

"The Big Book" : Bible for Alcoholics

By JOHN HAVERSTOCK

There was a time when the organization known as Alcoholics Anonymous, which has become one of the greatest boons to the drunkards of the world, had a membership which was a little lopsided. On its rolls the Bowery was better represented than Park Avenue, a fact deplored by the organization's leaders. So, recognizing that the rich can become as alcoholic as the poor, the organization decided to do something about it. Acting on its long-held tenet that only a sober ex-drunk can cure a down-and-out drunk, the A.A. leaders looked around for an ex-drunk with glamour and the ability to speak the Park Avenue language. They found it in an ex-drunk countess. The result: Park Avenue became as well represented as the Bowery on the rolls of A.A.

Now in the past few years, another change has taken place in the membership of A.A. - a change which has proved even more important than that accomplished by the countess, but which comparatively unnoticed by the public-at-large until last month. At that time A.A. held its bone-dry twentieth-anniversary convention and, in conjunction with the ceremonies, issued a revised, second edition of an oversized, ocean-blue volume which is familiarly known to all A.A. members as "the Big Book." The new edition, like its predecessors, is jacketed in a reversible dust cover, one side of which is blank, which allows it to be read in trains and buses without attracting the eyes of the curious. But, unlike its predecessor, the new

edition is not intended solely for alcoholics of the last-gasp variety. Right in the middle of it lies a whole section devoted to drinkers who have not yet lost their business or broken up their homes or, as most of A.A.'s original members seem to have done, landed in jail. Says ex-A.A. president Bill W. (who still keeps his last name anonymous, though he has now stepped down from his executive position): "Now we're getting cases whose drinking is merely become a menacing nuisance, and we're glad for them."

In the same way that A.A. discovered that the Park Avenue set could not be reached by the Bowery set it soon learned that potential alcoholics of the "menacing nuisance" variety cannot be reached by a membership composed largely of ex-last-gasp drunks. The solution: A.A. members made an effort to get a few representative "menacing nuisances" into the fold and, having accomplished this goal, found that its roll call of these "nuisances" soon began to increase by leaps and bounds. In the new edition of the "Big Book" appear twelve well-authenticated self-confessions by former "menacing nuisances." The section is subtitled "They Stopped in Time" and it will, A.A. leaders hope, bring even more "menacing nuisances" into the organization. "Half the people coming into A.A. today are in this group," Bill W. says, "and the members of this new class immediately identify with each other. Otherwise we couldn't keep them."

Who exactly are these

"menacing nuisances?" For A.A. purposes they are that segment of drinkers who are potential alcoholics. According to Bill W., there are certain well-defined symptoms by which they can be distinguished from other drinkers, e.g.:

A persistent lack of control over your drinking even when you want to control it and when it is necessary that you do control it.

An underlying maladjustment from which the excessive drinking usually stems.

Like all A.A.'s the new members find themselves in one of the most cleverly conducted organizations of modern times. It accepts no money from outsiders, so that even if you wanted to leave a bequest to A.A. the money would be refused. It also insists on the public anonymity of its members. (last year Bill W. turned down an honorary degree of doctor of laws at Yale because it would have brought him a personal type of glory frowned on by A.A.) Yet these two rules have always been credited with bringing the organization more really worthwhile publicity (i.e., the kind of publicity that reaches alcoholics who need A.A.) than could have been achieved by any other public relations policy. (Good A.A.'s for example, disapprove of such authors as Lillian Roth, who has publicly broken the shell of her A.A. anonymity to write such a best-seller as "I'll Cry Tomorrow." Says one A.A. spokesman privately in this connection: "We have many members who have pulled themselves up by their own resources.")

BY equal cleverness, A.A. which has baffled psychiatrists and religionists, has at the same time been approved by psychiatrists and religionists. There was a time when

the Catholic Church, for example, did not see eye to eye with A.A., believing that its religion was enough to cure any alcoholic. Then A.A. pointed out to the Church that many of its own priests, far from being able to pull themselves up by their religion, had joined A.A. to be cured. As a result the Catholic stigma was removed from A.A. Yet the basis of A.A. itself, which, once was closely associated with the Oxford Moral Rearmament Group, is a highly individualized religion that has been made palatable for even the most adamant atheist. Organized as what Bill W. describes as "everything from a benign anarchy to a democracy to a republic," the organization is one in which no member can be compelled to contribute anything to it or to believe in any particular dogma. "If you believe," says Bill, "that the hen came before the egg or that the egg came before the hen you have enough religion to join A.A." Even the most scientific alcoholic, he says, has to admit that by the time he gets around to A.A. he can't help himself. Therefore, he has to admit that there's a higher power than himself and, says Bill, "We put teeth into this belief by telling him that God in effect is saying, 'I hope you boys behave' but John Barleycorn is saying 'You'd damm well better behave, because if you don't -"

By such methods A.A. leaders estimate that they have now corralled 150,000 to 200,000 former alcoholics into their organization, though accurate membership figures are hard to come by, partly because all members of A.A. are allowed to make their own decisions on how closely they will work with the organization and partly because there are thousands of A.A.'s who, being isolated from cities where A.A. groups are able to meet, must in their own words "stay sober" solely by means of "The Big Book"

and by means of A.A.'s monthly magazine, *The Grapevine*. Sales figures of the first edition of the book alone reached a mammoth 300,000 copies - a figure that their membership extends far beyond their records. They know, for example, that by means of their tried-and-true methods the French membership has jumped to a great deal from a time when the only A.A.'s in France were American alcoholics in Paris. They also know that A.A. has transcended many international boundaries which are normally not transcended: for example, A.A.'s meet together from both North and South Ireland, crossing the boundary line to do so. One boundary still to be got across, however: the Iron Curtain. But in time even this boundary as well as others may disappear for, as A.A. leaders say, they have a built-in-self-perpetuating system: in order to stay cured every alcoholic has to spend some time helping another drunk to be cured or otherwise he may very well sink back into drunkenness himself.

Today for those alcoholics and potential alcoholics who would like

to join A.A. but who are remote from all A.A. groups the new and revised edition of "The Big Book" is now available for \$4.50 a copy. (to groups the price is \$4.) If you can not find it in your local bookstore the book can be ordered from Box 459, Grand Central Terminal Annex, New York City. Nobody - not even A.A. leaders - can speculate what the demand for the book will be. Only one thing is certain: that is that this edition will do better saleswise than did the original edition when it was first published in 1939. In that year A.A. Publishing Inc., was left with 5,000 copies of a book which nobody seemed to want and for which the unpaid printer's bills were so alarming that A.A. headquarters was actually visited by a deputy sheriff bearing a dispossess notice. Fortunately for everybody, however, the old *Liberty Magazine* published an article on the struggling organization and shortly thereafter John D. Rockefeller, Jr., sponsored a dinner for the organization. From that moment on A.A. was a success and so was "The Big Book."