

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-03119-6 - The Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley

Edited by Dorothy Stanley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

THROUGH THE WORLD

B

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-03119-6 - The Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley

Edited by Dorothy Stanley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF SIR HENRY MORTON STANLEY

CHAPTER I

THE WORKHOUSE

IT is said that one of the patrician Mostyns, of North Wales, possesses a written pedigree forty feet long, to prove the claim of his family to a direct descent from Adam. Though no doubt much of this extraordinary genealogy is fabulous, it allows all of us plebeians a reasonable hope to believe that we are also descended from that venerated ancestor of our common humanity. The time has been when patrician families fondly believed their first progenitor had come direct from Heaven, and we baser creatures had to be content with an earthly sire.

I can prove as ancient a descent for myself, though the names of my intermediate progenitors between Adam and my grandfathers, Moses and John, have not been preserved. My family belonged to a class always strangely indifferent to written pedigrees, which relied more on oral traditions, the preserving of which has been mostly the duties of females, on account of their superior fluency of speech, and their disposition to cling to their family hearth. My earliest pains were caused by the endless rehearsal of family history to which my nurse was addicted; for soon after sunset each evening she would insist on taking me before some neighbour's fire, where I would meet about a dozen dames from the Castle Row, prepared to indulge in their usual entertainment of recitations from their stock of unwritten folklore. After a ceremonious greeting and kindly interchange of civil enquiries about each other's health and affairs, they would soon drift into more serious matter. I have a vague idea that much of it bordered on the uncanny and awful, but I retain a strong impression that most of their conversations related to the past and present

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-03119-6 - The Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley

Edited by Dorothy Stanley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

HENRY M. STANLEY

of their respective families, courtships, marriages, and deaths being prime events. I also remember that there were many long pauses, during which I could hear a chorus of sympathetic sighs. The episodes which drew these from their affectionate breasts are quite forgotten, but those sighs haunt me still.

Such families as were clustered in front of the Green of Denbigh Castle were an exceedingly primitive folk, with far less regard for ancient ancestry than the Bedouin of the Desert. Indeed, I doubt whether any tradesman or farmer in our parts could say who was his great-great-grandfather, or whether one yeoman out of a hundred could tell who was his ancestor of two hundred years back. As King Cazembe said to Livingstone, the 'Seeker of Rivers,' 'We let the streams run on, and do not enquire whence they rise or whither they flow.'

So these simple Welsh people would answer if questioned about their ancestors, 'We are born and die, and, beyond that, none of us care who were before us, or who shall come after us.'

My personal recollections do not extend beyond the time I lay in the cradle; so that all that precedes this period I have been obliged to take upon trust. Mind and body have grown together, and both will decay according to the tasks or burdens imposed on them. But strange, half-formed ideas glide vaguely into the mind, sometimes, and then I seem not far from a tangible and intelligent view into a distant age. Sometimes the turn of a phrase, a sentence in a book, the first faint outline of a scene, a face like, yet unlike, one whom I knew, an incident, will send my mind searching swiftly down the long-reaching aisles, extending far into remote, pre-personal periods, trying to discover the connection, to forge again the long-broken link, or to re-knit the severed strand.

My father I never knew. I was in my 'teens' before I learned that he had died within a few weeks after my birth. Up to a certain date in the early Forties, all is profound darkness to me. Then, as I woke from sleep one day, a brief period of consciousness suddenly dawned upon my faculties. There was an indefinable murmur about me, some unintelligible views floated before my senses, light flashed upon the spirit, and I entered into being.

At what age I first received these dim, but indelible, impressions, I cannot guess. It must have been in helpless

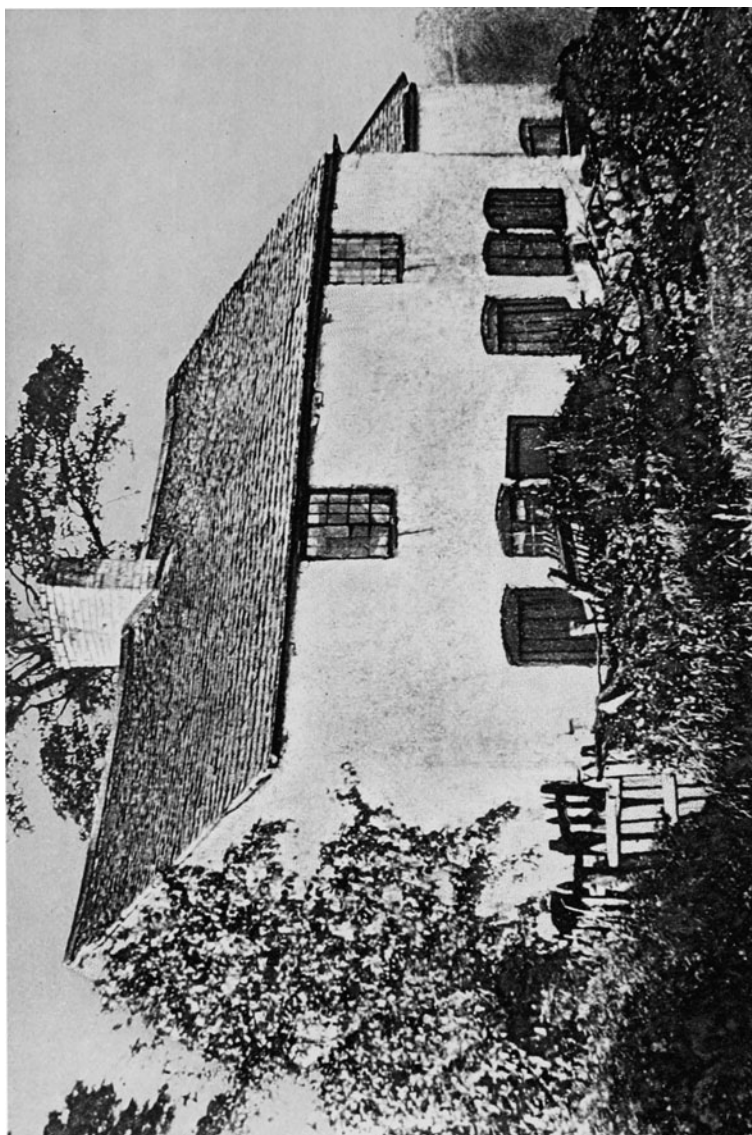
Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-03119-6 - The Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley

Edited by Dorothy Stanley

Excerpt

[More information](#)



Photograph from Album of Sir Henry Stanley, 1874.

Cottage where H. M. Stanley was born.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-03119-6 - The Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley

Edited by Dorothy Stanley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE WORKHOUSE

5

infancy, for I seem to have passed, subsequently, through a long age of dreams, wherein countless vague experiences, emotions, and acts occurred which, though indefinable, left shadowy traces on my memory. During such a mechanical stage of existence it was not possible for me to distinguish between dreams and realities.

I fancy I see a white ceiling, and square joists, with meat-hooks attached to them, a round, pink human face, the frill of a cap, a bit of bright ribbon; but, before I am able to grasp the meaning of what I see, I have lapsed into unconsciousness again. After an immeasurable time, the faculties seem to be re-awakened, and I can distinguish tones, and am aware that I can see, hear, and feel, and that I am in my cradle. It is close by a wooden staircase, and my eyes follow its length up, and then down; I catch sight of a house-fly, and then another, and their buzz and movements become absorbing. Presently a woman advances, bends over me a moment, then lifts me up in her arms, and from a great height I survey my world.

There is a settle of dark wood, a bit of carving at the end of it; there is a black, shiny chimney; a red coal-fire, with one spluttering jet of flame, and waving soot-flakes; there is a hissing black kettle, and a thread of vapour from the nozzle; a bright copper bed-warmer suspended to the wall; a display of coloured plates, mainly blue, with Chinese pictures on them, arranged over a polished dresser; there is an uneven flagstone floor; a window with diamond panes set in lead; a burnished white table, with two deep drawers in it; a curious old clock, with intensely red flowers above, and chains and weights below it; and, lastly, I see a door cut into two halves, the upper one being wide open, through which I gain my first view of sky and space. This last is a sight worth seeing, and I open my eyes roundly to take stock of this pearly space and its drifting fleece as seen through the door, and my attention is divided between the sky and the tick-tack of the clock, while forced to speculate what the white day and the pearly void mean.

There follows a transition into another state of conscious being wherein I appear to have wings, and to be soaring up to the roof of a great hall, and sailing from corner to corner, like a humming bee on a tour of exploration; and, the roof pre-

sently being removed, I launch out with wings outspread, joyous and free, until I lose myself in the unknowable, to emerge, sometime after, in my own cradle-nest at the foot of the wooden stairs.

And thus, for an unknown stretch of time, I endure my days without apparent object, but quietly observant, and an inarticulate witness of a multitude of small events; and thus I waited, and watched, and dreamed, surrendering myself to my state, undisturbed, unaffected, unresisting, borne along by Time until I could stand and take a larger and more deliberate survey of the strange things done around me. In process of time, however, my tongue learns to form words, and to enter upon its duties, and it is not long before intelligence begins to peep out and to retain durably the sense of existence.

One of the first things I remember is to have been gravely told that I had come from London in a band-box, and to have been assured that all babies came from the same place. It satisfied my curiosity for several years as to the cause of my coming; but, later, I was informed that my mother had hastened to her parents from London to be delivered of me; and that, after recovery, she had gone back to the Metropolis, leaving me in the charge of my grandfather, Moses Parry, who lived within the precincts of Denbigh Castle.

Forty years of my life have passed, and this delving into my earliest years appears to me like an exhumation of Pompeii, buried for centuries under the scoriæ, lava, and volcanic dust of Vesuvius. To the man of the Nineteenth Century, who paces the recovered streets and byeways of Pompeii, how strange seem the relics of the far distant life! Just so appear to me the little fatherless babe, and the orphaned child.

Up to a certain time I could remember well every incident connected with those days; but now I look at the child with wonder, and can scarcely credit that out of that child I grew. How quaint that bib and tucker, that short frock, the fat legs, the dimpled cheeks, the clear, bright, grey eyes, the gaping wonderment at the sight of a stranger; and I have to brush by the stupefied memories of a lifetime!

When I attempt to arrest one of the fleeting views of these early stages of my life, the foremost image which presents

THE WORKHOUSE

7

itself is that of my grandfather's house, a white-washed cottage, situated at the extreme left of the Castle, with a long garden at the back, at the far end of which was the slaughterhouse where my Uncle Moses pole-axed calves, and prepared their carcasses for the market; and the next is of myself, in bib and tucker, between grandfather's knees, having my fingers guided, as I trace the alphabet letters on a slate. I seem to hear, even yet, the encouraging words of the old man, 'Thou wilt be a man yet before thy mother, my man of men.'

It was then, I believe, that I first felt what it was to be vain. I was proud to believe that, though women might be taller, stronger, and older than I, there lay a future before me that the most powerful women could never hope to win. It was then also I gathered that a child's first duty was to make haste to be a man, in order that I might attain that highest human dignity.

My grandfather appears to me as a stout old gentleman, clad in corduroy breeches, dark stockings, and long Melton coat, with a clean-shaven face, rather round, and lit up by humorous grey eyes. He and I occupied the top floor, which had an independent entrance from the garden. The lower rooms were inhabited by my uncles, Moses and Thomas. By-and-bye, there came a change. My strong, one-armed Uncle Moses married a woman named Kitty, a flaxen-haired, fair girl of a decided temper; and after that event we seldom descended to the lower apartments.

I have a vivid remembrance of Sunday evenings at a Wesleyan chapel, on account of the tortures which I endured. The large galleried building, crowded with fervid worshippers, and the deep murmur of 'Amens,' the pious ejaculations, are well remembered, as well as the warm atmosphere and curious scent of lavender which soon caused an unconquerable drowsiness in me. Within a short time my head began to nod heavily, to the great danger of my neck, and the resolute effort I made to overcome this sleepiness, to avoid the reproaches of my grandfather, who affected to be shocked at my extraordinary behaviour, caused the conflict with nature to be so painful that it has been impossible for me to forget the chapel and its scenes.

After passing my fourth year there came an afternoon when, to my dismay and fright, a pitcher with which I was sent for water fell from my hands and was broken. My grandfather came to the garden door on hearing the crash, and, viewing what had happened, lifted his forefinger menacingly and said, 'Very well, Shonin, my lad, when I return, thou shalt have a sound whipping. You naughty boy!'

A tragedy, however, intervened to prevent this punishment. It appears that he was in a hurry to attend to some work in a field that day, and, while there, fell down dead. The neighbours announced that he had died through the 'visitation of God,' which was their usual way of explaining any sudden fatality of this kind. He was aged 84. His tomb at Whitchurch declares the event to have occurred in 1847.

Soon after, I was transferred to the care of an ancient couple who lived at the other end of the Castle, named Richard and Jenny Price, keepers of the Bowling Green, into which one of the courts of the old Castle had been converted. The rate for my maintenance was fixed at half-a-crown a week, which my two uncles agreed to pay to the Prices. Old Richard Price, besides being a gamekeeper, was Sexton of Whitchurch, and Verger of St. David's. His wife Jenny, a stout and buxom old lady, is remembered by me mostly for her associations with 'peas-pudding,' for which I had a special aversion, and for her resolute insistence that, whether I liked it or not, I should eat it.

Other memories of this period are also unforgettable for the pains connected with them, — such as the soap-lather in my Saturday evening tub, and the nightly visits of Sarah Price, the daughter of the house, to her friends at Castle Row, where she would gossip to such a late hour that I always suffered from intolerable fidgets. Mothers of the present day will understand how hard it is for a child of four or five years old to remain awake long after sunset, and that it was cruel ignorance on the part of Sarah to keep me up until ten o'clock every night, to listen to her prosy stories of ghosts and graves. Sarah's description of a devil, a curious creature with horns on his head, with hooved feet and a long tail, was wont to make me shiver with fright. She was equally graphic and minute in her descriptions of witches, ghosts, fairies, giants

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-03119-6 - The Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley

Edited by Dorothy Stanley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE WORKHOUSE

9

and dwarfs, kidnappers and hobgoblins, bugaboos, and other terrific monsters, against whose extraordinary powers it behoved me to be always on guard. The dark night was especially haunted by them, and the ingle-nook by a bright fire was then the safest place for children.

If the grown folk had not all shared Sarah's belief in these gruesome creatures, I might perhaps have doubted they existed; but I remember to have seen them huddle closer to the fire, look warily over their shoulders at the shadows, as though they lay in wait for a casual bit of darkness to pounce upon them and carry them off to the ghostly limbo. Had Sarah but known how pain impresses the memory of a child, it is probable that she would have put me to bed rather than have taken me with her, as a witness of her folly and ignorant credulity. She believed herself to be very level-headed, and, indeed, by her acquaintances she was esteemed as a sensible and clever woman; but, as she infected me with many silly fears, I am now inclined to believe that both she and her neighbours were sadly deficient in common-sense.

One effect of these interminable ghost-stories was visible one evening when I went to fetch some water from the Castle well. It appeared to me that I saw on this occasion a tall, black spectre, standing astride of the Castle well. I took it at first to be the shadow of a tree, but tracing it upward I saw a man's head which seemed to reach the sky. I gazed at it a short time, unable to move or cry out; then the phantom seemed to be advancing upon me, fear put wings to my feet, and I turned and ran, screaming, and never once halted until I had found a safe hiding-place under my bed. The dreadful vision of that ghost haunted me for years, and for a long time I made it a rule not to retire until I had looked under the bed, lest, when asleep, ghosts and kidnappers might come and carry me off. The belief that the darkness was infested by evil agencies and ferocious visitants hostile to little boys I owe to Sarah's silly garrulity at Castle Row.

I am under the impression that during the day, for a portion of this period, I was sent to an infant's school, where there was a terrible old lady who is associated in my mind with spectacles and a birch rod; but I have no particular incident connected with it to make it definite.

Richard Price and his wife Jenny seem to have, at last, become dismayed at my increasing appetite, and to have demanded a higher rate for my maintenance. As both my uncles had in the mean time married, and through the influence of their wives declined to be at further charge for me, the old couple resolved to send me to the Workhouse. Consequently Dick Price, the son, took me by the hand one day, Saturday, February 20th, 1847, and, under the pretence that we were going to Aunt Mary at Fynnon Beuno, induced me to accompany him on a long journey.

The way seemed interminable and tedious, but he did his best to relieve my fatigue with false cajolings and treacherous endearments. At last Dick set me down from his shoulders before an immense stone building, and, passing through tall iron gates, he pulled at a bell, which I could hear clanging noisily in the distant interior. A sombre-faced stranger appeared at the door, who, despite my remonstrances, seized me by the hand, and drew me within, while Dick tried to sooth my fears with glib promises that he was only going to bring Aunt Mary to me. The door closed on him, and, with the echoing sound, I experienced for the first time the awful feeling of utter desolateness.

The great building with the iron gates and innumerable windows, into which I had been so treacherously taken, was the St. Asaph Union Workhouse. It is an institution to which the aged poor and superfluous children of that parish are taken, to relieve the respectabilities of the obnoxious sight of extreme poverty, and because civilisation knows no better method of disposing of the infirm and helpless than by imprisoning them within its walls.

Once within, the aged are subjected to stern rules and useless tasks, while the children are chastised and disciplined in a manner that is contrary to justice and charity. To the aged it is a house of slow death, to the young it is a house of torture. Paupers are the failures of society, and the doom of such is that they shall be taken to eke out the rest of their miserable existence within the walls of the Workhouse, to pick oakum.

The sexes are lodged in separate wards enclosed by high walls, and every door is locked, and barred, and guarded, to