

QUAKER STRONGHOLDS

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Quaker strongholds by Caroline Emelia Stephen

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CAROLINE EMELIA STEPHEN

**QUAKER
STRONGHOLDS**

QUAKER STRONGHOLDS

BY

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AUTHOR OF "THE SERVICE OF THE POOR"

PHILADELPHIA

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1891

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QUAKER STRONGHOLDS.



INTRODUCTION.

WHETHER Quakerism be, as some Friends believe, destined to any considerable revival or not, it seems at least certain that any important revival of religion must be the result of a fresh recognition and acceptance of the very principles upon which the Society of Friends is built. What these principles and the practices resulting from them really are, is a subject on which there is a surprising amount of ignorance amongst us, considering how widely spread is the connection with and interest about Friends amongst the members of other persuasions. One seldom meets any one who has not some link with the Society, and yet it is rare to find any one not belonging to it at all accurately informed as to its point of view or its organization. The notorious disinclination of Friends to any attempts at proselytizing, and perhaps some lingering effects of persecution, prob-

ably account for the very common impression that Friends' meetings are essentially private—mysterious gatherings into which it would be intrusive to seek admission. Many people, indeed, probably suppose (if they think about it at all) that such meetings are no longer held; that the Society is fast dying out, and the "silent worship" of tradition is a thing of the past—impracticable, and hardly to be seriously mentioned in these days of talk and of breathless activity.

Some such vague impression floated, I believe, over my own mind, when, some seventeen years ago, I first found myself within reach of a Friends' meeting, and, somewhat to my surprise, cordially made welcome to attend it. The invitation came at a moment of need, for I was beginning to feel with dismay that I might not much longer be able conscientiously to continue to join in the Church of England service; not for want of appreciation of its unrivalled richness and beauty, but from doubts of the truth of its doctrines, combined with a growing recognition that to me it was as the armour of Saul in its elaboration and in the sustained pitch of religious fervour for which it was meant to provide an utterance. Whether true or not in its speculative and theoretical assumptions, it was clear to me that it was far from true as a

periodical expression of my own experience, belief, or aspiration. The more vividly one feels the force of its eloquence, the more, it seems to me, one must hesitate to adopt it as the language of one's own soul, and the more unlikely it is that such heights and depths of feeling as it demands should be ready to fill its magnificent channels every Sunday morning at a given hour. The questionings with which at that period I was painfully struggling were stirred into redoubled activity by the dogmatic statements and assumptions with which the Liturgy abounds, and its unbroken flow left no loophole for the utterance of my own less disciplined, but to myself far more urgent, cries for help. Thus the hour of public worship, which should have been a time of spiritual strengthening and calming, became to me a time of renewed conflict, and of occasional exaltation and excitement of emotion, leading but too surely to reaction and apathy.

I do not attempt to pass any judgment on this mental condition. I have described it at some length because I cannot believe it to be altogether exceptional, or without significance. At any rate, it was fast leading me to dread the moment when I should be unable either to find the help I needed, or to offer my tribute of devotion in any place of

worship amongst my fellow-Christians. When lo, on one never-to-be-forgotten Sunday morning, I found myself one of a small company of silent worshippers, who were content to sit down together without words, that each one might feel after and draw near to the Divine Presence, unhindered at least, if not helped, by any human utterance. Utterance I knew was free, should the words be given; and before the meeting was over, a sentence or two were uttered in great simplicity by an old and apparently untaught man, rising in his place amongst the rest of us. I did not pay much attention to the words he spoke, and I have no recollection of their purport. My whole soul was filled with the unutterable peace of the undisturbed opportunity for communion with God, with the sense that at last I had found a place where I might, without the faintest suspicion of insincerity, join with others in simply seeking His presence. To sit down in silence could at the least pledge me to nothing; it might open to me (as it did that morning) the very gate of heaven. And since that day, now more than seventeen years ago, Friends' meetings have indeed been to me the greatest of outward helps to a fuller and fuller entrance into the spirit from which they have sprung; the place of the most soul-subduing, faith-restoring, strengthening,

and peaceful communion, in feeding upon the bread of life, that I have ever known. I cannot but believe that what has helped me so unspeakably might be helpful to multitudes in this day of shaking of all that can be shaken, and of restless inquiry after spiritual good. It is in the hope of making more widely known the true source and nature of such spiritual help that I am about to attempt to describe what I have called our strongholds—those principles which cannot fail, whatever may be the future of the Society which for more than two hundred years has taken its stand upon them. I wish to trace, as far as my experience as a "convinced Friend" enables me to do so, what is the true life and strength of our Society; and the manner in which its principles, as actually embodied in its practice, its organization, and, above all, its manner of worship, are fitted to meet the special needs of an important class in our own day.

MOUNT PLEASANT,
WEST MALVERN, 1890.