

Visit to the Future

12



While Margaret was studying the history of her movement in London, Anthony Comstock made Sanger history in New York. He did so with his usual routine. One day a man introduced himself at Bill's studio as an old friend of Margaret's. Telling a pitiful tale of too many children and his wife's poor health, he asked for a copy of *Family Limitation*. Bill regretfully explained that he had none. Since the pamphlet had been written in his absence, he had nothing to do with it. The man seemed so disappointed that Bill rummaged through a desk and came up with his one personal copy.

A few days later the decoy returned with his familiar side-whiskered, massive-framed boss. Flourishing a warrant for Bill's arrest for circulating obscene literature, Comstock told him to come along quietly, presumably to the police station, but instead, with Bill protesting that he must see a lawyer, they went to a restaurant. Comstock assured Bill that he would advise him as a brother, lawyers would only aggravate the case. Growing affable as he enjoyed his dinner, the Inspector volunteered that once Bill had pleaded guilty, he would receive a suspended sentence. Bill rejected the idea on the grounds that the pamphlet was not obscene.

"Young man," declared Anthony Comstock between mouthfuls, "I have been in this work for twenty years and that leaflet is the worst thing I ever saw."

At one point in their talk, which Comstock was prolonging, he hinted that Bill would be acquitted if he told where his wife was. When Bill flared up about hell freezing over first, they finally ad-

journed to the police station. As planned, they arrived too late for Bill to reach a lawyer, and Comstock informed the press that Sanger could not secure bail. His victim spent the night in a filthy cell.

Bill sent word to Margaret to remain away until after the trial, which the court kept postponing. He was acting admirably, although for Margaret it was the ultimate irony that he should be harassed for her work, which had helped to alienate them. When the court deferred his case until the fall of 1915, she decided to remain abroad, in part because her research had reached a point involving another trip.

Poring over vital statistics in the British Museum, she had become enthralled by what looked like a benign force working exclusively in behalf of the Netherlands. In the last third of a century that little country had not only cut its overall death rate in half, but had achieved the lowest maternal death rate in the world, as well as the lowest urban death rate for babies. In grim contrast, the rich United States had the highest maternal death rate of any nation that kept statistics—three times that of Holland.

The Drysdales happily identified the benign force as a chain of birth control clinics. For three decades Holland had acted as a pilot project, showing the effects of contraception on race health. This work had originated through the efforts of Aletta Jacobs, the heroic Dutch woman doctor who had opened a free clinic, offering contraceptive counsel for the first time in history. Within a few years and within the radius of a few miles, the results were so striking that other people asked for clinics. Most of the subsequent ones were organized and supervised by Dr. J. Rutgers of The Hague. When Margaret learned that both of these innovators were still vigorously at work, she could hardly wait to see them.

From every prudent standpoint it was reckless to travel, for not only was Europe at war, but her false name might be discovered. Her fears were somewhat quieted when she asked for a visa at the Dutch consulate and the official merely said, "Eighty cents." Later she found that a letter from the flamboyant Bernarr McFadden of *Physical Culture* was her best passport. Before embarking on the channel boat, she nervously faced a battery of British inspectors

who wanted to know if she was on an American joyride. Had she any good reason for going? She answered with McFadden's request for articles on population growth and the problem of the unfit. With new respect, the official let her through.

Sighting neither submarines nor bombs, the channel boat arrived early one morning in Holland, an oasis of tranquillity in the war-torn continent. The Hague had embodied man's hopes for international arbitration, and even at this time its Peace Palace was being prepared for a Women's Peace Conference, to be presided over by America's Jane Addams. Margaret, also a pacifist, would have felt at home there, especially as she believed that her cause must be the cornerstone to world peace. However, with a false name and passport, she had to remain anonymous.

It was not yet nine o'clock when, quite unheralded, Margaret presented herself at Dr. Rutgers's home. The ringing bell started a chain reaction, with the opening of a tiny upstairs window, out of which darted a wizened head, like a cuckoo clock. It was the doctor himself, *not yet dressed or breakfasted*. He had deficient English but a welcoming spirit and was soon plying her with good Dutch coffee and brioches, while he commiserated over her story and answered her questions.

Margaret had been baffled by a major aspect of the Netherlands' program. The population had continued to grow. Dr. Rutgers set her right about the purposes of the clinics, which had nothing to do with either an increase or decrease in the numbers of Dutchmen. Instead, the aim was to ensure a good life for each individual. Basic to this was proper child spacing. After every birth, the mother was discouraged from another pregnancy until her own health and economic conditions assured a welcome for a new baby. Under this policy, infant mortality had dropped far more rapidly than the birth rate.

Since Dr. Rutgers was currently training two midwives for a new clinic, he obligingly enrolled Margaret in the class. Her apprenticeship in the Dutch system completely changed her views on contraceptive methods. She also learned that the issue was not just free speech, but trained instruction.

Of all the known techniques, the Dutch had found one vastly

superior. It was a diaphragm pessary developed by Dr. Jacobs in cooperation with a Dr. Mensigna, whose name it bore. Margaret had never heard of the device, but for several decades it would surpass all others and would be used around the world. The diaphragm's chief drawback was that there were fourteen sizes so that the skill of the fitter was as important as that of an optician picking the right lenses. With her professional knowledge of anatomy, Margaret found the task simple, and she personally fitted seventy-five women. After years of frustration, she was exhilarated.

At the Central Bureau of Statistics in off hours, she discovered how effective the program was.

In London she had learned about the low Dutch mortality rates, but at The Hague the army records showed that the nation's improved health was reflected in the increased stature of their men. Among the other social changes was the closing of all houses of prostitution. Few prostitutes were left and almost no native ones. Venereal disease in Holland had decreased, as had illegitimacy. The rate for the latter was the lowest in the world, a fourth that of its neighbor Belgium and less than half of England's. Most illegitimacy was found among Catholics, who did not use the clinics. Without fear of large families, other young people married early, and their children's educational achievements rose. In a land of small families, child labor was rare which, in turn, improved the position of labor.

In Holland, voluntary parenthood had, indeed, meant quality breeding and race improvement. Instead of condemning contraception as immoral, Dutchmen applauded it as a constructive force. Queen Wilhelmina had recently presented a medal of honor, along with a charter, to the Neo Malthusian League. Margaret had the reassuring sense that she had looked into the future and it worked.

After her first exultation, she learned that the admirable start suggested many unfulfilled possibilities. In the American sense, the clinics really were not clinics at all. At their best, they were perfunctory fitting rooms, where the person in charge had neither the time nor inclination to answer his patient's questions. Furthermore, for want of personnel, no records, except for names and

addresses, were kept This was the reason why the Dutch innovation was so little known and had made no impact on the rest of the world Had the Dutch centers written up case histories and maintained some follow-up, they would have had a treasure house of information for all nations On her return to England, Margaret meant to publicize the activities

A London lodging house might be a necessity in winter, but Margaret's friends thought it so intolerable for spring that Dr Drysdale's mother found a room next door to her own ivy covered home in Hampstead Gardens There, under the appleblossoms, she and Margaret enjoyed tea and talk at four o'clock The hostess was no ordinary person but the grande dame of the Malthusian movement

In mid-nineteenth century the Drysdales had all been united on the subject of fertility control, but the two doctor brothers had been rivals for the hand of another doctor, brave Alice Vickery, the first English woman physician Dr George won scholastic honors with a pioneer study of eugenics, which was translated into fifteen languages, but Dr Charles won the lady Together they launched and successively headed what they then called the Malthusian League Now, fifty years later, Dr Vickery, a leader of the nineteenth century, shared her insights, enlivened with clippings and photographs from the attic, with the new leader of the twentieth century

Although in her eighties, Dr Vickery lived chiefly in the present Nearly every day, stick in hand, she boarded the tram for some suffrage or eugenics meeting, where she would rise, calm but determined, to set the speakers right on controversial points One day she rounded up her friends, all modern-minded like herself, to hear about the Dutch clinics and Margaret's personal story

Some of those at Dr Vickery's tea decided that Margaret deserved a larger audience, which they provided by booking her for a lecture in Fabian Hall, to which came many important civic leaders On this occasion she met Dr Marie Stopes, a young and striking looking paleontologist They immediately struck up a

warm friendship which at first was mutually helpful and made a great impact on each of their careers

Dr Stopes wanted to hear more about the clinics and the subject of contraception, with which she was unfamiliar. Beyond that, she needed help with a manuscript called *Married Love*. Because of its forthright nature, she had been unable to find an English publisher and Margaret undertook the dubious task of finding an American one.

The Fabian lecture increased the number of Margaret's influential friends, who in the long run were a major asset. In the short run, however, with her funds almost gone, she was for the only time in her life tempted to abandon her cause. A publishing house had offered such a congenial and well-paid position that she longed to send for the children and settle down in a tolerant and friendly country. Instead, in September, bad news about Bill's trial brought her home.

Comstock had struck the keynote to the hearing when he told the press that the incriminating pamphlet was by "a heinous criminal [the defendant's wife] who sought to turn every home into a brothel." Presiding Judge McInerney apparently agreed, for he denounced *Family Limitation* as indecent, immoral, and a menace to society. Graciously, he added that men would not get into such trouble if they married decent wives who concentrated on having babies.

Bill was not allowed to read his carefully prepared defense, based on the rights of free speech, which the judge dismissed as "rigmarole." When offered the choice of a \$150 fine or thirty days in jail, Bill chose the latter, shouting to the judge, "I would rather be in jail with my self-respect than in your place without it," which, according to *The New York Times*, set off a volley of hand-clapping. This was the bright spot of the day, along with what Bill described as a sudden "apoplectic look of fury on the face of Anthony Comstock." The effect on Comstock was, indeed, the chief result of the trial.

Margaret felt sure that Bill had chosen jail in the hope not only of softening her penalty, but also of securing reconciliation with

her Thwarting that hope, as she must, made the return harder People had predicted that as Bill's trial went, so hers would go, but Comstock had announced that the author deserved five years at hard labor for every copy of her pamphlet It took more courage to sail back to her children than it had taken to leave them