

Easing Jackie's Burden

Eleventh in a series

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It was the beginning of December, and we were still in the White House. We were all stricken with sympathy for Jackie, and did whatever we could to ease her burden.

On the fifth, I worked with her all day on distribution of gifts to JFK's closest aides and others. His ties went to "The Irish Mafia"—T.J. Reardon Jr., Kenny O'Donnell, Larry O'Brien, Muggsy O'Leary, Dave Powers, and others. Golf shirt to Carol Rosenbloom. Cigar case to Pierre Salinger. At one point, Jackie said to me, "Oh, Mary, I'll see to it that you get something of Jack's, too. But first I want to take care of the people in the White House before we leave."

Friday was moving day from the White House. Jackie went to the Harrimans' house at 3036 N Street, NW, Georgetown.

At the Harriman house on N Street, Jackie's bedroom was on the second floor and she seldom left it. During those weeks I was constantly aware of her suffering. After the busy days moving from the White House, her depression set in. All activity was confined to the first floor.

I was in her bedroom at the Harriman house and found her in a lonely, depressed mood. We chatted for about 20 minutes. She wept, saying how very lonely she was.

"Why did Jack have to die so young? Even when you're sixty, you like to know your husband is there. It's so hard for the children. Please, Mary, don't ever leave. Get yourself fixed for salary on my Government appropriation—just don't leave me!"

We would soon be moving again.

Jackie had bought the house of the James McMillan Gibsons just across the street from the Harrmans', for \$175,000.

For a while, there wasn't a photograph of the President in sight. Many of the albums and folders of personal pictures remained unpacked. Jackie didn't seem to be able to muster the strength to face this task. Then, one morning, as she sat in my office going through a large envelope of material on JFK that we had ordered by mail, she asked that I remain in the room with her. She said, "It's so much easier doing it while you're here than at night when I'm alone. I just drown my sorrows in vodka."

Back in December, Jackie had suggested I fit my salary into her \$50,000 Federal appropriation. I approached Nancy Tuckerman, who I was told might be in charge of arrangements.

Nancy informed me that Dave Hackett—Robert Kennedy's close friend—was handling this. I told Nancy that I wanted to clarify two points. First, that my position with Mrs. Kennedy was that of personal secretary;

that I felt my working full time justified a fair annual salary of \$12,000.

A week later, I was taking the morning's dictation from Jackie. Propped up in bed, she delved into one matter after another with ease and in her typical, methodical manner. All was normal and smooth. Then, casually slipping her feet from the bed to the floor, Jackie walked to the bathroom and reached into the medicine cabinet for a jar of cold cream. As she applied it to her face, she began a conversation that hit me like a small bombshell!

"Oh, Mary," she said, "I understand you've asked for \$12,000 on my Government appropriation . . ."

I froze, waiting to hear the rest. Well over a year before, we had had a real spat when I asked for a salary increase.

"Gosh," she went on, "you know I really can't afford

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to pay all my help from the \$50,000—what with having to pay for the new house, and Provi, and all the other expenses."

I remained rigid, wondering first of all how she could bring herself to worry about the matter of my salary at a time when she was too upset and grief-stricken to think about it, and wondering next, why I hadn't heard first from Nancy or Dave. I couldn't believe my ears. Nor did I interrupt her. I couldn't. I felt slightly ill.

Jackie continued, suggesting, "Couldn't it be the way it was before? You know, like when you came to the house in Georgetown and worked two or three days each week doing only my personal things?"

At this stage, handling only "her personal things" would certainly add up to more than just "two or three days," but I couldn't bring myself to argue.

Instead, as Jackie came over to the bed again, facing

Tragedy

me, I could only say, "Jackie, I'm sorry you had to be troubled by all this. When you suggested that I get myself fixed for salary on your appropriation, I thought you meant just that, and I asked for what I thought would be fair."

She readily agreed, "Oh, yes, Mary, you've just been great! I don't know what I'd do without you . . ."

"Well, Jackie," I said, "I don't have the heart now to sit here and discuss my salary any more. Let's just leave things as they are for now."

Jackie showed no signs of recognizing that her small staff did not like being called on to provide all the services, accommodations, conveniences, and comforts that she had grown so used to receiving from a much larger staff during her years at the White House. Her staff's attitude, as far as I could see, puzzled her.

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