

PARTING OF THE WAYS

UPON my return to New York in 1928, after an absence of eighteen months, I soon came to realize that while there had been a gain in the worldwide movement through the World Population Conference at Geneva, the local situation through the activities of my own organization in New York had taken on a new direction

Step by step, I had built up a national organization based on an ever growing public opinion which was coming to recognize the importance of contraception in the social problems of every community from coast to coast—the problems of organized charities, of juvenile delinquency, of poverty and crime, which exact so heavy a toll from the taxpayers of every American town and country. My supporters were those who came to look upon birth control not from the point of view of any new conception of public morals, but as a means of social economics. They wanted to lessen the toll exacted by the delinquent, the defective and dependent elements of American society in order that these funds might be used for furthering the opportunities of the promising children

The list of adherents was made up of the names of distinguished scientists, scholars, ministers, doctors and social workers in every forward looking community

I had also acquired the sanction of the State of New York by securing the incorporation of the League under the membership laws of the state. How little did those who had entered this movement at the eleventh hour realize how much time and energy had been expended upon the drawing up of the aims and principles of the league, how much effort in scattering and broadcasting constructive stimulating suggestive plans throughout the land to the various social and educational agencies—all with the aim of stimulating thought and discussion on birth control. Then, too, there were the countless drives inaugurated—upon religious bodies of various denominations, upon civic organizations, women's clubs, men's clubs, universities. All this had been going on during the years preceding when the newspapers were printing stories of the more spectacular skirmishes and battles carried on by the loyal and hard working office force and directors I had gathered about me.

While I knew the weaknesses of organizations and the stifling effect they could have on spiritual evolution, still I liked to organize and to feel the satisfaction one has in doing a big and difficult thing well. I had succeeded in building up an organization which had not been caught in its own mechanism to become a dead weight of routine and red tape, as organizations without leadership might—and often did, in fact—become, thus defeating the very purpose for which they were initially established. Guarding against this type of bureaucracy with its checks upon enthusiastic action, I had from the beginning of my battles instinctively sought to build up an effective staff—a little army that could carry on the fight by the intensity of its loyalty to our ideal.

This I had succeeded in doing by friendship and by inspiring faith in my own ideals. That I had succeeded was evidenced by the number of men and women who had stuck through thick and thin—and who are still at my side.

Long experience had sharpened my judgment of character I have, I admit, been too ready to accept people's opinion of themselves, too willing to accept and believe the best in human beings I am not of a suspicious nature, nor am I a boss in the sense of prying into motives or tracking employees early and late to check up on their time and occupations If I believed in persons at all, I believed in them fully and wholly and gave them the opportunity of developing their initiative and proving their ability

My father said that I had organized something ever since I could talk, by which he doubtless meant that I had got the members of the family to band together with me to get something I wanted to have

Now there was to our credit the creation of a large organization, a monthly magazine, leaflets, pamphlets, books, speakers, friends and supporters I had organized and taken part in the organization of more than fifteen national and international conferences on birth control, and find this the best test of one's ability to cooperate

Now, however, I found myself confronted by an unexpected crisis During my absence from the country the American Birth Control League had developed a tendency to settle down into a more or less routine form of endeavor The pioneer days of our initial aggressive activity were to be superseded by a more or less doctrinaire program of social activity In my estimation the movement had gone beyond the parlor meeting stage It had grown strong enough to face its battles in the open It had gained the backing of a public opinion based on reason and intelligence But rapidly it became apparent to me that the very machinery one had to build up in organization, efficient as it was for routine results, could be a drag or a weight upon effective, spontaneous, aggressive action

The first event of importance which conflicted with long range vision and my aggressive policy, and more than any other one act convinced me of this, was when we were barred from the booth which we had contracted for at the Parents

Exhibition in Grand Central Palace in 1928 We were entirely prepared to take our place beside other civic and educational agencies in the city of New York Then Mr William O Shea, Superintendent of Public Schools in this city, seeing our name above the booth we had rented and engaged and contracted for, demanded that we be ousted from the exhibit and threatened to withdraw from the activities unless this was done The impertinence, the audacity, the bullying tactics of this Irish Catholic spokesman demanded our ejection Our contract was to be broken and our rights trampled ruthlessly under foot by the command of an intolerant official

My instinctive action was to use the machinery of the law as the means to protect our rights At once I consulted an attorney I asked him to secure an injunction in the courts to prevent them from excluding us In consulting this attorney, I was acting on my own, as there was not time to get into action the machinery of my own organization Here I felt anew the hampering effect of by laws and rulings and the waste of precious time in consulting individuals well meaning enough but utterly lacking in vision or resourcefulness in time of emergency By the time a meeting of the Board was called to consider and get consent to act the case was more hopelessly complicated The check which paid for space had been returned by the committee and the doors of the exhibit had already been opened to the public Our opportunity to force the issue had been lost by our own delay and by the Board's timid indecision

Here then was an internal conflict which had to be considered and dealt with wisely It was a question of policy and principle, based on persons lives whose experience had been as vastly different as the North and South Poles To me, this cause was a living inspiration and interest It was not a hobby It was no mere filler in a busy social life It was not something that could wait on this or that mood Its interest came first in my waking consciousness and was my last thought as I lost consciousness at night To me it was a big vital, living job which called for all one had to give

To the other members of the Board it was only one of many other interests. Their activities were divided, their time had to depend upon what was left from social duties. Husbands, children, dressmakers, servants, charities, church, entertainment, all had claims on those who now began to dictate to me the policy the League was to take.

The growth of the movement had to a considerable extent thrived and depended on the skill of taking advantage of the stupid tactics of our bullying enemies. This skill had been called forth in our earliest battles—in the challenging defiance of *The Woman Rebel*—in every step of that legal conflict with the Federal authorities, in the founding of the Brownsville Clinic, in Mrs. Byrne's hunger strike, in the tremendous aftermath of the Town Hall raid of incalculable educational value for the American public, in the long drawn out and finally victorious skirmish with the Japanese Government, in the establishment of the Clinical Research Bureau and the subsequent raid by the police, in challenging laws and defending aggressively our rights. These and other battles had been precipitated without the permission of any board of directors. With no little amusement I found that during my absence our bank account had grown. This was a telling point in a new development. Money actually in the bank! Thousands of dollars!—There it was—actually there! Drawing interest, too! What relief that was to a board whose past experience at every meeting was to hear wails from the president and treasurer as to our needs. My policy was to spend, not to save. I believed that money had been contributed to spend wisely at work for the expansion and growth of the movement, not to draw interest in a bank when work was needing to be done. I know that apathy which comes from a good bank account in public agencies. I know that attitude of tacit disapproval toward every suggestion which is going to disturb that precious sum!

In my opinion funds were given to support the life of the movement, to maintain interest, to mobilize the army of public opinion and the press at critical moments, to enlighten the

medical profession concerning the importance of birth control, to secure cooperation of women's and men's organizations—in fact, to awaken to direct, to lead out, to expand, to grow! With this in mind I had founded the *Birth Control Review* as an educational instrument for the development and growth of the movement. I had secured the services of a medical man to go into the field and inform the medical profession in the various states of the Union as to the technique of contraception. I had organized conferences and carried the idea into every important city from coast to coast. Twelve years of experience had taught me that from its inception the birth control movement had progressed and advanced by a series of battles by aggressive and defensive campaigns which must be conducted fearlessly with vision and with faith. I realized now that these campaigns could never have been waged had I been tied to or hampered in my activities by individuals or boards or committees lacking the understanding or appreciation of these qualities.

The tide of public opinion had begun to turn in favor of birth control. It was being tolerated as a social necessity as well as a constructive instrument in morality. Never before was there such an opportunity for organizing the nation to bear upon Congress and legislatures in the various states to effect legislation. It became more apparent to me that a person like myself whose contribution to the movement had been aggressive pioneering was now needed in the national field to organize a campaign to effect legislation in Congress. State and Federal laws hampered our progress. I believed that they must be changed, that it was our duty while interest was on the wing to get them changed and to secure such legislation as would enable us to hand down to posterity a constructive program for a better race.

Conflict of opinions reigned—opinions of policy, opinions as to forms of legislation, the open bill or the doctors bill, opinions as to state or Federal action. Regretfully I found that the organization I had built up by years of work, effort and influence was to sidestep the greatest and most important

and immediate activity in a national effort to secure a Federal amendment

To come to any decision was an effort. Could I give over to the direction of others this precious child of long labor? Not only the League, but the life of the *Review* was in jeopardy. Could or would any living parent or mother pass over in full consciousness the future care, the life of this child which had become a vital part of her very being? I asked myself this question, but no answer came. Day after day, incidents accumulated. Words, actions, innuendoes, suggestions began to take on meaning and finally after months of misgivings the answer came. I would give complete freedom to others to carry on as they saw best, in order to obtain a new freedom for myself. The battle was by no means over, but our lines of defense had to be changed. The parting of the ways was inevitable.

Two things needed to be done to redirect attention and effort to the reorganization of the Clinical Research Bureau, which had been a sort of orphan child in my absence, and to launch an aggressive campaign for Federal legislation, which I had begun in 1914. To do these meant a separation of interests of the Board. There was no need to regret the division of work, and I realized that in order to get you must give, in order to hold you must let go. Those friends who had fought with me throughout the years, Mrs. Juliet Barrett Rublee, Mrs. Frances B. Ackermann, Mrs. Ida Timme, resigned with me, as did Rev. William Garth, and Mrs. Lewis L. Delafield loyally offered to come with me but her greater usefulness to the movement could be obtained by remaining.

Throughout this internal conflict my interest had been vitalized and my faith sustained by the contact with the real problems of mothers, the women of the people. From the early days of Brownsville they had remained loyal, and in contrast with the superficial and fleeting interest of other women I had come in contact with, the tragedy of their lives came to me now with more poignant intensity. Over a

million letters from America's inferno had been addressed to me personally from the beginning of the movement—appeals for personal help. Never before in the history of humanity had there been such testimony concerning the business of being a mother, never before such social documentation. It had required a regular staff to classify and answer these letters. I decided to make a selection of them and to print them in a book, only removing the names and other evidences of identification. These voices of maternity's underworld rang in my ears as a sort of chorus of mothers in Greek tragedy—except that it was a modern American tragedy, a tragedy of the here and the now, though as grim, as relentless, as racial as any ever staged in ancient Athens. These voices, these letters, as well as the mothers of the poor I met, gave me a sense of the pressing immediacy of the problem. Could I get these mothers to help me? Could I get them to address their appeals to Congress and together batter down these barriers to their freedom? Here then was my inspiration, for more than ever birth control was no mere theory supported by columns of statistics or decorated by impressive graphs, no mere matter of population problems viewed through the wrong end of a scientific telescope, a theory remote and clear cut. It was a matter of life and death in these lives caught in the toils of a powerful instinct.

Thus it was that I turned away from the presidency of the American Birth Control League to take up the difficult task of the Federal work of changing the laws and to outline a program to stimulate research through the Clinical Research Bureau, directing it toward the perfecting of contraceptive technique, urging scientists and specialists to focus their attention upon this problem and to set up bureaus for the purpose of testing their achievements.

So after seven years of organizing and directing the activities of the League, I left it with an enviable position of respect in the country, with a total corresponding membership of over sixty thousand. The *Review* had a circulation of twelve to

thirteen thousand, we had never been in debt, and our credit was good in all circles. As I looked over the spacious, well aired and lighted office at 104 Fifth Avenue where I had spent the best part of twelve years, the words of the poet came to my mind

Hail and farewell! Farewell and hail!