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REV. PROF. JAMES I. GOOD, D.D., LL.D.

BY PROF. WILLIAM J. HINKE, PH.D., D.D.

Through the death of Dr. James I. Good on January 22, 1924, at Philadelphia, the Reformed Churches of America and Europe have lost one of their most representative men. In all that pertained to the welfare and growth of these churches he was most deeply interested and through a long life of unselfish service gave himself whole-heartedly to the promotion of all their varied interests. His passing away is, therefore, felt as a great loss by all his friends and co-workers, who have given expression to their appreciation of his manifold labors in numerous articles and addresses.

Among the many institutions which claimed Dr. Good's interest and attention the Presbyterian Historical Society was neither the last nor the least. He was elected a member of the Executive Council of the Society on September 18, 1899, and was re-elected in November, 1902. From 1917 to 1923, he served as one of its vice-presidents. During the twenty-five years of his connection with the Society he contributed numerous important articles to the Journal of the Society and gave to its Museum a number of interesting historical pictures. It is, therefore, fitting and appropriate that the Society should note and put on record his faithful labors as a Reformed historian.

Much of the later life of Dr. Good becomes intelligible

“ I WANT TO BE AN ANGEL ”

THE HISTORY OF A HYMN

BY REV. LOUIS F. BENSON, D.D.

I.

The hymns contributed to the common stock by members of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. are not so numerous that the historian can afford to overlook any one of them. The three that have won the widest acceptance are probably President Davies' "Lord, I am Thine, entirely Thine," which goes back to the time of the French and Indian War; Mr. Duffield's "Stand up, stand up for Jesus," which grew out of the revival of 1857; and Miss Gill's "I want to be an angel," written some twelve years earlier.

The story of Duffield's hymn I tried to tell more than twenty years ago in *Studies of Familiar Hymns* (Philadelphia, 1903), and I have nothing to add to it now. The story of Davies' hymn I have told more recently in a second series of these *Studies* (Philadelphia, 1923). The impulse to set down the story of "I want to be an angel" came in this way:—

I had been preaching to Trinity Church, Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, on Sunday morning, May 28, 1922, and was one of a little group of men gathered on the church lawn after service. Something turned the conversation to the origins of well-known hymns: and in the course of it Mr. Henry N. Paul, of the Philadelphia bar and President of the Presbyterian Hospital, remarked upon the fact that "I want to be an angel," was written by a cousin of his. That was a surprise, and it imparted the human touch to a subject of which I knew very little. On returning home I looked up the notice of the hymn in Dr. Julian's *Dictionary of Hymnology*, which is in substance as follows:

"There is a letter from Mrs. Anna Reed Wilson, of Newark, N. J., to Mr. Randolph, of New York, respecting this hymn and its authorship.

It is dated 'Newark, N. J., Feb. 6th, '73,' and in it Mrs. Reed (*sic*) says:—' My sister's full name is Miss Sidney P. Gill. (An odd name for a woman, but coming down from a Welsh ancestress.) The hymn was written in Philadelphia where my sister, *then* a very young lady, taught the Infant Sunday School of Dr. Joel Parker's Church, of which she was a member. She had been teaching a lesson on *Angels* (I believe), when a lovely little girl exclaimed 'Oh I want to be an angel! The child within a few days was attacked by a fatal disease and died; and under the strong impression of the circumstance, the little hymn was written, and sung in the S. school. The first knowledge we had of its being *in print* was finding it in a Dayton, Ohio, newspaper. . . . I cannot give you the exact date of its composition, but think it must have been about '54.' Dr. Julian adds, on his own account that "the hymn has become a great favorite with children. It is in use in all English-speaking countries, and has been translated into several languages."

In elucidation of the above it may be remarked that the church referred to was the Clinton Street Presbyterian Church, worshipping in the beautiful building at the northeast corner of Tenth and Clinton Streets, originally designed for the First Congregational Church (the Rev. John Todd, pastor) by Mr. T. U. Walter, the architect of Girard College. Dr. Parker's pastorate ran from his election on May 2, 1842 to his resignation in February, 1852.

This notice I copied and sent to Mr. Paul, asking him to let me have any information bearing upon the missing date and upon the circumstances surrounding the hymn.

Mr. Paul replied in the following very interesting letter, which (in relation to the tune among other things) deserves a permanent record:

" GRAVERS LANE, CHESTNUT HILL,
PHILADELPHIA, PA.

June 1, 1922.

" MY DEAR DR. BENSON:

" My Great-Aunt Sidney Paul Gill (Mrs. Bennington Gill) with her daughters, among whom was Sidney Gill (b. May 9, 1818, d. s. p. June 12, 1880), kept a young ladies boarding school in Philadelphia from about 1840 to 1850 when she died.

My mother was a boarder at this school, and while she was there her cousin Sidney wrote, ' I want to be an angel ' for her Sunday School Class, as my mother often told me, with details very much as recounted in the letter of Cousin Anna Wilson, of which you kindly send me a copy.

" As to when the hymn was written, I can only conjecture (knowing the years that my Mother was there), that it must have been between 1847 and 1850.

" I have no information as to when the hymn was first printed, but I can tell you where the tune came from. There is a mournful ballad, ' The Watcher, the poetry written by Mrs. Sarah J. Hale—the music composed by Dr. William Lardner, C. G. P. etc., etc.' This is the tune used for ' I want to be an Angel.' As it is copyright 1847, it is clear that the date of the hymn is no earlier than this year.

Yours most sincerely,
HENRY N. PAUL."

In elucidation of this letter I give the following entries from Philadelphia directories:—

- | | | |
|-----------|---|--|
| 1841 | } | B. Gill, gent., 336 Walnut St. |
| 1842 | | |
| 1843 | } | B. Gill, comm. merchant. Chestnut opp. mint [said to be the lot afterward occupied by the Presbyterian Board of Publication, number 1334]. |
| 1844 | | |
| 1845 | | |
| 1846 | } | Sydney P. Gill. Chestnut, opp. mint. |
| 1847 | } | do 421 Spruce St. |
| 1848 | | |
| 1849 | | |
| 1850-1856 | } | The Misses Gill. Young Ladies School, 427 Spruce St. |

and also these entries from the Gill Family Bible, furnished by James Wilson Bayard, Esq., of the Philadelphia Bar, who in the most gracious way entrusted to me numerous letters and family papers:—

" Bennington Gill, sixth child of Robert Gill and Hannah Allen, was born in Sixth Street, in the City of Philadelphia on the seventh day of August, 1785."

" Sidney Paul was born at Flemington, New Jersey, on the First day of March 1790."

" They were married on January 11th, 1810, at Belvidere, New Jersey."

[Their first four daughters appear to have been born in this country.]

"Sidney, fifth daughter of Bennington Gill and Sidney Paul his wife, was born at Summer Hill Terrace, near Birmingham, England, on May 9th, 1818, and died June 12th, 1880, at the house of her brother-in-law, the Rev. Dr. James P. Wilson, at Newark, New Jersey."

II.

In the *New York Observer* (edited by Dr. Samuel Irenaeus Prime) for February 19, 1874 (page 54), appeared the following:

" Reprinted for the *New York Observer* .

OUR FEMALE HYMNISTS AND THEIR HYMNS.

" A Lecture: by Rev. Thomas Armitage, D.D., at the Baptist Church, Forty-sixth Street, near Fifth Avenue, New York.

" The hymn sung for the past twenty years in Europe and England, as well as here, with the only signature, " American Hymn,"—

" I want to be an angel,"

was written by Mrs. Sydney P. Gill, in Philadelphia. In the Sunday school of Dr. Joel Parker's church she taught the infant class. She had been teaching a lesson on angels, when a little child said, " I want to be an angel." A few days after the child died, the hymn was written for that Sunday school to sing on her death, and it has struck a chord in every child's heart since 1854.*

" * The senior editor of this paper wrote the words, ' I want to be an angel,' and an incident that gave rise to the expression, at least six years before 1854, and it was very widely published at the time."

The footnote of Dr. Prime was unfortunate in its expression. It set up a claim to have written the first line of Miss Gill's hymn several years before the date of the hymn itself, and by a casual reader would probably be interpreted as a claim to have written the whole hymn. And, however interpreted, it apparently contradicted Dr. Armitage's statement that the author of the hymn took the words, " I want to be

an angel " directly from the mouth of an infant class scholar, by an implication that she took them from Dr. Prime.

He was a delightful old egotist; his weekly letter in the *Observer* was widely read; and a small tempest was aroused by his little footnote. Some correspondence has passed through my hands in which the references to Dr. Prime fall far short of being complimentary. Miss Gill herself took a hand, and a letter of hers to Dr. Armitage was turned over to Dr. Prime.

It elicited the following response:

" New York Observer Office,
37 Park Row.

New York, Mar. 20, 1874

" Dr. Armitage has kindly sent me a note signed Sidney P. Gill. As the *Miss* precedes the name in the letter, I am somewhat at a loss to know how to address this, but I presume it will reach the writer. It is a curious coincidence that is reached, and I presume may be explained by the fact (if it could be ascertained) that the incident in the *Observer* of April 5, 1845 was read in the hearing of the child who made use of the expression the following Sunday in the hearing of Miss Gill who wrote the hymn.

Respectfully yours

S. I. PRIME

To this Miss Gill replied:

" My reply

Newark, N. J. March 23rd, '74

" REV. S. I. PRIME, D.D.

DEAR SIR

" Accept my thanks for your note received this morning and for the copy of a proof prepared for the *Observer*.

" This is the first time I have ever seen your article headed, ' I want to be an angel ' as printed in the N. Y. *Observer* of April 5, 1845. Neither the title, nor the incident had any connection with the origin of my little hymn; though under the circumstances you relate, it was perfectly natural that you

should have supposed that it had. If you had been in my Infant school the Sabbath previous to April 19th, 1845 and seen the look of interest glowing and intensifying in the little face gazing so earnestly into mine—as I described the blessed glory of the heavenly host—you would never have suspected that the impulsive exclamation from her lips ' Oh, I want to be an angel! '—was other than the spontaneous utterance of a heart-wish.

" Again repeating my thanks for the courtesy accorded me
I subscribe myself

MISS SIDNEY P. GILL

[Endorsed] " With this I enclosed the proof sent me, by Dr. Prime in his letter—having run my pen through one of its sentences—which I knew would give an impression contrary to the facts stated in this note."

Dr. Prime's explanatory statement in answer to the very numerous queries (or protests) his dubious claim had brought down upon him (and which he had sent Miss Gill in proof) appeared in the *Observer* for March 26, 1874, as follows:

" I WANT TO BE AN ANGEL.

" In this paper of February 19, 1874, we printed a lecture on ' Our Female Hymn-Writers, '—in which the speaker, Rev. Dr. Armitage, said:

" The hymn ' I want to be an angel ' was written by Mrs. Sydney P. Gill, in Philadelphia. In the Sunday school of Dr. Joel Parker's church she taught the infant class. She had been teaching a lesson on angels, when a little child said, ' I want to be an angel. ' A few days after, the child died, the hymn was written for that Sunday school to sing on her death, and it has struck a chord in every child's heart since 1854."

" In printing the above we appended to it a note saying:—

" The Senior Editor of this paper wrote the words ' I want to be an angel ' and an incident that gave rise to the expression at least six years before 1854, and it was very widely published at the time."

" Since we made this remark, we have received so many in-

quiries concerning it, that we reprint the incident with a remark or two additional. In the spring of the year 1845, we wrote the incident and it was published first in the *Mother's Magazine*: it may be found on page 100 of the volume of that year. It was printed in the *New York Observer* of April 5, 1845, and in many religious papers afterwards. Very soon it was turned into verse. Park Benjamin, Esq., wrote a hymn out of it, and others tried their hands at it, and the hymn now so popular in Sunday schools was written by Miss Gill.”

[At this point Dr. Prime inserted a reprint of the original incident from the number of his paper for April 5, 1845, as follows:—]

“ I WANT TO BE AN ANGEL.

A child sat in the door of a cottage at the close of a summer Sabbath. The twilight was fading, and as the shades of evening darkened, one after another of the stars stood in the sky and looked down on the child in his thoughtful mood. He was looking up at the stars and counting them as they came, till they were too many to be counted, and his eyes wandered all over the heavens, watching the bright worlds above. They seemed just like “holes in the floor of heaven to let the glory through,” but he knew better. Yet he loved to look up there, and was so absorbed, that his mother called to him and said:

“ My son, what are you thinking of? ”

He stared as if suddenly aroused from sleep, and answered:

“ I was thinking——.”

“ Yes,” said his mother, “ I knew you were thinking, but what were you thinking about? ”

“ Oh,” said he, and his little eyes sparkled with the thought, “ I want to be an angel.”

“ And why, my son, would you be an angel? ”

“ Heaven is up there, is it not, mother; and there the angels live and love God, and are happy; I do wish I was good and God would take me there, and let me wait on him forever.”

The mother called him to her knee, and he leaned on her bosom and wept. She wept too, and smoothed the soft hair of his head as he stood there, and kissed his forehead, and then

told him that if he would give his heart to God, now, while he was young, that the Saviour would forgive all his sins and take him up to heaven when he died, and he would then be with God forever. . . ."

[The story goes on to its culmination in "I am going to be an angel," and can be followed out by any one who cares to consult the bound files of *The New York Observer* in the library of the Presbyterian Historical Society.]

This reprint of the story (in the above article of March 26, 1874) concludes with the following:

" POSTSCRIPT.

" Since the above was in type I have received a note from the Rev. Dr. Armitage, enclosing a letter addressed to him containing the following statement:

" The child's hymn ('I want to be an angel') was composed by Miss Sidney P. Gill, April 19, 1845, the day of the death of her little Sunday scholar, Anne Louisa Farrand. The following Sabbath it was taught in the Infant school of the Clinton St. Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, in which a week before, the child had uttered the exclamation 'Oh, I want to be an angel.'

SIDNEY P. GILL.

" The history of the hymn is therefore very obvious. In the *New York Observer* of April 5, 1845, the article appeared which we have copied above. Miss Gill wrote the *hymn*, April 19, 1845, just two weeks afterwards. The dates are now definitely determined by positive testimony; we have before us the *New York Observer* of April 5, 1845, with the words "I want to be an angel," and we have also before us a letter signed Sidney P. Gill, saying that the hymn was composed April 19, 1845. The statement which we made in the *Observer* of Feb. 19, 1874, is thus more than verified. We there said, "The Senior Editor of this paper wrote the words 'I want to be an angel' and an incident that gave rise to the expression at least six years before 1854." We now add, he wrote it *nine* years before 1854, and published it in the *New York*

Observer just two weeks to a day before the hymn was composed bearing the same name. IRENAEUS.”

III.

This little controversy—if so we are to designate it—was really a tempest in a tea pot. There was never any real question of Miss Gill’s authorship, of her veracity in disclosing the circumstances of the hymn’s origin or of the originality of her work. It all arose from Dr. Prime’s unfortunate statement that he was the author of the words, ‘ I want to be an angel.’ For my part I am glad it happened. I find it very human and, being human, very interesting. On one point only Miss Gill is not to my mind convincing. I cannot share her assurance that there is no connection between the printed phrase, “ I want to be an angel ’ of April 5, 1845, and the child’s exclamation of April 19. Why may not the child have had Dr. Prime’s story read to her when it appeared, as it must have been read aloud in numerous Philadelphia households? Otherwise the coincidence certainly is amazing.

Miss Gill had every reason to be glad of the phenomenal success of her little hymn, and she was naturally sensitive to the raising of any question whatever as to the circumstances of its origin. At all events she thought it desirable to strengthen and support her recollection of those circumstances by confirmatory evidence.

The name of the child who exclaimed “ Oh, I want to be an angel! ” was Louisa Farrand. To her mother Miss Gill wrote in March, 1874 from Newark, asking the exact date of Louisa’s death. To this her sister M. Elizabeth Farrand answered (from Trenton) on March 7th: “ The date was April 19th, 1845. She lies in Monument Cemetery, Philadelphia. There is no inscription upon her tombstone, merely a plain low stone alike at head and foot. At the head Anna Louisa, on the foot the date of birth and death. Born Oct. 4th, 1838. Died April 19th, 1845. How often I have sung that little piece, ‘ I want to be an angel ’ but did not know until I heard it (incidentally) a very short time ago that you was the author.”

The envelope containing this letter is endorsed in pencil by Miss Gill:

" Note from Miss
M. Elis. Farrand
fixing the date of
the day and year in
which I wrote
' I want to be an
angel ' vis
April 19th, 1845 "

Miss Gill wrote a second letter (to Miss Farrand this time) explaining that she was being asked constantly about the circumstances which led to her writing of the hymn, and was "anxious to record the facts without any danger of error." Would the mother "recall the scenes of little Louisa's dying hours—her words and feelings—and be so very kind as to write them out for me?" Miss Gill sets forth explicitly and at great length what her recollections of the event were, and of what she had been told—for she was not present at the child's death—and these were in the main confirmed in Miss Farrand's reply, dated April 4, 1874.

The letters are intrinsically interesting to the student of religion, in their testimony to the otherworldliness of the current teaching of the Evangelical school; which indeed the contemporary Sunday school hymn books make plain enough. They show the heights of mystical experience which the youngest child was expected to attain and even (under the spur of leading questions) to express. They explain the infant class instructions at Clinton Street and elsewhere, the rapturous exclamation of the little scholar, and indeed the content of Miss Gill's own hymn. It was the day of Dr. Mühlenberg's "I would not live away." And if that good man lived to regret its writing, he could not recall it from church use. As lately as 1895 the committee who had the *Hymnal* in charge did not feel it prudent as yet to omit it. In writing her hymn Miss Gill was simply a child of her time, breathing the atmosphere that surrounded her and expressing the feelings

and thoughts that came with her training. The immediate acceptance of her hymn would prove that.

It appears that, though sent for, Miss Gill did not reach the child's bedside until after her death. She says:

" I well remember my own emotions as I returned from your house that 19th of April, 1845—recalling—How the Sabbath before she had been so interested in the lesson as to clasp her little hands and exclaim aloud (as I was teaching), ' Oh, I want to be an angel! ' God's call to her had come so speedily.

" My heart was deeply moved. I stood (I remember) for a long time at the upper side window of our Spruce St. house—as the twilight deepened,—catching the music of the fountain playing in Gen. Patterson's garden,* and it seemed to force itself into the dear child's voice, singing within my soul, the following words:

" I want to be an angel
 And with the angels stand
 A crown upon my forehead
 A harp within my hand
 And there before my Savior
 So glorious and so bright
 I'd wake the sweetest music
 And praise Him day and night.

" I never should be weary
 Nor ever shed a tear
 Nor ever know a sorrow
 Nor ever feel a fear—
 But blessed pure and holy
 I'd stand in Jesus' sight
 And with ten thousand thousands
 I'd praise Him day and night.

" I know I'm weak and sinful
 But Jesus will forgive
 For many little children
 Have gone to Heaven to live.

* The Gill house was one of a row on the north side of Spruce Street, between Thirteenth and Juniper. The Patterson house was at the corner of Thirteenth and Locust, with extensive gardens stretching to Juniper Street in the rear of the Spruce Street houses.

Dear Savior when I languish
 And lay me down to die
 Oh send a shining angel
 To bear me to the sky.

" Oh there I'll be an angel
 And with the angels stand
 A crown upon my forehead
 A harp within my hand—
 And there before my Savior
 So glorious and so bright
 I'll join the heavenly chorus
 And praise Him day and night.

" I wrote them the next morning on the back of an old letter, and taught them the next Sabbath in the Infant School.

" Excuse so much upon this subject. Some day I may explain to you, why I am so particular."

IV.

There are very few hymns of whose origin and adventures we have a story at once so full and so authentic (and, if I am not mistaken, so interesting) as is disclosed by the papers placed in my hands by Mr. Bayard. And I have reached the end of them, so far as concerned with that story.

One feature of the hymn's history still awaits discovery, and that is the time and manner of its getting into circulation.

Miss Gill's narrative stops at the point of her teaching it to her infant class on the Sunday following its composition. How did it get into print? From what source did that Dayton newspaper copy it? * How did it attach itself to Dr. Lardner's setting of the "mournful ballad" which Mr. Paul found as copyrighted in 1847, and which became the "proper tune" of Miss Gill's hymn? And, especially, in what Sunday school hymn book was it first included?

It is not in the Philadelphia *Hymns for Youth* (1848)

* Mr. Paul now writes me that Mrs. Gill had a sister living at Dayton. She very likely received a copy of the hymn and communicated it to the local newspaper.

which Dr. Engles compiled for the Presbyterian Board of Publication. Nor is it in the *Hymns for Schools* which Professor Charles D. Cleveland published in 1850, though that book also was "made in Philadelphia." The earliest Sunday school hymn book in which I have found it so far is the Methodist *Hymns for Sunday Schools, Youth and Children* (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1854), in which it appears without the author's name. I should like to track the adventures of the little hymn between the years 1845 and 1854.

V.

Miss Gill's verses are pleasant and melodious, not without happy phrases, and have a refrain-like effect that is led up to successfully. As to their theology (or is it ethnology?) there is no occasion to say much. A good deal of wit of cheap character has been expended upon it, with the view of emphasizing the impracticability of transition from a human to an angelic nature; the futility of "wanting to be." "Irenaeus," who was not being allowed by his correspondents to forget "the words 'I want to be an angel,'" has some very sensible remarks upon the subject in the *Observer* for April 16, 1874, and its files may be consulted by any who wish to pursue that subject. So far as children are concerned they take their theology from their teachers, and are quite incurably romantic. And if their teachers of to-day should set before them graphic visions of white-robed angels, with crowns and harps, I am confident that a child would "want to be an angel" now, as much as ever.

And I wish to say that in my judgment Miss Gill's theme is poetically justified when one learns that she took it from the mouth of a child who had just seen that vision of angels. Her words represent, that is to say, the actual working of a child's mind, which is just what is wanted and so seldom got in children's hymns. One day I was walking on the shore of Gloucester Harbor, as the sun was setting behind its draperies of red and purple and gold; when a little child at my side said, "O papa, look at the sunshine going to bed." There again is a child's point of view, its way of putting things, an excellent

theme for a child's hymn; and yet with no more relation to reality than the theme of wanting to be an angel.

Whether the theme of Miss Gill's hymn is spiritually wholesome for common use is a different question, and it is a question that was raised comparatively early. The most curious handling of it is that of the American Tract Society. In its *Happy Voices* (1865) it included the hymn without change. The book was so successful that *Echo to Happy Voices* appeared in 1869. In this there was a hymn beginning "If I would be an angel" (I must, etc.), and on the opposite page a hymn beginning "I want to join the ransomed," with a third verse opening with

" I would not be an angel;
For them no Saviour died."

The Presbyterian Board of Publication handled the matter in a less catholic spirit, changing Miss Gill's first line into "I want to be with Jesus," both in the ill-fated *Hymnal* of 1866 and *Childrens' Praise* of 1867. This form seems to have been copied from the *Psalms and Hymns for the worship of God*, published at Richmond by the Confederate Presbyterians during the Civil War. In some English collections the hymn was made to read "I would be like an angel." The Rev. Newman Hall, in the intensity of his reaction against both the otherworldliness and the ethnology of Miss Gill's theme fairly splutters in

A BOY'S HYMN

A RESPONSE TO " I WANT TO BE AN ANGEL "

I want to live and be a man,
Both good and useful all I can, . . . *

* *Lyrics of a Long Life*. By Newman Hall. London, n. d., p. 240.