

June 1961

HUMILITY for TODAY

By Bill

Second of a Series

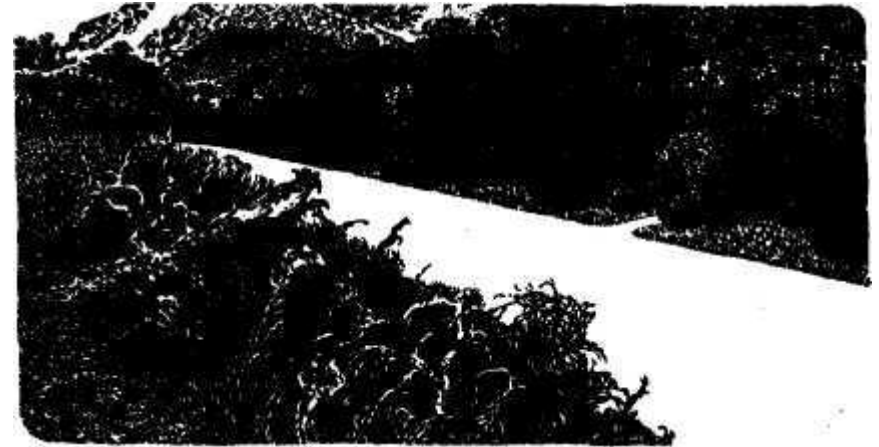
THERE can be no absolute humility for us humans. At best, we can only glimpse the meaning and splendor of such a perfect ideal. As the book "Alcoholics Anonymous" says: "We are not saints ... we claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection." Only God Himself can manifest in the Absolute; we human beings must needs live and grow in the domain of the relative. We seek humility for today.

Therefore our practical question is this: "Just what do we mean by 'humility for today' and how do we know when we have found it?"

We scarcely need be reminded that excessive guilt or rebellion leads to spiritual poverty. But it was a very long time before we knew we could go even more broke on spiritual pride. When we early AAs got our first glimmer of how spiritually prideful we could be, we coined this expression: "Don't try to get too

damned good by Thursday!" That old-time admonition may look like another of those handy alibis that can excuse us from trying for our best. Yet a closer view reveals just the contrary. This is our AA way of warning against pride-blindness, and the imaginary perfections that we do not possess.

Now that we no longer patronize bars and bordellos; now that we bring home the pay checks; now that we are so very active in AA; and now that people congratulate us on these signs of progress—well, we naturally proceed to congratulate ourselves. Yet we may not be within hailing distance of humility. Meaning well, yet doing badly, how often have I said or thought, "I am right and you are wrong," "My plan is correct and yours is faulty," "Thank God your sins are not my sins," "You are hurting AA and I'm going to stop you cold," "I have God's guidance, so He



is on my side." And so on, indefinitely.

The alarming thing about such pride-blindness is the ease with which it is justified. But we need not look far to see that this deceptive brand of self-justification is a universal destroyer of harmony and of love. It sets man against man, nation against nation. By it, every form of folly and violence can be made to look right, and even respectable. Of course it is not for us to condemn. We need only investigate ourselves.

How, then, can we do more and more about reducing our guilt, rebellion and pride?

When I inventory such defects, I like to draw a picture and tell myself a story. My picture is that of a Highway to Humility, and my story is an allegory. On one side of my Highway, I see a great bog. The Highway's edge borders a shallow marsh which finally shelves down into that muddy morass

of guilt and rebellion in which I have so often floundered. Self-destruction lies in wait out there, and I know this. But the country on the other side of the road looks fine. I see inviting glades, and beyond them great mountains. The countless trails leading into this pleasant land look safe. It will be easy, I think, to find one's way back.

Together with numbers of friends, I decide to take a brief detour. We pick our path and happily plunge along it. Elatedly, somebody soon says, "Maybe we'll find gold on top of that mountain." Then to our amazement we do strike gold—not nuggets in the streams, but fully minted coins. The heads of these coins each declare, "This is pure gold—twenty-four carats." Surely, we think, this is the reward for our patient plodding back there in the everlasting brightness of the Highway.

Soon, though, we begin to notice

the words on the tails of our coins, and we have strange forebodings: Some pieces carry rather attractive inscriptions. "I am Power," "I am Acclaim," "I am Wealth," "I am Righteousness," they say. But others seem very strange. For example: "I am The Master Race," "I am The Benefactor," "I am Good Causes," "I am God." This is very puzzling. Nevertheless we pocket them. But next come real shockers. They read: "I'm Pride," "I'm Anger," "I'm Aggression," "I'm Revenge," "I'm Disunity," "I'm Chaos." Then we turn up a single coin—just one—which declares: "I am the Devil himself." Some of us are horrified and we cry, "This is fool's gold, and this is a fool's paradise—let's clear out of here!"

But many would not return with us. They said, "Let's stay here and sort over those damned coins. We'll pick only the ones that carry the lucky inscriptions. For instance, those that say, 'Power' and 'Glory' and 'Righteousness.' You fellows are going to be sorry you didn't stick around." Not strangely, it was years before this part of our original company returned to the Highway.

They told us the story of those who had sworn never to return. They had said, "This money is real gold, and don't tell us any different. We're going to pile up all we can. Sure, we don't like those fool mottoes. But there's plenty of firewood here. We'll just melt all this stuff down into good solid gold bricks." Then our late arrivals added: "This is how the gold of

Pride claimed our brothers. They were already quarreling over their bricks when we left. Some were hurt and a few were dying. They had begun to destroy each other."

This symbolic picture graphically tells me that I may attain "humility for today" only to the extent that I am able to avoid the bog of guilt and rebellion, and that fair but deceiving land which is strewn with the coin of Pride. This is how I can find and stay on the Road to Humility which lies in between. Therefore a constant inventory which can reveal when I am off the road is always in order.

Of course, our first attempts at such inventories are apt to prove very unrealistic. I used to be a champ at *unrealistic* self-appraisal. I wanted to look only at the part of my life which seemed good. Then I would greatly exaggerate whatever virtues I supposed I had attained. Next I would congratulate myself on the grand job

I was doing. So my unconscious self-deception never failed to turn my few good assets into serious liabilities. This astonishing process was always a pleasant one. Naturally this generated a terrible hankering for still more "accomplishments," and still more approval. I was falling straight back into the pattern of my drinking days. Here were the same old goals—power, fame, and applause. Besides, I had the best alibi known—the spiritual alibi. The fact that I really did have a spiritual objective always made this utter nonsense seem perfectly right. I couldn't tell a good coin from a bad one; it was spiritual gold-bricking at its worst. I shall forever regret the damage I did to people around me. Indeed, I still tremble when I realize what I might have done to AA and to its future.

In those days I wasn't much bothered about the areas of life in which I was standing still. There was always

the alibi: "After all," I said to myself, "I'm far too busy with much more important matters." That was my near perfect prescription for comfort and complacency.

But sometimes I would simply have to look at certain situations where, on the face of them, I was doing very badly. Right away, a rousing rebellion would set in. Then the search for excuses would become frantic. "These," I would exclaim, "are really a good man's faults." When that pet gadget finally broke apart, I would think, "Well, if those people would only treat me right, I wouldn't have to behave the way I do." Next in order was this: "God well knows that I do have *awful compulsions*. I just can't get over this one. So *He* will have to release me." At last came the time when I would shout, "*This, I positively will not do; I won't even try.*" Of course my conflicts went right on mounting because



I was simply loaded with excuses and refusals.

When these troubles had finally exhausted me enough, there was yet another escape. I would commence to wallow in the bog of guilt. Here pride and rebellion would give way to depression. Though the variations were many, my main theme always was, "How god-awful I am." Just as I had exaggerated my modest attainments by pride, so now I would exaggerate my defects through guilt. I would race about, confessing all (and a great deal more!) to whoever would listen. Believe it or not, I took that to be great humility on my part, and I counted this as my sole remaining asset and consolation!

During those bouts with guilt, there was never a decent regret for the harms I had done, nor was there any serious thought of making such restitution as I could. The idea of asking God's forgiveness, let alone any forgiveness of myself, never occurred to me. Of course my really big liability—spiritual pride and arrogance—was not examined at all. I had shut out the light by which I might have seen it.

Today I think I can trace a clear linkage between my guilt and my pride. Both of them were certainly attention-getters. In pride I could say, "Look at me, I am wonderful." In guilt I would moan, "I'm awful." Therefore guilt is really the reverse side of the coin of pride. Guilt aims at self-destruction and Pride aims at the destruction of others.

This is why I see humility for today as that safe and secure stance midway between these violent emotional extremes. It is a quiet place where I can keep enough perspective, and enough balance to take my next small step up the clearly marked road that points toward eternal values.

Many of us have experienced far greater emotional gyrations than I. Others have experienced less. But all of us still have them at times. Yet I think we need not regret these conflicts. They seem to be a necessary part of growing up, emotionally and spiritually. They are the raw material out of which much of our progress has to be made.

Does anyone ask if AA is but a retching pit of pain and conflict? The answer is "Certainly not." In great measure, we AAs have really found peace. However haltingly, we have managed to attain an increasing humility whose dividends have been serenity and legitimate joy. We do not detour as much or as far as we once did.

At the outset of this meditation, it was thought that absolute ideals are far beyond our attainment, or even our comprehension; that we would be sadly lacking in humility if we really felt that we could achieve anything like absolute perfection in this brief span of earthly existence. Such a presumption would certainly be the acme of spiritual pride.

Reasoning thus, many people will have no truck at all with absolute spiritual values. Perfectionists, they

say, are either full of conceit because they fancy they have reached some impossible goal, or else they are swamped in self-condemnation because they have not done so.

Yet I think that we should not hold this view. It is not the fault of great ideals that they are sometimes misused and so become shallow excuses for guilt, rebellion and pride. On the contrary, we cannot grow very much unless we constantly try to envision what the eternal spiritual values are. As Step Eleven of AA's recovery program says, we *Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.* This surely means that we ought to look toward God's Perfection as our guide rather than as a goal to be reached in any foreseeable time.

I'm sure, for instance, that I ought to seek out the finest definition of humility that is possible for me to envision. This definition doesn't have to be absolutely perfect—I am only asked to try. Suppose I choose one like this: "Perfect humility would be a state of complete freedom from myself, freedom from all the claims that my defects of character now lay so heavily upon me. Perfect humility would be a full willingness, in all

times and places, to find and do the will of God."

When I meditate upon such a vision, I need not be dismayed because I shall never attain it, nor need I swell with presumption that one of these days its virtues shall all be mine.

I only need to dwell on the vision itself, letting it grow and ever more fill my heart. This done, I can compare it with my last-taken personal inventory. Then I get a sane and healthy idea of where I actually stand on the Highway to Humility. I see that my journey toward God has scarce begun. As I thus get down to my right size and stature, my self-concern and importance become amusing. Then faith grows that I do have a place on this Highway; that I can advance upon it with deepening peace and confidence. Once more I know that God is good; that I need fear no evil. This is a great gift, this knowledge that I do have a destiny.

As I continue to contemplate God's Perfection, I discover still another joy. As a child, hearing my first symphony, I was lifted up into its indescribable harmony, though I knew little of how or whence it came. So today, when I listen for God's Music of the Spheres, I can now and again hear those divine chords by which I am told that the Great Composer loves me—and that I love Him.