

SISTERHOOD

Mrs. Carter was not an unkind woman.

She was possibly the most patient board member of the National Association of Colored Women. That is why, she mused, she was chosen over Mrs. Wells or Mrs. Terrell. Her patience. Urgent, but calm. She wondered where that patience had gone.

Perhaps it was just the cold weather. She wanted to clutch her jacket, pull it in until she disappeared. Was the chilly February weather meant to dissuade her? Perhaps Mrs. Paul did not want her to show up.

When had she become so cynical?

She resisted the temptation to pull her jacket any closer. She would not walk into the building hunched over.

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The receptionist was not pleased to see her. She could not hide her discomfort at first, though she was quick to put on a gracious smile and extend her arm forward.

"It is a pleasure to meet you ma'am. Please, have a seat. Mrs. Paul has asked me to inform you that she regretfully will not be able to attend today's meeting." As Mrs. Carter began to rise, the receptionist hastily added "She has asked me to fill you in."

Mrs. Carter hesitated before sitting back down. "I hope this is about a possible partnership between the National American Woman Suffrage Association and the National Association of Colored Women. We have such similar goals, and we really should work together."

The receptionist nodded. "I quite agree. We want the same future."

"So why have you denied our requests for collaboration in the past?"

It was clear the receptionist was expecting this question. Without missing a beat, she replied "I hope that will not be a barrier to our future collaboration."

Mrs. Carter mulled that over for a few seconds before asking "What were the barriers to our past collaboration?" Her intention was not to start an argument, but to ensure that any attempts at a partnership were sincere. It was no secret that NAWSA believed any affiliation between the two would erase the progress made in Jim Crow states. Well, the progress made in getting white women the right to vote. However, after watching the receptionist's eyes flit back and forth, she took pity and refrained from wondering out loud what emergency had called Mrs. Paul away. Instead, she smiled kindly and told the receptionist to "Never mind that. What was this meeting to be about?"

The receptionist's face relaxed with relief at being able to return to her prepared script. "As I was saying, we want the same future. We should unite in a show of sisterhood and cooperation."

Mrs. Carter began to grow impatient. It was slightly infuriating to hear the same arguments she had presented to NAWSA parroted back to her. "Are you suggesting a merger?"

The receptionist's smile disappeared and she began to twist her ring. "Not exactly."

Mrs. Carter leaned forward. As she watched the receptionist fiddle with various objects on her desk (first a pen, then her name plate, and finally the buttons on the left sleeve of her blouse) she wondered why she allowed herself to meet with an organization that wouldn't take her seriously. A merger - now that would have been the proof of sincerity Mrs. Carter needed. Even a meeting with Mrs. Paul herself would have helped convince her. At any rate, she regretted asking the question.

"I see. What sort of collaboration do you propose then, Mrs.?"

"Clark," the receptionist supplied eagerly. "We would love for you to march with us the day before Wilson's inauguration. We have planned a procession with floats, bands, and the like. Mrs. Shaw and Ms. Keller will speak." She spoke very quickly, and handed Mrs. Carter a flyer with a woman adorned in purple and gold, atop a horse, riding past Capitol Hill and blowing on a trumpet with a "Votes for Women" flag draped on it.

Mrs. Carter took her time again before responding. "And you are not worried about what the Southern states might think?"

The gracious smile returned. "We are more concerned with getting votes for all women." The receptionist - no, Mrs. Clark - sat back in her chair, clearly pleased with her performance. The fiddling stopped as she awaited Mrs. Carter's gratitude.

Mrs. Carter glanced at the poster once more. Who was this savior in purple and gold, whose call to action would get women the right to vote? She looked at Mrs. Clark, before extending her hand and smiling just as graciously. "We would be delighted."

The receptionist took the poster back, replaced it with a map, and clasped her hands. "Wonderful. We are planning on marching down Pennsylvania Avenue, stopping at the Treasury Building, and finishing at the Memorial Continental Hall. We will be in touch to discuss details."

Mrs. Carter nodded, not sure what she was supposed to say. She was pleasantly surprised. "I look forward to marching side by side with the honorable NAWSA. We appreciate the invitation." She beamed at Mrs. Clark, who really wasn't so bad, and began to stand up.

"Well, not side by side of course."

Mrs. Carter sat back down and leaned forward once again. "Of course?"

"We'll have a separate area for the blacks to march. You will be right here." the receptionist said helpfully, pointing to a spot on the map.

"Segregation? In a march for equality?" Mrs. Carter was having a hard time hiding her disappointment. The receptionist didn't answer.

She picked up her bag, turned to the receptionist, and said "Then we will have to decline the invitation, Mrs. Clark. Sorry to disappoint." Cold air rushed in as she opened the door.

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Mrs. Wells picked up her pen, twisting it back and forth in her hands. "We must take a stand. We march with them, or not at all."

Mrs. Terrell slowly stood up. "You should write to them," she declared. "You should write, and you should let them know that we will not rest till we too get the vote. We will not rest until we are afforded a say in what happens to our families, our communities." She turned to the window and paused. "But we should still march."

Mrs. Carter glanced up sharply. "They should feel our anger. They should know that we will not compromise on our rights." Her voice rose with every word. "Let us make our frustration clear! They cannot get away with insulting us!"

"We shall. But we will still march."

Mrs. Carter's brows furrowed. "How will that show our frustration? We should boycott the march and have our own!"

"Why? Think of the national attention this march will get. We should not punish our movement just because we don't agree with them." She turned back to face Mrs. Carter. "This march is an opportunity. Our anger cannot blind us - if white women never get the vote, we will never get the vote."

Mrs. Carter met her gaze. "So we give in to every demand? What's next? Who knows how much we'll be asked to sacrifice!" Her patience had disappeared.

Mrs. Wells sighed, massaging her temples. "Our fight will continue long after the white woman gets her vote. But that doesn't mean we should not aid them in their battles. Their battles are our own."

Mrs. Carter shook her head. "We shouldn't have to compromise on our rights."

She thought about her three-month old at home. Even if she would never be able to vote in her lifetime, she would make sure that Francie would. She would do anything that brought her closer to that goal. Would marching really achieve that?

Would not marching achieve anything?

"It is a step forward, albeit a small step." Mrs. Wells took Mrs. Carter's hands in her own. "But any step forward is better than no step at all."

Mrs. Carter slowly nodded. "Alright. We will march with them. In this fight, they are not the enemy. They are our sisters."