

## ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

By THEODORE ENGLISH, *Scribner's* COMMENTATOR, January 1941

*New Year's resolutions, sanitariums and so-called cures are no help to many who are afflicted with the drink habit. One plan has really worked for over 700 people, and more are being helped by it every day.*

For publication, names are taboo, but it is impossible to tell the story of how Alcoholics Anonymous has cured 700 alcoholics without mentioning Bill...

Bill is a former alcoholic who learned to drink during the World War. When he came back he was successful in business – except he drank too much. Gradually liquor became a necessity. "Bath-tub gin, two bottles a day, and often three got to be routine," he says. "A tumbler full of gin followed by a half dozen bottles of beer would be required if I were to eat any breakfast." He tried suicide, washed down the sedatives doctors gave him with more gin, and was pronounced hopeless by sanitariums.

And then on Armistice Day in 1934 as he sat drinking in his kitchen, he had a visit from a former alcoholic companion, who was sober. Bill couldn't understand.

"Come, what's this all about?" he asked. "Are you really on the wagon?"

"I've got religion," his friend answered, refusing a drink. And then he told his story.

He had been taken to court and was about to be committed to an asylum, but two men had gotten him off by promising to help him stop drinking. They had given him a few simple principles to follow and he had been sober ever since. Bill could stop drinking if he asked God to help him. He did and hasn't taken a drink since.

Bill described his miraculous recovery to other alcoholics; it worked with them too, and they organized Alcoholics Anonymous to pass the word along to other drinkers. The cure is not medical, but spiritual, yet it pays allegiance to no church or sect. The alcoholic simply puts his faith in *some power greater than himself*, and asks it to help free him from an overpowering habit. It makes no difference what a man calls this power or how he conceives of it so long as he believes in it. Most alcoholics recognize it as God, but atheists and agnostics have been cured too. Bill has outlined the cure in twelve specific steps, which contain four major points.

Alcoholics must accept their inability to drink like normal people. They must become absolute abstainers.

But alcoholics can become abstainers only when they have asked for divine assistance.

Then they must patch up the friendships and placate the enemies selfish drinking has made. Anger and resentment are almost as great enemies as alcohol.

And to make the cure permanent, the alcoholic must pass the word along to others, for "faith without works is dead."

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS is anonymous because it is a handicap to be known as a former alcoholic, and because its members make helping others an avocation. They are interested only in helping others. They do not condemn drinking as an institution, and they admire those who can drink moderately. As alcoholics they cannot.

Alcoholism is a medical-not a moral problem. It is a form of sickness which baffles medicine and religion; exhortation and "will power" are also useless. Alcoholics are not bums, but able, intelligent people who are apparently normal in everything but their drinking. They have such a constant craving for liquor that knowledge of its effect upon their health and happiness makes no lasting impression. They know that the first drink is poisonous, for it leads to another and another. But there is always an insanely trivial excuse for beginning the savage routine with the first-just *one* this time. Alcoholics frequently drink themselves into unconsciousness. When they come to, they must calm their jitters "with a little hair off the dog that bit them"; this nip makes them feel like having another, and so it goes.

Alcoholics live in a little world of their own-just themselves and the bottle. They lose their jobs and their friends when they drink, and they drink when they have no job or friends. Alcoholic addiction develops insidiously from small beginnings. Most alcoholics have been "social drinkers," but the situations which apparently created a desire for more and more liquor are as varied as the cases. Men have begun drinking heavily when they failed-and when they succeeded.

"I became acquainted with the 'hilarious life' just when I was beginning to settle down," one ex-alcoholic writes in the book published by charter members of Alcoholics Anonymous. "My wife became pregnant and the doctor recommended the use of beer. Somehow or other, I must have misunderstood the doctor's instructions, for I not only made the beer for my wife, I also drank it for her.

"I discovered that a little shot of liquor now and then between beers put me in a whacky mood much quicker than having to down several quarts of beer to obtain the same results. I soon learned that beer made a very good wash for whiskey. Yes sir, the old boiler-maker and his helper. The last day of my drinking career, I drank twenty-two of them between 10 and 12 A.M."

And the consequences-

"In two years I had ten different jobs ranging from newspaper copy desk and rewrite to traffic director for an oil field equipment company. I was good for at least ten days or two weeks of every two months I worked, getting drunk and then half-heartedly sobering up.

"For eight months my daily routine was steady drinking. Even after slumping into bed late at night in a semi-stupor, I would get up at all hours and drive to some all-night spot where I could get what I wanted. All my troubles seemed to be piling up on me and liquor was the only refuge I knew.

"After holding good positions, making better than average income for over ten years, I was in debt, had no clothes to speak of, no money, no friends, and no one tolerating me but my wife."

The alcoholic makes resolutions: he will not drink before noon, he will drink only beer, he will drink whiskey only with milk, he will take just one drink, he will lay off altogether. Instead he often sells all his possessions, including his clothes, for liquor. Church and friends can do next to nothing with him-and doctors can do little more. One man had been to a sanitarium one hundred times, and several others began drinking again in ambulances on the way home from "cures."

"I remember one doctor," a former alcoholic writes, "who thought a course of seventy-two injections, three a week, after two weeks in a private hospital, would supply the deficiency in my system that would enable me to stop drinking. The night after the seventy-second injection I was paralyzed drunk."

THERE ARE no qualifications for membership in Alcoholics Anonymous except a genuine desire to get well. For this reason, the most promising recruits are alcoholics of long standing. On the edge of collapse, they are ready to try anything. People who have been cured find the best insurance-and sometimes the only way to avoid a "slip"-is to help some one else. Members introduce friends, but more often they call upon strangers.

One member, tempted to have the fatal "one" on a lonesome week-end, forgot all about it when he called upon a minister who sent him to talk to several members of his congregation. The Alcoholics have volunteered their services to doctors, clergymen, endeavor societies, and State institutions. Every Sunday, the State sends twenty alcoholic patients down from Rockland State Hospital to a meeting in New York City.

Alcoholics Anonymous has no dues or officers, and the membership expands like a chain-letter. In five years it has grown to over 700. There are large groups in New York, Cleveland and Akron. Smaller ones have been started in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Washington and Houston.

The growth of the Houston group is an example of how members have enlisted half the alcoholics they have encountered and cured two-thirds of them through patience and sympathetic assistance. The man who started it is Larry....About six months ago Larry was in Cleveland, where he had spent three weeks trying to taper off a friend by drinking with him. The friend finally

went to a sanitarium, where Larry visited him and met several members of the Cleveland Alcoholics Anonymous. A few days later when Larry was getting thoroughly drunk in his hotel room, he had a visit from an unfamiliar member of the Cleveland group. Larry wasn't interested. He wasn't an alcoholic; he just needed a little self-control. So they went to a bar. The Alcoholic drank coffee and bought Larry whiskey until he passed out.

The next evening when Larry was further gone than ever, he had another call from his new friend. Again they went to a bar where the friend finally persuaded Larry to go to a sanitarium, and drove him fifty miles in a blizzard to one endorsed by Alcoholics Anonymous. After eight hours of talk, the friend left at 4 A.M. Larry had taken his last drink. For a week, members of Alcoholics Anonymous visited him every day and on the fourth he accepted their program of recovery.

When he was discharged, his new friends lent him fare to Houston, where he got a newspaper job. Three weeks later he began a series of articles about Alcoholics Anonymous. The first one had hardly gotten into print when he received a call for assistance. He answered them all and began forming a new group. So far twenty people have been weaned and as many more introduced to the Alcoholic's program. His newspaper has printed editorials about the work, and Larry has traveled hundreds of miles speaking before church and welfare groups.

WHEREVER Alcoholics Anonymous has an established group, all members meet regularly to discuss their experiences and encourage each other. There is fraternity, and there are reunions every week. "Reunion" is the only way to describe one of the New York meetings I attended a few weeks ago.

It was held in a large studio of an uptown concert hall. About 130 people – men and women of all ages and creeds – were present. Three alcoholics shook hands and introduced themselves to every one who came in. Every one looked comfortably prosperous – and extremely happy. All have gone through the same experience and are glad to explain it to strangers, for they know that only absolute frankness will satisfy the growing curiosity of churches and the medical profession.

BILL told me something about the organization and how it has grown. Keeping in touch with the various groups takes all his time now. The other men I talked to were quite frank about their experiences. One of them had just come from an uptown hotel, where he had been urging a prospect to go to a hospital. Another had been a member about a year. "I prayed the Lord to help me stop drinking," he said. "And then I asked him to bring me some more customers, and He did that, too."

"I've had nineteen jobs in sixteen years," a third man told me. "The last time I took a drink was at a Christmas party at the office. I'd been going pretty good, so I thought I'd have just one. That was on December 23 and I woke up on January 14."

The meeting itself consisted simply of talks by five ex-alcoholics. Each of them described how his faith in a power greater than himself had eliminated his desire for alcohol and brought renewed health, a job, friends, and resistance to temptation. All of the talks were brief, informal, and sincere. And in all of them was a repetitious theme; these people had not only given up alcohol, but they had also found new and happier lives – aspirations to work for and accomplishments to be proud of.

The chairman, an attractive woman of thirty, put it this way. "I first thought that alcohol was the only thing the matter with me. And then faith struck me between the eyes. I have learned more about faith in the three months since my one slip than during the eleven months before when I didn't touch a drop. All alcoholics are abnormal – not enough to be insane, but abnormal for them. We are all extremists. My greatest ambition now is to be a normal human being."

The meeting lasted about an hour and a half. The stories told by the speakers were familiar and encouraging because they renewed confidence in a faith that has worked, does work, and will work with thousands of other alcoholics. "I am looking forward to the day," the chairman said, "when we will be able to hitch-hike across the country and stop at an Alcoholic house every night."