

The Argument that Took the Wrong Turning

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There was a sombre and a smoldering fire in the eyes of the quiet man in the corner of the ingle. The remarks of the prohibitionist who was holding forth from the big arm chair seemed to excite him, but one could hardly have said why. But when that respectable gentleman paused for breath, the fire leapt up. "May I add my humble testimony?" he said politely. "I feel more strongly than most men, I think, upon the subject. Were I to tell you my story, perhaps you would admit that I had a right to do so." The man from the Anti-Saloon League got out his note book with undisguised enthusiasm. "Can't we induce you to tell it?" he asked, scenting something sensational, "nothing so aids the cause as the recital of facts." "Well," said the quiet man, "I don't mind if I do. I was married to a young and beautiful woman. We passed six years of which one could not pick out a single month and say that it was not a honeymoon. She drank herself into a lunatic asylum." He stopped there, very suddenly; his words cut bitterly into the heart of every man in the room. They were too shocked for even the conventional murmur of sympathy. But the prohibitionist, with a smirk, asked for further details. "I shall be happy to gratify you, sir," replied the other, and there was a subcurrent of severity in his tone which made one or two of the more sophisticated men present prick up their ears. The quiet man lighted his cigar. "My wife's father," he said, "was vicar of one of the most important parishes in London. His wife liked a glass of champagne with her dinner. However, in her position, it would not do. She had to set a good example to the parish. At the same time she was not

going to give up her champagne, so she sent for a doctor who prescribed her champagne, and in order more effectually to silence the voice of scandal, it was necessary to prescribe for the children as well. The eldest daughter, at the age of 16, was drinking about a quart a day, by the doctor's orders. She married. Two years later, her husband died. Six years after that I married her myself. Presently I discovered that whenever anything happened to depress her she sought consolation in alcohol. The Puritan idea, the necessity of pretending to be what you are not, had destroyed her sense of freedom. She did the drinking secretly. Ultimately the smash came. I had to be away for some months on business. In my absence the baby died. I came back to find her a hopeless dipsomaniac. I tried everything. Naturally it was useless. She lost all moral sense. I was compelled to divorce her because she refused to follow the doctor's last orders, to spend two years in a 'home.' I would not stand by and let her kill herself so long as I was morally responsible for her moral welfare. Three months after the divorce, she had to be put into a lunatic asylum."

"A most striking story," said the prohibitionist, "A most admirable story, a most useful story for our purpose." But the quiet man rose to his feet. "No," he said, "my tragedy is not a tragedy of alcohol, it is a tragedy of humbug. It is the rotten popular Anglo-Saxon cowardice about the use of alcohol which leads inevitably to its abuse. It is people like yourself that are responsible for all the drunkenness, for all the insanity, for all the crime that people resort to. In countries where there is no feeling against alcohol, where, in honesty and decent freedom a man can sit with his family and drink in the open, we find none of these troubles." The prohibition orator became exceedingly annoyed. "I did not expect this treatment," he said, "it is most unwarrantable. I have no doubt at all, sir, that the poor woman was driven to drink by your own brutal

treatment." "Yes," said the other man, "I can be both brutal and violent on occasion." And he was.