

The Bitter with the Sweet

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The last half of the nineteen twenties was filled with paradoxes for Margaret. There was growing acclaim, but there were rebuffs from her own colleagues. There was public farce, and there were personal sorrows.

The year 1926 began with the death of Mary Higgins, the first to go since their mother, and equally a sacrifice to unplanned children. Margaret cited her as an example of "cruel immolation at the shrine of family duty" and was aware that she herself was a beneficiary. Together with Nan, Mary had helped make Margaret's career possible, first by arranging for the excellent training at Claverack and then by acting as a private social security system to which her younger sister turned in emergencies.

In August 1926 Michael Higgins died. He was eighty-four, speechless and paralyzed from a cerebral stroke, but since he was the great oak in whose shadow Margaret had grown, his fall reverberated in her thoughts. Stuart and his Uncle Bob had arrived in time to say good-by, after which most of the family escorted the body on its long hot journey from Truro, Massachusetts, to Corning. Although Michael had barred a religious service, he wanted to be buried near his wife.

Of all the children, only Joe remained in Corning, and hoping to honor his father, he had arranged a secular wake for old-timers to pay their respects. Of course most of Michael's contemporaries had died, but nobody, not one of his former acquaintances, appeared during that endless, bitter evening. He was still the town atheist,

slighted even in death. Nor did the reputation of his famous daughter help to assuage the feelings of his fellow Irishmen.

It was a sad homecoming, as had been all of Margaret's last, infrequent visits with her father. Her childhood hero had shrunk into a contentious, pitiful old man. For all of his grandiose dreams, his civic projects, and controversial stands, his final influence seemed nil.

Passing the clock tower near the bank, one of her brothers remarked on how small it was, although he had considered it a second Eiffel Tower. Children's memories, thought Margaret, inflated everything. Then into her mind flashed the picture of a tall red-headed man confronting a jeering, snarling mob. "The speaking will take place within the hour," announced his resolute voice. That erect head and that will to do what he thought right were attributes of courage. Without that childhood memory, she might never have dared confront her own crises. In the next years she replaced her recent recollections of the querulous old man with her earlier ones. When she wrote about her background, she told about her father's wide-ranging social concerns, his independence and his bravery. By then she saw her own career as the extension of his influence.

Two public appearances added wry humor to this period. One year the Harvard Liberal Club invited Margaret to a dinner where, for lack of space, hundreds were turned away. The success of the dinner outraged Boston's Mayor Curley, who is recalled today in the mellowed version of *The Last Hurrah*, but whose career included a term in prison as well as one in Congress. Curley threatened to revoke the license of any hall within his jurisdiction where "the Sanger woman" spoke. In turn, this threat inspired the Ford Hall Forum to ask her to attend their annual banquet as a silent guest. Her picture, with mouth conspicuously taped, was publicized across the nation. The speaker, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., hailed her as the "outstanding social warrior of the century." "To inflict silence on a woman," he said, "is thought to be a terrible punishment, but this silence inflicts thought upon us."

There were many attempts to silence Margaret. In Syracuse, the

Catholic dominated City Council passed an ordinance against her conference, but after protests from the university leaders, the mayor vetoed the act and the program went on as scheduled. It was the mayor of Albany who forced a hotel to break its commitment, the meeting moved to a large private home. In Cincinnati, the Knights of Columbus threatened a permanent hotel boycott, but this aroused the Masons, who won the fight by championing free speech. In Milwaukee, the Women's Marquette League demanded that Mayor Hoane stop the meeting, but he defended Margaret's constitutional rights. In Hagerstown, Maryland, the Sanger sponsors found that the only hall available was a rundown dance hall, outfitted with chairs from the undertaker.

One appearance was so secretive that Margaret never knew the names of those who invited her, nor the exact location of the place. Her invitation came from the Woman's Branch of the Ku Klux Klan of Silver Lake, New Jersey. Whether from curiosity or zeal to reach all groups, she accepted and having followed the written directions, found a parked car with a driver who might have been a deaf mute for all her greeting. After a tortuous ride, they stopped at a large barnlike building where she was told to wait. Inside, the Klanswomen performed their rites, while outside, for three long hours their guest speaker sat alone in the cold and dark. When she finally confronted the rows of Neanderthal faces, she reduced her message to the simplest terms. In any case, she pleased them more than they pleased her, for they asked her to a dozen more meetings, which she declined.

Margaret was always busy with her vast mail, supervising the clinic and editing the *Review*, but her thoughts began to turn toward world needs. Scholars were already pointing out that it had taken unknown millenniums to produce the first billion men on earth, by about 1830, but now, after less than a century, there was a second billion, and in perhaps thirty more years there would be a third billion, and in half that time, a fourth billion, etc. etc., at implacable, geometric speed. That was bad enough, but the Fascists and all militarists were trying to accelerate the growth. The new nationalism was stimulating population as well as armament races. Her friend, the Very Reverend Dean Inge of England, who saw the

issue more clearly than most clergymen, summed it up ironically "It is a pleasant prospect if every nation with a high birth rate has a 'right' to exterminate its neighbors. The supposed duty of multiplication and the alleged right to expand, are among the chief causes of modern war."

Margaret still hoped that the League of Nations might support population controls. To jolt them into recognition of the explosive facts, she proposed to bring to Geneva the world's authorities on related matters. This could not be a Neo-Malthusian or birth control meeting, since Catholic countries would boycott such auspices, it needed a broader approach. To try out her idea she invited an international committee, which had been set up at her New York conference, for a weekend at Willow Lake. C. C. Little, President of the University of Michigan, came from Ann Arbor, Clinton Chance from London, and once more they were delighted to cooperate on a forward-looking project, for which she would do the work. Normally it took at least two years to mount an international conference, but in her urgency, she promised it within the year.

If these men grasped the importance of her plan, the women on the board of her Birth Control League did not. They viewed it as another aberration which would add to their financial burdens. To reassure them, as well as to provide for interim leadership, Margaret took a leave of absence, thus raising the conscientious Mrs. Robertson-Jones to the position of acting president.

Noah, accepting the financial responsibilities, decided to rent a villa on the French Riviera, where intermittently they could relax and entertain. Before the end of 1926, Margaret was in Geneva, settling time and place. She signed up the Salle Centrale for three days, starting at the close of August 1927. Then she went to London to develop the content of the meeting.

Since her paramount need was an advisory committee of stature, she spent a weekend with Ellis in Cornwall, where they conferred in "long walks and leisurely, heavenly talks." Next she went to Edinburgh to lasso the biologist, F. A. E. Crew, famous for making roosters lay eggs and hens crow. But of all her advisers, the most helpful was young Julian Huxley, who rounded up many of the European as well as English participants. For him, birth control was

not only "something for the alleviation of distress in the present, but the means by which in the long run man can become trustee of the cosmic evolution" Finally, she picked as chairman of the conference, Sir Bernard Mallett, former president of the Royal Statistical Society, with the obvious asset of being a friend of Sir Eric Drummond, currently Secretary-General of the League of Nations

Margaret's daily reports to Noah for once show her side of a correspondence Her busy schedule was spiced with items such as lunch with John Maynard Keynes and his bride, Lydia Lopokouva, the ballerina, and tea with Maude Royden, the woman minister They also reflect the relations of the couple and their problems He was irked by her absence, while she was torn between his needs and those of the conference With both love and tact she tried to bridge the separation

"Stafford Hotel, London

"Sunday [December 5, 1926]

"Dearest Noah—Darling

"It is really always lonely to be away from you even one day "

Again on December 8, "It's a fact that I think of you a hundred times a day and laugh to myself over something we have laughed over together You are ever in my heart and deep in my heart as you know These little separations are not catastrophes So here's a hug and a kiss Ever your Margy" By now she accepted his money graciously and pleased him by acknowledging it "London is expensive," she noted "I'm happy my dearest can give me such comforts and happiness"

On Noah's insistence, she had delayed leaving him, and on December 9 explained her way of making decisions using the Quaker words, "inner voice" and "God" The latter may have been characteristic of his vocabulary, but had never been of hers "You see, Noah dear, all my life I have acted on an inner voice and when that speaks to me, it speaks wisely and never fails me When I disobey it for one reason or the other, for any consideration whatever I always suffer If only I could help you to believe this and help you to understand it you would I know add to it your splendid powers and make everything I do a glorious success But when we put our

own man made minds against God's will and God's advice then disruption and disaster results everywhere"

Later she wrote in the same mood

I have been deeply depressed today and yesterday over the affairs here I know that were I free to work and keep on the job, I could put over a conference that would astound the world—*But*—here I am, interests divided and diverted and I cannot know what to do The movement now needs one dominating force to drive it to success—The interest is alive—the time is ripe, but I shall need to give time to it if it is to succeed No one else can do it, so it seems It will crown my past efforts and repay my sacrifices to see this Conference a success Will you help me? Not by money, darling one, but by seeing this thing eye to eye with me and giving me the time I need to work it up properly

You have done so much to help me make it the success it has become, that I believe you will help me again—forever I can never believe that you have come into my life to hold me back, you who are so vigorous and glorious in your love and splendid in your ideals and generosity! You have helped others to attain their life's work, you have given support and inspiration to others you love less—and I believe with all my heart, with all my faith that you will help me to victory and success

After spending about six weeks with her husband at Cap d'Ail, in February she was back, flitting between London and Paris An appointment at a beauty parlor suddenly and permanently changed her appearance Accidentally, her long bronze hair was singed off on one side and she lost her chief beauty In the age of the bobbed hair flapper, she unwillingly followed the style For a few hours she was inconsolable, lest Noah be distressed, but like many devoted husbands, he spent the evening with her and noticed no change until morning By that time she never again wanted the weight of long hair Unlike the Biblical Samson, she came to believe that hers had sapped her strength But gone forever was the "Madonna" look that Mrs Dodge had described when she wore her straight hair wrapped around her head or simply coiled at the back From now on her short, slightly curled coiffeur presented a more sophisticated, if less distinguished appearance However, change was inevitable, for although no one guessed it, she was forty-eight years old

In April Margaret opened headquarters in Geneva, where her

staff of seventeen began to cope with the problems of an international meeting. The conference would be conducted in both French and English, but she engaged some other language interpreters with a scientific terminology. She also arranged the usual social schedule with lunches, receptions, boat rides on the lake, and a dinner at Mrs. Stanley McCormick's fifteenth century Château de Prangins at Nyon. This was a first gesture from the lady who would become her main support.

On the Friday before the Tuesday opening, Margaret was reading final proof on the program when Sir Bernard came into her office and put his pencil through the names of all of the women workers, starting with herself and Edith How Martyn, her able assistant. "We'll just leave these off," he announced, adding that they had no place on a scientific program.

Margaret was speechless. She had faithfully kept herself in the background, but for the chairman, whom she herself had picked, to refuse to acknowledge the services of those who had organized and largely financed the conference, was petty and unjust. Her good friend and aide, Mrs. How-Martyn, who had organized her Fabian Hall lecture and had once been jailed for suffragette activities, resigned at once from this male-dominated congress.

Antifeminism was easy to confirm in Switzerland, which to this day has not given its women suffrage. In this case, however, it was Sir Eric Drummond who had warned Sir Bernard that Europeans would ignore a conference if they thought a woman had organized it. In her erratically kept diary, Margaret privately fulminated: "An instance of the attitude of the Swiss male is this—What? A woman organized this conference? A woman brought together eminent scientists from forty countries of the world? My dear friend, don't speak of it unless you want to be the laughingstock of Europe. It is impossible to let it be known. Hide it, deny it, anything you wish, but don't openly acknowledge that!"

She had guessed that her name was the crux of the matter, but she also suspected that antifeminism was not the major enemy. In this she was also correct. Sir Bernard's Italian friends, along with others from Catholic countries, had insisted that since the words "Sanger"

and "birth control" were synonymous, her name should not appear on the program

On Saturday morning the whole secretariat followed Mrs How-Martyn's lead and struck. Even the girl who was to return the proof to the printer refused. Whether or not there could be a Tuesday opening once more rested with Margaret. No doubt it would have been pleasant to have left Sir Bernard fumbling in the chaos of arrangements, but during the previous night she had soberly considered alternatives. She had invested a year in the meeting and at the very start had herself decided to keep birth control in the background. The chance for public education on the world's most pressing problem still remained. So she spent the day persuading the staff to resume its anonymous work.

Years later Margaret suggested that the conference was a failure. Certainly it did not change world trends, halt the rise of Hitler, or prevent World War II, which were her objectives. However, out of it sprang the Population Union which for some years was the only international group producing research studies, bulletins, and conferences on related subjects.

Of the meeting itself, C V Drysdale wrote "Nothing could demonstrate more fully the immense progress in the appreciation of the importance of the population question which has recently been shown all over the world, than the brilliant conference which has just been held at Geneva. In weight of authority it has far surpassed all previous gatherings [his Neo-Malthusian ones], and has been second to none in brilliance." The discerning *Manchester Guardian* called it "an intellectual treat, such as it is rarely given the ordinary mortal to enjoy."

Not until the farewell dinner was Margaret Sanger's name publicly mentioned. Then, at the prodding of Huxley and his younger colleagues, Sir Bernard thanked her for her "absolute loyalty" in furthering the interests of the meeting and praised her "real ability" and "self-effacement." At this point Drysdale reported that the whole company rose and "thundered in her honor." They also applauded Noah Slee for his many contributions, including the bilingual journal which had reached the delegates each morning on their breakfast trays.

After the farewell dinner, the distinguished participants departed, leaving Margaret with the bills, the clearing-up, and the prodigious task of editing the proceedings. Exhausted, she finally packed Noah off for sightseeing in England and retired with her work to a sanatorium.

The Sleses resumed their daily correspondence, hers starting September 21.

Darling I have been under great tension and high pressure. What a woman needs is to be alone, absolutely alone with God for a few days or weeks until she has filled up the reservoir of her soul again with faith, hope and courage. I have been impatient, I know, and really horrid at times. You have been tired and disappointed so I should have been kinder and dearer to you than ever, but I was too unhappy to be anything but miserable. Now I shall get the papers to the printers and then go to the mountain top alone and meditate. I need solitude as much as food and I thank you for making it possible at this time. Ever your "Margy"

September 27, 1927

Are you thinking about us and our future? I am. It is not all clear sailing yet I'm afraid, because we are so much alike and yet so different. It is our interests that are so wide apart. There are none that you have that I can take up, so as to bring us into closer harmony, and you do not like me to expand my own, yet there is all the attraction between us that the world counts essential and necessary. It's really complicated.

My heart is troubled to have you lonely and apart from life's activities but I should wither up and die to be shut off from the intellectual currents of my contemporaries. All I want is a little more freedom. That is not much to ask, but I must be able to feel that I can *waste* [emphasis in original] a whole night or day or week if I feel it good for me to do so without explaining or asking. I'm too grown up and too developed to not be free. My actions so far have been tempered with intelligence and I can't go back to chattel slavery. For that is what it really is, dear, when a woman is not made to feel that she can act without asking her husband's consent. Outside of financial affairs (which is and should be a joint affair between them) there should be utter liberty for both parties to enjoy tastes and friendships utterly free from

the other You will never see this I am certain, but until you can see it there will be no real happiness for the modern woman If you could only be made to see what riches a woman can bring into your life, not only in outside forces, but in the joyousness of her own being, when she is fully conscious that freedom and love, faith and respect are the foundations of her marriage

I know darling Noah that one must not expect you to plunge into the depths of these thoughts but think them over now and then and talk about them to me and we will make our future I want to make your every day one of golden sunsets Those are my desires I worry because I am failing [in them] so I am analyzing the causes which underlie the problem Now you can write me just as you think and what you feel about the difficulties It will help me to see the other side

Devotedly and lovingly ever and ever no matter what we say

MARGARET

Before she had finished the editorial chore, Margaret was invited to Germany for a series of speeches under the auspices of a women's medical association Noah went with her, and they found a different country from that she had seen seven years earlier Now people had money to spend in hotels and restaurants, but the country was polarized between the rich and the poor There was a new nationalism and a scarcely suppressed zeal to reassert German power When a zeppelin appeared overhead, men took off their hats and hailed it as though it were a god After her talk at the Town Hall of Berlin-Charlottenburg, a savage debate broke out between the extreme nationalists and the leftists A woman, Dr Marthe Ruben-Wolf, had all the facts and ably defended birth control But logic would not help her, Margaret was told, Dr Ruben-Wolf was a Communist

Nevertheless, twenty women physicians were ready to give their services in the poorer section of Neukoln, where a friendly health commissioner, Dr Kurt Bendix, was eager to cooperate His was the first government agency in any land to sponsor birth control, or *Geburtenregelung*, as it was known Margaret was so touched that she pledged \$50 a month for three years toward supplies These supplies, produced in Germany, the source of most of America's bootlegged materials, were still unknown to many German doctors, who

continued to oppose contraception. This experiment in government-supported birth control flourished in a dozen centers until the Nazis took over. Dr. Ruben-Wolf escaped to Russia, Dr. Bendix committed suicide.

The Sleses had planned to go to India, where Margaret was in demand for lectures, but after the German trip she relapsed with great fatigue. Wisely, they changed their schedule to spend two months at St. Moritz. It was her first extended vacation, and in the exhilarating climate she tried skating again and even took up skiing. Long before they were ready to go home, Margaret was receiving distress signals from Juliet Rublee and her faithful aide, Anne Kennedy.

The American Birth Control League had been left in the hands of those who were devoted to the cause and wanted to advance it. If none of them had Margaret's experience, some of them, especially Mrs. Robertson-Jones, the acting president, had more knowledge of organizational procedures. In the past she had been shocked by Margaret's "impulsive" decisions. She also knew that other directors, who were busy ladies, dividing their time among philanthropies, their families, and social demands, felt harassed by Margaret's unexpected plans, titanic drives, and enthusiasm for new ideas. It was easy to convince them that the league should have a fixed program and budget so that members might once and for all make their pledges for their full annual responsibilities.

With birth control becoming respectable—except among the Catholic hierarchy—a new type of leadership was indicated. The movement had outgrown its fanatic youth and it was thought that a college graduate, a woman with broad cultural and social background, would be appealing as a leader. If birth control had the right tone, Mrs. Robertson-Jones believed that it could win universal acceptance. The previous year, and mostly through her personal efforts, the New York League of Women Voters had endorsed repeal of the state Comstock laws. For the current year she had high hopes that the Junior League might accept birth control as one of its fields for service. But tone was essential for the Junior League.

Tone was the reason for the ultimate discharge of Kitty Marion, the indomitable old war-horse who still sold the *Review* at Times

Square As a gracious gesture to soften the brusque ending of years of service, Mrs Robertson-Jones proposed to give Kitty a farewell lunch, along with a gift of money Kitty Marion declined to lunch with those who had fired her, took the money, and went back to England

During her first administration, Mrs Robertson-Jones put through a series of reforms, starting with graded memberships and the understanding that there would be no other appeals for funds New by-laws also assured the "accountability" of the president to an executive-type board This policy was one reason for dispensing with Anne Kennedy Anne had practically grown up with the league, and having served for the last eight years on the executive committee, had a disconcerting way of knowing more than anyone else about the organization Of course oldtimers, like Juliet Rublee, were indignant that Mrs Kennedy, originally a personal aide to Mrs Sanger, had not been allowed to present her own side to the board, but as Mrs Robertson-Jones put it, she was "not amenable to the direction of the Board," and would be out of place in the new setup

In spite of the unpleasantness over dropping Mrs Kennedy, the overall success of Mrs Robertson-Jones's efforts could be measured by the league's financial position At the start of 1928, for the first time, there was plenty of money in the bank

On her homecoming, Margaret, in turn, was shocked That money in the bank had been given to advance birth control, not to lie idle And how about the *Review* subscriptions? Unfortunately, through an oversight in not sending out reminders, these had dropped in her year's absence from 13,000 to 2,500 Margaret ordered that the renewal slips be sent at once, but she was then reminded that the new by-laws required special board authorization for any expenditure of more than five dollars

On her first day in the office Margaret faced a more urgent crisis Months earlier the league had agreed to take part in a Parents' Exhibition at the Grand Central Palace The league had a contract and had paid for its booth, but on the eve of opening was asked to withdraw William O'Shea, superintendent of schools, had

threatened to remove the school exhibit unless the Birth Control League was ousted. The acting president then proposed to delete any offensive material, but O'Shea would have none of it.

Margaret at once called a lawyer to secure an injunction against the exclusion. When she hung up, she learned that only the board might take such action. Before she could gather a quorum, the league check was returned, the exhibition opened and a major chance was lost to educate the public on both civil rights and birth control.

She was no "paper president," Margaret conceded. Experience had given her judgment which should have some freedom of action, instead of being trussed up in the red tape of those who did not understand the problems. This new group thought the league a charity to be run in a routine way for the performance of a quiet, continuing service. She saw it as an urgent, current crusade, "an instrument of accomplishment," which should avail itself of every psychological factor to push on to victory and then disband. She had come home full of plans for new enterprises, while these ladies wanted to relax in their *status quo*.

In June 1928 Margaret Sanger resigned from the presidency of the league that she had founded. There was no angry severance, and since most of the directors were devoted to her, she agreed to remain on the board and continue editing the *Review*. Meanwhile, she would launch her own new plans.

Margaret's continuing influence irked the small group of dissidents, and the cleavage grew. Mrs. Robertson-Jones frankly disparaged the *Review*, which she said any staff member could handle better than its editor. Finally she reorganized the paper under an editorial board of four, leaving only nominal control in Margaret's hands.

For some months Margaret had been considering her future. Since the *Review* had been a large part of her life for a decade, she hesitated to abandon it. On the other hand, the association was becoming disruptive. She might still be able to control the board, but as she wrote Mrs. Robert Huse, who had taken Mrs. Kennedy's place, she could "fight to the last ditch against the outside enemy, but to

fight old friends, women that I have loved, respected and worked with, that I cannot do”

Persuasive no doubt was the fact that her restless spirit had moved on to new fields. As she put it in *My Fight for Birth Control*, she would give “complete freedom to others to carry on as they saw best, in order to attain a new freedom for herself” In June 1929 she withdrew from the league itself, surrendering the *Review* to it as its property. Her letter of resignation was self-controlled, although she reiterated her belief in the “danger of curtailing the initiative which is essential to successful leadership” She said that she would let the current management assume entire responsibility for its policies which she might “protest but could not prevent”

Five directors resigned simultaneously, among whom was Frances Ackermann, the financial guardian of the *Review*, who had long been troubled by the new leadership. Mrs. Walter Timme, wife of a prominent physician, said that she was filled with apprehension because of the discourtesy to Margaret Sanger and the “lack of appreciation of her judgment and mission” Juliet Rublee wrote forthrightly that she could be of no use on a board whose policy she disapproved and under a president in whose wisdom and judgment she had lost faith. The stress was now on “small, technical details and overemphasis on business efficiency” There had been a deliberate effort, she said, to undermine Margaret Sanger’s influence, minimize her accomplishments and to prejudice people.

There was one more resignation—an angry one—from the league treasurer, Noah Slee. If no price tag could be put on Margaret’s services, he put a high one on his own. Over the last four years he had given \$64,000 “for the benefit of the ideal Margaret Sanger has slaved for” He enclosed a promised check of \$300, his “last contribution”

It was good therapy for Margaret that her thoughts were already on the future. By the time she wrote her *Autobiography*, she was philosophical, and the league was again begging for her help. There were many ways, she discovered, by which the same goal might be reached, and diverse ones must be tried to find the best alternative.

Once she had thought of the *Review* and the league as her chil-

dren and at first she had to guide their faltering steps. But unless you let children run and fall, they will never develop their own strength. "There is a biology," she wrote, "of ideas as there is a biology of cells and each goes through a process of evolution. The parent cell splits and the new entities in their turn divide and divide again. Instead of indicating breakdown, it is a sign of health. Cohesion is maintained until in the end the whole is a vast mosaic cleaving in union and strength."