

Sweet By and By-September's Hymn of the Month 2022

By
Bill Dagle

For most of us, summer generates memories of hot sunny days, warm starlit nights and sweet friendships that blossom into full bloom. These days and friends become more precious with each passing hour until fall and winter set in, and they are to be no more—or are they? In Christ, there is a promise of a sweeter time where death will be no more. Apparently, Samuel Bennett understood this truth and would capture it in song. From the 1906 edition of the book, *My Life and the Story of the Gospel Hymns*, by Ira D. Sankey, I get the story behind the writing of *Sweet By- and- By*:

“ In 1861 I became a resident of the village of Elkhorn, Wisconsin, the home of the composer, J. P. Webster, and shortly after became associated with him in the production of sheet music (songs) and other musical works. In the summer or fall of the year 1867 we commenced work on *The Signet Ring*. One of the songs written for that book was *Sweet By-and-By*. Mr. Webster, like many musicians was of an exceedingly nervous and sensitive nature, and subject to periods of depression, in which he looked upon the dark side of all things in life. I had learned his peculiarities so well that on meeting him I could tell at a glance if he was in one of his melancholy moods, and I found that I could rouse him from them by giving him a new song or hymn to work on. On such an occasion he came into my place of business, walked down to the stove, and turned his back to me without speaking. I was at my desk writing. Presently I said:

‘Webster, what is the matter now?’

‘It is no matter,’ he replied. ‘It will be all right by and by.’

The idea of the hymn came to me like a flash of sunlight, and I replied: ‘The sweet by and by? Would that not make a good hymn?’

‘Maybe it would,’ said he indifferently.

Turning to the desk I penned the three verses and the chorus as fast as I could write. In the meantime two friends, Mr. N. H. Carswell and Mr. S. E. Bright, had come in. I handed the hymn to Mr. Webster. As he read it his eye kindled, and his whole demeanor changed. Stepping to the desk, he began writing the notes in a moment. Presently he requested Mr. Bright to hand him his violin, and then he played the melody. In a few moments more he had the notes for the four parts of the chorus jotted down. I think it was not over thirty minutes from the time I took my pen to write the words before the two gentlemen, Mr. Webster and I were singing the hymn in the same form in which it— afterward appeared in *The Signet Ring*. While singing it Mr. R. R. Crosby came in. After listening awhile, with tears in eyes, he uttered the prediction: ‘That hymn is immortal.’ I think it was used in public shortly after, for within two weeks children on the streets were singing it.”

Samuel Bennett closes his story by stating that all the men in the drugstore, that day, are now dead except for S. E. Bright and himself. May I end my story by adding that Bennett and Bright are now gone too; but in Christ, we’ll see our friends again. I hope I’ll see you in “the sweet by-and-by.”

