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Literature.

PECULIARITIES OF INTEMPERANCE AS A VICE.

(BY MRS. ELLIS.)

If the physician, on taking charge of an invalid, should simply employ himself in laying down rules for the preservation of perfect health, it is evident that his advice would be of but little service in the removal of any existing disease under which his patient might be labouring. His rules might be excellent, his theory correct; but how would such a patient benefit by either? His malady would require the application of some direct and practical remedy, before he could be in a situation to take advantage of any method, however excellent, for the preservation of perfect health.

It is thus with the moral as well as the physical maladies of mankind. It would be a comparatively easy and pleasant task to lay down rules for the preservation of sobriety, order, and happiness, provided they had never been interrupted; but when evil habits have once gained the ascendancy, and the moral harmony of society has been destroyed, there must be a corrective employed to check what is evil, before any incentive can sufficiently operate promoting what is good.

Although the exceeding sinfulness of sin precludes all idea of there being in the Divine sight any degree of modification in the nature of sin itself; yet with regard to particular vices, as they come under human observation, there are certain points of distinction, which demand particular attention, and require appropriate treatment, as we see by the variety of regulations instituted for the well-being of society, and the still greater variety of systems of moral discipline brought into exercise for the purpose of controuling the evil tendencies of our common nature.

None who have ever been truly awakened to a sense of the all-sufficient power of religious influence upon the human heart, will be liable to suppose, that any mode or system of moral discipline, simply as such, can be effectual in its operation upon the life and character, so as, ultimately, to secure the salvation of the soul; but as a child is carefully taught that truth and kindness are good, and falsehood and cruelty evil, long before it knows anything of the religion of the Bible; so, in the case of every particular vice which has been known in the world, it may fairly be said to be better that it should be given up, than continued; provided only, it cannot be overcome except by the substitution of another. It is no small point gained, when an immortal being, a fellow-traveller in the journey of life, is prevailed upon to cease to do evil in any one respect. He is, at least, in a better condition for learning to do well than while persisting in his former course.

If a child, a servant, or any one under our care, has been accustomed to tell falsehoods, we rejoice over the first symptoms of their having learned to fear a lie, even though their conduct should evince no other indication of a moral change. We do not say, "Let him return to the evil of his ways, for it is of no use his leading a stricter life in this respect, unless he becomes altogether a changed character." We do not say this, because we know that the well-being of society, and the good of every individual connected with him, require that he should give up this particular habit, and if for no other reason, we think it sufficient that it should be given up for this—that the tendency of all evil is to contaminate, and that no vice can exist alone, but if indulged, will necessarily extend itself, and pollute whatever it comes in contact with, by this means producing innumerable poisonous fruits from one deleterious root. Thus the state of society is proportionately improved every time a vicious habit is wholly given up; and if this be true of vice in general, how eminently is it the case with that of intemperance; because there is no other, which, on the one hand, is so countenanced by the customs of the world, and which, on the other, spreads its baneful influence to so fearful and deadly an extent.

Intemperance is the only vice in the dark catalogue of man's offences against the will and the word of his Maker which directly assails the citadel of human reason, and by destroying the power to choose betwixt good and evil, renders the being whose similitude was originally divine, no longer a moral agent, but a mere idiot in purpose, and animal in action. The man who is habitually intemperate, consequently, makes a voluntary surrender of all control over his own conduct, and lives for the greater portion of his time deprived of that highest attribute of man—his rational faculties. It is, however, a fact deserving our most serious consideration, that in this state he is more alive than under ordinary circumstances to the impulse of feeling and of passion; so that while on the one hand he has less reason to instruct him how to act, on the other he has more restlessness and impetuosity to force him into action.

It has been calculated that of persons thus degraded, there are at the present time existing in Great Britain more than six hundred thousand, of whom sixty thousand die annually, the wretched victims of this appalling vice.

Such, then, is the peculiarity of intemperance, that while all other vices leave the mind untouched and the conscience at liberty to detect and warn of their commission, this alone subdues the reasoning powers, so that they have no capability of resistance; and while all other vices are such from their earliest commencement, this alone only begins to be a vice at that precise point when the clearness of the mind, and the activity of the conscience, begin to fail; and thus it progresses, according to the generally received opinion, by increasing in culpability in the exact proportion by which mental capability and moral power are diminished.

What an extraordinary measurement of guilt is this for an enlightened world to make! In all other cases, a man's culpability is measured precisely by the ability he has to detect evil, and the power he possesses to withstand temptation. In this alone he is first encouraged by society, and this is while his natural powers remain unimpaired. No blame attaches to him then. He is a fit companion for wise and good men; but no sooner does his reason give way, than he is first slightly cen-

sured by society, then shunned, then despised, and finally abhorred; just according to the progressive stages by which he has become less capable of understanding what is right, and controlling his own inclinations to what is wrong.

It is another striking feature in the character of intemperance as a vice, that it commences not only under the sanction of the law, but under that of what is called the best society; not only under the sanction of the world, but under that of religious professors, who believe themselves called out of darkness into light. It begins with the first welcome which kind and Christian friends assemble to give to a young immortal being, just ushered into a state of probation, by which it is to be fitted for eternity; and it extends through all the most social and cheering, as well as through many of the most lasting and sacred associations we form on earth; until at last, when the tie is broken, and the grave receives our lost and loved, the solemn scene is closed, and the mourner's heart is soothed, by the commencement of intemperance.

I say the commencement, for who can tell at what draught, what portion of a draught, what drop—for it must really come to this—who can say, then, at what drop of the potent cup sobriety ceases and intemperance begins? The intemperate man himself cannot tell, for it has justly been observed, that, "instead of feeling that he is taking too much, his only impression is, that he has not had enough." Who then shall warn him? Even if he were in a condition to listen to remonstrance, who should be his judge? If it be perfectly innocent, may right, in the first instance, to partake of this beverage, say to the extent of two thousand drops; if all sorts of persons, up to the highest scale of religious scrupulosity, take this quantity, and more, and deem it right to take it, even to double or treble it as occasion may demand, it must be strong evidence that quantity, as regards a few thousand drops, can be of little consequence. Still there is, there must be, a precise point at which mankind ought to stop, or why is the unanimous voice of society lifted up against the intemperate? But why, above all, are we told that no drunkard can enter the kingdom of Heaven.

Ask this question of a hundred persons, and they will in all probability each give you a different account of the measurement by which they ascertain at what point intemperance begins; because there are all the different habits and constitutions of mankind to be taken into account, as well as all the different degrees of potency in the intoxicating draught, according to its name and quality. Of twenty persons seated at the same table, and regaling themselves with the same wine, it is more than probable that the fatal drop at which intemperance begins, would not be in the same glass with any two amongst them. Who then shall decide this momentous question? for it is momentous, since eternal condemnation depends upon it. Let us reduce the number of persons, and see whether by this means the case will be made more clear. We will suppose, then, that three persons sit down to table to their wine, or whatever it may be, in what is called an innocent and social way. Out of this small number, it is possible that one may commit a deadly sin without taking more than the others. Yet to him it is sin, simply because the drop of transition between good and evil, from the peculiar constitution of bodily frame, occurs in his glass at an earlier stage than it does with the others. These three men, consequently, rise from that table, according to the opinion of the world, in a totally different moral state, for one has been guilty of a degrading vice, and the others are perfectly innocent. Yet all have done the same thing. Who, then, I would ask again, is to decide in such a case. I repeat, it cannot be the guilty man himself, because that very line which constitutes the minute transition between a state of innocence and a state of sin, is the same at which he ceased to be able clearly to distinguish between one and the other.

It is impossible, then, that this question should ever be decided, unless every one who indulges in the use of such beverage would take the trouble to calculate the exact distance between the extremes of sobriety and intoxication, not only computed by every variety of liquid in which alcohol is contained, but by every variety of bodily sensation which he may be liable to experience. This calculation will bring him to one particular point, which may not improperly be called the point of transition, at which positive evil begins, and beyond which it is a positive sin to go.—Who, then, I ask again, shall fix this point? It must of necessity be left to the calculations of the man whose inclination in the hour of temptation is not to see it, whose desire is to step over it, and whose perceptions at that time are so clouded and obscured, that he could not ascertain it if he would.

Here, then, we see a marked difference betwixt intemperance and every other vice. Theft, for instance, is as much theft at the beginning as it is at the end; and if a case should occur in which there was any doubt about the act being really such, reason might immediately be applied to, as unimpaired; nor would any other of the faculties of the mind have suffered in the slightest degree from the commission of a dishonest deed. Neither are there any degrees of theft openly countenanced by the world, and by religious society. We will not say that there are not tricks in trade, and dishonest practices which exist to the discredit of our country and our profession, but they are chiefly done in secret, and acknowledged, at least in the pulpit, to be wrong.

Another characteristic of intemperance is, that it often begins in what are considered the happiest and most social moments of a person's life. It begins when the hospitable board is spread, and when friend meets friend; when the winter's fire is blazing; when the summer's ramble is finished; on the eve of parting, when moments glide away with the preciousness of hours; when hearts warm towards each other; when broken confidence is restored; when the father welcomes back his son; and when the young and trusting bride first enters her new home. All these, and tens of thousands of associations, all as tender, and some of them more dear, are interwoven with our recollections of the tempting draught, which of itself demands no borrowed sweets.

How different from this are all other vices. Injurious to society in the first instance, as well as in the last, selfish in their own nature, and avowedly abhorred, they no sooner appear in their naked form, than a check is put upon them by the united voice of society. The thief is not welcomed into the bosom of kind families after he has been known to steal a little. The miser, whose evil propensities are, next to intemperance, the most insidious in their nature, is spurned and hated before his failing has become a vice. And so it is with all who sin in other ways. They are acknowledged to be dangerous as companions, and injurious as citizens, in the commencement of their guilt. It is only by denying a knowledge of their actual conduct, that they are supported and countenanced even by their friends. So far as they are acknowledged to be guilty, they are condemned, though having sinned but a little; while the victim of intemperance alone carries with him the sanction of society long after the commencement of his career; nay, he drinks of the very same bowl with the religious professor until he has lost the power to refrain.

The victim of intemperance may have originally sat down to the same cheering draught as the religious man. He may have been his friend. But it so happens that his constitution of body is different. With him the transition point occurs at an earlier period than with the other. He passes this without being aware of his danger, and his mastery over himself is lost. What horror then seizes the religious man, not against himself for having partaken with his friend, but against that friend for having gone too far. Had he begun with him to commit a little theft, or to tell a slight falsehood, and his friend had gone too far, he would have blamed himself for the remainder of his life for being accessory to the downfall of that friend; but here he starts back, considers himself, and is considered by others, as perfectly innocent; while his friend, who has committed nothing but a little more of the very same act, is shunned as degraded, and denounced as guilty.

The voice of society is most injurious and unfair with regard to intemperate persons. They are classed together as belonging to the lowest grade of human beings, frequenters of vicious haunts, and perpetrators of every abomination. It is a melancholy truth that such for the most part they become; but it is equally true, that many, if not most of them, have been thinned out from the ranks of honest and of honorable men, whose principles and habits were precisely the same as their own, in the first instance, but whose bodily constitution, and whose powers of self-mastery, were stronger, and who thus happened to remain on the safe side of the transition line.

I would not for an instant be supposed to doubt the efficacy of constant watchfulness, under the influence of religious principle; and, above every other consideration, the all-sufficient power of that Divine assistance which alone can be expected in answer to fervent and heartfelt prayer. I would not insinuate a doubt that thousands have not been prevented by this means from going too far, even under the critical circumstances already described. But I speak of people generally—of society as it is constituted—of things as they are; and I speak under the conviction, that, notwithstanding all the efforts of ministers of religion, and of zealous and devoted friends to the promotion of the Gospel of Christ, some additional effort is required, and some other means necessary, in order to rescue from destruction the thousands who now fill the ranks of intemperance, and the thousands beyond these, who, from cultivating the same habits, are following unconsciously in the same fatal course.

There is another important point of difference betwixt the victims of intemperance and those who are addicted to any other vice. The dishonest man begins his guilty course with a meanness of purpose, and a degradation of soul, which marks him out as a stain upon the society of which he forms a part. The miser cherishes, along with his thirst for gold, a hardness, a grudging, and sometimes a hatred against his fellow beings. And so it is throughout the whole catalogue of evil which marks the downward progress of degraded and guilty men. They are guilty and polluted even before the vices to which they addict themselves are committed. They are guilty before the world, and obnoxious to the open censure of society, just in proportion as they have harboured a thought, a conception, or a design, inimical to its well-being, and destructive of its peace. But the intemperate man begins his career with no such malevolent feeling. He begins it, most frequently, without a wrong intention at all; and is often—alas! too often—the kindest of the kind, the favourite guest, the beloved companion of those who cheerfully accompany him along the first stage of his dangerous career. It is, however, the most lamentable feature in his case, that although he may thus begin with a noble, generous, and affectionate heart, he invariably becomes mean, selfish, and even cruel.

An impartial observation of the world will, I believe, support me, when I repeat, that the habitually intemperate are, for the most part, persons who have been originally social, benevolent, and tender hearted, lovers of their fellow men, of cordial meetings, and of those gatherings together of congenial spirits which it would be impossible for a harder and less feeling nature so fully to enjoy. They are persons who, from excessive sensibility to pain and pleasure, are liable to be too much elated by the one, and depressed by the other, for their own peace—persons to whom enjoyment is too intense, and suffering too wretched, to be experienced with equanimity of mind—to whom a social hour with chosen friends is absolute felicity, and a wounded spirit death.

To such the intoxicating draught has ever been the strongest temptation, because, while, on the one hand, it seemed for the moment to heighten every pleasure, on the other it has, for a season equally transient, the power of smothering off the edge of every pain.

Again, we all know the force with which certain bodily diseases operate upon the mind; we know that the sensation of perfect health is enlivening to the mental faculties, and even cheering to the soul. In this state we can form and execute plans of which we should have been incapable under certain kinds of sickness, even had the power of action been unimpaired. Thus the

mind is in a great degree dependent upon the body, and especially those functions of the body with which nervous sensation is most intimately connected. In a state of nervous disorder, the powers of perception, judgment and decision, are so far deranged, that even conscience ceases to exercise a just and lawful influence, and ideas are conceived, and actions performed, under a total incapacity for clearly distinguishing right from wrong.

Inebriation, from the effect it produces upon the stomach and the brain, has a more instantaneous influence upon the nervous system, and consequently upon the mind, than any other disease. There are, of course, degrees of this influence, beginning first with the slightly pleasurable sensation which some persons experience after drinking a single glass of wine, and extending to the last and fatal draught of the poor outcast from respectable society. It is often asked, why does not the drunkard stop? and he is sometimes most severely blamed for taking too much, by those who take only a little less. But how should he stop, when his mind has lost its healthy tone in consequence of the particular state of his body?—when he ceases to be capable of distinguishing betwixt good and evil, and cares not for any consequences that may come upon him? How should he stop? It is a mockery of common sense, and an insult to common feeling, to suppose that of himself, and unaided, he should have the power to do so. At that critical moment he has not even the wish to stop. So far from it, his inclination is on the opposite side, and the whole force of his animal nature, with an excess of bodily appetite, are increasing on the side of evil, in the same proportion that his mental capabilities, his conscience, and his power of self-mastery, are becoming weaker on the side of good.

And this is the man of whom the world judges so hardly, because he has passed unconsciously the forbidden line—because he has never been able to ascertain exactly where it was—and, most probably, because, from some natural constitution of body, the same draught which was safely drunk by another, was one of fearful peril to him.

The original construction of the bodily frame has much to do with the diseases to which we are liable through the whole of our lives. There are hereditary tendencies which the skill of the physician, the care of the parent, and the advice of the friend, are strenuously exerted to correct. In no case are hereditary tendencies more striking than in the children of intemperate parents. It is true, the very excess, and consequent ruin, of one generation, not unfrequently tend to place certain individuals of the next more scrupulously upon their guard against the same lamentable fate, and ultimate safety often depends upon an early apprehension of danger. But there is in the bodily constitution of such families a peculiar liability which ought to render them the objects of the tenderest sympathy, and the most watchful care to others. There is in their very nature, if once excited, an aching want of that stimulus which even a very slight degree of intoxication supplies; and when once this want is gratified, it increases to such a degree as to resemble a consuming fire, whose torment nothing can alleviate but constant libations of the same deadly draught.

Now, it is quite impossible we should know, when mixing in general society, where and when we may meet with individuals of this constitutional tendency; for even with children of the most respectable parents it sometimes prevails to an alarming extent. Perhaps we sit down to table with twenty persons, and amongst them is one of those to whom the cup of which others are drinking, as they believe innocently, is the cup of poison and of death. Perhaps that one is a father's hope, or the only child of a widowed mother, or the beloved and betrothed of a young and trusting heart, about to become the father of a family, the head of a household, and himself in his turn an example and a guide to others. His friends drink with him. They all partake in safety, but within his bosom the latent elements of destruction are set on fire, and he plunges headlong into shame, and misery, and ruin. To a certain extent his friends have gone along with him. They have even pressed and encouraged him to partake; but no sooner do they perceive that he has overstepped a certain dubious and almost imperceptible limit—or, in other words, that his bodily frame has not been able to sustain what they have borne uninjured—than they turn from him, and acknowledge him no more as a companion and a friend. They are, in fact, ashamed to be seen with him. He loses caste amongst them, becomes a marked man, and is finally left to perish, as an object of disgust and loathing, too gross to be reclaimed, and too low for pity.

Nor is it with those who are constitutionally liable alone that this bodily tendency exists. The habit of intemperance itself creates it; and thousands who have begun their ruinous career, simply out of compliance with the usages of society, and not a few who have done so under medical advice, have acquired, for certain kinds of stimulants, and sometimes for all, an habitual craving, which they have ultimately sacrificed every other consideration to gratify. How do we know then, in mixing with society, but that we are sitting down to table with some individual who has just arrived at the turning point in this career? One who has just begun to suspect his own danger, who is hanging, as the weak always do, upon the example of others, and looking especially to religious people, to see what sanction they may give to an indulgence for which he is ever in search of an excuse? How do we know, amongst the many with whom we associate, and whose private history is untold to us—how do we know whose eyes may be fixed upon us, with an anxious hope that we shall go along with them in the course they are so desirous to pursue, though they would still wish to pursue it without condemnation or guilt. Now, if these eyes should be beaming from a young and trusting heart, unconscious of the whole extent of the danger, and fondly believing that safety dwells with us, but more especially if they beam from the fair countenance of woman—oh, if at the same moment we could look upon the misery and the guilt that would ensue to the being thus regarding us, and thus plunging into perdition from our example, what should we say to the