On Pilgrimage - November 1952

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Summary: A detailed account of a visit to the Blessed Martin House of Hospitality in Memphis where Helen Caldwell Day cares for the children of women cotton pickers. The problems of poverty. Urges use of spiritual weapons–poverty, precarity, self-denial, suffering. Says that only love can overcome the evil in the world. (DDLW #640).

Last night the rats squealed like little pigs underneath the floor and every now and then there was a great scurrying and scampering. It was hard to get to sleep. All day I had traveled on an Arkansas bus over narrow roads with much traffic, which made many stops and starts so that one was flung forward again and again. Besides hard seats there seemed to be a broken spring or maybe a wheel off. Anyway I felt well jolted when I arrived at Memphis and I was overtired and the rats didn't help much. I was glad when a big black cat jumped up on my bed and curled up on my feet. I slept then.

This morning the joyful little voices of children awakened me. Annie Green came at five thirty with a baby in her arms and two at her heels, half asleep, and when she had deposited three months old Rosetta and two and three year old Imagene and Jimmy Lee in another crib to go back to sleep again, she herself was ready for her day's work in the cotton fields. She came dressed for the job, denim pants, and over them a long full skirt which swirled around her as she walked. Her hair was tied up in a white bandana and she wore a man's coat. She moved with easy grace, a great vitality which was as evident at the end of the day as at the beginning. Certainly I wasn't seeing her very clearly at five thirty when she opened the door at the head of the bed where I slept and let in a good blast of cold air. It was 35 degrees outside, unseasonably cold for Memphis.

Cotton picking is the highest paid job for Negroes in the South. Fr. Murphy who is moderator for the Blessed Martin House told me that a friend of his was told that you could pick five hundred pounds of cotton a day, but when he went to try it he could pick only fifty. Annie Green picks two hundred pounds a day which is average, starting at sun up and working until sundown. Her work was in the Arkansas or Mississippi fields, both of which are just over the border from Memphis. The pay was two dollars a hundred, so she was getting four dollars a day.

There is a gay story of cotton picking in Texas in an October issue of the Saturday Evening Post, telling how gay and happy the Negroes are in the fields, how they sing as they work, how they compete with one another, how they buy on the installment plan and so spend all they make in the week, and also the contradicting report is there that the most

they ever earn is through cotton picking every fall, which money enables them to catch up a little on the grocery bill. The story was about the passing of the cotton picking since the machine is taking over the work. But either they are not making many machines, or farmers cannot afford them, because all I saw on the train between Memphis and St. Louis were fields with a dozen or so hand pickers in each one. Ammon Hannacy says it is the hardest work a man can do. And yet it was the work Annie Green was setting out for so gayly as she left her three tiny ones with Helen Caldwell Day who runs the Blessed Martin House of Hospitality in Memphis.

She was the first one on hand in the morning, and from five thirty on, mothers and fathers deposited little children who came with their lunches in a paper sack and took off their coats and hats themselves and hung them up. Children learn to take care of themselves early among the poor. There was two Ronnies, and two Tommies and Little Brother, and many other whose names I did not get.

Helen started the work because three little children were burned to death in that neighborhood when their mother locked them in their garage home while she went out to work. Such horrors are not uncommon. When Helen first wrote for me to come visit her she said, "You'll be breaking the law by staying over night in the same house with a Negro. A communist would be arrested for it."

It would be a good cause for which to go to jail, but Catholics are not jailed so easily. There is still a certain respect for religious convictions left, even though most religious people do not really act as though they believed in the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God when it comes to those of another race.

Helen and I started the day by getting to Mass down the street in old St. Patrick's church where Cardinal Stritch used to be pastor. Three little girls and Helen sang the Mass. It is an empty parish now and there is an empty school which certainly ought to be turned over to the Negro. People keep telling Helen she ought to get it for her children's center, but she keeps saying , "The Negro needs it for a school. Both St. Augustine's and St. Anthony's are over crowded. Let's pray it will be a school."

Not that she's content with the present set up of the Blessed Martin House. Of course there are rats. All slums have them. She heats with gas and the gas bill is around thirty a month. She has a hot water heater for water. There is an old stove on which to cook, and wash tubs, and windows across front and down one side. The place used to be a big store, and the soda fountain still stands along one wall, with cribs back of it and cribs front of it. There are so many beds around the room, I didn't count them. There were three davenports. Helen herself slept in a youth bed with Butch, her six year old son. Another Helen, a young girl of 23 who "is expecting" any moment slept in the back room where a crib and double bed took up all the space, with her two little sons. Helen Caldwell took her in, and as is usual in such cases, this little Helen is a tremendous help. We certainly could not have traipsed around Memphis to visit and speak at schools as we did if it had not been for her and Ida, the woman across the street who comes in to help every day. All the mothers help too of course, on the days when they are not working, so somehow Helen keeps going.

It is truly a center for mutual aid, a cooperative enterprise, but Helen Caldwell Day, who

can write, who can sing, who is young and beautiful and who could find many other ways of spending her time in this great rich world of ours, is the heart and life and center of all the work.

We all love Helen in New York when she worked with us on Mott Street, and she was part of a crowd of young people who managed to have a grand time in the apostolate and she returned to Memphis to the heartbreaking work of running the Blessed Martin House of Hospitality, which is a tiny oasis, a drop in the bucket when it comes to alleviating the human misery on every hand. Negroes make up 45 per cent of the population of Memphis and yet they lived in the worst sections, the poorest houses, they are not cared for in the Catholic Hospitals, they pay in those hospitals that are open to them.

The other Helen who was expecting was tired those days I was there. "I do hope a few complications set in so I can stay a few days," she said wistfully. Normally mothers go in the hospital one day to have a baby and come out the next. As it is Helen Day will probably have to raise $35 to pay for the delivery. "Too often the radical is animated by envy of the rich," I have heard it often said by press and public. Who would not be envious of those who have decent homes for their children and yards to play in, the privilege of staying home and caring for ones own instead of working out for a pittance because you are forced to sell yourself in this way? How help but envy those who can loll in a hospital bed after the birth of a child for five days or more, and then be nursed tenderly for weeks afterward at home?

"Some rich women only want to pay wages of $3.50 a week," Helen Day said. "Most of the mothers here earn at the most $12 a week." These are the wages for back breaking toil, and the Negro pays just as much rent, just as much for food.

What Helen is looking for is a little house with a little yard, for her brood of twenty seven children and mothers and young girls and boys who come in. Room for the children to play after school, room for some separation of the age groups. There is a six room house a few blocks away, up a rocky alley, in a patch of unpainted tumbledown houses where there are bushes and trees and vines growing over the porches. This house costs about three thousand and Helen thinks she can get it for Four hundred down. But there is no toilet, no running water, so repairs will have to be made before they get into it. They are hoping to stay in the same parish where their pastor cares for them and cherishes them, and there are few places for sale thereabouts. But I do hope by the next time I get to Memphis Helen will have her new home. She is paying $75 a month rent where she is, besides the $30 for gas and even so the place is falling apart.

The last time I was in Memphis was during the organizing of the Tenant Farmers' union back in 1935, and I visited the homes then of Negro and white sharecroppers and the settlements just across the river of the evicted tenant farmers, living in tent colonies and little community schools and churches, attacked, fired upon, mobbed often. I left all I had then to help the union in its beginnings and since then they have accomplished much to remedy the condition of the migrant worker through the country if only by calling attention to conditions and forcing the owners and operators by arousing their conscience to provide better living quarters and wages for the "hands." The very term shows how man is regarded in our industrialized agricultural system.

And now this time too, I left what I had with Helen except for carfare so that she could catch up a little on her gas and grocery bills, and put by a little for the house. The poor must help the poor. We must sow in order to reap. So I'm hoping that those who help us will help Helen too. Her address is 299 South Fourth St. Memphis, The Blessed Martin House of Hospitality.

My hands still smell of the cod liver oil I doled out to that long line of little ones, standing so trustfully and so open mouthed like little birds. Their utter dependence, their helplessness seems irresistible. And yet we deny them and we deny Christ in them in our whole large way of dealing with problems. We would not make a bomb to kill one of these little ones and yet we make them to kill hundreds of thousands of them and we say that there are now no non-combatants.

The problems of human poverty are so vast; we see the struggle in South Africa, the war in Korea, the famine in India, China gone over to Communism, and we think how little we can do. But with a sense of the Mystical Body, the knowledge comes that we can lower or heighten the strength and love in that Body, we can work as Helen does, among the least of God's children. Every act in that little house is an act of love, a gesture of love which reanimates and increases love and builds up this great force of love to overcome hatred and evil in the world. Poverty and precarity, self-denial and suffering, surely here is a tremendous use of the spiritual weapons, a letting loose of grace upon the world far more powerful than any atom or hydrogen bomb.

I am praying as I write this little account of one small house in the south, that other apostles will rise up, that some will come to help Helen, that others will start such houses in their own towns.

"Go to the poor," Pope Pius XI kept repeating. "Go to the poor." Not only to serve them, but to be of them, the despised, the forgotten, the neglected and needy, taking from others, beggars too, giving up job and hope and independence and becoming as Christ told us, one of the "little ones." Of such is the kingdom of heaven.