

AWAKENING AND REVOLT

EARLY in the year 1912 I came to a sudden realization that my work as a nurse and my activities in social service were entirely palliative and consequently futile and useless to relieve the misery I saw all about me

For several years I had had the good fortune to have the children's paternal grandmother living with us and sharing in their care, thereby releasing more of my time and renewed energy for the many activities and professional work of the nursing field. I had longed for this opportunity, and it now enabled me to share in the financial responsibility of the home which, owing to the heavy expenditures caused by my illness, I felt was the only self-respecting thing to do. I eventually took special obstetrical and surgical cases assigned to me from time to time, and had glimpses into the lives of rich and poor alike.

When I look back upon that period it seems only a short time ago, yet in the brief interval conditions have changed enormously. At that time it was not the usual thing for a

poor woman to go to a hospital to give birth to her baby. She preferred to stay at home. She was afraid of hospitals when any serious ailment was involved. That is not the case today. Women of all classes are more likely to have their babies in lying-in hospitals or in private sanatoriums than at home, but in those days a woman's own bedroom, no matter how inconveniently arranged, was the usual place for confinement. That was the day of home nursing, and it gave a trained nurse splendid opportunities to learn social conditions through actual contact with them.

Were it possible for me to depict the revolting conditions existing in the homes of some of the women I attended in that one year, one would find it hard to believe. There was at that time, and doubtless is still today, a substratum of men and women whose lives are absolutely untouched by social agencies.

The way they live is almost beyond belief. They hate and fear any prying into their homes or into their lives. They resent being talked to. The women slink in and out of their homes on their way to market like rats from their holes. The men beat their wives sometimes black and blue, but no one interferes. The children are cuffed, kicked and chased about, but woe to the child who dares to tell tales out of the home! Crime or drink is often the source of this secret aloofness, usually there is something to hide, a skeleton in the closet somewhere. The men are sullen, unskilled workers, picking up odd jobs now and then, unemployed usually, sauntering in and out of the house at all hours of the day and night.

The women keep apart from other women in the neighborhood. Often they are suspected of picking a pocket or lifting an article when occasion arises. Pregnancy is an almost chronic condition amongst them. I knew one woman who had given birth to eight children with no professional care whatever. The last one was born in the kitchen, witnessed by a son of ten years who, under his mother's direction, cleaned the bed, wrapped the placenta and soiled articles in paper, and threw them out of the window into the court below.

They reject help of any kind and want you to 'mind your own business' Birth and death they consider their own affairs They survive as best they can, suspicious of everyone, deathly afraid of police and officials of every kind

They are the submerged, untouched classes which no labor union, no church nor organization of a highly expensive, organized city ever reaches and rarely tries to reach They are beyond the scope of organized charity or religion, not even the Salvation Army touches them It was a sad consolation to hear other women in the stratum just slightly above breathe contented sighs and thank God that they had not sunk so low as that.

It is among the mothers here that the most difficult problems arise—the outcasts of society with theft, filth, perjury, cruelty, brutality oozing from beneath

Ignorance and neglect go on day by day, children born to breathe but a few hours and pass out of life, pregnant women toiling early and late to give food to four or five children, always hungry, boarders taken into homes where there is not sufficient room for the family, little girls eight and ten years of age sleeping in the same room with dirty, foul smelling, loathsome men, women whose weary, pregnant, shapeless bodies refuse to accommodate themselves to the husbands' desires find husbands looking with lustful eyes upon other women, sometimes upon their own little daughters, six and seven years of age

In this atmosphere abortions and birth become the main theme of conversation On Saturday nights I have seen groups of fifty to one hundred women going into questionable offices well known in the community for cheap abortions I asked several women what took place there, and they all gave the same reply a quick examination, a probe inserted into the uterus and turned a few times to disturb the fertilized ovum, and then the woman was sent home Usually the flow began the next day and often continued four or five weeks Some times an ambulance carried the victim to the hospital for a

curetage, and if she returned home at all she was looked upon as a lucky woman

This state of things became a nightmare with me. There seemed no sense to it all, no reason for such waste of mother life, no right to exhaust women's vitality and to throw them on the scrap heap before the age of thirty five.

Everywhere I looked, misery and fear stalked—men fearful of losing their jobs, women fearful that even worse conditions might come upon them. The menace of another pregnancy hung like a sword over the head of every poor woman I came in contact with that year. The question which met me was always the same. What can I do to keep from it? or, What can I do to get out of this? Sometimes they talked among themselves bitterly.

It's the rich that know the tricks, they'd say, while we have all the kids. Then, if the women were Roman Catholics, they talked about Yankee tricks, and asked me if I knew what the Protestants did to keep their families down. When I said that I didn't believe that the rich knew much more than they did I was laughed at and suspected of holding back information for money. They would nudge each other and say something about paying me before I left the case if I would reveal the secret.

It all sickened me. It was heartbreaking to witness the rapt, anxious, eager expression on their pale, worried faces as I told them necessary details concerning cleanliness and hygiene of their sex organs. It was appalling how little they knew of the terms I was using, yet how familiar they were with those organs and their functions and how unafraid to try anything, no matter what the results.

I heard over and over again of their desperate efforts at bringing themselves around—drinking various herb teas, taking drops of turpentine on sugar, steaming over a chamber of boiling coffee or of turpentine water, rolling down stairs, and finally inserting slippery-elm sticks, or knitting needles, or shoe hooks into the uterus. I used to shudder with horror as I heard the details and, worse yet, learned of the condi-

tions *behind the reason* for such desperate actions Day after day these stories were poured into my ears I knew hundreds of these women personally, and knew much of their hopeless, barren, dreary lives

What relief I had came when I shifted my work for a few weeks to the then fashionable Riverside Drive or to the upper western section of New York City, but inevitably I was called back into the lower East or West Side as if magnetically attracted by its misery

The contrast in conditions seemed only to intensify the horrors of those poverty stricken homes, and each time I returned it was to hear that Mrs Cohen had been carried to a hospital but had never come back, that Mrs Kelly had sent the children to a neighbor and had put her head into the gas oven to end her misery Many of the women had consulted midwives, social workers and doctors at the dispensary and asked a way to limit their families, but they were denied this help, sometimes indignantly or gruffly, sometimes jokingly, but always knowledge was denied them Life for them had but one choice either to abandon themselves to incessant childbearing or to terminate their pregnancies through abortions Is it any wonder they resigned themselves hopelessly, as the Jewish and Italian mothers, or fell into drunkenness, as the Irish and Scotch? The latter were often beaten by husbands, as well as by their sons and daughters They were driven and cowed, and only as beasts of burden were allowed to exist Life for them was full of fear

Words fail to express the impressions these lives made on my sensitive nature My own happy love life became a reproach These other lives began to clutch at all I held dear The intimate knowledge of these misshapen, hapless, desperate women seemed to separate me from the right of happiness

They claimed my thoughts night and day One by one these women, with their worried, sad, pensive and ageing faces would marshal themselves before me in my dreams,

sometimes appealingly, sometimes accusingly I could not escape from the facts of their misery, neither was I able to see the way out of their problems and their troubles Like one walking in a sleep, I kept on

Finally the thing began to shape itself, to become accumulative during the three weeks I spent in the home of a desperately sick woman living on Grand Street, a lower section of New York's East Side

Mrs Sacks was only twenty-eight years old, her husband, an unskilled worker, thirty two Three children, aged five, three and one, were none too strong nor sturdy, and it took all the earnings of the father and the ingenuity of the mother to keep them clean, provide them with air and proper food, and give them a chance to grow into decent manhood and womanhood

Both parents were devoted to these children and to each other The woman had become pregnant and had taken various drugs and purgatives, as advised by her neighbors Then, in desperation, she had used some instrument lent to her by a friend She was found prostrate on the floor amidst the crying children when her husband returned from work Neighbors advised against the ambulance, and a friendly doctor was called The husband would not hear of her going to a hospital, and as a little money had been saved in the bank a nurse was called and the battle for that precious life began

It was in the middle of July The three room apartment was turned into a hospital for the dying patient Never had I worked so fast, never so concentratedly as I did to keep alive that little mother Neighbor women came and went during the day doing the odds and ends necessary for our comfort The children were sent to friends and relatives and the doctor and I settled ourselves to outdo the force and power of an outraged nature

Never had I know such conditions could exist July's sultry days and nights were melted into a torpid inferno Day after

day, night after night, I slept only in brief snatches, ever too anxious about the condition of that feeble heart bravely carrying on, to stay long from the bedside of the patient. With but one toilet for the building and that on the floor below, everything had to be carried down for disposal, while ice, food and other necessities had to be carried three flights up. It was one of those old airshaft buildings of which there were several thousands then standing in New York City.

At the end of two weeks recovery was in sight, and at the end of three weeks I was preparing to leave the fragile patient to take up the ordinary duties of her life, including those of wifehood and motherhood. Everyone was congratulating her on her recovery. All the kindness of sympathetic and understanding neighbors poured in upon her in the shape of convalescent dishes, soups, custards, and drinks. Still she appeared to be despondent and worried. She seemed to sit apart in her thoughts as if she had no part in these congratulatory messages and endearing welcomes. I thought at first that she still retained some of her unconscious memories and dwelt upon them in her silences.

But as the hour for my departure came nearer, her anxiety increased, and finally with trembling voice she said: "Another baby will finish me, I suppose."

"It's too early to talk about that," I said, and resolved that I would turn the question over to the doctor for his advice. When he came I said: "Mrs. Sacks is worried about having another baby."

"She well might be," replied the doctor, and then he stood before her and said: "Any more such capers, young woman, and there will be no need to call me."

"Yes, yes—I know, Doctor," said the patient with trembling voice, but, and she hesitated as if it took all of her courage to say it, "*what* can I do to prevent getting that way again?"

"Oh ho!" laughed the doctor good naturedly, "You want your cake while you eat it too, do you? Well, it can't be done." Then, familiarly slapping her on the back and pick-

ing up his hat and bag to depart, he said "I'll tell you the only sure thing to do—Tell Jake to sleep on the roof!"

With those words he closed the door and went down the stairs, leaving us both petrified and stunned.

Tears sprang to my eyes, and a lump came in my throat as I looked at that face before me. It was stamped with sheer horror. I thought for a moment she might have gone insane, but she conquered her feelings, whatever they may have been, and turning to me in desperation said "He can't understand, can he?—he's a man after all—but you do, don't you? You're a woman and you'll tell me the secret and I'll never tell it to a soul."

She clasped her hands as if in prayer, she leaned over and looked straight into my eyes and beseechingly implored me to tell her something—something *I really did not know*. It was like being on a rack and tortured for a crime one had not committed. To plead guilty would stop the agony, otherwise the rack kept turning.

I had to turn away from that imploring face. I could not answer her then. I quieted her as best I could. She saw that I was moved by the tears in my eyes. I promised that I would come back in a few days and tell her what she wanted to know. The few simple means of limiting the family like *coitus interruptus* or the condom were laughed at by the neighboring women when told these were the means used by men in the well-to-do families. That was not believed, and I knew such an answer would be swept aside as useless were I to tell her this at such a time.

A little later when she slept I left the house, and made up my mind that I'd keep away from those cases in the future. I felt helpless to do anything at all. I seemed chained hand and foot, and longed for an earthquake or a volcano to shake the world out of its lethargy into facing these monstrous atrocities.

The intelligent reasoning of the young mother—how to *prevent* getting that way again—how sensible, how just she

had been—yes, I promised myself I'd go back and have a long talk with her and tell her more and perhaps she would not laugh but would believe that those methods were all that were really known

But time flew past, and weeks rolled into months. That wistful, appealing face haunted me day and night. I could not banish from my mind memories of that trembling voice begging so humbly for knowledge she had a right to have. I was about to retire one night three months later when the telephone rang and an agitated man's voice begged me to come at once to help his wife who was sick again. It was the husband of Mrs. Sacks, and I intuitively knew before I left the telephone that it was almost useless to go.

I dreaded to face that woman. I was tempted to send some one else in my place. I longed for an accident on the subway, or on the street—anything to prevent my going into that home. But on I went just the same. I arrived a few minutes after the doctor, the same one who had given her such noble advice. The woman was dying. She was unconscious. She died within ten minutes after my arrival. It was the same result, the same story told a thousand times before—death from abortion. She had become pregnant, had used drugs, had then consulted a five-dollar professional abortionist, and death followed.

The doctor shook his head as he rose from listening for the heart beat. I knew she had already passed on, without a groan, a sigh or recognition of our belated presence she had gone into the Great Beyond as thousands of mothers go every year. I looked at that drawn face now stilled in death. I placed her thin hands across her breast and recalled how hard they had pleaded with me on that last memorable occasion of parting. The gentle woman, the devoted mother, the loving wife had passed on leaving behind her a frantic husband, helpless in his loneliness, bewildered in his helplessness as he paced up and down the room, hands clenching his head, moaning. My God! My God! My God!

The Revolution came—but not as it has been pictured nor as history relates that revolutions have come. It came in my own life. It began in my very being as I walked home that night after I had closed the eyes and covered with a sheet the body of that little helpless mother whose life had been sacrificed to ignorance.

After I left that desolate house I walked and walked and walked, for hours and hours I kept on, bag in hand, thinking, regretting, dreading to stop, fearful of my conscience, dreading to face my own accusing soul. At three in the morning I arrived home still clutching a heavy load the weight of which I was quite unconscious.

I entered the house quietly, as was my custom, and looked out of the window down upon the dimly lighted sleeping city. As I stood at the window and looked out, the miseries and problems of that sleeping city arose before me in a clear vision like a panorama—crowded homes, too many children, babies dying in infancy, mothers overworked, baby nurseries, children neglected and hungry—mothers so nervously wrought they could not give the little things the comfort nor care they needed, mothers half sick most of their lives—always ailing, never failing, women made into drudges, children working in cellars, children aged six and seven pushed into the labor market to help earn a living, another baby on the way, still another, yet another, a baby born dead—great relief, an older child dies—sorrow, but nevertheless relief—insurance helps, a mother's death—children scattered into institutions, the father, desperate, drunken, he slinks away to become an outcast in a society which has trapped him.

* * * * *

Another picture of the young couple full of hope with faith in themselves. They start life fresh. They are brave and courageous. The first baby is welcome, parents and relatives come from near and far to witness this mystery. The next year the second baby arrives, all agree it's a little early, but husband receives congratulations. The third child arrives, and

yet a fourth Within five years four children are born The mother, racked and worn, decides this can't go on, and at tempts to interrupt the next pregnancy The siren of the ambulance—death of the mother— orphan children—poverty, misery, slums, child labor, unhappiness, ignorance, desti- tution!

One after another these pictures unreeled themselves before me For hours I stood, motionless and tense, expecting some thing to happen I watched the lights go out, I saw the dark- ness gradually give way to the first shimmer of dawn, and then a colorful sky heralded the rise of the sun I knew a new day had come for me and a new world as well

It was like an illumination I could now see clearly the various social strata of our life, all its mass problems seemed to be centered around uncontrolled breeding There was only one thing to be done call out, start the alarm, set the heather on fire! Awaken the womanhood of America to free the motherhood of the world! I released from my almost paralyzed hand the nursing bag which unconsciously I had clutched, threw it across the room, tore the uniform from my body, flung it into a corner, and renounced all palliative work forever

I would never go back again to nurse women's ailing bodies while their miseries were as vast as the stars I was now fin- ished with superficial cures, with doctors and nurses and social workers who were brought face to face with this overwhelming truth of women's needs and yet turned to pass on the other side They must be made to see these facts I resolved that women should have knowledge of contraception They have every right to know about their own bodies I would strike out—I would scream from the housetops I would tell the world what was going on in the lives of these poor women I *would* be heard No matter what it should cost *I would be heard*

I went to bed and slept

That decision gave me the first undisturbed sleep I had

had in over a year I slept soundly and free from dreams, free from haunting faces

I announced to my family the following day that I had finished nursing, that I would never go on another case—and I never have

II

I asked doctors what one could do and was told I'd better keep off that subject or Anthony Comstock would get me I was told that there were laws against that sort of thing This was the reply from every medical man and woman I approached

Then I consulted the up and doing progressive women who then called themselves Feminists Most of them were shocked at the mention of abortion, while others were scarcely able to keep from laughing at the idea of my making a public campaign around the idea of too many children It can't be done, they said You are too sympathetic You can't do a thing about it until we get the vote Go home to your children and let things alone

When I review the situation and see myself in the eyes of those who gave me such circumspect advice, I can see what they felt I was considered a conservative person, bourgeoisie from the radical point of view I was not trained in the arts of the propagandist, I had no money with which to start a rousing campaign I was not a trained writer nor speaker, never having lifted my voice in public above the throng I had no social position I had no influential friends I was digging deep into an illegal subject, alone and unaided It seemed to them that I was scheduled for Blackwell's Island or the penitentiary, and it looked as if I was determined to get there

I spent my time reading in the vain hope that I would get the secret women were asking for I read Havelock Ellis then forbidden volumes of Psychology of Sex in one gulp, and had psychic indigestion for several months afterwards

The following spring found me still seeking and more de

terminated than ever to find out something about contraception and its mysteries. Why was it so difficult to obtain information on this subject? Where was it hidden? Why would no one discuss it? It was like the missing link in the evolution of medical science. It was like the lost trail in the journey toward freedom. Seek it I would. If it was in existence it should be found. I would never give up until I had obtained it, nor stop until the working women of my generation in the country of my birth were acquainted with its substance. I was so settled in this determination that I ceased to worry further about the details of how this should be brought about. I approached this problem in a manner characteristic of my makeup. I settled the principle first and left the details to work themselves out. In other words, I put some of the burden of this great task into the hands of the gods.

The effect of this conviction, however, began to have a tremendous bearing upon my personal life. My three lovely, healthy children were full of life, vigor and happiness. They were glorious examples of wanted children, mentally and physically. Gradually, however, there came over me the feeling and dread that the road to my goal was to separate me from their lives, from their development, growth and happiness. The feeling grew stronger and stronger within me, and this, together with my temporary psychic indigestion, led me to gather the three of them onto a Fall River boat one late afternoon in June and sail off to Provincetown, Massachusetts.

I tried to run away from life, from its turmoil and perplexities. I wanted the quiet of the sea, the loneliness of the dunes, to be alone with myself forever. I wanted to have the children solely to myself, too. I wanted to drive away that descending, foreboding barrier of separation by closer contact with them. I wanted to feed, to bathe, to clothe them myself. I wanted to bind them to me and allow nothing to force us apart. I clutched at them like a drowning woman in a raging current, as if to save myself from its swiftness.

In Provincetown I rented a small cottage on the beach far

on the outskirts of the picturesque Cape Cod village, toward Truro. In 1913 Provincetown was not the busy resort of artists and art students it has become these summers, now that police men are needed to control the incessant motor traffic.

We found ourselves among a congenial group of social rebels and writers. Mary Heaton Vorse, the social leader of this group, and her husband, Joseph O'Brien, Hutchins Hapgood and his charming wife, the novelist Neith Boyce, Charles Hawthorne, who had discovered Provincetown for his fellow artists and conducted a summer school there. It was not until 1914 that the hegira to Provincetown began, not until 1916 that the Provincetown Players were organized and gave the first production of a play by Eugene O'Neill on a dilapidated wharf belonging to Mary Heaton Vorse.

Our own cottage verandah faced the bay, and when the tide was high the children would sit on the steps and dip their toes into the water. When the tide was out we had two miles of beach for our front yard on which they skipped and ran. These days were filled with the joy of playing and romping with the children, away from the turmoil and from the ever-pulling desire to be into the fight and battle of life. It was a wonderful place in which to forget the woes of the world.

The late William D. Haywood—Big Bill, as he was affectionately called—was in Provincetown that summer. He had been East advising the workers in Paterson who had been on strike in the silk mills. His health was failing, and the strain of work had put him on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Jessie Ashley, that aristocratic rebel gentlewoman, had carried Bill off for a much needed rest by the sea.

This picturesque hero of the Western Federation of Miners reminded me of the giant Polyphemus I had read about in the *Odyssey* as a child. One of his eyes had been destroyed in some violent mine explosion. This gave him the habit of turning his head slightly when he looked at you. He gave the impression of a bull ready to attack an adversary. In reality Big Bill was as gentle as a child. His frame was enormous, he was like a giant in stature. He had emerged

from the celebrated Haywood Moyer Pettibone case in Butte, Montana, an intransigent rebel against the then existing conditions of the workers. Like his young friend, John Reed, poor Bill was destined years later to die the death of an exile in Soviet Russia.

But that summer in Provincetown our outlook was sanguine, and there was no shadow of disillusion on the horizon of our sky blue hopes.

Bill came to see me often. We talked and read together day after day. He was a keen student of human nature, though like many American men he knew nothing of the finer sensibilities of woman's being. Still, I remember a remark of his one day as we walked along the beach. "Say girl," he said, "you're getting ready to kick over the traces!"

Then, taking my hand and pointing to the children, he added, "Don't do anything to spoil their happiness—will you?"

Despite the joy of those days I knew that I was only delaying the inevitable. It was no use. I could not forget the mothers bringing to birth children in poverty and misery. Even the fishermen's wives in Provincetown had the same dread, the same problems and fear of pregnancy as the workmen's wives in the slums of New York. They were like a great army of untouchables. Their voices were never raised, their agonies were unrevealed, their hopelessness ignored by church and society. This, the greatest of problems, as untouched as if it did not exist.

I went back and forth to Boston during these months to study in the medical library, ever seeking the information which was to relieve women of the burden of unlimited child bearing.

At the end of six months I was convinced that there was no practical medical information on contraception available in America. I had visited the Library of Congress in Washington, I had pored over books in the library of the New York Academy of Medicine and in the Boston Public Library, to find only the information no more reliable than that already obtainable from back fence gossip in any small town. It was

discouraging to contemplate, but I refused to accept defeat

Since childhood I had always been interested in social and political questions and had looked thoroughly into Free Trade, Socialism of its various kinds and schools, Syndicalism, as well as the theories of the Industrial Workers of the World While I had heard of Malthus and knew there was a Malthusian doctrine, I had associated it in my mind with over population and economic pressure, and not with knowledge of contraception or any artificial means of family limitation

I had previously cast my lot with the women of the Socialist movement I listened intently to all debates, arguments and theories of this great school of liberal thought Their ardent and passionate faith in legislation, however, I could never share Their answer to the misery of women and the ignorance of contraceptive knowledge was like that of the Feminists Wait until we get the vote to put us in power!

Wherever I turned, from every one I approached I met the same answer Wait! Wait until women get the vote

Wait until the Socialists are in power Wait for the Social Revolution Wait for the Industrial Revolution Thus I lost my faith in the social schemes and organizations of that day

Only the boys of the I W W seemed to grasp the economic significance of this great social question At once they visualized its importance, and instead of saying Wait they gave me names of organizers in the silk, woolen and copper industries, and offered their assistance to get any facts on family limitation I secured direct to the workingmen and their wives

Again Big Bill Haywood 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 I owe him a debt of gratitude which I am proud to acknowledge It was he who suggested that I go to France and see for myself the conditions resulting from generations of family limitation This idea, together with my interest in the social experiment then going on in Glasgow, convinced me that I was to find new ways to solve old problems in Europe I decided to go and see