

November 1953

A Group Is Born

South of the Border

FOR the many thousand of "tapatios" in Guadalajara, it was just another one of those beautiful June days. But for me, the skies had suddenly become gray and ominous. I was sitting in the little office of the alcoholic clinic operated by Doctor R., who was listed as the leader of the AA group.

"No, I'm sorry," he was saying, "there is no longer an AA group here. It existed for a short time but went to pieces because it lacked a driving impulse. There was nobody here to keep it going."

Even with four years of sobriety tucked under my belt, the bottom of my stomach seemed to disappear. I had just learned that in this vast republic of some thirty million souls, there now existed but *one* AA group: the Mexico City group, four hundred and twenty-five miles away! Had my wife and I traveled all over Mexico only to discover that the city of our dreams, wherein we hoped to settle for an indefinite period, lacked an AA group so essential to my sobriety?

Apparently so. There were two alternatives: return to the safety of the groups in the U.S.A. or start from scratch right here. I decided to stay.

"What about the former members of the group, Doctor?" Perhaps I could reform the group. Skies got a bit grayer.

"I don't know where they are. I've lost touch with them all," he said.

A sudden thought came to me. "Are you, yourself, an alcoholic, Doctor?"

"No," replied the doctor, and although I had the impression he had done his best, I knew the reason for failure. Only an alcoholic understands an alcoholic. AA, as such, had never really come into being here. At this low point in the conversation a ray of sunlight suddenly pierced my gray skies.

"I do know a young man, however, who is definitely an alcoholic, who speaks excellent English, and who might be a prospect. Would you like to talk to him?"

Would I!

Paulo, my brand-new "prospect," turned out to be a most interesting chap. Mexican by birth, married, three children, slender, wearing the traditional and ferocious "bigote" (mustache), and with a horribly deformed finger caused by gangrene which set in after he had driven his fist through a window during a "borrachera" (spree), he had a case history which would make oldtimers blush. Furthermore, and I was to have it verified later, I had arrived at exactly the right psychological moment. He was ready. A month sooner or later would have meant failure. I had found my man! A few days later, on Saturday, June 21, 1952, with one "alcoholico Mexicano," one "alcoholico Norteamericano," and one non-alcoholic associate present, AA was born in an apartment in Guadalajara, four hundred and ten years after the birth of the city itself.

Discouraging days followed. At the end of two months, in a city of more than three hundred thousand souls, our little group consisted of the two of us. Of the alcoholics we contacted, none wanted to quit. Take Bob's case, for example. A fifty-six year old student under the G.I. Bill, he has been saturated for years. When we entered his room we were greeted by, "I know all about AA and it isn't for me. I don't want to be saved." He is almost dead now. Step One stopped him. He won't admit that tequila is his master. It appeared that we were on a battleground that had been dominated for too many cen-

turies by our arch-enemy alcohol.

One night at the end of August, Paulo came to the apartment and told me of an emergency case about which he had just heard. Alberto was a prominent lawyer whose wife had just left him, taking all their possessions except for his tequila bottle, his clothes, and one cot. He had been in a stupor for weeks. We piled him into the car with all his clothes, gave him his bottle, and took him to the apartment. He was in critical condition. Nobody slept that night. Half in Spanish and half in English, he kept calling for "tragitos" (little drinks). Next day we managed to get him, via several bars for sustaining drinks, into Doctor R's clinic for the three-day dry-out.

For two months Alberto rode the proverbial AA *pink cloud*. He was a dynamo. He turned his sumptuous office over to us for meetings. And soon he was telling us what was wrong with AA. He wanted to rewrite the book. I did not understand the Mexican temperament, etc., etc. But the Man Upstairs had a use for him. For Alberto brought *Antonio* to us. And Antonio brought *Jose F.* to us. And, to date you won't find two better or stronger or finer members in AA anywhere. They are part of our "Faithful Five." Alberto? He wound up in the clinic again. Grateful for what he had done for them, Antonio and Jose F. stuck with him like leeches for weeks, hoping he would reach his bottom, but to no avail. Five repeats to the clinic, a ticker that is behaving badly,

and Step One still has Alberto baffled. Yes; cunning, baffling, powerful: that is tequila.

Now there were four of us. In the meantime a local padre had been trying his own approach on Alfredo A., another well-qualified alcoholic. Somehow he heard of our little group and brought Alfredo A. to a meeting. The spade-work had been done well. We had a new member, one who could speak English, too. He is still with us.

For the next six months it was much the same old story. Diego, the utilities man, came for a couple of months and then disappeared. Jose G. the rug weaver left for the U.S.A., but has been sober for more than a year. Juan, the public stenographer, came intermittently for many weeks and then went back to his love: tequila. Another Juan, a public guide, came for a few meetings, qualified as an alcoholic, and decided he could handle the situation himself! Then there was Jorge. He only slipped once in three months, then slipped into alcoholic oblivion. Finally, Paulo found Pedro, the ex-hotel manager, who had become an alcoholic while working north of the border for eleven years. He still takes a couple now and then, but he hasn't missed a meeting for three months!

Paulo and his family left us in February and moved to his home town of Teocaltiche, a hundred miles away. It was quite a blow to us, but the Man Upstairs had other ideas. Paulo had nine months of sobriety when he left.

Furthermore, he knew the town alcoholics by their first names! Before long he had his prospects meeting in the hotel bar and then proceeding upstairs to the AA meeting room. We still laugh at that one.

But how did he make out? About two weeks ago our little group took the rugged, five-hour, second class bus trip to Teocaltiche for a special, Saturday night meeting held in our honor. How that Greater Power must have smiled! All in all, there were *twenty* of us present. The result was the birth of a comradeship, an understanding, a happiness, and a knowledge that they were not alone in their sickness. AA had gained a little on this tough battleground of Mexico.

Now the question arises: why do we have but one member of AA in Mexico for each one million inhabitants (approximate only), whereas we are one thousand times more successful above the border? Study the history and nature of the people here. Perhaps Alberto was right; the temperament of the people *is* different. Family pride will cause a man to exclaim, "I am a 'macho', a man. I can drink with the best of them!"—even when he is tottering on the brink of the grave with the D. T.'s . There is also a reluctance to accept the fact that alcoholism is a disease. Add to this the poverty that exists on every hand, the cheapness of excellent tequila, the lack of hospital facilities, and the tendency to take a church six-month abstinence pledge instead of facing

facts,—and you have some of the answers.

There is the picture after almost a year: two more groups in Mexico for a total of three, and an almost impossible job ahead of us. But it has been exciting fun. In spite of the language barriers, I've seen the miracle of AA at work in new fields; I have staunch, new friends; and I've

strengthened my sobriety. Those who failed in our groups still have the kit of spiritual tools at their disposal. Who knows? Perhaps someday they may pick them up and go to work on a new personality.

I think I'll stick around a while longer! Mariana is only twenty-four hours away!

Ray R., Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico