

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

—PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

The Pilgrim

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Yesterday Came Suddenly

May, 1968

It was a sunny, generous day and my friends of the moment seemed to be very happy... At 9:00 a.m., with the warming of the sun, there were on the lake four ducks, five gulls, three stately geese and about a thousand coots... A coot, by the way, is an outlandish species of duck — small, black, and completely inedible... When I asked my friend from northern Minnesota about their history and life, he said that they were totally useless... that if you wanted to eat one, you would have to boil it, cook it, fry it, roast it — and then go out and buy a hamburger... I had never seen coots and their diving under the water (about every eight seconds) for a weed or a minnow seemed to me the almost perfect reduction of life to its essentials... a floating on the water, a headlong dive, a weed, and more floating on the water... Seemingly, they had found some ultimate answers... They must have been at Walden and the Sea of Galilee... to be joyfully viewed by their Creator...

And so there we were — ducks, geese, gulls, coots and I — gathered haphazardly at a small, hidden lake in Florida... Only the geese seemed to be aware of my presence... They came close now and then in the hope of a handout of crumbs... the only human touch in the quiet scene...

I had come to the lake for a few hours of forgetting and remembering... Another milestone in my days and years was coming out of the East, and I was weary of small victories and great defeats... I needed the timelessness — and strange uselessness of the coots... Why should I try to hold superfluous candles to the sun... even on a birthday...

A rain cloud came over the horizon and the coots moved closer to the shore... It was little protection against the north wind but the waves were smaller and one could hide behind an occasional clump of weeds...

So — I had now come quite close to three-score and ten... the figure chosen by inspired writers to be a very special sign of divine grace... If such mercy would continue a little longer, I thought, I might outlive another

THE CRESSET

generation of coots... At the moment the earth was still wide and the skies were clear...

I tried to push my thoughts as far back in time as possible... fifty years... 1918... surely I was entitled to a little history... even though I had made none I had had a good seat for the apocalyptic drama I had seen...

1918: I was making shells to kill the Kaiser... He turned out later to be a doddering old man chopping wood in Holland, but my shells helped to topple his throne...

1928: These were feverish days... madly prosperous with strange old words on the wall: Mene, mene, tekel upharsin"... A heavenly weighing machine was at work again: "Thou has been weighed in the balance and found wanting"... A year later the balance tipped sharply and men fell out of office windows in Wall Street... I noticed that the apples sold by my friends at the elevated station on Tremont Avenue were getting cheaper...

1938: More of the same — except that a strange screaming voice came over the short-wave radio... talking about "Lebensraum" and "Blut und Boden"... I did not know that millions would die by violence before that voice would be stilled in a bunker under a city burning to death... .

1948... 1958... and now 1968... I must tell you that story sometime... These yesterdays came suddenly... at last to bring me here alone with the symbols of continuity... the trees on the farther shore, the moving water, and the coots... I had no doubt that they were here in 1918, 1928, and 1938... While I was stuffing shells and watching the world's heartache, they were praising God and taking thankfully from His hand the minnows and the weeds...

I added a few lines of half-forgotten verses to my lean harvest of the years:

Master, receive me in Thy way,
For I am spent who followed mine;
Seal me from every alien sway,
Close to me every door but Thine.

And if Thou wilt, I journey on,
And if Thou wilt not, bid me wait;
It is enough for me to know

THE CRESSET

Whose hand it is that bars the gate.
It is enough that Thou art here;
No other joy is joy to them
Who wake from sleep and find Thee near,
Whose lips have touched Thy garment's hem.

