

October 1962

## BEFORE THEY HAD AA

*How some basic AA ideas were tried out  
nearly a century and a quarter ago ...*

### The Washingtonians:

An AA colleague recently dropped by at the *Grapevine* office to leave a tattered and watermarked volume, nearly a century old, called "*Six Nights With the Washingtonians.*" Thought we might like to look through it, he said, and see how close drunks had come to hitting on AA therapy that long before 1935. We began to read.

In the spring of 1840, the author, T. S. Arthur, relates, "there were assembled in a drinking-house in this city (Baltimore) six men, well advanced in years, who had for a long time been confirmed drunkards, so wedded to the love of strong drink as to have found it almost impossible to live without daily resort to it." Though they met accidentally, and had gone there to drink, there was, that day, "in the mind of each a strong desire to get out of his enslaved and wretched condition." They talked. "Soon the feelings of

each became known to the others, and they felt a sudden hope springing up in their minds—a hope in the power of association. Sad experience had proven to each that alone he could not stand. But together . . . they would conquer!" They organized a society, called it *The Washington Temperance Society*, and "determined that they would increase their number."

What happened to them? By an AA "coincidence" there arrived at the *Grapevine* the same week an excerpt from a scholarly treatment of "The Washingtonian Movement" written by Milton A. Maxwell, Ph.D. and published in the *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*. The Washingtonians, Dr. Maxwell points out, had certain notable features later incorporated into AA: (1) Alcoholics helping each other (2) Weekly meetings (3) Shared experience (4) Fellowship of a group or its members

constantly available (5) A reliance upon the Higher Power (6) Total abstinence from alcohol. Unfortunately, the movement eventually was torn apart in the political and doctrinal warfare associated with the temperance and abolition movements. Also, The Washingtonians lacked vitally important features of AA, among which Dr. Maxwell lists: (1) a program for personality change (2) anonymity (3) a steady flow of new ideas into the groups from outside their local memberships, and (4) avoidance of causes and controversies. Dr. Maxwell sounds a solemn warning as to the vital impor-

ance of unabated, energetic Twelfth Step work: "Whenever, and as long as, the Washingtonians were working hard at the reclamation of drunkards, they had notable success and the movement thrived and grew. This would support the idea that active outreach to other alcoholics is a factor in therapeutic success, and a necessary condition for growth—and even for survival."

The following pictures, taken from the Arthur book, are typical of 19th-century efforts to scare people sober. They indicate that old J. Barleycorn hasn't changed much in the past hundred years.



Scene 1st —THE BOTTLE IS BROUGHT OUT FOR THE FIRST TIME: THE HUSBAND INDUCES HIS WIFE "JUST TO TAKE A DROP."



Scene 2d—He is discharged from his Employment for DRUNkenness : they PAWN Their CLOTHes TO supply the BOTTLE.



Scene 4th.— Fearful Quarrels and Brutal Violence are the natural consequences of the Frequent use of the BOTTLE.



Scene 3d.—An EXECUTION sweeps off The greater PART of THEIR FURNITURE: They comfort Themselves with the bottle.



Scene 5th.—THE BOTTLE has done ITS WORK—IT has destroyed the infant and the MOTHER, IT has BROUGHT THE SON AND THE DAUGHTER to vice and to the street, AND has LEFT The father A hopeless MANIAC.