



Drawn by K. R. Chamberlain.

THE JONES FAMILY GROUP
(Mr. Jones believes that Family-Limitation is criminal)

REVOLUTIONARY BIRTH-CONTROL

A Reply to Some Correspondents by Max Eastman

THE interesting objectors to birth-control seem to be of two kinds: those who find it libidinous, or at least a violation of something sacred, and those who think it is not revolutionary enough, it is a palliative, a method of promoting contentment in poverty.

Of these two positions the latter is more interesting to us, but we wish to meet the former also on its own ground. For from the standpoint of knowledge as well as of revolution, we believe in this fight.

Whether society were built on the exploitation of the workers or not, whether society needed revolution or not (if we can imagine a society that didn't), it would be the heart of moral wisdom that the bearing and rearing of children should always be a deliberate and therefore responsible act. The direction of instinctive activities by intelligence is wisdom, and "wisdom is virtue," and those who hesitate to direct intelligently this most momentous of

activities, through a superstitious subjection whether to "God's law" or "Nature's," are no more virtuous than they are wise.

They are, in fact, more like salmon than like saints. For indiscriminate propagation against an enormous death-rate is the regular method of survival for those lower forms of life. And only as we ascend the steps of evolution do we find parental care and social regard lowering the death-rate, and the tendency to propagate indiscriminate multitudes falling away.

That is all a matter of physiology and instinct, of course, until we come to man, whose regard for the individual life is so great that even his low instinctive rate of reproduction far outruns the need of his race. It outruns the capacities of his environment. And therefore in this matter, more even than in others, his instinct needs to be checked, or hindered of its results, by intelligent action.

We do not mean to ignore our "disembodied" correspondent, who writes:

"Let's see—you are talking about birth-control—why not try a little self-control?"

We say to him, "By all means—go ahead." One of the methods of preventing conception, and one that is widely although by no means universally known, is to refrain from physical relations with persons of the opposite sex. We should like to make that, and all the benefits and disbenefits that attend it, known to the public along with the others. And for persons highly sublimated, or not strongly sexed, or who wish to spend a great deal of energy upon a negative effort, we have no doubt it will prove satisfactory. Our correspondent assures us that for him it has proved satisfactory; and we are glad to pass the information along. But for other temperaments, high spirits and a working subordination of the sexual factor in life cannot be permanently attained in this

way. And these temperaments are doubtless the numerous ones, and for them other contraceptive methods are desirable and wise.

It behooves us here more than anywhere else, to refrain from dogmatism, for the varieties of sexual disposition are as the varieties of men. They are the varieties of men. And no one need think that when he has "made an experiment of twenty-odd years," as one correspondent has, and reached a conclusion, that his conclusion of necessity applies to anyone but himself.

We are not advocating that the public should prevent conception, or trying to enforce a particular solution of sex-problems; we are advocating that the knowledge which is relevant to these problems be accessible to all.

"The Sexual Question," by August Forel, translated into English, and published by Rebman and Company, New York City, is the classic in this department of medical and moral science. Forel is recognized as a leading authority by men of science all over the world, and has been for years. His book is expensive, but it contains the information that the laws prohibit, and I suspect that anyone who can afford the price could secure it. "Necessity knows no law," as the great Puritan declared.

So much for the promotion of Knowledge.

But in a society which stands in such need of social revolution as ours, it is difficult to promote with much passion knowledge which has no bearing on that need. And we sympathize with those readers who object to our propaganda of Birth-Control as "true but irrelevant," and not appropriate to a revolutionary magazine. We sympathize with their statement that "the important thing is to make it possible for the working people to have all the children they want." But we think they misapprehend the relation of Birth-Control to the working-class struggle, and our prime motive in taking up the issue.

Perhaps, in its more general form, the question does not belong to THE MASSES—or at least it does not belong there any longer. For since our March number was published, the *New Republic*, *Harper's Weekly*, the *New York Tribune*, the *New York American*—to mention only the most respectable—have been giving the question publicity, and are probably making a great many more converts to it than we did. The propaganda is fairly launched in the American press, and we are satisfied. We can now lay the general question aside. But we have still the task of advancing its revolutionary significance, of answering from this time on, our second class of objectors.

It will be interesting to them to know that the first leaflet in the English language describing the technique of contraception, printed in 1823, and known to the journals of that time as "The Diabolical Handbill," was attributed to Robert Owen, the father of British Socialism. It was printed anonymously but very elegantly, addressed "To the Married of Both Sexes," and distributed with a letter signed "A sincere well-wisher to the working classes."

It seems probable to a writer in the *Economic Review*,¹ from whom I gather these facts, that the leaflet was actually written by Francis Place, another social radical of that time, but with the approval and support of Robert Owen.

Whoever wrote the handbill, the significant thing is that it was written and distributed in the interest of economic liberty. It was a part of the surge of revolutionary feeling in England at that time, and I suspect that a good share of its "diabolicalness" arose from that.

James Mill had cautiously, and as it were surreptitiously, alluded to the subject of Birth-Control in an article on "Colony" in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1818. Speaking of "the best means of checking the progress of population," he wrote:

"And yet if the superstitions of the nursery were discarded, and the principle of utility kept steadily in view, a solution might not be very difficult to be found; and the means of drying up one of the most copious sources of human evil . . . might be seen to be neither doubtful nor difficult to be applied."

And still better for our respectability (and for Bill Sanger's prospects) James Mill's son, John Stuart Mill, the greatest English mind of the nineteenth century, was "in company with some others interfered with by the police," in the words of his biographer, "for distribution of papers in promotion of a scheme for artificially checking the increase of population." Or, in the version of an enemy, writing in the *London Times*, he

"fell under the notice of the police by circulating copies of 'What Is Love,' and flinging down the areas of houses, for the edification of the maid-servants, printed papers or broad-sheets containing [a description of preventive measures]."

Thus were the radicals of that time sowing truth and reaping persecution. Even Jeremy Bentham was with them, and agreed, if somewhat tacitly, that his "principle of utility" should become so specific an instrument of revolutionary agitation.

In 1822 Francis Place published his essay on pop-

¹James A. Field in the *Economic Review* for April, 1911.

ulation, including a chapter on "Means of Preventing the Numbers of Mankind from Increasing Faster Than Food is Provided." And from this time forward, according to Graham Wallas,² he

"continually advanced the neo-Malthusian position in argument with every workingman whose confidence or gratitude he could earn, in every working-class newspaper that would admit his letters. . . . As a consequence his name, for twenty years, was hardly ever mentioned in print without some reference, deprecatory or abusive, to his notorious opinions. Good men refused to be introduced to him. . . ."

That this invaluable propaganda, so well and so eminently begun, should have died out almost entirely for fifty years, is one of those mysteries of time like the dark ages. It reappeared in England in 1876-8, when a great deal of public scandal culminated in the trials of James Bradlaugh, Mrs. Besant, and others, for "offending against public morals" by offering for sale a book describing contraceptive devices.

It did not reappear in the United States until 1902, when Dr. William J. Robinson began to publish the *Critic and Guide*. But we trust it may rise to some final crisis, so far at least as the law is concerned, on June 18, 1915, in the trial of William Sanger before the courts of New York for "circulating obscene literature."

It was the opinion of those earlier radicals, as I understand it, that birth-prevention would solve the problem of low wages by decreasing the number of the workers and so increasing the demand for their labor over the supply. To their thinking birth-control was the revolution, so far as they conceived revolution. And though we conceive a revolution more complete than the mere elevation of wages, and though we do not believe that the instincts of parenthood can be so far abrogated as to produce it in a mechanical fashion, still we know that the connection in those men's minds, and hearts, of birth-control with social-revolutionary progress, was radically right and true.

An unskilled worker is never free, but an unskilled worker with a large family of half-starving children cannot even fight for freedom. That for us is the connection between birth-control and the working-class struggle. Workingmen and women ought to be able to feed and rear the children they want—that is the end we are seeking. But the way to that end is a fight; a measure of working-class independence is essential to that fight; and birth-control is a means to such independence.

²Graham Wallas, "Life of Francis Place."

LAST BUT NOT LEAST—

THE most delightful book of the year so far—you might not know it from the title—is "Are Women People?" by Alice Duer Miller, just published by the George H. Doran Company (60c. net). It bears the sub-title, "A Book of Rhymes for Suffrage Times," and lest you think it an earnest and humorless piece of propaganda, we hasten to tell you it is not. It is the cleverest, funniest, sharpest collection of satirical verse that has appeared since Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "In This Our World." (Perhaps you haven't read that book. Well, you have missed one of the joys of life.)

The poem which opens the book, though it seems to have been first published in a newspaper only recently, has traveled all over the world, and is probably familiar to you. It is the one which begins:

You're twenty-one today, Willie,
And a danger lurks at the door—

and bears upon a well-known anti-suffrage argument:

They smirch, degrade and coarsen,
Terrible things they do
To quiet, elderly women—
What would they do to you!

There are many more things in the book quite as delightful. It punctures with a graceful or impatient wit a hundred banalities:

Charm is a woman's strongest arm;
My charwoman is full of charm;
I chose her, not for length of arm,
But for her strange elusive charm.

And how tears heighten women's powers!
My typist weeps for hours and hours:
I took her for her weeping powers—
They so delight my business hours.

A woman lives by intuition.
Though my accountant shuns addition
She has the rarest intuition.
(And I myself can do addition.)

Mr. Carter, of Oklahoma, made a speech against woman suffrage. He said: "Women are angels, they are jewels, they are queens and princesses of our hearts." What do you suppose Alice Duer Miller did to him? Well, you'll have to read the book to find out. We can't quote everything here, and besides, our book department wants to sell you the book.

If you are a woman, you will take a malicious (and quite justified) pleasure in this pretty vivisection of masculine vanity. And if you are a man, and don't believe that women are on to you (on to us, I should say), read this book and you will jolly well find out!

F. D.