

METHODS OF PROLONGING LIFE; A SHORT HISTORICAL SKETCH.

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Men of science have, throughout all ages, devoted their attention to the possibility of prolonging life, and have regarded it as a subject worthy of the most profound investigation; and their researches have been attended with benefit to posterity. As might be expected, the possibility of extending the average length of days has, from the most ancient times, afforded a fascinating and extensive field for the visionary, as well as for the deepest thinkers, and plans for increasing the age to which every man can live have usually been among the chief allurements held forth by empirics and imposters. By thus imposing upon the credulity of the public, many notorious charlatans have acquired rich harvests of ill-gotten gold.

Although it would be impossible to review all the schemes advanced, yet an account of the most remarkable theories advocated for the prolongation of life is certainly deserving of notice. At the same time, an elucidation of their fallacies is of no small moment in order to ascertain their true value. It is, indeed, interesting to observe the various and often opposite means advocated by enthusiasts for attaining the same end.

Ancient Theories for Prolonging Life.

As far back as the Egyptian, Greek and Roman periods, we find the idea of prolonging life prevalent. The Egyptians bestowed considerable attention upon various measures for the attainment of longevity, and they believed that life could be prolonged by the efficacy of sudorifics and emetics, if used systematically. Instead of saying: "How do you do?" as the usual salutation, they inquired of each other, "How do you perspire?" In those days, it was a general custom to take at least two emetics during each month. Hippocrates and his disciples recommended moderation in diet, friction of the skin, and well-timed exercise; all of which were certainly steps in the right direction.

It was during the darkness of the middle ages, ripe with fanaticism and superstition, that the most absurd ideas of witchcraft, horoscopes, chiromancy, and empirical panaceas for the prolongation of life, first became disseminated. The philosopher's stone and elixir of life were then vaunted by the alchemists. Foremost among the prolongers of life, we find Paracelsus (1490-1541), an alchemist of great renown, in spite of his quack methods. He claimed to have discovered the elixir of life, and so great was his influence that even the learned Erasmus did not disdain to consult him. Patients and pupils flocked around him from every quarter of Europe. Notwithstanding his famous stone

of immortality, he died at the age of fifty. His elixir was a derivation of sulphur similar to compound sulphuric ether. Whatever may be said against Paracelsus, it is an undeniable fact that to him we are indebted for our primary knowledge of mercury as a drug. Prior to his time, it had not been used as a medicine.

Astrological Methods.

About this epoch (1550), Leonard Thurneysser attained world-wide celebrity as an astrologer and nativity-caster. He was a physician, printer, bookseller and horoscopist all in one. He professed to be able, by the aid of astrology, not only to predict future events, but also to prolong life. He published yearly an astrological calendar, describing the nature of the forthcoming year and its chief events. His calendar, aided by his other work, enabled him to amass a large sum of money. His theory was that every man came within the influence of a certain star, by which his destiny was ruled. Upon ascertaining from what planet a person's misfortunes or sickness proceeded, he advised his patient to remove his residence within the control of a more propitious luminary. In short, to escape from the influence of a malignant to a more friendly satellite was the basis of his method.

Marsilius Ficinus, in his "Treatise on the Prolongation of Life," recommended all prudent persons to consult an astrologer every seven years, thereby to avoid any danger which might threaten them. During the year 1470, an individual named Pausa dedicated to the Council at Leipsic a book, in which he most strongly urges all persons desirous of longevity to be on their guard every seven years, because the planet Saturn, a hostile planet, ruled at these periods. According to the teachings of astrology, metals were believed to be in intimate connection with planets. Thus, no doubt, it was that amulets and talismans originated, as reputed agents for increasing the length of a man's life. The disciples of this creed had amulets and talismans cast of the proper metal, and under the influence of certain constellations, in order to protect themselves from the evil influence of adverse planets. These absurd conceits were at a later period revived by Cagliostro, of whom I shall have something further to say. It would appear that the more mysterious and ridiculous the conceptions of fanatics and imposters were, the greater was their success.

Abstemiousness.

The example of the renowned Cornaro (1467-1566), affords a brilliant instance of the superiority of an abstemious life to the foolish doctrines put forth by the astrologers. Up to his fortieth birthday, he was excessively intemperate, both in eating and drinking, so that his health suffered considerably. He then

made up his mind to reform and to submit himself to a temperate regimen. For the remaining sixty years of his life, in which he almost reached a hundred years, he continued the observance of his rules, with good result. While it is true that our days may be prolonged to some extent by exercising great moderation in eating and drinking, there are other factors in the problem of longevity, and rules that might be suitable for one person would not apply to another.

Transfusion of Blood.

Shortly after the death of Louis XIII, of France, who was bled about forty-five times during the last ten months of his existence, a contrary method came into fashion. Transfusion was for a time relied upon as a means of invigorating and prolonging life. The operation was performed by aid of a small pipe conveying blood from the artery of one person to another. In Paris, Drs. Dennis and Riva were enabled to cure a young man who had previously been treated in vain for "lethargy." Further experiments being less satisfactory, this device as a prolonger of existence was discarded.

Francois Bacon held somewhat unique ideas concerning the possible lengthening of life. He regarded vitality as a flame continually being consumed by the surrounding atmosphere, and he concluded that, by retarding vital waste, the consumption of vitality might be stopped. He recommended cold bathing, followed by friction. Tranquillity of mind, cooling food, with the use of opiates, he advocated as the most suitable measures for lessening internal consumption of "the force of life." In addition, he proposed to renovate health periodically, first by a reduced diet combined with cathartics; subsequently, through choice of refreshing and succulent foods. With a proper degree of modification, there seems to be wisdom in his views, excepting as regards the use of opiates, which are, of course, unnecessary, unless sickness demands them.

Numerous charlatans have appeared—and continue to appear at intervals—who make loud asseverations of having discovered the veritable elixir of life, which usually consists of some nostrum for internal consumption, and with which they mendaciously guarantee to prolong our days. One of the most notorious of these quacks was the Count de St. Germain (died 1784), who, with barefaced effrontery, insisted that he had already existed for centuries by the aid of his "Tea of Long Life," which, he claimed, would rejuvenate mankind. Upon careful examination, his miraculous "tea" was found to consist of a simple combination of sandalwood, fennel and senna leaves.

Mesmerism.

A great stir was created in 1785 by the occult pretensions of a fanatical physi-