

245

HYMNS ELLEN WHITE LOVED

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by

It was evening at Elmshaven, Ellen White's home in St. Helena.

Strains of a familiar hymn played on the small parlor organ announced the hour of worship. Grandma White descended the broad, winding stairs from her writing room and took her accustomed seat in an easy chair. One by one her helpers came in. At this time the family numbered ten besides herself. The number was made up largely of young women who were helping in the office as typists and stenographers, with the cook and bookkeeper, her lifelong traveling companion and house mother, and a young man who reported her sermons and interviews. This half hour together at the close of the day was usually spent in a leisurely manner. It would begin with the singing of one or two hymns. Then the Bible was handed to Mrs. White. She would read a favorite passage, make a few comments and offer prayer, mingling petition and praise, and ending in a strain of triumphant victory.

On this particular occasion the person in charge of the singing announced rather hurriedly, "I think we will omit the songs tonight, on account of the early social gathering that most of us wish to attend." But when the Bible was handed to Mrs. White, not having heard what was said, she looked up with a smile of surprise and asked, "Do we not have time tonight to worship the Lord in song?" The books were passed and a short hymn selected.

Whenever Grandma was asked to choose the hymns for worship, she would invariably name the cheerful ones:

"There is sunlight on the hilltop,  
 There is sunlight on the sea;  
 And the golden beams are sleeping  
 On the soft and verdant lea;  
 But a richer light is filling  
 All the chambers of my heart;  
 For thou dwellest there, my Saviour;  
 And 'tis sunlight where thou art."

Hymns Ellen White Loved-2

Or it might be:

"Let us gather up the sunbeams  
Lying all around our path;  
Let us keep the wheat and roses,  
Casting out the thorns and chaff;  
Let us find our sweetest comfort  
In the blessings of today,  
With a patient hand removing  
All the briars from the way."

Once after listening quietly as we sang "In the Glad Time of the Harvest," she remarked that there was a strain in that song which reminded her of songs she had heard the angels sing when in heavenly vision.

She enjoyed singing the old Advent hymns. They reminded her of the times when she had seen her husband coming down the church aisle toward the pulpit, and had heard him singing in his rich, melodious voice,

"I'm a pilgrim, and I'm a stranger;  
I can tarry, I can tarry but a night."

Or perhaps:

"I shall see my Lord acoming,  
While a choir of angels shall be chanting through the sky."

Those hymns of the Advent message had electrifying power.

Sometimes in the very early days, as James and Ellen White visited small, struggling companies of Adventist believers, they would find some who were almost overcome with loneliness and discouragement. When there seemed no other way of dispelling the gloom that settled over a meeting, Elder White would say, "Come, Ellen, let's sing for them." The two would stand and sing; and as their sweetly blended voices bore a message of hope and cheer to weary hearts, it seemed as if the channels of heavenly peace were opened afresh.

The early Adventists found the songs of Zion the best antidote for discouragement and depression. They sang while driving with horse

### Hymns Ellen White Loved-3

and buggy to meetings; and they sang, oh how they sang at the meetings! Often their songs were unaccompanied, because the erection of a church building had left the worshipers without sufficient money to purchase an instrument. They sang everywhere and at all times, waking up with, "Lord in the morning thou shalt hear my voice ascending high," and going to sleep with, "Sweet hour of prayer." No wonder that both these hymns were among Grandma's favorites.

They sang together at the worship hour, night and morning. They sang as they went about their daily tasks on the farm, or in the shop or kitchen. There were no radios then to entertain them with exquisite musical programs rendered by trained choirs. They made their own music, and they chose the songs of Zion. These songs grew out of experiences of struggle and triumph, and their singing brought glorious victories in daily living.

Grandma loved the gospel hymn, with their simple melodies and inspiring words. "I Will Follow Thee, my Saviour," "Just as I am Without One Plea," "Is my Name Written There?" "Crowded is your heart with Care; Have You no Room for Jesus?" were among her favorites.

Grandma maintained that singing was as truly a part of worship as prayer or Scripture reading. She welcomed as a fitting part of divine service, sweet, melodious songs, well sung by those whose hearts were touched with the love of God. But it tried her soul to listen to exhibitions of theatrical vocalizing.

Here before me is a letter that she wrote to a Sabbath-school superintendent, regarding a Christmas program given by his school. After expressing her pleasure over the beautiful setting of a lighthouse and ship at sea, she suggested ways by which the exercise

#### Hymns Ellen White Loved-4

might have been improved. She wrote:

"The singing was after the order we would expect it to be in any theatrical performance, but not one word to be distinguished. . . . If the precious hymns had been sung, "Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee," and "Jesus lover of my shoul, let me to Thy bosom fly, while the billows near me roll, while the tempest still is high." Whose souls were inspired with new and fresh zeal for the Master in those songs sung whose virtue was in the different performances of the singer?" (Letter 5, 1888)

From another letter I quote, "When the singing is such that angels can unite with the singers, an impression is made on minds that singing from unsanctified lips cannot make." She made it clear in her writings that the nearer the people of God can approach to correct, harmonious singing, the more God is glorified and the church benefitted."

From one of her printed books we read:

"I have been shown the order, the perfect order, of heaven, and have been enraptured as I listened to the perfect music there. After coming out of vision, the singing here has sounded very harsh and discordant. I have seen companies of angels, who stood in a hollow square, everyone having a harp of gold. . . . There is one angel who always leads, who first touches the harp and strikes the note, then all join in the rich, perfect music of heaven. It cannot be described. It is melody, heavenly, divine, while from every countenance beams the image of Jesus, shining with glory unspeakable."  
(1T 146)

Often I have heard Grandma say, "Children, we must learn to sing the songs of Zion here if we would join the angel choir yonder." Many a favorite hymn by little family and I sang with her as we drove with horse and carriage along the country roads, when she invited us to accompany her on her visits of helpfulness and friendship.

When errands sent us from our house to the Elmshaven home, we would sometimes hear Grandma singing as she moved about in her room putting her writings away and straightening her books and papers.

## Hymns Ellen White Loved-5

Softly we would tiptoe down the long hall, and listen at her door to the strains of "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross, on which the Prince of Glory died," or it might be "We praise Thee, O God, for the Son of Thy Love, for Jesus who died and is now gone above." We thought we could detect a plaintive note as she sang:

"When faint and weary toiling,  
The sweat drops on my brow,  
I long to rest from labor,  
To drop the burden now,--  
There comes a gentle chiding,  
To quell each mourning sigh:  
'Work while the day is shining;  
There's resting by-and-by.'"

And we were sure that we could discern an especially tender pathos when, in singing "The Ninety and Nine," she came to the stanza:

"But none of the ransomed ever knew  
How deep were the waters crossed,  
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through  
Ere He found His sheep that was lost."

During the years when Grandma White did as much preaching as writing, she sometimes found it expedient to deprive herself of the pleasure of singing, that she might reserve her voice for public speaking. Yet it was with difficulty that she refrained from joining in certain songs that breathed assurance of heavenly companionship, such as "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," "I Will Never, Never Leave Thee," "There are Angels Hovering 'Round." Another of the same type that she loved was "I Heard the Voice of Jesus say, Come unto me and rest."

Hymns of praise and adoration to God, or those that extolled the beauty of Christ's character and the glory of His name, were always sweet to her ears. "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty," "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name," "O Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness," were among her favorites; and often she could be

Hymns Ellen White Loved-6

heard singing "The Doxology" softly to herself.

She never wearied of hearing the hymns that were bright with promise of the future life, as "We Speak of the Realm of the Blest, . . . But what must it be to be there!" "When the Mists have Cleared Away," and "The Evergreen Hills."

"We have heard from the bright, the holy land; we have heard, and our hearts are glad," was sometimes rendered as a solo, or by a choir, when the subject of her sermon was "The future life and Our Heavenly home." The words of this song were composed by William Hyde, who was present when Ellen White was given a vision of the New Earth. After hearing her vivid description of the glorious scenes she had witnessed, he sat down and wrote the song. In my grandmother's day it was a general favorite, and was sung oftener in Adventist meetings than it is today.

In the year 1909, while attending her last General Conference session, she spoke one Sabbath morning on the theme of the Crucifixion, dwelling especially on the sad fate of Pilate and the grief of his wife. In the midst of her sermon she paused, while a male quartet visiting the Conference from England, sang "The Dream of Pilate's Wife." The congregation were deeply moved.

When a young girl, Mrs. White had heard her sister sing this quaint story-song and it made a deep impression on her mind, but she had never seen the words or music and could not remember either. When she and her husband began their public labors, they tried to find the song to use in their meetings, but never found it. Then one morning, years afterward, it came to her during the night. On waking, she sat up in bed and sang the entire hymn without hesitation. She repeated it to her husband, who took down the words and music

## Hymns Ellen White Loved-7

from her singing. Her son Edson, and his cousin Franklin Belden were compiling the book Hymns and Tunes at the time, and they included this song in the new hymnal.

Elder J. S. Washburn, who was in attendance at the Conference, has left a memory account of an interview which he had with Mrs. White during the session. As he himself was a composer of <sup>sacred</sup> music, their conversation naturally was on the subject of music. Quoting his words:

"She stated that she found it difficult to sing with people today because their singing was so mechanical. She emphasized the fact that the words were the principal thing, not the music. The music is simply the vehicle, the voice of the words. She said that in her youth, when singing, she followed the thought and the expression of the words entirely. If the words indicated that they should be sung slowly or rapidly, the music then must be sung slowly or rapidly, and that the music must be soft or loud as indicated by the words."

"In all musical literature," comments Elder Washburn, "there has never been written a more exact and simple rule for true expression."

This was the last General Conference that Grandma White ever attended.

Six years later, one Sabbath afternoon, her son William White and his family, and a few of her office helpers, gathered around the bed where she had lain for five months with a broken hip. She was nearing her eighty-eighth birthday, and we knew the end was near. She spoke a few whispered words of farewell and offered prayer. Then we sang together some of her favorite hymns. She listened enraptured until we began singing, "There's a land that is fairer than day." Then she joined in. As we heard her weak, trembling voice pronounce the words, "We shall sing on that beautiful shore the melodious songs of the blest," we knew that in anticipation she was already singing with the angel choir.

Ella M. Robinson, granddaughter to Ellen White

