

August 1957

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August...today...

God grant me the SERENITY TO ACCEPT
the things I cannot change,

COURAGE TO CHANGE the things I can,
and WISDOM TO KNOW the difference.

Let's
Be
Friendly

With
Our
Friend

Second in a Series
by Bill W.

... THE PHYSICIANS

ON TELEVISION RECENTLY, I watched as the American Medical Association in convention installed its new president. At first thinking it might be a routine affair, I nearly switched to a "whodunit." I'm now very glad that I did not, for those doctors gave me a most memorable and moving hour.

Up got the new president to make his inauguration address. He said little of the science of medicine. To my surprise he pointed his talk—just as we often do in AA meetings—straight at the newcomers, in this case the young doctors just entering practice. He told them that no doctor, however well-trained scientifically, could get far until he was able to make sick people feel that he understood them as human beings; and that

every real doctor had to be possessed of the deepest dedication and faith. Such was his theme, and how he did go to town with it. He certainly "carried the message" and I saw as seldom before that we AAs certainly have no monopoly on the practice of "Step Twelve."

Several citations for distinguished service were given, one of them to a layman for his outstanding work among the nation's infirm and disabled. He had proven to thousands of sufferers that they need no longer be emotionally or spiritually crippled and that some sort of useful and gainful work could always be theirs. Pointing out that self-pity is a prevalent ailment of the crippled, he quoted the Persian who had no shoes: "I wept because I had no shoes until I saw a man who had no feet!" The beaming man behind the lectern knew whereof he spoke, for *he* himself had no legs; he had been on artificial limbs for years. Clearly dedication, fortitude and faith had been his reliances. It was for these things that the AMA had given him such a signal recognition.

This gathering of the doctors, so spiritually centered, set me thinking. I keenly realized that doctoring is mainly a spiritual vocation and that the vast majority of physicians really join the profession to serve their fellowmen.

We AAs are apt to set a "triple A" rating on ourselves and our Fellowship. But when the names of

certain doctors come to mind, doctors who devoted themselves to us in our pioneering time, I wonder how many of us could really match their humility and their dedication.

Take my own doctor, William D. Silkworth. In our forthcoming history book, *AA Comes of Age*, I have drawn a word portrait of him which runs in part as follows:

"As we looked back over those early scenes in New York, we saw often in the midst of them the benign little doctor who loved drunks, William Duncan Silkworth, then physician-in-chief of the Charles B. Towns Hospital in New York, and the man who we now realize was very much a founder of AA. From him we learned the nature of our illness. And he supplied us with the tools with which to puncture the toughest alcoholic ego, those shattering phrases by which he described our illness: *the obsession of the mind* that compels us to drink and *the allergy of the body* that condemns us to go mad or die. Without these indispensable passwords, AA could never have worked. Dr. Silkworth taught us how to till the black soil of hopelessness, out of which every single spiritual awakening in our fellowship has since flowered. In December 1934 this man of science had sat humbly by my bed following my own sudden and overwhelming spiritual experience, reassuring me: 'No, Bill,' he had said, 'you are not hallucinating. Whatever you have

got, you had better hang on to; it is so much better than what you had only an hour ago.' These were great words for the AA to come! Who else could have said them?

"When I wanted to go to work with alcoholics, he led me to them right there in his hospital, risking his professional reputation.

"After six months of failure on my part to dry up any drunks, Dr. Silkworth again reminded me of Professor William James' observation that truly transforming spiritual experiences are nearly always founded on calamity and collapse. 'Stop preaching at them,' Dr. Silkworth had said, 'and give them the hard medical facts first. This may soften them up at depth so that they will be willing to *do anything* to get well. Then they may accept those moral psychology ideas of yours, and even a higher Power.'

"Four years later, Dr. Silkworth had helped to convert Mr. Charles B. Towns, the hospital's owner, into a great AA enthusiast and had encouraged him to loan \$2,500 to start preparation of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*—a sum, by the way, which later amounted to over \$4,000. Then as our only medical friend at the time, the good doctor boldly wrote the Introduction to our book, where it remains to this day and where we intend to keep it always.

"Perhaps no physician will ever give so much devoted attention to so many alcoholics as did Dr. Silk-

worth. It is estimated that in his lifetime he saw an amazing forty thousand of them. In the years before his death in 1951, in close cooperation with AA and our red-headed power-house nurse, Teddy, he had ministered to nearly 10,000 alcoholics at New York's Knickerbocker Hospital alone. None of those he treated will ever forget the experience, and the majority of them are sober today."

So Dr. Silkworth "twelfth-stepped" forty thousand alcoholics. Thousands of these he patiently treated long before AA when the chance for recovery was slim. But he always had faith that one day a way out would be found. He never tired of drunks and their problems. A frail man, he never complained of fatigue. During most of his career he made only a bare living. He never sought distinction; his work was his reward. In his last years he ignored a heart condition and he died on the job—right among us drunks, and with his boots on.

Who of us in AA can match this record of Dr. Silkworth's? Who has his measure of fortitude, faith and dedication?

So when—twenty-three years after Dr. Silkworth had treated me for the last time—I saw and heard and felt the spirit that was abroad in that great AMA meeting, I thanked God for the doctors, one of the finest groups of friends that AA can ever have.