

*From Union Square to Rome

Dorothy Day

Chapter 4 - College

Summary: Recounts her loneliness and poverty at college as well as her conscious turn away from religion. Describes reading Upton Sinclair, Ignazio Silone, Kropotkin, Tolstoi, and Dostoevsky—the latter two allowing her to cling to faith in God. Her yearning grows to struggle with the masses. “Where were the saints to try to change the social order, not just to minister to the slaves but to do away with slavery?” (DDLW #204).

I WAS sixteen when I graduated from high school and went to the University of Illinois. It was in 1914 and that summer the war had broken out in Europe. It was talked about along Webster Avenue where we lived and it was felt by all our neighbors, many of whom were Germans, but I was not affected by it in any way. The world could be convulsed with struggle, unhappiness and misery could abound on every side, but I was supremely happy. I was leaving home for the first time. Things were happening. I was going away to school. I was grown up.

But after those first glowing weeks of happiness I suffered miserably. I suffered because I was separated from you. It was as though I had been torn from my own child. After I was settled at the Y. W. C. A., after I had registered for classes, after I had found work to supplement the money I had in the bank to make it last as long as possible, instead of settling down to happiness in my work, I settled down to a dull, plodding misery.

For the first time in my life I suffered from insomnia. No matter how late I stayed up, trying to study, I could not sleep. Hour after hour I lay awake, thinking of home and of you, and how you must miss me as I missed you. Everything was cold and dead to me. I wanted the warmth of my home, I wanted my own, and I felt utterly abandoned. I was so completely homesick that I could neither eat nor sleep, and I paced the brick-paved walks of that small college town with tears streaming down my face, my heart so heavy that it hung like a weight in my breast.

Fortunately I had much work to do. That first semester I worked for my board with a professor who taught romance languages. I had breakfast at the “Y” but at lunch time I went to Professor Fitzpatrick’s and had lunch with his family that consisted of his wife, mother, and three children. They were Methodists and pious people and I used to talk about faith with the old lady as she washed the lunch dishes and prepared vegetables for the evening meal.

But even as I talked about religion, I didn’t like church. I grew to dislike hymn singing and I didn’t like the people who went in for both. I was repelled by them. I disliked them and did

not want to be like them. As a matter of fact, I started to swear, quite consciously began to blaspheme in order to shock them. I shocked myself as I did it. I had to practice it in order to become used to it, but I felt that it was a strong gesture I was making to push religion from me. It certainly was a most conscious gesture. Because I was unhappy, I felt harsh. Because I was hurt at being torn from you, my child and my brother, I had to turn away from home and faith and all the gentle things of life and seek the hard. In spite of my studies and my work, I had time to read, and the ugliness of life in a world which professed itself to be Christian appalled me.

Now I was away from home, living my own life, and I had to choose the world to which I wanted to belong. I most decidedly did not want to belong to the Epworth League. As a little child the happy peace of the Methodists who lived next door appealed to me deeply. Now that same happiness seemed to be a smug disregard of the misery of the world, a self-satisfied consciousness of being saved.

While I was going to school that year, my oldest brother, just two years older than I, went to work on *The Day Book*, a small, ad-less newspaper, an experiment in journalism, which was being published then in Chicago. Carl Sandburg, the poet, worked on it and many Socialists. Because it was radical, it was considered to be socialistic, but I do not know if it was politically. My memory may be at fault but it seems to me that it was an experiment of Scripps-Howard or a son of one or the other. Because they did not take advertising from the department stores, they were free to criticize wages and hours and conditions of labor in the department stores, and my brother used to send me the papers daily with his stories marked in them.

While I was free to go to college, I was mindful of girls working in stores and factories through their youth and afterward married to men who were slaves in those same factories.

The Marxist slogan, "Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains," seemed to me a most stirring battle cry, and it was to me a clarion call that made me feel one with the masses, apart from the bourgeoisie, the smug, and the satisfied.

The romanticism and the hardness of Jack London in his stories of the road appealed to me more at that time than the idealism of Upton Sinclair, though I still considered, and do yet to this day, that *The Jungle* was a great novel. But his romantic, realistic novel, *The Mystery of Love*, repelled me so that I discounted his other books. He had not yet written his other great labor novels which are superior to anything London wrote.

The Russians appealed to me, too, and I read everything of Dostoyevsky that I could lay my hands on, as well as the novels of Artzibashef, Andreyef, Chekhof, Turgenef, Gorki, and Tolstoi. Both Dostoyevsky and Tolstoi made me cling to a faith in God, and yet I could not endure feeling so alone in it. I felt that my faith had nothing in common with that of Christians around me.

It seems to me that I was already shedding it when a professor whom I much admired made a statement in class—I shall always remember it—that religion was something which had brought great comfort to people throughout the ages, so that we ought not to criticize it. I do not remember his exact words, but from the way he spoke of religion the class could infer that the strong were the ones who did not need such props. In my youthful arrogance, in my

feeling that I was one of the strong, I felt then for the first time that religion was something that I must ruthlessly cut out of my life.

Just recently I read a revolutionary novel, *Bread and Wine*, by Ignazio Silone, published by Harpers, and this passage struck my eyes so that I copied it out. It is not Catholic doctrine and I do not subscribe to it, but it does remind me of how I felt at that time.

" 'I lost my faith in God many years ago,' the young man said, and his voice changed. 'It was a religious impulse that led me into revolutionary movement, but once within the movement, I gradually rid my head of all religious prejudices. If any traces of religion are left in me, they are not a help but a hindrance to me now. Perhaps it was the religious education I received as a boy that made me a bad revolutionary, a revolutionary full of fears, uncertainties and complexities. On the other hand, should I ever have become a revolutionary without it? Should I ever have taken life seriously?'

"The old priest smiled.

" 'It does not matter,' he said. 'In times of conspiratorial and secret struggle, the Lord is obliged to hide Himself and assume pseudonyms. Besides, and you know it, He does not attach very much importance to His name. On the contrary, at the very beginning of His commandments he ordained that His name should not be taken in vain. Might not the ideal of social justice that animates the masses today be one of the pseudonyms the Lord is using to free Himself from the control of the churches and the banks?'

" 'There is an old story that must be called to mind every time the existence of God is doubted,' he went on. 'It is written, perhaps you will remember, that at the moment of a great distress Elijah asked the Lord to let him die, and the Lord summoned him to a mountain, and there arose a great and mighty wind that struck the mountain and split the rocks, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind, the earth was shaken by an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there arose a great fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. But afterwards in the silence, there was a still, small voice, like the whisper of branches moved by an evening breeze, and that still small voice, it is written, was the Lord.' "

So I felt at the time that religion would only impede my work. I wanted to have nothing to do with the religion of those whom I saw all about me. I felt that I must turn from it as from a drug. I felt it indeed to be an opiate of the people, so I hardened my heart.

It was a conscious and deliberate process, helped along by everything that I read. It needed cataclysms, it needed mighty winds, it needed the silence of mountain tops in my life to enable me to hear the still small voice of God. And my life was beginning to be full and busy and overladen with new impressions and emotions.

My work kept me from mingling much with other students the first five months I was away at the University of Illinois. I was greedy for the books that money could buy and I spent all my spare hours working to earn the money for them. In addition to working for my board, I took two-hour jobs washing and ironing clothes and taking care of children. The latter job was easy because it meant long evening hours to read.

It doesn't seem to me that I put in much time studying. I was taking history, biology, Latin,

and English, but nothing that I studied was related to life as I saw it. Even history did not teach me to study past events in relation to present ones with the intention of shaping the present to mould the future. I was not interested in biology so I skipped courses recklessly. I had loved the hours spent in reading Virgil in high school, and was so enamored of his verse that I went from the Aeneid to his Eclogues and Bucolics, reading them for my own pleasure at home. But I lost interest in Latin at college. The only thing I was really interested in was reading the books I selected for myself, and, of course, writing.

Before the two years were up, I had exhausted the money I had and many times I was out of work and money. To gain more time to read and write, I took a room in the home of a poverty-stricken instructor who had five children. I did not eat with them—they had scarcely enough for themselves—but I earned my room by doing the family washing on Saturdays. Many a time I scrubbed the skin off my knuckles laundering the baby clothes, and my back ached for days from the Saturday toil over the washtub and ironing board. I earned my room but to get money for my board it was necessary to take at least a two-hour job a day that would bring me forty cents. Forty cents a day would do me for food if I bought it myself and cooked over a one-burner oil stove. But my critical attitude towards the “Y,” which controlled the employment bureau, and my godless spirits kept me from getting many jobs. Besides, I got immersed in writing and let days go by without working so that I went hungry.

I really led a very shiftless life, doing for the first time exactly what I wanted to do, attending only those classes I wished to attend, coming and going at whatever hour of the night I pleased. My freedom intoxicated me. I felt it was worth going hungry for.

I got some work writing for space rates on the little town paper and occasionally it published a column. Many of my columns were critical of the existing order and those were not published. Some of the columns merely criticized the working conditions of the students and these were published which got me in some hot water. I do not think I was very well liked.

I had joined a little club for writers and the first story I turned in was on the experience of going hungry. It was not a bid for pity. I had taken a grim satisfaction at being made to pay the penalty for my own non-conformity, and I wrote with a great relish of three days without other food than salted peanuts. I knew of several jobs I could have taken, one of them with a bootlegger’s family in Urbana, the adjoining town, taking care of a howling troupe of children, which would have brought me money for food. But I had spent a week there and the sordid dreariness of the surroundings, the unattractive children, the unsavory character of my employer, had repelled me so that I left and took the room in the instructor’s household.

The room was bare and carpetless. There was a bed, a table, and chair, and the little stove to cook what food I had. My books were piled on the floor. It was cold so that it was hard to study at night. Even in bed it was impossible to keep warm. The winds from the prairie howled into the shabby old house and the heavy snows and sleet beat against the window. At night I could study in the university library. When I went back to my room I had to go to bed immediately, and when I was cold and hungry it was hard to get up in the morning. If it had not been for my English classes which I really enjoyed, I should have given up classes and stayed in bed for days. I was seventeen, and I felt completely alone in the world, divorced from family, from all security, even from God. I felt a sense of reckless arrogance and with

this recklessness, I felt a sense of danger and rejoiced in it. It was good to live dangerously. There was no one to guide my footsteps to the paths of the Spirit, and everything I read turned me away from it. The call to my youth was the call of Kropotkin, and the beauty of his prose, the nobility of his phrasing, appealed to my heart. He wrote in his appeal to youth:

“If you reason instead of repeating what is taught you; if you analyze the law and strip off those cloudy fictions with which it has been draped in order to conceal its real origin, which is the right of the tyrannies handed down to mankind through its long and bloody history; when you have comprehended this, your contempt for the law will be very profound indeed. You will understand that to remain the servant of the written law is to place yourself every day in opposition to the law of conscience, and to make a bargain on the wrong side; and since this struggle cannot go on forever, you will either silence your conscience and become a scoundrel, or you will break with tradition, and you will work with us for the utter destruction of all this injustice, economic, social and political. But then you will be a Revolutionist.

“Two courses are open to you: You can either tamper forever with your conscience and finish one day by saying, humanity can go to the devil as long as I am enjoying every pleasure to the full and so long as the people are foolish enough to let me do so. Or else you will join the ranks of the revolutionists and work with them for the complete transformation of society. Such is the necessary results of the analysis we have made; such is the logical conclusion at which every intelligent being must arrive, provided he judge impartially the things he sees around him, and disregards the sophism suggested to him by his middle-class education and the interested views of his friends.

“Having once reached this conclusion the question which arises is, What is to be done? The answer is easy.

“Quit the environment in which you are placed and in which it is customary to speak of the workers as a lot of brutes. Be amongst the people, and the question will solve itself.”

This was Kropotkin, to me at that time a saint in his way.

Whatever I had read as a child about the saints had thrilled me. I could see the nobility of giving one's life for the sick, the maimed, the leper. Priests and Sisters the world over could be working for the littlest ones of Christ, and my heart stirred at their work. Who could hear of Damien—and Stevenson made the whole world hear of him—without feeling impelled to thank God that he had made man so noble?

But there was another question in my mind. Why was so much done in remedying the evil instead of avoiding it in the first place? There were day nurseries for children, for instance, but why didn't fathers get money enough to take care of their families so that the mothers would not have to go out to work? There were hospitals to take care of the sick and infirm, and, of course, doctors were doing much to prevent sickness, but what of occupational diseases, and

the diseases which came from not enough food for the mother and children? What of the disabled workers who received no compensation but only charity for the rest of their lives?

Disabled men, men without arms and legs, blind men, consumptive men, exhausted men with all the manhood drained from them by industrialism; farmers gaunt and harried with debt; mothers weighted down with children at their skirts, in their arms, in their wombs, and the children ailing, rickety, toothless—all this long procession of desperate people called to me. Where were the saints to try to change the social order, not just to minister to the slaves but to do away with slavery?

St. Peter said, “Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle but also to the froward.[sic]” (I Peter, 2-18.) And the Socialists said, “Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains.”

Our Lord said, “Blessed are the meek,” but I could not be meek at the thought of injustice. I wanted a Lord who would scourge the money lenders out of the temple, and I wanted to help all those who raised their hand against oppression.

Religion, as it was practiced by those I encountered (and the majority were indifferent), had no vitality. It had nothing to do with everyday life; it was a matter of Sunday praying. Christ no longer walked the streets of this world, He was two thousand years dead and new prophets had risen up in His place.

I was in love with the masses. I do not remember that I was articulate or reasoned about this love, but it warmed my heart and filled it. It was those among the poor and the oppressed who were going to rise up, they were collectively the new Messiah, and they would release the captives. Already they had been persecuted, they had been scourged, they had been thrown into prison and put to death, not only all over the world but right around me in the United States.

There were the I. W. W.'s throughout the West, Bill Haywood, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Arturo Giovannitti, and Carlo Tresca. There were the Haymarket martyrs who had been “framed” and put to death in Chicago. They were martyrs. They had died for a cause. Even Judge Gary admitted that. In his charge to the jury he had said, “The conviction had not gone on the ground that they did actually have any personal participation in that particular act, but the conviction proceeds upon the ground that they had generally by speech and spirit, advised large classes of people, not particular individuals but large classes, to commit murder . . . and in consequence of that advice and influenced by that advice, somebody not known, did throw this bomb.” This incitement, according to Lucy Parsons, widow of one of the martyrs, writing in a bitter letter to a labor newspaper years after, consisted in their appeal to workers to organize for the eight-hour day.

There had been in the past the so-called Molly Maguires in the coal fields and the Knights of Labor working for the eight-hour day and the cooperative system. My heart thrilled at those unknown women in New England who led the first strikes to liberate the women and children from the cotton mills.

My mother, now that she saw my interest, told me how she had worked in a shirt factory in Poughkeepsie when she was a girl. She had seen no romance, no interest in those few hard

years of her life, until she saw it through my eyes. As a matter of fact, to her it was one of those episodes to be forgotten.

Already in this year 1915 great strides had been taken. In some places the ten-hour day and increased wages had been won. But still only about eight per cent of the workers were organized, and the great mass of workers throughout the country were ground down by poverty and insecurity. What work there was to be done!

There was a small group of Socialists in the town of Urbana and I joined the party, but the meetings were dull and I didn't attend very many. I was going to turn to larger fields as soon as I could get away from school.