Exposé of Polygamy

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CHAPTER III.

My Husband leaves for Italy—Experiences as the Wife of a Missionary—Privations and Struggles with Poverty in England—Suspensions of Polygamy—The “Privilege” of “Washing the Elders’ Feet”—Cheerful Words in Time of Trouble.

I had been married about four months when my husband was called to go on a mission to Italy. What terrible news this was to me, for I was to be left behind! In my grief I exclaimed, “Ah! why could they not have selected some one else?” Then I remembered how that, in my first joy and gratitude after being baptized into the church, I had said that I would do any thing that the Lord required of me; and now I felt that He was going to put me to the test. Thus it was that, when asked by one of the “Twelve Apostles” if I were willing that my husband should go, I answered “Yes,” although even at the time I thought that my very heart would break.

As Mormon elders receive no salary, nor any remuneration whatever, my husband was very much troubled about leaving me dependent on others, not being sure how I might be provided for, and knowing better than I did what want I should probably be exposed to. At his request, an old and valued friend was appointed his successor; Mr. S. believing that in doing so I should be provided for and watched over!

In June, 1850, Mr. S. went on his mission, in company with Lorenzo Snow, one of the “Twelve Apostles.” Though terribly grieved at his departure, I felt some pride in the fact that my husband was the first of the elders in Britain who was sent on a foreign mission.

For the first few weeks after his departure, my friends gathered around me and provided me with all that I needed. Before long, however, most of the “Saints” with whom I had been on intimate terms began to prepare for emigration to Utah. I soon saw that I should be obliged to break up my home, and be contented with one room. This I did cheerfully; for, after the great trial of separating from my husband for three years—as I then thought—this was comparatively nothing.

I got but little assistance from the church, and the question which now presented itself to my mind most imperatively was, “What can I do?” The reply, mentally returned, was, “Nothing!” I could only teach
English. But to whom could I teach English in England? Still, I was not altogether useless or helpless. I could sew very well; but I had as yet no confidence in myself, never having done anything of the kind before as a matter of business. I was in the greatest trouble. I had neither food nor fire. I could not venture to write to my husband about this, for fear of unfixing him for carrying out fully his mission, which I then believed would be a sin.

I then resolved that I would go round and visit some of my lady acquaintances, who had frequently invited me to come to their houses. I wished, if possible, to see whether, through their influence and introduction, I could do anything to earn a little money. Besides which I had another reason: I thought that possibly some one would ask me to dine with them. I was hungry enough, but I walked about the city, afraid to carry out my resolution, until I was quite worn out; for I feared in my pride that they might suspect that I came purposely for something to eat. Of this I was perfectly ashamed. No one who has not personally passed through such an ordeal can have any idea of what my feelings were.

The shame I felt was only equalled by my necessities, innocent as I was of any fault which could have placed me in this position. I was utterly miserable, and did not venture to call upon any one, but turned my steps toward my dreary home—only to fast and pray. The fasting, however, was not in my programme at that time. I had no inclination for it, although I was utterly unable to prevent it. I then earnestly prayed to the Lord to help me, and at the same time I thanked Him that I was counted worthy to suffer for His sake.

The time was fast approaching when I knew that I should be compelled to have fire and other necessaries; but where to get them I knew not.

One evening I was asked to dine at the house of a friend where some of the elders from Salt Lake were visiting, and I accepted the invitation with a great deal of pleasure, for more than one reason. It was thought a great privilege at that time to meet with American elders. Some of these gentlemen assumed such authority that they impressed the “Saints” with the idea that they were little gods.

I went to dine with these brethren, and as it is a Mormon woman’s “privilege” [?] to sit and “listen” to the “lords of creation,” without joining in the conversation at all, I had then, of course, that same privilege of listening while dinner was preparing.

I can not tell the horror of what I then heard. They were talking among themselves about Polygamy, but in such a covert way that it was evident that they thought I could not understand what was said. Neither should I have understood it had it not been that I had heard some whisperings of this kind once, before my husband went away, though then I did not believe it. I had asked him about the new doctrine, and he had
reassured me by stating that there was “no truth in it;” that it was a slander, promulgated by some evil-tongued people to injure “the cause.” I heard, however, something that day which troubled me very much, and I resolved to ask these “brethren” now present to tell me the honest truth—whether Polygamy really existed in Utah, or did not.

They positively denied its existence, and though I did believe then that what they said was true, I afterwards discovered much which troubled and worried me, and being constantly anxious to learn the truth, there was not much that escaped my notice.

I became wretchedly suspicious. At times, I even fancied that my husband had deceived me; and that thought was to me madness. I said—whatever other men may do, my husband will not deceive me. O dear! no. That I could not believe.

I now felt more inclined for fasting than for praying. In fact, just then it would have been utterly impossible for me to pray, I was so wretched. Doubts and fears had begun to creep into my mind, and it appeared to me (if I may say so) that the Lord, like a hard task-master, was exacting from me more than I had bargained to do or suffer when I embraced Mormonism. These troubled thoughts were not calculated to make me feel happy in my relations with the church, and I tried to overcome my feelings, and attain to a better state of mind, trusting sincerely in God that all would yet be well.

But to return to my difficulty in earning a living.

After some time I finally got a little plain sewing to do. This enabled me to win my daily bread and to pay the rent of my room, as well as to make a few scanty preparations for the little stranger which I now daily expected. The reader may suppose that it was, after all, a very hard struggle.

Now began the arduous task of endeavouring to support myself and my babe. In this dear little one there was to me another strong incentive to exertion. But how and where I was to get work, and what I was to do—and, in fact, what I could do—I did not know. There was nothing for me as far as I could see. I was willing to do any work, if only I could get it to do—that was now the difficulty. Yet I determined not to be foiled. I managed to live; but how? Sometimes, for two weeks together, I had nothing but dry bread. I became pale and thin, and so weak that I could scarcely walk.

I now became better acquainted with Mormonism, as I was able to go more among the Saints. But I lost confidence in the missionary brethren when I saw how familiarly they conducted themselves with the young “sisters;” for I knew that the elders I allude to were married men. They taught the “sisters,” both married and single, that it was their privilege to wash the elders’ feet, and to comb their hair, and in fact to wait on them in every way imaginable. This I mean literally. There was nothing symbolical about
it, and many of our silly girls liked nothing better. I saw even then that this was not right, and it annoyed me greatly.

With the President of the London Conference and his family I was well acquainted, and I knew that this man came down from London to the Southampton Conference about every two or three weeks, to court a young “sister.” He supplied her with money, and otherwise acted in a way which appeared to me almost scandalous. His conduct shook the faith of some of the older Saints. In these days the elders would take young girls to the theatres and other places of amusement, while their own wives remained at home. I sincerely believe now that many of these men taught Polygamy to the girls, while they denied it to the public.

I felt lonely, wretched, and disappointed in my religion, though I still believed it. Yet I dared not ask my husband to abandon his mission and come home. I resolved that I would try to endure to the end. Then, too, I knew that even at the worst he would return some time, and all my troubles, I felt, would then be ended; for I believed that he would be able to explain all to me—yes, every thing.

About this time I learned that Lorenzo Snow (the “Apostle” in whose company Mr. S. went to Italy) was on his way to England. This intelligence made me very happy, as may be supposed. I waited anxiously to see him. On his arrival, he came directly to my house. He seemed very much shocked to see the change in my appearance, and said that he would send for my husband to come home immediately.