

FENNY DRAYTON – THE FIRST QUAKER

By Alfred Lester Scrivener (1845-1886).



GEORGE FOX (1624-1691)

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Transcribed by Heather Lee*

“Sitting in his stall, working on tanned bides, amid pincers, paste-horns, rosin, swine-bristles, and a nameless flood of rubbish, this youth had nevertheless a living spirit belonging to him; also an antique inspired volume, through which, as through a window, it could look upwards and discern its celestial Home.” – Carlyle.

Crossing the Watling Street Road and turning by the Royal Red Gate into a quiet lane with a broad margin of green on either hand, between high straggling hedgerows, where clusters of blackberries deepen into purple, and a profusion of wild flowers coyly open white or pink or blue eyes under the shadow of green bushes, I bend my steps towards Fenny Drayton, or as it was sometimes called, Drayton-in-the-clay. A few sunny days have brought us to the fullness of the harvest, and on either hand I see the reapers toiling in the fields, and slow wains freighted with golden grain, and the glemers picking up the scattered ears that have fallen from the gathered sheaves. Far away on either side, flocks and herds are grazing the rich pasture of the Leicestershire meadows, among which the cornfields stand, golden isles in a sea of emerald. A few

thatched cottages, old and warped and weather-stained, under whose squared eaves the swallows have built their nests, and whose thick leaded lattices hardly light up the brown depths of the low and heavy raftered rooms; gardens decked with many an old fashioned garish flower and over-shadowed by the russet laden boughs of ancient apple trees; a blacksmith's shop; a pleasant white parsonage; a grey gothic church with low spire, quaint Norman doorway, and tasteful modern porch, and girdled by a sombre belt of venerable yews that stretch their dark arms above the green mounds of the dead – such is Drayton village, the birthplace of George Fox the first Quaker.

It was in July 1624, the last year of the reign of James I., that gossips in Drayton village told how a son was born to Christopher Fox the weaver, “Righteous Christer” as they called him. It was “Righteous Christer” who wove into fine sheets or substantial home-spun, the wool or the flax that was being spun with spindle and distaff in the kitchen of every farm house, and at the door of every cottage from year's end to year's end, so that he was known to every housewife in the country side. “Righteous Christer” was an honest, sober man “with a seed of God in him,” seeing or thinking he saw somewhat further into the mystery of Godliness than his spiritual pastor, but yet content to worship in his own parish church. His wife – “of the family of Lago and of the stock of the martyrs,” was an upright woman, accomplished above most of their degree in the place where she lived, though in a rude country village the standard would be sufficiently low. Not only in the household of “Righteous Christer” but in almost every English home, men were in those days questioning and studying their own hearts, and the Inspired Word, with a passionate intense earnestness never seen before or since; and the boy who was born on that July day in the weaver's cottage at Drayton, heard his parents and their friends, in their daily and hourly speech, canvassing the awful problems of life and death and eternity. In such an atmosphere the boy George Fox, shewed a gravity and staidness of mind and spirit not usual in children. “When I came to eleven years of age” he writes in his journal, “I knew pureness and righteousness; for while a child I was taught how to walk and be kept pure. The Lord taught me to be faithful in all things and to act faithfully in two ways, namely, inwardly to God and outwardly to man, and to keep to yea and nay in all things.” “Righteous Christer” and his wife, as they saw the deep, earnest, devout spirit of the lad, had some thought of training him for the ministry, but other counsels prevailing, George was apprenticed to the village shoemaker, who was also a grazier having a right perhaps to run his flocks in the wide unenclosed fields which then surrounded the village. As young George sat stitching in his stall, the spirit of questioning which possessed all England laid hold on him also, and vexed his soul – but alas for the poor cobbler's lad, none of the ways in which men had solved the Eternal Mystery, none of their church politics or forms of faith, could satisfy the hunger of his spirit. The peace he could not find in his stall he sought in the fields. He loved rather the task of shepherding his master's flocks, for in the solitude of the wide common, he could wrestle with God, with none near but the timid sheep to witness the travail of his soul, but yet he found not the peace he sought. Could it be that the petty cares of every-day life, the cobbling of shoes, the tendance of sheep, and the talk of his fellows whose souls were of the earth earthy, caused the doubts and fears and questioning that tormented him? He would flee from them though he left also the household loves that were so dear to his heart. He turned his handicraft to an unwonted used. He stitched for himself a long enduring suit of leather, and fled from his home “leaving his relations and breaking off all familiarity with old or young.” He was then (1643) nineteen years of age. We hear of him at Lutterworth, at Northampton, at Barnet, “often wandering solitary in the chace to wait upon the

Lord.” Then he went to London to write his journal, “I was under great misery and trouble there, for I looked upon the great professors of the city and I saw all was dark and under the shadow of darkness.” There had been grief and trouble in the weaver’s cottage at Drayton for the fugitive whom all “loved for his innocence and honesty”; someone found out George and told him of this, and the strong cords of filial love drew him home again – why not? – he was no nearer to God in London though the great Assembly of Divines was then in full session at Westminster. Home again at Drayton, the well-meaning village worthies proposed their own remedies for the craze which seemed to possess him. One would have had him marry, but George answered not unwisely “I am yet a lad, I must get wisdom.” Another would have had him join the army of the Parliament, but his warfare was not with flesh and blood but with the Prince of Darkness. The parish priest, Nathaniel Stephens by name, came to see him and George went often to the parsonage, where they talked over high and abstruse points of the doctrine, the priest commending the depth and wisdom of his answers and speaking of him to others. But George writes “what I said in discourse to him on the week-days, he would preach on the first days, for which I did not like him.” The parson seemed to be seeking rather for matter to enrich his own discourses, than to minister to a soul that was perishing of spiritual hunger. It is pitiable to read how the poor sick soul at this time sought physician after physician and found no help. The following are extracts from his journal : -

“After this I went to another ancient priest at Mancetter, in Warwickshire, and reasoned with him about the ground of despair and temptations ; but he was ignorant of my condition ; he bade me take tobacco and sing psalms. Tobacco was a thing I did not love, and psalms I was not in a state to sing ; I could not sing.

Then I heard of a priest living about Tamworth who was accounted an experienced man, I went seven miles to him ; but I found him only like an empty hollow cask.

I heard also of one called Dr. Cradock, of Coventry, I went to him. I asked him the ground of temptation of despair, and how troubles came to be wrought in man? ... Now as we were walking together in his garden, the alley being narrow I chanced in turning to set my foot on the side of a bed, at which the man was in a rage as if his house had been on fire. Thus all our discourse was lost. I went away in sorrow worse than I was when I came.”

After this I went to another one Macham, a priest in high account. He would needs give me some physic, and I was then to be let blood; but they could not get one drop of blood from me either in arms or head (though they endeavoured to do so) my body being as it were dried up with sorrows, grief and trouble, which were so great upon me that I could have wished I had never been born, or that I had been born blind that I might never have seen wickedness and vanity, and deaf that I might never have heard vain and wicked words on the Lord’s name blasphemed.

After these experiences one is hardly surprised to find a later entry, “as I was walking in a field on a first day morning that the Lord opened unto me “that being bred at Oxford or Cambridge was not enough to fit and qualify men to be ministers of Christ.” In 1647 he is again travelling up and down as a stranger in the land. He found no more help among the “separate preachers” than among the established priesthood, and groping alone through the darkness of the world, a ray of light from heaven reached his soul; “when all my hopes in them,” he writes, “and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me nor could I tell what to do, then, Oh then, I

heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus that can speak to thy condition,' and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy I saw that there was an ocean of darkness and death; but an infinite ocean of light and love which flowed over the darkness."

In 1652, being then among the mountain solitudes of the Peak, he saw in his rapt dreams "people thick as motes in the sun that should in time be brought home to the Lord." Then began wanderings no longer that he might fly from men, but that he might seek them out and show how they might be saved. From end to end of England, through Wales and Ireland, the West Indies, and the Continent of Europe, he hardly rested from his journeyings and preachings for 40 years, save when he was cast into prison. Neither he nor the "Friends" who followed him would take any oath – to them the simple lie was as awful a sin as the formal perjury; they would not put off their hats to high or low; they addressed all individuals as Thee and Thou, not without exciting anger – "Thou me, thou my dog;" answered one, "if thou thouest me I'll thou thy teeth down thy throat"; they used but few words and were at a word in dealing; they did not bid good morrow or good evening – was not the morrow always good, and the evening good? – neither would they "bow or scrape with the leg to any one"; and once when George was hauled up before a justice, the prisoner bade his judge *tremble* at the judgments of God, the justice answered that he was no *quaker*, and George Fox and his followers were known as Quakers from that day. It is no part of my purpose to discuss the theological subtleties of their faith of which the fundamental principle said by William Penn to be "The Light of Christ within as God's gift for man's salvation." I am rather concerned in the spectacle of a human soul struggling through darkness and despair to know the will of God and to do it, neither can I trace the first Quaker though all his wanderings, when he would enter the "steeple houses" and follow or interrupt the preacher with a discourse of his own, till it became a dreadful thing when sober formal priests in quiet parishes were told "The man in Leather Breeches is come." Now and again he returns to his old home at Drayton, and holds hot and angry distributions with Nathaniel Stephens the parson. Once Stephens aware that Fox was coming, gave out at Lecture in Atherstone, that there would be a great disputation on such a day. Crowds of people from Atherstone and the country round flocked into the village where Stephens and seven other priests held a long and heated disputation with George and a few friends, under the yews trees in Drayton Churchyard. But the priests toiled in vain. The enthusiasts refused to be convinced, and the clergymen "went away in a rage to the parsonage to drink." Then seven lusty fellows seized Fox in their arms and carried him to the church porch and would have carried him in, but the door being locked, they dropped him in the porch and fell over him, thinking it goodly sport to bait this mad fellow in the leathern breeches; and when he was thus mauled, the eight parsons returned and renewed the disputation, which lasted till a "professor" for very weariness cried out "George wilt thou never have done." I copy the entry recording another visit to Drayton a year after this disputation:

"From thence I went to Drayton my native town, where so many priests and professors had formerly gathered together against me; but now not a priest or professor appeared. I asked some of my relations where all the priests and professors were. They said the priest at Nun-Eaton was dead, and eight or nine of them were seeking to get his benefice. "They all will let you alone now," said they "for they are like a company of crows, when a sheep is dead they all gather together to pull out the puddings, so do the priests for a fallen benefice."

This entry also, dated 1677, possesses a peculiar local interest: -

“Went to Nathaniel Newton’s, at Hartshill, where several friends met me with whom I had good service.”

There is also a Friends’ Meeting at Hartshill to this day.

At the entrance to Drayton village an obelisk has been erected which bears the following inscription : -

“To the memory of George Fox, the Founder of the Society of Friends, born near this spot at Fenny Drayton, A.D. 1624, and was interred in Bunhill Fields Burial Ground London A.D. 1690.”

To this I need only add another extract from *Sarter Resartus* – “This man, the first of the Quakers, and by trade a shoemaker, was one of those to whom under ruder or purer form, the Divine Idea of the Universe is pleased to manifest itself; and across all the halls of Ignorance and earthly degradation, shines through in unspeakable Awfulness, unspeakable Beauty on their souls.”