Eleventh Chapter

The rules for conserving health in old age.

It is undoubtedly a good precept to conserve the health with the utmost diligence at all times of life, something that distinguishes happy people from sad. Continuing to apply this precept in old age is even more beneficial. In youth and in maturity, external threats are easily countered, but this is not the case for the elderly, who are like old beech trees that are very easily brought down by the slightest puff of wind. Anyone lucky enough to reach old age is rightly concerned to take more care of their health than in the past. In the same way, the prince who grows old must pay considerably more attention, and must give a different meaning to life so that he can abandon it one day with great serenity. Old age, which is closely linked to mental maturity, deserves to be called the real harvest of life if it is also accompanied by health.

Firstly, a diet suited to sustaining and not extinguishing the spark of life must be instituted. Given that old age is the opposite of childhood, it is necessary to adopt quite special criteria. During childhood, when natural heat and energy are very lively and overwhelming, it is necessary to gradually increase feeding; in old age, when the vital flame languishes and the stomach juices weaken, it is necessary to reduce the food intake. This is actually true for the first years of old age, while at the later stage, as Galen says in Com Aph. 13. 1. Sec., men “suffer the same thing that happens to lanterns that are about to go out: they need a constant topping off of oil, but cannot hold much nor be filled”.

Light foods in small quantities should be eaten. A prince should abandon the habit of eating the wide variety of foods and condi-
ments that always splendidly appear on his table. The foods should be nutritious and easy to digest and excrete; meats that, as mentioned before, are easier to digest, such as mutton or chicken and other fowl, should be advised. Given the variety of temperaments and different periods of aging, a set quantity of food cannot be determined. It may be said that sufficient food has been eaten when there is no stretching or heaviness of the stomach, when sleep comes easily and the state of nutrition is good. Hippocrates wrote that old people are well disposed to fasting and some have thought it good to circulate the theory of the single meal in the early stages of old age. But it is better to eat twice a day than once, precisely so as not to weigh down the stomach at a single sitting. Hippocrates also wrote that old people who eat only once a day age more quickly. In big kitchens there are often numerous cooks who work bathed in sweat to enrich the table, but the various foods are at times cooked and prepared in an unsatisfactory manner; as a result of too much or too little heat. It will be useful for the aged prince to have his own cook who has no other duty than to prepare foods for his lord with complete patience and care, and not only those he prefers and that satisfy his palate, but also the dishes that, according to his experience and knowledge, are good for his health. Martial has this to say on the matter: “It is not enough for the cook to know the art of satisfying the palate: the stomach must be his master”.

Of the many disturbances brought on with old age, the constipated bowel is no small annoyance. This is more common among princes when they begin to age because of their less active life than that of all other men. Nothing eases constipation better than physical activity, encouraging daily, effective evacuations. One understands why this annoying problem is the prerogative of the elderly and not the young, who normally have a regular bowel. The various organs and apparatus undergo a process of regression with advancing age. The membranes themselves become stiffer, turning into cartilage, and there is a consequent reduction in contractions and retractions, which are the basis of evacuation. In order to bring the bowel back to normal, it is necessary to resort to suitable foods that act precisely as medicines and have already been spoken of, because as Hippocrates says: “it is right to seek medicine in foods”; indeed, the chronic use of medicines induces a kind of dependency in the organism and then, with the passing of time, a stubborn
bowel. It is thus necessary to try to keep the bowel less constipated without this having an excessive diarrhoeic effect; between the two extremes, a constipated bowel is preferable to a diarrhoeic one, especially in old age. In his commentaries on Santorio’s *Statīca*, Martin Lister mentions having known a healthy person of 86, who was a good eater and also his close friend, who for many years evacuated only once a week and sometimes even once every fortnight. Drinking sweet, clarified wine made from prime quality mature grapes favours a long and healthy life. In the same way that a light, diluted wine is recommended for young people, the elderly should also drink a simpler wine, especially in winter. It is best that a prince abandon the use of ice, which in summer is always on the table. At times of intense heat it will be enough to resort to wine mixed with cold water, but not too cold. In winter the wine, if not heated at the fire, should at least be left to stand in a warm place. It is not reasonable to think that cold drinks are suited to those whose organism shows signs of exhausted strengths that weaken and cool. Philosophers say that cold is not one of the works of nature, or is so only accidentally, solely to temper the excess heat. Young people who sip boiling drinks of chocolate, coffee and tea also realize that these are more suited to the elderly.

No less important than the diet is daily physical exercise. This is indispensable for the prince of an advanced age more than a younger one, precisely in order to maintain the transpiration of the organism, which is of vital importance. In youth the more intense heat and more flexible tissues allow good respiration, while in the elderly the simultaneous dehydration and dryness of the skin hinder this. Nothing promotes good transpiration more than physical activity, when the face becomes puffier, the veins swell, the skin warms up and, if the activity becomes more intense, sweating becomes profuse. In order for the prince to be well he must indulge in light physical activity, better inside than out if it is cold, protecting himself as much as possible from the north winds, which constrict the cutaneous pores. Easier transpiration can also be obtained by soft massaging with sweet almond oil. The fibres of the skin relax when they are too contracted, which leads to obstruction of the glandular ducts. A very common proverb says: “eat honey and anoint yourself with oil”; by these means, it is said, Democritus ensured himself a long life. If it is true that in advanced age nothing
should be feared more than the dryness and wrinkling of the skin, it may be understood how soft massaging encourages transpiration, which is so necessary that, as soon as it is reduced there is an increase in secretions from the bronchi and other organs. For the same reason it will be wise to wear clothing suitable for protecting the body from the ravages of the air, paying particular attention to the head in cases where the hair has been lost.

The use of wigs is widespread in current times, which is perhaps why so few old men are seen about. There is only one prince of advanced age who does not hide his baldness with the hair of others and who does not also try to assume a youthful appearance by frequent shaving. Wigs in themselves are not to be condemned, because firstly their provide warmth, especially in winter, which is so dangerous for the elderly. They also have a positive psychological effect, hiding from the prince who looks in the mirror the changes that have taken place over the years. In past times, when it was not customary to hide it, baldness was accepted only grudgingly, due to the fear of being mocked. Julius Caesar was so ashamed of his baldness that when it began he did all he could to hide it, brushing his hair from the top of his head over his forehead. He then deemed it a great privilege when the Senate gave him permission to always wear a crown of laurels. It is worth noting that all Suetonius' emperors were bald, including Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Otho and Domitian. The latter was scornfully known as Nero the bald for his savagery, and from this derives Ausonius' line: "His own Rome called him Nero the Bald". He became furious on even hearing the word bald pronounced and anyone who mentioned his baldness in his presence, in jest or in earnest, was treated as if he had committed a crime. Baldness was also seen as something shameful among the Jews, according to the Holy Scriptures. This is why the children sneered at the prophet Elisha calling out "away, away bald man, away away bald man" (fourth book, Kings, second chapter), and he, in fury, cursed them and threatened them with things such as 42 of them being quickly and pitilessly tortured. In all places and at all times baldness has been seen as a disability, so there has been no one who was not concerned at hiding it, as Ovid says: "Ugly is the beast without its horns, ugly is the bare field and the tree without its leaves: ugly also is the man without his hair".

The passing years deprive old men's heads of the protection and
the ornament offered by their hair. The art of imitating nature has assisted old age by providing very elegant wigs that, apart from providing a service, procure respectability. There is no doubt that a false hairstyle has a good aesthetic effect, but it is also very healthy. It is common to see doctors who are very advanced in age and, as is said, with one foot in the grave, no longer distinguishing themselves with bald head and long beard as in the past, but appearing in public well shaven and endowed with hair to visit the sick and to give dissertations in meeting places. Those who suffer from some disturbances, such as headache or inflammation of the ears, which is fairly common, should also not fail to wear a wig. The current fashion for wearing wigs was introduced by the emperor Charles V when he came to Italy to be crowned by the pope Clement VII in Bologna. He was afflicted by a severe headache and thus ordered his fairly good head of hair to be cut. The local worthies, by ridiculous flattery, wanted to imitate him so were shorn of the hair they had so carefully cultivated.

It will be good for the prince of advanced years to arrange that the court adopts the custom of being asleep when the night is half through and not waking late, that is, greeting the sun “when the shadow is smallest”. He should also dine early, without performing activities after that require attention and effort, following the example of Augustus. He did not use to read or write after dinner, precisely in order to be able to give himself up to sleep, as carefree as possible. This is very important for elderly people, provided they still have good digestion, so that the mind is refreshed and the body nourished with sleep and rest. A prince should try to sleep in a room facing south, especially in winter, so as to be exposed to the life-giving rays of the sun. He should endeavour to see to the most pressing tasks during the day and to listen to petitions with the least possible involvement. Indeed, every day receiving any person and dismissing them with indulgent words is no small effort for a prince; it may also be tedious and cannot but be tiring. It is useful and worth remembering that which Sidonius Apollinaris says regarding Theodore, king of the Goths: “listen much and speak little”.

Augustus used to resort to signals when he wanted to order something from his servants so as not to tire himself speaking and, as Suetonius tells us, he communicated with his wife Livia by sending her cards. Pleasures may prove advantageous for the protection
of health, but only those that suit the critical age of the prince, such as attending events of men of letters at public academies, philosophical discussions, theatre presentations, popular games and even choral dances, enjoying the spectacle offered by the youth of both sexes dancing artistically. There are also those who recommend that the elderly meet and converse with young people, as a kind of fine association of spirits plays a reassuring function for the elderly. It has been observed that the elderly who are cheered up by meetings with young people live longer. This has been reported in the case of Pythagoras, Isocrates, Gorgias and the teachers of rhetoric, whose young disciples in their schools acted as listeners, who lived to over a hundred. In the end it is worth advising the prince clearly that, if he really wants to have good health in his old age, he must live a sober life when young, because "Youthful intemperance is a terrible enemy of old age".
Twelfth Chapter

The excessive obesity and corpulence of princes is no less pernicious than it is unseemly.

If what is often said is always true, that everything has very precise limits and that the good and the right cannot be within or beyond these, this is particularly true in the study of health. When health exceeds the limit, if it is possible to say such a thing, that is, if it reaches and surpasses the absolute apex of goodness, a seriously dangerous condition is reached whose severity increases until precipitating disastrously. This kind of observation was often made in past times when the study of gymnastics was in vogue, with studies being made directly on the bodies of athletes. Hippocrates dedicated the third section of his Aphorisms to these. In our time, it is not uncommon to see how these athletes reach excessive corpulence and how they are also the victims of sudden death. The same fate is common to all those who reach exceptional dimensions: having to sustain their own weight and to submit to it, exactly as was written regarding the Roman Empire: "the large fall, the rich burst". Those who are excessively corpulent are at risk of this more than those who have excesses in the two dimensions of width and depth, accompanied by suitable height. This defect is seen in healthy subjects with a sanguine temperament, and rarely in those who are more melancholy and bilious. Rather than being considered a positive conformation of the body, excessive corpulence and obesity are to be equated with rotten fruit, produced by a regime of immoderate living. As mentioned, excessive corpulence is reached by those with a sanguine temperament, considered the most common by doctors, compared to the remaining others who
seem immune. Those with a melancholy and bilious temperament have a greater extension of the veins, while the nutrient juices of those with a sanguine temperament are rich in sugars and lipids and are more easily deposited on the membranes and tissues. This does not happen in those with a bilious and melancholy temperament, in whom the blood is rich in bile and also contains bitter, sour particles that do not easily leave nutrient elements, but dissolve and reduce the fat. A similar phenomenon is caused with black bile in those with a melancholy temperament, whose veins are more extended, as is typical of a slender build. There is a line in Hippocrates, in the third chapter of the sixth book of the *Epidemics*, where he defines slender types as veinous, irascible and melancholy. Galen, too, in his comment to the *Aphorisms* (44, second section, and in 6.4.) associates the extension of the veins with slenderness and, on the contrary, constricted veins with corpulence. Thus, those who have this kind of temperament, whether from birth or acquired, are more predisposed than other individuals to excessive corpulence. I do not mean to say that things like a change of diet, age, or environment can result in a move from thinness to corpulence. It has been ascertained that certain fairly slender young people, abandoning work for indolence and indulging in a more substantial diet, have become obese as they have aged. Something similar can be observed in the case of animals. Initially thin and emaciated, they then fatten, as is the case with cows in cowsheds and birds raised in captivity. Not only have Hippocrates, Avicenna, Galen and others written on the origins of excessive corpulence and obesity, but others have done so more recently and with wider circulation. The latter include Ettmüller, who in his *Dissertations* has comprehensively discussed the formation of obesity and excessive corpulence. So on this subject everything that may wish to be known is known, both in relation to type and causes, and in relation to remedies capable of eliminating excessive corpulence. Princes are more subject to excessive corpulence and obesity than other men, because of their daily intake of highly nutritious foods, their limited physical activity and their life spent between indolence and the delights of the court. This is particularly true in the case of a prince with a sanguine temperament, who has a predominance of phlegm and a strong, robust stomach, and may also have a hereditary predisposition. In some princes’ families such
a diathesis and inclination to obesity is seen handed down in the descendants through seminal principles. The prince must exercise caution in this field, even if he feels well and vigorous, being robust and liking to see himself looking well and rosy cheeked. He ought to be suspicious of all these attributes, because, as Celsus says, it is actually easy for the veins to become replete, thus resulting in obesity, with a gradual increase in the tissues and membranes of fatty and gelatinous material with which the blood is saturated. It is also necessary that the doctor be cautious. In his daily visits to the prince he often does not realize that the bulk is increasing until the point at which the phenomenon becomes very obvious, but when it is not easy to resort to effective remedies. When the predisposition has a family nature and signs of the incipient fattening appear, something that can be established by evaluating the variation in body weight, as shown by Santorio in his *Statica*, the doctor must inform the prince of the predisposition that has deviously come into play and advise him of the problems and dangers that accompany excessive corpulence and how it is difficult to combat once it has been reached. The doctor can illustrate some examples, preferably of princes and noblemen. Indeed, it is very rare and odd to find similar corpulence in country folk or craftsmen; albeit, perhaps, in those who work in a seated position, such as cobblers. Excessive corpulence changes pleasant men into deformed and unpleasant people. The same thing happens to splendid, elegant women. When they become excessively corpulent they lose most of their beauty and are less pleasing to men, especially if the fat prevails over the fleshy parts. Martial has written effectively on this matter in the eleventh book: "O Flacco, I do not like a very thin lover, whose arms could go through my rings, but neither do I want a lover of a thousand pounds. I like flesh, not fat!"

There are, however, peoples that prefer very fat women with large breasts, as noted by Alpinus in his book *Medicine of the Egyptians*. In that country the custom of fattening by means of baths and massage is much in vogue. This is why one sees so many very fat women who are nauseous to Europeans. The dangers that often derive from excessive corpulence and obesity are not slight, including sudden death. This occurs because the natural heat is extinguished by the excessive abundance of humours and the narrowness of the veins that suddenly stops the circulation of the blood, which is
the basis of life. This is the reason that the obese do not live long. Hippocrates writes in the seventh section of his *Aphorisms*: "those who are fat die earlier than those who are thin".

The ancients thought that athletes who reached the highest level of health died a sudden death because they were unable to surpass that level and that they ought rather to have moved away from it, in the other direction. The real reason was that the arteries are unable to circulate the blood, because all the space is full of tissues and fat that, by compressing the origins and the terminus of the vein, prevents the clarification of the blood from taking place. The new nutrient juices from foods then end up occluding the cardiac ventricles, preventing these from contracting and thus causing collapse, followed by sudden death. Very corpulent persons usually have a serious shortness of breath and are unable to make any kind of movement, because the animal spirits are unable to make the muscular fibres contract; their nerves, compressed and buried in abundant fat, are as if dormant, torpid and less ready to fulfil their animal functions, reasoning and prudence, and such persons are barely able to make decisions. If such phenomena are manifest in a prince, how much is the respect of his subjects reduced? "A sharp light makes the soul very wise", said Heraclitus, such is the blood and such are the spirits, which represent the light of the soul. The blood in these subjects is saturated in particles of fat and the spirits that originate from this cannot be luminous and ethereal. It must be added that obese men are generally infertile, as claimed principally by Plutarch in his *Quaest. Con.*, 2. Indeed, due to their bulk, they are not very suited to performing sexual acts and, furthermore, their power of procreation is cooled and reduced. On the contrary, thin people have a greater quantity of salts and thus show more liveliness and fertility. Obese women cannot conceive because, as Hippocrates has written in the fifth section of the *Aphorisms*, their omentum compresses the opening of the uterus. But a normal autopsy shows that the omentum rarely falls below the navel, so the sterility must have a different cause, such as, for example, the great quantity of fat that, adhering to the membranes of the uterus, prevents the male semen from penetrating the ovary to fertilise it. In the same way that obesity makes women sterile, too much fat and obesity makes men infertile. Princes cannot but think to have sons and descendants to whom they can hand down their rule of state;
on the other hand, nothing troubles the subjects more than to see their prince deprived of this opportunity. They are well aware of the problems associated with the transfer of rule to the hands of indirect heirs, especially if foreigners. History is also full of those who are filled with the hope of better fortunes under a new prince.

Obesity makes a prince unpopular and loathed by his subjects and when he shows himself in public do not refrain from laughing at him, though secretly, and insulting him. The people usually focus on bodily vices, no less than those of the spirit, which is why they tend to give nicknames and mock these with biting wit. Such was the case with Caligula, with Germanicus for his skinny legs and with Julius Caesar and Augustus for their baldness. People are inclined to be content with a magnanimous prince, pleasant to look at and of seemly appearance, “the value of a good body is more highly appreciated”; on the contrary, they despise deformities. It is said that Santo, the king of Spain, usually called “fatty” because of his obesity, thought of abdicating as he knew he was unpopular with the people because of this deformity. He went to the king of Navarra to be cured by his doctor and, pleased with the results, returned home and was greeted with great happiness and acclaim. All cases of obesity and excessive corpulence are difficult to treat, but those of princes are even more so. What Celsus wrote regarding dropsy may be also said of this affliction, that it is easier to treat in servants than in free men, “for whom freedom itself is a risk”. If there is some cure for obesity it is unlikely that it will be very effective for princes, whose considerable power is in this case counter productive. This illness requires hunger, thirst, great patience and many other hardships, all of which cannot easily be borne by princes. It is therefore better than the prince does not incur this condition and that this affection, so pernicious and unbecoming, is prevented. The doctor must be solicitous and must intervene early before the illness is manifested. The same remedies that are used in its cure will also be used in its prevention. A suitable diet must be observed, primarily without excessive amounts of unnatural things. The reduction of the normal diet must be accompanied by a matching increase in physical activity, with an increasingly greater proportion of the latter, as this can prevent a further accumulation of fat. The types of physical activity will be those mentioned before, such as riding, walking, hunting, ball games and others of
this type. Brisk, dry massaging with the aim of reducing weight is also indicated. Massage does not have a single effect: Hippocrates writes in the Lib. de Chirurg. Off., that “brisk massage helps reduce weight, moderate massage makes one fat”. Celsus, writing on the same subject in the second book of Medicine, says: “massage, if vigorous, hardens the body, if gentle it softens it, if continued it helps reduce weight, if moderate it makes one fat”. Food must be eaten in much reduced quantities and must not only be light, but also be weight reducing. Fatty and oily foods, in other words nutrient foods that considerably increase the blood mass, must be avoided and replaced rather with sour, salty foods that wear down and dissolve the fat. Some evidence suggests that many subjects who have become fat have been freed of their load by resorting to the sole use of vinegar, which in the end is slimming. An example is offered by Famiano Strada and concerns Chiappino Vitellio. It is possible to see individuals who concoct acids or who take plenty of acid, such as hypochondriacs and sullen people; they are emaciated. It will be useful to reduce sleeping time in favour of wakefulness. This can be assisted by drinking tea, which is both desiccative and seems to induce alertness. The body actually fattens with sleep, especially in winter, but thins with wakefulness, more so in summer. In spring and winter, laxatives may be taken with the aim of freeing the abdomen as much as possible. It will also be useful from time to time to provoke vomiting to remove from the abdomen lymphatic juices that have accumulated there. Regarding the cure of the obese, Hippocrates writes in his De Salubri diaeta that: “Those who are fat and rotund should vomit on an empty stomach, after running or walking, around midday; they should take half a haemin of powdered hyssop in a congius of water, and drink it after having sprinkled it with vinegar and adding salt to make it more palatable. The first glass should be taken in small sips and very slowly, then greater quantities more quickly”.

It is true that bitter, salty, sour things are bound to invert a sweet blood composition, particularly acid things, which by their nature reduce the appetite and prevent the juices from adhering to the tissues and membranes. Experience shows that the meat of chicken and other animals seeped in vinegar has a low nutrient value. Some recommend taking a single meal during the day, but this is criticized by Hippocrates because, he says, it leads more rapidly to old
age. I was personally once able to observe a nobleman who ate very little, once a day, in order to overcome his excessive obesity. In a very short time he was struck by serious aesthenia and fainting and died a few years later. As regards drinking, light wine is to be recommended, while full-bodied and sweet wines are to be avoided; acidic and diuretic wines are more beneficial.