

War Casualties and Victories



The euphoria of her coming out of prison lingered for a while that spring. The press had never been as friendly, the governor had promised action, and her *Birth Control Review* had materialized. Since she had planned the first number long in advance, Fred Blossom, the managing editor, had brought it out on schedule while she was in prison.

There was glamor too in those first weeks when she and Blossom plunged into the motion picture business. Much as he had opposed the clinic, he had been so impressed by her publicity that he wanted an instant substitute to keep the issue in the public eye. Together they tried a scenario, to which they gave the disarmingly banal title, *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*. Still the miracle-worker, Blossom found an angel to finance it, and the film was shot.

The scene was the lower East Side of New York, Margaret played herself, a nurse who cared for someone resembling Sadie Sachs, the trial provided the climax. Briefly she fulfilled her childhood ambition to be a leading lady, but no one saw her in the part. The Commissioner of Licenses suppressed the amateur effort before it was released. Before this verdict could be challenged, a crisis developed in the production partnership.

Six months earlier, when Blossom had arrived in New York, Margaret was absorbed in her clinic plans, after that, first the trials and then prison took her away from her usual functions. Filling the vacuum, Blossom had deftly directed most phases of the work. He

had opened the New York office, answered the huge volume of mail, organized a New York Birth Control League, with himself as president and then, as editor as well as manager, had launched the *Review*

Officially, he called Margaret the Joan of Arc of the movement, but increasingly he thought her erratic and sensational. Although he had no use for Mrs. Dennett who, as president of the National Birth Control League, was the only one who had challenged Margaret's leadership, he agreed that Margaret Sanger lacked the background for her role. His academic Ph.D. fitted him for that part.

Since it never occurred to Margaret to give up either her life work or the *Review*, an adjustment between these two, sharing undefined responsibilities, required the utmost tact and good will. By that time it was doubtful that this able and charming man possessed either trait. Certainly he was unstable. During this period, in which he had broken with his wife, relinquishing his only apparent income, he kept changing his professional ties, leaving his former colleagues puzzled, if not mistrustful. At best he was careless in finances.

This partnership with Margaret broke over the seemingly irrelevant, but overwhelming, issue of the day. After Germany began unrestricted submarine warfare, President Wilson declared to a joint session of Congress, that "the world must be made safe for democracy. It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars. But the right is more precious than the peace."

Margaret was appalled, as were her friends in the labor movement. While they believed that wars were imperial nonsense, ruinous to the common man, she saw them also as the fulfillment of Malthusian laws. Once more men were bringing their numbers into balance with the available subsistence by slaughtering surplus people, who as usual were the young. Why talk of democracy? The civilized answer was birth control. War was a male vice and women were forced to proliferate the cannon fodder. Margaret, trying to explain all this in an editorial for the *Review*, reverted in tone to the shrill vehemence of *The Woman Rebel*.

To Blossom the article was horrible and pro-German. A Franco-

phile, he welcomed the long-delayed declaration of war, and felt so strongly that when Margaret insisted on the editorial, he resigned. After working for six months as a volunteer, he had a right to leave, but not in the way he chose.

One May morning when Margaret unlocked the door, she found the office stripped bare. Again, Blossom had a right to take the furniture, for which he had paid, but he had also taken the files, records, and funds. The *Review* had two thousand paid-up subscribers, each entitled to nine more issues, but without the payments and records the editor was stymied. Besides, Blossom was treasurer of the sisters' legal defense fund, which had received some large contributions of which he had never made an accounting.

Blossom always claimed that he had advanced more money than he had received. At first he was too busy even to sort out the papers, for he had plunged at once into the management of a Socialist candidate's congressional campaign. When time dragged on, Margaret's lawyer started a suit against him, but this brought the intervention of Blossom's new friends. They guaranteed to secure a full accounting if Margaret would drop the suit and give them her evidence of Blossom's questionable acts. Finally in the interest of harmony, she agreed.

Soon afterward, she was shocked to read in a morning paper that the Socialist Party had condemned Margaret Sanger's conduct in her dispute with Frederick Blossom. Later this report proved to be an error perpetrated by Blossom. After an investigation, her position was upheld and his censured, but by that time it was ancient history. Blossom had left the Socialist Party for a brief stay with the I W W, and the fact that both of these organizations also opposed the war, simply made his motives more mysterious. In any case, he never returned to Margaret either records or funds.

Beyond the bitterness of this experience, Margaret was left in such serious straits that for six months there was no *Review*. The printer carried her account for some weeks, after which, in order to pay him, Margaret again borrowed from her older sisters.

In June Congress passed an Espionage Act which triggered a crackdown on all subversives. After that, raids on pacifists, conscientious objectors, and labor's left wing swept the country along

with the influenza Bill Haywood went to Leavenworth with hundreds of his Wobblies, the nonviolent Eugene Debs started a ten-year sentence in Atlanta. Some months earlier Debs had written to Margaret at the Queen's County penitentiary that his blood boiled when he thought of her "locked up like a beast." Now, like a beast, he was locked up for failing to give the war his "moral" support.

The war turned the clock back on all progress. As people channeled their surplus time and funds into that effort they had no energy for other causes. New York's Governor Whitman did not name his birth control committee, three states passed new laws banning birth control. Teddy Roosevelt, exhorting mothers to have more children, thundered against race suicide, Billy Sunday flaminated to huge crowds on the sins of contraception.

With no way to capture the headlines for factual answers, Margaret brooded over tactics for preserving her hard-won gains. Finally she decided to make the *Review* her holding operation, as well as communication system. To revive the short-lived paper in wartime was in itself an uphill effort, but to consider it without personal income or financial backing was both audacious and characteristic of Margaret Sanger.

Reminiscing of this period in *My Fight for Birth Control*, the author says that she was sustained by faith that she was working in accord with the universal law of evolution. Her conviction not only gave her strength for her daily schedule, but it also opened locked doors. Certainly it unlocked the resources of some of her friends.

Juliet Rublee, who had often bailed Margaret out of crises, was the first to see that if the *Review's* editor-manager was to survive, there must be a steadier financial base than the haphazard largesse of a few supporters. Her initiative led to the incorporation of the New York Women's Publishing Company with shares at \$10, each share carrying one vote on the paper's policy. The first goals were to raise \$10,000 and to cut costs by securing second class mailing privileges. During the next decade these stockholders, with Frances Ackerman, the permanent treasurer and most responsible member, kept the journal solvent. While they never raised enough funds to

cover all needs, which Margaret often paid for from her lecture fees, they assured survival during the national emergency

After its erratic start, the *Review* became the movement's forward thrust. Not only was it the link among adherents, but also the reporter of local, national, and world developments and the special resource for speakers in all parts of the country. For sales appeal, it relied on Margaret's distinguished friends, inevitably, the lead article of the first number had been by Havelock Ellis, whose prestige was at its peak, and whom the editor honored with an annual birthday number. With a growing circulation, rising to ten thousand in the next few years, Margaret found that she need no longer rely on chance contributions. Distinguished experts were glad to write special articles. These files today offer a rich commentary on the era, with timeless and often amusing arguments for birth control.

In a random sampling, we learn from Luther Burbank that man uses the worst seed in the worst soil in only his human harvest. A fourth of the nation's parents, living in squalor, bring forth a half of America's children, "unwillingly and in passion and ignorance." The biologist, Gideon Diedrich, struck down the church argument that contraception, like abortion, kills life. Since all reproduction is based on cell division, no life is involved before any cell is divided.

A news reprint tells of a Georgia hen that laid twelve double eggs on successive days but on the thirteenth day died of the strain. Thomas Nixon Carver of Harvard compared employers who wanted large supplies of cheap labor, priests who wanted large numbers of parishioners, military leaders who wanted large numbers of soldiers for cannon fodder, with foxes who enjoyed large families of rabbits. Meanwhile, the paper reported that three judges with small families sent Kitty Marion to prison for advising the poor how to limit the number of their children.

Kitty Marion was a gift from the English suffragettes. A large Valkyrian blond, she had fled from her German home after a paternal beating, and in London did a turn in the music halls before she read about Mrs. Pankhurst. Her own suffrage services included seven jail sentences with forcible feedings, but when war

broke out, lest she be interned as an enemy alien, her friends shipped her to the United States. In New York, the congenial exploits of the Higgins sisters brought her into their movement. Since she had sold *The Suffragette* on London streets, she volunteered to sell the *Review* at Times Square.

From morning until midnight, day after day for thirteen years, she was a landmark. Passers-by assumed that she was Margaret Sanger, and for the rest of her life people told the latter how she had changed since she had patrolled Forty-second Street. Actually, Margaret did take her turn, but found it torture. Only the robust Kitty Marion could long endure the jibes and insults. When reminded of God's command to "be fruitful and multiply," she answered good humoredly that this had already been done. Then she quoted Ecclesiastes 16:1: "Desire not a multitude of unprofitable children." Right on her beat, she claimed to witness the most fascinating, comic, tragic, and moving spectacle in the world.

New policemen always arrested her and although she knew that her case would be thrown out of court, she often had to wake Margaret to bail her out. Once, however, she did serve thirty days, trapped into giving illegal advice to the same stooge who had trapped Bill Sanger three years previously.

Margaret called these the "leaden years." Since her cause was overshadowed by the nation's emergency and brought no dramatic or public response, most people were indifferent, if not hostile, to her efforts. Among her few intimates, J. J. Goldstein had become a favorite. Having defended her in court, he was now her chivalrous and frequent escort, to whom she refers in her journal as "J. J.—dear, generous one." "A queer lad," she also calls him, "fascinating at times, but does not try to be or is not conscious of it." In spite of a keen mind, he was "quite undeveloped emotionally and in some things intellectually and artistically."

More than three decades later Judge Goldstein gave his views of her in a recording for the Planned Parenthood Federation. Margaret Sanger was "charming—charming," he began, "with a great sense of humor and no touch of the battle-ax." As for integrity, he doubted that she could think dishonestly. He never knew her to lie, and she never made promises. To her, money was noth-

ing He himself neither received a fee, nor asked for one To serve her was a privilege

Then the distinguished judge summed up his experience It had been "the thrill of a lifetime to be her friend and to represent her" The world was a better place because of Margaret Sanger, and the more he thought about her, the happier he felt

From J J, Margaret received a homely and practical legacy, his cook, Daisy Mitchell, commonly known as "Old Faithful" For forty years she served the Sangers, freeing Margaret from endless chores

During the war when public response to birth control was again almost as frosty as in the days of *The Woman Rebel*, there was a continuing link in the person of Jessie Ashley, who had followed Margaret into the movement This radical daughter of one of the nation's first families relieved her friend of many burdens by accepting the position of managing editor of the *Review* She poured such zeal into her work that, while convalescing from the flu, she contracted pneumonia and was another war casualty Propped up on her pillows, her last words were a written exhortation to women in "every hamlet and every city" to spread the message and, following Kitty Marion's example, to sell the *Review*

William E Williams, former managing editor of the *Kansas City Star*, did most to professionalize the paper by teaching Margaret whatever technical skills she acquired Later he edited her first book His payment, according to his letters, was "the happiest and most inspiring" time in his life She had awakened "depths to his nature that he did not know existed" In her journal, Margaret soberly noted that "when men, so big and generous and devoted, offer their all, their strength, labor, energy, talents and love at our feet," it does not necessarily awaken a responsive feeling She thought perhaps love was a chemical matter and J J had more of that Years later when someone asked about Billy Williams, she answered guardedly that he might have thought he loved her, but it was not her physical self, but that which "emerged from her to touch the same quality in him"

Perhaps a truer example of her gift for arousing disinterested enthusiasm was Anna Lifshiz Her young stenographer was the

only one to receive a salary, if her uncertain pittance could be called one. She worked excessive hours without complaint because she too was enlisted in the cause. So was her mother who volunteered to distribute literature and on holidays sent wine and cakes with prayers for Margaret's health and happiness. Like most of Margaret's colleagues, Anna Lifshiz remained steadfastly loyal throughout the years. Much later she said that working for the movement was "like a religious crusade. The office was bedlam, volunteers rushing in and out. Through it all she [Margaret] moved, serenely confident, giving us all some added strength that would make us work thirteen hours that day when we were sure that we couldn't last ten."

Historic events were taking place abroad, and sometimes they brought personal repercussions. After the Kerensky revolution, John Reed telephoned Margaret with the offer of a house which they had seen together six years before in the village of Truro, near Provincetown. This captivating cabin of an old sea captain was what they each had wanted but since the Sangers were about to leave for France, Reed bought the place. Now, as a free-lance writer, he was taking off for Russia, where he would write his famous *Ten Days that Shook the World*, and he needed money. Margaret had just had a windfall, a thousand dollars for a series of lectures, which she gladly exchanged for the house. She hoped to make this a family homestead where she might vacation three months a year with the boys. Her sons did vacation there, but usually under the care of Grandfather Higgins, Aunt Nan, and "Old Faithful." Margaret seldom had time for more than a week's stay.

Truro, she may also have realized, could simplify her divorce. With property, she could establish a residence there and then with Bill's cooperation, which now seemed likely, since he was interested in another woman, she might win her freedom without publicity under the more lenient Massachusetts law.

One day a "bright bugle sounded." Margaret learned that the army was using the section on venereal disease from *What Every Girl Should Know*. Five years previously the Post Office had suppressed this chapter as obscene, now the army had reprinted it as educational material to protect the health of American soldiers.

This reprint, albeit with no acknowledgment to the author, should suffice to reverse Fania Mindell's conviction for selling an indecent pamphlet

If she heard a bright bugle in 1917, she must have heard a whole fanfare at the start of the New Year J J Goldstein had carried her case to the State Supreme Court where Judge Frederick E Crane of the Appellate Division gave the decision To most people the fanfare was muted, if they heard it at all, for Margaret's conviction was upheld This was based on the fact that as a nurse, not a doctor, she was not covered by the law's exemption

However, the historic part of the decision was an interpretative phrase which said that a licensed physician might give contraceptive advice "for the cure and *prevention* of disease" Crane had taken Webster's definition of "disease" as "any change in the state of the body which caused or threatened pain and sickness" In this way he stretched the meaning of the word far beyond the law's original intent

Crane fulfilled Margaret's faith in what an enlightened judge would do His interpretation had changed an outrageous law, meant only to protect male promiscuity, into one which would protect ailing mothers Her strategy had won Even J J conceded that "in the long run she was right, unassailably right"

On November 11, 1918, pandemonium broke out with Armistice Day Christmas was never more jubilant The boys were coming home and President Wilson's European reception on his way to the Peace Conference was stupendous The New Year would ring in a brand new world order, safe for democracy, with war forever banned

In the midst of national rejoicing Margaret was told that she might not be around to enjoy the new era—unless she changed her ways Dr Mary Halton warned that ever since she had come out of prison, she had been overworking She had ignored her symptoms, trudging on foot through rain and snow to give talks while she ran a temperature and should have been in bed Her days were too long, her home was too cold, and her diet inadequate She needed rest and sunshine With no funds for a winter vacation, Margaret was pondering the solution when a publisher offered advance

royalties if she would deliver a manuscript on labor problems. She seized the chance, hoping to combine writing of the book not only with convalescence, but with the company of her sons.

In her *Autobiography*, she explains that she put the boys in country schools directed by capable masters where they could lead healthy, regular lives. The sacrifice was hers, a loneliness that often seemed unbearable. Now, however, it became apparent that she should not interrupt Stuart's schooling. He was sixteen, preparing for Yale and earning part of his tuition at the Peddie School for Boys in New Jersey. On the other hand, since the affectionate and adaptable Grant was only ten, a three months' change of school would not hurt him and his mother's company might be reassuring. Perhaps because she had cared for him from infancy, as she had not been able to care for Stuart, their relationship was closer. Yet even in his case, she must have known that it was not easy to be the son of Margaret Sanger. Once he had attacked a larger boy for calling his mother "a jailbird." He got a black eye, but when others joined in the taunt, he ignominiously announced that she was "another Margaret Sanger."

One February evening mother and son boarded the train for the long and to Grant exciting trip west. They settled in Coronado, California, for three months during which she basked in sunshine and her favorite subject. While statesmen debated world plans, Margaret drafted what she believed was the only viable basis on which to build an enduring peace.

The publisher had asked for a book on labor problems, but Margaret Sanger wrote her "heart book," *Woman and the New Race*. She had not rejected her assignment, for the brief manuscript dealt with labor, along with most human problems, but in perspective, reducing them to the manageable scale that all would assume once mankind corrected its main error.

As she saw it, the chief cause of misery was woman's fertility. Excess people, not acts of God, created poverty, famine, and war. Craft unions had learned to better themselves by limiting their membership, but even they ignored the larger lesson. Labor itself

produced the excess workers who beat down their own standards of living

Margaret claimed that if labor would strike against the Comstock laws, it would gain more than by striking against any employer. Whatever a man's wages, they would go further in a small family than in a large one. With fewer births, there would be fewer deaths and much less illness. Mothers would have time for their children, who, rather than competing against their parents in mills, factories and coal mines, would remain in school, preparing for a better future.

All society would gain, said the author, if birth control were allowed to shut off the spigot that floods the world with weaklings. When sick and unfit mothers were not forced to breed, there would be an end to unwanted children who grow up to fill our prisons and asylums. Organized vice would dwindle, as would venereal disease.

As for war, the author confidently thought that mothers could end it by cutting off the surplus people. Of course military states always clamor for more children, first to defend the Fatherland, and when the population soars, to conquer more territory for the added millions. Napoleon had voiced the military mind when he said "Woman is given us to bear children. She is our property.

Because she produces children for us, we yield none to her. She is our possession, as the fruit tree is that of the gardener."

But why, asked Margaret Sanger of the twentieth century, did women ever accept the role of chattel in a male society? Much of the slim book is her explanation of woman's built-in submissiveness, stemming not only from physical weakness, but from the man-made laws of both church and state.

To the early Christians, Margaret recalled, sex itself was evil, and marriage a carnal indulgence. A child was conceived in sin by an unclean spirit, which only baptism could exorcise. Although a woman's life was determined by sex, in her the sex impulse was thought especially shameful. Satisfaction was a man's prerogative, for which woman's body was made. St. Paul ordered wives to "subject themselves to their husbands as to the Lord." No matter what her condition, nor how brutal, drunk, or diseased her husband, he must not

be denied. For this reason the outrages committed within marriage far outweighed the illegal ones.

The Comstock laws simply made permanent and explicit customs that had generally prevailed throughout the nineteenth century. Supposedly these laws applied to all, but they had become class legislation when first the rich and then the middle class learned how to evade them. Finally, only those who most needed help—the poor, who had no family doctors—were denied it.

Of all species, the author proclaimed, man alone had been given the power to perfect his race by promoting quality, instead of quantity. By fully using his gift, he would breed superior men and women. And since any code of human rights assumes that the individual controls his own person, it was high time that women gained that basic freedom. With the fear of pregnancy removed, wives would then develop healthier sex relations. They too would experience the soaring ecstasy of the consummated act.

Just as a slave race bears slave children, so mothers in bondage transmit their fears and cowardice to their offspring. But as perfect trees bear perfect fruit, so healthy, happy mothers would bear a race superior to those of former generations in both physical and spiritual robustness.

Woman and the New Race carries Margaret Sanger's enduring message. Since the author had a single great purpose, the same theme with remarkable variations, runs through her several books, countless pamphlets and short pieces.

Havelock Ellis always urged Margaret not to hurry. His method of writing was to put aside a first draft until it "ripened," then to revise it and probably repeat the process over and over again. As a busy activist, Margaret had neither the time nor temperament for such a leisured system. Instead, in her major works, she relied on a collaborator, the most congenial of whom was Rackham Holt, whose organization of material and "inspired" advice she acknowledges in the 1938 autobiography. The result was Margaret at her best, freed from chaotic structure and stylistic failings.

Margaret's unpublished journal tells how she produced *Woman and the New Race*. She wrote rapidly and sent each chapter east for Billy Williams to edit. Later, when she returned to New York,

they rewrote the first draft together. After the passage of a half century, some of the material is out of date, some of it is tiresomely didactic. Much however, remains fresh and fascinating. When it appeared in 1920, it was an arresting book that sold a quarter of a million copies.