

Once More Advancing

21



Among the upper classes and opinion-makers of England, birth control was fast being accepted, but the Drysdales had invited Margaret to reach the workers, who remained curiously alienated. Unlike Dr Stopes, who was an impressive orator but spoke only to large gatherings, Margaret addressed dozens of small cooperative guilds, to reach which she cheerfully rode the underground. Later she made a three-week speaking tour of Scotland.

Glasgow was her first booking, the Socialist city whose poverty had overwhelmed her seven years earlier. On the green, one Sunday noon, she celebrated Fourth of July with her own declaration of independence from excess children. Nearly two thousand shipyard workers in caps and baggy corduroys crowded around as she explained that labor itself produced the surplus workers who dragged down their living standards.

That evening she appeared at a Socialist-sponsored forum where women for the first time outnumbered men. The latter came to re-fight the historic battle between Marx and Malthus. Socialist dogma held that any reform dulling the edge of poverty retarded the main goal, the fall of capitalism. This doctrinaire view had kept the party from endorsing family limitation. To demolish the argument, Margaret asked, "Why do you fight for higher wages? If misery is your weapon, why ask for an eight hour day instead of a twelve- or fourteen-hour one?"

She reminded her audience that the Socialist Party had always endorsed women's rights, but these rights were meaningless to those who still lacked freedom to protect themselves from un-

wanted pregnancies. When she was done, the men were strangely silent, but women who had never before spoken in public poured out their personal testimonials.

In the next weeks Margaret, the veteran trouper, made one-night stands in towns which boasted neither inns nor taxis. Once she shared the only bed in the house with her hostess and was remarkably comforted to learn that Sylvia Pankhurst had recently enjoyed the same accommodations.

Near Andrew Carnegie's birthplace in Dunfermline, she found child labor reminiscent of the early years of the Industrial Revolution. Most of the population had been brought in to do munitions work and had remained after the war, although conditions became worse than elsewhere. Children were apprenticed to the mills at eight or nine, and because schooling was thought unnecessary for girls, they worked ten to twelve hours a day right through adolescence, through their own marriages, and up to birth of the first child. These young mothers had a built-in tiredness which, according to the local doctor, they transmitted to their children. In the first grade the pupils, who were pitiful examples of reckless breeding, kept falling asleep at their desks.

Although Margaret's talks made friends for the Malthusians, she grew increasingly aware that for the very poor and ignorant, there should be cheaper, easier methods of contraception than were then available. Ellis had told her of a chemical product that he had read about in a German medical journal just before the outbreak of the war. Apparently it had met all standards, but after the war he could find nothing more about it. Margaret decided to go to Germany and track it down. It might be the technical breakthrough which would democratize birth control.

Eventually Margaret located the chemist family that was again quietly manufacturing its contraceptive jelly, this time in Friedrichshaven. She was disappointed to find the materials too costly for her purposes, but she brought home samples of the jelly and a suggestion for a new approach, a commercial, chemical one.

In her search, she had interviewed many doctors, at first courteous, but who turned on her as though she were the enemy when she mentioned birth control. All of them insisted that the Fatherland needed

as many children as possible to make up for war losses. If a woman could not survive another pregnancy, she might be aborted. Since abortion was illegal, Margaret did not follow the logic until a gynecologist blurted out that Germany would never turn the future of the race over to its mothers, in the case of an abortion, doctors made the decision. As Napoleon had put it, children belonged to the state, as the fruit to the gardener.

In France, she found the counterpart to this view in one of the least publicized war casualties. Although the nation had been the first to stabilize its population, the government now demanded large families. The loss of its youth, plus fear of Germany, had reversed its policy. In the future not only were contraceptives banned, but bonuses were offered to the parents of many children.

At the end of her trip Margaret met the Drysdales in Holland for a tour of the clinics that she had studied five years earlier. Her English friends were now convinced that instruction in the poorer areas was the great hope for birth control. Since there were no legal barriers in Britain, they began to plan for a clinic staffed by doctors to be opened in London within the year. Before they fulfilled their plan, however, Dr. Stopes opened the first clinic, although hers was staffed by midwives.

Home once more, Margaret began to see the medical profession as an obstacle to progress, as it had become in Germany. Just before America's entrance into the war, the New York Medical Society had voted three to one against birth control and apparently it had not changed its views. The Crane decision of 1918 had explicitly stretched the right of physicians to prescribe contraceptives for health reasons, but no doctor had done so for the poor.

On Margaret's suggestion, Dr. Mary Halton had made a citywide test of twenty-nine hospitals. Two women, one with tuberculosis and the other with a kidney ailment, were refused help everywhere, although in each case another pregnancy might be fatal. As in Germany, the doctors hinted that if a woman were already pregnant, she might be aborted, but they could not compromise their standing by giving contraceptives to charity patients.

Well aware of the profession's hostility toward outsiders' meddling in health matters, Margaret nevertheless did not waver in her

plan to start a doctor-staffed clinic. With this in mind, she addressed letters to many child specialists, outlining her project and asking for support. Never would she forget the lighthearted cynicism of the replies, most of them reminding her that since babies were their business, they did not want to limit the supply.

In sharp contrast, Dr. Emmett Holt, author of *The Care and Feeding of Children*, the Bible for young mothers, wrote that a reliable contraceptive would be a godsend. With his aid, a small medical committee was formed, headed by a woman doctor pledged to set up the clinic. Since Margaret wanted nothing more than to have doctors take the initiative, she now gratefully turned her attention elsewhere.

At this time the future was bright with promises and new support. One of these involved a trip to the Orient, another, equally exotic, a tycoon. The latter's incredulous response, on being introduced, was, "You can't be *the* Margaret Sanger!"

She was confronting a tall, white-haired man with the ruddy glow of an English country squire. Brusque he was often called, but when he smiled, she saw a "radiant personality." J. Noah Slee was the founder of the Three-in-One Oil Company and an arch-conservative. Margaret and he were at once vividly aware of each other, although when he asked to drive her home, she did not want him to see her shabby flat. However, there was no putting him off and with disarming frankness, he pronounced her neighborhood unsafe. He also reproved her for impairing the health of a national leader by living in deprivation.

In the next months he courted her in all conventional ways, but most persuasively by applying his expertise to her office. Along with bouquets, he gave her a date stamper, a mechanical letter opener, and a new filing system. She was entranced by these attentions and impressed by his competence and reliability, traits in which the men of her family had been in short supply. However, she continued to doubt that his big-business outlook could be compatible with hers. Besides, he was eighteen years her senior. Still, Margaret had always liked older men, and he was two years younger than Havelock Ellis. He was, as she once wrote, "in the full plenitude of his powers with the vigor of youth."

Born in South Africa, Noah Slee had made his fortune, as well

as an unhappy marriage, in the United States. After a divorce, he had lived bleakly, confining his great energies to the promotion of his business, a few charities and his Episcopal church, the fashionable St. George's, where he served as Sunday school superintendent. He looked askance at social innovations, but after falling in love with the leader of the most controversial one, his sympathies expanded. Since he claimed that Margaret was the great adventure of his life, her cause became his cause and he supported all of her projects, often substantially, but always quietly.

In 1921, Margaret's chief project was the first National Birth Control Conference. Public opinion seemed ready at last to support a three-day educational program which she scheduled at the Plaza Hotel, shrewdly choosing the dates of the American Public Health Conference, so that delegates might attend some of her sessions.

On the eve of her meeting, she launched a new sponsoring group, the American Birth Control League, to take the place of the now defunct National League. Being a lone worker, she did this reluctantly and almost as casually as seven years before when she started the original league. This time it began under the aegis of the Rublee home and with able trustees to guide it through the first year while she would be in the Orient.

As she had planned, the conference opened in a dignified, rather than news-making, way. It looked as though the memorable feature would be the doctors' session at which a thousand crowded into a room designed for half the number. Margaret, who had once tried to learn from the profession, was now instructing physicians in the techniques and current methods of contraception. In view of their past indifference, it was ironic that some were disgruntled because she could neither guarantee adequate testing nor 100 per cent safety for any method. The session was an historic milestone, not only because it was unprecedented, but because it opened the eyes of so many to their new responsibilities.

The conference was to end with an evening rally at Town Hall, the most ambitious meeting that Margaret had ever planned and for which she had inveigled Harold Cox to come from England. This former member of Parliament and editor of the *Edinburgh*

Review, had startled the British Establishment by pointing out that neither the Anglican clergy nor most physicians practiced what they preached. Although denouncing contraception, they showed the lowest birth rates of all professional groups. To make the most of her prestigious speaker, Margaret invited leaders of all denominations, including Catholic Archbishop Patrick J. Hayes. Borrowing the theme of her opponents, she had billed the subject as "Birth Control: Is It Moral?"

Shortly before eight, Margaret, Cox and their dinner hostess, Juliet Rublee, drove to West Forty-third Street, rejoicing at the overflow crowd. Pushing their way up to the entrance, they were astonished when a policeman told them that the meeting was canceled.

Back rolled the years as Margaret saw again the locked door at Corning, the locked theater in St. Louis, and all of the locked doors that she had faced. But this was New York, and the speaker was a distinguished Englishman! It was incredible and humiliating. The officer had no further information except that no one, not even those who had rented the place, might enter. Margaret called police headquarters. Curiously, the officer in charge knew nothing of the meeting and had issued no orders.

As she considered what to do, Margaret noticed a few people emerging from the hall. Swiftly she wedged her way back to the door and when it opened with another trickle from those inside she ducked under the policeman's arm, into the partly filled hall and down the long aisle. Another officer stopped her at the stairs of the platform. Again frustrated, she was looking up at the seemingly unattainable stage, when she was lifted bodily and tossed up where she wanted to be. The tosser, a large man who had spoken earlier on her program, sprang up beside her. Thrusting into her arms a bouquet of American beauties that a messenger had been trying to deliver, he roared to the departing audience, "Here's Mrs. Sanger!" The crowd burst into tumultuous applause, those in the lobby stampeded back into the hall.

During the ensuing turmoil, Anne Kennedy, Margaret's aide, explained what had happened. As the hall was filling, several police arrived with Monsignor Dineen, secretary to the archbishop

Finding Mrs Kennedy in charge, he told her that the meeting was canceled on the archbishop's orders. The hall must be cleared at once and the doors barred. The police confirmed his authority and in her predicament, Mrs Kennedy asked Monsignor Dineen to put his message in writing so that she might read it to the audience. He did so, she read it, but the crowd just sat there incredulous.

This outrage convinced Margaret that she must settle the matter with a court ruling, even at the cost of another arrest. Both the hall and stage were jammed as she moved forward to start the meeting. The uproar subsided, but she had not said a dozen words when two policemen grabbed her. Why shouldn't she speak, she asked. Had they a warrant? What were the charges? They did not try to answer, but in the next hour were as busy as fire fighters stamping out sporadic flames, as they squelched each person who tried to speak.

Down below was bedlam as the police tried to herd the stubborn crowd out of the hall. When they failed to clear the platform, Captain Donohue, the officer in charge, arrested Margaret and her most voluble supporter. They marched the two women off to the nearby station house, with some hundreds following as a noisy protective guard. The night court put the cases off until morning, letting the defendants return to their homes.

Outside, reporters were clamoring for the facts. They had meant to dismiss the matter as police bungling, until the *Times* man, checking on Mrs Kennedy's story, called the "Power House." At St. Patrick's Cathedral, he reached Monsignor Dineen himself, who calmly accepted responsibility. Next morning the *Times* headline ran, "Suppression of Town Hall Meeting Under Direct Orders of Archbishop Hayes."

Never had there been such unanimity about a birth control incident. Perhaps because Mrs Ogden Reid had been a shocked spectator, her family paper, the *Tribune*, carried an editorial on "Police Prussianism." Said the *Evening Post*: "Every liberty loving citizen of New York is hot with indignation." The *World* summed it up: "The issue Sunday night was bigger than the right to advocate birth control. It is part of the eternal fight for free speech, free

assembly and democratic government It is a principle which must always find defenders if democracy is to survive "

Captain Donohue did not bother to appear in court the next morning and so with no charges against them, the cases were dismissed Margaret at once rescheduled the meeting for the next week and since Town Hall was booked long in advance, she took the Park Theater with twice the seating Even so, there was an overflow of two thousand The program proceeded as originally planned, but on the platform sat one impressive new sponsor, Karl Reiland, pastor of St George's Episcopal Church, of which Noah Slee was an influential member

The triumphant mass meeting by no means closed the matter Archbishop Hayes issued extensive statements, ending with his Christmas Pastoral "Children troop down from Heaven because God wills it Even though some little angels in the flesh through moral, mental or physical deformity of parents may appear to human eyes hideous, misshapen, a blot on civilized society, we must not lose sight of this Christian thought that under and within such visible malformation there lives an immortal soul to be saved and glorified for all eternity among the blessed in Heaven To take life after its inception is a horrible crime, but to prevent human life that the Creator is about to bring into being, is satanic "

Among the floods of protests were so many demands for an investigation that the Police Department finally volunteered to review the action But their closed hearings investigated the sponsors of the meeting rather than the ban Their guilt-by-association technique was a forerunner of the later McCarthy hearings However, for their own good, the questioner should not have called two witnesses J Noah Slee was not only a pillar of orthodoxy, but a most effective champion for Mrs Sanger Juliet Rublee proved a worse mistake

Mrs Rublee's published answer to the archbishop's first statement had already brought an anonymous threat on her life, now she was given a prolonged questioning Suddenly she was arrested for an alleged violation of the criminal code In court, her case was at once dismissed, but the malice of the hearings back-

fired Since she was the wife of an important lawyer, the elite of the bar closed ranks to defend her in an open letter to Mayor Hylan What they demanded was in effect an investigation of the investigation The signers included Henry Morgenthau, Sr, Charles C Burlingham, and Herbert L Satterlee, son-in-law of J Pierpont Morgan

The new hearings dragged on for months with no effectual action Again the *World* summed up the melodrama "The effort to muzzle the birth control propagandists is as stupid an attempt at obstruction as ever helped a minority movement It is a puzzle to see how anyone can imagine that police abuses, star chamber sessions, inquisitorial investigations, false arrests, farcical persecutions, dummy complaints will suppress the advocates The score today is all in favor of the birth control advocates, not because of the excellence of their case, but because of the sheer stupidity of the opposition "