

CHAPTER XXIV.—1893-1903.

THE MAKING OF A HYMN—THE “HYMN-WORKSHOP”—“MOODS” IN WRITING—“BUILDING” A MOOD—BEGINNING WITH PRAYER—MEASURE AND TUNE—WRITING TO AN AIR—THE BOOKS OF THE MIND—HYMNS WAITING FOR THEIR MATES.

TRUE hymns may be said, in one sense, to make themselves; although they must be given human instruments through which to work. No one should ever attempt to write a hymn, unless the ideas flow easily and naturally. But how is this to be brought about?—Some details of personal experience may not be uninteresting to the readers of this book—nearly all of whom are likely to be more or less interested in the subject.

“Take us into the hymn-workshop or laboratory”, friends sometimes say to me. “Let us know your processes of thought, of feeling, of accomplishment. Give us the steps you employ, as nearly as possible, in constructing a hymn.”

Moods, in Writing Poetry.

Well, I will, as accurately as I can. Maybe this chapter will inspire others to write sacred songs that shall do good in the future.

There is a great deal said nowadays, and I do not know but there always has been, about “moods” in writing. There is much truth in the doctrine. There are some days, or at least hours, when I could not compose a hymn if the world were laid at my feet as a promised recompense. Fancy writing verses when one has that “hell of a’ diseases”, as Robbie Burns called it, the toothache! The silent cry of the suffering molar would run through it all. Imagine yourself trying to get into sweet accord with Heaven while your nerves were suffering from neuralgia! It could not be done. Sick people have written good poetry, but I fancy it was in their intervals of partial convalescence.

I am not subject to very many unpleasant sensations on account of ill health: the good Lord has given me a sound constitution, and a body which, though not particularly strong in appearance, is fitted to endure. But there are times when I am not in the mood to write, and when, as I said above, it would not be possible for me immediately to compose a hymn.

So what would I do, if it were necessary or highly desirable that a hymn be written on

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a certain day or night: as, for some occasion, or some work soon to be published?—If I were not in the mood to write, I would build a mood—or, try to draw one around me.

I should sit alone, as I have done on many a day and night, praying God to give me the thoughts and the feelings wherewith to compose my hymn. After a time—perhaps not unmingled with struggle—the ideas would come, and I would soon be happy in my verse.

It may seem a little old-fashioned, always to begin one's work with prayer: but I never undertake a hymn without first asking the good Lord to be my inspiration in the work that I am about to do.

Although, of course, I cannot read a printed book, having been deprived of sight almost from birth, yet, while composing, I feel happier and more at ease, if I hold a small volume in my hand. This may be a matter of habit: during my many years of teaching, I always kept a small book in my hands; and in reciting my own poems to audiences, I follow the same method.

When at last I have arrived at the proper stage of thought and feeling, and am sure that I am in condition to reach the minds and hearts of my constituency, and sing to them something worthy for them to hear, I cast

Good Hymns Sometimes Crippled.

about, for a few minutes, as to the measure, and, possibly, the tune.

Much more depends upon this, than might at first seem to be the case. For if there is a false accent or a mistake in the metre, the hymn cannot stand much chance of proving a success; or at least its possibilities are very much lessened. Among the millions of hymns that have been sung and forgotten, many contain no doubt deep and pious thought and feeling, but have been crippled and killed by the roughness of some line, or the irregularity of one or more measures.

Often I take in my mind some tune already well known, as a model, or, perhaps, more accurately speaking, as a guide, and work to it. This, however, does not imply that the tune will ultimately be chosen as the companion of the words: for it has probably already its own true and lawful mate, with which it is to be happy and useful. Sometimes a tune is furnished me for which to write the words.

"Blesséd Assurance" was made in this manner. My dear friend, Mrs. Joseph F. Knapp, so well known as a writer and singer of most exquisite music, and as an aid and inspiration to all who know her, had composed the tune, and it seemed to me one of the sweetest I had heard for a long time. She asked me to

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write a hymn for it, and I felt, while bringing the words and tones together, that the air and the hymn were intended for each other. In the many hundred times that I have heard it sung, this opinion has been more and more confirmed.

After any particular hymn is done, I let it lie for a few days in the writing-desk of my mind, so to speak, until I have leisure to prune it, to read it through with the eyes of my memory, and in other ways mould it into as presentable shape as possible. I often cut, trim, and change it.

"How can you remember a hymn?" I am often asked. To this I need only reply that recollecting is not entirely a lost art, although we live in rushing days of memorandum-tablets and carefully kept journals and ledgers. The books of the mind are just as real and tangible as those of the desk and the library-shelves—if we only will use them enough to keep their binding flexible, and their pages free from dust.

I have no trouble in sorting and arranging my literary and lyric wares within the apartments of my mind. If I were given a little while in which to do it, I could take down from its shelves, hundreds if not thousands of hymns, that I have written during the sixty

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Hymn Waiting for Its Tune-Mate.

years in which I have been praising my Redeemer through this medium of song. Do not let go to decay and ruin those vast interior regions of thought and feeling, good brother or sister! Your memory would be much to you if you were ever deprived of some of the organs of sense that now so distract you from deep and continued thought.

After the hymn is finished, and transcribed by some friend, it generally waits for its tune, and steadfastly hopes that it will succeed in making a matrimonial alliance, and a good one. I have had the advantage, for the most part, of very sympathetic and talented composers.

After Mr. Bradbury's death, I wrote many hymns for W. H. Doane, who composed much beautiful music. One day he came to me hurriedly, and exclaimed: "Fanny, I have just forty minutes to catch the cars for Cincinnati; during that time you must write me a hymn, and give me a few minutes to catch the train."

I happened to be in a good mood for writing; he hummed the melody to which he wanted the words written; and in fifteen minutes I gave them to him, and he started away. Upon his arrival home, he published them; and I have been told upon good authority that the hymn is now sung wherever Christian music

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is known. Many of the readers of this book no doubt, are familiar with it. It begins as follows:

“Safe in the arms of Jesus,
Safe on his gentle breast,
There by his love o’ershadowed,
Sweetly my soul shall rest.”

The writing of the hymn, “All the Way My Saviour Leads Me”, was the result of a bit of personal experience. One day, I wanted the modestly substantial amount of five dollars for a particular purpose, and needed it very badly. I did not know, just then, exactly how to get it: and was led in my mind to pray for it. Somehow, I knew the good Lord would give it to me if I asked him for it—though exactly how, I did not know.

Not long after I had prayed for the money, a gentleman came into the house, “passed the time of day”, shook hands with me, and went out immediately. When I closed my hand, after the friendly salutation, I found in it a five-dollar bill, which he had left there.

I have no way to account for this, except to believe that God, in answer to my prayer, put it into the heart of this good man, to bring me the money.



BEFORE AN AUDIENCE.

Origin of a Famous Hymn.

My first thought, after finding out the pecuniary value of this little silken reminder of friendship and regard, was,

"In what a wonderful way the Lord helps me! All the way my Saviour leads me!"

I immediately wrote the hymn, and Dr. Robert Lowry, the famous clergyman hymn-writer, set it to music.

I could mention here, many and many a case, in which I have had direct answer to prayer. I have never had the least reason to doubt the practical usefulness of that promise that if we ask we shall receive. Our Saviour is so willing not only to lead us, but to supply our wants, if we only ask him!