

Chapter Ten

WE SPEAK THE SAME GOOD TONGUE



AT Montreal I found comfort and refuge. In fact, on any road I took men and women who knew about the *Woman Rebel* came to my aid. I shall never forget the generosity of the Barneses who met me at the tram and welcomed me to their home. They had been friends of Walt Whitman and still honored "his" memory. I sat at the table where "he" had sat, and in "his" chair. Among their many kindnesses they gave me an introduction to Edward Carpenter, also mentioned in awed tones, leader of the Whitman group in England and author of *Love's Coming of Age*, which was then on every modern bookshelf.

Since I was charged with felony I could be extradited. I was obliged, therefore, in buying my passage, to choose a new name. No sooner had I selected the atrociously ugly "Bertha Watson," which seemed to rob me of femininity, than I wanted to be rid of it. But once having adopted it I could not escape.

I boarded the *RMS Virgman*, laden with munitions, food, Englishmen returning home for war duty, and Canadians going over. Even before the printing of *Family Limitation* had begun in August, I had arranged a key message which would release all the pamphlets simultaneously whenever it should be received by any of four trusted lieutenants. In case one should be arrested, another ill, or a third die, still everything would go forward as provided for. Three days

out of Montreal I sent a cable and shortly had one in reply that the program was being executed as planned My soul was sick and my heart empty for those I loved, the one gleam in this dreadful night of despair was the faint hope that my efforts might, perhaps, make Peggy's future easier

The government official examining credentials at Liverpool said sternly, "England is at war, Madam You can't expect us to let you through We're sending back people without passports every day, and I can't make an exception in your case "

But I had Good Luck as an ally, she comes so often to help in emergencies A shipboard acquaintance telephoned and pulled wires, a procedure not so common in England as in the United States On his guarantee that I would get a passport from the American Embassy immediately on reaching London I was allowed to enter

I wound through dirty streets in a cab to the Adelphi Palace It rained all day, the wind blew, its howling came through the windows and crept down the chimney Homesickness swept over me worse than ever before or since I knew it would not do to "set and think" as the Quakers say, so I wandered about in the business district, trying to adjust my mind to the prices marked in the store windows in order to have some idea of what they were in dollars and cents I viewed church architecture and the Cathedral, which was not expected to be finished for fifty years It did not look so splendid, but since everything about it was closed I really could not tell

Liverpool was a quaint city I liked its weathered brick houses, and the evenness and settled feeling, as though the people in them planned to remain where they were for time everlasting The women of the poor were unconcernedly wearing on the streets dresses originally made for bustles, hats with feathers, caricatures which should have been stuffed away in attics forty years before

Bertha Watson had a letter to the local Fabian Society, and at six I went to the Clarion Cafe, where it foregathered each Friday I presented her letter, was welcomed heartily, and invited to the discussion I found the English then and later polite in speech and action, tolerant in listening One of the members helped me to locate temporary rooms while I waited for the arrival of letters and messages from the United States These lodgings were in the home of gentle, middle-

class people to whom I paid thirty shillings a week, including breakfast and dinner

I shall always be glad I went to that meeting, because there I met Lorenzo Portet, once companion of Francisco Ferrer and now heir to his educational work, which both believed was the key to Spanish emancipation

After the attempted assassination of Alfonso XIII and Victoria of England, the Government had arrested twenty-five hundred Spaniards having republican ideas, among them Ferrer His school had been closed and he had been jailed When he had been eventually released, he had still been determined to educate for universal peace by means of economic justice Accordingly, as Portet stated it, he had reopened a school for all Spain by publishing labor texts at Barcelona This again had earned him no reward from a grateful Government In 1909 he had been arrested in a purge of republicans, stood up against a wall and shot, and his body thrown into a ditch

Ferrer had left his money to Portet, who was now fulfilling his trust by feeding the country with modern scientific translations from Italy, France, and England He was a man of middle height and weight whose alert glance summed you up with an accuracy occasionally disturbing After our initial encounter he called on me with punctiliousness and formality, and produced an article from a New York magazine which carried the story of the indictment of Margaret Sanger "This is you?" he questioned with the jumping of all fact which is termed intuition

Portet, a born teacher, was then instructing youth at the University of Liverpool in Spanish No human being I ever knew could explain with such infinite pains the details of a subject He placed your own opposition before you, marshaled it in all its strength, and then annihilated every point, one by one His humorous cynicism was most baffling to those who were merely emotional converts to better worlds "Civilization?" he might say, "Mainly a question of good roads"

Sometimes in the midst of those long, drab, November weeks I escaped to Wales, where there were endless lanes, winding and hard, with very few carts, and all very quiet Even here were Carnegie libraries, one of them turned into a restaurant I went into the houses

of the smelting workers at Green Brombo, Wexham, all lovely, minute, stone cottages of two or three rooms, huddled closely together, charming with their walks and walls and flower gardens. The folk were slow, deliberate, simple.

Liverpool was only a junction, London was my terminus. There I could study at the British Museum, and meet the Neo-Malthusians. Towards the end of the month I rolled up to London through miles of chimney-potted suburbs, it continued rainy and foggy, but still there was a friendly atmosphere in the air. I seemed to be coming to a second home.

My first quarters were on the top floor of a "bed and breakfast" on Torrington Square, just back of the British Museum. I looked out on little rows of trees, iron fences, steps going up to all the houses. There was but one bathroom and to use it cost extra. Every morning about seven came a knock, and when I opened the door I discovered a midget jug of hot water outside. I was supposed to break the ice on my large pitcher, mix the two, and pour all into my tin tub, the back of which rose behind me like a throne. After this winter I realized how the British had acquired their well-known moral courage.

I had no fireplace, but two floors below was an empty room with a grate. Occasionally I indulged myself in the luxury of renting it for the evening, and of buying wood to keep myself warm while I worked. I made up for it by not having the slatternly Cockney maid bring up tea, and also went each morning to the basement dining room for my breakfast, thereby saving a shilling a week. It was not long before I was stricken by the first digestive upset I had ever had, and was obliged to call in an American doctor. He looked me over casually and then, without further examination, asked, "Have you been drinking English coffee?"

"Why, yes."

"Well, give it up. The English can't make coffee, they only know how to make tea. Take up English tea."

I followed his advice and from that time on, instead of carrying my own eating habits with me, have tried to adjust myself to the food of the country where I happened to be. In this way I get along much better.

Sundays I attended concerts or visited art galleries, though since it was war time disappointingly few pictures were being shown. Each week day, however, found me at the British Museum, going in with the opening of the gates in the morning. In order to secure permission to work, you had to have a card, but once you obtained it, you could take a special seat and books were reserved for you. My aim was to present my case from all angles, to make the trial soundly historical so that birth control would be seriously discussed in America. Therefore, I read avidly and voluminously many weighty tomes, and turned carefully the yellowed, brittle pages of pamphlets and broadsides, finding much that was dull, much that was irrelevant, but also much that was amusing, if only for the ponderous manner of its expression. In the end I had a picture of what had gone before.

The father of family limitation was Thomas Robert Malthus, born in 1766 at the Rookery, near Dorking, Surrey. In 1798 this curate of Albury published his *Principle of Population* and in the initial chapter laid down his famous postulates: "first, that food is necessary to the existence of man, second, that the passion between the sexes is necessary, and will remain nearly in its present state." Consequently the unrestrained fertility of the human race was certain to outstrip the available fruits of the earth, and, although the natural checks of war, disease, and privation had controlled population for centuries, they had brought misery, disaster, and death in their train. His solution was voluntary and intelligent control of the birth rate by means of late marriage, which left few years for childbearing. However, human nature is such that Malthus might preach forever without anyone's heeding his advice. Not until the profound economic depression which followed the Napoleonic Wars were people worried into concern over surplus population.

To John Stuart Mill the production of large families was to be regarded in the same light as drunkenness or any other physical excess. In the very first edition of his *Political Economy* he spoke of "prudence, by which either marriages are sparingly contracted, or care is taken that children beyond a certain number shall not be the fruit," and concluded that "the grand practical problem is to find the means of limiting the number of births." But he left it merely as a grand, practical problem.

Francis Place, the master tailor of Charing Cross, was born in a private debtors' prison kept by his father in Vinegar Yard. He was the first to suggest the idea of contraception as a remedy for poverty, but was more practical in his preaching than in his performance, fathering as he did fifteen children. In 1822 he published *Illustrations and Proofs of the Principle of Population*.

If, above all, it were once clearly understood, that it was not reputable for married persons to avail themselves of such precautionary means as would, without being injurious to health, or destructive of female delicacy, prevent conception, a sufficient check might at once be given to the increase of population beyond the means of subsistence, vice and misery, to a prodigious extent, might be removed from society, and the object of Mr Malthus, Mr Godwin, and of every philanthropic person, be promoted.

Place had educated himself on Adam Smith, Locke, Hume, Thomas Paine, and Burke. To his remarkable library came many notable thinkers and men of letters. Among them was Robert Owen, the textile industrialist, who, in his *Moral Physiology*, offered openly a method of contraception.

I sit down to write a little treatise, which will subject me to abuse from the self-righteous, to misrepresentation from the hypocritical, and to reproach even from the honestly prejudiced.

He spoke to young men and women who still believed in virtue and happiness. "A human being is a puppet, a slave, if his ignorance is to be the safeguard of his virtue." In reply to the accusation that coitus interruptus was unnatural, he pointed out that the thwarting of any human wish or impulse might be so termed. "If this trifling restraint is to be called unnatural, what shall be said of celibacy?"

Owen in his youth had been impressed by the sufferings of the working classes, and, in a first effort to lighten the burden of his employees, had instituted many reforms in the New Lanark Mills, himself prospering materially in so doing, he was less successful when he emigrated to the United States and at New Harmony, Indiana, established a short-lived communal colony. However, his coming to America had at least one important result. His book influenced Doctor Charles Knowlton of Boston to write a tract entitled *Fruits of Ph-*

losophy in which he recommended a chemical formula and other methods to prevent conception I had not found a trace of this in my previous research, even in Boston where it had been published

Knowlton's reaffirmation of the desirability both from a political and social point of view for mankind to be able to limit at will the number of offspring without sacrificing the attendant gratification of the reproductive instinct, would have been little noticed had it not been for the repercussion in England forty years later

During the early Victorian uprush of industrialism a man's children had been breadwinners, and family limitation had naturally lapsed But when humanitarian legislation had begun to rescue children from factories, the population specter had shown itself once more

In 1861 was formed the Malthusian League, designed to influence public opinion and overcome the prevailing misconception of Malthusianism, and in 1876 a Bristol bookseller brought out an English edition of *Fruits of Philosophy* He was promptly arrested on the charge of publishing an obscene book, and sentence was suspended on his plea of guilty

The brilliant rationalist and freethinker, Charles Bradlaugh, a redoubtable personality, together with Annie Besant, later the renowned Theosophist but then a young rebel, started a printing partnership and sold the pamphlet Although not approving it in all its details they determined to contest the right to publish it and to prove that prevention of conception was not obscene

Extraordinary interest was aroused in their trial before Lord Chief Justice Cockburn and a special jury The Solicitor General himself appeared as chief counsel for the prosecution Taking a copy of *Fruits of Philosophy* in his hands he opened it solemnly and said, "It is really extremely painful to me," then hesitating, "very painful to me to have to read this" But he did so

Bradlaugh and Besant conducted their own defense The latter with eloquence and astonishing poise held the admiring attention of the court for two days Nevertheless, both were convicted of defaming the morals of the public, sentenced to six months in jail and a thousand-dollar fine, and required to put up guarantees of twenty-five hundred dollars for good behavior during the next two years

The case was immediately appealed. Fortunately the upper court dismissed it on a technicality, because specific evidence of obscenity was not included, if the words were polluting they had to appear in the record.

This decision settled for all time in England that contraception was not to be classed among the obscenities. As a result, new life was injected into the Malthusian League and its name was changed to the Neo-Malthusian Society. In the first issue of its monthly journal it set forth a modest claim: "We have the ONLY REMEDY that the disease of society can be cured by." Instead of the impractical advice of Malthus to marry late, the Neo-Malthusians advised early marriage, the use of contraceptive methods, and children born according to the earning capacity of the father, a man's station in life should determine the number of his children. Furthermore, they intended one by one to "prick the flimsy bubbles of emigration, lessened production, and home colonization, which are from time to time put forward." The emphasis was still placed on the social and economic aspects rather than the personal tragedies of women.

That was in 1876, now in 1914 the Drysdales, Dr. C. V. and his wife, Bessie, were the guiding spirits of the Society. They had a long heritage of Malthusianism behind them, the uncle of the former, Dr. George Drysdale, fresh from Edinburgh in 1854, had anonymously published his *Elements of Social Science*, which had gone into fifteen languages. He had even himself studied Chinese to ensure a reasonably accurate translation in that tongue. In the darkest days of Victorianism, this young physician had included the New Woman in his interpretation of Malthus. Both he and his brother Charles, also a physician, had been in love with Alice Vickery, who had chosen the latter and borne him a son, the present C. V.

Alice Vickery was as great in her day as Mary Wollstonecraft in hers. After a tremendous struggle, which included getting her degree in Dublin and her training in Paris, she had proved her right to enter the medical profession, and had become the first woman doctor in England.

My keenest desire was to get in touch with the Drysdales. They invited me to tea at their offices—offices in the English sense, not ours. I squelched through the inevitable rain to Queen Anne's Cham-

bers and was astonished to find nothing on the door except Dr C V Drysdale's name. The term Malthusian was not considered proper according to the landlord's ideas of propriety. In fact, throughout England the word brought up antagonism. People crossed the street to avoid it.

I entered a sitting room, gay with chintz-covered chairs and a sofa, pillows at the back, quite fitted to Queen Anne's own day. A fire was burning cheerily, yet even this was not so welcome as the open arms and excitement with which I was greeted, not only by the Drysdales but also by Dr Binnie Dunlop, dark, Scotch, thin, and dapper, intellectually enthusiastic although not emotionally so, by Olive Johnston, the faithful secretary who had worked for many years with the Drysdales, and by F W Stella Browne, an ardent Feminist whose faintly florid face, hair never quite white, and indefatigable vivacity are the same a quarter of a century later. Many women in causes are like that, something in their spirit keeps them forever young.

Dr Drysdale was then in his early forties, slender, fair, inclined to be bald. In his ebullience he was not at all British, but his pleasing, warm, and courteous personality was British at its best. Bessie Drysdale, about her husband's age, was the practical member, dispensing charming hospitality. The others were like an army meeting me, but she brought up the rear with tea and cakes and comforting things.

It seemed to me I had seen them and known them all before. I was immediately certain I had come to the right place. In the United States I had been alone, pulling against all whose broad, general principles were the same as mine but who disapproved of my actions. But these new friends saw eye to eye with me. Instead of heaping criticism and fears upon me, they offered all the force of an international organization as well as their encyclopedic minds to back me up.

The policy of the Neo-Malthusians had been to educate the educators. They believed that once the practice of family limitation had been established among the well-to-do and socially prominent, it would be taken up by the lower strata. They were not discouraged, although after almost forty years success seemed as far away as ever, the working classes not only evinced no desire for the benefits

of family limitation, but did not even know such a thing existed

Everybody in the room appreciated my rebellion and extended congratulations on a name having been coined which was so simple and easy to understand as birth control. When I told them how I had managed the distribution of the *Family Limitation* pamphlets Dr Drysdale stood up impetuously and said, "Oh, would to God we had a Comstock law! There's nothing can so stir the British people as a bad law. Then they will do something to change it!"

That afternoon was one of the most encouraging and delightful of my life. The warmth of my reception strengthened me to face the future. It lessened my dreadful homesickness and curbed the ever-growing impulse to escape from war-sick London and hurry back to the children. During my stay I saw much of the Drysdales and their group, and between us all grew up a close kinship which has lasted through the stormy years.

I like to think of London at this time chiefly because of all my new friends and the laughter they brought me. Of late there had been little of it in my life, but with every friend I had in England—more than with any other people I have ever known—I laughed, and this laughter knit and welded the bonds of comradeship.

One day in the British Museum I was standing by the catalogs, which were in the form of books, waiting until a man near me finished the volume I wanted to consult. I glanced at him idly, then more closely, thinking I identified the profile from pictures I had seen. When he had put the book down I ventured tentatively, "Aren't you Edward Carpenter?"

Almost without looking at me he replied, "Yes, and aren't you Margaret Sanger?"

It was a shock for Bertha Watson to hear this name repeated out loud in a public place. However, Mr. Carpenter's recognition was readily explainable. He had been more or less prepared to see me because he had already received my letter and had that morning at my rooming house been told I never returned from the British Museum until evening. Since we could not talk in this hall of silence, we adjourned to the Egyptian Room, and then to lunch. He was human, full of wit, fun, and humor—a live person who exuded magnetism.

Edward Carpenter reassured me that what I was doing was not merely of the present but belonged even more to the future. From this fine spirit I drew confirmation of the purity of my endeavor, something essential for me to take back to America if others there were to experience the same sense of justification. We beyond the Atlantic were still uncertain of our ethics, and even of our morals. We needed the sanction of British public opinion and the approval of their great philosophers, so that we could be strong in our beliefs.

During the first weeks in England I did not feel vehemently about the War, especially as signs were displayed everywhere, "Business as usual." I supposed it would be a little flurry, soon over. War talk, of course, was universal. The German espionage system was much discussed. I wondered whether it were not the general characteristic of the German always to observe and be accurate in detail which made his information valuable. He did the same thing in the United States, where nobody thought of calling him a spy. Everywhere women were knitting socks and mitts, but I was more impressed by the fact they were smoking in hotel lobbies—a new indication of emancipation to me—and even rolling their own cigarettes. If a woman came in for tea, without a word being said, a bell hop produced her own box of tobacco. When she left, it was returned to its proper place.

As the months went on, however, to be an American became almost as unlucky as to be a German. Whoever wished to remain safely in England must agree with England, give over every vestige of independent thinking or free expression. Wherever I went I heard mention of "Traitorous America." At one dining-car table a gray-haired Englishman, unaware of my nationality, asserted, "Americans will do anything for money."

"Yes," agreed his companion. "They do not care whom their bullets kill. They get paid for them." He was a young Dutchman, apparently just returned from the East Indies, and the conversation between the two developed briskly. Americans were a "mixed breed without souls, they had none of the qualities which make a nation great—no traditions, history, art, music, absolutely nothing but their money, they had to come to Europe for everything—to England for laws, customs, and morals, to France for fashions and arts,

they were human leeches fastened on Europe without incentive, originality, or creative ability, they—”

I interrupted, “What do you want America to do? Why should she get into this? Does she owe loyalty to England or France or Russia?”

“Oh, no, but for Belgium America signed the Hague Treaty with the rest of us, and she has not stood by it”

To this I advanced the argument, “We Americans are not like Europeans We are a heterogeneous mixture of all the fighting forces and nations of the world We include the Irish who hate England, and Jews who hardly can be said to love Russia A large part of our population—industrious, civil, reliable, and prosperous—are Germans, with whom our Scandinavians are sympathetic Who then have we to ally against Germany? And why?—a very small far-back mention of gratitude to France for her help in our Revolution against British rule—and the Statue of Liberty”

On the whole I came more nearly being a nationalist when I left England than when I went there I had to do such battle to explain the United States that, almost involuntarily, I felt myself becoming less of an internationalist It was a strange feeling, as though somebody you knew and loved were being criticized, and you took up the cudgels in defense