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Hannah More.

IT may be well to remind ourselves in this new era of "emancipated" womanhood, with all its possibilities for good, that the fame and usefulness of women is not necessarily bound up with the question of the franchise. We may safely say, apart from political controversy, that the possession of the vote would not have added one whit to the great services which Hannah More rendered to her country, or would have enabled her to be a greater blessing to her day and generation. It is sad to reflect how transient is the memory of the noblest and most devoted lives, for although the fame of Hannah More both in this country and in America was deservedly widespread during the latter half of her long career, yet to the present generation, even of religious people, she is fast becoming little more than a name. Her long life (1745–1833) was passed during a most momentous and eventful period of our national history and progress. She took a most lively and intelligent interest in her country's welfare, and she witnessed the formation of our colonial empire in the conquests of Canada and India, as well as the wanton alienation of the American colonists in the struggle culminating in the War of Independence. She also took an active interest in the great European contest inaugurated by the French Revolution and the succeeding Napoleonic wars with all their attendant suffering and scarcity for this country. The abolition of slavery, the agitation for "Catholic" emancipation and parliamentary reform, all obtained fruition before she was called to her reward in 1833. The Methodist revival was at its height in her youth and she lived to see some of its results in the formation and increasing activity of the now famous missionary and religious societies—the Baptist, L.M.S., C.M.S., and B. & F.B.S.

Although Hannah More's father was a staunch Churchman of the "high" school, she possessed considerable nonconformist ancestry. Her grandmother was a strict Presbyterian and her grandfather used to act as doorkeeper with drawn sword at the proscribed "conventicles." Two of her father's great-uncles had also been captains in Cromwell's army. Her father, having lost a fortune and estate through a lawsuit, obtained a schoolmaster's

post at Stapleton, in Gloucestershire, where Hannah was born.

Even in her infancy she gave promise of her future talents and ability by composing verses and moral essays, while her childish games when she played at riding to London to see bishops and booksellers foreshadowed her actual career in later years. At the age of twelve she went to a boarding school in Bristol kept by her elder sisters, and she soon made rapid progress in her studies. At sixteen she made the acquaintance of the elder Sheridan when on a visit to Bristol, by addressing him in a copy of verses. She had already displayed considerable literary talents, and at the age of seventeen she wrote a pastoral drama, while at twenty she was proficient in Italian, Latin and Spanish, and was on terms of friendship with many prominent literary men. About this time she refused two promising offers of marriage. Her first suitor, who had originally won her consent but forfeited it later by his strange conduct, settled on her an annuity to enable her to devote herself to a literary career.

It was shortly after this time that Hannah More commenced her frequent visits to London, and obtained her first introduction to the celebrated literary and fashionable circles of the day. She fulfilled her ardent desire of seeing Garrick act Shakespeare, and soon numbered him and Mrs. Garrick amongst her most intimate friends. She was especially gratified when she obtained her first introduction to Dr. Johnson and until his death she remained his close friend and enthusiastic admirer. In fact, her brilliant wit and unusual intellectual gifts seemed to have gained for her at once an entrée into the famous blue-stocking coterie of the London of that day, and her correspondence tells of a constant round of visits, amusements, dinners and literary parties with the most prominent people of the time. She was soon a welcome guest in a brilliant circle including Horace Walpole, Burke, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Garrick, Dr. Johnson, Gibbon, Mrs. Boscawen and Mrs. Carter, while she was on intimate terms with most of the bishops and notable Church dignitaries. With Bishops Beilby, Porteus and Shute Barrington she enjoyed a warm lifelong friendship. But although she was thus immersed in the society of the great and fashionable, her life was, even at this period, by no means worldly and frivolous. In the midst of numerous social functions and entertainments she managed usually to read four or five hours daily and often spent

ten hours a day in writing. She never joined any card parties and refused to accept any social invitations on Sundays. In 1777 Hannah More's first play, a tragedy entitled "Percy," was brought out at Covent Garden theatre. Garrick was most enthusiastic over it, and as Hannah told her sister "he thinks of nothing, talks of nothing, writes of nothing but 'Percy.'" It had an immediate and remarkable success, the first edition of 4,000 being exhausted in a fortnight. Later on it was translated into German and performed with great success in Vienna. Her second play, "Fatal Falsehood," which appeared in 1779, although not so popular as "Percy," was also very well received. But in spite of this success as a play writer, Hannah More from the first had no special love for the stage or any public entertainments. In 1776 she writes that Mrs. Garrick had obtained for her a ticket to go to the Pantheon, but adds, "I could not get the better of my repugnance to these sort of places. I find my dislike of what are called public diversions greater than ever, except a play, and when Garrick has left the stage I could be very well contented to relinquish plays also." Very shortly afterwards she came to the decision that theatre-going was inconsistent with her Christian profession, and in 1783 she writes, "You know I have long withdrawn myself from the theatre. I have refused going to see Mrs. Siddons, though Lady Spencer took the pains to come yesterday to ask me to go with her." On another occasion all entreaties failed to persuade her to see Mrs. Siddons act the part of the heroine in "Percy." Garrick's death in 1779 affected her greatly, and she declared that she had never witnessed in any family "more decorum, propriety and regularity than in his." She gives a graphic description of the solemnity of Garrick's funeral in Westminster Abbey, and for many years after paid long visits to Mrs. Garrick to comfort her in her bereavement.

Hannah More held a very high and possibly even exaggerated opinion of Dr. Johnson's Christian character, declaring shortly before his death that he would not leave "an abler defender of religion and virtue behind him." She records the earnest efforts which the dying philosopher made for the conversion of his doctor —"believe a dying man," urged Johnson, "there is no salvation but in the sacrifice of the Lamb of God." She also relates the dying requests to which Johnson succeeded in obtaining the consent of his friend Sir Joshua Reynolds—that he would never paint on a

Sunday, and would always read the Bible on Sundays and whenever he had an opportunity.

About the year 1780 Hannah More read a copy of John Newton's *Cardiphonia*, and was so greatly impressed with its teaching that she soon discovered the author and commenced a close friendship and correspondence with him. In fact the earnest counsel and instruction she obtained from Newton was a great means of the development and deepening of Miss More's spiritual life from this time. She now became acquainted with many of the prominent Evangelical clergy. She visited Henry Venn at his special request shortly before his death, while the religious teaching of Thomas Scott particularly attracted her. She frequently heard him preach at the Lock Chapel and often walked six miles to his lecture in Bread Street for the privilege of hearing "in his northern dialect, the truths of the gospel faithfully delineated." In 1788 she enlisted her great literary talents in the cause of Christian morality and from her own thorough knowledge and personal experience she fearlessly exposed and reproved the sins and vices so prevalent in the higher ranks of Society in an anonymous publication entitled *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great in Society*. It had at once a remarkable circulation, running through five editions in a few months. Its authorship was ascribed both to Wilberforce and Bishop Porteus, but suspicion soon began to fasten on Hannah More, who expected when she was discovered "to find almost every door shut against her." At the same time she published a poem on "Slavery," and in 1790 appeared *An Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World*, which was read as eagerly as *The Manners of the Great*, although the criticisms and reflections on the prevailing corruptions in high society and on the decay of true piety were far bolder than in the latter book. Bishop Porteus declared that there were few persons who could have written such a book conveying "so much sound, evangelical morality and so much genuine Christianity in such neat and elegant language," but he assured her it was vain to conceal her authorship, for "your style and manner are so marked, and so confessedly superior to those of any other moral writer of the present age, that you will be immediately detected by any one that pretends to any taste in judging of composition." It would be difficult to estimate the beneficial influence to the cause of vital religion exerted by Hannah

More's writings, and although she informed John Newton that "when I am in the great world I consider myself as in an enemy's country," there is no doubt that it was her recognised position in Society which secured her books so wide a hearing. John Wesley once remarked to her sister, "Tell her to live in the world; *there* is the sphere of her usefulness, they will not let *us* come nigh them," while Newton declared, "You have a great advantage, madam, there is a circle by which what you write will be read, and which will hardly read anything of a religious kind that is not written by you."

Although Hannah More's religious convictions were decidedly Evangelical, she possessed a broad and catholic spirit, and freely acknowledged her indebtedness to such Puritan writers as Baxter, Matthew Henry and Doddridge, as well as to Roman Catholics like Pascal and the Port Royalists. "We hear," she writes, "of Christian Knowledge Societies opposed to Bible Societies; but I belong to both parties, I wish there was no such thing as party." She indignantly denied the accusation of teaching Calvinism in her schools, asserting her object to be not the inculcation "of dogmas and opinions," but the training up "of good members of society and plain practical Christians." She was however a staunch and even strict Churchwoman, recording with satisfaction that she had never once strayed "into a conventicle of any kind," not even into any of Lady Huntingdon's chapels, or Wesley's or Whitfield's Tabernacles.

In 1785 Hannah More built a small residence at Cowslip Green, near Bristol, and in this picturesque secluded retreat she enjoyed the quiet, retirement and country pursuits she loved so well. From this time her visits to London became shorter and less frequent. It was while living here with her sisters that she commenced her pioneer work for the cause of religious education, in which she incurred an extraordinary amount of ignorant and bitter opposition, but which was of incalculable benefit in transforming the moral character of the surrounding neighbourhood. Village life, in this district at least, had sunk into an appalling condition of degradation, vice and practical heathenism. Shocked at the abounding wickedness and spiritual depravity which she encountered in the villages she visited, Hannah More commenced a school for the instruction of the poor at Cheddar. Both the Vicar and curate of this parish

were non-resident, and the people were never visited. Only one Bible was discovered in the village, "used to prop up a flower-pot," and children were often buried without any funeral service. In fact thirteen adjoining parishes in this neighbourhood were without a resident curate. Other schools were soon established by Miss More and her sisters and were soon well attended, although many parents refused to send their children lest they should be kidnapped and sold into slavery! Religious teaching was given in the Sunday schools, while in the day schools the labourers' children were taught reading, to which was added writing and arithmetic for the children of the farmers. The girls were taught in addition sewing, knitting and spinning. These modest but praiseworthy efforts at instruction met with the most violent and prejudiced opposition. The rich squires, whom Hannah More describes as being "as ignorant as the beasts that perish, intoxicated every day before dinner, and plunged in such vices as make me begin to think London a virtuous place," declared that "religion would make the poor lazy and useless," while the opulent farmers asserted that the country "had never prospered since religion had been brought in by the monks of Glastonbury." Schools they considered as a positive evil, declaring that "we shan't have a boy to plough, or a wench to dress a shoulder of mutton." Hannah More and her helpers, however, persevered with their self-sacrificing labours. Clubs were started for the women, presents of clothing, coal and small weekly pensions were given to the sick, needy and aged, the Scriptures were expounded on week nights and "awakening" evangelistic sermons read after the Sunday school. Bibles, prayer books and helpful literature were distributed, usually as a reward for special proficiency in learning. The moral effect of this good work was soon evident, "many reprobates were," Hannah More informed her friend William Wilberforce, "awakened, and many swearers and Sabbath breakers reclaimed. The numbers both of old and young scholars increased and the daily life and conversation of many seemed to keep pace with their religious profession."

Miss More was always careful to secure the consent, and where possible the co-operation, of the incumbent of the parish before establishing a school, and thus in 1801 she was reluctantly compelled to close her school at Blagdon owing to the violent opposition of the curate-in-charge. For three years previously she had endured

a virulent persecution, her work had been reviled and outrageously misrepresented, and accusations of sedition and disaffection were actually levelled against her. At length she appealed to the Bishop of the diocese, stating fully the nature and history of her work and also the great benefits which had resulted from the instruction given in her schools, but offering to abide by his decision and close all her schools if he advised such a course. The bishop assured her that he wanted no evidence either of her faith or patriotism beyond her numerous publications, and that he heartily wished her schools success and would give them all the encouragement and protection in his power.

In 1792 the success of the French Revolution led to the wide dissemination of infidel and revolutionary principles in England, and an alarming spirit of unrest and sedition was soon apparent, especially amongst the humbler classes. In this emergency Hannah More was urged by many influential persons to write some popular pamphlet counteracting the pernicious influence of these publications. *Village Politics by Will Chip* appeared in response to this appeal, and was very widely circulated. The Government sent thousands of copies to Scotland and Ireland, and many hundred thousands were sold in London. It was widely affirmed that this little tract had essentially contributed to prevent a revolution in the country. Two years later Miss More started her "Cheap Repositary Tracts," issued at the rate of three each month, consisting of popularly written stories, ballads and Sunday readings, and more than two million copies were sold in the first year. In order to appreciate her remarkable literary activities we should remember that Hannah More possessed a very weak and delicate constitution, and was, as she once stated, "never absolutely free from pain for ten minutes since she was ten years old." On several occasions she had long illnesses lasting many months when her life was often despaired of, and yet she published eleven volumes after the age of sixty! It is seldom that any of her writings are found on any of our modern bookshelves, but there is little doubt of their extraordinary popularity at the time. *Cœlebs in Search of a Wife* appeared in 1809, and was out of print in less than a fortnight! while it ran through thirty editions in America during her lifetime. *Practical Piety*, published in 1811, speedily reached a tenth edition. The *Essay on St. Paul*, *Moral Sketches*, and *The*

Spirit of Prayer, followed in the succeeding years, all being widely read, and exerting a powerful influence for good. Miss More was constantly informed of the great profit which her books were to readers even in distant Iceland, while a Russian princess translated her Tracts into Russian, gratefully acknowledging the blessing she had received from her writings. Towards the close of her life Hannah More acknowledged that the extensive sales of her books had brought her in altogether £30,000, rejoicing that by this means she had been enabled to do so much good in private charity and public beneficence; in both of which directions she was most liberal. The upkeep of her schools alone, despite financial help received from such interested friends as Wilberforce, Henry Thornton and Lord Teignmouth, cost her £250 a year.

In 1802 Hannah More left her cottage at Cowslip Green and built a more commodious and comfortable residence in the same district called Barley Wood. It was in this healthy and picturesque spot that she received the visits of her numerous friends and admirers who came to visit her from America and all parts. In this way she met the famous and eccentric evangelist Rowland Hill, as well as such eminent divines as Dr. Chalmers and Dr. Marshman. It was here also that one by one her sisters, her faithful helpers and companions, were called to their reward, the last dying in 1819. With advancing years her constant illnesses and enfeebled constitution rendered her for several years practically a prisoner to her bedroom, and in 1828, feeling that she was no longer equal to the responsibility of superintending so large a household, she sold her dearly loved country home and passed the remaining five years of her life in a small house at Clifton. Although at this time her mental powers were gradually declining her piety continued to grow deeper and more fervent, while throughout her great sufferings her personal faith in her Saviour always shone out bright, firm and submissive. Her physician declared he had never known "a character in all respects so perfect," while to her close friends she must have seemed to dwell in Bunyan's "Beulah Land," which is the portal to the Celestial City. She abundantly fulfilled the Psalmist's prediction, "They that are planted in the house of the Lord . . . shall still bring full fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and green" (Ps. xcii. 13–14, R.V.).

C. SYDNEY CARTER.