



A Court Scene

HEREDITY FROM ALCOHOL.

(T. D. Crothers, M.D., in 'Union Signal'.)

A young man from a good family committed an atrocious murder and was put on trial for his life. His grandfather had been an excessive drinker. His father and mother had both drank moderately at their meals. His life and history indicated great brain feebleness and degrees of insanity for at least two years before the murder. Public sentiment was very strong against him at the trial. The district attorney had employed an able lawyer to assist him and he publicly announced that the cause of justice demanded the prisoner's death. Two distinguished physicians were retained to swear to the sanity of the prisoner. I was called as an expert in his defence. As the trial went on it was evident that the efforts of the state would be directed to break the force of my testimony as to the insanity of the prisoner. I answered the hypothetical question and explained it at some length for the defence and then was cross-examined by the state's attorney, who was evidently determined to destroy the impression which I had produced on the jury.

The attorney was a man of keen intellect and a thorough master of the art of examining witnesses. After trying various methods to create confusion in my statements, he settled down to a scientific examination, insisting on exact answers without qualifications. As the examination progressed it was evident to both of us that we were surprising each other in questions and answers. There was in his questioning unmistakable indications of a very clear knowledge of the alcoholic mind and method of reasoning such as can never be described in books.

Although two able physicians were seated at his side suggesting questions, it was evident that his knowledge of such cases was far superior to theirs, and the turns and forms of questions were revelations of familiarity with the subject that was a surprise to me.

At the close of the day's trial I concluded that a personal acquaintance with the attorney might give me an insight into his mentality that would be to my advantage in the next day's examination, which after a night of consultation and preparation would undoubtedly be still more severe. Upon being introduced by the judge, I, in an undertone, remarked to the attorney that I had never before been examined by any one who had such acute knowledge of the drink craze and its victims, and that I knew that this knowledge did not come from books. After a moment's hesitation he answered me with a quivering lip, 'Yes, I know of this matter personally in my family and it has been a skeleton to me.'

He asked me to come to his room at the hotel that evening for a personal talk. The interview lasted until midnight. He then told me of his only son who was expelled from college for drinking, and of how he had driven him away from his home much against the advice of his wife, and that this son was now serving a life sentence for murder in a western prison. He spoke of his bitter feelings against the attitude his wife had taken, for she had insisted that the boy was diseased. This he himself could not believe, and he reviewed the heart burnings and sorrows which followed the death of his wife, and her steadfast faith in the mental sickness of the boy, and her disapproval of his own harshness; and how at her death he realized that she was right, but his pride and position made him fear to think of this subject seriously.

He spoke of his own drinking days, and of his abstinence at his wife's request after the birth of his son. Even on this trial he did not dare to permit his feelings to assume the possibility of mental disease. I told him frankly that he made a mistake, that his wife was right, that his boy was a victim, the direct transmission of his own drinking habits.

We shook hands and parted with a cordiality which was not apparent in the next day's examination, and yet beneath the bluff and stern exterior I could see the real man struggling to put the question so that my answers would be the least favorable to his interest. The case was won. My testimony prevailed and the victim was placed in an insane asylum, where he died two years later. No one knew that our midnight interview saved this prisoner from judicial murder.

A few years afterward this lawyer employed me as an expert in the defence of a similar case. At the close of the trial I went to his home and there was introduced to his son, a poor, harmless, half-idiotic man. No questions were asked, but I knew that he had only recently been released and brought home to die. The father's tenderness towards him showed this. The crime had been committed in another state, and no one knew the facts of the case.

A year later this lawyer was found dead in his bed, and the boy was placed in a private asylum where he is now living. Fortunately, his mind is gone and he is unable to recall the past. This incident illustrates some of the startling facts not recognized, which can be traced through families of alcoholic heredity, followed by great misery and sorrow and often judicial murders. Poor alcoholized, insane men, whose parents and relatives are responsible, are constantly going to the gallows, and the harsh delusions of the law of sanity and reason are contradicted by every possible fact and condition.

The Cigarette Evil.

In the cigarette discussion in Parliament, I notice that one of the speakers said, 'If smokers would only practise self-denial for the benefit of others, it would do much to lessen the cigarette evil.' How can men who smoke expect their children to abstain? The difficulty of convincing youths of the evils of tobacco is great enough, but becomes greater when their seniors smoke. If the 'smoking' members and adherents of the church would set an example of abstinence, they would, in my opinion, benefit themselves, but they would benefit society as well, and particularly the rising generation.

Assuming that smoking is simply a habit of pleasure—though I think it is much more—would it not be a step in the direction of moral reform to give it up for the benefit of others? Are there not some men connected with the church who are willing to show their devotion by so doing? Let us have a revival along this line. Paul was willing to give up meat if his eating it caused offence to others. Surely we could do with a good deal less tobacco. I am only reasoning this matter from its influence and example, and my appeal is to those who stand in the way of moral reform. This matter needs all the help it can get. It needs the help of the church—not alone in prayers, but that personal and practical help which would be effective. I ask the thoughtful attention of those church members to whom these lines may have application, to this question, assured that if they are guided by their consciences, instead of by their personal feelings, they will practise what I am preaching.—'A Convert from Smoking,' in 'Christian Guardian.'

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