

Elizabeth Fry

S. E. LOWE

THE AUTHOR HAS divided his book into five chapters, "The making of a Quaker Minister", "The Problems of Prison Reform", "The Newgate Experiment", "A Public Figure", "The Rejected Reformer".

When one thinks of Elizabeth Fry, one pictures a quiet neatly dressed Quakeress, seated in a womens' prison cell at Newgate, reading to the prisoners; but we can also think of her as a successful reformer, bringing compassion and mercy into conditions which were often cruel and inhuman. Compassion and mercy were shown by her when she saw the moral and physical misery of the prisoners of her day. She not only wished to educate them but she was much concerned with their moral reformation. When she read the Bible to the Newgate women she did so because she believed that their characters could be radically changed by this simple method.

Born in Norwich in 1780, third daughter of an hereditary Quaker and successful merchant John Gurney, Elizabeth grew into a tall, flaxen-haired girl whose develop-

ment was not very much impeded either by formal education or by the restrictive pietism of the Society of Friends. She married Joseph Fry in 1800. Making her first visit to Newgate in 1817, she was horrified by what she saw and from then on determined to change prison conditions. As a reformer she was confronted with such problems as the increase in crime, the inadequacies of prison buildings, and the savage treatment of prisoners who were chained, flogged and punished by solitary confinement in dark cells. In an essay by her brother-in-law, Thomas Fowell Buxton, Member of Parliament, one is given a vivid picture of a man arrested for the first time, and still unconvicted. As soon as his commitment is made out, he is handcuffed to a file of perhaps a dozen similar persons, marched through the streets, followed by a crowd of insulting boys and exposed to the gaze of every passerby. Once in prison irons are hammered on him, he is cast into a compound of all that is disgusting and depraved. At night he is locked in a narrow cell, with a dozen thieves, or

vagrants, their clothes alive with vermin : he may well find himself in bodily contact with men suffering from all kinds of diseases. He may spend his days deprived of fresh air and exercise. He may be half-starved, mixing with the vilest of men, and in self-defence forced to adopt their habits, their sentiments and their language. He may become a villian by actual compulsion.

Elizabeth interested herself in Transportation. Was this the solution to the problem of overcrowding and an answer to the question of what to do with those serving long sentences ? On capital punishment her opinions never varied ; they were born of her religious outlook and confirmed by her experiences as a prison visitor. The death sentence she looked upon as lamentable.

Mrs. Fry had her home problems when she determined to take up her public work. The children

were sent to relatives and schools, her husband was left at home, and as the children grew up they rebelled against the sectarian limits of the Friends, and when the eldest daughter married a non-Quaker her mother was criticised for what was regarded as a failure in bringing up the family, and she was told to spend more time with them and less time in the public eye.

The financial failure of her husband in 1828, she regarded as inflicted by God. She wondered whether she ought to continue meeting with the Friends, whether she should give up her prison work. Her personal influence declined, she became more dependent on her brothers, lost some of her respect for her husband, had to abandon her charitable work.

You will find great interest in this book.

"Elizabeth Fry" by John Kent.
(B. T. Batsford, Ltd.) 16s. 0d.

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