

July 1966

In
Memory of

HARRY

by Bill



Harry M. Tiebout, M.D.

BY the time this issue of the Grapevine reaches its readers, the whole world of AA will have heard of the passing of our well-beloved friend, Dr. Harry M. Tiebout, the first psychiatrist ever to hold up the hands of our Fellowship for all to see. His gifts of courageous example, deep perception of our needs, and constant labor in our behalf have been — and always will be — values quite beyond our reckoning.

It began like this: The year was early 1939, and the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, was about to hit the press. To help with the final edit of that volume we had made prepublication copies in multigraph form. One of them fell into Harry's hands. Though much of the content was then alien to his own views, he read our up-coming book with deep interest. Far more significantly, he at once resolved to show the new volume to a couple of his patients, since known to us as "Marty" and "Grenny." These were the toughest

kind of customers, and seemingly hopeless.

At first, the book made little impression on this pair. Indeed, its heavy larding with the word "God," so angered Marty that she threw it out her window, flounced off the grounds of the swank sanitarium where she was, and proceeded to tie on a big bender.

Grenny didn't carry a rebellion quite so far; he played it cool.

When Marty finally turned up, shaking badly, and asked Dr. Harry what next to do, he simply grinned and said, "You'd better read that book again!" Back in her quarters, Marty finally brought herself to leaf through its pages once more. A single phrase caught her eye and it read, "We cannot live with resentment." The moment she admitted this to herself, she was filled with a "transforming spiritual experience."

Forthwith she attended a meeting. It was at Clinton Street, Brooklyn, where Lois and I lived. Returning to "Blythewood" she found Grenny intensely curious. Her first words to him were these: "Grenny, we are not alone any more!"

This was the beginning of recovery for both — recoveries that have lasted until this day. Watching their unfoldment, Harry was electrified. Only a week before they had both presented stone walls of obstinate resistance to his every approach. Now they talked, and freely. To Harry these were the facts —

and brand new facts. Scientist and man of courage that he was, Harry did not for a moment look the other way. Setting aside his own convictions about alcoholism and its neurotic manifestations, he soon became convinced that AA had something, perhaps something big.

All the years afterwards, and often at very considerable risk to his professional standing, Harry continued to endorse AA. Considering Harry's professional standing, this required courage of the highest order.

Let me share some concrete examples. In one of his early medical papers — that noted one on "Surrender"* — he had declared this ego-reducing practice to be not only basic to AA, but also absolutely fundamental to his own practice of psychiatry. This took humility as well as fortitude. It will always be a bright example for us all.

Nevertheless this much was but a bare beginning. In 1944, helped by Dr. Kirby Collier of Rochester and Dwight Anderson of New York, Harry had persuaded the American Medical Society of the State of New York to let me, a layman, read a paper about AA, at their annual gathering. Five years later this same trio, again spearheaded by Harry, persuaded the American Psychiatric Association

* Reprinted from the "Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol," Dec., 1954, pp. 610-621, available from the National Council on Alcoholism.

to invite the reading of another paper by me — this time in their 1949 Annual Meeting at Montreal. By then, AA had about 100,000 members, and many psychiatrists had already seen at close range our impact on their patients.

For us of AA who were present at that gathering it was a breath-taking hour. My presentation would be "the spiritual experience," as we AAs understood it. Surely we could never get away with this! To our astonishment the paper was extremely well received — judging, at least, from the sustained applause.

Immediately afterwards, I was approached by a most distinguished old gentleman. He introduced himself as an early president of the American Psychiatric Association. Beaming he said, "Mr. W., it is very possible that I am the only one of my colleagues here today who really believes in 'spiritual experience' as you do. Once upon a time, I myself had an awakening much akin to your own, an experience that I shared in common with two close friends, Bucke and Whitman."

Naturally I inquired, "But why did your colleagues seem to like the paper?"

His reply went like this: "You see, we psychiatrists deeply know what very difficult people you alcoholics really are. It was not the claims of your paper that stirred my friends, it was the fact that AA can sober up alcoholics wholesale."

Seen in this light, I was the more deeply moved by the generous and magnificent tribute that had been paid to us of AA. My paper was soon published in the American Psychiatric Journal and our New York headquarters was authorized by the Association to make all the reprints we wished for distribution.* By then the trek of AA overseas had well begun. Heaven only knows what this invaluable reprint accomplished when it was presented to psychiatrists in distant places by the fledgling AA groups. It vastly hastened the worldwide acceptance of AA.

I could go on and on about Harry, telling you of his activities in the general field of alcoholism, of his signal service on our AA Board of Trustees. I could tell stories of my own delightful friendship with him, especially remembering his great good humor and infectious laugh. But the space allotted me is too limited.

So in conclusion, I would have Harry speak for himself. Our AA Grapevine of November, 1963, carried a piece by him that, between its lines, unconsciously reveals to us a wonderful self portrait of our friend. Again, we feel his fine perception, again we see him at work for AA. No epitaph could be better than this.

* Excerpts from this talk are contained in *Alcoholism The Illness*, by Bill W., a pamphlet available from AA World Services.