

Chapter Thirty-nine

SLOW GROWS THE SPLENDID PATTERN

*"There is no force in the world so great as that of an idea when
its hour has struck"*

VICTOR HUGO



LOOKING back at the past is like peering from some promontory upon a varied landscape. The years run through it like a road winding through a valley. With the passage of time you get a far-sweeping view, and the small details become blurred and difficult to recall. I wonder whether there should not be a school course to emphasize the importance of keeping diaries, so that you would know the really momentous happenings to put down. Mostly you scribble notes intended to call up a picture rather than an actual account of what has happened—memoranda of dates, engagements and events, leaving the results to recollection. Some inequality in this chronicle as to what is significant and what is not—some gaps in my remembrance of events—may have been the result.

It is strange what tricks the mind can play. My father, the person who had done most in shaping my growth, died in 1926 at the age of eighty. The day he was buried in Corning I was passing the bank on the corner of the town square with my brothers Dick and Bob, and we chanced to glance simultaneously at the clock tower. Faintly startled, we gazed at each other and Dick exclaimed, "Look at that little tiny thing! I've always thought it was as big as the Eiffel Tower!"

In all of our travels each of us had been convinced that nothing ever was so tall as that tower. That can happen to so many youthful memories. Months and miles that seemed so long then are so short later.

The same year that took my father summoned also my sister Mary, whose cruel immolation at the shrine of family duty had obliged her to forego marriage, even though I had seen her but seldom, she, too, had had an important influence over me and remained a dear presence whose loss I felt deeply. Out of eleven children seven are still living. Families have a separate and distinct role in your existence. They are closer yet more apart than friends, but often you discover that you have nothing save the ties of childhood to keep you together.

What I have been able to contribute to the birth control movement has been the result of forces which set a clear design almost from infancy, each succeeding circumstance tracing the lines more sharply my being born into a family so large as to be in part responsible for my mother's premature death, my preparation as a nurse, which awoke me to the sorrows of women, the inspiration of having come into contact with great minds and having claimed many as friends. It may have been destiny as some have said—I do not know.

To have helped carry the cause thus far has been at times strenuous, but I have never considered it a sacrifice. Every conscious hour, night and day, in any city, in any country, has brought its compensations. My life has been joyous and exulting and full because it has touched profoundly millions of other lives. It is ever a privilege to be a part of something unquestionably proved of value, something so fundamentally right.

From time to time wonder is expressed that so much has been accomplished in so short a period. The fact remains that in an era when huge fortunes have been spent in alleviating human misery progress has been painfully slow. Countless women still die before their time because the bit of knowledge essential to very life is still not theirs. Birth control must seep down until it reaches the strata where the need is greatest, until it has been democratized there can be no rest.

It is true that great advances have been made in the realm of theory. You can almost tell people's age now by their attitude towards birth control. To the young it is merely one of the accepted facts, if questioned, they assume the whole matter must have been settled long ago.

Over and over again in the past a new epoch has adopted a con-

cept censured by the preceding one, and has wondered derisively how its forefathers could have been so blind to anything so obvious. The use of anesthetics for mothers in childbirth was once condemned as an unholy attempt to escape the Biblical curse pronounced against all women, and, similarly, evolution as striking at the roots of Christianity. Battles over impiety, heresy, blasphemy, obscenity have been fought, temporarily lost, and finally won. Science whittles away such obstructions little by little. "The Moving Finger writes, and having writ moves on." In January, 1937, in that same Town Hall where fifteen years before I had been forbidden to speak, and whence I had been haled into court, I was honored with a medal. Pearl Buck said on one occasion, "The cause conquers because youth is for you. I have lived in China so long, and know what it is to wait until the old ones die and the young can do what is necessary to be done." I am glad both my sons are doctors with a background of human interest to which has been added a scientific quality of mind that can aid in pushing the horizon of service further into the future.

I am often asked, "Aren't you happy now that the struggle is over?" But I cannot agree that it is. Though many disputed barricades have been leaped, you can never sit back, smugly content, believing that victory is forever yours, there is always the threat of its being snatched from you. All freedom must be safeguarded and held. Jubilation is unwarranted while the world is in warring turmoil, each political unit trying to hold on to what it has—some threatening to take it away and others looking covetously towards outlets in countries not yet completely filled. The application of the movement to nations which should, in the interests of peace, control their populations, must endure.

Before 1914 the world trend was towards unity and peace. But a typhoon then caught us and turned us upside down. We began to whirl violently in one direction—that of individual and national emancipation, until at last the great wind blew crowns from the heads of Tsars and Kaisers, sweeping power into the hands of the populace.

When that War had first burst upon a shocked world people everywhere stood aghast and wept for the slaughter of men they did not know. But after four years, in self-defense, they armored themselves

against the emotion which should be aroused by any cruelty, and became calloused and hardened until the deaths of thousands left nations unmoved

Then came the vortex, the center, of the storm, and we awaited breathless the approach of the opposite edge. Everything had been lashed down in readiness, the life lines had been strengthened. Finally, all we had considered constant in rational thought, morals, ethics, started to go with equal violence in the other direction towards dictatorship and nationalism and race prejudice—a giving over of individual freedom. The immediacy of the deaths of women in childbirth seemed so small in comparison, of so little consequence, no longer were felt the pains of problems which used to be of such deep concern.

Over and over again I hear, "How do you fit birth control into a world in which dictators are clamoring for more and yet more people?" I can only answer that momentum must now derive its power from some other source than arousing sympathy. The present insensitivity is due to a horror of hovering peril. Many will be swept away and destroyed but when the battered hulls of the various ships of state emerge into calmer seas, a lesson may have been learned, perhaps, whereby these vessels may be made more seaworthy.

The Greeks, with their innate genius for dramatizing basic truths in images of telling beauty, established of old the relay torch race, or Lampadephoría, in honor of the Titan Prometheus, who had bestowed the divine gift of fire upon humanity. The contest was held at night, the great flambeaux being appropriately kindled at the altar of Eros. Participation was not a distinction indiscriminately conferred, those elect were fitted by discipline to hand on the vital flame, just as parents need training before becoming eligible for their grave responsibilities. The figures speeding around the course symbolize the passing on of the spark of life from generation to generation. Each runner must deliver his torch undimmed to his successor.

"Build thou beyond thyself," said Nietzsche, and this the birth control movement is doing. All peoples will in the future have greater regard for the quality of the bodies and brains which must be equipped for the task of building the future civilization, birth control will be the cornerstone of that great structure.