



For Man's Pursuit of Maturity

THE NEW BIG BOOK

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS. *Second edition, revised.* 612 pages. AA Publishing, Inc. Reviewed here by an AA who is, among other things, a professional book critic. Price to be set by the General Service Conference, June 1955.

THIS book is so full of wisdom; each of its stories is so dead on the target, that *Alcoholics Anonymous* should be left on the alcoholic's night-table for continuous reference, for active and unexpected support, for the comfort of sudden insight, the re-inforcement of forgotten incident, the reminder of chagrin, of hysteria, wreckage, betrayal, and loneliness that can be described only as outer-spatial.

We were all there, many of us for years, and these re-visits in their multitude on the one hand and their merciful objectivity on the other—now that we are calmly passing the cage instead of whimpering on its floor—are the most moving and powerful paragraphs of our past that we can encounter in the days of our sobriety. This is an album of our own individual past, in all its grotesquerie, its homicidal ebullience, its sophomoric idiocy, its abuse and obscenity, its marathon

emptiness of talk, its gulping fantasy. It is a good thing for us to traverse this rutted acreage once more; this pitted pot-hole promenade. It's an important refresher-course in our unbroken need — not for glimpses of what we were and where we went—but for hard cold steady-eyed explorations of it; deliberate returns to it; continuous meditations upon it.

Reading the new book, as with reading the old, is part of our life and of our continuing education in continuing self-discovery. We can't stay sober without thinking about being sober; thinking actively and purposefully about it. The editorial selection of new material is especially commendable. Here, indeed, is a *tour-de-force* of today's miracle, one bravura story after another, all familiar yet all unendingly new, each one providing its special and deeply personal increment to the full treasure of what is without any doubt the richest story

in print of human salvage out of the jaws of human degradation and spiritual catastrophe; of last-minute rescue at the edge of insanity; of total recovery from total insanity.

The fascination of the dilemma of obsession in the known and acknowledged presence of abhorrence seizes the reader's imagination all over again. And it seizes his remembrance too, for all the known antidotes come back in these pages to straighten our sights, refortify our nerve, and re-emphasize the importance of one of AA's basics: the constant thought of others. It's a joy and a sudden challenge too, to re-encounter the blunt question: "Why don't you choose your own conception of God?"

Who can quarrel with propositions so basically sporting as this? What arrested alcoholic can hold back a slight shudder when he reads this once more: "If you want to test yourself, go to a bar and do a little controlled drinking. Drink, then stop."

It is stabilizing and reassuring to go over, in careful but compassionate prose, the description of the mental states that precede a relapse; to be re-impressed with the sameness of the distortion that afflicts the alcoholic and the insane; to behold once again the great resource for rationalizing that both share. It is good for us all to be warned again: that there is no safety in a long sobriety; that patterns of susceptibility are as set as blood types; that the disease is progressive, whether we're drinking or not drinking.

The meditations on the problem of agnosticism become more illuminating as the years pass; acquire more meaning and a greater sympathy with the pragmatic challenges which the serious agnostic puts up to the face of Faith. If the sincere agnostic—and there are millions—can find a safe sobriety while denying the existence of God, surely he cannot read these pages in *Alcoholics Anonymous* without feeling a sudden dispersion of the pressures of his own life; a lessening of his built-in prejudices; a falling away of antagonisms. "We've stopped fighting anybody or anything. We have to."

"Who are you to say there is no God?" Newcomers to AA (there are 6,000 groups of us now) can have a disturbing time—old-timers an amusing one—in going over the list of methods we alcoholics use (or used to use) to prove we weren't alcoholics. Do you remember them? Beer only? Never more than two drinks? (or three or four?) Never to drink alone? To drink only at home? To drink only at parties and never at home? Never to drink in the morning? Never to keep liquor in the house? Switching from Scotch to brandy? (a gruesome lateral, as this reviewer can testify) Taking a trip? Agreeing to resign if caught drunk? More exercise? Changing towns? Going to health farms? Committing ourselves to the loony-roost?

We had fun playing this game, didn't we? With no defense against the first drink, with our power of choice lost for all time. The book's explanation as to how so many alco-

holics can go on and on for long periods of time—even for years—though drinking hard, is as simple as it is penetrating: the will, unable to combat liquor, can remain strong in other respects.

As AA gets older, it is also getting younger and younger. For those just coming in, or thinking about sampling what it is that we have, the diagram for sensible living that is laid down in these pages; the testimony of those whose eloquent first-person narratives of the unbelievable wreckage they have survived is here given; the strange but visible phenomenon of our interdependence — as alcoholics — for

our continued serenity; the promise of a safe return to it after the occasional departure: this is our diagram.

If, when drinking, we are "extreme examples of self-will run riot," when not drinking we're pretty useful and fairly good company. We derive our strength from each other, in the group. And from a higher power, by whatever name. Where it comes from, none of us entirely knows. But how to find it is told, in rich detail by many who have been all the way there and come all the way back, in the new edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

M.W., New York City

SOME FACTS ABOUT THE NEW BIG BOOK

- The new edition has 612 pages, as against 400 pages in the old. In terms of cost it is the best non-fiction buy in the country. No other commercial publisher in America could match the book, in size and format alone, at its retail price.
- The edition you own now runs to 100,000 words; the edition just off the press is 168,869.
- The old edition contained 29 stories, about 1,800 words each; the new edition has 37—24 of them brand new—and all of them running to twice the length (or about 3,300 words) of the earlier work. The new stories are more detailed and explicit, more revealing, and of more useful contrast and variety.
- The geographical spread, in the new book, is far greater: 15 cities, 10 states, two foreign countries.
- The vocational range is immense:

buyer, industrial executive, surgeon, banker, writer, educator, soldier, insurance agent, advertising executive, furniture dealer, stock farmer, beautician, charwoman, truck driver, insurance investigator, salesman, real estate agent, promoter, accountant, sculptor, journalist, upholsterer, organizational executive, patent expert, lawyer, doctor, and housewife. The most numerous in this list is the housewife—with six stories.

- There are 110,000 words of absolutely new material, yet the practical, therapeutical, and expository first 175 pages of the original work are here **intact**. These pages have already gone into the American legend as the "greatest redemptive force of the twentieth century." And these pages will remain there, through the full history of man's pursuit of maturity.