

SPECIAL
ARTICLES

Our Contributors

BOOK
REVIEWS

GEORGE MATHESON'S HYMN.

(By the Rev. James Boyd Hunter.)

Among modern hymns none have obtained such a universal recognition of perfection, both of sentiment and words, as Dr. Matheson's "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go." Scarcely a hymnal issued within the past fifteen years but has given it a place and in general use it is a close second to Newman's "Lead, Kindly Light."

The circumstances of its origin are given in detail in the recently issued "Life of George Matheson" and are worthy of a wider audience than even so interesting a biography is likely to have. It may not be generally known that Dr. Matheson has written a considerable amount of poetry, some of which is garnered in a volume entitled "Sacred Songs," a book that contains many very beautiful lyrics, but none which compare to the hymn known to all lovers of true poetic genius. Indeed, Dr. Matheson himself once declared that he never again had been able to catch the swing of words and meter used in his hymn. His own account of the genesis of the hymn is: My hymn was composed in the manse of Innellau, on the evening of 6th June, 1832. I was at that time alone. It was the day of my sister's marriage, and the rest of the family were staying over night in Glasgow. Something had happened to me, which was known only to myself, and which caused me the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering. It was the quickest bit of work I ever did in my life. I had the impression rather of having it dictated to me by some inward voice than of working it out myself. I am quite sure that the whole work was completed in five minutes, and equally sure that it never received at my hands any retouching or correction. The Hymnal Committee of the Church of Scotland desired the change of one word. I had written originally "I climbed the rainbow in the rain." They objected to the word "climb" and I put "trace."

Much of the popularity of the hymn is undoubtedly due to the tune, "St. Margaret," written by Dr. A. L. Pease, which did for Dr. Matheson's words what Dr. Dyke's "Lux Benigna" did for Cardinal Newman's "Lead, Kindly Light." It is interesting to know that the same rapid and seemingly impromptu method of preserving the tune was followed by Dr. Pease as by the writer of the words. As musical editor of the Hymnal of the Church of Scotland he was in the habit of carrying about with him the words of the hymns. "Sitting on the sands at Arran, he was reading 'O Love that wilt not let me go' when the tune came upon him like a flash, and, taking out his pencil, he dashed it off in a few minutes."

Dr. Matheson from time to time received letters from all parts of the world, telling of the influence of his hymn. Several such are given in the "Life" and they all illustrate the grip the words can take upon a soul. For instance, a young woman was seized with a malignant disease, which made her bed a fiery furnace of pain. When the end came, and when her own voice had gone, the mother saw that she wished to speak—and, bending over her, heard her whisper, "Mother, sing me 'O Love that wilt not let me go';" and the music of this song ushered her into the presence of the Father.

Another letter describes the scene at the World's Sunday-school Convention, held in Jerusalem in 1904. The sessions were held on Gordon's Calvary, in a great tent, seating 1,800. On the Sunday morning of the convention, a great audience assembled to hear Archdeacon Sinclair preach, and the closing hymn was Dr. Matheson's. Fifty-five different sects were represented, and twenty-six different nations, but they all seemed to know the hymn and love it, "and a mighty flood of melody swept through that vast tent, as if all hearts knew only one common brotherhood in Christ. I was so deeply moved that the last verse came round I could only read in a convulsive sob."

One other letter is given, which, though long, is not too long to reproduce in outline. It tells of a service in a continental Presbyterian church, where a few tourists gathered to hear the gospel preached in their mother tongue. The service was tame, and dull, until the closing hymn was announced. It was Matheson's, and as the minister was reading it the lady who had been playing the organ exchanged seats with a man of about fifty years of age. "Suddenly the notes were touched and the little American organ seemed to have been 'born again'! Her followed bar. We all brightened up. There was a master at the keys. We stood and sang: 'O Love that wilt not let me go.' Was the change in me or in my environment? I cannot tell. The lost chord seemed to have been found. If a seraph had come to wake me with a song of Zion, the surprise would not have been greater. The organist seemed in the third heaven. Here and there he made pauses not in the book. He sang and played and carried us on irresistibly."

Each succeeding verse produced an added intensity to the feeling. The organist "was in rhapsody. Down his furrowed face tears made their way. Bending over the keys, he poured out his very soul. Of time and space he seemed ignorant. The emphasis was that of intense feeling, born of care experience, controlled by musical ability—both instrumental and vocal."

At the close of the service, the writer of the letter was among those who went forward to thank the organist. It was then that some one said to him, "We knew your wife," and the information was gathered that he was a distinguished Christian singer of England and Scotland. He had lost his wife, an American, and a singer of rare ability, about two years previously. "As she entered the valley of the shadow of death she had asked him to sing to her, 'O Love that wilt not let me go.' He did so, but had not ventured to sing it again until that memorable morning. Ah, that was a sufficient explanation. Sorrow had wrought the power. I wended my way hotelwards, but my thoughts were on the wings of the music—'blossoming red.' Such music (that lost chord), set to such words, I can never hope to hear again until I stand within the gates of the New Jerusalem."

"Glory to God in the highest," sings the celestial chorus, "and on earth peace, good will towards men." You see how the carol met with its music the two kinds of fear under which men lay trembling. "Peace on earth," where men were sore afraid of men; and good will from heaven that men may no longer be afraid of God.

HOW TO TEACH THE SCRIPTURES

By Ulster Pat.

If I were asked how to "teach the Bible," I should answer, in exactly the same way as you teach history, arithmetic, writing, etc. The instructor who told children about these subjects might be quite entertaining, but his teaching would bring little profit to them or credit to him. Yet that is what the bulk of the present-day "Bible teaching" amounts to. The "Lesson Helps" and "Notes on the Lessons" in use in Canada, and especially those we receive from the United States, contain a lot of myths, legends, conjectures, with some poetry and pictures, so inextricably interwoven with the sacred narrative as to bewilder both teachers and pupils. What wonder that the idea is prevalent that the Bible is not complete—that it does not contain all that is necessary for furnishing completely the man of God? The inevitable result of this error is a second, equally harmful—the impression that the Bible is fitted only for the learned, and that the average man can more profitably read "good books" than the best of books—The Book.

At the time of the Reformation, the two great Protestant Churches of Britain firmly took their stand upon the imperishable rock of Scripture. The Presbyterian Confession of Faith, chapter I, Section VI., avers: "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture or by good, and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture, unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or tradition of men," and this position is fortified by unassailable "proofs," which I shall not take space to quote as every reader of the Dominion Presbyterian ought either to know them "by heart," or to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them for himself—and that forthwith.

And I would have children taught the "Holy Scriptures" as Timothy was taught—by their parents, rather than by the amateur teachers of the Sunday School. Understand me, I am not now criticizing those volunteer teachers who are endeavoring in some measure to compensate the children for the neglect of those to whom God has entrusted them, to be trained for His service. In giving children, God is saying to the favored parents, "Take this child, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages." And it is a glorious wage that comes from obedience to that command! But now-a-days, parents turn over the training of their children to the Church; the Church entrusts it to teachers and gives an hour a week for the task—and even that is largely taken up with routine. Yet we wonder that people are growing up without the most elementary Scripture knowledge. Only the other day, a gentleman who professed to "sit under" a popular preacher in one of our Canadian cities, in discussing a political question, made reference to the marriage of Cana. Another, preliminary to stating his views, said: "You have read the narrative." The first looked surprised, hesitated, and then retorted, "Well, you can't deny that Christ made wine!" The impression left upon the auditors was that he had read the story of that first that he had read the story of that just miracle. I mention this as a warning indication of whether we as a people are drifting.