

## PEOPLE WHO WRITE TO ME

By Rev. T. De Witt Talmage, D. D.



PERHAPS I cannot do better this month than to select from the many letters from JOURNAL readers which awaited my return from Europe, and give answer to a few where the questions propounded are of sufficient general interest for answer in print.

A brother minister in the West writes to ask whether that which he "absorbs from books" and "puts into his sermons" is really theft. I should think much would depend upon what he "absorbs;" some men "absorb" so much from other people's ideas that they have not room left in their minds for any of their own. But this fellow-worker asks: "Do you believe that plagiarism is equivalent to theft?" In other words, my brother in the Gospel wants to know whether it is right for a clergyman to steal?



### MAY A MINISTER STEAL?

A FRIEND of mine once asked me: If a minister can find a sermon better than any one he can make, why not preach it? If an author can find a paragraph for his book better than any he can himself manufacture, why not appropriate it? That sounded well. But I said to him: Why not go farther and ask, if a woman find a set of furs better than she has in her wardrobe, why not take them? If a man find that his neighbor has a full Alderney cow, while he has in his own yard only a scrawny runt, why not drive home the Alderney? Theft is taking anything that does not belong to you, whether it be sheep, oxen, hats, coats or literary material.

Without attempting to point out the line that divides the lawful appropriation of another's ideas from the appropriation of another's phraseology, I have only to say that a literary man always knows when he is stealing. Whether found out or not, the process is belittling, and a man is through it blasted for this world, and damaged for the next one. The ass in the fable wanted to die because he was beaten so much, but after death they changed his hide into a drumhead and thus he was beaten more than ever. So the plagiarist is so vile a cheat that there is not much chance for him, living or dead.



### LITERARY FELONY IN THE PULPIT

WHAT every minister needs is a fresh message that day from the Lord. I would sell cheap all my parchments of licensure to preach. God gives his ministers a license every Sabbath and a new message. He sends none of us out so mentally poor that we have nothing to furnish but a cold hash of other people's sermons. Our haystack is large enough for all the sheep that come round it, and there is no need of our taking a single forkful from any other barrack. By all means use all the books you can get at, but devour them, chew them fine and digest them, until they become a part of the blood and bone of your own nature. There is no harm in delivering an oration or sermon belonging to some one else provided you so announce it. Quotation marks are cheap, and let us not be afraid to use them. Do you know why quotation marks are made up of four commas, two at the head of the paragraph adopted and two at the close of it? Those four commas mean that you should stop four times before you steal anything.

If there were no question of morals involved, plagiarism is nevertheless most perilous. There are a great many constables out for the arrest of literary defrauders. The stolen paragraph that you think will never be recognized has been committed to memory by that old lady with green goggles in the front pew. The very same brilliant passage you have just pronounced was delivered by the clergyman who preached in that pulpit the Sabbath before: two thieves met in one hen-roost. All we know of Doctor Hayward, of Queen Elizabeth's time, is that he purloined from Tacitus. Be dishonest once in this respect, and when you do really say something original and good, the world will cry out: "Yes, very fine! I always did like Joseph Addison!"

Sermons are successful not according to the head involved in them, but according to the heart implied, and no one can feel aright while preaching a literary dishonesty. Let us be content to wear our own coat though the nap on it is not quite as well looking, to ride on our own horse though he will not gallop as gracefully, and will "break up" when others are passing. There is a work for us all to do, and God gives us just the best tools to do it. What folly to be hankering after our neighbor's chalk-line and gimlet!

While personally I have suffered much at times from literary felony, I have never, I hope, cherished hard feelings for those who appropriated my works and used them as their own. I have rather, I think, felt sympathy for them. For, with such a beautiful Gospel to preach, such a message of bewildering grandeur to impart, such visions of heavenly glory to depict, I cannot understand how a man can do aught than preach from his heart. And where there is such a man who lacks the heart to preach that gospel, my tears are far more ready for him than my censure.

### A CURE FOR THE BLUES

A WOMAN from one of Canada's most beautiful cities, living in a home of elegance and refinement, as she tells me, writes: "I try to be cheerful and happy, but somehow or other I cannot overcome constant spells of the 'blues.' What can I do?"

Now almost every nature, however sprightly, sometimes will drop into a minor key or a subdued mood that, in common parlance, is recognized as "the blues." There may be no adverse causes at work, but somehow the bells of the soul stop ringing, and you feel like sitting quiet, and you strike off fifty per cent. from all your worldly and spiritual prospects. In such depressed state no one can afford to sit for an hour. First of all, my sister, when "the blues" seize you, get up and go out of doors. Fresh air, and the faces of cheerful men, and pleasant women, and frolicsome children, will, in fifteen minutes, kill moping. The first moment your friend strikes the key-board of your soul it will ring music. A hen might as well try on populous Broadway to hatch out a feathery group as for a man to successfully brood over his ills in lively society. Do not go for relief among those who feel as badly as you do. Let not toothache, and rheumatism and malaria go to see toothache, rheumatism and malaria. On one block in Brooklyn live a doctor, an undertaker and a clergyman. That is not the row for a nervous man to walk on, lest he soon need all three. Throw back all the shutters of your soul, and let the sunlight of genial faces shine in. Besides that, why should any woman sit with the blues? Shone upon by such stars as dot the Canadian sky, and breathed on by such air, and sung to by so many pleasant sounds, you ought not to be seen moping. Especially if light from the better world strikes its aurora through your night-sky ought you to be cheerful. You can afford to have a rough luncheon by the way if it is soon to end amid the banqueters in white. Sailing toward such a blessed port, let us not have our flag at half-mast. Leave to those who take too much wine "the gloomy raven tapping at the chamber door," but as for you and I give us the robin red-breast and the chaffinch. Let some one with a strong voice give out the long-metre doxology, and the whole world "praise God from whom all blessings flow."



### WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

OF course there are undoubtedly times when everything seems to go wrong. From seven o'clock A. M. until ten P. M. affairs are in a twist. You rise in the morning, and the room is cold, the steak for breakfast is tough, the stove smokes, the pipes have burst, and you start for your marketing nettled from head to foot. All day long things are adverse. Insinuations, petty losses, meanness on the part of everybody. The ink-bottle upsets and spoils the carpet. Some one gives a wrong turn to the damper, and the gas escapes. Besides this, you have a cold in your head, and a grain of dirt in your eye, and you are a walking uneasiness. The day is out of joint, and no surgeon can set it. Now, the probability is that if you would look at the weather-vane you would find that the wind is north-east, and you might remember that you have lost much sleep lately. It might happen to be that you are out of joint instead of the day. Be careful, and not write many letters while you are in that irritated mood. You will pen some things that you will be sorry for afterward. Let us remember that these spiked nettles of life are part of our discipline. Life would get nauseating if it were all honey. That table would be poorly set that had on it nothing but treacle. We need a little vinegar, mustard, pepper, and horse-radish to bring the tears even when we do not feel pathetic. If this world were all smoothness, we would never be ready for emigration to a higher and better world. Blustering March and weeping April prepare us for shining May. This world is a poor hitching post. Instead of tying fast on the cold mountains, we had better whip and hasten on toward the warm inn where our good friends are looking out of the window watching to see us come up.



### DRAWING UP YOUR OWN WILL

ONE good woman, with an economical turn of mind, and yet with an eye to the future comforts of those whom she will leave behind her, asks whether a will drawn up by herself will hold good in the eyes of the law. She has a good law volume to follow as to the proper formula.

Books setting forth legal forms are no doubt valuable. It should be a part of every young woman's education to know something of these. We cannot for the small business transactions of life be constantly hunting up the "attorney-at-law" or the village squire. But economy in the transfer of property, or in the making of wills, is sometimes a permanent disaster. There are so many quirks in the law, so many hiding-places for scamps, so many modes of twisting phraseology, so many decisions, precedents and rulings, so many John Does who have brought suits against Richard Roes, that you had better in all important business matters seek out an honest lawyer. And there are as many honest men in the legal profession as in any other. Do not get possessed of the foolish notion that all

lawyers are dishonest. They are not. Some of the best Christian men I know plead before the bar of justice. You can find plenty of honest lawyers if you really need them; and in matters involving large interests you had better employ one.

As to the making of one's own "last will and testament" I would say: Avoid it unless you have great legal skillfulness. Better leave no will at all than one inefficiently constructed. The Orphans' Court could tell many a tragedy of property distributed adverse to the intention of the testator. You save twenty to a hundred dollars from your counsel by writing your own will, and your heirs pay ten thousand dollars to lawyers in disputes over it. Perhaps those whom you have wished especially to favor will get the least of your estate, and a relative against whom you always had especial dislike will get the most, and your charities will be apportioned differently from what you anticipated—a hundred dollars to the Bible society, and three thousand to the "hook and ladder company."



### ARE OUT-DOOR SPORTS DEMORALIZING?

THERE is a splendid letter from a young man who loves out-door sports, but his parents object to his indulgence because they believe that the present tendency toward sporting in young men is demoralizing, and he asks whether his parents are right.

There is just now an attempt at the glorification of muscle. The man who can row the swiftest, or can knock a ball the farthest, or drop the strongest wrestler, is coming to be of more and more importance. The ball player is the hero of the hour during the summer, as is the "crack" stroke-oar. Recently we have had a nausea of pugilism. Strong muscle is a grand thing to have, but if Sampson finds nothing more useful to do than carrying off gate-posts, his strong muscle is only a nuisance. Out-door sports develop the muscle, and that is what every young man should have, but everything depends on the extent he goes into sports, and how he uses the muscle.

By all means I would advise any young man to cultivate physical energy. Let there be more gymnasiums in our colleges and theological seminaries. Let the student know how to wield oar and bat, and in good boyish wrestle see who is the strongest. The health of mental and spiritual work often depends on physical health. If I were not opposed to betting, I would lay a wager that I can tell from the book column in any of the newspapers or magazines of the land the condition of each critic's liver and spleen at the time of writing. A very prominent literary man apologized to me not long ago for his merciless attack on one of my books, saying that he felt miserable that morning and must pitch into something, and my book being the first one on the table, he pitched into that. Our health decides our style of work. If this world is to be taken for God, we want more sanctified muscle. The man who comes to his Christian work having had sound sleep the night before, and the result of roast beef, rare, in his organism, can do almost anything.

But while I advocate all sports, and exercises, and modes of life that improve the physical organism, I have no respect for bone, and nerve, and muscle in the abstract. Health is a fine harp, but I want to know what tune you are going to play on it. I have not one daisy to put on the grave of a dead pugilist or mere boat-racer or base-ball player, but all the garlands I can twist for the tomb of the man who serves God, though he be as physically weak as Richard Baxter, whose ailments were almost as many as his books.



### PROLIXITY IN RELIGIOUS SERVICE

A GOOD Presbyterian elder complains of the prolixity of the religious services in his church, and says it is driving the young people away. "How long," he asks, "do you believe ought a religious service continue?"

The question falls into the discussion now raging in some of the papers as to how long or short sermons and prayers ought to be. Some say a discourse ought to last thirty minutes, and others forty, and others an hour, and prayers should be three minutes long, or five or fifteen. Now, you might just as well discuss how long a frock coat ought to be, or how many ounces of food a man ought to eat. In the one case, everything depends upon the man's size; in the other, everything on the capacity of his stomach. A sermon or a prayer ought to go on as long as it is of any profit. If it is doing no good, the sermon is half an hour too long, though it take only thirty minutes. If the audience cough, or fidget, or shuffle their feet, you had better stop praying. There is no excuse for a man's talking or praying too long if he have good eyesight and hearing. But suppose a man have his sermon written and before him. You say he must go through with it? Oh, no. Let him skip a few leaves. Better sacrifice three or four sheets of sermon paper than sacrifice the interest of your hearers. But it is a silly thing for a man in a prayer-meeting or pulpit to stop merely because a certain number of minutes have expired while the interest is deepening—absurd as a hunter on track of a roebuck, and within two minutes of bringing down its antlers, stopping because his wife said that at six o'clock precisely he must be home to supper. Keep on hunting until ammunition gives out.

Still, I must admit that the danger is on the side of prolixity. The most interesting prayers we ever hear are by new converts who say everything they have to say and break down in one minute. There are men who, from the way they begin their supplications, indicate a long siege. They first pray you into a good frame, and then pray you out. They take literally what Paul meant to be figurative: "Pray without ceasing."

T. De Witt Talmage