

October 1960

A Late Report from France



Title of the series of  
seventeen articles in Paris newspaper  
translates into literal English as:  
"The Newfoundland Dogs of Alcoholism."

EVERYONE at GSO was delighted to meet the distinguished author of "The Lion"—Joseph Kessel, in town to gather material for a series of articles about AA for his paper, the Parisian *France Soir*. AAs rallied 'round to take him to meetings and to points of AA interest in New York so that he could have first hand knowledge of our program. It's all very well to read pamphlets and statistics, but the communication of the heart that Bill speaks of so eloquently can best be achieved through human beings talking to one another. As a result, almost a year later, the articles are presently appearing in *France Soir*. Six are out and there will be at least six more to come.

The first article had this to say about "Jef" Kessel: "Born in the Argentine, the tenth of February 1898, of a Russian father, Joseph Kessel is one of the most distinguished French novelists and newspapermen.

"This specialist in great adventures, this bard of sky heroes (*L'Equipage*, *Mermoz*, *Le Grand Balcon*, etc.), started his career in the most academic milieu in Paris, 'Le Journal des Debats' (The Newspaper

of Trials). A born fighter, he took part as a volunteer in two world wars. In 1914 he was in the Air Force; in 1940 he joined the Free French forces. He composed the words of the famous 'Chant des Partisans' with Maurice Druon. In 1927 he received the *grand Prix du Roman* of the Academie Francaise, and last year, the Rainier III prize for his novel, 'The Lion.' Our readers will not have forgotten his fine reporting on Asiatic ruby mines, Afghan centaurs, the slums of Hong Kong, nor the more recent extraordinary story of Dr. Kersten, Hitler's masseur who snatched hundreds of thousands of victims from the crematory ovens." [Home-grown translation. Forgive any crudity!]

The first *France Soir* articles tell us of how Kessel became interested in AA. He had heard of it but thought it insignificant, similar to many rather odd sects that he had read of as peculiar to the U.S. Then he had a conversation with an old friend, a scenarist who had been working for many years in the United States. The last time they had met was in Hollywood in 1948, ten years earlier. During the conversation the

scenarist recalled a party they had both attended. He reminded Jef of a young woman present at the party who had told him that she had become an alcoholic, but was now doing well in AA. He also told him of another friend, a colleague in the same studio where he worked, who had also become an alcoholic and who was now well and happy in AA. These stories impressed Kessel so much that he determined to visit AA in the United States and learn something about it.

He was fearful, though, that he would not be able to do the sort of job he wanted to, as he knew no one in AA, and was sure that any AAs that he might meet "cold" would be standoffish and reluctant to talk about themselves to a stranger. Just at this time, Irwin Shaw, the American writer and an old friend of his, happened to be in Paris. Jef talked to him about the doubts he had concerning his ability to get a good story about AA for *France Soir*. Shaw immediately told Jef that a very close friend of *his* was in AA, also visiting

Paris. He put the two of them together and so, when Jef finally came to the United States, he was armed with an introduction to the sponsor of Irwin Shaw's friend. The chain of communication had been forged and the results—these comprehensive articles. So far, they have covered a Rhinelander Group meeting in New York City, Bill's story, the story of the AA member Jef met in Paris and a visit to the Bowery.

In Paris nearly everyone goes on vacation during the latter part of July and all of August, so the Paris Group is having its problems in handling the inquiries, but Nick is supervising the operation and Fred's secretary is working after hours to answer the letters and get out the pamphlets and books in French which GSO and Quebec City have supplied.

Will this mean the same thing to France that the *Saturday Evening Post* article meant to us here in the States? We hope so with all our hearts.

Ann M., GSO Staff Member