

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

(THE FORTRESS OF LIFE.—V.) BY A FAMILY DOCTOR.



W E were sitting at breakfast one morning, but had not been speaking much, for Captain H— had the paper before him, and his pet leg on a camp-stool; and I also was reading.

Presently he threw the broad-sheet on the floor, gave his ankle a slap, and opened the fire of conversation by remarking, in his peculiarly decided manner—

“Pass the eggs, *mon ami*. Yes, sir; it is the want of supplies that will cause that garrison to fall. That is worse far than the want of ammunition; when powder and shot are gone, why, there is bayonet or sword to fall back upon; but when a beleaguered garrison doesn't get enough to eat and drink—well, it is literally holding on by the skin of its teeth, and the bitter end cannot be very far away. What think you yourself?”

“I'm of your way of thinking for once,” I replied. “It is a bad thing for either a garrison or an individual when he is obliged to hold on ‘by the skin of his teeth,’ as you figuratively describe it. When the Commissariat Department fails in its duty, when supplies come tardily in, when something interferes with the blood-making process, then, my dear H—, it is pretty near the end with the Fortress of Life.

“I wonder,” I continued, “if Principal Pirie, of Aberdeen University—who, I believe, is still alive and well—remembers an address he gave to the students some twenty years ago, in which, while speaking of the goodness and kindness of an all-ruling Providence, he made use of these words, ‘How kind the Great Father was in having so ruled it that even self-administration to our very wants and necessities gave us pleasure. Think,’ he said, ‘how terrible it would be if the simple act of eating a mouthful of food or swallowing a drop of water were accompanied with pangs of pain!’ The Principal may have forgotten these words, but I have not. Yes, the partaking of food gives us pleasure; and is the blessing not almost constantly abused? Are there not thousands—ay, tens of thousands—who live to eat instead of eating to live? The consequences are very dreadful, for sooner or later—more often sooner than later—the gourmand goes to the wall. The break-up comes, slowly it may be, and even insidiously, but none the less surely. The Commissariat Department fails, and the fortress falls.”

“In this case, however,” said my friend, “I should not think it was so much the fault of want of stores as the inability to make use of them that causes the mischief.”

“You are right,” I answered; “there may be no dearth in the supply of stores. They are duly brought to hand; they are deposited at the very gates of the fortress, but the *via vite* has been destroyed, and

there is no way of conveying them to the starving garrison, which perishes in the sight of plenty!

“The veriest school-boy, nowadays,” I went on, “knows all about the physiology of digestion.”

“No need then, doctor, for inflicting a lecture on that subject upon me.”

“Not so; unfortunately, the school-boy forgets all about his physiology, and thinks no more about it, till after many years he finds that dyspepsia, which he had read a great deal about, but had never really believed in, is no myth after all; that even he who used to boast about his healthfulness and his cast-iron constitution is a man subject to like infirmities as other people. He finds now that he actually possesses a stomach, a liver, and probably even a spleen, though he has still some doubts about the existence of the last organ. Perhaps, after a bad cold, he finds that his appetite does not return, or is more feeble than it ought to be. He does not get alarmed all at once. No; hope tells him the flattering tale that he is only suffering from a slight attack of indigestion, and that it will soon pass away, and he will be himself again. He knows he must eat, however, else he cannot expect to live, so he looks about for delicacies to coax the appetite, and sauces to tempt it.

“Perhaps this is about the very worst plan he could have adopted. I should like to tell this person suffering from incipient dyspepsia, and tell tens of thousands of the same class, that indigestion in its first stages is a disease of want of tone—want of tone not in the stomach alone, but in the whole internal economy. The liver may or may not be out of sorts. Very probably it is, and the pancreas and spleen, ay, and even the heart itself, partake in the general weakness. The cold, or other slight indisposition which culminated in the loss of appetite, was not the beginning of the mischief. There was debility of important internal organs creeping on before that, though it was not so much noticed. Now, what good are rich sauces or tempting wines likely to do in a case of this kind, think you? They will give false appetite. They will enable a man to get more food into his stomach in a pleasant and painless way—into his stomach, mind you, but not into his system. Eating without an appetite, or with what I may call a borrowed or artificial one, is almost as bad as not eating at all.

“But what is the poor man to do? you ask. Why, the answer is simple enough. He must eschew all appetising stimulants, and set about in all haste restoring the enfeebled condition of the general system. It is tone he needs—tone and strength of body. A more dangerous experiment than that of forcing the appetite in such cases I do not know. You, of course, have heard of the thoracic duct—that tiny tube, no thicker than a quill, which collects the chyle, or nutrient portion of the food we eat, and conveys it along the spine, emptying it into one of the principal

veins of the body, where its precious contents mingle with the general circulation. When one thinks that his very existence depends upon this little tube, and that as it grows feeble life must wane, he cannot help wondering that life should hang upon such a little thread as this. But so it is. And in all cases of debility, accompanied with loss of appetite, this thread—this tiny tube—partakes of the general weakness and general attenuation of the rest of the body. Little use then, surely, to load the stomach with food if the thoracic duct is feeble, and unable to take it up. I am not speaking without a purpose; I am not giving vent to words that have no meaning or practical value; and what I wish to be inferred is that a person suffering from incipient dyspepsia should by no means neglect it for a single day, but must direct his efforts to increasing the tone of the general system rather than directing attention to the stomach itself. This last will assuredly come right as soon as the body begins to regain power and vigour. Only—and here come in my words of warning—having been restored to health, let him beware for ever after what he eats and what he drinks. Perhaps a short sojourn at the seaside, or in some bracing inland place—such as Malvern, for example—will be necessary to restore tone to the system. The cold bath or shower-bath will in some cases act like a charm, while mild tonics may be required, with the mildest of mild aperients, if exercise alone does not succeed in keeping the system open; but the taking of tonics or aperients should never degenerate into a habit, or evil will come of it.

“Now, Captain H—, let us suppose that the garrison which you have just been reading about has a small line of railway connecting it with the sea, and that through this it draws all its supplies. That line would be to that garrison in the same relation as the thoracic duct I have mentioned is to the Fortress of Life. What would you think of the officer in command who should neglect to keep a clear line of communication with his base of supplies?”

“He'd be a fool, and soon find himself recalled.”

“And yet, almost every day of their lives people are making mistakes of the same fatal character. They overload their *via vite*; they overwork it; they weaken it in all conceivable methods, and knowing, too, that they do this, they wonder, or pretend to wonder, when they find it damaged, perhaps beyond hope of repair.

“But to drop metaphor for a time, let me mention one thing which I dare say is patent enough to all thinking men. It is this:—Unless an individual has not only peace, but calmness of mind and body, he cannot be either well or happy. Now, I maintain that unless the digestive organs are in healthful working order, repose of body and mind is an impossibility. And without this repose one's life is being frittered away. In other words, life is all one long-continued fever; and if so, all the faster must it run to a close. We well know that with an over-laden stomach good refreshing sleep is out of the question; and so in our waking hours repose is also an impossibility.

“It may now be well to consider one or two of the

mistakes that militate against repose of body, whether asleep or awake, and which keep the system in a state of constant wearing, tearing fever. Remember that there are thousands of people who never know what a day's real health is, owing entirely to this chronic condition, but who might be well if they only had the moral courage to regulate their lives, and live more according to the ordinary laws of health.

“The greatest mistakes of all are over-eating and eating too often. So long as a person is growing, the system needs extra nourishment to enable nature to build up the frame-work of the body. But adults have need of food only to supply the materials for new blood to make up for the waste of tissue. This waste of tissue is constantly going on, to be sure, but only in direct ratio to the work we do, whether mental or bodily. If a greater quantity of food is taken into the system than can be used up, it is more deleterious than if we had swallowed so much sand. The food so partaken of leaves the stomach in an undigested form, and never fails to work all kinds of mischief, and, instead of doing good, it does injury, and weakens the body that it was intended to strengthen.

“The next most common mistake that leads to this form of debility is the much-to-be-regretted practice of eating a poisonous mixture of foods at the same meal. The adjective ‘poisonous’ may be thought a strong one, but it is not too much so. If people who suffer from nervousness would only live plainly for a month or two, in all probability they would find renewed health, and with it a happiness and repose to which they had been strangers for many years. They would positively find themselves growing younger again instead of growing older, for the simple reason that they would not now be living either so fast or so feverishly.

“I began by characterising attacks of indigestion as merely symptomatic of weakness, and suggested toning up of the system as a cure, but this must go hand in hand with regulation of diet. Well, to be practical, would any lady or gentleman consider a diet like the following a starvation one? Let them try it before they reply:—

“7.30 A.M.—A cup of cocoatina and milk.

“8 A.M.—Cold or tepid bath. Rough towelling. Ten minutes' dumb-belling. Dress slowly. Five minutes' walk in the garden.

“8.45 A.M.—Breakfast. No tea or coffee. Cocoatina and milk. Toast or stale bread. White fish; underdone steak or chop. Lightly boiled eggs.

“1.30 P.M.—Lunch. A little of whatever is known to agree. A slice of beef or mutton, or a few oysters.

“6 P.M.—Dinner. No soup. White fish. Beef, mutton, fowl, game. No rich sauces. No made dishes. No pastry or cheese. Vegetables in moderation, preferably potatoes, sea-kale, or cauliflower.

“8.30 P.M.—Light supper of whatever is known to agree. To bed at eleven. If hungry, eat a biscuit first, and drink a tumbler of soda-water, with ten grains of bi-carbonate of soda in it. Sleep in a well-ventilated room on a hard mattress, and lightly covered.”