

Pilgrim Meets Compassionate

(with apologies to John Bunyan)

IDREAMED that when Amoralist saw that he could neither make Pilgrim turn back by the blows of his hammer, nor pierce him with his darts, he left him for a time. And though Pilgrim had been weakened in the battle, he resumed the path, making such time as he could.

He came to a crossroads by a pool of water. By one path was a sign with the words, To the City of the King, but the letters were dim, and the light was fading, and he wondered if his eyes played tricks. Moreover there led out from the crossroads other paths in great number, each in a different direction, some well beaten, but others seemingly little travelled. The sun being low in the sky, and his feet and arms being weary with battle and travel, he said, This is a good place to rest for the night; I will discern my path and take up my journey in the morning. As Pilgrim cupped his hand and lifted water to his lips, he heard a voice saying, Use my dipper instead.

And he looked up and saw a man clothed in pilgrim's habit like himself, who said, I am Compassionate, the steward of the pool. And my pool is called Reflection. Then Pilgrim drank from the dipper as he was bade; but he was not sure whether he were refreshed or not, for the water was cold as death. The face of Compassionate was lined with pity, and he asked, Have you been at war with Apollyon? And Pilgrim replied, Nay, I have not met the one you mention, but indeed I have been at war. Had it not been for my shield, which protected me, I would have perished, for the lies of my foe were as flaming darts and hammerblows to me; and I have passed heaps of bod-

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ies that he has crushed. The name of my foe was Amoralist. Compassionate said, That is the one I meant; Amoralist is the name he affects in this age, but of old he was called Apollyon.

And he said, Of your courtesy, let me see your shield. So Pilgrim showed him. And when Compassionate saw the King's Cross on it, he gave it back to Pilgrim, looked sorrowful, and said, I would have you know that although Amoralist is a liar, not everything that he says is a lie. And Pilgrim said, I do not understand. Asked Compassionate, Did he say that the King is dead and that there is no Royal Road? Said Pilgrim, Yes. Asked Compassionate, Did he say that each must hack his own Road through the wilderness, with no authority to hack but that he hacks? Said Pilgrim, Yes. Asked Compassionate, And did he say that to do this, one must be hard and ruthless and commit atrocities, hacking down not only grass and timber, but men and nations and generations that stand in the way? Said Pilgrim, Yes, and that is why we fought; for I was in his way. Then Compassionate said, I would have you know that the last thing Amoralist told you was a lie, but that all the other things were true.

Nay, it is not so, said Pilgrim. Nay, but it is, said Compassionate. The King is dead, for if He lived, then he would not suffer hackers. There is no Royal Road, for if there were, then the hackers too would be on it. Because there is no Royal Road, each must hack his own path through the wilderness. But because the King is dead, each must do so by no authority but that he hacks. Then declared Pilgrim, But at this very crossroads I saw a sign inscribed, To the City of the King. Asked Compassionate, Do you see it now? And Pilgrim

looked, but it had already grown dark and he could not make it out; so he said, No. You see, said Compassionate, it is as I said.

Pilgrim wept with the loss of his hope. But Compassionate said, Be not dismayed. Though Amoralist told the truth about all those things, yet he lied when he told you that one must be hard and ruthless and commit atrocities. For consider: If one may choose any path, then one may choose the path of Compassion. Consider also this: That although there is no Royal Road, yet there are Royal Helps for those who would choose well; and such is this pool, Reflection, and I am its steward. Pilgrim was confused in his mind, and he asked, Then do you choose this path of Compassion? Said Compassionate, Yes. And then he said, Now sleep; perchance morning will bring you new hope.

And I dreamed that Pilgrim lay down to sleep, and as he slept, he dreamed. And he dreamed that in the middle of the night he awoke to find that Compassionate was gone. He prayed, O King, am I to lose not only You and the Royal Road, but Compassion too? And he cried out to the steward of the pool, Where are you? Whereupon the voice of Compassionate returned, I am not far; come here. So Pilgrim rose and stumbled in the direction of the voice, and perceived that he was following a path; though what path it might be, he could not tell, because of the thick darkness. Then he came to a little valley, and at the bottom of the valley was an altar, and on the top of the altar was a fire, and in the light of the fire he saw Compassionate; and from the eyes of Compassionate ran tears; but his face was like the face of Amoralist.

This is the Valley of Pity, said the steward; Watch, and you will learn. And as Pilgrim grew accustomed to the firelight, he saw that around the altar was a crowd of the young leading the aged, and a crowd of the well leading the sick, and a crowd of women leading children. As each of the weak ones reached the altar, Compassionate lifted him into the flames, and he was consumed. Then Pilgrim's bones melted within him, and he cried, These are the atrocities of Apollyon; I passed your work yesterday on the road. But the steward said, No, this is different. For that was the work of hardness, but this is the work of softness; that was the

destruction of morality, but this is the creation of morality; that was indifference to suffering, but this is the relief of suffering; that was committing atrocities, but this is making necessary distinctions. For we must sacrifice these in order to give a humane quality of life to those. And Pilgrim swooned, but as he swooned he remembered the oracle which had been told to him by one of the daughters of the Interpreter: When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror.

Pilgrim remained long in his swoon, but when the sun was halfway up the sky he awoke. Seeing that he lay in a rocky valley beside a broken altar, he did not know whether he had dreamed or not.

And the name of the valley was Hinnom, and the name of the altar was Topheth; for he read these things upon a stone that had been set there long ago. Then he hurried back along the path to the pool of Reflection, but when he was almost there, he came up short. For standing beside the pool with his back to Pilgrim was Apollyon, and at the feet of Apollyon, with his head cleaved in, was Compassionate. And Apollyon gloated and laughed over the body, saying, You did good work for me, brother, but I can take over now. And after Apollyon had gone away some distance, Pilgrim approached the pool and turned over the body; and underneath it was a pouch or wallet, with some papers and oddments within it. And one of the papers was inscribed, Doctor; and another was inscribed, Professor; and another bore the owner's name. But his name was not Compassionate, as he had affected, but Sentimental; moreover, none of the papers appointed him steward of the pool. So Pilgrim pondered these things in his heart.

And I dreamed that after Pilgrim had covered the body of Sentimental with rocks, he committed his soul to the King, for he thought, Perchance at the last he repented. The sun was at the zenith, and it glittered from the pool, and it illuminated the sign which he had not been able to make out the night before. And its rays fell full upon the words, To the City of the King; and when Pilgrim saw them again he was astonished. So picking up his shield and sword, he continued on his way. □

—J. Budziszewski