

July 1957

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July... today...

*God grant me the SERENITY TO ACCEPT
the things I cannot change,*

*COURAGE TO CHANGE the things I can,
and WISDOM TO KNOW the difference.*

Let's Be Friendly With Our Friends... THE PSYCHIATRISTS

First in A Series

By Bill W.

IT WAS YEARS AGO and we were making our first contacts with mental hospitals. One of them was a New Jersey institution which had paroled two alcoholics who had found AA and had stayed sober for six months. Both of them had been classed as hopeless. Despite AA's unusual methods, the hospital's psychiatrists were not a little impressed.

Forthwith the eager AA group nearby began to bombard the hospital for visiting privileges. They wanted to bring the good news to every alkie in the place, no delays allowed. The doctors weren't so sure that this was the right idea.

They were still rather cautious, as they had plenty of reason to be.

"Well," said the AA committee, "why don't you doctors come to a meeting?" Two of the psychiatrists allowed this would be fine. They said they would go to New York's AA group the following week.

In that period I think we New Yorkers gathered in a parlor at Steinway Hall. With much delight we had heard about the proposed pilgrimage of the Jersey doctors. Meeting night finally rolled around. But in the interval, my memory had slipped a cog. I forgot all about those psychiatrists. Right after our meeting opened, the beaming AA contingent from Jersey entered the hall and slid into a back row. But even this reminder failed to jog my memory. I certainly had no reason to think that one of my life's worst embarrassments—and one of its best lessons—was just around the corner.

The meeting's first speaker told a fine story; both grim and inspiring. You could have heard a pin drop. It was simply great.

Then up got Jack. He told how he'd been a rising figure in the motion picture industry and had once earned the modest stipend of \$50,000 a year. Considering his vaunted abilities, Jack had figured this to be only a starter. Then Demon Rum began to cut him down. His worried studio produced a psychiatrist. Grudgingly, Jack took some treatments. The results were nil and more psychiatrists were tried. But Jack's ego, his resentments and his drinking all remained as colossal as

before. He worked himself down and finally out of motion pictures—not at all a surprising development. But here he was in AA, sober for months.

However, it soon became apparent that psychiatrists were still among Jack's pet grudges. He actually blamed them for his downfall. Well knowing that two of them were in the room, he saw the chance of a lifetime. Now *he* could dish it out and *they* would have to sit there and take it!

So Jack proceeded to do a job on psychiatry and all its works. As a speaker he packed a huge wallop and he had great talent for a cynical humor that now suited his purpose exactly. He tore his several psychiatrists apart, one by one. Then he attacked the entire profession, their theories and their philosophies. He called them "fish worm diggers." All the while he was screamingly funny. Though his talk was nine-tenths fantasy and nonsense, it was nevertheless a real piece of showmanship. The audience was convulsed and I thought I'd never laughed so long or so much. Jack finally sat down amidst big applause.

Following the meeting, the Jersey AA contingent pushed toward the platform. They looked both sick and sore, and they definitely were. Mumbling weakly, their spokesman introduced our "honored guests," the two psychiatrists!

I felt an awful sinking sensation in the region of my solar plexus.

Just then Jack, obviously much pleased with himself, walked up and genially slapped one of our guests on the back. "Well, doctor," said he, "how did you like 'them apples' I just handed you!" This was the limit. I could have died of mortification.

But the two psychiatrists smilingly rolled with his punch. They insisted that it had been a wonderfully helpful meeting. After all, they declared their profession ought to be able to stand a little ribbing now and then. To them Jack's talk had been good clean fun and very instructive.

This was an amazing demonstration of friendship and understanding. Under trying conditions these maligned gentlemen had turned the other cheek. They had met Jack's tirade with courtesy, kindness, good humor and even gratitude. It was a lesson in patience, tolerance, and Christian charity that I hope I shall never forget.

As quickly as possible, I angled the two doctors into a corner and began my apologies. In fact I ate crow. Then one of them looked at me and said, "Think nothing of it, Bill. As you surely see, *some* alcoholics are more maladjusted than others. We understand that perfectly!"

Within a month, this very exceptional doctor opened his hospital to AA visitors and a group began to form within the walls. Ever since that time the psychiatric profession

has continued to hold up AA's hands. And I venture to say that it is often their understanding and tolerance, rather than ours, which has brought about this happy state of affairs.

Two more examples: In 1949, the American Psychiatric Association asked me to read a paper on AA before their annual meeting. Going further, the psychiatrists published that paper in their official journal and permitted AA to reprint my material in pamphlet form for public consumption. This one generous act has since brought our fellowship untold benefit. Only recently a survey was made in Los Angeles to determine how the psychiatrists in that city and county felt about AA. I'm told that they feel fine; 99% of them are for us!

Of course this little story has its exaggerations. Great numbers of AA's are today very friendly to psychiatry and no doubt equally great numbers of psychiatrists who know nothing about us or who have seen only AA failures are still against us. But this is beside the point. The point that I am trying to make is that we AA's should try to be uniformly friendly under all conditions.

Now what became of my old friend Jack? Well, Jack just couldn't make it, though he tried hard. He died three years ago of alcoholism.

Perhaps real friendliness was something which Jack never came to understand.