



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

Even the hard roads, the steep, thorny stretches,  
they too lead home.

*There let the way appear steps unto heaven,  
All that thou sendest me in mercy given.*



## Two Poets

When Sarah Flower Adams wrote these lines of her best-loved hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee," she was ill with the disease that would take her life at age forty-three. Orphaned at five, forced at thirty-two to give up a brilliant acting career because of poor health, she could nevertheless see "all" that befell her as the pathway to heaven laid by a loving God.

Francis Thompson, too -- part of whose wrenching autobiographical poem opens this segment -- led a tragic life by any measure. Sick, destitute, addicted to opium, in *The Hound of Heaven* he recounts his self-destructive flight from God. By the end of the painful story he has become "of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot. "

Then God speaks. And what God says, at the conclusion of the long poem, is very like what Sarah Adams heard:

*All which I took from thee, I did but take  
Not for thy harms,  
But just that thou mightst seek it in My arms.  
All which thy child's mistake  
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:*

*Rise, clasp My hand, and come!*

One cannot be lost.

## Packing Barrel

If my parents never talked about religion, there was one family member who did --emphatically, as he did everything. Grandfather Schindler, whose portrait hangs beside Grandmother's in our living room, was a Unitarian minister with a prophet's fire. I remember my brother and me tugging desperately on his arms in a Toronto movie house, trying to get him to stand up for "God Save the King."

"I'll not rise for a king!" Grandfather trumpeted in his pulpit-trained voice as everyone turned to stare. "God save our freedoms and kings be d-----d!"

Then in his mid eighties, he'd retired from the ministry and now worked occasionally for Daddy "The world's oldest detective," said the entry about him in *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. An old man with a white goatee and a shiny bald head, Grandfather could sit in the lobby of a hotel, apparently dozing in a chair, and take in everything that went on. With the invisibility of the elderly and a memory like a tape recorder, he was the perfect undercover agent.

In his own profession of reforming preacher, however, he'd been less successful. Daddy's principal childhood memory, he used to say, was of moving. Grandfather was hopelessly idealistic, hopelessly ahead of his time. If a thing was morally wrong, no matter how central to the local economy, he thundered against it from the pulpit. In Virginia, he preached against tobacco; in Kentucky, against grain alcohol; and everywhere, in the 1880s and '90s, against racial segregation, child labor, and the refusal to give the vote to women.

As one offended congregation after another dismissed their too-visionary minister, Daddy would come home to find his patient mother bent over a packing barrel. Trunks were expensive. Once more she'd be placing books on the bottom, dishes for her family of nine next, then a layer of blankets. . . .

She never complained. A move was a chance to extend her prison ministry "I have all my young ladies sewing. There'll be others where we're going."

## The Prophet

Undaunted by his failure to sway his flocks, Grandfather continued all his life to voice unwelcome truths. When I first remember him, in the 1930s, he was warning about the military buildup in Germany. My last conversation with him concerned air pollution. It was 1948, a year before his death at age ninety-three, a time when "environment" to me was still just a word in the dictionary. I'd taken the train out to California to see him, hoping to draw story material from his wealth of memories. Like the time he'd stood by the train tracks in Ohio, a boy of seven, sobbing as Lincoln's funeral train passed by.

But out in Santa Barbara, Grandfather refused to look back. "Past history! Now if we don't control auto emissions," he pounded his chair arm for emphasis, "fifty years from now the air in Los Angeles won't be fit to breathe."

It was a rigorous religion to which Grandfather introduced me. A passionate stand in God's name against all forms of exploitation and inequality. I never once heard him say the word *Jesus*.

Perhaps exhausted in their youth by so demanding a creed, only one of Grandfather's seven children

professed religion as an adult. This was Daddy's sister Helen. A social worker in New York City, Aunt Helen attended the austere functional red brick Unitarian church on East 35th Street, where I often went with her. In that calm and rational sanctuary, I encountered a moral God I found more satisfactory than Daddy's creator-of-pencils. I was only a visitor at Aunt Helen's church, but whenever I had to fill in a blank under *Religion*, I would write "Unitarian."

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