

# The Woman Rebel

8



After renting a cheap little flat in uptown New York, and entering the children in a local school, Margaret started work on her magazine. She still cherished the hope that some labor union or wealthy feminist would back her. Years later she admitted that it would have been strange indeed if anyone had risked much on a relatively unknown young woman who had no experience as an editor and whose purpose was to advance an illicit cause.

But aside from her courage, she did have the asset of warm if impecunious friends, a few of whom offered publicity in labor and left-wing publications. Their advance notices of her paper brought in several hundred paid subscriptions at a dollar a year. Some unions also offered free distribution and the use of their mailing lists.

Another group of cooperators donated their spare time. Some wrote or did research in the libraries, and most of them addressed envelopes and typed letters in the Sanger dining room, which was the office for the forthcoming *Woman Rebel*. Margaret herself, as editor, manager, circulating department, and bookkeeper, was solely responsible for the publication.

One evening a few of these hard-working friends helped make an epochal decision. Since she was starting a movement, it needed a name. The terms then in use, such as Conscious Generation in France and Neo-Malthusianism in England, were too long, obscure, and lacking in appeal. She had mulled over the matter a long while before trying out on her friends certain possibilities, including "population control," "race control," "birth rate control."

"Drop the 'rate,'" someone suggested. At once everyone recognized that "birth control" was the name of her movement. The name would soon travel around the world.

Behind a movement should be an organization, and so they founded the National Birth Control League. Just when this occurred is not clear, and certainly the growth and maintenance of a national society was not a major objective.

The first issue of *The Woman Rebel* appeared in March 1914. Its lead article declared that the aim of the paper was to "stimulate working women to think for themselves and to build up a conscious, fighting character." Relying on shock treatment to teach downtrodden wives, the editor jolted them with slogans, such as, "No Gods, No Masters!" She told them to "look the world in the face with a go to hell look in the eyes, to have an idea, to speak and act in defiance of convention."

In its eight issues the magazine hammered away at such topics as child labor, women and children in industry, health, social hygiene, and above all, the results of having too many children. One article began, "Can you afford a large family?" Another explained the assets of a small one, starting with better living standards and going on to health and cultural opportunities. The provocative refrain was that a woman must be "mistress of her own body" and must determine her maternity. This was the most precious freedom.

At this period Margaret saw her fight in terms of the First Amendment to the Constitution, freedom of the press. For this reason she accepted some contributions that were irrelevant to birth control. After all, freedom of the press included even an anarchist defense of assassination in times of despotism. Later she dismissed this particular piece as "vague, inane and innocuous," but it was never innocuous. It was immediately hurtful and years later opponents still attacked Margaret's judgment on the basis of this article.

Her conscious policy was to harpoon Anthony Comstock. Waving a red rag at him, she tried to make him both so angry and ludicrous that he would strike out blindly on some unconstitutional ground. Max Eastman, of *The Masses*, ably appraised her efforts.

“We must thank Margaret Sanger for speaking out clearly and quietly for popular education in the means of preventing conception. There is no more important stand, and no stand that requires more bravery and purity of heart. And if the virtue that holds heroes up to these sticking points must be united with the fault of rather unconvincing excitedness and intolerance—all right, we will hail the virtue and call it a bargain at the price.”

For the editor, fringe benefits brought introductions to the world's leading feminists, from whom she quoted profusely. Her correspondence with English Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst, Swedish Ellen Key and South African Olive Schreiner later ripened into warm friendships.

In response to *The Woman Rebel*, many thousands of letters proved that labor wives were interested, although most of them wanted contraceptive information at once, and this she could not give. In spite of the fact that she never broke the law, in April she received an official, unstamped envelope from the New York postmaster. He wrote that the March issue of *The Woman Rebel*—the first—was unmailable. Since no specific article was mentioned, Margaret was puzzled and asked for particulars for future guidance. The reply was a copy of the first statement. In the next months she and the postmaster repeated this routine when the May and July issues were also banned.

Reports soon proved that the only copies of the March number that had been seized were those mailed from her local post office. After that, Margaret and her friends dropped the next issues into downtown mail boxes.

Meanwhile, Bill had sent cartoons for the first number, telling her not to use them unless she liked them. She did not, and he was deeply hurt. The overage student was working hard without much encouragement. He missed Margaret badly and was full of misgivings. Once he had to cable for money from her share of their rapidly dwindling funds, but in compensation, he sent some of his paintings to be sold. They were unsalable.

Bill planned to stay abroad for another year with a tour of Spain, Italy, and Germany, but instead, he would come back if she wished. She advised him to remain abroad, since it was his

chance of self-fulfillment Besides, she had found herself much freer for her work in his absence Increasingly, she felt remote from his aspirations, in which she had lost faith Finally, she wrote him what he called an "epoch-making" letter, asking to be released from every tie She wanted no personal relationship with any man, for in Bill Haywood's words, she was giving herself to the world

About that time, the world intruded on her personal problems with the news of the assassination of an Austrian archduke in a Balkan town with the unpronounceable name of Sarajevo There were headlines of possible war which Margaret, pacifist that she was, dismissed In any case, she had enough troubles of her own to consider, and with this her friends heartily agreed

Once more the Higgins family was conferring about Margaret She was obviously ill again, this time with her mind affected Some feared a complete nervous breakdown and insisted that Michael Higgins, the patriarch, must go to the big city which he had not visited in forty years, to take counsel with his distraught daughter No longer sympathetic to rebels and despising talk about sex, he blamed the nursing profession for having disclosed to his little girl "all of the secrets of the human body"

In New York father and daughter entered at once into a marathon argument which was interrupted one morning by the doorbell Two agents of the Department of Justice greeted the editor of *The Woman Rebel* with a warrant She had been indicted by the grand jury on nine counts for alleged violations of the federal statutes If found guilty, she would be liable to forty-five years in the penitentiary

When Margaret grasped the message, she asked the men to come in and sit down As they stumbled over a pile of woolly animals and a misplaced velocipede, it was their turn for surprise, which continued to mount as she explained about birth control She must have made one of the best presentations of her life, for three hours later the federal agents agreed that there should be no such laws as those she had violated Still, the laws existed and she must go to court

After the door closed, her father came out from the adjoining

room where he had been pretending to read the paper. Deeply moved, he took her in his arms as though she were again his favorite little girl. She was a "brave, clean warrior," he assured her and would win her case. Had he known before what he had just learned, her mother would still be alive. For the first time since Anne Higgins's death, father and daughter were united in spirit. When he returned to Corning, he tried again to collaborate with clippings and advice.

In Europe, the guns of August were in full blast when Margaret was arraigned in her personal war with her government. Nevertheless, her first session in court was so reassuring that she guessed that the federal agents had said a good word for her. Not only did Judge John Hazel postpone the case until fall, but the assistant district attorney volunteered that if this was not enough time, he would grant more. It seemed to her that these reasonable men would surely accept her story, as had the federal agents and her father.

Nevertheless, with an uncertain future, she must make new plans for the children. Bill's mother had died, but luckily they were used to being cared for by others. At the moment ten-year-old Stuart, wholly engrossed in sports, was enjoying summer camp in Maine. At her sister Nan's suggestion, she enrolled him for the next year at Winnwood, a Long Island boarding school. If need be, Nan herself would look after the younger ones who were spending August with friends in the Catskills. Margaret felt easier about Peggy because Grant remained her cherished guardian.

With the care of her children settled, Margaret turned to her long delayed task of writing up all that she had learned in France. She still had no idea when she might release it, but if she were to be locked up for life, the pamphlet, which she would call *Family Limitation*, must be ready as a last will and testament. "It is the big battalions of unwanted babies," she wrote, "that make life so hard for the working woman and keep her in poverty and stress from generation to generation. Every mother feels the wrong that the State imposes upon her when it deprives her of information to prevent bringing into the world children she cannot feed or clothe or care for." After a brief introduction, she set down in simple, straight-

forward language the forbidden knowledge, describing the condom, tampon, suppositories, and douches

Friends and family were now bombarding her with pleas for caution Margaret was blind and deaf to them as she poured out on paper what she had been longing to tell the Sadie Sachses of the nation Later, in writing of this period, she said that it was a wonderful sensation to live through weeks of apparent fanaticism Her single-minded vision obscured the possibility of defeat When she had finished writing, she began to look for a printer She interviewed specially recommended ones, twenty of whom turned her down before a Russian linotype setter agreed to do the illegal work after hours when the shop was supposedly closed

She had thought in terms of printing 10,000 copies, but after testing union demands, she wanted a million For lack of funds, she compromised on 100,000, most of which would go to leaders in the West Virginia coal mines, the Montana copper mines, and to the New England wool and New Jersey cotton workers She still did not know when to release them, although friends were already addressing the bundles It would have been exhilarating to have known that over the years they would sell 10 million copies of this pamphlet, that it would be translated into thirteen languages and that for a time in the Yucatan, Mexico, it would be given to each couple along with the marriage license

With her task done, Margaret felt singularly at peace Short of funds, she had not consulted a lawyer, nor had time to consider her defense plea when she learned one day in October that her case had been called and that she must be in court the next morning Still relying on the promise of whatever time she needed, she asked for a deferral

But the world had changed since August Belgium was overrun, the French lines had broken, and the Battle of the Marne was raging That was not all, thought Margaret, when the clerk trumpeted the words "The People versus Margaret Sanger" Her country was really at war with her In her mind flashed a huge map of the United States, which came alive like a prehistoric monster ready to trample on her, so small and helpless It was then she realized that with

a European war on, no one would care about her little freedom-of-the-press battle

Judge Hazel's attitude had certainly changed. He advised her to get an attorney at once, for the trial would start that afternoon. She found a labor lawyer who promised to secure a month's delay, but he failed. The utmost concession was a postponement until the next morning. The lawyer, by now convinced that her conviction had been decided on, insisted that she plead guilty, in which case he might be able to get her off with only a fine. Horrified, she said that she would call him later and went home.

She had eighteen hours to determine her fate. Somehow she had fallen into the one intolerable position—defeat with no effective protest. Unprepared as she was, she would be convicted by what had become a hostile court. Certainly she would not plead guilty because that would repudiate all that she stood for, furthermore, her children would have a mother known as a peddler of obscenity. On the other hand, if she served a long term, she might be broken in prison, which would hurt her cause, as well as herself.

Interrupting her thoughts came friends and relatives, most upsetting of all, Bill Sanger, just back with the last wave of refugees from France. He had taken a studio on Fifteenth Street, and now came to urge her to give up the fight. She must plead guilty and do what her lawyer said. Her mind stopped functioning. Then she asked everyone, including Bill, to leave while she made her decision. Alone at last, but surrounded with reminders of her children, she was still distracted. Finally, she packed a bag, went downtown and locked herself into an anonymous hotel room.

Her watch kept ticking off the seconds, devouring her period of freedom. Had she been indicted for *Family Limitation*, instead of *The Woman Rebel*, she could have projected her message to make the ordeal significant. Finally her course became clear. She must arrange the timing of the trial to favor her cause. By removing herself from the country, she could prepare an adequate defense. Meanwhile, she would release her blast on birth control.

Hastily she wrote letters to the judge and district attorney, ex-

plaining her plans. Because they had refused time for adequate preparation, she was leaving home, but she would inform them when she returned. To make her commitment clear, she added to each letter one of her illegal pamphlets.

All alone she made the tactical decision of her life. Then after calling a friend, she reached Grand Central Station shortly before midnight. There were a few to see her off, bringing money and promises to raise more for her needs abroad. With no passport and leaving behind all that she loved—her three children—Margaret Sanger boarded the train for Montreal, en route for England in the midst of war.