

## VILLAGE ALCOHOLISM.

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### A NOTE ON RURAL CONDITIONS MAKING FOR INEBRIETY.

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JEAN INGELOW (of holy memory) has somewhere a little *tableau vivant*, an idyll of alcohol, which goes as straight to the point as one of Bewick's vignettes. A poor woman is sitting late at night in a bare cottage by a fireless hearth, her babies whimpering in their sleep for cold and hunger. And over the snow comes to her the song from the public-house.

"I say, a song.

And doth she curse the alehouse, and the sots  
That drink the night out and their earnings there,  
And drink their manly strength and courage down,  
And drink away the little children's bread?—  
God's curse is curse enough.  
To-morrow she will say a bitter thing,  
Pulling her sleeve down lest the bruises show,  
A bitter thing, but meant for an excuse—  
'My master is not worse than many men.'

It takes a great poet to eternalize such an everyday scene as that. Here it is in village description :

"Mrs. Hicks crying at her door there ! Anything up ?"  
"Up ! Naw" (with some contempt). "Sims an' some on 'em  
kep' it up a bit late, singing and such-like. And he knocked her  
about a bit when he got home. It's that tongue o' hers as does  
it. He'd be all right if she'd let un alone!"

The situation is too trivial for interest. Some people, like the late Mr. Shandy, are "dear searchers" into trifles. What was

the song? Well, I may "hazard a wide solution." The name of the particular lyric in question is beyond recovery, but its character may be reasonably conjectured. A teacher in a village school the other day overheard a little girl singing to an attentive circle of playmates. The words were—well, *intolerable*. Questioned as to where she had picked it up, the little one tearfully protested: "'Tain't nothing but what feyther sings when he comes home drunk." "Feyther" was a labouring man of good character and position, a church-goer, of course, an "exemplary" person in the wider sense of the word. Filth and alcohol go hand in hand.

Habit blunts our perception of anomalies. Suppose a new intelligence (Mr. H. G. Wells's "Angel," say) brought face to face with the drink question in a country village. Drink is an evil, he is told, *nemine contradicente*. Then, its professional propagandists are opposed to and by the professional propagandists of Good? Not at all. Bishops are the guests of brewers; churches are built by the profits of the trade in drink. Why, a clergyman only the other day said publicly that "his experience of the publican was that in nine cases out of ten he was as honest and straightforward a Christian as any man living." Then the total abstainers who try to ruin these honest Christians by persuading people not to buy drink are wicked? Well, perhaps not *wicked* exactly. Still, at any rate, another clergyman said also publicly the other day that "his shame would be great" if a son of his should become a teetotaller. Then you have the diffusers of Evil tolerated and supported by the salaried upholders of Good, and attacked by a class of people to whom it is a shame to belong. It is a very odd state of things—very.

Of course this is not the case in every village in England, not at least to the degree indicated by the expressions quoted. But the relations between the two Establishments—between the Church of England and the Curse of England—are governed in general by a rule which has almost come to have the force of a commandment: "Live and let live." The parson wishes no harm to his friendly parishioner, the publican, who is often his admirer and supporter. Their places of worship are frequented by the same congregation. So, in Roman Catholic India, a popular saint and a popular idol sometimes receive the attentions of the same circle of worshippers. Paganism and Christianity are theoretically incompatible, but neighbours are neighbours. A *modus vivendi* has grown up, very much to the advantage of

that external peace and quietness which village clergy regard as a sign of the spiritual health of the parish. It is seldom that this tranquillity is disturbed by drink. Jean Ingelow's poor woman is anything but likely to show her bruises to the clergyman. Foul talk never comes to *his* ears. "His soul is as a star and dwells apart" in its own firmament of gentility. He alleviates the suffering of the poor to the best of his ability; with its causes he has practically nothing to do. That the gradual exclusion of the actual tiller of the soil from its occupation or ownership may very likely centuries ago have started the snowball of progressive poverty, now so inconveniently bulky, is a matter of historical or possibly political interest. It does not at all affect the cordiality of his relations with "the Hall." The laying down of corn-land in grass is undoubtedly reducing the number of labourers necessary on a farm, and choking the towns with unemployed. "Of course," he says, "the farmer must do what pays him best." (In the particular instance in my mind, this clerical dictum was delivered with as much conclusive force as though "Do ye therefore what pays you best" had been a *logion* of undoubted authenticity.) Drink stands on exactly the same footing in his thoughts. It is a great *fact*, a great industry in which enormous interests are involved, a national Institution with a legal right to existence (see Canon Knox Little's letter, published in the *Spectator*, May 16, as an advertisement) and consequently to recognition. Its representatives have the same claim to respect proportionate to their individual importance as any other law-abiding citizens. To attack them socially would be fatal to Peace. "The harm produced by Drink has been exaggerated. The public-houses in my village are most respectably conducted. Rows are very rare, and as for a conviction for drunkenness——! Such a thing is almost unknown. Make men *better*, and the evils now attributed to drink will disappear."

So a well-meaning parson.

The stream of life flows smoothly in his parish. Of course there is a snag or two. A new-come cobbler is a total abstainer and inclined to proselytize. He is a focus of unneighbourly feeling very trying to the forbearance of the pleasant publican over the way. And one of the churchwardens is sometimes a little thick in his speech. "Never sufficiently so to call for remark from me," the clergyman thinks, with self-congratulation. The village is poor, the old people drop off to the "House," the young slip away to the towns. Labouring families come and go

too rapidly for intimate acquaintance. His own personal circle is fairly permanent. His social orbit is widened by his cycle and his wealthy neighbours' motors.

What is called "parochial duty" was probably never better done in England than at present. But the social gulf between the parson and the poor is wider than ever. He accepts as normal the degradation on the other side. The life of an Esquimaux is revolting to English ideas. It is conditioned by his climate, and his climate is a fact. Cold, ice, and snow. Drink, dependence, and squalor. The grosser concomitants of these unavoidable conditions are naturally not paraded before the superior being who from time to time visits the horde. What he sees he affably condones, unless it obviously goes beyond what is reasonably permissible among Esquimaux. To do battle with Hrymir, the Frost-god, himself, would be manifestly ridiculous. But serious frost-bite is preventable.

Well, I differ. The cases are essentially dissimilar. "It can be done, and England ought to do it." But when once a duty is abandoned as impossible, it is only natural that its importance should be minimized. "After all, what great harm does Drink, as an institution, do in our villages?" says the parson. "Brutal excess of course there will be, here and there, as long as human nature remains what it is. But look at the average country village population. Begin where you like."

Very good. We will begin with the *women*.

It is matter of common remark that the wives of labourers don't keep their good looks very long. Hard work? Domestic drudgery? Well, the work is not very hard (I am not speaking of field women). A small cottage to keep in order; cookery of the very simplest sort; clothes-mending, *sometimes* making (a rare case); washing; care of children, much relieved by school. With a woman of energy and method, the clock seems to stand still, as Dolly Winslow says in "Silas Marner," pretty often. Whence the celebrity of village gossips. It is not *very* hard work, not even very coarsening work. Child-bearing? Babies in over-rapid succession? Contributory, no doubt, but by no means fully explanatory. Give Nature a fair chance, and her recuperatory powers are enormous. What is it, then?

I once asked a lady who, without money or "district," has somehow the gift of acceptability among the poor. She did not

hesitate a moment. "Oh, Drink," she said. "But it takes a lot more Drink than a village woman can afford to destroy the complexion or ruin the figure, or turn a fresh, buxom lass into a baggy harridan in that time!" She laughed. "Oh, the little more, and how much it is! And the little less, and what miles away!" A cottage budget is a matter of delicate equilibrium. A little more alcohol means a *great deal* less food." "Not *much* less food, after all, does it?" "How and when have a good deal to do with much and little," said my oracle. "Here is a young pair with fifteen shillings a week, relative abundance. As her first confinement approaches, the wife wants more food; Nature demands it. She very seldom gets it. The money goes on hats. When baby comes, her condition *requires* plenty of nourishing food, properly prepared. It is very seldom indeed she gets that. As it is her first baby, she stays perhaps a fortnight in bed. Ten days is more usual, and some poor souls are up and about in eight. Horrible, isn't it? Then she naturally gets very low. She manages to cook for her husband, but she "doesn't seem to fancy" food herself. She turns to the teapot, which makes things worse. The doctor says she must have stout. What she really needs is bed and a mutton chop daily, but he knows it is no good ordering that. If the doctor doesn't order stout, the neighbours declare she is dying for want of it. It gives no trouble, and she finds it very supporting. Say fourpence a day and her husband's beer fourpence. Take four shillings and eightpence from fifteen shillings and you will see there must be a pinch somewhere, even in those early days. It is the food that feels it. More tea and village baker's bread, less bacon and butcher's meat. Suppose the young wife's stout left off in a month or two. She has found a specific against "lowness," and she turns to it. The next baby, the whole thing *da capo*, only the natural craving for additional food during pregnancy is allayed by regular beer. The habit is formed. So just at the period when Nature demands more food and better for the nourishment of the successive babies and the confirmation of matronly beauty, the food gets worse and less, and alcohol in one form or another takes its place. The mothers suffer in looks and health, and the babies suffer in physique or character. That goes a good way towards explaining why half our recruits are rejected as unfit for service. But you see there's nothing *scandalous* about it, nothing to call for clerical expostulation, for instance. Of course there are other results. Drink flies to a woman's tongue. She nags. The nagging of the wife and the squalling of the babies drive the man

to the pub. I dare say they seldom drink there to (legal) excess. But when men of dull lives and few interests get together *for the purpose* of drinking and talking, the talk is infallibly of a degrading sort, and the atmosphere of obscene brutalism accompanies them home. Jean Ingelow's idyll is typical enough. But little domesticities of this sort don't concern the parson. They don't even come to his ears."

"So you think husband and wife went to church the next Sunday?"

"Why not?"