

The Noble Life of Frances Willard

by
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When Frances Willard was a little girl her father moved to the far west, where he had bought a farm near Janesville, Wisconsin.

The journey was taken in three large wagons loaded with the household goods. Mr. Willard drove the first wagon; the second was driven by Oliver, Frances' twelve-year-old brother, and the third by Mrs. Willard. If anyone had noticed the two little girls seated on an old desk in the back of this last wagon, talking now and then to the staid old dog which trotted on behind and enjoying every new sight and sound, he would not have selected either of the two as marked to be one of the great women of all time.

Mr. Willard had been a teacher in Oberlin for years and removed to the West for his health. The change affected the education of the children somewhat, transferring it largely from books to the great book of nature. They played out of doors and learned to know and love all God's creatures.

Even in her childhood Francis showed her strength of character, independence and originality. One of her great desires was for a gun, and she was not at all satisfied with only shooting her brother's when her mother was by to see that no harm came. She accepted a dare of her brother's to walk around the pasture in front of him while he carried his double barrel shotgun just behind her with both hammers cocked.

She early developed her great ability to overcome obstacles and carry out her purposes. An instance of this is when she patiently trained a pet cow, first to a rope harness, then to the saddle, because her father declined to let her ride horseback. When the father found that she was riding a trained cow he promptly put the horses at her disposal.

Mr. Willard had a few simple rules for the bringing up of his family, and the children thrived and were happy. An old temperance pledge cut out of paper and pasted into the family Bible shows what was the home influence on the great question of temperance, in the solution of which Frances Willard became such a power.

From her earliest childhood, trained in the atmosphere of religion profound and sincere, this keen young mind had a natural tendency to doubt and question everything, even God and the Bible. Perhaps this fact makes her

after-Christian life the more telling in its influence, when one knows her belief was not from mere happen because her parents believed. It ought to be enough for intellectual doubters to note that this clear intellect had tried and proved the religion of Jesus Christ.

While the children were young Mrs. Willard taught them, and later a young woman highly cultured was hired to teach them, together with some of their young neighbors. When a schoolroom was at last built in their district a professor from Oberlin came to teach in it, and in this school Frances made rapid progress, easily taking rank as first scholar.

It was a serious trouble to her when she was eighteen that her mother decreed she must put up her hair with hairpins and wear long dresses. She wrote in her diary, "I can never jump over a fence again so long as I live."

Another day of depression for the ambitious young spirit was the day her brother Oliver rode away to vote for the first time. With a lump in her throat she turned to her sister Mary and said: "Wouldn't you like to vote as well as Oliver? Don't you and I love the country just as well as he, and doesn't the country need our ballots?"

Mary looked scared, but answered, "Course we do, and 'course we ought, but don't go ahead and say so, for then we would be called strong minded."

Soon after this both girls were sent to Milwaukee Female College. The next year, however, they went to Northwestern, at Evanston. Here it was said of Frances: "My! But can't the new girl recite! She beats us all!"

At Northwestern Frances became the brilliant star, a favorite of all her teachers. And yet, strange as it seems to us who know more of her later years, she did not keep the rules of the school, nor did she become intimate with the best girls there, but made her most intimate friend of a wild girl and gathered about her a number of wild, daring girls who delighted to play pranks, though Frances would never go beyond pranks, refusing once to join in a moonlight horseback ride accompanied by young men, a thing strictly forbidden by the college. Her intimacy with this wild young girl, however, decided her parents to move to Evanston that they might keep a watchful eye upon their brilliant, willful, loving daughter, who as yet was not a Christian. The mother and father watched and prayed and hoped, as did her teachers, who loved her dearly, but for a long time she was hard hearted.

Francis was unable to graduate or to deliver the valedictory as had been intended because her health finally broke and she had typhoid fever at commencement time. When she recovered she was deeply thoughtful. During her illness, on the night of the crisis when she

overheard the doctor and her mother talking about her serious condition, she promised the Lord that if He would let her get well she would try to be a Christian girl. Thus we see that religion with her was not a matter of emotion, but a matter of "I will." The following year she united with the Methodist Church.

In spite of her father's strong opposition to a girl earning her living outside of her own home, and his earnest desire that she remain in her home, Francis applied for a position to teach school, and as the only vacancy was a little red schoolhouse in the country, she accepted it and was met at the station by a man in blue overalls, red shirt, long black hair and slouch hat, who called her "the school-marm." But she did not shrink nor turn back even when she arrived at the schoolhouse and found the scholars assembled in a free fight, breaking the windows. These boys chose as their opening song: "I want to be an angel." Francis had anything but an angelic time during this experience. This first school was followed by better positions.

Mary Willard's death then broke upon the home circle. The grief of all was so great that a few weeks later the family home was broken up and Francis went to take the position of preceptress of natural sciences in Northwestern Female College. Through the influence of

Bishop Simpson, Miss Willard later went to Pittsburgh Female College to teach. In all she taught in eleven different institutions of learning. One of her pleasantest fields of labor was Genesee Wesleyan Seminary in Lima, Ohio.

She finally became head of the Evanston College for Ladies, which was afterward united to Northwestern College for Men, in which she became professor of esthetics. Later, on account of the policy of the institution, she resigned her position.

About that time her father died, and her mother went west to visit Oliver, who was married. Then Frances realized the dream of her life in a delightful and extended trip abroad. During her stay abroad she wrote 20 books of notes on her travels.

During her years of teaching Miss Willard had been greatly interested in the work of the temperance crusade. She made a visit to New York, where she met Neil Dow and Mrs. L. M. N. Stevens. Bishop Simpson suggested to her the idea of becoming a philanthropist.

Shortly after she received an invitation to become lady principal of the fashionable school for young women near Central Park in New York, at a salary of \$2,400, and as few classes as she chose to take. At the same time she received an invitation for her to become a leader in

temperance reform. She decided to accept this latter opening and soon became president of the organization known as the “Woman’s Christian Temperance Union.”

“We have no money,” said they, “but we will try to get some if you will tell us how much you want.” And this was the beginning of her mighty work for temperance reform, which opened by her only experience in crusade work when she knelt in the sawdust of a Pittsburgh saloon and prayed as she had never prayed save at her sister’s dying bedside.

Oliver Willard died, but the “Saint Courageous,” as her mother came to be called, declared the great work needed her daughter more than she did, and so, much separated, they yet worked hand-in-hand through the years, till the mother was called home.

And then the heroine of the temperance cause, the “uncrowned queen,” lay down to die and whispered: “I’ve crept in with my mother.”

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