

*THE PROBLEM OF PERSONAL SUFFERING.*

WHEN Jesus' disciples were one day arrested by the sight of a blind man sitting in his pathetic helplessness at the door of God's Temple and asked the Master the meaning of his calamity, they touched a problem which is fresh in our day, and which has ever in it the blood of the human heart. Every city is studded with hospitals, where hundreds have begun to suffer or have been suffering long. No inconsiderable number of one's acquaintance have never known the joy of full health, but are daily contending against some secret weakness. In our own family there may be a member cut off from the activities of life, who the day long is wearying for night, and all night is watching for the dawn. What does this calamity mean? Surely it is not natural that men and women and little children should be blind, or maimed, or paralyzed, or in any way crippled. Rather, people ought to be strong and buoyant, able for all the labour and pleasures of life. Why should a certain proportion of the race be called forth to live in Gethsemane? This is a question on which, for his own or his brethren's sake, one longs for light.

Various answers can be given, and each one will satisfy some mind. It may be urged, for instance, that there is no problem, because a problem means a difficult principle which can be solved, but this matter of physical suffering is an accident. Until the delicate processes of nature and the complicated activity of human life perform their parts with unerring accuracy there will be failures and calamities. Nature is a huge and intricate machine, from which each person is thrown off like a piece of cloth from a loom. We watch the whirling wheels and flying shuttles with some understanding of the construction, but with no power of interference. A wheel drags ever so slightly, a thread

has a rough edge,—any slight flaw,—and a section of the web is damaged. So one of us begins life at a disadvantage, and this can only be avoided by a series of miracles going back, say, a century. Some day a signalman, being overworked or out of sorts, pulls the wrong handle and a train is wrecked, with physical consequences which may last for two generations. A child not yet born will be a cripple for life, but nothing could have saved that child save miraculous interference in that signal box. And God is not prodigal of miracles, even to avert catastrophes. His providence comes in later to utilize accidents for material ends; His grace sanctifies them to spiritual issues. Really it is not wonderful, considering how fine and sensitive the eye is, that here and there a man is blind; it is amazing that with this exception every person sees.

Or it may be pointed out with irresistible force that suffering can be traced, at a long interval in some cases, to sin, and that it is simply one of the wholesome sanctions of law. We are firmly convinced that we live in a moral universe, and by that we mean in a state where it will be made pleasant to do what is right and very unpleasant to do what is wrong, at least in physical affairs. If one play the fool and slap Nature in the face, that power will take up the quarrel and pursue it to the end with the man and his descendants till she has obtained complete satisfaction. If one make a covenant with Nature and keep her laws loyally, this power will remember him for good, and his children after him, opening her hand and blessing them with health and strength. With her saving judgments and her abundant mercies Nature fences up the way of life that we may be induced to walk therein with steadfast step. And if any one break through the hedge, it is good that he suffer; and if it be that its actual transgressor do not pay all the debt, but that the innocent must share his liability, this is only the inevitable consequence of the soli-

darity of the family and the race. None can interfere between the sinner and his penalty, and we can even see that it is well none should, for in so far as one accepts his chastisement with a right mind the pain leaves peace behind.

One also recognises that suffering is a choice instrument for shaping character, and that without its touch the most delicate chancing on a vessel would be impossible. It is an actual pleasure to look at a perfectly healthy man, who sleeps without a dream and works without fatigue, whose blood is clean and whose vitality is inexhaustible. He is excellent company for other strong men,—a buoyant, optimistic, victorious nature,—but he has his limitations. It is not easy for the preacher of Christ's Evangel to reach this man, for he is entrenched in his fortunate experiences and good-humoured contentment. He is glad to know that there are promises for broken down people, but as things have gone well with him they make no impression on his soul. The next world will be remarkable if it excel this present state, which has been excellently arranged and entirely satisfactory. No doubt the soul is superior to the body; but at the same time he cannot forget that his body has served him perfectly. His unshaken and exuberant health leaves him invulnerable against every spiritual appeal. It is not to this Samson that the vision of the unseen comes, but to St. Paul with his perpetual tormenting thorn, to St. John cast as a dry seaweed on the shore by Patmos. When one wants to hear the secret things of God or to delight one's eyes with the finer shades of grace, he leaves the market-place and visits some one who wrestles daily with cruel pain and has come to know death as a familiar friend. Without the last touch of pain certain natures had never come to their perfect sweetness and autumn colour.

Nor can it be denied that without the stimulus of suffer-

ing the Race had never started on its upward career. When the early physical processes had done their work and man appeared as an animal with the soul inbreathed by God Himself, he was, morals apart, simply a savage,—naked, idle, ignorant, useless. As soon as he was cast forth from Eden, where he had been lapped round by ease, and set himself to work, he began to rise, and the compelling force was the prick of hunger. The fair house of human achievement contains now many treasures of letters and art, but its foundations were the hard and inevitable struggle for bread. First the rough hoe, and afterwards the lyre, the pen, and the brush. If a vagabond of the city is ever to be civilized, he must first of all learn to work, and the one certain persuasive is hunger. When this fiercest of all pangs seizes him, he will bestir himself, and so soon as he puts his foot on the lowest rung of the ladder, he has started on the right way, and either he or his children may reach the top some day. Pain is the spur which drives the Race along its ordered path of progress.

All these uses and benefits of pain are, however, open to two criticisms. Some of them are ethical but partial in their operations, as, for instance, invalidism, which purifies one person and hardens another; others are universal but not ethical, as, for instance, the action of hunger. One is therefore moved to seek about for some end of pain which will affect men generally and ethically, and in the search this incident comes under his notice. A congregation, made up of well-to-do and easy-going people, whom the preacher has sought to move to the pity and service of their fellow-creatures, as, he fears, in vain, is coming out of church. Just as they emerge a runaway horse knocks down and tramples upon a young child. She is only a child of the city—nameless, and not lovely, who has been in the park, and was trudging home with a few buttercups in her hand. Her misery and suffering are nothing to the

vast spiritual deprivations of the world which the preacher has laboured. It does not matter: in such circumstances people do not criticise nor calculate. A little maid has been hurt, and her calamity conquers the heart. Men are instantly shaken out of their composure and rush to her aid; women forget their finery and wipe away the blood. A whole company are of a sudden delivered from their selfishness and inspired with human interest. Every sin—pride, vanity, hardness, envy—is suspended; every virtue—love, sacrifice, gentleness, humility—is called into exercise. What could not be done by the eloquence of the preacher was accomplished by the suffering of the child. A crowd of ordinary people was suddenly raised to practical sainthood by a stroke.

The same effect is produced on a congregation on Hospital Sunday in an English city. Where the subject of sermon is dogma or exposition the chances are that the audience is more or less bored or divided; if the plea be for missions, the hearers may have objections on principle or detail. Let the preacher put the case of suffering before their imagination, and a congregation is at once simply waiting and longing for the opportunity to give; so that a deft orator, seeing his jury at fever-heat when he has not yet completed his argument, will close his speaking and take his verdict. People of every creed and no creed meet round the suffering and are nearer to one another and to goodness than at any other time in their lives. Jealousy and bigotry, the most unconquerable of sins, together with every other evil work, are vanquished and held for a time in subjection by compassion and sympathy.

Such conspicuous and undeniable incidents of daily life suggest that one at least of the ends of suffering is not the effect on the sufferer, but on the world; that one at least of the methods of saving the world is the spectacle of suffering. We can also detect the principle which lies

beneath the means and gives their particular application. If sin be indeed the constant and unscrupulous preference of one's self before the interest of every human being and the consequence of this habitual selfishness an utter and hopeless hardness, then more than half the battle will be gained when the individual is shaken off his self centre and moved to the service of others. As soon as the lowest nature has forgotten its own desires and even for five minutes has lived for another, the grip of sin has been loosened and the work of religion has begun. And it were difficult to name any influence which so swiftly and effectually allures one out of self and so warms the blood with generous emotions as the appeal of Pain.

If Pain be indeed fulfilling this high purpose, it will be easy to accumulate instances, and the first can be found in our homes. It is a dark dispensation of Providence that a tender and gentle woman, a wife and mother, should be nailed, as it were, to a cross for ten years; but when you turn from this martyr to her household there is light. Her husband, quite a commonplace man once, has been redeemed from coarseness of soul, and has attained to the knowledge of deep mysteries of life; her sons have escaped the unconscious selfishness of youth, and have learned the habit of chivalrous service; her daughters have been deepened in character and have been lifted above a hundred petty foolishnesses by the sight of that martyrdom. Neighbouring households have not suffered, so they are counted fortunate; neither have they such delicate sensibility, such spiritual insight, such ingenuity of sacrifice, such an atmosphere of love, such a depth of peace. For the cross has been set up in this household, and they have lived under its life-giving shadow.

Among the various callings there is one which seems to confer a singular elevation and winsomeness of character. Its members have a firmer hold on the love of the people

than any other body of men, and they have won their just and enviable esteem by a habit of unparalleled self-sacrifice. No one serves his fellows at greater cost to himself, or with a more absolute disregard of himself, than a physician. If any one, indeed, has fulfilled the Sermon on the Mount, and exhibited the very spirit of Christ in action, it is this man. Yet how few have been his religious privileges, who is largely cut off from the Word and Sacrament, who labours while others worship, and is apt to be beset by various trials of faith? Is it not evident that he must enjoy some powerful compensation and some influence atone to him for what sanctifies others and he has lost? And is it not certain that this fine influence must be the contact with suffering from day to day, till under the necessary composure of his manner and his natural repudiation of sentiment his heart has been shaped to pity and his will to service? They who serve unceasingly before the altar of suffering receive their reward.

This beneficent end of suffering has its chief illustration in the "Man of Sorrows." It goes without proving, that no one has ever so affected our Race for weal as our Master, and that the spring of this salvation is in Himself. Partly it is His example of holy living, and partly it is His Gospel of Divine Truth, but a white marble Christ had not touched the human heart, nor loosed the bands of sin. It is the Crucified, in the unutterable pathos of His Passion and Death, who has overcome and gotten unto Himself the victory. Because it appears that God also is in the tragedy of life, and in the heart of its mystery. When one enters the dimness of a foreign cathedral, he sees nothing clearly for a while, save that there is a light from the Eastern window, and it is shining over a figure raised high above the choir. As one's eyes grow accustomed to the gloom, he identifies the Crucifix, repeated in every side Chapel, and marks that to this Sufferer all kneel in their trouble, and are comforted.

From age to age the shadow hangs heavy on life, and men walk softly in the holy place, but ever the Crucifix faces them, and they are drawn to His feet and goodness by the invitation of the pierced hands.

Had one lived in Jesus' day and realized His excellence, the Cross would have been an almost insuperable offence to faith. Why should He have had a crown of thorns? Had the veil been lifted from the future, and had one seen the salvation flowing from the five wounds of the Redeemer, then he had been comforted and content. No one then imagined that through the mystery of the Lord's Passion so great a blessing was to come on all ages, for none had entered into the secret of suffering. To-day we are perplexed by the Passion, not now concentrated like a bitter essence in the Cup of a Divine Person, but distributed in the earthly vessels of ordinary people, and stand aghast at the lot of the victims. Were our vision purged and power given us to detect spiritual effects, then we would understand, and cease to complain. We would see the hard crust of human nature broken up, and the fountains of fine emotion unsealed; the subtle sins which sap the vigour of character eliminated, and the unconscious virtues brought to bloom. Before the widespread, silent, searching appeal of the suffering, each in his appointed place, the heart of the Race grows tender, and opens its door to goodness.

This mission of Pain may well be a quick consolation unto them who are its victims. They mourn at times that they are refused a share of the labour of life, and are laid as a burden on their friends. It appears unto those saints in their patience that they are a reduction on the sum total of life and a daily drain on human kindness. They make too little of themselves: they do not understand that they are one of the potent forces of salvation. What no ordinary means of Grace has been able to do for members of their household and a circle beyond, they have wrought. From



beds of weariness as from a Cross they have done mighty works, and in weakness they have been more eloquent than the voices of preachers in a public place. To-day they are broken in body, so that friends have to lift the cup to their lips ; by-and-by they will slip the body of humiliation, and they will need strong arms in that day to carry their reward. They have gone forth weeping, and sowed their very life in the cold and windy springtime : they will return rejoicing, and they will be bowed down once more, but now beneath the golden burden of their sheaves. With their Lord they also have seen of the travail of their souls, and are satisfied. By His Grace and in their measure they have filled up that which was behind of the afflictions of Christ.

JOHN WATSON.