

## Three Months with the Shakers—I

Editor's note: The following is the first installment of a reprint of a fourteen-part article first published in *Bizarre: For Fireside and Wayside* (Philadelphia) 4, pt. 2 (Oct. 15, 1853): 17-18; 4, pt. 3 (Oct. 22, 1853): 36-37; 4, pt. 5 (Nov. 4, 1853): 65-66; 4, pt. 6 (Nov. 12, 1853): 82-83; 4, pt. 7 (Nov. 19, 1853): 97-98; 4, pt. 14 (Jan. 7, 1854): 214-16; 4, pt. 16 (Jan. 21, 1854): 241-43; 4, pt. 18 (Feb. 4, 1854): 277-78; 4, no. 19 (Feb. 11, 1854): 289-91; 4, no. 20 (Feb. 18, 1854): 305-8; 4, pt. 23 (Mar. 11, 1854): 345-47; 4, pt. 24 (Mar. 18, 1854): 357-60; 4, pt. 25 (Mar. 25, 1854): 369-71; 4, pt. 26 (Apr. 1, 1854): 381-83. This is a remarkable account of a three-month residence with the Watervliet, N.Y., Shakers. The author was apparently residing at the Gathering Order (North Family) during the 1840s or early 1850s. The article was intended to conclude with its second installment, but continued for a total of fourteen installments. We know that the author was a male (having confessed his sins to a male elder), and he cites one of several reasons for "casting his lot" with them as his former involvement with "spiritual rappings." The account furnishes detail respecting the life of a novice—looking at Shaker life from "the bottom up." He is both critical and admiring—noting the positive aspects of Shaker communal life, but full of candor when commenting on what he perceives to be their foolish beliefs and practices. By the end he argues strenuously for a socialistic system based on Shaker principles but minus their peculiarities. This account will be reprinted in full in two or three installments in *ACSQ*, this being the first.

October 15, 1853

My impression has long been that when any considerable number of persons accept a certain idea and act upon it for a lengthened period, it must be because such idea comprises more or less of truth and practical worth. On this account I long ago concluded, that the followers of Ann Lee, among all their eccentricities of opinion and discipline, must hold some thought which merited examination and analysis, if these might be had; and the elucidation of which might, perhaps, benefit the world. It may be that I have not grasped the formative principle of their organization and life. But I can say, that I made some efforts to this end, during a three months residence among them, as a recognised member of their body.

I need not detain the reader by stating the reasons why I enrolled myself among these unfashionably dressed people, and for a season "cast in my lot with, them," though some of these reasons belong, I suspect,



to the same class with what are now called “spiritual rappings.” In one respect, my “writing myself Shaker” was accidental; since, when I visited the Community, I thought it possible I might stay among them and share their modes of life long enough to understand something about them, without absolutely becoming one of them. At the end, however, of one week, during which I was hospitably entertained, it was gently hinted, that I “must now be able to decide whether I would join them or not.” And yet this joining implied nothing beyond a probation more or less protracted, since I was told by one of the Elders, that not more than one in ten remained among them beyond the close of the first year. Why this is, will appear from my narrative itself.

Well, I at once resolved to stand the trial, and requested the instant performance-of the initiatory ceremonies. I was instructed to retire to the guest-chamber reserved for masculine visitors. Here I was soon joined by the “first Elder” of the “Family,” wherein I was stopping. This Family contained some seventy persons, (the sexes being nearly equalized,) lodged in three dwelling houses, with the accompaniment of suitable workshops for various manufactures. There were three other Families in the town, some less and some more numerous, which, together with this, constituted one Shaker Community.

The Elder entered the room, a rather intelligent, good-natured looking man of forty-five. Without superfluous preliminaries, he said, my first step must be a *full confession* of every sin I could remember having perpetrated, wished or imagined, during my whole life! Something of a demand this on a frail child of Adam, who had passed his thirtieth year. However, having resolved to experiment fairly on that mode of thought and life, which was held by some thousands of human beings, as the way of truth and righteousness and eternal blessedness, I addressed myself in all honesty to the task he assigned me.

It is, I believe, a veracious declaration of the Shakers, that the seal of *their* confessional has been kept no less inviolate, than that of the Catholic Priesthood. Yet I cannot say it was an agreeable office thus to retrace the oftentimes painful years of a long Past, that I might reproduce for a stranger’s hearing, my faults and sins of whatever description. I did not, however, shrink or conceal, but frankly spoke out every delinquency, which my memory could recall. And—explain it who can—I drew a positive, distinct relief and solace from the act.



The Elder behaved well. Neither by word or look did he imply the slightest reproach. And, more than this, by an occasional question intended by him, as a *possible* aid to my memory, he intimated indirectly, that I had not, after all, been the “chief of sinners” within his knowledge, but that there were misdeeds in the world, which personal experience had never taught me. I think these suggestions were kindly meant by him to console me in the performance of my humbling task.

I finished my disclosures at last, and his sole comment thereon was—”your next step is to have your hair cut!” I had noticed, for it was impossible to avoid noticing, the heads of the “Brethren,” but I had gone too far to halt now. So, procuring a pair of keen scissors, he clipped my hair in a fashion, whose supreme ugliness must be seen to be even imagined. On first peering in the glass, after the operation, I thought no created thing ever matched me in appearance. But, on further scrutiny, I concluded that certain others of the Family went even beyond me in the very point where I fancied myself unapproachable. This was some consolation.

I may here mention, that I puzzled myself long to solve the problem, for what imaginable reason such a mode of trimming the hair should have been adopted. This reason I casually learned at last from a member of several years standing. He said, that one of the primitive elders of the “Believers” being on a certain occasion, in the Spiritual World, noticed that the Angels all had their hair dressed in this way; and therefore, on returning home, he introduced the fashion here. He told this gravely and manifestly believed it.

The Shakers economise time. The haircutting was finished about noon, and it was not accordant with their habits that the remaining half day should be lost. Without delay, then, they arranged me in butternut-colored pants; round-toed, cowhide shoes; a bluish-gray vest shaped like those of our great grandfathers; and a long, tow frock reaching to my ancles; and conducted me to an upper room of a large brick workshop. In this building the business of broom-making is carried on, various simple machines being applied to the several stages of the process.—Many thousand dollars’ worth of these utensils are made here annually, and I was told, that the nett profits of the preceding year, were ten thousand dollars. As I was now to commence my apprenticeship, I was inducted into a room where four or five men were trimming the corn for the manufacture with machines, and was seated at one of these myself. So little complex was its make, that a few days taught me to use it with considerable facility.



We labored till 7 o'clock, which was our supper hour, and the time for closing our workshops. Supper, like all our meals, was conducted in a certain invariable order. The men resorted to a special second story room of the building, containing our eating hall, while the women gathered at another room. After waiting here a few minutes, we marched two and two, at the tinkling of a bell, to the door of the two elders' room, when they came out and headed our procession, as did the two elderesses the procession of the women. Thus, mutely and solemnly, we stalked down to a large, half under-ground hall, where two long tables were spread, as far apart as possible, for the two sexes. At a certain signal we all seated ourselves consentaneously, and after dropping our heads for a moment or two, in what purported to be a silent grace, we together commenced the meal. By usage this lasted exactly fifteen minutes, and luckless was he whose alimentiveness was large and his mastication slow. At the close of the quarter hour, both parties simultaneously rose in imitation of the four elders, and returned to the rooms above, the women leaving the hall first. Thence all dispersed at once to their own chambers.

These chambers, though uncarpeted and studiously plain, are otherwise well furnished and comfortable enough. All, however, are subject to the evil of being overcrowded. Mine, though not over sixteen feet square, had in it three beds, each occupied by two persons. They allow no one in health to sleep alone—a most disagreeable arrangement, which was adopted as an essential part of their moral discipline.

About eight o'clock, a bell summoned us to the evening religious service, which is held in a pretty long, wide hall in the same building which contains our eating room. We gathered there and seated ourselves in grave silence, the men and the women at opposite extremities of the apartment. A few minutes after all had arrived, the elders and elderesses entered, and the service immediately began. The men and women arranged themselves—the former having doffed their coats—in lines across the breadth of the room, the elders and elderesses occupying one extremity of the front line. They then commenced singing some one of their hymns, the air and words being both produced among the Shaker Body, and, as they allege, derived alike from angelic inspiration.

[We shall conclude this paper in the next number of BIZARRE.]



October 22, 1853

After thus chanting for a considerable time, they commenced a march around the hall, the men and women in separate lines of two and two. It was a queer sight. The gait and general movements, in the vast majority of cases, were awkward and ludicrous even to sublimity; the hands being incessantly brought together and thrown asunder to the arms length, and the march being that of a “half-curtsyng” trot. Often, during this ceremony, the singing was also kept up by all the marchers who could sing at all. Often, too, at intervals in this march, the whole assemblage would suddenly change their advance into a strange species of stationary shuffle, which they call a “dance.” It was customary, and I believe invariable, during this procession, to have a band of male and female singers occupy the centre of the room, and chaunt for the purpose of timing our steps.

There are several kinds of these “dances,” not greatly dissimilar, and neither intricate in construction, nor very graceful in appearance. They are all an essential part of the Shaker worship, and in authentication of it, they quote the fact of “Miriam and all the women going out with timbrels and with dances;” of “David’s *dancing* before the ark,” &c. &c. The *manual gesticulation*, too, which is incessant with them, is an act of worship, and justified by such passages as “glorify God in your *body*, and in your spirit,” &c.

I believe I witnessed all their various dances on this my initial evening. As the marching, the dancing, the gesticulation, and ‘the singing went on, the assembly became wrought up to a state that reminded me of what I had read of the whirling Dervishes of the East. For suddenly the whole company broke from their ranks into a wild whirl, traversing and retraversing the room in all directions, and each two, on meeting, kissing each other with no slight *impressment*. (Of course it must be understood that men only kissed men, as did women, women, for any other proceeding would have horrified the “Believers.”) For myself, I found the operation very little to my taste, since the men were mostly, both stolid in aspect, and extremely *rough-faced*, from the fact that shaving above twice a week was interdicted by law.

I should have stated that the leading Elder made a brief address at the opening of the meeting, (as I found afterwards was his usual practice.) Occasionally he was followed by the second Elder, and one or both the Elderesses. It was not very unusual, either, for one or more members of



either sex to address the assembly in the course of the meeting. These addresses, for the most part, differed from any I had ever heard in other professedly religious gatherings. *Wherein*, I will presently explain.

One other scene will suffice to complete my account of this evening. Towards the close, the second Elderess, an Englishwoman of some twenty-two, suddenly began whirling on her axis with considerable velocity. She continued this rotation for ten minutes or more, never pausing an instant, till I expected to see her drop from dizziness. How any normal brain could endure this movement with impunity, amazes me. even now. She stopped, apparently unaffected, and with great volubility poured forth, for several minutes, a stream of words, or articulate sounds, totally unintelligible, and resembling no language I could recognise, if I had ever heard it. As she was uneducated, it could not have been a series of passages in some oriental tongue, committed by her to memory for purposes of delusion. If she had *devised* and committed this protracted jargon to memory with the same view, she must have had a marvellous invention, and an incredible memory. The Shaker explanation was, that this woman had the “gift of tongues,” and that the present was a specimen. They declared also that such exhibitions were caused by’ the presence and operation of “Spirits” at the moment. The effect of their operation did not uniformly take the same shape; for at other times this same person would merely profess to deliver a *message* from “Spirits then with us, or a brief exhortation. There were one or two other women, also professing to speak from spiritual dictation, though no other endowed with the “gift of tongues.” But all alike went through uncouth bowings, and other movements, before beginning to speak in tongues known or unknown. I couldn’t but think something wiser and brighter might have proceeded from so high a source.

I was told that some stranger, versed in the oriental languages, being once present, and listening to this “unknown tongue,” pronounced it Arabic or Hebrew. And this was apparently the belief of the Shakers; I could not, however, decide how generally the anomalies, of which these are specimens, were actually accredited; for I saw and heard not a little, during my stay, which looked like anything but faith. It was hazardous, however, for any one to seem unbelieving, for reasons I shall indicate hereafter.

I have been thus minute in describing the proceedings of my first evening, because three or four evenings per week were invariably spent in the same manner,—no one being allowed to be absent without special leave, and because the Sunday routine at Church was principally the same.



At the latter place I witnessed neither the “kissing worship,” or the speaking unintelligibly or intelligibly from instant spiritual dictation. Whether or not this was owing to the presence of the “world’s people,” as spectators, I cannot tell.

Our services lasted from one to two hours, when we were dismissed to our rooms. It is rather “contrary to order,” (in the customary phrase,) to sit up after nine o’clock, and indeed both then and on after evenings, I got so excessively fatigued with the unfamiliar labors of the day, that I was glad enough to retire at that hour.

November 5, 1853

Inexpressibly tired as I was, my head had no sooner touched the pillow, than I fell into a profound, dreamless sleep. It seemed to me, that no interval whatever had elapsed, when I was awaked by the ringing of the bell. On looking, I could dimly note, (for it was yet almost totally dark) that my room mates were all up dressing, On inquiry, I found that this bell was the signal for getting up and commencing work. Of course I “ followed suite.” After dressing, I noticed that each kneeled, and with bowed head remained a few minutes silent. I was told, that “ according to order” all must offer a mute prayer on rising each morning.

There were no means of lavation in our chambers, but we were obliged to traverse the broad inner yard, to an underground room in the edifice containing most of the workshops, where I found a sufficiently abundant supply of water. We then dispersed to our various shops, and by lamplight pursued our labors for an hour or two, till the bell summoned us to breakfast. Fifteen minutes having been allowed for this, we worked again till the dinner hour of twelve. Another fifteen minutes, and we labored till darkness brought the supper hour.

On going to my room after supper, I noticed that my companions were brushing up, and somewhat changing their working dress, and I was told that I must do likewise in preparation for the evening’s conversation meeting. (I will not be confident that “conversation” was the qualifying word, but this was the meaning.) Well, the old familiar bell sounded, and we “put out” for meeting. This sort of assemblage differed wholly from the worshipping one before described. From half a dozen to a dozen of each sex, assembled in some one of the inhabited rooms in the edifice containing



the worshipping hall. On entering our room, I noticed two rows of chairs, with some eight or ten feet between, extending along either side of the chamber, with as much regularity as two ranks of soldiers on parade. The women seated themselves in one row, and the men in the other.

The avowed purpose for which we were sent here, was that the two sexes, who, "according to order," had elsewhere hardly a chance to approach or speak to each other, might converse, compare notes, &c. &c. But it was a decided failure, so far as concerned any real interchange of thought and feeling. To mo this first evening was at least supportable, for it was a novelty, and I was buoyed up by curiosity. But on the whole, these were the flattest, emptiest, dreariest social gatherings I ever attended on earth, and this is a seemingly extravagant saying. For those who had long been "believers," apparently had neither thought nor feeling strictly deserving the name. Their Shaker life seemed to have extinguished, or at least put in abeyance, both mind and heart, and left only a sort of material vitality. Reading neither books nor newspapers; never going beyond their own precincts; and none of them originally having had more than a "reading, writing, and ciphering " education; of course they had nothing to think of, feel, or talk about, save what occurred among themselves. And these occurrences being impressibly monotonous, their souls of necessity were very like stagnant pools encircled by mountains, which shut out from their surfaces all passing benefits.

And those who had recently become members, if they possessed either education or thoughts, were quashed from uttering the latter, by an instinctive perception, that this was neither the time nor the place for them.

I cannot, for the life of me, recall what used to be the staple or character of such conversation as did actually take place. I do, however recollect that all seemed burdened more or less with *ennui*.

One or two diversions of the tedium were often brought into action. One was, the singing of our various songs. And this music, though not of the highest order, did actually prove an inexpressible relief to the dreariness of the hours. Another was, the reading of extracts from a certain reform paper, taken by some member,—a paper which contained some quite interesting and able things. This reading was always done by a member of two years' standing, who had joined with his wife and two children,—much to the discontent of the wife. He was perhaps thirty-three years old; was originally a shoemaker; next a Millerite preacher of the most zealous



kind; and now a Shaker, with large additions to his primitive zeal. He was an enthusiastic, active, restless man, of considerable native sagacity, and some imagination, ingenuity, and general ability. His besetting sin was a love of dictation and rule, which not seldom embroiled him with such as did not like being incessantly intermeddled with. He was, at the outset a great friend and patroniser of myself, but it was not long before we clashed on many accounts which need not be specified. Well, his reading, with some casual remarks, which could scarcely fail to be suggested by the subject, coupled with the singing, did enable me to get through these converzationes *alive*, and that was all.

These meetings were from one to two hours in duration, and none could absent themselves therefrom without the express permission of an elder or elderess. The evenings of the week were divided between these and the worshipping assemblies, so that every evening was occupied by one or the other.

Thus, from my description of the day's and the evening's employment, it will be perceived to be the Shaker's policy to leave, so far as may be, no moment of idleness, leisure or solitude. Social work; social worship; social eating; social sleep even; together with the social meetings for conversation, in "which Shaker life is about the, whole and only subject that can be talked about: unavoidably absorb every moment of the time. The main reason for this I may touch upon when I come to speak of the Shaker beliefs.

November 12, 1853

I have thus described the ordinary routine of life among the "Believers." As I before suggested, the mode of worship at the church, or "meeting-house," oh the Sabbath, differs in so few and unessential particulars from the tri-weekly domestic worship already described, that it were superfluous giving it a separate notice. I will simply mention that there is but one public Sunday service.

As I purpose, before concluding these sketches, to give some account of the peculiar dogmas of Shakerism, as also of the peculiar traits of character produced in the "Believers" by these dogmas, coupled with their general life-discipline, I will now briefly chronicle whatever is personal to myself, and thus leave the ground clear.



For four or five weeks I continued my labors in the room where I was first stationed, preparing the broom-corn for use by help of a simple machine. At the end of this term, I was advanced a degree in the rank of my employment, and, I may add, its laboriousness also. My work now was to polish the handles of the brooms. These handles were first turned in a machine invented by one of the members, and so smoothly were they rounded, that most persons would have thought any additional polish superfluous. Not so the Shakers, whose boast it is to offer nothing for sale which is not superior to what is elsewhere produced or prepared. My task now was to rub those handles briskly with sand-paper of two qualities, a coarse and a fine, until their surface was to the touch like satin or marble. The concluding touch was to fasten a sheepskin loop, for hanging up the besom, in a hole made by mechanism in the upper extremity.

I had thought thirteen hours per day, steadily devoted to broom-corn cutting, laborious enough for one whose only implement of toil had previously been the pen; and many a time I had finished my day's work some hours before the others. And to do the "Elders" justice, they had cheerfully acquiesced in this, and had shown themselves very tolerant to the "weaknesses" resulting from my "bad education." But in coming to the "polishing," I found my former employment had been more child's play in the comparison. My present work was excessively severe, and I would get so tired, that I could scarcely drag one foot after the other, but every muscle was so strained that a thorough cudgelling could scarce have made me feel lamer or sorer. My only room-companion, a German, the most irritable and mal-content of mortals, was so dissatisfied at my quitting my employment so early in the afternoon, and turning off so few handles per diem, that he kept fretting and grumbling without a moment's cessation,—a circumstance which did not add to my comfort.

My time here, however, was brief. I was next transferred to the largest of the workrooms,—the broom-making,—and put to the task of uniting the handle with the brush, or completing the manufacture for the market. Great help is afforded in this process by one or two simple machines, invented by the same person before mentioned, and a single day sufficed to familiarise me with them sufficiently to enable me to produce a broom "after a fashion." A very different looking article it was, however, from that wrought by my half dozen companions, who had been long engaged in the process. There were those among them who could make six, eight and ten dozen per day, every one finished with an exactitude and nicety which



I have never seen approached in these domestic implements manufactured elsewhere. As these were sold at \$2.50 per dozen one may here catch a glimpse of the reasons why Shaker communities invariably grow rich, since for all this profitable labor the workman receives nothing, save food, clothes, and shelter.

Although in the six or seven weeks of my broom-making, I so far improved as to turn off a tolerably handsome article, I never got able to finish over three or four dozen per day, and even to do this often fatigued me so excessively, that many a time I have flung myself on the floor in mid afternoon, and instantly sunk into a sleep hardly less deep and dreamless than that of the dead. I had moreover, my full share of hurts, especially by thrusting into my hand and wrist the big needle used in a part of the process. On the whole, however, I felt quite proud of my broom-making skill.

A few weeks after this last change, a lucky accident gave me rest for a week or more. An immense boil appeared on the back of one of my wrists, and for a while completely disabled me. I was transferred to an apartment in the Hospital building, which fortunately was vacant at the time. Here, with a room, bed, and rocking-chair to myself, and served with my meals where I was, I spent several days quite agreeably in reading all the books and pamphlets I could collect relating to the history, doctrine and rules of Shakerism. The information thus obtained, with my inferences therefrom, as also from what I personally observed, I shall hereafter present in an abbreviated form.

On my recovery I returned to my brooms, and there continued till I quitted the community.

It would require so much space to detail the reasons for my leaving, that if I give them at all, I will defer them till I have spoken of the history, the doctrines, and the discipline of these people, which I shall eater upon in my next.

November 19, 1853

With the specialties of Shakerism I am not acquainted. Indeed I am not aware that any such history has ever been drawn out. During my residence among these people, I never met with or heard any such mentioned. The reason why the fortunes of this sect have never been recorded may possibly



be, that the sect itself has, even to the present day continued so insignificant in numbers, and has exercised so little influence on the general course of events, that no one qualified for the task, has deemed it worth the requisite labor.

Nor can I pronounce myself familiar with all the items of their religious creed. Certain beliefs do exist among them, and are supposed to be accepted by the members of their communities; but whether a complete schedule of Shaker dogmas has ever been noted down, I know not.

In what I have to say, therefore, of Shaker History and Doctrine, I shall not assume to exhaust either topic, but shall merely throw together the miscellaneous items, gathered from my three months' associates and some pamphlets then casually encountered.

Shakerism, if I mistake not, is now some seventy years old, it took its rise from Anne Lee, the wife of an English blacksmith. She evidently must have been of very considerable native ability and practical energy, and in the absorbing and persistent vehemence of her religious enthusiasm, she reminds us of Jemima Wilkinson, George Fox, and numerous others of kindred type. She regarded herself as a recipient of Divine inspiration, commissioned to gather a religious community, far purer and holier than the world had witnessed aforetime;—a community, which, spreading till it embraced the entire race, should reinstate on earth the primeval Eden. The dogmas she proclaimed, and the mode of life she inculcated, were, in many respects different from and condemnatory of those generally prevailing about her. And as those were not days of religious liberality or even toleration, she encountered no slight persecution, and was once, at least, imprisoned for a considerable time. Like all of her class, she claimed for herself, and her followers claimed on her behalf, certain preternatural endowments, such as prophecy, reading the unspoken thoughts and looks of others, &c. &c.

How large was the number of persons she prevailed upon to admit her claims, and adopt her peculiarities and belief and practice in England, I never learned. The fact, however, eventually was, that on account of persecution, and maybe other considerations, she emigrated to this country, with sundry converts, male and female. Her husband accompanied her, though, according to one of her dogmas to be noticed hereafter, she no longer reckoned marriage as permitted by heaven—a dogma which, it seems, her husband at first himself accepted. He, however, not long after his arrival here, abjured his new faith, and, I think, took another “ help-



meet.”

On first coming to this country, she resided for a while in the neighbourhood of the township named “Watervliet,” but then, if I err not, entitled “Niskeuna,” six miles from Albany and Troy. Here she busied herself in propagating her views, and made some accessions to her numbers. Finally she purchased,—with funds derived I know not whence,—a tract of land in Niskeuna, and commenced the establishment of a community, organised and conducted, both theoretically and practically according to that peculiar plan which she professed to have received through inspiration.

This land was sandy, lean, and indifferently productive, as it came into her possession. But as,—whatever else may be said of her followers,—it cannot be denied that they execute in the most skilful and thorough manner, whatever they undertake ; they transmuted, by proper cultivation, this poor waste into one extended, exuberantly fertile and admirably kept garden. And the four several” Families,” growing ultimately out of this single small group,—two of them numbering, probably, one hundred individuals each, and the other two something over half that number apiece,—have accumulated wealth supposed to exceed a million of dollars. The “family” I was in was located on the very spot, where “Mother Anne” first entered on her work of organization.

The largest Shaker community now existing is in New Lebanon, N. Y., some forty miles from Watervliet, and numbers, I think, several hundred members. It is reckoned the Head Establishment, or what might be named, “The Metropolitan See” of Shakerdom, and is the customary residence of the two “Ministers,” who are the acknowledged “Heads” of the sect, from whose decisions there is no appeal, and to whom an appeal lies from all subordinate jurisdictions. Of the Shaker system of government I shall speak with something more of detail hereafter. I will now note down what I ascertained to be some of their cardinal doctrines.

Anne Lee is held to be, as she declared herself to be, the “Logos,” — “Word,” — “Christ,” or “Messiah,” in that “second coming” predicted by Jesus of Nazareth. The first incarnation of the Divine “Word” was in a man, Jesus, who, through this indwelling Power, became the Redeemer of the male sex from the primal “curse.” By the second incarnation of the same “word” in Anne Lee, she became the Redeemer of the female sex, from the same “curse.” In other phrase, her followers held her to be the “Christ” or “Messiah” as literally, and in precisely the same way as was Jesus, the son of Mary.



They do not regard her, or Jesus, as the Supreme God, though the only audible prayer I ever listened to from our first “Elder” was addressed directly to her. As, however, abstract notions and metaphysical distinctions are foreign to the Shaker mind, they probably have no very definite ideas of the essential nature of either of these two beings, or of their rank in the universe.

The popular dogma of the Trinity is not among their beliefs. Their Supreme Being is *dual*, or male and female,— the one entitled “God,” and the other, “Mother Wisdom.”

They accept the doctrine of the “fall of Man,” though not the ordinary views of the cause or occasion of such “fall.” This cause (taught Mother Anne,) was the abuse or pollution of the marriage relation. On this ground she based, what was with her a cardinal doctrine, an absolute *sine qua non*, the doctrine, that in the existing fallen depraved condition of the race, marriage was a positive sin and glaring impurity; or indeed any other relation between the sexes, than such as exists between man and man, and woman and woman. When pressed with the remark, that the adoption of their views would, in a single generation, leave the earth a depopulated waste, their reply is, “o let it be, if it must be so,—better an empty world, than a world filled with depraved sinful creatures.” To which they generally add, that “if Shakerism should ever once cover the earth, and, by gathering the entire race within its fold, should restore them to their pristine purity, an Omnipotent Being would be at no loss in devising measures to provide the globe with inhabitants, were it His pleasure that it should continue inhabited.”

Concerning the future state their ideas are not very definite, though perhaps as much so as those of most other sects. They do not hold punishment to be eternal, though adequate penalties will be inflicted for the sins perpetrated in the body. The life beyond the grave is probationary, like the present,—something, in short, distantly resembling the Catholic Purgatory, and the “middle state” of Swedenberg. It will probably surprise many readers to learn what persons, sufficiently well known on earth, have been converted to Shakerism in the spirit-world, and how unlike are the present occupations of some of these to their favorite pursuits here on earth.

Of these and other matters I shall speak hereafter.



January 7, 1854

The Shakers believe, or profess to believe, that conversions to their system go on far more rapidly in the spiritual world, than here. They need such a belief, one would think, to sustain their confidence in their views, since their present numbers cannot exceed seven or eight thousand. No other sect in history, to my knowledge, however extravagant, objectionable, or even infamous their dogmas and practices, ever existed seventy years, without gathering a greater than the above number of adherents.

They have among them a manuscript volume, in which are registered many strange and supernatural occurrences,—among others, the visitations and declarations of various spirits to one and another of their several communities. Thus, George Fox, William Penn, John Wesley, Washington, Franklin, Napoleon, and numerous others, who on earth had been eminent in diverse spheres, are recorded to have visited the “Believers,” and to have stated their conversion to Shakerism since their departure from earth. Washington is now preaching to the spirits of the North American Indians: and, if I mistake not, Napoleon is also a preacher, though to whom I have forgotten!

The Shakers appear to accept the Bible, as a Divine Revelation, like other sects; and like them, of course, put their own interpretation on its contents. I say, “*appear* to accept,” because, though I believe all the lodging rooms contained at least one copy of the Scriptures, I cannot recollect ever seeing a single person reading them. Our leading Elder, however, during our dancing service, used frequently to quote the Old Testament passages, where dancing is mentioned or enjoined, as part of the religious ceremonial of the Hebrews. He did this, I presume, to reconcile myself and sundry other newly entered catechumens to the anomalous spectacle of a religious “hop.”

Moreover, the person, whom I have before mentioned as having been first a shoemaker and then a Millerite preacher before becoming a Shaker, was accustomed to preach an extempore discourse at our Sunday meetings in the church; on which occasion he took a text from the Bible, according to the prevailing usage elsewhere. It was really curious to hear him interpret the types, figures and ceremonies of the Hebrew ritual, as well as the predictions of Daniel and the other prophets and the mystic passages of St. John’s Apocalypse, in accordance with the history and the peculiarities of belief and practice of the Shakers. He certainly exhibited wonderful



ingenuity and subtlety and a fruitful imagination; and I could not see why the texts cited by him did not establish his own case as clearly and strongly, as, in the mouths of other controvertists; I had before heard them employed to confirm a score of other religious dogmas, each irreconcilably hostile to all the rest. Had I needed proof of the utter futility and the worse than uselessness of mere *textual* polemics for securing their own desired end, I certainly had abundance of it here. In legal instruments, it is from the general scope of their contents, that we gather their meaning and purpose. No matter though two or more sentences, severed from their context or viewed without reference to the *prevailing tenor* of the record, may clash with or contradict each other apparently or even *really*. If the *general current* of its sense runs in *one direction* and towards a *single goal*, the inter-hostile passages are simply nullified, as “surplusage,” and the *ruling intent* decides. Were this equitable, common-sense axiom of law transferred to the interpretation of Holy Writ, we should no longer see the professed followers of Christ split into two hundred inter-antagonistic sects, or the words of prophets and apostles, as well as of the very “Master” himself, tortured into a semblance of confirmation of the wildest and even the most hideous, blasphemous and loathsome dreams, that may flit athwart the nightmare-ridden imaginations of incurably diseased and desperately perverted minds!

It was, too, both curious and instructive to hear this ex-Millerite preacher transfer to the advocacy of his present Shaker Faith the *very texts*, wherewith he had formerly established the verity of Second-Adventism to the unqualified satisfaction of both himself and others. I forget how he disposed of Daniel’s “times, time and half a time,” with other dates noted by this and the other prophets, as well as the apostles. But the Millerite doctrine of a *literal* “burning up of the world” he now construed *figuratively*. Thus, the “fire” of the Holy Spirit, through the intermedium of Shakerism, was to “burn up” the world’s falsities of opinion and sins of practice; the whole race were to become “true believers;”—and then they would be “taken up” into the *metaphorical* “heaven” of Shaker life, occupation and *bliss*,—that derived from broom-making, basket-weaving, whiplash-twisting, herb-curing, essence-distilling, &c., &c., inclusive. He had concocted a world beside of this species of interpretation, but these specimens must suffice.

I remarked, that ostensibly the Shakers recognized the Scriptures as Divine. Hence, I suppose, they regard its moral precepts, as binding rules of life, as they do its items of faith, in the sense they interpret them, as



obligatory on their belief. From appearances, however, I inferred that they held in yet higher estimation a volume, of about the bulk of the New Testament, penned by one of their own members, and published at their own charge. This volume is entitled the “Sacred Roll;” and, according to a long and minute detail given by the writer in his preface, together with numerous affidavits subjoined in an appendix by leading Shakers in various communities, many strange and preternatural incidents preceded and accompanied the production of the work. Among these were visions and audible predictions of angels, grand scenic representations of future events, &c., &c.

The writer’s account of the circumstances attending the composure of his book is substantially the following. It was announced to him by angels that he had been selected for this office. He begged to be excused on the ground of incompetency. He was told this might not be. He still persisted in his suit, and it was a considerable time before he fully acquiesced in his appointment.

Finally, he says, he was instructed by an angel to dress himself in a certain prescribed mode, and to repair, at a given hour, each morning, to a hill in the neighborhood of the establishment, provided with pen, ink and paper, and there obey the directions given him at the time. This was at New Lebanon, New York, of which community he was a member. He complied with these injunctions, and the angel, there visibly present, dictated audibly what he was to record, and he noted it down *verbatim et literatim*. If I rightly remember, these interviews continued six hours per day for six months, in which time the volume, or, at least, his part of it, was completed. The testimonials above mentioned, being added in an appendix, the volume was published, and at once took its place as a religious manual throughout Shakerdom.

The book is substantially a *resumé*, or exposition of the principal Shaker beliefs and usages, intermingled with messages and exhortations from sundry ancient Hebrew prophets and apostles. The moral tone of the work, if my memory serves me, is sufficiently correct. An “outside barbarian,” however, can find in it nothing elevated or profound enough to necessitate supernatural intervention for its production; nor can he understand why angels should have been called in to indite a description of doctrines, which all Shakers are supposed to hold, and of practices, which are daily passing before the eye in every Shaker community.

If I mistake not, the inditing angel directed a copy of the work to be



sent to each college in the United States, and to sundry persons, occupying high official stations, accompanied with intimations, that a neglect of its requisitions, would be followed by disastrous consequences. I think the book also states, that within two years from the date of its publication, some tremendous crisis was to occur in the world's affairs and condition, the nature of which made it a matter of vital moment to the welfare and safety of all, that they should seek a shelter within the Shaker fold.

As these two years have long been past, and neither these "disastrous consequences" nor this "tremendous crisis" have, to my knowledge, occurred, I should like to ask my old "Elder" how he explains the nonfulfilment of these fearful predictions.