

Autobiography of Rebecca Webb (Pennock) Lukens

I have latterly often thought I would pen a sketch of my life which might be interesting to my children when their mother should slumber in the grave, and in delineating the events which have marked its course draw for them a portrait of the noble, the exalted being to whom they owe their existence now I trust a Saint in a better world. They will be made acquainted by this with all the incidents which have varied the flight of thirty summers. Of the wild and romantic reveries of youth, the pure and perfect happiness of a short period of more mature life, and the feelings agonized and harrowed to phrensy which followed those few brief years of bliss. My design is not merely to gratify their curiosity but if possible to improve them by an instructive lesson by warning them of those errors in which my own inexperience and warmth both of imagination and feelings too often led me & by holding up to their view the bright example of their father incite them to follow in his steps the path of every noble every sublime virtue. In the fate of their mother they will learn the instability of earthly happiness and of the danger of making for themselves a paradise of bliss and vainly thinking the worshiped idol which absorbed all their thoughts and made this earth their Heaven should long be permitted to receive the worship due only to their Creator. In bitter sorrow have I learned this lesson and fain would I guard you my beloved girls from the fatal error. But, as I wish not to be led into digressions, I will begin my narrative from the earliest years of life which memory can furnish me with incidents to relate.

My Paternal ancestors were among the most respectable of those who wearied with the tyranny and oppression of civilized Europe sought amid the solitudes of America a quiet retreat and a secure home. What is it to me, though pride would whisper their titles designated them of Patrician race. They were willing to forego such petty distinctions and rest their claims to respect in the country of their adoption solely to their actions and rights as men willing to devote their talents and their fortunes in aiding to civilize and improve this interesting section of the world.

They settled in Pennsylvania and the heavy stroke of the axe sounded loud and solitary amid its thick and lonely forests. Here the brothers (there were two) reared their future dwellings. The houses still stand relics of antiquity, though now surrounded on all sides by more commodious and modern dwellings. That of the older brother still in possession of the family is still an interesting object. The situation is lofty and commands a view for miles over the adjacent country. Tall evergreens surround it and its strong walls, lofty ceilings and spacious apartments would almost give an idea of a feudal castle. My grandfather, born among the wilds, inherited with the large patrimony of his father all his lofty and unbending principles. Devoted to the country of his birth he served her with fidelity in the Assembly of his native State until the loud tocsin of war sounded through the land to awake her sons from the lethargy, in which they were sunk, to vindicate their rights as men and shake off the trammels of despotism. But declining in the vale of years my grandfather felt not its thrilling power, but retiring from public life devoted the evening of his days to agricultural pursuits, and endeavoured to forget that the angel of Peace had fled before the demon of discord. My father was his youngest child, and had until the period of his marriage always remained under the Paternal roof. But long before that event the struggle for freedom had ceased, a new government organized and the United States declared and acknowledged independent.

I can well imagine that in her youthful days my mother must have possessed many attractions. Her understanding was superior, though her education had been much neglected and she possessed a vigorous and powerful mind. My father was generous and amiable, full of the kindest feelings, and wishing to make all around him happy. I was the first to name him Father and on me was his affection fondly lavished. My first ideas abound with instances of his indulgence. My mother, occupied with the care of an increasing family, had little control over my actions and I was left to the exercise of my own will in my childish pursuits. The first event which served to impress itself on my memory was the death of my grandfather and myself forming one in the procession which followed him to the grave. Years rolled on and among my greatest enjoyments was the indulgence of being permitted to spend a week occasionally with some near relatives, the children of my father's elder brother. They were all much older than myself and consisted of a brother and two sisters. Then it was I felt of some importance. I was the caressed favorite of the whole family and my arrival was always hailed with the heart's warm welcome. My uncle and his wife were both invalids and the most affectionate endeavours were always used by their family to beguile the hours of pain and sickness. Every innocent amusement was allowed me. With my young friends I have bounded over hill and dale as wild, happy and joyous as youth could make me, when I neither knew nor feared misfortune. My cousins I loved with all the warmth of my nature. They were the first to endeavour to train my mind and give it its proper bliss, amiable and endearing in their manners. I eagerly listened to their instructions and wished to practice the lessons they taught. At an early period of my life my father, affluent in his circumstances, had spent a few years in the metropolis of our country to give his family the advantages of education, which our residence at that time denied, but a city life not being congenial to my mother's taste it was abandoned before I had received any permanent advantages from it and at the age of twelve I was placed at a boarding school.

There I continued for a year and I believe made tolerable progress in my studies and formed many intimacies. At the expiration of that term I returned home, and after spending a short time with my family I again resumed my studies, but at a different seminary. The pleasant town of W____ had schools better calculated to meet the views of my friends, and I was placed there to pursue with eagerness the education I wished much to gain.

Now it was that life began to open new charms for me. I was rapidly improving, a favorite with my teachers and at the head of all my classes, and here I first found that the wealth and respectability of my father made many eagerly seek my favour. I had many friends, some that I loved with ardour, and often after the duties of the day had passed over, hanging on the arm of one of these I again indulged in the rambling propensity, which had almost grown with my growth. Every beautiful and romantic situation was explored with unabated enthusiasm and, when the dusky shades of evening would warn us to regain our home, they were left with regret and again, with the next leisure, revisited. The banks of the B____ afforded many a delightful view and often were they trod over by the elastic steps of youth.

I was young, ardent and happy. My preceptor was the best of men. (Peace to his ashes he now rests in the grave). Every pains was taken to instill religious impressions into the minds of his pupils. He was a minister in the religious society of friends, and in truth he practiced what he preached. When he showed to us the wonderful order of the Heavenly bodies he dwelt with energy on the Great Glorious Architect, and with a strength of language and sublimity of expression, which still dwells in my memory. And when he opened to our view the book of nature it was to draw our minds to nature's God. I always look on this period of my life with pleasure and even now love to retrace it. It is true vanity now began to whisper me I was of

some importance, yet still I was too full of the untamed spirit of youth to listen much to its suggestions and my beloved tutor had often warned against its siren power spending my time between my studies and occasional visits home I reached my sixteenth year and with much regret bid farewell for a time to my scholastic pursuits and returned to the Paternal roof.

For a long time I felt lonely and isolated. I had no companions to mingle my thoughts with. I have already said I was the eldest of my family, which now consisted of two brothers and four sisters. The youngest boy, an infant, was placed under my care and my mother was anxious I should learn to assist her in the duties of her family. This for a time was irksome to one so new to it as I was, but I soon became interested in my little charge who was a lovely child, full of fervor and endearing traits. Often would I wander with him over the high hills that sheltered our home, and when tired of gathering the wild flowers, the first offering of Spring, for his amusement, I would seat myself on some fallen tree and with the volume in my hand, or lost in reverie, as he played at my feet, wander in a world of my own creating or be immersed in the story of times gone by. Books I read, or rather eagerly devoured their contents. The wild Dramatic stores of Hotsebin and Lewis I read with intense interest. Shakespeare awoke the noblest feelings of my heart, and many, many is the night I have hid in my chamber. The light served me to indulge in my favorite pursuit till the morning's dawn. Had my reading been more select it would have been of incalculable advantage to me, but I had no one to advise or direct my choice and I read with avidity all that fell in my way.

My cousins still held their influence over me, but I was too little with them at this period for them to be aware of the defect or to remedy it, and my mother, occupied with her domestic concerns, gave no thought about it. I was now rapidly advancing toward womanhood and, to perfect myself in several branches of my studies, again prevailed on my indulgent father to permit my return to W____. Oh, what were the glad emotions of my heart when the consent was obtained. how did it beat with anticipated pleasure. I could not rest until my dear H. and M. were made partakes of my joy. It was a lovely afternoon when I rode over to inform them of it. They participated in my feelings and assisted me to prepare for the school. Mary was delighted too to see me so happy and as soon as my preparations were completed I again left home.

My respected teacher had now engaged in a larger school. In the interval of my absence he had suffered severe domestic affliction. His wife had been taken from him by the hand of death, and he was left a sincere mourner with an infant family. His relatives had kindly assisted him in taking the charge of his children and he was left at liberty to attend entirely to the care of his establishment. It had now become a boarding school where all the pupils were accommodated under the same roof. here consequently we were more restricted than before, and, although I could no longer range at will during the hours of leisure, yet I was happy in devoting my attention to the different branches in which I wished to perfect myself. Chemistry and the French language claimed my attention and I devoted myself with untiring zeal to their acquirement. I was ambitious of distinguishing myself, considering this as the last opportunity I should have of improving in those studies. Indeed I was fully employed. Occasionally on a fine day we were indulged in a ramble to some favorite spot, and in the moonlight evenings were permitted to promenade through the grounds, and perhaps there was not a happier family to be found.

I love to dwell on those incidents. They mark a period of my life when every object had a charm for me for I was happy in myself and disposed to find happiness in all around me. No bitter sorrow was then felt or dreaded. When the time drew near for me to return I left W_____

with regret, after exchanging many a tearful adieu and promise of lasting friendship with those I left, as I stepped into the carriage in which I was to take my solitary ride home.

My return was in early spring, and after a few weeks I prepared to attend my father in a visit to Philadelphia. A short time served to equip and my heart bounded with anticipated pleasure.

The visit was a delightful one for every object wore the charm of novelty to me so long accustomed to secluded retirement. My time was divided among my numerous friends, and during the period of my stay a friend related to my mother called to see me. I heard when I entered the house she was in the parlour above awaiting my arrival and, as I sincerely valued her, I ran hastily into the room with an exclamation of pleasure. I started back, for she was not alone, and felt my face glow as, after welcoming me, she turned and introduced me to her companion, who she named as a Dr. L. who had drove her in his gig to the city. He bowed with a peculiar grace, and for a moment my eyes rested on his interesting face and his tall and commanding figure. He next bent them with confusion to the ground. After a desultory conversation he rose, and, pleading business, left us.

I spent the day pleasantly with Mrs. W____. In our walk through the city we again met the pleasing stranger and in the evening they returned to the beautiful village of Abington, where Mrs. W. resided, and where her companion, she informed me, had an extensive practice.

After they had taken leave my thought involuntarily dwelt on the interview with the young physician, with an interest I could not define. Young as I was I had heard the language of love in its most witching form, but my heart had remained untouched, and I smiled at a passion I had never felt and was sceptic enough to doubt its potency. It was the first time I was aroused to serious thought. The appearance, the very being my fancy had pictured in my lonely reveries, calculated to arouse every tender, every ennobling feeling, and one, even when thoughts are as visionary and ideal. I felt that the heart could love while it throbbed with life.

He was in his person above the common height. An air of grace and dignity were blended in his form. His hair was of the deepest shade of black, his eyes hazen, and his other features manly and remarkably handsome. But, although his was the "gloss of fashion and the mould of form" yet it was the expression of his countenance "where every good had seemed to get its seal" that most interested me. It spoke of lofty unbending principle, of a mind exalted and that felt its own power, while the benevolence which beamed from his eye and the suavity of his manner won their way to the heart, and fixed his empire there.

Mrs. W____. had spoken of him with enthusiasm in our short interview, and I was left in a state of feelings, as I before observed, I could not understand.

At length, by an effort, I banished, or strove to banish his image from my mind and mixed with my friends the gayest of the gay. My pride assisted me in driving the fascinating form of the stranger from my mind, and in a few days I returned with my father home.

Spring was now advancing and the country had never looked more lovely. Riding on horseback was a favorite recreation of mine, and often, after the tasks of the day had been completed, would I eagerly enjoy the ride across to my cousins. The kind indulgence which had been lavished on the favorite little girl was not withdrawn from me now, when childish pursuits had ceased to please, and admitted now as the companion of my cousins I enjoyed with a high zest the hours I spent with them.

My aunt had long been dead, and my uncle, surrounded by his three children, was not suffered to feel a want which they could relieve, and each one strove to pay him that attention his increasing age and infirmities required.

Then it was my heart even seemed to expand. I knew I was valued as I wished to be, and my feelings were all unlocked to them. In one of my visits I casually mentioned, in speaking of my visit to P_____, the young Dr. L. I felt embarrassed as I spoke, when Mary, fixing her eyes on me, smiled and replied "Ah, dear cousin, take care of that little heart of thine". "It is in no danger, dear M., I rejoined, for it is too proud to yield unsought and the acquaintance is too transient to suppose it won".

H. fixed her eye on me as I spoke and sighed. Early disappointment had clouded her youth and saddened the brightest of her prospects. Death had snatched away the beloved friend to whom her affections had been given and she would vain guard my heart from the pangs of hopeless, disappointed love.

Spring had now given place to early Summer and nature wore her gayest garb. Our walks were thickly shaded and every shrub lent its odour to the air or gave a more pleasant screen from the rays of an already powerful sun.

Late in the afternoon of a clear, beautiful day, I was sitting alone, and after throwing down Scott's fascinating "Lady of the Lake", which had claimed my attention for some time, was watching a most glorious sunset from the open window and, absorbed in a reverie, I scarcely noticed the approach of a step until the voice of Mrs. W. aroused me with a start of surprise and she stood in the parlour before me.

After the salutations, which spoke her welcome were over, she smilingly told me she was not alone, her husband and Dr. L. were with her, and as she spoke they entered the room. W. shook me familiarly by the hand and I felt my face and neck glow as I turned from him to meet the approach of his friend.

After they were seated I left them to inform my mother of their arrival and procure them refreshments.

I was provoked at myself for feeling the confusion I did and mortified I had so little command over those feelings. I determined to keep a strict guard over myself in future, nor let my tell-tale face show I felt any emotion. With this resolve I returned into the room. My father and mother were already there and in conversation with their friends. After tea Mrs. W. proposed a walk, the evening was so lovely, and we followed along the margin of the beautiful stream which passed through my father's grounds.

I walked by the side of Dr. L. and by degrees the reserve I had maintained gradually wore away, as he conversed with fluency on the beauties of the view before us. This he did with an animation and strength of expression, which plainly showed he fully felt and could appreciate its power. I had never before met with a mind so congenial with my own and I listened with delighted attention.

From the beauties of the view he turned to the charms of poetry, and here again I was in an element of my own. He quoted with animated expression some of the witching stanzas of "Marmion" and when we returned to the house, the last of the party, I felt I had never spent so delightful an hour.

When I retired for the night I seriously took myself to task and wept, as I felt that my firm resolves had all been useless. Was I without knowing I had caused the slightest interest to surrender my affections unsought to one, who, however, amiable, nay fascinating, he appeared, was nearly a stranger to me. Forbid it all the pride of woman's character. I knew my own heart and felt if I once loved it would be with ardour, and that forever, and as I knelt by my bedside I fervently prayed for strength to still my new and indelible feelings. I arose more composed and sought my pillow. I must here observe I had no counsellor, no friend in my own family in

whom to repose confidence. Between my mother and me there had never been that endearing familiarity which ought to exist between parent and child. She was even reserved, and rather repelled than claimed my confidence. My sisters were too young and my cousins at a distance. But I wished to act correctly and to guard my feelings with maiden pride from observation.

The next several days were devoted to the duties of hospitality and frequently in the evenings our walks were renewed. Still, though I had determined to the contrary, I ever found the Dr. by my side. Mrs. W. seemed anxious to promote an acquaintance, whether by accident or design I could not tell.

The last evening of his stay was drawing to a close, when after listening to a discourse, to me but too interesting, I found we were alone. He gently drew my arm within his own and silent, and embarrassed, I walked by his side. The moon had arisen in all her splendour, when we reached the wide piazza which fronted our dwelling. What a glorious view this is, said he, as our eyes rested on the beautiful scenery before us softened by her rays. We paused to contemplate it and, seating ourselves on the bench of the piazza, he expatiated on the beauties and order of the Heavenly bodies, of the vast attributes of Him who formed and controlled them, and that he felt the one who could view them unmoved must possess a mind dead to every noble, every exalted feeling.

Then was a thrilling sound in his tone as he spoke, and such a purity of thought, such a grace of expression, that I felt almost as though I were listening to a being of another sphere. Time passed on unheeded. He culled the sweetest flowers of fancy for me and gave freely of the stores of his highly cultivated mind. At length he spoke of his own feelings and declared how happy he had been since we had met. Tomorrow, my dear R., said he, I must bid adieu to you all, the active duties of my profession render it necessary, and say, will I sometimes be remembered in thy thoughts, or will the remembrance of something more interesting _____ me from thy memory.

It is now time for me to explain myself. From my first seeing thee in the city I determined, if possible, to excite an interest in thy heart and prevailed with our mutual friend to introduce me. Say then, dear R., have I succeeded and may I hope to win thy love? I cannot make those unmeaning professions found on the tongue of every trifler, but I can offer thee a heart that has never before felt the witchery of female power, a heart that would love and cherish thee as the first, best gift of heaven. Our tastes are alike, our minds assimilate, and may I hope for a reciprocal interest? Mrs. W. has long made me acquainted with thee and first excited my wish to see thee. Do not then think this declaration hasty. Grant my wish and permission to return.

I was agitated with powerful emotion as he urged his suit with irresistable eloquence. My head rested on my bosom. My heart beat with painful quickness, for I felt happy, aye, the happiest of the happy.

Yet I was young, inexperienced, and surprise and diffidence kept me silent.

At length I summoned my scattered thoughts to my aid and, as soon as I could still the agitation, which indeed shook my frame, I replied to his impassioned request to revisit me by a few words of assent and a reference to my father.

He thanked me over and over again for what he said had made him the happiest of men. A long and interesting discourse followed and when at length we seperated all was explained, all understood, and our plighted faith freely exchanged. In the solitude of my chamber I yielded to my overwrought feelings, and the tears of joy which I shed, when reflected on what had passed, relieved my too happy heart.