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978-1-108-06989-2 - A Treatise on Diet: With a View to Establish, on Practical Grounds, a System of Rules, for the Prevention and Cure of the Diseases Incident to a Disordered State of the Digestive Functions

John Ayrton Paris

Excerpt

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A TREATISE ON DIET,

ETC. ETC.

INTRODUCTION.

Apology for the Work.—Popular interest of the Subject.—Works on Dietetics, numerous, but not satisfactory.—Contrariety of Opinion begets Scepticism.—The fate of a Patient who consults too many Physicians.—The quantity of Food, and the circumstances under which it is taken, more important than its quality.—Dietetic Precepts should not savour of ascetic austerities.—Absurdity of the supposition that Nature can direct us in the selection of Food.—Man has no natural Food.—The qualities of Vegetables completely changed by Cultivation.—Cookery.—The folly of denying the influence of Regimen in the cure and prevention of Disease.—Digestion, comprehensive Signification of the Term.

IN these days of literary fecundity, an author who ventures to add a new work upon a subject which has already given birth to so many volumes, must be able to satisfy the public tribunal, that he is either prepared to extend the general stock of information, or to correct the errors into which preceding writers have been betrayed. I shall certainly, upon the present occasion, rely with greater confidence upon this latter plan of defence. It will be readily admitted that few subjects, connected with the medical art,

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have excited more popular interest, or occasioned more sedulous inquiry, than that of which I propose to treat in the following pages ; and yet, were the numerous works on dietetics subjected to a healthy digestion, how meagre would be the proportion of real aliment extracted from their bulky materials. Upon this occasion, at least, we may, with Diderot, ridicule the popular adage, “ *the more heads the better counsel—because nothing is more common than heads, and nothing so unusual as good advice.*” Suppose an unprejudiced reader, my assumption I admit is violent, were to wade through the discordant mass to which I allude, would he not inevitably arrive at the mortifying conclusion, that nothing is known upon the subject in question ; or rather, that there does not exist any necessity for such knowledge ? Nothing cherishes the public scepticism, with regard to the efficacy of the medical art, so much, as the publication of the adverse and contradictory opinions of its professors, upon points so apparently simple and obvious, that every superficially informed person constitutes himself a judge of their merits. If a reader is informed by one class of authors, that a weak stomach is unable to convert *liquid* food into aliment, and by another, that *solid* food is injurious to feeble stomachs, he at once infers that the question is one of perfect indifference ; and he ultimately arrives, by a very simple process of reasoning, at the sweeping conclusion, that the stomach, ever kind and accommodating, indiscriminately converts every species of food into nourishment, and that he has therefore only to consult his own inclination in its selection. On the valetudinarian, incapable of healthy reflection, and ever seeking for causes of fear and anxiety when they do not choose to come uncalled, such works may have a contrary tendency, and lead him to suspect the seeds of disease in every dish, and poison in every cup.

2. To make the case still stronger, let us suppose that the unprejudiced person, whom we have chosen to repre-

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sent on this occasion, instead of a reader becomes a patient, and submits his complaints to the judgment of these discordant authors; might he not, like the Emperor Adrian, prepare an inscription * for his tomb-stone? This is not an imaginary case, but one of daily occurrence in this metropolis. A dyspeptic invalid, restless and impatient from the nature of his complaints, wanders from physician to physician, and from surgeon to surgeon, in the eager expectation of procuring some relief from his sufferings: under the direction of one, he takes the blue pill, and, like Sanctorius, measures with scrupulous accuracy the prescribed quantity of his ingesta; but, disappointed in the promised benefit, he solicits other advice, and is mortified by hearing that mercury, in every form of combination, must aggravate the evils he seeks to cure, and that a generous diet, and bitter stomachics, are alone calculated to meet the exigencies of his case; a trial is given to the plan, but with no better success: the unhappy patient at length determines to leave his case to nature; but at this critical juncture he meets a sympathizing friend, by whom he is earnestly entreated to apply to a skilful physician, who had succeeded in curing a similar complaint, under which he had himself severely laboured: the anxious sufferer, with renewed confidence, sends for this long sought for doctor, and he hears, with a mixture of horror and astonishment, that his disorder has been entirely mistaken, and that he must submit to the mortifications of a hermit, or his cure is hopeless. It is unnecessary to pursue the history; but I appeal to the candid and enlightened members of the profession to say, whether I have caricatured the portrait. No one can believe that I intend to cast the slightest reproach upon any practitioner by these observations; it is to the unsettled state of professional opinion upon the subject of diet, and to the obscurity which involves the

* "It was the *great number* of physicians that killed the Emperor."

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theory of digestion, that all these evils are to be solely attributed. But to return to the subject of dietetic works ; it appears to me that their authors have laid far too great stress upon the quality of the different species of food, and have condemned particular aliments for those effects which should be attributed to the quantity, and circumstances under which they were taken ; their dietetic precepts have frequently assumed the air of ascetic austerities, and they have thus represented the cure far more formidable than the disease. It has been sarcastically observed by a popular writer, more remarkable for the playfulness of his style than the soundness of his arguments, that there exists a more intimate connexion between the doctrine of Tertulian and that of many a dietetic practitioner, than is generally supposed—that he is the ascetic intrenched in gallipots and blisters, preaching against beef and porter ; terrifying his audience with fire and brimstone in one age, and in the other, with gout and apoplexy. Now, while we must all deeply lament that the severity of this sarcasm should have been, in some measure, sanctioned by the theoretical absurdities of many of our minor writers, it is impossible that any reasonable person can seriously contend, that numerous diseases do not arise from an improper management of diet ; much less, that a judicious regulation of it cannot be rendered subservient to their cure.

3. It has been affirmed with an air of much confidence, that the management of our diet requires not the aid of reason or philosophy, since Nature has implanted in us instincts sufficiently strong and intelligible to direct us to what is salutary, and to warn us from such aliments as are injurious. We may here observe, that man has so long forsaken the simple laws which Nature had instituted for his direction, that it is to be feared she has abandoned her charge, and left him under the control of that faithless guide and usurper, to which civilisation has given dominion. Appetite, which expresses the true wants of the

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system, can no longer be distinguished from that feeling which induces us to prefer one species of food to another, and which entirely depends on habit, and certain associations. That the natural relations which subsist between the qualities of food and the impressions made by them on the senses, are changed or destroyed by the refinements of artificial life, is a fact supported by too many powerful arguments to refute: how many kinds of aliments, originally disagreeable, become pleasant by habit; and how many substances, naturally agreeable, become disgusting from the creation of certain prejudices! I am acquainted with a lady who is constantly made sick by eating a green oyster; the cause of which may be traced to an erroneous impression she received with respect to the nature of the colouring matter being cupreous. It has also been frequently observed, that persons in social life have acquired a preternatural sensibility to vegetable odours, while the savage has a keener sense for the exhalations of animal bodies: we are, for instance, assured by Captain Cook, that the people of Kamschatka did not smell a vegetable essence placed near them, but that they discovered, by their olfactory sense, a rotten fish, or a stranded whale, at a considerable distance.

4. Dr. George Fordyce has urged a still more serious and conclusive objection to that hackneyed maxim—"that we ought to live *naturally*, and on such food as is presented to us by nature;" viz. that *man has no natural food*. It is decreed that he shall earn his bread by the sweat of his brow; or in other words, that he shall, by his industry, discover substances from whence he is to procure subsistence; and that if he cannot find such, he must cultivate and alter them from their natural state. There is scarcely a vegetable which we at present employ, that can be found growing naturally: Buffon states, that our wheat is a factitious production, raised to its present condition by the

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art of agriculture. Rice, rye, barley, or even oats, are not to be found wild; that is to say, growing naturally in any part of the earth, but have been altered, by the industry of mankind, from plants not now resembling them even in such a degree as to enable us to recognise their relations. The acrid and disagreeable *apium graveolens* has been thus transformed into delicious celery; and the *colewort*, a plant of scanty leaves, not weighing altogether half an ounce, has been improved into cabbage, whose leaves alone weigh many pounds, or into a cauliflower of considerable dimensions, being only the embryo of a few buds, which, in their natural state, would not have weighed many grains. The potatoe, again, whose introduction has added many millions to our population, derives its origin from a small and bitter root, which grows wild in Chili and at Monte Video.* These few instances may suffice to answer the object for which they were introduced: the reader will find many others in the Introduction to my Pharmacologia.†

5. If cultivation can ever be said to have left the transformation of vegetables imperfect, the genius of cookery is certainly entitled to the merit of having completed it; for, whatever traces of natural qualities may have remained, they are undoubtedly obliterated during their passage through her potent alembic. It has been observed, that the useful object of cookery is to render aliments agreeable to the senses, and of easy digestion; in short, to spare the stomach a drudgery which can be more easily performed by a spit or stewpan, — that of loosening the texture, or softening the fibres of the food; and which are essential preliminaries to its digestion. A no less important effect is produced by rendering it more palatable; for it is a fact, which I shall have to consider on a future occasion, that

* See Pharmacologia, edit. 6. vol. i. p. 147. † Ibid. p. 114.

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the gratification which attends a favourite meal is, in itself, a specific stimulus to the organs of digestion, especially in weak and debilitated habits.

6. Experience can alone supply the want of instinct; and, unless we assume this as the basis of all our inquiries upon the subject of diet, our theories, however refined, and supported by chemical and physiological researches, will prove but Will-o'-th'-wisps, to lead us astray into numerous difficulties and embarrassments. Experience, for instance, dearly bought experience, has taught us that headach, flatulency, hypochondriasis, and a thousand nameless ills, have arisen from the too prevailing fashion of loading our tables with that host of French *entremets*, and *hors-d'œuvres*, which have so unfortunately usurped the roast beef of old England. The theorists, in the true spirit of philosophical refinement, laugh at our terrors; they admit, to be sure, that the man who eats round the table, "*ab ovo usque ad mala*," is a terrific glutton, but that, after all, *he has only eaten words*; for, eat as he may, he can only eat animal matter, vegetable matter, and condiment, either cooked by the heat of water or by that of fire, figure or disfigure, serve, arrange, flavour, or adorn them as you please. There is no physician of any practical knowledge who cannot, at once, refute such a doctrine; every nurse knows, from experience, that certain mixtures produce deleterious compounds in the stomach, although the chemist may perhaps fail in explaining their nature, or the theory of their formation. What would such a reasoner say, if he were invited to a repast, and were presented only with charcoal and water? would he be reconciled to his fare by being told that his discontent was founded on a mere delusion? that the difference between them and the richest vegetable viands was merely ideal, an affair of words, as in either case he would only swallow *oxygen*, *hydrogen*, and carbon? and yet the presumption in such a case would not be more violent, nor would the

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argument be less tenable, than that by which the chemist attempts to defend the innocence of a practice which converts our refreshments into burdens, and our food into poison. To those who question the value of dietetic regulations in the cure of disease, I have only to observe, that they may as well deny the utility of the medical art altogether, and assert that in all disorders of function, Nature is sufficiently powerful to rectify and cure them, without the intervention of art: unless this be granted, it is absurd to say that beneficial impressions may not be made as well through the medium of the *materia alimentaria*, as through that of the *materia medica*; or, to borrow the language of Dr. Arbuthnot, that what we take daily by POUNDS must be, at least, as important as what we take seldom, and only by grains or tea-spoonsful.

7. Those who have read my work on Pharmacology, will easily discover the train of research by which my mind has been led, from the study of the operation of medicines, to that of the digestion of aliment; while those who are acquainted with the various works on dietetics will readily admit, that an ample apology may be found for giving to the public another volume on that subject. Upon this point, however, I wish to be distinctly understood; for I should be seriously concerned at being identified with a school, which uniformly depresses the opinions and writings of others, in order that those of their own immediate disciples may rise in relative importance. It would be worse than foolish to assert that, upon the subject of dietetics, we have no works of merit; the valuable treatise of Dr. Fordyce would, singly, be sufficient to repel with triumph a charge so illiberal and unjust: at the same time, it cannot be denied, that since the periods in which many excellent works were composed, physiology, as well as chemistry, has advanced with rapid strides; pathology has thrown off the mystic veil with which the humoral doctrine had invested her, and the

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views, as well as the language of medical science, have undergone corresponding revolutions. Facts alone remain unchanged ; but those are so buried in the ruins of the fallen fabric, that, unless they be rescued from the confused mass, their intrinsic value must be entirely lost : any work, therefore, carefully collated, with the view of accomplishing such an object, even should it present but little novelty, must prove an acceptable offering to the intelligent part of the community.

8. Before the subject of dietetics can be systematically considered, or the principles upon which disease may be prevented or cured by an appropriate diet, can be properly understood, or profitably applied, the reader must be made acquainted with the complicated machinery by which Nature extracts blood from food. The various processes engaged in this wonderful transmutation are expressed by the comprehensive term DIGESTION, although this word is sometimes employed in a more limited sense, to denote only those preparatory changes which the food undergoes in the stomach. Mr. Abernethy would appear to use the term according to this latter acceptance, for he says, — “ *Digestion* takes place in the stomach, *chylification* in the small intestines, and a third process, hitherto undenominated, is performed in the large intestines.” The relation of a tale which has been so often told, may, perhaps, appear to many as not only superfluous but reprehensible ; I must, however, remark, that every author is conventionally allowed to state the theme of his discussion in his own language, and the advantages which have hitherto attended the indulgence sufficiently sanction its continuance.

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ORGANS.

Their elaborate Machinery.—Their Structure varies according to the Food of the Animal to which they belong.—Enumeration of the several digestive Organs.—Their extraordinary sympathetic relations.—The ALIMENTARY CANAL:—its peristaltic Motion.—The Stomach:—its Figure, Dimensions, Situation, and Structure.—Small Intestines.—The Duodenum:— Peculiarities of its Functions entitle it to be considered as a second Stomach:—Provisions to limit its Motions.—Jejunum.—Ilium.—Large Intestines.—Cæcum.—Colon.—Rectum.—The VARIOUS GLANDS, OR SECRETING ORGANS, FOR THE PREPARATION OF THE DIGESTIVE FLUIDS.—The salivary Glands.—Glands of the Stomach and Intestines.—The Liver.—The Pancreas.—Observations on the supposed Use of the Spleen.—VESSELS FOR CARRYING THE NUTRITIVE PRODUCT TO THE CURRENT OF THE CIRCULATION.—The Lacteals.—Mesenteric Glands.—The Thoracic Duct.—The LUNGS.—The KIDNEYS.—The SKIN.

9. No function in the animal economy presents such elaborate machinery as that of digestion; but its complexity and extent have been found to vary according to the nature of the food upon which it is designed to act. If it greatly differ in composition from the matter of which the animal is constituted, the changes it has to undergo before it can be adapted for the support and reparation of the body which receives it, must necessarily be more considerable, and the organs are accordingly more extensive and elaborate in herbivorous than in carnivorous animals; while man, who derives his supplies of nourish-