

# Making Marriage Work: The Alcoholic Parent

by Dorothy Cameron Disney

Making marriage work is never easy when alcoholism is involved. And when there are children in the family, the trial by ordeal that confronts a loving wife and mother can be virtually intolerable.

There are many wives who would be willing to carry on an unequal partnership were it not for the youngsters. But they are loath to subject their boys and girls to demoralized homes, parental quarreling, sleepless nights and hideous days. Divorce, for the children's sake, seems the answer.

**ANN'S STORY . . .** One night a year ago Mrs. Miller (this is not her real name) saw her daughter, Ann, climb out her bedroom window and scuttle through a back garden to the alley. The girl was carrying a large brown-paper bag. In the alley she lifted the lid of the family's trash can and removed empty gin bottles.

"I followed Ann a half mile to a building excavation," said Mrs. Miller, "and saw her heave away her parcel. And then I knew! She was trying to conceal from neighbors just how much her father drank. I had been so preoccupied with my own misery that I hadn't realized what was happening to the child. Right there, right then, I decided to get a divorce."

But next day Mrs. Miller did not go to a lawyer. She went to her pastor. He suggested that she and her daughter investigate a pioneering organization called Alateen, founded only four years ago to give youngsters like fifteen-year-old Ann guidance in a topsy-turvy world. It has been rightly said that alcohol addiction damages not only the compulsive drinker himself but everyone in his household.

On a recent rainy Saturday afternoon I met sparkling-eyed Ann on the steps of a small church. I followed her inside to the room where a dozen teen-aged youngsters awaited us.

"Until I joined Alateen," said Ann, "I was

busy feeling sorry for myself and couldn't think straight. I was so ashamed of my father's boozing and so mad at my mother for not stopping him I spent hours in my bedroom where I could brood in privacy. I pleaded with my mother to get a divorce so we could raise our shades, live like normal happy people."

Every youngster present at the meeting had an alcoholic parent. Each knew at first hand how uncontrolled drinking can wreck marriages and devastate families.

Alateen now has 150 branches scattered through 50 states. It is an offspring of Alcoholics Anonymous and an allied organization, Al-Anon, to which wives, husbands and friends of alcoholics belong. Alateen accepts the principles and philosophy of AA and the basic AA tenet that alcoholism is an illness that can be arrested but never cured. With this acceptance comes understanding and, more often than not, a sharp reduction in self-pity.

"Things are better now," said Ann. "Oh, I don't mean that dad has quit drinking. He hasn't. Just the same, things are better. I've learned from these other kids that my case isn't unique. Lots of them are worse off than I am."

The meeting opened with a prayer for serenity and courage. In the hour that followed, the boys and girls--members range in age from twelve to nineteen--exchanged bits of hard-won information, shared common experiences. In the main, typical teen-age dilemmas were explored. Yet it was meetings like this, Mrs. Miller told me, that helped to save her marriage. A wiser, calmer Ann eventually urged her mother to the final decision not to seek a divorce.

**PRACTICAL ANSWERS . . .** Alateens are not evangelistic groups dedicated to the reform of erring elders. One rule the new member learns at once: you cannot scold, plead, reason or threaten an alcoholic into sobriety; such an approach only makes matters worse. The best

