



Benjamin Lay.

From the frontispiece of the *Memoir* by Roberts Vaux, Phila., 1815

Benjamin Lay (1681-1759)

of Colchester, London, Barbadoes, Philadelphia

IN his introduction to John Woolman's *Journal*, the poet Whittier speaks of Benj. Lay as "the irrepressible prophet", and I can think of no other description of him at once so accurate and concise. Prophet he certainly was, for he so inspired the younger generation of his Quaker contemporaries in America that even 50 years after his death there was hardly a Quaker family in Philadelphia without a picture of Benj. Lay to be seen in one of its rooms. And irrepressible he certainly was—so much so that, in Colchester, where he spent much of the first part of his life, the prophet's halo was not discerned through the thick veil of his physical peculiarities and sternly uncompromising methods; and it must have been with intense relief that Colchester Friends, in the year 1729, "received a letter from Sarah Lay . . . wherein She Signifies her Intention of taking a Long Journey and her Concern for her Husbands Being at a distance from Friends." (Quoted by Devonshire House M.M. to Colchester Two Weeks Meeting.)

When Benj. Lay sailed from England to America he left under a cloud, so far as English Friends were concerned, as may clearly be seen in the voluminous correspondence—now preserved in the Strong Room at Colchester Meeting House—which passed between the Monthly Meetings at Colchester, Devonshire House and Philadelphia. This paper will try and penetrate that cloud and discover something of the real man beneath it, though the writer cannot hope to do him adequate justice. The fact is that Benj. Lay was a bundle of contradictions, and probably found it difficult to understand himself, although he was never in the least doubt as to the message which he felt called to deliver in season and out of season. Here are some of the contradictions in his life. First, a firmly convinced Quaker all his life, he was not a member of the Society of Friends during the middle part of it. Second, adored by the slaves in Barbadoes and other parts of America, none was more hated than he by the slave owners. Third, before

going to America he made a will bequeathing £100 to Colchester Monthly Meeting, but it is certain that he never intended Friends in Colchester to benefit by this bequest. Fourth, though only a common sailor, with very little education, as we understand education, he was on speaking terms with King George II, if not also with George I, and later in life became an intimate friend of Benjamin Franklin.

According to our Colchester register of Births, Benj. Lay was born in that city on 26.xi.1681/2, and his parents being Friends in poor circumstances, he had few educational advantages as he grew to boyhood. He was further handicapped by physical deformity, and it was only his indomitable will that enabled him to accomplish great things during his life of nearly 80 years. He was bound apprentice to a glove maker, but before he was 18 he went to work on his brother's farm, near Colchester. When he came of age, and so became his own master, he adopted the still more unlikely calling of a sailor, "an employment", adds his American biographer, "to which he did not seem by nature to be much adapted, being only 4 ft. 7 in. in height, his head large in proportion to his body," hunchbacked and with very slender legs. During the next seven years he visited various parts of the world, and he relates how he served for eighteen months on board a ship of 400 tons burthen sailing to the Levant. His biographer suggests that it was during the stay of the vessel at the port of Scanderoun¹ that Benj. Lay made an excursion to the interior of Syria; "for he often related . . . that he had visited the memorable spot where the Saviour of the World conversed with the woman of Samaria, and had refreshed himself by a draft of water from Jacob's Well."

In the year 1710 he left the sea and married a wife who possessed a fine character and proved a faithful helpmeet to Benj. Lay in his domestic life as also, later on, in his great work against slavery. How he maintained himself during the ensuing ten years in London I have hitherto been unable to discover, but I conjecture that he returned to the trade to which he had been apprenticed as a boy, but that very probably he combined the business of a draper with that of a glove-maker.

¹ Iskanderuneh, on the coast of Palestine about 20 miles from Samaria.

He was constant in attendance at meetings in London, where he gave considerable annoyance to Friends by the method which he adopted in order to call attention to the importance of preachers saying nothing of themselves, but only as God gave them utterance. His mind apparently became obsessed with this idea, and whenever he was present at Meeting no Friend who felt called upon to speak was immune from a public and stern rebuke from Benj. Lay for exceeding his commission. To use his own words, "it appeared to me in y^e Light of y^e Lord & in y^e openings of his pure truth in my Soul y^t there was many appearances y^t was not right in your Meetings." (Letter to Dev. House M.M., 3.i.1724/5.) It was in vain that Friends dealt privately with Benj. Lay, trying to persuade him to desist from causing such disturbances in Meeting; for, even though he promised to accede to their desires, he was unable to control his obsession. In desperation Devonshire House Monthly Meeting, after various warnings, disowned him, in the year 1720. It appears that other bodies than Friends were also troubled by his attentions. He even called upon the king, George I, and presented in person to him a copy of Milton's Tract, entitled "Considerations touching the likeliest means to remove hirelings out of the Church". Later, on the accession of George II, he again paid a visit to the palace armed with a copy of Milton's Tract against hireling ministers, and this time he was admitted to a private audience with the royal family. Perhaps it was in consequence of his disownment by London Friends that Benj. Lay decided to leave the metropolis and return to his native city. At any rate it was about that time that he and his wife removed to Colchester, where he opened a shop, probably as a draper.

The history of his sojourn in Colchester can be given almost entirely by extracts from the letters preserved to this day at Colchester Meeting House.

At first it seemed as though Friends' disciplinary methods, which relied on public opinion and discarded all appeal to physical force, were ineffectual in the case of Benj. Lay. Though he had been disowned, there was nothing to prevent his continued attendance at Friends' Meetings, and probably no one would have raised any objection to his doing so, had he been able to refrain from causing disturbances there.

The Quaker disciplinary system was later vindicated by the great work which it enabled him to carry on amongst Quakers in spite of his disownment. But at the time of which we are speaking, shortly after his removal to Colchester, the Friends of that city were puzzled to know how to deal with him. Seeing that he had already been disowned, what else could be done when he continued at Colchester Meetings the disturbances which he had previously practised in London? In September of 1722 the Colchester Two Weeks Meeting (by which name the Meeting of Friends in Colchester for discipline was then known) asked for the advice of the Meeting for Sufferings, to whom they wrote the following letter :

To ye Meeting for Sufferings held in London.

Dear Friends,

We having a due Regard to Religious order in ye Church of Christ & to ye Prosperity thereof & being desirous as much as Possible to Establish her Peace Have thought fit to Lay ye following Case before you in order for your advice & Direction therein The Matter is This Benjamin Lay late of London (who we Suppose is too well known to many of you) being Come to Settle in This Town hath in a disorderly Manner Charged some Publick Friends¹ here (with whom We have Unity & Fellowship) with Preaching their own Words & Going beyond ye Guidance of ye Blessed Spirit of God & having Threatned to be yet farther Troublesome to our Meetings of Worship & Discipline, He having irregularly Settled here without any Certificate, being as we are informed, disowned by ye Monthly Meeting of Devonshire House, We therefore Request a Line from you how we Shall proceed with him in this his Dark disordered Condition.

We dearly salute you in unfeigned Love & are Yo^r Very Lo: Friends & Brethren

Sign'd by order & on ye behalf of ye Two Weeks Meeting of Colchester
This 20th day of ye 6th mo 1722

By Pe: Jarvis Jun^r

A similar letter was also sent to Devonshire House Monthly Meeting, in order to ascertain how matters stood between that Monthly Meeting and Benj. Lay; and the following answer was received :

To Fr^{ds} & Brethren at their 2 Weeks meeting in Colchester these
Dear Fr^{ds}, Yours of ye 17th 7th mo last we had (in a L^r inclosed)

¹ Public Friends, i.e. acknowledged as ministers.

y^e 10th : 7th mon. 1722 ; in answer whereunto, may take as followeth Benja: Lay of whom you make mention in yours when with us did make Disturbance among Fr^{ds} in their Meetings, in divers places of this City & Suburbs, to y^e Dissatisfaction of fr[']ends, not unlike what you give acco^t of in yours : Because whereof, divers fr[']ends Spake to him privately & admonish't him to desist : informing him of y^e evil Consequence & Confusion y^t did & might attend Such Irregular Acts. Sometimes he would Say that he hoped he Should be no more concern'd yet Nevertheless when that unease & troublesome Spirit, Temper or Humour got up in him he became troublesome again, as formerly, so y^t fr[']ends after a considerable time of forbearance & he not desisting his troublesome Practices, were necessitated to Send for him to y^e Mo. meeting, where he being present, justified himself & y^e Disturbances he had made in fr^{ds} Meetings, fr[']ends therefore made a minute y^e 4th 11th mo. 1720, in y^e Mo. Meeting Book Signifying their Disunity with his S^d practices & with him also untill he repent & Acknowledge his Offence And thus dear fr[']ends he Stands as to us, without having given us any Satisfaction

. . . MILES WALKER

Colchester Two Weeks Meeting then decided that they would draw up a paper repudiating responsibility for, or unity with, the methods used by Benj. Lay, which paper should be read in Meeting. The fact was that the practices complained of were in danger of bringing Friends into disrepute amongst the members of other religious bodies in Colchester, whose meetings Benj. Lay also disturbed. Part of the paper runs as follows :

Whereas Benjamin Lay a reputed Quaker Resided in London divers Years, where for his disorderly and Irregular Practices he was disowned by y^e People Called Quakers, The said Benjamin Lay Removing from London to Colchester about the Forepart of y^e Year, where he has given Publick Disturbances to y^e Assemblies of y^e Church of England Presbyterians Independants Baptists and y^e People Called Quakers These therefore are to Certifie all Persons whatsoever That We have no Unity with the said Benjamin Lay and That he does not belong to our Society. . . . This was Read in our Publick Meeting y^e 18th of y^e 4th mo 1723. By Richard Freshfield.

It appears that Benj. Lay felt very keenly what practically amounted to a second disownment ; so he approached

Friends with the object of being re-instated as a member of the Society. Not unnaturally they asked that he would give them some assurance, in writing, with regard to his future conduct. Accordingly in December, 1724, he sent to the Two Weeks Meeting the following :

Dear friends, According to your order the last 2 Weeks Meeting, that I would give in something in Writing, for the Satisfaction of the Meeting ; This I declare as concerning y^e Charges alledged against me, I do with all readiness, and freedom of mind commit my cause to be decided by friends, indifferent men. Men fearing God, full of the Holy Ghost, free from, or hating Covetousness.

I am your Sincere friend & Brother, Benjⁿ Lay.

Before deciding the case Friends apparently suggested to Benj. Lay that he should make his peace with the Meeting which had originally disowned him, four years previously. So he wrote to Devonshire House Monthly Meeting, beginning " My Dear & Loving Friends, for so I have good cause to call you while I Lived in y^e Compass of your Quarter . . ." and concluding, " I do Intreat you will be pleased in favour to me to Signifie . . . to Friends in Colchester by a Line or two as you in y^e pure Light & Life & Wisdom of God shall think fitt I Remain dear Friends your Sincere true & Loving although Exercised & at times Sorrowfull & much afflicted Brother Benj. Lay."

Meanwhile Friends thought it was time to regularize the position of Sarah Lay, on whose behalf they had received no Certificate of Removal from London Friends, although she was an acknowledged Minister. But she refused—perhaps out of loyalty to her husband—to ask for such a Certificate from Devonshire House, the Monthly Meeting that had disowned him. So the Two Weeks Meeting wrote direct to Devonshire House.

For some months Devonshire House sent no reply to Benj. Lay's letter, which appeared to them more an attempt to justify his previous conduct than an expression of regret. So he sent them the following reminder :

Dear Friends, whereas I left a paper with you near a Year ago, I think ; I desire you will be pleased, to let me hear Once from you ; for you may well think (if you can believe I have any Sincerity) that it is no Small Exercise to me to be separated from my Brethren, whom I dearly love.

Devonshire House thereupon wrote to the Two Weeks Meeting, enclosing copies of Benj. Lay's two letters, and saying that they thought Colchester Friends "more proper judges . . . of his conduct & behaviour", and that if they thought him really sincere, "he may expect Friends here very ready to forgive & be Reconciled to him". They added, "We would in Charity hope that he means & intends 'better than he writes,'" and explained that some doubt on this score had led them to postpone replying to his first letter.

The Two Weeks Meeting returned a lengthy answer to Devonshire House, saying that since Benj. Lay had written to them he had been making more disturbances in Meeting " & also kept on his hatt in time of Prayer Contrary to y^e Advice of y^e Yearly Meeting, & he appears to us to be in y^e Same Restless uneasy & troublesome Spirit . . . that he was in before." They also made further serious charges against him, which however, Benj. Lay at the time strenuously denied.

A fortnight later he wrote this brief note to Friends of y^e Two Weeks Meeting in Colchester, "My Friends I do appeal against you to Friends of y^e Yearly Meeting in London next ensuing Your Suffering Brother Benjn. Lay."

A few days later, however, he thought better of it, and wrote :

Dear Friends Since I gave in y^e Paper Concerning an Appeal I have for Several days been under very Close Exercises of mind Concerning War. So one day this Week as I was Setting in my Shop in y^e Coolness & Stillness wth my mind Retir'd . . . it was shown me y^e Danger of an outward War y^t many were kill'd & Wounded now thought I if there should be many wounded or hurt in a Spiritual Sense on my account who are my Brethren . . . what great trouble it would bring on me instead of Peace so I resolved . . . to write to you my friends of this Meeting something for your Satisfaction . . . for y^t Many offences I have given you by disturbing your Meeting in making Publick Opposition & by over Shooting of myself in a Forward Zeal in disturbing other assemblys.

He then offers a full apology and promises to desist from such actions in the future.

But for three years no further action was taken by Colchester Friends, who said that Benj. Lay was still unable

to keep the promises which he had made. By this time there appears to have been a certain amount of sympathy for him in the minds of a number of the Friends who lived in the country districts near Colchester. These Friends formed what was then known as Colchester Monthly Meeting, which for convenience held its business meetings in the city, though none of the city residents belonged to it, but to Colchester Two Weeks Meeting.

By this time, 1729, Sarah Lay was very anxious to get her husband right away from Friends, whether in Colchester or London, and apparently persuaded him to agree to emigrate to America ; so she wrote to Devonshire House Monthly Meeting asking if they would send a Certificate to unite herself and husband to Colchester Monthly Meeting (as distinct from the Two Weeks Meeting). She had apparently ascertained that Friends of the Monthly Meeting would be willing to give them a Certificate of Removal to Philadelphia Monthly Meeting.

Devonshire House Monthly Meeting quite rightly referred the matter to the Colchester Two Weeks Meeting, in whose compass the Lays resided, and added that London Friends were quite prepared to reinstate Benj. Lay if Colchester Friends concurred. James Catchpool wrote to say that the Two Weeks Meeting had "reason to believe he Continues in a Spirit of Opposition & Disorder".

Learning that Colchester Monthly Meeting intended to accept Benj. Lay as a member, the Two Weeks Meeting sent a deputation to warn that Monthly Meeting against doing so, but as soon as the deputation had retired the Monthly Meeting acceded to Benj. Lay's wishes. The sequel was the following letter from the Two Weeks Meeting :

Dear Fr^{ds}, We being inform'd y^t your Monthly Meeting has allowed Benjⁿ Lay to be a member thereof & granted him a Certificate notwithstanding our remonstrance at y^e Said Meeting (on account of his Disorderly behaviour) to y^e Contrary we hereby give you Notice y^t we appeal to y^e next Quarterly Meeting for this County of Essex against your proceedings therein Sign'd On behalf & by order of our two weeks meeting held at Colchester y^e 21st of y^e 12th Mo 1731 by John Kendall.

However Benj. Lay had obtained his desired Certificate and sailed to America ; so it was in vain that the

Quarterly Meeting censured Colchester Monthly Meeting for granting it.

Some months before sailing he had, presumably in gratitude for the sympathy shown him, made a Will, dated 9th of 3rd mo., 1731, in which he left to "the Quarterly Meeting of Coggeshall" a legacy of £100. The income arising from this was to be distributed to persons "of sober life and sound mind persons loving truth and professing the principles of the people called Quakers in order to transport themselves to America". In the absence of any members of Coggeshall Quarterly Meeting desiring to emigrate to America, the income was to go to Colchester Monthly Meeting for the benefit of such poor Friends as "took no collection from" the Monthly Meeting. At that time there were two Essex Meetings with the status of a Quarterly Meeting, viz. the Colchester Two Weeks Meeting, which always met at Colchester, and the Essex Quarterly Meeting, which met alternatively at Colchester and Coggeshall.

Meanwhile Benj. Lay had obtained some land in the Barbadoes, "where the cruelties of slavery were to be seen at their very worst,"¹ on which he built a cottage, and "he became deeply interested in the condition of the slaves".² "Whenever he met the slaves of the island, he noticed them with kindness and commiseration. They soon became generally acquainted with his views & exertions in their favour, & as an evidence of gratitude to their benefactor, they came from the neighbouring farms on the sabbath day & assembled around his house in the town, to the number of many hundreds."³ The negroes were very much struck at the remarkable similarity in appearance of Benj. and Sarah Lay, both of whom were very small of stature and deformed. They used to say that the little white man had gone, as a sailor, all over the world to look for the little white woman.

One incident, at first sight unimportant, which occurred during his residence in the Barbadoes, seems to typify at once the hasty and impetuous nature which so often brought Benj. Lay into trouble and the deep sincerity that underlay all his acts. The incident which considerably

¹ Roberts Vaux's Biography of Benj. Lay.

² Whittier's Introduction to J. Woolman's Journal.

³ Roberts Vaux.

affected his outward mode of life, was as follows: After having built his cottage he was greatly annoyed one day to find a wild hog uprooting his newly planted garden, and in his wrath slew the intruder and fixed its body to the gateposts. Later on he was so stricken with remorse for his deed that he made up his mind henceforth to eat no food and wear no article of clothing that involved the death of any animal. It was thus that he became a strict vegetarian, and ceased to wear boots or anything else made of leather, and this partly explains the extraordinary appearance presented by his portrait. His food and clothing were further limited by the fact that he refused to use anything that was the product of slave labour, and this led to his making all his own clothes. However, "his violent denunciations of the practice of slaveholding so excited the anger of the planters", Whittier tells us, that he felt compelled to leave the islands. He went "to Philadelphia, but, contrary to his expectations, he found the same evil existing there. He shook off the dust of the city, and took up his abode in the country, a few miles distant." Whittier goes on to state that his dwelling was in a natural cave, but he appears to confuse it with a cave which Benj. Lay some years later fitted up as a kind of summer house library in which he kept the many books which he so loved. His American biographers know nothing of Benj. Lay's sojourn in Colchester between 1721 and 1731, and imagine that he was in the Barbadoes all that time. But he cannot have been there more than about a year. When he decided to move to Philadelphia, it was with the approval of his wife, who said that she also wished to leave the Barbadoes, "lest by remaining there she might be leavened into the nature of the inhabitants, which was pride & oppression".

Within a few months of his having left England, Colchester Friends, doubtless wishing to clear themselves from being held responsible for having introduced to their American brethren such a disturber of the peace as they had found Benj. Lay, wrote to Philadelphia Monthly Meeting. After explaining the difference, mentioned above, between Colchester Monthly Meeting which had given him a certificate, and Colchester Two Weeks Meeting, the letter summarizes the proceedings with regard to Benj. Lay's residence in London and Colchester, and concludes:

For y^e Clearing our Selves & to prevent your being Impos'd upon though wee wish his Behaviour & Conversation may be more Agreeable wth you than it has been wth us yet Least he Should Endeavour to Insinuate y^t he has made us Satisfaction & y^t it is Long Since he was Guilty of Disorders Among us wee hereby declare to you y^t he has not given us Satisfaction & y^t he Continued Disorderly & Troublesome till within a Very Short time before he left Colchester.

It was two years before Philadelphia Monthly Meeting wrote a reply, and it would be interesting to know how long the Colchester letter had taken to reach them. The reply is dated 5.6.1734, and reads

To Friends of y^e two Weeks Meet^s in Colchester Essex Sendeth Greeting Dear Friends, By Your Letters bearing Date y^e 27.6 mo 1732 Derected to our Monthly Meet^s &c. in Relation to Benj: Lay we are Inform'd Benj: & his Wife are not Recommended from y^e meet^s where unto they did properly belong and She (of whom Frend have a Good Esteem) being Joyned in y^e Same Sirtificate wth him Sarah (meantime) Appears to be under Concern and Dificulty Respecting her Publick Ministry wherein Fre^{nds} of y^e meeting think they Cannot without breech of Rule help her by a Recommendation apart from her husband to y^e monthly meet^s at Abington whereunto they are Removed of Late to Qualifie Fre^{nds} of y^t Meet^s to give Sarah a Sirtificate to Travel. Wee are therefore requested by our Monthly Meeting to write to you on her behalf for Shuch Sirtificate as you Shall See mete and nesasary in y^e wisdom of Truth w^{ch} wth y^e good Fruites of Love and Peace We fervently desire may Increase and abound in and amongst us and you wherein we Subscribe our Selves your Freind and Brethren W^m Hudson, Robt Jurdan.

This letter was not long in reaching Colchester, for two or three months later James Catchpoole and R^d Freshfield wrote on behalf of the Two Weeks Meeting replying "we have nothing to object against her Ministry nor Conversation during her Residence among us". So ends the series of 19 letters that were carefully copied along with other documents, into a book now preserved in the safe at Colchester Meeting House.

Meanwhile Benjamin Lay had once more built a house and planted a garden, this time near Philadelphia. Having completed it he proceeded to devote all his spare time to a campaign against slavery, commencing his labours amongst

Friend slave-owners, though he also “visited several of the governors of the neighbouring provinces, as well as other influential characters, in church & state”. It was in this way that he became acquainted with Benjamin Franklin, with whom he maintained an intimate friendship for the rest of his life. But his methods of drawing attention to the evils of slavery soon brought him into trouble with Friends; he was in the habit of visiting the various meetings for worship and bearing his testimony against slaveholders, greatly to their disgust and indignation. On one occasion he entered Market Street Meeting in Philadelphia, and a leading Friend requested someone to take him out. A burly blacksmith volunteered to do it, leading him to the gate and thrusting him out with such force that he fell into the gutter of the street. There he lay until the meeting closed, telling the bystanders that he did not feel free to rise himself. “Let those who cast me here raise me up. It is their business, not mine.” On one occasion, while the Yearly Meeting was in session at Burlington, N.J., in the midst of the solemn silence of the great assembly, the unwelcome figure of Benjamin Lay, wrapped in his long white overcoat, was seen passing up the aisle bearing a large book under his arm. Stopping midway, he exclaimed,

Oh all you negro-masters who are contentedly holding your fellow creatures in a state of slavery during life, well knowing the cruel sufferings those innocent captives undergo in their state of bondage, both in these North American colonies, & in the West India islands; you must know they are not made slaves by any direct law, but are held by an arbitrary & self-interested custom, in which you participate. And especially you who profess ‘to do unto all men as y^e would they should do unto you’—& yet, in direct opposition to every principle of reason, humanity & religion, you are forcibly retaining your fellow men, from one generation to another, in a state of unconditional servitude; you might as well throw off the plain coat as I do. [Here he loosed a button, & the great coat falling behind him, he disclosed to the astonished assembly a military coat underneath & a sword dangling at his heels & proceeded:] It would be as justifiable in the sight of the Almighty, who beholds & respects all nations & colours of men with an equal regard, if you should thrust a sword through their hearts as I do through this book.¹

¹ Roberts Vaux.

He then drew his sword and pierced a bladder filled with the red juice of the poke-berry and concealed within the cover of the book, whose leaves he had removed, sprinkling its contents over those who sat near him.

Whittier remarks that John Woolman, then a young man, was probably present on this occasion, which "must have made a deep impression on his sensitive spirit". At another time, when a deep snow was on the ground, we are told by his biographer that Benj. Lay stationed himself at a gateway, leading to a meeting house, having his right leg and foot entirely uncovered, as the Friends went in several of them reasoned with him for thus risking his health. "Ah," said Lay, "you pretend compassion for me, but you do not feel for the poor slaves in your fields, who go all winter half clad."¹

Just as in England he had not been accustomed to confine his attentions to Friends' Meetings, so in America he visited other places of worship in the prosecution of his object. He once walked into a church, wearing a mantle of sack-cloth wrapped round him, and stood attentively listening to the sermon. At the end of the service, Lay thus addressed the congregation, "I do not approve of all the minister has said, but I did not come here to find fault with the preaching; I came to cry aloud against your practice of slave-holding."² Sometimes his addresses were so long and vehement that his hearers would remove him from the building, an act to which he always submitted without opposition.

Lay was acquainted with a boy 6 years of age, whom he sometimes met at a distance from his parents' dwelling; one day he amused the boy in his house until evening, when the parents, having lost their boy, came "running towards his dwelling". He met them, and enquired in a feeling manner, "What is the matter?" The afflicted parents replied with anguish, "Oh Benjamin, Benjamin! our child is gone, he has been missing all day." Lay paused and said, "Your child is safe in my house, and you may now conceive of the sorrow you inflict upon the parents of the negro girl you hold in slavery, for she was torn from them by avarice."

¹ Roberts Vaux.

² Roberts Vaux.

“ Having once walked into Philadelphia, with an intention of conversing with an individual of considerable note, he found the family, on his arrival, sitting at breakfast ; Lay was invited to partake with them, but seeing a black servant in attendance, he inquired of his master, ‘ Is this man a slave? . . . then I will not share with thee the fruits of thy unrighteousness,’ and immediately departed from the house.”

Visited by Governor Richard Penn and Dr. Franklin and others, “ he received them in his primitive abode with his usual politeness.” A dinner of his usual food, vegetables and fruit, was prepared ; “ This is not the kind of fare you have at home,” remarked Benjamin Lay, “ but it is good enough for you or me, & such as it is, you are welcome to eat of it.”

Besides speaking against slavery on every possible occasion, Lay decided to publish a book on the subject. When he had written it he submitted it to Benjamin Franklin, desiring him to have it printed. Upon looking over it the Doctor told him that it was not paged, and that there appeared to be no order or arrangement in it. “ It is no matter,” said Lay, “ print any part thou pleasest first.” Dr. Franklin, however, could make nothing of it. This book, I suppose in manuscript, is said to be in the library of the city of Philadelphia. Apparently Lay made another attempt ; at any rate, in 1737, Franklin assisted him to publish a book called, *All slave keepers, that keep the innocent in bondage, apostates . . . it is a notorious sin which many of the true friends of Christ & his pure truth, called Quakers, have been for many years, & still are, concerned to write & bear testimony against ; as a practice so gross & hurtful to religion, . . . & yet lived in by ministers & magistrates in America.* I have been unable to find a copy of this long-titled book, but an American critic says, “ This work contains many interesting facts, & some powerful appeals to the judgment & feelings. In some parts, however, it manifests the same intolerance of the mistakes of others, which characterizes the other productions of the author on the subject of slavery.”

In spite of this, Lay possessed an innate humility, and nowhere is this better illustrated than in the closing words of this book, which run as follows,

Courteous & Friendly Reader, There are some passages in my book that are not so well placed as could have been wished ; some errors may have escaped the press, the printer being much encumbered with other concerns : thou art lovingly entreated to excuse, amend, or censure it as thee please : but remember that it was written by one that was a poor common sailor, & an illiterate man.—B.L.

It was not only on the subject of slavery that Benjamin Lay was in advance of his contemporaries. In 1737 he published a pamphlet on Criminal Code Reform, advocating the abolition of capital punishment. He also denounced the introduction of spirits into America, saying, " We send away our excellent provisions & other good things " to the West Indies " to purchase such filthy stuff, which tends to the corruption of mankind, & they send us some of their worst slaves, whom they cannot rule themselves, along with their rum to complete the tragedy, that is to say, to destroy the people in Pennsylvania, & ruin the country."

On account of the state of his wife's health, Benjamin Lay moved from the house which he had built, and went to live at the farm of a Friend near Abington Meeting House, and it was here that he constructed a grotto, where he installed his library ; he also laid out the ground near it as a garden, through which flowed a stream. A short time after this Sarah Lay died. Twenty years later, when Lay died, this Friend preserved his manuscripts, " but ", says his biographer, " it is sincerely to be lamented that these relics fell into the hands of the British, during the revolutionary war, who, it is supposed, destroyed them."

During his last years he was much confined to the house, occupying himself with " spinning & other domestic occupations, his room was hung with skeins of thread spun by himself. Honey was one of the few articles of his food, & he amused himself with constructing hives for the accommodation of his bees, & observing their curious labour. By his friendly care to those industrious insects, & by abstaining from the cruel practice of destroying them in order to procure their honey, he increased his original family to a large community, whose dwellings extended more than a hundred feet in a continued line."

Benjamin Lay lived to see the fruition of his labours against slavery, at any rate so far as the Society of Friends

in Pennsylvania was concerned, for not long before his death it was decided to disown slave holding members. When this decision was reported to him, after a few moments reflection on what he had heard, he rose from his chair, and in an attitude of devotional reverence, exclaimed, "Thanks giving & praise be rendered unto the Lord God." After a short pause he added, "I can now die in peace." He died in 1759, and was buried in the Friends' Burial Ground at Abington. He would have preferred cremation; only a few months previously he had offered a friend who went to see him the sum of £100 if he would undertake to burn his body after death, and throw the ashes into the sea. But the friend recoiled in horror at such an unheard of wish.

Just before his death he gave verbal instructions for £40 to be given to Friends at Abington, for the education of the poor children of that Meeting.

He had a great love for young people, and, in place of the stormy controversialist we may picture a little old man with a basket of books on his arm, entering one or other of the schools in his neighbourhood, talking to the children and distributing his books by way of prizes, or seated on the banks of the river Delaware beneath the shade of the elm tree where Penn made his famous treaty with the Indians, by a favourite bathing place of the boys of the district. Here he used to enjoy watching them frolic in the water and when they had dressed themselves, he gathered them under the tree, reminding them of the story of William Penn's treatment of the Indians; he used to "point to the elm, and enjoin on them to bear in mind, & tell it to their children, that under that tree Penn's treaty was held; & they should respect it accordingly".

No biography of Benjamin Lay appears to have been published since about 100 years ago; but Amelia M. Gummere in *The Quaker, A Study in Costume* devotes some pages to the sale, a month after Lay's death, of what she styles his "household goods & clothing". The inventory (15 folio pages) which is still in existence, contains mention of various leather Jackets and Breeches, numerous Cloaks, Riding hoods, silk hoods, silk handkerchiefs, silk gloves; a variety of materials "in the piece", 40 lbs. of Whalebone; a quantity of thimbles, needles, buttons; and 12,000 pins! Such a list hardly seems consistent with

Benjamin Lay's style of living. What should he want with leather and silk clothes, since he refused to wear anything whose manufacture involved the taking of an animal's life? And even supposing that his wife had not shared his scruples, are we to suppose, not only that the husband had stored all her clothing since her death, nearly 20 years previous to his, but also that these clothes had not fallen out of fashion in the course of 20 years, but could fetch good prices at a secondhand sale. And even if the lengths of material in the piece can be explained by the fact that Benjamin Lay made his own clothes, we should have to remember that he used undyed cloth for this purpose. Finally, if we can accept all these as the household goods of Benjamin Lay, how are we to account for the 40 lbs. of Whalebone and the 12,000 pins? Pins at that time were not so common as they are now. No clothes that fitted Lay the hunchback, would be likely to fit other people. Probably most of these things were the remains of his stock in trade as a draper.

The date of his death was February 3rd, 1759. We do not know how long it took to transmit the news to Friends at Colchester, but apparently it arrived just after Colchester Two Weeks Meeting had ceased to exist under that name; and had adopted the name of Colchester Monthly Meeting, while the original Colchester Monthly Meeting became known from 1760 to 1772, as Manningtree Monthly Meeting.

On the eve of his sailing for America, he had bequeathed £100 to Colchester Monthly Meeting. Misunderstood all through his life, the misunderstanding extended even to his Will. To this day payments are made under his bequest by Essex and Suffolk Quarterly Meeting to Colchester Monthly Meeting, which now includes Friends living in Colchester whom he had no intention of benefiting by his bequest.

It is the writer's hope that these notes have at least made clear the sincerity of this Essex Friend, even though he was, in the words of Whittier, "the irrepressible prophet who troubled the Israel of slave-holding Quakerism, clinging like a rough chestnut-burr to the skirts of its respectability and settling like a pertinacious gad-fly on the sore places of its conscience."

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