

CLINCS THE GOAL

IT WAS an eventful year—1916—filled with incident, conflict, and publicity. Looking back at the yards and yards of newspaper clippings that were the harvest of a lecture tour which took me to the Middle and the Far West, I am surprised to find that such liberal and radical papers as the *San Francisco Bulletin* then edited by that disillusioned iconoclast Fremont Older, now comfortably ensconced in the Hearst cabinet, opposed birth control, while on the other hand the *Chicago Tribune* certainly no friend of subversive doctrines, declared editorially that this is one of the problems that will have to be confronted by Europe after the war. Any attempt to control birth will be opposed by sentimentalists, but the stern facts are there for anyone to see.

When I left my home and children and country in October 1914, to prepare my case in Europe, I had visualized the birth control movement as a part of the fight for freedom of speech. It seemed to me then that the information given in pamphlet form and placed in the hands of fathers or mothers

would ultimately settle the problem of limiting the family. My studies in Europe and the practical course of contraceptive technique I took in Holland, as I have indicated, had convinced me that pamphlets, books or leaflets were of secondary importance to the consequences personally involved. I was convinced that personal instruction, personal advice, and personal examination were absolutely essential in order to guarantee the woman a fairly safe method. The safest method and the one advised over a long period of years in Holland, England, France and Germany was, and is today, the occlusive diaphragm or cervical pessary. That article must be made to fit the special requirements of the cervix and the vaginal canal as carefully as eyeglasses fit the eyes. Consequently, without a physical examination by a qualified person, who has some knowledge of anatomy, the advice of a pessary is useless. No woman is safe nor reliably protected from conception who obtains her information from a general source.

To carry out this program of instruction, I envisioned a glorious chain of clinics, thousands of them, in every center of America. I wanted to see specialists doing research work and gathering data to bring the subject up to other modern scientific standards. But first, in order to call attention to the necessity of this and to create public opinion in favor of birth control clinics, it was necessary to establish a model. I had Holland in mind, and remembered that in 1910 the Queen had issued a royal decree declaring that the work of the Neo Malthusian League in the Netherlands was a great public utility.

Now that my federal case was dismissed, I started on a lecture tour across the continent to California. I interviewed thousands of people, spoke in nineteen cities, and organized various groups into birth control leagues. Not wishing to tie myself down to committees and organizations, so I could be free to organize and agitate, I referred all of these groups to the National Birth Control League, and hoped for the best. Never was there a more interesting demonstration of mental attitudes

of a people than I found east and west of the Rocky Mountains on that tour in the spring of 1916

A workers group in Cleveland, the first stop after Pittsburgh, had arranged two meetings for me under the direction of Harry Weinberg, now a member of the medical profession. One was in the Unitarian Church, the other in a hall where the Industrial Workers of the World and other labor organizations held their meetings. At the former, I met Frederick Blossom, who was later to play a significant part in the birth control movement. Dr Blossom was then an officer in one of the charity organizations, and was ripening for a change. He saw clearly the futility of the short sighted policy of alleviation the charity organizations had adopted. He took to birth control like a duck to water, and, through his charming and winning personality and most disarming respectability, he was able to book me for a meeting at the Annual Conference of Social Workers which was to take place in Indianapolis within the next two weeks.

I went to Chicago, and was greeted by the message that the Women's City Club, the most powerful of women's organizations, would not permit me to speak before them. However, a large open meeting was to be held in a labor hall before about 1500 people, filling the building to its capacity. I also spoke at the Little Theater, due to the generous attitude of Maurice Browne, who has since become famous as the discoverer of the war play, *Journey's End*. It was not the women of the City Club I then wished to reach, but the women of the stock yard districts who were anxious for me to open a clinic near them. Chicago, however, was so well organized by social workers, through the influence of Jane Addams of Hull House, that it was extremely difficult for me to reach these women without sanction of a woman prominent in social work who was not interested in birth control. Thus were the poorest mothers fettered by organized social workers, and kept in ignorance of means to help them limit their families.

Minneapolis was a surprise both to me and to my co-work

ers I was advised not to go up there at all, as it was the most conservative city in America

You won't get six people to come out to hear you, said a woman doctor from that city with whom I had talked in Chicago

Do you think I'll get six? I asked

Quite possibly, she replied sarcastically

Then I'll go, I said It was my idea to go wherever I was asked to speak, regardless of the numbers, large or small I knew that six people properly converted and informed usually make sixty people think before very long

But to my surprise the audience was one of the largest on my schedule The meeting was held in the Public Library, and hundreds of chairs had to be brought in to take care of the overflow

From Minneapolis I set out for Indianapolis to attend the Social Workers Conference at the Claypool Hotel Thomas Mott Osborn and I were two speakers on the side, and we both made the conference alive to the issues of prison reform and birth control Catholic priests protested and raved at my being allowed to speak before the meeting, but the social workers were not of this opinion Thus was the ball kicked across the country, carried by hundreds of the persons best equipped to do so

St Paul, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Detroit, all responded to my lectures with the formation of local leagues

St Louis distinguished itself by arrogant Catholic coercion The Victoria Theater had been engaged for the evening Tickets had been sold and all was seemingly going well However, as the time for the meeting approached, without warning or notification, the theater doors remained closed while a crowd of two thousand people howled outside Although police threatened to arrest me if I spoke to the people, I stood up in an automobile, Robert Minor, the artist, standing beside me, and spoke until the meeting was dispersed This outrageous behavior on the part of the manager was explained later He had been threatened by a high Roman Catholic official of

the church, and was told he would be protected if we threatened suit for breach of contract

Then the fun began St Louis was not going to yield to arrogant dogmatic, religious dictation The papers stormed Carrying huge headlines, sarcastic cartoons of the Pope dictating to the citizens of St Louis from the Vatican, incited the Men s City Club and the Women s City Club to invite me to speak at their respective meetings Over forty Roman Catholic members of the Men s City Club resigned, while over one hundred new members joined The hall was packed for the men s meeting, and I was told that not even Teddy Roosevelt himself had had so large an audience

The effort to suppress Mrs Sanger, asserted the St Louis *Post Dispatch* in commenting on the incident of the Victoria Theater, has advertised her propaganda, piqued public curiosity, aroused popular interest, and gained public support from many who otherwise might be indifferent If Mrs Sanger were locked out of every theater and hall in town, her propaganda would spread underground where the opponent would be unable to meet and combat it If she teaches error, her teaching will fail If she teaches truth which appeals to the heart and conscience of men, suppressive measures are vain We commend to her opponents the wise saying of Jefferson Error of opinion may be tolerated when reason is left free to combat it

From St Louis I went to Denver, where Judge Ben Lindsey, fearless and courageous, now famous for advocating companionate marriage, presided at the meeting

My tour then took me to Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Portland, Oregon When I arrived in Portland, one of the men there asked me if he could sell the revised Family Limitation pamphlet at my meeting I said that I had no objection provided it did not involve anyone in arrests To make a long story short, it was sold and three of the men were arrested They were set free on bail, and a postponement of the trial was permitted so that I could deliver my scheduled

lectures in Seattle and Spokane and then return to be called as a special witness for them

On my return, I found that the City Council and the Mayor had met in secret and had passed a city ordinance against that special pamphlet. This action on the part of five men enraged the women of Portland, and they issued leaflets asking "Shall five men legislate in secret against ten thousand women?" Then one of the women doctors, Dr. Marie Equi, helped me to revise the pamphlet on Family Limitation, and at a protest meeting on the night preceding the men's trial I asked for women volunteers to distribute the pamphlet. Ten women came forward, and four of us were arrested—the doctor, myself, and two Englishwomen living in Portland. We spent the night in jail, all of us refusing to accept bail, saying, "Let those who put us in take us out."

The following day the trial of seven of us was jointly held. Two well known lawyers came forward and volunteered their services. They were both men of the old democratic type, trying to keep alive a few of the basic principles of democracy. We had nothing to say about consulting these lawyers, they simply took the responsibility on their own shoulders, as citizens, and they were splendid. It would be impossible for me to give the details of that trial, but one of the significant things was that no oaths were taken. Both pamphlets were on trial, the first and the second. Both were considered obscene. We were all found guilty, and the men were fined ten dollars, which the judge said they need not pay. The women were not fined at all.

Interest in the case was intense, and the room was packed. On the day before, we had fifteen men walking up and down the streets with posters bearing such sentences as "Poverty and large families go hand in hand," "Poor women are denied what the rich possess." I don't remember them all, but each was good and to the point. In the wake of our trial, letters supporting our cause besieged the press, and thousands of requests for the pamphlets were received.

In Seattle as well as in Portland a league had been formed,

and was doing educational as well as practical work. My two lectures there were successful in every respect. In Spokane I spoke in the Unitarian Church, which was crowded, and a league was formed the following day.

These early meetings in all cities attracted women. They came in swarms. They came in droves to the hotel ballrooms where many lectures were delivered. Each seized a chair with mechanical precision and planted it forcibly as near the platform as the laws of space would permit. Within a few moments the ballroom would be miraculously filled. White haired women struggled with chairs. There were numerous white haired old ladies, on all sides waiting to discover what they had gone ignorant of all through their existence.

During the course of my trip more than a hundred thousand educational leaflets and pamphlets were distributed. I received one thousand letters from St. Louis alone. Women came to me in the hotels with babies in their arms. Men, ready for work, carrying their lunch baskets, came early to get a little private advice before I left the city. The farm women way down in Texas and Arizona, who never got out to a lecture or meeting of any kind, I cared most to reach. Their letters were most touching and tragic.

On my way back, the Cleveland League gave a public banquet in my honor, and interest in the cause of clinics seemed to spread like a forest fire.

Taking everything into consideration, my campaign was a great success. I had created a national public opinion in favor of birth control, had won the press to discuss the subject, had inspired the organization of leagues to carry on the work throughout the country, and had aroused the nation to a realization of its great moral duty toward womanhood. I was encouraged, but not satisfied.

The idea of giving contraceptive information in the privacy of clinics set up for that purpose seemed to meet with general approval everywhere. People in the West, however, resented the implication that they could not *know* what methods were in use. There was a general demand by people to be properly

informed on this practical aspect of the subject, as well as on the economic or historical side

During my western tour, great activities were in process in New York. The challenge to women by Elsie Crew Parsons at the Brevoort dinner on January 18th had become a rebuke to many feminists and radicals. Meetings were called on the street corners, Union Square, Madison Square and elsewhere, leaflets distributed, several arrests were made. Bolton Hall, an attorney, Ida Rauh Eastman, wife of Max Eastman, were released on bail. Jessie Ashley, Mr S Kerr, P Marmer were also arrested for distributing leaflets on contraception. The latter two were sentenced to fifteen days in City Prison, the other three being lawyers by profession, got their own cases dismissed.

Upon my return from the West in July, I announced my intention of opening a free birth control clinic within a few months. This announcement brought me an avalanche of letters, telephone calls, and visitors. Women with infants in arms called to tell me their needs. I was besieged night and day with requests for information. It was impossible to go out of the house without being approached by women or men of all grades and nationalities with questions.

One day a group of three women crowded into my small room at an inexpensive hotel on Lexington Avenue where I was then residing with my sister. They had come from Brownsville in Brooklyn. They each had more than four children, and neighbors had offered to care for all the children and urged them to come to me to bring back the information or secret of birth control. They told of their own hardships, poverty and misery, of their own helplessness, their struggles to make ends meet. One woman said that she had just recovered from an abortion from which she had nearly died, an other abortion would take her off. Then what will become of my children? she moaned. They rocked back and forth in their chairs as they related their miseries, every tragic event told so simply as each woman recounted her experience,

scarcely able to allow the friend to finish before she took up the story of her own sufferings

When they had finished that hour's recital of misery, agony, and hopelessness, I felt as if I had been through it all myself. I wanted to scream out, to do something. I remember hearing the story of a man in Spain who had become so desperate over the injustice of innocent prisoners that he took a revolver and fired it at the first person he met on the street. Innocent persons of course he had killed, but it was his only protest, the only way the poor creature had of expressing his indignation. I understood this man that day after those women left me.

I wanted to open a free birth control clinic, a model clinic such as those in Holland. But where? And how could it be done with laws against it? Then, where was the money to pay for its necessities, I was asked. I pondered over these questions for hours. It seemed impossible to do it. I decided, as usual, to go out to look for a location, to take the first step. I would do that on the morrow. That much was settled. My telephone rang—a woman's voice—she had just come from California—she had brought a check of \$50 to me from Kate Gartz of Los Angeles—where should she send it?

That check was the answer to my doubts as to the first birth control clinic being opened in America.