

Nightingale in Camelot

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THE KENNEDY CASE. By Rita Dallas and Jeanira Ratcliffe. Putnam's. 352 pp. \$7.95

By ANNE CHAMBERLIN

I SHOULD THINK it would be better to have your telephone tapped than to have the publishers get to the live-in help. But the Kennedys were on the throne before Executive Privilege set in, and they've already heard from the personal secretary, the cook, the knights and jesters of the court and assorted scribes, official and otherwise, so I suppose they're braced for it. But when the nurse buckles . . . Gad. Is there anyplace left to hide?

Rita Dallas, a registered nurse with "a special interest in caring for people who were disabled, in any way, through paralysis," was asked to take "the Kennedy case" shortly after Joseph P. Kennedy suffered a massive stroke while playing golf in Palm Beach, December 19, 1961. For eight and a half years, until he died, there she was in the front part of the house, within earshot of a room, even when she wasn't in it. When Mrs. Kennedy wanted to talk privately to her son after the Chappaquiddick accident, they would retreat to the flagpole outside on the lawn. (And those tapes are probably in Mr. Ehrlichman's safe.)

Mrs. Dallas was in the *bathroom*, even. Her first encounter with Senator Edward Kennedy was in the sauna, where she had been asked to take some towels. There he was, with a group of friends, every one of them unabashedly stark naked. While staying at the White House with her charge, she was summoned to talk to the President—as he was soaking in the tub. He wanted to hear about

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his father's condition and suggested she take a seat on the toilet and tell him what she knew.

Well, all this was a long way from how Mrs. Dallas was brought up, and what gives her book a deeper interest than it really intends is what it reveals of the head-on collision of two worlds so totally alien to each other.

Probably no one before or since could afford to be sick on so grand a scale as Joseph Kennedy. He not only had an empire of his own but one son was President of the United States, another was attorney general and the youngest was the junior senator from Massachusetts. Yet in the end, the privilege and power that set his case apart and gave him a better chance to recover than any man on earth were the very forces—as Mrs. Dallas describes it, anyway—which hampered his recovery and in the end defeated it.

The life of the very rich is not only "different." It even limits perceptions. When cost is no longer an obstacle, a force of gravity is lost, and a lot of other values are left wandering around weightless, too. Normal sensibilities get tuned to another station, or perhaps tuned out entirely. The Kennedys were equipped to cope with death. But getting sick, like coming in second, was something you didn't do. Nothing prepared them for a lingering, bewildering frustrating illness at the hub of their lives. The "complicated life-style that results from a stroke is like the legendary Chinese water torture," Mrs. Dallas writes. "It gradually drives a family mad with worry, confusion and grief."

Only Jacqueline Kennedy, she says, "was always trying to help Mr. Kennedy accept himself and to not be ashamed of his condition. While others pretended not to notice the side of his body that was affected by the paralysis, she always held the deformed hand and kissed the affected side of his face." (And Jacqueline was the only Kennedy who bothered to introduce herself to Mrs. Dallas.)

Mrs. Dallas was a trained professional who had not skied in St. Moritz and was shocked at seeing a naked man in the sauna and was not equipped to laugh at the high-spirited pranks of the gambling

Kennedys, but she was doggedly convinced that to overcome his handicaps her patient would have to commit himself to a long, painful, unremitting program of special exercises and therapy. There were no shortcuts he could buy. He rebelled at every turn, but, as she tells it, he got the message, accepted the price and was ready to get on with the work.

But drudgery was not a Kennedy thing. You don't bow to adversity and toll in the pits; you defy it and laugh in its face. (Their laughter was a constant bewilderment to the help. After the President was

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assassinated, the Ted Kennedys' baby nurse resigned in a huff after they had a boisterous Thanksgiving evening and played touch football on the lawn.) In the family view, Joseph Kennedy had suffered enough. He should enjoy the time he had left. So they turned handsprings to make him laugh, teased him lovingly, took him to parties, had him talk to his New York office on the telephone every day, although bellowing "Yaaaaa," or "Naaaaaa," banging his fists on his chair, stamping his foot and throwing things around the room were his only ways of expressing himself. Only once, as he was watching a hated politician on TV, was he heard to exclaim, unmistakably: "You son of a bitch!"

"The Kennedys were dazzled by the brilliance of their own destiny," Mrs. Dallas writes, "and there was little time to slow down or look back or reconsider." And no one had time for the constant attention required, so Ann Gargan, Mrs. Kennedy's niece,

became a sort of family surrogate.

Mrs. Dallas explains delicately that Ann "had been allocated the role that often falls to a less affluent relative." In Joseph Kennedy's illness she became not only his constant companion, but countermanded his doctors' orders at will.

"The family did not oppose this," Mrs. Dallas says, "and it often put me in a position of conflict with her." In fact, as the tale unfolds, you wonder why Mrs. Dallas didn't throttle her with her bare hands, or carry her tale to the President, or the Attorney General.

But bearing tales was not in her code. So she hung on, in the eye of the storm, while 93 less durable nurses came and went. Only once did she dig in her heels: when Mrs. Kennedy asked her to do the laundry when the laundress took sick. (Nurses do not do laundry.)

"But Mrs. Dallas," she replied, baffled, "you'd do the wash if you were working for a poor family, wouldn't you?"

"Mrs. Kennedy," I said, "poor families do not have private nurses."

And so it goes, this dialogue of the deaf in the heart of Camelot.

The tale is laced about, of course, with a feast of gossip vignettes observed from Mrs. Dallas's privileged vantage point that future Kennedy books will be stealing from for years. We see Mrs. Kennedy in her frownies, her arch-support shoes and with her ill-fitting false tooth. We learn she kept a funeral dress ready in her closet and for months, after the President was killed in Dallas, she couldn't bring herself to call Mrs. Dallas anything but "Nurse." She kept turning out the lights to economize, and suggested the nurses bring their own thermos to work, since the price of coffee was so high.

All the other Kennedys tumble through the pages in various degrees of affection, frustration and disarray. And somehow, crippled, inarticulate and finally blind, Joseph Kennedy seemed to tower above them all until the end.

But it's Mrs. Dallas's inadvertent morality tale that holds you spellbound in your chair. 629