

THE IRON DID SWIM

Sermon of Dr. Talmage from a Little-Used Text.

Lesson Drawn from Story of the Stone and His Lost Ax Head and Its Recovery—Wonder of Divine Power.

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In this discourse Dr. Talmage makes practical use of an occurrence in the orient which has seldom attracted particular attention. Text, 2 Kings 6: 1-7: "The iron did swim."

A theological seminary in the valley of palms, near the river Jordan, had become so popular in the time of Elisha, the prophet, that more accommodations were needed for the students. The classrooms and the dormitories must be enlarged or an entirely new building constructed. What will they do? Will they send up to Jerusalem and solicit contributions for this undertaking? Will they send out agents to raise the money for a new theological seminary? Having raised the money, will they send for orders of Lebanon and marble from the quarries where Ahab got the stone for the pillars and walls of his palace? No; the students propose to build it themselves. They were rugged boys who had been brought up in the country and who had never been weakened by the luxuries of city life. All they ask is that Elisha, their professor and prophet, go along with them to the woods and boss the job. They start for the work, Elisha and his students. Plenty of lumber in those regions along the Jordan. The sycamore is a stout, strong tree and good for timber. Mr. Gladstone asked me if I had seen in Palestine any sycamore tree more beautiful than the one we stood under at Harvard. I told him I had not.

The sycamores near the Jordan are now attacked by Elisha's students, for they must have lumber for the new theological seminary. I suppose some of the students made an awkward stroke, and they were exterminated axmen. Stand from under! Crash goes one of the trees, and another and another. But something now happens so wonderful that the occurrence will tax the credulity of the ages, so wonderful that many still think it never happened at all. One of the students, not able to own an ax, had borrowed one. You must remember that while the ax of olden time was much like our modern ax, it differed in the fact that instead of the helve or handle being thrust into a socket in the iron head the head of the ax was fastened on the handle by a leather thong, and so it might slip the helve. A student of the seminary was swinging his ax against one of these trees, and whether it was at the moment he made his first stroke and the chips flew or was after he had cut the tree from all sides so deep that it was ready to fall we are not told, but the ax head and the handle parted. Being near the river side, the ax head dropped into the river and sank to the muddy bottom. Great was the student's dismay. If it had been his own ax it would have been bad enough, but the ax did not belong to him. He had no means to buy another for the kind man who had loaned it to him, but God helps the helpless, and He generally helps through some good and sympathetic soul, and in this case it was Elisha, who was in the woods and on the river bank at the time. He did not see the ax head fly off, and so he asked the student where it dropped. He was shown the place where it went down into the river. Then Elisha broke off a branch of a tree and threw it into the water, and the ax head rose and floated to the bank, so that the student had just to stoop down and take up the restored property. Now you see the meaning of my text: "The iron did swim."

Suppose a hundred years ago some one had told people that the time would come when hundreds of thousands of tons of iron would float on the Atlantic and Pacific—iron ships from New York to Southampton, from London to Calcutta, from San Francisco to Canton. The man making such a prophecy would have been sent to an asylum or carefully watched as incompetent to go alone. We have all in our day seen iron swim. Now, if man can make hundreds of tons of metal float, I am disposed to think that the Almighty could make an ax head float.

"What," says some one, "would be the use of such a miracle? Of vast, vast, of eternal importance. The students were preparing for the ministry. They had joined the theological seminary to get all its advantages. They needed to have their faith strengthened; they needed to be assured that God can do everything; they needed to learn that God does notice of little things; that there is no emergency of life where He is not willing to help. Standing on the banks of that Jordan, those students of that day of the recalled ax head had their faith reinforced, and among them that had found out in the classrooms that learned institutions had ever done more in the way of fitting them for their coming profession.

I hear from different sources that there is a great deal of infidelity in some of the theological seminaries of our day. They think that the garden of Eden is an allegory, and that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, and that the book of Job is only a drama, and that the book of Jonah is an unreliable fish story, and that water was not turned into wine, although the historian now by large glasses turns wine into water, and

that most of the so-called miracles of the Old and the New Testaments were wrought by natural causes. When these infidels graduate from the theological seminary and take the pulpits of America as exponents of the Holy Scriptures, what advocates they will be of that Gospel for the truth of which the martyrs died! Hail the Polycarps and Hugh Latimers and John Knoxes of the twentieth century, believing the Bible is true in spots! Would to God that some great revival of religion might sweep through all the theological seminaries of this land, confirming the faith of the coming exponents of an entire Bible!

Furthermore, in that scene of the text God sanctions borrowing and sets forth the importance of returning. I do not think there would have been any miracle performed if the young man had owned the ax that slipped the helve. The young man cried out in the hearing of the prophet: "Alas, master, for it is borrowed!" He had a right to borrow. There are times when we have not only a right to borrow, but it is a duty to borrow. There are times when we ought to lend. For Christ in His sermon on the Mount declared: "From him that would borrow of thee turn thou not away." It is right that one borrow the means of getting an education, as the young student of my text borrowed the ax. It is right to borrow means for the forwarding of commercial ends.

If in any assembly it were requested that those who had never borrowed hold up their hands, none would be lifted, or if here and there a hand were lifted we would know that it was a case of inviolability. Borrow! Why, we are borrowing all the time. We borrow from the Lord the sunlight that shows us the way, our water that slakes our thirst, the food that refreshes us three times a day, the pillow on which we slumber. We borrow gladness from our friends; we borrow all elevated surroundings. The church borrows all its beauty from the Christ who founded it. In our songs and sermons we borrow from the raptures of Heaven.

We borrow time; we will borrow eternity, and that constant borrowing implies a return. For what we borrow from God we must pay back in hearty thanks and Christian service, in improvement of ourselves and helpfulness for others. For what we borrow in the shape of protection from government we must pay back in patriotic devotion. For what we borrow from our parents in their good example and their hard work wrought for us in our journey from cradle to manhood and womanhood for all the ages to come we ought to be paying back.

Hayden, the painter, said his ruin began the day he began to borrow money, and he wrote in his diary: "Here began debt and obligation, out of which I have never been and never shall be extricated as long as I live." Dr. Johnson said: "Do not custom yourself to consider debt only as an inconvenience. You will find it a calamity." We have a right to borrow for the absolute necessities, expecting to pay back again, but we ought never to borrow for the luxuries.

In the summer watering places north, south, east and west, in the great hotels, serving at table and in baggage room, are theological students who are in preparation for the ministry, carrying in July and August the means by which they may study the other months of the year. I hail them; I cheer them; I bless them. They will be the Herzebels in the observatories, the Dr. Motts in your medical colleges, the Rufus Chastotes in your courtrooms, the Bishop McVinalines in your pulpits. Let them not now be ashamed of the ax with which they hew the beam for Elisha's seminary.

Let all those who toil for their education remember that they are especially favored, and if things go against them and the ax head should fly the helve that every hindrance may some time turn out advantageously, as the accident by the river Jordan, which seemed to finish the young student's capacity to help build the new seminary, resulted in a splendid demonstration of the power of Elisha's God to help anyone who helped himself. No ax that was ever welded has wrought so well as that ax, the handle and head of which parted.

Notice, also, how God is superior to every law that He has made, even the strongest law of nature, the law of gravitation. The stick that Elisha threw into the Jordan floated, but the ax head sank. By inexorable law it must go down into the depths of the Jordan, yet without so much as a touch the hard, heavy metal sought the surface. There it is, the floating ax head. What a rebuke to those who reject miracles on the ground that they are contrary to nature, as though the law were stronger than the God who made the law! Again and again in Bible times was that law revoked! Witness the scene on the banks of the same Jordan, where, in after time, the ax head sank and rose. Elisha stood there, wearing cape of sheepskin, when there was a mighty stir in the air and a flashing equipage descended. Elisha stepped into it, and on wheels of fire, drawn by horses of fire, he rose. Fifty men for three days searched the mountains to see if the body of Elisha had not been dropped among the rocks and picked at by birds of prey, but the search was in vain. The law of gravitation had been defeated.

Do not feel lonely because your nearest neighbor may be miles away, because the width of the continent may separate you from the place where your cradle was rocked and your father's grave was dug. Wakened though you may be by Bon's roar or panther's scream, God will help you, whether at the time the forestaround you raves in the midnight hurricane or you suffer from something quite

insignificant, like the loss of an ax head. Take your Bible out under the trees, if the weather will permit, and after you have listened to the solo of a bird in the treetops or the long meter psalm of the thunder, read those words of the Bible, which must have been written out of doors: "The trees of the Lord are full of sap, the cedars of Lebanon which He hath planted, where the birds make their nests; as for the stork, the fir trees are her house. The high hills are a refuge for the wild goats and the rocks for the conies. Thou makest darkness, and it is night, wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth. The young lions roar after their prey and seek their meat from God. The sun ariseth, they gather themselves together and lay them down in their dens. Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labor until the evening. O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom has thou made them all. The earth is full of thy riches." How do you like that sublime pastoral?

My subject also reminds us of the importance of keeping our chief implement for work in good order. I think that young theological student on the banks of Jordan was to blame for not examining the ax before he lifted it that day against a tree. He could in a moment have found out whether the helve and the head were firmly fastened. The simple fact was the ax was not in good order or the strongest stroke that sent the edge into the hard sycamore would not have left the implement headless. So God has given every one of us an ax with which to hew. Let us keep it in good order, having been sharpened by Bible study and strengthened by prayer. The reason we sometimes fall in our work is because we have a dull ax or we do not know how aright to swing it. The head is not aright on the handle. At the time we want the most skill for work and perfect equilibrium we lose our head. We expend in useless excitement the nervous energy that we ought to have employed in direct, straightforward work. Your ax may be a pen or a type or a yardstick or a scales or a tongue which in legislative hall or business circles or Sabbath class or pulpit is to speak for God and righteousness, but the ax will not be worth much until it has been sharpened on the grindstone of affliction.

Go right through the ax, and go right through all the past ages, and show me one man or woman who has done anything for the world worth speaking of whose ax was not ground on the revolving wheel of mighty trouble. It was not David, for he was dethroned and hounded by unfaithful Abimelech. Surely it was not Paul, for he was shipwrecked and whipped with 20 stripes from rods of elm wood on his way to bedlam. Surely it was not Abraham Lincoln, called by every vile name that human and satanic turpitudes could invent and depicted by cartoonists with more meanness than any other man ever suffered, on the way to meet a bullet crashing through his temples.

But I have come to the foot of the Alps, which we must climb before we can see the wide reach of my subject. See in all this theme how the impossibilities may be turned into possibilities. That ax head was sunken in the muddiest river that could be found. The alarmed student of Elisha may know where it went down and may dive for it and perhaps fetch it up, but can the sunken ax head be lifted without a hand thrust deep into the mud at the bottom of the river? No; that is impossible. I admit, as far as human power is concerned, it is impossible, but with God all things are possible. After the tree branch was thrown upon the surface of Jordan "the iron did swim."

You have a wayward boy. Only God knows how you have cried over him. You have tried everything for his reformation. Where is he now—in this city, in this country, or has he crossed the sea? "Oh," you say, "I do not know where he is. He went away in the sulks and did not say where he was going." You have about made up your mind that you will never hear from him again. Pretty hard pay he gives you for all your kindness and the nights you sat up with him when he was sick. Perhaps he struck you one day when you were trying to persuade him to do better. How different was the feeling of that hard fist against your face from his little hand in infancy patting your cheek! Father! Mother! That is an impossible that I would like to see God take hold of the conversion of that boy, for he will never be anything but a boy to you, though you should live to see him 50 years of age. Did you say his heart is hard? How hard? Hard as stone? "Yes," you say; "harder than that. Hard as iron." But here is a God who can lift the soul that has been deepest down. Here is a God who can raise a soul out of the blackest depths of sin and wretchedness. Here is a God who can make iron swim, the God of Elisha, the God of the young student that stood in dismay on the banks of the Jordan at the time of the lost ax head. Lay hold of the Lord in a prayer that will take no denial.

Alas, there are impossibilities before thousands of people—called to do work that it is impossible for them to do, called to bear burdens that it is impossible for them to bear, called to endure suffering that it is impossible for them to endure. Read all the Gospel promises, rally all your faith, and, while you will always be called to worship the God of hope, to-day, with all the concentrated energies of my soul, I implore you to bow down and worship the God who can turn the impossibilities into the possibles. It was no trivial purpose, but for grand and glorious uses I have spoken to you to-day of the borrowed, the lost and the restored ax head.

The Retreatant's Story

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It was the last afternoon of the three-days' retreat annually given to "associates and other ladies" by the Sisters of St. Martha. The period of unworldly silence had done its work well for the retreatants. Worldly faces were quiet and less anxious, tired ones had lost something of their weariness, sweet young girl-devotees had acquired a look of saintly calm. Only the conductor of the retreat, Father John Burton, S. J., seemed weary. It is not easy to pour out spiritual inspiration and encouragement four times daily to say nothing of three services and innumerable private interviews. Father John Burton, resting his head on his hand in an unexpectedly idle moment, tried not to feel jaded. But he aroused himself with an effort when the brief interval of quiet was broken by a tap at the door.

He swung it open cordially and Sister Alice Ambrose, the sister in charge of the retreat, entered, leading a young girl whom the priest remembered to have seen before him continually during the past three days. He had noticed her particularly because—for reasons most human but quite unbecoming a "served religious"—she had awakened poignant memories of the earlier days passed "in the world," and of some one for love of whom he had been led to follow the priesthood. This girl—but he shook the wrong thoughts from him roughly.

"I shall be very glad to hear you," he said, in response to the soft murmur wherewith Sister Alice Ambrose conveyed to him that the girl was sore troubled over some bygone experience. "Will you not sit down and let me see if I can help you?"

A moment later, when the door had closed softly behind Sister Alice Ambrose, his quiet eyes and sympathetic manner drew out the beginning of the story. The small hands of the speaker clasped and unclasped nervously as she told it.

"A long time ago—when I was a child—I ruined my sister's life and happiness. I didn't quite know what I was doing, but—but I was jealous, and I knew I was doing wrong. My sister, who is nine years older than myself, had always been devoted to me. After she was engaged to be married I was less with her. So I hated her lover bitterly, although he was very kind to me, and I think no one ever suspected my feeling, and I longed, in childish fashion, to part them. One day, when they were to have been married shortly, I—"

"Yes?" said the priest, encouragingly, seeing that she found it difficult to continue. "One day you—"

"My sister had promised to take me out that afternoon," came the recital, told to the accompaniment of those restless, haunting, nervous movements of the fingers, "but when John—her lover—sent a message asking her to accompany him somewhere, she put me off with promises of some future pleasure. I was mad with anger and jealousy, and when she sent me down to the parlor, that afternoon, to entertain him while she finished dressing, I—I told him that she had gone out with a cousin known to admire her, and I destroyed the hastily written note he asked me to hand her as soon as she came in. The note told her that he must leave the city, that evening, for an absence of several months; it asked her, since they had missed each other at that time, to meet him at the depot. I told Julie that he had left the house in impatient anger, refusing to wait longer for her, and when I heard that the engagement had been broken, some weeks later, because of John's inexplicable conduct and persistent silence, I rejoiced.

"My sister was ill for months, and I feared to tell her. Then I was sent to boarding school while our mother accompanied Julie to the mountains, and I only returned home in time for her wedding to Charlie, the cousin who had loved her so long. I felt then, being a little older, that I must hold my peace for ever, and gradually, I forgot all about my wrongdoing, save for occasional recollections now and then. But now—I am to be married myself, shortly, and last week my sister, in urging me to be sure that I really loved my lover, let me know something of what she herself has missed and suffered through my deception."

"Her marriage, then, has not been a happy one?" asked the priest, his face pale, his manner strangely quiet.

"Yes and no," was the troubled answer. "Her husband is a good man and he loves her, but she can only respect and admire him. She married him out of pique, and for loneliness and heartache. She told me last week that the only man she should ever love in this world was the man from whom—from whom I parted her. I should have told her all then, but she added that only the knowledge of his unworthiness helped her to live without him. Had she been separated from him for any other reason, she felt she should have gone mad."

"Since then I have been tortured by an agony of remorse and uncertainty. Last night I resolved to confide in you, and abide by your decision. Shall I tell my sister the whole story, or shall I hold my peace?"

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amies— . . . But there is mercy with Thee. . . . "No," said the priest, suddenly, "you must never tell your sister. Bear the burden of remorse and repentance bravely, as just punishment for your sinning—but be comforted concerning it, because, after all, it was a sin of ignorance and childhood, and you knew not what you were doing. And never, so long as you live, mention the matter to any other human being. Better, by far, that your sister should continue to believe her lover unworthy, than that, learning of the injustice rendered both him and herself, she should have one whit added to the load which weighs so heavily upon her."

The girl slipped from the room, quietly, smiling through her tears, happy, relieved of her heaviest sorrow, and Father John Burton, S. J., quiet man of God and the spirit, sank upon his knees suddenly, hiding his face in his hands. The strong throes of a mighty struggle were upon him. Speechless with sorrow, he strove valiantly to vanquish the natural resentment of the long-forgotten self which cried aloud for expression. But the hard years of patience and self-denial bore him brave testimony in that hour of disturbance, and when he presently went forth to address the assembled women his face and voice were like those of a prophet inspired.

"Father, forgive them—for they know not what they do," was the subject he announced for the meditation of that evening, and the eyes of the man discussing it rested, with a peculiar and meaningful tenderness, on the face of a girl before him—the face of the girl the burden of whose terrible responsibility had so recently been shifted from her shoulders to his own.

ETHEL M. COLSON.
NOT TRUE TO THE POLE.

Variations of the Magnetic Needle Discovered Aways Back in Columbus' Time.

Few familiar sayings convey a more erroneous notion than the phrase: "True as the needle to the pole." In order to keep track of the unfaithfulness of the needle to the pole, or the "variation of the compass" from true north, the United States maintains a separate bureau, the division of terrestrial magnetism. The government is now preparing, in cooperation with European countries, greatly to enlarge its work, and to make the investigations of 1902 memorable for their thoroughness, says Youth's Companion.

The magnetic needle varies not only at different places, but the variation changes from year to year, and even at different times in the day. On the "magnet-survey" charts those places which at a particular time have the same amount of variation are connected by what is known as an isogonic, or equal variation, line. Through those points on the map in which there is no variation of the needle from the true north a line known as the agonic passes.

Iron deposits and mountain ranges modify the action of the unknown causes of the periodical variation, and cause these lines to become even more crooked than those which mark equal temperatures, known as isothermal lines. Isogonic charts may be accurate today and full of errors in a few years. The celebrated Mason and Dixon's line, between Pennsylvania and Maryland, which was surveyed in the years 1763 to 1767, was run by the stars and not by the needle, a great piece of foresight in that day. If it had been surveyed by the compass in 1800 it would have shown a deviation in some places of two miles. Were the line to be run by

uncorrected compass to-day, the variation would reach nearly 19 miles to the south, and the rich coal-fields of two Maryland counties would be thrown into Pennsylvania. The discovery of the magnetic needle's shortcomings is believed to have been made during the voyage of Columbus. The disclosure really constituted a high tribute to the scientific perceptions of that day, even though it spread consternation among the ships' crews.

WEBSTER'S PLEA.
Story of One of the First Victories Before the Bar of the Famous Lawyer.

Soon after Daniel Webster came to the bar, he was retained in a suit between two neighbors, says the Green Bag. It seemed that they had got to loggerheads about a disputed line, out of which had grown trespass suits and all sorts of controversies, and that the more malicious and artful of the two had so plied the other with law in one shape or another that he had nearly ruined him. The latter at last became aroused and brought an action against the other for malicious prosecution, and retained Mr. Webster to manage it. On the trial proof of malice was clear and convincing, and it was evident that the day of reckoning had at last come. In summing up for the plaintiff Mr. Webster, after making a strong argument against the defendant, showing that he had again and again instituted suits against his client, merely to perplex and annoy him, closed as follows: "In a word, gentlemen, I do not see how I can better conclude than in the words of the good old psalm." Then he looked at the jury, but pointing to the defendant, he repeated from his favorite authors, Sternhold and Hopkins:

He digged a pit, he digged it deep,
He digged it for his brother,
By his great sin, he did fall in
The pit he digged for other.
And so it proved. The verdict was heavy against the "digger."

Population of Nevada.
The population of Nevada has shrunk to 43,000.

ENGLISH RAILWAY SERVICE.
Noted Traveler Calls It Poor as Compared with American, German and French.

In every respect the United States is superior to England—comparing like with like—but what is more notable, in Germany and France railway travel is cleaner, more speedy, and cheaper. No week passes that I do not run out from London for country air, and wherever I find a train that reaches its destination on time I make a note of it as a strange thing, writes Poultney Bigelow, in New York Independent. There are one or two trains that run fairly fast, according to British notions, and are tolerably good, owing to a faint degree of competition, but in the majority of cases the Englishman is satisfied to travel 25 miles an hour in dirty carriages which are not heated in winter and which are habitually late in starting and arriving. And as to overcrowding, I have frequently found myself in railway carriages wherein passengers have had to stand up all the way after having paid their fares. So far as my experience goes, I can travel with more speed and comfort in a German third-class carriage from Berlin to any big town like Hamburg, Frankfurt or Cologne than in a first-class carriage in England, and it will cost me about one-fifth of the English price.