



## THE HOLYOKE AFFAIR AND MANY SAD DEATHS

Margaret was forever fighting with people, and later, making up with them. She was forever resigning from birth-control work, then starting up again. Now in 1940 she was setting out on one of the hardest battles of her career.

The battle took place in Holyoke, Massachusetts, on the heels of several signal victories. Right after the One Package decision, the *New York World Telegram* announced in a front page story that the first openly endorsed, government-financed clinic in the country had opened in Middletown, New York, and thirty-seven similar clinics were about to open in New York City alone. The American Federation of Labor, had refused to support Margaret during her federal campaign, but at least one important branch, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, was promising to open a clinic, too.

All of this was heady news, and it tempted Margaret to come out of semi-retirement at the age of sixty-nine and take on the state of Massachusetts, one of seven states that kept its "little Comstock Law" on the books—a law that called the use of contraceptives "Crimes Against Chastity, Morality, Decency and Good Order."

Indeed, as late as 1928, a Dr. Antoinette Konikow had been arrested in Boston for exhibiting contraceptive articles during a private medical lecture. A few years later when fifteen prominent physicians filed a bill to legalize contraceptive care given by doctors only, the bill was

voted down after a spokesman for the Catholic Church declared that "the medical profession in Massachusetts is of too low an order to be entrusted with such responsibility "

Nevertheless, in 1932, after consulting with its lawyers, the Birth Control League of Massachusetts (later the Planned Parenthood League) opened several clinics to give advice to poverty-stricken married women referred to them for health reasons by social agencies, hospitals, and clergymen. The first to open, called with deliberate circumlocution the Mother's Health Office, was in Brookline. Six more followed in Springfield, Worcester, Salem, New Bedford, Fitchburg, and Boston's South End.

All went well until 1937, when the Salem, Brookline, and South End clinics were raided in rapid succession. In each instance an imposing-looking woman had appeared with counterfeit social-agency credentials, was found to have alarmingly high blood-pressure, and was given contraceptive advice. All known methods were presented to her including rhythm. Yet a few days later she returned flashing a police-woman's badge. Staffs of all three clinics were arrested, and confidential records seized. All persons involved were found guilty and fined, and the clinics summarily closed.

It didn't help when the policewoman publicly apologized later, saying she had been forced to become a stooge "because the police had something on her brother" and had threatened to "give him the limit" if she refused, nor that a respected poll showed that eighty-two percent of Massachusetts voters were in favor of permitting doctors to give contraceptive advice to married women for health reasons, and sixty-four percent were in favor of having them give such information to anyone who asked for it. The clinics stayed closed.

The time seemed right for the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts to ask Margaret Sanger, the movement's most charismatic personality and persuasive lecturer, to start on a state-wide speaking tour.

At first everything went well. Sixteen hundred people jammed the Community Church in Boston on October 13, applauding when she told them how George Bernard Shaw had called birth control "the most revolutionary idea of the century," and Julian Huxley had said "it will go down in history with the greatest advancements of the human intellect, along with the invention of the stone hammer, the mastery of fire, the discovery of electricity and the invention of the art of printing." In Hyannis and Worcester she had similar successes.

In Holyoke things looked promising at first Margaret was traveling with the socially impeccable Mrs Loraine Campbell, president of the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts The Reverend Ronald J Tamblyn, minister of the First Congregational Church of Holyoke, after receiving the unanimous vote of his board, had offered his church as a meeting place on October 17 A group of women arrived in town a day ahead of Margaret's talk, they were full of enthusiasm and ready to do some advance publicity and get a little rest They had hardly checked into their hotel when rumblings started

On the previous Sunday, the Right-Reverend Monsignor John F Fagan of St Jerome's, the mother Catholic Church of Holyoke, had ordered a declaration to be read at all masses saying that

we have been informed on good authority that a campaign is about to be launched in Western Massachusetts in the interests of the detestable practice of birth control It is understood that a nationally known defender of this vice, Margaret Sanger by name, is to arouse people to pass a new state law permitting this vice to be practiced Those who are sponsoring this lecture are engaged in a work that is unpatriotic and a disgrace to the Christian community Catholics, of course, will be guided by the mind of Christ, and His Church, and will *actively oppose* any attempt to label this locality as a center of such immoral doctrine

The Catholic declaration was also run in the *Holyoke Transcript* Two days later Monsignor Fagan personally telephoned a prominent member of Reverend Tamblyn's church, a man who was also president of the Holyoke National Bank, asking him to oppose the meeting The bank president was unimpressed, he had lunch with another member of his church committee, and both agreed to ignore the phone call and permit Margaret to speak as agreed But the following morning Monsignor Fagan telephoned the bank president again and urged reconsideration on the grounds of "community harmony" The bank president began to weaken He called a meeting of his seven-member church committee, including the Reverend Tamblyn, put the matter to a vote, and the permission was withdrawn by a vote of five to two A Mr Harlan was selected to make the announcement that "the problem of economic damage to Congregationalist members as a result of their allowing the speech to be made had to be taken into account" This quite clearly insinuated that there was now the possibility that all retail

businesses run by Congregationalists might be boycotted by Catholics if they went ahead Reverend Tamblyn sent a note telling this to Mr Eugene Belisle, executive secretary of the Mother's Health Office who was traveling with Margaret, and the battle was joined

Mr Belisle sent out a notice of cancellation to the local radio station, which announced over the air that the lecture had been called off, as a result offers from surrounding communities began to pour in But Margaret said, "No I will accept none, I will speak *here*" She did not know how or where she would speak, and reporters who came to interview her found her looking tired, ruffled, and incredibly aged Yet to all of them she kept repeating "Somehow I'll manage it I will speak *here*"

Mr Belisle, with the help of another local clergyman, phoned the manager of Holyoke's Turnverein Hall who agreed to rent them his place Mr Belisle hurried over with the fifty dollars rental fee and was given a receipt But in no time the president of the Turnverein was back on the phone He was very sorry, etc , etc , but would Mr Belisle please pick up his check as he couldn't let them have the hall after all And so it went Mr Belisle left rental fees at other halls, only to have the same thing happen All the fees were accepted, all were suddenly returned

Time began to run out, a last-ditch attempt was made through an attorney for the city of Holyoke to rent a vacant lot or store, but the owners of the empty stores were mysteriously busy, and the chief of police said he couldn't give a permit for an open-air meeting without the permission of the mayor, who unfortunately was out of town

At six-thirty, less than two hours before the scheduled time of the speech, Margaret was at a pitch of trembling excitement Then, the ice began to break

Holyoke had long been a manufacturing town, the home, among others, of Skinner's Satin and National Blank Book plants Only a few workers in these plants were unionized but the ones that were, were strong At about seven o'clock word of the threatened cancellation reached these unionized workers, and a half hour later Mrs Campbell received a phone call It was from the head of the textile workers union "My name is Annie Sullivan," she said, "I am a Catholic and I do not believe in birth control But I have just consulted with the other union officials, and we all believe in free speech We have two small meeting rooms that we alone control If Mrs Sanger would like to use them we will be glad to let her have them, at no fee"

The offer was accepted and the union immediately started a grapevine of its own. Soon seventy-five people were crowding into their small rooms, many standing or sitting on the floor while policemen paraded up and down outside the hall. Margaret spoke, hesitantly at first, then in a voice that was vibrant and clear.

She told how contraception had saved the lives of thousands of women too old or ill to bear children. How use of it had prevented countless separations and divorces. How fathers had been able to get off the relief rolls they had been on ever since the Depression and find jobs that could support families that no longer grew larger year after year. How women, above all, had been able to stop aborting themselves or resorting to ruthless quacks to do the job for them—all as a result of using birth control.

In the first row of the audience, the Reverend Ronald Tamblyn listened intently. He told the press later that he had come to defend the principle of free speech, but in church the following Sunday he spoke more humbly. He stood up before his assembled congregation and confessed, "Only those who never do anything are those who never make a mistake. We at least did something, although we may not even yet see clearly what it was." He ended with a plea for "a clearer understanding of the valley of humiliation through which we have recently walked together."

Only the *Holyoke Transcript* reported the Reverend Tamblyn's speech, while the Catholic side of the story was widely publicized. The *Ave Maria* of Notre Dame, Indiana, covered it under the curious title, "Mrs. Sanger's Retreat." On the other hand, to everyone's consternation, both the *Nation* and the *New Republic*, to which the story had been simultaneously submitted, ran Tamblyn's speech word for word. Years later a pro-Catholic book about the incident, *Protestants and Catholics: A Religious and Social Interaction in an Industrial Community*, was written by Kenneth Wilson Underwood and published in 1957 by the Beacon Press.

Once more Margaret had snatched victory from defeat.

This probably made her bold enough to challenge Angus' attempt to help her.

Sometime before, Angus had met Cardinal Tisserant, chief librarian for the Vatican, at a Librarians' Conference in the United States. Having heard of Angus' pioneering work with libraries, the Cardinal had asked him to come to Rome and make new arrangements for housing

the rare church manuscripts kept in the Vatican. Angus, still a staunch Presbyterian, agreed, on the condition he would not have to kiss the Pope's ring. But he also had other canny thoughts in mind. Maybe Cardinal Tisserant, who was Dean of the College of Cardinals, would become the next Pope, and Angus would have the chance to whisper a few words about birth control into his ear? Better yet, maybe he could arrange a meeting between him and Margaret?

The next time Tisserant came to America, Angus invited him to his Virginia home. Seated in deep black leather armchairs before the great stone fireplace, they relaxed over a cup of coffee followed by a bit of Scotch, and Angus casually brought up the subject of contraception. The Cardinal said he at least would be willing to meet Margaret and listen to her opinions. But now it became her turn to balk. Any and all Catholics were still enemies, she told Angus she couldn't possibly see the Cardinal on the arranged day because that very afternoon she had tickets to a baseball game. (She who hated baseball!) She couldn't do it the day after, or the day after that either. Later, Margaret did meet the Cardinal in Paris, they talked for several hours, but nothing came of it. Margaret, however, couldn't resist raving to Angus about the handsome Cardinal with his impressive long beard, regretting that such a good-looking man should be confined by celibacy. And Angus wittily named his guest room the Cardinal Tisserant—Margaret Sanger room because both had honored it by sleeping there.

Other prominent persons now came to the aid of Margaret and birth control. The first was Eleanor Roosevelt. Mrs. Roosevelt had long been a quiet supporter of the Sanger Research Bureau. Knowing nothing about birth control during her marriage, and, according to one of her sons, resorting to abstinence as a contraceptive measure after her five children were born, she had been giving freely to the cause for quite a while. When in 1940 she broke her silence and publicly announced her support, it gave the movement a tremendous boost. But opposition came from an unexpected quarter—the newly created Children's Bureau in Washington, a branch of the Public Health Service headed by Katherine Lenroot.

Miss Lenroot, a hard-faced, thin-lipped woman, the daughter of Republican Representative Irvine Lenroot, was a career bureaucrat. Although it was her bureau that was supposed to help control venereal

disease, and do something about the shocking number of deaths in childbirth among women who had borne too many children, she refused to see any connection between these matters and birth control. In 1938 she even canceled a speaking engagement by Hannah Stone at a baby-care conference organized by Dr. Stone, on the grounds that, on reflection, she thought that the people who would come would be offended if a birth-control advocate was there. She used all the old arguments against birth control that Congress had once used, plus a few of her own. She declared she was worried about a "civilization with a declining population," that conditions among ill, underfed, and undereducated children were "none of her business," and that the government should encourage high breeding among the "biologically fit." What she didn't admit, according to the historian David Kennedy, was that she was worried about the possibility of finding herself in a job with a declining influence. With fewer children born, she reasoned, her bureau might be closed.

One Public Health official who sensed her hostility declared, "Katherine Lenroot is hopeless." So did others when she tied up maternal- and child-welfare funds voted for her department and let them sit idly in the bank. And when women wrote to the Children's Bureau, thinking it a logical place to get advice on birth control, she instructed her subordinates to answer with a form letter stating "no information available." Answering this way, lamented a Washington Children's Bureau doctor, "always makes me feel mean."

Eventually, however, after Mrs. Roosevelt won over the Surgeon General to the cause, Miss Lenroot loosened her funds and turned them over to the Public Health Service, a department which had seen the need to advise women war-workers on how to space their children so they would take fewer leaves of absence for unwanted pregnancies. Margaret wanted to send out another victorious statement to the press hailing the action of the Surgeon General, but Mrs. Roosevelt made her promise she wouldn't. Instead, though she hadn't written him for a year, Margaret turned to Harold to exult "Another milestone!"

Harold and his wife Nell were not alone in adoring Margaret. Another admirer was Dr. Robert Latou Dickinson, who had progressed to a first-name basis with her. When Hannah Stone died suddenly at the age of forty-seven, Margaret, who still considered herself in command, appointed her husband, Dr. Abraham Stone, in her place at the

Sixteenth Street clinic Dickinson, who was supposed to make such appointments, ignored the matter About Abraham Stone he wrote, "a fine spirit his," ending, "yours with renewed enthusiasm, Robert "

Soon Dickinson was outlining plans for teaching seminars at the clinic and accepting Abraham Stone unconditionally In a letter to Margaret, he wrote "It's your clinic and you made it, and we who stand off and turn up only once in a while have no call to criticize if you appoint a new director without consulting a nominal Board of Management " This time he ended with even more enthusiasm "Yours in the hope we may convert the world "

Dickinson was also busy testing old and new contraceptives He found that the suppositories so much cherished by the French were not without problems, they melted at different temperatures in different women—some took five minutes, some took thirty He found that the medicated tablets sold in drugstores were often useless because they crumbled if kept too long, a stronger cardboard container would prevent this but the price would have to go up And as for the products advertised in magazines, for "personal daintiness," the ads gave no instructions, only the box Everyone knew that when a woman has an impatient partner she does not stop to read the boxtop He would write the advertisers at once

This kind of news greatly cheered Margaret Throughout the years she had been too busy to monitor research herself, but she had always read the hundreds of thousands of thank-you notes from faraway women whose only knowledge of birth control came from her pamphlets, these women felt she had literally saved their lives She seldom printed their letters though, knowing that tragic stories make far better copy than happy stories, and are much better at bringing in contributions

Yet, excellent fund raiser that she was, she was tight with her own money When Pearl Buck, who had been one of her main helpers during her federal campaign, started the East West Foundation to spread knowledge of the different parts of the world, she asked Margaret to become a Founder for a thousand dollars Margaret insisted she couldn't afford it, she had more repairs to make on Willowlake which had been more or less on the market since 1935 Besides, she was keeping up three residences—one in Tucson to which J Noah had returned, one in Truro where her sisters summered, and one in New York at the elegant Barclay Hotel



Though maintaining three homes was expensive, she was not having financial troubles. J. Noah had recouped much of his fortune and was soon to leave his beloved Margy five million dollars. But now that she was hobnobbing with multimillionaires, she felt she was by contrast only a small millionaire. She gave away money, but only to the friends and causes of her choice, such as the Converted Catholics Christ's Mission or the Society of Rosicrucians. Also, during the war years when food was being rationed in England, she sent friends there generous and frequent food parcels.

On the few occasions when she was at Willowlake, she continued to give lavish parties inviting people like Robert Dickinson and Clarence Gamble, a wealthy physician keenly interested in birth control. Dickinson recalled one of these parties in a handwriting so beautiful it looks like an illuminated manuscript.

It must be deep satisfaction to you to beget deep affection. Leadership sometimes means loneliness. Ideals so far in advance of public opinion as to be bitterly opposed, may breed sternness. For you to keep your kindness and tenderness is one of the traits your friends most prize.

I am remembering a morning of clear sunshine in a garden spot. No background of trees and vines and grey stone walls, blossoming dogwood and greensward slopes, could have been a better setting. Arm in arm, three of the most individual of individualists—calling each other Margaret and Clarence and Robert—had intimate talk, review of long team-work, planning of far outlook.

They had lived long enough to see very many of their dreams come true. It was a day to be remembered. Yours these many years.

In 1942 at the age of eighty-three, J. Noah had a stroke. And Stuart, who had suffered from the complications of his mastoiditis for so long, had at last had a successful operation, finished his medical education, married, and become an internist in Tucson before going into military service. Stuart's wife had also presented Margaret with her first granddaughter, named Margaret. When Harold Child heard this, he said he found it "as different as it is delightful to think of anyone so incurably young as you are with a little granddaughter of her own."

In 1942 an unexpected letter came from Bill Sanger. He had not

communicated with Margaret for over twenty years, but it was her birthday and he wanted her to know he remembered. He had written two books, one on Tom Paine, the other on the Aztecs. Neither had sold any better than his dark brooding paintings, still he prided himself on his attempt. Mainly, though, he was thinking of his children. He had heard that Stuart and Grant were in service and was worried about them. Would she please give him some details?

His letter went on with memories of the children when they were young. Stuart insisting on stopping to collect round stones that looked like baseballs as he trudged up a hill with his father, Grant in a little white suit messing up a neighbor's lettuce bed. And Peggy—always Peggy. "We mustn't love too much or it will be taken from us! I don't know who said those words but it's true. And 'Time heals all wounds.' No! The wound of Peggy's death has never healed!"

If Margaret answered Bill's letter there is no record of it. She did however write to H. G. Wells, having learned he was seriously ill with a recurrence of tuberculosis, and invite him to come to her beautiful home in Arizona to recuperate. Wells' secretary answered with a polite note saying he was too ill to travel, but that he appreciated her concern.

That same year, J. Noah had another stroke, putting him into a wheelchair and then into a hospital. He wrote his niece Carrol from the hospital.

I am as helpless as a newborn babe. I came out here in a series of ambulances. I think I got in four different cars at changing points. I was shoved into car windows and put together inside. I do not have an ache or pain. My physical body is as well as can be, and I am normal and healthy, which makes it difficult to have to succumb to the inevitable.

Margaret added a postscript saying that she was staying close and trying to give him a laugh now and then, as well as the kind of food he liked. He died a week later, at home as he had requested, not wanting his Margy out of his sight. Margaret described his death.

I was alone in the house—the nurse was on her four-hour leave—the doctor out on calls. I went into J. Noah's room about three o'clock to rest on the nurse's cot because there is a good cool-

er there which keeps the room lovely with cool, dry air I tried to let the bed down to give J N a little more comfortable position as he was then asleep He opened his eyes and waved me to stop So I turned to let down the Venetian blinds to keep the light from his eyes—he waved me away and said, “Let them alone I want to look at the mountains ” Those were his last words

Her two sons flew to Tucson for the funeral, both in military uniforms, but none of his own children came—either because he had been such a martinet to them or because of a long-standing grudge against Margaret Years later, when Willowlake had been sold, J Noah’s daughter exclaimed angrily, “This property should have belonged to me!”

Margaret put up a tablet in her husband’s memory at the Sixteenth Street Bureau, stressing his service as treasurer and using the sentimental quote “Where your treasure is, there lies your heart also ” But at the funeral service her old friend Dorothy Brush of the Brush Foundation delivered a more forthright eulogy “He was all bark and no bite In Heaven if everything isn’t all right, he’ll shout in an outraged tone, ‘Where’s Margy?’ Then he’ll kiss her and hold her tight ” He was buried at Fishkill

Soon Margaret had to face other losses

Harold had a fall that year after a stroke, but insisted he didn’t mind it a bit since he was an “insignificant whipper-snapper ” He dictated to his wife after he lost the use of his right arm, joking to the end “I am going to learn Irish, Pegeen, for I’m sure there must be some glorious swear-words in that language of Saints and Heroes ” He died before she had a chance to reply

Then Nan Higgins, a believing Christian Scientist, died during a heart attack after refusing to call a doctor Margaret began to keep a diary again, repeating herself as aging people do

October 24, 1944 Willowlake is for sale J N passed away June 21 ’43, and little sister Nan January 6, ’44 Two dear graves side by side in Fishkill Cemetery It is lonely Lots to do My painting and B C all big interests but one gets loneliness nevertheless

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Indeed she was lonely, and also more than a little confused, for the sudden inheritance of five million dollars left her stunned. J. Noah left nothing to his children by his previous marriage. He had kept his money almost exclusively in his own hands, handling everything on charge accounts which he closely inspected, and doling out such a small personal allowance that Margaret had had to sneak a few dollars from it when she wanted to do something on her own like send Grant a generous gift. Now, with five million all hers to spend as she pleased, she didn't quite know how. It took her some time to decide. When she did, she told Stuart: "I will blow it all in."

Though later she claimed she contributed much of her money to the movement, some of her "business expenses" seem questionable. She appears to have used it to finance her own vacations and to give gifts to her friends. Indeed, she drew a very fuzzy line between her own money and that of her cause. She felt that she was essentially "The Cause," and because she raised most of the funds, she thought herself free to hand them out as she chose. Also, like many crusaders, there was some of the charlatan and much of the mystic in her, making her charismatic and wondrous. Because most people enjoy the charismatic and wondrous, most people continued to adore her no matter what she did.

There were a few, however, who did not adore her. One was Dr. Helena Wright, a crusty English gynecologist. After meeting Margaret at the Cheltenham Conference in 1948, Dr. Wright described her: "Mrs. Sanger had violet eyes and reddish hair. Her main characteristics were vaulted ambition, arch-hypocrisy and financial meanness."

Another who disliked her was Robert Allerton Parker, to whom, as she grew older, Margaret continued to turn for new ideas on birth-control speeches. On one occasion, after much thought, he sent her several. In return, when he expected payment in cash he needed, she sent him a basket of fruit. "Fruit! just what I needed!" he stormed, having no choice but to accept it.

Margaret's 1944 diary continues with entries about her growing concern for her children:

December 22, 1944 Christmas carol on the air I'm frantic to have word of Stuart. I've always said since Peggy's death that life could not hold me if another of my children went before I do—I still feel that way. Stuart is usually lucky and uses his head if left to do so. But Army orders are different. It is now 6 P. M.

and I have a horrible feeling that something is wrong with one of the boys

Grant who also had married had given her several grandsons by now Margaret spent Christmas with them and their mother Edwina at their home in Mount Kisco, New York "They are adorable, and their mother is wonderful with her courage So is Barbara (Stuart's wife) and Margaret II and little Nancy are thrilling, too Only it makes my heart ache that their fathers are missing their development "

She became so family conscious that she began writing regularly to her sister Ethel after years of silence She also wrote to her brother Bob ("Spike") Higgins, football coach at Penn State, who was to become a member of the 1945 Football Hall of Fame But Ethel died soon after, at the age of seventy-two

From now on, with Ethel, J Noah, Nan, and Harold gone, it would be Hugh and Angus to whom Margaret would turn for comfort and to whom she would give it in return After Havelock died, Françoise wrote a book about Havelock that so damned Hugh he swore he would never have gotten over the shock of it without Margaret's help Angus, who took up flying at the age of sixty-five, injured himself so severely when he wrecked his private plane that Margaret quite literally became his dream woman, he wrote telling her of flying through dawns and sunsets with her at his side when he was, in fact, in a bodycast and it was impossible for him even to walk After he recovered, he continued to fly, and indeed, flew to Margaret on a number of occasions