

ON THE PRESERVATION OF HEALTH IN MIDDLE AGE.

BY A FAMILY DOCTOR.



At the age of thirty-five mankind, according to some eminent authorities, is said to have reached the meridian of life, while others name forty as the number of years we take to reach the hill-top of our earthly existence. But be this as it may, no one who has taken the ordinary means to preserve his health in youth and early manhood should feel other than young at the age of forty-five, from which period until that of sixty, if life be spared to us, we shall do well to consider ourselves middle-aged, and to adopt greater precautions for the preservation of health and consequent happiness than might have been deemed necessary when youth was on our side. And if this is done, the period of middle age should be one of the greatest activity, of both body and mind. What though the hairs are turning grey? that but shows one has suffered sorrow and survived it, or that, sorrow apart, he is a man who thinks. And what though the limbs be not quite so nimble? Calm enjoyments foster thought, and generate habits of that true temperance which conduces to long life and contentment more than anything else in this world; and whatever some may say to the contrary, I maintain that the desire to live long is inherent in every healthy sane man or woman. To die of old age is the only natural death, and, if death may ever be said to be pleasant, the only pleasant one. Though younger than some of my professional brethren still in harness, I have nevertheless seen death in very many shapes and forms, and in almost every case I have found the aged more resigned to the inevitable than those less advanced in years. For a well-spent life is like a well-spent day: at its close there is a wish for rest.

To those, then, of my middle-aged friends who may scan these lines, and who still enjoy the inestimable blessing of health and a fair constitution, I say, prize it, and do everything in your power to steer clear of anything likely to deprive you of it. As that sprinkling of grey in your hair tells you, the recuperative force of nature is not now quite so powerful in your nerves and veins as it was some time ago, and a few weeks' sickness from which, as a young man, you could have emerged scatheless, might now leave its effects upon you for life. To those, on the other hand, who may have in some measure trifled with their constitutions, and lived fast and free, I would not say it is never too late to mend, but that now is the time if ever to mend, that now is the time which you must take by the forelock, in order to get rid of evil habits, and remedy existing irregularities in your ways of living. And to all I would say that in this short paper I do not presume to *teach*, but to *remind*, because people are either physicians or fools at forty,

and I am convinced that my readers may all be classed among the former.

They need hardly be told, then, that as life is made up of periods of rest and periods of activity, the more perfect that rest is, the better it fits us for the tussle and turmoil of the coming day. Complete repose at night is necessary to a healthful existence. Sleep, gentle sleep, which closes the eyes of the youthful sailor, rocked in the giddy foretop, is a goddess who becomes more coy and difficult to woo as years steal over our heads. The middle-aged, then, must not be content with having earned a good night's rest, but they must also see that the apartment in which they mean to repose is a suitable one. Is it sufficiently ventilated without being draughty, sufficiently aired and warmed without being hot? have the windows been opened during the day? has the glorious life-giving sun had a chance to peep in? If the above questions can be answered in the affirmative, your chances of good refreshing sleep are so much the better. But in addition let me remind you that the furniture in a bed-room cannot be too simple; that Venetian or green blinds are an abomination because they exclude the light; that heavy curtains around the windows or bed should not be tolerated; that the room should be the essence of neatness and tidiness, and that sleeping with lights burning all night is injurious. Also that bedclothes should be warm, but not weighty, the mattress inclining to hard rather than soft, and the night-dress composed of that material which experience has suggested as the most comfortable. The practice of muffling up the head is a bad one, but if you have all through life treated your head like a hot-house plant, perhaps you had better continue to do so. Those who are subject to colds and coughs should in winter and spring wear a light woollen comforter around the neck at night, and as bronchitis is often taken from exposure of the space between the shoulder-blades—which is less protected by nature than the breast—I think it is a capital plan for such as are delicate in the chest to sleep in a felt chest-protector. I do not think the middle-aged should lie too long in bed of a morning, but I am certain that if they were to retire to rest much earlier than, as a rule, they do, it would be infinitely better for their health and comfort. The subject of sleep is one that is not half enough studied, nor is its value properly appreciated. If all the world would make up its mind to put on the clock a couple of hours, all the world would live a deal longer. We should then see shop shutters taken down at seven by the sun, people hurrying to business at eight by the sun; by eleven we should be hungry for lunch, at five by the sun we would dine, and we would all be in bed by nine. There is a little bird that, perched upon a rose-twig

in a cosy corner beneath the verandah of my French window, has slept there every night throughout the winter. At first I took it for a robin, but it turned out to be a cock-sparrow; never mind, he goes to roost whenever twilight falls, and he is up and away by daybreak, thus preaching to me what we should all bear in mind, that we cannot have too much early sleep in winter, nor too much daylight all the year round.

If proper clothing by night is of all importance for the preservation of health in middle age, the maintenance and conservation of the animal heat cannot be neglected with impunity by day. In summer clothes should be worn that are both light in material and light in colour, but soft woollen socks and thin soft under-flannels are necessities even in the warmest months. People who are advanced in years should study comfort more than fashion, and ought not to forget that clothes of a light colour are warmer in winter than dark ones, the colour having an influence on the radiation. White repels heat in summer, it is consequently cool, but in winter it conserves the heat of the body. We are now passing through—or just past—one of the coldest months of the year; have a care, then, to the comfort of the feet, as well as to the protection of the whole body from the injurious effects of cold, which at this season of the year are so liable to induce diseases of the throat and chest, as well the mucous membranes generally. Rheumatism, too, is a frequent but far from welcome visitor in spring.

No one who has reached the prime of life can afford to despise the evil influences of certain winds, and just as the soft western winds and the balmy breezes that blow ozone-laden from the sunny south bear health on their wings, so are baneful influences wafted towards us in the breath of the cold north, or dry and dangerous east. Both digestion and spirits fall to their lowest ebb while the latter blow; attacks of dyspepsia are therefore the consequence, and with them, owing to an acid state of the blood, rheumatism itself.

Food is to our bodies a source of heat; from it the material is derived whereby the constant waste of tissue going on in our bodies is counterbalanced; from it, too, by chemical combinations which I need not here describe, warmth is directly evolved. In order to properly insure these ends, attention should be paid to diet. This should be sufficient in quantity, although moderation in eating ought to be studied; it should be wholesome, varied, and should contain a just proportion of vegetable as well as animal substances. I may mention, however, that it is not by any means necessary that animal food should be the staple of every diet, or even a component part thereof, though this is considered an essential thing by many. People in our country live far too much on meat food, and do not rate at their proper value such life-giving articles as peas, beans, lentils, barley, and oatmeal.

Everything that is known to disagree should be carefully avoided; breakfast and dinner ought to be partaken of early, and should be substantial; but supper should be light, and taken fully two hours

before retiring to rest. The habit of taking alcohol before meals, to whet the appetite, need only be mentioned to be condemned. The best stimulant is healthful exercise in the open air.

I wish that all my readers could appreciate to the full the benefits to be derived from proper exercise, regularly taken day after day. Some there are, indeed, who do not realise the difference between motion and exercise in its medical aspect. One may have been on the move for many hours, hard at work perhaps, and still not have been taking exercise; for with the latter, in order to be beneficial, there must be a certain pleasure—there must be an unbending of the mind as well as movement of the body. As the food we eat, so should the exercise we take be varied; but it should never be carried to excess. A little and often, but preferably in the society of pleasant friends—this should be our rule. Some learned authority, whose name I cannot now recollect, considers it an indispensable law of longevity that at least an hour's healthful exercise be taken every day in the open air. Walking is excellent exercise, especially if we can vary the walk every day, and have some definite object in it.

I think it adds greatly to the chances of long life to take an annual holiday. Many make a point of doing so, and seldom, I believe, without benefit, if only by the change of air and scene. The people of towns, however, who rush down to the seaside, and there insist on leading precisely the same kind of lives they did at home, surely make a very grave error. Englishmen are said to take their pleasures sadly, but at the seaside in summer they mostly take them madly.

The eyesight, if not the hearing, may begin to fail at middle age. As regards the former, much might be done to preserve it. If we seldom ail, if we keep our nervous system up to the proper pitch, and attend to the etiquette which ought to be observed by a man towards that often greatly-wronged individual, his own stomach, we ought to see tolerably well up to the age of seventy or eighty, if spared so long. Reading or writing in very bright lights, reading small print, and reading in railway carriages, all help to injure the sight, as also does remaining too much in-doors, which ends in getting our eyes so focussed by looking at near objects, that it becomes impossible to see well those at a distance.

Middle-aged people who labour in-doors cannot have the rooms in which they work too well ventilated; they cannot have too much fresh air. The vitiation of the air in some of our workshops is very greatly to be deplored; it is no wonder many of our tradesmen are a puny race, and their children sallow, and often bilious, dyspeptic, and easily depressed in mind or body.

To conclude, I need hardly warn the reader against the evil effects of damp feet or clothes, or sitting while chilled in a draught, or against the weakening effects of over-indulgence in strong tea and tobacco. Nor need I say a word about the very great benefits of the daily bath, tepid if you cannot stand it cold, but always with soap and always with the flesh-glove.