

The Strangest Place in Chicago

John Bartlow Martin

Pictorial Comment by Ben Shahn

FROM the Chicago Loop, where sunlight off the lakefront strikes the shining towers, State Street runs straight south, wide, busy with streetcars and heavy trucks. Quickly the buildings get shabby—little stores selling auto parts, a junkyard crammed with rusting wreckage. The city is harsh: concrete streets, brick building walls, black steel viaducts. Beyond 22nd Street the faces of the people are black. This is the South Side Negro section. Here the street is quieter, the sun is hazy and dirty and pale, the sky is a network of trolley wires. Across an expanse of new-turned earth stretches a new public housing project, with a playyard for the children, and at 32nd Street begins the new campus of the Illinois Institute of Tech-

nology, sleek brick-and-glass buildings surrounded by new trees and new grass. And just beyond the Institute rises a great gray hulk of brick, four stories high, topped by an ungainly smokestack, ancient and enormous, filling half the block north of 34th Street between State and Dearborn. It is the Mecca Building.

Let us note its setting. Across State Street are a cleaning shop, a barber shop, a grocery, the Railroad Men's Social Club, McClain's Hair Goods, a Bar-B-Q, the office of H. Young the Icer, the Church of God & Saints of Christ in an old storefront. An old man pulls a handcart filled with junk across an empty lot. From a deep hole tunneled under the sidewalk emerges the head of a little Negro

The Mecca belongs in the remarkable series of social studies which Mr. Martin has written for Harper's, from "The Blast in Centralia No. 5" to "Incident at Fernwood." He is, moreover, the author of "Butcher's Dozen," a book about murder.

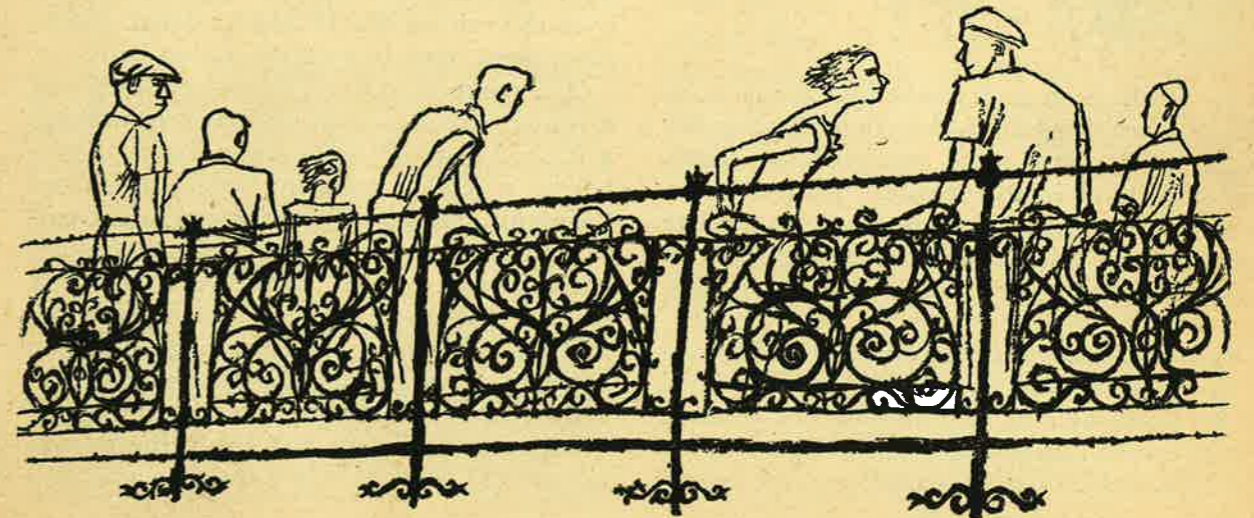
boy, playing. The sidewalk is cracked and broken. Nearby are rickety wooden tenements.

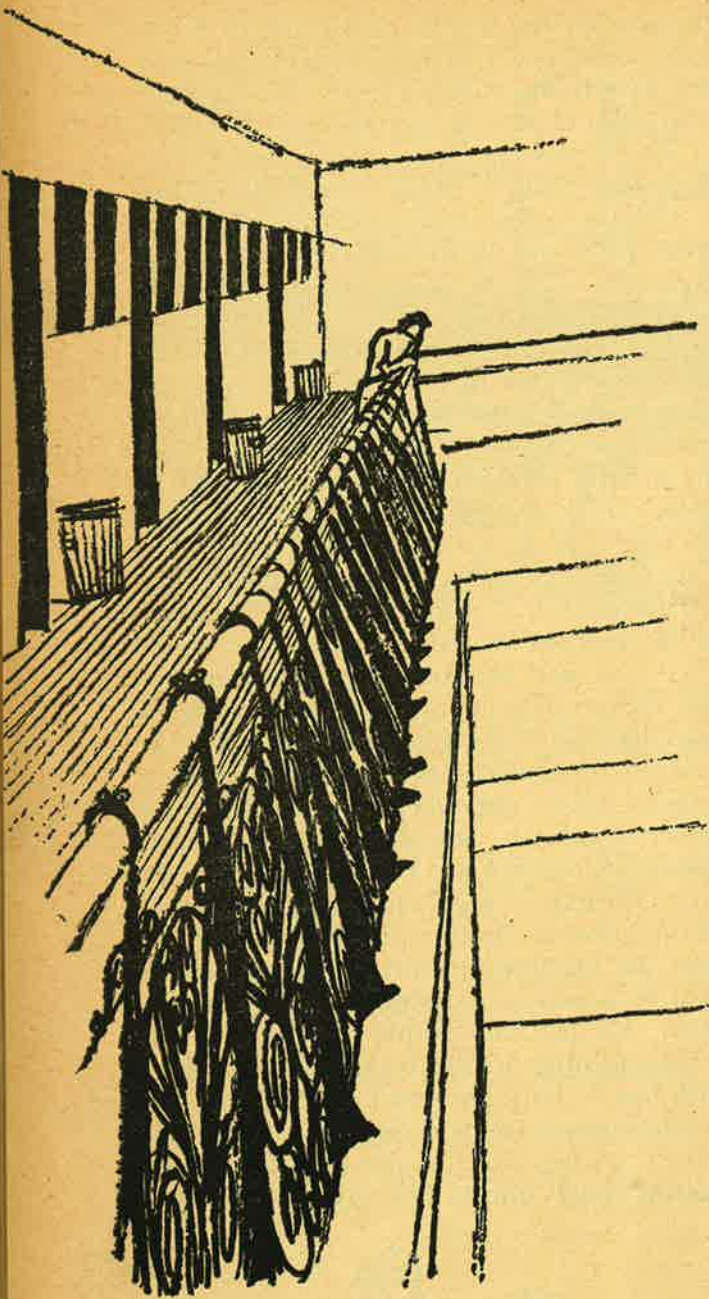
The Mecca Building is U-shaped. The dirt courtyard is littered with newspapers and tin cans, milk cartons and broken glass. Pigeons roost on a car on blocks. A skinny white dog huddles in a doorway. Iron fire escapes run up the building's face and ladders reach from them to the roof. There are four main entrances, two on Dearborn and two on State Street. At each is a gray stone threshold and over each is carved "The Mecca." The Mecca was constructed as an apartment building in 1891, a splendid palace, a showplace of Chicago. Today it is still an apartment building and a showplace but of a very different sort. It has become one of the most remarkable Negro slum exhibits in the world. Let us pass through the arched doorway of the Mecca; let us see what the Mecca looks like inside, see who the people in it are and how they live, whence they came and why they stay.

INSIDE, a powerful odor assails the visitor at once, musty, heavy, a smell compounded of urine and stale cooking and of age, not necessarily an unpleasant odor but a close powerful one, which, like that of marijuana, once smelled is never forgotten. The stone slab step is hollowed. The lower part of the walls of the vestibule once was covered with marble but now the marble has been stripped away in ragged patches, revealing naked brick and mortar. It is dark here. Ahead stretches a corridor; it is like a tunnel, it seems endless and it is indeed a block long,

running all the way to the Dearborn Street entrance; down its whole length hang only five light bulbs, glowing feebly in the gloom. Tan paint is peeling from the wall, the doors of apartments open into the corridor. This is the base of the U in the U-shaped building.

The arms of the U are identical. They are great halls, each lit by a skylight four stories overhead which, because of the dirt that has accumulated on the glass through years of neglect, admits the kind of unreal light found underseas. This light slants down in great long angling shafts filled with floating dust, shifting as the sun moves across the sky, falling in fitful patches on the floor. Around the walls run three balconies guarded by ornate wrought-iron grillwork, and off these balconies open the doors to the apartments, like tiers of cells in a prison cellblock. The floor in the center of the well is of hardwood, splintered now, and beneath the balconies it is of tile, broken in many places. A janitor with a wheelbarrow is slowly patching the tile with concrete; his shovel makes a rasping, scraping sound. From somewhere in the building comes always the sound of distant human voices—women talking, a baby squalling, children screaming, men muttering, no words distinguishable. Spittle splats flatly on the tile floor, falling from a great height, spat by a man or a woman standing on an upper balcony. All day long people stand at the balconies, leaning on the wrought-iron railings with hands clasped out over them, gazing out at other people facing them across the well in silence, gazing down at the floor far below, spitting, small human figures in a vast place,





two or three on each of the four floors, occasionally calling back and forth to one another but most of the time just standing silent. The building is never entirely quiet, not even very late at night, since so many people live here; but it is so vast that it seems quiet, even amid uproar.

IN THE center on the ground floor is a long narrow bank of mailboxes, tarnished brass, 176 of them. One has thirteen names on it, including seven different family names, indicating that thirteen adults expect-

ing mail occupy that particular apartment. Late in the morning the postman comes, a man in blue. Three tenants wait respectfully at the side while he distributes the mail. On the balcony above, two men leaning on the railing watch him critically: "He'll never get it all done doing it one at a time," and, "He's a new man." At last he finishes, and tenants emerge from their apartments to get their mail. From a high balcony a toddler throws a chunk of broken tile; it bounces on the floor by the mailboxes. A stooped old woman wearing a black sweater and black shawl, only her hair and her eyeballs white, moves slowly and painfully in the shadows beneath the balcony, keeping close to the wall as long as possible, touching it with bony fingers, and only leaving it when she must to venture across the open floor to the mailbox; gets her mail, then retreats along the wall to the stairs, where a man steps aside, saying kindly, "You come down to see what you got, didn't you?" and she says, in a gasping voice, "I'm going take my good time," then begins to ascend, pulling herself up by the railing, first her right foot up one step, then the left slowly after it, her body bent so low that her face almost touches the next step, stopping at the landing to rest and stare at the peeling walls with watery, half-blind eyes. Near the mailboxes three children are jumping rope, using a doubled rope, two boys swinging the two long strands in sweeping arcs while a girl rocks to and fro at one side to get into the rhythm before jumping in. Children ride battered tricycles across the floor, safe here from the traffic of the streets. On a balcony children are playing store, using a cardboard box. One of them throws a fistful of paper over the railing and it flutters down: policy slips, there must be a policy station here.

The wind blows in off Dearborn Street and a young woman neat in black enters, walking a leashed dog and humming a hymn. Somewhere a child is crying over and over, "Mummy, Mummy." In the long dark corridor a dog is nosing at garbage from an upset garbage can. From somewhere comes a clatter, perhaps of a falling garbage-can lid, and the high mad cackling laughter of an old man. A very young child standing on the third floor balcony urinates through the ornate iron grillwork and the urine falls to the ground floor far below and a woman calls

to him, "Don't you do that, you got no right to do that, I'm going to tell your mother." The ice man comes wearing a leather protector on his shoulder and back, carrying a cake of ice that gleams whitely against his black face and hat. A woman calls from the third floor, "Bring fifty pounds to 304½," and he plods to the stairs.

In the shadows against a pillar marked with match-strikes leans a man, his shirt-collar buttoned but without a necktie, his hat-brim slanting low over his scarred face, a cigarette slanting from his mouth; he is just standing there watching. How many people live here? He laughs. "I don't know." Two thousand? "Oh, more than that. There's 176 apartments and some of 'em's got seven rooms and they're all full." A heavy round-faced man in a long white apron holding a ball-peen hammer approaches: "You are visiting some of the historic sites of the city? You found one all right. If it don't fall in on you while you're lookin'." How many people live here? "That," he says, "is a mystery. You'll find them sleeping in bathtubs, sleeping in the kitchen under the sink, anywhere they can sleep." Nobody, in truth, knows how many people inhabit the Mecca Building. The janitor, Jimmy Sanders, estimates 2,300; the Democratic precinct captain, William Patrick Fitzgerald, who has lived here eighteen years, estimates 1,400; the owner doesn't know. All the inhabitants except one woman are Negroes. The Mecca Building contains more people than most Chicago precincts; indeed, it constitutes a precinct in itself, the 27th Precinct of the 2nd Ward.

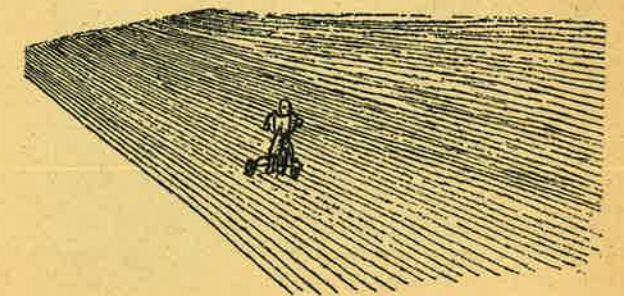
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ON THE third floor an old woman stands by the railing, a towel wound round her head, a big gold ring on her finger. Watching dispassionately as children run in from school for lunch, their screams ringing piercingly through the building, she says judiciously, "That size runs to roller skates," and then, "When I first came here they used to control the children. White people hadn't been gone so long, 1917 it was. They used to have a policeman here nights, you could hear a needle drop. Now they's shooting here five times a night. Them young men and the young girls is the worst. I'd move out tonight

if they'd find me a house. I moved out for a while once but I came back to have company, my daughter lives here and my granddaughter was born here," and she turns and shuffles into her flat.

In the flat, wallpaper hangs from the walls in great sheets. Clean newspapers are spread on the floor. Over the dresser are some artificial flowers, and a transparent plastic wrapper covers the bed. The sideboard, radio, and table are cluttered with family photographs. Mottoes and pictures hang on the walls, a picture of Jesus Christ and a crucifix put out by a liquor store, a plaque, "My Help cometh from the Lord," and also secular shrines: a large frame holding the pictures of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass flanked by Booker T. Washington, Paul Laurence Dunbar, W. E. B. DuBois, and other race leaders. And a framed faded campaign picture of Franklin D. Roosevelt. She calls Lincoln "Abraham." She was born in Alabama. She is bent and stooped, aged. She says, "I live here all by myself, me and my Lord," and then, as her visitor departs, she touches his arm and says gently, "Do you know anything about that man we call Jesus, do you know him personally, you ought to get in touch with him." Outside her door a teen-age boy is standing at the balcony railing, trying to spit clear across to the other side.

In the long first-floor corridor the janitor passes, Jimmy, a short squat man in a leather cap and jacket, ambling along with a Yankee drill in his hand. "I'm the maintenance man," he says. "I do a little of everything—work a little, fight a little, sleep a little, play a little." Right now he is accompanying the rent collector, a white man, a wiry Scot named John. "I go around with him," Jimmy says, shifting the stub of his dead cigar to the other corner of his mouth, "because the young fellas in the building think he's got money with him." About a year ago the





young fellows robbed an insurance collector of \$17. The rent collector, John, says, "I lost all my hair fighting with these people," and laughs. Actually, he has little trouble collecting rents, which are cheap. His troubles are of a different sort: he and Jimmy fight a hopeless rearguard action against decay and vandalism. "Last night they shot out the light bulbs," says Jimmy. "And the windows—in the last year I bet I put in over two hundred windows. They break 'em fast as you put 'em in." Who does it? "Outsiders, most of it. And the kids here. The kids gets to playin' and throwin' at one another and first thing you know they break the glass. There's nothin' you can do about it. You can't kill one 'cause he broke the glass."

AS THE rent collector walks along, a woman calls from the third-floor balcony, "Hold your head up, John, John, hold your head up, I want to talk to you," but John plods on, grinning secretly. A sign by the basement stairs reads, "Put All Complaints in Mail Box." Near the State Street entrance another janitor has temporarily left his job of cementing a broken place in the floor and is stooping over at an apartment

door, digging with a knife at something in the door. He gets it out: a bullet. "That's a thirty-eight," he says, turning it over in his hand, shiny and twisted. Then, to a woman who has come to the door, "They try to shoot you out last night?" She laughs. "Yeh, try to kill me. Like shootin' rabbits in a swamp down yonder." He says, "They was really shootin' here last night. Some of 'em shootin' for fun, some of 'em fightin'. That's every night around here. Couple of 'em got shot the other night." Any ever killed? "Oh, yes, one got killed summer before last up there in that corner," pointing upward. Why? "I don't know."

Down the stairs comes a man on crutches, his left leg off above the knee, his pants leg pinned up, coming down the steps, the crutch and his good leg visible first, then the man, thin, wearing white pants and a brown coat and hat; he walks diagonally past the mailboxes to the grocery, pausing to adjust his pipe.

High on the fourth west gallery, close up under the skylight, the balcony seems narrow. Two boys wrestle on it, and one falls heavily against the iron railing, which trembles but holds firm. It is four stories down to the ground floor; nobody ever heard of a child falling. An old woman is sweeping the floor. High up here at the north end a dozen young men and women are congregated, well-dressed, two of the men off to one side leaning idle on the railing and peering sullenly down, the others close together, laughing, fooling around with each other, the girls in tight white sweaters, the young men in snap-brim hats and suitcoats over sweaters.

III

AT THE south end in the corner, as in all the corners, a dark narrow passageway angles back from the balcony, and at its end is apartment 417½, the three-room apartment of Mrs. Corene Laury Griffin. It is one of the neatest in the building. Christmas cards dangle from a string looped along one wall. Mrs. Griffin, a small woman with a wrinkled forehead that makes her look always worried, is at home today and so is her mother, as usual. Mr. Griffin, a construction worker, is out hunting a job.

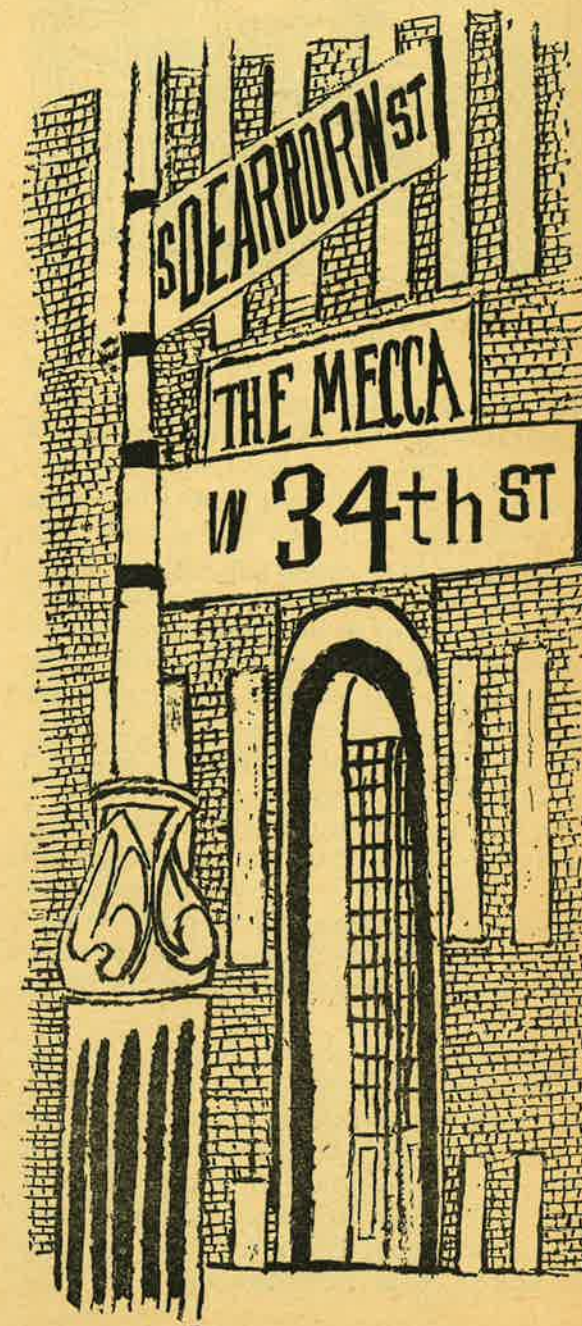
Mrs. Griffin, who wears her hair drawn

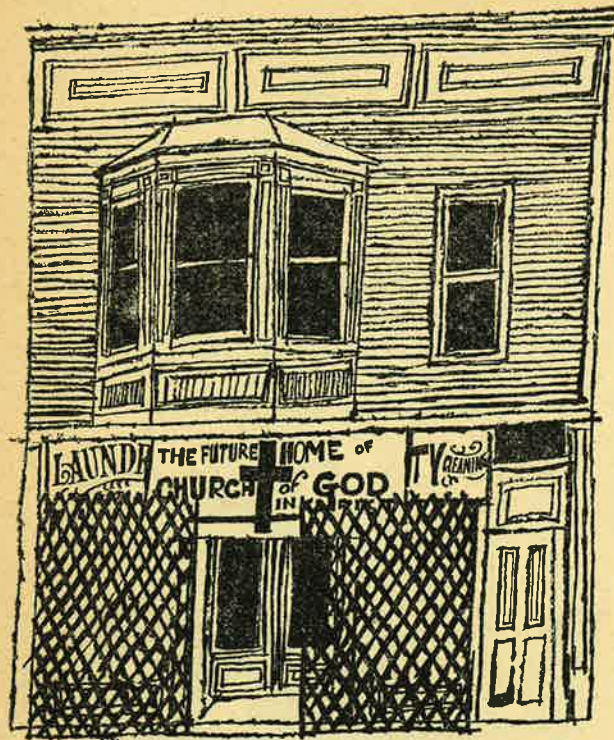
tightly back and who speaks in a soft fluent voice, laughing often and rather loudly, was born May 5, 1900, in Edward, Mississippi, where her parents "had their own place." She was the youngest of six children. Her father sold the farm at Edward and died on a rented farm at Shelby and her mother took the children to Pine Bluff, Arkansas—"We thought we'd move away, after people die, you know, you want to go some place." The other children left or died; Corene stayed with her mother in Pine Bluff. "They had berry farms there, we used to pick cotton, we had all kinds of different work, my mother and I did laundry work for people." Her mother's parents had been slaves in Virginia. "Yeah, we have done some kind of work, me and her," and she nods toward her mother, a large woman of eighty-nine now rocking in the sunlight by the window, a shawl around her shoulders, a white lace cap on her head. "I been working since my father died when I was fourteen. Work all that time, taking care of my mother. Till 1929, when the work went down, I did day work all over Chicago since 1920."

In 1924 she and her mother moved into this apartment, No. 417½, and they have been here ever since. At first they paid \$42.50 a month; they pay only \$20 now; "but at that time it was kep' up, it was decorated every year, the halls was decorated too, it was beautiful, it had the fishpond downstairs and everything, and the stores were lovely. Since then it's just gone down and down, that's what makes you so tired, you don't have nothin'. The building isn't in such bad condition. Only they haven't done anything to it in twenty years. People came in and carried the marble off the walls and carried it out and sold it." Her cheekbones are high, her face a little pinched. "We did everything to keep it together 'cause we had to have some place to live. There isn't no place else. Once I put up a five dollar deposit on a place, didn't get the place, like to never got the deposit back. Some people. I got tired of going out lookin' for places, spend all that carfare, couldn't find nothin', I just settled down here and try to fix this up to be comfortable. I've got my mother here, she's sick, she's old, can't walk up and down stairs, she can't hardly walk at all, only creep around the house."

Mrs. Griffin is sitting in an upholstered chair. The Mecca Building noise—squalling babies, fighting children, unidentified crashes—is but dimly audible. "I don't know what we're gonna do. What I just can't stand is the big boys that come here shooting, terrorize the place. We don't even have the landlord's telephone where he live. When we call the police station they tell us, 'We're not the people to see, you want to get your landlord.' How'm I going to get the landlord, I don't have his telephone?"

She straightened a doily on a chair. "Yeh,





we livin' in a dangerous condition but still we have to stay here. We get out and scrub the hall, they get back and tear it right back up, tear out the walls, everything. I've always lived decent—*till now*. I don't know why people don't be decent, if people can't be decent the world can't run. It's pitiful. But they just want you to go along, don't have nothin', don't do nothin', don't be nothin', don't know nothin', just be here, then they satisfied at you. I think that's a terrible world." Why has she stayed here so long? "At first, it was good heat. And when I went out to work, she," nodding toward her mother, "she was surrounded with people, I wasn't afraid to leave her, everything'd be all right when I come home. I stayed till the Depression—and then I wasn't able to move. And after the Depression, I couldn't find no place. Wasn't able to buy nothin'. I wanted to get a flat with a back porch so she could sit out in the sun."

Outside, an old woman leaning over the railing muses, "Alabama—the best place in the world. Ain't nobody gonna bother you if you don't go messin' 'round with white folks." She is watching for the rat man; he is in the building on his regular visit. Somewhere a telephone is ringing. The day must be ending; the skylight darkens.

IV

HIGH on the fourth floor dwells George Kinchlow, an old man. He is seventy-seven. He is sitting on a daybed in the dark. Saving electricity. He rises, a frail white-haired little man in cracked cheap slippers, and turns on a small dangling light for his visitor. The living room is nine feet by six. Against faded wallpaper hang publicity photographs of Irene Castle and of Velez and Yolanda and an old gold-framed photograph of a little boy in a sailor suit, his son. Clothing, rumpled and dirty, hangs on the chairbacks. Kinchlow apologizes for the way things look. "I been sick with high blood pressure, can't do much. That's why I got this towel around my neck to keep warmed up. Sometimes I sit in front by the window." The window is in the bedroom; it offers a view of the trolley wires on State Street and, in the distance, a dim grayness, perhaps Lake Michigan, far away. On the walls are more fan pictures and also pictures of the Pope and Franklin D. Roosevelt. On a dresser stand family photos and over the bed is a figure of Christ on a crucifix beneath a picture of the Boswell sisters.

Kinchlow was a porter all his working days. He left Indianapolis because "my hopes died out." He married, moved into this flat in 1915, and stayed. They raised their son here. The son has proved a disappointment to Kinchlow. "He does very little work of no kind." Mrs. Kinchlow died, "different ailments, locked bowels, the doctor said can't do nothin', they took her to county hospital and that night they called me up and told me she had died."

On the wall above the daybed are a picture of an Indian on a horse, and a cloth motto, "Father and Son." The steam in the radiator hisses; the apartment is hot but Kinchlow wraps the towel more closely about his thin throat. His fingers are long and skinny. Does he like living in the Mecca Building now? "God no! There ain't nothing here to like. But it's been awful hard to get a flat. Even hard to find a room. So, I just stuck on anyhow. It gets worse all the time. And for one thing, if there was flats to rent, my money's too thin. I only get the old-age assistance and that was cut last month—they chopped \$4 off of that, I was getting \$62. I was already livin'

from hand to mouth, I didn't dare to buy myself a pair of pants or I'd be good and hungry for a few days before that next month come around. When they cut that, they said the cost of living come down. I wonder O my God, on what? 'Cause all kinds of staple foods that you've got to have, they've got me so I'm scared to go into a butcher shop and order a decent piece of meat, oh my, it's terrible high." He gets his check monthly. "My check day is for tomorrow, get my little \$58, go pay \$20 rent right away, I wouldn't take no chances on getting held up or being wild or nothing, I take it right over. Or send my son over with it. Then starts my hustling and scabbling for another month. I have to be awful careful how I buy. I used to go downtown to Goldblatt's and Hillman's, buy my stuff on Saturday, I could get it so much cheaper, half-way decent roast of beef. Then the carfare went up to fifteen cents and I walked. I enjoyed it, too. But since I gotten old it look like walkin' is mean to me."

Presently he shuffles out to the tiny kitchen. "Supper last night," and he touches a pot of spareribs and lima beans on the stove, "it won't be throwed out, warm it up, *eat it*, all I can do is just look at those nice chops and roasts."

Now near dusk, the fourth-floor balcony is wrapped in gloom, and young men congregate, lounging, smoking cigarettes, they are not talking; and down on the ground floor beneath the balcony a wiry girl of twelve wrestles with a smaller, prettier girl in a new blue snowsuit, throwing her to the floor, rolling over and over with her in the dirt by the fresh cement the janitor poured. And whooping from the darkness in the far recess of the well comes a rushing crowd of boys and girls, flowing past the iceman, who is still at work, and the din grows louder, screams and cries, loud thumps and thunderous footsteps as the crowd swirls on around the corner into the dark then back, ten children, perhaps ten or twelve years old, armed with spears and bows and arrows, running, screaming, whooping. A man says, "That's all day. And all night too." They are dark leaning shadows racing around a pillar; they have upset and plundered a garbage can and now they throw applecores and onions at each other across the well, the air is filled with

flying applecores and onions, and a boy of sixteen armed with a whiskey bottle chases a girl on roller skates, at whom another boy shoots an arrow.

In a corner a small child sits on the floor, playing a mouth organ, and a boy about ten with a long-bladed knife lurks behind a post. Near the doorway two boys of nine or ten detach themselves from the rest and fight, fight in earnest, biting, kicking, hitting, swearing, then silently fighting, not talking, just breathing heavily, until a man comes in off the street and stops them, a tenant with a briefcase home from the office, taking one boy with him as he ascends into the upper reaches of the building.

V

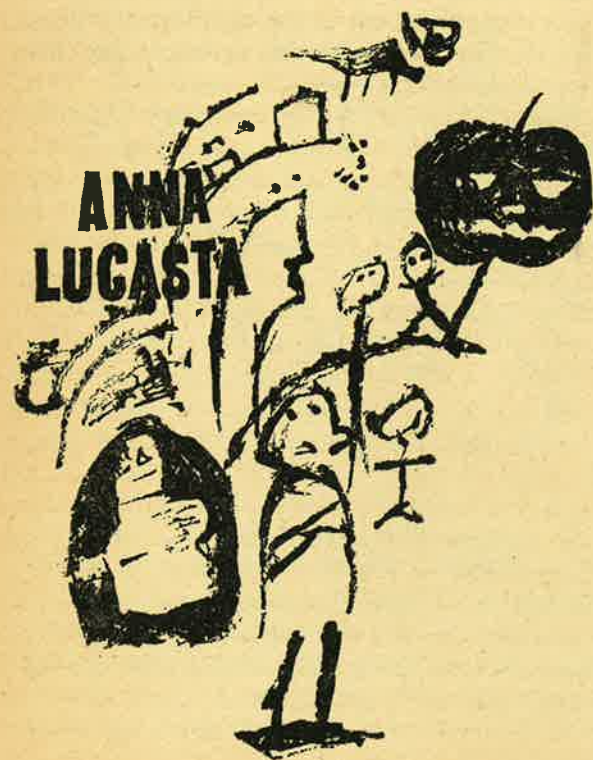
WHEN the Mecca Building was constructed it was considered one of the largest and finest apartment buildings in Chicago if not in America. It catered (almost needless to say) to a white clientele. But after 1900 the Negro migration to Chicago forced the black belt to expand, and by 1912 the Mecca Building was the home of the Negro elite—doctors, lawyers, business men.

I LOVE
CAROLYN C.B.
LOVE
CHARLES CAROLYN
FRANK

A woman who lives there still, Mrs. Florence Clayton, arrived in 1916, and she remembers, "There were carpets on the stairs and halls. There were goldfish in the fountain. On the first floor there were lounge chairs and outdoors we had a flower garden and beautiful trees and green grass, you could

go out there, oh, it was lovely. The courtyard was all fenced in and there was a lovely walk through the flowers."

The building started to deteriorate during the 1917-18 war. So did the whole neighborhood. Booming war industries pulled thousands of Negroes to Chicago. The luckier ones abandoned the region of 35th and State to the poor and the wicked. The black-and-tans where Chicago jazz flowered were right here. Jimmy, the janitor, recalls, "There were lots of fights and cuttings. Building was full of prostitutes. I saw a man throw a prostitute over the third floor railing—from the third floor to the first floor. Didn't hurt her much. She only weighed ninety pounds, kind of light. Finally one of the pimps killed the building watchman. Did it over a woman. And she wasn't even living with him." Jimmy pushes his leather cap back off his forehead. "That about ended it, though. They got a new watchman and he was a killer. He was just a little man but he had great big eyes and he'd shoot you with either hand. He had a cemetery of his own before he died. He only killed nine people—between the basement here and that wire fence. The building got kind of decent after that—families, working people."



And then the Depression came along, and the wicked left, and almost none but the poor remained. The Depression was awful in the black belt. About 1932 the bottom fell out. One woman who lived here then recalls, "The building was partly empty. One lady told me she was sitting down on the curb and the police passed and it was cold and they asked her what was the matter and she said she'd been set out and they told her to come on in here and the first flat she'd find, sit down. They carried her to court later but they didn't make her get out, they couldn't, people had no work to do then. It was always warm and nice in here during the Depression."

The Depression accounts for the presence today of the building's only white tenant, a heavy, soft-faced, white-haired woman of sixty-six. "I'd been a housekeeper at a hotel and one of my maids, a colored girl, she was married to a white doctor and they lived here in the Mecca Building. I couldn't find a job, I just got stuck, I couldn't make it, and they took me in." Some of the Mecca inhabitants who moved in while they were on relief are now earning good money in the steel mills or on Pullman cars and one or two earn upward of \$5,000 a year, but they are imprisoned here by the scarcity of dwellings for Negroes. A few of the long-time tenants remain by choice, oddly proud of the building. A few earn money by living there—they sublet rooms in their apartments for as much as \$12 a week. The janitor Jimmy says, "Every day people come in, many as ten or twelve a day, lookin' for a place, they been walkin' the street, lookin' for some place to go, say, 'Janitor, if you can get me an apartment in here I'll give you \$100,' but there ain't none."

THERE are several women's clubs in the building, such as the Old-Age Pensioners Club and the Twelve Tribes. Fitzgerald, the Democratic precinct captain, has been elected sweetheart of these. Fitzgerald, a neat, well-dressed, youngish man, has said, "If there's a weddin' I'm there, if there's a death I'm there, if there's a birth I'm there. I had a baby born in my car a while back, trying to get the mother to the hospital." Fitzgerald is a court bailiff by day. The Mecca precinct has voted Democratic since 1932. Like the other tenants, Fitzgerald

worries about the children. "In summertime the police chase them off the street. One day I come home and the police had backed up a wagon ready to take a whole load to the station for standing in front of the building. I had to put a stop to it. I had three ball clubs last summer and got uniforms for 'em all."

In a vacant store on the ground floor is the Mecca Center, for children. Nobody knows how many children are being raised in the Mecca Building but most people guess five hundred, and now at 4:30 P.M. on a Thursday fifteen of the five hundred are in the Mecca Center. The Center is a big square bare room, a dais at one side, a great clutter of dusty newspapers behind a desk, a piano and a windup Victrola against one wall, a tom-tom and Indian heads in the display window. Two older boys are playing Ping-pong and at a small table two younger ones are playing checkers but the rest of the younger ones, probably from nine to twelve years old, are chasing each other around the room, snapping cap-guns at each other, and soon the checker game stops and all thirteen of the younger ones are chasing each other, climbing over tables and chairs, leaping through the air onto each others' backs, screaming wildly; the Ping-pong players, older, proceed with their game, each with an arm outstretched to fend off the littler kids, occasionally pausing to take a cut at a near one's head; a dozen chairs stacked against a wall collapse as a boy's body crashes into them. A man in a hat is standing in a corner watching, saying vaguely, "She was supposed to come and be a musical program but I ain't seen her come in."

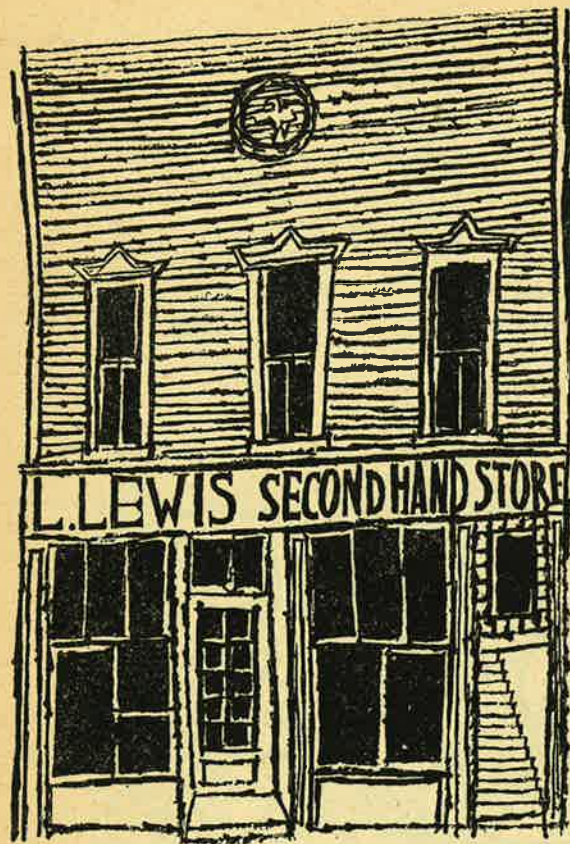
On the wall is a program schedule allotting various hours of the week to such activities as "Teen-Age Club," "Children's Story-Telling Hour," "Parents' Club Meeting." Right now, it is "Children's Game Period." The man watching says sharply, "You—let that Victrola alone," to a boy climbing onto it in order to leap onto another boy's back. A woman arrives bustling in. "I teach music and dramatics and folk dancing. I have about sixty enrolled. From six to eight we have singing and at nine physical culture and clubs." She is taking off her gloves, as unmindful of the children as they are of her; the children are growing more serious in their play, the temper has changed, ugliness has crept in, they battle silently, not laughing or screaming,



only panting hard. The man is making plans to take some of them to the circus.

IN ONE apartment in the building a woman and her husband are raising nine children, raising them in one room. This summer afternoon she is sitting in a chair by the door of the one room, her baby on the bed, evidently asleep but looking dead it is so thin and still, and the mother is saying, "It is hot at night, at night you burn up. My husband and I sleep in the bed. The kids sleep on the cot." The nine kids. They are from nine months to fifteen years in age. The room is eight feet by eleven. In it are one bed, one davenport, one radio, one light bulb, one picture, two straight wood chairs, one wicker table (on which stand a seashell, a jar of deodorant, and a can of face powder), one calendar. Back of the bed is a closet curtained with a rag. One necktie hangs on a nail in the wall. The plaster is broken. Her husband earns \$45 a week as a machine operator. They pay \$6 a week for this room. They have lived in this room four years.

The mother is twenty-nine years old.



When she and her husband first came to Chicago they lived in one room on Wentworth Avenue, then in three rooms on Prairie Avenue until "the lady sold the building," then in five rooms elsewhere on Prairie Avenue again "till the lady sold the building," then in four rooms elsewhere on Prairie "till the man sold the building," then here. They came here on August 6, 1946. "My husband knew the man that had this apartment so he let us have a place in it that same evening. We were out on the street." They can find no other place to live. "I looked so much that I'm just disgusted about it. They say you're a citizen of Chicago and on votin' day they're right up to your door to vote. My husband, he wrote to the Mayor of Chicago and everyone else and I don't see no results," and she rises and fumbles behind a curtain on the window ledge and finds two letters. She is young, quick-moving, pretty; her teeth flash and she wears big gold earrings and she appears about the age of her oldest daughter, fifteen, who now comes in and stands in the doorway looking reproachful. One letter is a long form letter from the Chicago Housing Authority:

"Dear Friend,
 ". . . The housing projects now in operation have such lengthy waiting lists that no additional applications are being taken at this time. . . ." The other is a personal letter from a Housing Authority official: "Mayor Kennelly has referred to us for reply your letter of March 2, concerning your need for adequate housing. We are very sorry."

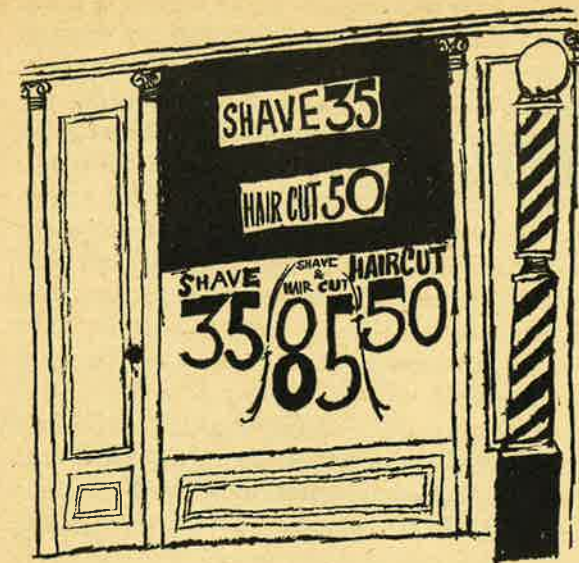
"All this stuff's just a racket," says the mother of nine. "They ain't doing nothing about it. Makes me sick." She hitches her chair around to face the wall. "After all, my husband works and makes an honest livin' and he do support his family the best that a workin' man can. His children do get clothes, the onliest kick that they can have is that they don't have no place to live. And that's not his fault." The baby on the bed stirs a little, then lies still again.

VI

UNTIL 1941 the Mecca Building was owned by a New York estate. The janitor Jimmy only once saw a representative of the estate. In 1941 the estate sold the Mecca to its next-door neighbor, the Illinois Institute of Technology. The Institute bought the building for only one purpose: to tear it down. The Institute was expanding its campus in accordance with a neat plan integrated with the neat plans of numerous other agencies for clearing the South Side slums. It wanted to replace the Mecca Building with a laboratory. But its plans ran head-on into an important need of the people who dwelt in the Mecca Building, the need for a place to live.

For nine years it has tried to evict them, taking them to court and warning them the Mecca is a firetrap. Thus far the tenants have managed to generate enough political pressure to stay. Recently, when the Institute again started eviction proceedings, State Senator C. C. Wimbish, a lawyer who has represented the tenants in court, said, "If they try to put these people out, they'll have a race riot down there on State Street and I intend to make it as tense as possible. Any roof is better than no roof."

It is quiet in the building on a summer morning, quiet as a tomb. Spit falls flatly on the ground floor, spat by a silent watcher



high on the balcony, and in a dark corner recess on the topmost floor a young girl, pretty, wearing a tight white sweater, strains against a young man leaning on the wall. An old man in blue pajamas, his eyes wild and staring, his body very thin, totters along, clutching at the railing, saying in a high, cracked voice, to a visitor, "Call me a telephone number please, mister, will you call me a telephone number," but a large woman steps from a doorway and shakes her head at the visitor, making circling motions beside her temple, and moves to take the old man's arm, and seeing her he starts, as though to run, then weeps, and she leads him away. A puff of blue smoke hangs in the dead air on the second balcony where a man is leaning on the railing, smoking. A janitor collects garbage in a cart that rumbles on the broken tile like a tumbril. Everything echoes in the halls, voices are hard to comprehend, are confused with distant sounds.

A visitor twists the bell on Mrs. Griffin's apartment and she calls, "Who is it?" then unfastens the chain. Her mother is sitting

by the window in the sun, as always. Mrs. Griffin says that when she got the most recent notice to vacate, she went house-hunting: "I found a place to buy at a real estate office way up on the North Side but no other colored people live right there, and I don't want to get bombed on," as indeed many Chicago Negroes have been when they tried to leave the black belt. She goes over beside her mother, who is rocking. "I think this housing situation is terrible, it's all politics, that's all. I'm not mad at the school. It's their property, we know that. I'm mad 'cause all this politics. Put 'em in office and they didn't do nothin'. They build streets and superhighways and recreation — not houses. They should turn that money loose and stop it—people has got to have some place to live. They gonna do *anything* if they don't."

She laughs, but does not sound amused: "They say they gonna place us somewhere. *Place us!* I don't wanta be placed anywhere myself. They might place me in some mud-hole somewhere and I never did live in that," and she laughs again. Her mother mutters something. "I don't know what they going to do with us. After all, there's no use in pushing us around from one place to another, that's no way to live." And then, after a pause, "It's all so mean."

Her mother, rocking, has started muttering steadily; she is looking out the window, her head in its white lace cap bobbing gently up and down. What is Mrs. Griffin going to do?

"I don't know. I'll have to have a place for my mother. I couldn't tell you what I'm going to do, to save my neck." Her mother, rocking, begins to mutter louder, but her words are not intelligible, it is just a human voice, muttering, and it is impossible to tell whether in anger or in joy, it is only sound.

