

Frances Ridley Havergal  
By Charles J. Little, LL.D.

The father of Frances Ridley Havergal was, when she, his youngest child was born, rector of Astley, in Worcestershire, England. His character was one of rare strength and earnestness. His musical gifts were of a high order, his intellect clear and steady, his piety serene, cheerful, and beneficent. "It is wonderfully thrilling to see him in illness, such utter peacefulness and grand conceptions of God's absolute sovereignty in everything, such quiet rejoicing in his will, be it what it may," wrote Frances of her father as he drew near to darkness and to death. Few scenes in domestic history are more touching than that of this good man, who, returning to his beloved home with sight restored, falls swiftly to his knees and pours out to the Father of Lights a praise for the recovered sunshine.

Frances' mother was beautiful to look upon, and all beautiful within. Frances, who disliked to be called Fanny, was, as a child, her mother in miniature. How beautiful both were can be guessed from the touching words of Rev. F. Jeffery. "To-day it is exactly fourteen years since I saw the sun for the last time, but it would need more years than that to blot out my recollection of Astley Rectory." With this beautiful and saintly mother Frances spent but eleven, short years; years, however, full of exquisite bliss, of quiet but intense joy, whose very intensity made it border upon pain. Her early childhood

was passed at Astley, which is described by her sisters as one of the loveliest of country homes. "The old house entwined with ivy, roses, and the vine."

When taken to St. Nicholas, Worcester, in 1845, her father called her his "caged bird," for country sunshine had kept her singing hitherto with spontaneous delight, and now she became quieter. The passage from country to town, was the first startling experience of her life, the death of her mother was the second.

Her communion with nature had been perfect. The presence of beauty wrought in her soul songs without words. She herself described it in after years as a "sort of unbearable enjoyment," which she experienced when drinking in the "golden quiet of a bright summer's day." Her letters from Switzerland disclose a rare power of seizing the subtlest effects of light and shadow, as well as a strong delight in the rugged and wild, in the weird and the overwhelming. But she herself confesses that the wordless rapture of her childhood never came back to her in mature years. Hence her passage out of the sunshine into the shadow, out of the country into the town, was a passage into an atmosphere charged for her with subtle and unavoidable influences of melancholy.

This sensitiveness to natural beauty was accompanied with what is even rarer—an exquisite sensibility of musical sound. It would be hard, I think, either from the

history of literature or the history of music to match the following:

"In the train I had one of those curious musical visions which only rarely visit me. I hear strange and very beautiful chords, generally full, slow, and grand, succeeding each other in most interesting sequences. I do not invent them, I could not; they pass before my mind, and I only listen. ... It is so interesting; the chords seem to fold over each other and die away down into music of infinite softness, and then they unfold and open out. This time there was an added feature; I seemed to hear depths and heights of sound beyond the scale which human ears can receive, keen, far-up octaves, like vividly twinkling starlight of music, and mighty, slow vibrations of gigantic strings going down into grand thunders of depths, octaves below anything otherwise appreciable as musical notes. Then all at once, it seemed as if my soul had got a new sense, and I could *see* this inner music as well as hear it."

No wonder her playing of the "Moonlight Sonata "was like a revelation, if she could see the inner music as well as hear it.

But the exquisite sensibility was not weakness. What more sensible of light than a diamond? It breaks the sunbeams, but they cannot melt it. Frances even as a child was strong of purpose and fleet of foot; outwardly a laughing, singing, joyous being. Her mother's death, she complains, did not soften her, on the contrary, she was

angry at God for taking her mother from her. Nevertheless, it wrought a transformation in her being of which she herself was never half conscious. The hiding of a great grief makes prematurely old. A gifted child become motherless, buries her childhood in her mother's grave. Thinking makes her old. Happy, however, was Frances in her family; her father was companionable even to his little daughter, her sisters intelligent, affectionate.

In 1851 Mr. Havergal married again and in doing so gave his daughter a life-long friend. For the wife was a noble Christian woman, rich in mind and heart.

But in the meantime Frances had been to school. Her teacher was a Mrs. Teed, whose methods of instruction her pupil describes as something more than common. Mrs. Teed was a woman of sweet and holy power. Her assistants were also devoted Christians. Many of the girls "took sweet council together." Here at Mrs. Teed's school Frances first entered into that trust of the Lord Jesus which became from that time forth the dominant principle of her being. Her account of these school-days and of this crisis of her young life is told with sweet simplicity in the autobiography published after her death by a surviving sister.

After her father's marriage she was sent to another school; but the intensity of her application brought on a serious illness which compelled her for a time to abandon every form of study.

When she began school life again it was in a strange land and in the German tongue. Here the strength of her character revealed itself in her courageous profession of Christ, where such profession provoked enmity, and made unkindness. She describes her experience, "as a sort of nailing my colors to the mast." The diamond soul flashed and sparkled, but was not even scratched in the rude handling. Eager for all sorts of knowledge, she learned much and rapidly, but music was her chief delight.

Frances Havergal would have been a beautiful soul even without her gifts of song. Such transparent candor, such delicacy of conscience, such strength of affection and of will, such thoughtfulness of others, such forgetfulness and deliberate denial of self, are always and everywhere lovely. Christ was her Master, and not to understand Him would have argued a lack of affection for Him. With heart and mind she entered into the secrets of His life, and became like Him by seeing Him as He was and is. It was this transfigured intelligence of hers, this divinely irradiated thoughtfulness, which gave her such indescribable fascination, so that all her natural graces seemed to take on a heavenly potency.

I do not find this in Hester Ann Rogers, or in the Countess of Huntingdon, or in Madame Guyon; there was some of it, doubtless, in Polly Fletcher, possibly in Grace Murray. George Eliot's "Dinah" is radiant with it; George Eliot herself might have been resplendent with it had she

retained her early faith. How exquisite is the conception of "Little Pillows!" But such conceptions are flashes of love, not genius. They come only to souls whose one passion is to be helpful. They are the mental accompaniments of gracious deeds.

The artistic career of Frances Ridley Havergal is, then, only an incident of her Christian experience. For a moment it threatened to be something else. The discovery, not of her gift of song, for she had been aware of that from her infancy, but of the richness of that gift, aroused in her for a time that passion for applause, so dangerous to spiritual growth. Hiller had spoken enthusiastically of her musical composition. Her skill in harmony took him by surprise. He could hardly believe her story that she was in this respect self-taught. Her singing was without effort, spontaneous as the lark's, tremulous with unuttered pathos, and suggestive of secret power. Her playing was of that rare kind where the instrument becomes instinct with life and feeling; where the keys take on intelligence and soul, and answer the inward as well as the outward movements of the player. What wonder if her marvelous power gave her untold delight! What wonder if her sympathetic soul reveled in the gladness which this power evoked in those around her! But she would lay her music at her Master's feet or go without it. She would sing for Jesus or she would not sing at all. The swept keys should praise Him or they should not tremble at her touch.

"Take my voice and let me sing,

*always, only, for my King"*

were words written with her life's blood. Ah, me! How little the world knows of struggles like these! The very perfection of the victory lies in the heavenly reticence with which it is laid at the Master's feet. To describe it in all its details would be to forego its most precious fruits. But in such poems as "Autobiography," and "Making Poetry," Miss Havergal has made us feel that no one shared her heart's secrets save Jesus! He, and He only, knew the value of the love with which she kissed His feet. No! We may not enter into the struggle with her, but we may share in the joy of the victory. We may learn from her what a power music may become in the service of life and love. It was natural that she should take up her father's work after his death and become joint-editor of the "Songs of Grace and Glory." But we are not in the realm of the natural when we see this rare genius, this radiantly pure soul, upon her knees translating the touch of God into music for his church on earth. "On more occasions than one we paused for prayer and, spreading the matter before the Lord, asked for his Divine Spirit to guide her pen," wrote her co-editor, when the sweet voice of Frances had become a memory of "days that are no more."

The passage quoted above in which she describes her musical vision gives some glimpses of the inner movements of her nature when musical inspiration was upon her. Memnon's statue sung to the rising sun. Plato

spoke of all great thoughts as reminiscences. Beethoven spoke of landscapes translating themselves into music. Frances Havergal's mind was full of "loyal responses "to the "sun of her soul," of that unremembered reminiscence; of the heavenly landscape translating itself into melodies and harmonies, familiar yet unremembered, full of the unconscious syntheses of genius whose secrets are with God. And when they came not of their own accord, she did not try to force their coming.

"Mr. Blake, what do you do when inspiration fails you?" asked some one of the mad painter. "Mary, what do we do?" he asked of his sweet-faced wife. "We pray, William!" was her quiet answer. Sometimes Frances Havergal would not so much as pray, but waited for her Master to touch her spirit of His own sweet will, she praising Him meanwhile by the music of her loving silence. But let no one suppose that Frances Havergal ever substituted, or thought to substitute, inspiration for study. The ease with which she analyzed, made what to others required severe application, a delightful mental play to her. But she did not forego learning when further knowledge could be won only by unfolding all her strength. Somewhere she alludes to the beautiful image once employed by Kant, that birds could not fly in an unresisting medium, that their power to soar is due to their having something against which to beat their wings. That wisdom which is the birthright of candid souls kept her from despising technical knowledge. Patiently she explored the secrets of execution, the laws of sound, the

structure of voice and instrument, and then of all this knowledge she made a perfect consecration. She did not expect her Master to touch the keys of an untuned soul. She did what she could that He might do what He would.

To such natures as hers, rhymed speech comes without the seeking. It is not surprising, therefore, that we hear of her making verses in her childhood. Yet there is an absence of all strain and stress in this part of her life. Without the unrest of an ambitious nature, without the turbulence which characterizes the strong intellect beaten upon incessantly by stronger passions, her poetry' was a radiance, an out-going of luminous undulations from a soul which transmuted all its impressions into light and music. None knew better than she that

"Shallow lakelets of emotion  
Are not like the spirit-ocean  
Which reflects the purest blue."

Yet one would search in vain through her poems for that affectation of profundity which mistakes capacity for depth. They are lucid and luminous, yet subtle as sunshine with thoughts brought from afar. Take, for instance, the poem, "How Should They Know Me?" What can be more weirdly beautiful? What so fraught with suggestions of the immeasurable in man?

"Though the soaring spirit of restless man,  
Might the boundary line of the universe scan,

And measure and map its measureless plan  
The gift of self-knowledge were last!"

In reading her poems I am reminded again and again of Cowper. I shudder when I think of what might have been the fate of Frances Havergal had her childhood been as dreary, as desolate, as heart-breaking, as spirit-maddening, as his. His humor is so like to hers, his gaiety in moments of happiness is so sweet, so innocent, so diffusively helpful. He, too, is so lucid and so unaffected, so sensitive to the beauty of sky and cloud, of trees breaking into foliage and water breaking into foam. He, too, pants for God, with such unutterable longing! But Cowper was appointed to strange eclipse.

"O poets, from a maniac's tongue was poured the deathless; singing,  
O Christians, at your cross of hope a hopeless hand was clinging."

The "fearful clouds" broke not in blessings on his head, until he beheld the Lamb in his beauty. For him surely

"Life stained the white radiance of eternity,  
Until Death trampled it to fragments."

Not so with Frances Havergal. The pure light shone through her spirit, unflecked, unstained. Life and death, like day and darkness to God, were both alike to her.

She was not led astray into writing for writing's sake. To some one who wrote that F. R. H. could do "Satisfied" grandly, she replied:

" No, I couldn't! Not unless He gave it me line by line! Some day perhaps He will send me a bright line of verse on 'Satisfied' ringing through my mind and then I shall look up and thank Him and say, 'Now, dear Master, give me another to rhyme with it and then another.'" Well, indeed, might she say that this was "really much nicer than being talented or clever!" Miss Havergal's poetry easily falls into two divisions, Hymns for the Church and Lyrics of the Soul. The former are so well known that even a scant allusion seems unnecessary; the beautiful consecration hymn, the inspiring missionary song, "Tell it out among the Heathen," are only two among many instances of her power. In an age which has given us "Lead, Kindly Light," "Sun of my Soul," "Abide with me," "Nearer my God to Thee," it is no light thing to give permanent voice to the emotions of Christendom. A hymn that shall be for all ages must be like the water that gushed from the rock, an outflow of earth and heaven, of human thought and feeling responding to miraculous power.

Of her Lyrics of the Soul, such as "Zenith," "The Thoughts of God," "The Message of an Eolian Harp," "Making Poetry," lean make but briefest mention. Certainly they lack the startling splendor of Mrs. Browning, the white glow of a soul ablaze but unconsumed; just as certainly are they without the

inwrought learning of the author of "Casa Guidi Windows." But the faith of them is serener if not so splendid; there is an absence of that emphasis which comes from long struggle with the spectres of doubt. There is a calm assurance in them far more consoling than the agitated beating of the wings of the upsoaring singer who was blinded sometimes by excess of light. Neither do they come so close to the commoner griefs and experience of human life as do the poems of Jean Ingelow. One would search in vain for anything like the song of "Margaret," or "High Tide on the coast of Lincolnshire." Her eyes were upon the invisible rather than the visible world. Human grief as such, human woe, the tragedy of life, she could not translate into song. Hence, where her poetry is not self-revelation, it is prompted by a didactic purpose, to which the artistic power and the aesthetic feeling is always subordinate. Her prose is very charming. "Four Happy Days" is exquisitely written; lucid, candid, without pretence, alive all over with tenderest feeling. Her books for children are, as I have already said of them, flashes of love: out-gleamings of a spirit which had become a child for Christ's sake. Her letters suggest a power, as does her poetry sometimes, which seems to be blossoming in the bud. I know not how to put my meaning into words. It is as though the almost unearthly atmosphere in which she lived retarded the growth of her powers, at the very moment that it was giving flower and fruit of surprising beauty. Whether owing to the distractions which grew out of the character of the calls upon her, or the weakening of her frame by disease, or the

narrowing intensity of her later experience, there is nothing in all her works which corresponds to the conviction of latent power which they leave upon us. She has after all given us—

"Only a transcript  
Of a life-line here and there."

Though to herself

"Around her feet  
All the opposites seem to meet,"

for us it is not so. She has given us visions of her peace rather than of her struggle. It is perhaps better so. This age certainly has had its full of soul-throes and world-smart. Why should we complain because the sun in its settings sometimes sends its beams across an unruffled sea?

Frances Ridley Havergal died early; but she made up in intensity of life for length of days. Born in 1836, she vanished from earthly sight on the 3rd of June, 1879. She once spoke of herself as gravitating towards life as bodies to the earth. Yet when told that she was going to die, she said it was "too good to be true." Her last earthly effort was to sing. The last sound that warbled through her lips was. "He—," and then she was gone—into the light. That twinkling starlight of music blazed about her in all its glory. She saw his face and was "satisfied."

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