

THE EXILE RETURNS

ONE definite, though inexplicable, experience all during my exile from home kept puzzling me. Nevertheless, I passed it by as without significance. To this day, I have been unable to account for it, but because of the consequences I am going to relate it here.

Upon awakening in the morning, or even before I was entirely awake, I became conscious of the number 6, as if that number repeated itself again and again in my sleepy mind. It was as if an imprint of the figure 6 were stamped on my brain. This recurred again and again, and I often tried to fit it into some event of the day—six o'clock, or the sixth day of the month, or the price of tea, sixpence, or anything else amusing and as casual or silly as I could make up. This I did to protect myself against the dread which seemed at first to come upon my consciousness with it.

This went on for several weeks. Then it came as something definite, like a large poster on a wall, and later still like a leaf on a wall calendar

Nov 6

 It stood out, "Nov 6"

I began to amuse myself with this date, and early in September, when I was making plans to work with a publishing house in Paris, I said, Yes, I'll accept the position if you will guarantee to lock me up or send me to Africa or the North Pole until after November sixth

Why November sixth? asked the publisher

I don't know, I replied, but I feel that something important is to occur on that day, something different, and something which will knock all my present plans to pieces

We both laughed, as cynical people outwardly laugh at such nonsense, *but*—I noticed later that he based our future plans for January 1st of the next year!!

Day after day, I studied and pored over books, articles and magazines in the reading room of the British Museum Regularly I was at the gate early in the morning, and usually I was the last to leave at night I was fascinated with my findings,—splendid material to stir the imagination, and facts galore to convince any judge or jury that birth control must be reckoned with in future social programs

There was only one drawback to my enthusiasm That was the subtle, persistent fear that Peggy, my little daughter, was not well Night after night, her voice would startle me from a deep sleep and leave me in a state of agitation until I received the next letter containing news that all was going well I tried to dismiss these fears, and would have them pretty well submerged But always the same troubled voice would again upset me for days Mother, mother! are you coming back?

One day, while visiting Mrs Drysdale, I confided my fears to her The Drysdales had a few months before lost a daughter fourteen years old Both of them were suffering heart-breaking grief Mrs Drysdale stopped in the walk we were taking

Margaret dear, stay for nothing more, but go home to that child, she warned

But to obey that desire was impossible I had come away

from all I loved best to accomplish a task. I could not return until that task was finished. I had taken the road. I had considered all consequences. I had accepted the challenge. Alas! I could not answer that voice. My work had to be done. There had been born in me the belief that one owed it to those one loved always to do the straight and honest thing. It was my belief also that those who had faith in and love for you preferred you *not* to return with whines and excuses and explanations for failing to achieve results, no matter what sacrifices to themselves your accomplishment entailed. With this feeling, it was utterly impossible for me to return until I was ready to take up the cudgels and battle my way through to a victorious legal decision.

The war seemed never ending. I was about to accept the contract of three years from Lorenzo Portet's publishing house in Paris to supervise and select all the English books accepted for translation into Spanish, Italian, and French, when, in September, came the news that William Sanger had been convicted in New York for giving the pamphlet, *Family Limitation*, to a decoy sent by Comstock. It was one of life's sharpest ironies that William Sanger should be drawn into my battle, and that he with loyal courage should be sentenced to jail for the dissemination of birth control literature.

The injustice of my husband's conviction in New York was one of the reasons that made me decide to go home to fight it out in the courts. To me this was a direct challenge from the unspeakable methods of Anthony Comstock.

William Sanger had been arrested by Comstock himself, who a few days previously had sent a decoy to his studio. The spy had told a story that had immediately aroused the sympathy of the impulsive and spontaneous artist. He claimed to be a friend of mine, he said he wanted the information for the use of his wife. Finally, William Sanger went to his library table, in the drawer of which were a number of my pamphlets, and handed one to the applicant. As he explained in a letter to me

On December 18th a Mr Heller came to my studio and left his card

Not seeing me, he called the next day at 8 a m He said he had heard of your book, and that he was personally acquainted with you, and wanted one of the pamphlets on family limitation I told him that I had no pamphlets that I knew of He insisted that he wanted it for his own personal use Finally, I went to the library table in which were your English and French pamphlets and your own on family limitation I gave him the first one I found

I thought no more of it until the same man called again last Tuesday and wanted to know where your book could be bought I told him of a store on Grand Street

A few minutes later a grey haired, side whiskered, six foot creature presented himself and said I am Mr Comstock I have a warrant for your arrest He was followed by that man, Heller, bearing a search warrant

He proceeded to search my studio, and found two pamphlets I had to submit to two searches, one by each of these creatures I was taken to Yorkville Police Court

Comstock said before we left the studio that I should be given every opportunity to prove my innocence, which I ignored

He seemed anxious to enter into a discussion of the case, saying that any statement I made would not be used against me I refused to discuss it, saying that I wished to consult my attorney

He replied that lawyers are expensive and only aggravate the case, and, patting me on the shoulder, said he advised me, like a brother, to plead guilty, and he would recommend to the Court that I be given a suspended sentence

I refused to entertain any such plea

I told him that, although I was in Europe when the pamphlet was written and circulated, I believed in the principle of family limitation

He then asked me if you and I were living together or

had separated I flatly told him I would give him no information He asked me where Mrs Sanger could be found I replied that I would not tell him, and that he or any other official of the Government had no right to ask me that

I was arraigned, and bail was fixed at \$500 I was in that filthy jail for 36 hours before bail was finally procured The case will come up Wednesday for preliminary examination, and then be sent down to the Court of Special Sessions and tried before a jury There is every possibility of getting one year's imprisonment and \$1,000 fine

I shall try to have the case tried on the principle of family limitation and free speech It will simply be a preliminary case to what your case will be on your return

In regard to your case, in going to the court with Comstock I asked him what he would do to the author of a pamphlet like Family Limitation *He said he would recommend that such a party be given the limit of five years' hard labor for every one printed*

It was also mentioned that *if I would give your whereabouts I would be acquitted* I replied that they would wait until Hell froze over before that would occur But there is a possibility of your being extradited

Twenty women have now banded together to fight the case on free speech and family limitation (I never discovered who these twenty women were)

It was the first and only copy of my pamphlet that William Sanger had ever given to any one We had agreed before our separation that each of us was to go on with our individual work William Sanger was not a propagandist, but he did believe in the justice of my cause, and he was not the man to cringe before Anthony Comstock He was willing to defend his right to express his ideas and to stand up for his principles

After innumerable delays, the date of the trial had been set Conviction was inevitable The Free Speech League had

made an appeal for defense funds. Gilbert E. Roe was to defend William Sanger. I waited in London for letters, hoping to hear from day to day.

So, one morning late in September, 1915, I set sail from Bordeaux. I wondered if I should ever reach New York. Not long before, the *Lusitania* had been torpedoed off the Irish Coast, and to cross the Atlantic in these hectic days was indeed a risk. I was going back to combat reaction, almost certain of meeting misunderstanding and injustice, with my husband in prison through my own activities. Perhaps, I decided, if there was no public support for this cause, it would be better, even safer, to pick up my children as silently as possible and return to civilized, though war-torn, Europe. America was home, it was my country, right or wrong—but in this case mostly wrong. But then after all, I told myself as the ship slipped out into the dangerous, foggy Atlantic, there I must fight, fight until the tide turned in favor of conscious and regulated parenthood. It would be a long battle, all too probably a losing one, but I seemed to be projected into it, despite all my conscious personal desires or reasons to the contrary.

I remember how interminable that voyage became. In darkness, with lights dimmed to avoid attracting the attention of German submarines, the ship plowed through the Atlantic. My own thoughts were as black as the night. Nervous tension crackled in the very air. That ship was carrying me onward, onward, to disaster, to prison, to inevitable sorrow. The old nervousness, the nervousness that comes with a queer gripping at the pit of the stomach which I always think is a thing of the past, was upon me. A queer sense of presentiment of evil was with me almost incessantly.

When I succeeded in snatching a few hours sleep—mere minutes they actually seemed—I would wake out of unpleasant dreams. One of them was of attempting to walk through a crowded street, against traffic. The mechanical, automaton-like crowds were walking, walking, walking, always in the opposite direction. I was crowded to the curb, and had to walk cautiously. They were impossible to fight against. And

then suddenly in my dream the people turned into mice, they even smelt like mice I awakened, and had to open the porthole to get the smell of mice out of my nostrils

At last the lights of Staten Island, winking like spectres in the autumn mist, signalled our safe arrival in New York Harbor We were at quarantine As the old ship sidled along the dock at West Fourteenth Street on the gray morning of October 16, 1915, a new joy, a new hope arose in my heart, even though there was no one there to meet me, no one to bring a message of cheer, no one to wave a hand of welcome But to see American faces again, after the ineffable hopelessness of Europe to feel the rough democracy of the porters and of the good hearted, hard boiled taxi drivers, to breathe in the wine like autumn air of New York—all that brought with it an irresistible radiation of the joy of life

I picked up my small bag and walked away from the docks I walked and looked, and sang to myself Home at last! My heart was bursting with gladness, especially at the anticipation of seeing the children again

At the first newsstand I passed, my attention was caught by the words Birth Control printed boldly on the cover of the *Pictorial Review* It was a queer sensation to be welcomed, not by friends nor relatives, but by a phrase of one's own creation on the cover of a magazine, by the words which had sent me into exile

I cannot describe the joy of being reunited with the children, the anticipation of taking up our lives peaceably together again But the shadow of the indictments and a prison term was heavy over my spirit, the foreboding of evil I could not shake off

Four days after my arrival, William Sanger was released from prison

A few days later, I informed the United States District Attorney of my presence, and inquired if the indictments handed down the year previous were still pending Birth control had been aired and discussed by respectable medical and social organizations, in various journals and magazines, so that the

violation of an obsolete statute no longer seemed so important I was politely informed that the indictments were still pending The case was called for the end of December, and then set for January 18, 1916 That left me sufficient time to organize a backing, so I set out to find out what had been done in my absence

A meeting of medical men had been held at the Academy of Medicine Dr Abraham Jacoby, beloved dean of American medicine, had presided From reports of the meeting there was by no means a clear account of the issue involved nor any harmonious agreement among the medical fraternity that birth control was in their province However, through the efforts and sagacity of Dr William J Robinson, who had a keen sense for personal publicity, a small medical committee was finally formed

Besides this exclusively medical committee, a National Birth Control League had been organized Its officers were Mrs Mary Ware Dennett, Mrs Anita Block, and Mrs Clara Stillman, all well known in radical and liberal circles I learned upon my arrival that this new league had been given all my files, including the list of subscribers and friends of *The Woman Rebel* Otto Bobsien, secretary of the first national Birth Control League organized the previous year in my home, had decided to pass these names along to the women who, he thought, were to be non partisan workers in the field Needless to say, I was delighted and agreed wholly with that procedure I hoped against hope that my suspicion of liberal women was unfounded

To test out the sincerity of the officers of this new national organization, I wrote a letter to Mrs Clara Stillman, the secretary, stating that I had returned to America, and that whether I should remain or not depended upon the moral support I was to receive I asked a plain statement of what I could expect from their league My letter was courteously answered Mrs Stillman wrote that an executive meeting was to be called the following week if I would call at her home on the afternoon of the meeting, she could then tell me

what action the National Birth Control League would take in my case I went out of my door when that afternoon came with high hopes in my heart and keen expectations that at least one group of women—the liberals—would join with me and link their own freedom in the fight for other women's liberty

I was expecting a kind of reticence, a willingness to go half way on their part, but I did not expect to receive the reply which came as the answer of the National Birth Control League

The executive committee had met Mrs Dennett, Mrs Block, and Mrs Stillman were still present, and I vaguely remember seeing a man—possibly James Morton, editor of *The Truthseeker*

Someone spoke of the absurdity of my asking their League to support *me* in the trial I was to face

Mrs Dennett, whose ability to reason and whose mental agility I have since had occasion to wonder at, stood up, and in no uncertain terms spoke for the committee

The National Birth Control League, she asserted, was a legal, law abiding organization, the aim of which was to change the laws in an orderly and proper manner They disagreed with my tactics, with my methods, with everything I had done It stood to reason, Mrs Dennett emphasized, that a law abiding organization, formed primarily to change the laws, could not logically support a person who had broken those laws

I arose and left the house On my way to the door, however, Mrs Dennett walked beside me and asked about my trip to Europe, and inquired as to the interesting people I had met Would I mind giving her the names and addresses of those socially prominent and distinguished persons I had found to be interested in my work? It has ever been a source of wonder to me that Mrs Dennett has not risen to greater political prominence, where her training and temperament would find suitable expression

I had also sent a letter to Dr Robinson His reply was

more evasive. The medical committee was as yet only in embryo; he was not certain that it would ever function. He enclosed a check for \$10.00 toward the expenses of my trial.

This, then, was the state of affairs when I arrived in New York in October, 1915.

Anthony Comstock had taken a chill at the Sanger trial, was taken to his home in a taxicab, and a few weeks later died.

As I looked over the situation, I realized the hopelessness of expecting support from such groups or sources. Yet, in spite of these depressing facts, I determined to remain and fight the case out in the courts, depending upon the common sense, the intelligence, and understanding of public opinion for the support I needed.

I settled down to organize my forces and to arouse the latent interest which I felt certain was ready to spring from the ranks of the American people. In this I was not disappointed.

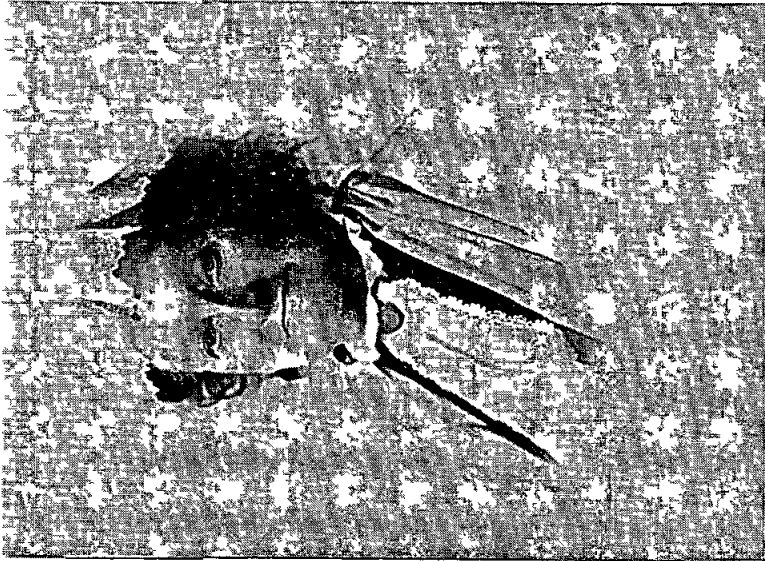
But all of these problems, upon which all my future activities seemed to depend, were suddenly swept aside by a crisis of a more intimate nature, a tragedy about which I find myself even today, after the passage of so many years and so much activity, unable to write.

A few days after my arrival, my beloved daughter Peggy was taken ill. The old foreboding came back. It was as if, subconsciously, the meaning of the strange symbols and pre-sentiments were gradually, inevitably, becoming clearer and clearer. I spent most of the days that followed watching over her. I saw the frail strength of her little body slip away. She did not respond to the treatment of the physicians. They hesitated to tell me the worst. Peggy's resistance was failing day by day. It was pneumonia.

The penalty was exacted one morning after a long vigil. It was only after I knew the worst that I was brought to any realization of the hour, the day, the date.

Then I realized with a shudder it was the sixth of November!

The bottom seemed to have fallen from the very earth itself.



DR ALICE VICKERY
Charming and courageous physician



DR ALETTA JACOBS
Head of the world's first medical clinic in 1878



Havelock Ellis

A great gulf of loneliness set me apart from the rest of the world. It separated me from everybody and everything—from facts—from sunshine, night and day. The joy in the fullness of life went out of it on that morning, and has never returned.

Here, then, was the answer to my uncanny dread, so prevalent in the Celt, that invading monster of fear which had haunted my nights and days all of that preceding year. Re-echoing endlessly in my memory was that unmistakable voice of my Peggy, calling, Mother, mother, are you coming back? —the voice that had awakened me night after night in my barren little room in London.

Even today, these events remain a mystery to me. The chasm of regret every mother who loses a child must face is enough to crush the bravest of hearts and the strongest of spirits. Yet despite all one must go on. Life must be lived out.

For a time, it was impossible for me to determine what to do. Grief so dulled my faculties that I was unable to think. I was numb in feeling, dumb in expression, and went about as in a sleep from which I did not even wish to awaken.

News of this tragic blow spread afar. My interests were gradually revived by the thousands of letters I received from old subscribers to *The Woman Rebel*. Boys in the North Woods, lumberjacks, bereft mothers, all sent sums of from one to ten dollars out of their meagre savings to help me carry on the fight. Miners from West Virginia wrote that their wives had for the first time in five, eight, or ten years been free from pregnancy, all due to the Family Limitation pamphlet. Miners had walked five miles to read the pamphlet. Others had had it copied by friends who could write. Men and women from all walks of life, from nearly every city in America, poured out their thanks to me in those weeks when I was bowed and soul stricken with grief.

Money came pouring in beyond my understanding, not large amounts, but large for the senders, and oh such tender, sympathetic letters! I had never known until then that the loss of a child remains an unforgotten loss to every mother

during her entire lifetime. Women wrote of children dead some twenty five years before, for whom they were still secretly mourning. They sent me pictures of dead babies, and locks of hair, and, as if it were a fresh outlet and relief to their troubled souls, they wrote page after page of their own sorrows.

This fresh contact with the source, contact with the motive power which had taken me out of my maternal corner two or three years before, renewed my desire and gave me the strength to carry on.

Deep in the hidden realm of my consciousness, Peggy has never died, but has continued to live, and in that strange mysterious place where reality and imagination meet, my little girl has grown up to womanhood. There she leads an ideal life untouched by harsh realities, immune to those influences which deform normal mortals.

For two years at least after her death, it was impossible for me to sit across from a child in a train, in the New York subway, or in a street car. Tears would flood my eyes, and I would move swiftly away to another seat or another car, or even leave the subway at the next station to the amazement and distress of those who happened to be with me. Never could I offer any explanation of this strange behavior—to explain would have brought about a veritable crisis of sorrow.

Today I am more able to talk freely about Peggy. Nature and Time—Time especially, which collaborates in all of life in mysterious and inexplicable ways—have sent their healing balms, even to the never ending sorrows of bereft mothers. Sometimes it seems to me that, intense as the pain and torture exacted of a mother is in bringing a child into the world it cannot be compared with her sorrow in letting it go out. Can men—even loving fathers—ever truly understand the two-edged sorrow the loss of a child inflicts upon womankind?