

# MR. O'SEA AND ME

*continued*

usually read the paper at home before visiting him, but I came to understand that he, too, needed to give, so I always took it with thanks.

On August 31, his birthday, Mr. O'Sea informed me he was being discharged from the hospital the next day. Since he had said previously he would like to visit Chrissie, I decided to ask the Sister in charge if he could stay an extra day while I made arrangements. Mr. O'Sea seemed strangely reluctant to have me do this and gazed woefully after me as I left for her office. When I told the Sister I understood Mr. O'Sea was being discharged the next day, I got the shock of my life! On the contrary, it seemed he had been asked to leave! But it got worse. The reason for his expulsion was that, on no less than six occasions, he had got drunk and, on the last occasion, had disappeared from the hospital and had not been found until three the next morning when the police located him sprawled under a tree in the pouring rain, roaring drunk! My heart plunged to the region of my shoes as I realized I had unwittingly been the source of his downfall. The Sister said of course he could stay until I made arrangements for him. When I returned to the bedside, his facial expression told me Mr. O'Sea expected to hear the worst, but I outfoxed him by entirely passing it over, and told him to stay there until he heard from me.

WHEN I ARRIVED home the following evening, Mr. O'Sea was in our living room. Moreover, Mr. O'Sea was rollicking drunk, and telling tales of when he was in the "Black Guards"! Hurried research revealed that he had taken it upon himself to leave the hospital and had made his way to the street outside our basement flat. There, he, installed himself to await my return and whiled away the hours by alternately playing his harmonica for pennies (despite objections of the neighbors) and imbibing the confiscated liquor which the hospital had been obliged to return to him. Lila, my roommate, had just been home a short while when there was a loud knock, heralding the appearance on the doorstep of two policemen. It appeared that a drunk and disorderly gentleman whom they were about to pick up kept insisting he knew me and that I would give him aid. Therefore, if we would take in the said gentleman, they would not have to incarcerate him! Fortunately, Lila's boy friend appeared at the moment and he helped her navigate Mr. O'Sea, crutches, bottles and all, down the stairs. The question was, what to do now? We began by trying to sober up Mr. O'Sea. He wasn't really objectionable, just sort of hiccoughy and full of melody. A telephone call to Liverpool revealed Chrissie was out of town, so the only alternative was to return him to Marylebone Lodge which, fortunately, was willing to take him back.

When I called to see him the following Saturday, Mr. O'Sea had gone out. A few days later, I received a humble letter from him. He had been too ashamed to stay and see me. In fact, he was amazed that I should want to call on him again. I wrote him not to be so stupid. During our conversation the next week, Mr. O'Sea asked me if I could lend him some money to buy new boots. When I

came home and told Lila about it, she said, "Are you sure he said 'boots' and not 'booze'?" But my faith was restored when I saw the shiny new boots the following week.

In October, Mr. O'Sea was moved to a much nicer suburban home where I continued to visit him. When I arrived, Mr. O'Sea would be waiting for me in the lounge but, as they came to know me, a cluster of little old men would wait at the door and escort me to him, whereupon Mr. O'Sea would become most irate. How sad, I thought, that there should be anyone in this world so desperate for someone to care that a solitary friendship should be guarded so fiercely. By now, Mr. O'Sea had become as much a part of my life as I was of his. I got a tremendous kick out of the old boy's salty Irish wit and contrary manner. He was so childishly appreciative of the smallest kindness—a visit to our place for Sunday dinner, a drive in the leafy countryside, and the new harmonica Lila and I clubbed together to buy when his old one fell apart. Despite all his hardships, I never heard him complain, fish for sympathy or speak ill of others. Even when I got engaged to a wonderful man and found myself planning to return to Canada, he only wished me well, not speaking of how he would feel with his only visitor gone.

A month before I left Mr. O'Sea's tuberculosis became active again and he was re-admitted to hospital. I visited him there for the last time on St. Patrick's Day and fought back the tears as I kissed his worn old cheek goodbye. But I hadn't realized just how much of an institution Mr. O'Sea had become. My friends, even the ones who had been most skeptical when this unlikely relationship began, came forward with offers to visit him. So he was not entirely forsaken. I continued to write to him and to Chrissie, and his letters would come back in an increasingly shaky hand. When the news came in the spring of 1966 that he was weakening fast, I managed to send enough money to Chrissie so that she could visit him and, subsequently, he was transferred to a hospital near Liverpool. But his worn old body could not keep up the fight forever and finally the news came from Chrissie that Mr. O'Sea died last December 16. He had been in great pain for some time, although there was never a mention of it in his letters. The State paid for the funeral. Chrissie was the only one at the burial and she wrote me that he had my picture in his R.I.P. prayer book.

I STILL HAVEN'T SEEN "Breakfast at Tiffany's"—the movie I missed that night. But the mention of it brings to mind a cold street, an old man hobbling into the wind, and the beginning of a wonderful experience. So, what was I able to give Mr. O'Sea—a little caring, a little food, a few laughs? Compared to what the experience of knowing him has given me, this seems so very little. Perhaps the greatest insight it has given me is that, no matter how hard we may search or how much we may "know" of life's real purpose, it is not until that moment when we begin to "feel" and, with the "feeling" spontaneously to offer ourselves to fill even the smallest of needs that we may begin to comprehend within our own being just a part of the joy and the triumph contained in his words when Jesus said: "These things have I spoken to you, that in me ye may have peace. In the world ye have tribulation: but, be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." (John 16: 33 ASV). ●