

# Blueplate Gospel

by Leslie H. Farber, M.D.

Books in Review: *September Remember*, by Eliot Taintor. New York: Prentice Hall, Inc. 322 pages. \$2.75.

Of all the methods devised by state, clergy or medical profession for curing alcoholism--prohibition, imprisonment, will power, electric shock, etc.--none has ever been so popular or so highly publicized as Alcoholics Anonymous. And so far as the limited aim is concerned of helping people deprive themselves of alcohol, there seems no doubt that the popularity is deserved.

Where other methods tend to say, "Now you are cured; go back to your life," this voluntary association of 15,000 members is unique in offering not a "cure" so much as a "life." Not drinking becomes in itself an absorbing occupation, providing fellowship, prestige and--in spite of an absurd body of crude medico-religious dogma--a very real communal faith. Obviously no one can give up a symptom without finding at least a partial satisfaction for its cause, which in this case is intricately related to the social structure. It is no indictment of the method itself, therefore, to criticize the kind of life celebrated by AA, or to suggest that what really goes on bears no relation to the blueplate values offered as explanation and inducement. These are not people driven to self-denial because of any deep awareness of interpersonal failure or spiritual emptiness in their lives; usually they have found that alcohol was threatening such real possessions as job, family or the deference paid them by the less addicted. It is hardly surprising if the compensatory social life which they achieve together must be glorified by women's magazine phrases and lodge-meeting principles.

The advantage of the present 300-page pamphlet (disguised as a pulp-style novel) over the shorter booklets distributed by AA, lies in its detailed revelations of group activity. While

the formal weekly meetings are devoted to inspirational talks by ex-alcoholics, coffee is drunk in no blue-nose spirit; good fellowship abounds ("You can get that sense of abandon without liquor"). AA members feel a natural solidarity: the way they would "get up and talk at meetings, really let their hair down, made other contacts seem thin and superficial. Other people shadowy." And while AA insists that it has no ambition to impose sobriety on the nation, its members feel a natural willingness to share their benefits with any applicant. They are "on call," so to speak, day and night, answering requests for aid or enlightenment from strangers or back-sliding fellows. Each member is at once both patient and physician: only from a fellow alcoholic can they receive that acceptance, without condescension, which society has withheld. As physician, setting an example to others, they have an incentive toward sobriety, but it seems to me they gain something more valuable as well: the privilege of adult responsibility without its full rigors. They feel free to become a child--a patient--again, whenever necessary. But in practice, of course, this dual role must cause some paralyzing inter-alcoholic confusions--depending on who is treating whom at the moment. Prestige is gained primarily through one's success in not drinking; second, through one's talent for mutual aid. Occasionally an unregenerate member is subjected to social ostracism. ("But probably every field has it lunatic fringe.")

One assumption is that only an alcoholic can understand an alcoholic. Within obvious limits this is true, but the quality of understanding is rather doubtful. Tag-lines of popular psychiatry, which serve as passwords in the organization, also serve to prevent any first-hand insight, while non-psychiatric understanding seems on an equally debased level. There is perhaps a fortunate discrepancy, however, between the "religious"

flavor of the pamphlets and the actual beliefs and practices deducible from the novelistic dialogue. The "Greater Power" so earnestly invoked in print is the kind of genteel deity, heavily infused with Buchmanism and popular science, to which a smart advertising man might subscribe in a mawkish moment. This has little to do with the prevailing faith, a strong group loyalty, which activates AA members and undoubtedly supplies another missing factor in their lives. A good sociologist might learn a great deal about our present society by

watching the operation of this paradox: the social values that have, to some degree, driven the alcoholic to drink, are here recreated in microcosm but with enough empiric differences, apparently, to act as an effective substitute for drinking. Even with its preposterous rag-bag of theory, AA has something of communicable value to offer the social sciences, but so far no psychiatrist has been enough of a sociologist, and no sociologist enough of a psychiatrist, to discover what it is.

Source: *The New Republic*, May 21, 1945, p. 716