

## “The Sage of Sex”



By the winter of 1914 Margaret had reached a turning point in her personal as well as her public life. Separated for a year, the Sangers had been drifting apart for much longer. In both of her autobiographies she said that her marriage had failed not “because of lack of love, romance, wealth, respect or any of those qualities which were supposed to cause marital rifts, but because the interests of each had widened beyond those of the other. Development had proceeded so fast that our lives had diverged, due to the very growth which we sought for each other.” From her standpoint this was true, although Bill would not have agreed.

From Paris he had written that ever since their first meeting her personality had set the die deep across his soul and he did not want to erase it. He had “basked in the sunshine of her mind, revelled in her vivacity and womanliness” and beyond that, had seen what she might become. Her “ways of thought would flash to the very skies” and there was no intellectual height she could not reach. Of course she must be relieved of family cares—although he did not suggest how—but he would rather accomplish less himself so that he might have “the priceless privilege to sit beside her spiritually while she expressed the best within her.”

Margaret did not want to live with anyone “conscious that her necessities were thwarting or dwarfing his progress.” Furthermore, in her new, demanding role she had neither time nor inclination to cherish a struggling painter in whom she had lost faith. Like a runner stripping off nonessentials, she wanted to be free of

Bill Sanger In spite of his devotion, he seemed to Margaret jealous, blundering, overbearing, insensitive, and always improvident

Probably the truth was that she had never loved him as he loved her Some of his traits which had at first attracted her, because they were so like her father's, she no longer admired Her instinct had been sound in trying to delay the marriage, just as he had been right in thinking it must be then or never His insistence had won his young bride, but now his beloved wife wanted her freedom

In England that winter there seemed a parallel in the personal lives of Margaret Sanger and Havelock Ellis He too was married in what his wife called a “semi-detached” way, which included living apart Currently she was on an American lecture tour, but the real separation had grown over the years through a series of complicated relationships By this time Ellis had concluded that his wife was “congenitally unfit” for marriage

Ellis's own unusual traits emerge from his posthumous *My Life*, as well as several biographies After the shy, precocious youth had decided to make sex his specialty, he studied medicine, taking a certificate of honor in midwifery, which he practiced for a year in London's slums This background gave some authority for his later writing He then retired to his studies Karl Marx, he once observed, “a student seated in the library of the British Museum,” was consumed with zeal in behalf of the proletariat whom he did not know He might have added that Havelock Ellis, a student seated in the same library, became an authority on sex, with which he had slight personal acquaintance

His pseudo introduction to the subject came in the eighteenthies with his friendship for Olive Schreiner, the South African feminist who was visiting England For four years they were spiritually inseparable Affectionately she called him her “other self” and more picturesquely, “a cross between a satyr and Jesus Christ” Since neither type appealed as a husband, they did not marry He frankly said that she realized that he was not fitted to play the part which her “elementary, primitive nature craved” To him, she remained a wonderful preview of future women, freed from

the taboos imposed upon them by possessive males. So he became the champion of Woman.

In 1891 he married Edith Lees, another dynamic feminist. Before the wedding, he made clear that his work would always come first and since it was not remunerative, Edith must care for herself and have no children. He would continue in his quiet bachelor quarters, but they would vacation and later spend their old age together. She accepted these rules partly because she too was independent, having revolted against a harsh father and stepmother, partly because she had a small income and faith in her own creative powers, but mostly because she loved him. After the wedding she found another barrier to conventional marriage. They were physically incompatible and after much frustration, they agreed to forget about sex. Both of them doubted his virility and they never again tested it.

Their letters, with which *My Life* is replete, show that they remained remarkably affectionate, although there was a change. Perhaps because of her unhappy childhood, Edith began to invest her husband with the maternal qualities that she had never known. He responded and always said that she had the spirit of a young boy. Meanwhile, in nonpsychiatric terms, a recluse had married a very active and sociable woman. To occupy herself, as well as to increase her income, Edith undertook many projects, including writing, and had some success. These activities filled the days of a wife who had no children nor husband to care for.

To fill the emotional void, she turned to those who wanted her company and over the years developed a series of intense friendships with other women, most of which Ellis said were like school girl crushes. Edith yearned, he explained, for someone on whom to lavish her attentions and to "expend a love which was like passion, even if an ethereal one." So etherealized was her greatest love that she conceived a posthumous, mystic cult around the memory of this woman.

Being forthright, Edith confided her feelings to her husband, although in the first instance she seemed to plead for his understanding and attention. According to *My Life*, which is largely

an account of his marriage and ends with Edith's death, only this one attachment shocked him. He had not yet diagnosed Edith's case and had he done so, he would not have blamed her. He explicitly said that her acts were in good taste and she could not be reproved for errant feelings. What jolted him was that the new love proved that she was less absorbed in him. After subduing his hurt pride, Ellis wrote reassuringly and sent his “sweetest love” to her lady friend. In retrospect, some critics thought that had he tried to meet her emotional needs at this time, he might have ended such incidents, but perhaps deep down he was relieved that she also was vulnerable.

In the first weeks of their marriage Ellis had been bored by her social demands on him. He wrote bluntly that he was not dependent on her for friends and did not want her to depend on him. Privately he admitted that her exuberance exhausted him. He recalled the old saying that a writer should marry a feather bed, but far from being a reposeful bed, Edith was more like a porcupine. To preserve his tranquillity and to ward off her pricks and proddings, he threw up an insulating wall around himself.

There may have been another reason why he did not oppose Edith's ardent friendships. Although he always maintained that his marriage was an ideal comradeship of the spirit—which was the best type of union—Ellis later found that he craved certain feminine traits that Edith did not have, but which were embodied in Amy Smith, a young girl whom he had long known. He kissed her once and then, as candid as Edith, he told his wife. She was furious, which he thought unjust, in light of his own self-imposed tolerance. Later he argued that Edith's double standard, conflicting with his own belief in mutualism, drove him into his first liaison. Still forthright, he gave her a play-by-play account of his affair and to please her, once temporarily broke with Amy.

Edith then proposed that they should both drop their extramarital attachments and be self-sufficient again. Since he would not discuss this proposal, nothing changed. While they had failed in their first concept of devotion, he came to believe that having faced their problem honestly, they had achieved a new harmony with greater depths of love. As he finally convinced Edith, it was easy to imag-

ine a more or less sexual relationship with some other person, but the spiritual passion of their marriage was unique

During this period Ellis brought out his first volume of the sex studies, on inversion, a theme which Edith disliked. Meanwhile, she wrote a novel, *Kir's Woman*, on the spiritual love that sustained a marriage after an accident had rendered the husband impotent. He thought it her best work and for many years did not connect it with their relationship.

Meanwhile, Edith developed nervous afflictions, as well as suffering bouts of pneumonia and heart trouble. By 1913, her doctor diagnosed diabetes, which was serious in pre-insulin days. Nevertheless, at the age of fifty, she seemed in fair health when she launched her most daring plan, an American lecture tour. With a beautiful voice and good platform presence, Edith had always enjoyed public appearances and now, billed as Mrs. Havelock Ellis, she hoped to boost their fortunes. She would speak not only on her famous husband, but on his contemporaries and the new outlook on sex and marriage, with special stress on spiritual passion. Ellis, being a shy man who never made a speech in his life, winced at the public exposure, but since the tour would stimulate book sales, which he needed, he agreed. The preliminaries had all gone well in the fall of 1914.

In her *Autobiography*, Margaret says that Ellis often left notes for suggested reading at her library desk, sometimes they went to a concert or had tea in his apartment. Forty years later she threw a sidelight on this period in an unpublished letter to Françoise de Lisle, Ellis's last close friend. To her, Margaret wrote that Ellis had confided that his wife was a "congenital homosexual," whom he had tried to shield from gossip through marriage. By this time he believed that she was also a manic depressive.

In *My Life*, speaking of the young American woman, Ellis said that he had never known a more charming and congenial companion, nor found one so swiftly. Their moods synchronized perfectly, which had never been the case with Edith. "The relationship was one of calm friendship, even though there was a sweet touch of intimacy about it." The unpublished letters at the Library of Con-

gress, as well as other evidence, suggest more than a calm friendship brightened by an occasional cup of tea

One of Ellis's biographers, Calder Marshall, noted that it was months before Ellis kissed Olive Schreiner, years before he kissed Amy, but only a few days before he kissed Margaret Sanger In *Impressions and Omens*, which Ellis published a decade later, he celebrated that New Year's kiss "I cannot tell in what lurid gloom mixed with what radiant halo this year will stand out from all the years in the eyes of men alive on the earth before us Yet we two are still living and for all living things hope springs afresh from despair So it is that I have begun this new year at the stroke of midnight with a kiss" Down through the years, as he once wrote Margaret, "this holiday is forever associated with the memory of your dear presence"

After this they were in daily communication "Dear Woman Rebel," began an early note and then dropping the "Rebel," his salutation became generic—"Dear Woman," or "Pearl of a Woman," or "You Darling Woman" He usually signed himself, "Lovingly, H" as he did to Edith They exchanged photographs, and she cherished a clip of white hair, which to this day is kept with his letters He treasured a twist of brown hair with a golden glint

On January thirteenth he wrote

I think we should agree, dear Twin, on the subject of love I think that passion is mostly a disastrous thing and certainly ruinous to work, for it makes all work seem of less than no account And then too, it's always felt for the wrong person Indeed, its very intensity seems due to a sort of vague realization that *there's nothing there* But I cannot say that I think love is anything but good, and good for everything including work I mean by love something that is based on a true relationship and that has succeeded in avoiding the blind volcano of passion (or has continued to pass safely through that stage) To secure the peaceful, joyous and consoling and inspiring elements of love—and to escape the other—seems to me a very desirable and precious thing indeed and by no means a common thing

In *My Fight for Birth Control*, Margaret wrote that "as we talked, we wove into our lives an intangible web of mutual inter-

ests, and speaking for myself, I developed a reverence, an affection, and a love which have strengthened with the years" In her 1939 *Autobiography* she said, "I have never felt about any other person as I do about Havelock Ellis" It may have been the supreme relationship of her life, although later she declared that she had not been interested in marriage, since she was not divorced, had three children, and a cause to which she had dedicated herself

In *My Life*, Ellis explains rather awkwardly the long silence about Margaret in his letters to his wife It was not his habit to practice deceit, but in this case he felt no need for secrecy, since he had no sense of guilt He had failed to mention Margaret only because he was usually slow in becoming acquainted and wanted to be sure that this swift friendship was genuine

Meanwhile, Edith's tour was prospering beyond all hopes Her first lecture on her husband was at a crowded theater in New York People were turned away when she talked on "The Loves of Tomorrow," in which she stressed spiritual passion Off the cuff, in an interview, she volunteered that an enlightened wife should even love the woman her husband loved (just as she had learned to love Amy!) Because of her lectures, the book stores sold out their Havelock Ellis stocks and were ordering more

For two months the Ellises corresponded about the climax of her tour, which would be at Chicago's Orchestra Hall A group of women doctors was sponsoring a meeting on "Sex and Social Hygiene," and as a special feature, she wanted him to write a message for her to read Obliging, he wrote it, then forgot the meeting, the strain of the tour, Edith's excitable nature and apparently everything except Margaret Sanger

Convinced at last that the friendship was authentic, he poured out the good news in a paean of praise to the nobility, charm, and intelligence of the woman with whom he had joined in a new spiritual comradeship He sent the letter to Chicago where Edith received it on the eve of what she thought the greatest day of her public life That night she drank a cocktail, toasting her husband and his latest love Somehow, she managed the lecture, but afterward she only wanted to die

Because of wartime delays it was three weeks before Ellis learned of her reaction and could soothe her. Meanwhile, he had written five more letters, all about Margaret. He later suggested that the strain of the tour had shattered Edith's health and brought on one of her illogical depressions. It was the letters that had prostrated her, Edith always insisted, but since she destroyed them, neither could prove his point.

Certainly the tone of her letters changed overnight from confidence to grim despair. She wrote of loneliness and death, and while denying jealousy, said that she was weary of everlasting crucifixion. The well-balanced Havelock Ellis, always serene and rational, mostly ignored this melodrama.

Yet she had a point. For twenty years Edith had schooled herself to accept Amy. Her husband had convinced her that a “more or less sexual relationship” with another woman was unimportant compared to her unique spiritual comradeship. So she had triumphed over her early jealousy and learned to send her love to the other woman in her husband's affections. Although not sure of herself in the conventional role of wife, on this tour, dedicated to the exaltation of Havelock Ellis, she had tried to embody the happy modern, married woman. She was in this exposed public posture when her husband announced that he had a new spiritual comrade. This one was a heroine, young enough to be Edith's daughter. She was famous too and the *New York Call* soon linked her name with that of Ellis. Gossips even reported that Edith was not really married anyhow.

If her husband were, indeed, “merged” with another being, Edith lamented from across the ocean, then her own foundations were gone. She apologized that her pride and pain could not always bear all things. She would rally herself to smile with a broken heart, and, in Ellis tradition, she sent affectionate greetings to “M.” If she herself died, she wryly suggested, her possessions could furnish an apartment large enough to share with both “M” and “A.”

Then she collapsed with fever, throat ulcers, and a heart attack. Canceling the rest of her tour, she miserably began to consume her hard-earned profits. At this point a kindly woman doc-



tor took her into her own home for treatment and convalescence. She wrote Ellis suggesting that he come to America to escort his sick wife home. He thought the letter a mere formality and failed to answer it.

Just after the *Lusitania* sank, Edith crossed the dreadnaught-studded Atlantic in a crowded, filthy ship. Still weak as she landed, she was badly upset when a newspaper woman asked if Mrs. Sanger would be waiting at the dock with Mr. Ellis. "Are you alone?" was her anguished and mysterious greeting to her husband.

She stayed a few nights at his London flat, but one day, after Amy called, Edith took morphia tablets. Ellis rescued her, but seemed to miss the link between the visit and the tablets. From her letters to him, published in *My Life*, it is clear that Edith's two desires were for her husband's presence and the assurance of his love. During the first terrible year he found it hard to grant either. She suggested divorce so that he might marry Margaret, and she finally drew up a strange "deed of separation."

Actually, Edith's return hastened the end of the first phase of the Ellis-Sanger relationship. They saw each other only rarely before Margaret returned to the United States, when their correspondence slackened to a weekly rate. She had been home for a year when he wrote, "Your birthday was a sad, sad day for me. On that early morning Edith died peacefully [A diabetic attack following a chill]. I wished that I had been more with her of late, as she always wished, but I know it was wiser as it was. She was always a child, although a very lovable child." Neither suggested anything symbolic about Edith's leaving the world on the anniversary of Margaret's birth.

Along with some of Ellis's erudition, Margaret took home with her his attitude toward sex. One of the first to view the subject in a scientific way, he thought that he had slain the dragon of guilt and that the world would be sweeter for his work. While not going as far as Freud in judging sex the one cause of great emotion, he knew that it was part of the deepest and most volcanic human feelings, but unlike the hunger drive, it could be transmuted into creative outlets. Theoretically, he approved unlimited sexual free-

dom and for women too. Men had always indulged their lusts, but Ellis insisted on a single standard of morality, as well as a new concern for women's erotic needs. He thought that if all relations were guided by love, they would be pure, the only remaining monster would be jealousy.