

The Pivot of Civilization

CHAPTER I

A NEW TRUTH EMERGES

Be not ashamed women your privilege encloses the
rest and is the exit of the rest
You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of
the soul

Walt Whitman

THIS book aims to be neither the first word on the tangled problems of human society to day nor the last. My aim has been to emphasize by the use of concrete and challenging examples and neglected facts, the need of a new approach to individual and social problems. Its central challenge is that civilization in any true sense of the word is based upon the control and guidance of the great natural instinct of Sex. Mastery of this force is possible only through the instrument of Birth Control.

It may be objected that in the following

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pages I have rushed in where academic scholars have feared to tread and that as an active propagandist I am lacking in the scholarship and documentary preparation to undertake such a stupendous task. My only defense is that, from my point of view at least too many are already studying and investigating social problems from without, with a sort of Olympian detachment. And on the other hand, too few of those who are engaged in this endless war for human betterment have found the time to give to the world those truths not always hidden but practically unquarried, which may be secured only after years of active service.

Of late we have been treated to accounts written by well meaning ladies and gentlemen who have assumed clever disguises and have gone out to work—for a week or a month—among the proletariat. But can we thus learn anything new of the fundamental problems of working men working women working children? Something perhaps but not those great central problems of Hunger and Sex. We have been told that only those who themselves have suffered the pangs of starvation

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can truly understand Hunger You might come into the closest contact with a starving man yet, if you were yourself well fed, no amount of sympathy could give you actual insight into the psychology of his suffering This suggests an objective and a subjective approach to all social problems Whatever the weakness of the subjective (or if you prefer the feminine) approach it has at least the virtue that its conclusions are tested by experience Observation of facts about you, intimate subjective reaction to such facts generate in your mind certain fundamental convictions—truths you can ignore no more than you can ignore such truths as come as the fruit of bitter but valuable personal experience

Regarding myself, I may say that my experience in the course of the past twelve or fifteen years has been of a type to force upon me certain convictions that demand expression For years I had believed that the solution of all our troubles was to be found in well defined programs of political and legislative action At first I concentrated my whole attention upon these, only to discover

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that politicians and law makers are just as confused and as much at a loss in solving fundamental problems as any one else. And I am speaking here not so much of the corrupt and ignorant politician as of those idealists and reformers who think that by the ballot society may be led to an earthly paradise. They may honestly desire and intend to do great things. They may positively glow—before election—with enthusiasm at the prospect they imagine political victory may open to them. Time after time I was struck by the change in their attitude after the briefest enjoyment of this illusory power. Men are elected during some wave of reform let us say, elected to legislate into practical working existence some great ideal. They want to do big things, but a short time in office is enough to show the political idealist that he can accomplish nothing that his reform must be debased and dragged into the dust, so that even if it becomes enacted, it may be not merely of no benefit, but a positive evil. It is scarcely necessary to emphasize this point. It is an accepted commonplace of American politics. So much of life, so large a part of all our social problems, moreover,

remains untouched by political and legislative action This is an old truth too often ignored by those who plan political campaigns upon the most superficial knowledge of human nature

My own eyes were opened to the limitations of political action when, as an organizer for a political group in New York, I attended by chance a meeting of women laundry workers who were on strike We believed we could help these women with a legislative measure and asked their support Oh! that stuff! exclaimed one of these women Don't you know that we women might be dead and buried if we waited for politicians and law makers to right our wrongs? This set me to thinking—not merely of the immediate problem—but to asking myself how much any male politician could understand of the wrongs inflicted upon poor working women

I threw the weight of my study and activity into the economic and industrial struggle Here I discovered men and women fired with the glorious vision of a new world of a proletarian world emancipated, a Utopian world—it glowed in romantic colors for the majority of those with whom I came in closest contact

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The next step the immediate step was another matter, less romantic and too often less encouraging. In their ardor some of the labor leaders of that period almost convinced us that the millenium was just around the corner. Those were the pre war days of dramatic strikes. But even when most under the spell of the new vision, the sight of the overburdened wives of the strikers, with their puny babies and their broods of underfed children, made us stop and think of a neglected factor in the march toward our earthly paradise. It was well enough to ask the poor men workers to carry on the battle against economic injustice. But what results could be expected when they were forced in addition to carry the burden of their ever growing families? This question loomed large to those of us who came into intimate contact with the women and children. We saw that in the final analysis the real burden of economic and industrial warfare was thrust upon the frail, all too frail shoulders of the children the very babies—the coming generation. In their wan faces, in their undernourished bodies, would be

indelibly written the bitter defeat of their parents

The eloquence of those who led the underpaid and half starved workers could no longer, for me, at least, ring with conviction. Something more than the purely economic interpretation was involved. The bitter struggle for bread for a home and material comfort, was but one phase of the problem. There was another phase perhaps even more fundamental, that had been absolutely neglected by the adherents of the new dogmas. That other phase was the driving power of instinct a power uncontrolled and unnoticed. The great fundamental instinct of sex was expressing itself in these ever growing broods, in the prosperity of the slum midwife and her colleague the slum undertaker. In spite of all my sympathy with the dream of liberated Labor, I was driven to ask whether this urging power of sex this deep instinct, was not at least partially responsible, along with industrial injustice, for the widespread misery of the world.

To find an answer to this problem which at that point in my experience I could not solve,

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I determined to study conditions in Europe. Perhaps there I might discover a new approach, a great illumination. Just before the outbreak of the war, I visited France, Spain, Germany and Great Britain. Everywhere I found the same dogmas and prejudices among labor leaders, the same intense but limited vision, the same insistence upon the purely economic phases of human nature, the same belief that if the problem of hunger were solved, the question of the women and children would take care of itself. In this attitude I discovered, then, what seemed to me to be purely masculine reasoning, and because it was purely masculine, it could at best be but half true. Feminine insight must be brought to bear on all questions, and here it struck me: the fallacy of the masculine, the all too masculine, was brutally exposed. I was encouraged and strengthened in this attitude by the support of certain leaders who had studied human nature and who had reached the same conclusion: that civilization could not solve the problem of Hunger until it recognized the titanic strength of the sexual instinct. In Spain, I found that Lorenzo Portet, who was carrying on the work

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of the martyred Francisco Ferrer, had reached this same conclusion. In Italy, Enrico Malatesta, the valiant leader who was after the war to play so dramatic a role, was likewise combating the current dogma of the orthodox Socialists. In Berlin Rudolph Rocker was engaged in the thankless task of puncturing the articles of faith of the orthodox Marxian religion. It is quite needless to add that these men who had probed beneath the surface of the problem and had diagnosed so much more completely the complex malady of contemporary society were intensely disliked by the superficial theorists of the neo Marxian school.

The gospel of Marx had however, been too long and too thoroughly inculcated into the minds of millions of workers in Europe, to be discarded. It is a flattering doctrine, since it teaches the laborer that all the fault is with some one else, that he is the victim of circumstances, and not even a partner in the creation of his own and his children's misery. Not without significance was the additional discovery that I made. I found that the Marxian influence tended to lead workers to believe that, irrespective of the health of the

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poor mothers, the earning capacity of the wage earning fathers or the upbringing of the children, increase of the proletarian family was a benefit, not a detriment to the revolutionary movement. The greater the number of hungry mouths, the emptier the stomachs, the more quickly would the Class War be precipitated. The greater the increase in population among the proletariat, the greater the incentive to revolution. This may not be sound Marxian theory but it is the manner in which it is popularly accepted. It is the popular belief wherever the Marxian influence is strong. This I found especially in England and Scotland. In speaking to groups of dock workers on strike in Glasgow, and before the communist and cooperative guilds throughout England I discovered a prevailing opposition to the recognition of sex as a factor in the perpetuation of poverty. The leaders and theorists were immovable in their opposition. But when once I succeeded in breaking through the surface opposition of the rank and file of the workers, I found that they were willing to *recognize the power of this neglected factor in their lives*

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So central so fundamental in the life of every man and woman is this problem that they need be taught no elaborate or imposing theory to explain their troubles. To approach their problems by the avenue of sex and reproduction is to reveal at once their fundamental relations to the whole economic and biological structure of society. Their interest is immediately and completely awakened. But always as I soon discovered, the ideas and habits of thought of these submerged masses have been formed through the press, the church through political institutions, all of which had built up a conspiracy of silence around a subject that is of no less vital importance than that of Hunger. A great wall separates the masses from those imperative truths that must be known and flung wide if civilization is to be saved. As currently constituted, Church, Press, Education seem to day organized to exploit the ignorance and the prejudices of the masses, rather than to light their way to self salvation.

Such was the situation in 1914 when I returned to America determined since the exclusively masculine point of view had dominated too long that the other half of the truth

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should be made known. The Birth Control movement was launched because it was in this form that the whole relation of woman and child—eternal emblem of the future of society—could be most effectively dramatized. The amazing growth of this movement dates from the moment when in my home a small group organized the first Birth Control League. Since then we have been criticized for our choice of the term Birth Control to express the idea of modern scientific contraception. I have yet to hear any criticism of this term that is not based upon some false and hypocritical sense of modesty, or that does not arise out of a semi prurient misunderstanding of its aim. On the other hand nothing better expresses the idea of purposive, responsible, and self directed guidance of the reproductive powers.

Those critics who condemn Birth Control as a negative destructive idea concerned only with self gratification, might profitably open the nearest dictionary for a definition of control. There they would discover that the verb control means to exercise a directing, guiding, or restraining influence—to direct, to regulate, to counteract. Control is

guidance direction foresight It implies intelligence forethought and responsibility They will find in the Standard Dictionary a quotation from Lecky to the effect that The greatest of all evils in politics is power without control In what phase of life is not power without control an evil? Birth Control therefore means not merely the limitation of births but the application of intelligent guidance over the reproductive power It means the substitution of reason and intelligence for the blind play of instinct

The term Birth Control had the immense practical advantage of compressing into two short words the answer to the inarticulate demands of millions of men and women in all countries At the time this slogan was formulated I had not yet come to the complete realization of the great truth that had been thus crystallized It was the response to the overwhelming heart breaking appeals that came by every mail for aid and advice, which revealed a great truth that lay dormant a truth that seemed to spring into full vitality almost overnight—that could never again be crushed to earth!

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Nor could I then have realized the number and the power of the enemies who were to be aroused into activity by this idea. So completely was I dominated by this conviction of the efficacy of control that I could not until later realize the extent of the sacrifices that were to be exacted of me and of those who supported my campaign. The very idea of Birth Control resurrected the spirit of the witch hunters of Salem. Could they have usurped the power, they would have burned us at the stake. Lacking that power they used the weapon of suppression, and invoked medieval statutes to send us to jail. These tactics had an effect the very opposite to that intended. They demonstrated the vitality of the idea of Birth Control, and acted as counter irritant on the actively intelligent sections of the American community. Nor was the interest aroused confined merely to America. The neo Malthusian movement in Great Britain, with its history of undaunted bravery, came to our support and I had the comfort of knowing that the finest minds of England did not hesitate a moment in the expression of their sympathy and support.

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In America, on the other hand, I found from the beginning until very recently that the so called intellectuals exhibited a curious and almost inexplicable reticence in supporting Birth Control. They even hesitated to voice any public protest against the campaign to crush us which was inaugurated and sustained by the most reactionary and sinister forces in American life. It was not inertia or any lack of interest on the part of the masses that stood in our way. It was the indifference of the intellectual leaders.

Writers, teachers, ministers, editors, who form a class dictating, if not creating, public opinion, are in this country, singularly inhibited or unconscious of their true function in the community. One of their first duties, it is certain, should be to champion the constitutional right of free speech and free press, to welcome any idea that tends to awaken the critical attention of the great American public. But those who reveal themselves as fully cognizant of this public duty are in the minority and must possess more than average courage to survive the enmity such an attitude provokes.

One of the chief aims of the present vol

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time is to stimulate American intellectuals to abandon the mental habits which prevent them from seeing human nature as a whole, instead of as something that can be pigeon holed into various compartments or classes. Birth Control affords an approach to the study of humanity because it cuts through the limitations of current methods. It is economic, biological, psychological and spiritual in its aspects. It awakens the vision of mankind moving and changing, of humanity growing and developing, coming to fruition of a race creative, flowering into beautiful expression through talent and genius.

As a social program Birth Control is not merely concerned with population questions. In this respect it is a distinct step in advance of earlier Malthusian doctrines, which concerned themselves chiefly with economics and population. Birth Control concerns itself with the spirit no less than the body. It looks for the liberation of the spirit of woman and through woman of the child. To day, motherhood is wasted, penalized, tortured. Children brought into the world by unwilling mothers suffer an initial handicap that cannot be meas-

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ured by cold statistics Their lives are blighted from the start To substantiate this fact I have chosen to present the conclusions of reports on Child Labor and records of defect and delinquency published by organizations with no bias in favor of Birth Control The evidence is before us It crowds in upon us from all sides But prior to this new approach no attempt had been made to correlate the effects of the blind and irresponsible play of the sexual instinct with its deep rooted causes

The duty of the educator and the intellectual creator of public opinion is, in this connection, of the greatest importance For centuries official moralists, priests clergymen and teachers, statesmen and politicians have preached the doctrine of glorious and divine fertility To day we are confronted with the world wide spectacle of the realization of this doctrine It is not without significance that the moron and the imbecile set the pace in living up to this teaching and that the intellectuals, the educators the archbishops bishops priests who are most insistent on it, are the staunchest adherents in their own lives of celibacy and

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non fertility It is time to point out to the champions of unceasing and indiscriminate fertility the results of their teaching

One of the greatest difficulties in giving to the public a book of this type is the impossibility of keeping pace with the events and changes of a movement that is now, throughout the world striking root and growing The changed attitude of the American press indicates that enlightened public opinion no longer tolerates a policy of silence upon a question of the most vital importance Almost simultaneously in England and America two incidents have broken through the prejudice and the guarded silence of centuries At the Church Congress in Birmingham, October 12, 1921 Lord Dawson the king's physician, in criticizing the report of the Lambeth Conference concerning Birth Control, delivered an address defending this practice Of such bravery and eloquence that it could not be ignored, this address electrified the entire British public It aroused a storm of abuse and yet succeeded, as no propaganda could in mobilizing the forces of progress and intelligence in the support of the cause

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Just one month later the First American Birth Control Conference culminated in a significant and dramatic incident. At the close of the conference a mass meeting was scheduled in the Town Hall, New York City, to discuss the morality of Birth Control. Mr Harold Cox, editor of the *Edinburgh Review* who had come to New York to attend the conference, was to lead the discussion. It seemed only natural for us to call together scientists, educators, members of the medical profession, and theologians of all denominations, to ask their opinion upon this uncertain and important phase of the controversy. Letters were sent to eminent men and women in different parts of the world. In this letter we asked the following questions —

- 1 Is over population a menace to the peace of the world?
- 2 Would the legal dissemination of scientific Birth Control information, through the medium of clinics by the medical profession, be the most logical method of checking the problem of over population?

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- 3 Would knowledge of Birth Control change the moral attitude of men and women toward the marriage bond, or lower the moral standards of the youth of the country?
- 4 Do you believe that knowledge which enables parents to limit their families will make for human happiness, and raise the moral social and intellectual standards of population?

We sent this questionnaire not only to those who we thought might agree with us but we sent it also to our known opponents

When I arrived at the Town Hall the entrance was guarded by policemen They told me there would be no meeting Before my arrival our executives had been greeted by Monsignor Dineen secretary of Archbishop Hayes of the Roman Catholic archdiocese, who informed them that the meeting would be prohibited on the ground that it was contrary to public morals The police had closed the doors When they opened them to permit the exit of the large audience which had gathered, Mr Cox and I entered I attempted to

exercise my constitutional right of free speech but was prohibited and arrested Miss Mary Winsor, who protested against this unwarranted arrest was likewise dragged off to the police station The case was dismissed the following morning The ecclesiastic instigators of the affair were conspicuous by their absence from the police court But the incident was enough to expose the opponents of Birth Control and the extreme methods they used to combat our progress The case was too flagrant too gross an affront, to pass unnoticed by the newspapers The progress of our movement was indicated in the changed attitude of the American press which had perceived the danger to the public of the unlawful tactics used by the enemies of Birth Control in preventing open discussion of a vital question

No social idea has inspired its advocates with more bravery tenacity, and courage than Birth Control From the early days of Francis Place and Richard Carlile, to those of the Drysdales and Edward Trulove, of Bradlaugh and Mrs Annie Besant, its advocates have faced imprisonment and ostracism In the whole history of the English movement, there

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has been no more courageous figure than that of the venerable Alice Drysdale Vickery, the undaunted torch bearer who has bridged the silence of forty four years—since the Brad laugh Besant trial She stands head and shoulders above the professional feminists Serenely has she withstood jeers and jests To day she continues to point out to the younger generation which is devoted to newer palliatives the fundamental relation between Sex and Hunger

The First American Birth Control Conference, held at the same time as the Washington Conference for the Limitation of Armaments, marks a turning point in our approach to social problems The Conference made evident the fact that in every field of scientific and social endeavor the most penetrating thinkers are now turning to the consideration of our problem as a fundamental necessity to American civilization They are coming to see that a *qualitative* factor as opposed to a *quantitative* one is of primary importance in dealing with the great masses of humanity

Certain fundamental convictions should be made clear here The program for Birth

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Control is not a charity. It is not aiming to interfere in the private lives of poor people to tell them how many children they should have nor to sit in judgment upon their fitness to become parents. It aims rather, to awaken responsibility to answer the demand for a scientific means by which and through which each human life may be self directed and self controlled. The exponent of Birth Control in short is convinced that social regeneration no less than individual regeneration must come from within. Every potential parent and especially every potential mother, must be brought to an acute realization of the primary and individual responsibility of bringing children into this world. Not until the parents of this world are given control over their reproductive faculties will it be possible to improve the quality of the generations of the future, or even to maintain civilization at its present level. Only when given intelligent mastery of the procreative powers can the great mass of humanity be aroused to a realization of responsibility of parenthood. We have come to the conclusion based on wide spread investigation and experience, that

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education for parenthood must be based upon the needs and demands of the people themselves. An idealistic code of sexual ethics, imposed from above, a set of rules devised by high minded theorists who fail to take into account the living conditions and desires of the masses, can never be of the slightest value in effecting change in the customs of the people. Systems so imposed in the past have revealed their woeful inability to prevent the sexual and racial chaos into which the world has drifted.

The universal demand for practical education in Birth Control is one of the most hopeful signs that the masses themselves to day possess the divine spark of regeneration. It remains for the courageous and the enlightened to answer this demand, to kindle the spark, to direct a thorough education in sex hygiene based upon this intense interest.

Birth Control is thus the entering wedge for the educator. In answering the needs of these thousands upon thousands of submerged mothers it is possible to use their interest as the foundation for education in prophylaxis hygiene and infant welfare. The potential

mother can then be shown that maternity need not be slavery but may be the most effective avenue to self development and self realization Upon this basis only may we improve the quality of the race

The lack of balance between the birth rate of the unfit and the fit admittedly the greatest present menace to civilization can never be rectified by the inauguration of a cradle competition between these two classes The example of the inferior classes, the fertility of the feeble minded the mentally defective, the poverty stricken should not be held up for emulation to the mentally and physically fit, and therefore less fertile, parents of the educated and well to do classes On the contrary, the most urgent problem to day is how to limit and discourage the over fertility of the mentally and physically defective Possibly drastic and Spartan methods may be forced upon American society if it continues complacently to encourage the chance and chaotic breeding that has resulted from our stupid cruel sentimentalism

To effect the salvation of the generations of the future—nay of the generations of to day—

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our greatest need, first of all, is the ability to face the situation without flinching, to cooperate in the formation of a code of sexual ethics based upon a thorough biological and psychological understanding of human nature and then to answer the questions and the needs of the people with all the intelligence and honesty at our command. If we can summon the bravery to do this, we shall best be serving the pivotal interests of civilization.

To conclude this introduction my initiation as I have confessed, was primarily an emotional one. My interest in Birth Control was awakened by experience. Research and investigation have followed. Our effort has been to raise our program from the plane of the emotional to the plane of the scientific. Any social progress, it is my belief, must purge itself of sentimentalism and pass through the crucible of science. We are willing to submit Birth Control to this test. It is part of the purpose of this book to appeal to the scientist for aid to arouse that interest which will result in widespread research and investigation. I believe that my personal experience with this idea must be that of the race at large. We

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must temper our emotion and enthusiasm with the impersonal determination of science We must unite in the task of creating an instrument of steel, strong but supple if we are to triumph finally in the war for human emancipation