

The Story of

“How Great Thou Art”

By R. D. K. AND G. P. G.

(The facts and illustrations in this article come primarily from two pamphlets by Stuart K. Hine and are used by his kind permission.)

“USE IT as often as possible because it [is] such a God-honoring song.” This was the suggestion given by Dr. Billy Graham to his song leader and choir director, Cliff Barrows, regarding the hymn, *How Great Thou Art*.

Mr. Barrows acted on the evangelist’s advice and used the song “often” — first, in the Toronto Crusade in 1955, then on the worldwide radio program, *Hour of Decision*, and in the Billy Graham Crusades all over America. In the New York City Crusade of 1957 alone, it was sung ninety-nine times. The popularity of this hymn is due largely to its use by the Billy Graham team. Dr. Graham reflecting on its extensive use by his team said, “The reason I liked *How Great Thou Art* was because it glorified God: it turned a Christian’s eyes toward God rather than upon himself, as so many songs do.”

The hymn, as we know it today, has had a long and circuitous journey from the original poem written in Swedish by Carl Boberg in 1885, to the English version by Stuart K. Hine, first published in 1949.

Carl Boberg, the author, was born in Monstera, Sweden, on August 16, 1859, and was thoroughly converted at the age of nineteen. On the way to Sunday services, he was strongly tempted by his friends to enjoy some games. Choosing rather to attend church, the goodness of

the Lord brought him to repentance. He became conscious that he was “a sinner beyond measure” and for ten days sought forgiveness in prayer night and day. When he overheard a young boy struggling to memorize the promise of John 14:13, “And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son,” he grasped its truth and claimed his salvation.

At the age of twenty-two, after two years of preparation, Carl Boberg began his ministry in his home town. He served the Lord as preacher, writer, poet, and editor for many years. Later, he also repre-

sented the people of his town in the Upper House of the Swedish Parliament from 1911-1924. He died in 1940 after a stroke. Fifteen years later, his poem gained the wide popularity it now enjoys.

Returning from a meeting in a nearby town on a warm summer day in 1885, Carl Boberg and his companions were caught in a sudden thunderstorm. After the storm, the rainbow appeared. Safely home again, Boberg admired the calm beauty of nature after the storm. Inspiration came, and he wrote nine stanzas entitled, “*O store Gud*” (O Great God). Thus the hymn was born. (See page 16.)

The poem appeared in several periodicals and was apparently forgotten. But several years later, Boberg was surprised to hear his poem sung to an old Swedish melody by a congregation in the province of Varmland. In 1890, Carl Boberg became the editor of *Sanningsvittnet* (*The Witness for Truth*) and, in the issue dated April 16, 1891, he published the words with music for the first time. Instrumentation for piano and guitar was arranged by Adolph Edgren (1858-1921). (Edgren, a music teacher and organist in Uppsala and Stockholm, gave concerts all over Sweden before emigrating to America. Here, he lived in New York City and Chicago for a time. Later he was organist for the Augustana Church in Omaha, Nebraska. From there,



Carl Boberg

he moved to Kansas City, Seattle, and finally to Washington, D.C., where he died.) Three years after its original publication, it was included in the Swedish Missionary Alliance hymnbook with the melody substantially the same that we know and love so well today.

Various Swedish immigrants brought the original hymn to the United States where it was sung in the many Swedish-speaking churches throughout this country, but there was at least no "official" translation into English until 1925. Then E. Gustav Johnson, a professor of North Park College, made a translation of verses 1, 2, 7-9, which was subsequently published in the *Covenant Hymnal* of the Evangelical Mission Church under the title of "O Mighty God." It was not Johnson's English version, however, which was to become popular, but one which made its pilgrimage through Germany and Russia.

About sixteen years after its original publication as a hymn (1907), it was translated into German by Manfred von Glehn and then published in *Blankenburger Lieder* under the title *Wie gross bist Du* which, rendered in English, is *How Great Thou Art*. So it is that the title of this now famous song comes from its German translation.

Then it was translated into Russian, probably from the German, by I. S. Prokhanoff — often called the "Martin Luther of modern Russia" — and was published (1912) in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) in the Russian hymnbook *Kimvali* (*Cymbals*), — a col-

lection of spiritual songs translated from various languages. This hymnbook gets its unusual name from Psalm 150:5, "Praise him upon the loud cymbals, praise him upon the high sounding cymbals." An enlarged edition of this songbook was published in Moscow in 1927. It was in this book that Stuart K. Hine, an English missionary in the Ukraine, found it and memorized it in Russian immediately so that he and his wife could sing it as a duet in their services. As they did so, they noticed "the telling effect it had on the unsaved."

Stuart W. K. Hine was born in England, July 25, 1899. His parents were ardent Salvation Army officers who determined to instill in their infant a love for God and His work. To this end, they posted "The Articles of War of the Salvation Army" (so to speak, its creed) at the foot of his bed. It was from this poster that he learned to read. As a child, he accompanied his parents to their meetings at the Army citadel (meeting place) amid showers of rocks and sticks mingled with curses.

Hine himself was not converted, however, until Feb. 22, 1914. The Lord used the singing of a converted opera singer, Annie Ryall, to speak to his heart as she sang a gospel song recounting the deliverance of the Israelites from the serpent bites by means of looking at the uplifted brazen serpent and its typical representation of Christ:

*The only means of healing
When humbled in the dust
Was of the Lord's revealing.
It is not "try," but "trust."*

As a student in school, he immediately took his stand and began to witness for Christ. Later, he was called into service in the British Army in World War I. He did not desire to engage in combatant service but felt he should commit himself to the Lord. As he was marching through the streets to go across the channel, a friend thrust a promise box at him from which he grabbed a little scroll. When he was able to do so, he read it:

The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace. Exodus 14:14. So the Lord did, and though he served in the front lines and was wounded, he never had to engage in combatant duty.

Upon his discharge from the army, he was secularly employed for a time, but all the while he was very actively engaged in Christian service of various kinds. During this period, he was married, and together he and his wife looked forward to full-time service. The Lord laid upon their hearts the need of the Russian people in particular and opened the door for them to go to the Western Ukraine where they ministered until 1932. It was during this time that *How Great Thou Art* came into their hands — in Russian, as already described.

After singing the hymn for many years in the Russian language, Stuart Hine translated the first three verses into English while ministering in the Carpathian mountains. (He had no knowledge of its Swedish origin at this time.) After an awesome thunderstorm which echoed and reechoed in the mountains, Mr.

Hine translated the first stanza and chorus into English:

*O Lord my God! When I in
awesome wonder*

*Consider all the works Thy hand
hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty
thunder.*

*Thy pow'r throughout the uni-
verse displayed:*

CHORUS:

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour
God, to Thee.*

*How great Thou art! How great
Thou art!*

A little later, while on a hike through the woods with Christian young people just over the border in Rumania, inspiration came for the second stanza:

*When through the woods and forest
glades I wander,*

*And hear the birds sing sweetly
in the trees;*

*When I look down from lofty
mountain grandeur,*

*And hear the brook, and feel the
gentle breeze:*

While distributing Gospel portions in the obscure mountain villages of the Russian Carpathian mountains, Stuart Hine found a small group of believers. He learned how a Bible left by a Russian soldier nineteen years before had been the means of converting each of those who made up the congregation. Only one woman could read in the entire village, and as she read aloud the story of the Crucifixion, God's Spirit worked and the little group began. This story inspired Stuart K. Hine's third stanza of translation from the Russian:

*And when I think — that God, His
Son not sparing,*

*Sent Him to die — I scarce can
take it in;*

*That on the Cross, my burden
gladly bearing.*

*He bled and died, to take away
my sin:*

At the outbreak of World War II, Mr. and Mrs. Hine had to return to England where they continued evangelistic work especially among the 165,000 Polish people and other displaced persons. Among these, there was one persistent question, "When are we going home?" This furnished the inspiration for the last verse which was composed in 1948:

*When Christ shall come with shout
of acclamation*

*And take me home — what joy
shall fill my heart!*

*Then shall I bow in humble
adoration,*

*And there proclaim: my God,
how great Thou art!*

Stuart Hine published the complete translation in his Russian gospel magazine, *Grace and Peace*, in Russian and English, in 1949, which was circulated among refugees in fifteen countries, including some in North and South America. Requests for copies were soon received so that thousands of free copies were sent out. Thus the song was sent out all over the world.

When musical "seed" is sown in such a manner over the whole world, it is virtually impossible to say with certainty when it was sung "first," in one country or another. According to Mr. Hine, however, James Caldwell, a missionary from Central Africa, introduced it to the United States when he sang it at a conference at Stony Brook, Long Island, in 1951. Other groups sang it after having secured it from various sources.

But it was left to J. Edwin Orr, famous evangelist of California, to "find" it in India in April, 1954. There he heard a choir of Naga tribesmen from Assam sing it in English. They had arranged the harmony themselves, and a Mennonite missionary had written it down. After hearing it, Orr wrote, "That night I could not sleep for elation of spirit. I intend using this hymn throughout the United States." So he brought it to the United States where Tim Spencer, a converted cowboy singer, of Manna Music, Inc., heard it at a conference where Dr. Orr was a speaker. Recognizing its worth, he negotiated for its publication by his company.

Meanwhile in England during the London Crusade of 1954, Beverly Shea had been handed a leaflet with the song. "At first I did not examine it closely," he recalls, "but I did notice . . . that it had a very strong and worshipful title." Later consideration of it led him to introduce it in the Toronto Crusade in August, 1955. Its popularity was immediate. As a result, Manna Music joined forces with the Billy Graham organization to make the hymn available by the millions free of charge. This, along with its prolific use by the Graham team and the recordings by George Beverly Shea have made *How Great Thou Art* one of the most popular hymns in America, if not the world, today. And it is, without doubt, the greatest universal expression of praise in Christian music—Swedes, Germans, Russians, Englishmen, Indians, Americans, all uniting in declaring, "*How Great Thou Art!*"