

The Fate of Tomlinson

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May 23, 1909¹

It has been observed with seeming acuteness that climatic conditions have a modifying influence upon the development of character. The extreme and barren rigor of the frigid zone fails to give the warmth necessary to the broad and versatile personality. On the other hand, the luxuriant abundance of the torrid zone tends to extinguish ambition and activity and produce a type of human nature whose distinguishing characteristic is most pungently described in the now famous words, "innocuous desuetude."² It is pointed out that only in the temperate zones with its variety of climate and the healthy ruggedness of its conditions that the most satisfactory specimens of manhood and womanhood are produced.

While it is possible to carry this kind of logic too far, yet there is a large element of truth in it. But it is to be noted that the same kind of logic may be applied to the development of the moral and spiritual life of man. Between the two possibilities of frigid barrenness on the one hand, and the enervating atmosphere of tropical luxuriance on the other hand, there is the temperate zone of the moral and spiritual life in which we develop a broad versatile, vigorous moral and spiritual character.

I am not concerned this morning with [the] specific danger of moral and spiritual barrenness growing out of the mere negation of warmth, but rather with that danger to the health of personality which comes from the excessive abundance of

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #4"—that includes sermons from February 14, 1909 to December 26, 1909.

² Desuetude is the principle that laws can stop having any legal force when they have not been used for a long time. In 1886 President Grover Cleveland suspended certain officials during a recess of the Senate, for a reason he wrote, "And so it happens that after an existence of nearly twenty years of an almost innocuous desuetude these laws are brought forth." The phrase became widely, frequently ironically, used through the 1920s.

luxuriance of life. Just as a strong and robust person loses his strength and powers of physical activity when he is compelled for any reason to spend his time in idleness, so with the intellectual, moral and spiritual aspects of life, voluntary or enforced idleness and inactivity results in moral, intellectual, and spiritual paralysis.

By nature we are constructive, creating, and producing beings. We live in the midst of a universe ordered in an intelligent goodwill. Our life is pregnant with infinite possibilities. This universe, ordered in an intelligent goodwill, this universe, shot through and through with the vitalizing powers of truth, goodness and beauty, is the inexhaustible mine out of which we take the raw material of life. Acting upon this raw material in the experiences of human life, we create, we construct, we produce, the visualized image, in the forms of labor, art, thought and conduct, of the idealized vision of human life. Each for the joy of the working, and each in his separate star, draws the thing as he sees it for the God of things as they are. When we are acting and reacting upon this inexhaustible storehouse of infinite truth; when we are taking from its unlimited supply, the requisite amount of raw material, and in the experiences of life are transforming that raw material into a finished product, we are living, a vigorous, healthy, intellectual, moral, and spiritual life. In this kind of a life, we are fulfilling our natural divine functions of creating, constructing, and producing a world of reality, which in some degree, measures up to the ideal of reality. When these functions cease, there appears the inevitable degeneration and decay, the growth of a fatty, flabby flesh, in place of the degenerating muscles of a normal active life. The supreme talent of human life is its capacity to create and produce the actual realization of its rational ideals. When that talent is not put to its proper use in the interchanging activities of human relationships, when that talent is buried in the deadly soil of inactivity and passivity, there immediately begins the slow, but inevitable, process of degeneration. The wages of passivity and inactivity is oblivion. Kipling, in his tremendously virile, and illuminating poem, "Tomlinson,"³ gives a dramatic, and highly

³ Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) English novelist, poet and journalist. His poem, "Tomlinson" was first published in *The National Observer*, January 23, 1892. It can be found in *The Works of Rudyard Kipling, Departmental Ditties and Ballads and*

imaginative picture of this insidious danger of human life. While you are doubtless familiar with the poem, I wish to recall it, quoting passages here and there. I beg of you to read it.

The point of the poem is that Tomlinson was just that type of a passive, non-creative, non-productive neutral kind of a being of which I have been speaking. He was neither good nor bad. He followed along the lines of least resistance, or rather, let us say, he remained basking in the sun of indolence, waiting for the chance bits of entertainment and excitement to find their way into his life. He reminds us of the alligator stretched out on the mud flats of the Nile, his mouth open, waiting patiently for the flies to come and gather there. When [a] sufficient number have gathered, the mouth snaps together. Thus did this Tomlinson. Thus do thousands of others. They sit in the sun of indolence, intellectually, morally and spiritually inactive, depending for their sustenance upon the thinking, the moral heroism, and the human vitality of others. They assume that they are here to be entertained, and they take their fun where they find it. So it happened, as the poem says, that,

... Tomlinson gave up the ghost in his house in
Berkeley Square.

And a Spirit came to his bedside and gripped him
by the hair—

A Spirit gripped him by the hair and carried him
far away,

Till he heard the roar of a rain-fed ford the roar
of the Milky Way,

Till he heard the roar of the Milky Way die down
and drone and cease,

And they came to the Gate within the Wall where
Peter holds the keys.

"Stand up, stand up now," Tomlinson, and answer
loud and high

"The good that yet did for the sake of men or ever
ye came to die—⁴

Barrack-Room Ballads, New York: Doubleday and McClure Co., 1899, pp. 129-139.

⁴ Rudyard Kipling, "Tomlinson" in *The Works of Rudyard Kipling, Departmental Ditties and Ballads and Barrack-Room Ballads*, New York: Doubleday and McClure Co., 1899, p. 129.

All that Tomlinson can say is to tell them what he has had been told to do by his priest and friend, who was his guide on earth. To which Peter replies,

– "For that ye strove in neighbor-love it shall be written fair,

"But now ye wait at Heaven's Gate and not in Berkeley Square:

"Though we called your friend from his bed this night, he could not speak for you,

"For the race is run by one and one and never by two and two."

Then Tomlinson looked up and down, and little gain was there,

For the naked stars grinned overhead, and he saw that his soul was bare.⁵

Then Tomlinson begins his tale of the good that he has read of, and has heard of. Peter become impatient at this second-hand piety and goodness, and thus replies,.

"Ye have read, ye have felt, ye have guessed, good lack! Ye have hampered Heaven's Gate;

"There's little room between the stars in idleness to prate!

"Oh, none may reach by hired speech of neighbor, priest, and kin,

"Through borrowed deed to God's good meed that lies so fair within;

"Get hence, get hence to the Lord of Wrong, for doom has yet to run,

"and ... the faith that ye share with Berkeley Square uphold you, Tomlinson!"⁶

Thus did the soul of Tomlinson fare in the world of idealistic endeavor after the good. This is but a picture of an absolute principle. We have the talents and the power and the capacity to strive for the good of the sons of men. In the failure to use those powers we barter the soul away, and there is no place for us in the world of idealism. The gates of Heaven, not the heaven

⁵ Rudyard Kipling, "Tomlinson" in *The Works of Rudyard Kipling, Departmental Ditties and Ballads and Barrack-Room Ballads*, New York: Doubleday and McClure Co., 1899, p. 130.

⁶ Rudyard Kipling, "Tomlinson" in *The Works of Rudyard Kipling, Departmental Ditties and Ballads and Barrack-Room Ballads*, New York: Doubleday and McClure Co., 1899, pp. 131-2.

of a hereafter, but the heaven of this life, are shut in our faces, and we are turned out into the empty vacuity of space.

But to return to Tomlinson—

The Spirit gripped him by the hair, and sun by sun
they fell
Till they came to the belt of Naughty Stars that
rim the mouth of Hell:

...

The Wind that blows between the worlds, it nipped
him to the bone,
And he yearned to the flare of Hell-gate there as
the light of his own hearth-stone.⁷

Tomlinson, being shut out from heaven, assumed that he could get into hell without trouble, but the Devil thus addressed him,

"Sit down, sit down upon the slag, and answer loud
and high

"The harm that ye did to the Sons of Men or ever
you came to die."⁸

Tomlinson, much taken aback, began again his tale of weak-kneed sin, and,

The Wind that blows between the worlds, it cut him
like a knife,
And Tomlinson took up the tale and spoke of his
sin in life:

"Once I ha' laughed at the power of Love and twice
at the grip of the Grave,

"And thrice I ha' patted my God on the head that
men might call me brave."

The Devil he blew on a brandered soul and set it
aside to cool:

"Do ye think I would waste my good pit-coal on the
hide of a brain-sick fool?"⁹

⁷ Rudyard Kipling, "Tomlinson" in *The Works of Rudyard Kipling, Departmental Ditties and Ballads and Barrack-Room Ballads*, New York: Doubleday and McClure Co., 1899, p. 132.

⁸ Rudyard Kipling, "Tomlinson" in *The Works of Rudyard Kipling, Departmental Ditties and Ballads and Barrack-Room Ballads*, New York: Doubleday and McClure Co., 1899, p. 133.

⁹ Rudyard Kipling, "Tomlinson" in *The Works of Rudyard Kipling, Departmental Ditties and Ballads and Barrack-Room Ballads*, New York: Doubleday and McClure Co., 1899, p. 134.

Thus the examination continued until at last Tomlinson receives the verdict in these words,

"Ye are neither spirit nor spirk," he said; "ye are
neither book nor brute—
"Go, get ye back to the flesh again for the sake of
Man's repute.
"I'm all o'er-sib to Adam's breed that I should mock
your pain,
"But look that ye win to worthier sin ere ye come
back again.
"Get hence, the hearse is at your door—the grim
black stallions wait—
"They bear your clay to place today. Speed, lest
ye come too late!
"Go back to Earth with a lip unsealed—go back
with an open eye,
"And carry my word to the Sons of Men or ever ye
come to die:
"That the sin they do by two and two they must pay
for one by one—
And ... the God that you took from a printed
book be with you, Tomlinson!"¹⁰

This whole thing is an excellent presentation of the essential human principles of life such as are suggested in that part of the parables of the talents as refers to the man who had the one talent and hid it in the ground.¹¹ It does not make any difference how [many] talents one has, the fact remains that if they are hidden in the ground of inactivity, they vanish from our lives, as living vital forces. The only way in which they be retained and developed is by putting them to active use in the affairs of human life.

We are awakening to a consciousness of the fact that in many aspects of our life we have been viciously inactive, with the inevitable result that we have lost our talents. Take municipal government. A large proportion of men have been inactive. They have simply let others do that in which they should have had a

¹⁰ Rudyard Kipling, "Tomlinson" in *The Works of Rudyard Kipling, Departmental Ditties and Ballads and Barrack-Room Ballads*, New York: Doubleday and McClure Co., 1899, pp. 138-39.

¹¹ See Matthew 25:14-30; and Matthew 25:25 for hiding a talent in the ground.

part. In so doing they have lost their capacity for democracy. One of the sad and yet illuminating aspects of many of the attempted reforms is the fact that the good intentions of the reformers does not make up for the loss in governmental capacity which they have suffered during the periods of inactivity. The purpose of government is not only to regulate the civic affairs for today, but to increase and develop an increasing capacity for government.

Note also a parallel situation in the religious life. The continued and persistent effort to throw the responsibilities of religious thought and feeling upon the shoulders of the priest, but simply dwarfs the spiritual life of man. The talent for religious feeling, thought and aspiration is a universal talent. Creative and productive activity is the only method through which a highly moral and religious aspiration in human life can be attained. Piety is not to be had for the asking. If men would attain unto a religious faith that is grounded in the very nature of things, they may do so only as they put their talents to work upon the problems of life even in the midst of the greatest complexities. The religious life of society has suffered in degree beyond measure because of that vicious idea that Revelation has been closed, and that the good life offers only the humdrum detail of obedience to that which is known, and cheap imitation of that which is set for us as an example. Only a Tomlinson, fit neither for heaven or hell, will accept this religion ready-made for him. Indeed, he cannot if he would. The fact that there is any spiritual life left among those who profess to accept in implicit obedience a ready-made religion handed out to them by some ecclesiastical authority, is evidence that they have been better than their vicious creed. They have not accepted their alleged authority, but have won for themselves in a creative and productive activity a religious faith of their own. Truth alone is authority, and truth can be attained only by living.

Carry this principle through all the departments of society, and you will find that our weaknesses are the apparent result of inactivity and passivity.

It applies equally well in the life of the individual. Life does seem worth living. It is simply because we have not been living, but have just been staying here waiting for entertainment. To him who has a purpose which calls into action

his creative and productive intellectual and moral powers, this bugaboo of the uselessness of life does not exist. To him all things are alive with infinite powers. He finds everywhere that which absorbs his interest, that which calls out in action every power and capacity that he has. His trouble is not that time hangs heavily upon his shoulders, or that he has to rush about like a mad-man in pursuit of some chance pleasure that may render the hours less heavy and long. Much rather is he concerned about the fleeting of time, and he is disturbed lest the years may not be long enough or many enough to enable him to make a beginning of the absorbing task that is before him.

The fate of Tomlinson is to be avoided. To be able neither to take part in the real vital life of productive goodness, nor to be able to take part in the real vital work of destructive evil is indeed a pitiable situation. To be shut from heaven and from hell, and driven out into the dark vacuum of passive oblivion because of inactivity, because one [has] neither spirit nor spirk, is indeed a lamentable and contemptable situation. Aggressive evil and wickedness has a certain dignity about [it], but this plain floating through life, like a ship without a rudder, or a cargo, is sad and depressing, not only to the victim, but to all men, be they good or be they evil.

What to do? Live, live. Apply the principle of democracy to your own life. Put away from the shores and the protected corners of indolence. Put out into the deep, where life is teeming with all its glorious possibilities, and there put down your nets and get a draught from below the surface. Your net will not be empty. Even if conditions cramp and crush, make one desperate [in] struggle, and in that struggle is the taste of the power that makes men free. In every problem of society apply the same principle. Activity, creative, and productive reaction upon the raw material of human life, is the force that draws out the latent powers of the human soul, heretofore hidden beneath the poisonous soil of passivity. Throw upon men responsibility, make each man feel that he is his own priest, and his own ruler, his own philosopher, and his own maker, and he will respond.