

Eighty Years and More (1815–1897)

Reminiscences of Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

When I was eleven years old, two events occurred which changed considerably the current of my life. My only brother, who had just graduated from Union College, came home to die. A young man of great talent and promise, he was the pride of my father's heart. We early felt that this son filled a larger place in our father's affections and future plans than the five daughters together. Well do I remember how tenderly he watched my brother in his last illness, the sighs and tears he gave vent to as he slowly walked up and down the hall, and, when the last sad moment came, and we were all assembled to say farewell in the silent chamber of death, how broken were his utterances as he knelt and prayed for comfort and support. I still recall, too, going into the large darkened parlor to see my brother, and finding the casket, mirrors, and pictures all draped in white, and my father seated by his side, pale and immovable. As he took no notice of me, after standing a long while, I climbed upon his knee, when he mechanically put his arm about me and, with my head resting against his beating heart, we both sat in silence, he thinking of the wreck of all his hopes in the loss of a dear son, and I wondering what could be said or done to fill the void in his breast.

At length he heaved a deep sigh and said: "Oh, my daughter, I wish you were a boy!" Throwing my arms about his neck, I replied: "I will try to be all my brother was." Then and there I resolved that I would not give so much time as heretofore to play, but would study and strive to be at the head of all my classes and thus delight my father's heart. All that day and far into the night I pondered the

problem of boyhood. I thought that the chief thing to be done in order to equal boys was to be learned and courageous. So I decided to study Greek and learn to manage a horse. Having formed this conclusion I fell asleep. My resolutions, unlike many such made at night, did not vanish with the coming light. I arose early and hastened to put them into execution. They were resolutions never to be forgotten—destined to mold my character anew. As soon as I was dressed I hastened to our good pastor, Rev. Simon Hosack, who was always early at work in his garden.

"Doctor," said I, "which do you like best, boys or girls?" "Why, girls, to be sure; I would not give you for all the boys in Christendom."

"My father," I replied, "prefers boys; he wishes I was one, and I intend to be as near like one as possible. I am going to ride on horseback and study Greek. Will you give me a Greek lesson now, doctor? I want to begin at once."

"Yes, child," said he, throwing down his hoe, "come into my library and we will begin without delay."

He entered fully into the feeling of suffering and sorrow which took possession of me when I discovered that a girl weighed less in the scale of being than a boy, and he praised my determination to prove the contrary. The old grammar which he had studied in the University of Glasgow was soon in my hands, and the Greek article was learned before breakfast. Then came the sad pageantry of death, the weeping of friends, the dark rooms, the ghostly stillness, the exhortation to the living to prepare for death, the solemn prayer, the mournful chant, the funeral cortege, the solemn, tolling bell, the burial. How I suffered during those sad days! What strange undefined fears of the unknown took possession of me! For months afterward, at the twilight hour, I went with my father to the new-made

grave. Near it stood two tall poplar trees, against one of which I leaned, while my father threw himself on the grave, with outstretched arms, as if to embrace his child. At last the frosts and storms of November came and threw a chilling barrier between the living and the dead, and we went there no more.

During all this time I kept up my lessons at the parsonage and made rapid progress. I surprised even my teacher, who thought me capable of doing anything. I learned to drive, and to leap a fence and ditch on horseback. I taxed every power, hoping some day to hear my father say: "Well, a girl is as good as a boy, after all." But he never said it. When the doctor came over to spend the evening with us, I would whisper in his ear: "Tell my father how fast I get on," and he would tell him, and was lavish in his praises. But my father only paced the room, sighed, and showed that he wished I were a boy; and I, not knowing why he felt thus, would hide my tears of vexation on the doctor's shoulder. Soon after this I began to study Latin, Greek, and mathematics with a class of boys in the Academy, many of whom were much older than I. For three years one boy kept his place at the end of the class, and I always stood next. Two prizes were offered in Greek. I strove for one and took the second. How well I remember my joy in receiving that prize. There was no sentiment of ambition, rivalry, or triumph over my companions, nor feeling of satisfaction in receiving this honor in the presence of those assembled on the day of the exhibition. One thought alone filled my mind. "Now," said I, "my father will be satisfied with me." So, as soon as we were dismissed, I ran down the hill, rushed breathless into his office, laid the new Greek Testament, which was my prize, on his table and exclaimed: "There, I got it!" He took up the book, asked me some questions about the class, the teachers, the spectators, and, evidently pleased, handed it back to me. Then, while I stood looking and waiting for him to say something which would show that he recognized the equality of the daughter with the son, he kissed me on the forehead and exclaimed, with a sigh, "Ah, you should have been a boy!"

My joy was turned to sadness. I ran to my good doctor. He chased my bitter tears away, and soothed me with unbounded praises and visions of future success. He was then confined to the house with his last illness. He asked me that day if I would like to have, when he was gone, the old lexicon, Testament, and grammar that we had so often thumbed together. "Yes, but I would rather have you stay," I replied, "for what can I do when you are gone?" "Oh," said he tenderly, "I shall not be gone; my spirit will still be with you, watching you in all life's struggles." Noble, generous friend! He had but little on earth to bequeath to anyone, but when the last scene in his life was ended, and his will was opened, sure enough there was a clause saying: "My Greek lexicon, Testament, and grammar, and four

volumes of Scott's commentaries, I will to Elizabeth Cady." I never look at these books without a feeling of thankfulness that in childhood I was blessed with such a friend and teacher. . . .

An important event in our family circle was the marriage of my oldest sister, Tryphena, to Edward Bayard of Wilmington, Delaware. He was a graduate of Union College, a classmate of my brother, and frequently visited at my father's house. At the end of his college course, he came with his brother Henry to study law in Johnstown. A quiet, retired little village was thought to be a good place in which to sequester young men bent on completing their education, as they were there safe from the temptations and distracting influences of large cities. In addition to this consideration, my father's reputation made his office a desirable resort for students, who, furthermore, not only improved their opportunities by reading Blackstone, Kent, and Story, but also by making love to the Judge's daughters. We thus had the advantage of many pleasant acquaintances from the leading families in the country, and, in this way, it was that four of the sisters eventually selected most worthy husbands.

Though only twenty-one years of age when married, Edward Bayard was a tall, fully developed man, remarkably fine looking, with cultivated literary taste and a profound knowledge of human nature. Warm and affectionate, generous to a fault in giving and serving, he was soon a great favorite in the family, and gradually filled the void made in all our hearts by the loss of the brother and son. My father was so fully occupied with the duties of his profession, which often called him from home, and my mother so weary with the cares of a large family, having had ten children, though only five survived at this time, that they were quite willing to shift their burdens to younger shoulders. Our eldest sister and her husband, therefore, soon became our counselors and advisers. They selected our clothing, books, schools, acquaintances, and directed our reading and amusements. Thus the reins of domestic government, little by little, passed into their hands, and the family arrangements were in a manner greatly improved in favor of greater liberty for the children.

The advent of Edward and Henry Bayard was an inestimable blessing to us. With them came an era of picnics, birthday parties, and endless amusements; the buying of pictures, fairy books, musical instruments and ponies, and frequent excursions with parties on horseback. Fresh from college, they made our lessons in Latin, Greek, and mathematics so easy that we studied with real pleasure and had more leisure for play. Henry Bayard's chief pleasures were walking, riding, and playing all manner of games, from jack-straws to chess, with the three younger sisters, and we have often said that the three years he passed in Johnstown were the most delightful of our girlhood. . . . As my father's

office joined the house, I spent there much of my time, when out of school, listening to the clients stating their cases, talking with the students, and reading the laws in regard to woman. In our Scotch neighborhood many men still retained the old feudal ideas of women and property. Fathers, at their death, would will the bulk of their property to the eldest son, with the proviso that the mother was to have a home with him. Hence it was not unusual for the mother, who had brought all the property into the family, to be made an unhappy dependent on the bounty of an uncongenial daughter-in-law and a dissipated son. The tears and complaints of the women who came to my father for legal advice touched my heart and early drew my attention to the injustice and cruelty of the laws. As the practice of the law was my father's business, I could not exactly understand why he could not alleviate the sufferings of these women. So, in order to enlighten me, he would take down his books and show me the inexorable statutes. The students, observing my interest, would amuse themselves by reading to me all the worst laws they could find, over which I would laugh and cry by turns. One Christmas morning I went into the office to show them, among other of my presents, a new coral necklace and bracelets. They all admired the jewelry and then began to tease me with hypothetical cases of future ownership. "Now," said Henry Bayard, "if in due time you should be my wife, those ornaments would be mine; I could take them and lock them up, and you could never wear them except with my permission. I could even exchange them for a box of cigars, and you could watch them evaporate in smoke."

With this constant bantering from students and the sad complaints of the women, my mind was sorely perplexed. So when, from time to time, my attention was called to these odious laws, I would mark them with a pencil, and becoming more and more convinced of the necessity of taking some active measures against these unjust provisions, I resolved to seize the first opportunity, when alone in the office, to cut every one of them out of the books; supposing my father and his library were the beginning and the end of the law. However, this mutilation of his volumes was never accomplished, for dear old Flora Campbell, to whom I confided my plan for the amelioration of the wrongs of my unhappy sex, warned my father of what I proposed to do. Without letting me know that he had discovered my secret, he explained to me one evening how laws were made, the large number of lawyers and libraries there were all over the State, and that if his library should burn up it would make no difference in woman's condition. "When you are grown up, and able to prepare a speech," said he, "you must go down to Albany and talk to the legislators; tell them all you have seen in this office—the sufferings of these Scotch women, robbed of their inheritance and left dependent on their unworthy sons, and,

if you can persuade them to pass new laws, the old ones will be a dead letter."

Thus was the future object of my life foreshadowed and my duty plainly outlined by him who was most opposed to my public career when, in due time, I entered upon it. Until I was sixteen years old, I was a faithful student in the Johnstown Academy with a class of boys. Though I was the only girl in the higher classes of mathematics and the languages, yet, in our plays, all the girls and boys mingled freely together. In running races, sliding downhill, and snowballing, we made no distinction of sex. True, the boys would carry the school books and pull the sleighs up hill for their favorite girls, but equality was the general basis of our school relations. I dare say the boys did not make their snowballs quite so hard when pelting the girls, nor wash their faces with the same vehemence as they did each other's, but there was no public evidence of partiality. However, if any boy was too rough or took advantage of a girl smaller than himself, he was promptly thrashed by his fellows. There was an unwritten law and public sentiment in that little Academy world that enabled us to study and play together with the greatest freedom and harmony. From the academy the boys of my class went to Union College at Schenectady. When those with whom I had studied and contended for prizes for five years came to bid me good-by, and I learned of the barrier that prevented me from following in their footsteps—"no girls admitted here"—my vexation and mortification knew no bounds. I remember, now, how proud and handsome the boys looked in their new clothes, as they jumped into the old stage coach and drove off, and how lonely I felt when they were gone and I had nothing to do, for the plans for my future were yet undetermined. Again I felt more keenly than ever the humiliation of the distinctions made on the ground of sex. My time was now occupied with riding on horseback, studying the game of chess, and continually squabbling with the law students over the rights of women. Something was always coming up in the experiences of everyday life, or in the books we were reading, to give us fresh topics for argument. They would read passages from the British classics quite as aggravating as the laws. They delighted in extract from Shakespeare, especially from "The Taming of the Shrew," an admirable satire in itself on the old common law of England. I hated Petruchio as if he were a real man. Young Bayard would recite with unction the famous reply of Milton's ideal woman to Adam: "God thy law, thou mine." The Bible, too, was brought into requisition. In fact it seemed to me that every book taught the "divinely ordained" headship of man; but my mind never yielded to this popular heresy.

Mrs. Willard's Seminary at Troy was the fashionable school in my girlhood, and in the winter of 1830, with upward of a hundred other girls, I found myself an active

participant in all the joys and sorrows of that institution. When in family council it was decided to send me to that intellectual Mecca, I did not receive the announcement with unmixed satisfaction, as I had fixed my mind on Union College. The thought of a school without boys, who had been to me such a stimulus both in study and play, seemed to my imagination dreary and profitless.

The one remarkable feature of my journey to Troy was the railroad from Schenectady to Albany, the first ever laid in this country. The manner of ascending a high hill going out of the city would now strike engineers as stupid to the last degree. The passenger cars were pulled up by a train, loaded with stones, descending the hill. The more rational way of tunneling through the hill or going around it had not yet dawned on our Dutch ancestors. At every step of my journey to Troy I felt that I was treading on my pride, and thus in a hopeless frame of mind I began my boarding-school career. I had already studied everything that was taught there except French, music, and dancing, so I devoted myself to these accomplishments. As I had a good voice I enjoyed singing, with a guitar accompaniment, and, having a good ear for time, I appreciated the harmony in music and motion and took great delight in dancing. The large house, the society of so many girls, the walks about the city, the novelty of everything made the new life more enjoyable than I had anticipated. To be sure I missed the boys, with whom I had grown up, played with for years, and later measured my intellectual powers with, but, as they became a novelty, there was new zest in occasionally seeing them. After I had been there a short time, I heard a call one day: "Heads out!" I ran with the rest and exclaimed, "What is it?" expecting to see a giraffe or some other wonder from Barnum's Museum. "Why, don't you see those boys?" said one. "Oh," I replied, "is that all? I have seen boys all my life." When visiting family friends in the city, we were in the way of making the acquaintance of their sons, and as all social relations were strictly forbidden, there was a new interest in seeing them. As they were not allowed to call upon us or write notes, unless they were brothers or cousins, we had, in time, a large number of kinsmen.

There was an intense interest to me now in writing notes, receiving calls, and joining the young men in the streets for a walk, such as I had never known when in constant association with them at school and in our daily amusements. Shut up with girls, most of them older than myself, I heard many subjects discussed of which I had never thought before, and in a manner it were better I had never heard. The healthful restraint always existing between boys and girls in conversation is apt to be relaxed with either sex alone. In all my intimate association with boys up to that period, I cannot recall one word or act for criticism, but I cannot say the same of the girls during the three years I passed at the seminary in Troy. My own expe-

rience proves to me that it is a grave mistake to send boys and girls to separate institutions of learning, especially at the most impressible age. The stimulus of sex promotes alike a healthy condition of the intellectual and the moral faculties and gives to both a development they never can acquire alone.

Mrs. Willard, having spent several months in Europe, did not return until I had been at the seminary some time. I well remember her arrival and the joy with which she was greeted by the teachers and pupils who had known her before. She was a splendid-looking woman, then in her prime, and fully realized my idea of a queen. I doubt whether any royal personage in the Old World could have received her worshipers with more grace and dignity than did this far-famed daughter of the Republic. She was one of the remarkable women of that period, and did a great educational work for her sex. She gave free scholarships to a large number of promising girls, fitting them for teachers, with a proviso that, when the opportunity arose, they should, in turn, educate others. . . .

After the restraints of childhood at home and in school, what a period of irrepressible joy and freedom comes to us in girlhood with the first taste of liberty. Then is our individuality in a measure recognized and our feelings and opinions consulted; then we decide where and when we will come and go, what we will eat, drink, wear, and do. To suit one's own fancy in clothes, to buy what one likes, and wear what one chooses is a great privilege to most young people. To go out at pleasure, to walk, to ride, to drive, with no one to say us nay or question our right to liberty, this is indeed like a birth into a new world of happiness and freedom. This is the period, too, when the emotions rule us, and we idealize everything in life; when love and hope make the present an ecstasy and the future bright with anticipation.

Then comes that dream of bliss that for weeks and months throws a halo of glory round the most ordinary characters in every-day life, holding the strongest and most commonsense young men and women in a thralldom from which few mortals escape. The period when love, in soft silver tones, whispers his first words of adoration, painting our graces and virtues day by day in living colors in poetry and prose, stealthily punctuated ever and anon with a kiss or fond embrace. What dignity it adds to a young girl's estimate of herself when some strong man makes her feel that in her hands rest his future peace and happiness! Though these seasons of intoxication may come once to all, yet they are seldom repeated. How often in after life we long for one more such rapturous dream of bliss, one more season of supreme human love and passion!

After leaving school, until my marriage, I had the most pleasant years of my girlhood. With frequent visits to a large circle of friends and relatives in various towns and

cities, the monotony of home life was sufficiently broken to make our simple country pleasures always delightful and enjoyable. An entirely new life now opened to me. The old bondage of fear of the visible and the invisible was broken and, no longer subject to absolute authority, I rejoiced in the dawn of a new day of freedom in thought and action. My brother-in-law, Edward Bayard, ten years my senior, was an inestimable blessing to me at this time, especially as my mind was just then opening to the consideration of all the varied problems of life. To me and my sisters he was a companion in all our amusements, a teacher in the higher departments of knowledge, and a counselor in all our youthful trials and disappointments. He was of a metaphysical turn of mind, and in the pursuit of truth was in no way trammelled by popular superstitions. He took nothing for granted and, like Socrates, went about asking questions. Nothing pleased him more than to get a bevy of bright young girls about him and teach them how to think clearly and reason logically.

One great advantage of the years my sisters and myself spent at the Troy Seminary was the large number of pleasant acquaintances we made there, many of which ripened into lifelong friendships. From time to time many of our classmates visited us, and all alike enjoyed the intellectual fencing in which my brother-in-law drilled them. He discoursed with us on law, philosophy, political economy, history, and poetry, and together we read novels without number.

The long winter evenings thus passed pleasantly, Mr. Bayard alternatively talking and reading aloud Scott, Bulwer, James, Cooper, and Dickens, whose works were just then coming out in numbers from week to week, always leaving us in suspense at the most critical point of the story. Our readings were varied with recitations, music, dancing, and games. . . .

As I had become sufficiently philosophical to talk over my religious experiences calmly with my classmates who had been with me through the Finney revival meetings, we all came to the same conclusion—that we had passed through no remarkable change and that we had not been born again, as they say, for we found our tastes and enjoyments the same as ever. My brother-in-law explained to us the nature of the delusion we had all experienced, the physical conditions, the mental processes, the church machinery by which such excitements are worked up, and the impositions to which credulous minds are necessarily subjected. As we had all been through that period of depression and humiliation, and had been oppressed at times with the feeling that all our professions were arrant hypocrisy and that our last state was worse than our first, he helped us to understand these workings of the human mind and reconciled us to the more rational condition in which we now found ourselves. He never grew weary of expounding principles to us

and dissipating the fogs and mists that gather over young minds educated in an atmosphere of superstition.

We had a constant source of amusement and vexation in the students in my father's office. A succession of them was always coming fresh from college and full of conceit. Aching to try their powers of debate on graduates from the Troy Seminary, they politely questioned all our theories and assertions. However, with my brother-in-law's training in analysis and logic, we were a match for any of them. Nothing pleased me better than a long argument with them on woman's equality, which I tried to prove by a diligent study of the books they read and the games they played. I confess that I did not study so much for a love of the truth or my own development, in these days, as to make those young men recognize my equality. I soon noticed that, after losing a few games of chess, my opponent talked less of masculine superiority. Sister Madge would occasionally rush to the defense with an emphatic "Fudge for these laws, all made by men! I'll never obey one of them. And as to the students with their impertinent talk of superiority, all they need is such a shaking up as I gave the most disagreeable one yesterday. I invited him to take a ride on horseback. He accepted promptly, and said he would be most happy to go. Accordingly I told Peter to saddle the toughest-mouthed, hardest-trotting carriage horse in the stable. Mounted on my swift pony, I took a ten-mile canter as fast as I could go, with that superior being at my heels calling, as he found breath, for me to stop, which I did at last and left him in the hands of Peter, half dead at his hotel, where he will be laid out, with all his marvelous masculine virtues, for a week at least. Now do not waste your arguments on these prigs from Union College. Take each, in turn, the ten-miles' circuit on 'Old Boney' and they'll have no breath left to prate of woman's inferiority. You might argue with them all day, and you could not make them feel so small as I made that popinjay feel in one hour. I knew 'Old Boney' would keep up with me, if he died for it, and that my escort could neither stop nor dismount, except by throwing himself from the saddle."

"Oh, Madge!" I exclaimed; "what will you say when he meets you again?"

"If he complains, I will say 'the next time you ride see that you have a curb bit before starting.' Surely, a man ought to know what is necessary to manage a horse, and not expect a woman to tell him."

Our lives were still further varied and intensified by the usual number of flirtations, so called, more or less lasting or evanescent, from all of which I emerged, as from my religious experiences, in a more rational frame of mind. We had been too much in the society of boys and young gentlemen, and knew too well their real character, to idealize the sex in general. In addition to our own observations, we had the advantage of our brother-in-law's wisdom.

Wishing to save us as long as possible from all matrimonial entanglements, he was continually unveiling those with whom he associated, and so critically portraying their intellectual and moral condition that it was quite impossible, in our most worshipful moods, to make gods of any of the sons of Adam.

However, in spite of all our own experiences and of all the warning words of wisdom from those who had seen life

in its many phases, we entered the charmed circle at last, all but one marrying into the legal profession, with its odious statute laws and infamous decisions. And this, after reading Blackstone, Kent, and Story, and thoroughly understanding the status of the wife under the old common law of England, which was in force at that time in most of the States of the Union.