

December 1989

## Christmas by the Book



What kind of goodies do you find in your Christmas stocking? Last Christmas I found a copy of the Third Edition of the Big Book in mine. It was a gift not from any of Santa's helpers but from a sponsee — one of my helpers. Shortly before, he was telling me of a discussion in which a young woman stated that in

the early years of Alcoholics Anonymous women were not allowed membership. Whereupon he referred her to the story of a woman who had gotten sober in 1939. Like a newcomer myself, I asked him where he had learned about that woman. "In the story at the back of the Big Book, of course," he said. "The one called 'Women Suffer Too.' You know the one I mean?"

I like to imagine I know a good deal about AA and AA history but, no, I didn't know which one he meant. Now, however, after many years of reading only the basic text of the Big Book, I have finally reread the stories at the back.

And what stories they are! Here is the account of the third AA member ("Anonymous Number Three") and the first AA group in the world. Here also is the account of the beginnings of AA in Chicago. Of special interest in that story ("He Sold Himself Short") was what the author had to say about the six-step program as it was at that time:

1. Complete deflation.
2. Dependence and guidance from a Higher Power.

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*"Certainly I am powerless over alcohol, but it seems to me that the whole objective of our recovery program is to help us to tap into a power that will enable us to cope with life"*

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3. Moral Inventory.
4. Confession.
5. Restitution.
6. Continued work with other alcoholics."

We can see the still strong influence of the Oxford Groups, as well as the germination of our Twelve Step program as it exists today. In the Conference-approved *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, Bill W. outlines that same six-step program but with more elaboration. For example, the item he lists as No. 5: "We tried to help other alcoholics, with no thought of reward in money or prestige." We can clearly see our evolving Twelfth Step, as well as the seeds of our Eleventh and Twelfth Traditions.

Oh, and let's not forget the humor! In "Desperation Drinking," the

author tells of the fellow who came into AA and "his sponsor said to him, 'Listen, buddy, do you believe in a Higher Power?'" And the guy said, 'Heck, yes, I been married to her for years!'" I think that laughter (at our meetings, especially) can be more important than three squares a day — more important even than our ubiquitous *relationships!*

Or look at "Join The Tribe!" This is the story of a Maliseet Indian who got into his share of trouble with the law, with himself, and with alcohol. When he is asked by other Indians what they must do in order to find peace, his response is, "Don't be afraid to join AA. I once hear people say only Indians crazy when drunk. If so, AA full of Indians. Join the tribe!"

How easy it was to identify with the retired movie publicist ("Those Golden Years") who wallowed in self-pity as he listened to sad songs on the radio. (Can you imagine this song title — "What Made Milwaukee Famous Made a Loser Out of Me"?) It was equally easy to identify with "A Teen-Ager's Decision." My teens may be far behind me, but alcoholism leads us all down the same avenue, doesn't it, past the same bars and liquor stores, whether we're seventeen or seventy.

I read, with fascination, about the young veteran in "Unto The Second Generation." His account of his DTs — the multiplying pineapples — provided me with quick identification. The DTs as I experienced them (prac-

tically all of my fifteen drinking years) were largely auditory. It was only toward the end that I was victimized by visible herds of buffalo thundering across the plains of my Manhattan apartment and crushing me in their stampede.

And those two lines from the last paragraph of "Stars Don't Fall": "Every day, I feel a little bit more useful, more happy and more free. Life, including some ups and downs, is a lot of fun." Isn't that something! I sometimes forget that being restored to sanity in AA includes the freedom to have fun.

In reading "*Me An Alcoholic?*" I couldn't help thinking of the many times I have heard my fellow AAs talk about power as if it were a dirty word. This in spite of our Eleventh Step, in which it is suggested we pray for guidance *and* for the power to follow through. This is what the author has to say about his entry into AA: "Here I found an ingredient that had been lacking in any other effort I had made to save myself. Here was — *power!* Here was the power to live to the end of any given day, power to have the courage to face the next day, power to have friends, power to help people, power to be sane, power to stay sober." Certainly I am powerless over alcohol but it seems to me that the whole objective of our recovery program is to help us to tap into a power that will enable us to cope with life and become productive members of society.

One of the most inspiring stories

I've ever read or heard is "Jim's Story." Jim, a physician, was the founder of the first black AA group. Reading even that brief account left me with a feeling of deep personal gratitude to Jim, a man I never met: gratitude for extending the boundaries of AA and making it possible for more of God's alcoholic children to find us.

One of the few things I did remember from my long-ago reading of the stories was "Dr. Bob's Nightmare." There is one line in particular in that story that some of us have managed to muddle over the years. How often have you heard it said (usually with authority) that AA is not for those who need it but for those who want it? The way Dr. Bob put it was very different. He said, "I spend a great deal of time passing on what I learned to others *who want and need it badly.*" (Italics mine.)

For anyone who has not read the stories lately, let me recommend them. For anyone who has not seen the Third Edition yet, let me suggest you give yourself a treat. There are several new stories, all of them full of promise and hope and lots of simple, straightforward talk. Here, for example, is the first paragraph of the final story, "AA Taught Him to Handle Sobriety": "When I had been in AA only a short while, an old-timer told me something that has affected my life ever since. 'AA does not teach us how to handle our drinking,' he said. 'It teaches us how to handle sobriety.'"

*W.H.. New York, N.Y.*