

## Marriage Crises



Bill Sanger, who had pushed through his own desires, could not control his wife's destiny, not even at the start. Her glandular operations had been palliatives and when she became pregnant six months after her marriage, the tubercular symptoms burst out with new virulence. Doctors advised her to settle permanently somewhere at a high altitude out west, but instead, because of Bill's work, she went to a sanitarium in the Adirondacks.

Since home delivery was the custom, in November she returned to their flat on 149th Street, but again she had bad luck. When her early morning labor pains began, Bill could not reach her obstetrician and had to settle on a young general practitioner. Margaret always felt that her prolonged, agonizing labor was a decisive factor in her future. Apparently the doctor agreed. Years later he wrote that he had often wondered what effect his "ignorance of obstetrics" had on her career. It had been "a hard night" for both of them.

The baby, Stuart, was born strong and healthy, but the ordeal nearly finished his mother. She was shipped back to the Adirondacks, along with the infant and a nurse who lived next door in the same cottage. At this place tubercular treatment involved large doses of creosote, which took away her appetite, and vast amounts of milk and eggs which nauseated her. The days and the weeks slipped by while the patient who answered to the name of Margaret Sanger, existing in almost a comatose state, felt nothing in common with the vital girl who had become pregnant. In the outer

world there was a presidential election, with Teddy Roosevelt urging a "life of strenuous endeavor" Endeavor! Margaret could not even down her breakfast! She felt remote from the world, her husband, and even the baby next door

At the end of eight months she was physically weaker and emotionally past caring about anything After conferring with her family, two doctors came to question her What would she like to do, they asked Where would she like to go? To whom would she like the baby sent? To every question she answered, "I don't care" They finally left, baffled by her negative attitude

On an impulse, the younger doctor returned His patient was still sitting exactly as he had left her when he dropped his hand on her shoulder and said with emphasis, "Don't be like this Do something Want something You'll never get well if you keep on this way"

His words cut through her lethargy They sank deep into her consciousness to awaken that spirit that used to believe that she could achieve whatever she set out to do It occurred to her that she did not have to sit there day after day Even if she died—as they seemed to expect—it would be better to do so at home than in this alien place She did not sleep that night, but before the next dawn she, the startled nurse, and the baby were on their way back to New York

Bill met them at the station and agreed with all her wishes She need not force herself to eat Certainly, he would not let her die For three weeks Margaret lived mostly on water and then, with a restored appetite, began to gain

When her convalescence was assured, Bill decided that they should live in the suburbs where she would have clean air, a garden, and a view They found all these at Hastings-on-Hudson, and also a group of pleasant professional people Until they could build a house of their own, the Sangers rented one near the lot where they intended to sink their roots It was a good place for Margaret to recuperate and a fine one for Stuart to toddle from infancy to boyhood Margaret's days were much the same as other young mothers' and she welcomed the low-keyed tempo of the community Bill, who was a devoted husband, lightened her tasks by doing er-

rands and chores With real insight, he encouraged her to channel her returning energy into efforts that might bring permanent satisfaction, such as writing and composing talks for children on social hygiene Years afterward she recalled that he had filled her days with "loving kindness"

In their leisure together they mulled over blueprints or she read aloud while he sketched Bill had not given up his hope of becoming a painter, although Paris constantly receded from possibility The scale of the Hastings house that he planned added to its distance Because he wanted his home to prove his professional quality, he designed a showpiece It was square, with fireproof, stucco walls, a great verandah overlooking the Hudson, a studio for himself, a fireplace and bath for each bedroom

As the building rose, Bill became a perfectionist At night he often knocked out what the workmen had done during the day, insisting that some parts be rebuilt several times Later both Sangers took a hand in the finishing They stained the woodwork and together built a rose window For three weeks they toiled over it, cutting their fingers and fraying their nerves as they leaded and welded together each glowing petal This window was to suffuse the central stairway with radiance, symbolizing the beauty and permanence of the Sanger home

In this time of joint labor, Margaret saw her husband at his creative best He spared no pains and was achieving on a more ambitious scale what their neighbors wanted, a physical structure to represent their family status and aspirations And the family was growing Five years after her first pregnancy, Margaret was pronounced well enough to have another baby and, with restored joy, she was looking forward to the new life, as well as to the new home

In February 1908, although the house was not quite finished and the weather was stormy, the Sangers could wait no longer, and they moved in It was like Christmas, opening the crates which had long been in storage and choosing the right place for their special treasures Margaret's enthusiasm outran her strength, but at last she went to bed Before following her, Bill stirred up a roaring fire in the furnace

They were awakened by their maid, banging on the door. Bill's efforts had overheated the new steam pipes, not yet wrapped with asbestos. A great fire had burst out in the basement. Since there was no telephone, Bill raced out in his pajamas to call the Volunteer Fire Department. Seizing Stuart, Margaret rushed over to their neighbors across the street. With her son settled in a new bed, she came out again to find the Fire Department vainly trying to climb the icy hill. Then she turned to watch the gaudy show of her blazing dream house.

As a nurse in training, Margaret had found that she did not panic. During a crisis she saw things clearly with insights that she never forgot. That night she even recognized the beauty of the moonlight on the ice and the strange patterns of the flames. Suddenly a tongue of fire curled up through the rose window and one by one the petals fell. So it was for this that they had slaved! It was for this that they had mangled their hands and lost their tempers! How futile to spend one's efforts on things that perish in an hour. She felt aloof and curiously relieved. She was freed from the temptation of making a fetish out of a physical structure. This was not the way she meant to use her life.

Because the walls were fireproof, Bill salvaged much of the house. He went over it patiently, tearing out scorched parts and saving what he could. That summer they moved in again, but it was never the same. There was always the smell of charred wood.

Yet outwardly the next three years passed much as they had planned. Soon after they were again settled, Margaret bore her second son, Grant. She was happy caring for him, as she had not been able to care for Stuart, and she wanted a third child, hopefully a daughter and close enough to be a companion to Grant. Twenty months later, Peggy arrived, a little girl so satisfying that Margaret did not mind when the doctor forbade any more children. The third pregnancy, coming too soon after the second, had reactivated the old infection.

Once more, and this time with three children in the house, Margaret had to think first about her own health. From her bedroom, where she spent most of Peggy's first year, she saw the world in transition. Revered figures, including Mark Twain and Julia Ward

Howe, who had seemed like permanent institutions, died. The last ties with the nineteenth century were cut in the solemn splendor of the funeral of Britain's King Edward VII. England's most famous lady, Florence Nightingale, also died. She had founded the nursing profession, for which Margaret had trained so arduously and for which she had practiced so little. As Margaret wrote in the *Autobiography*: "I was not able to express my discontent, but after my experience as a nurse with fundamentals this quiet withdrawal into the tame domesticity of the pretty riverside settlement seemed to be bordering on stagnation."

Sharpening her discontent were financial worries. Her sickness had been costly, as had the house. Although it had been insured against fire, the furniture had not been, and Bill had again borrowed heavily to replace it. During the eight years of her marriage, Margaret had learned that Bill himself was the chief obstacle to solvency. He was as improvident as her father. When he had money, he spent it foolishly, often on gifts for her, orchids perhaps or a piece of Oriental silk which she had no occasion to wear and could not enjoy while she owed every tradesman in town.

Bill was as unconcerned as Michael Higgins used to be. After years of bickering over finances, Margaret decided that the only solution was for her to earn and pay for her share of the expenses. If they lived in New York there would be no problem about the children because Bill's mother, whom they all loved, would like nothing better than to run her son's house again.

The idea of returning to the city opened tantalizing prospects, for as she convalesced, she felt that life was passing her by. They had "drifted into a swamp," as she put it, but they must not wait for the tide to set them free. She loved her children, she enjoyed her home and the community, but there were limitations. She knew everything that her neighbors had to say on their three main topics: their families, school, and domestic help. She wanted to hear about the outside world. She wanted to be in the midst of events, helping to shape them, not eternally sitting on the sidelines, dimly watching the performance of her generation. The stronger she grew physically, the more impatient became her spirit.

For a time Margaret hesitated to broach the subject to her hus-

band lest she wound him in suggesting that they leave "Margaret's palace," as he fondly called the house. The fact was, however, that Bill had only come to the suburbs for her sake. His work, his mother, friends, and interests were all in the city. Perpetually riding the New York Central, he was irked at the waste of time. Both of them, as she summed it up in her *Autobiography*, "were feeling what amounted to a world hunger, the pull and haul towards wider horizons."

Bill accepted the first offer for the house. They paid their debts and moved to a large, old-fashioned apartment on 135th Street, over which Mrs. Sanger Sr. presided. Margaret was then free to take occasional cases. Both Sangers emerged from Hastings as from a long hibernation, eager to catch up with contemporary ideas.