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ON ALCOHOL AS A MEDICINE.

BY

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ON ALCOHOL AS A MEDICINE.



AM not prepared to maintain that alcohol is entirely valueless as a medicine. But there are some popular mistakes about its use in that way, which I think it may be well to correct.

In the first place, a very great number of people appear to believe that alcohol in some form is good for all the ills that flesh is heir to—except corns. This is a very great mistake. In a very large number of cases where the old women of both sexes recommend wine, or beer, or spirits, these drugs (for I would have you to regard alcohol in any form, simply as a drug) are absolutely useless, and sometimes physically harmful or even dangerous to life. And in a still larger number of cases they might be replaced with unmixed advantage by other more reliable medicines.

The brandy-bottle, which is kept for emergencies and brought into requisition in almost any case of sudden illness, is a very dangerous institution. I have known instances in

which alcoholic stimulants, hastily administered in this way, have added seriously to the danger of the sufferer. I shall be asked, If we are not to administer spirit to a person suddenly taken ill, what shall we do? Indeed, that depends entirely upon what is the matter with him: and if you do not know that, you had better leave amateur doctoring alone. I suppose you would not think of administering strychnia or laudanum to a person, the nature of whose complaint you were doubtful. But, believe me, it would be far less dangerous to entrust the use of either of these powerful remedies to an ignorant person, than to allow him to use his discretion (or indiscretion) in the administration of spirits, provided only that the bottle were marked with the dose of the drugs, so that danger was only to be apprehended from their unsuitability to the case, and not from a mere poisoning by excessive quantity. The rule of safety is a simple one: if you do not know what to do, it is far better to do nothing, than to run the risk of doing harm.

Again, it is a mistake to suppose that strong drink makes strong men; perhaps it would be more to the purpose for my present audience,* if I said, strong drink will not make weak girls strong. What shall we say about the weak, and weary, and short-winded, girls, whose pale faces and white lips show that their blood is too poor in colouring matter to do its duty as an oxygen-bearer? These fair young ghosts rarely manage to wear their white flag of distress long, before some medical adviser, professional or amateur, suggests that they need port wine, or claret, or stout. The preference given to *red* wines

* This was written to be read at a meeting of B.W.T.A.

in these cases has always seemed to me to bear a touch of the comic about it, as if it was based on the notion that the log-wood or other dye with which these problematical liquids are coloured, would go straight into the blood of the patient and restore its natural hue! Permit me to say that the supposed necessity for the administration of any kind of alcoholic liquid in these cases is simply a delusion, and a very mischievous one. When the anæmia is simple, and not dependent upon some grave organic disease underlying it, the anæmia is usually readily removed by appropriate remedies, without the aid of alcohol in any form. And on the other hand, alcoholic stimulants will not remove anæmia without the aid of other medicines; nor is there good evidence that the addition of wine or stout to more essential remedies in any way expedites the cure.

I have no words sufficiently strong to condemn the abominable practice of administering spirits to young women for the relief of neuralgia and other pains which are naturally liable to last long and to recur frequently. Few such cases escape without at some time being exposed to the temptation to seek respite from suffering by this doubtful and dangerous means. It is well for them if their own good sense, or that of their parents, leads them to refuse it.

Not very long ago, a certain Dr. Mortimer Granville gained to himself much cheap (but I doubt not very profitable) notoriety by advocating in certain letters in the *Times* the habitual use of wine. A doctor who publicly proclaims his firm belief in such an attractive aid to health and strength, is sure to find his pockets the heavier by and by. For there are multitudes of people who "like a drop," but do not care

to admit that they take it simply because they like it. They prefer to plead, to their own consciences and others, the all-sufficient "doctor's orders." I have even heard something like this sometimes: "You know, doctor, I am a teetotaller on principle, but I am willing to take *it* if you think I need it." And I have sometimes been uncharitable enough to suspect there was a little shade of disappointment, when I expressed an opinion that health would not suffer by adherence to principle. And on the other hand, when a doctor chances to recommend some form of alcohol to a really red-hot teetotaller, the glow of conscious virtue with which the patient exclaims: "I would rather die than touch the accursed stuff," is such a delightful sensation, that he is not likely to be seriously offended with the doctor who afforded him such a pleasure

Now, the main point in Dr. Mortimer Granville's letters to the *Times* was that, although the habitual use of distilled spirits must be regarded as highly injurious, wine (of course, "in moderation") was, in his view, not only harmless but actually necessary for any one who would make the most of his life. He certainly admitted that statistics appeared to show that teetotallers live the longest. But he seemed to think that a teetotaller's life was not very well worth living.

It is really very strange that wine should be so strongly recommended while spirits are condemned. Every medical man knows well, or should know, that when he prescribes wine, the chances are very strongly that the liquid which the patient will actually swallow under the name of wine will be simply "silent spirit" more or less diluted and coloured and flavoured. Doubtless every gentleman who is

proud of his cellar fondly trusts that it is stocked with the pure juice of the grape. But the cunning art of the manufacturer is more than a match for the connoisseur. I do not say that there is no genuine wine in the market. But wine of moderate price is nearly always spurious; and the most costly is by no means necessarily genuine. When wine is recommended medically, we can never be at all sure what the patient will take; but we may be almost certain that it will not be the pure fermented juice of the grape.

Various compounds are largely advertised alleged to be made of wine in combination with various drugs or materials recommended as possessing nutritive properties. Not long since, a patient asked my advice about the use of one of these compounds. I replied, "Considering the difficulty of procuring genuine wine, we may practically eliminate the possibility of this preparation being made with the fermented juice of the grape. We may therefore state its composition thus—alcohol, diluted, coloured, sweetened, and otherwise flavoured: added to this, certain ingredients named in the published formula of the compound. These last-mentioned ingredients you may take separately, if it seems reasonable to suppose that they would be of any special service to you." My patient needed no arguments to prove that alcohol coloured and flavoured was no suitable remedy for her.

I shall, however, be very greatly misunderstood if it is supposed that I mean to lend support to the notion that genuine wine, if it can be procured, is a safe and desirable beverage, or that it possesses the medicinal value with which it is commonly credited. On the contrary, I believe that

all wine is dangerous because of the alcohol which it contains. But in drawing attention to the spuriousness of most of the wine which is to be had at the present day, I have simply shown the utter absurdity of maintaining that wine is wholesome, while spirits are admitted to be dangerous.

Medicine has been defined to be "the art of putting drugs of which one knows little into a body of which one knows less." And in truth the first half of the sneer is quite justified when wine is the drug which is prescribed. I should be very unwilling to prescribe any other medicine, the composition of which was equally uncertain. If only on the ground of scientific accuracy, I entirely agree with the suggestion of Dr. Richardson, that when alcohol seems really to be the most suitable remedy, it should be prescribed in the form of rectified spirit, in a medicine bottle, diluted, and combined with other substances as may seem desirable. We then know really what we are administering. I may add, however, that mere accuracy in administration is by no means the only, or (in my opinion) the chief advantage of this method of prescribing alcohol.

But I expect some, who have heard my objections to the medicinal use of wine, will be thinking that I have turned against very high authority. Did not St. Paul write to Timothy, "Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities"? Now just as there are some people who plead doctor's orders in excuse for taking their daily glasses of something strong—years after their recovery from the ailment which led them to consult a doctor—so there are some who have a muddle-headed notion that this text condemns the temperance

pledge. Really, it affirms the principle of the pledge, which abjures the use of intoxicants as beverages, while it allows of their use when necessary as medicine. But, "*when necessary,*" that is the question. *We mean, if we are honest with ourselves, that we will not use alcohol in any form, even as a medicine, if any other medicine will do as well.* It appears that Bishop Timothy, like some modern bishops, became a teetotaller on moral grounds. And St. Paul, while not condemning his teetotallism on moral grounds, knowing him to be an invalid, advised him to take some wine as a medicine. But is it quite certain that St. Paul would have given, or Timothy would have accepted, the same advice at the present day? Likely enough, in their time, wine was the only obtainable remedy for Timothy's complaint. But that is not the case in 1894. I have no doubt that St. Luke, who was St. Paul's medical adviser, knew what was to be known of medical science in his day. But if he were to come to life again, and presented himself as a candidate for examination at the Royal College of Physicians, he would infallibly be plucked, if he knew no more now than in the days when he used to feel St. Paul's pulse. And an inspired Apostle, advising an invalid about his health, would recommend an accessible remedy—not medicines which would only be obtainable some centuries after death, the great healer, had cured all his complaints. But I expect that if Bishop Timothy came to life again, and anyone repeated to him the old advice, he would ask (as a modern teetotal bishop did under similar circumstances, with the happiest results), "Will not any other remedy answer the purpose?"

But, granting in any given case that some form of alcohol is a possible remedy, it is quite another question whether it is an advisable one. It often happens in medical practice that certain symptoms observed in a case may suggest the use of some remedy, which on other grounds must be rejected because of some special danger attending its use. The remedy is said to be "contra-indicated."

Alcohol may be a powerful medicine ; but it is certainly a frightfully dangerous one—so much so, that it should never be used or recommended unless it is clear that no other remedy will answer the purpose. It very rarely happens that competent skill, aided by serious attention, is shut up to the necessity of employing any one remedy.

In most cases where alcoholic liquids are used, it is not so much because they are seriously believed to be the best remedy, but simply because they are (unfortunately) the most accessible and the most acceptable. It does not appear reasonable that a medicine so freely prescribed for such a multiplicity of complaints, should be exactly adapted for the needs of each. And in point of fact other remedies, carefully chosen with a view to the individual case in hand, do really replace the panacea alcohol with manifest physical advantage. Alcohol, as commonly used, is a blunderbuss remedy. A man who would hit anything with a rifle must learn to aim, and have a fair light when he shoots. But any clown can let off a blunderbuss in the dark—only he is just as likely to hit his wife as to bring down the burglar.

Unhappily those persons who are in the greatest moral and physical danger from alcohol are just the ones who are most ready to prescribe it for themselves, and the least ready

to accept any substitute. The minister, or doctor, or lawyer, or man of business, who finds the strain of life too heavy for his unaided strength, and looks to some form of alcohol to tide him over his difficulties, is in frightful danger. But it is rarely possible to make him believe that there are rocks ahead, until some time after charitable onlookers have proclaimed him already a hopeless wreck.

A young friend of mine, whose amiable disposition made him deservedly a general favourite, suffered from neuralgia and was recommended to take stout for its relief. There are many remedies for neuralgia far more effectual than stout, not one of which could possibly bring about the miserable ruin which followed from that inconsiderate recommendation. I do not suppose the amateur prescriber gave two minutes' thought to the question whether stout was really a suitable remedy.

But this is a danger to which women are far more open than men. For the most part a man's strongest temptation to drink is company: a woman drinks alone. A man drinks for pleasure: a woman drinks to escape from pain or distress. Hence it happens that inebriety in women is so frequently the result of a habit begun at the recommendation of some medical adviser, more commonly amateur than professional.

Women who drift into inebriety often manage to conceal their secret even from their nearest friends. Not very long ago a woman in a very respectable position came in company with a friend to consult me professionally. My suspicions being aroused, I set myself to play upon her emotions, and found that I could readily bring her from laughter to tears, and then again into very inconveniently wild excitement.

She volunteered the statement (which was probably untrue, for the proverb *in vino veritas* will not hold water) that a former medical attendant had advised her to take "as much port wine as she could afford." And she readily admitted that she had at one time taken as much as a bottle of port wine in the day. Probably that statement erred by being greatly within the truth. I took the friend aside and horrified and astonished her by explaining that port wine, &c., afforded the true explanation of the emotional exhibition which we had just witnessed. It is needless to say that I recommended abstinence. And I requested my patient to desire her husband to call upon me. She doubtless suspected that my object was the due enforcement of this harsh deprivation, and it was with difficulty that I extorted a promise to convey my request. I was not surprised that the promise was not kept. But I wrote to the husband and secured an interview. He was entirely unaware that his wife was in the habit of drinking to excess, although he owned that he had sometimes thought that she spent more in wine than was really needful. I have described this case at length, just because I regard it as a typical instance of the way in which alcohol unguardedly used as a medicine becomes very soon the worst of poisons.

A little girl about twelve years old was admitted into the Children's Hospital. The first night she was there she cried for her usual allowance of brandy! And yet, on her mother's own statement, that child's father "drank himself to death." So little do people learn by experience! The little girl suffered from a kind of paralysis, which was, I believe, due to brandy-drinking. But alcoholic paralysis was not so well

understood at the time this case occurred as it is now. It is probable that the credit of this advance in medical science is due, in great part, to Mr. Gladstone, for he invented the off-licences (commonly called "grocers' licences"), which have been the occasion of the alarming increase of secret drinking among women, which has taken place of late years. And, curiously enough, typical examples of alcoholic paralysis occur more frequently in women than in men. But for Mr. Gladstone's invention, it is possible that there would not have been a sufficient number of cases of alcoholic paralysis to enable the doctors to study that obscure disease, so as to arrive at their present complete knowledge of it. Honour to whom honour is due!

In all earnestness I would urge my readers never to deal with a licensed grocer; and that, not only to secure the members of their households from a possible temptation, but on principle. Grocers know that they have much to lose by refusing to take out a licence. Let them know that something may be gained by it too. Too many will go to one grocer because he is licensed; let us choose another because he is not licensed.

To sum up. I do not attempt to prove that alcohol is valueless as a medicine, but it is certainly much less generally useful than is popularly supposed; and it is often physically harmful where it is commonly thought to be beneficial.

It is, even as a medicine, so terribly dangerous, that it should never be employed when any other remedy will answer the purpose. The cases are excessively rare in which an efficient substitute cannot be found. Even where the disease is known to be surely and speedily mortal, so that all

danger of setting up bad habits in the patient himself is out of the question, it is still undesirable to prescribe ordinary alcoholic liquids. We can never estimate with certainty the danger incurred by other members of the household, when temptation is thus brought near to them. If, in such a case, alcohol is thought to be desirable or necessary for the patient, I would earnestly recommend Dr. Richardson's suggestion—viz., that it should be prescribed in the form of rectified spirit, *in a medicine bottle*. This is more scientific, because it ensures accuracy of dosage, and it is safer every way.

I am the more urgent in calling attention to the danger of alcoholic beverages needlessly used for medical purposes, because I am convinced, by experience, that this is the way in which most leakage takes place from the teetotal forces. To persons habituated to the use of alcoholic stimulants (whether in moderation or otherwise), the "social glass" is commonly the strongest inducement to refuse to adopt the principle of abstinence, and recent converts to abstinence are in the greatest danger of relapsing under the same temptation. But it is quite otherwise with persons who have been brought up as total abstainers, or who have been teetotallers for many years. They are very rarely persuaded to take intoxicants in deference to social customs, which they have been in the habit of ignoring, or condemning with all the eloquence they happen to possess. Nor are they willing to admit that they would give up long-cherished principles for the sake of mere personal gratification. But it very often happens that some form of alcoholic stimulant, first recommended as a remedy, comes to be taken habitually. The person who does this may have been formerly an active

worker in the total abstinence cause, but he soon feels that there is some inconsistency between his practice and his teaching, and, unhappily, it is often easier to give up the teaching than the practice. And in this way many useful advocates are silenced, and every now and then there is a painful sequel to the history of what was once a very hopeful life.

Let it therefore be a well-recognised principle, that alcoholic liquids are not to be used, even as medicine, when any other effectual remedy can be found.



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