

PASSING OF A GREAT PREACHER

Remarkable Career of the Late Rev. Dr. T. De Witt Talmage—His Wonderful Influence For Good—How Three of His Churches Took on "Red Wings of Fire"—Interesting Anecdotes.

[Copyright, 1902, by Louis Klopsch.]

There is but one man in America who can draw and hold and thrill every Sabbath the year round an audience of thousands and who preaches the gospel every week to 20,000,000, but one man who thinks in pictures and paints with a large brush in colors that burn and glow, and the nations gather around his pictures and feel an uplift and a holy thrill. This was said by a celebrated orator ten years ago of Thomas De Witt Talmage, the farmer's boy, whose remarkable career has just ended. Yet there was nothing in his boyhood home or early surroundings from which an arguery could be drawn of the worldwide fame he afterward attained. On a little farm in the New Jersey village of Bound Brook, the youngest son of a family of twelve children, the future pulpit orator first saw the light seventy years ago. His parents toiled hard and lived frugally that they might give their children an education. The eldest brother at the close of his college career went to China as a missionary and won renown there. Another became a minister, and De Witt, the youngest of all, chose the profession of the law. After graduating with honor from the University of the City of New York he spent a year in special studies. But his parents never ceased to hope that he might become a preacher. Their hopes were fulfilled, and in 1853, at the age of twenty-one, he entered the College of New Brunswick to prepare for the ministry.

As a student he was eccentric rather than brilliant. He set the laws of pulpit oratory at defiance and with bold originality spoke the thing that was in him in current phraseology and in his own way. "You must change your style," his teacher said to him. "Otherwise no pulpit will be open to you." But somehow the people listened to the daring young preacher whose doctrines, while familiar and orthodox, were explained in novel and unconventional language and illustrated by figures and events of the ordinary daily life.

HIS FIRST PASTORATE.

At the conclusion of his theological course he received an invitation from a church at Belleville, N. J., to become its pastor. He accepted it and spent three years in that quiet town. He was fond of relating an incident of that early time which to the last occupied a grateful place in his memory. He was promised a stipend of \$800 a year, which seemed to him a magnificent income. But he was fresh from college, with a college student's poverty. The first installment of the income was not due, and he was glad that, whenever the loneliness of his bachelor lodging became oppressive or his larder bare, the hospitable homes of his people were open to him. There was a parsonage attached to the church, but it was as bare of furniture as his pocketbook was of money. A few of his parishioners suspected the condition of his finances, and one day they suggested that he take a week's vacation. On his return one of his church officers handed him the key of the parsonage. He entered and to his amazement found it carpeted and cozily furnished from basement to garret. In the cellar was a stock of coal, and the pantry was filled with provisions. Even the kitchen stove contained a fire, ready laid. "All I had to do in beginning housekeeping," said Dr. Talmage in telling the incident, "was to strike a match." This was one of his earliest gleams of "Ministers' Sunshine."

Belleville, however, could not retain him long. Other churches offered a wider sphere of labor, and at the end of his third year he accepted a call to a church at Syracuse, N. Y. There his powers became more widely known, and invitations to more prominent pulpits poured in upon him. In 1862 a call came from the Second Reformed church of Philadelphia, giving him the opportunity of reaching the people of a great city. He accepted it, and his vivid, dramatic address, his anecdotal allusion and his fresh and pertinent illustrations took the people by storm. His brilliant vocabulary and the superb imagery that marked all his addresses were a revelation. It was pulpit oratory redeemed and sublimated. This sudden popularity might have spoiled some men, but young Talmage kept a close watch on himself. It gave him a sense of enlarged responsibility, and he became even more careful not only in the preparation of his sermons, but in his general conduct.

HIS LAST CIGAR.

At the beginning of his Philadelphia pastorate a characteristic incident occurred. Dr. Talmage at that time was a smoker. A member of his congregation, a tobacco merchant, called on him in his study, and, detecting the odor of tobacco, he casually remarked on leaving that he would like to have the pleasure of sending the doctor some choice cigars. Next day the preacher found on his study table a box filled with fragrant Havanas, and on the top of the cigars was the card of the sender, inscribed, "With compliments." He took out a cigar, looked at it, turned it

around between his thumb and finger and soliloquized, "Shall I smoke and enjoy these and thus very likely impair my influence with this man and his friends and my congregation in general, or shall I put influence and example first?" He laid the cigar back in the box, closed it with a snap and returned it to the sender with this note:

My Dear Sir—I have stopped smoking—quit today. T. D. W. T.

The sudden resolution, acted out in the spur of the moment, was typical of his whole life.

In 1860, seven years after his settlement in Philadelphia, Dr. Talmage received simultaneous calls to Chicago, Brooklyn and San Francisco. Their demands spurred him to still higher effort. He chose Brooklyn, as he believed that city needed him most. The call bore only seventeen signatures, but it was unanimous, for there were but seventeen members in the church. They had a large building, but the pews were mostly empty, and though it stood among a teeming population the church was exerting little influence. In March, 1860, he preached his first sermon there. The transformation that followed seemed magical. Every service was crowded. Within a year it was decided to erect a new edifice capable of seating 3,000. Dr. Talmage's first sermon was from the text, "Compel them to come in," but it seemed an inaptitude, for the people came in such numbers that many were compelled to stay out.

"RED WINGS OF FIRE"

Two years afterward, on a Sunday morning in December, 1872, Dr. Talmage looked from the window of his house and saw his beloved church "putting on red wings of fire" until it swept the heavens, a lurid mass of conflagration.

Undismayed by the destruction of their church, the congregation soon began to build a still larger structure which would seat 5,000. Although the completed edifice was the largest church of its denomination in America, it was never large enough to hold the crowds who came to listen to the now famous preacher. The regular hearers alone were nearly sufficient to fill the building, and their number was augmented by hundreds from New York, by many from other states and even by transatlantic visitors, who had read his sermons printed in their home journals. For fully fifteen years the church had uninterrupted prosperity, which was rudely broken on Oct. 13, 1880, by the complete destruction of the second tabernacle by fire. A third tabernacle was built still larger than its predecessors. It was finished in 1891, and its dedication was a great public occasion. Large delegations, drawn from every section of the Union, came, bringing congratulations.

It was a grand and beautiful temple of worship, rich in ornamentation, vast in seating capacity and perfect in acoustics. "I never could sing a note or raise a tune," Dr. Talmage would often say. Yet the music, the strains of the great, deep toned thirty thousand dollar organ, mingling with the mighty swell of voices, led by Peter All's silver cornet, was the finest imaginable. Three years later, when a series of meetings were held to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of his pastorate in Brooklyn, the state, the city and the clergy of the neighborhood united in recognition of the eminence Dr. Talmage had achieved. He was overwhelmed with verbal congratulations and good wishes, and telegrams, letters and cable dispatches came from illustrious personages here and beyond the seas. It was, however, the closing scene in his long succession of Brooklyn triumphs, for on the following Sunday, May 13, 1894, a fire broke out in the church at the close of the morning service, and the fine building in a few hours became a pile of smoking ruins.

HIS TOUR OF THE GLOBE.

Saddened by the destruction of his third and most beautiful tabernacle, Dr. Talmage for a time ceased active pastoral work and went abroad on a tour of the globe. He preached to large audiences in Australia, New Zealand, India and Great Britain and on his return published an account of his journeyings in a volume entitled "The Earth Girdled," which was widely circulated. He now devoted himself almost exclusively to his editorial duties on The Christian Herald, to which he had been a regular weekly contributor since 1878, becoming editor in chief in 1890. Dr. Louis Klopsch, the proprietor of that journal, had been his intimate friend and business associate for many years. He had furnished Dr. Talmage's sermons since 1855, distributing them regularly every week to over 3,000 newspapers. It is estimated that the total number of weekly readers reached by the syndicate and through other channels was not less than 20,000,000, an audience far more vast than has ever been addressed by any other writer or preacher in the world, ancient or modern.

"A MISSION OF BREAD."

During the next two years he varied his literary work by frequent preaching and lecture tours and an occasional visit abroad. He had a big, warm heart and generous impulses, and was interested in various philanthropic

movements, some of them of wide scope. His love of such work was fostered by his experience in 1892 when he visited Russia with Dr. Klopsch on "a mission of bread," first sending on ahead the steamship Leo, laden with 50,000 sacks of flour, the gift of generous Americans to the starving Russian peasants. While in St. Petersburg the Americans were summoned to Peterhof, the imperial summer residence, where they were presented to the Czar Alexander, the empress, Czarowitz Nicholas, the present emperor, and other royalties. That the stalwart American preacher made an impression was evident from the fact that the emperor sent to the visitors handsome gifts of gold and silver. The enthusiastic municipalities of St. Petersburg and Moscow gave them public fetes, and in the former city the astonished divine was carried on the shoulders of a cheering Russian crowd in front of the duma, or town hall. Dr. Talmage often referred with kindling eye to this Russian welcome, and he spoke many a kindly word for the young czar. In later years, with voice and pen, he greatly helped the cause of Armenian, Cuban and Porto Rican relief. In the great India famine and a few years ago in Chinese relief. Altogether, with his splendid talent for reaching the popular heart, \$2,000,000 was raised in these various worldwide charities. He was a member and active worker in a number of charitable organizations, but in these, as in all others of the same char-

acter, he invariably kept in the background. He is one of the incorporators of the Bowery mission of New York, the pioneer of American rescue missions.

HIS WORK IN WASHINGTON.

In 1895 Dr. Talmage accepted for a time a pastoral call from the First Presbyterian church in Washington, which is known as "the church of the presidents," many incumbents of the White House having worshipped there in former years. Among his parishioners were President Cleveland, many cabinet members and other high officials. He was the most popular minister at the national capital, and his church was crowded to the doors. But urgent calls from other quarters were multiplying, and he finally decided, though not without reluctance, to give up local pastoral work and devote himself exclusively to answering these demands. He retired from active connection with the Washington church in 1900 and thereafter gave himself up wholly to editorial work and preaching and lecturing.

The passing years served to increase his fame, and the announcement of his preaching was always sufficient to attract a vast audience. His personal mail was probably the largest of any man in America outside of public office. There were thousands who wrote to him, asking advice in spiritual things and laying their hearts bare to one whom they regarded as bearing a divine mission and "speaking with authority."

Dr. Talmage's home at 1400 Massachusetts avenue, Washington, was a handsome four story building, modern in style. Here in the center of national influence and culture the great preacher dispensed his hospitality to guests who visited him from all parts of the world. His study was an ideal snuggery, lined with well filled bookshelves and big, inviting, leather covered chairs and settees. Books and periodicals were everywhere. Near by was a famous collection of relics from eastern lands

troughs from the brook Elah (whence David took the stones with which he slew Goliath), relics from the Acropolis, from the Parthenon, from Mars hill (where Paul preached to the Athenians), from Sinai, Jerusalem, Olivet and even Calvary.

GREAT SERMONS AT SEVENTY.

Few men in literary life retained their intellectual vigor so long. Even those who knew him best could detect no diminution in the force of his eloquence and no dimming of the luster of his splendid periods though he had turned seventy. His last sermons were every whit as brilliant as those he composed when in his prime. His eye was as clear, his voice as flexible and resonant and his step as elastic as though he were not nearing that border land "where burdens are laid down." Those last few golden years were in some respects the happiest of his life. Though they were busy years, they still left him some leisure. In the summer, which he usually passed at his beautiful country home at Easthampton, N. Y., he did an immense amount of literary work. He was a most agreeable host and could recall with photographic fidelity scenes and events long passed, delighting his guests with such reminiscences. He was the personal friend of many leading Americans of the preceding half century, and his recollections of presidents, statesmen, authors and other eminent people were full of interest. Few men possessed the ability to tell a story so entertainingly. He had the keenest sense of humor and frequently set his audience in a roar by his droll wit and comic mimicry. But it was always good humored, and his wit, like a buttoned foil, had a point that hurt nobody. A master of invective, he was kindly at heart and never quarrelsome. Once when he was asked why he allowed attacks upon him to pass unheeded he answered with a characteristic story:

THE FATE OF THE FLY.

"When I was preaching my first sermon, on a hot summer Sunday, I had just given out the text and had hardly opened my mouth for the first sentence of my discourse when in popped

FOND OF RELIGIOUS LITERATURE.

All his life he was inordinately fond of religious literature. Even in childhood he would read Scott's Commentaries, a bulky volume, when he was too small to sit upon a chair and had to use a stool instead. If he could have mastered even a single foreign language, he would probably have become a missionary like his brothers, but he

announced, "Mr. Talmage will now address us on the influence of the moon upon vegetation," I felt as though I had been struck with a baseball bat. But I rose, pulled up my collar and made a speech. I don't remember what I said, but it was as full of serious, fine spun resounding phrases as though I had been a scientific professor fresh from the study of the subject and it passed muster. After that experience," he added, laughing, "I felt quite equal to speaking offhand on anything."

"TALMAGISMS."

As an editorial writer Dr. Talmage was versatile and prolific, and his weekly contributions on an immense variety of topics would fill many volumes. His writing was as entertaining and pungent as his preaching and full of brilliant eccentricities—"Talmagisms," as they were called. He coined new words and invented new phrases. If the topic was to his liking, the pen raced to keep time with the thought. It was the same with his sermons. Once conceived in the busy brain, the committing to paper was swift and exciting. Still, with all this haste, nothing could exceed the scrupulous care he took with his finished manuscript. He once wired from Cincinnati to his publisher in New York instructions to change a comma in his current sermon to a semicolon. He had detected the error while reading proof on the train.

His phenomenal memory was never at a loss. He had spoken or written of thousands of topics, and he remembered almost everything he had ever preached. In preparing his twenty volume series of sermons he used only 500, or less than half the total number he had preached. In addition to at least a thousand sermons of 4,000 words each, each sermon different from the other, this vast pulpit repository aggregating probably 4,000,000 words, he was the author of a number of lectures, the most popular being "The New Life of the Nation," "Grumblers," "Our New Home," "Big Blunders" and "The Bright Side of Things."

Originality in all things was perhaps the most pronounced trait of Dr. Talmage's character. In his literary work he scorned to borrow, though his own unique phrases and ideas were the prey of many petty plagiarists. Although his fame will rest chiefly upon his sermonic writings, his treatment of lighter topics was brilliant and clever. But his finest work was not among the shallows. His pen could go deeply into the secrets of the heart and soul, and such was his rare gift that with a single sentence he could move a multitude. Some of his volumes written in the early part of his career show rare vivacity and wit and give a clew to his wonderful success as an entertaining lecturer in mature years. Among the periodicals to which he contributed at various times were the New York Weekly, Hearth and Home, The Independent and The Christian at Work. About thirty volumes of his sermons have been published, twenty volumes appearing in a single series in 1900. His other works besides those already mentioned include "Crumbs Swept Up," "Around the Tea Table," "Sparks From My Anvil," "A Thousand Gems," "From Manger to Throne," "Sports That Kill," "The Wedding Ring," "Night Sides of City Life," "The Poetry of Life," "Old Wells Dug Out," "Abominations of Modern Society" and "The Earth Girdled." For many years his revenues from his editorial and other literary work, his book royalties and his lectures netted him the princely income of \$20,000 a year, these figures by no means representing the maximum.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS.

In person Dr. Talmage was above the medium height and well proportioned. His head was of average size, with marked evidence of intellectual power. His eyes were light and his complexion fresh and indicative of robust health. His face shone with amiability and cheerfulness. His conversation was animated, his manner gentle and cordial in the extreme. Self reliance, calmness and judgment were apparent, and his bearing indicated dignity and self possession, yet he was no wise ostentatious or affected, and his hearty manner and genial flow of conversation placed even a stranger on agreeable terms with him at once. He was a most fascinating conversationalist. His language was marked by nobility, sentiment, poetry and humor, and he talked with a fine originality, never being afraid to show his feelings. When in the glee and enthusiasm of the moment at a church festival he exclaimed that he felt "like a morning star," it was not that his taste induced him to take his illustration from negro minstrelsy; but, acting on the impulse of the moment, he seized upon a popular saying to express his own feelings. Men of stiff propriety and starched dignity would not have done such a thing. With him it was the impulsive expression of a free, cheerful heart bubbling over with the love of humor and the "milk of human kindness." Whether it was due to eccentricity or to an unusual store of rich, exuberant animal spirits, he was certainly more real and true to genuine human nature in social life than most of his ministerial contemporaries.

Dr. Talmage was three times married. His first wife was Miss Mary Avery of Brooklyn. A son, Thomas (who died in his nineteenth year), and a daughter, Jessie, were the fruits of this union. A great sorrow shadowed his life when Mrs. Talmage was accidentally drowned in the Schuylkill river near Philadelphia in 1862. His second marriage was with Miss Susan Whittemore, and five children were born to them, the eldest, Frank, being now a Presbyterian minister in Chicago. Again bereaved by death of his matrimonial companion, he married, in 1890, Mrs. Collier of Allegheny, who survives him.



REV. DR. T. DE WITT TALMAGE AT HIS DESK.