

MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD

IN EVERYONE'S life there are certain years, which, looked at in retrospect, seem unrelated and unimportant. As incidents and events recede in memory, details fade out and only towering impressions remain. Yet when memories and recollections are stirred by old letters, diaries, photographs or even snapshots, by those bits of jewelry or objects that we carry through life for no particular reason except that they symbolize certain lost periods and often possess the strange power of evoking pangs of regret—when, I say, we begin to relive those lost years, how full of significance they do actually become!

This at any rate is most certainly true of the years after I had left my nursing vocation to be precipitated swiftly into romance and marriage. I must confess right here that fundamentally I have never been able to separate romance from marriage. Some of the bored, sophisticated youths of this generation have often accused me of being incurably romantic. To me marriage and motherhood were at that

period, and still are, organically bound up with love and romance

William Sanger was an architect by profession, an artist by temperament. To me it seemed that he possessed the qualities of native genius, as well as its limitations and its liabilities.

One evening at the hospital in New York where I was taking a post graduate course an informal dance was held, attended by the nurses, internes, and some of the younger doctors. I had been dancing with one of the latter, and stood chatting with him when he was told that a caller was waiting for him in the reception room. It was his architect with the blue prints for the home the young physician was about to build in Westchester County.

He asked me to come with him to look at the plans. They were presented by a dark young man with intense, fiery eyes—eyes, I discovered, that did not leave me, since every time I looked up from the blueprints I found that the artist was looking at me instead of explaining details to his client.

I gave the incident little thought after he left. The next morning at seven thirty o'clock, however, as I left the hospital for my brief early daily constitutional, I was surprised to find the architect at the foot of the hospital steps. He asked if he could accompany me on my walk. I never knew whether it was an accident or whether he had been waiting for me. But after that day William Sanger was waiting for me each morning. He was impatient of conventionalities, intense in his new love, his whole mind concentrated on our future life together.

Within six months we were married, joyously planning our future. Although he was an architect, he yearned for more personal creative expression. As soon as money enough was saved, we were to go to Paris where he was to continue his studies.

It was less than a year, however, before we were rudely shaken out of this world of rosy dreams we so innocently inhabited. That was when our doctor bluntly informed us

that my health was in jeopardy, that long hours of work had made inroads upon a frail constitution and had overtaxed vital energies I was ordered to a climate of high altitude I guessed the worst, and the doctor confirmed my suspicion I was a victim of incipient tuberculosis, which it was necessary to check at once before it could spread to vital organs

Off I was sent to the Adirondacks to regain my health, to build up new strength and to safeguard the new life which even then was on its way to be born

A few weeks before the expected arrival of my first born I returned to New York to await the great event The physicians pronounced the child perfectly healthy, strong and sturdy I looked upon this as a victory As soon as I was out of the physician's care, however, it was deemed advisable for me to return to the Adirondacks The baby was put in the care of a competent nurse and the three of us went back to the mountains Our meager savings were depleted, but the artist husband insisted that my recovery was of first and paramount importance

In these days of advanced psychology great significance is attached to the relations of father and daughter For years I had looked upon the influence of my father as a decisive factor in my work for birth control Now I am not so certain that it was solely the cause The birth of my first son may have, and doubtless did have a tremendous bearing on my activities In the month of February 1930 I was in California, organizing the Western states for federal legislation I was calling a conference to discuss the form of bill to present to Congress for enactment I had sent invitations to physicians in all the Western states asking their endorsement of this work Among the replies I had a brief personal note from a doctor whose name I failed to recognize 'Dear Mrs Sanger,' I read, 'Some day I want to hear from your own lips just what part my ignorance of obstetrics has played in the work which you have made so definitely your own It was a hard night

for us both I'm with you heart and soul in the work you are doing. Sorry I can't attend the Conference.

At first as I read that note I could make nothing of its meaning. The name was not familiar to me, and I was about to put it aside for further consideration when the words

It was a hard night for us both seemed suddenly to open vistas of my memory. Then I recognized the name of the doctor as the same who had attended me at the birth of my first child twenty five years before. He was then a young general practitioner living in New York City, and was called in as a substitute for the obstetrician we had engaged.

Something in that note affected me like a shot. A flood of feeling engulfed me, and I had to leave my work and go home. All that night I suffered with pains in the back and had all the symptoms of labor pains! And this twenty five years after my son was born! It was extraordinary. I am not a hysterical person, yet it was all I could do to pull myself together for the next two days. The memory of that agonizing birth kept me in mental torture, and I felt again the physical pangs of those lingering hours on November 18th, 1905. Even now, as I write these words, I can feel slight spasmodic pains across the abdomen and back, and I believe were I to dwell upon the memory of that event even to describe it, I should be physically ill.

Here then is a factor which must be reckoned with.

Certain I am, at any rate, that the ordeal of the birth had overtaxed my limited vitality, even with the utmost care preceding and following birth. Gradually, inevitably, my condition went from bad to worse. At the end of eight or nine months it was necessary to call in specialists. In fact, it was Dr. Trudeau himself who advised that I must be separated from all personal responsibilities—family, baby, husband, that I should live in Saranac under his daily supervision. My sister and my husband's mother had come to arrange for this change and the future care of the baby. After the consultation it gradually dawned upon me that preparations were really being made for a long lingering illness, and eventually death.

I went to bed I could not sleep I turned the problem over and over in my sleepless mind I won't die! I won't! I kept repeating to myself Finally the first glimmer of dawn appeared through the curtains I got up, looked at the steadily ticking clock It was not yet five o'clock I dressed quickly for a long journey Then I crept stealthily out into the hall I went into the bedroom where the nurse and the baby were sleeping soundly I told her to get ready for a long ride to the railroad station, that we were going back to New York

She looked up in sleepy dismay Something in the resolute and determined expression in my face prevented her from voicing opposition to this order although she had been recently told that on no account was I to be worried or troubled over the care of the baby Now she found me taking charge of him again and she had nothing to do but obey

We took the long ride in a horse-drawn vehicle to the station toward Saratoga, and then found ourselves comfortably seated in an express for New York I was determined that I should act, that to remain in an atmosphere of invalidism, stuffing myself with quarts of milk and dozens of eggs each day and swallowing huge capsules of creosote would be slowly but surely to dig my own grave I decided to give old Death a run, and if he was to outdistance me I'd call it square, but at least I'd die in an atmosphere of love

We arrived at the Grand Central Station and were met by a much surprised and confused husband, with two telegrams in his hands wondering which information to follow A night letter sent from my sister stated I was to be removed to Saranac at once, and he was to forward his agreement and consent as to the care of the baby by other relatives The second telegram sent by me from Saratoga, said I was arriving at noon and he was to meet me and arrange living accommodations in the suburbs of New York City

When we met and he understood my motive in leaving, instead of scolding and arguing as I expected, he rejoiced my

heart by exclaiming "That's just right—get away from that d—d atmosphere! You won't die—I won't let you die!"

We started at once to look about in Westchester County for a possible home. For three weeks I refused to eat any food whatever and drank only water. Finally, at the end of that time, I began to take an interest in food, and gradually I became well enough to renew my activities. But the next six years were given over to constant consideration of recovery. It was six years of combat—unending, discouraging, impossible except for the indomitable optimism of youth. Although my first son was born strong and well, my own condition had to be constantly guarded and attended.

In looking about the suburbs for a suitable location in which to build and to bring up our family, we decided that we needed something more than a mere house. We wanted space. We wanted a house with a view. We wanted a garden. At Hastings-on-Hudson we came across a new development consisting of about fifty acres of hillside land overlooking the river. This land had been purchased by a group of professional people with the idea of developing a colony of homes for men and women of congenial tastes, and to insure proper environment for their children. We were delighted with its possibilities. We bought an acre of this land with high hopes. We were going to have our own home—at last! We were going to settle down for life. We were delighted with our neighbors. We planned a large family, a comfortable, serene, suburban existence.

We rented a little house near by so that we could supervise the construction of our home, the landscaping of our garden. Every architect, every artist longs for that happy day when he can see his cherished dreams become a reality. Every detail of the structure of that house was watched. There was to be a large library with a great fireplace, a spacious Colonial dining room, a large nursery opening on to a verandah overlooking the Hudson, a studio for drawing and painting. We spent our evenings planning this house of our dreams, careful to avoid mistakes.

Ours was but one of several houses then in the early stages of construction. We were brought in close contact with our neighbors who were facing similar problems, the two primary ones being the building of a home and the rearing of a family. The wives spent their afternoons together conferring on these momentous problems. Out of our informal meetings there sprang a literary club which grew into the Hastings Women's Club. It was made up of the wives of the artists, professors, scientists, doctors, and high school teachers who made up our little colony. There was an inclination, among both husbands and wives, to sink back into a complacent suburban attitude, to enjoy petty middle class comforts. For the wives, the height of adventure was a day in town—a shopping expedition followed by a bargain matinee. This adventure would furnish conversation for us all. At the literary club we read papers on Browning, George Eliot, Shakespeare, closely following the suggestions of the courses given at Columbia University.

But deep in my soul I could not suppress my own dissatisfaction with the futility of such interests. After my experience in the midst of life as a nurse, after my long ordeal with disease, it seemed to me that this quiet withdrawal into the tame domesticity of the pretty hillside suburb was bordering on spiritual stagnation. But I was not articulate enough to express this even to myself.

Meanwhile our house was nearing completion. It was modern in architecture, one of the first of its kind in this vicinity. It was even called a show house, and people came from far to study its simple design and the unadorned surfaces of the fireproof stucco of its walls.

Great was our anticipation of the day of its completion. For weeks we both worked on our rose window, which was to surmount the open staircase which led upstairs from the library. Every petal had been cut, leaded, and welded together by our own hands. After the baby had been put to bed, we worked far into the night. It seemed to me as if this rose window was the very symbol of the stability of



SUBURBAN MOTHERHOOD



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our future As in every detail of our house, we aimed for permanence and security We were certain that we would live the rest of our lives here together and that this rose window was a great achievement of beauty and design which welded together both our efforts and expressed an indestructible unity

At last our furniture was moved in Carpenters and painters were pushed out Everything was completed and finished The vans arrived about four o'clock in the afternoon with their precious loads Our few but precious antiques were carefully unpacked Tapestries long in storage radiated their beauty We impatiently opened boxes and barrels, removing this treasure and that, temporarily trying out their beauty against our immaculate walls and floors Rugs were spread out, paintings hung up, wrappings removed It was like a welcome home to our cherished belongings Weary at last but like happy children on Christmas Eve, we tumbled into bed We were rudely awakened a few hours later by a pounding at the door and the shout of the German maid— Madam, come! come! A fire in the big stove! The house was on fire!

There was no telephone within half a mile of the house My husband ran in his night clothes to sound the alarm, but it was already too late

I carried my terror-stricken son Stuart to the top of the staircase Flames were then leaping through one side of it I was confronted with a terrific danger dare I venture down those steps? I knew I must I put the bath robe over the child's head, and pressing close to the other side of the wall I descended cautiously but finally in safety I crossed the street to our nearest neighbors I tucked the youngster into an impromptu bed with a prayer of gratitude that we had escaped with our lives

In a few moments the flames that were consuming the staircase had swept through our precious beautiful rose window! This I realized as I stood gazing from the neighbors window into the night

It was a moonlit night in February It had rained earlier,

and the rain had frozen into crystals on the branches of trees and shrubbery. It was fantastically, unbelievably beautiful. In that setting of unreality the flames, as if directed by devilish intent, spurted only through our prized leaded rose window.

I stood silently watching the effort of months of our work and love slowly disintegrate. Petal by petal, it succumbed to the licking flames, one by one they fell into the frozen snow. I recalled our cut fingers, our bleeding hands, our irritated nerves, our fatigued eyes, all the loving hopes and ambitions which had gone into that window. It had taken so long to weld those things together, to overcome all the difficult obstacles! Now, relentlessly, they were pulled apart, melted by flames. This thing of beauty had perished in a few minutes.

I stood there amazed, but I was certain of a relief, of a burden lifted, a spirit set free. It was as if a chapter of my life had been brought to a close. I was neither disappointed nor regretful. I knew I had finished something. Somewhere in the back of my mind I saw the absurdity of placing all of one's hopes, all of one's efforts, involving as they did heart aches, debts, and worries, in the creation of something external that could perish irretrievably in the course of a few moments. Subconsciously I must have learned the lesson of the futility of material things. My scale of suburban values had been consumed by the flames, just as my precious rose window of leaded glass had been demolished.

Finally I turned from the window where I stood gazing with dry eyes into that fantastic night. I sank into the bed the hospitable neighbor had placed at my disposal and dropped immediately into a profound slumber with my small sleeping boy hugged tight in my arms.

Fortunately, the construction of the house was fireproof, and while the inside woodwork, doors and floors were badly damaged there was the possibility of quick restoration. Within a few months the place was renewed, and life went on apparently as if the fire had never been. But to me all was different.

There was a lapse of five years between my first and second child, also a son. I was delighted to resume being a mother.

I gloried in my recaptured health I wanted four children I yearned especially for a daughter If I were to bear more children I was convinced I should have them closer together than five years So it was that twenty months after the birth of Grant my long desired daughter was born She was named Peggy, and later her vivacious strength, vivacity and intelligence surpassed even my wildest hopes

A new spirit was awakening within me a strong, insistent urge to be in the current of life's activities I felt as if we had drifted into a swamp and had to wait for the tide to set us free The fire, the destruction of the rose window had done this I was never happy in that house again The first opportunity we had to sell it we let it go We moved our three children back to New York to take our part individually or collectively in the great Pageant of Living

My three children were to develop in divergent ways Their childhood years seemed to speed by, so swift was their growth At the time of my great awakening they were just at the ages when they were most interesting and adorable—four, six, and ten years Owing to my own frail health I had spent much time with them, planning their lives, reading and playing with each in his turn They were all so individual, so different, that each was a study Stuart, the oldest, was sturdy, active, athletic, reasoning, daring and logical He seemed one who had been born into life to test and prove himself Grant, the next child, five years younger than Stuart, was the artist type—loving, affectionate, original He was the embodiment of a talent come to express itself Peggy, the most independent child I ever knew, was positive, accurate, truthful, mischievous, laughing She was born to *do* to act, to lead She had the qualities of a person of power even at the age of five Peggy was blonde as Grant was dark, daring as he was cautious, leader as he was follower They seemed to complement each other in every way They spoke in terms of we always from the time Peggy talked at all

My life seemed to begin and end in their development and growth My activities and interests and work outside seemed

only for the purpose of completing and perfecting their lives I was never slavishly domestic, but I was inclined to be slavishly maternal

Housekeeping with its endless details was never drudgery to me. There was always the interest of conquering the problems, which made it fun. Uninvited guests of family and friends had a way of dropping in upon us for meals, or visits, when money was scarce and food just enough to go round, but I soon learned that good friends, understanding companions, inspiring conversations fed a deep need in our lives. The give and take, the sharing what we had, all helped to enrich tenfold our family life.

The children's father worshipped them and filled my life with love and devotion.

Here, then, was a full and happy life and a frail, shy woman, satisfied with her domestic career, knowing few people, lacking wealth, power, position, technique of intrigue, never dreaming that suddenly she would be thrust forth into the night of turmoil, uncertainty and despair.

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During the twelve years of my married life my three children and my later nursing work combined to give me many and various problems to think about. Constantly I saw the ill effects of childbearing on women of the poor. Mothers whose physical condition was inadequate to combat disease were made pregnant, through ignorance and love, and died. Children were left motherless, fathers were left hopeless and desperate, often feeling like criminals, blaming themselves for the wife's death—all because these mothers were denied by law knowledge to prevent conception.

My own motherhood was joyous, loving, happy. I wanted to share these joys with other women. I longed to see Motherhood come into its own—the flower of Womanhood. I had thought and thought, pondered over it all. Since the birth of my first child I had realized the importance of spacing babies, but only a few months before had I fully grasped the significant fact that a powerful law denied and prevented

mothers from obtaining knowledge to properly space their families. This was so outrageous, so cruel, so useless a law that I could not respect it. I could not believe that it would have the force of the government behind it were it challenged. I believed at the time that when the government knew the facts it would not and could not put that law into operation. I longed to prove its bad effects, to show up its destructive force on women's and children's lives. I was convinced in my heart that the *spirit* of the law would be interpreted and not the *letter* of the law. Little did I anticipate the future battle royal: Women's, mothers', children's lives against a worn out parchment!