

## A Stuart among the Quakers<sup>1</sup>

THE autumn of 1688 had made shipwreck of the Stuart fortunes, and during the winter months that followed, the shores of France and the remoter counties of England were strewn with the wreckage. Amongst the flotsam and jetsam cast up by this calamity there was no figure so remarkable as that of Jane Stuart, the King's natural daughter. She had spent the thirty-five years of her life at the Court—an acknowledged and favourite child. Then, seizing the opportunity of her father's flight, she herself stole away in disguise from Whitehall, and, taking no one into her confidence, travelled alone and on foot through half the counties of England. The goal of her journey was Wisbech, then an obscure market-town in Cambridge-shire. She had chosen it, perhaps, for its remoteness and inaccessibility, which had become a by-word in the seventeenth century. Arriving towards the end of the summer, she joined a group of labourers who were standing to be hired beside the Old Bridge, where farmers still come to engage their extra workers at hay-time and harvest. In spite of her evident inexperience she was hired with the others and sent out to reap in the fields. So great was her industry that before the season was over she had come to be known as the "Queen of the Reapers"—a strange title for a woman whose sister was even then seated upon the throne of England. As the winter drew on she bought a spinning-wheel, and, hiring a cellar, she took home the flax and wool which are the chief produce of that grazing and agricultural county. Then, sitting on a stand in the market-place, amongst the farmers' wives, she sold the thread which she had spun. From the time of her arrival she attached herself to the Quaker Meeting, a little community which was beginning to breathe again after the barbarous persecutions of the reign of Charles II.

Little by little her story leaked out. Her speech or her habits betrayed her. She was discovered in the

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this article have previously appeared in the *Glasgow Herald*.

act of reading the Greek Testament, and her confusion still further aroused the suspicions of her neighbours. Reluctant as she was to speak of her past life, the day came when the chief facts of her history were known in the town. For thirty years after her death in 1742, her memory was preserved only in the recollection of the inhabitants who had known her, and in the following entry in the Friends' Registry of Burials:—

Jane Stuart departed this Life on 12<sup>th</sup> of 7<sup>th</sup> mo, 1742, on first day, about 1 o'clock y<sup>e</sup> 14<sup>th</sup> aged '88. Supposed to be descended from James 2<sup>nd</sup> she lived in a cellar in the Old Market Wisbech—the house has been rebuilt by Chs. Freeman.

But in 1773 the grandfather of the present Lord Peckover came to live in Wisbech, and set himself to collect such details as still survived. In 1809 they appeared for the first time in print in an article in the *Monthly Magazine or British Register*, vol. 28. I am indebted for this information, as well as for some further particulars, to the kindness of Lord Peckover of Wisbech. He can himself remember his grandfather, who died in 1833, and thus forms a link, however slender, with this surprising history.

Jane Stuart was born in Paris in 1654, a natural daughter of the exiled Duke of York, but happy beyond the usual fate of these children in bearing her father's name. It is significant that her mother's identity has never been known, though she is believed to have been a Maid of Honour to Queen Henrietta Maria, and a Protestant. This secrecy seems to indicate that she came of a family which felt the disgrace of the royal favours, and the name of Stuart may have been granted to the child as an expiation of the wrong done to her mother. She may have been one of the ladies referred to by the Earl of Sandwich, when he declared that Anne Hyde was not singular in being able to produce a promise of marriage, signed by James with his own blood while he was resident in France.

At the time of Jane's birth her father was a youth of twenty-one, handsome, brave and affable. He was the idol, if we may believe Chancellor Hyde, of the French Court, and of the Army, to which he was attached as a member of the staff of Marshall Turenne. But in 1658

the French Treaty with Cromwell obliged him to leave the country and to resign his commission. He removed with his whole household, which included his little daughter, to Bruges. Here and at Brussels she grew up in the midst of a society only less corrupt than that of the Court of the Restoration. When in 1660 the exiles were welcomed back to Whitehall, she came to England in her father's train; and when he set up his establishment on a scale comparable to that of the King himself, he was careful that proper provision should be made for the child.

In the following autumn his secret marriage was acknowledged with the daughter of Sir Edward Hyde, the Chancellor, whose loyalty had been newly rewarded by a peerage. The bride brought the leaven of decent middle-class virtues into James's household, and it is to her influence that one can trace many of the qualities in Jane Stuart which would be otherwise inexplicable—her integrity and economy, her love of learning, and her purity of life.

Jane's attachment to the Quakers, which showed itself while she was still living at St. James's, is easily capable of explanation. The Friends held a prescriptive right, which they still possess, to appear before the King, and during the persecution which followed the Conventicle Act, they came almost daily to Charles the Second to plead the cause of their Society. Their "Thou Speech," as it was called, and their quaint dress, crowned by the hats which they refused to remove on a point of conscience, were familiar to every *habitué* of the Court. The Duke of York was notoriously friendly to them, and added to the distrust with which he was regarded by his intimacy with William Penn, the son of his favourite Admiral. Jane Stuart herself travelled in Germany in her girlhood, where she would be entertained by her father's cousin, the learned Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, the correspondent of Fox and Penn, and a kind hostess to many wandering Quakers. Jane Stuart's "convincement" to their principles brought no difference in her position.

It is related, though the tale has the smack of legend, that she pushed her beliefs to the only conclusion possible at the time, and suffered imprisonment at

Newgate, in the company of Thomas Ellwood. Ellwood was confined in Bridewell and Newgate in 1662, when Jane was a child of eight, and his last imprisonment was at High Wycombe (not in London), when she was still only twelve years of age. Even in those brutal times, a Dissenter under the age of sixteen was not punishable by law.<sup>2</sup> If it be true that this daughter of the Stuarts suffered in jail for her religion, it was not in the company of Milton's friend. There is no account of her trial and punishment in the Quaker records.

One other anecdote of her girlhood has been preserved and may be accepted as authentic. It gives a tantalising glimpse of a love-story, which must have been one of the strangest and most idyllic of her many-coloured memories. Even now, dim and broken as it is, it preserves some faint trace of its former beauty. During her life in London, Jane gave her heart to a man whose name and station are alike unrecorded, and whose sole surviving feature had been his desire to marry her for her own sake, and his willingness to share the obloquy and peril of the life of a humble Quaker. It seems most likely that he was himself a Friend, and that his quaint speech and plain dress had won the love of his mistress above all the glitter of her noble suitors. The marriage was to be celebrated according to the Quaker form. When the day came, the bride and bridegroom, accompanied only by his brother, set out in a coach for the Friends' Meeting House. Before they could reach it, however, the horses took fright, and the coach was overturned—an accident which was common enough in those days of unmade roads and top-heavy carriages. The bridegroom was killed on the spot, though Jane herself was unhurt, and the brother escaped with a broken leg. The bride did not stay to indulge her grief. She insisted on continuing her journey, and carried the brother to lodgings in London, where his leg might be set with some hope of success. Not content with this service, she stayed with him and nursed him herself until his recovery.

The story is welcome in the midst of a chronicle so disappointingly barren of illustration, or of explana-

<sup>2</sup> True, but Katherine Long, *aft.* Peckover, was imprisoned with her mother in Norwich, before she was sixteen. (*F.P.T.*) (ED.)

tory detail. If we reject the tradition of her imprisonment the account of her intended marriage is sufficient evidence of the thoroughness with which she had identified herself with the Quakers, and her conduct throughout the adventure gives such proof of her disregard for convention as might prepare us in some degree for her later actions.

The only other picture which she has left of this period of her life is a glimpse of the infant Prince, afterwards the Old Pretender, "a little white-headed boy," whom she nursed upon her knee. His birth gave the signal for the Revolution, and in a few months Jane herself was an exile, working unknown amongst the fields of Wisbech. At first some effort seems to have been made to draw her back to her old life. The partisans of the new King in particular desired her presence as a witness to their contention that the new-born Prince was a supposititious child, and not the heir to the throne. The Duke of Argyll succeeded in fact in tracing her as far as Wisbech. But Jane recognised the familiar arms upon his coach, as she sat in her stall in the market-place, and hastily packing up her thread, she hid herself until the search which she had foreseen had been abandoned.

Once, indeed, she was tempted out of her retreat. When her brother, the Old Pretender, landed at Peterhead, to lead the ill-fated rising of the '15, Jane Stuart hired a chaise and travelled the 300 miles into Scotland to see him, a journey which is in itself sufficient corroboration of his claim to be the son of James the Second.

With this brief and heart-stirring interlude her life pursued its even course for fifty-four years. Through the summer she worked in the fields, and in the winter she toiled at the spinning-wheel in her dark cellar, or sat without awning or shelter among the farmers' wives in the market-place. Her cellar was filled with birds, which she loved and cared for. She was never so happy as in the company of children, to whom, it is related, "she gave suitable religious advice when opportunity offered."

The last scene of her life has a touch of that romantic pathos which was the birthright of all her family. She had fainted one day in the Friends' Graveyard, and, as she came to herself, the peace of that green shade stole

into her brain, and she asked that when she died she might be buried in the place where she had fallen. She had a rowan tree planted to mark the spot—a tree, as one of her chroniclers has noted, most fitted to guard the resting-place of a daughter of Scotland. The tree grew too large for the little graveyard, and was eventually cut down and sold for twelve shillings. But the grave is not uncared for. Some reverent hand has hedged it round with box, and her initials, with her age, eighty-eight, and the date, 1742, grow in evergreen letters upon it. She was perhaps the happiest of all her ill-starred race, for she has left it on record in the only saying of hers that has come down to us, that “she enjoyed such contentment and peace that she would not leave her cell and spinning-wheel to be the Queen of England.”

MABEL R. BRAILSFORD.

*The Manse, Williton, Som.*

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A drawing by Wm. R. Brown, of Cambridge, of the grave of Jane Stuart may be found in *Cambridge and County Portfolio—Leaflets of Local Lore*.

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The truest end of life is to know the life that never ends. WILLIAM PENN, *Reflections and Maxims*, i. 489.