A HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS AGO

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EXCESSIVE INTAKE OF ALCOHOL AMONG THE RICHER CLASSES

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IT IS ESTABLISHED by custom and by the most recent physiological research that alcohol, as such, has its legitimate place in the sustentation both of the healthy and of the diseased organism. However, there is grave danger of excess from the multiplication of alcoholic drinks taken by the richer classes.

In this paper, we put the question of the absolute alcoholic allowance for healthy adults in a somewhat crude and abstract form. We do this to compel the upper and middle classes, and their medical advisers, to look the facts of alcoholic consumption honestly in the face. We show distinctly that the place of the stronger wines is rather among the cordials, to be used under express and careful medical sanction, than among the beverages of common life, since it is plain that a very little carelessness in their use may lead to actual excess.

"An allowance for ladies who are at all 'delicate' of two glasses of port or sherry at lunch, and the same quantity at dinner daily, makes up the alcoholic equivalent of a bottle of brandy every week"

With light wines, namely those that average no more than 10 per cent of alcoholic strength, it may be said in general terms that half a bottle a day of such wine for a sedentary, and a bottle a day for a vigorous and actively employed adult, affords a reasonable and prudent allowance of alcohol; and this quantity of wine, either alone or with water, will be enough to satisfy the needs of moderate persons for a beverage at lunch and dinner, the only two meals at which alcohol should, as a rule, be taken.

Wine glasses vary greatly in size and there has been a tendency to make them larger of late, but we will take the moderate average of 2 ounces for a port glass. Four of these will contain 8 ounces of wine, which, on the supposition that the liquor is of a fair age and quality, will represent 1½ ounces of absolute alcohol, or the alcoholic equivalent of 50 ounces (five large tumblers) of table beer, or 3 ounces of brandy, or two-thirds of a bottle of a generous claret or Rhine wine.

Or to put the comparison in another practical form, we may say that a bottle of twelve glasses of average port is equal, in alcoholic strength to rather less than half a bottle of brandy, or two bottles of good claret or hock, or nearly a gallon of table-beer or of light champagne.

Now, it would be easy to make a sensational point by showing that the by no means unusual allowance for ladies who are at all "delicate" of two glasses of port or sherry at lunch, and the same quantity at dinner daily, makes up the alcoholic equivalent of a bottle of brandy every week, which looks rather shocking on paper.

The daily allowance above mentioned includes an amount of absolute alcohol which our own experimental researches have shown to be about the limit of what can be habitually taken by persons leading a not very active life, without provoking symptoms of chronic malaise indicative of actual alcoholic poisoning.

No one who is at all conversant with the habits of the wine-drinking classes will deny that such a daily allowance of alcohol is distinctly within the average consumption of persons of moderate habits as the ways of society go; and indeed we fear that a good many persons will characterise it as utopian in its standard of temperance.

It is therefore well to remember, that the same quantity of alcohol, represented in beer, makes up between two and three pints; and that a labouring man who exceeded this daily allowance would certainly fall under the ban of conventional moralists as "intemperate". It would probably be a surprise to many worthy philanthropists, if they chanced to read this paper, to find themselves placed so nearly on a level with Hodge the carter, who reprehensibly fuddles himself with "t'other pint." In fact, the greater number of men, and a large number of women, of the middle and upper ranks habitually take a daily allowance of alcohol far larger than that above indicated.

Moderate diners-out and virtuous dancing ladies

Excluding from our reckoning the "fast" men who are perpetually "nipping" at bitters or absinthe, or "setting themselves right" with just another "brandy and soda," and the miserable women who indulge in secret dram-drinking, let us merely consider the case of the moderate diners-out, and the virtuous dancing young ladies.

"The moderate diners-out will certainly take daily ... about 3 ounces of absolute alcohol, or the equivalent of about a gallon of the puddle-beer that labourers drink"

The moderate diners-out will certainly take on the average 8 ounces of strong wines, and 12 to 16 of light wines, daily; or will make up the equivalent of this with beer or with spirits: in fact, he will take about 3 ounces of absolute alcohol, or the equivalent of about a gallon of the puddle-beer that labourers drink. And the young lady will not take less than three-fourths of this quantity, by the time she has finished her last champagne-cup at the ball or rout.

Were it discreet, we could produce accurate notes of the performances of terpsichorean and otherwise athletic young ladies, of irreproachable character, to which the foregoing facts are a trifle.

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