

The Influence of a Great Mother

By Glennie Weston Fuller

When the beautiful cathedral of Methodism in Brooklyn sought a subject for the art window to symbolise motherhood, Susannah Wesley was the one chosen, for she indeed attained the heights of the meaning of that term.

John Wesley's writings are full of reference to his mother, with illustrations of "her orderliness, reasonableness, steadfastness of purpose, calm authority, and tender affection, the serenity with which she transacted business, wrote letters and conversed, surrounded by thirteen children," and withal "a habit of profound reverence for God."

So to the womanhood to-day may we offer the portrait of a remarkable mother in terms of the great lacks and needs of to-day; supplied by the ideals of the yesterday of Susannah Wesley.

Poverty with Resourcefulness.

Susannah Wesley began married life on an income of thirty pounds a year, which did not increase much, and for weeks at a time her poetical husband was enjoying "a rest" in a debtor's prison while Mrs. Wesley continued to feed her little brood. When asked by the bishop if she ever lacked bread, she replied that the difficulty of getting bread was almost as miserable as the lack of it would have been. But despite the pinch of want, her large family was reared and educated largely by her business ability, thrift, methodical planning, and purposefulness.

Activity with Serenity.

Can one to-day visualize the activity of yesterday? Not the activity of a round of social pleasures—of teas and bridge and golf—but the household of no electric timesavers, with all food grown, picked, and prepared by hand, and even clothes made from wool grown on the sheep in the field, with poverty stalking at the door, with a new baby arriving almost every year, with business affairs to attend to, correspondence and her Manual to write, a large family to train and educate—and yet one of the characteristics which impressed her family most in later years was her patience and serenity. Her work was not a distraction but a creation.

Orderliness with Purposefulness.

The secret of Susannah Wesley's serenity in the midst of multiplied details of work was her "methodicity." As Lee says of her, "Her mind was methodical to a fault."

Fitchett adds, "Her motherhood had an inexorable plan running through it; and never were the innumerable offices of a mother discharged with such insistent method and intelligent purpose. The whole household life moved as if to a timetable. The very sleep of the children was measured to them in doses. A general retirement at five o'clock was maintained, when the oldest took the youngest that could speak, and the second the next, to whom they read the Psalms for the day and a chapter in the New Testament, as in the morning they were directed to read the Psalms and a chapter in the Old Testament, after which they went to their private prayers before they got breakfast or came into the family."

Even the hours of the week were scheduled so that each child had an hour of private interview with the mother each week. "It is probable that those rigors of introspection, that severity of self-analysis, which formed the habit of Wesley's life in after years, had their origin in those Thursday interviews." Susannah Wesley took time to guide her children into the Kingdom; she budgeted her time with the purpose of a mother's duty and privilege as a sacred trust.

Discipline with Affection.

Susannah Wesley lived before the days of psychology which said a child should not be suppressed, but she produced some masterpieces. At her son's request in her old age she set down some of her principal rules in training her children. She wrote: "When turned a year old (and some before), they were taught to fear the rod and to cry softly; by which means they escaped abundance of correction which they might otherwise have had; and that most odious noise of the crying of children was rarely heard in the house, but the family usually lived in as much quietness as if there had not been a child among them."

Again to quote Fitchett: "This wise mother understood that the will lies at the root of the character and determines it."

The Wesley household was richly endowed in the matter of the will, so that the first step in each child's education was to bring that force under government. It was a standing and imperative rule that no child was to have anything it cried for, and the moral effect on the child's mind of the discovery that the one infallible way of **not** getting a desirable thing was to cry for it must have been surpassing."

Again Mrs. Wesley wrote in her Manual, "In order to form the minds of children, the first thing to be done is to conquer their will and bring them into obedient temper. In the esteem of the world they pass for kind and indulgent whom I call cruel parents, who permit their children to get habits which they know must be afterwards broken."

As Lee says: "Rules, habits, obedience were the great words" in this household—and not so bad a psychology for the development of character. But this strict training was done in such a way that this mother was always "the centre of household affection." Discipline is understood and appreciated when strength of character is found to endure in middle life.

Education with Character.

Fitchett again says: "Susannah Wesley was a mother of very notable type, and her management of her children may well be the despair of all mothers and the envy of all fathers to the end of time. This brave, wise, high-spirited woman, with the brain of a theologian behind her gentle eyes, and the tastes of a scholar in her blood, had great ideals for her children. They were to be gentlefolk, scholars, Christians.

"As each child reached a fixed date in his life he was required, within a certain specified time, to learn the alphabet. Mrs. Wesley carried her principle of method and timetable into the realm of religion. She began surprisingly early. The children were early made to distinguish the Sabbath from other days and were soon taught to be still at family prayers and to ask a blessing immediately afterwards, which they used to do by signs, before they could kneel or speak."

Praying Mothers

From "Log of the Good Ship Grace"

Hannah prayed for Samuel and he became a prophet and a mighty man of Israel. Monica prayed for her wayward, paganized and ambitious child, and that child after years of dissipation became a Christian, was made a bishop of the Early Church and is known to the reverence of afterages as Saint Augustine.

The mother of John Newton, the hymn writer, prayed for him, and it must have been before he was seven years of age, for he lost her by death at that early period of life. But he himself tells us that he never forgot those prayers. He grew up to be a wicked man—a blasphemer and a "man stealer"—a kidnapper of slaves from Africa. In a terrible storm at sea, when every man was required to work the ship, he was missed from deck. A sailor was sent below to find him, and he found him on his knees, and heard him say, "O Thou God of my dead mother, have mercy on my soul!" And God did show mercy.

The last hours of the venerable Dr. Nott were peculiarly impressive. Visions of his childhood home floated continually before him and the name of his mother was continually upon his lips; the last words he muttered were the last words of prayer his mother taught him when a child—"Now I lay me down to sleep."

Says Spurgeon, "I cannot tell how much I owe to the solemn words and prayers of my good mother. It was the custom on Sunday evenings, while we were children, for her to stay at home with us. We sat around the table and read verse by verse, while she explained the Scripture to us. After that was done, then came the time of pleading with God. Some of the words of our mother's prayers we shall never forget, even when our heads are grey. I remember her once praying thus: 'Now, Lord, if my children go on in sin, it will not be from ignorance that they perish, and my soul must bear a swift witness against them at the day of judgment if they lay not hold of Jesus Christ.'"

"The cells of each infantile brain were diligently stored with passages of Scripture, hymns, collects. Prayer was woven into the fabric of every day's life. The daily lesson of each child was set in a framework of hymns."

Lee continues: "The children of this family were taught, as soon as they could speak, the Lord's prayer, which they were made to say at rising and bedtime; to which, as they grew larger, were added a short prayer for their parents and some collects, a short catechism, and some portions of Scripture, as their memories could bear."

No wonder that such a groundwork of reverence, such a saturation with things spiritual, such readiness with scripture, such a training in prayer could produce "the greatest religious leader of his century," who could save England from revolution and the Church from moral decay. And when the spirit of God warmed John Wesley's heart, Lecky, the historian, could say of that eventful Aldergate experience, "This day in the life of John Wesley meant more to England than all her victories under Pitt." Oh, for an education in home and school which will produce character!

—"Heart and Life."