

CHAPTER XVI

WINE AND WOMEN

During the summer of 1848 May wrote a long letter to his friend Pierpont, Unitarian pastor at Troy, New York. Tell me, he asked, what type of wine you use at the Lord's Supper? Here at Syracuse I am forced to use intoxicating liquor and the sacred chalice is transformed into "the cup of devils." Have you any non-intoxicating syrup you could loan me; do you know where such may be purchased; and what method do you pursue to purify the water used at Communion? These were not the questions of a fanatic; rather were they of one who honestly detested the thought of having to defile the memorial service of the Master's passion with ordinary liquor that any drunkard could buy for a few cents at Cook's Coffee Shop. May's sensitive nature recoiled against such a practice and so he wrote to Pierpont for advice - Pierpont who, in spite of smoking dark heavy cigars, was eternally sound on the temperance question. Well, Pierpont replied in short order, and while he was unable to send any non-intoxicating syrup he told May that Spaldings, Broomfield Street, Boston sold it at a dollar a bottle. And as for purifying the water, Pierpont added:

My filterer consists of alternate strata of sand, pulverized charcoal and sand, i.e., first over the orifice put a handful of sponge, then some clean white sand, such as they use for scouring, then a third stratum of charcoal pulverized - not very fine - and then another pretty thick stratum of sand. That's all. After the coal and sand are first put in place, let water pass two or three times through the mass and flow off through the stop-cock in order to take, as it will, any impurities from either, and after that the water - rain water - will come through like a sea of glass, clear as crystal and you will find it indeed a river of life.

May's interest in the temperance crusade predated his arrival in Syracuse where any active branch of the Sons of Temperance had existed for several years. This organization, as well as a branch of the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance, which May had joined while at Brooklyn, took high ground in advocating the principle of total abstinence.

In accordance with this avowed objective, the local temperance forces sought to increase their influence by propaganda and education; by persuading individuals to sign the pledge; and by petitioning the State Legislature to pass suitable resolutions and laws. Similar efforts elsewhere in the State finally resulted, in 1845, in the passage of a measure providing for a statewide election on the question, license or no license. In the spring of the next year the temperance crusaders won a smashing victory; the great majority of the towns outside of New York, which was not covered by the law, going dry. In Onondaga County, Pompey was the only town to favor the license system. Although there is no evidence to show that May participated in the local drive, it seems reasonable to assume on the basis of his past record that he must have done his bit. And when on Independence Day the Sons of Temperance gathered to celebrate their victory, May delivered the principal address.

The victory, however, was shortlived. Violations of the no license law occurred in numbers large enough to quicken the temperance advocates to renewed efforts. Mass meetings were held deploring these infractions and calling for rigid enforcement throughout the county. Similar scenes were enacted in other parts of the State but all to no avail as the foes of temperance were able to have the Legislature provide for another referendum. Many towns throughout New York, including eight within Onondaga County, voted to rescind their previous action. During the course of this election, May appears to have spoken in favor of no license at a number of local meetings and was chosen a member of the Board of Managers of the State Temperance Society.

Sentiment in Syracuse largely endorsed the principle of no license and it was not until the spring of 1848 that an attempt was made to reopen the liquor traffic. Immediately, May and his fellow temperance workers sprang to action and at a public meeting secured the adoption of resolutions against the issuing of licenses. His opponents, in the meantime, carried their case to the City Council which after listening to arguments from both sides passed an ordinance prohibiting licenses to anyone within the city limits. Quick to sense the importance of this victory, May marshalled his forces at a public meeting, applauded the brave stand taken by the Council and called upon the audience to pass resolutions approving of the Council's action. May knew only too well that powerful groups were at work which if not checked would weaken the position taken by the City Fathers and ultimately lead to the reappearance of the hated dramshop. May's efforts were not in vain as the meeting unanimously adopted the resolutions he had presented. May was delighted and, after returning from Brewerton where he addressed the Sons of Temperance, was instrumental in having an invitation extended to the Council asking for its participation in a city parade and demonstration in favor of temperance. The Council accepted the invitation and on July 12, 1849, the devotees of drink witnessed an official and public condemnation of the liquor traffic. Later, in the same year, May was chosen a member of the State Executive Committee at a meeting, held in Syracuse, of the State Temperance Society.

During the course of the next few years, May continued to labor in behalf of temperance. From his pulpit came pointed sermons and on several occasions he raised his voice at local gatherings against infractions of the law. Moreover, at a public meeting in February, 1851, he pled for the establishment of a Temperance League, chartered under the laws of the State with a capital stock of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Those

present at this gathering roundly applauded his suggestion and generously subscribed thirty-five thousand dollars. Although the enterprise does not appear to have materialized, it indicated the trend of May's thought and the strength of local opinion. About the same time, he carried the crusade into the public schools and at a Teacher's Institute secured the adoption of a resolution providing for the circulation of a pledge to be signed by the pupils against the use of liquor, tobacco and opium. One might as well kill three birds with one stone.

A little later at a local temperance convention, May introduced a resolution that "the intemperance of the Hon. Daniel Webster, so notorious that his most unscrupulous adherents will not soberly deny it, is a sufficient reason why all true friends of our country and humanity should exert themselves to prevent his election to the Presidency without any other consideration of his qualifications for that office." Murmurs of opposition greeted him from all sides. Some, it may be reasoned, must have thought the pastor was allowing bias and prejudice to dominate his sentiments. Less than two weeks before, Webster had thundered forth his wrath, from a balcony of the City Hall, upon the traitorous abolitionists of Syracuse, and that included May, who had announced their determination to violate the Fugitive Slave Law. Surely his feelings had been disclosed by the choice of such words as "intemperance," "unscrupulous" and "soberly." Others must have felt that personalities should be left out of their considerations regardless of political issues. May was somewhat taken back by this opposition and was forced to accept an amendment which eliminated Webster's name. In its place there was substituted the clause, "a candidate for any high office."

Shortly thereafter, the temperance societies throughout the State began agitating for a prohibition law and one may be certain that May lent his efforts to this task. Ultimately by 1854, such an act was passed though Governor Seymour courted political defeat by vetoing the same on constitutional grounds. The temperance friends then proceeded to rally behind Myron H. Clark, an ardent dry, and were able to place him in the Governor's Mansion at Albany. Clark rewarded his supporters by signing a prohibition measure only to have the Court of Appeals declare the law unconstitutional.

May's ill health and his herculean efforts in behalf of the slave prevented any considerable temperance activity during the remainder of the 1850's. On occasion he publicly condemned local infractions of the law and bemoaned the change in policy adopted by the Council which for some time had been granting licenses. During these trying days his repeated journeys to the family medicine chest in search of Kidder's Coridal and his samplings of wines and ales while in Europe hardly warrant classifying him as a complete teetotaler. Possibly, he may have rationalized himself out of this difficulty. His Paris doctor had recommended a richer life and for health's sake he would follow that advice. On his return home, however, in late 1859, he seems to have turned over a new leaf and, excepting for an occasional sip of Kidder's Coridal, never touched liquor in any form.

During 1861 May spent considerable time in furthering temperance activities. One day he would appear before the City Council pleading with them for a better enforcement of existing laws or for a complete prohibition on the sale of all intoxicating liquors. On another, he would be at Albany or some other city attending a meeting of the State or County Temperance Society. Locally, he ^{was} most active in promoting temperance gatherings and in sponsoring public addresses given by John Cough and other notable temperance leaders. On occasion, he spoke himself and during the most of

April addressed no less than seven meetings in Syracuse and neighboring towns. Late in the same year his old friend Smith visited him - Smith who for so many years had labored in behalf of temperance. Smith's remarks upon this question greatly impressed May and led him to insert the following in his diary, "For thirty years this excellent man has not taken intoxicating drink, tobacco, tea or coffee, and at the manly age of sixty-five he is fresh and vigorous."

Throughout the remainder of his life May sought to rival his friend's record in respect to strong drink. Tobacco he never seems to have touched, though he saw no harm in either coffee or tea. At the same time he continued to labor for temperance, speaking here and there, and attending a large number of state and local meetings. And when Dr. Charles Jewett and Father Mathew visited Syracuse, he did what he could to make their stay comfortable and successful. Nor did he hesitate to walk boldly to the City Hall and call the authorities to account for the evil conditions existing in Syracuse, and beg them at least to stop the sale of liquor on the Sabbath.

May's condemnation of the use and sale of intoxicating liquor rested fundamentally upon Christian principles. How he reconciled himself to the Marriage Feast at Cana is not known, though one may be sure he found a way around this difficulty. Probably, in the last analysis, May stood for temperance. As an individual, he would not touch any strong drink - except for health's sake - and would seek to influence others to do likewise. And while he frowned upon those who found cheer and comfort in an occasional sip, he was chiefly concerned with those who made themselves drunkards. Drunkenness, he said over and over again, was a sin against God and must be eradicated. It was also a sin against society and like so many ardent temperance advocates he had no difficulty in marshalling facts and figures to prove his contention. Millions of dollars were annually wasted in the saloons, dramshops and houses

of the country - money that might better be spent for better purposes. Excessive drinking was responsible for crime and insanity, and the prisons and asylums were crowded with persons whose downfall could be laid to liquor. Home after home had been torn asunder and orphans had multiplied in great numbers. And when called upon to present a solution for this national crime, May fell back upon educational processes. Man must be taught to understand the evils of drinking. Direct political action, he believed, would never make America a temperate nation. Vote for temperance candidates and when they are elected strengthen their hands by furthering educational propaganda and such laws as will in time eliminate drunkenness.

In pursuit of this end May frequently cooperated with Susan B. Anthony and other feminists who included temperance in their general program of equal rights for women. As a pastor at Brooklyn, he had not been blind to the "moral instincts" that actuated women in home, church and community, and repeatedly did he lean upon them to advance the fortunes of his struggling parish. He was quick to note their ability to discern right from wrong and how often they were leaps ahead of their husbands who, in arguing for some reform, frequently did little more than reflect what they had heard from their wives. The simple but important fact that they lacked political discipline left them free to follow their own convictions and humane sentiments. On the other hand, he accepted without question the approved mores of his age which denied to women an active voice in the conduct and administration of the church. And while he would listen to their suggestions, which he often endorsed through action, never thought of according them a voice in the deliberations of the parish meetings. He was willing to allow them the privilege of attending these gatherings and those of the local Colonization, Peace or Anti-Slavery Societies though he never saw any reason to change the universal sentiment and custom that forbade women to speak in meeting.

Increased activity in humanitarian affairs inevitably brought him into contact with women of unusual ability and learning. There were, for example, Lydia M. Child, the Weston sisters, Anna Green who became Mrs. Wendell Phillips, Susan Cabot and a host of others whose writings and public addresses attracted him and his fellow reformers. Later, on moving to South Scituate, he met the inimitable Grimke sisters who upon his invitation spoke from his pulpit on the slavery question. What if Angelina did orate for all of two hours, her remarks were all to the point and her appeal most eloquent. The propriety of women speaking in meeting was settled once and for all, so far as May was concerned. His pulpit would always be open to them and in 1837 he supported a resolution according them the same right of speech at a gathering of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. Nor would he deny them the right to vote at the organization meeting of the Non-Resistant Society.

Having taken this decisive step and after careful consideration of their demand for equal rights in all matters, May became a confirmed advocate of woman's rights. He realized that their cause was not in the hands of half-cracked feminists, that they were sincere and honest in their contentions and were entitled, therefore, to every political, economic and social privilege enjoyed by men. He admired their intelligent leadership and once remarked that "if the American people wanted a really great President they would elect Lucretia Mott." Lucretia, in turn, hailed May as one of "Heaven's own."

Of course May, as well as Garrison and others who befriended the cause of women, was ridiculed, scorned and damned by those who relegated the "weaker sex" to the pure and undefiled life of the home, nursery, and kitchen. The order and decorum of the ancient Christian church, so it was said, was being set at naught by the abolitionists and non-resisters. "If the vine, whose strength and beauty is to lean upon the trellis-work, and half conceal

its clusters, thinks to assume the independence and overshadowing nature of the elm, it will not only cease to bear fruit, but will fall in shame and dishonor into the dust." An absurd and unwarranted analogy, May replied. Consider for one moment, he added, the number of men who for one reason or other cling to and lean upon their wives, sisters or daughters for support, help and counsel. And yet you view women as the only frail vine! "O tempora! O mores!!", May exclaimed, when will the sons of Christ realize that in his divine sight no valid distinction exists between men and women?

Shortly after his arrival in Syracuse, May expounded his views in a sermon on the "Rights and Condition of Women." It attracted considerable attention locally and in time was published, receiving wide recognition both in America and Britain. Its author was marked as one who stood solidly behind the Woman's Rights movement. Small wonder that he was called upon to speak at their conventions and meetings, tasks he willingly shouldered with a vim and energy that evoked bewilderment from those who always found him hard at work on the antislavery crusade. On one occasion, he astonished those present at a State Temperance meeting in Syracuse by asking that the privileges of the floor be extended to women. Such a request had never been heard of in Syracuse and a great hubbub followed. What does May mean by introducing the vexed woman's question into a temperance gathering? Let him discuss it to his heart's content in his sermons and at woman's rights conventions, but not at a temperance meeting. We are not here to listen to the plea for equal rights; many of us do not believe in such fantastic notions; and to introduce it here may well lead to a dispute which will wreck our noble work. Amid these and other questions and remarks, Susan B. Anthony of Rochester gained the floor and tried to speak. Much to May's shame, she was hooted down and finally ruled out of order. Such intolerance May found hard to

understand.

In the summer of 1852 May was approached by Miss Anthony as to the wisdom of holding a Woman's Rights Convention in Syracuse. He was for it one hundred per cent even though at the time he was preoccupied with the forthcoming Jerry Rescue Celebration. Accordingly, May gladly wrote to Garrison, Smith and others urging them to be present at the meeting which was set for late September. Garrison, who planned to attend the Jerry Rescue gathering which was to be held the next month, excused himself though he gave May and Miss Anthony his blessing. Smith, whose interest in this reform does not seem to have been very marked at the time, nevertheless endorsed the convention and signed his name to the call which appeared in the local papers. In addition to Smith's name there was of course that of May's together with others like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucy Stone.

The meeting was held as advertised, September 8 to 10. Women from various parts of the State were present, some dressed in the quaint simple costuming of the Friends, others, who in their desire to evidence their sentiments, paraded about in bloomers, none of whom missed the alert eyes of the reporters who capitalized upon this feature of the convention. And sandwiched in between bloomers and Friends were a few bold men like May and Smith. After the blessing of heaven had been asked for by May, the meeting got down to business. Officers were chosen and special committees appointed to handle the matter of resolutions. Many animated discussions then followed as to rights of women and as to the policies that should be pursued. Most significant were the remarks that centered about Gerrit Smith's resolve that "Women are entitled to the same rights as Men." Needless to say, the convention warmly approved of this motion coming as it did from one whose presence must have done much to enhance the success and reputation of the meeting. The convention likewise voted, upon May's recommendation, to issue a paper devoted primarily to woman's rights, May being chosen one of

the editors. All in all the gathering was a distinct success and it was believed by its friends that definite progress had been made.

During the course of the next few years, although May was busy with antislavery matters, he took time off now and then to advance the cause of woman's rights. In 1856, for example, he introduced his dear friend Lucretia Mott to a local gathering and later journeyed to Worcester to attend a general convention on woman's rights. Frequently, during the Civil War days, he spoke in their behalf, and after this conflict had ended he doubled his efforts touring Onondaga County in their interest and stimulating the foundation of local woman's rights societies. In 1867, he drafted a petition to the State Constitutional Convention favoring the extension of suffrage to women, and circulated the same throughout Central New York. Two years later he was the driving force that led to a series of meetings in Syracuse and he tramped up and down the streets gaining signatures to a suffrage petition which later he sent to Washington.

During his visit to the Capitol in 1870, he attended the National Woman's Suffrage Convention and while it does not appear that he took any active part in its deliberations still ^{he} was a most interested listener. Greatly did he admire the skill and ability of the presiding officer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, whose address to the convention evoked his warmest praise. And as for Susan B. Anthony, well she highly amused him by her defiant, "dare-devil manner and curt sayings." Later, he listened to the interview accorded the suffragettes by a joint committee of the Senate and House of Representatives and believed his friends had the better of the argument. "I shall be heartily ashamed," he wrote in his diary, "of my country if they much longer withhold from the women any of their natural social or political rights." Congress, however, did not hold the same exalted notion of women and May left Washington convinced that a grévous error had been made. Later, in the same year, he cooperated in making plans for a State Woman's Suffrage

meeting to be held at Saratoga and in September attended a large gathering at Boston.

May's failing health prevented him from assuming the role in this movement he wanted to pursue. Moreover, he was conserving his strength for what he considered of greater importance, namely his missionary efforts in Central New York in behalf of Unitarianism. That he believed thoroughly in the justice of their demands cannot be questioned. His past associations with staunch women like Lydia Child, Sarah Grimke and Lucy Stone convinced him of their ability to exercise the vote intelligently and to be entrusted with affairs of state. Woman's role in society was as important as man's; she was called upon to render many unique services, pay taxes, assume responsibilities and contribute her sons to military service; and yet she had no voice in the determination of policies that profoundly affected her life. All this idle chatter about woman's place in the home he dismissed as so much dribble. To be sure she was the homemaker, but that was no reason why she should be denied equal rights with men. Grant them the vote, endow them with the same political and social rights as men, and the day will come when an enlightened electorate will banish from this country and the world all of the pernicious evils that at present surround both. Intemperance, the desecration of the Sabbath, immorality, war - injustice in all forms - will ultimately be eradicated through the sober and sane judgment of women.