

James Milton Black Wanted His Name on God's Roll



When James Milton Black came home, his wife saw at once that he was deeply troubled. Tears filled his eyes as he entered his gate. Now he sat down at his piano and in a few minutes wrote the words and composed a song that is familiar to most American church-goers: "When the Roll Is Called up Yonder."

James Milton Black was born August 19, 1856 in South Hill, New York. He acquired an early musical education in singing and organ playing and knew such famous songsters of his day as Daniel Towner and John Howard. Around 1881 he moved to Williamsport, Pennsylvania where he carried on Christian work through the Methodist Episcopal church. Teaching music during the week, he was a song leader, Sunday school teacher, and youth leader in his spare hours. In addition to all this work he edited hymnals.

He loved young people and tried to win them for Christ. One day, as he passed through an alley, he met a ragged fourteen-year-old girl. She was the daughter of an alcoholic. He invited her to his Sunday school and youth group and she began to attend.

However, one day when he took roll, the girl did not respond. Each child had to say a Scripture verse when his or her name was called. James saw a lesson in her silence. "I spoke of what a sad thing it would be when our names are called from the *Lamb's Book of Life*, if one of us should be absent."

He was not the kind of man to let the matter die with a moral lesson. After Sunday school he went to his pupil's home to find out why she had not showed up for class. He found her dangerously ill and sent for his own doctor--they still made house calls then. The doctor said that she had pneumonia. Since that was before the days of antibiotics, death was highly likely.

James returned home. He tried to find a song to fit the thought of a heavenly roll call but could not locate one. An inner voice seemed to say, "Why don't you write one." And that is what he did:

When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound, and time shall be no more,
And the morning breaks, eternal, bright and fair;
When the saved of earth shall gather over on the other shore,
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.

Refrain

When the roll, is called up yonder;
When the roll, is called up yonder;
When the roll, is called up yonder;
When the roll is called up yonder I'll be there.

"I played the music just as it is found today in the hymn-books, note for note, and I have never dared to change a single word or a note of the song," he said.

A few days later, he had the sad opportunity of explaining in public how he came to write the song when it was sung at the funeral of the girl whose absence at roll call had inspired it.