

'NOTHING EITHER GREAT OR SMALL.'

THESE words are the first line of a hymn which enjoyed an extraordinary popularity between 1860 and 1875. Familiarity brought on criticism and aversion, a new generation sprang up to which such didactic hymns did not appeal, and the once well-known hymn is now found indeed in Mr Sankey's *Sacred Songs and Solos*, but hardly anywhere else. I was recently asked for information regarding the hymn and its author. My notebooks seemed to promise an easy task; but the first attempt to verify the notes was quite fruitless; clue after clue led nowhere, and the facts only came to light after a very long correspondence in many quarters. The search revealed two things; first, that the history of the hymn affords a clear example of the way in which hymn-legends grow; and secondly, that the very severe criticisms which have been passed on the hymn rather miss the mark.

The stories which profess to tell the origin of well-known hymns are often nothing more than well-meant legends, designed to explain and justify the popularity of the hymns. Some are pure and simple fiction; see for example the *Dictionary of Hymnology*, 1907, p. 125 (*Befehl' du deine Wege*; this hymn has recently been found in the 1653 edition of Crüger's *Praxis*, while Gerhardt was not married till 1655), and p. 963 (*Nun danket alle Gott*; which has recently been found in the 1647 edition of Crüger's *Praxis*, while the Peace of Westphalia was not signed till Oct. 24, 1648). A second class consists of those which are founded on fact, and are told in good faith; but, by lapse of time and repetition of the tale, the facts get mixed, incidents which relate to one hymn are transferred to another, fancy plays its part, and the final form of the story is quite legendary.

The legend of 'Nothing either great or small' belongs to this second class. But first of the author of the hymn.

James Proctor was born in November 1826 at Dalkeith, of parents belonging to the United Presbyterian Church. He attended one of the ordinary day schools at Dalkeith, and was then apprenticed to a tailor in Edinburgh. After three years his health began to fail: he returned home and was apprenticed to a carpenter. As he grew up he became interested in the Temperance movement, and in 1849 returned to Edinburgh, as an agent of the British League of Juvenile Abstainers. He connected himself with the congregation of James Robertson, and began to give addresses at Home Mission meetings. In 1851 he

became Home Missionary to the congregation of William Reid of Edinburgh, and did good work there for five years, meantime attending classes at the University of Edinburgh. Finding the course of training required for the ministry of the United Presbyterian Church rather lengthy, he obtained leave to attend the theological lectures of the Scottish Congregational Hall after it was transferred to Edinburgh in 1855; and in June 1857 became Congregational minister at Hawick. For nine months all went well; then came a somewhat severe illness. On returning to work he began a course of lectures on the Acts of the Apostles, and drew from it lessons which were not agreeable to some of his hearers. Soon after he received an invitation to become Congregational minister at Hamilton, and went there in February 1859. In less than three months his health again broke down, rest and change availed little, and an attempt to resume work only brought on his final illness. After much suffering he passed peacefully into rest on Jan. 12, 1860. The funeral sermon preached by William Reid was published in 1860 under the title of *Undying Friendship*; the biographical portion has furnished much of the information in this article. The preacher probably overrated the abilities of his friend, but he spoke of what he knew from close intercourse; and at any rate one gets the impression of a man sincere, earnest, fearless, and devoted to his work as a servant of Jesus Christ.

He is known by a hymn which at one time enjoyed an extraordinary popularity, and which has called down upon itself the most trenchant criticisms. Let us take the criticisms first.

J. A. Froude contributed a paper on 'The Condition and Prospects of Protestantism' to *Fraser's Magazine* for January 1868 (reprinted in his *Short Studies*, ed. 1878, vol. ii p. 146). In this he relates that he had recently been present at an evening Evangelical Prayer meeting 'in one of our Western Counties', as one of an audience made up of all classes.

'When the first address was over, the congregation sung the following singular hymn, one of a collection of which, it appeared from the title-page, that many hundred thousand copies were in circulation:—

Nothing, either great or small

[Here follow the six verses in full.]

And this, we said to ourselves, is Protestantism. To do our duty has become a deadly thing. This is what, after three centuries, the creed of Knox and Luther, of Coligny and Gustavus Adolphus, has come to. The first Reformers were so anxious about what men did, if they could they would have laid the world under a discipline as severe as that of the Roman Censors. Their modern representatives are wiser than their fathers, and know better what their Maker requires of them. To the question "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" the answer of old was not, "Do nothing," but "Keep the Commandments". It

was said by the apostle from whose passionate metaphors Protestant theology is chiefly constructed, that "the Gentiles, who did by nature the things contained in the law" were on the road to the right place. But we have changed all that. We are left face to face with a creed which tells us that God has created us without the power to keep the Commandments—that He does not require us to keep them; yet at the same time that we are infinitely guilty in His eyes for not keeping them, and that we justly deserve to be tortured for ever and ever.'

This is strong enough. But Dr R. F. Horton in his *Teaching of Jesus* (1895, p. 85) is still more severe. He says:—

'Evangelical teaching has followed a course so eccentric that at last it makes the teaching of Jesus seem unorthodox. It has come to such a pass that the Law of the New Covenant has been nowhere so discredited as in the house of His friends. As against His express words, *every one that heareth these words of mine and doeth them*, a Christian lyric has been composed to the effect—

Doing is a deadly thing, doing ends in death.

If we come to ask what explanation they would give who have thus contrived to exactly reverse the word of their Lord, we get the answer, which has already been hinted at, that they are following the doctrine of St Paul.'

Does this criticism of the little hymn really hit the mark? Its style is bald to a degree. But it reveals its own purpose. Its very form suggests the after-meeting and enquirer's bench; it looks like a versification of words spoken by the writer at an after-meeting. Let us turn to the version given in the sermon, and to the foundation of the legend about it.

'It was while connected with this congregation [i.e. about 1850] that an incident occurred which shews the character of the man. Mr Robertson had preached two sermons from the words "My ways are not as your ways" [really Isaiah lv 8], in which he first shewed what were a sinner's ways of attempting to save himself, and then what was God's way. Two days after, he received a MS poem, entitled "The mistake and its rectification". In the first part of the poem the author describes the mistakes of sinners in seeking to make a way of salvation for themselves; and then, in the second part of it, he shews the error of such. As the second part consists of only a few stanzas, I may be excused for here giving it in full.

'Twas thus I plodded on,
And would have plodded still,
If I had not been shewn
The heights of Sinai's hill.
[Eleven stanzas follow.]

Mr Robertson, as you may suppose, was much struck with the composition. . . . He often read it to enquirers, and found that it met

their case. Copies of it were asked by many; and in due time it found its way to the world in connexion with the Stirling tract circulation scheme. All this was unknown to its author. Some four or five years afterwards, Mr Proctor, on entering a book shop, observed it lying on the counter, and taking it up, thought he was familiar with the verses; and, what is singular, at this moment Mr Robertson entered the shop, and finding the tract in his hand, said "By the way, did I never give you a copy of this?" "No," was the reply; "but I gave you a copy." For the first time his minister knew who was its author; and on telling how it had been blessed to many souls, he replied that he "was glad to learn that he had not been altogether useless in the world". Mr Robertson, believing that his poetical talents might be turned to good service in the cause of Christ, requested of him farther contributions of a similar kind. In complying, he supplied a few pieces in which he gives expression to the subsequent experience of the believer. He says:—

"Since I discovered Jesus to be the end of the law for righteousness to every one who believeth, I have more than once met with a poor sinner seeking peace at the foot of Sinai, instead of the Cross, and coming as little speed as I did; and as I have heard him now and again in bitter disappointment and fear, groaning out 'What must I do?', I have said to him 'Do! do! what *can* you do? What do you *need* to do?—

Nothing either great or small, Nothing, sinner, no—
Jesus did it—did it all, Long, long ago.

When He from His lofty throne Stooped to *do* and *die*,
Everything was fully done—Hearken to His cry:

'It is finished!'—yes indeed—Finish'd every jot;
Sinner, this is *all* you need—Tell me, is it not?

Weary, working, plodding one, Why toiling so?
Cease your doing; all was done Long, long ago.

Till to Jesus' work you cling By a simple faith;
Doing is a *deadly* thing—Doing leads to death.

Cast your deadly doing down—Down at Jesus' feet;
Stand in Him, in Him alone, Gloriously complete."

Practically the same account is given in the *Life of James Robertson of Newington* (1887, pp. 149, 150). There it is said that *The Mistake* was sent to Mr Robertson on the Monday, and was frequently used by him, but always in MS.

'It had, however, afterwards been printed, and widely circulated, as one of the series of "Stirling Tracts". The authorship of it was not known for about five years. In a bookseller's shop Mr Robertson met a friend, whom he noticed to be eagerly looking at this "Stirling Tract". Surprised to see it in print, he asked him: "It that new to you? Did I never give you a copy of it?" "It is new to me in *this* form," replied the other. "You never gave me a copy, but I sent you one." This friend—the Rev. James Proctor, who died soon after—was much touched

on hearing how useful his lines had been to many; and agreed, at Mr Robertson's request, to write other verses, suitable for those asking what they "must do to be saved". They were published, along with the former, by "the Book Society", under the title, *Man's Way and God's Way*.¹

The vagueness of this account has led some of those who read it to believe that *The Mistake and its Rectification* was identical with the hymn *Nothing either great or small*. The last stage is reached in a letter (sent by a lady in Edinburgh, under date Dec. 7, 1910) in reply to enquiries:—

'I had often heard the tale of how the hymn "Nothing either great or small" was written by James Proctor. . . . He had been in distress of soul, but, on hearing Mr Robertson preach one Sabbath morning (I forget the text exactly) he, with great joy, entered into the light, and accepted the finished work of Christ. In the afternoon he wrote that hymn and sent it unsigned to Mr Robertson, who was delighted with it, and took it next day to Mr Stevenson the publisher on the Mound to have a number printed on a page slip. In a few days Mr Robertson called back at Mr Stevenson's for the hymn-sheets, and found this student in the shop. On getting the sheets Mr Robertson handed one to Mr Proctor. The latter, glancing at it, said he had seen that before, which surprised Mr Robertson, who said that he had got it in manuscript.'

Thus the incidents which really relate to *The Mistake* are transferred to the hymn, and furnished with a new setting, and the story passes into the region of legend. As a matter of fact *The Mistake and its Rectification* appeared in the end of 1853 at Stirling (advertised as ready

¹ The collection entitled *Man's Way and God's Way* is on sixteen tiny pages, printed for the Scriptural Knowledge Book and Tract Repository of St Heliers, Jersey; without date on title or at end of preface. The unsigned preface (apparently by Mr Robertson, evidently in 1860) states that the author, the Rev. James Proctor, had 'been recently taken away by death'; and gives an account of the origin of the hymns. It says that Mr Proctor 'consented to Mr Robertson's request to furnish a variety of other lines adapted to the circumstances of such as are "asking the way to Zion". Some of those little pieces are here appended.' Besides *The Mistake and its Rectification* and *Nothing either great or small* (with the prefatory note printed in the funeral sermon) there are only:—

1. Come, poor sinner, come away.
2. O yes, I'm sinful, that I know.
3. I've tried in vain a thousand ways.
4. 'Abide in Me,' or peace will leave thee.
5. Dark day when Eden's crown was lost.

Sincerity and spiritual-mindedness breathe through all; the poetical gift is not very evident.

in the *British Messenger* for November 1853; the file copy kindly lent from Stirling is dated January 1854); the first part consisting of twenty-six verses, beginning

With conscious guilt opprest,
Of God and hell afraid—
I smote upon my breast,
Repented, wept and prayed,

and the second part in twelve verses, as printed in the funeral sermon. These thirty-eight verses have not one line in common with *Nothing either great or small*. That hymn was evidently written, at Mr Robertson's request, some five years after *The Mistake*. Mr Stevenson, in reply to enquiries, says that it was not printed by or for him, but was published by the Dublin Tract Repository; and a copy of the Dublin leaflet (undated, but about 1857) is now before me. It is headed *Deadly Doing*, with the subtitle 'What then must I DO to be saved?', and with the text in full of Gal. ii 16; Heb. ix 14; Col. ii 10. The variations from the 1860 version are

Sinner, this is all *your* need.
Weary, working, *burden'd* one,
Why *toil* you so?
Doing *ends* in death.

It was afterwards published as a leaflet in the Stirling series of Tracts, entitled *What must I do?*; but this was not till July 1865.

Let us turn then to the teaching of the hymn. It is clearly founded on the question of the Philippian Jailer, and on St Paul's answer, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved'. The writer also had in his mind Col. ii 10, and probably Romans x 3-9. He was certainly thinking of our Lord's saying 'It is finished'. If he had any other sayings of our Lord in his mind they may have been 'Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest', or 'Ye will not come unto Me that ye might have life', or 'This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent'. The appeal of the hymn is this. 'You feel that you are a sinner in the sight of God. Do not try to work out a righteousness of your own, and refuse to accept the salvation offered you by Jesus Christ; for that is a deadly and dangerous course of action. Submit yourself to Jesus Christ, accept the salvation He offers you, and you will find in Him all you need.'

Whatever Froude may say, this is the teaching of Luther and of the Reformation generally (see Article XX of the Augsburg Confession and No. XIII of the Thirty-Nine Articles); and it was not unrepresented at

the Council of Trent. The underlying idea of the hymn is that which we imply when we sing Toplady's nobler and more dignified words

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy Cross I cling.

And the writer was himself quite innocent of the intention to teach that conversion was the sum and end of the Christian life. He taught in season, it may be out of season, that true conversion must shew its fruits in a good life, and in the keeping of God's commandments. A passage in the funeral sermon plainly shews this :—

'On returning to Hawick in the summer of 1858, he commenced lecturing on the Book of Acts. It had been reported that a revival, previous to his settlement, had resulted in the conversion of wellnigh ninety souls. Of the fruits of this reported revival he had, however, seen little or nothing, so that, when in the course of his expository lectures on the Acts, he came to speak of those "who continued steadfast in the Apostles' doctrine", he adverted to the steadfastness of genuine converts ; and referring to the reputed revival among themselves, asked the question, "If ten were cleansed, where are the nine?" From that day forward all peace was at an end.'

JAMES MEARNS.