

## A FRIENDLY CHAT ABOUT THE MEMORY.

BY A FAMILY DOCTOR.



Y present paper is by no means meant to be anything like an exhaustive treatise on the subject either of memory or mnemonics. I would rather it should be considered in the light of what I may term a suggestive gossip, from which a few of my readers may learn something, which may lead

them in their own behalf to think the subject more fully out. Memory, the pocket dictionary tells us, is "that faculty of the mind which enables us to retain the knowledge of past events." The pocket dictionary in this definition is less vague than it often is on other subjects. Recollection, on the other hand, may be said to be the act of recalling to the mind's eye the knowledge of events, &c., of times past. Memory we might liken to a storehouse where everything is put in its proper place, docketed and labelled, so that by the aid of recollection we can lay our hands on anything wanted at once. That is a good memory; a bad memory is like a badly conducted storehouse, all confusion and chaos. Or memory might be called the dictionary of the mind, and recollection the act of turning to it. A bad memory is like a dictionary either unalphabetically arranged, or written with fugitive ink, so that when we turn to its pages for reference, lo! the impression has fled.

Of the importance of the possession of a good memory by people of every age and class in life, I need not remind the reader. In youth it is literally the foundation of all knowledge, in manhood our every action and our success in life depends upon it, and by it our very greatest men have been made—our greatest statesmen, soldiers, poets, architects, and preachers.

"Memory is a gift," some may say. The memories, I reply, of such great men as Shakespeare, Burns, Carlyle, or Napoleon were marvellous gifts; all genius is a gift; but these men were the giants of genius. Music, like memory, is a gift, which amounts to genius in about one human being in every million; but on the other hand, both music and memory are gifts that in some measure are presented to every human being in the world, and which may either be brilliantly and successfully cultivated, or left to hang as they grew, and cultivate themselves in their own crude way.

Mnemonics is, after all, but the science of system, a science that is within the reach of all, but one the study of which ought to be begun as early in life as possible. It is painfully neglected at schools. Teachers themselves seldom know much about it, or if they do know something, it is only about one branch of it, namely, *exercise*. "I make good scholars," said a village schoolmaster to me one day, "by hammering it into them, sir."

The man meant that he succeeded, by dint of perseverance on his part, aided probably by an occasional

dose of cane, in making his pupils remember enough facts and dates to enable them to present a respectable appearance on the day of examination. He exercised them well. But where was the method? That had to be found out by the child himself. This is surely not teaching in its true sense. As soon as a child can read sufficiently well, at some schools, he is put to learn passages "by heart," as it is called.

Alas! there is seldom much heart about the matter. But no system of committing these to memory is taught or explained to him, so one boy goes upon the principle of repeating the passage over and over and over again a thousand times perhaps, till he has learned it; another, a lad of more brains, seeks out some easily-retained words or ideas here and there, till he builds a kind of skeleton of the whole, and on this he hangs, easily enough, the verbiage; reading the passage once or twice over after this will suffice to stamp it on the tablets of his memory. The former boy's plan is one of *exercise*, that of the latter one of *method*. Probably both boys come up to repeat at the end of two hours, and they both do so satisfactorily enough, though the lad of method or system has been idle two-thirds of the time, and his companion hammering away during every minute of it. We know that the boy of method here spoken of is the more clever of the two, but considering the amount of indefatigable energy expended by the other, were a system of mnemonics to be taught him, we doubt whether he would not turn out the more successful man in life.

I am not going to say a word about what or which system of mnemonics ought to be taught at schools, but one of some kind should be, if we would manufacture clever, healthful men and women. If education at our schools—ay, and for the matter of that, our higher seminaries—were conducted in a less absurd way, and mnemonics formed a branch of education, we should be able to teach our youths many things that we cannot, as matters stand, that might be of real use to them in after-life, such as medicine, hygiene, or the laws of health, enough therapeutics to serve them a good turn at a pinch, enough surgery to enable them to behave rationally in an emergency, enough physiology to help to guide them in life, and enough botany and natural history to help them to draw near to the Creator in His creation. Geography, as taught at ordinary schools, is a mere farce, "dates" all cram, and "music" only moonshine. The music of ordinary schools I mean; pray do not misunderstand me.

Drawing, I think, is a great help in forming a good memory; it combines both method and exercise. The pen at public schools should hardly take precedence of the pencil.

Many of the so-called systems of mnemonics, when studied for the first time, convey to the mind somewhat of the grotesque, or even ridiculous, enough indeed to make sensitive or poetic minds shrink from taking advantage of such aids to memory. Who would

take the trouble, for instance, to learn an absurd rhyme, in order to keep green in his heart for ever the names of the counties of England, or the countries of Europe, or burden his brain with such a word as *bandarum* to enable him to remember the date of the battle of Bannockburn? Better, most people would think, to allow the rhyme and the counties to perish together, and let the dust of oblivion for ever obscure the date of that battle so sacred to "brither Scots." But children are not so particular; both the rhyme and the ridiculous word might avert a caning, and so they commit them to memory gladly. But these and such-like "aids" are but the stepping-stones to mnemonics, which science is meant to be of very great advantage to all classes of people who have to depend for their success in life upon their memories.

The science of mnemonics is to the orator what shorthand is to the writer, it enables him to pack a great deal into small compass, and turn to that compass for certain and sure guidance whenever he wishes to. This is a very great relief, for really and truly an overcrowded memory is one that does not hold out well. It is apt to induce worry and mental confusion.

If it be true, as it undoubtedly is, that the memory should never be overstrained, then any system that tends to lighten it is worthy of study; and I know, from professional experience, scores of cases in which memories have been undoubtedly benefited by learning and following out a system of mnemonics. And when I say memory, I may add their health, for there is more connection between memory and health than one can see at a cursory glance.

No system of mnemonics can enable a man to retain perfection of memory if his health be much below par, or if he be suffering from incipient disease of the brain or nerve-centres.

We often hear men complain at a comparatively early age, say forty-five or fifty, that their memories are failing them. They are generally men in business or in professions, who have worked very hard and had "a deal to think of," *i.e.*, a deal to remember, and who have probably lived hard lives, and trusted too much to the strength of their constitutions. For the cure of cases like these, it would be as ridiculous to apply a system of mnemonics, as it is to seek for relief from medicine in any chronic case of illness, without first removing the cause. Mnemonics might have acted as the preservative, it certainly cannot be called upon to perform the cure. It would have acted as a preventative by regulating the mind and rendering a hard life free from a deal of worry, and it may come in extremely useful after the health has been restored.

Loss of memory in middle age is a symptom that should never be neglected or thought light of. Remember, it *may* point to incipient softening of the brain, and utter collapse or dementia. I do not mean to frighten any reader, so I purposely italicise the "*may*." What may be, may not be, and *vice versa*. The symptoms of loss of memory, more often than not, are the result of over-tiredness, an undutiful kidney, or a liver that wants seeing to. If, coupled

with the loss of memory, there were occasional attacks of swimming in the head, sleepiness, weakness of sight, sensibly diminishing capability for accustomed work, fits of irritability, and lowness of spirits, the case would, to say the least of it, look more serious.

The loss of memory in middle age is different from that of old age, as far as my judgment goes. In the latter stage of life there is a gradual, but to the person himself not always noticeable, decline of the powers of memory, just as there is in the powers of strength of muscle, eyesight, and hearing. For a time at least the old man hardly misses his retreating memory, he lives more in the past than for the present, and has recollections of bygone times—ere the tablets of memory got hard and unimpressionable—though he with difficulty, if at all, can trace the events of yesterday. A merciful Providence rules it should be so. And, as I said, it is the same with eyesight and hearing. Is it Charles Lamb that tells the anecdote of the old man pointing up at the castle rookery and saying, "It is very strange, but the crows be all gone from out there these many years; but I remember the time they were thick enough, ay, and noisy enough too"? I always thought that a very delightful anecdote, and sincerely hope that no thoughtless being took the trouble to undeceive the old man tottering thus pleasantly on the grave's brink, by telling him that as he spoke the rooks darkened the air and made noise enough to awaken the Seven Sleepers.

But the loss of memory that points to disease or ailment of some kind in middle age is generally transient and periodic. The patient can remember or recollect well enough sometimes, not so well at others: memory is brighter with him of a morning, or after a period of rest, than when working or when tired. Some people while speaking fail suddenly for the loss of a word—men who had once been brilliant orators—others while writing suddenly stagger at the orthography of a word with which they really are familiar, or substitute one letter of a similar sound for another, a "b" for a "p," for instance, or a "d" for a "t." Either of the above may all at once forget the name of a person with whom they are intimately acquainted—yes, or their own cognomen.

Well, this loss of memory in middle age should always be treated as a serious symptom, whether it be so or not. People who suffer therefrom should decrease their hours of labour, work more systematically, be careful to take rest whenever they feel tired, relaxation when the least low in spirits, abundant *exercise in the open air whether they seem to need it or not*. They should attend to the general health and the regularity of the system. Take a tonic, a mild and non-constipating one—remembering, however, that tonics are dangerous tools, and too often volves in sheep's clothing, or stimulants in disguise. Temperance should be observed, and wine most sparingly used. By observing such rules as these a failing memory may be restored; then, and not till then, mnemonics may be had recourse to, in order to prevent a relapse.

Mnemonics should be to the memory what good spectacles are to the eyes—PRESERVATIVE.