

A WORD ABOUT TONICS.

BY A FAMILY DOCTOR.



ITH probably the single exception of aperients—generally used in the form of antibilious or “blood-cleansing” pills—there is no class of medicines more recklessly had recourse to than tonics.

“A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the
aperient spring.”

It was a medical student of the happy-go-lucky class who first made the above comical substitution of “aperient” for “Pierian,” though I notice it quoted in a London paper as a reporter’s error. But poor M— is dead and gone; he died in the wilds of Western Australia, with never a friend to close his eyes. This young man seemed to pin his faith on this oft-quoted couplet, “A little learning is a dangerous thing,” so M— ran no risk, he imbibed none of it. He imbibed in another way, though—he did drink deep, and as to the aperient spring, he tasted it almost every morning in the shape of a Seidlitz powder. However, Pope’s lines are wonderfully applicable to the too prevalent habit of self-doctoring.

As regards opening medicines, for example, there are hundreds of thousands of people who are constantly in the habit of flying to them whenever they feel a little out of sorts. It is present relief they try to get, quite forgetful or ignorant of the fact that reaction will follow, that Nature’s laws cannot be trifled with, and that the last state of their digestive canals and system generally will be worse than the first. It is not putting the case too strongly to say that, as far as health and life are concerned, one might as well be addicted to intoxicants as addicted to aperients.

I assure you, reader, it is a serious, ay, a solemn matter on which I am speaking; for one who cannot live without such medicines has what assurance offices would call a risky life. It would be bad enough if the pills they took were all as harmless, say, as *cascara sagrada*, or castor oil, and were simply laxatives, though not strengthening, but rather the reverse; for then the injury done, apart from slight weakening of the system, would be confined to the production after a time of a feeble and dry digestive canal. But many quack pills, that you see flaming advertisements of in every paper, contain one or more of three medicines which are highly dangerous when used indiscriminately. I give a line to each to show how important I consider my warning:—

MERCURY.
PODOPHYLLIN.
ALOES.

With the Editor’s permission I shall one day write a

paper on the antibilious and blood-cleansing medicines of commerce. For the present I must leave the matter where it stands.

One word about another dangerous class of remedies to which Pope’s lines (as revised) may also well apply. I mean narcotics. Out of the hands of medical men they are dangerous, one and all. It is dreadful to read the accounts—private—of the condition some of the inmates of French hospitals or homes set apart for the cure of such maladies as chloralism or morphia mania have reduced themselves to. Though but a year or two ago these unhappy beings might have been young, bright, and clever, with all the happiness within their reach that wealth can give, what are they now? Why, prematurely aged, debilitated in nerve, worn in body and in mind—worse than gibbering idiots.

But, as regards narcotics, the cry is “still they come.” A new narcotic has only the other day been forced upon the market; it has an outlandish name—I will not further advertise it—and is stated to contain no bromide, or anything that will affect the action of the heart, making it actually safe to take regularly and without the danger of an overdose. It is, moreover, to cure indigestion as well as sleeplessness. The wise will leave this medicine severely alone.

Now as to tonics. Much abused as they often are by the indiscriminate self-doctor, in whose hands the key of a medicine-chest is a far more dangerous tool than a razor in a baby’s, tonics nevertheless are most valuable when judiciously used; or, in other words, when used or prescribed by some one who knows how, when, and why to administer them.

I believe that in very old medical books these remedies were called “strengtheners.” Happily for the human race, perhaps, there were not so many medicinal tonics known two hundred years ago. People indulged more in those days in what I below call “natural tonics.”

Well, medicines of this class are also called roborants, corroborants, stomachics, and bitters, and are defined as drugs, the continued administration of which, in debilitated and relaxed conditions of the body, imparts strength and vigour without producing any sudden excitement. This is a very good definition. “They are stimulants,” say the same learned authorities, “inasmuch as they rouse the vital energies, but the excitement is slowly produced, and the effect is more permanent.”

If, however, they are given when the system is in a healthy state, their primary action, like that of stimulants, is often followed by collapse. For the word “often” in the last sentence, “always” ought to be substituted, and instead of “collapse”—“depression.” Collapse is somewhat strong in its sense, and although the depression may not in such cases be very observable, it is never entirely absent.

So then, in giving tonics we have to take into

account the condition of the body, and its measure of healthiness or the reverse.

It is often the case that tonics are divided by writers into *nervine* and *blood* tonics, but, with the exception of the natural tonics, even phosphorus itself must pass through the circulation before its effects on the nerves themselves come into play.

Tonics are not to be taken when there is a tendency to irritability of the digestive canal, including the stomach, or where the secretions are at fault. In a case, for example, of constipation alternating with attacks of diarrhoea, with a too acid condition of the stomach, and probably a heavy, dull, sleepy condition of brain during the day, it would be worse than useless, because dangerous, to administer tonics, until we had restored the balance of nature in the system. A course of very mild purgatives might therefore be called for. The choosing of this particular form of aperient would certainly be best left to one's own medical man, if he would be kind enough so to choose—in other words, if he chose to choose. But the reader must remember that doctors are only human, and that they would hardly relish an interview with a patient who said, "Dr. So-and-so prescribes tonics, but wishes you first to give me a course of mild aperients."

Dr. Human Nature would most likely reply, "My dear sir, you must choose between Dr. So-and-so and me."

The following medicines may be considered safe, but instead of giving a formula I can only indicate their use, for much depends on idiosyncrasy and constitution. Peppermint water, with the addition of ipecacuanha wine, carbonate of magnesia, aromatic powder, and powdered rhubarb. Well, Gregory's powder, a tea-spoonful or two in water, is also good, so are tabloids of *casacara sagrada*, or the tincture. If you are a gouty subject, ask your chemist to make you up a few doses of a mixture containing the infusions of gentian and senna, with two or three drams of tincture of rhubarb in it, and a few drops of sal volatile. Take one of these some time before breakfast. If bile is deficient, ask your man for a dandelion and Glauber salts mixture.

Meanwhile, take plenty of exercise and eat fruit before breakfast. This is the best advice I can give you, and having got the system into good working order, you may cautiously make choice of a tonic which shall tend to bring the secretions into a better state for the future, and at the same time give strength to the body and exhilaration to the mind.

But how shall you choose this tonic? That is the all-important, the burning question.

Well, first and foremost you must answer it Scotch fashion, viz., by asking another. That other is: What particular organ or function needs seeing to, needs restoring and bracing up?

Is it your blood that is not of good quality? If so, you will be paler in face and gums than usual, the pulse will be rather weak and more frequent than

usual, and it takes but little exertion to make the breathing difficult and the heart palpitate. There may be slight morning headache and a used-up expression about the eyes, while giddiness and noises in the head are far from infrequent. One in this state feels little inclination to work; everything is a trouble, everything a worry; he sleeps badly at night, has a sluggish system generally, and is apt to imagine that everything is going wrong with him and the world generally, that he would not be surprised if some day the sky should fall and smother the larks. The worst of such cases lies in the fact that while often dosing themselves in a half-hearted kind of way, people whose blood wants toning up are all too apt to fly to the occasional use of cordials and pick-me-ups in various forms. They could not do a more stupid nor a more dangerous thing, if they tried ever so hard.

In a case like this, then, if there be no other complication, complete reform in diet and mode of living must be heartily commenced, and iron taken. If there be any other disorder, that disease must be seen to separately. But in poverty of blood iron is our sheet-anchor. Take a mild aperient now and then, and the tincture of iron, or steel drops, as it is usually called, in doses of from ten to fifteen drops three times a day in plain water, will be the best medicine, or iron and quinine.

Now, it is in such cases as these that what I call natural tonics come in so well as accessories. What are they? Why, the cold or tepid bath every morning; exercise, pleasant and continued daily to the verge of fatigue; the Turkish bath, followed by the cold shower; and wholesome food.

But perhaps it is the nervous system more even than the blood that wants recuperation. Well, here again, reform in diet and mode of life, and a proper action of the secreting organs, are imperative before tonics can do good. Try the mild purgatives above mentioned, and then as tonics, phosphorus in some form should be tried, say four or five drops of the saturated solution of phosphorus in ether four times a day, or phosphorus pills, or the compound syrup of hypophosphate. Then cod-liver oil deserves a good trial; it cannot do harm, it must do good. It may be taken in conjunction with extract of malt, or if the oil is not easily borne, then the malt extract itself is the thing, and should be used at every meal.

Perhaps there is much loss of appetite, and conjoined with this either nervousness or biliousness. Well, there is quinine mixture, and quinine wine, also the various barks, notably quassia, because it does not constipate.

But with all tonics—I want to impress this on your mind, reader—reformation of mode of life and diet, with pleasurable exercise, especially cycling, if the system is not too weak, fresh air and the bath or morning tub, must go hand-in-hand, and the system must be free and the secretions abundant and unvitiated.