



A DISTURBING CHILDHOOD

Maggie Higgins was a small Irish redhead who, as Margaret Sanger, was to be called everything from a saint to a spitfire to a woman who did more for other women than anyone who ever lived

She was born on September 14, 1879, though she would never admit her birth date, indeed, she would become enraged when asked her age. On her various passports she never gave the same date twice, she even altered her record in the family Bible, changing her birth year from 1879, as her mother had written it, to 1883. But as time went on, her ink faded and her mother's showed through. It is quite clearly, 1879.

What made her equally angry was to be called a renegade Catholic. Though, like her mother, she was baptized and confirmed a Catholic, she left the faith early and never returned.

She left it primarily because of her father, Michael Hennessey Higgins. Michael Higgins was a powerfully built man with a shock of red hair that turned white early, a small powerful body, and bright blue eyes. He lived up to his middle name by spending much time drinking in the local pub, where he held forth on his favorite topics of socialism and free thought.

As a boy he had been left behind in Ireland to complete an apprenticeship to a stone mason, then followed his mother to a farm in Canada at the age of fifteen.

But life on a farm held little appeal for him. So in 1864 he left for

New York, where he hoped to enlist as a soldier in the Civil War. Because he was under sixteen, the best he could do was become a drummer boy, still, he was delighted to be in uniform, and forever after he boasted that he had personally led the march with Sherman to the sea.

At nineteen, Michael proposed to Anne Purcell, a rather nondescript girl from a strict Catholic family. Her parents objected to the union because Michael was a freethinker, but he was so handsome and persuasive he whittled down their objections, and the marriage soon took place.

After some wandering, the couple settled in Corning, New York, which they never left. Babies started to arrive regularly. Also, Anne was showing signs of tuberculosis and Michael had heard that Corning was noted for its "good country air." It was an up-and-coming place with its thriving glass works, and Michael hoped he could find steady work there carving headstones for cemeteries.

At first he prospered. He was even commissioned to renovate St. Mary's Catholic Church, though normally he wouldn't be seen in any church. "Where were you yesterday, you heathen?" Father Bustin would ask him on Mondays. "At home with my family where I belong," Michael would answer. "Not in God's house, where you belong," Father Bustin would shoot back. "The Lord will catch up with you some day!"

This was partly Irish banter, but it didn't seem like banter when two disasters struck. First, Michael's partner ran off with all the profits. Next, his shop burned down. Frequently he offended people with his loud speeches on his favorite topic, free thought. The local pub or shoe store served as his forums for these speeches. When he couldn't be found at either place, he was apt to be out hunting with his large pack of dogs or wandering about testing his belief in phrenology.

Michael's commissions disappeared rapidly when he offended the local Catholic hierarchy by supporting Henry George, a prominent social reformer who advocated a single tax on land only—a measure the poor strongly supported since few of them owned any land. Several popes had asserted the traditional Church doctrine that private property was a sacred right, and as the Church owned a great deal of land, this was considered an especially important pronouncement. In fact, when a Corning priest, the Reverend Edward McGlyn, endorsed George, he was quickly excommunicated.

The pro-Georgian group in Corning fought back, calling the Archbishop who had ordered the excommunication a public enemy, and Michael Higgins joined the battle. When George came to town to lec-

ture, Higgins gave a grand dinner in his honor, mainly to shock the clergy. Then he named his next child Henry George Higgins, an act that was sure to keep the controversy alive.

The next battle was over Bob Ingersoll, another famous man of his time, known particularly as a foe of orthodox religion. When Ingersoll came to Corning to speak, and Higgins rented a hall owned by the church for the lecture, another storm broke out. Even though the hall had been booked and paid for in advance, the pastor of St. Mary's discovered at the last moment what the topic was to be, and got the Mayor to padlock the door before Ingersoll arrived. Higgins grabbed Maggie, who was standing at the edge of the small crowd that had gathered in front of the door, and invited them all to follow him to a clearing in the woods behind his house. He hoisted Ingersoll onto the top of a tree stump and had him lecture from there.

Defiant activities like these cost Higgins many commissions, he was soon living in poverty, a poverty all the harder to bear because by now his family was growing at the rate of almost one new baby a year. As a devout Catholic, Anne Higgins would not in any case have practiced birth control, and Michael either knew nothing about it or considered it unmanly. The result was that Anne, by now an active tubercular, became pregnant eighteen times. Out of these eighteen pregnancies, she suffered seven miscarriages and delivered eleven children, four red-headed girls and seven boys. Each pregnancy made Anne's tuberculosis worse, soon she was too sick to do more than barely speak to her children, except for Ethel, her youngest daughter and pet. Anne would while away the time curling and recurling Ethel's beautiful hair as she lay on the parlor sofa wracked with coughs, while Maggie looked on with jealous eyes.

Michael tried moving away from the center of smoke-filled Corning to the outskirts, where he hoped the fresher air might benefit his wife. Nevertheless, he considered it unmanly not to have sexual relations at least every Saturday night. As a result, she stayed pregnant almost constantly until she reached the menopause, by which time she was so ill she had to be carried up and down the stairs. Yet once when Michael got a really good commission, and Anne expected him to bring home some much-needed groceries, he bought a big hand of expensive bananas instead and handed them out with a grandiose gesture to all the passersby.

With such a sick mother and an improvident father, most of the work of running the crowded household fell to the girls. Mary, the el-

dest, a gentle girl whom Maggie always referred to as "a veritable saint," took on the hardest jobs. As a rule, women of the time gave birth at home with the help of a midwife, but Michael Higgins felt competent enough to do anything anyone else could do, so at first he delivered the children himself, plying his wife with his favorite remedy for everything, good Irish whiskey. When Mary became a teenager, she became his midwife-helper, and soon was so competent she delivered the neighbors' calves, too.

Mary had to leave home at sixteen in order to earn much-needed money. She was lucky enough to get a job as a companion to the Abbots, one of the richest families in town. This meant being a nurse and baby sitter to the young, reader and general attendant to the old, and lady's maid to the middle-aged.

Maggie often visited Mary at the Abbott home, and what struck her most was its cleanliness and air of leisure. The adults were clean, the house was clean, the children were clean, while at her home there were dirty dishes, dirty beds, dirty clothes, dirty hands and feet that constantly cried out to be washed. And as to leisure, Mrs. Abbott and her daughters seemed to have endless time to play croquet on the lawn or to stroll in pretty dresses about the town. Maggie decided the reason for the difference was that the rich had only two or three children, while the poor had half a dozen or more. How the rich managed to do this she hadn't the slightest idea, but she swore she'd find out some day.

The second oldest Higgins sister was Nan. Nan was not at all a saint. She was sharp-tongued and snooty, and sassed her father regularly. Nan left Corning as soon as she could, heading for New York, determined to take on any job during the day that would earn her enough to pay for secretarial school at night. This left Maggie at fifteen to manage the home.

All her life Maggie Higgins spoke of her Corning childhood as joyless and filled with drudgery and fear. The drudgery came from the endless work in the tumbledown houses which were all the family could afford, houses not only on the wrong side of the tracks, but often right next to them. Yet if they somehow got hold of a better place for a while, they were either threatened with eviction for nonpayment of rent, or the house, like her father's shop, burned down. The fear of fire thus became for Maggie particularly strong.

But her worst dread was the flames of hell. When her father wasn't around, she used to sneak off to church on Sundays, stealing money to

buy flowers to lay at the Virgin's feet In church she heard all about hellfire, especially the kind that lay in wait for lukewarm Catholics "An ardent Catholic will be saved," the priest would preach, "sometimes even a cold Catholic But a lukewarm Catholic will be vomited out of the Lord's mouth straight down into hell" Her mother lukewarm? Yes But only because she was too ill to go to church Indeed, a priest once came to their house to ask sternly what was keeping Anne away, and she could only reply that she wasn't up to the long walk She didn't dare tell him that her husband would probably have blocked her if she tried to come to church, or add how, when she began to say grace at table, he would interrupt with "Let's all just pray to stay strong and well and get rich fast" One day when Maggie was on her knees saying the Lord's Prayer, she came to the line, "Give us this day our daily bread," and her father cut in "Why are you asking God for bread? Is God a baker?" True, when he noticed the startled look on her face, he had continued in a kinder tone "Always think things through for yourself, lass Don't take anything for granted, even things that have been repeated for centuries You'll only grow up when you begin to think for yourself"

One day Maggie was openly disgraced in church She was about six years old and was standing in line to get one of the free Christmas gifts that were being handed out to the youngsters When the priest caught sight of her, he said sharply, "Get out of line, you child of the devil" The other children giggled and snickered, and Maggie ran off in shame

Finally, on March 23, 1893, Maggie was baptized in St Mary's though it had to be kept secret, as her father would have been furious Again with much trepidation, she was secretly confirmed a year later, on July 8, 1894 The baptism and confirmation were probably her last desperate efforts to join the Catholic community, but even after these events, she was not invited to become a member of the Children's Society of St Mary's or the Purgatorial Society (which met every day in November to pray for lost souls) Realizing that she was an outsider, and an outsider she would remain, she gave up soon afterward and left the Church

In later years she lumped together her childhood frustrations under the general heading of "Corningitis," saying that whenever she was on a train that merely rode through the town, she got a sharp pain in the pit of her stomach

Olive Byrne Richard, her niece, who also had been brought up as a

Catholic in Corning, put the blame on their Irish heritage She wrote in a later letter

I also was afflicted at one time with Corningitis, an affliction I shared with you until I found out that poor old Corning was not to blame, except that what we felt was first experienced there Actually, it was Irish fear All the Irish feel it inherently and they seem to embrace any religion or way of life that nourishes it, because fear is thrilling to them They are afraid to live, afraid to die They laugh a lot because they are afraid they will cry They usually die of a fearsome illness and go to a fearful place I still find it hard at times to be reasonable about it

But all the Higgins girls did something about it Mary to soothe the fearsome path of the people she loved, Nan eventually to say, "I will be bigger than it is" and help others to be so, Ethel to run away from it, and you to say, "What is the biggest fear there is? I will fight it!" In your experience, your mother's fear of pregnancy was the biggest You found it possible to project your fear into the world that it might be united with a common fear and form a Goliath worth slaying Actually, when you now travel through Corning, you should wake up laughing and with thumb at nose

Olive Byrne's explanation is probably as good as any, for Maggie's childhood was not as terrible as she made it out to be If she was full of fear, she at least acquired the weapons to counter it—courage, the love of beauty and art

She learned courage at her father's side, particularly during one strange trip to the cemetery At that time, her mother had lost a child, a boy of four who died of croup Because she had no picture to remember him by, she mourned him keenly Michael, who knew how to make death masks, stole into the cemetery at midnight, dug up the freshly made grave, opened the casket, and made a plaster cast of the boy's face—a cast he could then reverse and carve into a bust Maggie was chosen to go along with him and hold the lantern while he worked, and she did so without a whimper But then, she was familiar with cemeteries Michael had often taken her there to point out the various schools of art illustrated on the tombstones—those of the Italian school, the English school, the Spanish school With no other museum in town, it was his way of teaching her art as best he could

She also learned how to fight. There is always a certain amount of bickering in large families. But in the Higgins family, the bickering was constant, and Maggie, a middle child, jockeyed hard for position.

When she was about seventeen, her fighting spirit showed itself dramatically. She had been given a rare gift, a pair of warm gloves—a great luxury during the cold Corning winters. She was so proud of these gloves she kept them on in school and sat openly admiring them. When her teacher saw her, she exclaimed sarcastically, “Miss Higgins, you are so busy admiring your gloves you seem to be above a little thing like paying attention to the lesson like the rest of the class is doing.”

The other pupils giggled. That did it. She ran out of the room and straight home, where she burst in and announced, “I am never going back to that school again! Never!” Mary, who usually could calm her, was sent for, she couldn’t budge her. Back to that high school—the only one in Corning—Maggie would not go.

But Mary too was stubborn. “You must get an education somehow. You must,” she argued. “You’ll never get anywhere without it. You’ll never even get out of this town.”

Maggie was unmoved.

Then Mary said something she’d been saying all her life. “All right, I’ll think of something else. I’ll work something out.” She immediately got a list of all the boarding schools in New York state and sent away for their brochures. When they came, she read them carefully. One in particular appealed to her. It had the grand name of Claverack College or the Hudson River Institute. Three miles from the town of Hudson, it boasted of being one of the oldest and least-expensive co-educational institutions in the state, as well as one of the most moral, since it taught the elements of a “pure and noble womanhood.” Also, it would let Maggie wait on tables and wash dishes to pay part of her way.

Maggie capitulated. In Corning she was not only an ostracized child, but a lonesome one, her family had of necessity moved so frequently she seldom had had a chance to make girl friends. At Claverack there would be lots of girls and, hopefully, boys.

Like many a man who is loudly liberal in public, Michael Higgins was a patriarch at home. He regularly thrashed his sons “to make men of them.” And as soon as his daughters reached adolescence, dates with boys were forbidden. When on the rare occasions he did permit callers in the parlor, he sat in the next room with the door open, pretending to

read At 9 55 he would stand up and give the coals in the fireplace an audible shake At 9 58 he would cough loudly, and at 9 59 he would shout, "Good night!"

Indeed the hour of ten o'clock was so firmly fixed as a bedtime deadline that once when Maggie and Ethel were allowed the privilege of going unescorted to an evening concert, they ran all the way home, yet still didn't make it by ten They found their father waiting at the door Ethel he yanked inside, but on Maggie, he slammed the door, announcing sternly "You're older and need a lesson " He let her sit on the porch cold and shivering for an hour before he relented and let her in

When Higgins had been drinking he was more unpredictable than usual Whiskey made him either more light-hearted or more pugnacious, and it was hard to predict which it would be When he was gay and fairly reasonable, he would tell Maggie "Make sure you leave the world better than you found it, lass " When he was pugnacious, he was so fierce it made Maggie's own temper flare up Soon the feuding between them had grown so intense that when Maggie proposed leaving for Claverack, both father and daughter were glad to be quit of each other for a while