

# Help for the Alcoholic's Family

by Jerome Ellison

*The exclusive story, with case histories, of a new group that is bringing hope to alcohol's most tragic victims: The wives, husbands and children of the drunkards themselves.*

One night three years ago a wife in Long Beach, California, despondent over her husband's drinking, went to a meeting of the local Alanon--contraction of Alcoholics Anonymous--Family Group to see what, if anything, might be done. After an evening of intent listening to men and women who had served as spouses to other drinkers, she returned home with her strategy drastically revised.

Always one to pour the household liquor down the drain when a binge was on, she now purchased five imperials of the finest, lined them up on the kitchen sink and waved an invitation to her husband to help himself. Unmanned by this reversal, he sat down to hear her explanation. He was so impressed by what she had learned about his problem that he returned the bottles unopened and hasn't had a drink since.

Alanon Family Groups, of which there are now about 700 neighborhood units, have produced many recoveries which are hardly less remarkable. The society is not mainly organized, however, to effect such comebacks. This is the province of its parent organization, Alcoholics Anonymous, or AA, the international fellowship of former problem drinkers who keep sober by helping inebriates find sobriety. Alanon tackles the problem from the standpoint of the nonalcoholic who is hurt in the emotional and economic tornado which so often accompanies alcoholism. Its members are mostly wives and husbands of AA members or prospects.

The field for Alanon is larger, the statistics suggest, than that available to AA itself, and the need is scarcely less urgent. The National Committee on Alcoholism, an educational and

fact-finding organization, estimates that of the 65,000,000 Americans who drink, 4,000,000 have well-developed cases of alcoholism. A Public Affairs Committee summary of the annual cost to the nation charges \$31,000,000 to medical care, \$25,000,000 to jail maintenance, \$89,000,000 to accidents, \$188,000,000 to crime, and \$432,000,000 to wage losses. Other costs, such as the addling of good brains, the neglect and abuse of children, the disruption of families and friendships, are borne in large measure by those closely associated with problem drinkers. It is this population segment of 20,000,000 that Alanon Family Groups are intended primarily to help.

"And we need help," says the wife of AA's surviving founder. "After years of living intimately with an acute drinking problem, we've become as jumpy as the drinker, and as much in need of restorative measures."

As in AA, help is given mainly in the form of shared experience. Just as former drinkers are best qualified to appreciate inebriates' problems, so the harassments of the alcoholic's spouse--or brother, father, sister, mother, sweetheart, employer or friend--can best be understood, Alanon members say, by a nonalcoholic who has had similar experiences.

The voices of experience are heard in the talks members give at meetings, during the refreshment period afterward, and through informal get-togethers between times. Sometimes, as in the case of the Long Beach wife, a listener gains insight that results in an immediate improvement of the home situation. Of course, no one had suggested treating alcoholism with alcohol. But the principle that a desire to stop drinking is an inward thing that cannot be created by outside lecturing,

threatening, scolding or deprivation, is one of the tenets embraced in a way of life that AA's and their mates call "the program." The Californian grasped it promptly, applied it daringly and achieved a seemingly miraculous recovery.

"Hang around," new members are advised. "Sooner or later, you'll hear a story that exactly matches your own." When this happens, a feeling of belonging is strengthened, isolation is ended, anxiety begins to ease off.

In a recent trip through the East and Midwest I met and talked with scores of Alanon members, attended their meetings and heard their case histories. There was a fantastic variety of family narratives, most of them having a happy ending. Families had been salvaged from circumstances seasoned counselors had pronounced hopeless. With the help of AA and Alanon, chronic drunks had been restored as dependable fathers, female barflies had made a comeback as conscientious mothers, families had been lifted from a special brand of hell to a special brand of peace.

"Stories," as members call their talks at meetings, briefly describe the family's condition before AA and Alanon, the circumstances that led to joining and the family record since. The "before" passages often recall days and nights of desperation and shame. "Our house was always a mess," a New York husband reminisced. "I could never be sure my wife would be sober when I came home; we could never entertain friends or go visiting. I hated all of it." A Westchester father said, "I dragged my son out of bars, argued with him, took his money and liquor away. Nothing worked."

Wives spoke movingly of what had happened to their loved ones and themselves. "He was changing before my eyes, losing his gaiety, growing irritable. He was a binge drinker and the binges came closer together."

"Our problem so filled my mind that I found myself forgetting appointments, riding past bus stops, looking at people and not hearing what they said."

"We lived in a small, gossipy, party-line

town. We tried to keep up a gay front, but were stingingly unhappy."

From a Western state: "You know the story: father'd get plastered and you'd retreat to a corner to commit mental suicide and murder. I could never know what turn things would take; there was never any security or sense of well-being or peace. Finally I built a wall around myself and retreated behind it. We didn't go out for months at a time."

### **The Alcoholic Doesn't Fool the Children**

Some had taken refuge in a dulled acceptance. "I had given up hope and become a martyr. We never talked much; we were almost strangers. He was sure I had stopped loving him; I was sure he had stopped loving me."

"The strain had affected my disposition, and this, in turn, affected the children. Our daughter avoided home like a plague and our son was in trouble at school. Bills at all the stores were long past due, we had no cash, our furniture belonged to a loan company. For a family accustomed to making its way, it was hard."

Others had lived at a high pitch of nervous protest. "When he was out, I'd jump out of my skin when the phone or doorbell rang, chain myself to the house so I'd be there when he returned, visualize accidents, extravagances, infidelities, arrests. When he was home there were spilt drinks, uneaten meals, insults, physical violence, interrupted sleep, ordinary filth, constant quarrels."

One wife said, "Our marriage was held together by a little hope, a large fear and two children."

The children were not fooled. "I always knew when daddy was drunk, by the way he put his key in the door," a drinker's daughter said. "When he was like that I ran to my room and locked the door."

Another recalled: "Kids notice things. I remember them stumbling around saying, 'This is the way Marilyn's daddy walks.'"

In some cases a family member took the first step toward family recovery through Alanon, drawing the alcoholic into the AA orbit

later. "Our doctor suggested AA as a possible step for our son," one father said. "I began attending AA meetings on my own, and after a time Bob went with me. AA made sense to him right away, and he hasn't had a drink since his first meeting." Later, this father helped organize a family group and served as its chairman.

The alcoholic's response is not always so prompt. "Alanon welcomed my daughter and me and gave us new hope," one wife said, "but my husband didn't join AA until a year and a half later, when being fired for drinking finally opened his eyes."

In a New York City Alanon meeting it was the questing wife, one night, who received the eye opener. After hearing the symptoms of alcoholism described she jumped up, saying, "I don't belong here, but in AA. I'm an alcoholic!"

Some members report having been self-conscious and even suspicious in the beginning. "We had been referred to AA by our minister. I knew nothing about it, and my son was afraid it might let him in for some kind of enforced soul-saving program. He came home glowing after his first meeting, relieved of this and a great many other fears." This Midwest mother learned of the family group, joined and became an effective counselor to other families.

Family groups like to compare notes about how they happened to "come in." Some are awed at the unlikely "chance" which brought help in a desperate hour. A husband said, "One day when I was at my wit's end about Mary's drinking, I ran into an old friend who had been a complete lush, and found out about AA. Mary said she'd try it, and I joined the local family group to help her."

A wife reported: "During the last week of Jim's last bout, a ninety-seven-day affair, I knelt down in my flower garden and said what was probably my first really serious prayer. A few minutes later a neighbor called and suggested I phone AA."

Frequently the alcoholic joins AA and the nonalcoholic partner affiliates with Alanon at the same time. "While I was in the hospital for

an operation, my husband drank himself into another hospital. The AA's called on him, and when he came out he was a member. When I came out I joined the family group."

More commonly the alcoholic pioneers in AA, and the spouse joins Alanon weeks or months later. One factor is curiosity. "Something had worked a profound change for the better in my husband," a Buffalo, New York, wife testified, "and I wanted to find out what it was." Another factor is a constructive kind of rivalry. In my visiting around the groups I heard frequent reference to the growth in understanding and maturity of the alcoholic spouse through AA. "We had to find out what it was all about or be hopelessly outdistanced."

**Finding out what it's about sometimes comes as a shock.** "I was quite put out at my first meeting," one wife said. "I expected to hear my husband's problem discussed, but there was hardly any mention of husbands. I was huffed when one wife expressed the opinion that fear, worry, gossip, criticism, grudge-bearing, self-righteousness and self-pity might be as reprehensible as drunkenness, lying and thieving. This was a shock--it hit home." A more usual first reaction is one of relief. Again and again I heard of the newcomer's reassurance on discovering that others had survived all he now faced and more, and had emerged cheerful and with a solution.

The "after" portions of the stories did not always proclaim unqualified victories over the demon rum. AA claims to be able to help all sincere applicants except those who are "constitutionally unable to be honest with themselves." A number of these are represented in Alanon by their spouses. One wife felt that the Alanon program was successful in her case "simply because I have some degree of serenity and good health, and can feel respect and good will for my husband even though he's just come off a two-week drunk." Another reported dramatic relief from disabling headaches which she believed had been psychosomatic. A five-year member, she is successfully raising her two sons, though her

husband remains a pathological drinker. One wife advised newcomers to be optimistic and patient about mates who were slow to respond. Her husband, now sober four years, had taken seven years to "make" AA!

Another group of "after" stories bears a restrained witness to improvement. "Has all disagreement ended in our household?" one woman asked rhetorically. "No, but friendly compromise has become possible."

After a year of Alanon, a wife reported: "The main difference in our family is that now we can talk. The two hardest people on earth to talk to are a drunk and an irritated wife. Now that we've broken the sound barrier, companionship is growing."

Generally, however, Alanon stories reflect a happily reconstructed family life. They are preponderantly enthusiastic. "I'll never forget those first meetings--seeing so many people I knew, never dreaming they'd had the same problem we'd had! I'd been a plain snob! We had all been so foolish to cover up our problem instead of solving it!"

"I've made such wonderful friends! We can laugh and even cry together and understand just what we're laughing or crying about."

"My advice to families with an alcoholic problem is, don't try to do it alone; it's too big."

"We found this secret of harmony: When each partner is trying to remedy his own defects, there's nothing to differ about."

I recall particularly a meeting in Des Moines, which has a family group of the predominantly female variety. Since AA runs more than five-to-one male, this is the usual, but by no means invariable, complexion of the spouse groups. The main AA group in Des Moines has more than 200 members and holds meetings in its downtown clubrooms, over a store at 816 1/2 Walnut Street, on Tuesday evenings. Saturday night is family night, and it is not unusual to have seventy for dinner and twice that many for the evening program of AA speakers. Family group meets on second Wednesdays at eight P.M.

At the meeting I attended I counted about eighty women. There were grandmothers and

there was a babe in arms. The twenties and forties were well represented, with the thirties having a plurality. The members were smart in appearance and cheerful in demeanor, and the quarters pleasant. The loft measures perhaps forty by a hundred feet. In the rear are kitchen and dining facilities, a coffee bar and an office. The front portion, where the meetings are held, is a lounge and auditorium. Presiding was the secretary, a long-limbed, gently spoken matron in her thirties named Dorothy H.

Before the meeting I learned that Dorothy was the wife of Ray H., a prominent local attorney and one of the founders of the Des Moines AA group, and that they have an eleven-year-old son. Ray, in his day, had been jailed eighteen times for drunkenness, and hospitalized countless times. On one of these occasions the attending doctor jotted: "A chronic alcoholic, formerly a man of repute." As Ray's secretary, it was once part of Dorothy's job to cover up for him during his binges. She agreed to marry him only if he'd give up drinking. He accepted the condition and stayed sober three months. There followed four "awful" years, until one day fourteen years ago, when an AA stranger from Omaha blew into town, told Ray he was the man to introduce AA to Des Moines, and wrought the marvel of sobriety.

The secretary and treasurer reported briefly, and members learned that some \$17.85 remained in the till. A collection basket was passed, into which the ladies put as much as a dollar and as little as a dime. Four new members were introduced, and presented with pamphlets outlining the nonalcoholics' adaptation of AA's twelve suggested steps, stressing self-examination, self-improvement, prayer and service. A rummage sale was announced among the coming events, and a home-talent show. These latter are popular, drawing as many as 500 spectators. At one of them a prominent local political candidate and AA member offered his services as a target for custard pies. At five dollars a throw, he became a formidable money-maker. By these and other means, the family group has provided the

club with furniture, television, piano, refrigerator, dining silver and kitchen range.

The first speaker, an attractive forty-year-old redhead celebrating the first anniversary of her family's affiliation with AA, said it had been a short year and the happiest of their married life. "When Don came in a year ago, the neighborhood tavern keeper made a pool on which of the first fourteen days Don would resume drinking. The pool was extended to three, then four weeks, then called off. Don likes AA and likes sobriety, and now it's a year. In our house, it was a revelation to learn that for an alcoholic the dangerous drink is not the third or seventh or eleventh, but the first! It's wise to recall the things that happened while Don was drinking--it encourages a sense of gratitude--but unwise, I think, to brood over them. Some of them, recalled a year or two later, even seem funny.

"We didn't go out much, because Don drank all day and wanted only to sleep when he came home. Now and then, to make up, he'd blow me to his idea of a big treat--like the time he took me to a drive-in theater, then snored all through the show. Our social life has improved a great deal, now that people can understand what Don is saying. Don says my cooking is better. Of course, it is. He used to phone at dinnertime and say he'd be home in ten minutes. Two hours later he'd call and say he'd be home in five minutes. An hour later, when everything was dehydrated to the consistency of cedar shingles, he'd turn up for dinner." She had long been in the habit, she said, of cutting out and saving quotations that particularly appealed to her. She read us one: "A clever wife sees through her husband; a good wife sees her husband through."

The next speaker was one of the founders of the family group. "Jack and I came into AA eleven years ago. He's a broker. He drank a lot in his business and we drank together daily, I almost as much as he. Things were not going well with us, with Jack's business, with the children. There had to be a change, either for better or for much worse. Then Jack Alexander's article came along in *The Saturday*

*Evening Post*, and we began to talk about AA. After three years of talk, my Jack actually joined, and, of course, I affiliated with the family group. It has given me friends, and steady help with current problems, and many good times." She closed by reading the passage of the marriage ceremony that goes: "---from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health---" It helped her perspective to remind herself, she said, that she had once made such a promise and considered it binding.

**The active therapeutic ingredient of AA-Alanon, a mysterious force that AA's are sometimes heard to call "the program," is a little hard to define.** After attending meetings over a wide geographical spread, I concluded that the effective essence is not in physical surroundings or programming. In Montclair, New Jersey, and Kew Gardens, New York, the groups met in churches. In Jackson Heights they met in an office building, in Westchester in a museum, in New York City in an AA club, in Buffalo in an apartment. In Des Moines there were eighty at the meeting; in other places the average attendance was twenty. In Westchester and in one of the North Jersey groups, the chairmen were men. Buffalo and New York City had speaker programs. In Kew Gardens and Jackson Heights the meetings were open discussions. In Westchester and Montclair, new members submitted written questions, and the program consisted of older members' answers.

These were typical questions: How far does one go in accommodating an AA spouse's drunken proteges? How do you take a moral inventory? Should liquor be kept under lock and key? To what extent should one cover the lies of a husband who's still drinking? How long after the alcoholic stops drinking does that awful uncertainty persist?

A question which drew a comment from practically everybody present at the Montclair meeting was: How do I find peace of mind? The consensus was that one never captured it by frontal attack; when it came at all, it was a

by-product of some other activity--usually of trying to help someone else. Some found a measure of peace in counting blessings, others in talking out a problem with an understanding friend. Prayers--"Don't let me think that way," "Help me to make the most of this single day," and the familiar AA prayer for serenity and wisdom--were reported as tending to restore tranquility.

**The program is obviously flexible** as to size, location and form of meetings. I received an impression, however, that it called for a certain minimum of individual effort. A sincere desire to get sober and remain so is expected of the alcoholic; and of the nonalcoholic, a genuine wish to achieve and maintain harmonious family relationships. Reform activities are to be confined to oneself; efforts to change others are to be restricted to friendly concern. Criticism, gossip and grudge-bearing are definitely off the program. One may rib another person only on condition one ribs oneself more sharply. Humility, though regarded as nearly unattainable, is nevertheless to be sought, along with patience, understanding, thoughtfulness and honesty. The participation of a Higher Power is frequently alluded to as a desirable condition for the program's fulfillment. Regular attendance at meetings and frequent contacts with other members are parts of the program. Through these contacts the extraordinary understanding of one sufferer for another finds opportunity to take effect.

The growth of the family groups roughly parallels that of AA, which celebrates its twentieth anniversary this month with an anticipated attendance of 15,000 at its St. Louis convention. The two founders of AA were a Wall Street broker and an Akron physician. From the beginning, their wives were important partners in the movement. They turned their homes into virtual rescue missions overflowing with drunks. As more family men entered AA, there were more wives to be encouraged and advised. The book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, from which the society took its

name, was published in 1939. Special chapters were addressed to the needs of wives and families of alcoholics. When the first meetings were held in members' homes, spouses chatted over coffee in the kitchen while AA's met in the living room. Some went along on responses to appeals for help--"twelfth-step calls"--talking with the sober spouse while the AA dealt with the inebriate. Later, in localities where the AA tradition includes large "open"--to the public--meetings, the nonalcoholic partner attended regularly. Even where there were only "closed"--to all but alcoholics--meetings, enough AA thought filtered through to provoke a lively curiosity.

Mainly, however, Alanon has drawn its strength from a discovery that the affected nonalcoholics have problems distinctly their own--problems which respond amazingly to appropriate application of the familiar ideas which make up AA philosophy. Nonalcoholic auxiliaries, variously called Alanon, Alano, Onala, wives' groups and ladies' auxiliaries sprang up. By 1949 there were about fifty of these. The need for some such agency as a partner and helpmeet for AA was becoming more evident. AA general headquarters at 141 E. 44th St., New York City, was receiving a steady stream of inquiries from distracted wives and husbands of alcoholics. Family groups were clamoring for some sort of central facility.

A report on family groups was given at the 1950 convention in Cleveland, which was attended by more than 10,000 AA's and their mates. Returning delegates spawned groups everywhere. In the next five years 650 were formed, including units in Europe, Africa and Oceania. There are now 300 in Canada alone. Groups are so numerous in California that the state had to be divided into northern and southern councils. They are still forming, at a current rate of about one a week. The Alanon Family Groups Handbook, a 200-page two-dollar volume has just--June, 1955, made its appearance. The Alanon Family Groups Clearing House publishes a monthly bulletin and answers inquiries from P.O. Box 1475, Grand Central Station, New York 17, N.Y. It

is manned by volunteers; overhead is defrayed by a traditional dollar a member in spring and fall.

AA as a whole has welcomed its offspring, if not always with a wild exuberance, at least with a warm tolerance. What is probably a consensus was well stated by AA's official publication, Grapevine, in an approving article by an initially suspicious member. "This reporter had heard about these goings-on," the piece says, "and, like many a smug AA, assumed they were mere knitting circles. I was lured into one of their meetings recently. If I came to sneer, I remained to pray. This was no sewing bee but a spiritual force at work. I guess I was expecting to hear long complaints about how they'd been put upon by our boozing. There was none of that. They were examining not us but *themselves*."

Whatever "the program" may be, there is no longer much question that in many cases it can reunite families, sometimes beyond reasonable expectation. I talked with a father of five children who had spent nine years in a state penitentiary for bad-check passing, an activity that invariably accompanied his drinking. There was an AA group in the prison and he joined. When he found that it worked for two years "outside," he got in touch with his wife, who meanwhile had divorced him, and began a second courtship. Part of his wooing was introducing her to Alanon. They've now been remarried two years.

Then, of course, there are the cases where it has not quite worked, and these are the sad ones. While I was in Des Moines, Ray H., the lawyer, took me down to the courthouse one afternoon when a family case was set to be tried. "Just so you can see what can happen when we miss," he explained. Both the father and mother in the case were alcoholics and there were six children, eighteen to four. The continued destructive drinking of the father produced a home unfit for children. County welfare had worked with the family for years and given up hope, and now was asking the court to take the children from the father and mother. This was done, and I shall not soon forget the tear-stained face of the fifteen-year-old daughter or the way the four-year-old kept looking into people's faces, trying to understand. There are such scenes in all the courthouses all the time, and not all of them, we now know, are beyond hope. There is need for AA's new present to all the family.

Volunteers at the Clearing House--all AA wives--don't have to be told of this need--they read their mail. One day they let me read some of it. I jotted down the closing words of one letter: "My husband is an alcoholic, but will not ask for help. He thinks he can work it out for himself. He's not doing it, but what can I do? Is there anyone in the world who can help us or will try to? Please, for God's sake, can you help me?"