

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

By Helen Howard

AM I MY BROTHER'S keeper? I have to be. The poor people, who live just above the welfare and relief, have to live by that old saying, "I can see farther over the mountain than the man who is standing atop of it." We know and see the problems, because we *have* to live so close to them. We know that we have a sense of responsibility, and we (some of us) have tried to instill some of the ambitions we could not realize into our children. Some of us feel that the entire situation is just hopeless, and it would be easier to just forget the whole thing, and live each day as it comes.

Am I my brother's keeper? I have to be. Have you ever tried to send two children to college? At the same time? Well, I have, and most of the time I prayed during the day as I worked, and cried and prayed at night when I went to bed.

Am I my brother's keeper? I have to be. We (the poor) know what the "nitty-gritty" poor is like. The "nitty-gritty" poor is the hopeless and bleakness we have to face night and day. You, the so-called middle class, and the rich, cannot begin to know how much harder we have to work, and still not accomplish a thing. How much braver we are, to withstand the hardships that are forced upon us. Did you know that the suicide rates among us, the poor people, are far less than those of the middle class or rich people? Sure we fight, curse, cut, shoot

and kill each other, but this is just another way for us to try to release some of the pressures of our everyday living.

Am I my brother's keeper? I have to be. When we apply for aid from the relief or the welfare, we get turned down. Why? Because we make *too much money*, so they say, or our husbands haven't been gone three months, or we haven't starved to death or been put outdoors yet. When we try to better ourselves, and apply for government jobs like the E.O.A., we get turned down because of our "poor credit ratings," or "our previous jail records." They expect us to have lived a spotless life, but how can we, living in places like these? We have to rob Peter to pay Paul, then we get undesirable credit ratings. We have to steal sometimes to keep the family from starving to death. We make the same mistakes other people make, but ours are held against us. You, who have never had to experience this, cannot begin to imagine what this hell is really like. You, middle class or rich people, can't know how hard it is to have to accept this fate; you can't imagine what we people who are just above the welfare and relief have to do just to try to meet some (not all) of our daily obligations. We try to make it, honestly we do; it's not a case of being "lazy" or not wanting things for ourselves, no matter what you have heard or what you may think. We do have dreams. We do have ambitions.

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Mrs. Howard is a resident of Vine City in Atlanta, a low income Negro section. She is a housewife, and sometimes does domestic work.

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to be. You wonder who sells the liquor, and who writes the numbers? We do! The poor people who can't find jobs that pay enough to feed us, we, the poor people, who have ambitions and refuse to be pushed down any farther than we already are, we, the poor people, who have ambitions for our children, and are trying every way we know how, even by "Hook or crook" to make it. Many of our Negro doctors, lawyers, nurses, school teachers, and professional people have become what they are because their parents did all these things to make the world a better place for them and possibly for their children.

When I was a little girl, I used to sit and watch the stars at night, and I would wonder what the future held for me. Nothing, I guess. But I am trying to make the future hold much, much more for my children.

Am I my brother's keeper? I have to be. Middle class and rich people take things for granted, things that we would call heaven, your nice painted walls for instance, while we, as I heard a little boy say, "Lay down in bed at

night, look through the ceiling and see shooting stars." You have your nice wall to wall carpets, while we have our little 9 by 12 linoleums, that will not cover half of the floor, and will wear out before long because of the awful floors that they cover.

Am I my brother's keeper? I have to be. I see all these things going on around me, things like selling liquor, writing numbers, boys gambling on the street corners, and transient houses. No . . . I don't and I won't call the police to these people, because the people who are doing these things are the people with ambitions, the people who are making a better life for themselves, and their family. These are the people who will be able to send their children to colleges, who will be able to pay their bills, buy their homes and move to a higher economical, as well as social status. These are the people who want to and will get a little respect. This is why I am, Why I have to be my brother's keeper.