

The Dry Rot of Society

Showing How a World Made Safe for Democracy Must Now Be Made Not Less Safe for Morality

By MARIAN COX

SO Victory has ushered in another war over the fresh sod of the late war, the war of our best society against the drunkard.

Society has had its fill of excitement, bloodletting and the ecstasy of conquest, and now we are prepared for the reaction into a dry, sober world of the prohibitory virtues.

If thought, as the inspiration of man, did arise from the indigestion of an overeating ape—as one evolutionist states—conscience developed as an afterthought along the same lines of our somatic experience. Abstinence follows excess; the Puritan follows the debauchee. So glutted modernity is summoned to a state of stark self-consciousness amidst the wreckage of its exploded world, the sore self-consciousness full of index fingers which "ardent spirits," so called in Colonial days, seemed especially designed to enable man to escape.

A Roman moralist wrote in the ancient *De Tranquillitate* that "The inventor of wine is called *Liber* because he frees the soul from care, releases it from slavery, quickens it, and makes it bolder for all undertakings." And to relieve the social tension in Rome that was caused by the Imperial City's excess of laws, Seneca recommended an occasional drunkenness for the lawmakers as well as for the citizens. We Americans are the inheritors of the Roman genius for law and order, and the ruling majority possess the temperament of Caesar's wife. But the Roman moralists provided the Saturnalia as a kind of official spree for the overburdened caryatides of Home and State, which may account for the lasting soundness of the Roman virtues.

In fact, all the ancient sages and rulers have recognized and provided for the orgiastic instinct in human nature in some form or other. Savage, primitive and mediaeval authorities have all builded their worlds on order—with man's right to an occasional disorder. The classic orgies of pagan forests, the Greek Orgeia and Roman Saturnalia and Christian Agapae, and the Fasching of the Middle Ages were all cunningly devised to purify society by means of an occasional spell of license. The autocrats of the past fancied that it made better subjects, workers, slaves, matrons, or Christians, to allow a complete change of conduct now and then, and they adroitly steadied their masses for their daily bondage with a play in the forbidden fields, at appointed seasons.

A holy day for the unholiness of the people was the wise policy pursued by the ancient ecclesiastics and sovereigns, who regulated life on the belief that restraint strengthens but relaxation sweetens the nature of human beings. Thus to every one was given his Day. The slaves were

allowed to act as masters, the priests were allowed to blaspheme their Most High, the poor were allowed the luxuries of the rich, the women were allowed their full fling of hysterics—everybody was allowed—even *made*—to express in the open all his secret dreams of power or delight, in dance, song, mirth, feast, and drink—because of the ancient idea of the orgy's function to purify and preserve the stability of society. Well, we moderns have lost the *rationale* and right to the orgy since the Reformation; but we have evolved the cerebral orgies, distinctive of modern life, some of which Freud and his school have popularized as the ingrowing dream.

Society is about to enter a new phase of social experimentation with human nature in a nation of teetotalers, beneath the Stars and Stripes. It is a logical outcome of the late war in its influence upon the American psychology. Our war with Germany stopped in a shock of peace just when we had tasted blood and got up our steam for the knock-out blow that never came. We are an adaptive, utilitarian people and were bound to find some use for all this sudden threatened waste on our hands—of the war morality, the Intelligence Bureau, the Espionage act, &c.—that covers the face of our democracy. It

isian Czar when he pronounced his ukase against vodka, and diverted the viciousness of the mujik into another channel, the intemperate desire to rule himself. The land of the Pilgrim Fathers is uniquely fitted for the attack upon the drunkard, and the will of the people has been ratified for a world made safe for our morality. The mid-Victorian morals could afford to tolerate the drunkard and to camouflage him as a gentleman, "as drunk as a lord," when found beneath the dinner table after the port was served; but our democratic virtues can scarcely afford to support the drunkard any longer, and society must be protected from the one who is a traitor to our civilization in so many ways.

The social machinery, as well as the morale, has been perfected by the war for the detection and destruction of the drunkard. There are the internment camps all ready for him, and the jails fast emptying of their conscientious objectors, pacifists, and dangerous aliens. The strongest point in favor of the Federal law of prohibition is that it will give an opportunity to the great war bureaucracy to continue and increase its power and work. Therefore prohibition may be a providential means of solving the labor problem which looms upon the horizon as one of the embarrassing results of the



A Man Hunt for the Drunkard.



The Bovine Spree Is Called an "Apple Drunk."

was a magnificent inspiration of the lawmakers to substitute anti-saloonism for anti-Germanism and to transform the man hunt for the spy and the unnaturalized citizen into a man hunt for the drunkard as the most dangerous alien in the new rule of peace.

The drunkard must go. It is an edict given in the grand manner of the Rus-

premature peace. Prohibition will require a vast army of revenue officers, police and spies to enforce the law, thus providing employment for far more millions of people than are to be disemployed by the nation-wide edict.

In some Southern States where prohibition is already being enforced it is said that there is no longer any labor problem. It has caused a migration of the negroes to the North, and for the superior race, down there, it has supplied many new industries and sinecure desks. West Virginia is overrun with deputies endowed with an extraordinary power of search and seizure; and Tennessee has devised extensive offices of "State rangers" and "liquor deputies" whose sole business is that of watchful waiting for an infringement of the law. Without a doubt, prohibition is the essential step at this critical stage of our progress when society does not know whether it is crawling forward or backward, but is unpleasantly conscious of a redness, somewhere, which the optimists call a blush and the pessimists call Bolshevism.

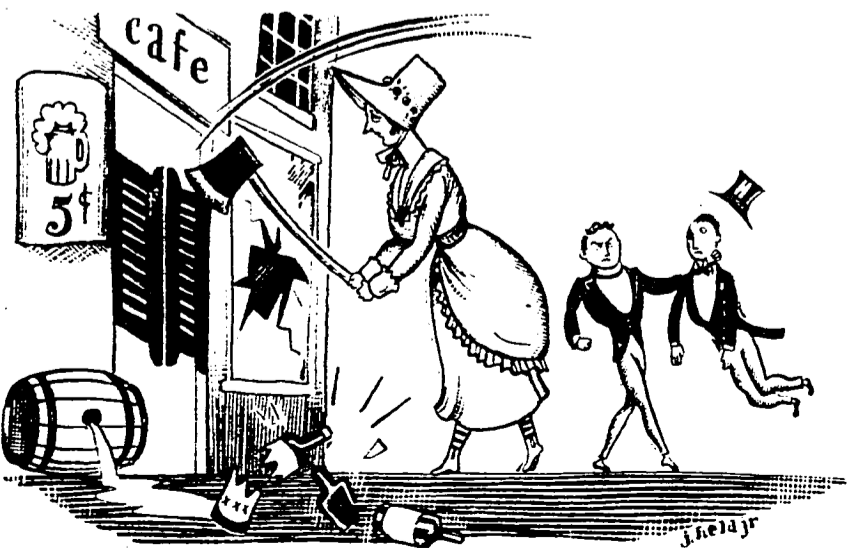
So the teetotaler becomes the new model for the reconstructionists of the dissipated old world. The teetotaler embodies the popular virtue of renunciation. Everybody glorifies a renouncer, instinct-

ively perceiving in the renouncement of the other fellow—whether of wine, women, his money or his life—a sweet making of room, a delicate compliment to the neighbor or the coming generation, a beau geste of surrender of a right for a duty—the quality that is preservative of the species in peace times and in war makes conscription unnecessary. Naturally, we, as traditional Puritans, love the renouncer of life, and in this divine moment of our thanksgiving for the accomplishment of our boys over there we will express it by a national deification of the teetotaler.

The teetotaler has never been accused of a bloodless pacifism even by the most abject or riotous of toppers. The teetotaler is always ready for a fight, and has the angels backing him with all their flashing swords. Carrie Nation hacked her way through the saloons with her little axe as one of the great builders of the nation, some day to be immortalized in the American Hall of Fame, which refused a place to Edgar Allan Poe because he was a drunkard. And Billy Sunday, the Saint Vitus of Morality, what a man's muscle he has for the D. T.'s of the world, and a rhetoric that bombards the masses into his brand of religion.

In the new social order, to discover, to expose, and to catch the drunkard will soon become our patriotic duty as well as the fashionable hobby of both the sheep and the goats. "Moonshiner" will be the cliché of conversation, exploited like "pro-German" by the moral sensationalists, eager for suspects. The recluse or the aristocrat who indulges in too much privacy of life will be liable to the ugly suspicion and rumors of a secret still; and only the frankest exposure of one's home life and daily habits will be able to satisfy the new sleuths of democratized domesticity. Conceivably, one might be made to display a medical voucher of a household's abstinence from alcohol in the doorway of the home, replacing the Food Administration's recent vouchers of a citizen's abstinence in another regard.

Openness in the home life and steadiness on the streets will become the standard of conduct, propriety, and Americanization. The man who zigzags in his walk may receive the summary justice of the mob that was so well practiced on the blond beasts of our recent



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furor; and the gentleman of the salon who gives himself away with a hiccough or an indecent cheer will be snubbed by everybody who is anybody with the expert snubs so recently visited upon the fool or knave who mouthed of peace at the dinner table before the armistice was declared.

The drunkard is characterized by an exaggerated sociability which may have something to do with the imperative attraction of the bottle to him. He finds society indispensable to him in his quest of effect and is as ready as a homeless dog to make friends with every stranger. Almost invariably he is a good mixer, a boon companion, and a clubbable fellow, whose entire lack of snobbishness should commend him to the mercy of our democracy, at least. The drunkard never sits in judgment upon his fellow-men. His fault is an abject one, and he loves to condone "human nature" for its many failings, and seems free from all society's fears of the faux pas, although a rank victim to the fear of loneliness, which drives him to seek the gregarious warmth of people or of booze. The drunkard is an idealist who wants things different from what they are, and he is striving in his way, curiously enough, to reform society and create a better world of men and women, living a hyperbolic, englamoured life that carries out to the fullest extent all the socially damned instincts of the human race. Thus, like the teetotaller, the drunkard is an idealist and an extremist, though the resemblance stops there; for the drunkard drinks out of a profound humility of being, and the teetotaller speaks out of the vainglory of the faultily faultless.

The drunkard is also like the German

in being the victim of a false absolute that has perverted his emotion of the ideal. To the German the false absolute was Germany, and he sought her glory beyond the frontiers of his national experience. But the false absolute of the drunkard is life, and he seeks its glory beyond the frontiers of his personal experience in a divine debauch. He drinks to escape his own confines. He drinks with a mystic hankering that makes his toast like an unutterable prayer that he may feel one with the gods for one glorious moment of their sun-soaked eternity. He drinks to escape himself and the sober, stone-eyed world which has hitched all his little stars to a treadmill, a petticoat, or a plow. The drunkard could give to society profound reasons and excuses for drinking, if only he were gifted with the language of other-worldness. It is the tragedy of the drunkard that he is too full for utterance, even when sober.

Do the gods drink? The Greeks fancied so, and peopled Olympus with a comely crew of high-livers, the memory of whose ambrosial feasts haunts our prohibited spirits for all time. The drunkard is assailed with this memory in the flesh, a kind of misplaced nostalgia for man's lost provinces of bliss. The most humble of mortals, he seeks to climb out of his dull clod on a borrowed wing or a throb of the universe, whose heart is full of tears and flame.

It is true the drunkard sins against the social laws and against the Holy Ghost in himself, but it can scarcely be said against him that he sins also against natural law. Alas! Nature abets him in his shameful vice, and scientists say that alcohol is the mechanical energy of the sun which literally soaks matter (makes an old souse of mother earth!)

and creates a little moonshiner out of nearly everything that grows. The drunkard can extract his fatal beverage from white blossoms or black peat; and the fruits of the orchard, the berries, the woods, the reeling fields of grain, all offer their wide-open bar of Bacchus to him in sunny defiance of every law that society can enact. Yes, nature must shoulder some of the guilt of the drunkard, for she is a universal distillery forever brewing her inexorable essence of delight and hurt for man and beast and has protected her immoral traffic by perpetuating in all that lives the appetite for the intoxications of life.

Man has been defined as the only animal who makes love at all seasons and who drinks when he is not thirsty. The remark of some wily Puritan who would glorify the inferior animal in his desire to degrade the human. For all through the animal creation we can discover the same old intoxication impulse, subject only to the control or cultivation of the creature's will. Naturalists relate that insects are frequently intoxicated by indulgence in overripe fruit juices; elephants and dogs, and even that paragon of domesticity, the barnyard hen, have been found to possess a natural alcoholic taste capable of an abnormal development. And the gentle cow—the Madonna of mammals!—succumbs to temptation in the windfall season, when the ground is spread for her feast of the fatal apple. The bovine spree is called "an apple drunk" by farmers, and the agricultural colleges give instructions on how to treat and cure the fallen creature at this time in order to keep her milk pure rather than her morals.

Can virtue intoxicate?

If so, the patriautocrats of prohibition and democracy should be made to realize the fact and to incorporate it in a law for the regulation and control of the

virtues against the dangers and follies of excess.

Wine, poetry, and virtue! Surely a little of each is good, though a great deal may carry the imbibor to the padded walls or moral crusades of society. Virtue as a savor to the spirit acts as a preservative of tone and color, like alcohol, but an excess of virtue corrupts and destroys like the vice of dipsomania. Even self-sacrifice, the supreme virtue in our morality of war or peace today, carried to excess becomes a statutory offense, suicide.

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