Lady Bountiful and the K. D.

She is there every time court convenes. It just wouldn't be court without Mrs. Lawson. But she is not merely curious. She knows that almost inevitably one member of her sixty-two families will be "up" and she is there to see that he gets justice. If he is guilty she gives him a tongue lashing which hurts more than the judge's thirty days. But she sees to it that the rest of the family eats regularly while he is doing his time.

Sixty-two families, not "average" people but ignorant, helpless ones—these are the people which Mrs. Lawson, as "Lady Bountiful" for the King's Daughters has chosen to look after. Officially she is the "case worker" (without pay) for Chapel Hill's oldest charity organization. The K. D. have been on the job for over fifty years, calling themselves the King's Daughters in the God's children idea. But the origins of their needy class go back farther than that.

A long time ago there was a handsome plantation house on top Laurel Hill. A wide carriage road led up to it, passing through fields of tall corn and groves of wide-board pine. In the fifties Orange county could boast of many such plantations. But now—two fallen chimneys are all that is left of the great house. A wide red gully follows the line of the old carriage road. Scrubby second growth, with now and then a sawdust pile tells the story of the forests. Dwarfed, blighted corn pushes up in the fields. One thing only remains of the old glory; the gracefully curved iron chassis of a once beautiful carriage that rusts beside a tumbling shed.

So with the other plantations all over the country—constant farming, careless farming.

A textile mill was built in Carrboro about the turn of the century. Many were glad to forsake the land for sure wages. In 1912 more factories were built. During the first years of the current "depression" all of these mills shut down. Now only one is in operation. Here, then, were left a large group of stranded people. They knew no other trade. They lacked the capital or initiative to return to the land. A few found work in Durham and in Chapel Hill. Many more moved out. But, as usual, the weak were left behind, unable to add just themselves—without support.

"And they are hard to help, too," says Mrs. Lawson. "They just don't seem to know what it is to plan and save. Those who are left, they've got sense enough to watch a machine or pack socks—most kinds of mill work, and would do it if the other mills would open up. But they can't do much else." Idleness is their downfall, liquor their destruction. Somebody must look after them, and the K. D. were not ones to shirk. They fed and schooled them, clothed and nagged them. When the funds of the K. D. gave out the state welfare office, and through that, the Federal government recognized them as such capable workers that they allowed the K. D. to distribute government food and clothing grants and to certify people for work relief.

"We just couldn't possibly have come through the last few years without the Federal aid," said Mrs. Lawson.

Looking after the white people who need help is only half the problem. Conditions among the Negroes are even worse. Most of the colored population of Chapel Hill and Carrboro is native to Orange county. Their grand parents worked its plantations. Their parents replaced many of the emigrating white people on the land. A few of them learned to work it properly and saved its fertility. Most of them soon gave up the struggle and sought work in the growing towns of Chapel Hill and Carrboro. Soon two new "residential sections" were formed by their make-shift shanties: "Tin Top"—located between the two towns, beyond where the University laundry now stands, and "Potters Field" in the Northwest corner of the plateau. The University and the people connected with it furnish most of their seasonal employment. Wages at best are barely above subsistence level. So when boarding houses close for the holidays, when fraternities dismiss their servants during the vacation months, when the smaller summer school enrollment makes it necessary to "lay off" some of the laundry labor, there is want—a great deal of it.

"They get so little," went on Mrs. Lawson, "and whenever they have any little bit of money
extra you can just be sure it’s going either to the bootlegger or to the installment man. Oh, they just will sign up for anything they have the first payment for. Some of them can’t seem to realize that there is going to be a dinner time next Thursday too.” Mrs. Lawson has discouragements. Sometimes she takes them chickens so they can have eggs only to go back the next week and find they have eaten the hens. Out in Tin Top there was a family of ten which she was helping. They had a large house. “It was a right good house, too,” emphasized Mrs. Lawson. “But they were short on stove wood. Well, they started tearing down the shelves and burning them. The house had a sort of shed on the back of it and they started pulling at that. When the shed was done they kept pulling boards from the back rooms. Finally it got so cold that all ten of them had to move into the front rooms, but they kept pulling. I was out there just a while ago and all ten of them were scrounged up in two little rooms. They had just about finished with the rest of the house and somebody was pulling a board out of what was left. ‘Matty Bell,’ I said, ‘Don’t you know it’s going to make you all cold, pulling those boards out like that?’ ‘Yes, yes,’ she said, ‘I ain’t gonna do it no more.’ Phew. Won’t do it no more! They’ll keep on till they are on the naked ground.”

With such discouragements as that to face, one wonders how Mrs. Lawson has the courage to go on. But thirty-two years of charity work has taught her patience. Somehow she has developed an affection for these helpless ones she calls “my people.” With an almost savage determination she goes after the things the people need. She is one of those women best described as bumptious—who have a peculiar gift for getting what she goes after. How she gets so much done no one knows. But that white head, quick smile and strong voice seem to be everywhere. She is an extremely kinetic person. Her presence makes inertia impossible.

Some encouragement she does get. Many of the people she helps are not inferior, they just have not had a decent chance to better themselves. Her chief joy seems to be helping these to find work and to better their homes. Mrs. Lawson, herself, found permanent non-relief jobs for over fifty people in the last year. But she doesn’t “drop” them there. Through their employers she checks up on the quality of their work. She tries to see that their families get more of their wages than the bootlegger and pounds into them the necessity of planning for the future. Last summer some of her families canned as many as 200 jars of food for the cold weather.

“How?” many people have asked, “has Chapel Hill managed to keep as pleasantly free of the beggars and professional transients who disturb the housewives of almost every other small town. Being off the railroad line explains it in part, but the K. D. have a great deal to do with it. All housewives are advised by them to refuse to feed people who ask for a ‘hand out,’ but send them around to a local cafe where the K. D. would pay the cost of the meal. Also they are asked to report to the police persons who persist in hanging around the residential sections. In this way much petty thievery is avoided—at the same time the hungry are fed.

“Some of them have this place spotted, too. They think there will be easy pickings here. I saw one of them getting off the bus just the other day. He rolled up his sleeve so people could see his horribly syphilitic arm, got his pencils in his hat and started down the street. Well you know that man’s got no business selling pencils or even being on the street with an arm like that. Some child is as liable as not to get one of those pencils and put it in his mouth. Children just will do things like that. Well, I went around and got the policeman and in about thirty minutes that man was on the bus going out of this place.”

Although an independent organization, the K. D. does cooperate with other charitable agencies in the Village, both public and private. The K. D. is the only purely charitable organization in Chapel Hill, and for a long time it carried on all the charity work, “and did it well, too.” But the task became too great. Other organizations began to give charitable assistance and, finally, a county welfare agency was set up. This agency had professional case workers, office facilities, was backed up by funds donated by the Federal government. But the K. D. did not stop working. They found that no amount of professional training can fully prepare case workers for the problems of a particular community.

So the King’s Daughters still has found a need for their services, a need that cannot be met by any other agency. “Lady Bountiful” works steadily on.

Last spring Mrs. Lawson was chosen Chapel Hill’s “best citizen,” People in West Wood and Park Place, in Buttons and Tenny circle approved of the choice. But the people in Tin Top and Potter’s Field, they knew how completely she deserved that title.

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