

KEN

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p. 31

NOTES ON LIFE OR DEATH

**"What," asked the First Lady,
"is the use of saving babies, if
they can't earn a decent living
when they grow up?" Or, in other
words, why keep them alive?**

Two years ago your reporter had the honor of an argument with Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt. The First Lady was in Grand Rapids, inspecting a whooping cough research project supported by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration or maybe the letters had been changed to WPA by that time. Your reporter was trying to explain to her the life-saving possibilities of this citywide test of a hoped-for preventive vaccine against this ill that is now the major killer of young children. With the government hard put to it for money to keep people from starving, there was danger that the project would be abandoned before the final facts were found . . .

"But if you want to get hard-boiled about it," objected the First Lady, her eyes blazing, "what's the use of science saving all those babies, if they're not to have the chance for a job that will give them a decent living when they grow up?"

In other words, "why keep them alive?"

To your reporter who believes naïvely both in science and in life, that choice put before him sounded too silly. It seemed too ghastly that we should have to put the brakes on science because it might increase the sum total of available human energy. What wealth is there, except human energy?

At that time your reporter was indignant at what seemed to him to be Mrs. Roosevelt's defeatism, but two years have passed, with us deeper than ever in our economic tailspin. It may be that the First Lady was right to doubt the power and value of science, but for a grimmer reason than the one she gave.

In a nearby large Michigan city, thousands of workers have recently been thrown out of their jobs. The County Welfare Relief Commission does what it can, with miserable state and county funds, to keep them from starving.

Classifications for these jobless were drawn up by the authorities. They are a scream, in this alleged land of plenty. If a woman is found to be "moderately active" she is allowed a grocery order of so many dollars a month. If she is "very ac-

tive" she is allowed calories to the amount of 95 cents more. Ditto her man, and a few cents extra.

It is possible that the thousands of jobless saw the chance here to chisel the relief workers, and that they began buzzing round their dirty hovels like so many hypocritical bees when the agents of mercy arrived to investigate whether or not they should be allowed to live. Whatever the reason, the category "very active" was dropped. And now there are only "moderately active" men, women, and children allowed on relief in that city . . . Not to get ahead of their calories, when they move their arms and legs, they should move *andante* . . .

For existing, for doing nothing moderately, a man and woman are allowed food, for the two of them, to the value of \$4.91 for two weeks. . . . And milk to the value of \$1.12 for the same time. . . . A little over 40 cents a day for food for two people, who had better not try to be very active, or else.

And workless ones who have been lucky enough to have come from certain southern states to this Michigan county say that this dole—compared to what they were getting in Dixie—means living on the fat of the land.

All over America there are millions, most of whom can and want to work, but whose working would mean horrible, terrible government spending, who are half-alive, much less than moderately alive on this shameful pittance or less. Their malnourishment is sickening them, yes killing them, not mercifully the way we put dogs out of their misery, but delicately, slowly with a finesse that old Torquemada would have envied.

Yes, our First Lady was right, only more so. Board up the laboratories! Smash the test-tubes! Kill the guinea pigs! Leave the monkeys in India! Put the researchers, doctors, nurses, lab-attendants on the dole and tell them to be sure not to be more than moderately active! Plug your ears against the screams of babies dying with tuberculous meningitis, and other quick deaths. Don't let them grow up to live useless moderately active half lives.