

Our Kill-Joy Autocracy

Illustrated by PETER NEWELL

By CHARLES HANSON TOWNE

WE all remember the story of the fond mother who, on leaving her children one afternoon, said to them: "Now, don't play with the matches, dearies." When she came home her house—and children—were on fire.

All the emphasis having been placed on our *not* drinking, the stupid prohibitionist wonders why we think of nothing *but* drinking. There is one maddening phase of all this nonsense—a point that pricks a sensible citizen to the bone—and that is the fact that the minority who got together and did it to us are the type of folk whom we wouldn't like to go out to dinner with in any circumstances; a pack of kill-joys who, even were they willing to absorb all the cocktails and champagne in the world, couldn't by any stretch of the imagination be called "good fellows."

How long will America writhe and squirm under their autocratic rule? How long will we all remain mute, motionless and mad under their domination? I dislike the thought exceedingly that people who never drank a drop before are now fast slipping down to the gutter; that just as drinking was taking care of itself so beautifully we were punished as a nation has never been punished in all history. Our only salvation lies in the fact that if there is method in the madness of these bumptious critics of our private morals, there can still be method in your madness and mine. It is by no means too late to organize and have the entire Eighteenth Amendment wiped out. Do we intend to lie down and choke to death in a Sahara that covers the whole country?

Make no mistake about it—the professional reformer, having reformed us once, will try it again. He is always looking for new worlds to conquer; he is not content with a single victory—if victory this can be called. Yet I hear people saying all the time, "Oh, do not worry, they'll never dare to take this or that away from us; that would be going too far!"

We have, then, learned nothing, and we shall deserve, as Plato said, exactly the kind of government we get unless we take an interest in our politics—and our politicians.

The anti-saloon people thought that with the Eighteenth Amendment swept into our beloved Constitution the American people would take their medicine, stupidly submit, keep their mouths shut (in every way), obey the drastic law, no matter how offensive, and let a bunch of dry-as-dust fanatics with vinegar mouths and chalklike cheeks rule them. They honestly imagined we were like that—a nation of asinine puppets; and they counted upon many of us (of whom I was one, I am ashamed to say, not so long ago) submitting because it was too much trouble to protest.

The old American spirit of *laissez-faire*—we have it in abundance and call it good nature—was a weapon in their hands, a distinct asset to them. Moreover, they made it clear in every answer that they gave to an anti-prohibitionist that there was a stigma put upon the man who dared to open his mouth or use his pen in righteous rebellion against the enforcement of the Volstead act; that any one who uttered a protest must of necessity be a confirmed drunkard, a common sot. That was only another clever ruse, another cudgel held over our heads, and we are but just waking to a consciousness of the sham and the scheming. You and I were "tanks" if we didn't keep still and obey teacher and accept with docility the dictum of a few sour-visaged Freudian cases.

But the time has now gone by when one who upholds his freedom may with impunity be labeled a drunkard. We now have enough

perspective on this wretched and un-American business to understand the tricks of the organized and performing reformers. If a bowl of goldfish is brought from their sleeves, we are quick to discern how the thing was accomplished. Palming is an open book to us; and I doubt not that "palming" of another kind has been practiced more consistently than any other trick in their whole pack of tricks.

Patrick Henry once said that "if we wish to be free, we must fight." I think the fight has begun. The American people were caught unawares. We were napping; there was a surprise attack, behind the back, as it were; and we who believe in liberty and justice were unorganized, going about our ordinary business, not bothering much about anything save the winning of a war. In the meantime, as we have all come to realize, an organized minority were working tooth and nail, lobbying, frightening weak and corrupt legislators who had not the courage of their convictions, spending days and nights in the unbelievable business of having prohibition put over on us.

Like many another, I sometimes rub my eyes and wonder how it all happened—if it actually has happened. I can't believe it possible that "the pursuit of happiness" clause in our Declaration of Independence has been forgotten, and that a fanatical few have inter-

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before the Volstead act became a hideous fact and made it impossible to keep going otherwise.

According to the fanatics who have imposed their will and wishes upon us, any one who disagrees with them about a stupid law is not a good American. They forget that placid and bovine acceptance of a wrong is worse than the bloodiest honest rebellion, and I would take it as a sure symbol of our national mollycoddleness if we supinely submitted to the restrictions of the Volstead act—which, by the way, ex-President Wilson vetoed.

There is a deep principle involved. If they can put one like this over on us, what next? I am not an alarmist; but fanaticism, as any one who has read history should understand, knows no limits; and the under-

lying that I often rub my eyes and pinch myself to make sure that I am not asleep and having one of those nightmares that most of my waking hours have become.

Our kindly rulers in the future years will find themselves in a desperate situation. They will wish—some of them—to interpret the law liberally and generously, and during one Administration—or reign—we may be privileged to drink light wine and beer and during another we may be permitted to do nothing of the sort. Here's a petty mess! Here's a state of things! as Gilbert said, and here's a howdy-do!

Why is every one so timid? Do my fellow Americans like to stand before the rest of the world as a people who allow themselves to be ruled by cranks? It does not fill me with pride thus to label myself; and I cannot be terrified into a Siberian silence by the self-constituted head of any Anti-Saloon League. Judging by the letters I have received since the publication of my last article, there are thousands upon thousands of others who feel the same way; who have applauded my stand and promised to help in every way they can. These are hardly what I would call empty-headed citizens. They are sane people, the cream of our country, who object, as I do, to being walked over and stepped upon by busybodies who, having no honest work to do, have resorted to the dubious business of regulating the private lives of a hundred and ten million people.

When the Governor of a great State says openly that the best way to get rid of a pernicious law is to see that it is rigorously enforced, I think I am right in assuming that he believes that law to be pernicious. The best way to get rid of a whipping is to get it, in other words. But in the meantime how it hurts when the paternal hand swats the

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The other day at luncheon I saw four honest-looking citizens—obviously intelligent and successful business men who pay large income taxes to our as yet unbenevolent Government—drinking gin at a nearby table in a restaurant. They acted like schoolboys, and as though the whole world were Teacher. Surreptitiously, amid giggles and blushes, they brought forth their spirits, covering the bottle with a napkin, fearing even the waiter, lest he prove a Government agent and spy.

A delightful and elevating spectacle! Grown-up men behaving like naughty little rascals! To think that men and women who patriotically helped their country by buying all the so-called Liberty bonds they could—skimped and scraped to do so—now scrape and cringe before a law in which they do not believe.

A friend of mine who never over-indulges, and never will—just to spite Mr. Volstead and Mr. Anderson!—told me that on a recent visit to Cuba he had never felt happier, for while in that sunny and civilized land he could walk fearlessly into a café and order a drink without feeling like a criminal and as though the man at the next table might be a Federal officer. It is abominable and intolerable that every one of us has come to distrust his neighbor and to be a little ashamed of his Americanism. A system of espionage is to be the next step in the damnable propaganda of the Anti-Saloon people, but to offset that one reads that, owing to the kindly paternalism of Mr. So-and-So, beer may be served over soda fountains. Had we thought we would ever come to that?

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ground passages to our Legislature must be clogged with busy little reformers at this very moment, burrowing their way to the lawmakers of the land, pushing and shoving one another in their haste and eagerness to get there.

It is surprising and disheartening to hear on all sides remarks like these: "I wonder if Harding will give us back our booze," and "Do you think Governor Miller will let us have light wines and beer?"

In other words, we are drifting—however unconsciously—toward the dangers of a benevolent autocracy, a kindly paternalism. The younger generation are growing up to believe that the laws are to be enforced, or not enforced, by one man whom the people, ostensibly, have elected to a place of power. They will soon forget that our Government was never intended to be run on any such basis. Our President, our Governors, our Mayors—all our officials, in fact—far from being our rulers, were intended to be our servants; and they should do our will, and ours alone.

There is a growing belief in the sanctity of the *person* who happens

seat of the trousers! I should think it would be better and simpler to throw away the paternal switch. And it is damning to realize that while we are being licked our sour-visaged friends, the prohibitionists, are looking in at the window of our house of pain, experiencing a vicarious and pathological joy at our discomfort; and the only liquid we get is our liquid eyes.

But how is it possible to enforce a law to the utmost—farce, farce to the utmost, one might say—when the people do not wish it enforced and are joyously and openly and brazenly resisting it everywhere? How is it possible to make effective a law which is laughed at and in which the police themselves do not believe? It is all very confusing to live in a country that can find no means of punishing war profiteers and ticket speculators and stopping pro-German public meetings when we have not yet made a formal peace with Germany; a country that cannot stop trading with the enemy and yet can see diligently to it that a decent citizen is arrested for carrying a flask on his hip. It is so mys

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Just because of sweet temptations
To belong to other nations,
He's no more A-mer-I-can!

One might poorly paraphrase Gilbert—how this comic-opera librettist crops up in any dissertation on booze!

When one hears stern and aged Judges saying in their homes that the Eighteenth Amendment is the greatest piece of stupidity ever foisted upon a so-called self-governing people; when one hears 18-year-old schoolboys crying out in cabarets, "Hip, hip, hooray!" with the accent—and their hands—on the hip; when one knows that the rich can, and always will, get their "rum," as the ignorant prohibitionists call anything and everything intoxicating, just as the drummer refers to champagne as "wine"; when the poor cannot get even a sniff of beer;

when a charming old lady of 73 writes one that she and her aged husband need stimulants and cannot afford to buy them, yet are regaled by reading how high officials in our delectable land have special permits to remove their rare wines to their new home; when cocksure minorities crow over robust majorities and laugh at their human desire for a tiny bit of color on the drab background of an elongated Gopher prairie; when the cup that cheers but does not inebriate is grabbed from our hands by thin and adroit fanatics who are about as intelligent as the late Carrie Nation—it is time to wonder what it is all about and, instead of facing the music and sitting back with folded hands, get up and prove that the spirit of America is not dead, even though its spirits are relegated, for a time, to a limbo created by zealots who have no understanding of poor old decent human nature.