

The Girlhood of Harriet Beecher Stowe

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By Charles Edward Stowe,
and Lyman Beecher Stowe

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Stowe, Charles Edward, and Stowe, Lyman Beecher
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McClure's Magazine

Charles Edward Stowe, and Lyman Beecher Stowe

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THE GIRLHOOD OF HARRIET BEECHER STOWE BY HER SON, CHARLES EDWARD STOWE AND HER GRANDSON, LYMAN BEECHER STOWE

HARRIET BEECHER'S earliest recollections were of her mother, who died in 1816, before Harriet was six years old. She says of her mother, in describing the first of these memories: "Mother was an enthusiastic horticulturist in all the small ways that her limited means allowed. Her brother John, in New York, had just sent her a small parcel of fine tulip bulbs. I remember rummaging these out of an obscure corner of the nursery, one day when she was gone out, and being strongly seized with the idea that they were good to eat, and using all the little English I then possessed to persuade my brothers that these were onions, such as grown people ate, and would be very nice for us. So we fell to, and devoured the whole, and I recollect being somewhat disappointed at the odd, sweetish taste, and thinking that onions were not as nice as I had supposed.

"Then mother's serene face appeared at the nursery door, and we all ran toward her and began to tell our discovery and achievement. We had found this bag of onions and had eaten them all up.

"Also, I remember that there was not even a momentary expression of impatience, but that she sat down and said: 'My dear children, what you have done makes mama very sorry. Those were not onions, but roots of beautiful flowers; and, if you had let them alone, mama would have had in the garden, next summer, great, beautiful red and yellow flowers such as you never saw.' I remember how drooping and dispirited we all grew at this picture, and how sadly we regarded the empty paper bag."

This was one of the two incidents which, as she says, "twinkle like rays through the darkness." The other was "of our all running and dancing out before her from the nursery to the sitting-room one Sabbath morning, and her pleasant voice saying after us, 'Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.'"

She goes on to say: "Then I have a recollection of her reading to the children, one evening, Miss Edgeworth's 'Frank,' which had just come out, I believe, and was exciting a great deal of interest in the educational circles of Litchfield. After that I remember a time when every one said she was sick. I used to be permitted once a day to go into her room, where she lay bolstered up in bed. I have a vision of a very fair face with a bright red spot on each cheek, and a quiet smile as she offered me a spoonful of her gruel; of our dreaming one night, we little ones, that mama had got well, and waking in loud transports of joy, and of being hushed down by some one coming into the room. Our dream was

indeed a true one. She was forever well; but they told us she was dead, and took us in to see something that seemed so cold and so unlike anything we had ever seen or known of her."

Then came the funeral, which, in those stern days, had none of the soothing accessories of our gentler times. We are told of Harriet's little baby brother, Henry Ward, that, after the funeral, he was seen by his sister Catherine digging with great energy under her window, the bright sunlight shining through the long curls that hung down on either side of his little flushed face. When she asked what he was doing, he replied, "I'm doing down to find mama!"

"Although mother's bodily presence disappeared from our circle," says Mrs. Stowe, "I think that her memory and example had more influence in molding her family, in deterring from evil and exciting to good, than the living presence of many mothers. It was a memory that met us everywhere; for every person in the town seemed to have been so impressed by her character and life that they constantly reflected some portion of it back upon us. The passage in 'Uncle Tom' where Augustine St. Clair describes his mother's influence is a simple reproduction of this mother's influence as it has

always been in her family." Such a woman was Roxana Foote, Dr. Lyman Beecher's first wife and the mother of eight of Dr. Beecher's eleven children.

Lyman Beecher's Love of Music

Harriet Beecher was born at Litchfield, Connecticut, in June, 1811. The house in which Harriet was born and grew up was originally a square building with a hipped roof, to which before her birth her father had built an addition known as the "new part." In the "Autobiography and Correspondence of Lyman Beecher" it is described, in part, as follows:

"The ground floor of the new part was occupied by a large parlor in which memory recalls ministers' meetings with clouds of tobacco smoke, and musical soirées with piano, flute, and song. Over this were sleeping-rooms, and in the attic was the study, the windows of which looked out into an apple orchard."

Mrs. Stowe wrote of this home, and of her father:

"Father was very fond of music, and very susceptible to its influence; and one of the great eras of the family in my childish recollection is the triumphant bringing home from New Haven of a fine-toned upright piano, which a fortunate accident had brought within the range of a poor country minister's means. The ark of the covenant was not brought into the tabernacle with more gladness than this magical instrument into our abode. Father soon learned to accompany the piano on his violin in various psalm tunes and Scotch airs, and brothers Edward and William to perform their part on their flutes. So we had often domestic concerts, which, if they did not attain to the height of artistic perfection, filled the house with gladness.

"One of the most decided impressions of the family, as it was in my childish days, was of a great household inspired by a spirit of cheerfulness and hilarity, and of my father, though pressed and driven with business, always lending an attentive ear to anything in the way of life and social fellowship. My oldest sister, whose life seemed to be a constant stream of mirthfulness, was his favorite and companion, and he was always more than indulgent towards her pranks and jokes." This eldest sister, Catherine, says of her father: "I remember him more as a playmate than in any other character during my childhood."

In spite of the fact that he was ever bubbling over with fun, he was respected and obeyed by his children in the minutest particulars. Catherine says of her father:

"As to family government, it has been said that children love best those that govern them best. This was verified in our experience. Our mother was tender, gentle, and sympathizing; but all the discipline of government was with father. With most of his children, when quite young, he had one, two, or three seasons in which he taught them that obedience must be exact, prompt, and cheerful, and by a discipline so severe that it was thoroughly remembered and feared. Ever after, a decided word of command was all-sufficient. The obedience was to be speedy and without fretting or frowns. 'Mind your mother! Quick! No crying! Look pleasant!' These were words of command, obeyed with almost military speed and precision."

"Team Work" in the Beecher Family

Never was a father more idolized by his children than was Lyman Beecher. Mrs. Stowe mentions especially his power of exciting family enthusiasm. "Whenever he had a point to be carried, or work to be done, he would work the whole family up to a pitch of fervent zeal, in which the strength of each seemed quadrupled. For instance, the wood for the family used to be brought in winter on ox-sleds, and piled up in the yard exactly over the spot where father wished to plant his cucumbers and melons. Of course, as all this wood was to be cut and split and carried into the wood-house before the garden could be started, it required a miracle of generalship to get it done, considering the immense quantity of wood required to keep an old windy castle of a house comfortable in winter weather. The axes would ring and the chips fly; the jokes and stories would fly faster, till all was cut and split. Then came the great work of wheeling in and piling."

Harriet would work like one possessed, sucked into the vortex of enthusiasm by her father's remarking, "I wish Harriet were a boy! She would do more than any of them!" Then she would throw aside her book or her needle and thread, and, donning a little black coat which she thought made her look more like a boy, she would try to outdo all the rest till the wood was all in and the chips swept up. Frequently Mr. Beecher would raise a point of theology and start a discussion, taking the wrong or weakest side himself, to practise the youngsters in logic. If the children did not make good their side of the case, he would stop and explain to them the position, and say, "The argument is thus and so! Now, if you take this position you will be able to trip me up!" Thus he taught them to reason as he would have taught them to box or wrestle, by actual face-to-face contest.

Dr. Beecher's Fishing Parties

The task done, the Doctor always planned to have a great fishing expedition with the children. Before Harriet was old enough to go, she looked on these fishing expeditions as something pertaining only to her father and the older boys, and watched the busy preparations with regretful interest. They were all going to Great Pond, and to Pine Island, to that wonderful blue-pine forest that she could just see on the horizon; and who could tell what strange adventures they might meet!

When they were gone, the house seemed so still and deserted all day long -- no singing, shouting, tramping, and wrestling of noisy, merry boys. Harriet would sit silent and lonely, sewing a long seam on a sheet by way of beguiling the time. At last it would begin to be dark, and the stars, peeping out one by one, would look down as if surprised to find a little girl who had gone to bed but not to sleep. With what joy she finally hailed in the distance the tramp of feet, the shouts and laughter of her father and brothers, as, glad with triumph, they burst into the kitchen with long strings of perch, roach, pickerel, and bull-heads, with waving blades of sweet-flag and lofty heads of cat-tail, and pockets full of fragrant wintergreen, a generous portion of which was always bestowed upon her. To her eyes, these were trophies from the dreamland of enchantment for which she had longed. She was then safe from being sent back to bed for an hour or more, and watched with delight the cheerful hurrying and scurrying to and fro, the waving of lights as the fish were cleaned in the back shed, the fire kindled into a cheerful blaze, and her father standing over the frying-pan, frying the fish. To his latest day, Doctor Beecher was firm in the conviction that no feminine hand could fry fish with that perfection of skill which was his as a king of woodcraft and woodland cookery.

The Minister's Study

One of Harriet's favorite haunts was her father's study. It was an arched garret room, high above all the noise and confusion of the busy household, with a big window that commanded a view of Great Pond with its fringe of steel-blue pines. Its walls were set round from floor to ceiling with the quiet, friendly faces of books, and there stood her father's study-chair and writing-table, on which always lay open before him Cruden's Concordance and the Bible. Here Harriet loved to retreat, and to snuggle down in a quiet corner with her favorite books around her. She had a restful, sheltered feeling as she sat and watched her father at his sermon-writing, turning his books, and speaking to himself

from time to time in a loud, earnest whisper. She vaguely felt that he was about some holy and mysterious work, far above her childish comprehension.

The books ranged around filled her, too, with solemn awe. There, on the lower shelves, were enormous folios, on whose backs she spelled in black letters "Lightfoot's Opera" -- a title whereat she marveled, considering the bulk of the volumes. And, overhead, grouped along in sociable rows, were books of all sizes and bindings, the titles of which she had read so often that she knew them by heart. There were "Bell's Sermons," "Bonnett's Inquiries," "Bogue's Essays," "Toplady on Predestination," "Boston's Fourfold State," "Law's Serious Call," and other works of the kind, that she had looked over wistfully, day after day, without finding even a hope of something interesting.

Harriet Discovers Cotton Mather

It was a happy hour for Harriet when her father brought home and set up in his book-case Cotton Mather's "Magnalia." What wonderful stories, these, and stories, too, about her own country! Stories that made her feel that the very ground under her feet was consecrated by some special dealings of God's wonder-working providence. When the good Doctor related how a plague had wasted the Indian tribes, and so prepared a place for the Pilgrim fathers to settle undisturbed, she felt in no wise doubtful of his application of the text, "He drove out the heathen, and planted them." No Jewish maiden ever grew up with a more earnest faith that she belonged to a consecrated race, a people especially called and chosen of God for some great work on earth. Her faith in every word of the marvels related in this book was fully as great as the dear old credulous Doctor Mather could have desired. It filled her soul with an eagerness to go forth and do some great and valiant deed for her God and her country. She wanted then, as always, to translate her feelings into deeds.

But, aside from her father's study, Harriet found poetry and romance in the various garrets and cellars of the old parsonage. There was, first, the garret over the kitchen, the floors of which in the fall were covered with stores of yellow pumpkins, fragrant heaps of quinces, and less fragrant piles of onions. There were bins of shelled corn and of oats, and, as in every other garret in the house, there were also barrels of old sermons and pamphlets.

Bunyan in the Smoke-house

But most stimulating to the imagination of a Puritan child steeped in that wonderful allegory, Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress," was the smoke-house, which was a wide, deep chasm made in the kitchen chimney, in which the dried beef and the hams were prepared. The door that opened into this dismal recess glistened with condensed creosote, and Harriet trembled as she listened to an awful rumbling within, followed by crackling reverberations. One day she summoned courage to open the door and peep in, and was reminded of a passage in "Pilgrim's Progress" that reads: "Then I saw in my dream that the shepherds had them to another place, in a bottom, where was a door in the side of a hill; and they opened the door and bid them look in. They looked in, therefore, and saw that within it was dark and smoky; they also thought that they heard a rumbling noise as of fire, and a cry of some tormented, and they smelt the smell of brimstone." Harriet closed the door and ran away trembling.

Old Sermons and the "Arabian Nights"

She delighted in upsetting the barrels of old sermons and pamphlets on the floor, pawing about in the contents, and reading with astonished eyes the queer titles. It seemed to her that there were thousands of unintelligible things. "An Appeal on the Unlawfulness of a Man's Marrying His Wife's Sister" turned up in every barrel she investigated. But, oh joy and triumph! one rainy day she found at the bottom of a barrel a copy of the "Arabian Nights"! Thenceforth her fortune was made. She had no idea of reading as is the fashion in these days -- to read and dismiss a book. To read, with her, was a passion, and a book once read was read daily, becoming ever dearer, as an old friend.

It was also a great day when she discovered an old torn copy of the "Tempest." This experience she wrought into that romance of the Maine coast, "The Pearl of Orr's Island," where she pictures Mara exploring the garret and finding in an old barrel of cast-off rubbish a bit of reading which she begged of her grandmother for her own.

Harriet's Fear of the Rats

There was one class of tenants whose influence on Harriet's youthful mind must not be passed over. They were the rats. They had taken formal possession of the old parsonage,

grown, multiplied, and become ancient, in spite of traps, cats, or anything that could be devised against them. The family cat, in Harriet's day, having taken a dispassionate survey of the situation, had given up the matter in despair, and set herself philosophically to attend to other concerns. She selected a corner of the Doctor's study as her special domestic retreat. Here she made her lair on a heap of old pamphlets and sermons, whence, from time to time, she led forth litters of well-educated kittens, who, like their mother, gazed on the rats with respectful curiosity, but ran no imprudent risks. Consequently the rats had, as it were, the "freedom of the city" in the old parsonage.

They romped all night on the floor of the garret over Harriet's sleeping-room, apparently busy hopping ears of corn across the floor and rolling them down into their nests between the beams. Sometimes she would hear them gnawing and sawing behind the wainscoting at the head of her bed as if they had set up a carpenter's shop there, and would be filled with terror lest they should come through into her bed. Then, there were battles and skirmishes and squealings and fightings, and at times it would seem as if a whole detachment of rats rolled in an avalanche down the walls, with the cobs of corn they had been stealing. When the mighty winds of the Litchfield winters were let loose, and rumbled and thundered, roaring and tumbling down the chimneys, rattling the windows and doors, when the beams and rafters creaked and groaned like the timbers of a ship at sea, and the old house shook to its very foundations, then would the uproar among the rats grow louder and louder, and Harriet would dive under the bedclothes, quaking with fear. Thus did the old parsonage exert its silent influence, every day fashioning the sensitive, imaginative child.

The Seafaring Uncle

There was probably no one who more profoundly influenced Mrs. Stowe's intellectual development than did her seafaring uncle, Captain Samuel Foote. Of him her sister Catherine says:

"Uncle Samuel came among us, on his return from each voyage, as a sort of brilliant genius of another sphere, bringing gifts and wonders that seemed to wake up new faculties in all. Sometimes he came from the shores of Spain, with mementoes of the Alhambra and the ancient Moors; sometimes from Africa, bringing Oriental caps or Moorish slippers; sometimes from South America, with ingots of silver, or strange implements from the tombs of the Incas, or hammocks wrought by South American tribes of Indians.

"He was a man of great practical common sense, united with large ideality, a cultivated

taste, and very extensive reading. With this was combined a humorous combativeness that led him to attack the special theories and prejudices of his friends, sometimes jocosely and sometimes in earnest.

"Of course, he and father were in continual good-natured skirmishes in which all the New England peculiarities of theology and of character were held up, both in caricature and in sober verity.

"I remember long discussions in which he maintained that Turks were more honest than Christians, bringing very startling facts in evidence. Then I heard his serious tales of Roman Catholic bishops and archbishops whom he had carried to and from Spain and America, and he affirmed them to be as learned and as truly pious and devoted to the good of men as any Protestant to be found in America."

Lyman Beecher's Second Marriage

When Harriet was between six and seven years old, her father married Miss Harriet Porter, of Portland, Maine. She has herself thus described the advent of the new mother:

"I was about six years old, and slept in the nursery with my two younger brothers. We knew father was gone away somewhere on a journey, and was expected home, and thus the sound of a bustle or disturbance in the house more easily awoke us. We heard father's voice in the entry, and started up, crying out as he entered our room, 'Why, here's pa!' A cheerful voice called out from behind him, 'And here's ma!'

"A beautiful lady, very fair, with bright blue eyes, and soft auburn hair bound round with a black velvet bandeau, came into the room, smiling, eager, and happy-looking, and, coming up to our beds, kissed us, and told us that she loved little children and would be our mother. We wanted forthwith to get up and be dressed; but she pacified us with the promise that we should find her in the morning.

"Never did mother-in-law make prettier or sweeter impression. The next morning, I remember, we looked at her with awe. She seemed to us so fair, so elegant, so delicate, that we were afraid to go near her. We must have been rough, red-cheeked, hearty country children, honest, obedient, and bashful. She was peculiarly dainty and neat in all her ways and arrangements; I remember I used to feel breezy, rough, and rude in her presence. We felt a little in awe of her, as if she were a strange princess rather than our own mama; but her voice was very sweet, her ways of moving and speaking very graceful, and she took us up in her lap and let us play with her beautiful hands, which seemed like wonderful things made of pearl and ornamented with rings."

Mr. Beecher and Jonathan Edwards

One Sunday evening, shortly after the arrival of the new mother, Dr. Beecher, who was at that time given to an indiscriminating admiration for the works of the great Jonathan Edwards, was reading to her from a volume of sermons by that divine. It happened to be the sermon with the pungent title, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Harriet was curled up on the sofa, apparently absorbed in a book of her own. Drawn to observe closely her new mother, she saw that she seemed to be listening with abhorrence and suppressed emotion. A bright red spot suffused each cheek, every moment growing brighter and redder. Finally, rising to her stately height, she swept out of the room, saying as she went: "Mr. Beecher, I will not listen to another word! Why, it is horrible! It is a slander on the character of my heavenly Father!" Harriet was impressed with the stupefaction pictured on her father's face. If a bucket of ice-water had been thrown over him, the effect could not have been more startling. He probably never again read Edwards' lurid pages with the same ease of mind as formerly. Doubtless this incident placed his foot on the first rung of a ladder which the ultra-orthodox of the period thought led anywhere but to heaven. Harriet Porter, although orthodox, was human, and she belonged to a different age from Edwards.

Harriet's School Days

Harriet attended a school for young women kept by a Miss Sarah Pierce, who is described as a woman of "more than ordinary talent, sprightly in conversation, social, and full of benevolent activity." In process of time the school was enlarged, and her nephew, Mr. John Brace, became her assistant. Of him Mrs. Stowe writes:

"Mr. Brace exceeded all the instructors that I ever knew in the faculty of teaching the art of English composition. The constant excitement in which he kept the minds of his pupils -- the wide and varied regions of thought into which he led them -- formed a preparation for teaching composition, the main requisite for which, whatever people may think, is to have something that one feels interested to say.

"His manner was to divide his school of about one hundred pupils into divisions of about three or four, one of which was to write every week. At the same time, he inspired an ambition to

write by calling every week for volunteers, and every week there were those who volunteered to write.

"I remember I could have been but nine years old, and my handwriting hardly formed, when the enthusiasm he inspired led me -- greatly to his amusement, I believe -- to volunteer to write every week. The first week the subject of the composition chosen by the class was 'The Difference Between the Natural and the Moral Sublime.'

"One may smile at this for a child of nine years of age; but it is the best account I can give of his manner of teaching to say that the discussion that he had held in the class not only made me understand the subject as thoroughly as I do now, but so excited me that I felt sure that I had something to say about it.

First Literary Honors

"By two years of constant practice, under his training and suggestion, I had gained so far as to be appointed one of the writers for the annual exhibition, a proud distinction, as I then viewed it. The subject assigned me was one that had been very fully discussed in the school in a manner to show to the best advantage Mr. Brace's peculiarity in awakening the minds of his pupils to the higher regions of thought. The question was, 'Can the Immortality of the Soul be Proved by the Light of Nature?'

"Several of the young ladies had written strongly in the affirmative. Mr. Brace himself had written in the negative. To all these compositions and consequent discussions I had listened, and, in view of them, chose to adopt the negative.

"I remember the scene at the exhibition, to me so eventful. The hall was crowded with all the literati of Litchfield. Before them all our compositions were read aloud. When mine was read, I noticed that father, who was sitting on high by Mr. Brace, brightened and looked interested, and at the close I heard him ask, 'Who wrote that composition?' '*Your daughter, sir!*' was the answer. It was the proudest moment of my life. There was no mistaking father's face when he was pleased, and to have interested him was past all juvenile triumphs."

Wonders of the "Meeting-house"

"Never shall I forget the dignity and sense of importance which swelled my mind when I was first pronounced old enough to go to meeting," writes Mrs. Stowe, in another account of those early Litchfield days. "To my childish eyes our old meeting-house was an awe-inspiring place. To me it seemed fashioned very nearly on the model of Noah's Ark and Solomon's Temple, as set forth in the pictures of my Scripture catechism, pictures which I did not doubt were authentic copies."

Rigors of the Sabbath

Harriet had hallowed associations connected with the thought of the old church. Early one summer morning she had been reminded that it was Sunday, the Holy Sabbath day,



From a painting by C. Harding

DR. LYMAN BEECHER

THE FATHER OF HENRY WARD BEECHER AND HARRIET
BEECHER STOWE

Dr. Lyman Beecher: The Father of Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe



The Beecher Family; From a Photograph Made in 1861



The Beecher Family; From a Photograph Made in 1861

by the following incident. Her two younger brothers, Henry and Charles, slept together in a little trundle-bed in a corner of the nursery where she also slept. She was waked by the two little fellows chattering to each other as they lay in their bed making little sheep out of cotton pulled from the holes in the old quilt that covered them, and pasturing them on the undulating hillsides and meadows which their imagination conjured up amid the bedclothes. Suddenly Charles' eyes grew wide with fright, and he cried out, "Henry, this is wicked! It's Sunday!" There was a moment of consternation, followed by silence, as both little curly heads disappeared under the old coverlet.

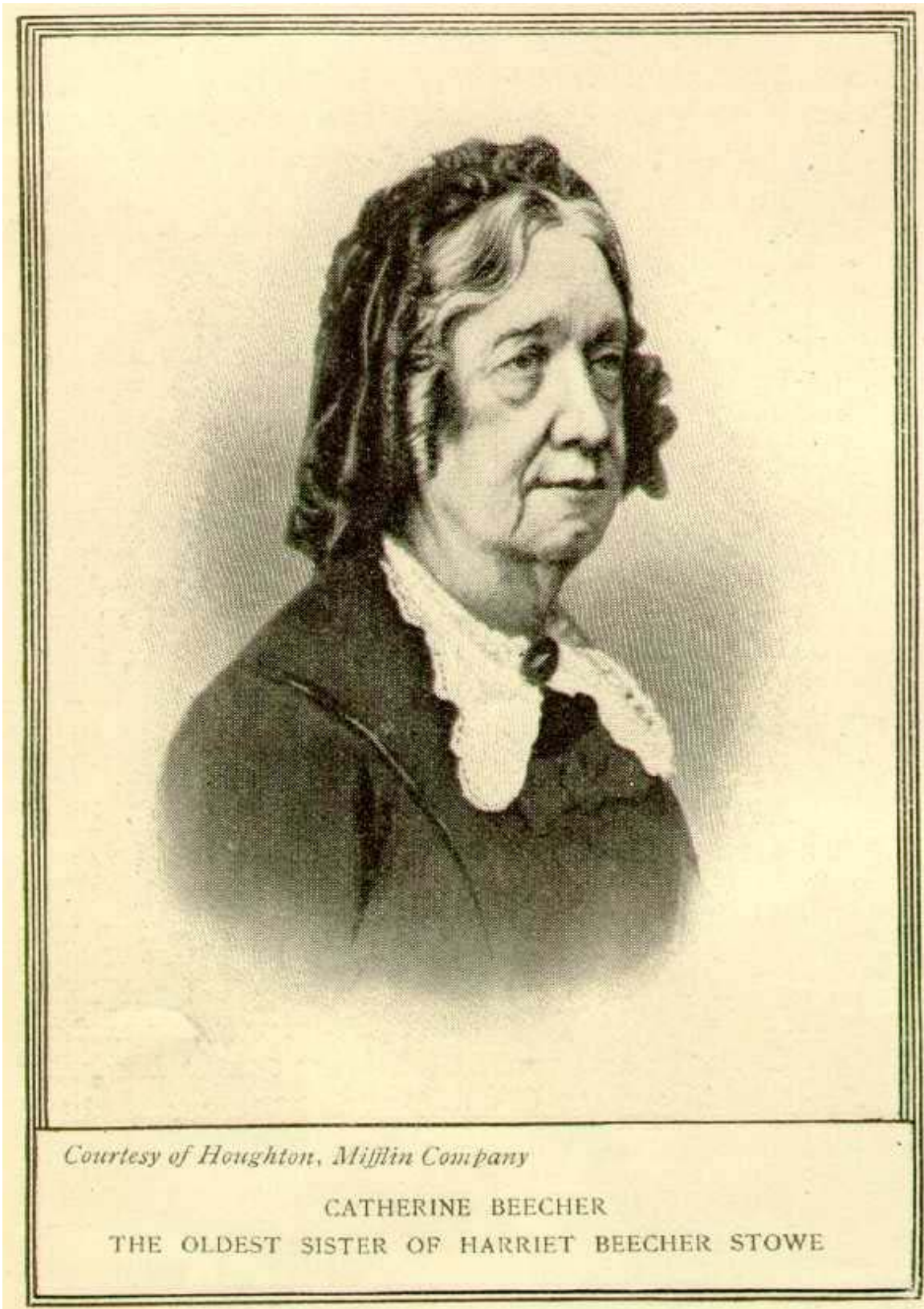
Harriet's Conversion

Yes, it was Sunday, and Harriet was trying her best to feel herself a dreadful sinner, but with very poor success. She was so healthy, and the blood raced and tingled so in her young veins. She tried to feel her sins and count them up; but the birds and the daisies and the buttercups were a constant interruption, and she went into the old meeting-house quite dissatisfied with herself. When she saw the white cloth, the shining cups, and the snowy bread of the communion-table, she hopelessly felt that the service could have nothing for a little girl -- it would all be for the grown-up people, the initiated Christians. Nevertheless, when her father began to speak, she was drawn to listen by a sort of pathetic earnestness in his voice.

The Doctor was feeling very deeply, and he had chosen for his text the declaration of Jesus: "I call you not servants; but friends." His subject was Jesus as the soul-friend offered to every human being. Forgetting his doctrinal subtleties, he spoke with the simplicity and tenderness of a rich nature concerning the faithful, generous love of Christ. Deep feeling inclines to simplicity of language, and Dr. Beecher spoke in words that even a child could understand. Harriet sat absorbed; her large blue eyes gathered tears as she listened, and when the Doctor said, "Come, then, and trust your soul to this faithful friend," her little heart throbbed, "I will!" She sat through the sacramental service that followed with swelling heart and tearful eyes, and walked home filled with a new joy. She went up into her father's study, and threw herself into his arms, saying, "Father, I have given myself to Jesus, and he has taken me." He held her silently to his heart for a moment, and she felt his tears dropping on her head. "Is it so?" he said. "Then has a new flower blossomed in the kingdom this day."

"Spiritual Experience" and the Old New England Divines

Shortly after going to Hartford to attend school, Harriet made a call upon the Rev. Dr. Hawes, her father's friend, and her spiritual adviser, which left an enduring impression upon her mind. It was her father's advice that she join the church at Hartford, as he had received a call to Boston, and the breaking up of the Litchfield home was imminent. Accordingly, accompanied by two school friends, she went, one day, to the pastor's study to consult him concerning the contemplated step. In



Catherine Beecher: The Oldest Sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe

those days much stress was placed on religious experience, and more especially on what was termed a conviction of sin; and self-examination was carried to an extreme calculated to drive to desperation a sensitive, high-strung nature.

The good man listened to the child's simple and modest statement of her Christian experience, and then, with an awful, though kindly, solemnity of speech and manner, said:

"Harriet! do you feel that if the universe should be destroyed" -- alarming pause -- "you could be happy with God alone?"

After struggling in vain to fix in her mind the meaning of the sounds that fell on her ears like the measured tolling of a funeral bell, the child of fourteen stammered out, "Yes, sir!"

"You realize, I trust, in some measure at least, the deceitfulness of your own heart, and that, in punishment for your sins, God might justly leave you to make yourself as miserable as you have made yourself sinful."

Having thus effectually, and to his own satisfaction, fixed the child's attention on the morbid and oversensitive workings of her own heart, the good and truly kind-hearted man dismissed her with a fatherly benediction. He had been alarmed at her simple and natural way of entering the kingdom. It was not theologically sound to make short cuts to salvation. The child went in to the conference full of peace and joy, and came out full of distress and misgivings; but the good Doctor had done his duty, as he saw it.

Theological Struggles in the Beecher Family

It was a theological age, and in the Beecher family theology was the supreme interest. It fills their letters, as it filled their lives. Not only was the age theological, but it was transitional, and characterized by intense intellectual activity, accompanied by emotional excitement. The winds of doctrine were let loose, blowing first from this quarter and then from that. Dr. Beecher spent his days in weathering theological cyclones; but the worst of all arose in his own family, among his own children. Great as were his intellectual powers, he was no match for his daughter Catherine and his son Edward -- the metaphysical Titans who sprang from his own loins. It was almost in a tone of despair that this theological Samuel, who had hewn so many heretical Agags in pieces before the lord, wrote concerning his own daughter:

"Catherine's letter will disclose the awfully interesting state of her mind. . . . You perceive she is now handling edged tools with powerful grasp. . . . I have at times been at my wits' ends to know what to do. . . . I conclude that nothing safe can be done, but to assert ability, and obligation, and guilt upon divine authority, throwing in at the same time as much collateral light from reason as the case admits of."

Catherine was at this time breaking out of the prison-house of the traditional orthodoxy, and her brother Edward was in many ways in sympathy with her, though not so radical as she. Dr. Beecher was contending with might and main for the traditional Calvinism; and yet, in his zeal for its defense, he often took positions that surprised and alarmed his brother ministers, seriously disturbed their dogmatic slumbers, and caused them grave doubts as to his orthodoxy.



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HENRY WARD BEECHER
AT ABOUT THE AGE OF THIRTY

Henry Ward Beecher: At About the Age of Thirty

Tragic Death of Catherine's Betrothed

When Harriet was in her eleventh year her sister Catherine had become engaged to Professor Alexander Fisher, of Yale College. He was a young man of brilliant talents, and specially noted for his mathematical genius. As an undergraduate at Yale he distinguished himself by original and valuable contributions to mathematical astronomy. Immediately on graduation he was appointed a professor of mathematics, and was sent abroad by his alma mater to devote some time to study and the purchase of books and mathematical instruments. The ship *Albion*, on which he sailed, was wrecked on a reef off the coast of Ireland. Of the twenty-three cabin passengers, only one reached the shore. This was a man of great physical strength, and all night long he clung to the jagged rocks at the foot of the cliff, against which the sea broke, till ropes were lowered from above, and he was drawn up, limp and exhausted. He often told of the calm bravery with which Professor Fisher met his end.

Up to this time in her life, Catherine had been noted for the gaiety of her spirits and the brilliancy of her mind. An imitable story-teller and a great mimic, it seemed to be her aim to keep every one laughing. Her versatile mind and ready wit enabled her to pass brilliantly through her school days with comparatively little mental exertion, and before she was twenty-one she had become a teacher in a school for girls in New London, Connecticut. It was about this time that she met Professor Fisher, and they soon became engaged.

Catherine's Religion Taught that His Soul was Lost with His Body

When the news of his death reached her, to the crushing of earthly hopes and plans was added an agony of apprehension for his soul. He had never been formally converted; and hence, by the teachings of the times, his soul as well as his body was lost.

She wrote to her brother Edward: "It is not so much ruined hopes of this life -- it is dismay and apprehension for his immortal spirit. Oh, Edward, where is he now? Are the noble faculties of such a mind doomed to everlasting woe?" Anxiously, but in vain, she searched his letters and journals for something on which she might build a hope of his eternal welfare. "Mournful contemplations awakened when I learned more of the mental exercises of him I mourned, whose destiny was forever fixed, alas, I know not where! I learned from his letters, and in other ways, as much as I could have learned from his diary. I found that, even from early childhood, he had ever been uncommonly correct and

conscientious, so that his parents and family could scarcely remember of his doing anything wrong, so far as relates to outward conduct; and year after year, with persevering and unexampled effort, he sought to yield that homage of the heart to his Maker which was required, but he could not; like the friend who followed his steps, he had no strength. . . . It seemed to me that my lost friend had done all that unassisted human strength could do; and often the dreadful thought came to me that all was in vain, and that he was wailing that he ever had been born, in that dark world where hope never comes, and that I was following his steps to that dreadful scene."

Bereaved Girl's Struggle with Pitiless Calvinism

Miss Beecher passed the two years following the death of Professor Fisher at Franklin, Massachusetts, at the home of his parents, where she listened to the fearless and pitiless Calvinism of Dr. Nathaniel Emmons. Her mind was too strong and buoyant to be overwhelmed and crushed by an experience that would have driven a weaker and less resolute nature to insanity.

The conventional New England Calvinism gave her no satisfactory solution of her difficulties. She was tormented with doubts. "What has the Son of God done which the meanest and most selfish creature upon earth would not have done?" she asked herself. "After making such a wretched race and placing them in such disastrous circumstances, somehow, without any sorrow or trouble, Jesus Christ had a human nature that suffered and died. If something else besides ourselves will do all the suffering, who would not save millions of wretched beings, and receive all the honor and gratitude without any of the trouble?" Yet, when such thoughts passed through her mind, she felt that it was "all pride, rebellion, and sin." So she struggled on, sometimes floundering deep in the mire of doubt, and then lifted out of it by her constitutionally buoyant spirits.

It was in this condition of mind that Catherine Beecher came to Hartford, in the winter of 1824, and opened her school. In the practical experience of teaching she found, at last, the solution of her troubles. Turning aside from doctrinal difficulties and theological quagmires, she determined "to find happiness in living to do good." She says: "It was right to pray and read the Bible, and so I prayed and read the Bible. It was right to try to save others, and so

I tried to save them. In all these years I never had any fear of punishment or hope of reward."

Without ever having heard of pragmatism, she became a kind of pragmatist. She continues: "After two or three years I commenced giving instruction in mental philosophy, and at the same time began a regular course of lectures and instructions from the Bible, and was much occupied with plans for governing my school and in devising means to lead my pupils to become obedient, amiable, and pious." These "means" resulted in a code of principles for the government of her school which were nothing more nor less than systematically formulated common sense, with plenty of the "milk of human kindness" thrown in. These principles she carefully compared with the government of God, and came to the conclusion that He, in His infinitely mighty and complex task of governing the universe, was applying the same fundamental principles as she in the relatively infinitesimal and simple task of governing her school. This was her solution, and this the view of the divine nature that was for so many years preached by her brother, Henry Ward, and set forth in the writings of her sister Harriet.

Harriet's Desire for Love

In the winter of 1829 Harriet was in Hartford again, this time assisting her sister Catherine in the school. She was now eighteen, but still morbidly introspective, sensitive, and overwrought. She apparently lived largely in her emotions. In closing one of her letters, she said: "This desire to be loved forms, I fear, the great motive for all my actions." Again, she writes to her brother Edward:

"I have been carefully reading the Book of Job, and I do not find in it the views of God you have presented to me. God seems to have stripped a dependent creature of all that renders life desirable, and then to have answered his complaints from the whirlwind; and, instead of showing mercy and pity, to have overwhelmed him by a display of his justice. From the view of God that I received from you, I should have expected that a being that sympathizes with his guilty, afflicted creatures would not have spoken thus. Yet, after all, I do believe that God is such a being as you represent him to be, and in the New Testament I find in the character of Jesus Christ a revelation of God as merciful and compassionate, in fact, just such a God as I need!"

This was the vision of God that came to her at the time of her conversion. It was the confusing and perturbing influence of her father's Calvinistic theology that had dimmed

that gracious vision. Out of the prison-house of Giant Despair she had been delivered by the teachings of her sister Catherine and her brother Edward.

Religious Doubts and Fears

But, again, in the same letter we have a passage that shows that her feet are still enmeshed in the net of Calvinistic theology. She writes:

"My mind is often perplexed, and such thoughts arise in it that I cannot pray, and I become bewildered. The wonder to me is, how all ministers and all Christians can feel themselves so inexcusably sinful, when it seems to me that we all come into the world in such a way that it would be miraculous if we did not sin! Mr. Hawes always says in his prayers, 'We have nothing to offer in extenuation of any of our sins'; and I always think, when he says it, that we have every thing to offer in extenuation.

"The case seems to me exactly as if I had been brought into the world with such a thirst for ardent spirits that there was just a possibility but no hope that I should resist, and then my eternal happiness made to depend on my being temperate. Sometimes, when I try to confess my sins, I feel that I am more to be pitied than blamed, for I have never known the time when I have not had a temptation within me so strong that it was certain that I should not overcome it. This thought shocks me, but it comes with such force, and so appealingly, to all my consciousness, that it stifles all sense of sin."

It was such reflections and arguments as these that had aroused Dr. Beecher to despair over his daughter Catherine's spiritual condition. The fact was, he belonged to one age and his children to another. Yet the brave old man lived to sympathize with them.

Harriet Breaks with Calvinism

Harriet at last learned to give up her introspection and morbid sensitiveness, and to live more healthily and humanly. At the age of twenty-one she was able to write thus to her friend, Georgiana May:

"The amount of the matter has been, as this inner world of mine has become worn out and untenable, I have at last concluded to come out of it and live in the eternal one, and, as F. S. once advised me, give up the pernicious habit of meditation to the first Methodist minister who would take it, and try to mix in society somewhat as other persons would.

"*'Horas non numero non nisi serenas.'* Uncle Sam, who sits by me, has just been reading the above motto, the inscription on a sun-dial in Venice. It strikes me as having a distant relationship to what I was going to say. I have

come to a firm resolution to count no hours but unclouded ones, and let all others slip out of my memory and reckoning as quickly as possible." In this new life she was able to write to her brother Edward:

"I have never been so happy as this summer. I began it in more suffering than I ever before have felt; but there is One whom I daily thank for all that suffering, since I hope that it has brought me at last to rest entirely in Him." So she learned to suffer and to love. To suffer and to love, and at last to rest. After five years of struggling, she returned to where she started when converted as a child of thirteen. Love became her gospel, the alpha and omega of her existence -- love for her God, for her friends, and, finally, for humanity. The three words "God is love" summed up her theology.

The End.

