

John Wesley the Methodist

Chapter III - The Gownboy of the Charterhouse

A Friendly Duke.--The Charterhouse School--John's School Days.-- The Epworth Ghost.--The Brothers at Westminster.

MRS. WESLEY gives a characteristic glimpse of her boy John in a letter to her husband in London in 1712: "Jack has bore his disease bravely, like a man, and indeed like a Christian, without any complaint, though he seerfled angry at the small pox when they were sore, as we guessed by his looking sourly at them, for he never said anything." When John was a child his father once said to him: "Child, you think to carry everything by dint of argument; but you will find how very little is ever done in the world by close reason." "Very little indeed," was John's comment in after years.

Mrs. Wesley trained the children to refuse food between meals, and little John's characteristic and polite reply to all kindly offers was, "I thank you; I will think of it." "One pictures John Wesley at Epworth," wrote the present rector, Dr. Overton, "as a grave, sedate child, always wanting to know the reason of everything, one of a group of remarkable children, of whom his sister Martha was most like him in appearance and character; each of them with a strong individuality and a very high spirit, but all well kept in hand by their admirable mother, all precise and rather formal, after the manner of their day, in their language and habits."

As soon as the sons of the Wesleys were old enough to leave home arrangements were made for carrying on their education in the best schools that the kingdom afforded. Samuel went to Westminster School in 1704, then to Oxford University, returning to the old school as a teacher about ten years later, when his younger brother, John, was entering the Charterhouse. Charles, the youngest son, entered Westminster School in 1706. Thus for four years before John went up to Oxford the three brothers were in London together.

In a letter recently brought to light the rector of Epworth, in attendance upon Convocation in London in May, 1711, writes of the good fortune which was in store for his two elder boys:

I believe twill be no unpleasing news to so good a Friend, that my Son is chosen from Westminster to Xtchurch, & the week after Whitsun-week I design to com to Oxford with him, & see him matriculated.

I've a younger son at home whom the Duke of Buckingham has this week writt down for his going into the Charterhouse as soon as he's of age: so that my time has not been all lost in London.

The younger son was John Wesley, who at the age of eight was thus assured a free scholarship in the famous school of the Charterhouse. The nobleman to whose patronage the lad was indebted was the lord chamberlain to Queen Anne. The literary duke had befriended the literary rector before, helping him out of his financial troubles in 1703, and receiving from him an account of the rescue of "Jacky" from the rectory fire. A Latin memorandum in John's own hand records the dates of his admission to school and university opportunities: "Joan. Westley ad nominat. ducis de Bucks admiss. in fundat. Carthus. 28 Jan. 1713-4. Ad. Univ. 24 June 1720."

Never had boys a nobler "private education" than the "plain living and high thinking" of the Epworth rectory, had afforded the Wesleys. When John went to the Charterhouse he suffered less from the hardships of school life than many who had been reared in the lap of luxury. Already he was "a diligent and successful scholar and a patient and forgiving boy, who had at home been inured, not indeed to oppression but to hard living and scanty fare." Nevertheless, from the Epworth home to the cheerless Charterhouse must have been a trying experience even for a boy like John, who was not yet eleven years old.

The school of the Charterhouse celebrated its one hundredth anniversary the year that little John Wesley came to live within its walls, but its buildings were much more ancient, having beep a part of a great Carthusian monastery. Sir Thomas Sutton, one of the merchant princes of Queen Elizabeth's reign, had bought the buildings and established in them a school and a home for old men. Forty-four boys were "on the foundation"-- that is they were educated at the expense of the Sutton fund-- and it was as one of these charity scholars that John Wesley gained admission. He had his meals in the gownboys' dining hall, a low-ceiled room, adorned by a carved chimney-piece with the founder's arms sculptured above. Tradition says that it had been the refectory of the lay brothers of the monastery.

Here in Wesley's day discipline was so lax that the boys of the higher form were suffered to rob the small boys of their portions of animal food, and Wesley himself says, "From ten to fourteen I had little but bread to eat, and not great plenty of that. I believe this was so far from hurting me that it laid the foundation of lasting health." Isaac Taylor says: "Wesley learned as a boy to suffer wrongfully with a cheerful patience, and to conform himself to cruel despotisms without acquiring either the slave's temper or the despot's." He faithfully obeyed his father's instructions to run round the green three times every morning, "and this," declares a recent writer in the Charterhouse School Magazine, "would amount to one mile, as We know to our cost, having repeatedly done it ourselves in exceedingly bad time." But it is in chapel "that one naturally thinks of the little gownboy in his black cloth gown and knee breeches, sitting in one of the rows of seats which may still be seen just in front of the founder's tomb; and close to his left, in a sort of glorified pepper box of

strange construction, sat the great head master, Thomas Walker, who had himself been a gownboy! A little farther away, in the corner near the pulpit, sat, in a similar pepper box, Andrew Tooke, usher, or second master."

Sarah Wesley, the daughter of Charles Wesley, in a letter to Adam Clarke, written from Marylebone in 1809, gives the true version of an anecdote about Tooke and John Wesley which was related to her by her father:

When John Wesley was at the Charterhouse, the schoolmaster, Mr. Tooke, missing all the little boys in the playground, supposed them by their quietness to be in some mischief. Searching, he found them all assembled in the schoolroom around my uncle, who was amusing them with instructive tales, to which they listened rather than follow their accustomed sports. The master expressed much approbation toward them and John Wesley, and he wished him to repeat this entertainment as often as he could obtain auditors and so well employ his time.

Sarah Wesley wrote this letter to confute a malicious version of the story by Nightingale, which represents Wesley as haranguing his schoolfellows from the writing desk and, when rebuked for associating with the smaller boys, replying, "Better to rule in hell than serve in heaven,"

Of his religious life as a schoolboy Wesley himself gives us a glimpse. In 1738, after describing his early life at Epworth, he wrote: "The next six or seven years were spent at school, where, outward restraints being removed, I was much more negligent than before, even of outward duties, and almost continually guilty of outward sins, which I knew to be such, though they were not scandalous in the eye of the world. However, I still read the Scriptures and said my prayers morning and evening, and what I now hoped to be saved by was, (1) not being so bad as other people; (2) having still a kindness for religion; and (3) reading the Bible, going to church, and saying my prayers." Defective as this was, Rigg justly considers Tyerman's judgment on the schoolboy, based on this confession, too severe--"John Wesley entered the Charterhouse a saint, and left it a sinner." It is clear that "Wesley never lost, even at the Charterhouse, a tender respect for religion, the fear of God and the forms of Christian propriety. It was no slight evidence of at least the powerful restraining influence of religion that he passed through such an ordeal as his six or seven years' residence without contracting any taint of vice."

The death of Queen Anne, his father's benefactress, occurred during John Wesley's first year in school, and the excitement which it occasioned must have passed within the school gates. Dr. Sacheverell, the agitator, stirred the populace to riots over the new king's attitude to the Church.

Toward the close of his schooldays Wesley had occasion to visit Sacheverell, who still held the living of St. Andrew's. The boy's early environment must have saturated his mind with Tory and High Church ideas, but his regard for one of their chief exponents received a rude shock when he visited the turbulent and pompous clergyman. "I remember," says Alexander Knox, "Mr. Wesley told us that his father was the person who composed the well-known speech delivered by Dr. Sacheverell at the close of his trial; and on this ground, when he, Mr. John Wesley, was about to be entered at Oxford, his father, knowing that the doctor had a strong interest in the college for which his son was intended, desired him to call on the doctor in his way to get letters of recommendation. 'When I was introduced,' said Mr. Wesley, 'I found him alone, as tall as a maypole, and as fine as an archbishop. I was a little fellow. He said, "You are too young to go to the university; you cannot know Greek and Latin yet. Go back to school." I looked at him as David looked at Goliath, and despised him in my heart. I thought, "If I do not know Greek and Latin better than you, I ought to go back to school indeed." I left him, and neither entreaties nor commands could have again brought me back to him.'"

The coffeehouses were the chief social institution of the metropolis. At Smith's coffeehouse, Stockmarket, Samuel Wesley and his colleagues of the Athenian Society used to meet. As young Wesley passed by these he might have caught a glimpse of those famous old Charterhouse boys, Steele and Addison. Just before John was at the school Addison's hymns, "When all thy mercies, O my God," and "The spacious firmament on high," appeared in the Spectator, and must have been read with pride by the Charterhouse masters. More than twenty years after (1737) Wesley inserted them in his first Hymn Book, and thus introduced them into the public worship of the churches.

The story of "the rectory ghost" must have at least a word. "Old Jeffrey," as the children named him, did not begin his antics until John had left Epworth for the Charterhouse School. Strange noises were heard at night and during family prayers--knocks and groans and rattling doors and pans; trenchers danced and dogs howled. Clergymen and others urged Wesley to leave the "haunted," parsonage, but he replied, "No; let the devil flee from me, I will not flee from him." On the general question of apparitions Mrs. Wesley guardedly wrote to "Dear Jacky" in 1719: "I do not doubt the fact, but I cannot understand why these apparitions are permitted. If they were allowed to speak to us, and we had strength to bear such converse--if they had commission to inform us of anything, relating to their invisible world that would be of any use to us in this--if they would instruct us how to avoid danger, or put us in a way of being wiser and better, there would be sense in it; but to appear for no end that we know of, unless to frighten people almost out of their wits, seems altogether unreasonable." There is much of Susanna Wesley's characteristic common sense in these words. The latest biographer of Mrs. Wesley--Eliza Clarke, 1886--states that about a hundred years after the Wesleys, had left Epworth strange noises were heard in the rectory, and the incumbent, not being able to trace or account for them, went away with his family and resided abroad for some time. The present

rector is of the opinion that 'Old Jeffrey' is, to some extent, answerable for a marked feature in Wesley's character--his love of the marvelous and his intense belief in the reality of apparitions and of witchcraft."

One minor incident, which is linked in a singular way with the history of Methodism, ought not to be omitted. While John and Charles Wesley were at school an explosion took place which John must have heard, for the Charterhouse was not many minutes' walk from the place where it occurred, and which Charles might have heard, as there were few buildings to break the sound, save the quiet hamlet of Charing, between the city proper and Westminster. As the building at which the explosion occurred became, twenty-three years afterward, the first Methodist chapel, the account which appeared in Newsletter of May 12, 1716, has for us a more than ordinary interest:

On Thursday night last, at a quarter past nine, as they were casting three pieces of cannon of an extraordinary size, at Mr. Bayley's, a founder on Windmill Hill, soon after the second cannon was poured into the mould, the same burst (occasioned by some small damp), whereby Mr. Hill, one of the clerks belonging to the Ordnance, was so mangled that he died yesterday morning between three and four o'clock. Mr. Whiteman, who keeps a public-house hard by, and about ten or twelve more being present at this sad accident,; were so dreadfully wounded that their lives are despaired of. Several persons of distinction were expected there on this occasion, but happily they did not come.

That explosion was followed by important consequences to the nation and the Church. Vulcan migrated with his molds and sledges from Windmill Hill, Moorfields, to Woolwich, and created the Royal Arsenal. The shattered foundry, after nearly a quarter of a century's abandonment to uselessness and silence, became the mother church of the whole family of Methodist churches in both hemispheres, on all continents, and on many distant island of the sea.

In 1720 John Wesley left the Charterhouse for Christ Church College, Oxford, taking with him a school "exhibition" prize of 40 a year, the equivalent in purchasing power of some 160 at the present day.

Wesley looked back upon his years at school "not only without bitterness, but with pleasure." He would have agreed with the later Carthusian, Thackeray, that the pupils educated there "love to revisit it, and the oldest of us grow young again for an hour or two as we come back into those scenes of our boyhood."

We get an interesting record of one of Wesley's later visits in his Journal (1757): "Aug. 8th. I took a walk in the Charterhouse. I wondered that all the squares and buildings, and especially the schoolboys, looked so little. But this is easily accounted for. I was little myself when I was at school, and measured all about me by myself. Accordingly the upper boys . . . seemed to me very big and tall, quite contrary to what they appear now, when I am taller and bigger than them."

Another link with the Charterhouse is found in Wesley's friendship for Pepusch, the famous musician, "a profound student of the ancient Greek modes and systems," who also advanced English love of music by adapting old national and popular airs to modern words. After his wife's death he left his sumptuous house and took the post of organist at the Charterhouse. Wesley records several visits to him.

Contact with the first musicians of their day, including not only Pepusch, but the greater master, Handel, must have done much to form the musical tastes of the two brothers, who were the great leaders of a modern reform in the music for worship in the churches.

To appreciate the astounding energy of the Wesleys in sacred psalmody, and their numerous publications of hymns, often accompanied with music, through all their public career, one must recognize the impulse which they received from this early acquaintanceship with a master.

It must not be supposed that John Wesley had educational advantages beyond his brothers. Samuel had left Epworth at fourteen, and entered Westminster School in London, going thence to Oxford, and after graduation returning to teach at Westminster. He was a fine classical scholar, a poet of taste and talent, and the friend of the great poets of his day. Charles Wesley came to study at Westminster, in 1716, while John was still at the Charterhouse. Samuel found a home for the little boy of nine, and derailed the expenses of his education until he won a place as king's scholar, in 1721, when his board and schooling became free. A few years later we find him captain of the school, and so becoming the link between the masters and the four hundred boys. Westminster has been particularly rich in poets, and Charles Wesley's best work as a sacred lyrical poet was to bring new honor to the school which trained Ben Jonson, Cowley, Dryden, George Herbert, Cowper, and Southey.