

On Pilgrimage - January 1964

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Summary: Homey tales of a winter visit to her daughter, the story of two old guests, and their upcoming move to a new farm. Sums up their work as the works of mercy and the works of study. (DDLW #811).

January 7

Last week when I visited my daughter Tamar in Vermont, it was 15 degrees below zero. Pipes had frozen in the cellar, water had to be obtained in buckets from a reservoir, the car would not start, but the furnace worked and the kitchen stove and the fireplace burned wood and we kept warm all through the house. Visits in mid-winter are wild affairs, with Tamar's nine and a neighbor's three children in and out from dawn till dark and later, since there was a full moon. The latest craze is bowling, and a plastic set being one of the Christmas presents, the long living room constantly was the scene of a game, and the rest of the family, playing with dolls, or games at the table, or books beside the fire, had to keep to one side. There were two dogs, too. Between meals and dishes, I took refuge in a bedroom off the living room, and when Tamar would come in for a talk, first Katie, three, and one by one all the others came too, and the small room was a Bedlam. My refuge was to take to my transistor radio, a present from Tom Hughes, and use an earpiece in one ear and a pillow over the other. Also I worked at an afghan (log cabin pattern) which Tamar started me at a year ago, and bowed my head under the storm, and even got drawn into it, in the way of discussions about right and wrong conscience.

Tamar took refuge in her books on psychology and kept her nose in one paper back I had brought up, LOVE OR CONSTRAINT which has to do with children and the problems of authority and discipline and whether or not you should compel a child to go to church and such-like vital issues. Problems are the same everywhere, whether one is at Peter Maurin Farm, St. Joseph's House on Chrystie street, or the beach bungalows.

Looking back over the things which have happened last month, I see a note in my little diary, - "Old Henry died," which reminds me that neither last month nor this month, was mention made in the Chrystie Street column of the charity of old Henry, who lived a few doors away from us in an old tenement all by himself, and came to the CW, as to his club, to sit out in the sun on bright

days, and to share the warmth of the big dining room on the cold and stormy ones. He had Parkinson's disease, and his hands shook constantly, but he did not go to a hospital or clinic as far as we knew, and refused all invitations of his relatives to share a home with them. Just before Thanksgiving he announced that he was going to buy the hams for the Thanksgiving dinner, and with the turkeys already received the ambassadors of God, several hundred of them, had a rare feast. (It was Peter who said that the poor were the ambassadors of God and also quoted that we only take into heaven with us the riches we have given away.) So old Henry took into Heaven with him this great and generous gesture towards the poor of the Bowery.

Speaking

Besides a three-day visit to Tamar I spoke at Worcester, Newton and Boston. On the bus from Vermont to Boston, I met Edna Hower who is still living on her farm outside of Rutland, and although she has sold much of the land, and her big house, she is as active as ever. What a debt all the conscientious objectors owe her for the year she gave us when we had the c.o. camp at Stoddard, New Hampshire.

When I mention speaking trips in this column I give the impression that I am away all the time, and indeed this year I have travelled half the world over. But my short hops to Philadelphia, Boston, even to the midwest, take not more than a few days out of the month, much of which is spent on Staten Island, either at the beach or farm. I am at the farm mostly this month, since Charles Butterworth is taking a mid-winter vacation, part of which will be spent with the Trappists in Virginia.

The Story of Leo

A few years ago when Albert Check was in the hospital at Princess Bay, Staten Island, which is only a few miles away from the farm, Jean Walsh, the farm nurse, on her visits to him met a middle-aged man in the next bed whose name was Leo. A month before, a local policeman had called her in the night asking her if any of our men at the farm were missing. He had found a man in the woods who had been sleeping out and who didn't know where he was or how he had come there. There was no evidence of drink on him, but he was dirty and vermin-ridden and suffering from hunger and exposure. It was not one of our men, she told the police, so they took him to the local hospital for treatment. There he had been nursed back to health, and Jean, grateful for the help the hospital had unflinchingly given us as city patients, offered to take him on the farm. There he remained with us for some months and little by little began to speak to us. He was Swiss, could speak Italian, and had been a waiter. His wife had a breakdown, was in Central Islip Hospital, and he indicated a desire to live in the city, but with us, so that he could more easily visit her.

So for the last year or two he has lived at the Salvation Army, around the corner from us, and has eaten his meals with us. The manager at the Salvation Army helped him with infinite patience to fill out papers for social security, and now he gets sixty dollars a month, out of which he pays five a week for his little room, eats with us and visits his wife weekly. The fare to this huge State hospital is \$4.80 a round trip. If we can arrange a transfer for his wife to Manhattan State, on Ward's Island, he can visit her for only sixty cents a trip.

Holidays

I spent Christmas at the farm, and we had just enough visitors to make things festive. The chapel is beautiful, we have had some snow and some bitter weather, and now it is like spring out, and the holidays being over, people are grumbling about pneumonia weather, and the fact that winter is just beginning. The January doldrums, my sister and I call these days. I insist that February 11 is the first day of spring, and always recall how I planted radishes on March fourth. So I shall overcome doldrums by getting under the covers early at night and reading Jane Austen. (When I was in England and visited Newman's shrines with Canon Drinkwater, including his library, I was charmed to handle volumes of Jane Austen in which his name acknowledged ownership.)

Let me here thank all our grateful friends who sent us generous presents this Christmas and made our lives brighter. In one of Bob Steed's letters from Salt Lake City, he grumbles sometimes, though in general he seems to be enjoying himself, that it is like the House of the Dead of Dostoevsky, or like jail because there are no women around, and so on. I always thank God that we are so diversified, young and old, men and women, sick and well; we hold each other up. And altogether we keep "an inn by the side of the road" running cheerfully and smoothly.

New Move Ahead

Later I will write at greater length about the new place we are going to have up the Hudson, to which we will move in May. We have sold the Peter Maurin farm (though there is a law suit and various difficulties involved) but in spite of these, we have made a down payment on a new place where there are three buildings, one large enough for year-round use for our entire family of twenty six people. We will have at last a Folk School (like Highlander folk school) a place for study and discussion, (like the Putney graduate school) and a retreat house such as we have had several times in the past. The entire school will be staffed by our "community of need" who are with us now and who have been with us, as in the case of John and Hans and Joe for so many years. Bard college is only five miles away and we hope some of the students (I spoke there once) will make up a work camp and come over to help us get settled. The scholars will become

workers, and the workers scholars (and tensions will grow up as always between workers and scholars and there will be conflicts and clarification of thought.)

We are already planning our peace conference for the coming summer, and one on cooperatives; and several retreats, five or six days in silence, in work and in prayer.

So the work develops, the works of mercy as the main work of our lives, the work our Lord told us to do in Matthew 25. The work of study, on all levels as Baron von Hugel suggested, to develop mind and spirit and to grow in the knowledge and love of God.

We ask our readers' prayers for this new move, and later issues of the Catholic worker will give more details of the move.