Chapter 3

MORE ABOUT ALCOHOLISM

Most of us have been unwilling to admit we were real alcoholics. No person likes to think he is bodily and mentally different from his fellows. Therefore, it is not surprising that our drinking careers have been characterized by countless vain attempts to prove we could drink like other people. The idea that somehow, someday he will control and enjoy his drinking is the great obsession of every abnormal drinker. The persistence of this illusion is astonishing. Many pursue it into the gates of insanity or death.

Most of us struggle to admit that we are real alcoholics. Just like everyone else, we dislike feeling different or unusual. We want to be normal, regular people. So we spend a lot of time and energy trying to prove that we can drink like normal, regular people. We believed that somehow, someday we will be able to control and enjoy our drinking. Since we cannot, we fail over and over again. It is astounding how long we continue trying to prove that we aren't alcoholics! Some of us do it until we lose our minds—or die.

We learned that we had to fully concede to our innermost selves that we were alcoholics. This is the first step in recovery. The delusion that we are like other people, or presently may be, has to be smashed. We alcoholics are men and women who have lost the ability to control our drinking. We know that no real alcoholic *ever* recovers control. All of us felt at times that we were regaining control, but such inter-

vals—usually brief—were inevitably followed by still less control, which led in time to pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization. We are convinced to a man that alcoholics of our type are in the grip of a progressive illness. Over any considerable period we get worse, never better.

Over time, we have learned that the first step in recovery is to completely accept that we are alcoholics. The false belief that we are like other people, or more specifically like other drinkers, must be smashed. As alcoholics, we have lost the ability to control our drinking. We have lost this ability *permanently*. There may be short periods of time when we feel like we have taken control. Then we begin to relapse, and then we lose control completely. In fact, it is usually worse. Whenever this happens, we feel like we have failed completely in our lives and may never be worthy again. We are convinced that we have an illness that only gets worse, and never better.

RELAPSE: When an alcoholic who has stopped drinking for a period of time begins to drink again.

We are like men who have lost their legs; they never grow new ones. Neither does there appear to be any kind of treatment which will make alcoholics of

our kind like other men. We have tried every imaginable remedy. In some instances there has been brief recovery, followed always by a still worse relapse. Physicians who are familiar with alcoholism agree there is no such thing as making a normal drinker out of an alcoholic. Science may one day accomplish this, but it hasn't done so yet.

There is no treatment, program, or medication that will make alcoholics the same as normal drinkers. We have tried every treatment we could find, and nothing worked. Doctors who treat alcoholic patients also agree that it is impossible to turn an alcoholic into a normal drinker. Maybe someday scientists will find the secret, but they haven't done so yet.

Despite all we can say, many who are real alcoholics are not going to believe they are in that class. By every form of self-deception and experimentation, they will try to prove themselves exceptions to the rule, therefore nonalcoholic. If anyone who is showing inability to control his drinking can do the right-about-face and drink like a gentleman, our hats are off to him. Heaven knows, we have tried hard enough and long enough to drink like other people!

We have a huge amount of evidence showing that alcoholics cannot control their drinking, but some alcoholics stubbornly believe that they still can. They will insist that they can drink like normal people whenever they want. They will say they can quit whenever they want. They will experiment and argue, trying their hardest to show that they are in charge of their actions.

Here are some of the methods we have tried: Drinking beer only, limiting the number of drinks, never drinking alone, never drinking in the morning, drinking only at home, never having it in the house, never drinking during business hours, drinking only at parties, switching from scotch to brandy, drinking only natural wines, agreeing to resign if ever drunk on the job, taking a trip, not taking a trip, swearing off forever (with and without a solemn oath), taking more physical exercise, reading inspirational books, going to health farms and sanitariums, accepting voluntary commitment to asylums—we could increase the list ad infinitum.

Many members of A.A. have experimented with their drinking in this way. Here are some of the ways we have tried to prove that we can drink normally:

- Drinking beer only
- Limiting the number of drinks we drink at one time
- Never drinking alone
- Never drinking in the morning
- Drinking only at home
- Never keeping alcohol in the house
- Never drinking during business hours
- Drinking only at parties
- Switching from liquor to wine
- Drinking only natural wines
- Agreeing to resign from our jobs if we ever get drunk at work
- Swearing that we will never drink again
- Reading inspirational books
- Spending time at health spas
- Going into treatment for alcoholism voluntarily

This list could go on forever. As you might have guessed, none of these experiments has changed us into normal drinkers.

We do not like to pronounce any individual as alcoholic, but you can quickly diagnose yourself. Step over to the nearest barroom and try some controlled drinking. Try to drink and stop abruptly. Try it

more than once. It will not take long for you to decide, if you are honest with yourself about it. It may be worth a bad case of jitters if you get a full knowledge of your condition.

We don't like to label other people as alcoholics, but you can try this experiment and decide for yourself. Go to a bar and start drinking. Force yourself to stop drinking suddenly. Do it more than once. Doing this will show you how much control you really have. Even though you may not feel well later, the experiment may be worth it.

Though there is no way of proving it, we believe that early in our drinking careers most of us could have stopped drinking. But the difficulty is that few alcoholics have enough desire to stop while there is yet time. We have heard of a few instances where people, who showed definite signs of alcoholism, were able to stop for a long period because of an overpowering desire to do so. Here is one.

Many of us believe that we might have been able to stop if we'd decided to do so earlier in our lives. Whether or not this is true is hard to say. Few alcoholics truly want to stop while they have any chance at success.

However, there are stories of people who showed signs of alcoholism and were able to stop drinking for a long period of time simply because they tried their hardest. Here is one of those stories.

A man of thirty was doing a great deal of spree drinking. He was very nervous in the morning after

these bouts and quieted himself with more liquor. He was ambitious to succeed in business, but saw that he would get nowhere if he drank at all. Once he started, he had no control whatever. He made up his mind that until he had been successful in business and had retired, he would not touch another drop. An exceptional man, he remained bone dry for twenty-five years and retired at the age of fifty-five, after a successful and happy business career. Then he fell victim to a belief which practically every alcoholic has —that his long period of sobriety and self-discipline had qualified him to drink as other men. Out came his carpet slippers and a bottle. In two months he was in a hospital, puzzled and humiliated. He tried to regulate his drinking for a while, making several trips to the hospital meantime. Then, gathering all his forces, he attempted to stop altogether and found he could not. Every means of solving his problem which

money could buy was at his disposal. Every attempt failed. Though a robust man at retirement, he went to pieces quickly and was dead within four years.

Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic

Once there was a 30-year-old man who was doing a lot of binge drinking. During this time, he felt very nervous when he woke up in the morning. He calmed his nerves with more booze. This man was eager to be successful in his career, but realized that he would fail at his job if he drank at all. He knew that once he started, he had no control over his drinking. So he decided that until he had succeeded in the business world, he wouldn't take a single drink.

He kept this promise to himself. He didn't drink at all for 25 years, and retired at age 55 after a long and happy career. He began to believe that this long period of abstinence from alcohol meant he could drink like a normal person. (Many alcoholics tell themselves this lie.) So he began to experiment with drinking occasionally. After just two months of this he was in the hospital, feeling confused and humiliated.

> **ABSTINENCE: Preventing yourself from doing something on purpose. Avoiding an activity, such as drinking.**

Once he was released from the hospital, he tried his best to stop drinking and found that he just couldn't do it. He had enough money to pay for any kind of counseling or treatment he might want, but nothing

helped. Everything he tried failed. Although he was a perfectly healthy man when he retired at age 55, he died just four years later.

This case contains a powerful lesson. Most of us have believed that if we remained sober for a long stretch, we could thereafter drink normally. But here is a man who at fifty-five years found he was just where he had left off at thirty. We have seen the truth demonstrated again and again: "Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic.'' Commencing to drink after a period of sobriety, we are in a short time as bad as ever. If we are planning to stop drinking, there must be no reservation of any kind, nor any lurking notion that someday we will be immune to alcohol.

This story contains a powerful lesson. Most of us think that if we stop drinking for a long period of time, that means we can begin to drink normally. This man was dry for 25 years. As soon as he started to drink again it was as if he had never stopped. Members of A.A. have a saying, "Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic." We have seen this saying come true again and again. If we plan to stop drinking, we need to do it knowing that we will not be able to experiment with drinking ever again.

DRY / DRY DRUNK: Someone who has stopped drinking but hasn't changed the way they think or feel in any positive way.

Young people may be encouraged by this man's experience to think that they can stop, as he did, on their own will power. We doubt if many of them can do it, because none will really want to stop, and hardly one of them, because of the peculiar mental twist al-

ready acquired, will find he can win out. Several of our crowd, men of thirty or less, had been drinking only a few years, but they found themselves as helpless as those who had been drinking twenty years.

Younger people reading the story above may feel hopeful. When they hear that this man stopped drinking for so long just by using his willpower, they may think they can do the same thing. If any of those people were to try it, they probably would not succeed. Most of them don't truly want to stop drinking, and being young doesn't make it easier. Some people who have been drinking for just a few years struggle to stop as if they had been drinking for decades. You don't have to drink for a long time, or drink large quantities of alcohol, to be a serious alcoholic.

Dry drunks often relapse into drinking. Many dry drunks also still show many of the same behaviors as when they were drinking alcohol. In other words, they are not truly "recovering" from alcoholism.

To be gravely affected, one does not necessarily have to drink a long time nor take the quantities some of us have. This is particularly true of women. Potential female alcoholics often turn into the real thing and are gone beyond recall in a few years. Certain drinkers, who would be greatly insulted if called alcoholics, are astonished at their inability to stop. We, who are familiar with the symptoms, see large numbers of potential alcoholics among young

people everywhere. But try and get them to see it!* As we look back, we feel we had gone on drinking many years beyond the point where we could quit on our will power. If anyone questions whether he has entered this dangerous area, let him try leaving liquor alone for one year. If he is a real alcoholic and very far advanced, there is scant chance of success. In the early days of our drinking we occasionally remained sober for a year or more, becoming serious drinkers again later. Though you may be able to stop for a considerable period, you may yet be a potential alcoholic. We think few, to whom this book will appeal, can stay dry anything like a year. Some will be drunk the day after making their resolutions; most of them within a few weeks.

And even if you can stop drinking for a year, or five years, or ten years, you may still be an alcoholic. In fact, you probably are. We don't say this to make you feel shameful. It's simply a fact.

You don't have to drink for a long time or drink huge amounts of alcohol to become changed by your drinking. Some alcoholics start drinking and then spiral out of control in a few years. And some drinkers would be insulted if you called them alcoholics to their faces, but are totally unable to stop drinking. We at A.A. are familiar with the symptoms of alcoholism, so we see potential new alcoholics everywhere. Especially among young people.

When we meet with someone who isn't sure if they are an alcoholic, we challenge them to stop drinking for a whole year. If they are an alcoholic, it is very likely that they will fail. But even if they do succeed in avoiding liquor for a year, they might still become

alcoholics later on. Many of us have been sober for a year at a time, and became serious drinkers after that. Being able to stop for a long period of time isn't enough. We think that most people who read this book would struggle to stay sober for a year. Some will be drunk one day after making the decision to stop drinking. The rest will be drunk within a few weeks.

For those who are unable to drink moderately the question is how to stop altogether. We are assuming, of course, that the reader desires to stop. Whether such a person can quit upon a nonspiritual basis depends upon the extent to which he has already lost the power to choose whether he will drink or not. Many of us felt that we had plenty of character. There was a tremendous urge to cease forever. Yet we found it impossible. This is the baffling feature of alcoholism as we know it—this utter inability to leave it alone, no matter how great the necessity or the wish.

How then shall we help our readers determine, to their own satisfaction, whether they are one of us? The experiment of quitting for a period of time will be helpful, but we think we can render an even greater service to alcoholic sufferers and perhaps to the medi-

* True when this book was first published. But a 2003 U.S./Canada membership survey showed about one-fifth of A.A.'s were thirty and under.

cal fraternity. So we shall describe some of the mental states that precede a relapse into drinking, for obviously this is the crux of the problem.

What sort of thinking dominates an alcoholic who repeats time after time the desperate experiment of the first drink? Friends who have reasoned with him after a spree which has brought him to the point of divorce or bankruptcy are mystified when he walks directly into a saloon. Why does he? Of what is he thinking?

How to tell if you are an alcoholic

One of the most frustrating things about alcoholism is that it affects all alcoholics equally. People who want to stop drinking and people who don't want to stop drinking will *both* be unable to get sober. People who are good-hearted and people who are cruel will continue to drink uncontrollably. People with strong willpower in all other areas of life will have zero willpower when it comes to drinking. Alcoholism doesn't care who you are or what you've done.

So how do you know if you are an alcoholic yourself? The quickest way is to go to a bar and try to control your drinking. Let yourself drink for a little while, then make yourself stop very suddenly. Try to do this more than once over a few weeks. If you are honest with yourself, it won't take long to see the truth.

If you don't want to try this experiment, you don't have to. The members of A.A. have learned to see and understand the signs of a relapse. We know how alcoholics think. We know how they're feeling when they want to stop drinking and cannot do it. Throughout this

book are stories of real alcoholics who share their own experiences. If you read these stories and recognize yourself in them, then that is all you need. You are one of us.

Our first example is a friend we shall call Jim. This man has a charming wife and family. He inherited a lucrative automobile agency. He had a commendable World War record. He is a good salesman. Every-body likes him. He is an intelligent man, normal so far as we can see, except for a nervous disposition. He did no drinking until he was thirty-five. In a few years he became so violent when intoxicated that he had to be committed. On leaving the asylum he came into contact with us.

Let's start with the story of a man we will call Jim. He ran a successful car dealership that had been started by his father. He had a lovely wife and family. He was a war veteran, a talented salesman, and a well-liked member of his local community. He seemed quite normal, except that he had a nervous personality. He didn't start drinking until he was 35, but his drinking became serious very quickly. Soon he lost his car dealership. Within a few years, he started to become uncontrollably violent when he got drunk. Jim went into a hospital psychiatric ward, and when he was ready to leave, he found out about the A.A. program.

We told him what we knew of alcoholism and the answer we had found. He made a beginning. His family was re-assembled, and he began to work as a salesman for the business he had lost through drinking. All went well for a time, but he failed to enlarge his spiritual life. To his consternation, he found him-

self drunk half a dozen times in rapid succession. On each of these occasions we worked with him, reviewing carefully what had happened. He agreed he was a real alcoholic and in a serious condition. He knew he faced another trip to the asylum if he kept on. Moreover, he would lose his family for whom he had a deep affection.

He started the program and felt hopeful at first. He moved back in with his family, and began to work as a salesman for the car dealership he had lost through drinking. Everything seemed to be going well. But Jim didn't try to connect with a Higher Power. That meant he wasn't fully committed to A.A. He was only doing some of the things he needed to stay sober.

Soon, he was getting drunk again many days in a row. He was surprised and upset when this happened. Each time he spoke with other A.A. members to figure out what he'd done wrong. He didn't want to get drunk, so why had he done it? Where had he slipped up? He knew he was a real alcoholic and in serious trouble. He knew he would have to go back to the psychiatric ward if he kept drinking, and that he would lose his family. He didn't want any of those things to happen.

Yet he got drunk again. We asked him to tell us exactly how it happened. This is his story: "I came to work on Tuesday morning. I remember I felt irritated that I had to be a salesman for a concern I once owned. I had a few words with the boss, but nothing serious. Then I decided to drive into the country and see one of my prospects for a car. On the way I felt hungry so I stopped at a roadside place where they have a bar. I had no intention of drinking. I just thought I would get a sandwich. I also had the notion that I might find a customer for a car at this place, which was familiar for I had been going to it for years. I had eaten there many times during the months I was sober. I sat down at a table and ordered a sandwich and a glass of milk. Still

no thought of drinking. I ordered another sandwich and decided to have another glass of milk.

But he got drunk again. Some friends of his in A.A. asked him to explain exactly how it happened. This is what he told them:

"I came to work on Tuesday morning. I remember I felt angry that I had to work as a salesman at the dealership I used to own. I talked with the boss, but nothing serious. Then I decided to drive into the country and see one of my customers. On the way I felt hungry so I stopped at a roadside restaurant where they have a bar. I was not planning to drink. I just thought I would get a sandwich. It was a restaurant I had been going to for years, so I thought I might find a customer for a car there. I ate there many times during the months when I was sober. I sat down at a table and ordered a sandwich and a glass of milk. Still no thought of drinking. I ordered another sandwich and decided to have another glass of milk.

"Suddenly the thought crossed my mind that if I were to put an ounce of whiskey in my milk it couldn't hurt me on a full stomach. I ordered a whiskey and poured it into the milk. I vaguely sensed I was not being any too smart, but felt reassured as I was taking the whiskey on a full stomach. The experiment went so well that I ordered another whiskey and poured it into more milk. That didn't seem to bother me so I tried another."

"Suddenly I had a thought: If I put an ounce of whiskey in my milk, it couldn't hurt me on a full stomach. I ordered a whiskey and poured it into the milk. I had the feeling I wasn't being very smart. But I told myself it was OK since I was drinking the whiskey on a full stomach. The

experiment went so well that I ordered another whiskey and poured it into more milk. That didn't seem to bother me so I tried another."

Thus started one more journey to the asylum for Jim. Here was the threat of commitment, the loss of family and position, to say nothing of that intense mental and physical suffering which drinking always caused him. *He had much knowledge about himself as an alcoholic. Yet all reasons for not drinking were*

easily pushed aside in favor of the foolish idea that he could take whiskey if only he mixed it with milk!

This is how Jim ended up in a psychiatric ward again. He knew that he might have to go back into the hospital if he drank. He knew he might lose his family and his job. He also knew that drinking made him feel terrible, both physically and mentally. *He had plenty of knowledge about himself as an alcoholic. And he ignored it all when he decided it would be "safe" to drink whiskey if he just mixed it with milk.*

Whatever the precise definition of the word may be, we call this plain insanity. How can such a lack of proportion, of the ability to think straight, be called anything else?

You may think this an extreme case. To us it is not far-fetched, for this kind of thinking has been characteristic of every single one of us. We have sometimes reflected more than Jim did upon the consequences. But there was always the curious mental phenomenon that parallel with our sound reasoning there inevitably ran some insanely trivial excuse for taking the first drink. Our sound reasoning failed to hold us in check. The insane idea won out. Next day we would ask ourselves, in all earnestness and sincerity, how it could have happened.

The mind of an alcoholic

You may think Jim's story is an extreme case. To anyone in our Fellowship, it is not. It shows the same kind of thinking that all of us have experienced. Some of us may have thought more about what might happen after we

drank, or got drunk, or went on a binge. But the way our minds work is tricky. We could imagine the awful things that would happen after drinking, but we could always find an excuse to take that first drink. Trying to reason with ourselves never worked for long. The unreasonable need to drink always won. The following day, we would truly have no idea how it could have happened.

In some circumstances we have gone out deliberately to get drunk, feeling ourselves justified by nervousness, anger, worry, depression, jealousy or the like. But even in this type of beginning we are obliged to admit that our justification for a spree was insanely insufficient in the light of what always happened. We now see that when we began to drink deliberately, instead of casually, there was little serious or effective thought during the period of premeditation of what the terrific consequences might be.

There are also times when we go out to get drunk on purpose. This usually happens when we can use the excuse of feeling nervous, angry, worried, depressed, jealous, or some other strong emotion. But even when we do this, we can look back on our choices and see our excuses were weak. Especially when we consider the chaos that our drinking created in our lives. Any one of us will tell you that when we began to drink regularly instead of casually, we almost never thought about the consequences of our actions.

Our behavior is as absurd and incomprehensible with respect to the first drink as that of an individual with a passion, say, for jay-walking. He gets a thrill out of skipping in front of fast-moving vehicles. He enjoys himself for a few years in spite of friendly warnings. Up

to this point you would label him as a foolish

chap having queer ideas of fun. Luck then deserts him and he is slightly injured several times in succession. You would expect him, if he were normal, to cut it out. Presently he is hit again and this time has a fractured skull. Within a week after leaving the hospital a fast-moving trolley car breaks his arm. He tells you he has decided to stop jay-walking for good, but in a few weeks he breaks both legs.

Alcoholics are able to ignore the ways that first drink might impact our lives. This is both strange and puzzling, of course. We think it compares to the thoughts of someone who is obsessed with jaywalking.

Imagine a person who gets a thrill out of walking in front of fast-moving vehicles. She enjoys doing this for a few years even though people in her life have warned her to stop. You might just think of her as a foolish woman with a strange definition of "fun." Then her luck runs out and she gets injured a few times, right in a row. If she thought like a normal person, you would expect her to stop jaywalking altogether. But she doesn't, and soon she gets hit by another car and fractures her skull. A week after leaving the hospital, a speeding bus breaks her arm. She says she has decided to stop jaywalking for good, but in a few weeks she breaks both legs.

On through the years this conduct continues, accompanied by his continual promises to be careful or to keep off the streets altogether. Finally, he can no longer work, his wife gets a divorce and he is held up to ridicule. He tries every known means to get the jaywalking idea out of his head. He shuts himself up in an

asylum, hoping to mend his ways. But the day he comes out he races in front of a fire engine, which breaks his back. Such a man would be crazy, wouldn't he?

This continues for several years, and all that time she continues to promise she'll be careful. Or she says she will keep off the streets altogether. Finally, she loses her job, her spouse demands a divorce, and people start to make fun of her. She tries everything she can think of to get jaywalking off her mind. She goes into rehab, hoping to cure herself. But the day she gets out, she races in front of a fire engine, which breaks her back. This behavior just doesn't make any sense to us. Someone like that must be deeply troubled, right?

You may think our illustration is too ridiculous. But is it? We, who have been through the wringer, have to admit if we substituted alcoholism for jay-walking, the illustration would fit us exactly. However intelligent we may have been in other respects, where alcohol has been involved, we have been strangely insane. It's strong language—but isn't it true?

This story may sound ridiculous at first … but is it? Those of us who have suffered from alcoholism will quickly admit that it sounds familiar. If we swapped alcoholism for jaywalking, the story would fit us exactly. Even if we are smart and sensible in all other areas of life, when alcohol is involved we seem almost insane. It's strong language, but to most of us it feels true. We feel as though we have lost our sanity.

Some of you are thinking: "Yes, what you tell us is true, but it doesn't fully apply. We admit we have

some of these symptoms, but we have not gone to the extremes you fellows did, nor are we likely to, for we understand ourselves so well after what you have told us that such things cannot happen again. We have not lost everything in life through drinking and we

certainly do not intend to. Thanks for the information.''

Some of you are thinking, "What you're describing makes sense, but it doesn't apply to me. I have some of these symptoms, but not all of them. I haven't gone to the same extremes as the people in these stories. And I won't, especially now that I've read their stories and understand myself better. I haven't ruined my entire life through drinking. I won't ruin it now, thanks to this new information you've shared with me."

That may be true of certain nonalcoholic people who, though drinking foolishly and heavily at the present time, are able to stop or moderate, because their brains and bodies have not been damaged as ours were. But the actual or potential alcoholic, with hardly an exception, will be *absolutely unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge.* This is a point we wish to emphasize and re-emphasize, to smash home upon our alcoholic readers as it has been revealed to us out of bitter experience. Let us take another illustration.

Some people who aren't alcoholics can stop drinking or control their drinking. Some people who drink without thinking or drink heavily can stop drinking or control their drinking. Their brains and bodies are not affected by alcohol in the same ways as ours. Actual alcoholics will be absolutely unable to stop drinking no matter what. Learning that they are alcoholics will not help them. *Actual alcoholics will be absolutely unable to stop drinking just because they want to*.

We will make this point over and over again so it is sure to sink in.

Fred is partner in a well known accounting firm. His income is good, he has a fine home, is happily married and the father of promising children of college age. He has so attractive a personality that he makes friends with everyone. If ever there was a successful business man, it is Fred. To all appearance he is a stable, well balanced individual. Yet, he is alcoholic. We first saw Fred about a year ago in a hospital where he had gone to recover from a bad case of jitters. It was his first experience of this kind, and he was much ashamed of it. Far from admitting he was an alcoholic, he told himself he came to the hospital to rest his nerves. The doctor intimated strongly that he might be worse than he realized. For a few days he was depressed about his condition. He made up his mind to quit drinking altogether. It never occurred to him that perhaps he could not do so, in spite of his character and standing. Fred would not believe himself an alcoholic, much less accept a spiritual remedy for his problem. We told him what

we knew about alcoholism. He was interested and conceded that he had some of the symptoms, but he was a long way from admitting that he could do nothing about it himself. He was positive that this humiliating experience, plus the knowledge he had acquired, would keep him sober the rest of his life. Self-knowledge would fix it.

Drinking without thinking

Let's look at another story to show how important it is to accept that alcoholics are different from regular drinkers. A man we will call Fred is a partner at a well-respected accounting firm. His income is good and he has a nice home. He is happily married, and he's the father of kids who are ready to go to college. He makes friends easily. He's respected at work, and appears to be a stable, happy man. But he is an alcoholic.

About a year ago, Fred went to the hospital with a bad case of jitters. It was his first time experiencing the jitters and he felt ashamed. He was not ready to admit that he was an alcoholic. Instead, he told himself he came to the hospital to rest his nerves.

The doctor hinted to Fred that his health might be worse than he realized. This made Fred feel depressed, and he decided to quit drinking altogether. He never thought that he might not be able to quit. Although he began working with A.A. members while at the hospital, he still wouldn't accept that he was an alcoholic. He liked some of the ideas he had heard, and he admitted he had some of the symptoms of alcoholism. But he still believed he could stop drinking if he just put his mind to it. He felt sure that the humiliation of going to the hospital would

keep him sober the rest of his life. His new knowledge from A.A. would help, too. Self-knowledge would fix his problem.

We heard no more of Fred for a while. One day we were told that he was back in the hospital. This time he was quite shaky. He soon indicated he was anxious to see us. The story he told is most instructive, for here was a chap absolutely convinced he had to stop drinking, who had no excuse for drinking, who exhibited splendid judgment and determination in all his other concerns, yet was flat on his back nevertheless.

Fred left the hospital and seemed to do fine for a while. A few months later, he was back at the hospital, and his shakes were even worse. He was eager to talk with other A.A. members. He told them a story that illustrates everything we have been saying throughout this chapter. Fred was absolutely convinced he had to stop drinking. He had no excuse for drinking. He showed real judgment and determination in other areas of his life, yet he was totally powerless to stay sober.

Let him tell you about it: "I was much impressed with what you fellows said about alcoholism, and I frankly did not believe it would be possible for me to drink again. I rather appreciated your ideas about the subtle insanity which precedes the first drink, but I was confident it could not happen to me after what I had learned. I reasoned I was not so far advanced as most of you fellows, that I had been usually successful in licking my other personal problems, and that I would therefore be successful where you men failed. I felt I had every right to be self-confident, that it would be only a matter of exercising my will power and keeping on guard.

Here's what he told a few members he was close to:

"I was impressed with what you told me about alcoholism, and I truly didn't believe it would be possible that I would drink again. I liked how you described the 'insanity' that comes before the first drink. But I was confident that would not happen to me after what I had learned. I felt like I wasn't as serious a drinker as most of you. I had been able to deal with my other personal problems in the past. Because of that, I believed I could stop myself from drinking. It seemed like all I needed to do was use my willpower and stay alert.

"In this frame of mind, I went about my business and for a time all was well. I had no trouble refusing drinks, and began to wonder if I had not been making too hard work of a simple matter. One day I went to Washington to present some accounting evidence to

a government bureau. I had been out of town before during this particular dry spell, so there was nothing new about that. Physically, I felt fine. Neither did I have any pressing problems or worries. My business came off well, I was pleased and knew my partners would be too. It was the end of a perfect day, not a cloud on the horizon.

"I felt like this for a while, and it worked at first. I had no trouble saying 'no' to drinks. I began to wonder if I was making a big deal about nothing. One day I went to Washington to present some accounting evidence to a government bureau. I had been out of town before during this 'dry' spell, and I had not had a drink then. So there was nothing new about that. Physically, I felt fine. I wasn't especially worried or anxious either. My business went well, which I knew would make my partners happy. It was the end of a perfect day, not a cloud in the sky.

"I went to my hotel and leisurely dressed for dinner. *As I crossed the threshold of the dining room, the thought came to mind that it would be nice to have a couple of cocktails with dinner. That was all. Nothing more.* I ordered a cocktail and my meal. Then I or-dered another cocktail. After dinner I decided to take a walk. When I returned to the hotel it struck me a highball would be fine before going to bed, so I stepped into the bar and had one. I remember having several more that night and plenty next morning. I have a shadowy recollection of being in an airplane bound for New York, and of finding a friendly taxicab driver at the landing field instead of my wife. The driver escorted me about for several days. I know little of where I went or what I said and did. Then came the hospital with

unbearable mental and physical suffering.

> "I went to my hotel and changed my clothes for dinner. *I went into the dining room. The thought came to mind that it would be nice to have a couple of cocktails with my dinner. That was all. Nothing more.* I ordered a cocktail and my meal. Then I ordered another cocktail. After dinner I decided to take a walk. When I returned to the hotel, I decided I wanted a cocktail before going to bed. So I stepped into the bar and had one. I remember having several more that night and plenty the next morning. I have a hazy memory of being in an airplane flying to New York, and finding a friendly taxi driver at the airport instead of my wife. The driver drove me around for several days. I barely remember where I went or what I said and did. Then I woke up in the hospital feeling sick and overwhelmed.

"As soon as I regained my ability to think, I went carefully over that evening in Washington. *Not only had I been off guard, I had made no fight whatever against the first drink. This time I had not thought of the consequences at all.* I had commenced to drink as carelessly as though the cocktails were ginger ale. I now remembered what my alcoholic friends had told me, how they prophesied that if I had an alcoholic mind, the time and place would come—I would drink

again. They had said that though I did raise a defense, it would one day give way before some trivial reason for having a drink. Well, just that did happen and more, for what I had learned of alcoholism did not occur to me at all. I knew from that moment that I had an alcoholic mind. I saw that will power and self-knowledge would not help in those strange mental blank spots. I had never been able to understand people who said that a problem had them hopelessly defeated. I knew then. It was a crushing blow.

"As soon as I could think straight, I tried hard to remember that evening in Washington. *I realized I hadn't even tried to resist that first drink. I started to drink liquor like it was as harmless to me as ginger ale.* I remembered what my alcoholic friends had told me. They said if I had an alcoholic mind, I couldn't avoid drinking again. They said that no matter how hard I tried, someday I would find an excuse to drink. And I realized right then that I did have an alcoholic mind. I saw that willpower and self-knowledge would not help me. Nothing could help me during those strange times when my brain turned itself off and I started drinking without thinking. Before that, I never understood people who said their drinking defeated them. I knew then. I felt crushed.

"Two of the members of Alcoholics Anonymous came to see me. They grinned, which I didn't like so much, and then asked me if I thought myself alcoholic and if I were really licked this time. I had to concede both propositions. They piled on me heaps of evidence to the effect that an alcoholic mentality, such as I had exhibited in Washington, was a hopeless condition. They cited cases out of their own experience by

the dozen. This process snuffed out the last flicker of conviction that I could do the job myself.

"Two of the members of Alcoholics Anonymous from the hospital came to see me. They grinned, which I didn't like so much. Then they asked me if I thought I was an alcoholic after all. I said I was. They told me that the way I had acted in Washington was called the 'alcoholic mentality,' and that it was a hopeless condition. I couldn't beat it on my own. I believed them.

"Then they outlined the spiritual answer and program of action which a hundred of them had followed successfully. Though I had been only a nominal churchman, their proposals were not, intellectually, hard to swallow. But the program of action, though entirely sensible, was pretty drastic. It meant I would have to throw several lifelong conceptions out of the window. That was not easy. But the moment I made up my mind to go through with the process, I had the curious feeling that my alcoholic condition was relieved, as in fact it proved to be.

"Then they told me about the importance of connecting with a Higher Power and how the A.A. program worked. They said more than 100 of them had followed the program and successfully gotten sober. I had never gone to church very often, but what they told me about the spiritual side of A.A. didn't seem too odd or unreasonable. The actions I would need to take as part of the program made sense. They also sounded hard. I would have to change some beliefs that I'd had throughout my whole life, which wouldn't be easy. But as soon as I decided to join the program, I had this strange feeling that I would find relief soon. That turned out to be true.

"Quite as important was the discovery that spiritual principles would solve all my problems. I have since

been brought into a way of living infinitely more satisfying and, I hope, more useful than the life I lived before. My old manner of life was by no means a bad one, but I would not exchange its best moments for the worst I have now. I would not go back to it even if I could.''

"Soon I discovered that connecting with a Higher Power was the missing piece. Since I found that, my life has felt more satisfying and enjoyable. My old way of living didn't feel bad at the time. Still, I wouldn't trade the best moments of that life for the worst moments I have now. I wouldn't go back to it even if I could."

Fred's story speaks for itself. We hope it strikes home to thousands like him. He had felt only the first nip of the wringer. Most alcoholics have to be pretty badly mangled before they really commence to solve their problems.

Fred's story shows how confusing and upsetting the alcoholic mentality can feel. Especially if you don't know what it is or why it's happening to you. We hope that some of you readers recognize yourselves in his story. Fred had only started to struggle with his alcoholism when he joined A.A. Many alcoholics have to do more damage to their own lives before they decide to address their drinking.

Many doctors and psychiatrists agree with our conclusions. One of these men, staff member of a world-renowned hospital, recently made this statement to some of us: "What you say about the general hopelessness of the average alcoholic's plight is, in my opinion,

correct. As to two of you men, whose stories I have heard, there is no doubt in my mind that you were 100% hopeless, apart from divine help. Had you offered yourselves as patients at this hospital, I would not have taken you, if I had been able to avoid it. People like you are too heartbreaking. Though not a religious person, I have profound respect for the spiritual approach in such cases as yours. For most cases, there is virtually no other solution.''

Many of the doctors and psychiatrists we've spoken to agree with our conclusions. They know that we cannot stop ourselves from drinking, and that willpower is never enough. One of these doctors, a staff member at a world-renowned hospital, made this statement to A.A.'s founders:

"What you say about the hopelessness of the average alcoholic is correct, in my opinion. I have heard the stories of two of your founding members. I have no doubt that they would have been 100% hopeless if they had not connected to a Higher Power. If they had come to my hospital for treatment or detox, I wouldn't have taken them as patients. That's how bad they were. Alcoholics who are that sick are too heartbreaking. I am not a religious person myself, but I have deep respect for the spiritual aspect of A.A. For most alcoholics, there is no other workable solution."

Once more: The alcoholic at certain times has no effective mental defense against the first drink. Ex-cept in a few rare cases, neither he nor any other human being can provide such a defense. His defense must come from a Higher Power.

We'll say it once more: At certain times, alcoholics have no mental defense against the first drink. They

cannot stop themselves from drinking. No other human being can stop them from drinking. The only way to stop is to create a meaningful relationship with a Higher Power.