

MRS. SATAN: A NEW EVANGEL OF WOMANHOOD

By Mary Hutchings Reed

As a woman representing the Chicago Literary Club at an event hosted by the all-female Fortnightly Club, I wanted to write about a woman icon, and who could be more iconic than the first woman to run for President of the United States? But unlike her well-known contemporaries Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, Victoria Woodhull, who ran for president in 1872, did not become an icon of the women's movement. Why not?

At a time when the women's movement needed one, Victoria Woodhull called herself an "evangel." But many called her "Mrs. Satan." She was condemned as a "bad girl," and bad girls don't become icons for good causes.

Born in Ohio in 1838 to a large, dysfunctional family, Victoria Claflin was a spiritualist, newspaper editor, Wall Street broker, free lover, sometime Marxist, scandal monger, blackmailer and the presidential candidate of the Equal Rights Party.

From an early age, Victoria believed that she was guided by the spirits. Because her father was a hot-tempered horse thief, the Claflin clan was always on the run; at 15, she was married off to Dr. Canning Woodhull, an alcoholic doctor twice her age. By the time she was 20, Victoria was supporting two children as well as her husband's whores and whisky habits, first by doing needlework for 38 cents a day and then as a stage actress. After 2 desperate years that drove her to casual prostitution, the spirits summoned her home to Columbus to be with her beloved 14 year old sister, Tennessee. "Miss Tennessee" was the star of their father's road show. For \$1 she would contact the dead, foresee the future, and diagnose diseases--all of which could be cured with Miss Tennessee's Magnetic Life Elixir--a mixture of alcohol and opium--for another \$2/bottle.

Victoria joined her father's tour as a practitioner of spiritual magnetism, seeing auras and laying on hands. Spiritualism flourished in post-war America, and women flocked to her, confiding their deepest secrets and confessing sexual abuse, neglect, poverty and oppression. Women's independence became Victoria's passion.

She married her second husband, Spiritualist Colonel James Harvey Blood in 1867, but divorced him in 1869 to protest the Marriage Laws, which effectively made women the chattel of

their husbands. She lived with Blood through her presidential campaign until she unnecessarily divorced him again in 1875. Even then he called her, “the grandest woman in the world.”

In 1868 Victoria, Blood and Tennessee moved to Manhattan, then a city of one million, 20,000 of whom were prostitutes. The sisters began visiting some of the city’s 700 houses of prostitution, selling the women Magnetic Life Elixir, contraceptives and male-safes. At the time, a gentleman’s evening often included dinner at Delmonico’s, a fine brandy, and a visit to one of the brothels listed in *A Gentlemen’s Guide*, a sort of Michelin’s Guide to the best houses. Prostitutes were the richest, most independent and most powerful women in New York; they could make in a night what the average factory girl made in a week.

At this time, the women’s movement was under extreme stress. The American Equal Rights Association had been formed in 1866 and was led by Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone and Frederick Douglas. By May of 1869, these leaders were embroiled in disagreements over the scope of the proposed Fifteenth Amendment. Anthony and Stanton opposed it because it gave former slaves but not women the right to vote, and they founded the National Woman Suffrage Association. The NWSA’s broad agenda called for equal pay, the 8 hour work day, reform of the Marriage Laws and an end to employment discrimination. In response, Lucy Stone, believing “it was the Negro’s hour,” formed the single-issue American Woman Suffrage Association, asking women to wait their turn. At the end of the convention that splintered the movement, Elisabeth Stanton declared the need for “a new evangel of womanhood....”

Also at that divisive convention, Mary Livermore of Illinois further fractured the movement by falsely hanging the epithet “free love” on Anthony and Stanton. Of all the radical ideas then current, “free love” was the most controversial. It meant different things to different people, but at its core it profoundly threatened the double standard of a hypocritical, male-dominated society.

Victoria Woodhull promoted free love, proclaiming, “I have an inalienable, constitutional and natural right to love whom I may, to love for as long or as short a period as I can, to change that love every day if I please!” She argued that people ought to be able to make a contract to marry the same as any other contract, for a day or for a year—whatever time they mutually agree. To her, government-sanctioned marriage was an insidious form of sexual slavery, making married women, who could not refuse their husbands, no different than prostitutes.

Both Victoria and Tennessee occasionally took money for sex, but always, they claimed, by choice and for their own pleasure. Victoria became Cornelius Vanderbilt's spiritual medium and Tennessee his mistress. Like many rich and powerful men, the Commodore bragged to his mistress of his business transactions, and like the savvy madams of New York, the sisters knew how to profit from loose lips. With inside information from the brothels, Victoria was able to give Vanderbilt remarkably accurate financial advice while deep in a trance, and in gratitude he shared a percentage of his profits with her and Tennessee, making them millionaires. In January 1870, the sisters founded the first woman-owned brokerage firm on Wall Street. Vanderbilt, Boss Tweed and other luminaries attended their opening, and hundreds of women--heiresses, housewives and prostitutes-- brought them whatever money and stock tips they had.

Victoria's Manhattan parlor filled with the rich and powerful, among them radical Republican Senator Benjamin Butler, a strong supporter of women's rights. In April, 1870, Victoria placed a notice in the *Herald* newspaper:

While others of my sex devoted themselves to a crusade *against the laws* that shackle the women of the country, I asserted *my individual independence*.... *** I boldly entered the arena of politics and business and exercised *the rights I already possessed*. *** I now announce myself as a candidate for the Presidency. [italics added]

At the time, Harriet Beecher Stowe warned, "Whoever is set up to be President of the United States is just set up to have his character torn off from his back in shreds and to be mauled, pummeled, and covered with dirt by every filthy paper all over the country." As to the possibility of a woman candidate, she added, "[W]hat sort of brazen tramp...could stand it and come out of it without being killed?"

In the months to come, Victoria's character would indeed be pummeled, and she would in turn expose the character of her foes, but because of the prevailing double standard, *she* was the one who would land in jail.

A month after her announcement, Victoria founded *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*. The paper published articles on Spiritualism, scandals and social reforms, but its primary purpose was promoting Victoria's candidacy. In November of 1870, the *Weekly* published an article claiming that the proposed Sixteenth Amendment—giving women the right to vote—was

irrelevant because women were citizens and citizens were already entitled to vote. Two weeks later the *Weekly* published a full explanation of this constitutional argument under Victoria's signature. Senator Benjamin Butler, who was most likely the author of the document, then asked Victoria to testify before the combined Judiciary Committee of both houses of Congress, making her the first woman to do so.

Stanton, Anthony and the NWSA embraced their new evangel. Lucy Stone and the AWSA did not. They questioned what they called Victoria's "antecedents." Mary Livermore recalled Victoria's past as a magnetic healer in Chicago and reported, "Her hands are unclean."

While in Washington, Victoria overheard scandalous gossip about the most famous preacher of the era, Brooklyn's Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, whose "Gospel of Love" was a kinder form of Calvinism. Beecher led an opulent lifestyle and was said to preach to 20 of his mistresses every Sunday. One of his mistresses was the wife of his protégé, Theodore Tilton.

As Livermore's gossip about Victoria's "antecedents" spread, Woodhull threatened to retaliate by exposing her detractors, who, like Reverend Beecher, practiced free love but wouldn't admit it. Some paid "protection money" by way of buying advertising in the *Weekly* or otherwise supporting Victoria's campaign. Beecher, however, did not. Although he supported women's right to vote, in November, 1871 he refused an invitation to introduce Victoria's "Principles of Social Freedom" speech, not wanting to be publicly associated with "free love." For that hypocrisy, he incurred Victoria's fateful wrath.

With the women's movement still splintered, in May 1872 Victoria Woodhull was nominated by the Equal Rights Party as its candidate for president, with Frederick Douglas as her running mate. Anthony and the NWSA, and eventually Stanton, supported President Grant, as did Rev. Beecher and the AWSA; Beecher's now foe, the cuckolded Theodore Tilton, supported Horace Greely. Rev. Beecher's sister, Isabelle Hooker, supported Woodhull.

The newspapers gave Woodhull scant coverage, and one of the most powerful cartoonists of the day, Thomas Nast, penned a cartoon demonizing her as "Mrs. Satan." In it, she carried a sign, "Be Saved by Free Love." Lecture halls cancelled her speaking engagements, and her campaign ran out of money. In September she gave a fiery speech to her last supporters, the Spiritualists, telling all she knew of the sexual behavior of many of the rich and powerful, including Reverend Beecher, Mrs. Tilton, Mary Livermore and Lucy Stone's husband.

Victoria scraped together enough money to repeat these allegations in 100,000 copies of the *Weekly*, and she threatened to further expose Beecher's hypocrisy and to print a popular brothel's "little black book." She also published an account of sexual assaults on young girls during New York's infamous French Ball. The issue sold out and 150,000 more were reprinted, copies going for as much as \$40 each. Victoria used Biblical language-- "the red trophy of her virginity"--to describe a girl's deflowering at the Ball, and for this Beecher conspired with the crusader Anthony Comstock to have Victoria and Tennessee arrested and charged with sending obscene material through the mail. The sisters managed to post bail, but when Comstock induced further mailings of the offending issue, they were arrested again, and were in prison on Election Day. There are no recorded votes for Victoria Woodhull. Susan B. Anthony and fourteen other women intimidated an official into letting them vote, but they voted for Grant. Anthony, hailed as a heroine, was arrested three weeks later for voting.

Shortly thereafter, in a 3-month trial, Tilton sued Beecher for \$100,000 for alienation of affection, and then Cornelius Vanderbilt died, leaving a lopsided will favoring his sons, which his daughters contested. By agreeing with certain parties in these two cases not to testify to damaging information uniquely in their possession, the sisters extorted several million dollars, enough for them to start a new life in England, where each married well.

In a ruthless and greedy age, Victoria Woodhull, herself ruthless and greedy, set out to transcend her unladylike antecedents and to control her own destiny. Some say she was used by men to further their agendas for social reform, but she herself believed that she was being used by the Spirits to relieve the burdens of women born powerless in a man's world. She was a "brazen tramp" willing to use the two powers she had—sex and words. While she did not have the power to vote, she had the courage to promote radical ideas and to expose hypocrisy. She wasn't afraid to use incriminating information, even to the point of blackmailing persons who should have been her allies. She could call out hypocrites on the free love issue because she was not ashamed of her own sexual behavior. Her exposure of Beecher's private life was not to condemn his lifestyle but to condemn his *hypocrisy*, the double standard that didn't inquire of a man's antecedents. She stood for the principle that preachers should practice what they preach, and practitioners not deny what they practice. For this, Mrs. Satan is an evangel, if not an icon.