

## CHAPTER VI

### CRIES OF DESPAIR AND SOCIETY'S PROBLEMS

**B**EFORE we pass to a further consideration of our subject, shall we not pause to take a still closer look at the human misery wrought by the enslavement of women through unwilling motherhood? Would you know the appalling sum of this misery better than any author any scientist, any physician, any social worker can tell you? Hear the story from the lips of the women themselves. Learn at first hand what it means to make a broken drudge of a woman who might have been the happy mother of a few strong children. Learn from the words of the victims of involuntary motherhood what it means to them to their children and to society to force the physically unfit or the unwilling to bear children. When you have learned stop to ask yourself what is the worth of the law the moral code the tradition the religion that for the sake of an outworn dogma of submission would wreck the lives of

these women, condemn their progeny to pain, want, disease and helplessness. Ask yourself if these letters, these cries of despair, born of the anguish of woman's sex slavery are not in themselves enough to stop the mouths of the demagogues, the imperialists and the ecclesiastics who clamor for more and yet more children? And if the pain of others has no power to move your heart and stir your hands and brain to action, ask yourself the more selfish question: Can the children of these unfortunate mothers be other than a burden to society — a burden which reflects itself in innumerable phases of cost, crime and general social detriment?

For our own sakes — for our children's sakes — plead the mothers, "help us! Let us be women, rather than breeding machines."

The women who thus cry out are pleading not only for themselves and their children, but for society itself. Their plea is for us and ours — it is the plea for happier conditions, for higher ideals, for a stronger, more vigorous, more highly developed race.

The letters in this chapter are the voices of humble prophets crying out to us: stop our na-

tional habit of human waste. They are warnings against disaster which we now share and must continue to share as it grows worse unless we heed the warning and put our national house in order.

Each and every unwanted child is likely to be in some way a social liability. It is only the wanted child who is likely to be a social asset. If we have faith in this intuitive demand of the unfortunate mothers, if we understand both its dire and its hopeful significance we shall dispose of those social problems which so insistently and menacingly confront us to day. For the instinct of maternity to protect its own fruits, the instinct of womanhood to be free to give something besides surplus of children to the world cannot go astray. The rising generation is always the material of progress, and motherhood is the agency for the improvement and the strengthening and guiding of that generation.

The excerpts contained in this chapter are typical of the letters which come to me by the thousands. They tell their own story simply—sometimes ungrammatically and illiterately but nevertheless irresistibly. It is the story of

slow murder of the helpless by a society that shields itself behind ancient, inhuman moral creeds — which dares to weigh those dead creeds against the agony of the living who pray for the mercy of death

Can a mother who would rather die than bear more children serve society by bearing still others? Can children carried through nine months of dread and unspeakable mental anguish and born into an atmosphere of fear and anger, to grow up uneducated and in want be a benefit to the world? Here is what the mother says

"I have read in the paper about you and am very interested in Birth Control I am a mother of four living children and one dead the oldest 10 and baby 22 months old. I am very nervous and sickly after my children I would like you to advise me what to do to prevent from having any more as I would rather die than have another I am keeping away from my husband as much as I can but it causes quarrels and almost separation All my babies have had marasmus in the first year of their lives and I almost lost my baby last summer I always worry about my children so much My husband works in a brass foundry it is not a very good job and living is so high that we have to live as cheap as possible I've only got 2 rooms and kitchen and I do all my work and sewing which is very hard for me"

Shall this woman continue to be forced into a life of unnatural continence which further aggravates her ill health and produces constant

discord? Shall she go on having children who come into being with a heritage of ill health and poverty and who are bound to become public burdens? Or would it be the better policy to let motherhood follow its instinct to save itself, its offspring and society from these ills?

Or shall women be forced into abortion, as is testified by the mother whose daughters are mothers and who in the hope of saving them from both slavery and the destruction of their unborn children wrote the letter which follows

I have born and raised 6 children and I know all the hardships of raising a large family I am now 53 years old and past having children but I have 3 daughters that have 2 children each and they say they will die before they will have any more and every now and again they go to a doctor and get rid of one and some day I think it will kill them but they say they dont care for they will be better dead than live in hell with a big family and nothing to raise them on. It is for there sakes I wish you to give me that information"

What could the three women mentioned in this letter contribute to the wellbeing of the future American race? Nothing except by doing exactly what they wish to do — refusing to bear children that they do not want and can not care for Their instinct is sound — but what is to be said of the position of society at

large, which forces women who are in the grip of a sound instinct to seek repeated abortions in order to follow that instinct? Are we not compelling women to choose between inflicting injury upon themselves, their children and the community, and undergoing an abhorrent operation which kills the tenderness and delicacy of womanhood, even as it may injure or kill the body?

Will the offspring of a paralytic, who must perforce neglect the physical care and training of her children, enhance the common good by their coming? Here is a letter from a paralytic mother, whose days and nights are tortured by the thought of another child, and whose reason is tottering at the prospect of leaving her children without her care

I sent for a copy of your magazine and now feel I must write you to see if you can help me

I was a high school girl who married a day laborer seven years ago In a few months I will again be a mother the fourth child in less than six years While carrying my babies am always partly paralyzed on one side Do not know the cause but the doctor said at last birth we must be more careful as I could not stand having so many children Am always very sick for a long time and have to have chloroform

We can afford help only about 3 weeks until I am on my feet again after confinement I work as hard as I can but my work and my children are always neglected. I wonder

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if my body does survive this next birth if my reason will

It is terrible to think of bringing these little bodies and souls into the world without means or strength to care for them. And I can see no relief unless you give it to me or tell me where to get it. I am weaker each time and I know that this must be the last one for it would be better for me to go than to bring more neglected babies into the world. I can hardly sleep at night for worrying. Is there an answer for women like me?

In another chapter, we have gotten a glimpse of the menace of the feebleminded. Here is a woman who is praying for help to avoid adding to the number of mentally helpless.

My baby is only 10 months old and the oldest one or four is 7 and more care than a baby has always been helpless. We do not own a roof over our heads and I am so discouraged I want to die if nothing can be done. Can't you help me just this time and then I know I can take care of myself. Ignorance on this all important subject has put me where I am. I don't know how to be sure of bringing myself around. I beg of you to help me and anything I can do to help further your wonderful work I will do. Only help me this once no one will know only I will be blessed.

I not only have a terrible time when I am confined but caring for the oldest child it preys so on my mind that I fear more defective children. Help me please!

The offspring of one feebleminded man named Jukes has cost the public in one way and another \$1,300,000 in seventy five years. Do we want more such families? Is this woman standing guard for the general wel-

fare? Had she been permitted the use of contraceptives before she was forced to make a vain plea for abortion, would she not have rendered a service to her fellow citizens, as well as to herself?

Millions are spent in the United States every year to combat tuberculosis. The national waste involved in illness and deaths from tuberculosis runs up into the billions. Is it then good business, to say nothing of the humane aspects of the situation, to compel the writer of the following letter to go on adding to the number of the tubercular? Which is the guardian of public welfare here—the mother instinct which wishes to avoid bearing tubercular children, or the statute which forbids her to know how to avoid adding to the census of 'white plague' victims? The letter reads

Kindly pardon me for writing this to you not knowing what trouble this may cause you. But I've heard of you through a friend and realize you are a friend of humanity. If people would see with your light the world would be healthy. I married the first time when I was eighteen years old a drinking man. I became mother to five children. In 1908 my husband died of consumption. I lost two of my oldest children from the same disease—one at 16 and the other at 23. The youngest of them all a sweet girl of nineteen now lies at \_\_\_\_\_ sanatorium expecting to leave us at any time. The other sister and brother look very poorly



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I have always worked very hard because I had to In 1913 I married again a good man this time but a laboring man and our constant fear and trouble is what may happen if we bring children into the world I m forty six years old this month and not very well any more either So a godsend will be some one who can tell me how to care for myself so I can be free from suffering and also not bring mortals to earth to suffer and die

Not even the blindest of all dogmatists can ignore the danger to the community of to day and the race of to morrow in permitting an insane woman to go on bearing children Here is a letter which tells a two sided story — how mother instinct even when clouded by periodic insanity, seeks to protect itself and society, and how society prevents her from attaining that end

There is a woman in this town who has six children and is expecting another Directly after the birth of a child she goes insane a raving maniac and they send her to the insane asylum While she is gone her home and children are cared for by neighbors After about six months they discharge her and she comes home and is in a family way again in a few months Still the doctors will do nothing for her

She is a well educated woman and says if she would not have any more children she is sure she could be entirely free from these insane spells

If you will send me one of your pamphlets I will give it to her and several others equally deserving

Hoping you will see fit to grant my request I remain,  
etc”

The very word syphilis brings a shudder to anyone who is familiar with the horrors of the malady Not only in the suffering brought to the victim himself and in the danger of infecting others but in the dire legacy of helplessness and disease which is left to the offspring of the syphilitic is this the most destructive socially of all plagues Here is a letter, which as a criticism of our present public policy in regard to national waste and to contraceptives, defies comment

I was left without a father when a girl of fourteen years old I was the oldest child of five My mother had no means of support except her two hands so we worked at anything we could my job being nurse girl at home while mother worked most of the time as she could earn more money than I could for she could do harder work.

I wasn't very strong and finally after two years my mother got so tired and worn out trying to make a living for so many she married again and as she married a poor man we children were not much better off At the age of seventeen I married a man a brakeman on the ——— Railroad who was eleven years older than I He drank some and was a very frail looking man but I was very ignorant of the world and did not think of anything but making a home for myself and husband After eleven months I had a little girl born to me I did not want more children but my mother in law told me it was a terrible sin to do anything to keep from having children and that the Lord only sent just what I could take care of and if I heard of anything to do I was told it was injurious so I did not try

In eleven months again October 25 I had another little

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puny girl In twenty three months Sept 25th I had a seven lb boy In ten months July 15 I had a seven months baby that lived five hours In eleven months June 20 I had another little girl In seventeen months Nov 30 another boy In nine months a four months miscarriage In twelve months another girl and in three and a half years another girl.

All of these children were born into poverty the father's health was always poor and when the third girl was born he was discharged from the road because of his disability yet he was still able to put children into the world. When the oldest child was twelve years old the father died of concussion of the brain while the youngest child was born two months after his death

Now Mrs Sanger I did not want those children because even in my ignorance I had sense enough to know that I had no right to bring those children into such a world where they could not have decent care for I was not able to do it myself nor hire it done I prayed and I prayed that they would die when they were born Praying did no good and to-day I have read and studied enough to know that I am the mother of seven living children and that I committed a crime by bringing them into the world their father was syphilitic (I did not know about such things when I was a girl) One son is to be sent to Mexico while one of my girls is a victim of the white slave traffic

I raised my family in a little college town in \_\_\_\_\_ and am well known there for I made my living washing and working for the college people while I raised my little brood. I often wondered why those educated well to do people never had so many children I have one married daughter who is tubercular and she also has two little girls only a year apart I feel so bad about it and write to ask you to send me information for her Don't stop your good work don't think it's not appreciated for there are hundreds of women like myself who are not afraid to risk their lives to help you to get this information to poor women who need it "

There is no need to go on repeating these cries. These letters have come to me by the thousands. There are enough of them to fill many volumes — each with its own individual tragedy, each with its own warning to society.

Every ill that we are trying to cure to day is reflected in them. The wife who through an unwilling continence drives her husband to prostitution, habitual drunkenness, which prohibition may or may not have disposed of as a social problem, mothers who toil in mills and whose children must follow them to that toil, adding to the long train of evils involved in child labor, mothers who have brought eight, ten, twelve or fifteen undernourished, weakly children into the world to become public burdens of one sort or another — all these and more with the ever present economic problem and women who are remaining unmarried because they fear a large family which must exist in want, men who are living abnormal lives for the same reason. All the social handicaps and evils of the day are woven into these letters — and out of each of them rises these challenging facts. First, oppressed motherhood knows that the cure for these evils lies in

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birth control second, society has not yet learned to permit motherhood to stand guard for itself, its children the common good and the coming race. And one reading such letters and realizing their significance is constrained to wonder how long such a situation can exist.