

With more old people in our population than ever before, millions of families are faced with an agonizing problem.



What do you owe your parents?

by Al Ostrow

THE SPINSTER schoolteacher who never married because she has to support her mother . . .

The white-haired grandmother who sobs with self-pity because "the children never have time to visit me any more" . . .

The husband whose home life is shadowed by the presence of a mother-in-law whose efforts to please him are uniformly futile . . .

Tottering, elderly men and women, huddled together in the monotonous misery of a "rest home"—while their children complain bitterly about the high cost of keeping them there . . .

You know all these people. Everybody does. They live in every community in America. They are part of a most painful personal problem—the relationship of aging parents with their children and grandchildren.

Every year, the problem engulfs thousands of additional families. Modern medical science is chiefly responsible. According to insurance-company records, 40 years was the normal life span a century ago. Today, thanks to better public and private health measures, the average person can anticipate living to 70 or more.

It's estimated that there are 14 million persons over 65 in the United States. And the figure may double in the next 25 years.

Many senior citizens reach the twilight of life with empty pocketbooks. They can't live on Social Security and have no other income. They must depend on their children for support.

The children face an agonizing choice. Should they divert funds needed to educate their own children to support their elderly parents? Should

feeble elders be kept in the family circle, wearying a wife by constant demands for attention, or should they be placed in an institution or rest home?

You've heard the small child's cruel remark: "Daddy says we can't afford a new car because we have to feed Grandma." And the wife's grumble that "I can't stand my mother-in-law. She's always criticizing me and the children."

Equally poignant are the resentments of affluent elders, wealthy enough to live alone and shower lavish gifts on their descendants, who nevertheless find themselves ignored by their children. The children are "too busy" raising their own families and earning a living.

NO YARDSTICK can measure the misery of millions of parents who find their golden years tarnished by real or imaginary neglect by their children. Nor can words describe the mental agony of children who must decide what to do with an aged father or mother who depends on them. Let's take a look at some typical family case histories concerning this problem.

John J. is a railroad man, eligible to retire on pension next January. He and his wife Helen would like to sell their home and move to Florida. But living with them is Helen's mother, who will soon celebrate her 90th birthday.

"I'm unable to care for Mother any more," Helen explains tearfully. "If we took her to Florida, none of us would enjoy it. If we paid to put her in a rest home, we wouldn't be able to get along on John's retirement income. I don't know what we're going to do about Mother."

George and Mary B. decided they would have to "do something" about the presence of his feeble, forgetful father in their home. The old man required so much attention that Mary's health was suffering and they felt their own three children were being deprived of a normal family life.

They drove around week after week, seeking a suitable rest home. They saw pitiful clusters of faded, wrinkled men and women, sitting and staring blankly at sometimes ramshackle surroundings, waiting stolidly for the curtain to fall on their barren existence. They learned what Dr. Ralph E. Dwork, Ohio State Health Commissioner, meant when he said, "I wouldn't put my dog in some of these nursing homes!"

Oh, yes, there were a few somewhat cheerful, apparently well-managed rest homes. But the operators asked from \$150 to \$500 a month. Some insisted on agreement that the parent would be removed immediately if he became seriously ill.

"We'll have to keep him at home and struggle along as best we can," Mary said hopelessly. They did—and had difficulty disguising their feeling of relief when merciful death solved the problem a year later, freeing them of a burdensome obligation.

Tom and Betty S. don't speak to Tom's brother and sister-in-law any more. Their arrangement for Tom's semi-invalid father was for the old man to spend three months with each family.

"He can't get up and down stairs without help," Betty complains. "When he gets to their house, they help him up to a room in the attic, and leave him there until it's time for him to return to us."

Betty suspects this treatment is part of a plot to