

Chapter Eight

I HAVE PROMISES TO KEEP



HOW were mothers to be saved? I went through many revolving doors, looked around, and, not finding what I was seeking, came out again. I talked incessantly to everybody who seemed to have social welfare at heart. Progressive women whom I consulted were thoroughly discouraging. "Wait until we get the vote. Then we'll take care of that," they assured me. I tried the Socialists. Here, there, and everywhere the reply came, "Wait until women have more education. Wait until we secure equal distribution of wealth." Wait for this and wait for that. Wait! Wait! Wait!

Having no idea how powerful were the laws which laid a blanket of ignorance over the medical profession as well as the laity, I asked various doctors of my acquaintance, "Why aren't physicians doing something?"

"The people you're worrying about wouldn't use contraception if they had it, they breed like rabbits. And, besides, there's a law against it."

"Information does exist, doesn't it?"

"Perhaps, but I doubt whether you can find it. Even if you do, you can't pass it on. Comstock'll get you if you don't watch out."

In order to ascertain something about this subject which was so mysterious and so unaccountably forbidden, I spent almost a year in the libraries—the Astor, the Lenox, the Academy of Medicine, the Library of Congress, and dozens of others. Hoping that

psychological treatises might inform me, I read Auguste Forel and Iwan Block. At one gulp I swallowed Havelock Ellis' *Psychology of Sex*, and had psychic indigestion for months thereafter. I was not shocked, but this mountainous array of abnormalities made me spiritually ill. So many volumes were devoted to the exceptional, and so few to the maladjustments of normal married people, which were infinitely more numerous and urgent.

I read translations from the German in which women were advised to have more children because it could be proved statistically that their condition was improved by childbearing. The only article on the question I could discover in American literature was in the *Atlantic Monthly* by Edward Alsworth Ross of the University of Wisconsin, who brought to the attention of his readers the decline of the birth rate among the upper and educated classes and the increase among the unfit, the consequences of which were sure to be race suicide.

The Englishman, Thomas Robert Malthus, remained little more than a name to me, something like Plato or Henry George. Father had talked about him, but he meant mostly agriculture—wheat and food supplies in the national sense. Possibly he had a philosophy but not, to me, a live one. He had been put away on a shelf and, in my mind, had nothing to do with the everyday human problem. I was not looking for theories. What I desired was merely a simple method of contraception for the poor.

The pursuit of my quest took me away from home a good deal. The children used to come in after school and at once hunt for me. "Where's mother?" was the usual question. If they found me at my mending basket they all leaped about for joy, took hands and danced, shouting, "Mother's home, mother's home, mother's sewing." Sewing seemed to imply a measure of permanence.

I, too, wanted to drive away the foreboding barrier of separation by closer contact with them. I wanted to have them solely to myself, to feed, to bathe, to clothe them myself. I had heard of the clean, wind-swept Cape Cod dunes, which appeared to be as far from the ugliness of civilization as I could get. Socialism, anarchism, syndicalism, progressivism—I was tired of them all. At the end of the spring, thoroughly depressed and dissatisfied, I tucked the children

under my arms, boarded a Fall River boat, and sailed off, a pioneer to Provincetown

In 1913 the tip of the Cape was nothing but a fishing village with one planked walk which, I was told, had been paid for by Congress Up and down its length the bellman, the last of the town criers, walked, proclaiming the news

At first we lived in the upper story of a fisherman's house right on the water After he went out in the morning, his wife and her children, and I and mine, were left alone Then the old women recalled scenes from their early days on the whaling vessels Their mothers had brought them forth unaided, and their own sons, in turn, had been born on the ships and apprenticed to their husbands They fitted into life simply, but the younger Portuguese, who were taking over the fishing industry, were asking what they should do about limiting their families

The village was rather messy and smelled of fish I was still too close to humanity and wanted to be more alone, so we moved to the extreme end of town Our veranda faced the Bay, and when the tide was high the water came up and lapped at the piles on which the cottage was built Stuart, Grant, and Peggy used to sit on the steps and dabble their toes At low tide they had two miles of beach on which to skip and run, it was a wonderful place to play, and all summer we had sunrise breakfasts, sunset picnics

Ethel, who had married Jack Byrne, was now widowed and had also gone into nursing She had considerable free time and stayed with me Consequently, I was able to leave the children in her care when I made my expeditions to Boston's far-famed public library, taking the *Dorothy Bradford* at noon, and coming back the next day Even there I found no information more reliable than that exchanged by back-fence gossips in any small town

I spent the entire season at Provincetown, groping for knowledge, classifying all my past activities in their proper categories, weighing the pros and cons of what good there was in them and also what they lacked It was a period of gestation Just as you give birth to a child, so you can give birth to an idea

Between interims of brooding and playing with the children I took part in the diversions of the minute colony of congenial peo-

ple Charles Hawthorne had a school of painting, and Mary Heaton Vorse with her husband, Joseph O'Brien, were there, so also were Hutch Hapgood and Neith Boyce. Jessie Ashley had lifted Big Bill Haywood out of the slough of the Paterson strike and brought him down to rest and recuperate.

Big Bill was one of the few who saw what I was aiming at, although fearful that my future might involve the happiness of my children. Even he did not feel that the small-family question was significant enough to be injected into the labor platform. Nevertheless, as we rambled up and down the beach he came to my aid with that cheering encouragement of which I was so sorely in need. He never wasted words in advising me to "wait." Instead, he suggested that I go to France and see for myself the conditions resulting from generations of family limitation in that country. This struck me as a splendid idea, because it would also give Bill Sanger a chance to paint instead of continuing to build suburban houses.

The trip to Europe seemed so urgent that no matter what sacrifices had to be made, we decided to make them when we came to them. In the fall we sold the house at Hastings, gave away some of our furniture and put the rest in storage. Although we did not realize it at the time, our gestures indicated a clean sweep of the past.

Anita Block proposed that we go via Scotland, she wanted me to write three or four articles on what twenty-five years of municipal ownership in Glasgow had done for women and children. Socialists were talking about how everything there belonged to the people themselves and had earned their own way—banks, schools, homes, parks, markets, art galleries, museums, laundries, bath houses, hospitals, and tramways. The city was about to pay off the last debt on the transportation system, and this was being hailed as a great victory, a perfect example of what Socialism could do. It sounded big and fine, and I, too, was impressed. Certainly in Glasgow, I thought, I should find women walking hand in hand with men, and children free and happy.

In October the Sangers sailed from Boston on a cabin boat, little and crowded, and one black night two weeks later steamed up the Clyde. The naval program of 1913 was causing every shipyard to run double shifts, and the flare and glare against the somber dark

was like fairyland—giant, sparkling starlights reaching from the horizon into the sky, a beautiful introduction to Utopia

The very next day I started out upon my investigations. To mind the children, aged nine, five, and three, I availed myself of a sort of employment bureau run by the Municipal Corporation. I had been told that anyone could call here for any imaginable type of service. In response to my summons, there promptly arrived at my door, standing straight and machine-like, a small boy in a buttons uniform, with chin strap holding his cap on the side of his head. Willie MacGuire's stipend was to be twelve cents an hour, or fifty cents for the half day. His function was to take the three out, entertain them, and return them faithfully at any time designated. Though he was no bigger than Stuart, his efficient manner reassured me, and I soon learned that he performed his duties diligently.

Religiously I made the rounds of all the social institutions, and at first everything appeared as I had been led to expect—except the weather. It had always just rained, and, when the sun did show itself, it was seldom for long enough to dry up the walks. Though the streets were clean, they were invariably wet and damp, and nobody wore rubbers. Everywhere could be seen little girls down on their knees, scrubbing the door-steps in front of the houses, or, again, carrying huge bundles or baskets of groceries to be delivered at the homes of the buyers. The people themselves seemed cold and rigid, as dismal as their climate. Only the policemen had a sense of humor.

As I proceeded, flaws in the vaunted civic enterprises began to display themselves. Glasgow had its show beauty spots, but even the model tenements were not so good as our simplest, lower-middle-class apartment buildings. One had been constructed for the accommodation of "deserving and respectable widows and widowers belonging to the working class" having one or more children with no one to care for them while the parents were away. But the building had been turned over to the exclusive use of widowers. Widows and their children had to shift for themselves.

All tenements were planned scientifically on the basis of so many cubic feet of air and so much light per so many human beings, ranging from quarters for two to those for five. No overcrowding was allowed.

"Well," I asked, "what happens when there are five or six children?"

"Oh, they can't live here," replied the superintendent "They must go elsewhere"

"But where?"

Conversation ceased

With particular attention I traced the adventures of one family which had expanded beyond the three-child limit. The parents had first moved over to the fringes of the city, and thereafter as more children were born had traveled from place to place, progressively more dingy, more decrepit. They now had nine and were inhabiting a hovel in the shipbuilding slums, unimaginably filthy and too far from the splendid utilities ever to enjoy them.

The further I looked, the greater grew the inconsistency. The model markets carried chiefly wholesale produce, and the really poor, who were obliged to huddle on the far side of the city, contented themselves with bread and tea and were thankful to have it. Another disappointment was the washhouses, dating from 1878 when they had been deemed a public necessity because men had protested they were being driven from their homes by washing which, on account of the incessant rain, seemed to hang there forever. A stall cost only twopence an hour, less expensive than heating water at home, and there were always women waiting in line. But the tram system, which was on the point of being liquidated in spite of its low fares, forbade laundry baskets, and, consequently, those who were not within walking distance—and they were the ones who needed it most—were deprived of its use.

Throughout the slum section I saw drunken, sodden women whose remaining, snag-like teeth stuck down like fangs and protruded from their sunken mouths. When I asked one of the executive officers of the corporation why they were so much more degraded than the men, he replied, "Oh, the women of Glasgow are all dirty and low. They're hopeless."

"But why should this be?" I persisted.

His only answer was, "It's their own fault."

Bill and I walked about late at night, overwhelmed by the unspeakable poverty. The streets were filled with fighting, shiftless beg-

gars Hundreds of women were abroad, the big shawls over their heads serving two purposes one, to keep their shoulders warm, the other, to wrap around the baby which each one carried It was apparent that their clothing consisted only of a shawl, a petticoat, a wrapper, and shoes Older children were begging, "A ha'penny for bread, Missus, a ha'penny for bread"

It was infinitely cold, dreary, and disappointing—so much talk about more wages and better subsistence, and here the workers had it and what were they getting?—a little more light, perhaps, a few more pennies a day, the opportunity to buy food a little more cheaply, a few parks in which they could wander, a bank where their money earned a fraction more interest But as soon as they passed beyond the border of another baby, they were in exactly the same condition as the people beyond the realm of municipal control

Municipal ownership was one more thing to throw in the discard

One dull, rainy day, glad to leave behind the shrill, crying voices of the beggars of Glasgow, we boarded a horrid cattle boat bound for Antwerp The children were all seasick as we bounced and tossed over the North Sea It was something of a job to handle the three of them with no nurse, especially when the storm threw them out of their beds on to the cabin floor Fortunately they suffered no fractures, although twenty-six horses in the hold had to be shot because their legs had been broken

We arrived at the Gare du Nord in Paris at the end of another dismal, bewildering day—toot-toot¹ steam, luggage, brusque snatching by blue-smocked, black-capped porters, all looking like villains, jam at the ticket gate, racketsy taxi to a hotel on the Left Bank

Paris seemed another Glasgow, more like a provincial village than a great metropolis The atmosphere of petty penury destroyed my dreams of Parisian gaiety and elegance, even the French children were dressed in drab, gloomy, black aprons Within a few days we had sub-let an apartment on the Boulevard St Michel across from the Luxembourg Gardens where Grant and Peggy could play It was four flights up, and the cold penetrated to the marrow of our bones We could put tons of briquets into the little fireplaces and never get any heat All the family went into flannel underwear, the first since my early childhood

I presented Stuart to the superintendent of the district *lycée*. He demanded a birth certificate, and I had none.

"But without it how can I tell where he was born or how old he is?" The official seemed to imply that Stuart did not exist.

"But," I protested, "here he is. He's alive."

"No, no, Madame! The law says you must have a birth certificate."

I had to send him to a private school, which was something of a drain on the budget.

Bill found a studio on Montparnasse, just back of the Station. Again and again he came home aglow with news of meeting the great Matisse and other revolutionary painters barely emerging from obscurity. I trailed around to studios and exhibits occasionally, but I was trying to become articulate on my own subject, and paid scant attention to those who loomed up later as giants in the artistic world. The companionship of Jessie Ashley and Bill Haywood, who had just come to Paris, was more familiar to me.

I was also eager to encounter French people and discover their points of view. One of the first was Victor Dave, the last surviving leader of the French Commune of 1871. Thanksgiving Day we had a little dinner party and invited American friends to greet him. He was then over eighty, but still keen and active. As the evening wore on we started him talking about his past experiences and he held us enthralled until way into the morning, when we all had breakfast in the apartment.

The old Communard spoke English far better than any of us spoke French. He was now making three dollars a week by his linguistic abilities, because he was the sole person the Government could call upon not only for the language but the dialects of the Balkans. Just the day before he had been translating a new series of treaties which France was making with the Balkan States in a desperate attempt to tie them to the Triple Entente. Though he was a philosophical person who could be gay over his own hardships, his confidences to us were serious and sad. From the agreements then being drawn up, particularly those with Rumania, he could see nothing but war ahead, predicting definitely that within five years all nations would be at each other's throats. We newcomers to Europe could not grasp the meaning of his words, and the residents

shrugged their shoulders and said, "He is getting old He cannot see that we are now beyond war, that people are too intelligent ever to resort to it again"

As I look back it is apparent that we heard in France the whole rumblings of the World War Unrest was in the air as it had been in the United States, but with a difference Theaters were showing anti-German plays, *revanche* placards decorated Napoleon's tomb in the Invalides, and the rusty black draperies around the shrouded statue of Strasbourg in the Place de la Concorde pointed a macabre note These were remembered afterwards, at the time they were merely part of the Paris scene

I realized the disadvantage of not being better acquainted with the French language, and started in to practice what I knew and learn more Good fortune brought me in touch with an Englishwoman, the wife of the editor of *L'Humanité*, the organ of the Confederation Générale de Travail, the famous C G T To her I clung and at her home I met the Socialist leader, Jean Jaures His English was bad and my French worse, we had to have an interpreter Doubtless we missed a lot, but even so we found we understood each other I believe that his assassination on the eve of the war which he had done so much to prevent proved an irreparable loss to the cause of peace

In my language difficulties Jessie Ashley's fluency was an ever-present help Together we used to eat in the restaurants frequented by laborers, who came in groups, keeping their caps on, enjoying the cheap and good food accompanied by wine Often we were the only women in the place, always excepting the inevitable cashier

Though women were rarely seen at a C G T meeting, Victor Dave took Jessie and me to a particularly impressive one which Bill Haywood was to address His reputation as a firebrand had preceded him, and the police were making certain that no riot should ensue, they were stopping each person who crossed the bridge and demanding an account of his destination Our passport was the venerable appearance of our escort, whose long white hair hung low about his head His top hat, that universal badge of respectability, let us through

The vast auditorium was filled with some three thousand French

syndicalists, similar to the American I W W 's, all standing, all wearing the uniform of the proletariat—black-visored caps and loose corduroys. They were being urged not to take up arms against the workers of other nations. I began to wonder whether perhaps the various tokens of disquiet which had impalpably surrounded me since coming to France had some more desperate meaning than we in America had realized. The *War, What For?* discussions in New York had seemed only a part of the evening conversations. Here again I was listening to protests against government efforts to arouse national hatred by calling it patriotism. I had heard the words so often, "Workers of the World, Unite," yet at last I was vaguely uneasy because of the difference in spirit.

As we emerged into the narrow, alley-like street we found the exits into the boulevard guarded by hundreds of gendarmes, both mounted and afoot. Had any outbreak occurred, the assembled syndicalists would literally have been trapped.

My uneasiness was increased as a result of a visit to the Hindu nationalist, Shyamaji Krishnavarma. In England he had been an agitator for Indian Home Rule and, when the London residence of the Viceroy of India had been bombed, with other Indians who might have been implicated, he had fled to France, so long the sanctuary for anyone who, because of political beliefs, got into trouble elsewhere. Krishnavarma was now editing the *Indian Sociologist*, which was being secretly spirited across the Channel.

Krishnavarma had asked whether he might be permitted to give a reception in my honor. No Hindu had ever given a reception in my honor. Trying to appear, however, as though this were a frequent occurrence, I set a time and bravely entered his salon, supported, as usual, by Jessie.

About twenty-five men were there, Indian students all, and only one other woman, Mrs. Krishnavarma, barely out of purdah and still in native dress. As a great concession she had been allowed to come in, despite the presence of men. It was evident she could listen but not speak, because, when I asked her something about her children, Krishnavarma answered for her quickly. A little later I was disputing a point with him and, to bolster up his argument, he gave

her a curt command in Hindustani. She rose swiftly and soon returned with a well-thumbed and pencil-marked copy of Spencer. I had come to consider Spencer's philosophy old-fogyish. His teachings were so mild that I wondered what in the world he could ever have been hounded for. Though Krishnavarma was working towards the freedom of India he had gone no further than this pink tea which was not even pale China, let alone sturdy, black Ceylon.

I had been home scarcely more than half an hour and was dressing for dinner when Peggy ran in animatedly "Mother, there are three soldiers at the door!" The bright uniforms of the gendarmes had taken her fancy, and she was pleased and excited. When I went out to meet them they demanded to know where we had come from, the object of our visit to France, how long we intended to stay, in what manner we had located the apartment, from whom we had rented it, where I had been that afternoon, the length of time I had known Krishnavarma, and the reason for my being at his home. Finally, they explained their presence by saying the concierge had not sent in the required information to the prefecture.

When I described the strange visitation to someone familiar with French customs, I was told that concierges were all ex officio agents of the police and were compelled to make regular reports of the activities, no matter how petty, of their tenants. These were incorporated into the dossiers of all foreigners. Actually, the police, working with the British Secret Service, were checking up on Krishnavarma's callers. Thereafter gendarmes lingered in doorways outside our apartment, and wherever I went I was conscious they were in the vicinity.

Because of the predilection of the French for quality rather than quantity, they had not only adopted the sociological definition of proletariat, "the prolific ones," a term originally applied by the Romans to the lowest class of society, but had interpreted it literally. The syndicalists in particular had made what they called conscious generation a part of their policy and principles, and had affiliated themselves with the Neo-Malthusian movement, which had its headquarters in London.

The parents of France, almost on the same wage scale as those I had seen in Glasgow, had settled the matter to their own satisfaction. Their one or two children were given all the care and advantages of French culture. I was struck with the motherly attention bestowed by our *femme de chambre* upon her only child. She came promptly to work, but nothing could persuade her to arrive before Jean had been taken to his school, and nothing could prevent her leaving promptly at noon to fetch him for his luncheon.

When Bill Haywood began taking me into the homes of the syndicalists, I found perfect acceptance of family limitation and its relation to labor. "Have you just discovered this?" I asked each woman I met.

"Oh, no, *Maman* told me."

"Well, who told her?"

"*Grandmère*, I suppose."

The *Code Napoléon* had provided that daughters should inherit equally with sons and this, to the thrifty peasant mind, had indicated the desirability of fewer offspring. Nobody would marry a girl unless she had been instructed how to regulate the numbers of her household as well as the home itself.

Some of the contraceptive formulas which had been handed down were almost as good as those of today. Although they had to make simple things, mothers prided themselves on their special recipes for suppositories as much as on those for *pot au feu* or wine.

All individual Frenchwomen considered this knowledge their individual right, and, if it failed, abortion, which was still common. I talked about the problems of my own people, but they could give me no help, merely shrugging their shoulders, apparently glad they were living in France and not in the United States. This independence of thought and action seemed wholly admirable to me at the time, and I sang the praises of the system.

Bill was happy in his studio, but I could find no peace. Each day I stayed, each person I met, made it worse. A whole year had been given over to this inactive, incoherent brooding. Family and friends had been generous in patience. I had added to my personal experience statistics from Glasgow and the little formulas I had gathered from the French peasants. With this background I had practi-

cally reached the exploding point I could not contain my ideas, I wanted to get on with what I had to do in the world

The last day of the year, December 31, 1913, Bill and I said good-by, unaware the parting was to be final With the children I embarked at Cherbourg for home