

AA Grapevine, June 1985

# A Very Special Room

**F**RIDAY, THE NIGHT of the first day of February 1985. It is raining, with snow on the way. I have just entered the tall church house diagonally across from New York City's exclusive Gramercy Park. From the lobby I can see into the AA meeting room, and if I were shooting a movie about AA, this would be the perfect set. Not only is this room typical, it might be the archetype of all AA meeting rooms!

Inside, there is a cubbyhole kitchen with serving counter built into the back wall, but the coffee table is set out in the main room. I get my coffee and take a seat in the back row. Slowly, the room begins to fill: some attractive women, some nicely dressed men — a lot of people I've never seen before, although I've been coming to meetings in New York for fourteen years and this group is only a fifteen-minute walk from my home group. I

have never been in this room, this very special room, before tonight.

The meeting is called to order; the chairwoman reads the Preamble. Behind her are hung the Steps and the Traditions; between them and higher up is a church emblem with the motto DISCIPLINIA EST LIBERTAS — but between the two main words and covering the "EST" is our slogan "Easy Does It," softening the effect considerably. All this on a wall made up of five gothic arches. But then I remember, this is, after all, a very special room.

The speaker is announced, and a man dressed all in black, whom I had seen earlier and mistaken for a priest, steps forward to the podium. He is a handsome man in late middle age with wavy white hair and a rugged man-of-action face — turns out, he is a businessman and a former Navy pilot.

As he begins his opening remarks I start to drift off, hearing the sounds but not the words. I think of this room, of why this AA meeting room is different from all others. And as if on cue, the speaker tells me: "... As a man who used to be here" — and he is pointing his finger straight up — "often said, 'If you want to see Faith in action, go to an AA meeting.' This man, no longer with us, was the rector of Calvary Church from 1926 to 1951."

The man the speaker is quoting was the Rev. Dr. Samuel Shoemaker, whose Oxford Group meetings were held in this very room. This room where our co-founder Bill W. sat on Sunday evenings between 1934 and 1937 and received much of the spiritual part of our program!

This meeting is being held next door to Calvary Episcopal Church, East 21st Street and Park Avenue South, at Calvary House, a nine-story annex caused to be built by Dr. Shoemaker in 1928. The speaker was pointing his finger up because Sam Shoemaker and his family lived in an apartment high in the building.

Bill found his way to this special room via Calvary Mission, located in 1934 at 346 East 23rd Street and opened in February 1926 by Sam Shoemaker during his first year at Calvary. Shoemaker believed his ministry should extend beyond the upper middle-class environs of Gramercy Park to the homeless alcoholics and derelicts who swarmed in the old Gas House district just a few

blocks east of his church. He converted an unused chapel belonging to the church into the Mission, which eight years later would house a newly sober Ebby T. who brought the message to a drunken Bill W.

A few days later Bill, wondering what on earth had so changed his old drinking crony, decided to go to the Mission and see for himself just what "brand" of religion got Ebby! Bill started out sober but, after leaving the train at 23rd Street and Fourth Avenue, hit all the low-life saloons of the Gas House district on his way to the mission, picking up Alec the Finn, seaman and sailmaker, in the process. Bill, still drunk in spite of a plate of beans given him by Ebby, decided to go forward with other penitents when they were "called to Jesus." Ebby, embarrassed, grabbed the coattail of Bill's second-hand Brooks Brothers suit, but Bill shook him loose, and, standing tall and elegant compared to the other ragged drunks, gave what amounted to AA's first qualification. After some initial resistance to his speaking from the floor, Bill's speech was well received.

Three more days of drinking brought Bill to Towns Hospital for his fourth and last detox. There Bill had his powerful spiritual awakening, and several days later either Ebby or Rowland H. brought Bill a copy of William James's book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. With some difficulty, Bill read it through. (One of the stories in that book was about Samuel H. Hadly, whose son, coin-

identally, was Shoemaker's first superintendent of Calvary Mission, Henry Harrison Hadly II.)

In the six months before his historic trip to Akron and meeting with Dr. Bob, Bill became an active member of the Oxford Group and attended its Sunday night meetings at Calvary

House. The principles he learned there (and first heard from Ebby) — admit you are licked; take stock in yourself; recognize your character defects; confide your shortcomings to another person; make restitution to those persons you have harmed; live a life of giving with no thought of

return; prayer — later helped him formulate the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Bill also, at this time, was having talks with Dr. Silkworth at Towns Hospital and learning about the medical aspects of alcoholism. These two doctors, one of the spirit, the other of the body, were Bill's advisers during these early days. His real teachers, however, were the drunks Bill tried so desperately and unsuccessfully to get sober those first six months.

Bill was a firebrand. His natural enthusiasm and salesmanship, coupled with the zealotry of the recent convert, sent him off like a misguided missile. He preached to drunks at the staid Oxford Group meetings; he thundered at them at the Calvary Mission; he exhorted them at Towns Hospital. Bill knew he had a superior product here, the real goods, and he was giving it the hard, hard sell! The trouble was, Bill was concentrating on the spiritual, trying to force his drunks into "deflation at depth" whether they wanted to deflate or not. He wanted them all to have his kind of "blinding flash" spiritual transformation, and would be satisfied with nothing less!

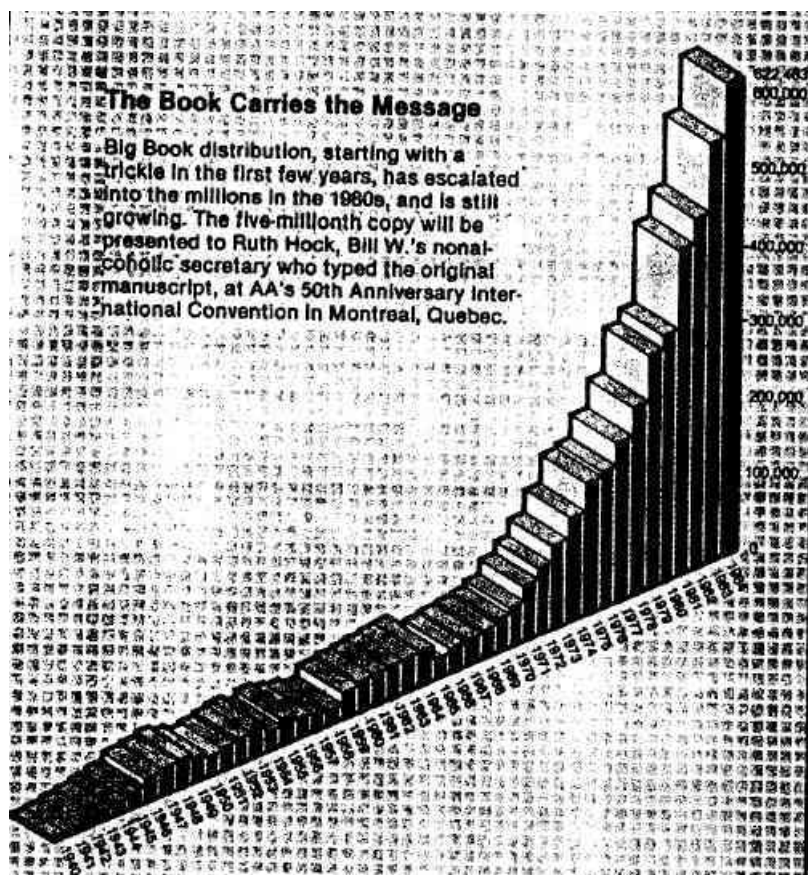
Later, when Bill asked Dr. Silkworth what he was doing wrong, Silkworth gave it to him straight: "For God's sake, Bill, stop preaching to them, you're scaring them half to death!" He went on to say that Bill had got the cart before the horse — that Bill should give them the medical

business first. Soon after, in Akron, Bill took Dr. Silkworth's advice and used this approach on Dr. Bob.

Even before Bill's trip to Akron, he became a member of a little group of alcoholics that would meet at Stewart's Cafeteria after Sunday night meetings at Calvary House. These were all drunks recovering in the Oxford Group. They had a rear table at Stewart's, and over endless cups of coffee in a haze of cigar and cigarette smoke they would talk and joke and relax with one another long into the night. There was Ebby, of course; sometimes Rowland H. would be there; there were Grace McC. and Shep C. and one or two others. This was the start of a long and valued AA tradition — the after-meeting meeting.

A bit of doggerel written by Lois W. referred to "a funny man who lived at 182" and "had so many drunks around he didn't know what to do." It concludes: "But the funniest thing about him was, he really 'fixed' a few." This pretty much summed up Bill's and Lois's experience of turning their house at 182 Clinton Street in Brooklyn into a hostel for drunks.

When Bill returned from Akron late in August 1935, he and Lois, following the example of Dr. Bob and Anne, converted their home into a sort of halfway house. Bill then had the notion that what most drunks were lacking was love — and he and Lois were the ones to supply it. Much later, in the Big Book, Bill wrote of





New York City drunks attended Oxford Group meetings at Calvary Church (left) near historic Gramercy Park (lower right), then moved on to AA meetings in Bill and Lois's home at 182 Clinton Street, Brooklyn Heights.

the dangers of bringing alcoholics into your home; that love alone was not the answer, in fact it was often counterproductive, leading to over-protection and "institutionalism."

Ebby moved into the house that year, as did Alec the Finn, the seaman Bill picked up on his drunken excursion to Calvary Mission the year before. Altogether, there were between fifteen and twenty alcoholics who came to live, at one time or another, at the Brooklyn brownstone, staying from a few days to as long as a year. At the same time, Bill started regular Tuesday night meetings at the house, which would con-

tinue until they had to give up the house in April 1939.

From Towns Hospital, from Calvary House, from the mission for derelicts came drunks in various stages of recovery to Bill's house in Brooklyn. Eventually, these became the nucleus of what was to become New York AA.

Toward the end of 1935, some of the Oxford Group leaders were disapproving of Bill's band of sober drunks, saying that this splinter group was "not really maximum," that Bill's group within the Oxford Group was "narrow and divisive." An assistant of Sam Shoemaker

spoke of Bill's Tuesday night meetings as "special meetings held surreptitiously behind Mrs. Jones's barn." Finally, those in charge of the mission forbade any of the resident drunks there from attending the Brooklyn meetings.

This criticism and rejection hurt Bill and caused him to become disappointed in the O.G.'s leadership. But he was not, at this time, disillusioned with the Oxford Group itself or with its principles. He continued going to Calvary House meetings, and until the summer of 1937 he and Lois would attend weekend "house parties" given by the Oxford Group in such places as Richmond, Virginia, West Point, New York, the Poconos in Pennsylvania, and Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Lois described these weekends as "a cross between a convention and a retreat."

By 1936, the Oxford Groups were at the peak of their popularity. By 1937, the once-intimate group that met at Calvary House had grown too large, and Bill and his sober alcoholics formally left the Oxford Group.

In 1940, Bill wrote why he left the Oxford Group. Among other things, Bill thought that the O.G. principle of "aggressive evangelism" just would not work with alcoholics, as he discovered to his chagrin during his first six months of "preaching." The Oxford Group penchant for personal publicity was, Bill found, extremely dangerous to recovering alcoholics. The O.G.'s Four Absolutes — absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness,

and love — were fine as ideals, but you don't tell any drunk that he "absolutely" must be or do anything! Finally, Bill believed that the principles of love and tolerance had to be *much* more emphasized than they were in the O.G. "Especially tolerance," he wrote: "We had to become much more *inclusive* and never, if possible, *exclusive*. We can never say to anyone (or insinuate) that he must agree to our formula or be excommunicated. The atheist may stand up in an AA meeting denying God, yet reporting how he has been helped in other ways..."

The Oxford Groups wanted to change the world — Bill just wanted to change a few drunks.

On a job-seeking trip west during the summer of 1937, Bill stopped in Akron to compare notes with Dr. Bob and they discovered that between the two groups, Akron and New York, there were forty sober drunks! They discussed ways to bring the message to more people. They came up with three ideas: paid missionaries to take the message on the road, special hospitals for alcoholics, and the publication of a book. The first two schemes were shot down at the famous Rockefeller meeting, which turned out to be a blessing because it ensured we would always be non-professional. The last idea eventually became our Big Book.

In the spring of 1938 Bill started on the book, and at the Tuesday night meetings Bill would read the sections of the book that had been done that

week. There was much discussion (heated and otherwise), many suggestions, and many revisions, and this was how the Big Book was put together.

In April 1939, Bill and Lois had to leave the house on Clinton Street. Then began two years of "living around," as Lois described it. She said they stayed at fifty-one different places (not including weekend visits) during that period. Mostly, they stayed at the homes of AA people, and wherever they lived meetings followed. The Clinton Street meeting was transferred to Burt T.'s tailoring establishment on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue, and later to his uptown loft.

By 1940, there were probably a dozen regular meetings at the homes of members throughout the metropolitan area. In February of that year, AA had its first real home, in a converted stable at 334½ West 24th Street — the legendary 24th Street Clubhouse. A year later, the Jack Alexander article appeared in the *Satur-*

*day Evening Post*, and groups began springing up all over the country. In 1946, an article about AA appeared in the overseas edition of the *Reader's Digest*, and AA groups began to form in Europe and other parts of the world ... .

February 1st, 1985. The meeting is over, and I'm standing outside Calvary House (now called Tracy House). I cross over to Gramercy Park, encircled in its high wrought iron fence, gates locked to all outsiders — you'll find no winos sleeping on its benches. I think of the tremendous debt of gratitude we owe to the Oxford Group that met fifty years ago at Calvary House. This tiny neighborhood in Manhattan, I feel, is the source, the cradle, of what AA has become today. From this spot today, by car, train, or bus, and within an hour and a half, I could find any one of 1,077 groups of Alcoholics Anonymous offering 2,868 meetings each week!

*R. K., Manhattan, N.Y.*