

John Woolman and Susanna Lightfoot

His unpublished letter to her

IT seems improbable that a major Woolman document should still be lying, unknown and unprinted, in Friends House Library; yet such appears to be the case. There are, in fact, two copies there, one in MS. Portfolio 31 (88), and the other in the Catchpool MSS., Vol. II, 305, on which the text below is based. Two other copies are known: one (which I have collated) in the Proctor Commonplace Book, in possession of Mr. Spence Sanders, of Farnham Common; the other (which I have not seen) in the Nicholson MSS., belonging to Liverpool Friends' Meeting. No American copies are known to me; but the practice of copying such epistles into commonplace books, under the injunction: "Gather up the fragments that remain" was so frequent, that perhaps others may still be found, and from them it may be possible to establish the date and the occasion of the letter, at present unknown. The three copies I have seen have neither date nor place; they show about 50 small verbal differences of little importance. It is likely, however, that the letter belongs to the last years of Woolman's life, and it can hardly be earlier than the summer of 1764, when Susanna went to settle with her second husband, Thomas Lightfoot, in Uwchlan, Chester County, Penna., a place well known to readers of Woolman's *Journal*.

That, however, was not the beginning of the acquaintance between Susanna and John Woolman. But, since she is one of the forgotten figures of eighteenth century Quakerism, unmentioned (for instance) in Rufus Jones's *Later Periods of Quakerism*, or Elfrida Vipont's *The Story of Quakerism*, perhaps a brief biography may be of value. It is based on the account in Comly's *Friends' Miscellany* (1836), Vol. IX, 2, and that of John Gough in *Friends' Library* (1838), Vol. II, 460 (see also IV, 262; X, 444; XI, 49-59). There are many other passing references to her in the journals of eighteenth century ministering Friends, always affectionate and approving.

Susanna, daughter of John and Margaret Hudson, was born 10th of 1st mo. 1720 (N.S.) at Grange, Co. Antrim, in

Northern Ireland. Her parents were Friends, but her father died young and she was put out to service; she remained devoted to the Society, and in her teens walked miles to attend meetings, and "laboured hard to make up the time to her master and mistress." It is a great mistake to suppose, as we often do, that eighteenth century ministers were all old in years; Susanna appeared in the ministry at seventeen, being taken (she said on her death-bed) "as from the milking-pail."

Her call came through John Hunt of London, who later settled in America, that "great, wise and experienced minister and elder" as John Pemberton called him—not the same as John Woolman's cousin of the same name. John Hunt prophesied in an Irish country meeting, before he had yet met her, that there was one present who would "go forth to publish the glad tidings of the gospel." Recalling the occasion forty years later as she lay dying, Susanna remembered that "Friends remarked, that there was nobody for it but Susy,—which exceedingly humbled me." Perhaps it was this humility, which she kept all her life, which endeared her to John Woolman. She called back a young woman Friend who had visited her in her last illness to say to her: "Dear child, be humble; for it is in the low valley of humility that the Lord will teach thee of his ways."

Susanna Hudson had plenty of opportunity for practising humility, for Friends at the time kept their "station in life" even while acknowledging spiritual equality. She took service with Ruth Courtney, a ministering Friend, and in 1737 travelled with her to America. Perhaps a little human jealousy of her gifted maid was mingled with the ministry they shared, for John Gough recorded that Ruth Courtney "made her not only wash their linen constantly, but supply with her own hands the horses with hay and oats, and rub them with straw several times a day, and would let no other Friend's servants intermeddle. Her public services in meetings were generally acceptable to Friends, and they pitied her." Susanna was not only eloquent, she was beautiful; proposals of marriage followed her. But her first choice was unfortunate. In 1742 she married Jesse (some accounts call him Joseph) Hatton, a linen weaver; Friends collected thirty pounds to set them up in a huckster's shop in Lisburn. "Whilst she was capable of attending to it," says John

Gough, "the shop seemed likely to do well, but having twins a second time, and having them both to nurse, as soon as she could inspect the state of affairs, she found them neglected and impaired." The shop was sold up, and the Hattons moved first to Lurgan, and later to Waterford, in a vain search for financial stability and prosperity. Persecution was added to the private trials she endured, but "through all these things, she grew brighter and more excellent in her ministry . . . not one in those large [Irish] meetings rose up with that Divine authority and dignity that she did."

In 1759 her husband died; and in 1760, having apprenticed her older children and left the younger ones in the care of Friends, she travelled for the second time to America, and spent two years in the ministry, through New England and as far south as Charleston, Carolina. It was on this second journey that the friendship of John Woolman and Susanna Hatton began. They were both of an age; Susanna was 41 and John Woolman about to have his 41st birthday when they attended, with other Friends, the Indian Treaty at Easton in the autumn of 1761. The Indian chief, Papunahung, whom John Woolman visited two years later at Wyalusing, brought his wife with him and Susanna Hatton spoke at a meeting with her and the other squaws, with "such a remarkable display of the tendering power of Divine Grace over the Indians that several Friends present declared that they never saw the like before."¹

It was during this American visit that Thomas Lightfoot, brother of William Lightfoot who accompanied John Woolman on part of his Indian journey, met and fell in love with Susanna Hatton. After she had returned to Ireland he followed her there and proposed to her; they were married in September of 1763, and in the following summer she took several of her children with her to settle in Uwchlan.

Her second marriage was one of deep affection. "I never grieved thee willingly. Our life was one continued scene of love to each other," said Thomas at the end.²

Sensitive as she was, Susanna soon felt bowed down with the coming Revolution; and proclaimed again and again "the approach of a stormy trying time, that would shake the

¹ MS. account in Boston Public Library, quoted in Gummere, *Journal of John Woolman* (1922), p. 81.

² Susanna Lightfoot died at Uwchlan, 8.v.1781, aged 61 years.

sandy foundations of formal, or mere nominal professors." Perhaps it was this dark mood of Cassandra-like prophecy in a time of the breaking of nations, or some more private grief, which John Woolman answered in the letter which follows. Here, more than anywhere even in the Journal, he reveals the dark night of the soul which he sometimes knew, in phrases that have none of the careful simplicity of the Journal, but pour out in breathless profusion, the more moving from their formless and impetuous flood.

ORMEROD GREENWOOD

EXTRACT OF A LETTER FROM JOHN WOOLMAN
TO SUSANNA LIGHTFOOT

Undated.

In the fellowship of true & unfeigned love, that unites the hearts of the faithful in a joint communion one with another, do I dearly salute thee; even that communion that begets a sympathy in Spirit, to partake in some degree of the state of one another as Members of one body in the mystery that the World knows not of; for by this communion the members are not insensible of the state one of another, and if one member suffers, the other suffers with it; and if one rejoices or abounds the rest are rejoiced in a degree of the same abounding love; by this there is help communicated without partiality or sinister views, according to the proportion of that Love which is boundless, proceeding from God, thro' Jesus Christ, and centering in the same eternal fulness.

Thus my Dear Friend, if I may be so qualified as to be any way useful, I shall be much satisfied that I have performed that part of friendship that may be profitable to thee, with a great deal of pleasure, and judging also that I have had some experience of the various states and conditions of a christian life, & the manner of the Lord's dealings with his people. These I have learned in the deeps; & in the silence of fleshly reasonings; in the stillness where the Enemy approaches not have had to cry out in admiration with the Prophet: "how unsearchable are thy Judgments, O Lord! & thy ways past finding out!" Yet there is often a long time of suffering in hunger & thirst, in nakedness & distress, before we can come here to this stillness, to the intent that God Almighty in his infinite wisdom, may manifest his own Arm of power, which sometimes brings deliverance without any means of our own

proposing. I have often observed that he reserves entirely to himself the greatest deliverances, yet not always so, as not to make use of any means at all; but then those means appear on a just view, to have something in them so extraordinary and providential that they appear plainly to be from the first moving cause; the instrument is in some sort overlooked, tho' it is in sincerity acknowledged as the bounty of heaven, in the distribution of his providence, yet the acknowledgment does not terminate in the means or instrument, but arises in pure breathings, as a divine flame to the source and fountain of all our mercies.

Thus his Judgments are to human attainments unsearchable, & his ways (tho' ways that lead to peace) past our finding out. When he corrects, 'tis not in his sore displeasure, lest he should bring us to nothing; but by the chastisements, as of a merciful Father, he urges and draws a greater degree of obedience from his children, for it is in his love.

Our time then, is to be still, to bear all things, to endure all things, to rejoice in all things that he shall lay upon us, as knowing that thereby we may procure to ourselves the most lasting peace by being thus restored again to favour. And oh! how happy are all those that can so quietly submit in all things! & in order to this let us only consider that they are distributed to mankind in his abundant wisdom and counsel. But I freely confess and acknowledge, that there is another sort of affliction that is as bonds and imprisonments, as laying nights and days in the deeps (yea more afflicting than bonds outwardly,) and the cause intirely hid from us, wherein there is a striving between Life and Death, between hope and despair, longing to be delivered, and but short glimpses of it, if at all beholding the deliverer, & at times crying out with the Prophet: "Thou hast compassed thyself about with a Cloud, that our prayers cannot pass thro!" There appears no mediator, no High Priest before the Throne of God, he forever seems to hide his blessed countenance, and his absence is our greatest pain; for being deprived of his presence, all things else yield no relief. O! then how does the Soul tremble, how does the heart faint! the tears are dried up, no vent that seems to ease the anguish of the Soul, no Balm in Gilead, no Physician there, so that we are ready to cry out, "Our bones are dried up! our hope is lost! we are cast off forever!" & with Job "O that my griefs were thro'ly weighed, & my calamities

put into the balance together; for then it would appear heavier than the Sands of the Sea; therefore my words are swallowed up!" O that I could feel so much softness in my heart as might affect mine eyes, then should I have hope; if it were the effect of contrition or consolation, it would yield me equal Joy, that my Redeemer had not quite forsaken me, nor given me up to the rage of my most cruel Enemy, but has mercy for me still in store. Thus lamenting Days and Nights when it is Day we wish for night, & when Night we desire Day; fear to be alone, & fear to be in company; we can neither read nor hear with attention, nor meditate on God with any composed devotion.

Yet let me tell thee, O my Friend! (having waded thro' these and more afflictions, that are not to be express'd) if such distress is now, or has been upon thee, God is near at hand to bear up thy drooping Soul; he is ever underneath and round about thee, tho' for a while thou seest him not. And I have always found, that after these times he has appeared with abundant more lustre & glory; to teach us not to attribute anything to ourselves, nor fix our thoughts on anything less than his omnipotency.

He that has made the Sea, & prescribed bounds to the Waves thereof, saying "hitherto shalt thou come & no further; & here shall thy proud waves be stayed;" is not to be limited by finite creatures, as the best of Men are; & tho' the Sea may dash and foam, yet it cannot make an inundation but by the direction, or at least high sufferance of Almighty wisdom; who is not less in regard to his Children's well-being than wise in his counsels to frustrate the proudest attempts of the wicked. Wherefore by having an eye single to him at all times of tossing or fluctuation of the Mind, proceeding from what cause they will, is the most proper method of attaining to a settled state and condition.

When the disciples of our Lord were tossed on the Sea, their help was near, tho' to them Jesus seem'd asleep & undisturbed, yet his inward apprehension as God was awake, & ready to help them at their call, "Master, carest not thou, that we perish?" Whereat he arose, & rebuked the Winds, & said to the Sea, "Peace, be still!" & the Wind ceased, & there was a great calm, whereupon their admiration seemed to be raised more by that signal deliverance, than by any other miracle, inasmuch as they at that time were the more

immediate objects of his mercy & partook of the blessing of his powerful word; neither did they spare returning their acknowledgments by saying "What manner of Man is this, that even the Winds & the Seas obey him?"

Thus is he near when he seems most absent, ready to help in every needful time of trouble, as he is called upon in the least degree of faith (tho small as a grain of Mustard Seed) settling & quieting the Mind in his own time; sometimes before we ask, to prevent our asking; herein is fulfilled that saying of Scripture, "I was found of them that sought me not, & made manifest unto them that enquired not after me;" Sometimes he waits long, according to the strength of the sufferer, as is illustrated in the cause of the importunate Widow, by his saying "tho he bear long with them, yet always in his own time he will answer (and that is the best time) sometimes entirely unexpected by the Creature, & whether the Deliverer comes early or late, in that deliverance there is a looking back with wonder and acknowledgment to God, as Israel sang on the Banks of the Sea, saying, "The Lord is glorious in holiness, fearful in praise, doing wonders;" or again, "these are thy wonderful works, O God! my soul has been brought down to the bottom of the pit, & thou hast delivered it again from the Destroyer, & hast once more set my Feet in the just man's path, in the bright shining light that shall shine more and more unto the perfect Day."

In these short intervals the Soul gathers strength to ascend to her Beloved, & rejoices in her happy deliverance from bondage. And it is agreeable to the experience of many, that there is no state that produces such convincing proof of the regard of Heaven, as that wherein we are reduced to the last degree of poverty and want; to that degree that there appears nothing but confusion; the very brute Animals seem in a more desirable condition; they rove idly unemployed, & have their food prepared in season, & if they are slain, Death is to them an end of all sorrows. The Trees & the Shrubs, & all the species of inanimated things, seem to discover a greater beauty & display in livelier texture their great original than we; these tho' they all suffer decay in the course of nature, & by the Scythe of time are soon reduced to the earth from whence they sprang; yet as they are insensible of pain, they neither can nor need cry out for succour; but Man, the noblest part of God's creation, made to adore and

reverence the supreme being with sublime intellects, is of all creatures taught of God, to trust in him, to wait upon him, to be resigned to his will in all things; & if at any time he is pleased to hide his face for awhile. 'tis in order to manifest his power, & bring forth more lasting fruits of praise to himself; and more honour and dignity to the Creator by virtue of his prolific Word; for by Death is Life perfected; by staining the glory of this World, the glory of God is rendered more conspicuous; by seeing ourselves really as we are, we have a glimpse of what God is; by beholding our own emptiness, we desire to partake of his fullness; by feeling our own poverty, we covet his riches; by being hungry & thirsty we have a true relish of the Bread and Water of Life; by a real sense of our own nothingness, we dare not murmur if we receive nothing; but in all states, with the Holy Apostle, learn to be content; thus God becomes all in all. And thus it is necessary that we have a spiritual assistance, to distinguish times and seasons as they are in the hand of God; when we abound, not to be lifted up; when in poverty & want not to repine too much; when afflicted, that we pray first for the spirit of prayer & supplication, that we may be directed how, & in what manner to pray: for it is not always consistent that we should have what we most desire as Creatures, but that which is most profitable for us as Christians, Believers, & Followers of Christ, who was a most perfect pattern of humility & self-denial whilst in the Flesh, who just before the offering up his Life for the Sins of the whole World; & by having an apprehension of the greatest of all agonies, he breathes as if constrained by the most perfect weight, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" but as if he checked himself adds, with submission and filial duty: "Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt!"

We therefore have great need to distinguish aright that in all things we may be preserved, by watching in stillness, to be renewed in strength; by virtue of the holy anointing to know what to ask, & temper our longings by a perfect submission: sometimes to ask no more than to be endued with patience and strength to bear the present affliction, that it may terminate to our advantage, & acceptance with Almighty God.

At other times when the Days of captivity are ended, & the Seed that has been oppressed is to be set at liberty, the Lord gives notice thereof by causing the Soul to breathe in

open air, & to ascend to the Divine Majesty with an easy supplication; and an earnest, as it were resounding back upon the Soul, with heavenly harmony that strikes a firm belief that our prayers are heard, like the fire that fell upon Elijah's offering, & consumed the Wood, the Flesh, the Stone, & the Water. But when the emanations of this divine life are absent, which is not to be counted strange or a new thing, the enemy of Man's happiness who waits all opportunities like a restless & indefatigable Foe, to besiege, & if possible to storm & sack the whole City of God; he is then ready to make his strongest attempts, if possible to shake the foundation; but the foundation of God stands sure, having this Seal: "The Lord knows them that are his"; and them he will preserve and care for; tho' the Enemy may tempt, & raise considerable disorders & fluctuations in the Mind without any visible cause; at other time suggests into the Mind desponding thoughts, as if we should never more be regarded; but he who was a lyar & a murderer from the beginning, is so still; & as he abode not in the Truth, his Envy is raised the more particularly against all who strive to persevere aright.

But let us trust in God, who will not suffer us to be tempted above what we are able to bear, but will with the temptation also make a way to escape it; but those desponding thoughts have so much influence sometimes, that the Creature seems wholly swallowed up in them, & complains like Zion in bitterness of Soul saying "The Lord hath forsaken me! My God hath forgotten me!"

But he that was nearer than she was aware of & readier to help than she hoped, expostulated with her in the most affectionate & moving manner; "Can a Woman forget her sucking Child that she should not have compassion on the Son of her Womb?" "Yea, she may!" No compassion is sufficient to illustrate the Love of God! Women may become hardened & be careless of their own offspring, & be inexorable to the cries of their Children; "but the Lord thy Maker, thy Husband that takes care of thee, will not forsake thee," "Thou art graven on the Palms of my Hands;" as much as to say, "to forget thee were to forget myself; to forget my Power, that made all things & upholds all things," "thy Walls of Protection are continually before me," "Thy Salvation is not out of sight, thy Redeemer is near at hand."

My dear Friend, I seem to have exceeded the Bounds of a

letter already, altho' I have been obliged to confine my thoughts very much, & have sent thee only a short extract of what has presented itself to my Mind, with a considerable degree of warmth & sweetness; but I'll just add, that I have been deeply engaged in humble petition to Almighty God, that he may vouchsafe to draw nigh with the visitation of his pure light, & in mercy cause his brightness to appear, by removing the Cloud that hangs over the Tabernacle; & so far favour those who have no might of their own, as to guard them by his own Arm by Day & Night, gently leading those who are with young, & bearing them in his Arms. Amen.

John Woolman.

From a copy "Wrote 17th of 4 mo. 1800 at London by J. C[atchpool]" in Catchpool MSS., II, 305-10, collated with another copy in Friends House, Portfolio 31.88, and another in the Proctor commonplace Book (in possession of Mr. Spence Sanders of Farnham Common). Where there are slight verbal differences the best reading has been chosen.

Reports on Archives

The *Bulletin of the National Register of Archives* (Historical Manuscripts Commission). List of accessions to repositories, No 8 (1956) reports the following additions to the manuscript collections in various institutions which may interest workers on Quaker History: Berkshire County Record Office, Shire Hall, Reading.

Society of Friends: minutes of 4 Berkshire monthly meetings, 1668-1755; accounts, 2 Berkshire monthly meetings and Warborough (Oxon) meeting, 18th-19th cent.; transcripts of birth, marriage and burial registers, Berks. and Oxon quarterly meeting 1612-1837.

Other deposits include the diary of Edward Belson, Quaker and distiller, 1707-22.

Cornwall County Record Office, "Gwendroc", Barrack Lane, Truro.

Society of Friends: quarterly and monthly meetings: minute books, suffering books, registers, record book of muniments, 1655-1904.

Glamorgan County Record Office, County Hall, Cardiff.

Society of Friends: monthly meeting minutes, etc., South Wales and Monmouthshire, 1660-1947 (45 vols.).

Kent Archives Office, County Hall, Maidstone.

Society of Friends: minutes, etc., of quarterly and monthly meetings for Kent, 1648-1943.

Lancashire County Record Office, County Hall, Preston.

Society of Friends: records of Marsden monthly meeting (covering most of East Lancashire), 1653-1938.

Leicester Museums and Art Gallery, New Walk, Leicester.

Society of Friends, further minute books, etc., 19th cent.