

June 1957

Where to begin

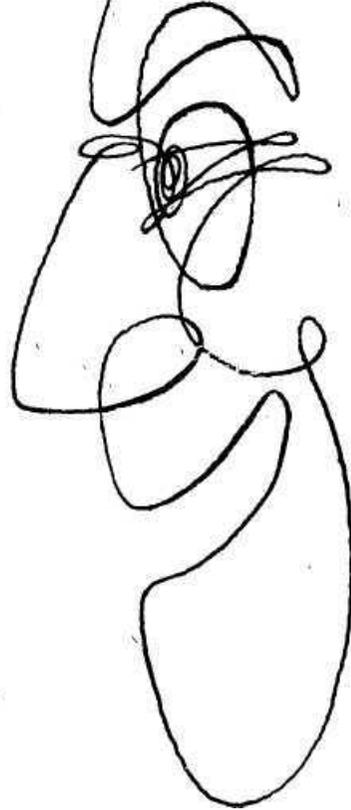
WHEN YOUR EDITOR AND MY BOSS announced that I was to do a "color story" on your delegates' conference, I looked at him blankly and said, "What's that?" He explained with the patience of an ex-newspaper pro to the feeble-minded cub that it was very simple—I just had to "cover" it as if I were doing it for the Times or Tribune, like the Democratic story from Chicago or the Republican story from San Francisco. "I see," I said, "the human side of the news." He sort of grunted what I took for approval.

Well, that was a great help ... I have never been to a convention in my life but my ideas at least were highly colored by my television viewpoint of both these national spectacles. I went off muttering—caucuses, covenants (secretly agreed upon), committees (smoked-filled rooms). . . .

My notes from Wednesday, the opening day, start off auspiciously. They consist of the following profound observations:

1. Wearing badge—Texas hat—Dallas '58. Why?
2. Doug, Maritime 6,000 miles! Canadians nice.
3. Delegates have attractive wives.

4. The dinner orchestra leader thinks we all belong in moth-balls—why doesn't he update us with "Tea for Two?"
5. Mr. Harrison is a *doll*.
6. I feel just like the White Rabbit, "Oh dear, Oh dear."

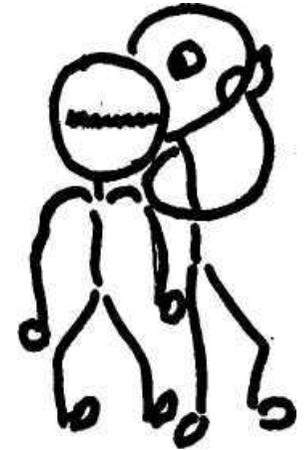


Wednesday night late when I tried to unscramble this into a sensible summation of my impressions of the first day, it came out like this: 1. I never found out. 2. Doug is the delegate from the Maritime province of Canada and he covers 6,000 miles of AA territory, reporting to his groups on the Conference and all AA business. Canadians *are* nice (so is everybody!) 3. They do. 4. Oh well. 5. Mr. Harrison is the Chairman of the Conference and Chairman of the General Service Board and one of our non-alcoholic (or Class A) trustees. He has given us years of devotion and service and he is a doll.

Thursday morning Pete, one of the new delegates, expressed my feelings exactly. He said he was reminded of his sister's first day as a young school teacher. Assigned to the first grade and very anxious to make a good impression, she approached one angelic-looking six-year-old with a bright smile: "Well Johnny, it's nice to see you, do you read?" Johnny's answer: "Hell no, it's my first day." Well, I wasn't alone. If I couldn't "read" neither could any of the new delegates and I had a good warm feeling that the confusion was only part of the newness and that this was after all only an AA meeting with AA business to transact . . . just an extension of any local group—in fact, a business meeting on a national level. I was confident that there would be plenty of "color." After all, anyone who

has ever participated in group politics—personality gripes, financial fiascos, slippee officers—knows how colorful it can be ... it's an old and familiar story, I thought. This is going to be easy.

Mr. Harrison opened the serious business of the day by reading a telegram of greeting from the AAs in Bergen, Norway. It was addressed to "The Lt. General of Alcoholics Anonymous." It seemed a charmingly appropriate beginning and I added it to my anticipated list—covenants, committees, cau-

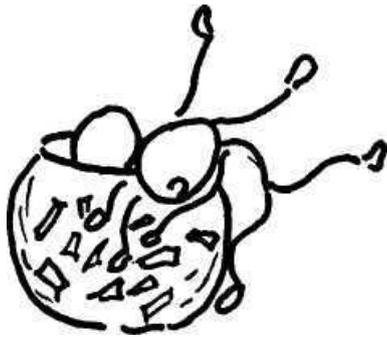


cuses . . . and now Lt. Generals in the plural.

I sat next to an attractive youngish stranger at lunch. I couldn't see his name plate from my side so I asked brightly, "What do you want to be called?" "Why, I am hoping you will all call me Harry,"

he answered. That seemed an odd remark and I said, "Well, did you think we might call you Mr. Grass Roots?" "Harry," it turned out when he was introduced later, was Professor Harrison Trice, a new non-alcoholic trustee. You couldn't tell a trustee A or B from a common old garden variety delegate. So much for Lt. Generals.

The gals from Headquarters gave their reports on the worldwide services of AA in a manner that reflected the tone of all of the subsequent reports—the only pronoun used was "we" — the verb was "share" — the ultimate noun was "service."



As for the committees, the members of these recommending bodies were chosen by lot from the names of the new delegates written on slips of paper, drawn at random in full view of the Conference. This method clearly disposed of covenants (secretly agreed on). (I'm not at all sure what a covenant is but anyway there were none.)

Thursday night the delegates met for dinner and for an evening session, with no Headquarters staff or trustees present. This was the time for the delegates to express dissatisfaction with Headquarters activity, to air regional gripes, to suggest changes in group relations with General Service Headquarters . . . the floor was open and uninhibited—and all that emerged was a calm and reasonable report endorsing Conference action and recommending further indoctrination of new delegates in the details of Conference Committee responsibility for next year. So much for caucuses.

By Friday it was evident that the only, vivid flashes of "color" to be gained from this gathering were in the AA Staff Members' dresses and *they* were on the conservative side. These delegates of ours represented every State in the Union, seven areas of Canada and Puerto Rico. They were of all shapes, sizes, ages and sexes, including two female. They covered every conceivable occupation. They should have been busting with idiosyncrasies and regional egos—and in actual fact the most noticeable thing about them was the absence of any individual quirks. They were appallingly sober. Every bit of business brought before the Conference was being conducted with a sense of balanced judgment, unheated discussion, wholehearted agreement based on full information on the subject. It was an astoundingly *un*-colorful demonstration of mature,



responsible citizens conducting the affairs of Alcoholics Anonymous for the total benefit of the total membership.

Friday afternoon Bill gave an inspired talk on the structure of our Fellowship which defined the nature and meaning of this Conference as it relates to AA as a whole. When he had finished I found I had made one note: "Only an informed group conscience can make the right decisions." These chosen representatives of ours are that informed group conscience. Because they are, they have the right of petition, participation and decision on which the Third Legacy of service is based. They are in truth the keepers of our keys, the sober voice of experience, the "all of our affairs" of our collective Twelfth Step.

Small wonder that there was an absence of "convention color." This was not a convention at all—it was

a conference. Its members were the elected voice of AA's group conscience; they reflected the steady growth, the adult concepts and the grown-up responsibility which are ours in 1957.

After this it was no longer necessary to try to present the feeling of this Seventh Annual Conference in terms of "color." I watched and listened during the rest of the sessions with a profound sense of safety and respect. It was fascinating and deeply impressive to see the calm unhurried way in which reports were given, discussed and approved. The friendly, relaxed, informal efficiency which governed each meeting was far removed from the "group business meeting" I had originally thought it would reflect.

The last day of the Conference fell symbolically on Easter Sunday. When Mr. Harrison rose to give his closing talk he spoke of this, and of the "outreach of influence" which AA extended beyond the borders of its membership. He told us of the spiritual uplift that working with AA seemed to give to everyone connected with it. And he told a lovely old Persian parable of the man who "wept bitter tears because he had no shoes—until he met a man who had no feet." We rose when he sat down and all of you know what that means in terms of the love and respect we feel for the non-alcoholic in our midst.

Then Bill spoke and he too referred to this day and of how

Easter with its symbol of resurrection meant something very special to each AA. He described us as "lately come people on the world scene" and relived our origins and our coming-of-age. He summed up his impressions of the Seventh Conference as one of "many words of prudence and none of fear." He felt that we had come a long way and that now we had reached the point of maturity where our main function is to maintain and preserve what we have—without aggression—from perils within and without.

He read the beautiful chapter from the new book, "AA Comes of Age," which is taken from his closing talk at the Twentieth Anniversary Convention in St. Louis, which compares AA to the construction of a mighty cathedral—and he asked us never to think that the structure was finished: the refinement of the form—and the beauty—will go on. In conclusion Bill requested that we "always look back to the day when we came of age and always remember to ask ourselves: have we been prudent in protecting what we have?"

That night I tried to assemble my feelings and thoughts into an orderly report and knew I could not, but as I was searching for words to convey some of my feel-

ings, I remembered suddenly how years ago I had gone to Washington and had attended the morning session of Congress, and how I was at first alarmed at the seeming ineffectiveness of the legislators. Of course after awhile I learned better. Later the same afternoon I had watched a pleading in the Supreme Court and I remembered how my faith in our Government had been restored by the considered judgment and dignity of this great office.

I feel there is in part a parallel. Of course, we all know there is no "government" in Alcoholics Anonymous, no ruling bodies, courts or vested authority as such—but for me, the parallel is this: our individual groups are something like Congress. They "represent" us drunks in an absolutely vital way, in our local, personal concerns. Our Conference, with its focus on the welfare of AA as a whole, is more like the Supreme Court, where the right of petition, appeal and decision really does reflect the best and most considered judgment of us all—what we have come to know as the group conscience of AA. It is certain to be an enduring structure, safe-guarding us all from future perils within or without.

GV Staff, N. Y.