

READING**EARLY BLOOMERS**

CHAPTER 10

As Elizabeth Smith Miller cultivated her garden in the spring of 1851, her thoughts wandered from the flowers and vegetables to her muddy, bedraggled skirt. Those long, trailing flounces seemed to catch on every stalk and branch; layers of stiff petticoats made stooping to weed and plant almost impossible; her snug corset kept her short of breath. Irritated and uncomfortable, Miller resolved then and there to free herself from bondage to those “fettering folds” by designing a simpler outfit. The result was a loose-fitting dress that reached a few inches below her knees and a pair of trousers that tapered at the ankle, resembling “harem pants.” “It would be suitable dress for a journey to California,” one dubious but diplomatic family member remarked. Miller remained undaunted. “What is Life,” she rejoined, “but a journey to California—to that Eldorado of higher development in pursuit of which one should cast off every impediment.”

In her eagerness to “cast off every impediment,” Elizabeth Miller epitomized the perfectionist spirit of early Victorian America, and her chosen object of reform became women’s dress. The daughter of Gerrit Smith, a wealthy landowner and merchant from upstate New York who endorsed abolition, temperance, and women’s rights, Miller enlisted in the cause of dress reform feminists like her cousin, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Amelia Bloomer, the editor of a temperance newspaper, *The Lily*. After Bloomers newspaper publicized Millers design, other journalists, dubbed the outfit “bloomers,” and Cady Stanton, along with many other women prominent in the suffrage movement, adopted the costume.

Dress reform attracted adherents with a variety of social agendas. Some feminists, like Elizabeth Miller, simply sought greater freedom of movement. Cady Stanton, for example, commended bloomers to all busy wives and mothers “who wash and iron, bake and brew, carry water and fat babies upstairs and down, bring potatoes, apples, and pans of milk from the cellar, run our own errands, through mud or snow, shovel paths, and work in the garden,” “The drapery,” she concluded, “is quite too much—one might as well work with a ball and chain.” Other feminists went further, seeing dress reform as essential to establishing the

equality of the sexes. Sarah Grimké contended that “so long as we submit to being dressed like dolls, we can never rise to the stations of duty and usefulness from which they [men] desire to exclude us.” Many women members of utopian socialist communities like Oneida, Brook Farm, and New Harmony adopted the bloomer costume for similar reasons, applauding dress reform as a leveling, democratic influence.

A consensus concerning the need to simplify women’s dress reached well beyond the ranks of feminists and utopian thinkers. Health reformers like the followers of Sylvester Graham joined with more orthodox members of the medical community in condemning the vogue of “tight-lacing” corsets. Some physicians warned that tight lacing impaired the ability of women to bear healthy children by narrowing the pelvis, while others charged that the practice could result in broken ribs, collapsed lungs, weakened abdominal walls, and uterine disorders. Catharine Beecher, who instituted a regimen of health-promoting calisthenics at her female seminaries, agreed with feminists that confining corsets and “seas” of crinoline petticoats restricted ease of movement. The members of female moral reform societies also took up the cause, contending that addiction to fashion and finery encouraged prostitution. A similar suspicion of high style pervaded sentimental novels of the period, literature written largely by and for women.

But not all Victorians agreed on the need for dress reform. *Harper’s Bazaar*, a popular women’s magazine, stood with tradition by declaring that “we believe in the petticoat as an institution older and more sacred than the Magna Carta.” Critics associated bloomers with the radicalism of upstate New York’s “Burned-Over District,” where it had been created, and with the free love theories of the Oneida Community, where it reigned as the prevailing fashion. Others charged that bloomers resembled the garments worn by prostitutes in big city brothels, while pious skeptics pointed to the biblical prohibition against women wearing trousers. Most middle-class Americans, steeped in both Scripture and the doctrine of “separate spheres,” strongly identified wearing pants with masculinity and believed that bloomers would make women men’s rivals” rather than their “coun-

terparts,” Even Cady Stanton’s father lamented that she had made “a guy” of herself by appearing in the new costume.

By the 1860s, bloomers had fallen from favor even among feminists. The outfit proved difficult to make, and even Elizabeth Miller admitted that her creation did not “sit” gracefully. More to the point, the flurry over fashion distracted attention from the cause of women’s rights. Susan B. Anthony abandoned bloomers when she noticed that

men stared at her ankles instead of listening to her talk. Perhaps most important, many suffragists became convinced that women’s degradation was rooted in laws and institutions, not in dress. “We have no reason to hope that pantaloons would do more for us than they have done for man himself,” Cady Stanton wrote. “The negro slave enjoys the most unlimited freedom in his attire . . . yet in spite of his dress and his manhood, too, he is a slave still.”

