

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF TOASTING

By ROBERT C. BENCHLEY

IF THE Prohibition party has the welfare of the country really at heart and wants to abolish the use of strong drink by statute, it should turn its energies from attempting to prohibit the manufacture of spirits to a concerted drive to rush the following resolution through Congress:

BE IT HEREBY ENACTED THAT every person, or persons, taking a drink, or drinks, of spirituous liquor, or liquors, shall be required, under penalty of imprisonment, to recite an original toast before taking the first swallow of said liquor. Said original toast must be not less than twenty-five words long, and may be either in rhyme with chorus, or of an epigrammatic nature, containing no less than three clever plays on words.

With a copy of this law posted conspicuously in every bar in the country, it would take a stronger argument than those advanced by the Brewers' Benevolent Association Publicity Bureau concerning the beneficial effect of beer on the singing voice to make the average American see his way clear to exercise his "personal liberty" to the extent of taking a drink. He couldn't stand the strain.

And yet it was not always so. A glance at any one of the publications of any of our most popular centuries will reveal a perfect epidemic of toasting. From all reports it was considered as poor form in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to take a drink without offering a verbose toast as it is to-day to take a drink without offering some slight money exchange to the proprietor. Drinking in those days was evidently just an excuse to give the drinker an opportunity to get off a good one he had just thought of on the spur of the moment. If some enterprising dentifrice manufacturer of the time had thought of putting an antiseptic gargle on the market especially designed to be used in offering toasts, the jolly gentlemen of that period would probably have taken to that as eagerly as they did to the steaming bowl of rum, so long as it gave them a chance to crowd together and shout, one by one, "With this sparkling antiseptic gargle I give you the health, long life and happiness of that paragon of beauty, that arbiter of loveliness, Mistress Beatrix."

The accompanying illustration is typical of what was considered a Big Evening in the old days. Here we see five

gentlemen, one of them evidently General Custer, and two others suspiciously resembling James Fenimore Cooper and Chester A. Arthur, respectively. The occasion was probably following a Cabinet meeting or something, which would explain the other two gentlemen as newspaper men. Anyway, here are five obviously leading citizens who have taken it upon themselves to relax from the cares of state for a few minutes. And what do they do?

They rent a hall bedroom, equipped with two plush chairs, a table and a second-hand Municipal Court lamp. They then order four cruetts of wine (served for five, 10 cents extra) and proceed to crowd about the table. And the good time begins.

"All ready, boys," says Jim Cooper, "I'll lead off. Now when I say three, everybody raise his glass to a point about six inches above his head and a foot and a half in front. You know how. All right? Now—one—two—aw, come one now, Custer, there you go bugging the whole thing by lifting it too soon. Now, wait till I say three. Ready, one—two—three! No, no, no! Chester, you dragged a whole beat. It's right on three that you come up. Now, we're going to do this thing until we get it right. . . . One, two three! Fine! Now, hold it! . . ."

Here's to the maiden of bashful fifteen;
Here's to the widow of fifty;

Here's to the flaunting extravagant queen,
And here's to the housewife that's thrifty.

Now, everybody in on the chorus. It goes like this:

Let the toast pass—
Drink to the lass—
I'll warrant she'll prove an excuse for the glass.

Then General Custer speaks up and says, "How about that, Jim. Is that your own stuff?"

And Cooper admits that it is.

"That's funny," says the General, "I thought Sheridan wrote that."

"Who, Phil Sheridan?" says the novelist, in an injured tone.

"Why, no; R. B. Sheridan, the Irishman."

"Well, honest to gosh, boys," says Cooper, "I never saw it. You know I



A Big Evening in the Old Days.

wouldn't pass on a toast that some one else had written. It just came to me, that's all."

"Well, never mind," says Mr. Arthur, "we've got to get back to work pretty soon. Come on, now, Custer; it's your turn."

And so it goes. They all get the hang of just how high to lift their glasses, and just when to do it, but it takes a lot of practice and the room gets stuffy and the second-hand lamp begins to smell of the wick, and pretty soon they begin to pick flaws in each others' toasts and insinuate ugly things about getting them out of "Fifty Clever Toasts, Speeches and Responses," by Dick & Fitzgerald, and the whole party breaks up after an hour and a half's work with the cruetts only half emptied and everybody fagged out. Such were the rollicking nights during the period when toasting was on its decline.

When it was at its height, in the eighteenth century, it must have assumed terrific proportions. In order to qualify

for a five-cent glass of currant-shrub a man must have had to show himself proficient in extemporaneous declamation, a master of several forms of meter, a wag of the first water and somewhat of a juggler. A person afflicted with stuttering or a slow thinker might just as well have quenched his thirst from the kitchen faucet and saved all the embarrassment and expense of trying to mingle with regular drinkers.

Small wonder that the bucks of that time were noted for their staying qualities in the tonnage consumption of spirits. Where the high-life man-about-town to-day feels that he has got to absorb a magnum with the speed of a bucket brigade at a fire or else be considered backward (and gosh how he dreads it), your Sir Anthony and Lord Hal would take the best part of a Saturday half-holiday drinking a beaker apiece, what with the recitations and selected readings that preceded each swallow. Where the silent guzzler of to-day shows his virility and general value

to the community by being led out at the end of the third round, the gay boys at Wyckham Towers, Eggandhamshire, by the time the week was up had consumed twice the amount and were still going strong on the iambics.

The life of one flagon of steaming brew in the old Cheshire Cheese Tavern was an eventful one, in which the experience of being swallowed was merely a side issue. First, it had to be drawn by a tapster and served by a barmaid, a process which took considerable time, when you consider that the barmaid had to be chucked under the chin and be called "a buxom lass" no less than seven times per flagon, and that the tapsters had to stand round in the offing singing a tapsters' chorus, arranged for male voices with the melody in the second tenor.

Once the brew had reached the table it was only in the early stages of being consumed. In the first place, it had to be held aloft with one hand and pointed to with the other, the drinker thereby indicating to his companions that here was a beaker of brown October ale and that, on the whole, it was a tolerably decent beverage; his companions, in the meantime, indicating the same thing with their potions. This was often accompanied by stamping the feet on the off-beat, with everybody singing the verse and exhorting everybody else to join in on the chorus, which, under the circumstances, was hardly necessary. It must have taken no little skill to raise a foaming beaker up and down in the air several times a minutes in rhythm with the drinking song and still not spill any of it up the cuff.

It being settled to everybody's satisfaction that this was October Ale or January Thaw, or whatever it was that had been ordered, the song stopped, and they settled down to the real business of the evening—toasting.

Starting at the dealer's right, each member of the party stood up and worried his beaker around in the air some more and recited several stanzas, with refrain, to the effect that, come what might, health and prosperity were undoubtedly only the just due of Mistress Julia, whose heart, like good wine, grew mellow and brighter as it grew older. And then, just as the brew had given up all hope of ever being anything but

tossed about, the toast ended and a couple of sips were taken of it. Exact time which elapsed between drawing and the first sip, forty minutes; estimated time before another sip was taken, eleven minutes, sixteen seconds; delay due to blowing out of another toast.

By the time the tenth member of the party was reached the entire evening's recitations could have been collected into a neat little 12mo. 77 pp. volume and bound up in limp leather for the Christmas trade. And probably also by the time the tenth member was reached he would try to execute something like the following:

"Here's a health to me and mine,
Not forgetting thee and thine;
And when thee and thine
Come to see me and mine,
May me and mine make thee and thine
As welcome as thee and thine
Have ever made me and mine."

A toast like that would be all right for the first man to start off with, when the evening was young, but for the tenth man to attempt it must have made the occasion needlessly sordid.

But the point of the matter, if it has a point, is that a shilling flagon could be made to insure the robust good health of the Royal Family, piece by piece; the Host and Hostess and the Young Mistress, the Jolly Good Fellows of the Frat, and anybody else who didn't mind having his name banded about, while an equal amount of stimulants in these days of efficiency would merely serve to get the drinker started on a vivid account of where he told his Boss he could get off.

Now, in spite of the fact that many eminent German physicians have made sworn statements before notaries that, to the best of their knowledge, alcohol is the best known cleanser of white gloves on the market, it is pretty generally agreed among the laity that too much of it is taken by those intellectual Samsons who can "take it or leave it alone." If, as has been suggested, a law could be passed making toasting compulsory before each glass, the consumption of liquor would be reduced at least seventy-five per cent.

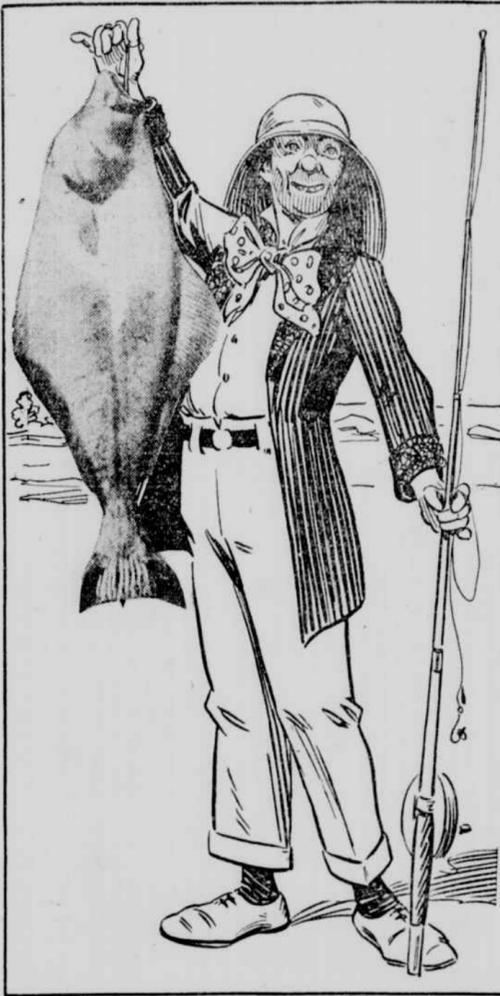
For a man who can, without laughing, go in and deliberately stand in front of a bar and pay fifteen cents for a drink which he has to follow up with a glass of water to get the taste out of his mouth, cannot, even by appealing to

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Theatrical Press Agents Have Neglected To Do This. Why?



Miss Tillie Twinkletoes and the shark she caught at Grease-paint-by-the-Sea. Miss Twinkletoes will begin a stellar engagement with "Hello Something," on September 16, opening in Burlington, New Jersey.



Man-eater captured after a terrific battle by Throckmorton Rant at Lake Egadsir, Vermont. Mr. Rant first qualified as a fisherman in the part of the lighthouse keeper in "Shore Acres."



The popular ingenue of the Movies, Miss Mary Flickerford, and her pet shark, Fifi. Miss Flickerford has a private shark hatchery at her summer home, Good Night Point, Connecticut.



Speckled shark taken in a butterfly net by one whose race is familiar to all patrons of the Screen, Mr. Clarence X. Simp, light comedian of the Flapper Film Co. Mr. Simp expresses the view that sharks make swimming dangerous.