



Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Last Tuesday night I sat in a cafe on Times Square watching the glittering lights cast bright reflections on the mass of promenading humanity jamming the sidewalks. Suddenly a speeding car, pursued by the police, slammed into a mini-skirted young woman who had just stepped off the curb. Her broken body was knocked back into the gutter where it lay grotesque and still.

Instantly a huge crowd swarmed over the scene. Policemen arrived to hold them back as the mob stared and gaped. An ambulance pulled up and her lifeless body was lifted aboard. It pulled away, siren screaming.

I dropped my eyes momentarily and when I looked up again it was as though nothing had ever happened. Cars and taxis honked, bumper to bumper in the street. Loud music and bright lights filled the air. The man putting letters on the theatre marquee never looked down from his ladder. The mass of humanity had simply swallowed up the scene of the tragedy.

It was as if the girl, moments before laughing and alive, had never existed. The city had closed over her as the waters close over a pebble tossed in a lake. A splash. A ripple. And forgotten.

And so it will be with most men.

Yet I know one who lives on. Last Saturday I stood at the head of his grave in a South Carolina cemetery while eight members of Alcoholics Anonymous gently lowered his casket on a flower-banked mound of red clay. For 20 years Ed Seymour had been the town drunk in Greenwood, South Carolina. Then, 14 years ago, his life was revolutionized. Although he had no children of his own, little children now came flocking to him, sitting on his lap, caressing his rough face, and throwing their innocent arms around his neck. For little children, who always see much more than adults, could see in him the Man of Galilee who gathered little ones to him so many years ago.

For years, he once said, he had heard about people in Jesus' day who were healed by simply touching the hem of His garment. "Oh, if He were only here today I would touch Him and be delivered," he had cried. Then one day he realized — He is here. And Mr. Ed, town drunk, touched the hem of His garment and was delivered.

He joined the biggest church in town and was soon teaching a class of men. Later he was ordained a deacon. And when the new young pastor moved to town it was Mr. Ed who came by in his dirty old car that first night and said, "Come with me, boy, I'm going to take you out and show you what it's all about."

And he did. For eight years he was the shepherd of his pastor, teaching him more theology than he ever dreamed of learning in seminary. He taught him about drunks in particular, and people in general. He taught him that the only difference between the sophisticated cocktail drinker and the beer guzzler is the cloth that covers their body; and that the common prostitute and the suburban flirt are no different except one operates off the street and the other out of a split-level home.

I know, for I was the pupil.

Last Tuesday my wife and little girl flew up to be with him in the hospital. Even though his body was ravaged with cancer he kept whispering to the doctors and nurses that his "baby" had come to see him. Thursday at noon Jackie stood beside his bed and held his hand as he slowly closed his eyes and stopped breathing. I arrived from New York 45 minutes later and an old friend met me at the little airport.

"He's gone," he said.

I glanced around at the familiar airport where Mr. Ed had taught me to fly. ("Don't land on the runways, it burns up your tires. Land on the grass," he always cautioned.) A huge mountain of memories loomed before me and I turned to my friend.

"No, he's not gone. Some people die and are gone, but Christ touched my life and the lives of countless others through Mr. Ed. And because of that, he will never be gone. Not really."