

EARLY PHILADELPHIA

I was introduced to AA in late winter or early spring 1940 by C. Dudley Saul, M.D. Dr. Saul was our family physician and when my drinking reached the critical point in late 1938, my wife, Marie, called him in to see what he could do. It so happened that Dr. Saul had two sons who were alcoholics and had struggled without much success to straighten them out. He told me, "John you're an alcoholic." My reply was, "Yes?" "And," he added, "you are going to die or go crazy." "Is that all?" I asked. "That's all," he replied, "unless you make up your mind never to take a drink again."

I was in an emotional state where I was not inclined to quarrel with his diagnosis or his remedy but what was interesting to me as I looked back on that experience was that in 17 years of drinking Dr. Saul told me for the first time I had ever heard what was wrong with me.

Dr. Saul suggested going to a Turkish bath to get the alcohol out of my system – a mistaken program as we now know but it seemed to make sense. So I sweated at the bath for a couple of days and drank at the doctor's suggestion lots of liquids.

Then I did what we tell AA prospects to do: I called my father, a clergyman who had been sorely grieved by my drinking, and told him that I was going to quit. He was delighted; he said nothing like "it's about time" as might be expected; he came to see me and we had a good talk and cemented the bonds of love which held us together; I called my boss and told him what had happened and he, too, was pleased and told me to take whatever time I needed to get back in shape.

There was no AA in Philadelphia where my home was at the time, but Dr. Saul, in effect had his own group. His patients, and there were others like me, were invited to come by his office (thus reminding ourselves we were sick), say "hello" to him and report on how things were going, and chat with other patients in his waiting room. I've often wondered what Dr. Saul's non-alcoholic patients thought of what was going on.

And so I stayed dry, helping by the expression of confidence by the members of my church (of which father was the pastor) who elected me a Ruling Elder, the highest office a layman can hold in our Presbyterian system. After that there were many times I wanted a drink very badly but although I might have taken one as far as I was concerned or father, or Marie or Dr. Saul were concerned but I just couldn't let those people down who had trusted me.

Early in 1940 Jimmy Burwell came over to Philadelphia from New York and, in effect, brought AA to the city. He got in touch with Dr. Saul and with another physician, Dr. Wiese Hammer and told them about AA. The two doctors were on the staff of St. Luke's & Children's Medical Center and they invited the tiny new AA group to meet at the hospital. What this meant to AA was tremendous; it gave sponsorship and emphasized the AA message, that alcoholics are sick people. And Dr. Saul told me about the new group and advised me to go.

So I went. The first meeting was chaired by a man who had been a member of the Oxford Group, with which I had had unfortunate experiences in school and college. So the next day I told Dr. Saul I wanted none of it. "John," he said, "how many AA meetings have you been to?" I told him, "Only the one, of course." "Well," he replied, "don't be such a mental snob. You go back. You need AA and AA needs you." So I did go back and attend the weekly meetings faithfully.

That was where I met Bill Wilson. He came over to our meetings from New York rather frequently in those early days and helped make the Philadelphia group a success.

I continued in the Philadelphia group until early 1942 when I got a job in Washington and started attending meetings there. I don't recall ever seeing Bill at any of our meetings.