

## Hymn Story: The Old Rugged Cross

Al Smith

Submitted by Ayo Owodunni, Nigeria

I had the privilege of singing at the Mel Trotter Mission in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in the 1940's. The evening meeting closed and I wandered over to Walgreen's drugstore to get a sandwich. After I gave my order, an elderly man with flowing snow-white hair and very thick glasses came to me and asked, "Are you Al Smith?" When I replied that I was, he introduced himself, saying, "I'm George Bennard." God was answering the desire of my heart for I had often wished to meet the writer of "The Old Rugged Cross" and here he was.

Here's how he told the story to me that night. "John 3:16 had always been a favorite verse of mine. The more I quoted it, instead of becoming worn and threadbare, it became more alive and seemed to take on a deeper meaning. But always there was with it a vision of a cross--not a beautiful gold-colored one, but a rough and rugged one--a cross of shame stained with the blood of God's only begotten Son shed for me. One day as I was again reviewing the scene in my mind's eye, I began to compose a song. A complete melody came in matter of minutes; but all I could get of the words was, 'I'll cherish the Old Rugged Cross.'"

"I then took some evangelistic services in New York State. In these meetings I felt led to major on the theme of the cross. At each service many were coming to Christ, claiming the finished work at Calvary. More and more the Lord showed me the true meaning of His love at Calvary.

"The thrilling experiences of these meetings so overwhelmed me with the importance of the cross that when I returned to Albion, Michigan, I sat down and immediately was able to rewrite the stanzas of the song without so much as one word failing to fall into place. I called in my wife, took out my guitar, and sang the completed song to her. She was thrilled!

"I then sent the manuscript to Charles H. Gabriel in Chicago, asking him to harmonize it so that I could have a music plate made to publish it. When Mr. Gabriel returned the finished manuscript, he enclosed a note saying, 'You will hear from this song.' When I played and sang it for some friends they said, 'God has given you a song that will never die; it has moved our hearts as no other song ever has.' I realized then, as I do now, that I could take no credit for the song, for you see I really hadn't written it. I was merely the instrument that God used."

Dr Bennard then excused himself saying, "I must get back to Albion tonight, for it isn't good for a young fellow like me (he was then over 75) to be out too late after dark.