

The Sexual Revolution



The nineteen-twenties opened brilliantly for Margaret enjoying spring once more in England now at peace. The Drysdales arranged this by booking many lectures. In the next decade Margaret returned almost yearly either to lecture or to secure speakers for meetings back home. In England, where her cause was first welcomed, she recharged her mind, while her spirit flowered in the warmth of British admiration.

Although unrelated to her speaking, the event of this 1920 visit was her friendship with H. G. Wells. In the future the highlight of every trip would be a stay in his Essex home. Wells's squeaky voice with its trace of cockney was a legacy of his youth, but in middle life he lived like landed gentry. The ivy-covered former rectory, which was his home, was set in spacious lawns, interspersed with gardens and woods. Weekend guests enjoyed an easy hospitality based on many rooms and servants.

Wells's sons, home from Cambridge, attracted young people who did not segregate themselves, as in the United States, but joined in the activities which included a Sunday morning ball game invented by the author. But conversation, usually witty although often serious, was the main diversion. According to Margaret, everyone had his turn in the spotlight. Certainly she did.

To Wells, Margaret was heroic. She was leading the world's most important crusade, but at the same time was a feminine delight, for which he was unabashedly greedy. Early in their acquaintance he wrote, "I want to see you as much as possible" as

much as possible without people about" Sixteen years later he confided, "Now I can tell you that I have loved you very dearly ever since I first met you and I always shall"

Wells was the foremost English spokesman for a change in society's attitude toward sex Whether or not Victorian morals had altered, frank discussion was a twentieth-century phenomenon Among intellectuals in England, where divorce was almost impossible, there was a widespread rejection of monogamy Margaret's friends urged several high-minded, pseudo-scientific reasons for multiple loves On her first visit she had been exposed not only to the philosophy of Havelock Ellis, but also of Marie Stopes, who was now referred to as the high priestess of love and marriage The influence of these two had affected Margaret's vocabulary, her thinking and finally her way of life

According to Wells, the female's restricted role had resulted from man's "animal jealousy," which, making a fetish of her chastity, had reduced her to his property Wells argued that a Socialist government should end the "servitude" of women, as well as that of labor More basic than the vote, for which the suffragettes clamored, was the endowment of motherhood With economic independence, women would gain self-respect, and then developing freely, as did their brothers, they would enter into life-enhancing, if transitory, relationships with members of the other sex

Wells's program, enunciated some years previous, had run afoul of the most prestigious Socialists, the Fabians, led by Sidney and Beatrice Webb and George Bernard Shaw In a paper before that group, of which Wells was then a member, he had declared that the Socialist "no more regards the institution of marriage as a permanent thing than he regards competitive industrialism as a permanent thing" Unfortunately, the cornerstone of Fabian strategy was to stress only a few major issues and refrain from stirring up irrelevant controversies The endowment of motherhood was not on the agenda and, more important, whatever their personal habits, no other Fabian wanted to join Wells in publicly endorsing free love

Beatrice Webb, one of the great women of the age, had discussed Wells's views in her journal, referring to the thesis of his novel,

In the Days of the Comet "Education through promiscuity," she noted, "was familiar to intellectuals and seemed to have some validity Friendship between particular men and women has an enormous educational value to both [especially to the woman] If you could have been the beloved of the dozen ablest men you had known, it would have greatly extended your knowledge of human nature and human affairs but there remains the question whether, with all the perturbation caused by such intimacies, you would have any brain left to think with moreover, it would mean a great increase in sexual emotion for its own sake and not for the sake of bearing children And that way madness lies"

To Margaret Sanger the educational value of such friendships might have had a great appeal, as would the chance of winning strong allies for her cause On first meeting Wells, she observed in her diary that he was a "sort of naughty boy man" with twinkling, laughing eyes In the *Autobiography* her comments were disingenuous, for she was trying to deflect gossip when she said that Wells was the "Don Juan of spinsterhood that there was a Mrs Wells, for whom Mr Wells cared deeply, did not matter in the least"

In this case, Margaret may have been equally indebted to Catherine Wells, who, through an obscure gift, diagnosed the infection that had long plagued the former nurse Instead of applying an ice pack every night to her "tubercular glands," Mrs Wells thought she should have her tonsils out Embedded tonsils did prove to be the root of her twenty-three years of unnecessary suffering After the operation, she enjoyed better health than she had known since childhood

Meanwhile, Wells's contributions to Margaret's cause, by way of his speaking, writing and entertaining, were impressive Once after a visit, he scrawled, "Wonderful! Unforgettable" But over the years their encounters were mostly at banquets and formal meetings where their wit and praise of each other were shared by large audiences, as when Wells announced, "Alexander the Great changed a few boundaries and killed a few men Both he and Napoleon were forced into fame by circumstances outside of themselves and by currents of the time, but Margaret Sanger made currents and

circumstances When the history of our civilization is written, it will be a biological history and Margaret Sanger will be its heroine”

If friendship with the famous H G was the high point of 1920, he was only one among many admirers Five years after she and Ellis had parted, they toured Ireland together Ostensibly, they were trying to trace her forebears, especially the link with the poet Edward Fitzgerald of *Rubaiyat* fame, but lack of contacts, plus the Sinn Fein rebellion, raised too many roadblocks Finally, they hired a two wheel cart, in which they sat back to back, bumping through a misty drizzle until they reached Killarney There, Ellis, feeling a chill, took to his bed while she chatted downstairs with three young priests They volunteered that the ablest youths, for lack of jobs in an overcrowded country, were emigrating It is not clear how much of her standard speech Margaret Sanger made to the friendly priests

If Margaret and Ellis had ever seriously considered marriage, they dropped the idea now that it was possible Edith was gone and after years of pleading, Margaret was gaining her divorce But they both must have realized that a union between an aging recluse and a crusading reformer would be disastrous Besides, Margaret had known for two years that someone else shared Havelock's love He had assured her that the little Frenchwoman, Françoise de Lisle, would never drive the Irish woman from his heart, but Françoise was close at hand and worshipful Perhaps he offered a chivalrous compensation when he introduced Margaret to his young disciple, the poet, Hugh de Selincourt

This year and in the next ones Margaret often relaxed at Hugh's Sussex home, Wantley Enchanting she found this thatched and memory-haunted birthplace of Shelley and lyrical the evenings filled with poetry read by Hugh, music played by his wife and daughter and moonlit walks on the lonely moor

Wantley was unique in its attempt to fulfill Shelley's dream that "to live and love are one" Disdaining the vulgar and promiscuous, Hugh once set down his own fastidious standards in a note to Margaret, commenting on the dancer, Isadora Duncan, also in the vanguard of the sexual revolution This other famous American, who

had supported Margaret during the 1916 trial by taking a box at the Carnegie rally, had seen herself as a chaste Diana when she made her European debut, but she had emerged an insatiate Bacchante "Gallant and adorable" she was, wrote Hugh, but "It" used her, she could not use "It" She was so greedy that her loves led nowhere, certainly not to the tenderness and understanding for which he aimed

To the sensitive Hugh, love was a psychic force as powerful as electricity sending out waves of creativity Blake, Shelley, and Havelock Ellis had all sensed this phenomenon and knew that it was as futile to judge or condemn love as it was to judge or condemn electricity Instead, they urged its use As a start, Hugh believed that those who loved the same person should love each other Together they should drink the cup of bliss, which meant sexual relations, thus breeding new happiness in a cumulative way

Insane and immoral as his ideas were to most people, he lived consistently and encouraged his wife Janet to do the same She wrote Margaret that at first she had been a "grudging little pig," but over the years and in spite of their complex ménage, the affection of the Selincourts proved remarkably durable Eventually they shared a new home, Sand-Pit, with Harold Child, author of lead articles for the London *Times* Having lost both his wife and wealth in her long illness, Child was partly consoled by drinking the cup of bliss with Janet But that was only the start of their entanglements Janet's sympathy went out to a neighbor doctor whose wife was institutionalized Gallantly Janet's husband and lover picked the daily bouquet which she presented for the doctor's office

First Hugh and then Harold Child became enthralled with Margaret, although, true to their principles, they were not jealous On the contrary, Hugh rejoiced at the workings of "cumulative" love A note from Child suggests his feelings "My Margaret—mine because you gave it to me and you can spare it without taking away from the Margarets of all the other people who love you"

Like Ellis and Wells, they were captivated by her mixture of the heroic and the feminine Hugh put it variously as "the delicious blend of the great queen and little girl," and the fact that she, while

moving the world, was "delicate and fragrant" For him, she was the "creative, unifying woman, helping all that's lovely to thrive" Shamelessly he bragged of kissing her feet Harold Child, less whimsical, asked, "Great and lovely lady, are you real or are you a most wonderful dream?" She was to them a crusading goddess, half Athena, half Aphrodite

And how did Margaret take this adulation? She found it delightful, the more so after years of Spartan, even ascetic existence She had worked relentlessly, living alone in a comfortless room and, lest she hurt her cause, she had been very discreet Yet she was no Puritan, in fact, she was part hedonist with a gift for laughter, "the laughter of the Gods," Harold Child called hers She too was a product of the sexual revolution which was sweeping the Western world

For ten years she had been associated with New York's radical left, innovators of changing mores As Bill Sanger's letters from Paris show, he had become convinced that the "so called Labor Revolutionary Movement was nothing but a Saturnalia of Sexualism" He suspected that its free lovers were after his wife, "her body", yet she would never break with them

On her first visit to England, Margaret had readily accepted Ellis's views, which among other points, stressed a single sexual standard, with the right of women to the same freedoms that men had always enjoyed Her own speciality, birth control, merged with Ellis's studies on the art of love She also recognized that a major cause of marital unhappiness was the disregard of the wife's erotic needs Enlightened love-making would not only enhance life, but release a many-sided creativity

In her *Intimate Memories*, Mabel Dodge gives a revealing sidelight from a private conversation after Margaret's first stay in England Never before had Mrs Dodge heard anyone speak of the "mysteries and mightiness of physical love as a sacred and scientific reality" At a time when a sense of sin was always mixed with the sense of pleasure, Margaret openly acclaimed "the joys of the flesh" She was trying to rehabilitate sex, to teach people to accept "the life in the cells, developing it, expanding it and enjoying it with a conscious attainment of its possibilities that would make

previous relations between men and women, with their associations of smirking shame and secretive lubricities, seem ignoble in their limitations and stupid beyond words in their awkward ignorance" Margaret Sanger stressed the "conscious, careful selection of a lover, that is the mate, if only for an hour, for a lifetime maybe"

Mabel Dodge was not always reliable, but she publicly thanked Margaret for liberating her future, which was one of the more flamboyant examples of changing mores Her emancipation began with the much publicized affair with John Reed Once he fled from her "smothering" love, but she finally turned her passion to others, including two more husbands The last of these, Toni Luhan the Indian, saw her always "goin' by, goin' by, just like water" Unstable as water! She caught his point With no inner purpose, she tried to fill the vacuum with physical love She made a cult of it, but "It" used her, she never used "It"

Margaret left no intimate memories, and since her autobiographies recorded her leadership in birth control, she excluded that which would create irrelevant hostility Nevertheless, Mrs Dodge's report was consistent with Margaret's frankest writing on sex, which appeared in 1926 under the unimpeachable title, *Married Happiness*

According to her thesis, happiness in marriage, as elsewhere, is an achievement won by conscious effort The first requisite, a single standard of purity, is not enough, for ignorance is the great destroyer Rightly understood, sex fulfillment is an art, requiring complete mastery over the instrument through which it is expressed

Using an Ellis simile, Margaret likened the average man's approach to the orangutan trying to play a violin As in a symphony, each part of the sex act should unfold its own delight, while leading without break into the next part It is the husband's function to attune the mind as well as the body of his mate for the harmonic consummation She must fall into the rhythm of the love flight, "a dance in which two humans are no longer separate and distinct persons, but in which their beings are commingled in a new and higher unity, a mutual rhythm and ecstasy"

The author saw sex as a sacred gift, as well as the most valuable

human inheritance Misuse or precocious use of it, which surprisingly, she said was before the age of twenty-three, wastes the forces needed for the individual's development Eventually, sex should supply the radiant strength for all types of endeavor "To deny its expression cuts one off from the zest and beauty of life"

In England on the eve of her divorce, Margaret saw no reason to cut herself off from the zest and beauty of life In the postwar world, repression was the villain, but it was absent from Wantley For a brief period Margaret welcomed many loves Her admirers were outstanding men, all sympathetic to her cause Transmuting their interest into enduring friendships, she never ended any with a bang or a whimper

With Hugh de Selincourt the attachment produced such a prodigious correspondence that one wonders why Margaret, in the midst of important events, bothered She once wrote that he was the man of her "adolescent dreams" and since they met rarely, for the most part he remained just that, a disembodied love The tonic of his letters she declared was better than a health cure topped by a case of champagne For one facing constant public attack, his large doses of undiluted adoration were important ego-lifters

Over the years while her one time lovers continued to aid her, she brightened their lives with her affection until one by one they died Hers was the gift, which Ellis preached, of spiritualizing erotic relationships, but her success was unique Even the happiness of Ellis, "the king" of the Wantley, then the Sand-Pit group, was a casualty to the multiple concept

The bitter shadow over Ellis's last years is fully chronicled in *Friendship's Odyssey*, a book written after his death, but at his request by Françoise de Lisle Françoise had come to him in 1918, distraught over an unhappy marriage and the burden of supporting two children Always at his best with ladies in distress, Ellis had restored her confidence, as he had done for Margaret four years earlier Suddenly the impulsive Françoise declared her love and, as she faithfully recorded, within a week they were "naked in each other's arms"

This swift-paced attachment was the culmination of his loves

and, according to Françoise, the only consummated one. By sheer faith in his virility, she overcame his self-doubts and induced a miracle in this man of sixty. Love for them became a beautiful game that inspired his essay, *The Play Function in Sex*. He scarcely knew whether he was on research or pleasure bent. But if Olive Schreiner, his earliest love, had detected the satyr in him, Françoise, a third of a century later, felt that word conveyed too much age. Archly answering to the name of Naad, she called him "the Faun."

Yet the blessings of Françoise eventually brought equal torments. When Ellis introduced her to Hugh, the two young people began to collaborate on a book about their "king." The theme was Woman's Debt to Havelock Ellis. Together they talked Ellis by the hour, sharing a mystic sense that they were extensions of their beloved sage. In this curious cult, they merged until one day Françoise awoke to find she had two lovers. Although a faithful type, she had been led astray by the Shelley-Ellis-Selincourt dreams of passionate friendships.

When her elderly lover learned the facts, she found his "volcanic" reaction out of place. After all, she had been drawn to Hugh only because he was Ellis's disciple. Besides, she never quarreled over the Faun's passionate friendships, and the number of lovely ladies seeking his counsel had increased with his fame. Perhaps it was his own record that made the blow so harsh. Naturally, he rejected the charge of jealousy, which he had always condemned, but he declared that Hugh had distorted his beliefs. People who preached plural attachments, such as Shelley and Selincourt, made a mess of their own lives as well as those with whom they consorted.

What he had always feared had taken place. The young woman, whom he cherished, had succumbed to a man twenty years his junior, "a sexual athlete," who in a few months had given Françoise more rapture than he had given her over several years. Ellis proposed to withdraw quietly, but that was the last thing that the lovers wished. For weeks, months, and even years all three analyzed and dissected their predicament. Furthermore, all members

of this articulate triangle poured out their separate views to Margaret Sanger across the ocean

To Françoise it became clear that Hugh had lit the flame of a gigantic fire that threatened to consume them all. To the king, it also seemed like *Gotterdammerung* the twilight of the gods. Deep in his conscience smoldered the fact that, like the legendary king, his own philanderings had laid the basis for this almost incestuous love between the young couple who claimed to be his "children." His hard-won kingdom, built on amorous play and irrelevant philosophy, was crashing about him.

Françoise, although still madly in love with Hugh, finally renounced him. She hoped to salvage a Platonic friendship among the three, but in this she failed. When Hugh lost his king, he bitterly repudiated Françoise. Out of their years of agony, she thought that she had learned two profound truths. You cannot love by proxy, and sexual love is not cumulative when shared by several. Still ardent, in the prime of life, Françoise then settled down with her Faun, who had suddenly grown very old.

For Ellis, the ordeal had been excruciating. In the last test, spiritual love had transcended sex, but curiously, that drew him closer to the memory of his long dead wife. Again he heard her beautiful voice, vainly calling him from the nursing home, "Havelock! Havelock!" Now basking in the care of Françoise, he decided that Edith had been his one great love. In *My Life*, he hardly mentions Françoise, and referring to his wife's jealousy of "M," wrote, "Beautiful as my new friend was to me and continues to be to this day, I have sometimes been tempted to wish that I had not met her."

Yet Margaret transmuted even that passionate friendship into an enduring relationship. She was probably the best friend that Ellis ever had and continued to enhance his days with extraordinary gifts. She not only lavished upon him such conventional delicacies as wines, fruits, flowers, and a phonograph with fine records, which he could not afford, but she looked after his interests in the United States. She interviewed publishers for him, stimulated articles by and about him, and wrote some of the latter herself. For his eightieth birthday she rounded up cabled greetings

from celebrities, along with a princely gift of money. She helped finance a house for his old age and most remarkable, for two years paid Françoise a salary equal to her teacher's pay, so that she could care for the king.

Of all the Sand-Pit circle, Margaret alone emerged serene, admired by all and untouched by the backlash of cumulative love. In part, this was because she came infrequently, never living in the emotional maze. More important, erotic love never controlled her destiny. During his last years Hugh wrote brokenheartedly of the havoc caused by his entanglement with Françoise. Not only had he lost his king, but all that Havelock had taught him about love and the Woman Spirit came "leering back" at him until he thought he might go mad.

Margaret tried to lead him back to equanimity. "I am so happy in a cause, Hugh. All the world of human beings is a passing show. They come and go, but the idea of human freedom grows ever closer around one's heart and comforts and consoles and delights."

The Ellis group was only one of the manifestations of the sexual revolution that affected Margaret. Writing years later, Mrs. Dodge had said that it was as though Margaret Sanger had been "arbitrarily chosen by the powers that be to voice a new gospel of not only sex knowledge in regard to conception but about copulation and its intrinsic importance." However, the phrase "new gospel," had been taken from Dr. Marie Stopes and so had the stress on sex as a "prophylactic part of right living," which Mrs. Dodge attributed to Margaret.

For a period Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes were potent influences upon each other. Margaret had introduced the Englishwoman to the subject of birth control and clinics, which started a new phase in the latter's career. In turn, Dr. Stopes's sexual theories obviously, if briefly, colored Margaret's ideas. More important, her open letter to President Wilson, signed by famous British writers, was, as Margaret gratefully acknowledged, a major factor in changing public opinion during the 1916 trial.

When they met at Margaret's Fabian lecture, Dr. Stopes had

just secured an annulment as "virgo intacto," to a short marriage. She had turned her ordeal, as well as weeks of study about sex, into a manuscript called *Married Love*. No English publisher would take it, but in New York Margaret found one who brought out an expurgated version. The cuts, however, determined the author to bring out a privately printed British edition.

Thanks to a new friend, Colonel Humphrey Verdon Roe, of the Royal Air Force, Dr Stopes could now finance the book. She had persuaded him not only to put up the funds, but to break with his fiancée, so that he might marry his new author. For some time both decisions seemed supremely right. In their pristine and almost primeval delight, she called him "Tiger" and signed herself "Woodnymph."

The book was always a fine investment, in fact, a runaway success, selling more than a million copies. Today this is hard to account for, except that it was the first popularly written book explaining the physiology of sex. According to Dr Stopes, her unique contribution was material which today is dismissed as chimerical. Science was investigating the newly discovered sex glands and hormones when she announced that the sexual act enriched and vitalized the partners by the mutual exchange of "substances materially presented as chemical and ultrachemical molecules."

She talked of chemicals, instead of electricity, but like Selincourt, created her own hypothesis that exalted sex as a panacea for spiritual and physical well being. Scientifically, she was as irresponsible as a medieval schoolman and although she used her academic title to give her words authority, she was not a medical doctor.

In the twenties, Aylmer Maude, who had written a biography of Tolstoi, the ablest man he had known, decided to do the same for the ablest woman, his dear friend Dr Stopes. He claimed that her achievements, which were substantial, derived from the fact that she was "attuned to the universe." This cosmic association inspired her *New Gospel to All Peoples*, directed in 1920 to the Anglican Bishops of Lambeth. The amazing message starts "My Lords, I speak to you in the name of God. You are his priests. I am his prophet. I speak to you of the mysteries of the union

of man and woman" At this point she explained about the interchange of molecules "Without the balance of these subtle, internal secretions, neither child, nor unmated man or woman can be a whole individual"

A posthumous biographer, Keith Bryant, who had access to the tons of papers Dr Stopes left to the British Museum, says that she suffered increasingly from megalomania, which Colonel Roe confirmed Because of a war-time injury, he became deficient as a husband and apparently when the tiger in him left, her love went also Nostalgically, he settled alone near the fiancée, whom he had once jilted

Before Margaret's second visit to England, a rift had already divided the two somewhat parallel women leaders A third and lesser one, Mary Ware Dennett, then president of the Voluntary Parenthood League had arranged the break She had not only started an American cult of Dr Stopes, bringing her to New York for a mass meeting, but had never ceased to circulate reports that Margaret was a sensational, ineffectual leader without background Dr Stopes now adopted these views and the former friendship turned into the one bitter rivalry of Margaret's life However, at this period, probably no one in the same field could have maintained a friendship with Dr Stopes

Marie Stopes, who had risen swiftly from obscure poverty and loneliness to wealth, fame and a coterie of admirers, decided in her late fifties to start a third career She had spent twenty years in science, twenty years in sex education and now would pursue poetry and drama She meant to continue her world contributions for another sixty years, but to do so she must maintain her creative forces through the subtle secretions which she had described As caretaker of genius, she needed those vitalizing molecules

The author of *Married Love* and *Enduring Passion* kept neither love nor passion, for she separated from her second husband for the same reason as from her first She who wrote *Radiant Motherhood* and *Wise Parentage* broke forever with her only child when he dared to marry Somewhat indignantly, with only half her life schedule fulfilled, Dr Stopes died in 1958 at the age of seventy-seven

Marie Stopes was perhaps the most gifted and certainly the most repellent spokeswoman for the many-faceted sexual revolution. Her extravagant claims for physical love made a gargantuan joke out of her ill-balanced life. The omnipotent molecules which were supposed to spiritualize passion destroyed both her affection and common sense. By comparison, Margaret Sanger appears singularly level-headed and self-disciplined.

But what have these erotic excesses to do with birth control? Opponents claimed that they were the inevitable corollary. Margaret always answered that the use of contraceptives was not related to morality. Women inclined toward promiscuity would surrender to it whether or not they had protection against pregnancy. Modern permissiveness in rearing unchaperoned girls, along with the opportunities provided by parked cars, had created new temptations. Contraceptives merely prevented the tragedy of illegitimate and unwanted children.

Neither Margaret nor her friends were promiscuous since they chose their lovers carefully, believing, in the words of Havelock Ellis, that sometimes "the communion of bodies becomes the communion of souls." Margaret was so discreet that most of her associates did not know that she had other than conventional habits. Since she succeeded during her life in hiding her loves, the question therefore arises, why they should be exhumed in death. The first answer is that they have already been exposed. She talked freely to her intimates about her loves and in the early fifties she did so to her biographer, Lawrence Lader. He wrote about the Sand-Pit group in detail and, according to Françoise de Lisle, with many inaccuracies. Beyond that, Margaret left her uncensored correspondence to the libraries.

As the custodian of a great cause, Margaret tried to protect it during its critical years, but she never repudiated her own views. Her loves were bright strands in her life, wholly consistent with the ethos to which she subscribed. With a sense of her historic role, Margaret Sanger was content to let posterity make the final judgments.