

Hell hath no fury like a secretary

MY LIFE WITH JACQUELINE KENNEDY. By Mary Barelli Gallagher. Edited by Frances Spatz Leighton. Illustrated. McKay. 396 pp. \$7.95.

By James Brady

No gentleman could have written such a book and no lady would have.

Mary Barelli Gallagher's memoir of her years with Jacqueline Kennedy is in the small tradition of backstairs gossip. It is one with the tattling of Buckingham Palace nannies, intimate and frivolous, ripe with great names and sodden with trivia.

Of course the book is badly written. Put that to the account of Frances Spatz Leighton, its editor. But that's not important. No one reads a book like this for its literary style. We read it as nose women pick through a neighbor's drying laundry, eager to penetrate shaded windows and closed doors. Mrs. Gallagher's eleven years as a secretary with the Kennedys certainly qualify her as one to raise shades and open doors. But curiously she succeeds mainly in revealing not the Kennedys, but herself.

Perhaps Jackie Kennedy was the troll under the bridge. Over-fond of clothes, a spendthrift who exasperated her husband, given to lying abed mornings, habitually late ("For God's sake, Jackie," becomes a presidential refrain throughout the book), she doesn't seem a candidate for anyone's model wife.

But it was Jacqueline Bouvier who married Jack Kennedy. And it is this that seems most bitterly to bug Mary Gallagher. The author may not be aware of it but the reader comes away convinced she was herself in

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Mary Barelli being sworn in as a secretary to Senator John F. Kennedy, 1953

love with J.F.K. and resentful of Jacqueline. "My first loyalty was to him," she admits, and early in the book she meows, "I used to wish that Jackie would eat breakfast downstairs with the senator."

Mrs. Gallagher's first job in Washington was as one of several secretaries to Senator John F. Kennedy and later, in the White House years, as private secretary to his wife. She was outrageously underpaid, undoubtedly overworked, and obviously a competent and efficient secretary. What is incredible is that she suffered all this for eleven years without exercising the logical option of quitting.

The attraction of being around famous folk, of being on the inside, and her very real devotion to Kennedy

scorned

combined to keep her on the job. But, as Mary admits, it wasn't easy. "The way to stay on the good side of Jackie was to stay on the side away from the cameras," Mary complains after having been shunted out of a White House photo.

She kept notes on Mrs. Kennedy's failings. "Jackie's finances would haunt my nights and days from then on," moans Mary and she goes on to indict her boss as a poor housekeeper, an indifferent parent, and a shocking hostess. She recounts the now familiar anecdote in which Jackie suggests unfinished drinks be passed around a second time at official functions "even if a few people got hepatitis."

Envious of the First Lady, it's clear that Mary Gallagher did not understand the sort of girl John Kennedy married. It does not occur to her that Jackie might have been indulging in a complicated joke when she got off the hepatitis crack.

After the assassination Mrs. Gallagher does not relent. She makes sure we know that the depressed Jackie admits, "I just drown my sorrows in vodka." And she recounts a Jackie tantrum in which the widow snarls at her secretary, "Don't you know the Johnsons despise us?"

There are few new insights in the book. The Bay of Pigs is not mentioned and the Cuban missile crisis is dismissed in one paragraph: "I did not notice her [Jackie] taking any unusual interest."

There's a good book to be written about Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis. But this isn't it. Mrs. Gallagher's bitchery got the better of her. She winds up her account with a pious little disclaimer wishing Jackie "happiness and all good things." And says how grateful she is for having had "one foot in Camelot." The reader concludes that if Guinevere had had Mary Gallagher there would have been no need of Merlin. ✽