

Ida M. Tarbell
120 East 19th St.
New York City

IF NOT PROHIBITION - WHAT?

Having come slowly to the reluctant conclusion that intemperance in this country, after ten years of prohibition, is more sinister and corrupting than before the 18th Amendment was adopted, I feel, that as a citizen, I am not free to evade the straight question the editor of the Women's Journal is putting to several of her contributors - the question, "If not prohibition - what?"

Any answer I can make will be hesitating. I see no straight way out of our present predicament. I am convinced, however, that something must be done. Enforcement at its best will never be more than partial. The evils of prohibition are of an insidious nature. They will increase, rather than decrease with time. Yet, any drastic change is bound, so far as I can see, to produce for sometime - new confusion - new abuses - irritated and violent dissatisfaction.

Under prohibition a great and powerful traffic outside of the law has been established, taking the place of the legalized and badly regulated traffic of old days. To destroy this liquor piracy, supported as it is by strong political, social and economic influences will be a task from which any Government might shrink. Certainly our Government, unable as it is to end,

even seriously to cripple the present traffic, will find it a baffling and difficult task to replace it with a system which it can hope to control, as will be imperative, of course, if the amendment is repealed, even if the Volstead Act is modified. My mind shrinks from the difficulties that we must face when we attempt, really to grapple, with the evils which prohibition has brought upon us.

Conscious as I am of these difficulties, I would prefer that the country go back to 1918 in its handling of liquor, rather than to remain where it now is. I have several reasons for this. The foremost is, that, I believe the principle of prohibition is immoral - it denies a man's freedom to choose in a matter which is his own business. I believe that law and its organized agencies for enforcement can never be as successful in developing temperance and self-control in people as education and appeals to self-respect. Law and its agencies are but secondary instruments in developing men - they depend almost entirely for their efficiency on popular opinion. When popular opinion is against them in any substantial degree, if it is only luke warm in their support, they become ineffective and contemptible. In attempting to make the people of this country tee-totalers by law we have thrown aside the only machinery by which men and women are really developed - the machinery of

education and moral training. I want to see that machinery in operation again. It can never be effective as long as the 18th Amendment stands. Men and women will not listen to arguments and prayers if they are convinced that those who make them are taking from them their right to make decisions.

When the 18th Amendment was adopted in 1918 this country was on the road to temperance. If we go back seventy five or a hundred years and compare the drinking habits of all classes of society with those which we had in 1918, we will find that our most impressive advances had been made. Go back to the days when Abraham Lincoln was first taking an active part in the political and social affairs of Illinois, back to the eighteen thirties and forties. Why, Lincoln, himself, when for a short time he ran a country store, had a barrel of liquor beside his barrel of molasses and sugar, and the liquor barrel was in the cellar of the very minister of the gospel.

The abuses were general and frightful. One of Lincoln's earliest published speeches was made for ^{Frank G. Ke} the Springfield Washingtonian Temperance Society, one of the great organizations of his day, which was struggling against intemperance. "Although the temperance cause had been in progress for nearly twenty years," he said in beginning, "it had only just been crowned with a degree of success hitherto unparalleled." He found the chief reason for this success in the fact that men were using new tactics - a sympathetic appeal to men's better natures. There had been too

4

much denunciation - this was impolitic because, said Lincoln, "it is not much in the nature of man to be driven to anything; still less to be driven about that which is exclusively his own business." He believed that the new impetus given to temperance was due to "persuasion, kind unassuming persuasion."

Certainly from Lincoln's day on the "temperance movement," as it was called, grew in power. All sorts of agencies, schools, churches, societies of various kinds allied themselves and with varying degrees of intelligence, patience, love of their fellow man, built up in this land a strong sentiment for temperance as a rule of life - temperance in all things. Even in the sections where there was the greatest abuse of liquor there was less of the old brutality, fewer habitual drunkards. The work was far from complete but we had in active operation the only forces which bring man to self-control - persistent line upon line teaching, logic, appeal. Whatever temporary stirring of a community a temperance crusade may have caused, the solid and lasting temperance work of the country was done by men and women who believed in the power of the human being to correct himself and who believed, too, that only by such self-correction did a man make a man of himself. They did not believe that a man who gave up drinking because he could not get liquor was necessarily a temperate man. What they sought to do was to arouse in him a desire - a preference for decency and self-control - encourage a choice of what was good, help in fixing the choice as a habit.

This is not saying that laws had nothing to do with the growing temperance of the country. They did but they were effective and helpful only when they were the result of a majority community feeling.

Our old educational temperance work has been almost completely ousted by the coming of prohibition. I would see it restored to its former activity - the necessity of it recognized - its methods improved. It has a more serious task on its hands, should it be restored, than before the days of prohibition. It must deal with a youth which has learned to drink, sometimes in a home bar room, again in certain classes in a home speakeasy, which has developed a thirst for fiery liquors, is not content with a glass of wine or beer. It must deal with a new lawlessness born at least partly from the effort to make this not a temperate country but one in which what a man drinks is proscribed by law.

Whatever method is finally decided upon to restore to the people of this country a practical method of developing their one time ambition to make themselves temperate, whether the first step be by repeal of the amendment or a modification of the Volstead Act, it must not be forgotten that either change means the establishment of some kind of legalized selling place for whatever forms of liquor are allowed. What are we going to do about that? We rightly fear and hate the old saloons, yet the old saloon at its worst was less to be feared than that

which has replaced it. The speakeasy, the blind pig - whatever you choose to call it - is an institution outside of all control, slippery as an eel, irresponsible and defiant. Moreover, it is a secret place and the old-fashioned saloon was open. You knew it was a saloon. The men who went in and out did so openly, as a rule. That is, we were dealing with something which we could see. The speakeasy has no distinguishing mark. As a matter of fact it may exist on the floor above or beneath you in your exclusive apartment house. It may set itself down in the house next to yours in a neighborhood, long highly desirable for residences. Your own door bell may be clanged by a would-be patron. I know of at least one man in New York City, who has sold a home long beloved, because his block has become so infested with speakeasies that his butler was kept busy turning inquirers from his door. There is a story going around, of one house owner who put up this sign, "This is not a speakeasy."

I am afraid that any effort to handle the kinds of drinks which may be finally legalized, if any ever are, is going to meet strong opposition from many men and women who prefer that which they hate to be kept out of sight. It hurts them less and they can delude themselves into a conviction that if they do not see it, it must be negligible.

A few months ago, coming down the street of a college town with a woman of the faculty, she told me that once, in the days before prohibition, she had passed three open saloons every time she went into town. "Now you see they are all gone. Today our boys have no temptations."

But at that moment a group of students, under the direction of a Professor in the Economic Department, was making a detailed survey of the town, a bit of laboratory practice. They were finding out how many automobiles were owned and of what makes - they were tabulating school children - church attendance - men and women who owned their houses and among other things - they were tabulating the town speakeasies. I saw that chart - the drinking places marked in red - there must have been three times as many as there had formerly been open saloons. These boys, who my friend said were growing up without ever seeing a saloon, into which if they wished they could drop, had discovered that throughout the community there were concealed places, into which they could go and drink without danger of detection. Which condition was safer for the boys? Undoubtedly the first saved the lady anguish of mind. Will she ever consent that an evil, which she can see, which cannot hide itself, is less to be feared than one which can sneak into corners and multiply freely?

One of the most insidious and alarming features of these drinking places, developed under Prohibition, is that women have become patrons, decoys, and in industrial centers, manufacturers and distributors. The "home speakeasy," as it is called, familiar enough particularly in sections of the foreign born, used children freely in making and handing out the brew, and it is children the country over, not only among the foreign born, but among natives that deliver stuff sent out by speakeasies. Here is a development in the traffic quite unknown to the old saloon. No one was more rigid about keeping out women and children than the saloon keeper and for good enough reasons. Even if he had no personal objection to their presence he knew that nothing would arouse the public against him quicker than seeing a woman or child enter his place.

One of the chief reasons for getting away from prohibition after the moral reason, that it is inconsistent with our contentions as a Christian democracy, is to put an end to the truly awful concoctions of hard liquor that are made and distributed. Merely allowing free sale of beer and wine is not going to do that, at least for a long time. And how about beer and wine? Are we to allow anything that any manufacturer wants to make? Certainly with the experience of the past in mind, no beer or wine should be allowed sold, except what was made under the strictest Government supervision. It is probable that the

9

brewer and the wine maker, chastened by the revolt of ten years ago against his methods and his products, would now be amenable to strict public supervision. I am not too hopeful about this. Nothing is easy in this terrible situation, but certainly experience of the brewers should count for something.

The repeal of the amendment means a return to local option, that a community will again be responsible for its own decency, order and temperance. We are inclined to overlook the advance in temperance among communities all over the country where there was a sentiment strong enough to secure a majority against the sale of liquor in any form. I was never more impressed with the quality of a community, which had developed under local option, than when, back in 1916, I went through the state of Ohio on what was called a Chautauqua circuit.

Day after day we moved from town to town. One had no more than to touch his foot on the platform of the station - look at the bus of the hotel than he recognized whether it was a dry or a wet town. The tidiness, the prosperity, ~~order~~ - were all on the side of the dry. The inhabitants in the town where there had been a long term of dryness were plainly the better for their temperance. I made not a few inquiries in these places about the perfection of enforcement. I doubt if there was ever a "bone dry" town - certain never a dry state in which men were not able to get hold of liquor if they wanted it. But where the majority of the sentiment of a community was plainly and

aggressively against the saloon - you had no saloon and you had only an occasional speakeasy. The group was small enough and watchful enough to take care of transgressors. Moreover it was the people and not agents who were looking after the sobriety of the community. The plain truth is that the community under prohibition has turned over to paid agents a kind of supervision in the interest of order and temperance which it formerly exercised and the paid agent too often unhappily looks after his own interest. He can make more out of violators of the law than out of upholders of the law. You cannot buy a temperate community - you can only develop it.

The amendment is failing and will continue to fail, because it is inconsistent with the political, social and moral contentions of a democracy. If man is a puppet, then he plainly must be fitted with strings to be pulled both in his own interests and in the interests of society. But democracy is not possible with a race of mechanical toys. It is only conceivable with creatures capable of growth. Growth results only from the free exercise of the will. Let us admit that men must be made to understand their own power of choice - that they must be given constant examples of good and evil - that the environment in which they find themselves must be made as clean, stimulating, hopeful as possible; all of this is necessary if you are to develop character. And what else is worth our effort but the

development of character? Personally, I feel only profound discouragement when I hear the argument that prohibition must be sustained for the sake of prosperity. What is prosperity in people if character is to be stunted? What goodness is there in a prosperity won by taking away from human beings their power of choice, however wantonly they may at times abuse that power of choice?