

The Story of

“What a Friend We Have In Jesus”

By ROBERT D. KALIS

“THE LORD and I did it between us.” This was the way Joseph Scriven described the birth of the hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” when asked, just before his death, if it was really true that he was its author.

Eleven years before this, in 1875, Ira D. Sankey, Moody’s famous gospel singer, came across this hymn in a pamphlet of Sunday school hymns. He sang it through and immediately determined to have it in *Gospel Hymns No. 1*, the first of the great evangelistic hymnals which he had compiled in collaboration with P.P. Bliss, even though the completed manuscript was already in the hands of the publisher! Since the composer of the hymn’s tune, Charles Converse, was his good friend, he felt free to substitute this hymn and tune for one of the other compositions of the musician. By this means “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” passed into general circulation.

Charles Crozat Converse, who was born at Warren, Massachusetts, October 7, 1832, was a descendant of Edward Converse, founder of Woburn, Massachusetts, and friend of Governor Winthrop of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. From 1855-1859 he studied music in Berlin and Leipzig under Hauptmann, Plaidy and Richter and became acquainted with the great Franz Liszt and Louis Spohr. Returning to the United States Mr. Converse earned a law degree at Albany College and pursued the legal profession in Erie, Pennsylvania, where he settled. There he headed an organ manufacturing firm and served as a judge for a short time. Under the pen name of *Karl Reden* he wrote a number of serious musical works, including a cantata based on Psalm 126, two oratorios, and two symphonies. After his death at Highwood, New Jersey, on October 18, 1918, his unpublished *Christmas Overture* was presented in New York City by the famous conductor, Walter Damrosch. Although most of his music is very little known, Charles Converse will always be remembered as the composer of the simple and beautiful tune for “What a friend Friend We Have in Jesus.”

In the pamphlet where Sankey found this hymn, the words were attributed to Horatius Bonar, famous Scotch minister and author of “I heard the Voice of Jesus Say” and many other beautiful hymns. Consequently, Sankey listed him as the author, but

Bonar himself later informed him that he was not the author. Not until some years later was the true author discovered — Joseph Scriven.

Born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1820, Scriven was educated in Trinity College in his home city. In due time he became engaged to a beautiful lady. On the very eve of their wedding his intended bride was accidentally drowned. Shortly thereafter, at the age of twenty-five, Joseph migrated to Canada where he settled in the vicinity of Port Hope, Ontario. Although he was a man of means and refinement, “he chose humble duties.” Those who knew him best later testified that he attempted to obey strictly every precept of the *Sermon on the Mount*. He earned the reputation of giving to him that asked and not turning away from him that would borrow

One day a fine gentleman from the vicinity of Port Hope, after seeing Scriven in working clothes and carrying a saw and a saw-buck, thought to secure his services to cut his wood. The companion of the gentleman informed him, however, that he could not get that man. “He won’t cut wood for you.”

“Why not?” asked the gentleman.

“Because you are able to pay for it. He only saws wood for poor widows and sick people.”

During Mr. Scriven’s last illness, a kind neighbor, going through his belongings at his request, discovered a manuscript copy of “*What a Friend We Have in Jesus*.” The neighbor was delighted with the poem and inquired about its origin. The author then told for the first time that he had written it to comfort his mother in Ireland at a time of great sorrow and had sent it to her. He did not intend anyone else to ever see it. Apparently his mother had given a copy to someone, for it found its way into the Sunday school pamphlet and so into *Gospel Hymns*.

As no one around Port Hope imagined that Scriven had any poetic ability, and as the hymn had for many years been credited to the great Scotch divine, Bonar, it is not surprising that another neighbor, upon hearing that he had said he had written it asked himself if he had really composed the work and received the original answer: “The Lord and I did it between us.” Sankey later corrected his unwitting error and told the story in his autobiography, *My Life and the Story of the Gospel Hymns*.

Joseph Scriven had indeed found a true friend in Jesus. Although he never realized his hopes of having a wife to share his joys and sorrows, he did find in Jesus a “refuge,” a “solace,” and “a Friend so faithful.” And he went to live eternally with his Friend on October 6, 1886.

A monument was erected near Rice Lake, Ontario, to perpetuate the memory of the humble Irishman who wrote the greatly beloved hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” “Thus the last hymn that went into the book,” Ira Stankey later testified, “became one of the first in favor.” It was the favorite hymn Dwight D. Eisenhower, and has been “first in favor” with multitudes of Christians everywhere since its publication.