

" HAVE YOU SOMETHING TO SAY?"

(~~Miss~~ Ida M. Tarbell, presents in this interview her views on the right method of attack for the young woman ambitious to write. Endowed with many gifts, Miss Tarbell has none more appealing than her sympathy and understanding for the beginner. Not only ~~the women~~ preparing to write, will be fascinated by Miss Tarbell's views but every worker and thinker. | Ed.)

In a spacious <sup>noisy house</sup> study with its walls lined with books, ~~Miss~~ Ida M. Tarbell, sat at her desk and smiled at the interviewer's question. Then her grey eyes, eyes which can hold a soft light of sympathy and change instantly to a glint of steel, gazed out of the French window into the February sleet.

"So you want me to say to you whatever I would say to <sup>all</sup> young women <sup>in America</sup> who wish to write? Well then, first of all, one who wishes to write must see what is at hand. If one's town is Podunk, one should start in Podunk. There is no necessity to be in New York to begin. True enough, the markets are chiefly in New York, but all life is not here. One has to learn to see and to write before one is any good to the market. Every town has a newspaper. The editors are likely to be remarkably interesting, big-visioned people. They offer market enough for the start. Think of working under William Allen White on the Emporia Gazette!

"On Main Street in any little town are to be found all the eternal things in men and women---great loves, great hates, great meannesses, great goodness. It's all there. Main Street people dream great dreams and have great fulfillments. They all have their interiors. That's what a writer is after-- the interiors. One who cannot see interiors often fails because he is so concerned with exteriors.

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"HAVE YOU SOMETHING TO SAY?"

An Interview With Miss Ida M. Tarbell

In a spacious walnut-brown study, its walls lined with books, Miss Ida M. Tarbell sat at her desk and smiled at the interviewer's question. Then her grey eyes, eyes which can hold a soft light of sympathy and change instantly to a glint of steel, gazed out of the French window down upon a brisk afternoon crowd, typical of New York at five o'clock.

"So you want me to say to you whatever I would say to all young women in America who wish to write? Well then, first of all, one who wishes to write must see what is at hand. If one's town is Podunk, one should start in Podunk. There is no necessity to be in New York to begin. True enough, the markets are chiefly in New York, but all life is not here. One has to learn to see and to write before one is any good to the market. Every town has a newspaper. The editors are likely to be remarkably interesting, big-visioned people. They offer market enough for the start. Think of working under William Allen White on the Emporia Gazette!"

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"Travelers in Europe often do not see anything there because they did not see anything at home. They failed to see beauty in a flock of birds winging their way across a dull sky. They stood unmoved at the sight of a stark poplar, robbed of its leaves, outlined before a November sunset. They didn't have the habit of looking for the beauty which is around us all.

"If one can't see beauty on Main Street, one can't see it on Broadway and Fifth Avenue by any means. So it is no good feeling that unless one can come to New York one cannot write. I am a great believer in starting from where you are with what's about you."

"What about college training? Is it essential?" Miss Tarbell was asked.

"No, I do not consider college training essential. It is a splendid background but not essential. Thoughtful habits of observation and a wealth of good books carefully read might well be a background considered equivalent.

"But college training ought to give a girl the ability to take hold of any new work in a competent fashion. It should teach her how to attack work -- any work, not merely writing -- in the right way. She should try to see first of all what she doesn't know and then understand how to go after the knowledge she needs. College should teach her that method of attack.

"College girls too often come to undertakings with a confidence in their powers which is not at all justifiable. All college can do is to convince one that any work is a subject for more study.

It is essential for any college girl to have respect for any job she undertakes and much modesty in approaching it. To these she must add great willingness to take whatever training is necessary to fit her to the job. She must make up her mind to discover ~~or~~ not just what she wants to do but what it is that she can do. Too often girls rattle around in new work trying to find what they want to do rather than what contribution they are actually able to make.

"No matter what the thing is, the worker ambitious to progress must begin at the bottom. Girls who go into industrial work want to start out by being personnel managers or industrial instructors. Few are willing to begin at a machine. Yet, college trained or not, one cannot be an industrial instructor or an employment manager without first knowing what the processes are. In every sort of work one must begin with the simpler forms and work into the more complicated.

"What college ought to do and tries to do is to give students a better capacity to appreciate what's in a thing. Then, whatever the college woman is called to do she will be able to see the problem. She will be able to analyze it and see the factors in it and their relative importance. One must do that or one will not get far."

"That is putting the burden of responsibility for success or failure on the individual, isn't it?" the interviewer remarked.

"It isn't the business of the colleges to train people for work," was the thoughtful response. "College is to train the mind so that one has an appreciation and interest developed which enables one to see into a job. College training should furnish that valuable imaginative training which, turned upon any given work, will mean comprehension of its intricacies and its whole.

"The same attitude toward her college training and her entering wage job must be held by the writer as by every other worker. College has not made her a writer. No matter what her training is, the young woman ambitious to write must start at the bottom. If she must pay her way from the beginning, she must be willing to write simple things at first."

"What sort of work will give the beginning writer the best opportunity to progress?" the interviewer queried.

"There are many types of work which will aid the writer if her own attitude toward her aims is right. Secretarial work on a magazine may lead to an assistant editorial job or to reading manuscripts if the critical sense is developed by contact with the making of a magazine. But the secretary's work is likely to be so strenuous that she has little time or strength to make the best use of her contacts."

"How about the value of newspaper work?" asked the interviewer, wondering if in the presence of so much peace, surrounded by hundreds of beloved books, Miss Tarbell would scorn experience in the rush of the city room.

"Newspaper work is of unquestioned value," Miss Tarbell's reply came quickly, "unless the worker allows herself to be swamped in the newspaper. That depends on her determination and passion to be a writer. I have the highest idea of the opportunity there is on a newspaper."

"Mastery of a clear, narrative style can be obtained that way. When a reporter has an assignment she must learn how to get her facts, and next she must learn to respect facts. Respect for fact is of the greatest importance in writing."

If one would go far, one must have it. The reporter learns, too, to observe all kinds of things and weigh their meaning. She must be quick as lightning in observation, collect her facts, then put them into a clear narration. The element of clearness, so important in good writing, can be mastered in newspaper work. For in newspaper copy, just as in any of the best literature, sentences must be lucid; just enough words must be used and no more. There is aid in newspaper reporting, too, in the construction of an article. The story must flow naturally. There must not be unrelated observations.

"The newspaper worker learns after a while that she may be just as humorous and just as imaginative as possible on top of being a trustworthy reporter of facts. If the narrative is understandable, clear and logical, no good editor is going to discourage its being made more interesting by means of the writer's ingenuity.

"While on a newspaper, a young woman should be thinking constantly of other forms of writing. She should be trying for the weeklies, for the magazines and for the Sunday feature sections of the newspapers. She should be thinking of a book which she wishes to write, since that is the ripest form of writing."

"It is sometimes said that if one can master the mechanics of the short story, for instance, that one can turn out any number of good stories. Is there any truth in this?"

"Writing is not a trick," replied the author of fourteen books and a hundred ~~and more~~ magazine articles, "One may turn out any number, ~~after~~ <sup>of</sup> learning something of the mechanism, but they will not be good. Good writing doesn't come from the outside but from within. Mastering the mechanism with nothing of inspiration

within, means just factory made stories. Stories can be---and too often are---turned out in the machine-like fashion of shoes or other factory products. They will sell, frequently, but they are not great writing.

"Anyone trying to write should be always and forever trying to find out what to her is good writing. Many persons trying to write attempt to "put something over." Anything with a few smart turns in it will sell/<sup>somewhere.</sup> But selling doesn't prove one a writer. Knowing what is good writing is a thing worth going after hard. And it will not come at the start.

"Going back to ways of starting off. While newspaper work is excellent training for the writer, it is a hard road. A position in an office which will leave half of a young woman's time free to write is a good way to begin. Much good writing has been done even at the end of a full day of work. Hawthorne was a clerk in a customs house while he was doing much of his best work. And Charles Lamb was doing some sort of office work. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was written while Mrs. Stowe was taking care of her babies and her house. But those writers had something to say."

Here the possessor of a mind which can see clearly into the intricacies of industrial conditions<sup>and</sup> of a heart which dictated "He Knew Lincoln," brought a slender hand down upon her desk and leaned forward.

"The great handicap in this field is not lack of money or leisure. It is having nothing to say. If one has a great thing to say, it must be said. That is the amazing thing about having something in one which must be got out. One can't keep it in. One can sit up all night in the unburdening process and not be tired.

"Every job that can be undertaken by the potential writer is valuable as it offers material. If one could dramatize any job, then write of it, setting down the human relations involved, it would be a splendid thing. So, for the writer, no job is to be looked upon from the standpoint of money. Jobs must be seen with more imagination. Any job is worth a story if the worker has the power to see it.

"Great writing is made inside of people. Precious few stories in the course of a year's magazine work have been made that way. It is worth working for. The greatest thing in the world is to give something that is you at your highest. Too much is done by formula. It is better to aim at the greatest thing one can do--- to look into one's soul and say "I see and feel it so and I must make others see and feel it so."

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