ETHICS AND THE LARGER NEIGHBORHOOD, MARCH TWELFTH, 1914

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Ethics and the larger neighborhood, March twelfth, 1914 by Hamilton Wright Mabie

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The George Dana Boardman Lectureship in Christian Ethics

(Founded Anno Domini 1899)

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University of Pennsylvania
1914

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Ethics and the Larger Neighborhood

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By

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ETHICS AND THE LARGER NEIGHBORHOOD

MR. PROVOST, Ladies and Gentlemen: In the initial lecture in the Boardman Lectureship, happily delivered by the founder himself, the foundation on which all succeeding lectures must rest was laid broadly and securely in a definition and application of the Golden Rule. In that rule was gathered up the substance of the highest teaching of the Old Testament, and from it as from a commanding height the broader and more spiritual teaching of the New Testament must be understood. Dr. Boardman declared that Charles Reade's novel, "Put Yourself in His Place," is an echo of St. Paul's great phrase, "Let no one seek his own, but each his neighbor's good."

"What our poor world needs is not division of spoils, but reciprocity of life; not compassion, but co-passion; not pity, but sympathy. . . . For human society is, so to speak, one vast

moral corporation, in which are no limited or silent partners, but in which all have a joint issue, sharing alike or at least reciprocally the profits and losses of our common corporate life."

The subject of the present discussion, "Ethics and the Larger Neighborhood," will, it is hoped, illustrate and suggest revelations of this fundamental truth in the development of human society; for it is a historic truth and not the conviction of a man of prophetic imagination and deep Christian sympathy.

The progress of a historic movement is sometimes marked by the appearance of a new word, or the deepening and widening of the meaning of an old one. Life deals freely with language, as it does with all the other symbols in which men try to express its ever changing significance. Equality meant one thing in France in the period of the Revolution; it has never been other than an abstract word in England. Liberty has never been defined in France; but charters, bills of right, statutes and judicial decisions have given it trenchant definiteness in English law and

practice. Mr. Kipling has said, with picturesque license, that in this country liberty and equality have always been matters of indifference, but that Americans insist on fraternity; so long as a man is what is commonly called "a good fellow" a mantle of charity covers him like a garment. He may rob the city, but if he gives generously to the poor nobody is willing to be so disagreeable as to "have the law" on him. He may despoil the state, but if he is always accessible and helpful, and has the reputation of "standing by" his friends, people are reluctant to blur the pleasant impression he makes on the community. The hearty, genial immoralist, generous with money which is not his own, has long been a privileged person in this country; and the "hail-fellow-well-met" manner has been an easy road, not only to popularity but to position and power.

Of course, there is exaggeration in Mr. Kipling's picturesque generalization; but there is also a substratum of truth which is not discreditable either to American intelligence or character. Good fellowship is a form of an American quality which was a product of the original condition in

which the colonists found themselves—the quality of neighborliness. Under primitive conditions, faced by all kinds of peril, with foundations of every sort to be laid, men were driven together by sheer force of necessity. The loneliness of forests, the isolation created by vast distances, the watchfulness of crafty foes, bred in the colonists the spirit and habits of neighborliness, —which is an intimate name for democracy.

When the kindred pioneer quality of self-reliance sent waves of emigration from the older communities through the valley of Mohawk and the passes of the Alleghanies, the neighborly temper was fostered and invigorated by another first-hand dealing with an untried climate, an unsubdued soil, and by dangers and difficulties which would have daunted men and women of less resolute courage. In the new communities on the Ohio and Mississippi and, later, on the fertile prairies and the vast stretch of plains brooded over by an immense silence, the neighborly attitude of helpfulness and the neighborly habit of sharing work and privileges, became more pronounced and the application of democracy more radical.