

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

The Story of

How Many Thousands of Men and Women
Have Recovered from Alcoholism

THIRD EDITION



ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS WORLD SERVICES, INC.

NEW YORK CITY

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Sixteen printings from 1955 to 1974
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OTHER BOOKS

TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS
An interpretive commentary on the A.A. program
by a co-founder

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS COMES OF AGE
A brief history of A.A.'s first two decades

AS BILL SEES IT
(formerly THE A.A. WAY OF LIFE)
Selected writings of A.A.'s co-founder

DR. BOB AND THE GOOD OLDTIMERS
A biography, with recollections of early A.A. in the Midwest

BOOKLETS
CAME TO BELIEVE . . .
Spiritual experiences of 75 A.A.'s

LIVING SOBER
Practical suggestions heard at meetings

PREFACE

THIS is the third edition of the book "Alcoholics Anonymous." The first edition appeared in April 1939, and in the following sixteen years, more than 300,000 copies went into circulation. The second edition, published in 1955, reached a total of more than 1,150,000 copies.

Because this book has become the basic text for our Society and has helped such large numbers of alcoholic men and women to recovery, there exists a sentiment against any radical changes being made in it. Therefore, the first portion of this volume, describing the A.A. recovery program, has been left untouched in the course of revisions made for both the second and the third editions. The section called "The Doctor's Opinion" has been kept intact, just as it was originally written in 1939 by the late Dr. William D. Silkworth, our Society's great medical benefactor.

The second edition added the appendices, the Twelve Traditions, and the directions for getting in touch with A.A. But the chief change was in the section of personal stories, which was expanded to reflect the Fellowship's growth. "Bill's Story," "Doctor Bob's Nightmare," and one other personal history from the first edition were retained intact; three were edited and one of these was retitled; new versions of two stories were written, with new titles; thirty completely new stories were added; and the story section was

divided into three parts, under the same headings that are used now.

In this third edition, Part I ("Pioneers of A.A.") stands unchanged. Nine of the stories in Part II ("They Stopped in Time") are carried over from the second edition; eight new stories have been added. In Part III ("They Lost Nearly All"), eight stories have been retained; five are new.

All changes made over the years in the Big Book (A.A. members' fond nickname for this volume) have had the same purpose: to represent the current membership of Alcoholics Anonymous more accurately, and thereby to reach more alcoholics. If you have a drinking problem, we hope that you may pause in reading one of the forty-four personal stories and think: "Yes, that happened to me"; or, more important, "Yes, I've felt like that"; or, most important, "Yes, I believe this program can work for me, too."

FOREWORD TO FIRST EDITION

This is the Foreword as it appeared in the first printing of the first edition in 1939

WE, OF Alcoholics Anonymous, are more than one hundred men and women who have recovered from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and body. To show other alcoholics *precisely how we have recovered* is the main purpose of this book. For them, we hope these pages will prove so convincing that no further authentication will be necessary. We think this account of our experiences will help everyone to better understand the alcoholic. Many do not comprehend that the alcoholic is a very sick person. And besides, we are sure that our way of living has its advantages for all.

It is important that we remain anonymous because we are too few, at present to handle the overwhelming number of personal appeals which may result from this publication. Being mostly business or professional folk, we could not well carry on our occupations in such an event. We would like it understood that our alcoholic work is an avocation.

When writing or speaking publicly about alcoholism, we urge each of our Fellowship to omit his personal name, designating himself instead as "a member of Alcoholics Anonymous."

Very earnestly we ask the press also, to observe this request, for otherwise we shall be greatly handicapped.

We are not an organization in the conventional

sense of the word. There are no fees or dues whatsoever. The only requirement for membership is an honest desire to stop drinking. We are not allied with any particular faith, sect or denomination, nor do we oppose anyone. We simply wish to be helpful to those who are afflicted.

We shall be interested to hear from those who are getting results from this book, particularly from those who have commenced work with other alcoholics. We should like to be helpful to such cases.

Inquiry by scientific, medical, and religious societies will be welcomed.

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS.

FOREWORD TO SECOND EDITION

Figures given in this foreword describe the Fellowship as it was in 1955

SINCE the original Foreword to this book was written in 1939, a wholesale miracle has taken place. Our earliest printing voiced the hope "that every alcoholic who journeys will find the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous at his destination. Already," continues the early text, "twos and threes and fives of us have sprung up in other communities."

Sixteen years have elapsed between our first printing of this book and the presentation in 1955 of our second edition. In that brief space, Alcoholics Anonymous has mushroomed into nearly 6,000 groups whose membership is far above 150,000 recovered alcoholics. Groups are to be found in each of the United States and all of the provinces of Canada. A.A. has flourishing communities in the British Isles, the Scandinavian countries, South Africa, South America, Mexico, Alaska, Australia and Hawaii. All told, promising beginnings have been made in some 50 foreign countries and U. S. possessions. Some are just now taking shape in Asia. Many of our friends encourage us by saying that this is but a beginning, only the augury of a much larger future ahead.

The spark that was to flare into the first A.A. group was struck at Akron, Ohio, in June 1935, during a talk between a New York stockbroker and an Akron physician. Six months earlier, the broker had been relieved of his drink obsession by a sudden spiritual

experience, following a meeting with an alcoholic friend who had been in contact with the Oxford Groups of that day. He had also been greatly helped by the late Dr. William D. Silkworth, a New York specialist in alcoholism who is now accounted no less than a medical saint by A.A. members, and whose story of the early days of our Society appears in the next pages. From this doctor, the broker had learned the grave nature of alcoholism. Though he could not accept all the tenets of the Oxford Groups, he was convinced of the need for moral inventory, confession of personality defects, restitution to those harmed, helpfulness to others, and the necessity of belief in and dependence upon God.

Prior to his journey to Akron, the broker had worked hard with many alcoholics on the theory that only an alcoholic could help an alcoholic, but he had succeeded only in keeping sober himself. The broker had gone to Akron on a business venture which had collapsed, leaving him greatly in fear that he might start drinking again. He suddenly realized that in order to save himself he must carry his message to another alcoholic. That alcoholic turned out to be the Akron physician.

This physician had repeatedly tried spiritual means to resolve his alcoholic dilemma but had failed. But when the broker gave him Dr. Silkworth's description of alcoholism and its hopelessness, the physician began to pursue the spiritual remedy for his malady with a willingness he had never before been able to muster. He sobered, never to drink again up to the moment of his death in 1950. This seemed to prove that one alcoholic could affect another as no nonalcoholic

could. It also indicated that strenuous work, one alcoholic with another, was vital to permanent recovery.

Hence the two men set to work almost frantically upon alcoholics arriving in the ward of the Akron City Hospital. Their very first case, a desperate one, recovered immediately and became A.A. number three. He never had another drink. This work at Akron continued through the summer of 1935. There were many failures, but there was an occasional heartening success. When the broker returned to New York in the fall of 1935, the first A.A. group had actually been formed, though no one realized it at the time.

By late 1937, the number of members having substantial sobriety time behind them was sufficient to convince the membership that a new light had entered the dark world of the alcoholic.

A second small group had promptly taken shape at New York. And besides, there were scattered alcoholics who had picked up the basic ideas in Akron or New York and were trying to form A.A. groups in other cities.

It was now time, the struggling groups thought, to place their message and unique experience before the world. This determination bore fruit in the spring of 1939 by the publication of this volume. The membership had then reached about 100 men and women. The fledgling society, which had been nameless, now began to be called Alcoholics Anonymous, from the title of its own book. The flying-blind period ended and A.A. entered a new phase of its pioneering time.

With the appearance of the new book a great deal began to happen. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, the

noted clergyman, reviewed it with approval. In the fall of 1939 Fulton Oursler, then editor of *Liberty*, printed a piece in his magazine, called "Alcoholics and God." This brought a rush of 800 frantic inquiries into the little New York office which meanwhile had been established. Each inquiry was painstakingly answered; pamphlets and books were sent out. Businessmen, traveling out of existing groups, were referred to these prospective newcomers. New groups started up and it was found, to the astonishment of everyone, that A.A.'s message could be transmitted in the mail as well as by word of mouth. By the end of 1939 it was estimated that 800 alcoholics were on their way to recovery.

In the spring of 1940, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. gave a dinner for many of his friends to which he invited A.A. members to tell their stories. News of this got on the world wires; inquiries poured in again and many people went to the bookstores to get the book "Alcoholics Anonymous." By March 1941 the membership had shot up to 2,000. Then Jack Alexander wrote a feature article in the *Saturday Evening Post* and placed such a compelling picture of A.A. before the general public that alcoholics in need of help really deluged us. By the close of 1941, A.A. numbered 8,000 members. The mushrooming process was in full swing. A.A. had become a national institution.

Our Society then entered a fearsome and exciting adolescent period. The test that it faced was this: Could these large numbers of erstwhile erratic alcoholics successfully meet and work together? Would there be quarrels over membership, leadership and money? Would there be strivings for power and

prestige? Would there be schisms which would split A.A. apart? Soon A.A. was beset by these very problems on every side and in every group. But out of this frightening and at first disrupting experience the conviction grew that A.A.'s had to hang together or die separately. We had to unify our Fellowship or pass off the scene.

As we discovered the principles by which the individual alcoholic could live, so we had to evolve principles by which the A.A. groups and A.A. as a whole could survive and function effectively. It was thought that no alcoholic man or woman could be excluded from our Society; that our leaders might serve but never govern; that each group was to be autonomous and there was to be no professional class of therapy. There were to be no fees or dues; our expenses were to be met by our own voluntary contributions. There was to be the least possible organization, even in our service centers. Our public relations were to be based upon attraction rather than promotion. It was decided that all members ought to be anonymous at the level of press, radio, TV and films. And in no circumstances should we give endorsements, make alliances, or enter public controversies.

This was the substance of A.A.'s Twelve Traditions, which are stated in full on page 564 of this book. Though none of these principles had the force of rules or laws, they had become so widely accepted by 1950 that they were confirmed by our first International Conference held at Cleveland. Today the remarkable unity of A.A. is one of the greatest assets that our Society has.

While the internal difficulties of our adolescent

period were being ironed out, public acceptance of A.A. grew by leaps and bounds. For this there were two principal reasons: the large numbers of recoveries, and reunited homes. These made their impressions everywhere. Of alcoholics who came to A.A. and really tried, 50% got sober at once and remained that way; 25% sobered up after some relapses, and among the remainder, those who stayed on with A.A. showed improvement. Other thousands came to a few A.A. meetings and at first decided they didn't want the program. But great numbers of these—about two out of three—began to return as time passed.

Another reason for the wide acceptance of A.A. was the ministration of friends—friends in medicine, religion, and the press, together with innumerable others who became our able and persistent advocates. Without such support, A.A. could have made only the slowest progress. Some of the recommendations of A.A.'s early medical and religious friends will be found further on in this book.

Alcoholics Anonymous is not a religious organization. Neither does A.A. take any particular medical point of view, though we cooperate widely with the men of medicine as well as with the men of religion.

Alcohol being no respecter of persons, we are an accurate cross section of America, and in distant lands, the same democratic evening-up process is now going on. By personal religious affiliation, we include Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Hindus, and a sprinkling of Moslems and Buddhists. More than 15% of us are women.

At present, our membership is increasing at the rate of about seven per cent a year. So far, upon the

total problem of several million actual and potential alcoholics in the world, we have made only a scratch. In all probability, we shall never be able to touch more than a fair fraction of the alcohol problem in all its ramifications. Upon therapy for the alcoholic himself, we surely have no monopoly. Yet it is our great hope that all those who have as yet found no answer may begin to find one in the pages of this book and will presently join us on the highroad to a new freedom.

FOREWORD TO THIRD EDITION

BY March 1976, when this edition went to the printer, the total worldwide membership of Alcoholics Anonymous was conservatively estimated at more than 1,000,000, with almost 28,000 groups meeting in over 90 countries.¹

Surveys of groups in the United States and Canada indicate that A.A. is reaching out, not only to more and more people, but to a wider and wider range. Women now make up more than one-fourth of the membership; among newer members, the proportion is nearly one-third. Seven percent of the A.A.'s surveyed are less than 30 years of age—among them, many in their teens.²

The basic principles of the A.A. program, it appears, hold good for individuals with many different lifestyles, just as the program has brought recovery to those of many different nationalities. The Twelve Steps that summarize the program may be called *los Doce Pasos* in one country, *les Douze Etapes* in another, but they trace exactly the same path to recovery that was blazed by the earliest members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

In spite of the great increase in the size and the span of this Fellowship, at its core it remains simple and personal. Each day, somewhere in the world, recovery begins when one alcoholic talks with another alcoholic, sharing experience, strength, and hope.

¹In 1984, over 58,500 groups, with A.A. activity in 114 countries.

²In 1984, about one-third are women; about one-fifth, 30 and under.

THE DOCTOR'S OPINION

WE OF Alcoholics Anonymous believe that the reader will be interested in the medical estimate of the plan of recovery described in this book. Convincing testimony must surely come from medical men who have had experience with the sufferings of our members and have witnessed our return to health. A well-known doctor, chief physician at a nationally prominent hospital specializing in alcoholic and drug addiction, gave Alcoholics Anonymous this letter:

To Whom It May Concern:

I have specialized in the treatment of alcoholism for many years.

In late 1934 I attended a patient who, though he had been a competent businessman of good earning capacity, was an alcoholic of a type I had come to regard as hopeless.

In the course of his third treatment he acquired certain ideas concerning a possible means of recovery. As part of his rehabilitation he commenced to present his conceptions to other alcoholics, impressing upon them that they must do likewise with still others. This has become the basis of a rapidly growing fellowship of these men and their families. This man and over one hundred others appear to have recovered.

I personally know scores of cases who were of the type with whom other methods had failed completely.

These facts appear to be of extreme medical importance; because of the extraordinary possibilities of rapid