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Rum and the Rum Power

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HENRY GEORGE is a thoughtful man, a philanthropist, and a most attractive writer. Those who oppose his views can but admire his honesty of purpose and frankness of expression. He is a sincere patriot, seeking the good of the country, and, instead of being the demagogue that some have proclaimed him, has always shown an independence of thought and action characteristic of the honest American. It is a pleasure to deal with such a true man even in the way of controversy. Mr. George, in his article in THE ARENA on the Rum Power, proposes what he thinks is the proper treatment of the giant evil. He treats the subject in his usual forceful and vigorous way, clear in thought and masterly in language.

And yet we have the hardihood to question the logic and the principles beneath the logic of this excellent essay. One of the principles we controvert is that one which is conspicuous in the essay, that it is more important to destroy the political Rum Power than to destroy intemperance. There are two fallacies in this position. One is that any political tyranny is worse than moral death, and the other is the failure to see that the destruction of intemperance would necessarily destroy the Rum Power.

Far better would it be for us to be under the government of the Czar than to be under the government of our personal lusts. The country would be far better off if a virtuous population were governed by a wicked oligarchy, than if a wicked and depraved population were governed by the most equal laws. Rum in the rulers is far better than rum in the ruled, for the ruled are many and the rulers are few. If you have a moral community, it will soon necessitate a moral government, but a moral government by no means necessitates a moral community. Make the community moral, therefore, and you are taking the best way to make a moral reform in the government.

We must correct the people as the first and main work, and the "Rum Power" or "Iron Power" or "Railroad Power" or any other power afterwards and through the people.

If the vice of intemperance were eradicated from the people, the Rum Power would be nowhere. That power lives by this popular vice. If that vice were gone, what would become of saloons and distilleries? Who could keep a saloon without customers? And who could run a distillery without saloons? The aim, therefore, of abating intemperance is also an aim at the Rum Power, and legislation that can reduce intemperance must necessarily weaken the Rum Power. The instincts of the people are not mistaken, when they see in the saloon the enemy they must destroy as the main propagator of intemperance. We cannot prevent a man from drinking, but we can prevent the invitation to drink from hanging out on every corner. The reason why we should aim at the saloon is not primarily to destroy the Rum Power, but to check intemperance. It is where the law can get its best hold of the matter for this high moral end. So we assert again that it is not more important to destroy the Rum Power than to destroy intemperance, and this is one fallacy that vitiates the essay of Mr. George. The other is (as we have said) the failure to see that the destruction of intemperance would be the destruction of the Rum Power.

Mr. George is equally opposed to Prohibition and high license. He would have Free Rum. He accounts all restriction an error because it forms a Rum Power in monopoly, and this Rum Power is the dangerous thing. He runs this theory into other departments of trade. There should be no customs duties and no taxes, because they at once (he says) create a concentration of business in the hands of a few, who become a corrupt and corrupting power. He quotes the iron interest, the cigar interest, the match interest, and the opium interest, as examples; and above all he points to the whiskey ring as an exhibition of the evil of putting any restraint on the sale of liquor. In these quotations he has somewhat mixed things, for in the iron, cigar, match, and whiskey trades, the combination is to *support* the tax, but in the opium trade it is to *avoid* the tax by smuggling. The effort in the first is *for* monopoly,

but in the last it is *against* monopoly. In the first the endeavor is to *use* law for undue personal advantage, but in the last it is to *break* law.

Of course these different evils are to be treated in different ways. To say they are alike because they both get into politics will not meet the case of treatment. Everything gets into politics. Education, religion, sanitary matters and public service get into politics, but Mr. George would not make that a reason to abolish all legislation on these subjects, and let education educate to crime, and religion appoint suttees, and men heap filth in their houses, and public office be seized by the strongest. There must be something else besides the getting into politics which should make us give up restriction and decree free rum. Anything that interests the community is apt to get into politics. Bad men, moreover, will always try to use the laws lawlessly, will take advantage of technical mistakes, will endeavor to corrupt the officers of the law and will use every means to accomplish their own evil designs. But these facts and fears do not lead us to give up law as a failure. They only teach us to form our laws with greater exactness, and to see to it that honest men are put into office.

Where people break law, as in smuggling opium, the question is: "Which is the more expedient, to continue the law and address ourselves to the detection and punishment of the smuggler, or, by reason of the ease with which so small an article is smuggled, to alter the law and make opium free?" But when people use the law, as in the restriction of the rum traffic, to build up monopolies and rings, then the question is: "Which is the more expedient, to continue the law and address ourselves to the checking of monopolies and rings, or to alter the law and allow rum to be free?"

It is this latter method Mr. George advocates. He considers the whiskey ring a sufficient cause for abolishing all restriction on the trade in ardent spirits. This certainly is a most startling position. Mr. George tells us that if we made rum free, drunkenness would not increase. That is to say, that if we multiplied the facilities of getting drunk, and the temptations to drink, there would be no more

drinking! He also affirms that by making rum cheap the treating habit would be weakened! And then again he declares that if there were no restriction there would be no saloons! These assertions seem to us so wild that we hardly know how to reply to them. Are there not thousands of young men who are led into the snare of drinking because the saloon is open to them on every corner, and their companions can thus readily invite them to a drink? Would not a reduction of the number of saloons reduce this evil? Suppose that New York City, instead of having 6,811 saloons had only 1,000, would not the cutting off of 5,811 lessen the temptation? Of course the hardened drinkers would be the same as ever and find their way to the saloons remaining, but we plead the cause of thousands who are not hardened drinkers, and who can be saved.

Then to imagine that when whisky becomes cheaper treating will be less, is an inexplicable paradox. The drinker will only be glad that he can treat with less injury to his finances. It is not the high price of the liquor that causes the treating, it is the good fellowship and the love of liquor combined, and the lowering of the price would not affect either. Water cannot be compared with liquor, as Mr. George makes the comparison. No one would treat in water, if you made water to cost so much a glass. So the argument that if whisky were as cheap as water no one would treat in it, is absurd. It is the character of whisky as exciting that makes it a treating article. Make whisky cheaper and you will necessarily strengthen, and not weaken the treating habit.

The third affirmation of Mr. George is equally crazy with these two, namely, that if there were no restriction there would be no saloons. When there is no restriction, are men going to abandon drinking? And if they continue drinking, will not someone have to sell the drink? And will not every neighborhood need its seller? If the proceeds would be too small to support the saloons selling only liquor, would not groceries, and confectioneries, and fruit-stores all become saloons to satisfy the public demand for liquor? If the technical "saloon" should be abolished by this process of cheapening liquor, would not real, death-dealing saloons be found in every restaurant, bakery, confectionery, grocery, etc., such as Mr.

George enumerates? The *name* "saloon" is of no importance; it is the *thing* saloon that we wish destroyed. Your free rum would multiply the real saloon, indefinitely. Therefore, in making free rum the means of destroying the whisky rings, we should fill the land with drunkards in order to check a political clique. The price is too fearful.

It is very curious that on the same day in which Mr. George's article was put into our hands we received the issue of the *Wine and Spirit Gazette*, of December 12, in which we found alike demand with Mr. George's for free rum. The trade does not think that Mr. George's plan would injure it.

"The *Wine and Spirit Gazette* says: "Law neither reforms the drunkard, nor restrains intemperance, nor diminishes the liquor traffic in the great cities of our country." Its antagonism to both high license and prohibition is exactly a bass to Mr. George's treble. The *Wine and Spirit* man talks in the line of his interest, but Mr. George sadly wanders from the line of his philanthropy.

But what is to be done with the whisky ring? And how are we to avoid monopolies? These are fair questions, and we think there are 'reasonable answers, without approving Mr. George's plan of national suicide.

There are evils connected with every reform, just as there is pain in the resetting of a bone or the extracting of a tooth. In reducing the number of saloons (and then reducing the facilities and temptations to drink) we must necessarily give the sale into fewer hands. To that extent we must make monopolies. This is choosing the lesser evil. By reducing the number we not only reduce the facilities and temptations, but we make the proper espionage over a dangerous trade the easier and more complete. If we reduce by a high license, we make the seller more careful not to break any of the restrictive features of the law, lest he lose his costly license fee. He is just so much more under control. Reduction in number makes fewer places for thieves and prostitutes to gather, and for criminals generally to hold their assignations, and when the number is so greatly reduced

that the authorities can constantly watch them, the sellers will be afraid to let their places be the resorts of such company. All these advantages far outbalance the evil of creating monopolies. Any tax or license fee makes monopolies to a greater or less extent. If Mr. George's tax on land should be put into operation, only the rich could own land. The rich would have a monopoly. They could afford to lose on land, while they piled up their money from other sources. The only question practical with us is how to keep these monopolies from doing mischief. We have not space in this article to treat the details of this legislation regarding monopolies. We can only point out some lines of efficiency which would restrain all monopolies from abusing the privileges which they necessarily have. First, in the matter of employees, their interests should be guarded by a system of law combining the co-operative and arbitral ideas. Secondly, the cornering of the market should be prevented by judicious limitations. Thirdly, all purchase contracts for things nonexisting should be void in law. Fourthly, combinations to raise the price should be made hazardous. Fifthly, when the monopolist is such by a license (as the liquor-dealer), conviction for any offence should forever incapacitate him from having a license. Sixthly, punishments for infraction of the laws touching monopolies should be severe.

Legislation embracing these principles could preserve the community from all evil that monopolies inflict, and, as applied to the whisky-seller, would make his monopoly a very cheap price for the moral advantages gained to the nation in the diminution of intemperance by a system of high license.

There is one other position of Mr. George that should be alluded to. It is his statement that high license begets adulteration. There is a prevailing notion that the liquor sold in the groggeries is an adulterated stuff, and that the materials used in adulteration are fearfully poisonous. Mr. John D. Townsend in an article in the *Mail and Express* seems to imply that all the trouble is in adulteration, and that free liquor, by stopping adulteration, would heal the sorrows of the nation, from this source. He appears to be a disciple of Mr. George on this point. But is it true that it is the adulterated liquor that ruins the drinkers? Is not the pure whisky the fiend that

ruins body and soul? Can adulteration add anything to make it worse? Would the cure of adulteration cure drunkenness? We have the testimony of one of the most distinguished chemists in New York, that he collected promiscuously from a hundred grogeries in that city, vials of the whisky they sold over the bar, and in each case the whisky was *pure or diluted with water!* The hard drinks are not adulterated. It is the expensive wines that are adulterated, of which the saloons have no sale. Be assured, Mr. George and Mr. Townsend, that the stoppage of adulteration in liquors would have no more influence in preventing the deadly evils of intemperance than the cleaning and polishing a bayonet would prevent its fatal power. One other word. Mr. George wishes to destroy the Rum Power. "So say we all of us." But he would destroy the Rum Power by free rum! Now we submit that when the whisky ring is broken, the Rum Power is by no means destroyed. It only appears in a worse form, not now a political clique, but a debauched nation. This will be a Rum Power that cannot be restrained by law and that will dig the grave of all American institutions.