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FANNY CROSBY

(MRS. FRANCES JANE CROSBY VAN ALSTYNE.)

THE CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN TO CHRISTIAN HYMNOLOGY.

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BEGAN WITH MOTHER OF JESUS.

Christian hymnology began with a woman. In the earliest hour of the dawn, when as yet the darkness out-measured the light in the day, no less a woman than the Mother of Jesus, filled with the prophets and catching up the spirit of Deborah and Hannah, gave to the world the rhapsody known as the *Magnificat*. It may be that it was not used for purposes of worship until long after the first century of disciples had passed away, but it was the first Christian psalm, standing historically at the head of that countless list of distinctive pieces through which the followers of Jesus have lifted their souls to God in song. And while in the nature of the case it could not reflect the fuller light, its opening couplet sounded the keynote of praise for every generation of believers:

“My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.”

PROBABLE APOSTOLIC WARRANT.

According to the Apostle Peter it was promised that the spirit of God would be poured out on the sexes alike,

that "daughters" as well as "sons" and "handmaidens" as well as "servants" would "prophecy." And the New Testament period knew of women who had the gift. Probably some, if not all of them, knowing the principle of Hebrew parallelism as a thing familiar, threw their effusions into poetic form. Unless the early post-apostolic story confused Philip the Apostle with Philip the Evangelist, there were two daughters of the Apostle as well as the four of the evangelist "which did prophecy." It is possible that some of those early Christian songs whose fragments have been detected here and there in the New Testament writings were born of the "fine frenzy" of women.

FIRST FIFTEEN CENTURIES.

One would not expect to see the names of many women in this line of service in the records of the fourteen centuries that followed that of the Apostles, since comparatively only a few names of the men so serving were preserved; but that there were some is evident from the appearance of Elpis, wife of Boethius, in the 5th century, the Spanish lady, Cyrilla, in the 7th, and the abbesses, St. Hildegarde and Herradis in the 12th. During this long period most of the voices that sounded were from the cloister and there was little in the situation to encourage the initiative in others. But the breaking of the Reformation over Europe was also the breaking of the fountains of Christian song. One of the effects of the great movement was the re-looseing of the tongue of praise. The Catholics themselves, on whose side a counter revival of interest took place, entered on a new era in the matter of hymn production. It was the beginning of the production of probably a million and a quarter of hymns, of which some six hundred thousand have appeared in German alone.

ACTIVITY FOLLOWING THE REFORMATION.

It was in the wake of this activity that women hymn writers began to come into their own, especially after the

restoration of congregational singing, when the voice of the people was heard with that of the priest and the choir in the service of song. In this awakening, which was fairly on in the early part of the 17th century, the Catholics had a splendid representative in hymn writing, in the distinguished Madame Guyon. Ludamilla Elizabeth and Emilia Juliana, cousins, and each Countess of Schwartzburg-Rudolphstadt, and Anna Sophia, Countess of Hesse-Darmstadt, were Lutherans. The Reformed body, following Zwingli and Calvin, though favoring psalmody rather than hymnody, and so more or less repressive of individual hymn-making, had some independent producers as Louise Henriette of Brandenburg, wife of the great Elector. In England, Queen Elizabeth, though not herself a hymn-writer, gave encouragement to hymn singing, and it was in her language that women hymnists were to do their most extensive work. Here in the 18th century the Church of England had its Hannah More; the Independents (or Congregationalists) their Eliazbeth Rowe and Susanna Harrison; the Unitarian Independents, their Anna Laetitia Barbauld; the Baptists, their Anne Steele, the most prolific hymn-writer of her day, and their Sarah Slinn; the Moravians, their Clare Taylor; and the Methodists (of the Whitefield type) their Selina Shirley, Countess of Huntingdon.

INTRODUCTION INTO AMERICA.

It was in English and in the 18th century that woman hymn-writing passed to "the American strand," to bring forth in due season on this continent many of its most interesting types, as certainly its most abundant yield. And one does not need to be in the spirit of exaggeration to say that of all the women who have wrought in Christian hymnology in English, or in any tongue, in many respects the most remarkable was the American singer who is familiarly known by the world as Fanny Crosby.

SKETCH OF FANNY CROSBY'S LIFE.

Frances Jane Crosby was born of godly parents at Southeast, Putnam County, New York, March 24, 1820, and died at Bridgeport, Connecticut, February 12, 1915. When about six weeks old a wrong application of a poultice to her eyes rendered her sightless for the rest of her life. As she developed under the gentle hand of her best of friends and came by ear and touch into contact with things external, she discovered a sense of her loss, but also grew a beautiful reconciliation to her lot. "As I grew older," such is her own story, "they told me that I should never see the faces of my friends, the flowers of the field, the blue of the sky or the golden beauty of the stars. When my dear mother knew that I was to be shut out from all the beauties of the natural world, she told me in my girlhood that two of the world's greatest poets were blind and that sometimes Providence deprived persons of some physical faculty in order that the spiritual insight might more fully awake. I remember well the day she read to me, with deep expression, Milton's sonnet on his own blindness. * * * Soon I learned what other children possessed, but I made up my mind to store away a little jewel in my heart which I called Content. This has been the comfort of my whole life." At eight years of age she wrote her first piece, which naturally enough took color from her condition but showed also the pluck, the indomitable spirit, the upward look, which followed her through life:

"O what a happy soul am I;
Although I cannot see,
I am resolved that in this world
Contented I will be.
How many blessings I enjoy
That other people don't;
To weep and sigh because I'm blind
I should not and I won't."

When she was fifteen years old she was entered at the New York Institution for the Blind, where she was unusually proficient in her studies. Such were her attainments that after graduation she was made an instructor, a place which she held from 1847 to 1858, teaching Grammar and Rhetoric and Ancient and American history. In 1858 she was married to Alexander Van Alstyne, a professor of music in the same institution, also blind, with whom she lived in marked appreciation and devotion to the day of his death. Her first volume, *A Blind Girl and Other Poems*, appeared in 1844, while she was yet in school, and was followed in 1849 by *Monterey and Other Poems*, and in 1858 by *A Wreath of Columbia's Flowers*. The discovery of her talent for lyrical composition brought her requests from publishers and she became the author of many songs, first secular, afterwards religious. The first hymn was not written until 1864. *Rosalie a Prairie Flower*, *Hazel Dell*, *Proud World*, *Good-bye* and *Music in the Air**, were all popular in their day; while the last named, now some fifty years after it was written, still appears in collections of popular songs.

She traveled much from place to place speaking and lecturing, interested always in her *Alma Mater* and similar enterprises and in evangelism, and was associated in terms of personal friendship with many notable persons. She heard Ole Bull play and Jenny Lind sing and read in the hearing of the latter her poem, *The Swedish Nightingale*. She appeared on many public occasions and was the first woman to address the United States Senate. She boasted of living in the life-time of all the Presidents, Washington excepted, many of whom she personally knew. Henry Clay was one of her friends in the earlier years; Grover Cleveland, associated in his younger days

*The writer recalls vividly that one of the first songs learned by him in his childhood in Montgomery, Ala., was Fanny Crosby's "Jesus the water of life will give," and that in his young manhood at La-Grange, Ga., one of the most popular of the songs used in parlor and in serenades was her "Music in the air."

with the Institution for the Blind, helped her frequently in copying her pieces and she was a welcome and willing guest in his home after he became her country's president. In 1891 she issued her last volume, entitled *Bells at Evening and Other Poems*, but kept up the composition virtually to the year of her death. She was a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

How she found her distinctive lifework is one of the most interesting of stories that she told about herself. "I had written a large number of secular and religious poems, a few cantatas and many songs, but my real writing of Christian hymns began on my leaving the Institute and becoming associated with some notable religious characters. They have been everything to me. Many of them have reached the Golden Strand and I am sure of meeting and knowing them there. Mr. W. B. Bradbury, I first met at 425 Broome Street, New York City. He asked me if I would write a hymn for him. I was delighted. I was hungry for some one to ask me that question. In three days I returned with some verses which he set to music and published. This was my first hymn:

We are going, we are going,
To a home beyond the skies;
Where the fields are robed in beauty
And the sunlight never dies.
Where the fount of life is flowing
In the valley green and fair,
We shall dwell in love together
There will be no parting there."

Her real work as a hymn-writer, began from that hour. She had found her mission and was "the happiest creature in the land." But her hymn which first won world-wide attention, she says, was "Pass me not, O Gentle Saviour" suggested by W. H. Doane and written in 1868. Her great friends in this important day in her life were Wm. B. Bradbury, George F. Root, W. H. Doane and Sylvester Main. Having found her calling, she applied her-

self to it with all the passion, writing weekly and sometimes daily to the end of her life. The publications that carried her pieces were sold by millions and every part of the English speaking world, and a number of her hymns have been translated into other tongues. It is safe to say that in fifty years no Lord's Day has passed in cities like London, New York, Washington, Atlanta, or in English speaking towns of good size in the world, without some use of Fanny Crosby in some of the churches, halls or homes. She was the poet of modern evangelism. Moody and Sankey, Whittle and Bliss, Torrey and Alexander, Chapman, Wharton, Dixon, all, feeling and using her power.

THE THREE MOST DISTINGUISHING FEATURES.

One cannot consider Fanny Crosby without thinking of the three characteristics that stood out in sharpest relief in her life. Simply stated, they were her great affliction, her extreme longevity, or rather her long sustained activity in her chosen field, and her amazing productiveness. She was blind from her first year, not born blind, but virtually so. It is not amiss to think, as her mother did, of the Blind old man of Scio's rocky isle, and of the sightless author of *Paradise Lost* in whose beautiful sonnet on his own blindness occurs the impressive line "they also serve who only stand and wait." And if one be an American he is likely to think of William Henry Prescott who wrote his *Conquest of Mexico* and other works in blindness. But Homer and Milton and Prescott had had eyes, and these eyes they had used in at least the preparations for life and achievement. But after all, was not Fanny Crosby's limitation her opportunity? She herself thought so. It is to be written of Fanny Crosby not that, having eyes, she saw not; but that, having not eyes, she saw. An inquiry appearing in an English journal in 1872, "Who Is Fanny Crosby?" received the reply: "She is a blind lady whose heart can see splendidly in the sunshine of God's love." It was on this that

Frances Ridley Havergal wrote the poem "A Seeing Heart," addressed to Fanny Crosby.

"Sweet blind singer over the sea,
Tuneful and jubilant, how can it be
That the songs of gladness which float so far
As if they fell from the evening star,
Are the notes of one who may never see
'Visible music' of flower and tree,
Purple of mountain, or glitter of snow,
Ruby and gold of the sunset glow
And never the light of a loving face?
Must not the world be a desolate place
For eyes that are sealed with the seal of years
Eyes that are open only for tears?
How can she sing in the dark like this?
What is her fountain of light and bliss?

O her heart can see, her heart can see,
And its sight is strong and swift and free;
Never the ken of mortal eye
Can pierce so deep and far and high
As the eagle vision of hearts that dwell
In the lofty sunlit citadel
Of faith that overcomes the world
With banners of Hope and Joy unfurled,
Garrisoned with God's perfect peace
Ringing with pæans that never cease,
Flooded with splendor bright and broad
The glorious light of the Love of God."

"Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents; but that the works of God should be made manifest in him."

And this was throughout the length of a long, long life. When she died in February, 1915, she was in her ninety-fifth year, and, beginning to compose verse when she was eight years of age (for like Alexander Pope she

“lisp’d in numbers”), she had been eighty-seven years in the service of song. From 1864, she was in the hymn writing service which became the occupation as well as the passion of her life. Taking it all together, neither Watts nor Wesley served so long or so continuously.

The third remarkable distinction was the almost incredible fertility of the soil in which she grew her plants. And this showed itself not only in the abundance of the harvest but also in the marked variety of the products. The number of her songs has been variously estimated from 2,000 to 8,000. If it be fixed at 3,500, which is not an unsafe estimate, it would make her, with the one sole exception of Charles Wesley, the most prolific producer of hymns in the history of Christianity. “So fruitful has been her pen,” writes one of her reviewers, “that publishers have felt forced to conceal her prolificness by the use of various signatures, nearly a score of which are given by her biographers.” Yet the publishers have always been glad to get her pieces. Initials were often used as A., F., F. J. C., V. V. A., and sometimes initials not even remotely suggesting her own, as D.H.W. Ella Dale was one of her pen names, also Mrs. Jenie V. Glenn, and Mrs. Kate Grinley. And sometimes also she put it Viola and Viola V. A. These devices by keeping attention from herself, may have aided her in a measure in breaking away from certain ruts in which hymnology had fallen. For example, the monotony of one set of metres had long reigned, and Fanny Crosby believed in variety. She possessed a lyrical sense of her own and stood for flexibility in combinations and melodies. Her harp was a harp of a thousand strings. A growing, changing world calls for a growing, changing hymnody, not in principles to be sure but in adaptation; and no one has helped more to bring it about than Fanny Crosby.

HER CONTEMPORARY HYMNISTS.

The point made by her on her own life that, extending from before the death of John Adams, it was lived in the

lifetime of all the Presidents except the first, would lead easily to the thought that it also encircled the lives of the other hymn-writers of the same period, and the well-known friendship existing between her and Frances Ridley Havergal would as easily suggest that she was a link of fellowship between the lyrists on the two sides of the Atlantic. This period, precisely the world's greatest period of activity, showed in no one specific more advancement than in the number of hymn producers and the quantity and variety of hymn products. From her unique position Fanny Crosby was a sort of overseer of the whole. Figuratively, her eye, and her's alone, was able to command the entire field. She was the only person that could strike the perspective, that could watch the growth of things, and her biographies indicate that she did it.

In her earlier days the two women whose names were most dominant in literary circles were Felicia Dorothy Hemans in England, and Lydia Huntley Sigourney in America. Both were hymn-writers, the latter the author of "Lab'ers of Christ, Arise" and "Blest Comforter Divine." It was a happy recollection of Fanny Crosby's that she had "touched the garments of Mrs. Sigourney." Among other spirits that had already wrought long and were now just filling out their days were some of the brightest lights in hymnology. Over the sea were Harriet Auber, Dorothy Ann Thrupp, "Saviour, Like a Shepherd lead us"; Charlotte Elliott, "Just as I am"; Margaret Mackay, "Asleep in Jesus," and Eliazbeth Mills, "We speak of the realms of the blest," all of the Church of England; Alice Flowerdew and Maria Grace Saffary, Baptists; Jemima (Thompson) Luke, "I think when I read that sweet story of old," Congregationalist; Amelia Opie, Quaker; Sarah Flower Adams, immortal author of "Nearer, My God, to Thee"; and Katherine Hankey, who wrote "Tell me the old, old story." In her own country, belonging to the same class, were Phoebe Hinsdale Brown, Congregationalist; Sarah Boardman Judson and Lydia Baxter, "Take the name of Jesus with you," Baptists;

Elizabeth Payson Prentiss, "More Love to Thee, O Christ," Presbyterian; and Martha Matilda Stockton, Methodist.

It was regarded by Fanny Crosby as an interesting coincidence in her life that three of her sister hymnists were born in 1820, the same year as herself. One of them was the English Quakeress, Anna Laetitia Waring, who wrote "In heavenly love abiding"; Another was Anna D. Warner, Presbyterian, "One more day's work for Jesus"; while the third was Alice Cary. If the investigation had gone a little farther a fourth name could have been added to the list, the American Methodist, Mary Ann Kidder, author of "We shall sleep but not forever."

Her contemporaries, then, were of three classes: those that were already serving when she was born and continued for awhile with the newcomer, those whose birth year coincided with her own, and those that came on the scene after she had begun and helped her to renew from time to time the zeal of her long life. If she stood in a reverential attitude toward the first, she was in a sisterly relation to the second and felt a motherly devotion for the third. It is an almost interminable list, those that grew up as under her tutelage. They multiplied rapidly on both sides of the sea and their names are without number. But splendid specimens of them may be seen in the Roman Catholic Adelaide Proctor; bright ornaments of the Episcopalian communions, Cecil Frances Alexander, "There is a green hill far away," Frances Ridley Havergal "Take my life and let it be," Anna L. Walker "Work for the night is coming," and Lucy Larcom; Presbyterians, Eliazbeth C. Clephane "There were ninety and nine," Ellen Huntington Gates "I will sing you a song of that beautiful land," and Emma Campbell "Jesus of Nazareth passeth by"; Congregationalists, Phoebe Cary, "One sweetly solemn thought"; Baptists, Marianne Farningham Hearn, "Watching and Waiting," and Annie Sherwood Hawks, "I need thee every hour"; and Methodists, Elvina (Hall) Myers, "I hear the Saviour say."

No complete list could omit the Chautauqua lyricist, Mary Ann Lathbury, who wrote "Break thou the bread of life," and scores of others, representing many communions, and showing the extent and value of the contribution of women to Christian hymnology, particularly in the lifetime of Fanny Crosby. And she must be conceived of as sitting in the midst of the circle a sort of mother superior with her heart over all.

ESTIMATE OF HER WORK.

It has been customary with reviewers to disparage the merit of Fanny Crosby's work. Quality it is said has been lost in quantity. Julian, the English hymnologist, had better not spoken of her at all. And our American Duffield has been satisfied with dubbing her with faint praise. "It is more to Mrs. Van Alstyne's credit as a writer," says he, "that she has occasionally found a pearl than that she has brought to the surface so many oyster shells."

Now that she is dead and gone and the question of her place among song writers must be resolved, it were well to let prejudice go and soberly take all the values into the count. When this is done it will be found that Fanny Crosby was a true poet, with a lyrical faculty of a rare order, gifted in expression, sufficiently strong when aiming at strength, but preferring beauty, spontaneity, flow. It is not against her that she sang much, any more than a similar charge would be against Watts, Wesley, Montgomery, Newton. She sang much because she had to sing. A mocking bird is not to be judged by all of its notes, but it must sound all in order to sound its best. Judged by the *residuum* Fanny Crosby must have a high place as well as a permanent place among the song writers of the kingdom. But how high? Let most of her pieces go; her admittedly good ones would remain, and they are numerous. She would still have to her credit a number of really fine pieces in excess of the number of

those on which the fame of any other woman rests. Mrs. Sigourney had a prototype in Anne Steele of England, and resembled her closely. She was called the Anne Steele of America. Fanny Crosby had no prototype, but she most resembled Frances Ridley Havergal. That is high enough.

Poetry is not a thing to be judged apart. It should be studied in the light of some intent. Fanny Crosby did not write primarily to be read but to be sung, to be looked at but to be felt. And, beyond some writers who have been considered her superiors, she had the art of adapting her poetry to the point. She sang for immediate blessed results, and that her method has succeeded on an eminent scale is certified by the splendid records of modern evangelism and millions of the most intelligent and sober-minded Christians in the world. If the test be made in the point of actual usefulness, Fanny Crosby's poetry will put the critic to shame.

But as works of art many of her songs will live. No one of her pieces can be singled out and called the greatest hymn of its class. She did not write the greatest hymn on Heaven, probably Watts did that in his "There is a land of pure delight"; but she wrote beautiful Heaven hymns, "Safe in the arms of Jesus" and "Some day the silver cord will break."* She did not write the greatest hymn on Christian security; probably George Keith did that in his "How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord"; but she wrote "All the way my Saviour leads me" which in addition to being one of the most devotional of Christian hymns, is one of the most finished short poems in the English language. She did not write the greatest hymn on Christian missions; probably Heber did

*The writer was present at the Moody Memorial Service in Carnegie Music Hall, in New York. On that occasion Mr. Sankey sang his own piece composed in honor of his great friend, "Out of the shadow land" and Fanny Crosby's "Some day the silver cord will break." He can never forget the effect of the latter piece on the assembly. We all felt as if we were with Moody in glory.

that when he wrote "From Greenland's icy mountains"; but she wrote "Rescue the perishing," and "Speed away, speed away, on your mission of light," two of the most effective of missionary hymns. Must Ben Jonson be despised because he was not Shakespear?

These pieces of hers will live. Toplady immortalized himself with his "Rock of Ages"; by all odds the second best piece in English using the same fine figure is Fanny Crosby's "In thy cleft, O Rock of Ages, hide thou me." Put with all these "Jesus, keep me near the cross," "To the work, to the work, we are servants of God," "Pass me not, O Gentle Saviour," "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord," "Thou my everlasting portion," "I am thine, O Lord, I have heard thy voice," "'Tis the blessed hour of prayer," "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine," "When Jesus comes to reward his servants" and "Saviour, more than life to me," a human deposit of pure gold is revealed that cannot but enrich the kingdom for generations to come. Thank God for Fanny Crosby!