

# "Rock of Ages"

By ROBERT D. KALIS

WHEN PRINCE ALBERT, husband of Queen Victoria of England, lay on his deathbed, he found great comfort in repeating the first stanza of the beloved hymn, *Rock of Ages*. "If in this hour," he said, "I had only my worldly honors and dignities to depend upon, I should be indeed poor."

Few hymns have won such universal acclaim. Written by a young minister, Augustus Montague Toplady (1740-1778), it has been translated into many languages for use on the mission fields. A Latin version was written by the great Prime Minister of England, W. E. Gladstone. In Constantinople an English clergyman inquired which hymn it was that had brought tears to so many eyes. The local pastor revealed that it was an Armenian translation of *Rock of Ages*.

Every line of the hymn draws its inspiration from some scripture. The title, *Rock of Ages*, is the marginal rendering of the last part of Isaiah 26:4: "The Lord Jehovah is the rock of ages." Really the hymn reflects the training by his devout mother who literally saturated him with biblical truths. Widowed when her husband, Major Richard Toplady, was killed in the battle of Carthage, she trained her son well. His formal education was obtained in Westminster School and Trinity College of Dublin. When only nineteen, he published a volume of religious poems.

It was on a return visit in Ireland that Toplady was thoroughly converted. He recorded the

experience in his diary as follows: "That sweet text, 'Ye who sometime were afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ,' was particularly delightful and refreshing to my soul. It was from that passage that Mr. Morris preached on the memorable evening of my effective call by the grace of God. Under the ministry of that dear messenger, under that sermon, I was, I trust, brought nigh by the blood of Christ, in August, 1756.

"Strange that I, who had been so long under the means of grace in England, should be brought nigh to God in an obscure part of Ireland, amidst a handful of God's people met together in a barn, and under the ministry of one who could hardly spell his name. The excellency of such power must be of God and can-



The Cleft Rock at Burrington Combe which inspired "Rock of Ages"

not be of men."

One day the author was caught in a sudden storm while walking some distance from his home. He took refuge in the cleft of a huge rock formation which stood conveniently near. While waiting for the storm to abate, he wrote the words of the first stanza on a playing card which he found lying there. This card is still in existence.

The complete hymn was published in the *Gospel Magazine* (March, 1776) while Toplady himself was the editor. It appeared at the close of a unique article regarding the national debt of England which showed how impossible it was for the great debt ever to be paid. There followed a mathematical calculation of an individual's sins. This debt, also, it was shown, could not possibly be liquidated by human means. Christ alone, by His death had merit enough to pay it all, and that for all humanity. Here followed the original four stanzas of the hymn under the strange title: *A Living and Dying Prayer for the Holiest Believer in the World*.

The tune known as *Toplady*, to which *Rock of Ages* is almost always sung, was written more than fifty years after the hymn by Dr. Thomas Hastings in 1830 and was composed especially for the hymn. The music follows the words beautifully, accenting just the right ones. Tune and hymn were quickly joined together never to be put asunder. The composer is also remembered as the publisher of the first hymnal which had the words and music of hymns printed on the same page. But above all, Dr. Thomas Hastings (1784-1872) will be remembered for *Toplady*, the best of his many hymn tunes.