

## A TALE THAT IS TOLD

Some Practical Thoughts on the Closing Year.

### A GOOD STORY OR A BAD STORY

Rev. Dr. Talmage Makes Some Suggestions as to Right Living Experiences of the Past as Guides for the Future Years of Our Lives.

Washington, Dec. 31.—In this holiday discourse, Dr. Talmage takes the opportunity of offering some very practical and useful suggestions.

The Israelites were 40 years in the wilderness, and during 38 years of the 40 nothing is recorded of them, and, I suppose, no other emigrants had a duller or more uninteresting time than they had. So they got to telling stories—stories concerning themselves or concerning others; stories about the brick kilns of Egypt, where they had toiled; or about the Red sea piled up into palisades at their crossing; story of the lantern hung in the heavens to guide them by night; story of fishes destroying the reptiles of the wilderness; stories of personal encounter. It must have been an awful thing to have had nothing to do for 38 years except to get lost every time they tried to escape from the wilderness. So they whiled away the time in story telling.

Indeed, there were persons whose one business was to narrate stories, and they were paid by such trifles as they could pick up from the surrounding listeners. To such instances our text refers when it says, "We spend our years as a tale that is told."

At this tremendous passage from the year 1899 to the year 1900 it will do us all good to consider that our whole life is a story told—a good story or a bad story; a tragic story or a foolish story; a wise story or a foolish story; a clean story or a filthy story; a story of success or a story of failure. "We spend our years as a tale that is told."

In the first place I remark that every person's life is a very interesting story. My text does not depreciate "a tale that is told." We have all of us been entertained by the story teller when snow bound in the rail train, or in the group a winter's night in the farmhouse, or gathered around a blazing hearth with some hunters at the mountain inn. Indeed it is a praiseworthy art to impersonate a good story well. If you doubt the practical and healthful and inspiring use of such a story, take down from the library Washington Irving's "Tales of a Traveller," or Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Twice Told Tales." But as interesting as any of these would be the story of many an obscure life, if the tale were as well told. Why do we all like biographies and autobiographies? Because they are stories of eminent human lives. But the story of the life of a backwoodsman, of a man who looks stupid, of one about whom you never heard a word, must be just as thrilling on a small scale as on a larger scale is a life of a Cyrus, or a Caesar, or a Pizarro, or a Mark Antony, or a Charlemagne, or the late General Gordon, who was upon a parapet leading his soldiers with nothing but a stick in his hand, and his troops cried, "Gordon, come down. You will be killed." But he did not come down, and one of the soldiers said "It is all right. He don't mind being killed. He is one of those blessed Christians."

As Oliver Cromwell on the anniversary of his greatest victory followed his darling daughter to the grave, so in the humblest and most unpretending life there has been a commingling of gladness and gloom, of triumph and despair. Nothing that David Garrick ever enacted at Drury Lane Theatre in the way of tragedy or Charles Matthews ever played in Covent Garden in the way of comedy excelled things which on a small scale have been seen in the life of obscure men and women. Many a profound and learned sermon has put the audience to sleep. While some man whose phraseology could not be parsed and whose attire was cut and fitted and made up by the plainest housewife has told the story of his life in a way that melted the prayer circle into tears as easily as a warm April sun dissolves the snow of the previous night.

Oh, yes, while "we spend our years as a tale that is told" it is an interesting story. It is the story of an immortal, and that makes it interesting. He is launched on an ocean of eternal years, in a voyage that will never terminate. He is striking the keynote of an anthem or a dirge that will never come to its last bar. That is what makes the devotional meetings of modern times so much more interesting than they used to be. They are filled not with discourses by laymen on the subject of justification and sanctification, which lay discourses administer more to the faculties than to the edifying, but with stories of what God has done for the soul—how everything suddenly changed; how the promises became balsamic in times of laceration; how he was personally helped out and helped up and helped on. Nothing can stand before such a story of personal rescue, personal transformation, personal illumination. The mightiest and most skillful argument against Christianity collapses under the ungrammatical but sincere statement. The atheistic professor of natural philosophy goes down under the story of that backwoodsman's conversion.

The New Testament suggests the power of the "tale that is told." Christ was the most effective story teller of all the ages. The parables are only tales well told. Matchless stories: That of the traveler cut up by the thieves and the Samaritan paying his board bill at the tavern; that of the dinner, to which the invited guests sent in fictitious regrets; that of the shepherd answering the bleat of the lost sheep and all the rural neighbors that night

helping him celebrate the fact that it was safe in the barnyard; that of the bad boy, reduced to the swines' trough, greeted home with such banqueting and jewelry that it stupefied the older son with jealousy and disgust; that of the Pharisee full of braggadocio and the publican smiting his breast with a stroke that brought down the heavens in commiseration; stories about leprosy, about paralysis, about catalepsy, about dropsy, about ophthalmia—stories that he so well told that they have rolled down to the present and will roll down through the entire future.

The most of the Old Testament is made up of inspired anecdotes about Adam and Eve, about Jacob, about Esau, about Ahab and Jezebel, about Jonah, about Daniel, about Deborah, about Vashti, about men and women of whom the story gave an accurate photograph long before human photography was born. Let all Christian workers, prayer meeting talkers, Sunday school teachers and preachers know the power of that which my text calls the "tale that is told."

In what way could the fact that infidelity will not help any one die well be so powerfully presented as by the incident concerning a man falling ill in Paris just after the death of Voltaire, when a professional nurse was called in and she asked, "Is the gentleman a Christian?" "Why do you ask that?" said the messenger. "If the nurse who attended Voltaire in his last illness, and for all the wealth of Europe I would never see another infidel die." What discourse in its moral and spiritual effect could equal a tale like that?

You might argue upon the fact that those fallen are brothers and sisters, but could we impress any one with such a truth so well as by the scene near Victoria park, London, where men were digging a deep drain and the shoring gave way and a great pile of earth fell upon the workmen. A man stood there, with his hands in his pockets looking at those who were trying to shovel away the earth from those who were buried, but when some one said to the spectator, "Bill, your brother is down there," then the spectator threw off his coat and went to work with an agony of earnestness to fetch up his brother. What course of argument could so well as that incident set forth that when we tell for the salvation of a soul it is a brother whom we are trying to save?

A second reading of my text reminds me that life is not only a story told, but that it is a brief story. A long narrative stretched out indefinitely loses its interest. It is generally the story that takes only a minute or half a minute to rehearse that arrests the attention. And that gives additional interest to the story of our life. It is a short story. Sub-tract from our life all the hours of necessary sleep, all the hours of incapacity through fatigue or illness, all the hours of childhood and youth before we get fairly to work, and you have abbreviated the story of life so much that you can appreciate the psalmist's remark when he said, "Thou hast made my days as a hand's breadth," and can appreciate the apostle James' expression when he compares life to "a vapor that appeareth for a little season and then vanishes away."

It does not take long to tell all the vicissitudes of life—the gladness and the griefs, the arrivals and the departures, the successes and the failures, the victories and the defeats, the ups and the downs. The longer we live the shorter the years. We hardly get over the bewildering fatigue of selecting gifts for children and friends and see that the presents get off in time to arrive on the appropriate day than we see another advancing group of holidays. Summer fruit so sharply changes the summer harvest, and the snow of the white blossoms of springtime come so soon after the snows of winter. It is a remark so often made that it fails to make any impression and the platitude that calls for no reply, "How rapidly time goes."

Every century is a big wheel of years, which makes a hundred revolutions and breaks down. Every year is a big wheel of months and makes 12 revolutions and then ceases. Geologists and theologians go into elaborations of guesses as to how long the world will probably last; how long before the volcanic forces will explode it, or meteoric stroke demolish it, or the cold of a long winter freeze out its population, or the fires of a last conflagration burn it.

My friends, as our life is short, punctuality is one of the important virtues and lack of punctuality one of the worst of crimes. How many who know nothing of punctuality arrive at the depot five minutes after the train is gone. They get to the wharf in time to see that the steamer has swung 500 yards from the dock. They are late at church and annoy all who have promptly taken their places; the late comers not being as good as a Christian woman who when asked how she could always be so early at church replied, "It is part of my religion not to disturb the religion of others." The tardy ones mentioned are apt to speak the word of counsel when it is too late. They are resolved to repent at some time in the future, but when they come up "the door is shut." They resolve to save a soul when it is already ruined.

But short as time is it is long enough if we rightly employ it. The trouble is we waste so much time we cannot catch up. Some of us have been chasing time we lost at 20 years of age, or 30 years of age, or 40 years of age, and if we lived 250 years we could never overtake it. Joseph, a poor apprentice, every morning passed a certain store as the church clock struck 6 at the moment when the merchant took down his shutters, each of his years saying, "Good morning, sir," and nothing else.

A third reading of my text reminds me that life is not only a story told, but a story listened to. There is nothing more vexatious to any one than to tell a story when people are not attending. They may be whispering on some other subject, or they are preoccupied. One cannot tell a story effectively unless there are good listeners. Well, that which in my text is called the "tale that is told" has plenty of listeners. There is no such thing as being alone. God listens, and the air is full of spiritual intelligences all listening, and the world listens to the story of our life, some hoping it will be successful, others hoping it will be a failure.

We all talk about public life and private life, but there is no private life. The story of our life, however insignificant it may seem to be, will win the applause or hiss of a great multitude that no man can number. As a "tale that is told" among admirers or antagonists, celestial or pandemoniacs, the universe is full of listening ears as well as of gleaming eyes. If we say or do the right thing, that is known. I suppose the population of the intelligences in the air is more numerous than the population of intelligences on the earth. Oh, that the story of our life might be fit for such an audience in such an auditorium! God grant that wisdom and fidelity and earnestness and truth may characterize the "tale that is told."

Ave, all the world will yet listen to and be redeemed by a "tale that is told." We are all telling it, each in his own way—some by voice, some by pen, some by artist's pencil, some by harp and some by song; mother telling it to child, teacher telling it to a Sabbath class, reformer telling it to outcast, preacher telling it to assembly. The story of the lowliest of God's creatures down to this scarred and blasted island of a world. He was ordered back from its shores and struck through with lances of human hate as soon as he landed. Shepherd's dog baying on the hills that Christmas night, was better treated than this rescuer of race, yet keeping right on, brambles on brow, feet on spikes, flagellated with whips that had lumps of lead fastened to them, through midnight without lanterns, through storms without shelter, through years that got blacker until they ended in a noonday with the sun blotted out. Mightiest tale ever told, and keep on telling it until the last sorrow is assuaged and the last animosity is quenched and the last dark is white with the lily and golden with the cowslip and blue with the gentian and crimson with the rose.

While reading my text the fourth time I bethink myself that the story of life will end when the group breaks up. The tale told to be something when the listeners depart. Sometimes we have been in groups interestedly listening to some story told when other engagements or the hour of the night demanded the going of the guests. That stopped the story. By the exit of another year I am reminded that these earthly groups will break up. No family group or social group or religious group or political group stays long together.

The family group breaks up. Did you ever know a household that for 25 years remained intact? Not one. Was there ever a church record the same after the passage of 25 years or 15 years or 10 years? The fact is that the story of our life will soon end because the group of listeners will be gone. So you see if we are going to give the right trend and emphasis we must give it right away. If there are old people in the group of our influence, all we can do for them will be in five or ten years. If there are children around us, in 10 or 15 years they will be fashioning the story of their own life. "What thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might." Passing all, passing everything, as a "tale that is told," my text, in referring to the years, reminds me that in 12 hours this year will forever have gone away. Ninety-nine out of the hundred years of this century will have disappeared. We have only one year of the century left. There ought to be something especially suggestive in the last year of the century. It ought to be a year of unparalleled industries, of unheard of conservation. Not a person in any of our audiences this day can remember the first year of the century. Not a person in any of our audiences to-day will ever again see the last year of a century.

Oh, crowd this last year with prayers, with hosannas, with kind words, with helpfulness. Mark the peroration of the century the climax of Christlike deeds. Close up the

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