



The Pilgrim

“All the trumpets sounded for him on the other side”

—PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

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The Gentle Furies

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And so I finally went to the hospital... The three doctors involved never had believed me when I said that countless ages had waited for what I was going to do next week and that I had go to on... and on... They solved the problem by having a secretary call me: “Your room is ready for you. The doctor will give you your pre-operative shots at 5:00 p.m.”... When I frantically asked: “How long will I have to stay there,” she said, “That is not my problem...”

And so at 3:00 p.m. on a cloudless autumn day I fell into the hands of three nurses whom I now know as the “Gentle Furies”... At first I thought that they were called to be my slaves and that I was really in command of the situation... I seemed to be, but by the third day I found that the balance had shifted, subtly, but definitely... a clear example of authority stemming from superior knowledge... Of course, the situation should have been clear from the beginning... after all, this was my first bout with whatever ailed me... For the ladies in white, however, I was only the latest of hundreds of similar wretches who had come and gone— all with the same aches, the same fears, the same silly questions... When Fury No. 1 said, “No breakfast for you this morning,” or “Go to the bathroom,” I soon knew there was a finality about these decisions which was almost supernaturally authoritative... I just lay back on my pillow and started to think about the mystery of the Holy Trinity... even the Nicene Fathers must have had stomach aches... Perhaps they even did their best work with a nurse, symbol of authority, standing over them... At any rate all earthly matters had now been fitted into their proper, secondary place... I became overnight pathologically submissive...

I soon discovered that I had entered a world all its own— in language, customs, rituals, rites, traditions... Time was measured by pills, washing, bed changing, the doctor’s arrival, more washing and meals fit for a king — with ulcers... Behind it all, of course, was the ebb and surge of life

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and death, pain, healing, suffering, darkness and light, both physical and mental... No wonder that my schedule changed almost imperceptibly to correspond with the ancient cycle of the sun... There was something cosmically liturgical about it... breakfast at dawn, dinner at sunset and sleep before a tentative harvest moon had come over the rooftops... There may have been midnight oil around somewhere, but it was no longer for me... And I was “222-cataracts”...

I must emphasize, however, that this substitution of numbers for names was not the reflection of a cold, impersonal approach... not at all... Their interest could not have been more real and warm... What they were saying was that the name of the individual did not matter at this moment in his life... His identity was determined by the four walls which contained and held him and the particular organ which had brought him here... There was an intimate realism about this which made me proud even after just five days to be known only as “222-cataracts”... This gave me a fixed identity in time and condition which I had never known before... It was so easy to put my head into another room with no formal introduction, no historic background, no titles — just “222-cataracts”... and the dim figure in the corner would answer: “Kidney stones — and they hurt like hell”... Only much later I learned that despite his volcanic language, the brother with the kidney stones was a good Methodist — momentarily on leave of absence from Calvinist restriction...

The Three Gentle Furies assigned to me were experienced pros... All had families of their own and whenever I complained of any pain they proudly told me about Johnnie’s allergies, Elsie’s bad teeth, and the bald spot on Alice’s head... In less than a week I developed a proprietary interest in these unseen small fry... They seemed to be a hovering choir of little angels ready, at any moment, to sing (and cry) louder than I possibly could...

Footnote: Perhaps-I have presented a distorted picture of the life and work of a “Gentle Fury”... But one night when sleep would not come, I saw the page of the recording angel which is devoted to her life and work ... It is an astonishing assortment of little things... there is the cup of cold water which our Lord Himself hallowed eternally... there is the cool hand on a hot brow... the soft step... the quiet voice, “Let me help you.”... the watchful eye under the dim lamp in the corner as you fight for sleep... the

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patient voice, “The doctor will be here in a moment.”... the final maternal, “Now just go to sleep”...

All these little things, I know, will be written on a celestial page... and the very last sound before the Throne will be the voice of one of the Gentle Furies: “Lord! Who? Shall I stand before thee? Me?” And the answer will come, warm and unbelievably lovely: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren ye have done it unto me...” “

