

New Tactics

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Thrift was Margaret's guide in choosing her home in New York, as it had been in London, and she settled for much the same, an unheated, cold-water "studio" room in a decrepit building on West Fourteenth Street. After all, Europeans lived without central heat and a few coals on her hearth gave as much warmth as Havelock's gas grate over which she had often huddled. Her yellow curtains took the place of sunshine and on the floor above lived her younger sister.

The marriage of Ethel Byrne, which had not been happy, had curiously paralleled her own. Ethel's husband, just out of high school, had meant to study medicine, but instead, to support his bride and the two children who followed rapidly, he took a job at the Corning glass works. For lack of funds, they moved in with his family, although Mrs. Byrne, Sr., who had cherished high hopes for her only son, always resented Ethel. John soon lost his ambition, and Ethel began to see her future as a bitter recapitulation of her mother's. At last she left her husband and children with her mother-in-law, and following Margaret's example, became a trained nurse. She was a quiet, intense young woman with an astringent wit and a somewhat competitive feeling toward her older sister.

Margaret also had a new associate in Frederick Blossom, who had come to her like a gift from the gods or more truly, a gift from his wife, whose money enabled him to donate his services. Charming and experienced, he had the administrative skill that Margaret never developed. He also had a flair for raising money and attract-

ing volunteers, sucking them in like a vacuum cleaner, she said. On his own, he opened an office on lower Fifth Avenue, equipped with files and business methods with which he now attacked Margaret's mail. During the tour, letters had come to her in such torrents—1,000 from St. Louis alone—that she had sent them east unanswered, in trunks. Her mail continued at the rate of a senator's, although she had no government-paid staff to cope with it. This response had become a nightmare until Blossom set his volunteers to work. They analyzed, classified, and answered it, as does a congressional office. Eventually her mail, one of the largest ever received by a private citizen, became the basis for her book *Motherhood in Bondage*, an historic record of the tragic results of antiquated laws.

After his conquest of the mail, Blossom turned to new projects. He assumed the first responsibilities for the journal Margaret had now resolved on. He also started the New York Birth Control League to bring pressure for a change of laws.

The New York laws were the stumbling block to Margaret's immediate goal. Since federal legislation dealt only with the mails and public carriers, the legality of clinics rested with the states. Section 1142 of the New York Penal Code said that no one could give contraceptive advice for any reason, but Section 1145 offered a loophole. It allowed physicians to prescribe for the cure or prevention of disease.

After consulting two lawyers and several physicians, Margaret confirmed her belief that the exemption had been added for only one reason, to protect men from venereal disease. After all, the English Colonel Cundom had developed his eighteenth century sheath for precisely that function. In other words, contraception was legal if its purpose was to promote male promiscuity. No doubt the New York gentlemen who wrote and voted for the law loved their wives and daughters, but they barred them, along with all women, from protection that might save a mother's life. Their only tolerance was for phallic frolics.

It was Margaret Sanger's inspired view that an enlightened judge would use the loophole to serve the needs of married women. While her critics knocked their heads against the Comstock laws,

she laid the strategy for vaulting over those legal obstructions. Again it was her knowledge of the Bradlaugh-Besant trial that made her rely on the short cut of an appealed court decision. Fortunately Blossom was systematizing the office work and freeing her to develop this winning strategy, which he, along with most birth control advocates, heartily disapproved.

Since the loophole applied only to physicians, Margaret had felt fortified when two women doctors had offered to staff a clinic whenever she decided to open one, but that was before the case of Dr. Mary Halton, of Grosvenor Hospital. At her evening clinic Dr. Halton had once prescribed a pessary for a patient who had shown tubercular symptoms. By 1916 it was a common practice for doctors to protect their private patients in this way. But Dr. Halton's patient was a poor woman at a public clinic, and when the hospital's board heard of the incident, they asked Dr. Halton to resign.

Compared with some others, Dr. Halton was lucky. Her health was not broken by a six-year term in Leavenworth, as in the earlier case of Dr. Elliott, nor by three months at hard labor, as in the historic example of Dr. Knowlton. Nevertheless, her dismissal was a warning. At a period when birth control was becoming routine for the well-to-do, there was no physician to serve the poor.

Reluctantly, Margaret abandoned the hope of finding a doctor. That was a setback for her strategy, but it did not end her resolve to open a clinic. If there were no doctors to serve, there were two trained nurses, the Higgins sisters. Her tutelage under Dr. Rutgers at The Hague had qualified her for the task, but she made a major concession to the medical profession in deciding that there would be no actual fitting. They would explain the use of pessaries with charts and estimate the right size from the number of previous births and miscarriages. This was not perfect, but it would help the majority of women and at worst, it would substitute a harmless effort to stop pregnancy for the vicious ways then in use. Furthermore, if the clinic were closed, as she expected it to be, there would be another chance to test the law.

Once she had settled her tactics, she mentioned the forthcoming clinic in a press interview, saying that she was looking for a site. Because the right location was all-important, she had tramped

the streets of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and lower Manhattan She had studied the vital statistics of the boroughs, their wage scales, and the number of social agencies in the areas Then one day the answer came to her in a delegation from the Brownsville section of Brooklyn

One of the women had read her interview and after sharing it with the others, they had come to urge the immediate opening of this clinic Each of them had a heartrending tale of poverty, poor health, sickly children—in no case less than four—and constant terror of another pregnancy As she heard their stories, Margaret suffered with each, just as she had once suffered with Sadie Sachs When the women left, she realized that Brownsville was her site Next morning she would go out and find the exact place

Now everything was settled, except finances, which never deterred her When she was a young housewife, solvency had been most important, but after she had found her cause, she was psychologically Michael Higgins's daughter On principle, she acted first and then found the practical solution Ethel thought that she should take an occasional nursing assignment, but Margaret declared that she had "cast herself on the universe," which would provide Soon afterward when she received a contribution, the sharp-tongued Ethel called it her "gift from God" Now God seemed to be helping again She received a \$50 donation from a Los Angeles enthusiast, the first month's rent for the Brownsville clinic!

The next morning, in cold rain, Margaret and her Chicago recruit, Fania Mindell, made their way through Brownsville's dismal streets, which were lined with run down houses, bursting with humanity, most of whom were Jewish or Italian After a few rebuffs, they found their landlord, Joseph Rabinowitz So interested was he that he reduced his usual rent to the specified \$50 Margaret was well pleased, not only because she thought this Jewish community would offer the best protection from harassment, but because it seemed appropriate Starting with Sadie Sachs, Jews had played an important role in her work They had taken the lead in birth control committees, and Jewish mothers had brought her to Brownsville

Her landlord exceeded her hopes by donating hours of labor to make the rooms more "hospital-like" Fania's Yiddish secured the best prices at local stores for a few indispensable chairs, a desk, a stove, and curtains Margaret ordered five thousand handbills printed in English, Yiddish, and Italian They read

Mothers,

Can you afford to have a large family?

Do you want any more children?

If not, why do you have them?

Do not kill Do not take life, but prevent

Safe, harmless information can be obtained of trained nurses

46 Amboy Street

Near Pitkin Ave Brooklyn

Tell your neighbors and friends All mothers welcome

*A registration fee of 10¢ entitles any mother to this
information*

Passing out the handbills was a good way to introduce themselves and promote their cause They dropped them in letter boxes, pushed them under doors of rickety, condemned buildings, still crowded with people Unkempt children swarmed through most of the corridors and alleys, they sat on fire escapes and played in the rubbish heaps of the vacant yards In the streets, almost every mother either carried or wheeled a baby, while older children tagged along beside them

Margaret chatted with as many as possible, offering extra handbills for friends The women were at first startled and then excited But would they come? She recalled that doctors claimed that the poor bred like rabbits because they liked to Could these women understand how birth control might change their lives? Would these poor creatures dare to use her clinic?

Taking one last precaution, Margaret visited the area druggists Since they were already selling a wide assortment of alleged and illicit preventives, they were glad to stock her material also In this way she avoided the additional risk of selling contraceptives Finally she notified the district attorney that she was opening a clinic but she never received a written answer