

# THE FIRST OF THE FLAPPERS

**J**UST WHEN LADY ASTOR was ridiculing the flapper, there emerged from the printer's a two-volume book which describes not only the first of the flappers but the first of the Lady Astors, and it is hard to say which of them was the more pitilessly ridiculed in her day. The book, "Elizabeth Cady Stanton as Revealed in her Letters, Diary, and Reminiscences" (Harper's), takes us back to the period when "shorts," meaning short skirts with trousers underneath, startled the world. The "Bloomer costume," this innovation was then called, and Mrs. Stanton writes thus of its principal sponsor:

There was one bright woman among the many in our Seneca Falls literary circle to whom I would give more than a passing notice — Mrs. Amelia Bloomer, who represented three novel phases of woman's life. She was assistant postmistress; an editor of a reform paper advocating temperance and woman's rights; and an advocate of the new costume which bore her name.

In 1849 her husband was appointed postmaster, and she became his deputy, was duly sworn in, and, during the administration of Taylor and Fillmore, served in that capacity. When she assumed her duties the improvement in the appearance and conduct of the office was generally acknowledged. A neat little room adjoining the public office became a kind of ladies' exchange, where those coming from different parts of the town could meet to talk over the news of the day, and read the papers and magazines that came to Mrs. Bloomer as editor of the *Lily*. Those who enjoyed the brief reign of a woman in the post-office can readily testify to the void felt by the ladies of the village when Mrs. Bloomer's term expired and a man once more reigned in her stead. However, she still edited the *Lily*, and her office remained a fashionable center for several years.

Altho she wore the bloomer dress, its originator was Elizabeth Smith Miller, the only daughter of Gerrit Smith. In the winter of 1851 Mrs. Miller came to visit me in Seneca Falls, drest somewhat in the Turkish style—short skirt, full trousers of fine black broadcloth; a Spanish cloak of the same material reaching to the knee; beaver hat and feathers and dark furs; altogether a most becoming costume and exceedingly convenient for walking in all kinds of weather. To see my cousin, with a lamp in one hand and a baby in the other, walk upstairs with ease and grace, while, with flowing robes, I pulled myself up with difficulty, lamp and baby out of the question, readily convinced me that there was sore need of reform in woman's dress, and I promptly donned a similar costume. What incredible freedom I enjoyed for two years! Like a captive set free from his ball and chain, I was always ready for a brisk walk through sleet and snow and rain, to climb a mountain, jump over a fence, work in the garden, in fact, for any necessary locomotion.

Mrs. Bloomer having the *Lily* in which to discuss the merits of the new dress, the press generally took up the question, and much valuable information was elicited on the physiological results of woman's fashionable attire; the crippling effect of tight waists and long skirts, the heavy weight on the hips, and high heels, all combined to throw the spine out of plumb and lay the foundation for all manner of nervous diseases. But, while all agreed that some change was absolutely necessary for the health of women, the press stoutly ridiculed those who were ready to make the experiment.

A few sensible women, in different parts of the country, adopted the costume, and farmers' wives especially proved its convenience. It was also worn by skaters, gymnasts, tourists, and in sanitariums. But, while the few realized its advantages, the many laughed it to scorn, and heaped such ridicule on its wearers that they soon found that the physical freedom enjoyed did not compensate for the persistent persecution and petty annoyances suffered at every turn. To be rudely gazed at in

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public and private, to be the conscious subjects of criticism, and to be followed by crowds of boys in the streets, were all, to the very last degree, exasperating. A favorite doggerel that our tormentors chanted, when we appeared in public places, ran thus:

Heigh! ho! in rain and snow,  
The bloomer now is all the go.  
Twenty tailors take the stitches,  
Twenty women wear the breeches.  
Heigh! ho! in rain or snow,  
The bloomer now is all the go.

The singers were generally invisible behind some fence or attic window. Those who wore the dress can recall countless amusing and annoying experiences. The patience of most of us was exhausted in about two years; but our leader, Mrs. Miller, bravely adhered to the costume for nearly seven years, under the most trying circumstances. While her father was in Congress, she wore it at many fashionable dinners and receptions in Washington. She was bravely sustained, however, by her husband, Colonel Miller, who never flinched in escorting his wife and her coadjutors, however inartistic their costumes might be. Mrs. Miller was also encouraged by the intense feeling of her father on the question of woman's dress. To him the whole revolution in woman's position turned on her dress. The long skirt was the symbol of her degradation.

Some very distinguished women of that day went in for "shorts," and Mrs. Stanton goes on to say,

The names of those who wore the bloomer costume, besides those already mentioned, were Paulina Wright Davis, Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Mrs. William Burleigh, Celia Burleigh, Amelia Willard, Dr. Harriet N. Austin, Charlotte Beebe Wilbour, Helen Jarvis, Lydia Jenkins, and many patients in sanitariums, whose names I can not recall. Looking back to this experiment, I am not surprized at the hostility of individual men to the dress, as it made it very uncomfortable for them to go anywhere with those who wore it. People would stare, many make rude remarks, boys follow in crowds, with jeers and laughter, so that gentlemen in attendance would feel it their duty to show

fight, unless they had sufficient self-control to pursue the even tenor of their way, as the ladies themselves did, without taking the slightest notice of the commotion created. Colonel Miller went through the ordeal with coolness and dogged determination, to the vexation of his acquaintances, who thought one of the duties of a husband was to prescribe his wife's costume.

Tho we did not realize the success we hoped for by making the dress popular, yet the effort was not lost. We were well aware that the dress was not artistic, and tho we made many changes, our own good taste was never satisfied. After giving up the experiment, we found that the costume in which Diana the Huntress is represented, and that worn on the stage by Ellen Tree in the play of "Ion," would have been more artistic and as convenient. But we, who had made the experiment, were too happy to move about unnoticed and unknown, to risk again, the happiness of ourselves and our friends by any further experiments. I have never wondered since that the Chinese women allow their daughters' feet to be encased in iron shoes, or that the Hindoo widows walk calmly to the funeral pyre; for great are the penalties of those who dare resist the behests of the tyrant Custom.

It was a favorite joke of Mrs. Stanton's to address Mrs. Miller as "Julius," and one should bear this in mind while reading the following letter to the inventor of bloomers:

SENECA FALLS, AUGUST 5, 1851.

DEAR JULIUS,—Now I have something to tell poor Julius that will cheer his sad heart. Well, you heard of the proposed festival at Glen Haven. I went to it and had a most pleasant



time. I took Amelia, who was in "shorts," and Theodore. There I saw ten ladies in costume—three from Syracuse, four in our party, and the rest residents of Glen Haven. Theodosia Gilbert's get-up pleased me very much. She was dressed in a short green tunic not reaching to the knee, and white linen drilling trousers made *à la masculine*. They all wore white trousers with dresses of various colors. In a word, the "shorts" were the theme of conversation, tracts and addresses. Oh, that you had been there! We dined in the open air and had a great many agreeable people at table, so that the conversation was quite brilliant and interesting. At dessert, William Burleigh spoke in high praise of the "shorts" and with great disgust of the "longs." "The long dress is now an offense to my eyes," he said: "and I can not help exclaiming to myself whenever I see a woman trailing bedraggled petticoats through the dust, 'Oh, the dirty creature!'" Warm applause from the delighted listeners. But Mr. Burleigh had with him a Miss B., whom he treated with too great attention. I like fun and frolic, romps and jokes, but sentimental pawings are excessively disgusting to me. Returning to Glen Haven, we reached Skeneateles at seven, and lo and behold, all the town had come out to see us! We had left our carriage and coachman there, and the news had spread through the village that four ladies in "shorts" were to come down in the evening boat; so there the multitude stood—men women, and children. Ossian Dodge with his guitar in a green baize bag and I with my baby in a blue merino cloak took the lead, the three other ladies and two or three odd-looking gentlemen in long hair following. What a spectacle for men and angels as we solemnly proceeded from the boat to our carriages. What would the venerable judge have said could he have witnessed the scene!! I expected to be insulted, but not one word was said. The people had evidently been impelled by an honest curiosity to see—nothing more. But I was glad enough to find myself shut up in a carriage in brisk motion with my blessed baby safe in my lap. Julius, how long will the heathen rage? I have received another awful shot about the short dress, and seven vials of wrath have been poured on my devoted head. I think they were bottled by one of my New York sisters. They have a metropolitan odor. We are very much like the poor fox in the fable, who having cut off his tail and not being able to restore it, found that nothing remained for him to do but to persuade the other foxes to do likewise that he might not be a by-word among his kind. As we have performed this surgical operation on our entire wardrobe, nothing remains for us to do but to induce as many as possible to follow our example. We can have no peace in traveling until we cut off the great national petticoat. God grant that we may be more successful than the fox.

A serious-minded set of women were the flappers of that day—"strong-minded," too, and eager to fight for "women's rights" even tho the fight might involve addressing a State Legislature. In Mrs. Stanton we have a precursor of Lady Astor. When a woman could make herself heard in the Capitol at Albany, it was only a question of time when women would take their place in political life in a far more effectual way. However, it required courage to break the ice:

Women had been willing so long to hold a subordinate position, both in private and public affairs, that a gradually growing feeling of rebellion among them quite exasperated the men, and their manifestations of hostility in public meetings were often as ridiculous as humiliating.

True, those gentlemen were all quite willing that women should join their societies and churches to do the drudgery; to work up the enthusiasm in fairs and revivals, conventions, and flag presentations; to pay a dollar apiece into their treasury for the honor of being members of their various organizations; to beg money for the church; to circulate petitions from door to door; to visit saloons; to pray with or defy rum-sellers; to teach school at half price, and sit round the outskirts of a hall, in teachers' state conventions, like so many wallflowers; but they would not allow them to sit on the platform, address the assembly, or vote for men and measures.

From the year 1850 conventions were held in various States, and their respective legislatures were continually besieged. Appeals, calls for meetings, and petitions were circulated without number. In 1854 I prepared my first speech for the New York legislature. That was a great event in my life. My father felt so nervous when he saw by the *Albany Evening Journal*, that I was to speak at the Capitol, he asked me to stop at Johnstown on my way to Albany. Late one evening, when he was alone in his office, I entered and took my seat on the opposite side of his table, to read my speech to him. On no occasion, before or since, was I ever more embarrassed—an audience of one, and that the one of all others whose approbation I most desired,



whose disapproval I most feared. I knew he condemned the whole movement, and was deeply grieved at the active part I had taken. Hence I was fully aware that I was about to address a wholly unsympathetic audience. However, I began, with a dogged determination to give all the power I could to my manuscript, and not to be discouraged or turned from my purpose by any tender appeals or adverse criticisms. I described the widow in the first hours of her grief, subject to the intrusions of the coarse minions of the law, taking inventory of the household goods, of the old armchair in which her loved one had breathed his last, of the old clock in the corner that told the hour he passed away. I threw all the pathos I could into my voice and language at this point, and, to my intense satisfaction, I saw tears filling my father's eyes. I can not express the exultation I felt, thinking that now he would see, with my eyes, the injustice women suffered under the laws he understood so well.

Feeling that I had touched his heart, I went on with renewed confidence, and, when I had finished, I saw he was thoroughly magnetized. With beating heart I waited for him to break the silence. He was evidently deeply pondering over all he had heard, and did not speak for a long time. I believed I had opened to him a new world of thought. He had listened long to the complaints of women, but from the lips of his own daughter they had come with deeper pathos and power. At last, turning abruptly, he said: "Surely you have had a happy, comfortable life, with all your wants and needs supplied; and yet that speech fills me with self-reproach; for one might naturally ask, how can a young woman, tenderly brought up, who has had no bitter personal experience, feel so keenly the wrongs of her sex? Where did you learn this lesson?" "I learned it here," I replied, "in your office, when a child, listening to the complaints women made to you. They who have sympathy and imagination to make the sorrows of others their own can readily learn all the hard lessons of life from the experience of others." "Well, well!" he said, "you have made your points clear and strong; but I think I can find you even more cruel laws than those you have quoted." He suggested some improvements in my speech, looked up other laws, and it was one o'clock in the morning before we kissed each other good-night. How he felt on the question after that I do not know, as he never said anything in favor of or against it. He gladly gave me any help I needed, from time to time, in looking up the laws, and was very desirous that whatever I gave to the public should be carefully prepared.

The first woman's convention, which met in Albany at this time, was followed by "a kind of protracted meeting" that lasted two weeks, and there were several legislative hearings, to say nothing of meetings in Association Hall. Further:

Being the capital of the State, discussion was aroused at every fireside, while the comments of the press were humorous and varied. Every little country paper had something witty or silly to say about the uprising of the "strong-minded."

Here is a specimen of the way such editors talked at that time. The *Albany Register*, in an article on "Woman's Rights in the Legislature," dated March 7, 1854, says:

"While the feminine propagandists of women's rights confined themselves to the exhibition of short petticoats and long-legged boots, and to the holding of conventions and speechmaking in concert-rooms, the people were disposed to be amused by them, as they are by the wit of the clown in the circus, or the performances of Punch and Judy on fair days, or the minstrelsy of gentlemen with blackened faces, on banjos, the tambourine, and bones. But the joke is becoming stale. People are getting cloyed with these performances, and are looking for some healthier and more intellectual amusement. The ludicrous is wearing away, and disgust is taking the place of pleasurable sensations, arising from the novelty of this new phase of hypocrisy and infidel fanaticism.

"People are beginning to inquire how far public sentiment should sanction or tolerate these unsexed women, who would step out from the true sphere of the mother, the wife, and the daughter, and, taking upon themselves the duties and the business of men, stalk into the public gaze, and, by engaging in the politics, the rough controversies and trafficking of the world, upheave existing institutions, and overturn all the social relations of life."

The frivolous objections some women made to our appeals were as exasperating as they were ridiculous. To reply to them politely, at all times, required a divine patience. On one occasion, after addressing the legislature, some of the ladies, in congratulating me, inquired in a deprecating tone, "What do you do with your children?" "Ladies," I said, "it takes me no longer to speak than you to listen; what have you done with your children the two hours you have been sitting here?"