

# The Oracle at the Private Bar

Banjo Paterson

“Cumanavadrink!” said the Thin Man to the Oracle, when they met at the corner hotel, and he moved to the main entrance.

“I never go into the threepenny bar,” said the Oracle, “because I am liable to gout, and can’t drink beer, and they can’t sell anything drinkable for threepence but beer, which they ought to sell for twopence now that the brewers have reduced the wholesale price; but threepence seems to be what the Japanese in their weekly ultimatums to the Czar of Russia call the irreducible minimum.”

“Well, come into the private bar,” said the Thin Man.

And they did.

“Of course, you know why this is called the private bar?” said the Oracle.

“Well, no, I don’t,” said the man of slight obesity.

“It is called the private bar,” said the Oracle, “because it is open to the public. That is, it is open to those members of the public who are the happy possessors of the irreducible minimum of one sprat. To every possessor of sixpence a private bar is a public bar, and to every person with less than threepence a public bar is a private bar. In fact, he is barred altogether. In this country you cannot look at a barman through the end of a long-necked tumbler, or through the glass bottom of a pint pot, for less than threepence; that, as Admiral Kamimura would say, is the irreducible minimum.”

“I see,” said the Thin Man, who was so thin that his friends used to ask him if he were a grandson of Napoleon Boney Party.

“Hennessey and Schweppe, my dear,” said the Oracle to the flaxen-haired Hebe behind the bar, “and my friend will have the same, because he knows that when you sell a fair nobbler of brandy and soda for sixpence you do so at a dead loss; while, if you sell two for a shilling and split the soda there is a profit of very nearly a halfpenny!”

“But I could come in and have a Hennessey and Schweppe on my own for sixpence, couldn’t I?” inquired the Thin Man, well knowing that he could do so.

“Of course you could,” said the Oracle.

“Then why, if it doesn’t pay them, do they sell one brandy and soda for sixpence?”

“It’s the quantity they sell that makes it pay,” said the Oracle. “I am inclined to think,” he went on, as he half emptied his glass, “that drink should be put down.”

The barmaid smiled, and the Oracle frowned.

“This,” he said, pointing to the young woman, “seems to be a very respectable girl; but I do not think a bar is a proper place for a girl. In this view I have the support of many estimable persons, who have never been inside an hotel, and consequently do not know anything at all about them. The number of things which are condemned by people who know nothing at all about them is one of the quaintest paradoxes of the twentieth century. Did you ever know a temperance lecturer to come into a bar, have a drink, shout for the barmaid, and invite her to Manly to shoot the chute and tobog the toboggan? No! Why? Because he is afraid it would be a Steyne on his character! But, as Antony said to Cleopatra, as recorded by the immortal bard, ‘Let’s to billiards!’”

“Who was the immortal bard?” asked the Thin Man.

“I refer,” said the Oracle, “to William W. Shakespeare, the greatest of all English poets, and the first to mention the game of billiards. Apparently he played billiards, and probably Ben Jonson called him the Spot Stroke Bard.”

“I observe,” said the Oracle, when they reached the billiard room, and he was searching the rack for a cue with a tip as big as a shilling, “I observe that the Labour party have constructed an entirely new platform of six planks, all cut of their own heads, and I have no doubt that they have wood enough left to make another half-dozen. Shall I play you with a ten break, or give you fifty in a hundred?”

“Oh, we’d better play level,” said the Thin Man.

“Play level!” cried the Oracle; “what’s your name; Memmott?”

“No,” said the Thin Man.

“Who’ll break?” said the Oracle.

“I’ll toss you for it,” said the Thin Man.

“Oh, if we toss for it you probably won’t have a shot at all. I can often make a hundred off the red from baulk. John Roberts used to pay me £200 a year to stop in Australia. He was

afraid, you see, if I went to England I would be matched against him. Grand player, John. Did it ever strike you that the man who reaches the highest position in his trade or profession is generally named Roberts?"

"Nonsense!" said the Thin Man.

"No nonsense about it," went on the Oracle. "Look at John Roberts as a billiardist. Look at Lord Roberts as a general. Well, I'll break 'em up, give you 98 start, and bet you five bob you don't score at all."

"It's a wager," said the Thin Man, and the marker smiled as he put him on to 98. Then the Oracle fired straight into the middle pocket and the game was over.

"You're out," said the Oracle, "and I'll have to pay for the table out of the five bob I won from you on the side wager that you wouldn't score!"

"I don't like this way of playing billiards," said the Thin Man.

"Oh, it's like Bill Scroggins," said the Oracle. "It's all right when you know it, but you've got to know it first. Have another game? No? All right. Let's have another drink."

They returned to the P.B.—the Private Bar, the Pretty Barmaid, and the Pale Brandy.

"Drink," repeated the Oracle, as he again emptied his glass, "drink should be put down."

"You seem to be putting it down all right," said the barmaid.

"And barmaids," went on the Oracle, "should also be put down. A beautiful creature like this leads men to drink. How much a week do you spend in drink?"

"Probably a pound," said the Thin Man.

"And how long have you been a drinker at that rate?"

"About twenty years."

"Ah, well, I was a teetotaller for forty years, that is what makes my hand so steady at billiards. You noticed my steady hand, probably, as I fired into that middle pocket? And you have been spending a pound a week in liquor for twenty years. Disgraceful! Twenty times fifty-two equals 1040. You have spent £1040 in drink, and probably kept sober all the time. Must have kept fairly sober, or you couldn't have earnt the money to buy liquor. Do you know, sir, that if you had put that pound per week into the Post Office Savings Bank, or into any other bank at a reasonable interest, you might now be the happy owner of a terrace of three or four fairly good houses?"

“Very likely,” said the Thin Man. “Where’s your terrace of houses?”

“Eh?” queried the Oracle.

“Where is your terrace of houses?”

“I’ve got no houses,” said the Oracle.

“Well, where’s the money?” asked the Thin Man.

“I’ll tell you,” said the Oracle, “if you promise not to let the matter go any further than the columns of a newspaper. The money that I didn’t spend in drink during the forty years I was a teetotaller is in the same place as Mr Thomas Waddell’s next surplus!”

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