What Magazine

Ida M. Tarbell
120 East 19th Street
New York City

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THE WORLD

"I think that saving a little child
And bringing him to his own
Is a derned sight better business
Than loafing around the throne."
John Hay in "Little Breeches."

This is a brave old world despite failures and despairs. What more valiant than the way it comes back generation after generation to what it knows in its soul to be the most important task in the world - the bringing of a little child to his own. I might have said century after century for King Solomon occupied himself with the problem and laid down rules for bringing up a child which never have been beaten.

Long ago as that was sound as were Solomon's counsels each generation furnishes a fresh stream of "problem children" - the diseased or crippled, incorrigible or unmoral, stupid or precocious - forcing us to grapple anew with the double task of curing, reforming them and of drying up the poluted sources from which they come.

Here in these United States there has been an increasing interest in the child since the organization of the Republic - men and women realized at the start that if their new government was to succeed they must drill its hope, its faith and its principles

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

into the child. He was never more a pawn of the future than in 1776.

We have gone on and on until we have come to this century of the child, as it is called, with its magnificent ideal of health, gayety, education and a suitable calling for every boy or girl that comes into the world! And what a machinery we have built to achieve the end! The churches and schools on which we first relied have been re-enforced by Committees, Commissions, Conferences, Societies and Leagues of Child Aid and Child Welfare, Children's Bureaux, National and State, Children's Courts and Children's Legislation - by innumerable local attacks on this or that side of the problems by industries, settlements, men and women alone or in groups and a movement as wide as the nation determined, disinterested, passionate.

It is easy to lose oneself in this glut of activity, to see nothing but a deluge of unrelated reports, bulletins, statistics, to hear nothing but the appeals for money which daily ring in our ears - money for "homes", camps, hospitals, play grounds, psycophatic wards.

The danger is that the individual, upon whom in the long run the support of all this complicated machinery rests, will become so bewildered by the multiplicity of appeals and campaigns that he will wash his hands of it all, concluding that the child is being submerged by a mania for organization, figures and blue prints.

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

But it is a poor head that confronted by vast machinery, even if it is un-intelligible at first sight, jumps to the conclusion that the product cannot be worth the wheels. To know what the child age like the machine age means, you must leave the office, the factory, the Engine House and go to the town and the country side where those for whom all this pother is made dwell, see with your own eyes what they are getting out of it.

Take this matter with which for eighteen years now our Federal Children's Bureau has been chiefly occupied - the bringing of healthy children into the world. All I had ever heard or read about the "welfare and hygiene of maternity and infancy" never made me "see" what it meant in terms of mothers and babies as the actual experience of one of my country friends - a brave and sorely distressed Czech woman, who came into my neighborhood some dozen years ago with a family of four - a sick husband and three diseased and partially sub-normal children. She had fled the factory town which had brought her nothing but woe from an instinctive sense that the soil - the fresh air of the county was the only hope for herself and brood. "Steffie" (she bore the beautiful name of Stephania) was an admirable worker. She soon had as many days of her week filled as she could manage and then came what we all regarded as a catastrophe. She was going to have a baby - another diseased and sub-normal child, we all supposed, but it had to be gone through and we concluded that if there was anything in the teachings of the

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

Children's Bureau, Steffie must have the advantage. What would - what could the township do to help in such a case? We investigated and rather to our surprise discovered in the Welfare Commission of the County a clear conviction that it was their business to help all they could, any woman about to bear a child. There was no district nurse - there is now - but they would give her two weeks in the maternity ward of an excellent hospital in a nearby town. "If you can get her to go" - of which they were sceptical and well they might be. To Steffie, as to most all foreign born women, the word hospital was a terror. It took a month of arguing by doctors and friends to persuade her that if she would care for herself as the doctor ordered and would let us take her to the hospital for her confinement there was a chance that she bear a normal child. We won out.

As it happened she was six weeks, instead of two in the hospital, but the Commission stood by manfully and had its reward for when the woman came back blooming as when in her native land and with her as husky and jolly a baby as you could ask, "its head as round as an apple," The whole family always pointed out in pride and wonder.

Steffie brought back from the hospital an utterly new outlook on life and an utterly new technique for dealing with her family. Her first fears over she had soaked up almost all that hospital knew about pre-natal care - child delivery - care of babies -

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

care of ailing husband and children and she has ever since practiced what she learned with a thoroughness which puts all of us who watch her to shame.

Three babies have come to Stephania, twice she "had one on the town" and each time by her own arrangement and at her own expense she has gone back to that maternity ward and each time returned with a husky, laughing baby "its head as round as an apple."

If you took the trouble to analyse the interest and the kind of help this woman received from her community you would find that it was due to the inspiration of the teachings of the Children's Bureau. They had reached this country-side just as the products of the factory had: - by word of mouth - "somebody told us about it"" - by a stray bulletin - an article in the paper - a lecture at the community school house. Today we have in full swing in that neighborhood, engineered by a school nurse and county demonstration agent, all that the government of the United States teaches about health and sanitation, just as we have flivers, radios and fireless cookers. Generally speaking this is true the nation over.

The point is that this work of the Children's Bureau "gets over" by force of its need and its soundness. In the eighteen years since it was undertaken the Federal Government has appropriated some $13,000,000 for its undertakings. What it has accomplished would be cheap at a thousand times the amount. War has cost us in sixteen of these eighteen years close to twenty nine billion dollars.

I shall not stop to argue that we should not have so spent the money - the world is what it is, but I do assert that thirteen

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

millions in eighteen years to prevent disease in children and two thousand two hundred and thirty times the amount for Army and Navy is grotesquely disproportionate. What greater safe - guard to a nation than health of body and brain?

The work of the Children's Bureau is preventive work. Examine the physical plague spots - destroying healthy childhood. and you will find that it is conceded by those who are trying to relieve or cure the victims, that the numbers are slowly but surely decreasing largely through the activities of the Children's Bureau. Take crippled children - we get them at the rate of about fourteen thousand a year. There are many agencies - usually local - trying to "do something". None that I have ever met has gone to my heart like the Shriners' Hospitals. Part of my feeling is no doubt due to the fact that my first accidentally meeting with their work changed what had been a pet abomination into one of a profound admiration. No one who ever a period of years has spent, as I have, a month or six weeks of every winter on a "lecture tour" but has encountered Shriners' Conventions. It was my fortune to be constantly colliding with them. If I had not always been fagged and irritable on these barnstorming junkets I would have enjoyed the Shriners' lusty celebrating, but hurried and self-centered as I was I resented the way the train, the hotel and the town belonged to them.

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

A Shriners' red fez had come to be to me like the proverbial red flag to the bull. When some five years ago I went to Shreveport, Louisiana for a lecture. As usual the Committee showed me the town. All I remember of that sight-seeing tour now is the flood of pity and gratitude which swept over me as I went through the beautiful and well equipped hospital for crippled children, which the Shriners established there in 1922 - saw little limbs that had been straightened or would be soon - the bed ridden and helpless that had been brought to self-help - enjoyment of life - the sorrowful eyes turned glad. The visit left me weeping and laughing and set me at once to finding out what had started these gentlemen, whom I had come to detest so heartedly, on so magnificent an undertaking.

The Shriners say of themselves that they awakened about ten years ago to the fact that all their six hundred thousand or so members were doing when they met was "to put on their Ceremonials, entertain visiting Nobles and enjoy themselves" - I can testify to the fact that they knew how to enjoy themselves! - and then somebody said, "Look here, we fellows ought to be doing something for somebody. Why not look after crippled children. Let us charge ourselves $2.00 a year and see what we can do."

Six hundred thousand of them, $2.00 a year, meant a million two hundred thousand dollars. They built the Shreveport hospital and had money to spare. Another year they built a second, then a third and so on until now they have fifteen, not to speak of the various Mobile Units, as they call them, put up more or less

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

temporarily in places where there is a need - one is in Honolulu. Over eleven thousand crippled children have been received by the Shriners' Hospitals in the eight years since the first was built.

The Shriners take the victims of disease and accident whenever there is a hope of curing or helping them and when there is nobody else to look after them. The children's Bureau sets out to decrease the number of cripples that in the future will knock at their doors-and they are making a dent. At the Society of Crippled Children of New York, an organization now thirty years old, they tell me, that they are sure that the number of crippled children in their territory is decreasing, through what they call contributory causes! Not only the pre-natal work fostered by the Children's Bureau but the Nurses work fostered by such noble institutions as the Henry Street Settlement, the Good Milk campaigns, the fresh air schools for the children, the Summer camps, the scores of things all pouring their little stream of prevention and cure into a source of horrible misery, cleaning it out, drying it up.

But there are more heart-breaking and difficult problems in dealing with child-life than disease and deformity. The crippled child is a tragedy but the criminal child is both a tragedy and a menace to society. And in what numbers we get them! Every city in this land, as well as many a village and country-side is turning out a batch of children, born and reared in homes

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

where vice is the rule of life and where crime of one sort or another is an accepted occupation. The child knows only the world he is born and bred in - his ways are the ways of his world. I remember being, soon after the armistice, in a little devastated town of France, which had been occupied for four years by the Germans - Where some dozen children, no one ~~was~~ over nine, whose families had been trapped ~~there~~ had grown up in the trenches. They knew nothing but the ways of war. They knew all about shells, guns and dug-outs and dead lines, but nothing of baths, combs and pocket handkerchiefs - not to say of letters and catechisms. The efforts of those who had unearthed them and were attempting to introduce them to the ways of peace had resulted when I saw them in little but bewilderment to the children and discouragement to the teachers. And yet who can doubt that they were finally civilized.

In the long run admit that we are not going to wipe out criminal children until we wipe out all crime centers that produce them, nevertheless the experience of thousands of individuals and societies attacking the problems where they meet it and by the best means they find at hand proves daily that these victims of evil conditions can be and are being brought back to decency and order and useful happy living.

Take the experience of my friend, Sanford Hearn, of the Goodwill Center of Brooklyn. Eighteen years ago he set himself down in what was by general consent the then wickedest district in Greater New York to see what could be done for the children.

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

There were few indeed in his neighborhood who were not familiar with every form of evil, drunkedness, vicious practices, thieving - even murder - indeed one of the prides of the boys who strayed into his settlement out of curiosity or looking for a chance for some new form of mischief was having seen a man killed - there was one boy who boasted of having been in at three killings!

What could Sanford Hearn do? He didn't know, but he had a profound faith that if you could awaken an interest in any healthy, decent thing - give a look in on a kind of life, not evil, you had taken your first step. He trapped them at the start and still continues to do so by a Saturday afternoon picture show - movies - a talk - an invitation to make yourself at home. They come to these shows by the hundreds - storming the gates - and always there are those who linger. The problem then is to find for these the point of interest always as varied as the child - always a personal task--what will hold each one.

I remember that J. Liberty Tadd, the interesting artist of Philadelphia, who believed in training <u>both</u> hands to equal skill, used regularly to find in his night manuel training classes for street urchins those that could not be interested in construction of any sort, but who would fall with enthusiasm on any destruction. So he kept all of the multitudes of carvings and buildings of his classes that "did not come off" and must be thrown away for these young destroyers to express themselves on.

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

To break and cut and maul a thing which somebody had made filled their savage young hearts with joy ~~at the start~~. But not for long. All about them boys and girls were making things - beautiful and useful things. Inevitably ~~before long~~ shame or envy ~~over~~ shall took them. They asked for work and from their ranks came some of his best pupils.

Such is Sanford Hearn's practice. To put a boy or girl where he'll find himself - with a little help - advice, which he must seek - no pressure - no hectoring - only friendleness - welcome - help when needed - let it soak in - let them do it.

And the results? Well, I've seen with my own eyes boy after boy who once stormed that settlement gate a raga-muffin, familiar with every vice and crime, come to manhood, clean, honest, active in business, a student in law and medicine.

Sanford Hearn puts his percentage of salvage high - ten out of twelve of some ~~youths~~ groups, he will tell you, but he'll stoutly add - "If not made over, they're all helped." It is like the Shriners' cripples - not entirely cured - still the better for the treatment.

All over the land men and women are in one or another way practicing this same wisdom and patience with the youth from crime centers and it is always intensive personal direct work that is demanded. A perverted mind is like a crippled limb - always a special case - which is a way of saying that there is a job somewhere for every one of us!

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

Nobody will deny that back of all efforts to bring to decency and right living the products of vice there must go continually a mighty effort to rid city and country of the sources that produce them. There is no apathy, no lack of impassioned determined efforts to do just this. We strive by laws, education, agencies of all sorts to make healthy-minded, as well as healthy-bodied communities in which to grow our children. We make tremendous mistakes. I believe myself we made a mistake when we undertook to distroy one of the greatest of all the enemies of the child - the abuse of hard liquor, by making it a crime to manufacture drink of any sort for sale. Children should grow up without ever seeing a saloon, a drunkard, a glass of whiskey, wine or beer. It hasn't turned out so. They see it at home now, learn to drink it there, often help make it - assist the bootlegger. Possibly we are learning that while natural appetites can be trained they cannot be denied.

But hard and distressing as the case is, there is no disposition to shrug our shoulders at it - say "so be it." Rather there is an increased determination to make a temperate country where a child shall understand the penalities of the abuse of any appetite. - shall be helped to self-control by choice.

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

We are saving children for their own sakes - but we are saving them also for the protection of the future - that better future we struggle to believe in and which we know will only be better if we can pass on from year to year fewer diseased and crippled, fewer crime-soaked and degenerate, more alert minds, trained hands, honest hearts, more lovers of truth and beauty. That's what we are after and must have to make that better world we talk so much about.

Every nation on earth today realizes, as we did in '76, that if the thing it is after is to survive and establish itself it must look to the children. That is where Russia is looking. Her children are being taught the communist philosophy and practice with the ardor and thoroughness of a religion.

Italy is staking the future of fascism on her children - they think fascism and nothing else. I have never seen the Russian child's acceptance of communism tested, but I have the Italians of Fascism and a more complete and practical conversion I have never encountered. Take the campaign against bad manners - inconsideration on the railroads, in public places that Mussolini ordered in 1923. Apparently every young Fascist considers himself authorized to see that its regulations are enforced. Umbrellas must not be laid on seats or tables in railroad stations, run the rules - or anywhere else, the zealous young Fascist concludes. Going into a restaurant of Siena in Palio time, I laid my umbrella - dry - on the table.

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

Immediately a handsome lad of twelve or so addressed me. With some difficulty I gathered that my umbrella must stand on the floor "by order of the government!"

They accept it, practice it, these boys and girls of Italy and like the young Russians are prepared to die for it. It is the method we followed in '76. It is what every nation setting out to preserve a revolution believes necessary. But with this devotion to one's own system goes insistance on the tyranny and stupidity of other systems. What can exceed the exaggeration and bitterness of Russia's teachings on capitalism - the contempt and intolerance of Italy's teachings on Democracy. But in neither case is it more intolerant than what this Nation taught from the start about all forms of monarchy, oligarchy.

And the result of such education? It certainly does not make for world peace to rear a child to dispise all systems but his own, instead of giving him a fair and well-informed idea of what each nation is trying to do and how it came about that it is what it is.

Mutual understanding, mutual tolerance and co-operation in their attitude towards other people, other nations - that is what a group of the world's greatest scholars, led by Albert Einstein himself, have set out to teach the children of the earth.

These men and women met last July in Geneva to consider what scholars might do to help insure peace in the future. Begin with the children - that's the most important thing in the world - Einstein told them. There's your true scientist, who sees the root

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

of things. He does not dwell on his own discoveries:- Relativity - Time - Space - a straight line - a curve. Not at all. He sees the real source of human regeneration - the child. How one likes this man, Einstein the more you hear of him. He smokes a pipe - he sails a boat - he plays a violin - and he recognizes the child in the scheme of human betterment.

It is an amazing army that has volunteered for the Childrens' Crusade - the Shriner with his red fez - great specialists - the W.C.T.U. and the Anti-saloon Society - county authorities - regiments of nurses and teachers - playground and camp workers - devoted missionaries like Hearn - the officers in the courts - the policeman on the beat - the top notch scholar of the world, Albert Einstein.

Each does what he sees to do - meets the immediate demand on him confident that somehow his work will find its place in the whole, each helps contribute to that most elementary and essential need - if the objective is reached - the increasing number of happy free intelligent homes.

I wonder sometimes, indeed, if the greatest result of all these manifold activities is not going to be better parents, a greater number of men and women more keen to give to their children what they by chance found in some settlement, camp, night school, for looking at it in any way you will nothing has yet been devised to approach in its effectiveness the Home for bringing the child into his own.

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.