

TALMAGE'S SERMON.

"THE PETTY ANNOYANCES OF LIFE" THE SUBJECT.

Golden Text: "Moreover the Lord Thy God Will Send the Hornet Among Them Until They That Hide Themselves from These Are Destroyed."

WASHINGTON, D. C., Dec. 15, 1895. Dr. Talmage today chose for his discourse a theme that will appeal to most people, viz.: The petty annoyances of life.

It seems as if the insect world were determined to extirpate the human race. It bombards the grain fields and the orchards and the vineyards. The Colorado beetle, the Nebraska grasshopper, the New Jersey locust, the universal potato-bug, seem to carry on the work which was begun ages ago when the insects buzzed out of Noah's Ark as the door was opened.

In my text, the hornet flies out on its mission. It is a species of wasp, swift in its motion and violent in its sting. Its touch is torture to man or beast. We have all seen the cattle run bellowing under the cut of its lancet. In boyhood we used to stand cautiously looking at the globular nest hung from the tree branch, and while we were looking at the wonderful covering we were struck with something that sent us shrieking away. The hornet goes in swarms. It has captains over hundreds, and twenty of them alighting on one man will produce death.

The Persians attempted to conquer a Christian city, but the elephants and the beasts on which the Persians rode were assailed by the hornet, so that the whole army was broken up, and the besieged city was rescued. This burning and noxious insect stung out the Hittites and the Canaanites from their country. What gleaming sword and chariot of war could not accomplish was done by the puncture of an insect. The Lord sent the hornet.

My friends, when we are assailed by great behemoths of trouble, we become chivalric, and we assault them; we get on the high-mettled steed of our courage, and we make a cavalry charge at them, and if God be with us, we come out stronger and better than when we went in. But, alas, for these insect annoyances of life—these foes too small to shoot—these things without any avoirdupois weight—the gnats and the midges and the flies and the wasps and the hornets! In other words, it is the small stinging annoyances of our life which drive us out and use us up. In the best-conditioned life, for some grand and glorious purpose God has sent the hornet.

I remark, in the first place, that these small stinging annoyances may come in the shape of a nervous organization. People who are prostrated under typhoid fevers or with broken bones get plenty of sympathy; but who pines anybody that is nervous? The doctors say, and the family say, and everybody says, "Oh, she's only a little nervous; that's all!" The sound of a heavy foot, the harsh clearing of a throat, a discord in music, a want of harmony between shawl and the glove on the same person, a curt answer, a passing slight, the wind from the east, any one of ten thousand annoyances opens the door for the hornet. The fact is that the vast majority of the people in this country are overworked, and their nerves are the first to give out. A great multitude are under the strain of Leyden, who, when he was told by his physician that if he did not stop working while he was in such poor physical health he would die, responded, "Doctor, whether I live or die, the wheel must keep going round." These sensitive persons of whom I speak have a bleeding sensitiveness. The flies love to light on anything raw, and these people are like the Canaanites spoken of in the text or in the context—they have a very thin covering, and are vulnerable at all points. "And the Lord sent the hornet."

Again, the small insect annoyances may come to us in the shape of friends and acquaintances who are always saying disagreeable things. There are some people you cannot be with for half an hour but you feel cheered and comforted. Then there are other people you cannot be with for five minutes before you feel miserable. They do not mean to disturb you, but they sting you to the bone. They gather up all the yarn which the gossips spin, and retail it. They gather up all the adverse criticisms about your person, about your business, about your home, about your church, and they make your ear the funnel into which they pour it. They laugh heartily when they tell you, as though it were a good joke, and you laugh too—outside.

These people are brought to our attention in the Bible, in the Book of Ruth. Naomi went forth beautiful and with the finest of worldly prospects, and into another land; but, after awhile, she came back widowed and sick and poor. What did her friends do when she came to the city? They all went out, and, instead of giving her common-sense consolation, what did they do? Read the Book of Ruth and find out. They threw up their hands and said, "Is this Naomi?" as much as to say, "How awful bad you do look!" When I entered the ministry I looked very pale for years, and every year, for four or five years, a hundred times a year, I was asked if I had not the consumption; and, passing through the room I would sometimes hear people sigh and say, "A-ah! not long for this world!" I resolved in those times that I never, in any conversation, would say anything

depressing, and by the help of God I have kept the resolution. "These people of whom I speak reap and bind in the great harvest-field of discouragement. Some day you greet them with an hilarious "good-morning," and they come buzzing at you with some depressing information. "The Lord sent the hornet."

When I see so many people in the world who like to say disagreeable things, and write disagreeable things, I come almost in my weaker moments to believe what a man said to me in Philadelphia one Monday morning. I went to get the horse at the livery stable, and the hostler, a plain man, said to me, "Mr. Talmage, I saw that you preached to the young men yesterday." I said, "Yes." He said, "No use, no use; man's a failure."

Perhaps these small insect annoyances will come in the shape of a domestic irritation. The parlor and the kitchen do not always harmonize. To get good service and to keep it, is one of the greatest questions of the country. Sometimes it may be the arrogance and inconsiderateness of employers, but, whatever be the fact, we all admit there are these insect annoyances winging their way out from the culinary department. If the grace of God be not in the heart of the house-keeper, she cannot maintain her equilibrium. The men come home at night and hear the story of these annoyances, and say, "Oh, these home troubles are very little things!" They are small, small as wasps, but they sting. Martha's nerves were all unstrung when she rushed in, asking Christ to scold Mary, and there are tens of thousands of women who are dying, stung to death by these pestiferous domestic annoyances. "The Lord sent the hornet."

These small insect disturbances may also come in the shape of business irritations. There are men here who went through 1857 and the 24th of September, 1869, without losing their balance, who are every day unhorsed by little annoyances—a clerk's ill manners, or a blot of ink on a bill of lading, or the extravagance of a partner who overdraws his account, or the underselling by a business rival, or the whispering of store confidences in the street, or the making of some little bad debt which was against your judgment, just to please somebody else.

It is not the panics that kill the merchants. Panics come only once in ten or twenty years. It is the constant din of these every-day annoyances which is sending so many of our best merchants into nervous dyspepsia and paralysis and the grave. When our national commerce fell flat on its face, these men stood up and felt almost defiant; but their life is going away now under the swarm of these pestiferous annoyances. "The Lord sent the hornet."

These annoyances are sent on us, I think, to wake us up from our lethargy. There is nothing that makes a man so lively as a nest of "yellow jackets," and I think that these annoyances are intended to persuade us of the fact that this is not a world for us to stop in. If we had a bed of everything that was attractive and soft and easy, what would we want of heaven? We think that the hollow tree sends the hornet, or we may think that the devil sends the hornet. I want to correct your opinion. "The Lord sent the hornet."

Then I think these annoyances come on us to culture our patience. In the gymnasium, you find upright parallel bars—upright bars, with holes over each other for pegs to be put in. Then the gymnast takes a peg in each hand and he begins to climb, one inch at a time, or two inches, and getting his strength cultured, reaches after awhile the ceiling. And it seems to me that these annoyances in life are a moral gymnasium, each worriment a peg with which we are to climb higher and higher in Christian attainment. We all love to see patience, but it cannot be cultured in fair weather. Patience is a child of the storm. If you had everything desirable, and there was nothing more to get, what would you want with patience? The only time to culture it is when you are led about, and sick and half dead.

"Oh, you say, 'if I only had the circumstances of some well-to-do man I would be patient, too.' You might as well say, 'if it were not for this water I would swim;' or, 'I could shoot this gun if it were not for the charge.' When you stand chin-deep in annoyances is the time for you to swim out toward the great headlands of Christian attainment, so as to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and to have fellowship with his sufferings.

Nothing but the furnace will ever burn out of us the clinker and the slag. I have formed this theory in regard to small annoyances and vexations. It takes just so much trouble to fit us for usefulness and for heaven. The only question is, whether we shall take it in the bulk or pulverized and granulated. Here is one man who takes it in the bulk. His back is broken, or his eyesight put out, or some other awful calamity befalls him; while the vast majority of people take the thing piecemeal. Which way would you rather have it? Of course in piecemeal. Better have five aching teeth than one broken jaw; better ten fly-blisters than one amputation; better twenty squalls than one cyclone. There may be a difference of opinion as to allopathy and homeopathy; but in this matter of trouble I like homeopathic doses—small pellets of annoyance rather than some knock-down dose of calamity. Instead of the thunderbolt give us the hornet. If you have a bank, you would a great deal rather that fifty men would come in with checks less than a hundred dollars than to have two depositors come in the same day each wanting ten thousand dollars. In this latter case you cough and look down to the floor, and you look up at the ceiling, before you look into the safe.

New, my friends, would you not rather have these small drafts of annoyance on your bank of faith than some all-staggering demand upon your endurance? But remember that little as well as great annoyances equally require you to trust in Christ for succor, and for deliverance from impatience and irritability. "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee." In the village of Hamelin, tradition says, there was an invasion of rats, and these small creatures almost devoured the town, and threatened the lives of the population; and the story is that a piper came out one day and played a very sweet tune, and all the vermin followed him—followed him to the banks of the Weser; then he blew a blast and then they dropped in and disappeared forever. Of course this is a fable; but I wish I could, on the sweet flute of the Gospel, draw forth all the nibbling and burrowing annoyances of your life, and play them down into the depths forever.

I go into a sculptor's studio and see him shaping a statue. He has a chisel in one hand and a mallet in the other, and he gives a very gentle stroke—click, click, click! I say, "Why don't you strike harder?" "Oh!" he replies, "that would shatter the statue. I can't do it that way; I must do it this way." So he works on, and after awhile the features come out, and everybody that enters the studio is charmed and fascinated. Well, God has your soul under process of development, and it is the little annoyances and vexations of life that are chiseling out your immortal nature. It is click, click, click! I wonder why some great providence does not come, and with one stroke prepare you for heaven. Ah, no; God says that is not the way. And so he keeps on by strokes of little vexations, until at last you shall be a glad spectacle for angels and for men.

You know that a large fortune may be spent in small change, and a vast amount of moral character may go away in small depletions. It is the little troubles of life that are having more effect upon you than great ones. A swarm of locusts will kill a grain-field sooner than the incursion of three or four cattle. You say, "Since I lost my child, since I lost my property, I have been a different man." But you do not recognize the architecture of little annoyances, that are hewing, digging, cutting, shaping, splitting and interjoining your moral qualities. Rats may sink a ship. One locifer match may send destruction through a block of store-houses. Catherine de Medici got her death from smelling a poisonous rose. Columbus, by stopping and asking for a piece of bread and a drink of water at a Franciscan convent, was led to the discovery of a new world. And there is an intimate connection between trifles and immensities, between nothings and everythings.

Now, be careful to let none of those annoyances go through your soul unarraigned. Compel them to administer to your spiritual wealth. The scratch of a sixpenny nail sometimes produces lock-jaw, and the clip of a most insignificant annoyance may damage you forever. Do not let any annoyance or perplexity come across your soul without its making you better.

Our Government does not think it belittling to put a tax on small articles. The individual taxes do not amount to much, but in the aggregate to millions and millions of dollars. And I would have you, oh Christian man, put a high tariff on every annoyance and vexation that comes through your soul. This might not amount to much in single cases, but in the aggregate it would be a great revenue of spiritual strength and satisfaction. A bee can suck honey even out of a nettle; and if you have the grace of God in your heart, you can get sweetness out of that which would otherwise irritate and annoy.

A returned missionary told me that a company of adventurers rowing up the Ganges were stung to death by flies that infest that region at certain seasons. I have seen the earth strewn with the carcasses of men slain by insect annoyances. The only way to get prepared for the great troubles of life is to conquer these small troubles. What would you say of a soldier who refused to load his gun, or to go into the conflict because it was only a skirmish, saying, "I am not going to expend my ammunition on a skirmish; wait until there comes a general engagement, and then you will see how courageous I am, and what battling I will do?" The general would say to such a man: "If you are not faithful in a general engagement, you would be nothing in a general engagement." And I have to tell you, oh Christian men, if you cannot apply the principles of Christ's religion on a small scale, you will never be able to apply them on a large scale.

Polycarp was condemned to be burned to death. The stake was planted. He was fastened to it. The faggots were placed around him, the fires kindled, but history tells us that the flames bent outward like the canvas of a ship in a stout breeze, so that the flames, instead of destroying Polycarp, were only a wall between him and his enemies. They had actually to destroy him with the poniard; the flames would not touch him. Well, my hearer, I want you to understand that by God's grace the flames of trial, instead of consuming your soul, are only going to be a wall of defense, and a canopy of blessing. God is going to fulfill to you the blessing and the promise, as he did to Polycarp. "When thou walkest through the fire thou shalt not be burned." Now you do not understand; you shall know hereafter. In heaven you will bless God even for the hornet.

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