

John Wesley the Methodist

Chapter II - The Epworth Household

Epworth in Lincolnshire.--The Wonderful Mother.--Pecuniary Difficulties.- "A Brand Plucked from the Burning."

LINCOLNSHIRE, the county of "fen, marsh, and wood," has, perhaps, been the most assertive of all the seething counties of the eastern coast of the British Isles. In almost every great crisis of English history we find leaders from Lincolnshire. For at least seven hundred years it has been represented in the high places of English life by some illustrious son.

The old market town of Epworth stands on a piece of land once inclosed by five livers, and called the Isle of Axholme. Its population remains about the same as in the days of the Wesleys, when the parishioners numbered two thousand. They live, for the most part, in the one street that stretches out for two miles. From the time of Charles I down to the first quarter of the eighteenth century the "stilt walkers" had fiercely resisted every effort to drain the fens, and when the work was accomplished by new settlers the older Fenmen burned the crops, killed the cattle and flooded the lands of the intruders. The turbulent spirit of the Fenmen lingered still among the villagers of Epworth, who were also profligate and vicious in their habits--as Samuel Wesley discovered to his cost during his first twelve years among them.

The exterior of Epworth Church remains much the same as in Wesley's day. Porches, walls, buttresses, and towers have not been materially altered in the two centuries. Within, the pews, organ, and decorations are new, the rood screen has been removed, the aisles have been reroofed, and six bells have been hung in the tower.

The first home of the Wesleys at Epworth was a typical country parsonage of the seventeenth century, a homely frame structure, plastered within and roofed with straw. Parker's well-known painting of John Wesley's deliverance from the fire provides a partially imaginary picture of the house. An old document thus describes it: "It consists of five bays, but all of mud and plaster, the whole building being contrived into three stories, and disposed in seven chief rooms, kitchen, hall, parlour, butterie, and three large upper rooms, and some others of common use; a little garden empailed between the stone wall and the south, a barn, a dove coate, and a hemp kiln."

Let us take a look into the interior of the Epworth rectory, for in this household we have, as Stevens well says, the "real origin" of Methodism. Mrs. Wesley's education in the splendid religious environment of the twenty years' life in her father's house in London, and her diligent self-improvement during her married life, gave superior qualifications for the training of the school in the home. The method of living and the course of study have been given in a letter by the matchless teacher herself. The children were always put into a regular method of living, in such things as they were capable, from their birth; as in dressing, undressing, and changing their linen. When turned a year old they were taught to fear the rod, and to cry softly. "I insist," she says, "in conquering the will of children betimes, because this is the only strong and rational foundation of a religious education, without which both precept and example will be ineffectual, but when this is thoroughly done then is a child capable of being governed by the reason and piety of its parents, till its own understanding comes to maturity, and the principles of religion have taken root in the mind."

As soon as the child learned to talk, its first act on rising and its last act before retiring were to say the Lord's prayer, to which, as it grew bigger, were added short prayers for parents some collects, a short catechism, and some portion of Scripture, as memory could bear. That genius of successful management which utilizes every help and helper was shown when, at the regularly designated hour, the oldest took the youngest that could speak, and the second the next, to whom were read the psalms for the day and a chapter in the New Testament. In the morning they were directed to read the psalms and a chapter in the Old Testament. They were taught to be still at family prayers, and to ask a blessing, which they did by signs before they could speak.

The exquisite manners of John Wesley came largely from his careful training in childhood. The children were trained to "civil behavior;" saluting one another by the proper name with the addition of "brother" or "sister," yet nearly every child a gentle nickname. Each must "speak handsomely for what was wanted," even to the humblest servant, saying, "Pray, give me such a thing." Telling the truth brought reward; rude, ill-bred talk was unheard; and the children were forbidden freedom with the servants in conversation or association, lest something coarse or evil might be projected into their lives. But there was recreation in abundance. They thus grew up in that humble home a healthy, happy, witty band of children.

There was on the calendar of this home "The Alphabet Party." On the fifth birthday of each child, the house having been set in order the previous day for the celebration, the new pupil took the first lesson. To begin the child's education was better than a banquet, and the first effort must, if possible, be a decided success. In the school hours of the learner's first day the alphabet was acquired. The second day spelling and reading began in the Holy Scriptures, with the Book of Genesis. Much stress was laid on good reading and writing. Then came the multiplication table, elementary mathematics, grammar, history, and geography. The drill which John acquired in grammar flowered out into his later authorship of short grammars for the study of English, French, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Reading

aloud became a specialty with the older children, from such authors as Milton and Shakespeare. John Wesley declared that his sister Emilia was the best reader of poetry that he had ever heard. The wise mother drilled the mental faculties, the "memory drill" being another specialty.

"Why do you go over the same thing with that child the twentieth time" said the rector impatiently to his wife.

Because," said she, "nineteen times were not sufficient. If I had stopped after telling him nineteen times, all my labor would have been lost."

There was even a successful adaptation of university study and method. Mrs. Wesley taught first by talks or lectures, then by text-books, and required essays or papers from the elder scholars. The classics were exalted, and the daughters took the same lessons as their brothers. Mehetabel, the first one trained by the systematic plan finally adopted, could read in the Greek Testament when only eight years old. The rector rendered assistance in the classics. In the school hours attention was given to the culture of the soul, and there even was a catechism drill in the primary department, and the teaching of Christian doctrines in the higher grades. Then there were Mrs. Wesley's own compositions, so highly commended by Adam Clarke, but lost when the rectory was burned. There were elaborate essays on religious and educational themes which she had prepared as text-books for her home school.

Has there ever been a home school equal to this in Epworth rectory The stroke of the family clock regulates all things. But morning and evening the glad sound of youthful voices rings out in singing. Around the evening candle sit the happy family, with sewing and witty talk, with many games, with even the sensation of a haunted house; where the ghost is often heard, but never seen, and, better still, never feared. Buoy well says: "Epworth was an ideal home; the family were the embodiment of the name of their church, St. Andrew's; for they were said to have been the most loving family in Lincolnshire."

It was not all sunshine, however, in the Epworth home. The rector grew vexed because his wife would not respond "amen" to his prayer for the king. "Sukey, if we serve two kings, we must have two beds," and, as impulsively as when he left London for Oxford, Samuel Wesley hurried away to the London Convocation, to return only at the death of the king as if nothing unpleasant had ever occurred. There were many conflicts between the rash rector and his ungodly parishioners. They hated him, and he knew not how to win their love. Debts crowded in upon him. In 1705, when John was two years old, his father was arrested in the churchyard for a debt of 30 and hurried off to jail. His good wife sent him her rings to sell, but he returned them, believing the Lord would provide otherwise. We see him at work among his "fellow jailbirds" in Lincoln Castle reading prayers and preaching, even securing books to distribute among the prisoners. He writes: "I am now at rest. I am come to the haven where I've long expected to be." And again: "A jail is a paradise in comparison of the life I led before I came hither. No man has worked truer for bread than I have done, and few have lived harder, or their families either."

But the storm beat more fiercely upon the rectory, for food was hard to find, the crop of the previous year having been a failure. The angry neighbors now burned the flax, stabbed the three cows that had given milk to the family, and wished "the little devils"--the children in the rectory--would be turned out to starve. The delicate, brave-hearted wife toiled on, and kept together the half-fed and half-clothed children.

"Tell me, Mrs. Wesley," said the Archbishop of York, "whether you have ever really wanted bread."

"I will freely own to your grace," she replied, "that strictly speaking, I never did want bread. But then I had so much care to get it before it was eat and to pay for it afterward as have often made it unpleasant to me; and I think to have bread on such terms is the next degree of wretchedness to having none at all."

Friends came to the relief of the rector, and through the influence of the Duke of Buckingham he was presented with 25. After three months' imprisonment he returned to his parish and his books.

Then came the enemy's torch. The rectory went down in ashes, and only the good providence of God saved the lives of John and his mother. It was on Wednesday night, the 9th of February, 1709. Mrs. Wesley was ill in her room, with her two eldest daughters as companions. Bettie, the maid, and five younger children were in the nursery, while Hettie was alone in the small bedroom next to the granary, where the newly threshed wheat and corn were stored. The rector left his study at half-past ten, locked the room that contained his precious manuscripts and the records of the family and parish, and retired to rest in a room near to his wife.

It was a wild night. A howling northeast storm obscured the half moon. The fire crept up the straw roof and dropped upon the bed where Hetty slept. Scorched and alarmed, she ran to her father's room, while voices on the street cried, "Fire! fire!" The father warned his wife and daughters, helped them down stairs, and wakened those in the nursery. Bettie escaped with Charles in her arms, while three children followed. The brave father helped them into the yard and over the garden wall, and back to the house he rushed, trying in vain to find his wife. He tried to reach the study and failed. A dismal cry came out from the flames, "Help me!" "Jacky" had awakened to find the ceiling of his room on fire. The distracted father tried to force himself up the stairs, but streams of flame beat him back. He and the

children committed the boy's soul to God. Within, Mrs. Wesley, lost in the excitement, sought the opened front doors, but was forced back by the blinding sheet of fire and smoke. At a third effort she was literally blown down by the flames. Calmly she sought divine help. Wrapped in a cloak about her chest, she waded knee-deep through the flames to the door. Her limbs were scorched, and her face was black with smoke, so that when found by her frantic husband he did not know her.

John, not yet six years old, climbed on a chest to the window, and cried to be taken out. One man was helped up over the shoulders of another, and the child leaped into his arms. At the same moment the roof fell in. The boy was put into his mother's arms. The rector, in his search for his wife, found her holding the child, who by this time he had thought was burned to ashes. He could not believe his eyes until several times he had kissed the boy. Mrs. Wesley said to him, "Are your books safe?" "Let them go," he replied, "now that you and all the children are preserved." He called on those near him to praise God, saying, "Come, neighbors, let us kneel down; let us give thanks to God. He has given me all my eight children. Let the house go; I am rich enough."

To John Wesley for more than fourscore years this event was the initial of his vivid reminiscences. There was no place found in his thought from that time onward for a doubt of a Supreme Being whose mercy interposes in moments of danger. The mother's escape was as miraculous as that of her celebrated son. In later years he caused a vignette to be engraved of a burning house, beneath his portrait, and these words underscored: "Is not this a brand plucked from the burning?"

The rectory was soon rebuilt in a more substantial manner and on a more commodious plan. While the rector is attending the Convocation in London the good mother holds service with her children on Sabbath afternoons in the kitchen, reading good books and sermons. Neighbors ask the privilege of coming to hear, and there are soon as many as thirty attending regularly. The rector, though displeased with the news, is delighted with the plan. On his return the next year he has a conceited curate, who writes him words of bitter complaint against the sermon-reading wife. She tells her husband of the good work, and that as many as two hundred come to hear. The curate writes him strong words of a "conventicle" a pestiferous gathering of Dissenters--and the rector in reply urges his wife to discontinue the meetings. The defense of the mother of Methodism is in these noble words:

It is plain, in fact, that this one thing has brought more people to church than ever anything did in so short a time. We used not to have above twenty or twenty-five at evening service, whereas we have now between two and three hundred, which are more than ever came before to hear Inman in the morning.

Besides the constant attendance on the public worship of God, our meeting has wonderfully conciliated the minds of this people toward us, so that now we live in the greatest amity imaginable; and, what is still better, they are very much reformed in their behavior on the Lord's day; and those who used to be playing in the streets now come to hear a good sermon read, which is surely more according to the will of Almighty God

I need not tell you the consequences if you determine to put an end to our meeting If you do, after all, think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me that you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience; but send me your positive command, in such full and express terms as may absolve me from guilt and punishment for neglecting this opportunity of doing good when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The marvelous service continued to shed its light abroad, for who could resist the words and work of that matchless heroine of the spacious Epworth kitchen

The fire sadly interfered with the school in the home. The children were received into friendly families until the rectory could be rebuilt, and when they returned their mother had a difficult task to restore order and good manners. She was deeply impressed by John's escape, and two years afterward we find her meditating in the eventide, and writing: "I do intend to be more particularly careful of the soul of this child that thou hast so mercifully provided for than I ever have been, that I may do my endeavor to instill into his mind the principles of true religion and virtue. Lord, give me grace to do it sincerely and prudently, and bless my attempts with good success."

Much as the Epworth children owed to their mother, they owed not a little also to their father, a learned man, a comprehensive thinker, a racy writer and speaker, a brave worker, a manly soul, hasty, impetuous, hot, but loving, liberal, and true." He gave a good example to his own children by his self-sacrificing care for his widowed Nonconformist mother. He never failed, amid all his distress, to make up an annual 10 for her. His letters to his sons at school and college show that he was their friend and teacher. When he was not at Convocation he taught them the rudiments of classics. He imparted to his sons his own love of books, for he was a bibliomaniac of pronounced type. He encouraged his children in a wide range of reading. He criticized the "sorry Sternhold Psalms," and in the same letter expressed his love for music as "a great help to our devotion."

In two of his many enterprises in the Press and the pulpit the vigorous rector notably anticipated the principles of his Methodist sons; he was the apologist of the TM religious societies" of his day, and he was the advocate of "a broad and comprehensive scheme" of foreign missions. Indeed, he was to the year of his death disposed, could the way be made clear, to go out himself as a missionary to heathen lands.