

**SOCIAL WORK SERIES.
WHAT IS SOCIAL CASE
WORK? AN INTRODUCTORY
DESCRIPTION**

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Social Work Series. What Is Social Case Work? An Introductory Description by Mary E. Richmond

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S O C I A L W O R K S E R I E S

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AN INTRODUCTORY
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WHAT IS SOCIAL CASE WORK?

I

INTRODUCTION

THERE was real teaching in the world long before there was a science or art of teaching; there was social case work long before social workers began, not so many years ago, to formulate a few of its principles and methods. Almost as soon as human beings discovered that their relations to one another had ceased to be primitive and simple, they must have found among their fellows a few who had a special gift for smoothing out the tangles in such relations; they must have sought, however informally, the aid of these "straighteners," as Samuel Butler calls them. Some teachers have had this skill, occasionally ministers of religion have had it, and secular judges, and physicians; though at

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no time has it been the exclusive possession of these four professions or of any one of them.

A writer whose stories and tales are too little known says of one of her characters:

For the Doctor, in that age of medical darkness, had what is more useful even to his profession than a knowledge of medicine—a great knowledge of character; and was famous for his diagnosis of the maladies of the soul as well as of the body. He not only perceived, which was easy, from the look of Hodge's face and the trembling of his hands, the direction of Hodge's wages; but saw, though indeed only in a glass darkly, what few people saw at all in that day, the effect of mind on body; so that the little dressmaker, a meek, frightened thing, who had set up for herself in Basset . . . required, not physic and plasters, as she believed, but a start, and an order from Mrs. Latimer at the Manor. The very next afternoon, Dr. Richard wheezed up the Manor drive to see Pollie; obtained her word, which was as good as a bond, to assist Miss Fitten; and cured his patient.*

Even in our own day, the skill of the social case worker who is able to effect better adjustments between the individual and his environment seems to many of us—as reading and

* Tallentyre, S. G.: *Basset, A Village Chronicle*, p. 93. New York, Moffat, Yard and Co., 1912.

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writing seemed to Dogberry—to come by nature. To many, such case work is neighborliness and nothing more. There is a half truth in this neighborliness theory, for the good case worker must be both born and made, but its element of error is the failure to recognize how much is being done in social work to develop a native gift through training and specialized experience.

The difference of method and point of view as between neighbor and specialist is well illustrated in the *Life of Laura Bridgman*,* where Asa Tenney is the neighbor and Dr. Howe the teacher. Laura, it will be remembered, was the untrained blind and deaf child discovered in 1837 by the Boston philanthropist, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, who had founded Perkins Institution for the Blind. For the first time in the history of the deaf-blind, one of their number under his guidance was to learn through touch alone to read and write and use her mind and hands in a variety of occupations. Fortunately, Dr. Howe

* Howe, Maud, and Hall, Florence Howe: *Laura Bridgman, Dr. Howe's Famous Pupil and What He Taught Her*, p. 34. Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1903.

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had the scientific habit of mind; not only did he devise new ways of releasing an imprisoned spirit, but he kept accurate notes, made at the time, of his methods and results. Upon this foundation, as I shall presently show, others have been able to build.

I have said that the Bridgman family had a neighbor, an old man with a big, simple heart. When Laura was a little girl he used to take her for country walks, and taught her the difference between land and water by letting her feel the splash upon her cheek as she stood by the brookside and threw stones into it. At the time that Dr. Howe asked permission to give Laura systematic instruction, old Asa Tenney was one of those who "scouted the notion of anybody's being able to teach her more than he could. She knew him from anybody else, and she knew a cat from a dog, an apple from a stone, and he could teach her anything in the same way by which she had learned these things."

The world could ill afford to spare its Asa Tenneys. Affection and kindness unlock many doors, straighten out many complications. But

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when to affection and kindness we are able to add that knowledge of the workings of the human mind and that knowledge of social resources which Dr. Howe possessed, we have a new power in the world added to the older power of just loving one another.

In the year 1886 the parents of a deaf-blind child living in Tuscumbia, Alabama, applied to Perkins Institution for the Blind for a private instructor. Choice fell upon a former pupil of the institution, Anne Mansfield Sullivan,* who had been almost totally blind from early childhood but whose sight had become partially restored before her graduation from the institution. In her student days Miss Sullivan had lived in the same cottage with blind and deaf Laura Bridgman. In addition to her observations of this famous pupil and to her own studies at the school, she was able before going to Tuscumbia to devote a good deal of time, in preparation for her task, to the examination of Dr. Howe's original records and diaries. Thus Dr.

* Now Mrs. Macy.