ALCOHOL AND THE WAR.

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IN war-time the emotions are inevitably stirred more strongly than in the ordinary times of peace. Life is more vivid to-day than it has been for generations. The air is tense with excitement. Event crowds forward on event, and each in its train brings joy and despair, optimism and pessimism. In the present war this has been particularly the case with those who are engaged or are interested in another war—the war against alcohol. They have had good news and bad news; they have been cheered by glorious victories, they have been chilled by defeats; and they have been filled with high hopes, only to see them finally dashed to the ground.

There are a number of well-meaning people who assert that the war against Germany is the one supremely important thing in the world of to-day, and that all other matters and questions are in comparison of such minor significance that they can be indefinitely postponed until after the war. This is a quite natural point of view, but it is a most deplorably restricted one. To the persons involved, a life-and-death struggle is naturally a matter of supreme importance, but to the world at large it is not necessarily of such moment. Dismissing the purely personal point of view, and regarding the war from that of the world at large, it is obvious that the struggle is important only in so far as it will affect the future progress and happiness of the human race. Will the war, no matter what its result may be, confer benefits on the human race in any way commensurate with the vast expenditure of life and wealth involved? This is not the place to discuss that question, but merely to point out that it is more than doubtful whether the war against Germany, regarded from the viewpoint of humanity, is in any way so important as the war

against alcohol. Broadly speaking, the result of the war against Germany affects only those peoples immediately involved. The result of the war against alcohol is a matter which affects the happiness and progress not merely of every inhabitant of the globe to-day, but of generations yet to be. The man who realizes that alcohol is as deadly an enemy of the human race as Germany is of Britain is not merely justified in continuing his warfare against it; he brands himself a traitor to the human race if he calls a truce now, when health, efficiency, and happiness, are needed more than at any time previously. He serves his country best who serves humanity as well.

The most gratifying effect of the war has been the way in which the peoples of Europe have been brought to realize that alcohol constitutes a peril as pressing as any foreign army. Public opinion on the subject of alcohol has leapt forward during these past few months. An advance has been made which a year ago the most optimistic would not have believed possible without years of patient educative effort. There is nothing of the miraculous in this advance; it was inevitable. War, with its perils and fears, brought with it a spirit of sacrifice, with the result that the people voluntarily submitted to reforms which in times of peace could only have been forced upon them, and then more likely than not at the cost of a revolution.

This has been most strikingly exemplified in Russia, the most interesting country in the world. Before the war the Russian had the unenviable distinction of being the greatest drunkard in Europe. It is only necessary to read the novels of Maxim Gorki, Dostoevski, Tolstoi, and the other great realists, to understand to what an appalling degree the country was literally soaked in alcohol. The drunkard was the rule and not the exception. The evils of alcoholism were rampant on every hand. For years the authorities had been vainly endeavouring to cope with the problem. Ten years ago a system of State control was instituted in the hope that it would check the evil. There is much to be said theoretically in favour of State control, but, unfortunately, such control has never yet proved efficacious in practice. In spite of the earnest endeavours of the Government, the State monopoly of vodka in Russia, far from stemming the rising flood of alcohol, actually increased it. In 1914 no less than 294,000,000 gallons of vodka were sold, producing a revenue of 900,000,000 rubles out of a total revenue from all sources of 3,415,000,000 rubles.

When it is remembered that vodka contains upwards of 40 per cent. of absolute alcohol, it is not surprising to find that in the course of a year Russia lost 4,500,000 infants, that 1,000,000 workmen died of alcoholism, that hundreds of thousands of sufferers from various forms of alcoholism filled the hospitals, that there were 800,000 criminals in the gaols, and that lunacy, crime, prostitution, destitution, and all the other evils which are among the inevitable results of alcoholism, were increasing at an alarming rate.

The social position in Russia at the time of the outbreak of war was indeed desperate. Prohibition was impracticable—firstly, because the Imperial Exchequer could not afford to lose the huge revenue from vodka; and, secondly, because the people were so firmly in the grip of alcohol that they would never have submitted to the loss of what was in millions of cases their only available recreation. Then, as a measure of purely military expediency, prohibition in respect to alcohol was imposed at the outset of the war. Russia remembered how in the struggle with Japan hundreds of thousands of lives had been needlessly sacrificed as a result of the chaos caused by the drunken habits of all ranks, and the country was determined to profit by that lesson. The results attending this drastic step have been remarkable. The troops have fought and endured the rigours of a winter campaign in Poland far better without their beloved vodka than many believed possible. But it is among the people themselves that the greatest results have been achieved. The loss to the revenue has been amply made up by the increased prosperity of the people. At the end of 1914, five months after the issue of the ukase proclaiming prohibition, the national savings were just double what they were at the end of 1913, and that in spite of the war. As to the general happiness and health of the people as a result of prohibition, the position has been summed up by a village priest in the following words: "War is said to be hell, but this is like a foretaste of heaven."

In France the war has rendered possible temperance reforms only less striking than those which have transformed Russia. Absinthe is the wickedest form of alcoholic drink that ever misapplied ingenuity devised. There is little that is attractive about vodka—its taste and effects are harsh and crude; it is drunk merely to produce intoxication, and not as a beverage. Absinthe, on the other hand, is most insidiously attractive. Its

colour and taste are sensuously alluring; its immediate effects on the drinker are pleasant in the extreme. It is far easier to break the thrall of drugs than that of absinthe. Containing from 47 to 72 per cent. of absolute alcohol per volume, and the oils of wormwood and other herbs, absinthe is the most deleterious of all intoxicating drinks. Its action on the brain makes it the quickest route to the prison and asylum that man has yet invented.

Absinthe was the poison that had become the national drink of France. No less than 53,000,000 gallons were consumed during 1913. The direct result was that whereas lunacy, degeneracy, crime—especially crimes of violence—and the number of tuberculous, mentally deficient, and otherwise defective children, were increasing at an alarming rate, the birth-rate was fast declining. The problem of checking the evil was rendered wellnigh hopeless by the fact that there were some 1,300,000 people engaged in the distilling industry, forming indeed a guild with great political powers.

But the war has saved France by rendering the prohibition of absinthe practicable. The action of the distillers in accepting the measure, and actually helping it forward, was the most patriotic act that the war has seen. The greatest test of patriots is not that of death in the excitement of battle; it is the deliberate and silent sacrifice of profits without any glamour or glory.

It must be confessed that in Great Britain the drink question has not been tackled with anything like the same sanity or determination as has been the case in Russia and France. Those who were acquainted with Lord Kitchener's views on the question of Drink and the Soldier were not surprised at his initial warning to the men of the Expeditionary Force as to the necessity of their being on their guard against temptation in the form of alcohol. But even Lord Kitchener has his limitations. He has been doing the work of ten men, cheerfully accepting responsibility for everything, and performing miracles in the way of raising and organizing the new armies. But there are many matters which he has of necessity to leave to his subordinates. Hence those who were acquainted with the ways of the War Office were not surprised to find that the splendid lead which he gave in the matter of alcohol and the war was not followed up.

The first blunder of the authorities was to revive the rum ration. This retrograde step was in open defiance of scientific opinion. Alcohol does not "keep the cold out"; in fact, it does just the opposite. Nevertheless, some hundreds of thousands of gallons of rum were shipped across the Channel. The results were twofold: In the first place, the men were rendered additionally susceptible to frostbite, pneumonia, and all the other consequences of exposure; in the second place, those who were abstainers were officially encouraged to drink. Of course, an alternative to the rum was sometimes available, but when a man has been freezing in a water-logged trench for days, the temptation to indulge in some form of alcoholic stimulant is obviously increased a hundredfold.

Another blunder on the part of the military authorities was in the matter of the provision of canteens. The Canadian and other colonial contingents were abstainers to a man of at least some months standing when they arrived in England. Throughout their training at home and on the voyage to England all alcohol had been rigorously banned. But the first thing the authorities did was to provide them with canteens, and thus encourage them to take up handicapping habits of drinking. Many of the men were unable to resist the temptation thus thrust upon them, and finally a number of them had to be shipped back disgraced to their homes.

The war has forced upon the attention of the military authorities the fact that alcohol is responsible for the spread of the greater portion of venereal disease now prevailing in the Army and Navy. In this matter, of course, alcohol acts in two ways: In the first place, the average decent-minded man has to be more or less drunk before he will consent to associate with a prostitute; and in the second, a man under the influence of alcohol is probably more susceptible to contagious diseases than the man who is not; at all events, the alcoholic man is robbed of his surest safeguards. Owing to the censorship regulations, it is not possible at present to give any statistics on this point; but questions have been asked in Parliament as to the number of recruits refused on account of social diseases. The fact that the answer to these questions has not been made public is in itself an indication as to the nature of the answer. It is also an undoubted fact that as a result of the swarms of loose women, often of the most degraded type, which have flocked to the

neighbourhood of the garrison towns, military camps, and training centres, numbers of men have contracted venereal disease while in the Army. It is hoped that eventually statistics will be available showing the direct relationship between alcohol and disease in such cases.

It is also interesting to note that in the Russian Army, where absolute abstention from alcohol is enforced, 85 per cent. of the wounded are reported as being able to return to the firing-line. In Britain, where the friends of convalescent soldiers have unlimited opportunities for treating them, the percentage is stated to be 65.

The greatest disappointment of the war was the muddle which the late Government made of the question relating to alcohol and the workers. In February it was discovered that the drunken habits of a number of workmen was seriously hindering the progress of the war. The repair of battleships and the manufacture and transport of munitions were shown to be seriously delayed. The speeches of Lord Kitchener and Mr. Lloyd George on the subject stirred public opinion to such a degree that at the beginning of March there is little doubt that the whole nation was prepared to accept voluntarily the most drastic measures for coping with the evil. But the golden opportunity was allowed to slip by. Mr. Lloyd George had to rouse not only the nation, but Parliament as well. And Parliament was very much afraid of the "trade." In spite of our show of democracy, the chief power under the present system of government is held by those who contribute to the secret party funds—a fact of which the "trade" has taken the fullest advantage. Parliament dared not rouse the opposition of the brewers and distillers. As a result, months were wasted in vain talk, and when in May a half-hearted attempt at a compromise was brought forward, it failed as it deserved. In the meantime the nation very naturally came to the conclusion that the drink problem had been grossly exaggerated. All who know anything of the problem will agree that there was no exaggeration, and that there was, and still is, ample justification for the most stringent measures in regard to all forms of intoxicating drinks.

However, although the opportunity has been lost, there can be no doubt that the outlook for reform is extremely hopeful. Russia and France are giving us practical examples of the

value of temperance. Our enemies and various neutral countries, such as Denmark, have enforced restrictive measures, and have prohibited the use of wheat, barley, potatoes, and other foods in the manufacture of alcoholic drinks. At home the war has called attention to the evils of alcoholism, and the nation is, and will remain, in a serious mood. Excellent reforms have been achieved, noticeably in the direction of the restriction of hours of sale, the military and munitions authorities having in some districts reduced the hours to four a day. At the moment of writing the question is more or less in abeyance, but there is little doubt that the campaign for national economy is having a marked effect on the drink bill. In short, there can be no doubt that the war has advanced the cause of national sobriety in Britain by generations, and that in the near future striking further reforms will be achieved. Indeed, it is more than probable that the forthcoming Budget will mark the beginning of a new era.