

September 1951

"When I started here," Dorothy tells you, "my teacher said over and over: 'If they leave with a smile, you've given them something to cling to.' My teacher, of course, was Grace Cultice."

She has mentioned a magic name. The late Grace Cultice's benign face smiles at Chicago AAs from a black picture-frame on the office wall. Her doughty spirit and rich humanness pervade the center she founded. A non-alcoholic rarity, she combined true understanding with an insatiable urge to serve.

Grace helped build Chicago AA, starting from scratch. She was the first secretary, Dorothy's only predecessor; and her first "office" was in Sylvia's Evanston apartment.

She was everybody's "sponsor" when the members were a handful. She typed the Twelve Steps on cards. She made spaghetti for the open house. She knew, by some miraculous instinct, when to rebuke a derelict and when to mother him. But she never talked "down" to an alky and always tried to make him hope.

In 1941, when a modest club was opened at 127 North Dearborn St., the adjoining room became Chicago's first "downtown office." Katie D., then a public stenographer, took desk space and became Grace's "Staff."

Two years later the club fell apart (Chicago AAs never have been strongly addicted to clubs), but the service office had become

indispensable. A modern suite high in the Republic Building, 209 South Street, was occupied in 1943 and remained the hub of fellowship activity for five years.

The work expanded in step with the enlarged membership. Services were increased, the staff grew to four and more space was needed. AA got off State Street for economy reasons; the present quarters were taken over in 1948.

Nowadays Chicago AA revolves happily about this busy center dedicated to "Service, Not Authority." Anonymity is rigidly maintained at the public level, but Greater Chicago has learned where to apply when AA help is needed.

Channeled through "123" are the services to the public; to the individual member, to the neighborhood group; to the divisional meetings; to the committees; to the Foundation; to the national and international brotherhood; to puzzled employers and heartsick families of still-stubborn alkies; but especially and most importantly, to the feeble but incessant cry of some wretched soul reaching out for AAs message of hope.

Alcoholics in Chicago dislike "organization" as much as those elsewhere, and insist on holding it to a minimum. In their cooperatively maintained central office, where many are served by few, they seem to have found an ideally simple agency for teamwork in the pursuit of their one primary purpose.



DOWN BEAT

There are a good many greats among musicians in Chicago AA, dating back to the Dixieland era and on along the scale of time. Booze and muggles are almost synonymous with the hot men. Here's an angle by one of them who can blow it straight where AA is concerned, even though you can still cook on the music he turns out.

"HEY! Give the piano player a drink." The left hand keeps rolling; the days move — no "lull in the joint." The right hand tosses it down.

Chicago - the toddlin' town - Capone, Dago Lawrence, Mangano, the Genna boys. "Knock twice and say Benny sent ya!"

New Orleans music had moved up the Mississippi to the Windy City. Hot and dirty — dance on a dime. "I Wonder What Became of Sally" brought a tear to the eye and a buck to the kitty.

New Years Eve — a saloon somewhere in Halsted near Harrison — gamblin' room upstairs. The guy is drunk — pulls a gun — fires three shots through the tin ceiling. The gang boss is wild — walks up to the joker; hits him over the head with a big water bottle. He's out cold. Five minutes later the law walks in - into the back - the pay-off. The band crawls out from behind the piano.

Looking for reasons why the musician drinks? Nervous tension? Jitters? The customer who hacks

away at your ears. The wife who doesn't appreciate or understand you (the dancer in the show does). You could have been with the symphony if you'd gone on and studied. But along came the war; or the first baby; or the boss's favorite; business is bad, so let's get a new band. Out of work again. If only the breaks weren't against me. Possibly we drank because it inspired us — we played better.

We originated the word sponsors — "a guy who sets them up free" - the willing and cheerful giver - the customer. We doted on them. Surely we can keep on drinking. No financial worries — Nuts. It didn't work. The money went, anyway. We drank the best. That didn't help — and so, "Curtain Call."

We came to believe — we who had said, "If I'm crazy I hope to stay this way." We who believed, "Let's get drunk and be somebody" — we, around whom the world revolved; surrendered. That a power greater than ourselves (oh, man, what torture to accept) could restore us to sanity (God, what a job you've cut out for yourself.

New Years Eve celebration rolled along. The first group celebration in Chicago — and two of our boys were there on Wabash Avenue, playing for the gang — piano and string bass. More groups were formed; there were more celebrations, and we were there. These were our people, and not a few were formerly our best sponsors.

They hadn't changed. They still liked music. Into the very upholstered sewers we played in, they came to help us — 50 cents for a coke — and they sat there practically holding our hands while we sweated through those "early evenings."

As you must know, Chicago is a spread-out town. If you lived in Rogers Park, and knew a musician living on the south side that you wanted to get together with; brother, pack a lunch. Still, we thought it possible that we could get a nucleus of a musician group started. So with the Alano Club as a base, and 4 p.m. afternoon as the right time, we gave it a whirl. At no time was this meeting "just for musicians." The boys are on the road a lot. They live scattered around. But the big reason against a "just for musicians" group was this — We had to learn to live with "just plain people;" the poor fish who got up at 6 a.m. and rode jammed up street cars — the suburbanite, who "mowed his lawn." The "squares." We'd always figured Texas Guinan was right — Hello Sucker - We needed to "change our thinkin'." We needed people.

The curves started coming — "Keep an open mind" - "Just for 24 hours" - "Accept things we cannot change." On and on — how long it went on before it began to seep in. There were six of us at first meeting. After that possibly four or five. Some questions we

could answer for each other — like, "what to do when the customer insists you have a drink" or when the yakety-yak in front of the bandstand talks above the music; or requests a tune then doesn't hear it and 10 seconds later accuses you of not playing it. No, you don't hit him over the head with the clarinet.

We have found that the musician in AA doesn't need a special group; nor special attention. He needs a group. He needs attention. He needs meetings. He's no more selfish, self-centered, fearful, bewildered, alone than the rest of you. He may be a bit screwier. Most of us still are exposed nightly to alcohol. The greatest number of our boys work in bars, taverns, night clubs. Five nights a week the Demon is at your elbow. You see him; you smell him, you're exposed — So what! So is the bartender, only more so. What about the waiter and waitress? The cafe owner? They've found "a new way of life." Well, what about the battle cry "But I can't play good unless I'm inspired?" You can wrap that and your button shoes up

in mothballs. The truth is "alcohol" doesn't loosen up your fingers.

Just plain sobriety pays off on that score. As to inspired performance — for the sake of wear and tear lost to argument, let's admit that if a guy could take four or five drinks he'd gain a certain amount of inspiration — so let's forget it. "We can't guarantee our behavior after the first drink." If we could take four or five and stop, we'd still be doing it. Truthfully, we have found that inspiration comes from being able to lose oneself — become apart — forget our surroundings, get unconscious of people staring, a sort of reaching out into space, hearing sounds, capturing them, and relating them to our listeners. I warned you; we may be a bit screwier. But living the AA Program puts you in tune. You don't lose your talent if you ever had it. No doubt your performance changes. But there's no loss. Like the one armed trumpet player with twice the strength in his "one wing" — there's always compensation.

