Straw that broke the camel's back

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The idiom **the straw that broke the camel's back**, alluding to the proverb "it is **the last straw** that breaks the camel's back", describes the seemingly minor or routine action which causes an unpredictably large and sudden reaction, because of the cumulative effect of small actions.

Look up ***the straw that broke the camel's back*** in Wiktionary, the free dictionary.

This gives rise to the phrase "the last straw" or "the final straw", meaning the last in a line of unacceptable occurrences, provoking a seemingly sudden strong reaction.

- "It is the last feather that breaks the horse's back" (1677);[1]
- "it is the last straw that overloads the camel", mentioned as an "Oriental proverb" (1799);[2]
- "it was the last ounce that broke the back of the camel" (1832);[3]
- "the last straw will break the camel's back" (1836);[4]
- "As the last straw breaks the laden camel's back" (1848);[5]
- "this final feather broke the camel's back" (1876)[6]

Other variants are:

- "the straw that broke the donkey's back";
- "the last ounce broke the camel's back";[7]
- "the last peppercorn breaks the camel's back";
- "the melon that broke the monkey's back";
- "the feather that broke the camel's back";
- "the straw that broke the horse's back".
- "the hair that broke the camel's back".

Variants were discussed in several numbers of *Notes and Queries* in 1893.[8]

The last drop

The same sentiment is also expressed by the phrase "the last drop makes the cup run over", first found as "When the Cup is brim full before, the last (though least) added drop is charged alone to be the cause of all the running over" (1655).[9]

Antecedents

The phrase has been compared with Seneca's discussion on why death is not to be feared.[1][10] Starting with a mention of the commonplace "we do not suddenly fall on death, but advance towards it by slight degrees; we die every day" (*non repente nos in mortem incidere, sed minutatim procedere; cotidie morimur*), Seneca compares life to a water-clock:

> It is not the last drop that empties the water-clock, but all that which previously has flowed out; similarly, the final hour when we cease to exist does not of itself bring death; it merely of itself completes the death-process. We reach death at that moment, but we have been a long time on the way.
>
> *Quemadmodum clepsydram non extremum stillicidium exhaurit, sed quicquid ante defluxit, sic ultima hora, qua esse desinimus, non sola mortem facit, sed sola consummat; tunc ad illam pervenimus, sed diu venimus.*[11]

In contrast to the imagery of the "last straw", which emphasizes dramatic final result, Seneca emphasizes the continuity of the final hour of life with all the hours that have come before.[12]

References

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3. Henry Lee, "An exposition of evidence in support of the memorial to Congress..." p. 12 (https://books.google.com/books?id=fdrN9n2hFygC&pg=PA50&dq=camel)
4. book review, *The Dublin Review* **1** (May–July 1836) full text (https://books.google.com/books?id=FBsYAQAAIAAJ&pg=PA47&dq=%22last+straw%22)
5. Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*
6. Mark Twain , *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.
7. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Notes*
8. **8**:3:p. 48 (https://books.google.com/books?id=_wk4AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA48) (21 January 1893); **8**:3:118 (https://books.google.com/books?id=_wk4AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA118) (11 February 1893); **8**:3:p. 232 (https://books.google.com/books?id=_wk4AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA232) (25 March 1893).
9. T. Fuller, *Church History of Britain* **9**:2, as quoted in George Latimer Apperson, *English Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases: A Historical Dictionary* (1929), reissued as *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Proverbs*
10. *Notes and Queries*, **8**:3:25 March 1993, p. 232. p. 232 (https://books.google.com/books?id=_wk4AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA232)
11. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Richard M. Gummere, trans., *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales* in *The Loeb Classical Library*, 1917 *Ep.* **24**:20, p. 178-179 (https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=H3w6AQAAMAAJ&pg=GBS.PA179).
12. see also the discussion in James Ker, *The Deaths of Seneca*, 2012, ISBN 0199959692, p. 167

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