

June 1991



Fragments of AA History

It was a Saturday in May 1935. An ill-starred business venture had brought me to Akron where it immediately collapsed, leaving me in a precarious state of sobriety. That afternoon I paced the lobby of Akron's Mayflower Hotel. As I peered at the gathering crowd in the bar, I became desperately frightened of a slip. It was the first severe temptation since my New York friend had laid before me what were to become the basic principles of AA, in November 1934. For the next six months I had felt utterly secure in my sobriety. But now there was no security; I felt alone, helpless. In the months before I had worked hard with other alcoholics. Or, rather, I had preached at them in a somewhat cocksure fashion. In my false assurance I felt I couldn't fall. But this time it was different. Something had to be done at once.

Glancing at a church directory at the far end of the lobby, I selected the name of a clergyman at random. Over the phone I told him of my need to work with another alcoholic. Though

I'd had no previous success with any of them I suddenly realized how such work had kept me free from desire.



The clergyman gave me a list of ten names. Some of these people, he was sure, would refer me a case in need of help. Almost running to my room, I

seized the phone. But my enthusiasm soon ebbed. Not a person in the first nine called could, or would, suggest anything to meet my urgency.

One uncalled name still stood at the head of my list — Henrietta Seiberling. Somehow I couldn't muster courage to lift the phone. But after one more look into the bar downstairs something said to me, "You'd better." To my astonishment a warm Southern voice floated in over the wire. Declaring herself no alcoholic, Henrietta nonetheless insisted that she understood. Would I come to her home at once?

Because she had been enabled to face and transcend other calamities, she certainly did understand mine. She was to become a vital link to those fantastic events which were presently to gather around the birth and development of our AA Society. Of all names the obliging rector had given me, she was the only one who cared enough. I would here like to record our timeless gratitude.

Straightaway, she pictured the plight of Dr. Bob and Anne. Suiting action to her word, she called their house. As Anne answered, Henrietta described me as a sobered alcoholic from New York who, she felt sure, could help Bob. The good doctor had seemingly exhausted all medical and spiritual remedies for his condition. Then Anne replied, "What you say, Henrietta, is terribly interesting. But I am afraid we can't do anything now. Being Mother's Day, my dear boy has just brought in a fine potted plant.

The pot is on the table but, alas, Bob is on the floor. Could we try to make it tomorrow?" Henrietta instantly issued a dinner invitation for the following day.

At five o'clock next afternoon, Anne and Dr. Bob stood at Henrietta's door. She discreetly whisked Bob and me off to the library. His words were, "Mighty glad to meet you, Bill. But it happens I can't stay long; five or ten minutes at the outside." I laughed and observed, "Guess you're pretty thirsty, aren't you?" His rejoinder was, "Well, maybe you *do* understand this drinking business after all." So began a talk which lasted hours.

How different my attitude was this time. My fright of getting drunk had evoked a much more becoming humility. After telling Dr. Bob my story, I explained how truly I needed him. Would he allow me to help him, I might remain sober myself. The seed that was to flower as Alcoholics Anonymous began to grow toward the light. But as dear Anne well guessed, that first tendril was a fragile thing. Practical steps had better be taken. She bade me come and live at their menage for a while. There I might keep an eye on Dr. Bob. And he might on me. This was the very thing. Perhaps we could do together what we couldn't do separately. Besides I might revive my sagging business venture.

For the next three months I lived with these two wonderful people. I shall always believe they gave me more than I ever brought them. Each

morning there was devotion. After the long silence Anne would read out of the good book. James was our favorite. Reading him from her chair in the corner, she would softly conclude "Faith without works is dead."

But Dr. Bob's travail with alcohol was not quite over. That Atlantic City Medical Convention had to be attended. He hadn't missed one in twenty years. Anxiously waiting, Anne and I heard nothing for five days. Finally his office nurse and her husband found him early one morning at the Akron railroad station in some confusion and disarray — which puts it mildly. A horrible dilemma developed. Dr. Bob had to perform a critical surgical operation just three days hence. Nor could an associate substitute for him. He simply had to do it. But how? Could we ever get him ready in time?

He and I were placed in twin beds. A typical tapering down process was inaugurated. Not much sleep for anybody, but he cooperated. At four o'clock on the morning of the operation he turned, looked at me, and said. "I am going through with this." I inquired, "You mean you are going through with the operation?" He replied, "I have placed both the operation and myself in God's hands. I'm going to do what it takes to get sober and stay that way." Not another word did he say. At nine o'clock he shook miserably as we helped him into his clothes. We were panic stricken. Could he ever do it? Were he too tight or too shaky, it would make little difference, his misguided scalpel might take the life of his patient. We gambled. I gave him one bottle of beer. That was the last drink he ever took. It was June 10, 1935. The patient lived.

This excerpt was taken from an article written by Bill W. in the January 1951 Grapevine, an issue devoted to the memory of Dr. Bob. It was later reprinted in the book, "The Language of the Heart" (page 354). The photos are courtesy of the AA Archives.

