

The Story of

## *Ira D. Sankey and*

# *“The Ninety and Nine”*

By ROBERT D. KALIS



Ira D. Sankey  
1840-1908

MR. SANKEY sings with the conviction that souls are receiving Jesus between one note and the next.” So did one discerning observer vividly describe the singing of the man who accompanied the great Nineteenth Century Evangelist, D. L. Moody, of whom it is claimed that he “reduced the population of hell by a million souls.” Sankey’s contribution to Moody’s success cannot be overestimated, for the “tap, tap, tap of melody on the heart” which the singer kept up probably “was at times even more effective” than the preacher’s “ever-iterated question, ‘Are you a Christian?’” The fact is that what three men—George Beverly Shea, Cliff Barrows, and Paul Mickelson—are to Billy Graham, Ira D. Sankey alone was to D.L. Moody — soloist, organist, and choir leader.

It was in 1870 that Sankey and Moody first met at a convention of the Young Men’s Christian

Association in the days when the YMCA was a strong evangelical force in the salvation of souls and the molding of Christian character. That year the annual YMCA convention was to be held in Indianapolis, and Sankey, a newly elected delegate from western Pennsylvania, was on his way to attend. The knowledge that the great evangelist, D.L. Moody, would also be attending added to the thirty-year-old Sankey’s anticipation.

After arriving at his destination, Sankey kept a sharp eye open for Moody, but after two days, he had not even seen him. Since Mr. Moody had served as chairman in the two preceding conventions, it was decided that a change was in order. Consequently, the evangelist was seated obscurely with other delegates. Late Saturday afternoon, however, it was announced that Mr. Moody would lead a prayer meeting at the Baptist Church at six o’clock on Sunday morn-

ing. Sankey, of course, resolved to attend.

He arrived at the church a few minutes late the next morning, and the meeting was already in progress. A fellow delegate from western Pennsylvania made room for Sankey and whispered to him that the singing had been terrible. He suggested that if the fellow who was leading in prayer ever stopped, Sankey should start a hymn.

The prayer did finally end, and without hesitation Sankey sang *There is a Fountain Filled with Blood*. The entire group joined the song enthusiastically, and the spirit of the meeting was raised.

At the close of the meeting, Sankey’s friend suggested that they try to shake the evangelist’s hand. When Sankey had been introduced, Moody startled him by asking, “Where are you from? Are you married? What is your business?” Sankey in-

formed him that he lived at Newcastle, Pennsylvania, that he was married and had two children, and that he was employed by the United States Government.

"You will have to give that up," said Moody abruptly.

Sankey stood there dumbfounded for a moment and then exclaimed, "What for?"

"To come to Chicago and help me in my work," Moody answered.

When Sankey objected that he could not leave his business, Mr. Moody was adamant. "You must!" he insisted, "I have been looking for you for the last eight years." Moody told him of the work in Chicago and of the need for a song leader who would know how to draw the net at the close of a service. "At least," Moody asked, "Will you come and pray with me over the matter?" Sankey consented, more out of politeness than anything else. He left Moody's room a while later, greatly impressed by the evangelist's prayer, but still undecided.

The next day a note was delivered from Mr. Moody requesting Sankey to meet him on a certain street corner at 6:00 P.M. Accordingly, Sankey went to the corner at the appointed time. The events which followed are best told in Sankey's own words:

"In a few minutes Moody came along. Without stopping to speak, he passed into a store nearby and asked permission to use a large store-box. The permission was granted; he rolled the box into the street and, calling me aside, asked me to get up on the box and sing something.

*Am I A Soldier of the Cross?* soon gathered a considerable crowd. After the song, Mr.

Moody climbed up on the box and began to talk. The working men were just going home from the mills and factories, and in a short time a very large crowd had gathered. The people stood spellbound as the words fell from Moody's lips with wonderful force and rapidity. When he had spoken for some twenty-five minutes, he announced that the meeting would be continued at the Opera house and invited the people to accompany us there. He asked me to lead the way and with my friends sing some familiar hymn. This we did, singing as we marched down the street, *Shall we Gather At The River*. The men with the dinner pails followed closely on our heels, instead of going home, so completely were they carried away by the sermon from the store-box.

"The Opera house was packed to the doors, and Moody first saw that all the workingmen were seated before he ascended to the platform to speak. His second address was as captivating as the one delivered on the street corner, and it was not until the delegates had arrived for the evening session of the convention that Mr. Moody closed the meeting, saying, 'Now we must close, as the brethren of the convention wish to come in to discuss the question, *How to Reach the Masses*. Here was a man who could successfully reach the masses while others were talking about it.'"

Despite these remarkable experiences, Sankey returned home to Newcastle, Pennsylvania, unconvinced that he should join Moody in the work in Chicago. After all, he was serving the Lord at home. As an officer of the local YMCA and as a Sunday school superintendent, plus his occasional singing engage-

ments, he was quite active for the Lord. But Moody gave him no rest. He kept after him until, after six months, early in 1871, Sankey consented to join him for one week in Chicago. The week was extended to encompass the rest of Mr. Moody's life: almost thirty years!

From the start, the two fit together like a hand and glove. Sankey had definite ideas regarding congregational singing, and he put them into practice immediately with Moody's wholehearted support. A large and powerful pipe organ might do well in its place, but what Sankey wanted was a simple soft-reed organ that would not drown out the people, but support them and keep them on pitch. "It is the human voice we want instead of the playing, for there is nothing to equal the human voice in the world," Sankey contended.

The songs Sankey used were not the old traditional hymns, though occasionally these were used with great effectiveness, but the new *gospel hymns*, characterized by their greater emotional freedom and by their popularity. The hymns of Philip P. Bliss were particularly successful.

Most effective of all were the solos rendered at the close of Moody's sermons. Mr. Sankey believed the words to be all-important, and the tune should wing the words to the hearts of the people.

Sankey's success lay, not in the technique or perfection of his music, but in its simplicity and sincerity. An observer wrote of Mr. Sankey's singing, "A very erroneous opinion seems to exist among some people that this gentleman is an accomplished singer. Nothing can

be further from the truth. Mr. Sankey has no pretensions of the kind, and we question if he could vocalize properly the simplest exercise in the instruction book. He possibly never had a singing lesson in his life. His voice is a powerful baritone of small compass. He touches E flat with considerable difficulty, and even E strains his voice. He sings from the chest register, and his intonation is far from perfect."

The same critic points out, however, that many more polished performers might learn from Sankey, for the force of his performance lay in the fact that he profoundly felt what he sang and conveyed that feeling to his listeners. Behind all this lay the real secret: "*He prepared himself with prayer, and his sensitive and nervous temperament responded to the spirit of the hymn and the stimulus of the surroundings often to the point of tears.*"

Not only was Sankey an organist and singer, but he also

composed the tunes for a number of songs. Among the better known of these tunes are those for the hymns: *Hiding in Thee*, *Faith is the Victory*, *Trusting Jesus*, and *The Ninety and Nine*. These, along with many others of the new gospel hymns and songs, were included in his *Sacred Songs and Solos* which, after its first appearance in 1873 as a twenty-four page pamphlet, grew to a volume of twelve hundred numbers in its final form (1903) and sold over eighty million copies! This hymn

book has been especially popular in England and Canada, while its American counterpart, *Gospel Hymns Nos. 1-6*, edited in collaboration with McGranahan and Stebbins, has been equally popular and influential in the field of gospel music.

Significant of Sankey's sincerity and devotion is the fact that he made no personal financial gain from his song books, the proceeds from which could have easily made him a rich man. Instead he gave up all copyrights on the tunes he composed and freely granted permission for any of his works to be republished! With some of the profits the old Moody Church in Chicago, a church in Sankey's Newcastle, and a YMCA building in that city were erected.

In 1874, three years after joining forces, Moody and Sankey held meetings in the British Isles. After a long campaign in Glasgow they were on their way to Edinburgh by rail to hold another campaign. Sankey purchased a local weekly newspaper for a penny to see if he could find any news from America. He went through the paper once, but found nothing of interest except a sermon by Henry Ward Beecher. He threw the paper aside and took a short rest.

Before arriving in Edinburgh, he took up the paper once more to scan the advertisements. In a corner of the paper, Mr. Sankey discovered a poem. He read it over carefully and decided it would make an excellent hymn for evangelistic work if it had a tune. So impressed was Sankey with it that he told Mr. Moody of it. Moody asked that he read it aloud. Sankey read it with great enthusiasm only to find that Mr. Moody had gone back to the letter he was reading and

hadn't heard a word. Notwithstanding his disappointment, Sankey tore out the poem and inserted it in his music scrap-book.

At the midday meeting on the second day of the Edinburgh campaign, Mr. Moody spoke on the subject of the Good Shepherd. When Moody had finished, he called upon Dr. Horatius Bonar, who was in attendance, to say a few words. Dr. Bonar thrilled the large audience with a short, eloquent talk on the same subject. As he finished, Mr. Moody turned to Sankey and asked, "Do you have a solo appropriate for this subject with which to close the meeting?" Sankey was in a quandary. They had already sung the twenty-third Psalm twice in the meeting.

"At that moment," Sankey recorded, "I seemed to hear a voice saying, 'Sing the hymn you found on the train.' But I thought this impossible as no music had ever been written for that hymn. Again the impression came strong upon me that I must sing the beautiful and appropriate words I had found the day before, and placing the little newspaper slip on the organ in front of me, I lifted my heart in prayer, asking God to help me to sing that the people might hear and understand. Laying my hands on the organ I struck the key of A flat and began to sing.

"Note by note, the tune was given to me clear through to the end of the tune. After the first verse, I was very glad I had got through, but overwhelmed with fear that the tune for the next verse would be greatly different from the first. But again looking up to the Lord for help in this most trying moment, He gave me again



Sankey Playing and Singing at His Organ

D. L. Moody is seen seated the second from the right.

the same tune for all the remaining verses, note for note."

As the song ended, Sankey realized that it had reached the hearts of his audience. Hundreds were weeping. Sankey's cheeks were wet with tears. Moody left the pulpit and coming and bending over the little organ to look at the scrap of paper from which the hymn had been sung, with tears in his eyes he asked, "Sankey, where did you get that hymn? I never heard the like of it in my life!"

Sankey answered, "That is the hymn which I read to you on the train yesterday, which you did not hear."

From a lady in the meeting, Sankey learned that the poem had been written by her sister, Elizabeth C. Clephane, who had been born right in that city in 1830 and who had gone to be with the Lord five years before the Edinburgh campaign. Later Sankey found another poem by Miss Clephane for which he also wrote the music, the beautiful hymn of consecration, *Beneath the Cross of Jesus*. February 19 marks the one hun-

dredth anniversary of the death of the author of these poems which were quickened into immortal hymns by the divine inspiration given to Sankey.

Especially has this inspiration been felt of "There were Ninety and Nine" since the first time it was sung. Its effects have never been better described than by a woman who heard it sung that memorable first time:

"When you hear *The Ninety and Nine* sung, you know of a truth that down in this corner, up in that gallery, behind that pillar which hides the singer's face from the listener, the hand of Jesus has been finding this and that and yonder lost one to place them in His fold."

So Mr. Moody and Sankey worked together for the Good Shepherd for almost thirty years until Mr. Moody heard the Shepherd's voice and followed Him up into His heavenly fold at the turn of the century.