

Little Quicksilver

Everywhere great crowds of people were gathering for the coronation of the young Queen Victoria at Westminster Abbey. Shops were closed, houses empty as throngs filled the streets of London and cities, towns and villages all over the United Kingdom. It was the 28th of June, 1838 and in the rural parish of Astley the bell in the church tower had rung in the early morning to call the people together. A coronation of a young queen was quite a celebration. Tables piled with great joints of beef, loaves of bread and sweets of many kinds were set near the church wall next to a huge barrel of cider. Nearby friends and family stood, including young Frances Ridley Havergal, the newest addition to the rector of Astley's family. The crowd quietened as the rector raised his hands. When he began to sing in his fine voice, *God Save the Queen*, the crowds joined their voices to his, and behind him young Henry, his oldest son, lifted one-and-a-half-year-old Frances onto his shoulders, saying, 'You must sing too, and one day I will tell you how you welcomed the Queen this day.' And sing she did, though in her own way!

Some months later, when her second birthday came, Frances, now mostly called Fanny by the family,

did know how to sing. At two years old, she spoke clearly and was learning faster than anyone could have imagined. But punctuality was not Fanny's strong suit and never would be. It was something, though, that her father held in high importance.

So when the bell had already rung calling the family together for morning prayers, Fanny should have paid attention but didn't. It was the 14th of December and outside the tall parlour window snow was falling. In the distance the hills looked blue-white. Her father's great, tall fir tree had soft white along its branches. Her mother's gardens below and the woods beyond were covered in snow. Fanny had climbed onto a chair to see and would not be moved, not even by her brother Frank who tugged at her to come down. 'But look, it's snowing,' she cried. 'It's snowing on my birthday.' She clapped her hands.

'You must come now, Fanny.' Frank said. 'Papa is waiting for you. Everyone else is ready to begin.' Taking one more long look, she stamped her small foot before she slid down from the chair and followed her brother.

'Come now, Fanny, even my favourite two-year-old girl must learn to be punctual.' Her father sat by the fireside and held out his arms to Fanny who ran into them.

'But Papa, it's snowing! It's snowing on my birthday,' she said, climbing onto his knees, a place reserved for the youngest.

'Your birthday! So it is,' her father said, nuzzling into the pile of light golden curls that covered her head till she giggled. 'But you, my little Quicksilver, must learn

not to keep your mother and your sisters and brothers waiting.’ From his pocket her father took out his large gold watch. ‘Now, can you tell me what time it is?’ Fanny’s blue eyes shone with merriment. Her father loved clocks and they were everywhere in the house. Even the front of the church had a great clock that he had donated to the congregation.

She looked at the watch, giggled, and said. ‘Yes, Papa, we always begin prayer time at 9 o’clock.’

‘And then how late are you, child?’ Her father was no longer smiling.

‘I am very late,’ she said softly. ‘Maria has been teaching me to tell the time, and so I am five minutes late.’

Patting her head gently, her father, his face still unsmiling, looked around at the family and the servants, and asked, ‘I shall abide by your judgement. Seeing as how it is her birthday, is it your will that we shall forgive her this time?’ Laughter filled the room along with hearty ‘yeses’.

‘Then we shall indeed,’ her pastor father said. ‘Only remember, Fanny, that in this household, punctuality is the rule, and we must all hold fast to it. Now, shall we sing our thanks to the Lord for this fine snowy day?’ In his rich and beautiful voice, her father began a hymn all of them knew, even Fanny. Her oldest sister, Miriam, had told her that when she was a baby, she cooed in time with the nursery rhymes her brother Frank, two years older than she, had sung to her.

‘This is a singing household,’ Miriam had said. ‘Papa got his first gold medal for his beautiful hymn at the same time you were born.’ Fanny had seen the shiny medal, and knew the beautiful hymn sung in English churches everywhere. ‘And did you know that every Havergal child has gone to music school, just like you, first in the arms and on the shoulders of Papa?’ Fanny had giggled. She did enjoy sitting on her father’s shoulders when he played the harmonium, and she was learning to sing with him.

Her father also demanded punctuality, and her mother believed in activity and learning and resourcefulness. It was her mother, with her gentle ways, who had taught them all to read and write before they were old enough for school. Now, Miriam, home from school, had charge of two-year-old Fanny’s half-hour lessons. By the time Fanny was three, she could read easy books, write in round hand¹, repeat her daily verses and sew patchwork stitches. At four years old, she could read harder books including the Bible. Her mother also taught the girls to sew for themselves and others, how to bake the famous ‘Astley apple turnovers’² and how to help care for the sick and the poor in the small cottages nearby. Visiting with her mother was part of their training and Fanny learned to help carry the buckets of soup her mother often took to the needy among them. Her father also took them on his visits to the cottages.

1. A type of handwriting and calligraphy originating in England in the 1660s.

2 See recipe on page 172.

Fanny was four years old when her father took her with him to a cottage where a boy her own age had died. 'He died,' Papa explained, 'but he is now in heaven with Jesus.' The boy looked pale and quiet in his coffin, and Fanny wondered why he lay so still even when she lightly touched his cold hand. She said nothing and afterwards when her dog Flora, a small brown and white spaniel, came running to greet her at the garden gate, she quickly forgot about the boy.

On a visit with her sister Ellen to her grandmother and grandfather's house, it was almost the same when a letter came from her mother to tell her that one of the cottage babies had died.

Her mother wrote:

I am so glad to hear how happy you are at Wycombe . . . I miss you and often think I hear you call "Mama", or expect you are coming to me. You remember the three little babies at Dunley. Jane, the one that you nursed, is gone to heaven. May my Fanny know and love Jesus Christ! Then she will be sure to go to heaven whether she dies young or old. Some of the seeds are come up in your garden; I love to watch them, because you helped me to sow them. Dear Papa sends his love. Goodbye, dear Fanny . . .

Fanny thought of the baby, Jane, for a second and wondered if she too had been cold like the dead boy, but she hadn't a thought about heaven. True to her father's nickname for her, 'little Quicksilver', her mind turned straight away to the happy picture of her seeds in her mother's garden and she ran to tell her grandmother.

Back at Astley, she was free to run everywhere and explore the large grounds of the rectory, fields, gardens, the woods around the parsonage, and the little brook that ran through. Fanny and Flora had many daring adventures together.

One day, Fanny heard of a visiting Irish boy who had discovered two adders under the steep bank near the brook. He had caught them by the back of their necks and brought them to her father. The possibility of serpents and snakes made her adventures to the secluded brook all the more exciting. A rustle of leaves and the gleam of what might have been small dark eyes deep in a crevice of the bank made her sure there might be adders there still. 'We must go no closer, Flora,' she would whisper pointing to the bank. Flora's short sharp barks were enough to keep any adders away. 'We'll cross the brook further down on the old plank,' Fanny whispered to faithful Flora.

The trees she climbed were too high ... the consequences being slips, falls, torn knees, scraped arms and severely torn stockings could not be hidden. Her sisters shook their heads and gave her lectures along with bandages, but she could never be sorry for more than a moment and was soon laughing and on to the next adventure. It was Flora who knew her plans to be a poet and probably a mountain climber too. But there was another side to Frances Ridley Havergal, and it was beginning to show!

From the first day that she had hidden behind a thick window drape in the upstairs hallway to eavesdrop on

the German tutor, Mr. Lowes, Fanny found herself learning German along with her brothers and sisters. How easily it came to her as she quietly repeated the lessons to herself. One day, Mr. Lowes discovered her standing in the hallway pressed against the wall just outside the door to the classroom. 'Good morning, Miss Frances. Were you wanting something?' he said. She answered him in perfect German. An astonished Mr. Lowes reported his discovery and begged that she be allowed to take lessons with the others.

'She is so young,' her mother said. 'We will need to be careful that she does not overtax her mind.'

'Yes, my dear, but our little Quicksilver will be better off sitting inside the schoolroom learning German than standing in the hallway learning it.' Her father laughed and held out his hand to Mr. Lowes. 'It seems you are to have a new pupil, sir.' It was to be only the first of many new things for Fanny. French and music would soon follow. Fanny loved to learn and advanced quickly beyond her age. However, even Fanny would soon forget her studies for a while. Her sister Miriam was going to marry Henry Crane in October! And not only that, but the Havergal family was leaving Astley for the new Rectory of St. Nicholas in the city of Worcester.

First they would go to stay at Henwick House near the village of Hallow for a while. Fanny danced with joy at the exciting news. 'You will have fields and gardens and trees to roam,' her father promised. 'I believe Henwick will be all that my little Quicksilver could wish for.'

‘Yes, Papa. We will love our new house, but what shall we do with Flora at the wedding?’

Her father laughed and patted her head. ‘Someone will look after her while we are gone.’ Fanny dreamed of the new adventures to come in the countryside at Henwick. She could hardly wait for Miriam’s wedding. Miriam, dark-haired and dark-eyed like their father, looked like a princess in her gown of pale-blue satin with lace embroidery and her crown of flowers. It was Fanny’s first wedding and so beautiful, Fanny knew she would never forget it.

Henwick House at Hallow was all that her father had promised. Fanny threw herself into the new surroundings with all its wonderful wildness, and Flora followed at her heels. She didn’t notice the change in poor Flora until it was too late. One morning, Flora did not come to greet her. The little dog lay still and cold in her basket.

‘I’m afraid Flora is dead,’ her father explained.

Tears streamed down Fanny’s face.

‘It is her first sorrow,’ her mother whispered as later that day the family stood by the white blooming Mespilus tree in the back garden where Flora lay buried. Fanny had written a paper to mark the spot:

*Here lies little Flora,
Died 16th, April 1844,
Aged 7, Reverence her remains.*

Fanny could not imagine the other changes that were soon to come.