

# CHRISTIAN FRIEDRICH RICHTER

by SYDNEY H. MOORE

**M**R. MOORE, former Headmaster of Silcoates School, who died on October 31, 1964, at the age of eighty-six, was an expert in the field of German hymnology; in 1956 he had published by the Independent Press a series of studies of German hymn-writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries under the title "Sursum Corda". He was also the translator of J. Richter's "History of Missions in India".

**L**OVERS of hymns will find in the life and work of Christian Friedrich Richter a welcome and refreshing variant from the normal biography of a hymn-writer. Objections to his language, his learning, his perfectly astounding knowledge of the Bible, his style of verse-making, are not hard to find, yet Nelle's final verdict still stands: "the real poet among the Pietists of the Halle school is their doctor, Christian Friedrich Richter".

What a curious mixture of a man he was! On the one hand a clever young physician constantly occupied in seeking solutions to the multiple problems of his profession; on the other a doctor to whom every symptom he observed and every bolus he invented was somehow connected with divine goodness and omniscience. In both respects he remained a sincere and modest Christian who with untroubled conscience wrote:

With fraudless, even, humble mind  
Thy will in all things may I see;  
In love be every wish resigned  
And hallowed my whole heart to Thee.  
Close by Thy side still may I keep  
Howe'er life's various current flow;  
With steadfast eye mark every step  
And follow Thee where'er Thou go.

There are critics who disparage his work or ignore it altogether. But he is well worth knowing; let us look at him more closely and with broader understanding.

Whilst still a mere youth of twenty-three he was appointed medical adviser to the orphanage, schools, training college, infirmary, etc., generally known as "The Halle Orphanages", which August Hermann Francke was building, stage by stage, in the old city on the Saale. Men weary of the useless ruinous strife between Protestant and Romanist had founded there in 1693 a University at which the Pietism of Spener and Francke might find practical exposition; Francke had himself been recently expelled for outspoken Christianity from the university staff at Erfurt.

Richter's position was one before which a medical man of far wider experience might well have quailed. Yet from the start his work was successful and from Halle there went out a constant succession of well-instructed doctors, pastors and teachers whose words, works and hymns flowed like a life-stream of healing through every corner and region of the country. Their message was often misrepresented and condemned—notably by their influential neighbours, the University of Wittenberg. But Dr. Richter was made of robust stuff and the whole of his too short life (he died at the age of thirty-seven) was whole-heartedly and gladly spent in service at the Halle headquarters.

For that day his methods there were strikingly original. He would hear nothing of medicaments whose ingredients included minced snails or the boiled tails of mice. For each fresh ailment he would think out some new remedy. Having invented the pill or potion which he felt would bring relief, he would formally dedicate it with prayer; stories of the whole Hallensian staff being assembled round a new drug to pray for its success are still current. Some of his discoveries, particularly that of the *essentia dulcis*, a kind of "gold-cure", not only brought about therapeutic benefit but also ensured greatly-needed financial aid to the ever-mounting Orphanage expenses. Details of this catholicon and of his other extraordinary prescriptions can be found by those interested in the *Höchst nötige Kenntnisse* compiled by his brother Sigismund in 1715. These were not 'quack' remedies; one proof of this is furnished by their huge sale and the numerous cases of undoubted healing they occasioned. As far as the income they provided is concerned, the latest Göttingen *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon* (1959) states that through them Francke's establishments benefitted yearly to the remarkable tune of 30,000-40,000 thalers.

To Francke and Spener the addition of a competent craftsman like Richter was a sheer gift of Providence. It was only half a century since the Thirty Years War had ended, leaving Germany with devastated lands, towns in ruins, innumerable villages and schools completely wiped out. Poverty and ignorance were still everywhere in evidence; hunger, plague and violence had by no means disappeared on the signing of the Peace in 1648. Fortunately for the country the Pietist attitude to life was an intensely practical one. The colossal ignorance of parents and children must, they felt, be coped with—Halle showed how this might be done; multitudes of lame, halt, blind, needed medical attention—Halle showed how to give it; schools of training to cancel the dearth of pastors, teachers and doctors were acutely necessary—in Halle they were

erected and well staffed ; and finally there were thousands of homeless orphans . . . and to this day the Halle Orphanages remain, the time-honoured and noblest monument of Pietist philanthropy.

Richter's aid in the organization and development of all these activities was invaluable. After his early death his brother Sigismund wrote a most moving tribute to him. Sentences in it which help us to a clearer view of the hymn-writer run: "As far as I know, he never regarded one single human being as his enemy" ; "His one great delight in life was that an opportunity to serve the desolate and the poor was given him and in the quiet of his heart he thanked his Heavenly Father for every chance to benefit the souls and bodies of those who came to him".

As a doctor of much wisdom Richter won a deserved reputation—his treatise on the medical aspects of the Crucifixion is still read with wonder. But it should not be forgotten that, despite all professional calls upon his time and thought, he remained to the end an enthusiastically active evangelist ; indeed even on October 4, the last day of his life, he gave "with great joy and seriousness" to those about his bed an address on the peace of God every believing heart might enjoy. Today, however, it is not as a medical man we specially remember him. These men of Halle were determined, as were John and Charles Wesley a quarter of a century later, that those to whom they expounded the Gospel should possess hymns to drive home and to keep alive in the minds of all worshippers the truths they sang in church. On this point Richter was in entire agreement with them and himself composed both hymns and tunes.

He was no prolific poet, of the Schmolck, Woltersdorf, Zinzen-dorf type. His known total of hymns is only 33, but of these 33 Freylinghausen, Pietism's austere censor, chose no fewer than 24 for his great collections of 1704 and 1714. And several of these have been translated into English by such experts as John Wesley and Catherine Winkworth. Words from the hymn with which Miss Winkworth opened her *Lyra Germanica* were the last heard from the lips of that dear old lady and poetess whom I remember so well, the Princess Helena von Reuss, as she lay dying in 1903 (*Hüter, wird die Nacht der Sünden*). Probably the best known to us is the one Wesley translated for his *Charlestown Hymnbook* of 1737 : "Thou Lamb of God, Thou Prince of Peace", two stanzas from which were quoted in our second paragraph. Yet another, also included in the Charlestown Book, is "My soul before Thee prostrate lies" (*Hier legt mein Sinn sich vor Dir nieder*). "To be familiar with these verses is sheer gain."

What were the points then on which critics have fallen foul of

this exceptional man? One is delicately hinted at by his great friend, Dr. Lange, Pro-Rector of Halle University. "He has a wide knowledge and a real lyrical gift. But his thought is often so profound that he is quite unable to express his ideas in clear unambiguous language." How moderns think of him we find (again in one of his admirers) in Dr. Wilhelm Nelle, Germany's hymnologist *par excellence* of the twentieth century. Confessing his great love for the Halle doctor, he does not hesitate to admit that "in him we see exactly how Pietism loves to smuggle into its hymns involved, difficult and unheard-of illustrations from Holy Writ. The majority of Richter's hymns bristle with them, illustrations calculated to baffle any ordinary Bible student. . . . One gets the impression that his muse is too lofty, too remote, too ideal for the normal congregation. . . . Jung Stilling, also a doctor, was an ardent lover of Dr. Richter, but to one hymn he appended the note "This hymn requires a commentary to itself as do several of the others'." Finally, in Julian we read, after ample eulogy, the blunt comment: "His hymns are often not clearly thought out and consequently somewhat obscure. Others, in unusual metres, are wedded to tunes not very devotional in character".

Yet one has only to dip into many of the Pietist hymnaries to perceive how outstanding is Richter's nobility of thought and how unquestionable his simple religious faith. Here is a best-seller, Pfarrer Hartmann's *New Hymns for all Ranks of Spiritual and Evangelical Zion* (Rostock, 1712). In it, we are told, will be found "hymns suitable for singing by lawyers, clerks, coachmen, printers, peasants and barbers"! In another, *Theologia in Hymnis, 1300 specially chosen Hymns* (Leipzig, 1737), Pastor Gottschald claims that a hymn can be found for every circumstance of life—for insomnia, for wet weather, on being a godfather, at the appearance of a comet, on going for a stroll, for the blind, the lame, the deaf, and begs to be told where he can lay hands on really good hymns for conjurers, pickpockets, rope-dancers, thieves, gipsies and rogues, and even for "smokers, gamblers and all who strut about in fine new clothes". Yet another pastor, Lehmus, printed at Rothenburg a repellent and tasteless *Jesus; in 365 Odes and Songs* (apparently he had forgotten Leap Year!).

Such pseudo-hymnals abounded and it was against all this fantastic frivolity that Richter stood out, an able exponent of what the gospel hymn should be. However recondite and out of the ordinary many of his compositions at first sight appear, a wider acquaintance with them forces us to agree with Koch: "His hymns are laden with meaning, yet always lovable. With every power he

possessed he ever sought the Christian secret of inward and outward peace. He was in verity a man taught of God, an inspiring doctor and a real disciple of Christ, in whose school he had learned the wisdom from on high, and by personal experience had gained a profound knowledge of God's hidden ways and works". How many sufferers must have found comfort in what he used to call his "sick man's hymn" (*Krankheitslied*), which Miss Winkworth has given us in *Lyra Germanica* as "God, whom I as love have known". Two verses will show its trend:

Let my soul beneath her load  
 Faint not through the o'er-wearied flesh ;  
 Let her hourly drink afresh  
 Love and peace from Thee, my God.  
 Let the body's pain and smart  
 Hinder not her flight to Thee,  
 Nor the calm Thou givest me ;  
 Keep Thou up the sinking heart !  
 Suffering is the work now sent.  
 Nothing can I do but lie  
 Suffering as the hours go by ;  
 All my powers to this are bent.  
 Suffering is my gain ; I bow  
 To my heavenly Father's will,  
 And receive it hushed and still ;  
 Suffering is my worship now.

That last line, *Leiden ist mein Gottesdienst*, was a new idea and no doubt contributed to the success of the medicines given to patients in the Halle hospitals ; to see suffering as a part of their *worship* was as likely to restore health as whole boxes of piously fabricated pills.

By common consent Richter's finest hymn is *Es glänzet der Christen inwendiges Leben*, "the Christian's inward life can be seen glowing on his countenance"; though as far as I know it has never yet found a first-rate translator ; this is a pity, for it was Schleiermacher's favourite and Julian regards it as the doctor's greatest. Even its lilting tune cannot destroy the sense we have on reading it that it simply pictures the inner life of its author.

They live upon earth but their life is in heaven ;  
 Their arm may be weak yet they strengthen our race.  
 To the conflicts of men their peace is a leaven ;  
 They are poor but enjoy all the wealth of God's grace.  
 By sorrows oppressed  
 Their minds are at rest ;  
 They are dead to old pleasures of evil and sin,  
 They're alive through their faith in God's cleansing within.

Koch annotates it more fully than many hymns better known,

adding often apt quotations from Luther to justify his comments. This was the hymn condemned as 'heretical' by the Theological Faculty of Wittenberg! But there are theologians today who even refer us back to the second century after Christ, maintaining that that most precious relic, the *Letter to Diognetus*, contains a large number of the sentiments of this hymn and suggesting that Richter with his antiquarian tastes was the very man to have dug them out of such a cache.

With regard to his other hymns we must rest content with mentioning two—both still sung in Germany. In the 1704 Freylinghausen can be seen the first: *Es kostet viel ein Christ zu sein*, "it is very hard to be a Christian", of which Julian says no translation exists; in the 1714 edition of that great hymnal we have Richter's second thoughts on the same theme: *Es ist nicht schwer ein Christ zu sein*, which Mr. Massie has rendered for us in "To be a Christian is not hard".

Hard or easy it will be, as every Christian soon finds out; but it is hard indeed for any true lover of hymn lore to leave a man so modest and high-minded, so honest and ingenious and fascinating as C. F. Richter, "the most profound thinker of Hallensian Pietism". Let the last words about him be his own: *Schenke mir, Herr, auf meine Bitte ein göttliches Gemüte, einen königlichen Geist*—"Grant, Lord, my request that I may have a Christlike temper and kingly spirit."

No one can become Richter's friend without growing aware that his petition was certainly heard and granted.

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