REMINISCENCES OF JANE GREY SWISSHELM

By

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One pleasant Sabbath morning in the late "seventies," or early "eighties" of the last century, the congregation of the Swissvale Presbyterian Church were gathering, as usual, for worship. The last sounds of the sweet-toned church bell were dying across the lawns and gardens and groves of the attractive suburb, and being succeeded by the notes of the organ prelude, when the youthful pastor noticed a stranger walking up the side aisle, unattended, yet apparently indifferent to the eyes or attentions of others. Entering a pew, and seating herself next to the aisle, she responded with a gentle nod to the friendly smile of the prominent lawyer who sat in the adjoining pew, and then removing her very plain bonnet, placed it on the floor of the aisle, and with an air of absorption, awaited the opening hymn. Her dress was exceedingly plain, and her whole appearance was that of one to whom fashion or the desire of personal adornment made no appeal.

She was then, probably, about 65 years of age, and her dark hair touched with gray, her face somewhat lined with years of an active life, and her slight yet vigorous form, were attractive or unusual only because of an indescribable air of self satisfaction. She was an attentive worshiper, and, whatever her comparative judgment of sermon or music, was refined in manner and unobtrusive in attitude. At the close of the service it was evident that she was no stranger to many of the congregation, for she was soon greeted by friends and acquaintances, as one returning to her old home. It was at this time that the young pastor was introduced to Mrs. Jane Grey Swisshelm, of whom he had heard, and at whose suggestion the name of the suburb was created. She was pleasant in manner and appreciative of her friendly neighbors, to whom she owed many acts of kindness. She was whimsical in speech, alert, gifted with humor, and easily sarcastic. She was at this time nearing

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the end of a very peculiar life, an experience greatly varied both in her personal and domestic relations, and the newspaper activities and reforms. Rather thin or spare in figure, she gave one the impression of a bird by her alert and changeful movements. She was sojourning in the old log cabin which had been her husband's home, and now had become her own property, and here she was preparing her autobiography under the title "Half A Century." With some corrections I shall rely upon this volume for the data and facts concerning her varied life.

At this point let me say that few persons are qualified to write an autobiography. There is at times a lack of perspective, and, in some natures an unwillingness to recognize defaults or mistakes, which destroys accuracy. Then, too, there may be the tendency to let distance lend enchantment, and trust to the partial memories of loving friends for flattering reminiscences of childhood. In this respect Mrs. Swisshelm was apt to be credulous, and the story of her life is clothed with a glamour which her hardships probably led her to enjoy. She was born in 1815 on Water Street, Pittsburgh, and it is to be remembered that at that date this city had less than 5,000 inhabitants.

An enthusiastic reporter claimed, at the time of her death, that she was a lineal descendant of Lady Jane Grey, but his historic knowledge was not sufficient to inform him, that Lady Jane Grey was married in May, was arrested by Queen Mary and sent to the Tower in November, and was executed, in February, never having known the responsibilities of motherhood. Mrs. Swisshelm speaks of her family as Scotch in descent, and connected with royalty through the Grey family. It is more than probable that here romance attracted her, though the Grey family is an extensive one, and such feudal relations are numerous; and we have heard that while Charles the Second left no legitimate children, he might be called in a special sense the father of his people.

Mrs. Swisshelm emphasizes her relations to the Covenanters, and her thorough doctrinal training under the ministry of the Rev. Dr. Black of the Covenanter Church in this city. Her childhood was spent in this city and Wilkinsburg, to which place the family removed, returning to a house on Sixth Avenue, opposite Trinity Church, whose grounds she remembered as enclosed with a board fence. While quite
young she was sent to a girl's boarding school near Braddock, a training she enjoyed for about a year.

In her story we gain an interesting glimpse of the scenes which were to be associated with her early married life, and which recall for some of us the changes wrought in later years. She describes her journey from Pittsburgh to Braddock by wagon, turning from the road, the old Greensburg Pike, now Penn Avenue, at the old Yellow Tavern, which in its ruins some of us recall, and following the rough road now named Braddock Avenue, rode on in the dark night, descending into what we know as Nine Mile Run, and while crossing the depths of the dark ravine, was endangered by the overflowing stream. Harm might have followed if she had not been rescued by a powerful youth, who carried her in his arms to his log house home at the roadside. Subsequently he became her husband, the log house the scene of the trials of her early married life, and eventually the resting place for her last years.

Let us remember that at this time, about 1827 this deep ravine as it ran back from the Monongahela River became Y-like in shape, one branch running northwest to Wilkinsburg, and the other northeast to what is now Edgewood, and, as yet, open and unobstructed by the huge fills made necessary, when a quarter century later the Pennsylvania Railroad was completed.

Mrs. Swisshelm is not quite correct concerning the age of the log house and the adjoining mill. The date of the house was probably about 1813, while the stone barn opposite carried in its gable end a stone with date, 1814, cut in it. Near it was a mill which, despite Mrs. Swisshelm's belief that to it the Indians came for flour, is of later date than such customers could need.

After a childhood in which she finds herself, as an infant, unusually gifted, and a varied schooling, she was married at the age of 21 to James Swisshelm. At the very beginning she seems disillusioned. She finds this large framed, black bearded and gigantic bridegroom entirely dependent upon, and submissive to his mother, whose religious affiliations prejudiced her against the little bride, and whose control of the property produced an irritation and unhappiness which never wholly ceased. Mrs. Swisshelm's tendency to over emphasize all she was or possessed, leads her at times to describe her husband as remarkable in appear-
ance, and possessed of masculine beauty and grace, though she realized, that for much of her unhappiness he was measurably responsible. But those who knew all the circumstances judged, that the marriage was truly an unequal yoking, that physically, mentally, aesthetically, and to a degree religiously they were antipodal. You read between the lines her realization that he was unfitted for such a wife, and lacking in all the requirements to be a true companion or consort.

The conditions of married life, so lacking in comfort and satisfaction, made her restless, and drove her out of her ordinary circumstances. She says of herself that in her early days she was diffident and unreliant, and fearful of publicity. But she was to pass through such experiences that publicity became a delight, public debate a joy, and fierce verbal debate like the trumpet to the war horse. Her early training in the Covenanter Church had given her a horror of slavery, as a theory. A sojourn in Louisville, Kentucky, where her husband took her in a vain attempt at a new method of livelihood, intensified her anti-slavery zeal. She had begun to write letters in the newspapers, and slavery became her theme.

Let us remember that at this time, 1840, the population of Pittsburgh was only 21,115, and a bright and energetic writer soon attracted attention in this region. This letter-writing, which at first was over an assumed name, furnished an outlet for her literary tastes, and gave variety to an otherwise limited and almost sordid life. It is pathetic to note how she craved contact with the aesthetic and artistic phases of living. It is not too much to say that during most of the period preceding the midcentury, this region was very crude and narrow in many ways. Reflect that until 1852 there was no Pennsylvania Railroad; that in 1860 there were less people in Pittsburgh than there are today in McKeesport, and that while the larger element of the city's population were moral, energetic and reliable, it was a population in which the higher culture was not greatly realized, and an atmosphere in which art did not spontaneously flourish. Mrs. Swisshelm tells of meeting a painter and obtaining from him some materials, and thus inspired setting to work upon her own task, and reveling in the new realm of art. Despite her satisfaction with her skill, it does not seem unkind to say, that her genius was not marked, but her enjoy-
ment of this outlet for thought and aspiration is very evident. Her home life was lacking in almost everything that such an active mind and spirited nature craved. Her husband and relatives were unsympathetic, and even the ordinary conditions of the household were unsatisfying to such an eager nature and widening vision.

Upon returning from the sojourn at Louisville, where her husband’s business difficulties drove her to dressmaking and other tasks for a livelihood, all that this husband possessed of material resources were represented by a panther, two bears, and a deer, which this strange couple harbored in and around the log house. Was there ever a stranger or more amazing fancy, a more astonishing revelation of character in mature people, than this pleasure in a miniature menagerie, which consumed pigs and poultry, and terrorized the little settlement? Just across the road from the site of the log house, still may be seen a cave in the hillside, at the end of the former Edgewood Golf grounds, in which, tradition says, this panther or the bears were confined. Here where the road to Braddock passes, lived this strange household, elements almost as diverse as the fiery panther, the somnolent bears and the timid deer.

The anonymous newspaper work was giving her an unrecognized training for the part she was to assume in the anti-slavery conflict. As yet she discussed the legal disabilities of women, the denial of property rights to her sex, and became a champion for remedial legislation. Her own experience gave point to her criticisms and appeals. To the end of her married life, and even beyond, she was oppressed by her husband’s assertion of his property control and mastery of her physical conditions. He never ceased to assert with an unconscious harshness his ownership and mastery, even while she was contributing to household support by her own inherited income, and the compensation derived from her newspaper work. Ultimately he became the owner of a considerable tract of land, but he was far from generous or considerate.

Yet, while contending for better legislation, and those better judicial decisions for the relief of her sex, it is interesting to note that she was but little concerned with schemes of so called women’s rights. She was never an ardent suffragist. She looked with mild interest upon the efforts of Miss Anthony, Lucy Stone and that line of reformers, who today
gaze with triumph upon those changes which they regard as so promising. It is to be said of her that she was never dissatisfied with her sex, and never blamed the Creator for her feminism, nor lost her admiration for the true and worthy exponent of manhood, or regarded man as her enemy. She ridiculed the idea that difference of sex was a matter of education. She smiled pityingly upon the bloomerites, even while she was attacking unfair legislation. It seemed to be her opinion, and, I think that opinion was justified by her experience, that while reforms were necessary, true argument and appeals and publicity would accomplish them, and were more to be relied upon, than votes or political threats.

She had already begun to write over her own name when the Mexican war began. She regarded this invasion as entirely unjustified, and unpatriotic, and she therefore wrote against it, with her natural vigor and the conviction of righteousness. She had begun the publication of a weekly journal called the Visiter, which she spelled with an "e." As time passed she wrote with a greater vehemence on the subject of slavery. This was to her, as it was to John Wesley, "the sum of all wickedness," and whenever "she mused the fire burned." She wielded a very caustic and pointed pen. She was intensely personal. Her wit was morbid, her invective biting, her ridicule unlimited. Judges, ministers, lawyers, editors and others were assailed without reserve or disguise. The pastor of the Third Presbyterian Church, and his brother, also Judge Grier and others were pilloried by her sarcasm, and assailed by her argument.

It is interesting to observe how her sex seemed to protect her. If she had been a man she might have shared the fate of Sumner in the Senate and Lovejoy in the West, for violence would have been the resource of her enemies. Even when she went to Minnesota, and in that region of an incomplete civilization began her attacks upon the advocates of slavery, while she suffered the loss of her printing press, she was rarely in danger of her life.

In 1857 she felt compelled to leave her husband, and with her infant child journey to the Northwest. It was while she was thus absent that she received the tidings of his securing a divorce, and she remarks in a spirit of retrospection, that if her husband had been willing in their earlier married life to have gone with her to the West, or to some
place where they could have established a home untroubled by his relatives, much of their differences and sorrow might never have been known.

In the Northwest she entered on a new experience, that of addressing public meetings. She regards this as remarkable, for she tells of her early timidity and weakness in public. But here the very qualities of her newspaper work came into play. Her sense of right, her sarcasm, her power of ridicule, her personalities attracted the crowd, encouraged her associates, and discomfited her enemies. Here again her weakness was her strength. Her womanhood was her defence. Until a mob is overwhelmingly passionate it respects womanhood. And it is to be considered whether the advocates of the new regime of women’s rights, and equality with men, realize that they may lose a large influence, and special weapons, if they discard the fact of sex, and despise the law of compensation.

Going to Washington in 1850, Mrs. Swisshelm became a contributor to the New York Tribune, receiving five dollars for every letter. Rightly or wrongly she regarded herself as wielding a great influence, and assumed a marked prominence. Newspaper notoriety is very appealing. The love of public notice is for many very strong. Many are susceptible to the desire for some kind of publicity, as the photographs of so many in our daily press, without the slightest excuse, make us wonder what kind of home life is prevalent, and what ideas of refinement and privacy are taught. This delight in publicity grows by what it feeds on. It came to Mrs. Swisshelm, and it is ever apparent in her autobiography.

It was her boast that by her statements in a letter to the Tribune concerning the private life of Daniel Webster she defeated his attempt to reach the Presidency. She found pleasure in the statement of a friend, that she was another Jael, the destroyer of another leader. This is, of course, no place for controversy; but as we desire to be accurate, we may well ask what candidate for the Presidency was ever set aside for personal immorality? History, in explanation of Webster’s failure and blighted ambition, lays greater and plainer stress upon his decline from anti-slavery principles and his bargaining with Southern leaders for place and power. This decadence and change were more in the
minds of the public than private peccadilloes. As was natural, Mrs. Swisshelm's self-confidence grew with her publicity. She seems never to have been conscious of a mistake. Lincoln was regarded by her as unworthy, and commercializing the War, when he recalled the proclamation of emancipation issued by one of his generals, and postponed emancipation to a later day. She had no confidence in Grant's patriotism or sincerity. As the war went on she entered the hospitals and camps as a nurse. Here again her self-confidence never fails. With repeated stories of what she accomplished she criticizes surgeons, generals, administration, nurses, and makes biting personal comment on the leader, Miss Dorothy Dix. She was undoubtedly useful and kindly, but her very virtues must have been trying.

Meanwhile her child was approaching womanhood. The war was over. The position she held as a clerk in Washington was lost. Ere long she planned a musical career for her daughter. For her she craved prominence, and the public eye, and so she took her to the master-teachers of the piano abroad, and sought the training which would qualify her child for a professional career. The life in Europe gave a new bent to her mind.

I doubt if she ever had much interest in the temperance reform. But conspiring with Germans and French persuaded her, that total abstinence was unwise, and the use of beer and light wines desirable. She never was a student or investigator. And thus on her return she began to write letters assailing the reform, and employing some of her old vigor of language. She had many readers, even of those who disagreed with her. Then, too, she loved to discharge her invectives at St. Paul, and assail his comments upon the actions of women. In her wandering life something of her reverence for the Bible, and confidence in Christian principles had been dimmed. But it was never totally lost. When she found Episcopalians in their conventions, and Presbyterians like Van Dyke, Plummer and Palmer, and Methodists justifying slavery, and in some cases asserting its divine authority, her orthodoxy was shaken and, as she says, she had sympathy with unbelievers who were abolitionists. She did not realize the large number of Christians who were seeking her ends, quietly undermining the slave power, and seeking a true overthrow of the iniquity.

At last her active work seemed ended, and she returned
to the community where her early womanhood had been spent. There she found true and reliable friends, sympathetic acquaintances, those who had known her for years and been loyal in all her days of trial. There, among the cultured and kindhearted, she found those whose sympathy was increased by the sense of the humorous, friends who, knowing all, were able to appreciate her really fine qualities, and also enjoy her eccentricities, and smile at her kindly wit. Thus, ere the long day closed, she found friendships which never varied or ceased, and a welcome to the most delightful homes. It was a happy condition that she could thus spend her last years in a great satisfaction. We felt that she was privileged to review her life and find much to please and read. She could see our land free from a great curse, and feel that in that victory she had a part. She had done something to remove from the life of her sex unwise and oppressive legal limitations, and, like Luther in the Castle of Wartburg, she had by her ink bottle exercised the devil of injustice and cruelty.

She dwelt in the old house, which had come to be her own property, despite her husband's claims, and from her porch she could see that husband's newer home on the crest of the hill above the shadowed vale. Sometimes she passed the weeks of summer in a cottage in the Alleghanies, for she loved the forests. One afternoon three of us took a friend, who had expressed a desire to meet our famous neighbor, to her log house home. It was not many months before Mrs. Swisshelm's death, and when we entered we found her practically alone, reclining upon an old couch in the large living room with its rude old-fashioned fireplace. The house was distressingly bare. There was little furniture, and this most plain. We were cordially welcomed, and in a quaint and interesting way were entertained by her talk. Her varied life and contact with the world, her worthy purposes and aims in life, had given her a real culture, and attractiveness of manner. Though years were burdening her, she retained the old gentleness and quietness, for it was only in her letters that she was robust or assertive. When she noticed our eyes directed to a large black canvas, without a frame, which rested against the stone chimney, she explained with a shrewd smile, that some time before, while roaming in the Alleghany forest, she had found a very large fungis, which was so round and beautiful, that she felt she could almost fall down and worship. So great was its charm
to her, that seizing her paints she had transferred its likeness to this canvas to preserve its memory and grace. I am sure she did not resent our smiles, for while the painting was far from a work of art, or a satisfying reproduction of nature, the enthusiasm of the artist, the joy in the forest glades, and the whimsical pleasure in the memory were delightful to us all. Thus she spent in quietness her remaining years. Her daughter, preferring a home with her husband and children to all the presumed attractions of a public career, had given some disappointment to the mother's plans, but the daughter's happiness was her solace.

It was a strange running of the full circle, that the very house and room, to which she had been carried as a girl of twelve in the stormy night by the muscular youth who became her husband, was her last earthly home, and the place from which she was borne to her grave. Despite all her changes, I like to believe she obeyed at eve the voice obeyed at prime.

The number of those who either personally or by family tradition are familiar with the great anti-slavery conflict is fast decreasing. It will soon be for many a spent fact of history, as remote in interest as the Whisky Rebellion in our country, or the Corn law troubles of England. To me personally this tremendous controversy has an especial interest, because my father in his intimacy with Salmon P. Chase, Prof. O. McK. Mitchell, Harriet Beecher Stowe and others at Cincinnati, was a patron of the Underground Railroad stretching from the Ohio to Canada. He was a participant in the decision of the New School Presbyterian Church to seek the abolition of slavery, which led to the division of that Church.

There is no usefulness in merely reviving a dead controversy, or preserving old bitteresses. But it is well for us to be so familiar with our history that we can recognize and admire those ardent and highminded men and women, who could not be at ease in Zion, and strove even through sacrifice and possible martyrdom to destroy slavery, and make the principles of the Declaration of Independence something more than "glittering generalities."

In that struggle Mrs. Swisshelm was a prominent and wholehearted participant, and her aims should be admired, and her name treasured by us who dwell in a land no longer "half slave and half free," and where we can truthfully sing of the land of the free, as well as the home of the brave.