

Must We De-Alcoholize Literature?

How Shakespeare, Rare Ben Jonson, Robert Burns, and Omar Khayyam Will Sound if They Are Revised to Fit Those Sober Days Soon to Come

THE triumphant march of prohibition, accompanied by the usual cries of "Vae victis" on the part of its more militant friends, flushed with a victory more heady than the wine of its foes, raises speculation in the mind of the observer. As through a mist, self-interested and apprehensive Philistines already think they discern an arid future when not only shall the glass and the bottle be struck from the hand of the unregenerate, but when he must fill his pipe with some alfalfa combustile containing not over 1½ per cent. tobacco. Nor may he escape, for through the mist of that dire burning, more potent than the fumes beneath the tripod of the oracle, he beholds in his mind's eye the Puritan officer of the law—or more likely the officer of a Puritan law—already invading his kitchen, his cellar, and the brown jar on his study desk. Nor does he find too much hope of relief on foreign travel, in view of the proved prowess of the reformer and his declared intention to bring the world under his sway.

Among various gloomy forebodings of the sort one possible—nay, probable—extension of the restraints of compulsory morality has not apparently been considered. One of the first means of enforcing national prohibition, it is said, will be the suppression of all advertising of alcoholic drinks. What constitutes advertising? And where have the pleasures of the "crushed poison of the misused grape" been most effectively set forth? Clearly in those passages of literature termed convivial, from the letter of Philostratus, of which Ben Jonson made such exquisite use, down to the writers who still find unregenerate amusement in contemplating the convivial signer. It is true that the immense quantity of such literature raises a hope that the size of the task will prove discouraging, but on this one may not reckon, knowing the tremendous energy of the reformer type of mind.

Yet the military censor himself might quail at the task of excising convivially objectionable passages from all works that continue to be reprinted. The losses would be appalling; Chaucer would be a walking casualty, Shakespeare a stretcher case, and the forces of Dickens would be decimated. Think of Mr. Pickwick bereft of the mellowing influence of punch! He would undergo a complete character transformation. Remembering the Cheeryble Brothers, old Fezziwig, Mr. Micawber, Bob Cratchet at his humble Christmas dinner, and a score of others, one asks: "Can a Dickens character realize good cheer without the artificial aid of liquid inspiration?" The sheer capacity exhibited by Dickens's world for exhilarating beverages suggests the principle of unlimited supply responding to the call of unceasing demand. Other times, other manners, indeed! Expurgate Dickens in terms of intoxicants and about the only unmangled characters will be Little Nell and Paul Dombey.

Perhaps the censor of morals, instead of eliminating, would allow a revision of passages, after the fashion of Oliver Wendell Holmes's "Ode for a Social Meeting, with Slight Alterations by a Teetotaler." It is a sad thought, like the threat of the Germans to rebuild Rheims Cathedral, but it might be attempted—say, after this fashion:

Drink to me only with thine eyes,
Though they, I am afraid,
Contain a potent brew more strong
Than may today be made.

The thirst that from the soul doth rise
Is the only thirst allowed—

But no, it is too painful. Let us try an equally famous but less spiritual passage, that best of old drinking songs,

by the Bishop of Bath and Wells. Doubtless he no longer has sympathizers among the clergy. He was an Englishman; so in revising his song, obviously one must fall back on tea:

I cannot eat but little meat,
My stomach is not good,
But one may see that I drink tea,
As a son of Johnson should.

Though I go bare, take ye no care,
For cold shall ne'er let me,
I stuff my skin so full within
With twenty-seven cups of tea.

Back and side go bare, go bare,
Both foot and hand be seen,
So long as tea shall agree with me,
Whether it be black or green.

This goes better. But the future even of tea is uncertain.

One shudders to think of Shakespeare de-alcoholized, with Fat Jack Falstaff among the casualties, hacked far more effectually than by the fourteen men in buckram. Stephano and Trinculo must go—they are irredeemable; but Iago's song might be saved, for he does not name his tippie. The purpose, however,



Beer—A Beverage Once Commonly Used Among the Northern Nations.

is obvious, and the law may judge the intent. It might be well to be specific:

And let me the canakin clink, clink,
And let me the canakin clink!
A life's but a span,
But 'twould lengthen, my man,
If we tipped on buttermilk drink.

It must be admitted that this valetudinarian note in Iago is somewhat out of character.

Another dramatist whose works will suffer under the threatened deprivation, much as their author himself would have done, is Goldsmith. Even as the moral lexicographer corked up the bottle of champagne on which the irresponsible Oliver had spent his last (borrowed) guinea, so will some of Goldsmith's cheeriest passages cease to effervesce. To them, too, will the cork be applied. We must lack old Hardcastle as an innkeeper and Miss Hardcastle as a barmaid. What will become of the "Three

Jolly Pigeons"? Will the effort of the revisionist save it?

When moralist fellows come down
A-preaching their solemn decerum,
We are certain that under their crown
They are planning a *lex Romanorum*.
For to cure us the natural way
Is counted too tame a religion—
If the pigeon persists in his play,
Why pluck out the quills of the pigeon.

Here the touch of Latin may serve to introduce the Third Fellow's scorn of "anything that's low" and the Fourth Fellow's comment that "the genteel thing is the genteel thing."

There are some considerations induced by convivial literature that almost lead one to mistrust the universal success of this prohibitory Alexander. The Scotch, for instance, may renounce their national drink, but they will never give up Robert Burns, and what were Burns without "Tam o' Shanter" and what "Tam o' Shanter" expurgated? Shall they lose "John Barleycorn," or that most daring of audacities, "The Jolly Beggars"? Burns without Scotch drink? Have you ever tried one of the near-beer substitutes? How may one hope to save "Willie brewed a peck o' maut"? To a Scotchman, doubtless the nearest approach to the inward illumination of hot Scotch is the uplift of metaphysical or theological controversy; yet the substitute is not lyrically satisfactory:

Willie read the parson's book,
An' poundit hard upo' the table,
Rob an' Allan speak at once,
Sae fast an' loud as they were able.
We are na fou, we are na fou,
Tho' losh! I ken we better be,
Our lugs are clean affrontit sair
Wi' sic' unsound theologic.

And how shall we read Herrick? His epigrams we may sacrifice, with good will and gratitude, to whatever rids us of them: But how preserve the record of the quaint customs of old Devonshire. "The Harvest Home," "The Wassail," the easy pleasures of "The Country Life," or the joys of the Mermaid Tavern? One might indeed preserve the "Farewell to Sack," for some to read with responsive sighs, did it not contain the dangerous sentiment:

'Tis not Apollo can, or those three three
Catalan sisters, sing, if wanting thee.

This is not the last or best of Herrick's songs: hence either this dictum is false, or, more likely, his "Farewell" was oft repeated, like the farewell appearance of a reluctant retiring stage favorite. A future generation will approach Herrick with difficulty. There is sense in his charge:

In sober mornings, doe not thou rehearse
The holy incantation of a verse,
But when that men have both well
drunke and fed,
Let my enchantments then be sung or
read.

Shall we continue,
When that the corks pop in the ginger
beer
Let right Cato these my verses hear?

Oh, what a fall was there, my countrymen!

To some who formed their taste in poetry in that long-buried past before the great war, and even before the emergence of the cult of the unashamed realists, one of the most regretted of prospective losses will seem that of Fitzgerald's rendering of Omar Khayyam.



"Think of Mr. Pickwick bereft of the mellowing influence of punch!"

The middle-aged generation recalls well when these quatrains were on everybody's lips. How shall they survive in an arid land? For death by misapprehension is final. It will be no effective plea that in Omar wine is a symbol of a philosophy. Most reformers and all law courts are literal minded. To be sure, a host of parodists have proved how easy it is to parody the Rubaiyat, but alas for the spirit that has departed with the phrase! It is impossible to cry fervently, "Gather ye rosebuds while you may," with an eye on a blue law. Suppose the pilgrim of the primrose way exclaims:

A book of verses with the leaves uncut,
A loaf of bread, a jug of grape juice, but
Be sure no amber bubbles chase the
cork
No sparkling glass shall lay me in the
rut

Though this I promised oft-time before,
There was no Federal statute when I
swore—

Of moral resolutions now what need,
Morals are easy—and an awful bore

And yet my claret mild was innocence
Till by the law I saw it hurried hence
To saddle me with artificial crime,
That is a retroactive insolence.

The hands are the hands—or at least the feet—of Omar, but the voice is the voice of a much more chastened person.

The literary effects of the disappearance of alcohol from the ways and words of men will not be without some happy results. On the one hand, the harrowing temperance tale will disappear; on the other, the elaborately comic "drunk" will pass from the cheap play where he wearies and offends the judicious. But these advantages will be offset by a last sad effect. Footnotes and annotated school editions will be more abundant, in which grave information in chemistry and personal hygiene will stalk unabashed. We may yet read in such a mine of curious research some note like this: "Beer—A beverage once commonly used among the northern nations, of later origin than mead. It was prepared by exposing malted grain to certain conditions of moisture and heat, thus charging the liquid with alcohol. Alcohol in its pure state may be observed in laboratories, where it is used for the preservation of biological specimens. A study of the strange effects of the general use of this drug reveals—"

One shudders to think how far his thirst for knowledge may lead the industrious editor and the suffering pupil.