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The Nations That Drink Too Much

That very sensible gentleman, Bishop Potter, recently got himself into water too hot to hold him by saying a few temperate words of excuse for poor hardworking men who sometimes take too much of what is not always good for them. From the viewpoint of the sleek and well nourished Prohibitionist nothing looks easier than total abstention from liquor. Finding no difficulty in avoidance of drink himself he is pained and a bit surprised to discover in his precept and example an inefficacy for which he cannot account otherwise than by the power of a habit carelessly acquired. Against this habit he naturally invokes the force of law, but with no better result.

One would think that after so many centuries of failure the worthy and well meaning proponents of total abstinence would begin to suspect the existence of an overlooked factor in the problem. At the back of the drinking habit is there not some constant force to which it is due—some natural necessity that created it?

Let us consider certain customs, which are habits of the people. Those which have nothing behind them but whims and caprices do not persist, fashions in dress for example. Clothing is a necessity, so all wear clothing. But any particular fashion in clothing is not a necessity, so nothing is more variable than fashion. Our women will wear wide sleeves one year and narrow the next, for there is no reason why sleeves should be either wide or narrow; but all wear sleeves to keep their arms warm.

Recreation is necessary to health; we all play games. But as it does not greatly matter what kind of a game we play, so that it exercises the body and the mind, we run to baseball in one decade, to cycling in another; golf succeeds lawn tennis and from golf many turn to ping-pong. Twenty years ago billiards was far more popular than now. In the next century the favorite sports of today may be forgotten. If any persist they will be those which in a special and particular way minister to some constant and natural need.

All peoples in all ages have used intoxicants, even those whose religions forbade. Probably there is no one thing upon which so much human ingenuity has been expended as invention of alcoholic substitutes for water, which we are told is our “natural” drink. We never drink water because we like it, as we do wine, coffee and half a score of other beverages. We take it only as a handy medicine for the recurrent disorder known as thirst. When thirsty we like it, as we like almost anything that is wet; and it is cheap, accessible and abundant.

Have these large facts no meaning? It is most unscientific to think so. I venture to believe that they have a profound and important one, to the discovery and understanding of which the friends and proponents of temperance might more advantageously address themselves than to reclamation that does not reclaim and prohibition that does not prohibit. If it is true that in the human system is a natural *demand* for alcohol, it is none the less, but all the more, true that alcohol is a dangerous food, and all the current, immemorial dissuasions from excessive use

remain in full force and effect. To recognize the real character and power of an enemy is not a disadvantage, but an advantage. Convinced of his invincibility to heroic measures for his destruction we shall the more intelligently devise some homely, practical means to control him.

I know now what value and significance there may be in the fact that the dominant races and nations are hard drinkers, but it is indubitably true. The abstemious Mahometan goes down like grass before the scythe when pitted against the gluttonous Christian. A hundred thousand beef-eating and brandy-drinking Englishmen hold in subjection three hundred million vegetarian abstainers of the same Aryan race in India. With what an easy grace the whisky-loving American pushed the temperate Spaniard out of Cuba. The vodka-sodden Tartar who calls himself a Russian has a "picnic" in Manchuria, which drinks tea.

Everywhere it may be observed that the nations which drink too much fight rather well and not always righteously. Possibly their hard drinking and hard fighting have nothing to do with each other. One would wish to know that they have no other than an accidental coexistence. Even if their relation were seen to be that of cause and effect the estimable ladies of both sexes who abolished the army canteen in the interest of abstract temperance will hardly call themselves to repentance for crippling the military strength of their country. Some observers will think that they have conspicuously augmented it.