

# ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

By Gordon Best

At 7 p.m. on January 19 last, eight men sat down to dinner in Little Denmark a small restaurant on Bay Street in Toronto. Other diners noticed nothing extraordinary about these men. They included a lawyer, doctor, insurance man, flier and a broker.

However, there was something unusual about this group, each man was a confessed alcoholic. The dinner meeting was held for the purpose of founding the first Canadian branch of Alcoholics Anonymous, an organization which has over 200 branches or "clubs" in the states with over 8,000 members.

If there is anything less anonymous than the average alcoholic we would like to know it. But the reason for anonymity of members of Alcoholics Anonymous appears to stem from the delusion of every alcoholic that very few people know that he drinks to excess. He would not be induced to join a club that flamboyantly proclaimed itself to be a band of alcoholics for fear of the effect this might have upon his business connections if he has any left.

Alcoholics Anonymous are ex-alcoholics who ally themselves for mutual support in remaining "ex's" and to aid helpless alcoholics who desire their aid, to overcome their uncontrolled thirst.

In no sense a temperance society, crusaders against liquor or backers of anti-alcohol campaigns. Alcoholics Anonymous have nothing to offer the controlled drinker nor the slightest desire to influence these to abandon their drinking.

Prominent doctors and psychiatrists state that while there are many kinds of alcoholics,

they all have one symptom in common; an allergy to liquor which after the first drink or two, places the overcoming of desire for additional drinks entirely beyond their mental control. This does not mean that in every instance, the alcoholic, having taken the first drink is going to end up in drunken stupefaction, but that, having taken the first drink he cannot control the length of time he continues drinking. It might be ten minutes or ten days.

Many doctors believe that the alcoholic craving is limited to this class. These allergic types can never safely take even one drink. At a party, the alcoholic, no matter how good his abstemious intentions is not at ease until he gets hold of one of those drinks, drinks he sees his friends taking with impunity and then he is off to the races.

Many alcoholics, look at the one's you know, are keen and competent with strong wills and sound judgement in other spheres. But parallel with their ordinary sound reasoning will be so insanely trivial excuse for taking the first drink. And their allergy to drink, one they take the first one, entirely eliminates their will power, responsibility and standards of value. This allergy is a disease. Condemnation, haranguing and arguing had so far failed to cure any known disease. Treatment of an alcoholic along these lines by relatives, holier-than-thou or controlled drinkers who do not understand the alcoholic's problem, not only fails to help him but in many cases sets up a resentment, probably due to his sense of frustration in his own attempts,

which frequently leads to additional indulgence.

But there is one kind of person to whom an alcoholic, with a desire to stop, usually will listen to, another alcoholic. The other speaks his language, he has been through the mill.

Members of Alcoholics Anonymous are thus in a highly strategic position to help the alcoholic who desperately wants to stop drinking, but has found after many futile efforts on his own part, that he is unable to do so. They help him with non-moral, straight, practical advice. Their system works. Many of the worst cases, men who have been in and out of hospitals and institutions for alcoholics for years have proven them successful. Thousands of so called hopeless cases have been completely cured.

Alcoholics Anonymous is not an organization in the strict sense of the word. Rather it is composed of autonomous groups in various cities and towns, over two hundred at this writing. There are no dues or fees of any kind. There is no alliance with any religion or creed. The pass key to become a member is the recognition and admission on the part of the prospective member that he is an alcoholic and possession of an honest desire to stop drinking.

Besides the club in Toronto, which has about 100 members, there are branches of Alcoholics Anonymous operating in Victoria and Montreal. As in the states, each club is autonomous. Additional clubs are now in the process of formation in Winnipeg, London, Hamilton and Ottawa.

Alcoholics Anonymous appear to have developed a form of applied psychology somewhat similar to the theme expounded in Lloyd Douglas' "Magnificent Obsession." To a degree, their good deeds are anonymous, but instead of operating

singly they have adopted the convoy system. An explanation of this appears in a brochure entitled "Impressions of A.A."

"Finally it became manifest to us that as a part of our regeneration, assistance to other alcoholics who sincerely wished to be rid of their affliction was necessary. We have found group association to be of inestimable assistance. Only the alcoholic can understand and sympathize with the other alcoholic's problem. Especially in the beginning do we lean heavily on each other."

"Probably the most emotionally satisfying part of our program is the aid which we have been able to give to others. Much of this program is not easy for all. But the feeling of elation each of us has enjoyed in the knowledge that we, and in most cases only we alcoholics, can aid other alcoholics is deeply gratifying. Everyone of us who has had the experience of assisting a fellow alcoholic in the solution of his problem has been definitely strengthened in the conquest of his own problem. The gratitude and satisfaction of seeing wives reconciled, families reunited, self-respect restored, is an experience transcending in satisfaction most every other experience in our lives."

The Toronto branch holds a dinner each Tuesday night and to one of these was a guest. I went a couple of weeks ago. Informal conversation before and after dinner, while largely on the topic of drinking was anything but clinical or academic. Indeed, a considerable amount of it consisted of humorous stories about the antics of current alcoholics whom some of the members had been trying to help. Extreme tolerance and understanding was the highlight of these. In fact, several of the members in telling these stories, would compare similar capers of their own in the days when they

were drinking, to those of some who  
they are today trying to help. This  
attitude was very impressive, the  
antithesis of that of the

professional reformer and is, no  
doubt, one of the keynotes to the  
success of the organization.

*Source: Saturday Night, November 27, 1943*