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## TALES OF JOHN BARLEYCORN

I'm an alcoholic. When I tell people at parties, they usually don't know what to say. Some smile as if they already knew; others look confused or worried. Often there's a pause while they work out their reply. 'OK,' they're thinking, 'what do I do next?' or they're wondering whether I'm joking. Occasionally they say something like, 'Oh, but you're all right with drink *now*?' and offer me a glass. That's when I explain that alcoholism doesn't go away, adding that though I haven't indulged for twenty years, when I did one Christmas it soon escalated. Even after that there are still a few who won't take no for an answer — probably first-stage alcoholics themselves — but for most people what they find odd is the idea of total abstinence. To them, saying no to pleasure just isn't done. It has a nonconformist edge to it, a kind of disrespect for 'do as I do' and playing by the rules. You can almost hear them asking each other, 'Well, would *you* say no to a drink?' Of course they're all perfectly well-intentioned, but in a materialist age you grab what you can get, calling it your right to party. Anyone who doesn't is an oddball who needs careful watching. Because to step out of line seems dangerous to those who fear the cold sober eye of judgement when they're at their worst.

But for me renunciation is freedom. It keeps me inside a charmed circle and out of harm's way. When I drank I knew no limits. It was as self-punishing as any high-performance sport. And I thrived on its highs and lows because they made me feel alive. I had my dream, an unreal bubble surrounding me, and as long as I remained in there I was important.

In fact I was more of a spectator, watching myself going under. When I looked in the mirror I could see I'd changed. My face had hardened in a way that wasn't obvious to the world. It had a subtle mask-like quality, a defensive stillness, like a patient after an operation. There were other changes too, mostly physical:

- ♪ I had what they call marmalade eyes.
- ♪ My hands shook slightly when they came close to a glass.
- ♪ I drank too quickly, all evening, and sometimes from the bottle.
- ♪ In the morning my body ached all over.
- ♪ Occasionally, I wet myself.

Like many addicts, I developed defensive strategies. So I hid my empty