

The Search

6



Although Margaret Sanger had made a decision that would alter her future, she awoke with no plan of action. She knew in which direction she meant to go, but being a practical woman in a technological age, she also knew that she must have careful guidelines. As she saw it, her task was to liberate the masses of poor women from their age-old sexual servitude. She would no longer patch them up to repeat their pitiful ordeals and never again did she take a nursing assignment. That decision was easy, but before she could plan her strategy, she must educate herself.

Again she turned to her doctor friends, asking, as so many women had asked her, if there were not some way for a wife to protect herself against an unwanted pregnancy. No one gave her a definite answer, and she began to suspect that most of the medical profession were as ignorant as she. Beyond that, physicians feared to discuss a subject that was banned by both state and federal laws. That was the crux of the matter, they salved their consciences by saying that since the poor enjoyed breeding like rabbits, they would never use contraceptives. They always closed their remarks by warning that the bogy Comstock would get her if she didn't watch out!

Margaret's next hope was the libraries. She tried many, including that of the American Academy of Medicine, but neither private nor public collections helped her. The Comstock laws had insured a vacuum of information.

During her search, she did discover Krafft-Ebing's recent study

of homosexuality and Havelock Ellis's seven volumes on *The Psychology of Sex*, which she "swallowed in one gulp" Later, suffering from psychic indigestion, she wondered why there should be so much material on abnormalities but nothing on the needs of normal married people

In this winter of frustration she failed to find any support for her cause She had thought that all feminists would be her allies, but those she talked with said that they could do nothing until they had won the vote To her this was the wrong priority because millions of women would remain politically indifferent until freed from the burden of excess children From their standpoint, the suffragists were indubitably right They had been inching along, state by state, for three generations until they had almost enough congressional support to insure a national victory It would have been absurd to endanger the outcome by embracing a new and explosive issue Furthermore, once women had the vote, they could take the lead in support of the needed changes

Her labor and Socialist friends were also cool "Wait until we win our economic rights," they told her "Wait until a million more Sadie Sachs die," she sputtered Bill Sanger began to think she was obsessed After all, it was not her problem, she had wanted three children Sometimes she doubted that any man would understand this feminine tragedy Yet it was a man and a labor leader who finally suggested her first practical step

By spring she was a dispirited crusader Not for a moment did she abandon her cause, but since she had reached an impasse, she decided to remove the children from New York's oncoming heat and retire to some cool, quiet place, where she might gain a perspective Whatever the future, about which she had forebodings, she and the children would have this time together

She had heard of a lovely isolated spot on Cape Cod, near a fishing village called Provincetown, unknown as yet except to a few artists and writers There she rented a cottage with a porch on the Bay Sitting on the steps of the house, the children could dabble their toes in the rising water, while at low tide they had a two-mile beach for play Stuart, nine years old and active in all sports, was the leader, after whom the younger ones, hand in hand tagged

behind Grant, with his father's dark hair, was the protector of blond, mischievous Peggy

More than a half century later the brothers, who had both become doctors, agreed that Peggy at some time contracted an unrecognized case of poliomyelitis, leaving one leg with a slight muscular atrophy Grant believed that this had occurred during the 1912 epidemic He also thought that the illness, inflicting a permanent limp, was a source of dissension between his parents However unjustly, Bill Sanger felt that his wife's deep preoccupation with her new concern had made her deficient in caring for Peggy The fact that Margaret never mentioned the affliction, in spite of all that she wrote about this beloved daughter, may testify to the poignancy of her feelings

Bill had joined the family for a long vacation in order to paint He was now in his forties, he still disliked his profession and had never had a chance to go to Paris Furthermore, he and Margaret were drifting apart He had been very patient during her illnesses In fact, he had been at his best when caring for her, but her new commitment seemed to threaten their relationship and made him irritable Meanwhile, her absorption in ending the needless tragedy of mothers may have lessened her interest in his personal ambition to be a painter

Into the small summer colony lumbered Bill Haywood, guest of Jessie Ashley, who had brought him to recover from the collapse of the silk workers' strike at Paterson, New Jersey During long walks with him on the beach, Margaret became fascinated by his belief that he belonged so fully to the oppressed workers of the world that he would make no binding, personal ties Perhaps that was the price for successful leadership Out of his one good eye, Big Bill watched the young Sangers at play and then offered some surprising advice Margaret should never sacrifice the happiness of her children She had no thought of sacrificing anyone, but she always recalled his idea of belonging to the world

Sympathetic to her cause, although to him it was a secondary issue, Big Bill one day made a fruitful suggestion There was a country, he reminded her, where, for three generations the birth rate had been declining and where most families practiced some

kind of contraception Why not go to France for a spot investigation? He would be there in the fall and could introduce her to the Syndicalist workers who had fraternal relations with his own Wobblies

The idea struck the Sangers as an inspiration Paris was what they both needed At last Bill would have his chance to study modern trends, while she gathered information To finance the trip, they would use the last of the Hastings house payment and savings which they had made for the children's education Someday they would replace this Meanwhile, they would start their trip with a Scottish detour so that Margaret might add to their funds by writing a series of articles for *The Call*

In October 1913, the five Sangers set out together for the last time Their two-week stopover in Glasgow proved a surprisingly useful contrast to Paris For twenty-five years this Socialist government had run all of its institutions, banks, schools, markets, hospitals, laundries, and even tenements *The Call* thought Margaret might appraise and extol this record Margaret appraised, but could not extol Instead, Glasgow corroborated her views that neither socialism nor any political system would solve the problems of the poor

She had been enthusiastic about what she saw until she learned that there were two Glasgows There was the municipal showpiece and there were the unspeakable slums The scientifically planned tenements were fine for small families, but where did the larger families live? "Not here!" insisted the building superintendents Large families were shunted to ghettos on the city's outskirts, where they squatted in filthy hovels in the shipyard areas, out of bounds of the much vaunted city utilities In these teeming suburbs, every woman carried a baby, while the older children begged for a halfpenny for bread Socialist Glasgow catered only to small families, the city's aristocrats!

The Sangers saw Paris at the end of an epoch, as it would never be again Everyone talked of the coming war, but Margaret and Bill, discounting such archaic nonsense, followed their personal concerns Plunging into his long-delayed studies, he was enchanted

when he met Matisse, whose work he had recently seen in the New York Armory Show of Modern Art

Among Margaret's letters of introduction was one to the editor of *L'Humanité*, the organ of the French Federation of Labor. His English wife was doubly helpful, not only acting as interpreter, but arranging meetings with key people. When Bill Haywood arrived, he further broadened Margaret's contacts by taking her into the homes of Syndicalist workers. Since there were neither Comstock laws, nor Puritan traditions, the French wives spoke as a matter of course with no embarrassment. After a few moments of casual chat, a stranger might explain the mysteries for which Margaret had vainly sought for years in the United States.

At this period "the secret" consisted of tampons, suppositories, and douches, used according to individual choice. "And where did you learn your system?" Margaret would ask. "My mother taught me," was the usual answer. "And where did she learn?" "From grandmama." For generations French women had been experimenting with homemade devices, the formulas for which they prized as they did their recipes for pot-au-feu.

Although French wives had created their own protection, they had not greatly affected the birth rate until their husbands saw an economic motive for doing so. Napoleon, paradoxically, was given credit for stabilizing the population, although, like all warriors, he urged large families. But he had come to power championing the goals of the French Revolution, and his legal code provided that a man's children share equally in his "estate." This was a reversal of the old laws, favoring the oldest son.

The Napoleonic Code stirred up unforeseen resentment among a new class of property owners, the once landless peasants. They had just gained their coveted plots of earth and had no mind to dissipate it among numerous children. The solution was a small family. For the first time men saw an advantage in contraception and insisted on its use. From now on a wife's duty was to regulate the numbers in the household, as well as to manage the work. If her system failed, she might have an abortion, which in France was relatively safe because it was performed by reputable surgeons.

This point of view was shared not only by the peasants and the

well-to do, but by at least one group of industrial workers, the Syndicalists "Conscious Generation" was a part of their platform, and the results showed in their living standards. Their wage scale was close to that of the Glasgow workers, but since it covered only one or two children, by contrast, their homes looked affluent. The gain was not just material, but spiritual. Because parents had the leisure and vitality to be companions to their children, whole families strolled in the parks together or visited the Louvre and other historical places. This way of life encouraged quality instead of quantity.

Although individualism had developed Conscious Generation, it also accounted for some failures. Since neither the medical profession nor any health agency was responsible, there were no standards, which resulted in needless errors and suffering. Too often family limitation was achieved by abortion and so the French system, which was no system at all, did not please Margaret. Nevertheless, she had finally learned what she had so long sought and felt as though she would explode with the illicit information which she wanted to bootleg back home. From then on she was impatient to leave.

Bill, on the other hand, was just starting his long postponed year of study and needed peace and quiet. As he put it in a letter, the winter had been hard, "storm-tossed by the din and roar of children and no studio." He knew that he was irritable, and at last agreed that the solution was a temporary parting of the ways.

On New Year's Eve 1913, the family, minus Bill, sailed from Cherbourg. When the children were asleep, their mother went back to pace the deck. Again her thoughts were racing as on the night of Sadie Sachs's death and again this woman whom she had failed, represented the millions whom she meant to save.

In her unpublished diary, Margaret wrote that the next day would start her new life, as well as the New Year. After fourteen months of hunting, she had found what she was looking for, but how could she use it? Of course someday she would describe all that she had learned and her work would doubtless be the first American one on contraception. But if she released the material now, it would be banned and her usefulness ended before she had achieved anything.

First she must create a following Her articles for *The Call* had appealed to the lower income women whose cause she championed Perhaps she could fire their interest by a journal planned especially for them She would announce that there were safe ways for women to prevent excess pregnancies and that in France those ways were freely used She would teach wives to insist on their own rights She would publish a paper to make the meek revolt The journal's name would be *The Woman Rebel*