

### AMERICAN CHARACTERS

## MARTIN COUNEY

by Richard F. Snow

The edgy young man with the hatbox wanted to see Dr. Couney—a personal matter, he said. The doctor assumed he had something to sell and sent him away. The man took his hatbox and left to spend hours wandering amid the dancing elephants, scenic railways, and carnival din of Coney Island. At last he reappeared; could Dr. Couney see him now? This time Couney said yes. The man opened the hatbox. Inside was a premature baby, tiny and red and struggling for breath.

Dr. Martin A. Couney knew just what to do; in fact, he knew more about “preemies” than anyone else in the United States. He was the first American to offer specialized treatment for them and could boast, toward the end of his career, that out of 8,000 in his care, 6,500 survived. “I can’t save all the babies,” he said, “but the percentage of loss is not large, and every parent knows I took good care of his baby until God took its soul. I never had a complaint or an investigation.”

This last was all the more impressive because—as the somewhat incongruous straw hat in the picture suggests—Couney was a showman. He paid for the wet nurses and the incubators that kept his premature babies alive by showing them to the public at twenty-five-cents-a-head admission on the boardwalk at Coney Island.

Couney was born either in Alsace or Breslau, in 1870. According to Dr. William Silverman, a California pediatrician who has been investigating Couney’s career ever since he read his obituary in 1950, he took his medical degree in Leipzig. By the 1890’s he was in Paris, studying the pathology of prematurely born babies under the great expert in the field, Pierre Budin.

Couney’s extremely rarefied sideshow was born when Budin asked him to supervise a display of incubators at the 1896 Berlin world’s fair. The nascent showman stirring within him, Couney inveigled six premature babies from the staff of the Berlin charity hospital, put them on display in the machines, and named his exhibit “Kinderbrutanstalt.” The “child hatchery” was a terrific success, and Couney, who had hoped only to clear expenses, found himself on the way to raising enough money to come to America.

In the summer of 1898 the doctor turned up at the Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha with a roomful of incubators and infants to show in them. Three years later, after a stint at the 1900 Paris Exposition, he was in Buffalo, New York, for the Pan-American Exposition. His success there is hinted at by the ecstatic metaphysics the exhibit wrung from the newspaperman Arthur Brisbane, who compared Niagara Falls and its tributary rivers with “the diminutive baby in its hot-air chamber, sightless, deaf, feeble—but with the great human race, the vast sea of organized thought back of it. ... What is the power of the falls beside the force that may originate in the tiny brain of an incubator baby? ... That brain may start a work that will persist and affect man’s destiny when the falls shall have dwindled down to an even placid stream. ...”

In 1903 Couney settled in America for good and set up shop on Coney Island. For the next forty years on that gaudy stretch of beach, surrounded by the smell of cooking grease and the clatter of shooting galleries, he ran an elegant little hospital. Visitors stood before a gleaming bank of incubators while a lecturer explained how air, drawn in from the outside, passed through an elaborate filtering system and a heated coil into the chamber and then out the top; the baby enjoyed a complete change of atmosphere every five seconds and was attended by wet nurses who observed the strictest rules of hygiene. The system was the finest available; when Dr. Couney’s own wife, Annabel, bore their daughter prematurely, the infant spent the first three months of her life on exhibit.

If all was immaculate and efficient inside, Couney knew how to compete with the other ballyhoo out in front. Under a sign reading “All the World Loves a Baby,” Couney’s barkers harangued the crowd. One of them, Archibald Leach, liked the job enough to stay in show business under the name of Gary Grant. “Don’t pass the babies by!” Leach yelled, and thousands of people didn’t. Couney did a lot of repeat business: he noticed that women would pick out a favorite baby and come back weekly throughout the season to check its progress. One visitor showed up every week for thirty-five years.

Jealous of his reputation, Couney kept careful track of newspaper announcements of premature births, ever vigilant for what he called outrages. “There come stories out about babies weighing six ounces, nine ounces, God knows what, and the people who read them don’t want to look even at a baby that weighs two pounds. They

think it is a giant.”

The smallest baby Couney handled is reported to have weighed a pound and a half. At his exhibit at the 1933–34 Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago, he had at one time four infants weighing less than two pounds; all pulled through. Uncharacteristically he missed a major coup when, in the middle of the fair, the Dionne quintuplets were born in Canada. William Randolph Hearst offered to send Couney north, but the doctor refused. He said that he couldn't leave the thirty infants in his care; actually, he was certain the quintuplets wouldn't survive. Nevertheless, the fair was the high-water mark of his career. During it, 1,250,000 people visited the baby incubators. When the police arrested Sally Rand, whose show was next to Couney's on the midway, the fan dancer complained that the babies wore fewer clothes than she did, and nobody made a fuss about *them*.

Encouraged by his success in Chicago, Couney built a lavish pink pavilion for the 1939 New York World's Fair. For the first time, he lost money; the public had at last begun to tire of incubator babies. It was the same story back at Coney. “Thirty-five years ago I could do more business with 60,000 visitors than I can do with 500,000 now,” Couney complained in 1940. “Coney Island is so degraded now—even the hot dogs cost only a nickel—that people bargain to see my babies.” Couney had never taken money from the parents of a premature baby, and he refused to start now. But he did lower his admission price by a nickel. Nothing helped. He hung on for a few seasons on the boardwalk to keep up his standing as a showman, but attendance dwindled. When, in the mid-forties, Cornell's New York Hospital opened the first center for premature infant care in the city, Couney shut down his show forever. “I made propaganda for the preemie,” he said. “My work is done.”