

November 1963



BADGE OF HONOR

*I carried it proudly every night on the bus,
hoping someone would ask*

THE other day I saw one of the old First Editions of the Big Book. The bright red and yellow paper jacket with the words "Alcoholics Anonymous" in glaring white against the red brought back a piercing sweet memory of twelve years ago—as clear as if it had happened only yesterday. Well, I just sat down and laughed a while and then cried a while, remembering how it was with a child-woman and her Book so long, long ago.

Maybe you turned the cover on your book inside out and put it back on so only the plain white was visible—but I didn't. I realize that the way in which each man and woman regards their membership in AA is a very private, personal thing and no one's business but their own.

I suppose it depends a great deal on what went before. You see, from the age of seventeen I had suffered shame, heartache and self-condemnation as a result of excessive drinking. From the time I was twenty-two until I was thirty-two I spent many hours of my life in jail charged with "drunk," "drunk and disorderly," "drunk in a public place," "disturbing the peace"—among other things. It seems unbelievable now that a skinny little girl weighing 86 pounds soaking wet could have caused the "authorities" so much trouble. Public crucifixion still goes on in our world but we are civilized now and, in our refinement, have banned the cross, the nails and the tree. Neighbors have called the police to do some-

thing with me, and when they came to take me away, stood in a knot of angry, righteous wrath, watching. I had many names when I joined the ranks of the condemned. Little children scampered with coltish glee by my windows and hurled names they had heard their parents say—each one a stone striking straight and sure to my heart. Bartenders said, "Get out of here, lush." My husband said worse. Parents said, "Our disgrace." And my mirror absorbed all the names and the words and played them back to me in the mornings with all the hopelessness of the final judgment of the highest tribunal.

So, now you'll understand why the sweetest words I ever heard were "alcoholic" and "Alcoholics Anonymous." I found the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous and there was wild, unbounded joy in the thought: "I am a member!" No longer ostracized, no longer alone, but a member of a group of wonderful people who understood and cared. I read the Big Book and it explained my life. I wanted to take the Book around to everyone I knew. I wished I could show it to the Judges and the officers and the neighbors and say, "*Please* read this, please forgive me. It says right here in the Book that I didn't mean to be the way I was. It tells you right here in this chapter that I was

sick; that I drank against my own will, and will power or morals have nothing to do with it, for I have a disease." I wanted to take the Book to my parents and say, "I didn't mean to make you lie awake those nights waiting for me to come home. Please read this book and maybe you will forgive me." I wanted to show it to my son, "Please read this, and you will understand why you couldn't live with me so many years. Please try to love me again just a little bit." Oh miracle of miracles! The hand that placed the Big Book in mine might have been a shaft of sunlight reaching through the darkness straight from heaven to shine softly on that book with the red and yellow jacket.

I rode the city bus back and forth to the AA meetings—five nights a week—in snow or rain or warm summer nights. I didn't know much about "anonymity" and I carried my Book in my hand wherever I went. That's how I remember her, the child-woman that was I, hopefully looking into each face on the bus, thinking surely one of them some night might come up to my seat and tell me they had a drinking problem and ask me to tell them about the Book I was carrying so proudly—my badge of honor.

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