

THE WOMAN REBEL

IN THOSE years just before the war a new religion was spreading over our country. It had no definite name, and its adherents would have been the first vociferously to deny that they were religious. This new faith was made up of scoffers, rebels, revolutionists, anarchists, socialists of all shades, from the pink tea intellectual to the dark purple lawbreaker. The term radical was used to cover them all. But while all were freethinkers, agnostics or atheists, they were as fanatical in their faith in the coming revolution as ever any primitive Christian was for the immediate establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Faith is infectious, and radicalism in the decade preceding the declaration of war in August 1914 made a tremendous appeal to the young, to idealists, to all who were brought face to face with the tragedies of modern society and who were totally disillusioned by the blight of conservative reaction then entrenched in power. Gross injustices were to be witnessed on all sides. The doctrines of Syndicalism, of Sabotage, of

Ca Canny and Direct Action were discussed and advocated These revolutionaries sneered at Political Actionists, Direct Actionists distrusted opportunists

Almost without realizing it, you became a comrade or fellow worker, like the primitive Christian, a member of a secret order The martyr, it has been well said, creates the faith Well, there were martyrs aplenty in those days—men and women who had served sentences in prison for their beliefs and who were honored accordingly One had hardly any social standing at all in radical circles unless one had worked for wages, or brushed up against the police, or had served at least a few days in jail As in the early Church, most of the members of this order were of the working classes, though there were eccentric millionaires, editors, lawyers, and rich women who had experienced conversion and were active in the movement Some could even predict the exact date of the coming Revolution

This movement ranged, as I say, from light pink to dark purple At one end of the scale there were lawbreakers, the Direct Actionists, the strike leaders, Syndicalists and Industrial Workers of the World, familiarly known as Wobblies, at the other end the Marxian Socialists and Trade Unionists Between the two there was a chasm that was never to be closed Radicals reviled the orthodox Socialists even more than they did the Capitalists and the *bourgeois* this last term being the greatest insult that could be hurled at a comrade with whom one disagreed

After Francisco Ferrer, the Spanish libertarian, had been executed and thrown in a ditch at Montjuich, at the instigation of the Roman Catholic Church in Spain, a tremendous wave of indignation swept over the civilized world A little group of New York radicals sought to honor his name and perpetuate his memory by the establishment of a Modern School on East Twelfth Street Leonard Abbott, Hutchins Hapgood, Bayard Boyeson and others were the leading spirits in this enterprise Many who have since become famous taught and lectured there Manuel Komroff, now acclaimed as a novelist,

was for a time associated in the direction of the Ferrer school Lola Ridge, a fiery, intense rebel from Australia, who has since won renown as a poetess, was its secretary Robert Henri and George Bellows lectured and taught art there Alexander Brook and Man Ray, now in Paris, were students And for the children, after many changes, a young man named Will Durant was chosen as instructor Will Durant, a recent convert from Catholicism, his young head bursting with his recent liberation, and yet withal so innocent of life, created quite a problem for the directors of the Modern School by more or less promptly falling in love with one of his pupils, a young girl not out of the roller skate period! Indeed, I can remember Puck Durant, even after their early and quite successful marriage coming to my house to spend the day and spending the greater part of it out playing marbles with my son Stuart

It is not hard to laugh about it all now, but no one could have been more serious and determined than we were in those days

When the Lawrence, Massachusetts, strike broke out in 1912, the Syndicalists tossed me into their ranks of action The Italian leaders in New York City planned to invite the children of the strikers to visit the workers homes of other cities Help was needed for the job of transferring them, and I was requested to go to Lawrence to assist in bringing the 250 children to their foster parents in New York I did this with enthusiasm, and made an examination of the children's throats and chests before putting them aboard to avoid the possible spread of contagion Four or five children were remanded I was again appalled at the faces of these mothers As they parted with the children, they had the same secret dread, the worried countenance, the age wrinkled skin of sixty on faces less than thirty

Never shall I forget that night when we arrived at the Grand Central Station The train was late Thousands of men and women workers and liberals had waited for that train to come in When we descended from the train to the platform we must have presented a picture like the Pied Piper

followed by the children of Hamelin. As soon as we were recognized by some of the leaders, there was a grand rush, a pushing aside of policemen, and jumping over the ropes to the platform. Each man as he came snatched the first child up in his arms, hoisted it upon his shoulders, and with torches, banners, songs, we marched to the notes of the music, every child under the age of twelve hoisted on the shoulders of one of the marchers.

Thus, in the evening of that cold March day, we marched a thousand strong from Grand Central Station to a public hall near Union Square, where a hot supper awaited the visitors, and foster parents loitered about waiting for the child or children whom they were temporarily to adopt until the strikers were back at work again.

I went home more puzzled than ever over the social problem, and searching, still searching for the solution. For in the great industrial strikes, urged by the Industrial Workers of the World and the revolutionary Socialists, I saw that the greatest suffering fell upon the women and children. They were the starved, the shivering, during those long days and nights when the agitators were busy urging the factory workers to hold out against their employers. And in not a few cases these starving women were not only forced to hear the pitiful whining of the children for something to eat, but within their frail and enfeebled bodies an unborn child was making ever increasing demands upon an under nourished system.

It was at this time I began to realize that Anthony Comstock was alive and active. His stunted, neurotic nature and savage methods of attack had ruined thousands of women's lives. He had indirectly caused the death of untold thousands. He and a weak kneed Congress, which, through a trick, in 1873 had given him the power of an autocrat, were directly responsible for the deplorable condition of a whole generation of women left physically damaged and spiritually crippled from the results of abortion. No group of women had yet locked horns with this public enemy. Women in far western states who had fought for the sacred privilege of the ballot and *won*

it years earlier had never raised their voices against the Comstock laws. Their own shallow emotions had not grappled with so fundamental a need as sex.

Now upon my return from Paris I came at last to the realization that I must fight the battle against Comstock's obscenity laws utterly alone. No organization would support me. No group of women would stand beside me in this fight. On all sides, in fact, I was advised to let it alone or suffer the consequences. I decided to test out public opinion on the broad issues of economic and feminist principles.

I took what money I was able to subtract from my rapidly decreasing bank account and started the first lap of my work by the publication of a monthly magazine, *The Woman Rebel*.

Its message was a scathing denunciation of all organized conventionalities. It went as far as was necessary to arouse the Comstockians to bite. While the main reason for its publication was to feel out the authorities on the Federal law, it had another purpose, namely, that of gathering friends and supporters to this cause. It championed freedom of speech and press and lived up to its principles.

I have no apologies for the publication of *The Woman Rebel*. It expressed exactly what I felt and thought at that time. Some recent critics claim that it went too far afield and lent itself to theories beside the question of contraception, all of which is true, but this only strengthened its substance, nevertheless, and widened its appeal.

The entire burden of putting out *The Woman Rebel* was upon my individual shoulders. I was editor, manager, circulation manager, bookkeeper. I was solely responsible for it financially, legally, and morally. I paid the printer's bills and worked day and night at making it as red and flaming as possible. Max Eastman of *The Masses* was doubtless correct in saying of its first issue: We must thank Margaret Sanger for speaking out clearly and quietly for popular education in the means of preventing conception. And if she goes to court in this fight, we must go too and stand behind her.

and make her martyrdom—if martyrdom it must be—the means of that very publicity she is fighting to win. There is no more important stand, and no stand that requires more bravery and purity of heart, than this one she is making. And if the virtue that holds heroes up to these sticking points must be united with the fault of rather unconvincing excitedness and intolerance—all right, we will hail the virtue and call it a bargain at the price.

The response to its call was immediate. Requests for information came from labor unions, friends of labor, radicals, dissatisfied men and women all over the United States. The majority of labor papers carried news of *The Woman Rebel* and within six months I had received over 10,000 requests for contraceptive information.

One morning after the children were washed and dressed and sent away to their school in the neighborhood I started my day's work by looking over my huge batch of mail. My attention was immediately caught by an unstamped envelope from the New York Post Office. I tore it open. Dear Madam, I read. You are hereby notified that the Solicitor of the Post Office Department has decided that *The Woman Rebel* for March 1914 is unmailable under Section 489 Postal Laws and Regulations. It was signed by E. M. Morgan, Postmaster.

I re-read the letter. At first the significance of its contents did not register on my brain. I read it again, and yet again, and then I *knew* the fight was on!

This very morning, May —, 1931, as I write these words, I have before me a statement, published on the front page of the *New York Times* issued by the Committee on Marriage and the Home of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America supporting birth control from the point of view of morality and pleading for it to promote the health of women and family happiness in the home. The article on Prevention of Conception in that March issue of *The Woman Rebel* was the first outspoken challenge on a subject which was to change the thought of a generation.

I have often been asked by new friends how I felt when that letter from the New York postmaster informed me that *The Woman Rebel* was unmailable, that if I went on with its publication I might be convicted of a crime and sentenced to a long term in prison. Why, they ask, didn't you stop right there? My reply is that I had already visualized, or foreseen, with what I can only call long range vision the long series of obstacles, legal and financial, I was to encounter. I had sensed with amazing accuracy the denunciation, mis understanding, accusation and ostracism which was to follow. I was prepared for anything. Nothing could come as a surprise. For, remember, even before the first issue of the paper was prepared my closest friends had used all their influence to dissuade me from starting it. Every argument, every weapon to discourage me had been met by my passionate retort that the issue was Millions of mothers lives against the comfort and security of one. Now again I had come face to face with another weapon, not the advice of friends or relatives, but with the power of a great nation—the law.

After the first emotions of surprise had cooled down, I began to read the letter with what I often call my head sense, and then realized that the letter was vague and ambiguous and in no way helpful to me in getting at the facts of its suppression. There was no mention of any special article or articles which had caused the paper to be banned. Surely all the articles in that little eight page sass box could not be considered obscene!

I therefore took up my pen and replied courteously to the letter. I asked Mr Morgan to help me by stating definitely what had offended him, thereby assisting me in my conduct in the future. The reply which followed simply repeated the statement in his former letter, namely, that the March issue was unmailable. Again, when the news of the post office action spread in the press, my friends came and begged me to cease such absurd activity, and cautioned that I could never get away with this kind of thing.

For heaven's sake, go back and take care of your children!
said one noted woman rebel

To me, having visualized these and many other obstacles, this was only the first open fire, and it was not in my nature to run back while a principle was involved. I felt that a right was on my side, and *always I had believed* that principles eventually win out if you hold fast to them.

I was to be shaken like a sapling in the wind before many weeks later, in this belief.

There followed several months of the most trying ordeal any woman could experience in a country said to be for the brave and the free. For weeks I was followed about by detectives. My every move was spied and reported upon. I had to act quickly and make quick decisions in order to accomplish what I had set out to do.

The first thing necessary was to get a name for contraception which would convey to the public the social and personal significance of the idea. A few friends and supporters of the paper gathered together one evening in my apartment to discuss the selection of a distinctive name. We debated in turn

Malthusianism, conscious generation, voluntary parenthood, voluntary motherhood, preventception, the new motherhood, constructive generation, etc., etc.

All of these names were cast aside as not meeting the demands. Then we got a little nearer when family control and race control and birth rate control were suggested.

Finally it came to me out of the blue— Birth Control!

We all knew at once that we had found the perfect name for the cause. There was no further discussion. Our object was attained. The group disbanded to meet no more.

That was the first time the words were used together. The phrase has now gone round the world like a magic message to herald the coming of a new dawn. It has become part of the English language and is embodied in the encyclopedia as well as in practically every modern book on sociology. It is discussed in newspapers all over the world, in colleges, religious conventions, and medical and philosophical institutes,—

everywhere Birth control, as conceived and defined, is the conscious control of the birth rate by means that prevent the conception of human life

With this definition and name the discussion of birth control dominated all others then current in *The Woman Rebel* The postal authorities ignored practically all theoretical attacks on the government The articles on politics and economics were not deemed indictable, but any mention of birth control or its ramifications was promptly suppressed and indictments issued It was the challenge of a free press How much would the postal authorities suppress? What were they really after? What kind of articles did they consider obscene? No one knew The postmaster would not definitely reveal his objections

But the fight was on, and all classes of people threw themselves into it laborers, radicals, liberals, anarchists, semi revolutionaries, industrialists, and hundreds of others who were neither in nor out of the so-called radical movement People of whom no one had ever heard turned up to offer advice or bring articles on every possible subject They challenged, defied me to publish them in the name of free speech! It got to be something of a riot, but a lark nevertheless I accepted all challenges and printed everything

During all these months while *The Woman Rebel* was doing the window dressing for me—attracting attention and creating public discussion—I was hard at work writing a little practical pamphlet called *Family Limitation* Within its covers was contained all the practical advice I could give, including the names and descriptions of the devices used for contraception which I had obtained in France It was simply and plainly written, and was dedicated to the wives of working men With this pamphlet I intended to overcome all Puritanical objections to birth control I naively believed that the Suffragists and Feminists, when they read its simple directions and its clean and wholesome advice, would join in this crusade and challenge the absurdity of such clean ideas being classified

as obscene I was to undergo many disappointments in the next few years

I wrote the pamphlet under great pressure It was as if a psychological whip lashed me into a prison of my own making There was no rest, no contentment in my heart until every word had been set down in its proper place, but when it was finally finished a great peace entered my soul

The story of getting that little pamphlet printed has never been written, and even now it cannot be entirely divulged To me it was such a plain, simple, and modest little treatise that I could not credit it with the power it seemed to have of upsetting so many people I took the manuscript to a printer well known for his liberal tendencies and courage He read the contents page by page, turned deadly pale, and said That can never be printed, Margaret It's a Sing Sing job

I looked him straight in the eye and said Well, what about it?

That question doubled him up He stuttered something about having a family, and I replied that I had one too It was pathetic to see him struggling with his conscience, his ideals, his desire, and his common sense Finally, after being goaded into shame and fury, he said that he did not believe in the damn thing and would not print it for a thousand dollars

I visited at least twenty printers within the next two weeks No one would touch the job It seemed impossible ever to get into print the contents of that pamphlet

It is a marvellous sensation, however, to have a period of apparent fanaticism No obstacle can discourage you The single vision of your quest obscures defeat and lifts you over mountainous difficulties Never would I give up looking for a printer I realized, however, that it was hopeless to think of having it done by the regular trade I had to win the sympathy of some one individual who would do the initial work, and trust the gods to do the rest I am not at liberty to tell who did the work The man is now a prominent leader in politics in another country Blessings on his head! He did

the linotype work after hours when his shop was supposed to be closed so that there would be no workers about to see him at his risky job. After that, there was still the question of printing, binding, and storing, all of which was accomplished by individuals of five nationalities over a period of three months despite the careful watching of Uncle Sam.

When the edition of 100,000 was finally printed and carefully wrapped, addressed, sealed and transported to storage in three cities ready for future circulation, I knew that the battle was half won. I was now ready for action and its consequences.

My desire had been to print a million copies of the family limitation pamphlet. These were to be divided conveniently for storage in several large cities or industrial centers. At a signal from me they were to be released, and all who had requested copies were to receive them at the same time. It was a cherished plan of mine. The quantity had to be reduced, owing to lack of funds, but the arrangement and distribution was now under way. Workers in Chicago, Pittsburgh and San Francisco helped to carry the plan through. Within a specified time 100,000 pamphlets would be finding their way into the homes of working men and women in every state in the Union.

The March, May, July, and August issues of *The Woman Rebel* had been suppressed by the postmaster. Repeatedly in reply to the formal notice I inquired specifically which article or articles had incurred Uncle Sam's austere disapproval, but never could I obtain that definite information. The whole issue was always suppressed, and apparently that was all there was to that. I refused to accept such wholesale disregard for liberty of the press, and night after night, often until the early hours of the morning, with one or more co-workers I wended my way from the printers to the general post office and dropped the magazine, piece by piece, into the various letter boxes and chutes.

The threat of a prison sentence hovered over me constantly. I was not afraid to go to jail for an ideal, but jail was not my

goal I had seen braver and hardier souls than I broken in spirit and body by prison terms, and I had no more intention of submitting tamely to prison life than I had had eight years earlier of submitting to a protracted illness. It was one thing to go to jail because of your principles, but it was a far more satisfactory feeling to know you had accomplished your purpose in getting there. I wanted the satisfaction of thinking and knowing that knowledge of contraception was at last in the open, spreading its way into the homes of working men and women where I knew it would be received with gratitude.

Later, when indictments had been issued, I found out which articles had been the cause of suppression. In the March issue, it was an article called "The Prevention of Conception." The suppressed May issue contained three articles: "Open Discussion," "Abortion in the United States," and "Can You Afford to Have a Large Family?" The July issue announced the formation of the first birth control league in America. This announcement, together with two other articles, was the cause of Uncle Sam's disapproval, although at the time I could not find out just what subject or just which articles were considered unmailable, and I was determined to prod and goad the postmaster until some definite knowledge was obtained as to *what* obscenity is. Five issues had been denied admission to the United States mails and no reason given—nothing to go by. How could any editor be expected to guard against suppression when no explanation of the offending articles was given? So far there had been no information on contraception in *The Woman Rebel*.

My plan was to set free from my prison cell the pamphlet "Family Limitation" then in storage to those thousands of mothers all over the country requesting them, and thereby to awaken the womanhood of America to the simple decency of the contents of the pamphlet. If my own country had only iron bars for those who tried to spread enlightenment and knowledge to the masses, then I should have to accept that decision, but I was determined not to spend years or even months in jail without a battle for the privilege of discussing

the right to change a law. It was agreed that were I sent to prison the doors of the storehouse would be opened and the pamphlets containing all the practical information on contraception would be released as an answer and a protest. Men and women workers all over the country were ready and willing to cooperate. Organized labor officials in West Virginia mines, New England woollen mills, New Jersey silk mills, Montana copper mines, all unofficially offered to spread the pamphlets at a word's notice.

However, before I could complete this gigantic plan of distributing the pamphlets, I was interrupted one afternoon in August by the call of two men representing his majesty, Uncle Sam. They said that I had been indicted by the grand jury for articles in *The Woman Rebel*.

But, I protested, there is no information on contraception in the pages of *The Woman Rebel*.

It's against the laws, they proclaimed. You had better submit quietly.

I assured them that I would do nothing of the kind, that I intended making noise enough to resound from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. They then sat down and questioned me as to my motives. They were, I am glad to say, intelligent officials of the federal government, capable of assimilating new ideas. I set the case before them and told them exactly what I believed birth control could do. I think they were disarmed by the simplicity of my motives, and I think that they believed me. When I went to court at the appointed time, as agreed upon, I felt that they had said a good word in my behalf. Judge Hazel, a kindly, fatherly man of Southern origin, allowed me to go on my own recognizance, and the case was adjourned until the end of October.

This seemed to be sufficient time for me to prepare a proper defense, and I at once set about planning for the future care of my children in case I should be sentenced to prison.