

Onward, Christian Soldiers - The Story Of a great Hymn and its Author.

By the Rev. John T. SALISBURY.

Sixty years ago the late Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould, veteran hymn-writer and brilliant novelist and antiquarian - one of the grand old men of the Church - began his work as curate at Horbury Bridge, where, in due time, "Onward, Christian Soldiers" was written. It was not an inspiring district, for with the exception of occasional cottage meetings no religious provision for the needs of the people had been made.

Baring-Gould took a cottage, and, in the downstairs room, instituted a school for every winter evening. It was attended by men as well as boys and girls, and it afforded all the education some of them were able to get. He himself superintended the school and was there practically every night. Often he would go down visiting in the afternoon and stay for tea with the cottagers, who took it in turns to invite him: Sometimes, indeed; especially in wild weather, he would stay all night, instead of returning to his rooms at the vicarage. He had a bed-chair at the school, and slept there many a winter night.

His aim, however, was not only to educate and civilize the people, but also to Christianize them. He held religious services in the room over the night school.

Says one of our informants: "I was in St. Peter's choir in 1864. It was a good walk from Horbury Bridge for a little chap. One day the Vicar, the Rev. John Sharp said to me, 'There's a Mr. Baring-Gould coming to start a mission at Horbury Bridge: -it's only right that you should help him, although I shall be sorry for you to leave the parish church.' I agreed. We got a little-choir together and soon had the place full of people upstairs, and the steps all crowded, and -the house downstairs and out into 'the street. We had Church service Sunday morning and evening and school in the afternoon. Every Thursday night we had a little service and then a practice.

The old gentleman continues: "When he was preaching once-in the upper room, you could have heard a pin drop: everybody was so quiet; -we all had our mouths open, listening: So anxiously was I catching every word that Baring-Gould looked down at me; he seemed to fix me with his eyes as long as he could, and then, as if he- could not help it, his face beamed with such a smile as, I can never forget. But little did we boys think, in those days, that he would become such a noted man, although we admired and loved him far more, than I can tell you."

"After practice on a Thursday:night he would say, 'Now then I'll tell you a tale,' upon which we -ran about the room fetching the forms and arranging them as near to him as we could get. He used to say, 'Little bear!, where are you 'Come here!' He gave me that name because of the shaggy brown cape I always used to wear, wet or fine, and so I always took my place at his right side, and he put his arm round me and began his story. Sometimes the story would be very exciting. His voice would sink to a whisper, especially if the story was intended to frighten us a bit. We crouched down almost scared to death, and then, all at once, he would give a shout that made us nearly jump out of our skins."

Says our good friend: "A little while ago I sent my photograph to Mr. Baring-Gould, In replying he said, in reference to my rather tall figure and white hair, that he could no longer call me his little brown bear: he would have to call me his big polar bear."

Baring-Gould's work at Horbury Bridge succeeded beyond expectations, and a substantial Mission Chapel was erected. All kinds of people helped-the building fund, one individual donating ten shillings. from a prize-fight! -

An especially valuable helper was Mr. Fred Knowles, organist, Sunday-school superintendent - and quarry-owner. He generously gave and carted all the stone required. Related, by the by, to Mr. Thomas Knowlea, the famous alto soloist at -the Chapel Royal, Mr. Knowles lived in a large house overlooking Calder Valley. Baring-Gould occasionally took his boys from the Mission for games in his beautiful grounds.

For the mill-workers' worship in the Mission Chapel Baring-Gould composed some of his beautiful hymns. It has been stated that his "most perfect" hymn-" On the Resurrection Morning "-was written under these

circumstances. Really, it was written before he came to Horbury, a few months before his mother died of cancer. Apparently- the- hymn was written to comfort himself and his dear ones when entering the shadow of that great bereavement. In the early years of her widowhood, Queen Victoria derived much solace from this hymn. Baring-Gould's sweet little evening hymn, "Now the day is over," has been associated with the Mission Chapel, and we have the best evidence that his most popular hymn was inspired by an emergency in the lives of the Mission scholars.

It is a singular reflection that while the fruit of long researches still lies unpublished in Exeter and York Cathedral Libraries - in the latter; his "Legendary History of Northumbria," and, in the former; his "History of Religion in England " (on which he spent fifteen years) - the stirring Christian hymn, which has made his name famous throughout the English-speaking world, was struck off, for a passing, occasion, within fifteen minutes

It was the custom for the St. Peter's scholars to celebrate their Feast on Whit-Tuesday. The Vicar 'decided that the Bridge Mission scholars should join them. Baring-Gould was asked to conduct them to St. Peter's. It was a steep gradient for over a mile. The little ones would straggle all over the place and tire themselves out. Why not sing a hymn pleasantly to beguile them up the hill? But what was there suitable in the hymnal? Should he abandon the idea? No; he had already written hymns, he would write another !

Through the courtesy of Canon J. B. Hill, we are in possession of Baring-Gould's own account: "The hymn, 'Onward, Christian Soldiers,' -was' written on Whitsun Eve, 1865. I had been resolved that the Brig children should come up, to the parish church on Whitsun Tuesday: Mr: Fred Knowles came to me at the vicarage and asked what they-should sing on the day of the long walk. We discussed one thing and then another. I said, 'I'll write a processional.' -Mr. Knowles replied, 'You must be sharp about 'it, as this is Saturday : there will shortly be no printing done. So ,I sat down and wrote the hymn. It was printed, practised on the Sunday afternoon at school. and it was sung to the tune by Haydn on the Tuesday. One 'of our informants connects the first rehearsal with the vestry of the Mission Chapel: "'Now then, boys,' said Baring-Gould, 'we're going to learn s new hymn that I've written'; and he began singing it himself. Mr. Knowles couldn't sing.; he was a player."

But the Mission Chapel was only opened on St. Catherine's Day (November), 1865 - six months after the hymn was first sung. -What our good friend remembers in the vestry would be the second year's rehearsal, or, possibly, the first rehearsal of some other hymn from the same facile pen.

The- Horbury people,cherish a pretty story which is probably true. As Whitsuntide was approaching,' Mr: Baring-Gould, calling upon one of the poorest families in his flock, found a young girl much disappointed because she could not attend the " Feast."

"And why not ? " he inquired. It transpired that she hadn't a new hat ! " Never mind,'-, said he, " you'll look quite,as nice in your old hat as the other people in their new ones." And she did! One wonders if the curate walked by her side up Quarry Hill. At any rate he often seemed to call at the house, and Grace,for that was her name, taught a class in the Mission Chapel. A charming little creature, if she did work at the mill! Baring-Gould fell in love with her, had her educated, and, in 1868, married her. And splendidly did she uphold the family prestige-at Dalton Vicarage, East Mersea Rectory, and in the Baring-Goulds' ancestral home at Lew Trenchard.

We left the Brig children ascending Quarry Hill, carrying their flags to the admiration of their parents lining the route: -To these were addressed the invitations of the closing stanza.

*"Onward-then, Ye people,
Join our. happy throng,
Blend with ours your voices
In the triumph song."*

One can see them respond, by falling into the ranks. The procession continued over the railway bridge, past Mr. Knowles' quarry and up the hill.

It has been asserted that the Flockton Band led the way The reply is, "In later years, doubtless; but not in 1865. Inaccurate; too, is the claim that the new processional was an instantaneous success. One who was there, a,leading church-worker today, confesses: "A sorry mess; we made of it!"

Striking the Ossett-Wakefield road the children waited, under Charlesworth's wall, for the St.-Peter's children as they approached along Ellaby Lane. (named after "old Billy Ellaby, who used to go round with a bell selling yeast"). The united column then poured along Wakefield Road, (sometimes Climtergate and Northfield Lane), and then up New Row, and in at the gate and up the wide steps under the pleasant trees to the south door of St. Peter's

The Vicar, the Rev. John, afterwards Canon; Sharp is admiringly described by Baring-Gould in his novels, *Through Flood and Flame* and *The Penny-come-quicks*. The latter too speaks of the vicarage as "old-fashioned . . . with the door opening on the church-yard.

Here the children had their "Feast." An old St. Peter's scholar tells us: "I remember the children coming up from the Brig. We were a bit spiteful, pushing them to one side, as they didn't belong to us."

An old Brig Scholar says: "Baring-Gould used to get five or six of us boys in his room at the vicarage on a winter night for practice, and then tell us ghost stories. But first, he would lower the gas! During 'the story we durstn't so much as look round, and when we got out of the door we scurried home like frightened rabbits, and Baring-Gould must have been laughing in his sleeve all the time."

We still picture him where he used to say " Good-bye " to so many - at the Vicarage door just under his bedroom window.

And as we sing his glorious hymns in future days, we shall think of the widely travelled man who was inspired for his outstanding contribution to Christian song by the needs of factory children. In his hymn is the simple directness that one might show who leaned upon an arm of-flesh; but the mystical undertone is there as well : they are " horses and chariots of fire " with which the mountain is full. Despising extravagance in religion and full of mistrust for any loud voicing of religious experience, Baring-Gould grasped and triumphantly expressed the underlying spiritual conditions of our lives. This -ultra-shrewd and-virile nature- "hitched his wagon to the stars."

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