

# Alcoholics Anonymous

by *Gurdon Simmons*

The smartly-groomed woman, showing no self-consciousness before her audience of several hundred, launched into a graphic recital of her recovery from chronic alcoholism. The doctors, she said, had pronounced her case hopeless.

Unable to "take a drink or leave it alone," she was suffering from an allergy, she said emphatically, for which medicine had no cure. The consequence of the "insidious first drink" was years of anguished alcoholic slavery, followed by almost incredible spiritual release. A power greater than herself had redeemed her.

Succeeding speakers testified similarly. Without embarrassment, they spoke of themselves as former jail-birds, ex-sots, and inmates of asylums. All had achieved too momentous a triumph over thirst to be squeamish in their revelations.

The occasion was a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, probably the most amazing movement of its kind in modern times.

Alcoholics Anonymous has more than 10,000 members. There are 250 branches in 45 States, Honolulu, Canada and Australia. The membership includes cops, clergymen and clerks; stage stars and storekeepers; artists, writers and advertising experts; sailors and statesmen; diplomats and druggists; housewives and working women; salesmen and social celebrities; brokers and ball players; fliers and fighters; doctors, dancers and dentists; businessmen, bankers and barbers; lawyers and laborers.

Many of the groups, with a bare handful of members in small communities, hold meetings in members' homes. Others have fully equipped clubrooms, financed by "passing the hat" for donations when funds are needed.

Meetings are not solemn affairs for these reclaimed drinkers whose superior intelligence, as innumerable surveys disclose, made them easy prey for alcohol. They are

pleasant gatherings of men and women of sharp wit and a keen sense of fun. They laugh easily in relating the inevitable humorous episodes that befell confirmed toppers who "kept bottles tucked everywhere about the house for emergency nips, even behind living room radios."

Numerically, Alcoholics Anonymous is still far from impressive, considering the field. The nation's 44,000,000 persons who use alcoholic beverages include 2,500,000 termed "intemperate," and a "chronic alcoholic" fringe of 600,000. Considering the comparative recency of the group's origin, it is the nucleus of a force which may eventually set 600,000 addicts free.

Alcoholics Anonymous was pioneered less than ten years ago by a once wealthy stockbroker who had been ruined by rum, a friendly, gangling man, now known to thousands of reclaimed drinkers as "Bill." At the end of 1934 he found himself homeless and penniless, deserted by all but his family.

"Alcohol was my master. Ahead loomed asylum or cemetery," said Bill. Strangely enough, that admission proved an astounding ally, and started him on the road to recovery, for simultaneously he recognized the need of help from a power greater than himself. Bill turned to God.

"God comes to most men gradually," wrote Bill later in his memoirs, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, a history of the movement. "But his impact on me was sudden and profound."

The experience was so startling that Bill promptly visioned "hallucinations" and rushed to his doctor for a sanity test. The physician was equally mystified but urged Bill to "hang on to it. Anything is better than the way you were." The same doctor, Bill reports, has since seen many men who have had similar experiences. He knows they are real.

Acknowledgment of alcohol's mastery over the victim, and recognition of need for spiritual

aid, regardless of the individual's personal concept of God, are the first steps in reclaiming a chronic alcoholic, in the Alcoholics Anonymous "twelve steps" to recovery. Correspondingly important is "helping others similarly afflicted," as Bill explains.

"The average alcoholic is a bankrupt idealist," Bill wrote. "He has been frustrated in reaching for something high and has fallen back on liquor to forget about it. Reforming someone else, making a man useful again, suits his idealism. He won't drop back into his old habits."

Bill had occasion to test his axiom during the early stages of his own come-back campaign. While on an important business mission in Akron, Ohio, he found himself almost succumbing to an impulse to take "just one drink." A single drink, experience warned, would undo the good accomplished by months of abstinence. Bill set out to find another alcoholic.

Inquiries led him to a prominent Akron physician who was losing a lucrative practice through unrestrained drinking. Bill found him in the throes of a periodic bender and related his own lurid record. The doctor was responsive. They worked together; each helped the other. Bill's desire for "one drink" passed, and Alcoholics Anonymous had its second member. The movement was on.

Early progress was slow. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous are neither evangelists nor crusaders. They do not solicit "salvagees" or thrust themselves on likely candidates for redemption. They have nothing against drink because of their own unfortunate allergy. Many, as a matter of fact, maintain well-stocked "bars" for their guests who can drink in moderation.

Consequently, over a period of many months following the meeting of Bill and the drinking doctor in Akron, Alcoholics Anonymous comprised the few men and women who came in personal contact with one of them.

But the disciples, in turn, spread their influence, and membership expanded.

Eventually, Bill penned his memoirs, and reviews of the book accelerated interest in the movement. Many Alcoholics Anonymous testify to recovery induced by merely reading the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* itself.

Then, in March, 1941, an inspiring tribute to Alcoholics Anonymous by Jack Alexander appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Membership skyrocketed. Now, three years later, inquiries occasionally dribble in, in response to The Post piece.

Alcoholics Anonymous is unique, not only because of its phenomenal job of saving human beings from alcoholic misery, but also because it is not a formally "founded" organization. Bill began it as a one-man reclamation project to save himself. From there, it just grew. Bill now devotes virtually all of his time to the cause, but Alcoholics Anonymous continues without constitution, charter, by-laws and dues.

The movement is still in its infancy, but its influence spreads rapidly, even invading the prisons. In California's San Quentin some time ago, a group of inmates who had held alcoholism responsible for their incarceration obtained permission from the warden to organize a unit. Soon, other alert penologists were following San Quentin's lead.

Because the Alcoholics Anonymous thoroughly understand their allergy which makes the first drink "fatal," they refer to their redemption as "recovery," and not "cure." A "cure" pre-supposes ability to drink again.

Recovery in itself follows no predictable course or period. For some men and women it is joyously sudden and lasting. Others find it a slower, harder path, beset by discouraging lapses. But it is a tribute to the sincerity and determination of these men and women that the majority eventually come out on top.

The chief stumbling blocks to a chronic alcoholic's recovery, it is said, are the victim's reluctance to admit that "liquor is boss," and corresponding reluctance to ask for spiritual aid. Invariably, an alcoholic employs every possible subterfuge of self-deception before admitting that "booze cannot be beaten without help of one greater than myself."

Finally, after making the admission, many balk at the thought of religion as the price of release.

But, as the Alcoholics Anonymous themselves show, no one has to get religion in the accepted sense to be freed from the bottle. The sufferer who calls on God to help him applies his own personal conception of who or what the Deity is. It certainly cannot be hard to take, judging by the serenely happy men and women comprising the 10,000 former alcoholics who now lead normal, useful lives

through the aid of a power greater than themselves.

"P.O. Box 658, Church Street Annex, New York 7, N. Y.," through which flows an ever widening stream of inquiries from alcoholics or their despairing families and friends, is the only public contact with Alcoholics Anonymous. These touching inquiries receive swift, sympathetic response. P.O. Box 658 is an anonymous address that many must bless.

Source: *Read*, February 1944, pp. 47-50