it might be somehow freer from prejudice than the big-city schools. It might consider enrolling a woman student.

“Gentlemen,” said Dr. Lee, “after much thought we have decided to leave this matter entirely in your hands. The decision is yours. Please vote on it as quickly as possible. But remember! Any decision to admit this—uh—lady must be unanimous. One negative vote is all it will take to keep her out.”

Dr. Lee then turned and fled, closing the door behind him. He hurried to the college

president’s office, slumped in a chair, and wiped his damp forehead.

“Well?” said Dr. Benjamin Hale. “What did they say?”

“Nothing. I left before they could recover from the shock. They—”

“Listen!” Dr. Hale held up his hand.

The sound of yelling, cheering, whistling, catcalling, and foot stomping could be clearly heard down the long corridor.

“The shock has worn off,” said Dr. Hale.

Dr. Lee shook his head glumly. “I hope we haven’t made a mistake.”

“Nonsense, of course we haven’t. It will work out just as we planned. We can tell Dr. Warrington that we wouldn’t have refused his request. It was just that the students themselves took a negative stand and we felt that, under the circumstances . . . This way it won’t look as though *we*, personally, had turned him down.

“These Quakers! They always expect everybody else to share their modern views. And what’s getting into women these days! Next thing you know they’ll be wanting to vote. What’s this female’s name again?”

“Blackwell. Elizabeth Blackwell.”

Dr. Hale chuckled. “Well, any minute now the students will have Miss Blackwell blackballed.”

But the students had found too much entertainment value in the letter from Philadelphia. It was much too special to be wasted on a single meeting. They put off the voting until that night.

The voting session was a huge success. In speech after hilarious speech the students pleaded for the rights of women. With a

great show of earnestness they demanded that women be allowed to study whatever they pleased. A rumor arose that the letter was a hoax planted by the students of a rival college, but nothing could stop the fun.

When the chairman finally called for a vote, he was answered by a thunderous "Yea!"

"All those opposed?" he asked solemnly.

From the rear of the room came a single, timid "No."

In seconds the lone voter found himself at the bottom of a heap of his more muscular classmates. "Yea! Yea!" he gasped, "I change my vote! *Yea!*"

"That's settled then," said the chairman. "We will inform Dr. Lee that by a unanimous vote of the student body the lady medical student is to be admitted at once."

And thus it was that Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman ever to be admitted into an American medical school. That was in 1847. In 1849 she hung out her shingle as the first woman doctor in the country. (Medical school took a great deal less time then than it does now.) In 1857 she opened a hospital run entirely by women—the first of its kind in the world.

By the close of the Civil War a number of medical schools had begun to open their doors to women. Now nothing could stop the revolution in medical education that was set in motion by young Elizabeth. It is an interesting thought that none of this might have come to pass if the students at Geneva had not happened to be in the mood for a little joke.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. Most of the students at Geneva College came from
 - A large cities
 - B foreign towns
 - C farm villages
2. The letter from the town council indicated that the students were
 - A unhappy
 - B unruly
 - C untruthful
3. Dr. Lee, on receiving Dr. Warrington's letter, can best be described as
 - A upset and worried
 - B calm and amused
 - C angry and determined
4. Apparently Dr. Warrington looked up on Geneva College as a
 - A first choice
 - B sure thing
 - C last resort
5. Dr. Lee and Dr. Hale hoped that the students would
 - A vote to admit Miss Blackwell
 - B vote to reject Miss Blackwell
 - C never reach a decision
6. The main concern of Dr. Lee and Dr. Hale was how to avoid offending
 - A a hopeful student
 - B a fellow doctor
 - C their Quaker students
7. The students voted yes because they
 - A believed in women's rights
 - B were in the mood for a joke
 - C had up-to-date views
8. If the "no" vote had remained unchanged, Elizabeth's application would have been
 - A rejected
 - B accepted
 - C reconsidered
9. The vote was changed by means of
 - A outright trickery
 - B earnest argument
 - C physical force
10. Elizabeth spent only two years in medical school because
 - A she was an extremely rapid learner
 - B a more important job needed doing
 - C medical courses were shorter then