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His Conscience

This is the tenth in an intermittent series of personal stories which first appeared at the back of the first and second editions of the Big Book, **Alcoholics Anonymous**, but were later dropped from the third edition.

By presenting this story from the second edition, the Grapevine is happy to offer newcomers a chance to meet — in print — some of the Fellowship's early members.



How was I to know that I was an alcoholic? No one ever told me that I was or even hinted that I had passed the point of no return.

Some years ago my thinking was that alcoholics just did not live in my world. Yes, I had seen them on my infrequent visits to the seamy side of town. I had been panhandled by them in almost every city in Canada. In my estimation an alcoholic was a down-and-out, a badly dressed bum who much preferred drinking to working.

If I had been asked I would have said that I did not even know an alcoholic. As for being one, it was the very farthest
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thing from my mind. I would have bitterly resented any such suggestion. Besides, I thought that any alcoholic was a misfit with a mental quirk of some kind. It was my opinion that they were all introverts and on tests I had twice been classified as an extrovert.

Certainly I did not know that alcoholism was an illness. Furthermore, I had no idea that it was a progressive illness.

I come from a family of five children and I had a very happy childhood in a small Canadian town. Both my mother and father were religious, without overemphasizing it. In due time, I went through grade and high school and entered college as a little better than average student.

The First War had broken out before I got around to taking my first drink. I

joined the Army fairly early in that war.

Oddly enough, I drank very little while in the service for the very good reason that every time I took a drink something disagreeable happened to me. My first drink was scotch undiluted. It put me temporarily out of business through strangulation. The second drink made me sick at my stomach. After the third trial I went to sleep in the summer sun and was painfully sunburned. In France I gave away my rum ration far more often than I drank it.

With the War half over I was sent back to Canada for my discharge from wounds and shock. During the period of waiting for my final papers, along with friends, I spent a good deal of time in a neighboring speakeasy enjoying a few social drinks.

Out of the Army, my drinking dropped away to a drink or two on very special occasions, two or three times a year. So it went for the next ten years, no pattern, no problem.

Toward the end of the twenties the company by which I was employed went through a merger. I was given a more responsible position which entailed a great deal of travelling from coast to coast. I found that a few drinks with agreeable companions, in sleeping cars or hotels, helped while away the time. Frankly, I preferred the company of those who took a drink or two to those who did not.

For the next few years I had a lot of fun with alcohol. I liked the taste of it; I liked the effect of it. I conducted myself properly and no harm came of it. Without realizing it, I came to look for-

ward to several drinks before dinner and then to some during the evening. I gradually developed into a heavy drinker with the result that I didn't feel so well in the mornings.

I would like to make it clear at this point that neither business pressure nor added responsibility had anything to do with my drinking. I had the capacity for handling business without any fear of criticism. I enjoyed the companionship of drinking friends, but I began to notice that there was this difference between us; they were still satisfied with one or two drinks, but alcohol was having a different effect on me. My system seemed to need more alcohol than theirs. In retrospect, my only conclusion is that at that time I was becoming more physically sensitive to and losing my tolerance for alcohol.

But obviously my illness was progressing because it wasn't very long until I started experiencing blackouts. There were times when I would lose my car. At this distance it seems funny, but in those days it was a serious business. With some serious drinking in mind, I would take great care to park my car in some inconspicuous space, some distance from where I intended to do this drinking. After several hours, I would return only to find that it wasn't there. At least it wasn't where I thought I had left it. Then I would start walking up blocks one way and down blocks the other way until I would finally locate it, usually in an entirely different direction than where I was sure I had parked it. On these occasions, I would always end up with a feeling of remorse not far re-

moved from a loathing of myself and the condition I was in. And, of course, I was always terribly afraid of being seen by someone who knew me.

It wasn't long until travelling even by train became a hazard. I could somehow manage to catch a train, but all too often it was not the train which I intended to catch. Sometimes it would be going in the wrong direction, and I would end up in a town or city where I had no intention of being and, therefore, had no business to transact.

Having blackouts also meant that I couldn't clearly remember all of what had transpired the night before, and then it was only a short step to not being able to remember any of it. This became very embarrassing to me. I began to avoid discussing the happenings of the night before. In fact, I no longer wanted to talk about my drinking. I took to drinking alone.

Up to this point, my rise in the business world had been steady. I had become vice-president of the Canadian end of a large company known the world over. Now I found myself delaying making decisions, putting off appointments because my eyes were bloodshot and I didn't feel so well. It was difficult for me to concentrate and even to follow closely a business conversation.

Time and time again I went on the wagon; I said I was through with drink, and at the time actually meant what I said. The end result was always the same. Sooner or later, I started in all over again and binges came closer and closer together.

From time to time friends and rela-



tives spoke to me about my drinking. My wife and family asked me to control it, to pull myself together, to use my will power, to drink like a gentleman. I made dozens of promises and at the time of making them, I sincerely meant to keep every one. I became two different people, one person when I was sober and an entirely different one when I was drinking.

I discovered the morning drink and soon it took two, three or four to straighten me out. I had the shakes so badly that shaving became a task that I feared and dreaded because my hand was so unsteady. I discovered that the shakes came only when I allowed the alcoholic content of my system to drop too low. All too often when I brought it up with some stiffjolts, I went into a blackout. Striking an even balance seemed beyond my power.

I will never forget the first time I became conscious of that overpowering compulsion. No matter what happened—I simply had to have a drink.

This compulsion soon became part of my make-up.

One Monday morning when the compulsion was on me, I met an old drinking friend. Our meeting was generally the signal for a bender of some proportions. I always thought that he was the one who should watch his drinking habits—not me. On this particular morning, he was clear-eyed and sober, truly a minor miracle for Monday. He looked well and he looked happy. He said he felt fine and that he had stopped drinking. I asked him whether he had got religion. He said no, but that he had joined AA. That was the first time I had ever heard of such an organization. Since he couldn't produce a drink, I went on my way and forgot about it.

From this time on, my drinking progressed rapidly. My family life deteriorated. My friends no longer wanted to drink with me. Business trips always became benders. One bender ended by starting another. I discovered that the conscience was the only part of a human

being that was soluble in alcohol. I lied about my drinking. I lied about everything else—even things that didn't matter. I thought that everyone was watching me.

The company for which I worked told me politely but firmly that, unless I controlled my drinking, we would have to part. I promised to do better and mend my ways. I was drunk within the hour. Two months later I appeared drunk at a meeting and the next day I was on my own.

I promptly went on the wagon, got another good position and stayed sober for a year. Although this new position offered many opportunities, I did not take advantage of them. I'm sure that this was because I found out that being on the wagon was the most miserable of all existences. I was moody and irritable. My mind was never at rest. I imagined all sorts of things. I worried about the past and I could see no hope for the future. On occasions, I attended parties where there was some drinking and

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good natured fun. I hated every minute of it because I just could not join in with this fun. I sat morosely by myself, wondering how soon the endless evening would be over. In short, I was just plain sorry for myself. After several evenings like this, I did everything I could to avoid social engagements and felt more lonely than ever before. I had lost the art of being friendly. The people I had liked best irritated me most.

At the end of the year I fell off the wagon, promising myself that I would stop after just a drink or two. Within two weeks I was drinking harder than I ever had before. The only way I knew to drive away remorse was to drink more and more.

After nine months of mental suffering and physical torture, I sat at home one night alone with a bottle beside me. I had been drinking hard all day, but no matter how much I drank the shakes did not even diminish. My mind was clear, but the bottle on which I depended did

not do anything for me. My way of life passed before me as on a screen. I saw how I had slipped and how rapidly I was deteriorating. The cure of the bottle on which I had grown to depend no longer worked. I broke out in a cold sweat. I was without hope. I could not stop drinking. The ceiling came down. The walls pressed in. The floor came up. I could think of no answer. There seemed no way out. Was it too late?

There just wasn't any use of taking another drink; even that didn't help. Then across my mind came the picture of my drinking friend whom I had met three years before—clear-eyed and sober. Then and there I decided to try AA. I put the bottle away.

Next morning, I made my first contact with AA. I was asked some questions, one of which was, "Do you turn to lower companionship and inferior environment while drinking?" Ashamed, I felt as if they had been reading my mail. This, and other questions, convinced me that here were people who understood my problem.

One thing my AA friend said to me that morning was, "Today could be the most important day in your life." It was and still is, for nothing but good has come to me through AA.

After admitting and accepting the fact that I was powerless over alcohol, my first great feeling of relief was that I was no longer alone. I was in a Fellowship of people who had the same problem that I had; indeed, most of them had been very much worse off than I.

Having enjoyed good companionship for many years, my loneliness near the

end of my drinking had become a real hell to me, but this new fellowship of understanding people gave me new life and new strength. I now realize that an alcoholic cannot get along alone, any more than anyone else can. I, like all men, was a social being who desperately needed fellowship and acceptance. These I found in AA where hands were reached out to me. I was not condemned. On the contrary, I was greatly encouraged by these people who spoke my language and, what was so important, offered me hope.

When I became a member of AA, I immediately went to the president of the company for which I worked and told him about it. His hearty handshake and unmistakable look of approval were all that passed between us. That was enough. I knew I was on my way up again—as long as I remembered to stay away from the first drink.

As sober days passed into sober weeks, I was soon back in the confidence of men who once again respected my judgment in business. I no longer had any fear of interviews with fellow executives because my eyes were clear and my hand was steady. My home life improved and today it is happier than ever before.

Certainly, I still have my ups and downs in my new life without alcohol, but during my years in AA, I have been and am continually learning to accept the things I cannot change, being given courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

How has all this happened to me? I have already mentioned how important

was this newfound fellowship, but I am sure there is more to it than that alone. Right from the start of my attending AA meetings, I heard various speakers give all credit to a Power greater than themselves. One morning as I was walking to work, from seemingly nowhere at all, there came a thought that there was a possibility that I might never drink again. I have had no desire to drink since that time. It was certainly nothing that I myself could have done that brought this newfound peace. There was only one answer. This Power greater than myself had, as to so many others, restored me to sanity.

Finally, let me say that I am sure that I could not have in the past seven years, nor can I in the future, enjoy my happy and contented sobriety unless I try to share it with others. Therefore, my earnest hope in relating my experience here is that it will help someone, anyone with a drinking problem, but particularly that person who may still be hanging on to his job or business, or may still be holding his home together.

It has often occurred to me that, if I had been a baseball player and had lost an arm, I would soon have reconciled myself to the fact that I could no longer play baseball. Similarly, with the great help of this Fellowship, I have reconciled myself to the fact that I can no longer handle alcohol even to the extent of taking a single drink.

AA has given me a happy and contented way of living, and I am very deeply grateful to the founders and early members of AA who plotted the course and who kept the faith.