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*"How It All Began: AA in South Africa" — From the October 1993
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In 1946, two men in Johannesburg were on a tear. Each one, independently of the other, happened to get hold of a copy of the *Reader's Digest* in which there was an article on Alcoholics Anonymous and each wrote to the Alcoholic Foundation in New York for further information. The two men were Arthur S. and Solomon M.

Arthur lived in a palatial house in Parkview and was, like one of the original founders of AA, a stockbroker. He was, of course, a white man. Solomon, who lived in a one-room house in Alexandra township, was a black man. The two extremes of society.

When Arthur received the information from the United States he was so taken with the program that he immediately set about forming a group. In order to get into contact with alcoholics, he approached two professionals at the Johannesburg General Hospital, Miss Donovan and Sister Maxwell, head nurse of the casualty ward. They became in-

terested from the layman's point of view, and they called in others to help spread the news and make contact with alcoholics.

These others included two ministers of religion, a psychiatrist, the director of social services, and an observer.

These people, then, launched the hitherto unknown movement in Johannesburg. The first ever meeting of AA in South Africa was held in Arthur's home in Parkview.

The first newspaper publicity brought a congratulatory letter from Solomon who had already embarked on the AA way of life as a Loner.

At this stage, the only literature the group had was the small pamphlet issued by the Foundation, called "AA," which consisted of excerpts from the Big Book. No one had seen the Big Book itself, and no one had so much as heard of the Twelve Traditions. Many grand schemes were envisaged. Money raised by Arthur provided hospitalization for dozens

of alcoholics, while his dominant personality held the group together.

Thus when, after a few months, Arthur went on a skid, the group disintegrated rapidly. Arthur, unfortunately, never recovered and died in March 1947.

Another serious repercussion was the fact that the group now discovered that Arthur, in his enthusiasm, had allowed his zeal for hospitalization to far outstrip the money he had available for this purpose and that it now owed a Johannesburg Nursing Home the sum of 500,000 sterling (approximately \$2,000 in those days).

This money was later repaid with the help of a grant-in-aid from the Johannesburg Social Services.

In spite of this crippling blow, there remained, however, a small hard core of stalwarts who had been imbued with the true AA philosophy, and these few set about rebuilding the group. By this time, a more varied supply of literature had been ordered from America and more had been learnt about the real AA program.

Thus, although it had suffered this severe setback early in 1947, there was never any actual break in continuity, and by the middle of 1947 the group, though small, was functioning in the true AA spirit.

Of those who helped weather the storm, the names of Ronnie M. and Sister Maxwell come to mind. Ronnie was secretary, almost the only person prepared to speak at meetings, and general "roustabout."

Although a nonalcoholic, Sister Maxwell devoted endless time and energy to the group and it may be said that without her it is doubtful whether the group could have sur-

vived that first storm. Much criticism was leveled at the group for keeping Sister as a permanent member of its steering committee, but it would indeed have been an ungrateful lot if it had kicked her out at that point — just when the movement had been established on a sound footing. The critics can have little conception of the heartbreak and struggle of those early years, when an attempt was being made to establish something entirely new in this country.

In the meanwhile, Solomon had been quietly carrying on with his life of newfound sobriety. It is doubtful whether his own words can be improved upon.

He relates: "My association with AA, from somewhere toward the end of 1946, beginning like nearly all other similar cases with the end of a bender, the last of many which were always to be the last.

"I woke up that Wednesday morning with the dreadful apprehension and horror of one who felt that the end of the world had come.

"There were things — dreadful things — to be faced. The events of the previous day and far into the night now confronted me with stark naked reality. Two people stand out in my memory: my wife and my employer.

"Between the two of them, they literally hauled me out of the wreckage, the consequences of which were to keep me out of pocket for the subsequent seven months. And this meant virtual starvation for my family of three.

"To revert once more, I was taken to a doctor. I endured the usual course of lectures from all and sundry. I made the usual promises, confusedly, doubtfully, and of course with a double dose of high octane resentment.

"Somewhere inside, however, was the feeling that something had cracked up. The haunted sensation returned, gradually but relentlessly and within a few weeks I knew I was in for it.

"Then I got hold of a copy of the *Reader's Digest* — rather dogeared. I turned a few pages and stopped at an article about AA. Less than an hour later, my letter was on its way to New York, to the Foundation.

"Without my knowledge, neither by design or previous planning on my part, the Higher Power had set to work, had taken me by the hand, and was surely leading me out of the labyrinth of alcoholism.

"Most of my records disappeared in February 1949, when we moved from the one-room mansion to the two-room palace we occupy as tenants today. In those records was a letter from Mr. Arthur S., a prized possession, if ever I valued anything. Older members of the Johannesburg Group may remember him. How I got in contact with him I can't remember, but he invited me to his house in Parkview twice. A fine double-story structure it was. Tea on the back porch, AA, and again AA. Two alkies, one white, one black. Talking on one subject which both understood all too clearly. Talking grimly, openly.

"At the end of the session, Mr. S. would take out his car and drop me near the entrance to the so-called residential township which has been my home these many years. Again the hand of the Higher Power.

"Then the blow came via New York. Mr. S. had died. Several empty, anxious months

followed. The only standby: the Big Book and an occasional letter from the Foundation. They also sent useful bits of encouraging literature. With the coming of *The Tendril* [a national AA newsletter and forerunner to the Regmaker], things changed. I still remember the first number to which I had the privilege of contributing a congratulatory letter. Let me add that the Handbook also did its part in bringing home to me that several groups had sprung into existence all around me in a remarkably short space of time.

"While I have not been able to make the necessary contacts to form a group of Africans, I have the pleasure of knowing that I can still do so, thanks to the local AAs who have always taken a keen interest in my welfare as a Loner. To them and to my sponsor and to all of you, my deep and eternal gratitude.

"I am now resigned to the role that the Higher Power has ordained for me, confident that sooner or later I shall be a worthier member of the magnificent organization of which I have the privilege of regarding myself as a humble, though incomplete unit.

"It would be ungrateful of me not to mention that three AAs in America have been writing to me for quite a few years now.

"They have done more than I can express in words to keep me sober. And along with birthday greetings to *The Tendril*, I would add my appreciation of the invaluable service the magazine renders in keeping me and others informed of the latest AA developments in South Africa." ~

