HANNAH MORE

Barn at Stapleton, Gloucestershire, February 2, 1745.
Died at Clifton, September 7, 1833.

HANNAH MORE.

MR JACOB MORE, the village schoolmaster of Lord Bottelourt's foundation-school at Stapleton, near Bristol, probably felt no little disappointment when his wife presented him with a fourth daughter on the 2nd of February 1745; but this same daughter was destined to become world-famous, and to bring countless visitors into the neighbourhood of Bristol, both during her life and after her death. At eight years old we see little Hannah the happy possessor of a long-coveted "whole quire of writing-paper," which it had not needed much coaxing for her to obtain from her observant mother. Mrs Jacob More was one of Nature's gentlewomen, and though only a farmer's daughter, she was a person of vigorous intellect, who fully appreciated the value of education, and had made the most of her own rather narrow possibilities. Bearing in mind the efforts of her later years, it is interesting to notice that Hannah More's first attempts in religious literature were letters to

imaginary people of depraved character and their replies thereto, full of contrition and promises of amendment!

Probably none of these documents are now in existence, or the reproduction of the square writing, with its quaint childish phraseology and spelling, would make us realise, as nothing else could do, what were her early tastes and principles.

The evangelical piety of Hannah More is rather remarkable, when one considers that her father was a staunch Tory and High Churchman. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that it *seems* remarkable at first sight; for it has been noticed that a Nonconformist strain is frequently productive of conspicuous piety in the families of High Church religionists. Three generations had passed since the time when Jacob More's ancestors had fought bravely as captains in Cromwell's army, and it is probable that the precocious child heard many stirring stories of their doings in the time of the Commonwealth, which intensified the personal and fiery interest with which she afterwards watched the Revolution of 1793. "Coming events cast their shadows before," and the nursery floor was often the stage whereon, in carriages made of their high-backed chairs, the child played at excursions to London, and drove with her sisters "to see Bishops and Booksellers" -- a curious combination, when one remembers the happy experiences which

she subsequently enjoyed with Porteous and Cadell.

The following quaint advertisement occurs in the Bristol newspapers of March 11, 1758:—

> "At No. 6 in Trinity St. near the College Green. On Monday after Easter will be opened a School for young Ladies, by Mary More and Sisters, where will be carefully taught French, Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, and Needlework. Young Ladies boarded on reasonable terms."

A few weeks later an additional line appears—

> "A dancing master will properly attend."

At this time Hannah More was only thirteen, so that the statements as to her having been a chief promoter of the school are altogether incorrect and absurd. Mary More, then barely twenty-one, seems to have been one of those thoroughly unselfish women of whom there are but too few; and she delighted in developing the taste for languages and literature which her more gifted younger sister very early evinced. The school prospered from the first,—and no wonder, for the mistresses were no ordinary women; and from their wise teaching scores of girls went out, strengthened in principle as well as richer in knowledge, into a world where "it was the fashion to be irreligious."

Hannah took her share in the school duties when she was old enough to do so; but at

twenty-two years of age a wealthy but elderly admirer appeared upon the scene, and her engagement, to Mr Turner of Wraxall, was doubtless a source of much satisfaction to the little circle, who in 1762 had moved to a large house in Park Street.

It is difficult now to realise the original condition of Park Street—described in the "Annals of Bristol' as "certain land 40 feet wide in Bullocks Park." This "Park" has long since disappeared; but the street still remains, and the house now known as "Hannah More Hall" is a standing memorial of those old-world days. That house was probably the scene of many lovers' meetings, and for six years the curious courtship continued; but at the last moment the gentleman decided that he did not feel equal to the responsibilties of matrimony, and, after compensating his Amaryllis for her "blighted hopes" with an annuity variously computed at £200 and £400 per annum, he died a bachelor. To the last this quaint pair entertained a "cordial respect" for each other, and by his will she found herself the possessor of a legacy of £1000. The annuity enabled her to feel independent and to devote herself to the study of literature, for which she was really far more suited than to the consideration of the "varying moods" of a middle-aged landowner. The literary world is distinctly the richer, so

that we are able honestly to rejoice at the capricious conduct of the vacillating lover.

Her first work, 'The Search after Happiness,' published in 1773, was an immediate success, and at once secured her a footing among the distinguished writers of that day. At twenty-eight the obscure schoolmaster's daughter awoke to find herself famous. It was a far cry from Bristol to London in those days. George Stephenson was still unborn, and the natural terrors of the journey were increased by the hordes of highwaymen with which the roads were infested.

In 1763 the "Flying Machine" promised to do the distance from Bristol to London in the amazingly short space of twenty-four hours; but the addition of the words "if God permit" in the advertisements leads us to believe that this unusual speed was considered a plain tempting of Providence, and the additional charge of 3s. per head beyond that of the more steady-going three-day coach points to the same conclusion.

It is a red-letter day when, in 1773, Hannah More starts on her first pilgrimage to London. Every step of the way is fraught with interest to the young traveller, whose ideal, Johnson, looms in elephantine grandeur as at the farther side of a great gulf. She has heard of him, read of him, dreamed of him, and now she is to see her hero—the scarred, uncouth scholar whose brilliant intellect

could make even his enemies admire and tremble and who has had the solitary glory of *creating* a faithful biographer. For Boswell was that and more—a friend whose fidelity through good and evil report was as touching as it was rare. His Scottish foresight may have seen bawbees in the Biography which for twenty-one years he collated with such ardent hero-worship, but the worship was not less sincere on that account. And *we have the book*—of which Carlyle, sternest of critics, says, "Out of the fifteen millions that then lived and had bed and board in the British Islands, this man [Boswell] has provided us a greater pleasure than any other individual at whose cost we now enjoy ourselves."

Starting at two o'clock in the morning, we can imagine the stir occasioned in the simple Park Street household. The young ladies "boarded on reasonable terms" are almost as much excited as the More sisters; but when the last Good-bye is said, the drowsy coach goes lumbering forward, through perils of waters and perils of robbers, as steadily as the exigencies of the way will allow, to the perils of the great city.

"There are only two bad things in this world—sin and bile," so Hannah More once declared, and this conclusion she probably arrived at during that monotonous journey, when the two evils waged a war with each other day and night, all day and again all

night, on the narrow battlefield of that Bristol coach!

Her interview with Sir Joshua Reynolds was also an event of enormous interest during this visit to London, and as she stood for the first time at the door of his house in Leicester Square she probably felt far more diffident than would many a *debutante* of to-day at Her Majesty's Drawing-room.

Under the careful training of her parents and sisters she probably was—like Charlotte Bronte—"nourrit de la Bible," and there is no fear of her having betrayed such ignorance as did one visitor to Sir Joshua's studio, who, on being told the title of one of his famous pictures, exclaimed, "But who *was* Samuel?"

In April 1775 much excitement was caused in the west of England by the announcement that John Weeks, of the Bush Inn, would run the "original Bristol Diligence or Flying Post-chaise" from Bristol to London in sixteen hours; and as the Miss Mores were very "up to date," we may feel pretty sure that this would be the "machine" chosen by them for the next visit to town—though its alarming speed was much deprecated by old-fashioned travellers, and filled them with mingled terror and diamay.

Arrived in London, she is the cynosure of all eyes; and as if to prove that Barabbas was *not* a publisher, T. Cadell of the Strand made her the