

CHAPTER V

THE WICKEDNESS OF CREATING LARGE FAMILIES

THE most serious evil of our times is that of encouraging the bringing into the world of large families. The most immoral practice of the day is breeding too many children. These statements may startle those who have never made a thorough investigation of the problem. They are, nevertheless, well considered, and the truth of them is abundantly borne out by an examination of facts and conditions which are part of everyday experience or observation.

The immorality of large families lies not only in their injury to the members of those families but in their injury to society. If one were asked offhand to name the greatest evil of the day one might, in the light of one's education by the newspapers, or by agitators, make any one of a number of replies. One might say prostitution, the oppression of labor, child labor, or war. Yet the poverty and neglect

which drives a girl into prostitution usually has its source in a family too large to be properly cared for by the mother, if the girl is not actually subnormal because her mother bore too many children, and, therefore, the more likely to become a prostitute. Labor is oppressed because it is too plentiful, wages go up and conditions improve when labor is scarce. Large families make plentiful labor and they also provide the workers for the child labor factories as well as the armies of unemployed. That population, swelled by overbreeding, is a basic cause of war, we shall see in a later chapter. Without the large family, not one of these evils could exist to any considerable extent, much less to the extent that they exist to day. The large family — especially the family too large to receive adequate care — is the one thing necessary to the perpetuation of these and other evils and is therefore a greater evil than any one of them.

First of the manifold immoralities involved in the producing of a large family is the outrage upon the womanhood of the mother. If no mother bore children against her will or

against her feminine instinct, there would be few large families. The average mother of a baby every year or two has been forced into unwilling motherhood, so far as the later rivals are concerned. It is not the less immoral when the power which compels enslavement is the church, state or the propaganda of well-meaning patriots clamoring against "race suicide." The wrong is as great as if the enslaving force were the unbridled passions of her husband. The wrong to the unwilling mother, deprived of her liberty, and all opportunity of self development, is in itself enough to condemn large families as immoral.

The outrage upon the woman does not end there, however. Excessive childbearing is now recognized by the medical profession as one of the most prolific causes of ill health in women. There are in America hundreds of thousands of women, in good health when they married, who have within a few years become physical wrecks, incapable of mothering their children, incapable of enjoying life.

"Every physician," writes Dr. Wm. J. Robinson in *Birth Control or The Limitation*

of Offspring " knows that too frequent child birth, nursing and the sleepless nights that are required in bringing up a child exhaust the vitality of thousands of mothers, make them prematurely old, or turn them into chronic invalids "

The effect of the large family upon the father is only less disastrous than it is upon the mother. The spectacle of the young man, happy in health, strength and the prospect of a joyful love life, makes us smile in sympathy. But this same young man ten years later is likely to present a spectacle as sorry as it is familiar. If he finds that the children come one after another at short intervals — so fast indeed that no matter how hard he works, nor how many hours, he cannot keep pace with their needs — the lover whom all the world loves will have been converted into a disheartened, threadbare incompetent, whom all the world pities or despises. Instead of being the happy, competent father, supporting one or two children as they should be supported, he is the frantic struggler against the burden of five or six, with the tragic prospect of several

more The ranks of the physically weakened, mentally dejected and spiritually hopeless young fathers of large families attest all too strongly the immorality of the system

If its effects upon the mother and the wage earning father were not enough to condemn the large family as an institution, its effects upon the child would make the case against it conclusive In the United States some 300 000 children under one year of age die each twelve months Approximately ninety per cent of these deaths are directly or indirectly due to malnutrition, to other diseased conditions resulting from poverty, or to excessive childbearing by the mother

The direct relationship between the size of the wage earner's family and the death of children less than one year old has been revealed by a number of studies of the infant death rate One of the clearest of these was that made by Arthur Geissler among miners and cited by Dr Alfred Ploetz before the First International Eugenic Congress* Taking 26 000 births from unselected marriages and omit

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ting families having one and two children
Geissler got this result

	Deaths During First Year
1st born children	23%
2nd	20%
3rd	21%
4th	23%
5th	26%
6th	29%
7th	31%
8th	33%
9th	36%
10th	41%
11th	51%
12th	60%

Thus we see that the second and third children have a very good chance to live through the first year. Children arriving later have less and less chance until the twelfth has hardly any chance at all to live twelve months.

This does not complete the case however for those who care to go farther into the subject will find that many of those who live for a year die before they reach the age of five.

Many perhaps will think it idle to go farther in demonstrating the immorality of large families but since there is still an abundance of proof at hand it may be offered for the

sake of those who find difficulty in adjusting old fashioned ideas to the facts. The most merciful thing that the large family does to one of its infant members is to kill it. The same factors which create the terrible infant mortality rate and which swell the death rate of children between the ages of one and five operate even more extensively to lower the health rate of the surviving members. Moreover, the overcrowded homes of large families reared in poverty further contribute to this condition. Lack of medical attention is still another factor so that the child who must struggle for health in competition with other members of a closely packed family has still great difficulties to meet after its poor constitution and malnutrition have been accounted for.

The probability of a child handicapped by a weak constitution, an overcrowded home, inadequate food and care, and possibly a deficient mental equipment winding up in prison or an almshouse is too evident for comment. Every jail, hospital for the insane, reformatory and institution for the feebleminded cries

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out against the evils of too prolific breeding among wage workers

We shall see when we come to consider the relation of voluntary motherhood to the rights of labor and to the prevention of war that the large family of the worker makes possible his oppression and that it also is the chief cause of such human holocausts as the one just closed after the four and a half bloodiest years in history. No such extended consideration is necessary to indicate from what source the young slaves in the child labor factories come. They come from large impoverished families — from families in which the older children must put their often feeble strength to the task of supporting the younger.

The immorality of bringing large families into the world is recognized by those who are combatting the child labor evil. Mary Alden Hopkins writing in Harper's Weekly in 1915 quotes Owen R. Lovejoy, general secretary of the National Child Labor Committee, as follows:

How many are too many? Any
more than the mother can look after and the
father make a living for Under pres

ent conditions as soon as there are too many children for the father to feed some of them go to work in the mine or factory or store or mill near by In doing this they not only injure their tender growing bodies, but indirectly, they drag down the father's wage The home becomes a mere rendezvous for the nightly gathering of bodies numb with weariness and minds drunk with sleep And if they survive the factory, they marry to perpetuate and multiply their ignorance, weakness and diseases

What have large families to do with prostitution? Ask anyone who has studied the problem The size of the family has a direct bearing on the lives of thousands of girls who are living in prostitution Poverty, lack of care and training during adolescence, overcrowded housing conditions which accompany large families are universally recognized causes of waywardness in girls Social workers have cried out in vain against these conditions pointing to their inevitable results

In the foreword to *Downward Paths* A Maude Royden says Intimately connected with this aspect of the question is that

of home and housing, especially of the child. The age at which children are first corrupted is almost incredibly early, until we consider the nature of the surroundings in which they grow up. Insufficient space, over crowding, the herding together of all ages and both sexes — these things break down the barriers of a natural modesty and reserve. Where decency is practically impossible, unchastity will follow, and follow almost as a matter of course. And the child who has no place to play except in the street, who lacks mother care, whose chief emotional experience is the longing for the necessities of life? We know too well the end of the sorry tale. The forlorn figures of the shadows where lurk the girls who sell themselves that they may eat and be clothed rise up to damn the moral dogmatists who mouth their sickening exhortations to the wives and mothers of the workers to breed breed breed.

The evidence is conclusive as regards the large family of the wage worker. Social workers, physicians and reformers cry out to stop the breeding of these who must exist in want until they become permanent members of the ranks of the unfit.

But what of the family of the wealthy or the merely well to do? It is among these classes that we find the women who have attained to voluntary motherhood. It is to these classes, too, that the 'race suicide' alarmists have from time to time addressed specially emphasized pleas for more children. The advocates of more prolific breeding urge that these same women have more intelligence, better health, more time to care for children and more means to support them. They therefore declare that it is the duty of such women to populate the land with strong, healthy, intelligent offspring — to bear children in great numbers.

It is high time to expose the sheer foolishness of this argument. The first absurdity is that the women who are in comfortable circumstances could continue to be cultured and of social value if they were the mothers of large families. Neither could they maintain their present standard of health nor impart it to their children.

While it is true that they have resources at their command which ease the burden of child-bearing and child rearing immeasurably it is

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also true that the wealthy mother, as well as the poverty stricken mother, must give from her own system certain elements which it takes time to replace Excessive childbearing is harder on the woman who lacks care than on the one who does not but both alike must give their bodies time to recover from the strain of childbearing If the women in fortunate circumstances gave ear to the demand of masculine race suicide * fanatics they could within a few years be down to the condition of their sisters who lack time to cultivate their talents and intellects A vigorous intelligent fruitfully cultured motherhood is all but impossible if no restriction is placed by that motherhood upon the number of children

Wage workers and salaried people have a vital interest in the size of the families of those better situated in life Large families among the rich are immoral not only because they invade the natural right of woman to the control of her own body to self development and to self expression but because they are oppressive to the poorer elements of society If the upper and middle classes of society had kept pace with the poorer elements of society in re

production during the past fifty years the working class to day would be forced down to the level of the Chinese whose wage standard is said to be a few handfuls of rice a day

If these considerations are not enough to halt the masculine advocate of large families who reminds us of the days of our mothers and grandmothers let it be remembered that bearing and rearing six or eight children to day is a far different matter from what it was in the generations just preceding. Physically and nervously, the woman of to day is not fitted to bear children as frequently as was her mother and her mother's mother. The high tension of modern life and the complicating of woman's everyday existence have doubtless contributed to this result. And who of us can say until a careful scientific investigation is made, how much the rapid development of tuberculosis and other grave diseases even among the well nurtured may be due to the depletion of the physical capital of the unborn by the too prolific childbearing of preceding generations of mothers?

The immorality of bringing into being a large family is a wrong doing shared by three

— the mother, the father and society Upon all three falls the burden of guilt It may be said for the mother and father that they are usually ignorant What shall be said of society? What shall be said of us who permit outworn laws and customs to persist in piling up the appalling sum of public expense misery and spiritual degradation? The indictment against the large unwanted family is written in human woe Who in the light of intelligent understanding shall have the brazenness to stand up and defend it?

One thing we know — the woman who has escaped the chains of too great reproductivity will never again wear them The birth rate of the wealthy and upper classes will never appreciably rise The woman of these classes is free of her most oppressive bonds Being free we have a right to expect much of her We expect her to give still greater expression to her feminine spirit — we expect her to enrich the intellectual artistic, moral and spiritual life of the world We expect her to demolish old systems of morals a degenerate prudery, Dark Age religious concepts laws that enslave women by denying them the knowledge of

their bodies and information as to contraceptives These must go to the scrapheap of vicious cast off things Hers is the power to send them there Shall we look to her to strike the first blow which shall wrench her sisters from the grip of the dead hand of the past?

Interesting and perhaps surprising light is thrown upon the origin of the term race suicide by the following quotation from an article by Harold Bolce in the Cosmopolitan (New York) for May 1909

The sole effect of prolificacy is to fill the cemeteries with tiny graves sacrifices of the innocents to the Moloch of immoderate maternity Thus insists Edward A Ross Professor of Sociology in the University of Wisconsin and he protests against the dwarfing of women and the cheapening of men as regards the restriction of the birth rate as a movement at bottom salutary and its evils minor transient and curable This is a very rare gospel and particularly significant coming from the teacher who invented the term race suicide which many have erroneously attributed to Mr Roosevelt