

INDIVIDUALISM

LITTLE PINE BOXES

By Henry George, Jr.

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“I NEVER saw a baby nor heard of a baby while I was in town.” This is the remarkable prefatory utterance of Mrs. John van Vorst and Miss Marie van Vorst in their collaborated book, “The Woman Who Toils.” It is of industrial life in Perry, a New York mill town, that the book treats. Say the authors:

The American woman is restless, dissatisfied. Society, whether among the highest or lowest classes, has driven her toward a destiny that is not normal. The factories are full of old maids; the ballrooms in the worldly centers are full of old maids. For natural obligations are substituted the fictitious duties of clubs, meetings, committees, organizations, professions, a thousand unwomanly occupations. Among the American born women of this country the sterility is greater, the fecundity less than those of any other nation in the world, unless it be France, whose anxiety regarding depopulation we would share in full measure were it not for the foreign immigration to the United States, which counteracts the degeneracy of the American.

The original causes for this sterility are moral and not physical. When this is known, does not the philosophy of the American working woman become a subject of vital interest? Among the enemies to fecundity and a natural destiny there are two which act as potently in the lower as in the upper classes—the triumph of individualism, the love of luxury.

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Embodied in the preface is a letter to one of the joint authors from President Roosevelt, in which, with undoubted earnestness, he says that “the man or woman who deliberately avoids marriage, and has a heart so cold as to know no passion, and a brain so shallow and selfish as to dislike having children, is in effect a criminal against the race, and should be an object of contemptuous abhorrence by all healthy people. . . . There is no physical trouble among us Americans. The trouble with the situation you set forth is one of character, and therefore we can conquer it if we only will.”



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Mrs. and Miss van Vorst say that American-born men and women in high and low life are marrying less, and, when married, are having fewer children than was the wont of yore in this country. President Roosevelt accentuates the authors' belief that the cause of the evil is moral—that one class of American-born men and women seek a false standard of living, and hence cannot afford to marry, or, marrying, cannot support children; while another class, with no need for thought of expense do marry, but will not trouble with children.

This speaks truly of many of the rich, but does it speak as truly of the other classes? I think not.

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Take the rich: As when Augustus Caesar had to prohibit more than eight divorces to each of the nobility and had to encourage by marks of distinction the begetting of children among them, so now with our aristocracy of wealth, stability of wedlock is falling by the way and children are becoming unfashionable. In the mad and eager chase of pleasure, marital bands snap or melt and offspring are not wanted.

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But why among the temperate middle class are there so many old maids and matured bachelors? The reason is not lack of inclination to wed. It is lack of means. The present state of intellectual development makes for them a certain standard of living indispensable to decent ease and happiness. But, because of the expense, the attainment of that standard is more difficult for them when wedded than when single. Hence they avoid marriage. Their standard is not false. What is false is that something that thrusts itself between them and their standard's attainment in wedlock.

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If it be thus with the rich and the middle classes, how is it with those who constitute the mass of the community—the poor? Mrs. and Miss van Vorst say that they did not see or hear of a baby while they were in the mill town of Perry. That indicates a departure among the poor; for as a rule they marry and welcome children.

Yet to what are these children born? Want or the fear of want is the ravaging wolf that pursues them from the cradle. The ever-pressing, ever-consuming, blood-sweating business that they must learn is how to satisfy the stomach's hunger.

And how well do they learn that lesson? Multitudes of boys must risk the penitentiary and the gibbet for scant physical comforts, and thousands of girls must sell their bodies to satisfy simple creature needs!

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As for the babies: the little pine boxes in the morgue of any of our great cities tell their pathetic tale!

Starved, strangled by merciless physical conditions, with never a chance to live their lives—these little innocents are hurried in thousands away to the grave before they have come to know the cradle. They die in our centers of population like flies in an August heat. Poverty kills them, and poverty buries them. Their little pine coffins are huddled together in one great, common trench in Potter's Field, with only numbers to guide some grieving mother who comes with tears and flowers to find the sleeping place!

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Did the Maker of the world intend all this? I cannot believe so. If men but followed the natural order that makes for equality—which condemns special privileges which rob some into corrupting wealth and others into brutalizing want—there would at all times be plenty for all. Population, then, would regulate itself by the operation of a great natural law, which my father, in his "Progress and Poverty," has defined in these words:

This law is that population, instead of being always uniform, has beautiful adaptations by which the tendency to increase is strong where a greater population would give increased comfort and where the perpetuity of the race is threatened by the mortality induced by adverse conditions, but weakens just as the higher development of the individual becomes possible and the perpetuity of the race is assured.

The law of population accords with and is subordinate to the law of intellectual development, and any danger that human beings may be brought into the world where they cannot be provided for arises not from the ordinances of nature, but from social maladjustments that in the midst of wealth condemn men to want.

Henry George Jr