

THE WOMAN NOBODY KNOWS

BY JERRY KLUTTZ and HERBERT ASBURY

PHOTOGRAPH FOR COLLIER'S BY LOFMAN-PIX

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 A resolution demanding her impeachment was introduced in the House of Representatives, though it was withdrawn after a House Committee had listened to her.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 little by little. Labor leaders ignore her, and the public generally is convinced that she is incompetent.

Yet there she is, and there or thereabouts 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 unlikely 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 hats, 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 trade-mark. 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 profitless as trying to analyze a soldier by studying his uniform. To catch 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, strait-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 Perkinses 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 and 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 deploras any public mention of her family—she has a

married daughter, and a husband with whom she spends summers and an occasional weekend. 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 form a side of her character of which the general public knows nothing. In her professional contacts, she is nearly always cold, formal and reserved; she is especially horrified when anyone acts familiarly 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 usurp 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 coldness 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. Arriving at the first meeting, Mrs. Rosenberg 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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Since Miss Perkins had never seen Mrs. Rosenberg before, she didn't know what to make of such familiarity or how to react to it. So she followed her natural instinct. She recoiled visibly and greeted Mrs. Rosenberg with pointed formality.

The two women now treat each other courteously and with respect, but they certainly don't constitute anything you could call a mutual-admiration society.

So much has Miss Perkins become obsessed by the idea of privacy that she has tried (and with more success than she has ever realized) to keep her public life private also. She never gossips or discusses the affairs of her department, and she never reads the gossip columns of the newspapers; and apparently she seldom even glances at the news columns. She didn't know, for instance, that she had been voted "most useless" in a correspondents' poll, although the story had appeared in nearly every paper in the country and had been the subject of many editorials.

Once a Senator, impressed by her knowledge of a difficult subject and by the ease and clarity with which she expressed her ideas, told her that what she needed was a good press agent. Well, she has a press agent, but he never gets her any good publicity, partly because she consistently refuses to say anything that would make good copy, and partly because of his own ineptness.

With newspaper reporters, she tries to be cordial, but only succeeds in being cold and distant. Several unfortunate incidents in which she claims she was misquoted and misunderstood have caused her to mistrust the press, and she goes to little or no trouble to hide her feelings. She hates to hold press conferences, and, when she does, she refuses to unbend; she insists upon talking upon one specific subject and nothing else. She wouldn't even dream of telling the reporters anything "off the record."

Authoress of the New Deal

The consequences have been inevitable. Nobody knows anything about Miss Perkins, or what she is doing, or what she thinks. Who, for example, knows that she opposed the President's scheme to pack the Supreme Court? Who knows that she didn't like the idea of a third term, that she referred to herself often as "no third term," and that she hopes sincerely that it will never again be necessary for a President to serve more than two terms? Who knows that she is the only Cabinet member who can, and does, talk back to the President and get away with it? Who knows that her resignation has been in Mr. Roosevelt's hands since 1936, and that she has frequently urged him to accept it, particularly since the 1940 election? Who knows that she advised the President not to engage in a public fight with John L. Lewis, because she knew that Lewis was greedy for power and couldn't be dealt with reasonably. Who knows that she is genuinely afraid that the continued invasion of private rights, and the growth of bureaucracy, will ultimately bring about regimentation of the people by the government? And for that matter—her relations with press and public and most of her colleagues being what they are—who cares?

Miss Perkins was born in Boston on April 10, 1882, of pioneer English-Scottish stock, but was reared in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her father, Frederick W. Perkins, was a Professor of Church Law, and taught in American and European universities. He was deeply religious, as his ancestors had been, and religion was a very important factor in the Perkins' family life. Today, Miss Perkins is probably the most religious official in Washington; she often stops at her Episcopal church for prayer and meditation in the morning on her way to work.

As a child Miss Perkins was subjected to strict discipline. Two of the prime rules of life in a New England family of that era, particularly in a family with a tradition such as the Perkinses possessed, were that a child should be seen and not heard, and that any parental dictum must be accepted without question as authoritative and binding. Like most children thus reared, Miss Perkins was

excessively shy, so much so that even after she had reached adolescence she found it impossible to go to the public library and ask for a book. This would have involved talking to strangers, and she had been taught that nice girls do not talk to strangers. She lost most of her shyness when she went to Mount Holyoke College, where she majored in chemistry and biology, but she still retains more than is good for a woman in public office. After graduation she was offered a job as chemist in a canning plant, but her father said no; such work was not suitable for a respectable young woman. He also strongly advised against further study; in his opinion she already had as much education as a woman would ever require. He urged her to marry and settle down; she was a personable girl, and suitors aplenty were on hand.

Against the advice and without the consent of her father Miss Perkins decided against immediate marriage and went into social welfare work which naturally led her into the field of labor relations. Some of her friends

of Pennsylvania and at Columbia University, where she received an A.M. degree in 1910. Miss Perkins became executive secretary of the Consumers' League in New York, and started working vigorously for consumer, labor, social welfare and public health legislation. Her labors attracted so much attention that Governor Al Smith appointed her a member of the New York State Industrial Board, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, when he succeeded Smith as governor, promoted her to the post of State Labor Commissioner in 1929. In this job she was very active and extraordinarily 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 a public employment agency. From this plank came the United States Employment Service, heart of the War Manpower Commission.

6. Abolition of child labor. Miss Perkins says this has been accomplished by the Walsh-Healy Act, the Wage and Hour Act, and various state laws.

It is not possible to obtain confirmation of Miss Perkins' statements from the President, but, if her memory is correct, what this country has been operating under for the past twelve 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 has even patted them benignly on the back, 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 to her program they had considerable difficulty bringing the remainder of the Cabinet into line. Lewis Douglas, Director of the Budget, fought her radical social ideas and resigned in protest. Several times the opposition was so great that the President wavered; the fight over Social Security was particularly fierce. She felt certain that her ideas would prevail, however, largely because Mr. Roosevelt had come out for unemployment compensation at a Governors' conference in Salt Lake City in 1931. "I knew he was going to," she said, "because I wrote that part of his speech."

The Enmity of Labor

Labor fight against Miss Perkins began the day she was appointed and has subsided only for brief intervals, while her enemies in union ranks brought up fresh ammunition. She'd scarcely been sworn in as Secretary before William Green, head of the American Federation of Labor, announced that organized labor would never become reconciled to her appointment. It hasn't. Labor leaders have four main reasons for disliking Miss Perkins—she is a woman, she isn't a union member, she refuses to be subservient to them, and, intellectually, she is much keener than they are. For that matter, Miss Perkins is intellectually superior to most of her colleagues in the government, too; she is unfortunate in that nobody knows it. Labor chiefs have frequently accused her of being anti-union, and have complained that the unions have much less influence in her administration than they had in previous regimes. On the other hand, her opponents outside of labor's ranks denounce her for coddling the unions.

Miss Perkins insists that these accusations simply aren't true. She declares that she has never coddled the unions, and points out that what she has accomplished has been for the ultimate benefit of all workers, organized and unorganized. At the same time she professes a strong belief in unions, and thinks that all working people should join them. Also, 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 and policies 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 think that the President should rarely, if ever, become involved in labor strife. He never did until the War Labor Board started running to the White House with its problems. When that happened Mr. Roosevelt signed the papers without asking many questions."

Labor chiefs have never recognized Miss Perkins' services as an intermediary, nor agreed with her that under the Congressional



say that she has never quite conquered the feeling that she had committed the cardinal sin of disobedience to parental authority; once in a while they get the impression that in the back of her mind is the nagging thought that she might have been happier had she followed the pattern of life laid down for her by her father. At the same time she is proud of her record in public office.

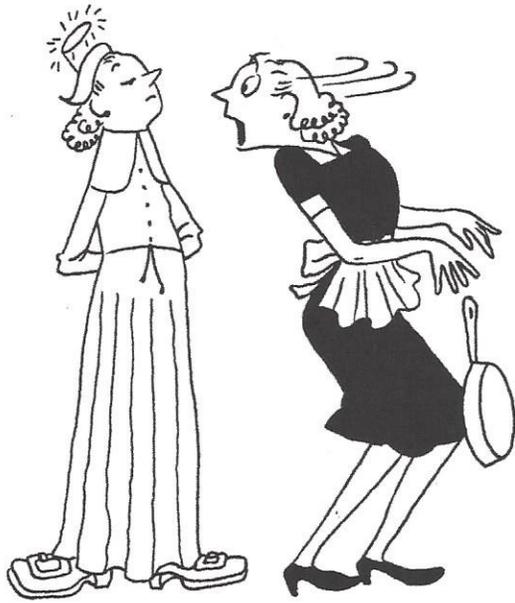
Despite the misgivings of her family Miss Perkins remained in social work for two years. Then her father allowed her to accept the more genteel job of teaching chemistry in a girls' school at Lake Forest, Illinois, but it was too late; the things she had seen during her two years among the underprivileged had only strengthened her determination to devote herself to the solution of social problems. She resigned the teaching post after a few months and went to Chicago to work with Jane Addams at Hull House. Again her father expressed disapproval; he felt very strongly that all charitable and welfare work should be carried on through the churches. During this period Miss Perkins helped support herself by writing stories for boys' magazines with an occasional piece based on working conditions for women in department stores.

Following further study at the University

and predicted that the labor organizations would object to her, a prophecy which certainly hit the nail on the head. The President said that he believed the time had come for all workers, organized and unorganized, to get consideration from the Federal government. Miss Perkins says that she then agreed to accept the job if the President in turn would accept her program as embodying his objectives for labor and social legislation and economic betterment. As Miss Perkins recalled them recently, these were the main planks of her platform:

1. Immediate Federal aid to states and local governments for direct unemployment relief. This idea evolved as the Public Works Administration.
2. An extensive works program, which eventually became the Works Project Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps.
3. A Federal law to encourage the fixing of minimum wages and maximum hours of work. Out of this came the National Recovery Administration, which Miss Perkins says was also her idea; the Walsh-Healy Act, conceived by Miss Perkins after a conference with Felix Frankfurter; and the Wage and Hour Act.
4. Unemployment and old age insurance, now provided by the Social Security Act. Not

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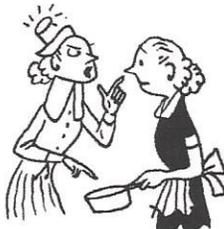
"YOU PINCHED ME!"

War Conscience: Certainly I pinched you, dearie. I'm your new Wartime Conscience. And if you keep throwing out perfectly good kitchen fats that way, I'll have you black and blue all over in a week.

Woman: Black and bl—! Why you—! I'll—



War Conscience: Tut, Madam! Do you realize that your Government needs that Waste Kitchen fat of yours so badly for ammunition that it's willing to give you two whole meat points, for just a pound of it? Do you—?



Woman: 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

For delicious iced coffee—make Sanka Coffee double strength (2 heaping tablespoons to one cup water). A product of General Foods.

maybe a person forgets her War Duty 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?

Woman: What?

War Conscience: Caffein-free, dear. Take Sanka Coffee, for instance. 97% caffeine-free. Lets you sleep and sleep and sleep. And flavor! Madam, this Sanka Coffee is



the strawberry shortcake of the coffee world! It is the coffee that eliminates the man who says he can't get a good cup of coffee. It's the creme de la creme for the woman who's kept awake by caffeine.

Woman: Really?

War Conscience: Certainly, dearie! Try it...but remember this...Sanka Coffee may let you sleep, but I won't if you fall down on your Wartime Job! That's all, Sister!

Act of 1913, which established her department, she 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:

Regular independent and public audits should be made of all union monies. Unions should be conducted according to democratic rules and constitutions, and operated in a sensible parliamentary way 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 re-study such monopolistic practices as closed memberships and high dues combined with closed shops.

"Furthermore," says Miss Perkins, "the unions should disown excessive picketing and demonstration, the raiding of union memberships by other unions, stoppages 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 could 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—she simply cannot bear the thought of pushing herself into public notice, and she is afraid that the cries of "antiunion" 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 know they'll get a sympathetic hearing and perhaps be the center of a dramatic incident. Failing in that, they seek out Mrs. Rosenberg, who is known in some Washington circles as the "unofficial Secretary of Labor." Mrs. Rosenberg is secretary to the joint A. F. of L.—CIO committee which meets regularly with the President, and she helps make postwar 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 influence than Miss Perkins. The result is that scant attention is paid to the Secretary'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 "woozy 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 miners are concerned. She recalled that Lewis loosed his first blast at the President as long ago as 1937, and simply because his pride had been hurt. Incidentally, Miss Perkins has often told Lewis that pride is his greatest sin, 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 issued a statement denouncing Mr. Roosevelt.

"Before that," says Miss Perkins. "the President thought Lewis was just about the finest sort of fellow. He never quite got over what Lewis said about him."

In the middle of the summer of 1940, a little while before he came out for Wilkie, Lewis came into Miss Perkins' office and began a tirade against the President. She inter-

rupted him to say temperately: "John, you know you shouldn't talk that way about the President. He has done many good things 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 dramatically: "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 ignored Lewis' constructive suggestion, and Miss Perkins says she was not at all surprised at Lewis' subsequent actions.

An Unfounded Rumor

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 frequently consults 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 Lenroot and Miss Mary Anderson, heads of the Children's and Women's bureaus respectively, formed the habit of going over Miss Perkins' head and discussing their problems with Mrs. Roosevelt. They quit it when Miss Perkins gently but firmly reminded them that she was, after all, Secretary of Labor, and that she must be consulted first on all policy matters. Miss Perkins herself has enlisted the aid of Mrs. Roosevelt but once. That was when she was trying to resign following the election in 1940. Unable to get a decision from Mr. 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 ever to be close. For one thing, the sort of life Mrs. Roosevelt leads is, to her mind, nothing less than appalling. She once remarked that 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 has ever appeared to interfere with the traditional American pattern. Although she strongly supports Social Security, she worries over the fact that this governmental agency has in its files the names, ages and other personal information about millions of citizens. She had hoped that some other system of coverage could be worked out because, as 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 passion 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. She presides at the forums, 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, Miss Perkins could stand it no longer. She jumped up and said:

"All you young men alarm me, and so much so that I want to warn you that among other things that are extremely precious in this country is liberty—individual liberty. I cannot find it in my heart ever to endorse any program of pre-employment physical examination by any employer or by any government. I don't know why the government, or this company or that company, should know the state of health of every individual in the United States. I mean this. The next thing will be universal fingerprinting, and then they'll be telling you, for your own good, of course, where you can best work, where you can best live, where you can best do this, that and the other."

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

THE END