

Lives of Girls Who Became Famous

By

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Harriet Beecher Stowe

In a plain home, in the town of Litchfield, Conn., was born, June 14, 1811, Harriet Beecher Stowe. The house was well-nigh full of little ones before her coming. She was the seventh child, while the oldest was but eleven years old.

Her father, Rev. Lyman Beecher, a man of remarkable mind and sunshiny heart, was preaching earnest sermons in his own and in all the neighboring towns, on the munificent salary of five hundred dollars a year. Her mother, Roxana Beecher, was a woman whose beautiful life has been an inspiration to thousands. With an education superior for those times, she came into the home of the young minister with a strength of mind and heart that made her his companion and reliance.

There were no carpets on the floors till the girl-wife laid down a piece of cotton cloth on the parlor, and painted it in oils, with a border and a bunch of roses and others flowers in the centre. When one of the good deacons came to visit them, the preacher said, "Walk in, deacon, walk in!"

"Why, I can't," said he, "'thout steppin' on't." Then he exclaimed, in admiration, "D'ye think ya can have all that, *and heaven too?*"

So meagre was the salary for the increasing household, that Roxana urged that a select school be started; and in this she taught French, drawing, painting, and embroidery, besides the higher English branches. With all this work she found time to make herself the idol of her children. While Henry Ward hung round her neck, she made dolls for little Harriet, and read to them from Walter Scott and Washington Irving.

These were enchanting days for the enthusiastic girl with brown curls and blue eyes. She roamed over the meadows, and through the forests, gathering wild flowers in the spring or nuts in the fall, being educated, as she afterwards said, "first and foremost by Nature, wonderful, beautiful, ever-changing as she is in that cloudland, Litchfield. There were the crisp apples of the pink azalea,--honeysuckle-apples, we called them; there were scarlet wintergreen berries; there were pink shell blossoms of trailing arbutus, and feathers of ground pine; there were blue and white and yellow violets, and crowsfoot, and bloodroot, and wild anemone, and other quaint forest treasures."

A single incident, told by herself in later years, will show the frolic-loving spirit of the girl, and the gentleness of Roxana Beecher. "Mother was an enthusiastic horticulturist in all the small ways that 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 in 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 with one voice began to tell our discovery and achievement. We had found this bag of onions, and had eaten them all up.

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

When Harriet was five years old, a deep shadow fell upon the happy household. Eight little children were gathered round the bedside of the dying mother. When they cried and sobbed, she told them, with inexpressible sweetness, that "God could do more for them than she had ever done or could do, and that they must trust Him," and urged her six sons to become ministers of the Gospel. When her heart-broken husband repeated to her the verse, "You are now come unto Mount Zion, unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels; to the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the Mediator of the New Covenant," she looked up into his face with a beautiful smile, and closed her eyes forever. That smile Mr. Beecher never forgot to his dying day.

The whole family seemed crushed by the blow. Little Henry (now the great preacher), who had been told that his mother had been buried in the ground, and also that she had gone to heaven, was found one morning digging with all his might under his sister's window, saying, "I'm going to heaven, to find ma!"

So much did Mr. Beecher miss her counsel and good judgment, that he sat down and wrote her a long letter, pouring out his whole soul, hoping somehow that she, his guardian angel, though dead, might see it. A year later he wrote a friend: "There is a sensation of loss which nothing alleviates--a solitude which no society interrupts. Amid the smiles and prattle of children, and the kindness of sympathizing friends, I am *alone*; *Roxana is not here*. She partakes in none of my joys, and bears with me none of my sorrows. I do not murmur; I only feel daily, constantly, and with deepening impression, how much I have had for which to be thankful, and how much I have lost.... The whole year after her death was a year of great emptiness, as if there was not motive enough in the world to move me. I used to pray earnestly to God either to take me away, or to restore to me that interest in things and susceptibility to motive I had had before."

Once, when sleeping in the room where she died, he dreamed that Roxana came and stood beside him, and "smiled on me as with a smile from heaven. With that smile," he said, "all my sorrow passed away. I awoke joyful, and I was lighthearted for weeks after."

Harriet went to live for a time with her aunt and grandmother, and then came back to the lonesome home, into which Mr. Beecher had felt the necessity of bringing a new mother. She was a refined and excellent woman, and won the respect and affection of the family. At first Harriet, with a not unnatural feeling of injury, said to her: "Because you have come and married my father, when I am big enough, I mean to go and marry your father;" but she afterwards learned to love her very much.

At seven, with a remarkably retentive memory,--a thing which many of us spoil by trashy reading, or allowing our time and attention to be distracted by the trifles of every-day life,--Harriet had learned twenty-seven hymns and two long chapters of the Bible. She was exceedingly fond of reading, but there was little in a poor minister's library to attract a child. She found *Bell's Sermons*, and *Toplady on Predestination*. "Then," she says, "there was a side closet full of documents, a weltering ocean of pamphlets, in which I dug and toiled for hours, to be repaid by disinterring a delicious morsel of a *Don Quixote*, that had once been a book, but was now lying in forty or fifty *dissecta membra*, amid Calls, Appeals, Essays, Reviews, and Rejoinders. The turning up of such a fragment seemed like the rising of an enchanted island out of an ocean of mud." Finally *Ivanhoe* was obtained, and she and her brother George read it through seven times.

At twelve, we find her in the school of Mr. John P. Brace, a well-known teacher, where she developed great fondness for composition. At the exhibition at the close of the year, it was the custom for all the parents to come and listen to the wonderful productions of their children. From the list of subjects given, Harriet had chosen, "Can the Immortality of the Soul be proved by the Light of Nature?"

"When mine was read," she says, "I noticed that father brightened and looked interested. 'Who wrote that composition?' he asked of Mr. Brace. '*Your daughter, sir!*' was the answer. There was no mistaking father's face when he was pleased, and to have interested *him* was past all juvenile triumphs."

A new life was now to open to Harriet. Her only sister Catharine, a brilliant and noble girl, was engaged to Professor Fisher of Yale College. They were to be married on his return from a European tour, but alas! the *Albion*, on which he sailed, went to pieces on the rocks, and all on board, save one, perished. Her betrothed was never heard from. For months all hope seemed to go out of Catharine's life, and then, with a strong will, she took up a course of mathematical study, *his* favorite study, and Latin under her brother Edward. She was now twenty-three. Life was not to be along the pleasant paths she had hoped, but she must make it tell for the future.

With remarkable energy, she went to Hartford, Conn., where her brother was teaching, and thoroughly impressed with the belief that God had a work for her to do for girls, she raised several thousand dollars and built the Hartford Female Seminary. Her brothers had college doors opened to them; why, she reasoned, should not women have equal opportunities? Society wondered of what possible use Latin and moral philosophy could be to girls, but they admired Miss Beecher, and let her do as she pleased. Students poured

in, and the seminary soon overflowed. My own school life in that beloved institution, years afterward, I shall never forget.

And now the little twelve-year-old Harriet came down from Litchfield to attend Catharine's school, and soon become a pupil-teacher, that the burden of support might not fall too heavily upon the father. Other children had come into the Beecher home, and with a salary of eight hundred dollars, poverty could not be other than a constant attendant. Once when the family were greatly straitened for money, while Henry and Charles were in college, the new mother went to bed weeping, but the father said, "Well, the Lord always has taken care of me, and I am sure He always will," and was soon fast asleep. The next morning, Sunday, a letter was handed in at the door, containing a \$100 bill, and no name. It was a thank-offering for the conversion of a child.

Mr. Beecher, with all his poverty, could not help being generous. His wife, by close economy, had saved twenty-five dollars to buy a new overcoat for him. Handing him the roll of bills, he started out to purchase the garment, but stopped on the way to attend a missionary meeting. His heart warmed as he stayed, and when the contribution-box was passed, he put in the roll of bills for the Sandwich Islanders, and went home with his threadbare coat!

Three years later, Mr. Beecher, who had now become widely known as a revivalist and brilliant preacher, was called to Boston, where he remained for six years. His six sermons on intemperance had stirred the whole country.

Though he loved Boston, his heart often turned toward the great West, and he longed to help save her young men. When, therefore, he was asked to go to Ohio and become the president of Lane Theological Seminary at Cincinnati, he accepted. Singularly dependent upon his family, Catharine and Harriet must needs go with him to the new home. The journey was a toilsome one, over the corduroy roads and across the mountains by stagecoach. Finally they were settled in a pleasant house on Walnut Hills, one of the suburbs of the city, and the sisters opened another school.

Four years later, in 1836, Harriet, now twenty-five, married the professor of biblical criticism and Oriental literature in the seminary, Calvin E. Stowe, a learned and able man.

Meantime the question of slavery had been agitating the minds of Christian people. Cincinnati being near the border-line of Kentucky, was naturally the battle-ground of ideas. Slaves fled into the free State and were helped into Canada by means of the "Underground Railroad," which was in reality only a friendly house about every ten miles, where the colored people could be secreted during the day, and then carried in wagons to the next "station" in the night.

Lane Seminary became a hot-bed of discussion. Many of the Southern students freed their slaves, or helped to establish schools for colored children in Cincinnati, and were disinherited by their fathers in consequence. Dr. Bailey, a Christian man who attempted to carry on a fair discussion of the question in his paper, had his presses broken twice and

thrown into the river. The feeling became so intense, that the houses of free colored people were burned, some killed, and the seminary was in danger from the mob. The members of Professor Stowe's family slept with firearms, ready to defend their lives. Finally the trustees of the college forbade all slavery discussion by the students, and as a result, nearly the whole body left the institution.

Dr. Beecher, meantime, was absent at the East, having raised a large sum of money for the seminary, and came back only to find his labor almost hopeless. For several years, however, he and his children stayed and worked on. Mrs. Stowe opened her house to colored children, whom she taught with her own. One bright boy in her school was claimed by an estate in Kentucky, arrested, and was to be sold at auction. The half-crazed mother appealed to Mrs. Stowe, who raised the needed money among her friends, and thus saved the lad.

Finally, worn out with the "irrepressible conflict," the Beecher family, with the Stowes, came North in 1850, Mr. Stowe accepting a professorship at Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine. A few boarders were taken into the family to eke out the limited salary, and Mrs. Stowe earned a little from a sketch written now and then for the newspapers. She had even obtained a prize of fifty dollars for a New England story. Her six brothers had fulfilled their mother's dying wish, and were all in the ministry. She was now forty years old, a devoted mother, with an infant; a hard-working teacher, with her hands full to overflowing. It seemed improbable that she would ever do other than this quiet, unceasing labor. Most women would have said, "I can do no more than I am doing. My way is hedged up to any outside work."

But Mrs. Stowe's heart burned for those in bondage. The Fugitive Slave Law was hunting colored people and sending them back into servitude and death. The people of the North seemed indifferent. Could she not arouse them by something she could write?

One Sunday, as she sat at the communion table in the little Brunswick church, the pattern of Uncle Tom formed itself in her mind, and, almost overcome by her feelings, she hastened home and wrote out the chapter on his death. When she had finished, she read it to her two sons, ten and twelve, who burst out sobbing, "Oh! mamma, slavery is the most cursed thing in the world."

After two or three more chapters were ready, she wrote to Dr. Bailey, who had moved his paper from Cincinnati to Washington, offering the manuscript for the columns of the *National Era*, and it was accepted. Now the matter must be prepared each week. She visited Boston, and at the Anti-Slavery rooms borrowed several books to aid in furnishing facts. And then the story wrote itself out of her full heart and brain. When it neared completion, Mr. Jewett of Boston, through the influence of his wife, offered to become the publisher, but feared if the serial were much longer, it would be a failure. She wrote him that she could not stop till it was done.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was published March 20, 1852. Then came the reaction in her own mind. Would anybody read this book? The subject was unpopular. It would indeed be a

failure, she feared, but she would help the story make its way if possible. She sent a copy of the book to Prince Albert, knowing that both he and Queen Victoria were deeply interested in the subject; another copy to Macaulay, whose father was a friend of Wilberforce; one to Charles Dickens; and another to Charles Kingsley. And then the busy mother, wife, teacher, housekeeper, and author waited in her quiet Maine home to see what the busy world would say.

In ten days, ten thousand copies had been sold. Eight presses were run day and night to supply the demand. Thirty different editions appeared in London in six months. Six theatres in that great city were playing it at one time. Over three hundred thousand copies were sold in less than a year.

Letters poured in upon Mrs. Stowe from all parts of the world. Prince Albert sent his hearty thanks. Dickens said, "Your book is worthy of any head and any heart that ever inspired a book." Kingsley wrote, "It is perfect." The noble Earl of Shaftesbury wrote, "None but a Christian believer could have produced such a book as yours, which has absolutely startled the whole world.... I live in hope--God grant it may rise to faith!--that this system is drawing to a close. It seems as though our Lord had sent out this book as the messenger before His face to prepare His way before Him." He wrote out an address of sympathy "From the women of England to the women of America," to which were appended the signatures of 562,448 women. These were in twenty-six folio volumes, bound in morocco, with the American eagle on the back of each, the whole in a solid oak case, sent to the care of Mrs. Stowe.

The learned reviews gave long notices of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. *Blackwood* said, "There are scenes and touches in this book which no living writer that we know can surpass, and perhaps none can equal." George Eliot wrote her beautiful letters.

How the heart of Lyman Beecher must have been gladdened by this wonderful success of his daughter! How Roxana Beecher must have looked down from heaven, and smiled that never-to-be-forgotten smile! How Harriet Beecher Stowe herself must have thanked God for this unexpected fulness of blessing! Thousands of dollars were soon paid to her as her share of the profits from the sale of the book. How restful it must have seemed to the tired, over-worked woman, to have more than enough for daily needs!

The following year, 1853, Professor Stowe and his now famous wife decided to cross the ocean for needed rest. What was their astonishment, to be welcomed by immense public meetings in Liverpool, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee; indeed, in every city which they visited. People in the towns stopped her carriage, to fill it with flowers. Boys ran along the streets, shouting, "That's her--see the *courls!*" A penny offering was made her, given by people of all ranks, consisting of one thousand golden sovereigns on a beautiful silver salver. When the committee having the matter in charge visited one little cottage, they found only a blind woman, and said, "She will feel no interest, as she cannot read the book."

"Indeed," said the old lady, "if I cannot read, my son has read it to me, and I've got my penny saved to give."

The beautiful Duchess of Sutherland entertained Mrs. Stowe at her house, where she met Lord Palmerston, the Duke of Argyle, Macaulay, Gladstone, and others. The duchess gave her a solid gold bracelet in the form of a slave's shackle, with the words, "We trust it is a memorial of a chain that is soon to be broken." On one link was the date of the abolition of the slave trade, March 25, 1807, and of slavery in the English territories, Aug. 1, 1834. On the other links are now engraved the dates of Emancipation in the District of Columbia; President Lincoln's proclamation abolishing slavery in the States in rebellion, Jan. 1, 1863; and finally, on the clasp, the date of the Constitutional amendment, abolishing slavery forever in the United States. Only a decade after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was written, and nearly all this accomplished! Who could have believed it possible?

On Mrs. Stowe's return from Europe, she wrote *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, which had a large sale. Her husband was now appointed to the professorship of sacred literature in the Theological Seminary at Andover, Mass., and here they made their home. The students found in her a warm-hearted friend, and an inspiration to intellectual work. Other books followed from her pen: *Dred*, a powerful anti-slavery story; *The Minister's Wooing*, with lovely Mary Scudder as its heroine; *Agnes of Sorrento*, an Italian story; the *Pearl of Orr's Island*, a tale of the New England coast; *Old Town Folks*; *House and Home Papers*; *My Wife and I*; *Pink and White Tyranny*; and some others, all of which have been widely read.

The sale of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has not ceased. It is estimated that over one and a half million copies have been sold in Great Britain and her colonies, and probably an equal or greater number in this country. There have been twelve French editions, eleven German, and six Spanish. It has been published in nineteen different languages,—Russian, Hungarian, Armenian, Modern Greek, Finnish, Welsh, Polish, and others. In Bengal the book is very popular. A lady of high rank in the court of Siam, liberated her slaves, one hundred and thirty in number, after reading this book, and said, "I am wishful to be good like Harriet Beecher Stowe, and never again to buy human bodies, but only to let them go free once more." In France the sale of the Bible was increased because the people wished to read the book Uncle Tom loved so much.

Uncle Tom's Cabin, like *Les Misérables*, and a few other novels, will live, because written with a purpose. No work of fiction is permanent without some great underlying principle or object.

Soon after the Civil War, Mrs. Stowe bought a home among the orange groves of Florida, and thither she goes each winter, with her family. She has done much there for the colored people whom she helped to make free. With the proceeds of some public readings at the North she built a church, in which her husband preached as long as his health permitted. Her home at Mandarin, with its great moss-covered oaks and profusion of flowers, is a restful and happy place after these most fruitful years.

Her summer residence in Hartford, Conn., beautiful without, and artistic within, has been visited by thousands, who honor the noble woman not less than the gifted author.

Many of the Beecher family have died; Lyman Beecher at eighty-three, and Catharine at seventy-eight. Some of Mrs. Stowe's own children are waiting for her in the other country. She says, "I am more interested in the other side of Jordan than this, though this still has its pleasures."

On Mrs. Stowe's seventy-first birthday, her publishers, Messrs. Houghton, Mifflin & Co., gave a garden party in her honor, at the hospitable home of Governor Claflin and his wife, at Newton, Mass. Poets and artists, statesmen and reformers, were invited to meet the famous author. On a stage, under a great tent, she sat, while poems were read and speeches made. The brown curls had become snowy white, and the bright eyes of girlhood had grown deeper and more earnest. The manner was the same as ever, unostentatious, courteous, kindly.

Her life is but another confirmation of the well-known fact, that the best work of the world is done, not by the loiterers, but by those whose hearts and hands are full of duties. Mrs. Stowe died about noon, July 1, 1896, of paralysis, at Hartford, Conn., at the age of eighty-five. She passed away as if to sleep, her son, the Rev. Charles Edward Stowe, and her daughters, Eliza and Harriet, standing by her bedside. Since the death of her husband, Professor Calvin E. Stowe, in 1886, Mrs. Stowe had gradually failed physically and mentally. She was buried July 3 in the cemetery connected with the Theological Seminary at Andover, Mass., between the graves of her husband and her son, Henry. The latter was drowned in the Connecticut River, while a member of Dartmouth College, July 19, 1857.

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