

School and Romance

2



Claverack was one of the first coeducational schools in the East. Besides the innovation of teaching young men and women together, it fostered a humane spirit that awakened Margaret's zest for both studies and people. There she made enduring friends such as Amelia Stuart, whose last name she would give as a first name to her elder son.

Saturday morning chapel was exciting because students were then allowed to present their own concerns. For most girls, participation in this hour was torture, but for Michael Higgins's daughter, it was a golden opportunity. With the help of her father's long-range advice and before a staunchly Republican audience, she was soon championing free silver. Echoing the Boy Orator, William Jennings Bryan, she warned "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold."

More characteristic was her talk on women's rights, although again she was abetted by her father. He relayed Susan B. Anthony's arguments and cited potent ladies of the past, such as Helen of Troy and Cleopatra. Still under his influence, she went out to the nearby cemetery to practice her oratory. At last, with the same feeling at the pit of her stomach that she had known in her graveyard vigil at Corning, she delivered her talk at the chapel.

Her preannounced subject created much hilarity because some young men passed around cartoons of trousered females smoking huge cigars. Margaret did not make many converts that day, but

she did impress the elocution teacher who encouraged her to recite dramatic bits. She had shown unusual poise under harassment and had a pleasant voice that carried to the back of the hall with some eloquence. Years later Amelia Stuart, then Mrs. Michell, recalled that her friend played the lead in most of Claverack's dramatic productions. In her *Autobiography*, Margaret said that for a season she considered going on the stage.

She must have been a picture on the platform with her slender, erect carriage and the bronze halo of her hair. From a host of photographs, we see her posing and preening, sometimes vain and callow looking, but always pretty. If the young men had disapproved of her chapel talks, they now found her a very feminine feminist. In the Hersey biography, Mrs. Michell says that Margaret had great appeal for both sexes. "Anything she touched, she glorified in some mysterious way." Margaret's natural reserve, Mrs. Michell also reported, sometimes gave way to gales of laughter. The shy but purposeful girl who had entered Claverack, was developing the lighthearted gaiety which would remain one facet of her nature.

With her growing popularity, Margaret's enthusiasm for reform speeches shifted to escapades at an off-limits dance hall. This phase ended with a memorable talk with the principal. He could have expelled her for breaking the rules, but instead, he spoke of her gift for leadership. Would she learn to use it constructively or would she always stir up mischief for herself and her followers? Because he neither scolded nor threatened, but spoke of her potential, Margaret was deeply moved.

After three happy years at Claverack, her father called her home to nurse her mother. As far back as the Higgins children could remember, their mother had been plagued by a formidable cough. No one had guessed that there could be anything seriously wrong with this indispensable member of the family, but now she was bedridden, spitting blood and with strange Harlequin red spots on her cheeks. Her husband finally put her in the hands of a doctor who called often.

In Margaret's eagerness to speed her mother's recovery, she borrowed several medical books that fired her own ambition to be-

come a doctor. Unfortunately the obsolescent texts did not warn about infection. The untrained nurse conscientiously closed the windows so that no draft or fresh air ever reached the sick room. There was an old Irish saying that if a consumptive survived the month of March, he would live until fall. Anne Higgins died on March 31, 1896, and with her went the happiness of the home.

On Margaret's young shoulders fell her mother's cares—the cooking, washing, scrubbing, mending, ironing, and the losing struggle to make ends meet. What was worse, her father became a changed man. In his lonely grief and sense of inadequacy, he turned into a petty tyrant, especially with Margaret, perhaps because she was his favorite. Ethel, the youngest daughter, was in high school and in love with a fellow student. Naturally her father thought she was too young, but he was even more upset because Margaret went out with a variety of beaux. When she was a child, he had trusted her as an adult, but now that she was almost grown up, he treated her as a child. Since he disliked everyone who called, she stopped seeing anyone. Yet he was never pleased.

One night, when she and Ethel arrived home a few minutes late after a band concert, he locked them out. Then he opened the door for Ethel who, he said, was not responsible for the tardiness, but slammed the door in Margaret's face. She was stunned and since she had worn no coat, she was also very cold. Finally, she left to spend the night with a friend. The punishment boomeranged on her angry father who had only meant to teach her a lesson. He tramped the streets for hours looking for her. Father and daughter were soon partly reconciled, but after three years away from home, Margaret knew that she could not remain there. Neither could she start medical school, for lack of funds, but she made the crucial decision to take nurses' training. Toward the close of the century the mother of one of her Claverack friends arranged for her to enroll at a new nursing school at White Plains, New York.

The great challenge of her training was maternity work. In her third year she was called out on night cases, miles away from the hospital. Her first duty was to boil the water over the woodfire stove in the kitchen and sterilize the forceps. Meanwhile, the doctor was supposedly scrubbing himself, but sometimes he was late

It was an awesome responsibility for a girl not yet through nurses' training, to take charge, but Margaret had to deliver many babies.

More than a half century later a Mrs O'Connor, born at White Plains early in 1902, claimed to be Margaret Sanger's first delivery. According to the parents, it had been a complicated birth, but the courage and skill of the student nurse had saved the child from suffocation. To the end of her life, Margaret felt that witnessing a birth was the most momentous human experience. Holding a newborn infant with its tiny perfection made her want to pray.

Some patients, who had already had several children and miscarriages, begged Margaret to tell them how to prevent another pregnancy. She had no idea. When she asked the doctors, they were indignant that anyone would raise the question with a nice girl.

Margaret's apprenticeship was rugged, largely because of the long hours and the primitive working conditions. The hospital at which she trained had been an old manor house with many steps and no conveniences, not even electricity or adequate washrooms. Margaret was soon running a temperature and suffering from what was called tubercular glands. With decreasing strength, she could hardly get through her long days and to relieve the glandular infection, she was twice operated upon.

Her final assignment was in New York at the Manhattan Eye and Ear Hospital. There the equipment was modern and the work lighter, but an extracurricular event overshadowed everything else. At a hospital dance, a small dark man interrupted a waltz to show her partner some blueprints. While the doctor examined his building plans, the intense eyes of the architect never left Margaret's face. The next morning at seven-thirty, when she went for her early walk, she found this man waiting for her at the foot of the hospital steps. For her, this was romantic. For him, it was love at first sight. The man's name was William Sanger.

Waiting for Margaret at the hospital steps became Sanger's habit as he started a whirlwind courtship. Since he was eight years her senior and already making a good living, he was the most impressive suitor she had known. He had more social status than she and was acquainted with interesting people in New York. Already an expert architectural draftsman, he meant to abandon this work to

become a great painter Like her father, of whom he often reminded her, Bill seemed to have an unconquerable spirit

Soon they were talking of marriage, with a long honeymoon in Paris where Bill would study The stumbling block, on which they could never agree, was when they would marry Margaret insisted on receiving her degree, and really wanted to work a year, although trainees were not allowed to marry and Bill did not want to wait At last he cut the Gordian knot On an August afternoon in 1902, when they met during her two hours off duty, he gave her an ultimatum It must be then or never He had arranged everything, ring, minister, witnesses, and even a boy to hold the horse of his hired carriage

Margaret was always reticent about personal matters, but her unpublished family letters describe that afternoon To her sister Mary she wrote "That beast of a man William took me away for a drive last Monday and drove me to a minister's residence and married me I wept with anger and wouldn't look at him for it was so unexpected I had on an old blue dress and looked horrid He was afraid this precious article [herself] would be lost to him I'm very sorry to have the thing occur, but yet I am very, very happy" To her sister Nan she wrote much the same, but added that Bill was jealous, "bestly, insanely jealous" That too may have seemed romantic

Why did such an independent girl acquiesce in an elopement that made her cry with anger? First love, about which she later warned, was, no doubt, the chief reason, but at this time both she and her younger sister Ethel were vulnerable because they had lost their security with the death of their mother, followed by estrangement from their father While still in high school, Ethel had secretly married John Byrne Margaret had not meant to follow her sister's example, but on that August afternoon the risk of losing forever the man she hoped one day to marry was simply too great

To his new sisters-in-law, Bill Sanger explained his demand Margaret had many admirers, several serious ones who made him feel that he must act at once She was "a treasure and the very embodiment of sunshine," who would make almost any man happy This would always be his view