AN ADDRESS ON THE USE AND ABUSE OF ALCOHOL.

*Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Aberdeen, Banff,
and Kincardine Branch.*

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GENTLEMEN,—Till the announcement of the annual meeting of our Branch was put into my hands, I had hoped that the example of our late esteemed President would have been followed in future, and that the address would have been dispensed with. The impropriety of such an irksome task to the speaker, and weariness to the hearers, would have justified—to say the least of it—such an omission. For what, I may ask, have been the fruits of such harangues in the annual gatherings of our scientific medical and sanitary associations in the past, notwithstanding their having been entrusted to some of the very highest representative men in their several departments? Patiently or impatiently listened to at the time, or skimmed over subsequently in the closet, they have, I think you will own, left a blank in the minds of most who have heard or read them; unless, it may be, in those exceptional cases which were found to contain some striking observation or startling announcement. We may remember having our attention called to some such alleged facts or visionary hypotheses as that our barren earth was indebted to some benevolent asteroid, which, in its chance passage, dropped some germ to serve as the starting-point of vegetable and animal life in our midst; so that this wonderful being—man—is nothing better than some of the machines which he constructs, the only marvel in his case being that, while these demand a mechanist for their construction, his constructs itself!

Holding, then, but a slight estimation of annual addresses, but tied down to the announcement of our excellent Secretaries, I have resolved, with your leave, to take a middle course on this occasion. I do not mean, therefore, to follow the hackneyed course of dealing with such generalities as the advancing state and the healthy condition of our noble profession; its prominent position among the sciences of greatest utility to mankind; or what remains for us to do to secure its future stability. Were I to do so, it would be to speak to you on topics on which you are better informed than I can profess to be. What I thought, then, would be preferable here, would be to venture respectfully to suggest to the Society that, at some future meeting, or series of meetings, we should take up, and do what we can to throw the light of our experience and reflections on the problem of the day—a problem which especially concerns us members of a profession which has much to do, and has always done not a little, towards the securing of the present well-being and the future progress of society.

I refer to the use and abuse of alcohol and its congeners. I say deliberately *use* and *abuse*. For while I contend that alcohol admits of being regarded from both these points of view, I regret to find that this twofold aspect of the subject has been lost sight of on all hands, though chiefly on the part of those who only look at it from its dark side. These I would remind that, as the world is constituted, we are not entitled to count on the possession of any agency whatever without estimating it impartially; without balancing correctly its beneficial and its deleterious actions. We are told, on the highest authority, that some can wrest the Scriptures to their own destruction: the food we eat may be made the ready minister of disease and death; our most valuable drugs may be made to serve for deadly poisons. Are we, on that account, to indulge in indiscriminate condemnation of such ministries? In health and in disease we can have the use of food and medicine without their abuse; and why not, it is argued with some show of reason, may we not avail ourselves, in the same way, of alcohol in some of its least objectionable forms? The discovery of it, they further argue, at every age of the world's history, and by every people where anything above the very lowest arts are known, could scarcely have been permitted by the Benevolent Being who rules the world, had it been so purely pernicious as some contend.

Is it undeniably certain that all the crimes, vices, and weaknesses of humanity are directly or indirectly traceable to strong drink? Have avarice, ambition, pride, sloth, and sensual indulgences had anything

to do with these undesirable results? Is alcohol a poison, and *only* a poison? Has it ever been the means of counteracting nervous depression, prolonging valuable lives, or raising them up almost from the gates of death?

But, not to go so far as this, I would further ask on this side of the question, Is alcohol in moderation so utterly useless and superfluous as we have it confidently stated to be? If we admit, for argument's sake—though this is not very clearly brought out—that alcoholic stimulants do not supply any nutritive elements to the system, is their uselessness thereby irrefragably demonstrated? We have condiments which confessedly do not directly supply any of the elements entering into the tissues of the body, which nevertheless we admit to be useful, if not essential to the preparation and assimilation of our food. Can alcohol in the same way bring out the nutritive quality of that food, or assist its secondary assimilation, as it undoubtedly does bring out the virtues of some of our most important drugs, and facilitate their progress towards the organs on which they exert their special action? How, once more, does alcohol differ, except in degree, from such universally employed and justly esteemed milder stimulants as coffee and tea? Believing that there is something deserving at least of serious consideration in these and other like arguments, I cannot altogether go in with much that is said on the other side, or follow implicitly the lines of attack which the assailants of alcohol adopt in carrying out their battle against strong drink. To take an extreme case, I cannot think, for instance, that such intemperate advocates of temperance can carry the day by the circulation of such an address as the following, which reached me several years ago, and which I have kept by me as a curiosity. In that document, issued by a defunct society in town, I find that the cost and consequences of the liquor traffic for the year 1867 are thus set down.

I. Money spent on intoxicating liquors, £250,000; loss in productive labour, £100,000; idleness, disease, pauperism, crime, and accidents, £50,000; total, £400,000.

II. Adding together such a heterogeneous list of items as jail committals, boys and girls in reformatories, prostitutes, paupers, inmates of the night-shelter and house of refuge, patients in the infirmary and dispensary, pawn and other brokers, we have a total brought out of 40,548 victims of intemperance in Aberdeen!—one-half of our population at the time.

Comment on this is unnecessary. Further, an instance of a strained argument is, I am sorry to perceive, even at this time, employed in the same direction by parties who should know better. All of you, if you have noticed it, must have been shocked at the spurious exegesis which would explain away any such Hebrew and Greek passages in Scripture as mention without condemnation—to say the very least—the use of the weak wines of Asiatic countries: little if at all better than the small beer once universally drank amongst our rural population. No honest interpretation can convert such wine into the juice expressed from the ripe grape.

I must here, however, guard myself against the mistake of going to the opposite extreme. As far, indeed, as abstinence goes, I might virtually claim to be a teetotaler. I think that inebriates who have gone so far as to have lost all self-control, and in their downward career hinder their usefulness in life, make shipwreck of the happiness and the material welfare of their families, disgrace their relatives, and are hastening their own deaths, should be shut up as imbeciles and criminals in reformatories and jails. I would lay it as a duty on the community to attempt the adoption of such measures as promise to elevate the masses, advance education beyond the three R's, close the crowded dens and close cellars where human beings are huddled together like wild beasts in their dens; tempt them to cultivate decency, decorum, and cleanliness; attract them to the green fields; and provide them with moral and religious influences for good; and above all, encourage them to self-culture and self-reliance.

Short of this, we are only skimming over this social gangrene. Diminishing the number of houses licensed for the sale of drink is at best but a poor palliative, if it do not, indeed, add to the evil by multiplying, in the same ratio, the dens where there is no check afforded by the kind of supervision which can be employed in licensed and open taverns. The locking-up the drunk and disorderly for a few hours, or bringing them before a magistrate for fine, or temporary imprisonment where the fine is not forthcoming, has proved utterly useless for restraining the drunkard.

With these few hints loosely thrown together, I take leave of this fertile topic, recommending it for consideration at some of our next reunions. Further, I have only again to thank you for the honour done me in placing me in this chair, which I now leave, to place in it a successor who needs no commendation of mine to ensure him your cordial support in the occupation of his new office.