ALCOHOLISM,
ITS SCIENCE AND MYTHS

By the Director of Yale University’s Laboratory of Applied Physiology,
a centre for studies on alcoholism,

HOWARD W. HAGGARD, M.D.

It may seem a long call between the lady who, in candlelight, places wine glasses on mahogany and lace, and the cocktail shaker and the savage woman who, in the light of the tribal campfire, pours millet beer into gourd bowls. But it is not a long call, not in the survival of deeply seated social practices. There is in reality only one basic difference. The modern hostess puts a glass before her own plate and she expects a cocktail, perhaps a divinity. The savage woman, to the contrary, came in for little or no share, for, in her day, drinking was a male prerogative. The savage woman usually brewed the beverage she served but was not allowed to drink. The modern woman has shed that culinary responsibility but has an emancipation which permits her to join the men, she has gained, as always from emancipation, a heavier responsibility: that of standing on her own feet, literally, on the problem of alcohol, and what is more, doing a little leading for her menfolk. Drinking is one of man’s oldest and strongest customs, but with it there has always been recognition that in spite of the values that have given it survival, it is a custom that needs social control.

To add to the burden of the responsibility, there are few practices which are more surrounded with myth and misinformation than that of drinking. Take so trivial a matter as the history of the beverages themselves. Either wine or beer, or both, were known and used with few exceptions by all primitive peoples before they met the Europeans. The alcoholic sin committed on the savage by the Europeans was not the introduction of alcohol. Rather, it was the introduction of distilled spirits, which contain 90 percent alcohol but which were drunk by the savages in the amounts to which they were accustomed to drink their wine and beer, containing perhaps only a tenth as much alcohol.

Distilled spirits, and also fortified wines such as port and sherry, to which brandy is added to increase the content of alcohol above that of natural fermentation, followed the discovery of fractional distillation by which liquids of different boiling points could be separated from a mixture—a discovery which came into wide use only after the Renaissance. Distillation of wine gave brandy; beer gave whiskey; and fermented molasses, rum. Gin came through the medical channel, as a tincture of juniper berries used for urinating kidneys.

The taste of any beverage is not directly that of alcohol but of a flavoring mixed with the alcohol and water. The taste for any beverage is an acquired one in the sense of the taste for olives, oysters, and Roquefort cheese, but the acquisition is primarily conditioned by the pleasurable sensation, the euphoria, from the alcohol. In the wines and beers of native peoples, fermentation and paternification ran neck and neck. The hop flavor of modern beer, the flavor of charred oak in American whiskies, and of crocuses in Scotch and Irish, are acquired tastes, and equally so is the bouquet of vintage wine. The uncultured and the alcoholic may of necessity indulge extensively in such variants as cognac, sherry, and port, and because of the gratification, occasionally develop a taste for them as dogmatic in its preference as those of the connoisseur of vintage wines.

It is alcohol and the effect of alcohol that alone give the beverages their popularity. Physiologically, the only difference between them—baring the effect of the cereal content of beer in slowing the absorption of alcohol—is the percentage of alcohol they contain. The belief that well-aged whiskey contains less fusel oil than unaged or spirit blends is a myth and so also is the supposed virulent effect of mixing drinks. The only physiological basis is that it takes at least two drinks to make a mixture and two drinks obviously contain more alcohol than one drink. The “belief” is actually a perversion to physiology of what was a social convention in the days when only a bounder broke the dinner ritual of sherry, white wine, red wine, and port by drinking a brandy and soda with the roast. He suffered not physiological but social damage from “mixing” his drinks. Actually, there is no greater mixture of beverages than from the ingredients that go into the modern cocktail.

The serious physical ills of excessive drinking are mainly indirect. Aside from local irritation from straight liquor, with an eventual whiskey tenor voice and chronic gastritis, and the temporary functional disturbances of the hangover, the ill effects are mainly dietary. Alcohol is used in the body as a food; it liberates energy just as does carbohydrate or fat. And alcohol, next to fat, is the richest of foods. An ounce by volume yields 168 calories, hence for a jigger of whiskey, 126 calories. That is a fair figure per drink for most beverages, except beer which, because of its low content of alcohol, has fewer calories per glass. Three cocktails and a highball during an evening, say a total of some 500 calories, are a highly fattening addition to the diet of a lady who refuses the sugar for her coffee—some 40 calories—for the sake of her figure. But here the dietetic effects, however painful, are wholly aesthetic. A pint and a half of hard liquor a day bring some 2,000 calories to the diet. Calories that satisfy hunger and therefore curtail the intake of other food, but calories which are unaccompanied by vitamins, minerals, proteins, and roughage. There may be serious trouble ahead on such a diet.

The gratifying effects of the alcohol are not stimulation but always depression, anesthesia. Alcohol is chemically a first cousin to ether and its general action is precisely the same. Alcohol bears no relation—(Continued on reverse side)
ship to the narcotic drugs which are inherently habit-forming because they gradually make themselves an indispensable part of body chemistry or to the headache relieving pills which act predominantly upon the central part of the brain to quieten emotions at their source. Alcohol depresses the brain in progressive stages. The evident depression from moderate amounts is limited to the higher areas where inhibitions, timidities, and anxieties are exercising their restraining and disturbing influences. With more than moderate amounts, not only is the effect in this area increased, but it also extends deeper into the brain, and coordination of muscular movement is affected. At this stage, and confusion is obliterated in full ananesthesia.

There is no inspiration in alcohol. It is only when natural talents are inhibited by self-consciousness and unconscious fears and anxieties. Few are so joyfully inclined that they are free from monotony and restlessness. Fear, anxiety, monotony, and restlessness breed what may be called tension. Tension represses, indeed, may be, a voluntary pain. Tension is relieved by relaxation, by escape in any set or occupation which the individual finds pleasurable, engage-

ing, and gratifying. The same relief or relaxation can be obtained passively, certainly, and quickly from the anesthetic action of alcohol.

It is because of this passive relaxation, the social euphoria given by moderate amounts of alcohol, that alcohol beverages have played a part in human culture from days far before history and will undoubtedly continue to be so. They have always been a popular part of human culture, of social customs, and of the part played by alcohol, may be more denominalizing than the abuse of alcohol.

Modern studies of the problem of alcohol, conceived in the understanding of the body's alcoholism, have turned attention first on the alcoholism. Understanding of him may lead to his rehabilitation, but far more important for society, it may supply the information for the sound approach to the solution of the problem of excessive drinking. The first step in these studies has been to unravel the medical and social threats in the mind of the alcoholic not as a moral delinquent but as a man who is socially and medically, and for whom society, because of its traditions, is in a measure responsible.

The third category is that of the true alcoholic, and it is upon him the interest is particularly directed, for his drinking is of the sort that cannot be precluded before it has developed and therefore can act as yet he presented. This fact is saddening, for many alcoholics come from among those who are socially elevable, and especially fine and intelligent, a characteristic feature of the fully developed alcoholic is that he can no longer drink much or even of one or two drinks end up in a week-long spree; and second, that he has developed a compulsive habit that drives him to drunkenness in spite of the fact that he knows that his drinking is destroying every bond that he cherishes: home, job, family.

This problem is not new, it appears suddenly, but develops almost imperceptibly over the course of years. It is also for the first time in the history of society that we are dealing with a problem of the developed alcoholic, as for the first time in the history of society we are dealing with people who have never drunk before and have never known the difference between being drunk and being sober. This is an entirely new problem, and it is the one that we are just beginning to understand.