

THE TRAGEDY OF HETTY WESLEY

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THE recent addition of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's famous novel *Hetty Wesley* to the Everyman series will serve probably to focus more attention on this tragic figure of the eighteenth century, and her life so full of genius and of sorrow. In a sense the root of her tragedy lay in the fact that she was born a woman child, out of due season. Although the eighth child of the Rev. Samuel and Susannah Wesley, she was the first of the family to be born in Epworth Rectory, that home where her somewhat choleric father had to face so many difficulties financial and parochial. It is freely admitted by most competent critics that in personality, grace and mental accomplishments Hetty surpassed all the rest of that remarkable family, not excepting her illustrious brothers. Her father was evidently proud enough of his daughter's maturing powers in the realm of scholarship, and was not slow to make use of her as his literary amanuensis. Had he only exercised the same discerning and sympathetic judgment in the matter of her social and domestic welfare, much of the tragedy of her life would probably have been averted. Even her saintly mother, one of the noblest Englishwomen who ever lived, to whose early training all her children owed so much, scarcely possessed the necessary knowledge of the world and of men, which was required to save Hetty from her two fatal misalliances. In accordance with the spirit of the age, the Wesley daughters were again and again sacrificed for the benefit of their celebrated brothers. This comes out especially strongly in the case of Hetty, who if she had lived to-day would have been acclaimed as a poet of true genius and a scholar of rank fully equal to that of her brothers.

In her childhood there were no doubt elements in the character of Hetty which were a source of real anxiety to her parents. She seemed almost out of place in that sombre rectory, and no doubt suffered much from the irksome restraint of that home. Her natural sprightliness and wit caused her to be regarded as almost dangerous at times by her parents and even by her more timid sisters. It is idle to suppose, as some of the pious biographers would have it, that the conversation of six young women in a debt-ridden home like Epworth turned chiefly on personal salvation. It is only natural to assume that their thoughts and talk turned frequently

to the one means of escape from their almost intolerable existence and the tyranny of their father. Hetty's well-known petition to her mother at this crisis in their lives would seem to indicate the situation clearly:

Dear mother, you were once in the ew'n (oven),
 As by us cakes is plainly shewn,
 Who else had ne'er come arter;
 Pray speak a word in time of need,
 And with my sour-look'd father plead
 For your distressed daughter.

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch succinctly sums up the beauty and character of Hetty at the age of 27: "a queen in a country frock and cobbled shoes; a scholar, a lady amongst hinds; above all, a woman made for love, and growing towards love surely, though repressed and thwarted."

Two notable events had occurred in Hetty's childhood at the rectory, each of which no doubt left a lasting impression on her. The first was the fire which occurred in 1709 when she was twelve years of age, a fire which came very near to putting an end to her life. She had a miraculous escape. A few years later there followed the mystery of the Epworth "noises." The story of these spirit rappings has been fully recorded in a narrative drawn up by John Wesley in 1720. Soon after the cessation of these noises Hetty came of age, and with her so-called freedom her troubles began. It was not surprising that, in her complete ignorance of men and the world, she should fall in love with the first handsome suitor who came after her, who with all his undoubted faults was a clever professional man of good family. The whole root of the trouble which followed lay in the nature of her unbending father's opposition to this match with a "rascally attorney". Where gentle reasoning and persuasion on his part might have made it clear to Hetty that there was much good sense in the matter on his side, his attitude of unreasoning tyranny over a daughter, who in this matter of marriage was a mere chattel in his eyes, naturally aroused the fierce opposition of Hetty and her lover. I have sometimes thought that, as regards her father, poor Hetty's very genius was the cause of her undoing. In that wonderful play now running, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, we have the picture of a father whose jealous tyranny over a daughter of genius amounted to such a mania that he was willing to see her droop and die before his eyes, rather than allow her to seek freedom and happiness away from him. There was no doubt a parallel strain of tyrannical jealousy over his gifted daughter in the case of Rev. Samuel Wesley. The 18th and 19th centuries furnish numerous examples of parallel

cases. Although the history of this incident in Hetty's life is necessarily in part a matter of surmise, it would seem, briefly, that the resentment of the lovers reached a point of indiscretion. The rector's fury was uncontrolled, and he threatened his beautiful daughter with expulsion from the house. To their credit be it said that her brothers took a far more charitable view of any lapse on Hetty's part. It was just at this time that John came down to Epworth and preached a notable sermon on charity and forgiveness, which only served to fan the flame of the rector's wrath. Her gentle mother also intervened on her behalf, but poor Hetty in her remorse, which was very real, and her sorrow at bringing such discord into the family, made in her father's hearing a rash vow to accept the first man who should offer for her hand. Incredible as it may seem, her father allowed her to go forward in this scheme, and actually pushed her over the brink into an alliance with one Wright, a journeyman plumber, rough and boorish, utterly unsuited to her in mind, education and manners. Before it was too late, Hetty sought to withdraw from her rash vow, and her mother interceded for her powerfully, entreating her husband not to ruin their child in soul probably as well as body, but the rector was inexorable. The marriage was actually carried through in 1725, and she whose hand would have been an honour to the first gentleman in the land was mated to a rustic boor, who was soon to add drunkenness and personal cruelty to his utter unsuitability. There is nothing more pathetic than the manner in which Hetty, in the early days of her marriage, sought to win some regard from her wretched husband, even writing him an address in verse. "Perhaps", says the biographer caustically, "no other journeyman plumber was ever so complimented in elegant rhyme."

If gentle speech can ever move
The cold remains of former love,
Turn thee at last, my bosom ease,
Or tell me why I cease to please.

The few years that followed were the saddest even in Hetty's sad life, for to the ill treatment of her husband there was added the tragedy of the loss at birth or in infancy of child after child. To a nature such as Hetty's the outpouring of her heart in mother love would have been healing balm indeed, but even this balm was to be denied her, and no doubt these losses confirmed her in the sad conviction that she was under the Divine displeasure. It is interesting to read that, under these heavy sorrows that fell to her, her father's anger towards her relented somewhat. A letter written by Hetty to her father on July 3rd, 1729, throws much interesting light on the situation. Although the letter is full of

dutiful respect, it contains none the less, unconsciously perhaps, a stern indictment of her father's wrong attitude towards her marriage. "I had not always", she writes, "such notions of wedlock as now, but thought that where there was a mutual affection and desire of pleasing, something near an equality of mind and person, either earthly or heavenly wisdom, and anything to keep love warm between a young couple, there was a possibility of happiness in a married state; but *where all, or most of these were wanting, I ever thought people could not marry without sinning against God and themselves*". Her own views on matrimony were sound and clear enough, but the words in italics must have given the rector furiously to think.

After the birth and death of her third child Hetty was moved to write "A Mother's Address to her Dying Infant," one of the most poignant short poems ever written, with its tragic mother cry

That whene'er the fatal cloud
Must thy radiant temples shroud,
When deadly damps impending now
Shall hover round thy destined brow,
Diffusive may their influence be
And with the blossom blast the tree!

It was during these sad years that Hetty sought consolation in the Muse and wrote the bulk of her poetry, including another well-known poem "Written when in deep anguish of spirit."

Her poetry began at this time to attract wider attention. In *The Gentleman's Magazine* for 1736 there is a long poem written in her honour by one Sylvius, who praises her beauty and her poetry, and exhorts her to publish her poems for a wider public:

No longer let thy muse the press decline;
Publish her lays, and prove her race divine.

In this poem Hetty was addressed as "Granvilla". In spite of this appeal, however, she could never be prevailed on to collect her poems and give them to the public. They are scattered about in various collections and old magazines. Some of her best productions were happily preserved by her brother John. During this time she also found some comfort in ministering to her uncle Matthew, to whom she was devotedly attached, in his last illness.

The next outstanding event in Hetty's life, an event which marks the last turning point in her earthly career, was the death of her saintly mother in 1742. There can be few finer chapters in all fiction than that in which Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch has described this event fraught with such great significance to the Wesley family. This beautiful description, so true in spirit, of the passing of the

mother of Wesleyanism, must be very precious to all her descendants and followers. All the members of the family were present, save Charles, but it was his famous hymn *Jesu, Lover of my soul* which they sang, and then *Hark! a voice divides the sky*. The concluding passage describes so vividly and accurately the crisis which the event produced in Hetty's life that I quote it here:

And then suddenly, certainly, in their rapture she saw the purpose and end of all their common sufferings, want, hunger, years of pinching and striving . . . her own sorrowful fate and her sisters' only less sorrowful—all caught up in the hand of God and blazing as a two-edged sword of flame. Across the blaze, though he was far away, she saw the confident eyes of Charles smiling as at a prophecy fulfilled. But the hand outstretched for the sword was John's, claiming it by right indefeasible. She too had a right indefeasible; and before the sword descended to cleave the walls of this humble death chamber, and stretch over England, her heart cried and claimed to be pierced with it. "Let it pierce me and cut deep, for my tears too have tempered it."

During the last few years of her life, between the earnest struggles of John for her soul, and the gentler ministrations of Charles, who loved and understood his sister better than any other, her poor stricken spirit found rest and peace at the last. Many doubts, fears and sorrows still assailed her from time to time, and her health was irreparably broken, but in 1745 she writes to Charles: "Yet thought I am yet in desertion, and the enemy is very busy, I enjoy so great a measure of quietness and thankfulness as is really above nature." Under the tender spiritual care of Charles the "bruised reed" was not "crushed", nor the "smoking flax" quenched. It is Charles's Journal which brings the brief and tragic record to a close.

March 14, 1750. "I found my sister Wright, very near the haven; a bruised reed which the Lord will not break."

Her beautiful and gentle spirit found eternal rest on March 27th. Charles preached a funeral sermon on the text "For the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended." All present were deeply moved. In her darkest days she had written an epitaph for herself which concluded:

The painful mortal conflict's o'er;
A broken heart can bleed no more.

Such was Hetty, and to-day when women have such free and unhampered opportunities to develop their powers and work out their own salvation, we do well to keep her memory fragrant, and to let fall "the meed of some melodious tear" on her unknown grave.