

THE MEANING OF THE WOMAN'S CLUB MOVEMENT

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The History of the Woman's Club Movement by Mrs. J. C. Croly (Jennie June) contains this passage in one of the opening chapters:

"The woman has been the one isolated fact in the universe. The outlook upon the world, the means of education, the opportunities for advancement, had all been denied her. . . . The opportunity came, with the awakening of the communal spirit, the recognition of the law of solidarity of interests, the sociologic advance which established a basis of equality among a wide diversity of conditions and individualities, and opportunities for all, capable of using them. This great advance was not confined to a society or a neighborhood; it did not require subscription to a tenet, or the giving up of one's mode of life. It was simply the change of a point of view, the opening of a door, the stepping out into the freedom of the outer air, and the sweet sense of fellowship that comes with liberty and light. The difference was only a point of view but it changed the aspect of the world."

This new note, which meant for the woman, liberty, breadth, and unity, was struck by the Woman's Club.

To the term "club" as applied to, and by women, may be fitly referred the words in which John Addington Symonds defines "Renaissance." "This," he remarks, "is not explained by this or that characteristic, but as an effort for which at length the time had come."

To rehearse even in the most cursory manner, the history and growth of the Woman's Club Movement, would be out of place, in a publication of this kind. Suffice it to say, that from the small beginning of the union of a few scattered literary clubs, called together by "Sorosis," of New York, in 1889, came the

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following year, the organization of the "General Federation of Women's Clubs," the great State Federations, sometimes numbering forty thousand in membership, and the wonderful increase in individual club organization. Today the General Federation has a membership of approximately five hundred thousand women, extending into almost every town and city in our own land, and embracing in its union, clubs in nearly every foreign country.

It was soon evident to the leaders and students of this "Renaissance," so eagerly embraced, so instantly grasped, so greedily absorbed, that literary study, and mutual and self-improvement alone, as a foundation would not build a permanent structure. Gradually, but, surely and sanely, the women of the Federation are coming to believe that this union of forces is here, not a happening, not for a few years, but that it is a part of the plan of the world, that it is a great helpful, uplifting influence for the making of the Kingdom, the Kingdom of enlarged opportunities of higher ideals, of the redeeming spirit which can have no better word expression than the motto of the Federation:

"Unity in Diversity."

At the present time a stage of evolution has been reached, by which the outside work of the Federation is carried on by twelve standing committees. To enumerate all the achievements of the General Federation thru these committees would be impossible, but a glance at a few of their activities may not be without interest.

The Art Committee has sent hundreds of pictures over the country for schools, libraries, and into remote and lonely homes. Great practical sermons have been preached by loan exhibitions of originals, by classes under the supervision of the clubs, by preaching the doctrine of "good art or no art" in the decoration of public buildings, the erection of monuments, park gates, drinking fountains, etc. Perhaps the most far-reaching work inspired by the Federation, has been the placing of works of art upon the walls of public schools and the formation of School Art Leagues. In one small territory where distances were great, and educational facilities most limited, every school received two fine pictures through the generous efforts of the club women of the territory. One large department club in a Western City, has expended ten thousand dollars in schoolroom decoration; exam-

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ples of this kind could be given in great numbers. The next step asked of Clubs and Federations will be the endeavor to have a Municipal Art Commission in every small town, to serve without salary, to be composed of men and women of experience and cultivation, so that the adornment of municipalities may be in the hands of experts, and not left to the selection of supervisors or aldermen, who may happen to be in office upon the crest of a partisan wave. This will be the keystone in the laying of a foundation to make America artistic, as a Nation. Under the head of "Civics" there is almost no limit to the work done by Clubs and Federations, in beautifying streets, in studying and carrying out sanitary measures, in establishing parks and municipal play grounds, in preserving sacred historical spots and natural glories. Two notable examples of the work of the Clubs in the latter instance, are the protection of the Palisades, and the establishment of the "Mesa Verde" National Park by the present Congress, for the preservation of the Cliff Dwellings in Colorado. Perhaps the best result of the Civics Committee work is the knowledge acquired by hygienic conditions which helps us to better our homes as well. This is a glimpse of the work of the Civic Committees. The third Committee on Civil Service Reform is comparatively new. It is not proposed to take up the great unsolved questions of National and Municipal Civil Service, but the scope of this Committee is to bring to citizens a careful study of the Institutions in which are housed, the Dependent, the Delinquent, and the Defective — the helpless members of the body politic. Hundreds of women and men as well, have given of their leisure, at the instigation of this Committee, to look into the condition of their State Institutions, to ask thru the press and public that only merit shall be considered, in the appointments, and that these helpless sisters and brothers shall no longer be victims of the spoils system. Much improvement and lasting interest has already been the result.

The Educational Committee is inducing a careful study of the conditions, not of your child and mine, but of all children. It has found millions of people who have no educational advantages in this good land of ours and is working to rouse public opinion to meet this mighty problem. The educational work in the Clubs has brought into loving relations, teacher and parent; been the

means of placing women upon School Boards, of obtaining rightful unpaid taxes to maintain schools, of establishing scholarships and of much other wonderful work.

The fifth Committee, called Household Economics, has endeavored to interest the women of the Federation in the practical problems confronting the housekeeper. The great majority of the members of the Clubs and Federations are the homemakers, the thoughtful, earnest mothers and wives, who are giving their best efforts to the solution of the problems of their own and their children's lives. They are the "Grand Army," the majority, the ninety per cent, who make the splendid, sturdy Americanism, which must be the hope of the future.

The Pure Food Committee, Number Six, is also of recent birth, but if its life shall continue to be as vigorous, as has been its early promise, it will indeed be said of it that it is "born well, and well born." Even the most absolute unbelievers in the public work of women have admitted that the work of the Federation through its Central and State Committees has been of potent influence in passing the Federal measure known as the Pure Food Bill. The next step will be an effort for similar legislation in the respective States, in order to make the National Law effective.

The Forestry Committee has a correspondent in each State Federation of which there are now forty-six. So valiant and increasing has been the warfare waged in this cause, that at the present time, nearly every State is aroused to the need of legislation and work for the protection of these necessary adjuncts to civilization and happiness—the woods and forests. The Industrial and Child Labor Committee deserves an entire article, if we would tell how it has gone into the lives of the workers, investigating, helping, giving a genuine uplift in hundreds of cases; coming now to demand a census of conditions from the nation itself.

Perhaps the most effective work done by this Committee has been the awakening of many States to the knowledge of the conditions of workers within their borders. State pride enters so largely into the composition of the American people, that it has been a long and arduous task to even obtain an admittance to the idea, that like commonwealths, individuals have grievous distempers, and need at times, even the surgeon's knife.

The Legislative Committee, in conjunction with the other Com-

mittees, has fought heroically for the Juvenile Court Laws, which now prevail in twenty-five States, for humane legislation, for the enactment of just property laws for women and children, and for the statutes which shall protect the Home and purify community and State. The Library Extension Committee: Perhaps at this moment, there are three hundred thousand books being sent over this land, books to the lonely, books to the ignorant, books to help and instruct and revive. In numbers of cases, the inception of a Carnegie Library Building, has been the small Woman's Club free library in the town or city. In one small State Federation of forty clubs in membership, thirty had founded free libraries, giving time, means, and most unselfish service in maintaining them. No greater advance can be made in the growth of a nation than by work of this nature, for the dissemination of good literature, means the overcoming of ignorance, and its train of disaster and dynamite.

A new Committee, suggested at the recent Biennial will be called the "Outlook" Committee, to whom shall be referred for investigation new work or plans proposed to the Federation.

We can give only this glance at the work of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, omitting, as impossible to describe, the mighty stimulus given to literary study and work, by means of the respective literary clubs and Literature Committees. Not even glancing at the wonderful living value of the Federation, in bringing to women the community idea, the fellowship which rounds and develops character, the encouragement of the student habit thereby keeping the mother abreast of her children, the teaching of the real things of life, the giving of purpose and healthful activities, to many otherwise lonely or useless lives. These achievements may not be recorded by pen or print, but they will go far in the making of the coming men and women.

In the final estimate, if we define this organization, if we reply to the oft-repeated question, What is the purpose of the Federation we should answer: The General Federation of Women's Clubs is not a reform organization *per se*. It is broadly sympathetic with reform, but it is not a propaganda. It is not philanthropic distinctively, though one of the greatest agencies of the day for careful study of methods and genuine helpfulness in this direction. It is not purely sociological, though with living inter-

ests, and a splendid record of service in uplifting work. It is in no sense political, yet its influence and power are to be seen in every State legislature, and it has the proud boast of having been a great factor in passing the long disputed Pure Food Bill during the present session of Congress. It cannot be called an academy or museum of art, yet one of the greatest authorities of the age has said that the years of study and demonstration in the clubs and federations have produced the wonderful results shown in the school-room decoration and much of the Arts and Crafts movement, by which a genuine love for, and knowledge of art is being instilled into the coming men and women. It is not a university, yet a surprising stimulus has been given to the study of literature, science, and history in hundreds and hundreds of American homes because of the club membership of mother or daughter. It has no bureau of publicity, yet through its membership of clubs and federations, it has been more far-reaching in disseminating knowledge and arousing public sentiment upon the questions which make for good citizenship, than any other body of workers, because of its broad, inclusive lines and wider outlook. The Federation may become a mighty factor in the civilization of the century, if wielded as a whole,—an army of builders, ready, alert, systematic, and scientific, not only a potent force in this generation, but transmitting to the next a vigor and strength which have never been given by any race of women to their inheritors.