

CHAPTER VII

WHEN SHOULD A WOMAN AVOID HAVING CHILDREN?

ARE overburdened mothers justified in their appeals for contraceptives or abortions? What shall we say to women who write such letters as those published in the preceding chapter? Will anyone, after reading those letters, dare to say to these women that they should go on bringing helpless children into the world to share their increasing misery?

The women who thus cry for aid are the victims of ignorance. Awakening from that ignorance, they are demanding relief. Had they been permitted a knowledge of their sex functions, had they had some guiding principle of motherhood, those who at this late day are asking for contraceptives would have swept aside all barriers and procured them long ago. Those who are appealing for abortions would never have been in such a situation.

To say to these women that they should con-

tinue their helpless breeding of the helpless is 'stupid brutality' The facts set forth earlier in this book, and the cries of tortured motherhood which echo through the letters just referred to, are more than ample evidence that there are times when it is woman's highest duty to refuse to bear children

There has seemed to be a great deal of disagreement among the medical authorities who have attempted to say when a woman should not have children This disagreement has been rendered even more confusing by a babel of voices from the ranks of sociologists Within the past few years, however, so much light has been shed upon the subject that it is now comparatively easy for the student to separate the well founded conclusions from those which are of doubtful value, or plainly worthless The opinions which I summarize here are not so much my own, originally, as those of medical authorities who have made deep and careful investigations There is, however, nothing set forth here which I have not in my own studies tested and proved correct In addition to carrying the weight of the best medical authority, a fact

easily confirmed by the first specialist you meet, they are further reinforced by the findings of the federal Children's Bureau, and other organizations which have examined infant mortality and compiled rates

To the woman who wishes to have children, we must give these answers to the question when not to have them

Childbearing should be avoided within two or three years after the birth of the last child. Common sense and science unite in pointing out that the mother requires at least this much time to regain her strength and replenish her system in order to give another baby proper nourishment after its birth. Authorities are insistent upon their warnings that too frequent childbearing wrecks the woman's health. Weakness of the reproductive organs and pelvic ailments almost certainly result if a woman bears children too frequently.

By all means there should be no children when either mother or father suffers from such diseases as tuberculosis, gonorrhoea, syphilis, cancer, epilepsy, insanity, drunkenness and mental disorders. In the case of the mother, heart disease, kidney trouble and pelvic de-

88 WOMAN AND THE NEW RACE

formities are also a serious bar to childbearing

Thousands of volumes have been written by physicians upon the danger to mothers and offspring of having children when one or both parents are suffering from the diseases mentioned above. As authorities have pointed out in all these books, the jails, hospitals for the insane, poorhouses and houses of prostitution are filled with the children born of such parents, while an astounding number of their children are either stillborn or die in infancy.

These facts are now so well known that they would need little discussion here, even if space permitted. Miscarriages, which are particularly frequent in cases of syphilis and pelvic deformities, are a great source of danger to the health and even to the life of the mother. Where either parent suffers from gonorrhoea, the child is in danger of being born blind. Tuberculosis in the parent leaves the child's system in such condition that it is likely to suffer from the disease. Childbearing is also a grave danger to the tubercular mother. A tendency to insanity, if not insanity itself, may be transmitted to the child, or it may be feeble-minded if one of the parents is insane or suffers

from any mental disorder Drunkenness in the parent or parents has been found to be the cause of feeblemindedness in the offspring and to leave the child with a constitution too weak to resist disease as it should

No more children should be born when the parents, though healthy themselves, find that their children are physically or mentally defective No matter how much they desire children, no man and woman have a right to bring into the world those who are to suffer from mental or physical affliction It condemns the child to a life of misery and places upon the community the burden of caring for it, probably for its defective descendants for many generations

Generally speaking, no woman should bear a child before she is twenty two years old It is better still that she wait until she is twenty-five High infant mortality rates for mothers under twenty-two attest this fact It is highly desirable from the mother's standpoint to postpone childbearing until she has attained a ripe physical and mental development, as the bearing and nursing of infants interferes with

90 WOMAN AND THE NEW RACE

such development. It is also all important to the child, the offspring of a woman who is twenty five or somewhat older has the best chance of good physical and mental equipment.

In brief, a woman should avoid having children unless both she and the father are in such physical and mental condition as to assure the child a healthy physical and mental being. This is the answer that must be made to women whose children are fairly sure of good care, sufficient food, adequate clothing, a fit place to live and at least a fair education.

A distinctly different and exceedingly important side of the problem must be considered when the women workers, the wives and the mothers of workers, wish to know when to avoid having children. Such a woman must answer her own question. What anyone else may tell her is far less important than what she herself shall reply to a society that demands more and more children and which gives them less and less when they arrive.

What shall this woman say to a society that would make of her body a reproductive machine only to waste prodigally the fruit of her

being? Does society value her offspring? Does it not let them die by the hundreds of thousands of want hunger and preventable disease? Does it not drive them to the factories the mills, the mines and the stores to be stunted physically and mentally? Does it not throw them into the labor market to be competitors with her and their father? Do we not find the children of the South filling the mills, working side by side with their mothers, while the fathers remain at home? Do we not find the father, mother and child competing with one another for their daily bread? Does society not herd them in slums? Does it not drive the girls to prostitution and the boys to crime? Does it educate them for free spirited manhood and womanhood? Does it even give them during their babyhood fit places to live in, fit clothes to wear fit food to eat or a clean place to play? Does it even permit the mother to give them a mother's care?

The woman of the workers knows what society does with her offspring. Knowing the bitter truth learned in unspeakable anguish what shall this woman say to society? The power is in her hands. She can bring forth

92 WOMAN AND THE NEW RACE

more children to perpetuate these conditions, or she can withhold the human grist from these cruel mills which grind only disaster

Shall she say to society that she will go on multiplying the misery that she herself has endured? Shall she go on breeding children who can only suffer and die? Rather, shall she not say that until society puts a higher value upon motherhood she will not be a mother? Shall she not sacrifice her mother instincts for the common good and say that until children are held as something better than commodities upon the labor market, she will bear no more? Shall she not give up her desire for even a small family and say to society that until the world is made fit for children to live in, she will have no children at all?