MRS. FITZHERBERT

WITH the publication of Mr. Shane Leslie's *Life* of Mrs. Fitzherbert,* which appears a little over a century after her death, the clouds which so long hung over the name and fame of that sorely maligned woman have surely lifted at last and for ever. None will more rejoice at a final vindication than will the spiritual descendants of the English Catholic body, to which she belonged, and which (even when appearances seemed most adverse) always clung loyally to her. Her fellow Catholics were sometimes puzzled at and bewildered by her actions, but remained convinced that ultimately she would be found never to have strayed from the right path. Dr. Kirk, writing in her life-time his Biographies of English Catholics, well expressed their feeling: 'Mrs. Fitzherbert's long and mysterious connection with George IV when Prince of Wales rendered her the topic of general conversation, more than perhaps any other woman of her time; but by her friends and relations, and by all who ever enjoyed her acquaintance, she has always been regarded with the most unqualified sentiments of approbation and esteem.'

To all students of her period, Mrs. Fitzherbert's name and personality are well known. This 'wife who for reasons of state had to pretend to be a mistress' figures constantly in the histories, memoirs, pamphlets, lampoons, newspapers, paintings and caricatures of the entire epoch, by some sneered at as a light o' love, by others placed on a level with the Valiant Woman of the Scriptures. Mrs. Fitzherbert's father was one of the Smythes, Baronets of Eshe and Acton Burnell, her mother an Errington of an ancient Catholic family in the North. She was brought

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* *Mrs. Fitzherbert. A Life.* Chiefly from unpublished sources. By Shane Leslie. (London, 1939. Burns Oates; 15/- net.)

up in Paris, by the 'Blue Nuns,' an English educational community then greatly in favour with her co-religionists. Married at nineteen, first to a Weld and then to a Fitzherbert, thus becoming chatelaine successively of two historic houses, Lulworth Castle and Swynnerton, she was doubly a widow and twenty-seven years old when in 1784 she came to London, and thereby entered into English history.

Of great attractiveness, well dowered, with a house in Mayfair and a villa on the river, she seems to have taken the town by storm, and to have rapidly become a social success in the most brilliant circles. The Prince of Wales, then in the hey-day of youthful charm but with a reputation already sadly soiled, was greatly struck by her, and soon declared himself madly in love, ready to marry her, to renounce his position, to fly with her to America. But she, though not unresponsive or unappreciative, was on her guard, and hung back in much alarm. The only effect was to increase the frenzied passion of her royal admirer. Eventually and with great prudence, Mrs. Fitzherbert decided to withdraw to the Continent, and spent a couple of years in France and Holland. But it was of small avail. Pursued incessantly by couriers, letters and demands, she had to give way in the end and to consent to the honourable terms that the Prince now proposed. 'He gave her the word of a Prince that he would marry her. But she was to keep the marriage a secret as long as he lived. She trusted to his honour, and agreed to return toEngland.'

On December 15th, 1785, according to the still-extant marriage lines carefully treasured by the bride ever afterwards, 'George Prince of Wales was married unto Maria Fitzherbert,' by the Rev. Robert Burt of Twickenham, and in the presence of the lady's brother and uncle as witnesses.

Of the fact of this marriage there is now no doubt, but as to its legality and validity there are various opinions. It was certainly a good marriage from a Catholic stand-

point, the participants in the ceremony being quite free from canonical impediments, while the fact that no Catholic priest assisted would not affect matters inasmuch as Tridentine legislation on that point had not then been applied to England. The Anglican Church (if regarded as a spiritual body, and not a mere state department) would probably have taken the same view. But as regards English law, the case was otherwise, and there were fatal objections. For, by the Royal Marriage Act of 1772, no member of the ruling house might marry a subject without the King's leave, any such marriage or even attempted marriage being declared utterly null and void, while those concerned in it would be liable to severe penalties. Moreover, under the Act of Settlement, the union of the heir to the throne with a Roman Catholic was forbidden and would affect the succession.

However, the deed was done, and the die cast. Mrs. Fitzherbert, though not appearing on state occasions, began to take her place at the head of the Prince's establishments at Carlton House and the Brighton Pavilion, and to figure constantly at his side. The world was mystified and seethed with gossip. At first it was thought to be but a case of one mistress the more; but when it was seen that Mrs. Fitzherbert still regularly attended to her religious duties at the Bavarian chapel in Warwick Street, and that the Prince of Wales insisted that Society should accord her the same deep respect that he himself paid, a private marriage was naturally suspected.

So for a while Mrs. Fitzherbert reigned happily with her Prince, himself improved and uplifted by her influence. Unfortunately he was in dire financial straits, with debts running into the hundred thousands. At long last he sought parliamentary assistance and relief. Then the storm broke. Blunt questions were asked about the alleged marriage. The very succession to the throne seemed in peril. The Whig party, who placed in the Prince all

their hopes of future power and office, took alarm, and brought such pressure to bear that Fox was allowed to assure the House of Commons as if with authority not only that no ceremony that could be regarded as a legal one had taken place, but even that there had been no marriage at all. At the same time Sheridan informed the bewildered senators that there was in the background another person 'on whose conduct truth could fix no just reproach, and whose character claimed and was entitled to the truest and most general respect.'

Mrs. Fitzherbert's first reaction to all this was a desire to fade out of the picture. Her character was compromised, her feelings outraged, her religion besmirched. But in the end her ideas of wifely duty prevailed and she continued in her course and left the world to think and say what it liked. She held her head high, the Prince's brothers stoutly upheld her, and on the whole Society took her part.

And so matters drifted on until 1794. In that fateful year, the Prince's debts being now some £375,000, he was constrained by the King as a necessary condition of their discharge to 'settle down' and to enter upon a legal constitutional 'Act of Parliament' marriage. But the coming of Caroline of Brunswick meant the dismissal of Maria Fitzherbert. Yet for her it was by no means the end.

Two years later, the Prince of Wales, unhappy and disillusioned, and loathing the woman who had been forced upon him, asked Mrs. Fitzherbert to return. It was a difficult problem she had to face, and she hesitated a long time. To live again with the Prince was to proclaim herself his mistress when she knew she was his wife. The world would never understand the situation, and yet her former solemn promise of secrecy bound her lips. She resolved to seek the guidance and accept the decision of the Head of her Church. One of the Warwick Street priests, the Rev. William Nassau, was sent by her to Rome early

in 1800, on the understanding that if he obtained a favourable answer she would rejoin the Prince. We learn from a document in the Westminster Diocesan archives which Mr. Leslie has unearthed that the emissary was received by the just-elected Pope, Pius VII, with great kindness. The Pontiff had a long talk with him, asked him to put his case into writing so that he might consider it with the help of his canonists, and yet made the final decision quite his own personal act. Mr. Nassau was able to bring back to Mrs. Fitzherbert a Pontifical Brief allowing her to live with the Prince *ut uxor*. Seven years of tolerable happiness followed.

When the inevitable happened, and the Prince's love cooled and his affections strayed elsewhere, Mrs. Fitzherbert retired without a murmur to spend the remainder of her long life in quiet dignity at Brighton in the comfortable still-existing house she had built there. Only from afar did she view the splendours of the Regency and the long-deferred Kingship of the man she knew to be her husband. But when George IV died, she considered that her lips might be in a measure unsealed, and some statement of the true facts of her life be put on record at least for posterity. She owed this at least to herself, her family, her Church. She asked the new King to visit her, and she showed him her papers, her husband's Will and letters, and the Certificate of her marriage. The good William IV was ' moved to tears by their perusal, and surprised at so much forbearance with such documents in her possession, and asked what amends he could make her.' His offer of a Peerage she declined, but accepted permission to put her servants into royal livery, and for herself to wear mourning weeds for his brother. The King ever afterwards treated her as a venerated friend.

It was agreed that most of her papers should be destroyed, though those vital to the defence of her character were to be sealed up by the Duke of Wellington and de-

posited in the vaults of Coutts' Bank. Only in our own day have these last been opened, examined, copied and in some cases published, and this by the gracious permission of the Sovereign.

Mrs. Fitzherbert died on March 27th, 1837, aged 81, and just in sight of the Victorian era.

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On the effigy erected to Maria Fitzherbert's memory in the little Church of St. John Baptist at Brighton, where she lies at rest, there is a subtle reference made to the fact that she had been widowed thrice and not merely twice. On her finger are sculptured *three* wedding-rings.

ROBERT BRACEY, O.P.

We take this opportunity of wishing all our readers a happy and peaceful Christmas, notwithstanding the stress and distresses of wartime.

We are able to offer them in this issue an increased number of pages, and hope that, with the New Year, we may expand still further. The need of financial support is still urgent, however, and we venture to reiterate our appeal to our readers to do all in their power to increase the number of subscribers to BLACKFRIARS.

Editor.