

The Sick Person We Call an Alcoholic

Mrs. Mann, once a victim of liquor, tells what we can do to help those who would quit but can't.

By B.J. Woolf

Yale University is sponsoring a new course in education. It is not being given in the college buildings, but it is one which its sponsors hope will affect the entire country and foster a better understanding of one of the most common of all diseases.

The National Committee for Education on Alcoholism, in existence for a year and a half, is being largely financed by the university. Its primary function is to change public opinion regarding alcoholism and to aid in establishing a program for its treatment.

For, according to the executive director of the committee, the drunkard who rolls in the gutter is as sick as the man suffering from some mortal disease. The only difference between the two is that there is hope for the former; with the proper treatment he may become a worthwhile citizen.

And, judging from the executive director herself, one must be tempted to believe what she says. For Marty Mann, according to her own story, was a victim of the craving for alcohol. The only reason she did not lie in the gutter was that she had enough money to have a place where she could be helpless and sodden. Today Mrs. Mann is an attractive, smart-looking woman in her thirties. Her clear complexion, her alert blue eyes and her manner bear no trace of years of hard drinking. As she told me her story she might have been recounting the trials and

sufferings of another. She seemed detached from the victim whose longings she recalled, as separate an entity as Dr. Jekyll was from Mr. Hyde.

Moreover, although she said her illness was not cured but arrested, she expressed no fear of a relapse. And when I asked her to what she attributed the change, she ascribed it to Alcoholics Anonymous, an organization founded in 1934 by a former drunkard who had successfully reformed another habitual drinker. The organization now has nearly 400 chapters in the United States and Canada and claims a national membership of more than 15,000. Its members are not ashamed of having been sick and are so grateful for their own recovery that they try to help others, offering at their meetings friendship, counsel and guidance.

It was not only what Alcoholics Anonymous did for her but also what it has done for others which influenced Mrs. Mann to undertake her present work. Now, in addition to directing the activities of the national committee from its New York headquarters, she tours the country, giving lectures on the best ways to conquer alcoholism. "The alcoholic," she says, "is a sick person who can be helped and is worth helping. This is a public health problem. Apart from the economic aspect - for the alcoholic is an expense not only to himself and his family but also to the

community at large - the humanitarian side is tremendously important.

"Our committee is endeavouring to teach the public that alcoholics must not be shunned but helped. We are getting local programs started throughout the country to make clear the basic facts about alcoholism, the need for a change in attitude towards those afflicted and the best methods for solving the problem through community action. We are assisting in the establishment of local committees, composed of representative citizens, which will act with our assistance in combating the evil.

"We are making available literature on the subject, explaining the treatment of the disease either at home or in clinics, and encouraging the transfer of alcoholics from jails to hospitals. A man should not be jailed for being drunk; he should be sent to a hospital to be cured.

"At the present time there are but two clinics for drunkenness in the entire country; yet alcoholism is as prevalent a disease as either tuberculosis or cancer and one that, rightly handled, is more easily treated. Our committee proposes to play the same part in fighting the disease as the tuberculosis committee does in its field. We are certain that when people in general become aware of the true state of affairs they will help in stamping out this evil. Do you realize that there are few places in the whole country with adequate facilities for the care and treatment of alcoholics?

"In the first place, alcoholism must be correctly diagnosed. One type is the symptom of an underlying mental ailment. This requires the care of a psychiatrist and will not yield to ordinary treatment for alcoholism. To cure it, the mental condition

must be cured. On the other hand, so-called secondary alcoholism responds to simple re-education - that is, making the patient realize his illness and convincing him that his physical make-up is such that it is impossible for him to drink in moderation. This is the method employed by Alcoholics Anonymous. In some cases this re-education must be accompanied by either medical or psychiatric treatment and sometimes even by institutional care.

"Until the clinics are established with experts in charge, all drunkards will be handled in the same way, and there is little chance for their recovery. But in establishing these clinics we must watch one important thing: they must not be too closely allied with courts. They must be places no one need be ashamed to go to, places which do not brand the patients as law breakers. One of the principal aims of our committee is to encourage the establishment of such clinics throughout the country and to assist them with all the scientific data on the subject."

As she puffed a cigarette Mrs. Mann went on: "Alcoholism is like greatness. Some people are born alcoholics, some achieve alcoholism and others have alcoholism thrust upon them. I belong to the third class, for it was prohibition that did the thrusting.

"I was born in Chicago and my people were well-to-do. I had everything for which a girl could ask, including a year at school in Florence. When I came back to this country I was in many ways just like other girls in my set. The usual coming-out party, dances and other social events filled my life.

"But America's noble experiment was being tried out and decent young men thought it was smart to go around with hip flasks. In addition, they would take us

girls to little places where they must be recognized through a peep hole before being allowed to enter. I was young and happy and gay and I thought it great fun to take a drink.

"One thing I did not realize then - I did not learn it until years later - was that I, like three-quarters of a million others who are known and countless others who are not known, may be called allergic to alcohol. We are the unfortunates who are not immune to it. And there is no Schick test as there is for diphtheria, which can determine a person's immunity. One only finds out too late."

She went on to say that there are those who drink in moderation. They enjoy a certain release after a drink or two. Their tensions are eased and this, she believes, is a perfectly legitimate reason for their drinking. But they do not need to drink. A movie, a theatre or a visit to friends serves the same purpose.

As she continued her story it was hard to believe that she was talking about herself. She seemed calm and detached. There was humour in her talk and there was nothing of the "professional dry" in her manner. While apparently a certain emotional urge brought about her recovery. It was not accompanied by the jingle of tambourines or the "step-up-and-be-saved" shouts of the sawdust trail.

She told of her marriage a year after her debut and the discovery that her husband was an alcoholic. She does not blame him for her drinking, for she had the disease when she was married. But even his example did not stop her. Within a year she divorced him and drank more than ever. Then she went to England to get away from herself.

While she was there her family suffered financial reverses and she

had to go to work. At first she became an interior decorator and later became associated with a photographic establishment. And all the time she kept drinking more and more to feel "normal."

"Of course," she said, "like all alcoholics, I made the usual excuses. I kept saying to myself that I could stop it if I wanted to, and I persuaded myself that I was drinking for business reasons. But I was miserable and finally I became convinced that I was going crazy. Strangely enough, I never once attributed my mental state to my drinking, but was sure that I was drinking to calm my nerves.

"Things got worse and worse. I became melancholic. Twice I tried suicide and finally one of my business associates insisted that I go to a sanitarium. I decided to return to America.

"By this time I was a confirmed drunkard. For weeks I would stay in my room, too drunk to do anything but lie in bed. Even then I did not attribute my condition to drink. I was sure that it was my brain and that I would end my days in a mad house.

"Finally friends persuaded me to go to a sanitarium in Greenwich. I did not seem to improve much, but one day the doctor handed me a copy of 'Alcoholics Anonymous.' I glanced through it and became angry. I was not an alcoholic. This had nothing to do with me. So in a fit of temper I threw the book across the room. Then something happened which I cannot explain. The book lay open on the floor and as I picked it up my eyes lighted on the words, 'We cannot live with anger.' They attracted me and I sat down with it and began to read. I became interested and suddenly the truth swept over me. I was an alcoholic. I had an obsession of the mind coupled with an allergy of the body."

She wrote to Alcoholics Anonymous and began getting letters of encouragement from them. Then she came to New York to attend their meetings. "Here were decent people," she said, "all in the same boat as I. They did not look down on me nor did they lecture me. They did not say they were cured, but that their illness had been arrested. They did not touch liquor because they knew if they did they would become sick once more. They did not suggest that I sign a pledge. All they did was to advise me to promise myself that I would not drink for twenty-four hours and when the twenty-four hours were passed to make myself the same promise again."

Their tolerance, their understanding and their desire to help all made a deep impression upon her. Once or twice she slipped, but when they heard of it, instead of lectures they gave her sympathy. They themselves had done the same thing.

Today Mrs. Mann is a firm believer in the efficacy of this system in the treatment of many cases of alcoholism. She does not attempt to explain why it works. But she says it is successful in about 80 per cent of the cases. Undoubtedly group therapy plays an important part. Being able to talk plainly with no shame to others who

have been through the same distress means a lot. For, she says, no one except an alcoholic can truly understand the feelings of one.

"Those who have attended our meetings," she said, "who came to scoff have remained to pray. At these meetings men and women who have recovered get up and tell their experiences. All of them are intensely sincere in their desire to help and, while there is no particular religious dogma involved all of us recognize a power higher than ourselves which has helped us. To some it is God, to others a spiritual force which cannot be explained."

In carrying on the work of the committee, Mrs. Mann sees Alcoholics Anonymous playing an important part.

"But," she says, "please don't get the idea that our committee is a crusading outfit that is going around the country with hatchets trying to smash up gin mills. Those of us who are alcoholics are personal drys because we realize that we can't take liquor in moderation. But this does not mean that we believe that those who can should be deprived of it. For us it is drunkenness or dryness. For those not afflicted as we are, to drink or not to drink is not such an important question."