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PUBLICATION DEPARTMENT
RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION

130 E. 22D STREET, NEW YORK CITY

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

WHAT IS SOCIAL CASE WORK?

AN INTRODUCTORY
DESCRIPTION

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NEW YORK
RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION
1922

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**Printed February, 1922, 2549 copies
Reprinted March, 1922, 3000 copies**

**WM. F. FELL CO. PRINTERS
PHILADELPHIA**



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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 brook-side 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.

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Howe's stone was cast—not like Laura's into a brook, but into shoreless waters upon which the circles continue to widen and widen.

The story of what followed has been told many times, but not from the angle from which, as an introduction to the subject of case work, I now propose to view it.

Helen Keller was six years and nine months old when Miss Sullivan came to Tuscumbia. Though her teacher did not keep a diary like Dr. Howe's, we have what for my present purpose serves even better. At almost weekly intervals during that first year Miss Sullivan wrote to a friend, the matron of Perkins Institution, giving her not so much the educational details of a task with which her correspondent was already familiar, but describing the new situations, many of them social, with which she found herself confronted, and adding the frankest possible report of her own mental processes in trying to meet these. So we have in the letters not only *what* happened but *how* it happened, and the teacher's own reactions as well as the pupil's.

On the educational side, some of Miss Sulli-

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van's methods anticipate those of the most advanced school of present-day teachers. On the social side, also, they represent at many points our modern social case work method of procedure, though under conditions that social work can seldom command. In 1903 Miss Keller, while a student at Radcliffe College, published *The Story of My Life*,* and Miss Sullivan's letters are given in Part III of that book. My readers will not be satisfied, I hope, to know anything less than all of these letters, together with the whole book of which they are a part. There could be no better introduction to social case work. In fact, certain incidents in the story are wonderful illustrations of what has been termed unconscious case work, and I shall try to describe a few of these incidents before giving examples of the conscious processes of professional case workers.

Helen had been an "eager, self-asserting" infant. At nineteen months an illness, described as "acute congestion of the stomach and brain,"

* Keller, Helen: *The Story of My Life*. New York, Doubleday, Page and Co.

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had left her deaf and blind. She was learning to talk before the attack, but very shortly "ceased to speak because she could not hear." Soon she began to tyrannize over everybody, "her mother, her father, the servants, the little darkies who play with her, and nobody," wrote Miss Sullivan, "had ever seriously disputed her will, except occasionally her brother James, until I came." The parents gave the new teacher entire charge of the little girl.

They have promised to let me have a free hand and help me as much as possible. . . . Of course, it is hard for them. I realize that it hurts to see their afflicted little child punished and made to do things against her will. Only a few hours after my talk with Captain and Mrs. Keller (and they had agreed to everything) Helen took a notion that she wouldn't use her napkin at table. I think she wanted to see what would happen. I attempted several times to put the napkin round her neck; but each time she tore it off and threw it on the floor and finally began to kick the table. I took her plate away and started to take her out of the room. Her father objected and said that no child of his should be deprived of his food on any account. (p. 313)*

* Page references throughout this summary are to passages in Miss Keller's *The Story of My Life*.

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Thus Miss Sullivan had the task of winning over more than one insurgent. This was in March. By the following Christmas she was able to write:

. . . It was evident that every one, especially Captain and Mrs. Keller, was deeply moved at the thought of the difference between this bright Christmas and the last, when their little girl had no conscious part in the Christmas festivities. As we came downstairs, Mrs. Keller said to me with tears in her eyes, "Miss Annie, I thank God every day of my life for sending you to us; but I never realized until this morning what a blessing you have been to us." Captain Keller took my hand, but could not speak. But his silence was more eloquent than words. My heart, too, was full of gratitude and solemn joy. (pp. 343-44)

How was this transformation effected? Cut off from the normal approaches to a child's heart, Miss Sullivan had very early had a frank talk with Mrs. Keller and suggested that Helen be separated from her family for a few weeks. There were "two essential things to teach her, obedience and love," and neither could be taught without a chance to pursue a consistent, uninterrupted policy. Accordingly, teacher and pupil were established in a little garden house near

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the former Keller home. At that time Helen "was unresponsive and even impatient of caresses from any one except her mother." In the new surroundings she "was greatly excited at first, and kicked and screamed herself into a sort of stupor. . . . When she felt me get into bed with her, she jumped out on the other side." (p. 310)

Captain Keller came every day, unknown to Helen, to see how his little daughter was progressing. He often found her crocheting a long red chain of Scotch wool or stringing beads on a sewing-card, and he remarked how quiet and contented she seemed. One day, during the two weeks of Helen's separation from her family, his dog, Belle, came too. The child recognized the dog's presence and, sitting down beside her, began to manipulate her claws. "We couldn't think for a second," writes Miss Sullivan, "what she was doing; but when we saw her make the letters 'd-o-l-l' on her own fingers, we knew that she was trying to teach Belle to spell." (p. 313) Helen's teacher had been spelling whole words into the child's hand without instructing her

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in the manual alphabet, and had associated this spelling with the corresponding objects.

Tempting as are the passages in Miss Sullivan's letters which describe her extensions and modifications of Dr. Howe's great educational discovery, the matter to which I must confine myself here is the use that she made of Helen's own world—not only of her immediate household but of the social occasions of the community, the animal life of the farm, and the beauty and variety of the whole countryside.

Laura Bridgman had not only been trained in an institution as a child, but had found in it her only satisfactory home as long as she lived, dying there in her sixtieth year. Helen Keller, on the contrary, was to become a citizen of the world. As every one knows, she was graduated from Radcliffe College, has written several books, is interested in the education of the deaf-blind, and has had the deep satisfaction of winning for them many better opportunities. Her social endeavors have not stopped here, however, but have been extended to the much larger group of all the blind, and she has also been an active