

NICHOLAS WAIN.
(From an old sketch.)

Page 87.

NICHOLAS WAIN

(1742-1813)

NICHOLAS WALN.

NICHOLAS WALN—THE LAWYER, THE CHRISTIAN.

Perhaps there is not a brighter Philadelphia boy walking the streets of "the city of brotherly love," and going to the good old William Penn Charter School to-day, than was young Nicholas Waln, who was doing these same things about the year 1750.

He was born at Fair Hill, near Philadelphia (between Germantown and Frankford) in 1742. When he was eight years old his father died, and soon after he entered the Penn Charter School, where we read that "he passed through the English departments, studied the mathematics, became a good Latin scholar, and, what was of far greater importance upon his after life, he was educated in the principles and doctrines of the Christian religion."

In later life Nicholas Waln used to say that these childish impressions of pure religion never quite left his heart, and that he believed they had kept him from yielding to many temptations.

We are not told just when he left school, but we read that it was "while yet a mere lad" that he began the study of law, for which he soon showed wonderful ability.

He delighted in gayety and merriment, and his wit was quick and keen, but he allowed nothing to

"Cheer up, and rejoice, for the time is drawing nigh when everlasting joy will be assigned to those who have fought the good battle of faith, and have worn the cross with resignation and patience."

Extract from a letter
of Nicholas Waln.

interfere with his studies. He gave a good deal of time to mastering the German language, and his fluent use of it, as well as his agreeable manner, made him popular as a lawyer with the German country people of his native State when he began to practise, and in the county courts, especially at Lancaster and Easton, he had much work during the time (about seven years) that he was active in his profession.

Before he was of age Nicholas Wain was admitted to practice in the courts, where, it is said, "he met with much encouragement." Perhaps it was of this time in his life that the following story is told:—

One day Nicholas Wain questioned keenly the justice of a charge from an elderly judge (who, it would seem, had been formerly his teacher), and the latter, amazed at his audacity, exclaimed, "Have I brought up a young crow to peck my eyes out?" Nicholas Wain quickly replied, "No, to open them!"

This clever young man was not without some weaknesses and temptations of his own, however, and too great a love of money seems to have been one of them.

His friend, Miers Fisher, who felt for him "the greatest veneration and reverence," could yet remember the time when he was "remarkable for his penuriousness." But he could also testify how the love of money and of fame was finally overcome by the love of his Saviour. For Nicholas Wain experienced what may be truly called "conversion"—an entire change of heart and life.

This change began about a year after his marriage, which took place at Friends' Meeting House on Pine Street, Philadelphia, in the Fifth Month, 1771. His wife was Sarah, the only child of Joseph Richardson, "who was through life a true helpmeet to him."

But at a time when his cup of earthly pleasure might seem most full—in the strength of his young manhood, happily married, wealthy, talented, honored in his profession—Nicholas Wain came under such a sense of sin that he said every day was to him "as a judgment day," when "everything that was covered up or past was revealed" to the heart-searching power of the Holy Spirit. Like George Fox, when he found no man who could speak to his condition, Nicholas Wain seemed to feel all earthly help and comfort taken away. He was so overwhelmed with sorrow that he could not attend to business or converse with business men.

In this state of mind he was kept until the day when he uttered that remarkable prayer in which his own heart seemed to melt and the hearts of his hearers with it. The story has been often told, but it bears retelling, and, as we always prefer to hear of remarkable events from those who have witnessed them, we will quote the account given by Joseph Oxley in his Journal (published in "*Friends' Library*," Vol. II., p. 474):—

"The 6th of Second Month, 1772, I was at the Youtns' Meeting in Philadelphia, which was attended by some Friends from the country. At this meeting was Nicholas Wain, who had his education among

the Society, but was brought up to the law, and became great in his profession as a counsellor, and who had pleaded at court but a very few days before.

“He sat under an awful weighty exercise of mind from the early sitting down of the meeting, and removed his seat into the ministering Friends’ gallery. He appeared to be agitated, and trembled very much. After sitting about half an hour, he kneeled down and prayed, but his behavior and dress being so contrary to such an appearance caused Friends to be much divided, and made some disorder in the meeting, but afterward it settled, and ended to the edification of many.”

Joseph Oxley adds a few sentences telling of the change which followed in Nicholas Walm’s whole manner of life, and how, before his return to England, he went to visit the young Christian, and found him “solid and weighty,” and “since have heard well concerning him.”

The prayer has been kept for us in these words, which but faintly picture the spirit which made them so living and powerful:—

“Oh, Lord, arise, and let Thine enemies be scattered! Baptize me; dip me yet deeper in Jordan. Wash me in the laver of regeneration. Thou hast done much for me, and hast a right to expect much; therefore, in the presence of this congregation, I resign myself and all that I have, to Thee, oh, Lord! It is Thine, and I pray Thee, oh, Lord! to give me grace to continue in this resolution.

“Wherever Thou leadest me, oh, Lord, I will follow

Thee, if through persecution or even martyrdom. If my life is required, I will freely sacrifice it.

“Now I know that my Redeemer liveth, and the mountains of difficulty are removed! Hallelujah!
 “Teach me to despise the shame and the opinions of the people of the world. Thou knowest, oh, Lord! my deep baptisms. I acknowledge my many sins and transgressions. I know my unworthiness of the many favors I have received, and I thank Thee, oh, Father! that Thou hast hid Thy mysteries from the wise and prudent, and revealed them to babes and sucklings.” Amen.

When the meeting was over Nicholas Walm went at once to his home, and for several weeks lived very quietly, going out but little except to his place of worship. After a time he resumed his place among men, but he proved the sincerity and depth of the vows which he had publicly taken.

He gave up his practice as a lawyer, and never seems to have doubted that, for him, this was the right course. One day, during the latter part of his life, a young man came to his office and told him that he “had an offer to be trained as a lawyer without cost.” Nicholas Walm simply answered, “I had an income of ten thousand a year—and quit it.”

But we are not to think of Nicholas Walm as always bowed under a sense of sin, or as always giving up, at his Master’s call, what had been dear to him.

Perhaps he is best remembered as one of those who

“Never deemed it sin to gladden

This vale of sorrows with a wholesome laugh.”

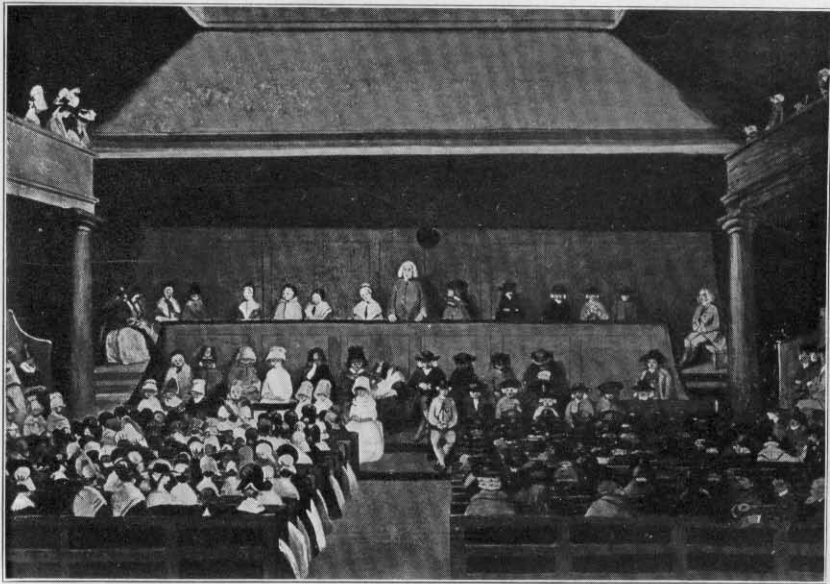
and many an anecdote has been handed down to us, showing his quick wit and sense of humor. As we glance at the face, under the old-time cocked hat, in his portrait, we can well believe, as a Friend has written of him, "Humor at times sparkled in his light eyes, and the reflection of ludicrous thought often flashed, in changeful hues, over his countenance."

Of the many amusing stories told about him the following shows his charity as well as his humor:—

The large woodpile in his back yard seemed to be rapidly growing smaller, and the reason was a mystery; but Nicholas Waln concluded that one of his neighbors, on a back street, was making too free use of it. As he believed that the man was really needy, the next morning he went to the wharf, bought a load of wood, and directed that it should be delivered at his neighbor's door. The man soon appeared, and demanded the reason of the gift. "I did not want thee to break thy neck off my wood-pile!" was Nicholas Waln's reply.

It was the day of plain speech both in and out of meeting. A fellow-minister and family connection of Nicholas Waln had a drawing and melodious manner of speech, which sometimes grated upon his sensitive nerves, so that he once remarked audibly (at least to those seated near him), at the close of a long-drawn-out discourse, "I'm tired of this singsong!" To which the brother minister calmly returned, "And I'm tired of this chit-chat!"

Nicholas Waln's freedom of speech must have



GRACECHURCH STREET MEETING.
(From a very old English engraving.)

Page 95.

GRACECHURCH STREET MEETING.

Upper Gallery.

Centre figure standing, Isaac Sharpless.

No. 1. Nicholas Wain of Philadelphia.

No. 2. Samuel Scot. No. 3. Samuel Emten.

No. 4. Robert Letchworth. No. 5. Dr. Fohbergill.

No. 6. Artist of picture.

Second Gallery—Men's side.

No. 1. Jos. Smith (banker),

below Isaac Sharpless, and next to women.

Under the Gallery.

Dr. Lettson (with legs crossed).

Side bench, sitting high up on right.

Samuel Hoar (banker of Gannell, Hoar & Co.).

Side bench, sitting high up on left.

Grizzel Hoar, wife of Samuel (with dark dress).

Lower side bench, on left.

The three daughters of Samuel and Grizzel Hoar, the middle one being Grizzel, wife of Wilson Birbeck, and third wife of William Allen. On her right Margaret, who married Samuel Woods in 1769. On her left Sarah, who married Joseph Bradshaw, and died in 1783.

Second Gallery—Women's side.

Ann Christy, the little bent woman, generally called Nanny Christy. Attire—white cast-over, green apron, green mittens.

This picture was sold in London early in the nineteenth century. The foregoing is from Biographical catalogue, London Friends' Institute, 1888.

sometimes been rather embarrassing to sensitive people. A cousin to his wife, a young man from Delaware, was about to be married at the old Pine Street Meeting House, and, as his own father was not living, was glad to have Nicholas Waln act for him. But at "the passing" (then to be gone through with twice, and in person), when the ceremony was over in the women's meeting, and they were leaving it, the young man, following Nicholas Waln, finding that the door had not been properly latched, and, turning to secure it, was much abashed to have him ask aloud, "What, does thee want to go back in there?"

Nicholas Waln's ministry was often very powerful. At a Youths' Meeting held at Abington in 1797, such a solemnity followed his closing prayer that even after the Friends at the head of the gallery had shaken hands, in token that the meeting had closed, the stillness remained unbroken, and no one seemed willing to leave the room. At last Nicholas Waln spoke out, saying, "Under the solemn covering we are favored with, perhaps Friends had better separate."

A few young men near the door then rose, but, finding that no one followed their example, sat down again. Sweet silence followed until Richard Jordan, standing up, repeated the song which greeted our Saviour's entrance into Jerusalem: "Hosanna! blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord!" A few sentences followed, and then the meeting closed.

He visited most of the meetings in England (1783 to 1785), and ten years after went to Ireland, where there was much secret unbelief among Friends. At the "Province Meeting," at Mountmellick (1795), Nicholas Wain spoke openly of this, and said his mind was impressed with a belief that there was a spirit in that place which would divide and scatter Friends, drawing many who filled high stations into a disbelief in the truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As he honestly unfolded his view, it was a surprise to many who heard him, and some wished to have him publicly reprovved. But William Savery, who was in the same place three years later, had his mind opened to the same unbelieving spirit, and he also faithfully labored against it. Later events proved that there was cause for this concern.

Nicholas Wain visited, as a minister, meetings in his own State, in Delaware and Maryland, attended the Yearly Meeting in New England and some others, besides laboring in England and Ireland. But it was mainly in and near Philadelphia that this work as a minister was done. He seldom made long religious visits, saying it "was better to go again—twice or thrice—than to overstay one's time."

The same powers of mind which had made the study of law such a delight to him were used to aid Friends in their difficulties in dealing with offenders against the discipline, especially at the time of the troubles with the "Free Quakers."

Yet he had a high ideal of the unity and harmony which should mark a religious society, and once wrote

that, though there might be a variety of opinions, "Yet as we dwell in love, and keep low, in a feeling state, we are sometimes favored with a sense of what is proper to be done, and so unite with the judgment of Truth; and which, when known, we dare not oppose." Perhaps this sentence defines what Friends mean by "love and unity" better than any other among their writings.

Nicholas Wain does not seem to have kept a journal, as so many of our elder Friends did. Some of his letters have been preserved; one to an aunt during his stay in London—when, as a young man, he crossed the ocean to finish his studies—we often see reprinted, and from it are quoted the words at the beginning of this chapter. Another, also from London, years later, to his wife, is kept in manuscript in an old scrap-book belonging to one of his wife's descendants. In this some account of religious exercises mingle with details of social life, and he speaks of some bodily ailments, and sends a message of love "to our children, for whom I often feel very anxious."

"The way to the Kingdom," he says in the same letter, "is through many tribulations, and I often fear that I shall not arrive there at all."

His strong personality was so impressed on the minds of those who knew him that, while we have so little from his own pen, we have many testimonies from others concerning him.

Oliver Paxson said, "As a great man, as a wise man, as a learned man, and as a rich man, I knew

none possessed of as much childlike humility and simplicity as Nicholas Wahn !”

Others wrote of him, “He was an original, being no man’s copy, and remarkable for independence of mind. . . . Faithful Friends, and even little children, loved him, but hypocrites feared him. . . . He possessed much of this world’s goods, but lived a life of self-denial.”

As old age came on, and he grew increasingly feeble, his friends thought that bodily weakness might excuse him from attending meetings, and one of them spoke to him kindly of it, telling him that he was not well enough to go to meeting. To which he replied that he “would as lief die there as anywhere else !”

A short time before his death he said, with much emphasis, “*To die is gain !*” And so, having “overcome,” to him was granted, we must believe, an “abundant entrance” into that Kingdom which, in his human weakness, he had feared he might never reach.

Nicholas Wahn died on the 29th of Ninth Month, 1813, aged seventy-one years.