

But God was with them, and let none of their words fall to the ground. They spoke as the Spirit gave them utterance, and their influence was more direct and effective, in all likelihood, than could have been exerted by any diplomacy or any patronage. The Oxford of to-day has more organized effort and more prominent names to back it. It will be well if it can wield the same power and achieve as great results.



When the Foot Drags.

BY THE REV. CHARLES COURTENAY, M.A.,
Vicar of St. Peter's, Tunbridge Wells.

THIS is a contribution to the study of the inner life of the minister of Christ; an attempt to clear and invigorate that inner being when the foot drags. To put a new spring into that dragging foot, or even to show the way to lift it, is worth attempting, even if the venture be not wholly successful.

I. Let us first ponder carefully *the complaint*.

It is easily identified, for all my ministerial readers will have traversed that very dark subway of life which I have ventured to describe by the dragging foot. The mood comes on with more or less suddenness, and, when it comes, plunges us into the worst of life's morasses. The old buoyancy which has hitherto kept us afloat in God's free air disappears, and the strangest of changes takes place in the inner spirit. The joy of work evaporates, the sense of hopefulness disappears, the love of our fellows suffers an eclipse, the delight in rapid movement ceases, our songs are dirges, and then, well—the foot drags.

The distressing part of the complaint is that, in spite of it, we have to keep moving, the foot has to be kept "on the go." Visits must still be paid to souls hungering for some buoyant message of life, sermons must still be preached to congregations who are more or less dependent on our life and brightness,

classes must still be conducted, whether the foot drags or not. If only we might go away somewhere, far from the madding crowd, and conceal that dragging foot where no one might see the poor paralyzed thing, we could better tolerate it. But this cannot be. It has to be dragged in the face of the sun and the world.

Of course, there are various degrees of intensity in the malady, but in whatever measure it appears it is eminently distressing. Sometimes we detect it in the feeble response within us to God and truth. Sometimes it comes in the form of strain; work, which before we did with alacrity, changing into a burden now. Sometimes we feel wooden, so that we can scarcely arrive at a single worthy thought to pass on to our flock. We do not doubt our creeds, or lose a general kind of faith in the powers of God, but faith takes less and less the living form of personal trust and assurance. Formalism stretches its chill hands over us and our work. We cease to have visions of the Holy One, cease to run to meet Him, cease to leap in the ways of service and duty. In a word, the foot drags.

Truly, of all the many complaints which afflict the poor parson this is the very worst, the one we dread most, the one which strikes the hardest. It almost seems as if all the mischiefs of life find their king and chief in it.

II. We will now dwell for a little on *the curse of the dragging foot*.

Naturally, under the circumstances, there is *an arrest of usefulness*, for our moods are a part of our message and ministry, and our depressions and exaltations being more or less contagious, there is nothing more certain than the stoppage of blessing. A doleful mood is not a worthy setting for our bright Gospel, and a minor key cannot properly represent the truth as it is Jesus. It is very much as if we draped a white marble statue with crape, or sang a bright song in a tearful voice, or played the Dead March at a wedding. We get over but little ground when the foot drags. We are like a broken-

down motor-car drawn along by horses; but ministers and motors are intended to run more easily than that.

And does there not seem to be *a sort of scandal* in the dragging foot? A religion which has broken down is not the nicest spectacle for our people, and a joyless religion is not the best of advertisements for so gladsome a faith. The consciousness of this does not tend to make our foot drag the less. And, of course, the more the foot drags, the more the dust rises, and the deeper the roadway is scored. It is a sad pity.

Yes, and we know that *one dragging foot means others* before long, by sheer contagion. For if we expect our people to imitate our good features, they are not likely to stop there. They will certainly go on to imitate our bad ones as well. And depression not only drags, but drags down. It puts weights in the place of wings. It lowers, not only our own vitality, but the vitality of the congregation. It is a thought we are not often brave enough to face, but it is one which has to be dealt with. For, just as the soldiers' feet keep pace with the band in front, so do parochial feet have a tendency to keep pace with the swift or dragging foot of the minister. It is a serious matter, this dragging foot.

It seems sometimes a little hard that we ministers should stand so much before the footlights, but is it not a part of the plan? The city set on a hill is the chosen image of the Master for His children's position in life, and evidently they are set there, like the lamp on the stand, to be seen and to be useful. We may, if we choose, place a bushel measure over the light, but we do it at our own peril. No, instead of complaining of the blessed heights to which the grace of God has raised us, let us fall in with the Divine plan and play well the part assigned to us. True, our feet may be more visible as we move about on the high places. Then all the more reason for our acceptance of the promised blessing that He will make our feet like hinds' feet, nimble and springing, and all the less excuse for us if the foot drags. In truth, there can be no more serious accusation against us than this dulness of movement, this

slowness of pace, this want of spring, this absence of heart, this presence of effort and strain, when the foot drags.

III. God forbid that I should make sadder the hearts of any of God's weary servants! And, were it not the fact that we are never nearer a rise than when we are conscious that we have sunk the lowest, I should scarcely have ventured to write so strongly of the curse of the dragging foot. But a sense of inward wrongness is the best of spiritual springboards from which to leap upwards, and so let us treat it, passing on now to the consideration of *the causes of the dragging foot*.

We may look in several directions for the occasion of this sad visitor, and, no doubt, it is from a variety of causes that the depression comes.

Frequently, it is the product of *an overstrained body and mind*. For weal or woe the soul is tied to a weak body, a frail brain, and brittle nerves, and we do well not to forget the frailty of the physical partner. But some intense souls are apt to forget all this, and to hurry heedlessly on to a physical breakdown. The sharp sword wears the scabbard through. The experiment has often been tried, and the results have often been reaped, but in every generation the experiment is tried over again in the hope that bodies and minds are stronger than of old. But they are not. And then the spiritual foot drags too. Under this condition of things the doctor is the best spiritual physician, for the overstrained mind and body have to be dealt with as the procuring cause of the soul's ills.

Not infrequently the foot drags because of *the overstrained soul*, for the soul which tries to do both its own part and the part of God is not unlikely to break down. Surely, the whole art and science of spiritual work is to do *our* best, and leave all else to the Master. To shoulder both burdens is fatal. Probably, it is true that it is not so much work that wears as worry—and worry is not the less worry because the soul is anxious about the results of work. The golden path is the path of energetic work and energetic faith, and then an easy, confident mind that what is out of our hands is now in the

Lord's, and may be happily left there. "Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts shall be established." Some may protest at such apparently cold-blooded quietness, but it is in reality a purer spirituality to trust God with the issues than to worry and spoil all with a dragging foot. No doubt, it is better to wear out than to rust out; but why do either? Steady work is better than a rush, and spiritual spasms are not half so reliable as the steady pressure which lasts, because the strain is less tearing. We are apt to think ourselves indispensable. It is well to learn that God has other agents, and still others, and that when the time comes to superannuate His servants He has others just as good, and perhaps better, in reserve. "He that believeth shall not make haste." *Festina lente*. It is scarcely likely that the foot will not drag when we tug about heavy weights which do not rightly belong to the foot.

Now, if the foot drags because we overwork or overstrain body, mind, or spirit, it is also true that the foot drags when *we work too little*. And we may say with some certainty that, as a cause, it is a more disastrous one than doing too much. Neglected duties recoil upon us in just this way, compelling us to stagger with a dragging foot. One feels a great admiration for the worker who from overwork breaks down, but the worker who is prostrated by apathy and laziness and neglect provokes indignation rather. We cannot waste our sympathy upon him.

Apparent failure, also, is apt to breed the dragging foot, for we cannot bear, if we are in earnest, the plodding, cheerless work that seems unproductive. Naturally, we want to see fruit; we should not be human if we did not. But we must learn to draw a distinction between results which we can see for ourselves and results which God sees. Oftentimes "their works do follow them," and these we cannot see just yet. There are disappointments in all work, whatever the character of the work may be. The Lord Jesus Himself had them. But failure, absolute and final, in any work done for God, and done in Him, is not only impossible, but unthinkable.

Want of appreciation has sometimes a hand in the weighting

of the foot, and there are certainly many who feel bitterly that they are undervalued. Bishops know them not. Patrons pass them by. No incense of praise ever greets their nostrils. Newspapers are oblivious of their eloquence and talents. The masses seek out more popular preachers. They are just stranded, and they do not like it. And as they sit and ponder their desolate condition, they feel a paralysis creeping downwards until the spring is gone. Well, human nature is very human, and we can hardly expect perfection in an imperfect world. Still, is there not a little that is rather too human about this cry and longing for appreciation and popularity? We are ministers of Christ, are we not? and we say that our best rewards are inner ones. And may not the spirit of self be a little too much in evidence here? It has sometimes happened that appreciation and incense and adulation, thickly laid on, have acted a worse part in the deterioration of the soul of the minister than the sheerest of neglect. Pedestals are giddy places, and brains are weak and easily turned, and some have become sadly spoiled by position and dignity and elevation. The safest places are lower down. Why court publicity, then, and notice? Why long for human uplifting? Besides, we may be as able and worthy as we think we are, and—we may not be. And the chances are that if we hold so lofty an opinion of ourselves and our deserts, that we are proud and conceited. Surely, the Divine notice is not a trifle, and if He applauds with His "Well done," that surely should outweigh all earthly neglect. No wonder that the foot drags with this overestimate of ourselves hanging on so sadly. Perhaps God is waiting until we discover that we are not worthy, until the spirit of humility comes in, until we are satisfied that, amidst the unnoticed world, He knows and praises and rewards. It is very likely. It is the man in the parable who takes the lowest room to whom the Master says, "Friend, go up higher."

Unkind criticisms can heavily weight the foot, as most men know in the course of their ministry. We cannot please everybody. Somebody is sure to find fault. But, however much

fault-finding is experienced, we do not easily get used to it. We may do our best, but we shall not often get the credit for it. Sometimes criticism is true, and we shall do wisely to welcome the wholesome correction. And if it is not true, we need not mind much, for most likely the critics did the best they knew, and meant it well. And if they meant it maliciously, we must comfort ourselves with the reflection that it will not break any bones. The truth is, that hard words are rarely meant, that unkind words sound worse than they truly are, and that, like sparks recklessly thrown out, they only ignite what is dry and flimsy.

But, probably, the deepest reason for the dragging foot is *the lack of proper nourishment*. If the heart were half as well nourished as the head, we should seldom drag our foot. But alas! how often it is not. When prayer is stinted, and communion with God shelved, when we are more with man than with God, when we read and study other books to the neglect of the Word of God, when we are ever drawing on our own resources and are satisfied with them, when the Holy Spirit is ignored in the inner apprehension, when the Church hides away the real presence of the Head of the Church, it is no wonder that the foot drags. We become faint from starvation. The truth is, it is a hard thing for the ministers of Christ to be always in the very pink of condition as they ought to be. It is only by spiritual exercise, plenty of spiritual nourishment, and that nourishment taken often, that we can keep the spring in the foot, and prevent its dragging. But never has it happened that, given the right attitude, the right energy, the right confidence, and the right expectation, the foot has dragged.

IV. It is of course better to prevent the foot dragging than to cure it after it has lost its spring; but when it is dragging, the first thing is to set it right, and to restore it by a radical cure. So let us deal with *the cure of the dragging foot*.

And, surely, the first duty is *not to acquiesce* in it. One may easily do this, and in sheer despair let things go. It is easy to point out its folly—a folly which men do not perpetrate in

temporal things, in the care of the bodily health, or in the mending of broken fortunes. But we too well understand that with a certain pitch of depression the work of self-recovery is difficult, and the longer it is delayed the more difficult does it become. And this is why that, to insure a real cure, the spirit of hope should be nourished, and the will set to the overcoming of this tyrannous mood.

And, just as surely, the second duty in the interest of a radical cure is to *cut off all occasions* to depression and despair. We must be content, if the root be physical, to go slowly, to moderate our energy, and to keep within bounds. To go on at the highest pressure in the face of these serious warnings is suicide of mind and body, to say nothing of a soul sapped and sacked. Your elastic band will stretch, and stretch, and stretch, and—break. Most broken men might have been saved had they been content to listen to the physical and mental voices and obey. But no, they must go on; the time is short; better, they say, to wear out than to rust out; and then—something snapped, and left them a ruin.

But if the cause be a spiritual one, then the remedies must be spiritual too. So, frequently, the call is to *come back to God*, to mend the broken connections, to drink afresh of the waters of life and healing and strength. Honestly, it is as backsliders we have to return to God, in repentance and faith and renewed self-surrender. Then, when we hear again the welcome of the Lord, and taste afresh of His sweetness, and feel His hand upon our heads and hearts, the depression will vanish, and the old refreshing waters of comfort will be found flowing once again into the deep places of the spirit. But restoration requires, further, the *maintenance of the higher levels* of life, the uplands of God, where we shall walk with Him in communion. Here we shall find the bracing air which is the soul's natural atmosphere; here will sound the voice which, sweet and low, shall encourage and cheer us on our way; here the discords of earth shall be silenced, being too far off to articulate themselves to our hearing; here shall we learn to leave God's part to God,

and be content with doing just our own ; here our powers shall be found at their best and highest ; and here the pull of the world shall be least and weakest.

But all this will not come as a matter of course. Nothing so comes in the spiritual experience. The worker's path is beset with temptations and snares which have to be met and checkmated continually. There will come the intrusion of the self-spirit which literally poisons the very centres of the inner man. The temptation to be somebody important, the temptation to shine, the temptation to achieve glory, will sap the inner purity if not checked by some higher motive. And when self sweeps us off our feet, the fall which ensues is a bitter experience.

There will come, too, the spirit of the world, with its show and materialism, its excitements and its witchery. The world has tremendous sapping power, and, like a stream undermining the bank, and bringing down many a mass of good soil, it undermines the Christian worker off his guard. The world's breath soils all that it touches, and takes the shine out of all the spirit's bright things ; its tentacles, like that of the stinging jelly-fish, benumb progress. This thing and that may look harmless enough, but when the results are totalled up, lo ! we find ourselves like a despoiled Samson with our strength gone.

We cannot, of course, keep ourselves in glass cases, shut off from all harmful things, but we can cushion our spirits by the intervention of that blessed protecting shield which the Divine Spirit introduces.

We must do as we do on wet days—pick our way and choose out the cleanest spots. For earth's mud and clay sticks, and is quite heavy enough to weight the foot and make it drag. We must learn to walk lightly, remembering the old royal saying that the world is a bog, and they go best over it who go quickly. And if the pull of earth be strong, we must hitch our waggon to a star and neutralize its attraction. Our course takes the line of the strongest pull, and if that be Heaven's, we need never fear that the foot will drag. Like the troops who have on

occasions to march lightly, let us be careful not to multiply impediment and to add unnecessarily to our baggage.

But, after all, the main consideration for us who minister in holy things, and who fear the dragging foot, is the inner one, for the foot follows the heart, and where the inner springs are right, the jolting and the jar will be lessened. And for this the upward look and the realized Presence are the main resource. Left to ourselves, we drag: held up by the higher attractions, we soar. There can be no tyranny of moods when the Lord is Master. There can be no dragging foot when the Lord is Lifter.



The Holy Angels.

(ST. MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS' DAY, SEPTEMBER 29).

BY THE REV. HERBERT A. BIRKS, M.A.,
Vicar of Kingsbridge, Devon.

THIS earth is God's fair dwelling,
Where angels come and go,
Their gracious tidings telling
Of love to man below.

Strong dwellers in the far light
Of God's most holy hill,
Who wander through His starlight
And silent spaces fill—

In tangled wildernesses,
On tiny blades of grass,
Ye print your happy kisses,
And bless them as ye pass.

In unsuspected places,
Mid tenements forlorn,
Ye light on children's faces
The sunny smile of morn.