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# Maltbie Davenport Babcock, D. D.

BORN AUGUST 3, 1858

DIED MAY 18, 1901

Maltbie Davenport Babcock was born at Syracuse, New York. In 1875 he entered the University of Syracuse, graduating four years later, whereupon he entered Auburn Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1882. He was ordained to the Presbyterian ministry July 13, 1882 and entered upon his first pastorate in Lockport, New York, that year. He was united in marriage to Katharine Tallman, October 4, 1882. In 1887 a call came from the Brown Memorial Church of Baltimore, and his pastorate there ended when he accepted a call to The Brick Church of New York in 1899.

During the Baltimore pastorate nearly all of his poems were written. Here also his musical compositions took form. During the stay in Baltimore he was a great influence upon the students of Johns Hopkins University and a special room was set aside for his use in order that he might receive students for personal talks. His sermons at The Hill School, Princeton University, Yale University, and Harvard University brought him in touch with thousands of students.

Not long after the distinguished poet Henry van Dyke resigned the pastorate of The Brick Church, the name of Maltbie Davenport Babcock was presented to the congregation and a call extended. The entire city of Baltimore was stirred with a desire to retain him in their midst. Prominent citizens of every profession and every creed urged him to remain there.

Dr. Shepherd Knapp, historian of The Brick Church, referred to his brief pastorate there as "A Golden Year." Not only did he attract vast crowds through his dynamic preaching, but he managed to call upon every family of his parish in that first year.

In February of 1901 he left, in company with friends, for a trip to Egypt and the Holy Land. Before departure he promised to send letters to the Men's Association of the Church, and those have been preserved in a volumn *Letters from Egypt and Palestine*. Six months after his death *Thoughts for Every Day Living* was published, embodying extracts from prayers and sermons as well as his poetry. Novello & Ewer published his *Hymns and Carols*; and *Fragments that Remain*, sermons reported and arranged by Jessie B. Goetschins, appeared in 1907.

Dr. Babcock was stricken with a fever en route home from the Holy Land and died in the International Hospital at Naples. He was buried in Syracuse, New York. Mrs. Babcock passed away in 1943. A sister, Mary Babcock Scholes, is the last remaining member of the family, and resides in Syracuse.

# The Hymn

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# Maltbie Davenport Babcock, D. D.

## A Centenary Appreciation

GEORGE LITCH KNIGHT

UPON THE OCCASION of the Centenary of the birth of Maltbie Davenport Babcock there are yet living a goodly number of persons who remember him and recall with gratitude his gracious and brilliant personality as well as his almost legendary achievements in the one year of his ministry in New York City's historic Brick Presbyterian Church.

Henry van Dyke's words, lettered in bronze in Siena marble on a memorial tablet placed in the southwest entrance hallway of the Park Avenue edifice, are an eloquent tribute to his memory:

Not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing instant in prayer, he preached the Word with gladness, comforted the sorrowful with tender mercy and brought a blessing in the name of Christ to the hearts of his people, who remember him ever with grateful love.

Though Dr. Babcock served but a year as a minister of the Church, so great was his influence upon those who were touched by his personality, that upon the occasion of his sudden death at the height of his career, the following Minute was adopted by the Brick Church Session in June, 1901:

He came to us—A MAN! Great-heart in every sense! . . . His soul, too, was attuned to music, his life itself a hymn of praise.

From Dr. Babcock we have gained a clearer vision of what must have been the personal influence of the Man Christ Jesus when He walked the paths of that Holy Land from which our pastor was called to walk with Him in the streets of the New Jerusalem and beside the still waters of the Rivers of God.

Dr. Charles E. Robinson, in his memorial sketch of Maltbie D. Babcock, tells of the concern voiced by a member of The Brick Church upon the new minister's first Sunday: "I shall never be quite satisfied unless our new pastor shows that fine cultured discrimination and worshipful feeling which were so apparent in Dr. van Dyke's selection of his hymns." At the close of that eventful service came this comment: "I am content, it was perfect." This was not strange, for the new minister was himself the composer of several hymn tunes which had found their way into contemporary hymnals, as well as other tunes which were published posthumously.

In the files of The Brick Church is a newspaper clipping, yellowed by age, which tells of the vast numbers who flocked into the old Brick Church then located on Fifth Avenue at 37th Street (Murray Hill), to hear Maltbie D. Babcock preach. In those days nearly every pew in the Church was owned, and only when ten minutes of the service had gone by could visitors and non-pewholders be seated. The popularity of the preacher was so great that on some Sundays upwards of 400 persons stood in the vestibule of the Church waiting—not always patiently—for an opportunity to enter. On the last Sunday Dr. Babcock preached, February 24, 1901, before his departure on the journey to the Holy Land which was to end in his death, there were such vast numbers of persons crowding the doors that the regular pewholders could scarcely enter. The New York newspaper reporter, commenting on the scene, said that the harassed ushers would no doubt be pleased when the minister was safely on his way to Egypt.

Maltbie D. Babcock was not consciously a hymn writer. Like Whittier, he was a hymn writer by accident. Just as Whittier's hymn "Dear Lord and Father of mankind" is part of a longer poem—not written originally as a hymn at all—so is Dr. Babcock's "This is my Father's world" part of a sixteen-stanza poem which was published in its entirety six months after his death, appearing in *Thoughts for Every Day Living*, compiled by Mrs. Babcock and Miss Mary R. Sanford. The poem, entitled "My Father's World," reflected the author's great love of the out-of-doors.

This is my Father's world.  
 On the day of its wondrous birth  
 The stars of light in phalanx bright  
 Sang out in Heavenly mirth.

This is my Father's world.  
 E'en yet to my listening ears  
 All nature sings, and around me rings  
 The music of the spheres.

This is my Father's world.  
 I rest me in the thought  
 Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas,  
 His hand the wonders wrought.

This is my Father's world.  
 The birds their carols raise,  
 The morning light, the lily white,  
 Declare their Maker's praise.

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This is my Father's world.  
He shines in all that's fair.  
In the rustling grass I hear Him pass,  
He speaks to me everywhere.

This is my Father's world.  
From His eternal throne,  
He watch doth keep when I'm asleep,  
And I am not alone.

This is my Father's world.  
Dreaming, I see His face.  
I ope my eyes, and in glad surprise  
Cry, "The Lord is in this place."

This is my Father's world.  
I walk a desert lone.  
In a bush ablaze to my wondering gaze  
God makes His glory known.

This is my Father's world.  
Among the mountains drear,  
'Mid rending rock and earthquake shock,  
The still, small voice I hear.

This is my Father's world.  
From the shining courts above,  
The beloved One, His only Son,  
Came—a pledge of deathless love.

This is my Father's world.  
Now closer to Heaven bound,  
For dear to God is the earth Christ trod,  
No place but is holy ground.

This is my Father's world.  
His love hath filled my breast,  
I am reconciled, I am His child,  
My soul has found His rest.

This is my Father's world.  
A wanderer I may roam,  
Whate'er my lot, it matters not,  
My heart is still at home.

This is my Father's world.  
O let me ne'er forget  
That tho' the wrong seems oft so strong,  
God is the ruler yet.

## THE HYMN

This is my Father's world.  
 The battle is not done.  
 Jesus who died shall be satisfied,  
 And earth and Heaven be one.

This is my Father's world.  
 Should my heart be ever sad?  
 The Lord is King—let the Heavens ring  
 God reigns—let the earth be glad.

Dr. Babcock was once asked why he did not publish a collection of sermons and poems. His reply appeared in the following pithy statement in the "New York Times Saturday Review:"

I have no hankering to go down to posterity in half calf. . . .

It was no secret, however, that Maltbie D. Babcock was the possessor of a poetic gift. Over a period of some dozen years as minister of Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, nearly everything he wrote appeared in the *Sunday School Times*, in *Forward*, *Youth's Companion*, *Brown Memorial Monthly*, or *The Christian Endeavor World*. One of his most effective poems is the Table Grace which is sung at a number of schools:

Back of the loaf is the snowy flour,  
 And back of the flour the mill;  
 And back of the mill is the wheat, and the shower,  
 And the sun, and the Father's will.

Under the title "Companionship" the following verses were printed in the posthumous volume which contained his poems:

No distant Lord have I,  
 Loving afar to be;  
 Made flesh for me, He cannot rest  
 Until He rests in me.

Brother in joy and pain,  
 Bone of my bone was He,  
 Now,—intimacy closer still,  
 He dwells Himself in me.

I need not journey far  
 This dearest friend to see,  
 Companionship is always mine,  
 He makes His home with me.

I envy not the twelve,  
 Nearer to me is He;

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The life He once lived here on earth  
He lives again in me.

Ascended now to God,  
My witness there to be,  
His witness here am I, because  
His spirit dwells in me.

O Glorious Son of God,  
Incarnate Deity,  
I shall forever be with Thee  
Because Thou art with me.

Something of Maltbie D. Babcock's religious faith glows in the brief poem with the short title "Thine."

Whose eye foresaw this way?  
Not mine.

Whose hand marked out this day?  
Not mine.

A clearer eye than mine,  
'Twas Thine.  
A wiser hand than mine,  
'Twas Thine.

Then let my hand be still  
In Thine,  
And let me find my will  
In Thine!

Though nearly sixty years have elapsed since the event, one is still conscious of the crushing blow and heartfelt shock which the sudden death of this great man was to those close to him and to the public which knew much of his life and work. When word of his death was reported to the Presbyterian General Assembly, meeting in Philadelphia, the Reverend Edwin C. Ray spoke thus of him:

. . . that honored and beloved brother, who was a David for sweet song; a Paul for fiery zeal; an Apollo for eloquence; a Jonathan for friendship; and a John for Heavenly Spirit—whose sainted spirit went home the other day from Naples. . . .

Daniel Hoffman Martin, D.D., writing in *The Christian Intelligencer*, for May 29, 1901, said of Dr. Babcock:

He had a combination of rare qualities not frequently given to one man—well-born, athletic, a fine musician, a clever poet, the instincts of an artist, a clear thinker, a powerful and persuasive orator. Added



to all this was a certain indefinable personal magnetism which gave him power over an individual in conversation or over an audience in preaching. Men were charmed with him, women were entranced with him and children loved him. He was a pure soul consecrated to Christ. . . .

Later, in the same article, Dr. Martin summarized the qualities which were responsible for the greatness that was Maltbie Davenport Babcock:

He had gotten beyond the place where he was in bondage either to vanity or ambition for the applause of men. . . . As surely as Paul was called to Mars Hill, Maltbie D. Babcock was called to Murray Hill.

An article in the *Presbyterian Journal*, quoted in the June, 1901, issue of the *Brown Memorial Monthly*, contains this estimate of him:

He was one of those few men whose worth transcends estimate. . . . He was a man of many sides—attractive in physique, pleasant in manner, with a soul that reflected God. . . . Dr. Babcock was a clear thinker, a fluent speaker, and one who knew the proper relations of things. And yet he was more than all these. God shone through him. Goodness with him was not a thing apart—it was himself.

*The New York Evangelist* carried a full account of the Memorial Service held at the Music Hall in Baltimore at which some 4,000 persons crowded the available seats with hundreds standing outside. Said the editorial:

The people who filled the streets and crowded Music Hall came not because a man was gone whom they had known as the most influential minister in the pulpit of this great city, but because they wished to pour out of their hearts a tribute to the best and most generally loved man they ever knew.

The Reverend Oliver S. Huckel, a close friend to Maltbie D. Babcock, and a fellow minister in Baltimore, was invited to speak at the Memorial Service concerning his friend's musical and poetic accomplishments. Mr. Huckel made several favorable comments regarding the hymn tunes which Dr. Babcock had composed. He spoke of his poetry:

The poems that he published are gems, full of quickening life and beauty. There is a touch of Emerson and a touch of Browning in his verse, even more than there was of his favorite Wordsworth.

At that same service two of Dr. Babcock's sacred solos were sung by

B. Merrill Hopkinson, M.D., who had been a personal friend and for whom they had been written, one in 1894, and the other in 1898. It was for this same distinguished singer that Isaac Watts' text "Salvation" was set to music by Dr. Babcock. Mary Babcock Scholes, the only surviving member of the Babcock family, told this writer that her memories of her brother always seemed to involve music; whenever he came home to visit, much of the time in the family circle was spent in making music. Twice in his *Letters from Egypt and Palestine* Dr. Babcock made special mention of singing, though his natural modesty prevented him from stating that it was he himself who was always the leader of such endeavors.

*Maltbie Davenport Babcock*, by Charles E. Robinson, D.D., is a biographical sketch and memorial. William P. Shriver, a close associate of Dr. Babcock in Baltimore days, published reminiscences in 1941, *Recollections: Baltimore, 1887-1900*. In 1908 John Timothy Stone, successor to Dr. Babcock at Brown Memorial Church, published *Footsteps in a Parish*, an appreciation of Dr. Babcock as a pastor.

Harris Elwood Starr, author of the biographical sketch of Dr. Babcock which appears in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, 1928, says that he "wrote some excellent poetry." He went on to say:

Maltbie Davenport Babcock was not a theologian, or even a deep thinker. . . . His main interest was in life and the needs and possibilities of men and women and in an extraordinary degree he was able to inspire his hearers with hope, courage, and the will to overcome. In this power, and as much, perhaps, in his own personal goodness, lay the secret of his success.

It was this great success which was a significant factor in the immediate response by the public to *Thoughts for Every Day Living* and which insured a widespread enthusiasm for the hymns which were subsequently constructed from the poems printed in it.

You cannot read or sing the lines of "This is my Father's world" without sensing the strong current of optimistic courage which calls one to Christian discipleship. It is not a shallow optimism; it is a vigorous, realistic appraisal of the world with the affirmation:

That tho' the wrong seems oft so strong,  
God is the ruler yet.

There is no flabbiness or self-pity in these stanzas. Rather, one is called upon to give heart, mind, and soul to continue the Christian warfare, that:

Jesus who died shall be satisfied,  
And earth and Heaven be one.

No small amount of the success of this hymn may be attributed to its tune, *TERRA PATRIS*, composed by Franklin Sheppard, a friend of Dr. Babcock's. For a time it was believed that this was an arrangement of an English folk tune, but the composer has clearly stated that it is an original tune. (In its earliest form, free from the hymn tune-tampering of a later generation, the tune has a lyric quality.)

The poem commencing "Be strong!" has entered a number of hymnals during the past forty years, in spite of the fact that its appropriateness as a religious poem makes it more satisfactory as a solo or anthem than as a congregational hymn. Its unusual meter is not conducive to its use as a hymn. It, as well as others of Dr. Babcock's poems, have been set to music by some of America's great composers of church music.

Would it be fair to say that Maltbie Davenport Babcock will probably be remembered longest as a "one hymn writer?" This may well be true. However, this is in no sense a deprecation of the man, his memory, or the brilliant achievements of his ministerial career. Largely as a result of his being the author of "This is my Father's world" the name of Maltbie D. Babcock seems destined long to be remembered. Within our generation there appears to be a re-awakening of interest in his poetry and the fragmentary prose which remains to us. Time has a way of winnowing the grain from the chaff, and coming generations will undoubtedly find many good quotations from this great man, and will be grateful as well for the hymn which he unwittingly wrote.

#### A PRAYER

**O**UR Father, Thou art better to the worst of us than the best of us deserve. Help us to realize how good a thing it is to bear pain and weariness for Thee. May our faith get into our hands and feet, into our tongues and tempers, so that the world may see how warm is our solicitude for Thy good name. May we be stern, stringent, remorseless, toward our own sins and wrong-doings. May we set our faces steadfastly to go to our Jerusalem. We thank Thee for all past mercies and present blessings and future hopes. By Thy constant forgiveness we hope to live lives needing less forgiveness—lives that shall ring with victory. May we give ourselves to Thee in a consecration so complete that we shall be fitted for the rest of our lives here and for the never-ending eons of our true life there. Through Christ our Lord.  
*Amen.*

*From Thoughts for Everyday Living*