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A Poor Player

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A Poor Player

Margaret Sanger scrawls a note in thick black ink at the top left corner, and sends the letter to her best friend. “Juliet,” she writes, “Please keep this for me. It is too precious to destroy.” The letter is dated the 24th of October, 1924. The writing in the body of the letter is in a hand very different from Margaret’s. The letters are scratched and small, as if written in a hurry. It’s a short letter, a love letter, addressed to Margaret. “I love you, I love you, I love you...Margaret - do you know how every prick of my skin thrills and shifts at your touch, and how the deepest soul of me calls out to you? I love you my queen, my love, my darling.” Signed, “H.”

Four years later: January 24th, 1928. Imagine a light snowfall dusts the ground of Sand Pit, the Sussex residence of novelist Hugh de Selincourt and his wife Janet. Hugh permanently shares this country-house with Harold Child: a critic and writer at *The Times* in London. The two men share nearly everything: a house, a social circle, a profession, their lovers. Hugh has perhaps just come in from a drive - he loves driving; he says so in his letters. Imagine the roads of Sussex made tunnel-like by snow-laden boughs reaching towards the ground in a wintry embrace. The skeletal orchards and gardens of Sand Pit glitter with January frost. The window-panes of the house are latticed with crystalized lacework. Hugh brushes off his slacks, hangs his jacket on a hook in the foyer. “Janet!” he calls. “Do let me know, dear, when supper is on the table!” He walks through the house to his study and sits down at his desk.

Hugh hand-writes his address on each one of his letters in the center, underlining each of the three words individually. He writes on big, legal-sized blank sheets of paper, thin paper that crackles ninety years later. Perhaps he thinks stationery too limiting, too precious, a waste of paper if one writes such long letters. Hugh writes long sentences too; he punctuates with extended dashes and colons. He shoves exclamation points in the middle of sentences. His lower-case letters march along the page, unaware of marks which grammatically demand capitalization.

Hugh’s handwriting is very like a snowflake: controlled, spindly, tiny. His letters’ lines are both looping and sharp. “Very dear Juliet,” his January note begins, “So long since I have heard from you, dear.” His crystalline alphabet travels across an ocean. It arrives days later in the mailbox of his friend Juliet Rublee, the best friend of American Birth Control League president and founder, Margaret Sanger.

I do not know if it snowed on January 24th, 1928 at Sand Pit. I do not know if Hugh went for a drive or if he hung up his coat or called his wife for dinner. I cannot know if his writing desk overlooked the estate’s vast lawn. I do not know if his wife was even home that day. I don’t know if his wife was ever home. Hugh almost never mentions his wife in his letters, save for a line about him being envious of his younger brother for being “on speaking terms with his wife and daughter.” If Hugh did not love his wife, with whom he had an open marriage and no longer a physical relationship, I do know that he loved Juliet, and loved her best friend Margaret even more.

Hugh continues writing as the Sussex snow falls outside the window to settle on Sand Pit’s muted lawn. “I have finished my book ‘*Never in Vain*,’” he writes, “and given it to Margaret and she likes it, quite a lot, I gather.” Margaret and Hugh had met for lunch earlier that month in London; Margaret flew in from Switzerland. “My heavens!” he continues, “What a lunch it was,

too!” Imagine the two of them in some mahogany-paneled club, surrounded by the intellectual and social elite tittering at white cloth-covered tables.

“Margaret! *Darling!* How was the trip? Not too tiring I hope,” Hugh might have said, kissing her on the cheek. He would have embraced Margaret mightily before the two settled into a long, expensive lunch. Maybe London is grey and blustery outside that day, the club cozily lit with butter-yellow light. Imagine that Margaret removes her fur stole and lays it on the burgundy leather booth beside her. Elegant silverware clinks on refined china, Margaret dabs her mouth with a folded napkin, ever the composed business-woman. A smile plays upon her lips, giving way at last to hearty laughter.

“*Hugh,*” she perhaps says, grinning. Hugh smiles in return, a twinkle in his eye. He’s captured her – if just for a few hours. In that club, the marvelous woman is *only* his, he doesn’t have to share her with the others. Margaret came to London and made time for *him*. They discuss Hugh’s work and Margaret’s new ideas for the clinic. Hugh passes his newly finished manuscript of *Never in Vain* across the table to her, winking.

“Margaret liked the idea of me lecturing in the USA this autumn: I’ve said Rather! But what agent would take ME on. I should love it,” Hugh writes on that snowy January afternoon in Sussex. Hugh likes the idea of giving a series of lectures too. A visit to the US would allow a visit Juliet at her brownstone at Turtle Bay in the city, and of course, he could see Margaret.

Margaret visits Hugh again in February – visits him as well as her other Englishmen. She writes to Juliet on February 12th of 1928 on paper the color of a faded blue jay feather. As spiked and small as is Hugh’s handwriting, Margaret’s is the opposite. She writes with curved, sure lines. Her letters rise in large sensuous arches, undulating on the page. She writes not on the thick monogrammed cardstock of a society woman, but on big sheets of paper embossed with the names of hotels around the world, the address of her country house in Fishkill, and on legal-sized sheets that at the top say things like: *World Population Conference*. This is a woman with no time for or interest in fussiness; she writes in big confident strokes on any paper she can find.

This particular letter is embossed with the seal of the Suvretta House, a grand hotel nestled in the Swiss alps. She had returned to Switzerland after her January visit to London. Maybe she stares out at dusk-blue mountains through the great arched windows of the lobby before writing that she’ll be traveling on the thirteenth of February “to London to see Havelock and Hugh and then back to Paris.” She adds that she “may dip down to Grasse to spend a week with H.G.” Margaret Sanger, champion of reproductive rights, an avid practitioner of free love amidst her intellectual circle. Havelock Ellis, H.G. Wells, and Hugh de Sélincourt – all Margaret’s lovers. There was another man – another one of her lovers, who would await Margaret’s arrival that winter: Harold Child. Only Margaret and H.G. Wells’ work and fame have stood the test of the ages – the remaining three are left burnished into dull banality by time.

Not one to dwell on matters of the heart, Margaret describes in this letter that she “had a lovely visit [at Suvretta House] with Lady Astor...I gave her B.C. [Birth Control talk] as much as she could take it – I’d like to get her convinced. She would be such a person.” Nobody knew, of course, of the affairs. Margaret kept them secret from the society patrons who helped to fund the operations of the American Birth Control League. It’s unclear as to whether her second husband Noah Slee knew of her many affairs, though in their marriage contract, she stipulated that she was to retain her freedom, her last name, and their separate residences in the city.

The winter dregs of 1928 turn to spring turn to summer. Farmers shave the Sussex sheep. Juliet and her husband George move temporarily to Mexico City for George's job as advisor to the American ambassador. A letter from Sand Pit arrives at 6A Colle Liverpool 90, Mexico City, Mexico. Sussex is "chilly" that summer, the English gardens burst with lush pinks and greens and creamy yellows and bright whites. Hugh spends his time working. He takes drives along the shaded roads and "dips in the pool." He congratulates Juliet on her "Mexican film work," praises her adventurous spirit. "I was enchanted to hear of you and your Mexican bandits:" Hugh writes, they "made the poor old Sussex Sheep feel very soft and wooly." While Hugh delights in his work amidst clear country air, Margaret feels suffocated by New York City's heat wave and by the League's board of trustees.

In the summer of '28, the American Birth Control League's board members push Margaret out as president. With Juliet away in Mexico, her best friend is barely reachable. Margaret must send three letters before one emerges from the cross-border vortex and arrives at the American Embassy in Mexico. "I am resigning as Pres...," Margaret's letter reads, "As I wrote to you in all other letters." Lonely and frustrated, Margaret travels to England for pleasure and company. "The old spirit is gone," Margaret writes to Juliet. Her transatlantic lovers will distract her. If Margaret does not recognize that Hugh is in fact, of questionable talent, she does perhaps realize that her feelings for the debonair Sélincourt are juvenile. She writes that Sélincourt is like one of her "adolescent dreams - the man I looked for in books, on the stage - but never found."

"It was too delicious - hearing her laugh again," writes Hugh of Margaret's summer visit. The two go bashing through the English countryside in an "enormous Chrysler." Imagine Hugh at the wheel of a flashy car, snatching glimpses of Margaret as he drives. Imagine Margaret's dark hair flying back as Hugh speeds down winding country roads through Canterbury and Salisbury and Rye. Her eyes glint as she laughs. The two kiss under electric green leaves of the rainy English countryside. Margaret's tongue is pink and stings when she presses her mouth up against Hugh's. She's tangy to kiss: she's on a new orange-juice diet that strips the coating from her tongue and the softness from her belly. Margaret does not write to Juliet about her visits to Hugh or the rest of them - she's too caught up in the drama and business affairs of the League. These men are trivial as compared to her work. She must steel herself against silly love obsessions. She is an *activist*: not one of the flighty femme lovers of Hugh's stories.

Hugh is asked that summer to give a course of ten lectures in London rather than in the America. He is just as pleased to have been asked at all, "I can't think why I've been asked," he writes to Juliet with gentlemanly false humility. Hugh hosts parties for Margaret's visit, throwing open the doors of his Sussex home and spreading chairs and blankets out onto the lawn for his beautiful and intelligent friends. The party guests whirl about Sand Pit, silken frenetic figures framed by a "blaze of flowers." Hugh invites Harold Child to the party. Maybe Child takes Margaret aside to whisper gossamer words in her ear. Perhaps this is why Hugh feels a pang of bitterness; watching the two of them together. "There were moments when I felt like a dog surrounded by buzzing flies," he tells Juliet. "She," could he be speaking of Margaret? "chatted nimbly about everything - I began to hate laughter and women and all the things I most enjoy."

The languid English summer of 1928 turns to a feverish autumn. Hugh falls "rather seriously ill" on August 3rd. Cooped up in his bed, he coughs weakly as he works and writes. Hugh's handwriting trembles on delicate legs. Due to his poor health, Hugh cancels his lecture series in London. A shame, he writes, to cancel what he put so much time into preparing. "Forgive a tiny note:" writes Hugh in his August letter, "from bed of sickness," self-deprecatingly pitiful.

He's never without humor. The Sand Pit days stretch out on one listless, colorless timeframe. Juliet's Mexico City nights are similarly endless. She gets into an accident in Mexico at the end of summer, though I don't know what kind of accident. Margaret writes about the accident in her letters to Juliet, as does Hugh. They're anxious to know how their friend is faring in a foreign land, unmoored from her circle.

A September letter brings the same short letter length. Hugh is recovering, although it is a slow process. He writes to Juliet that he can now "stick his nose outside" once in a while. He asks Juliet when she's leaving Mexico. It is strange to go through these archives, to read questions posed to Juliet by her friends, to wonder about them myself, to never hear her response. After many rejections, Hugh finally sells his book *Never in Vain*. "It's the best thing I've done," he writes.

Hugh's novel *Never in Vain* is published in February of 1929. Although Hugh writes in these letters that the new novel is his best work, he is now known primarily for his 1924 book *The Cricket Match*. Hugh is largely forgotten as a novelist, and there is little secondary information about him and his work. The Dartmouth library owns only *The Cricket Match*, and his 1918 collection of short stories, *Nine Tales*. While most books in the library have spines embossed with golden call numbers, somebody has instead painted a black stripe across these faded green and rust-red spines, the call numbers hand-written in ochre. A few rows back Harold Child's own book *A Poor Player; the Story of Failure*, is tucked away, spine marked with the same damning black stripe. Fitting title.

Hugh's letter paper from the archives is crisp and crackly, his handwriting delicate. In contrast, the paper of these forgotten books is pulpy, thick. The pages are greyed and yellowing like dirty snow. Hugh's words have turned to slush. The spines are cracked so that the pages turn out of line, attempting to launch themselves out of the book altogether. When I check the books out, the woman at the front desk calls her supervisor over. "I forget how to do the thing when they don't have the barcodes," she says. The books have never been re-entered into the system, the librarian tells me. A symptom of a forgotten text.

The introduction to *Nine Tales* is written by Harold Child. "Introductions are supposed to criticize, appraise, 'place' their subject," Child writes. "I cannot do that with Hugh de Sélincourt's work because both he and it are too near to me...there is a stage of intimacy...which leaves the admirer all but tongue-tied." A stage of intimacy. "When we come to talk of love," writes Child in this introduction, "we must bear in mind...the inherited common wisdom of mankind, which declares love to be a kind of madness and possession." He continues: "I do not know of any living realistic novelist who could describe the growth and state of jealousy as they are described in [Hugh's short story] 'Realms of Day.'" A telling passage.

Harold Child also writes to Juliet: there are stacks of his letters from 1924 to 1926. Child writes in tiny, scrawled letters on stiff stationary. His address is not hand-written like Hugh's, but printed in embossed navy letters. Flat 17a, 36, Buckingham Gate, SW1, Victoria 8873, will later be destroyed in the World War II London blitz. In a letter dated January 16th, 1925, Child writes that "the more and the better you love, the more people you can love...love is illimitable." Child had an affair with Hugh's wife Janet, of which Hugh knew and encouraged. In another letter, this one dated August 3rd, 1925, Child writes from a news assignment in Lancashire, though he's staying at Sand Pit. He writes that "somehow Janet and Hugh and I...have got a glimpse of what love-relations ought to be...one must always be careful about one-sided love, and scratch it for any alloy it may have of mere desire to possess." What love relations ought to be: free, without jealousy or possession. A liberating thought. An unrealistic one.

Child goes on, “Of course...I can’t free myself of jealousy and rage...But it’s worth all the efforts; because the more you can feel yourself free of the desire to possess, the more...you thaw the love of the other person.” Child grits his teeth as he writes this letter, unsuccessfully ignoring the cacophony of the hotel. He flips his fountain pen over, writing with the point rather than the flat side. “Fidelity,” he writes with newly spider-thin lines, “so often comes to mean domestic possession, and loyalty is so often a disguise for jealousy...Love simply has to be free: otherwise it is not love.” By 1925, Child’s affair with Margaret had already begun. “Has it done her harm or good?” he asks Juliet, “I would be so glad to know what you think and feel about it.” Juliet must have sanctioned it, for Margaret’s affair with Harold Child continued for at least three more years.

Child does not only write to Juliet of love in his letters, but also speaks to her about business. In April of 1925, he gives Juliet power of attorney and the rights to his story *Phil of the Heath*, which he hopes she can help transform into a movie. This aspiration is never realized. A letter dated August 8th, 1925, arrives in Juliet’s mailbox at her sprawling country-house in Windsor, Vermont. It’s a type-written letter, professional and cold as compared to the handwritten notes of Hugh and Child and Margaret. “Dear Mrs. Rublee,” writes Laura W. Wilck: ‘Broker in Manuscripts,’ “Mrs. Alma Reed asked me to write you direct about PHIL OF THE HEATH by Harold Child. I’m afraid it won’t do. It is extremely old-fashioned. So sorry.” Child’s writing too old-fashioned. Hugh’s writing the same.

Hugh’s handsomeness can’t save his work in death. It’s his mediocre writing rather than his charm that speaks beyond the grave. Two old-fashioned, forgotten writers: Child and Sélincourt, preaching free love, unsuccessfully fighting their desire to possess whoever the other man covets. “A stage of intimacy beyond normalcy,” Child had written in the introduction. Indeed.

Three years later, the two men find themselves entangled once more in such a tryst, this time with Margaret. “The triangle position, dearest Juliet,” writes Hugh on December 3rd, 1928, “is always, in my opinion, wrongly stated. She loves both [men] in completely different ways and needs [them] both, if she is a live woman.” By “wrongly stated,” Hugh echoes Child’s own words in a letter to Juliet in 1925, where Child says there can be no “lesser lover” of two. Poor Hugh, wanting so badly to possess Margaret, jealous of her husband. No “‘fine’ man,” he writes, “would beg a woman to leave the father of her two children and the two children! Oh! For a little courage, a little honesty...This awful slave morality based on fear and stupidity and heat.” The contradictory words of a man in love: denouncing the domestic “slave morality,” and yet desiring to possess Margaret in the same fashion as does her husband, Noah Slee.

“Sacrifice is a positive, a great creative gesture. This woman would know what it meant if she quietly without shame told both men the truth of her feeling,” writes Hugh. He echoes Child’s introduction of ten years before. Child also writes of sacrifice in the 1918 introduction to *Nine Tales*. “The sacrifice which life, which virtue, demands, according to the author of these tales, is not a denial but an affirmation.”

Hugh continues his lamentations in this December 3rd letter, furiously scratching out mistakes, and crossing out words and sentences. None of Hugh’s other letters possess this kind of heavy editing. These are the marks of a man in the throws of heartache and jealousy. “But she seems not to know [her feeling] herself. So I should think whatever she does, they will enjoy their mild unhappiness.” Hugh takes a deep breath, cracks his knuckles, and closes his eyes. Recomposes himself. He thinks back, perhaps, to another holiday season three years prior, spent with Child, the man of whom he is now so envious.

This letter dated December 24th, 1925, is the only one in which Hugh mentions his wife Janet. “We are giving Harold a chair with arms, which we shall decorate with ribbons and fir

boughs and we shall sing a song of triumph as he takes his seat. All absurd fun: and very delightful.” No such “absurd fun” in December of 1928. No Child invited to stay for the holiday. Hugh is wracked with jealousy and unrequited – not love – but rather unrequited *possession*.

The last third of this December 1928 letter is jubilant, Hugh attempts to cover up his dejection. “What fun meeting Lindbergh!” he writes, “Mexico must be a marvelous country, as you describe it.” Juliet will, many years later, write a letter to the Lindbergh baby’s captor. The Lindbergh letter is the only letter in the archives written by Juliet. It’s type-written, unsigned, unsent. A shame to not be able to see the handwriting of a woman to whom these men and Margaret wrote so intimately.

Hugh cannot effectively shake his emotions in this 1928 letter, signing off, “I’m in a stupid sort of disgruntled state, not working properly.” A cold quiet drapes itself over the Sussex fields, Hugh is left shivering and hollow in the December air.

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” writes Harold Child to Margaret Sanger on October 24th, 1924. A letter “too precious to destroy,” Margaret sends it to Juliet. Margaret writes to Juliet about Hugh on June 1st of 1928, “he is a joy and laugh in my life. The bright spot seeping fresh hope and love in humanity.” She speaks too in this letter of Child. “A letter from Harold saying I did not read his letter correctly...I can’t get it at all, but I’ll look up his letter and see how I could have misread its meaning.” Margaret does not dwell on these men in her letters to Juliet as they do on her. She mentions them in passing. She drops their names at the end of letters mostly concerned with hers and Juliet’s resignations as president and vice president of the American Birth Control League. Their love-triangle seems the very “alloy” of one-sided love and possession Child warns against. Margaret may not have seen her relationships with Hugh and Child as a triangle at all. She was unconfined to these two men alone, with men like Havelock Ellis and H.G. Wells flitting in and out of her life.

“Happiness is a bye-product, always unexpected and apparently unresolved. See Blake passion. it’s the old truth of - ‘we die to live.’ Which seems nonsense, and often becomes in wrong practise, hypocrisy, but is never the less a fundamental truth,” writes Hugh in an October 1928 letter to Juliet. October 1928: Hugh is still in recovery from his illness, “undergoing strenuous treatment osteopathy and sunrays,” triply hit by illness, treatment, and heartache.

In December, Hugh writes that if Margaret would “quietly tell both men the truth,” then she would “die to live.” This last part is written at the top of the letter, carotted in place. A sinuous line tethers happiness suspended in white space to Margaret’s hypothetical truth. If *only* Hugh seems to say. If only Margaret would tell the truth, *his* truth: leave her husband, fall into another version of the very domestic possession which Hugh denounces. Child does not seem susceptible to this same jealousy, perhaps he buys his own pronouncements of “free love” in a way Hugh does not. Or perhaps this is my perception based on a dearth of information: there are no letters from Child to Juliet in the archives from this time.

This is the peril of archival work. There are so many things I cannot know: scraps of information that have been thrown out, misplaced throughout the years. There are sentences and words in those letters which I must have misinterpreted. What I can speak to is the legacy of Margaret Sanger. Her legacy is not one defined by her affairs with or marriages to various men. She is a woman remembered for her own work, however controversial. Her love of the League, as evidenced in her letters, overshadowed everything else. Margaret and Hugh de Sélincourt would all but lose contact at the start of World War II, and there would be many more men like him. As for Harold Child, I’m not sure for how long his and Margaret’s affair endured after 1928. Hugh and

Harold are but blips in Margaret's life. They remain half-obsured in Margaret Sanger's biographies by the complex social and sexual entanglements which connected them to Margaret and to each other. "I have found," writes Hugh to Juliet in that limp October letter of 1928, that "happiness depend[s] upon others, and not upon ourselves." Perhaps this is what separates the forgotten from the remembered. The remembered draw purpose from themselves, and *not*, as Hugh states, from others. It is only the forgotten who depend on others for self-definition.

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