Letter from Marjorie to Barnum Brown, 4 May 1920

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My Pal, I find I’m to be stranded high and dry on July first, just as I was last year, though this time at least I’ll have no such impediments as Edna. My name will drop from the payroll then, and I have not, on the other hand, heard from Matthew. I seem to be destined to be a derelict – just a bit of wreckage amidst the flotsam and jetsam on the ocean of Life. I read the ads in the papers everyday but I never see a thing that appeals to me. College women are going into all lines of business with marked success but I can’t think of any that I’d care for. It seems so curious not to have a niche that is my own, just to be one of the misfits of this world. I have always so pitied the people who were holding down jobs that they hated and now I’ve jointed the group. But I won’t ever for very long stay at a thing which is distasteful; I’ll move on, and surely in time I’ll find the right thing. I like my present position better than any other I have had this past year but still I shall be quite glad to give it up by July first. At first it seemed to offer an inviting field to me but there are several serious draw backs.

I am, of course, dealing largely with the business end; it’s my job to run the office efficiently but I do come in contact with the children more or less and all the records of the cases pass through my hands. If I remained there very long one of two things would happen to me: either I’d acquire an official callousness and not take things to heart or I’d have all the sunshine taken out of life for me. As it is now my too susceptible heart is aching much of the time because of the misery that passes before my eyes. Seeing these little children who must suffer all their lives for the sins of their parents just breaks me all up, some of them I can’t get out of my thoughts for days. Pal, I just never knew that such awful things could be as I have learned of in the last few weeks. In the course of a professional career such as mine, one never comes in contact with the side of life I’m seeing now; one never realizes that there are thousands and thousands of children born into the world with all the odds against them, born of parents, one or both of whom are epileptic or insane or tubercular or drunkards or worst of all, sexually diseased. These children are indeed conceived in sin, born in darkness, reared in poverty, filth and pestilence and are destined to end in prisons, asylums, and hospitals. They are the most pitiful, forlorn little scraps of flesh in His likeness that could well be imagined.

People in thinking of the slums usually regard them as pretty bad places to live in because of the crowded conditions, poverty, etc. But they seldom think of the worst aspect and that is the absence of privacy and the effect that has upon the children. When families of six or eight live in two rooms and there are regular yearly additions to the families it is evident that there is not a single fact about sex that isn’t known to all the children however small. The results are too horrible to talk about – little girls of six or eight despoiled for life, mere babies robbed of every scrap of innocence, twelve and thirteen year old mothers of illegitimate children, and little boys aping the sins of their elders. It seems to me that a child cannot come out of the slums with any beauty of soul left to him; there is no childhood, no playtime, no period when life is beautiful and happy, for from the beginning it’s sordid, disillusioning, bitter, belligerent. Home offers no attractions to boy or girl, parents are unloving and without understanding, the children are underfed, unclothed, neglected.

My wrath is kindled against the parents who bring these children into the world by tens and dozens, but my heart goes out to the poor little kiddies who had no say in the matter of their birth. But I can’t understand this constant association with the ragged ends of life. I asked one of the other workers in the office if it didn’t affect her and she said she never thought of the children she examines as human beings, they were just “brains” to her and she was interested in the brain content of each child as measured by the number of psychological tests he could pass. She said the children never touched her sympathies. I guess that type of woman can succeed a whole lot better in the work than I could; perhaps it’s better to be emotionless but I can’t be that way. I’ve talked to other workers and they are all more or less “used” to things; the children are “cases,” just records in manila folders in a filing cabinet, not suffering bits of humanity.

(p. 4) I think I couldn’t be a social worker because I can’t acquire the official air, the stolid countenance, the cold, commandeering voice. Just because I’m dealing with poor people coming to a clinic, I cannot order them around like cattle. I greet a bare-headed woman from the slums with as cordial and welcoming a smile as I do a celebrity at an afternoon tea, and you’ve no idea how grateful those people are for a smile and a little human interest taken in them. And yet I only treat them as I’d wish to be treated if I were poor and were taking my child to a clinic. One of the great complaints made against all our city institutions is the coldness and the superciliousness of the officials. Maybe it’s because I’m new at the game that I feel as I do but I don’t believe I’d ever become cold and callous.

In spite of my sympathy with the individual children I am not in sympathy with the work in large measure. Miss Farrell’s idea is that these mental defectives should be trained for trades and it’s true that children who cannot go beyond the 2nd or 3rd grade at school can be taught manual occupations at which they can earn their living. But the trouble with all this work is that it doesn’t strike at the root of the evil. One gets nowhere. The other day I came across a case which is fairly typical: mother and father foreign-born, low grade, one mildly insane; family of six young children, three mental defectives, one so bad that he had to be committed to an institution. We were called on to aid the mother to expedite the commitment of the oldest child, the imbecile, because she was expecting another baby in a few weeks and needed the room at home. So the community at large must undertake the care of the imbecile while the mother goes on breeding more imbeciles for us to bring up, and all the charitable institutions pitch in to encourage these women, to make it easy for them to have children. When a baby is born, this breeder of imbeciles has a doctor’s care free, has a visiting nurse free, and even has a layette provided and milk sent in. But if a sane, healthy, normal woman in our station of life wants to have a child her husband has to pay dearly at every step – the community doesn’t make it easy for her or help her financially. If a mother in the slums were made to realize her responsibility in bringing a child into the world, if she had to go through childbirth without doctor or nurse, had to see her newborn child lie naked because she hadn’t provided clothes and had to see it die for lack of food, she’d think twice before she’d have a child next year. It would be spartan treatment but it would be Nature’s way of weeding out the unfit. Social workers spend their lives trying to go against natural laws and attempting to preserve those who should perish.

Another and even better way would be to close our gates tight to all immigrants for twenty-five years, for it’s the foreign born who fill our slums, our lunatic asylums, epileptic colonies, prisons, and hospitals. We get the scum from Italy than which nothing is worse. They have the lowest standard of living of any of the immigrants. Not long ago the case came up of a large family of Italians, living in wretched poverty in a four-room tenement for which they paid $20.00 a month. Their condition was pitiable in the extreme, no carpets, no bedding, hardly any dishes and only the cheapest of food, but their income was $160.00 a week! Saving up to go back to Italia and be rich – you get-a-de-idee?

If I work among immigrants much longer and continue to travel on the Second Avenue El, I shall become a snob. When I get on the train at night and stand as I nearly always do, and look through the car at the persons sitting I find that most of them are dirty Italians or Jews, not a one born in this country I could wager. It’s the Americans who hang on straps while the foreigners occupy the seats.

I’ve never been snobbish, nor have I boasted of my ancestors or even thought much about them till lately. But now I’m beginning to wonder to whom America does belong. This is the land where my fathers really did die, it’s the land my ancestors helped to build and now I have to look on while outsiders crowd me out. My grandfather served as mechanical engineer at Fort Sumpter in the Civil War. My great uncle fought in the Mexican War, my great grandfather in the War of 1812, and so on. My people for many generations (p. 5) have done their full share in the development of the country, a New England branch having gone in for farming, the Newark, N.J. branch for more than a century being engaged in manufacturing and business. My great uncle was one of the pioneers in California in the days of ’49 and one of our treasured family possessions is a box full of the letters he wrote to my grandmother when she was a little girl of twelve, vividly describing the life out West in those days. He made a fortune in gold-digging and was in a fair way to making the family one of the wealthiest in Newark when he died at sea on the way around the Horn. His partner wept crocodile tears and told my great-grandparents that all that they could hope to get would be a few of my great uncle’s personal possessions and trinkets. Well, California was a long way away in those days, and the person on the spot made good his claims at a pistol’s point, so the partner became immensely wealthy and his children formed a part of the moneyed aristocracy of Newark while our family got left. The watch chain I wear is made of the gold panned by that uncle and was originally a present from him to his sister (my grandmother).

My folks weren’t anything particular to boast of, just plain, stolid, middle class Americans, the kind of folks who owned their own home and the land around, who lived comfortably, had the best education they could get, and on the whole “lived like folks.” The house where my grandparents and great-grandparents lived is still standing in Newark, and it somehow makes one feel as though one belonged.