

CHAPTER III

CHILDREN TROOP DOWN FROM HEAVEN

FAILURE of emotional, sentimental and so called idealistic efforts based on hysterical enthusiasm to improve social conditions, is nowhere better exemplified than in the undervaluation of child life. A few years ago the scandal of children under fourteen working in cotton mills was exposed. There was much raving and agitation. A wave of moral indignation swept over America. There arose a loud cry for immediate action. Then, having more or less successfully settled this particular matter the American people heaved a sigh of relief, settled back and complacently congratulated itself that the problem of child labor had been settled once and for all.

Conditions are worse to day than before. Not only is there child labor in practically every State in the Union but we are now forced to realize the evils that result from child

labor, of child laborers now grown into manhood and womanhood. But we wish here to point out a neglected aspect of this problem. Child labor shows us how cheaply we value childhood. And moreover it shows us that cheap childhood is the inevitable result of chance parenthood. Child labor is organically bound up with the problem of uncontrolled breeding and the large family.

The selective draft of 1917—which was designed to choose for military service only those fulfilling definite requirements of physical and mental fitness—showed some of the results of child labor. It established the fact that the majority of American children never got beyond the sixth grade because they were forced to leave school at that time. Our overadvertised compulsory education does not compel—and does not educate. The selective draft, it is our duty to emphasize this fact, revealed that 38 per cent of the young men (more than a million) were rejected because of physical ill health and defects. And 25 per cent were illiterate.

These young men were the children of yesterday. Authorities tell us that 75 per

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cent of the school children are defective This means that no less than fifteen million school children out of 22,000 000 in the United States, are physically or mentally below par

This is the soil in which all sorts of serious evils strike root It is a truism that children are the chief asset of a nation Yet while the United States government allotted 92 8 per cent of its appropriations for 1920 toward war expenses three per cent to public works 3 2 per cent to primary governmental functions, no more than one per cent is appropriated to education research and development Of this one per cent only a small proportion is devoted to public health The conservation of childhood is a minor consideration While three cents is spent for the more or less doubtful protection of women and children fifty cents is given to the Bureau of Animal Industry for the protection of domestic animals In 1919, the State of Kansas appropriated \$25 000 to protect the health of pigs and \$4 000 to protect the health of children In four years our Federal Government appropriated—roughly speaking—\$81,000,000

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for the improvement of rivers, \$13 000 000 for forest conservation \$8 000 000 for the experimental plant industry \$7 000,000 for the experimental animal industry \$4 000 000 to combat the foot and mouth disease and less than half a million for the protection of child life

Competent authorities tell us that no less than 75 per cent of American children leave school between the ages of fourteen and sixteen to go to work This number is increasing According to the recently published report on The Administration of the First Child Labor Law, in five states in which it was necessary for the Children's Bureau to handle directly the working certificates of children, one fifth of the 25 000 children who applied for certificates left school when they were in the fourth grade, nearly a tenth of them had never attended school at all or had not gone beyond the first grade and only one twenty fifth had gone as far as the eighth grade But their educational equipment was even more limited than the grade they attended would indicate Of the children applying to go to work 1,803 had not advanced further than the first

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grade even when they had gone to school at all, 3 379 could not even sign their own names legibly and nearly 2 000 of them could not write at all. The report brings automatically into view the vicious circle of child labor, illiteracy, bodily and mental defect, poverty and delinquency. And like all reports on child labor the large family and reckless breeding looms large in the background as one of the chief factors in the problem.

Despite all our boasting of the American public school, of the equal opportunity afforded to every child in America we have the shortest school term, and the shortest school day of any of the civilized countries. In the United States of America, there are 106 illiterates to every thousand people. In England there are 58 per thousand, Sweden and Norway have one per thousand.

The United States is the most illiterate country in the world—that is of the so called civilized countries. Of the 5,000 000 illiterates in the United States 58 per cent are white and 28 per cent native whites. Illiteracy not only is the index of inequality of opportunity. It speaks as well a lack of considera

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tion for the children. It means either that children have been forced out of school to go to work, or that they are mentally and physically defective.¹

One is tempted to ask why a society, which has failed so lamentably to protect the already existing child life upon which its very perpetuation depends, takes upon itself the reckless encouragement of indiscriminate procreation. The United States Government has recently inaugurated a policy of restricting immigration from foreign countries. Until it is able to protect childhood from criminal exploitation until it has made possible a reasonable hope of life, liberty and growth for American children, it should likewise recognize the wisdom of voluntary restriction in the production of children.

Reports on child labor published by the National Child Labor Committee only incidentally reveal the correlation of this evil with that of large families. Yet this is evident throughout. The investigators are more bent upon regarding child labor as a cause of illiteracy

¹ I am indebted to the National Child Labor Committee for these statistics as well as for many of the facts that follow.

But it is no less a consequence of irresponsibility in breeding. A sinister aspect of this is revealed by Theresa Wolfson's study of child labor in the beet fields of Michigan.² As one weeder put it: "Poor man make no money, make plenty children—plenty children good for sugar beet business." Further illuminating details are given by Miss Wolfson.

Why did they come to the beet fields? Most frequently families with large numbers of children said that they felt that the city was no place to raise children—things too expensive and children ran wild—in the country all the children could work. Living conditions are abominable and unspeakably wretched. An old woodshed, a long abandoned barn and occasionally a tottering, ramshackle farmer's house are the common types. One family of eleven, the youngest child two years, the oldest sixteen years lived in an old country store which had but one window. The wind and rain came through the holes in the walls, the ceiling was very low and the smoke from the stove

² People Who Go to Beets. Pamphlet No. 299. National Child Labor Committee.

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filled the room Here the family ate, slept, cooked and washed

In Tuscola County a family of six was found living in a one room shack with no windows Light and ventilation was secured through the open doors Little Charles eight years of age, was left at home to take care of Dan Annie and Pete whose ages were five years, four years, and three months, respectively In addition, he cooked the noonday meal and brought it to his parents in the field The filth and choking odors of the shack made it almost unbearable, yet the baby was sleeping in a heap of rags piled up in a corner

Social philosophers of a certain school advocate the return to the land—it is only in the overcrowded city they claim, that the evils resulting from the large family are possible There is according to this philosophy no overcrowding no over population in the country where in the open air and sunlight every child has an opportunity for health and growth This idyllic conception of American country life does not correspond with the picture presented by this investigator who points out

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To promote the physical and mental development of the child we forbid his employment in factories shops and stores On the other hand we are prone to believe that the right kind of farm work is healthful and the best thing for children But for a child to crawl along the ground, weeding beets in the hot sun for fourteen hours a day—the average workday—is far from being the best thing The law of compensation is bound to work in some way, and the immediate result of this agricultural work is interference with school attendance

How closely related this form of child slavery is to the over large family, is definitely illustrated In the one hundred and thirty three families visited there were six hundred children A conversation held with a Roshian German woman is indicative of the size of most of the families

How many children have you? inquired the investigator

Eight—Julius, und Rose und Martha dey is mine Gottlieb und Philip, und Frieda, dey is my husband s —und Otto und Charlie—dey are ours '

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Families with ten and twelve children were frequently found while those of six and eight children are the general rule. The advantage of a large family in the beet fields is that it does the most work. In the one hundred thirty three families interviewed, there were one hundred eighty six children under the age of six years, ranging from eight weeks up thirty six children between the ages of six and eight approximately twenty five of whom had never been to school, and eleven over sixteen years of age who had never been to school. One ten year old boy had never been to school because he was a mental defective one child of nine was practically blinded by cataracts. This child was found groping his way down the beet rows pulling out weeds and feeling for the beet plants—in the glare of the sun he had lost all sense of light and dark. Of the three hundred and forty children who were not going or had never gone to school only four had reached the point of graduation and only one had gone to high school. These large families migrated to the beet fields in early spring. Seventy two per cent of them are retarded. When we realize that feeble mindedness is ar-

rested development and retardation, we see that these beet children are artificially retarded in their growth, and that the tendency is to reduce their intelligence to the level of the congenital imbecile

Nor must it be concluded that these large beet families are always the ignorant foreigner' so despised by our respectable press. The following case throws some light on this matter, reported in the same pamphlet 'An American family considered a prize by the agent because of the fact that there were nine children, turned out to be a flunk. They could not work in the beet fields they ran up a bill at the country store, and one day the father and the eldest son a boy of nineteen, were seen running through the railroad station to catch an out going train. The grocer thought they were jumping their bill. He telephoned ahead to the sheriff of the next town. They were taken off the train by the sheriff and given the option of going back to the farm or staying in jail. They preferred to stay in jail and remained there for two weeks. Meanwhile the mother and her eight children, ranging in ages from seventeen years

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to nine months, had to manage the best way they could. At the end of two weeks father and son were set free. During all of this period the farmers of the community sent in provisions to keep the wife and children from starving.' Does this case not sum up in a nut shell the typical American intelligence confronted with the problem of the too large family—industrial slavery tempered with sentimentality!

Let us turn to a young, possibly a more progressive state. Consider the case of California, the Golden as it is named by Emma Duke in her study of child labor in the Imperial Valley as fertile as the Valley of the Nile.³ Here cotton is king, and rich ranchers absentee landlords and others exploit it. Less than ten years ago ranchers would bring in hordes of laboring families but refuse to assume any responsibility in housing them, merely permitting them to sleep on the grounds of the ranch. Conditions have been somewhat improved, but, sometimes, we read a one roomed straw house with an area of fif-

³ California the Golden by Emma Duke Reprinted from *The American Child* Vol. II No 3 November 1920

teen by twenty feet will serve as a home for an entire family, which not only cooks but sleeps in the same room. Here, as in Michigan among the beets children are thick as bees. All kinds of children pick, Miss Duke reports, even those as young as three years! Five year old children pick steadily all day. Many white American children are among them—pure American stock who have gradually moved from the Carolinas, Tennessee and other southern states to Arkansas Texas Oklahoma Arizona and on into the Imperial Valley. Some of these children it seems wanted to attend school, but their fathers did not want to work so the children were forced to become bread winners. One man whose children were working with him in the fields said, Please, lady don't send them to school, let them pick a while longer. I ain't got my new auto paid for yet. The native white American mother of children working in the fields proudly remarked No they ain't never been to school, nor me nor their poppy nor their granddads and grandmoms. We've always been pickers! —and she spat her tobacco over the field in expert fashion.

“In the Valley one hears from townspeople, writes the investigator that pickers make ten dollars a day working the whole family With that qualification, the statement is ambiguous One Mexican in the Imperial Valley was the father of thirty three children—about thirteen or fourteen living, he said If they all worked at cotton picking they would doubtless altogether make more than ten dollars a day

One of the child laborers revealed the economic advantage—to the parents—in numerous progeny Us kids most always drag from forty to fifty pounds of cotton before we take it to be weighed Three of us pick I'm twelve years old and my bag is twelve feet long I can drag nearly a hundred pounds My sister is ten years old and her bag is eight feet long My little brother is seven and his bag is five feet long

Evidence abounds in the publications of the National Child Labor Committee of this type of fecund parenthood⁴ It is not merely a

⁴ Cf. Child Welfare in Oklahoma Child Welfare in Alabama Child Welfare in North Carolina Child Welfare in Kentucky Child Welfare in Tennessee Also Children in Agriculture by Ruth McIntire and other studies

question of the large family versus the small family. Even comparatively small families among migratory workers of this sort have been large families. The high infant mortality rate has carried off the weaker children. Those who survive are merely those who have been strong enough to survive the most unfavorable living conditions. No, it is a situation not unique, nor even unusual in human history of greed and stupidity and cupidity encouraging the procreative instinct toward the manufacture of slaves. We hear these days of the selfishness and the degradation of healthy and well educated women who refuse motherhood, but we hear little of the more sinister selfishness of men and women who bring babies into the world to become child slaves of the kind described in these reports of child labor.

The history of child labor in the English factories in the nineteenth century throws a suggestive light on this situation. These child workers were really called into being by the industrial situation. The population grew, as Dean Inge has described it, like crops in a newly irrigated desert. During the nineteenth

century the numbers were nearly quadrupled ' Let those who think that the population of a country can be increased at will, consider whether it is likely that any physical moral or psychological change came over the nation coincidentally with the inventions of the spinning jenny and the steam engine It is too obvious for dispute that it was the possession of capital wanting employment, and of natural advantages for using it that called those multitudes of human beings into existence to eat the food which they paid for by their labor

But when child labor in the factories became such a scandal and such a disgrace that child labor was finally forbidden by laws that possessed the advantage over our own that they were enforced, the proletariat ceased to supply children Almost by magic the birth rate among the workers declined Since children were no longer of economic value to the factories, they were evidently a drug in the home This movement it should not be forgotten however, was coincident with the agitation and education in Birth Control stimulated by the Besant Bradlaugh trial

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Large families among migratory agricultural laborers in our own country are likewise brought into existence in response to an industrial demand. The enforcement of the child labor laws and the extension of their restrictions are therefore an urgent necessity, not so much, as some of our child labor authorities believe, to enable these children to go to school, as to prevent the recruiting of our next generation from the least intelligent and most unskilled classes in the community. As long as we officially encourage and countenance the production of large families the evils of child labor will confront us. On the other hand, the prohibition of child labor may help, as in the case of English factories, in the decline of the birth rate.

Uncontrolled breeding and child labor go hand in hand. And to day when we are confronted with the evils of the latter in the form of widespread illiteracy and defect we should seek causes more deeply rooted than the enslavement of children. The cost to society is incalculable as the National Child Labor Committee points out. It is not only through the lowered power, the stunting and

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the moral degeneration of its individual members but in actual expense through the necessary provision for the human junk, created by premature employment in poor houses hospitals police and courts, jails and by charitable organizations

To day we are paying for the folly of the over production—and its consequences in permanent injury to plastic childhood—of yesterday To morrow we shall be forced to pay for our ruthless disregard of our surplus children of to day The child laborer of one or two decades ago has become the shifting laborer of to day stunted underfed, illiterate unskilled unorganized and unorganizable He is the last person to be hired and the first to be fired Boys and girls under fourteen years of age are no longer permitted to work in factories mills canneries and establishments whose products are to be shipped out of the particular state, and children under sixteen can no longer work in mines and quarries But this affects only one quarter of our army of child labor—work in local industries, stores, and farms, homework in dark and unsanitary tenements is still permitted Children work

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in homes, on artificial flowers finishing shoddy garments, sewing their very life's blood and that of the race into tawdry clothes and gewgaws that are the most unanswerable comments upon our vaunted civilization. And to day we must not forget the child laborer of yesterday is becoming the father or the mother of the child laborer of to morrow.

Any nation that works its women is damned once wrote Woods Hutchinson. The nation that works its children one is tempted to add is committing suicide. Loud mouthed defenders of American democracy pay no attention to the strange fact that, although the average education among all American adults is only the sixth grade every one of these adults has an equal power at the polls. The American nation with all its worship of efficiency and thrift complacently forgets that 'every child defective in body education or character is a charge upon the community' as Herbert Hoover declared in an address before the American Child Hygiene Association (October, 1920). The nation as a whole he added, has the obligation of such measures to ward its children as will yield to them

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an equal opportunity at their start in life. If we could grapple with the whole child situation for one generation, our public health, our economic efficiency, the moral character, sanity and stability of our people would advance three generations in one.

The great irrefutable fact that is ignored or neglected is that the American nation officially places a low value upon the lives of its children. The brutal truth is that *children are cheap*. When over production in this field is curtailed by voluntary restriction when the birth rate among the working classes takes a sharp decline, the value of children will rise. Then only will the infant mortality rate decline, and child labor vanish.

Investigations of child labor emphasize its evils by pointing out that these children are kept out of school and that they miss the advantages of American public school education. They express the current confidence in compulsory education and the magical benefits to be derived from the public school. But we need to qualify our faith in education, and particularly our faith in the American public school. Educators are just beginning to wake

up to the dangers inherent in the attempt to teach the brightest child and the mentally defective child at the same time. They are beginning to test the possibilities of a vertical classification as well as a horizontal one. That is, each class must be divided into what are termed Gifted, Bright, Average, Dull Normal, and Defective. In the past the helter skelter crowding and over crowding together of all classes of children of approximately the same age, produced only a dull leveling to mediocrity⁶

An investigation of forty schools in New York City typical of hundreds of others reveals deplorable conditions of overcrowding and lack of sanitation⁷. The worst conditions are to be found in locations the most densely populated. Thus of Public School No. 51, located almost in the center of the notorious Hell's Kitchen section we read

The play space which is provided is a mockery of the worst kind. The basement play room is dark, damp, poorly lighted, poorly ventilated, foul smelling, unclean and wholly unfit

⁶ Cf. Tredgold *Inheritance and Educability* *Eugenics Review* Vol. XIII No. I pp. 839 et seq.

⁷ Cf. *New York Times* June 4, 1921.

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for children for purposes of play. The drain pipes from the roof have decayed to such a degree that in some instances as little as a quarter of the pipe remains. On rainy days water enters the class rooms, hall ways, corridors, and is thrown against windows because the pipes have rotted away. The narrow stairways and halls are similar to those of jails and dungeons of a century ago. The class rooms are poorly lighted, inadequately equipped and in some cases so small that the desks of pupils and teachers occupy almost all of the floor space.

Another school located a short distance from Fifth Avenue, the wealthiest street in the world, is described as an old shell of a structure erected decades ago as a modern school building. Nearly two thousand children are crowded into class rooms having a total seating capacity of scarcely one thousand. Narrow doorways, intricate hallways and antiquated stairways, dark and precipitous, keep ever alive the danger of disaster from fire or panic. Only the eternal vigilance of exceptional supervision has served to lessen the fear of such a catastrophe. Artificial light is

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necessary even on the brightest days in many of the class rooms In most of the class rooms it is always necessary when the sky is slightly overcast There is no ventilating system

In the crowded East Side section conditions are reported to be no better The Public Education Association's report on Public School No 130 points out that the site at the corner of Hester and Baxter Streets was purchased by the city years ago as a school site but that there has been so much tweedledeeing and tweedledumming that the new building which is to replace the old has not even yet been planned! Meanwhile year after year thousands of children are compelled to study daily in dark and dingy class rooms Artificial light is continually necessary declares the report The ventilation is extremely poor The fire hazard is naturally great There are no rest rooms whatever for the teachers Other schools in the neighborhood reveal conditions even worse In two of them, for example In accordance with the requirements of the syllabus in hygiene in the schools the vision of the children is regularly

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tested In a recent test of this character, it was found in Public School 108, the rate of defective vision in the various grades ranged from 50 to 64 per cent ! In Public School 106 the rate ranged from 43 to 94 per cent !

The conditions we are assured, are no exceptions to the rule of public schools in New York where the fatal effects of overcrowding in education may be observed in their most sinister but significant aspects

The forgotten fact in this case is that efforts for universal and compulsory education cannot keep pace with the overproduction of children Even at the best leaving out of consideration the public school system as the inevitable prey and plundering ground of the cheap politician and job hunter present methods of wholesale and syndicated education are not suited to compete with the unceasing, unthinking, untiring procreative powers of our swarming, spawning populations

Into such schools as described in the recent reports of the Public Education Association, no intelligent parent would dare send his child They are not merely fire traps and culture-grounds of infection, but of moral and intel

lectual contamination as well. More and more are public schools in America becoming institutions for subjecting children to a narrow and reactionary orthodoxy, aiming to crush out all signs of individuality and to turn out boys and girls compressed into a standardized pattern with ready made ideas on politics, religion, morality, and economics. True education cannot grow out of such compulsory herding of children in filthy fire traps.

Character, ability, and reasoning power are not to be developed in this fashion. In deed it is to be doubted whether even a completely successful educational system could offset the evils of indiscriminate breeding and compensate for the misfortune of being a superfluous child. In recognizing the great need of education we have failed to recognize the greater need of inborn health and character.

If it were necessary to choose between the task of getting children educated and getting them well born and healthy, writes Havelock Ellis, it would be better to abandon education. There have been many great peoples who never dreamed of national systems of education; there have been no great peoples without the

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art of producing healthy and vigorous children. The matter becomes of peculiar importance in great industrial states like England, the United States and Germany, because in such states, a tacit conspiracy tends to grow up to subordinate national ends to individual ends, and practically to work for the deterioration of the race.⁸

Much less can education solve the great problem of child labor. Rather, under the conditions prevailing in modern society, child labor and the failure of the public schools to educate are both indices of a more deeply rooted evil. Both bespeak *the undervaluation of the child*. This undervaluation, this cheapening of child life, is to speak crudely but frankly the direct result of overproduction.

Restriction of output is an immediate necessity if we wish to regain control of the real values, so that unimpeded, unhindered and without danger of inner corruption humanity may protect its own health and powers.

⁸ Studies in the Psychology of Sex Vol VI p 20