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## CHAPTER ONE

# *Soujourns of a Blind Girl*



Fanny sat next to her grandmother Eunice on the old, wooden rocking chair. It was her place of safety and comfort. She fingered the hem of her grandmother's worn cotton apron and nestled closer to her soft, warm body, listening to the words of Scripture. Her grandmother's voice was kind and firm. No matter how long she would read, Fanny always asked for just a bit more.

"It's a beautiful day, Fanny," said her grandmother, reaching for her cane and straightening her aging knees. "Let's go for a little walk."

Taking the child's hand in her own, she led Fanny off the porch and down the path. Guiding her carefully over the stony ground, she described the blossoms on a nearby apple tree. "It won't be long," she said, "and we will see apples on this tree—shiny red and shaped like a tooth."

"A tooth," said Fanny, laughing. "That's a funny shape!" She loved these nature walks—just the two of them—where she could touch and feel and smell the nature objects with her grandma. She could almost glimpse the golden sunlight, but the rest was just a shadow. Frances Jane Crosby had been blind since she was an infant.

She was born March 24, 1820, in eastern Putnam County of New York. Frances, or “Fanny” as she was called, was the only child of John and Mercy Crosby. Fanny never knew her father as she was only one year old when he died. She was raised among women: her mother and grandmother, as well as extended family. The Crosbys came from Puritan stock—with a solid Christian faith and a strong, serious work ethic.

Fanny did not remember when she became blind. As her mother explained, it happened when she was just six weeks old. Mercy was worried about her infant daughter who had developed a severe cold—the baby’s eyes were inflamed and red. Since the family doctor was out of town, they asked another self-proclaimed medical expert, traveling through the area, for assistance. The stranger applied a hot mustard poultice to little Fanny’s eyes. While the poultice might have helped reduce the swelling, it also burned and left the little girl completely blind. The man left shortly after the incident and was never heard from again.

Throughout her life, Fanny said she never felt a spark of resentment against the man. When Fanny was in her late eighties, she wrote: “I have always believed from my youth to this very moment that the good Lord, in His infinite Mercy, by this means consecrated me to the work that I am permitted to do.”<sup>1</sup>

Although she was blind and the world darkened around her, Fanny describes a childhood filled with sunshine and happiness. She never wanted her blindness to cause others to treat her differently. She was full of energy and mischief—and loved to play with the other children in town.

Fanny said, “One of the earliest resolves that I formed in my young and joyous heart was to leave all care to yesterday and believe that the morrow would bring forth its own peculiar joy, and behold, when the morrow dawns, I generally have found that the human spirit can take on the rosy tints of the reddening east.”<sup>2</sup>

Fanny was taught plain language by the Quakers and Scripture from her grandmother. She was determined to learn as much as she could and refused to be limited by her blindness. “Why should the blind be regarded as objects of pity?” said Fanny.<sup>3</sup>

While Fanny had an optimistic attitude, her mother, Mercy, struggled with the unfairness of her daughter’s infirmity. Why should her little girl have this terrible disability? Why should she live in a world shrouded in darkness? As a mother, she felt pressure to do something, to find a solution, to solve the problem. She talked to doctors, seeking medical advice, and was finally referred to a famous physician in New York City, Dr. Valentine Mott—the best eye specialist in the United States of America. If anyone could cure Fanny’s blindness, it was Dr. Mott. Mercy was excited and determined to meet him.

She and Fanny, then just five years old, traveled to New York by horse drawn carriage and boat. Mercy became ill on the sea voyage and left Fanny in the care of the captain who entertained the little girl by telling “sea yarns.”

Fanny remembers sitting on the deck of the boat and having tea. It was April, and the sun was setting. Although most of the beauty was invisible to her, she could distinguish some faint colors on the right kinds of background. Today, she could see a faint golden hue from the blinding sunset. “I sat there on the deck, amid the glories of departing day, the low murmur of the waves soothed my soul into delightful peace.”<sup>4</sup>

Once they finally reached their destination, the doctor’s visit was disappointing. Dr. Mott, after careful examination, confirmed what Mercy probably suspected was true. With great sadness, the doctor delivered the bad news—Fanny would never recover her eyesight. This was devastating to Mercy who had set great hopes upon the doctor. The return trip was somber. This time it was Mercy who turned to the comfort of her own mother for words of hope from hymns and Scripture.

While others were devastated by a lack of cures for the little girl's condition, Fanny refused to be seen as an object of pity. She wrote this poem at age eight:

“Oh, what a happy soul I am,  
Although I cannot see,  
I am resolved that in this world  
Contented I will be.  
  
How many blessings I enjoy  
That other people don't!  
To weep and sigh because I'm blind  
I cannot and I won't.”<sup>5</sup>

Her childhood was a normal one, or as normal as it could be without the ability to see. Fanny wrote later, “The sunny hours of my childhood flowed onwardly as placidly as the waters of the Hudson.”<sup>6</sup> She would attend the village school from time to time, but the teacher was often too busy with the other children to spend time individually with young Fanny.

The little girl had discovered, much to the amazement of her family and teacher, that she was a bit of a poet. She could weave together bits of verse and begged her mom to read her famous poems. She loved words and music. Twice a week, she took singing lessons from a traveling music teacher who would visit their church. As she sat with the other children on the hard wooden pews of the old Presbyterian meeting house, the room would echo with the joyful strains of Handel and Haydn.

Fanny loved to read stories. She heard about the adventures of Robin Hood and Don Quixote. She was raised on Sunday school stories and easily memorized the Bible. “Many quiet evenings, I would sit alone in the twilight and repeat all the poems and passages of Scripture I knew.”<sup>7</sup>

She was smart and hungry for more. Her grandmother did all she could to satisfy Fanny's growing desire for knowledge, but it was often not

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enough. Fanny said it felt like a great barrier rising before her shutting her out from the information she so desired. In the quiet hours of the evening, when no one had time to entertain her, she would often pray to God, "Dear Lord, please show me how I can learn like other children."

Her blindness, while she did not see it as a limitation, did restrict her abilities to learn the way she desired. She could not attend school each day like the other children. She could not read books on her own. She was always dependent on the kindness and patience of others to satisfy her growing craving for knowledge. Fanny wrote: "I was not content always to live in ignorance, and, in the course of time, in a way of which I had no previous intimation, my wish was to be granted in fullest measure."<sup>8</sup>

One day, in November of 1834, an acquaintance told Mercy Crosby about a new school in New York City—a school specifically intended to educate the blind. Mercy was conflicted by the news. How could she send her daughter so far away? How would she protect her? How could she bear the separation from the little girl she loved so dearly? Yet, she knew that this would be an amazing opportunity for her daughter.

Somewhat reluctantly, she told Fanny about the New York Institution for the Blind. "It was the happiest day of my life," said Fanny. "Not that I craved physical vision—for it was mental enlightenment that I sought. It was my star of promise."<sup>9</sup>

Certainly a few tears were shed while mother and grandmother packed clean clothing and supplies for young Fanny's journey. Finally, the trunk was shut with a resounding click, and all that was left was to bid farewell to their girl.

On March 3, 1835, a stagecoach pulled to the door of the Crosby home. Fanny hugged her mother closely, and trembled a bit as she was pulled into the familiar arms of her grandmother. She almost turned around and went back into the safety of her home. Her mouth felt dry and her stomach rumbled with nervousness.

## ❧ WHEN OTHERS SHUDDERED ❧

Could she leave behind everything she had ever known? Taking the hand of the stagecoach driver, she stepped up and took her seat. She could not see her mother or grandmother waving as the coach pulled away from her childhood home, but she knew exactly what they looked like.

Tears silently fell down the young girl's face—and she fumbled for her handkerchief to wipe them away. She refused to look sad. She knew this was the right decision. It was what she had longed for—it was what she had prayed for year after year. “Please God, be my vision,” Fanny prayed. “Thank You for answering my prayers. Help me to have the courage to follow Your leading.”

The stagecoach, carrying Fanny and other passengers, rumbled toward the bustling, growing metropolis of New York City.