

Elizabeth Fry at Newgate

We are indebted to Isabel Grubb for the following account and the note on its writer. The account is extracted from a letter by Melesina Trench [*see* D.N.B.] to her son, Charles Manners St. George, dated London, May, 1820, printed in *The remains of the late Mrs. Richard Trench, being selections from her journals, letters, and other papers. Edited by her son, the Dean of Westminster, (1862), pp. 428-431.*

Melesina Chenevix was granddaughter of the Bishop of Waterford, with whom she passed her early childhood. At eighteen she married Colonel St. George who died four years later. In 1802 when about to visit one of her Irish estates she wished to stay at the inn then recently opened by William Leadbeater at Ballitore Hill. The inn was full of Friends going to Yearly Meeting, so the Leadbeaters brought her to their own home. She stayed there a fortnight, and thus began a life-long friendship and correspondence between her and Mary (Shackleton) Leadbeater. Mary Leadbeater helped her in her plans for the improvement of conditions on her estate and she was useful to Mary Leadbeater in her literary work. In 1803 Melesina St. George married Richard Trench and thereafter resided mostly in England. Their son (later Archbishop) Richard Chenevix Trench published the work mentioned from which the following is taken.

I WENT yesterday to Newgate, to see Mrs. Fry's performance. I by no means wish to underrate her merits by the phrase. The same lips which said, "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth," have also said, "Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick;" leaving the heart at liberty to follow either precept, as it conscientiously judges one or other most useful at the time; thus proving in this instance, as in so many others, that the Gospel is "the law of liberty."

Miss Hewitt, Lady Jane Peel, and I set out at ten for Newgate; where a stonework of fetter over the door told us we had arrived after a twenty minutes drive. Two fat and jolly men received us in a sort of office, and civilly consigned us to a maid-servant, who led us up two narrow and steep flights of stairs to a small homely room, in the middle of which, her back to the door, Mrs. Fry sat at a table, with books and papers before her. The female convicts, I suppose about sixty in number, faced her on rows of benches, raised as in the gallery of a theatre. Opposite to these were two or three rows for the visitors, and a single row on each

side, all as full as possible. As we entered we were slightly named to her, and slightly acknowledged. The smell was oppressive, and the heat unpleasant, but this was instantly forgotten in the interest of the scene. The convicts first drew my attention. They were of decent appearance and deportment, habited like the lowest class of servants. They were singularly plain, but most of them in the prime or vigour of life, not one very old woman ; and two had children, whom they nursed. Among the visitors I saw a few of my acquaintance, and some persons of note.

After a short silence Mrs. Fry read, in a soft, low, silvery tone the fourth chapter of the Ephesians, with perfect intelligence and expressive sweetness. She then paused, and explained what she thought wanted elucidation in a few simple well-chosen words. Two men of the Society of Friends spoke a few words of exhortation. She then read a Psalm, and, I think, did not say anything in explanation ; but she knelt down and commenced a prayer for comfort to the unhappy convicts, and spiritual blessings for them, for us, and for all. This prayer was chanted in a way, I am told, peculiar to the Society of Friends. I did not like it, with all the advantages of Mrs. Fry's sweet voice and musical skill. It is not a regular tune ; the words rise a few notes in the scale in regular progression, and fall again in the same place, but never descend lower or change their order. Many words, of course, sometimes are given to one note, and the long-drawn emphasis sometimes laid on " and ," and other equally insignificant words, was disagreeable to my ear. On the whole, it affected my nerves unpleasantly, and wanted the solemn unction of the human speaking voice. Music ought to be very fine when we address the Deity ; even then it seems more suitable for repeating, or dwelling on, our petitions, or for praise and gratitude, than for humble, deep, deprecatory prayer.

The convicts now left the room. A subscription followed ; and Mrs. Fry offered to show us the jail. I went part of the way ; but as we seemed to walk through narrow, dark and winding passages cut out of the cold rock, my courage failed. Thought dwelt intensely on those that went in that way, never to return but to death or banishment, and I felt that I was exposing myself perhaps to illness, when uncalled on by any duty. I prevailed on a good, kind Quaker friend to be

my Orpheus, and was very glad to see the light of day once more.

It was a fine lesson of humility and gratitude. The doubt whether in similar circumstances one might not have been more guilty than the worst of these women, the reflection how deeply they might have been assailed by the temptations of want, added to every other infirmity of our nature, and how bitterly they might expiate in this world the offences of which they had repented, all pressed on the mind at once.