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978-1-107-60496-4 - The Story of Fanny Burney: Being an Introduction to the Diary & Letters of Madame d'Arbly

Muriel Masfield

Excerpt

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# *The* STORY of FANNY BURNEY

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTORY

THE story of Fanny Burney, the demure eighteenth-century "Miss" whose first novel kept Burke from his bed and Sir Joshua Reynolds from the dinner table, and made Dr Johnson impatient for the third volume, takes us into the same witty and companionable society that still lives in the pages of Boswell.

Born in 1752, Fanny Burney belonged to a circle which knew all the glamour of Garrick in a gay humour, of Burke in congenial talk at Sir Joshua Reynolds' house, of Dr Johnson in the pleasant intimacy of Streatham, with the lively Mrs Thrale as hostess.

Fanny sipped her cup of tea in the new-fangled conversaziones of the great blue-stocking ladies, where "only the rank and the literature were admitted," and she was entertained by Horace Walpole at Strawberry Hill. She sat at Warren Hastings' trial, and the leading prosecutors—Burke, Windham and Sheridan—all found their way to her side in

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2

## INTRODUCTORY

turn to hear her comments, or be dismissed with a cold curtsey when she thought they had been too severe.

Queen Charlotte, wishing to do honour to this surprising little Miss Burney, who had written a novel which the most carefully brought up princess might safely read, invited her to come to Court as second keeper of the robes. She was, as Horace Walpole expressed it, royally gagged and promoted to fold muslins, and for five years she kept a journal of Court life in which George III and his Queen live their daily round before us, and each Princess is more charming than the last.

Finally when the French Revolution stretched its shadow over England, Fanny was drawn into its fortunes. She married an *émigré* of the Terror, the Chevalier d'Arblay, who had been Adjutant-General to Lafayette. She shared the throes of France under Napoleon, who spoke gallantly of one of her books but sorely disturbed the course of her life.

She received still prettier compliments from Louis XVIII, and drove proudly beside her husband in the Bois de Boulogne when he was restored to his rank of General and belonged to the King's Body-Guard. Napoleon's escape from Elba broke up this happy security, and during the amazing Hundred Days of his last flare of activity Fanny had to fly from Paris. She was in Brussels during the battle of Waterloo, and only when Napoleon was at last in secure

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTORY

3

restraint at St Helena could she begin to grow old in peace.

Through all these varied years Fanny Burney kept a voluminous journal, and wrote long, descriptive letters to her father and sister. The volumes are full of interesting matter, but their bulk—and perhaps their uneven quality—discourage many people from reading them. The object of this little book is to supply an introduction to the *Diary and Letters of Madame d'Arblay*, to give her characters and scenes that touch of familiarity which makes further detail interesting.

In some cases a few supplementary facts about people and circumstances have been given—facts Fanny took for granted, and without which her pictures lose in interest and truth.

To those who are not familiar with the period, the very names which are brought together in the diary will be helpful in linking up the history and literature of more than half a century. Others may perhaps be reminded of the charm of growing intimate with a bygone generation, especially one which was distinguished for good talk and expressed itself vivaciously in letters, journals and memoirs.

The society of Madame d'Arblay's diary has a further hold on our imagination because it has been so richly illustrated by portrait painters—Gainsborough, Romney, Joshua Reynolds, Opie, Hoppner, Lawrence, Copley and West.

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## CHAPTER II

### THE BURNEY HOUSEHOLD

CHARLES BURNEY, Fanny's father, was a man of great charm; the large and varied circle of his friends would have agreed readily that he was, in Dr Johnson's words, a man for all the world to love. "My heart goes out to meet him... I much question if there is in the world such another man as Dr Burney" —these were great tributes from Dr Johnson. Moreover, Mrs Thrale mentions as a further claim to distinction for Burney that he was the only man whose pardon Dr Johnson had ever asked!

Charles Burney was one of a large family, and he had to make his own way in the world. He chose music as his profession, and had the good luck to be taken as an apprentice by Dr Arne, a well-known London composer and musician. He passed hours of drudgery in copying music, varied by playing in the Drury Lane orchestra; he even composed pantomime music. At the house of Mrs Cibber, Dr Arne's sister, he saw something of society, and, as ever, his good spirits and his versatility won him a welcome. During his apprenticeship he was brought to the notice of Fulk Greville, a rich young man of fashion, who liked to believe himself in the van of all the arts and graces of life, as well as of

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE BURNEY HOUSEHOLD 5

sport and pleasure. Greville wished for a musical companion to play to him and his guests, and to give him lessons as whim and leisure allowed, but was afraid he would never find a musician gentlemanly enough to fill the rôle. Kirkman, a harpsichord maker, promised to introduce to him a young man who had "as much music in his tongue as in his hands, and who was as fit company for a prince as for an orchestra."

Accordingly, Burney, quite unsuspecting, was invited to Kirkman's shop to try a new harpsichord, and Greville to listen. The result was that Greville paid Dr Arne £300 to cancel Burney's agreement with him, and engaged him himself.

Burney's happy temperament made the position an entirely pleasant one, and he enjoyed the society of the rich and fashionable without any loss of dignity or balance. Eventually Greville's marriage was quickly followed by Burney's own—to a beautiful and clever girl, Esther Sleepe, who had French ancestry on her mother's side. Burney now drew upon the circles into which he had been introduced by Greville for pupils, and was soon a popular music master. He found time to compose too, and became a doctor of music.

A period of bad health obliged Burney to move his family to King's Lynn in Norfolk, and there Frances, the third of his and Esther's six children, was born, in 1752. At Lynn Burney had soon as many friends as in London, and was

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[More information](#)

---

## 6 THE BURNEY HOUSEHOLD

equally busy; even as he rode from one pupil's house to another's he would be studying Italian, with a Tasso in his hand, and a dictionary (of his own compiling) and commonplace book in his pockets. When he was able to take up his work in London again, he would often dine on sandwiches, with wine and water from a flask, in the hackney coach in which he made the round of his pupils. Yet he never seemed to be worried or ruffled; Fanny records in her diary that, however busy he might be, her father was always his natural self—gay, facile, sweet.

In 1761, when Fanny was nine years old, Mrs Burney died.

When the household rallied from this grief the boys and girls carried on somehow, with plenty of affection and kindness, but not a great deal of attention, from their busy, versatile father, who sought relief from his trouble in translating Dante. Their father's friends were inclined to take a hand in the up-bringing of the clever, attractive group of children. Amongst them was Samuel Crisp, who had been a man of the world, very much of the Fulk Greville type, had tried to write, and taken the failure of his tragedy—*Virginia*—so hardly that he had broken off from his old way of life. Now, from the retirement of a country house at Chesington, he became a true guide, philosopher and friend to Dr Burney and his family, especially to "Fannikin," who called him Daddy Crisp. He was one of the very few people who could break

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE BURNEY HOUSEHOLD 7

through the crust of Fanny's shyness at this time. When she was but eleven, most of the visitors to the house found her nickname of the Old Lady so appropriate that they soon adopted it.

David Garrick and his wife also took a great interest in the little band of children, and on one occasion Garrick introduced two of them to his brother as "two of my children, two of the Burneys." Many antics Garrick played for this little private and particular audience.

In time two of the girls, Esther and Susan, were placed at school in Paris for two years. Fanny was passed over, partly because of her timidity and backwardness, partly because her father was afraid that her warm affection for her French grandmother might incline her to Roman Catholicism.

When Fanny was fifteen, her father married again. The second Mrs Burney was a lady of conventional good sense, who prided herself on blue-stockings tastes. She was a widow, with children of her own, and before long there were three families of young people in the Burney *ménage*. The sunny-tempered Burneys steered a happy course through all these relationships. Mrs Burney was often in Norfolk, where she had responsibilities, and then her step-daughters were left in charge of the London house, where they enjoyed the comings and goings of their father and his friends as much as ever. Dr Burney used to have musical evenings, and great musicians of the day delighted to present them-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

## 8 THE BURNEY HOUSEHOLD

selves, and to sing and play informally. On these occasions St Martin's Street would be almost blocked with the carriages of the fashionable world.

The talk she heard in her father's house was a vital part of Fanny's education, for she had little regular teaching. Susan read French with her, and long journal-letters to Daddy Crisp, with interesting replies from him in a whimsical but scholarly vein, took the place of the essay-writing of a normal education. Fanny always took more kindly to writing than reading, but she studied some solid books in her father's library, and she had a liberal education in human nature—from great personalities of her day to the family of the wig-maker next door.

The family circle of the Burneys must always have been interesting. Of the brothers, James sailed round the world with Captain Cook, and eventually became an admiral. Charles Lamb wrote of his flashes of wild wit and described his household in later life.

Charles, the youngest brother, was reputed to be the sweetest-tempered boy in the school when at Charterhouse; he won great distinction as a classical scholar, and became a second Dr Charles Burney.

Of the sisters, Esther, who sang and played for her father's guests, was the most vivacious. Susan—when only fourteen—wrote of her: "My eldest sister shines in conversation, because, though very modest, she is totally free from any



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[More information](#)

THE BURNEY HOUSEHOLD 9

*mauvaise honte.*" Susan herself seems to have had an endearing charm which made all her family turn to her for sympathy, and introduce her with happy confidence to their various friends. She stood by crying when Fanny made a bonfire of her early manuscripts, she listened eagerly on the other side of the wall when Dr Burney read *Evelina* aloud to Mrs Burney before breakfast, and reported every laugh to Fanny, the still unknown authoress. When the secret was out, Mrs Burney could scarcely believe that Susan had had no hand in writing the book.

For Susan, Fanny wrote the greater part of her diary; at Susan's house (she was then Mrs Phillips) she first met the Chevalier d'Arblay. The third sister—Charlotte—was considerably younger, and was often away in Norfolk. When at home, however, she added her full share to the family *joie de vivre*; Garrick called her his little Dumpling Queen.

Fanny was, at first, somewhat of a lame duck in this lively household. Susan, on her home-coming from the school in Paris, gravely noted Fanny's characteristics in her own journal. She considered that they were "sense, sensibility and bashfulness, and even a degree of prudery. Her understanding is superior, but her diffidence gives her a bashfulness before company with whom she is not intimate, which is a disadvantage to her."

Fanny probably lost nothing at this time by keeping her sprightliness in reserve. She made

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breakfast for her father while his hair was being curled, copied his manuscripts, was dutiful in the household sewing, and the family relied upon her to be useful in many little ways. Her father often spoke of her with an affectionate "poor Fan"; her step-mother was afraid that her unfortunate taste for scribbling might unfit her for everyday life and society. Meanwhile in the pages of her journal Fanny lived over again, with fun and exuberance, the scenes in which she had played her actual part as a quiet figure in the background.