

REPAIRS NEATLY EXECUTED

THE baby, new to sky and earth, surrounded by toys and playthings, extracts the keenest pleasure from throwing them about, picking them to bits, thumping them flat, pulling them awry, squeezing them out of shape.

Although this early impulse is not necessarily an evidence of original sin, it does show a twisted instinct which will need correction. That correction comes, partly through parental discipline, partly from a dawning sense in the tiny brain that things are made to be kept and used.

So, somewhere about the age of six or seven, the boy or girl sets greater store by doll or tin soldier, picture book or toy train, even taking means to preserve them from injury, and being worried if they spoil. Thus there emerges in the child consciousness the notion of repair, and an inkling of the part it plays amongst us. Then follows the training of school to drive home the lesson.

We, too, are all at school: tuition flows in upon us continually from all quarters. Some of our teachers we like, some we dislike; but there is a general conspiracy to make us learn. We prefer, I suppose, the indirect method; and, as if to please us (by coating the pill), the parabolic way is that chiefly favoured by the great college of preceptors.

Materials for these parables are continually offering themselves to us. They are bound up with our common tasks. The Banished Duke in *As You Like It* found 'tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,' and so forth. While we, of a less poetical cast of mind, may catch eloquent speech from a watch-

Repairs Neatly Executed

maker's tools, or receive warnings from a surgeon's instruments.

No sooner is a clock wound up than it begins to wind down. However bright the polish, steel will rust. Socks form holes, umbrellas want re-covering, carpet designs are trodden out of recognition, buttons fall off, clothes rub thin, cuffs fray at edges, trees shed their leaves, chairs sink in at their seats, stoppings come out of teeth, hair dies on the male scalp, crockery chips, violin strings snap, knives blunt, slates slip off roofs, earth subsides, foundations loosen.

Moreover, the same law extends to bigger things, entailing graver consequences. Not only do worlds break up and moons freeze into desolation, but tender consciences may harden into stone. Not only will watch-springs snap, but the ties of friendship loosen under strain. Not only does a prolonged drought dry up rivers and streams, but the sources of the spiritual life become impoverished under the fierce glare of worldliness. Not only, too, does the havoc wrought by flood bring distress and lamentation, but the dykes which a nation throws up to protect a fair land of liberty can be overthrown by an advancing tyranny. If acids corrode metal, selfishness and greed gnaw into the very vitals of life. If tissues degenerate, worse, far worse, is the corruption of the human will.

So repairs have to be executed—neatly or botchily, speedily or slowly, cheaply or dearly, temporarily or eternally—in this world or the next.

Listen to a tale of woe! But is it a tale of woe? Would we have it other? Think what we should miss in a long, repairless existence. And think, also, what they would miss who do our little jobs for us. No more entertaining chats with the doctor. No more pleasant journeys when the streets are 'up.' No more merry squabbles over matching things. No more heated arguments with the plumber. No more

Blackfriars

arrangements to make with Jane about breakages. No more consultations with lady friends about 'transformations.' No more spring cleaning. No more summer holidays. No more autumn garden rubbish clearing. No more winter strikes!

We could not face the situation. We could not bear the stagnation of a dreary precision with no happenings to awake interest, with no accidents to warm us into excitement. Let us take things as they are. We'd rather bear such ills as we have than fly to others that we know not of.

I take it, then, that we are reconciled to a condition in which articles, objects and organs get knocked about, damaged, soiled, weakened and out of order. When the chimney pot tumbles down, we will smile. When a castor comes off the sofa, we will treat it as a good joke. And when the frost bursts the water pipes, we will invoke that Saint of Sunniness, the imperturbable Mark Tapley!

Since, therefore, with patch and rivet, with varnish and physic, with darn and screw, with wigs and apologies, we restore and renew the things we use and the natures we possess—let us see what profit philosophy can suck out of business.

Take two instances of repairs, homely ones—and the better for that: the stitching of split gloves, and the rejuvenescence of faded and wrinkled cheeks. What more necessary? What more praiseworthy? With regard to the gloves, of course, you might cast them aside, or give them to the housemaid and buy new ones. But in the affair of the spoiling face, you would have to grin and bear it, unless you took steps to improve its appearance.

Let us suppose that, in both instances, you decide to repair. Well, you get the gloves stitched at the finger-tips, or where the thumb takes a turn outwards, and they will serve your hands for a few more weeks.

Repairs Neatly Executed

As to the other trouble, you submit to facial massage and apply cosmetics, rouge or the powder-puff—with the result that wrinkles disappear and the glow of simulated youth returns for a season. So far, so good. But mark what has happened. The intentions of Providence have been frustrated by your interference.

Now consider another pair of enterprises. You catch what is termed a 'cold.' Nature at once starts to put you right again by setting up inflammation; and you, approving her kind efforts, apply a poultice or hot fomentations to the affected part. Again, a summer storm has beaten down some climbing plant that covered up an ugly black fence in your garden. Nothing daunted, its tender shoots begin once more their merciful task of concealing an eye-sore, while you assist by training the stems, or providing supports, or in any other suitable fashion. Now observe that in these two instances you also are a repairer—but by co-operating, not by hindering.

Take two more examples of another kind of repairing. A lovely early Italian mural painting has been whitewashed over by Philistines of the dark eighteenth century. To repair that wall, one must carefully peel off the wretched veneer. A ceiling with fourteenth century open oak rafters has been blocked out by plaster and paper to satisfy a later lack of taste. Clearly what is wanted is the destruction of the additions so as to re-expose the ancient wood supports. Here, then, is a third typical sort of repair. As you notice, it consists in removing without scruple what had been put on to things.

Our parable begins to take a shape; and we can advance cautiously to the lesson stage—the stage of application and interpretation.

To repeat, the three sorts of neatly-executed repairs which we wish to weigh critically are these: (1)

Blackfriars

Repairing by patching, involving a check to what is making for disintegration; (2) Repairing by co-operation with an *existing* process of amendment; and (3) repairing by the undoing of wrong work. Let us apply and try to explain.

To begin with, consider politics. A sorry business, largely in the hands of amateur tinkerers, it has become a game of cheating without being found out. Anyone may freely indulge in it who has enough bounce and sauce to deceive the ignorant. But, for all that, a minority of wise heads in the study, of serious counsellors in Parliament, may be counted upon in every generation, to save a community from madness, fanaticism, jingoism, and, what is worse, faddism. One thinks of Burke and Mill, Bright, Gladstone and Disraeli.

Such men have to deal with the constitution and to direct its machinery. In this connection their work is twofold. It consists, in the first place, in upholding and strengthening the fabric upreared by our ancestors; while, in the second place, there is laid upon them the grave duty of superintending repairs. These repairs will come under the three headings already stated.

Pieces of fresh legislation will often have to be let in to fill up the rents made by the pulling asunder of new social forces. Not only that, but frequently there arise in the state fresh reforming activities, which, if encouraged and sanely guided, lead to health in diseased economic conditions. Still, a third method of reform is needed upon occasions: the cutting away of excrescencies, the scouring that removes dirt.

Here are a couple of situations—or whatever you call them—with which the philosopher-statesman, bent upon repairing, has to deal.

Repairs Neatly Executed

(1) The problem of the indigent is ever with us. Falling back upon our three kinds of repairing, three courses are open to us. You can give temporary relief by doles of charity, organised or unorganised. This is a palliative that mends matters for a time. Better than this, you may harness legislation to existing movements of goodwill, fostering by State support tendencies towards improvement which the corporate conscience gives birth to—tendencies that would spend themselves to little effect, if unaided. Or, again, you may jump at the calamitous expedient of robbing the rich to pay the poor. Subtracting from one set of persons to add to another set stills the clamour of a moment, but may leave behind a heritage of rancour bringing social warfare in its train. This last is the pet panacea of the revolutionary—

‘Some true admirer of the time’s reform
Who strips an ancient dwelling like a storm’

as Crabbe pillories him.

Dangerous as such ‘admirers’ are at home, their influence cannot fail to be deadly when it is exerted in the repairing of international relations. Immense tact and foresight can alone guide safely the destinies of nations. Suppose another tragic crisis in Europe. Britain, through no fault of her own, is placed in a position of great peril. How to guarantee her security becomes the urgent question. Pacifists would knit us up into short-lived safety by casting sops in the form of empty effusions of friendship to the threatening wolves, or by throwing tiny bits of territory to stop their mouths. The peace-loving patriot, on the other hand, anxious only to prevent, never to precipitate conflict, will have detected a weakening of the national fibres long ere signs of decay excite the malevolent activity of an enemy. He will have urged forward plans of re-

Blackfriars

pair; and these plans will consist mainly in nursing a non-provocative Christian patriotism, in placing the weight of national support on the side of practical training for defence and universal discipline; in short, in stimulating those many forces stirring in the commonwealth that make for strength and unity. Thus might we be spared a deal of belated crying over spilt milk and much mumbling over wanton neglect. Nor can the third kind of repairing be omitted. Because the idle and wealthy parasites sucking the blood of the nation, the home-enemies that fatten upon its vitals, together with the agitators who divide the house against itself and the unscrupulous capitalists who exploit its distracted workers, will have to be cut away, or rendered harmless by suppression.

Yet the machinery devised by politics can only cope with men in the mass. After a rough and ready fashion, it aims at keeping us orderly, at minimising the evils of discontent, eccentricity, fanaticism and unfair competition. Here, is put on the drag; there, the spur is applied. Without wishing to belittle their office, our statesmen are scarcely more dignified than keepers of menageries. If they happen to reach a level of least injustice, that appears to sum up pretty well the utmost excellence of their makeshifts. Operating from outside upon large groups of persons, they throw crackers and squibs into their midst to create clearances, or drive them like sheep into pens, or chase them in droves to feed or play, or bring them into line, or knock some justice into their conduct with the hammers of legislation. For the politician has to do with abstract impulses, such as greed and selfishness, divorced from individual personalities. Hence all their repairing is superficial.

The messengers of the good tidings of reform seek out the human units. Mentally, morally and spiritually, we find our substance wasting. Friction

Repairs Neatly Executed

with circumstance, burdens of responsibility, monotony of habit, sluggishness of function, excesses of mis-directed energy, corruption ever struggling against rising vitality—all these influences wear us into holes, fray us out at edges, drain up the springs of energy. The voice of wisdom, understood secretly, is drowned in the clamours of foolishness. The brightness of the soul becomes tarnished by the breath of the world. How pressing the need to be renewed in the inward parts, to be restored continually by the oil and wine of grace! ‘Hoc opus, hic labor est.’ It is, far and away, the biggest job men and women have to tackle. Should we not say, it is the only work that presses?

A boy is sent to school, with an extension, perhaps, at college. He leaves with a smattering of more or less useless information. He is crammed with dead facts upon a hundred subjects—grammatical and arithmetical rules, a hotchpotch of scientific formulae, lists of dates, names of great persons, with summaries of and opinions upon their works and doings. But he remains quite uneducated in spite of having muddled or fidgeted through scores of text books. He quickly finds that, intellectually, he is in rags and tatters. Assuming that self-respect is one of his qualities, he is anxious to conceal the scandal by suitable repairs. What course shall he pursue? If foolish, he yields to vanity and elects to fit himself for the career (in his small circle) of the universalist in information. Desiring to stop up all the gaps in his mental defences, he gobbles up book after book. He hangs about the lecture-rooms of night-class professors; struggles with note taking; writes ‘papers,’ as they are called; submits, lamb like, to the indecent designs of the crammers; and arrives at the very summit of stupidity by replying to captious examination queries. The poor fellow fancies he is getting edu-

Blackfriars

cated, or acquiring culture. He is, as we know by daily observation, only wasting his time by flattering the meanest sort of egotism.

Another man grasps the situation better. Not at all keen on becoming an encyclopaedia, he is content to remain ignorant upon scores of topics, asking himself in what direction his inclinations push him. That which he likes, he learns and ponders slowly and delightedly, following the promptings of his tastes. For there are many roads to culture. The man's studies are to him entrancing pleasures. For the mockery of 'examinations,' he feels only a quiet contempt. He moves from one subject to another, according as each presents attractions. Loitering if he chooses, he rambles along byeways and refuses to be tied up or restricted. Loving what he seeks, and seeking what he loves, this student, month by month, adds more and more solid human culture to his life—a culture that many masters of arts and doctors of literature might envy. Trusting largely to himself for guidances, he achieves the education suited to his particular bent of mind and temperament. It may well chance that sometimes the official professor saves you a little time and drudgery. But is that worth while if that saving cripples your initiative or represses your originality? And this is not all. Respond, above everything, to the promptings of nature; but do not neglect to repair your defects by throwing away and forgetting the load of useless lumber with which your early educators may have saddled you.

With regard, next, to moral wholeness—indefinitely harder to attain than the merely mental, unspeakably more precious—we cannot choose but be ever busy-ing ourselves with repairs and reconstructions. If we do not, the structure will fall in upon us and bury us in the ruins.

Repairs Neatly Executed

Mostly it rests with ourselves, under the eye of the Unseen Master-Builder, to execute these moral under-pinnings and buttressings. Curious spectators are around, and help may be got from hints they drop. But all the houses are different, each treatment is unique. Furthermore, neatness cannot be insisted upon: the matter is too urgent.

Crumblings in the fabric have to be made good. Wind, rain and smoke are agents of mischief: they eat into or soften stone, and their attacks have to be watched and checked. There are dangers also from parasite plants; and here repair means destruction. While, above all else, the main supports of a building require constant strengthening.

So a man's duty to his moral self must be three-fold. For example: human rectitude is upheld by four cardinal virtues—Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance. No labour, then, is lost that goes to preserve and to improve their staying power. The deadly vices of sloth, luxury, hatred and lust cling for unholy life to the crevices of the soul's masonry: only the knife of a sane asceticism will tear away such insidious foes. While, from without, the world and the devil hurl themselves upon our weak spots: no help but in an unresting watchfulness over the points assaulted, filling up holes, defending exposed surfaces. To stand four-square asks the utmost of each.

Yet a still sterner task is imposed. The fire of the spiritual life of faith has to be fed and fanned, guarded and stirred. The strictness and the enthusiasm of a vestal virgin alone will suffice for the daily repairs to its flame. Your soul-house must be warmed to be habitable. If, with one hand, you are raking out of your hearth the cinders deposited by spent aspirations, with the other hand you are obliged to pour in oil and add fresh fuel from heavenly altars. Now, the many competing creeds have striven to con-

Blackfriars

struct systems for keeping up and diffusing this divine heat. But faced by the problem of problems—the problem of spiritual combustion—and bewildered by the artful advertisements by our up-to-date—and out-of-date—religious quacks, so many make a sorry mess of things. Shall we not be more than satisfied in seeking the advice of Christ's own corporation of experts, who, guided unerringly by Him, have had the benefit of centuries upon centuries of experience in the matter. Wary of new-fangled projects, and obsolete failures, let us lend an ever-attentive ear to the same safe proposals placed before men ages since—proposals crowned and triumphantly justified by success. In short, let us hear the Church.

Repairs to the self, repairs undertaken by groups of selves for mutual aid might well, one would imagine, exhaust the whole duty of man as a mender. Yet, by some impish instinct, we aspire to go further. We want to patch up each other; and we want, in addition, by sticking on or by lopping off, to change articles of all descriptions that labourers have in the past bequeathed for our use. Here begins a tale of waste, failure, impertinence.

Who but bewails that mania for cobbling the boots of one's neighbours—for setting right the wrongs one detects in others. *A* trifles with our leisure: he should be shown to be a bore and a nuisance. *B* spends too much upon luxuries: our duty, then, is to visit him and preach a sermon on the dangers of extravagance. *C*'s temper embroils him with his relatives: our course is clear—*viz.* further to alienate them and to increase his exasperation by, underhandedly, framing plans for the quarreller's reform.

The mote and the beam lesson confronts one rather unpleasantly during these proceedings. The worst of ways to cure the disorders of our neighbours is to

Repairs Neatly Executed

administer the draught ourselves. Either our hand shakes in giving the physic, or the moment is inopportune, or the decoction only turns the stomach of the patient. Thus the remedy becomes worse than the complaint. Example alone, the example of one's own relative health is what, in the first and last instance, really avails.

Oh! for the rarity of Christian non-interference under the sun. Would we but stick to the better fashioning of ourselves. Other forces, be sure, are in operation which are only hindered by our methods of quickening their action.

What are we to think now of those repairs people execute, neatly or clumsily, upon substances of art or thought left to us by former craftsmen and thinkers? A proper subject, in all conscience, even to broach—let alone to empty. Elaboration, rectification, restoration: these are the objects our repairs aim at in dealing with that vast heritage of the past committed to our care. Sometimes these improvers are justified of their work. More often they are to be blamed as impudent vandals.

Corrections in the schools of thought: our thanks are due for these. As the field surveyed widens, as instruments for observation are perfected, as interrelations are studied more closely, we expect and welcome useful repairs. Philosophy—or, rather, the surface of philosophy—has undergone modifications. Aristotle tones down Plato. Intuitionist digs deep trenches over the smooth plateau of the empiricist. The idealist takes up the realist's doctrine and etheralises certain of its implications. Laid foundations are turned up continually. Neither Kant nor Spencer, nor Hume nor Hegel, nor Bergson nor Einstein settles the eternal inquisition so thoroughly explored seven hundred years ago by our own St. Thomas.

Blackfriars

Take theology. The earlier symbols of our Catholic faith are enlarged, and made clearer. Definitions, as occasions arise, serve to fill in details. Former pronouncements are submitted to later readjustments. Never a pause in the development of that Divine Deposit once for all committed to the Church. Never an all-exhausting definition of even fundamental dogmas—so infinitely rich in their contents.

Then, in regard to science: we pass from stage to stage, and are turned upside-down almost from decade to decade. The scenes of this play shift with such embarrassing suddenness. Verily, the whole world of appearances looks quite differently to us from age to age. Repairs from first to last; and never do we reach the conviction that any tiny scrap of earthly knowledge will preserve its present look.

The relations of art to our problem are widely different, although some profess to treat its creations as if they were submitted to the same rules. One can do no more than suggest a few ways in which the repairing spirit comes into the discussion.

Why, there is a theory that art itself is a kind of repairing of nature. Certain groups will have it that the artist is a superior critic of nature's semi-blindness, the assumption being that art carries to climaxes of beauty the fallings-short of nature. In such effrontery there remains, no doubt, this element of truth: that nature's infinite, complicated perfection being ungraspable, man's microscopic works bear a semblance of expanding hints thrown out here and there.

However, artists themselves are tireless repairers. Why these footnotes? Why appendices to books? Why the rough sketch? Why the working over of crude ideas? Why the re-paintings, the paintings-out? Why the hasty outlines figured on the staff,

Repairs Neatly Executed

painfully, stage by stage, brought, with all their fillings in, to the consummated symphony? Why the months of chipping that the sculptor bestows upon a face to break away the flaws which his progress entails? Certainly the artist is a perpetual repairer.

But, his task complete, the workmen gone, it is only stupidity that afterwards tampers with his results. Censure will here be excused, however severely it strikes the miserable practices of repairers. One single set of instances alone will absolve them and render us their debtors. Even as the huge carbuncle may justly be torn from the haughty crest of Lucifer to be chiselled into the Cup of Salvation, the mystic Holy Grail, so may base things be turned from their baseness to answer sacred purposes. Barring that, our condemnation of vandalism ought to be unqualified. What an intolerable deal of petty meddling has had to be borne.

To begin near the top. Protestants trim our hymns to meet their various fashions in theology. A word lopped off, a phrase deleted, and, with due substitutions, the sting of a dogma is drawn. Are you left in suspense? Add a verse to re-assure yourself and save your heresy. Are the attributions too general? Make them particular. Is a sentence coloured with the vivid scarlet of Rome? It is easy to make it sombre with the black of Geneva, or the neutral grey of Canterbury!

Look, next, at the so-called 'restorations' of the masterpieces of mediaeval architecture. Woe be to the spoilers and their trade! All over Europe are spread the painful results of their practices. Classic fronts stuck on to Gothic backs; oblong windows, villainously over-decorated, thrust in where the soaring lancets were. Does a cathedral of the thirteenth century exhibit weakenings of age? Hurrah! for the luck that enables us to bring it up to the date of our

Blackfriars

pompous, empty and garish Renaissance. How sick one is at it all. Disgusted, likewise, at the picture 'renovators'; at the pupils who 'improve' on their masters' compositions; at all those 'repairings' that convert the canvasses of immortal epochs into lies and deceits.

Does literature escape the attention of the menders? The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, scandalised by Shakespeare, furnished eviscerated versions of the greatest of the plays, suitable for genteel audiences to attend. Milton, too, was taken in hand and disembowelled by noodles deaf to his tremendous music, blind to the sweeping majesty of his horizons.

Music, alas! has been even more outrageously violated. We get abortions and hybrids galore: Bach—Gounod; Mozart—Pitt; Weber—Weingartner; Handel—Wood; and so on, *ad nauseam*. Where orchestration is 'thin' (as they term it), the score is inundated with lava streams of volcanic brass. The 'advanced' moderns turn up their noses at the sanity of a hundred years ago, and 'repair' its defects with the howlings of demons.

It is wearying to pursue such a record as is presented to us by the ravages of the repairer. We are wise and fair only in taking gratefully what has been willed to us. If we don't cherish it, others may; and the remainders that seem puerile to us, others may prize.

To reach a conclusion, we can hardly avoid putting to ourselves, *sotto voce*, the question: Exists there any object, abstract or concrete, inside or outside us that requires no repairing—anything that, in very deed, would be soiled, disfigured or destroyed by the bare touch of knife, scissors, putty, brush or any other of the thousand implements of correction, spiritual or material?

Repairs Neatly Executed

Yes; the three realities : the three sisters that never can be severed without pain—Goodness, Truth and Beauty. Nevertheless, they are unmistakeably reflected back to us men, and for our salvation, in the supernatural, everlasting mirror of the visible Body of the Divine Redeemer which is His Church. By and through that splendid Vision we are urged forward, in union with Christ the Lord, towards the complete apprehension of them there where alone they actually subsist. All these our repairing instincts point to some final satisfaction. That final satisfaction is the Beatific Vision of God.

From shadow to substance; from segment to circle; from cramping limitations to that which is the archetype, fulfilment and ultimate hope of all effort. Hence the significance of our education as Catholics and Christians. It is a promise and a pledge of an attainable goal. That goal, as we believe with enthusiastic assurance, will be the end and the crown of the long series of dissatisfactions. Like Browning's *Abt Vogler*, we are exploring our keyboard. We pass from one modulation to another, from dissonance to resolution. We slide from key to key, mixing afresh the notes. And our goal is the mighty, all-conquering, all-perfect C major of Life Everlasting, whose harmonies shall swallow up in a completeness of peace the troubles and perplexities of time. '*Expectatio creaturæ revaluationem filiorum Dei expectat.*'

GEORGE EDGAR BIDDLE.