

## TRAGEDY, DEATH, AND DECAY

BY ROBERT SPARKS WALKER

ONE cannot find a treasure until it has been lost. When I was engaged in business and was forced to charge off so many hundred dollars at the close of each year, this question invariably came to me: Is it possible to make money unless some one is losing it? The question cannot be proved by test, because money will always be lost. We shall have to get rid of the bankrupt courts and change the nature of fire and floods, and even the very natures of many human beings before we can give it a fair trial.

With tragedies happening daily, many of which might be avoided, we can always depend on them calling for their quota of human lives. Often in our forgetfulness, we unconsciously become so selfish that it requires the most serious tragedy to arouse us to a sense of duty to our fellowmen. Sometimes I feel that we are permanently stupid, and that there are few, if any good movements launched and brought to a success but what have had their births in tragedy. Tragedy! the thoughts of it is the one single thing that will cause people to rise up and act with reasonable speed to do an unselfish act to protect the life and the virtue of another.

A few weeks ago, I went over a great battleground which covers many acres of land. During the three days fighting there, thousands of men lost their lives. For many years visitors have been coming from far and near to visit the place. As I stood on that great battle-field and watched strangers silently viewing the once bloody spots, this question arose spontaneously: After all, what is the one thing that brings people here?

There were thousands of men engaged on both sides in that conflict, and for three days each side struggled hard to conquer the other. If during that time there had not been a single life lost, although the Nation had won a most decisive victory, I dare say

that to-day the spot would not contain a single marker or monument, and the old battlefield would scarcely attract passing notice. But when in any great conflict men give their lives heroically, then and there that place becomes sacred ground for the generations of people that follow.

Life in itself is dependent on tragedy. For example, our physical bodies are entirely dependent on the simple green leaf. The green leaf is the one thing that may truthfully be said to stand firmly between man and eternity. The green leaf is the only thing under heaven that can take out of the earth that which is not food and convert it into a product that will sustain life. But as repulsive as the thoughts may be to some people, before a green leaf thrives, it must be connected directly with the relics and remains of the tragedies of the ages! If the naked eye is growing dim, then it becomes necessary to employ the microscope to see what this earthly fertile bed of soil contains, which is so constantly being reworked for the preservation of all animal life. Each particle adds its unimpeachable testimony to the facts in the case, and its history connects it somewhere with a tragedy the date of which may have been lost in the mists of the past. Do you agree with me when we examine together just a handful of what we regard as the precious leaf mold?

I found it in the shady wood,  
Where oaks and maples long have stood,  
And there the sable mass all lay  
With not a hint of stone or clay;  
The tender rootlets modest stole  
Throughout the mold and took their toll;  
And here and there I sometimes found  
Small holes where beetles left the ground.

What can this fertile leaf mold be?  
A fragrant bit of history,  
That's printed plain in letters bold,  
With illustrations pure as gold;  
It once had life and beauty too,  
It once had breath, and then could do  
In wisdom's way with Nature's wit,  
The work that God assigned to it.

Into a handful let us look:  
 Here are some leaves from last year's book  
 That felt the breeze on maple trees,  
 And here's a twig killed by a freeze;  
 A thousand insects' lives have run,  
 And here's a sparrow's skeleton,  
 In this black mass that quiet lay  
 A-yielding fast to death's decay.

No leaf mold rich on earth can be  
 Unless stern death runs wild and free;  
 Impossible is life on earth  
 Without cold death to give it birth;  
 Out of it all there shall arise  
 More creatures stronger that comprise  
 The good of all returned to dust  
 Where Nature long has held her trust.

And as I hold this rich leaf mold  
 Before my eyes, a phantom bold  
 Of mold composed of thoughts and deeds  
 Comes marching up and ne'er recedes;  
 This ghost of mine,—deeds of the past,—  
 In memory decaying fast,  
 Is fertile food for purer thought,  
 And noble deeds unselfish wrought.

In giving lectures on Nature subjects, I have often referred to an old tree as a creation that furnishes the best example of what an unselfish life should be. Yet when a tree is thrown under the spotlight of reason, then its altruism takes flight and disappears as stealthily as a shadow. It is true that the old tree gives its foliage back to the soil for the nourishment of new crops, and for making beds that animals may be kept warm and comfortable. It is true that it feeds and sustains animal life, and that its wood supplies fuel that keeps families from being snuffed out by blizzards. It is true that the body of the tree is sacrificed in the construction of homes, of vehicles, of ships and other useful devices. In a way the tree furnishes a good example how that a human being may spend his life unselfishly, but it is altruistic because the Creator has willed it so.

However, a tree sometimes really becomes altruistic. Altruism

is merely the performance of some act, the purpose of which is for the sole benefit of some other creature beside the actor. The performance of this act must draw on the energies and the resources of the doer, causing the creature to make a sacrifice from which it must not hope nor expect to receive any material reward.

The most of the vegetable citizens perform such acts, but it is tragedy that compels them to do it. For example, the one prominent altruistic act performed by the white oak tree is that of feeding and housing a small insect. This little wasp-like creature makes the well known Woolsower gall that is so often seen in summer on the white oak tree. It is a beautiful creation, indeed. In the hatching and the development of these galls on the twigs of the white oak, the tree is compelled to do something exclusively for the welfare of another creature. This is just what the white oak does, and to me the tragedy of a gall on any tree or plant is not short of being a miracle. The physical creation known as the Woolsower gall possesses an individual beauty that is not excelled by many flowers. The same thing is true of some of the other galls.

On the other hand, I regard as the greatest miracle in the human family is the sudden awakening of a man or woman, who forgets self, and turns his or her attention and resources, unselfishly to the welfare of the remainder of humanity. But it must be repeated, that it sometimes requires the hand of tragedy to arouse men from their deep selfish slumber.

Tragedy in the material world has a brother in the spiritual world. Tragedy in the former is a necessity to the latter, no matter how much we dread to face it. It has been so arranged that we cannot see beyond the bounds of the sepulcher, that the human soul may attain its fullest and finest development. In the meanwhile, the person into whose life tragedy enters, there is an afterglow of beauty that is wholly impossible without its experience.

Tragedy lurks about us, and in our efforts to prevent it, and in our attempts to heal the wounds and assuage the grief of those who have fallen within its wake, there is born within us what is known as pity, mercy, sympathy, humility, service, and unselfishness. Out of all these there is born that most precious of all treasures,—immortality!

And Death Came.

## II

"Which one dear? Which one?" I doubled the question as I looked wonderingly into my young companion's blue eyes less than a year after we had been passing on life's trail together. I say "trail" because we did not often walk over smooth roads and paved highways, for ours were the meadows and the woods, among brambles where the birds and wild flowers stay.

We realized that unless by some fatal accident, that one of us would likely be compelled to go alone. The dread of separation was equally shared between us, for neither of us was really happy when not in the other's company.

She was well and strong, and so was I, but still we knew that according to the laws of Nature, that one of us would likely sooner or later be forced to look on the other through sorrowful eyes. And, we agreed that when that fateful moment came that we would meet it bravely, still we hoped that the dark hour might be delayed until both of us had reached the foot of the hill where all paths end naturally.

It was easy for us to help each other plan for the changed life that was certain to follow. At intervals for twenty years we discussed the question, and while we were sane enough to admit that such a thing was possible, yet it did seem that it would not strike us, for were we both not strong, happy, and young? Twenty years of unbroken affections between two persons and, life without the other becomes an unthinkable suggestion. But we were willing to go and, if perchance it was she, I was to hold her hand and kiss her as she passed out of my life to join our first born and wait with him until I caught up as they journeyed together on the trail in the Great Beyond.

Well, twenty years of uninterrupted happiness and our honeymoon was not well begun, but this morning the life cord suddenly snapped and how strange I felt when I sat on the bed by her side fondling for the last time a warm hand I had been holding so long, from which I was conscious that life was rapidly passing! Each time I caressed that soft hand in mine a wedding ring left its deep impression in the palm of my hand, which from sorrow seemed itself frantic. She could not speak, and probably was not conscious that I was living up to my agreement. Just two weeks previous, we little dreamed that this ordeal was on the way.

How often she asked me a few days before if I thought that we had taken our last tramp in the fields and woodlands together? To be among the wild flowers and hear the voice of the birds was one of her greatest delights. The answer clogged my throat.

This morning Death came and answered that question for me. Before my own eyes he took from me my rarest and dearest treasure. "Which one, dear?" That old, old question has been answered for us. It came, and our early strange question's answer places on me that most sorrowful task which we hoped would not come early in life.

All that she ever said that was so sensible to make me brave in this hour comes up before me, but how differently it sounds this morning! How difficult it is for me to think, feel, and do as we have planned in the event of a separation like this! All is silent. Now I must fall on faith and faith alone to bridge my feet across the strange chasm that will lead me safely across the abyss to where she has been transplanted. It is a dream pure and simple, and I find myself constantly trying to convince myself of this fact.

### III

You have watched the form of a dear one as she departs until a turn in the road, to the right or to the left, when the strange curve swallows her form. When I saw that she was leaving me forever, as well as I loved the beauty spots of the earth and all the good things that life holds, I was desperately desirous of joining her on the adventure. How I did long to clasp her hand in mine and go romping along the winding path that leads into eternity as we had been doing on our tramps into the fragrant woodlands on earth! She did not dread to go alone except for leaving me and her boy behind. Not to have both by her side was the only unnaturalness of the journey.

She was gone. Gone forever. I was left standing on a desert island with eyes firmly fixed on space where I had seen her last. I tried to go to the same haunts where we had so often gone together. Out in the yard I see the Spiderwort that she and I dug with our own hands on a gravelly hillside two years before and transplanted. To me, this morning, this wild flower has a soul, for there surely is something about it that makes it immortal today. And, close by grows the clump of Robin's Plantain which she brought in from the woods, and somehow I can see images of her



face copied in this wild flower which also seems strangely immortalized!

Today the blue jay flew to the persimmon tree that grows in the front yard, and in my mind, how greatly he has grown in importance, for she always admired him and his beautiful dress. Despite the accusations brought against him, she was never able to see anything except the good, the pure, and the beauty in his life as she did her neighbors. To me the blue jay is dearer than he has ever been before.

The wren, the catbird, the mockingbird, the bluebird, the vesper sparrow, the robin, the cardinal, and the wood thrush can not come to me this morning without being exceedingly magnified in my estimation. How ardently she loved them, and now I find myself adoring even the mention of their names! The earth, where I know she has often stood, and where her hands have worked the soil for the flower beds, is holy ground. I go through the yard seeking the places where I know her feet have often pressed. How I do like to look at the spots where she liked to be, and I find myself being magically drawn into the nooks that were so dear to her.

This morning, I hate more than I ever did all forms of vice, all the ugly, all that is untrue, all forms of hypocrisy, I suppose for her sake. Whatever she disliked, I care not to think about, but whatever she loved is strangely associated with love eternal.

The first few hours each morning, I  
 Am normal, but soon as the day  
 Wears wearily along, and I  
 Can hear her soft footsteps as they  
 Come gently tripping to my room  
 Up stairs, but never enter in,  
 The memory of her becomes  
 So burdensome that I am plunged  
 Into a mental stupor; yet  
 I like to live amidst old haunts  
 Of hers, for there's a sweetness in  
 The comatose atmosphere: but  
 What I cannot endure, is to  
 Go to the woods, or church alone,  
 For there I am so strangely conscious  
 That pains from my old wounds become  
 Unbearable, because the anaesthetic  
 Has not the strength to put me to sleep.