

Novice In Harlem

By MARY JERDO

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"Wondrous and incomprehensible are the ways of the Lord..." The Cabdriver stared at me curiously. "Ma'am," he said, "you sure you want to go to... 135th Street?"

"Oh, quite sure," I answered in my most ladylike voice, for I was positive that even if my address didn't smack of culture and refinement, the tone of my voice would. The Captain of the Parmalee gazed at me doubtfully. Almost instinctively I could read his thoughts. "Hm... White woman... Harlem... Two and two... But maybe two and two didn't make four in my case, for he continued paternally... '135th Street ain't no place for a white gal like you... Gotta watch your step there, sister.'"

With that admonition he reluctantly picked up my bags, tossed them in the cab, slammed the door and off we went, slithering through traffic and green lights.

My newest adventure was starting... my strangest interlude was waiting for me in the environs of Friendship House!

Hours later I sat on the edge of a chair in my new bedroom and wondered how soon I could leave that madhouse called "Friendship House." The place was completely "nuts" and so were its inhabitants, and I thanked the gods piously that I probably wouldn't be there more than a week at the most. Just until I got a job as a clerk at the Five and Ten or as a stenographer in a two by four office. Anything, but let me out of here soon! The events of the afternoon and evening kept coming back to me... forming a weird pattern... I couldn't relax, too much had happened. It didn't seem possible that just a few hours before I had left the comparative luxury of a rambling farmhouse in the Adirondacks.

AND NOW here I was... in a dingy little room in Harlem. Suddenly, I wanted to cry... But I wasn't the sort that cried. Not me... I'd been away from home for nearly eight years before this. I could take care of myself. But darn George. He had no right to send me into a set-up like this without warning me. He must have known what he was getting me into. Hadn't he worked with the Baroness for years? Probably he was laughing up his sleeve at me right now. Laughing because he had sent me—a little Pagan—into a hot-bed of Catholic Action. Contamination with Catholicism while looking for a job, huh? But just wait... I'd show him I was immune to that pietistic stuff.

But it certainly was a funny place. The cabdriver had gotten me there much too fast. We had bowled up Lenox Avenue and then Crosstown, and had stopped at 34 West 135th Street, brakes screeching. Still dubious, my friend had deposited me, bag and baggage on the sidewalk, and shaking his head he departed. There I was!

There was nothing glamorous about the scene I faced. The street was full of dogs, little black boys and girls, and garbage cans. Right in front of me was a glass window that said "Friendship House - De Porres Catholic Lending Library." And that big window was filled with a peculiar collection of plants, goldfish and religious signs! Evidently the latest thing in Settlement House displays this season.

I MANAGED to get through the doors in spite of the two bags. And there she stood—the Baroness Catherine de Hueck. She was tall and blonde, and dressed in blue and she didn't walk toward me she strode. "You're Mary Jerdo, I suppose?" The voice was husky, throaty. But I didn't like the inflection on the "suppose." Maybe she wasn't any more enthusiastic about having me than I was about being there.

"Yes, I'm Mary Jerdo." "Come... sit down," she suggested. And going to her desk, she pointed to a folding chair beside it. "So you're the girl George sent me?" she said looking at me intently. "And how is George?" I assured her that George was fine.

"Is this the first time you've ever been in Harlem?"

"No, I've been here before, but it was to slum at the Savoy."

Her eyes flashed... just perceptibly. They were slanting in-fathomable eyes.

"Well," she said, "The Holy Ghost... He'll fix that." I noticed then that she had in recent service...

... and I noticed too that I had probably said the wrong thing. "George hasn't told me much about you," she continued... "Just sketchily... Now you tell me about yourself."

"I should like to," I said. "I love talking about myself. I'm twenty-three... French-Irish recent... High School and Business College graduate... A farmer's daughter but I've spent the last eight years trying to live it down..."

"Just a minute," the Baroness interrupted. "What's wrong with being a farmer's daughter? The earth and God are very close to each other. He loves simple things and simple people... You and me, we'll have a long talk about it some day."

I agreed and wondered vaguely why we should.

THEN I WENT ON. "There has been nothing unusual about my life... I graduated from High School at sixteen... and I've been knocking around since then. I've drifted from job to job and lived to suit myself. Anything that chains me frightens me. I like to dream... And some day I want to write. George found me when I hadn't had a job for several months... I suppose he felt sorry for me, though I was losing hope and ambition. He said that if anyone could help me land a job, you could. He didn't hesitate to ask you because you had been such good friends and had worked together."

"And what about religion?" the Baroness asked. "Do you have any?"

"I was born a Catholic," I said, "but I've never liked anything that I've seen of Catholicism... I don't want any part of any religion."

That apparently didn't please the Baroness, or was it pity that I saw in her eyes? But all she said was, "I'll pray for you, and then went on, 'but first I'll show you the rest of the place, and while you're here I think it best that you work part-time while you look for a job. What would you like to do?'"

I DIDN'T want to do anything, and I certainly didn't care if I never saw the rest of the place. But I had to be polite. I had to say something... So I plunged at random. "Do you have little children?" I folded my hands and looked demure... "I love little children I'd like to work with them."

For the first time the Baroness smiled and hitting the desk with her hand, she exclaimed "Boy, oh boy, you're just the person we need! There's a vacancy in the Cub's Come on."

We went across the street, and for the first time I noticed a row of stores with blue and white insignia marked C.Y.O.

"These are all part of Friendship House. Here is the Cub's Room and there is the General. Next to it is the Clothing Room and next to that is the Junior Councillor Room," the Baroness pointed out. "With the exception of the Clothing Room, from which we distribute clothing to the poor, and the Library which you were just in, these have been converted into clubrooms for Negro children. They cover an age range of from seven to twenty-five."

She said was, "Oh." I didn't feel impressed. I only wanted a hot bath and bed, for I had traveled most of the day. But the possibilities of that seemed remote. Apparently I was to go to work immediately. It made me feel a little indignant.

We went into the store marked "C.Y.O. General." It was smoky and crowded. There were kids of High School age all over the place... playing games, cards, and ping-pong to the tune of a blaring radio. I was deafened by the noise.

THEN I noticed two white girls. Two, pretty, normal looking white girls. The Baroness introduced me to them. "Miss Betty Schneider, Miss Jane O'Donnell, this is Miss Jerdo who has come to stay with us for a while. Bring her up to supper." Then turning to me, she continued, "I leave you in capable hands... now I must cook. So, good-bye for the present." With that she strode out of the room and slammed the door hard.

The Misses Schneider and O'Donnell didn't waste any time on preliminaries either. They explained that they were "Staff Workers" whatever that was... and immediately inducted me into service.

"Do you know how to play cards?" asked Miss Schneider. Weakly I admitted having some knowledge thereof.

"Fine," she continued. "these boys need a fourth at Rummy. Wouldn't you like to play with them?"

Whether I would like to play rummy with these three Negro lads was purely irrelevant. It was the kind of request in which somebody had made up your mind for you, so I said "Yes" meekly, and sat down.

One of the boys pushed a deck of cards toward me with a grin and said, "Your shuffle, Miss."

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