

THE TRAGEDY OF A MIND

From The Delphic, 1898

In a lecture room of one of the large universities a white haired professor sat alone late in the afternoon. He had just dismissed a body of students and could hear them even now noisily dispersing on the campus beneath his window. "I see them very tired tonight," he said half aloud as he indifferently arranged his books and papers, and he found himself heaving a sigh of relief because the work of another day was done. Leaning back in his chair he clasped his hands on his tired forehead and noticed what he had not realized, that it was hot and throbbing. "It seems queer" he thought, "my work never used to affect me so."

The door opened and a tall girl carrying an armful of books entered and came quickly toward him. It was his daughter Edith, who never failed to come and walk home with him at five. He was always glad to see her, to-night especially so for she had such a restful face. He held out his hand and as she came up and took it, she looked lovingly down into his strong, rugged face and a look of tender anxiety came into her deep, thoughtful eyes as she said: "Let's go home and have our tea father, you look so very tired."

"Do I?" he said with a little laugh. "Well I believe I am just a little tired tonight, or at any rate my head is troubling me some. I wonder why it is Edith, it never used to take so much effort to hold fifty or more inquiring young minds for an hour on a subject I have spent my whole life trying to get in hand."

"Well it wouldn't now," she answered re-assuringly, "if you were perfectly well, but that awful cold you have had all month has kept you from being yourself."

"No doubt that is it" he said wearily, and he let her help

him on with his coat, and they passed out into the hall.

"I had almost forgotten," he said. "I have to go in library for a second, you hold these things and I'll be t just a moment."

Groups of the students were sitting around at the beginning preparations for the next days work and Hummel's kind smile seemed to diffuse itself warmly them all. He loved all the university's boys and girls, as I wont to call them, and they were quick to appreciate ti was genuinely their friend. He liked to feel that he was e in touch with their young, expanding lives, it pleased stimulated him to be told of their hopes and aspirations, a always treated their views with the same respect as emanating from conservative maturity. Their disturbances, and so called trials, were never of small imp his eyes, and in their successes he was never too bu rejoice. He called them his inspiration, and he worked ne the recognition that followed from the world without little college sphere, but only to instill into the receptive n that came daily before him that which would broaden enrich the lives they were to live. Keenly he felt responsibility of offering to them the best of what he assimilated through years of effort, in order that they might and develop it for themselves, and for humanity, when he gone from among them.

He was standing in one of the alcoves, looking for wha wanted, when he heard someone enter the little room on other side of the thin partition, and recognizing the voice, two of his favorites was about to go in and speak to th when the boy said.

"Wasn't that lecture this afternoon pitiful?"

"Yes," replied the girl sadly. "it fairly made my heart ac I've seen it coming on all this year, but the last week has b a great deal worse, and this afternoon certainly was distressi Once in a while there comes a little gleam that just sugge the brilliancy of other days, but then he weakens and wand almost instantly and we are only forced to pity the contrast."

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"I was just trying to think," said the boy, "what it must mean to a mind like that, to feel itself growing weak. To know that the time had come when it must rest passively on what it had done, no matter how it craved to do more."

"Right there," responded his companion, "seems to me the pathetic part of it. Prof. Hummel in no sense realizes that he is not the power he once was. Evidently he is entirely unconscious of how dangerously his gigantic intellect is tottering, and his students are all so thoroughly devoted to him, and reverence so profoundly the wonders he has achieved, that they would endure anything rather than let him feel the change. And yet I sometimes wonder how much longer it can go on this way."

Like shadows not even conscious of the walls they are darkening, they passed on, leaving the old man in the next alcove leaning heavily against one of the shelves. His drawn lips quivered helplessly as a child's, and he saw the books and familiar things about him through a blinding mist. There are times in life when one does not speak, when one does not even think. As he turned, and walked slowly away, he stooped a trifle more, his age-furrowed face was a little whiter, and the bloodless hand on his cane shook perceptibly, but he had the same cordial smile for the students he met in the hall, and when he joined his daughter he apologized with characteristic courtesy for having detained her so long.

When they reached home he said: "My head is aching badly now, Edith, so I am going right to my room and I will ask you to send my tea there. Try not to have me disturbed."

"Father isn't there something I can do for you?" she asked in a troubled voice, and he answered with a sadness she failed to understand. "No child, there is nothing to be done."

He lay down on the couch for a long time, then he got up and began feverishly pacing the floor. Pretty soon he stood still, and laughed. Why, it was all a huge joke! He was laboring under a temporary indisposition and his students had conceived the idea that he was losing his mind. Poor deluded children, he must hasten to re-assure them. He would make a

special effort for to-morrow's work, and then they would see their absurdity, and know that their old teacher had many years to lead them yet. So almost briskly he settled himself to his books, but his new brightness was of short duration. He was watching himself now, he soon saw, and heaven pity him, he understood. He was weak, and it was too bitter, too awful to bear. He gathered the books he had lived with, and loved so many years up in his trembling arms, and holding them tight cried as he had not done since the days of his early boyhood. It seemed saying goodbye to his dearest friend. They might meet again, but they would never clasp hands. The sweet fellowship of a long life time was burning low, and soon there would be nothing left him but to worship from afar. He knew it was not the unimpedible wave, natural old age, that this chilly mist foreran. Age that was but the luscious ripening of the half-matured fruit he could adjust himself to, and when his tastes and habits had smoothly moulded themselves to the changing years, he would find it, though very different, sweet. He had often thought of the tranquil pleasure reserved for the time when pretensions had ceased and desire and vitality were sleeping in one grave: the passive time when one sits day after day in one's easy chair meditatively reviewing the life one has lived, content in knowing that the apportioned time had been used, and the day of activity drawn to a symmetrical close. But to feel a mental stupor weighing you down while the body yet held its own, to know that you were not broken with years, but had climbed too high, and were now falling from the dizzy height, falling, falling into something you know not what, save that it was worse than death. For what is death but freedom, and what was this but bondage in which the songs of freedom were chanted from afar?

The many colored sunset that melts from radiance into an ethereal hue and mirrors its soft loveliness far into the responsive east is nature's choicest masterpiece, and in the beauty of its mellowed splendor the soul forgets the burning of the noon-day sun, but the storm that fiercely sweeps the helpless sky while the western horizon waits yet a league a

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way, shrouds in blackness e'en the hours that went before, and leaves unpainted the sunset that should have been. To the artist, an unfinished painting means a painting lost, and a half executed symphony leaves the heart tuned to music unsatisfied and restless. To leave one's work unfinished, this we give as one synonym for failure. Grasping helplessly at half recognized possibilities we live on to fulfill them. On the basis of what we have built, do we conceive the superstructure.

On this he brooded, for this he plead. He was not through; who would finish his half written book? Who would lecture to his students? Much that he had to tell them yet lurked phantom like in the veiled recesses of his brain, and no man even knew that it was there. Was it then forever to go unspoken, this the culmination, the vital essence, of his whole life's work?

The walls were closing in on him, the air he breathed was heavy and thick. He looked out and saw that it was moon-light, and a strange fancy came over him to go up to the university and walk around a little, for it was large and high there and he could breathe. With the craftiness of a wayward child he let himself out, and with hands clasped behind him, and head bowed low on his breast he sorrowfully went the way that year after year he had gone. It was first in the buoyancy of youth, that with elastic step he had come upon that campus. The years that had ruthlessly silvered his brown hair had busied themselves in scattering far and wide the companions that had made his college days the all they were. In the clear, fresh morning of youth they had met and called themselves friends. In the light of common interests and common desires their friendship had flourished and bloomed. The life they lived fashioned them after one mould, and they came closer to one another than man ever comes to man again. Their minds were at work together, their very hearts beat together, over them all was thrown the sweet mantle of understanding, appreciation, comradeship, and sympathy. A mantle of rare weave, with an existence short-lived, but a memory imperishable. When they were floating down the green banked stream, lingering along just within roar of the sea, they pulled their little barks close

together and said: "Remember we are never going to drift apart." And for a time they did hold together, but it was harder to keep within hailing distance than they had anticipated. The water grew very rough, billow after billow came in fast and wild, storms they had not foreseen blew up and whirled their frail boats round and round in a seething whitecapped mass, foreign crafts pursued and jostled them, and mighty ocean steamers enticed some off to unknown seas. In the blackness of the night they drifted widely apart, and after each had tugged long and desperately to keep himself afloat he knew not in what stream to seek the brother whose gaily painted canoe had floated lazily beside him down the rippling river. All he could do was pause a moment in the lull, and dream fondly of the rollicksome crew of which he was once a part, and wonder if the oars that splashed so musically then had withstood the oceans' hurricane.

The scattered mass of buildings looked weird and ghostly in the moonlight and failed to appeal long to his whimsical fancy. Unlocking the door he went into the room that had been his for almost forty years. He sat down, and while the pale beams played fantastically about his white head he thought of the work he had done in those years, and how now it was virtually over. Hope, rather than joy, old age struggles against relinquishing. Having done what he could, he was to be supplanted by a man from a new generation, who would be welcomed, admired and loved in his stead. His mind was worn to worthlessness and even now he could feel it slipping cruelly from him. He supposed that soon he would cease to be conscious of his loss, and no longer unhappy. Too great a man to bewail the inevitable, here in the strange solitude he grew calmer and clung only to the one pathetic hope that some one would be found to take up the threads he was untangling and with the dexterity of a well trained intellect, and the strength and fearlessness of blood that is young and untired, weave the beautiful tapestry he had but conceived. He had trodden it long and unflinchingly, he had made giant strides, and had not grown breathless, but now he was to step from the broad

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highway to sit in an arbor by the wayside, to watch the passers-by, and to wait. Wait until the God who had made him all he was, return to him a hundred fold enriched the mind and strength that for a short while he was taking from him. Wait, until the stars that the gray twilight was hiding shine luminously and serenely in the deep blue ether of eternity.