

## John Wesley the Methodist

### Chapter XX - The True John Wesley

John Wesley's Appearance.--His habits.--His Temperament.--His Tact.--His Love of Children.--His Unhappy Matrimonial Experience.--His Wit and Humor.--His Freedom from Selfish Ambition.--Asbury's Tribute.

MANY authentic portraits, from Williams, in 1763, to Romney, in 1788, have given John Wesley's features to the world. His hazel eyes are said to have been bright and penetrating, even to the last. In youth his hair was black, and in old age silvery white. In height he was not quite five feet six inches, and he weighed one hundred and twenty-two pounds; his frame was well knit, muscular, and strong. He was scrupulously neat in his person and habits, and wore a narrow-plaited stock, a coat with a small upright collar, buckled shoes, and three-cornered hat. "I dare no more," he said in his old age, "write in a fine style than wear a fine coat." "Exactly so," remarks Overton, "but, then, he was particular about his coats. He was most careful never to be slovenly in his dress, always to be dressed in good taste. . . It is just the same with his style; it is never slovenly, never tawdry."

In his habits of order, account-keeping, and punctuality he was literally a "methodist." "Sammy," said he to his nephew, "be punctual. Whenever I am to go to a place the first thing I do is to get ready; then what time remains is all my own." In old age, as he stood waiting for his chaise at Haslingden, he remarked, "I have lost ten minutes, and they are lost forever."

Every minute had its value to him for work or rest. "Joshua, when I go to bed I go to bed to sleep, and not to talk," was his rebuke to a young preacher who once shared his room and wished to converse at sleeping time.

Dr. Johnson once said to Boswell: "John Wesley's conversation is good, but he is never at leisure. He is always obliged to go at a certain hour. This is very disagreeable to a man who loves to fold his legs and have his talk out, as I do." On another occasion he said, "I hate to meet John Wesley; the dog enchants you with his conversation, and then breaks away to go and visit some old woman."

Yet Wesley was never hurried in mind or manner. "He had no time," says Henry Moore, "to mend anything that he either wrote or did. He therefore always did everything: not only with quietness, but with what might be thought slowness."

Wesley was a delightful companion, and his comrades on the road and friends in the home witness to his cheerfulness, courtesy, kindness, and wit, "Sour godliness is the devil's religion," was one of his sayings. He told Mr. Blackwell that he could not bear to have people about him who were in ill humor, and he did his best to cure them.

Knox, as we have seen, was charmed with Wesley's habitual cheerfulness. When he first met him he tried to form an impartial judgment of his character, and wrote: "So fine an old man I never saw! The happiness of his mind beamed forth in his countenance. Every look showed how fully he enjoyed 'the gay remembrance of a life well spent.' Wherever Wesley went he diffused a portion of his own felicity, Easy and affable in his demeanor, he accommodated himself to every sort of company, and showed how happily the most finished courtesy may be blended with the most perfect piety. In his conversation we might be at a loss whether to admire most his fine classical taste, his extensive knowledge of men and things, or his overflowing goodness of heart. While the grave and serious were charmed with his wisdom, his sportive sallies of innocent mirth delighted even the young and thoughtless; and both saw in his uninterrupted cheerfulness the excellency of true religion. No cynical remarks on the levity of youth embittered his discourses. No applausive retrospect to past times marked his present discontent. In him even old age appeared delightful, like an evening without a cloud; and it was: impossible to observe him without wishing fervently, 'May my latter end be like his!'"

Wesley and one of his preachers were once taking lunch with a gentleman whose daughter had been greatly impressed by Wesley's preaching. The itinerant, a man of very plain manners and little tact, was conversing with the young lady, who was remarkable for her beauty. He noticed that she wore a number of rings, and taking hold of her hand, he raised it, and called Wesley's attention to the sparkling gems. "What do you think of this, sir," said he, "for a Methodist's hand" The girl turned crimson, and the question was awkward for Wesley, whose aversion to all display of jewelry was so well known. But the aged evangelist showed a tact Chesterfield might have envied. With a quiet, benevolent smile he looked up, and simply said, "The hand is very beautiful." The young lady appeared at evening service without her jewels, and became an earnest Christian.

Of Wesley's love for children many anecdotes are told. Robert Southey says: "I was in a house in Bristol where Wesley was. When a mere child, on running down stairs before him with a beautiful little sister of my own, whose ringlets were floating over her shoulders, he overtook us on the landing and took my sister in his arms and kissed her. Placing her on her feet again, he then put his hand upon my head and blessed me, and I feel as though I had the blessing of that good man upon me at the present moment." As Southey spoke the last words his eyes glistened with tears, and his voice showed what deep emotion the memory of that scene of his childhood awakened.

John Wesley's marriage presents a sad contrast to his brother's happy union. Dr. Rigg, in his Living Wesley, with psychological insight

and balanced judgment has forever vindicated Wesley, and the Christian women with whom he was brought into close relations before and after his unhappy marriage, from the austere and by no means discriminating or delicate criticism of more voluminous writers on the subject. Wesley's letters, he says, reveal his "extreme natural susceptibility to whatever was graceful and amiable in woman, especially if united to mental vigor and moral excellence. He had been brought up in the society of clever and virtuous women--his sisters--and it seems as if he could at no time in his life dispense with the exquisite and stimulating pleasure which he found in female society and correspondence. He was naturally a woman worshiper--at least a worshiper of such women. An almost reverent courtesy, a warm but pure affection, a delicate but close familiarity, marked through life his relations with the good and gifted women--gifted they were, for the most part--with whom he maintained friendship and correspondence."

Alexander Knox, who convinced Southey of Wesley's freedom from personal ambition, also wrote to Hannah More a letter which reveals an unbiased critic's view of Wesley's relation to his women friends. He is writing of Wesley's friendship with Miss Knox, and having transcribed a note to himself, in which Wesley sends an earnest message to "My dear Sally Knox," declaring that he "loves her dearly, and shall be glad to meet her at our Lord's right hand," Mr. Knox proceeds as follows: "John Wesley's impressible nature inclined him to conceive such attachments, and the childlike innocence of his heart disposed him to express them with the most amiable simplicity. The gayety of his nature was so undiminished in its substance, while it was divinely disciplined in its movements, that to the latest hour of his life there was nothing innocently pleasant with which he was not pleased, and nothing naturally lovely which, in its due proportion, he was not ready to love. To interesting females, especially, this affection continually showed itself; of its nature and kind, what he says of my sister gives a striking manifestation."

This susceptibility of Wesley shows that his somewhat ascetic and intensely busy public life and his ecclesiastical statesmanship did not crush his tender human feeling, as some of his critics have supposed.

In four instances Wesley the friend became a lover before he made the fatal mistake of marrying one who proved unworthy of his affection. Miss Betty Kirkham, the sister of one of the earliest Oxford Methodists, was his first love. With her he corresponded in the curious stilted manner of the day--a style he afterward utterly forsook. In those first love letters he transformed prosaic Betty into the romantic "Varanese," just as in his later correspondence with Mrs. Pendarve (Delany) he named that lady "Aspasia," his brother Charles "Cyrus," and himself "Araspes." Then came his ill-fated love affair with Miss Hopkey, in Georgia, which revealed what Canon Overton calls "his extreme guilelessness, his readiness to believe the best of everybody, his utterly unsuspecting nature." But the broken courtship which brought him most pain was with Mrs. Grace Murray.

Grace Murray, a sailor's widow, was then a devoted worker in the orphanage at Newcastle. She had a hundred members in her classes, was a skillful housekeeper, and nursed the sick itinerants who found refuge in Wesley's northern home. In spite of the pungent aspersions of Tyerman there is nothing in the history of her residence at the orphanage inconsistent with the conclusion that "she was a woman not only of singular tact, but of attractive modesty and of deep piety." All who knew her best testify to this; her diary, and the savor of her piety, and long after-life as a wife and widow of another than Wesley confirm this. Canon Overton is in evident sympathy with Charles Wesley's strong objection to having "a ci-devant servant-maid for his sister-in-law." But she was far superior in intelligence and true refinement to many "ladies of quality" of the coarse Georgian period. That she manifested weakness and vacillation under circumstances of great perplexity may be granted, but in a woman of tender conscience and compassionate heart, surrounded by conflicting counselors, this is not surprising. John Bennet, one of Wesley's preachers, and John Wesley himself both fell in love with her. She had nursed the former through an illness of six months, in 1747, and next year Wesley was under her care for six days. She accompanied the preachers on their journeys to assist in village work, in leading bands and classes, and addressing small gatherings. According to the custom of that century, when women everywhere rode on pillion behind servingman, friend, or relative, she followed the fashion. Mrs. Charles Wesley did the same. Mr. Tyerman reflects on Wesley for thus taking Grace Murray with him on journeys when there was special work for her to do. Wesley's contemporaries would have thought no evil of this, nor was there any impropriety in it. She corresponded with John Bennet, and, though there does not appear to have been a definite agreement between them, their marriage was no doubt looked forward to by both; but when John Wesley, with characteristic decision, made her an offer of marriage in August, 1748, she accepted it with surprise and delight. But John Bennet proved to be a successful rival, persuaded Grace Murray that it was her duty to marry him, and said that if she did not, he should "run mad." Charles Wesley intervened, alarmed at the thought of his brother marrying a woman who was so inferior to his own wife in social station. He saw Grace Murray and passionately remonstrated with her--"Grace Murray, you have broken my heart!" The weak, distressed, and vacillating woman rode with him to Newcastle and fell at Bennet's feet, begging forgiveness for using him so badly. Within a week she became John Bennet's wife.

Bennet soon left Wesley, taking with him the majority of the members at Bolton and Stockport. He afterward became a Calvinistic minister at Warburton, where he died, in 1759.

The loss of Grace Murray was the greatest personal sorrow of John Wesley's life. Very pathetic are the letters and verses in which he refers to the event. He did not meet her again until 1788. "The meeting was affecting," says Moore, who was present; "but Mr. Wesley preserved more than his usual self-possession. It was easy to see, notwithstanding the many years which had intervened, that both in sweetness of spirit and in person and manners she was a fit subject for the tender regrets expressed in his verses. The interview did not continue long, and I do not remember that I ever heard Mr. Wesley mention her name afterward."

If Wesley had married Grace Murray he would have been saved from the matrimonial disaster which afterward befell him. In 1751 he married Mrs. Vazeille, the widow of a London merchant. Wesley took care that her fortune should be settled on herself and children, and it was agreed that he should not preach one sermon or travel one mile less than before his marriage. During the first four years Mrs. Wesley accompanied her husband on many of his journeys, but she naturally grew discontented with the discomforts of this unsettled life, and when she remained at home she became possessed of such an absurd jealousy of her husband that she almost became a monomaniac.

Charles Wesley early discovered her to be of an angry and bitter spirit, and in 1753 wrote to his own amiable wife: "I called, two minutes before preaching, on Mrs. Wesley at the Foundry, and in all that time had not one quarrel." He begs his wife to be courteous without trusting her. She acted with such unreasonable malice that it is charitable to accept the suggestion that she was at times mentally unsound. She seized her husband's papers, interpolated his letters, and then gave them into the hands of his enemies or published them in the newspapers. She shut up Charles Wesley with her husband in a room, and told them of their faults with much detail and violence. Charles called her his "best friend," for this service, but began to recite Latin poetry and persisted until she at last set her prisoners free. He had tried this device with good effect on his voyage from Georgia.

Sometimes Mrs. Wesley drove a hundred miles to see who was with her husband in his carriage. John Hampson, one of Wesley's preachers, witnessed her in one of her fits of fury, and said, "More than once she laid violent hands upon him, and tore those venerable locks which had suffered sufficiently from the ravages of time." She often left him, but returned again in answer to his entreaties. In 1771 he writes: "For what cause I know not, my wife set out for Newcastle, purposing 'never to return.' Non eam reliqui; non dimisi; non revocabo." (I did not forsake her; I did not dismiss her; I shall not recall her.)

In 1774 a petulant letter shows she was still with her husband. She died at Camberwell, in 1781, when Wesley was in the West of England. Jackson in his Life of Charles Wesley says that several letters of Wesley to his termagant wife, during his worst trials from her, show "the utmost tenderness of affection, such as few female hearts could have withstood; and justify the opinion that, had it been his happiness to be married to a person who was worthy of him, he could have been one of the most affectionate husbands that ever lived. Those who think that he was constitutionally cold and repulsive utterly mistake his character."

He told Henry Moore that he believed God overruled this prolonged sorrow for his good; and that if Mrs. Wesley had been a better wife, and had continued to act in that way she knew well how to act, he might have been unfaithful to his great work, and might have sought too much to please her according to her own desires.

Of wit and humor there is much in the Journals, and much more in the pithy letters which he was continually sending to his preachers. His anecdotes and racy sayings often supplied a tonic much needed by some of these itinerants

He was naturally quick-tempered, and sometimes said sharp things, but he was yet quicker to apologize if he felt he had spoken too hastily and in anger. He was incapable of malice, and was marvelously ready to forgive his most cruel traducers and hittest opponents.

It must be admitted that Wesley was sometimes too ready to believe the marvelous, and that his guileless trustfulness of his fellow-men betrayed him into practical errors during his half century of labor. "My brother," said Charles Wesley, "was, I think, born for the benefit of knaves." He was too prone to take men and women at their own estimates. He attributed to the immediate interposition of Providence events which might be attributed to natural causes. He was too ready to regard the physical phenomena of the early years of the revival as spiritual signs, though he checked them when he was convinced of their imposture.

Southey was convinced by Knox of his error in regarding selfish ambition as a leading feature in Wesley's character. Canon Overton truly says that "Knox knew Wesley intimately; Southey did not." Knox, who united wide culture with ardent piety, but who differed from Wesley in some of his opinions, speaks thus of his motives: "The slightest suspicion of pride, ambition, selfishness, or personal gratification of any kind stimulating Mr. Wesley in any instance, or mixing in any measure with the movements of his life, never once entered into my mind. That such charges were made by his opponents I could not be ignorant. But my deep impression remains unimpaired--that since the days of the apostles there has not been a human being more thoroughly exempt from all those frailties of human nature than John Wesley," "And this," says Overton, "is the unvarying strain of those who knew Wesley best." He was a born ruler of men, but he used his extraordinary power for no selfish ends. He ruled preachers and people with absolute authority, but he was no despot. He was the patriarch of his people, and they knew he spoke the truth when he said: "The power I have I never sought; it was the unexpected result of the work which God was pleased to work, by me. I therefore suffer it till I can find some one to ease me of my burden." When he heard that men said he was "shackling freeborn Englishmen," "making himself a pope," and exercising arbitrary power, he replied with characteristic artlessness: "If you mean by arbitrary power a power which I exercise singly, without any colleague therein, this is certainly true; but I see no harm in it. Arbitrary in this sense is a very harmless word. I bear this burden merely for your sakes." He possessed, as Macaulay says, "a genius for government." Matthew Arnold ascribes to him "a genius for godliness." Southey considered him "a man of great views, great energies, and great virtues; the most influential mind of the last century; the man who will have produced the greatest effects centuries, or, perhaps, millenniums hence."

In America the irritation caused by Wesley's expression of his opinions during the Revolution had passed away before he died. Bishop Asbury in his Journal (April 29, 1791) refers to the death "of that dear man of God," and gives what Dr. Buckley well calls "probably the best estimate of his character and career." It is well worth quoting here as we conclude our plain account of his life: "When we consider his plain and nervous writings, his uncommon talent for sermonizing and journalizing; that he had such a steady flow of animal spirits; so much of the spirit of government in him; his knowledge as an observer; his attainments as a scholar; his experience as a Christian; I conclude his equal is not to be found among all the sons he hath brought up, nor his superior among all the sons of Adam he may have left behind."

THE END.