CHAPTER XI

THE FREEING OF WOMEN

"Every kitchen maid must learn to rule the state."

LENIN.

Throughout the world a struggle goes on for women's equality and freedom, with varying methods and varying success. The methods most commonly known are those of different women's organizations which fight, decade after decade, for new specific increases in women's "rights." They count their victories by the number of women who one by one attain high office, by the number of rights slowly secured, the right to vote, to enter industry, to inherit property, to divorce, to some individual status after marriage.

Undoubted gains they have known, and also many disillusions. A tireless woman in New England recently told me that she had fought for thirty years to get "a decent inspection of women's labor in our state" and that they would "probably lose it at the next election." Nor does the elevation of the occasional woman to high position necessarily improve the lot of women generally. From Cleopatra down to America's women officials, ex-

ceptional women have occasionally been permitted to rule; it is not recorded that the mass of women gained more consideration from them than from men rulers. Women the world over are still unequal to men, bound by a thousand discriminations. In the backward lands of the East hundreds of millions of women are still a subject sex. Not even in the most advanced capitalist countries are they quite equal with men; the long list of disabilities against which the National Women's Party protests in America is evidence of that. Nowhere in capitalist lands have they equal access to all universities, equal pay for equal work in all industry, equal right to advance in all professions, equal rights in marriage and in the care and custody of children. Even those rights which they have attained are today under attack by fascism, which under the phrases of chivalry drives women back to the Middle Ages.

It is therefore the more amazing that Soviet women should have gained so swiftly an equality unknown elsewhere in the world. They receive equal pay for equal work and no jobs are closed to them. They have equal opportunity in education and in government. They have equal rights and duties in marriage; they are free to have or not to have children. They have full political, economic, legal and social equality, as human beings

and citizens. This has been attained in eighteen years in a country where women were once suppressed not only in the European but also in the Asiatic manner. Tsarist law made Russian wives the property of their husbands "in duty bound to render him love, respect and in all things obedience to his wishes." They had no right to separate passports; if they ran away, the police returned them to their husbands. This law was reinforced by brutal peasant customs; Gorky relates the sight of an unfaithful wife bound naked to a cart and flogged by her peasant husband into unconsciousness in the midst of a jeering, applauding crowd. In tsarist Central Asia millions of dark-skinned Mohammedan women lived in the seclusion of harems and behind black veils.

The freeing of women takes place in the Soviet Union swiftly because it is not a woman's fight alone. It comes as part of the freeing of human beings by giving them joint ownership over the country's means of production, irrespective of sex, color or race. . . . "The emancipation of women is not only the work of women Communists but of men Communists also, just as the fight for socialism is a mutual fight," said Krupskaia, widow of Lenin. The Communists hold that the gains in women's freedom made through centuries have been chiefly due to change in methods of produc-

tion. The modern factory freed women from the patriarchal home, but imposed its own form of slavery; it used women to cut down wages, thus increasing the antagonism of the sexes. Economic slavery is the basis of all other inequalities, the key-log in the jam which must first be loosed that all others may rush free.

No freedom comes without battle. The October Revolution created the economic, legal and political basis of woman's equality. The industrialization of the country was the consciously applied weapon for making woman equal with man. Yet in every village and factory women still had to fight their way over the traditional habits of centuries, which lingered in their own souls and in the souls of men. But these barriers of the past were no longer buttressed by ancient law and by the need of private industry for cheap woman's labor.

The first women to establish their freedom were the workers in the factories who took part with their men in the Revolution. I recall Dunia, who was once an illiterate textile worker, living with husband and children in the same room with another family, nine people in all. Dunia was one of those who in the first year of Revolution seized the manager's house for a day nursery so that her children might have space to grow. She learned to

read and began to rise in political and social work, as did simultaneously millions of others. She said to me: "Once life went on without us workers, still more without us women. The father gave her to the husband; she was slave to her man and her factory. Now I am slave to no one. The road is open to all life." This phrase of the "open road to life" I have heard hundreds of times from working women.

The emancipation of peasant women came more slowly. Scores of women presidents of villages have told me of their difficulties with the peasant men who jeered at "petticoat rule." "They laughed at the first woman we elected to the village Soviet so much that she could do nothing; at the next election we put in six women and now it is we who laugh." This was a typical statement.

The widespread collectivization of farming in 1930 gave women's freedom in the rural districts its needed economic base. Farm women everywhere in the collective farms are awakening to the implications of their independent income. Drunken husbands are no longer masters in the home. "I got for myself a warm new coat, a dress and shoes; I got clothes for the children," said a farm woman displaying her purchases in the local market. "But my man spent his money on drink and I'll buy him nothing. I've told him if he gets drunk again I'll

throw him out of the house and not even feed him. The farm will back me up, unless he quits drinking and loafing. I can get along without him in the collective farm." Some thirty million farm women from Leningrad to Vladivostok are awakening to the amazing fact that they can get along economically without their husbands.

Most cruel and bloody of all was the fight for women's freedom in those lands of Central Asia where for centuries veiled women had been sold like chattels to the harems. Here local religion and custom supported men who murdered their wives for the crime of unveiling. When young folks in Tashkent schools spent vacations agitating for women's freedom, one girl's body was sent back in a cart. Accompanying the hacked pieces were the words: "This is your women's freedom." In another locality of Central Asia, nine murders of women occurred before any were discovered by central authority; every attempt of a woman to get justice was met by local vengeance.

But the women of Central Asia, led by the hope which the new government gave them and the new industries encouraged, fought their way into freedom. The blood of martyrs stirred them to greater struggle; fifty thousand women marched at the funeral of the Tashkent girl student. In Bokhara, citadel of Mohammedan orthodoxy, a spectacular

unveiling of women in great meetings and processions took place on International Women's Day, March 8, 1928. Amid indescribable enthusiasm they tore off veils, stamped on them, threw them on the streets and at the feet of speakers. When one woman was murdered by her husband for this unveiling, a public trial was held in a great mass meeting; the murderer was swiftly condemned and executed. From that time women walked unveiled in holiest Bokhara. Today a woman, Abidova, who at the age of twelve was sold in marriage to pay a fifteen-ruble debt of her father, is vice-president of the Uzbek Republic, and its permanent representative in Moscow.

These women of the East are quite aware of the relation of their new freedom to the socially owned means of production.

> The roar of the factory is in me.
> It gives me rhythm,
> It gives me energy,

sing the Uzbek girls of the state silk mill which brought them out of the harems. Another song makes the application wider:

> Flower of the East, the time has come
> To cast off the veil and the paranja. . . .
> For a thousand years you slept in darkness under the yoke.

When you awake, when you arise from deep sleep,
The workers of the world await you!

Steadily the share of Soviet women in industry and in public life has climbed upward. The percentage of women among industrial workers has risen by a steady 3 per cent a year during the Five-Year Plan, and is now (1935) 42 per cent of all persons gainfully employed. In technical higher schools 36 per cent of the students are women, in medical schools 75 per cent; in no institution of learning is there any discrimination against women. The percentage of women who took part in elections rose from 28 per cent of all eligible women in 1926 to 80.3 per cent in 1934. Women constituted 18.2 per cent of the membership of city soviets in 1926; this rose to 32.1 per cent in 1934. The change in the rural districts was greater; a 9.9 percentage of women in 1926 in village soviets rose to 26.4 per cent in 1934. Only 0.6 per cent of the villages had women presidents in 1926, though even this figure testified to the successful fight of thousands of women; by 1934 the figure was over 8 per cent. More than a million women today hold some form of public office in the soviets, including 400,000 elected members of soviets, 400,000 members of local government commissions, 112,000 "co-judges" in the courts, a

function similar to but somewhat more specialized than that of our jurors, and 100,000 members of managing boards of co-operatives.

The city of Tver, now renamed Kalinin, gives an example of the varied kinds of work done by women. As a textile town, its population included a large proportion of women textile workers before the Revolution, a fact which explains its present status as a progressive city, boasting itself among the first Soviet cities in which women attained their full half of the seats in the city government. (Other cities are steadily following, as women through initiative and education take advantage of their legal right to equality.) Tver's two most important women are Anna Kaligina, city secretary of the Communist Party, than which no higher post in the city exists, and Feodorova, who held till recently the prize of "best weaver" for the USSR. Thousands of others follow in the footsteps of these leaders.

Policeman Lily travels fearlessly through dark woods about the city to round up criminal gangs. On one occasion, when she was convoying a prisoner caught setting fire to turf fields, she was set upon in the woods by two of his accomplices and brought back to jail not one criminal but three. That same evening she played the part of fragile heroine in lilac gown in the local dramatic club, for

Lily is an ardent amateur actress specializing in dainty feminine parts. Black-eyed Katya is a street-car conductor, with the best record among the twenty-seven woman conductors of Tver. She is also in the second year of the workers' college, where she studies Turgenieff and geometry. Morosov, the motorman, writes poems about her.

All the young men admire Nina, eighteen-year-old glider pilot, who three days a week sails through the air on light wings. Her regular job is in the car works, making valves for railway cars. But her pastime is the aviation club and she expects some day to be an aviator. Zoya is champion motor mechanic in a clothing factory and also chairman of its shop committee, handling trade union affairs for five hundred and sixty women; in her spare time she is an enthusiastic ski runner, who took second place in a contest held by the clothing workers of five provinces. Marusia is studying to be a doctor; Tonia is a former spinner who did such good work on the wall newspaper that she is now a full time writer. Dusia was the first woman chauffeur in the city; the boys used to run after her yelling, "girl driver." One by one the girls of Tver have conquered every trade and profession. So have the women throughout the USSR.

Foreign visitors are occasionally shocked to find

women taking part in heavy and dirty labor, field work, street-cleaning, even digging the subway. But Soviet women are still of the generation of peasants, who worked in the fields. They know that in all ages women have done heavy labor; it is the skilled work from which they have been barred. They know that equal share in labor means in the USSR equal share in ruling and in all opportunities of life. So young girls fought for the right to equal work on the subway, against engineers and miners who didn't want to let the women underground. They worked knee-deep in water alongside experienced men, challenged them to records and often beat them. "The subway was the richest experience of my life," said a prize-winning girl.

There are, however, regulations governing women's labor, which prohibit work proved by experience more dangerous to women than to men. Women may not engage in trades involving danger of lead poisoning, may not lift weights above a certain amount. Special regulations, reinforced by medical observation, surround the whole period of pregnancy, and the last six to eight weeks women may not work.[1] Many labor processes are con-

[1] Six weeks before and six weeks after childbirth for office jobs; eight weeks before and eight weeks after for physical labor; longer periods may be ordered at any time by the doctor, and are given without loss of wages.

stantly under investigation to determine whether or not they are injurious to women; when experiment shows that they are, they are prohibited. This is no sex discrimination but part of the ordinary routine of the public health service, which steadily investigates the effect of occupations and bars from them those groups of the population which might be injured. Thus sand-blasting trades are prohibited to youth, which is more susceptible than older people are to tuberculosis from sand-blasting. No trade or profession is prohibited in advance as "unwomanly"; any trade may be barred after investigation to any group or individual on grounds of public health.

Not access to heavy labor but to skilled professions distinguishes Soviet women from those of other lands. Anna Kofanova won fame as operator of a combined-harvester, harvesting 1,500 acres in one season, the township record. Natalia Mikhailova is director of a machine tractor station entirely manned by women which services the 15,000 acres of thirty-two collective farms. Shchetinina, a ship captain, navigates the ocean. The envelopes of Soviet stratostats were designed by a woman chemist. Irene Rousinova was the first woman polar explorer, wintering several seasons in the north; she has been followed by hosts of others, including Nina Demme, who for two years has

managed the scientific station on North Land. Galina Medovnik weeded tobacco in tsarist days as a girl of eight, fought in the Red Army during the civil war and was several times condemned to death; she escaped to become today a representative of housewives in the Moscow Soviet, where she superintends the building of apartment houses for workers.

Equality in work has given to women equality in every field of life: education, politics, marriage. The assumption behind the Soviet marriage code is the equal human dignity of both parties in deciding their intimate relations—a decision with which the state has no right to interfere. State action is limited to protection of children and prevention of force or fraud. Young couples appearing at the Marriage Registry Bureau are therefore required to give name, residence, occupation, past marital history, any children, and the future name which each intends to take. Questions to each are identical. The same name is often taken but not always. A person who infects another with disease is criminally liable. Property owned before marriage remains individual; that later acquired is jointly owned. Any married person who desires a divorce gets it, nor has the state the right to ask the reason. Both parties are responsible for the care and support of children up to eighteen and for giving the

other partner any needed temporary economic aid to establish the independent relation. Recent much publicized changes in the divorce code were only a better bookkeeping, insuring that both persons actually knew of the divorce and were actually held for the support of children.

Recent comments of Soviet leaders that more time should be given to family life are similarly part of the general emphasis on richer human relations now possible through increasing leisure rather than any belated recognition of the family. Casual attitudes toward marriage have been discouraged from the beginning; no one was more emphatic on this than Lenin. But the pressure is social rather than legal. Trade unions, collective farms and Party organizations will penalize, even to the point of expulsion, persons who cause social havoc through their sexual instability. But they consider concrete situations, not traditions. The continuous and open living together of two people is respected, whether or not they are "registered"; it constitutes marriage in both the social and legal sense. Taking advantage of another person is penalized, through whatever forms accomplished. Peasants who took advantage of the marriage code to secure brief brides for harvest work soon stopped when they found this gave the woman equal right to the harvest. One notorious case

some years ago was that of a man who seduced a girl by marriage and threw her out next morning; he was convicted of rape, which is legally defined as sex relations obtained through force or fraud, and was punished by imprisonment. The fact of the marriage registration was rather an aggravation than otherwise; he had used a Soviet office to assist fraud.

Problems occasionally arise in marriage from the fact that both partners have jobs. I met a girl tractor-driver in Siberia who married a tractor-driver on another field brigade. They spent their honeymoon some miles apart; once each week the young man walked ten or twelve miles on his free day to stay with his bride. The girl never met him half-way; she was boss of the winning brigade and took no chances. To my casual query why they did not get into the same field-gang, both exclaimed: "Desert my brigade in sowing-time!"

A woman's relation to the state is always individual; it is never through her husband. Not even the wives of great men may live by reflected glory. When Stalin's wife died, the black-bordered announcements in the press gave her own name and occupation in the artificial silk industry, and only after this mentioned that she was the "close friend and companion of Stalin." Kalinin's wife wins recognition by creating a state farm and center of

culture in the Altai Mountains, where they call her by her own name, not by the name of the president.

The tradition that love is "woman's whole existence" is challenged by a new assumption, a refusal to admit that any human being's happiness can be completely dependent on one other human being. When Salima, a young woman of Turkestan, accepted a scholarship to study in Tashkent, her husband ordered her to return, and, on her refusal, divorced her, boasting by letter that he had taken another wife "obedient and illiterate." Salima showed her quality by replying: "I received your letter telling me that you have another wife. I will have my revenge. When I finish my studies I will come back to the village and teach your second wife to read and write." The older generation may be horrified by the flippant Salima, but the new Soviet generation will applaud her as a free and self-reliant citizen.

The freedom of every woman to dispose of her own body, to marry or not to marry, to have children or not to have them, irrespective of marriage, is taken for granted by Soviet law, and is restrained only by social opinion, not by legal penalty. Dr. Milashkevich, head of the Gynecological section of the great polyclinic, where a medical personnel

of three hundred serves the thirty-five thousand workers of Stalin Auto Works, told me that all women working in the plant come to her as part of their routine health examination. "If they are married I ask them: 'Do you want children?' Then I give them medical advice according to their intentions. If they do not want children, the polyclinic supplies the means of prevention." She further informed me that every attempt was made to discourage abortion, by urging grounds of health, and by sending nurses and even neighbors to reason with the wife and husband, but never by absolute refusal. "To compel a woman either to have or not to have children we would consider an infringement of human rights," said Dr. Milashkevich. "If she decides to have them, the state gives every assistance, through free medical and hospital care, special funds for milk and children's clothing and the use of day nurseries to care for children during her working hours." That the women are deciding to have children is clear from the average increase of population of three million annually—in the past two years of growing prosperity three and a half million [2]—an increase unparalleled in any other land.

Every year the Soviet Union produces its crop of national heroes, who spring into fame for some

[2] Figures from Soviet Statistical Dept. 1936.

notable achievement and whose methods are widely copied. In 1935 the names most heard were those of Stakhanov, a miner, and Marie Demchenko, a farm woman. A former farm servant of the sugar beet districts, Marie had risen through collectivization of farming, and the knowledge she gained in the laboratory cottage, to challenge in spring of 1935 all the beet growers of the land. "Let us flood the land with sugar. My brigade will get twenty tons of beets per acre." Hundreds of letters accepted; hundreds of visitors came to inspect the fields which Marie's determined brigade of women nine times hoed, and eight times cleared of moths by setting fires at night. They conquered a rainless August by the local fire-fighting apparatus, pouring twenty thousand buckets of water on their fields. They won twenty-one tons per acre and came to the November celebrations in Moscow to receive the Order of Lenin amid the plaudits of the entire country.

Who were these women singled out for honor? They were women who got down in the dirt to dig sugar beets, who soiled their hands with slimy insects that a beet crop might be improved. What made their achievement honored? This—that their beets were no commodity for private profit, but sugar for the workers of a nation. They were

leaders in the public task of farming a continent. This made of the hitherto unregarded toil of farm women a heroic collective epic, worthy to be classed with the work of explorers who raid the Arctic or scientists who storm the stratosphere.