

**“THE BRIGHT FOREVER”
The Life of Fannie Crosby**

A Monologue

Written by Gary Carden

"THE BRIGHT FOREVER"

THE STORY OF FANNIE CROSBY

THE LIGHTS COME UP ON THE STAGE OF A NEW YORK BOWERY MISSION HALL, CIRCA 1900. THE STAGE IS A SPARTAN AFFAIR, UNADORNED EXCEPT FOR A BANNER ACROSS THE BACK WALL THAT PROCLAIMS "THE WATER STREET MISSION." BENEATH THAT, ANOTHER BANNER BEARS THE INSCRIPTION, "RESCUE THE PERISHING."

FANNIE CROSBY, A FRAIL BLIND WOMAN WHO IS WELL INTO HER 80'S SITS D.S.C. IN A STRAIGHT-BACKED CHAIR. SHE WEARS SQUARE-SHAPED, WIRE-RIMMED, GREEN-TINTED SPECTACLES, AND HER ABUNDANT GREY HAIR IS PULLED BACK IN A SEVERE BUN. SHE WEARS A FULL-LENGTH MAROON GOWN (1860'S) SIMILAR TO THE STYLE WORN BY MARY TODD LINCOLN. HER ONLY ADORNMENTS ARE A SILVER CROSS ON HER BREAST ALONG WITH A SINGULAR SMALL SILK AMERICAN FLAG (1880'S) SHE SITS WITH THE ALERT AWARENESS OF THE BLIND, HER HEAD SLIGHTLY ELEVATED AS THOUGH TO CATCH EVERY NUANCE OF SOUND IN THE HALL. SHE CLASPS A SMALL, LEATHER-BOUND BOOK IN HER LAP. D.S.R., A SMALL TRIPOD BEARS A POSTER THAT ANNOUNCES "GUEST SPEAKER, FANNIE CROSBY, THE QUEEN OF GOSPEL SONG."

(AS THE HYMN, "PASS ME NOT, OH GENTLE SAVIOR" BEGINS TO PLAY, FANNIE RISES.

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WHEN THE MUSICAL STANZA BEGINS
AGAIN, FANNIE BEGINS TO SING.)

Pass me not, oh gentle Savior.
Hear my humble cry.
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.
Savior, Savior,
Hear my humble cry. While on
others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.

(The music stops. After a
moment, Fannie motions
for her audience to sit
and then speaks with a
marked, almost childish
enthusiasm.)

God bless your dear hearts! I am
so happy to be here with you
tonight! In response to the hymn
that we just sang, you may rest
assured, He will not pass you by!
That is what I have come here to
tell you.

(If you don't know who I
am, dear ones, I am
Fannie Crosby, and as you
can see, I am blind. I
may be shut out of the
world, but I am shut in
with the Lord! (Laughs.)
As I sat here in this
hall tonight
listening...*(Pauses, and
then says)*, ..."I do a
great deal of that, you
know! ... Listening in
the watches of the
night...*(Pauses
again)*...But here,
tonight, in this hall, I
can *(emphasis)*... "hear"
you there in the
darkness...Hear your
hearts beating with
anxious hope.

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For I know that you would not be here tonight, kind hearts, if you were not troubled.)

Perhaps you know what they say about the blind..that their other senses improve after the loss of sight? Well, it is true! If you lose the ability to see, your other senses become keener, sharper..more powerful. It is as though they were all comrades, and when one of them fails, the others rush forward to fill the gap. Is this not a wondrous thing! To see with your ears and your fingers? So it is that I hear you there, and in my own way...I see you. (Pause.) But that is not all! Oh, no! I feel you, too. I sense the striving of your souls there in the darkness.

My friends sometimes ask, "What is it like, Fanny? To sense hundreds of invisible souls, all yearning for acceptance, assurance and peace?" Well, brothers and sisters, it resembles another experience that I have had quite often. I like to stand on the pier at Ocean Grove, New Jersey with my friend, Rev. Dwight Moody when the wind rises over the Atlantic Ocean before a storm. Sometimes there is thunder and a flash of lightning that penetrates the night behind these eyes for a moment. Together, Dwight and I feel the turbulence of the ocean and hear the violence of the surf. The wind sometimes rises as though it might carry us away, and... Oh, to feel all that mighty turmoil, that restless heaving to and fro. That is what it is like, dear hearts. That is what I feel here, tonight! A rising tide of yearning!

Let me tell you, now, what is going to happen.

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I know, because it has happened before...thousands of times. As we commune here together tonight, the winds will cease and the awful turmoil within your breast will subside. (*Pauses, laughs and nods*) Yes, it will! Your troubled souls will pause, and there will come a peace and a serenity...If you will open your hearts. But, will it last? When you wake in the morning, will that wondrous calm still be there?

That is for you to decide, dear hearts! Tonight, you can calm the storm in your heart.

I want to tell you a story..the story of my life. It won't take long! I am a very old lady, its true. I have lived a long time, but my story is quickly told.

I was not born blind, you see. When I was six weeks old, I had an inflammation in my eyes which a doctor treated by applying hot compresses. Those compresses seared the tissues in my eyes and blinded me. I am often asked if my heart is not filled with rage for that doctor whose ignorance took my sight.

Dear friends, let me tell you a wondrous thing! If that poor doctor were here tonight...if he should rise from this audience and come to this stage and say, "Fanny, I am the man that blinded you," I would clasp him to my heart! For you see, blindness has been the greatest blessing of my life!

Oh, it didn't seem that way at first. You see they didn't know how to teach blind children in 1830, although they tried. Most of us had to be content to stay at home where we learned simple domestic chores, cooking, sewing, mending.

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But, I wanted to go to school!
And I did, but each time that I
went, I came home sad and defeated
by those classrooms...and those
teachers who didn't know how to
reach me and did not have the time
to try. Even so, I sensed that
there was a world of wonders
waiting to be discovered if I
could just find my way to them.
(with childish delight) I wrote
my first poem when I was eight
years old, and it simply said:

"Oh, what a happy child I am,
Although I cannot see.
I am resolved that in this world,
Contented I will be!"

(Laughs at her childish rhymes)

But, even then, I felt that I was
blind for a reason. It was
frustrating for a while. No one
could teach me except my dear
grandmother who would place
feathers and flowers in my hands
and say, "This is a blue bird,
Fannie! This is a rose!" I would
vaguely sense what a bird's flight
was like, and how dew clung to the
petals of a flower...a faint hint
of the reality. But then, when I
was fifteen, I learned that
because I was blind, I could go
to the new school...the New York
Institute for the Blind. It was a
school set up to prove that the
blind could be taught to lead
useful lives. There, I acquired an
education which I would never have
been able to afford if I had been
blessed...or cursed with
sight...But, because I was blind,
I went to that marvelous school
where I discovered music, learned
to play the piano and the harp,
discovered literature, poetry and
learned of the wonders of the
universe...all because I was
blind! I loved it all, and when I
graduated, I stayed for thirty
years as a teacher. I was always
learning, learning! Well, I loved
almost all of the subjects, but...

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I never learned to love...algebra. In my life, I have never had reason to hate...except for mathematics! In time, my teachers took pity on me and said, "No more two and two are four! No more twelve divided by four is three" (*Pauses and laughs*) It is three, isn't it? Instead, I learned to write poetry, and eventually to write hymns.

At first, the teachers worried about me because when I discovered poetry and music, I never wanted to do anything else. I would stay up all night writing, playing, singing! Oh, for one terrible period...two months, it was...I was forbidden to write poetry because it had become an obsession...I didn't want to do anything else. But when they saw how miserable I was, they relented, and I have never stopped since. Never. Eventually, I became a teacher at the school and taught English and history.

You see, because I am blind, I know this. I know why I am here, why I am on this earth. I am here to praise God and to bring others to salvation. That is why I am blind! It is a gift from God. You see, sight is a distraction. (*Gives an affirmative nod.*) Because you can see, you are distracted by beauty and the fascination of this moving world that pulses with color. Without that distraction, there is nothing between me and the wonder of God's presence.

I know what a distraction this glorious world must be for those who can see because I can see some colors. If I turn my face to the sun on a summer day, I see a darkness streaked with red.

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In this hall, if I lift my face to the lights, I see a faint whiteness, and, of course, I have seen the sudden jolt of color that is the lightning on the pier at Ocean Beach. I know something of what blue must be from summer skies, and I have seen a hint of green when I stand in a peaceful forest. No faces, no objects, no birds, no rainbows. Just the merest hint of color. It is enough. I have only a faint idea of what it must be like to see...but, my dear friends, it is also true that all of the rich and varied colors of this world are but a vague hint of what it will be like to see our Savior face to face! In a way, what you see is very like what I see! Truly, this world in all of its transitory splendor is but a faint suggestion of the eternal glory that will be there!

For a long time, I was content to remain at the school teaching and writing poems and hymns. People came to see me there - presidents and the world's great religious leaders became my friends. Teddy Roosevelt is one of my dearest friends, as is Helen Keller, Grover Cleveland, and the presidents, Grant, Hayes and Garfield. I have dinner with Woodrow Wilson and Harriet Beecher Stowe ...and General Sherman. Eventually, I met publishers and musicians, and everyone asked me to write hymns for them. And write, I did! Commemorative hymns, graduation hymns, wedding hymns, hymns in memory of a lost child or world leader. I had my own stenographer who wrote down the songs and poems that I dictated, and there were days when I would do six or seven, jumping back and forth between them!

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(Claps her hands with delight.)
Sometimes, musicians would come to me with music and they would play it and say, "Fannie, what does that sound like?" Many times, I would hear what the music wanted to say. Yes!

(Pause and then Fannie continues reluctantly.)

I did go through a dark time for a while because I envied the world and all of the pleasures that others enjoyed that I did not. When my sisters married and when I heard children laughing, I was filled with a terrible yearning. I wanted those things, you see. And when a young man who was also blind came to see me at the school, I began to think that perhaps I could also know what it means to love another.

(long pause as Fannie struggles with this memory.

His name was Van. He was a musician, too, and when he came to see me, we played together. My friends were happy for me. Oh, I remember how Phoebe cried when she saw us together, two blind souls playing duets! *(Laughs)* He had a wonderful face and I loved to trace his features with my fingers,....his mouth...his nose. For a while, I thought that this was meant to be...that Van and I were meant to spend our lives writing music and singing songs about God's love.

Pause) That didn't happen. Oh, there was a year that seems unreal to me now. We made plans when I became pregnant. But, the child, *(Fannie falters)* ...the child not live. Afterwards, Van and I discovered that something was gone from our relationship...something vital. Eventually, Van moved to his own apartment. He became a teacher for blind children who wanted to learn to play.

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We still have dinner
together.....We are still
friends.....

*(abrupt change of tone as
Fannie struggles to go
on.)*

And, of course, I have my music!

One of my talented friends was
Howard Doane, a man who has
written the music for thousands of
hymns. On a spring day in 1868,
he came to see me. "I have a
melody, Fannie, but I can't hear
the words. Perhaps, you can."
Then he sat down and played.

*(Fannie calls to the
pianist off stage.)*

Mary, please play a bit of the
hymn on page 214.

*(The music for "Safe in
the Arms of Jesus" begins
to play.)*

Well, dear hearts I heard what the
music wanted to say. *(Calls)*

Mary, begin again.

(Fannie sings)

Safe in the arms of Jesus,
Safe on his gentle breast.
There by his love o'shaded,
Sweetly my soul shall rest.
Hark! Tis the voice of angels
Borne in a song to me.
Over the fields of glory,
Over the jasper sea.

(song ends)

These words came to me immediately
when I heard Howard's song. It
was as though the music needed to
be "clothed" in words, and each
word came to me as I heard each
note. What was I thinking of when
I wrote that song? I was thinking
of all of the mothers who had lost
children or other loved ones...and
needed to be reassured...to know
that the loved one was "Safe in
the Arms of Jesus." I also felt
that in a sense, I did not write
that song. It simply flowed
through like a refreshing, crystal
stream from the Holy Spirit.

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Sometimes, Howard and I reversed the process. I wrote the lyrics and read them to him and he immediately heard the music. That is what happened when I decided to write a song for all of the missions in this country - missions like this one where we are gathered tonight. *(calls)* Mary, please play page 143! *("Rescue the Perishing" begins to play and Fannie sings.)*

Rescue the perishing,
Care for the dying,
Snatch them in pity from sin and
the grave,
Weep for the erring one,
Lift up the fallen,
Tell them of Jesus the Mighty to
save.

(Music stops)

Oh, we did it again and again. Sometimes, I wrote both the music and the lyrics. But, my friends, best of all, I like to join with others. I met a wonderful man named William Kirkpatrick...I always called him "Kirkie"...and he helped me publish my songs. In time, we became a part of a religious movement that swept this country. It was led by Dwight Moody, of course. As his revivals swept across the nation, packing churches and great halls, my music went with him. What a wondrous thing to hear my songs sung by the world's most beautiful voices - not just in New York and Chicago - but in London and Dublin!

As I listened to the accounts of those meetings, I wanted to be a part of it. Something was happening in this country - a great, spiritual awakening. I knew that God did not wish for me to stay in my safe haven, the New York Institute for the Blind, writing hymns and talking to my wonderful friends. It was time for me to leave.

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Where should I go, then? To the great halls where Dwight Moody spoke to thousands of souls eager to come to God? To great lecture halls and universities? Ah, no. I knew where I must go. God had told me.

Often, when I rode through the streets of New York with Dwight Moody or my friend Phoebe Knapp, I would sense a change in the city...the sounds, smells and taste of the streets. I would hear shouts and hollow laughter, anger and weeping. I would smell sickness, rot and poverty. When I would ask "Where are we?" Someone would say, "This is the Bowery, Fannie." When I ask them to describe what was outside our carriage, they told me. Drunken men, they said. Poverty, sickness, women selling their bodies, invalids from the war, beggars, abandoned children. Lost souls everywhere.

So, as the "Great Awakening" swept through our cities and great throngs of people - many of them wealthy and privileged, fought for seats in Dwight's meeting halls....I came here. I have a one-room, cold-water apartment not far from where we are tonight. I could have afforded better perhaps, but this is where I wanted to be, and I knew that I should live simply. Oh, I made a bit of money from all of those hymns that were published and a half-dozen volumes of poetry as well...But, I gave that money away!

(laughs.) Gave it to missions and orphanages and hospitals for the poor. That is what you are supposed to do, you know.

I still write, sometimes.

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I find it easiest to do so late at night when the sounds from the street - the cries and shouting - are gone.

I also attend church regularly, but I have no particular preference. Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and Catholic. All of them are nearby and they all seem to be doorways to the same destination.

My friends come to see me, of course. (Laughs suddenly at a memory) They used to play a game with me..Phoebe, Dwight and Kirkie!

They would sneak quietly into my little room where I was sitting, and they would tip-toe up and touch my shoulder! (Fannie mimes the touch) Like that. When I felt the touch of their hand, I always said, "Oh, Phoebe, or Kirkie or Dwight, you are here at last!" They were amazed that I knew who they were by the touch of their hand. It is true. People I had not seen in years, like my sister or Teddy Roosevelt, I would know by their touch, like you would recognize a friend's face or their voice. But, mostly, I spent my time alone, thinking, praying, writing hymns that I would keep in my memory until I could dictate them to someone...

I have learned to find my way alone, from my room to this mission, or others like it, and over the years, the people on the street have come to know me. Oh, that terrified my friend, Phoebe Knapp, who was wealthy and lived in a great mansion. She begged me to come and live with her, but I belonged here on the streets of the Bowery. Often someone walks with me - beggars, drunkards and the unemployed.

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They always tell me of a night when they heard my message and how they have struggled to stay on the side of the angels since then. I remember one night when I first started coming to the missions and the streets were filled with lost souls...there was a night when I was talking to my boys that is what I call them, you know... and I heard a single voice somewhere in the crowd...a single, anguished cry, that said, "Ah, Lord, Please Lord, do not pass me by!" It was such a pitious sound that I could not forget it. When I went home to my apartment and sat down and wrote that song that we began this night with, (singing a capalla)

"Pass me not, Oh Gentle Savior,
Hear my humble cry.
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by."

I use it often now in the mission meetings, and I have asked that it be placed in all of the mission hymn books.

*(Stops, smiles and lifts
the book that she clasps
in her hand.)*

Speaking of books, my friends, perhaps you are wondering what an old blind lady needs with a book! Well, let me tell you about that. It is a foolish thing, perhaps, but when I first began talking to my boys in the missions, I was a little frightened...not of my boys, mind you, but of my ability to speak. Well, I found that if I held this book, I could speak! Yes, it is as though the Holy Spirit speaks to me, boosts me up, gives me confidence through this book. Foolishness, perhaps, but I beg you to indulge an old lady. He is with me, you see!

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(She brandishes the book.)

My friends tell me that the world is changing, and I know that it is true. I have heard that the people no longer come in droves to hear Dwight Moody or any of the other great preachers. I have been told that the Great Awakening is over, and that the world has gone back to sleep. Attendance is off at churches and membership has gone into a decline. I have been told that the number of men who have accepted Christ as their savior is alarmingly low. I told Phoebe recently that there may not be enough men in the heavenly choir to make a decent bass section! (laughs).

And yet, nothing has changed here, on the Bowery. Here, where the lost and abandoned souls of this great nation gather, the missions are still crowded. "The poor are always with us," said Jesus. Yes, indeed, they are, as are the homeless, the unloved. You are here tonight, my dear friends, my boys...and I sense your yearning hearts there in the darkness.

Well, I have talked enough, perhaps, but let me say one final thing. When, I first started talking at the missions, I told my friends, Kirkie, Dwight and Phoebe, I said, I want to bring one million souls to Christ. I want to know that one million people have accepted Christ as their savior before I die. They tell me I have done that now. Yes, over all of the years that I have stood on this stage, that over one million souls have come forward. They tell me that I have written over 8,000 hymns. Oh, I am as amazed as you are, as I never counted them. 8,000 hymns....one million souls. And yet....I want to go on. But the songs have stopped.

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That great flood of music has
stopped and now....Oh, dear
hearts, I am an empty vessel.

(Fannie pauses, obviously
affected by her loss)

I...know...the time...is near
when, after living in darkness for
so long...I will see my Savior
face to face. I will stand in the
light...in the bright forever
with my God.

("Blessed Assurance"
begins to play softly)

I would like to think that when my
Savior calls me, it will be like
those wonderful storms on the pier
at Ocean Beach....that the wind
will rise and the tide of His love
will come. Perhaps his coming will
be like when my dearest friends
enter my room and touch my
shoulder. I will feel his hand on
my shoulder and I will say "My
Lord, You are here at last."
My friends, of all of the hymns
that I have written, there is one
that I have chosen for my epipath.
I would like to close tonight by
singing it.

(Lights gradually dim as
Fannie sings)

"Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh, What a foretaste of glory
divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of
God,
Born of His spirit, washed in His
blood.

(Lights fade to black.)