

EDITOR'S ETC.

BY DEAN MERRILL



My grandfather was . . . a drunk.

That's a blunt way of putting it, but unfortunately it's true. Those in central Indiana who knew Jimmy Merrill from the 1910's to the 1950's would not argue with me.

He was likable enough when he was sober, but his lack of control ended up devastating his family. The crisis broke when his God-fearing wife died of jaundice at the tender age of 29, leaving my 6-year-old father and three *younger* siblings to his mercy. There was little choice but for the maternal grandparents to step in and raise the children from then on.

Meanwhile, Jimmy went on living by his wits, trading horses and hunting dogs to make a buck, boozing and bartering his way through the years. Prohibition didn't stop him, the Depression didn't stop him, nothing stopped him . . . until late in his life, he'd finally had enough. Something brought him to a point of finally surrendering to Jesus Christ. For his last dozen years, he was a startling witness to the power of God over alcoholism.

At his funeral, my brother and I sang a then-new gospel song about Heaven, "What a Day That Will Be." Two lay preachers led the service—both of them having been introduced to Christ by the man we buried that sleeting January day.

Little wonder, then, that our family carries strong feelings about the subject of drinking. I confess I'm mystified these days by an odd crossover of opinion: more and more

Christians seem to be trying to make ethical room for drinking ("in moderation," "with control," of course) . . . while at the same time *secular* authorities are warning and worrying about this society's rampant problem with alcohol. The two are like ships passing in the night, and it seems clear to me who's headed for the iceberg.

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As Jim Broome says in our lead interview this month, "No one sets out to become an alcoholic. Each person is convinced he can 'handle it.'" Some say European cultures seem to handle it fine; others claim the same for people in Bible times. That may be true (there are a variety of explanations)—but this is North America, and on this continent we cannot deny we have a destroyer on the loose.

On the other hand, surveys show that in spite of all the Bud Light commercials and Johnnie Walker billboards, one-third of American adults have decided *not* to drink. One of them is a friend of mine named Fred Smith, Dallas businessman and sought-after speaker. He delights in saying, with a twinkle in his eye, "This is a free country, and I have a right not to drink. Don't try to make me feel odd about that!"

One of the first things David

Kucharsky did when I arrived here at *Christian Herald* last December was take me down to the Bowery Mission for an evening. It's in a part of the Lower East Side they don't show you on the Gray Line bus tours of New York.

As I watched more than a hundred men come shivering off the street into the brightly lit chapel, Director John Willock made an interesting observation: "Notice how the average age is dropping. Rescue missions used to be filled with men in their 40's and 50's. Now take a look."

I saw young faces in every row. Guys who couldn't be more than 25. I thought to myself, *The downward slope of alcohol and drugs has gotten steeper, more slippery.*

The mission staff singers struck up an opening song at the front—five husky-throated men who'd been on the street themselves not many months before. Now one played the upright piano (a gift long ago from the famous Fanny Crosby, who reportedly wrote "Rescue the Perishing" at its keyboard) while the other four belted out the good news of their lives: "The Old Rugged Cross Made the Difference."

I wish Jimmy Merrill could have been with me that night. He would have joined right in. He'd have flashed his gap-toothed, crinkly-cheeked smile and told everybody how his life was salvaged at last by the most powerful force in the world—Jesus.

Dean Merrill