

Harrisburg Story

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Summary: Graphic account of Mary Frecons work in a black section of Harrisburg, PA,—the spirited church services, the smell of rats, the care for the dying sick. Emphasizes the unity of body and soul and the need for “blind faith” in such conditions. “How little it all is, as obscure as the life of the Blessed Mother, and as ‘little’ as the life and sufferings of the Little Flower!” (DDLW #490).

There is a Kaethe Kollwitz mentioned often in the art world who died recently who spent her life drawing pictures of the poor. She felt it was her job to arouse the consciences of those who looked at her pictures, and since she was the wife of a doctor and saw a great deal of human suffering, she had many a model for her work. I have only seen reproductions of a few of her things, but I was reminded so much of her this month when I visited Mary Frecon in Harrisburg, at her Martin de Porres House of Hospitality at 1017 N. Seventh street.

It has been about ten years now, maybe more, that Mary has worked there in Harrisburg combating the indifference of the whites to the tragedy of the blacks.

No use talking, aside from a tiny few more privileged ones, the majority of the colored are the poor of this country.

Sunday Nite

I arrived in Harrisburg one Sunday evening last month before the weather had turned cold, and it was a good time to be there, because the night was alive with dark faces and bodies, sitting on the steps of the ramshackle houses, nursing their babies, watching their children, listening to the music, the rhythm of tambourines, the clapping of hands, the singing from the tabernacles, churches of the Lord, Pentecostal and Zion, on every corner.

Sing and Sway

Around the corner was a tent with the flap open in the front, and on a platform was a beautiful young light brown girl, slim and graceful, swaying to the music, all dressed like a bride or an angel in white satin – three men, well dressed, preaching at intervals and saying nothing, punctuating every phrase, every sentence, with **Amen, Amen**. And the music kept

beginning again, and more and more of the congregation got up and swayed and sang, and people were waiting, waiting, for something to happen.

You felt that in the air, that waiting, that tenseness, that excitement. The rhythm of the singing, the clapping, went on and on, staccato, sharp, till the breath quickened, and the heart beat faster, and the excitement rose again and again, and again and again fell exhausted.

Someday something will happen, someday there will be the climax, the glory, the fullness of life, release, joy and freedom. You felt it in the air.

Misery

Meanwhile, across the street from 1017 the open windows of another Church of God gave us a view of a young sturdy Negro with seemingly inexhaustible voice, who shouted, who groaned, who cried out, who kept saying over and over, "God has taken my children. He has killed them all. The Lord gave, the Lord took away. God help us all. We got misery. Every one got misery. God killed my children. He burned my house. Oh God. God. Oh my God. But I say Amen. Amen. All right then God killed my children. God burns my house. Amen, God. Amen."

It went on and on, and it was only when he stopped for breath, and a woman on a bench near him took up the reading of the book of Job, that we realized that he was acting out his concept of the suffering Job. He groaned, he tore his hair, his knees buckled under him, he roared in anguish. And then after a long, long time, when the nerves were taut and could not stand any more, suddenly he stopped and the singing began again, a single tune which was barbaric, horrible, monotonous, always the same tune, here and around the corner, down the street, the rhythm the same, the beat the same, until the pulse quickened again and the breath came short.

All through the warm night there was the smell of rats. The smell of dead things, the smell of rotting garbage. If you have ever been in a town where there are stock yards, fertilizer factories, paper mills, you know the peculiar odors of our industrial system. They are not sweet.

Chicago to Mobile

I have smelled them in Bayonne, in Chicago, in Mobile, and they are the smell of death. I have also lived in a tenement, where a rat died in the walls, and it was winter, and to breathe you had to leave your windows open. You could not get the rat out; you could not locate it without tearing down the house. It was a torture. And all that evening as we walked through that slum district of Harrisburg there was the odor of dead rats, coming from windows and doors, from alleys and the holes in the sidewalk.

The night was soft and alive. There was a velvety feeling in the air. The children were playing and dancing. Mothers nursed their young. There was a hunger for beauty there, and it expressed itself in song and music and the movements of the bodies of the young.

Playground

For three days after that I stayed and the neighborhood was something else again. When we got up to go to Mass at the Cathedral which is the nearest Church and that ten blocks away, men were going from the houses with paper bags of lunch, young men, family men, women going out to housework. Later on children were on their way to school. The street had the week day aspect. None sat out, none was idle save a few little ones too young for school who played in the playground that Mary built with her own hands across the street, playing on the swings, the slide, the sandbox. The night before the street had been for the humans. Now trucks raced by all day. It is a dangerous street and full of the dirt of traffic. Directly in back are the Pennsylvania railroad tracks; down the street are gigantic junk yards, fencing in with ten foot fences all other vacant spaces where the children were used to play. Down the street on the other side is Swift's.

What do these people eat? Beans cooked up in bacon rind. Beans and oxtail broth. Swift sells them all the trimming at top prices. Swift smells.

Compassion

An ordinary journalistic device is to paint a picture with contrasts. It is an emotional way of making a point. But our aim also is to move the heart, stir the will to action; to arouse pity, compassion, to awaken the conscience. We want to do such work as Kaethe Kollwitz, and so does Mary Frecon. Compassion, it is a word meaning "to suffer with." If we all carry a little of the burden, it will be lightened. If we share in the suffering of the world, then some will not have to endure so heavy an affliction. It evens out. What you do here in New York, in Harrisburg, helps those in China, India, South Africa. Europe, Russia, as well as in the oasis where you are. You may think you are alone. But we are members one of another. We are children of God together.

Contrast Ana Pauker, whose picture appeared on Time a few weeks ago, and Mary Frecon. It was a fearful picture: The story described her as "the most powerful woman alive and millions depended on her for life, bread, and spiritual guidance . . . Ana Pauker, communist and key figure in the struggle for the world. . . Leading Communist in Russian satellite states from the Baltic to the Adriatic." (We notice that Finland is never listed as a satellite state. Small as she is, powerless as she seems to be, she keeps her integrity.) Ana is described as fat and ugly, cold as the frozen Danube, bold as a boyar on his own rich land, and pitiless as a scythe in the Moldavian grain." A poetic description indeed. The magazine went on to describe a series of women, once idealistic, warm, full of pity, ideals, and now they are Amazons, fiends, ruthless, etc. etc. I cannot begin to match the invective of the capitalist press. It is better even than the Communist.

We have many a woman in politics and in the trade union field in this country who is just as hard, bold, brazen and ruthless.

Suffering

On the other hand, you have such women as Mary Frecon, making crab apple jelly in the little kitchen of her house on Seventh street from the fruit sent to her by one of her sons, both of whom have fruit farms. (She does not need to live on Seventh street.) Mary, nursing a diabetic, swollen, heavy with water, holding her up at night so she could breathe, bringing the priest to her, looking after her body and soul, materially and spiritually. Susie, burned by a jealous rival, oozing pus from her infected shoulders, cut by glass from broken windows when she tried to escape, nursed back to health of body and soul. Katie dying of cancer, tuberculosis and syphilis, her body dung, now, indeed, but once a thing of beauty, strung taut with life and pleasure and now overwhelmed with torrents of pain.

Lucille Pearl, dying in an alley, flies and worms feasting on the open sores of her flesh, these women dying and yet alive today in heaven, literally dragged into the wedding feast, dying happy and sure, and already, before death, given a foretaste of the life to come.

Violence

And those Communist women, Panker, Vermeersch, Bloor, Knusinen—have they so changed? We are given a horrible picture of brute strength, all softness and tenderness gone. We know there is evil, cruelty, disease, vice. It is all around us in these slums in which we live. Graham Greene, in all his books, is haunted by the violence, the sin, of the world. It is a fearful picture he draws, too.

Love

How to draw a picture of the strength of love. It seems at times that we need a blind faith to believe in it at all. There is so much failure all about us. It is so hard to reconcile oneself to such suffering; such long-enduring suffering of body and soul that the only thing one can do is to stand by and save the dying ones who have given up hope of reaching out for beauty, joy, ease and pleasure in this life. For all their reaching, they got little of it. To see these things in the light of faith, God's mercy! God's justice! His devouring love! I read one story of the death of the Little Flower, and her death was just as harrowing in its suffering as that of Mary's Katie. Her flesh was a mass of sores, her bones protruded through her skin, she was a living skeleton, a victim of love. We have not such compassion, nor ever will have. What we do is so little.

The stink of the world's injustice and the world's indifference is all around us. The smell of the dead rat, the smell of acrid oil from the engines of the Pennsylvania railroad, the smell of boiled bones from Swift's. The smell of dying human beings.

Souls! But we are living in the flesh, we are very much in our bodies, and we want to know whether it is too late to do anything but save SOULS. No use in talking about how many SOULS there are in the neighborhood of West Seventh street. God has made us creatures of bodies and souls and what we know of Him we learn through our senses, exterior and interior.

It is good to be able to tell that Mary saves bodies, too. She feels she does so little, the years are long, and everything seems the same. But there is the story of the twins which we could tell, who were locked for a year and a half in a room and starved and beaten, and whom Mary rescued and put away in a school. And Susie is still alive, and at present in a state of grace.

Melancholy Man

But here is the story of one she did not save. Did I say in the beginning of this story that there was that feeling of waiting? That sense of violence? It came to a climax in the murder of a young woman around the corner. It happened when Mary was away, and she was out of earshot of the place, anyway, so she might not have known it was going on, if she had been there. A few blocks away a man of thirty beat his 26-year-old wife to death with a broken chair. He had been blinded some years before when a beer bottle flung from a tavern hit him as he passed by, and he was a melancholy man who drank sometimes, himself, and did not talk to his neighbors. He worked every day, and he and his wife were considered respectable people. They never came to Mary for help in the way of clothes as others in the neighborhood did. There had been one scene of violence between them, and they had separated for a few days, but then they were seen walking down the street hand in hand.

And then this other fight had come about, and with the neighborhood standing outside, waiting for the police, and listening to the violence within, he had beat his wife to unconsciousness behind his locked door so that she died three hours after she was taken to the hospital.

And Mary faces all this misery pretty much alone. Dr. Clark helps her with the sick. The Johnsons, next door, are her able assistants in many a work of mercy. Young people from the Catholic High School come every week and help with the children.

Out in the back yard there is a little garden with sunflowers, marigold, petunias and ice plant. Out in front there is one tree.

How little it all is, as obscure as the life of the Blessed Mother, and as "little" as the life and sufferings of the Little Flower!

Some day something will be done. There will be decent places to live. Instead of a tent tabernacle with the rhythm of the jungle there will be a Church with the Mass, with Christ Himself in the Blessed Sacrament.

Yes, the nearest Catholic Church is ten blocks away, but just the same Christ is there, most surely there, in the least of his children. He has said it Himself.