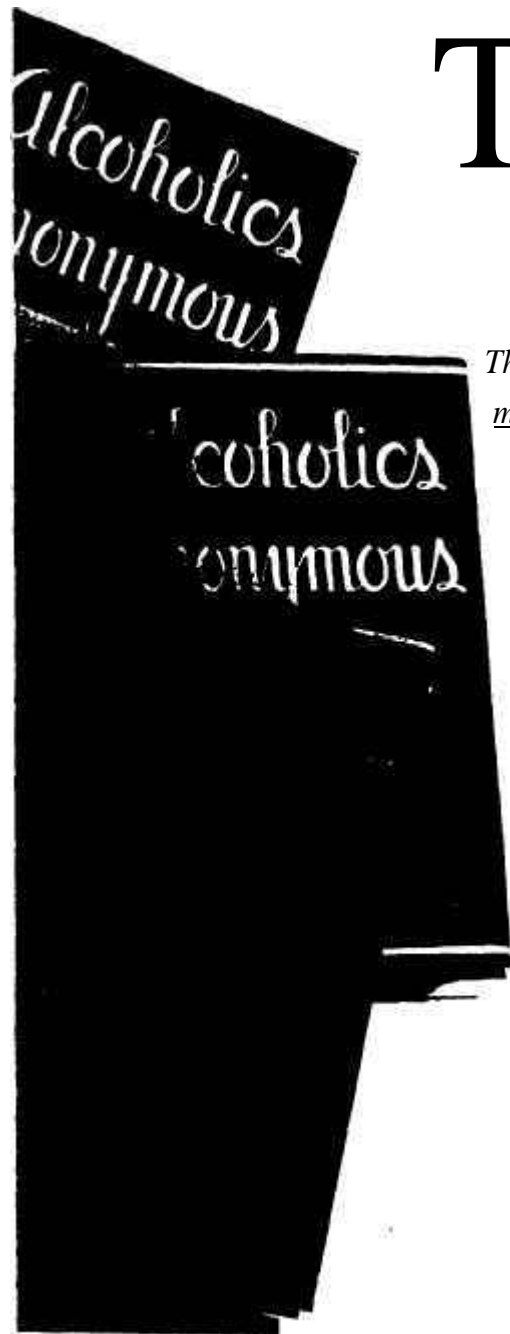


August 1976

# The Big Book



*The first copy of Alcoholics Anonymous was published in 1939. Some million and a half books later, in a brand-new third edition, the basic message of the Big Book remains the same. No modern discipline nor ancient esoteric philosophy can claim as many converts to sobriety as can the simple program set forth in the Big Book.*

## How AA Came to New Zealand

*The story  
of one man  
and a book,  
and of the  
impact he made  
on his  
homeland*

**I**N FEBRUARY 1976, AA in New Zealand celebrated thirty years of carrying the message, with an anniversary dinner held during the annual convention. One of the guests of honor was Ian, the first AA in New Zealand, who achieved sobriety in 1946 through following suggestions in the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

In his prime, Ian was a big-framed man of some eighteen stone (about 250 pounds). He came from a well-to-do New Zealand family, which owned a large machinery firm with branches throughout the provinces. Ian enjoyed social drinking for ten years, and then crossed over that invisible line into alcoholism. He proceeded to run the full gamut of the disease.

Ian joined the family business,

but the day came when his business associates hated to see him coming, and inevitably he was squeezed out altogether. He spent periods estranged from his wife and family, and at one stage his wife had to leave. His family did everything possible to help him. He saw doctors, and played the usual alcoholic games with them. They would shake their heads and say, "Ian, you haven't seen the end of this yet. It won't be very pretty."

Then he went to England to consult the medical experts on Harley Street, but they had no answer for him. When the crew of the liner Rangitane saw him staggering along the wharf for the return journey, they gave him a rousing welcome, for they had never seen a drinker quite like him before.

Later, he was committed to an island for inebriates in the Hauraki Gulf. When he was delivered to the island, he wrote down all the people he was going to get for this, and his wife headed the list. When he returned home, the drinking went on apace, so he decided on a geographical cure and bought a small farm. He thought farmers, being close to the land, had fewer worries, tensions, and pressures. But it made no difference.

One Saturday morning, Ian proceeded to the pub for his usual session. He decided to go home via the psychiatric hospital. He doesn't know why to this day, but when he arrived at the hospital, he asked the

superintendent to admit him. "Maybe," he says, "I had reached the point beyond which I was not prepared to go, or possibly it was my wife's faith." His wife always prefaced her conversations with the words "Ian, when you recover," never "if you recover."

The superintendent knew Ian and his family well, and he was more than a little puzzled at his request. One is supposed to be in full possession of one's faculties for voluntary admission, and Ian hardly qualified — he was very drunk. So the superintendent rang Ian's wife, Heather, and said, "Ian is here and wants to be admitted. What will I do with him?"

She replied, "If you can get him, grab him." So in he went.

Though his parents and many other well-meaning people had made strenuous efforts to get him sober, this was the first move he had ever made himself. There was no treatment for alcoholism in the hospital. They simply dried him out and left him to mooch about as he wished. He didn't check himself out, for he was now far too frightened of what might happen to him next.

One day, he wandered into the patients' common room and picked up a *Reader's Digest*. He noticed an article called "Maybe You Can Do It, Too." It was about alcoholism, and the author drank the way Ian drank, felt the way he felt, and thought the way he thought. Ian was immediately able to identify. The ar-

ticle said that anyone who had a problem with alcohol and wanted help could write to GSO, New York, and the address followed.

This Ian did, and soon back came a letter from Bobbie of GSO, along with a copy of the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*. The book came with the compliments of an American businessman, who had spent some years in New Zealand.

In Bobbie's letter, she said words to this effect: "We don't know if this thing will work by mail or not; we see no reason why it shouldn't. On one of our walls here, we have a map of the world, and a flag is pinned on all the countries where AA is to be found. As far as New Zealand is concerned, you are it. Goodbye and God bless you." That was in 1946.

Ian used the Big Book as an instruction manual, and tried to do what it said about the Steps. It took him a year to get anywhere near a contented sobriety. His wife had noticed that his drinking was always associated with tension, and so, whenever tension came Ian's way, he would do two things: take out the book and go through the Steps again to see where he was going wrong, and write to Bobbie and tell her how he felt. Always, the tension vanished. "Even when I popped the letter to Bobbie in the postal box, I felt better." Her replies would come back, and they were so accurate regarding his problems that for a long time he suspected Heather was writ-

*"We don't know whether  
this thing will work  
by mail or not..."*

ing to Bobbie on the sly.

So he read on, absorbing it all, accepting it all, and trying to do as the book suggested. Then he came to Chapter 7, "Working With Others," where it says, "Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics." He read the chapter very carefully and then sought out other alcoholics — which wasn't very difficult. Some of the practicing alcoholics used to come and stay on the farm with Ian and Heather. They soon found one Big Book was insufficient, so they imported five more. The five prospects would sit down, read, and discuss the Big Book with Ian. Few achieved sobriety.

Then Ian received word from GSO that a *March of Time* film with a comprehensive survey on alcoholism would be shown in New Zealand. A good portion of this film was devoted to AA. Ian got busy and told anyone he could about this film. Then Lillian R. and her husband Bert visited New Zealand. Lillian was on the comeback trail in show business, and her show opened in Auckland. To meet them, Ian traveled the 450 miles from Welling-

ton, where he now lived. He learned much about AA from them — especially from Bert, who had been sober seven years. In addition, Ian told anyone and everyone who would listen that recovery from alcoholism was possible in AA.

Around this time, a doctor in Auckland was worried about his brother-in-law, Alf, a dental surgeon, who had a serious drinking problem. Though everything possible had been tried, Alf never remained sober for long. The doctor wrote to the Health Department in Wellington, said he had heard of some new treatment for alcoholism there, and asked for information. Ian had made the facts of his recovery known to the Health Department, so they got in touch with him and relayed the request. Ian sent the doctor a few pamphlets and his copy of the Big Book, and in an accompanying letter said that he had achieved sobriety by accepting the suggestions in the book and putting them into action, and that very likely Alf could achieve sobriety in the same way. The doctor took Alf some twenty miles out of Auckland to his weekend cottage, laid the book and the pamphlets on the kitchen table, said, "See what you can make of that lot," and went away and left him on his own. Alf became sober, has not had a drink since, and still is a staunch AA man in Auckland. As a result of Alf's contact with the Big Book, AA was on its way in Auckland Province.

Then a man wrote from Dunedin. His brief correspondence, written on toilet paper, said that though he hadn't lost everything, he was worried that he might have a problem. Dunedin is 600 miles south of Wellington, and Ian picked up his Big Book and went the 600 miles.

And so it went on and on, the carrying of this message. Ian's Big Book got such a workout that it fell apart at the seams. He got a bookbinder to repair it, but this time he left out the personal-story section at the back, for he felt he didn't need that section any more. He still reads something from his Big Book every day. Written inside the cover are these words: "It is foolish to assume that you can recover from alcoholism without a book which contains the recovery instructions." Underneath this, he has written, "Abstain from weakening the AA program with Twelve Step substitutions — or you will water it down to the point of drunkenness."

As a result of the powerful force of one alcoholic talking to another, groups began to appear in the main New Zealand cities. They had many problems and many arguments, but always they would solve these by reference to the Big Book. Then public meetings began to be held, and articles and meeting advertisements began to appear in the newspapers. In 1950, a commercial traveler staying at a hotel in Wellington was too sick to work, and contemplating suicide, when he saw

one of these articles in the newspaper. He contacted AA and then grew impatient at having to wait for a Big Book. So, having some money left, he imported 100 copies. Today, the New Zealand GSO distributes 500 Big Books a year.

In the early years, Ian saw the necessity of having some organization to educate the public to the disease concept of alcoholism, so he formed the National Society on Alcoholism and was its first secretary. Today, the National Society is big business, and its work is slowly bearing results. There is still much to do. Not many medical men know much about alcoholism, but this will change, for alcoholism is now included in the curriculum of the country's medical school.

I have been fortunate over the

years to attend the group to which Ian belongs. I have noticed that hardly ever does he speak at an AA meeting without picking up the Big Book and reading from it something relevant to what he has just been talking about. He then goes on to stress the value of this wonderful book to anyone seeking recovery from alcoholism, and the necessity of doing what it suggests.

Small wonder, then, that when Ian resumed his seat after his talk on the great occasion of New Zealand's thirtieth-anniversary celebration, everyone spontaneously stood, most with tears in their eyes and lumps in their throats, and applauded, for what seemed an eternity, this great old-timer's endeavors that began thirty years ago.

*Pat, Wellington, New Zealand*

## *Big Book*

# Twelve Promises

*Eleven of them offer growth beyond sobriety*

WE ARE ALL familiar with the first great promise of Alcoholics Anonymous — that through its teachings and by working the Twelve Steps, we can recover from alcoholism and be able to attain and maintain sobriety. Great as this promise is, it is not the only promise the program makes — contrary to the current belief of many.

I was well into my twenty-fourth year of continuous sobriety in the AA program, at a meeting 1,200 miles away from my home group, before it was brought to my attention that the Big Book makes us eleven other promises besides that of sobriety.

On page 96 of the original 1939 edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*

and starting in the last paragraph on page 83 of the second and third editions, are these assurances: "We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves."

In all three editions, these words follow: "Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us — sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them."

Go back and read the eleven promises again. They are beautiful. They assure us of happiness, serenity,

peace, and freedom from regret, self-pity, selfishness, and insecurity. Are not these the things we so desperately sought, along with sobriety, when we came to AA? I believe that they are and that newcomers should be informed of these promises when they are being told of the AA way of life.

*W.C., Shelbyville, Ind.*

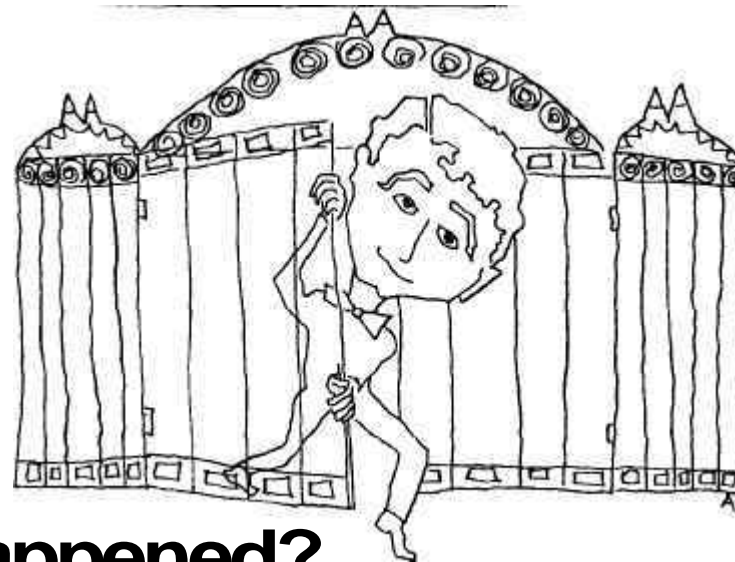
*Big Book*

## What Ever Happened?

**W**HEN I WAS catapulted into AA eleven years ago, I was considered a younger person. I was told that people like me were unusual when AA began, that younger people were sometimes advised to go out and get themselves a story. Nobody said that to me. I was referred to AA by a psychiatrist after I had encountered many of the animals from Walt Disney's movies in person and after I had lost my job. I was ready. I had hit bottom. I had qualified by any standard.

I quickly saw I had needed AA in my life before I reached that chronic stage. I had always been alcoholic and could have used AA at twenty or maybe even earlier. So I set about making new people, who had come as close to the chronic stage as I had, as comfortable as I could.

I made remarks in my talks to



*Is our sophisticated search for "something else" leading us away from basic AA principles?*

appeal to them. I said I should have been here earlier. I got active speaking to non-AA groups and helped point out the usefulness of our glorious program to problem drinkers before they had DTs and enlarged livers, or were collecting unemployment checks.

Members who thought as I did helped expand AA's membership. We have worked hard during the past decade to prove to the world that "the only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking."

If I had it to do over, I would do it over. But I must admit a prejudice: I still feel at some unconscious level like a low-bottom, down-at-

the-heel, old-fashioned, garden-variety drunk!

Bill said AA must change, and it has. I went to three meetings last week where nobody mentioned the Big Book, sponsorship, the Steps, or Twelfth Step work. The three speakers gave breezy, sophisticated talks and then launched into advice to the newcomer, which was actually a plug for their therapists. They made AA sound like a charm school. They talked about dieting, dressing well, and not smoking. They really tried to turn the room on with a lot of erudite talk — and I must admit, they succeeded.

I felt lonesome. I felt outdated. What ever happened to our "pro-



gram of recovery"? I hear that there are no musts, but I can't help feeling some people have interpreted that theory to mean that AA is an abstinence club, and you get your other guidance from more chic and expensive sources.

One old-timer was sitting in the middle of one of these new meeting rooms (no Slogans, no AA literature, no coffee and cake). She interrupted all the Noel Cowardish talk and advised the group to just come to meetings, stay away from one drink one day at a time, practice the Steps, and try to give it away, and everything would be fine. They ignored her. I wanted to kiss her.

The phenomenon I am speaking of may be true in certain areas only. There are slight regional differences in AA, and I am all for them. But will this move away from "old-fashioned" AA begin to spread? And would it be so bad if it did?

I don't want to fall into the bleeding-deacon category; if AA changes, I will change with it, in order to stay sober and continue to grow as a human being. Still, change for the sake of change is not always a good idea. Being consistently liberal is boring; being consistently conservative is dull. The human mind is capable of endless variations, and I want to experience as many as possible — but without floating around like a straw in a windstorm.

Spirituality is a priceless component of our program for me, though I am not a listed member of any

*But will this move away  
from "old-fashioned" AA  
begin to spread?*

church. We have built into the core of AA a three-pronged approach to recovery from alcoholism: mental, physical, and spiritual. Without the spiritual element, AA meetings become nothing but group-therapy sessions — and a lot of us know how well we did in group therapy.

Without the tools of our program of recovery, an AA meeting is nothing but a temperance lecture or a rally where pep talks are given by a sober coach. When we do not allude to the Steps or the Big Book, the newcomer can easily end up wondering why AA thinks it's any different

from any other outpatient clinic for alcoholism. And we may start having the same success rates as most of these clinics. We don't want that to happen.

Now that I've presented the problem (or is it a tempest in a teapot?), let me talk about some possible solutions. I can start a Big Book group; I can holler a lot at meetings; I can drop out of these newfangled meetings and go only to meetings where they sing "Gimme that old-time AA."

Or... I can be still and be tolerant. I can learn from these new members while making certain that I myself stick to basics. I can be ready to offer advice when asked by some of the people who attend this new type of meeting exclusively. Advice such as "If you want to get out of your depression and all else has

failed—have you ever thought of Twelfth Step work, buddy?" They will probably say they are not ready, but I can try.

I can also be grateful that these people are sober and will probably stay alive. Desperation is a great teacher. When all else fails, they may read the directions—and learn what is meant by the expression "program of recovery." And I can look upon the always-inspiring proof that AA works in many ways for many people. As someone once said, there are many paths up the mountain; mine is certainly not the only one.

As for this 24 hours, I think I'll begin rereading the Big Book. There must be answers to my questions in it. Now, let me see — where did I put it?

*E.S., Manhattan, N.Y.*

## Making the Big Book Come Alive

*How it works in the life of one family*

AAs went through a breakfast buffet. Three bleary-eyed non-AAs came in for breakfast, and I overheard their conversation.

"What's that group?" said one.

"I heard it was an AA convention" was the reply.

"Oh, the automobile people."

"No, Alcoholics Anonymous — just a bunch of kooks."

I finished my meal and went into the convention hall for the Sunday-morning spiritual meeting, where I heard an inspiring pitch by a kooky priest who told of his battle with booze and his triumphs after coming to AA. During the talk, I watched some people who weren't aware that I was watching, and they showed me a little of the meaning of "You may

be the only copy of the Big Book he has to read."

I was moved to tears by this kooky family. I had seen them together the day before and noticed that they looked happy. (Happiness is easy for me to see, by contrast, since I've found out the destructive influence I had on my family.) They were eating breakfast together. The father's badge told me he was the alcoholic. He was about forty-five; his wife, fortyish; his daughter, about seventh-grade; the son, about fourth-grade.

After eating for a while, the son leaned over and asked his father a question. He obviously knew his father either had an answer or could find one without knocking the boy into a corner or putting him off with "That's not important" or "Can't you see I'm busy?"

The father put his arm around his son's shoulder and gave his answer, and the son looked up into his father's eyes, tilted his chin up, and smiled with an "Oh, now I see" look.

I usually answered my children's questions with fists or big talk to cover up my character defects when I didn't know — those actions that teach children to quit talking.

A while later, the daughter shared some idea of hers with the mother

and father, and you could tell how much that family loved one another by the way they glowed.

Presently, the father wanted some coffee, got up and went to the hall, and returned with a fresh pitcher. On his way back, people at other tables would look up with that empty-cup expression, asking for a refill. He graciously filled cup after cup, and I was filled with a gnawing worry — *he* wasn't going to get any. Again, I read from his Big Book. You see, when I go for coffee, come hell or high water, my selfishness and insecurity prompt me to fill my cup first. I now understand a little better why some people drift away from me, leaving me with an empty, lonely feeling, one of the feelings I used to appease with alcohol.

After he had returned to his cup with the dregs and enjoyed them for a while, he leaned over and slyly whispered something to his wife. She leaned her head over on his shoulder for a moment, and looked at him with one of those "when the kids get to bed" smiles.

And that family just sat there and loved one another's company for the hour.

It was a beautiful chapter from their Big Book.

*Jim H., Lewiston, Idaho*