

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN WORSE

Alcohol was a looming cloud in this banker's bright sky. With rare foresight he realized it could become a tornado.

HOW CAN a person with a fine family, an attractive home, an excellent position, and high standing in an important city become an alcoholic?

As I later found out through Alcoholics Anonymous, alcohol is no respecter of economic status, social and business standing, or intelligence.

I was raised like the majority of American boys, coming from a family of modest circumstances, attending public schools, having the social life of a small midwestern town, with part-time work and some athletics. The ambition to succeed was instilled in me by my Scandinavian parents who came to this country where opportunities were so great. "Keep busy; always have something constructive to do." I did work of all kinds after school and during vacations, trying to find that which would appeal most as a goal for a life work. Then there was wartime service to interrupt my plans, and an education to be picked up after the war. After that came marriage, getting started in business, and a family. The story is not very different from that of thousands of other young men in my generation. It shows nothing or no one to blame for alcoholism.

The drive to get ahead, to succeed, kept me too busy for many years to have any great experience with social life. I would have begrudged the time or money for alcohol. In fact I was afraid to try it for fear that I would wind up like many examples I had seen of excessive drinking in the army. I was intolerant of people who drank, particularly those who drank to an extent that interfered with their on-the-job performance.

In time I became an officer and director of one of the largest commercial banks in the country. I achieved recognized and national standing in my profession, as well as becoming a director in many important institutions having to do with the civic life of a large city. I had a family to be proud of, actively sharing in the responsibilities of good citizenship.

My drinking did not start until after I was thirty-five and a fairly successful career had been established. But success brought increased social activities, and I realized that many of my friends enjoyed a social drink with no apparent harm to themselves or others. I disliked being different so, ultimately, I began to join them occasionally.

At first it was just that—an occasional drink. Then I looked forward to the weekend of golf and the nineteenth hole. The cocktail hour became a daily routine. Gradually, the quantity increased and the occasions for a drink came more frequently: a hard day, worries and pressure, bad news, good news—there were more and more reasons for a drink. Why did I want increasingly greater quantities of alcohol? It was frightening that drink was being substituted for more and more of

the things I really enjoyed doing. Golf, hunting, and fishing were now merely excuses to drink excessively.

I made promises to myself, my family, and friends—and broke them. Short dry spells ended in heavy drinking. I tried to hide my drinking by going places where I was unlikely to see anyone I knew. Hangovers and remorse were always with me.

The next steps were bottle hiding and excuses for trips in order to drink without restraint. Cunning, baffling, powerful—the gradual creeping up of the frequency and quantity of alcohol and what it does to a person is apparent to everyone but the person involved.

When it became noticeable to the point of comment, I devised ways of sneaking drinks on the side. “Rehearsals” then became a part of the pattern, stopping at bars on the way to or from the place where drinks were to be served. Never having enough, always craving more, the obsession for alcohol gradually began to dominate all my activities, particularly while traveling. Drink planning became more important than any other plans.

I tried the wagon on numerous occasions, but I always felt unhappy and abused. I tried psychiatry, but of course I gave the psychiatrist no cooperation.

I was living in constant fear that I would get caught while driving a car, so I used taxis part of the time. Then I began to have blackouts, and that was a constant worry. To wake up at home, not knowing how I got there, and to realize I had driven my car, became torture. Not knowing where I had been or how I got home was making me desperate.

It now became necessary to have noon drinks—at

first just two, then gradually more. My hours of work were flexible, so that returning to the office was not always important. Then I became careless and returned sometimes when I shouldn't have. This worried me. The last two years of my drinking, my entire personality changed to a cynical, intolerant, and arrogant person completely different from my normal self. It was at this stage of my life that resentments came in. Resenting anyone and everyone who might interfere with my personal plans and ways of doing things—especially for any interference with my drinking—I was full of self-pity.

I will never know all the people I hurt, all the friends I abused, the humiliation of my family, the worry of my business associates, or how far reaching it was. I continue to be surprised by the people I meet who say, "You haven't had a drink for a long time, have you?" The surprise to me is the fact that I didn't know that they knew my drinking had gotten out of control. That is where we are really fooled. We think we can drink to excess without anyone's knowing it. Everyone knows it. The only one we are fooling is ourselves. We rationalize and excuse our conduct beyond all reason.

My wife and I had always encouraged our children to bring their friends home at any time, but after a few experiences with a drunken father, they eliminated home as a place to entertain friends. At the time this didn't mean much to me. I was too busy devising excuses to be out with drinking pals.

It seemed to me my wife was becoming more intolerant and narrow-minded all the time. Whenever we went out, she appeared to go out of her way to keep

me from having more than one drink. What alcoholic can be satisfied with one drink? After every cocktail party or dinner party she would say she couldn't understand how I could get in such a drunken stupor on one drink. She of course didn't realize how cunning an alcoholic can be and the lengths to which he will go in finding ways to satisfy the compulsion for more and more drinks after having had the first one. Neither did I.

Finally our invitations became fewer and fewer as friends had more experience with my drinking pattern.

Two years before I joined A.A., my wife took a long trip during which she wrote me she just couldn't return unless I did something about my drinking. It was a shock of course, but I promised to stop and she returned. A year later, while we were on a vacation trip, she packed up to go home because of my excessive drinking, and I talked her out of it with the promise I would go on the wagon for at least a year. I promised, but within two months, I began again.

The following spring she left me one day without giving me any idea of where she had gone, hoping this would bring me to my senses. In a few days an attorney called on me and explained that something would have to be done, as she couldn't face returning to me as I was. Again I promised to do something about it. Broken promises, humiliation, hopelessness, worry, anxiety—but still not enough.

There comes a time when you don't want to live and are afraid to die. Some crisis brings you to a point of deciding to do something about your drinking problem—to try anything. Help you once continually

rejected, suggestions once turned aside are finally accepted in desperation.

The final decision came when my daughter, following a drunk of mine that ruined my wife's birthday, said, "It's Alcoholics Anonymous—or else!" Of course, this suggestion had been made before on a number of occasions, but like all alcoholics I wanted to handle my problem my own way, which really meant I didn't want anything to interfere with my drinking. I was trying to find an easier, softer way. By now it had become difficult to visualize a life without alcohol.

However, my low had been reached. I realized I had been going down and down. I was unhappy myself, and I had brought unhappiness to all who cared for me. Physically I couldn't take it any more. Cold sweats, jumpy nerves, and lack of sleep were becoming intolerable. Mentally, the fears and tensions, the complete change in attitude and outlook bewildered me. This was no way to live. The time for decision had arrived, and it was a relief to say yes when my family said they would call Alcoholics Anonymous for me—a relief, even though I dreaded it, feeling that this was the end of everything.

Early the next morning a man whose name I knew well, a lawyer, called on me. Within thirty minutes I knew A.A. was the answer for me. We visited most of that day and attended a meeting that night. I don't know what I expected, but I most certainly didn't visualize a group of people talking about their drinking problems, making light of their personal tragedies, and at the same time enjoying themselves.

However, after I heard a few stories of jails, sanitariums, broken homes, and skid row, I wondered if I

really was an alcoholic. After all, I hadn't started to drink early in life, so I had some stability and maturity to guide me for a while. My responsibilities had been a restraining influence. I had had no brushes with the law, though I should have had many. I had not yet lost my job or family, even though both were on the verge of going. My financial standing had not been impaired.

Could I be an alcoholic without some of the hair-raising experiences I had heard of in meetings? The answer came to me very simply in the first step of the Twelve Steps of A.A. "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable." This didn't say we had to be in jail, ten, fifty, or one hundred times. It didn't say I had to lose one, five, or ten jobs. It didn't say I had to lose my family. It didn't say I had to finally live on skid row and drink bay rum, canned heat, or lemon extract. It did say I admitted I was powerless over alcohol—that my life had become unmanageable.

Most certainly I was powerless over alcohol, and for me, my life had become unmanageable. It wasn't how far I had gone, but where I was headed. It was important to me to see what alcohol had done to me and would continue to do if I didn't have help.

At first it was a shock to realize I was an alcoholic, but the realization that there was hope made it easier. The baffling problem of getting drunk when I had every intention of staying sober was simplified. It was a great relief to know I didn't *have* to drink any more.

I was told that I must want sobriety for my own sake, and I am convinced this is true. There may be many reasons that bring one to A.A. for the first time,

but the lasting one must be to want sobriety and the A.A. way of living for oneself.

From the start I liked everything about the A.A. program. I liked the description of the alcoholic as a person who has found that alcohol is interfering with his social or business life. The allergy idea I could understand because I am allergic to certain pollens. Some of my family are allergic to certain foods. What could be more reasonable than that some people, including myself, were allergic to alcohol?

The explanation that alcoholism was a disease of a two-fold nature, an allergy of the body and an obsession of the mind, cleared up a number of puzzling questions for me. The allergy we could do nothing about. Somehow our bodies had reached the point where we could no longer absorb alcohol in our systems. The *why* is not important; the *fact* is that one drink will set up a reaction in our system that requires more, that one drink is too much and a hundred drinks are not enough.

The obsession of the mind was a little harder to understand, and yet everyone has obsessions of various kinds. The alcoholic has them to an exaggerated degree. Over a period of time he has built up self-pity and resentments toward anyone or anything that interferes with his drinking. Dishonest thinking, prejudice, ego, antagonism toward anyone and everyone who dares to cross him, vanity, and a critical attitude are character defects that gradually creep in and become a part of his life. Living with fear and tension inevitably results in wanting to ease that tension, which alcohol seems to do temporarily. It took me some time to realize that the Twelve Steps of A.A.

were designed to help correct these defects of character and so help remove the obsession to drink. The Twelve Steps, which to me are a spiritual way of living, soon meant honest thinking, not wishful thinking, open-mindedness, a willingness to try, and a faith to accept. They meant patience, tolerance, and humility, and above all, the belief that a Power greater than myself could help. That Power I chose to call God.

A willingness to do whatever I was told to do simplified the program for me. Study the A.A. book—don't just read it. They told me to go to meetings, and I still do at every available opportunity, whether I am at home or in some other city. Attending meetings has never been a chore to me. Nor have I attended them with a feeling of just doing my duty. Meetings are both relaxing and refreshing to me after a hard day. They said, "Get active," so I helped whenever I could, and I still do.

A spiritual experience to me meant attending meetings and seeing a group of people all there for the purpose of helping each other; hearing the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions read at a meeting; and hearing the Lord's Prayer, which in an A.A. meeting has such great meaning—"Thy will be done, not mine." A spiritual awakening soon came to mean trying each day to be a little more thoughtful, more considerate, a little more courteous to those with whom I came in contact.

To most of us, making amends will take the rest of our lives, but we can start immediately. Just being sober will be making amends to many we have hurt by our drunken actions. Making amends is sometimes doing what we are capable of doing but failed to do

because of alcohol—carrying out community responsibilities such as community funds, Red Cross, educational and religious activities in proportion to our abilities and energy.

I was desperately in earnest to follow through and understand what was expected of me as a member of A.A. and to take each step of the twelve as rapidly as possible. To me this meant telling my associates that I had joined Alcoholics Anonymous; that I didn't know what was expected of me by A.A., but that whatever it was, it was the most important thing in life for me; that sobriety meant more to me than anything in this world. It was so important that it must come ahead of anything.

There are many short phrases and expressions in A.A. that make sound sense. "First Things First." Solve our immediate problems before we try to solve all the others and get muddled in our thinking and doing. "Easy Does It." Relax a little. Try for inner contentment. No one individual can carry all the burdens of the world. Everyone has problems. Getting drunk won't solve them. "Twenty-four hours a day." Today is the day. Doing our best, living each day to the fullest is the art of living. Yesterday is gone, and we don't know whether we will be here tomorrow. If we do a good job of living today, and if tomorrow comes for us, then the chances are we will do a good job when it arrives—so why worry about it?

The A.A. way of life is the way we always should have tried to live. "Grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference." These thoughts become part of our daily lives. They

are not ideas of resignation but of the recognition of certain basic facts of living.

The fact that A.A. is a spiritual program didn't scare me or raise any prejudice in my mind. I couldn't afford the luxury of prejudice. I had tried my way and had failed.

When I joined A.A., I did so for the sole purpose of getting sober and staying sober. I didn't realize I would find so much more, but a new and different outlook on life started opening up almost immediately. Each day seems to be so much more productive and satisfying. I get so much more enjoyment out of living. I find an inner pleasure in simple things. Living just for today is a pleasant adventure.

Above all, I am grateful to A.A. for my sobriety, which means so much to my family, friends, and business associates, because God and A.A. were able to do for me something I was unable to do for myself.