

The Demon Drink

I admit it. I like a drink or three. Despite regularly exceeding the so-called safe alcohol unit guidance, I do not consider that I have a drink problem.

Since time immemorial Homo sapiens has been fascinated by the delights and of fermented beverages. The Chinese brewed an alcoholic beverage as far back as 7000 BCE, the Sumerians worshipped Geshtinanna, a wine goddess, around 2700 BCE and in India sura, an alcoholic beverage distilled from rice, was a tippie of choice in the third millennium BCE.

Pleasurable as an alcoholic drink is, it is undeniable that the demon drink has ruined many a life, not only that of the toper but of their family and loved ones. And this provides fertile ground for the practitioner of quackery to ply their trade.

No 1: Arthur Pointing and Antidipso

What would people give for a miracle cure that would transform even the most degenerate drunkard into a tea-totalling paragon of virtue?

At the start of the twentieth century, Arthur Pointing (1868 – 1910) claimed to have just such a miracle cure, Antidipso, made from some previously unexploited herb from South America. His advertising, and the remedy was heavily promoted, was primarily focused on the fairer sex, the implicit assumption being that the drunkard was always likely to be a man.

“Drunkenness cured”, the adverts screamed, “it is now within the reach of every woman to save the drunkard”.

If you were worried about how to administer it, Arthur had figured that out. Poisoning seems to have been the most popular way for a woman to murder her victim in the 19th century. Slipping a phial of poison into a drink or dinner was the work of seconds and didn't require any brawn. This was clearly the way that a woman could trick her hubby into taking the miracle cure.

The adverts carefully gave the instructions, “Can be given in tea, coffee or food, thus absolutely and secretly curing the patient in a short time without his knowledge”.

To get your hands on this wonder cure, all you had to do was to apply to Ward Chemical Co of Regent Street who, on return, would send a package of the remedy, securely sealed in a plain wrapper together with full directions on how to use it and testimonials galore. Packets retailed for ten shillings, worth it, perhaps, to get your hands on something which, according to the advertising copy, “has shed a radiance into thousands of hitherto desolate firesides” and which “does its work silently and surely that while the devoted wife, sister or daughter looks on, the drunkard is reclaimed even against his will and without his knowledge or co-operation”.

But what was in it and did it work?

By January 1904, the *Lancet*, the medical journal, had Antidipso in its sights and published an analysis of its ingredients. They found that 78% of it was made of milk sugar and the balance, potassium bromide. There wasn't a hint of an exotic South American herb to be seen. Although bromide could make you feel sick and, possibly, put you off the demon drink, if only temporarily, the journal concluded that the quantities in a daily dose of Antidipso were so small as to be barely noticeable. What's more, the cost of the ingredients amounted to around one and half pennies. The retail price of ten shillings, even allowing for advertising expenses, showed a phenomenal mark up. No wonder within ten years of its launch, Pointing was worth almost £38,000.

Pointing tried to fight back, visiting the journal's offices and showed sheaths of glowing testimonials as to the efficacy of his cure. But to no avail. The *Lancet* savaged Pointing for perpetrating a “cruel and wicked fraud” on those who were trapped in a difficult situation by, in effect, selling them false hopes. But that, my friends, is what quackery is all about.

In 1906, Pointing had a mental breakdown and became a resident of Peckham House Asylum until his death four years later. He left part of his ill-gotten fortune to his employees and charities; perhaps he had found his conscience.

No 2: Quaff-aid

For the seasoned toper, a hangover is an occupational hazard. A real humdinger may provoke the resolution never to let a drop pass your lips ever again but, in my experience, these thoughts are even more short-lived than the resolutions we make at New Year.

Many of us have our tried and tested methods of dealing with a hangover, mine is to have a hair of the dog as quickly as I can, but wouldn't it be wonderful if you could pop a pill that inured you from the effects of a hangover?

Well, this is what Quaff-Aid purported to do. It was manufactured by Amber Laboratories in Milwaukee, a subsidiary of yeast processor, Milbew Inc, who were looking around for new uses for the by-products from the brewing process. The pills, made from concentrated brewer's yeast, were launched in the state of Wisconsin in the Spring of 1955. The adverts, as you might expect, were fulsome in their praise of the efficacy of the tablets.

"No regrets tomorrow for feeling good today", they screamed. They went on to promise "a wonderful time...every time. You'll be poised, assured, relaxed; have a wonderful sense of light-hearted freedom from worry because you know your fun won't be spoiled. Goodbye to hangovers!"

Not unsurprisingly, packets of Quaff-aid flew off the shelves of local pharmacists and bars.

For just ninety-eight cents you could get your hands on a Carry Home Party Pak, which consisted of five two-tablet packs. What's more the Party Pak came with some paper napkins and the helpful advice that a party hostess could hand the tablets out to her guests before the evening's festivities got into full swing.

I've been to a few parties where dubious looking tablets have been handed out, but never Quaff-aid. I'm not sure why you need a napkin to help you ingest a tablet, perhaps they were envisaging a crowd of drooling inebriates.

In October 1956, the Amber Laboratories in Buffum Street were visited by officials from the US Food and Drug Administration. They seized around a quarter of a million tablets, claiming that the product was no damn use. Perhaps one of the officers had had a skin-full and was rather disappointed, despite having summoned the assistance of Quaff-aid.

This prompted a furious response from the Director of Research at Amber, Sheldon Bernstein, who was reported by the *Milwaukee Journal* as saying that the vitamins to be found in Quaff-aid were essential for a speedy recovery from a bout of over-indulgence, but the FDA would not be moved and the product disappeared as quickly as it arrived and, doubtless, more speedily than a hangover.

Amber Laboratories, despite this setback, prospered, generating by the mid-1980s sales in excess of \$10 million from manufacturing yeast extracts, animal feed supplements and distilling alcohol for industrial and domestic use. It was acquired by Universal Foods in 1983.

No 3: Hall's Wine

It is a strange thing, but for the late Victorians, nervous complaints were as endemic as allergies are for us today. For those who felt a little below par and were in need of a pick-me-up, there was a bewildering array of tonics. One such was Hall's Wine, which was introduced to the unsuspecting public in 1888 by Stephen Smith & Co of Bow in East London.

Another was Coca-cola but we will look at that gem when we meet John Pemberton.

Marketing is everything and Henry James Hall, the proprietor, hit on the wheeze of offering free tasting samples to anyone who bothered to write in. They were overwhelmed by the demand, so much so that they had to take out adverts in the press advising that "our offer...has brought us so many applications that our staff has been unable to attend to them on arrival. We are dealing with the letters in rotation, and hope to clear off arrears in less than a week".

I imagine the poor overworked staff had to glug copious amounts of the stuff to keep them going as they made strenuous efforts to reduce the backlog.

At its launch the potion, which sold at two shillings and three shillings and sixpence a time, was known as Hall's Coca Wine. Hall was perfectly upfront about its contents. "It is necessary to state", the same advert goes on, "that Hall's Coca Wine contains nothing but the extractive principles of the coca leaf and although a powerful nervine, is practically harmless".

So, dosing yourself up with cocaine is practically harmless, is it?

It turns out that there was more than just coca leaf in the Wine: Old High Douro and Priorato Port. I hope the bottle was passed to the left.

In 1897, the wine was rebranded, the Coca being dropped. It was not because Hall had any qualms about the cocaine content of his product, rather that he found that he was boosting the sales of inferior coca-based products. The adverts continued to boast about the efficacy of the tincture. It was ideal for when "you are neither one thing nor the other" and would allow you to regain "the last five or ten per cent of health, without which all is dullness". Hall even garnered some glowing testimonials from distinguished organs, such as the *Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal*. But trouble was looming.

Interestingly, it was not the cocaine that attracted opprobrium but the alcoholic content of the potion.

Teetotallers were fooled, so some temperance worthies claimed, into thinking that they were knocking back some medicated substance which, despite the name, didn't contain alcohol. For some, it was the start of the very slippery slope to alcoholism. The President of the Royal College of Physicians opined that "the prescription of medicated wines is in some cases responsible for the starting of the drink habit, especially in women" and one anonymous contributor thought "the devil in disguise is more dangerous than the devil with his fork and tail".

Eventually, of course, the cocaine content did for it, but it is a fascinating insight into the views of the time that the evils of the demon drink outweighed those of a variant of the Colombian marching powder.

There was a school of thought, though, that considered that less than enthusiastic abstainers saw the use of medicated wines as a way of getting their fix without overtly breaking their pledge. Whether the tonic did anything for the nerves is unclear, but it certainly took the market by storm.