

Rock of Ages.

THERE is a story regarding the writing of this hymn, that Toplady wrote it when sheltering under a rock in Burrington Coomb. This receives a large amount of credence, and pilgrimages are made to this place, and the hymn sung on the spot, by many West Country folk, and this rock itself is known as the rock of ages. But is there any truth in the story? Has any definite proof been brought forward that it is true? Our greatest authority on hymnology, Dr. Julian's Dictionary, says: "We have put this to the test, and find the alleged story, so fondly believed in, was never heard of in the parish until the coming of Dr. John Swete as Rector in 1850, seventy-five years after it had appeared in the *Gospel Magazine*. Our witness is the school mistress who was teaching in the parish school when Dr. Swete came to the parish, and who is still (1903) alive. Dr. H. B. Swete, Pro. of Divinity at Cambridge, who was curate to his father at Blagdon from 1858/65, cannot trace the story beyond his father's statement. Beautiful as the tradition is, we must have clearer and more definite information concerning it before we can accept it as an undoubted fact."

That is the Julian opinion. Careful noting of indisputable dates confirms this view. Toplady was at Blagdon two years, from 1762 to 1764. The later date gives twelve years before the hymn, as a hymn, was first heard of. Hymns were scarce in those days, and if it was written during the period that Toplady was a country curate at Blagdon, for such he was, surely he would have introduced it to his congregation at once and been proud of it? Another factor casting doubt on this story is Toplady's diary. Some years ago, searching in a junk shop in Bristol, I came across a rather dishevelled book which turned out to be *Memoirs of Toplady*. I have had this rebound. Now, in this book there is an extensive personal diary, quoting weather and other factors. In one case, referring to riding home from preaching, he says: "I think this has been the most remarkable day in the point of weather I ever knew. Between the time of rising in the morning and returning home at night we had frost, snow, thaw, rain, hail, thunder, lightening, calm, high wind and sunshine, a mixture of almost all weather from sunrise to sunset." Surely if he made a habit of recording weather incidents (and this diary suggests he did) then we should expect

to find some reference to the storm from which he sheltered in Burrington Coomb, but there is nothing. The writer of his memoirs, who doubtless had access to all necessary documents, makes no reference to this incident. Obviously it would not have been overlooked if there was anything to justify the statement. I will not deal with the many additions to the original story I have heard, because as far as I can see no one brings substantial proof. How, then, came this hymn? During the period Toplady was ministering it was the custom for the preacher to compose a hymn to follow the sermon, generally bearing on the subject dealt with. Many instances can be quoted. Much of Wesley's work came in this way. Phillip Doddridge, at Northampton, John Newton at Olney, Benjamin Beddows at Bourton-on-the-Water, and others, could be quoted. I am convinced this hymn of Toplady's also came that way. Further, some of the phrases in the sermon and the hymn are inspired by a book in use among the ministers of that day. The sermon referred to is dated 1775; it is called an essay, but it bears all the stamp of a sermon of that period. I have a copy of it and quote from it. The text is Genesis xii. 5: *They went forth to go unto the land of Canaan, and into the land of Canaan they came.* After a long introduction (a custom of that period) he makes his divisions: (1) That the world will endeavour to turn your feet out of the narrow way. Then comes, secondly, beware of sin, shun the remotest appearance of evil.

Expanding on this point, he goes on to say: "Yet if you fall, be humble, but do not despair, pray afresh to God, who is able to raise you up, and to set you on your feet again. Look to the blood of the Covenant, and say to the Lord from the depths of your heart:

Rock of ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee,
Foul I to the fountain fly,
Wash me Saviour or I die.

And shortly after this his sermon ends; then the hymn, complete, follows on another page, entitled "A Prayer for the Living and Dying."

I have done quite a lot of searching to try and find some light on this hymn. In the course of searching I came upon a book of hymns, *Wesley's Sacramental Hymns*, published 1745. There is a preface in this book which is an extract from another, and at the end it gives the initials "D.B." In this extract occur such phrases as "Let not my heart burn with less zeal," and then, "O Rock of Israel, Rock struck and cleft for me," "Streams of blood and water which gushed from Thy side." These quotations were so closely allied to this hymn that I commenced

a long search to find out the author, "D.B." Let me say here that Toplady undoubtedly knew of Wesley's book and knew this preface, and I also think he was aware of the book from which Wesley took his preface. Who, then, is "D.B."? All authors of these initials were sought, and finally I found "Daniel Brevint, D.D." He was Dean at Durham Cathedral 1661/73, and he published a book, *The Christian Sacrament and Sacrifice*, in 1673, actually dated January 24th. I found this in the British Museum and searched its pages to see if this was the book I wanted. On pages 16 and 17 I found these words: "Let not my heart burn with less zeal, to follow and serve Thee now, when this bread is broken at this table, than did the hearts of Thy disciples when Thou didst break it at Emmaus, O Rock of Israel, Rock of Salvation, Rock struck and cleft for me, let those two-streams of blood and water which once gushed out of Thy side . . ." "And let not my soul less thirst after them at this distance, than if I stood upon Horeb, whence sprang this water and near the very cleft of rock, the very wounds of my Saviour (page 18) whence gushed out this sacred blood."

This, then, is the result of my search. I venture to suggest that Dr. Daniel Brevint's book is more likely to have inspired this hymn than Burrington Coomb. Particularly when we remember the hymn was not heard of until twelve years after Toplady ceased to be curate at Blagdon, and that there is no trace of the rock story until eighty-six years after he had gone.

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