

Chapter Thirty-three

OLD FATHER ANTIC, THE LAW



BETWEEN Fifth and Sixth Avenues, practically in the shadow of the gray mass of St Francis Xavier's College, was a shabby, brownstone building, Number 46 West Fifteenth Street. After the two years of gathering statistical histories at 104 Fifth Avenue we decided in 1925 the time had come to expand, and moved to this second home of the Clinical Research Bureau. It was next to an express agency, three steps down from the street, which was generally lined with trucks since the section was thick with lofts, factories, and warehouses—not particularly attractive, but inexpensive, and we had a happy Irish landlord who helped convert the English basement into offices and reception rooms.

The clinic was a neighborly place where mothers could congregate. We tried to keep it home-like, so that they would not feel an atmosphere of sickness or disease. The patients were accorded just as much consideration as a business house gave its clients, and not, as in many doctors' anterooms, made to wait indefinitely, they were usually nervous enough anyhow without having to endure added suspense. Moreover, they had husbands and children to feed and care for, and every hour was precious to them. As they increased, staff increased, two physicians were always on hand. We shortly included the first floor, and finally occupied the three.

About a year before we had changed our location Lord Buckmaster had introduced in the august House of Lords the memorable

resolution which we had discussed when I had been last in England
Rarely had such an eloquent voice been lifted for our cause

I would appeal on behalf of the women upon whose bare backs falls the untempered lash of the primeval curse declaring that "in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children," the women with the pride and glory of their life broken and discrowned, and the flower of motherhood turned into nothing but decaying weeds, and on behalf of the children who are thrust into this world unwanted, unwelcomed, uncherished, unsustained, the children who do not bring trailing behind them clouds of glory but the taint of inherited disease, and over whose heads there may hover for ever the haunting horror of inherited madness, on behalf of them all I would appeal and as men who believe in the great future of our race, I beg of you, I earnestly entreat you, to support the motion that I seek to move

It is said that these women whom we seek to benefit are so indolent, so ignorant, so foolish that they will not come for the information. It is not merely that they do come, but the people who make that statement do that which men so often do—they overlook the women's side of the question. What to a man may be a mere triviality, an act between a sleep and a sleep and forgotten in a moment, may bring to the woman the terror of consequences that we cannot measure, of months of sickness, misery, and ill health, ending with hours of agony that are not veiled under the cloak of chloroform's most merciful sleep. These are the people that we want to help.

We, too, were dedicated to help such women, and each day brought more to the doors of our clinic than we could provide instruction for, from all over the country and of all classes. Some weeks so many Italian women crowded in that we had to employ an interpreter. Then droves of Spanish or of Jewish arrived.

Merely judging by the letters that had come to me I was prepared to find many psychological problems presented. I often thought of the high cost of small families for women who had more or less restricted their procreative powers through other means than contraception. Although the size was limited, it was frequently accompanied by marital unhappiness and hidden psychic disturbances. But the kindness of Dr. Stone aided immeasurably in our informal "court of domestic relations."

One hot July day when I was coming out of the clinic I saw a woman, obviously pregnant, carrying a year-and-a-half-old baby,

dragging another one, only a trifle bigger, crying behind her. The little girl's shoes were too short and were pinching her toes. I squirmed myself, remembering my own squeezed feet as a child. I caught up with her. "Can't I carry one of the babies? This one seems tired. Which way are you going?"

"Can you tell me where the jail is?"

"The nearest one is on Spring Street, I think."

"No, there's a jail somewheres around here."

"Didn't you get the address?"

"Yes, but I left it on the table."

"What do you want a jail for?"

"My man's there."

"What for?"

"Leaving me. He always does when I get like this."

"How many children have you?"

"Nine."

"How often has he left you?"

"This is the fourth time now."

"Do you want any more children?"

"No!" emphatically.

"Did you ever know there was a way to stop having so many?"

She almost dropped the infant, took hold of me, and said, "They won't give it to me. I'm asking everybody. They'll only give it to the rich. He wants it. He'll even have an operation. But nobody'll tell us."

I wrote down our street and number and said, "You go back to that place where I met you, and the doctor there will tell you about it."

The next day I was called up unofficially by a social worker, one of those who used to send us cases on their own initiative. She wished to explain to me the husband would be let off if he promised to live with his family and support them, otherwise he had to serve a sentence. His wife had seen him and shown him my note, he had said he would rather go to the Island for three years than come out, unless we could not only guarantee his getting the information, but, furthermore, that it would work. He was fed up with having a new baby every year.

We suggested he talk it over with us and bring his wife. She was silent, glum, did not appear to know what it was all about. He was discouraged and doubtful. We gave him the information and he departed "I'm the one to do this. She won't," glaring at his wife, who tagged on behind him.

We hoped for the best.

About half a year later both returned for the check-up, she with her hand on his arm. This vague, dumb, immobile woman was now in spruce jacket and skirt, head up, stepping lightly. You would never have known her for the same person. The two were off to the movies together.

Few social workers were understanding enough to smooth the lives of people in such difficulties. One agency was told by a doctor that a certain family on its rolls must not increase, the mother had already borne four babies and had a bad heart. A visiting nurse relayed this to the husband one Sunday morning when he was home from work "If your wife becomes pregnant again, you'll be a murderer."

He was frightened "I don't want to kill her. What shall I do?" "Sleep alone."

The husband's disposition began to change, he became gloomy, would not talk to his wife, was ugly in sudden tempers, slapped, shouted at, and even kicked the children, rushed into the house to eat his meals and then out again, not retreating to his own bed until after she was in hers, which had been made up in the kitchen where it was warm. She was so unhappy over the metamorphosis that she made tentative approaches, whereupon he beat her and ran into the street. The next day she marched to the nurses' settlement to tell them what she thought of them "If all you can do is keep my husband from me, stay away. I'd rather be dead than live like this!"

The case was taken to a physician, who sensibly warned, "You can't separate people by such barriers. That's not the answer."

Then she was sent to us. After she had been instructed the tension lessened and the domestic situation was remedied.

In another family of six children, the husband, part Italian and part some other nationality, was affectionate and irresponsible.

Every time he walked in the door, wreathed in smiles, his wife greeted him with frowns and scowls. She threw dishes and pots at him. He thought she was crazy and asked to have her committed. A psychiatrist talked to her and found she was in deadly fear of being pregnant again. When we saw her she really appeared to be demented.

One forenoon, six months later, as I passed through the waiting room, the nurse at the desk tendered her usual, "Good morning, Mrs. Sanger." Immediately a neat, trim woman came over to me.

"Look at me," she beamed. "You don't know me. I was the one who sat there and they said I was crazy. I don't look crazy now, do I? I wasn't crazy then—just worried to death."

For four years we went along in the clinic, working steadily, straightening mental tangles and relieving physical distress when we could. Then, early in the morning of April 15, 1929, the telephone in my apartment rang, startling me. I was pretty nervous, having been up all night with Stuart, who had mastoiditis. His temperature was running high, and he was suffering with terrible, indescribable pain.

I took off the receiver. "Hello. This is Anna. The police are here at the clinic." Briefly she related how they had descended without warning, stamped into the basement, and were at that moment tearing things to pieces.

With this meager information pounding through my brain I hastened to the street, hailed a taxi, and urged the driver to go as fast as he could to West Fifteenth Street.

The shade to the glass door was pulled down, the door itself was locked. I knocked and a plain-clothes man of the Vice Squad opened it. "Well, who are you?"

"I'm Mrs. Sanger and I want to come in."

My request was passed on to a superior and I heard someone answer, "Let her in."

Inside, in a room more than ordinarily small because partitions had sliced it up to make minute consultation booths, the patients were sitting quietly, some of them weeping. Detectives were hurrying aimlessly here and there like chickens fluttering about a raided roost, calling to each other and, amid the confusion, demanding names

and addresses The three nurses were standing around, Dr Elizabeth Pissoort was practically in hysterics

Dr Stone was aloof, utterly unmoved by the tumult and the noise I have always admired her attitude This was the first time in her life she had been arrested, yet she treated it so lightly "Isn't this fantastic?" she remarked "Only a few moments ago a visiting physician from the Middle West asked one of the nurses whether we ever had any police interference 'Oh, no,' the nurse cheerfully replied 'Those days are over' "

Stocky Mrs Mary Sullivan, head of the City Policewomen's Bureau, was superintending the raid in person Her round, thick-set face might have been genial when smiling, but was very terrifying when flushed with anger She was giving orders to her minions in such rapid succession that it seemed impossible to keep pace with them I tried to talk to her, asking why she had come and what it was all about

"You'll see," said Mrs Sullivan, and went on directing the patrolmen who were removing books from shelves, pictures and diagrams from walls, and sweeping out the contents of medical cabinets In their zeal I noticed they were seizing articles from the sterilizers, such as gloves and medicine droppers, having no sinister significance whatsoever They were also gathering up the various strange, weird devices patients had brought us to inquire as to their efficacy, and which we exhibited as curios

Patrolwoman Anna McNamara, far less assured than her chief, was consulting a list in her hand and turning over the case histories in the files as swiftly as her fingers could move Many of these contained the personal confessions of women, some of whom had entrusted us with the knowledge that their husbands had venereal disease or insanity It ran through my mind that dire misfortune could follow in the way of being blackmailed by anyone obtaining the records

I requested Mrs Sullivan to show me her search warrant, and saw it had been signed by Chief Magistrate McAdoo Nevertheless, I cautioned her, "You have no right to touch those files Not even the nurses ever see them They are the private property of the doctors, and if you take them you will get into trouble "

"Trouble," she snapped back "I get into trouble? What about the trouble you're in?"

"I wouldn't change mine for yours "

"Well, this is *my* party You keep out "

One of the policemen scooped up all the name cards and stuffed them into a waste basket to be carried off as "evidence " This was a prime violation of medical ethics, nothing was more sacred to a doctor than the confidences of his patients Immediately Anna telephoned Dr Robert L Dickinson at the Academy of Medicine that the police were confiscating the case histories of patients and asked him to recommend a lawyer He suggested Morris L Ernst, whom Anna then called

Doctors, nurses, and evidence were being hustled into the street The patrol wagon had arrived, but I summoned taxicabs in which we rode to the West Twentieth Street station On the way I heard part of the story, which accounted for my non-arrest About three weeks earlier a woman who had registered under the name of Mrs Tierney had come for contraceptive advice and, on examination, was found by both doctors to have rectocele, cystocele, prolapsus of the uterus, erosions, and retroversion Although not informed of her exact condition, she was instructed, because another pregnancy would be dangerous, and told to return for a check-up She had now done so under her rightful name of McNamara, including in her entourage Mrs Sullivan and a police squad

Dr Stone, Dr Pissoort, and the three nurses were booked for violation of Section 1142, though I attempted to explain the clinic had been active for six years quite legally under the exception, Section 1145 At Jefferson Market Court, to which we next traveled, Magistrate Rosenbluth looked over the warrant and ordered a three-hundred-dollar bond for each

The succeeding morning I sent Stuart to a hospital for treatment, I had to attend a meeting in Boston, and the day after that go to Chicago for a series of lectures Again I was obliged to leave him, and this time with even more misgivings At Buffalo came a telegram saying a mastoid operation had been performed At Chicago I telephoned the doctor and was reassured The moment my duties

were over I hurried back to be with him, and, incidentally, to attend the hearings

I still had no idea of the fate of the case histories and had been very worried. Now I learned that the evening after the raid Magistrate McAdoo had been dining with Dr. Karl Reiland, my husband's pastor. Dr. Reiland, much upset, had remarked upon its outrageousness. Justice McAdoo, aghast and horrified to find that, without reading it, he had signed this warrant, just one of many laid on his desk, had called up the police station without delay, saying that all the twenty-four histories must be put in his safe and kept there until he arrived in the morning. He had perceived instantly that those doctors' records were going to be a serious embarrassment.

One hundred and fifty cards, our sole memoranda of names and addresses, were never restored. Catholic patients, whose records had thus been purloined, received mysterious and anonymous telephone calls warning them if they continued to go to the clinic their private lives would be exposed. They came to us asking fearfully, "Will I get in the papers?"

Immediately after the raid various doctors volunteered to go on the stand and testify as to the medical principles involved. The New York County Medical Society was aroused and passed a resolution protesting against the seizure. Through Dr. Dickinson's foresight and energetic interest the Academy of Medicine held a special meeting which resolved

We view with grave concern any action on the part of the authorities which contravenes the inviolability of the confidential relations which always have and should obtain between physicians and their patients.

Police Commissioner Grover A. Whalen, then embroiled in a mortifying, futile investigation of the murder of Arnold Rothstein, the gambler, had termed the raid a "routine matter," but when Dr. Linsley Williams, Director of the Academy, wrote a letter of protest, he decided it might not have been so routine as it had appeared, and apologized.

What had caused the raid in the first place? I employed the Burns Detective Agency to sift the affair. Approximately fifty percent of our cases were being sent by social workers on the lower East and West Sides, a conglomerate of all peoples and classes, including Irish, Italians, and other Catholics. So many had benefited and told their neighbors that others also were asking of their agencies how to get to our clinic. Catholic social workers, at a monthly meeting with officials of the Church, had sought guidance in replying to parishioners, and the ecclesiastics had been shocked to find that a clinic existed. Catholic policewomen had been summoned, Mary Sullivan had been chosen to wipe out the Clinical Research Bureau, and Mrs McNamara selected for the decoy.

Morris Ernst, who had accepted our case, had already won a reputation for his espousal of liberal causes. It was most encouraging to discover a lawyer who was as convinced as we that the principle of the law was the important issue. Although he seemed very young, the moment I talked with him I recognized here was the person for us. He was a good psychologist as well as a good lawyer. He tried to bring everything out, but wanted the evidence correct and the minds of the witnesses straight as to what had happened.

On April 21st, when Magistrate Rosenbluth called the case, the attitude in the courtroom was far different from anything exhibited at previous birth control hearings. Only one witness was heard that day, Mrs McNamara. In spite of the hostility of Assistant District Attorney Hogan, which was to be expected, and in spite of the Magistrate's prompting that she was a policewoman and not required to tell all, Mrs McNamara was made to confess she had set out deliberately to deceive the clinic doctors. As she testified under Mr Ernst's cross-examination what she had done, her stolid face turned from pink to purple. On her first visit she had learned the routine and on her second, being left alone, had copied down the number of every name card lying on Dr Stone's desk.

Murmurs rose among the spectators, a melodious sound to ears still echoing with the harsh and suspicious accents of a mere twelve years before.

After forty minutes Magistrate Rosenbluth adjourned the hearing over our protests, if the object had been to secure a quieter and less

sympathetic audience the ensuing day it failed. Now physicians took the stand. Dr. Dickinson, Dr. Frederick C. Holden, Dr. Foster Kennedy, the neurologist. The climax came when Mr. Hogan asked Dr. Louis T. Harris, former Commissioner of Health of New York City, whether he had ever given any information to a patient regardless of a marriage certificate. Dr. Harris answered, "The birth control clinic is a public health work. Every woman desiring treatment is asked whether she is married."

"Don't they have to bring their marriage certificates with them?"

"No."

The Magistrate leaned forward ponderously and heavily. "Does not the clinic send out social workers to discover the truth of patients' statements?"

Mr. Ernst interpolated, "Did you ever know of a situation where a doctor dispatched a detective to find out whether his patient were married?"

Loud laughter came from the listeners. Judge Rosenbluth pounded his gavel. "Unless there is absolute silence I shall clear the court room." Then, seeming to grow more angry, he added, "On second thought I shall clear it anyhow. Out you go."

The joke was on him. It was the doctors who had laughed the loudest and their presence as witnesses could not be dispensed with. Following a fifteen-minute recess the audience was once again in the room, more partisan than ever.

Young Mr. Hogan tried to be dramatic, but he failed before our attorney's cold uncompromising logic. He took up one of the pessaries that had been appropriated in the raid and addressed Dr. Harris. "You know that the laws of New York State are that contraception may be given only for the cure or prevention of disease. Do you dare to claim this article will cure tuberculosis? Will it cure cancer, high blood pressure, heart disease, kidney disease?"

Again came mirth. No one assumed a pessary or any other form of contraceptive could effect a cure. "But," replied Dr. Harris, "in preventing conception it may be said to cure because pregnancy can often be the cause of furthering the progress of a disease."

A month later the defendants were discharged, Magistrate Rosenbluth writing an admirably lucid, fair, and definite decision.

Good faith in these circumstances is the belief of the physician that the prevention of conception is necessary for a patient's health and physical welfare

Mrs Sullivan was temporarily demoted. She continued, however, to be paid the same salary as before, and was eventually restored to rank

It was an ill wind that did not blow somebody good. After this our calendars were filled three weeks in advance, and we had to add two evenings a week to the daily routine. To our amazement among the many patients there appeared one afternoon Mrs McNamara, who had first heard in court of her five ailments, every one of which legally entitled her to contraceptive information. She had come back to ask Dr Stone whether she really had so many things the matter with her, and was assured the diagnosis was correct.

The raid had been one of the worst errors committed by the opposition, because it had touched the doctors in a most sensitive spot, the sanctity of records, and they were obliged to stand by us, whether they wanted to or not. Even so we were not yet certain that the question had been settled for all time. At any moment our Irish landlord might receive orders from his bishop to eject us. To avoid any such contingency and to take care of the increasing numbers, in 1930 we bought a house of our own at Seventeen West Sixteenth Street.

Our new building gave us not only more room for patients but better opportunities for research. It was a sad commentary that though medicine had evolved into the preventive state where it was causing a revolution in sanitation and health education, contraceptive technique had been little advanced since the days of Mensinga.

However, research was going on in various lands under the most diverse conditions. A modern clinic had started up again in the Netherlands, a memorial to Aletta Jacobs and bearing her name. It was based on the old Rutgers standards which had lapsed for so long America and England, as the consequence of guiding the movement along professional lines and putting emphasis on the keeping of records, had made the greatest strides. But all accomplishments needed to be correlated, co-ordinated, unified in a scientific conference. Zurich was a central location for many countries, and, in addition, offered beautiful scenery in abundance, it was a pleasant place to be.

September 1, 1930, some one hundred and thirty physicians and directors of clinics from different parts of the world began comparing notes and reporting progress. Only the present generation was behind the times. A representative from the Netherlands one day stood up, a rather youthful person, and said, "I am glad to announce that at last we in the Netherlands have also a birth control clinic." This was extraordinary in view of the fact that the Netherlands had been the pioneer country and had inspired us all.

Even more recently I encountered a young matron, a member of the American Birth Control League and head of the state organization in New Jersey, who had again utterly disassociated herself from history. She urged, "Mrs. Sanger, can't we convert you to the establishment of clinics? You know, they're going, they're being established all over the country."

"When were you born?" was all I could gasp.

These two women epitomized a day which had not studied what had gone before, if new to their minds, then it was new.

In contrast to Geneva and its problems in fact, Zurich was a dove-cote. One slight incident alone disturbed the calm. I had gone to Berlin to secure delegates and there in a public theater had seen a film which had traversed the length and breadth of Germany as propaganda for abortion under safe conditions. The scene opened with feet endlessly passing on the streets, you saw a kerchief drop, a masculine hand reach down to pick it up, the boy and girl at lunch, she looking up at him wide-eyed. Soon she was obliged to go to a *femme savante* in a filthy narrow old alley, you watched her ascend the rickety stairs, an ancient crone peeling potatoes, shoving wood in the stove with dirty hands, the agony in the girl's face. It was a succession of pictures such as this, straight out of life itself.

I had borrowed the film and rented a theater in Geneva. To my great surprise and no little amusement when the Caesarian section appeared on the screen several men and women in the audience began to faint, among them our own workers, even Edith How-Martyn. One, a young scientist, had to be led out and given a drink to brace him up. Cars and taxis were commandeered to cart the squeamish back to their hotels.

This Conference must remain a milestone because there all propa-

ganda, all moral and ethical aspects of the subject were forgotten. The whole problem was lifted out of the troubled atmosphere of theory, where previously it had been battered by the winds of doctrine and the brutal gusts of prejudice, into the current of serene, impersonal, scientific abstraction. It was too early to tell what practical results might ensue, but at least we soon received the assurance that certain doctors would welcome efficient contraceptives.

Individual physicians in New York had since 1923 taken serious thought of the need for contraception. Mrs. Amos Pinchot had organized certain outstanding members of the Academy of Medicine into the Committee on Maternal Health. They had been fortunate enough to secure the well-known retired gynecologist, Dr. Dickinson, as secretary. He had trained many of the younger men and was able to bring into the movement doctors who would have paid slight attention to anyone less admired and honored. With the aid of various foundations, the Committee on Maternal Health had been doing a fine piece of work in publishing the findings of scientists in brochures and pamphlets.

The Academy, after the Zurich Conference, formally declared that "the public is entitled to expect counsel and information by the medical profession on the important and intimate matter of contraceptive advice."

We had been attaining small victories, and little by little and bit by bit the Protestant churches had begun to regard us favorably. In September, 1925, the House of Bishops of the Protestant Episcopal Church, meeting at Portland, Oregon, had gone on record against birth control. Later some of the wives of these same bishops had come to me in New York and asked my help in educating their husbands. A group of three had taken it upon themselves to see that every bishop was thoroughly enlightened. The consequence of the campaign was that at a subsequent meeting in 1934 they reversed their original stand.

Even the Jews had on occasion been in opposition. Rabbi Mischkind of Tremont Temple had been rebuked by his Board of Trustees for having invited me to speak one Sunday morning. Rather than surrender he had resigned and found another synagogue in which I could appear.

Now the Central Conference of American Rabbis urged the recognition of birth control. The hundred and seventieth conference of the Methodist Church sanctioned it and the American Unitarian Association did the same. A special commission appointed by the Presbyterian General Assembly to study the problems of divorce and remarriage admitted the desirability of restricting births under medical advice. And in March, 1931, the Committee on Marriage and the Home of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America approved it.

Due in large measure to Lord Dawson's eloquence, the Bishops at Lambeth gave us one of our greatest triumphs by voting 193 to 67 in favor of birth control. Bernard Shaw believed the Church of England was making a "belated attempt to see whether it could catch up with the Twentieth Century."

Ever since the outburst of religious intolerance at Town Hall, it had been apparent that in the United States the Catholic hierarchy and officialdom were going to be the principal enemies of birth control. From city to city you could feel this. At Albany we could not have a hall because the police commissioner was a Catholic. In Cincinnati the Knights of Columbus almost succeeded in barring us from the hotel. At Syracuse the mayor had to veto the ordinance of the Catholic Council before we could hold a conference there. When I was to give a lecture in Milwaukee the Catholic Women's League came to protest the meeting to Socialist Mayor Hoane. He had told them, however, "If I prevent Mrs. Sanger from speaking because you protest, I shall also have to prevent you from speaking when others object to Catholic doctrine. Free speech must prevail in Milwaukee."

Tactics aiming to bring about a reconciliation between the Anglicans and Rome had been rendered futile by the endorsement of the Bishops. I suspected the demand for a clear statement from the Vatican on the question originated in the United States where Catholic women were showing a gradual yet persistent spirit of independence. In spite of Church canons they were using contraceptives, and the Church, in its wisdom, was obliged to change the law to keep its parishioners from breaking it. In December came the answer in the form of a Papal Encyclical. The world moved but the Pope sat still.

He declared that he was "looking with paternal eye—as from a watch-tower" But what was he looking at?

The Pope said over and over again that sexual intercourse, unless definitely designed to produce children, was against nature and a sin, he roundly condemned any contraceptive and he affirmed that in the matter of limiting families continence alone was permissible Yet in the selfsame document he nullified his previous insistence that procreation was the sole justification of marital relations by countenancing them at times when pregnancy could not result These times he made indefinite, they might refer to sterility, post-menopause, or the so-called "safe period" during the menstrual cycle, in fine, he was saying first, that you might not have intercourse unless you expected to have a child, and, in the same breath, that you might have intercourse when you could not possibly have a child This Jesuitical inconsistency allowed a loophole for the issuance of the Latz Foundation booklet entitled *The Rhythm of Sterility and Fertility in Women*, published with "ecclesiastical approval" and recommended by Catholic societies

It had become part of my routine to answer every challenge to the cause, just as I tried to answer every question at a meeting Here again was the hoary "nature" argument which should have been in its grave long since The contention that it was sin to interrupt nature in her processes was simple nonsense The Pope frustrated her by shaving or having his hair cut Whenever we caught a fish or shot a wolf or slaughtered a lamb, whenever we pulled a weed or pruned a fruit tree, we too frustrated nature Disease germs were perfectly natural little fellows which had to be frustrated before we could get well As for the alleged "safe period" which *Rhythm* now set forth, what could be more unnatural than to restrict intercourse to the very time when nature had least intended it?

But, taking one consideration with another, it seemed to me then that the birth control idea was rolling merrily along I could sympathize with an indignant old radical who left a birth control congress sniffing, "This thing has got too darned safe for me"