

THE COMPULSIVE DRINKER

Anonymous

Alcoholism is a disease which affects different people differently. Whether Americans are more susceptible to it than Europeans is a question, but there can be no doubt that Alcoholics Anonymous, whose headquarters is in New York City and of which this writer is a member, has inspired a cure remarkably efficacious for those in the final and compulsive stage.

Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name..." At the end of my first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting the words of the old prayer came suddenly alive. Black despair melted into a glimpse of health and a good life, of relief from suffering, remorse, anguish - just a ray of hope, but enough to enable me to square my shoulders in new determination. These fine people had given me something I badly needed at that moment. They had shown me a way out of the abyss of alcoholism.

Earlier in the meeting the chairman had called on a well-groomed citizen to speak. He looked healthy, vigorous, and prosperous. He began with: "My name is John, and I am an alcoholic." Then he went on to tell how as a sales manager of a nationwide hardware firm he had discovered that cocktails before business luncheons softened up customers, cocktails before sales staff dinners made him more popular, relaxed him, encouraged the bright ideas. He told about packing a bottle in his bag to take on the Sunday night train to a distant city, about learning to leave a good slug in the bottle for an eye opener Monday morning.

Then he began to miss Monday appointments; district salesmen never saw him until the middle of

the week. Finally he lost his family, job, and health. But all the time John said, "this is my problem. I'll handle it." Talks with a psychiatrist helped, but short stretches of sobriety always gave way to worse trouble. Down and out, almost broke, living on liquor and far from home, he finally asked himself, "What can I do?"

I sat there thunderstruck. This man John was telling my story. He was talking about me. He is a business executive and I am a professional man, but our stories are the same. John's fears were my fears, too. My will power is strong, but I simply could not do what my friends could do: sip a couple of drinks, eat a good meal, and get up in the morning rested and ready for another day. I always missed one train after another and ended the evening stumbling and dreading the next day. I wondered if John ever had blackouts, losses of memory such as were hitting me lately. I wondered if he ever got up in the morning with no idea of where he had left the car, not knowing whom he had been with or what he had said, without a dollar left in his wallet. I could tell him about meeting an important client for lunch and not being sure whether I could get a fork to my mouth. I could tell these people about the utter soul-shattering

degradation of trembling hands that spilled coffee on my shirt or caused that match to miss lighting my wife's cigarette.

I could tell them - but would I? I shrank from the prospect of getting up before this parish house full of ex-drunks and peeling myself open for their inspection. How could people so earnestly reveal what seemed to me a shameful weakness? Could I ever admit to being one of them?

The chairman kept things going in friendly fashion. He said this A.A. meeting would complete his month of presiding over the local group's affairs and that he would appoint another member to carry on next month. He reminded the crowd that there are no officers in A.A., no fancy national headquarters - only simple services that will help carry the message to other alcoholics. "There are no dues or fees in A.A.," he said, "but we do pay rent to use this room every week, we buy coffee and refreshments, and right now I'll ask Joe to take up the usual collection." I noticed that when the basket came along my row it was generously filled, and I whispered to one of my new friends to inquire whether A.A. receives gifts. He said that the organization declines outside contributions, that every A.A. group is self-supporting, and that problems of money, property, and prestige might divert A.A. from its primary purpose.

"I should like to explain to any newcomers," the chairman added, "that A.A. is strictly anonymous. This is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities. We must always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films. This is an open meeting where visitors are welcome. Anyone interested in learning about A.A., also members of their families and

friends, can join us at any time. The door of A.A. swings both ways. You can come in; you can go out. You can always come back - we'll be here."

The chairman then called on an attractive young woman who stepped to the speakers platform to speak. "My name is Kate, and I am an alcoholic." Kate told the intimate story of the near ruin of her home. As soon as the children were off to school and her husband had left for work, she tried to remember where she had hidden the bottle the night before. That first drink was like pulling down a shade, shutting out her remorse and shame, blotting out the hangover. She played records and danced around the living room in her negligee and exchanged neighbourhood gossip over the phone with friends. Instead of eating lunch she drank it. By the time the children came home she was in bed: "Mother has a headache; make yourselves a chocolate milk and some sandwiches for supper."

This girl is no orator, I thought, but there she stands, looking good, relaxed, almost smiling, talking straight from her heart and from her own experience with tough problems that I know so well. Again I thought: Will I ever be able to do that? Wouldn't it be great if I could sit down privately with a man who knew exactly what I was going through and had licked it, who talked my language and wanted to help me? The closest I had ever come to it was a session I had with Dr. Richard Proctor at the Bowman-Gray Medical School, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

"Face your situation as it is and not as you wish it might be. When you understand what your problem is and why you have it - the real reasons, not your alibis and excuses - you can enjoy a normal life again," he told me. "Most people who drink are not alcoholics and probably will never

will be. But for five million men and women drinking is a sickness, and you're one of these. There is just one guy who can cure you, and that is you." Dr. Proctor recommended that I try A.A.

Kate ended her talk with a phrase that stuck in my mind. She said, "But for the grace of God and A.A. I wouldn't be here tonight." Then came the Lord's Prayer: "...And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil..." and the meeting broke up for coffee. I knew that it had taken me years to get myself into an alcoholic hole and that I could not pull out of it overnight; but I left sobered, thoughtful, determined to do my utmost to make the flash of hope come true.

For the next three months I attended two or three A.A. meetings a week. No one asked me any questions or gave me any lectures; all of them were glad to see me, and I made new friends at every meeting. I felt normal and healthy. Instead of going from the office to the club, then making a few stops at bars, I went directly, eagerly home. My wife was smiling, and her voice was happy. One morning my daughter said, "Daddy, every night I thank God, and I just want to thank you for being well again." Doris was a happy girl, too, and I was charged with new energy for a full day's work.

My old hobbies, like fishing, which I had neglected for years, began to look good again. The season would open before long, and I suggested to Marge that we go over to Bill's to make plans for May weekends. The thought of wading in fast water at the head of a long pool fanning out to a quiet stretch where I could drop a fly ready for a trout to strike was tremendously exciting to me. Plans must be made, gear overhauled. I could hardly wait.

I hadn't seen Bill for a year, not since my gang carried me into the house and left me on the divan when we were making ready for the last fishing season. But on this Saturday night we were talking as we used to in the old days, eagerly planning to leave before daylight on opening morning. The girls would join us for the weekend. Then Bill went out to the kitchen and came back with a tray of ice water and glasses, also with a flushed look on his face as though he had just had a good stiff drink. "I thought it would be nice," he said, "If we all had something to drink."

It was almost too much for me. Why the hell couldn't Bill offer everybody a highball and be natural about it? He and the girls wanted a drink. Couldn't I have the privilege of declining or accepting if I wanted to? I burned with anger.

My sullen mood spoiled what little was left of the party. Marge could sense my distress, and we made excuses to leave early. I kept my childish fury pent up and roamed around downstairs desperately tempted to drink anything I could find, but brewed black coffee instead and growled at Marge, who was entreating me to get some sleep.

I was groggy at daylight, but the idea occurred to me that I was entirely at fault. I phoned and said, "Bill, I'm sorry to disturb you so early, but I want to apologize about last night. The plain fact is that I can't handle liquor and you know it. All I ask is that you treat me like any other friend. Whenever you want a drink, don't let me interfere. Also please don't put ice water or a Coke in my hand. Just ask me what I would like to have, and I'll name it. I am trying like the devil to be worthy of your trust."

I heard a sleepy, "Thanks for calling, Bob. That makes me feel a

lot better about the whole thing. We can have some great times together, and I want you to know that I am proud of you. Don't forget we've got a date for opening day!"

I gave up A.A. meetings. They were alright for somebody in bad shape, but I did not need them anymore. This period went on for a few weeks longer. I felt normal and healthy. I found that anything I did with liquor I could do better without it. I was my own man again, but I had neglected Mark Twain's remark that quitting smoking was easy - he had done it hundreds of times.

It was a good sign that my family was beginning to trust me. My wife, beaming with new confidence, told me that she planned to take the children on the following weekend on a family visit. Out of habit, I welcomed the chance to be alone, puttering around, varnishing my old trout rod, watching TV - and drinking. "But my God!" I thought. "I'm not drinking, and I don't want to start. What kind of crazy thinking is this?"

As the week wore on, I tried with less and less success to get the idea of having a few drinks out of my mind. They drove away Saturday morning early, and I kept busy in and out of the house, catching up on postponed chores. That evening I walked a mile to the liquor store and paused at the door to wonder. Then I went in and bought two bottles. A taxi rushed me home, and I tore off the cap and poured half a glass. Only the first drink tasted as I had hoped. During the rest of that bottle and half of the second I sat cursing myself for being insane. Words for the causes and symptoms of my sickness haunted me. "Oh, God, can I ever stop again?"

Sunday night I had to call a

doctor to get a shot in the arm before the family got home. It was a bad night, but I kept away from anything to drink, and next night I went back to A.A., shaky, overwhelmed with remorse and shame. I ought to admit my slip. I could not make the aisle to go up front as other did, so I just stood where I was and muttered, "this past weekend I tried liquor. I couldn't handle it. I am sorry I had a slip, and thanks to you for keeping the doors of A.A. open. I have the proof now that I don't want to go out that door again. I know that there is no way out of the abyss, except giving up liquor."

I felt much better for coming out in the open. I was encouraged and managed a feeble grin. "I guess I forgot Mark Twain's lesson about giving up smoking," I said.

During the next few months I actually enjoyed being sober - not fighting that first drink, which is the one that does the damage. I settled down to regular attendance at an A.A. group where I felt most congenial. Perhaps I was still an imposter, playing a masquerade. I was not yet being completely honest with these decent people and with myself. For somewhere in this good period the terrible thought returned that someday I might do what no alcoholic on earth has ever been able to do, drink normally again.

Then one night before closing a meeting, the chairman dumfounded me by announcing: "For the next month I should like to name Robert, our new member as chairman." He was referring to me. Everybody clapped, and I wondered how in the world I could do it. I spent every evening rereading what we in A.A. call the *Big Book* and leafing through our monthly magazine, *The Grapevine*, to bone up for the job of chairman. I studied for the hundredth time our twelve steps to sobriety: the

admission that we were helpless against alcohol but that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity if we would turn over our wills and lives to God as each of us understands Him.

My new responsibilities weighed heavily on me. The night of my first meeting as chairman I stood near the entrance of the parish house greeting everyone, my wife standing happily at my side. Alcohol is no respecter of persons: I was smiling and saying hello to lawyers, truck drivers, doctors, housewives, business leaders, mechanics, and, accompanied mostly by sponsors from our group, a few newcomers looking shaky and white, sick and bleary-eyed. As is customary at all A.A. gatherings, chatter, laughter, and smoke filled the air; wives in the parish-house kitchen brewed coffee and made sandwiches. It was time to start. I felt reticent and unworthy to fill the chairmanship, so that the traditional A.A. prayer with which I opened the meeting disturbed me: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

While I read along the brief statement of principles which starts every A.A. meeting, that prayer began repeating itself. "The courage to change the things I can" - and the truth flashed in my mind with blinding clarity: *You are still a coward, still holding out; you are not really, not sincerely here!* It probably lasted only a few seconds, but I could see the lies I had told the doctors who were trying to help me, the deceit of making light of my problem to my minister, family, and associates, those endless alibis and excuses that had always given me a getaway route for a backslide into drinking. I had never burned all my bridges, nor had I quite achieved

enough humility to admit, to accept, and to act on my problem wholeheartedly. The next few words may have sounded natural to the audience, but to me they represented unconditional surrender. They meant I was not just a visitor at these meetings, looking over the program with a skeptical eye, trying something else to please my wife or maybe to learn some new way to live with liquor. I finally uttered the words I had never had the courage and humility to say: "My name is Robert, and I am an alcoholic."

A great weight lifted from my mind and body. Forgetting all the words I had read in the literature of A.A., the thoughts of others that I had memorized for this occasion, I plunged ahead. "I want to thank you folks for making me chairman this month," I began, "I'm not sure I can do a very good job or that I am ready for it. Perhaps older and wiser heads around here decided that one way to keep me good and sober for a month was to make me chairman!"

"Seriously, though, I have just gone through a few moments of decision that I would not swap for anything else that ever happened to me. Most of us in this room have in common a serious physical and emotional problem. We are trying to do something about it. I have just learned in standing up here before you that I can without a shadow of a doubt succeed; I can achieve recovery and can help others as you are helping me. Without A.A. meetings and group fellowship, I would be lost. I can't do it alone. I thank God I don't have to."

As I had known all along, my story was similar to their stories. But now it suddenly became not my story, not their story, but our story - for I was finally, completely one of them.

And then the final speaker emphasized the importance of taking

each day as it comes. "This is a twenty-four-hour program," he said. "Today is the only day that counts. Yesterday is gone, and tomorrow may never come."

The hour was nearly up, and I concluded the meeting. "A.A. is not a religious organization," I said, "but many of us believe that the spiritual part of the program is the most important. Striving to live a good life, to be in tune with our fellow men, to be our best selves at all times is a program that will help anybody, including

drunks. We'll all stand and close the meeting in the usual way..... *Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...*" And as Marge and I that night walked home hand in hand, we shared the serenity of accepting the things we could not change, because some power had given me the courage at last to change the things I could, and Marge and I continue to know the difference.

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