

# More Love to Thee

By ROBERT D. KALIS

OCTOBER 26, 1968 marks the one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Elizabeth Payson Prentiss, author of the beautiful prayer-hymn, *More Love to Thee, O Christ*. There is no dramatic story connected with the origin of this hymn; it simply was the expression of the deep, consuming passion of its writer. What we do know is that which the author's husband, Rev. George L. Prentiss, recounts in his book, *The Life and Letters of Elizabeth Prentiss*: "The hymn, *More Love to Thee, O Christ*, belongs, probably as far back as the year 1856. Like most of her hymns it is simply a prayer put into the form of verse. She wrote it so hastily that the last stanza was left incomplete, one line having been added in pencil when it was printed. She did not show it, not even to her husband, until many years after it was written; and she wondered not a little that, when published, it met with so much favor."

Elizabeth was the fifth of eight children born to Edward and

Ann Payson, ministers of the gospel in Portland, Maine. Several generations earlier the first Payson (also Edward) to come to these shores had married Mary Eliot, the sister of John Eliot, the illustrious "Apostle to the Indians."

Family life for young Elizabeth was all that could be desired. Father, who was regarded all over New England as a "saint," was never too busy to take time with his children. They all loved him passionately.



Elizabeth Payson Prentiss

But, before Elizabeth reached her ninth birthday, her father, in his 45th year, was taken from this world. Yet his love and saintliness left their mark on family and congregation for many years to come. It has been recorded that hundreds of baby boys all over New England were named Edward Payson in memory of him.

At the age of twelve, Elizabeth made her first public confession of Christ. Although she was exceedingly frail in body, she exercised her mind vigorously. She loved classical literature and spiritual classics. *The Memoirs of Henry Martyn* and *Journal of David Brainerd* were an inspiration to her and she read them more than once. When only sixteen years of age Elizabeth Prentiss had her first literary efforts accepted for publication.

School teaching came naturally to her. Wherever she taught, her scholars loved her dearly. In Richmond, Virginia, where she taught in a private school for girls, her efforts were very

fruitful so that she was able to lead a number of girls to the Savior.

Marriage brought the school-teaching career to an end, but opened up a new and wonderful career as the wife and helpmeet of Rev. George L. Prentiss. Together they served the Lord in New Bedford, Massachusetts, the whaling center of New England. His circle of friends increased, and everywhere she found her way into the hearts of the people. For more than five years they ministered in New Bedford, during which time two children were born, the second, Eddy, a frail and sickly child.

In the midst of great trials and the extreme weakness of the young mother, the family moved, first to Newark, New Jersey, and then to New York City. There Mr. Prentiss served the congregation of the Mercer Street Presbyterian Church. Many members of this church were known and honored the world over. In this society, the pastor's wife made many lasting friendships.

Shortly after the third of her six children was born, little Eddy failed in health and died. Then the new baby, which was the picture of health, suddenly became violently sick and also was taken. The bereaved mother could not eat or sleep. All the rest of her life she suffered from insomnia. Often it seemed that she would follow her children. In the Lord alone she found comfort, and daily she found herself drawn closer to Him.

At this time she took up her pen once more and wrote a child's story entitled *Suzy's Six Birthdays*. It was the first of many such books for children. Most notable in her writings is

the record of her own experiences in the life of self-denial. *Stepping Heavenward* was a best seller in its day, selling over 200,000 copies.

Fenelon became her favorite author, and she fed on his writings and assimilated into her own life his great themes: pure love to God and crucifixion of self. *Pilgrim's Progress, Imitation*

١ زِدْ حُبِّي لَكَ يَا  
وَأَمِّعْ لَطْفِي  
إِذْ كُلُّ بَغْيِي  
لِلْمُنْتَدِي  
حُبِّي الْوَدُودِ  
عِنْدَ الشُّجُودِ  
فَرَطُ الْعَبَّيَةِ  
لِلْمُنْتَدِي

٢ قَدْ رُمْتُ هَهُنَا  
وَأَلَا فِي رَبِّي  
إِذْ كُلُّ مُنْبِي  
لِلْمُنْتَدِي  
بَلَّ أَلْهِنَا  
كُلُّ أَلْهِي  
فَرَطُ الْعَبَّيَةِ  
لِلْمُنْتَدِي

٣ لَا أَخْشِي أَعْزَنَ  
لَا بَلَّ تَبِيضَ لِي  
إِنْ زَاوَرْتُ مُعْجَبِي  
لِلْمُنْتَدِي  
وَلَا أَعْيَنَ  
مِنْهَا أَلْيَنَ  
فَرَطُ الْعَبَّيَةِ  
لِلْمُنْتَدِي

٤ وَحِينَهَا يَدُنْ  
يَا نَفْسِي رَدِّي  
تَحْطِي بِطَلْعَةِ  
أَلْمُنْتَدِي  
مُنْبِ الْأَجَلِ  
سُخَّ أَعْمَلِ  
رَبِّي الْعَبَّيَةِ  
أَلْمُنْتَدِي

The Hymn, More Love to Thee,  
in Arabic

of Christ, and Saints' Everlasting Rest were also among her constant companions.

Elizabeth Prentiss carried on an extensive correspondence which was a blessing to many. She encouraged all to love Jesus more and to seek Him more. To

a fellowlaborer she wrote, "The study of Christ's life on earth reveals Him to us as incessantly busy, yet taking special seasons for prayer. It seems to me that we should imitate Him in this respect."

To a young lady inquiring into the closer walk with God she wrote: "You ask if I revel in *Pilgrim's Progress*. Yes, I do. I think it an amazing book. It seems to me almost as much an inspiration as the Bible itself. . . . I have felt about hymns just as you say you do, as if I loved them more than the Bible. But I have got over that; I prayed myself out of it, not loving hymns the less, but the Bible more. I wonder if you sing; I can't remember, if you do, I will send you, sometime, a hymn to sing for my sake, called *More Love to Thee, O Christ*."

A young relative received the following encouragement from Mrs. Prentiss, "To love Christ more — this is the deepest need, and constant cry of my soul. . . . Out in the woods, and on my bed, and out driving, when I am happy and busy, and when I am sad and idle, the whisper keeps going up for more love, more love, more love!"

Mrs. Prentiss regarded death as an invitation to God's house. Despite her constant consciousness of unworthiness, her confidence in the Savior was so great that she steadfastly affirmed her desire to be with the Lord. On August 13, 1878 after a brief and severe illness she left the "vale of tears" and journeyed to her "Father's house" above. It was fitting that as the body was lowered into the earth, the throng of friends and relatives tearfully sang her hymn which was truly the theme of her life: *More Love to Thee, O Christ*.