

**THE POISON PROBLEM;
OR, THE CAUSE AND
CURE OF INTEMPERANCE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649676255

The Poison Problem; Or, The Cause and Cure of Intemperance by Felix L. Oswald

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FELIX L. OSWALD

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THE

POISON PROBLEM

*OR THE CAUSE AND CURE OF
INTEMPERANCE*

Revised BY
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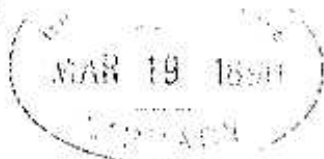
"Light is Help from Above."—G. E. Linsane.

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NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
1887

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Gift of
Gen. S. A. Green

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P R E F A C E.

“WHAT shall we do to be saved?” is a question which must force itself upon the thoughts of all who believe in the correlation of health and happiness, when they reflect upon the facts established by the North American and West European statistics of intemperance. In Great Britain the consumption of fermented and distilled liquors has increased since 1850 at the average yearly rate of three and one third per cent; in France, two per cent; in Switzerland, five and a half per cent; in northern Germany (including Saxony and Alsace-Lorraine) the manufacture of malt liquors has doubled since 1866; and even in the United States the consumption of intoxicating drinks of all kinds has advanced at a rate exceeding that of our rapid growth in population by one fifth. In Norway, Poland, Galicia, and the Danubian principalities, the production of distilled liquors is the only growing branch of industry; and in European Turkey the habitual use of alcoholic stimulants is no longer confined to the trinitarian subjects of the sultan. Since the harvest-time of 1873, while Ireland and eastern Brazil were struggling with famine, and thousands of our fellow men in Persia, Armenia, Cash-

mere, and Greenland actually died for want of bread, between 390,000,000 and 400,000,000 tons of bread-stuffs have been converted from a blessing into a curse. In England and Scotland alone the production of alcoholic drinks has consumed half a billion bushels of cereals, every handful of which has strewn the path of coming generations with the seeds of misery and disease.

The pious belief that the excess of every social evil tends to insure its abolition, seems, indeed, to have been almost disproved by the history of the alcohol habit. When the yoke of despots had made deliverance more desirable than life itself, despotism had reached the term of its power. When the rule of priests had made the hatred of shams burn hotter than the fire of the stake, no Jesuitical intrigues could prevent the triumph of the Protestant revolt. But, though the evil of intemperance has long been recognized as the blighting curse of modern civilization, the sore-felt need of relief seems thus far to have revealed no remedy. In spite of all our philanthropists have done to stem or deflect the current, the *Gift-quelle*, the dire poison-fountain of social life, has overflowed its ancient banks, and threatens to submerge the sanitarium of the primitive highlands. In countries of Christendom where the ebb of all other industries has enforced a degree of frugality unknown to the revival periods of mediæval asceticism, the liquor traffic still swells the tide of revenue and disease. Remedy after remedy has been proposed, tested, and changed for another, doomed to a similar failure.

And yet the general tendency of those changes

reveals an advance in the right direction. Philosophers have long thought it probable that the historians of the future will deal with the records of legislative reforms rather than with the bulletins of battles and bombardments, and the value of such records in characterizing the spirit of the age is strikingly illustrated by the chronicle of temperance legislation. The necessity of controlling the grosser excesses of intemperance was always more or less recognized, but until lately the efforts to that purpose were directed to the suppression of the symptoms rather than to the removal of the cause. There was a time when the belief in the necessity of alcoholic stimulation would have proved a wholly unassailable axiom, even if legislators could have been induced to waste their time on such secular vanities as the preservation of health. It was the millennium of madness, when the promotion of sanitary habits was thought of far less importance than the enforcement of insane ceremonies; when the images of miracle-mongers lodged in gilded domes while the image of God rotted in a hovel; when men were tortured to death for whispering a doubt against the pretensions of their spiritual taskmasters, but were freely permitted to poison themselves and their neighbors with spirituous abominations. In that golden age of antiphysical doctrines, temperance had no chance whatever. Cavaliers and commoners vied in "wassail"; nay, the moral exemplars of Christendom outguzzled the thirstiest laymen:

"O monachi, vestri stomachi sunt amphoræ Bacchi,
Vos cetis, Deus est testis, turpissima pestis,"

rhymed Ulric Hutten, and there is no doubt that for centuries every large convent had a private wine-cellar. The monastery of Weltenburg, on the Danube, operated the largest brewery of the German Empire, and thousands of prelates owned both breweries and vineyards. Spiritual tyranny and spirituous license went hand in hand. Yet, even then, communities had to legislate against the bestial abuse of that license; and there were voluntary friends of temperance, men of higher ideals, scholars and philanthropists, who abhorred drunken riots, though they loved their wine, and recommended a self-denial which they found often more easy to preach than to practice. Their motto was "Moderation." Be temperate in all things. Keep the safe middle course.

A dangerous fallacy lurks in those precepts. It may be safe to compromise conflicting duties, as charity and economy, patriotism and domestic obligations; but where is the golden mean of virtue and vice? How keep a safe middle course on the slippery road to ruin? After opening the flood-gate, not one man in a thousand can stay the progress of a besetting vice, and of all besetting vices the alcohol habit is the most inevitably progressive. An unnatural appetite has no natural limits. For weeks, sometimes for months, young toppers have to struggle against the protests of a better instinct, but the final surrender of that monitor marks the incipience of a morbid craving, which every gratification makes only more exorbitant. For, by and by the jaded organism fails to respond to the spur; the stimulant palls, but the hankering for stimulation remains, and the toper has

to satisfy his thirst either by increasing the quantum of his tippie or by resorting to stronger poisons. After kindling the flames of alcoholism it is in vain to urge the advantage of a moderate conflagration; one might as well recommend a moderate use of the privilege to ignite a barrel of gunpowder. We can not tolerate the use of intoxicants and hope to prevent intoxication.

The lessons of experience, if not of physiology, gradually taught the friends of temperance to relinquish that hope. A strong party of the Reform League declared in favor of total abstinence from alcoholic beverages, and devised plans for the effective propaganda of their tenets. They doubted the expediency of coercion in "a matter of private habits," but shrank from no sacrifice in braving the odium of personal intolerance, in advocating their principles in public lectures, in printing and distributing millions of eloquent pamphlets. Their own habits were generally distinguished by a strict conformity to their principles. They hoped to cure the alcohol-habit by illustrating in theory and practice the advantages of uncompromising abstinence. Their motto was "Repudiation."

A good deal of learning has lately been paraded in demonstrating the legal necessity of distinguishing between crimes and vices, between direct and indirect offences against the statutes of the moral code. But the recognized interests of public welfare have always been pursued across the boundaries of such distinctions; or, more properly speaking, the varying definitions of good and evil have ever biased the pre-