

September 1950

EDITORIAL

AA has had a significant summer, an historic one in fact. We flexed our muscles a bit at Cleveland, pausing to admire ourselves as 'a big international movement'. Now it's September. Each Fall has meant more drunks pounding on our door. Our large membership may be impressive — to us. But AA will never be any bigger than one drunk helping another. So — Easy Does It — the drunks are coming — one at a time!



WE COME OF AGE

By Bill

Cleveland July 28-30, 1950

ON AAs 15th Anniversary everybody knew that we had grown up. There couldn't be any doubt about it. Members, families and friends — seven thousand of them — spent three inspiring, almost awesome days with our good hosts at Cleveland.

The theme song of our Conference was gratitude; its keynote was the sure realization that we are now welded as one, the world over.

As never before, we dedicated ourselves to the single purpose of carrying good news of AA to those millions who still don't know. And, as we affirmed the Tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous, we asked that we might remain in perfect unity under the Grace of God for so long as he may need us.

Just what did we do? Well, we had meetings, lots of them. The medical meeting, for instance. Our

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first and great friend Dr. Silkworth couldn't get there. But his associate at Knickerbocker Hospital, New York, Dr. Meyer Texon, most ably filled the gap, telling how best the general hospital could relate itself to us. He clinched his points by a careful description how, during the past four years at Knickerbocker, 5000 drunks had been sponsored, processed and turned loose in AA; and this to the great satisfaction of everybody concerned, including the hospital, whose Board was delighted with the results and specially liked the fact that its modest charges were invariably paid, money on the line. Who had ever heard of 5000 drunks who really paid their bills? Then Dr. Texon brought us up to the minute on the malady of alcoholism as they see it at Knickerbocker; he said it was a definite personality disorder hooked to a physical craving. That certainly made sense to most of us. Dr. Texon threw a heavy scare into prospective "slippees." It was that little matter of one's liver. This patient organ, he said, would surely develop hobnails or maybe galloping cirrhosis, if more guzzling went on. He had a brand new one too, about salt water, claiming that every alcoholic on the loose had a big salt deficiency. Hence the craving for more drinks. Fill the victim with salt water, he said, and you'd quiet him right down. Of course we thought, "Why not put all drunks

on salt water instead of gin? Then the world alcohol problem might be solved overnight." But that was our idea, not Dr. Texon's. To him, many thanks!

About the industrial meeting: Jake H., U.S. Steel, and Dave M., duPont, both AAs, led it. Mr. Louis Seltzer, Editor of the Cleveland Press, rounded out the session and brought down the house. Jake, as an officer of Steel, told what the company really thought about AA — and it was all good. Jake noted AAs' huge collective earning power — somewhere between ¼ and ½ billions of dollars annually. Instead of being a nerve-wracking drag on society's collective pocket book, we were now, for the most part, top grade employables who could contribute a yearly average of \$4,000 apiece to our country's well being. Dave M., personnel man at duPont, who has a special eye to the company's alcohol problem, related what the "new look" on serious drinking had meant to duPont and its workers of all grades. According to Dave, his company believes mightily in AA. By all odds the most stirring testimony at the industrial seminar was given by Editor Louis Seltzer. Mr. Seltzer spoke to us from the viewpoint of an employer, citizen and veteran newspaper man. It was about the most moving expression of utter confidence in Alcoholics Anonymous we had ever heard. It was almost too good; its implications

brought us a little dismay. How could we fallible AAs ever measure up to Mr. Seltzer's high hope for our future? We began to wonder if the AA reputation wasn't getting far better than its actual character.

Next came that wonderful session on prisons. Our great friend, Warden Duffy, told the startling story of our original group at San Quentin. His account of AA's five-year history there had a moving prelude. We heard a recording, soon for radio release, that thrillingly dramatized an actual incident of AA life within the walls. An alcoholic prisoner reacts bitterly to his confinement and develops amazing ingenuity in finding and drinking alcohol. Soon he becomes too ingenious. In the prison paint shop he discovers a promising fluid which he shares with his fellow alcoholics. It was deadly poison. Harrowing hours followed, during which several of them died. The whole prison was tense as the fatalities continued to mount. Nothing but quick blood transfusions could save those still living. The San Quentin AA Group volunteered instantly and spent the rest of that long night giving of themselves as they had never given before. AA hadn't been any too popular, but now prison morale hit an all time high and stayed there. Many of the survivors joined up. The first Prison Group had made its mark; AA had come to San Quentin to stay.

Warden Duffy then spoke. Appar-

ently we folks on the outside know nothing of prison sales resistance. The skepticism of San Quentin prisoners and keepers alike had been tremendous. They thought AA must be a racket. Or maybe a crackpot religion. Then, objected the prison Board, why tempt Providence by freely mixing prisoners with outsiders, alcoholic women especially? Bedlam would be unloosed. But our friend the Warden, somehow deeply convinced, insisted on AA. To this day, he said, not a single prison rule has ever been broken at an AA meeting though hundreds of gatherings have been attended by hundreds of prisoners with almost no watching at all. Hardly needed is that solitary, sympathetic guard who sits in the back row.

The Warden added that most prison authorities throughout the United States and Canada today share his views of Alcoholics Anonymous. Hitherto 80% of paroled alcoholic prisoners had to be scooped up and taken back to jail. Many institutions now report that this percentage has dropped to one-half, even one-third of what it used to be. Warden Duffy had traveled 2000 miles to be with us at Cleveland. We soon saw why. He came because he is a great human being. Once again, we AAs sat and wondered how far our reputation had got ahead of our character.

Naturally we men folk couldn't go to the meeting of the alcoholic ladies. But we make no doubt they

devised ways to combat the crushing stigma that still rests on those poor gals who hit the bottle. Perhaps, too, our ladies had debated how to keep the occasional big bad wolf at a respectful distance. But no, the AA sister transcribing this piece crisply assures me nothing of the sort was discussed. A wonderfully constructive meeting, she says it was. And about 300 girls attended. Just think of it, AA was four years old before we could sober up even one. Life for the alcoholic woman is no sinecure.

Nor were other special sufferers overlooked, such as paid intergroup secretaries, plain everyday secretaries, our newspaper editors and the wives and husbands of alcoholics, sometimes known as our "forgotten people." I'm sure the secretaries concluded that though sometimes unappreciated, they still loved every moment of their work. What the editors decided, I haven't learned. Judging from their telling efforts over the years, it is altogether probable they came up with many an ingenious idea.

Everybody agreed that the wives (and husbands) meeting was an eye-opener. Some recalled how Anne S. in the Akron early days, had been boon companion and adviser to distraught wives. She clearly saw alcoholism as a family problem. Meanwhile we AAs went all out on the work of sobering up incoming albies by the thousands. Our good wives seemed entirely lost in that

prodigious shuffle. Lots of the newer localities held closed meetings only, it looked like AA was going exclusive. But of late this trend has whipped about. More and more our partners have been taking the Twelve Steps into their own lives. As proof, witness the 12th Step work they are doing with the wives and husbands of newcomers, and note well those wives' meetings now springing up everywhere. At their Cleveland gathering they invited us alcoholics to listen. Many an AA skeptic left that session convinced that our "forgotten ones" really had something. As one alkie put it — "The deep understanding and spirituality I felt in that wives' meeting was something out of this world."

Far from it, the Cleveland Conference wasn't all meetings. Take that banquet, for example. Or should I say *banquets*? The original blueprint called for enough diners to fill the Rainbow Room of Hotel Carter. But the diners did much better. The banqueteers quickly overflowed the Ballroom. Finally the Carter Coffee Shop and Petit Cafe had to be cleared for the surging celebrants. Two orchestras were drafted and our fine entertainers found they had to play their acts twice, both upstairs and down. Though nobody turned up tight, you should have heard those AAs sing. Slap-happy, they were, and why not? Yet a serious undertone crept in as we toasted the ab-

sent ones. We were first reminded of the absent by that AA from the Marshall Islands who, though all alone out there, still claimed his group had three members, to wit: "God, the book 'Alcoholics Anonymous' and me." The first leg of his 7000 mile journey to Cleveland had finished at Hawaii whence with great care and refrigeration he had brought in a cluster of floral tributes, those leis for which the Islands are famous. One of these was sent by the AA lepers at Molo-kai — those isolated AAs who will always be of us, yet never with us.

We swallowed hard, too, when we thought of Dr. Bob, alone at home, gravely ill. One toast of the evening was to another AA who, more than anything, wanted to be at Cleveland when we came of age. Unhappily he never got to the Tradition meeting, he had been carried off by a heart attack the night before the Tradition meeting and the birthday banquet took place. But at length gaiety took over; we danced till midnight. We knew the absent ones would want it that way.

Several thousand of us crowded into the Cleveland Music Hall for the Tradition meeting, which was thought by most AAs to be the high point of our Conference. Six old-time stalwarts, coming from places far flung as Boston and San Diego, beautifully reviewed the years of AA experience which had

led to the writing of our Tradition. Then I was asked to sum up, which I did, saying:

"That, touching all matters affecting AA unity, our common welfare should come first; that AA has no human authority — only God as he may speak in our Group Conscience; that our leaders are but trusted servants, they do not govern; that any alcoholic may become an AA member if he says so - we exclude no one; that every AA Group may manage its own affairs as it likes, provided surrounding groups are not harmed thereby; that we AAs have but a single aim, the carrying of our message to the alcoholic who still suffers; that in consequence we cannot finance, endorse or otherwise lend the name 'Alcoholics Anonymous' to any other enterprise, however worthy; that AA, as such, ought to remain poor, lest problems of property, management and money divert us from our sole aim; that we ought to be self-supporting, gladly paying our small expenses ourselves; that AA should remain forever non-professional, ordinary 12th Step work never to be paid for; that, as a Fellowship, we should never be organized but may nevertheless create responsible Service Boards or Committees to insure us better propagation and sponsorship and that these agencies may engage fulltime workers for special tasks; that our public relations ought to proceed upon the principle of at-

traction rather than promotion, it being better to let our friends recommend us; that personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and pictures ought to be strictly maintained as our best protection against the temptations of power or personal ambition; and finally, that anonymity before the general public is the spiritual key to all our traditions, ever reminding us we are always to place principles before personalities, that we are actually to practice a genuine humility. This to the end that our great blessings may never spoil us; that we shall forever live in thankful contemplation of Him who presides over us all."

So summing up, I then inquired if those present had any objections to the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous as they stood. Hearing none, I offered the AA Traditions for adoption. Impressively unanimous, the crowd stood up. So ended that fine hour in which we of Alcoholics Anonymous took our Destiny by the hand.

On Sunday morning we listened to a panel of four AAs who portrayed the spiritual side of Alcoholics Anonymous—as they understood it. What with church-goers and late-rising banquetees, the Conference Committee had never guessed this would be a heavy duty session. Out church-goers had already returned from their devotions and hardly a soul stayed abed. Hotel Cleveland's ballroom was

filled an hour before hand. Hundreds who couldn't get near the meeting packed its corridors and main lobby. People who have fear that AA is losing interest in things of the spirit should have been there.

A hush fell upon the crowd as we paused for a moment of silence. Then came the speakers, earnest and carefully prepared, all of them. I cannot recall an AA gathering where the attention was more complete, or the devotion deeper. Yet some thought that those truly excellent speakers, had, in their enthusiasm, unintentionally created a bit of a problem. It was felt the meeting had gone overfar in the direction of religious comparison, philosophy and interpretation, when by firm long-standing tradition we AAs had always left such questions strictly to the chosen faith of each individual. One member rose with a word of caution. As I heard him, I thought, "What a fortunate occurrence. How well we shall always remember that AA is never to be thought of as a religion. How firmly we shall insist that AA membership cannot depend upon any particular belief whatever; that our Twelve Steps contain no article of religious faith except faith in God—as *each of us understands him*. How carefully we shall thenceforth avoid any situation which could possibly lead us to debate matters of personal religious belief." It was, we felt, a great Sunday morning.

That afternoon we filed into the Cleveland Auditorium. The big event was the appearance of Dr. Bob. Earlier we thought he'd never make it, his illness had continued so severe. Seeing him once again was an experience we seven thousand shall always treasure. He spoke in a strong, sure voice for ten minutes, and he left us a great heritage, a heritage by which we AAs can surely grow. It was the legacy of one who had been sober since June 10, 1935, who saw our first Group to success, and one who, in the 15 years since, had given both medical help and vital AA to 4000 of our afflicted ones at good St. Thomas Hospital in Akron, the birthplace of Alcoholics Anonymous. Simplicity, devotion, steadfastness and loyalty; these, we remembered, were the hallmarks of that character which Dr. Bob had well implanted in so many of us. I, too, could gratefully recall that in all the years of our association there had never been an angry word between us. Such were our thoughts as we looked at Dr. Bob.

Then for an hour I tried to sum up. Yet how could one add much to what we had all seen, heard and felt in those three wonderful days? With relief and certainty we had seen that AA could never become exhibitionistic or big business; that its early humility and simplicity is very much with us, that we are still mindful our beloved Fellowship is God's success, not ours.

As evidence I shared a vision of AA as Lois and I saw it unfold on a distant beachhead in far Norway. The vision began with one AA who listened to a voice in his conscience, and then sold all he had.

George, a Norwegian-American, came to us at Greenwich, Connecticut, five years ago. His parents back home hadn't heard from him in twenty. He began to send letters telling them of his new freedom. Back came very disquieting news. The family reported his only brother in desperate condition, about to lose all through alcohol. What could be done? The AA from Greenwich had a long talk with his wife. Together they took a decision to sell their little restaurant, all they had. They would go to Norway to help the brother. A few weeks later an airliner landed them at Oslo. They hastened from field to town and thence 25 miles down the fjord where the ailing brother lived. He was in a bad state all right. Unfortunately, though, everybody saw it but him. He'd have no AA, no American nonsense. He an alcoholic? Why certainly not! Of course the man from Greenwich had heard such objections before. But now this familiar argument was hard to take. Maybe he had sold all he had for no profit to anybody. George persisted every bit he dared, but finally surmised it was no use. Determined to start an AA Group in Norway anyhow, he began a round of Oslo's clergy and physi-

cians. Nothing happened, not one of them offered him a single prospect. Greatly cast down, he and his wife thought it high time they got back to Connecticut.

But Providence took a hand. The rebellious Norwegian obligingly tore off on one of his fantastic periodics. In the final anguish of his hangover he cried out to the man from Greenwich, "Tell me again of the 'Anonymous Alcoholics.' What, oh my brother, shall I do?" With perfect simplicity George retold the AA story. When he had done, he wrote out in his all but forgotten Norwegian, a long-hand translation of a little pamphlet published by the White Plains, N.Y. Group. It contained, of course, our Twelve Steps of recovery. The family from Connecticut then flew away home. The Norwegian brother, himself a typesetter, commenced

to place tiny ads in the Oslo newspapers. He explained he was a recovered alcoholic who wished to help others. At last a prospect appeared. When the newcomer was told the story and shown the White Plains pamphlet, he, too, sobered instantly. The founders to-be then placed more ads....

Three years after, Lois and I alighted upon that same airfield. We then learned that Norway has hundreds of AAs. And good ones. The men of Oslo had already carried the life giving news to other Norwegian cities and these beacons burned brightly. It had all been just as simple, but just as mysterious as that.

In the final moments of our historic Conference it seemed fitting to read from chapter eleven of Alcoholics Anonymous. These were the words we took home with us:

Abandon yourself to God as you understand God. Admit your faults to Him and your fellows. Clear away the wreckage of your past. Give freely of what you find, and join us. We shall be with you, in the Fellowship of the Spirit, and you will surely meet some of us as you trudge the Road of Happy Destiny. May God bless you and keep you — until then.



Louis B. Seltzer



Clinton C. Duffy

To the three non-alcoholics who participated in our International Conference AA owes a great debt of Gratitude. Warden Clinton C. Duffy of San Quentin (where the first prison group was formed) traveled 2,000 miles to be with us. What he told us was worth going 2,000 miles to hear. Louis B. Seltzer, Editor, of the *Cleveland Press*, has many times proved his devotion to the AA 'way of life.' His address at the 'AA In Industry' session was the inspi-

ration highlight of the Conference. Dr. Meyer Texon of New York's Knickerbocker Hospital made, a personal sacrifice as a last minute substitute for our beloved Dr. Silkworth. Dr. Texon's depth of understanding made us realize once again our great obligation to the men of medicine. To these three, as symbols of the many non-alcoholic friends in many fields who have helped us, may we of AA say our heartfelt 'Thanks!'