

The Die Is Cast



As a nurse, Margaret specialized in obstetrical cases, in part so that she might plan her schedule and be back home in the usual two weeks. At that time most women still had their babies in their bedrooms and Margaret's calls ranged from the professional and clerical classes down to the very poor.

Sometimes she went to prosperous homes where the long hoped for child was a cause of celebration. Here the mothers were treated like heroines who had just performed their highest service. Friends showered them with flowers, gifts, and tender solicitude. Even before his birth, the baby had been endowed with a layette of charming clothes and equipment for every need. These young mothers were eager to learn all about infant care so that their precious progeny would start with every asset.

Some of the poor also saved money for doctors and nurses. They had painfully scraped it together over the months by sacrifice and with the help of donations from relatives. But among the poor, Margaret seldom attended a first baby. Often, in addition to older children, there had been many miscarriages and abortions. The shocking fact was that in such families a baby born dead was a reprieve from deeper misery. Margaret saw, firsthand, that all babies were not created equal, since the wanted ones had a vast headstart over those whose coming spelled disaster. Unless the mother was physically fit and the father could support him, a child might be handicapped for life.

Some of her calls came from the lower East Side of New York, from cold water flats where sunshine never entered the rooms which opened on dark courts reeking with refuse. As the ultimate in desolation, she recalled once plodding up five flights of stairs to find the baby had arrived ahead of time. A ten-year-old-boy, helping his mother, had cleaned up by dropping the placenta out of the window.

In this district, the women, who were worn out at the age of thirty, were all obsessed by their need to prevent another pregnancy. When word spread that there was a nurse in the building, neighbors appeared one by one with gifts of homemade delicacies. The real reason for the calls came out in their questions as they lingered at the door.

At first Margaret tried to explain the two ways on which the middle class relied—the condom and withdrawal. The women hooted at the notion that their men would ever use either method. Margaret began to see that since sex was the poor man's only luxury, he would not mar his instant pleasure with prudence for the future. What the women wanted was some protection that they could use themselves. They wanted "the secret" which they were certain rich ladies possessed.

Occasionally, after an interval, Margaret returned to the same street, where she learned the tragic end of some of her visitors. Mrs. Cohen had been taken to the hospital and never came home. Mrs. Kelly had sent her children to her sister's and then put her head in the gas oven.

What did the others do about unwanted children? They tried everything, from herb tea to turpentine and patent medicines. They rolled downstairs or inserted button hooks and knitting needles into their bodies. When all this failed, they collected their nickels and dimes and queued up on Saturdays, sometimes a hundred, at the office of the \$5 abortionist. He performed a quick curettage and sent the patient home, where she might bleed to death. There were few complaints, since the whole business was illegal.

Saints might like to help the poor, thought Margaret, but she preferred to work with the clean and happy middle class. It was not just the physical hardships from which she shrank, but the fact that

she was inadequate. She could neither give the women what they needed, nor convince them that she had no secret.

In mid-July 1912, Margaret took on a case of a woman near death from blood poisoning caused by a self-induced abortion. Jake Sachs, a truck driver, had come home one evening to find his three small children in tears on the floor huddled about his unconscious wife. He called a doctor, the doctor called Margaret and together they started a frantic, uphill fight to save the woman. Sachs took the children to relatives and did what he could to help Margaret. Since his home had no conveniences, every morning before leaving for work, he lugged up the water supply and in the evening, took down the slops and refuse. Neighbors brought groceries and carried up heavy squares of ice.

A fierce heat wave hit the city, turning the little flat into an inferno with no respite even at sundown. It was an incredible heat that went on day after day, night after night while Margaret, with few breaks for sleep, performed her round-the-clock chores as if herself in a fever. Never had she worked so hard and continuously, but at the end of two weeks the doctor said that the crisis was past. They had won a victory.

Still in her twenties, Sadie Sachs had a gentle gravity even in the days of rejoicing when her husband and children hugged her. She managed only a wan smile when the neighbors brought in their custards and congratulations. During the third week she seemed brooding, aloof from everyone until Margaret was about to leave. Then she voiced her fears.

"Another child will finish me, I suppose?"

Margaret, evading the question, turned it over to the doctor on his last call. He nodded emphatically and stepping over to the bed, warned,

"Any more such capers, young woman, and there will be no need to send for me."

For a moment Mrs. Sachs stared back at him and then, as though summoning all of her courage, asked, "But how can I prevent it?"

Now it was the doctor's turn to hesitate, although he had no intention of becoming involved in that subject. "You want to have

your cake and eat it too," he chuckled Just before leaving, he added another jocular word "Tell Jake to sleep on the roof!"

As the door closed Margaret saw a look of desolation on Mrs Sachs's face Claspng together her thin, blue-veined hands, she pleaded with her nurse to tell the secret She was so desperate that Margaret dared not admit her ignorance Instead, she promised to return soon for a talk She made her patient as comfortable as possible and when she fell asleep, Margaret guiltily hurried off

All the way home on the subway and for many nights after, Sadie Sachs's face haunted her She meant to return, but in the next days she was busy with her own family and with writing her columns for *The Call* Later she took other cases Yet, her real reason for not going back was that she had nothing to tell Mrs Sachs

Jake telephoned in October His wife was sick again and in the same way Now it was Margaret who felt desperate She wanted to say that she could not come She thought of sending someone else, but in a few minutes she was back on the subway, heading south

Once more she found Sadie Sachs near death, this time she was gone in a few minutes Jake sobbed like a maniac "My God! My God!" he wailed Margaret folded the thin, blue veined hands that had vainly pleaded with her She pulled the sheet over the white face and left

That night, during hours that she later recalled as the most momentous in her life, she walked and walked, hardly conscious of her surroundings or aware of the heavy nurse's bag that she carried She was acutely aware of a great change Something within her had gone with Sadie Sachs's life It was her reluctance to face a forbidden truth This was a turning point Because of this night, tomorrow and forever would be different She knew the future She would close her heart to every other cause to give herself to one great goal

At three o'clock, when she reached home, everyone was asleep She looked down from her window at the hushed city As she wrote in the *Autobiography*, she saw "with photographic clearness women writhing in travail to bring forth little babies, the babies themselves naked and hungry, wrapped in newspapers to keep them from the

cold, six-year-old children with pinched, pale, wrinkled faces, old in concentrated wretchedness, pushed into gray and fetid cellars, crouching on stone floors, their small scrawny hands scuttling through rags, making lamp shades, artificial flowers, white coffins, black coffins, coffins, coffins interminably passing in never-ending succession. The scenes piled one upon another." She could bear it no longer.