

## CHAPTER XII

ST. ANNE'S HILL. MRS. ARMISTEAD

### I

What classic scenes arise on ev'ry side,  
The sage's and the poet's mind to fill !  
And yet no bard the tribute hath supplied,  
That truth demands for sainted Anna's Hill.

The variegated landscape to explore,  
Th' historic Muse here loves to take her stand ;  
And points, applauding Britain's chiefs of yore,  
To Thames's green margent her recording hand.

So wrote the Reverend Peter Cunningham in *Saint Anne's Hill : A Poem*, "respectfully and gratefully inscribed by the Obliged Author" to Charles James Fox on his fifty-first birthday, January 24, 1800. It speaks highly of Charles's public merits and private virtues, but it is not much of a poem. Nothing, however, could be surer of pleasing its recipient than praise of St. Anne's Hill, the home that for over twenty years was the happiest circumstance of Fox's life. Situated at Chertsey, some two miles south of the Thames below Staines, it still commands an unspoilt view of the Surrey plains and woodlands, and the garden, that so often touched his correspondence with an idyllic note, is as peacefully secluded as it was when he wandered about it in his green baize apron with pruning scissors in his hand. Later tenants have enlarged the house, somewhat pretentiously, but in the cuts to the parson's poem it is a gracious little villa with a trellised verandah, and embellished with the trimly designed caprice of the landscape gardener.

Fox was living here by 1783, and either then or shortly afterwards he was joined by Mrs. Armistead. According to Brayley's *History of Surrey* the place was, in fact, her



property, and had been since 1778, the same authority asserting that she took Fox there. It may well have been so. This lady's earlier life is obscure to history, though it was by no means obscure in itself. Born in 1751, she was two years younger than Fox. Her name is spelt variously Armistead, Armstead, and Armitstead, but although the editors of Lady Sarah Lennox's *Life and Letters* refer to her as the "widow of Mr. Armistead," there seems to be no evidence that such a gentleman ever existed. When she married Fox in 1795, she signed the register Elizabeth B. Cane, which name has sometimes been misread as Blane. She is said to have been the daughter of a methodist shoemaker, but as a young woman she appears to have put methodism firmly aside. Disconcerting as it may be to morality, the fact is that "Bet Armistead," who when she was a little over thirty settled down to a life of charming and blameless domesticity with Fox, to whom she brought the most devoted care and a highly intelligent companionship, spent several years in openly promiscuous amours. By 1773, she was a familiar figure in the fashionable town, associated with a certain "notorious establishment" in Marlborough Street. According to Lady Mary Coke, she at this time succeeded Nancy Parsons as the mistress of John Frederick Sackville, third Duke of Dorset, with whom she lived for three years. On June 27, 1778, James Hare wrote to George Selwyn: "Derby is gone into camp near Winchester, and has built a kitchen and a stable for twelve horses, while Lady Derby is living away at Brighthelmston. He does not, however, think his establishment complete without a declared mistress, and he is therefore to take Mrs. Armstead from Lord George." The Countess of Derby, it may be added, had recently run away with Dorset, and to make the action duly symmetrical we may surmise that the Lord George was Lord George Germain, who was Dorset's uncle. How long



the Derby affair lasted we do not know, but by 1782 Elizabeth was on terms of intimacy with the Prince of Wales. In August of that year Lady Sarah Napier wrote to Lady Susan that "the Prince of W. . . calls upon Mrs. Armsted every morning," and the heir's new passion was carefully encouraged by his uncle Cumberland. Lord Cholmondeley, a Whig of small eminence, makes a brief entry on this somewhat crowded scene, and then follows the quiet and enduring fidelity of St. Anne's Hill.

## II

Elizabeth Fox, as she legally became in 1795, and as she is so rarely called in the records, was a woman of unquestionable beauty. She sat several times for Reynolds, his appointment book mentioning her name in 1772, 1779, 1781, and 1784. The portrait here given is described in the catalogue under the last of these dates as "Looking to right, large black hat, white plumes." It is sufficient evidence of her attractions. She had a tall, elegant figure, and, humble as her origins may have been, a manner notable in an age of fine manners. She is said to have been at one time waiting woman to Mrs. Abingdon; she may have been more closely associated with the stage. When she came into Fox's life, she was still in the prime of her looks, and she had a mind deficient neither in wit nor learning. Once she had engaged his affection, she was able to hold it and make him happy for the rest of his days. She took charge of his health, his habits, and his leisure, and was repaid by a grateful and unfailing courtesy. If he fell ill, she would take him off to nurse him at Bath; if he was tired, she sheltered him; if he was for an excursion, she was eager company. She could tease him too. She complained that he would not listen to what she said, and when they were married her wedding gift was a seal showing an ear held by a hand.



A few references taken, without discrimination of dates, from Charles's letters will serve to show the deeply contented nature of his regard for her. "Mrs. Armistead and I, and perhaps one or two more, mean to dine at Maidenhead Bridge on Saturday, and to go after dinner on the water to see the boys row up to Surley Hill." That is to his nephew, Henry Fox, "dear young one," as also is this: "Though my fortnight is not near out, Mrs. A. says I must write to you once more before I leave this place." "Here [St. Anne's Hill] am I, passing a most comfortable week of holidays, the weather delicious, and the place looking beautiful beyond description, and the nightingales singing, and Mrs. A. as happy as the day is long—all of which circumstances combine to enable me to bear public calamities with wonderful philosophy." And again: "I need not tell you that Mrs. A. is as happy as I am, and she says she only wants to see the young one to make her completely so. God bless you, my dearest Henry." "Soon after I wrote to you last from Thetford, I was called home by a most severe fever which had attacked Mrs. Armistead, but which lasted a very little time, and from which thank God she is perfectly recovered." "I suppose you will not go to Venice again, but if you do, pray see Sig. Gazzaniga, a composer, and give him Mrs. A.'s compliments and mine, and desire him to send her some new airs, easy and pretty." And, since a note so pleasing cannot weary the reader, we may continue: "I must not let the post of to-day go without telling you how very delighted I am with your verses to Mrs. A. . . . I do not know that the verses, as such, are particularly good, but there is a kindness in them and something altogether that made me feel quite happy when I read them, and indeed you are right, for I believe that if ever there was a place that might be called the seat of true happiness, St. Anne's is that place." And this, after ten years of life together: "Mrs. A. and I had each



This Twenty fourth Day of February in the Year One Thousand nine hundred and nine

This Marriage was solemnized by me Samuel Leary Rector

In the presence of Thomas Martin Gene Borden

of [the] Parish of [the] County of [the] State of [the]

Married in this Church by Licence this 28 Day of September and 95

This Marriage was solemnised between Us Elizabeth B. Cone in the presence of Mary Dapozzibile

by me [the] Rector



a letter from you last week, I need not say how much pleasure your letter to her gave me. You were never more right than in what you say of my happiness derived from her, I declare I think my affection for her increases every day. She is a comfort to me in every misfortune, and makes me enjoy doubly every pleasant circumstance of life; there is to me a charm and a delight in her society, which time does not in the least wear off, and for real goodness of heart if she ever had an equal, she certainly never had a superior." "I told you . . . how very much Mrs. A. admires the ring you sent her. She desires me to tell you that the hours here, which always used to be too short, grow shorter than ever, and that we improve in laziness, which however as to me is a false accusation, for, so far from being idle, I hardly have time for anything, though what the time is taken up with is a little difficult to say." And, as a last example: "I am perfectly happy in the country. I have quite resources enough to employ my mind; and the great resource of all, literature, I am fonder of every day; and then the Lady of the Hill is one continual source of happiness to me. I believe few men, indeed, ever were so happy in that respect as I."

In this atmosphere of mutual affection, life at St. Anne's Hill passed without a breath of discord. An abundance of wild oats may have been sown; they had certainly come to a very satisfactory harvest. No explanation is given by Fox or his friends of the reasons why he and Elizabeth waited until ten years of union had passed before they went through the ceremony of marriage. The existence and demise of a possible Mr. Armistead might be the solution after all. Charles had a friend, J. Pery, who was rector of the little parish of Wyton in Huntingdonshire, about two miles out from the county town. To him in September, 1795, Elizabeth went on a visit for the necessary fortnight's residence,



and on the 28th of that month the wedding took place, as testified by the entry here reproduced from the church register. It has been suggested, by Lord John Russell among others, that Fox kept the event secret, and did not openly acknowledge his wife until he visited France with her in 1802, after the Peace of Amiens. The theory has little to support it, and is highly improbable. A formality that made no difference to the settled habit and conduct of their lives may well have seemed to them of no public importance, and Charles may insensibly have continued to speak of Elizabeth as Mrs. A. But that there was any attempt at concealment when the woman, who for ten years had openly kept house with him and been on cordial terms with his family and friends, became his wife, is not credible. It is true that in one case at least Elizabeth was never received at a house where Charles was always welcome. The Bedfords, the Spencers, and other great Whig families did not stint their hospitality to a woman who could grace their or any society. But Coke of Norfolk, at Holkham, where Charles was frequently a guest in the shooting season, had other views. We might wish, perhaps, that Charles had been stiffer about it, and declined the single invitation. But Coke and he were old and close friends, and there seemed to have been no ill-will in the matter. Coke made civil enquiries about Mrs. Fox in his correspondence, and sent her presents of game. He had, as we shall see, shown a much more considerable generosity to her husband. But he did not ask her to his house. Had she been mortified, there can be no doubt as to what Charles would have done. It is even likely that if he expressed any misgivings she laughed at him, and told him to go and shoot his partridges in peace. We do not know the circumstances. But if we did, we might still wish that he had found his partridges elsewhere.



## III

Further occasional references to Elizabeth Fox will be made, particularly when we come to the closing years of her husband's life. But it will be suitable to insert here certain passages from diaries that she kept in later years. These manuscript diaries are now in the possession of the Hon. and Rev. Edward V. R. Powys, Fox's great-grand-nephew, who has kindly allowed me to make these extracts. The little volumes, covering a period of something like twenty years, for the most part are concerned with the minutiae of daily life. But they show a vivacious, alert personality, and frequent and delightful touches of character. The references to Fox are rare, but always of the tenderest nature. Lists of books read are included, and have many pleasant echoes of earlier days at St. Anne's Hill. These representative entries are taken from two volumes covering the years 1822-1824 and 1827-1828. I have thought well to print them in two groups: one (A) of a general character, the other (B) relating to Charles.

## A.

1822. (Aged 71.)

Aug. 12. A very fine day. Went to Chertsey in the donkey car.

Aug. 15. [Friends] dined with us on a fine haunch of venison from the Duke of Bedford, which was very good, so was the whole of the dinner.

Nov. 13. [To the play at Drury Lane] did not get back to H[olland] H[ouse] till near one.

1823.

Feb. 10. Got to dear home at near five obliged to have four horses the last stage the roads were so heavy.

Feb. 28. A fineish day of the cold sort went out early to look over laundry and the other out-



buildings and was sorry to see them all in a dreadful state and in great want of repairs and how I shall ever be able to do anything to them I am sure I know not. Oh that I could recall back a few years. I have been improvident, but alas am now paying very dearly for it, God knows, and I hope will forgive me.

April 23. heard the nightingale for the first time, she was heard in the garden on Friday and so was the cuckoo.

May 12. [Drury Lane] to see Mr Kean in Richard and beautifully he did it.

May 14. I am longing to get to dear home again.

May 23. better, and went to dear home.

May 26. [During another visit] I do long to be at dear home.

May 31. [London] very hot and disagreeable I do long to be at dear home.

June 8. I felt very uncomfortable at parting with dear little Maria it is a foolish thing to allow oneself to love any child that does not belong to one but there is no happiness without having something to love. I left Town at half past eleven . . . and got to dear home before four found all well and dear home looking so beautiful.

Aug. 12. The Thames looked very gay and beautiful about Kingston there was a rowing match and there were a great many pretty boats and smart looking people.

Dec. 22. The play She Stoops to Conquer Tony Lumpkin by Liston which he did pretty well but all the other parts were vilely performed.

1827. (Aged 76.)

July 23. [At a fair] I bought a good many pretty things and won a very pretty worked gown in a Raffle of five shillings.

July 30. got to Henley a little before two, had some of the best mutton chops I ever tasted, and some excellent tea afterwards.

Aug. 1. Got to Stratford on Avon by half past



twelve—went to see the House that they say Shakespeare was born in it made me feel nervous.

Sept. 13. [To Bedford, lunched at the Swan] and had some of the best champagne I ever tasted I had two glasses!! . . . to the penitentiary to see them work at the treadmill, it did not appear very hard work there were only fourteen at work almost all Boys the oldest not more than twenty.

Oct. 20. played two rubbers at whist won them both got home a little before twelve. [The diversion of whist was varied by Speculation, Cribbage, Commerce, and Picquet, and December 13, 1822, we read: "played a little with Matilda at Shuttlecock."]

Nov. 4. Went to Church and stayed the communion, which God Almighty make me worthy of.

1828.

Feb. 4. [Left Woolbeding, Lord Robert Spencer's place] got to dear home soon after six.

April. 14. first asparagus. The nightingale heard [in] the garden, but not by me.

May 24. Got to dear home soon after three—found all well and dear place looking so beautiful.

June 14. to Sandgate to the King's Birds and Beasts the poor Cameleopard looks ill and weak—there were some new animals which I thought ugly.

July 11. my birthday. God of his great goodness make me thankful for all the blessings he is so good to grant me particularly for the health I enjoy and great goodness to me in every way.

B.

1822.

Nov. 14. had a pair of horses, and went to Town . . . went to several shops and afterwards to Westminster Abbey to see the monument parts of which I like very much I think upon the whole it is beautiful but it is ill placed and rather too



low—I could not stop long enough to see it well it made me nervous and there were several people.

1823.

May 13. had a good deal of nervous conversation with poor Lady Sarah, and am to have a dreadful time some day soon to look over papers and shall find a great many of my angel's with them, but she says she has no one else that she can trust poor woman so I must do it however heartbreaking.

May 28. L<sup>d</sup>. Holland [dear young one] came to talk over the Epitaph for his dearest Uncle, and I hope and trust he will be firm and have the name only for I cannot like any of those which have been written for the occasion.

Sept. 28. [Her wedding day] Alas, what a happy woman I was this day twenty-eight years ago.

1827.

July 10. Tucker had some music in the evening being his wedding and my Birth day, which my angel used to say was the happiest day of the year except one.

1828.

April 6. Mr. and Mrs. Maule came about half past twelve it was a fine day and the place looked in high beauty and it gave me real pleasure to show it to a friend so sincerely attached to my angel as Mr. M. seems to have been and indeed is to his memory.

April 19. I am very glad he got through [his speech in the Lords] so well, it reads beautifully how happy it would have made my angel had it pleased God to have spared him to us, as it was a subject he always looked upon as being most oppressive.

To these passages must be added one of rather greater length. In January, 1824, Mrs. Fox, then aged seventy-four, was at Brighton. On the 18th she writes: "Went



to the King's Chapel afterwards took a drive it was not a pleasant day." On the 19th we find the following:

Not at all well. Sir W. Keppel called early to say that His Majesty had commanded him to arrange the time and manner for me to go to the pavilion. We went a quarter after eight o'clock and was shown into a very nice room handsomely lighted up with Tea and Coffee things set out. Sir William came soon afterwards and brought . . . the Housekeeper who carried us all round the rooms and very magnificent and beautiful they were when we had seen all but the dining room we returned to the room we first went into and had our Tea. About half past nine Sir William said we could now see the dining room as they were all gone—so there we went and the desert was all left as His M. had left it, it really was a most magnificent sight and quite like a scene in the Arabian Tales. We walked about some time and had some sweetmeats to bring home. Just as I was going to say it was time for us to do so Sir W. said I must leave you for a few minutes which he did but returned almost immediately with the King who came up to me and embraced me in the most kind and friendly way saying he had long wished to see me and that it gave him great pleasure to have that satisfaction in short nothing could exceed the warmth of his manner and professions, he sat down and talked over old times in his former kind way said he should be happy to do anything that I wished and that I had only to make my wishes known through Sir W. Keppel. He sat with us rather better than three quarters of an hour and was really so very kind I was quite overcome, I was glad to see him looking so well rather older than he ought to look for his years but in perfect health. We got home a little before eleven I not at all well, indeed the flurry I had gone through had made me sadly nervous.



Seventy-four, and he was sixty-two. The episode decidedly scores a good mark no less for George IV. than for the old lady who had been lovely forty years ago. On the next day, January 20, "Did not sleep well. Sir W. Keppel called early to know how I was." And five days later, "Sent to Sir W. Keppel to know how the King was." On the 26th the enquiry was answered: "the King had got the gout but . . . His Majesty's physicians said it was a healthy gout and that they thought it would not last long." The recollection of this so strange meeting remained vividly as the weeks passed; and on March 1 "got to dear home . . . so very glad to be at dear home again." We are told that it was an immoral age.

And now for some of the books read. In the period 1822-1824 we find: "Finished the Fortunes of Nigel—did not like it very much though I dare say it may be very clever—there are some good characters in it." "Gertrude of Wyoming parts of it very pretty." "Napoleon in Exile by Barry E. O'Meara . . . made one ashamed of being an Englishwoman to read the cruel treatment this poor man met with he who once had Europe at his feet to be treated worse than the most common criminal . . . that wretch Sir H. Low will suffer for his conduct some time or other—he is quite a monster." Reading Ramsey's *Life of Washington*, she wishes Napoleon had been more like the American. *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater* she found in "parts very good but upon the whole tiresome," and the same judgment is passed on *Quentin Durward*. Benvenuto Cellini she took from his Memoirs to be a "strange half mad man though full of talent," and other books on the list are *A Dissertation on the Gout*, *The Martyr of Antioch*, *Travels in Canada and the United States*, *Life or Fashion and Feeling*, *Travels in the Ionian Isles*, *Letters from Spain*, Moore's *Loves of the Angels*, *Bracebridge Hall* ("an amusing book"), Lingard's *History of England*, *The Court of James I.*, Robertson's *Charles V.*,



*The Life of Latimer, The North American Indians, and Cowper's Letters.* In 1827 are entered, among others, *Castle Rackrent, Scott's Life of Dryden, Captain Head's Narrative of a Journey across the Pampas and among the Andes* ("rather interesting"), *The Favourite of Nature: A Novel* ("the Heroine a most odious character"), *The Establishment of the Turks in Europe, The Chronicles of the Canon Gate, O'Driscoll's History of Ireland, and The Clubs of London* ("bad could not finish it"). Which is more than some of us may be expected to manage at seventy-seven. She died in 1842, at the age of ninety-two, and is buried in Chertsey Parish Church. Mr. Powys tells me that he remembers two old ladies who were daughters of Charles and Elizabeth Fox, but the direct line has not survived.

## IV

In 1788 Fox visited Switzerland and Italy. At Lausanne he called upon Gibbon, who was then fifty-one years of age. Samuel Rogers, in a note on the occasion, tells us that the historian talked a great deal, "generally ending his sentences with a genitive case," while Gibbon himself wrote in his journal: "Mr. Fox gave me two days of free and private society. He seemed to feel and even to envy the happiness of my situation, while I admired the powers of a superior man, as they are blended in his attractive character with the softness and simplicity of a child. Perhaps no human being was ever more perfectly exempt from the taint of malevolence, vanity, or falsehood." Among the Hinchingsbrooke papers is a letter from Lancelot ("Capability") Brown to Lord Sandwich, dated at Lausanne October 18, 1788, in which he says: "I spent two very pleasant days with Mr. Fox, in his tour through this country. When he was at Zurich he went to see Lavater, the famous physiognomist. After



he was gone Lavater drew the following portrait of him:\*

Brow indomitable; Greater wealth of ideas and imagination than I have ever seen marked on any countenance in the world; Eyebrows proud, masterful, dominant; The eye full of genius, piercing, fascinating, magical; Nose mediocre; The cheeks voluptuous; Mouth indicates a surprising and agreeable volubility; and the lower part of the face, sweet, affable, and sociable.

I think it very much resembles Mr. Fox's character."

Mrs. Armistead accompanied Fox on this journey, and they were detained in Italy by an accident to her ankle. It was then, as we have seen, that Burke wrote to Charles urging his immediate return in connection with the Regency crisis. As that passed, first undertones of the French Revolution broke softly upon the world.

\* The original is in French, and is quoted from another source in *Wilkes, Sheridan, Fox*, by W. F. Rae, 1874.