

# STRAWS IN THE WIND



SIGNIFICANT NOTES IN  
WORLD AFFAIRS TODAY

## Parents Versus Non-Parents

*The War for the Future*

By Gilbert Seldes

*This new class war is more significant than that other class struggle projected by the proletarians. The difference in attitude and standard of living between parents and those who have no children is wide. Mr. Seldes points out, not too seriously, several salient facts*

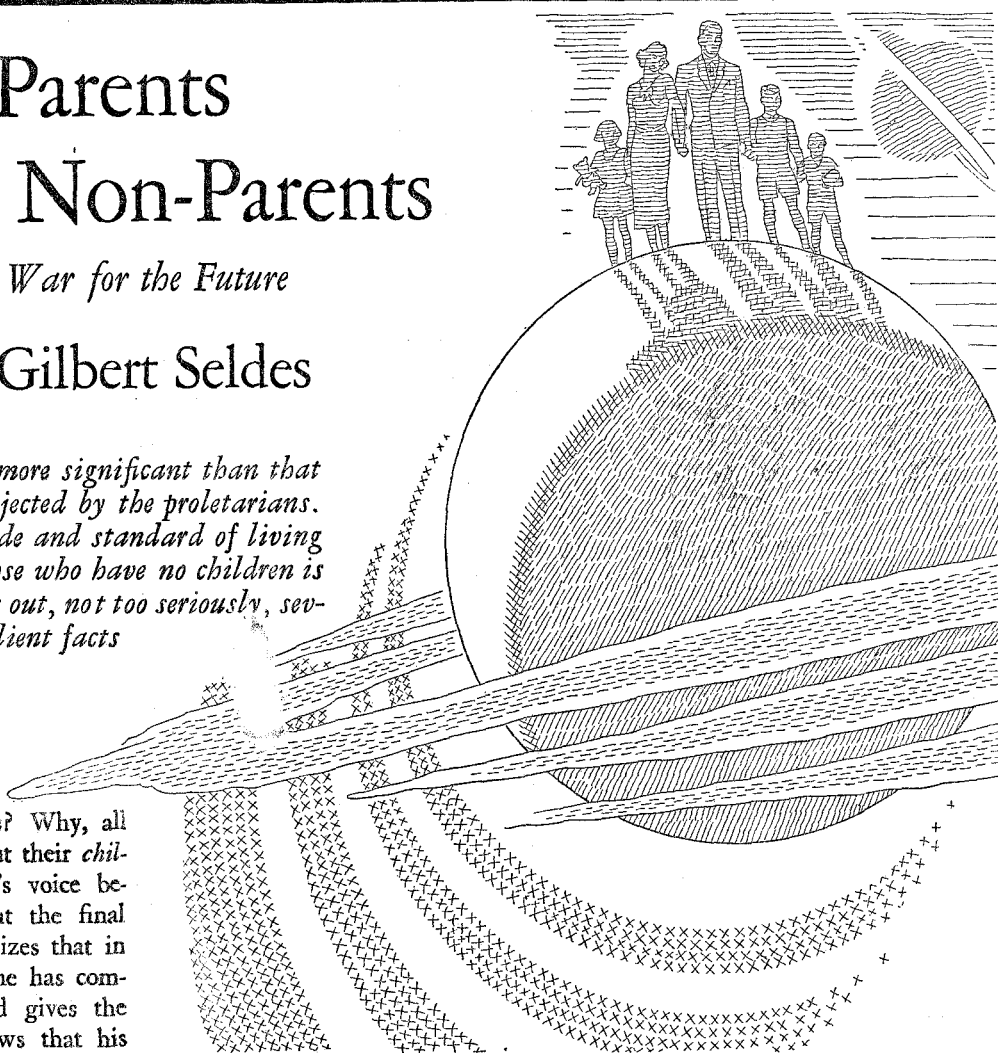
BILL and Lucy Childs? Why, all they do is talk about their children!" Mrs. Knott's voice becomes almost hysterical at the final word, and Jim Knott realizes that in his efforts to be helpful, he has committed a social error and gives the whole thing up. He knows that his wife has spoken the truth: the Childs are agreeable enough and it must be said for them that they do not go about repeating the kind of bright sayings for which tabloids pay a dollar; but they have a tendency to bring their two growing boys and a six-year-old daughter into the conversation when you would least expect it. On the train for instance, last week, when the rubber was ended there was some talk about taxes and relief, and Bill Childs suddenly said, "You know, a few years ago every one was talking about telling youngsters the facts of life. Well, the thing that embarrasses me is to explain to my kids why some people have no work. Last night Johnnie asked me why I had a job and Jimmie Saunders's father had none. I think I blushed." And

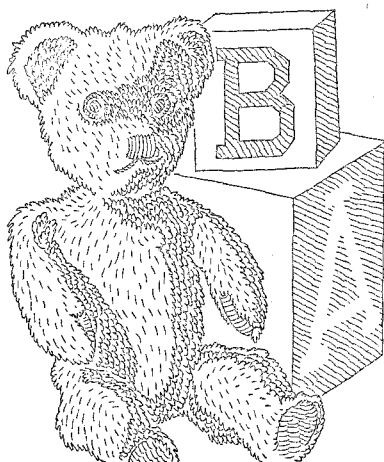
then when the men started on golf, Bill Childs didn't seem so interested. Probably wanted to go on talking about his kids. Sort of a mania.

Mrs. Knott has experienced similar situations and being one of the smarter hostesses, she has solved her difficulties perfectly. She lives in two sets and makes it a point that, under her roof, at least, they shall not meet. She has found that women who have children or intend to have them, are fairly congenial to one another, but that you can't have two mothers and three or four women who can't be bothered, at the same time.

The thing Annabel Knott doesn't know is that when she utters her heart-cry about the Childs family, she is sniping from under cover in a new class-

war, incomparably the most critical ever fought. It is the fundamental war of our time, the struggle for the possession of the future fought on one side by those who have children and on the other by that strange group of human beings for whom there is no specific name, since they are more than childless, they heartily disbelieve in children—you might call them, a little awkwardly, non-parents. To make it easier to identify them, I have named my examples on each side in a simple way. Multiply the Childs by eighteen million and you have the families in the United States who have children; multiply the Knotts by eleven and a half million and you have the families who have no children under voting age. Childs: children; Knotts: not.





The Knotts and the Childs are both members of the same country club. Last year, the day after Dollfuss was assassinated, Mrs. Pastor, who is almost sixty, held up before their eyes a newspaper with "Italy Mobilizes" in dreadful black print, and said, "It's just like 1914; and it makes my blood run cold." And Mrs. Knott laughed and answered, "Let them have their war, for all of me. Jim's over age for front-line fighting." Another woman hoped we'd be in it and out of it soon, because all her grown-up relatives were too old and her grandchildren too young. Mrs. Childs said, "If it lasted only three years they'd get Arthur out of college." As Mrs. Knott remarked to a friend, "Lucy Childs seemed actually to get more and more depressed, as if her Alfred or Albert or whatever his name is was going right out and die miserably in the trenches just to show what a good mother she is. Really, I mean!"

More immediate than war was the pitched battle of Route 19-a. It was understood that Avondale could have some \$85,000 from some branch of that strange, impersonal, and beneficent source, the Federal Government, and it was up to the citizens to choose for what the money would be spent, the only proviso being that it should make work. The Knotts and their friends knew perfectly what Avondale needed. There was a nine-mile stretch after you leave Route 21 which was just the way the ox-cart left it, ruts and mud and, in winter, simply awful. If the money were spent on the road, every one in Avondale would benefit by it, property would go up, and your friends would be more willing to come to see you. Suppose the new road would make it easier to get to the country club?

There's no sin in a country club, is there? But the Childs got together a gang—including little Italian farmers and drug clerks and every one who had a vote in the township—to ask for a new school!

It was unreasonable, the way they argued. They wanted chemical laboratories and courses in electrical engineering and all that sort of junk, because they weren't sure that fifteen years from now they could afford to send their children to college or technical schools. They thought a training in science would make it easier for their children to get along in the world of the future—whatever that world might be. And when a lawyer on the Knott side smartly asked, "How do you know what's going to be useful fifteen years from now?" they answered that they didn't know, but had to guess. And there was the road, which wasn't guesswork, but something real and tangible, to use right now, not in the future.

Things were quite strained in Avondale for a time and every time a child ran into the street to chase a ball, the Knotts felt injured and wondered whether they hadn't better move to a town which wasn't run exclusively for the benefit of some one else's brats.

I hate to leave the Childs and the Knotts because the war between parents and the childless is an intensely personal problem; but there are a few general observations to make. One of them, I admit, is a bit startling: some of the Knotts may have children and some of the Childs might just as well never have had them. There are parents who live their lives without thinking of their children and there are childless men and women, married or unmarried, who care about the future—after all, nephews and nieces and little cousins will grow up, too. The second observation I quote from an English writer, Doctor Harry Roberts, and it supplies the reason for bringing into the open the hidden hostility between the two classes: "There can be no doubt," he says, "that at present we are offering rewards to the infertile, and hardships and difficulties to the fertile." And he adds, sardonically, "A stock-breeder who worked on these lines would soon find himself in Queer Street." And for a final warning: "So, obviously, may we."

I will come to those rewards and hardships in a moment. Just now I am impressed by a question: On the great fundamental problems of our time, can the childless have the same attitude as those who have children to think for? On war, on the settlement of our economic and political chaos, on education, on morality? On limiting fortunes, Stalinism, and boycotts? On censorship in the movies, on the quality of broadcasts, on Federal relief, on clean books, on adulterated foods? On speed limits, on comic strips, on free textbooks, on roller skating in parks, on the price of spinach, on high-school fraternities, on advertising methods? On streamline trains, airplanes, and skyscrapers?

Before answering, consider one more thing: at any level of income, the childless are richer than the parents. We all know this in practice: Jones and Williams each earn \$40 a week; Jones spends his salary on himself and his wife, Williams on three children, his wife and himself, in that order. The childless Jones has certain liberties and can afford to be indifferent to a number of Williams's perplexities, because he is definitely a richer man. A skyscraper to Jones may be a magnificent building; to Williams it may mean the loss of sunlight for his children; and the streamline train which is only a "stunt" to Jones, may mean a change in the cost of ordinary railfares which will enable the father to make a home for his children in the suburbs two or three years from now. Imagine another great era of boom prosperity in which the airplane goes into quantity production. All the Knotts will buy; most of the Childs will be content with a new motor car, and the battle of Avondale will be repeated on another line, for the Knotts will no longer care for good roads, they will want landing fields out of the taxes collected in Avondale, and the Childs will be the ones clamoring for good roads.

I said, "imagine another great era of boom prosperity," because on the face of it, we all would love to be rich and spendthrift again. But underneath, aren't fathers and mothers worrying more about security than about sudden wealth? Would they speculate? Nineteenths of them didn't speculate the last time. How many of them want again the kind of boom that ends in the chaos of 1929 and after?



The Census Bureau, which can tell, at a glance, how many native-born red-headed Anabaptists have radios, has no specific figures on the number of married couples who have never had children—let alone knowing how many will do their damndest not to have any in the future. There are available, to be sure, statistics on the birth-rate which really do not bear on the specific relation between the begetters and the refusers of children. We know that even the begetters are slackening, that the size of families goes down and that, in a sense, it now takes, to reproduce a child, twice as many people as it did in the great days of Grover Cleveland, because in those days 40 children were born to every 1000 of population and today less than 20 are born. If the birth rate had kept up, we would now send out 5,000,000 announcements of blessed events, actually we send out only 2,000,000.

The only important figure we have is that 7,000,000 families in the United States consist of two persons and the percentage of couples without children is moving steadily upward. Even allowing for widows with one child and odd assortments of uncles and nephews making a household, the greater part of these 7,000,000 couples must be truly childless, and the significance of this is that it leaves only some 18,000,000 couples who are parents. As there are 74,000,000 men and women over the age of twenty in the country, this means that considerably less than half of the adult population is bound to protect and nourish and prosper the citizenry of the future. Only the 36,000,000 parents have to think all the time what effect a new beer garden or a new motor road or a new movie house will have on the impressionable and the immature. Only they are compelled to wonder who will pay taxes in 1970 or redeem pledges. Because children are, as Bacon said, hostages to fortune, parents have a claim upon the future. They are singularly incapable of pressing that claim; they are almost unaware that they have a special right and standing in the community.

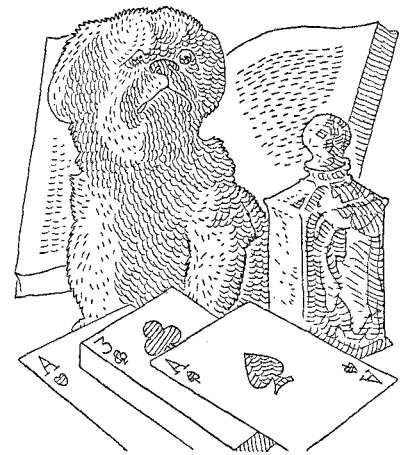
For instance, there is the question of movie censorship, on which the best Knottish opinion is that you must not reduce the movies to the level of a child's intelligence. Having sat through hundreds of pictures meant for adults,

I appreciate any protest against reducing the standard any further, but in the company of the 36,000,000 other men and women who are responsible for children, I come up against a single unalterable fact: that children *will* go to the movies. It thereupon becomes a matter of moment to me that the pictures shown be of a proper nature and while I am not shocked when a lad of six sings a modified version of Frankie and Johnny and his slightly younger sister says "comup'nseemesometime," I know that dozens of pictures have been made which are upsetting to the adolescent mind and hundreds which, setting morals aside, are the product of uncultivated and uninteresting minds, and are therefore vulgarizing. Assuming that, like most parents, I have at least a vague idea of the *rate* at which I wish children to develop, I do not want the process either hastened or retarded by books or movies or plays. My own pleasure, let us incorrectly assume, depends on highly sophisticated movies. Under a strict censorship, I forego them in favor of the sensibilities of children. If I am not a parent, I protest and make brilliant remarks; if I am a parent, I protest dully and stupidly, but I protect my children.

I am not proposing any solution of the cinema-censor problem in all this. I am only noting that the approach to the problem is bound to be basically altered for better or worse by the circumstance of having children. That the childless should determine what movies children shall be in a position to see, is obviously an impropriety. Almost as flagrant an impropriety as limiting the gay and sophisticated non-parents to the movie fodder found fit for children.

I said, above, that I "forego" a pleasure, although accompanying a child to a Silly Symphony is a far greater right than sitting through most of our major films in the company of adults. The point remains, that parents sacrifice their immediate pleasure to the long-run good of their children. They look toward the future. And it would be a good thing if they looked far enough to make their position, as parents, politically more tolerable. Until parents act politically, they have no control of the future; and paradoxically, they cannot act politically until they forget for a moment that they have children.

You recall the remark of Mrs. Knott:



"All they talk about is their *children*!" And (if you are a parent yourself) you must have recognized in these words a distorted echo of something you and all your parent-friends have said. It is a matter of emphasis. The same words, when parents say them, sound like this: "All they talk about is *their* children!" An important, an essential difference. For the second way concedes the propriety of talking about children and dissents only in regard to a detail: whose children shall be talked about? In the universal "*ours*" which is the answer, lies the root-trouble of parents as a political force. For it isn't talking about children that is important, but thinking about them, and so far parents have thought about *their* children more or less as the enemies of all other children, wanting them to have better chances in life, to be better dressed and have prettier manners, to win more prizes, get bigger scholarships, be in the best dancing classes, and arrive at maturity with a better chance to make more money than any one else. That, I am told, is human nature and I do not propose to change it just now. But when parents learn that the real danger to their children lies not in other parents and other children, but in the great number of childless citizens who are not interested in the remote future, they will bury their rivalries and unite against the common enemy.

I would like to see the Pop-Mom party taking the place of the Republicans, and "Down with Children" substituted for "The New Deal," because a political division with parents on one side and non-parents on the other is far more sensible than any we have experienced so far. Let a political party omit from its platform the customary polite

phrases about children being the hope of the future, and offer, instead, a change in the income tax law giving an exemption of \$2000 a year for each child under the age of seventeen, making up for any deficit by taxing double all large incomes enjoyed by the childless. Then you would have a political campaign which meant something. Let aldermen and mayors run for office with a pledge that on matters of education only parents shall have a decisive word and that on all other pertinent matters, they should have double votes. Let statesmen promise protection to parents now struggling against the intolerable burdens placed upon them, the penalties they suffer for doing the one thing which the state most wants them to do, that is provide citizens for the future.

Two exemptions already exist, in a way. First, the father who is the sole support of a family is classed in the lower brackets for duty in war. Mrs. Knott, if she went through the last draft, feels a little resentful about this, pointing out that Jim Knott as an inventor of electrical appliances is irreplaceable, while Bill Childs would never be missed, except by his wife and those ever-erupting children of theirs. Mrs. Knott is dead right. It is not Bill Childs' present value that spares him from active service; it is the circumstance that a few years ago he became a father. A grateful country, eager to remain strong and populous, wishes to reward him and delays his call to the colors; and after the war, it allows him a second exemption: \$400 per child from the total on which he pays his income tax. This means that if Bill Childs is around the average, the Government really allows him about \$15 a year for each child, which goes a long way, doesn't it? toward paying the \$700 for straightening the boy's teeth and the \$150 a year for extra milk, with plenty left over for clothes and bicycles and books.

Mrs. Knott says the Childs wanted children and pretend to like having them around, so let them pay. She doesn't know that all of her husband's electrical inventions would be useless if the Childs weren't bringing up children who would in turn found families which would, in turn, buy electrical devices. She doesn't know, in short, how a country lives and what its future depends on. She is willing for the Childs to take the financial rap. The

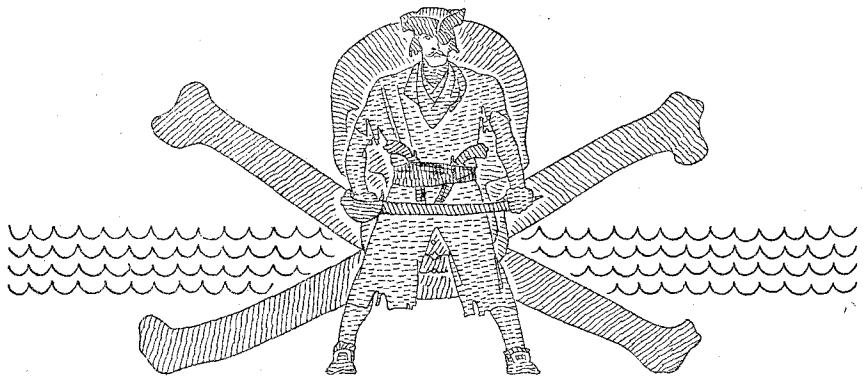
grotesque penalties parents pay for the crime of having children strike her as just about right. Let us accept her judgment.

Because the chief thing is not the present cost of children; it is the virtual impossibility for unorganized parents to control the course of national events and create the kind of future which their children ought to enjoy. These parents may have different aspirations, ranging from Communism to the great ideals based on the McKinley tariff. That does not matter. What matters is that they want to be sure of a future in which their children can live.

Suppose that no war could be declared without the consent of parents; suppose that all social legislation should

be submitted first to those whom it will most affect—parents; suppose that parents had the determining vote on the distribution of taxes. Suppose, in short, that life in the United States were guided by the needs of those who have provided life in the United States.

The only thing you can be sure of is that Mrs. Knott wouldn't like it at all. Mrs. Knott would go out in a rage and buy three new dresses to calm her jagged nerves. But Mrs. Childs, sitting calmly at home, would smile and see whether, by a few expert changes, she couldn't make that old coat do another year. She would still have some problems left, but I think she might have a friendlier feeling toward her government.



## Are Today's Children Different?

By Charles G. Muller

ON the movie screen, *Treasure Island* raced to an exciting climax. Despite the protests of his besotted band that he was raising a shin mark for Long John Silver's cannon on the pirated *Hispaniola*, Captain Smollett hoisted Britain's flag above the log-house.

"Strike my colors! No, sir, not I!" cried the brave captain with fine sentiment. "Where that flag flies is England!"

Through the theater spread the slightest ripple of applause.

Then the pirates ran their Jolly Roger up the schooner's masthead. And the mere sight of skull-and-crossbones—connoting robbery and bloodshed and

all that is lawless—brought from the youthful audience a spontaneous burst of whistles, shouts, and stamping.

For boys and girls of 1935 are no different from the children who thrilled to *Treasure Island* in 1895 and who since have become law-abiding, upright Captain Smolletts. They still prefer lusty pirates to honest seamen.

To say that boys today are more sophisticated than those of a past era, that modern girls are young ladies at twelve, is to lay oneself open to a charge of reckless judgment. Because until approximately fourteen, normal boys and girls of every generation live in a world that has nothing adult in it.

Their juvenile universe is a simple,