

The Quakers.

IN numbers the Quakers are "a feeble folk," but their influence on the social and religious life of the nation is very considerable. Nor are they a decreasing quantity; for, while many of the Churches have been deploring lessened numbers, the Quakers have during the past ten years more than maintained their ground.

Before George Fox the principles of Quakerism began to assert themselves, but he is usually regarded as the founder of the sect. Fox was born at Drayton-in-the-Clay, a little village in Leicestershire, in the year 1624. In early life he worked with a shoemaker, who was also a dealer in cattle and wool. Then a great change came into his life. He had come across two friends at a fair, and observed that, though they both professed religion, they did not act in harmony with their professions. He began to ask himself, "If these men are the followers of Christ, where do I stand?" He went to London to hear some preachers of the day; they gave him no relief. He was miserable.

At last light came. "The Lord," he wrote in his "Journal," "did gently lead me along, and did let me see His love, which was endless and eternal, and surpasseth all the knowledge that men have in the natural state, or can get by history or books. Now I was come up in spirit through the flaming sword into the paradise of God." Now he had a message for all men—the message of "the inner light," which is lit by the Spirit of God in every man.

This message, this new thought—which was really not new—spread. Fox had many followers. In the North of England the movement received a great impetus from Margaret Fell, the wife of Judge Fell, who at the age of thirty-eight determined to devote her life to the cause. Seventeen years later, on the death of her husband, she married Fox. But before this event occurred Fox suffered much from his

opponents, who handed him over to the mercy of the mob. He was beaten and stoned, and even his life was attempted. Nothing, however, daunted him, and when free he was constant in his efforts to spread the tenets of Quakerism.

So little is known of the Quaker Church that it may be well to mention a few facts respecting its inner working. First, there is the "Meeting," so graphically described by Charles Lamb: "Wouldst thou know what true peace and quiet mean; wouldst thou find a refuge from the noises and clamours of the multitude; wouldst thou enjoy at once solitude and society; wouldst thou possess the depth of thine own spirit in stillness, without being shut out from the consolatory faces of thy species; wouldst thou be alone, and yet accompanied; solitary, yet not desolate; singular, yet not without some to keep thee in countenance; a unit in aggregate; a simple in composite. Come with me into a Quakers' Meeting."

A "Meeting" is also held monthly for business purposes, when matters are discussed relating to the work of the Society. The transactions are, when necessary, passed on to the Quarterly Meeting of the district, to which delegates are appointed from the Monthly Meetings. The final authority expresses itself in the Yearly Meeting, a general assembly of the representatives of the Society, which is held at Devonshire House, Bishopsgate, London. This, by the way, is the headquarters of the Quakers, and consists of two large halls and a series of offices. The question of rebuilding these premises has been before the Society for some years, but no final decision has been reached as to the best course to adopt, one party desiring to retain the present buildings and have a hall in some other part of London, whilst others of the older school are opposed to this course, and would erect new premises on the present site. At all these meetings—monthly, quarterly, and annual—questions of the day are discussed at length, and the deliberations are carried on with grave decorum, the presiding officer being assisted by the "clerk," who gauges the sense of the meeting without any formal vote, and duly records it.

Besides these statutory meetings that we have enumerated, there is yet another, which is known as the "Meeting for Sufferings." It was established as early as the year 1695, to investigate cases of persecution, which were then constantly arising. Since then, however, it has extended its work, and discusses questions relating to the welfare of communities who require assistance in different parts of the world. Nor are these efforts fruitless, as it has been shown from time to time. Though opposed to war, this Meeting for Sufferings is foremost in aiding those in need, and sending food and money to succour the distressed. During the present war this is being done, and the more wealthy members subscribe liberally to the war funds.

As is well known, Friends have no paid ministers. They accept the services of men and women who have proved their special adaptability, and, though the office confers no special status upon the individual, he or she devotes much time and care in guiding the Church both in spiritual and temporal matters. Two other officers are known in the Quaker Church—those of Elder and Overseer. The former acts as a guide and adviser to the younger members, while the latter exercises a general supervision over the members generally.

What, it may be asked, is the main teaching of the Friends? It is that every man and woman can have direct communion with God, and that the Divine Presence is immanent in the hearts of all. Friends believe that "worship is like the fragrance exhaled from a flower, that gives joy to men and praise to God at the same time." Outward observances are regarded as of little value; every form of institutional religion hinders the soul's progress. The spiritual life is an experience, a being and a doing, and we receive God for ourselves in our appropriation of Him.

J. C. WRIGHT.

