

A HYMN MADE FAMOUS ON A BATTLE FIELD

The Swan-song of Gustavus Adolphus

*Be not dismayed, thou little flock,
Although the foe's fierce battle shock
Loud on all sides assail thee.
Though o'er thy fall they laugh secure,
Their triumph cannot long endure,
Let not thy courage fail thee.*

*Thy cause is God's-go at His call,
And to His hand commit thine all;
Fear thou no ill impending;
His Gideon shall arise for thee,
God's Word and people manfully
In God's own time defending.*

*Our hope is sure in Jesus' might;
Against themselves the godless fight,
Themselves, not us, distressing;
Shame and contempt their lot shall be;
God is with us, with Him are we;
To us belongs His blessing.*

JOHANN MICHAEL ALTENBERG, 1631

"Be not dismayed, thou little flock" will always be known as the "swan-song" of the Swedish hero king, Gustavus Adolphus.

No incident in modern history is more dramatic than the sudden appearance in Germany of Gustavus Adolphus and his little Swedish army during the critical days of the Thirty Years' War. It was this victorious crusade that saved Germany, and probably all of northern Europe, for Protestantism.

The untimely death of the Swedish monarch on the battlefield of Lützen, November 6, 1632, while leading his men against Wallenstein's host, not only gained immortal fame for Gustavus, but will always cause the world to remember the hymn that was sung by his army on that historic day.

When Gustavus Adolphus landed in Germany in 1630 with his small but well-trained army, it

seemed that the Protestant cause in Europe was lost. All the Protestant princes of Germany had been defeated by Tilly and Wallenstein, leaders of the Imperial armies, and the victors were preparing to crush every vestige of Lutheranism in Germany.

The Margrave of Brandenburg and the Duke of Saxe, however, furnished a few troops to Gustavus, and in a swift, meteoric campaign the Swedish king had routed the army of the Catholic League and had marched all the way across Germany. In the spring of 1632 Gustavus moved into the heart of Bavaria and captured Munich.

The Imperial forces who had sneered at the "Snow King," as they called him, and who had predicted that he would "melt" as he came southward, were now filled with dismay. The "Snow King" proved to be the "Lion of the North."

Wallenstein rallied the Catholic forces for a last stand at Lützen, the battle that was to prove the decisive conflict.

On the morning of November 6, 1632, the two armies faced each other in battle array. Dr. Fabricius, chaplain of the Swedish army, had been commanded by Gustavus to lead his troops in worship. The king himself raised the strains of "Be not dismayed, thou little flock," and led the army in singing the stirring hymn. Then he knelt in fervent prayer.

A heavy fog prevented the Protestant forces from moving forward to the attack, and, while they were waiting for the fog to lift, Gustavus ordered the musicians to play Luther's hymn, "A mighty Fortress is our God." The whole army joined with a shout. The king then mounted his charger, and, drawing his sword, rode back and forth in front of the lines, speaking words of encouragement to his men.

As the sun began to break through the fog, Gustavus himself offered a prayer, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, help me today to do battle for the glory of Thy holy name," and then shouted, "Now forward to the attack in the name of our God!" The army answered, "God with us!" and rushed forward, the king galloping in the lead.

When his aid offered him his coat of mail, Gustavus refused to put it on, declaring, "God is my Protector."

The battle raged fiercely. For a time the outcome seemed ominous for the Lutherans. At 11 o'clock Gustavus was struck by a bullet and mortally wounded. As he fell from his horse, the word spread quickly throughout the Swedish lines, "The king is wounded!"

It proved to be the turning point in the battle. Instead of losing heart and fleeing, the Swedish troops charged the foe with a fierceness born of sorrow and despair, and before the day was ended another glorious victory had been won. The Protestant cause was saved, but the noble Gustavus had made the supreme sacrifice.

The authorship of his famous "battle-hymn" has been the subject of much dispute. The German poet and hymnologist, Albert Knapp, has called it "a little feather from the eagle wing of Gustavus Adolphus." Most Swedish authorities, too, unite in naming their hero king as the author. However, the weight of evidence seems to point to Johann Michael Altenberg, a German pastor of Gross Sommern, Thuringen, as the real writer of the hymn. It is said that Altenberg was inspired to write it upon hearing of the great victory gained by Gustavus Adolphus at the battle of Leipzig, September 7, 1631, about a year before the battle of Lützen.

In any event, it is a matter of record that the Swedish king adopted it immediately, and that he sang it as his own "swan-song" just before he died at Lützen. Someone has aptly said, "Whether German or Swede may claim this hymn is a question. They both rightly own it."