

July 1972

## A History of Horrors

*Since the days of the Deluge man has recorded his treatments and his 'cures' for the disease of alcoholism*

WITH EXTENDED PALMS and without hope for an answer, Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, asked a question: "Who could have foretold, from the structure of the brain, that wine could derange its functions?" The shadows from the oil lamp danced on the dirt floor. In the corner of the cell, the drunk lay in his own vomit. In six hours, he would be in the snake pit. The place was Greece. The time was 400 BC.

Down through the years, since the beginning of recorded history, the shouts of "success" in treating alcoholism and the whispers of many failures have echoed through time's dark corridors up to 1935's burst of sunlight, when Alcoholics Anonymous merged the truths of millions of yesterdays and offered hope to him who was hopeless: the chronic drunk.

Not all alcoholics have been so fortunate.

History has never had a holiday from alcoholism. Since long before the crest of ancient Greek civilization, thousands of years before the

founding of AA, man has continued his discouraging task of recording the theories and problems relative to alcohol and alcoholism, together with the "cures" that have been used in attempts to combat this mysterious malady. Although over 200,000 articles have been written on these subjects, the search is far from over. A little knowledge sometimes beats a loud drum.

Attempted "cures" for drunks have, for the most part, been fielded by either law, religion, medicine, or combinations of these three. Information on all drugs and substances used in the Western world for this purpose during the last 2,000 years has been researched by F. Lickint, chief physician of the medical clinic



in Dresden, East Germany. Published in 1953, the book shows a bibliography of more than 450 items. This great list of "cures" contains substances such as amethyst, gold chloride, drowned (?) eels, sweat, and sulphuric acid. And the items listed are only those said to induce the alcoholic to become a total abstainer or moderate drinker. They do not include drugs intended to ameliorate the symptoms of intoxication. The search goes on.

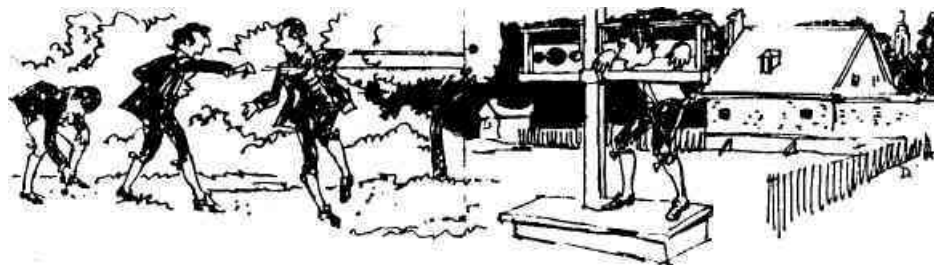
In religion's field, such as the Bible's 250 references to alcoholic beverages, the thunder of consequence for the sin of drunkenness comes through loud and clear. Genesis 9:20-21 tells of Noah, who learned the strength of his wine and

promptly passed out. If nothing else, this incident helps prove that booze was already around in the days of the Deluge, and some folks couldn't handle it then, either.

A little later, Proverbs 20:1 and 23:29-35 hammer out the consequence of overindulgence.

The New Testament adds to the warnings. First Corinthians 6:10-11 puts drunks in "colorful" company, and Galatians 5:19-21 is no more delicate: "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are ... envyings, murders, *drunkenness*, revelings, and such like."

The Old Testament does offer some comfort to the drunkard: "Repent!" The New adds the thought "and follow Jesus Christ!" Over the



centuries, millions of troubled drunks have fallen in line behind religious banners. But how many have succeeded in the march, found the answer to their drinking problem through straight religion? Even a debatable estimate would be low.

Our Ebby was one of the drunks who tried that approach and during most of his life failed — for himself. And yet, in 1934, with his admission to Bill that "I've got religion," Ebby indirectly unlocked the gift of freedom for the thousands of AA members around the world today.

Laws have always been used in the attempt to solve the problem of alcoholism. Back 2,000 years before the advent of the Christian era, the ancient Chinese government tried to control intoxicants by monopolizing their manufacture and sale. Later, during the fifth century AD, in further effort to reduce drunkenness, an imperial edict proclaimed that all liquor makers, sellers, or users were to have their heads chopped off! Kublai Khan, founder of the Mongol dynasty of China, in the thirteenth century, announced the sentence of banishment and slavery for all engaged in the liquor traffic.

The snake pits of ancient Greece were another colorful innovation. Citizens dug deep trenches, into which they released dozens of snakes — followed by a now sober but hung-over patient who had slept it off in a cell. When he was forced into the pit and lowered to the bottom, his reaction was either silence

through apprehensive fear or an action-packed rendition of "Danse Macabre" to the tempo of his fearful screams.

Although no evidence shows that this treatment worked, the snake pits did expose Greek belief in the magic, curative power of snakes. Even today, the symbol of medicine is the caduceus, a winged staff with two snakes or serpents wound around it.

The use of the stocks as a form of punishment and "cure" dates back to early England, in 1350, when the Statute of Laborers provided that unruly or drunken workmen should be punished in the stocks.

It became an even more popular method of treatment for alcoholism after James I was crowned King of England in 1603. His contempt for drunks was expressed in his manifesto: "Drunkenness is an odious sin, deserving punishment by fine, imprisonment, and in the stocks." That was expected to teach the drunk not to repeat his transgression!

The stocks were a wooden framework with holes for the legs, arms, and neck of the victim. Drunks and other persons who had broken the law were placed on public display for periods ranging from several

hours to several days. Mobs threw stones and other objects at them. Even before the days of Coopers-town, an expert pitcher occasionally effected a permanent cure. The drunk never took another drink. He was dead.

The use of stocks in America did not disappear until the early 1800's, nearly 500 years after their introduction.

The year 1840 heard thunderous prayers of thanksgiving. At long last, it seemed there was an answer to the malady of alcoholic destruction. The Washingtonian movement\* was organized. Composed of both alcoholics and nonalcoholics, all pledged to total abstinence, it grew in a few short years to 400,000 members — and then destroyed itself.

In 1879, Dr. Leslie E. Keeley, who had been a Civil War surgeon, heard the chorus of cries for help from alcoholics and their associates. The good doctor answered with his famed slogan: "Drunkenness is a disease, and I can cure it!" His method: a "secret" injection.

During the 1890's, Keeley Clubs flourished over the United States, with alcoholics sporting gold buttons

\* See "The Washingtonians," February 1971 Grapevine,

to signify membership. As the Washingtonians had, they preached exciting confessional sermons.

The Keeley "cure" enjoyed a spectacular burst of popularity — and then faded. Dr. Keeley died in 1900.

Whatever remedies were tried through these past thousands of years, one popular solution was always available: "Lock him up!" From dungeons to insane asylums to sanitariums to drunk tanks: "Lock him up. We have no other answer for this one!"

In 1892, William Osier, one of the outstanding doctors of the day, published his book *Principles and Practice of Medicine*. "Chronic alcoholism," he wrote, "is a condition very difficult to treat. Once fully established, the habit is rarely abandoned. Prolonged seclusion in a suitable institution is, in reality, the only effectual means of cure. When the hereditary tendency is strongly developed, a lapse into the drinking habit is almost inevitable."

That was only eight years before the start of *our* century!

After all the thousands of years of effort — the snake pits, the stocks, the institutions, and all the rest — the alcoholic's future looked as bleak as ever. Tomorrow's lonely dawn wore a gray veil.

And then the truths of all those yesterdays merged to light our way. Alcoholics Anonymous was born.

We AAs are a bunch of lucky drunks!

Anonymous, "Out West"