

CHAPTER THREE

In September 1916 I left for New York to try my luck with acting and see what the Fates might hold. Thousands before me had done it, and thousands are still doing it. Thousands undoubtedly had the same results I had, and perhaps came to the same conclusion—that it was not for me.

After making the rounds of the theatrical agents' offices, I wrote a letter to Burton, still in Boston:

I wish you could see the people lined up in these offices. I wish you could. They would make you shiver, such derelicts—awful! That's not what we want ... The theatre is dreadful and these poor people looking for jobs in them—dreadful.

Listen, today I read this sentence: "There is a time in every man's life and education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance, that imitation is suicide, that he must take himself for better or worse as his portion. Who would be a man must be a nonconformist."

This letter was in a way prophetic, for it became for us a "habit of living." Burton never sat in an agent's office. He had realized years earlier, while clerking in his father's drugstore, what I saw then in New York City's casting mills.

But we had to find some sort of work to keep us alive. Was there nothing, anywhere in New York, that we could do? Burton's sister Josephine was working as a secretary in the Lenox Hill Settlement House, then on East 69th and Avenue A. The settlements, as they were called, had grown out of an undertaking by Canon Barnett and his wife, who had set up similar institutions in a depressed slum area in London, England. They had seen the ignorance and the depression of the people of the neighbourhood and hoped to ameliorate it by providing education, a few cultural advantages, and a place where people could meet. The settlements were financed completely by donations from the well-to-do, who sat on committees or boards and directed the activities of the institution. They were sometimes called Neighborhood Houses or Community Centres, but all were established for the same purposes and operated under the same conditions.

I immediately saw them as a possibility for the use of our talents. I was so enthusiastic that I wrote to Burton immediately:

This Lenox Hill Settlement is a perfect gold mine of opportunity for a neighborhood theatre. The people who come here are wonderful. The house is considered the very finest in the city in equipment. If you could only see what wealth is here.

The house is heavily endowed, is loaded with equipment, and has absolutely nothing distinctly educational. Think what could be done if we could only get something to keep us alive, some work, perhaps our opportunity lies right here. The paid positions in the house are of course filled, but we could make a place for ourselves in a year.

So Burton joined me in New York. He brought with him all our worldly wealth: sixteen dollars and twenty-odd cents, all that was left after paying for his transportation out of the twenty-five dollars that he had raised by pawning (on my instructions) the twin-diamond engagement ring that had been my mother's and was now mine.

The first job we got was for an agency organized by a man and his wife for the relief of the starving Albanians. They had printed up brochures with pictures of the miserable plight of the Albanian people and were asking for contributions. It was our job to stuff the brochures

in envelopes and send them out. The husband was away, carting wheat to the Albanians, and management of the office had been left to the wife, who, unfortunately, was prone to temper tantrums, screaming, pulling her hair, frothing at the mouth. Burton and I would come out of the office at night so shaken that we could scarcely eat.

When it seemed that both of us were bound to have nervous breakdowns, I found another job—as a file clerk and part-time switchboard operator in a brokerage office at 49 Wall Street. I'm sure I couldn't have realized what I was doing, taking a job as a Wall Street switchboard operator when the mechanics of operating a simple pencil sharpener can throw me. I discovered that the frenzy of the woman at Albanian Relief was a spring breeze compared to what happens when the market starts going up or coming down. It was an experience, as I learned to say, that I shouldn't have picked and wouldn't have missed. I witnessed the lunacy of speculators at first hand, an education for anyone.

My salary was twelve dollars a week, and at Christmas they gave me a bonus of twenty-five dollars, a real kindness since I'd only been there for a few weeks. With this blessed yuletide windfall, I went merrily out and bought a wicker chair, some pots and pans, some extra sheets, and put the remainder of the money, twelve dollars, in a safe hiding place under the shelf paper in the kitchen cupboard of our tenement apartment.

Unfortunately, in an excess of housewifely zeal while getting ready for the holidays, I cleaned the cupboards only a few days later and threw out the shelf paper, twelve dollars and all! Perhaps I knew even then that “easy come, easy go” on a field of empty pockets would be an appropriate heraldic emblem for the James family.

Our apartment was in a so-called “model” tenement in the Yorkville section, on 76th Street between Avenue A and John Jay Park, erected by the man for whom the park was named, the philanthropist grandson of the first chief justice of the United States. Mr. Jay had built it for people with tuberculosis, but when a Vanderbilt put up a better TB residence across the street, the Jay building was opened to everyone.

Our main, and largest, room was the kitchen, a comparatively spacious twelve by fifteen feet, containing sink, washtub, gas stove, kitchen cabinet, tiny closet, and our trunk with a poncho over it. There was, of course, no refrigeration (it hadn't been invented yet, or

at least it hadn't reached 76th Street), but we did have a bathroom—a converted clothes closet.

The bedroom was larger than the bathroom, but smaller than the kitchen. In fact, when our friends at Settlement House kindly found us a bed we discovered that the bedroom door couldn't be shut once the bed was moved in. Burton's drawing board, balanced on the radiator, was our dressing table, and that, along with an odd chair or two and a couple of pieces of carpet, completed the furnishing of our new home.

Its main charm was the price—I believe it was three dollars a week, plus quarters for the gas meter. The cockroaches were a free bonus, and if there had been a bounty on them, we would soon have been rich. Burton puttied all the cracks he could find, and we used all manner of baits and poisons, but nothing discouraged them. When we went out in the evening, Burton would leave his slippers behind the hall door. When we came home, we would slip in quietly, grab a slipper apiece, then snap on the light and swat as many roaches as we could reach before they had time to scurry away to their hiding places. We were never very successful as pest controllers, I'm afraid.

Looking back on that particular period in our lives, it all sounds very grim and depressing, but I don't remember it being that way. We were young, healthy, optimistic, and very much in love. And we were sure that we could cope with anything.

Well, just about anything. Though I was managing to keep up with the filing at my brokerage office, the switchboard was growing more and more malevolent. Even when it was quiet, it frightened me, but when it lit up like a Christmas tree, I was a quivering mass. I could see somebody's millions going down the drain because I pulled the wrong plug. So my chief emotion was one of overwhelming relief when I was finally fired. "Let go," I believe the euphemism is. And no captive was ever happier to be let go than I was.

Soon after that, my life took another unpredictable turn. We were having dinner at the Settlement one evening and a suffragette had been invited to be one of the guests. Votes for women had become an issue in England and the United States during World War I, following not-very-quickly the introduction of the idea by John Stuart Mill in a speech at Westminster on March 30, 1867 in one of the early debates on the Reform Bill. Mill suggested that the time was ripe to give women

the right to vote. The suggestion was greeted with loud guffaws from the British male, and *Punch* made good use of it in cartoons. British women—even the educated ones—quietly acquiesced to this male judgment of their inadequacies and incapacities, comforting themselves with the aphorism that “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.” Then Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters entered the scene.

As a student in Boston, I had heard Mrs. Pankhurst speak about women’s problems in England. She was a gently spoken lady, dressed in a grey chiffon gown, carrying a bouquet of pink roses. She defended the extreme measures taken by the women of Britain in their struggle and said, “You American women can never understand the thick-headed, stubborn stupidity of the British male.”

Yet in 1917, all over the North American continent, women were rising, demanding the right to vote. It didn’t seem a large or unreasonable request.

I had first recognized gaining the vote for women as an issue when I was attending Emerson, and it came as a surprise to me. Women in Idaho had had the vote for years. I can’t ever remember my mother not going with my father to the polls to cast her ballot. Politics were frequently discussed in our home by friends and relatives of both sexes and all ages. But in Boston, for the first time, I heard women’s suffrage described as if it would be a calamitous happening for women to get the vote, or even to become involved in the suffrage movement. They would begin to frequent “grog shops,” their children would land in the gutters, and home and motherhood would disappear.

I knew from my own experience that this just wasn’t so. My mother was not only a good mother, and a good wife, she was a responsible citizen who cherished highly and took seriously her right and obligation to steer and shape our democratic nation.

My first real bit of political education had come from her, when I was about six years old. William McKinley had defeated William Jennings Bryan to become president of the United States. We, being Westerners, had been for Bryan and against the famous “cross of gold.” (Burton told me that, as a child, he had worn a “gold bug” button, to indicate his family’s loyalties.)

In those days, the only “hot” news we ever got in Pocatello was from the trainmen, so it was from a trainman, calling to a neighbour, that I

heard, "McKinley's been shot in Buffalo, New York!" I was delighted that our "enemy" had been dispatched, and ran to tell my mother.

To my amazement, mother burst into tears. "But Mama, we didn't like him, did we?" She answered, through her tears, "Mr. McKinley is the president. We didn't want him for president, but the people elected him, and all the people have to support him. That's democracy."

I didn't know then exactly what democracy was, but I never forgot. Twenty years later, the lady at the Settlement House dinner talked of the struggle that women all across our democratic country were waging to get the right to vote. I was impressed. In New York State, they had to collect a million signatures to get suffrage on the ballot in the coming election. They were looking for people to ring doorbells and talk to women and collect signatures.

She asked if I was interested. I certainly was, and when I heard that they paid twelve dollars a week, which was what I'd been getting on Wall Street, I said "yes" right away and set out rapping on doors for the cause of women's suffrage.

We got our million signatures and had a parade from 59th Street and Fifth Avenue to Washington Square. Many men marched with us in that parade, Burton among them. Suffrage was on the ballot and won. On November 6, 1917, the women of New York State got the right to vote.

Women today, in all parts of the country, are too often careless about exercising that right. They forget, if they ever knew, the struggle that was waged to get it. Women not only marched in parades and rapped on doors, they picketed the White House, they heckled speakers, they spoke from pulpits, they got themselves arrested, and at least one was killed. When they were thrown into jail, the suffragettes were generally put in the worst section, with the most hardened of the women prisoners. They made friends of these prisoners, and when the jailers in Washington discovered that their charges were not suffering enough, they opened a rat-infested jail that had not been in use since the Civil War and put them into that. Women who had gone to jail had the privilege of wearing a little iron pin shaped like a jail gate. The fact that many of these women were socialites from the first families made little difference. When they began demanding rights that the "establishment" of the day thought they did not need and should not ask

for, masculine opinion was that they had to be taught a lesson. Mrs. Pankhurst had flattered the American male.

When the franchise was granted, the first presidential candidate we voted for, in 1920, was Eugene V. Debs, who was serving a term in Atlanta Penitentiary for “obstructing” World War I. He had said that it was actually a power struggle for markets and that none of President Wilson’s fourteen points, including the ideas that it was “the war to make the world safe for democracy” and “a war to end all wars,” would ever be realized. The Versailles Treaty had been signed, and we could discern the scaffolding that was to support World War II.

THROUGH THE SUMMER OF 1917, which was horribly hot in New York City—so hot that the Humane Society couldn’t get around fast enough to pick up all the animals that dropped in the streets, and a dead horse lay on Park Avenue in the heat until it exploded—I was employed as a sort of social worker.

Mrs. James F. Curtis, a woman of wealth and good heart, had set up a project for those prostitutes, amateur and professional, who were picked up in raids on dance halls and bawdy houses and sent for treatment for venereal diseases to City Hospital, an adjunct of Blackwell’s (now Welfare) Island Prison. The “girls” ranged in age from twelve to seventy and it was my job to supervise their training in how to run a sewing machine, bring them magazines, take them for walks, and try to prepare the way at home for their reception when they were released. Although I was twenty-four and married, I was still the quite-innocent product of a sheltered Catholic home and it was a heart-wringing experience, a lot like trying to empty the ocean with a fork. The basic environmental situation could not be altered in any substantial way, the method was unorganized and unscientific, and the project never succeeded in becoming anything more than the good-will gesture of a generous woman. However, some of the “girls” I met became my friends and used to drop in at our flat from time to time, even after I had moved on to other employment.

That fall I went to work, first for the State and then the Federal Food Board, as an inspector, at the unbelievably generous salary of one hundred dollars a month. (It took me from 1928 to 1946 to get my salary at the Playhouse up that high!) Since Burton had finally been

put on staff at Lenox Hill as a playground and camp supervisor, at a salary of fifty dollars a month, we felt we were finally going to be able to make ends meet.

The Federal Food Board was an agency that had been set up by the government to control profiteering in food during the war. Every morning, food prices were listed in the paper. Grocers were supposed to sell food at the prices quoted, but of course in some instances they didn't. They also resorted to dubious practices, like forcing customers to buy a large order of groceries before they could get anything that was in short supply, such as sugar. Customers would send their complaints, enclosing their bills as proof, to the Federal Food Board, and we as inspectors would go out to investigate the complaints and later testify if charges were laid. Anyone who violated the price regulations could be summonsed and fined, and many were, which seemed to exercise sufficient control to keep prices in line.

Three women and a couple of men actually did the work, but the staff also included a collection of terrible old crocks, political appointees who had been wangled into their jobs by some ward-heeler and spent most of their time sitting in the office playing cards. Our superior, a young and dedicated lawyer, depended on the five of us to get the work done. Sometimes he'd sigh, "I hate to send you women out on this complaint. It could be a rough one." (He worried more than a little about me in particular because by this time I was pregnant, making my rounds in a terribly smart maternity wardrobe loaned to me by one of the society women on the board at Lenox Hill. No one, however, ever suggested that I should remove myself from the work force or from public view because of my "condition.") He would then look around the office and say in a loud voice, tinged with resignation-blunted hope, "One of these men should do it." None of them ever did, at least not while I was there.

As a result of my war effort, I developed pneumonia and an ear infection, and was trundled off to New York's Roosevelt Hospital on 59th Street, five months pregnant, flaming with fever, and in considerable pain because my ear had been operated on at the Settlement House that afternoon. It was wartime, hospitals were understaffed, there were shortages of linens, facilities, medicines. I would like to think that they were doing the best that they could to cope, but my three weeks in

Roosevelt Hospital were exquisite torture that would require the pen of a Theodore Dreiser to describe adequately.

I was a paying patient—fourteen dollars a week, I believe—but the only bed available to me was in the huge charity ward. I didn't care. I was too sick to worry about where I was. I only wanted to get better and to keep any part of my illness from affecting my baby. The night I arrived at the hospital, a student nurse took me into an icy bathroom, where she washed my long, black hair, but neglected to dry it. Back in bed, my fever mounted, and I asked for water, which I wasn't supposed to have. Someone gave it to me, and a short while later I threw it up, all over my covers, my pillow, my bed jacket. The overworked attendants hastily wiped up the mess, but no one came to change my clothes or the bed linen. I lay that way all that night and through the next day. But when on the second night I awoke momentarily from my fevered dreams, my pillow was fresh and clean again. Someone had taken my bed jacket, washed and dried it, and spread it on the pillow in place of the soiled case. When I asked who had done this, someone said, "Mary."

I lost track of time while I slipped in and out of the delirium of fever. I was occasionally aware of people touching me, moving me, and later realized that these were the student nurses, with varying degrees of expertise. Once a day, a white-capped, stern-visaged nurse would sweep through to check the ward. I always thought she must have been kept under glass between rounds, because she was more concerned with her position as a nurse, and the appearance of the ward, than the condition of the patients.

But none of these women, whose professional responsibility it was to oversee and speed my recovery, was named Mary. It took a night straight out of Dostoevsky for me to finally meet my benefactress. I had regained enough strength to sit up a little and to totter to the bathroom and back by easy stages. This night, I had just dropped off to sleep when a hand on my shoulder shook me awake. There was thunder, the sound of rain on the windows, and pitch blackness all around me. In the momentary flash as a bolt of lightning illuminated the scene, I saw the figure of a nurse beside my bed, holding out a bathrobe.

"Go sit in the diet kitchen. Quickly."

Dizzy and still half asleep, I wondered what was happening, where the lights were, and what the keening and screaming were from the other end of the ward. But my mind began to clear as I moved slowly and gingerly down the ward, using the ends of the beds for support in the darkness, to the little diet kitchen. I realized that the spring thunderstorm must have caused a power failure and that at least one of the patients in the ward was dying, for part of the noise was the tearful intoning of the litany by two women holding flickering candles near an unscreened bed, and part was an old Jewish woman at the other end of the ward, loudly reciting the Hebrew prayers for the dead.

After what seemed like a very long time, I made it to the diet kitchen and collapsed shakily into a rickety old kitchen chair, clutching the hospital bathrobe around me. The eerie uproar in the ward had increased, as an elderly Irish woman left her bed to screech and shout at the Jewish woman, in an effort to stop her noise. I gritted my teeth and tried not to think of anything except that everything would soon be over, the noise, my illness, the night, the storm, and soon I would get well and leave this awful place and have my baby. They had told me, quite casually, when I was admitted, that pneumonia in pregnancy was usually fatal to the woman, or to her child—or both. I refused to think about that.

“I’ve come this far,” I said to myself, “I’m not going to give in now. I’m going to keep this baby.”

The diet kitchen was a small, dingy room, stale with the odours of thousands of meals, millions of dirty dishes. A single guttering candle, placed on the counter, cast a fitful light over the yellowed woodwork, the chipped cabinets, the patterned walls—and then I realized for the first time that the pattern on the walls was moving. It was a pattern of cockroaches, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of them, almost obscuring the pale plaster. And on the open shelves that ringed the pantry, I could see in the candlelight larger shapes, mice, scurrying back and forth, back and forth.

I didn’t dare scream or cry out. I would have gone completely to pieces if I had. And it’s unlikely that anyone would have heard me anyway. I sat very still and drew my feet up off the floor, as best I could given my cumbersome bulk. I prayed to God that no mouse would drop on me. Cockroaches I was familiar with, but mice terrified me,

and I was afraid that if one touched me in the dark, my heart would stop with fright.

At last, I decided that being in bed in the ward, surrounded by the noise and confusion, could be no worse than sitting here in frozen shock, surrounded by bugs and rodents. Somehow, I managed to get out of the chair and stumble to the door, but I couldn't get any further. I made it beyond the sill, into the dark hallway, then my legs crumpled and I slid down the wall to sit on the floor, like a rag doll without its sawdust.

After a long moment, someone was beside me in the darkness. Someone picked me up as though I were a child, cradled me to an ample bosom, and carried me easily back to my bed. I was tucked in and covered up, with my back to the dying girl, whose bed had now been screened, and then my someone sat beside me, patting my shoulder reassuringly, singing comforting old songs in a rich, loving voice, until I fell asleep.

When I awoke in the morning, I had a blinding headache that lasted for twenty-four hours, and then I fell asleep for three days and nights without a break. When I finally woke again, I told myself that the worst was now over, that I was ready to get well, and that I had to find my mysterious friend.

It was Mary—Mary White—a patient in Roosevelt Hospital too but able to be up and around. She was Black, about fifty, large-boned, ample-breasted, with a boundless capacity for compassion and love. Mary was the one who had cleaned me up, as best she could, the night I had been so sick. And she was the one who picked me up and comforted me, the frightening night of the thunderstorm. Mary helped everyone she could, in every way she could, and her love and humanity made a tremendous impression on me.

She continued to care for me as my own mother might have, watching over me, helping to feed me, giving me pieces of ice to suck, for she knew that drinking water made me sick. Mary didn't talk about herself, and I was too ill to ask many questions. When I finally left the hospital, our paths never again crossed. But the memory of that wonderful woman has stayed with me for nearly sixty years, and I bless her for the way she helped me survive and grow in courage during that terrible time.