

Returning Home (DURRS. Winter, spring, 1963.)

The last night we passed on our trip back South from Boston before entering Mississippi was in Montgomery, Alabama at the home of Clifford and Virginia Durr. They had been both our teachers and a source of inspiration since the time of my first arrest in 1960 in Montgomery. Clifford had been one of our defense attorneys. Old New Dealers, they had long fought against segregation, and were among the few Southern whites in this struggle. After redbaiting attacks in the McCarthy era they had returned to Montgomery. Virginia's sister was married to Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black. Rosa Parks was a close friend. Their home was a sanctuary for many people, from wandering SNCC staffers like Bob Zellner, white student from Alabama who had joined the Movement, to their old friend Jessica Mitford, reporting on the Movement as an openly sympathetic journalist and sometimes participating as a veteran agitator.

It was good for us to know that some whites in the South had always been in the struggle for democracy. The Durrs knew of our family problems, starting with my initial arrests and the difficulties with our wedding. Now we had worse news to give them. A few weeks earlier, two days after being told of my decision to take the job at the black college, my father had suffered a massive heart attack. He had been seriously ill with a diabetic condition for over six months. We talked with the Durrs about the fear both our families felt for themselves as well as for us and my guilt and confusion about my father.

Virginia Durr reassured us that whatever the amount of pain, for ourselves and for our families, we had to return to Mississippi and that the Movement was the only hope for the South. Now there was no freedom for blacks or whites. She talked of how some good

people had wanted moderate, easy ways to end slavery, but never found them. She said that eventually all democratic civil liberties and even human decencies had to bow before the all-powerful institution of slavery. Slavery came first in the old South, everything else was secondary. Clifford elaborated on all the problems of the South, how little changed some of the basic issues, responses, and attitudes were in any period--the War, the Reconstruction, the Populist times, the New Deal, and today. Virginia went back to slavery and made one of her beautiful observations, "Why, you know, Ed and Jeannette, our grandfathers were not even free to be good--not even if they wanted to."

The Durrs agreed with us about the importance of Mississippi. Alabama was certainly bad, but Mississippi was worse. As long as Mississippi could stand as the symbol of "never" it would be a rallying point for racists anywhere in the South or the nation. If the Civil Rights Movement could start change in Mississippi, that would mean that change and progress were possible anywhere.

The Durrs had been called every name from traitor to Communist to nigger-lover. They knew what we would be called in Mississippi and knew, perhaps even more than we did, what might happen to us. Clifford and Virginia Durr were so much like the relatives that Jeannette and I most loved but the Durrs were free persons.

When we first met the Durrs a popular term for the new sit-in campaigns was the "Coffee Cup Revolution." The reporter who coined that phrase may have been laughing at the Movement. But at the time all those of us who joined the Movement knew that the important thing was really "Revolution." If the starting point for this phase of the struggle was a "Coffee-cup" it had been a stroke of genius, perhaps beyond the comprehension of the

strategy of any traditional revolutionary plotter. I mentioned my thoughts to the Durrs over breakfast coffee and we all laughed. It was time to go to Mississippi.