

Finding Herself



The New York into which the Sangers plunged was ebullient with ideas which would soon create a cultural divide. Muckrakers had stripped the glamour from the nation's tycoons by exposing their ties with racketeers, boodlers, and the vice ring. Labor was in a fighting mood, with a new eloquence gained through the support of writers and artists in whom social and aesthetic radicalism merged. This group helped plan the Armory Show of Modern Art, whose daring dissonances and distortions staggered most of its viewers, but intoxicated Greenwich Village. Down in the Village, young Will Durant was lecturing on the heretofore undiscussed topic, sex psychology, inspired by Havelock Ellis and Krafft-Ebing.

Even politics was in for a change when Teddy Roosevelt came home from big-game hunting in Africa, and broke with his hand-picked successor, President Taft. In New Jersey, the scholarly Governor Woodrow Wilson was talking about the New Freedom, but in Manhattan that phrase meant more than moderate reforms. It meant a social revolution that would trample on the old gentilities and the very ethos of American Puritanism.

Bill Sanger had always called himself a Socialist, but like his father-in-law, politics to him meant talk. Still, Local 5, the party headquarters, was only a few blocks away and both Sangers joined, making their flat a meeting place for members. As Margaret said, "They came to see Bill, I made the cocoa." Later they drank beer and came increasingly to see her.

Bill, a friend of Eugene V. Debs, the beloved party leader, up

held the official view that the good society must be won by ballots, not bullets. Some of his guests defended violence, some talked casually about class war, while anarchists and members of the International Workers of the World—the Wobblies—argued that in a showdown, they must rely on bombs.

These brutal views were created by brutal conditions. American industry was still protected by armed Pinkerton men, as well as by government troops and court injunctions. Labor, mostly unorganized, in some industries still worked a twelve hour day, with low wages and no social security. The raw injustice of this system had created a ferment of revolt that exploded verbally in the Sanger parlor. In her book *My Fight for Birth Control*, Margaret herself appraised the era.

In those years before the war, a new religion was spreading over the country. It had no definite name and its adherents would have been the first vociferously to deny that they were religious. This new faith was made up of the scoffers, rebels, revolutionists, anarchists, socialists of all shades from the "pink tea" intellectual to the dark purple lawbreaker. The term "radical" was used to cover them all. But while all were freethinkers, agnostics or atheists, they were as fanatical in their faith of the coming revolution as ever any primitive Christian was for the immediate establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Faith is infectious and radicalism made a tremendous appeal to the young, to idealists, to all who were brought face to face with the tragedies of modern society and who were totally disillusioned by the blight of conservative reaction then entrenched in power. Gross injustices were to be witnessed on all sides.

Almost without realizing it, you became a "comrade" or "fellow worker," like the primitive Christian, a member of a secret order. The martyr, it has been well said, creates the faith. Well, there were martyrs aplenty in those days—men and women who had served in prison for their beliefs and were honored accordingly. One had hardly any social standing at all in radical circles unless one had "worked for wages," or brushed up against the police or had served at least a few days in jail. As in the early Church, most of the members of this order were of the working classes, though there were eccentric millionaires, editors, lawyers and rich women who had experienced "conversions" and were active in the "movement."

Three who often came together in the Sanger parlor were examples of these disparate elements—John Reed, son of Portland's leading family, in his mid-twenties was a first-rate journalist. His western speech, overlaid with a Harvard accent, contrasted oddly with that of his associate, Bill Haywood, leader of the Wobblies. Margaret found a gentle and discerning side to this uncouth giant as did Jessie Ashley, Haywood's usual companion. She was a wealthy blue blood and, thanks to the training of her brother, dean of the New York School of Law, the city's first woman lawyer.

The Sanger parlor became a microcosm of New York's left wing, but the full spectrum was soon on display at the famous Evenings of Mabel Dodge. Lincoln Steffens, king of the muck-rakers, had suggested a salon for the radical left and Mrs. Dodge, trying to fill a vacuum in her own life, agreed to start such a group.

This literate and clever Buffalo heiress grew up with a sense of everlasting emptiness. From early childhood, her unloving and eccentric parents had planned their days so that all three of them separately lived out their "different modes of loneliness." Now in her early thirties, disenchanted with her second husband and before her stupendous affair with John Reed and his successors, Mrs. Dodge presided over her drawing room off Washington Square.

In her autobiographical volume, *Movers and Shakers*, Mrs. Dodge told how she entertained trade unionists, anarchists, suffragists, poets, lawyers, murderers, and Wobblies. The last, sitting cross-legged on the floor, were as hirsute as latter-day Hippies, although inside, they were men of steel. Apparently Big Bill Haywood did not look so, for Mrs. Dodge once described him as "a large, soft, overripe Buddha with one eye." He was stretched out that evening on her yellow damask chaise longue with a bevy of maidens at his feet.

On that occasion stocky Emma Goldman, the anarchist, harangued. Present also were two recent and disparate Harvard graduates, Walter Lippman, self-assured and precise of speech, earnestly trying to achieve a meeting of minds, and John Reed, who poured out his breathless and boyish enthusiasm.

Margaret Sanger sat serene and quiet, "the Madonna type of woman with soft brown hair parted over a quiet brow." This was

early in the salon's history before Margaret became what Mrs Dodge called the "arbitrarily chosen voice of a new gospel"

By curious chance Margaret described Mabel Dodge that evening "brown bangs, outlining a white face, simply gowned in velvet, beautifully arched foot, beating the air" For two hours she watched that "silken ankle in its violent agitation" These two young women both gifted, attractive, ambitious, and moving in the same circle, noted in the other a trait that seemed significant in their divergent lives Margaret's outer repose sprang from her inner strength, while Mrs Dodge's foot expressed her rudderless diletantism

Although Margaret was not ideologically inclined, she accepted various assignments from Local 5, hoping to find some worthwhile part to play For a time she recruited working women for the Socialist Party and wrote for its paper, *The Call* Her first assignment was an article on the laundry strike To gather material, she went into the homes of the poorest-paid union members Some of them rose at five, had ten minutes off for lunch, another ten minutes for supper, and reached home at eleven o'clock This was one of the few strikes in which men and women picketed together, but Margaret found their attitudes different The women, also wanting shorter hours and higher wages, nevertheless, were skeptical After all, a few more pennies would not care for another baby What the men fought for was not as important as what they refused even to discuss with their wives, family limitation

One day Margaret reluctantly agreed to pinch-hit as a speaker to a small group of women When she felt the old alarm at the pit of her stomach, she realized that this was her first speech since school days Although she switched the subject from labor to her own specialty, health, she wrote afterward that she was too nervous to eat any dinner Still, the subject was such a welcome change that the group asked for a series of talks, which she prepared while on an obstetrical case as her patient slept As the series of talks progressed, she was rewarded by a constantly growing audience

Because of the unusual interest, *The Call* asked for some health articles to be run Sundays in its Women's Section These columns, named "What Every Mother Should Know," were later published

as a pamphlet They included some thoughts that Margaret had developed in her Hastings days

When her son Stuart and his little friends had begun to ask about babies, she had called them together If she did not specifically mention the birds and the bees, nevertheless, she approved the traditional approach By starting the explanation with other forms of life and moving up the evolutionary ladder from plants and insects to fish, frogs, and mammals, sex was depersonalized, the mother lost her self consciousness, and the child learned his place in nature

The column was so popular that *The Call* asked for more and Margaret agreed on a second series, "What Every Girl Should Know," an introduction for adolescents to the subject of sex Everyone seemed pleased until one Sunday she turned to the Women's Section with its familiar heading, "What Every Girl Should Know," and read in large black type "Nothing!" Underneath were the words "By order of the Post Office Department"

It was no joke, no accident Into Margaret's mind flashed the well-known likeness of Anthony Comstock, bull-necked, white side whiskers, and bald pate For forty years he had been the special agent of the Postmaster General, enforcing the obscenity laws that he himself had drafted and almost single-handedly put through Congress

Comstock was known satirically as the nation's Guardian of Purity, but in this article, which dealt with venereal disease, Margaret felt that her motives were the same as his, the protection of the young The censorship seemed the more baffling since the city itself had lately opened a Bureau of Social Hygiene to fight the "social evils" In her article, Margaret, as a nurse, had treated the subject explicitly That, she was informed, was just the trouble She had used the words "gonorrhoea" and "syphilis," instead of generalities which her readers would not have understood

This first brush with Comstock was characteristic of the man who could not distinguish between education and obscenity He, more than any other individual, would obstruct her way and in so doing, assure her future

It was in the cause of labor and again as a nurse that Margaret first attracted national attention. At Lawrence, Massachusetts, 25,000 low paid and unorganized textile workers staged a walk-out. Fourteen hundred soldiers were rushed there, but instead of keeping the peace, one of them accidentally shot a girl picket. With this as an odd excuse, the labor leaders were arrested, whereupon Big Bill Haywood appeared on the scene to direct a spectacular show with parades, songs, speeches, and pickets endlessly circling the plants.

The question was the staying power of labor, for parents usually gave up as soon as they heard their children's hunger cries. Since the strikers were mostly Italian, New York's Italian colony borrowed an Old World practice and offered temporary adoption of the strikers' children. Probably it was Haywood who suggested that the nurse, Margaret Sanger, should head a committee to bring the children to New York.

On Margaret's insistence, the youngsters had a physical examination before leaving town. She sent one child home with diphtheria, several with chicken pox. All of them were in bad condition, undernourished and dressed in rags in spite of the bitter weather. Six weeks later when the young visitors came back to Lawrence, she had the pleasure of seeing them transformed into healthy, happy, and warmly dressed children. Between times, playing a small part in the successful outcome of the strike, she stepped for a moment into national prominence.

In answer to a charge that the children's exodus was a publicity stunt, Milwaukee's Victor Berger, the Socialist congressman, started an investigation of the workers' conditions. Among those whom he called to testify was the nurse, Margaret Sanger. For the first of many times she took the train to Washington and appeared in the crowded chamber of the Rules Committee.

The strikers' testimony had made a poor impression with too few facts and too much emotion before Berger called Margaret to the stand. Although a few months back she had flinched at speaking to a handful of working women, now she had the outward calm of a veteran as she addressed an audience of congressmen and in-

dustrial and labor leaders, as well as a barrage of blinding, clicking cameras

Her nurse's training had taught Margaret to classify significant details and so, with the help of her notes, she could answer questions about the children's ages, weight, and physical condition. She reported that they were all undernourished, and that most had enlarged tonsils and adenoids. Only 4 out of 119 wore overcoats, none had woolen clothes, and few had underwear.

Next morning many people across the country admired the photograph of the slim young nurse who had testified so ably.