Exposé of Polygamy

DeSimone, Linda, Stenhouse, Fanny

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CHAPTER XV.

Trouble with the Church—Implicit Obedience demanded—Confidence in the Church Authorities declining—Clinging to Faith—Attempts to suppress Doubts—How Inquiry was suggested—Brigham angry—“A Prophet might be mistaken”—Day dawning at last—“Obeying Counsel,” and what it cost—An Article on “Progress”—A Scene—We withdraw from the Church—A brutal and scandalous Outrage upon my Husband and myself—Strange Police!—Without Redress—Popular Anger—Private Sympathy.

Mr. Stenhouse has been a member of the church since 1845. He had, to the very best of his ability, lectured, preached, written, and published in Great Britain, and various parts of the Continent, as well as in the United States, in support of the Mormon faith. He was a most earnest advocate of Mormonism, laying aside his own interests, and those of his family, all the time.

Personally, he was devotedly attached to Brigham Young for many years. While the members of the church have unshaken confidence in the faith of the new revelation, they very naturally acquire a regard for the Prophet, and render him unquestioning obedience. When Brigham spoke, he was ready to obey; and at any time during twenty years he would joyfully have given up his own life to save the life of the Prophet, had it been endangered. Whatever he might have seen or heard of Brigham’s disregard of the rights of the working poor, and his ridiculous counsellings and teachings to the brethren on business affairs, he was ready to excuse it all, on the plea that “Brigham was the servant of the Lord,” and, therefore, knew more than all the rest, and doubtless had inspiration to direct him in all that he did.

While he was in this condition of mind, I was almost without hope that the change I had so long desired would ever come. When I would bring before him things which I frequently heard of Brigham, and his oppression of any one, he would answer me that I could not righteously judge; for I only partially knew the facts, and that if I knew more, I would probably think otherwise. This was his answer to every thing; and probably many women in Utah have had something like this experience with
The Wealthy Polygamist.
husbands devoted to the Prophet’s interests and reputation. He was not, however, so satisfied with every thing as his answers indicated. From the conversations that I listened to between him and influential men in the church, I clearly saw that many of the most devoted brethren around Brigham did not approve of much that he said and did; but their observations were always tempered with a fear of “meddling with the servant of the Lord.” There is, indeed, a dread in the soul of every good Mormon of entertaining any doubts about their leaders, or criticising in any way whatever they might think proper to do or say.

Brigham Young, in one of his sermons, says, “In the days of Joseph, the first thing manifested in the case of apostasy was the idea that Joseph was liable to be mistaken; and when a man admits that in his feelings, and sets it down as a fact, it is a step toward apostasy; and he only needs to take one step more, and he is cut off from the church.” It is this kind of teaching that binds every man in Mormonism. I was, fortunately, not a man; and as women will sometimes persist in thinking for themselves, I kept on thinking and admitting that Joseph Smith was liable to be mistaken, and that Brigham Young even excelled him in this particular. In fact, he was not only “liable,” but I knew that he had been mistaken many times. My thinking very often seriously troubled Mr. S.

The frequent visits we had from strangers passing through Salt Lake City, and Mr. S.’s own frequent travels in the States, contributed much to undermine his confidence in the teachings of the church. In their isolation, and the infrequency with which the Saints had any intercourse with others than themselves, it afforded the teachers an opportunity to represent the Gentiles in the worst possible manner; and in harmony with their faith, they believed the world was corrupt, and fit only to be destroyed. When visitors had retired from our house, the remark would frequently be made, “What a pity these persons are not in the church!” Instinctively there would follow that expression, the suggestion that surely they would not be damned because they did not accept the mission of Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism. The more we had of that intercourse, the less confidence we had in the Tabernacle faith. The malignant and abusive language, too, so frequently used in the sermons, was a puzzle that did not tend to confirm confidence. It seemed that the inspiration of “the Lord” was continually at war with good sense and experience. The more we knew of Christian institutions, and of persons outside of the Mormon Church, the less we believed in the priesthood’s declarations of damnation, and there was a gradual returning to reason. The Mormon leaders had always counselled the people to avoid intercourse with the rest of the world; and in that they were right, for there are few persons who have much intercourse and acquaintance with the world, who are strong in the Mormon faith. With a better knowledge of mankind, the less they
believe in the revelations of Joseph Smith, and of the world coming to an end within the next twenty years. If they grow at all, they outgrow the Mormon faith.

How I prayed in secret that Brigham would some day attack Mr. S.! and how glad was my heart when that time came!

Brigham had been to the country for a few days, and during his absence some contention had arisen among the brethren at an election, which dreadfully annoyed him. On the morning after his return to the city, the police reported to him that the Gentiles were mingling freely with the Mormon girls, and skating on the same ice, on the Hot Spring Lake, north of the city. He was furious, and was “mad” with every thing and every body.

Mr. S. called upon him, and without perceiving his sweet temper, introduced some newspaper business on the very subject that had made the Prophet angry. Brigham accused him of publishing a favourable notice in his paper of (to him) a very objectionable Gentile store; and added to that personal charges about matters that had been published in his paper during Mr. S.’s absence in the Eastern States. Mr. S. angrily replied to him that what was personal to him “was not true;” and as Brigham was on the eve of leaving, he asked for a conference with him in the evening.

“After all these years of labour and devotion,” said Mr. S. to me in the afternoon, “for Brigham Young to speak to me and of me with such bitterness, without a particle of foundation! where was his divine inspiration?” He suddenly checked himself; but the truth was out, and I saw he had reached the conclusion that indeed “a prophet might be mistaken” in ordinary matters of life.

When he returned home in the evening, he told me that Brigham had received him very kindly, and had apologized, in his way, for the morning scene. The reconciliation made no change in my mind; for I knew that, however frankly Mr. S. would forgive Brigham, there was too much of the Scotchman in his nature to allow him ever to forget it. But to get him to avow that Brigham was simply human, was a great step in the direction of future freedom.

One circumstance followed another, and I saw growing upon Mr. S. a disposition to listen to and weigh what he heard; and at the same time his confidence in divine inspiration began to dwindle gently away. I was contented, and believed that the day which I had long looked for was dawning at last.

The strength of Mormonism consists in the “blind obedience” of its disciples. Let them once question what they hear from the Prophet, and they are gone! The quotation I have already given from Brigham’s sermon illustrates this. He knew what he spoke. Instead of rebelling against Polygamy, had I only read the revelation carefully, and doubted its divine
origin, I would have been saved a life of misery. It was only when I came to the conclusion that Joseph Smith never had this revelation from God that I was delivered from my former faith, and became once more happy.

When I saw Mr. S. looking upon Brigham Young and his teachings and actions as he looked upon other men, I knew instinctively that he would finally conclude that Brigham was not only fallible, but even very liable to make mistakes.

Mr. S. had been so long engaged in the defence of Mormonism, that it was deeply grounded in him. Its teachings and observances seemed to him beyond a doubt, and were strongly riveted in his mind. Its weak and doubtful points fled before his faith. When I heard him with others bringing up some of the questionable teachings of the church, criticising Brigham’s “counsellings,” and doubting some of his measures, and speaking of him as they would of any other of the brethren, I was satisfied that he could not long remain such as he once had been.

Long years of submission, and the receiving, without question, a prophet’s teaching as divine inspiration, necessarily benumbs the soul and withers its life, till unconsciously the victim becomes an abject slave—a mere automaton.

With Mr. S., Mormonism had been everything for a score of years and more. It had grown with his years, until it had become a part of himself. A trifling incident might possibly awaken doubts, but it required time to effect a perfect change.

The measures adopted by Brigham in the spring of 1869, for the purpose of controlling the commerce of Utah, as well as the faith of the people, caused great discontent. The teachings of the Tabernacle were wild and arrogant; Brigham assuming that it was his right to dictate in every thing, “even to the setting up of a stocking,” (so he said,) or “to the ribbons that a woman should wear.” What Brigham said, and the fanaticism that it created, aroused many of the people to opposition, and the more he observed the signs of the opposition, the more fierce he became in his denunciations, and harsh in his measures.

One Sunday evening, which I shall never forget, my husband came home and said to me, “President Young wants me to move the Telegraph,” (a daily paper, of which Mr. S. was editor and proprietor.) “to Ogden.”

With the vividness of lightning, a glimpse of what was in store for us flashed across my mind, and I exclaimed,

“What is that you say?”

He repeated, “President Young wants me to go to Ogden.”

“With the Telegraph?” I inquired.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Does he mean,” I asked, “that you should leave all you have accomplished during these past years of labour, and begin again at Ogden?”
“He does,” answered Mr. S.
“Surely, you must be deceived,” I suggested.
“No,” he replied, “I am not deceived.”
“But who had told you this?” I asked.
“One of the Apostles,” said he.
“But,” I questioned, “will you go?”
“What can I do?” he replied.
“Do!” I exclaimed; “why, I would tell him at once that I would not go.”
“Then,” said he, “I shall be charged with rebellion.”
“But,” I responded, “will you quietly and submissively lose the business that you have created by these years of struggle, without telling him what you think?”
“If I object to go,” he replied, “Brigham will charge me with want of faith in the Lord, and I may as well close up my business and leave the church.”
“But surely, “ I questioned, “you will not yield to this despotism?”
“I don’t know,” he said, “I do not see very clearly yet, but I shall know better after he has spoken to me.”
That night, little as I then thought it, and little as I then guessed what it would cost us, was the dawning of the day of liberty to me.
The following evening, my husband came home very sorrowful. I knew at once that he was unhappy; and the more he tried to conceal his trouble, the more I observed the depression under which he was labouring.
“Have you seen the President?” I inquired.
“Yes, I have,” he briefly replied.
“And are you going to Ogden?” I said.
“Yes,” he answered, “I am going.”
“You are!” I exclaimed.
“What can I do else?” he asked.
“Do!” said I; “why, do what your own experience dictates.”
“You speak,” said he, “like a woman.”
“And I am a woman,” I replied, with warmth; “but if you submit to this, you are only a slave!”
“Oh! be quiet,” he said; “let me at least have a little peace here.”
In the face of the most certain ruin, and with the urgent remonstrances of his best friends ringing in his ears, Mr. Stenhouse yielded to Brigham’s order to “pull up the Telegraph, root and branch, and go to Ogden.”
As soon as my husband told me that he had been told to “pull up the Telegraph, root and branch, and go,” I knew what that meant. It was like going into a desert and giving up all, simply to prove faith and obedience.
“But surely, after all, you will not go?”

He replied, “I have always obeyed ‘counsel,’ and I am not prepared now to disobey it. What can I do? I must go.”

“Well,” I answered, “you must do as you think best; but if you would take my advice, you would tell Brigham Young plainly that you would not go. Tell him that you are the best judge of your own affairs, and that you can see clearly how obeying his instructions will bring ruin to your family.”

I felt that this would certainly be the case. I had always had a thorough contempt for what was called “asking counsel,” although occasionally I had been obliged to submit to it. I really could not understand why people should have brains at all if they were not to use them; and I am sure I utterly failed to see the superiority of those who set themselves up as “counsellors” to the men whom they attempted to “counsel.” Besides, I had often discovered that the counsel thus given was not always for the benefit of the person counselled.

My husband carefully thought over the matter. I saw he was much troubled, but he came to the conclusion that he would unreservedly accept the order, “obey,” and go.

It was of no use to resist, and so I held my tongue. Very often since, it has occurred to me that probably this was the best thing, after all, that he could do; for it was, in a measure, the means of bringing him to realize his dependent position upon the will of Brigham Young.

He went to visit Ogden, and on his return he said to me, “President Young might as well have sent me into a desert. He may perhaps not know it, for probably he does not comprehend the expenses of a daily paper; but it will ruin me.”

I, of course, did not exult over this unpleasant fulfilment of my anticipations, for I knew too well how greatly it would affect both my family and myself. It had, however, as I hoped, the desired effect of adding to his growing convictions about Brigham and the priesthood, and with this I was satisfied.

Since then I have often asked Mr. S. if he had not better have taken my advice, and he has answered me, “There is a period in every man’s life in Mormonism when he must show his obedience; my time was then. I gave evidence of my obedience, and it brought ruin, as I expected. Henceforth I will follow the best experience of my life.”

Much as the trial had cost us, I rejoiced; for I saw in this a renewal of his own manhood.

Shortly after Mr. S. returned to Salt Lake City with the Telegraph, the Utah Magazine began to question Brigham’s measures, and the editors assumed to speak to the people of their position. This was at once pronounced rebellion and apostasy. The Telegraph took no part against the
rebels, and that was construed to be “aid and comfort” to the enemy. Mr. S. could not oppose a movement that he felt was destined to shake the unchallenged power of the priesthood.

I well remember Mr. S. writing an article upon “Progress,” for the Telegraph. He wrote it at home, and read it to me, paragraph by paragraph, as he wrote it. I thought he was “inspired;” the reasoning was so just, and the words came so freely from his pen. When it was finished, and he read it to me entire, we looked at each other. I thought his look was asking my opinion, and I quickly replied, “Publish it; it is true.” He said, “It is true, but it will bring trouble if published.” “Never mind,” I added, “if it brings us to the door; let us be true to the truth.”

It was published on the 2d of October, 1869.1

The semi-annual conference of the church was held that week, and continued in session five days. At the close of the session, on the Sunday afternoon, the Apostle Amasa Lyman, and Mr. William S. Godbe, soon after prominent men in the reform movement, came to dine with us, by previous appointment. Mr. S. had gone to the post-office, but soon joined them in the parlour, carrying a small newspaper open in his hand as he entered.

After the usual greetings he said, “Brethren, the ball is open; hear this.” In that little paper there was a letter reviewing the article upon “Progress,” and with it the correspondent professed to reveal that there was a “movement” on foot in Salt Lake City to attack Brigham’s assumptions, and make a strike for “civil and religious liberty;” and that the article on “Progress,” while it professed to treat of France under Louis Napoleon, meant Utah under Brigham Young. The article had just only been read a few minutes, and the gentlemen named, Mr. S., and myself, were looking with that vacant, thinking, meditative stare which showed that each one was fully absorbed with the idea that there was something to come of it. At that very instant, Mr. Joseph A. Young, President Young’s eldest son, entered the parlour.

After friendly salutations, Mr. Young excused himself from joining us at dinner; and as we entered the dining-room, we instinctively turned to each other and remarked how singular it was that he should drop in upon us while his father was the subject of conversation and meditation. That, however, was all right.2

On the following Tuesday evening, I made Mr. Joseph A. Young acquainted with the feeling in opposition to his father, and avowed that Mr. S. was in the hostile camp.3 On Saturday, seven elders, of which number Mr. S. was one, were attacked in “the School of the Prophets,” and summoned to appear on the following Saturday.

This was looked for; but Brigham, in his anger, had gone too far, and “disfellowshipped them from the church of Jesus Christ, for irregular
Brigham’s assumption of the right to disfellowship men from Christ because of irregular attendance at a school, brought Mr. S. to a conclusion. He said to me, “With such an assumption of authority, what will he not do next? To submit to it is to acknowledge him absolute and me a slave. There is but one choice now—slavery or freedom. Cost me what it may, I shall be free.” From that day we never attended a meeting of the Saints. In August of the following year, 1870, Mr. S. sent a respectful, kindly letter to the bishop of our Ward, stating that he had not faith in Brigham’s claim to an Infallible Priesthood, and that he ought to be cut off from the church. I added a postscript, stating that I wished to share his fate, although I little dreamed that in three days after that my request should have such a malignant fulfilment.

We were going home on the Saturday night succeeding our withdrawal from the church, a few minutes past ten o’clock. The night was very dark. Our residence is in the suburbs of the city, north of the Temple block, and the road is very quiet. As we went along we suddenly and dimly saw four men come out from under some trees a little distance from us. They separated, and two of them came forward and stumbled up against us, and two passed by the side of us. I thought for a moment that they were intoxicated, but it was soon clear that they were acting from design. As soon as they approached, they, one on each side, seized hold of my husband’s arms, and he, although by no means deficient in strength, was thus rendered powerless. The men, I should state, were masked so that we could not distinguish their features. I imagine that they supposed I should be frightened and run away. But in this they had calculated wrongly. I still clung to my husband’s arm, but with my left hand caught hold of one of the ruffians by the collar of his coat; for I apprehended the worst, well knowing of what atrocities these men were capable. This considerably impeded their movements. The other two, who were likewise masked, stood a few feet distant, and seemed to hesitate for a moment. One of the men who held my husband’s arm exclaimed, “Brethren, do your duty!” The voice was in an instant recognized as that of one of the policemen, whom Mr. S. and myself had patted on the head when a child in England.

Instantly I saw them raise their arms. It was too dark to distinguish any thing definitely, and I thought they were about to kill us. We had both the same thought, and this probably would have been Mr. Stenhouse’s fate had he been alone; but I think that my presence somewhat disarranged their plans. A much less noble fate was reserved for us. I am ashamed to tell what they did. * * * Even now I shudder, as I recall the scenes of that night. I was nearly insane with rage and indignation. I felt at the moment that life was nothing to me, and I called to them to come and kill us. It would have been an honour and even pleasant to have been shot or killed by the assassin’s knife, rather than endure such an indignity as this.
Although the men who attacked us were masked, there is no question in our minds that they were two of the regular, and two of the special police. I have every reason to believe that their original intention was to kill Mr. S. About ten minutes before, they had seen him alone, and they did not believe that I should be with him. Had I run away and left him with them, I believe they would have beaten him to death. Men who would commit such an assault were capable of committing murder.

When they had perpetrated this disgusting and brutal outrage, they turned and fled. We ran after them for some little distance; but we had no arms or any thing to defend ourselves, and as there was another man lurking about a little distance in the direction in which they ran, we thought best not to go any further; for we knew that they would not shrink from murder, if that would conceal what they had done.

I declared in my anger that if there yet remained one solitary link which bound me to Mormonism, it should be severed that night. Not that I blame the mass of the Mormon people; for I know the honest hearts of that community, and that as a body they revolted at the atrocious wrong that was done us; and although not one of them came openly to express that feeling to me, hundreds of them did so in private. I was sick for three days after, so that it was impossible to attend to business. I could not calm my agitated feelings or stifle my indignation. Probably I was wrong in giving way to anger; but it seemed to me that nothing except revenge upon those horrible men could satisfy me. My husband and I felt sure that we knew who they were, but how could we swear to masked men? Some time after, a wife of one of these men, whom we suspected, came to see me, and told me that she believed her husband had been engaged in the affair. It seems perhaps strange that any wife should do this; but she had a great respect for me, and none at all for her husband, as he was very brutal to her.

When I had sufficiently recovered to return to business, I went down to the city with my husband. In passing the house of D. H. Wells, the Mayor of the city, we saw him standing at a short distance from us; but he made no attempt to come forward and express any regret. This I considered it was his place, as mayor of the city, to do; and as an old friend I fully expected as much from him. No Mormon, as I before intimated, came purposely to sympathize with me; but the whole of that day my store was filled with Gentiles,* and for several days after they kept coming to tell me how disgusted and indignant they were at such an abominable

* The Mormons use the term “Gentiles” to designate all outside of the church, whether Christians, Jews, or any other religion, and in this sense it is used in this volume. When a man forsakes Mormonism, he does not become a “Gentile” again, but an “Apostate,” which is a still more odious and opprobrious appellation among the Saints.
outrage. I received also many letters from different parts of the country, both within the Territory of Utah and outside of it.

Mr. Joseph A. Young offered a reward to the chief of police on the night of the attack for the apprehension of the ruffians, and a few “Gentile” friends offered a reward of $500 for evidence that would lead to their identification, but there was no response. A Mormon paper, in order to direct attention away from the guilty parties, tried to insinuate that it was caused by some “personal difficulty.” This course was not a new one. When Dr. Robinson, a few years before, was murdered in Salt Lake City, the Tabernacle insinuated that he had met his death in gambling. That gentleman was utterly innocent of gambling, and was not known to have an enemy.