

# AN ALTAR IN THE FIELDS

By LAWRENCE P. SPINGARN

ON each First Day Evelyn Grantham walked to the Friend's meetinghouse from "Uplands," her father's farm, through columned oak and beech woods to the main road, where the children of the community travelled to the same meeting in bright groups. Her calm and classic face was dowered with wise, merry eyes. The children, recognizing her tweed cloak and severe felt hat, waited for her in expectation of the smiles and caresses that she bestowed on all of them without favor, before they moved ahead to join their parents in worship. For the time she was with them, she was a child herself. She could have married long ago—Evelyn Grantham, spinster of thirty-three, still beautiful, still courted, reputed wealthy but poor in worldly show. Tall, with much color in her cheeks and a touch of grey already in her brown hair, she moved with simple dignity toward her goal. When he was well, Nicholas Grantham would come with his daughter, but he was eighty now, the road long, the return hard and steep. It was enough that Evelyn came. Seeing her there, observing her still and steady face that worship in the old silent way had strengthened, the other Friends knew that now the meeting could begin.

Although the white rock had always been part of her consciousness, this crucial summer was burning up in piled leaves before Evelyn rose in meeting and spoke of it. Who could foresee that it would mean so much to her, this giant block of quartz left by the glacier in her father's lowest pasture, next to the woods, where the road dipped and rose again through the silence of brambly fields? Few of the congregation knew about the white rock; those who recalled her description never thought of the outcome. On the Facing Bench, where the elect of years or vision confronted the meeting, tired spirits were drowsing in the heat of Indian Summer, the drone of flies. It was Henry Potter, the only geologist in the community, who waited after meeting through the hand-claspings and farewells until Evelyn came toward him with a smile of recognition.

"Cousin Grantham? I was thinking of what thee said. Strange that such a rock could lie in the fields for years, and not be noticed. . . ."

Of course, they were not related, Henry Potter and Evelyn Grantham; his was the old, fast-vanishing form of address that

bound all Quakers in a family of the spirit. Evelyn blinked, and looked at him more closely.

"Thank thee, Henry. Few would notice it now. Why, the road is quite grown over. I am the only one who uses it."

"If thee doesn't mind," Henry said, "I'd like to see this great rock. If thee doesn't mind—"

Evelyn had not thought to secure an escort home, yet she had liked Henry from their childhood days, and still found him handsome, despite the baldness that threatened his thin blond hair. He was Evelyn's age, had lived West as a mining engineer, and had just returned to visit his parents. He was always a plain liver, quiet in his manner; Evelyn took his arm with only a trace of forbidden coquetry. Passing through the woods, he was a slight, drab figure at her side and when they came to the white rock, he had not broken his silence. Evelyn withdrew her arm, studied Henry as he began to observe the rock. His pale eyes glowed with a pride of knowledge that was alien to his upbringing. He knew the properties of quartz, the history of rocks, but this rock, Evelyn guessed, was a little beyond him.

"A great crystal," he said, moving to the shadow side through the uncut grass. "Almost a pure block of quartz. Why did it stop here, and not move on?"

Evelyn shrugged and looked away. Her mind was not engaged to explain the rock, yet her spirit wondered at it, and she felt that she must bring others to wonder also.

"If it hadn't stopped," she said suddenly, "why it might have crushed the meetinghouse."

Henry frowned and put his head on one side.

"That's an odd thing to say. 'Crushed the meetinghouse'? The rock was here years before we were."

"Yes, Cousin Potter. And will be years after we're gone."

Evelyn did not want to dismiss him now. Although she had ceased to think of marriage, she still entertained admirers, and Henry, in his shy way, was one of them. He talked enough then to fill a small book. He even claimed to see the markings in the ground, the "spoor" of the glacier, as he called it. And when he was through rhapsodizing, she led the steep way up to her father's house, where tea was ready and the old man impatient for her return. The sun was westering, the parlor fire seemed appropriate. There were sandwiches, a spice cake Evelyn had baked the day before; Henry ate with a will, but

afterwards, he wiped his small mouth deliberately and looked hard at Evelyn.

"What did thee mean?" he began. "Crush the meeting-house? Why, that's an alien thought. I wouldn't connect it with thee."

"Ah, Cousin Potter! Thee'll soon see what I mean. The world's a corrupt place, and this meeting too."

It was Nicholas Grantham who snorted, and threw light on what Evelyn had said.

"We're to have a new leader," he explained. "A pastor like other men."

"Thee means, our ways are changing?" Henry asked.

"Our ways are changed *for us*," Evelyn said. "When some are weak, all must suffer."

As he took leave of them that evening, Henry did not ask to call again. There was a shadow at his eyes, and Evelyn observed the set look of his mouth; he had seen the white rock, and what more could hold him here? But when he had gone down the road, she left the dishes and went for the vanity of a mirror in her own room, where one glance assured her that the dark, glowing symmetry of her face had taken on new meaning.

When First Day came again, Nicholas was ready for worship. Evelyn dressed carefully in a frogged suit and a brown, narrow-brimmed straw hat. She did not carry her stick, an oddity at her age, but supported her father's arm until they reached the main road. Children were there, yet Evelyn did not sing out their names, or praise their ruddy cheeks, or pretend to chase them; she was sober as a fence now. Coming into the pool of people before the meetinghouse, she passed Henry Potter with a mere nod; there was change afoot, and she knew the way to trouble.

When the meeting convened, the rustling of garments, the stir of expectancy continued. Looking at the Facing Bench, Evelyn was not the first to notice the new Mr. Felton there, but her reaction was instantaneous. The "leader" had already stood upon his feet when she was up like mercury, her back board-straight, her hands folded. For a moment it was a question who would speak first. Evelyn began to sway gently, yet no words came. When she did speak at last, her tone was lilt- ing and strained and vibrant.

"This is an old sanctuary. We are tired with listening, watching for the light. It is easier to sleep, to sit still. Ah, let the ambitious lead us, the forceful show the way. Come

out of quietness into clamor, out of darkness into paths of fire. But I do not know this new resolve. I was nourished in the old manner. And now, I turn my back on thee, on such leadership."

When she sat down, the silence flew like great birds to all the windows. Then a man coughed, a child whispered to its mother. It was time for the new person, the "leader," to talk about his qualifications, his schemes, the march of progress. Mr. Felton was no longer a young man, yet he belonged to the new order of the Society of Friends. A widower, he had come East from a pastorate in Indiana, where the silent meeting for worship had given way to the preacher's "discipline," to sermons, and to hymns like those sung in other churches. He believed in the need for leadership, distrusted the voice of the spirit, had the support of certain influential and wealthy Quakers in this very community. He had begun as a "visitor," been given a bench at the front of the meeting, and now sat on the Facing Bench, where only the oldest or most spiritual Friends were allowed to sit after years of testimony delivered from the floor. Although he spoke well, and to the mark, and with deep feeling, the hearts of most worshippers were shut against him. He cleared his throat, looked about, and finally stared accusingly at Evelyn Grantham before sitting down, but her eyes were closed peacefully and the wind of disfavor passed above her. The silence lasted to the end of that meeting.

Outside, in the cooling air, Evelyn stood with Henry Potter and her father. She could not share their talk of weather and crops and money. She was watching the children as they collected into groups for the walk homeward; there seemed to be a distance between parent and child she had never noticed, a quarrel of the generations, and Evelyn was on the winning side.

"Look!" she cried, turning to Henry but pointing beyond him. "Look how bright they are, how receptive! They do not live for words alone, but in deeds. They should worship their own way, not with us."

"Evelyn," her father said, "let's be getting home. . . ."

"Ah, wait! Wait for them, Father. They shall lead us the right path home, if only we are patient."

Henry looked quizzically at the older man, made his excuses, disappeared in the crowd. When Evelyn took her father's arm, it was trembling badly, but she did not remark on this as they began the long climb to their house. They came to the white rock. She turned off the road to circle it slowly, her

hands clasped, her eyes alight. Nicholas Grantham followed her, pushing back his hat in perplexity, frowning.

"What ails thee, girl? First, at meeting, thee spoke against Mr. Pelton before he could be heard. And now, thee runs and gapes like a ninny at this, this—"

"This altar," she said with quiet force. "Tonight I have found its name."

In the trough of the week her life went on as usual. There were the sick to be visited, a bride to be advised, a widow comforted. She had hands to any task, and an easy-opening purse, but it was not the dead or dying that she favored most. Wherever she went, the children echoed her quickness, her laughter, the unshadowed diurnal side of her nature. And one morning she knocked at the door of James Felton's house.

The little girl who answered Evelyn had a peaked face and large brown eyes. Would the lady step inside and wait? She'd see if Papa would come down, and she smiled out of a great deep of sadness before she left the room.

"Ah, yes. Of course! Miss Grantham. I thought thee'd come to see us."

Evelyn kept her seat as he entered, and studied Felton through puzzled eyes. His pomposity struggled with his better nature; for a moment, the outcome was doubtful, but she was sure of herself. She had heard the 'us'—was there a faction, then?

"Mr. Felton! I've not come to visit idly, in any formal sense. Thee intends a change. I want to know what it is."

"Right, Miss Grantham. Perfectly proper." He did not seem in need of credentials as he approached his desk, but when he sat down and spread his arms, she saw that he must lecture her.

"Thee was right last meeting," he said. "This is one of our older communities, a place we are all proud of. And I was not paid to interfere with firm believers."

"Paid!" Evelyn formed the word carefully, rolling it on her tongue, tasting its gall.

"Yes. Why not?" Felton got up quickly, took a turn around the room. "There are ways of meeting the spirit, slow ways and other ways. For a month or two I shall observe what is said, what happens. Then I shall lead the majority to a quicker realization."

This man was entrenched already; Evelyn sat back and lifted her chin higher.

"Thee counts on my support?" she asked.

"No. The others gave me theirs. The trend is away from thy—individualism."

"I have friends on my side."

"Name them," Felton said coldly.

Evelyn leaned forward again, but closed her eyes—and the stout, florid Felton became meagre and pale in her view.

"There was a time we met in the woods, in barns, in city streets. A time of peril and hurt. Will thee forget?"

"History is a strange study," he answered. "The more one reads it, the less one believes in the naked soul. Men move in herds, Miss Grantham. Let's remember that."

"Thee has words only, Mr. Felton. The soul acts for itself."

When he pursed his lips and took up a book, she knew that the interview was over, but, for a moment, she looked about his study and concluded that he could fill a need for some people. His was a tidy room, with rugs, a plaster bust, and flowers. The books had taught him all he required to know; he kept them in treasured order. Now she did not say goodbye, but went out quietly, head lowered. In the hall she met the little girl, dressed for the weather. Evelyn took her hand, led her outside trying to make her smile again, but this atmosphere of power was a wave that had dampened the child's spirits.

"What's thy name? Is it hard to say? Is it long, like mine? Come dear, don't frown so much!"

They went a little ways from the house, where Evelyn lifted the child into the fork of a tree to view the rounded hills and the looted orchards struggling up their sides. It was a pretty day, but sad for both of them; the woman's eyes returned frequently to the child's face, in need of its innocence.

"Daddy preaches very well. And is handsome—oh, so handsome! Yes, and his little girl is there to see him: isn't she?"

Something was wrong. The child did not smile at these words, and Evelyn wondered if the father's garment of authority had smothered her young strength already. She lifted her down from the tree and knelt before her, looking into her eyes.

"But I can preach too. I am 'gifted', as we say. Would thee like to hear me?"

When the child answered plaintively, but affirmatively, Evelyn described the white shaft, the glacier's monument.

"Thee comes by this road to meeting, doesn't thee? Well,

I shall wait for thee by the spring, and thee may come with me to worship."

On next First Day Evelyn urged her father to be ready early. When they reached the meetinghouse, no one else was there, and Evelyn, using an old prerogative, opened the door with her own key. She stood in the swift light a few moments, beside the feeble old man who was already seated; her tapered hands were on the bench in front of them; her lips moved, yet she did not speak right away.

"Father," she said at last. "I must leave thee here. I am going back to the road. I cannot pray here anymore."

Nicholas Grantham nodded and bent his head in acceptance. He had raised her in the old way, but could not oppose her wish to keep it. A few minutes later, standing in the shadows of the giant oak by the spring where the road turned, Evelyn waited for the sound of laughter, for the bright faces that would respond to her alone. It was no miracle that Tansy Felton was the first to appear, for Tansy was the only child from whom she had extracted a promise. In a black tam and a green coat too long for her, Tansy seemed to Evelyn as lost and tired as the congregation toward which she was going, but she was not lost; when Evelyn took her hand and reminded her of the white rock, Tansy bit her lip, glanced behind at two other children approaching them.

"And thee too," Evelyn said to the brother and sister joining hands as they ran forward on recognizing her. "Today I am going to preach. Today I'll be the leader. Would thee like to see the great rock, the altar I've chosen? Then follow me."

But the world is an uneasy place; when the brother and sister, holding hands more tightly, looked in their turn at Widow Davies' three mites who had just rounded the corner, Evelyn knew that her preaching must begin at once.

"Come!" she said to all six children. "It's fun to see a rock that is of God's body in the world, to speak to it and have no answer but an echo, to climb on it and see what happened when the earth was cold. Children! Come along now. Come along with me."

She held Tansy's gaze, but drew herself to full height and kept smiling in her serenity. When Tansy smiled and nodded, she took the child's hand and led the way toward the white rock. The other children followed them.

When the meeting indoors broke up, the parents of the

missing children singled out Nicholas Grantham for questioning. They had seen him sitting alone, and they felt Evelyn's absence more than her presence at any other time. It was Henry Potter who quieted them and drew the old man aside.

"I know where she may be," he said. "Don't be angry if I show thee."

Henry waited until Mr. Felton locked the doors. When the 'leader' came down the meetinghouse steps, he paused beside the old man and looked at Henry helplessly.

"This is very strange, friends. A few children absent, and immediately the parents ask where Miss Grantham is keeping herself."

Nicholas Grantham traded on his age as he shook his head and spread his gnarled hands in a sign of ignorance. Felton went off at last, and Henry took Mr. Grantham by the elbow.

"It's on the way home," he said. "No need to hurry. No need to be alarmed."

Nicholas was first to see the altar and the children sitting in a circle around it. When he noticed his daughter leaning against the rock with closed eyes and working features, he gasped and clutched Henry's arm.

"Look! They hardly move. She's spelled them, for sure! Why, in meeting the children are always restless. They whisper, even."

"This isn't meeting," Henry said. "This is idolatry."

"Idolatry!"

"In Felton's eyes," Henry explained. "Shall we tell him now?"

"No!" the old man said stoutly. "He'll find out for himself."

When Evelyn reached home, tea and Henry Potter were there to comfort her. Her eyes were full of a dark fire as she sat down, took off her wraps, and began pouring.

"They came with me of their own free will," she said. "They sat for a full hour without speaking. And then one of them was moved to praise. A little girl said what I already knew, that the rock was an altar, that she would come there again."

"Thee's caught 'em young," her father remarked. "What will be the result?"

"Trouble," Henry predicted. "The meeting will be angry now. Some may even speak against Evelyn."



"But, she smiled at me!" Evelyn said. "The little girl smiled."

"Who was that?" Henry inquired.

"Tansy Felton," said Evelyn.

A week later the meeting had visibly diminished. Nicholas Grantham stayed away; even some faithfuls were missing from the Facing Bench; nobody was moved to speak, and Mr. Felton concluded worship early. As Felton started through the woods, Henry Potter followed just out of sight, but caught up with him when he emerged at the edge of the field and stood staring at the white rock.

"Does it amaze thee, Cousin Felton?" Henry asked, standing at the leader's side in the long grass. "Thy child here, and waiting patiently like the others. . . Does thee think to win them back?"

Felton sighed, closed his eyes, and turned up his face to the fading sun.

"They may come back, but the damage is done. The lady has worked me harm here."

"Wait," Henry counselled him. "Wait, and hear what she tells thee."

The children had a signal among themselves; when they began to stir, Tansy got up and ran to her father's side. The other children went homeward through the woods, and Evelyn approached the men. Her eyes were strange again. She shaded them as if against the light, looking at Henry, then at Felton, but without either triumph or apprehension.

"Thee has a gift," Felton told her. "I could not make angels behave better."

"They're not angels," Evelyn said.

"Come back to us again," Henry pleaded. "Thee has turned against us."

"Yes, Cousin," Felton said. "Come back. Thee can sit on the Facing Bench next time."

Evelyn bowed her head in acknowledgement of the offer, but soon she was watching the child, who stood mute and shy in her father's shadow. When Evelyn spread her arms, Tansy ran to her and jumped to kiss her face. Felton, seeing this, closed his eyes.

"Perhaps I was hasty," he told Evelyn. "I tried to bring a new discipline to this meeting. My own ideas, of course, but I was sure they would work. . . ."

"Tansy," Evelyn said quietly. "Go to your father now. Take *his* hand this time."

Felton too was watching his child, wincing at the indecision he read in her face. He kept his back very straight, but his hands were trembling. He could have reached down to claim her, and disguise this force with a show of affection, but there was Henry, and Evelyn's clear eyes to deter him. When Tansy looked at Evelyn again, she was smiling. She turned quickly, took her father's hand, and hid her face in his coat.

"There!" Evelyn said. "Thee has Tansy again."

"Goodnight, Cousin," Henry Potter said.

Evelyn answered both men with a smile, and moved up the road to her own house. Felton watched until she disappeared, then rounded on Henry with a grimace of distaste.

"What is thee thinking?" Henry asked.

"Strange thoughts," Felton said, reaching again for the child's hand. "In those old days she loves, men would have burned her for a witch."

And now they looked down at Tansy in alarm, for she had broken away from her father and was sobbing loudly.

During that week Henry called at Evelyn's several times, but she was always out; he found himself making excuses to her father. When First Day arrived, the wind was frosty and the sky ribbed with thin clouds. The old people arrived first at the meetinghouse, in cars and a few stubborn traps. Felton drove up alone, wearing a new suit, and took his place on the Facing Bench. Only Henry Potter, his thin hair wind-tossed and a worried look on his pale face, waited on the road a hundred yards off. People who had known him all his life passed him with greetings, and winked at each other because he failed to answer. Finally, his patience was rewarded: the groups of children came up the road, their faces expectant, their gestures care-free. When Henry heard twigs snap in the woods, he turned slowly and peered among the trees. There was Nicholas Grantham, and there, supporting his arm, was Evelyn in her gray cape and felt hat. She smiled at Henry as she came into the road, but when the children approached her, his shoulders stiffened in apprehension.

"Hurry! Hurry now!" she called to them softly. "We're all late as it is. And the berries are picked off."

As Evelyn shepherded the children through the waiting door, Henry took a seat where he could see the entire room.

The people quieted at once. The children slipped into the

vacant seats beside their parents. And suddenly a hundred pair of eyes shifted to the Facing Bench, where James Felton sat with his hands across his eyes. For a breathless interval he seemed to notice nothing; at last, his shoulders began to shake and finally, he glanced up and out over the hushed room. Nobody looked at Evelyn then. She remained by the closed door quite alone, her eyes lowered, her hands clasped in front of her. She was not powerful here, but when Felton rose and stepped down and crossed the floor, taking a seat on the front bench beside Tansy, the meeting began to breathe. It was Evelyn's turn to decide, yet she did not go to the Facing Bench. She did not choose the seat of power. She was smiling as she entered the back row of floor benches and found a place between her father and Henry Potter. Her father smiled, Henry reached out to claim her hand. And the silence grew into worship, in the old manner she was used to.

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