The Apprenticeship of George Fox

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By Janet Payne Whitney

ONE of the most interesting questions we can ask about a great man is "How did he become that way?" What forces played upon his childish years? How did he develop in adolescence? And when manhood brought its major choice of a career, what influenced him?

When a great character leaves behind him a detailed diary we are a long way towards answering those questions, and fortunately we have the journal of George Fox of which John Nickalls, one time the Librarian of the Religious Society of Friends, made a neat one-volume edition, carefully culling from all the available manuscripts. This is easy to handle, easy to read and has the benefit of an index. It is the edition to which page references can most readily be made.[1]

I am also the possessor of a first folio printed in 1694—the one prepared by George Fox's stepson-in-law Dr. Thomas Lower,[2] with the long fascinating biographical preface by William Penn, and the testimony of Margaret Fox concerning her late husband George Fox.

With all this one might hope not only to have, what we do have, a vivid impression of Fox the man—the leader, the friend, the husband—but also some account of his earliest disposition and development.

But of the three witnesses mentioned, Penn, Lower and Margaret Fell all became acquainted with Fox in his maturity.

We depend therefore upon George Fox alone to find out about his childhood and earliest youth.

Unfortunately for our anxious curiosity, George Fox himself did not regard these years as important—except in one or two particulars—and *did* regard them as private.

[1] *The Journal of George Fox*. A revised edition by John L. Nickalls. Cambridge University Press, 1952. References not otherwise specified are made to that edition.

[2] Lower had married Margaret Fell's daughter Mary.

Perhaps a certain introspection is necessary which developed late. But the thwarting fact is that George Fox passes over his first eighteen years in one and a half short pages (Nickalls edition)—or a single foolscap page of folio.

Yet that single foolscap page contains the seeds of all that comes after. To get some insight into George Fox we must press between the lines and try to follow every hint, every shadow of a picture, or flicker of feeling, that gives a clue to home background, family life, early education; of encouragement, of ambition and thwarting, which gave colour and direction to later life.

In addition to this scarcity, there is another handicap. George Fox, like St. Paul, did not use a ready pen, and preferred to dictate his material. Remember when in prison at Launceston Castle he sent for an able young woman,[1] who travelled the two hundred miles from London to act as his secretary. So the voluminous breathless journal, with its strange events, multitude of characters, short cuts here and long detailed dialogue there, was dictated to the pen of Fox's stepson-in-law Thomas Lower during the year and a half of Fox's rest at his wife's home Swarthmoor Hall, many years after the earliest events.

One drawback to this is that we don't hear all we would like to, and the other is that in the account of the incidents of boyhood and youth we get an old man's gloss on a young man's act.

A touch of retroactive priggishness enters here and there as the dignified leader looks back upon his early days with a critical, sometimes scandalized eye, and puts in a pious commentary which in the vivid narrative seems out of drawing.

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George Fox, the son of Christopher Fox, weaver, of Drayton-in-the-Clay, Leicestershire, and of Mary *née* Lago his wife, was first intended to be trained for the priesthood of the Anglican Church, a decision made when somewhere near the age of eleven he had a very definite religious experience perhaps connected with the solemn instructions of the Rector during preparation for Confirmation. But to move

[1] Anne Downer (1624-86).

from the realm of even reasonable deduction into the factual statement of George himself, "my relations thought to have [made] me a priest, but others persuaded to the contrary," and George was apparently rather hastily apprenticed to a well-to-do kinsman in the nearby village of Mancetter, one that was "a shoemaker by trade, and that dealt in wool, and used grazing, and sold cattle."[1]

This then represents the first and technical part of George Fox's apprenticeship to his future. What did he learn in those vital seven years from twelve to nineteen? Did he learn to make shoes? Perhaps. But he never says so. We have two sources of information on what he did. One is what George himself dictated to Thomas Lower to put down in his Journal, and the other is William Penn's report of what George Fox said to him about it. Taking William Penn's memory first, he recalled bits of conversation, when Penn was probably in his twenties and Fox in his forties, that "he [Fox] was brought up in country business; and as he took most delight in sheep, so he was very skilful in them; an employment that very well suited his mind in several respects, both for its innocency and solitude, and was a just figure of his after ministry and service."[2] But Fox himself gave a different emphasis when he dictated his life to his stepson-in-law. The wool trade of England was very prosperous. To be producing sheep for wool might be an accessory to his father's weaving industry. At all events, it was the business side to which the young George Fox was attracted, and in which, as he developed, he was most employed by his master, as his accuracy in accounts and talent for trading became gradually manifest; the buying and selling at fairs, the keeping of accounts. "A great deal went through my hands . . . I never wronged man or woman in all that time . . . While I was in that service, I used in my dealings the word 'verily', and it was a common saying among people that knew me, 'If George says "Verily" there is no altering him'."[3]

We have here the direct statement of a masculine youth, very much in control of his environment, conscious of efficiency and success in his business life. He had an eye for a horse, a sheep, a cow; he knew quality, and he kept in

1 *Journal*, p. 2; cf. 1694, Folio ed., p. 2.
2 *Journal*, p. xxxix; cf. 1694 ed., signature H1a.
3 *Journal*, p. 2.

touch with market fluctuations. Dealing with sellers and buyers of cattle and sheep and horses, notorious for sharp practice, he had learned, with his better trained brain and capacity for quick thinking, and slow deliberate speech, to outwit the double-crosser, the man of two prices, by sheer intelligence and unbreakable decision. The bartering, the beating down, taken for granted, was not young Fox's way. And he elevated that principle—decide on a just price and stick to it—into almost a religious tenet. It is not surprising that his master benefited greatly by George's abilities before his apprenticeship was up. Fox comments in retrospect—"While I was with him, he was blessed." Is it the elderly Fox who adds complacently, "but after I left him he broke, and came to nothing."[1]

Fox appears to have slept at home during the years of this apprenticeship, going to Church at St. Michael-and-all-Angels with his family on Sundays. For, as William Penn says, "he descended of honest and sufficient parents, who endeavoured to bring him up, as they did the rest of their children, in the way and worship of the nation; especially his mother, who was a woman accomplished above most of her degree in the place where she lived."[2] ("Sufficient," that is reasonably well-to-do; "Way and Worship of the nation," i.e. orthodox as to Church and King.)

But Mrs. Fox was also interested in the currents of religious thought which flowed through the nation. She belonged to a group of "professors" who needed more religious nourishment than was found in the Church service alone. When Fox was fourteen, torn from his studies for the ministry and *perhaps* for a time employed in learning the craft of shoemaking, a pamphlet came out entitled *How Was a Cobbler, and The Cobbler's Sermon.* Its subject was "the Sufficiency of the Spirit's teaching, without human learning; or a Treatise tending to prove humane learning to be no help to the spiritual understanding of the Word of God." It said in plain print "the learned divines do pervert all Scriptures . . . whenas the unlearned ones, simple men and women having the spirit of truth in them, shall rightly know them and God's mind in them, for their great comfort."

As a result of such teaching, widely disseminated by

[1] *Journal*, p. 2.
[2] *Journal*, p. xxxix; cf. 1694 ed., signature G2b.

secret channels in the disturbed years of the Star Chamber and Laud's Court of High Commission, small groups and congregations had sprung up everywhere in the lonely villages. They would meet in fields and barns, in kitchens and parlours, on the Sunday afternoons—not to clash with authority by meeting in Church time—"and instead of orthodox Divines they set up all kinds of mechanics, as shoemakers, cobblers, tailors, butchers, glovers . . . button-makers, coachmen. These lawless lads do affect an odd kind of gesture in their pulpits."

Archbishop Laud had started out with the idea of a tolerant Church. He did not mean to hunt down the groups, as long as their components conformed. There had been groups in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Let the tares grow along with the wheat, so long as they would consent to grow in the same field. The Church of England was for everybody. But groups of men whose doctrines would end in breaking the acceptance of conformity to the universality of the Church, that was another matter. The Star Chamber and the Court of High Commission would deal with them. He dismissed clergy from their livings simply for refusing to wear the surplice: such revealed an inward nonconformity. Laud attacked the rain of secret pamphlets as seditious, and subversive of the Establishment in Church and State (as in fact they were).

The boldest pamphleteers, like Burton, scorned anonymity. Examples were made to stem the rising tide. Burton,[1] a clergyman, Prynne,[2] a barrister, and Bastwick,[3] a doctor, were pilloried, ears cut off, branded, banished to fortresses for life. The pillory became their pulpit, and Laud reaped national hatred.

That excitement and its undercurrents had not died down when the talk flew through the villages about Lilburne, the ex 'prentice, taught by Dr. Bastwick through his prison window to "put off his hat and make a leg like a gentleman, and polish his rustic speech." Lilburne, said by some to be Prynne's clerk or servant, claimed to be an offshoot of gentle blood, and had certainly shown a talent for rabble-rousing politico-religious pamphlets, anonymous, but when charged

1 Henry Burton (1578-1648); *Dictionary of National Biography*.
2 William Prynne (1600-69); *D.N.B.*
3 John Bastwick (1593-1654); *D.N.B.*

with, he did not deny. In 1638, before the Court of Star Chamber, he raised a new issue; he refused to "take the oath," i.e. "to swear on the Book," quoting Christ's words "Swear not at all." But this did not save him—why should it? Lilburne was sentenced to be whipped at the cart's tail from the Fleet prison to the Old Palace Yard in Westminster. The crowd was on his side. "I have whipt many a rogue," said the executioner, "but now I shall whip an honest man." Lilburne shouted prayers to heaven as he went. The prayer was answered. "God hardened my back and steeled my reynes, and took away the smart and pain of the stripes from me." Bystanders at the pausing places where the executioner rested his arm—at Fleet Bridge, and in the Strand, and at Charing Cross—bade him be of good cheer. "So I am," he answered them, "for I rest not in my own strength but I fight under the banner of my great and mighty Captain, the Lord Jesus Christ."

Still exhilarated beyond pain, he addressed the hushed crowd from the pillory, beginning with a dramatic simplicity —"I am a young man and no scholar." The Book of Revelation, with its current political interpretation for the times—the scarlet woman, the Church of Rome, Queen Henrietta Maria—seemed to be his theme. The guards fetched a gag and clapped it in, and then the blood ran down silently from his mouth, eloquent and shocking. His friends distributed to eager takers, at the very foot of the pillory, a batch of his newest pamphlet. It had just reached London from the printers in Holland, by whose use the pamphleteers evaded Laud's censor. And young Lilburne, at twenty-four, a handsome magnetic youth, whom prison could not silence—(his letters and pamphlets poured forth, there was always someone to smuggle them out for him)—became the favourite martyr-hero of the hour. Especially to the young.

This tide of feeling could hardly go unnoticed and unfelt by the lad George Fox, who was himself, through his mother, "of the stock of the martyrs." But the spring of 1638, which saw the new rector[1] installed at Drayton, the boy George Fox apprenticed to the shoemaker, and the events of disaster to Lilburne, Burton, Bastwick and Prynne, also saw the signing of the Scottish Covenant,[2] and set the pattern for

[1] Nathaniel Stephens.
[2] Against Laud's efforts to force the Anglican Church pattern on Scotland.

Laud's downfall and the long-drawn-out fatal struggle between King and Parliament. Two years later, 1640, the new elected "Long" Parliament released Burton, Bastwick and Prynne, and also Lilburne; and Laud was put in the Tower, his power broken forever.

Nathaniel Stephens could now be as Presbyterian as he wished. He had only been Rector of Drayton under Laud for two years.

The hidden groups now came into the open, and met comfortably in each others houses for Bible study and prayer, sometimes discussing pamphlets which poured forth uncensored now, or more ambitious publications, books, deeper than temporary controversy. The leader read aloud, and there was some question and answer. The young George Fox joined in this group and that from time to time—perhaps chiefly in the one that met in his mother's kitchen—listened, tasted new ideas, thereby advanced his education. William Tyndale's classic, *The Obedience of a Christian Man and how Christian Leaders Ought to Govern*, was receiving much attention. It stretched the mind the more because, along with a Calvinistic cast of thought, in Tyndale's marvellous gift for phrase, was found imbedded the theory of the divine right of kings which had first started Henry VIII and now Charles Stuart on self-determination in government permissible to the Lord's anointed. *The Forbidden Fruit* by the German mystic, Sebastian Franck, was translated from the Latin into English in 1640 by John Everard,[1] a member of the Platonist group called the Cambridge Mystics. Perhaps it was George Fox's mother, with her instinct for mysticism, who introduced this book to her son, and to the group which sometimes met in the Fox's house. At all events it is a fact that Everard's book, and also Tyndale's, are among those which George Fox owned, and read.

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It was not surprising that there was a good deal of sadness in George Fox's backward look. Many memories rose with edges of painful detail. He was a source of inevitable conflict in the family group. "My relations were offended at me."[2]

[1] Pollard & Redgrave, *Short-title catalogue*, 11324.
[2] *Journal*, p. 72.

Although now we only remember Christopher and Mary Fox because of their son George, they seemed at the time to have plenty of cause for complaint, and to have right on their side[1]. The days of George Fox's apprenticeship were drawing to a close, and yet he seemed to show no sign of taking up any career leading from it. What was he going to do with his life? In September 1643 he relieved the situation on both sides by leaving home to find that out for himself.

An incident sparked off his departure which throws light on Fox's ordinary day-to-day goings on, and his easy, unaffected comradeship with young men of his own age. He never had the exuberant, popular high spirits of St. Augustine, or the witty gaiety which caused the young John Woolman to excel "in the art of foolish jesting." Like Napoleon, he had no humour, and could do without amusement, but he was infallibly interesting. Once the cat-calling of the little boys with whom he would not play, was outgrown, his company was both feared and sought. He provoked a large variety of reactions throughout the course of his life, but boredom was never one of them. So when he came towards nineteen years of age—that is July 1643—"being upon business at a fair" a couple of young men came up to him and invited him to come to the pub and join them in a drink. George readily accepted. He was thirsty in the dusty July market, and the young men were congenial. One was a cousin of his, named Bradford. Both of them attended the same reading and worship groups of "friendly people" as George did. They were "religious professors" therefore, beyond the habitual Church attendance, which was taken for granted. At first all went well, but perhaps Bradford and friend had been drinking before. Anyhow, they were in an excited mood, and when all had enjoyed a glass apiece, the others began to drink healths—perhaps beginning with a toast to George for his birthday. They called for more ale, "agreeing together that he that would not drink should pay [the bill for] all."[2] George Fox's quick scorn was equalled by his social aplomb. He curtly got up, threw down his groat and said "If that's the

[1] The Lichfield incident belongs to this period but having printed it in the *Friends' Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 5 (Jan. 1963), pp. 202-5, I do not repeat it here.

[2] *Journal*, p. 3.

way it is, I'll leave you," and walked out. He finished his business in the fair, and went home, but he was deeply disturbed. Was this all that religious profession meant in daily life? (even to a strong professor like cousin Bradford?)

He paced about his room all night (evidence perhaps that he had a room to himself). Within a few weeks he had wound up his affairs and left home for nothing less than the search for truth.

The elder Fox, dictating the memoried event against a background of long years of religious certainty which the youth of the memory had yet, through sweat and tears, to discover, gives the solemn ultimate reason—"*At the command of God*, I left my relations."[1]

The incident in the tavern may indeed have been the last straw in the whole complex of pressures, in which the increasing and terrible impact of public affairs had much to do.

Almost exactly a year before this, Richard Baxter, then fairly new to the charge of the parish at Kidderminster, was filling a friend's pulpit at Alcester on 23rd October when they heard a new sound in England—the heavy reverberation of distant cannon. "About sunset . . . many troops fled through the town, and told us that all was lost on the Parliament side . . . The townsmen sent a messenger to Stratford-upon-Avon to know the certain truth. About four o'clock in the morning the messenger returned and told us [correctly as it turned out] that Prince Rupert wholly routed the left wing of the Earl of Essex's army; but . . . the main body and the right wing routed the rest of the king's army."[2] The compassionate, victorious amateur general, Essex, his face bleeding from a swordcut, walked among his troops knocking up their weapons, shouting—"Spare your fellow countrymen!"

Baxter rode over at dawn of day to see the battlefield. He found the troops still drawn up about a mile apart, with "about a thousand dead bodies in the field between them."

So the bitterness of war came to the English countryside. "The fury of our own rabble and of the king's soldiers was such that I saw no safety," wrote Baxter, "in staying at home . . . I knew not what course to take. To live at home I

[1] *Journal*, p. 3.
[2] *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, ed. J. M. W. Thomas, 1925, pp. 41-42.

was uneasy . . . Soldiers on one side or other would be frequently among us, and we must be at the mercy of every furious beast that would make a prey of us. I had neither money nor friends; I knew not who would receive me in any place of safety; nor had I anything to satisfy them for my diet and entertainment."[1] A friend suggested that he might go to Coventry and earn his way by assisting in the preaching duties of an old acquaintance who was a minister there to the Parliament troops, who were making it a rest headquarters. "So thither I went with a purpose to stay there till one side or the other got the victory and the war was ended, and then to return home again. For so wise in matters of war was I, and all the country beside, that we commonly supposed that a very few days or weeks by *one other* battle would end the wars."

As war conditions in the midlands intensified, George Fox also was restless at home. But unlike Baxter, he had both money to pay his way and friends to go to, and a deep sense of quest in his travels.

George Fox left home on 9th September 1643, the first time in his record that he has given an exact date. Not even his birthday got anything but the month and year. This is probably an indication that from now on he was using in his dictation a number of old journals—"the little journal books"—not dated with complete care but giving accounts of people, places, and events more or less in order and generally fairly fresh after the event. George Fox left home then with the goodwill of his parents, with a horse and enough money for all his needs. One may say confidently with a horse, because most of the time throughout his journal George Fox customarily made his journeys on horseback, and when we look at his itinerary—Lutterworth, Northampton, Newport Pagnell, Barnet—which he reached in June, 1644, and then on to London, we see that they are all about a day's ride apart. There was nothing vagabond or haphazard about his behaviour. His programme is described several times. He would go to the house of a "professor", that is to say a religious group member or leader whom he knew of, and would hire a room; then he would join in the meetings of the group; a quiet, reserved, observant visitor, avoiding intimacy

[1] Baxter, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

with any; and would stay some weeks or months as he felt inclined.

He ignored the fact that he was travelling in a land at war. Yet in the previous Autumn ('42) the midland counties all around Leicestershire as centre, had been organized into an association for the Parliament under Lord Grey:[1] Leicester, Derby, Nottingham, Rutland, Northampton, Beds., Bucks., and Huntingdon. The other two adjacent counties to Leicester, Warwick and Staffordshire, were joined in a different group under Lord Brooke, the same that was shot at Lichfield.[2] The eastern shires organized in an Eastern federation. These associations were mainly for recruiting and training militia. The indeterminate battle of Edgehill[3] had been fought near Banbury in October 1642. After that battle Cromwell had taken command of Cambridge, near his home, and fortified it as a centre of recruiting and defence; and the King had taken over Oxford for the duration of the war. (A new conception of Oxford and Cambridge and their importance in national life.) The organized recruiting, however, was a serious matter. Volunteers were sought, and many came. But England had long been accustomed to pressing men for the Navy—catching a likely man in a tavern or wandering along the highways (very seldom were men taken from their work). Now such likely customers were pressed for the Army. Both sides, Royalists and Parliament, went in for the press gang method. A young man, well set up, of military age, particularly one who was obviously officer material, was liable to interference as he went about his own business. It may be that George Fox had to use ingenuity to avoid such encounters more than once. To go away from the too active midlands and take up some definite journey which involved temporary residence in different places was not a bad idea, and linked on with the young man's desire to see the world and to pursue his inward search, away from family pressures.

George Fox had been at Lutterworth a fortnight when the first battle of Newbury Down near Reading, on the wool route to the west, was fought and won by Parliament.[4]

1 Thomas Grey, baron Grey of Groby; *D.N.B.*

2 Robert Greville, 2nd baron Brooke (1608-43); *D.N.B.* See my previous account (*FQ* vol. 14, no. 5, p. 204).

3 The one reported by Baxter.

4 20th September, 1643.

A strange air of unreality, almost play-acting, hung over these earlier battles fought in English fields, each side respecting the other as fellow-sons of the same soil, and yet irrevocably, and in the case of the more intelligent, bitterly, divided on matters that went deep. On the royalist side Prince Rupert, the King's brilliant nephew, come over to help him from abroad, would take his pet white dog with him on to the field. The Parliament soldiers called him the "dibble dogge pudle." (He was killed, poor little beast, at Marston Moor.) Lord Newcastle, royalist Commander-in-Chief, would drive on the field of battle in a coach-and-six, where he would have his refreshments, and from which he would direct the preliminary operations. And there were Parliamentary commanders who would sometimes take time off from desultory pursuit of a retreating enemy for a day of fasting and prayer, especially on a Sunday.

But whatever they did George Fox took no notice, made no comment, was absorbed in his private life. Not that he was the only one. Richard Baxter was scornful of the many thousands throughout England whom he would describe as neuter. Baxter came to take a more tolerant view of them in later life, admitting that there were times when those who had not got a clear opinion at the beginning would find it hard to make up their minds between the statements of the aims of war made by King Charles I on the one hand and Parliamentary leaders on the other. (Some of the latter were plumping for complete Presbyterianism as the established religion of England, and for making everybody take the solemn oath and Covenant in order to go into entire league with the Scots.)

John Lilburne had from the beginning thrown in his part with the Parliament Army, and expressed his religious feeling mainly through political statements couched in biblical terms. Being a brave soldier he had early obtained a captaincy, and had a great deal of influence with the troops. (He was beginning a kind of propaganda which presently led to the formation of the short-lived sect called the Levellers.) John Bunyan also was glad to conduct a holy war in the Army of the Parliament. But George Fox, younger than either of these, was indifferent and "neuter." Yet events and news had their painful impact.

Oliver Cromwell, whom Fox was to know intimately in

later life, had already established a high moral standard for the regiment of a thousand horse which he had recruited in the Eastern Association. In May, before Fox left home, Cromwell had proclaimed that his troops would be fined for swearing, put in the stocks for drunkenness: that looting, or damage to property or person, would be severely punished. And he kept his word, so that "the counties where they come leap for joy at them."

He obtained this high standard, both in camp and in battle, by the unusual course at that time of constant and regular drill. He also provided excellent horses for his Ironsides, and much more regular pay than was at all common in either army. Fox, a lover of horses and an excellent business man himself, must have approved of what he heard in this regard.

It is not impossible that the added conflict of feeling that his life might have more purpose if he joined in the war, had a part in the depression of spirit which accompanied him, and fell on him very darkly when he reached Barnet in June.[1] On 3rd June the King, besieged in Oxford by Essex, got away, and there seemed a down turn for the Parliamentary cause, a time when people hitherto "neuter" might rally to the help of what they thought the right side. And since Cromwell had been at Nottingham through part of May, recruiting and drilling, and talking his lofty, passionate propaganda, George Fox might have received word from home and friends thereabout that gave interesting and stimulating sidelights on the character of the new leader and of his Ironsides. Travellers from north and midlands to London were constantly coming through Barnet.

In the first week of July news came down from the north of the great victory of Oliver Cromwell and his Ironsides in the battle of Marston Moor. This battle was decisive in breaking the royalist forces and especially the powerful cavalry of Prince Rupert. When the troops lined up at Marston Moor, among the crops and hedges and difficult lanes and ditches for the Roundheads, and open moorland giving first advantage to the royalist troops, Prince Rupert anxiously enquired whether Cromwell had come to this fight, and took pains to draw up his cavalry immediately

[1] 1644.

opposite so that it might be a duel between him and Ironside horse. He lost. And Cromwell's name became magnetic to ardent young religious patriots throughout the land. Perhaps this was one of the "temptations" that Fox mentions, without specifying what they were, that tore him spiritually at Barnet. He walked day by day in the Chase wrestling with the Devil, although George Fox is not one who uses that word often. "But temptations grew more and more and I was tempted almost to despair, and when Satan could not effect his design upon me that way, then he laid snares for me and baits to draw me to commit some sin, whereby he might take advantage to bring me to despair. I was about twenty years of age when these exercises came upon me . . . And I went to many a priest to look for comfort but found no comfort . . . And sometimes I kept myself retired in my chamber, and often walked solitary in the Chase, there to wait upon the Lord. And I wondered why these things should come to me; and I looked upon myself and said: 'Was I ever so before?' Then I thought, because I had forsaken my relations I had done amiss against them; so I was brought to call to mind all my time that I had spent and to consider whether I had wronged any."[1]

He came to the conclusion, with his sturdy common sense, that though he had hurt his family, specifically his mother, by coming away from home and staying away so long, he had not done wrong in it. He wrote a letter to give his mother some comfort. But he was not yet ready to return. He still hoped that by living away from all his old associations and all their influences, making acquaintance with strangers, and seeing different landscapes, he might give a new life a chance to burgeon within him. At any rate he would have more of a chance to come to a conclusion of his own. He was evidently a source of great interest to those among whom he lived, and they would gladly have drawn him into closer fellowship. But he was wary of falling under the influence of any person, or joining up with any meeting or group. He perceived that they had not got what he was looking for.

In the Autumn, a wet and chilly season of fog and mist, he went on to London "where I took a lodging, and was

[1] *Journal*, p. 4, with sentences in a different order.

under great misery and trouble there . . . I saw all was dark." Yet here he had not only friendly acquaintance but kinsfolk. There was his Uncle Pickering and family. The important thing about Uncle Pickering was not what he did for a living, or what his status was in the city, but that he was a Baptist. Perhaps George stayed at his Uncle Pickering's. He does not say whether he did or not. But certainly through him and his family Fox was very closely in touch here with the local group. The Baptists were now a strong sect, and Fox felt that he had much in common with them. "They were a tender people then." Yet there was something lacking. One barrier was that he could not feel intimacy with his Uncle. Problems of opinion or of career remained still undiscussed. The looked-for advice was either not given or was inappropriate. "I could not impart my mind to him nor join with them, for I saw all, young and old, where they were . . . [And] I looked upon the great professors of the city of London, and I saw all was dark and under the chain of darkness."[1]

Why did Fox find London so dark?

That winter, 1644-45, the King's Commissioners were at Uxbridge. The Scottish and Parliament Commissioners were treating with him. His case was desperate. To win them (and the Scots were his only hope) Charles was making wide promises of allowing the Presbyterian Church to be the dominant church in England, stipulating for full recognition also of his beloved Anglican Church. Such an arrangement would logically entail recognition of others, in fact a general toleration of the main sects, of which Baptists were the chief. So the negotiations ended in deadlock. The war must go on.

Parliament in London was adopting a New Model Army to be organized on a national instead of a regional basis, but to be on the pattern of Cromwell's Ironsides; regular pay, good horses for the cavalry, and fine red coats for a dress uniform. They called it *pro tem.* the Auxiliary Band among the Soldiery. Men were being pressed for its service in every part of England, since numbers were essential, but volunteers were coming in well. Sir Thomas Fairfax, whom everybody liked and trusted, was named Commander-in-Chief. (King Charles II many years later told Pepys, when he dictated to

[1] *Journal*, p. 4.

him the story of his adventure after his escape from the Battle of Worcester, how one day he found himself with his attendant friend (both in disguise) in a town which proved full of "Cromwell's Redcoats.")

But the chief talk of the streets and the pulpits was the bitterness and the hate fanned up by the long-drawn-out trial of Archbishop Laud. Prynne, chief counsel for the prosecution, disfigured as he was for life by Laud's pillory, gave no example of Christian charity, but bullied and rated the dignified prisoner, interrupted his slow, scholarly periods, had him waked up at night to give up his papers, and tired him out by day. Laud had been cruel in his time, fair enough. But the revenge spread darkness rather than light.

The event that was most noticed by the citizens of London, 'prentices and aldermen, Bishops and Baptists, including Uncle Pickering and most surely by the young Fox, was the execution of Archbishop Laud on 10th January, 1645.[1] Men were presently to say of King Charles I that nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it. What then of the Archbishop, so bigoted and cruel (chiefly responsible for the burning alive of the last religious victim to be so treated, just before the birth of George Fox, in the horrified town of Lichfield) how would he behave when himself on the scaffold? At his trial he had given voice to the sentiment that had made the iron hand in his policy, a deep-rooted part of his conviction, irreconcilable with the new spirit of religious variety, if not religious freedom—"*I have ever been of the opinion that laws bind the conscience.*" Now he came before the crowd to die by the axe, the old man, maintaining the dignity of a Prince of the Church, shivering in the cold blast of the January day; and, allowed the customary freedom of last words, he made a speech which contained these words—"Good people, this is an uncomfortable time to preach! I thank God, though the weight of the sentence lie heavy upon me, I am as quiet within as ever I was in my life."

When Spring came and the roads were open—such rough paths as they were, fetlock deep in mud, you often did not know if you were on the track or on a ploughed field—George Fox obeyed fresh letters and turned homewards, among the early buds of green, the mating birds.

[1] 1644 O.S.

And so at last came back to Leicestershire and Drayton-in-the-Clay.

What had he to tell them of his year and a half of apprenticeship to life—new scenes, different habits, fresh acquaintance, contact with different minds and other points of view? The crushing temptations during the long stay at Barnet—perhaps confided to his mother only; or perhaps to none. And last the disappointment over Uncle Pickering, and the saddening overwhelming impact of London, where the best religious teachers of England were holding forth to large congregations (the brand-new Puritan Church Order replacing the Prayer Book) and offering, from George Fox's point of view, a stone of harsh doctrine instead of the Bread of Life.

After the welcome and delight of George's return, the anxious parents set themselves once more to the problem of their son's future. He was not willing to use his technical apprenticeship in organizing his father's wool and weaving trade, nor was he ready to take over the orchards and small farm. He still asked for more time to explore his vocation. To settle himself. An unsettled young man is often settled by marriage, with its joys and comforts, and responsibilities assumed for the lives of others. So that was the first proposition made to him; and no doubt there was an attractive candidate, perhaps one known from childhood. But George Fox rejected this as being not yet ready for it. Then why not join the Auxiliary Band among the soldiery as many young men among his acquaintance were doing? The New Model Army? Regular pay, an active adventurous life, with an army group that was as sober and godly as a Church? Called themselves a Church! In any case he ran the risk of being pressed for service. But Fox rejected this plan also.

Then what would he do? It was hard to say. He had served his technical apprenticeship and acquired some skills; he had served a second session of apprenticeship in the ways of the world, a modest equivalent of the rich man's grand tour. But he still had more to learn; to explore and find out matters too deep to explain. He rode away to Coventry, to re-establish his independence, and escape the sense of their disappointment. And after a while among congenial friends there (not including Baxter, whom he did not know) he went back home again, that they might feel comfortable. So he

lived at home for "about a year",[1] helpful in many ways to his father, an obedient son in daily life; "easy, modest, gentle, tender," as Penn said; but needing freedom and time to pursue the necessity of his further self-education, in the quest of nothing less than certainty.

No youth apprentice now, but a man, with a man's stern honesty and a man's power to suffer. As he enters the awful experience of the dark night of the soul, from which he was to emerge at last with a triumphant revelation that revives our hearts today, he is a leader to be proud of.

* * * *

It is a curious fact that we very seldom get a description from his contemporaries of the appearance of a great man. It is to Thomas Ellwood that we are indebted for a description of George Fox's appearance. "Graceful he was in countenance, manly in personage, grave in gesture, courteous in conversation . . . free from affectation in speech or carriage."[2]

[1] *Journal*, p. 5.
[2] *Journal*, 1694, Folio ed., p. xvi.