

The Reader of Time: Maria Augusta Generoso Estrella, Brazil's First Woman Physician

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It was night. I was walking through the house looking for my husband. I stepped quietly into the study and found him seated on the sofa, deep in thought, his gaze lost in a painting by Victor Meirelles that hung on the wall before him.

"So here you are!" I said, drawing his attention. "I was looking for you. Are you not going to bed?"

"Yes — I was only sitting here trying to rest my mind a little."

"Has some problem come up?" I asked, settling into the armchair beside him.

"And is there a day when they do not?" He smiled. "That seems to be the chief occupation of a man of business. And the children?"

"They must be asleep by now. They went to bed thrilled, because I told them we are going to the Botanical Garden tomorrow. I was even thinking we might have breakfast there. I shall prepare a basket with food and a cloth."

"A picnic, then. It will be a fine time with the children."

I smiled, and after a slight sigh I said: "Our children are growing so quickly... I have the impression that time passes faster with each day. At this rate they will soon be grown, with families of their own, and we alone in this house!"

"Is that not the natural cycle of life, my dear? But take heart. When it happens, we shall have the chance to live the cycle again with our grandchildren."

"That is true. I only hope to have vigor enough to run after children still. Or shall I have grown too old to care for them?"

"Of course you will be well! And you will still be a most beautiful lady."

"You have just alerted me to something: I must take greater care of my health from now on. After all, I intend to be a sprightly grandmother!" I said, decided.

I fell silent for a few moments, and then remembered what I had read that morning: "Speaking of the passing of time — it seems like yesterday that Maria Augusta went to study medicine in New York... and five years have gone by! Do you remember?"

"Of course; every newspaper reported it. It is indeed a thing to marvel at, that a young girl should part from her father to study abroad."

"Not only that, my dear — she went to become a physician. And to think that she left while still almost a child... she was only fifteen when she departed Brazil. The *Gazeta* published today a letter she sent to her beloved father."

"I cannot imagine how Mr. Generoso Estrella must miss her. So many years away from his daughter. I would never allow it. No child of mine goes far away!"

"You say that because they are not yet of an age to know what they want. But when they do know, we shall not be able to keep them from winning their own dreams."

"But our children will not need to go so far to live their dreams. Let them live here, in our own land, near the family."

"And who was it that spoke a moment ago of the natural cycle of life?" I retorted with a smile.

"I meant seeing them grow, becoming adults — not living alone in a strange country."

"It is a good thing the imperial decree opened higher education to women in Brazil. And I believe it was Maria Augusta's example that opened that road for so many Brazilian women."

"The decree is from last year, so her case may well have had its influence. If I am not mistaken, it is the Emperor who is supporting the young lady's studies."

"Yes. When Mr. Generoso Estrella declared bankruptcy and could no longer sustain his daughter's studies, Maria Augusta received the Emperor's support. Dom Pedro II then took on the cost of her education."

"Well, there is no denying she is a diligent young woman."

"It cannot be easy for a young girl to live so far away, in a land that speaks another language, apart from her own people. But tell me, what does the newspaper say about her?"

"The *Gazeta* published a letter Maria Augusta wrote to her father; such a beautiful letter, a true demonstration of faith in God and of the love she bears Mr. Generoso Estrella. Maria Augusta writes with such sweetness and respect that it touches the heart. She is a good and obedient daughter. She speaks too of her gratitude to the Emperor for bearing the cost of her studies, of how she misses Brazil, and of what she wishes for when she graduates."

"So she intends to return?"

"Yes; the letter says she wishes to come back to Brazil to devote her knowledge to Brazilian women."

"That is truly noble. To bring home the knowledge she has acquired and to contribute to Brazil through her calling. Besides, it will be most important for women to have the care of a woman doctor."

"Certainly! A doctor with whom we women may feel at ease in treating our own matters. Be assured that I shall be her patient. She says, indeed, that this is a mission she believes she received from God: to become a physician and care for women. And she says as well that she was gravely ill for nearly three months, but received great support and care from the friends and teachers with whom she lives."

"That is why I shall never allow our children to study abroad, far from us. And if they fall ill, who will care for them?"

"Be easy, my dear. We have higher courses in Brazil, and women are now admitted to them. That is a problem you will probably not have to face."

"Fortunate for me — the ones I face daily are quite enough."

"Let us go to our room, then, so that you may rest and be ready for tomorrow's problems," I teased, rising and offering my arm.

"I will do without the problems. Tomorrow we shall have a pleasant outing with the family," he answered, rising and linking his arm through mine.

As we passed through the drawing room, I took from the table the copy of the *Gazeta de Notícias* in which Maria Augusta's letter had been published. I wished to read it once more before sleeping.

And you, dear reader — do you also wish to know the letter of the young Brazilian woman who left her country to become the first woman physician of Brazil? I leave it here for you.

Historical source

Gazeta de Notícias, Rio de Janeiro, February 20, 1880, p. 3: "The Estrella Girl — A Brazilian Woman Doctor of Medicine". The transcription below is translated from the Portuguese of the period; the original spelling is preserved in the Brazilian edition of this article.

The Estrella Girl — A Brazilian Woman Doctor of Medicine

Gazeta de Notícias — Friday, February 20, 1880

Having read one of the latest letters, dated January 3 of the present year and running to seventeen pages, which this talented girl wrote to her father, Mr. Generoso Estrella, we were moved by the enthusiasm of the old friend who saw her make admirable progress, still in childhood, at the Colégio Brasileiro in Laranjeiras, to ask him the favor of allowing us to publish some passages of that interesting letter, in which we find the deep love of a devoted daughter for her father, for her religion, for her unremitting scientific studies, for her friends, and finally for her beloved homeland, Brazil. Here they are.

"Papa. — First of all I thank God and Our Lady of Sorrows, my godmother in baptism, for having saved my life from the grave illness that afflicted me for nearly three months, and likewise for the progress I have made in my studies; for without the help of Divine Providence I should certainly not have attained what I so longed for. I owe much as well to my dear friends and teachers, Doctors Clemence Losier and Jennie Losier, with whom I have the happiness of living, and who employed every effort of science to save me, together with the tenderness and attentions of the most devoted mother, to relieve my sufferings and pains.

As to the progress of my studies, I owe much to these excellent ladies also. Besides my own force of will, dedication, and perseverance, they have been tireless in explaining my lessons every night, so that the next day I might recite them perfectly at the academy, and in having me practice alongside them at the women's hospital belonging to our own academy, in their consulting room, and in their private practice, which is immense.

My dear papa may see that with teachers so good and so devoted, I could not fail to learn and to make the progress they say I have made in so short a time. I know that my papa has shed copious tears on my account, praying to God for my life and health; oh, yes... God in His merciful goodness hears your prayers, for He knows how much you love me and what a good heart you have, not only toward me but toward all who appeal to your kindness — for which cause you have been so thwarted in all your affairs, to the point of losing everything you possessed.

But God is great and a good Father, and in Him I trust the science that by His inspiration and command I embraced, so that anywhere in the world — and by preference in my dear Brazil — I may earn the daily bread for myself and for my papa, to whom I owe everything, even sacrifice; for you have always given me what you could, so that together with the allowance I receive from our magnanimous Emperor — to whom, and to our good Empress, may God grant many years of life and health — I might live comfortably and content in my studies. I might not have overcome them, had I not so good and affectionate a father, who even from afar has never ceased, with his friendly words, to convince me how great is the high mission I shall have to perform in society, if I am fortunate enough to win the campaign of science, in whose ranks I enlisted as a simple volunteer. Your good counsel, the encouragement the whole Brazilian press has extended to me in its flattering articles, and the assiduous care with which my friends and teachers have guided my feeble intelligence, have had this result: that today I have the satisfaction of telling you that very soon the day will come when I may say I have won the campaign of science to which I have devoted myself — I mean, I have won the most difficult part, for the study of medicine never ends.

I beg leave to say to my father, and pray do not take it amiss, for I say it not in pride but in satisfaction, that when a general wins the field of battle it is at the cost of his soldiers' blood and of the corpses he leaves stiffened upon that same field.

Your little daughter will win the field of medical science solely at the cost of her arduous studies, dedication, and perseverance — besides the vexations, the privations, and the tears. But above all this, my dear papa, it remains for me to tell you that my greatest satisfaction is to be able to be useful to my sex in the career I have embraced, and that no one shall ever be able to say that I obtained my doctor's parchment through influence or through money; for all know that papa is poor, and that it is His Majesty our Emperor who has contributed, since December of 1877, to the continuation of my studies until their conclusion. And I am certain he will not regret having granted me his high protection, for I applied myself to my studies as I ought, and have always known how to honor, with all dignity, the sex to which I belong and the flag of my country.

I say this with pride: there are the women physicians with whom I live, and the professors of my academy, who in support of the truth may attest to it.

Papa may perhaps have no idea how arduous the study of medicine is, above all for a woman.

How was it that, so young a child, I took heart to part so far from my most loving father, from my dear homeland, from the friends of my childhood, from my good teachers?

Only now do I marvel that I had such resignation and courage. It was nothing but the power of God, who said to my heart: Go, my daughter, with my blessing; I command it; your good father is already disposed, through me, to part from you — go to your future.

I believe, papa, that it was the great power of God that separated us, to the astonishment of all who knew us and who called my resolution to study medicine in the United States a folly. They did not believe that we could part; and against their expectation we parted. I studied; and very soon I shall be a doctor of medicine!... Yes, that honored title will be justly mine, at the cost of my studies, and I shall then be proud to exercise the noble and humanitarian mission that God in His infinite goodness entrusted to me.

Papa, some years have now passed since I had the pleasure of seeing you here at my side, attending my entrance into the Academy of Medicine for ladies — which was difficult enough, on account of my young age. Today that pleasure would be exquisite, if in the same way you could attend my commencement, which, as I have told you, I hope in God and Our Lady will take place in the coming month of April. Oh, how happy I should be on that day, if I could give you my first embrace of satisfaction and receive your blessing, that I may be as fortunate in my treatments in my own land as I have constantly been here. The ceremony for the young ladies who take their degree is not held at the Academy, which cannot hold the number of friends and of the curious who usually attend on such occasions; it takes place almost always in an immense private hall where great musical concerts are given. It is a very beautiful celebration. If papa cannot come, however, I shall be very sad, but I shall have no remedy save to take the degree — should they waive the age required by the statutes — and to remain here practicing beside my friends and teachers until papa can come to fetch me. But, my God, how ardently I long to go to my Brazil! Papa, I have already made my itinerary; these are my golden dreams. I know I shall not realize them, for I do not deserve so much of God; and yet I shall reveal them all the same.

After I take my degree, I should like to go with papa to Paris, London, and Vienna, to visit the women's wards in the hospitals, to take some notes, and even to attend some difficult operations, staying a fortnight in each of those places; then to go to Lisbon, where I would also visit the women's wards, and at the same time see the Baron of Mendonça and his kind family, to whom we owe so many attentions and courtesies when we were in Portugal. Afterward we would proceed to the province of Bahia to visit your friends, to whom you are pledged to present me, as well as to the distinguished literary society Greve Acadêmica, to which I already have the honor of belonging as a corresponding member. There we would stay some eight days, using the time to visit the women's wards as well.

And once this pleasant and useful itinerary were concluded, we would proceed to our dear Rio de Janeiro, my native land, which I so love and esteem, and for which I have felt such longing. It seems to me that when the happy moment comes to catch sight of the Corcovado and the lovely Sugarloaf, I shall not be able to hold back tears of joy...

Yes, dear papa, I am not ashamed to tell you that at this moment I weep for pleasure — not only because my heart tells me that the day of seeing my homeland again is very near, along with all my friends and papa's friends, who are mine as well, but also for the satisfaction of giving papa the news that I have reached the highest position a lady could desire, a position that no one in this world can take from me, conferring upon me the right to be useful to the sufferings of my sex, as a priestess of medicine. Dear papa, I shall now tell you what my greatest wishes are for the day when I have the happiness of landing in my Rio de Janeiro. The first persons I should wish to see and embrace are the good directresses of the schools where I boarded: Dona Florinda de Oliveira Varejão, Madame Fernandes de Oliveira, Madame Gros and her sister, as well as all my teachers and schoolmates, if it were possible.

Then that we should go to the church of the Candelária, where the image of Our Lady of Sorrows stands, to pray and thank God and the Most Holy Mother for my having returned to my homeland in the position I so ambited from my earliest years. That religious act concluded, that we should proceed to the palace of São Cristóvão to fulfill a duty of profound gratitude, kissing the hand of our good Empress and offering her my services, and thanking from the depths of my soul His Majesty the Emperor for the valuable protection he deigned to extend to me. Returning from the palace, we would then go to our house, or wherever our residence may provisionally be, and there we should have the honor of receiving all those who deign to visit us. But papa will do as he thinks best in these circumstances, for he knows that I am, and for all my life shall be, your obedient and grateful daughter, who asks your blessing that she may be happy.

MARIA AUGUSTA GENEROSO ESTRELLA."

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