

Telling Her Story

14



After all of the emotional investment, it was sad that Margaret's case was not the Bradlaugh-Besant equivalent for America. Nevertheless, although it ended ambiguously, it had broken the sound barrier which John Reed reported had formerly kept even the *New York Times* from using the words, "prevention of conception." More than that, it raised birth control from gutter smut to a serious national issue. Meanwhile letters coming from all over the country persuaded Margaret that her next task was a lecture tour.

For one who dreaded public appearance, she seemed to have a strange compulsion about speaking, but the decision followed naturally from her commitment. She had gained a million dollars worth of free advertising and the time to use it was at once. Besides, she might promote birth control leagues and, she hoped, some clinics.

On the other hand, because she dreaded lecturing, Margaret painstakingly mastered the art. She not only thought out a speech, but wrote it out and spoke it out, as she had her first one at Claverack. For lack of a handy graveyard, she gained her privacy in the vertical, Manhattan way. Climbing to the roof of her small Lexington Avenue hotel, she recited it to the housetops. In pre-microphone days Margaret had to learn to project her voice without seeming to shout but she rehearsed chiefly to familiarize herself so well with her material that her mind would not black out in stage-fright. Prematurely she tried her speech on a small suburban audi-

ence, but at the last moment she read it. The response was tepid. Back she climbed to the chimney pots where she practiced until it was second nature. When she opened in Pittsburgh early in April, 1916, she laid aside her notes and the audience was hers.

She put a great deal into her basic speech, which she gave 119 times the first year. Although she always remained a nervous speaker, she was never again an inexperienced one. Usually she began in a quiet way while her listeners became used to the fact that this was the notorious Mrs. Sanger. "The first right of every child is to be wanted," she might start. No one could object to that.

Being wanted, she would explain, depended on a father's wages and the spacing and number of other children in a family. For the sake of the unborn child, as well as the human race, birth control should be practiced in at least seven circumstances. Here she paused as people fumbled for their pencils. The circumstances were:

1 When either parent had a transmittible disease, such as epilepsy, insanity, or syphilis

2 When the wife suffered from a temporary infection of the lungs, heart, or kidneys, the cure of which might be retarded by pregnancy

3 When parents, although normal themselves, had subnormal children

4 When either husband or wife was an adolescent. Parenthood should be postponed until the boy was at least twenty-three and the girl twenty-two

5 When the father's earning capacity was inadequate

6 Until the passage of two, preferably three, years after the birth of the mother's last child

7 For at least a year after marriage so that the couple had time for physical, mental, financial, and spiritual adjustment

In lighter vein Margaret often suggested a bureau of application for the unborn, where a couple might register as for a cook or chauffeur. The child-to-be would want assurances from potential parents as to their health, habits, and state of nerves. In addition,

what was the family income and how many other children were there? "Eight living in two rooms? No, thank you," any smart baby would end that interview "Next applicant, please"

At the close of her Pittsburgh lecture, she met with a group who wanted to form the first state birth control league Foresightedly, she had outlined the needs of a well-balanced group and the matter of some central liaison Since she herself had no organization and the National League greatly wanted to assume the role its name implied, she had decided, with some misgivings, to turn over to Mrs Dennett whatever groups her trip produced She began with the Pennsylvania League and soon added others in Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Detroit

That was beginner's luck, for she shortly faced frustration and even melodrama Frustration started in Chicago, where she had received overtures from the prestigious Woman's Club On follow-up, the executive committee prudently withdrew its invitation and an officer imprudently told the press that admirable as Mrs Sanger might be, she was "a little too strong for Chicago" In response, Margaret was quoted as saying that the "sophisticated club members doubtless knew all that she could tell them" and she really wanted to talk to working women

She had expected aid from Hull House, which eventually helped launch the second birth control clinic in the nation, but in 1916 Jane Addams was absent and ill Although Margaret underestimated the hostility of the Catholic power structure, which she had not yet encountered, her Chicago impasse was finally resolved by a young woman, Fania Mindell, who was so inspired by Margaret's presence that she soon moved east as a permanent aide Before that, she arranged for Margaret to address a large stockyard rally

A more imposing recruit from this trip was Frederick A Blossom, head of Cleveland's Associated Charities, who became convinced that birth control was the issue of the age His first service was to arrange an extracurriculum assembly in Indianapolis during the National Social Workers Conference Because of its representative nature, Walter Lippman reported that the meeting would "kick the football of birth control straight across to the Pacific It

did Delegates from the conference helped schedule the western tour

The fireworks started in St. Louis, where the Victoria Theater had been paid for. To Michael Higgins's daughter the occasion brought a flashback of a Sunday a quarter of a century earlier and some 1,500 miles away. The drama was much the same, but played in an urban setting with herself as speaker. She was escorted to the theater in an open car by two well-known men, Robert Minor, the cartoonist, whom she had known in New York, and Roger Baldwin, later head of the American Civil Liberties Union. As they approached, they found the streets blocked by an angry, churning crowd of some two thousand, who wanted to break down the locked door of the theater. Threatened by a permanent Catholic boycott if Mrs. Sanger spoke, the manager of the building had left town.

Up to this point Margaret's main opponents had been Protestants of Puritan tradition, personified by Anthony Comstock, but from now on, as the Protestant churches had second thoughts on birth control, Catholics took over the opposition. This was the first time that the Church used extralegal steps to silence her.

Minor urged her to stand up in the car and make her speech right there. With her memory of the happy outdoor finish at Corning, she gamely tried to do so, but since she did not have the voice for it, she was relieved when a policeman intervened and the chauffeur started his car.

"To throttle free speech is to give it a megaphone," thundered the *Globe Democrat* next morning. All that her opponents achieved, said the *Post Dispatch*, was to multiply Mrs. Sanger's audience. A cartoon in *Reedy's Mirror* showed the national Capitol topped by a papal crown. The St. Louis Men's City Club, which had never before thought of inviting Mrs. Sanger to address them, held an overflow crowd for her, larger than the recent record one for Teddy Roosevelt. Forty Catholics resigned, but a hundred new members joined.

Margaret moved on to Denver, where she fell in love with the West, a romance which she would resume in later life. Sitting by Judge Ben Lindsay of the famous Juvenile Court, she thought that

at last there were men to match the mountains. Women, too, she decided when he told her that it was the feminine vote that kept him in office, for Colorado had been the second suffragist state. In Los Angeles, a women's police division welcomed her at the station, in contrast to the baleful receptions policemen gave her in the East.

From the next weeks of lectures, conferences, interviews and everlasting fatigue, Margaret recalled two incidents. Once in San Francisco, between meetings, a thoughtful lady had whisked her out to the giant redwoods, where she was left alone for fifteen minutes. The sun burst through a patch of sky, and Margaret was filled with peace.

The second memory was of the only time when she ran out on her self-imposed schedule. Being indisposed, she had given only a tentative acceptance to speak at the close of a church service, but as usual she went, slipping in, unseen at the back. A few moments later she was horrified to hear the minister describe her as a modern Joan of Arc. This was too much. With the old sick feeling at the pit of her stomach, she rose and tiptoed, still unseen, out of the church.

In the Northwest she ran into lumbermen who had helped distribute *Family Limitation*, and to her surprise, she found that they were still selling it. Since it was not copyrighted, it had been reprinted, not only to boost the cause but the income of those who handled it. This was all right with her, but as she skimmed through the reprint, she saw that it needed revision. Although it had served its purpose, it had been hastily written and did not include much of her current knowledge. Between meetings and with the help of a pioneer woman doctor, Marie Esqui, she drafted another edition.

Since there were no restrictive Oregon laws, friends planned to sell the pamphlet at the Portland meeting, but they had not reckoned with the police, who arrested the distributors. The City Council then condemned *Family Limitation* offering a retroactive reason for the arrest. In the next week the free-wheeling ways of western justice held several surprises, some agreeable, as when the hearings were postponed to fit in with Margaret's lecture schedule in Seattle and Spokane. She had asked to testify as a special wit-

ness, but in the end appeared as a defendant Dr Esqui had called a protest rally the night before the hearings and at that time both she and Margaret were arrested. Some hundred supporters followed them to jail, clamoring to be arrested too. To keep the crowd out, the doors were finally bolted. Another pleasant surprise was Margaret's first jail, which was warm and clean.

Next morning, after the court had condemned the pamphlet and found the prisoners guilty, the judge gallantly waived the penalties for the ladies, fined each man \$10, but advised them not to pay. When the defendants left the courthouse they were greeted by a friendly crowd, enlivened with sandwich board men whose signs proclaimed "Poverty and large families go hand in hand" and "Poor women are denied what the rich possess." Naturally, all this free advertising launched a flourishing new league, along with two others in Spokane and Seattle.

Measured by publicity, the tour was a triumph, but Margaret was unhappy as she rode east. Not only was she exhausted, but she was not sure that her efforts had been worthwhile. She had said that she wanted to speak to working women. She had talked to tens of thousands of them, arousing them to the importance of her cause, but what these women wanted was not more speeches, but clinics to supply their needs.

During the long trip back to New York Margaret had time to assess her position. She saw that she was at another turning point both in her personal life and in public tactics. Her boys were happy at country boarding schools, undisturbed by her melodramas. Bill Sanger, if not resigned to separation, was becoming used to it, although his last months had been bitter, mostly because of her. Among his grievances was the fact that his study abroad had been cut short. There at least she might help him financially to realize his dream of going to Spain. Meanwhile, for the first time she too must learn to live alone.

As for tactics, her travel had shown that her growing sprawling movement needed a unifying force, a communication system. Once more she resolved to start a journal, this time a birth control review. This would unite her supporters and prepare them for the climax of her work, the establishment of clinics.