

## Remember Me

Today we remember one of the greatest men in history – that great explorer, that famous benefactor, that doer of deeds never to be forgotten, Dr. William Gibson.

This wise and selfless man was passing through the small town of Jamestown, Pennsylvania, one day when he decided to stay and open an apothecary, and began offering, for a small price, a miracle cure for urinary ailments. As specimen vials and money came addressed to “the Water Doctor,” he dumped their contents, untested, in a vat outside his office, sent out his miracle powder, and made a small fortune.

Some jealous people called him a quack, and the townspeople really didn’t like that vat of urine outside his store, but that didn’t stop him from becoming the local postmaster. When he saw another opportunity, he founded the Jamestown and Franklin Railroad. With the capital from those ventures, he established the local bank. Having locked up most of the business in town, he also built a private school for women and opened an opera house.

Of course, an important man like Dr. Gibson required no ordinary house. He and his wife moved into a thirteen-room mansion which dominated the downtown.

In 1867 the Gibsons joined an excursion to Europe and the Holy Lands that included Mark Twain. Dr. Gibson, who had promised to bring back some rare plants for the Smithsonian Institute, traveled under a title he had given himself, *Commissioner of the United States of America to Europe, Asia and Africa*. Twain wrote, “To my thinking, when the United States considered it necessary to send a dignitary of that tonnage across the ocean, it would be in better taste, and safer, to take him apart and cart him over in sections in several ships.”

Gibson was like a character out of Twain, but absurdly actual, terribly real. Twain considered him “an innocent old ass who eats for four and looks wiser than the whole Academy of France...and never uses a one-syllable word when he can think of a longer one...that serene, that inspired, that overpowering humbug ...” Twain’s pen caught him one day trying to compete with a Mediterranean sunset: “Well, that’s gorgis, ain’t it! They don’t have one of them things in our parts, *do* they? I consider that them effects is on account of the superior refragability, as you might say, of the sun’s dirambic combination with the lymphatic forces of the perihelion of Jubiter....”

Now, every great man wants to be remembered. Dr. Gibson thought about founding a college. He also donated to the Presbyterian Church a pulpit supposedly made out of African teak from his travels; parishioners discovered it was local lumber.

In the end he decided on erecting a monument for himself, commensurate with his character and accomplishments. It is the largest private memorial in the United States. A bronze lion guards the twelve-step staircase to the tomb. The base of the tomb itself is almost fourteen feet square, and then the pedestal goes up seventy feet – that’s taller than a seven-story building – topped by a fifteen-foot statute of Hope.

In 1884, Dr. Gibson ordered this monument at a cost of \$100,000. It was shipped from Maine on his own railroad, the Jamestown and Franklin Railroad, and when it arrived, they say, he took a hammer and chipped the top of the statue so that he might have the price discounted for damage in transit.

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At the other end of history is a man who may have been homeless, who left no written word, made nothing with his hands that survives; by the usual measure of things, it's as if he never lived.

He spent most of his short life in an area about half the size of Rhode Island, far from any major city. After an obscure youth and wayward adulthood, he was convicted of several crimes and executed.

And that should have been the end of his name. But within days of his death, it was on a great many lips, then spread throughout the country, and soon around the world. I haven't yet mentioned his name, but every one of us knows it. Isn't it, really, a miracle that we all immediately recognize it?

But imagine if he had never lived.

Imagine a world without his stories, or stories about him – where physical laws and ordinary expectations always had the last word; where kingdom, power, and glory belonged only to dictators. Where the poor would be only the poor, rather than three billion different faces for him.

It is amazing and lovely that we remember this man before all others. As the Apostle Paul put it:

Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being found in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him, and gave him the name that is above every other name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

*Philippians 2: 6-11*

We remember someone else, too, from that same time. He wasn't very good at his job, because he was caught red-handed at it – convicted of it and sentenced to death. We don't know what he tried to steal. No one kept track of his trial or recorded his name. He should have been forgotten with everyone else from his last day.

Instead, by the grace of God, he wound up on a cross beside the first man. There someone overheard him, in the last moments of his life, as all his foolishness and pettiness drained out of him. He seemed to be thinking clearly for the first time as he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!"

How presumptuous! A common criminal!

And Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

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We all want to be remembered. By whom, we're really not sure – maybe by the neighbors or the folks who wander past our monuments in the cemetery a hundred years hence. Perhaps it's pride, or the fear of death, but we want something of us to survive in our work and our children. (Now that a young girl has my last name, I look in her eyes

every day to see some of myself, my values, all the while knowing in my dark heart that she is her own person.)

But really it doesn't matter what we do – we are all destined to pass into oblivion. Even the famous among us will be lost, for no one will remember any of us as we really were. As Mark Twain said,

What a wee part of a person's life are his acts and his words! His real life is led in his head, and is known to none but himself. All day long the mill of his brain is grinding, and his thoughts, not those other things, are his history. Biographies are but the clothes and buttons of the man – the biography of the man himself cannot be written.

But even though the world has never really known us, by the grace of God we are indeed fully known, and will never be forgotten by the one who made us.

In the incredible words of scripture, we have been fearfully and wonderfully made; God has written our names upon the palm of his hand, and even the hairs on our heads have been numbered. Still we hurry on, busying ourselves, anxiously unaware that someone pays attention to the least of us, just as he did to a long-ago thief, with absolutely no concern for who we are or what we've done.

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And what of Dr. William Gibson? Well, he had no children to inherit that vast rambling house. Within a generation it was known not as the Gibson House but as Mark Twain Manor, and it became an inn, then a restaurant. At present it is vacant, gone to rack and ruin. The women's school and the bank closed seventy years ago. The opera house is no longer used. The monument that Gibson built to himself still stands, a curiosity attended to mostly by pigeons.

But if you drive out in the country some ways, you're likely to see in some farmer's field three crosses. They may not rise very high, but they have much to say about life and death. Only one of those crosses is truly tragic. It is like any number of crosses over the graves of those who died trusting in their accomplishments.

The other two, the crosses of humble men, speak of the kingdom, power, and glory.

God help me, I am nailed to my cross. *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*