

## On Turning Plain

**L**ETTERS and Journals of the Gurney family of about one and a half centuries ago, contain interesting records of movements among birth-right Friends in the direction of a closer adherence to the outward semblance of Quakerism in life, dress and speech, accompanied with a closer attachment to its religious obligations.

In volume xx we printed several letters from Joseph Gurney (1757-1830) to his cousin, Joseph Gurney Bevan (1753-1814), which gave a glimpse of the youthful life, at that period (1772-1776), of prosperous Friends of the gayer type.

Letters between J. G. Bevan and J. Gurney in 1774-1775 of the same type appear in *The Gurneys of Lakenham Grove*, sect. 14, dealing much with horses, excursions and other subjects dear to the youthful aristocrat. From 1775 to 1791 there is a drop in this correspondence. Meanwhile the cousins have married and more serious subjects form their correspondence, as will be seen in the following letters :

Joseph Gurney writes from Norwich to his cousin, Joseph Gurney Bevan, at Row Court, Lombard Street, London, " 9th 11mo. 1791 " :

" If I am to be bro<sup>t</sup> to a plain & honest confession, as a man of common reflection I really feel shame that my resolution is yet too weak to break off from the sports of the Field, tho' I cannot but look upon them as enemies to my peace. Hunting I have left off & coursing I seldom follow, but the Gun sticks by me & I fear swallows up the reward I might have felt for giving up the others ; and thus by being but half willing, that evil part which remains grows stronger & stronger. . . . I can leave off shooting, but to *make covenant* staggers my will, and with the next excursion the glee for the sport revives, tho' the day does not end in quite such vivid colours as it was wont to do. . . . Something of the same nature thou hast had to struggle with tho' not so long resisted nor of so deep a dye.

. . . . A word in *due season* is some times a help, but I do not wish to *save my Pheasants* by *encreasing* thy scruples, tho' I wou'd not have thee expect any more as they are rather a rare article with us."

Joseph Gurney became a Minister and travelled as such, but he was never so exact a Friend as Joseph Gurney Bevan, who received from James Jenkins the title of "our chief disciplinarian" (xx. 71ff). Later letters deal with tithes and taxes, religious education of children, a naval militia, first cousins marriage,<sup>1</sup> plainness of speech, etc.

Joseph Gurney writes to his cousin, 26 vii. 1808, respecting his daughter Hannah, later Hannah Chapman Backhouse (1787-1850), the travelling Minister :

" . . . . Our dear Hannah, I may inform thee, continues, we trust, to endeavour after the right thing—the change in her has been with us a matter of mingled joy & anxiety & perhaps of suffering too ; at least it has placed us in a spot in some measure novel, in which whilst we participated with her in her sacrifices, we had to be watchful over ourselves least any thing in us or from us should stimulate or discourage beyond the safe boundary, & from this, thou mayst suppose we have left her much to herself. She is now at Earlham & I do not find she desires to withdraw from her usual associations, whether in or out of Society, or that she seeks the fostering countenance of those more nearly devoted to it. She appears to be a Girl of a strong mind & of sound good sense, not so likely to take anything upon trust, as to follow her own convictions. I desire that she may not soar above her guide. I have confidence that whether she walks in a more or less narrow path than her parents have done before her, they will have strength of mind to rejoice. I trust with joy unfeigned." Thankfulness is expressed that the other children are "keeping aloof from the common gaities of life . . . . Tho' their views may as yet be more circumscribed than their elder sister."

<sup>1</sup> John Gurney, of Earlham (1781-1814), married his first cousin, Elizabeth Gurney, of Keswick (1784-1808), in 1807. J. G. Bevan's attachment to Rachel Gurney, sister of Joseph (of The Grove), *circa* 1770, was broken off, they being first-cousins. For such marriages see London Y.M., 1675, 1747, 1801.

J. G. Bevan writes to J. Gurney, 7 i. 1808 : “ No friend in his full senses ever thought that plainness of speech behaviour and apparel made up the whole cross. . . . I have not yet seen many [spiritually] baptized friends who have not a considerable degree attended to those outward things. I therefore am apt to think them, rightly understood, important things: though I know that the disposition, that rather piques itself on looking down on them, slips in readily enough.”

The same to the same, 14 ix. 1812 :

“ I have been gladdened, according to my measure, by hearing that thy name-sake [Joseph John Gurney] had assumed the speech & appearance of a friend.”

He concludes :

“ I am generally at the house of my cousin Paul at Tottenham, whose wife, now with me, is the writer of this & my principal caretaker,” owing to the loss of his wife and to his blindness.

On the other hand J. G. Bevan wrote, in Tenth Month, 1806 :

“ I am sorry to see so many of my young cousins hastening away from the restraints of what I think truth, to the spirit and liberties of the world, yet I retain an interest in their concerns & if I could have my own wishes should see them oftener.”

The private Journals of Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845), *née* Gurney, also bear evidence of this interesting movement among Friends :

1798. *Aet.* 18, a year after her conversion under the ministry of William Savery :

“ Ra & I had a very serious talk to-day upon religion & quakerism, she fearing I should turn plain and I giving reasons for it. . . . I do not believe that she or any one else can prevent my being a true Quaker if I think it right to be one. . . .”

“ This day I have said *thee* instead of you.”

“ Charles Lloyd was here. I felt calling him by his name and *saying thee* to him.”

“ I still continue my belief that I shall turn plain. . . . I find it almost impossible to keep up to the

principles of friends without altering my dress & speech.  
 . . . They appear to me a sort of protector to the  
 principles of christianity in the present state of the world.  
 . . . I think I am a Quaker at heart. . . . I should  
 never be surprised to see us all quakers."

"It is odd to me & I believe it is to herself ["Chrissy Gurney"] that she *is not a Quaker*, but she is good without it, but I think she would be happier with it."

1799. *Act.* 19. Visiting at Hampstead:

"I think I really tryed to act right. It was about wearing a cap which is a step to appearing like a friend, & when the cap is once worn the fasson of the head does not require so much attention. I first put on my cap, then I fear'd I was mistaken. I did it without sufficient authority in my own mind, & I felt it my duty to consult the feelings of dear Rachel & I took my cap off, put on my turbon, determined to try to do right about it. However, after much uncertainty I felt most easy to appear like a quaker & wear my cap which I did."

"I did one thing this morning that required a little courage. I put my handkerchief over instead of under my gown. It was rather a cross to me. Dressing plain is not much a cross to me. I have felt it at times humiliating, but more often I think I wish to have my dress more simple."

"To-day I took up a little cross in dress which was leaving off the band to my cap. If I believe it right, I hope not to wear it again, but yet if I don't see it better not to wear it, do not leave it off."

There are also references in Elizabeth Fry's Journals to the "turning plain" of other Friends:

1798. "I met a young woman, Elizabeth Pryor, who I believe is turning plain."

"Yesterday I was with a girl turning plain. She & I had much talk & I did not quite like the foundation she appeared to go upon."

At Earlham, 6 mo. 23 and 24, 1808, E. Fry entered in her diary the same information as that afore given by her uncle:

"On 1st day D. Darby & R. Bird were at meeting & cousin S. Alexander. I certainly do believe that there is an advancement spiritually in the family & a drawing



nearer to friends. I heard yesterday that dear Anna Buxton had begun the simple language & I believe means to alter her dress.

“Yesterday I dined at the grove & my aunt told me that dear Hannah meant to alter her language and put on caps and handkerchiefs. This I think gave me more comfort than the news of yesterday about dear Anna. I did not look for it in her. Truly there appears a great revival & a striking visitation amongst the youth. O Lord preserve them.”

Anna Buxton, afterwards wife of William Forster, was a birthright Friend, but early taught the accomplishments and introduced into the gaities of fashionable life. The following is taken from the *Memoirs of William Forster*, chapter xvii :

Anna Buxton was a fine, lovely girl of remarkable refined and elegant manners, and George III. noticed her with much kindness and affability. [She was living with her mother at Weymouth, see vol. xiii. p. 165.] But continued intercourse with the fashionable world soon lost its charm. . . . Without any marked human instrumentality, strong religious convictions had already taken hold of her mind and these were confirmed by the death of her first-cousin, Elizabeth Gurney, wife of John Gurney, Jun., of Earham.

The modern Friend may smile at the importance felt by the Friends of this period of things which to him seem of little moment, but to the Friend of the “middle-age” the outward appearance was closely allied with the spiritual life—the Quaker dress with the Quaker faith—and *the one helped the other*. We may well believe that Elizabeth Fry’s Quaker dress was a distinct aid to her philanthropic work ; her personal appearance, as she sat in the Mansion House at dinner, conversing with Prince Albert and Sir Robert Peel, supported the inward beauty of her life, as also when at a cold luncheon, she sat by the King of Prussia, who told her that she was the best friend he had in the world and must pay her a visit at her own house.

There are forms of worldliness from which the Friend of to-day is called to “turn” if he would follow the leading of Truth. May he act as conscientiously as they did of whom we have written.