

AUTHORS AND ALCOHOL



"Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch stands on the inside, looking disdainfully out. George Bernard Shaw stands on the outside, looking bitterly in."

By ELLERY RAND

OVER in England a tempest has been raging; not precisely in a teapot, but in and out of an ale jug. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch stands on the inside, looking disdainfully out. George Bernard Shaw stands on the outside, looking bitterly in.

Quiller-Couch asserted boldly that a total abstainer was imperfectly equipped for high literature. Shaw took violent exception to this statement. He offered Shelley and himself as examples to prove it fallacious. He said, "If Quiller-Couch asserted that alcohol can add a single inch of gray matter to the brain, then I want to know how much he had had when he said it."

Altogether, it seemed too good a fight to leave tucked away in England. So a number of American writers have been asked how they felt about it. Hamlin Garland supports Shaw. Irvin S. Cobb and Charles Hanson Towne stand up for Quiller-Couch, each in his characteristic manner. So does Samuel Hopkins Adams, with certain reservations. Gertrude Atherton and Robert Chambers find the issue incapable of a general solution.

The trend of the answers received is against prohibition. This does not mean, of course, that all American writers are opposed to it. It indicates simply that a particular group seems to show that reaction. Possibly the anti-drink writers are less accessible; possibly they are more reticent. If any of them find their blood boiling at the opinions voiced here, let them rise and declare themselves.

Mr. Cobb had heard all about the Shaw-Quiller-Couch contention, and he had some definite opinions on it, put and waiting to be voiced. He settled back in his chair. He drew out a long cigar and attacked it industriously. Then he began:

"I don't know that I'd go as far as Sir Quiller-Couch, and say that a total abstainer is imperfectly

equipped for high literature. I'm not sure that I know just what is meant by a total abstainer; and I'm not at all certain of what comes under the head of high literature.

"But this I can say quite positively: That an enormous amount of interesting, exhilarating writing has its background and basis in alcohol—not in drunkenness, but in moderate indulgence.

"There is a spirit engendered by a mellow bottle passed around the table that heightens the joys of human companionship and tints the world a bright and comfortable rose-color. It sharpens the wit and ripens the philosophy of the most staid and stolid. It makes people more genial and gentle and amiable. It makes them more truly themselves. And a writer can judge them better, and give a sounder and more telling picture of them, when he has had a few drinks in their company.

"I believe that old Bobby Burns would have been more of a mute, inglorious figure if he hadn't had a good bit of Scotch in him. I don't think our own James Whitcomb Riley would have touched so feelingly the heartstrings of the great American public if he hadn't tried many a friendly glass of beer in the back parlor of his favorite saloon in Indiana.

"And think of the Rubaiyat," Mr. Cobb quoted tenderly:

"I wonder often what the vintners buy
One-half so precious as the stuff they sell."

"I'd like to ask Mr. Shaw what would have happened to Omar Khayyam if he had stuck to the water wagon. And we can go back still further. Take Noah. There's quite a story in the Bible about his fondness for the fruit of the vine. You know"—he waxed suddenly confidential—"personally, I never have believed that Noah really did take all those animals on the Ark. He may have had a cat or so, and a dog to keep the cat out of mischief; but he didn't take the whole

troupe along. It would have spoiled his trip for him. He probably went aboard stocked with plenty of his best home brew—and then he imagined those animals. He let his fancy wander at will. And he turned out the first and greatest circus story that has ever gladdened the hearts of men and children.

"And as for Bernard Shaw and his prohibition—somebody dragged me to see 'Back to Methuselah' the other night; and if teetotaling is in any degree responsible for that, I say bring on the stoops of Falernian—pass around the Wassail bowl—make free with the wines and ales, not to mention the cocktails, cigars and highballs.

"Mr. Shaw is a prohibitionist and a vegetarian. That is to say, he admits to having sworn off strong waters and red meats. Well, I'm beginning to feel that he swore off thinking as well.

"'Back to Methuselah'—Mr. Cobb spoke with the conviction born of pain and suffering—"Back to Methuselah" is one of the dreariest things that ever was written. It has no point, no excuse, no connection with life. If it were signed with any other name than Shaw's, people would laugh it out of countenance.

"It is strange what a hold he has on the popular imagination. He has produced a school of literature to which he is the sole contributor; and he has established a cult that worships him. He was clever enough to build up his own audience. Undoubtedly, he wrote some very keen and arresting things. But that seems to be all over. Now, it looks as though the school of literature had stopped producing, leaving its cult to hang on to the ashes of a busted genius. So if Shaw says stop drinking, I say look what abstemiousness did for him, and go right on.

"From an economic point of view, the man who took the first drink placed a heavy burden on society.

But from an artistic standpoint he had a great idea. And if the ultra-prohibitionists have their way, if never again, save by stealth and law-breaking, we can have a drink, in future years literature, art, and living itself will show a dullness, a dreariness and sadness which should be foreign to the volatile nature of the people on this hemisphere."

Mr. Cobb took off his erudite spees. He put what remained of his cigar on the tray before him, and rose with an air of having settled everything. "There," he said, gravely. "There you are. And I've said enough to get me in bad with every prohibitionist in America."

Mr. Towne stood firmly with Mr. Cobb on the side of those who like their bottle now and then.

"Personally," he said, "I've never written a line of verse or prose with even a drop of alcohol in me, and I don't see how any one could. I do know a few writers who have done it, and produced some of their greatest works under the stimulus of drink. But I'm not concerned with them just now.

"I'm talking about the great proportion of men who engage in letters as a profession. And I know that very often their most inspiring and original ideas come to them after they've had a glass or two of champagne. They gather vivid impressions and find new sensations which they use later in their writing. They are more truly alive and sensitive. Things are clearer and more poignant to them.

"That is why I dislike prohibition so much. It robs the artist of the mental relief from the tedium of life which is so essential to him. And it robs him of that glorious thing—contrast. No artist can live on a deadly level of everyday. He needs fluctuations, variety. His spirit needs change to keep it alive. He does not need to get drunk; but he should be stimulated ever so often if he is to produce masterpieces.

"It is all nonsense to say that artists are as other men. They are

a race apart. If they have greater faults, they have greater powers to make reparation for them. They must be taken as they are. Ask any intelligent woman about them. She will tell you that she would rather be married to an artist, with all his failings and shortcomings, than to the goodliest, godliest, commuting business man that ever put his money in a savings bank.

"Fancy a poet being for prohibition! Even if he did not drink himself, his imagination, his ability to project himself into the sensations of others, would prevent him from assuming an attitude of superiority over the other fellow.

"It is only the people without any breadth of mind or sense of humor who can possibly stand with Mr. Volstead. Look at the dullness that they are responsible for. Look at the lengths to which they are forcing us. They make stealth inevitable, and poison highly probable." Mr. Towne was growing dramatic. "Why, I'd rather see five thousand scoundrels dead drunk in the gutter than five good men blind from wood alcohol.

"And think of what they've done to New York—the unspeakable aridity they have produced. What exists today to supply the easy camaraderie of the old saloon-bar? It furnished a place where kindred souls could perform mental gymnastics—just as definitely as one can now perform physical gymnastics on another kind of bar. I should rather see the old days back, when there was some real conversation, than these dry-as-dust evenings when New York looks like Gopher Prairie and has about as much resiliency and glamour.

"Booze, per se, may be bad for most of us; but it is a mighty fine thing for some of us. And I say, let each man, each artist, decide for himself how much he needs to give his mental cog-wheels their proper oiling."

Mr. Chambers is a hard man to

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reach. He has a valet who watches over him like a faithful Cerberus. Every time I telephoned I was informed that "Mr. Chambers is in 'is bawth.'" or "Mr. Chambers is 'avin' 'is breakfast.'"

Finally I did get Mr. Chambers himself on the wire. I explained that I wanted his opinion on the Shaw-Quiller-Couch discussion. "What do you think about it?" he asked me. I told him that I had not made up my mind. "Well, neither have I," he answered. I floundered for a moment. Then Mr. Chambers broke in charitably. "I tell you what you can do. You write out what you would imagine I would say about it, and then bring it up and show it to me. I'll tell you if you are right."

I rang off, dismayed. That seemed rather a large order. At length I hit upon an idea. I knew that he writes love stories. I assumed that he knows all about love. I would have him say that just as one must experience love to write about it, so must one know the feelings that are produced by drink before he can adequately describe them.

I got an appointment with Mr. Chambers. We drove down town in his car. I was thankful for every traffic block that kept us longer on the road.

At the outset, he frightened me a little. "I warn you," he said. "I think the whole thing is a lot of foolishness. How can any one say that writers should drink or that they shouldn't drink? It's about as sensible as saying that they should eat corned-beef hash. It is good for some of them, and bad for others. Some like it. Some don't. It is pointless to stand definitely with one side or with the other."

After that, I felt a slight hesitation about telling him my version of where he stood on the question. But he was courteous and disarming, so I plunged boldly ahead. I stated the parallel between love and drinking that I wanted to attribute to him.

Mr. Chambers laughed heartily. "Don't you say that I think any such foolish thing as that," he admonished. "Do you suppose I fall in love every time I write a book? Does a man need to die to write a death scene, or to murder to describe a killing? No—the only requisite is imagination. With imagination, a writer can do anything. Without it, nothing will help him."

I said I thought it was different with drinking. I didn't think a man could describe getting drunk unless he had been drunk.

Mr. Chambers laughed again. "No, I don't think that is necessary. One kind of intoxication is very much like another. As far as

I am concerned, I can get just the same kind of exhilaration from breathing the clear mountain air of the North as I can out of whisky. Not"—and his eyes twinkled—"not that I need a great deal of persuasion to take a drink now and then. But the outdoors in the country braces me in the same way. I go up just as often as I can. It makes a new man of me every time."

I must have looked a little dubious, because he watched me quizzically for a minute. "You're not thinking of trying to get drunk for the experience of the thing, are you?" he asked.

I blushed and muttered sheepishly. "Well," he said, "I shouldn't ever attempt to advise any one on the general question of drinking, but there is one thing that I can say very emphatically. Just as long as you are trying to work, keep away from the stuff. It is bound to change your perspective, if only very slightly. When you are writing, you need all the clarity and keenness you can possibly muster. You will draw on every inch of your mental resources. And drinking is likely to upset you. I know I shouldn't dream of touching a drop of anything while I am at work. If I expect to write in the evening, I won't take even a taste of the mildest claret with my dinner. For, whatever else can be said in favor of alcohol or against it, it is dangerous to try to work and drink at the same time."

Mrs. Atherton stands somewhere near Mr. Chambers in her attitude toward the controversy. "I don't think you can make any set rule about it that would fit every one," she said. "Because every one is affected differently by drinking."

"As far as I am concerned, I never take the stuff. Not from any moral scruples, but because it makes me dull and depressed. If I depend on alcohol for stimulation, I should probably be in a stupor most of the time."

"I rely on my natural vitality"—and Mrs. Atherton has plenty of it; the kind that at once rests and stimulates and communicates itself to those about her—"natural vitality and tea. Not tea that has been allowed to stand, but tea drawn fresh from the leaves. That is the only way to take it. When it draws too long, it becomes the most deadly sort of poison."

"I suppose tea seems rather mild and ineffectual, doesn't it?" she asked. As I sat watching Mrs. Atherton, it struck me that nothing seemed ineffectual when she talked about it; but I did not interrupt her. "Well," she continued, "I find that it helps me in my writing, and, after all, the writing is the thing. What-

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ever makes that easier is worth taking.

"I do think that most people who write need some sort of bracer at one time or another. Take Mr. Shaw himself as an example. His best plays were written in the vigor of his manhood. He has continued writing after his natural fire has abated; and his work shows a slump. If he had taken to some sort of a stimulant when his power started to decline, the chances are that his latest plays would compare more favorably with his earlier and better ones.

"At the outset, it probably matters very little what form of bracer is tried. I don't think that people crave any one definite thing. They take to one thing, then they get dependent on it, and have to stick to it. They form their habits unconsciously.

"Of course, those who rely on whisky find that they need more and more of it—but, at that, I believe whisky is no more harmful than coffee. Coffee is the most pernicious kind of a drug.

"I wish more people realized how helpful it is to take a tonic once in a while, something with a little strychnine or iron in it. Very often, when I feel that I haven't an inch of go left in me, my doctor gives me a tonic, and it sets me on my feet again in a remarkably short time.

"There are other ways of stimulating the mind. Some people find the deepest inspiration in spiritualism. Just look at our friend, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and all the fuss he is stirring up." Mrs. Atherton's eyes showed the shadow of a smile.

"I must confess that it's hard for me to understand these spirit-seekers. I don't see why they want to bother so much about the next world when there is so much right here to intrigue them. And those unpleasant ghosts that are always flickering about us." She shuddered. "Really, it makes me nervous to think that we never can get away from them. I for one like my privacy once in a while.

"Then, of course, there's music. Music, and especially the opera, affects me very profoundly. I very seldom hear an opera that some new theme or sensation does not present itself to me. Often when I feel myself a little stale, or tangled up in a story, I go to the opera. It rarely fails to help me. Sometimes it makes me quite dizzy and light-headed. It affects me much as drinking must affect those who like it.

"Why, only a few weeks ago, I went to hear 'Parsifal.' When I left, I felt as though I was walking on air. I went straight from the opera to a tea. There I started talking to a man who had been divorced the week before. I knew perfectly well that he had been divorced—but, to my intense horror, I found myself asking him how his wife was. I just couldn't help myself. He must have thought I'd been drinking.

"There is another thing that affects me strangely—and that is a good roaring storm. I shall never forget one Summer that I was spending in a house built on the top of a mountain in California. I was writing the 'Tower of Ivory.' For fifty days and fifty nights the heavens played havoc. It poured and thundered and lightened with scarcely any let up—the most splendid and furious storm I have ever seen. It reminded me of Wagner—I could always hear themes of his echoing through the wind and the rain. 'Tower of Ivory' is concerned very largely with Wagnerian music. I could not dissociate my writing from the tempest. And when at length the downpour stopped, my brain stopped, too. For a long time after the weather cleared, I simply could not write.

"Well," she finished, "We've wandered pretty far from Shaw and Quiller-Couch, but they were too readily disposed of. All I wanted to say about their discussion was, you can't generalize on the liquor question. Let each man make out his own case."

Mr. Adams saw me fiddling nervously with a pencil and a notebook as he started speaking. He smiled reminiscently. "Is it still bad form to take notes while you are interviewing?" he asked. "I know it was when I was doing it—many years ago. But I don't mind your notebook. I really wish you would use it, and take down what I say word for word, if you can." He

laughed. "I'll probably get into enough trouble if I'm quoted exactly; and Heaven knows what will happen to me if you start touching up what I say.

"To begin with, of all the writers I know, I can't think of a single one who doesn't drink, at least in moderation. Not that they drink while they are working; very few of them can do that and stay on the list of active producers.

"That eighteenth-century idea of drawing literary power straight out of the bottle is a little outworn, I think. It may have served for lethargic old Englishmen who let themselves fall into ruts and needed prodding. But the American of today does not require it. He is too full of vitality and nervous energy. He can incite himself to his best efforts without any artificial stimulation.

"So drinking for the specific purpose of making one's self capable of writing well need not be too seriously considered. But as for drinking outside of working hours, as a relief and a recompense to the creative artistic temperament, that is another matter.

"It seems to me that the esthetic side of the drink question has been strangely neglected. I have been wanting to say something about it for a long time, and I may as well do it now.

"Alcohol adds to the misery of the world—but to be fair-minded we must concede that it also adds to the joy and the beauty of living. The creative artist is inevitably committed to everything concerned with beauty. He loves music and painting. In much the same way, he can love drinking. It opens up new and pleasant vistas. It enriches and colors life for him.

"Now mind, I'm not speaking of drunkenness; for when writers become drunkards, the chances are that their work is over. I refer to moderate indulgence, which comprises about 90 per cent. of drinking—or did before the Volstead act was passed.

"No, I can't think of any one writing now who doesn't indulge. And I can't recall any of our early American writers who were teetotalers."

"How about Longfellow?" I hazarded. Mr. Adams smiled. "I can see how you would imagine he was an abstainer. Most of his poetry is a little—dry. But he has a few passages that suggest the wine of youth—and as a matter of fact, I think he did drink a little.

"I suppose they had their conten-

tions just as we have them. Do you remember that poem of Oliver Wendell Holmes's—done over by a teetotaler?" I had never seen it, so Mr. Adams showed it to me. Here it is:

ODE FOR A SOCIAL MEETING. (With Slight Alterations by a Teetotaler.)

Here is a little poem I sent to a committee for a certain celebration. I understood that it was to be a festive and convivial occasion, and ordered myself accordingly. It seems the President of the day was a Teetotaler. I received a note from him in the following words, containing the copy subjoined.

"Dear Sir: Your poem gives good satisfaction to the committee. The sentiments expressed with reference to liquor are not, however, those generally entertained by this community. I have therefore consulted with the clergyman of this place, who has made some slight changes which he thinks will remove all objections, and keep the valuable portions of the poem. Please to inform me of your charge for said poem. Our means are limited, &c., &c., &c. Yours with respect"

Here it is with the slight alterations:

Come! Fill a fresh bumper, for why should we go
logwood

While the ~~purple~~ still reddens our
cups as they flow"
decoction

Pour out the ~~rich~~ still bright
with the sun.

Till o'er the brimmed crystal the
dye-stuff
shall run.

The ~~purple~~ half-ripened apples
purple-stained clusters their
life-dews have bled.

How sweet is the ~~breath~~ of the
sugar of lead

For Summer's ~~best~~ rank poisons
lie hid in
wines!

That were garnered by ~~unwieldy~~
boys smoking long-pines.
who leached through the vines.

Then a ~~scowl~~ and a ~~howl~~, and a
sneer
and a ~~chance~~
strychnine and whisky and

For ~~all the good wine~~ and ~~ratsbane~~
and beer!

In cellar, in pantry, in attic, in
hall,

Down, down with the tyrant that
masters us all!

Mr. Garland alone stands valiantly with Shaw. "A man's ability to write," he said, "depends on his endowment of brains and his special faculty for expression. If he is gifted in the line of letters, he can write whether he drinks or not. But he can do better work if he does not drink. He will write well, not be-

cause he drinks, but in spite of the fact that he drinks."

He chuckled suddenly—a surprisingly boyish chuckle for such a dignified gentleman. "You know," he confided, "I don't take this argument very seriously. There doesn't seem to be much about it that needs fighting over. The doctors made a pretty clear case of it, I think. They have analyzed the effects of alcohol on the brain and the nervous system, and shown them to be deleterious in every case. I think every one is better off without drinking. I know that I am.

"I am not a teetotaler, but I am a Prohibitionist. Theoretically, I'm against drinking, though sometimes at dinners and parties it is hard to avoid it. I can willingly spare liquor. I should be much more alarmed if coffee were prohibited. I like coffee, though it is a stimulant, and probably makes me pay by some compensatory reaction for any pleasure and benefit that it gives me.

"I don't drink or smoke or chew. I've never been in a saloon in my life, and don't propose to start now. "Of course," he smiled, "men that enjoy these things may say that I'm not in their class, and to get in their class I'd have to cultivate their habits. Well, I'll have to leave it to the critics to decide between their work and mine, and between their work and Shaw's. When any of these gentlemen climb up into Bernard Shaw's class, it will be on another kind of ladder than a row of beer and champagne bottles. They may get there—everything is possible. But it won't be with the help of alcohol.

"You know, this talk about drinking among the authors is a sort of tradition that comes down from Crab Street, a survival of the tales of the Mermaid Inn. There's very little in it."

"I can become as perfectly hilarious over a cracker and a small cup of coffee as I care to get. The kind of inspiration that comes out of a bottle doesn't appeal to me. I hate the whole lobster-palace, jazz-dugged atmosphere, and I think people are beginning to tire of it."

I suggested to Mr. Garland that several writers had criticized Shaw for his latest play. He reflected for a moment in silence. "'Back to Methuselah,'" he began, "is a curious and rather baffling piece of work. I have read everything that Shaw ever wrote, and I find it the least satisfying of all his work. I can't follow his plan in it. Yet it contains a great deal that stimulates, though, and repays study.

"Anyway, I don't see what that has to do with the drink question. Shaw is likely to do something quite different and even more remarkable at any moment—and he will do it on cold water and a vegetarian diet, too.

"This delusion that writers need to drink reminds me of a story that Thoreau used to tell. 'One day,' said Thoreau, 'as I was walking in the fields, I chanced upon a farmer at work on his soil. We fell to discussing vegetarianism. I was defending it. But the farmer could not see it. "No, sir," he said, "if a man has to work, he needs strength—and how can he get any strength unless he eats good meat?" And all the time we were talking, Thoreau would conclude, 'the farmer was being dragged along by two powerful oxen who never ate anything but a little green grass.'

"If these men who talk so much about needing liquor will only stop and consider, they will realize that real literary power does not need to be coaxed along with whisky."