A HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS AGO

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THE USE AND ABUSE OF ALCOHOL BY YOUNG WOMEN

BY FRANCIS E ANSTIE, EDITOR OF THE PRACTITIONER

WE HAVE NOT BEFORE EXPRESSED with distinctness the strength of our feeling on the question of alcohol as an article of diet for young girls between puberty and marriage, but it is now our duty to speak plainly.

The women of our middle and upper classes are becoming infected to an alarming extent, contends the recent *Saturday Review*, with the tendency to alcoholic excess. In not a few instances this goes the length of positive and shameful tippling, either habitual or frequent. A still larger number of ladies drink, unconsciously, enough liquor to produce a degrading effect upon their mental purity and energy, although they afford no open scandal to the world.

The tendency to excess in educated women has been in many cases aggravated by the indiscreet prescription by doctors of stimulants, as a relief from the thousand and one petty miseries of body and mind that are the product of the wear and tear of modern social life.

All tipplers become more or less untruthful, and the favourite lie which they invent as an excuse for their habits, is an apocryphal medical order "to take plenty of support and stimulants." The practice is notorious to physicians who see much of nervous diseases.

While we have openly argued in favour of alcoholic liquors, both as valuable medicine in particular diseases, and as a valuable part of the ordinary diet, we have shown that 1½ ounces of absolute alcohol, or 2 in the case of unusual exercise of body or mind, is about the maximum standard allowance of adult men. If such a quantity be the proper allowance for a man weighing 160 lbs it would surely seem reasonable to say that a woman, weighing say 120 lbs, ought, at the outside, not to exceed the daily quantum of ¾ ounce of absolute alcohol, which would represent about two ordinary glasses (two ounces each) of the usual highly fortified sherry or port which ladies prefer.

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However, no physician who sees much London practice will deny that a great number of ladies take twice and some three or four times this quantity. At many modern ball-suppers champagne flows like water. These same young ladies, who have so freely partaken of champagne overnight, will next day, at lunch, take plenty of bottled beer, or a couple of glasses of sherry. Dinner comes around, and again either champagne, or hock, or port, or sherry is drunk, not less than a couple of glasses being taken. And then the evening very often brings a party of some kind, with the inevitable champagne or sherry.

Many girls who live among rich (especially *nouveau riche*) and gay society are in the habit, during six months out of the twelve, of taking (in the shape of wine, &c.) a daily average of 2, 2½ or 3 ounces of absolute alcohol, a quantity which, if expressed in cheap beer, would be equal to six or seven pints.

We maintain that the family doctor who sees this sort of thing going on, without most strenuous remonstrance, is highly culpable.

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It may be that we think too strongly on this point; but we confess that in our opinion alcohol ought to be almost entirely withheld from young women during that critical period of their lives when the sexual function is developing.

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Very large supplies of simple nourishing food can and ought to be taken, under the stimulus of unlimited fresh air, and free physical exercise; but the appetite and digestion should not be stimulated with alcohol, except in cases where one or other of certain distinctly diseased conditions exist. We suggest the training of the higher faculties of the mind, as an essential prophylactic against that morbid state of the nervous system which places young women in danger of abusing an agent, like alcohol.

We have no desire to forbid absolutely alcohol to young ladies; but we do insist that the habitual allowance ought to be very small, and, above all, that irregular occasions of taking it should not be provided.

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