

I WAS A DRUNK

By An Alcoholic

as told to J.J. Dingman

*A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF RECLAMATION BY CO-OPERATION,
THE STORY OF A PRACTICAL FELLOWSHIP,
ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS*

Two years ago I awoke late one day in the psychopathic ward of Toronto General Hospital. I was 39 years old, completely broke, out of a job. I was despised by my former friends, shunned by my family. I was a "rubby dub" who the night before had socked a cop and been tossed into a cell. When the jail doctor found me still in a fog the next morning, I was hospitalized. I was, politely, a confirmed alcoholic, colloquially, a "drunken bum."

I had drunk myself out of a \$10,000 a year business I had inherited from my father when I was 33. I had served three terms for drunk driving before hitting "skid road." My wife and daughter had left me after standing by me for many miserable years. When he had fired me, my last employer had conceded that I was a good worker, when sober, but said my periods of sobriety were too short. I had no hope that anyone else would hire me.

Today I am a respected citizen in another community, earning a good salary. My family is with me again, and happy, and I have excellent prospects of living cheerfully to a useful old age. Not only have I cured myself but I have helped many other alcoholics back to permanent sobriety.

Alcoholics Anonymous is responsible for the change.

This 10 year old organization

of 18,000 men and women in 425 groups in several score United States and Canadian communities proves anew every day that the age of miracles is not past. By a combination of common sense, applied psychology, co-operative effort and practical Christianity, Alcoholics Anonymous has transformed 18,000 hopeless drunkards into happy, useful citizens. Its members practice one of the greatest examples of mass therapy in the history of mankind. And their numbers multiply daily. Canada now has organized groups of Alcoholics Anonymous in Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Hamilton, London, Windsor, Vancouver and Victoria. Canadian A.A.'s (that's what we call ourselves) number in hundreds, where five years ago there were none.

Medicine, the Church and the state have struggled with the problem of alcoholism for thousands of years. Medicine can't cure an alcoholic. The church can seldom reform a drunkard. The state can't legislate him back to sanity. But Alcoholics Anonymous cures 75% of all alcoholics exposed to it. Two per cent was the best ever attained by any other combination of agencies.

My own introduction to A.A. was entirely unexpected. On release from hospital, my last remaining friend staked me to the railroad fare to another city, where in

wartime I easily got another job. The armed services would have no part of me. I had "signed the pledge again." "I'd never take another drink so long as I lived. But the same gruesome pattern began repeating. I got drunk for one night, then for two days, then for a week on end. This went on with briefer periods of sobriety and longer periods of drunkenness. I lost that job, got another, and met a fellow to whom I took an instinctive liking. He saw me at lunch one day when I had made it to work, although every muscle and nerve in my body twitched in the agony of a hang-over. He noticed my shaking hands.

"Would you like to stop drinking?" he asked, casually.

"I want to more than anything else in the world," I replied, "But I've tried everything, and nothing works."

"I've suffered from your illness for ten years," he replied. "I believe I can show you a way out."

So I went to my first A.A. meeting.

I was amazed to find cheerful, animated, wellgroomed men and women in a clublike atmosphere. I listened to a visiting speaker tell simply his spectacular story of release from alcohol by following the TWELVE STEPS as laid down in the A.A. program.

I was introduced to many people and many of them told me briefly how they had successfully come back. There was something immeasurably consoling in realizing that I was a sick man and not a bad man; that I had a disease, not a vice; that I suffered from an allergy just as another man has an allergy to strawberries. I was comforted most of all because here was proof that there was a cure. If others could do it, I could.

The first requisite of an A.A. member, I had - I honestly wanted

to stop drinking. This time there was no pledge to sign, no swearing off for life. A man who had once begged dimes for beer and is today a prosperous merchant said;

"You've signed the pledge a dozen times. We all have. This time just take it easy. Just say; "I won't take a drink today. I won't drink for twenty-four hours." Then say the same thing again tomorrow. Its easier not to drink for a day than to quit for a life. Easy does it, one step at a time. Sobriety is new to you, drink's an old habit. So just don't drink tonight and then don't drink tomorrow."

The second step for A.A. members, he told me, was "to believe that a power greater than ourselves would restore us to sanity, and to decide to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him." The words as we understood Him are vitally important. Most men recognize that there is a power greater than themselves, though definitions differ. I was a nominal Christian, having been baptized a Presbyterian. My counsellor, himself a Roman Catholic, suggested that I pray quietly by myself, for strength to keep sober for the next 24 hours. Observing my hesitation, he said;

"It doesn't matter to whom you pray. I pray to God; you suit yourself. But when you get up in the morning, say within yourself, to whatever greater power you recognize: "Please keep me from drinking today." and when you go to bed at night, say "Thank you, but be sincere and mean it."

A.A. NOT PROHIBITIONIST

I was relieved that I didn't have to be "saved" or hit a revival-meeting sawdust trail in order to get into A.A. I never liked that sort of thing. But I could take the prescription

offered, as plenty had done before me. I found A.A. non-sectarian, its members including Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews and agnostics. I was also glad to find that A.A. is not even faintly a prohibition or temperance group. It is not a "gold cure," and there are no pills, no doctors, no clergymen. This knowledge made embarking on the Twelve Step program less formidable an undertaking. I decided to try it.

Operating on the 24-hour plan I totally abstained for three weeks, though it wasn't easy. Then came a bad break in the office, and in my bitterness I fell back on the timeworn technique - get blind drunk and achieve oblivion. I had to drink again the next day and the third day I couldn't get out of my room. I was in the drunkard's uniform - dressing gown, pyjamas, and no slippers - and could hardly lift my head from the pillow when my friend called for me to go to an A.A. meeting. But he didn't seem either shocked or disappointed, merely remarking, "your not the first to have a relapse, and it isn't necessarily serious." He went out to a drugstore for some high potency Vitamin B1, brought me food, and chatted cheerfully. I felt better before he left, and the next day was able to go to work.

This wasn't the last time I was tempted, but it was the last time I fell. Over and over, when the craving came back, I felt like giving my right arm for a drink. Often my A.A. friend would appear unbidden, almost intuitively, at my elbow, suggesting a movie, a ball game or some bridge. With him behind me I could fight back the urge to drink. For a long while I didn't go to movies alone because seeing anyone on the screen sip a cocktail set up an almost unendurable craving.

This man literally saved my life, but the whole A.A. group

helped. This treatment was a form of mass therapy, and this is, to me, the foundation of A.A.'s success. Let me tell you what I mean by the term.

At meetings I met a man who had been reduced to drinking the alcohol he had drained from car radiators, tell how he bounced back to a prosperous place in his city's business life. I heard a physician tell how he drank himself out of a \$20,000 a year practice and had been quite literally yanked out of the gutter by A.A., to fight his way back to sobriety and success. I listened to a workman tell how he had been in and out of jails for 10 years and now held a priority job in a war plant.

All these men had admitted publicly that they were alcoholics, that they could never hope to control their drinking and therefore must totally abstain. The very admission and subsequent discussion, helped us all tremendously. We faced facts we had evaded all our lives. Having been helped by the Twelve Step program, these A.A.'s helped others. For it is the basis of our program that only an alcoholic can understand an alcoholic and help him. The doctor prescribes a hypo in the arm, but he doesn't have the disease. The clergyman probably never drank anything stronger than Aunt Maud's elderberry wine. The wife says, "Think of your family," failing to understand that the alcoholic does think of his family, with the bittersweet remorse. The state says, passing periodic prohibition laws, "Thou shalt not drink," but alcoholics and non-alcoholics alike reply, "Nuts."

But the recovered alcoholic says to the shaking, despondent wreck just emerging from the fog after a frightful bender; "I know just how you feel because I have been there myself. Not just once or a few times. I've had those

shakes, those chills and fevers, those sweats, that terrible, awful remorse, that horrible feeling of aloneness, that vicious craving for another drink, that desperation that makes me a liar and a thief and a beggar to get another shot. I've had these not once, but hundreds of times in the past 10 or 15 years. I know what it's all about."

"You're not just another drunken bum. You're not just another moral outcast. You're just a sick man with a disease as malignant, but more easily diagnosed and cured, than cancer. I think I have the cure for you if you honestly want to stop drinking."

The sanitarium treatment for alcoholism, which does not always succeed, is not available for many but the well to do. Many a discharged patient will get drunk on his way home from a three week hospitalization only for the attainment of temporary sobriety. After that the first step is to take the patient to an A.A. meeting. There he gets the full impact of the mass therapeutic treatment.

Men who understand this disease explain that it's an allergy not a vice. This theory is comparatively new, and it explains why some people can drink safely and some can't, just as some are unmoved by ragweed and others are reduced to agonies with hay fever when exposed to the plant. It also explains why when a man is once an alcoholic he is always an alcoholic. Like the diabetic sufferer who takes insulin, the alcoholic can only hope to arrest his disease. He can stop drinking but he will still be an alcoholic when he dies. All this is explained by sympathetic fellow sufferers, who tell what they and other have accomplished.

The patient must say,

privately and to at least one other person: "I just can't take it."

TRAITS IN COMMON

In addition to sharing an allergy, the symptom of which is unnatural craving, alcoholics usually have certain personality traits in common. We are often emotionally immature and burdened by a inferiority complex. The A.A. program helps in this field, too, and the third step requires a frank discussion of problems, and restitution to those who have been wronged. But the past is held to be water over the dam - just take a moral inventory, do the best you can to fix things up, and then go on being sober the rest of your life. I, for instance had always been a "worrier," and often worry literally drove me to drink. But since being in A.A. I have been honest with myself and have stopped worrying.

The majority of A.A. groups meet two or three times a week. There is one public meeting, to which all comers are invited, always addressed by a recovered alcoholic who tells his case history. In the Detroit-Windsor area, for instance, where there are 12 A.A. groups, a joint public meeting is held monthly, attended by some 400 alcoholics. That is an inspiring spectacle. Annually, in both cities, A.A. stages public banquets where the cocktail is tomato juice, and the liquor is demitasse coffee. Windsor, the strongest of the Canadian units, has benefited enormously by association with the able, active A.A.'s in the great Detroit organization.

A.A. has two other types of meetings - the clinical session for A.A.'s only and the social evening. In the clinic the boys take their hair down, tell of their drinking

careers and try to analyze what made them drink, and by exchanging experiences help each other permanently ride the water wagon. There is the Saturday night bridge or poker session, when a dozen or more alcoholics rotate around each other's homes. For many of them it's the first time they've ever played poker sober. These activities offer an antidote to loneliness, which has driven many an alcoholic man to the nearest bar.

The patient exposed to this experience in mass treatment is cured in 75 out of 100 starts. Just being together in one large room a group of prosperous, cheerful men and women who once were "hopeless drunkards" has a tremendous psychological effect on the newcomer and old-timer alike.

I went through the A.A. program of admission, of acknowledging a power greater than myself, of taking inventory of my weaknesses and making restitution to those I had injured. But it was in the Twelfth Step - in helping others like myself - that I found the greatest satisfaction and a guarantee of permanent sobriety. A couple of months after I had been in A.A., I got another fellow to join. I thereby wrote myself an insurance policy, I paid the premium by helping myself and others. I drew the dividend of permanent sobriety. For once a man has induced others to join A.A., he'll never be likely to fall again himself. Pride, if nothing else will be his mainstay, for never can he let these men see him drunk. Of course A.A. has backsliders, but those who do slip off the water wagon climb on again with an agility they never thought believable before. It just isn't done to let down the fellow who helped you when everyone else, and all else, had failed.

We had a fellow who had been

the "town drunk" for 15 years. Sceptics said, "if you can cure him you can cure anybody." This chap slept in used car lots, bummed dimes on the street, was in and out of jails, and drank everything from leftover beer to shaving lotion. Everytime he got out of jail he was plastered again as soon as he had the money. Yet he really wanted to quit. When he first approached me I was frankly apprehensive. But when we had exposed him to our program, fed and decently clothed him, and got him a job, he was a new man. He hasn't had a drink for 14 months. He's our most spectacular cure and one of our most helpful members.

Another was a lawyer, a man prominent in public life who had been hospitalized in the "best places" a dozen times. But always he found himself back in the same spot - holed up in a hotel room, the living likeness of "The Unhappy Drinker" who wants to stop but can't. He did his drinking on a different level of society than the "town drunk" but he was making an even better job of wrecking himself mentally and physically. He was also tossing a promising career into the ash can. He didn't know A.A. existed in this city, but he had read of the international organization and wrote to the New York Office of Alcoholic Foundation Inc., and his letter was sent on to me. He hasn't had a drink for 15 months.

I was at an A.A. meeting one night when a man 60 odd years old, and very, very high indeed, stumbled in. He was belligerent and abusive. He'd located the local A.A. group, and he wanted help, but he had to drink himself a little courage to come to see us. We found he had once been a power in the Labor movement, a highly paid union organizer, now reduced to washing dishes in a "greasy spoon." He has totally abstained for 12 months,

and now has a good job compatible with his intelligence and education.

MOSTLY VOLUNTEERS

But I want to make it clear that A.A. never pesters a man to join. Ninety-nine per cent of the people who join our own group have asked for help. We must first be assured that a man wants to stop drinking before we'll move. If he doesn't want to stop more than anything else in the world then he's not ready for A.A. and unless he's ripe we'd be wasting our time, and might even prejudice him against us. If an alcoholic comes into A.A., attends a few meetings and then drops out, we never go after him. We wait until he's taken another real nose dive, and then we'll comb the bars and joints to drag him back to sanity. That may sound a bit brutal, but we have found that it is best to get a man when he is full of remorse after crawling out of the stupor of a bat, than to try to work on him when he's cold sober and falsely believes he has liquor licked.

Let me make it very clear that Alcoholics Anonymous is for alcoholics only. We want no part of the social drinker, or the man or woman who occasionally ties one on at a party. We define the alcoholic as one who is "powerless over alcohol." Any "morning after" drinker is either an alcoholic or a potential alcoholic. This is the type who'll take a drink when he doesn't want to, when he knows that taking that drink may wreck his future economically. The recovered alcoholic wants to cure others like himself, but he does not want to interfere with the drinking habits of those who enjoy their liquor and forget about it. We don't want to close any bars or cut liquor rations. We recognize that for most people drinking is an enjoyable,

harmless social pastime, one that adds a good deal to the gaiety of nations. But we also recognize that it is not for us. A.A. will almost guarantee a cure based on total abstinence, but as yet to turn out a safe social drinker. Many of us firmly established in A.A. serve liquor to others in our homes and clubs, tipping ourselves on fruit juice and cokes. But that is not sound practice for new recruits, on the principle that its foolish to stick one's head into the lion's mouth. He is wise to avoid temptation.

After I had been in A.A. a while the man who 10 years ago founded the movement spoke one night in a nearby city and I went to hear him. A charming, intelligent man, an able executive and fluent speaker, he could earn \$80,000 a year today, yet he devotes his life to A.A., running the international organization from New York for barely enough to keep him going. Let's call him arbitrarily and to preserve the principle of anonymity, Davis.

Davis, a New York stockbroker who had a rich and varied drinking career, found himself one day in Akron, Ohio. He was alone, knew not a soul in the city, and was almost stone-broke, and he badly wanted a drink. But he knew that if he took one he would walk the same old path again to torture and eventual hospitalization.

Davis had become intensely interested in the problem of alcoholism while paying a visit to a New York detoxicating hospital where he had been a patient. In his Akron hotel lobby Davis looked at a Church directory opposite the bar, impulsively he called a clergyman, although he did not know him, and through the minister he met an Akron physician who was really an advanced alcoholic. The doctor and the broker became friends, and tried to hold each

other up on the water wagon. But the doctor fell off. It was on June 10, 1935, that the physician took his last drink. It was a drink given to him by Davis, to pull him out of a hangover. These two became the first A.A. group. In a year and a half they had effected only 10 cures. By the early part of 1939 the number had grown to 100. It was at that time that Alcoholics Anonymous - the A.A. bible - was published. This is a remarkable work, with a preface by the founder, and case histories of a dozen spectacular cures. A.A.'s call it the "Big Book." It is such a powerful piece of simple writing that cures have been effected by one reading of it, and nothing else. It is procurable from any A.A. group or by writing to the head office, Box 459, Grand Central Annex Post Office, New York City.

Since then, groups have been almost self-starting in Cleveland, Detroit, Toledo, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Pittsburg, Toronto, Washington, Montreal, Chicago and some 50 other cities and towns in the United States and Canada. Everywhere they are endorsed by clergymen, doctors and social workers.

About five years ago the movement gained a foothold in Canada. Toronto is the oldest and Windsor is the second oldest group.

NO RESPECTER OF RANK

What has Alcoholics Anonymous got to offer Canada and Canadians?

A.A. offers to thousands of Canadian drunks and to borderline cases and potential alcoholics restoration to a happy and gainful place in society, painlessly and without cost. All they have to do is want to be cured. A.A. is really a co-operative, and alcoholics can band themselves together in a co-operative just as can the grain growers of Western Canada or the

farmers of Ontario. A.A. welcomes everybody who wants to slay the dragon that has made his life hell - extrovert and introvert, beggarman and thief, lawyer and office worker, banker and day laborer, rich, poor and the suffering white-collar man, society lady and the truck driver.

For one thing, A.A. has taught its members that alcohol is no respecter of rank or birth or worldly position. I know the head of a war plant who's making money so fast he can't count it. I know a chap who works for this man for forty cents an hour, when he works. They are both alcoholics. One is a well educated, intelligent man, with a charming wife and family. The other is a poor chap who never had a chance to acquire an education, or the capacity to absorb it. They both suffer from the disease of alcoholism, just as they might in other circumstances have tuberculosis. A.A. can, and does, help both these extreme types and all the run-of-the-mill humanity in between.

A.A. groups offer very practical assistance too. Our reputation has grown to be respected by employers and by agencies of the state. We feed and cloth some down-and-outers we think deserving, and get them jobs. Six months ago a large firm wrote me asking if we had in our group a personnel man, for they believed an ex-alcoholic could, by his greater understanding of man and his frailties, handle men better than most other types. The other day I met the head of that firm on the street.

"You know that ex-drunk you sent me?" he enquired.

"Yes," I recalled, "What's the matter? Did he get drunk again?"

"Drunk, no!" he snorted, "Send me half-a-dozen more like him."

That was one of the most satisfying moments of my life.

Recently a big bruiser of a chap, one of those "fighting drunks," was up in court on the old fighting the cops charge. But instead of sending him to jail this time, the magistrate paroled him to me when I was able to tell the court that the man had been in A.A. for six months and had had but this one brief relapse. I staked my own and the reputation of A.A. on that fellow, and I know I'll win.

And A.A. is for potential alcoholics, too, for the smart operator who's intelligent enough to see where he's heading before he actually musses his trousers in the gutter. We have had more than a dozen of that type join us in the last month.

To answer the inevitable "wise guy," who sees a racket in all human endeavor, let me point out that the modest organization maintained by A.A. is financed through the voluntary contributions of recovered alcoholics. There are no dues or fees. At our meeting we contribute to the "kitty" the price of one drink or one bottle, depending on how flush we are at

the moment. No newcomer pays a nickel. Each of the groups is completely autonomous. The Alcoholic Foundation Inc., New York, is the central clearinghouse for information and advice, and helps each individual unit. But no group owes money of allegiance to New York. Each can help pay the New York rent or not, as it seems fit. Many don't, but most do.

The other night at our local meeting, a King's Counsel, just in two months said, "I don't know why I drank. I don't really care. I know that I'm not drinking now. I'm not yet sure how this program works, or why, but I know that it does. That's enough for me right now."

This brilliant lawyer is but one of hundreds of Canadians who have been restored to sanity and usefulness. That is what Alcoholics Anonymous offers to Canada and Canadians - sane and sober men and women, who once were drunkards, contributing of their best to the nation in wartime and peace.