



## BITTER BATTLES

Margaret celebrated the year's end at the Suvretta House. After an exhilarating sleigh ride, she dressed in the new silks and sapphires J Noah had given her and danced and feasted through Christmas Eve. On New Year's Eve she reveled in a letter from Hugh that referred again to J Noah as "a poet crowned with blue flowers in striped silk pajamas."

Noah was so impressed he answered in kind. "My dear Poet," he wrote on January 11, returning to a persistent theme, "would you like to write my Margy's life? But there are so many angles. Do you mean to write biographical or about her work? I am so very ignorant of literary efforts. My mind is entirely commercial."

Hugh replied as usual that he would think about it, so J Noah and Margaret continued to dance, feast, and sleigh ride until February 15, when they had had enough of the mountains and set off for Zurich, Paris, and London. Finally, they sailed for home on the *Ile de France*, landing in New York on March 13. Grant, Stuart, and J Noah's three children were waiting on the dock.

They had been away for eighteen months.

It was another two weeks before Margaret got around to visiting the Research Bureau. For ten days, she came in every morning, then retreated to Willowlake and bed rest in the afternoon.

Life at Willowlake was luxurious. There were nine servants, includ-

ing a chamber maid, laundress, butler, chef, chauffeur, head gardener, and two assistant gardeners Margaret still had her private apartment, making a retreat to bed afternoons and dinner alone later, both easy and delightful

As soon as she was feeling her oats she began a bitter battle with American Birth Control League (ABCL), especially with Mrs Ellen Robertson-Jones, the new acting president The bone of contention between them was the fact that Mrs Jones, a woman with long-time experience as a member of the League of Women Voters had been trying to put the league on a sound financial basis, instituting yearly dues of ten dollars instead of relying on haphazard donations In addition, every disbursement over five dollars was to go through the treasurer, there were to be no more big expenditures jotted down as "petty cash " These changes, Mrs Jones said, were necessary because the league's bank balance, always in a precarious state, was especially low at the moment It ran both the Research Bureau and the *Review* at a loss, and now was being asked to foot a significant portion of the bill for the Geneva conference as well Margaret countered by speaking of "the apathy that comes from a fat bank balance," and insisted that she alone should control the ABCL funds, as she was the chief money raiser, she should be the sole money dispenser—with no questions asked

The battle came to a head over a small matter An ABCL booth had been engaged for a propaganda display at a Parents League exhibition to be held at Grand Central Palace in New York William Shea, the Catholic Superintendent of Schools, heard that the birth-control group was to have a booth and threatened to pull out his booth unless theirs was canceled Hearing this, without notifying the ABCL board, Margaret rushed to a lawyer and offered him a substantial fee to get an injunction against the entire Parents League exhibit The ABCL board members insisted that since they would have to pay the lawyer's fee, they should have been consulted Margaret defended her right to act on her own She went ahead further, and rented space for an exhibit in a building across the street from Grand Central Palace, again saying the ABCL would foot the bill The board was furious and asked for her resignation as president, though it would let her continue as a member if she chose

She resigned as president at once, claiming with veiled sarcasm that she was sure they would do very well without her True, she admitted she was accused of being a fanatic, but "what some call fanaticism is

never dangerous to the life of an organization such as this one Apathy and languid convictions are ”

The ABCL ignored her rude remark and proposed a compromise Margaret would manage the Research Bureau, while they would run the *Review* under professional management

This so infuriated Margaret that she wrote the ABCL saying she was not only quitting entirely, but taking with her a group of socialites, including Mrs Frances Ackerman, Mrs Walter Timme, and Mrs Thomas Hepburn—all of whom had not only called her “our beloved leader” and “a singing symbol,” but insisted they would be happy to follow her wherever she went Slee gave the league a gift of a few hundred dollars, vowing it was his last It was almost the last of the league as well Deprived in one stroke of Margaret’s growing fame and Slee’s contributions, it never fully recovered

Geared for fight, Margaret waged still another battle in 1928 This fight was with Mary Sumner Boyd, the regular assistant editor of the *Review*, but editor-in-chief during Margaret’s absence Out of the fifty thousand heartrending letters received by the Bureau during the past few years, Mrs Boyd had, at Margaret’s suggestion, selected a few hundred for a book to be called *Motherhood in Bondage* Due for publication in 1928, the book contained letters like these

I was married when a girl of only 17 There were 13 children of us My father always drunk and we had to go to work very young, myself when I was 11 years old caring for the boarders in a large boarding house I am now only 21, and already have four children How can I stop?

I have been married eight years My first child was only a six months baby She lived three days, born in July and the next January I had a miscarriage The next January a little boy was born, in about four months another miscarriage, and then the next January 27 another girl, 21 months and a boy who is now two years old, and I have had two miscarriages since then I never had a chance to regain my real strength When my second child was born I said then if I was ever that way again I would commit suicide I’m almost ready to do it now

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Others spoke of being the mother of ten children after twenty pregnancies, or of having delivered fifteen children, only to have eleven die during the first year

"I just want to rest," one woman summed up her life "I want one night's real sleep before I die "

All the letters were not tragic, to be sure A few were humorous (one woman asked for another diaphragm because she had hidden hers in the barn and the cow had eaten it), but most were pitiful pleas from women truly in bondage to their fertility Mrs Boyd had culled the best and edited them with great care The battle began when she asked Margaret to give her credit on the title page, or at least a thank you in the preface Margaret argued that since Mrs Boyd had been paid for her time, nothing more was due her When *Motherhood in Bondage* was published merely as "by Margaret Sanger," Mrs Boyd was understandably aggrieved

The book did not sell well in any event A few heartrending letters sprinkled between articles in the *Review* were highly effective They were equally effective when Margaret included them in her speeches, holding up the original handwritten copies and adding dramatically, "What an orgy of agony!" But a whole volume of them was deadening It merely gave Margaret one more title to add to her list of publications, plus several thousand unsold copies to mail out for propaganda purposes

Meanwhile she complained to Havelock "Mrs Boyd has a martyr complex and her inflated ego had gone to its limit Politics, jealousy, selfishness, desire for glory and power, kill the spirit always " It was a fine example of projection, since it was Margaret's own ego that had caused the fight

She summed up her feelings in her diary "I'm left weak with the sadness of it " Reacting in what was now her typical way, she became ill and retreated to Truro for a long summer of rest

At the same time, Juliet went off to Mexico with her husband, taking a house near the Dwight Morrors, parents of Anne Morrow Lindbergh The two women wrote each other often, usually about diets which they undertook to "purify their systems " Some of these diets were odd indeed, like one which consisted of nothing but lettuce, spinach, and soup Juliet wondered whether two weeks on nothing but water wouldn't be even more helpful, she had heard of a place in England where people went for water diets which made them feel wonderful

But Juliet, like Hugh, could be practical on occasion She saw a

chance to do Margaret an important favor to get her the support of a foundation that would give regular contributions to the cause, and thus lessen her dependence on haphazard donations

Margaret had worked for this for years, applying to one foundation after another, only to be turned down But in August 1928 Juliet succeeded, she persuaded the Brush Foundation to promise a definite yearly sum

Charles Brush was a wealthy uncle of Juliet's whose son had died the year before The young man had been interested in scientific research, and his father had set up a publishing trust in his memory The trust had published a few papers on child development, but the bulk of the money was untouched Juliet heard that her uncle was becoming interested in population problems, and wrote Margaret immediately

My uncle asked what you thought would be the best thing to do with about 25 or 30 thousand a year I said that I thought the most important part of the work was to establish clinics, as the real aim of the movement was to give immediate help to the women who needed it and also thereby help save the world from the menace of the hordes of the defectives He said he thought so too I told him there were about 22 states that had no laws against them, and clinics could be established at once if we had the money to send out the workers and get them started He pointed out that there were thousands of women on farms who could not be reached by clinics but only by mail, and that we must continue to work to get the law changed So telegraph at once about the \$25,000 and the best use for it Love! Health! Wealth! Juliet

Margaret was elated, a plump bank balance was just what she wanted And, another important matter had been mentioned by Charles Brush Margaret had been thinking of getting not only the local or "little Comstock laws" changed in those states that still had them, but also mounting a full-scale attack on the federal law She had tried this in Washington in 1925, but had given it up when Anne Kennedy reported that more educational work was needed first In 1926, Mary Ware Dennett's Voluntary Parenthood League, faced with the same problem, had folded completely But now, with Brush's support, Margaret decided to mount a federal legislative campaign, beginning with an intensive cross-country lecture tour

She also devised what she hoped would be another coup Mrs Den-

nett had long advocated an "open bill"—that is, one that would legalize the giving of birth control information to any woman who asked for it. Margaret decided to advocate a "doctor's only" bill, meaning giving information only through doctors. Margaret realized that, in the climate of public opinion in the twenties, such a bill had a far better chance of being passed.

The chief pitfall here was her relations with the medical profession. At her Town Hall Conference in 1921, her birth-control exhibits had created great controversy. Many of the doctors violently opposed the methods demonstrated, calling them "foreign contraceptions that were filthy, untested, and unsafe."

Her *Family Limitation* pamphlets were equally suspect. She had written the first pamphlet in 1915 before fleeing to England, releasing it through her radical friends, so doctors never got hold of it, there is no copy of it in the files. But there are copies of a pamphlet dated 1916, which told women not to wait until they "came around," but to keep a chart and take a laxative four days before their periods were due, as this would "expel the semen from the uterus." She suggested laxatives like castor oil, Beecham's Pills, or quinine followed by hot water. (What taking a harsh laxative like castor oil every month, whether needed or not, would do to the women's intestines, she did not say.)

In the 1916 edition, she also condoned abortion, declaring "No one can doubt that there are times when an abortion is justifiable," though she qualified this by saying "abortions will become unnecessary when care is taken to prevent conception. (Care is) the only cure for abortions." Later she stopped condoning abortions, but meanwhile the very use of the word scared doctors because medical men were regularly being sent to jail for performing them.

In the same edition she had a section titled "Douches and Their Importance." Here she advocated various chemicals to be added to water and used after intercourse. They included first Lysol, which was potentially harmful when used in large amounts, second, bichloride of mercury, which could be absorbed by the vaginal tissues, distributed throughout the body, and if used over a long period of time, do enough damage to kill a woman, third, chinosol, which she admitted was less hazardous than bichloride, but harder to come by, and fourth, vinegar, which every woman had at home on the shelf.

In an undated edition there was also the curious advice to use douches, particularly astringent douches containing boric acid, alum,

citric acid, or hydrochlorate of quinine, *before* intercourse as a preventive of pregnancy How these could become contraceptives, other than by slightly tightening the tissues at the entrance to the womb, was not explained

Something else that put doctors off was her advice that women use their index finger to explore the vagina and clean out whatever remaining semen might be left after a douche had been used Using a finger this way seemed dangerously close to masturbation and was distasteful indeed Even more distasteful was her advice concerning the use of the diaphragm or pessary (Both are words for the same thing) "Any nurse," Margaret said, "can teach one how to adjust a diaphragm, then women can teach each other" Now "any nurse" did not know how to adjust a diaphragm, much less how to choose the correct size And the vision of women teaching each other was especially horrifying Doctors called this "lay gynecology" and opposed it strongly

At least, in none of her pamphlets did Margaret repeat the advice of the Dutch physician, Dr Mensinga, who advised his patients to leave the diaphragm constantly in place except during the menstrual flow Margaret advised her clients to leave it in only for a few hours after intercourse, then to remove it, wash and dry it, and put it away until needed again—a far more sanitary practice But then, doctors didn't read her pamphlets carefully They simply continued to dismiss the whole matter of birth control as "filthy and indecent," ignoring even her revised material, where she no longer spoke of using douches as contraceptives, but suggested they be used for cleansing purposes only Or when, in her eighteenth edition, she advised women to put a contraceptive jelly inside the diaphragm to double its effectiveness No matter what she said, doctors turned their backs on her

To be sure, in the light of modern knowledge her pamphlets weren't very good, but they contained the best that she, or anyone else at the time, knew But women didn't turn their backs They were grateful for her persistence in getting illegal material printed, and her cleverness in getting it into the mail without being caught by either Comstock or his successors—both achievements of no small order