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The Protestant Sisterhood.
Olive C. Taylor.

As the tiny bud tenderly caressed by the balmy air, kissed by the bright sunshine, and nourished from the fertile soil, unfolds petal by petal into a beautiful flower, so was the development of the blessed work of the Protestant sisterhood. Its roots extend far into the past, giving it a permanency far surpassing that of any common growth. Even when Christ walked among men ministering to the necessities of others, we see Phoebe the first representative of this noble band, nursing the sick and ministering to the necessities of the saints. Ever and anon throughout the course of church history we find traces of the heroic, consecrated

work of the deaconess. Now single handed, now as a member of a well organized band she instructs children, and foreigners in the Christian doctrine, wins converts to the Christian faith, and — dies at the stake, a martyr to the Christian cause. In the Dark Ages the shadow of the monastery falls upon these noble women working in the open world. They become the secluded, retired nuns of the Catholic faith. The Reformation brought with it repeated attempts to reorganize the deaconess' work, but woman's social condition, coupled with a most natural and well-grounded dread of the monasteries, defeated all efforts until the opening of the

present century, when, under the leadership of that God-sent man of Kaiserswerth, a vast system of schools, reformatories, hospitals and asylums was established and put under the supervision of women. Theodore Fliedner, a humble German pastor, laid the foundation for the work of hundreds of women in France, England, Asia Minor, and North Africa. Yes, more than that! To-day in the Methodist church of America alone there are seven hundred women banded together under that well chosen Greek word *Ἰσὶα καὶ οὐνοσ* whose English translation puts a world of meaning into two short words prompt helper.

How varied our opinions of the deaconess! Ignorance and prejudice form such warped conceptions! To many she is a poor, little woman in black, with serious face and humble mien who, unable to do anything else, drifted as a last resort into the work of nursing the poor and outcast. To others she is a prating preacher of the shams. To those who have studied her work she is the embodiment of intelligence, culture and refinement. No position calls for more talent and skill. No one is better trained for her vocation. After two years course in a training school she is far better prepared for her position than the average nor-

mal student. In her ranks are numbered physicians, trained nurses, editors, teachers and stenographers. Unlike the professions, her work does not tend to spoil the motherhood of our land. The deaconess is mother to the starving babes of the slums, mother to the neglected "street-girls," mother to the old and decrepit, mother to the sorrowing, mother to the race. But is this the end of her mission? What accounts for the hundreds of deaconess hospitals, homes, and reformatories? The deaconess is a business woman. Many of them leave splendid positions in the secular world. Lulu Knowlton, a Chicago deaconess, refused an of

fer of \$80 dollars per month rather than forsake her unsalaried work as deaconess. What a pity? Do not pity the deaconess. She does not need your pity, tho' she may need your sympathy and help. She is in the work because she loves it; if she did not love it she would leave it because there are no vows that bind her to it, save those between herself and God. Having made a good investment of money, brains and soul she is happy and above all - contented. Patient and obeying the law of love, we find her in the slums, caring for the motherless waif, comforting the deserted, or worse than deserted

wife, nursing the sick, feeding the hungry. Now helping an Italian, here an American, there a Chinese, or a Hungarian — foreign missionary work at home. By her side is her Catholic sister, bound by vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, her equal in sincerity and purity, her superior in numbers, gathering multitudes into her Church, doing a noble work but deprived by needless vows of many blameless opportunities.

The deaconess passes beyond the limits of home. New fields open before her. In India the black garb is exchanged for one of grey; but the same sweet face smiles above the white

bonnet strings, the same gentle hand
is held out to all in need of sym-
pathy or aid. Her radiant beams of love
pierces the jungles of Africa finding
jewels for her Master. Her field of
work unlimited, her labor consecrated,
the deaconess finds "not only an op-
portunity, but a vocation." How dif-
ferent from the toiling seething mass
of wage earners, how far removed
from the mercenary struggles of the
world, and yet how many problems
of the century is she solving! The
proud world asks in scorn; "What
is your gospel to the poor? The wretch-
ed outcast moans in his distress:
Where is the gospel of real, material

help? "Your God a God of love?" "The Church for the masses?" In response to these oft repeated questions, comes the deaconess. For centuries the Catholics have labored among the poor and outcast and to-day owe much of their strength, the majority of their numbers, to the organized work of their sisterhood. So quietly has she done her work that only recently has Protestantism realized wherein lay her sister's power. United, consecrated effort on the part of womanhood forms the link between the cold, haughty church and the degraded, unchurched masses. Led onward by the Guiding hand, helping the

church, making better every home
she touches, opening to benighted
souls fields of purity and hope, she
has become an important factor
in the evangelization of the world.

Quietly but surely making the
world better, the work of the deacon-
ess has begun. What we have already
seen is but a hint of what we are
to see in the swiftly coming years.

Commencement Oration of Olive C. Taylor, Class of 1900

Edited by Tim Flaherty, February 2015

The Protestant Sisterhood
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