

THE GRACIOUS CLUB WOMAN — We arrived too early for the banquet, while the president was still busy in the kitchen. Other guests straggled in — visitors from other Institutes, a pressman with a camera, a woman who was going to sing; and we sat in a corner of the room trying to make conversation but feeling rather strange with each other.

Then a woman we had never seen before, saw the strangers off in the corner, left her basket of food in the kitchen and came back to welcome us like long-lost relatives. She was not the appointed social hostess of the organization, just a friendly woman with a native sense of hospitality. She found a place for the pressman to put his equipment. She asked if the piano was in the right spot for the singer. She took us to her house down the street to freshen up after our journey. And suddenly we felt at home, relaxed and ready to enjoy the evening.

In women's clubs we hear a good deal about the dynamic speaker, the good organizer, the efficient chairman. Something that may mean more than any of these is the quality of graciousness. It makes people feel good; it puts a warmth in the atmosphere; it eases tensions; some of it is sure to rub off on rude or touchy members if there are any about. I have seen timid women working with a gracious leader grow and blossom and accomplish the impossible. I have seen a woman with the sympathetic understanding we call tact restore a humiliated one to self respect, make a breach of etiquette nothing to worry about, take an idea that might seem trivial and turn it into something important. The gracious person knows how to "build people up" — and don't we all need it sometimes?

The gift of graciousness — or perhaps it's an accomplishment rather than a gift — is the first requisite in introducing a speaker, thanking a speaker, extending "courtesies" at the close of an event.

Introducing a speaker, the gracious club woman knows that she has just one job to do — to make the audience eager to hear the speaker and to make the speaker eager to speak, or at least tolerably pleased with the prospect. She puts the spotlight on the speaker and is careful to keep out of it herself. The opposite of this is "Mrs. Glib," very assured, very conscious of herself. Introducing a speaker who is to give a talk on Switzerland, she may say: "I know what a treat is in store for us, because on our trip to Europe last year my husband and I enjoyed Switzerland more than any other country. I am sure Mr. Blank's camera caught the glow of the sun going down behind the snow-capped mountains, the roads spiralling up and up . . ." and so on. Perhaps this is not what Mr. Blank intends to talk about at all; and perhaps after what Mrs. Glib has said the audience will be disappointed at missing pictures of the sunsets and the winding roads. Anyway Mrs. Glib had not been asked to make a speech herself — just to set the stage for the speaker of the day. And she would have done this more effectively if she had said nothing about her trip to Europe, but had concentrated on the club's good fortune in having Mr. Blank to speak to them. She might have told something about the breadth of his experience, the specific purpose of his travels, any books he had written or films he had made, anything that would contribute to the impression of an interesting personality.

Among many observations of graciousness in club women, I remember a banquet where the entertainers were blind musicians. From the minute they arrived at the banquet hall there were women ready to be their guides and friends, serving them at the table, arranging a place for them to rest in the wings of the stage so they wouldn't have to stumble up the steps when their numbers were called.

I have another unforgettable picture. At an Institute meeting in a northerly settlement years ago, the program had ended and the women were putting food on the table when the door was cautiously opened and a woman with four children stood outside. They were pitifully clothed and obviously hungry. Perhaps some of the Institute members knew them; anyway they lost no time in bringing them in, being as friendly and casual as if there was nothing unusual in arriving at this hour, or in being so hungry that food disappeared as fast as it could be brought to them.

A considerable part of the significance of a club, and certainly its public image, depend first of all on the graciousness of its members.

Ethel Chapman