

July 1963

My name is

MELVIN

*and I found the Big Book**"out on the hill with those crazy people"*

MY home town in Nebraska has a place on the northeast side which local people refer to as "out on the Hill." It is the state hospital. As boys, we considered it great sport to ride out there on our bicycles, often hooting derisive comments while racing past shuffling groups of patients, who stared at us oddly or grinned in what we thought was the weird manner of "crazy people." We no doubt felt we were taking great risks in daring to venture upon the premises at all.

This may have happened once or twice during the summer of 1935, when I was nine years old. I was too young to know that the people we taunted were mentally ill, and of course I did not perceive that a variation of mental illness would someday bring me to the same place. And, like

thousands more, I could not possibly have known that my own future redemption was being carefully worked out that same summer by a couple of strangers in Akron, Ohio.

Fifteen years later, the world had changed radically and so had I. I had joined the ambling groups of patients "out on the Hill." I was only twenty-four, but my past life was so disorderly I could hardly bear to look at it. I had been a high school "drop-out." I had made false starts on a dozen or more jobs. The previous year, the Army had turned me loose in New Brunswick, N.J., with an undesirable discharge, and I had lost even that dubious certificate as a result of being rolled in a drunken stupor. I had no confidence, no known goals, no firm principles and hardly any friends. I knew nobody

who had become so complete a failure in such a short time.

At this point I was almost without hope. I feared that frequent and long commitments to state hospitals would now become part of my life also, as had other troubles. But what really disturbed me was the realization that I no longer had control over my own life. I hated the life I was

ings before, but without really accepting the idea that alcoholism is a permanent kind of disease which a person is stuck with for the rest of his life. But now I had a different attitude, and the book began to make a great deal of sense to me. I studied it almost every day, and fought a savage battle with myself every time I started to rebel against some of its



leading, but, to my despair, I perceived that I didn't have the power to change it. Despite my determination and resolutions, I always seemed to drink again. One evening early in my hospital stay I became so despondent that I actually believed I had finally made a firm decision to kill myself, something I had often considered during previous periods of depression.

But some remarkable things were about to happen. A day or two following this dark night I found a stray copy of "Alcoholics Anonymous" while picking through a pile of books on the ward. I had gone to AA meet-

suggestions. It was fortunate, I believe, that AA urged only "willingness" instead of "action" on some of the tougher parts of the program, for I was scarcely capable of decisive action.

I began attending AA meetings, first at the hospital and then in town. At some point during the next seven weeks I suddenly came to the breathtaking realization that I never had to drink again if I didn't want to. It was almost unbelievable that such a contrast of feelings could have occurred in the same person during a hospital stay of less than two months. But it must have been the beginning of a

true spiritual awakening, for I haven't had a drink since and my life has improved steadily.

I believe that AA members were then somewhat more skeptical about the prospects of younger alcoholics than they are today. "You've got a tough fight ahead of you," an older member said to me, shaking his head slightly. "You'll sure be lucky if you get the program at your age," other hoary-headed members remarked, but in a manner that plainly revealed their strong doubts. And one elderly member, who never in his life lost a job or reached a moment of suicidal despair or was ejected from the Army in disgrace, patted me on the shoulder and said he was glad that I would avoid all the suffering he had endured.

All of these well-intended remarks served a good purpose, for they made me acutely aware of the fact that I *was* different from most of the other AA members. I was far more unstable, and my emotional development had been so retarded that I hadn't even acquired the simple social skills that other people largely take for granted. "Mel has to learn everything," one of my friends was to say a few years later, and he was

quite right. And even at that late date, he was making such a remark to excuse crude behavior that I hadn't as yet corrected.

So pain and humiliation continued long after my last drink, but this was the pain and humiliation of the growing-up process. It eventually brought the pleasure of achievement, and as I look back over the road I've traveled in the past thirteen years, I wonder if enough people realize what marvelous changes can be made in a human life as a result of following the AA program. I am absolutely certain that "with God, all things are possible."

Today I live in a central Michigan city with my wife and two young boys, and I am almost thirty-eight. Almost every year for the past twelve years I've returned to Nebraska to visit my old home town and the cluster of AA friends who carried this message "out to the Hill." I consider it a great and humbling experience to drive out there in my car, past the shuffling groups of patients whom I came to know so well since first meeting them twenty-eight years ago.

We understand one another better today. *M.D.B., Jackson, Mich.*