Exposé of Polygamy
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CHAPTER V.

The “Revelation” on Polygamy—How I received it—Left without Hope—The Doctrine first taught—“ Beauties” of the System—My first Convert to Polygamy—A Scene—How Work progressed—Disaster to Swiss emigration.

Mr. S. returned from England, and, after a while, began in conversation to introduce—gently and enigmatically, I thought—the subject of Polygamy, at the same time telling me that he “did not know” that it was true, but that he had heard that there had been a revelation given about it. He dreaded to tell me the truth; but I had heard enough, and determined not to accept the doctrine. Still, at times, I tried to hide my feelings from him; for I hoped that, after all, the intelligence might even now not prove true. Vain hope! for very soon the “revelation” was sent from “Zion,” with instructions to make no secret of it.

A printed copy of the “revelation” was given to me to read.¹ I was just about to sit down to the breakfast-table. There were present a Protestant minister, whom Mr. S. had baptized, and two Mormon elders. The minister knew nothing of the “revelation;” but my husband and the two elders looked at me, to watch the effect produced upon my mind by its perusal, with an interest and solemnity as if they were breaking to me cautiously the news of my mother’s death.

I immediately left the room and sought the retirement of my own apartment, where, after locking the door, I began to read the document; but before I had got through one half I threw it aside, feeling altogether rebellious against God. I now began to feel perfectly reckless, and even willing to throw aside my religion, and take “my chance of salvation,” rather than submit to Polygamy; for I felt that that new doctrine was a degradation to womankind. I asked myself, “Why did the Lord wish to humiliate my sex in this manner?” though at the same time I believed, as I was told, that the “revelation” was indeed sent from God. Perhaps if I had kept calm, and had I read it through very carefully and allowed my own judgment to be exercised upon it, I might have detected there and then that there was no divinity in it, as I afterwards discovered, to my satisfaction, when I read it a second time, after the lapse of many years.
“I could tear you to pieces!”
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After some time I began to feel a little more calm, and was able to reason with myself about Polygamy. If, said I, this “revelation” is of God, (and of course it is,) then I ought not to oppose it. It never once entered my mind that any man would dare to give a revelation to the world as coming from God except it was true. Then, I thought, if the Lord requires me to submit, it must be for some good purpose; for “He doeth all things well.” I must, therefore, try to subdue this wicked and rebellious nature of mine, and submit to His divine will, and surely He will aid and bless me. After these reflections and constant prayer, I managed to subdue my disobedient heart sufficiently to make my appearance again among the brethren in the breakfast-room. But, oh! that was indeed a wretched day for me; and every day after was more wretched than the previous one. Polygamy was the last thing I thought of at night, and the first thing in the morning. It was with me in my waking hours and in the dead of the night. It haunted me like a spectre. It was like a fearful blight that had fallen upon me and was withering my soul. One thought was ever present in my mind—that thought, Polygamy!

How should I be ever able to bear it? In a moment, every thing in life appeared to have lost its charm for me, except my darling children, and they seemed now to be dearer than ever; for I felt that they were indeed my own, and that no one could take them away from me. But how I mourned over my little daughter; for I felt that she, perhaps, would some day suffer as I did. Oh! I exclaimed, may heaven forbid it! She is to-day a polygamic wife, and the mother of two children!2

I would not have my readers think that I bore all my troubles in the introduction of Polygamy meekly, like a saint. Indeed I did not; and I firmly believe that I was a sore trial to my husband. I was wicked and rebellious at times, and said very bitter things of “the Prophet of the Lord,” and all his sex, my husband included; for I began to hate the very name of “man.” I am afraid that Mr. S. was very much shocked indeed, for he was then a devoted Mormon. He often told me that I was a great clog to him, and more than once he said he could not enjoy the Spirit of God and live with me.

But I was not always so rebellious. There were days when I was full of sorrow and regret for what I deemed my wicked thoughts about “celestial marriage,” and then I would fast and pray, and seek forgiveness from the Lord and from my husband. But even in my best moments, I could never bear to hear him speak about Polygamy; and whenever the elders came to our house, the painful topic was sure to be discussed. As soon as I heard it, all my angry excitement returned, and I instantly felt a spirit of rebellion stirring within me. I could not help it. I felt that womankind was insulted whenever the subject was mentioned, and I never got over the feeling. Oh! I thought, how shall I ever “get salvation” with such an offending heart as mine?
It was necessary, however, for me to do something; for I was told by my husband, and the other elders who were present at the time, that it devolved on me to teach the hateful doctrine to the women of Switzerland. That was to be my mission, and I, poor, deluded thing that I was, believed it to be so. I concealed my feelings as best I could, for I was obliged to nerve myself to the task, and prepare to perform my duty, trusting in God to assist me. How fearful a task this was!

My sorrow concerning the introduction of Polygamy was not like any other grief, for it was utterly without hope. Had its teachings been for this life only, I could have borne it with more fortitude, and should have endeavoured to resign myself to my fate. But we were taught that it was to be “for time and for eternity.” When I thought that some time my life must end, and that then earthly sorrows would cease, this brought me no comfort; for the cause of my grief was still to exist beyond the grave. Polygamy was to be practised in heaven as well as on the earth. The only possible hope that remained to me was that there—in another world—I might perhaps be so changed as not to know myself or any one else; or that my feelings might be so greatly altered from what they were in this world that I should not realize any pain from what we were taught were the matrimonial arrangements in heaven.

Feeling, as I did, so acutely myself, how was I to break the intelligence of this new and terrible “revelation” to those honest, loving women with whom I was acquainted? I shrank from the task of inflicting so much pain. Their own husbands had not courage to tell them, and I am sure that I had not. But I had already been instructed in the manner in which I was to endeavour to impart to them a knowledge of the doctrine. I had also myself been taught respecting the beauties of the “system,” so that I might be able to introduce it in a proper manner. It is needless to say that I failed to see those “beauties.”

It was soon settled which of the sisters was to be the first victim. She was one whom we all dreaded most, although for rather peculiar reasons. She was a good woman; but, like myself, possessed the weakness of being too fond of her husband. She was possessed also of a very high spirit, and was indeed a completely spoiled child.

It was told her that I had some new principle to communicate to her from “Zion,” and she was sent to my apartment to hear it.

“No, I have nothing to tell you,” I said.

“Yes, you have,” she replied; “for your husband and mine said so.”

“No,” I answered; “if there was any thing, I can not now remember what it might be.” The truth was, my courage had all left me.

I stood there, pale and trembling, even though she was my intimate friend. She noticed it, and feared that I was ill. I was ill—worse than she thought or could yet imagine.
However, I presently regained composure enough to commence telling her, and she listened quietly for a while, when suddenly she sprang up, and, with great emotion, cried, “O mon Dieu! Qu’elle religion des animaux! And your husband to come to us Swiss with such a religion as that!” She perfectly scared me. She nearly annihilated me with her looks. What a commencement to my mission!

I did not attempt to stop her or get away, say what she liked, for I knew from my own experience what she suffered. I believed, however, that there was no other way for her to “obtain salvation,” and my heart ached for her. After she had spent her wrath, she came and sat by me and said, “Does my husband believe this?”

“Yes,” I replied, “he does.”

Then followed another outburst of grief and rage fearful to witness. I tried to soothe her, but it was useless. She was one of those gushing, impulsive women, who give way to passions of grief, and I saw that it was best to leave her alone. When she became more calm, we talked over it and wept together, and together knelt and prayed. I was almost going to add, we swore together in the same breath! This, of course, we did not do. It was something else! Finally, we came to the conclusion that we would both of us fight against the doctrine, and that we would likewise teach all the sisters to do so.

This was certainly a pretty state of affairs!

After she had left the room, I began to feel ashamed of myself, that I, a missionary’s wife, should have thus given way. Here, I thought, is all my work to do over again. However, she repented, and I repented; and we now agreed to talk to the other sisters about it, and see how they would take it. I felt a little better, now that I had a companion in misery who could sympathize with me; and we consoled each other, neither of us believing that our husbands would ever practically adopt the doctrine, or, at least, not for a long time to come.

We taught it to the other sisters; but it was the same sad story over and over again. Some rebelled, and some even fell sick over it. They all lost their joyous, happy looks; and now understood why, for some time past, I had appeared so unhappy and miserable.

At every council of the missionary brethren, the sisters became suspicious of their husbands and what teaching they might be listening to. It was very evident that Polygamy was not going to contribute in any way to our peace of mind or happiness. We could not see how it was possible that any good could result from it. The missionary elders, on the contrary, seemed deeply interested in the new doctrine, and saw “glories” and “beauties” in it that had never been dreamed of before. They could see far away into the eternal world the “exaltation” that awaited the women who would “give wives to their husbands.”
The teaching of the doctrine of plural wives, in Switzerland, was fortunately limited. The Protestant minister, of whom I before spoke, received at first the announcement of “celestial marriage” with unfeigned pleasure. He had no son to transmit his name to posterity, and he flattered himself with hope. But his wife, who was not very young, attacked him so violently that he soon abandoned not only the ideas of patriarchal marriage, but also Mormonism itself.

A sister of the lady to whom I had first taught the doctrine of Polygamy, as soon as she discovered that I had converted her sister, called to see me, in company with another lady. She was a tall, angular woman. As she entered the room, she asked me if I were Mrs. Stenhouse. I answered affirmatively; and, before I had time to ask her to be seated, she caught hold of me by the shoulders, like a maniac, and shook me violently, quite taking away my breath. I was like a child in her hands, and could offer no resistance. I had not been accustomed to such violence as this. She then began to declaim wildly against me, and declared that she hated me for teaching her sister such an abominable religion. Her passion rising again, she seized me a second time, and, forcing me into a corner, stood nervously clutching her hands and making for my face, screaming violently that she felt as if she “could tear me to pieces.” All this time her friend stood by, with an amused expression on her countenance, as if she quite enjoyed the sight. But to me it was no joke; and I do not know what the enraged woman would have done to me, had not a gentleman, who was a friend of Mr. S., happened to come in at the moment, and, hearing the uproar, hastened to my rescue. The reader may well suppose that I shall not easily forget my experiences in introducing Polygamy among the Swiss.

The first emigration from Switzerland had a sad history. The emigrants were a good people, of the class bourgeoisie, who for the Mormon faith left all that was dear to them in fatherland, and, in many cases, gave up the homesteads which had been theirs and their ancestors’ for many generations.

Once, when Mr. S. returned from visiting several cantons where he had been for the purpose of counselling the Saints to emigrate, he told me it took all the courage he could muster to tell people in such comfortable circumstances to sell all and to gather to the deserts of Utah. The thought was painful; but faith prevailed, and those among the simple people of the Helvetian Republic who had embraced the Mormon faith, set out, regarding little the perils of the ocean or the privations of the prairie, believing only that every weary step they took led them nearer to the “Zion” of their hopes.

The story of that emigrant band is very sad. Faith had been the actuating principle which induced each one of the company to leave all that
was dear on earth and set out for the City of the Saints. But privation and misery shook the faith of some, and in many instances banished even the shadow of hope.

On their way to “Zion,” some of the emigrants became dissatisfied, and separated from the general company. They were overtaken between St. Louis and the frontiers by the dreadful cholera of 1853, and almost totally perished. When the news reached Switzerland, the friends of those who were thus lost were very naturally enraged with the Mormon missionary who had “led them into all their trouble and to death.” This demonstration of anger was somewhat unreasonable, for every emigrant must himself have known that his way to Utah was not over a path strewn with roses; and the missionaries who advised the journey, being only human, could not possibly foresee the visitation of the cholera, which proved so fatal to the pilgrims.

These facts, however, no one seemed to take into consideration; and it was with difficulty that Mr. S. escaped from personal violence in Lausanne. Though his friends counselled his instant departure from the place, with his usual “confidence in God,” he stopped over night; but the morning’s reflections suggested discretion and an early departure.

Those of the Swiss pilgrims who escaped the scourge of the cholera were only spared to realize that other scourge—Polygamy.

Many a time, amidst the horrors of polygamous “Zion,” have faithful wives, who passed unscathed through that terrible plague, wished that it might have been their own fate to have perished with their country-women on the desert wilds.

We remained in Switzerland about three years and a half. The mission, notwithstanding its dark beginning, had been very successful. Mormonism had been introduced into seven cantons; a paper, in the French language, was published by Mr. S., in the interests of that faith, in Geneva, as well as books and brochures in the French, German, and Italian languages, almost entirely supported at the expense of the converted Swiss. By the time that we left, there were several missionaries from Utah, and about the same number from England, labouring in Helvetia.

Mr. S. requested to be released from his presidency of the Swiss and Italian missions; and, with the means which some of the more wealthy of the emigrating Swiss had generously furnished, we were provided with what was necessary for our journey to Utah.