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Ransom Notes

Feather or Fetter?

Fall was approaching as I made the thirty mile trip to Lincoln, IL for a gathering of the Jolly Seniors at Lincoln Christian Church. I was excited because one of my favorite organist was the guest that day. Mark Gifford, Director of Music and Organist for the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Springfield, would shortly fill the air with 'sounds of music'. There was a smile on my face as I zipped up Interstate 55.

Snacks, coffee, tea, and devotions followed moments of chatting with friends. Then Judy, the organizer, invited us to move to the auditorium for the anticipated event that would both thrill my soul and calm my heart. Mark, the smiling gentleman, set the stage for his program, and then sat down behind the white ivories and began. He entertained us with both favorite hymns and light classical numbers on the piano.

Generally he preceded each number with a bit of history of either the music and/or of his special connection to the tune. Many times I had to 'stomp on my tongue,' as I so wanted to hum or whistle along. All problems and challenges of my day had vanished as I was transported into a world of beautiful sound. Heaven on earth filled my heart.

Two numbers, however, made a special impression in my memory bank as I drove south later than afternoon. Part of his program was played on the organ that morning, as he trotted back and forth between the two instruments. He reminded us that for eight years he had directed the music at the Cathedral and during that time his hands, especially his thumbs, were telling him that 'Arthur' had attacked. Yes, Mr. Arthritis was present and some of these numbers today were a bit more difficult to play. But Oh! what awaited us.

Today we would hear an old favorite as never heard before. Hopefully each reader remembers the familiar words, heard so often sung in the children's department on Sunday mornings, of the hymn written by Anna Bartlett Warner back in 1827. Suddenly strains of 'Jesus Loves Me' filled the room. Soar thumbs and all, the music went from the simple notes originally written, to a burst of sound making one think the Chicago Symphony was honoring us with their talents. Tears began to arrive in the corners of my eyes. I was experiencing an angelic moment. This was heaven on earth. The Puritan Pilgrims of the 1800's would, I think, have been overwhelmed, if they had been present. The trip that day was worth it just to hear Mark's rendition of 'Jesus Loves Me.'

The second interesting memory, still retained in the head of this eighty-nine year old, resolves around another favorite hymn which Mark played on the piano. This inspired message was even older, reaching back to 1758. The lyrics are based on I Samuel 7:12, which tells the story of the prophet Samuel raising a stone to mark a place where God helped the Israelites. Robert Robinson, the composer, grew up without a loving father. His dad passed away when he was only eight years of age. Without going into great details, his life was extremely difficult, but he loved to study, even though he became the breadwinner for the family while very young.

He also began to write poetry and songs, became influenced by the famed evangelist, George Whitfield, and became a minister of the gospel. Unfortunately though, for some reason, he became most unstable and unhappy. He was drifting away from the faith. Then on one occasion, some time later, Robert found himself on a stagecoach with another passenger, a young lady. Allegedly she began humming to break the monotony of the trip. The lady turned to Robert and asked him what he thought of the hymn she was humming. History records that he responded, "Madam, I am the poor unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago. I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then." Guess what she was singing? Some of you will remember the song, 'Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.'

Come, Thou fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.

Mark related the story behind the composer and the song and then invited the audience to sing along as he played. By now, of course, I am emotionally engaged and let my voice help fill the auditorium with joyful melody. But, that is not the end of this tale. We came to the fourth stanza.

Oh to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be?
Let Thy goodness, like a
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.

I boldly sang the word, **feather**. I have no idea why I sang 'feather', but it just seemed right or my historical brain remembered that word from singing the song previously many times. **Goodness** certainly could float like a feather, but I was so wrong. The true message was, 'Let Thy goodness, like a **fetter**, bind my wandering heart to Thee. God's love for us binds us to Him. A fetter, manacle or chain was often fastened to the ankle of a prisoner to restrain the individual. A feather would never restrain a resisting prisoner. No way!

God may float around the world like a feather, but thank goodness His 'streams of mercy' are still flowing. He will cling to us. Guess I better update my memory button and release the feather and let God's goodness grab hold of me, like a fetter.

"I, (God) cling to you;
your right hand upholds me" (Psalm 63:8).