

Era of Achievement

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Before Margaret went to her first international congress, the venerable sponsoring group, in tribute to her, added three words to an already ponderous name. It was the Fifth International Neo-Malthusian *and Birth Control* Conference that met in London during July 1922.

Back from the Orient, Margaret Sanger was billed as "the greatest pioneer of the modern movement," at a rally presided over by H. G. Wells. Exotic proof of her influence was the presence of the "Japanese Margaret Sanger," Shiduze Ishimoto, who had journeyed all the way from Tokyo to participate. There were delegates from most European nations, including former enemy ones, but for the first time the largest foreign group came from the United States.

John Maynard Keynes, the newly famous author, struck the keynote when he declared that population was not only an economist's problem, but would soon be recognized as the "greatest of all political questions." This was censored news in countries which were demanding large families. Mussolini had sharpened the issue by claiming that Italy had three alternatives. It could "addict itself to voluntary sterility," but his people were too intelligent for that, it could try to find outlets for its surplus millions, or it could forcibly seize such outlets.

As the first requisite to international peace, the conference urged the League of Nations to advise its members to limit their populations according to their resources, since excess numbers did not justify aggression. Although the league did not act on the Mal-

thusian advice, Margaret was so impressed by the informative world-wide news coverage that she longed to repeat it back home. Since the American delegation, including Juliet Rublee, was enthusiastic, she invited the other delegations to the United States for a sixth international meeting in 1925.

During this exhilarating week, Margaret's thoughts must often have strayed to a personal problem. She had once told Juliet that she was not inclined toward matrimony. "Where is the man," she asked, "to give me what the movement does—joy, interest, freedom?" But, as she also repeatedly wrote, she was often desolate in her cold little flat. Occasionally she thought she would go mad, not only stripped of comforts and pleasures that she knew so well how to enjoy, but existing only for her cause.

Presumably she remarried a few weeks after the conference, although she did not publicize the fact until the press discovered it in February 1924. She then announced that she had been Mrs. Noah Slee for eighteen months or since September 1922. September eighteenth was, indeed, the anniversary that the couple celebrated and the 1930 edition of *Who's Who*—the only one with any of her dates—gives 1922 as the year. True, this edition puts her first marriage in 1900, although Bill Sanger's letter in the Library of Congress establishes 1902 as the correct year. That Margaret was quite unreliable about dates is corroborated by Dorothy Brush, her frequent traveling companion. Once when a customs official pointed out that her answer to a routine question about age did not agree with her passport, she airily dismissed the matter. She thought that everyone made up such dates!

In 1922, according to her lighthearted story to relatives, she had to marry Noah because he had followed her around the world. Had she married earlier, as some believed, she could have ended any ambiguity by saying so. She had received her quiet Massachusetts divorce in 1920, and yet her two autobiographical accounts, both devoid of dates, do not mention Noah until after the tour. *The Margaret Sanger Story*, based on "hundreds of hours of interviews with Mrs. Sanger," implies that the wedding service, "before an English Justice of the Peace," took place in the fall of 1922. The author further embellishes the account by adding that the

bridegroom had agreed in advance to her continued independence in both personal and professional life

There was no apparent reason for secrecy, and Margaret denied to the press that there had been any. The Sleees had informed their friends about the step and did not believe that their personal lives were of public interest. Nevertheless, in *My Fight for Birth Control*, Margaret notes that she was "amused" to have achieved an unpublicized divorce and remarriage. The truth seems to be that since her field of work made her vulnerable to attack, she went to great lengths to suppress controversial items in her private life. Besides, her *Autobiography* admits to "apprehension" about this union, and letters in the Library of Congress show that during 1922 she consulted both Hugh de Selincourt and Havelock Ellis. The latter replied dubiously that "however nice, kind and generous" Slee was, if he was a "committed reactionary," disapproving and disliking everything Margaret really was, the marriage would not work. On the other hand, if Slee was "a sort of repentant millionaire," who deep inside felt that she was doing what he wanted, the union might turn out very well.

Unlike most of her friends, Noah Slee was neither liberal nor intellectual. In *My Fight*, Margaret says that when her heart "was awakening to love again," she was troubled and perplexed. In the end she came to believe that he was "a spiritual radical and revolutionist in common sense." The last trait had been so lacking in the first two men in her life, Michael Higgins and Bill Sanger, that she doubly appreciated Noah's practical competence. In part, as she recognized, they were drawn together because they both cherished a somewhat naive regard for success, which both had attained through uncommon stamina and courage.

The good executive, Noah Slee, was softened by much kindness, some humor, and "the heart of a child." In spite of incompatibility with his own grown sons, his care of Grant during convalescence suggested a good relationship with her sons, whose education he proposed to finance. Margaret would not discuss money and curtly declined his suggestion of an English-style premarital settlement. As she said in *My Fight*, she had grown proud of her own earning capacity from royalties and from lectures at \$150 each,

and had no intention of managing any but her own income. Nevertheless, ever mindful of her cause, she did not underestimate what money could do for birth control. Explicitly, she wrote, "I knew that the cooperation of a man whose experience had been gained in building up for thirty years a well known business, with such backing and interest as he could give, would help enormously in extending the work and expanding it along the lines I had mapped out on an international scale."

From the first, she had warned that her work would interfere with a conventional marriage. Noah would tire of kissing her good-by at depots and waving farewell as gangplanks lifted. He shrugged this off, reminding her that he too had commitments. They would go their own ways, but always reinforce each other.

Because the marriage was not announced, the Sles continued to have separate apartments, although she moved at once to Noah's modern building at 39 Fifth Avenue. The individual apartments helped to maintain her independence and followed the Havelock Ellis pattern of semi-detached living that she had approved. Nevertheless, once the marriage was publicized, they established their real home in the country.

On their return to New York, Margaret faced a major disappointment. The promised doctors' clinic had not materialized. Frightened by the furor of the Town Hall raid and with no help from her medical colleagues, the physician in charge had simply given up. If anything was to be done, Margaret again must resume full responsibility.

Since working for the clinic might ruin a doctor's future, no gynecologist was found available. However, Dr. Dorothy Bocker, then employed by the Georgia Public Health Service, had the necessary New York license. She was enthusiastic, willing to learn, and with a two-year contract, ready to accept a salary of only \$5,000.

At first even this sum threatened to stymie the plan. Former donors refused to give anything for a project that might put Margaret back in jail. Never, she wrote, had she so desperately wanted money, although it seems strange that Noah did not provide it. He would soon give far larger sums for projects about which she cared less. Perhaps she wanted to prove that she could do it on her own.

Three years earlier Clinton Chance, a wealthy Malthusian, had told Margaret that if she ever started a clinic, he might help. It was to him that she now turned. His cabled answer assured Dr Bocker's two year salary and therefore the English financing of the first enduring birth control clinic in the United States.

Both thrift and caution suggested a quiet start. In the first years Margaret simply referred the many women who still called at her office to Dr Bocker, installed in two rooms in the same building. Except for word of mouth, there was no promotion for the work behind the door obscurely labeled Clinical Research Bureau. Technically, it was not yet a clinic, but from the first there was research based on the growing case records.

In its second year the bureau's existence was announced at a public lunch, where the response seemed to justify expansion. Margaret knew that a medical advisory committee would be her best aid, but she soon found that in professional eyes, Dr Bocker's lack of experience was a great handicap. She also learned that Dr Hannah Stone of Lying-In Hospital might donate her services. Margaret did not hesitate. It was one of her swift, ruthless, and farseeing decisions, and it accounted for one of Margaret's few abrasive breaks with a staff member.

If the whole of the profession had been available, there would have been no better choice than Dr Stone. She not only impressed physicians, but had rapport with her patients. When Lying-In Hospital made her choose between her associations, she stayed with the nonpaying, controversial clinic. "It needs some of us who care," she explained. She made the clinic her life's work and the most powerful argument for the eventual reversal of the professional attitude toward birth control.

This professional outlook remained as lethargic, if not as hostile, as before the Crane decision. The less a doctor knew, the more violently he reacted against contraception. Margaret used to say that she longed to send a missionary out to preach to the benighted medical societies. In the mid-twenties, that is precisely what she did. Dr James F. Cooper, as a gynecologist and former medical missionary in China, had swiftly been converted to birth control. His wealth of experience as well as his platform presence inspired Mar-

garet to engage him, at \$10,000 a year, to preach to his profession throughout the nation

And where did she find the money? As usual, she first approached the board of the American Birth Control League—"charming women," she described them, "whose instinctive reaction to new ideas was always negative" They were appalled at her irresponsibility Certainly no cautious trustee would approve such a sum for a project with no direct returns Luckily, as she related in *My Fight for Birth Control*, "a noble friend," who had sufficient faith in her, pledged the money Who was this noble friend of great faith? Her husband, we discover in the later written *Autobiography* In a note preserved in the Library of Congress, she frankly wheedled him The tide was turning in her favor, and if Dr Cooper succeeded in putting over her program, she would "please J Noah H Slee and retire with him to the Garden of Paradise"

She was premature about the tide, but she never regretted Dr Cooper In two years, visiting all of the states, he made more than seven hundred speeches, mostly to physicians Always in demand and with access to groups which would have barred most speakers, he brought the first accurate understanding of birth control to thousands of doctors who had been abysmally misinformed With charts and exhibits, he taught the techniques of contraception

A by-product of his lectures proved a real breakthrough, some twenty thousand physicians agreed to instruct patients referred to them Margaret was still receiving a gargantuan volume of mail, more than a million inquiries in five years and at last she could refer the writers to doctors in most areas

Now began a race to secure safe and adequate supplies to meet the growing demand Jointly Dr Cooper and Dr Stone created a chemical contraceptive with a lactic acid and glycerine base, far cheaper than the German one that Margaret had brought home Used with a diaphragm pessary, it was highly effective But since pessaries were not made in the United States and were barred from the mails and common carriers, they were hard to come by

Margaret never told how she secured the supply used at the clinic or by Dr Cooper Titillating rumors of socialites returning

from abroad with a few dozen contrabands in their pockets or strapped around their waists explained an occasional windfall, but not the steady provisioning of 500 to 1,000 a week

In the days of Al Capone, there was no more picaresque and certainly not as altruistic a case of bootlegging as that carried on by a staunch pillar of St George's Episcopal Church I found the key to the mystery in an uncatalogued memorandum in container 110, among the 272 containers in the Margaret Sanger Collection of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress On November 25, 1925, Noah Slec dictated a statement saying that his Canadian factory had received a large shipment of German diaphragms, which were repacked in three-in-one cartons and sent to his factory at Rahway, New Jersey This subterfuge made possible the effective growth of the clinic, as well as Dr Cooper's crusade

Smuggling was only the exotic part of Noah's aid With his business acumen, he found the proper way to package the lactic acid paste and then turned his attention to the domestic production of pessaries No American rubber company would touch the project, but two of Margaret's supporters, an engineer and a public relations man, formed the Holland-Rantos Company to reproduce the Mensigna cap for sale on prescription of physicians Noah loaned \$15,000, but would take no stock in the company

Both Slec's were sure that Holland Rantos would make money, as it did, but lest their motives in promoting birth control be misunderstood, they did not enter any profit-making concern Margaret reluctantly declined several radio offers which would have made a fortune, but the policy proved wise when John Sumner, Comstock's successor as head of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, once asked her how much she made on her birth control "racket" she silenced him with her files of letters refusing to sponsor any kind of article

After the Holland-Rantos Company proved the market potential, a German company brought over a group of skilled workmen who became the world's largest producers of contraceptives During the depression, the manufacture of such articles was not only big business, but one of the fastest growing ones

With a physician in charge of the clinic and another out lectur-

ing, Margaret began to concentrate on the project in which she had involved the League while she was in London. To a group of wealthy supporters she broke the exciting news of the upcoming Sixth International Conference. Her audience stared back incredulously. The *Review*, they reminded her, was again in the red and she wanted \$25,000 for an international congress! Together this group of ladies might painlessly have underwritten the whole amount, but it was impossible to convey to them the value of such an event to the American movement.

Margaret decided to raise the money herself from the subscribers of the *Review*. This was the hard way, with few large gifts, but with small donations from all over the country. As the date of the Congress approached, she converted the trickle of funds into one-way passages from Europe to fetch speakers and needed delegates. She only hoped that later she would be able to send her distinguished visitors home.

It was another history-making meeting. Some eight hundred delegates came from eighteen nations as well as twenty-four colleges and universities. From the press angle, it was superlative. With no sensational incident, it yielded eight hundred articles, of which two hundred were editorials, all informative and mostly favorable. This coverage accelerated donations until the debts were paid and was banked with a surplus.

The endearing session was the Pioneers' Dinner, presided over by columnist Heywood Broun and with double stars, C. V. Drysdale, representing two generations of his family, and Dr. Aletta Jacobs of Amsterdam. Ten years earlier she had refused to meet Margaret in Holland, but now the old lady crossed the ocean to explain her mistake, receive the plaudits of the congress, and confess that the New York Clinical Research Bureau was the only place where her standards had been fully realized.

The most important session was for physicians, so unexpectedly crowded that an overflow group had to be accommodated in a second nearby hotel. The subject was unprecedented. For decades the Malthusians had been debating social doctrines, oblivious of the fact that contraceptives had never been evaluated. They were naively unaware that many of their prescribed methods were not reli-

able and that none could be used in every case Dr Cooper updated their information

Dr Stone's report of the clinic's first eleven hundred cases was the sensation She knew who came to the clinic and why All groups in the community used it, 38 per cent being Protestant, 32 per cent Jewish, and 26 per cent Catholic, which closely paralleled their numbers in the area They came for both health and economic reasons Most had suffered at least one abortion and some were already wrecked by self-inflicted operations

The audience wanted statistics about methods and Dr Stone had these also She had inspected and made laboratory tests of most commercial devices, a large part of which were worthless Of all types, the diaphragm pessary, used with the new lactic acid paste, gave the surest protection It was 98 per cent effective, while the paste alone rated 92 per cent This evidence was of prime interest Dr Robert L Dickinson, dean of gynecologists, who in retirement now headed a committee on maternal health, later wrote, "For the first time in the hundred years controversy there was an analysis of a large series of followed-up histories" So valuable was the innovation that Dr Dickinson finally arranged for the publication of the clinic's report in *The Medical Journal and Record* (MD Publications, Inc) Never before had a leading professional magazine treated the subject Eventually, Dr Dickinson also threw the weight of his prestige behind the bureau by taking a place on its advisory committee

By 1925 the bureau had outgrown its two rooms and had moved into more adequate quarters Dr Stone had secured the services of some of her colleagues, so that two physicians were always on hand, as well as nurses and a secretary to take the records There was also a social worker for follow-up Appointments had to be made two weeks in advance, and by the end of the twenties, nearly ten thousand patients came yearly The shabby gray-stone building on West Fifteenth Street was a magnet not only to the poor women of the city, but to doctors and other visitors from all parts of the country and from abroad

The success of this first enduring clinic was infectious, and a second soon followed in Chicago Illinois had no restrictive legisla-

tion, but Health Commissioner Bundeson arbitrarily refused a license until its promoters, led by Dr Rachel Yarros of Hull House, and Mrs Benjamin Carpenter, took the matter to court There Judge Harry Fisher gave a favorable decision With this encouragement, the friends of birth control opened two more centers in the wide sprawling city Back east, Dr Stone began to supervise a second clinic in nearby New Jersey Then Baltimore started one, as did Cleveland and Buffalo Out in fast-growing California, a dozen popped up like toadstools

Noah had promised Margaret that together they would accomplish more than she could alone, and in the twenties, his partnership greatly accelerated progress Giving his time and skills, as well as his money, he became treasurer of both the American Birth Control League and the Clinical Research Bureau He paid off the *Review* deficits, gave generously to the league, bought Dr Stone an examination table and other equipment, in addition to paying Dr Cooper's salary, financing the Holland-Rantos Company, and becoming a big-time bootlegger of contraceptives

In return, what did Noah Slee receive? The most enthralling years of his life! He had the comradeship of the woman he had courted for two years and even pursued around the world He took vast pleasure in helping to achieve her goals

For Margaret these years may also have been her best After a decade of grueling effort, she was fulfilling the resolve that she had made when Sadie Sachs died The Fifteenth Street Center was saving the lives of New York women and encouraging other centers to do the same And, although slower than she had hoped, the tide was coming her way

But that was not all Her personal life expanded with new pleasures Her marriage had not only brought a devoted husband, but security, status, and a piece of private paradise in the Dutchess County hills Noah had owned a mansion on the Hudson, but since she thought it gloomy and overwhelming, he had made a curious exchange, suggested by his neighbor, Henry Morgenthau The latter knew of a beautiful wooded estate on which a convent had recently burned In their emergency, the nuns thought Noah's house with its thirty bedrooms providential, and for it gladly traded their

hundred acres near Fishkill For once the wishes of a Catholic institution and Margaret Sanger were resolved to their mutual advantage On a spacious clearing, alongside a small lake, the Sleys built their home of native fieldstones

Margaret had feared that marriage might lessen her time with her sons, but instead, it produced the perfect vacation resort with built-in swimming, boating, riding, and tennis While Stuart was at Yale and Grant at boarding school and then at Princeton, they came regularly for weekends, often with a troop of young people

The place was equally attractive to Noah's children, two grown sons and a daughter, with none of whom he felt on easy terms In summers, Margaret engaged a nurse to look after his grandchildren, and the house was full of youngsters and laughter Noah's daughter left what must be one of the most affectionate appraisals of a stepmother This famous wife of her father did not look like a reformer, she noted, "but just a small woman with chestnut hair, an oval face and pretty sloping shoulders, like one of Godey's prints" Always a sympathetic listener, Margaret had a genius for encouraging others without flattery The children thought her a fairy godmother who followed their fancies, helping to fulfill their dreams

Margaret herself relished the pleasures of her new affluence Ascetic out of necessity in the past, she now developed a taste for many luxuries When Noah discovered her favorite beverage, he whimsically set up a trust fund to assure her a monthly allowance of \$160 for champagne

Although a thrifty man, he took a childlike joy in indulging Margaret's every wish He should have learned long back how little material things really meant to his wife On their honeymoon, strolling down the Rue de la Paix in Paris, he noted whatever caught her eye in the shop windows Next day those items, including an ermine wrap and a strand of emeralds, were delivered to her She protested that they were not appropriate for her and most be returned Finally, they compromised, keeping only the emeralds which were lovely with her coloring Some years later when he asked her to wear them, she confessed that they were pawned to help a project that he had not wanted to finance As

usual, she had her way, the project and the emeralds, which he re-deemed

The luxuries that she preferred at Willow Lake were not just material, but helped to lift her spirit. Instead of rising to the jangle of a telephone, she and Noah began their mornings with a canter through the quiet woods. In summer, the lake and the rock garden were her delights, and on dismal evenings nothing could surpass conversation with good friends around a roaring fire.

At such times Noah was at his country-squire, jovial best. A friend described him as being all bark, no bite and full of puns and riddles. At bedtime he might ask a guest why night was like the letter *p*. Because it puts Slee to sleep! Or if the discussion had seemed overly solemn, he told about the farmer's wife who would not take the blame for being childless because, while she might be a goose, her husband was not "a propaganda."

In this new and pampered togetherness one might expect the once single-minded crusader to grow relaxed and complacent, but there is no evidence that she ever wavered in her plans, although she readjusted her schedule. She was in her New York office less, but always commuted at least once a week.

Through the eyes of a new staff member, Elizabeth Grew Bacon, we see her coming into the office at 105 Fifth Avenue, "small, quiet, elegant in a stone beige coat trimmed with Persian lamb." Her turtleneck hair was straight and swathed around her head. Wide-set in a small, heart-shaped face, her incredibly deep blue [they were green] eyes met the gaze of the inquirer with the steadiest, most penetrating look one has ever seen. This look reflected "a steadfast light, a steadfast faith, a steadfast dedication to her cause that had never changed nor faltered, nor weakened down the years."

Her voice, wrote Mrs. Bacon, was calm and answered questions without fuss or unnecessary elaboration. With a smile of greeting to those who caught her eye, she went to her personal office and the desk, where there was a large photograph of her husband, "who had eased the life of his beloved Margie," and who wooed her by strategy, and with such gifts as the Addressograph and an updated filing system.

Her personal secretary, Anna Lifshiz, would bring her a sheaf

of mail, phone messages, a hundred and one requests for lecture dates, magazine articles, and interviews. But this was only her city office. At Willow Lake she built an aerie, Treetops, at the edge of a cliff overlooking the Hudson, where she insulated herself from the talk, laughter, and noisy bustle of those whom she had invited to her home. With or without her secretary, she worked over her enormous mail and appropriately, she wrote *Married Happiness*. Her one-time friend, Marie Stopes, suspected that she had stolen both title and theme from her own best seller, *Married Love*, but if so, it had taken eight years and Noah Slee to bring it to maturity.

In her mid-forties, although no one knew her age, Margaret had a special attractiveness. No doubt her clothes helped, for it was the first time that she could buy what she liked, and never before had the word "elegant" been applied to her. She had never wanted to be conspicuous, following the adage that the more radical one's views, the more conservative should be one's appearance, but she liked a tailored look and had found that simplicity comes high. For lack of a platform wardrobe, she had sometimes lectured in the borrowed dress of a friend.

With married happiness, improved health, and a growing sense of achievement, Margaret shed a new radiance, on which newspapers commented. Said a Denver reporter: "To keep young and beautiful, one should acquire a great faith. This recipe sprang to mind when, after seven years' absence, Margaret Sanger came into view, younger and lovelier than on her first visit before she had suffered imprisonment."