

CHAPTER II

CONSCRIPTED MOTHERHOOD

Their poor old ravaged and stiffened faces their poor, old bodies dried up with ceaseless toil their patient souls made me weep They are our conscripts They are the venerable ones whom we should reverence All the mystery of womanhood seems incarnated in their ugly being—the Mothers' the Mothers' Ye are all one!

From the letters of William James

MOTHERHOOD which is not only the oldest but the most important profession in the world has received few of the benefits of civilization It is a curious fact that a civilization devoted to mother worship, that publicly professes a worship of mother and child, should close its eyes to the appalling waste of human life and human energy resulting from those dire consequences of leaving the whole problem of child bearing to chance and blind instinct It would be untrue to say that among the civilized nations of the world to day, the pro

profession of motherhood remains in a barbarous state. The bitter truth is that motherhood, among the larger part of our population does not rise to the level of the barbarous or the primitive. Conditions of life among the primitive tribes were rude enough and severe enough to prevent the unhealthy growth of sentimentality and to discourage the irresponsible production of defective children. Moreover there is ample evidence to indicate that even among the most primitive peoples the function of maternity was recognized as of primary and central importance to the community.

If we define civilization as increased and increasing responsibility based on vision and foresight, it becomes painfully evident that the profession of motherhood as practised to day is in no sense civilized. Educated people derive their ideas of maternity for the most part either from the experience of their own set or from visits to impressive hospitals where women of the upper classes receive the advantages of modern science and modern nursing. From these charming pictures they derive their complacent views of the beauty

30 PIVOT OF CIVILIZATION

of motherhood and their confidence for the future of the race. The other side of the picture is revealed only to the trained investigator to the patient and impartial observer who visits not merely one or two homes of the poor but makes detailed studies of town after town obtains the history of each mother and finally correlates and analyzes this evidence. Upon such a basis are we able to draw conclusions concerning this strange business of bringing children into the world.

Every year I receive thousands of letters from women in all parts of America, desperate appeals to aid them to extricate themselves from the trap of compulsory maternity. Lest I be accused of bias and exaggeration in drawing my conclusions from these painful human documents, I prefer to present a number of typical cases recorded in the reports of the United States government and in the evidence of trained and impartial investigators of social agencies more generally opposed to the doctrine of Birth Control than biased in favor of it.

A perusal of the reports on infant mortality in widely varying industrial centers of the

United States published during the past decade by the Children's Bureau of the United States Department of Labor, forces us to a realization of the immediate need of detailed statistics concerning the practice and results of uncontrolled breeding. Some such effort as this has been made by the Galton Laboratory of National Eugenics in Great Britain. The Children's Bureau reports only incidentally present this impressive evidence. They fail to coordinate it. While there is always the danger of drawing giant conclusions from pigmy premises here is overwhelming evidence concerning irresponsible parenthood that is ignored by governmental and social agencies.

I have chosen a small number of typical cases from these reports. Though drawn from widely varying sources they all emphasize the greatest crime of modern civilization—that of permitting motherhood to be left to blind chance, and to be mainly a function of the most abysmally ignorant and irresponsible classes of the community.

Here is a fairly typical case from Johnstown, Pennsylvania. A woman of thirty

32 PIVOT OF CIVILIZATION

eight years had undergone thirteen pregnancies in seventeen years. Of eleven live births and two premature stillbirths, only two children were alive at the time of the government agent's visit. The second to eighth, the eleventh and the thirteenth had died of bowel trouble, at ages ranging from three weeks to four months. The only cause of these deaths the mother could give was that 'food did not agree with them'. She confessed quite frankly that she believed in feeding babies and gave them everything anybody told her to give them. She began to give them at the age of one month, bread potatoes, egg, crackers, etc. For the last baby that died this mother had bought a goat and gave its milk to the baby, the goat got sick but the mother continued to give her baby its milk until the goat went dry. Moreover she directed the feeding of her daughter's baby until it died at the age of three months. On account of the many children she had had the neighbors consider her an authority on baby care.'

Lest this case be considered too tragically ridiculous to be accepted as typical the reader may verify it with an almost interminable

list of similar cases ¹ Parental irresponsibility is significantly illustrated in another case

A mother who had four live births and two stillbirths in twelve years lost all of her babies during their first year. She was so anxious that at least one child should live that she consulted a physician concerning the care of the last one. Upon his advice to quote the government report she gave up her twenty boarders immediately after the child's birth and devoted all her time to it. Thinks she did not stop her hard work soon enough, says she has always worked too hard keeping boarders in this country and cutting wood and carrying it and water on her back in the old country. Also says the carrying of water and cases of beer in this country is a great strain on her. But the illuminating point in this case is that the father was furious because all the babies died. To show his disrespect for the wife who could only give birth to babies that died, he wore a red necktie to the funeral of the last. Yet this woman, the government agent reports, would follow and profit by any instruction that might be given her.

¹ U. S. Department of Labor, Children's Bureau, Infant Mortality Series No. 3, pp. 81, 82, 83, 84.

34 PIVOT OF CIVILIZATION

It is true that the cases reported from Johnstown Pennsylvania, do not represent completely Americanized families This lack does not prevent them however by their unceasing fertility from producing the Americans of to morrow Of the more immediate conditions surrounding child birth, we are presented with this evidence, given by one woman concerning the birth of her last child

On five o'clock on Wednesday evening she went to her sister's house to return a wash board, after finishing a day's washing The baby was born while she was there Her sister was too young to aid her in any way She was not accustomed to a midwife she confessed She cut the cord herself, washed the new born baby at her sister's house, walked home cooked supper for her boarders and went to bed by eight o'clock The next day she got up and ironed This tired her out, she said so she stayed in bed for two whole days She milked cows the day after the birth of the baby and sold the milk as well Later in the week, when she became tired she hired some one to do that portion of her work This

woman, we are further informed kept cows, chickens, and lodgers, and earned additional money by doing laundry and charwork. At times her husband deserted her. His earnings amounted to \$1.70 a day while a fifteen year old son earned \$1.10 in a coal mine.

One searches in vain for some picture of sacred motherhood as depicted in popular plays and motion pictures something more normal and encouraging. Then one comes to the bitter realization that these in very truth are the normal cases not the exceptions. The exceptions are apt to indicate instead the close relationship of this irresponsible and chance parenthood to the great social problems of feeble mindedness, crime and syphilis.

Nor is this type of motherhood confined to newly arrived immigrant mothers, as a government report from Akron, Ohio sufficiently indicates. In this city the government agents discovered that more than five hundred mothers were ignorant of the accepted principles of infant feeding, or, if familiar with them, did not practise them. This ignorance or indifference was not confined to foreign born mothers. A native mother reported that

she gave her two weeks old baby ice cream, and that before his sixth month he was sitting at the table eating everything This was in a town in which there were comparatively few cases of extreme poverty

The degradation of motherhood, the damnation of the next generation before it is born, is exposed in all its catastrophic misery, in the reports of the National Consumers League In her report of living conditions among night working mothers in thirty nine textile mills in Rhode Island based on exhaustive studies, Mrs Florence Kelley describes the normal' life of these women

When the worker cruelly tired from ten hours work, comes home in the early morning she usually scrambles together breakfast for the family Eating little or nothing herself and that hastily she tumbles into bed—not the immaculate bed in an airy bed room with dark shades, but one still warm from its night occupants, in a stuffy little bed room darkened imperfectly if at all After sleeping exhaust edly for an hour perhaps she bestirs herself to get the children off to school, or care for insistent little ones, too young to appreciate

that mother is tired out and must sleep Perhaps later in the forenoon she again drops into a fitful sleep, or she may have to wait until after dinner There is the midday meal to get, and, if her husband cannot come home his dinner pail to pack with a hot lunch to be sent or carried to him If he is not at home the lunch is rather a makeshift The midday meal is scarcely over before supper must be thought of This has to be eaten hurriedly before the family are ready for the mother must be in the mill at work, by 6, 6 30 or 7 P M Many women in their inadequate English, summed up their daily routine by Oh me all time tired *Too much work too much baby too little sleep!*

Only sixteen of the 166 married women were without children thirty two had three or more, twenty had children one year old or under There were 160 children under school age below six years, and 246 of school age

A woman in ordinary circumstances adds this impartial investigator with a husband and three children if she does her own work, feels that her hands are full How these mill workers, many of them frail look-

38 PIVOT OF CIVILIZATION

ing and many with confessedly poor health can ever do two jobs is a mystery when they are seen in their homes dragging about pale hollow eyed and listless often needlessly sharp and impatient with the children. These children are not only not mothered never cherished they are nagged and buffeted. The mothers are not superwomen and like all human beings they have a certain amount of strength and when that breaks their nerves suffer.

We are presented with a vivid picture of one of these slave mothers a woman of thirty eight who looks at least fifty with her worn, furrowed face. Asked why she had been working at night for the past two years, she pointed to a six months old baby she was carrying, to the five small children swarming about her and answered ironically, 'Too much children!' She volunteered the information that there had been two more who had died. When asked why they had died the poor mother shrugged her shoulders listlessly and replied 'Don't know'. In addition to bearing and rearing these children her work would sap the vitality of any ordinary person.

' She got home soon after four in the morning cooked breakfast for the family and ate hastily herself At 4 30 she was in bed staying there until eight But part of that time was disturbed for the children were noisy and the apartment was a tiny, dingy place in a basement At eight she started the three oldest boys to school and cleaned up the debris of breakfast and of supper the night before At twelve she carried a hot lunch to her husband and had dinner ready for the three school children In the afternoon there were again dishes and cooking, and caring for three babies aged five three years, and six months At five, supper was ready for the family The mother ate by herself and was off to work at 5 45

Another of the night working mothers was a frail looking Frenchwoman of twenty seven years with a husband and five children ranging from eight years to fourteen months Three other children had died When visited, she was doing a huge washing She was forced into night work to meet the expenses of the family She estimated that she succeeded in getting five hours sleep during the day ' I

40 PIVOT OF CIVILIZATION

take my baby to bed with me but he cries, and my little four year old boy cries, too and comes in to make me get up, so you can't call that a very good sleep

The problem among unmarried women or those without family is not the same this investigator points out They sleep longer by day than they normally would by night We are also informed that pregnant women work at night in the mills sometimes up to the very hour of delivery It's queer' exclaimed a woman supervisor of one of the Rhode Island mills but some women both on the day and the night shift will stick to their work right up to the last minute and will use every means to deceive you about their condition I go around and talk to them but make little impression We have had several narrow escapes A Polish mother with five children had worked in a mill by day or by night ever since her marriage stopping only to have her babies One little girl had died several years ago and the youngest child says Mrs Kelley did not look promising It had none of the charm of babyhood, its body and cloth-

ing were filthy, and its lower lip and chin covered with repulsive black sores

It should be remembered that the Consumers League, which publishes these reports on women in industry is not advocating Birth Control education, but is aiming to awaken responsibility for conditions under which goods are produced and through investigation, education and legislation to mobilize public opinion in behalf of enlightened standards for workers and honest products for all ' Nevertheless, in Miss Agnes de Lima's report of conditions in Passaic New Jersey, we find the same tale of penalized, prostrate motherhood bearing the crushing burden of economic injustice and cruelty the same blind but overpowering instincts of love and hunger driving young women into the factories to work night in and night out, to support their procession of uncared for and undernourished babies It is the married women with young children who work on the inferno like shifts They are driven to it by the low wages of their husbands They choose night work in order to be with their children in the daytime They are afraid

42 PIVOT OF CIVILIZATION

of the neglect and ill treatment the children might receive at the hands of paid caretakers. Thus they condemn themselves to eighteen or twenty hours of daily toil. Surely no mother with three, four, five or six children can secure much rest by day.

Take almost any house—we read in the report of conditions in New Jersey— knock at almost any door and you will find a weary, touselled woman, half dressed doing her housework or trying to snatch an hour or two of sleep after her long night of work in the mill.

The facts are there for any one to see the hopeless and exhausted woman, her cluttered three or four rooms the swarm of sickly and neglected children.

These women claimed that night work was unavoidable as their husbands received so little pay. This in spite of all our vaunted high wages. Only three women were found who went into the drudgery of night work without being obliged to do so. Two had no children, and their husbands' earnings were sufficient for their needs. One of these was saving for a trip to Europe and chose the night shift because she found it less strenuous than the

day Only four of the hundred women reported upon were unmarried and ninety two of the married women had children Of the four childless married women one had lost two children, and another was recovering from a recent miscarriage There were five widows The average number of children was three in a family Thirty nine of the mothers had four or more Three of them had six children and six of them had seven children apiece These women ranged between the ages of twenty five and forty and more than half the children were less than seven years of age Most of them had babies of one, two and three years of age

At the risk of repetition, we quote one of the typical cases reported by Miss De Lima with features practically identical with the individual cases reported from Rhode Island It is of a mother who comes home from work at 5 30 every morning falls on the bed from exhaustion, arises again at eight or nine o'clock to see that the older children are sent off to school A son of five like the rest of the children, is on a diet of coffee,—milk costs too much After the children have left for school,

44 PIVOT OF CIVILIZATION

the overworked mother again tries to sleep, though the small son bothers her a great deal Besides, she must clean the house wash, iron, mend, sew and prepare the midday meal She tries to snatch a little sleep in the afternoon but explains 'When you got big family, all time work Night time in mill drag so long, so long, day time in home go so quick' By five, this mother must get the family's supper ready and dress for the night's work, which begins at seven The investigator further reports 'The next day was a holiday and for a diversion Mrs N thought she would go up to the cemetery I got some children up there, she explained, 'and same time I get some air No, I don't go nowhere's just to the mill and then home

Here again as in all reports on women in industry, we find the prevalence of pregnant women working on night shifts, often to the very day of their delivery Oh yes, plenty women big bellies, work in the night time one of the toiling mothers volunteered 'Shame they go but what can do?' The abuse was general Many mothers confessed that owing to poverty they themselves worked up

to the last week or even day before the birth of their children. Births were even reported in one of the mills during the night shift. A foreman told of permitting a night working woman to leave at 6 30 one morning and of the birth of her baby at 7 30. Several women told of leaving the day shift because of pregnancy and of securing places on the night shift where their condition was less conspicuous, and the bosses more tolerant. One mother defended her right to stay at work, says the report, claiming that as long as she could do her work, it was nobody's business. In a doorway sat a sickly and bloodless woman in an advanced stage of pregnancy. Her first baby had died of general debility. She had worked at night in the mill until the very day of its birth. This time the boss had told her she could stay if she wished but reminded her of what had happened last time. So she had stopped work, as the baby was expected any day.

Again and again we read the same story which varies only in detail: the mother in the three black rooms, the sagging porch overflowing with pale and sickly children, the over

46 PIVOT OF CIVILIZATION

worked mother of seven still nursing her youngest, who is two or three months old Worn and haggard, with a skeleton like child pulling at her breast, the woman tries to make the investigator understand The grandmother helps to interpret She never sleeps explains the old woman, how can she with so many children? She works up to the last moment before her baby comes and returns to work as soon as they are four weeks old

Another apartment in the same house another of those night working mothers, who had just stopped because she is pregnant The boss had kindly given her permission to stay on but she found the reaching on the heavy spinning machines too hard Three children, ranging in age from five to twelve years, are all sickly and forlorn and must be cared for There is a tubercular husband who is unable to work steadily, and is able to bring in only \$12 a week Two of the babies had died one because the mother had returned to work too soon after its birth and had lost her milk She had fed him tea and bread so he died

The most heartrending feature of it all—in

these homes of the mothers who work at night—is the expression in the faces of the children, children of chance, dressed in rags undernourished underclothed, all predisposed to the ravages of chronic and epidemic disease

The reports on infant mortality published under the direction of the Children's Bureau substantiate for the United States of America the findings of the Galton Laboratory for Great Britain showing that an abnormally high rate of fertility is usually associated with poverty filth disease feeble-mindedness and a high infant mortality rate. It is a common place truism that a high birth rate is accompanied by a high infant mortality rate. No longer is it necessary to dissociate cause and effect, to try to determine whether the high birth rate is the cause of the high infant mortality rate. It is sufficient to know that they are organically correlated along with other anti-social factors detrimental to individual national and racial welfare. The figures presented by Hibbs² likewise reveal a much

Henry H. Hibbs Jr. *Infant Mortality Its Relation to Social and Industrial Conditions* p. 39. Russell Sage Foundation New York 1916

48 PIVOT OF CIVILIZATION

higher infant mortality rate for the later born children of large families

The statistics which show that the greatest number of children are born to parents whose earnings are the lowest,³ that the direst poverty is associated with uncontrolled fecundity emphasize the character of the parent hood we are depending upon to create the race of the future

A distinguished American opponent of Birth Control some years ago spoke of the racial value of this high infant mortality rate among the unfit He forgot, however, that the survival rate of the children born of these overworked and fatigued mothers may nevertheless be large enough aided and abetted by philanthropies and charities, to form the greater part of the population of to morrow As Dr Karl Pearson has stated Degenerate stocks under present social conditions are not short lived they live to have more than the normal size of family

Reports of charitable organizations the famous one hundred neediest cases presented

³ Cf U S Department of Labor Children s Bureau Infant Mortality Series No 11 p 36

every year by the New York *Times* to arouse the sentimental generosity of its readers statistics of public and private hospitals charities and corrections analyses of pauperism in town and country—all tell the same tale of uncontrolled and irresponsible fecundity The facts the figures the appalling truth are there for all to read It is only in the remedy proposed the effective solution that investigators and students of the problem disagree

Confronted with the startling and disgraceful conditions of affairs indicated by the fact that a quarter of a million babies die every year in the United States before they are one year old and that no less than 23 000 women die in childbirth, a large number of experts and enthusiasts have placed their hopes in maternity benefit measures

Such measures sharply illustrate the superficial and fragmentary manner in which the whole problem of motherhood is studied to day It seeks a *laissez faire* policy of parent hood or marriage with an indiscriminating paternalism concerning maternity It is as though the Government were to say Increase and multiply we shall assume the responsi

bility of keeping your babies alive Even granting that the administration of these measures might be made effective and effectual, which is more than doubtful we see that they are based upon a complete ignorance or disregard of the most important fact in the situation—that of indiscriminate and irresponsible fecundity They tacitly assume that all parenthood is desirable, that all children should be born and that infant mortality can be controlled by external aid In the great world problem of creating the men and women of to morrow it is not merely a question of sustaining the lives of all children irrespective of their hereditary and physical qualities to the point where they in turn may reproduce their kind Advocates of Birth Control offer and accept no such superficial solution This philosophy is based upon a clearer vision and a more profound comprehension of human life Of immediate relief for the crushed and enslaved motherhood of the world through State aid no better criticism has been made than that of Havelock Ellis

To the theoretical philanthropist eager to reform the world on paper, nothing seems

simpler than to cure the present evils of child rearing by setting up State nurseries which are at once to relieve mothers of everything connected with the men of the future beyond the pleasure—if such it happens to be—of conceiving them, and the trouble of bearing them and at the same time to rear them up independently of the home in a wholesome, economical and scientific manner. Nothing seems simpler, but from the fundamental psychological point of view nothing is fals^er.

A State which admits that the individuals composing it are incompetent to perform their most sacred and intimate functions, and takes it upon itself to perform them itself instead attempts a task that would be undesirable even if it were possible of achievement.⁴ It may be replied that maternity benefit measures aim merely to aid mothers more adequately to fulfil their biological and social functions. But from the point of view of Birth Control that will never be possible until the crushing exigencies of overcrowding are removed—overcrowding of pregnancies as well as of homes. As long as the mother remains

⁴ Havelock Ellis *Sex in Relation to Society* p. 31

52 PIVOT OF CIVILIZATION

the passive victim of blind instinct instead of the conscious responsible instrument of the life force controlling and directing its expression, there can be no solution to the intricate and complex problems that confront the whole world to day. This is, of course, impossible as long as women are driven into the factories on night as well as day shifts as long as children and girls and young women are driven into industries to labor that is physically deteriorating as a preparation for the supreme function of maternity.

The philosophy of Birth Control insists that motherhood no less than any other human function must undergo scientific study, must be voluntarily directed and controlled with intelligence and foresight. As long as we countenance what H. G. Wells has well termed the monstrous absurdity of women discharging their supreme social function bearing and rearing children in their spare time, as it were, while they earn their living by contributing some half mechanical element to some trivial industrial product any attempt to furnish 'maternal education' is bound to fall on stony ground.

Children brought into the world as the chance consequences of the blind play of uncontrolled instinct, become likewise the helpless victims of their environment. It is because children are cheaply conceived that the infant mortality rate is high. But the greatest evil perhaps the greatest crime of our so called civilization to day is not to be gauged by the infant mortality rate. In truth unfortunate babies who depart during their first twelve months are more fortunate in many respects than those who survive to undergo punishment for their parents' cruel ignorance and complacent fecundity. If motherhood is wasted under the present regime of glorious fertility childhood is not merely wasted but actually destroyed. Let us look at this matter from the point of view of the children who survive