

Chapter Thirty

NOW IS THE TIME FOR CONVERSE



SIDE by side with the clinic and education another project had been stirring for some time in my mind Internationalism was in the air, and I wanted that outlook brought into the movement in the United States To this end I made plans for the Sixth International Malthusian and Birth Control Conference, to be held in New York in March, 1925

In the summer of 1924 I called a Conference Committee meeting of the League That is, in addition to the regular Board members, other supporters were invited to attend As soon as the matter was brought up they expostulated, "You still have to ask for money to run the *Review* How can you pay the fares of the delegates and furnish them with hospitality? Do you know how much it will cost?"

Since I wished to have the Conference important enough to make its mark I replied promptly, "Not less than twenty-five thousand dollars "

"Have you thought of how you are going to finance it?"

"Certainly I have " I was certain that the interest of many of our contributors extended beyond the magazine, and that they would see we now had a broader field of activity They had given before and would give again I knew money would come in

Any five of the outside women present could have underwritten the Conference, but they objected that funds were needed for other work One by one they left in a hurry, the inevitable appointments were waiting for them Their advice to the Board was, no Conference—and the wealthy members of the Board concurred

Nevertheless, I went ahead with the details of securing backers. Even the letterhead on our stationery was significant. You could tell such a lot about an organization—quality, standards, tone—from the names, often more informative than the body of the letter. My intention was to make people stand in public for what they believed in private, and at least our list of sponsors was impressive enough—a brilliant and distinguished array.

The success of any conference was determined in great measure by the caliber of the men who took part in it. Results depended first upon the concept animating it, and second, as had been proved before, on the presence of an eminent figure to ornament the assemblage. I decided to see whether I could induce Lord Dawson to be our main speaker, and, hoping that personal persuasion might be more efficacious than written, sailed for England in September.

Havelock came up from Margate to greet me, as usual far removed from the hurly-burly of the world, aloof from the conflict of ideas which meant so much to me. Yet to talk with him again was to return to the mêlée with renewed inspiration. I managed to crowd in a motor trip to Oxford, lunch at the Mitre, a walk through Brazenose and King's, and a drive back through Buckinghamshire, where the beeches were changing to bronze and russet. I felt a regretful pang that so little of my life could be lived in England.

Unfortunately for my purposes Lord Dawson was away shooting in the North. With some temerity I dwelt upon the possibility of Lord Buckmaster, the former Stanley Owen, Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Asquith Coalition of 1915, who had become one of the most finished orators in the House of Lords. He had just returned from Scotland and telephoned me to suggest we exchange views. He was about to present a resolution that, under the auspices of the Ministry of Health, restrictions on birth control instruction be removed for married women who attended welfare centers. He was gathering practical information from people who had had practical experience, and wanted to know how methods in the United States differed from those in England and, particularly, verification of their harmlessness.

When he came to my hotel one afternoon, I did not take time to mention the Conference, because H. G., knowing the value of proper introductions, had arranged one of his most brilliant dinners for that

very evening, or rather he had proposed it and Jane had arranged it For H G to entertain in behalf of a cause set the seal of approval on it Jane had invited literary luminaries and their wives George Bernard Shaw, Arnold Bennett, Sir Arbuthnot Lane, Professor E W MacBride of the Eugenics Education Society, Walter Salter of the League of Nations, and Lord Buckmaster

It had been my experience that personages gave little of themselves on formal occasions So many people expected these lions to roar bravely, forgetting that they preferred to save their sparkling sallies for the pages of their books Moreover, when the English came together for an evening they liked to have it light and amusing I had received much from the books of Shaw, who had advanced civilization by breaking down barriers of all sorts, now almost nothing from him personally, although he was very diverting, with funny quips upon life and America and birth control

I had by design been seated next to Lord Buckmaster, and after the meal had been in progress for perhaps half an hour, H G leaned over and whispered to me, "Have you got him?"

"I haven't started yet"

"You're no true American You ought to work faster You're missing out" Whereupon he focused his own attention on Lord Buckmaster, who, in answer to his direct query, regretted that the date conflicted with the opening of Parliament

Before I could realize it the time came when I was due to sail from Southampton Lord Dawson had just returned and could see me at three that afternoon Promptly on the hour his secretary ushered me into his library at Wimpole Street A fire was burning cheerfully in the grate, a gentleman, traditionally tall and handsome, was sitting leisurely on the sofa as though my boat train did not leave Waterloo Station at four-thirty, and endless days remained in which to talk about the interesting subject of birth control He was a grand seigneur such as you rarely encountered in your travels, having a mind that could understand and meet any discussion with knowledge, facts, and comprehension The approach, the surroundings, his courtesy, charm of manner, and poise, proved him a great English aristocrat He asked me about the attitude of the medical profession in the United States, desirous of knowing who had identified themselves with it I recited

my past efforts to enlist the support of the leading physicians. The minutes sped relentlessly away, I had to leave, and barely caught my train. Having admired him so long from afar, I was glad to have had this brief contact, even though he was unable to attend the Conference.

I was back in New York by the end of October, and soon came a letter from Shaw cheering me with his point of view.

Birth control should be advocated for its own sake, on the general ground that the difference between voluntary, irrational, uncontrolled activity is the difference between an amoeba and a man, and if we really believe that the more highly evolved creature is the better we may as well act accordingly. As the amoeba does not understand birth control, it cannot abuse it, and therefore its state may be the more gracious, but it is also true that as the amoeba cannot write, it cannot commit forgery—yet we teach everybody to write unhesitatingly, knowing that if we refuse to teach anything that could be abused we should never teach anything at all.

Interminable correspondence began immediately with adherents and, in many distant lands, possible delegates. I sent out telegrams to the former and as fast as money arrived dispatched it to the latter for their passage over, though I did not yet have enough to get them home again. Languages and interpreters then had to be arranged for, in Europe that was difficult enough, but here it was more than perplexing. Worst of all was the eternal barrier of our laws. Topics that could be freely discussed in London were forbidden in the United States, and we could not afford to have the dignity of the occasion marred by another Town Hall episode. I had to tell delegates what their papers were to be about, and, when it was necessary to cut out a reference to contraceptives, had to apologize and explain why.

I quickly found that visitors from seventeen countries could produce more problems than statistics and theories proved. The committee sent to meet Dr. G. O. Lapouge, a French eugenicist, after vainly searching through the cabins on the boat, went back to the pier whence all had fled save one inconspicuous, desolate man sitting on top of his luggage, reading, waiting patiently for someone to come for him—so unimportant-looking that no one would have suspected him of being a renowned scientist. The next morning the Hotel McAlpin, where the

convention was to be held, called me up to report that Dr Lapouge had been severely burned, and an interpreter was needed Dr Drysdale hurried off to find the poor little man of seventy in excruciating pain but carrying on a dissertation, highly amusing, about the hazards of America's much-advertised plumbing Without understanding how to regulate the shower he had stood under it and turned on the hot water The skin fairly peeled off his chest Nevertheless, bandaged and oiled, he undauntedly attended all the sessions

The opening night we had a "pioneers' dinner" over which Heywood Broun presided The Danish Fru Thit Jensen, blond, vivacious, was to relate the troubles she had had in arousing interest in her own country She made her address in English courageously enough, but it was evident at once that someone slightly familiar with American slang had helped her out She was describing a doctors' meeting in Denmark and the first words we heard were, "When I gave my greetings to those boneheads as I am to you—" We all burst into laughter because they seemed to apply to the guests present Her face remained sphinx-like in its determined immobility, she halted for us to subside, then continued Almost immediately the dignified gathering went off again into a fresh peal You no sooner recovered from one shrieking convulsion than she made another remark equally ludicrous After each outbreak she paused resignedly before going on with her carefully prepared speech The hilarity finally got out of hand, so whether the end was funny or not nobody knew or cared

At every meeting Dr Ferdinand Goldstein of Berlin, who was hard of hearing, sat in the front row The mention of any phase of population, on which he was an expert, brought him promptly to his feet Standing directly in front of the speaker, he cupped his ear in order not to miss a single word The one discordant note occurred on the last day when the committee declined to embody in its program any endorsement of abortion He not only left the Conference but went back to Germany without saying good-by to anyone

The Austrian delegates were Johann Ferch and his wife, Betty This Viennese printer had become interested in birth control through setting up material on his linotype He had informed himself of methods and in a short time had several clinics started in Vienna One morning when I found them at breakfast in the dining room, great tears

were rolling down Mrs Ferch's face I asked her what the trouble was and she said she was weeping because the pot of coffee on the table, a simple bit of food, cost thirty-five cents, and she realized what this amount of money would buy at home, for the price of one meal in New York their starving relatives could live for a whole day in luxury Neither of them felt entitled to indulge in such extravagance

Dr Aletta Jacobs walked along with me after one of the sessions She said the fact she had refused to see me in 1915 had been on her mind ever since, and she desired to clear up the matter now, she had always been against lay people taking part in the movement, and for that reason had opposed the Rutgers method of training practical nurses and allowing them to go out in the field after only two months' instruction She had put me in the same category as those in her own country who had wanted to establish clinics as a commercial venture That afternoon she visited our clinic and went over methods with Dr Cooper and Dr Stone Here, she said, with kindling eyes, was the system she had envisioned in the Netherlands but had never been able to make come true

The eugenists were given their opportunity to speak at the Conference Eugenics, which had started long before my time, had once been defined as including free love and prevention of conception Moses Harman of Chicago, one of its chief early adherents, had run a magazine and gone to jail for it under the Comstock regime Recently it had cropped up again in the form of selective breeding, and biologists and geneticists such as Clarence C Little, President of the University of Maine, and C B Davenport, Director of the Cold Spring Harbor Station for Experimental Evolution, had popularized their findings under this heading Protoplasm was the substance then supposed to carry on hereditary traits—genes and chromosomes were a later discovery Professor Davenport used to lift his eyes reverently and, with his hands upraised as though in supplication, quiver emotionally as he breathed, "Protoplasm We want more protoplasm"

I accepted one branch of this philosophy, but eugenics without birth control seemed to me a house built upon sands It could not stand against the furious winds of economic pressure which had buffeted into partial or total helplessness a tremendous proportion of the human race The eugenists wanted to shift the birth control emphasis from

less children for the poor to more children for the rich We went back of that and sought first to stop the multiplication of the unfit This appeared the most important and greatest step towards race betterment

A special round table for the eugenists was held at which we took the opportunity to challenge their theories I said, "Dr Little, let's begin with you How many children have you?"

"Three "

"How many more are you going to have?"

"None I can't afford them "

"Professor East, how many have you, and how many more are you going to have?"

And so the question circled Not one planned to have another child, though Dr Little has had two since by a second wife "There you are," I said, "a super-intelligent group, the very type for whom you advocate more children, yet you yourselves won't practice what you preach If I were to put this same question to a group of poor women who already have families, every one of them would also answer, 'No, I don't want any more ' No arguments can make people want children if they think they have enough "

When the Conference was over, a final meeting was held at my apartment to form a permanent international association of which Dr Little was made president

Handling everything had been something of an undertaking, but after all the delegates had been sent off we still had money in the bank My faith had been justified that, if you started something worth while, means for its realization would be forthcoming