

AN ENQUIRY CONCERNING
TOPLADY AND HIS HYMN
“ROCK OF AGES”

AND ITS
CONNECTION WITH
BURRINGTON COMBE
SOMERSET

BY

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To

MY WIFE

*who has always been interested in
Burrington Combe and the surrounding district,
these notes, published at her request,
are dedicated.*

H. J. W.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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THE "ROCK OF AGES" PILGRIMAGE.

An Enquiry concerning Toplady's Hymn "Rock of Ages" and its connection with Burrington Combe, Somerset.

THE interest in Toplady's immortal hymn "Rock of Ages," used throughout the world, bringing help and comfort to thousands of souls, has increased, particularly in the West of England, and many questions are asked as regards its connection with Burrington Combe, Somerset. Year by year thousands of tourists visit this Combe and gaze at the rock styled "the Rock of Ages," while from time to time pilgrimages are made, when it has been estimated that some thirty thousand persons have been present.¹

Before dealing with the legend connecting the composition of this hymn with a certain rock in Burrington Combe, Somerset, a few of the chief dates and facts in Toplady's career may be helpfully recalled. He was born at Farnham on 4th November, 1740; educated at Westminster School and Trinity College, graduating at Dublin University in 1760. He was ordained—at an earlier age than usual—deacon by the Bishop of Bath and Wells on 5th June, 1762, and licensed to the curacy of Blagdon, Somerset—in the neighbourhood of which (but not in Blagdon parish) is situated Burrington Combe—preaching his *first sermon there on Sunday*

¹ See *Bristol Evening World*, 29th July, 1935.

evening, 13th June, 1762. He preached what was intended to be his farewell sermon on Easter Sunday, 22nd April, 1764, but as he stayed on a week longer, he preached his *final sermon on 29th April, 1764.* So *Toplady's stay at Blagdon was under two years and terminated on 29th April, 1764*—of importance to be remembered in considering the composition and publication of his hymn "Rock of Ages."

Toplady preached in St. John's Chapel, Bath, on the following 13th May, 1764, and later in this month is found officiating in an episcopal chapel in Duke Street, St. James' Square, London.

Ordained priest on 16th June, 1764, he became curate of Farleigh Hungerford, Bath, leaving in June, 1765. Toplady is next found preaching in London. In April, 1766, he became incumbent of Harpford with Fen Ottery, in Devonshire. In 1767 he exchanged those livings for Broad Hembury (about fifteen miles from Exeter and five miles from Honiton), Devonshire, where he preached his first sermon on 17th April, 1768. Here Toplady stayed till 1775, but, developing phthisis (which eventually caused his death) and the humidity of this place being against him, he, with episcopal sanction, arranged for his work to be taken by a resident curate and left for London. He stayed on the way at Bath—he was there on 4th August, 1775, when it is stated that "he dragged his poor, shattered body along like a wounded snake"—arriving in London at the end of August, 1775, hoping much from the climate, which he considered to be a sanatorium.

From the autumn of 1775 till April, 1776, Toplady (in spite of ill-health and his need of rest, which he seemed



Photo, A. F. Sergeant.

"ROCK OF AGES," THE COOMBE, BURRINGTON.

ever incapable of taking), preached occasional sermons in several places far and near.

In April, 1776, his friends secured for him the use of the Huguenot or French Calvinistic Chapel in Orange Street, Leicester Square, London, this chapel being subsequently licensed by the Bishop of London. He preached his first sermon there on 11th April, 1776. His last heroic appearance in that pulpit (when he dealt with what he considered was a controversial misrepresentation) was on Sunday morning, 14th June, 1778.¹

Toplady passed peacefully and joyfully—notwithstanding slanderous statements by his opponents to the contrary—to the Greater Life on 11th August, 1778, in the thirty-eighth year of his age. His body was interred on 17th August following in Tottenham Court Chapel, London.

While it is charitable to forget the controversial methods of Toplady and his defects of character, it must always be remembered that he can only be truly judged by the character of his times: it is always pleasant and helpful to turn to his immortal hymn "Rock of Ages."

Around this hymn has grown up a local legend, of which there are several variants, connecting its inspiration with and its composition within a certain bold rock in Burrington Combe, Somerset. For the present writer not only are very precious and sacred memories associated with this

¹ "Had the people seen an apparition they could scarcely have been more agitated. But, if it was a startling sight, it was a painful sight, for Toplady could scarcely support himself in the pulpit, and his delivery was hindered by a hectic cough and laborious breathing. Death himself seemed in the pulpit."—*Life of Toplady*, by Thomas Wright, p. 216.

hymn, but his interest was increased by the fact that some years ago he owned a place on the hill opposite to Burrington Combe and, when he was at liberty to be out there, he could look away to that combe and recall Toplady and the local legend.

The chief forms of the legend are :—

1. Toplady, caught in a violent thunder-storm, took shelter in the cleft of this rock in Burrington Combe, and while sheltering received an inspiration. On returning to Blagdon, he then and there wrote his hymn.

2. The second form heightens the legend and relates that during this violent thunder-storm, and while sheltering in the rock, Toplady actually wrote his hymn—a physical impossibility, as the present writer has twice proved when his caravan was pitched there during very violent storms.¹

To turn to the hymn “Rock of Ages.”

It will be recalled that Toplady ministered at Blagdon from 13th June, 1762, to 29th April, 1764, during which period the legend states that he wrote this hymn either at Blagdon or in Burrington Combe. *When was the hymn written?* It is not dated by Toplady and so it is a matter of “probability of evidence,” as is also the origin of the legend.

In the *Gospel Magazine*—a small monthly brochure—appeared an article, commenced in September and finished in October, 1775, entitled “Life a Journey.” At the end of this article appears this single verse :—

¹ A souvenir, obtained during the summer of 1936 by the present writer when visiting Burrington Combe, bears the following legend in reference to this hymn, of which the first verse is printed :—
“Composed by the Rev. A. M. Toplady while sheltering in the cleft of the Rock *during a storm in 1775*”!

“ Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
 let me hide myself in thee !
 Foul, I to the fountain fly,
 Wash me, Saviour, or I die.”

The article is signed *Minimus*, one of Toplady's pen names.

In the March issue, 1776, of the same magazine (of which Toplady had become the editor) appeared an article entitled “ A remarkable calculation, etc.,” which concluded with the hymn as follows, and signed “ A.T.” :—

“ A living and dying Prayer for the Holiest believer
 in the World.”

1.

“ Rock of Ages, cleft for me
 Let me hide myself in Thee !
 Let the Water and the Blood
 From thy riven Side which flow'd
 Be of sin the double cure
 Cleanse me from its Guilt and Pow'r.

2.

“ Not the labors of my hands
 Can fulfill thy Law's demands
 Could my zeal no respite know
 Could my tears for ever flow,
 All for sin could not atone,
 Thou must save, and Thou alone !

3.

“ Nothing in my hand I bring ;
 Simply to thy Cross I cling,
 Naked, come to Thee for Dress ;
 Helpless, look to Thee for grace ;
 Foul I to the fountain fly :
 Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

4.

“ Whilst I draw this fleeting breath—
 When my eye-strings break in death—
 When I soar through tracts unknown—
 See Thee on Thy Judgment-Throne—
 Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
 Let me hide myself in Thee !—A.T.”¹

So this hymn, which the legend states was written at Blagdon or in the rock at Burrington Combe some time between June, 1762, and April, 1764, *was not published till twelve years after Toplady had left that neighbourhood.* Upon this fact his latest biographer² comments thus :—“ The fact that the hymn was not published till long afterwards is without weight, for Toplady held back many of his hymns

¹ In the same year (1776) Toplady was responsible for the publication of a hymn book, entitled : “ *Psalms and Hymns for Public and Private Worship.* Collected (for the most part) and Published by Augustus Toplady, A.B., Vicar of Broad Hembury, etc. London. Printed by E. and C. Dilly, 1776.” In the preface appears : “ With regard to the following collection I can only say that (excepting very few hymns of my own which I have been prevailed with to insert) it *ought* to be the *best* that has yet appeared considering the great number of volumes (no fewer than between forty and fifty) which have, more or less, contributed to this compilation.—London, July 26, 1776. Augustus Toplady.” There are 419 Hymns and Psalms in this book, of which “ Rock of Ages ” is No. cccxxxvii and is a reproduction of that in the *Gospel Magazine.*

A copy is in The Bodleian Library and marked 14721 f.21. On the first fly leaf is written “ Of Palmer & Son, Paternoster Row.” This is a peculiarly rare volume. It is the *only genuine edition* of Toplady, for all those subsequently printed were not Toplady’s, but selected and arranged and altered by the deacons of his chapel.

Not mentioned by Dr. Collin in his valuable *List of Editions of Psalms*, 1821, 8.

² Thomas Wright, *Life of Augustus M. Toplady*, ed. 1911, p. 43.



ON THE MENDIPS.

for years after they had been composed." But this legend derives no support from such pleadings, when we remember that between 1770-1776 Toplady published twenty-one hymns but did not publish "Rock of Ages."¹ Toplady published in the *Gospel Magazine* an adaptation of a well-known hymn and two other hymns in October, 1774; four in the following December; and "Rock of Ages" in March, 1776 (incorporating the single verse of four lines published in the preceding October, using the first two lines as the opening of verse one and the remaining two lines as the fifth and sixth lines of verse three). Thus, while Toplady was writing and publishing hymns from 1770-6 which cannot be compared with his immortal hymn, we are asked to believe—and only that the legend that it was written at Blagdon (for, incidentally, the above-mentioned biographer discredits it being written in Burrington Combe) may receive support—that composed between 1762-4, this hymn was held back from publication for twelve years. All available evidence goes to show that it was published in 1776, soon after it was written.

In support of the legend is brought forward the fact that Toplady used the phrase "Rock of Ages" in a sermon at Blagdon: "It is worthy of note that the first instance in which in any preserved manuscript occurs the expression 'Rock of Ages' is in a sermon preached to the people at Blagdon on Easter Sunday, 22nd April, 1764 (*i.e.* in one of his farewell sermons), that Toplady first publicly used, as far as I know, the expression 'Rock of ages' . . .

¹ *C.f. Hymns and Sacred Poems on a Variety of Divine Subjects*, printed by Sedgwick in 1860.

Personally I am firmly of opinion that the hymn 'Rock of Ages' was written at Blagdon."¹

It would have been strange, indeed, if Toplady, an earnest biblical student, had not often used the symbolism of "Rock of Ages" and living, too, in such a neighbourhood and in proximity to Cheddar Gorge. He would be familiar with many passages such as Exod. xxiii. 22, Isa. ii. 20-21, xxvi. 4, xlii. 11, 1 Cor. x. 4, Rev. vi. 15, etc. Mr. Wright supports this: "The idea of our Lord as a Rock had fascinated Toplady even in his Trinity College days² and ideas similar to those which are embodied in the hymn had haunted Toplady's mind as early as 1759, when he was writing his volume of poems."³

*The present writer firmly believes that the memories of the storm and of his sheltering in the rock in Burrington Combe were the sources of inspiration to Toplady: that he most probably spoke of them in a sermon at Blagdon at the time of their occurrence: so that when his hymn "Rock of Ages" was published in 1776 and came to their knowledge, it at once awakened memories in his former parishioners, and out of these grew the legend.*⁴

The question may well be asked: What overwhelming sense of helplessness and of human insufficiency was upon Toplady—for the depths are too great for it to be but an

¹ Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-3.

² *Ibid*, p. 105.

³ *Ibid*, pp. 42-3.

⁴ Canon Leigh Bennet, in an article in the "D.N.B.," gives it as his opinion that the hymn was published "probably soon after it was written, although local tradition associates its symbolism with a rocky gorge in the parish" (but read *neighbourhood*) "of Blagdon, his first curacy."



Photo, A. F. Sergeant.

THE "S" IN THE COOMBE, BURRINGTON.

ordinary production to end an article or only to be an embodiment of his Calvinistic creed—which led to the inspiration of this glorious hymn, which has found its echo in millions of hearts? Toplady in 1775-6 was a doomed man: he had left Broad Hembury in 1775 afflicted with phthisis and his personal appearance in August of that year has been already described. His restlessness—in 1773 he wrote: "I could wish to be ever on the wing, ever on the stretch,"—probably a sign of the oncoming disease, coupled with his flaming zeal (shown in his labour of preaching not only in London, but in distant places) and controversial life, must have often exhausted him, and this seems to be reflected in his inspired hymn. His latest biographer writes of Toplady, who commenced his ministry in Orange Street Chapel, 11th April, 1776, shortly after the publication of "Rock of Ages": "He knew that he was a doomed man. Death with curled finger never ceased to beckon him. . . . It must have been a thrilling moment, too, when the worshippers saw him arise from the middle of the great triple pulpit, that thin hectic man. . . . From so attenuated a figure, with death in its face, a hearer present for the first time could scarcely expect any very remarkable word. . . . Toplady no sooner commences than the air seems alive with arrowy thoughts. He is majestic. He is inspired."¹ Ever restless, active to the end, his exhaustion and insufficiency of strength at times must have been extreme and pathetic. Personally the present writer has always thought that such conditions called forth from the depths of Toplady's inmost being the cry of "Rock of Ages."

¹ Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-9.

To trace the nucleus of a legend or tradition—even the most fantastic, for there is always to be found a sub-stratum of truth in these—is an interesting study. In the case under consideration it is not a difficult task; here is a hymn, with its compelling appeal, taking deep hold upon those to whom the knowledge of it came: it was written by one who was sometime their beloved curate, who had in all probability spoken to them of the storm and shelter experienced in Burrington Combe. So local pride affectionately seizes on it and the legend grows: fostered by repetition and guide books—never more so than to-day.¹

Upon Toplady's controversial work the dust has settled thickly—and may it grow thicker!—"while year by year the number of his hymns in use is becoming less, and the reason is soon found. He was no poet or inspired singer. He climbs no heights. He sounds no depths. He

¹ The "working up" of this legend comes out clearly in an unsigned article in the *Strand Magazine*, vol. xlii (July, 1911), pp. 106-7: "*The Six of Diamonds*. The association of card playing and hymnody may strike many as preposterous, and yet the fact remains that the famous Toplady was an enthusiastic devotee of whist, and the first suggestion of his finest hymn was scribbled on a playing card—the six of diamonds. The card itself, long preserved in the family, but now in America, was inscribed across the middle with the words:—

'Rock of ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.
March 12th.'"

The card cannot now be traced and so no test is available. Would not an obvious explanation be that some tourist, who had heard the legend, was visiting the rock in Burrington Combe and makes a record of his visit on a playing card which he had in his pocket, with the date of the month?

There are other variants of this legend of the playing card: even rings being made in which six diamonds were set on a playing card.

has mere vanishing gleams of imaginative light. His greatness is the greatness of goodness. He is a fervent preacher and not a bard."¹ Yet once at least Toplady was truly an inspired poet and reached heights and sounded depths, as human hearts the world all over have testified by their love and use of "Rock of Ages." To mention two only: to the Prince Consort it gave great consolation in his last illness; and the late Dr. Chavasse, the saintly and great Bishop of Liverpool, directed the hymn to be used at his funeral "because it expresses my sole salvation and eternal life."

Latin translation by William Ewart Gladstone.

1.

Jesus, pro me perforatus,
 Condar intra Tuum latus
 Tu per lympham profluentem,
 Tu per sanguinem tepentem
 In peccata mi redunda
 Tolle culpam, sordes munda.

2.

Coram Te, nec justus forem
 Quamvis tota vi laborem,
 Nec si fide nunquam cesso
 Fletu stillans indefesso:
 Tibi soli tantum munus:
 Salve me, salvator unus!

3.

Nil in manu mecum fero,
 Sed me versus crucem gero:
 Vestimenta nudus gero:
 Fontem Christi quaero immundus
 Nisi laves, moribundus.

¹ John Julian, D.D., in his *Dictionary of Hymnology*.

Dum hos artus vita regit :
Quando mox sepulchro tegit,
Mortuos cum stare jubes
Sedens iudex inter nubes :
Jesus, pro me perforatus,
Condar intra Tuum latus.

Made in 1848 and published in *Translations by Lord Lyttelton and the Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone*, London, 1861.

Westbury-on-Trym Vicarage,
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