

A NOTE ON THE STUDY OF INEBRIETY:  
THE UNWRITTEN BOOK.

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WHEN "The Northern Cobbler" was written, I happened to say to Lord Tennyson: "I expect you will be read now on every temperance platform in the land," and the poet replied something after this fashion: "Yes; I dare say I may be read, and what I say will be applauded, but I shall probably be liked best by those who will not need the lesson of the story. The question is, will it reach—and will any parable reach—the unredeemed drunkard?" I ventured to say in reply: "One can never tell. There must be a mass of hearers who have not 'heard' in the sense that they do not set an example yet; they are favourably inclined till it comes to self-denial themselves." "Like you and me," he laughed. And that is just it. I was once so situated that I had set myself the task of reclaiming a friend of mine. He was a very humble friend indeed, but he had that saving sense of humour which is, at least, one of the "salts" of life. I set to work to compete with the public-house as to amusements, warmth, a cheerful room, etc., and contrived never to finish till the public-house had closed. I was aiming at one man's welfare, but I asked a lot similarly inclined. We were making excellent progress, and I had been lecturing on Charles Kingsley. As I finished, a working-man rose and said to me: "But he was a drinker of beer." I nodded affirmatively. My inquisitor proceeded: "Can you tell us one writer of fiction who tries to reclaim the drunkard who sets an example by not drinking?" And I was, at the instant, that psychological moment, unable to do so, and I felt the sands of others' resolves slipping away from under all our feet. I knew my missionary fervour was as useless from that moment as so much broken crockery. The man who was my

interlocutor was a rather remarkable fellow. I never knew such a genius for asking "discomfortable" questions. He had the faculty of spoiling the game of any mere professor of temperance to a degree I should never have believed had I not known the facts. A very unfortunate would-be M.P. had been sent to the North to contest a safe seat for the Liberal party. On the night before the poll he spoke (and most eloquently, I do not doubt) on the temperance question. But there was a man in that room who had travelled 200 miles to ask him just two questions. They concerned the ownership of two village public-houses away in a Southern shire. He had to own up, and he lost the seat. Within the memory of man (publican included) no Tory had ever sat for that borough before!

And so I fear I am driven back on the value of example as the one supreme factor of success in individual influence.

Someone once said that a very interesting article might be written on the "Dogs of Fiction." I think a very valuable article might be written on the "Drunkards of Fiction," but I still should be inclined to say that however strange such fiction would be, the truth, as in the classic phrase, would be even stranger.

But the book I want to see written is this book. Let us suppose a man of education has fallen into alcoholism; from alcoholism he makes a life-extract of his lower centres, and comes within reach of the criminal law. He has a sentence of seven years, which means, if he is a good convict, eighty-four months less twenty-one. I want the diary of his first twelve months, when, suddenly cut off from all alcohol, he is face to face with his own changing neuroses and mutable fits of despair. I also want the diary of his emancipated brain cells when the hope of a speedy release is linked, with an unclouded outlook of his true position. But I desire the book to be written by the prisoner from inside, and not by the poet or philanthropist or trained writer of fiction from the external standpoint. I want life-fiction and not fiction-fiction. And until we get the true experience of the man himself—written himself by the man who can write himself down—we shall not have the very first letter of the alphabet of the bitter bibliography of inebriety from the point of view of the human parable. And yet I doubt if the man who should write it would ever publish it after reflection. And why I say so is this: I have put away in

the arcana of my study my own diary before, during, and after addiction to opium. And once upon a time I allowed a publisher, who was a friend of mine, to read a page each of all three of those chapters of life. He said he had never read anything so horrible in all his experience. When he told me this I re-read them all, and I must say I agreed with him, though my experience was not his. Now, *during* alcoholism we should have no diary: the days would be blanks; but the opium habit is (or was with me) distinguished by a capacity for detail, and the details were, strange to say, impersonal chiefly, and took the form of a pitiful sort of criticism of others. If my experience is a sound experience, the opium habit has never yet been written from the inside of its bondage in any work of fiction; nor do I think has alcoholic inebriety been so written. Everything has been "discovered" by the idealist as to the environment and relationships of the drunkard, but the drunkard has not been written yet. If he had ever been so written, he might *deter*. He never will deter out of the fiction which poses as fact, and is (so far) put down as realism in the "novel with a purpose" of yesterday or to-day. The novelist might as well try to "discover" the mind of the insane!