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THE HISTORY OF SALT

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With Observations on the Geographical Distribution, Geological Formation, and Medicinal and Dietetic Properties

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CHAPTER I.

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INTRODUCTION.

How frequently it happens that those natural productions with which we are to a certain extent superficially familiar, are to a great many not only uninteresting, but are regarded as subjects more or less beneath their notice; and by others as deleterious to the human race, and therefore to be cautiously used or scrupulously avoided. Another peculiarity is, that the more we are accustomed to them, the more our interest wanes, and probably at last degenerates into apathetic indifference.

We can only attribute these ignorant conceits and apparently unaccountable obliquity of judgment to two causes: an assumption of wisdom, and an unenlightened mind, unwilling to learn and loath to improve. Another hindrance which to a considerable extent precludes the study of what one may truthfully designate every-day subjects, is the restless *furor* for artful counterfeits of science, which are nothing else than the emanations of vain and visionary minds mixing together, as it were, an amalgam of truth and error. The present age is wonderfully productive of these eccentric ideas, while at the same time it is unhappily pregnant with the most unnatural and anti-healthful habits. The mystified authors take good care to run into the wildest extremes, so that their marvellous schemes and quaint devices (fortunately for their fellow-creatures) cause them to be justly derided by the thoughtful and disregarded by the sensible, though not a few are caught by the tinsel.

The grotesque aberrations of thought which have so prolifically generated such an incongruous medley of medico-social phantasmagoria, though considered by their promoters as wonderful scientific projections, are rendered more ridiculous than they really are, by their wild and unreasonable denunciations of those who do not happen to coincide with their farcical puerilities and whimsical crudities; and their intolerant followers, with considerable more zeal than discretion, promulgate their doctrines with voluminous additions and preposterous assertions—*mentis gratissimus error*.

These parodies of science have exerted as yet no material influence on modern thought, though there is a visible impress observable here and there; and they doubtless will ultimately collapse, like alchemy and other illusions of a bygone age, and in due time will fall as ignominiously before the resistless onslaughts of true science and knowledge, as those deceptive will-o'-the-wisps were finally extinguished, after whisking about for some centuries, by the calm, dignified, and logical condemnation of philosophical and scientific investigation. Need I remind my reader that I am referring to spiritualism, homœopathy, vegetarianism, and various other bastard distortions of science, though their purblind believers may regard them as legitimate offspring, and therefore deserving of due respect and consideration. Such imaginative plerophory is invariably antagonistic to scientific conclusions and common-sense principles, beside being redundant of inane folly and trivial hyperbole.

One of the peculiar crazes of the day, though it is not so universal as those to which I have just referred, is the unhealthful and insensate antipathy to salt, which has infatuated, in a greater or lesser degree, the several strata of

society: some going so far as to proscribe it altogether, whilst others use it as if it were destructive to life, or at least subversive of health, and others assert that it originates disease! Some time ago I saw a letter in a temperance journal (we know that the advocates of total abstinence are frequently guilty of degrading their good cause by descending to frivolity), advising total abstention from salt; the writer, with amusing self-complacency, accused it of producing evils of an astounding nature—such is the latitude of pragmatical ignorance and silly egotism. The palpable absurdity of such an argument must be apparent even to the most careless thinker; it is with the view of exposing such a fallacy, both injurious and irrational, that I have written this treatise, and have been prompted to do so more especially as I find such ridiculous notions find great favour with those from whom better things ought to be expected.

I have laboured under many difficulties, owing to the meagre accounts concerning the history of this most important article of diet; no doubt arising from the fact that it has not been studied with that attention which it manifestly deserves; consequently I have been obliged to allude to the pages of Holy Writ, not that I wish to base my arguments on religion, but simply because we find therein the primary mention of salt, both as a purifying agent and as a condiment to food.

Reverting to the Bible on subjects of scientific import frequently brings down upon the author ill-timed ridicule, especially from those who profess a belief in nothing except their own crude notions; a fact which is surprising, for here we possess a Book which has stood the test of ages, which has weathered many a storm, which has victoriously emerged from many a conflict, and which has indeed passed through an ordeal which no other volume has been called upon to do—all

indicative that it emanated from a mind immeasurably superior to that of man; and thus I am quite content to bear with any amount of satire, however pointed and keen, if I have it on my side of the question, which undoubtedly is the case respecting the medicinal and dietetic properties of salt: besides, when it is pronounced to be “good” by the Divine Speaker, one need not care an iota for those who assert that it is pernicious, however plausible or apparently logically conclusive their arguments may be.

CHAPTER II.

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HISTORY OF SALT.

I AM approaching a subject somewhat novel and indeed difficult, and very probably it may be regarded by some as one far from being profitable or interesting; therefore I shall endeavour, though with some degree of diffidence, to consider it not only from a medical point of view, but to glance at some facts, both historical, geographical, and geological. By so doing, we shall be touching upon other matters not only pleasing but instructive, and which to a great many are but indifferently known; for though salt is to be almost universally seen on the tables of rich and poor alike, yet few are aware of its undeniable medicinal virtues, and many are totally ignorant of the great sustenance they derive from this indispensable and undoubtedly savoury condiment, besides being but moderately acquainted with its history. At the present time it is used nearly all over the world, and is acknowledged to be at least an adjunct necessary for perfect cookery; it is in requisition in fact everywhere, and even those who do not use it would be considered as lacking in taste were they to discard it altogether from their tables.

All, however, are to a certain extent cognisant of the fact of how insipid the daintiest dishes taste, if salt is omitted in their preparation, and the cook, however expert he may be in the culinary art, invariably fails in giving satisfaction (except to those whose palates are deranged or vitiated) if they are not seasoned with it; few, I think, will deny that animal food in particular is deprived of its pleasing flavour if it be eaten

without salt. Those who have an unnatural aversion to it should bear in mind that the ingestion of improper animal and vegetable food frequently occasions many severe attacks of illness, and invariably provokes and intensifies that universal complaint, dyspepsia. George Herbert tells us in his *Jacula Prudentum*, that “Whatever the father of disease, ill diet is the mother;” and if food is taken into the stomach without its proper portion of salt, it is not what one would consider as wholesome; on the contrary, it is most decidedly “ill diet:” and being such, the system does not derive that kind of nutriment suitable for the promotion of a healthy action of the organs of the body, neither are the secretions in such a condition as is compatible with health. Physiologists inform us that the saliva[1] holds salt in solution, and that it is also present in the gastric juice, which indicates at once how highly necessary it is for the system to be regularly supplied with it; for it is a physiological fact that the process of deglutition and digestion is partly due to the disintegrating and solvent action of these two secretions on the food, especially the latter; and consequently if the nutritious particles are to be absorbed in a state fit to make up for the waste of tissue, they ought to contain a sufficient amount of the chloride of sodium to take the place of that which has passed off through the media of the skin and the kidneys.

With these self-evident facts and a few physiological data before them (which really require no great effort to prove, so plain are they in their simple truth), all indeed must, or should be, convinced of the necessity of a liberal and judicious use of a substance which plays such an important part in the animal economy, and into which we shall enter more fully when we come to consider the relation which salt bears to food while it is going through the process of digestion.

Owing to the peculiar and incomprehensible prejudices of those who labour under the false impression that they are wiser and more discriminating than others, and who become proportionately obstinate in their notions, we shall endeavour to bring forward undeniable evidence in support of our arguments, though it is possible they may neither acknowledge that they are wrong, nor admit that their preconceived ideas prevent them from arriving at an unbiased conclusion. To such I have no hesitation in saying that they are much deceived if they imagine that the habit of abstaining from salt is contributive to health; such crabbed and confined views, however, are significant of the fact that human nature is frequently antagonistic to, and at cross purposes with, that which is ordained by the laws of nature to be beneficial.

I shall pass over the merits of salt as a seasoning to food, as it is my object to consider it solely in its relation to the animal economy, its operation in certain morbid conditions of the system, and its great importance as a health-preserver. But before proceeding, it will be as well to give a passing glance at its history and other attractive matter with which it is indirectly in relation; for though our investigations will be rather of a tentative character, and in a degree speculative, they may at least be interesting if not instructive. Perhaps others may be stimulated to penetrate deeper into the almost impenetrable obscurity with which the discovery of salt as a condiment is surrounded; and if they can bring to light who it was that primarily found out the chloride of sodium and utilised it as an adjunct to food, they will have solved a geological problem, and a long-standing historical enigma will be elucidated.

We possess no distinct and reliable data, and in fact no information of any kind, concerning salt in the early ages of

the world as an article of diet, outside the pages of Scripture: all we really know, is, that in the infantile period of Europe, when the Indo-Germanic tribes entered it from Asia, though they were unacquainted with the sea, they were familiar with salt, as is proved by the recurrence of its name; yet whether they used it with their food we are by no means so sure of. The Kitchen-Middeners, who had their miserable dwellings on the wild shores of Jutland and similar inhospitable localities, *might* have been acquainted with it; but when we call to mind the nature of the food2 on which they lived, we may, I think, fairly conclude that they were ignorant of the use to which salt is now put; here again, however, we have only vague conjecture to fall back upon. The founder of Buddhism, Arddha Chiddi, a native of Capila near Nepaul, who subsequently changed his name to Gotama, and afterwards to Chakia Mouni, in his "Verbal Instructions," when dealing with his inquiry into the nature of man, asks us to consider what becomes of a grain of salt when cast into the ocean. Of the epoch of Gotama, or Chakia Mouni, there is great diversity of opinion; the Chinese, Mongols, and Japanese fix it at B.C. 1000; the Cashmerians at B.C. 1332; and the Avars, Siamese, and Cingalese fix it at B.C. 600.

The reference which Gotama thus makes to salt shows us that he was familiarly acquainted with it, otherwise he would not have figuratively mentioned it.

We are completely in the dark regarding salt as a condiment till Moses, in the Book of Job, asks the pertinent question, "Can anything which is unsavoury be eaten without salt?" As this book was penned B.C. 1520, we may conclude with a tolerable degree of certainty that it was so used in the time of the great Jewish Law-giver, and as he was brought up in the court of Pharaoh, and was skilled in all the wisdom of

the Egyptians, it would point to the probability that salt was in common use in that ancient country.

The *first* mention we possess of salt is when Moses refers to the Vale of Siddim, which is the Salt Sea. This vast reservoir was known as the Dead Sea,[3] and is so to this day: so the Jews, who were commanded to use salt in their sacrifices, had a large natural depôt which afforded them a limitless supply of the necessary material for carrying on their worship, and likewise for individual consumption: they also mixed a certain amount of salt with their incense. The second reference is in relation to one of those extraordinary incidents with which the first five books of the Old Testament teem, and that is during the destruction of the "Cities of the Plain," when Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt for disobedience.

We also read of salt in the Iliad of Homer, and as he did not flourish till about B.C. 850,[4] we must give the honour of marking it indelibly on the pages of history to Moses the Jew, who lived, if the above date is correct, 670 years anterior to the illustrious Father of epic poetry, and, if the Cashmerians are correct in their calculation, 188 years before Gotama gave to the world his eight hundred volumes, pointing out the path towards individual extinction or "Nirwana."

We may likewise conclude that as it was known to the sagacious Hebrew, the æsthetic Greek, and the imaginative Asiatic, it was no doubt equally well known to the Egyptians, and probably amongst the neighbouring African tribes, long before the arrival of Joseph in the land of the Pharaohs, and centuries before the Oracle of Delphi was instituted.[5]

From the following lines we may justly conclude that the Greeks looked upon salt as sacred, and used it as a thank-offering, and that it even was an absolute necessity to go through the ceremony of washing their hands before touching

it; such extreme care and scrupulous observance indicates that it was a substance held in the highest reverence:

"At this the Sire embraced the maid again,
So sadly lost, so lately sought in vain.
Then near the altar of the darting King,
Dispos'd in rank their hecatomb they bring;585
With water purify their hands, and take
The sacred off'ring of the salted cake;
While thus with arms devoutly rais'd in air,
And solemn voice, the Priest directs his pray'r."

POPE'S *Homer's Iliad*, book i.

"And Menalaus came unbid, the last.485
The chiefs surround the destined beast, and take
The sacred off'ring of the salted cake:
When thus the King prefers his solemn pray'r."

Ibid., book ii.

"Achilles at the genial feast presides,
The parts transfixes, and with skill divides.
Meanwhile Patroclus sweats the fire to raise;
The tent is bright'ned with the rising blaze:
Then, when the languid flames at length subside,
He strows a bed of glowing embers wide,280
Above the coals the smoking fragments turns,
And sprinkles sacred salt from lifted urns."

Ibid., book ix.

At the time of the Exodus, Egypt was the great disseminator of knowledge, the centre of civilisation, and the emporium of

trade, being then at its zenith of prosperity and power;6 and the countries which were conterminous no doubt regarded it with feelings of admiration and emulation, and were only too desirous to adopt its customs, as well as to avail themselves of the learning and culture which were only to be found in the land of obelisks and pyramids. Even the Greek philosophers were fain to acknowledge that Egypt7 was their storehouse of wisdom and æsthetic art; neither Athenian, Spartan, or Corinthian, ever disavowed his presumed Egyptian descent: and if history is to be relied on, the first King of Attica was a citizen of Sais; though this is a disputed point, for not only is the country of Cecrops a topic for controversy, but even his very existence is questioned, and by some altogether denied. This legend, if it is such, however, tends to show that the communication between the two countries (though of the two, Egypt was much more exclusive) was frequent; however, it is still a theme upon which classical commentators continue to exercise their controversial dexterity, some of whom affirm that there is no foundation for the myth. Yet many philosophical authors who flourished in Athens believed implicitly in the Egyptian genealogy of Cecrops; so that there is no reason why it should be stamped as fictitious, especially when it is verified by those who lived closer to that period of time than the incredulous moderns, whose great delight is to hint that many past historical events are incredible, and therefore apocryphal. I think we may certainly conclude that the sage discriminating Athenians were acquainted with their Egyptian descent,8 for they were the last people to believe in uncertainties, save such as were connected with their religion; and what nation is there, I should like to know, which is not similarly imposed upon by its own strange credulity, and the artful designs of schemers in this particular?

Cecrops, no doubt, while he introduced Egyptian arts and sciences into his adopted country, was too wise, and too well conversant with such an important commodity as salt, to forget both its existence and utility, on his arrival in the peninsula. Presuming for one moment that the emigration of Cecrops from Egypt is a fable, it is indicative of the fact that a perpetual intercourse, though of a modified nature, existed between that country and Greece. We know, however, that both Egyptian and Grecian histories, about the period of Cecrops, are involved in much obscurity and uncertainty (particularly as regards dates); and if, therefore, Cecrops and his foundation of a Pelasgic colony in Attica is a mythological tale, we may justly infer that Greece, owing to the greater antiquity of Egypt, imitated many of the social customs which were in vogue in the ancient and luxurious cities of the Nile.

We are also aware that at this early age, with a few brilliant exceptions like Egypt (we possess no reliable records of China, Japan, or Hindostan9) the world was in a state of mental stagnation—chaotic is more descriptive: the thoughtful and mystical Egyptians were really the only recipients and parsimonious (if historical accounts are to be credited) disseminators of knowledge to their neighbours.

Many centuries later, we find a very remarkable instance of this influence of Egypt, which, though of a religious character, bears indirectly on our subject, by exemplifying this intellectual supremacy; the worship of Isis was established even in Imperial Rome herself, and we are told that the goddess was a most popular divinity amongst the wealthy citizens, a temple being erected to her honour in the Campus Martius; while she was designated by her enthusiastic worshippers, Isis Campensus. Now, though an Egyptian goddess was admitted with so much apparent readiness to

occupy such an exalted position in the capital of the empire, when the Romans, with supercilious toleration, allowed the worship of as many gods as the people chose to venerate, yet the fact of building a temple for her exclusive worship, when all the other gods and goddesses were mixed and scattered hither and thither, without the slightest regard to order or attributes, is sufficient proof to substantiate the truth of my argument; and again if we call to mind the jealous pride of the Romans, and their disinclination to conform to the habits and customs of the countries which succumbed to their iron will, the admission of Isis to such elevated and almost unprecedented honours, would tend to show that many customs of Egyptian origin were not only adopted by the haughty Roman, but also by the Jew, Greek, Assyrian, and Persian, with a willingness in proportion to their utility, ornamentation, and agreeableness; and in some instances in deference to the intellectual ascendancy and scientific acquirements of this ancient people.

The Egyptians, owing to the central position of their country, the knowledge they were known to possess, their unrivalled skill in irrigation, the sublimity of their architecture, the abstruse wisdom of their priests, the mysterious erudition of their astrologers, and their wonderful agricultural proficiency and renown, caused their country to be frequently visited (sometimes by stealth, owing to their stringent laws against the admission of foreigners) by Greeks, Phœnicians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans, and indeed by all who professed the study10 of science, learning, and philosophy; so that we may be sure they very naturally carried back to their respective countries many of the domestic customs, as well as the knowledge of their learned entertainers and instructors. The great city of Thebes stood to Ethiopia, as well as to Egypt, in

the same relation as that occupied by Rome to mediæval Christendom: the construction of her temples and palaces, and the vast population of priests and their thousands of attendants, in addition to the presence of the court, must have attracted thither multitudes of merchants, artists, artisans, and indeed travellers from all parts; for it was the centre in those days of civilisation and commerce; and it was easy of access, for an opening in the Arabian Sea afforded communication with the port of Kosseir on the Red Sea; while on the other side, the city was the best starting-point for the caravan routes across the desert to the three chief *oases* (the Greater, the Lesser, and that of Ammon), and to the interior of Africa. Thus Egypt, through Thebes, commanded the trade with India, and with the gold, ivory, and aromatic districts; and the mines of the neighbouring limestone hills added to her enormous wealth, and gave employment to thousands.

There is another point which we must not overlook, and that is, the Egyptians did not remain secluded in their own country, though they were jealous of the entry of strangers. They were a courageous and seafaring people (though much inferior in that respect to the adventurous Phœnicians), as far as the times went; for they engaged in many nautical enterprises after Psammetichus, about B.C. 670, had completely overthrown the ancient system of isolation, showing their dormant marine proclivities, which had hitherto been but secretly indulged in.11 Before these barriers had been broken down, their expeditions, as far as we know, never extended beyond the ancient Pillars of Hercules, which was regarded as an extraordinary exploit in those days (so we are told). One thing we may be practically certain of—wherever they went they carried with them not only their learning, but also their own peculiar customs and habits; and doubtless they

experienced a satisfaction and pride in displaying their superiority not only in matters appertaining to knowledge, but also in civilisation. May we not justly infer that in their peregrinations they promulgated the utility and advantages of such a valuable commodity as salt wherever they went, wherever they settled? And would not the various peoples whom they visited, after having once experienced the palatableness of salt, take to it with an eagerness approaching avidity? The following paragraph, which I have extracted *in extenso* from the work of a highly gifted American author, and which is, I am proud to say, confirmatory of my own observations, delineates in a most forcible and graphic style the wonderful pitch of excellence in the sciences to which the Egyptians had attained, and their remarkable approach to the goal of indefectibility.

"The hieroglyphic writing had passed through all its stages of formation; its principles had become ascertained and settled long before we gain the first glimpse of it; the decimal and duodecimal systems of arithmetic were in use; the arts necessary in hydraulic engineering, massive architecture, and the ascertainment of the boundaries of land, had reached no insignificant degree of perfection. Indeed, there would be but very little exaggeration in affirming that we are practically as near the early Egyptian as was Herodotus himself. Well might the Egyptian priests say to the earliest Greek philosophers: 'You Greeks are mere children, talkative and vain; you know nothing at all of the past.'"[12]

There is another channel which we will now take into consideration: the Philistines, who are supposed to have been descended from the Hycksos, or Shepherd Kings of Egypt, must have carried with them not a few of those customs which were in fashion amongst the sons of the founders of the

gloomy temples of Memphis and Luxor; and on their expulsion by the regenerated Egyptians they were probably much assimilated with them, owing to many years' intercourse, and being located in the same country, though their nationalities were entirely distinct and their habits antagonistic, and notwithstanding the dislike the Egyptians had for, and their abhorrence of all those who were connected with, the grazing and the breeding of cattle; for whenever two nations mix promiscuously, however limited it may be, they are sure to adopt more or less each other's peculiarities, both in language and customs. These Philistines, when they emigrated on their defeat, took with them Egyptian civilisation, and the various tribes surrounding their newly acquired territory were very soon initiated into customs of which, perhaps, they were previously ignorant. There is nothing to prove this, but we may certainly surmise as much, if only by inference.13

Though we possess no historical record, we may, owing to the influence which Egypt doubtless exerted over the civilised parts of Europe, come to the conclusion that through her instrumentality the use of salt was made known to the surrounding nations and tribes; the sons of Jacob and their families were not sufficiently numerous to render them important in the estimation of their neighbours, nor were they powerful enough to extort respect or generate emulation.

We learn from Herodotus, who was born B.C. 484, that the Egyptians eat salted food, but nothing as regards using it in the same way as we do. He says, "They live on fish, raw, but sun-dried, or steeped in brine; they eat also raw quails and ducks, and the smaller birds, salted beforehand."14 The climate of Egypt, being remarkably dry and hot, would soon cause the decomposition of fresh animal food, and the Egyptians doubtless were aware of the fact that a prolonged

immersion in brine or salt would be a complete deterrent; therefore there is no reason to doubt but that it was as common a custom amongst them as it is amongst us at the present day.15 The “Father of History” does not mention that salt was used as a condiment; though we may presume as much.

We might feel inclined at first to ascribe the honour of promulgating the utility of salt to the Hebrews, owing to the fact of one of their nation being the first to mention it, and of our possessing no other record of so early a date. Abraham was very probably cognisant of the virtues of salt, but though he was the founder of the people whose mission and chief delight was indiscriminate massacre, he was not one of them, but a Chaldean, a people famed for their wisdom; besides, he was the progenitor of two nations, viz. the Hebrews and the Ishmaelites, so that if Isaac was acquainted with the properties of salt, his half-brother Ishmael was equally so. Ishmael’s descendants speedily developed into a free, independent nation, while Isaac’s became slaves, and were made to construct costly monuments, build gigantic palaces, and raise majestic temples for their highly-cultured and imperious oppressors.

Which branch was likely to be imitated? Not the labouring, ignorant Hebrew, smarting under the lash of servitude, but rather the wandering Ishmaelite, who roamed at pleasure over the burning solitudes of Arabia; still, we must remember they were like a drop in the bucket when compared with their exclusive neighbours over the Red Sea. We are all aware that to this day the Eastern custom of placing salt before a guest is a token of amity and goodwill, and is significant enough to tell the visitor that he is for the time being in perfect safety; no Arab, even under provocation, would injure his most violent