Narrative: John D. Rockefeller in Cleveland, Ohio, October 1904

Tarbell, Ida M.

http://hdl.handle.net/10456/34972

©Allegheny College. All rights reserved.

All materials in the Allegheny College DSpace Repository are subject to college policies and Title 17 of the U.S. Code.
On Saturday, October 10, 1903 I left New York by Lake Drive Limited for Cleveland - a fool's errand I thought very likely but quite content to try it. We arrived late. Siddell met me and drove to Woodrich House. The inmates were very much amused and inclined to show us up but we hoped for the best and contended it was worth trying.

Marian was already there and at 9 A.M. S. started him off with two young men of the house to flank him. We reached church about 9:15, learned "Rally" was to be in room downstairs. This room was below decorated with a barbaric dark green paper with big gold designs and a hateful frieze, cheap stained glass windows of ugly color, awkward glass fixtures, comfortable of course and convenient, but so uninteresting, so ignorant, so palpably a fake, a copy. Many big photos on wall of past pastors - none of J.D.R. We were sitting meekly and to appearance as stupidly as the rest when I looked towards the door marked 27 a large full man with smooth face and derby hat was standing there. There was a awful age in his face and had that impression and then S. poked me violently in the side and hissed, "There he is." (S. was nearly choking with glee that R.'s arrival that I feared a scene on the spot) The man stepped and took off his hat, a round smooth head absolutely hairless appeared. And such a head, big, great breadth from back to front, high broad forehead, big bumps behind the ears, curves, creases, not a shiny head but with a sort of wet look. The skin seemed good color, as fresh as that of healthy men about. The nose shaped thin, aristocratic like that of a highbred horse - no lips. The mouth line, the upper lip about over the lower as if the teeth were always shut hard, deep furrows running down each side of the mouth from the nose - a sad, sad hard mouth, puffs under the colorless eye with creases running from them - the puffiness I have long associated in men and women with sexual irregularity. Dead and old - dead and old. This was all I felt as I watched him, He shook hands with various people and then went up the aisle with joy where he took off his coat and hat. He came out soon and put on his skull cap, shook more hands, then went back of me somewhere to the door and I suppose. I did dare look around. The exercises began and R. came to the front. He sat on the back of a little chair. I think at least he was above the children around him and faced the audience fully. His back to the wall. He looked this way and that constantly, scanned every face, peered around the joc to the audience close to my wall, never still a moment. He sang the choruses of the imbecile music, swaying slightly when the tune was strongly marked. Through all the exercises he kept his conspicuous seat, peering incessantly into the faces of the audience. His speech is in papers here this morning. As he stood he made an impression of power, a curious hush came over the place. He was introduced simply - "our superintendent, Mr. R." He is not tall but big with head, shoulders slightly bent.
His face seemed sad and older than ever when he stood up. One expected a quavering voice but his voice is not old, think a little fatigued and thin. He began in his tone, a striking contrast to the humbug voices of the assistant superintendent, assistant pastor and other religious officers. It was grave, joyless but very clear voice. He meant it I think when he said he was sorry to go. The poor creature hasn't anything in the world but such circles as this. Think of it - a circle which is enough to paralyse the intellect in a month by its sheer sleepy unthinking stupidity.

There was a delicious bit of chance in the speech. He had to use the word saloon and he hesitated before it as if ashamed to utter such a bad word. The joy of the speech was in his illustration. Put something in if you would have dividends. Put something in with a gesture as if putting a lot in something. He was much firmer in tone, more assured in speech when he talked of dividends. He was on his own guard. He used all his time and when back to his seat we filed to the church in order to get the place S. wanted in the gallery. R. did not come into church at once. When he did come he stood up some time with back to the wall. He went out and came in and seated himself between the men on a bench by the wall, here he sat through the long prayer. A curious study - he wasn't still an instant, his head went down in his hand. There was lifted, he looked around, dropped his head as if he had been thought himself. He looked around and so on through the service. After the prayer he went to S's room for a long time and sat beside Mrs. R. She is a plain good natured woman with a face thin and very long. Her clothes are simple though with some pretence of a domineer, with lace on her coat, bitterly without style or elegance. Mr. R. and she whispered a moment after he came in. He sat bowed over. I don't believe he knew at all what the minister said. He would fix his gaze on him by an evident effort, then turn and look at the congregation, turning back his gaze and then suddenly turned his head to the left or right gazing at the people, leaning forward sometimes to peer into a face without his range. He looked frequently at the gallery, I fancied at S. and me. In the last prayer he was equally restless. Then the benediction and the congregation rose. He stayed "to shake hands." Scores came up and from the gallery. S. and I. noted how long he held the women's hands! I was seized with a sudden desire to speak to him, to say, "Mr. R. I am Miss T." I went down to join the admiring throng. We passed close to him. He looked me fully in the face and fled. The repulsiveness, his smooth caput is only near it is awful something cruel and bestial at once, and those pale blue eyes with their intent look scared me. I moved a step and stood watching him. He shook hands now and said, "A good sermon. The Mr. gave us a good sermon. A very good sermon wasn't it?" A man in a mill forever grinding. I went back passing close. He would have shaken hands
but I couldn't. It was too awful. He is rotten and dead with a cruel intense fire of greed still glowing in him and burning all who touch it. The church society is as absolutely unintelligent as any I ever saw and stupid, uninspired, senile, hushed. The stolid faces, the cant voice of the deadly assistant pastor, the poor meaningless talk of the pastor. There is no reality, no vitality in it. It is a church with one thought - we are J.D.R's church. When we got out S. declared that if there was a drinking man he would get drunk. He had almost burst with exultation when he found it, was all a success and muttered all through the service, "cinch, cinch, cinch." it was worth the trip. J.D.R. is an appalling creature and sad, sad, sad. Great power written on his mummy-like head and lust and death. It may be he has many years but he drags with him a dead nature, dead to all beauty, sweetness, intelligence. There is the aristocracy of power in his features in this nose, his lost lip, the high forehead, the degradation of lust in his purdy eyes, his bull neck, unhealthy feverish gloss of his skin.

His nose stood out from his face like a thorn.

David Graham Phillips when I say R. looks dead and yet powerful says, "dead like a devil fish!"