



# The Pilgrim

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

—PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

O. P. Kretzmann

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Dear Son:

One day, many years from now, you will, I am quite sure, sit down before a blank piece of paper with a pen in your hand wondering<sup>1</sup> when and how the words which must now be written will appear. You will learn that they seldom come at one’s casual bidding. At times, it is true, they will flow and tumble like a mountain stream. But more often they will remain locked and silent under the ice of our bewildered hearts and stammering minds. They are strange and wayward things.

I mention this to you now since it always happens to me when I try to write you a letter for Christmas. Last night when we carried in those logs for the first fire of the winter and the wind blew sharp and cold from the north I had no trouble with my words. We talked, you will remember, about your football playing, about Mark’s birthday, about the leaves falling like rain from the elms, about the coming of Christmas again. But this morning somehow the words come slowly. Perhaps one reason is that something so great and holy as Christmas should not be put into quick and careless words, easily spoken and soon forgotten. When the angel began to speak in the midnight silence: “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior” there was an eternity of divine meditation and compassion behind his simple speech. It had been preparing ever since dusk came over Eden and God, in his evening walk under the trees, came upon a man and woman who were hiding, lonely and ashamed, in a corner of the garden. So many years and such great compassion had gone into the words of the angel, the first description of the meaning of Christmas, that anyone else who says anything about it should say it softly and reverently — as if one were afraid to wake the Child on Christmas Eve.

A few years ago I read somewhere that in certain European villages a boy about as old as you are is chosen to deliver the sermon on Christmas Eve. Perhaps there is an echo of that ancient custom in your recitation in church

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and the reading of the Christmas Gospel by one of the children. This is the night beyond all others when children should be heard. Christmas, with all its ages and all its depth, with its meeting of history and eternity, is still—and how strange this is—most clearly and warmly understood by those who are closest to the Child in years and understanding. Sometimes we who are much older come close to that beatitude, but more often it eludes us, choked and buried under the rubble of the years. We honor the past more than we live the present. We feel more the homesickness for other Christmases than the presence of *this* Christmas. If you will read my letters of other years you will see how often I turned back to the Christmases in New York when my parents and brothers and sister and I were all young together and Christmas was *now*. A little of that you must let me keep each Christmas Eve—the vigil for the past, the remembrance and, by God’s pity, the return, of the great simplicity and joy of a Christmas that is really happening now. This is at least part of what the Child become Man meant when He said: “Except ye become as little children. . . .” Christmas is still yours and it can become mine only if you will take me by the hand and show me how to stand, small and forgiven and happy, before the Manger.

I recall carrying you, years ago, into the living room to hear “Silent Night” for the first time in your life. I thought that I saw a little smile of recognition and understanding on your face, as if this were music that comes with special sweetness to one who is still so close to the new grace of Baptism or even as if the simple melody were the echo of another world from which Christmas is a single rift of light along our darkness, seen most clearly by eyes that have not yet looked out on the world without Christmas. You did not know at that time that the same voices that sing “Silent Night” at Christmastime could yell, “Kill the nigger bastards” on hot and stuffy summer nights. You did not know the evil of the earth, the sorrow of life, the hardship of toil, the loneliness of love and the grief of labor. You did not know yet how good is known only in the loss of good, and joy in the deprivation of joy. These you did not yet know and perhaps it was just because you did not know them that “Silent Night” came through to you with singular grace and purity.

And so it must come to all of us, please God, this Christmas Eve—to you and to me standing outside the stable trying hard to look in. As you grow older, you will slowly learn that silence was not only a part of Christmas night but that most of the momentous hours in human history have begun in

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silence. Most of the world of creation serves its Creator in silence. For silence is the mark of humility, and that is why you and I must come quietly this Christmas Eve to see those things which have come to pass and to stand in silence with the star and the oxen and a wondering world. Can we do it? The world is too much with us. But we seek the presence of Him Who quieted Genessaret with the command: "Peace, be still." What He was able to do to the angry sea He can surely do to our restless hearts.

