

A.A.'s Auxiliary

Medicine Column

For 25 years Ann Smith's husband Ed gradually increased his liquor intake until he was drinking up to two fifths a day. "He was one of those alcoholics," says Ann, "who had to go to the end of the line." As Ed settled into the role of alcoholic, Ann played the alcoholic's wife: "I bathed myself in pity. I nagged. I turned the children against him. I was extremely self-righteous. I was convinced that Ed was doing this to me deliberately." Fired from his job, Ed threw a monumental drunk one Christmas season, came to in January and called Alcoholics Anonymous. Paradoxically, that was when Ann's troubles really began. Where she had formerly lost her husband to the neighborhood bar, she now lost him to A.A.

As Ed progressed through A.A.'s twelve self-improvement steps (sample: "[We] admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs") and became an enthusiastic convert, Ann found her life was losing what meaning it had held before. Playing nursemaid to a drunk had been a full-time responsibility, the focus of her existence, but Ed's new purpose all but left her out in the cold. Where once Ed had been out drinking with his cronies, now he was sitting up nights with new cronies, helping to keep them from drinking. "I was suddenly jealous of Ed," she says. "He had a cause, and he was burning with it." Soon she found herself guiltily yearning for the bad old pre-A.A. days. Then Ann was saved by joining Al-Anon, a kind of ladies' auxiliary to A.A.

"Calm as a Cow." Al-Anon has nearly 1,000 national chapters and 12,000 members. It exists because of one hard fact: the average alcoholic, apart from what he does to himself, cuts a devastating swath through his surroundings. The nation's 4,000,000 alcoholics have in one way or another impaired the lives of an estimated 20 million

nonalcoholics, most of them relatives. Al-Anon bars active alcoholics, but is open to almost anybody who might have suffered from them--wives or husbands of reformed, unreformed, or backsliding alcoholics; remote relatives and friends of alcoholics; people whose lives were indirectly upset by alcoholism, and who want the comforts of group therapy.

Whereas A.A. membership is roughly 5-to-1 male, Al-Anon finds its membership running roughly 10-to-1 female. Better than half the members join Al-Anon at an earlier stage than Ann Smith did, i.e., while they still have active alcoholic mates on their hands. One such recruit was Grace T., a schoolteacher brought in by Ann. "I've never seen anyone so close to flying apart," says Ann. "She'd had to quit teaching school; she was doing her children more harm than good. Well, now Grace has been going to my group for two years. Her husband is still drinking, harder than ever, and nobody knows it better than Grace. But I've never seen such a change in a person. She's as calm as a cow. She's told her three kids that their daddy is a sick man and not responsible for what he does, and that you love people no matter what they do--and she's sold them on it. And she's sold herself. She runs her household, she's teaching again, and she's patient. Some day, she is sure, her husband will join A.A."

"He'll Come Around." Al-Anon expects members to rush out at any hour of the day or night to bolster wavering members or shepherd its new ones. Al-Anon weekly meetings are apt to be subdued, casual affairs largely devoted to testimony about a family's condition before and after A.A. and Al-Anon.

Although Al-Anon's influence occasionally leads an alcoholic into A.A., this is incidental to its purpose. Many members deliberately conceal from their alcoholic mates that they

belong to Al-Anon. They do so in the belief that their problem is unique and should not be confused with the alcoholic problem. "You've got to take your eye off the alcoholic's problem and put it on yourself," says one group

chairman. "Don't pour his bottle down the sink. Let him drink. One day he'll come around. But in the meantime you can be helping yourself and others."

Source: *Time*, December 17, 1956, pp. 50-51