

## CECIL FRANCES ALEXANDER.

It is not long since the world was mourning the death of Christina Rossetti, the Authoress of "Called to be Saints," and "The Face of the Deep," one of the most eminent of the female poets of the century, whose genius was always used on behalf of truth and right. And now another distinguished poetess, whose great gifts were in like manner consecrated to the service of Christ, has been taken away to swell the band of sweet singers in the paradise of God. The Authoress of "The Burial of Moses," and "There is a Green Hill Far Away," died October 12th, in the palace at Londonderry, amid the loving regrets of her bereaved family and a mourning city.

Mrs. Alexander was the daughter of Major Humphreys, of Milltown House, Strabane, in the county of Tyrone, and was born at Eccles Street, Dublin, in the year 1818. Her education was carefully carried on at home by governesses and private masters. In her early life she showed a great fondness for books, reading everything that came in her way. Poetry was always, as we might suppose, a favourite branch of study. She had an intimate acquaintance with the best authors of our own country, and was also well-versed in foreign literature.

But while there was much of contemplative Mary in her character, she was by no means deficient in the Martha-element. Both qualities seemed to blend harmoniously in her. All her life she was beneficently active. Even in her youthful days it is said she was indefatigable in visiting the sick, cheering the sad and lonely, and carrying food and wine from her father's table to those who needed them. She was often seen reading by the sick bed, and in the house of mourning her sympathy was tenderly manifest. She also taught in the Sunday School; and in these various ways she endeavoured to make her life "beautiful before God," and useful to man; and so developing a kindly benevolent character she was unwittingly qualifying herself for the sphere to which God's providence had destined her, as the wife of a clergyman.

In 1850 Miss Humphreys married the Rev. William Alexander, who had just been appointed to the living of Termonamangan, in the diocese of Derry. Mr. Alexander was a man of distinguished attainments, and like his wife a poet of considerable ability. He had come from Oxford a few years before crowned with honours, and had gained the Newdigate prize for his poem, "By the Waters of Babylon," which reached a higher standard than such poems usually attain. Life in a country parsonage with little that was eventful to break its monotony, seemed to be peculiarly adapted to one of Mrs. Alexander's temperament. She was shy and retiring, loved to commune with nature, loved books, loved as a recreation from these companions of her solitude, to accompany her husband in his pastoral visits. Quietly, unobtrusively, unselfishly, she went about doing good. There was no ostentation in her character, no self-consciousness manifested, no craving after notoriety or applause. She made no boast of her good works and charitable deeds. It was her rule not to let her left hand know what her right hand did, she did good by stealth. She was a true help-meet to her husband, and sustained and sympathised with him in all his labours, literary and pastoral. To the last she kept up the habit of visiting the cottages of the poor. On these occasions she was usually accompanied by a little pet dog who sat quietly at her feet while she read or talked to the inmates.

And here we may mention that she was

a great lover of dogs, and in the latter years of her life owned three of different breeds, which frequently accompanied her in her habitual walks. To see how they gambolled about her, wagging their tails, and looking up into her face, and barking in a concert of exuberant joy at their release for this daily exercise, was always a source of interested pleasure to the on-lookers. And it may be noticed as a singular circumstance that when she died there was not one of them left to mourn her. Two of them had died just before herself, and the third, a large collie, had got into the bad habit of snapping at persons, and was therefore parted with as dangerous.

Mrs. Alexander always had an eye for scenery, a great love for the beauties of nature, and she had the good fortune to be always located amid scenes where she was able to gratify this passion to the fullest extent. Termon, Fahan, and Strabane, the successive parishes held by her husband, are all beautifully situated, and one of them, Fahan, on Lough Swilly, in the county of Donegal, is surrounded by the loveliest scenery in the



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kingdom. The mountains, lakes, wooded dells, the golden gorse and the purple heather, the soft pastoral vales running up into the wild hills, and the variegated colouring characteristic of the whole scene, form a *coup d'œil* which may be said to be matchless. In these modern days it may be described as a happy hunting-ground of the tourist, but when Mrs. Alexander lived here its beauties were comparatively unknown, and visitors from the outside world were very rare. There was here everything to captivate the fancy of the poetess, and to provide nutriment for her imagination, and it is impossible to read her poems, many of which were written in this favoured region, without seeing the influence of her surroundings in them all. She might have got every detail in that fine passage in her poem of "Samson," from this locality:—

"The eagle cast a shadow  
As he sailed to and fro,  
On far Lekiah's limestone cliff,  
And on the sward below.  
The white clouds flung strange figures  
On the corn and the waving grass;  
While the blind man ground in his prison  
house,  
Bound with his chains of brass.

But shades and lights more wonderful  
Were in that lone dark place;  
For the shadow of his own great deeds,  
Was on the blind man's face."

What a sweet picture is that which she gives of Lough Swilly, "The Lake of Shadows," in one of her poems—

"Then did a charm of coloured light—  
A sudden gleam—the hills suffuse,  
They stood transfigured to my sight;  
A mass of delicate lilac hues.  
The waves beneath ran green and blue,  
Rose-tinctured where the last cloud lay;  
God's blessed sun had broken thro',  
God's light was lovely on the bay."

A competent critic some years ago wrote of her poetry: "It is doubtful if any woman has ever excelled Mrs. Alexander in her own especial branch of poetry. There is a delicacy of expression and depth of religious feeling along with the truest poetic genius, not often to be met with, and one must hope that the writer of 'There is a Green Hill Far Away' may long be spared to give to the Church many more of her beautiful hymns."

As a hymn-writer, Mrs. Alexander has long since gained the *imprimatur* of public acceptance. Not only in this kingdom, but in America and Australia the name of Cecil Frances Alexander has been a household word. She is known wherever the English language is spoken, and everywhere the high quality of her work is recognised. Psalms and hymns have never perhaps been wanting to the Christian Church, from the time when Paul and Silas sung in their dungeon at Philippi, or the days when the martyrs raised their hymns as a death-chant beneath the claw of the lion or the fang of the flame, or later when the Christians of Milan met together to sing the hymns of St. Ambrose in the churches of the city. The Middle Ages, dark and barren as they were, have given us some noble hymns, from the fine hymn of Gregory the Great, translated by Dryden, "Creator Spirit by whose Aid," to the popular compositions of Bernard of Clugny and Bernard of Clairvaux. And from those mediæval times, both in the Greek and Latin Churches, we have some of the noblest chords of popular Christian sentiment in melody. The hymns of Luther stirred the heart of Germany, and it is said did more to bring about the Reformation than even his pulpit discourses. In the dreary period of the Georges, when the spiritual life of this nation seemed sinking into the sleep of death, Watts and Wesley, Cowper and Newton, by their hymns awoke the slumbering peoples and kindled anew the fire of religious truth. And in our own times a holy influence has been shed over our Christian society by the hymns of Keble and Newman, Lyte and James Montgomery, Bonar and Bickersteth, Frances Ridley Havergal and Cecil Frances Alexander. All song is divine, for it is, as one has said, spirit striking on the chords of life; it is the music that wins man, the wanderer, back again to rest and happiness. You may instruct him with song, console him with song, melt him with song, and a little child will lead him. Moral teachers find the charm of song one of the most fitting and successful means for awakening attention and leading to a nobler life. "Give me," said Fletcher of Saltoun, "the making of a people's ballads, and I care not who makes their laws." By song we open a child's sympathy and awaken its love. Mrs. Alexander's "Hymns for Children" are an illustration of this sentiment.



It is more difficult to speak to children than to adults, more difficult to secure and hold their attention. But in this department of literature she has won a complete triumph. Her hymns were mostly written at first for the benefit of her own children as they were growing up around her, but now, like the light, they have gone forth into all lands, and their words unto the ends of the world. A returned missionary from Central Africa tells us he heard them sung by the children of the Mission Schools on the shores of Lake Nyassa, in a language of which their author was entirely ignorant. And at home are they not known everywhere, and wherever they are known, loved? With what delight we have heard a congregation of little ones singing, "We are but little children weak," a hymn which is penetrated from the first line to the last with a practical teaching which cannot but leave a good impression upon the young mind. Her "Hymns for Children" have a short preface by Keble, whose influence is seen in all her poetry, in which he expresses the hope "that they will not only be found useful in the way which she earnestly desires, but will also win a high place for themselves in the estimation of all who know how to value true poetry and primitive devotion." How clearly she sets forth, what our fathers used to call, the plan of salvation in the verse:—

"He died that we might be forgiven,  
He died to make us good;  
That we might go at last to heaven,  
Saved by his precious blood."

And the teaching of the Scripture that there is only "One Mediator between God and man," and that "no man cometh unto the Father but by Christ," is reproduced in language equally simple and direct—

"There was no other good enough  
To pay the price of sin,  
He only could unlock the gate  
Of heaven, and let us in."

Sweetness and light, to use Matthew Arnold's combination, are characteristic of Mrs. Alexander's writings. Lucidity shines over them all. There is no undercurrent of meaning, no obscure line of thought anywhere. She said what she meant. She spoke direct to the understanding and the heart, and her words went to the heart. And the humblest capacity could comprehend her.

This is true also of her other volume, *Poems on Subjects in the Old Testament*. Amongst the subjects which she treats of in this little book we may mention as specially worthy of study: "Cain and Abel," "Enoch," "The Dove," "Abraham's Sacrifice," "Isaac in the Field," "Esau," "Joseph a Type," "Moses' Choice," "The Night of the Passover," "The Manna in the Wilderness," "The Invitation to Hobab," "Ruth," "King David's Offering," "The Death of David." In this volume is found "The Burial of Moses," which Tennyson much admired. This will show the wide range of

subjects handled, and all of them her genius has illuminated. They are treated with a freshness and a grace which at once commend them to our favourable regard. And the language is so clear, and the illustrations so pertinent, that we cannot fail to receive, or at all events to understand, the lesson which she has to teach. Take for instance her first poem on "The Creation." How admirable is the lesson which she draws, and how needful in this age of restless endeavour and impatient hurry to accomplish our desires—

"Slowly He wrought and duly set  
All things above, and below;  
Wilt thou, His creature, chide and fret  
If thine advance be slow?  
Patience, and zeal, and toil He asks,  
Then let thine heart be strong;  
Nor weary of thy lowly task,  
Because the time is long."

And in the poem on "Enoch," she writes:—

"There's many a household fair to see  
By woodland nook, or running river,  
Where children climb the parent's knee—  
O that those homes like His might be  
Filled with God's presence ever!  
O that our thoughts so heavenly were,  
Our hearts to Christ so fully given,  
That all our lives, and toil, and care,  
Might only lead us nearer there,  
Where He is set in heaven."

How vividly she brings before us that scene in the life of the old patriarch:—

"When the great pastoral prince with love  
Undying  
Rose up in anguish from the face of  
death,  
And weighed the silver shekels for its  
buying  
Before the sons of Heth.  
Here, when the measure of his days was  
numbered,  
Days few, and evil in this vale of tears;  
At Sarah's side the faithful patriarch  
slumbered  
An old man full of years.  
Here, holy Isaac, meek of heart and  
gentle,  
And the fair maid who came to him from  
far;  
And the sad sire who knew all throes  
parental,  
And meek-eyed Leah, are."

In what touching and beautiful words does she tell us of those who sleep together in the cave of Machpelah, "the burial place in Ephron's pasture ground"—

"Like roses from the same tree gathered  
yearly,  
And flung together in one vase to keep;  
Some, but not all who loved so well, and  
dearly,  
Lie here in quiet sleep."

What solemn, earnest teaching does she

draw from the life of the worldling Esau, for those who think

"An age of tears shall wipe away"  
The follies of youth!

"Thou wilt not have the same young powers,  
The fresh warm heart that loves and  
glows;

Who ever saw sweet April flowers  
Come peeping through December  
snows?"

"He sought in vain with bitter tears,  
That first best blessing back to win;  
Beware, beware, lest future years,  
Should find no time to shrive thy sin!"

It has always seemed to me that this volume shows an unusual poetic power and a wonderful deftness and skilful treatment of the subjects under consideration. There is too a force of phrase which reminds us of Cowper, and a quaintness of fancy which almost equals George Herbert, while the brightness of pictorial colouring which brings before the reader with a vivid clearness the theme on which she is discoursing reflects something of the splendour of Keats. We see rather than read. We are, as it were, spectators of the events described. This is the attainment of the Arabian standard, "He speaks the best who turns the ear into an eye."

"How beautiful is genius when combined  
With holiness!"

That line is descriptive of this gifted Christian authoress. All her teaching was the outcome of her own sanctified mind. She had been baptised with the Holy Ghost and with power. She could say of Jesus Christ from her very heart, "He loved me and gave Himself for me." Voices that are not of earth were ever speaking in her soul. The teaching of Jesus, and Paul, and John, and the old Psalmists and Prophets coloured her thoughts and influenced her words. Her mind was steeped in Holy Scripture. There are no hymn-books or compilations of sacred poetry which do not contain some of her pieces. The "Lyra Anglicana," the "Lyra Hibernica Sacra," the "Irish Church Hymnal," "Hymns Ancient and Modern," and other selections are enriched by the metrical fruits of her genius. Full of pious sentiment, clothed in chaste and expressive language, suffused in the glow of Scripture, and reflecting the spirit of the church's teaching, they have imparted tender consolation and high hope to many a reader, young and old, during the last half century.

The following is a complete list of Mrs. Alexander's works:—"Hymns for Little Children," "Hymns Descriptive and Devotional," "Moral Songs," "Narrative Poems for Village Schools," "Poems on Subjects in the Old Testament," "The Baron's Daughter," which has reached a sixth edition, and "The Lord of the Forest and his Vassals," an allegory which has gone into the fifth edition.

WILLIAM COWAN.

## THE FINE ARTS.

### A FEW PRACTICAL WORDS TO YOUNG WOMEN.

WE all of us have no doubt heard the expression "The Fine Arts," and know that it is applied to those beautiful gifts of our Father in heaven, the gifts of painting, of music, and of sculpture, which add so much to the enjoyment and pleasure of life. And the word "fine" is, I suppose, given to them to denote some particular points of excellence,

which other arts do not possess. You know also that the word "art" is used of work requiring some skill, which takes time and thought to acquire. "There is great art in that," we say, implying that it is something beyond common workmanship.

Now it is not of such arts that I would speak to you to-day, but of that fine art of

living aright, which is far more difficult than the art of music or painting, for many indeed have learnt these to perfection, who have known but little of the other. And the beautiful thing about the art of living aright is, that everybody can learn it—the plainest, the poorest, the stupidest. No special gifts of wealth, of intellect, or of personal charms