Chapter 1

BILL'S STORY

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS: This chapter contains the story of Bill W., one of A.A.'s founders. The story is told from Bill's point of view. It describes his struggles with drinking, his surrender to alcoholism, and his journey to recovery.

War fever ran high in the New England town to which we new, young officers from Plattsburg were assigned, and we were flattered when the first citizens took us to their homes, making us feel heroic. Here was love, applause, war; moments sublime with intervals hilarious. I was part of life at last, and in the midst of the excitement I discovered liquor. I forgot the strong warnings and the prejudices of my people concerning drink. In time we sailed for "Over There." I was very lonely and again turned to alcohol.

During World War I, I was a young officer in the U.S. military. After spending time at a base in Plattsburgh, New York, I went with some other officers to a New England town where the people were very kind to us. They made us feel like heroes. They told us how brave we were for going off to war. During this exciting and emotional time, there were many celebrations in homes and bars. I discovered how much I loved liquor. Although my family back home had warned me not to drink, I began to drink regularly.

We landed in England. I visited Winchester Cathedral. Much moved, I wandered outside. My attention was caught by a doggerel on an old tombstone:

Once we arrived in Europe and began to fight the war, I felt very lonely and continued drinking to deal with my feelings. One time while I was in England, I visited Winchester Cathedral where I spent some time wandering around by myself. I saw these words written on an old tombstone:

"Here lies a Hampshire Grenadier
Who caught his death
Drinking cold small beer.
A good soldier is ne'er forgot
Whether he dieth by musket
Or by pot."

Ominous warning—which I failed to heed.

Looking back, these words seem like a warning to me about the dangers of drinking. But at the time, I didn't think too much about their meaning.

Twenty-two, and a veteran of foreign wars, I went home at last. I fancied myself a leader, for had not the men of my battery given me a special token of appreciation? My talent for leadership, I imagined, would place me at the head of vast enterprises which I would manage with the utmost assurance.

When I was 22 years old and the fighting was over, I finally went home as a war veteran. I was an officer, so I had been in charge of other soldiers. The men in my unit had followed my orders and given me their

respect, so I believed I was a talented leader. Because of this, I felt sure that I could become the leader of a huge company back at home. My success as an officer made me confident that I would be a success no matter what I did with my life.

I took a night law course, and obtained employment as investigator for a surety company. The drive for success was on. I'd prove to the world I was important. My work took me about Wall Street and little by little I became interested in the market. Many people lost money—but some became very rich. Why not I? I studied economics and business as well as law. Potential alcoholic that I was, I nearly failed my law course. At one of the finals I was too drunk to think or write. Though my drinking was not yet continuous, it disturbed my wife. We had long talks when I would still her forebodings by telling her that men of genius conceived their best projects when drunk; that the most majestic constructions of philosophic thought were so derived.

My early career as a stock market investor

I took a night school course in law, and got a job as an investigator for an insurance company. I was very eager to show the world how successful and important I could become. Because of the type of work I did, I had to spend time near Wall Street, where the New York Stock Exchange is located. This is an area where lots of bankers and investors work. Just by being around them, I became interested in what they did. Investing money in the stock market sounded exciting, and I knew it had helped some people become rich very quickly. Maybe that would work for me, too.

I started studying economics and business as well as law. I was already drinking regularly at the time

and my drinking made it hard for me to study. I almost failed my law course. At one of my final exams, I was too drunk to think or write. I wasn't drinking every day, but my drinking habits still worried my wife. We had long talks about it. I would try to calm her down by telling her that the world's great geniuses had done their best work while drunk. She tried to be patient with me, but she knew I was making bad choices.

By the time I had completed the course, I knew the law was not for me. The inviting maelstrom of Wall Street had me in its grip. Business and financial leaders were my heroes. Out of this alloy of drink and speculation, I commenced to forge the weapon that one day would turn in its flight like a boomerang and all but cut me to ribbons. Living modestly, my wife and I saved $1,000. It went into certain securities, then cheap and rather unpopular. I rightly imagined that they would some day have a great rise. I failed to persuade my broker friends to send me out looking over factories and managements, but my wife and I decided to go anyway. I had developed a theory that most people lost money in stocks through ignorance of markets. I discovered many more reasons later on. We gave up our positions and off we roared on a motorcycle, the sidecar stuffed with tent, blankets, a change of clothes, and three huge volumes of a finan-

cial reference service. Our friends thought a lunacy commission should be appointed. Perhaps they were right. I had had some success at speculation, so we had a little money, but we once worked on a farm for a month to avoid drawing on our small capital. That was the last honest manual labor on my part for many a day. We covered the whole eastern United States in a year. At the end of it, my reports to Wall Street procured me a position there and the use of a large expense account. The exercise of an option brought in more money, leaving us with a profit of several thousand dollars for that year.

By the time I had finished my law course, I knew I wasn't meant to be a lawyer. I wanted to work on Wall Street as a stock market investor. Business and financial leaders had become my heroes. I felt sure I could make a fortune working with them.

My drinking habits and my false belief in my talents as a businessman put me on a path to failure and unhappiness.

But I didn't know that at the time. My wife and I saved up $1,000, which I used to buy some cheap stocks that were unpopular with other investors. I believed that they would rise in price and be worth a lot of money someday. I tried to convince my broker friends to send me out traveling. I wanted to inspect factories run by the companies whose stocks I'd bought. I believed that most people lost money in stocks because they didn't understand the companies they were investing in. I decided that I could become a better investor by doing research in person. My

broker friends wouldn't pay for me to travel. So my wife and I both quit our day jobs, and drove off on a motorcycle. We had a sidecar stuffed with a tent, blankets, clothes, and three huge reference books on investing.

Our friends thought we had lost our minds, and they might have been right. I made a little money on my first few investments but not very much. My wife and I worked on a farm for a month so we wouldn't have to spend the tiny amount we'd earned from our investments. (That month on the farm was the last honest, hard work I did for a very long time.)

We traveled across the whole eastern United States in a year. At the end of it, I sent the research I'd done to my coworkers on Wall Street. They were so impressed they gave me a job. I even had an expense account—a bank account owned by my employer but controlled by me. I got to use the money in that account for travel, meals, and anything I thought would help me earn more money for the company. I succeeded in that job, and earned some large bonuses.

For the next few years fortune threw money and applause my way. I had arrived. My judgment and ideas were followed by many to the tune of paper millions. The great boom of the late twenties was seething and swelling. Drink was taking an important and exhilarating part in my life. There was loud talk in the jazz places uptown. Everyone spent in thousands and chattered in millions. Scoffers could scoff and be damned. I made a host of fair-weather friends.

Wealth, success, and lots of liquor

For the next few years, I had plenty of money and

got lots of praise from my coworkers and bosses. I believed I was living out my destiny as a successful leader. Many people listened to my advice about how to invest in the stock market, and we all made a fortune. This was in the late 1920s, when America seemed to be having one big, never-ending party. Drinking was an important and exciting part of my life. I went to jazz clubs filled with loud talkers and big spenders. I met lots of people who I thought were my friends.

My drinking assumed more serious proportions, continuing all day and almost every night. The remonstrances of my friends terminated in a row and I became a lone wolf. There were many unhappy scenes in our sumptuous apartment. There had been no real infidelity, for loyalty to my wife, helped at times by extreme drunkenness, kept me out of those scrapes.

DELIRIUM TREMENS: Also called "the shakes" or "the DTs," delirium tremens takes place when a chronic alcoholic suddenly stops drinking. It is a sign of severe alcohol withdrawal, meaning the physical body is struggling to work correctly without alcohol in its systems. The most famous symptom of delirium tremens is body tremors or shaking, but it may also cause irritability, confusion, nausea, vomiting, and seizures.

Around this time, my drinking became even more serious. I started drinking non-stop all day and almost every night. If my friends begged me to stop, we would fight, so eventually I started drinking alone. Inside our beautiful apartment, my wife and I would fight, too. I had not cheated on her with other women. I was loyal to her, and being drunk all the time kept me from cheating. But she was unhappy with my behavior.

In 1929 I contracted golf fever. We went at once to the country, my wife to applaud while I started out to overtake Walter Hagen. Liquor caught up with me much faster than I came up behind Walter. I began to be jittery in the morning. Golf permitted drinking

Then, in 1929, I started playing golf, and became obsessed with the sport. My wife and I began to spend lots of time in the country so she could watch while I practiced playing. Many people play golf and drink at the same time, which was part of the reason I loved it so much. I was drinking every day and every night. It was fun to wander around fancy, exclusive golf clubs that I'd dreamed about as a young boy. My skin became very tan, and I was spending my money almost as fast as I could earn it. But my habits were having some nasty effects. I was drinking so much that I began to feel jittery in the morning.

The jittery feeling that Bill was experiencing in the morning was delirium tremens

every day and every night. It was fun to carom around the exclusive course which had inspired such awe in me as a lad. I acquired the impeccable coat of tan one sees upon the well-to-do. The local banker watched me whirl fat checks in and out of his till with amused skepticism.

Abruptly in October 1929 hell broke loose on the New York stock exchange. After one of those days of inferno, I wobbled from a hotel bar to a brokerage office. It was eight o'clock—five hours after the market closed. The ticker still clattered. I was staring at an inch of the tape which bore the inscription XYZ-32. It had been 52 that morning. I was finished and so were many friends. The papers reported men jumping to death from the towers of High Finance. That disgusted me. I would not jump. I went back to the bar. My friends had dropped several million since ten o'clock—so what? Tomorrow was another day. As I drank, the old fierce determination to win came back.

Suddenly, in October of 1929, the stock market became unpredictable and unstable. Prices rose and fell all day long, and stock market experts like me were under a lot of stress. After one of those stressful days, I went to a hotel bar to get drunk but then returned to the office. It was eight o'clock, five hours after all stock market work had stopped. A machine called a ticker was still printing out information about stock prices. One of my stocks had gone from $52 per share in the morning to $32 that night.

All the money I'd made was suddenly gone.

The newspapers printed stories about men committing suicide by jumping out the windows of tall bank buildings. That disgusted me. I would not jump. Instead I went back to the bar. My friends had lost several million dollars since ten o'clock that morning—but so what? Tomorrow was another day. As I drank, the urge to be a successful businessman came back to me. I believed I would make it through this crisis somehow.

Next morning I telephoned a friend in Montreal. He had plenty of money left and thought I had better go to Canada. By the following spring we were living in our accustomed style. I felt like Napoleon returning from Elba. No St. Helena for me! But drinking caught up with me again and my generous friend had to let me go. This time we stayed broke.

A new start in Canada

The next morning I called a friend in Montreal. He had plenty of money left, so I decided to move to Canada to work for him. By the following spring, my wife and I were living just like we had in New York. We had a lovely home and plenty of money. I felt like I had won a huge battle, all by myself. But my drinking caught up with me again, and my generous friend had to fire me. This time we stayed broke.

We went to live with my wife's parents. I found a job; then lost it as the result of a brawl with a taxi driver. Mercifully, no one could guess that I was to have no real employment for five years, or hardly draw a sober breath. My wife began to work in a department store, coming home exhausted to find me drunk.

I became an unwelcome hanger-on at brokerage places.

We went to live with my wife's parents. I found a job, then lost it because I started a fist fight with a taxi driver. For the next five years I didn't have a steady job, and I was drunk almost all the time. My wife had to work in a department store to pay our bills. She would come home exhausted to find me drunk.

Liquor ceased to be a luxury; it became a necessity. "Bathtub'' gin, two bottles a day, and often three, got to be routine. Sometimes a small deal would net a few hundred dollars, and I would pay my bills at the bars and delicatessens. This went on endlessly, and I began to waken very early in the morning shaking violently. A tumbler full of gin followed by half a dozen bottles of beer would be required if I were to eat any breakfast. Nevertheless, I still thought I could control the situation, and there were periods of sobriety which renewed my wife's hope.

Liquor was no longer something I wanted. It became something I needed. I made my own liquor—called "bathtub gin" since it was created at home, often in bathrooms—and drank it constantly. Sometimes I was able to sell some of my stocks to earn a few hundred dollars. Then I would pay my debts at the bars and restaurants.

Gradually things got worse. The house was taken over by the mortgage holder, my mother-in-law died, my wife and father-in-law became ill.

This went on and on, and I began to wake up very early in the morning shaking violently. If I wanted to eat any breakfast without feeling shaky, I had to drink a glass full of gin and six bottles of beer. There were many signs that I was becoming very sick, but I still thought I could control my situation. And there were a few short periods of time when I did stay sober. These periods of time helped my wife feel hopeful. But gradually things got worse. Our house was taken by the bank, my mother-in-law died, and my wife and father-in-law became sick.

Then I got a promising business opportunity. Stocks were at the low point of 1932, and I had somehow formed a group to buy. I was to share generously in the profits. Then I went on a prodigious bender, and that chance vanished.

After all that terrible news, I got an exciting business opportunity. It was 1932 and stocks were very cheap, so I was asked to buy some stocks with a group of investors. If it went well, I would make a ton of money. But before the deal was done, I decided to spend several days getting very drunk. After that I was told I wasn't welcome in the group of investors anymore. The business opportunity was gone. I had ruined my chance to take part in it.

I woke up. This had to be stopped. I saw I could not take so much as one drink. I was through forever. Before then, I had written lots of sweet promises, but my wife happily observed that this time I meant business. And so I did.

That experience made me see that I was in a

terrible situation. This had to stop. I realized I could not take a single drink or I would just keep drinking. I decided I was done drinking forever. Before that, I had made lots of promises to stop, but I had never done it. This time, my wife believed that I would actually do it. I believed it, too.

Shortly afterward I came home drunk. There had been no fight. Where had been my high resolve? I simply didn't know. It hadn't even come to mind. Someone had pushed a drink my way, and I had taken it. Was I crazy? I began to wonder, for such an appalling lack of perspective seemed near being just that.

Shortly after that I came home drunk. I hadn't even tried to resist drinking. Someone had pushed a drink my way, and I had taken it. Was I crazy? I began to wonder if I was, since I seemed to have absolutely no control over my own actions.

Renewing my resolve, I tried again. Some time

passed, and confidence began to be replaced by cocksureness. I could laugh at the gin mills. Now I had what it takes! One day I walked into a cafe to telephone. In no time I was beating on the bar asking myself how it happened. As the whisky rose to my head I told myself I would manage better next time, but I might as well get good and drunk then. And I did.

Stopping and starting again

I tried to stop drinking again. I was able to stay sober for a pretty long time, and I began to feel very confident that I could stop drinking. I decided I was finally strong enough to quit for good! I had beat my alcoholism. Then one day I walked into a cafe to use their phone. Very soon after that, I found myself beating my fists on the bar, drunk, and wondering what had happened to me. As I brought the cup of whisky to my lips, I promised myself I would do better next time. But I figured I might as well get good and drunk then. And I did.

The remorse, horror and hopelessness of the next morning are unforgettable. The courage to do battle was not there. My brain raced uncontrollably and there was a terrible sense of impending calamity. I hardly dared cross the street, lest I collapse and be run down by an early morning truck, for it was scarcely daylight. An all night place supplied me with a dozen glasses of ale. My writhing nerves were stilled at last. A morning paper told me the market had gone to hell again. Well, so had I. The market would recover, but I wouldn't. That was a hard thought. Should I kill

myself? No—not now. Then a mental fog settled down. Gin would fix that. So two bottles, and—oblivion.

I'll never forget the guilt and hopelessness I felt the next morning. I didn't have the courage to keep fighting to stay sober. I also woke up feeling shaky and jittery, like I had so many times before. My brain was going a million miles a minute. I was convinced that something terrible was about to happen to me. The sun was barely up, but an all-night bar was open and I drank at least 12 beers as quickly as I could. My nerves finally began to calm down.

Then I looked at the morning paper, and saw that the stock market had crashed again. I felt like I had crashed my life. The stock market would recover someday, but I felt like I never would. That was a hard thought. I wondered if I should kill myself. But I thought no—not now.

My mind felt hazy and I decided that drinking gin would clear it up. So I drank two bottles and forgot everything.

The mind and body are marvelous mechanisms, for mine endured this agony two more years. Sometimes I stole from my wife's slender purse when the morning terror and madness were on me. Again I swayed dizzily before an open window, or the medicine cabinet where there was poison, cursing myself for a weakling. There were flights from city to country and back, as my wife and I sought escape. Then came the night when the physical and mental torture was so hellish I feared I would burst through my window, sash and all. Somehow I managed to drag my mattress to a lower floor, lest I suddenly leap. A doctor came with

a heavy sedative. Next day found me drinking both gin and sedative. This combination soon landed me on the rocks. People feared for my sanity. So did I. I could eat little or nothing when drinking, and I was forty pounds under weight.

Even though I spent the next two years drinking as much as I possibly could, my mind and body kept me alive somehow. My choices made me feel full of shame, but I couldn't stop myself. When I woke up in the morning feeling shaky and confused, I would steal money from my wife's purse to buy more liquor. I wondered again and again if I should kill myself. I thought maybe I could jump out a window or overdose on prescription medicine … but I was too scared. My wife and I would go to the country, hoping a change of scenery might help me change my behavior. But it never did.

Then there was a night when the physical and mental pain was so hellish I felt sure I would jump through my window, glass and all. I dragged a mattress to a lower floor in case I actually did jump. My wife called a doctor, who gave me a sedative: Medicine to help me calm down and get some sleep. The next day, I started drinking gin along with the medicine. That combination of things nearly killed me. People in my life were afraid for me, and I was afraid for myself. I couldn't really eat anything while I was drinking, so I was 40 pounds underweight. My life was in serious danger, and I knew it.

My brother-in-law is a physician, and through his

kindness and that of my mother I was placed in a nationally-known hospital for the mental and physical rehabilitation of alcoholics. Under the so-called belladonna treatment my brain cleared. Hydrotherapy and mild exercise helped much. Best of all, I met a kind doctor who explained that though certainly selfish and foolish, I had been seriously ill, bodily and mentally.

Learning about alcoholism at the hospital

My brother-in-law was a medical doctor. He worked with my mother to get me into a well-respected hospital that treated alcoholics. I was given more sedatives to calm my body and mind, and eventually my brain stopped racing. Various therapies and a little exercise helped me feel better. Best of all, I met a doctor who explained what was happening to me. He said that my behavior had been selfish and foolish, but I was also very sick in both my mind and my body. He said to me that it wasn't all my fault that I kept going back to drinking. He explained that most of his patients had gone through similar struggles.

It relieved me somewhat to learn that in alcoholics the will is amazingly weakened when it comes to combating liquor, though it often remains strong in other respects. My incredible behavior in the face of a desperate desire to stop was explained. Understanding myself now, I fared forth in high hope. For three or four months the goose hung high. I went to town regularly and even made a little money. Surely this was the answer—self-knowledge.

It was a relief to hear that most alcoholics have a hard time resisting drinking, even if they are able to control themselves in other parts of their lives. This

helped me understand my actions. I wanted very badly to stop drinking, but it seemed like I just couldn't. This is how most alcoholics felt. Knowing this gave me hope, and I felt like I was finally strong enough to get sober. For three or four months, everything went well. I got some work, made a little money, and believed my new knowledge could solve my drinking problem.

But it was not, for the frightful day came when I drank once more. The curve of my declining moral and bodily health fell off like a ski-jump. After a time I returned to the hospital. This was the finish, the curtain, it seemed to me. My weary and despairing wife was informed that it would all end with heart failure during delirium tremens, or I would develop a wet brain, perhaps within a year. She would soon have to give me over to the undertaker or the asylum.

But it did not. The day came when I drank again. After that, my emotional and physical health got much worse and I went back to the hospital. I felt sure this would be the end for me, and that I would die. The doctors told my tired and desperate wife that I was at risk for a heart attack during my morning attacks of the shakes. They also said that my drinking might cause permanent brain damage. They expected one or both of these things to happen within a year. I would either end up unable to speak, or unable to live and sent to an early grave.

They did not need to tell me. I knew, and almost welcomed the idea. It was a devastating blow to my

pride. I, who had thought so well of myself and my abilities, of my capacity to surmount obstacles, was cornered at last. Now I was to plunge into the dark, joining that endless procession of sots who had gone on before. I thought of my poor wife. There had been much happiness after all. What would I not give to make amends. But that was over now.

Everything they told my wife made sense to me. I already knew I was destroying my life, and welcomed the idea of dying. I remembered coming home from World War I and feeling sure I would be a huge success. I felt deep shame at how terribly I'd behaved. I was out of options, and felt like I was trapped in a corner. I thought about my poor wife and how happy we'd been in the past. I wished I could apologize and make things better with her, but it seemed like it was far too late for that.

No words can tell of the loneliness and despair I found in that bitter morass of self-pity. Quicksand stretched around me in all directions. I had met my match. I had been overwhelmed. Alcohol was my master.

I can't find any words to describe the loneliness and despair I felt during this time in my life. I felt like there was no way to escape my awful situation. I was powerless, and believed that alcohol would always control me.

Trembling, I stepped from the hospital a broken

man. Fear sobered me for a bit. Then came the insidious insanity of that first drink, and on Armistice Day 1934, I was off again. Everyone became resigned to the certainty that I would have to be shut up somewhere, or would stumble along to a miserable end. How dark it is before the dawn! In reality that was the beginning of my last debauch. I was soon to be catapulted into what I like to call the fourth dimension of existence. I was to know happiness, peace, and usefulness, in a way of life that is incredibly more wonderful as time passes.

When I finally left the hospital, I felt like a broken man. I stayed sober for a while out of fear, but the moment I took a single drink I was back to my old habits. On Armistice Day 1934—the anniversary of the end of World War I—I got drunk and stayed drunk. Everyone in my life felt sure I would drink myself to death this time.

I had no idea that in a few short weeks, I would be introduced to a whole new way of living. A way of living full of peace, relief, and even happiness. Soon, I would be thrown into something I call "the fourth dimension of existence." When I got to this fourth dimension, I would finally be free. My life would feel completely different to me in magical, spiritual new ways. I was experiencing those darkest hours that come right before the dawn.

I would feel like I was starting to live for the very first time.

Near the end of that bleak November, I sat drinking in my kitchen. With a certain satisfaction I reflected there was enough gin concealed about the house to carry me through that night and the next day. My wife was at work. I wondered whether I dared hide a full

bottle of gin near the head of our bed. I would need it before daylight.

A visit from a friend

Near the end of November 1934, I sat drinking in my kitchen. I thought about how I had enough gin hidden around the house to keep me drunk through that night and the next day. My wife was at work. I wondered if I could hide a full bottle of gin near the head of our bed. I knew I would need it before I woke up the next morning.

My musing was interrupted by the telephone. The cheery voice of an old school friend asked if he might

come over. *He was sober.* It was years since I could remember his coming to New York in that condition. I was amazed. Rumor had it that he had been committed for alcoholic insanity. I wondered how he had escaped. Of course he would have dinner, and then I could drink openly with him. Unmindful of his welfare, I thought only of recapturing the spirit of other days. There was that time we had chartered an airplane to complete a jag! His coming was an oasis in this dreary desert of futility. The very thing—an oasis! Drinkers are like that.

My thoughts were interrupted by the telephone ringing. I heard the cheerful voice of an old school friend through the phone. He asked if he could come over to visit me. *And he was sober!* It was years since I could remember hearing him sober, so I was amazed. I'd heard rumors that he was arrested and ordered by a judge to get treatment for his alcoholism. I wondered how he had escaped. I imagined that he would come over for dinner, and then I could drink openly with him. I wasn't thinking at all about my friend's health or well-being. I was just thinking of having fun with him like we used to do. I thought of his visit like being rescued. I felt like I was lost in the desert all by myself and dying of thirst. He was a pool of clear water that appeared suddenly to save my life.

The door opened and he stood there, fresh-skinned and glowing. There was something about his eyes. He was inexplicably different. What had happened?

I pushed a drink across the table. He refused it. Disappointed but curious, I wondered what had got into the fellow. He wasn't himself.

"Come, what's all this about?'' I queried.

He looked straight at me. Simply, but smilingly, he said, "I've got religion.''

I was aghast. So that was it—last summer an alcoholic crackpot; now, I suspected, a little cracked about religion. He had that starry-eyed look. Yes, the old boy was on fire all right. But bless his heart, let him rant! Besides, my gin would last longer than his preaching.

The door opened and he stood there, looking healthy and happy. He seemed very different, though I couldn't figure out what had changed.

I pushed a drink across the table to him. He refused it. I felt disappointed but curious. I wondered what had happened to change him. He wasn't acting like himself.

"What's going on?" I asked.

He looked straight at me and smiled. He said, "I've got religion."

I was shocked by this news. I thought to myself, "Well, last summer he had been a crazy alcoholic. Now he's just as crazy about religion." His eyes were wide and sparkling with excitement. I expected him to start giving me a long, passionate speech about finding God.

But he did no ranting. In a matter of fact way he told how two men had appeared in court, persuading the judge to suspend his commitment. They had told of a simple religious idea and a practical program of action. That was two months ago and the result was self-evident. It worked!

But he didn't. Instead he told me how two men had come to his court hearing, and convinced the judge

that he didn't need to go to the hospital against his will. These men said they had a simple religious idea and a practical program of action to help alcoholics get sober. They offered to help him stop drinking. That was two months ago, and he hadn't had a drink since then. It worked!

He had come to pass his experience along to me—If

I cared to have it. I was shocked, but interested. Certainly I was interested. I had to be, for I was hopeless. He talked for hours. Childhood memories rose before me. I could almost hear the sound of the preacher's voice as I sat, on still Sundays, way over there on the hillside; there was that proffered temperance pledge I never signed; my grandfather's good natured contempt of some church folk and their doings; his insistence that the spheres really had their music; but his denial of the preacher's right to tell him how he must listen; his fearlessness as he spoke of these things just before he died; these recollections welled up from the past. They made me swallow hard.

That war-time day in old Winchester Cathedral came back again.

He had come to tell me about his experience and I was shocked, but interested. Before he arrived, I had felt hopeless about my own drinking. Now I was curious. He talked for hours, and memories from my own childhood came back to me. I could almost hear the sound of the preacher's voice as I sat in church on Sundays. I remembered how my grandfather felt about religion. He believed that there was some great mystical force working in the world, but he didn't want the preacher to tell him what that force was or how it worked. He wanted to make up his own mind about God and religion. He didn't respect the people who went to church regularly and did exactly as they were told by the preacher. Remembering all of these things made me feel uneasy.

Then I remembered that day at the Winchester Cathedral in England, when I saw those words written on the gravestone. And I started to wonder about my own relationship with religion.

I had always believed in a Power greater than myself. I had often pondered these things. I was not an atheist. Few people really are, for that means blind faith in the strange proposition that this universe originated in a cipher and aimlessly rushes nowhere. My intellectual heroes, the chemists, the astronomers, even the evolutionists, suggested vast laws and forces at work. Despite contrary indications, I had little doubt that a mighty purpose and rhythm underlay all. How could there be so much of precise and immutable law, and no intelligence? I simply had to believe in a Spirit of the Universe, who knew neither time nor limitation. But that was as far as I had gone.

With ministers, and the world's religions, I parted right there. When they talked of a God personal to me, who was love, superhuman strength and direction, I became irritated and my mind snapped shut against such a theory.

ATHEIST: Someone who does not believe in God or gods.

I had always believed in a Power greater than myself. I was not an atheist. I didn't think many people were true atheists, because believing that no Higher Power existed would be so hopeless. It would mean that the universe came from nothing and existed for no reason, which is dark and depressing. I respected the great scientists of the world, and all of them believed that nature followed certain rules and laws. Things like gravity, motion, and other scientific laws worked in predictable ways. Everything worked in harmony. Because of this, it seemed to me that there must be a Power greater than myself. A Power that was guiding our world in some way.

So I believed there must be a God, but I had not made myself think about God's power or ability to help me. I didn't like or trust preachers, ministers, and religions. And if anyone started talking about a God who was made of love and strength, I felt angry and uncomfortable.

To Christ I conceded the certainty of a great man, not too closely followed by those who claimed Him. His moral teaching—most excellent. For myself, I had adopted those parts which seemed convenient and not too difficult; the rest I disregarded.

The wars which had been fought, the burnings and chicanery that religious dispute had facilitated, made me sick. I honestly doubted whether, on balance, the religions of mankind had done any good. Judging from what I had seen in Europe and since, the power of God in human affairs was negligible, the Brotherhood of Man a grim jest. If there was a Devil, he seemed the Boss Universal, and he certainly had me. But my friend sat before me, and he made the point-blank declaration that God had done for him what he could not do for himself. His human will had failed. Doctors had pronounced him incurable. Society was about to lock him up. Like myself, he had admitted complete defeat. Then he had, in effect, been raised from the dead, suddenly taken from the scrap heap to a level of life better than the best he had ever known!

I knew that wars had been fought over religion, and people had been killed because of their religious beliefs. This made me feel sick. I even doubted if the religions in our world had truly helped people at all. When I fought in World War I, I saw people do brutal, awful things again and again. This made it seem like the Devil was the one controlling human life.

But my friend told me honestly that God had helped him when he could not help himself. Like me, he had

felt totally hopeless and unable to control his actions. Doctors had told him it was impossible for him to get sober and healthy again. A judge wanted to lock him up in a hospital so he couldn't hurt himself or anyone else. Just like me, he had given up completely. But when he connected with God, he was filled with hope and the courage to live and try again. He had gone from wishing he was dead to living a joyful, healthy life. He felt like he had been saved from his own death. When he was drinking he felt like he was living in a garbage dump. Now, his life was better than he ever thought it could be.

Had this power originated in him? Obviously it had not. There had been no more power in him than there was in me at that minute; and this was none at all.

By connecting with God, he realized he was not alone. He was not the only person or force guiding his actions. And that was such a relief to him. Knowing he was not alone had saved him from hopelessness.

That floored me. It began to look as though religious people were right after all. Here was something at work in a human heart which had done the impossible. My ideas about miracles were drastically revised right then. Never mind the musty past; here sat a miracle directly across the kitchen table. He shouted great tidings.

I saw that my friend was much more than inwardly

reorganized. He was on a different footing. His roots grasped a new soil.

I was amazed. I began to wonder if religion was more important and useful than I had realized. Maybe God could help people who could not help themselves. Maybe God could guide them toward strength that they could not find alone. My friend's story showed me that miracles were possible. He was a miracle himself, sitting across the kitchen table from me.

Looking at him, I realized that he hadn't just changed how he thought and felt. He had changed his entire being. He was a completely new and totally different person. He was a better, happier, healthier person.

Despite the living example of my friend there remained in me the vestiges of my old prejudice. The word God still aroused a certain antipathy. When the thought was expressed that there might be a God personal to me this feeling was intensified. I didn't like the idea. I could go for such conceptions as Creative Intelligence, Universal Mind or Spirit of Nature but I resisted the thought of a Czar of the Heavens, however loving His sway might be. I have since talked with scores of men who felt the same way.

My friend suggested what then seemed a novel idea. He said, *"Why don't you choose your own conception of God?"*

Even though I could see all of this, I still felt some

doubt. I had never fully embraced God before, especially a God that was connected to me on a personal level. I didn't like that idea. When people talked about God using terms like "universal mind" or "spirit of nature," I felt more comfortable. The idea of God as a loving ruler of everything didn't make sense to me. (I have talked to many people who felt the same way.)

Then my friend suggested something that might help me. He said, *"Why don't you create your own idea of who—or what—God is?"*

That statement hit me hard. It melted the icy intellectual mountain in whose shadow I had lived and shivered many years. I stood in the sunlight at last.

It was only a matter of being willing to believe in a Power greater than myself. Nothing more was required of me to make my beginning. I saw that growth could start from that point. Upon a foundation of complete willingness I might build what I saw in my friend. Would I have it? Of course I would!

Thus was I convinced that God is concerned with us humans when we want Him enough. At long last I saw, I felt, I believed. Scales of pride and prejudice fell from my eyes. A new world came into view.

That simple question changed everything for me. All of my fear and doubt melted away. I felt like I had been living in the shadows for years, and could suddenly step into the sunlight. It was a miraculous moment.

I realized that I didn't need to suddenly become a man who went to church every day and had total faith in God. I just had to be willing to believe in a Power greater than myself. That was the only thing I needed to do to begin moving away from my drinking

problem. I just needed to accept that I was not the only person or force guiding my life. If I let myself believe that a Power greater than myself existed, I could start recovering. Then, one day, I could be as healthy and happy as my friend.

The real significance of my experience in the Cathedral burst upon me. For a brief moment, I had needed and wanted God. There had been a humble willingness to have Him with me—and He came. But soon the sense of His presence had been blotted out by

worldly clamors, mostly those within myself. And so it had been ever since. How blind I had been.

At that moment, I thought again about that day at the Winchester Cathedral in England, when I saw the words written on the gravestone. When I was there, I needed and wanted God to be part of my life. I was willing to believe in a Power greater than myself, and that Power had come to visit me. God had been with me in that graveyard. But soon after that, I let myself get distracted by the activity of daily life. I let go of my connection with God, and I had not tried to find it again.

My conversation with my friend made me feel determined to connect with God again. This time for good.

At the hospital I was separated from alcohol for the last time. Treatment seemed wise, for I showed signs of delirium tremens.

There I humbly offered myself to God, as I then understood Him, to do with me as He would. I placed myself unreservedly under His care and direction. I admitted for the first time that of myself I was nothing; that without Him I was lost. I ruthlessly faced my sins and became willing to have my new-found Friend take them away, root and branch. I have not had a drink since.

The long road to recovery

I returned to the hospital, where I was treated for possible signs of delirium tremens (the shaking that

happened to me in the morning before I started drinking). While I was there, I made a silent agreement with God. I asked God to care for my health and well-being, and promised that I would listen for God's direction. I thought long and hard about all of the hurtful decisions I had made, and I asked God to forgive me. I had never been able to forgive myself, but when I made this agreement with God I finally felt forgiven. It was like I had been carrying a huge weight on my shoulders, and God took that weight away from me.

I have not had a single drink since that day.

My schoolmate visited me, and I fully acquainted him with my problems and deficiencies. We made a list of people I had hurt or toward whom I felt resentment. I expressed my entire willingness to approach these individuals, admitting my wrong. Never was I to be critical of them. I was to right all such matters to the utmost of my ability.

My old school friend visited me at the hospital, the same friend who had come to my house to tell me that God had helped him get sober. I explained my own struggles with drinking. Together we made a list of people I had hurt, and also people who had made me angry. I told my friend that I wanted to talk with every person on the list and admit that I had been wrong. I promised that I wouldn't blame these people or criticize them during our conversations. I just wanted to make things right between us, if I could. This would be part of my process for getting sober.

I was to test my thinking by the new God-consciousness within. Common sense would thus become uncommon sense. I was to sit quietly when in doubt,

asking only for direction and strength to meet my problems as He would have me. Never was I to pray for myself, except as my requests bore on my usefulness to others. Then only might I expect to receive. But that would be in great measure.

My friend asked me to do something else, too. He suggested that I silently explore my new relationship with God. If I ever felt doubt or confusion, he said I should sit quietly and ask God for direction and strength. If I prayed, I should not pray for myself unless I was asking for wisdom I could use to help other people. I needed to learn to trust in the Higher Power, and I needed to be less self-centered. These things would take practice. But my friend told me that practicing them and creating a relationship with God was all I needed to stay sober.

My friend promised when these things were done I would enter upon a new relationship with my Creator; that I would have the elements of a way of living which answered all my problems. Belief in the power of God, plus enough willingness, honesty and humility

to establish and maintain the new order of things, were the essential requirements.

Simple, but not easy; a price had to be paid. It meant destruction of self-centeredness. I must turn in all things to the Father of Light who presides over us all.

These were revolutionary and drastic proposals, but the moment I fully accepted them, the effect was electric. There was a sense of victory, followed by such a peace and serenity as I had never known. There was utter confidence. I felt lifted up, as though the great clean wind of a mountain top blew through and through. God comes to most men gradually, but His impact on me was sudden and profound.

It seemed simple, but that didn't mean it would be easy to do. Making these big changes was overwhelming. But as soon as I started making these changes, my life was transformed. Lying there in the hospital, I felt like I had finally won a long and difficult battle. Then I felt a deep sense of inner peace and a surge of confidence. It seemed like I was standing at the very top of a mountain, and a strong, clean wind was blowing through me. God comes to some people slowly, but my own experience connecting to that Higher Power was sudden and very powerful.

For a moment I was alarmed, and called my friend, the doctor, to ask if I were still sane. He listened in wonder as I talked.

Finally he shook his head saying, "Something has happened to you I don't understand. But you had better hang on to it. Anything is better than the way

you were." The good doctor now sees many men who have such experiences. He knows that they are real.

For a moment I was scared, so I called my doctor[1] into my room to explain what was happening and how I felt. He listened quietly as I talked.

Finally he said, "Something has happened to you that I don't understand. But you had better hang on to it. Anything is better than the way you were." (My doctor now sees many people who have had experiences like mine.)

[1] This is Dr. Silkworth, whom you read about earlier.

While I lay in the hospital the thought came that there were thousands of hopeless alcoholics who might be glad to have what had been so freely given me. Perhaps I could help some of them. They in turn might work with others.

My friend had emphasized the absolute necessity of demonstrating these principles in all my affairs. Particularly was it imperative to work with others as he had worked with me. Faith without works was dead, he said. And how appallingly true for the alcoholic! For if an alcoholic failed to perfect and enlarge his

spiritual life through work and self-sacrifice for others, he could not survive the certain trials and low spots ahead. If he did not work, he would surely drink again, and if he drank, he would surely die. Then faith would be dead indeed. With us it is just like that.

Bringing a message of recovery to more alcoholics

While I lay in the hospital, I thought about the thousands of hopeless alcoholics in the world. If I could help them like I had been helped, they might find hope again. Then they could help *even more* alcoholics recover and get sober. I imagined a network of alcoholics connecting with one another. Help and hope could spread through them.

When my old school friend had talked to me in my kitchen, he told me that what mattered most was helping other people. He told me that part of my healing process was to work with others like he had worked with me. Sharing experience, strength, and hope with other alcoholics was the only way to survive the pain and challenges of recovery. Alcoholics who didn't help other alcoholics would eventually drink again. And if alcoholics drink, they will eventually drink themselves to death. Helping each other and working together would keep us hopeful and alive.

My wife and I abandoned ourselves with enthusiasm to the idea of helping other alcoholics to a solution of their problems. It was fortunate, for my old business associates remained skeptical for a year and a

half, during which I found little work. I was not too well at the time, and was plagued by waves of self-pity and resentment. This sometimes nearly drove me back to drink, but I soon found that when all other measures failed, work with another alcoholic would save the day. Many times I have gone to my old hospital in despair. On talking to a man there, I would be amazingly lifted up and set on my feet. It is a design for living that works in rough going.

My wife and I decided that we would spend all of our time working with other alcoholics. This was easy to do since my old coworkers didn't believe I would stay sober. I couldn't get a job for about a year and a half. I was still pretty sick during that time, and also struggled with some difficult feelings. I felt sorry for myself, and sometimes I felt frustrated with my new life. Once in a while it got so bad that I came close to taking a drink. As soon as that happened I would find another alcoholic to talk with, and that kept me sober. Whenever I was feeling overwhelmed or angry, all I had to do was go to the hospital and work with another alcoholic. Helping others get sober helped me stay sober. Doing that helped me feel stable again. It works when nothing else does.

We commenced to make many fast friends and a fellowship has grown up among us of which it is a wonderful thing to feel a part. The joy of living we really have, even under pressure and difficulty. I have seen hundreds of families set their feet in the path that really goes somewhere; have seen the most impossible domestic situations righted; feuds and bitterness of all sorts wiped out. I have seen men come out of asylums and resume a vital place in the lives of their families and communities. Business and professional men have

regained their standing. There is scarcely any form of trouble and misery which has not been overcome among us. In one western city and its environs there are one thousand of us and our families. We meet frequently so that newcomers may find the fellowship

they seek. At these informal gatherings one may often see from 50 to 200 persons. We are growing in numbers and power.*

By talking and working with other alcoholics, I began to make some important friendships and build a community. It's wonderful to feel part of a group that understands what I've been through. They understand because they've been through it themselves. Together, we all feel real joy to be alive. The work we've done has saved families from destruction, helped fix broken relationships, and kept people from losing their jobs. I've seen people follow this program and finally feel able to rebuild their lives. In fact, I can't think of any kind of trouble or misery that the members of our Fellowship couldn't deal with together. We meet as a group or one on one. We welcome any new people who want to join the program. We are growing quickly into a large, strong community.

An alcoholic in his cups is an unlovely creature. Our struggles with them are variously strenuous, comic, and tragic. One poor chap committed suicide in my home. He could not, or would not, see our way of life.

An alcoholic who is actively drinking is a difficult person to love. We know this from experience. The community of recovering alcoholics that we created has dealt with situations that were stressful, funny, and sometimes deeply sad. One poor man committed suicide in my home. He could not, or would not, see

our way of life.

There is, however, a vast amount of fun about it all. I suppose some would be shocked at our seeming worldliness and levity. But just underneath there is deadly earnestness. Faith has to work twenty-four hours a day in and through us, or we perish.

The work is hard, but we actually have a lot of fun doing it. Some people might be shocked to hear a group of sober alcoholics joking and laughing together, but the humor keeps us sane. And underneath it is a strong dedication to healing, and dedication to each other. We must have faith all day every day—in each other and in a Higher Power—or we will never survive.

Most of us feel we need look no further for Utopia. We have it with us right here and now. Each day my friend's simple talk in our kitchen multiplies itself in a widening circle of peace on earth and good will to men.

Most of us feel like we have created an ideal place and life together. We feel loved, understood, and peaceful whenever we are with the members of our Fellowship. And we know that every day, alcoholics across the world are having talks like the one that took place in my kitchen all those years ago. We are connecting with each other in a widening circle of peace, acceptance, and healing that touches more people every single day.

Bill W., co-founder of A.A.,
died January 24, 1971.

*In 2006, A.A. is composed of over 106,000 groups.