

## Exile



Reckless and immoral as her decision to leave seemed to many, it was, nevertheless, an inspiration. It proclaimed to millions not only that there were safe ways to limit the size of a family, but that discussion of the subject was a crime. Overnight the name Margaret Sanger became synonymous with a challenge to the law.

From her own standpoint, Margaret was simply buying time. Since she had been trapped in a position where defense was impossible, she had forced a postponement of her trial. Unexpectedly, her tactics achieved what Comstock and the Post Office most wanted to avoid, vast publicity on the censorship of birth control.

While on the train, to avoid extradition, Margaret changed her name. Later she regretted her ugly choice, but unconsciously she may have been attracted by the phonetics of the first name. For the next year she answered to Bertha Watson.

Friends who met her at Montreal volunteered to join with the New York group in raising money for her months in exile. Then, as soon as she was at sea, Margaret cabled her labor associates to release the 100,000 copies of *Family Limitation*. With that achieved, she felt completely drained, and for the next weeks suffered only an aching loneliness for her children, especially for little Peggy. Someday she hoped that her daughter would understand, perhaps would find life easier, because of her mother's crusade.

The ship on which she sailed was loaded with munitions and with men returning for home duty. All through Margaret's life well-wishers would appear when she faced emergencies. This time

one passenger was indispensable because on reaching Liverpool, she was told that she might not debark without a passport. England was at war. Although she never disclosed what happened, someone's personal intervention made it possible for her to land.

A prolonged fog and then a cheerless London lodging house increased Margaret's sense of desolation. Her flight had severed her life like a self-inflicted amputation. Here she was, thousands of miles from her family, with nothing to do in an alien land. In her unpublished journal she wrote "How lonely it all is. Could any prison be more isolated? Could one be more alone in solitary than wandering about the world separated from the little ones you love, from their childish prattle, caresses, whisperings and quarrels." As planned the previous summer, Stuart was at boarding school, but the care of the younger children had been hastily improvised. Margaret had been relying on Nan, but for once this most conventional of the sisters had been too shocked to help. Margaret had been forced to leave the younger ones with Bill's neighbors on Fifteenth Street.

To enlist the moral support of her sister Mary, now living in Buffalo, Margaret wrote a long letter, trying to explain what she had done and why. She also confided that Bill's year in Paris had "sort of prepared us both for a parting of the ways." Then, since her great concern was the younger children, whom Mary did not know, she described them, "beautiful dears, Grant dark with brown eyes and Peggy light with blue eyes. Just my romantic dream come true." Would Mary please keep in touch with Bill Sanger, who had promised to supervise the children? Of course various friends were also looking after them.

In these first London days she also noted in her journal that she had been so impressed by a lecture on the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, that she meant to study his works with a view to preparing her own talk. This was more than a passing impulse, for a quarter of a century later she closed her *Autobiography* with his words, "Build thou beyond thyself."

Since compassion had inspired her career, Margaret never accepted the simplistic view that Nietzsche exalted ruthless power. On the other hand, she too disliked weakness in herself and in

others, and agreed that so-called morality was often merely conformity. She found downright unhealthy the priestly rejection of physical joys, while approving Nietzsche's "Overman" who affirmed all phases of life and used the full powers of a trained mind, with passions controlled, but not deadened. It was better, she wrote, to develop the God within oneself than to worship "at the shrine of other egos."

Most earlier women crusaders had found their support in religion, but Margaret Sanger, alienated from orthodox churches, turned in her loneliness to this famous anti-clerical writer. Her study of Nietzsche probably toughened some of the fibers of her complex nature, helping her to stand alone, even to the point of relinquishing her husband. Interspersed among comments on Nietzsche, she wrote, "I have this day cast the die. I have written Bill a letter ending a relationship of over twelve years." Later she added that Bill would not be surprised, for she had prepared him. "Only I am very slow in my decisions. I cannot separate myself from my past emotions quickly, all breaches must come gradually to me."

One day she screwed up courage to write to the C. V. Drysdale, with whom she had been in touch as editor of *The Woman Rebel*. Dr. Drysdale was the current head of a family which for two-thirds of a century had headed the British movement for population control—the portentous-sounding Neo-Malthusian Association.

On a dark November afternoon Margaret swashed through drizzle to find her homesick despair dissolve in the cheery comfort of a fire, tea with scones, and the warmest welcome she had ever known. Several persons were present, they all knew her story and accepted her stand. More than that, they exulted in it.

It was as though she had met some close but hitherto unknown relations. These were her people. Their purposes were hers and, indeed, they had long been struggling for similar goals. They received her as an ally from the United States, a country just entering the first stage of a campaign which they had won decades earlier. So with her first London contacts, she found that she was not alone.

True, the English group had worked in quieter ways, because their goal had been to educate the educators. In British tradition,

they believed that if the upper classes supported family limitation, the masses would follow. But forty years of meager results had created so much dissatisfaction with their tactics that no one wanted to rebuff the brave young American, instead, they offered her their resources, helped to publicize her story, and later booked her for their meetings.

With the Drysdales' encouragement, Margaret began a course of self-directed study in the reading room of the British Museum. There she was given her own desk where she spent most of her waking hours. One December afternoon she shortened her usual schedule to accept another invitation to tea, this time with the author Havelock Ellis.

Contemporaries sometimes placed Ellis beside Darwin and Freud as a genius who had opened up a new science. This overstated his contribution, since he offered no new scientific system, but he did help to raise sex from the gutter and purify it in the sunlight of reason. A prodigious, wide-ranging writer, his unique contribution was *The Psychology of Sex*, whose seven volumes Margaret had read the preceding winter. While it did not give her the answers for which she was looking, she revered its author as the authority in the field from which her crusade stemmed.

Diffidently she had let the brass knocker drop and then was overwhelmed when her host himself opened the door. At fifty-five, he seemed a slender giant with the outdoor glow of a Viking, but combined with the snowy hair, beard, and brooding eyes of a prophet. He smiled a beautiful welcome as he led her into a small room cluttered with books and only slightly warmed by the gas fire on the hearth.

Margaret groped to fill a long silence, stuttering banalities, to which he hardly responded. Gradually it occurred to her that he was saying little because he was as shy as she. She relaxed and within the hour they had established real communication which they would maintain as long as he lived. On that first day they discovered profound similarities, including a single-minded sense of destiny which had come suddenly to each.

At the age of twenty, Ellis had settled his future by deciding to

explore the field of sex. He made the choice not because he was a highly sexed youth, for the fact was the reverse, but because the subject was a vast unknown territory, which, for the welfare of man, he thought should be examined. For him, it opened a unique career, starting with fifteen years of study, followed by fifteen years in which he poured out his erudition on paper. When he had fulfilled his plan, he wrote, "The work that I was born to do, is done."

Margaret understood his commitment, which strengthened her own. But there was another bond between them, their conflicts with archaic laws. Sixteen years before *The Woman Rebel* was banned, the first volume of Ellis's sex studies was condemned in London as "lewd, wicked, bawdy, scandalous and obscene." A promoter of the book had pleaded guilty when arrested, and Ellis had not intervened. Having a thin, reedy voice, he never spoke in public and feared that contention would reduce his scholarly creativity. The whole trial was bungled and the author so wounded that he never published any more books in England.

Ellis had relied on time to win his victories, and it had vindicated his faith. Soon after the trial, in the nineties, the controversial volume was issued in Germany and then in the United States by a medical publishing house. In the next years the series was translated into many languages. Avoiding disputes, the author had quietly pursued his work and although his books seldom made money, his prestige steadily mounted.

Havelock Ellis did not exult, as had the Drysdales, at his new friend's defiance of the law. Although deeply sympathetic and admiring her courage, he always urged caution. Had she followed his tactical advice, probably she would not be known today. On the other hand, she needed precisely the traits which he encouraged, a deeper understanding of her subject, moderation in statement, and an improved style.

As she studied his works, her first impulse was to burn all of her own. There was no reason for that, he assured her. While he was not certain she had a gift for writing, he liked *The Woman Rebel* because it was direct and sincere. Years later the great stylist cheered her progress with his enthusiasm for *My Fight for Birth Control*.

His immediate influence was to guide her daily reading. Since no one was more knowledgeable in her field, he became her counselor. His own habit was to spend two days a week in the library, and on those days they lunched together. Under his guidance, she developed an intellectual background that gave depth to her leadership.

But Ellis's impact was more than that of academic guide. To her, he was Olympian and when he stretched out his hand in friendship, she clasped that hand, never to let it drop. Years later in describing their first meeting in the *Autobiography*, she said that her emotion was too deep to be called excitement. She felt as though she had been "exalted into a hitherto undreamed of world." Their response to one another was such that they called each other "Twin."