

THE WOMAN WHO WANTED A MICROSCOPE

According to her own declaration, Ida M. Tarbell never had the "urge" to be a writer. At all events, it did not trouble her in the extreme and painful form that tradition usually credits to those who make literature their career. This celebrated biographer, whose most recent book, "The Life of Judge Gary: A Story of Steel", has been so widely successful, asserts confidently that it was merely one of the haphazard accidents of life which caused her to enter this pursuit, almost unwillingly.

She wanted most of all to be a scientist, it appears. After leaving high-school in the town of Titusville, Pennsylvania, where her family made their home, she entered Allegheny College. In a recent interview, reported by Mary B. Mullett in the American Magazine, while talking of this period, she said that by the time she graduated she "really had developed an ambition". "I always had been interested in natural science", she continued, "but at college it became a genuine passion with me. I wanted, more than anything else in the world, to have a binocular microscope and to devote my life to studying and teaching biology. I have always said that a binocular microscope was the only thing that could make me actually tremble and my face flush with excitement! That may seem absurd...but it is true. I never longed to write. I never dreamed of it as a career."

It is seldom that so frank and uncompromising a statement is heard from one who has really succeeded in any field, whether it be the success most desired or not. For success alters things. Most victors have a way of forgetting that they may have set out towards some quite different goal. But not Miss Tarbell. Despite her achievement, she seems to think herself a victim of chance.

Finishing her college course - the only woman in her class - she taught for two years in a small seminary in Ohio, always hoping that some opportunity would present itself to continue and develop her interest in natural science. But Fate ruled matters differently. At that time the Chautauqua movement was in its early stages, and its magazine, "The Chautauquan", was being published in a town near Titusville, where the Tarbell family lived. An editorial position was offered her, which she gave up her teaching to accept. The latter had failed to appeal to her from the first. So here she was, finally, in the writing field. Yet, in her own words, -"To me it was only a temporary thing. I had no inclination toward writing or toward editorial work. This was merely a stop-gap, nothing more."

Nevertheless, though she had no special taste for her new duties, she worked diligently. She soon was learning the technical end of the business, planning the magazine, introducing new departments, handling the correspondence, writing and translating articles, "making up" the edition, and so on - indeed, learning to handle everything in any way connected with publication. After seven years of this many-sided experience, she went to France. There she determined to learn the methods employed by the French in writing biography and history, for she admired their products in this field above all others. She succeeded in syndicating some articles to various American papers to help finance her stay abroad. Her "Life of Mme. Roland" and "Life of Napoleon" were written at this time; and it was also in Paris that she first met Mr. S. S. McClure, who became interested in her work and subsequently used so many of her writings in his magazine, most memorable of all being the much-discussed "History of the Standard Oil Company". As most people recall, this open indiotment of wealthy and powerful interests caused a stir which has scarcely subsided even today. Various of Miss Tarbell's other biographies followed, and now "The Life of Judge Gary" has been added to the list, probably as noteworthy an achievement in the field of biographical writing as the past year has produced. And all this, one remembers with surprise, is the accomplishment of a woman who very much wanted to do something else! She hasn't had time for her binocular microscope. She has always been too busy applying a hypothetical one, its substitute, to the ways of human lives.