

God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen, Ernest Hemingway

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IN THOSE DAYS THE DISTANCES WERE ALL very different, the dirt blew off the hills that now have been cut down, and Kansas City was very like Constantinople. You may not believe this. No one believes this; but it is true. On this afternoon it was snowing and inside an automobile dealer's show window, lighted against the early dark, there was a racing motor car finished entirely in silver with Dans Argent lettered on the hood.

This I believed to mean the silver dance or the silver dancer, and, slightly puzzled which it meant but happy in the sight of the car and pleased by my knowledge of a foreign language, I went along the street in the snow.

I was walking from the Woolf Brothers' saloon where, on Christmas and Thanksgiving Day, a free turkey dinner was served, toward the city hospital which was on a high hill that overlooked the smoke, the buildings and the streets of the town. In the reception room of the hospital were the two ambulance surgeons Doc Fischer and Doctor Wilcox, sitting, the one before a desk, the other in a chair against the wall.

Doc Fischer was thin, sand-blond, with a thin mouth, amused eyes and gambler's hands. Doctor Wilcox was short, dark and carried an indexed book. The Young Doctor's Friend and Guide, which, being consulted on any given subject, told symptoms and treatment. It was also cross-indexed so that being consulted on symptoms it gave diagnoses.

Doc Fischer had suggested that any future editions should be further cross-indexed so that if consulted as to the treatments being given, it would reveal ailments and symptoms. "As an aid to memory," he said.

Doctor Wilcox was sensitive about this book but could not get along without it. It was bound in limp leather and fitted his coat pocket and he had bought it at the advice of one of his professors who had said, "Wilcox, you have no business being a physician and I have done everything in my power to prevent you from being certified as one. Since you are now a member of this learned profession I advise you, in the name of humanity, to obtain a copy of The Young Doctor's Friend and Guide, and use it. Doctor Wilcox. Learn to use it."

Doctor Wilcox had said nothing but he had bought the leather-bound guide that same day.

"Well, Horace," Doc Fischer said as I came in the receiving room which smelt of cigarettes, iodoform, carbolic and an overheated radiator. "Gentlemen," I said.

"What news along the rialto?" Doc Fischer asked. He affected a certain extravagance of speech which seemed to me to be of the utmost elegance. "The free turkey at Woolf's," I answered.

"You partook?"

"Copiously."

"Many of the confrères present?"

"All of them. The whole staff."

"Much Yuletide cheer?"

"Not much."

"Doctor Wilcox here has partaken slightly," Doc Fischer said. Doctor Wilcox looked up at him, then at me.

"Want a drink?" he asked.

"No, thanks," I said.

"That's all right," Doctor Wilcox said.

"Horace," Doc Fischer said, "you don't mind me calling you Horace, do you?"

"No."

"Good old Horace. We've had an extremely interesting case."

"I'll say," said Doctor Wilcox.

"You know the lad who was in here yesterday?"

"Which one?"

"The lad who sought eunuch-hood."

"Yes." I had been there when he came in. He was a boy about sixteen. He came in with no hat on and was very excited and frightened but determined. He was curly haired and well built and his lips were prominent.

"What's the matter with you, son?" Doctor Wilcox asked him.

"I want to be castrated," the boy said.

"Why?" Doc Fischer asked.

"I've prayed and I've done everything and nothing helps."

"Helps what?"

"That awful lust."

"What awful lust?"

"The way I get. The way I can't stop getting. I pray all night about it."

"Just what happens?" Doc Fischer asked.

The boy told him. "Listen, boy," Doc Fischer said. "There's nothing wrong with you. That's the way you're supposed to be. There's nothing wrong with that."

"It is wrong," said the boy. "It's a sin against purity. It's a sin against our Lord and Saviour."

"No," said Doc Fisher. "It's a natural thing. It's the way you are supposed to be and later on you will think you are very fortunate."

"Oh, you don't understand," the boy said.

"Listen," Doc Fischer said and he told the boy certain things.

"No. I won't listen. You can't make me listen."

"Please listen," Doc Fischer said.

"You're just a goddamned fool," Doctor Wilcox said to the boy.

"Then you won't do it?" the boy asked.

"Do what?"

"Castrate me."

"Listen," Doc Fischer said. "No one will castrate you. There is nothing wrong with your body. You have a fine body and you must not think about that. If you are religious remember that what you complain of is no sinful state but the means of consummating a sacrament."

"I can't stop it happening," the boy said. "I pray all night and I pray in the daytime. It is a sin, a constant sin against purity."

"Oh, go and—" Doctor Wilcox said.

"When you talk like that I don't hear you," the boy said with dignity to Doctor Wilcox. "Won't you please do it?" he asked Doc Fischer. "No," said Doc Fischer. "I've told you, boy."

"Get him out of here," Doctor Wilcox said. "I'll get out," the boy said. "Don't touch me. I'll get out." That was about five o'clock on the day before. "So what happened?" I asked.

"So at one o'clock this morning," Doc Fischer said, "we receive the youth self-mutilated with a razor." "Castrated?" "No," said Doc Fisher. "He didn't know what castrate meant." "He may die," Doctor Wilcox said. "Why?" "Loss of blood."

"The good physician here. Doctor Wilcox, my colleague, was on call and he was unable to find this emergency listed in his book." "The hell with you talking that way," Doctor Wilcox said.

"I only mean it in the friendliest way. Doctor," Doc Fischer said, looking at his hands, at his hands that had, with his willingness to oblige and his lack of respect for Federal statutes, made him his trouble. "Horace here will bear me out that I only speak of it in the very friendliest way. It was an amputation the young man performed, Horace."

"Well, I wish you wouldn't ride me about it," Doctor Wilcox said. "There isn't any need to ride me." "Ride you, Doctor, on the day, the very anniversary, of our Saviour's birth?"

"Our Saviour? Ain't you a Jew?" Doctor Wilcox said. "So I am. So I am. It always is slipping my mind. I've never given it its proper importance. So good of you to remind me. Your Saviour. That's right. Your Saviour, undoubtedly your Saviour—and the ride for Palm Sunday."

"You're too damned smart," Doctor Wilcox said. "An excellent diagnosis, Doctor. I was always too damned smart. Too damned smart on the coast certainly. Avoid it, Horace. You haven't much tendency but sometimes I see a gleam. But what a diagnosis—and without the book."

"The hell with you," Doctor Wilcox said. "All in good time. Doctor," Doc Fischer said. "All in good time. If there is such a place I shall certainly visit it. I have even had a very small look into it. No more than a peek, really. I looked away almost at once. And do you know what the young man said, Horace, when the good Doctor here brought him in? He said, 'Oh, I asked you to do it. I asked you so many times to do it.'"

"On Christmas Day, too," Doctor Wilcox said. "The significance of the particular day is not important," Doc Fischer said. "Maybe not to you," said Doctor Wilcox.

"You hear him, Horace?" Doc Fischer said. "You hear him? Having discovered my vulnerable point, my achilles tendon so to speak, the doctor pursues his advantage."
"You're too damned smart," Doctor Wilcox said.

The End