

# The Alcoholic Problem in Everyday Life

By Howard A. Kelly, M. D.

*Professor diseases of women of the Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, Md.*

The following is a paper in part that was read by Dr. Kelly before the American Association for the study of Alcohol and Other Drug Narcotics, held in Washington, D. C., March 17, 18 and 19, 1909. It appears in Senate Document No. 48, which bears the title, "Some Scientific Conclusions Concerning the Alcoholic Problem and its Practical Relations to Life." The introductory note to this collection of papers read at this convention says among other things:

"This association was organized in 1870, and is composed exclusively of physicians and scientific persons interested in the exact study of alcohol and the diseases associated with and following from its use.

"This was the first effort of medical men in modern times to take up the alcoholic problem as a strictly scientific study, and for over twenty years was the only society in the world discussing this subject.

"At present there are two similar societies in Europe, and for many years great congresses have been held every two years in different parts of Europe for the general discussion of this problem.

"These papers are presented as the most authoritative contributions and conclusions to this subject, and not only indicate what has been done, but point out great possibilities for further and more exact work.

"It is only from contributions of this character that the public can learn the real facts and their application in the means of prevention and cure."

I take it as my privilege, speaking on this first day of the session, to avoid entering into any of the minuter scientific discussions which will naturally follow in our program, and to address myself somewhat generally to the topic, hoping that I shall be able to voice the mind and give expression to the sentiments of the thoughtful medical profession of the country. I take up therefore the question of alcohol as it has gradually crystallized itself in my mind as a result of unnumbered experiences—experiences which, though rightly counting for the validity of a positive judgment, have not been filed away in any available written records. It is true that in this way, too, prejudice may be fed, but I feel sure the best judgment the world has to bring to bear upon its problems, affecting our deepest and most sacred interests, are constantly formed by this less laborious process.

## Alcohol a Dangerous Drug.

With regard to my own work, I speak (1) as a physician with thirty-two years' experience, dating from the beginning of my medical studies, and (2) as a citizen deeply interested in public affairs.

I began my practice in private life by prescribing alcohol in its various forms as an easily diffusible stimulant in cases of periodic weakness, in low fevers, and exhaustion, in accordance with the common custom of a generation ago. The physiologic argument was a simple and a short one. The patient is weak; she needs strength. What drug have we which will at once give the desired strength? Answer, alcohol.

Alcohol whips up flagging energy and produces an appearance of a temporary improvement; therefore give alcohol as a tonic at intervals until the patient is able to do without it. This was much like the fallacious argument which appeals so often to the relatives of a patient: "When Mary was well and robust, she had a good appetite; now she is sick and she has no appetite. Doctor, please give her a prescription to give her an appetite, and we know she will be well again."

My medical experience has taught me that the effect is temporary, evanescent; that the drug (for such it is) does no real good, and that a dangerous habit is thus easily engendered which may be most difficult to eradicate, a habit which may utterly ruin the patient—body, soul, and spirit, making it far better if she had died at once of her disease while under the doctor's care.

It is clear in the light of experience and of recent research work that alcohol ought to be classed in the list of dangerous drugs along with morphine, cocaine, and chloral, a drug which may so affect the will power as to gain the complete mastery over the patient, and in the end destroy him.

## Lessens Vitality.

English and German physiologists have since that period, twenty-five years ago, demonstrated beyond a question that the continued use of alcohol in any quantity is not only useless, but positively harmful, and on the basis of experience I appeal to my colleagues everywhere to abjure its use.

The fittest uses a doctor can make of alcohol are to preserve dead tissues, cancers and the like, and to dehydrate sections of tissue for the microscope.

Those who drink constantly in so-called "moderation" often develop alarming symptoms, in time associated with diseases of a degenerative character affecting in the lines of least resistance one or other of the great vital organs of the body. In operations these factors demand careful consideration. In the prognosis they are as a rule more important than any other factor; a habit of "moderate" or excessive drinking lowers the vitality and lessens the reparative powers, so that serious postoperative complications are likely to follow and interrupt or even cut short the convalescence in such cases.

One of the most alarming effects is that observed in the arterial walls and in the heart muscle, which are weakened. The impairment of nutritive processes is another pronounced factor. All rational surgery and treatment of disease takes into serious account the question of the use of alcohol by the patient. This is science and not sentiment or theory.

## Kills Paternal Tenderness.

As a citizen, with eyes opened perhaps a little wider because of my medical training, I observe that alcohol has destroyed the happiness and the lives of relatives, friends, and acquaintances; that it has sometimes served to degrade the noble-minded and the godly man below the level of the pig.

I have seen that it robs the home of peace; it puts a barrier between husband and wife and kills all true parental tenderness, throwing the children back into the world for that moral training a father and a mother are alone fitted by nature to give.

As a citizen, I observe with alarm an increasing tendency to its use by women in society, who take cocktails, champagne, and the various wines of the table. I have seen sweet, modest girls, flushed with wine, become loud and boisterous, and, with habitual indulgence, coarse, and at last ruined morally and physically. I have never met a man or a woman who indulged freely who loved the truth or had any clear vision of the value of spiritual things. Its use is perhaps the commonest cause of spiritual blindness.

## Corrupts Legislatures.

As a citizen I further note that it is one of the most dreadful and insidious of all corrupting agents known to men in de-