

REVIEW.

ELIZABETH FRY, QUAKER HEROINE.*

The Life of Elizabeth Fry, Quaker Heroine, by Janet Whitney, is a book of exceptional interest, both from the literary standpoint, and because it deals with the life and work of one of the greatest and most remarkable women of the eighteenth century.

Mrs. Fry was the fourth child of the family of twelve of John Gurney and Catherine Bell, and our first glimpse of them gives little indication of the future life of Elizabeth.

The escapade of the seven girls defying the coachman of the Norwich coach and holding it up indicates the temper of the family. "All of them horsewomen, they knew that the four great horses, snorting and smoking, would not run them down if they maintained an unbroken group. But not many girls could have done it.

"The coach stopped.

"Then the scarlet line broke into units, dancing in momentary triumph round the captured coach. Two of them produced apples for the horses, the smallest one threw a placating kiss to the coachman—promptly returned, with *éclat*, by the lively young man on the box. . . . The coach proceeded, smiling in spite of itself.

"'T'was the prettiest adventure I ever encountered," said the young man. 'For all the world like an unbelievably natural, spontaneous *corps de ballet*.'

"Oh, shocking, shocking—for these young maids were Quakers."

Their father, John Gurney, was a wealthy wool-stapler and hawker, a member of a notable Norwich Quaker family, a widower, hard put to it to bring up his madcap girls—seven in number, and four sons to boot—"Earlham Hall contained them all, their weal and woe, their pranks and tasks, their loves and fears and hopes. And, fortunately for posterity, they belonged to a journal-keeping age." Of the seven sisters, "somehow it happened that Betsy in a healthy-minded family was temperamental. Her spirits were more delicately poised, her feelings more sensitive. When she was down she was so very far down."

In the youth of Elizabeth Gurney there was a spirit of tolerance abroad, so that "Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Unitarians, Quakers and other Dissenters mingled comfortably in the same social circles. . . . The 'plain Quakers' were debarred from easy mingling with general society, but the 'gay Quakers' were just like other people except for a stern barrier against intermarriage with the 'world.'"

"The development of every person of genius requires a period or periods of solitude. If circumstances or education do not provide it the growing spirit must be protected in some way or other from the pressure of the commonplace.

Neither Betsy nor her sisters had the slightest suspicion that she possessed that uncommon extra quality, that mysterious something more, which achieves greatness. But the destiny watching over her demanded for her room to grow. In the late seventeen-hundreds the need of a healthy person to be occasionally alone had not yet been recognised. And, in Betsy's lifetime, the girl heir to the English throne grew up in the stuffy safety of her mother's bedroom to make her first command as Queen: "Then may I be alone for half an hour."

So Betsy's sense of need deepened. She was aware of "that dim capacity for wings" that "made her feel at one and the same time her ambitious nature, and her present futility." The solution was ready for the crystalising agent; it appears at least a singular coincidence that the appropriate agent should arrive so pat to the requirement; and in person of William Savery, a "visiting friend" from Philadelphia.

On February 4, 1798, Betsy Gurney was not feeling very well, but decided to go to "Goats" (the Quaker meeting house). She was looking down at her pretty boots when William Savery broke the dull silence "not by the usual drone of Quaker preaching, but by a voice resonant and musical, with something definite to say and great feeling in saying it.

"It was, in sober fact, the crisis of her life." "I am to be a Quaker." That was it. That was what she had been waiting for. Something to *do*. She looked around to see if there was no one she could help *now*, to-day—and her eye fell at once upon the salient spot. The country-side swarmed with children totally untaught."

Elizabeth set to work and soon gathered 70 or more children in the laundry. "Meanwhile the family gathered cosily in the Great Parlour with their music and their books, in the pleasant glow of candlelight and a bright fire. And with all that crowd of dirty ill-fed little bodies—phew, my dear.

"So they did not help; but they did not hinder. They, indeed, respected. But there were other more personal results of Betsy's new point of view that they resisted with all their might."

To the Gurney sisters the "plain" Quakers had always seemed too drastically severe, absurdly narrow. But now Betsy began to see their point. "I still continue that I shall turn plain," she wrote. "I find it almost impossible to keep up to the principles of Friends without altering my dress and speech. . . . She did not, however, do it easily—no, nor quickly."

"To become 'plain' was for Betsy not to escape from sin. She never used the word—but to prune away the unessential. The cutting hurt. That which she cut off was bound up with the life of others, and their pain doubled hers. But once the effort was made she felt release."

John Gurney again administered a dose of London. This time Rachel went too, Betsy's nearest and dearest sister.

Betsy's diary is very girlish in its vivid portrayal of a debate between cap, turbon, turbon, cap, before appearing at a party at the Hoares. "However," she writes, "after much uncertainty I felt most easy to appear like a Quaker and wear my cap, which I did.

The Hoares had included in their party friends of the Gurneys, especially one who did not know how to flirt but wished to promote a plain and honest courtship. Betsy was, perhaps, hardly aware of his wooing, being accustomed to swains with more address and polish. But it was not long before "young Fry" was to force himself solidly on her attention and walk right into the middle of her ordered world. She refused him three times, but his masterfulness would take no refusal, and in the end he conquered, and it was on his comfortable shoulder she sobbed her indecision away, and Elizabeth's days became full of winding up her work and preparing her trousseau and for the marriage which was to prove so permanently happy, although many problems bristled for the new bride when her husband took her home to Mildred's Court and the exactions of hospitality extended far beyond the family. John Gurney had been right. Elizabeth was made for marriage. It was Joseph Fry's misfortune that in those early malleable days he could not have her more to himself.

In August, 1801, Betsy's first child (Katherine) was born. All that love could do, all that money could do, was lavishly and fervently done. But chloroform was yet in the future; the cruelty of Nature was unchecked. And when at long, long last her husband showed her the little new-born child she could only answer by a burst of tears. Betsy's exhaustion was extreme. It was a month before she could write in her journal "I have now pretty much recovered," and even then she was spiritless.

* By Janet Whitney. George Harrap & Co., Ltd., London. Price 12s. 6d. net.

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