

SCIENCE *studies the* CHILD BRIDES

By Jane Stafford

WHEN 9-year-old Eunice Johns was discovered in her Tennessee home playing with a doll on her wedding day, an entire nation was stirred to horror and sympathy.

The idea of a child being taken from the nursery to face the responsibilities and physical strain that prove too severe for many a grown woman aroused a storm of indignation. Equally indignant were Eunice's parents, who, according to reports, insist that the marriage will not hurt the child, ever suggest that it will be good for her.

Which opinion is correct? The answer can be guessed at, but the question cannot be accurately answered. Not even scientists who have carefully studied child health and development will hazard a definite answer. You can tell from their faces when the subject comes up that these men of science feel as you and I do about the situation. But they have no facts, and without facts the true man of science will not make a statement.

Scientific opinion seems to be that the chief effect of such an early marriage will be on the child bride's mind and personality.

Her small body may stand the physical strain. Kindness and consideration may spare her young mind from the shock of the new experience. Such kindness and consideration will let her slip as easily as possible into her new role of wife but it does not keep her from the chief danger of too early marriage.

That, as psychologists see it, is the danger of a crippled personality. The child-bride is destined to be a sort of mental stepdaughter.

Taken from her parents' home at such an early age, she becomes the ward of her husband. Instead of parents, she has a husband for a guardian. Too young to know the significance of being married, ignorant even of the marriage relation, she can look on her husband only as a combination of grown-up playmate, guardian and mentor. The danger is that the child, accustomed at an early age to this feeling, may never completely outgrow her dependence on



A scene from the movie, "David Copperfield," in which Maureen O'Sullivan as Dora, and Frank Lawton, as David, enact a pathetic child-bride marriage.

Discard the romantic, idealistic touch of a Victorian novelist, which made tragedy beautiful instead of harsh, and you can see in Little Dora's story the probable fate of the child brides whose plight has recently shocked the nation.

This may be the ultimate result of the marriage. More immediate effects may appear. Little Eunice and other child brides probably enjoy learning, under the guidance of mother or mother-in-law, to cook and sweep and clean. Thousands of 9-year-old girls like helping with domestic tasks and are quite capable aids to the busy housewife or mother.

Left all alone in a home, however,

in such cases the children were forced or duped into the marriage, which is said not to have been the case so far as Eunice and other recent child brides are concerned.

Scientists are of the opinion that a little girl who is eager to leave a happy home, kind parents and brothers and sisters and to give up her child playmates and games for marriage with a much older man, even if she has no knowledge of the marriage relation, cannot be like most other little girls.

Physiologically these child brides are probably different also. This difference may help them to stand the physical strain of marriage, although there are no records to prove that it will. Physicians believe that even though motherhood may be physiologically possible for a girl at the age of 12 or younger, the strain will weaken her health and shorten her life.

This is especially apt to be the case if the little girl has not finished the period of most rapid growth. The child may have attained her full height and matured physiologically, but she needs more time for storing up tissue reserves to give strength for adult activities such as marriage and childbearing.

In warm climates girls are known to mature early. Children of primitive peoples mature and marry earlier than children of our civilization. Girls of 12 and 14 have borne children and not long ago was reported the case of a 7-year-old child in Delhi, India, who gave birth to a living baby.

The ages between 20 and 25 have been found most favorable for childbearing, but for girls under this age the situation is different. The death rate for mothers in childbirth is higher for those younger than 17 years than for those older. The death rate is also higher for the babies born to these very young mothers.

Among the reasons for the higher death rates of very young mothers, which means those in the 15-17 year age group, is the fact that the mother's small size may complicate the birth process. This may, however, be offset by the fact that her bones may not have become completely hardened and her tissues may be more elastic at the younger age.

ANOTHER aspect of the result of child marriages was described in a study made some years ago from the sociological viewpoint.

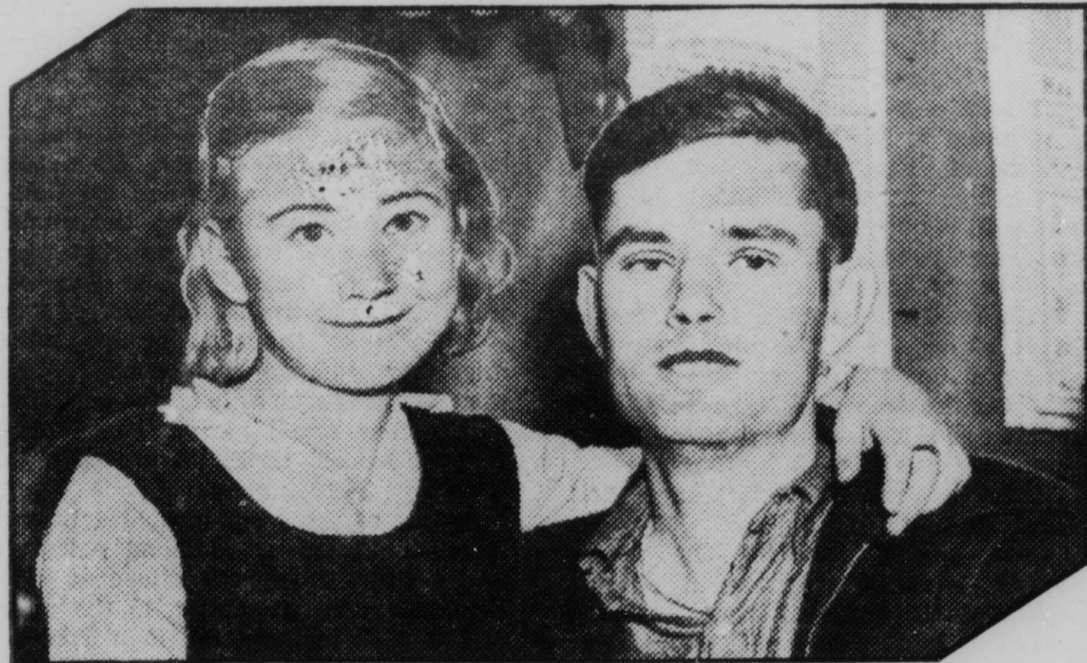
Information about 250 married children, both boys and girls, was obtained. Of these children, nearly one-fourth were under 14 years. Of this fourth a number were only 11 and 12 years. An-

other fourth of the total were just 14, and the rest were 15, with the exception of a few boys who were 16 or 17.

The marriages were largely of a very temporary character, this study showed. In 11 marriages the couples separated within a few days. In a few other cases the marriage lasted from a few weeks to a few months. In 16 cases the husband and wife never lived together or never established a home for themselves.

Of 90 married couples, 16 were still living together when the study was made some time after the marriages had been contracted, but in 28 of the 90 marriages, annulment or divorce proceedings were under way or had already been accomplished.

The authors of this sociological study, Mary E. Richmond and Fred S. Hall, pointed out an "ugly and difficult" aspect of the child marriage. This was the relation between these marriages of children and commercial exploitation and immorality. This was found in a considerable number of the marriages studied.



The 9-year-old bride and her husband—Mr. and Mrs. Charlie Johns, of Tennessee.

her husband as a guide for every thought, feeling and act.

SUCH a situation is sad for the husband as well as for the child. Neither can become equal partners and genuine comrades in marriage. The husband continues to be a guardian and his child bride remains his child wife.

You probably remember the pathetic and even tragic picture Dickens drew of Little Dora, David Copperfield's child wife. The story shows what happened to a girl who married before she was mature enough in emotions and mentality for the responsibilities of marriage, and it shows also the unhappiness this caused her husband. Yet Dora was no 9-year-old child, and while the young Copperfields lived on a small budget their living conditions included none of the physical hardships of life on a small Tennessee farm.

with the complete responsibility for running it, is quite different from merely helping or substituting temporarily. Night terrors, sleep-walking and other signs of nervous and mental strain may develop as a result of such heavy responsibility.

ALL this, of course, is speculation, not scientific knowledge based on facts. The theory is based on what might be expected to happen to the average child married at an extremely early age.

These child brides, however, are probably not average. Scientists feel—though again there is no proof—that these little girls are different and cannot be judged by ordinary standards of child development.

The average girl of 9 or 10 or 12 years would not willingly marry. There are cases on record of average little girls being married at these ages, but



Dorothy Taylor, 11-year-old Oklahoma girl who was married to a 57-year-old farmer in 1933.