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The Janssen portrait of Nicholas Ferrar

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# CONVERSATIONS AT LITTLE GIDDING

*'On the Retirement of Charles V'*  
*'On the Austere Life'*

DIALOGUES BY  
MEMBERS OF THE  
FERRAR FAMILY

EDITED WITH INTRODUCTION  
AND NOTES BY

A. M. WILLIAMS



CAMBRIDGE  
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1970

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To Linda, my late wife, and Hannah, our daughter,  
without whose patient indulgence for my long  
preoccupation with the Little Academy this  
work could not have been accomplished

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The Janssen portrait of Nicholas Ferrar	<i>frontispiece</i>
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## *Preface*

During the 1630s, under the direction of Nicholas Ferrar, members of his family held 'conversations' in which nearly every phase of contemporary society was a cause for discussion—and dismay. The first of the two conversations reproduced here reflects the fascination with the retirement of Charles V which permeated a good deal of the thought and literature of the early seventeenth century. The second conversation shows the increasing concern of thoughtful contemporaries with the luxury and self-indulgence which helped prepare the way for Cromwell. The Ferrars were intelligent and outspoken critics of life under the Stuarts, sure in their condemnation of the declining morality of the upper classes, of the licentiousness common to both literature and dress, of the sybaritic luxury of the wealthy, and of the pernicious influence of imports from the New World, especially tobacco. In their defence of the old-fashioned virtues of honesty, modesty, hard work, and simple living they have much to say to our tempestuous times.

What follows is the best attempt that I can make to reproduce the two hitherto unpublished manuscripts at Clare College and in the British Museum. The task of transcribing the originals was considerable. I have been as accurate as I possibly can be, but the number of different scribes—each with his personal idiosyncrasies of spelling and punctuation—and the fact that the same scribe was by no means consistent in his own practices may open me to the charge of carelessness. In the printing of the manuscript, superior letters have been brought down to the line and the orthography has been expanded and amended where necessary. With these exceptions the text is as exact a transcript as modern methods of printing can reasonably produce.

As for the Introduction and notes, their purpose is to give the



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## PREFACE

reader background and help in understanding only the two manuscripts here reprinted, not to tell the whole Little Gidding story. There are gaps; there is speculation; there is work still to be done. There may be errors and, although I am indebted to several for help, the mistakes are of my own making.

For scholarly and editorial advice I want especially to express my very deep gratitude to the late Alan Maycock, whose books *Nicholas Ferrar of Little Gidding* and *Chronicles of Little Gidding* are the sources of nearly all factual information about the Ferrars and whose personal interest in my undertaking greatly deepened my long-held admiration and affection for him. Leicester Bradner, professor emeritus of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, has made suggestions for the Introduction.

For the tangible and intangible kinds of help without which I should have had neither the opportunity nor the time to complete this volume, I thank the Trustees of St Mark's School, Southborough, Massachusetts, and the former Headmaster, William W. Barber, Jr. It was through them that I was able to spend six months in England under a grant most generously provided for Masters of St Mark's by the Honourable Hugo Loudon, for whose generosity I am most grateful.

A. M. WILLIAMS

*St Mark's School*  
*Southborough, Massachusetts*

NOTE: Page references in the Introduction refer to page numbers of the present volume, not to those of the manuscripts. Within the text which follows, folio numbers of the manuscripts are inserted in caret brackets at the end of each folio. All the material of the 'Dialogue on the Retirement of Charles V' except Part II (see head-note) is found in the Clare College manuscript (see Bibliography). All the material in the 'Dialogue on the Austere Life' is found in B.M. Add. MS. 34659.

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## *Introduction*

If you came at night like a broken king,  
 If you came by day not knowing what you came for,  
 It would be the same, when you leave the rough road  
 And turn behind the pig-sty to the dull façade  
 And the tombstone. And what you thought you came for  
 Is only a shell, a husk of meaning  
 From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled  
 If at all. Either you had no purpose  
 Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured  
 And is altered in fulfilment.

. . . . .  
 A people without history  
 Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern  
 Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails  
 On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel  
 History is now and England.

T. S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', *The Four Quartets*

My fascination with the Ferrars is an interest which has endured since I first read the last of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*—to which he gave the title 'Little Gidding'. Being something of an Eliot-man, I set out to learn what this place was which he had described and why it had such significance for him. It was not long before I was deep in Alan Maycock's biography of Nicholas Ferrar, son of the strong-willed old lady who in 1625 established a retreat for herself and her family at the manor of Little Gidding in a remote section of Huntingdonshire. It was from this biography that I learned of the existence of four manuscript volumes in which were recorded the conversations of 'The Little Academy', a discussion group formed by members of the Ferrar family to instruct both themselves and their audience in matters moral and intellectual.

I discovered that at least one of the 'Story Books' had been

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published in 1899 by Miss E. Cruwys Sharland, who described it as Volume I, and that she had also included half of what she called Volume II. As I leafed through the discussions, I became impressed by the wide reading of the participants, their ability to design artistic dialogues, their command of a vivid but still direct prose style, and by the inevitable intrusion of personal and contemporary comment in the midst of solemn attempts at moral improvement.

Next, Blackstone's *The Ferrar Papers*, published a bit later than Maycock's book, came to hand; it completed the second half of the folio published in part by Miss Sharland and known as Volume II. This is the section that includes the grimly amusing, Donnesque dialogue on the winding sheet and the idyllic recreation of life free from lawyers on the Isle of Man. It was in these discussions that the Ferrars first became thoroughly live to me as human beings, bearing the scars of their deep involvement with the life of the first quarter of the seventeenth century and, by way of reaction, dedicated to a life of retreat and retirement, of self-discipline and unselfish service.

Miss Sharland's volume had indicated the existence of an earlier long dialogue (now published for the first time) devoted entirely to discussions centred around the retirement of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, and considering his resignation as a commentary on the corruptions of the world, on the necessity for private and personal renunciation, and on the superficiality of the unexamined life. Many years ago I traced this manuscript volume to the library of Lady Eleanor Langman, a descendant of the Ferrars, but it was not until she gave it to Clare College, Cambridge, that it became readily available for study.

A fourth manuscript is part of the British Museum collection and is now also published for the first time. Although ostensibly concerned with questions of abstinence and diet, and inspired by the Ferrars' imminent preparations for the celebration of Christmas, the discussions frequently become a free-swinging commentary on the licence and luxury of their day. Personalities

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### THE FAMILY BACKGROUND

clash, the nobility are castigated, contemporary life and literature condemned, translations of the Bible compared, and great quibbles take place over the nature of gluttony—and of raisins. The Little Academy showed itself to be a vigorous, imaginative, well-informed, and amazingly outspoken group of disputants.

Fascination with the Ferrars has led me a long way from Eliot's *Four Quartets*—and the present volume is the unexpected result. When as an Eliot-man I first began my researches, I thought I knew what I had come for, but 'the purpose is beyond the end figured and is altered in fulfilment'.

#### THE FAMILY BACKGROUND

In May 1625 at the age of seventy-four, Mary Woodnoth Ferrar, widow of Nicholas Ferrar senior, an important member of the Virginia Company, purchased the manor of Little Gidding for £6,000. There she and her bachelor son, Nicholas, gathered around them many members of their family, including Mrs Ferrar's eldest child, Susanna Collett, her husband John, and nine children, Mary, Anna, Susanna, Hester, Margaret, Elizabeth, Ferrar, Joyce and Judith. Nicholas's elder brother John Ferrar also retired to Little Gidding with his second wife, Bathsheba (his first wife having died childless in 1613), and their son Nicholas, the third of that name. Two other children—Virginia and John—were later born into this family.

At the time of their arrival at Little Gidding, the grandchildren of Mrs Ferrar can be grouped roughly by age: Hester Collett was approaching twenty and her sisters Mary, Susanna, and Anna were increasingly older; Margaret and Elizabeth were between ten and fifteen and Ferrar, Judith and Joyce as well as Nicholas Ferrar, John's son, were ten or under.

Old Mrs Ferrar may have been the dominant personal force behind this gathering together of her family, but her son, Nicholas, who had long dreamed of retreat from the distracting world of

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London business and society, was its spiritual guide. He had had a brilliant scholarly career at Clare College, Cambridge, from which he had received his B.A. in 1610 at the age of eighteen. He became a fellow of the college with the intention (perhaps partly motivated by his own uncertain health) of studying medicine. Even as an undergraduate he had frequently resorted to

*Members of Little Gidding Community*


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MOTHER, FOUNDER, GRANDMOTHER	Mary Woodnoth Ferrar (1550–1634)
MODERATOR	Susanna Ferrar Collett (1581–1657), daughter of Mrs Ferrar
RESOLVED	John Collett (1578–1650), husband of Susanna
CHIEF, later MOTHER	Mary Collett (1601–80)
PATIENT	Anna Collett (1603–38)
GOODWIFE	Susanna Collett Mapletoft (m. 1628 before establishment of Little Academy; d. 1657)
CHEERFULL	Hester Collett Kestian (m. 1635)
AFFECTIONATE	Margaret Collett Ramsay (m. 1636) Elizabeth Collett Woodnoth
SUBMISSE	Joyce Collett Wallis
OBEDIENT	Judith Collett Mapletoft
GUARDIAN	John Ferrar (1590–1657), elder son of Mrs Ferrar Bathsheba Owen Ferrar, wife of John Ferrar (d. 1659) Nicholas Ferrar (1620–40) Virginia Ferrar (1626–87) John Ferrar (1632–1719)
VISITOR	Nicholas Ferrar (1592–1637), younger son of Mrs Ferrar

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the home of his married sister Susanna in nearby Bourn to recover his strength and energies and to escape the damp discomforts of Clare Hall. There

he began a work of piety that was to bear abundant fruit in the future. It was one of his chief delights to talk to the Collett children about the wonders of the Christian faith, training them up in the daily reading of the Scriptures and in memorising the Psalms of David. In all good things he made himself their guide and director. In years to come this association, begun when Nicholas was a boy in his 'teens, was to be deepened and enriched beyond measure; to these children he 'continued to his dying day their true spiritual friend and father'.<sup>1</sup>

With the spring of 1613 came a dramatic shift away from what was a very promising academic career. Nicholas was advised that in order to preserve his health, perhaps even his life, he must seek a complete change of climate abroad. An opportunity came for him to join the entourage of the Princess Elizabeth Stuart and the Elector Frederick V on their wedding trip and triumphal return to Heidelberg. Although he had intended to stay with the royal party until it reached its destination and despite the possibility of becoming a secretary to the princess, Nicholas soon set out on his own. He did not return to England until five years had passed and until he had seen nearly all the principal cities of Holland, Germany, Austria, Italy and Spain.

When he did return in the late summer of 1618 he brought with him a large collection of books, a proficient knowledge of several languages, and the results of two years' study of medicine at Padua. He must also have brought back with him a habit of self-discipline and a love for solitude, requisites for those who, although in poor health, desire to accomplish something in the world. Most important of all, he brought with him considerable first-hand experience with the Counter-Reformation.

The recovery of the interior life of prayer; the purifying of religious practice and observance; a new austerity and dignity in public worship;

<sup>1</sup> Maycock, p. 29.

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a wonderful flowering of charitable works in the care of the sick, the education of children and reform of prisons; the restoration of the proper ideals of the priesthood—these are, in the Christian sense, the true fruits of the sixteenth century in Catholic Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Despite his preference for quiet and solitude, Nicholas immersed himself in family business affairs and especially in the complicated struggles of the Virginia Company until that valiant venture lost all its privileges in 1624. It was doubtless the deep concern felt by all members of the family over their financial troubles that explains their familiarity with the language of law and business and their genuine scepticism about the possible benefits to be derived from contact with the New-found World.<sup>2</sup>

By study, by nature and by experience, Nicholas became convinced that he could find fulfilment only in a life devoted to the service of his fellow man and to the worship of God. With the demise of the Virginia Company, he must have felt that he had fulfilled all the worldly demands required of him. He had refused one after another several enticing opportunities—a readership at Gresham College, an offer of marriage which included a £10,000 dowry, an important diplomatic post and, after taking orders as deacon, advancement within the Church. His mind must have been determined long ago; now his own and his family's affairs were in order—and he was released.

And so it came about that after a year or so devoted to the search for a remote and suitable retreat, Little Gidding was purchased in May 1625. The plague which ravaged London during the spring and summer of that year hastened members of the Ferrar family in their decision to escape the city; some first took refuge with Mrs Collett at Bourn and others later at Little Gidding. Characteristically, Nicholas stayed on in London to help the plague-stricken until early autumn, when he joined his

<sup>1</sup> Maycock, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion of the Ferrars' involvement with the Virginia Company and with the plantations of the New World see Maycock, Chapter IV, and *Clare College, 1326–1926*, Chapter IX.

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mother and family in the great work of restoring the chapel, main house and outbuildings of the dilapidated Little Gidding manor. His final renunciation of all worldly concerns was consummated on Trinity Sunday 1626 when he was ordained deacon at Westminster Abbey by Bishop Laud. On that day

towards evening he returned home to his mother and entreated her to hear him read somewhat he had written . . . It was the solemn vow he had made to Almighty God, that 'since he had been afforded so many gracious deliverances from so many perilous attempts of the devil and man upon his soul and body, and since now his family was rescued from a ruin so deplorable and unavoidable, if God had not been infinitely good to them;—he would now separate himself to serve God in this holy calling, to be the Levite himself in his own house, and to make his own relations, which were many, his cure of souls'.<sup>1</sup>

## THE LITTLE ACADEMY

The restoration of the buildings, the organization of the school (which was later to include other children in addition to those of the resident families), the establishment of a dispensary for medicine and food to the neighbouring poor, and the inauguration of the hourly weekday Offices in the Great Chamber of the manor house and of the Night Watches in the chapel or oratories demanded the full attention of the Ferrars in their early years at Little Gidding. At first there could have been no time for the preparation of the elaborate conversations which were later carried on by the group to be known as 'The Little Academy'. A daily custom was established, however, which obviously provided the foundation and inspiration for the formalized dialogues later initiated in 1631. In his life of his brother Nicholas, John Ferrar describes the family meal-time practice.

Grace said, all standing, after some time they all sat down, and one whose turn it was read at dinner and suppertime some part of history, such as was appointed, either some chronicles of nations, journeys by

<sup>1</sup> Mayor, pp. 226–7.



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land, sea-voyages, and the like. The reasons and the methods of them I shall for the better satisfaction of the historian set down.

Finding silence at meals' time unpleasant and common discourse for the most part unprofitable, it is agreed that there shall be always something read during meal-times. And because the mind, then being in most men altogether intent upon the refreshment of their bodies, doth not willingly admit any serious speculation, it is thought fit that the reading shall be always of some easy and delightful matter, such as are history and relations of particular actions and persons, such as may not only furnish the mind with variety of knowledge in all kinds, but also stir up the affections to the embracements of virtue. The performance of this shall be by two young daughters and four boys, every one in their course, whereby a particular benefit is hoped will arise to the whole, and they shall by these means be brought to read any book well and gracefully. . . . For the better retaining in memory of that which shall be read, it is agreed that a summary collection shall be kept in writing of those things, which are judged worthy of observation out of that book. The drawing of this abstract shall be the work of one of the parents or masters, but the transcribing of it fair may be by any of the children; and every noon, presently after collation, shall be made a repetition of that which was formerly read. The manner of this repetition, whether it shall be by examination of the younger, or by the elders relating it and application of things, is left to the judgement of the directors of those exercises to proceed according as the nature of the subject, time, persons and other occasions shall require. The ordinary and constant charge of this matter is committed to John and Mary Ferrar, and for assistance and supply, when they cannot, Susanna Collett; the mother and the elder daughters are desired always, as occasion serves, to give their help. Some other orders and directions were given, but this as a taste may suffice. And by this means it came to pass, that though they seemed to live privately and had not much commerce with people, yet they were well acquainted with the former and latter passages of the world, and what was done in it at home and abroad, and had gained knowledge of many actions of note and passages of consequence and the manners of other countries and nations and affairs of their own country.<sup>1</sup>

From the education of the young to the edification of their elders was not a great step. It must have been out of the interest

<sup>1</sup> Mayor, pp. 40–2 and below, pp. 241 and 248.

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created by the meal-time readings and a desire for more serious discussion and more mature application than such occasions permitted that the Little Academy came into being on the Feast of the Purification, 2 February 1630/1. By this time most of the manual work of restoration would have been completed and the spiritual and charitable routines established. Jebb describes the purpose and nature of the Little Academy both in his own words and in those of Francis Peck.

They were equally diverted and instructed by divine interludes, dialogues and discourses in the Platonic way, that admirable way of drawing the truth out of another's ignorance. These innocent and profitable entertainments and recreations he [Nicholas Ferrar] introduced to wean the family off from the Christmas games and wilder sports which could hardly exist without riot and extravagant license . . . On All-Saints'-Day they began, and at Christmas on every holiday they proceeded in gracefully repeating and acting their Christian histories, taken out of both ancient and modern historians . . . These he formed into colloquies, with forcible applications of all to their own circumstances . . . Mr. Ferrar himself compiled and wrote them with his own hand, to be transcribed by the actors that had parts in them.<sup>1</sup>

Ascetic conversations interspersed with sundry admirable examples and tales in honour of virtue and piety; as discoursed and related (in the time of k. Ch.I.) in the sisters's chamber by the seven virgin ladies and others . . . of the religious academy at Little Gidding in Huntingdonshire: first drawn up for their use by their Visitor, the pious Mr. Nicholas Ferrar, Gent . . .<sup>2</sup>

That the Ferrars in their isolation and retirement chose to tell themselves stories and to form out of their family members an organized 'Little Academy' can surprise no one familiar with the classical, medieval, and Renaissance prototypes with which the Little Gidding community was familiar. Some of the sources later to be discussed—the Oratories of St Philip Neri and the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 273–5. See also Sharland, p. 75, for evidence that written stories were read out at the meetings of the Little Academy.

<sup>2</sup> Mayor, p. 294. For the confusing bibliographical background, see Maycock, Appendix II.

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conversations of Valdesso with his friends—could have directly inspired the Ferrars in their determination to encourage by group discussion the 'more ready and fervent prosecution of virtues and the better performance of all such duties as . . . should be required of them' (p. 5). On occasions when 'storying' became partly intended for amusement as well as for edification, a comparison (and, one might add, a contrast) with the pleasures of other isolated groups—Boccaccio's plague-driven refugees and Chaucer's road-weary pilgrims—is tempting but to be avoided. Socratic dialogue, which came to be a favourite device to encourage lively participation by members of the Ferrar family, was as old as Plato and served as a common means of instruction in many 'academies' that flourished after him, as well as a popular framework for the examination of literary, political, and philosophical problems. To suggest that the Little Academy was also in the tradition of the Courts of Love and that Mary Collett is an Eleanor of Aquitaine turned anchorite would be open to question. Blackstone, however, traces the dialogues to a wholly Elizabethan

court tradition, as it were baptised and purged of vanity, yet recognisably part of the pastoral convention. Nicholas surrounded by the Sisters . . . is but a variation on the shepherd with his swains and nymphs; the names of Phyllis, Corydon and Chloe are exchanged for those of Learner, Patient and Humble; the quaint conceits, the elaborate compliments and courtly euphuisms are the same, though they adorn a theme higher and more solemn than was ever discovered in Arcadian valleys.<sup>1</sup>

## STORYING

The original Little Academy, made up as it was of participants ranging in age from less than fifteen to nearly eighty, was an ambitious undertaking and one (even when undertaken by such determined people as the Ferrars) doomed to fall far short of its ideal. At first, daily meetings were contemplated, and may

<sup>1</sup> Blackstone, pp. xiv–xv.

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## STORYING

indeed have been held, but if they were, the discussions were considered unworthy of preservation.

They agreed every day at a set hour to confer together of some subject as should tend either to the information of the understanding or to the exciting of the affections, to the more ready and fervent prosecution of virtues and better performance of all such duties as in their present or other course of life hereafter should be required of them. (p. 5)

Later their intentions were augmented to include an attempt to entertain as well as to instruct. 'It is a hard task . . . that we must likewise endeavour to profit them in the way of virtue as well as to please them.'<sup>1</sup> Finally an additional demand was made upon the storytellers—compensation for a cheerless Christmas. The stories told at Christmastide 1632 were required not only to instruct and please but also to quiet the belly in 'its grudgings for those delicacies which you have robbed it of'.<sup>2</sup>

Subjects for discussion were at first planned ahead, and assignments were made of material to be worked up by the participants, although there were occasional deviations and surprises (p. xli). It was doubtless Nicholas Ferrar and Mary Collett who decided upon the topic and organized the illustrative material. Care had to be taken, for the sessions of the Little Academy were attended not only by the participants, but also by other members of the household and frequently by guests. The writer of the narrative links (Nicholas Ferrar) remarked on one occasion that there was 'a necessity of handling some choice subject because of the presence of certain friends whom dearest affection forced to admit and worth required to entertain with more than ordinary preparations' (pp. 15–16).

The Ferrars were fascinated by history and deeply read in the events of the recent past, in which they searched for the working

<sup>1</sup> Sharland, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246. The first stories told in this Christmas season were lurid accounts of the torturing of ancient and modern martyrs. They seem to have been chosen for their narrative appeal as well as to honour those saints whose martyrdom is recalled at this time.

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out of God's plan and purposes as well as for convincing examples that goodness, piety, and noble actions were still possible. As a result, a large number of their stories concern nearly contemporary men and events and at times draw on their own experience.

But because old stories move not so much, either because they have been often heard formerly, or perhaps not so fully credited, I shall desire that our instances may be of later times, and that you, dear Patient, make entrance by the recompting of that incomparable history touching the death of the last king of Spain, Philip the third, than which I have never heard a more convincing proof of this world's vanity and of the worth of God's service. (p. 17)

In keeping with their preference for modern rather than ancient stories was their sceptical attitude toward many practices and beliefs, both public and private, which had the sanction of tradition but, to their minds, lacked the blessing of God.

Finding in themselves and observing in others that do sincerely pursue virtue that the greatest bar of perfection was ignorance of the truth, whereby through misapprehension many prejudicial things were embraced and many most behoveful to their ends and most delightful in performance were not only neglected but abhorred, which having in many particulars experimented in themselves, doubting that they were abused in most of those things which we have received from our fathers, they determined . . . to make a particular survey of those opinions and practices which the world recommends or disallows, weighing them not in the scales of common judgement but of true and right reason according to the weights and by the standard of the Scriptures. (pp. 4-5)

Once when the Cheerfull seemed to be particularly obtuse in grasping the correction of a common error, the Chief reprimanded her, saying

God hath given you an understanding capable of deeper points than these and he hath seconded it with a heart that dares not, I know, be against the truth. But you have been so long rooted and fortified in the common error of the world that I see you have taken it up for a main principal of truth so as you are loath to admit any question about it. (p. 56)

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## STORYING

The words of the Chief invite comparison with those of Francis Bacon in *Novum Organum*.

The Idols and false notions which are now in possession of the human understanding, and have taken deepest root therein . . . so beset men's minds that truth can hardly find entrance . . . The formation of ideas and axioms by true induction is no doubt the proper remedy for the keeping off and clearing away of Idols.<sup>1</sup>

Bacon's desire to clear away the Idols is very closely paralleled by the Affectionate's remarks in the abstinence dialogue: 'The authorities indeed that you alleged are great and evident. But experiment [experience], a more infallible argument, proves the contrary' (p. 192). Bacon, however, wrote for the instruction of man; Mary Collett advocated the glorification of God.

In order to keep the attention of a group which varied greatly in age, intelligence and interests, the Chief recommended stories not only of 'later times', but also of men of ordinary stature.

Dim eyes see better in a shady light than in the brightness of the sun, and middling examples and arguments more prevail with weak and feeble minds than those that are more excellent in all other kinds, so especially in matters of virtue. That which must strongly move to imitation must not be too far removed from hope of matching in some good proportion. Wonder not, therefore, if now and then you hear that which may seem but ordinary. It's purposely contrived, as coarser dishes are served in greatest feasts, that there may be that which may be pleasing and proper for every man's liking and constitution.<sup>2</sup>

This sentiment is also reflected in later words by the Moderator.

The examples of saints (said the Moderator) works little but upon those that endeavour to become saints, or find themselves plain sinners. The first are taken with conformity of that profession which themselves long after, and the last are troubled with deformity of their own vices in the light of others' virtues. But worldly men that think themselves Christians good enough for heaven, whilst none can touch them with open enormities, make but a jest of the authority or examples of holy men, when they are alleged either to prove or persuade that which they

<sup>1</sup> Bacon, *Novum Organum*, 1620, Sections 38 and 40.      <sup>2</sup> Sharland, p. 21.

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please not to believe or follow. I would rather, therefore wish to hear, if it might be, the confirmation of this new doctrine (for so it will be counted) by the testimony of some such persons as there lies no exception of partiality against by reason of any great eminency of holiness.<sup>1</sup>

It is not surprising that the Little Academy needed guidance in their undertaking and that, when such guidance was lacking, things fell apart and the centre could not hold. The first crack appeared when the group allowed their fascination with Charles V—and perhaps the Chief's insistence that they hear all about him—to alter their plan to have a number of participants tell a variety of stories.

The Charles V discourse was a departure from their original intent as it is for the most part a long monologue by the Chief. The discussion became general only when toward the end the Moderator insisted upon its becoming personal and introduced a long digression: her lively attack on the keeping of unnecessary servants, although related to Charles's preference for the simple life, was really centred about the problem of the *Submissee*, who aspired to become a lady-in-waiting.

The firm direction of Nicholas seems missing, and we learn from Maycock that the Visitor was absent from Little Gidding a good part of the time during that summer.<sup>2</sup> It is also possible, of course, that foreseeing his absence Nicholas planned the introduction of the subject and turned the meetings of the Little Academy over to the Chief with the assurance that she could keep the recently organized group intact and interested. Planned or not, the Charles V discussion shows that when the control exerted by Nicholas was absent and that of the Chief proved ineffective, the Ferrars had the unfortunate failing of most human beings—to give way to personalities and gossip when they became bored with more elevated topics.

<sup>1</sup> Sharland, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> 'In June 1631 he [Nicholas Ferrar] was appointed to serve on a Royal Commission to consider the condition of Virginia. Its activities were not extensive; but its sessions necessitated his presence in London for some six weeks in that summer, and probably on later occasions.' (Maycock, p. 157.)



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Order was restored at Christmastide 1631 and the storying at that time went on according to the original plan and doubtless under Nicholas's direction. These conversations of the Little Academy, published by Miss Sharland, are among the most artful, finished, and impersonal of the dialogues. There is no evidence, however, that the group met again until St Luke's Day (18 October) in 1632, when the Chief lamented their infrequent meetings and when, as the result of her criticism, she was elected Mother.<sup>1</sup> Speeches and the giving of gifts in her honour occupied all of that meeting and part of next session on All Saints' Day (1 November). By St Andrew's Day (30 November) planned storying was resumed only to be interrupted by the Cheerfull, who wanted to convince the family that Christmas be celebrated—if celebrated is the word—in an austere fashion.

At Christmastide 1632 the Little Academy made another attempt to return to the good ways of the past, but it was short-lived and no session is recorded after Holy Innocents' Day (28 December) until some time after Mrs Ferrar senior's death in May 1634. They met then to honour her many requests that the discussions be renewed; and the rather few participants, having assumed new names,<sup>2</sup> managed to produce the previously mentioned dialogues on the winding sheet and life on the Isle of Man. These conversations seem completely spontaneous and free from the restraint of any director, but Ferrar art and artifice have not disappeared. The Learner (probably Mary Collett) had just finished a story about which the Register (perhaps Mrs Collett) remarked, 'With death you went off and with death you come on, and by a Conrad bring us back again to the same place from whence by a Conrad you lead at first away. Whether it be by art or by chance . . . I will not enquire.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sharland, p. 164.<sup>2</sup> Blackstone, p. III.<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200. In the dialogue called 'The Winding Sheet', after the opening discussion of the gift of the winding sheet and the digression on life on the Isle of Man, the emphasis fell on men and women who had made a 'good' death. The name of Conrad III (1093–1152), King of Germany, was introduced



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Nor can we enquire whether it is by art or by chance that the last recorded words of the Ferrars' storying, uttered by the same speaker a few lines later, are so reminiscent of their opening words four years earlier. 'You have my opinion and purpose, and I think it to be suitable to that which we intend. That is, the bettering of ourselves by the knowledge of truth and the practice of virtue. The least progress in which is more to be esteemed than the perfection of all the arts and learning.'<sup>1</sup>

## CHRONOLOGY OF THE STORY BOOKS

One must not be misled by the traditional and more or less arbitrary numbering of the 'Story Book' volumes as I, II, III and IV. Such numbers have very little to do with the order in which the discussions took place. In other words, Miss Sharland's description of what she printed as Book I and half of Book II is misleading, especially when considered in conjunction with her subtitle, *Being the Religious Dialogues Recited in the Great Room, 1631-2*. An examination of the texts of all four manuscript volumes will show the logical development of the Little Academy's thought and reveal interrelationships among the subjects discussed which on first glance seem not to exist.

The reasons for the foundation of the Little Academy (as Nicholas Ferrar expressed them) and its early conversations are recounted in Miss Sharland's book, pages 2-10. These passages were copied on manuscript pages 1-16 to serve as an introduction to the 'Dialogue on the Retirement of Charles V'. In chronological order of recitation, however, this conversation, for the

(Blackstone, pp. 165-7) and, more to the point, the example of Conrad I, who just before his death in 918 made public repentance for the wars and bloodshed in which he had taken part, was treated at length (Blackstone, pp. 167-73). At the end of the discussion (Blackstone, p. 200) Conrad II is mentioned in preparation for the account of another death-bed pronouncement; but the discussion (which may never have taken place) was omitted in favour of a graceful ending for the manuscript volume.

<sup>1</sup> Blackstone, p. 201.

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### CHRONOLOGY OF THE STORY BOOKS

most part really a monologue, was also preceded by Sharland, pages 11–18 and 61–9.<sup>1</sup> This material is here restored to its proper place, for without it the 'Dialogue on the Retirement of Charles V' would appear to be unmotivated and references in it to these earlier stories would not be understood. That the Charles V conversations followed those on Ash Wednesday 1630–1 and preceded those on St Stephen's Day 1631 is apparent from the manuscript: 'The story of Charles the Fifth's relinquishment of the world having grown already to a volume, and yet not perfected, although as much as is done was recited in the summer, is here omitted, and we pass on to the setting down of the Christmas Stories . . .' (p. 28 n. 1) Since the Ferrars were self-consciously aware of their own life *in contemptu mundi*, the story of the retirement of Charles V proved of such interest to them that the Chief's monologue was seldom interrupted. The balance of what Miss Sharland printed as the first volume of the manuscript follows along quite nicely after the note of explanation which precedes the St Stephen's Day conversation.

As has been seen, the Little Academy did not convene again until St Luke's Day (18 October) 1632;<sup>2</sup> the conversation on that occasion was the first entry in a new manuscript volume, which Miss Sharland called Book II. The discussion had nothing to do with St Luke, but rather with the concern of the Chief, Mary Collett, over their long neglect of 'those many excellent works we had in hand'. It may be presumed that Mrs Ferrar senior was now too aged to participate in the affairs of the Little Academy, and it is true that Nicholas had been away a good deal. The upshot of their self-examination was to elect Mary Collett to the office of Mother to succeed her grandmother, Mrs Ferrar. The rest of the conversation for that day as well as the first part of the subsequent conversation on All Saints' Day (1 November) was devoted to matters of reorganization and to the formal installation of Mary in her new office. St Andrew's Day (30 November) was

<sup>1</sup> Sharland, pp. 13–14, and see below, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Sharland, p. 154.

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celebrated with a number of stories; no more were recorded until those told at Christmastide.

A comparison of the opening paragraph of the Christmas stories of 1631 with the similar passage of 1632 sustains an important deduction. Mary Collett, the Chief, is the speaker in both instances.

ST STEPHEN'S DAY 1631. It is a hard task that is imposed on us, most honoured Grandmother and Founder of our Little Academy, that we should make supply of delights to your family for those vain pastimes of cards and the like, which you have so Christianly deprived them of. But when it is added that we must likewise endeavour to profit them in the way of virtue, as well as to please them, in requiring of two things that scarce stand together, there is a great surcharge of difficulty to the work and pains to us.<sup>1</sup>

CHRISTMASTIDE 1632. It is a hard task, beloved Cheerefull, that is upon us, and *double to that which was last year enjoined*. To outvie idle pastimes by worthy stories was not much; the pleasure lies the same way in both these matters. It's the delight of mind that's sought by gaming, and, therefore, when a better satisfaction was offered in the same kind, it was no great difficulty to content them from whom we took the less. But the belly, you know, hath no cares; and therefore I know not how you can apply your stories to quiet its grudgings for those delicacies which you have robbed it of. They must be very material stories that can recompense for the loss of so much good cheer as your austere temperance hath retrenched.<sup>2</sup>

Something had clearly changed—and the Cheerfull was held partly responsible. It is a very likely conjecture that the discussion of temperance initiated by the Cheerfull had already taken place—and that this cheerless Christmas was the result. A complete manuscript volume is given over to the problems of diet appropriate to the health of body and soul and to the evil results of self-indulgence in both drink and food. This volume begins in haste:

CHEERFULL: Pardon me if I seem importunate in occasioning this meeting so much before your expectation. Not only the earnestness of

<sup>1</sup> Sharland, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246. Italics mine.

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mine own desires, but the necessity of the thing itself admits no longer delay.

MOTHER: You say very true. For except you now give us the better satisfaction we may no longer forbear the making of our Christmas provisions.

CHEERFULL: Call them as they be, I pray, carnal excesses and spiritual prejudices that corrupt the body, defile the soul, and waste the estate. (pp. 159–60)

When the textual evidence is assembled and evaluated, the suggestion that the discourses on temperance took place in Advent 1632 is difficult to refute.

Miss Sharland ended her book with the Christmastide 1632 colloquies, which make up only the first half of the manuscript volume in which they appear. The latter half, printed by Blackstone in *The Ferrar Papers*, is the transcript of a discussion which occurred two years later, i.e. some time after the death of Mrs Ferrar senior and after a second reorganization of the Little Academy and the adoption of new names by its members.

### THE NATURE OF NAMES

Which of the former actors these were is not to be enquired. The desire of concealing this point was one of the reasons of the alteration of names, though not the principle. The truth is, however, their intents were not, at least as they themselves thought when they took these specious titles of virtues and abilities with which they were first styled, to procure honour in others' esteem, but rather to animate themselves in the pursuit and practice of those things which were most necessary and proper for them; yet finding a secret kind of complacency arising in their hearts upon the sounding of such magnifiquie attributes in their ears and feeling a manifest failing, that I may not say, flat contradiction in their dispositions and actions to them, they began to be afraid in good earnest least they should by the use of them, though it were not in dead earnest, incur not only the unpardonable guilt of usurpation of that which they had no right unto, but the irreparable damage of impairment and happily of the utter overthrow of that humility which they ought above all others to pursue.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Blackstone, pp. 111–12.

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These are the words of Nicholas Ferrar, the anonymous narrator, as he introduced the last of the series of conversations which the Little Academy held. Except for the elevation of the Chief (Mary Collett) to the title of Mother,<sup>1</sup> the original names had been retained and used with scrupulous care from the beginning.

There is a valid distinction to be made between the significance of the names assumed by or given to the adults of the group and those which the adults assigned to the younger members. The titles of Mrs Ferrar senior, who is styled variously as Founder, Grandmother, or Mother, were objectively descriptive of her position and relationship. Her eldest child, Susanna Ferrar Collett, was known as the Moderator. Although not always equable and sweet-tempered, Susanna, as mother of a family of more than twelve, doubtless merited the appellation. Her husband, John Collett, was called the Resolved. Perhaps 'Resigned' would have been a more accurate description since Maycock describes him as 'completely dominated by his wife'.<sup>2</sup> He speaks little and seems perhaps to be resolved only in his determination to keep peace in the family.

John Ferrar, Nicholas's older brother, as titular head of the household was addressed simply as the Guardian. The title, one can be sure, is not specious (p. 146) despite his unguarded financial ventures which nearly lost the family fortune. Nicholas, the Visitor, although he attended as well as supervised a majority of the meetings, had least to say of any member of the older group. When he does speak, the manuscript identifies him merely as 'one of the company'.

Fitting, formal, and respectful as the names of the older generation seem to be, those of the younger members of the Little Academy were clearly bestowed, with one great exception, with a touch of pious hope and a bit of wishful thinking. The exception, of course, was Mary Collett, known at first as the

<sup>1</sup> Sharland, p. 164; Maycock, p. 179.<sup>2</sup> Maycock, p. 172.

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Chief, an office which as mistress of ceremonies she clearly fulfilled. It was she who voiced concern over the failure of the Little Academy to convene and she who claimed that she must accept certain burdens out of 'conformity of name' (p. 23). It is interesting to note that, when she assumed the role of Mother, she received as a gift seven children that she might 'truly be invested in the reality of motherhood in particular, as well as in name and generality thereof'.<sup>1</sup>

That Mary's title of Chief or Mother was an honourable exception among the names given the young is corroborated not only by the quotation with which this section of the Introduction opened but also by the words of the Moderator in a passage found in the discussion of Charles V. 'There's none here perhaps answers to their names, as an expression of their natures, but as a testimony of their desires and endeavours, that they would fain be such as they are called.' (p. 136)

Of the younger group, first in order of age after Mary was Anna Collett, known as the Patient. That her title may very well be a sincere one is ably argued by Maycock,<sup>2</sup> but there is considerable evidence within the Story Books themselves to suggest that she was also capable of impatience. After a long digression in the 'Dialogue on the Retirement of Charles V', the narrator (Mary Collett, still known as the Chief) asked where she left off.

Why, upon departure (said the Patient) from his little nephew. And because you told us at the first, he made such haste, we suppose he is by this time come to the end of his journey, and now settled in his long desired rest, wherewith I pray proceed.

Ah, dearest Patient (said the Chief and laying her hand on hers) how doth the unwonted impotency of desires transport you to the prejudice of themselves and all here, whilst too impatiently you require accompt of his retirement and quiet. (pp. 117–18)

At a later meeting, the Guardian, in commenting on the weaknesses of his nieces, said: 'I would assign . . . want of wisdom, or

<sup>1</sup> Sharland, p. 179.<sup>2</sup> Maycock, p. 182.