

The Rubaiyat of a Scotch Highball

(By O. Henry in New York World.)

This document is intended to strike somewhere between a temperance lecture and the "Bar-tender's Guide." Relative to the latter, drink shall swell the theme and be set forth in abundance. Agreeably to the former, not an elbow shall be crooked.

Bob Babbitt was "off the stuff," which means—as you will discover by referring to the unadorned dictionary of Bohemia—that he had "cut out the booze," that he was "on the water wagon." The reason for Bob's sudden attitude of hostility toward the "demon rum"—as the white ribbons miscall whiskey (see the "Bar-tender's Guide") should be of interest to reformers and saloon-keepers.

There is always hope for a man who, when sober, will not concede or acknowledge that he was ever drunk. But when a man will say (in the apt words of the phrase-distiller), "I had a beautiful skate on last night," you will have to put stuff in his coffee as well as pray for him.

One evening on his way home Babbitt dropped in at the Broadway bar that he liked best. Always there were three or four fellows there from the downtown offices whom he knew. And then there would be highballs and stories, and he would hurry home to dinner a little late but feeling good, and a little sorry for the poor Standard Oil Company. On this evening as he entered he heard some one say: "Babbitt was in last night as full as a boiled owl."

Babbitt walked to the bar, and saw in the mirror that his face was as white as chalk. For the first time he had looked Truth in the eyes. Others had led to him; he had disassembled with himself. He was a drunkard, and had not known it. What he had fondly imagined was a pleasant exhilaration had been maudlin intoxication. His fancied wit had been drivel; his gay humors nothing but the noisy vagaries of a sot. But, never again!

"A glass of scotch," he said to the bartender.

A little silence fell upon the group of his cronies, who had been expecting him to join them.

"Going off the stuff, Bob?" one of them asked politely and with more formality than the highballs ever called forth.

"Yes," said Babbitt. Some one of the group took up the unwashed thread of a story he had been telling; the bartender shoved over a dime and a nickel change from the quarter, ungarbled with customary smile; and Babbitt walked out.

Now, Babbitt had a home and a wife—but that is another story. And I will tell you that story, which will show you a better habit and a worse story than you could find in the man who invented the phrase.

It began away up in Sullivan County, where so many rivers and so much trouble begins—or begins; how would you say that? It was July and Jessie was a summer boarder at the Mountain Spring Hotel, and Bob, who was just out of college, saw her one day, and they were married in September. That's the tabloid novel—one swallow of water, and it's gone.

But those July days. Let the explanation point upward, for I shall not. For particularly, you might read up on "Romeo and Juliet," and Abraham Lincoln's thrilling sonnet about "You can fool some of the people," etc., and Darwin's works.

But one thing I must tell you about. Both of them were mad over Omar Rubaiyat. They knew every verse of the old bluffer by heart—not consecutively, but picking 'em out here and there as you fork the mushrooms in a fifty-cent steak à la Bordelaise. Sullivan County is full of rocks and trees, and Jessie used to sit on them, and—please be good—used to sit on the rocks; and Bob had a way of standing behind her with his hands over her shoulders holding her hands, and his face close to hers, and they would repeat over and over their favorite verses of the old tent-maker.

They saw only the poetry and philosophy of the wonderful lines then—indeed, they agreed that the Wine was only an image, and that what was meant to be celebrated was some divinity or maybe Love or Life. However, at the time neither of them had tasted the stuff that goes with a sixty-cent table d'hôte.

Where was I? Oh, they were married and came to New York. Bob showed his college diploma, and accepted a position filling inkstands in a lawyer's office at \$15 a week. At the end of two years he had worked up to \$30, and gotten his first taste of Bohemia—the kind that won't stand the borax and formaldehyde tests.

They had two furnished rooms and a little kitchen. To Jess, accustomed to the initial but beautiful savor of a country town, the droggy Bohemia was sugar and spice. She hung fish seines on the walls of her rooms, and bought a rakish-looking sidle-board, and learned to play the banjo. Twice

or three a week they dined at French or Italian tables d'hôte in a cloud of smoke and brag and unshorn hair. Jess learned to drink a cocktail in order to get the cherry. At home she smoked a cigarette after dinner. She learned to pronounce Chianti, and leave her olive stones for the waiter to pick up. Once she assayed to say la, la, la in a crowd, but only got as far as the second one. They met one or two couples while dining out and became friendly with them. The sidle-board was stocked with Scotch, and eye and a liquor. They had their new friends in to dinner and all were laughing at nothing by 1 a. m. Some plastering fell in the room below them for which Bob had to pay \$4.50. Thus they footed it merrily on the rugged frontiers of the country that has no boundary-line or government.

And soon Bob fell in with his cronies and learned to keep his foot on a little rail six inches above the floor for an hour or so every afternoon before he went home. Drink always rubbed him the right way, and he would reach his rooms as jolly as a sandboy. Jessie would meet him at the door, and generally they would dance some insane kind of a rigodon about the floor by way of greeting. Once when Bob's feet became confused and he tumbled headlong over a foot-stool Jessie laughed so heartily and long that he had to throw all the couch pillows at her to make her hush.

In such wise life was speeding for them on the day when Bob Babbitt first felt the power that the gift had given him.

But let us get back to our lamb and aint sauce.

When Bob got home that evening he found Jessie in a long apron cutting up a lobster for the Newburg. Usually when Bob came in, mellow from his hour at the bar his welcome was hilarious, though somewhat tintured with Scotch smoke.

By screams and snatches of song and certain audible testimonials to domestic felicity was his advent proclaimed. When she heard his foot on the stairs the old maid in the hall room always stuffed cotton into her ears. At first Jessie had shrunk from the rudeness and flavor of these spiritual greetings, but as the fog of the false Bohemia gradually encompassed her she came to accept them as love's true and proper greeting.

Bob came in without a word, smiled, kissed her neatly and noiselessly, took up a paper and sat down. In the hall room the old maid held her two plugs of cotton poised, filled with anxiety.

Jessie dropped lobster and knife and ran to him with frightened eyes. "What's the matter, Bob, are you ill?"

"Not at all, dear."

"Then what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

Hearken, brethren. When She-who-has-a-right-to-ask interrogates you concerning a change she finds in your mood answer her thus: Tell her that you in a sudden rage, have murdered your grandmother; tell her that you have robbed orphans and that your nose has struck you; tell her your fortune is swept away; that you are beset by enemies, by bionics, by any kind of malevolent fate; but do not, if peace and happiness are worth as much as a grain of mustard seed to you—do not answer her "Nothing."

Jessie went back to the lobster in silence. She cast looks of darkest suspicion at Bob. He had never acted that way before.

When dinner was on the table she set out the bottle of Scotch and the glasses. Bob declined.

"Tell you the truth, Jess," he said, "I've cut out the drink. Help yourself, of course, if you don't mind I'll try some of the seltzer straight."

"You've stopped drinking?" she said, looking at him steadily and unsmilingly. "What for?"

"It wasn't doing me any good," said Bob. "Don't you approve of the idea?"

Jessie raised her eyebrows and one shoulder slightly. "Entirely," she said with a sculptured smile. "I could not conscientiously advise any one to drink or smoke or whistle on Sunday."

The meal was finished almost in silence. Bob tried to make talk, but his efforts lacked the stimulus of previous evenings. He felt miserable, and once or twice his eye wandered toward the bottle, but each time the scathing words of his bibulous friend sounded in his ear and his mouth set with determination.

Jessie felt the change deeply. The restless fever, the false gaiety, the unnatural excitement of the shoddy Bohemia in which they had lived had dropped away in the space of the popping of a cork. She stole curious and forlorn glances at the dejected Bob, who bore the guilty look of at least a wife-

beater or a family tyrant. After dinner the colored maid who came in daily to perform such chores cleared away the things. Jessie, with an unreadable countenance, brought back the bottle of Scotch and the glasses and a bowl of cracked ice and set them on the table.

"May I ask," she said, with some of the ice in her tones, "whether I am to be included in your sudden spasm of goodness? If not, I'll make one for myself. It's rather chilly this evening, for some reason."

"Oh, come now, Jess," said Bob good-naturedly, "don't be too rough on me. Help yourself, by all means. There's no danger of your overdoing it. But I thought there was with me, and that's why I quit. Have yours, and then let's get out the banjo and try over that new quickstep."

"I've heard," said Jessie in the tones of the oracle, "that drinking alone is a pernicious habit. No, I don't think I feel like playing this evening. If we are going to reform we may as well abandon the evil habit of banjo-playing, too."

She took up a book and sat in her little willow rocker on the other side of the table. Neither of them spoke for half an hour.

And then Bob laid down his paper and got up with a strange about look on his face and went behind her chair and reached over her shoulders, taking her hands in his, and laid his face close to hers.

In a moment to Jessie the walls of the dining-room seemed to shimmer, and she saw the Sullivan County hills and rills. Bob felt her hands quiver in his as he began the verse from old Omar:

"Come, fill the Cup, and in the Fire of Spring
The Winged Garment of Repentance fling;
The Bird of Time has but a little way
To fly; Lo! Lot the Bird is on the Wing!"

And then he walked to the table and poured a stiff drink of Scotch into a glass.

But in that moment a mountain breeze had somehow found its way in and blown away the mist of the false Bohemia.

Jessie leaped and with one fierce sweep of her hand sent the bottle and glasses crashing to the floor. The same motion of her arm carried it around Bob's neck, when it met its mate and landed tight.

"Oh, my God, Bobbie—not that one—I see now. I wasn't always such a fool, was I? That other verse, boy—the one that says: 'Remould it to the Heart's Desire.' Say that one—to the Heart's Desire."

"I know that one," said Bob. "It goes: 'Ah! Love, could you and I with Him conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme entire
Would not we?'"

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