

THE PLAYGROUND AS A PHASE OF SOCIAL REFORM

PAPER OF MRS. HARRIET HICKOX HELLER

A small street lad was recently confined in a hospital pending his recovery from the glorious Fourth. Not far from his cot lay a pale girl about his own age. She had a badly burnt arm that refused to heal. He overheard the anxious little mother's talk with the doctor. The doctor said, "No, you will not do; it must be some one in more vigorous health, nearer her own age." The mother, wiping her eyes, replied, "There is no one, and no money to pay for such a service." Later the boy got the particulars as to the delicate operation known as skin-grafting. "Two pieces of skin as large as a silver quarter," the doctor said, "taken from the back of a vigorous person"—"Does freckles hurt?" the boy interrupted, "nor tan?" Assured that they were no impediment, he said sturdily, "She can have some of my hide, if it'll do any good. But I'm awful freckled and tanned, been swimming so much."

He was not to be dissuaded from the service. So together into the ghastly operating-room they went, Sir Freckles making one only regret that "there was no more swimming for that summer," lest the tell-tale scar betray the secret.

The surgeon was greatly interested. "Honest now, Freckles," he pleaded, "why did you do this thing? Do you like that little girl?" "Naw! Hate her same as all girls." "Well, then why? Tell me. It was really a very brave, manly act." "Oh, cut it!" exclaimed the disgusted boy. "I don't know why I done it. Just done it!"

Recently, a fine-looking young man left his team in the street, sprang over the fence, and rang hurriedly at the side door of an imposing residence. "I want the small boy who just came in here," he said, with perfect courtesy, albeit very earnestly. He was assured that there was not a boy on the place. But he had just seen one enter. It took a few moments to investigate and substantiate the statement. The cook said a small boy with a basket passed through the kitchen. She had thought it the child of the laundress. The laundress said that her child was at home. Meantime a little bare-legged boy, with a

basket on his arm, had gone out the rear gate, down the back alley, and an irate American citizen was relating how he, driving on the streets, in the pursuit of his business (delivery for wholesale grocers), had been the target for several eggs thrown by this aforesaid unknown boy. Convinced that the householder was not a party to the misdemeanor and that the boy was out of reach, he went his way, and if the emanating vibrations which surrounded him were not quite harmonious, who can blame?

Being interested in boys, not only *what* they do, but *why* they do it, I followed "the matter"—to get from the offender a repetition of the answer of the hero, "I don't know why I done it. Just done it."

For three years I have sat through the sessions of our Juvenile Court and heard this pathetic, ungrammatical confession through all degrees of abject contrition and sullen stubbornness. It is a true and significant statement.

In the boys' own phraseology, "it's up to us" to know the why if we wish to increase deeds of nobility and heroism and decrease those of an unsocial character.

In some part we do not know why he does it. We know, even those of us who cannot say "when I was a boy," that he is expressing a tremendous life force. The problem of worthily expressing a great surging life force is not a new one. Those of us who have won gray hair and deep lines in a continued effort to "stay to the track," or very frequently to get back upon it, have earned the right to call things by their real names and open the way for a worthy and safe issuance of great, good, bounding vitality.

You and I know that Joe, the boy who threw the eggs, was actuated by no malicious desire to annoy the driver. He would just as readily have made a target of a telegraph pole, if only the pole could have chased him. It was the game of it that attracted him! He just *had* to have a little contest, and come out ahead if possible. He had a long line of quite unheralded ancestors whose ambition had been made keen by constant "getting ahead". They conquered the frost, the heat, the wild animals, the stubborn soil! The solid rocks were vanquished to shelter them.

This lad had "the getting-ahead vibrations" in his blood. Of course, his mode of expression was very poor. "Oh, he was a bad boy!" you say. "He knew better." Granted, an external

application of old-fashioned strap-oil would not have interfered with Joe's development and might have improved his manners; but, do you know, you and I are guided in action not so much by what we *know* as by what we *feel*. He felt a great inclination for that game of "catch me if you can." It was a tremendous emotion. You may have never known one half so great, and it pleaded a great need—the need of the game, self-expression, fun!

Joe's frolics had been rare. Like the rest of us who have *honest* records, his family-tree showed some defects. Whisky ruined his father, and a little scrap of a mother washed five days in the week for six of them. (Oh, yes, they had some help. In winter sweet charity furnished rather poor coal and very poor oatmeal regularly.) Joe stayed home a good deal tending the baby, getting the meals, doing a good many things, pending the time when the little stoop-shouldered mother should come smiling home. For that's the way she almost always came home, and I have sometimes thought that it was because of the persistency of that smile that there was enough left in Joe to seek "a lark".

But who is to arrange that Joe shall get a joyous vent for his activity? Who but those of us who find that living, not existing, has so "ironed us out" that our problem is to get vim enough to carry the burdens onward as ideal and necessity render desirable. We crave the service of conserving the initiative, the flood of energy plus, against the hour of need; Joe's condition is not so great a menace as if he had ceased to struggle for normal fun.

One important function of this new social institution is an escape valve for pent-up energy. We sometimes hear the term "reversion of type". Each child is a reversion of type, is he not? A young barbarian, and amidst the tinsel and spangled frills of a highly wrought civilization, he finds small opportunity to give free scope to his power, thereby civilizing himself by primal conquest.

The playground, then, has an opportunity as a reversion-of-type institution. It is not an unbroken forest nor an undeveloped field, but primal forces may work out primitive victories there.

It is clearly economically and sociologically practical to afford the young the opportunity to travel gaily through the

stage that their elders, both in family and community, have ever found trying. It is certainly psychologically and pedagogically sound to supply means of free activity during the time of rapid physical development, to stimulate achievement by exhibitions of strength and skill, and give opportunity for wholesome, unstrained social relation with his peers at a time when the awakening nature is not only most sensitive, but is most occupied in forming those ideals which become permanent life standards.

We seem to have thought by building a stronger dam and deepening the stream-bed we could force practically the whole life-stream into the cañon of intellectual education. But the dam breaks—the stagnant water floods us! There is a scent of disaster brooding about! Delinquency has become a problem of sociology, and delinquents (after a rather intimate acquaintance with them for several years, I am prepared to give expert testimony), 98 per cent. of them, are, in popular newspaper phrase, “just kids”—“kids who ain’t had no chance”.

Give the whole boy, not just the boy intellectual, a normal experience, and you will find a normal boy. Very few delinquents have had that normal experience. What is a normal experience? Well, enough nourishing food, sufficient clean air and water, an honest father and virtuous mother, a place to play, a little appreciated service to be rendered, a little chance at learning; and if something must be pinched off short, the boy can spare the formal “learning,” for he is busy being educated every minute.

The best organized and most efficient institution whose privilege it is to supplement the homes, and in a measure supply the normal experience where the home is becoming too weak to function, is the public school. The ranks of the delinquent army are recruited from those thrown from the hopper of the public school mill. The children of more than normal energy and intellect, the slightly subnormal, the “born shorts,” the nervous, the general misfits of the system, offer conditions meet for the propagation of malignant social cultures. With Vassar’s president, I would plead for an adjustment, based upon the needs and ability of the child, rather than the extent of modern research and knowledge. And with contrition of spirit I beg to present the fact that the overpressure to force intellectual expression is a telling factor in producing delinquency.

“Lord, we thank thee for the blessing of a scarcity of brains,”

runs the couplet of a modern rhymster. It is pertinent thanksgiving! There is so little of us brains, and so much of us something else, that we are forced to consider the entire entity.

The playground to the rescue—to the rescue of the whole boy! We pedagogues are a good sort. We mean well, and while a little overdeliberate, taking ourselves too seriously, we are sincere and we may get an entirely new perspective of our end of the work from studying the child in the playground.

The adequate equipping of a reasonable number of playgrounds in our city would eliminate most of the misdemeanors arising from misdirected energy. This list is considerable, including the disturbing of venders, entrance of vacant houses, burglary, arson, street gambling, fighting, a fair share of neighborhood quarrels, certain thefts and gang work, and much general lawlessness. Let us cease to pride ourselves on being masters of *repression*, and become skilled in the art of expression. It is not enough to be without vices—let's attain virtues! A sufficient quantity of chloroform will, properly administered, make any boy good (?). We must learn to help him let the golden flood-tide loose, and still be good and do good!

This is the problem not only of every individual, but of every educational and sociological effort. The idea is revolutionizing the industrial and reformatory schools. It will reach the prisons. "Amusement" or, better yet, enjoyment, is stronger than vice and can strangle the lust of it.

But the constructive value of the playground is a second and greater element in its meaning as a factor in bettering social conditions. As soon as a boy has turned about three somersaults, one back handspring, and shouted as loud as he can,—in short, convinced himself that he is free,—he is ready to use his power to some purpose. Thus you bridle the winged steed and he becomes a happy and controlled worker. Through exercise he gets better muscles, through practice, greater skill. He gains perhaps some personal recognition, but is sure to gain a sense of pride in his team. He comes to recognize his responsibility for those younger and weaker, and to be responsible to those stronger or in authority. He is growing as an individual and as a citizen. He is not likely to begin this too early or continue progress too long. More and more is it becoming a delicate adjustment and serious consecration to be as good a citizen as the commonwealth needs.

In connection with our playground the self-governing organization of the boys and girls is known as the Juvenile City. It has been received among us with entire gravity and respect. Representatives of our city council and our mayor appear at all official functions of the playground, and each juvenile mayor has appeared before the city council of Omaha with business of his constituency, and has been given every attention and courtesy due to the head officer of a neighboring municipality. In response to the plea of the juvenile mayor this year, the council gave the first municipal support.

It is not an empty honor to be chosen to serve the juvenile public. It demands labor and sacrifice. The city electrician, a youth of twenty-one, has given all his Saturday half-holidays since identifying himself with the organization. It is his line of business, and he is efficient. The superintendent of grounds is a little younger, but is possessed of a pair of massive shoulders and a square jaw that render the most courteous requests effective.

These two boys, with their gang of fifty, calling themselves, from their favorite diversion, "the gallery gods," have this year for the first time become interested in the Juvenile City. They are valuable officers.

The newspapers give generous space to all Juvenile City items. Its elections are much advertised, its issues duly exploited, its officers' pictures adorn the public sheet.

Thus the busy city has paused to contemplate the normal joy and growth of the children, and the reactionary effect on the tense, rushing, struggling life has been felt. More grown-ups remember that pleasure is sane and relaxation vital; that not having, but being, is the real meaning of life.

The growing life of the child is not, cannot, be adequately expressed in play, at least in play that is only a physical and mental or spiritual creation. It also demands an expression in permanent form. This is, or approaches, work. (This subject was touched upon in last year's congress by Mr. S. T. Stewart, of New York City, who called this phase "the Kinderwelt.") If it is true that while the child's activity should under no condition receive the stamp of commercial value, it may at least have the recognition and dignity of service.

The playground may be the agency to produce the inspiration necessary to the solving of this need. This question of

something to do, for the half-grown, that he may be dignified by the sense of helping, and developed by the act of doing, is one of the questions before us.

The school garden reaches in this direction. The Detention School of Lancaster County, Nebraska, went into camp this summer near the Griswold Seed Farm. By the work of a few hours each day each boy earned his way and almost every one had something for himself. These straws point the rising wind. Will the future Juvenile City also be a juvenile commercial center?

The legitimate end of every playground is to become an all-year-round recreation center. Stories and moving pictures are already forming parts of our social evening. The natural development will be the popular lecture and the musicale, for music and its twin sister, rhythm, have no adequate recognition among us as joy bringers; then clubs, literary and political, or at least argumentative, and theatricals.

The most important of all these agencies is the theatrical. The young people who like to partake in dramatic work are usually persons of strong emotions and hence especially in need of high ideals, not so much of histrionic art, but of life; and under proper guidances a theatrical or dramatic club may in a high sense contribute to that worthy end. From such modest beginnings might grow a patronage for professional talent; a children's theater might come to be a playhouse where every word would be right, every play ennobling, and every actor worthy to be an acquaintance or possibly a friend. It would be worth living a hundred years to see so sane and powerful an agency at work.

For the theaters, which no one is really supposed to take seriously as a whole, are the greatest factor at work to-day in forming the social ideal. Not the grave, dignified drama, not the problem-play, nor Ibsen, not the high-priced places at all, but the cheap house and the vaudeville furnish the working basis for the youth in our cities.

A theological professor once thus addressed his class of students: "And now, my young friends, we are facing one of the gravest of problems; and now, my friends, having faced it, let us pass on." This is the usual procedure with reference to all delicate matters; but let us be eccentric and pause.

The playground's most vital and far-reaching service is in

forming a recreation center, a basis for social life; social life—the meeting of friends, men and boys, girls and women, young and old, but more particularly, to be quite frank, the meeting place for boys and girls, boys and girls who will in a short time be men and women. The dissolution of the homes of the masses tends to wipe out the proper, natural meeting-ground for young people. The poorer people, even in my own young western city, have no fit place for meeting and social enjoyment. (But oh, there are so many cheap, unfit ones!) Our society is based upon the theory that it is natural and proper for boys and girls, young men and women, to frankly respond to their interest in each other and enjoy themselves in each other's society. Poet, sage, philosopher, and cynic never tire of the theme of the subtle attraction. The man who loves his kind and the earnest devotee of religion are not less observant of this phase of life, and the children who frankly, the youth who shyly, seek without ceasing to learn its mystic secret, its ideal significance, are mainly left to guess it out unaided.

No more wholesome beginning can be conceived for social relations than the natural standard of the playground, that the body be a strong skilled tool for achieving. No better place to accept good standards and wholesome ways of pleasing; no better place to take instruction by inference, and perhaps the ways for definite and specific instruction will appear.

If the playground can put the much needed social training in reach of children whose opportunities are limited, this will be its greatest service. If it can give them opportunities to hear good music, and sing good songs, dance upon good floors, cultivate pleasing, kindly manners, imitate worthy examples, give heed to the high ideals of the novel and drama, in association of others of similar aim, it will be filling a great need felt in every community.

Based upon a close observation of Omaha's Juvenile City and a rather intimate acquaintance of what might be termed the frazzled edge of our social fabric, I believe the playground has come to function, not only as a vent for precious but barbaric energy; not only as a school for citizenship, perchance higher politics; not only as a laboratory where pedagogues may learn methods and economists read the signs of the times; not only even as the children's club and commercial center, but as a social dynamo gathering invisible, wasting force and transmuting it into vital, electrifying power that shall go thrilling and

throbbing to the remotest corners of the community, stirring to the achievement of better homes, better children, fuller and better lives, higher and more joyous living, which I take to be the most acceptable praise and glorification of God!

Owing to the lateness of the hour, the following paper by Professor Royal L. Melendy was not read.

THE PLAYGROUND FOR COUNTRY VILLAGES

PAPER OF PROF. ROYAL L. MELENDY

The significance of giving this subject a place on this program lies not in any material difference between the city playground and the village playground, or in any greater or less necessity for the playground in the country village, but in the fact that in popular consideration the playground in the country village is a separate, unique, and possibly unnecessary part of the playground movement. From the standpoint of social pathology, which was formerly given greater emphasis in playground literature than to-day, there are undoubtedly distinctly different reasons for the establishment of the playground in these two types of communities. These differences have been discussed earlier in the movement. I shall not, therefore, seek to restate the peculiar conditions and temptations that tend to accentuate badness in the bad boy or girl in country village or city slums, for the emphasis in the playground movement has happily shifted from social pathology to social education, from saving the bad boys and bad girls who, after all, are relatively few, to training the social instincts of the normal boy and girl, incidentally producing a wholesome effect on the so-called bad children.

This shifting of emphasis from the playground to the play director, from breathing spots to play schools, from philanthropic interest in the child without a playground to educational interest in the educational value of all play, is increasing the value of the movement and tending rapidly to its extension without reference to geography or industry. We now recognize