

Real Life Stories

When Sankey Sang The Shepherd's Song On Christmas Eve

It happened that on Christmas Eve of the year 1875, Ira D. Sankey was travelling by steamboat up the Delaware River. It was a calm, starlit evening and there were many passengers gathered on the deck. Mr. Sankey was asked to sing, and as always, he was perfectly willing to do so. He stood there leaning against one of the great funnels of the boat and his eyes were raised to the starry heavens in quiet prayer. It was his intention to sing a Christmas song, but somehow he was driven to sing the "Shepherd Song."

Saviour, like a shepherd lead us,
Much we need Thy tenderest care;
In Thy pleasant pastures feed us,
For our use Thy folds prepare:
Blessed Jesus, Blessed Jesus,
Thou hast bought us, Thine we are.

We are Thine, do Thou befriend us,
Be the Guardian of our way;
Keep Thy flock, from sin defend us,
Seek us when we go astray:
Blessed Jesus, Blessed Jesus,
Hear, oh hear us when we pray.

Thou hast promised to receive us,
Poor and sinful though we be;
Thou hast mercy to relieve us,
Grace to cleanse and power to free:
Blessed Jesus, Blessed Jesus,
We will early turn to Thee.

Early let us seek Thy favor,
Early let us do Thy will;
Blessed Lord and only Saviour,
With Thy love our bosoms fill:
Blessed Jesus, Blessed Jesus,
Thou hast loved us, love us still.

There was a deep stillness. Words and melody, wending forth from the singer's soul, floated out over the deck and the quiet river. Every heart was touched. After the song was ended a man with a rough, weather-beaten face came up to Mr. Sankey and said, "Did you ever serve in the Union Army?"

"Yes, in the spring of 1860" answered Mr. Sankey.

"Can you remember if you were doing picket duty on a bright moonlit night in 1862?"

"Yes", answered Mr. Sankey, very much surprised.

"So do I," said the stranger, "but I was serving in the Confederate Army. When I saw you standing at your post, I thought to myself, that fellow will never get away from here alive. I raised my musket and took aim. I was standing in the shadow completely concealed, while the full light of the moon was falling on you. At that instant, just as a moment ago, you raised your eyes to heaven and began to sing. Music, especially song, has always had a wonderful power over me, and I took my finger off the trigger. Let him sing his song to the end, I said to myself, I can shoot him afterwards. He's my victim at all events, and my bullet cannot miss him. But the song you sang then was the song you sang just now. I heard the words perfectly; We are Thine, do Thou befriend us, Be the guardian of our way.

These words stirred up many memories in my heart. I began to think of my childhood and my God-fearing mother. She had many, many times sung that song to me. But she died all too soon. Otherwise much in my life would no doubt have been different.

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When you had finished your song, it was impossible for me to take aim at you again. I thought, The Lord who is able to save that man from certain death must surely be great and mighty, and my arm of its own accord dropped limp at my side.

Since that time I have wandered about far and wide; but when I just now saw you standing there praying just as on that other occasion, I recognized you. Then my heart was wounded by your song. Now I wish that you may help me find a cure for my sick soul.”

Deeply moved, Mr. Sankey threw his arms about the man who in the days of the war had been his enemy. And this Christmas night the two went together to the manger in Bethlehem. There the stranger found Him who was their common Saviour and Good Shepherd who seeks for the lost sheep until He finds it, and when He has found it, He lays it on His shoulders, rejoicing.

“He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust. Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler; and from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler. Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day.” (Psalm 91:1-5)