

# The Reluctant Lover: John Wesley as Suitor

by Maldwyn Edwards

## John Wesley and His Mother

When Dr. Samuel Annesley was asked how many children he had, he said, "Either two dozen or two dozen and one!" That difference was vastly important because the twenty-fifth child from his two marriages was Susanna. Her father had been vicar of the famous church, St. Giles, Cripplegate, before he went out of the Church with two thousand other clergymen on St. Bartholomew's Day, 1662, because he could not offend his conscience and accept the Act of Uniformity. His family relationship with the Earl of Anglesey, his great learning, and the remarkably close relationship between Susanna and himself causes one to marvel that despite his immense influence, she decided at thirteen years of age to leave and become an Anglican. Such a girl, who could withstand a father to whom she was the favorite child and by intellectual conviction choose her own church and go her own way, was obviously destined to influence profoundly those who became her children.

Susanna could not help imbibing to some degree her father's Puritanism, and this showed itself in her plain methodical way of life and her conduct of her own large household. Those who admire Susanna as daughter, wife, and mother, are sometimes most hesitant when it comes to Susanna as educationalist. Did she not say that "in order to form the minds of children the first thing to be done is to conquer their will and bring them to an obedient temper?" Writers have spoken of her system as cruel and repressive. She taught her children from nine in the morning until noon and from two to five in the afternoon, and for the young children, in the light of modern methods, that seems too long, but here again it must be remembered that the hours were light compared to many schools of the day.

The best vindication of Susanna is that none of her ten surviving children was cowed or repressed by reason of their rectory training. On the contrary, all the seven girls grew up lively and high spirited and independent in mind. In intellectual accomplishments they far exceeded the standard reached at the private academies for young ladies.

In her dealings with her children the key question is whether her most famous child had a "mother fixation." One popular study of John Wesley carried the suggestive title, *Son to Susanna*, and

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may have attributed his failure to marry until he was forty-eight years of age to the never-fading image of the one who always had a dominant influence over him. The theory is plausible but open to many objections. Susanna had a great fondness for all three sons and knew "Jacky" as a "brand plucked from the burning" after the near escape from death in the destruction of the Rectory by fire in 1710. From that date she knew he was spared for some special reason, and her letters to him showed how ready she was to share his confidences and to offer him advice. Nevertheless, she wrote regularly to her other sons, and Samuel Junior, who for years had been a financial prop and a mainstay in her many trials, had his own very special place in her affections. It was to Samuel she went on the death of her husband.

In any case, John left home when he was eleven, went to Charterhouse, and from there to Christ Church, Oxford. Apart from occasional visits, and a period of less than two years as Curate to his father at Wroote, mother and son were never together again until she came to the London headquarters of Methodism two years before she died. No mother was less possessive and no son less demanding. When he sought his widowed mother's approval to go out to Georgia as chaplain, she cheerfully concurred. "Had I twenty sons I should rejoice they were so employed, though I should never see them more."

But it is still true that Susanna was (apart from his father), the major influence on his life, and it was never exercised so strongly as in her last few years. Her eldest son, Samuel, was shocked at the emotional excesses of the Revival, but Susanna discerned its abiding importance and with an admirable resiliency she decided to commit herself to this untried road. Once installed at the Foundery, she attended the Sunday worship and the weekday classes. Take a classic example of her readiness always to commit herself to some new activity, provided she believed the new was better than the old. A lay preacher, Thomas Maxfield, had preached at the Foundery, and this was altogether unauthorized. John came post-haste from Bristol. "Thomas Maxfield has turned preacher I find." The words were ominous, but Susanna was not to be moved from her support of the layman. "He is as surely called of God to preach as you are—hear him yourself." To his credit Wesley did so and confessed, "It is the Lord." Through her influence at a critical moment, he accepted so early the full-time and part-time use of lay preachers.

It was not his mother who kept him from marriage, but it may be argued that until her death in 1742, she was the one to whom naturally he would turn, and when she died and the thought of marriage became more urgent, he was in the midst of those turbu-

lently busy first years of the Revival. In that sense only she may unconsciously have delayed his decision until a time when middle life and his own fastidious temperament made so decisive a step far more difficult to take.

There were other inhibiting influences which played strongly on him. Despite that liveliness which caused Southey's comment, "wherever he went he made a festival for his friends" and that "change of scene and society kept him in hilarity as well as health," he was actually prevented by an inner reserve from complete identification with people either in their joys or sorrows. Perhaps the blunt statement of sister Emily that for him "natural affection is a great weakness if not a sin" had one small grain of truth. He could not freely express his emotions nor wholly understand the depth of others' sorrows.

This was not just a question of temperament but because, having wholly committed himself to God he was ready to accept any deprivation that might increase his own usefulness as God's servant. His error was in supposing that what he accepted for himself, others would also accept. In joy or sorrow, therefore, he did not trust his own immediate reactions, but sought to know God's will in it. This was scarcely calculated to make him adventurous in matters of the heart. This reluctance was strengthened further by his Oxford reading of patristic literature, and the knowledge that for Paul as for the Fathers, celibacy had great honor. The flesh must be under severest restraint. As V. H. Green has said, he was tempted to place chastity before marriage. He was in the company of those who became eunuchs for the Kingdom of God's sake.

### Sophy Hopkey

How can one talk of John Wesley's relation with any one woman without discussing his attitude to them all? All of his seven sisters were devoted to him, and Martha and himself were so united in spirit that Adam Clarke said it even extended to their appearance so that "had they been dressed alike they might have been mistaken for the other." Emily was also especially dear to him and for thirty years was closely associated with his work at the Foundery and then at West Street Chapel. All of his sisters corresponded with him in the most endearing terms.

While still in his first years at Oxford he showed in the quaint phrase of Alexander Knox that "he had a predilection for the female character." He was sensitive to the beauty and wit as well as the goodness of women. It was in this way that he was greatly attracted by Sally Kirkham, Mrs. Pendarves (later to be known as the lovely and distinguished Mrs. Delany), and her sister, Mrs. Granville. He almost proposed marriage to Mrs. Pendarves and

was only prevented by his own timidity and the social circles in which she was incessantly moving. He wrote twice to every one of hers, but when her delay in reply lengthened into three years, she excused her tardiness in vain. Wesley made a polite but final withdrawal.

Throughout his whole life this delight in a woman's company never lessened. At Epworth in 1726 he made visits to Kitty Hargreaves at Gainsborough and to Lincoln where she may have been an assistant teacher. Kitty remains a shadowy figure, but indisputably he was emotionally attracted to her. In that strange mixture of religious exercise and social diversion that John Wesley never found incongruous in his dealings with women, we find in May 1731 at Lincoln that he had prayers with Kezzy and Miss Kitty, and that later he read Law's *Serious Call* to Miss Kitty and after dining with her he passed the evening in music and cards. Later that summer he was with the two girls again and read with them a play called "The Fall of Mortimer." So it was throughout his itinerant ministry that with total ingenuousness he responded eagerly to the respect and admiration that women of all classes felt for him. One major cause of complaint that Mrs. Wesley found in her husband was his voluminous correspondence with women associated with his evangelistic work. They ranged from Sarah Ryan, with her dubious past, to Lady Maxwell of aristocratic birth and marriage, who fostered the Methodist cause in Scotland. Think of such women as Mary Bosanquet, Sarah Crosby, Ann Bolton, Hannah Ball (the pioneer of Sunday schools), Hester Ann Rogers and Elizabeth Ritchie. To them all he would sign himself as "your affectionate brother" and, less frequently, "yours affectionately," but since these were words he used for all his friends, regardless of sex, they merely show his great delight in having women as well as men as his friends.

Without doubt, however, in certain instances this response he made to women who liked and admired him was quickened into genuine love. Was this true in the case of Sophy Hopkey? There can be few friendships between a man and a woman where so much data has been provided for speculation and interpretation. On the very first day he met Sophy Hopkey, a lovely and intelligent girl of eighteen years and the niece of Thomas Causton, director of supplies and Chief Magistrate of Savannah, it was a case of lively attraction. He was charmed by her natural modesty and her readiness to learn. While they were reading or conversing she was so still that "she seemed to be in all but her attention, dead." Yet, ruminated Wesley at other times, she was all life, "active, diligent, indefatigable." The record of his friendship, set out so fully in his *Journal*, is remarkable because he hides nothing in his

sequence of events and is ready at all times to analyze his own feelings of warm regard for her.

The first favorable impression Sophy made was only deepened by their daily meetings, in which after breakfast she joined in devotions. Then between eight and nine Wesley taught her French and at nine they had prayer together. For another hour she read or wrote in French. At night he read her selections from the writings of Ephraem Syrus, Dean Young, and the sermons of a certain Mr. Reeves.

If ever a girl was thrown into a man's company, it was Sophy. There were good reasons for this readiness to offer the girl to John as a suitable wife. General Oglethorpe would doubtless then have been ready to see John Wesley settled as Rector of Savannah, with increasing ecclesiastical authority and able, through his administrative gifts, to share in the councils of the young state. Equally Thomas Causton, as Sophy's guardian, was pleased to have a gentleman and scholar in the confidence of the Trustees, the S.P.G., and Oglethorpe himself, to consolidate his own uncertain position in the life of the colony. Mrs. Causton, who was already plagued by the violent overtures of Tom Millichamp to Sophy's heart, would gladly have accepted John if only to get her niece safely and respectably married. There can be no question that Sophy realized why she was being so gladly entrusted to Wesley each day, and doubtless even though he was so much older, the compounded feelings she had of love and respect would have induced her to accept John, had he been ready to press his suit.

After the ninth day of meeting John Wesley realized sufficiently the danger in which he stood to write to brother Charles a letter in Greek in which he confessed that he stood in jeopardy every hour. When Sophy visited friends in Frederica, and John Wesley, who was to go there, went to Causton for directions, he was told, "Take her into your own hands. Do what you will with her, promise her what you will, I will make it good." He found her in a state of despondency and determined to return to England. The religious arguments he adduced left her unmoved, but when he spoke of their own friendship, she began to soften. When, in his turn he spoke of the lack of response to his labors and Oglethorpe's own lack of interest in his pastoral work, and said she was free to return to England since he would no longer devote himself to her needs as formerly, she swiftly replied she would not stir a foot. Then turning to John in great earnestness, she said, "Sir, you encouraged me in my greatest trials. Be not discouraged in your own. Fear nothing. If Mr. Oglethorpe will not, God will help you."

The acid test of the friendship was in the return journey by

boat to Savannah. Oglethorpe, still hoping that these two would marry, replied to the question, "In what boat should she go?" by the answer, "She can go in none but yours and indeed there is none so proper." John Wesley saw immediately what was in the General's mind, but he comforted himself with three somewhat specious reasons for hazarding his emotions. Firstly, he argued, it was not his choice; secondly, he still had the same desire and design to live a single life; and lastly, he was persuaded her own resolution to live single would continue. The whole story of this astonishing voyage is set out so fully and in such polished style in the *Journal* that it may well have been an earlier hurried account written up later for his mother to read.

Accompanied only by the crew of the boat, they sailed for several days along the coast and at times landed on the coast and walked together. Would any other man under similar circumstances "pray every hour with Miss Sophy" and change that diet occasionally by reading Fleury's *Manners of the Ancient Christians* or an exposition of *The Excellent Woman*? So, interspersed by landings on islands, did they at last reach shore. There had been only one flash-point. Wesley had said, "Miss Sophy, how far are you engaged to Mr. Mellichamp?" and she replied, "I have promised either to marry him or to marry none at all," whereupon in the relative safety provided by that remark, John had said, "Miss Sophy, I should think myself happy if I was to spend my life with you." But she told him that he didn't know the danger he was in and begged him to say no more on the subject. Perhaps he breathed an inner sigh of relief, and in his *Journal* he laconically adds, "we ended our conversation with a psalm." Astonishing, but true!

Once on shore the daily meetings for reading and prayer were resumed, and Wesley also gave her lessons in French. Time and again he was on the point of taking her hand when, as he knew, all would be lost. On February 26, 1737, he recorded in his *Journal*, "Her words, her eyes, her air, her every motion and gesture were full of such softness and sweetness! I know not what might have been the consequence had I then but touched her hand. And how I avoided it I know not. Surely God is over all." Once he was about "to say too much" when Mr. Causton called them both in, and so, in his words, he was "once more snatched as a brand out of the fire."

At this point John Wesley's protege, Charles Delamotte, came into the story. He was completely devoted to Wesley and could not bear a woman to come between them. Since he could not share the same house with Wesley if he married, he plainly told him

that he ought to cut off his meetings with Sophy because he was daily losing ground. Wesley agreed with him and on March 4 they cast lots and of the three alternatives, "Marry," "Think not of it this year," and "Think of it no more," it was the third that was chosen. When a final lot was cast to know whether he might even converse with her again, the answer was "only in the presence of Mr. Delamotte." With his astonishing gift of self-analysis, he confessed to his *Journal* that he knew not how to escape. "If I continued to converse with her, though not alone, I found I should love her more and more." Matters were not made easier by the fact that a Hernhütter, Johan Töltschig, whom Wesley trusted, could find no reason to prevent the marriage.

Sophy, however, had no longer a passive role to play waiting for the fastidious harassed clergyman to know his own mind. Once he told her that he would not think of marrying until he had accomplished his mission to the Indians, and had made the blow heavier by declaring that he did not feel "strong enough to bear the complicated temptations of a married state," she began to realize that this so-elusive lover was not for her. Instantly she began to cool and no longer came to his home to receive her French lessons. The end was not too long delayed. Although on one day she assured Wesley that she would never take any step without first consulting him, the very next day she became engaged to Mr. Williamson who lived in her uncle's house. Wesley was taken wholly by surprise and his diary for March 8 hid a world of astonishment, bewilderment and grief with the terse entry, "Miss Sophy engaged. Alas!" On the next day, however, the diary abounds in short exclamations—"Quite distressed! Confounded! Could not pray!" and then the entry, "Tried to pray, lost, sank." Finally the moving lines, "No such day since I first saw the sun! O deal tenderly with Thy servant! Let me not see such another!"

Wesley's apprehensions about Williamson were fully justified. For him it was an excellent match, and in lively fear that John Wesley might interfere he even refused to allow any conversation between them. Wesley then indulged in one of his pithy reproofs. "Tomorrow, Sir, you may be her director, but today she is to direct herself." Four days after the betrothal they were married in a neighboring church without any publication of the banns. So careless and informal a wedding would hardly seem legal to Wesley, and his appeal to the Bishop of London's Commissary bore fruit because future marriages without banns were forbidden. Four months passed by, during which time Wesley lamented what he believed to be her insincerity and her absence from religious services. These he plainly stated in a letter to Sophy on July 5. When no satisfactory answer was forthcoming he took the drastic

step on August 7 of repelling Mrs. Sophy Williamson from Holy Communion. In no sense could this be really justified, although Sophy had every warning and could quite easily have prevented it happening. On that fateful Sunday, Mrs. Burnside, Sophy's friend, said to her that she was much to blame for going to the table before she had cleared herself to him, and had concluded "you may easily put an end to this by going to Mr. Wesley now and clearing yourself of what you are charged with." Sophy chose rather to allow her husband to charge Wesley with defaming his wife and repelling her from Communion.

Once the processes of law had been set in motion, John Wesley's usefulness to Georgia was at an end. Causton was enraged and the whole colony was forced to take sides. It is not true to say that Wesley fled from Savannah, because he gave the officials full notice that he was leaving. When he left they had ample opportunity for apprehending him since it was twenty days before he reached Charlestown and on December 22, 1737, went aboard the *Samuel* and said his long farewell to America.

It was regrettable that he left Georgia under a cloud and that even his German friends were dismayed. Nevertheless, since he only meant his stay in the colony as a preliminary to the mission to the Indians, and since this had become impossible, quite apart from the lawsuit, he felt abundantly justified in returning, and we who have the benefit of hindsight cannot doubt that he was right.

John Wesley must be counted to have had a providential escape. She was undoubtedly a nice attractive girl, scared of the violent Tom Millichamp and to some degree of the masterful Williamson of whom she said, "I have no particular inclination. I only promised if no objection appeared." She was drawn irresistibly to John Wesley and yet finally held back because in her affection, compounded with reverence, she instinctively knew that a man who could talk first of Indians and secondly of the drawback to a married state was no suitable husband for her. Poor girl! Between the inaccessible John and the all too approachable Williamson, a man of no reputation, and her own well-meaning but shallow and suggestible nature, she was doomed to sorrow and frustration.

One trembles to think how much hung on the fact that John seemed always prevented from holding her hand or saying one word too much. Had he married her and settled in Georgia, perhaps in time as Bishop of the colony, he would have been lost to history forever. As it was, he came back bruised and shaken but ready for any adventure to which God called him. If one could choose a phrase so often used by him to describe the secret ways of God, this was indeed "a covered Providence."

### Grace Murray

There is a curious parallel in the story of Sophy Hopkey and Grace Murray. The lively attraction John had for Sophy, he most certainly felt for Grace. She also was both lovely and devout. Indeed, she possessed more weapons in her armory than Sophy could ever boast. Married at twenty years of age to Alexander Murray, she was left a widow five years later but not before she had braved her husband's anger and declared herself a Methodist. When she returned to her mother's home at Newcastle she may well have met John Wesley on his first visit to that city in 1742. By that time she had already been one of the leaders of the Bands at the Foundery in London. Now she was both a speaker and visitor in the women's bands in the northeast. Soon she became housekeeper at the Orphan House in Newcastle and found that a major duty was looking after the sick preachers; amongst them was John Bennet, who found that it took him half a year (1746) to recover from his fever and who did not try to stop himself from falling in love with her. From this time on they corresponded with each other.

In August 1748 John Wesley was indisposed while in Newcastle and was nursed by Grace Murray. His encomium sufficiently reveals his growing affection for her.

She has every qualification that I desire. She understands all I want to have done. She is remarkably neat in person, in clothes, in all things. She is nicely frugal yet not sordid. She has much common-sense; contrives everything for the best, makes everything go as far as it will go, foresees what is wanting and provides for it all in time. She is a good work woman, able to do the finest, ready to do the coarsest work. Observes my rules when I am absent as well as when I am present! and takes care that those about her observe them, yet seldom disoblige any of them.

True, it reads rather like an exceptionally warm testimonial to an employee of high standing, but Wesley intended more than the words conveyed. It is reminiscent of the artless way he spoke admiringly of Sophy on their first meeting. In the case of Grace Murray, he followed it a little later with much stronger language. He made a proposal of marriage, and had she only said "yes" without qualification, the whole matter would have been resolved and John would have known a married happiness that later he sought in vain.

As it was, and curiously in similar terms to Sophy Hopkey who also trembled before so great an honor, Grace could only gasp, "This is too great a blessing for me: I can't tell how to believe it. This is all I could have wished for under heaven if I had dared

to wish for it." Had Wesley been the ordinary type of lover he would have taken this as complete acceptance and married her without delay. But he had learned nothing from the temporizing of his Georgia days. It was his custom to tell his preachers not to travel one mile the less nor preach one sermon the less because they were married, and this advice he followed himself both in his courtship of Grace Murray and his marriage with Mrs. Vazeille.

Grace could claim a temporary success. Though he was setting forth on his way south, she prevailed on him to take her with him. At Chinley they met John Bennet, and here, with astonishing ingenuousness, Wesley left Grace, telling Bennet to take care of her. Meanwhile, the innocent unsuspecting John Wesley recorded, "I left her in Cheshire with John Bennet and went on my way rejoicing." Bennet followed up his advantage and when he wooed her and asked if anything existed between John Wesley and herself, she somewhat reprehensibly said, "No." She also took care to add, "If Mr. Wesley will give his consent, I will yield." Bennet said, "I will write him this night," and so the fateful letter was dispatched. It reached him after he had arrived at the Foundery and he wrote a mild reply to them both.

This might have been final were it not for Grace Murray, who in the next six months gave some color to Luke Tyerman's violent assertion that "she was a flirt." Certainly she did not seem to know her own mind. She corresponded with both Wesley and Bennet in truly affectionate terms. In February 1749, she gladly went with Wesley to Ireland, and during the next four months

she examined all the women in the smaller societies and the believers in every place. She settled all the women bands, visited the sick and prayed with the mourners, more and more of whom received remission of sins during her conversation or prayer.

Inevitably the old love revived in him with greater ardor than ever. In Dublin they were betrothed by a contract de praesenti. This was a bond of marriage honorably binding on the two parties and preparatory to the legal marriage itself.

When they returned to Bristol in July, she heard idle and untrue rumors of John Wesley's friendship for a Molly Francis. In a fit of jealousy she wrote a letter to John Bennet and asked him to meet her on the journey north. They met at Epworth and Bennet told the horrified Wesley that Grace had forwarded all of John's letters to her for him to read. In the next few days she seemed distractedly to be torn between the rival lovers. Wesley decided to let John Bennet have her, though he had "a piercing conviction of his irreparable loss." Whereupon, Grace sent for him in deep distress and cried out, "How can you think I love anyone better

than I love you. I love you a thousand times better than I ever loved John Bennet in all my life." Then she spoiled it all by adding, "But I'm afraid if I don't marry him he'll run mad," and that very night she promised once more to be his wife.

No wonder Wesley was perplexed almost beyond bearing. Some days later, when they had proceeded to Newcastle, he forced her to make a decision, and she replied, "I am determined by conscience as well as by inclination to live and die with you." For her part she now wisely wanted Wesley to marry her at once. However, the irresolute lover of Sophy was once again not so easily to be brought to an irrevocable step. He objected on three grounds. First, he wished to satisfy John Bennet; secondly, to secure his brother's consent; and thirdly, to send an account of his reason for marrying to all his preachers and societies. When she, quite properly, said she would not wait longer than a year, John laconically answered, "Perhaps less time would suffice."

This vacillation, however honorable, would in itself have endangered the marriage, but two further factors made it impossible. First of all John, after a solemn renewal of the contract *per verba de praesenti* made in the presence of witnesses including Christopher Hopper, went off on a northern tour. All might still have been well if Charles Wesley on receipt of his brother's letter had not impetuously rushed to Newcastle and on to Whitehaven where his unsuspecting brother was staying. Charles poured out all his objections to the marriage, but John Wesley temperately gave his reasons for marrying Grace. He said she was "indefatigably patient and inexpressibly tender; quick, clean and skilful, of engaging behavior and a mild sprightly cheerful and yet serious temper; while her gifts for usefulness were such as he had not seen equalled."

When Charles realized his brother was not to be moved, he galloped back to Grace Murray and persuaded John Bennet to meet them in Newcastle. By sheer determination he overcame Grace's hesitation and less than a week later in the presence of Charles Wesley and George Whitefield, she was married to John Bennet. Instead of feeling contrite and abashed when he met his brother again, Charles declared impetuously, "I renounce all intercourse with you but what I would have with a heathen man or a publican." When Charles finally allowed John to explain the course of events, Charles was amazed and exonerated him from all blame, and placed the onus wholly on Grace. Never was the magnanimity and forbearance of John more strikingly displayed than when, as he wrote in a letter to Thomas Bigg of Newcastle, the desire of his eyes was taken away at a stroke. Wesley kissed Bennet instead of upbraiding him, and the next day he resumed his preaching and his travels.

Despite Wesley's readiness to retain John Bennet as a preacher and even to go to Rochdale to preach for him, Bennet was not slow to bite his hand. As Wesley knew, he was increasingly Calvinist in bias and soon he left the Society (1751), taking with him a hundred members from the Bolton Society and virtually the entire society at Stockport. Three years later he became pastor of a Calvinist church at Warburton, and five years later he died at the early age of forty-five. It is sad to reflect that in these years he railed against Wesley both as a man and a holder of Popish doctrines. The psychologists would explain it all by the fact that so often those who inflict injury will turn on the injured just because their conscience is sore and they want perversely to quieten it.

Grace Murray emerges from this "tragedy of errors" as a woman who, like Sophy Hopkey, had an affection for John bordering upon reverence, but also, like her Georgia counterpart, believed she could cope more easily with a man more human in character and nearer to her in his station. Even so, she vacillated in her fashion as much as John, but whereas she did it because of another suitor, John only temporized because of his religious and ecclesiastical scruples. In the event, their delay in marrying gave Charles the opportunity to make it impossible.

None can excuse the hasty action of Charles in rudely taking away the desire of his brother's eyes and precipitating him on the rebound into a most disastrous marriage. Perhaps, however, one ought to understand that the motive actuating him was the supposed good of the young Methodist Societies. Even the action of John in taking Grace on two of his journeys had caused much unfavorable comment and gossip and several women made their criticisms known to John. Charles Wesley believed that if he married one who was only a stage higher than a domestic servant then there would be a dangerous rift in the societies.

He has found many biographers to agree with him and in all such cases Wesley's own feelings have been entirely ignored. We know that whoever Wesley married, he would not have allowed her to slacken for a moment his zeal for God's work. How much better, therefore, to have a wife who loved him and could journey with him and who could make their home a place of quiet and content. It is true that for a time the Societies would have been divided in their view of the marriage, but as Grace's qualities revealed themselves, criticism would have quickly died and she would have been accepted as his true helpmeet. In this story of blunders, Charles must bear a heavy blame. The responsibility is only slightly lessened by saying that he acted with the best intentions.

John and Grace met only once in later life and that in a brief

perfunctory manner, when both were aged. After John Bennet's death, Grace conducted weekly meetings for prayer and fellowship and gave herself to the upbringing of her five boys. Later she moved to Derbyshire and was known for her saintliness and good works. She died in 1803, in her eighty-fifth year. In a lonely churchyard near Chapel-en-le-Frith there is a tombstone on which her name and dates of birth and death are inscribed, and underneath are the memorable words: "His faithfulness not mine."

### Mrs. Vazeille

The first question is not to ask why John Wesley's marriage was unhappy. In the very nature of the case nothing else could be expected. When Wesley married Mrs. Vazeille, the two magazines which recorded the event spoke of her fortune. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, which gave the date as February 18, 1751, spoke of her as a merchant's widow with an income of £300 per annum; the *London Magazine*, which gave the date as February 19, referred to her as "a widow lady of large fortune." It has been estimated that the fortune was £10,000, invested in three percent consols. What we do know is that with John Wesley's consent the fortune was wholly secured for her and her four children. By his own express desire he never touched a penny of it.

The undeniable fact, however, is that she was a middle-aged widow with a grown-up family, who had lived in great comfort and now was asked to companion a man who was incessantly on the move and whose constant preoccupation was the welfare of the Methodist Societies. To her credit it must be said that she made the attempt. A few weeks after their marriage she made a journey north with him and later in the summer she accompanied him to Cornwall. In the following March she and one of her daughters endured the rigors and hardships of a further three months' journey to the north of England. It is scarcely possible, however, that at her age and with her background of easy affluence she could long have sustained the privations of an itinerant life.

Why did he do it? Despite his own reserve and the all too scanty references in his *Journal*, the intervention of Charles Wesley in his courtship of Grace Murray was the heaviest blow he could suffer. The contract *de praesenti*, solemnly reaffirmed, was in his eyes entirely binding as a marriage contract. As Frank Baker has shown, it had the force of law. He was, therefore, doubly shaken because in addition to his brother's impetuosity he had the disillusionment of a woman he loved retracting an oath and therefore breaking a sacred bond. Although he forgave both Charles and Grace, and for that matter John Bennet, who cuts a somewhat

sorry figure, he was inwardly resolved not to allow such a mischance to reoccur.

This was further driven home by his brother's own happy marriage to Sarah Gwynne, daughter of a Welsh squire on April 8, 1749. This was a happiness he anticipated for himself, and when a week after Charles' marriage John took Grace Murray to Ireland to share in the work, he must have thought that she would be to him as Sarah was to Charles. In a poem written at this time he dwells on her graces:

In early dawn of life, serene,  
 Mild, sweet, and tender was her mood;  
 Her pleasing form spoke all within  
 Soft and compassionately good;  
 Listening to every wretch's care,  
 Mingling with each her friendly tear.

I saw her run, with winged speed,  
 In works of faith and laboring love;  
 I saw her glorious toil succeed,  
 And showers of blessing from above  
 Crowning her warm effectual prayer,  
 And glorified my God in her.

When, therefore, his own plans were disrupted, he was resolved that Charles should never again be free to interfere. It was at this fatal juncture that he had an accident on London Bridge as he was rushing from the Foundery to Snowsfields to meet his congregation before the start of a northern tour. He slipped on the ice and badly strained his ankle. The journey north had to be delayed. He took up his quarters in the house of Mrs. Vazeille in Threadneedle Street, where he engaged for some days in "prayer, reading and conversation, partly in writing a Hebrew Grammar and 'Lessons for Children.'"

He was always susceptible to the kindness and attention of women, and doubtless Mrs. Vazeille proved a most capable nurse. He was forty-eight years old and time would not wait indefinitely for him to make up his mind. As previously he had been too slow, now he was too fast. Within the week he had not only proposed but had married. At that time he could not easily set his foot to the ground, and when he preached the following Sunday, he did so in a kneeling position. The adage that those who marry in haste repent in leisure precisely applies to Wesley's action.

It must be said that by this time in life he was not only completely settled in his habits and style of life, but that he was prepared to make no concessions because of his married state. He averred to Henry Moore that he would not print one sermon or

travel one mile less. Indeed he said to his poor wife, "If I thought, my dear, I should have to travel or preach less, as well as I love you I would never see your face more." This was an intolerable obligation to lay on his wife. Possibly Grace Murray for a time could have sustained the pace, but certainly not the middle-aged Mrs. Vazeille. She did attempt it on and off for the first four years. She went to the north of England, to Cornwall and to Scotland, and she experienced both the rude discomforts of travel and at times the unkindly behavior of mobs. Nor was she accepted by Wesley's people who knew him as their leader, but looked at with frosty eye on one from a different social and ecclesiastical background who so suddenly was thrust upon them. She was doubly handicapped in any case because by temperament she craved total attention to her own demands, and linked to an almost ungovernable temper, she had a lively jealousy of Wesley's friendship with other women.

Within a year of the marriage, Vincent Perronet was expressing to Charles Wesley his sadness at her "angry, bitter spirit." Charles Wesley needed no convincing. He and his wife Sally were guests of Mrs. Vazeille for some days in 1750, and he found her to be "a woman of mournful spirit." When on February 2, 1751, he was told, without being previously consulted, about his brother's plan to marry, he "retired to mourn" with his wife. His groaning continued for several days, and he said he could "eat no pleasant food, nor preach, nor rest, either by night or day." In his journal Charles wrote, "I called two minutes before preaching, on Mrs. Wesley at the Foundery and in all that time had not one quarrel." On September 21, 1755, Charles wrote to his wife, "I hope Mrs. W. keeps her distance. If malice is stronger than her pride she will pay you a mischievous visit. Poor Mr. Lefevre breakfasted with me this morning and lamented that he cannot love her. . . ." In another letter to his wife for July 19, 1766, Charles says grimly about his sister-in-law living in London, "I do not wonder that my poor brother trembles and quakes at the thought of coming to London."

Despite the unhappiness which showed itself almost from the start, Mrs. John Wesley continued the unequal struggle of trying to keep up with John in his journeyings until 1755. Then her travelings ceased and she gave herself at home to the self-tormenting task of wondering what her husband was doing. Fuel was added to the flame of her jealousy by intercepting letters to Wesley from his woman correspondents. At first she did it legitimately since inadvisedly he told her to open all letters addressed to himself. As her jealousy mounted, however, she did not hesitate to search his pockets and rifle his papers.

One main cause of the unbridgeable rift which arose between

them was Wesley's friendship with Sarah Ryan, whose past had been disreputable but who after her conversion became house-keeper at Kingswood School. Wesley wrote to Sarah that he had "a thousand little tart unkind reflections in return for the kindest words I could devise. Little drops of eating water on the marble at length have worn my sinking spirits down." In another letter he complained that his wife had found a letter in his pockets and opened it. "When she read it God broke her heart and I afterwards found her in such a temper as I have not seen in her for several years. She has continued in the same ever since. . . ."

It was on January 27, 1758, that Wesley wrote to Sarah that his wife, after many severe words, had left him, vowing to see him no more. His troubles, however, were not to be so lightly ended. She continued to dog his footsteps, sometimes, according to John Hampson, ordering a chaise and driving a hundred miles to see who was with her husband in his carriage when he entered a town. On October 23, in a letter to his wife, he set down ten excellent reasons for disliking her behavior and equally ten ways by which she could amend her ways. The logic was unanswerable but the psychology was deplorable. It only served further to inflame her temper, and the very next month on November 24, 1759, he wrote again to say, "You gain occasion to make people think ill of me and well of you. You totally lose my esteem; you violently shock my love; you quite destroy my confidence. You oblige me to lock up everything as from a thief; to stand continually upon my guard. . . ."

Insensibly she drifted out of his life. Often she went off only to return again. At last, on January 23, 1771, he wrote the famous words, "For what purpose I know not, my wife set out for Newcastle, purposing never to return. Non eam reliqui; non dimisi; non revocabo." She did return temporarily, but on October 2, 1778, he addressed perhaps the most trenchant letter of rebuke ever written by a famous man to his wife.

You have laid innumerable stumbling blocks in the way both of the wise and the unwise. You have served the cause and increased the number of rebels, deists, and atheists; and weakened the hands of those that love and fear God. If you were to live a thousand years twice told, you could not undo the mischief you have done. And till you have done all you can towards it, I bid you Farewell.

When she died in 1781, he was in the west of England and was not even informed. "On October 14th," he records in the *Journal*, "I came to London and was informed that my wife died on Monday." So the long martyrdom of thirty years was over. Her money went to a son and one ring went to her husband. She had the last word after all!

For thirty years she had, in his own words, "torn the flesh off my bones by her fretting and murmuring." It was not only that ungovernable temper was allied to incurable suspiciousness and jealousy, but that the passage of the years revealed a streak of mental unsoundness. Tyerman, after stringing together such adjectives as "suspicious, jealous, fretful, taunting, twitting and violent," dismissed her in a terse phrase as "a bitter unmitigated curse."

John was not without blame. In the words of Augustin Leger, "God was after all, the only lasting passion of John Wesley." At no time, and emphatically not when he married at forty-eight years, could he give to any woman that attention that was her due. Never would he consent to compromise in the interests of their mutual happiness. So the springs of affection were dried up by his own way of life and his wife's perverseness, and it remained for him only to show what infinite stores of fortitude and forbearance he possessed. Subjected to persistent provocation he never once acted, wrote or retorted in kind. Charles, who knew the situation better than anyone else, affirmed that nothing could surpass his brother's patience in dealing with such a wife. At least he had untroubled peace and happiness during the last ten years of his life!