

Homecoming

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In fog and darkness, for all lights were dimmed, the ship steamed across the Atlantic. The future, as well as the trip, were filled with foreboding. Margaret felt a weight at the pit of her stomach, at night she woke in a cold sweat. Sometimes she heard Peggy's voice trying to reach her, as she had often heard it in London. Once in a dream she was straining to move forward against an onrushing mob which suddenly turned into mice, so realistic that on waking she had to open the porthole to clear the musty stench.

On landing, her mood swung to exuberance when her overwrought nerves seized on several good omens. As she passed a newsstand, she read the headline, "What's to be done about birth control?" *The Pictorial Review* was taking a poll and had greeted her with the phrase that she had coined, "birth control." More startling, Anthony Comstock was dead! With him gone, perhaps after all, her obstacles would shrink into mice. The Sanger friends boasted that Bill's trial had finished Comstock, for at that time he did catch the cold that prostrated him some time later after exertions at a Purity League Conference.

Margaret's hopes began to soar. She had fled from her native land in bitterness, but it was good to be home! In those first hours she liked everything. Even the faces in the streets shone with vigor and honesty. When she saw her children, it was pure joy. In spite of her worries, the reports had been right, for they were in excellent health. Stuart had changed the most and was now a broad-shouldered boy, completely engrossed in sports and in his hero,

Uncle Bob Higgins, former all-American football star and now coach at Pennsylvania State University. The younger ones, still inseparable, were also, thank heavens, still affectionate. Grant was shy and winsome, Peggy, very bright and full of mischief.

The exile, fulfilling her promise to Judge Hazel and the assistant district attorney, Mr. Content, informed them that she was home and asked if the indictments still held. They did. Outwardly she was back where she had been a year before, although now her money was gone and she owed a great deal to Nan, Bill was in prison, and she had to face both the expense of her trial and family maintenance.

Two possibilities seemed to offer at least moral support. In her absence, the New York Academy of Medicine had elected Dr. William Jacoby president. In his acceptance speech, he had supported the principles of contraception and later had appointed the liberal Dr. William J. Robinson to head a study group on the subject. This gave Margaret premature encouragement which was quickly dispelled. Enclosing a check for \$10 as his personal contribution, Dr. Robinson warned her to expect nothing more.

Her other hope rested on what looked like a ready-made ally, the new National Birth Control League. The little committee of that name, which she had launched the previous year, had been reorganized by prominent women under the leadership of Mary Ware Dennett, able writer and suffragist. Presumably the goals, as well as the name, remained the same, and since they had taken over the files and mailing list of *The Woman Rebel*, Margaret asked what support they would give. In answer, she was invited to an executive meeting, at which Mrs. Dennett spoke for the group.

In this first encounter, Mrs. Dennett set forth her enduring opposition, which had been fortified by a study of *The Woman Rebel*. As late as 1926 in her book, *Birth Control Laws*, Mrs. Dennett insisted on Margaret's "atmosphere of violence," exemplified by the "wild words" of the 1914 journal. In 1915, Mrs. Dennett told Margaret Sanger that the purpose of the Birth Control League was to change the laws in an orderly, constitutional way. Since the league completely disagreed with her tactics, which they considered lawless, they would not sanction her activities.

Stunned at the rebuff, Margaret stared silently round the group which included a few of the old members. Perhaps to ease the tension, Mrs. Dennett rose and began to walk her to the door. On the way she observed that the league would welcome Margaret's list of distinguished Europeans interested in birth control.

Before she could improvise new plans, Margaret was engulfed in tragedy. Peggy came down with pneumonia. Putting off her appointment with Mr. Content, she became a full-time mother, night and day, first at home and then at the hospital. Everything was done for her child except that which might have helped. It was twenty years too soon for penicillin. The little girl, who Margaret always thought a perfect daughter, wasted away. Once, she opened her eyes to whisper, "Are you back, mother?" Again, as in her dreams in London, the child could not hear her reassurance.

Peggy's death was the most poignant blow that Margaret ever received. As she wrote in her *Autobiography* twenty years later, "The joy in the fullness of life went out of it then and has never quite returned." For a while she was numb and indifferent to the future. She could take no initiative.

But there was no longer any need to act. Although she was unaware of the fact, her tragedy had brought a turning point in public opinion. The story was in the headlines, and from across the country poured letters of condolence. Miners from West Virginia, lumbermen from the West Coast, unknown friends who had read *Family Limitation*, rallied to her support with small donations.

Closer at hand came impressive offers, although some hinged on a change of tactics. Most persuasive was the distinguished lawyer Samuel Untermyer. It was all so clear to him. Mrs. Sanger need only sign a statement saying that she would not break the law again. With that, he could persuade the district attorney to quash the charges and there would be no trial. "But the law would remain the same?" asked Margaret. Of course! But she would not go to jail. Going to jail was not her main concern, she tried to explain. She would not plead guilty, when she had not been obscene. Untermyer, a few minutes earlier, so kind and understanding, lost patience. So did others. By the time Clarence Dar-

row offered his services, she was convinced that any lawyer would cloud the basic issues

She had parted with her first attorney on this point and in England had been confirmed in the rightness of her stand Now she meant her trial to be the equivalent of the historic Bradlaugh-Besant trial of the nineteenth century By refusing to plead guilty, the English defendants had forced a test and while at first convicted, on appeal, their case had been dismissed on a technicality Margaret wanted to test the issue in the same way, but lawyers were not concerned with this because their prestige was bound up with keeping their clients out of jail

All right, she would take another page from the famous trial and defend herself This was no easy decision for a shy woman with no legal training, but, like Annie Besant, she would use the trial as a public forum to arouse the nation about birth control She too would explain that she was not the real defendant, but the counsel for the poor mute mothers who were denied their human rights Having made up her mind, she asked Mr Content to call the case as soon as possible It was scheduled for the end of November and then postponed until January

Meanwhile, the public image of a militant woman rebel had been displaced by that of the mother-nurse who for three weeks had watched day and night over her child To this new pathos was added a touch of heroism when she announced that she would speak for herself Finally an appeal from England gave an international dimension to her story

An open letter to President Wilson urged him to use his influence "not only for the benefit of Mrs Sanger, but of humanity" This well-publicized message called for an end to criminal prosecution for circulating material which would be allowed in every civilized country except the United States The letter had originated with Dr Marie Stopes who had secured the signatures of nine of England's most famous authors, including William Archer, Arnold Bennett, Gilbert Murray and H G Wells Its effect, as Margaret hastened to tell Dr Stopes, was of the greatest importance on the American public

To many who had discounted Margaret Sanger as a fanatic, this

English appeal was impressive. Some were eager to ride the bandwagon, others, aroused for the first time to the importance of the issue, offered help. A group of experienced suffragists gave Margaret what she had never had before, support from New York's top social register. Up to this time she had been either unknown or suspect to those whose shining names vouched for all important charity and social events. Her new volunteers organized a Night-Before-Trial dinner at the Brevoort Hotel. There would be just two speakers, Dr. Jacoby and Mrs. Sanger, but the guest list was composed of two hundred personages.

This carefully planned testimonial began with a crisis which Mrs. Stokes, the toastmistress, explained to Margaret as they went into dinner. Her own Cinderella-rise from Rose Pastor, the little cigar maker, to the wealthy Mrs. J. G. Phelps Stokes, had given the lady unusual insights. The crisis that she disclosed was that Dr. Jacoby had perversely decided to blast the guest of honor for meddling in medical matters. To forestall him, Mrs. Stokes would introduce Margaret first, and Margaret must spike his guns. This was a hard assignment for a nervous and inexperienced speaker.

When she arose, disarmingly small, with her tranquil, Madonna look, Margaret Sanger began in a soft voice that made people strain to listen. It was strange, she said, for one as ill equipped as she to address this group in which there were so many from whom she could learn. Some, she knew, wanted to endorse birth control, but disapproved her tactics. She had broken the law and used methods they found sensational. But she had been appealing to overworked and ignorant women who needed contraception and she wondered if academic arguments would reach them. Wise men had known about contraception for centuries, but they had not helped the poor. Even today in New York City, those in the depths of poverty had to limit their families in the old barbaric ways of infanticide and abortion. As a nurse who had worked in the slums, she knew the facts. She was one who saw a house on fire and shouted for help.

When she was done, Dr. Jacoby had been forestalled. He shifted his subject to quality in population, which, as Margaret wryly said, might be construed as a speech in her behalf. But she had

scarcely finished her own talk before a dozen persons were on their feet offering special aid. Among them she was surprised to hear the imposing Mrs. Dennett announce that the National Birth Control League was backing Mrs. Sanger in her ordeal. Furthermore, the league needed contributions.

Her social debut at the Brevoort was to be only a prelude for her real test the next day, but since the place swarmed with well-known writers, including Walter Lippman and John Reed, the papers covered it in full. Next morning a record number of reporters appeared in court. Her new friends came en masse, and the *Evening Globe* noted that twenty limousines with liveried chauffeurs clogged the streets around the Federal Building.

The common man and his wife also jostled for room to see the show of the season. The star was a young woman pitting her wits against all of the resources of the state attorney's office. The issue was whether poor women might have the right that the rich already enjoyed, to prevent unwanted pregnancy. The stakes were freedom for the young defendant mother or up to forty-five years of prison.

Perhaps the crowded court house, as well as the Brevoort dinner, changed proceedings. After a long delay, the judge entered and at once granted the request of the district attorney to adjourn the session. It was a terrible anticlimax. In the streets, the disappointed audience cheered the heroine of the suppressed drama and promised to return. They did—again and again. The *New York Sun* said that the Sanger case presented "the anomaly of a prosecutor loath to prosecute and a defendant anxious to be tried." The *Washington Post* called it one of the most unique trials in the history of the nation.

In February the *Pictorial Review* announced the results of its poll on birth control: 97 per cent favorable. Experts had warned Margaret that in the midst of world events, her trial would be ignored, but it made the front page during the Battle of Verdun. In Tennessee, the *Chattanooga News* saw strong sentiment for Mrs. Sanger, while sympathizers in Los Angeles started a Birth Control League.

On February, 18, 1916, the government entered a nolle prosequi

"Victory and vindication!" cried the defendant. Certainly the government had retreated and instead of sending her to jail, had raised her to a national figure of protest against an unjust law.

However, on somber second thought, Margaret agreed with the *New York Globe* that the quashing of the indictment settled nothing. The right to discuss birth control was just where it was, subject to the "mutton-headed restrictions of some post office clerk and the complaisant persecution of a federal district attorney." From the district attorney's office came various explanations. They had not wanted to make a martyr of Mrs. Sanger. The indictment was two years old and it had become clear that the defendant was not a "disorderly person" nor in the habit of publishing obscene articles.