

I'M AN ALCOHOLIC'S WIFE

By Janet

*Today's Alcoholic is babied as a noble, frustrated soul,
Says this wife. But what about the real victim - the family.*

Alcoholism has become respectable, so to speak. It is discussed in magazines and papers, in sermons and at Rotarian meetings; everywhere in fact. It seems that alcoholism is an illness, and the victim of the disease needs sympathy and not blame - the victim, according to this theory, always being the one who indulges, never the family. It's just like a bad cough or measles.

The weak spot in this comparison is that people are usually glad to be rid of disease, and will go to ludicrous lengths to effect a cure (as witness the radio commercials), while the alcoholic clings with a love, "passing the love of women", to his so-called disease.

Better compare it to insanity, but again there is a difference. An insane person is generally confined where he can do no harm, while the alcoholic is allowed at large to drive high powered cars, trucks, buses, to carry firearms, to squander money, to run up bills.

It's nice, though, to have the alcoholic so fashionable. A wife can now sit at a bridge table and say to another wife, "Oh, your husband is tubercular? Mine is an alcoholic," just like that - not a bit embarrassed or anything. In this way she can hold the floor for quite a while, instead of remaining silent when other wives discuss ailments of husbands. In fact, the alcoholic is now almost a hero. It seems he is a sensitive, noble

soul, who can't stand the sorrows and sufferings of mortal life, and must have liquor to cast a rosy glow over it, or to numb him into not feeling anything.

Very good! What about the wife, sister, mother, or even brother, who perhaps, too, is a sensitive creature, and to whom war and famine and orphaned children are unbearable thoughts, but who must think about them cold-sober, and also put up with the eternal worries, the chronic heartache, the everlasting pall which hangs over every alcoholic home which shelters an alcoholic? What about Them?

It seems they are impatient, self-righteous clods, lacking in understanding, thinking about such mundane subjects as how to pay the rent or what to feed the children, thinking about - would you believe it? - of what the neighbours are saying when the dear alcoholic staggers up the front steps in broad daylight.

One alcoholic writes a whole book on the subject, blaming the ordinary natural family affection, the indulgence and praise of his mother, as the cause. Don't praise your children too much, he solemnly warns, well, that sounds logical. Most drinkers seem inordinately fond of praise; but the next authority says profoundly, "People drink because of an inferiority complex. Parents should praise their children for every effort."

Yet all around, you see people with inferiority complexes of the most painful natures who never take

to drink, who either endure or overcome their feelings of inferiority, and in many cases lug an alcoholic along with their complexes. When will the learned people start looking for the cause at its source - alcohol?

But you mustn't be bitter. These people are trying to help you. All you have to do now is tell Johnny and Suzie that papa is sick. "Why doesn't papa have treatment?", little simple Suzie asks. Papa doesn't want treatment. i mean, what fun would paps have when Joe Doakes drops in, if he had treatment - what fun would papa have on his business trips, at his class reunion, at the bar?

No, on second thought, better not tell Suzie he is sick. Better not say anything to Suzie, To Johnny, maybe, Johnny has been acting morose lately, embarrassed when the gang sees papa not quite himself.

Tell Johnny, "Papa is sick. He is an alcoholic. You mustn't be ashamed of him any more than Jim is ashamed of his father's heart trouble." If Johnny cries out, "But Jim's father stays in bed with his heart trouble. He doesn't say and do foolish and bad things because of his heart trouble. He is not allowed to drive and nock down fence posts because of his heart trouble!" - but he won't, being Johnny, and 14.

THAT SYMPATHY LOOK

He will squirm uncomfortably and change the subject. He'll become quieter and meet the gang down the street a way, and sometimes you will catch him, with sympathy in his eyes, looking at you.

Thank goodness Suzie is different! She is gay and is never bothered by papa's actions. But the little demon, memory, whispers, "Johnny was like that a few years

ago too." Suzie will get quiet and ashamed, and will look at you with pity, and do little kindnesses far beyond her years - which will hurt you more than any childish thoughtlessness ever hurt. But you smile until your face aches, and you swear that no one will ever see you looking like a drunkard's wife.

You dress becomingly, and keep the children looking nice and the home homelike. By rigid economy you manage fine - that is, on a good week you can save just about as much by all your economies and mendings as papa spends in a day. BUT KEEP THAT SMILE ON! Drunkards wives are apt to let their faces sag to scowl, to let their hair hang down their necks. You will never come to that!.

So you extol papa's virtues to the children and to outsiders. You are old-fashioned. You still can't talk about papa being a drunkard - excuse it, an alcoholic. You know that everyone knows, and that they know you know it, but it saves your face a little to pretend you don't. This wins you some admiration but not much. Mostly it brings you scorn. "Why doesn't she admit he drinks too much? Wouldn't it be better?" Better by far, a hundred times better, but you can't. It hangs over you every waking minute, eating into your vitals, coloring, or discoloring your life; but you can no more talk about it than you can undress on Main Street.

As the years go by it gets harder to keep your resolution not to look like a drunkard's wife, not to let the children know, not to invite sympathy. You don't give a damn how you look some days, but habit is strong (even a good habit) and you keep up appearances. You don't care what the children think of papa, but secretly you hope they think the worst. You long to win sympathy on the street car and in the stores by your look of patient long-suffering - to let your hair

down and tell all to the "girls" - to hear their cluck-cluck of sympathy, their words of praise - or just to get it out of your system.

YOU DON'T CARE

Above all, some days you don't care what becomes of papa. Better have him come to some harm than to harm someone else, you say grimly or philosophically, according to your mood. The quick sympathy, the feeling of tenderness, when he becomes sober and penitent, is gone. It seems kind of good. Enough to feel sorry for yourself and the children without feeling sorry for papa. You tear out of your heart the image of the man he might have been - the man he was. Like having a tooth pulled, it's hard, but a relief.

You read some more. "Only an alcoholic can help another alcoholic. He alone understands his problem." Only an alcoholic's wife can understand another alcoholic's wife, you paraphrase. And they are not always sympathetic, you think sourly, they can always see how the other wife is to blame, but not themselves. You wouldn't confide in them anyway. Instead you hold aloof and don't associate with them. What snobs we drunkard's wives are!

You lose control more easily. You sob and cry and pound the table, and heap curses on the heads of the liquor interests, and maledictions on anyone who hands out a drink of liquor; but the next time papa gets out the drinks for the guests, you adjust your wooden smile and help. Never must the alcoholic's wife openly disapprove of liquor. That will always be seized upon as a reason for his drinking, by relatives, by friends, by papa!

In fact, you learn early that alcohol is a Sacred Cow. To help food saving you eat up all the

crusts so obediently that there is nothing left with which to stuff the Sunday chicken. You feel guilty to have the chicken, even, and well you might, the papers tell you; but only the most courageous - or foolhardy - editor will suggest, once in a while, that perhaps some of the grain that goes into alcohol might better go to feed a starving world. Leave that Sacred Cow alone!

You hear that there is a comedy at a downtown theatre, and you all go, including your husbands maiden aunt. Monty Woolley portrays, in equally divided parts, a mixture of Monty Woolley, Alexander Woollcott, George Bernard Shaw, and the village bum - with an endearing character! He plays a gifted actor who never holds a job, an alcoholic, well-pleased with his status. His daughter is a cripple because he drunkenly dropped her when she was a baby. You can see what a riot it is! She waits on him and worries over him and has no social or romantic life. Devastatingly funny, of course! Monty is selfish, rude, lazy - and full of charm. Hired to be a store Santa Claus, he becomes inebriated, insults the customers, and burps. The children force a laugh, but presently you all leave, voting it the worst picture of the year.

What is your amazement to find, in a respected magazine, a review of this picture, citing its humor, and adding, gratuitously, that everyone will delight in it but bluenosed prohibitionists. You boil. You contemplate writing a scathing letter to the editor and pointing out to her that the one who disliked it the most was not the maiden aunt, not the children, not the wife, but the alcoholic himself. But you don't - you don't. No Carrie Nation you, to lift up the tongue against the Sacred Cow.

Many a night you go to bed sobbing hysterically, to be brought up short by the thought of the

children. What will become of them if you break down? You have been a father and mother to them for years. You settle down to sleep. Surprisingly enough, you sleep long and soundly, and awake amazed at your own resiliency. This is another day. Be thankful you can take care of the children.

Occasionally the day ends with you feeling encouraged and hopeful, but perversely, the next morning the pall is thick around you, and it seems almost impossible to go on. It's a relief to get the children off to school, and no longer have to pretend before their searching, sympathetic eyes; and on this day life stretches before you without a ray of hope, with no release this side of the grave. The one thing you are thankful for on one of these days is that there is no gas stove in the kitchen, no gas jets on the walls.

And the week ends, the horror of the week ends! No school to send

them off to, Suzy's friends in and out, Johnny spending more time than is good for him at the movies and bowling alleys to avoid seeing his father celebrate. The "new leisure," the long week-end, beginning Friday afternoon and lasting until Monday morning.

Oh, for the good old days when drunkards had to wait until Saturday night to start the week-end celebration! But Sunday you get up and start the dinner. You rouse the children in time for Sunday School. You dress carefully, and put on your new hat for church. How flattering the color is with your silver hair. You can wear a lot of colors now you never wore before. You must remember that when you shop for clothes. All these things help in keeping up appearances.

And once again, you vow eternally that you will never look like a drunkard's wife - no, not even like an alcoholic's wife.