

Bill's Story



The Original Version

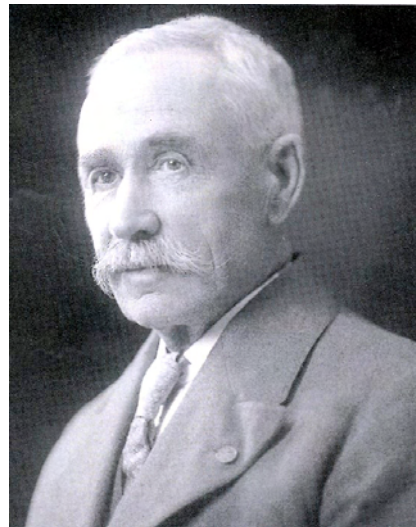


Bill's Story

At the age of ten I went to live with my grandfather and grandmother - their ancestors settled the section of Vermont in which I was to grow up.

Bill at age 10

Grandfather was a retired farmer and lumberman; he nurtured me on a vigorous pioneering tradition. I see, now, that my grandfather was the kind of man who helped make America.



Gardner Fayette Griffith

Little did anyone guess I was to be of the war generation, which would squander the savings, the pioneering traditions and the incredible stamina of your grandfather and mine. Ambitious but undisciplined - that I was.

There was a genius for postponing, evading and shirking; but a certain dogged obstinacy persistence drove me to succeed at special undertakings upon which my heart was set.

Especially did I revel in attacking the difficult or the impossible. Grandfather, for instance, said that no one but an Australian could make and throw the boomerang. No school work was done, no wood box filled and little sleep was there, until a boomerang had circled the church steeple, returning to almost decapitate him. Having accomplished this, my interest ceased.



Bill's High School Graduation

So it was with my ambition to be a ball player, for I was finally elected captain of the team at the little Seminary I attended after leaving country school. Someone told me I could never sing, so I took up voice until I had appeared in a recital, then, as with the boomerang, my interest ended abruptly. I had commenced to fuss with the violin. This became such an obsession that athletics, school work, and all else went by the board much to everyone's consternation. I carried fiddling so far I failed to graduate. It was most embarrassing, for I was president of the Senior Class.

So collapsed a certain legend of infallibility I had built around myself. Repairing this failure, I attempted to enter a leading technical school. Because of fierce enthusiasms I had displayed for matters chemical and electrical, it was assumed I was destined to become an engineer.

At Boston, I failed the entrance examinations dismally. My people were heartbroken and my self sufficiency got another severe deflation.

Finally I commenced electrical engineering at an excellent military college, where it was fervently hoped I would get disciplined. No such thing happened.

As usual I had good grades when interested but often failed when not. There was an illuminating instance concerning my calculus teacher. Not one formula would I learn, until all of the theory underlying the subject was made clear.

At the library, I poured over the researches of Leibnitz and Newton, whose genius had made calculus possible. Loving controversy, I argued much with my instructor, who quite properly gave me a zero, for I had solved only the first problem of the course.

At this juncture, and quite conveniently for me, the United States decided to go to war.



Second Lieutenant Bill W.

We students bolted, almost to a man, for the First Officers Training Camp at Plattsburg. I was commissioned a second lieutenant of artillery, electing that branch rather than aviation or infantry. For when I lay in my bunk at night, I had to confess I did not want to be killed. This suspicion of cowardice bothered me, for it couldn't be reconciled with the truly exalted patriotism which took possession when I hadn't time to think. Later, under fire abroad, I was relieved to learn I was like most men; scared enough, but willing to see it through. I was assigned to a post on the New England coast. The place is famous for its Yankee trading and whaling traditions.

Two far reaching events took place here. I married; had my first drink and liked it. My wife was city bred. She represented a way of life for which I secretly longed.

To be her kind meant fine houses, servants, gay dinners, cultivated conversation and a much envied sophistication. I often felt a woeful lack of poise and polish. These inferiority's were later to drive me cityward in quest of success, as I suppose they have many a country boy.

War fever ran high, and I was flattered that the first citizens of town took us to their homes and made me feel comfortable and heroic.



Lois Burnham

So here was love, applause, adventure, war; moments sublime with intervals hilarious. I was part of life at last.

My gaucheries and ineptitude's magically disappeared, as I discovered the Siphon and the Bronx Cocktail. Strong warnings and the prejudices of my people concerning drink evaporated. Then came parting, with its bizarre mixture of sadness, high purpose, the strange elation which goes with adventure having fatal possibilities. Many of us sailed for 'Over There'. Loneliness seized me, only to be whisked away by my charming companion, Prince Alcohol.

We were in England. I stood in Winchester Cathedral with head bowed, in the presence of something I had never felt before.

Where now was the God of the preachers? Across the Channel thousands were perishing that day. Why did He not come? Suddenly in that moment of darkness - He was there! I felt an enveloping comforting Presence. Tears stood in my eyes. I had glimpsed the great reality.

Much moved, I wandered through the Cathedral yard. My attention was caught by doggerel on an old tombstone.



"Here lies a Hampshire Grenadier
Who caught his death
Drinking cold small beer
A good soldier is ne'er forgot
Whether he dieth by musket
or by pot."

My mood changed. A squadron of fighters roared overhead. I cried to myself, "Here's to Adventure". The feeling of being in the great presence disappeared.

Homecoming arrived at last. Twenty two and a veteran of foreign wars! I fancied myself a leader, for had not the men of my battery given me a special token of appreciation?

Leadership, I imagined, would place me at the head of vast enterprises which I would manage with the assurance of a great pipe organist at his stops and keys.

Soon enough, I was brought to earth. A position at half the army pay, from which I was presently discharged as a poor and rebellious bookkeeper, was the first salutation of unsentimental industry. My resentment was so great I nearly turned Socialist; which in Vermont is downright treason. Humiliation and more came when my wife got a much better job and commenced to pay the bills.

I fancied my new city friends were snickering at my predicament. Unwillingly, I had to admit, that I was not trained for anything.

Characteristically, I nearly failed my law course. At one of the finals I was too drunk to think or write. Though drinking was not continuous, it frequently disturbed my wife. We had long talks, when I would still her foreboding by saying men of genius conceived their vast projects when jingled; that the most majestic constructions of philosophic thought were so derived.

When the law course was done, I knew the profession was not for me. The inviting maelstrom of The Street had me in its grip. Business and financial leaders were my heroes. Reminiscent of the boomerang episode, I became wholly absorbed and fascinated. Out of this tissue of drink and speculation I commenced to forge the weapon that one day would turn in its flight, and all but cut me to ribbons.

Both at work, and living modestly, my wife and I saved \$1,000.00. It went into utility stocks then cheap and unpopular. I rightly imagined that they would some day have a great rise. Failing to persuade my broker friends to send me out looking over factories and management's, my wife and I decided to go anyhow. I had a theory people lost money in stocks by not knowing markets, management's and the ideas at work in a given situation. I was to discover lots more reasons later on.

The Motorcycle Hobos - 1925



We quit our positions and off we romped on a motorcycle and side car stuffed with a tent, blankets, change of clothes, and three huge volumes of a financial reference service.

Our friends almost wanted a lunacy commission appointed. Perhaps they were right. There had been some success at speculation, so we had a little money though we once worked on a farm for a month to avoid drawing on our capital. It was the last honest manual work for many a day. The whole Eastern United States was covered in a year.

At the end of it, strangely enough, my reports sent back to Wall Street procured for me a position there, and the use of what seemed to me a large sum of money. The exercise of an option brought in more money and we had several thousand dollars profit. For the next few years fortune threw money and applause my way. I had arrived. My judgment and ideas were followed by many to the tune of paper millions.

The great boom of the late twenties was soothing and swelling. Drink was taking an important and exhilarating part in my life. Loud talk in the jazz places uptown, we all spent in thousands, and chattered in millions. Scoffers could scoff and be damned. Of course they didn't, and I made a host of fair weather friends.

My drinking had assumed more serious proportions, going on all day and nearly every night. Remonstrance of my cooler associates terminated in a row, and I became a lone wolf. There were many unhappy scenes in our apartment. This, by the way, was large, for I had rented two, and had the wall between knocked out. There had been no great infidelity. Loyalty to my wife, and sometimes extreme drunkenness, kept me out of those scrapes.

In 1929 I contracted golf fever. That is a terrible illness. We went at once to the country, my wife to applaud while I overtook Walter Hagen. Golf permitted drinking both by day and night. It was fun to carom around the exclusive course which had inspired such awe in me as a lad. I acquired the impeccable coat of tan seen upon the well-to-do. With amused skepticism the local banker watched me whirl fat checks in and out of his till.

Abruptly in October, 1929, the whirling movement ceased. Hell had broken loose on the New York Stock Exchange. After one of those days of inferno I wobbled from a hotel bar to a brokerage office. It was eight o'clock - five hours after the market close. The ticker still clattered. I was staring at an inch of the tape. It bore the inscription PFK - 32. It had been 52 that morning. I was done and so were many friends. The papers said men were already jumping to death from those towers of Babel that were High Finance. That disgusted me. Going back to the bar I felt glad I would not jump. My friends had dropped several millions since ten o'clock - so what? Tomorrow was another day. As I drank, the old fierce determination to win came back.

Next morning I called a friend in Montreal. He had plenty of money left, so he thought I had better come up. By the following spring we were living in our accustomed style. It was like Napoleon returning from Elba. No St. Helena for me. But I soon excelled as a serious and frivolous drinker, and my generous friend had to let me go. This time we stayed broke.

We went to live with my parents-in-law. I found a job; then lost it through a brawl with a taxi driver. Mercifully no one knew I was to have no real employment for five years nor hardly draw a sober breath. My wife began to work in a department store, coming home exhausted to find me drunk. I became a hanger on at brokerage places, less and less desired because of my habits. Liquor ceased to be a luxury; it became a necessity. "Bathtub" gin, two bottles a day, and often three, got to be routine.



182 Clinton Street – Brooklyn, NY

Sometimes a small deal would net a few hundred dollars, and I would pay the bars and delicatessen. Endlessly this went on, and I began to wake early, shaking violently. A tumbler full of gin followed by half a dozen bottles of beer would be required if I ate any breakfast. I still thought I could control the situation. There were periods of sobriety which would renew my wife's hope.

But things got worse. The house was taken over by the mortgage holder, my mother -in- law died; my wife became ill, as did my father-in-law.

Then I had a promising business opportunity. Stocks were at the low point of 1932, and I had somehow formed a group to buy. I was to share generously in the profits. I went on a prodigious bender, and that chance vanished. I woke up. This had to be stopped. I saw I could not take even one drink. I was through forever. Before then, I had written lots of sweet promises, but my wife happily observed that this time I meant business. And so I did. Shortly afterward I came home drunk. There had been no fight. Where had been my high resolve? I simply didn't know. It hadn't even come to mind. Someone pushed a drink my way, and I had taken it. Was I crazy? I began to wonder, for such an appalling lack of perspective came near being just that.

Sticking to my resolve I tried again. Some time passed. Confidence began to be replaced by cocksureness. I could laugh at the bars. Now I had what it takes! One day I walked into a place to telephone. In no time I was beating on the bar asking myself how it happened. As the whisky rose to my head I told myself I would manage better next time, but I might as well get good and drunk then. I did just that.

The remorse, horror and hopelessness of the next morning is unforgettable. The courage to do battle was not there. My brain raced uncontrollably. There was a terrible sense of impending calamity. I hardly dared cross the street, lest I collapse and be run down by an early morning truck, for it was scarcely daylight. An all night place supplied me with a dozen glasses of ale. My writhing nerves were stilled at last. A morning paper told me the market had gone to hell again. Well, so had I. The market would recover but I wouldn't. That was a hard thought. Should I kill myself? No, not now. Then a mental fog settled down. Gin would fix that. So two bottles, and - oblivion.

The mind and body is a marvelous mechanism, for mine endured this agony two years more. Sometimes I stole from my wife's slender purse when the morning terror and madness were on me. Again I swayed dizzily before an open window, or the medicine cabinet where there was poison, cursing myself for a weakling. There were flights from city to country and back, as my wife and I sought escape. Then came the night when the physical and mental torture was so hellish I feared I would burst through my window, sash and all. Somehow I managed to drag my mattress to a lower floor, lest I suddenly leap.

A doctor came with a heavy sedative. Next day found me drinking both gin and sedative without the usual penalty. This combination soon landed me on the rocks, and my wife saw something had to be done and quickly. People feared for my sanity, and so did I. When drinking, which was almost always, I could eat little or nothing. I was forty pounds under weight.



Dr. Leonard Strong – Bill's Brother-in Law

My brother -in -law is a physician. Through his kindness I was placed in a nationally known hospital for the mental and physical rehabilitation of alcoholics. Under the so-called belladonna treatment my brain cleared. Hydrotherapy and mild exercise helped much.

Best of all, I met a kind doctor who explained, that though selfish and foolish, I had also been seriously ill, bodily and mentally. It relieved me somewhat to learn that in alcoholism, the will is amazingly weakened concerning drink, though frequently remaining strong in other respects. My incredible behavior in the face of a desperate desire to stop was explained.



Dr. William D. Silkworth

Understanding myself now, I fared forth in high hope.

For three or four months the goose hung high. I went to town regularly and made a little money. Surely this was the answer. Self- knowledge.

But it was not, for the frightful day came when I drank once more. The curve of my declining moral and bodily health fell off like a ski jump.

After a time I returned to the hospital. This was the finish, the curtain, so it seemed to me. My weary and despairing wife was informed that it would all end with heart failure during delirium tremens. Or I would develop a wet brain, perhaps within a year. She would soon give me over to the undertaker or the asylum. It was not necessary to tell me. I knew, and almost welcomed the idea. It was a devastating blow to my pride. I, who had thought so well of myself and my abilities, of my capacity to surmount obstacles, was cornered at last.



The Town's Hospital, Central Park West

Now I was to plunge out into the dark, joining that endless procession of sots who had gone on before. I thought of my poor wife. There had been much happiness after all. What would I not give to make amends? That career I'd set my heart upon, that pleasant vista, was shut out forever. No words can tell of the loneliness and despair I found in that bitter morass of self pity. Quicksand underlay me in all directions. I had met my match. I had been overwhelmed. King Alcohol was master.

Trembling, I stepped from the place a broken man. Fear sobered me for a bit. Then came the insidious insanity of that first drink, and on Armistice Day, 1934, I was off again. Everyone became resigned to the certainty that I would have to be shut up some where, or stumble along to a miserable end. How dark it is before morning comes! In reality, this was the beginning of my last debauch. I was soon to be catapulted into what I like to call the fourth dimension of existence. I was to know happiness, peace and usefulness, in a way of life that is incredibly more wonderful as time passes.

Near the end of that bleak November I sat drinking in my kitchen. With a certain satisfaction I reflected there was enough gin concealed about the house to carry me through that night and the next day. My wife was at work. I wondered whether I dared hide a full bottle near the head of our bed. I would need it before daylight.



Ebby T.

My musing was interrupted by the telephone. The cheery voice of an old school friend asked if he might come over. He was sober. It was years since I could remember his coming to New York in that condition. I was amazed. He had been committed for alcoholic insanity. So rumor had it. I wondered how he had escaped. Of course he would have dinner. Then I could drink openly with him. Unmindful of his welfare, I thought only of recapturing the spirit of other days. There was that time we had chartered an airplane to complete a jag. Another glass stirred my fancy. His coming was an oasis in this dreary desert of futility. The very thing - an oasis! Drinkers are like that. The door opened.

He stood there, fresh skinned and glowing. There was something about his eyes. He was inexplicably different. What had happened? I pushed a drink across the table. "Not now" he said.

Disappointed but curious, I wondered what had got into the fellow. He wasn't himself. "Come, what's all this about", I queried. He looked straight at me.

Simply, but smilingly, he said, "I've got religion."

I was aghast. So that was it - last summer an alcoholic crackpot; now I suspected a little cracked about religion - he had that starry-eyed look. The old boy was on fire alright. But bless his heart, let him rant! Besides, my gin would last longer. But he did no ranting.

In quite a matter of fact way, he related how two men had appeared in court, persuading the judge to suspend his commitment. They had told of a simple religious idea and a practical program of action. That was months ago and the result was self evident. It worked. He had come to pass his experience along to me - if I cared to have it.

I was shocked but interested. Certainly I was interested. I had to be, for I was hopeless. He talked for hours. Childhood memories rose before me. The sound of the preacher's voice which one could hear on still Sundays, way over there on the hillside; the proffered temperance pledge I never signed; my grandfather's good natured contempt of some church fold and their doings; his insistence that the spheres really had their music; his denial of the preacher's right to tell him how he must listen; his fearlessness as he spoke of these things just before he died; such recollections welled up from the past. They made me swallow hard. That war- time day in old Winchester Cathedral came back again.

In a power greater than myself I had always believed. I had often pondered these things. I was not an atheist. Few people really are, for that means blind faith in an illogical proposition; that this universe originated in a cipher, and aimlessly rushes nowhere. My intellectual heroes, the chemists, the astronomers, even the evolutionist, suggested vast laws and forces at work.

Despite contra indications, I had little doubt that a might purpose and rhythm underlay all. How could there be so much of precise and immutable law, and no intelligence? I simply had to believe in a Spirit of the Universe, which knew neither time nor limitation. But that was as far as I had gone. With preachers, and the world's religions, I parted right there. When they talked of a God personal to me, who was love, superhuman strength and direction, I became irritated and my mind snapped shut against such a theory.

Of Christ, I conceded the certainty of a great man, not too much followed by those who claimed Him. His moral teaching - most excellent. I had adopted those parts which seemed convenient and not too difficult. The rest I disregarded.

The wars which had been fought, the burnings and chicanery that religious dispute had facilitated, made me sick. I honestly doubted whether the religions of mankind had done any good. Judging from what I had seen in Europe and since, the power of God in human affairs was negligible;

the Brotherhood of Man a grim jest. If there was a Devil, he seemed the Boss Universal, and he certainly had me.

But my friend sat before me, and he made the point blank declaration that God had done for him what he could not do for himself. His human will had failed. Doctors had pronounced him incurable. Society was about to lock him up. Like myself he had admitted complete defeat. In effect he been raised from the dead; suddenly taken from the scrap-heap to a level of life better than the best he had ever known.

Had this power originated in him? Obviously it had not. There had been no more power in him than there was in me at that minute; and this was none at all. That floored me.

It began to look as though religious people were right, after all. Here was something at work in a human heart which had done the impossible. My ideas about miracles were drastically revised right then. Never mind the musty past; here sat a miracle directly across the kitchen table, straight out of the here and now. I saw that my friend was much more than inwardly reorganized. It went deeper than that. He was on a completely different footing. His roots grasped a new soil.

Thus was I convinced that God is concerned with us humans, when we want Him enough. At long last I saw; I felt, I believed. Scales of pride and prejudice fell from my eyes. A new world came into view.

The real significance of my experience in the Cathedral burst upon me. For a brief moment, I had needed and wanted God. There was a humble willingness to have Him with me - and He came. But soon the sense of His presence had been blotted out by worldly clamors - mostly those within myself. And so it had been ever since. It was simple as that. How blind I had been.

At the hospital I was separated from King Alcohol for the last time. Treatment seemed wise then, for I showed signs of delirium when I stopped drinking.

There I humbly offered myself to God, as I then I understood Him, to do with me as He would. I placed myself unreservedly under His care and direction. I admitted for the first time, that of myself I was nothing; that without Him I was lost.

I ruthlessly faced my sins of omission and commission, and became willing to have my new -found Friend take them away, root and branch.

My schoolmate visited me, and I fully acquainted him with my problems and deficiencies. We made a list of people I had hurt or toward whom I felt resentment. I expressed my entire willingness to approach these individuals, admitting my wrong. Never was I to be critical of them. I was to right all such matters to the utmost of my ability.

I was to test my thinking by the new God consciousness within. Common sense would thus become uncommon sense. I was to sit quietly when in doubt, asking only for direction and strength to meet my problems as He would have me. Never was I to pray for myself, except as my requests bore on my usefulness to others. Then only might I expect to receive. But that would be in great measure.

My friend promised when those things were done I would enter upon a new relationship with my Creator; that I would have the elements of a way of life which answered all my problems. Belief in the power of God, plus enough willingness, honesty and humility to establish and maintain the new order of things, were the essential requirements.

Simple but not easy; a price had to be paid. It really meant the obliteration of self. I had to quit playing God. I must turn in all things to the Father of Light who presides over us all.

These were revolutionary and drastic proposals, but the moment I fully accepted them the effect was electric. There was a sense of victory, followed by such a peace and serenity as I had never known. There was utter confidence. I felt lifted up; as though the great clean wind of a mountain top blew through and through. God comes to most men gradually, but His impact on me was sudden and profound.

For a moment I was alarmed, and called my friend the Doctor to ask if I were still sane. He listened in wonder as I talked.

He finally he shook his head, saying:

"Something has happened to you I don't understand. But you had better hang on to it. Anything is better than the way you were." The good doctor now sees many men have such experiences. He knows that they are real.

While I lay in the hospital the thought came that there were thousands of hopeless alcoholics who might be glad to have what had been so freely given me. Perhaps I could help some of them. They in turn might work with others. My friend had emphasized the absolute necessity of my demonstrating these principles in all my affairs. Particularly was it imperative to work with others, as he had worked with me. Faith without works was dead, he said.

And how appallingly true for the alcoholic! For if an alcoholic failed to perfect and enlarge his spiritual life through work and self sacrifice for others, he could not survive the certain trials and low spots ahead. If he did not work he would surely drink again, and if he drank he would surely die. Then faith would be dead indeed. With us it is just like that!



Bill & Lois

My wife and I abandoned ourselves with enthusiasm to the idea of helping other alcoholics to a solution of their problems. It was fortunate, for my old business associates remained skeptical for a year and a half, during which I found little work. I was not too well at the time, and was plagued by waves of self-pity and resentment.

This sometimes nearly drove me back to drink. I soon found that when all other measures failed, work with another alcoholic would save the day. Many times I have gone to my old hospital feeling terrible. On talking to a man there, I would be amazingly lifted up and set on my feet.

It is a design for living that works in the tough spots.

We commenced to make many fast friends and a fellowship has grown up among us of which it is a wonderful thing to feel a part. The joy of living we really have, even under pressure and difficulty. I have seen one hundred families set their feet in the path that really goes somewhere; have seen the most impossible domestic situations righted; feuds and bitterness of all sorts wiped out. I have seen men come out of asylums, and resume a vital place in the lives of their families and communities. Business and professional people have regained their standing.

There is scarcely any form of human misadventure and misery which has not been overcome among us. In a Western city and its environs, there are sixty of us and our families. We often meet informally at our houses, so that newcomers may find what they seek. Gatherings of twenty to sixty are common. We are growing in numbers and power.

An alcoholic in his cups is an unlovely creature. Our struggles with them are variously strenuous, comic and tragic. One poor chap committed suicide in my home. He could not, or would not see what we beheld.

There is, however, a vast amount of fun about it all. I suppose some would be shocked at our seeming worldliness and levity. But just underneath one finds a deadly earnestness. God has to work twenty four hours a day in and through us, or we perish.

Most of us feel we need look no further for Utopia, nor even for Heaven. We have it with us on this good old Earth, right here and now. Each day that simple talk in my kitchen multiplies itself in a widening circle of peace on earth and good will to men.

The End

This was a working version of Bill's Story prior to the publication of the "original manuscript of the Big Book. The photographs, courtesy of Barefoot Bill, were inserted to provide the reader a new experience with this treasured story.

Produced by the Big Book Study Group of South Orange, New Jersey for the enjoyment of our A.A. friends and family.