



Drawn by Arthur Young.

Hell on Earth

A Question for Eugenists: In an atmosphere of worry and fear, how can children be developed physically and morally?

The MASSES

Vol. VI. No. 6

MARCH, 1915

Issue No. 46

IS THE TRUTH OBSCENE?

Max Eastman

IT WAS an hour after a visit to Isadora Duncan's studio that I met William Sanger and heard the morbid story of our government that I am going to tell. And I am loath to tell it without conveying, too, some echo of the music and lovely vision of ideal and natural life that youth gives us in that studio. From the tragic death of her own children Isadora Duncan seems to have risen to create, in her language of motion, a poem of the children of the future—children of a time when life shall be both frank and free, and proceed under the sky with happy fearlessness of faith in the beauty of its real nature. So at least I perceived the dancing of those girls, free-clad and strong of limb.

Be sure it is a vision like this toward which they are striving, who spend their youth in the old struggle against ignorance and money-tyranny. It is a happier task to draw costly patterns in the air of what the world shall yet become, than to stay at the soiled and disreputable business of dragging it along. Yet both these tasks are necessary, and I only wish the visible joy of the one might mingle a little oftener with the dark labor of the other.

To Margaret Sanger came the conviction which has come to many of us, that second if not almost first, of the steps toward perfecting life on the earth, is to make sure that no unwanted and insupportable life is born on the earth. The birth of a child should be the deliberate and chosen act of its parents. To this opinion, as it applies to the upper classes of America, there is small honest objection, for it is a custom of the married in those classes to receive from their physician illegal information as to the means of controlling conception. But when this opinion is generalized to include all classes, and is acted upon in a generous and forthright campaign of instruction, then it suddenly becomes obscene. It becomes socially abhorrent, morally degenerate, and of criminal intent, involving a penalty of five years' imprisonment and \$5,000 fine for each offensive act. The postal authorities, the secret service, Anthony Comstock and other detectors of pornographic literature, are brought into service—and the whole power of the United States Government, and the State Governments too, is invoked in the suppression of the moral, and indeed constitutional, right of an individual to speak to his neighbor concerning vital truth.

In 1913 Margaret Sanger, who is a trained nurse of unusual intelligence and wide experience, began to publish in the *New York Sunday Call* a series of articles entitled "What Every Girl Should Know." They were a simple elucidation of the nature of sex and its problems, and were to include, at the appropriate time, allusions to the all-important question of birth-control. These articles were spied out by the ferreting eye of

Anthony Comstock, who represents, through the sufferance of an apathetic citizenry, the sovereign power of the United States. They were suppressed, and the *New York Call* appeared with the following epitaph in their accustomed place:

"What Every Girl Should Know."

NOTHING!

By Order of the Post Office Department.

Thereupon so many hundreds of letters and pleas and petitions from a public genuinely concerned to know, poured in upon Mrs. Sanger that she had her articles published in book form. She then set out to raise the funds to issue a paper, which should be a forerunner and advertiser of leaflets upon the subject of birth-control, and of birth-control leagues, a great many of which were subsequently formed all over the United States.

The March, May, July, August, September and October, 1914, issues of this paper—*The Woman Rebel*—were suppressed and confiscated by the Post Office, and Margaret Sanger was placed under indictment for circulating obscene literature through the mail. So persecute we the prophets.

But by a good fortune it happened that Mrs. Sanger was released without bail, and in order to win the fruit of her labor and daring before losing her liberty, she left the country and proceeded at once to prepare the leaflets which she had promised to her subscribers in *The Woman Rebel*. The first leaflet is completed, and has been (criminally) circulated in this country, by the friends of posterity, to the number of one hundred thousand. Two other leaflets are in process of preparation, and upon their completion and distribution, Margaret Sanger intends to return to America and make her fight, and the fight of civilization, before the courts.

In the meantime, the postal authorities have become anxious lest their virgin innocence was being secretly violated, and they have planned and executed, with the help of Anthony Comstock, a stroke which was supposed to bring Margaret Sanger home begging before her work was done.

On December 19th a gentleman called upon her husband, William Sanger, an architect, at his studio, 10 East Fifteenth Street, and asked him for one of those leaflets, entitled "Family Limitation." Mr. Sanger said that he did not distribute them and doubted whether there was one to be found in the studio. After much insistence from his visitor, however, who asserted that he was a friend of Mrs. Sanger and interested in her work, he instituted a search through some bundles of his wife's papers, and found one of the leaflets. The visitor took it and departed.

In due time he returned with Anthony Comstock and a search warrant. Mr. Comstock arrested Mr. Sanger for distributing obscene literature, and then proceeded to turn his studio inside out. He found nothing to satisfy his taste, but he proceeded to take Mr. Sanger in custody as far on the way to the police court as a convenient restaurant. There, although Mr. Sanger insisted on being taken at once to the court, and refused to join the party, Mr. Comstock and his detective sat down to a meal, and a little conversational campaign. They tried to induce him to discuss the whereabouts and the present plans and activities of his wife. Failing of that, they took the following course:

"Young man," said Mr. Comstock, "I want to act as a brother to you, and I want you to take my advice. Plead guilty to this charge, and I will ask for a suspended sentence. You can be quite sure of a suspended sentence."

Mr. Sanger replied that he had committed no crime, and that his principles were at stake, and that he would plead not guilty.

"You know as well as I do that there is nothing obscene in that pamphlet," he said to Mr. Comstock.

"Young man," said Mr. Comstock, "I have been in this work for twenty years, and that leaflet is the worst thing I have ever seen. Just look here,"—and he drew it from his pocket, and pointed to some words explaining, in the simplest scientific manner possible, contraceptive devices that are advertised in the public press in France, and Belgium and Holland, and that are distributed legally in England to anyone who declares in writing that he or she is about to be married.

Surely this country is old enough to get along without a prurient-prudish supervision of its education in hygiene.

Well,—after a quite futile attempt to induce Mr. Sanger to reveal his wife's plans, and agree to commit an error that would seriously compromise her chances before the courts upon her return,—Mr. Comstock finished his afternoon meal, and managed to arrive at the police court so late that his prisoner could not get into communication with an attorney and a bonding office, and had to spend the night in jail.

Upon their arrival, when the police officer asked Mr. Sanger how he wished to plead, I am told that Mr. Comstock replied:

"He pleads guilty."

"I do not plead guilty," said Mr. Sanger, "I plead not guilty."

On the following day Mr. Sanger was bailed out, and he has been held for trial in the Court of Special Sessions. He believes in the propaganda that his wife has been conducting, and he believes in his constitutional right of free speech, and he is ready to fight and go to jail for it. Gilbert E. Roe is his at-

torney, and the fight is on.

But Mr. Sanger has neither wealth nor what are called social connections, and it will require the public support of all men and women who believe either in the truth, or in constitutional liberty, to win this case. *It must not go by in the dark.* Five hundred New York physicians ought to come down to that trial and testify that they have committed the crime of imparting information as to the control of conception. Fifty leaders of the women's movement ought to appear there, and say that Margaret Sanger has offered herself in sacrifice to a great principle, and has performed a duty that every one of them has known must be performed.

It is unfortunate that her husband's trial must come first, for it is obviously less easy to defend a man than a woman upon the principle involved. But that is the essence of the trick. If Mr. Sanger is convicted of "circulating obscene literature" for giving this one pamphlet to an importunate visitor, there remains little legal doubt that Margaret Sanger has produced and circulated obscene literature. We must make the fight on William Sanger's case, if we are going to make the fight at all. And are we not?

Shall we let those little resistances which we feel against public acknowledgment of a private truth, a truth as vital as birth itself, silence us in this critical fight for humanity?

I wish I could quote the thousands of letters Margaret Sanger received from working women in this country who appealed to her, as to a rescuer, for that little buoy of knowledge. I cannot do that, but I quote this bit of the same substance from the organ of the Neo-Malthusian Society that is doing a similar work, without the burden of illegality, in England.

"I was at St. George's Church last Tuesday at your meeting. I thought it was splendid and I have told 4 people already about it. I am 27 years of age and I have been married 6 years. I have got 3 children and I regret to say I am expecting again. I plead for your help. My husband earns very little. I shall be please hear your methods of Limitation.

"Blackfriars Bridge Road. Mrs. P."

"Having been handed a tract bearing an invitation to write to you I beg to apply for a form for the leaflet about family limitation. I may say I am 24 yrs. of age and have been married nearly 2 yrs. and have one baby boy but am fearful of my wife having any more children as she is subject to epileptic fits and am afraid of same being hereditary. Also I may add my income is just enough to keep us decently.

"Camberwell. Mr. L."

"Would you be so kind as to send me a leaflet. I should be very thankful as my wife has had 5 Children having lost 2 and 1 only a week old.



Drawing by George Bellows

I only get 25/- a week which is very hard to keep them on, I am very sorry cannot send you any more only postage I hope to send somethink later on.

"Borough, S.E.

Mr. B."

"Would you be Kind enough to let me have one of your leaflets on the limitation of a family as I am only an Hawkers wife and have already got six Children and it is a very hard struggle to keep them the way things are just now so if you would kindly send me one of your leaflets I would be very Grateful and Oblige

"East Finchley.

Mrs. B."

"I should be very grateful for one of those practical leaflets mentioned in a handbill left at my door. I have never heard of such a thing before, and having 3 little children myself and bad health as well, you can imagine how much I wish to avoid having any more at present. I sincerely hope this grand thing will be made more known amongst the poorer working classes, and women unable to help themselves like myself through sheer lack of knowledge. Trusting your League will meet with every success.

"Wandsworth Road.

Mrs. D."

The acquittal of Mitchell Kennerley, the publisher of "Hagar Revelly" last spring, established in a Federal court the right of healthy-minded people to discuss vital truths of the body for purposes of art.

Now shall we not stand up and win the same right for the purposes of morality?

It is a harder fight, because morality is not so much fun as art. Mrs. Sanger's pamphlet will not justify itself to a jury by the pleasure they get out of reading it. It is pleasant reading for those who need to know. But it is a thousand times more important to all. For the whole world is gravid and sick with untimely children.

Perhaps the masters of the world, who use these untimely children in their workshops, are in great part responsible for the hoarding of this knowledge. Perhaps an old tradition from the time when war and pestilence and hunger ate up the tribes, and innumerable babies were the only hope of the race, is responsible. Perhaps it is the fear of the male that women may become in reality free and self-dependent individuals. Perhaps it is the morbid terror of truth in those who lack the character to live in its presence. Perhaps it is all these tyrants that we must fight. But this is certain—we need not sing the songs nor dance the dances of a future race of children—frank and free and healthy growing in their bodies and their souls—unless we are willing earnestly and openly to consider, and know, and make known to all, the wise control of the physical processes by which those children shall be brought into the world.

"Anarchist!"

FROM *Harper's Weekly* we learn that the Rev. Bouck White conducts an "Anarchist" church. But from some slight contact with Bouck's congregation we know that is about as much an "Anarchist" congregation as *Harper's Weekly* is an Anarchist weekly. Sometimes we have heard peeved persons call Norman Haggood an Anarchist, as when, for instance, he pressed home the Ballinger issue. We could measure the motive pretty clearly in those cases. But in the case of Norman's weekly what can the motive be? A. C.

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