

December 1959

*an evening at thirty-ninth Street*

A MEMBER of the Stamford Group called me up and asked if I would like to help man the telephones at Intergroup headquarters in New York City from five to eight PM one Monday last month. Realizing I was going to be in town that day, I said I would be delighted.

Being a sort of New Canaan country boy, I was quite curious about the workings of Intergroup. At various meetings I had heard certain members say that they could get along without Intergroup and that they objected to supporting it. Their objections to Intergroup never made sense to me, but on the other hand I never would give any specific reasons why Intergroup should be supported. So I was quite anxious to see what was what.

Arriving at East Thirty-ninth Street—an old brownstone with a basement entrance—at a little after five, I walked into the room where the telephones are located. My country compatriots were already there. In short order I was given a desk and instructions as to what I was to do and I was in business.

Incidentally, my desk was so located that any person coming in would take me as a receptionist—making my job doubly interesting, as it turned out.

There were four telephones each hooked up to a series of lights over the door. When a light lit up, one of us would answer. So we sat wait-

ing for the first call, not knowing exactly what was going to happen.

At five-thirty a call came in. With some qualms I took it. "Hello," I said, "this is Intergroup."

"I want to meet you one block away," said a slightly thick voice.

Immediately I was stumped. Was this part of the job? Should I leave the phone? I turned to a more experienced member. I tried to explain. He said, "Give me the phone." In short order he told the caller to come down here. Handing the phone back to me, he said, "Use your common sense."

At that moment I became an experienced telephoner.

The calls were sporadic up to six o'clock. Starting at six o'clock and lasting to seven-thirty, the four lights were on almost constantly. Suddenly I realized that I had become an intimate part, if only for an instant, of the thoughts and fears of those troubled souls who called in. It might be a man in a bar, a wife at home, a girl in a boarding-house. They all had one thing in common—alcohol.

I don't know how many calls I took. I had only two men who came in—one arrived at about six o'clock and stayed until seven. The other was one of my telephonees who decided to visit me.

I shall have to tell you about him. He called up at about six-fifteen and announced that he was at Fifty-ninth Street and Columbus Circle, that he was feeling aw-

ful, that he had only forty cents and that I should come and get him immediately. He said all this in a beautiful Southern accent. I respectfully suggested that he walk down to Thirty-ninth Street, which idea he took gracefully.

As I said, about seven-fifteen he arrived at my desk. He was fairly dirty, but not unbearably so. He told me he was tired of drinking and what could he do about it. I told him that the best thing to do was to stop drinking, and that there was a meeting starting at seven-thirty a short distance away which he should go to. Remembering he had only forty cents and hoping to forestall a fast trick, I said he could get coffee and cake at the end of the meeting, also.

He saw my point. He said, "Don't think I would try to panhandle this joint. I doubt whether there is a dollar in the crowd. But," he said,

"I appreciate your efforts on my behalf. Give me a pencil and paper."

Thereupon he wrote something and handed it to me. It read: *White House, Washington, Take good care of this man,*

*signed Joe H.*

"When you get to Washington, be sure to use this. I have a lot of friends down there." And he left in the grand manner leaving me wondering who was helping who.

Each telephone call was a story in itself. Either tragedy or pathos or a mixture of both—all trying to get out from under the burden of alcohol. And I—each of us there—had the proud position of being the first to give them a little taste of hope. It was a great experience.

Now I have something concrete to say when the question comes up: "What good is Intergroup?"

*J. N., New Canaan, Conn.*