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THE DRUNKARD'S PROGRESS:

NINETEENTH-CENTURY TEMPERANCE DRAMA

THE VALUE of the nineteenth-century temperance movement has long been acknowledged by social historians. Both its zeal and its reforms were necessary to combat appalling and widespread drunkenness produced mainly by the squalor and monotony of industrial life. From about 1830, in both Britain and the United States, temperance organizations—the Washingtonians, the Rechabites, the United Kingdom Alliance, the Band of Hope, the Church of England Temperance Society, and scores of others—fought grimly by voluntary persuasion and legal restriction to stop people drinking. Like all militant groups, they often overreached themselves, and their fervency was sometimes a matter of irritation to the drinker and of amusement to the observer of manners.

The enthusiasm and determination of the temperance movement is most apparent, not in tables of statistics or the pages of historians, but in its own creative literature: hymns, poems, short stories, novels, plays, mottoes, pledges, primers, and a great mass of miscellaneous material. All this appeared in a variety of publications, such as *Illustrated Temperance Anecdotes*, *The Temperance Hymn-Book*, *Temperance Rhymes*, *Popular Temperance Stories*, *The Band of Hope Review* and *The Temperance Penny Magazine*. There were dozens of temperance periodicals alone. It was an age that read *The Drunkard's Plea for Sunday Closing*, sang "Water, water, water, clear,/Not for us the gin and beer," and

I have signed the pledge, dear mother;
Now to keep it I must pray.
No more beer for me, dear mother,
Lest in evil ways I stray.

Temperance poets warned the age with "Shun the tempting tavern door" and poems, like the following, which built up horror and pathos stanza by stanza. The first verse reads

'Tis but a drop, the father said,
 And gave it to his son;
 But little did he think a work
 Of death was then begun.

Temperance propaganda was aimed at old and young alike. A physician produced a "Moral and Physical Thermometer" which showed the diseases, vices, and punishments (ending in Botany Bay and the gallows) attaching to various drinks. For children the drawing of a serpent twisting around a bottle of East India Pale Ale underlined the moral of the letter B:

B stands for Beer with its frothy white head,
 Bids you drink deep till your health it has fled;
 Then, like the treacherous foam of the deep,
 It leaves you in sorrow and anguish to weep.

This literature was accompanied by the often crude, sometimes brilliant, but always graphic drawings and engravings of temperance artists such as George Cruikshank, whose three series, "The Bottle", "The Drunkard's Children", and "The Gin Shop" are among the first illustrative works of the time. The big stick was the chief weapon of temperance writers and artists, although playing upon emotions of fear, horror, and self-preservation alternated with techniques of gentle persuasion, sweet reason, and happy pictures of the teetotal factory worker and the home of sobriety.

Nowhere is temperance propaganda more extreme or more violent than in nineteenth-century melodrama. In selecting the stage as a medium, temperance writers chose wisely, for melodrama itself is a form given over wholly to extremes of moral behaviour and character delineation, violent emotionalism and physical incident, the rewarding of virtue and the punishment of vice. These characteristics could only be expressed by exaggerated acting techniques and inflated dialogue. As a means to an end, melodrama was ideally suited to moral admonition and horrifying displays of the consequences of drink. Sensationalism was an essential aspect of temperance appeal, and it was most powerfully expressed on the stage.

Several temperance plays might be glanced at as characteristic of the whole *genre*. They are generally similar in content. The first act exhibits a young married couple with children, whose happiness is marred only by the husband's tendency to reach for the bottle. Encouraged by the inevitable melodramatic villain with designs on wife and property, or both, he falls deeper into the cesspool of alcohol, turns nasty to his wife, and wanders irresponsibly as a drunken vagrant

far from home. The forlorn and poverty-stricken wife searches for him hopelessly; the villain turns up to chuckle over the husband's fall and to press himself obnoxiously on the heroine; the children complain of cold and hunger; the wife totters on the brink of madness. At the last possible moment, the erring husband either regains his senses, swears off liquor forever, and returns a new man to his joyful family, or, more frequently, a temperance spokesman appears as *deus ex machina* to save him. After surviving dreadful attacks of *delirium tremens*, the hero signs the pledge and is rewarded by unexpected wealth, the imprisonment of the villain, a devotion to the cause of temperance, and renewed tenderness from his ever-faithful, ever-suffering wife.

Sometimes, however, the demon triumphs, and the family perishes in the most awful manner. An example is Douglas Jerrold's *Fifteen Years of a Drunkard's Life* (1828), the first of the temperance plays, where the villains Glanville and Pounce drive Vernon further into drink and rob him of money and property. Finally, in a drunken frenzy, Vernon robs and murders his wife without knowing who she is, and dies by Glanville's bullet. Another unusually grim temperance drama is T. P. Taylor's *The Bottle* (1847), written as dramatic accompaniment to Cruikshank's series of engravings by that title. Through a fatal addiction to the bottle, Thornley, a factory worker, loses his job, gambles away all his money, has his furniture seized, is turned out of his house, and begs in the street. When his youngest child dies of starvation, he drinks stupidly by the coffin. He apprentices his other son to criminals for drink money, kills his wife in a drunken rage with "the Instrument of all their Grief," and ends chained in a madhouse. Coupeau, in Charles Reade's *Drink* (1879), adapted from Zola's *L'Assommoir*, finds his death in a brandy bottle cunningly planted by the villainess. Though warned by his doctor never to drink again, Coupeau drains the bottle and dies in a delirium. His starving wife collapses in the snow, but is rescued and married by the benign temperance spokesman.

Far more common are the plays in which the temperance man saves the drunkard and his family from their fate and compassionately observes the destruction of all who foolishly refuse to abstain. The two most famous temperance dramas, both American, are W. H. Smith's *The Drunkard, or The Fallen Saved* (1844) and *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* (1858), an adaptation by W. W. Pratt of T. S. Arthur's novel. In *The Drunkard*, the evil lawyer Cribbs ruins the domestic bliss of Edward Middleton by introducing him to the village tavern. Thoroughly corrupted, Middleton becomes a vagrant in New York, sleeping in gutters and brawling in saloons. Cribbs assaults the virtue of Mary, Middleton's wife ("Nay then, proud beauty, you shall know my power; 'tis late, you are unfriended, helpless . . ."), but is repelled

by the iron-clad sentiments appropriate to such an occasion ("Know, despicable wretch, that my poor husband, clothed in rags, covered with mire, and lying drunk at my feet, is a being whose shoes you are not worthy to unloose") and the timely intervention of the comic man. Middleton is saved from suicide by the charitable Rencelaw, signs the pledge, and comes into a large sum of money previously denied him by the villainy of Cribbs, who is exposed. In the final scene, Edward and Mary, happily united, return to their little cottage with its vines, roses, myrtles, and bird cages, "*the extreme of rural tranquil beauty*," the stage directions inform us, with "*everything denoting domestic peace and tranquil happiness*." The sun sets over the hills, and the villagers softly sing "Home, sweet home." *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* portrays the degradation of the New England village of Cedarville after the opening of the "Sickle and Sheaf". Its landlord, formerly a prosperous miller, becomes bloated and slovenly, and is killed behind his own bar by his drunken son (his wife is already in the madhouse). The squire's son is murdered in the tavern by a gambler; the Yankee comic man is never sober; and the drunkard is reformed only just in time by the pathetic death of his little daughter, struck in the bar-room, where she had sought him, by a heavy glass. These events are witnessed by a temperance spokesman who saves the comic man from his downward path and at the end of the play proposes legislation to forbid the sale of liquor in the county. All surviving characters acclaim the idea, and stepping forward, exhort the audience to mend their ways.

Other temperance dramas follow the same pattern. In C. W. Taylor's *The Drunkard's Warning* (1856), the drunkard Mordaunt is caught in a fraud to pay his gambling debts, and is sent to prison. Released, he goes from bad to worse, until the sight of his starving wife on a miserable pallet shocks him into signing the pledge ("Louisa, hear me while I swear ne'er again to pollute my lips with that accursed fluid that has brought this misery on us both!"). In the last act, restored to his fortune by a temperance spokesman, Mordaunt dispenses local charity and speaks at temperance meetings. In John Allen's *The Fruits of the Wine Cup* (1858), old Hamilton loses his business through drink and is sent to prison for debt. However, a drunken tramp exposes the villain, who had cheated Hamilton, and at the end of the play Hamilton, the tramp, and the comic servant all sign the pledge. The rich young hero, who says that he has lived a life "unclouded by the demon alcohol, beneath the free banner of the Washingtonians," marries Hamilton's daughter. Dinah, the coloured nurse of Henry Seymour's *Aunt Dinah's Pledge* (1853), gets everybody in the play to sign a comprehensive pledge covering drink, tobacco, chewing tobacco, and snuff. Even Albert, a "Fast Youth", signs it, declaring that "by the

memory of my sainted mother, I vow never again to taste intoxicating drink." In *The Fatal Glass, or The Curse of Drink* (1872) by James M'Closkey, the hero accepts a sociable glass (drugged by the villain) on the morning of his wedding, and in a prophetic vision of the future dreams that he becomes a drunken pauper. His child starves to death; his wife dies in the snow outside the poorhouse door; he commits murder and goes to the gallows. Awaking in horror, he rejects all further social glasses, espouses the cause of temperance, and goes to his wedding unpolluted. The comic man of an earlier play, *The Drunkard's Doom* (1832), by G. D. Pitt, while drinking lustily in a tavern sees a vision of the coffins of his drunken companions; every time he raises his glass a demon appears and taps it warningly with a coffin nail. Naturally, he concludes that abstinence is the safest policy.

Temperance drama survived as general public entertainment until at least the early years of the twentieth century. Two music-hall sketches of that period, *Fast Life* and *Saved from Crime*, both by William Walton, indicate that the dramatic techniques of temperance propaganda remained unchanged. The hero of *Fast Life*, a mill-owner, drinks himself and his family into poverty. After a particularly violent attack of the d.t.'s ("how he groans and foams at the mouth!"), his young daughter prays for him by the sickbed and persuades him to sign the Band of Hope pledge. A temperance spokesman arrives and gives him a fortune willed to him on condition of sobriety and a steady life. All ends happily. In *Saved from Crime*, the temperance man stops the drunken Duncan from stabbing his own child, and Duncan's wife nurses him through a fearful attack of the d.t.'s ("You will live to be grateful for that cup of tea"). The remorseful Duncan reforms, and the family prospers.

The plight of the drunkard himself made the utmost demands upon the sensation potential of temperance dramatists, and he is obviously the focal point of their work. In appearance, speech, and conduct, he had to be a terrifying testimonial to the hellish darkness of drink and the heavenly whiteness of temperance. In order to emphasize his fall, dramatists usually show the drunkard either in a state of innocence or before drink has fully done its work. However, when it begins, physical deterioration is rapid. In *Fifteen Years of a Drunkard's Life*, the ravages of drink have their effect on Vernon. At first his appearance indicates "*the dissoluteness of the past night*." He relapses "*into insensibility*" and "*falls into a stupor on the sofa*." Five years later "*his appearance is gloomy and haggard*," and ten years after that he is "*gray-headed and in tatters*"; striving to reach a cottage he "*staggers and falls*." The landlord of the "Sickle and Sheaf" in the last act of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* is "*bloated, one eye gone, clothes much worn*", and, in the depth of his

misery, Edward Middleton in *The Drunkard* lies on the ground, "without hat or coat, clothes torn, eyes sunk and haggard, appearance horrible." Horrible too was the unavoidable and climatic *delirium tremens* scenes, the drunkard's last agony before repentance and salvation, or else a dreadful sign of impending dissolution. Understandably, these scenes made actors happy and frightened audiences. Edward Middleton, "on ground, in delirium", calls out "Here, here, friend; take it off, will you—this snake, how it coils round me! Oh, how strong it is!" Joe Morgan of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* is attacked by snakes and devils and falls in agony, crying "Keep off! Keep off! Ha, ha, ha, ha!" Other d.t. scenes are no less intense, and often protracted.

The conscience of temperance drama operates even in the drunkard. He will behave most irresponsibly toward his employer and family, and break all his promises, but when he calls feverishly for drink will often do it, as Middleton does it, "to deluge reflection in the strong water of death." From the viewpoint of temperance, he must be aware that he is a moral criminal. Mordaunt, in *The Drunkard's Warning*, is a typical temperance-drama drinker when he declares that "I am engulfed in guilt, reckless of my fate, and lost to heaven. A hope! Brandy! Brandy! The agonies of remorse gnaw at my heart, and all is madness, darkness, and despair. (*Rushes off*)". Considering the ease and speed of his conversion to abstinence, the drunkard must always have been a latent temperance man, and he declaims temperance speeches of the utmost vigour even while reaching for the bottle.

The utterance of temperance sentiments—the didactic core of this kind of drama—is best fulfilled, albeit drearily, by temperance spokesmen themselves, who never miss a chance to lecture the drunkard on his sins or exhort the audience directly. Sometimes a distressed wife or child is used as a medium for such advice; more often the morality is delivered less emotionally, but just as luridly, by a symbol of high seriousness and the virtuous life upright and calm in contrast to the tattered and trembling drunkard he addresses. His speeches vary from pithy statements of temperance dogma, such as "when a young man becomes the votary of the intoxicating draught, he forfeits the title of friend", to terse commands like "abjure the drunkard's creed, become the friend of temperance, and you are the friend of all the human race", and highly coloured descriptions of the drunkard's fate. The temperance man of *The Drunkard's Warning* orders the offender to "look at your bloated features, drooping eyelids, trembling joints, fetid breath, and say, drunkenness this is thy work!" And the following picture is drawn in *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* of the drunkard's world:

I have lived to see and suffer all the evils that cling around the drunkard's home. I have lived to see hearthstones deserted, men shorn of their manliness, women from whose white cheeks sorrow had crushed the roses, children across the golden thresholds of whose lives trails the black shadow of a parent's shame. I have seen frightful death-bed scenes, where the frothing lip and the bloodshot eye, the distorted features and the delirious shrieks, told the fierce agony of the departing soul, and as my shuddering glance takes in but a feeble outline of the revolting spectacle, I know how much of the great sea of crime, and want, and woe, pour through the slender channel of that one word, "Drunkard."

Drink itself is often called "the deadly compound", "the destructive bowl", "the envenomed cup", and "the poisoned chalice." The temperance innkeeper of *The Drunkard's Warning* refuses to sell "liquid poisons", offering his customers only tea, coffee, milk, lemonade, and the "wholesome, pure, refreshing draught from nature's crystal spring."

The morality of temperance sentiments was strongly reinforced, not only by the wretchedness of the drunkard, but also, most powerfully, by the suffering of his wife and children. In this respect, of course, temperance drama is no different from standard melodrama, whose most prominent feature is a distressed heroine. Here, however, all misery flows from one contaminated source, drink. It would be tedious to enumerate the repetitious agonies of wives of stage drunkards. Their husbands are always rejecting their anxious advice, breaking their promises not to drink, spending the last few pennies (intended for the children's bread) on liquor, hurling them to the ground and rushing off to the pub, beating and sometimes killing them, or at very best leaving them to freeze and starve and suffer the tender mercies of the villain (until ultimate reformation and the intervention of the temperance philanthropist). One or two examples may be taken as typical. The deserted wife in *Fifteen Years of a Drunkard's Life* desperately calls on her husband to return to his "desolated home" where their child is "sunk to sleep in his wild cries for bread." The plight of Mary Middleton in *The Drunkard* is far worse. In early scenes she wears a plain patched dress and weeps, the room showing "a want of comfort and order"; her barefooted child asks why her father comes home ill every night with such a hot face. There comes a time when the scene displays "a wretched garret", with every evidence of "want and poverty." The abandoned Mary, in "miserable apparel" is "sewing slopwork, a wretched shawl thrown over her shoulders." Her child is sleeping on a straw pallet, "covered in part by a miserable ragged rug." The food of the house consists of half a loaf of bread on the table. Mary despairs bitterly: "Alas, alas! It is very cold! Faint with hunger, sick, heart-

weary with wretchedness, fatigue, and cold. . . ." Until death or a happy ending, such was the lot of the wife in temperance drama.

A curious mixture of didacticism and extravagance typifies temperance drama. Its writers, completely serious in their morality, were wildly sensational in its presentation, and utterly melodramatic in their consistent choice of extremes, both in moral position and in theatrical effect. It is easy to laugh at temperance drama now, easy to forget the impression it made upon the working-class audiences it was aimed at and the good it may have done. (During the run of *The Drunkard* in Philadelphia, thousands signed the pledge in the lobby.) The stage was, in fact, the perfect weapon for temperance propagandists, and it was used for a hundred years. If one wanted a theatrical symbol of the temperance movement, one could find it in the Spirit of Temperance, advancing with a glass of water at the end of *The Fatal Glass* and addressing the audience thus:

Drink from this fount a pure and crystal draught,
The only beverage that man should quaff;
No crime, nor bruised hearts in this be found:
That poisoned distillation dash to ground!
By this, long life and happiness the sum;
Shame, death, here and hereafter, you will find in rum!