

Chapter Fourteen

O, TO BE IN ENGLAND



WHEN I reached London it was spring, and beautiful as only spring in England can be. I longed to get out into the country and, through the kindness of Dr. Alice Vickery, was soon lodged in a private home in Hampstead Gardens next door to her quaint, ivy-covered, red-brick house. In the large garden in back we often had tea under the blossoming apple trees. There, dressed in gray or purple, with white collar and a wisp of lace not quite a bonnet on her head, she entertained the young and modern women of England who were working for reforms of no matter what kind. Still, at the age of eighty, she was alert upon all questions of the day, busily engaged in writing leaflets or articles pointing out the weak spots in social programs.

Dr. Vickery was so full of the living side of Neo-Malthusianism that I could ill afford to forego one possible hour with her. Often when we found ourselves alone in her drawing room I sat at her feet and heard the story of the pioneer Malthusians, what they had had to undergo, and what they had accomplished. For my benefit she brought out of her attic a veritable treasure of the early days—old circulars, pamphlets, and letters now, I am afraid, destroyed.

Almost every afternoon, taking her walking stick and with Dr. Binnie Dunlop for a companion, Dr. Vickery boarded the tram to attend some gathering. She had been one of the first to welcome the militant suffragettes, and she never missed a suffrage meeting, nor, for that matter, any other significant one on infant or maternal wel-

fare, eugenics, or public health. She always went with the definite purpose of getting the audience down to fundamentals. In time she became a familiar figure. As soon as she entered a hall you could feel those present aligning themselves against her. They knew she was going to bring up a controversial subject that no one wanted discussed, such as birth control. It was like casting a boulder into a nice quiet lake, but, with an unruffled exterior and grim determination, she invariably rose just the same, asked the chairman to recognize her, and said her say on the Feminist side of the question. From the lips of this Victorian old lady it sounded strange to hear frank remarks about the importance of limiting offspring. Dr. Dunlop, with Scotch determination, was also bent on setting people straight, he followed her and expounded the medical aspects of population.

In June Dr. Vickery asked me to tell my story to a group of her friends. Among them was Edith How-Martyn, who had recently graduated from the London School of Economics. But already the zealous ardor of this small and slight person had landed her in jail for suffrage. She had now split from Mrs. Pankhurst, unable to subscribe to the militant policy.

The American woman is apt to say, "Anything I can do for you, let me know," and then go away, her conscience relieved. The Englishwoman states definitely that she can get up a meeting, bring you in touch with so and so, give you money, or get money for you. Edith How-Martyn in her quiet manner said to me, "I think what you have told us today should have a larger audience. Will you give a lecture if we arrange it for you? We'll do the donkey work, all you have to do is speak."

In a few days the time and place were set. I was to appear in Fabian Hall the following month under my own name.

The chairs in the auditorium were wooden and the interior was unheated—not like an American hall. The audience was quite different from the little Socialist gatherings of working women I had addressed at home. The atrocious and hideous English hats gave it an intellectual and highly respectable air. These representatives of nearly every social and civic organization in London, had the rationalist attitude and preferred to listen to principles and theories. I told them what I had been trying to do through the *Woman Rebel* and ex-

plained my private and personal conception of what Feminism should mean, that is, women should first free themselves from biological slavery, which could best be accomplished through birth control. This was, generally speaking, the introduction of the term into England.

Many came up and talked to me afterwards, among them Marie Stopes, a paleontologist who had made a reputation with work on coal. Would I come to her home and discuss the book she was writing?

Over the teacups I found her to have an open, frank manner that quite won me. She took me into her confidence at once, stating her marriage had been unconsummated, and for that reason she was securing an annulment. Her book, *Married Love*, was based largely on her own experiences and the unhappiness that came to people from ignorance and lack of understanding in wedlock, and she hoped it would help others. She was extremely interested in the correlation of marital success to birth control knowledge, although she admitted she knew nothing about the latter. Could I tell her exactly what methods were used and how? In spite of my belief that the Netherlands clinics could be improved upon, I was fired with fervor for the idea as such, and described them as I had seen them.

Later when I came back to the United States, I brought with me the manuscript of *Married Love*, and tried every established publisher in New York, receiving a rejection from each. Finally I induced Dr. William J. Robinson to publish it under the auspices of his *Critic and Guide*, a monthly magazine which took up many subjects. The *Journal* of the American Medical Association would not touch. Unfortunately even here it had to be expurgated. When I cabled Dr. Stopes I had a publisher in New York, her new husband, H. V. Roe, financed an unabridged English edition which appeared simultaneously.

No one can underestimate the work Marie Stopes has done. Though her other books, *Radiant Motherhood* and *Wise Parenthood*, were limited in value because they were based on limited personal experience, she has handled sex knowledge with delicacy and wisdom, placing it in a modern, practical category. She started the first birth control clinic in England, but she was not a pioneer in the

movement Annie Besant, Dr Vickery, the Drysdales, and many others had plowed the ground and sown the seed. It needed only a new voice, articulate and clear as hers, to push her into the front ranks of the movement, where she must have been much surprised to find herself

Many people went out of their way to be kind to me in those days. I was often asked to the home of E. P. C. Haynes, solicitor, writer on freedom of the press, and a fine adviser. Around his table, one of the grandest set anywhere in England, could usually be found a large group of distinguished people. Among them was the American Civil War veteran, Major G. P. Putnam, a dapper, lively, alert little publisher with a white mustache and cold blue eyes. He was conservative and formal, but at the same time a firebrand in his fashion and an enthusiast for certain issues. Haynes had invited him to hear my views, and himself introduced the subject of birth control. Thus I was enabled to pave the way for having G. P. Putnam's Sons eventually take over the publication of *Married Love* in this country, although not until 1931, through the Major's efforts, was the ban lifted which prohibited the importation of the complete edition into the United States.

Harold Cox, brilliant Member of Parliament and editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, was another delightful host at Old Kennards in Buckinghamshire. In the *Review* he was constantly helping to form an enlightened public opinion on birth control, having every argument at his finger tips and never missing a chance to answer questions in the *London Times*.

Hugh and Janet de Selincourt's place at Torrington, Sussex, where Shelley was born, always was a haven of refuge. After five days' work in town I could come, tired and pent-up, for a week-end. I loved the joy and simplicity of the music there, the lighthearted conversation, and tea on the lawn. From there you saw English ivy climbing up to the thatched roof, and a pond, a small one, which had been converted into a swimming pool. The general impression was of shrubbery and old walls with fruit trees trellised against them. Beyond the velvet green grass were red tree roses, beautiful borders of pink lupins, and delphiniums, the tallest and bluest I have ever seen. From the dining-room window the effect was that of a tapestry.

I wanted some day to embody the rambling spirit of this home in one of my own

Here again laughter bound me to these people We laughed and we laughed and we laughed Whole days were spent in gaiety over the most absurd things Hugh could never quite accept me as a crusader, he went into roars of merriment whenever I mentioned the subject of population—it was too much for a woman in a yellow dress to bother about

But many of my week-ends were spent in “bothering” about it At Sunday afternoon labor meetings in London someone was always holding forth “Here’s a chance for you to talk birth control,” Rose Witcop once urged

It was an opportunity to reach working people and I agreed, but lunch of that day found me trembling Henry Sara, a young man but old in the ways of the speaker, noticed I was not eating or drinking and could hardly utter a word “I say, what’s the idea of all this worry? What you must think about is that everybody there comes merely to hear somebody or anybody They’ve no notion what you’re going to say Anything is all right with them Get that in your mind and stop worrying”

His friendly encouragement gave me a little more fortitude, but on the way to the hall Rose Witcop took me severely to task for the trembling, which I seemed unable to stop “These are just plain people you’re going to speak to It’s utter nonsense to be nervous about it”

When Rose stood up to introduce me, she began, “Comrades—” There was a long pause For the second time she tried in a less assured tone, “Comrades—” Another interval and a third time, in a voice so weak she herself could hardly hear it, she attempted, “Comrades—” Then, barely whispering, “Excuse me,” she sat down By comparison my speech was not bad

Writing at this time was a means of expression much easier than speaking I had not forgotten my subscribers to the *Woman Rebel* I had to fulfill my obligations and supply something to take the place of the three issues which I had been unable to furnish them Therefore, I wrote three pamphlets on methods of contraception in England, the Netherlands, and France respectively Printing them cost

me a considerable amount of money. My friends in Canada, knowing I was not affluent, now and then when they had a little windfall or unexpected dividend sent me small checks of from five to ten pounds, saying, "To use for your work." These had come in quite often.

On one occasion I had squeezed my pocketbook dry paying for the last pamphlet, I had not another penny to buy stamps. Ten days had gone by, and I kept wishing something might come in to help me out. That morning a letter arrived. I tore it apart and a money order dropped out. Hurrying as fast as I could to the post office I received the cash, spent it all on stamps, and hastened back in the hope of getting the whole edition off on the *Arabic*, in wartime sailings had to be considered. One batch of envelopes had already gone into the pillar box, and I was just finishing addressing and stamping the second lot when I heard the knocker on the door below clatter through the house. It had the ring of authority and sounded so ominous that I felt it must have something to do with me.

Sure enough, in a few moments a bobby and a man in plain clothes appeared at my threshold. They asked whether I were the person who had been sending quantities of mail to a foreign address.

"Yes," I admitted in a small voice, wondering what on earth was going to happen now.

The bobby came closer, showed me an unopened envelope, and demanded sternly, "Did you post this?"

"I think so."

"Madam, in England we never put His Majesty on upside down. We do not represent our King standing on his head. Will you please, in affixing your stamps, pay attention to the customs of our country?"

The care with which I stuck on the remainder right side up delayed me so that I barely made the *Arabic*. Only then did I have time to read the letter. I took it out of my bag, thinking how wonderful it was of my friends to send me the money and how much good I had been able to do with it. To my consternation and amazement it was not for my use, but to buy gifts—certain books to be sent back as soon as possible.

The money was gone and the presents could not be purchased.

After all this rush and pother the *Arabic* was torpedoed and went down with the entire two thousand pamphlets I made another effort, this time successfully completed, and shaped an article on Emerson, Thoreau, and Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community, about whom the English were talking

Meanwhile I had written to Canada apologizing and saying I expected shortly to be able to fulfill the commissions I now had an opening ahead of me for a career abroad Portet's publishing house in Barcelona was closely allied with others in Paris Through him I was offered the job of choosing appropriate books in English, which could be published in both French and Spanish, especially works that would be of help to women and labor The salary was satisfactory, the job itself interesting, and it gave promise of permanency as soon as the War should be over I had almost decided to take it, even selecting a little house in Versailles with sunny rooms and a garden for the children

There was only one drawback—the subtle, persistent dread that something was wrong with Peggy Night after night her voice startled me from deep sleep and left me in a state of agitation until I received the next letter containing news that all was going well I tried to dismiss this fear and would have it partially submerged, but always the same troubled voice rang in my ears, “Mother, Mother, are you coming back?”

One definite though inexplicable experience kept puzzling me As I unclosed my eyes in the morning, or even before I was completely awake, I became conscious of the number 6, as though that numeral were repeating itself again and again in my drowsy mind I often tried to fit it into some event of the day—six o'clock, sixpence, the price of tea, or anything else amusing, and as casual or silly as I could make up This I did to protect myself against the premonition which seemed at first to come upon me with the recurrence of this number Later, like a leaf on a wall calendar, NOV 6 stood out

When the publisher asked me to commit myself by signing a three-year contract to stay in Paris, I said, “Yes, I will if you'll guarantee to lock me up or send me to Africa or the North Pole until after November 6th ”

“Why November 6th?”

"I don't know, but I'm certain that something important is to occur on that day, something different, and something which will affect my entire future."

He drew up our plans as of January 1st of the following year.

Edith Ellis was lecturing in America, and by letter we arranged for her to bring back Peggy and Grant, because it appeared I might be staying for some time. Then, since only Peggy seemed lonely and in need of her mother and Grant was happy in school, it was determined he should be left there. Edith was to sail with Peggy on the *Lusitania*.

When word was flashed that the liner had been torpedoed, I stood in the middle of the night in front of the Cunard office, scanning with horror the mounting ranks of missing and dead. Not until two in the morning was the list complete and could I breathe once more, neither Peggy's nor Edith's name was on it. Edith had received one of those slips warning prospective passengers that the ship might be blown up, and was one of the few who had heeded the admonition and transferred to another boat. Even so, the thought of being responsible for Peggy had been too alarming and she had decided not to bring her.

The War had sent many Americans back from Europe and Bill had returned to New York. I had had a detailed letter from him describing the stirring events of the previous December. A man introducing himself as A. Heller had called upon him at his studio and requested a copy of *Family Limitation*, pleading that he was poor, had too large a family, and was a friend of mine. Bill said he was sorry but we had agreed that I was to carry on my work independently of him, and he did not even think he had any of the pamphlets. However, the man's story was so pathetic that he rummaged around and by chance found one in the library drawer.

A few days later Bill opened the door to a gray-haired, side-whiskered six-footer who lost no time in announcing, "I am Mr. Comstock. I have a warrant for your arrest on the grounds of circulating obscene literature." Accompanying him was the so-called Heller, who turned out to be Charles J. Bamberger, an agent of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. The three departed.

but Bill soon found himself in a restaurant instead of the police station. When he protested that he wished to consult a lawyer without delay, Comstock, between mouthfuls of lunch, offered advice: "Young man, I want to act as a brother to you. Lawyers are expensive and will only aggravate your case." Here he patted Bill on the shoulder: "Plead guilty to this charge, and I'll ask for a suspended sentence."

Bill's answer was that, though he had been in Europe when the pamphlet had been written, he believed in the principles embodied in it, and that, therefore, his own principles were at stake. He would not plead guilty: "You know as well as I do, Mr. Comstock, there's nothing obscene in that pamphlet."

"Young man, I have been in this work for twenty years, and that leaflet is the worst thing I have ever seen."

This sort of conversation went on all afternoon, Comstock even tried to bribe Bill to turn states' evidence by disclosing my whereabouts. It was his custom to arrive at the police station so late that his prisoner could not communicate with a lawyer or bonding office and had to spend the night in jail. He could then make a statement to the papers that his captive had been unable to secure bail.

When Comstock and Bill at last reached the Yorkville Police Court and the clerk had asked the latter how he wished to plead, Comstock spoke for him, "He pleads guilty."

"I do not," expostulated Bill. "I plead not guilty."

He was arraigned and bail fixed at five hundred dollars, but he was obliged to spend thirty-six hours in jail before it could be procured.

In September I had word that, after several postponements, his trial had finally come up before Justices McNerney, Herbert, and Salmon. He started to read his typewritten statement: "I admit that I broke the law, and yet I claim that in every real sense it is the law and not I that is on trial here today."

Justice McNerney interrupted him: "You admit you are guilty, and all this statement of yours is just opinions. I'm not going to have a lot of rigmarole on the record. We've no time to bother. This book is not only indecent but immoral. Its circulation is a menace."

to society Too many women are going around advocating woman suffrage If they would go around advocating bearing children we should be better off

"The statute gives you the privilege of being fined for this offense, but I do not believe this should be so A man, guilty as you are, ought to have no alternative from a prison sentence One hundred and fifty dollars or thirty days in jail "

"Then I want to say to the court," shouted Bill, leaning forward and raising his hand for greater emphasis, "that I would rather be in jail with my self-respect than in your place without it!"

Although he was convinced of the justice of my cause, this was the first and only copy of the pamphlet he had ever given out It was one of life's sharpest ironies that, despite our separation, he should have been drawn into my battle, and go to prison for it

When I received Bill's letter bearing this news, I tore across the lawn to Dr Vickery's Dr Drysdale happened to be there, and in his indignation his face became red and his hands were clenched He tramped up and down the floor in a frenzy of rage that such a thing could be done to any human being I am still touched when I think of this mild, gentle person being moved to depths of anger over an injustice which did not affect him personally

The question before me was, "Should I go back?" As had gone Bill's trial so would probably go my own I did not want to sacrifice myself in a lost cause I was young, and knew I should be used for something Temporarily postponing my final answer to the publishing house, I decided to return to the United States, but only long enough to survey the situation, to gather up my children I intended, if possible, to come back to that little house in Versailles