THE WOMAN NOBODY KNOWS

BY JERRY KLUTTZ and HERBERT ASBURY

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Handicapped by a hatred of publicity, ignored by labor, denounced as incompetent, Frances Perkins struggles on as Secretary of Labor, the most misunderstood official in Washington. And she's apt to be there for some time.

A MAJOR Washington mystery is how Frances Perkins has managed to hang on to her job as Secretary of Labor for twelve long years. No public official has been more thoroughly damned and abused. The files of her department and those of the White House are crammed with demands that she resign. Correspondents have voted her the "most useless" of Washington officials. A resolution demanding her impeachment was introduced in the House of Representatives, though it was withdrawn after a House Committee had listened to her. Her department has lost steadily in prestige, and the authority that should go with her job has been taken from her by little by little. Labor leaders ignore her, and the public generally is convinced that she is incompetent.

Yet there she is, and there are those who think she is apt to remain. If Mr. Roosevelt is elected to a fourth term, you can be sure that Miss Perkins will continue to be one of his advisers, if not a member of his Cabinet. The President respects her judgment, although he doesn't often follow her advice.

"Curiously enough, when the definitive history of this Administration is written, it is quite likely that Miss Perkins will be hailed as the most successful of the New Dealers, for the Roosevelt pattern of government contains more of her ideas than those of any other of the President's followers. She is very much misunderstood, both in and out of Washington, and it is almost entirely her own fault. She has never defended herself against attack, or attempted to explain any of her actions or lack of action. And it is infinitely that she ever will. She has often said, "I'll let history judge my record, not the newspaper boys."

A Background of Religion

You can't learn much about Miss Perkins by looking at her hair, the way you can with most women, because she has worn the same little tricorne number since she was fifteen years old, with occasional variations in design so slight as to be almost unnoticeable. Her dresses don't divulge much, either; she has appeared in public in a simple black frock for so long that it has become almost a trademark. You can easily deduce that Miss Perkins' taste is definitely old-fashioned, but trying to analyze her character from her clothes and the way she wears them is about as profitable as trying to analyze a soldier by studying his uniform. To get even a glimpse of what makes Miss Perkins, the sort of woman she is, you've got to go back to her ancestry and early training, her upbringing in a strict, strict-laced and deeply religious New England family.

You must consider particularly what one of her old aunts said to her when she took her first public job a good many years ago: "Remember, Frances, we Perkiness are very private people and we live very private lives."

This admonition pretty well sums up the family philosophy. Miss Perkins accepted it, and it has colored every bit more or less guided her conduct, especially since she became Secretary of Labor. Her ingrained horror of personal publicity has become a phobia, so that she deeply resents anyone who tries to pry into her private life. She deplores any public mention of her family—she has a married daughter, and a husband with whom she spends summers and an occasional week-end. She dislikes intensely to be photographed, and not long ago she asked two women friends to return the only intimate letters she had ever written, so she could destroy them.

Her telephone number and place of residence in Washington are among the capital's most carefully guarded secrets, and she is always fearful lest someone disclose the exact location of her farm in Maine, to which she hopes some day to retire.

Miss Perkins' intimate friends (of whom she has very few) describe her as a delightful companion—articulate, sincere, and possessing a keen sense of humor and an encyclopedic mind. But all these are a side of her character of which the general public knows nothing. In her professional contacts, she is nearly always cool, formal and reserved; she is especially horrified when anyone attempts familiarity toward her on slight acquaintance.

This latter trait has greatly affected her relations with the bubbling Mrs. Anna Rosenberg, one of the President's principal labor and political advisers, who has had many chances to assert power and influence which rightfully belong to the Secretary of Labor; and if Washington gossip is to be believed, Mrs. Rosenberg has neglected few opportunities.

The children between the two women goes back several years, to a time when Miss Perkins, at the request of Mrs. Roosevelt, appointed Mrs. Rosenberg to a committee formed to study labor conditions in Europe. On arriving at the first meeting, Mrs. Roosevelt rushed across the room, kissed Miss Perkins, and said loudly, "So nice to see you again, Frances."

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The Woman Nobody Knows

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of Pennsylvania and at Columbia University, where she received an A.M. degree in 1919. Miss Perkins became executive secretary of the Consumers’ League in New York, and started working vigorously for a consumer’s labor, social welfare and public health legislation. Her labors attracted so much attention that the Leverhulme Foundation appointed her member of the New York State Industrial Board, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, then who succeeded Smith as governor, promoted her to the post of State Labor Commissioner in 1929. This job was very arduous and extraordinarilly successful; many of the social and labor laws which she helped write and push through the New York Legislature became models for other States. Her reputation in this field and her friendship and close association with Roosevelt made her a clear Cabinet possibility when he was elected President in 1932. In February of 1933 Mr. Roosevelt summoned her to his New York home and offered to appoint her Secretary of Labor. At first, she refused. She pointed out that she was not “a bona fide labor person,” unreasonably, Miss Perkins considers that this is her most constructive accomplishment.

5. Creation of the National War Manpower Commission. From this plank came the United States Employment Service, an outgrowth of the War Manpower Commission.

6. Abolition of child labor. Miss Perkins says this has been a form of social ‘carpetbagging’ if, her memory is correct, what this country has been operating under for the past twenty years is not so much the Roosevelt New Deal as it is the Perkins New Deal. For the platform, of which Miss Perkins says Mr. Roosevelt implied his approval as the price of her acceptance of the Labor post, forms the veritable foundation of the New Deal; take it away and there would be no New Deal. No one in Washington seems able to understand why credit has been withheld from Miss Perkins for so many years. The President has often spoken kindly of Harry Hopkins and other New Deal advisers, and on occasion makes excuses for distorting the facts but, kind words for Miss Perkins have been exceedingly rare. She has been pilloried as incompetent and worse, but no adequate defense of her has been forthcoming from the White House.

Miss Perkins says that even after the President had agreed upon the deal, they had considerable difficulty bringing the remainder of the Cabinet into line. Lewis Douglas, Director of the Budget, fought her radical social ideas and resisted in protest. Several times the President tried to tell Mr. Roosevelt that the President waved; the fight over Social Security was particularly arduous. Miss Perkins certaunly that her ideas would prevail, however, largely because Mr. Roosevelt had come out for unemployment relief and the “governors’ conference in Salt Lake City in 1931. I knew he was fighting because I wrote that part of his speech.”

The End of Labor

Labor fight against Miss Perkins began the day she was appointed and has subsided only for brief intervals. The opportunists in union ranks brought up fresh ammunition. Mrs. Perkins was herself put under a secret investigation by William Green, head of the American Federation of Labor, and got somewhere in the Cabinet, according to her husband. Hoover was asked to appoint Mr. Perkins to the position. The cabinet had been appointed, and she was not in the consciousness of Miss Perkins; she is a woman, she isn’t a union member, she refuses to Prelude to them, and, intellectually, she is much nearer to them than they are. For that matter, Miss Perkins is intellectual in the narrowest sense; she has no son, but the rest of her colleagues in the government, too; she is unimportant in intellectual life. Women, anyhow, have not been able to distinguish themselves outside of labor’s ranks. Demographic beliefs have frequently been accused of her being anti-intellectual, and have complicated that the union have much difficulty in learning the offices that they have in previous roles. On the other hand, her accomplishments outside of labor’s ranks denounce her for carrying the same. Miss Perkins insists that these accusations simply aren’t true. She declares that she has never comitted the sin, and points out that what she has accomplished has been for the betterment of all workers, organized and unorganized. At the same time she professes a strong belief in women, and thinks that all working people should join them. At any rate, she says that the unions have more influence with the Department of Labor now than ever before, and that they are always consulted before proposed programs are put into effect.

I have always encouraged Mr. Roosevelt to meet with labor leaders, she said, “and I am responsible for his doing it in the first place.” But I should add, I should hardly, if ever, become involved in labor problems. He needs a strong Labor Board to run away with the White House with its problems. When that happened, it was frequently asThough I am the one who is now in charge of many questions.”

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"We better approach our careers. She might be a superior officer."
War Conscience: Certainly I pinched you, dearie. I'm new in Wartime Conscience. And if you keep showing out perfectly good kitchen fats that way, I'll have you black and blue all over in a week.

Women: Black and blue—why you—Ugh!

War Conscience: Certainly! I pinched you, sometimes when she's tired or something.

War Conscience: Personally, Madam. I don't care how tired you get! Your Government needs you to do your War Job, and I'm here to see you do it. And as far as not sleeping goes—hasn't anybody ever told you about caffeine-free coffee?

Women: What?

War Conscience: Caffeine-free, dear. Take Sanka Coffee, for instance. 97% caffeine-free. Let you sleep and sleep and sleep. And flavor? Madam, this Sanka Coffee is the strawberry shortcake of the coffee world! It's the coffee that eliminates the man who says he can't get a good cup of coffee for dinner! And do you realize maybe a person forgets her War Duty sometimes when she's tired or something?

War Conscience: You know that your Government needs that Wartime Kitchen fat of yours so badly for ammunition that it's willing to give you two whole max points, for just a pound of it? Do you—?

Women: Certainly I realize it. But do you know I didn't sleep a wink last night, just because I had one measly cup of coffee for dinner? And do you realize the strawberry shortcake of the coffee world! It's the coffee that eliminates the man who says he can't get a good cup of coffee for dinner! And do you realize maybe a person forgets her War Duty sometimes when she's tired or something? Make Sanka Coffee double strength (2 heaping tablespoons to one cup water). A product of General Foods, Act of 1912, which established her department, she it is bound to "foster, promote and develop the welfare of the wage-earners of the United States" without regard to their union affiliations. She has repeatedly warned labor leaders that eventually the unions would be regulated by the government unless they reformed and operated in the public interest. She has proposed these reforms: that only independent and public utilities should be made of all union monies. Unions should be conducted according to democratic rules and constitutions, and operated in a more personal manner by and for the membership. Union officers should be chosen by the whole membership, and only American citizens should be allowed to hold office. Unions should carry out fully all collective bargaining agreements, even though they turn out to be poor bargains. Unions should study such monopolistic practices as closed memberships and high dues combined with closed shops.

Furthermore, says Miss Perkins, "the unions should shun excessive picketing and demonstration, the raiding of union membership by other unions, stoppage of work due to jurisdictional disputes, and the boycotting of goods provided by the labor of other unions. Now, these are reforms which every sensible student of the American labor movement knows are bound to come sooner or later in one form or another. If the fact that Miss Perkins advocates them would be generally known, her stature as a public official would increase enormously. She presented her view on labor relations in a speech to an American Federation of Labor convention, three years ago, but thereafter made no effort to get them across to the people. Instead, she buried them in one of her annual reports. For this she has two reasons—the simple breastbear the thought of pushing herself into public notice, and she is afraid that the data of 'anomalies' will increase. Labor leaders have entirely ignored her recommendations. They ignore her, too, as much as they can. Whenever possible they take their troubles to the White House, where they will get a sympathetic hearing but perhaps the center of a dramatic incident. Falling in that, they seek out Miss Roosevelt, who is known in some Washington circles as the 'intellectual Secretary of Labor.' Mrs. Roosevelt is a secretary to the Joint A. F. of L. CIO committee which meets regularly with the President, and she helps make policy plans and fix the policies of the War Manpower Commission, of which she is Regional Director in New York. In many fields of labor relations she has vastly more competence than Miss Perkins. The result is that her attention is paid to the President's advice and suggestions, and thus the legend of her incompetency grows.

The Deadly Sin of Pride
John L. Lewis respects Miss Perkins' ability, but he won't admit it; his present line is to call her reactionary and incompetent. Once when she urged him to make peace with the A. F. of L. he roughly described her as "woven in the head." On the other hand, while declining to reveal her personal feelings toward Lewis, Miss Perkins says she has a high regard for his gifts as a negotiator, and respects his fidelity to his given word as far as his minions are concerned. She recalled that Lewis badgered his first blast at the President as long ago as 1937, and simply because his style has been hurt. Incidentally, Miss Perkins has oft told Lewis that pride is his greatest, an observation which comes right out of a New England conscience. In this instance Lewis was miffed because he thought the President was trying to shun him. Miss Perkins tried to bring the two men together, but before she could succeed Lewis flew off the handle and made a statement denouncing Mr. Roosevelt.

"Before that," says Miss Perkins, "the President seemed to have been just about the first sort of fellow. He never quite got over what he said about him." In the middle of the summer of 1940, a little while before he came out for Willkie, Lewis came into Miss Perkins' office and began a barrage against the President. She interjected him to say temperately: "John, you know you shouldn't talk that way about the President. He has done more for you and the whole labor movement. Everything you say is destructive. Why don't you make a constructive suggestion?"

Lewis looked at her solemnly for a moment, then said: "I have made a constructive suggestion. But I've heard nothing, nothing at all."

He refused to explain, but later Miss Perkins learned that Lewis had proposed to Mr. Roosevelt that he be nominated for Vice-President on the third-term ticket. The President simply accepted Lewis' constructive suggestion, and Miss Perkins says she was not at all surprised at Lewis' subsequent actions.

An Unfulfilled Promise
It is common gossip in Washington that Mrs. Roosevelt's influence is about all that keeps Miss Perkins in her job, and that the President's wife dictates Labor Department policies and has a close relationship with Miss Perkins' subordinates. Miss Perkins says emphatically that all this is foolishness and a myth. It probably goes back to the time when Miss Katherine Loomis and Miss Mary Anderson, heads of the Children's and Women's bureau respectively, formed the habit of going over Miss Perkins' head in laboring their problems with Mrs. Roosevelt. Then it quit when Miss Perkins flew off the handle, but firmly reminded them that she was, after all, Secretary of Labor, and that they must be consulted first on all policy matters. Miss Perkins herself has denied the aid of Mrs. Roosevelt but once. That was when she was trying to resign following the election in 1928. Unable to get a decision from Mrs. Roosevelt, she asked the President's wife to help her. But in fact, Miss Perkins and Mrs. Roosevelt are not particularly good friends. They are too fundamentally different to be close. For one thing, the President like Mrs. Roosevelt leads in, to her mind, nothing less than appalling. She says, "The President's wife lives in a goldfish bowl. She has to, I suppose," said Miss Perkins, "but I never could."

Many of Miss Perkins' most intimate friends say that she feels as strongly about the growth of bureaucracy and the dangers of regimentation as she does about anything that keeps Miss Perkins in her job, and that the President's wife has ever appeared to interfere with the traditional American pattern. Although she is not particularly good friends, she worries over the fact that this government agency has in its files the names, ages, and other personal information about millions of citizens. She had hoped that some other system of registry could be worked out because she put it, "too many other government agencies have personal information about our people."

But about the only public statement she has ever uttered about her position for individual liberty was made last December at the tenth annual conference on labor legislation. Miss Perkins started these conferences so state labor commissioners could exchange views, go into administrative problems, and build up higher standards of work in the states, but stays out of fights and arguments and expresses few opinions. But at the last conference the discussion turned on compulsory pre-employment physical examinations, advocated by some of the younger commissioners. Finally, Mrs. Perkins could stand it no longer. She jumped up and said: "All you young men, listen, and do me a favor. I want you to worry that...I say, all the things that are extremely precious in this country is liberty—individual liberty. I cannot find it in my heart ever to envision any program of pre-employment physical examination by any employer or by any government to examine these things, of course, where you can best work, where you can best do this, that, and the other."

Thus spoke New England and the shadows of her Revolutionary ancestors.

The End