

DEBILITY: ITS CAUSES AND CURE.

BY A FAMILY DOCTOR.



HOSE who suffer from the effects of over-work, care, worry, or grief, or *general debility* from almost any cause, would derive incalculable benefit by spending the earlier spring months in a voyage to New York and back. Leaving this country about the first week in April, they would find a balmy, pure, and bracing air; and a trip or two up the Hudson, with its splendid scenery, would put new life into them, would banish care, would give them appetite and strength, and make them feel quite ten years younger.

Sea-sickness only lasts a few days, if it comes on at all. In some cases, I grant you, it may last all the voyage, but that is only when people, through sheer want of courage, give in to it.

I'll tell you two things that I have noticed at sea. First, those among the cabin passengers who stay on deck all they can, and, even from the very first morning, come resolutely down to meals, get over the *mal de mer* in a very short time. I've watched them. I myself am "sea-fast," so I could afford to do so. The first day or two, their faces would be pale enough, and their eyes dreamy and languid, and when we talked to them or tried to amuse them they smiled, but it was a sickly smile, a mere smile of politeness; and they sometimes, if the ship gave a bit of a lee-lurch, or lifted her head or stern higher than usual, ran away from the table altogether. But I could mark a change on the second day; and on the third there was the blood back again in their cheeks and lips; they paid more attention to their toilettes, and even spoke and laughed without being spoken to. Meanwhile Mr. A and Mr. B, who had lowered their flags to old Neptune, would still be prone in their stuffy cabins, and likely to be there all the voyage. For this reason—it is only when you first come on board that you have really strength enough to fight the foe. If you give in to him, and keep your cabin for three days even, debility of mind and body ensues, and you have neither the will nor the power to hold your head up.

The second thing I have noticed is this:—The emigrants that go out seldom suffer for more than two days from sea-sickness; and why? Is it that they are made of tougher metal; that they are more inured to sufferings of all kinds on shore? I do not think this is quite the reason. The cause of their immunity from sea-sickness lies, methinks, in the fact that they are "roused out;" they are drilled on deck; all their "tween-decks" abode must be washed and scrubbed daily, and while this is being done they are up above,

breathing the pure air of heaven, and inhaling the ozone-laden winds that blow over the blue, blue sea; and more than that—they get sunshine.

Prevention lies in a nut-shell. Sea-sickness is very easy with those who possess stamina and nerve. You come on board with this; then perhaps *mal de mer* attacks you. Well, if you keep below you have merely your own strength to defend you; if you go on deck, and keep on deck, you find allies, most valuable, in the pure bracing air of the sea, and in the sunshine, and in the walking exercise you take, to say nothing of the good mental effects that accrue from seeing everything that is taking place around you, and from exchanging ideas with your fellow-passengers. In this way debility flies; you get stronger instead of weaker every day, and as you gain more and more strength, farther and farther flies away the danger of becoming a victim to sea-sickness.

Debility must be fought by passengers going first to sea; and my advice to all is to prepare for the voyage for three weeks or a fortnight beforehand, by regular living, temperance in everything, good diet, exercise, and fresh air. Do not take stimulants at sea, or the liver is bound to go wrong, and your last state will be worse than your first.

Well now, I had a friend with me when I went out to America. He did not eat much for the first few days, because it was blowing a little, but under my supervision he soon got round, and used to handle his knife and fork with all the joyful agility of a Berkshire ploughboy at a beanfeast. I used of a morning to put the following question to him—

"How is your thoracic duct this morning, old man?"

"Bother the thoracic duct!" he used to say. "Until I came on this voyage with you, Doctor, I never knew I had such a thing as a thoracic duct."

"By the way, Doctor," said our paymaster one day, what *is* a thoracic duct? Have I got one?"

"By the way you play with that plate of plum pudding—your second help, mind," I replied, smiling, "I should think you had, and that it was in first-rate order too."

Many people, reader, live and die without ever knowing that they are possessed of such things as thoracic ducts; and still, upon the competency of that little tube—and it is not much thicker than a quill—the existence in this world of a man entirely depends. I will try and explain, for this duct has a good deal to do with the subject I am writing on, namely, debility.

What becomes of the food of which we partake? It is digested, turned into blood. But how? Why, briefly speaking, in this way:—It is first masticated in the mouth. This process of mastication is a far more important one than most people believe. It consists of two distinct operations, though they are both performed at one and the same time, namely, the grinding down of the food, or the pulpification of it, and the

mingling of it with the juices which come from the different glands, whose efferent ducts open into the mouth. These last aid its digestion, and if the food be swallowed quickly, without sufficient mastication to enable the stomach to act on it easily, digestion is delayed, the food leaves the stomach only partly acted on, and produces flatulence, acidity, diarrhoea, constipation, and many other kinds of mischief. But well-masticated food is easily rendered by the stomach into healthy chyme, by means of muscular action, and by the addition of the gastric juice. After this chyme—a homogeneous pulpy matter—leaves the stomach it is mingled with the secretions from other important organs, such as the liver and spleen, and then becomes what we call chyle, a milky kind of fluid, which represents the nutrient portion of the food we have eaten.

Now this chyle is collected or absorbed by a distinct series of extremely minute vessels, like tiny veins. These, after charging themselves with their valuable contents, unite and reunite; just as rippling rills join bigger streams, and bigger streams rivulets, and rivulets the great river itself, and the great river flows onwards to the sea, so the absorbents, laden with all that is life-giving of the food we have eaten, end at last in one larger canal or tube which goes upwards, for safety's sake, we may presume, along the vertebral column, opens into one of the largest veins in the body, and thus the chyle is mingled with the blood.

This tiny tube, then, is all we have to depend upon for life itself. Were anything to happen to it, were it to become diseased, or were a tumour to press upon it, we should assuredly die of inanition—in other words, starvation. In battle a bullet may pass clean through the lungs, or all round the chest; it may even wound large vessels, and still the soldier may live; but if it cuts through this little life-laden tube, no power on earth can save the man.

This tube, the thoracic duct, in cases of debility partakes of the general weakness; so do the absorbents, and this only proves the inutility and even danger of forcing food into the stomach when there is little or no appetite. Hunger is but the voice of nature telling us that sustenance is desired, and that all preparations have been made to absorb it. But if in the absence of this appetite food is swallowed, encouraged probably by the use of stimulants, the stomach, it is true, may act in a half-hearted kind of way—rob the already weak blood of gastric juice, and finally force the food along—but the effects of the stimulant will have gone by this time, the absorbents take up but little of the chyle, and very likely fermentation takes place, not the least painful results of which are a fevered, uncomfortable state of body, restlessness in bed, bad dreams, a foul tongue in the morning, with either headache or feeling of discomfort about the brow and eyes.

Debility is one of those ailments in which every portion of the muscular system, and every organ in the body, are more or less affected.

Thousands and tens of thousands suffer from debility who have no actual disease of any particular organ, but, inasmuch as some vital part may be at

fault, every one so suffering should consult a medical man and adopt proper treatment. For be assured that general debility cannot last very long without working deadly mischief in some way or other.

Apart from actual disease of important internal organs, general debility is usually caused by depressing influences of any kind, such as over-work of brain or body, over-worry, grief, want of sufficient sleep, intemperance, working in rooms that are not sufficiently ventilated, exposure to cold for days or weeks together, the abuse of tea, coffee, or tobacco, or the continued use of aperient medicines, to which many people resort to keep the system free, instead of devoting an hour or two daily to wholesome exercise.

The symptoms are almost too well known to require description; probably there is not a very appreciable degree of loss of muscular strength in the limbs, although generally the sufferer from this complaint cannot walk far without perspiring either about the body on the whole, or about the knees and fore-parts of the legs; the appetite is lost, or capricious; there is a sense of weariness on getting up in the morning, and a feeling of drowsiness which even sleep does not banish. This latter points to a congested state of nerves and brain. There is also great irritability of temper, fits of depression of spirits, languor, listlessness, and a feeling as if everything in the world was going wrong with the patient. He is unable to look beyond his own weakness, and very often despairs of ever being any better. He is sometimes even afraid to consult a doctor, but generally not averse to treating himself, or, alas! at times having recourse to stimulants, the habit of taking which grows rapidly on either male or female.

Well, as to the cure of general debility: it is usually simple enough if the patient can be got to adopt it. Let him disabuse his mind for ever of the idea that he can get well by the use of medicine alone. Medicine well chosen may assist the cure; it never can complete it. He must remove the cause of his debility. He must get to the truth of what this cause is, and if he values his life, he *must* change his mode of living.

The first thing, then, for a patient suffering from debility to do is to meditate, to examine himself, and determine at once to live by rule—live, for a time at least, in obedience to all laws hygienic. Let him not neglect careful clothing, exercise, and the bath. Above all, let him be temperate in eating—I need not say in drinking—and let his supper be light and solid, and taken a good two hours before going to bed.

If he can get away from all business and care for a time to a well-chosen seaside place, and to a mountainous district, let him do so. As for medicine, an iron tonic with quinine, or dilute phosphoric or nitrohydrochloric acid, will do well, the latter to be taken with some vegetable bitter infusion and tincture of orange-peel. A very mild aperient pill should also be taken weekly. But I repeat, medicine is only an aid to cure; regularity and alteration in life alone can bring a patient round; and to every one suffering from debility—without actual disease of internal organs—I say, your life is in your own hands.