

**THE ORIGINAL LETTERS FROM
INDIA; CONTAINING A NARRATIVE
OF A JOURNEY THROUGH EGYPT
AND THE AUTHOR'S
IMPRISONMENT AT CALICUT**

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The Original Letters from India; Containing a Narrative of a Journey Through Egypt and the Author's Imprisonment at Calicut by Mrs. Eliza Fay & Walter Kelly Firminger & Hyder Ally

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MRS. ELIZA FAY & WALTER KELLY FIRMINGER & HYDER ALLY

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THE
ORIGINAL LETTERS
FROM INDIA

OF

MRS. ELIZA FAY.

A NEW EDITION

WITH

INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY THE

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INTRODUCTION.

OF the rare contemporary works, which throw light on the social life of the Calcutta of Warren Hastings and Sir Philip Francis, one of the most rare and certainly the most interesting is the *Original Letters of Mrs. Fay*. The book suddenly introduces Mrs. Fay and her husband to us on 18th April 1779, and in July 1795, the narrative leaves her, at a low ebb in her fortunes, in America. The second part of her book was written at Blackheath in 1815. The Registers of St. John's Church, Calcutta, show that she was buried on 10th September 1816 in one of our cemeteries (which no one now can say) by the Rev. H. Shepherd. On the occasion of her first visit, the City of Palaces, although boasting of a fine theatre, had but a mere apology for a church. Mrs. Fay survived to see Calcutta distinguished by a Cathedral. She had no doubt sat under Padre "Tally Ho Johnson," the last husband of that much "intermarried" Begum who could tell of the misfortunes of the English in Bengal in 1756, and of how her then husband (Watts) concealed in the palki of a purdah nasheen lady had entered Mir Jaffar's house at Murshidabad to arrange for the undoing of Suraj-ud-Daula. Mrs. Fay must have had some acquaintance with the old Begum, and she too must have known, howsoever distantly, that famous Mrs. Ellerton, who in the days of Lord Canning was wont to describe how she had seen Francis carried away "all bloody" after his duel with Hastings. The India of Mrs. Fay seems far remote in time from the India of to-day, and yet it is strange to think that my own mother, during her short stay in India, met with a lady, who, if she had not actually known Mrs. Fay, must probably have seen her, or at least known all about her.

Readers of Dr. Busteed, Archdeacon Hyde, Miss Blechynden, Sydney Grier, and Mr. H. E. A. Cotton are well acquainted with Mrs. Fay's prattle about Belvedere, the Harmonic, the beauty of Lady Chambers, the elegance of the second Mrs. Warren Hastings, the troubles of a Calcutta memsahib of the period, etc., etc., but few in late years have read—or indeed have had the opportunity of reading—Mrs. Fay's book from first page to last. It certainly deserves to be read as a whole, for although as a reviewer in 1818 wrote, "there is little magic in her style," the authoress was, as the same authority perceived, "a person of considerable acuteness and information." Indeed, apart from the context, Mrs. Fay's account of her visit to Belvedere cannot be quite valued for what it is worth: the context makes it clear that she was in a bad temper with her hostess. But the whole story of her first journey out to India—the gipsy-tour across France, over the Alps to Leghorn, the anxious journey through Egypt, the captivity at Calicut—is decidedly well worth reading.

It may indeed be wondered how it is that a book so often laid under contribution, so full of adventures, containing so many clearly cut descriptions of interesting persons and places, has been allowed to fall out of circulation. Well, in the first place, as it has been observed, Calcutta, being a place of frequent partings, is, in consequence, a place of short memories. When Mrs. Fay, in advanced years, returned to Calcutta, about a year before her death, and set to work to put her letters into print, I suppose there would have been but few here who would have remembered her on the occasion of her first visit, and perhaps the Calcutta of Warren Hastings' days had not for the men of that time the glamour which it has for us to-day. The Executors cut the book short where Mrs. Fay had left the printing of it; and after copies had been issued to the subscribers, its existence was forgotten until the Rev.

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J. Long, in his articles in the *Calcutta Review*, began to draw upon it for picturesque quotations. Then, again, there is something about Mrs. Fay which fails to charm, something of a too conscious superiority which alienates sympathy in circumstances in which sympathy would not be grudged. When Mrs. Hastings hinted that our authoress had brought her troubles on herself "by imprudently venturing on such an expedition out of mere curiosity," although we see the injustice of the hint, yet after all we cannot help feeling that if Mrs. Fay would be so audacious, and would do things in a way which no ordinary woman would, or perhaps should, dare to do them, most people would feel inclined to share her critic's view of her sufferings.

For it is clear that the joint career of the Fays, from first to last, was a mad one. They started for India without obtaining the Company's permission to reside there. They plunge into France when the French nation was at war with our own. Eliza had been in France on no less than four previous occasions, but judge of her notion of the passage over the Alps from her *savvy* confession :—"On arriving near the Alps, it appeared that I had formed a very erroneous idea of the route, having always supposed that we had only one mountain to pass and that the rest of the way was level ground." (Another curious instance of Mrs. Fay's notions of geography will be found on P. 192, in regard to the highest mountains in the world.) The Fays make for Leghorn at a time when an English private trading ship would hardly dare to venture out of port unless protected by a convoy. Her own account shows how foolhardy (at least for a woman) was the journey through Egypt, yet we find the pair making for Suez, although they seemed to have been previously informed that the Turkish authorities had determined to close that port to European vessels. They arrive at Calicut to fall into the hands of Sudder Khan. Mrs. Fay has a dissipated and extravagant

husband to look after ; but are not her economies a little too drastic—those inns (recalling to our memory Sterne's last chapter of the *Sentimental Journey*) where beds (eight in a room) are procured at four sous a night, the tea which she calls a most "curious mess," etc, etc? Poor Anthony, we feel certain, will sooner or later revolt. There is, as college friends on long vacation tours find out, no severer strain on friendship than the strain involved in a tramp together through strange lands. The happiness of the journey depends so much on mutual give and take, on constant readiness to adopt what the other thinks the better way, forbearance with one another's faults in taste and temper, and on a generously tolerant view of one's friend's excesses both in economy and in expenditure. Mrs. Fay has good reason to know that she is "the better man of the two," and because her husband probably is made to realise this, he becomes pig-headed and obstinate. The pair are not friends, and we may feel certain that, sooner or later, they will part. It is, for instance, with scarcely suppressed amusement Eliza records Anthony's fatigue after he had boasted that the ascent of the Mount Cenis would have *for him* but few difficulties. It is little incidents such as this one which makes us see that the Indian experiment will never succeed.

I have been inclined to wonder whether Anthony Fay was such a fool as his wife has made him to appear. The fact that he started without the Company's permission to reside, and travelled by unusual routes and foreign ships, refused to call on the Judges, etc., etc., gives colour to the suspicion that he had really been sent out by some foe to prepare for that impeachment of Sir Elijah Impey on which ultimately we find him at work. If this were indeed the case, his wife, although deceived into believing that he seriously intended to practise as a Barrister, may to some extent have been misled by some of her husband's prejudices. The acerbity of her account

of Hastings' wife has been noticed : of Hastings himself she writes : " He will never desert a friend, or forgive an enemy:" but it becomes clear that she changed her mind to some extent. She clearly came to see that her husband's attack on Sir Elijah Impey would extend to her benefactor, Sir Robert Chambers. In October 1778, Impey accepted the Presidency of the Sadr Diwani Adalat, and this was put forward as the taking of a bribe ; but Chambers, who had to some extent been regarded as a possible ally by Francis, followed suit by accepting the office of Judge of Chinsurah. This, I take it, is what Mrs. Fay alludes to when, in connection with the articles of impeachment, which Anthony Fay was drawing up, she writes : " the character of a highly revered friend is obliquely glanced at, and may be in the future more seriously implicated in the business."

The dates of Mrs. Fay's journey are as follows.—

1779 (April 10)—1783 (February 7).

1784 (March 17)—1794 (September 4).

1795 (August 2)—1796.

Unknown—Death 1816.

Of the last journey nothing is now known ; in the second and third we have Mrs. Fay comparatively in " peace and prosperity." The business house she occupied is still in existence, but, as I write, it has fallen into the builders hand for alteration, if not for demolition. It stands in the corner formed by Church Lane and Hastings Street. From the records of St. John's Church I have been kindly permitted to extract the following letter.

" To the Rev. Mr. Blanshard, the Rev. Mr. Owen, Mr. Cockerell, Mr. Thornhill, Mr. Sealey, Mr. Johnson, members of the Church Vestry.

13th April, 1789.

" GENTLEMEN,

Pardon the freedom I use in making an application, which I flatter myself, however, will be attended with success

having nothing for its object that can in the smallest degree injure the property of the Church.

"Permit me then to acquaint you that, about five years since, I became an inhabitant, and, sometime after purchaser of the house I now reside in, formerly the Post Office, and forms the south-west boundary of the old burying ground, now the compound of the New Church. At the period I mention, the lower floor was nearly as habitable as the upper one ; but shortly after, a considerable part of it was rendered almost useless, in consequence of a wall being built up against the window, so close as to prevent the accession of either light or air. There is also great reason to apprehend that from the accumulation of damp between the walls and the house, and the want of a free ventilation, walls of the latter will sustain material injury.

"Suffer me, therefore, to request, Gentlemen, that you will have the goodness to take the subject of this letter into consideration ; and be pleased to allow that part of the wall, which stands against my house, to be taken down ; or such openings to make in it, as may suffice to restore the premises to their former usefulness.

" I am, Gentleman,

" Your most humble servant,

" ELIZA FAY."

This letter supplies the reason for the name given to Old Post Office Street to a neighbouring street.

It is strange that, although on the occasion of her second visit to Calcutta, Sir Robert and Lady Chambers were still resident there, Mrs. Fay makes no mention to them. The references to the Chambers are some of the most interesting things in the book. Robert Chambers' name has been immortalised in many oftquoted passages of Boswell's *Life of Dr. Johnson*. He had been a member of the "Literary Club," that select coterie, which included among its members Burke, Reynolds, and Goldsmith. We all remember how on