

# One Man's Sickness

## by An Alcoholic

*'Unhappy am I, because this has happened to me—not so, but happy am I, though this has happened to me, because I continue free from pain, neither crushed by the present nor fearing the future. For such a thing as this might have happened to every man. . . .'* The Thoughts of Marcus Aurelius.

It is a disease. The World Health Organization has defined it, and yet, when one has known and felt the nature of the thing, all medical definitions, even theirs, seem to lack something. To call the condition a state of sin is equally insufficient, for although the alcoholic has grave moral responsibilities, particularly regarding his first drink after a period of abstinence, no one can identify the stages either at which he becomes capable of recognizing that alcohol is his problem, or at which he loses control of his will.

I am an alcoholic. I am a person whose drinking was consistently or sporadically compulsive. This produced an effect of progressive deterioration in my physical, mental, spiritual, and social well-being. For years I had an intense nostalgia for religion, yet was helplessly aware of the absence of God. My condition was alleviated only by abstinence from alcohol.

It must be emphasized that what I write is essentially personal, for this disease is insidious. We who suffer from it are adept at discovering reasons why the personal self should be different from the hundreds of thousands of others. Each one of us has repeatedly dissociated himself from any specified complex of symptoms in order that his personal experiment in the possibility of the existence of painless drinking might continue. With a strange forlorn optimism we each drag out our suffering, each one of us convinced that one day he will, in some miraculous way, discover a recipe which will allow him to drink again with pleasure, and with none of the consequences that alcoholics inevitably suffer. Generalities about the patterns or the nature of the disease are misused by such invalids, who grasp at the absence of one particular symptom to find hope where no hope exists.

Then again it is not merely presumptuous, but it is futile to be dogmatic about recovery. Precepts are intolerable to the alcoholic. However true one has found it to be that recovery is essentially a spiritual experience, a practising alcoholic could create his own dangers out of reading such a statement.

And yet, incongruously, there is no one more aware of the spiritual

influences at play within himself than the practising alcoholic. He knows that the darkness of his condition is outside of nature. In his introduction to *Under the Volcano*, Stephen Spender draws attention to the spiritual isolation of Malcolm Lowry. He also quotes Lowry's statement that 'the real cause of alcoholism is the complete baffling sterility of existence as sold to you'. Poor Lowry's assertion may seem to be artistically satisfying, but it is inaccurate. To say that there is no real cause of alcoholism would, here and now, be precocious, but it is a current practicality for the alcoholic. No one can escape death by knowing its cause; neither can the alcoholic evade his disintegration by searching for the cause of his alcoholism. It is a better thing for him too to concern himself with living. At least it was for me—and it is again apparent that this must be essentially personal. I would not sell 'the sterility of existence' to anyone.

It is also necessary to distinguish between a heavy drinker and an alcoholic, for quantity alone is of little relevance. No heavy drinker would have obtained satisfaction from the total quantity I drank between July 1960 and December 1964, yet this was my most obviously damaging period.

I see three essential differences. A heavy drinker can curtail or even stop his drinking for a period which he can safely foretell. Compulsion, sooner or later, makes the alcoholic break all promises about the amount he will drink or the period for which he will abstain. Secondly, the heavy drinker can predict his own general behaviour over any two- or three-day period. The alcoholic has no idea what might happen if he drinks; he might start drinking in London and finish sober in a Glasgow jail or drunk in a Paris nightclub, with no control over the events which took him to either. The third difference is that the heavy drinker may drink as much at fifty years of age as at twenty and see no resultant change in himself or in his pattern of drinking; the disease of alcoholism is progressive.

It is strange that even if an alcoholic does not drink for a number of years the progressive effect seems to continue, although no signs are apparent until he drinks again. I have known four or five tell of drinking again after many years. They all found, not that they began to suffer as when they had last drunk, but that they were almost immediately at a much more advanced stage of deterioration. But I cannot write of this empirically. I would also be happier to write only about my recovery, but if I did, there would be a danger that I might not be identified either with the unfortunate in the gutter or with the doctor, priest, electrician or farmer who also suffers.

In me the disease progressed throughout 19 years. My first drink was in 1947 when I was 19—a simple brown ale after a first night in amateur dramatics. The most important feature of the first seven or eight years is that I seemed to want, and to be able to drink, progressively larger quantities. I only drank at parties or after a football match and I was never once drunk.

I spent four of those years in the R.A.F. Always the last to leave any party, I never knew what it was to have a hangover. I was athletically active, socially acceptable and capable of specialized work. Until a stomach operation in 1953 I drank heavily, but I curtailed my drinking rigorously after it to try and regain fitness. I was never medically passed for operational flying duties again.

A curious feature of my recovery is that the longer I remain sober, the earlier I see alcoholism as effective in my life. I recognize a compulsive element in my drinking even then, and with its increase I had developed an irresponsibility in attitudes, a tendency to overspend and an impatience with authority. These combined, no doubt, with the medical reports to make me unsuitable. Anyway, my ulcers must undoubtedly have been nourished by the amount I drank.

In 1954 I went to West Africa and some time during my first year there I was drunk for the first time in my life. This did not worry me, for others did it more regularly, but I remember being puzzled that it should happen to me at all. I drank heavily there and this odd thing getting drunk, happened on several other occasions. It had no regularity; sometimes I drank as much as ever and showed no signs of incapacity, other times drunkenness happened almost without control or effort from me. I did not behave badly in my cups, but there was an immense selfishness in all I did and misdemeanours were more frequent. My friends became more rueful and less admiring as they related my escapades and in the end my employer had had enough of me. To my amazement, he accepted the resignation I had submitted to him almost as a challenge.

When I went to a different African country in September 1956 I was a newly-wed and within months my wife noticed something odd about my drinking. Most lunch-times I had one or two beers, but every evening and at the week-ends I drank, usually heavily. I was also becoming drunk more often.

At about this stage I had the first 'black-out' I can identify. We were to dine with friends and I sat down to have a drink or two before my bath. I was aghast when I wakened in the morning and asked my wife what possible explanation I could give T.

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'How can I explain why we didn't turn up for dinner last night?'

'But we did have dinner with T. and E.', she told me.

In the end she convinced me. I had behaved rationally all evening. I had driven the car carefully, going and returning. I had talked reasonably and had eaten and drunk normally. Yet to this day that evening is a blank in my life.

Such 'black-outs' are a significant signpost on the alcoholic journey; the Swedish call them 'the Iron Curtain'. They increase in frequency and I later reached a stage when I had one every evening. Every morning I had to check whether or not the car was in the garage.

During 1957 and 1958 there was a rapid acceleration in the onset of various alcoholic symptoms in me. Some nights I did not reach home at all, sleeping in the car or even in the open in country infested by snakes, baboons and hyenas and which also contained leopards. I was ill every morning, suffering violent tremors until I had kept down one or more tumblers of neat spirits. I slept irregularly, always waking up in terror, and if I wakened too early I was unlikely to go to work. On those occasions I was too drunk by 7.30.

By 1959 I had lost three jobs, almost all our friends had turned their backs on us and our debts were prodigious. My wife had no option but to leave me, for she was expecting our second baby. I made a fresh start in another country and, unfortunately for my wife, she rejoined me when I wrote that I had changed my habits. I had obtained yet another good job, but as soon as my wife and I were re-united I began to drink again.

Six months continual drinking brought me fairly near death. It ended when I locked myself in a room with my supply during a bout lasting eleven days and nights. From there I was taken to a clinic by a doctor who understood and there I first learned about Alcoholics Anonymous:

'Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.'

I was one of those who do not respond. I either could not or I would not stop drinking. All that A.A. can do is to signpost the road walked by its recovered alcoholics. Each alcoholic must walk that road himself.

Implicit in the first step of the A.A. programme is an acceptance which I overlooked. I stopped drinking for several months, but the way in which I forced the rest of my life shows that I had not admitted that my life had become unmanageable. I paid lip-service to my powerlessness over alcohol, but remained unchanged otherwise. Early in 1961 I started a drinking bout which lasted four days; it set a pattern for the next four years.

For that time, no one, least of all me, knew when I was going to drink. I did without alcohol for months at a time. I worked abnormal hours. I studied and passed examinations, I wrote articles, I began to teach at the local polytechnic and I even attempted social work. I was motivated by a selfish determination to prove that the drunkard

was not the real me; but the drunkard was this same man who insisted upon the dominance of his own will.

My drinking brought agonising consequences although I only drank beer during my 'benders'. At no stage was there pleasure and always there was remorse, for I knew that so many others had been able to stop. Normally my benders lasted up to five days and my professional life fluctuated between achievement during my sober periods and degradation when I drank. My spiritual life was empty, marked only by desultory attendance at Mass.

I often attended meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, but I used to search out the differences between myself and others. For some reason I thought of myself as different because I was a Catholic. This was not my only lack of humility. At various times I was an intellectual alcoholic, a chronic alcoholic, a beer alcoholic—any sort of qualification as long as it provided me with a loophole through which I could crawl for my next drink. I now find it as stupid for me to qualify my alcoholism as it would be for a woman to say she was only a little pregnant.

My worst bender was in December 1964. I had almost a total blackout for the seven days it lasted and in hospital I doubted if I would ever be sane again. I lost yet another job, but this time I lost my family as well. Even my wife had lost hope for me and could foresee no security. Whatever one believes about divorce there are circumstances which will lead anyone to resort to it when it is available.

Suicide was possible and this fear made me turn desperately to religion. I was on my knees for hours each day and attempted daily Communion, but it only required a minor upset to send me back to my pattern of bender drinking, for my concentration was still upon self. Friends tried to help but could not reach me. In the end I fled to London.

The practising alcoholic continues to live in his own mind, however repugnant he finds its disorder; there is a barrier between him and the rest of the world. All alcoholics comment on their loneliness. I drank in London because I was lonely and I was lonely because I drank. I went to Ireland and there I found an excuse for drinking in my isolation from my community because of my divorce. In London again I was re-established in a job and in teaching and had the chance to continue writing. I drank and lost them all within a month. In the end I walked out of London and I was fortunate to arrive in the town where I have now settled; it could so easily have been anywhere.

A priest gave me practical help and understanding and his advice led to a job as a porter in a hospital. I lived in a cheap hostel. But I drank again and one Sunday, as desperately unhappy as ever, I decided to return to London to find work which paid better. Such is the way the alcoholic mind thinks! However, on the following day

I made a further decision and I have not had a drink since.

My mind was in a curious state that Monday morning. One part seemed to detach itself and examine objectively the thinking of the remainder. This detached part of my mind recognized my own alcoholic thinking. It argued that running away was useless, that I could not hide from myself. I was conscious of a dual functioning of my mind and quite suddenly I recognized that I was spiritually defeated. A telephone call produced an address and I found myself talking to a recovered alcoholic, the warden of a hostel run by the local Council on Alcoholism. Through him I made contact with the local group of Alcoholics Anonymous and I lived at that hostel for four months. I regard the moment that I rang its doorbell as the moment at which I began to recover.

People have recovered from alcoholism without A.A. Perhaps they too surrender to the fact that they are powerless over alcohol and accept God's will in their lives, but I needed A.A. to teach me how to do this. The only prayer of the fellowship is:

'God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.'

This prayer epitomizes my own recovery attitudes. I find that the utter simplicity of it all helps nearly as much as the understanding of others who have been where I have been. A.A. puts the practicalities of recovery into words which make sense to the alcoholic. It has a unique record of success, for hundreds of thousands attribute their sobriety to membership. It makes no rules and each member interprets its programme for himself. The most important practicality for me was acceptance.

I learned that I could change nothing outside myself and I learned to accept the externals. I learned to accept myself as I am, that the self image about which I had been so concerned was a reflection from a distorting mirror. Growth begins with an acceptance of self and when I pray for courage I pray for action to nourish that growth. Acceptance of the will of God is not as automatic as I would wish, for I must think about what God's will is. But I find that an honest examination of motives with a deliberate remembering of the will of God always produces action which cannot lead me into unhappiness. Acceptance of my alcoholism is no longer a major problem, yet I would never dare start any day without subordinating every event of that day to the will of God and to this basic fact of my life—that I am an alcoholic.

Sobriety has to take precedence in my life. Without it I have nothing and am nothing. I cannot think, I cannot act, I cannot pray if I am not sober. Without sobriety I have no job, no home, no money, no health, no self-respect, no hope, no religion, and above all no God. With it I have peace of mind.

I also learned that I must live my life one day at a time. I only

have today. I can do nothing in the past and God has not yet given me the future. The most practical application of this 'twenty-four-hour programme' is illustrated by two simple A.A. mottoes, 'Just for today', and 'It's the first drink that does the damage'. They combine to form the only resolution which members make: 'I will not take that first drink today.' Our resolution is only needed today although our desire is for all time.

We extend this daily programme to the rest of our lives. Peter, that God-loving man who answered my ring at the doorbell, taught me to see that alcohol was something outside myself. He showed me that alcohol has nothing to do with my joys or my sorrows, my pleasures or my disappointments, my happiness or my separations. Alcohol is an external—a thing apart from me. To introduce it into my life again would now require a conscious effort of will on my part, for I regard each day well lived as a brick in a wall between me and that thing outside myself—alcohol.

I have learned too that my friends are humility, self-honesty and tolerance and that my enemies are pride, self-pity and resentment. I see humility as knowledge and acceptance of myself as I am; a very little thought dissolves any pride I might ever feel in what I am. Self-pity is ridiculous when one acknowledges the true cause of one's troubles. I used to think of the poor, suffering alcoholic that I was. Now I see that nothing bad that happened was caused by the fact that I am an alcoholic. It happened because I drank—a very different thing! Acceptance of God's will has swept the resentment out of my life.

Each recovery is essentially personal, so the programme of A.A. is suggested in Twelve Steps acceptable to anyone, of any creed or of no creed:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to God as we understood him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked him to remove our short-comings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood him, praying only for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and practise these principles in all our affairs.

The personal encounter with God which these steps lead one to, was something I had to experience before the practice of my religion could have full meaning again. To serve God I need the Church, but before I could begin to know God again, the alcoholic needed the guidance of A.A. The practising alcoholic really does believe that he has been sold a sterile existence. Although the Church, thank God, has room for its alcoholic members, it has the human race as its flock and the practising alcoholic sees himself as someone apart. For this reason some of us distort our relationship with the Church. Then again I was not interested in the profound simplicity of faith; in my arrogance I claimed complete comprehension as a right. I needed words specifically aimed at the alcoholic to help me find the glorious simplicity of things.

These twelve steps indicate a path along which I can find development. I read them carefully from time to time. If I am honest with myself my study is of value, for it makes me aware of my neglects, carelessness and inadequacies. It draws attention to those of my habits to which I must apply more effort, for I believe I must continue to work at my sobriety.

I also need exposure to sobriety and I obtain this by cultivating the company of other recovered alcoholics. For me, regular attendance at A.A. meetings is essential. There exposure is most intense, for A.A. meetings revolve around sobriety; they have very little to do with alcoholism. At meetings I find people who understand, but it is not only that; neither is it only that I want some of the strength and the happiness I find there to rub off on me. I find meetings to have true charity. People sober for ten or fifteen years, who could possibly afford to miss meetings, come along to be available to those like me.

When I see such a person welcoming and talking to a trembling alcoholic at his first meeting I know my own humanity, my own identification with my fellows, to be a wholesome thing. Sobriety is the fundamental, but we are given so much else. Every human relationship I have is enriched by it. There is a glorious wonder in feeling its development.

Most people readily attribute the anonymity of A.A. to shame, but the greatest example to any alcoholic is Bill W., one of the two original members in 1935. Very early he saw that anonymity had more to do with humility than with shame and he never afterwards identified himself at a public level. Nothing could so aptly teach me to try to write this, for example, with neither pride nor shame. Sober, I have no shame in being an alcoholic, but equally I have nothing



to be proud of in my recovery. At meetings I meet people with much more reason to be proud, and they are rarely proud. I preserve my anonymity unless it would help another person to know that I am an alcoholic, for my recovery only means that I am, by the grace of God, a normal ordinary human being.

For such a thing as this, either this disease or this recovery, might have happened to every man.



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