

The Finders of the Syriac Codex.

When we were living at Grantchester, our garden adjoined that of Professor and Mrs. Bensly. Their only daughter Louisa was of my own age and we became friends and played together.

I can say that we were friends for we stuck to one another although we did not think alike on any one subject and our childish arguments almost rose to quarrels. In spite of these differences, quite openly and strongly expressed, her parents were extremely kind to me.

Professor Bensly was one of the most learned men in ancient Oriental languages at that time and was one of those ^{re} who translated the Bible, issued as the Revised Version. One summer when I was going for a visit to them from Bedford I was escorted to the station by my whole family - mother, brothers and sisters. To go for a visit was in those days an event and all of us, of course, shared in the small excitement of sending off the happy traveller.

On my arrival at Cambridge station I was much surprised and disappointed to find no one to meet me on the platform. I had expected to see Mrs. Bensly and Louisa. I went outside feeling rather forlorn. The rain was pouring down and the station yard was one big puddle. I found ^{the} old Grantchester

flyman, Glasscock, waiting for me and he trundled me to the house. I was told by the maid that Mrs. and Miss Bensly had gone to a concert and I was shown into the dining room. Professor Bensly was there and he welcomed me with real but absent-minded kindness. He was in the middle of a strange, nondescript meal which had been laid on a corner of the table on which had been placed a small, far from clean, cloth. The table was covered with books and sprinkled with crumbs. Books and papers were on the chairs and on the floor. They were about in that house both in the dining room and library. Professor Bensly cleared a chair for me and he poured me out some tea and cut me some cake and returned with relief to his book which he read while eating. He began to be restless when I had finished my tea and got up and went into the library and returned with the Revised Version of the Bible in his hand. "You may like to look at it," he remarked and left me alone and went back to work in his library. Whether he thought as he sat there that I might be feeling dull and uninterested or whether he thought the reverse, I do not know but presently he came in again this time with the Authorised Version in his hand. "You may like to compare the translations" he said and retreated. I only hope that I played up to his evident belief that I possessed powers of criticism unusual in a young girl. I was very glad when Mrs. Bensly and Louisa returned. My letter describing my arrival at the Bensly's has been preserved among the family

records.

One day Mrs. Bensely told me that she was going to take Louisa and me with her to a reception given by Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Gibson who lived in a house called Castle Brae. The name attracted me and I asked why "Castle" and why "Brae". I was told that the ladies were Scotch and when they built their house at the foot of the mound where Cambridge Castle had once stood they called it Castle Brae. Their garden went some way up the back of the hill. Mr. Widnall had told me about Cambridge Castle. I knew something of its history. I knew that it had been heightened and fortified by the Britons and that the Romans, the Saxons and the Normans had valued it for the same reason as it had been valued by the Britons because it guarded a ford. When I shook hands with my hostesses who were receiving their guests in the lower garden, I paid very little attention to them, my head being much too full of the Hill. I was glad when, after tea, I was told I could explore the higher, wilder garden. My two hostesses left little impression on me. I regarded them as very elderly but I am sure now that they were not as elderly as I thought them. I may have been uninterested in them because of their rich, stiff, enveloping dress, by their huge hats tied on with gauze scarves and by the fact that they wore white cotton stockings when every one else was wearing black stockings of wool or thread. They had plain features and they seemed to me to be very dull and ordinary

ladies as well as elderly. I discovered afterwards that they were by no means ordinary.

These two Scotch sisters were twins. Their father was a Greek scholar and learned in Eastern languages and he taught Greek and Eastern languages to his daughters. When he died he left them his property which was considerable and recorded his wish that they should always live together.

One of them married a Mr. Gibson. Before the lady consented to marry him she asked him if he would allow her sister to live with them. He consented and all went well. Mrs. Gibson was fond of society and entertained a good deal. Her sister had the same tastes but kept herself in the background. Mr. Gibson died and the sisters continued to live together. A Mr. Lewis proposed to the unmarried sister. He was accepted and the same request was made to him as to Mr. Gibson and he also consented. All went well They lived in Cambridge. Their friends were sometimes amused at the difficulty Mrs. Gibson had of adapting herself to her altered social condition, and they were often surprised at the courage and firmness of Mrs. Lewis in sweeping her sister aside and insisting on being regarded as the head hostess. Mr. Lewis died and the twin sisters were again equal.

Mrs. Lewis and Mrs Gibson had always been fond of travelling and they now travelled more than ever. They went as far as to Mount Sinai. In those days it was not only a long journey

but a dangerous one. It could only be made then on camelback and they were riders quite unaccustomed to such uncouth mounts. For two ladies, unattended by gentlemen, such a journey across the desert, even with a strong escort, was an extraordinary feat. When they arrived at St. Catherine's monastery they made their usual request to be allowed to look at any old manuscript the convent might possess.

Permission was at once given and some of the old books and manuscripts were brought to the sisters whose tents were pitched in the convent garden. Amongst the manuscripts was an ancient parchment called "The Lives of the Female Saints" written in old Greek. While examining it they found that it was a palimpsest. Though very old it had yet older, faded writing underneath.

Mrs. Lewis had made great friends with the Abbot and it was owing to that, that they were allowed, not only to look at the book but even to photograph some of the pages. This they did on the chance that their discovery might prove valuable. Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Gibson knew enough Syriac to have found out, in that strong outside light, that the under writing was a very old Syriac version of the four gospels.

The two ladies were acquainted with young Mr. Burkitt who had studied ancient Eastern languages under Professor Bensly. Mr. and Mrs. Burkitt were friends with a great scholar, Professor Bevan. On their return to Cambridge the sisters were most

anxious that Professor Bevan should look at their photographs and Mrs. Burkitt requested him to do so but he refused. He had wasted much time, he said, over things that he had been requested to look at and which proved valueless and photographs taken by two ladies did not sound promising. Mrs. Burkitt was still hopeful. She was having the great man to tea and she asked Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Gibson to meet him and bring their prints. By a ruse she managed to leave them alone with him. However it was of no use. Having refused once to look at them Professor Bevan again refused. It was a bitter disappointment to the ladies. Then Mr. Burkitt took the matter into his own hands. In a strong light he examined the prints, spending time and eyesight on them. At last, having made up his mind, he hurried to Professor Bensly and opened the matter by saying: "Sir, surely this is like the Cureton codex!" Professor Bensly roused and interested, took possession for a time of the prints and was soon able to tell Mr. Burkitt that he was right.

Other learned men were consulted and it was decided that some one must certainly go to Sinai to copy the manuscript. It might prove of great value. Professor Bensly and Mr Burkitt said that they would go. The delight of Mrs. Lewis and Mrs Gibson can be imagined. They also would go with the scholars and indeed their knowledge of modern Greek as well as of Eastern travel made them indispensable. Mrs. Burkitt and Mrs. Bensly both also insisted on going and Dr. Rendel Harris, another

Eastern scholar, a friend of Mrs. Lewis also joined the party. As soon as University work would allow them to leave they started off.

Far too much time had to be spent in Cairo in gathering together a sufficient escort. One of the many applicants to be their guide was a slim youth. On questioning him it was found that he had not been to Sinai, that he did not understand the language of the Bedouins and also that he had no experience in camel-riding. When they turned from him he exclaimed - "I am a Christian and I will trust in the Lord and He will lead us safely through the desert". He was assured that the members of the party also relied on the blessing of the Lord and trusted that it would rest also on a capable dragoman.

At last the party was travelling over the desert. It was a change for Professor and Mrs. Bensly after their quiet academic life ! They pressed on with all haste making the journey in ten days from Cairo to St. Catherine's monastery on Sinai. They were welcomed by the Abbot who was only too delighted to receive yet again as his guest the ladies who had been so kind to him and had talked to him in his own language of all that went on in the outside world.

The party were allowed to have the precious manuscript in their care. The three scholars divided the light between them, Professor Bensly always taking the first watch. No time was lost on the work that they had come to do. As long as

there was any daylight there was no pause. At meal times one of the scholars was always missing from their dining tent for their food was taken, like their work, in relays. The writing table was made from a washstand and stood at the tent door. As one left it another sat down to it.

The ladies were able to give considerable help to the scholars. Almost illegible passages occurred which needed many eyes. Leaves required to be smoothed and made ready. During their spare time a careful list was made for the Abbot of his old manuscripts. These precious writings had been considered useless old papers. They were hidden in boxes and thrust into cupboards. They were all now carried down on builders hods and poured on the ground at the feet of the ladies. Mrs. Gibson and Mrs. Lewis, with the help of Mrs. Bensly and Mrs. Burkitt, were able to get these into order and the enlightened Abbot had cases made for them and they are now treasured possessions of the monastery.

After six weeks the last word of the Codex was copied. The return journey was made in haste for University work needed the presence of the Scholars. They went back in triumph carrying with them the earliest Syriac version of the gospels yet discovered.

They arrived in England all in good health. It was unfortunately at the time when a certain quantity of ale was being sold that had been inadvertantly poisoned. Professor

Bensly on his arrival in England felt that he must have a glass of English beer. I was told that he was one of the victims of the poisoning. In three days he was dead. England lost a great scholar. His loss made a sorrowful home-coming for all the party. It may have been that he died when he would most have wished to die, after his great work was finished and after the most interesting and exciting time in his life.

Professor Bensly was an exceptionally modest and retiring man. At the learned gatherings he had to attend both in England and on the Continent he refused to take the limelight. Mrs. Burkitt told me that she often felt inclined to stamp her foot at him for letting men with not half, or a quarter, of his attainments speak on platforms and catch the public notice. He would wander in to the Assembly Hall rather late, dressed in his comfortable old clothes with a scarf, as was his wont, twisted carelessly about his neck and often well on one side. He would take a seat among the audience - that is if he could possibly escape being dragged up the steps of the platform - and there he would listen patiently to the words of a man who might be considered a beginner in knowledge compared to himself.

He was very absent minded and easily became absorbed in study. Once he was reading in the University Library. As he held the Office of Under Librarian he naturally knew the rules of the place but on this occasion he forgot time and found himself locked in and had to spend the night there. His pillow

of books could not have been very comfortable. In those pre-telephone days he had no means of letting the outside world know of his plight and so relieve Mrs. Bensly's anxiety

Mrs. Bensly was learned although far less so than her husband. She became blind but was able to write in braille-type her charming book "Our Journey to Sinai". I am glad to say that she was my friend until she died. It was only after I had lost her and her husband that I began to feel with pain that I had taken the friendship shown to me by them too much for granted.

Mr. Burkitt on his return from Sinai left the credit of the discovery of the importance of the manuscript to his dead friend, but it was he who first realized it.

I add a few words by Mr. Burkitt on the Codex :- "The importance of the Syriac palimpsest of the four gospels lately found by Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Gibson consists in this :- This version is probably older than the Syriac Diatessaron, which is not older than 170 A.D. Of this version only one other M.S. is known to survive our palimpsest, namely the codex in the British Museum used by Cureton; from this, however, more than half of the contents are wanting and its text has certainly undergone revision from the Greek. In the Sinai palimpsest considerably more than three fourths of the Gospels is legible and its text shows no clear signs of revision from the later Greek M.S.S.

(From a paper read by Mr. Burkitt at the Church Congress in 1895.)