

Part II. Chapter 44 A Declaration of Sentiments 1850

“Dress up nicely, Lena. Mrs. Daly hasn’t seen you for a long time.” Bridget had sent a note asking for permission to visit, renew their friendship and introduce her two newest sons Tommy and George to her old friend. Betty would look after the other children while Bridget and Lena were paying the call. Lena would be accompanying her mother on her visit and a sunny spring afternoon in April.

Mrs. Jones lived in a four-story Federal style residence on Second Avenue near Ninth. From this perch she overseen her daughter’s marriage and child-rearing at a distance sufficient to let her withdraw when her daughter expressed displeasure with her “meddling.” Now she had embraced her daughter again and surrounded her with love. Bridget wondered how Mrs. Daly was enduring that maternal embrace. Bridget decided not to use the servant’s entrance. Ahe “was not and never had been a servant in Mrs. Jones house,” as she told Lena. Instead, she walked right up the front steps and was happy to see that Mrs. Daly herself answered the door.



After Bridget presented two and a half year-old Tommy and baby George, Mrs. Daly sent for Molly and Charlie, explaining that Will was away, finishing his last semester at a private boarding school.

Mrs. Daly ignored the reason why she was living with her mother, making it sound like it was at her mother’s request that she had moved back home. “Mother is glad to have us with her. Now she doesn’t need an excuse to see the children.” Her mother had come in and greeted Bridget, or rather nodded in her direction, Bridget thought.

Bridget and her children stood up to acknowledge the older woman. She presented her children and Lena curtsied, as she had had been taught always to do when presented to an adult.

Mrs. Jones then directed the conversation back her grandson: “Did you tell them that Will expects to attend Columbia College in the fall, after we return from Europe?”

“Oh, yes, Bridget. Will is to remain in New York for his education, although he had hoped to study in Paris.”

Bridget waited until the older lady had left to pursue her questions. She didn't want to probe, especially as she her friend seemed satisfied to accept living with her mother, although Bridget couldn't imagine anything worse for a married woman of forty than to be living with her mother. Meanwhile, she changed the topic.

"Did you know that my Will died in the cholera epidemic?"

"Oh, Bridget, I am so sorry. Yes, I heard from Mr. Leary, and wanted to send my condolences at the time, but," she pressed her lips together, "my husband strictly forbade me to contact you. He was a man of principles, you see." At that point, Bridget noticed that Mrs. Daly's voice trembled with suppressed anger. Then she changed the subject back to Bridget's loss.

"How did it happen? If there is anything I can do to help, Bridget."

Bridget couldn't bring herself to mention that Will had been a peddler in the streets, which she thought was where he was exposed. She didn't know how Mrs. Daly's principles would regard children peddling in the streets but was sure that it would have been anathema to Mrs. Child. At any rate, no child of hers would ever do that again. She changed the subject.

"Your mother mentioned Europe?" Bridget prompted.

"Yes, I intend to get away from New York while the lawyers are handling my divorce. I'm trying to get possession of the house on Washington Square. I don't want to read or hear the sordid details in the papers, or to be pointed out in the streets as 'that poor woman'. And this may be the last chance we'll all have to travel together, after Will is in college. Mother insists on coming along to help, and I have resigned myself to her presence. Thanks to her generosity in taking us in, I want to do everything to please her. She has stopped criticizing me and has learned that I may not always be in the wrong. I will worry about what comes next when I return. Maybe I'll meet an Italian count," she laughed at her own audacity.

Bridget was astonished. Mrs. Daly seemed greatly changed by her experience, in a totally unexpected way. Instead of being apathetic and heartbroken, she seemed to radiate a zest for life. Bridget had admired her friend before--when she had declined society, preferring to spend time with her children; and when she had taken up the cause of the reformers, although she was obviously naïve and ignorant of the reality of the lives of the prostitutes she sought to reclaim. Now, she had made another leap into the unknown, cutting herself off from all the supports of her class—its society and privileges to file for divorce. Instead of the weeds of injured mourning, she seemed to have donned the apparel of the gay divorcee.

“Have you been keeping in touch with your reformer friends?” Bridget hoped that a connection existed there.

“Yes! Reverend Finney took some of them to the Seneca Falls Convention the previous summer—I would have liked to attend, but my husband forbade it. Oddly, it was during that time that that he began leading his other life, or I began hearing about it. Had he let me go, perhaps I would never have heard those rumors.”

She gave no details, preferring to stress her positive feelings for the the Convention. “Their Declaration has some passages that seemed expressly written for me at that time. Have you read it?” She searched through the secretary desk until she found a copy.

“It is modeled on the *Declaration of Independence*--compiling a list of our grievances against men. . . Listen to this: “*He has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account in man.* When I read that I knew that someone at that meeting had gone through exactly the same experience I was having at the time.”

“I had not heard of the Convention at all,” Bridget replied, but Mrs. Daly went on.

“Here’s one that applies to my situation at present: ‘*He has so framed the laws of divorce, as to what shall be the proper causes of divorce, in case of separation, to whom the guardianship of the children shall be given; as to be wholly regardless of the happiness of the women - the law, in all cases, going upon a false supposition of the supremacy of a man, and giving all power into his hands.*’

“You should read it. It will open your eyes.” She handed the copy to Bridget, who handed it to Lena.

While her mother continued to speak with Mrs. Daly, Lena briefly perused the document and was surprised to learn that girls were not allowed to go to college.

Bridget was amazed at the change in Mrs. Daly. Any feelings she might have harbored of wronged innocence occasioned by Mr. Daly’s dalliance with the actress seemed to have been waived in favor of feelings of triumph inspired by the women’s convention at Seneca Falls, feelings that relieved her of any necessity to observe the customary rituals of dignified suffering by the wronged wife. She had moved on, past her anger, into a world of hope and defiance.

When Bridget later relayed her impressions to Betty, her friend observed that divorce would probably not tarnish her social standing. “She is from a very old

New York family. Several streets are named for her ancestors, I believe. She has not lost any social status by leaving her husband, especially as everyone knew she was the victim. Society will open its arms to embrace and welcome her, even though she is divorced. A new New York law will even allow her to take with her whatever property she brought into her marriage—which was considerable wealth.”

“But social status means nothing to her,” Bridget stopped her friend’s remarks..

“Well, all the better. If she should ever desire it, it’s hers. I only hope Mr. Daly does not decide he no longer needs the services of his tailor.”

Bridget was surprised to receive a note a few days later written on Mrs. Daly’s special stationery.

“My dear Bridget,

It was lovely to see you recently with your darlings. Although your dear Will can never be replaced, having so many children must be some consolation. You can certainly be proud of raising such a large brood. . . . Mother and I were especially impressed with what a confident, mature young lady Helena has become. I hope you won’t think I’m out of place in asking you this, but it occurred to me that you might help me and I might help you now that your family is growing so rapidly. As Helena has finished her education, perhaps you might agree to lending her to me a few days a week, when I am engaged with other affairs. I intend to resume my activities with my friends—you have met some of them I believe.”

Bridget thought she must be referring to the reformers, including Mrs. Wilson and the other lady who had insisted on going to that entertainment establishment, where Mr. Daly had blamed Bridget for leading his wife and their friends astray and forbidden any further contact with her.

“After we return from Europe, I will need someone to be available to help Mother and the children at those times when I am engaged in activities. Helena would be asked to act as a companion to Mother and to supervise Molly and Charlie. Charlie will not take supervision from Molly. He needs a stronger hand. You know that I prefer to supervise my own children. But in my absence--as I try to regain something of my old self--I hope that you can help me. I don’t want to add any regular staff to Mother’s household. She is used to her own cook and housemaid, but she agrees that it would be nice if someone could read to her and play cards and “amuse her.” And perhaps if Helena is as good with the needle as her mother, she might help with some needlework. She will be well paid.”

Bridget showed the letter to Tom, who said they should leave it up to Lena.

Lena (Helena) had suddenly acquired a new luster. Nearly sixteen, some might see her as a beautiful young woman, especially if she had a new dress to bring out her new maturity. The thought that her daughter might work in a fine home, where people went on foreign travels, dressed for dinner, held educated conversations, captured Bridget's imagination. Lena might never again have such an opportunity. Bridget herself had benefited from working for the elderly lady in Galway. There she had learned how well-to-do households were run. Lena would benefit from contact with people in the Jones family, especially now that Mrs. Daly was unencumbered by the strict, judgmental Mr. Daly, who had taken so against her and Tom.

Bridget forgot that she had asked Lena to drop out of school to help her with baby George, who was sickly. Lena should finish school after all, and be furnished with the proper credentials.

"After all, I had them myself, Lena," she said in explaining her change of heart.

Although Lena had no interest in being a companion, she accepted the offer from Mrs. Daly, as it meant that she would be allowed to return to school. She was overjoyed to spend the last month with her friends and teachers, catching up on her classes and preparing for the exams. In June she passed the exams, received her certificate and graduated, all before she was even sixteen. Life had a way of turning corners, just when you least expected.

Another corner was turned when they moved out from Nell's bedroom at Leary's, where they had been staying for almost a year. It had taken them that long to find the two rooms and a tiny kitchen, for twenty dollars a month, on Bleecker St. near Wooster. Tom had been helping move someone out of the rooms and had gone back immediately to ask the landlord about renting them. It was a real bargain, Tom said. "Close to school, to church, to the Learys, A proper residence."

"And to the Dalys," Bridget reminded him. She was happy that Lena would be working for Mrs. Daly now. In truth, she thought it was not even as large as their former rooms on Canal, and twice as expensive, but they would no longer be imposing on Tim and Betty. The children, including the twins, could walk the few blocks south to the Cathedral school. Dan had been taking James there, but now that Lena had finished at the Academy, the twins would go there with him as well. He was the new Chieftain. "And you'll be making your first Communion next May," his mother reminded him.

Lena spent the summer helping with the children as usual, but the *Declaration of Sentiments* which Mrs. Daly had given her mother, occupied her spare thoughts. She had never thought or even heard about any of these rights that had been denied her by men. It was a shock to learn that should she be able to afford college, it would be denied her.

“He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her.”

She had felt privileged to have finished her education at the Academy. She had never thought of college. None of her teachers had ever even mentioned college. She knew that Will, who was her own age, would be entering Columbia when he returned from Europe in the fall. Was it true that women were not allowed there?

He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God.

She had not thought about any sphere of action for herself but teaching or becoming a domestic worker. Most women were content to be mothers and to let their husbands do the work. What other sphere could a woman possibly wish for that would be denied her?

He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.

Did women really lead abject and dependent lives? Her mother and other women she knew all seemed dependent upon a man. But how could they support themselves or raise children otherwise? Even Mrs. Daly had to go home to her mother when she left her husband. The only way a woman could support herself seemed to be by working in an “establishment,” catering to men. It must be true. Was this because of men? Was that necessarily ‘abject’?

“She is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her master - the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty, and to administer chastisement.”

If men would really did have power over her and could prevent her from pursuing her own sphere of action, would it not be better never to marry than to surrender her liberty?

When asked, her mother said she didn't have time to worry about such things. “We've had no power, so neither of us knows how to wield it. I suppose that's a good thing.” As for self-confidence, that she certainly had never lacked!

But Lena kept wondering about the ideas in the Declaration. If they were true, she agreed with their conclusion:

Now, in view of this entire disfranchisement of one-half the people of this country, their social and religious degradation--in view of the unjust laws above mentioned, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States.

When the Dalys returned from Europe that September of 1850, Lena was eager to begin working for them. She had recently had just celebrated her sixteenth birthday and was legally entitled to work. Her only regret was that she would be a domestic entering through the servants' entrance, not a teacher entering through a school room door, as she had planned.

Mrs. Daly summoned her one warm September afternoon to come spend the afternoon reading to Mrs. Jones up in her rooms, at the front of the house on the second floor. Mrs. Daly's rooms were in the back, while the children were on the floor above. The servants lived on the top floor, as was customary. The library was on the first floor, behind the drawing room. The kitchen, pantry, scullery, and storage were in the basement.

Mrs. Jones made clear that she liked everything just so. "I am a little forgetful, so I want everything left where it is, Helena. It upsets me when I can't find things." She liked all the cushions plumped up as if for visitors. She was always hoping that one of her grandchildren or her daughter would stop by and ask if there was anything she wanted. She didn't like a lot of servants—and kept only the cook and housemaid she'd had for years. But she wanted attention, as Lena found.

Mrs. Jones handed her Emerson's Second Series of essays, explaining, "My daughter was reading these during our travels this summer and was praising them so highly that I agreed to read them. My eyes aren't so good any more and I have been unable to read lately. I'll have to rely on your young eyes, Helena." She pointed to another volume on the side table. "I have another book which we may choose to read if there's anything distasteful." Lena saw that it was *The Ten Virgins and Other Sermons on the End Times* by Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne. She hoped Mrs. Jones found nothing distasteful in Emerson.

Mrs. Daly had suggested that she begin by reading Emerson's "Spiritual Laws," which she had found immensely comforting. Lena was glad for the opportunity to read Mr. Emerson. None of her teachers at St. Mary's had mentioned him. Most of what he wrote seemed way over her head, and Mrs. Jones was soon nodding off. When Lena stopped reading, the lady roused herself and said, "Please continue, Helena. The sound of your voice is very soothing."

Lena read on thinking it was all gibberish, until she read the passage, *“The regular course of studies, the years of academical and professional education have not yielded me better facts than some idle books under the bench in the Latin School. What we do not call education is more precious than that which we call so. We form no guess, at the time of receiving a thought, of its comparative value. And education often wastes its effort in attempts to thwart and balk this natural magnetism, which is sure to select what belongs to it.”* This stopped her as she realized that he was dismissing formal education! This would have sounded like heresy to her teachers. Possibly this was the reason none had ever mentioned him. Further on, she read further bold assertions about her favorite subject, history: *“There is less intention in history than we ascribe to it. We impute deep laid far-sighted plans to Caesar and Napoleon; but the best of their power was in nature, not in them.”*

She couldn't stop reading, and was glad that Mrs. Jones continued to doze. Lena could barely imagine a lady of Mrs. Daly's standing reading such broadminded ideas as these, but she remembered her fondness for *The Mother's Book*. Lena had read it aloud a number of times while her mother worked or nursed or rocked one of the children. Mrs. Child's was the only voice she knew that carried echoes of Emerson.

She read that *“a higher law than that of our will regulates events; that our painful labors are unnecessary and fruitless; that only in our easy, simple, spontaneous action are we strong, and by contenting ourselves with obedience we become divine.”* Perhaps it was true. She had her plans to become a teacher, but perhaps there was a higher law that determined that she should be a companion in this household and read Emerson. Perhaps she would never have encountered his ideas otherwise.

Later, she came across a passage that had been underlined, evidently by Mrs. Daly: *“Each person has his or her own vocation. The talent is the call. There is one direction in which all space is open to you. You have faculties silently inviting you there to endless exertion. You are like a ship in a river; you run against obstructions on every side but one; on that side all obstruction is taken away and you sweep serenely over God's depths into an infinite sea.”* Perhaps this passage had given Mrs. Daly the courage to leave her marriage. Perhaps she could trust that God would show her that opening into the infinite sea that would be her “call.”

“Mr. Emerson's ideas are quite audacious, aren't they?” she asked Mrs. Jones when she woke up. She really meant to say “radical,” but didn't want to alarm Mrs. Jones or put a stop to the reading.'

“Oh, I think my daughter is right about Mr. Emerson.” the older woman reassured her. “He's a man of vision.”

Working for Mrs. Daly sometimes meant working on Saturdays—Mrs. Daly might send over a message Saturday morning summoning her. Sundays were the only days she had guaranteed free to tackle the laundry piles and other chores her mother had saved for her. Working at the Dalys allowed Lena to realize that not every household was as improvisational as the O’Shaughnessys’.