

ELEMENTARY CIVICS.

Some of the vague notions about the American flag that prevailed before the Civil War were ludicrously exemplified by a community of average intelligence and sterling patriotism, not more than seventy miles from New York, who held their first "Union mass meeting" in 1861 under the folds of an immense home-made flag. They came near to using a flag of red, white and blue stripes and an insignificant number of blue stars upon a white field. A neighbor who had "been to the city" returned in the very nick of time to advise a change.

Mistakes like that could not now occur. The American flag has become as familiar as the face of a friend, and along with familiarity there has grown up a warm affection for it in the hearts of the people.

But this affection is not necessarily a good thing. It portends good or evil according to its essential character. To idolize the flag itself, its combination of fibre and color and form, is to worship a fetich. To cherish it as a symbol merely of the glory of the past is to live out our patriotism in graveyards. Unless "Old Glory" means to us something different from that and far deeper, by making it an object of adoration we deaden civic conscience and furnish equipment for demagogues. If, on the other hand, we revere the flag as our symbol of liberty, remembering that liberty is not a sacred corpse to be preserved, but a growing tree to be nurtured and guarded, the aureole of a new glory will bathe "Old Glory" in resplendent light.

Doing this with intelligence is good citizenship. But it must be done with intelligence. Patriotism without sense, like faith without works, is dead; it may be noisy, but nevertheless it is dead. It needs the vitalizing force of intelligence, and this it is the function of what we call "civics" to supply.

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"Civics" denotes the science of citizenship, of the relations between citizens and the government. It includes duties in society, governmental methods and machinery, law in its direct applications to the interests of society, political economy, and the history of civic development and movement. Its field, therefore, is so extensive that if good citizenship depended upon a comprehensive knowledge of the subject we might well throw up our hands in despair and turn this popular government of ours over to the absolute management of doctors of sociology. But good citizenship depends upon no such impossible condition.

An every-day kind of man can grasp the elementary principles of civics readily and apply them intelligently. It is not a loose aggregation of the elements of all the sciences that this science in part includes—ethics, political science, law, political economy, and political history,—but a combination or melting into a complete whole of so much of what is elementary in those sciences as relates directly to the rights and duties of the citizen as a citizen.

Civic ethics is the flux with which this melting is done, the integrating factor of the science. It refers, not to each man's duties to other men individually, which is private morality, but to the duties of each to his community as a whole and the duties of the community as a whole to him.

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When the idea of civic ethics is caught, the deepest of all political truths springs to the surface. It is seen at once that there must be such a thing as right social order, such a thing as a principle of government that will stand the test of ethics, a principle that does not depend upon history, but is right simply and solely because it is ethical.

And we need not wait long or go far to learn that this principle of government is the democratic principle. Democracy is the only morally sound principle of government. It alone aims to secure equal rights, and until inequality of rights can be squared with our sense of justice, the democratic principle cannot be rejected without repudiating ethics as a civic factor.

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Chief among the corollaries of this central principle are home rule and universal suffrage.

The principle of home rule is violated whenever the local affairs of a community are controlled from outside. To illustrate with our own institutions: Every municipality should be absolutely independent regarding those affairs which in their nature concern its citizens alone; affairs that in their nature are of common concern to the citizens of the State at large, and do not affect the rights of citizens of other States, should be managed by the State; and affairs that in their nature are of common concern to all the States, together with those that relate us to foreign peoples, should be subject to Federal control. Under existing laws the principle of home rule is but imperfectly recognized, and one of the most pressing duties of good citizenship is to improve the laws in this respect.

The only just limitations of suffrage, the other

chief corollary of the central principle, are those that nature plainly imposes or that personal conduct compels. Idiots and lunatics cannot vote; they are by nature incapacitated for intelligent judgment. This is also true of children. Convicts may be justly held to have forfeited the right by personal conduct, provided the penalty is appropriate to the crime. But it is difficult if not impossible to specify other limitations that would not violate the central principle. Basing suffrage upon accidents of birth, upon sex, or upon wealth, is in effect a positive repudiation of the principle. Possession of wealth, so far from indicating civic superiority, is often evidence of the possession of civic qualities of the worst order. The sex limitation is so desperately false in principle that in democratic communities its defenders are forced to argue that women vote by proxy through men, an argument which in its final application would prove that an absolute monarchy is a democracy because the monarch votes the proxies of his subjects. Hereditary suffrage is so foreign to our ideas that we should spontaneously reject it if it were baldly proposed; but there is a tendency to regard the "well-born" as peculiarly qualified to govern, which at bottom is much the same thing. Educational limitations are of a different order, and offer more room for unprejudiced debate. It is doubtful, however, if they accomplish any good civic purpose, for illiterates are not the most dangerous citizens.

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Most questions relating to suffrage rise out of the deplorable economic conditions of large cities, which are so bad that the democratic principle is often said to have broken down in cities. It is a false saying. The fault is not with democratic principle, but with the inadequacy of our recognition of that principle. We are not true to democracy, and aristocratic conditions creep in. Both the fact and the effect are more clearly seen in cities, because it is in cities that un-democratic conditions, though they prevail everywhere, are most highly developed.

According to the census of 1890, 94 families out of every 100 in New York were tenants. Allowance must, of course, be made for tenants who lived in hotels or fine houses or commodious flats, but even after that allowance, what a startling story of want upon the one hand and wealth upon the other these figures suggest. It is this juxtaposition of want and wealth that explains the breaking down of democracy in cities. How can the poverty-born or the poverty-stricken have

civic pride or civic virtue where evidence of vast wealth continuously confronts them, and exhibitions of indolent and often insolent luxury are on every hand? How can men be good citizens when they are barely able to live with hard labor while fellow-citizens enjoy the most delightful products of labor without laboring? This is a condition in which "beelers" flourish and "bosses" rule. Nor is it confined to cities. It is a general condition, and it has been growing worse. Is the cause to be found in private conduct, or in civic institutions?

That is the most vital question that good citizenship is called upon to answer. If private conduct is the cause, the citizen, as citizen, cannot help it; if civic institutions are the cause, every citizen is morally bound to help it. But the question cannot be answered intelligently without an understanding of the elements of political economy—not the mazes of the economics of the schools, but the great facts and great principles of industrial life which every one who thinks can understand.

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Ethics points the citizen to the ultimate aims of citizenship, and arouses his sense of civic duty; civil law and the machinery of government furnish him with tools and explain the manner and circumstances in which they may be used; political history offers him examples and inspiration; but if he would learn the true way to do the right thing he must turn to those elements of political economy which consist simply in common-sense reasoning about a few of the large facts of every one's observation and experience.

For the determination of general civic policy it is enough to know elementary principles. To decide whether government ought to be democratic or aristocratic, whether special privileges giving economic advantages ought to be maintained, whether suffrage ought to be universal, whether taxation ought to be equalized in proportion to benefits, and the like, does not require expert knowledge. For the adjustment of details expert knowledge of present and historical conditions may be indispensable; for in adjusting details we are confronted with a condition as well as a theory, and those who best understand both theory and condition are most fully equipped for the task. But in deciding upon policies, which is the primary function of citizenship, the thing desired rather than the details of accomplishment, is the first consideration.