

Indian Clubs

The Riverside Magazine For Young People
An Illustrated Monthly
Vol. 3, 1869

Hurd and Houghton NY
November, p. 492-495

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It may be well to state, for the benefit of those who do not know, that "Indian Club" is the name of a certain club-shaped implement used in gymnastic exercise. Concerning gymnastics in general, I propose, with your Editor's permission, at some time to say a word to you; but for the present, I must content myself with supposing that you need enlightenment as to this particular kind.

Before I give the authentic history of the Indian Club, I wish to propound a theory, which you may accept or not, as you please, but which seems to me to assign a very ancient and satisfactory origin to the implement. The theory is that a Certain Oriental tale, which I am going to relate, contains an account of its discovery and earliest use. The story runs as follows:

An Oriental king, whose kingdom (according to my theory) must have been in India, by the luxurious life of a palace, had lost appetite for food, and relish for occupation or pleasure. At length, dreadfully weary of doing nothing, yet too weak of will to rise up and find something to do, he called his wise men about him, to prescribe a remedy for his evil condition. At this they were a good deal puzzled, for it did not require much wisdom to see that all the king needed was to stir himself, and shake off the slothfulness that had fastened upon him. So, one after another, evading the real difficulty, they proposed a journey, change of diet, a sleeping potion, or some tonic; but, as the wise men expected, these remedies accomplished nothing, while the king grew daily more listless and languid. At last, an obscure man, who had heard of this strange malady, made bold one day to ask for an audience with the king, professing to bear an important message. The king granted his request, and with an air of great languor, asked his message.

"To cure thee, O King," he said.

The king was astonished and unbelieving. "How canst thou," he said, "accomplish what the learned of my kingdom has failed to do?"

The stranger quietly replied, "I bring thee this club. Within its handle lie hidden potent drugs, which will impart their virtues only when thy hand, grasping the club, and brandishing it thus and thus, hath become heated, and imparted its heat to them. Then will their healing power be aroused, and the cure begin. Rise with tomorrow's sun, eat sparingly a simple food, and when the sun is three hours high, withdraw into the garden. There, for the space of half an hour, swing this club as I have instructed thee; and after that, go to thy bath and thy couch. Two hours after the midday meal, go forth again to thy garden; use the club as in the morning, and afterward bathe and rest. Continue thus till the cure is complete

The king was persuaded to try the remedy, though much doubting of any success. To his surprise and joy the first day gave relish for the simple food allowed him, and at night his sleep was sweet and unbroken. The rising sun called him to a second day of trial, which went like the first, with increase of good result. Thus passed a third day, and many more, till the keen delight of returning health reminded him of the debt of gratitude he owed his unknown benefactor. Summoning him to his presence, his eagerness to reward him knew no bounds, and he would have lavished upon him wealth and honors without stint. But the stranger modestly declined the royal bounty, saying, "Thou owest nothing to me. No drug could have worked so marvelous a change. Thou owest all to the exercise thou has taken, and the temperate living thou hast practiced."

Now, to you, my wise young reader, this wonderful advice is very plain, and you are ready to laugh at the simple old king. But when you have lived a little longer, and have grown a little wiser, you will think differently about the simplicity of the transaction. The world has scarcely changed from that ancient time; it is certainly not much sharper than then. How many do you think to-day will follow the few plain laws of health, and thus get really well, and keep so, rather than go to some quack, swallow his scented, sugared pill of bread, if nothing worse, and open wide their purses in profound gratitude? Therefore do not, I beg you, scorn the lesson of this tale, but take a word of advice about the Indian Club, which, like the wise man of old, I would commend to you. I shall not try to lend the charm of mystery to it, but shall hope to draw you to its faithful use by an "unvarnished tale" of its genuine merits

Leaving now the region of this fabulous story, let us turn to the accounts history gives of the Indian Clubs. In the narratives of missionaries and travelers to India, of the national sports and pastimes, mention is made of the swinging of heavy clubs in curiously graceful and difficult motions, requiring great skill and strength. An officer of the British army, stationed in India, describes these exercises as follows: "The wonderful club exercise is one of the most effectual kinds of athletic training known anywhere in common use throughout India. The clubs are of wood, varying in weight, according to the strength of the person using them, and in length about two feet and a half, and some six or seven inches in diameter at the base.

The exercise is in great repute among the native soldiery, police, and others, whose caste renders them liable to emergencies where great strength and muscle is desirable.”

Soon after the occupation of India by the English, the excellence of the club-exercise was felt to be so great, that it was adopted for army use, as a part of the preliminary drill. The exercises thus introduced were mainly modifications of the so-called “extension movements” of the regular drill, such as raising the arm at full length with club extended, and by a movement of the wrist bending the club back upon the arm, and returning it to perpendicular, or to an opposite horizontal position. From the army it was natural that the Indian Club should find its way into the hands of all lovers of athletic exercise. These, however, were not content to practice a few simple movements of the “extension” drill, but borrowed largely from the original source, the Indian practitioners, and added many of their own suggestions. From England to America the transition was also easy. When, a few years ago, the interest in gymnastic exercise became great enough to encourage the establishment of gymnasiums, with teachers to give systematic instruction in gymnastics, the use of Indian Club was taught, with that of other apparatus. But the club of those days was a very different thing from the club of our day. The march of improvement has not left unchanged the Indian Club. What was then a short, round post, with a handle at one end, has become a thing of elegance and beauty. The proportions of handle and “body” are not left to chance, but are shaped with mathematical precision. The point of greatest weight must be as nicely adjusted as that of a Damascus blade. Nor is all this care and study wasted, as you might think; for there is thus secured a higher degree of skill, and a vastly greater amount of pleasure. Of this consideration you can hardly fail of being sensible; for the real difficulty in persuading the sick, and all who are likely to become so, to take the proper and necessary amount of exercise, lies just there: that exercise is a burden and a bore. The remedy is to make it attractive, and a source of pleasure. This is the avenue through which we can reach the enervated and enfeebled ones of modern times. They will hardly believe a tale of the wonderful virtues of a hidden drug, and so be induced to brave the toil of club swinging: but they may be persuaded by the ease and fascination of the health-giving motion.

As a proper termination to a general article upon the Indian Club, it will not be out of place to state the reasons for its use, and the benefits that may be expected to follow. It is of course plain that the hand, wrist, arm and shoulder are the parts actively used. The muscles of the chest and back are the agents of the principal motions; while the muscles of the waist, in order to hold the body firmly upon the legs, and the muscles of the legs, in order to furnish the steady support, must also bear no unimportant part.

Now, consider for a moment what the most important organs of the body are, and what functions must be performed, and well performed, in a healthy body. The most vital functions must be those of preparing the food for passage into the blood, and of effecting the second change, by which the food supplies new tissues, and fresh energy. These two functions are digestion and respiration. The parts that perform these functions are the stomach, with the intestines and the lungs. This statement is not perfectly accurate, but is enough so for our purpose. What exercise, then, will most benefit the stomach and lungs, and best enable them to perform their functions properly? Will it be the form of exercise that touches the parts nearest, or that touches the parts most remote; that, in short, which uses the arms, or uses the legs? Remember that I am not going to recommend the exclusive use of arms, but only to represent its advantages. You will agree at once that the best exercise for bodily health, must be that of the arms. Take, for instance, the process of digestion; it is very much aided by an active circulation of the blood, and is very much retarded by a sluggish circulation. It is also aided by the movement of the broad muscles that lie over the intestines. What will the use of the legs do for these great objects? It will make the circulation active, and will call into play the broad muscles of the abdomen. But, on the other hand, if these muscles are used in holding the body in its place while carried by the legs in walking or running, they are used much more, when to its own weight is added the weight and motion of a pair of Indian Clubs. As to increasing the activity of the circulation, a form of exercise that will make the blood flow as fast, and make you breathe as hard as the fastest running, while it makes the chest itself grow larger, and so makes the capacity of the lungs greater, must be better than exercise which leaves the chest unchanged. If the blood flows faster than the lungs can provide passage for it, you would better stop running, and in future run more slowly. Of course, in time, by walking and running, the chest would share in the general growth of the body, and the lungs would provide passage for a more rapid circulation; but the club-exercise with the arms reaches this point at once and always. It has all the advantages of leg-exercise, as to helping the great functions of the body, and more, because it does the work better.

The club-exercise will do much to develop the proper outlines of the shoulder, chest, back and waist. The man who uses the clubs diligently will never need to have his coats "built out" on the shoulder, or padded in front or rear. He will have the form of a man, as his Maker intended him to be. The club-exercise will do more, perhaps, than any other, to check the bad habits of body, so easily contracted by students, professional men, business men and all who have to bend much over books and desks. It will cure such habits more quickly and thoroughly than any other exercise. Like the wand of some kind of fairy, the Indian Club transforms all whom it touches. It makes the crooked straight, gives a manly fullness to the narrow chest, gives breadth and massive power to the rounded back, puts firm knotted muscle in place of flabby impotent matter and fills every vein with bounding life.

One word more, and I am done. Most that has been said in favor of the Indian Club will be true of the faithful use of any good, honest exercise. There remains one last advantage, which few other kinds of exercise possess; it is convenience. Many a man has given up active exercise because he cannot spend time enough to go to the gymnasium, or to the river, or to the ball-ground; and often it has been impossible to avoid the sacrifice. A boat needs a roomy sheet of water; a ball-ground, to avail much, needs the enthusiastic cooperation of fifteen or twenty kindred spirits; and a gymnasium cannot be sustained in every town. To be sure one can put up a single bar, or a pair of bars, almost anywhere, although it is not easy to find a suitable place that can be used in all weathers and seasons. But the Indian Club can be used out-of-doors, if the sun shine, within doors, if it rains, in the wood-shed, if the weather be warm; in the study parlor, if the weather be cold. It can be used by the merchant in his counting room, the mechanic at his bench, the lawyer in his office. It can be taken up for a moment's relief from labor, or continued for half an hour's sharp practice. Odd moment, or solid time, may alike be devoted to it, with the certainty of a rich return. The Indian Club stands always ready to furnish health and pleasure for the strong and the weak, for young and old, for man, and woman, and child.