

FAMILY DESERTION*

BY OSCAR LEONARD

Family desertion is one of the most serious problems because it strikes at the very roots of organized society. Its unit, the family, suffers. The burden falls heavily upon shoulders least able to bear it, the women and children. We shall here limit ourselves to family desertions among those who become dependent upon public or private relief as a result of this offense on the part of the breadwinner.

The family living from hand to mouth finds it difficult enough in these days of high cost of living to maintain itself with any degree of physical efficiency. Take away the income and the family is in danger of becoming completely demoralized. To the social worker this problem is most distressing and most difficult. He cannot undertake to look after the family of a deserting husband as liberally and as readily as he does in the case of the sick, the widow and the aged. His liberality may encourage desertion, or may result in collusive desertion. It is natural, therefore, for the relief worker to be extremely cautious in undertaking the care of a deserted family, also in the treatment he maps out.

Family desertion, in addition to being a menace to society, is also financially very burdensome. It is difficult to estimate what it costs in Missouri to care for deserted families. New York City estimates that desertions cost public and private charities over \$500,000 a year. A careful investigation would probably bring to light some large figures in our own State. The Jewish Charitable and Educational Association of St. Louis spent in connection with desertion close to \$2,000 one year. It is generally admitted that the Jews care for their own families exceptionally well, and that the percentage of Jewish deserters is smaller than that of the rest of the population. This figure is therefore very significant. It gives some faint idea of what a burden desertion is to our State, and the burden is upon the State whether the money comes from private or public charities. It is estimated that between 15 and 20 per cent. of dependency is due to family desertion.

We need not be discouraged, however, in spite of the fact that desertion is such a heavy and unnecessary burden. It is a burden that can be done away with. All we need is the necessary machinery. At present we have very little machinery to trace and bring back deserters. That such machinery can be devised is certain. Take, for instance, the National Desertion Bureau established and maintained by the National Conference of Jewish Charities. The Bureau was established in 1906. Up to last year it received nearly 900 cases to look after, and it succeeded in locating almost 600 deserting husbands, or about 66 per cent. Wherever sufficient information and pictures are furnished, the Bureau invariably succeeds in locating the offender.

A word about the method employed by the Bureau. It maintains headquarters and an office force in New York City. The Jewish charitable organizations in the various cities of the United States act as its local agents. If a man deserts his family in St. Louis and complaint against the deserter is lodged with the St. Louis Jewish Charities, the organization obtains certain information. This information and a photograph of the deserter are forwarded to the New York office. The office then causes the picture and the information to be printed in several Yiddish newspapers in what is known as "The Gallery of Missing Husbands," a sort of modern rogues' gallery. These papers being read all over the United States and Canada, accomplish the desired results. Persons recognizing such deserters gladly inform the nearest charity office. The arrest is made and arrangements are made for the return of the man to the city where he belongs. In the majority of cases reconciliation is effected. In other cases support of the family is arranged. Where the man is obstreperous, his case is pushed to the limits of the law. Time does not permit to quote instances which would show how the Bureau works and what wonderful results it has obtained in very many instances.

In addition to its work in bringing deserters either back to their families or to

the bar of justice, the work of the Bureau decreased desertions among Jewish families. Every Jewish charitable agency has been benefited by its work. It is estimated that the decrease is between 30 and 40 per cent. It means a saving in cash and prevention of untold suffering and anguish for women and children.

But the Desertion Bureau freely admits that its work is greatly hampered by the lack of uniform laws dealing with domestic relations. Under our present laws a great deal of time and effort is wasted in dealing with family deserters. Then, too, after the deserter is brought back to the scene of his desertion at great effort and expense, all that can be done is mete out punishment. This does not always bring him back to his senses nor help the family greatly.

Some States have found a way out of it. They put a man to work and pay the family for his labor. Thus Oregon allows the County Court to compel a man guilty of non-support to work on the public roads. His work may bring his family as much as \$1.50 a day. The laws of Maryland make such an arrangement possible, too, but neither of these States, according to Mr. William H. Baldwin of Washington, D. C., has ever paid a penny to families of deserters. They have the machinery, but allow it to go to rust. The same is true of Colorado. Michigan paid the families of 18 men \$3,251.65. The District of Columbia pays to families of deserters 50 cents a day when these deserters are confined. California has recently passed a law punishing deserters by paying their families \$1.50 a day while these offenders are at work. Missouri needs similar legislation. Our State must learn to punish the offender, but not his innocent wife and children. At present we punish the offender and at the same time sentence his family to starvation or send them to stretch forth their hands for alms.

Missouri also needs the machinery which will help bring the offenders to the bar of justice. To devise proper machinery it will be necessary to secure proper co-operation and probably interstate legislation. New York City is so well pleased with the work of the National Desertion Bureau that it has appointed a commission to in-

vestigate the desirability of establishing a Municipal Desertion Bureau modeled after the one maintained by the National Conference of Jewish Charities.

Certain it is that with the advent of pensions paid by municipalities and States to broken families where the father is either dead, missing or imprisoned, it will become necessary to devise ways of apprehending deserters. Perhaps the day will come when our Federal Government will take up this important work. It is a problem national in nature and in scope, and should be dealt with on a nation-wide scale. But until this happens it behooves the good people of the State of Missouri to bestir themselves and establish the necessary legislative machinery to deal with this problem.

To be sure, we are the "Show Me State." Well, we have been shown by other States. Need we wait to be the last State in the Union to do our duty? If we are unwilling to be "the first by whom the new is tried," let us then not "be the last to lay the old aside."

**Read at the Missouri Conference of Charities and Correction.*

Suggestions to Settlements

At the convention of the National Women's Trade Union League, held recently in St. Louis, the following are among the many resolutions which are of special interest to social workers:

CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

Young Workers' Knowledge of Their Rights

"WHEREAS, The yearly influx of young boys and girls into the industrial world, with no knowledge whatsoever of their rights under their own State laws, is one of the most menacing facts in our industrial life; and

"WHEREAS, Their ignorance and inexperience makes exploitation easy and helps to break down protective legislation; therefore, be it

Resolved, That the National Women's Trade Union League urge at once upon the educational authorities to introduce into the public school curriculum a special study of the State and Federal laws that have

been enacted for their protection; and that such a course shall be of a nature to equip the boys and girls entering the industrial world with a full sense of his or her responsibility for seeing that the laws are enforced."

Requirements for the Issuance of Working Certificates

"WHEREAS, For years almost every State has enacted provisions for the safety, health and welfare of the workers, but

"WHEREAS, No adequate attempt has been made to bring to the knowledge of the child these laws so important to him and so fraught with importance to the general welfare of the State; therefore, be it

"Resolved, That the National Women's Trade Union League urge upon the educational authorities that no working certificates be issued to a boy or girl unless he or she has passed a satisfactory examination in the laws which have been reached by the State for their protection."

"The Committee on Education wishes to recommend, in connection with the last two resolutions regarding 'study of laws enacted' and 'issuing of working certificates,' that the Committee on Education of each local shall devote special time and energy to agitation along these lines."

I should like to make a further suggestion. That every other organization standing for social betterment should prevail upon the educational authorities to introduce these subjects into the public schools, and until the Boards of Education in the various communities see fit to make these subjects part of the public school curriculum it should be the duty of the settlement, which has been the pioneer in other reform and educational movements, to interpret these laws to their constituents.

Had such a scheme been in vogue, a Baltimore philanthropist might have been spared the unpleasantness of appearing in court for having violated the Ten-Hour Law. Among the girls interviewed as prospective witnesses, one lived in the Working Girls' Home of the Y. W. C. A. and another a club member of that institution; two were members of the Girls' Friendly Society and one a constituent of the Jewish Educational Alliance.

When the foreman announced "overtime until further notice," one girl had the intelligence to say, "It is against the law." The foreman, however, replied by saying: "We have secured a permit from the Commissioners to meet our rush orders." Believing this to be true, the girls continued to work without a word of complaint. It was through a mere coincidence that news of this violation reached the ears of the inspector, but not until the rush period was over.

Had these subjects been taught, as suggested above, at least someone would have known that it is impossible to obtain a permit to violate the law.

G.

Valuable Pamphlets

A number of valuable papers, prepared by Dr. Lee K. Frankel, have just been distributed. They include "Visiting Nursing from a Business Organization's Standpoint," read at the meeting of the National Organization for Public Health Nursing; "Industrial Insurance the Basis of Industrial Hygiene," reprinted from the transactions of the Fifteenth International Congress on Hygiene and Demography; "Insurance Companies and Public Health Activities," read at the meeting of the National Public Health Association, and "Popularizing Health Conservation," read before the American Life Convention.

At the recent meeting of the Maryland State Conference of Charities and Correction there were spirited meetings on the advisability of State aid to widows. Miss Minnie F. Low of Chicago read a paper giving the experience of Chicago with mothers' pensions, and Mr. Solomon Baroway of Baltimore discussed the subject at some length. They expressed themselves in favor of pensions. The entire Jewish group was in favor of pensions; on the other hand, non-Jewish workers were divided, some for and some opposed.

The Magnus Butzel branch of the public library of Detroit was dedicated on October 13th. Among those who took part were Rabbi Leo M. Franklin, Hon. Oscar B. Marx, Mr. Albert Kahn and Mr. Ferd Butzel.

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THE NEXT BIENNIAL MEETING

The Eighth Biennial Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Charities will be held in Memphis, Tenn., May 6th to 8th. There will be two sessions the first day, Wednesday, three on Thursday, and one, perhaps two, on Friday. The National Conference of Charities and Correction will hold its opening meeting Friday evening, May 8th, and the work of the Jewish conference will be cleared up before the other sessions begin. This has been the practice in the past, and the result has been very satisfactory, the two conferences meeting jointly, yet not overlapping.

The meeting at Memphis affords an opportunity for a section of the country that has been all but unrepresented in previous conferences to participate in the deliberations without the inconvenience and expense that has hitherto been unavoidable. In some of the Southern and Southwestern States charities have been efficiently organized, and they need a common meeting place for the discussion of their peculiar problems. Their problems are as real and troublesome as are the larger problems to the great cities, and require as much study and attention. They should therefore seize the opportunity to attend the Memphis conference and take an active interest and part in the meetings to be held there.

There was a time when the National Conference was regarded by those not well acquainted with its work more or less as an association of relief societies, concerned mainly with the distribution of what is known as outdoor relief; but nothing can be further from the truth. On the program

of the conference settlements and immigration work, social service and orphan asylums are equally welcome, and there is no phase of Jewish philanthropic or social activity that is out of place or will not be given the hearing it is entitled to. It would redound to the benefit of some of the national organizations if they would make use of the platform of the National Conference of Jewish Charities to bring their work before the Jewish public. The Free Loan Associations will this year be given a place on the program, and those interested in this kind of work will find much to stimulate them in conferring with workers engaged in cultivating other fields.

While new forces will always be welcome, the old should maintain their interest and enthusiasm in the meetings of the National Conference. There is a tendency on the part of men and women who have attended a number of these conferences and who have in time past borne the brunt of organizing and conducting them to feel that they have performed their duty, and are privileged to step aside and let others express themselves. This self-effacing attitude does more credit to their modesty than to their energy, and works out to the detriment of the conference. Without their active participation the conference is not fully representative of the length and breadth of Jewish charity, and the character of the meetings must suffer. Every Jewish worker, whether professional or volunteer, ought to feel a loyalty to the National Conference of Jewish Charities that makes his absence, without an adequate excuse, unthinkable.