

Prohibition in Fact and Fancy

I went to America with some notion of not discussing Prohibition. But I soon found that well-to-do Americans were only too delighted to discuss it over the nuts and wine. They were even willing, if necessary, to dispense with the nuts. I am far from sneering at this; having a general philosophy which need not here be expounded, but which may be symbolised by saying that monkeys can enjoy nuts but only men can enjoy wine. But if I am to deal with Prohibition, there is no doubt of the first thing to be said about it. The first thing to be said about it is that it does not exist. It is to some extent enforced among the poor; at any rate it was intended to be enforced among the poor; though even among them I fancy it is much evaded. It is certainly not enforced among the rich; and I doubt whether it was intended to be. I suspect that this has always happened whenever this negative notion has taken hold of some particular province or tribe. Prohibition never prohibits. It never has in history; not even in Moslem history; and it never will. Mahomet at least had the argument of a climate and not the interest of a class. But if a test is needed, consider what part of Moslem culture has passed permanently into our own modern culture. You will find the one Moslem poem that has really pierced is a Moslem poem in praise of wine. The crown of all the victories of the Crescent is that nobody reads the Koran and everybody reads the Rubaiyat.

Most of us remember with satisfaction an old picture in Punch, representing a festive old gentleman in a state of collapse on the pavement, and a philanthropic old lady anxiously calling the attention of a cabman to the calamity. The old lady says, 'I'm sure this poor gentleman is ill,' and the cabman replies with fervour, 'Ill! I wish I 'ad 'alf 'is complaint.'

We talk about unconscious humour; but there is such a thing as unconscious seriousness. Flippancy is a flower whose roots are often underground in the subconsciousness. Many a man talks sense when he thinks he is talking nonsense; touches on a conflict of ideas as if it were only a contradiction of language, or really makes a parallel when he means only to make a pun. Some of the Punch jokes of the best period are examples of this; and that quoted above is a very strong example of it. The cabman meant what he said; but he said a great deal more than he meant. His utterance contained fine philosophical doctrines and distinctions of which he was not perhaps entirely conscious. The spirit of the English language, the tragedy and comedy of the condition of the English people, spoke through him as the god spoke through a teraph-head or brazen mask of oracle. And the oracle is an omen; and in some sense an omen of doom.

Observe, to begin with, the sobriety of the cabman. Note his measure, his moderation; or to use the yet truer term, his temperance. He only wishes to have half the old gentleman's complaint. The old gentleman is welcome to the other half, along with all the other poms and luxuries of his superior social station. There is nothing Bolshevik or even Communist about the temperance cabman. He might almost be called Distributist, in the sense that he wishes to distribute the old gentleman's complaint more equally between the old gentleman and himself. And, of course, the social relations there represented are very much truer to life than it is fashionable to suggest. By the realism of this picture Mr. Punch made amends for some more snobbish pictures, with the opposite social moral. It will remain eternally among his real glories that he exhibited a picture in which the cabman was sober and the gentleman was drunk. Despite many ideas to the contrary, it was emphatically a picture of real life. The truth is subject to the simplest of all possible tests. If the cabman were really and truly drunk he would not be a cabman, for he could not drive a cab. If he had the whole of the old gentleman's complaint, he would be sitting happily on the pavement beside the old gentleman; a symbol of social equality found at last, and the levelling of all classes of mankind. I do not say that there has never been such a monster known as a drunken cabman; I do not say that the driver may not sometimes have approximated imprudently to three-quarters of the complaint, instead of adhering to his severe but wise conception of half of it. But I do say that most men of the world, if they spoke sincerely, could testify to more examples of helplessly drunken gentlemen put inside cabs than of helplessly drunken drivers on top of them. Philanthropists and officials, who never look at people but only at papers, probably have a mass of social statistics to the contrary; founded on the simple fact that cabmen can be cross-examined about their habits and gentlemen cannot. Social workers probably have the whole thing worked out in sections and compartments, showing how the extreme intoxication of cabmen compares with the parallel intoxication of costermongers; or measuring the drunkenness of a dustman against the drunkenness of a crossing-sweeper. But there is more practical experience embodied in the practical speech of the English; and in the proverb that says 'as drunk as a lord.'

Now Prohibition, whether as a proposal in England or a pretence in America, simply means that the man who has drunk less shall have no drink, and the man who has drunk more shall have all the drink. It means that the old gentleman shall be carried home in the cab drunker than ever; but that, in order to make it quite safe for him to drink to excess, the man who drives him shall be forbidden to drink even in moderation. That is what it means; that is all it means; that is all it ever will mean. It tends to that in Moslem countries; where the luxurious and advanced drink champagne, while the poor and fanatical drink water. It means that in modern America; where the wealthy are all at this moment sipping their cocktails, and discussing how much harder labourers can be made to work if only

they can be kept from festivity. This is what it means and all it means; and men are divided about it according to whether they believe in a certain transcendental concept called 'justice,' expressed in a more mystical paradox as the equality of men. So long as you do not believe in justice, and so long as you are rich and really confident of remaining so, you can have Prohibition and be as drunk as you choose.

I see that some remarks by the Rev. R. J. Campbell, dealing with social conditions in America, are reported in the press. They include some observations about Sinn Fein in which, as in most of Mr. Campbell's allusions to Ireland, it is not difficult to detect his dismal origin, or the acrid smell of the smoke of Belfast. But the remarks about America are valuable in the objective sense, over and above their philosophy. He believes that Prohibition will survive and be a success, nor does he seem himself to regard the prospect with any special disfavour. But he frankly and freely testifies to the truth I have asserted; that Prohibition does not prohibit, so far as the wealthy are concerned. He testifies to constantly seeing wine on the table, as will any other grateful guest of the generous hospitality of America; and he implies humorously that he asked no questions about the story told him of the old stocks in the cellars. So there is no dispute about the facts; and we come back as before to the principles. Is Mr. Campbell content with a Prohibition which is another name for Privilege? If so, he has simply absorbed along with his new theology a new morality which is different from mine. But he does state both sides of the inequality with equal logic and clearness; and in these days of intellectual fog that alone is like a ray of sunshine.

Now my primary objection to Prohibition is not based on any arguments against it, but on the one argument for it. I need nothing more for its condemnation than the only thing that is said in its defence. It is said by capitalists all over America; and it is very clearly and correctly reported by Mr. Campbell himself. The argument is that employees work harder, and therefore employers get richer. That this idea should be taken calmly, by itself, as the test of a problem of liberty, is in itself a final testimony to the presence of slavery. It shows that people have completely forgotten that there is any other test except the servile test. Employers are willing that workmen should have exercise, as it may help them to do more work. They are even willing that workmen should have leisure; for the more intelligent capitalists can see that this also really means that they can do more work. But they are not in any way willing that workmen should have fun; for fun only increases the happiness and not the utility of the worker. Fun is freedom; and in that sense is an end in itself. It concerns the man not as a worker but as a citizen, or even as a soul; and the soul in that sense is an end in itself. That a man shall have a reasonable amount of comedy and poetry and even fantasy in his life is part of his spiritual health, which is for the service of God; and not merely for his mechanical health, which is now bound to the service of man. The

very test adopted has all the servile implication; the test of what we can get out of him, instead of the test of what he can get out of life.

Mr. Campbell is reported to have suggested, doubtless rather as a conjecture than a prophecy, that England may find it necessary to become teetotal in order to compete commercially with the efficiency and economy of teetotal America. Well, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there was in America one of the most economical and efficient of all forms of labour. It did not happen to be feasible for the English to compete with it by copying it. There were so many humanitarian prejudices about in those days. But economically there seems to be no reason why a man should not have prophesied that England would be forced to adopt American Slavery then, as she is urged to adopt American Prohibition now. Perhaps such a prophet would have prophesied rightly. Certainly it is not impossible that universal Slavery might have been the vision of Calhoun as universal Prohibition seems to be the vision of Campbell. The old England of 1830 would have said that such a plea for slavery was monstrous; but what would it have said of a plea for enforced water-drinking? Nevertheless, the nobler Servile State of Calhoun collapsed before it could spread to Europe. And there is always the hope that the same may happen to the far more materialistic Utopia of Mr. Campbell and Soft Drinks.

Abstract morality is very important; and it may well clear the mind to consider what would be the effect of Prohibition in America, if it were introduced there. It would, of course, be a decisive departure from the tradition of the Declaration of Independence. Those who deny that are hardly serious enough to demand attention. It is enough to say that they are reduced to minimising that document in defence of Prohibition, exactly as the slave-owners were reduced to minimising it in defence of Slavery. They are reduced to saying that the Fathers of the Republic meant no more than that they would not be ruled by a king. And they are obviously open to the reply which Lincoln gave to Douglas on the slavery question; that if that great charter was limited to certain events in the eighteenth century, it was hardly worth making such a fuss about in the nineteenth--or in the twentieth. But they are also open to another reply which is even more to the point, when they pretend that Jefferson's famous preamble only means to say that monarchy is wrong. They are maintaining that Jefferson only meant to say something that he does not say at all. The great preamble does not say that all monarchical government must be wrong; on the contrary, it rather implies that most government is right. It speaks of human governments in general as justified by the necessity of defending certain personal rights. I see no reason whatever to suppose that it would not include any royal government that does defend those rights. Still less do I doubt what it would say of a republican government that does destroy those rights.

But what are those rights? Sophists can always debate about their degree; but even sophists cannot debate about their direction. Nobody in his five wits will deny that Jeffersonian democracy wished to give the law a general control in more public things, but the citizens a more general liberty in private things. Wherever we draw the line, liberty can only be personal liberty; and the most personal liberties must at least be the last liberties we lose. But to-day they are the first liberties we lose. It is not a question of drawing the line in the right place, but of beginning at the wrong end. What are the rights of man, if they do not include the normal right to regulate his own health, in relation to the normal risks of diet and daily life? Nobody can pretend that beer is a poison as prussic acid is a poison; that all the millions of civilised men who drank it all fell down dead when they had touched it. Its use and abuse is obviously a matter of judgment; and there can be no personal liberty, if it is not a matter of private judgment. It is not in the least a question of drawing the line between liberty and licence. If this is licence, there is no such thing as liberty. It is plainly impossible to find any right more individual or intimate. To say that a man has a right to a vote, but not a right to a voice about the choice of his dinner, is like saying that he has a right to his hat but not a right to his head.

Prohibition, therefore, plainly violates the rights of man, if there are any rights of man. What its supporters really mean is that there are none. And in suggesting this, they have all the advantages that every sceptic has when he supports a negation. That sort of ultimate scepticism can only be retorted upon itself, and we can point out to them that they can no more prove the right of the city to be oppressive than we can prove the right of the citizen to be free. In the primary metaphysics of such a claim, it would surely be easier to make it out for a single conscious soul than for an artificial social combination. If there are no rights of men, what are the rights of nations? Perhaps a nation has no claim to self-government. Perhaps it has no claim to good government. Perhaps it has no claim to any sort of government or any sort of independence. Perhaps they will say that is not implied in the Declaration of Independence. But without going deep into my reasons for believing in natural rights, or rather in supernatural rights (and Jefferson certainly states them as supernatural), I am content here to note that a man's treatment of his own body, in relation to traditional and ordinary opportunities for bodily excess, is as near to his self-respect as social coercion can possibly go; and that when that is gone there is nothing left. If coercion applies to that, it applies to everything; and in the future of this controversy it obviously will apply to everything. When I was in America, people were already applying it to tobacco. I never can see why they should not apply it to talking. Talking often goes with tobacco as it goes with beer; and what is more relevant, talking may often lead both to beer and tobacco. Talking often drives a man to drink, both negatively in the form of nagging and positively in the form of bad company. If the American Puritan is so anxious to be a censor morum, he should

obviously put a stop to the evil communications that really corrupt good manners. He should reintroduce the Scold's Bridle among the other Blue Laws for a land of blue devils. He should gag all gay deceivers and plausible cynics; he should cut off all flattering lips and the tongue that speaketh proud things. Nobody can doubt that nine-tenths of the harm in the world is done simply by talking. Jefferson and the old democrats allowed people to talk, not because they were unaware of this fact, but because they were fettered by this old fancy of theirs about freedom and the rights of man. But since we have already abandoned that doctrine in a final fashion, I cannot see why the new principle should not be applied intelligently; and in that case it would be applied to the control of conversation. The State would provide us with forms already filled up with the subjects suitable for us to discuss at breakfast; perhaps allowing us a limited number of epigrams each. Perhaps we should have to make a formal application in writing, to be allowed to make a joke that had just occurred to us in conversation. And the committee would consider it in due course. Perhaps it would be effected in a more practical fashion, and the private citizens would be shut up as the public-houses were shut up. Perhaps they would all wear gags, which the policeman would remove at stated hours; and their mouths would be opened from one to three, as now in England even the public-houses are from time to time accessible to the public. To some this will sound fantastic; but not so fantastic as Jefferson would have thought Prohibition. But there is one sense in which it is indeed fantastic, for by hypothesis it leaves out the favouritism that is the fundamental of the whole matter. The only sense in which we can say that logic will never go so far as this is that logic will never go the length of equality. It is perfectly possible that the same forces that have forbidden beer may go on to forbid tobacco. But they will in a special and limited sense forbid tobacco--but not cigars. Or at any rate not expensive cigars. In America, where large numbers of ordinary men smoke rather ordinary cigars, there would be doubtless a good opportunity of penalising a very ordinary pleasure. But the Havanas of the millionaire will be all right. So it will be if ever the Puritans bring back the Scold's Bridle and the statutory silence of the populace. It will only be the populace that is silent. The politicians will go on talking.

These I believe to be the broad facts of the problem of Prohibition; but it would not be fair to leave it without mentioning two other causes which, if not defences, are at least excuses. The first is that Prohibition was largely passed in a sort of fervour or fever of self-sacrifice, which was a part of the passionate patriotism of America in the war. As I have remarked elsewhere, those who have any notion of what that national unanimity was like will smile when they see America made a model of mere international idealism. Prohibition was partly a sort of patriotic renunciation; for the popular instinct, like every poetic instinct, always tends at great crises to great gestures of renunciation. But this very fact, while it makes the inhumanity far more human, makes it far less final and convincing. Men

cannot remain standing stiffly in such symbolical attitudes; nor can a permanent policy be founded on something analogous to flinging a gauntlet or uttering a battle-cry. We might as well expect all the Yale students to remain through life with their mouths open, exactly as they were when they uttered the college yell. It would be as reasonable as to expect them to remain through life with their mouths shut, while the wine-cup which has been the sacrament of all poets and lovers passed round among all the youth of the world. This point appeared very plainly in a discussion I had with a very thoughtful and sympathetic American critic, a clergyman writing in an Anglo-Catholic magazine. He put the sentiment of these healthier Prohibitionists, which had so much to do with the passing of Prohibition, by asking, 'May not a man who is asked to give up his blood for his country be asked to give up his beer for his country?' And this phrase clearly illuminates all the limitations of the case. I have never denied, in principle, that it might in some abnormal crisis be lawful for a government to lock up the beer, or to lock up the bread. In that sense I am quite prepared to treat the sacrifice of beer in the same way as the sacrifice of blood. But is my American critic really ready to treat the sacrifice of blood in the same way as the sacrifice of beer? Is bloodshed to be as prolonged and protracted as Prohibition? Is the normal noncombatant to shed his gore as often as he misses his drink? I can imagine people submitting to a special regulation, as I can imagine them serving in a particular war. I do indeed despise the political knavery that deliberately passes drink regulations as war measures and then preserves them as peace measures. But that is not a question of whether drink and drunkenness are wrong, but of whether lying and swindling are wrong. But I never denied that there might need to be exceptional sacrifices for exceptional occasions; and war is in its nature an exception. Only, if war is the exception, why should Prohibition be the rule? If the surrender of beer is worthy to be compared to the shedding of blood, why then blood ought to be flowing for ever like a fountain in the public squares of Philadelphia and New York. If my critic wants to complete his parallel, he must draw up rather a remarkable programme for the daily life of the ordinary citizens. He must suppose that, through all their lives, they are paraded every day at lunch time and prodded with bayonets to show that they will shed their blood for their country. He must suppose that every evening, after a light repast of poison gas and shrapnel, they are made to go to sleep in a trench under a permanent drizzle of shell-fire. It is surely obvious that if this were the normal life of the citizen, the citizen would have no normal life. The common sense of the thing is that sacrifices of this sort are admirable but abnormal. It is not normal for the State to be perpetually regulating our days with the discipline of a fighting regiment; and it is not normal for the State to be perpetually regulating our diet with the discipline of a famine. To say that every citizen must be subject to control in such bodily things is like saying that every Christian ought to tear himself with red-hot pincers because the Christian martyrs did their duty in time of persecution. A man has a right to control his body, though in a time of

martyrdom he may give his body to be burned; and a man has a right to control his bodily health, though in a state of siege he may give his body to be starved. Thus, though the patriotic defence was a sincere defence, it is a defence that comes back on the defenders like a boomerang. For it proves only that Prohibition ought to be ephemeral, unless war ought to be eternal.

The other excuse is much less romantic and much more realistic. I have already said enough of the cause which is really realistic. The real power behind Prohibition is simply the plutocratic power of the pushing employers who wish to get the last inch of work out of their workmen. But before the progress of modern plutocracy had reached this stage, there was a predetermining cause for which there was a much better case. The whole business began with the problem of black labour. I have not attempted in this book to deal adequately with the question of the negro. I have refrained for a reason that may seem somewhat sensational; that I do not think I have anything particularly valuable to say or suggest. I do not profess to understand this singularly dark and intricate matter; and I see no use in men who have no solution filling up the gap with sentimentalism. The chief thing that struck me about the coloured people I saw was their charming and astonishing cheerfulness. My sense of pathos was appealed to much more by the Red Indians; and indeed I wish I had more space here to do justice to the Red Indians. They did heroic service in the war; and more than justified their glorious place in the day-dreams and nightmares of our boyhood. But the negro problem certainly demands more study than a sight-seer could give it; and this book is controversial enough about things that I have really considered, without permitting it to exhibit me as a sight-seer who shoots at sight. But I believe that it was always common ground to people of common sense that the enslavement and importation of negroes had been the crime and catastrophe of American history. The only difference was originally that one side thought that, the crime once committed, the only reparation was their freedom; while the other thought that, the crime once committed, the only safety was their slavery. It was only comparatively lately, by a process I shall have to indicate elsewhere, that anything like a positive case for slavery became possible. Now among the many problems of the presence of an alien and at least recently barbaric figure among the citizens, there was a very real problem of drink. Drink certainly has a very exceptionally destructive effect upon negroes in their native countries; and it was alleged to have a peculiarly demoralising effect upon negroes in the United States; to call up the passions that are the particular temptation of the race and to lead to appalling outrages that are followed by appalling popular vengeance. However this may be, many of the states of the American Union, which first forbade liquor to citizens, meant simply to forbid it to negroes. But they had not the moral courage to deny that negroes are citizens. About all their political expedients necessarily hung the load that hangs so heavy on modern politics; hypocrisy. The superior race had to rule by a sort of secret

society organised against the inferior. The American politicians dared not disfranchise the negroes; so they coerced everybody in theory and only the negroes in practice. The drinking of the white men became as much a conspiracy as the shooting by the white horsemen of the Ku-Klux Klan. And in that connection, it may be remarked in passing that the comparison illustrates the idiocy of supposing that the moral sense of mankind will ever support the prohibition of drinking as if it were something like the prohibition of shooting. Shooting in America is liable to take a free form, and sometimes a very horrible form; as when private bravos were hired to kill workmen in the capitalistic interests of that pure patron of disarmament, Carnegie. But when some of the rich Americans gravely tell us that their drinking cannot be interfered with, because they are only using up their existing stocks of wine, we may well be disposed to smile. When I was there, at any rate, they were using them up very fast; and with no apparent fears about the supply. But if the Ku-Klux Klan had started suddenly shooting everybody they didn't like in broad daylight, and had blandly explained that they were only using up the stocks of their ammunition, left over from the Civil War, it seems probable that there would at least have been a little curiosity about how much they had left. There might at least have been occasional inquiries about how long it was likely to go on. It is even conceivable that some steps might have been taken to stop it.

No steps are taken to stop the drinking of the rich, chiefly because the rich now make all the rules and therefore all the exceptions, but partly because nobody ever could feel the full moral seriousness of this particular rule. And the truth is, as I have indicated, that it was originally established as an exception and not as a rule. The emancipated negro was an exception in the community, and a certain plan was, rightly or wrongly, adopted to meet his case. A law was made professedly for everybody and practically only for him. Prohibition is only important as marking the transition by which the trick, tried successfully on black labour, could be extended to all labour. We in England have no right to be Pharisaic at the expense of the Americans in this matter; for we have tried the same trick in a hundred forms. The true philosophical defence of the modern oppression of the poor would be to say frankly that we have ruled them so badly that they are unfit to rule themselves. But no modern oligarch is enough of a man to say this. For like all virile cynicism it would have an element of humility; which would not mix with the necessary element of hypocrisy. So we proceed, just as the Americans do, to make a law for everybody and then evade it for ourselves. We have not the honesty to say that the rich may bet because they can afford it; so we forbid any man to bet in any place; and then say that a place is not a place. It is exactly as if there were an American law allowing a negro to be murdered because he is not a man within the meaning of the Act. We have not the honesty to drive the poor to school because they are ignorant; so we pretend to drive everybody; and then send inspectors to the slums but not to the smart streets.

We apply the same ingenuous principle; and are quite as undemocratic as Western democracy. Nevertheless there is an element in the American case which cannot be present in ours; and this chapter may well conclude upon so important a change.

America can now say with pride that she has abolished the colour bar. In this matter the white labourer and the black labourer have at last been put upon an equal social footing. White labour is every bit as much enslaved as black labour; and is actually enslaved by a method and a model only intended for black labour. We might think it rather odd if the exact regulations about flogging negroes were reproduced as a plan for punishing strikers; or if industrial arbitration issued its reports in the precise terminology of the Fugitive Slave Law. But this is in essentials what has happened; and one could almost fancy some negro orgy of triumph, with the beating of gongs and all the secret violence of Voodoo, crying aloud to some ancestral Mumbo Jumbo that the Poor White Trash was being treated according to its name.