



The Children of Reading Meeting

(From 'A Book of Quaker Saints' by Lucy Violet Hodgkin.)

350 years ago, the government didn't like Quakers, so they made it against the law to go to Quaker Meeting. Many people were put in prison, and some moved to other countries so that they could be free. Here is a famous story about children in England at that time.

Dorcas was nearly ten and therefore almost grown up now. This must have been what mother had meant when she bent down to kiss her little girl in bed last night, saying that she was going to a meeting at Friend Curtis' House, hoping to be back in an hour or two.

"But if not" - here Dorcas remembers that mother's eyes had filled with tears. She left the last sentence unfinished, adding only "anyway: I know I can trust thee Dorcas to be a little mother to the little ones while I am away. But if not..." Dorcas had been too sleepy last night to think about what the words meant, or to keep awake until Mother's return.

But Dorcas' mother didn't return that night - and every child knew why. Because at that time, at any moment, a meeting of five or more persons who met to practice a form of worship not authorised by law might be rudely interrupted by the constables and all the Friends who were sitting there in silence together dragged off to prison for disobeying the Quaker Act.

Some other children came to the house saying their parents had been taken away as well. After sharing their stories, one of them said "hasten or we shall be late for meeting", and another chimed in "Yes of course Dorcas, we must go to show them that Friends are not cowards, and that we shall keep our meetings come what may."

And so they went to their meeting place, only to find it locked. Instead they found their way to a nearby granary where they seated themselves on scattered bundles of hay. As they settled down into stillness, one of them spoke up "Our dear, dear parents. Help them to be brave and faithful, and to make all of us brave and faithful too." None of the boys and girls looked round to see who had spoken, for the words seemed to come from the deepest place in their own hearts.

But then they heard voices outside, the door burst open, and the constables surged in, threatening the children and punching and beating the boys. But still the girls could not be moved, until the constables picked them and hurled them down the road. But despite the disturbances, Sunday after Sunday, one way or another, Meeting was held.

And meanwhile, through those long months that the children kept meeting each week, the father and the mothers prayed for their absent children. And although

apart from one another they were not really separated, for they were both listening to the same shepherd's voice.

Until at last, the happy day came when the gaol doors were opened and the prisoners released. Then – oh the kissing and the hugging, the crying and the blessing. As the parents heard of all that the children had undergone to remain faithful and true. That was indeed the most joyful meeting of all.