Letter: N.J. Noble to Editor, American Magazine, May 20, 1911

Noble, N.J.

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Editor of the American Magazine,

Dear Sir:-

In the face of a strong probability of its being rejected I wish to submit another communication on the tariff as viewed by Miss Tarbell.

Miss Tarbell, it seems to me, should be taken very seriously. The history of our country shows a periodic recurrence of almost clock-like regularity to free trade experiments each accompanied by disastrous results. Another period has now about elapsed and Miss Tarbell, with her careful study and forceful exposition of the facts—some of them—is making herself a power which cannot be safely ignored.

The facts are to be welcomed; the danger lies in the conclusions at which she arrives. Thus, she concludes that the tariff makes bad men, whereas from her own statement of the facts she has instead proved that bad men are making the tariff, a very different thing calling for a very different remedy.

Another serious fault in Miss Tarbell's last article is her failure to start out with a clear and accurate statement of her position or to confine herself to any definite position. Her clearest statement is found near the close of her article in the following words: "So when one tackles the history of protection he will not, if he has historical sense—not to say common sense—expect it to have been handled without compromising, backsets, and errors of judgment, but he can expect it to be handled as a principle and not as a commodity."

This statement seems to admit what Miss Tarbell has carefully saved herself from denying in several other passages, namely, that the tariff is not bad per se though it is badly handled at present. Nevertheless, the article as a whole, whether carefully or carelessly read, as well as its caption and its relation to current events leads us to the conclusion that what Miss Tarbell really wishes to attack—and is attacking— is the tariff itself and not merely the method of handling it.

This conclusion is more than strengthened by at least one passage in her article. At the top of page 191 she characterizes the present-day product of "the protective system" as "a man unwilling to take his chances in a free world—struggle". The last three words, it seems to me, more accurately describe Miss Tarbell's real position than she may have intended. "A free world—struggle" can mean nothing less than free trade with the entire world, and it would certainly be a struggle in which the laborer would be ground between the upper and nether millstones of domestic capitalistic greed and foreign pauper labor.

But even if we allow Miss Tarbell to retain her more clearly defined position, we may still take exception to that position; we
for it has never yet been proved that bargaining in commodities is in
and of itself pernicious or that the tariff is not necessarily direct-
ly related to buying and selling of commodities. The wise king's
ideal of Miss Tarbell's sex was a woman who "considereth a field, and
buyeth it", and The Lord Himself commended the unjust steward and even
likened His Own Kingdom to the man who sold all that he had and bought
the pearl of great price. I, for one, can see no objection to tar-
iff making by a system of bargaining provided the bargaining is fair,
nor can I see how a just or practical tariff measure can, under pres-
ent conditions, be enacted in any other manner.

But even supposing, as Miss Tarbell claims, that the tariff
makes bad men, it still seems to me that, like some preachers, she
has her eye too much on the poor rich sinner. Even if the tariff
has corrupted such men as William McKinley what can be said of the re-
sults of our "only seven percent" tariff reduction of 1893? Even if
it did save a few capitalists from the sin of extortion did it not,
in its Pullman Strike and Coxey's Armies, make hundreds and thousands
of criminals out of otherwise honest men? And are not these labor-
ing men as much entitled to salvation from the sins of poverty as the
rich are to salvation from the sins of extortion?

Has Miss Tarbell, then, really made out a case against the
tariff or even its present-day application? Has she not instead
simply shown what has always been true and always will be true until
the millennium arrives, namely, that human nature is far from perfect

and that until the human heart changes human laws can never be a cure-
all for our social or political ills?

Very truly yours,

N. J. Noble