

*Prohibition
Comes to London*

*by
Stephen Leacock*

*Illustrated by
C.W. Jefferys*

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PROHIBITION COMES TO LONDON

By STEPHEN LEACOCK

ILLUSTRATED BY C. W. JEFFERYS

A Letter to a Canadian Friend

London. Year 1930

How glad I am that I have lived to see this wonderful reform of prohibition at last accomplished in England! There is something so difficult about the English, so stolid, so hard to move. We tried everything in the great campaign that we made, and for ever so long it didn't seem to work. We had processions, just as we did at home in Canada, with great banners carried round with the inscription DO YOU WANT TO SAVE THE BOY? But these people looked on and said, "Boy? Boy? What boy?"

Our workers were almost disheartened. "Oh sir," said one of them, an ex-bar-keeper from Lethbridge. "It does seem so hard that we have total prohibition in Canada, and here they can get all the drink they want." And the good fellow broke down and sobbed.

But at last it has come. After the most terrific efforts we managed to get this nation stampeded and for more than a month now England has been dry. I wish you could have witnessed the scenes, just like what we saw at home in Canada, when it was known that the bill had passed. The members of the House of Lords all stood up on their seats and yelled: "RAH! RAH! RAH! WHO'S BONE DRY? WE ARE!" And out in the streets the brewers and inn-keepers were emptying their barrels of beer into the Thames just as at Montreal they emptied the beer into the St. Lawrence.

I can't tell you with what pleasure I watched a group of members of the Athenaeum Club sitting on the bank of the Thames and opening bottles of champagne and pouring them into the river. "To think," said one of them to me, "that there was a time when I used to lap up a couple of quarts of this terrible stuff every evening. But it's over now," he said, "Hallelujah!"



The Members of the House of Lords all stood up on their seats and yelled: "Rah! Rah! Rah! Who's Bone Dry? WE ARE!"

And he heaved a quart bottle of Mumm's Extra Dry away out into the Thames. I got him to give me a few bottles as a souvenir, and I got some more souvenirs, whisky and liqueurs, when the members of the Beefsteak Club were emptying out their cellars on to Green Street; so when you come over I shall still be able, of course, to give you a drink.

The Elevating Influences.

We have, as I said, been bone dry only a month, and yet already we are getting the same splendid results as in Canada. In the first place there is the clarifying and elevating of social life. You remember what the London dinners and banquets used to be like,—the uproarious speeches and the laughter, and all that. Well that's entirely changed. All the big dinners are now as refined and as elevating and the dinner speeches as long and as informational as they are in Toronto or New York. The other night at a dinner at the Whitefriars Club, I heard Sir Owen Seaman speaking, not in that light, futile way that he used to, but quite differently. He talked for an

hour and a half on the state ownership of the Chinese Railway System, and I almost fancied myself back in Toronto or Edmonton. He was followed by someone else,—I forget who but I think it was Mr. Grossmith,—on the Excavation of Mud from the Bottom of the Thames.

But that of course is only one side, and a small side of the extraordinary effects. Much more noticeable is the very obvious increase in efficiency. A member of the House of Commons told me that he finds himself at least forty per cent. more efficient than he was; before the great change, he used, so he said, always to take a gill of sherry before he went to the House,—either a gill or a gallon, I forget which. Now he simply goes to the soda water fountain that they have opened in Parliament Square, and drinks a pint of orange phosphate. He can speak longer and hear better and understand almost all of what is going on round him.

Calling Down the Bricklayers

And the working-class too! It is just wonderful how prohibition has increased their efficiency. In the old days they used to drop their work the moment the hour struck. Now they simply refuse to. I noticed yesterday a foreman in charge of a building vainly trying to call the bricklayers down.

“Come, come, gentlemen,” he shouted, “I must insist on your stopping for the night.” But they just went on laying bricks faster than ever. I know a man near here, a coal-cart driver, who used to spend every evening at the public house. Now after his supper he hitches his horse in his coal cart and drives over to the National Gallery to see the pictures.

Of course, as yet there are a few slight difficulties and deficiencies just as there are with us in Canada. We have had the same trouble with wood alcohol (they call it methylated spirit here) with the same deplorable results. On some days the list of deaths is very serious and in some cases we are losing men that we can hardly spare. A great many of our leading actors, in fact most of them, are dead. And there has been a heavy loss, too, among the literary class and in the legal profession. There was a very painful scene last week at the dinner of the Benchers of Gray’s Inn. It seems that one of the Chief Justices had undertaken to make a home brew for the Benchers, just as people do on our side of the water. He got one of the waiters to fetch him some hops and three raw potatoes a packet of yeast and some boiling water. In the end four of the Benchers were carried out dead. But they are going to give them a public funeral in the Abbey.

Death List in Navy

I regret to say that the death list in the Royal Navy is very heavy. Some of our best sailors are gone and it is very difficult to keep Admirals. But I have tried to explain to the people here that these are merely the things that one must expect, and that with a little patience they will have bone-dry admirals and bone-dry statesmen just as good as the wet ones. Even the clergy can be dried up with firmness and perseverance.

There was also a slight sensation here when the Chancellor of the Exchequer brought in his first Appropriation for Maintaining Prohibition. From our point of view in Canada, it was modest enough. But these people are not used to it. The Chancellor merely asked for ten million pounds a month to begin on; he explained that his task is heavy; he has to police not only the entire coast, but the interior; for the Grampian Hills of Scotland alone he asked a million. There was a good deal of questioning the figures in the House. The Chancellor was asked if he intended to keep a hired spy at every street corner in London. He answered, no, only on every other street. He added also that every spy will wear a brass collar with his number.

I must admit further, and I am sorry to have to tell you this, that now we have prohibition it is becoming increasingly difficult to get a drink. In fact sometimes, especially in the very early morning, it is most inconvenient and almost impossible. The public houses being closed it is necessary to go into a drug-store—just as it is with us—and lean up against the counter and make a gurgling sigh like apoplexy. One often sees these apoplexy cases lined up four deep.

Big Run on the Glue

But the people are finding substitutes just as they do with us. There is a tremendous run on patent medicines, perfume, glue, and nitric acid. It has been found that Shears' soap contains alcohol and one sees people everywhere eating cakes of it. The upper classes have taken to chewing tobacco very considerably, and the use of opium in the House of Lords has very greatly increased.

But I don't want you to think that if you come over here to see me your private life will be in any way impaired or curtailed. I am glad to say that I have plenty of rich connections whose cellars are very amply stocked. The Duke of Blank is said to have five thousand cases of Scotch whisky and I have managed to get a card of introduction to his butler. In fact you will find, that just as in Canada and the United States, the benefit of prohibition is intended to fall on the poorer classes.

There is no desire to interfere with the rich.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *Prohibition Comes To London* by Stephen Leacock]