

Retrospect

On her good days when her mind was clear, Margaret Sanger read the letters and clippings that still poured in to her. Although bed-ridden, she could not complain, since she was eighty-six years old. Propped up on her pillows at the nursing home, she tried to ignore her infirmities, as she had often done in the past, but now, instead of forcing herself on to new efforts, she indulged in memories of the enormous victory, the triumph of her cause.

What was it H. G. had said? That Margaret Sanger was the greatest woman in the world? Extravagant, of course, but there was something else, less personal, more significant. Wells was always talking of the future and he had predicted. Yes, that was it. He had predicted that within a hundred years the movement that she had started would be the most influential of all time in controlling man's destiny on earth. Already in 1966, less than half a century later, the changes had begun to equal her titanic hopes.

When she started her crusade, in 1914, federal, state and local laws were all arraigned against her. She was jailed eight times. The medical profession denounced her, the churches excoriated her, the press condemned her and even liberal reformers shunned her. She entered the fight alone, a frail young woman without much education, with no social or financial backing, with nothing but conviction. Yet step by step, she made her points and eventually won her battles.

At first even her friends opposed her tactics. Those who approved her goal said that she must change the laws as reformers

did in other fields. But at that period, legislative relief at any government level was as remote as the chance for Negroes in the Deep South to gain their civil rights by state action. Indeed, for all the later efforts of many people, including herself, most of the laws still remain on the books exactly as they were when she began her fight.

Her winning strategy was to secure new interpretations of existing laws. After challenging the restraints, she appealed the judgments of the lower courts and was upheld by the broader views of the upper courts. Thus she won *de facto* repeal of restrictions long before the civil rights leaders followed the same course.

And what had these legal changes accomplished? Margaret Sanger, immobile though she was in the nursing home, once more zestfully reviewed the milestones of her career. Birth control instruction, which she had introduced at the Brownsville clinic, had spread across the nation to countless clinics, hospitals, and health services. That was not all, for she had carried her message around the globe on mammoth lecture tours. Five times she had campaigned in Japan, and today that country offers triumphant proof that planning can halt a runaway population.

In the twenties, she conceived and set up the first World Population Conference at Geneva. After World War II, when she was seventy-three, she organized the International Planned Parenthood Federation, and as its president for six years, she built its strength. Today with fifty member nations, the federation gives birth control instruction to twice that number of countries.

Hers was the steady, driving force in the development of modern contraceptives. At home, she had to start by educating the hostile medical profession, which she did through instructional clinics and by financing a full-time lecturer to speak before the state and local associations. The most persuasive argument came from her own Medical Research Bureau, whose unprecedented body of case histories not only confirmed the need of child spacing, but assessed the value of current techniques. This pioneer body of statistics inspired the first studies in birth control and family living.

At Zurich, in 1930, she mounted an international conference

where doctors and scientists considered physiological problems. In the next decades, channeling funds into promising studies, she became the catalyst for biochemical research. Just as the American Polio Foundation gave the impetus for the development of vaccines, her efforts led to cheap, safe, and effective ways to turn the rich lady's privilege into protection for the poor. She democratized the movement.

But the test of her work, as Margaret Sanger always insisted, was not measured in abstractions, but in the reduction of human tragedies. Today birth control not only saves the lives of countless mothers, but enhances the health and happiness of many times that number. Where it is used, it ends the nightmare of constant pregnancy and of bearing more children than the parents can support. It introduces the spacing of babies for optimum welfare and gives mothers the basic right of determining their maternity.

Perhaps above all, her influence was in teaching people to accept sex as it is, a part of life that needs a rational response. When she was young, the very word was outlawed in polite society. Nice girls grew up in ignorance of their own anatomy, while, on the other hand, boys were encouraged to face the facts of life with guffaws, in brothels and accommodated by a white slave traffic. Before she started her campaign, the law had suppressed her article, *What Every Girl Should Know*. Today public schools teach the physiological facts for which she was once censored.

And how did all these changes come about? She used to say, in Victor Hugo's words, that there was no force so great as an idea whose hour had struck. A technological age had created the hour and she was the alarm that aroused the lethargic world. Some thought her leadership as unlikely as that of the fifteenth-century peasant girl to whom she was so often compared, the girl who led the King's defeated army to victory. Again extravagant! But at least they shared the same devotion to their cause. They let nothing stand in their way, not health, money, security, family or friends. Her friends? She made them work, starting with that brilliant galaxy of English authors who first espoused her views. Early in life she had closed her heart to every other need so that she might fulfill this one.

People smiled at her Celtic mysticism, but she saw a unifying force, like a thread of destiny, determining her career. In her mother's early death she had glimpsed the results of birth by chance, not choice. In her own tuberculosis, twice activated by pregnancy, and in the sufferings of her patients, she had learned the ravages of the old way. Her life was of one piece, all fashioned to her task.

From her window in the nursing home, Margaret Sanger watched the sun go down and the world grow dark. In just one night, by tomorrow's sunrise, there would be 160,000 more babies on the earth. This quickening growth put her achievements in agonizing perspective. At this rate, world population would double before the next century and triple not long after and so advance with ever-increasing speed. Technology had postponed the old restraints—famines and plagues—but had brought new evils. Man was overloading the once clean air, water supplies, even the earth itself, as well as all utilities and cultural institutions. Sheer proliferation was lowering standards to meet the needs of quantity. Experts agreed that her program now offered the only hope of progress with peace and rational solutions, but the will to promote it was still lacking.

In the darkening room Margaret Sanger closed her eyes. As a last legacy, she longed to leave her sense of urgency in coping with mankind's supreme challenge.