

THE CHANCES OF ATTAINING OLD AGE.

The Duration of Life Discussed.

The last quarterly report of the British Registrar-General furnished some returns which have given rise to considerable comment and some discussion in the leading insurance journals. One prominent feature of the report is engaging the attention of life insurance men—the death rate. For the closing quarter of 1898, the figures given are only 17.6 per 1,000. Unwilling to accept this reduction in the death rate as conclusive evidence that the chances of life are improving, some of the actuaries and insurance journalists are asking what change, if any, has occurred in the probabilities of life at various ages. From much correspondence on the subject, we select the following observations in the "Insurance Spectator:"—

"At the very root of life insurance necessarily lies the great question of its probabilities at all ages whereat insurance of any kind can be safely effected. A correct knowledge and a really clear and comprehensive understanding of these points is, of course, an absolute essential to the life insurance man. In this connection, not a little interest and importance attaches, we think, to a point raised the other day in a daily contemporary on the question, what is the change, if any, that has occurred in the ordinary probabilities of life at various ages?

"A correspondent of the journal in question remarking on the returns of the Registrar-General in his last quarterly report reminds us that the birth rate in England and in the principality has sunk to the lowest on record for the closing quarter of last year. At the same time the death rate was stated to have been only 17.6 per 1,000. It has not unnaturally been observed that these figures indicate that the chances of life are improving. But the real question must be, do the chances of life improve at all ages? It must not be forgotten that everywhere we are faced by the facts that certain very serious diseases are on the increase among all classes of the community. Thus it is asserted, and by the best authorities, too, that such fell plagues as heart disease, cancer and other fatal ailments actually do increase, while no one doubts that nervous disorders, to which many of the current suicides are most certainly due, have of recent years augmented in a very alarming ratio to the population. But it must be borne well in mind that these and other ailments of the vital organs do not usually attack the majority of people who succumb to them until they attain the middle period of life. Under these circumstances, the writer in question asks whether the duration of life has really extended after middle age; in other words, do we have more or less recruits to the old age veterans of the battle of life than of yore? We are, of course, quite aware that lately there has been very much made of certain notable examples of longevity that have been commented upon and set forth as rather proving the rule than the exception to the ordinary course of contemporary existence among us.

"That the chances of life have greatly improved

during the earlier stages thereof is incontestible, but we fear that, if the true statistics were sifted in respect to the entire community, it would be found that the increasing wear and tear of competitive life tells very heavily against the majority engaged in the foremost work of the day, and that with them at all events the outlook is not quite so rosy as we could desire. Medical science and surgery, as we all know, has achieved extraordinary progress, but then the number of diseases appears to have increased, as it were, with the agencies brought into being for their removal, and it needs but a casual glance around to perceive that, as the struggle for thousands in our overcrowded cities becomes harder and more intense, the chances of attaining old age becomes less for very many.

"Everywhere life is carried on under high pressure conditions, and for every advantage that the contemporary individual undoubtedly possesses over his ancestor in regard to hygiene, and many other things, he has to encounter other evils which were altogether unknown before the days of the telegraph and the telephone. Let us take but a single typical illustration from ordinary commercial life. Formerly, when a man had built up a business, great or small, it could, to a considerable extent, be left to its own momentum. Time was when a capitalist, great or small, thinking of starting in any business, would inquire whether in such and such a locality there was already an undertaking of the same kind as that in which he contemplated engaging. If he found there was, then he sought out some *new* field where he could have it to himself.

"In our days it is very generally the exact reverse, and the new enterprise is located in a certain place because there is already one or more of the same description there already. It must be obvious that this altered method of doing business necessarily adds very much to the toil and cares of all forms of mercantile enterprise, and we know that in point of fact it does. Then, again, it is useless to deny that of old the prevailing modes of life were conducted on much simpler lines, and there was infinitely less strain on the individual all round. Taking all these considerations into full account, we should conclude that after fifty the chances of life are now in many localities tending to steadily diminish. This is, therefore, a subject which may very well engage the attention of those who have leisure and inclination to analyse the facts and figures available for the purpose."

As to the steady diminution in the chances of the active business man of the period reaching a ripe old age there is much to be said. The "Spectator's" type of ordinary commercial life is good enough in its way. But, when referring to the "simpler lines" and the "modes of life" of our grandfathers, the writer in the English insurance journal seems to forget that, in the vigorous pursuit of business, in the diligent doing of daily work, and in giving full, fair play to the intellect, the man of to-day takes pleasure, and in ceaseless occupation has found the very means of prolonging existence.