

Parochial Vignettes.

III. STRAIN.

HE who knows how to manage himself has learned the secret of a long and happy life. Health of body, quietness of mind, and success in life all hang upon the question whether we are wise or fools about ourselves. For our lives are like our incomes; managed well, they keep us from want; managed ill, they land us in the workhouse. Now, in the one word with which I have headed this paper we find ourselves face to face with one of life's saddest tragedies. Most of the wrecks of life are due to just this strain. Not content with common effort we have pushed energy to the point of strain, and—we have snapped. Like the overstrung violin string, like the overstretched hawser, we have snapped.

Granted then the importance of the subject of strain we shall not do amiss to dwell upon it a little. It will be something gained to have understood it better. And if, in addition, it should lead us to relax the strain, we shall have done something to prevent a lamentable catastrophe. At any rate, we shall not be able to set our particular rupture down to ignorance. We shall have been warned.

Now what is this strain?

It is just an attempt to force nature beyond her powers. Mind, muscle, nerve and heart are warranted, like some machines, to do just a definite amount of work and no more. Keep within this measure, and you are safe. Go beyond it, and you may smell danger. We are like bridges, warranted to stand a certain strain roughly estimated, and so long as you subject them only to this strain and no more both you and the bridge will stand firm. But not beyond.

It is comparatively easy to give the strain point of a machine, for all its laws of resistance are known to a degree. For ourselves, we are too complicated to adjust it to a nicety, but there are rough measures even for the brain and the nerve which are good enough for common daily use and experience, and these are guides not to be despised. For symptoms of overstrain appear long before the breaking point, and nature runs up her danger signals in plenty of time to prevent a rupture. The wise man will attend to these and

relax at the summons. He is not a wise man, however earnest, who goes on until he drops. At the bar of God and man he is a fool, however well intentioned.

Nobody is likely to mistake the strained muscle with its fatigue and disinclination to move. We are tired, dog-tired perhaps, and we are under no delusions as to the rest it demands and deserves.

The strained brain is equally manifest, for when it strikes work, and refuses attention, and aches, and craves sleep, we know the symptoms well enough to lay aside our books and to take up some muscular exercise to balance matters a little.

And the tired nerve, strained by too strong emotions, betrays its condition in ways we cannot doubt, and demands rest from the excitement which has been the cause of its fatigue.

And if we do not rest because we cannot afford to rest, and if we go on, well, then, we pay the penalty. We may be carried to some narrow bed in some picturesque cemetery or churchyard, or we may be compelled to undergo a rest cure somewhere in silence, or we may become an inmate of some mental asylum.

Some, no doubt, escape, but not many. Outraged nature generally gets her revenge. The blow may hover over us for a time, but the longer it is withheld, the heavier it falls when it does come.

For some of us are more delicately made than others. The nature which is like a rough machine will bear more ill-treatment than one which is as delicate as a watch. And it is the best brains and the best nerves which break down the soonest, and are harder to recall to health again.

And what are the symptoms? let us now ask.

We may know that we are straining ourselves unnaturally when our inner being is thrown out of gear and the machine moves uneasily and with difficulty. No longer do the wheels move of themselves, but they drag and shriek, betraying friction. Instead of running to our tasks, we have to drag ourselves to them as an unwelcome duty. And what we generally achieve joyously, we now groan in the doing of it.

Perhaps we grow irritable in our tempers, and feel as if we have a quarrel with ourselves and with everybody else. It is a very common form of strain, and is generally unmistakable. The edginess which is ever ready to break out snappily, and to deal in exceedingly hot water, spells strain, and demands immediate treat-

ment. And when such temper is unnatural, let not its warning be disregarded.

Then we begin to imagine things, and it seems as if our minds had lost their sense of proportion, and as if we were endowed with a vision which is like an enlarging camera. We imagine difficulties ; we imagine slights ; we imagine opposition ; we imagine conspiracy.

A spirit of despair is apt to seize upon us when the strain comes, and then all our work is bad and useless, and we ourselves are mere cumberers of the ground and quite useless. A dark cloud covers us, and we go along under a pall which we cannot lift. We seem to ourselves to have had our day, and to be played out, and, like Jonah, we throw ourselves under some bush, shadeless and menacing.

Then we indulge in hard judgments of men and things which in our better moods we never utter or even think. Denunciations come easy to our lips, and we feel like Elijah that the faithful have vanished from the earth and that we stand alone. We scan the world, and see naught but faithless, decadent men. "I, even I only, am left."

In the case of a bad strain we even speak of the judgment of God against us because of our sins and imagine that we are deserted by Him Whom we are trying to serve. God's face is hidden, we say, and He has deserted His worthless servant.

And all the time the strain hurries us on to do more and still more, and we pile engagement upon engagement, as if we would fain relieve the pressure by doing still more violence to our poor nature. We whip the top that it may not fall, not realizing that the best thing would be to let it fall and rest.

The strange thing is that sensible men and women, who would recognize these symptoms in others, cultivate the blind eye towards themselves, and, even when the doctor warns them, will refuse to believe it until the worst comes. In their efforts to prevent the sin of unfaithfulness, they run upon the rocks and make shipwreck of themselves. Or they think that to rest is the temptation of the evil one, so they resist him and play the more into his terrible hands.

We should do better to remember that these symptoms of over-strain are given us, just as the driving clouds and falling barometer are given us, to hurry us into some restful, quiet port. And just

as it is no merit to defy the warnings and to keep at sea running a risk which may be fatal, so it is the height of folly to defy the penalty of an overstrained body or heart or nerve.

Now we will listen to a few apologies for letting the strain continue, for, in spite of all the dangers of it, there are not a few who try to justify it by specious arguments.

“It is better to wear out than to rust out,” says one.

As if these two alternatives exhausted the list of possibilities. Why do either? we ask. It is quite possible to work up to safety point without breaking the machine by over-pressure. And if we work up to the level of our powers, and never beyond, there is no danger of rusting out either. What right has a workman to misuse his master's machine, and to wear it out before the time? We, too, are not our own, but, body, soul, and spirit, belong to our God in heaven. Where both such extremes are bad, why not seek a happy medium?

Here is another justification by way of necessity, “If I don't do it, who will?”

But are you so indispensable to God that He cannot do without you? And is He so short of workers in His kingdom that He must needs push to the death His willing ones? Why, those who say such a thing as an excuse for overdriving the poor human organism would be the very first to haul up before a magistrate some driver who cruelly pushed his tired horse on to labour. Besides, if God cannot do without you, why should you ever die, and why should He ordain that any one should die in their prime? It may flatter our pride to fancy ourselves Atlases with the responsibilities of the world upon our shoulders, but since when was this demanded of us?

“Can I serve such a Master with less than my best, and give less than my all?” This is another argument.

But are we giving of our best when we spoil the poor soul in the body in the giving? As well may a harpist say, “I must play my best before my King,” and then, as a preliminary, break a string or two to show his zeal. The fact is that an overstrained worker cannot give anything of real value with a broken instrument. And when the strain is on, the service, however abundant, is of the poorest possible quality. Because such a service must be forced service, soiled and spoiled service, for, with the edge blunted and the springs broken, how can it be acceptable or powerful? When we

are at our best, we can give of our best, but not when we are at our worst.

“Life is short, and souls are perishing. What else can I do than work to the last?”

The motive is splendid, and who can but commend it? But, if life is short, why make it shorter? If life is short, why not try to lengthen it out by proper care of the servant? To throw away life, because there is so little of it, is like a man with a small income spending it all in a fortnight. If you have little, why not husband that little? It seems most sensible, does it not? We have all heard of burning the candle at both ends. Is not this what such a man is doing? This is shortening the candle's natural term of life just as a man who is a victim of continual strain burns out his life.

“I put all my irons in the fire so that they may always be hot and ready when they are wanted.”

But my friend, you can only use one at a time, can you? And your white-hot, unused iron is meanwhile wasting away for naught. Is that wise? Is it good for your tools to heat them unnecessarily? It does not seem so very wise to me. If a great show of energy is good, if there be a comfort in the glare and heat of a busy fire, if there is something comforting in feeling that your instrument is always ready should you want it, then you may satisfy yourself by putting all your irons in the fire at the same time. But to most people this seems to be waste of good fire and a deterioration of good tools.

But how melancholy it is, this effort to bolster up a bad process with bad arguments. Nothing can ever justify this overstrain, this attempt to secure spiritual results by a *tour de force* which blunts the edge of the tool, and forces into decay what was intended to last for many a year of work.

And when those who give these counsels of prudence are called names, and are held to be lukewarm and lazy for their care of their own faculties, the proofs of the overstrain are evident in the attitude assumed. Is that alone earnestness which overdrives nature, which rushes into the fray, and drops on the field almost as soon as the task is reached, which dulls and stales the whole inner being in its attempts to do more than it can, which lashes itself into impotence, and which actually cuts itself in its frantic efforts to reap a speedy harvest? Since when has it been deemed wisdom

to lose sobriety and common sense in the work of the Lord? Surely, he is wiser who looks ever and anon at his safety-gauge to see whether the pressure at which the machine works is too great, and who at the first symptom of over-pressure allows his machine to cool down, and gives it rest for a while.

Now, seeing that it is better to check strain before it comes than after, it is advisable to consider some of the ways in which it may easily and rationally be prevented.

We should, in the first place, be quite clear how far we can go, and not attempt to pass that limit. It is no very hard task after all, for some of us have lived many years of life, and have all that amount of experience to guide us. It is in this sense that a man is either a physician or a fool by forty. If we can only walk a mile, why try to walk a mile and a quarter? Experiments are all very well when little or nothing is at stake, but when the human organism, with its health and powers, is at stake, trying it on is a pure bit of madness. The stake is too big for such gambling. So what we know we can do let us do cheerfully, and be wise enough to stop there.

Then we should manage ourselves better if we would avoid dangerous strain. Mismanagement is to blame for more than half our breakdowns. Thus a man runs for the train and drops dead upon the platform, because he was foolish enough to start five minutes late. So a parson will put off his Sunday preparation until Saturday night and strain his poor wits until the early hours of Sunday in getting some forced thoughts together. It is not the amount of work which kills, so much as the crowding the work into too short a time. If we looked ahead ever so little, prepared in advance, and took time by the forelock instead of the tail, we should be able to compass our life's labours with comparative ease. It is the rush and worry of forced actions which wear and tear the poor man to pieces. To see some man tearing along to overtake his work, and sweating at every pore in his frantic efforts to do so, is not an object so much of pity as of contempt, for he is in all this hurry because he began too late and frittered away the morning hours in nonentities. If a man is compelled to stay up late, it is probably because he got up late. In the calm of a well-arranged life the perils of strain are unknown.

It is important, too, to learn what we may with advantage drop in life. All things are not equally important and pressing, and

to fancy that they are is to thrust yourself into the clutches of strain. It is the person who has lost his sense of proportion who is in danger. If life is too short for all we have to do, or think we must do, then, in the interests of mental sanity and physical health, let some of it go for a time. It is better to let something slide than to slide under ourselves and render ourselves incapable of achieving anything.

It is good, too, to realize that things done under strain are almost invariably done badly. The restlessness of the strained mind somehow imparts itself to the quality of our work. It smells of the candle.

It is the leisurely work which is best, because it is the best thought out, the most carefully executed, the most elaborately finished. The feverishness of the work done against time makes it lack maturity and life. This is an element of the case which ought not lightly to be dismissed, and, if it be true, it ought to bring us to our bearings quickly, and compel us to see that rather than do bad work it is almost better to do nothing at all. For what gain is there in a work which to be presentable must be done all over again?

And supposing that we do gain by forced work, the amount gained we shall probably lose later on by enforced rest and longer holidays. So we shall have half ruined the machine, and secured no worthy results. Is it worth the candle?

It is better, too, to trust in God and do less than to trust yourself and do more. For a good deal of strain comes from the idea that we are indispensable, and cannot be done without. We feel ourselves of such vast importance that we imagine that if we fail the whole work must collapse. And so we strain ourselves to keep the measure full. Anxiety and painful, wearing suspense can only come by overlooking the relative place of self and God. Shift the emphasis to the true point, and the calm which comes from our faith will make all the difference to the inner feelings which chafe and fret. God blesses not so much the work we do as the spirit of calm and quiet in which we do it; not so much the abundance of our toil as the frictionless manner of our accomplishing it. One word spoken in calm assurance that God is at the back of it is infinitely better than a torrent of impetuous, laboured eloquence which is all of self. And so, if we can only get rid of our conceit, we shall get rid of a great deal of our strain in service.

A few words are needed now to show how fatal strain appears from others' point of view. It has the worst of effects on the on-lookers. It gives the impression that Christian service is hard. For we see the toil of the man who ought to set a good example of quiet rather breeding the idea that we serve a hard Taskmaster. We can generally judge a master by his servant, unless the servant belies the master. If I see such a servant in a constant state of agitation, afraid of not doing his work, and striving early and late to achieve the impossible, I am apt to judge the master wrongly. And if my impression turns out to be wrong, then I am bound to blame the servant for leading me to such a conclusion. He has belied the master, has he not ?

And those, too, to whom we direct our feverish labours are apt to resent the too energetic treatment which such a strained man is too prone to apply. Nobody is huffed by gentle handling, and a soft word is mostly welcome. But your strained man will be sure to overdo his action, and raise his voice and hustle. For with the overstrain is blent a tension, a hurry and a violence which sends men off at a tangent and in a tantrum. The swift interview in which you are led to believe that the shorter it is the better, the rapid handling of your case, the refusal to linger a moment longer than is absolutely necessary, the stinted courtesies, the cutting short of your perhaps somewhat long-winded story, the impatience, the slumbering sense of fever in the whole tension are not quieting to the interlocutor, and are apt to hurry him too out of all chance of receiving good. There is nothing soothing or pacifying about such treatment as this ; rather the opposite. It stultifies itself.

One last reflection. If we could only gather into one huge building the victims of strain, it would be an object lesson we should never forget. And if the overstrained minds, the overstrained nerves, the overstrained hearts which we should pass in review could give their note of warning, would it not be to rest more, to cultivate more the quiet mind, to rack ourselves less and to attempt to do no more than our capabilities will allow ?

CHARLES COURTENAY.

[The next article in this series—"Our Brethren the Laity"—will appear in the April number.]

