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ADDRESS

AT THE FUNERAL OF THE

REV. DR. NOTT.

SCHENECTADY, FEBRUARY 2, 1865.

IN THE

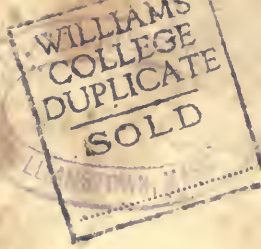
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

BY THE PASTOR.

REV. J. TRUMBULL BACKUS, D.D.

PRINTED FOR THE USE OF THE FAMILY.

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REV. DR. NOTT,

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NEW YORK:
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1866.

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ADDRESS.

THIS occasion makes its own impressions. The silent power of these preparations for the grave, with their sad and tender associations for us all, is more eloquent than could be the most fervid human utterances. It is the voice of God to His mortal creatures.

We look upon this coffin, and think of him whom we have known and revered for these long years, so great, so potent as he was. But *he* is not there, the tabernacle is bereft of its glory. That which gave such power to his eye, such expressiveness to his face, such grandeur and command to that form, *the spirit*, is no more here. It has returned to God.

And we, with hearts full of the high interest and value of his life, gathered about that in its grave dress which was he, where for so long he has been wont to stand between the living and the dead and proclaim salvation, on the spot whence so often he distributed and enforced the sacramental emblems,* let us all receive from that awful repose one more impres-

* Dr. Nott had been accustomed for many years to take part with the pastor in the administration of the Lord's Supper.

sion upon his favorite theme of death and eternal life. As he was laboring down to the river now passed, he said (not consciously), "I will preach." And doth he not preach to us beyond all the matchless oratory of his best days? He, who could so impressively express himself upon the grave and retribution, that he might commend to mortal men Him who through death destroyed the power of death and delivered them, now himself of the dead, and on his way to the sepulchre, preaches his last, his farewell sermon to his pupils, to his co-laborers in pulpit and college, to his fellow-Christians and fellow-sinners. We may no more hear his voice, nor look upon his venerable presence; but his unwonted silence and stillness, the strange indifference to us, his sorrowing friends, have *such* a heart-breaking power, such a divine solemnity of appeal! Holy Spirit, preach Thou to every one here through these memories of him who is to preach no more; make the living lay to heart this day's lesson of Divine Providence.

To others it shall be left, and on more fitting occasion, to remind this community of what he was to them from of old; how he labored for their melioration and welfare in all respects; how every concern of moment to this locality enlisted his generous, far-seeing zeal, (from the very shade trees which relieve and adorn our streets, all through the gradations of municipal

and social life, up to the establishment of the school, and the endowment of the college); how thus, for a period of sixty years, he has been of material and pecuniary advantage beyond any other instrumentality to our city.

Let it be told by others what his relation has been to the important educational record of this, his adopted State; what essential influence he exerted toward the inception of our common school system; how unselfish and noble he was in regard to the interests of the sister colleges of the Commonwealth, and how worthily he fulfilled the trusts reposed in him for them.

Let it be for others to portray his public spirit, his sympathy with all philanthropic enterprises, his singular readiness always to do and to endure for whatever proposed relief of the poor, the oppressed, or the afflicted,—for any real melioration of man.

All this, and such as this, has to be told, and will be again and again repeated in just eulogy. Confident are we that, when his life and influence are recorded by well-informed, competent, and congenial spirits, (impartially, Christianly recorded), it will be so rich in incident, so extraordinary in its facts, so demonstrative of greatness and goodness in its subject, that the world will more than ever take knowledge of him, and honor his memory.

But *our* hearts and memories do not need that, here

and now. To the relation between his life and religion, therefore, we will at present restrict ourselves; and in trying to tell how he began, how he was disciplined, and how he finished, we will determine what his real life was, and what should be our estimate of it.

Looking back nearly a century, we see a little boy of not yet four years, leaning on his mother's knee, gazing with his bright eyes into her fond face, while she instructs him. The lesson is, "Fear God, and keep His commandments." Already the child has committed most of the English version of the Psalms, and very many besides of the grand old renderings of them by Sternhold and Hopkins. What must have been the religious influence of a mother, unusually wrapt up in her precocious son, as she seems to have been, and so devoted to his religious welfare, as this fact implies? The mother * was a gifted woman, as well as fervently pious. She was also, for the times, unusually well educated and accomplished; and she put in requisition all her resources to obviate the disabilities of poverty for the mental and religious culture of the son. She heard him read the Bible entirely through, ere he was four years old. From her he derived his first and finest impressions in that art of elocution for which he became so distinguished (as he often said); herself his only model and critic in that which some supposed to

* Mrs. Stephen Nott was a daughter of Col. Samuel Selden, of Lynn, Conn.

be the artificial result of a very different schooling, but with which she had imbued him till it became a second nature. He said of her: "The light of my young life went out when my mother died;" and, to appreciate this fully, we must have in mind how more than ordinary was the relation of that mother and son; that she was to him companion, as well as counselor, playmate, as well as teacher and mother. He never had any child's society. The reverses of the family compelled him to work regularly on the little farm before he was nine years old, and, though his thirst for knowledge was insatiate, precluded his studying by day. So at night after toil, his mother sympathizing and aiding, the boy was learning and laboring at that early age. That faithful, loving mother died when he was fifteen, but not before her work for his *soul* had been well done. He could not remember when he began to fear and love God, because (we presume) at a *very early period* his heart was turned to the way of salvation. But the effect upon him of her loss, terrible as was the affliction, seems to have been to seal upon his heart the lessons of her pious care, and induce him publicly that year to profess religion, and ultimately to devote himself to the holy ministry.

Dr. Nott was ever and eminently reverent and awe-struck in the contemplation of death. It did

not seem to be an *ordinary* fear of dying. It was rather a fearful impression of death's remorseless indifference to human plans and hopes; a dread, as of an enemy whose dire power to bereave he had sorely tried. His mother's decease was the great trial of his child-life, and at an age when perhaps it is most hard to bear. It doubtless left a deep scar upon *his* heart. Do we not perceive the effect all through his after life?

There was another such impression, when at thirty years of age he, the gifted and widely honored pastor of an Albany charge, at a time when to be so placed and honored was to be the religious monitor of the chief men in our State and nation, the friend and associate of persons whose fame has since been world-wide. In that experience of care and responsibility and severe pressure upon the brain and the heart, (such as led himself to say that he could hardly have lived through it long,) he relied exceedingly upon his gifted and devoted wife.* He had never thought (he said) that *she* would die. Yet remorseless death came again, and blotted out the brightness of his home, and bowed him how deeply! The tradition of this bereavement and its mournful effects lingered in that city through another generation. Is it only an imaginary conviction, that this new and severe lesson accounts, in no small

* She was a daughter of Rev. Joel Benedict, of Plainfield, Conn., with whom Dr. Nott completed his preparation for college, and afterward studied theology, while acting as the Principal of Plainfield Academy.

degree, for that peculiar tone which characterized his after religious life, and preaching the prominence of such thoughts and themes?

Then there was a third stage in this singular experience and its effects. It occurred much later in life. Never can it be forgotten by those who were immediately cognizant of it. An entire community was thrown into the deepest sympathy of grief by the death of his only daughter.* She had made his home so bright, so like it of old, when her mother was its gladness. No doubt he had comforted himself with the confidence that it would be for him ever so to his end. No one could mistake the potency in that ever-to-be-remembered loving influence. But it was not to continue. Again came remorseless death, and threw his pall over the brightness of that home. The blow was severe beyond description, but he met it like a Christian.† The sub-

* She was the wife of Rev. Alonzo Potter, D.D. and LL.D., then Vice-President of Union College, afterward the distinguished prelate of the Episcopal diocese of Pennsylvania.

† Extract from a letter written by Dr. Nott under the influence of that grief:

* * * "Nothing could have been more sudden and unexpected than the death of my daughter, and nothing to me or mine more distressful. Few people live who are bound together with more tender ties than those which bound her to us—especially to me. I had hoped to lean on her as I descended toward the grave, and to hear her voice and feel the support of her hand on my bed of death. But I have been called to build her tomb, and she not mine. Her departure has left a mighty void in my heart, and there remains a sense of desolateness which must be abiding. It is a wreck that cannot be repaired. No other stroke could so have crushed my hopes and joys. But I

limity of that grief cannot be described. Without sternness, without bitterness or murmuring, without distrust of God; but such an appalling power it implied of death, such a renewal was it of his earlier experiences.

This, and such as this, was his discipline from God; as it seems to me, made means of grace, more than any others of his varied trials to prepare him to die the death of the righteous; and probably giving its peculiar tone to his religious experience, and to his public discourses. At any rate, whatever the cause, a prominent characteristic in his preaching, and of his religious life, was this sense of the fearfulness of death. His sermons abounded in it; and thoughtful minds were sure to witness its manifestations in the freedom of social intercourse. Remarkably cheerful and felicitous as he was in society, alive always to the interest,

feel, and from the first have felt, that the arm of God inflicted it. I do not wish, I have not wished, the decision altered. I have a strong conviction on my mind that Maria was prepared to die. She had been ripening for heaven, and I trust was ripe for it. If so, our loss is her gain; and if we truly loved her, therefore, in place of sorrowing, we should rejoice. It is difficult to carry the truths of the gospel out in practice. The want of faith embarrassed even Christ's disciples.

“If they had little faith, what may be said of us? It is hard to learn that this is not our rest, and hence loss, follows loss till the weary, bereaved pilgrim finds that no prop is left on earth to lean upon. There is nothing left so dear to me as the child which God has taken. But it is God who has taken her. If she were borne away into exile, there would be a sore pang at the recollection of departure. But she has gone home to her Father's house, and there I hope presently to meet her. My remaining journey will indeed be less cheerful than it would could I have continued to enjoy the solace of her company. Still the end will not be less joyful because she has gone before me.” * * * *

of passing events, active and earnest in regard to duties and efforts for the immediate present, nothing seemed more natural and necessary than to recur to those other thoughts and feelings.

The grand aim of Dr. Nott's life would seem to have been the melioration of men according to the spirit of the gospel. This simple idea of a renewed, a Christian heart, with its Puritan associations, (may we not say its Puritan *essentials*?) of education, freedom, and fraternity, affords the clue for a fair unfolding of this remarkable life. We make no claim for him of sinless disinterestedness, or of perfect freedom from the infirmities of our humanity. No one could pray as he did, apart from a painful sense of his own imperfections and sins. No one arrogated less for himself in such respects than he. Yet this grand aim of a truly Christian mind *was* his, by the grace of God. He had originally experienced it through his mother's pious care. It had been intensified through those disciplinary familiarities with death to which we have alluded. And it was evident to his latest life. Therefore he so dreaded out-living his power to be at work. Therefore he so felt the obligation to do with his might while the day lasted. And so it was, that the blow which laid him aside from active life a few years since found him, though really an infirm old man, harder than ever at work, resolutely, almost perversely bent upon doing his

utmost so long as he could. All his invention, his pressure of secular care, his marked sagacity in dealing with men, and such other things, which we associate with him, had been *forced upon him by the circumstances besetting* the working out of his grand aim.

Just threescore and ten years ago he came first to this State. He came in a missionary spirit, fired with the noble aim referred to. In his Puritan associations the school and the church kept company. Knowledge and religion were properly twin sisters, *real* science and *real* revelation never at variance. And throughout his long and admired career he has diligently pursued this aim in this spirit. He has endeavored to instill it into all others. He has striven to impress it, with its love of truth as truth, its regard for duty as duty, its candor, catholicity, and all magnanimity, upon the young. Did time permit, it would be pleasing to dilate upon these aspects of the character and life, which his friends so love to dwell upon. Were I to choose a single expression of all these social characteristics of our Honored Dead, it would be that *he was remarkably superior to all the littlenesses of human selfishness*. He was truly a magnanimous man, because his natural nobleness of spirit was informed and aggrandized by fear of God; and it was this character, which so adapted and signally empowered him as the educator

and governor of youth. It is well said that "he governed the college by his prayers." But it was the praying of *this sort of man*; of one who *sympathized* with the young men; of one who forgot not his own need of grace when he dealt with the erring,—forgot not the sweetness and power of home, when he prayed for, or watched over his pupils, forgot not his own bitter experiences, when poor or discouraged students were to be aided and cheered on their way. When others would counsel harshness of discipline, when rash youth had been overborne by temptation, he never ignored his Divine Master's tender interest for the young, never failed to remember that the Lord, and the servant, had a *mission of love*, to "seek and to save the lost." And master of all the powers of college strategy though he was so beyond compare, detecting, preventing, and rectifying evil and mischief with an almost superhuman faculty, he was furthest possible from the spirit of a mere and harsh inquisitor or tyrant. He aimed to be a father and friend of every young man, good or bad, and his pupils, consciously or not, felt it, and loved him. So his magnanimity, even more than his skill and power, governed them. And therefore it was so: "Dr. Nott governed Union College by his prayers."

There was one characteristic of this beloved man, of *essential* affinity with his grand aim, a vital part of it,—

which I hazard nothing in styling the crowning glory of his character and life. He was pre-eminently and unreservedly a Peacemaker. Wonderfully here he made one feel, always, that he was an exceeding good and great man. The chief element in this excellence was his own forgiving spirit. For a third of a century one, who has been perhaps as free to intrude upon him as any other, and as fully possessed of his temptations to bitterness, censoriousness, and uncharitableness, with whom he conferred so unreservedly, and expressed himself so unguardedly, that a glimpse of the wrong spirit *would* have been had, if indulged,—and that witness here testifies, if ever there was in mere man the nobleness of a thoroughly and invariably forgiving spirit, it characterized our departed Friend and Father. He talked freely of matters, in regard to which it was notorious that his sense of justice and honor had been cruelly outraged. But never did unchristian harshness of expression escape him. With such a spirit, what a power he had as a peacemaker! He, who always so truly prayed, “Forgive us as we forgive those who have sinned against us,” could, and habitually did, throw himself, often with most benign effect, between opposing partisans in Church and in State. To many a furious and ruinous discord he has effectually said, “Peace, be still.” In how many a social, and even in the more unmanageable domestic feud, has he gracefully and ten-

derly interposed, bringing order and rest out of confusion and wrath. Most of that record is, of course, only on high. But enough of him is well known, and reverently felt, as to the loveliness and power of this spirit, to assure us that all the glory and the good is his of that saying of our Lord: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God."

The immediate expectation of death is usually a severe test of man; and Dr. Nott has been conscious of that condition for years. Since 1860 he has felt that he was within a momentary summons to go hence. During much of this protracted period of awaiting and expecting, he has been enough himself to discriminate clearly, and cautiously consider, his prospects. Clouds and apprehensions would sometimes intervene; but always there was reverent, cordial submission to the Divine will, and for the *most part* a sweet, humble, child-like fearlessness of trust and hope. It was the manifestation of a true, soul-sustaining Christianity; and a demonstration of his sincerity, an interpretation of his life beyond all scope for cavil or doubt—a priceless testimony to the covenant faithfulness of God. How sad it was to witness the waning of that noble spirit, to be so premonished all these weary months and years that he was passing away! Yet how blessed the assurance accorded to us, made more and more full at every new stage of his progress homeward, that he

was trusting unwaveringly in that grace of God, which had cared for him from infant life. He was ever to the end a little child before God, most pleased to sit at Jesus' feet, and confiding firmly, gratefully, in the sovereignty and loving-kindness of his gracious Lord. In his dying hours, when he felt that the end could not be afar, his parting counsel and legacy to his nearest friend was, "Fear God, and keep His commandments;" the counsel and legacy of his mother to himself, which had begun and controlled his entire religious life. When utterance was difficult, the spirit only not gone, he said: "One word, one word—Jesus Christ!" And the last, the very last exclamation from his lips was: "My covenant God!" Blessed, beloved man! These precious remains we will deposit tenderly in their appointed resting-place, the grave made honorable and sure, because under watch and ward of Him who is "the Resurrection and the Life." Remorseless death may seem to have dominion. But it is only a seeming. Thou, sainted Friend and Father, thyself art in another sphere and rest, in the home of God, in "the house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." We will think of thee hereafter as denizen of the brighter, better country, knowing even as also thou art known, refined of all dross, purged of all sin, released from all care, at home in the joy of thy Lord. "There the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest."

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