

Progress by Prohibition

[excerpt]

(March 1, 1908)

Some well-meaning but deluded people think that all wickedness can be overcome and the millennium ushered in by prohibition. Anything they do not happen to like is bad, according to their ethics, and forthwith is put upon their prohibition list. These people strain at gnats and swallow camels. They throw a fit over a man taking a drink at 11:30 or playing a game of cards, but they are not concerned about wage-slavery, or child-sweating, which have a thousand victims where the saloon has one.

These people are not satisfied to be permitted to spend their Sundays as they choose, but they must see to it that others spend their Sundays in the same way. According to these fanatics, practically everything in town is to be closed Sunday except the churches. This means that Terre Haute is to be converted into a sabbatarian penitentiary. The gospel of gloom will then be triumphant and the spirit of bigotry and intolerance will seek other fields to conquer.

Thirty days of this kind of punishment would be a good thing for Terre Haute. A sixty days' sentence would be still better. It would cure the community of its puritanic affliction, as it has others, for many years.

There are some of us who prefer the theaters to the church; who would rather be entertained at a play than to listen to a stupid sermon. We do not in the least object to people going to church; it is their right and purely their own affair. We simply insist upon the same right to go to the theater, or to the ball park, or wherever we choose, so long as we do not interfere with the equal right of our neighbors.

It is wonderful how tamely people will submit to this spirit of intolerance, this mean and narrow fanaticism. I know that many are opposed to it and yet such is their economic dependence that they dare not speak out for fear they may lose some "trade," or some "practice," or some "prestige," or something else upon which they depend as a means of livelihood.

It is quite the thing in this crusade to pounce upon the saloonkeeper and hold him up as a monster of iniquity. I have no brief to speak for him, but as long as the saloon is licensed by the government it is just as lawful as any other business in the profit-mongering system, and the saloonkeeper is entitled to the same consideration as any other citizen. The saloonkeeper is no more responsible for the saloon than the preacher is for the church, and the saloonkeeper is not necessarily a bad man, nor the preacher necessarily a good one. Speaking for myself, if I were hungry and friendless today I would rather take my chances with the average saloonkeeper than with the average preacher.

It seems not a little strange that this gospel of puritanism born of the same spirit which hanged witches and tortured Quakers, should be preached in the name of Jesus Christ. There is not a word in all he ever uttered to justify it, and if he happened to enter Terre Haute today as he entered Jerusalem, presenting the same appearance, having the same mission, and being followed by the same crowd, these solemn bigots would be the first to call him a hobo and demand that he be sent to the rock pile for profaning the Sabbath.

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