A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

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SEA-BATHING

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THE PRACTICE of sea-bathing is as old as the race itself. As a religious rite, as an aid to cleanliness, or as a source of pleasurable gratification, references to it abound in the earliest pages of history.

The famous Dr. Russel, of Brighton, at the beginning of the eighteenth century achieved fame and wealth by his advocacy of its value as a therapeutic agent. To him is due the credit of first attracting the pleasure seekers and valetudinarians of the metropolis to the sea-coast villages, thus laying the foundation of the prosperity, not of Brighton alone, but of the very many health resorts that now flourish around our coast. Such was his fame, and so wonderful his reputed cures, that the world of fashion, headed by the Prince of Wales, crowded into "Brighthelmstone" to avail themselves of this novel and delightful cure for all the ills of the flesh. One is inclined to think that there must be something in the general talk concerning latter-day degeneracy when we read of the famous Mrs. Thrale, with her companion Mme. D'Arblay, and her three beautiful daughters, bathing at 6 A.M. on a November morning, before setting out by coach for London, and describing their experiences as "cold but pleasant"!

"Over 100 years ago it was considered unwise to start a course of sea-bathing before the system had been 'prepared' by a course of sea-water drinking"

Nowadays sea-bathing is apt to be regarded as a pastime only and its therapeutic value is in danger of being overlooked. Much harm is often done through indiscreet indulgence by those to whom, except under stringent regulations, it is not suited; indeed no one in the slightest degree "out of health" ought to embark on a course of sea-bathing, without at least a preliminary consultation with a medical man. The quality of the "hydro-therapeutic reaction" depends a good deal on the condition of health of the bather, and on his being accustomed or otherwise to indulgence in cold bathing.

It behoves everybody to exercise caution on first arriving at the seaside if the weather is very hot. The unwonted exposure to the sun, the glare of the sea, and the chilling of the body, frequently cause headache and nausea in perfectly healthy people. Those with feeble circulations should bathe only when the weather is very warm and the sea calm and none but the very robust should bathe more than once a day. Continuous paddling cannot be too strongly discouraged.

It is worthy to note that over 100 years ago it was considered unwise to start a course of sea-bathing before the system had been "prepared" by a course of sea-water drinking.

Indications and contra-indications

Muscular rheumatism, functional nervous complaints, nervous dyspepsia, hypochondriasis, some forms of hysteria and mild forms of diphtheritis paralysis are generally benefited by a course of sea bathing. Anaemia, unless of extreme grade, or dependent on organic disease of the heart or vessels, is not a contra-indication. Constipation, although sometimes intensified for the first few days, is generally relieved after a time, owing to the improved muscular tone of the bowels.

No one should bathe when under the influence of great emotion or excitement. Bathing is plainly contra-indicated in the case of elderly people with high-blood pressures and arterio-sclerosis, seeing that immersion in cold water causes a considerable rise in the blood pressure. Apoplexy is by no means an infrequent cause of "drowning". Disease of the heart, blood vessels or lungs, organic nerve diseases, enlargement of the liver, extreme grades of anaemia should be deemed an absolute bar to bathing.

Dress and methods of bathing

Bathing suits should be made of some woollen material, preferably flannel. Non-swimmers should have sleeves long enough to reach the wrists, and the drawers to cover the knees, as a protection from sunburn. Women and children escape much discomfort and injury to the feet from sharp stones by providing themselves with bathing shoes. Swimmers, for the sake of freedom, should have short sleeves, and drawers ending about the knees.

The ordinary means of bathing is from a machine, a contrivance which has not progressed in luxury or convenience with the lapse of time. Of course for those who cannot swim the attractions of the open sea and the dive from the boat are inaccessible. Delicate people and children should make use of a machine or tent, if obtainable, in preference to undressing in the open air, because the mere exposure to the air in the act of stripping is a potent means of loss of animal heat. It is best to avoid loitering about after undressing, and to run rapidly into the water and immerse the whole body under the first available wave.

Duration

The duration of the bath should be regulated by the constitution of the bather, the state of his health, the temperature of air and water, and the force of the waves. The water should be left at once if the preliminary chill is not at once followed by a healthy reaction, and under no circumstances should the bath be so prolonged as to lead to secondary chill; alarming symptoms are liable to supervene, especially in those who are debilitated, or suffering from fatigue before entering the water.

Five minutes for non-swimmers and 15 minutes for swimmers are probably quite long enough periods even for those in the most perfect health.

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