

BRORSON, THE POET OF CHRISTMAS

The Great White Host

*Behold a host, arrayed in white,
Like thousand snow-clad mountains bright,
With palms they stand--who are this band
 Before the throne of light?
Lo, these are they, of glorious fame,
Who from the great affliction came,
And in the flood of Jesus' blood
 Are cleansed from guilt and blame;
Now gathered in the holy place
Their voices they in worship raise,
Their anthems swell where God doth dwell
 'Mid angels' songs of praise.*

*Despised and scorned, they sojourned here,
But now, how glorious they appear!
These martyrs stand a priestly band,
 God's throne forever near.
So oft, in troubled days gone by,
In anguish they would weep and sigh;
At home above, the God of love
 The tears of all shall dry.
They now enjoy their Sabbath rest,
The paschal banquet of the blest;
The Lamb, their Lord, at festal board
 Himself is host and guest.*

*Then hail, ye mighty legions, yea,
All hail! now safe and blest for aye;
And praise the Lord, who with His Word
 Sustained you on the way.
Ye did the joys of earth disdain,
Ye toiled and sowed in tears and pain;
Farewell, now bring your sheaves, and sing
 Salvation's glad refrain.
Swing high your palms, lift up your song,
Yea, make it myriad voices strong:
Eternally shall praise to Thee,
 God, and the Lamb, belong!*

HANS ADOLPH BRORSON, 1763.

No Scandinavian hymn has attained such popularity in recent years as "Behold a host." This sublime "glory song" was first given to the world after its writer, Hans Adolph Brorson, had gone to join the "host, arrayed in white" that sings "before the throne of light."

It was published by his son in a collection entitled "Hans Adolph Brorson's Swan-Song," which appeared in 1765, a year after the famous Danish hymn-writer had gone to his final rest. The collection contained seventy hymns, all written in the last year of the poet's life.

Brorson was a product of the Pietistic movement emanating from Halle, in Germany. Born June 20, 1694, at Randrup, Denmark, he early came under the influence of the great spiritual awakening which was then sweeping through the Lutheran Church.

Brorson's father was a Lutheran pastor, and all of his three sons, including the hymn-writer, entered the service of the Church. Brorson's first pastorate was in his native city of Randrup, a place he dearly loved and to which he often returned in later life when he found himself oppressed by manifold cares.

It was during his ministry in Randrup that Brorson began to write his first hymns. He speaks of the eight years spent at this place as the happiest in his life. In 1729 he was called to become Danish preacher at Tonder, where he labored side by side with Johan Herman Schrader, who was also a hymnist of some note. Because of the mixed Danish and German population of Tonder, a curious situation existed in the church worship. Although Brorson preached in Danish, the congregation sang in German! To remedy this, Brorson, in 1732, wrote a number of his famous Christmas hymns, among them 'Den yndigste Rose er funden,' one of the most exquisite gems in sacred poetry. A free rendering of four of its eleven stanzas by August W. Kjellstrand follows:

The sweetest, the fairest of roses
I've found. Among thorns it reposes:
'Tis Jesus, my soul's dearest Treasure,
Of sinners a Friend above measure.

E'er since the sad day when frail mortals
Were thrust from fair Eden's bright portals,
The world has been dark, full of terror,
And man dead in sin, lost in error.

Then mindful of promises given,
God sent from the gardens of heaven
A Rose, 'mid the thorns brightly blowing,
And freely its fragrance bestowing.

Wherever this Rose Tree is grounded,

The kingdom of God there is founded;
And where its sweet fragrance is wafted,
There peace in the heart is engrafted.

As Kingo was known among the Danes as "the poet of Easter," so Brorson from this time was hailed as "the poet of Christmas."

In 1747 Brorson was appointed by Christian VI to be come bishop of the diocese of Ribe. It is said that the Danish monarch upon meeting Brorson at a certain occasion inquired of him if he was the author of the hymn, "Awake, all things that, God has made." When the poet modestly answered in the affirmative, so the story runs, the king promised him the bishopric.

When Erik Pontoppidan, later bishop of Bergen, was appointed to revise Kingo's hymnal, which for forty years had served the churches of Denmark and Norway, he found his task a comparatively simple one through the valuable assistance rendered by Brorson. Kingo's hymns were changed only slightly, and the greater part of the new material was from Brorson's pen.

The later years of the poet were darkened by sad experiences. In the year that Brorson was elevated to the bishopric, his beloved wife died while giving birth to their thirteenth child. This and other troubles served to make him melancholy in spirit, but he did not cease to compose poems of rarest beauty. His thoughts, however, turned more and more toward heaven and the blessedness of the life hereafter. A celestial radiance is reflected in the hymns of his "Swan-Song." This is particularly true of "Behold, a host arrayed in white," a lyric that has become a favorite in America as well as in Europe through its association with Edvard Grieg's famous adaptation of a Norwegian folk song.

Brorson's earnest character and pious nature made him deeply concerned about the salvation of souls. Many of his poems and hymns contain solemn warnings touching on the uncertainty of life and the need of seeking salvation. His gripping hymn, "Jeg gaar i Fare, hvor jeg gaar," gave Arch bishop Wallin, the great Swedish hymnist, the inspiration for his noble stanzas:

I near the grave, where'er I go,
Where'er my pathway tendeth;
If rough or pleasant here below,
My way at death's gate endeth.
I have no other choice;
Between my griefs and joys
My mortal life is ordered so:
I near the grave, where'er I go.

I go to heaven, where'er I go,
If Jesus' steps I follow;
The crown of life He will bestow,

When earth this frame shall swallow.
If through this tearful vale
I in that course prevail,
And walk with Jesus here below,
I go to heaven, where'er I go.

Other well-known hymns by Brorson are "Thy little ones, dear Lord, are we," "O Father, may Thy Word prevail," "O watch and pray," "Life's day is ended," "My heart, prepare to give account," "By faith we are divinely sure," "Children of God, born again of His Spirit," "O seek the Lord today," "I see Thee standing, Lamb of God," "Stand fast, my soul, stand fast," "Jesus, Name of wondrous grace," and "Who will join the throng to heaven?" Brorson's childlike spirit may be seen reflected in the first of these, a children's Christmas hymn:

Thy little ones, dear Lord, are we,
And come Thy lowly bed to see;
Enlighten every soul and mind,
That we the way to Thee may find.

With songs we hasten Thee to greet,
And kiss the dust before Thy feet;
O blessed hour, O sweetest night,
That gave Thee birth, our soul's delight.

Now welcome! From Thy heavenly home
Thou to our vale of tears art come;
Man hath no offering for Thee, save
The stable, manger, cross, and grave.

Jesus, alas! how can it be
So few bestow a thought on Thee,
Or on the love, so wondrous great,
That drew Thee down to our estate?

O draw us wholly to Thee, Lord,
Do Thou to us Thy grace accord,
True faith and love to us impart,
That we may hold Thee in our heart.