

me with to feed my child, after Christmas, the loss of my position [made me] now unable to buy food for the baby[.] I must starve and also see the rest of the children do the same, at the end of 3 months my chubby little fellow that weighed 11 lbs at birth now was just merely a skeleton.

When the mother sat down to write to the bureau, she was pregnant once more, and was horrified by the thought that the nightmare of before would recur:

I am to become a mother again this coming month and just what I have endured I must go through again, no food for the ones I already have and nothing to nourish the coming, only abuse and torture at the hands of the man who promised to provide and protect woman, and no law to enforce this promise. . . . I love my children and willing would have as many as possible but never before have I dreaded the ordeal of child birth, as I am afraid to look upon its little face, how can it be human and a perfect child after all that I have been through this last time[?] each place I have asked for advice what to do or for to compel my husband to work and provide for me and the children, the best I receive is, (why do you live with him and have children for such a man[?] You deserve no pity,) nice advice to poor mothers, who are nothing but fools for men but to bear their children for them and then afterwards neglect them to go out to work for to buy their food, God help the poor mothers of today, the cry is Save the babies but what about the mothers who produce these babies[?]¹¹

Upon receiving the letter, Julia Lathrop, then Chief of the Children's Bureau, requested, via an interoffice memo, that someone visit the woman to "see if there is some human way to help her. . . . This type of letter is becoming too frequent."¹² What exactly Lathrop meant by "this type" is not known, but if she was referring to letters in which deprivation, abuse, and victimization were dominant themes, she was perhaps more prescient than she realized. For during the Machine Age, the Children's Bureau received thousands of letters that showed a dark and terrifying side of American family life. The following are examples from among these letters.

A farmer's wife and mother of nine children from Winterville, Georgia, wrote that she was tired of having to care for children who were constantly underfoot and for a husband who did not "sympathize" with her "one bit" but only talked "rough" to her. "Should I be [de]lined of a few simple articles or money either[?]"¹³

A Southington, Connecticut, woman complained, "[The] father [of my girl and with whom I am about to have another child] is getting so mean because he can not find work so he started beating me often, so [I] got

him arrested got 30 days am afraid when he comes back home will beat me more, and do not know [what] to do."¹⁴

A Brooklyn, New York, mother detailed the "tortured lives" she and her six-year-old daughter were forced to endure as the result of her husband's "disordered mentality": "Shortly after [my daughter] was born, upon reaching home from work in the evening, if I happened to be giving my child her feeding, he would snatch the bottle from her mouth and say 'who in the hell does she think she is, I ought to be ready to serve him with supper immediately' although he came home at indefinite times. And whether it was 4 o'clock PM or 4 AM we had to suffer, as we often do now, his thunderous demands. Kissing me, loving me, striking me, all in the same moment."¹⁵

A 15-year-old girl from Hillsvale, Virginia, beseeched President Roosevelt, "While every one has gone off and left me this morning I will try and write you a few lines. I can't go to school because I have to work to hard at home, but still Mother and Dad seem to think I don't do anything. I have a big brother they send him to school and buy him pretty clothes while I haven't hardly any clothes. What I do have are not pretty like other girls are. Daddy drinks very much & always is cussing me. I wonder why they can be so mean to me if I'm really their child. I used to play my guitar every spare minute I had but I didn't play to suit mother and she made me stop. Mr. Roosevelt I am so very unhappy what can I do that will make my life happy? I know you haven't time to fool with a little girl like me, but you was the only one I know to tell my story to. Well I'll stop for I have to scrub the floors & get dinner before mother gets back. Love, . . . P.S. Answer soon as possible. My parents would whip me if they knew I wrote you. I'll wait for the mail though so pleas ans."¹⁶

Finally, a "step-mother" from Glendale, California asked what she could do about a father-in-law whom she suspected was sexually abusing one of her husband's daughters. "[At bedtime] Grandpa goes in with D, always, closes the door and actually gets in bed with her and stays until she is asleep. . . . I no longer believe that he loves D., but I have come to believe that she is an obsession with him. . . . For instance, he was putting vaseline on her 'pee-pee' every night. . . . He fondles her constantly and nobody knows what goes on behind those doors, when he takes her to bed."¹⁷

I introduce these letters because in a discussion of New Fatherhood it is possible to lose sight of the fact that fatherhood has both a good side and a bad. (The same can be said of motherhood.)¹⁸ Because the modernization of fatherhood was basically about making men more caring and