

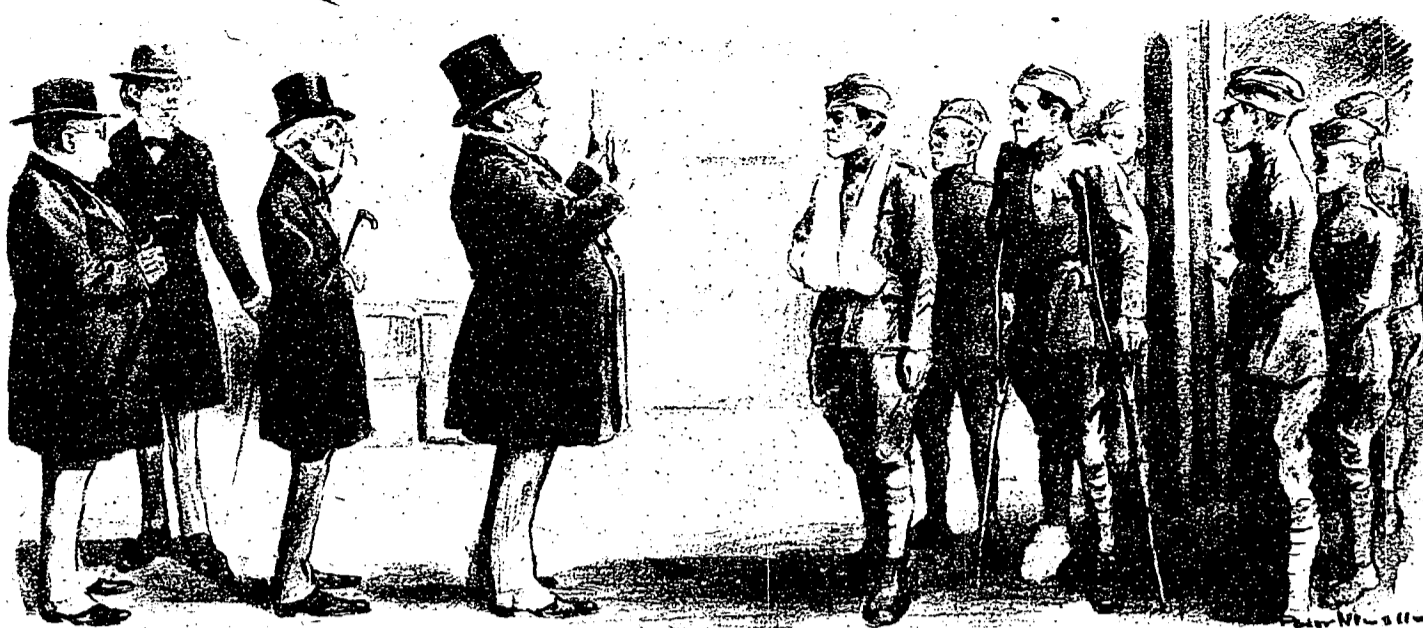
Too Much "Verboten"

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WE have to fight for our fun nowadays. I think I am as good an American as I ever was, but I confess that there is coming over me a feeling of human resentment at the treatment which I, along with a hundred and ten million other God-fearing folk, am receiving.

The war, of course, is responsible for many things; but that we fought to make a sick world safe for democracy is now nothing but a joke—a Gilbert and Sullivan joke worthy of a deathless lyric. Indeed, a short time ago, had a librettist put into a comic opera some of the happenings of this hour—only some of them, mind you—his book would have been hissed off the stage. There are some things that are true to life, but not true to fiction. For instance, think of the irony of our boys being sent across the seas to shoot guns at Prussians and begging them to free themselves from an autocratic Kaiser, and, during their necessary absence, being deprived of a glass of beer when they came back home.

It would be the most laughable farce comedy were it not the deepest tragedy. I can conceive of a brilliant first act, wherein some doughboys, parched and thirsty, arrive in a German village and for the



"You are all wrong, bo, and you really ought to know, that we've rearranged the show, and it's bone-dry you will go, and though honors we bestow, now, alas! no beer will flow! for we've put one over on you—Pro-hi-bi-tion!"

the situation could not exist, even in a realm of dream."

But see what has happened! This plot would have proved a prophecy and made several fortunes for the author and the manager. "What!" I hear some character saying in the course of the first act, just before the curtain descends; "do you mean to say the boys who fought for this democracy stuff had no voice in the passing of the law that made it a crime to sip a glass

of good beer?" And the answer would be, "Of course not! How behind the times you are! America is a free country, you know. The people who dwell in it boast of their superiority of intellect and rejoice in their form of self-government. It is the land of the spree no longer; it is the home of the grave." (Business of laughter. Solemn music is heard, and the entire chorus of legislators pass with stately steps to the Capitol, dressed in heavy mourning).

But nothing is being done about anything! The American people, whipped into obedience, as Prussians were never whipped, take their medicine (from which even one-half of 1 per cent. of alcohol has been extracted by a lot of fanatics) and obey the law. Only they don't. They go out and break it to bits; and the legislators wonder why they have so many bad children on their hands, and isn't it a strange world, and why is it that folks won't be good

are threatened, which blast one's hopes of the simplest kind of good times. These laws are based on a complete misunderstanding of poor old human nature, which needs, every now and then, say what you will, an escape from the dreariness of life. The harmless diversions which in childhood take the form of playing ball and cricket and tennis experience a metamorphosis as we grow older; and we crave just a tinge of excitement after the harsh, unyielding day's work. Most Americans work hard—there is no doubt of that. American business is a strenuous, glorious thing—a delightful game, if you will; but it is also a serious note in the scale of our national consciousness.

Drinking, as we all know, had become very unfashionable—I mean the wrong kind of drinking. I can remember—and I am not so very well along in years, at that—when it was considered smart to absorb four or five cocktails before dinner. Our suburban life was lived in a swimming pool of booze; and one got out of the hazy waves of alcohol with a bandaged head the next morning. But American business, American common sense, wouldn't stand for any such tomfoolery; and the luncheon accompanied by even a small beer was taboo.

We need relaxation after eight or nine hours at a desk; and the lights of a great city are the lure that lead us forth—not to get drunk, God knows, but to get just that fillup the weary body and brain need when an honest day's work is done. The people who don't understand this, and who are trying to rule and run America, are in a class with those who fail to understand the psychology of Coney Island; who never heard Stevenson's line about Shelley, "God give me the young man with brains enough to make a fool of himself." How a glass of light wine or beer is going to hurt a fellow is more than I can see, for the



first time in their lives taste real Münchener beer—the beer of their enemy—learn to like it, decently enough, get the recipe, and decide that they will take back to their home town the one good and harmless thing the enemy country gave them. Then, as a climax, they arrive, wounded and depressed, a tattered demoralized battalion, glad that the filthy war is over and done, and ready now to drop back into calm, blissful citizenship, with their young wives and families. But no, say a delegation of legislators on the pier (a charming comic chorus this!), with palms extended upright, "You are all wrong, bo, and you really ought to know, that we've rearranged the show, and it's bone-dry you will go, and though honors we bestow, now, alas! no beer will flow! for we've put one over on you—Pro-hi-bi-tion!" (Curtain, amid general consternation.)

"The American people, whipped to obedience as Prussians were never whipped, take their medicine."

"They are going after our tobacco."



Now, if a libretto with this plot development had been offered to a Broadway manager three years ago, it would have been turned down at once as impossible. I can see the first reader's report: "A great deal of whimsical imagination is shown by the author; but the American people are very sensible, and even Barrie and Gilbert could not be allowed to take such liberties with life as it is. Isn't it too bad that writers do not know the public better? What a pity it is that they cannot evolve plots that will be a revelation of life, not as it might be in a mad, whirligig world of fancy? This is not good, even as satire, for

of good beer?" And the answer would be, "Of course not! How behind the times you are! America is a free country, you know. The people who dwell in it boast of their superiority of intellect and rejoice in their form of self-government. It is the land of the spree no longer; it is the home of the grave." (Business of laughter. Solemn music is heard, and the entire chorus of legislators pass with stately steps to the Capitol, dressed in heavy mourning).

and do as they are told, and what are laws for, anyhow, and this disrespect of the law is awful and must be punished, and some one has got to go to jail, and why is Bolshevism growing when we are all so happy?

Ah! there is the answer in one word! We are not happy—every one is decidedly, unequivocally, wretchedly, miserably, gloomily, stonily, fearfully, terribly unhappy!

And why? Simply because a lot of laws have been passed, and more

life of me; and if he takes his wife along, as he usually does, or wishes to do, there is precious little danger that one will ever fall over the terrible precipice of intoxication and go down into the bottomless pit of disaster.

Passive discontent finally breeds active rebellion. Our lawmakers should have the wit, the vision, to realize that. A law cannot be higher than the people for whom it is made; and for a whole nation to be

Then why all this "reform" business, gone at with such gusto? It is pathological—any doctor will tell you that; and the American people, who believe in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, permit themselves to be governed by a pack of pathological cases who, themselves, should be in wards, if not padded cells. And they are not content with this initial victory—if it can be called a victory. As the Irishman put it,

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Too Much "Verboten"

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"If this is prohibition, why didn't we have it long ago?" They are going after our tobacco, our motor-ing on the Sabbath; and they are going to dip into our cellars and rob us of that which we used to keep there, oh, so seldom, but now have in great and wise abundance.

It never occurred to any of us, in the old, halcyon days, when one could loll on the back platform of a horse car or trolley with the glorious multitude, and smoke there, to keep a supply of liquor in our homes. If we were giving a dinner, and wished to oil the social wheels just a bit to start the machine going, we may have sent to the corner and bought a bottle of gin and a little vermouth, and perhaps a quart of California claret, and let it go at that. No, one disgraced himself. It was all very quiet and serene and sane and nice. We hurt no one; we did ourselves no injury (any physician will tell you that; he needs whisky in his practice, if he is the right kind of physician) and a pleasant time was had by all, as the country newspapers say.

But from such undramatic drinking what, because of Mr. Longface, have we leaped to? To the hip-flask, the sly treating in coatrooms—and other places I need hardly mention—

long before dinner begins, so that one may be sure of a sensation which no decent man should care to experience. A nervous tension is in the air, putting us all back twenty years. I assure you that never once in my life did I ever carry a flask of brandy, even when I was going on a long journey; yet my dear mother was as certain that I should take one as that I should wear rubbers when it rained; and I let her believe I did both, for the sake of her peace of mind. Was my mother a criminal? Not then; but she would be considered one now, with Mr. Volstead's act on the records of my beloved land. Actually, I am a criminal if I take a sip outside my home—in my club, in my travels. If I transport a little of that whimsical stuff of which poets have sung so beautifully and often I can be dragged to jail. Boo! What a mockery!

I heard a fine citizen say the other evening—a man of wealth and position, a publicist, a man of affairs (I am using the word in its proper sense!), a man who loved, very definitely, the great America that used to be—that for the first time in his life he had the despicable thought that he would like to withhold something, if he could, on his income tax. He felt little compunction for the base thought. Why should he hand his hard-earned money over to a

Government which deprived him of so much of his personal liberty and held over his head the dire threat of further deprivation? How would Liberty Bonds sell in public now? Yet how loyally we all bought them during the war, before we knew that we were not shackled! What was this man getting out of America? he asked me. Just a dull time, to be truthful; and when he wanted diversion he must pack up and fare to other lands, crave a passport, swear that he had paid last year's tax, produce a receipt he had never received, and promise to pay this year's, and either not stay away too long or see to it that his lawyer attended to it for him.

A jolly state of affairs! It makes one feel so loving toward one's Government, doesn't it? We are all children, and Uncle Sam is no longer a symbolical old figure, but an avuncular autocrat who goes about nosing everywhere, almost invading the sanctity of our homes (ah! he may do it yet!) in his senseless quest for this and that. But just as Santa Claus could never get down every chimney in the world, one feels certain that Uncle Sam cannot pry into every wine cellar, and examine, if he had all eternity, every tiny bank balance. Moreover, my friend will not cheat on his income tax. He, at least, is decent.

Let us not delude ourselves that we are living in a democracy any longer. Laws were passed from time to time in the history of our great country, without the people's vote; but they were laws that served our best interests and did not interfere with our personal liberty. When our rights as citizens were molested, we got up on our hind legs and yelled. "What is this?" we naturally inquired. "Why, it is what has always been done," came the answer from the bars of injustice. And that was literally true. Only we didn't know it. "You can't break the Constitution," was a further argument. "Once a Federal amendment, always a Federal amendment, you know."

And why, pray? If the good old iron Constitution cannot be tampered with, it is high time that it was. If our forefathers who framed it meant it to be an inelastic document, they didn't count on the elastic minds of the American people. "New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth," said the wise James Russell Lowell once; and nothing is more certain than the fact that the moment has come when the people, and not a handful of legislators, who rushed madly to lay in a stock when they saw which way the wind was blowing their straws, should be heard.

It grieved me, as a good American

to hear an Englishman say the other evening before a lot of my fellow-countrymen that his idea of a complete life would be to spend nine months of the year in England as a British citizen and three months in the United States as an American subject. There was much mirth; but somehow I could not laugh (and I hope these Federal amendments, coming so thick and fast, are not causing me to lose my sense of humor). It was a statement in which so much of truth was compressed that I shuddered; and I thought of all the forms of verboten that had lately been foisted upon us. I recalled how, ten years ago, a friend of mine had returned from Germany and told me, laughingly, how the subjects of the Kaiser were eternally forbidden this and that. It was verboten, verboten, verboten everywhere the eye turned; and he said then how contrary to the American spirit was this constant stress on "Thou shalt not." We both smiled over it, and pitied the poor Germans. "What a glorious land we live in," we said.

But could we honestly say that now? Do not let us be hypocrites. Before foreigners, we bravely and loyally uphold our form of government, because one does not like to cleanse his soiled linen in public or reveal a family quarrel; but deep down in our hearts—I hear it discussed everywhere I go—is a feeling of apprehension: and the everlasting question is being asked, "Whither are we, as a people, being led?"

If the political machinery is being clogged with too many foolish laws that are merely jokers and venomous restrictions, why do we not speak out in meeting, call together groups of God-fearing citizens, as we are privileged still to do under the Constitution (unless another amendment has been added since this was written), and protest against this extravagant misuse of power?

The reason England has always been such a comfortable country to live in is because of the spirit of constructive criticism that has filtered through the nation. If a Londoner does not like the tram roads, he writes to *The Times* about it, and the matter is adjusted. He has the backing of all his neighbors, and ten to one they have written, too. But how many Americans, insulted in the subway or by some public servant, will sit down and write a letter of complaint?

We stand meekly like droves of cattle behind tapes in motion-picture "palaces," pressed in by eager little ushers endowed with a momentary authority, until released and permitted to fumble our way down dark aisles to such seats as we can find. We allow ticket speculators to buy up all the best places in our theatres, adding what profit they demand, and say nothing. "Ah! we're here for a good time, and we don't care what it costs us," is the answer of the average visitor to the metropolis when he is asked why he does not protest against such unjust measures. Yet we talk of prohibition as though we were manfully trying to save the next generation from the perils of drink! We are doing nothing of the sort. We are merely bowing our craven heads to a mandate because we have neither the courage nor the energy to speak loudly against a stupid law foisted upon us by an organized minority. Our altruistic purpose is not apparent, for it never existed.

"Ah, but," some one whispers, "the majority of people want this and that; so we must give in to them."

Even so, why should we give in to them? The majority of people prefer flashy movies and Pollyanna and Harold Bell Wright and chewing gum and cheap jewelry and Gopher Prairie and slapstick humor and loud laughter and a crowded beach on Sunday, and other things foreign to my desires; why, then, should I walk in their path, jump over the hurdles that the multitude puts in front of me?

Arnold Bennett once said that the classics were kept alive, not by the man in the street, but by the pas-

sionate few. He was dead right. In the words of your beloved majorit;, he said a mouthful. Now, because my neighbor and my neighbor's neighbor have a weakness for the best sellers, and find a robust pleasure in never thinking anything beyond baseball, I do not see why I should be forced to indulge in a stupid Pollyanna optimism and forget my Keats and Shakespeare.

I wonder what would happen if a Federal officer ever came over to your table in a restaurant and put his finger in your glass of sherry, tasted what dripped from it, decided it contained more than one-half of 1 per cent. of alcohol, and hailed you to court.

I know what I should do. I have my little speech all prepared in my mind against such a moment.

"Your Honor," I would say, "I am a good American citizen. I love my country more than I love anything in this world. I wish to obey its laws even when they are as unintelligent as this one under which I have been brought before you. But I cannot; and I notice, your Honor, that I am not alone in my stupidity. How can I take seriously the Eighteenth Amendment to our Constitution, when the Fifteenth is not enforced? When that is attended to, I will begin to consider the sanctity of this amendment which so fragrantly interferes with my personal liberty. Moreover, if I have tasted liquor in public, and am guilty of a misdemeanor—or worse—so is the officer who arrested me; for his finger dripped with my sherry, and I saw him taste it. The sherry was mine. I paid for it long ago. He stole some of it from me. Therefore, I press charges against him on two counts—he has broken the sacred Volstead law and he is a highway robber."

But the Judge, perhaps, would see little humor in my statement, my befuddled point of view; and doubtless I should be sent to jail for an hour or two, that the majesty of the law might be upheld.

What psychological effect will this constant contempt for the law of the land have upon us as a people? Surely something dire and dreadful is seeping into our national consciousness, and we are in danger of coming to a human dislike of all laws in consequence.

I do not wish that hour to come; but come it will, unless something is done to remedy the present abhorrent conditions, which, I repeat, are making us all unhappy. We are entangled in too many legal nets; and it is not pleasing and edifying to see an ex-Judge and jurist who came out strong for prohibition sitting night after night in a certain restaurant, imbibing his dollar cocktail, creating scandal in a more than crowded room. He is not in his cups, these days—only in his demi-tasses. I wonder if he knows what an example he sets, this minion of the law, and with what derision his public utterances are now greeted whenever he opens his mouth to speak between drinks?

I hear men and women saying all the time, "America is no place to live now. The streets of our large cities at night look like villages in some remote district. Dull, dull, and drab, drab. One more tyrannical law, one shadow of that deep blue which imperils us, and we will go and live abroad—anywhere but here."

Is that nice talk to listen to? Does it make one proud that he is an American? It is not wise to have such feelings fomenting in the hearts of those who honestly and sincerely love their native land—love it so much that, during a terrible war, they were proud to offer to die for it, or allow their sons to die for it. But this is not the time to desert the old Ship of State. Now, as never before, the United States needs its best blood, its best workers, its best citizens, to put the country back where it belongs.

It is because I love America so that I do not wish to see her make a complete fool of herself. And I say it as loudly as I can, that these pernicious laws, this spirit of verboten, is only making the world safe for De-mockery-cy.