

Novice In Harlem

By MARY JERDO

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(Continued from Last Week)

+AND this strange collection of people talked as they ate. Talked about things I'd never heard of before. The Pope's Encyclicals... The Lay Apostolate... The Holy Ghost... The Heroics of Good Works... The Mystical Body of Christ. My thoughts about the group were most unflattering. Long haired, pious Catholics, that's what they are. I decided the only food they cared about, apparently, was food for thought. Here, I said to myself, was Catholic intelligentsia at play. When I was a low brow and glad of it.

Supper ended with prunes and a pietistic thanks for the blessings received. Once again the Baroness took me in tow. "You might as well go down to the Cub tonight, as long as you're going to work with them. But first I'll show you your bedroom."

It was a tiny room. Just off the Common Room. A tiny little brown room that back on the farm we would have used for closet space. It had one window that looked out on a cement courtyard... a courtyard that was imprisoned by tall grey tenements. There was a studio couch in the room and I looked at it longingly.

The Baroness smiled at me a big flashing smile. "You've never met anything like us before. We're a crazy bunch aren't we?" I didn't smile. I only agreed. "You're all utterly insane."

+DOWN to the Cub Den we went. And that was the last straw. The perfect climax to a nerve racking day. Forty little boys and girls of Grammar School age crowded into a room two sizes too small for their number. Forty, shouting, shrieking, singing little devotions, busy giving an amateur performance for a visiting priest. They "trucked on down" and did the "jumping jive" awaying their bodies to the rhythm of a radio. Little brown girls sang "Oh, Johnnie Oh" and rolled their eyes until only the whites of them showed. And little black boys spoke pieces and shuffled their feet as they spoke.

The audience came back with constant shrieks, cat calls and boos and scattered applause. But the performers in this extraordinary Amateur Program were not affected in the least. And as long last it was all over. The Cub's... their performance... the whole long ghastly day. I was back in my little brown room, and my mind was full of Encyclicals, Baronesses, Rummy, Catholics, Crazy People, Lap Apostles, Burned Soup.

The mind and body can only take so much... and so because the couch was soft... and the sheets were clean, I began to relax. Boom... bang... the sound of breaking glass... the noise of shouting, cursing people brought me back to reality with a crash. I sat up in bed and groaned. "What in the name of all that's good and holy am I doing in a place like this?"

Strangely enough, very soon I discovered that it was in the name of One who is Good and Holy that I was there.

+SOMEHOW the first week slipped by. Not on golden wings... but not on leaden feet either. Superficially, I had the ability to adjust myself to externals. Inwardly, I was seething with bewilderment. Fortunately, I had no prejudices against the Negro, simply, I suppose, because I had never known any. No, it wasn't Interculturalism that perturbed me. It was the peculiar status quo of the Staff of Friendship House...

the boys and girls who gave up all for a life of poverty in the slums. Friendship House was alright as a stopgap for me. I'd be going on soon, to a job downtown. But these boys and girls... it was a way of life for them. They liked it. It wasn't an alternative. It was a choice. They lived in bedbug infested apartments, and ate watery soup and hard bread. But why? My sense of values was dizzy.

I think the answer came to me gradually. One day I saw our most beautiful staff member at work in the Clothing Room. A huge Negro woman wanted a pair of shoes, and there was Jane kneeling at her feet, treating her with all the courtesy due an Archbishop. And there was a strange beautiful light in Jane's eyes.

+THEN there was the way that Charlie (he was staff too) treated the Ambassadors of God. I saw him listening patiently to what one of these King-Kong sodden gentlemen had to say, and finally take him by the arm and escort him to a beanery that was down the street. There was a light in Charlie's eyes too. And all of this seemed to correlate with a phrase that I'd heard at Friendship House. "I saw Christ in the Negro." Betty, Flew, Jane and Charlie... they all saw Christ and saw Him in the poor. I began to pull out of the fog.

But it was hard. I didn't know much about God. I'd never wanted to know much about Him. But here everyone talked about God as though He were a friend of the family. God was a nice friendly sort of person who sent large donations of canned goods when the larder was bare. He sent money, too... when the wolf was about to move into the library. The God I'd heard about wasn't like that. He was an avenging God who punished people for little sins, and he sent wars and famine and desolation. He was a God that I didn't want to know.

But somehow the weeks passed by. A month, then two... and still I didn't have that job downtown. Then it didn't matter much for I was completely engrossed. The "B" (it's an abbreviation for the Baroness Catherine de Hueck) gave me the office and files to handle... and four NYA girls. It was fun to make a smoothly running mechanism out of the office to train the girls. But the files were inhabited by a bad genie who each night put the B's in the A's and the R's in the Q's. And the genie has never moved away.

+I WORKED with the Cubas at night after my day's work was finished in the office. Working with the Cubas was a liberal education. It was entrancing to be greeted by a seraphic chorus of "Good evenin' Miss Mary." It made you feel warm and glowing inside. But the illusion was usually destroyed fifteen minutes later. The cherubic darlings of the previous moment became precocious brats. They hid the marbles in Chinese Checkers, and turned their lesson Folk Dancing into the Saxy-Q. They kept me at the piano playing "Love Grows on the White Oak Tree" by the hour. I had never worked so hard in my life before... and if I had it would have been for money. But here I was working for love... not money. And I like it... for I, too had seen Christ.

I don't think that I really wanted to find God. I knew that I would never be "comfortable" again if I let Him into my heart... Not comfortable in the worldly sense. But the Hound of Heaven was on my trail. And He pursued me until I couldn't run any farther, and finally exhausted and tired, I stopped running and let the sweetness of knowing Christ pour into my soul.

Many and varied were the ways I learned of God. There was the Baroness, who in her deep-thundered voice made the sanctification of one's own soul sound like a thrilling thing. And there was daily Mass... Daily Mass and Communion for me, who before coming to Friendship House could count on one hand the number of times that I had participated in the Supreme Sacrifice. And then there were the ramifications that sprang from this deeper knowledge of Christ... I discovered the Doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, a Doctrine pulsating with love and beauty.

+AND through this Doctrine I discovered that I could never be alone again for the flood gates of my heart and soul were opened to all the Catholics of the world. The Catholics who from the "Body" in this marvelous teaching in which Christ is the Head. I learned that one's spiritual growth mars the "Body" more radiant... more beautiful, and that every Christian shared in this growth. I was my Brother's Keeper... Supernaturally as well as naturally.

Then there was charity. Not the charity I had known before... A charity where a monetary gift to an organization saved one's conscience for a comfortable length of time. This charity was different. Charity and love were synonymous. It amazed me to learn that it was charity that tempered the short re-

ports that sprang to one's lips at someone's stupidity. It was charity that permeated one's being and made one see Christ in the needy, as Jane had seen Him in the fat Negro woman who wanted shoes. It was a circle of love and somehow I was drawn into it.

One month slipped into another and before I knew it a year had passed and I was no longer a Novice in Harlem. The pagan... through the Grace of God... was a professed in the Lay Order of Friendship House.

Transcribed Program Distributed For 60th Anniversary of K. of C.

NEW HAVEN, Conn. "60 Crowded Years" is the title of a transcription disc released by the Knights of Columbus to their local councils as a special feature for their sixtieth anniversary observance in their Founders Week, Mar. 22-29. The 15-minute radio program gives a portrayal of the origin, achievements and future aims of

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