



THE RESTLESS HOUSEWIFE

The Sangers first settled into an apartment on 119th Street in Manhattan where rents were cheap, and Margaret busied herself collecting pots, pans, and dishes. But no amount of pots and pans and dishes could turn Margaret into a housekeeper. After years of drudgery in Corning, cleaning, cooking, and washing dishes bored her to distraction. Also, maids were easily hired in 1902. Room and board plus five or ten dollars a month was usually enough to attract a new immigrant girl.

She soon became pregnant with a much-wanted child. Although she certainly didn't plan on having eleven children like her mother, she did want two or three. Yet as soon as she became pregnant her tuberculosis flared up, this time in her lungs as well as her neck, and Bill quickly arranged to send her off to Trudeau in the Adirondacks, one of the best private sanitariums in the country.

The treatment at Trudeau was the only one known at the time—fresh air, good food, and enforced rest. But this regimen bored her even more than housekeeping. Margaret, as Bill quickly learned, had two strongly opposing drives. On the one hand, she enjoyed lolling about in the soft, pretty clothes he delighted in giving her. On the other, she was bursting with intellectual and physical energy, eager to be out in the world. Now she yearned for the excitements of New York, of which she had had barely a taste, she ran back from Saranac without asking

permission, and Bill, unable to deny her anything, opened his arms wide and welcomed her back.

During the last months of her pregnancy, he also took over as many of the household chores as he could. On the maid's day off he hurried home after a ten-hour stint at the office, cooked dinner, served it, and washed up, content to have his Peg lolling on a sofa nearby. The baby was born on November 18, 1903—a rosy, smiling, nine-pounder, blue-eyed like Michael Higgins. She named the baby Stuart, after her friend Amelia, though Bill dubbed him "Sunny Jim." Despite Bill's misgivings, Margaret had him baptized an Episcopalian.

With such a large baby and such a small mother, labor had been long and difficult, her TB flared up even more strongly from the strain. Bill sent her back to Saranac, and this time, she went willingly, taking Stuart with her and staying a full year, since she was now terrified of dying of tuberculosis. But Bill kept reassuring her "I won't let you die, sweetheart, I won't let you die," and vowed he would get her out of New York and into the suburbs as fast as he could. He also vowed he would not let her get pregnant again soon.

Shortly after Margaret and Stuart returned from Saranac in June of 1905, Bill bought a half-acre plot in the charming suburb of Hastings-on-the-Hudson. He began to design his own house and to save the money to build it. Later he said that the happiest days of his life were when he was saving for a home even though they had to live in a rented place that was little more than a shack in the meantime. Within a year his house on Edgar Lane had been started. It was an imposing three-story structure of hollow tile, covered in Italian-style pale pink stucco with large rooms and many bathrooms. The house had a Juliet balcony for Peg to sun herself on, open fireplaces everywhere, bay windows that looked out on the sweep of river, a nursery for the children, and a painting studio for Bill. He summed it up as "full of tranquil space."

It was far too expensive a house for Bill's pocketbook, and he was often hard pressed to pay the contractors. Yet he was as romantic and impractical as Margaret and a tireless worker. He was also a perfectionist who kept changing his mind, especially about the relative size of the nursery and studio. Margaret wanted a small studio and a large nursery, Bill wanted a small nursery and a large studio. They had a terrible fight over this, and as usual, Margaret had her way.

One thing they did agree on was a stained-glass rose window. Since Bill had so much experience with stained glass, he trusted this to no

workman Margaret, he found, had a fine sense of beauty, so they worked together on it, placing bits of glass in place piece by piece, and moving and removing them, until a beautiful rose window was completed

In February 1908, when the house was finally finished, they drank a bottle of wine to celebrate and moved in. It was a blustery night, and Bill helped the maid stoke the coal furnace particularly high to protect Margaret from the cold. They were hardly under the bedcovers when the maid called out "Fire! Madam, fire!" Flames escaped from the overheated furnace and spread to the main floor.

By the time the fire was out, the heavy supporting beams in the cellar were badly scorched and the rose window ruined. Because Bill's funds were by now very low, he repaired most of the damage himself, reinforcing the damaged beams, but a new stained-glass window was out of the question. One of plain glass had to be substituted instead.

Margaret's Irish mysticism led her to believe that the fire was a bad omen, and she could not be comforted over the loss of the rose window. She also complained that the smell from the scorched beams continued to pervade the house.

The truth was that suburban living did not suit her. She had envied the idle life of the rich women in Corning, now she realized this life was not what she wanted.

Even though she bore another much-wanted son in July 1908, she ran away from Hastings every day she could, either to visit Amelia in White Plains or to roam the exciting streets of New York. Dark-eyed Grant looked like his father, and on the whim of his mother, was baptized a Presbyterian, again over the objections of his father. A neighbor, Mrs. Edward Griswold, remembers going over to the Sanger house one day and finding Grant crying in his crib, his throat sore with the painful ailment thrush, his bottle on the floor, while an Irish maid sat complacently looking on.

For want of something to do, Margaret started a women's reading circle, but this proved too tame to hold her interest. She switched to a series of lectures on reproduction and sex, which she gave at home to neighborhood children, accompanied by their mothers. While the children were barely old enough to understand her, their mothers were impressed with Margaret's months as a nurse-probationer, and their eager questions made her realize how much they wanted information. It was a significant first step toward her lifelong career.

But even these talks began to pale. A third baby, especially if it were

a girl, would fill her need. Though her doctor had warned her against having more children, less than three years after Grant was born, in May 1911, she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl whom she named Peggy, after herself. This time, the child was not baptized. Bill, who had twice before given in to his "Peg's" vague religious leanings, held firm in his anarchist conviction that religious ceremony was hollow.

Though the blonde, blue-eyed infant seemed a good omen, Margaret found caring for her as boring as caring for the boys. As Peggy grew, her clothes were often held together by safety pins, once a button fell off, it stayed off. "I just never will learn how to sew," she explained. Yet she would run cheerfully to massage a neighbor's sprained ankle, because nursing she enjoyed. She loved to hug and kiss her children, but taking responsibility for them was something else.

Bill kissed and hugged them often, too. Indeed, Margaret's niece Olive remembered that he was the first man she had ever seen who kissed his wife and children good night. No man she knew in Corning had ever done that.

Still, Margaret couldn't find enough to interest her in Hastings. After living in her new house only a few years, she urged Bill to sell it and move back to town. He was appalled. Everything he had worked and hoped for since he met her was centered in that house—his family, his painting studio, his architect's vision of tranquil space. But Margaret persisted until he offered to sell it, at the low price of twelve thousand dollars, almost exactly what it had cost him for the materials alone. He sold it to a local furniture dealer named Fishel, accepting a small down payment and a long-term mortgage. He signed the deed of sale with a trembling hand.

Forty years later, in a letter to Grant, Bill still regretted the sale. "I've asked myself so many times whatever possessed me to sell my house. I realize I was as blind as a bat to have ever consented to part with it. It's all over the dam a long time now, but it broke my back to have been renting living space ever since."

It broke his heart too, because he had put into that house all he knew of design and construction and all he knew of love. Once when he was an old man, he went to Hastings and stood in the road, looking at the house intently for a long time, then turned and walked slowly away.