

From Union Square to Rome

Dorothy Day

Chapter 7 - Reporting

Summary: Describes her life as an advocacy journalist depicting the misery of the poor and working class. Engages in picketing, organizing, and anti-conscription activities. An account of being jailed with suffragettes and their hunger strike. Theme of being “tormented by God” and impulses toward faith recurs. (DDLW #207).

IT WAS during the winter of 1916-1917 that I worked on *The Call*, just before the United States declared war. There were the beginnings of a peace movement among students and workers. The Russian Revolution had not yet taken place. Trotsky, exiled from Germany, France, and Spain successively, had come to New York to write on the Russian socialist daily, *Novy Mir*.

The offices of the paper were then at 77 St. Mark’s Place, and I went with another *Call* reporter to interview him. He refused to be lured into talking about his exile in Siberia or his various escapes in disguise, but talked instead of the failure of Socialism to halt the war. Perhaps it was his bitter criticism of the parliamentarianism of the Socialists of New York which kept *The Call* from printing more than the one interview with him. His name appeared only twice in the paper.

The *Call* had been emphasizing constantly the work of the Socialists in the legislature, headlining the activities of Shiplakof and the other Socialists who were prominent in politics. Trotsky said that where parliamentarianism was weakest the Socialistic movement was strongest, Where they sought to win the state, he said, they were won by the state. (His words should be of interest to Catholics who trust to political activity rather than to Catholic action to further the Christian revolution.) Trotsky predicted the ruin of the capitalist class, terrific taxes after the war, and concentration of power in the middle class. “The social unrest,” he said, “after the war will eclipse anything the world has ever seen. The workers will take a heavy accounting of masters and the future alone can tell what form the protest will take.” A few weeks later he spoke at Cooper Union. “Revolution is brewing in the trenches,” he said, little dreaming himself perhaps that on March 21, less than two months later, the New York masses would be celebrating the downfall of the Czar at Madison Square Garden. Ludwig Lore, now a writer for *The Post* the *Volkzeitung*, introduced his friend.

Life on a newspaper, whether it is a radical or a conservative one, makes one lose all perspective at the time. One is carried along in a world of events, writing, reporting, with no time at all for thought—one day listening to Trotsky and the next day interviewing Mrs. Vincent Astor’s

butler, writing articles about the Navy Department's charges against Charles Schwab and other munition makers, stories about child labor in rural districts, child labor in the laundries (one fourteen-year old boy working ninety hours weekly). Nothing stood out in my mind. We worked from twelve noon until twelve at night covering meetings and strikes. We walked on picket lines, we investigated starvation and death in the slums.

Our function as journalists seemed to be to build up a tremendous indictment against the present system, a daily tale of horror which would have the cumulative effect of forcing the workers to rise in revolution. Our editorial heads trusted in legislation, but we young ones believed that nothing could be done except by revolution, by use of force. The old time Socialists with the parliamentarianism that Trotsky condemned trusted to education and legislation to change the social order. The editorials and the leading stories in *The Call* indicated that policy, but they were dull and doctrinaire, and the masses who read the paper could not help but read between the lines the incentive to revolt rather than to sow patiently and build slowly. I know that everything that I wrote, I wrote with the impatience of youth. I was hopeless of gradual change.

On March 21, 1917, at Madison Square Garden, I lived with the others those first days of revolt in Russia and felt the exultation, the joyous sense of victory of the masses as they sang *Ei Uchnjem*, the workman's hymn of Russia which seemed to signify, as *The Call* said the next day, that "like the flow of the river is the progress of human events," and they described the song as a "mystic, gripping melody of struggle, a cry for world peace and human brotherhood."

Only two days later a war-mad audience, led by Elihu Root and Mayor Mitchel, filled Madison Square Garden. The place was filled not with the working masses—the Jews, the Russians, the Slavs in general who live in the slums of New York—but by home guards, Boy Scouts, naval reserves, militia men. It was almost a social event with limousines pouring out the well-dressed, well-fed coupon clippers, to shout for war so that their investments might be protected.

My work during that winter was to cover strikes, peace meetings, and food riots. Margaret Sanger and her sister, Ethel Byrne, tried to open a birth-control clinic in the slums of Brownsville and were promptly arrested. Ethel Byrne was sent to Blackwell's Island (now called Welfare Island) where she started a hunger strike. It was the first time a woman had ever hunger struck in this country, although the suffragettes in England had used this technique, and the newspapers made much of it. I was assigned to the story, and for the next couple of months my job was to write up these women as martyrs in a holy cause and to paint harrowing pictures of the suffering of Ethel Byrne in jail and after her release. As a matter of fact, she was not on a hunger strike very long. Actually she did not suffer from her hunger strike and she was perfectly well and strong when she was released from jail, a release that was effected by the strike; but my job was to paint a picture of a woman at the point of death. I did not realize until I had been on a hunger strike myself that she was not as weak and ill as she and her doctors claimed, so I wrote the stories as the editor desired them. Just the same, I realized that I was distorting the truth, and it sometimes irked me that my job was always to picture the darker side of life, ignoring all the light touches, the gay and joyful sides of stories as I came across them.

For instance, if I were writing about Mrs. Gottlieb I had to ignore the homely comfort of their well-cooked meals and stress the high cost of living and the insecurity of her husband's employment. I had to leave out the happy pictures of our mornings at the public baths and see only the grim sordidness of the bathless tenement house. I still question the value of this overemphasis of human misery and underemphasis of bravery, the courage of human beings enabling them to make the best of their surroundings.

All that winter I enjoyed myself hugely attending labor bazaars and balls given by Socialists, Anarchists, and I. W. W.'s. The most effective speaker I heard was Elizabeth Gurley Flynn who was working with the I. W. W.'s and who was one of the leaders of the strike on the Mesabi iron range. She came to New York to get money for the relief of the miners' families and for labor defense. Wherever she spoke, the audience wept and gave heartily to the cause. The night I heard her she was speaking in the Brownsville section and I gave everything I had in my pocket, not even saving out carfare, so that I had to borrow the fare back to the office and go without lunches for some days afterwards. When I think of the hundreds of meetings I have attended where the workers have contributed toward strikes, labor defense, and the upkeep of their publications I am still amazed at their spirit of sacrifice.

I picketed a good many times that winter in the cold and snow and realized the value of picketing as well as the hardships that go with it. I have spoken many times these last few years to clubs of middle-class women, club women and church women, many among them so ignorant of the labor movement that they had never heard of the American Federation of Labor and did not know what picketing was for. They understood it to be an intimidation, not of strikebreakers, but of the public, and they felt themselves to be brave in going past picket lines into restaurants and stores. They did not realize that this is one way in which the workers can bring their cause to the attention of the public. They did not realize that the industrialists have at their disposal newspapers which are usually on the side of the advertisers, the radio, and very often the pulpit. If they did not picket no one would know that a strike was in progress. Not even other workers who were induced by the offer of higher wages to come and take the jobs, would know that a strike was going on unless they saw a picket line in front of the factory or workshop. I picketed before garment factories and restaurants, and it was hard not only to spend so many hours in an unnaturally slow walk, but it was also hard to face the public and the contempt of most of the police.

By the beginning of March that year students at Columbia became very active in the peace movement and I worked with them, and not only in my role as a reporter. We attended meetings, got out leaflets, and had hundreds of stickers printed protesting the outbreak of war that was imminent. At night we walked together up and down Fifth Avenue, in the subways, and in the department store district and put the stickers on windows and sides of houses. I remember the great enjoyment I had in pasting up the front of the Union League Club.

The week before April first we chartered a Chinatown bus and drove down to 'Washington stopping at Jersey City, Bayonne, Newark, Elizabeth, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and many other cities and towns on the way, holding street meetings and sometimes meetings in rented halls. By that time the war spirit had become so feverish that our meetings were broken up as fast as we started them. Then we had to climb back into the bus and speed on to the next stopping place where we would make another attempt. There was a riot in Baltimore.

We were holding a most dignified meeting in the auditorium when groups of Catholic college students disrupted the meeting. The speakers were booed from the platform and the police broke up the meeting. Out in front of the hall the rioting continued, and standing in the thick of it by one of the police wagons trying to find out whether it was our own or the disrupters who were being arrested, I had two ribs cracked by a policeman's club. I had my newspaper card pinned on my coat, but no credentials were of any account in such a disturbance. The policeman who struck me had blood streaming from his forehead from some missile that was thrown at him and he could scarcely see in the mob that was pressing close around him. Two of our crowd who were arrested were released immediately, and the next morning we proceeded on our way.

A few days after war was declared, and there was nothing for us to do but go back to New York and work with the Anti-Conscription League. The work that we had to do then was to persuade people not to register for the draft.

Not long after this I left *The Call* and worked for a time with the Anti-Conscription League. I was the only paid member of the group, drawing a salary of fifteen dollars a week. The rest of the crowd were all college students, and they needed someone to keep the office open, answer letters, and handle publicity. I did not stay there very long as the *Masses* offered me a job as assistant editor, and I began the more leisurely life of working for a monthly publication. I continued going around with the Anti-Conscription League members as well as with the Socialists. Jack Reed's and Arturo Giovanitti's poems in the *Masses* stirred the blood, and the one on the murder of Frank Little I can remember to this day. He was one of the Everett I. W. W.'s who was taken out by an armed mob and hanged from a railroad trestle.

There were cartoons and drawings by Art Young, Hugo Gellert, Boardman Robinson, Maurice Becker, and Glintenkamp. Max Eastman carried on a controversy with President Wilson, and the letters they exchanged were printed monthly in the paper. Floyd Dell, the managing editor, wrote articles and book reviews and in his spare time was working on a novel. Max Eastman wrote very beautiful lyric poetry and essays on aesthetics. I believe that these older members of the staff were more artists than propagandists.

I spent a great deal of time with Maurice Becker and Mike Gold. There were many afternoons when we took long walks along the Palisades and over on Staten Island. Hugo Gellert used to draw beautiful pastoral pictures for me which Max Eastman helped himself to very charmingly to decorate his apartment.

Most of the artists and writers lived in real poverty, and when some friends of the magazine offered some of us on the staff an apartment in Greenwich Village for the summer, we very joyfully accepted and lived in bourgeois comfort for the next five months. It was on the top floor of an old building in MacDougall Street over the Provincetown Players. I occupied the hall bedroom and Floyd Dell, Merrill Rogers, and David Karb took the rest of the apartment. During those months we had many meetings in the two living rooms of the apartment. I remember one meeting especially, the night before men were required to register for the draft, when Max Eastman, Floyd Dell, Jack Reed, the Boni brothers, Hiram Moderwell, Mike Gold, Harold Stearns, and many others spent the entire night discussing whether they should register the next day and then most of them went out and registered.

A good many of my friends during the next year evaded the draft by going to Mexico. The one true, consistent objector I knew at the time was Hugo Gellert's younger brother who was thrown in the guard house in a camp out on Long Island. Deprived of everything but a shirt and trousers, he was put on bread and water. Hugo and I used to go to see him and bring him bars of chocolate and fruit and whatever we could smuggle in. The guards were friendly and permitted us to give him the food. I don't remember what month it was, but the nights were chilly, and one of the guards used to give him a trench coat to cover himself with as he slept on the floor. He had a violin which they smuggled in to him so that he could sit and play to wile away not only his long hours but those of the guards. And then suddenly we heard that he had committed suicide the day after we had visited him. We had left him laughing and cheerful. He had been murdered, Hugo insisted, convinced that his brother was not the one to seek death as a way out, coming as he did from a family of Hungarian revolutionists.

During the course of the summer Max Eastman went on a speaking trip to raise funds for the *Masses*, and Floyd Dell left for a month's vacation. I had the job of selecting material, making up the paper that month, and it was some of the articles and cartoons in that issue that led to the indictment of the editors on the charge of treason. Suppression had been threatened for the past few months, and it was only a matter of time before the paper had to cease publication, so no one felt that I had precipitated matters. The trials did not take place until the following winter.

During that summer Rayna came to visit me from Chicago, and we spent many a night roaming the streets with Mike, Maurice, Hugo, and others, ending up at the apartment for coffee and discussion. We used to pick up people we encountered in the parks and bring them home with us. Sentimental charity some of the others called it. Mike Gold recognized it as an expression of what he called my religious instinct. We were both reading Tolstoi at the time and were thoroughly in sympathy with the Christianity he expressed, the Christianity that dispensed with a church and a priesthood.

In the fall, after Rayna had gone home, I went down to Washington with the League for the Defense of Political Prisoners to picket the White House, which had been besieged by suffragists for some months. A large number of the suffragists had been in jail, sometimes as many as twenty-five at a time, many for as long as sixty days, sentences which they served in the workhouse at Occoquan.

Two of the leaders were hunger striking, demanding the right to be treated as political prisoners instead of being forced to work, wear prison clothing, and be deprived of books and mail. The rights of political prisoners were recognized by most European countries, even by Russia under the czars. As a matter of fact, most of the revolutionists who spent long terms in jail and had been in exile in Siberia had used the opportunity given them by the government to study Marxism, and history in the light of Marxism, solidifying their influence as intellectual leaders of the masses.

But in Washington the suffragists were treated as criminals and shared cells with petty thieves and prostitutes. The suffragists had recruited a large number of women from all over the United States, reflecting all classes of society, to picket with them in protest against the brutal treatment they had received. The wife of the president of the Board of Trustees of

Bellevue Hospital was among them. There were society women from Boston and Philadelphia, one dignified old lady from Florida, school girls, and teachers.

We all met at headquarters and started our slow march in front of the gates of the White House. Usually the police gathered up the pickets as fast as they appeared, but on these days that we picketed, there were small riots and on the first day some of the United States Marines tore our banners from our hands and destroyed them. Those banners that we were able to save were loaded into the police wagons with us, and we made a gay sight through the streets of Washington with the placards hanging out of the back of the police truck. The first day we were discharged on bail. After the second picketing the women refused to give bail and were held over night at the detention house in Washington where army cots had to be set up to hold so large a crowd. The next day all of us were sentenced to thirty days and taken down to the workhouse at Occoquan.

We went by train escorted by many guards. It was fall and the countryside was beautiful in the dusk. It was pitch dark when we reached the workhouse and were forced by the guards to the superintendent's receiving office. They went out of their way to be rough, pulling us by our arms over the country road through the dark, and practically throwing us into the room. After they had taken away our belongings we were all assigned to cells, and those of us who had been vigorous in protest at the rough treatment were assigned to a punishment block of cells where usually prisoners were kept in solitary confinement. There was only a single bunk in each cell, but there were so many of us that they put two in each one, and I shared that of Lucy Burns, a red-headed school teacher from Brooklyn who was one of the leaders of the suffragists.

I had tried to get up in the reception hall of the punishment cell block to join a young artist whom I knew on the other side of the room, and as I moved, four guards jumped upon me as though they were indulging in a football game and I were the football. Other women arose to my assistance, and immediately there was a mad scuffle, a most disgraceful scene where dignified women tore at the guards, bit and kicked and were belabored in turn.

When Lucy Burns was flung into the cell with me she stood by the barred door and began calling to some of the other women to see if they had been injured. She refused to heed the orders of the superintendent to "shut up" and he came to the cell, his face livid with rage, and ordered the guards to handcuff her to the bars. She was forced to stand there for several hours with her arms up above her head. Later on when they released her they left the handcuffs on all night, and the two of us, on the single bunk that had neither mattress, blankets, nor sheets, lay there in our clothes and talked through a good part of the night. I remember we talked about all the novels of Joseph Conrad that we had read. Her favorite was a story called *Youth*.

All of us went on a hunger strike immediately. On the second day we were really put into solitary. The hours were interminably long. I lay there on my bunk watching the slit in the upper part of the cell through which thin sunlight streamed part of the day. I could hear birds outside and the sound of the guards walking in the corridors. But otherwise there was complete silence. The barred door opened on a corridor and every now and then a guard came and looked in. There was a toilet in one corner of the cell which had to be flushed from outside of the cell. We were supposed to call the guard for this attention. Once a day one

of the guards would escort us to a wash room at the end of the building. We went one by one, and only encountered our fellow prisoners on these occasions. There was no chance to exchange a word.

The first day our clothes had been taken away from us and we had been presented with prison garments—Mother Hubbard dresses, chemises made of coarse, unbleached muslin and two shoes which were exactly alike.

After the first few days, I asked one of the guards for a Bible as I knew it would be the only thing allowed, and I lay there reading the Psalms by the hour.

Going without food was not hard at all. We drank plenty of water and there was nothing to do. There were so many of us that they could not forcibly feed us all. That torture they saved for the leaders of the group. Thank God I wasn't a leader! The woman in the next cell was forcibly fed and I could hear her struggles as the four guards held her down on the bed and the doctor and his assistant forced a tube down her throat through which they poured beaten egg and milk.

Altogether we were on hunger strike for ten days, and this was most effective. It aroused the protest of the nation. At the end of ten days our demand to be treated as political prisoners was granted. Naturally, we were not forced to work while we were on hunger strike, and when the strike was ended, our own clothes and books were given back to us and we were permitted to receive mail. From then on we were treated with great tenderness when it came to food. They broke our fast with milk toast, and after a day of that we had a most delicious chicken dinner.

That same day we were transferred to the Washington city jail. All of us were taken in cars back to Washington. The beautiful fall weather was invigorating, and we all felt triumphant at the success of the strike. There had been real suffering and misery in the workhouse but from now on imprisonment was more or less of a lark. We were assigned to cells in the Washington jail, and the doors were left unlocked all the time so that we could roam through the prison corridors and visit back and forth and buy food and cigarettes and in general entertain ourselves. There were many colored prisoners in one of the corridors and they also were given a great deal of freedom. There was a phonograph and in the early evening there even was dancing. I remember one afternoon lying in my bunk with a large dish of baked beans, baked by the Negro cook, which were good as candy, sweetened as they were with molasses. I had a book to read, *Fortitude* by Hugh Walpole, while Peggy, my roommate, sat in her lower bunk drawing sketches of the other prisoners.

At the end of sixteen days President Wilson signed a pardon for us all, and we were released. Those last few days, aside from the fact that we were prisoners, were nothing, but the first six days of imprisonment were miserable. In spite of the fact that I was with scores of other women I felt a sense of complete solitude lying behind the bars. I felt keenly the misery of all those others in jail for criminal offenses. My own sentence of thirty days seemed interminable and when I thought of long sentences and even six months seemed terribly long, I was overcome by the misery of those about me. The cause for which we were in jail seemed utterly unimportant. I had not much interest in the vote, and it seemed to me our protest should have been not for ourselves but for all those thousands of prisoners throughout the

country, victims of a materialistic system. They were enduring punishment which would not cure them nor deter them from future crimes, and they were being punished by men not much better than themselves, indeed, far worse in some cases.

The one thing our combined protest did affect was the removal of the superintendent, Whittacker, from his position at the workhouse. Our testimony and the affidavits we were able to collect as to his brutality were sufficient.

I truly suffered that first week and the reading of the Bible intensified that suffering. I felt that we were a people fallen from grace and abandoned by God. I felt that we were indeed children of wrath and that a personal conversion was necessary before any revolution could be successful. At the same time I felt that my attitude was morbid. I distrusted my own emotions, feeling that they arose from my long fast and the imprisonment, and besides I felt a sense of shame in turning to God in despair. There was in my heart that insinuation of my college professor that religion was for the weak and those who needed solace and comfort, who could not suffer alone but must turn to God for comfort—to a God whom they themselves conjured up to protect them against fear and solitude.

After I came back from Washington, I freelanced for a while, living in one furnished room after another, moving from the lower East Side to the upper East Side and then again down to the lower West Side of town. It was a bitterly cold winter and the rooms I lived in were never really heated. There was a coal shortage that winter and heatless Mondays were instituted. Usually it was pleasanter to stay out of my room, so there was a great deal of visiting of friends, of hanging around the Provincetown Players where a few of my friends had plays in rehearsal. In the evening the usual meeting place was the back room of an old saloon on the corner of Fourth Street and Sixth Avenue.

Soon I began work on *The Liberator*, a successor to the *Masses*, edited by Crystal Eastman, Max's sister, Eugene O'Neill, Terry Karlin, an old Irishman who knew the Haymarket martyrs in Chicago, Hypolyte Havel, the editor of an anarchist publication, who had been in jails all over Europe for his convictions, Michael Gold and others, were my constant companions on these long evenings. No one ever wanted to go to bed, no one ever wanted to be alone.

It was on one of these cold, bitter winter evenings that I first heard *The Hound of Heaven*, that magnificent poem of Francis Thompson. Gene could recite all of it, and he used to sit there, looking dour and black, his head sunk on his chest, sighing, "And now my heart is as a broken fount wherein tear-drippings stagnate." It is one of those poems that awakens the soul, recalls to it the fact that God is its destiny. The idea of this pursuit fascinated me, the inevitableness of it, the recurrence of it, made me feel that inevitably I would have to pause in the mad rush of living to remember my first beginning and last end.

Mike Gold and Tolstoi, whose books we read, had recalled me to a remembrance of spiritual things the summer before, and now it was Eugene O'Neill and *The Hound of Heaven*. Neither of them knew perhaps how profoundly moved I was. I did my best to hide it, but I was again "tormented by God."

You will be surprised but there was many a morning after sitting all night in taverns or coming from balls over at Webster Hall that I went to an early Mass at St. Joseph's Church on Sixth Avenue. It was just around the corner from where I lived, and seeing people going

to an early weekday Mass attracted me. What were they finding there? I seemed to feel the faith of those about me and I longed for their faith. My own life was sordid and yet I had had occasional glimpses of the true and the beautiful. So I used to go in and kneel in a back pew of St. Joseph's, and perhaps I asked even then, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

The trial of the editors of the *Masses* came up that winter and I was subpoenaed as a witness for the state. Morris Hillquit, the Socialist attorney, whom I admired as a scholar and a gentleman, defended them and we worked together over the testimony. I was a very bad witness for the state and a very good one for the defense.

Then suddenly a succession of incidents and the tragic aspect of life in general began to overwhelm me and I could no longer endure the life I was leading. Some friends of my family were nurses and it was war time and though I was still bitterly pacifist, I decided nursing the sick was not contrary to my beliefs by any means.

So many nurses had joined the Red Cross and had gone abroad that there was a great need for nurses at home. By January 1, 1918, I had signed up as a probationer in Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn.