

On Pilgrimage - December 1959

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, December 1959, 2, 6.

Summary: Tells of George Clements whose skeleton was found in the woods near Peter Maurin Farm. Paints a picture of the natural surroundings at the beach house. Describes the men's house in the city, wishing they had yellow paint for the walls. Answers critics who say they have a "morbid preoccupation with misery." (DDLW #759).

The day before we went to press last month, Beth Rogers called me from the farm and said that the body of a man had been found in the woods about a half a mile from the Peter Maurin Farm. It had been lying there for so long that it was just bones. The police had called the farm because we had reported George Clements as missing last March. Beth and Charles identified the clothes on the body, and it was taken to the morgue at the Farm Colony, in the center of the island, before the coroner had a chance to examine it to find whether the body was of a hunchbacked man, as George was. But it was George, as we knew from the clothes, even from the special shirt that Tommy Hughes had given him because he himself had outgrown it. If it had just been a matter of the clothes which came into our clothes room and which to a large extent outfits us all, – we could not be sure. But Tommy knew his shirt. In the absence of any known relatives, the body was turned over to us, and George was buried, with Fr. Campbell, our pastor, offering Mass at which all the farm group attended, including Bob, and three of the men from St. Joseph's Loft in town. He was buried in St. Joseph's Cemetery on a little hill in back of the church, and he lies beside Chad and Charlie Smith, Philip Millions, little Catherine, and Mr. Stokes. It is here that we are going to have Peter Maurin's body rest, and the undertaker will attend to the matter as soon as possible. It will be good to have him near us near the farm, in the midst of the family, instead of away over in St. John's Cemetery in Brooklyn.

George Clements became interested in **The Catholic Worker** when he lived on Skid Row in San Francisco on welfare, and attended a meeting at which I spoke at St. Boniface Church, which he attended. He was so fascinated by the work that he wandered around among his friends, among whom were priests, and collected enough money to take the bus to New York. We were surprised, of course, to see him arrive, but not at all surprised when he found the CW not at all the Utopia he had expected. He stayed for some months, and was able to make enough friends, and write to enough friends in California to get the bus fare back again to San Francisco. But nostalgia for Mott Street drew him back, and in another six months he was back again, bag and baggage, this time to remain. I cannot remember whether it was fifteen or twenty years he was with us, getting older, quieter, more bent than ever. Probably his most animated moment was when Kieran Dugan chose him to act Santa Claus in the

Christmas play he put on two years ago, called **The Trial of Aaron Heresy**. Many in the house acted in the gay little skit, which drew people together in hours of practice down in the basement of Chrystie Street. Kieran's verses were sung to the popular tunes of a current Broadway musical, and everyone enjoyed the frivolity.

Last January, when we were evicted from Chrystie Street, Slim and Molly and California George, as they called him, were moved down to the farm. They all settled down nicely and neither Slim nor George seemed to be disturbed by the move. Except that George kept writing to friends in San Francisco, asking for money to go back. So many years had passed that most of the letters were returned to him as **Not Found**, or **Deceased**. Once in a while, he took a walk in the woods, but he was last seen, according to report, in front of the post office in Pleasant Plains.

When the police could find no trace of him through the Missing Persons Bureau, we began to think that by some miracle, some friends of George had gotten the money together to send him back to California. He was always secretive. People who are forced to live in community often take pains to have a private life of their own, outside of it. (An indication of the kind of community we are, of people forced to live together by physical need. We talk of the need for community, intentional, voluntary community, but in spite of a history of houses of hospitality and farms, we have never yet achieved it. We talk so much of the use of force, the collective and cooperative farms in Russia having been achieved by force, but we must remember the force of dire need that has brought about our own. But there are other communities to be studied, those in Israel, those of the Bruderhof and other religious communities.)

It was a grave shock to us all to find that George had wandered off like a sick animal to die, covered over with leaves, hidden from the road, merging with the earth, overlooked by the mushroom hunters who scour the woods spring and fall, and finally found by a school boy playing in the woods one Sunday afternoon.

Works of Mercy

During the course of the month, there was a great deal of visiting the sick, including Fr. Elias in Bellevue with a broken leg, and Richard Nixon in the psychiatric ward. Bob always says when he returns from visiting there that it is more peaceful than Spring Street. That is because, he being in charge, there are so many calls made on him, and so many of them impossible to fulfill. When one is in charge of the funds, there are ceaseless requests for carfare to apply for jobs, to get to jobs, to keep going until first pay, for week's rent, for month's rent – from people made brazen by the ceaseless blows of illness and unemployment, and the scorn of others that makes it more bitter; and from people who do not call upon you until too late, until they are evicted, and then there is the added trouble of finding shelter, finding relief. We have to always remember that we are stewards, that we are not dispensing what is our own, except our time, our love, our patience. Once during the month, we learned that we were overdrawn at the bank by a hundred dollars. We did not send out an October appeal as we usually do, because we have money coming to us from the city for the Chrystie Street house, and we do not like to appeal for help until our resources are really exhausted.

The Police

As usual, the works of mercy become dangerous. One night, the food being exhausted and all fed that the loft could hold, Hugh Madden, our rancher-seaman, locked the doors downstairs, whereupon a crowd formed of those who were still coming. One of the neighbors called the police, and the squad car pulled up, and more people gathered. It is always hard to explain what we are doing. Why should individuals feed the hungry? Why are we not under the shelter of the Catholic charities? Are we an approved group? Have we a license to run a dining room?

Moreover, it is hard for those not involved to believe that people are really hungry, that there is really human misery in this great and prosperous city, or any other city in the United States. It is indecent to talk about it, to write about it. It is in bad taste. We are “necrophiliacs” as one critic put it; and others say we have a morbid preoccupation with misery. I would say rather we have a vocation to **work** along these lines.

Every hour on the hour news comes over the radio of all the human disasters that have occurred during the day and this account is repeated over and over, with occasional new bits of tragedy added.

The newspapers are better because there one can find relief in feature articles, book reviews, interviews with men of note. But on the radio, the stress is all on tragedy, sudden death on the highway, murder by juvenile delinquents, thefts, robberies, airplane tragedies, people burned to death, homes destroyed, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, and people sit in their snug homes and survey the world through the windows of television.

One of the early Fathers of the Church, St. Jerome or St. Basil, writing to console a friend on the loss of a wife, said, “What if you could stand on a high mountain and look out over the entire world and see the torrent of tears shed?” But we are doing that now, when we listen to the radio and watch television, and we become strangely callous. “What has that to do with me? Let the State take care of it.”

On the Beach

It is cold now on the beach, and one must bundle up to go out and pick up driftwood, to fill the stoves in our two beach houses. They are in the process of being “winterized” but there is a strong wind, and it sweeps under the house and makes the floors cold. It is comfortable working at manual tasks, but when it comes to sitting down to a typewriter, it is a cold job. Thanksgiving day, there was a new moon, and the tide went away out, and revealed mud flats covered with green seaweed, with gulls white against the rocks. Little flocks of grebes swam in the deeper water, and dived and disappeared, feasting on the bottom. The gulls content themselves with the garbage dumps over on the other end of the island where the city is filling in the beautiful marshes for an ugly highway, so they only play at fishing, diving to the surface of the water, two or three after some morsel, their shrill cries filling the quiet beach. The wind was off shore so there was no sound of waves.

On Thanksgiving night, after a delightful day at Peter Maurin Farm, Anne Marie Stokes and I walked down the road, through the woods to the station and went into New York. Doing without cars on the farm has meant more staying at home, and more walking when we go out. The walk to the beach must be about five miles and Stanley can make it in an hour. Those not used to it can take the train between Pleasant Plains and Annadale and walk down from there, and both walks are along roads where there is little traffic, and beautiful woods. Jimmie Hughes commented on how much he saw when he was walking, and one delight for the eyes were great patches of bitter sweet among the brambles, and lovely yellow rushes in the swamps.

The ride on the train takes a half an hour, and the ferry almost that, and there are always families returning from visits to relatives, with branches of leaves or cuttings of plants, now that there are no longer any flowers. Anne Marie had gathered herself a yellow bouquet of seed pods of various grasses growing by the edges of the fields. John had ploughed practically everything and put in rye, some of which was up in great checkerboards of brightest green, contrasting beautifully with the brown of freshly turned and harrowed earth. One had to look for weeds, and Anne Marie was loathe to leave them behind, but Hans had given her a great loaf of raisin bread, true feastday bread, and what with other bundles, she had to abandon the weeds on the top of our piano. John also had ready for us some cuttings from the fig tree which is now blanketed in hay and burlap against the winter. I had brought that cutting, purchased for fifty cents in a tomato can from a curb peddler on my way to church on Mott Street ten years before, and transplanted it to Peter Maurin Farm, and it has borne almost a peck of figs, even a bushel, each of these last three years. We could not carry the cuttings either, but John promised to water them for us, and we will collect them another time; Anne Marie for her roof, and me for the garden in back of the beach house where I have already put in a fine row of chrysanthemums this fall.

One appreciates the country all the more when forced to go in and out of town. People laugh when we say the country, because Staten Island is still New York City.

Books I'm reading . . .? "Desert Callings" by Anne Fremantle, books and magazine articles about Algeria and the Sahara, Peace News accounts of the projected caravan into the Sahara by Michael Randle, Francis Hoyland of England, and Michael Scott (whom we always associate with South Africa) and Bayard Rustin and others. The Direct Action Committee in England spearheads this venture into the Sahara to protest bomb tests on a territory which is rich in oases and populated by at least 20,000 people. The White Fathers by Glenn Kittler which tells of the terrible hardships endured and the massacre of many of the priests who first tried to penetrate the desert. Another book on Africa by Alphoeus Hunton, published by International Publishers, is rich in statistics and reliable as to history, written as it is by a man educated at Howard, and at present teaching there, with degrees from Columbia and other colleges. But it is onesided, too, and whole areas of history are neglected.

Whether or not men have faith, they cannot ignore the facts of history, that other men have lived and died side by side with them in their desire to educate and do justice as well as show love for their brothers. The same is true of the religious minded. They work along spiritual lines, trying to grow in the spiritual life, deepen their life of prayer, and too often, the active work of building a new earth wherein justice dwelleth is ignored. We are not just souls, we

are bodies, and those poor bodies of desert folk are already suffering as expellees, refugees, homeless, transplanted, suffering once again from the dominating empire building whites who always take first place at table, the best of land, and to whom it has never occurred that they should wash the feet of their brothers as our Lord showed them to do.

Meeting

The night after Thanksgiving, I sat in our large loft and listened to the speakers, one of them Karl Meyer, just released the day before from the Federal prison in Pennsylvania, visiting us and his home in Vermont for a few days before he returns to work in the Chicago House of Hospitality; and Ed Egan, teaching at Mt. Mercy College in Pittsburgh and home for a few days' vacation.

This is not to report the meeting, but to give an impression of St. Joseph's Loft to make our faraway readers acquainted with it. John Cogley used to call attention to the glaring unshaded electric lightbulbs, truly ugly. We need shades, what kind I do not know. The walls and ceiling are glaring white, and when I commented on its ugliness to Bob Steed, he said in great surprise, "Why, they were just painted last July!" A warm yellow to make the room look brighter might be better. How many times I have longed for people with decided tastes to come in and say, "We are here to clean, to paint, and this is what we are going to do!" People are too diffident. People around the CW are too harassed by human needs to accept the help that is available, or to go out and look for it. Also, too many start projects and never finish them. Or do them once, as though to show how, and then do not follow them up. It is a miracle how things **do** get done, however, in the chaotic anarchism which is the Catholic Worker. The lower half of the walls are about the ugliest green I have ever seen; it is supposed to be bright, and also not to show the dirt! I would rather show the dirt, and so see the need to attack it. Once I asked that my bedroom floor be painted a bright yellow, over on Mott Street, and the request raised a furore. If one of the girls had not stood up for my rights to have the floor the color I wanted, it would have been the dark red the men deemed fitting for floors. The yellow reminded me of Mexico on the one hand, and an old New England farmhouse on the other. Our floors at the loft are good, hardwood floors, unpainted, and if they were, Hugh would soon have the paint scrubbed off. Thanks to him, however, they were good and clean that night of the meeting. There were about fifty at the meeting, and there was plenty of room. Two long tables were set up with cups for the coffee and sassafras tea which Jonas had already prepared. He sat at the end of the kitchen drinking his own tea out of a huge bowl and made us all thirsty. We faced the rear wall on which hangs a four-foot crucifix, black wood and black corpus, which someone brought in and wanted hanging in a room where the poor were served. To one side on top of some shelves there is a statue of St. Joseph, lily in hand, made of white china, and a replica of the one in Montreal at the shrine. Some attempt was made to back it against the white wall with a contrasting color, and there was a yellow chrysanthemum in front of him. But someone had tucked cornflake boxes to one side, as usual, and behind the statue, as though he were guarding them, were a pair of socks and a muffler. What we need are lockers so that men can have some sense of privacy and security. John Pohl had his little radio stolen, and since he loved classical music, this is a great loss. He can no longer hear WNYC or WQXR. If

anyone has a radio to spare, please bring it and give it to John Pohl, no one else! On the other side of the door which leads into the clothes room for men, and which in turn leads into Keith's room where he has the addressograph, hangs Mike Sollito's wire shopping basket on wheels which he pulls down to the fish market on Fulton Street for swordfish tails each Friday. "What kind of fish are you going to get today," Larry always asks, and Mike always replies, "Dead fish." On the wall hangs a beautiful copy of St. Michael, made by a friend of Mary Roberts who copied it from a statue in the Cloisters. On the left wall there are Mary Whalen's and Fritz Eichenberg's drawings which face me when I am sitting at table. They do not stand out well against the blank white wall, unframed as they are.

All this is by way of being a hint to the work group of the Walter Farrell guild, or to one or another of the work camps to come and give us a hand at refurbishing the place for Christmas. But remember, it is **yellow** walls I want, not white; perhaps nothing can be done with that bright grass green below. Jack English, before he became a Trappist priest, electrified us all with his chartreuse and coral kitchen on Chrystie Street. That is what we need, a little cheerful imagination, plus clean windows, and perhaps curtains of striped denim.

And while I surveyed the soiled dishtowels hanging in front of St. Joseph who probably noticed such things as little as Charlie Butterworth, Ammon Hennacy or Bob Steed, Ed Egan went on talking about people capable of making value judgments, the difference between relativism and subjectivity, and intuitive personal certitude.

We have not yet begun to think of Christmas, but since this is the December issue, I will wish you all a very happy, holy season.

Let the heavens rejoice and let the earth be glad, before the face of the Lord; because He cometh!