

HOBBIES: THEIR EFFECT ON THE HEALTH.

BY A FAMILY DOCTOR.



I had wanted a motto for this paper, I should have selected this: *Mens sana in corpore sano*. Very hackneyed words, I grant you, but words that contain much truth nevertheless. You cannot separate mind and matter, says the philosopher. I shall leave him to think so while I, from a purely medical standpoint, assert boldly that howsoever serene and calm the mind of a man, and especially a Christian man, may remain while suffering bodily, certain states of the mind cannot long exist without deleteriously affecting the health of the body. I am not, be it understood, talking of positive disease of the mind, such as melancholia or mania in any form, but such minor mental ailments as care, worry, impatience, and ennui. We must have the *mens sana*, the healthy mind, if we would be well. Now many of the so-called ills of

this life are merely imaginary, and would melt into nothingness if we did not think about them. Moreover, mourning over little griefs and vexations, if much indulged in, soon becomes a habit, and induces extreme sensitiveness and nervousness, and these in their turn tend not only to shorten our lives, but to render us miserable while we do live. There is something to be said in favour of the school of laughing philosophy after all; only we must learn to laugh at adversity, not from the teeth forwards, but from the heart. Now there is, I think, much good to be derived from the possession of an honest hobby of some kind. It gives us much pleasure, and some interest in life, something to live for and think about, it helps to banish care and ennui, and with these, who can say how much sickness? Hobbies, moreover, keep us from evil habits; an idle man, depend upon it, is never a happy man, and I quite concur with Dr. Watts that "the devil finds some mischief still for idle hands to do." I am of opinion, too, that if the cultivation of simple and innocent hobbies was more the rule and less the exception in our country, there would be fewer gin-palaces and fewer unhappy homes in England.

Now let me give you an instance of how the adoption of a hobby saved a ship's crew from scurvy. There were three of us altogether—three full-rigged Greenland ships, each with a crew, all told, of nearly ninety men, and I myself made one in one of the three. The weather had been exceedingly mild for some weeks, and in the pursuit of our avocation we had bored our way many, many miles in through the ice, towards Greenland West. There, thinking he was sure of us, King Winter blew on us from the north with his icy breath, and lo! we were held as in a vice, and thus remained for months, fully one hundred miles from blue water. As time went on, the fear that

we might not escape from our snowy prison that season increased, and the captain of our vessel very properly reduced our allowance of food. Light was in plenty, both by night and day, for the sun never set; water we had enough of and to spare; but, as I said, our provisions were stinted, and they were mostly salt. We had neither books nor games to amuse us; the solitude of our situation was more dreary than I can describe, for no living creature, bird or beast, ever came near us. Besides, we had positively nothing to do, and too much time to do it in. Taking exercise in a case of this sort is very monotonous, because you know you are merely taking it to try to keep body and soul together. It was a happy thought then of old Peter Noble, our spectator, which found vent in the following words:—

"Pitch away your pipes, lads; there is more to do in this world than smoke, and mop and mourn. Let us make silver rings for our wives and sweet-hearts."

"Bravo!" chorused his companions, "that's a capital idea; let us make rings for the dear ones at home, and when in happier days we look at them, we'll kiss the hands that wear them, and our minds will revert to this dull time, and we will thank Him we are free, and in our own land again."

Now this making of rings was a very simple thing, but it required some time and a little thought besides; but it was a labour of love, and it kept the hands well employed. A shilling, a florin, or even a six-penny-piece was softened in the fire, a hole was then bored in the centre, and into this hole was inserted the point of a marline-spike—this latter being an iron tool, round and tapering, not unlike a steel for sharpening knives on, which is used at sea for unstranding ropes in splicing. Well, the coin, being adjusted on this handy instrument, had to be hammered gradually down it, until the hole was supposed to be wide enough to admit the finger of the fair one for whom it was intended; this done, it had to be filed, and afterwards nicely polished. Of course there were big rings to be made and little rings.

"My little Mary," said one sailor, as he hammered away and thought of home, "bless her heart; her little finger ain't thicker than a pipe-stalk."

"Ah!" said another, "but my Sue is a fine lass; half-a-crown ain't a bit too big for her finger."

Now the upshot of all this ring-making was that, first and foremost, there was not a coin left in the ship that was not converted; there was thus much illegal defacing, for which I think Her Majesty would graciously forgive us, if told that the hobby kept our crew in health and spirits, and that the crews of both the other ships were down with, and some dead of scurvy.

Well then, if some of my readers are convinced that the state of the mind does really influence that

of the body—that the pursuit of an innocent hobby, which pleasantly engages the thoughts, has an effect for good on the general health—then I think they cannot do wrong by adopting one. And here is a word of advice at the outset : in the choice of a hobby, just as in that of a profession, be guided by your bent or inclination ; and whatsoever hobby you do choose, determine to excel in it, for if your motto be *Excelsior*, you will derive double the pleasure therefrom. Probably your station in life, and the part of the country in which you reside, will have a good deal to do with your choice. If your home is near the sea, for example, or by the banks of a good boating-river, rowing will most likely suggest itself as a most pleasant hobby ; and a more manly or health-giving exercise it would be hard indeed to find. By constant daily rowing, the muscles, especially those of the chest, are greatly strengthened, and the capacity of the lungs is much increased, while at the same time the mind is correspondingly exhilarated. Few people indeed come home unhappy after rowing for an hour or two ; a little tired, perhaps, but usually dreamily contented. Be cautious, however, if you take up rowing as your hobby, that you do not catch cold ; flannels are essential to the oarsman, and you will soon learn the wisdom of slipping on a comforter and reefing-jacket on leaving your boat, heated though you may be at the time. There is no need to toil at the oars and tire yourself ; avoid very hard rowing and what are called “ spurts,” for these tend to heart-disease of the most distressing kind. Neither would I have you be over-vigorous or ascetic in “ training ;” live naturally and you will live all the longer. Riding and hunting are grand hobbies, combining as they do the best of out-door exercise with the most pleasant and healthful excitement. My friend G—, yonder, confesses to nearly seventy, yet is he hours in the saddle daily, and his eyes are clear as a baby’s ; they have not that bilious, curried look, which you see in people who are addicted to indolence ; my old friend’s biceps is hard as a cocoa-nut, while every sinew of his arm is as tough as telegraph wire, and I fully believe he will live till he is ninety. But nearly all out-door sports may be taken up as hobbies, such as cricket, which greatly enlivens the mind, and I am sure tends to length of days, for I know at this present moment several amateur cricketers who have had an “ innings” of eighty years, and are likely to live a few more ere their wickets go down.

Bicycling was at first thought by many medical men to be prejudicial to health, but it is now generally allowed to be very excellent constitutional exercise. The young man is surely to be envied, who after a day’s work, or a week’s hard toil at the “ drudgery of the desk’s dull wood,” can mount his airy iron horse, and in an hour or less exchange the city’s din and dust for green fields and shady lanes, and life-giving ozone-laden breezes. More chance of long life has he, I ween, than yonder wan clerk, whose only exercise is his pedal progression twice a day between his office-stool and his dingy lodging, and who, if he neglect to make good use of his Saturday half-holidays, can have

little idea how pleasantly the lowing of kine sounds in summer evenings in the green country, or how sweet is the singing of birds, the murmur of brooklets over their stony beds, or the splash of the glad trout in the tree-shaded pool. Talking of trout, by the way, reminds me that I know a gentleman who makes fishing one of his hobbies. He whirls down on his bicycle from town, bringing his tackle along with him, puts up for the night at some rural hostelry, spends the evening in reading his favourite author or in quiet chat, and next day in fishing. He always manages to make a good bag, and after so enjoyable a day, or returning to town he cannot help feeling invigorated. An occasional day now and then spent in this fashion, is better for one than all the physic in the world. To a man of contemplative mind, I think there can be no better hobby than fishing. You never tire of it, and it never over-tires you as shooting may, while there is just sufficient excitement about the sport to make it delightful, without the chance of after reaction.

Sketching or painting is another hobby which takes one much out of doors ; it is especially to be recommended to those who are irritable and excitable, or dyspeptic, and whose nerves want calming and toning. But happy is he who can combine the pleasure of a walking with that of a sketching tour. A month or six weeks thus spent in Highland or lake districts, when the bloom is on the heather, or the autumn tints are on the trees, will so brace a man up that he can easily do without a single dose of medicine for a whole year at the very least.

The capability of playing well on some musical instrument is, of course, better named an accomplishment than a hobby ; still music is a wonderful care-killer. Were I to be separated from my good old fiddle—oh ! call it not a violin—I verily believe I soon should wax old and die.

There are many excellent hobbies that may be adopted both in town and country, by those who have either little time or little wish for hard exercise. Flower-tending, for example, and window-gardening, are both occupations that tend to soothe the mind, and often too carry the thoughts to higher things. What a charming hobby a fernery is, and how easily one may be built, filled, and kept up ! An aquarium is another, especially a salt-water one ; it is very great amusement to watch and study the many curious manners and customs of its inmates. This leads me to say a word in conclusion concerning the domesticated animal hobby. The proper care and breeding of beautiful dogs and cats, for instance, gives genuine delight to more people in the British Islands than in any other country in the world, and those who have not tried this hobby can have no idea to what state of beauty or perfection a noble dog, or even a humble cat, may be brought.

I could name to you hundreds of care-dispelling health-giving hobbies, but this is not my intention. I only wanted in this paper to give the reader a taste for doing something or keeping something. If I have succeeded, I am indeed rewarded.