

From Union Square to Rome

Dorothy Day

Chapter 9 - Chicago

Summary: Recounts her involvement with the I. W. W. in Chicago and, in some detail, an accidental jail experience. After a move to New Orleans she starts to make “visits” to Church. With the money from selling a book she wrote, she buys a beach house, enters into a common law marriage, and begins to “read and think and ponder, and I notice from my notebooks that it was at this time that I began to pray more earnestly.” (DDLW #209).

The years from 1919 to 1921 were given to writing, newspaper work, attendance at meetings, jobs of various kinds in both New York and Chicago. Often there were long periods when I thought only in terms of my own writing, and after days of work I spent the evening hours writing short stories and sketches and plays that were never published. Since I spent my time with artists and writers and those whom radicals termed bourgeois intellectuals, I was not, strictly speaking, close to the radical movement. There has always been that separation between the liberals and radicals, recognized by the Marxists, both Socialists and Communists.

During these years of my early twenties I was in reality living for myself, and personalities rather than ideas influenced me and kept drawing me back to the labor movement. I held many jobs, reporting jobs, covering the courts in Chicago for capitalistic rather than labor papers, proofreading, library work, cashiering in a restaurant, even clerking in Montgomery Ward's where I had to punch a time clock.

I spent a year in Europe but because I was associating at that time only with liberals I had no vital contact with what was going on in those countries. My time in England, France, and Italy was spent with people who were only interested in art and literature and were not in any sense propagandists.

I came back from Europe and went back to Chicago where the Communist party was leading a precarious existence underground. That was the time when meetings were held in the Michigan woods, when there were hundreds arrested, when workers did not know whether they were Socialists, anarchists, I. W. W.'s or whether they were going into the newly forming party. The Socialists were too dull. They had too little vitality as far as I was concerned, and my allegiance for the most part was with the I. W. W.'s whose ideas in regard to solidarity and direct action appealed greatly to my youth.

It was about this time that I had my second jail experience. It came about in a rather peculiar way with none of the respectable circumstances attendant on it as in the Washington

experience. I was associated at that time with some I. W. W.'s who had their headquarters on West Madison Street, Chicago. Across the street from their printing office was an old rooming house where a great many of them stayed, and where in true Wobbly fashion they had an everlasting pot of Mulligan on the fire. Everyone who came in was supposed to contribute to the pot whether it were a bunch of carrots, a piece of meat or a few pounds of potatoes. It was kept going from week to week, and when the funds were low the boys used to beg from grocers in the neighborhood. Those who had funds took care of their companions who had none, and there was a good spirit of comradeship. Their slogan was "An injury to one is an injury to all" and their sense of solidarity went even into housekeeping details.

One of the girls I met had grown up in reformatories and had been a companion of criminals. She had been a pickpocket and shoplifter and had served many terms in jail. At one time in her life she had taken drugs, but she had cured herself of that habit. She was, at this time, unhappily in love with a newspaper man.

One day I opened the paper to find she had taken bichloride of mercury and was in the city hospital. They managed to save her life but when she was released from the hospital she went straight to the I. W. W. lodging house where she knew she would be taken in. I went over to see her in the evening to bring her food and planned to stay for the night with her. She was still ill and very much depressed and not altogether happy that they had dragged her back from death.

We were undressed and getting into bed when a knock came at the door and four men burst in telling us that we were under arrest for being inmates of a disorderly house. Being arrested on the streets of Washington and being arrested when one was lying in bed in a Chicago West Side rooming house are two entirely different things. I had the moral support in the first case of sixty or seventy women who were arrested with me, and it was some technical charge such as obstructing traffic that was made against us. Now we were alone. It made no difference that radical headquarters all over Chicago were being raided and wholesale arrests being made. We could not feel that we were a part of a movement that was suffering persecution. Perhaps we were not sufficiently indoctrinated.

It had not occurred to us that it was unconventional or unseemly to be staying in a lodging house on West Madison Street. As a matter of fact, it was an unfortunate accident that there were only men in the house at that time as both men and women and married couples had stayed there. The ugly fact remained that we were two young girls arrested by four plain-clothes men who refused to leave the room while we got up and dressed for fear we would try to get away by the fire-escape. These were the days of the Palmer red raids when no one was safe. Those were times of persecution for all radicals. However, it is well to remember that now in these years the same things are occurring. At a strike of the Commodore Hotel workers a few years ago the group of girls who were arrested were charged with disorderly conduct and kept in detention cells. The workers who were wounded last year in the Republic steel riot were arrested on their hospital beds.

After being taken out of the house in company with a few of the men and being forced to stand on the corner with the police while they called the police wagon, we were taken to the West Chicago Avenue Police Station. Most of the men had dived through windows and down fire-escapes and had gotten away. They were wiser than we were, realizing that places

where radicals congregated were always liable to this kind of attack. It was just a case of our knowing that these things were occurring every day and yet not realizing that they could occur to us. We were booked on the charge of being inmates of a disorderly house. We were not allowed to use the telephone to get in touch with a lawyer or our friends, although according to law we should have had this privilege.

We were thrown into a large cell that had six beds in it, one of which had been turned upside down by a drunken woman prisoner who had been in it before us. There were no sheets nor pillows on the beds, just dirty mattresses. It was midsummer so we had only our dresses to spread over us for sheets. We took off our shoes and stockings and dresses and lay down again to try to sleep. We felt peculiarly exposed and naked lying there in our slips with the open bars of the cell in front of us, opening out into the reception room where the police and plain-clothes men continued to come in all night bringing other prisoners. At the time that the raid was made on the West Madison Street rooming house there were raids made on *bona fide* houses in the Chicago red light district. All during the night women continued to be put in our cell until pretty soon there were about twenty. There were only six single beds. To keep their clothes from being wrinkled the girls took off not only their dresses but their slips. They treated the affair casually as incidental to their profession. Half dressed as they were, they kept running to the bars of the cell.

I felt at first a peculiar sense of disgust and shame at the position I was in, shame because I had been treated as a criminal and made to feel exactly as though I were guilty of the charge on which I had been arrested. But it was only what I could expect, I thought to myself bitterly, under the present social system, and I thought again of Deb's words: "While there is a lower class, I am of it, and while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

After my first stunned amazement at what had happened, I could lie on the edge of the cot and observe my companions. They seemed to me to be like any other group of working girls, these young women, who had turned to this hideous way of earning a living. Two of them had been picked up on the street and all the rest of them had been taken from the same house. Several of them had children whom they were supporting in schools or boarding houses out of town. I felt peculiarly helpless at not being able to make a telephone call. It was impossible to get in touch with people on the outside and I felt more actually a prisoner than in those six days of solitary confinement at Occoquan. We were there all that night, all the next day, and the next night.

No food was served to us. We were expected to buy it from the jail matron. A sandwich and a cup of coffee cost a dollar. A package of cigarettes or a pack of cards also came to a dollar. If it had not been for our fellow prisoners we would have gone hungry. I had only two dollars with me and Anne, my companion, had nothing. Our fellow prisoners shared their sandwiches with us and kept us supplied with coffee.

Because I was morose and silent, one of them, who had been booked as the keeper of the house, although she was probably not more than twenty-five herself, insisted on trying to comfort me for what she took to be my first experience. "There always has to be a first time," she told me, and she pointed out one of her own girls who was taking it hard.

During that long interminable day three lost children were brought in, and the whole jail was so full that the matron put the children in with us. The girls, who had no sense of modesty before the police or each other, very considerably put on their dresses while the children were with us and one of them sat with a little boy in her arms and rocked him to sleep, keeping the others quiet while she did so. There was one little girl who was brought in late that night who had been found in a doorway claiming she was lost. But it turned out that she was really afraid to go home because she had bought a pocket book with the money her aunt had given her to buy groceries—a piece of childish recklessness for which she was paying dearly. The girls induced her to tell her name and where she lived so that the police could notify her people. Then one of them filled her new pocket book with a clean handkerchief, some rouge and lipstick and powder, the money which she had spent, and gave the aunt a long lecture on the gentleness with which she should treat the little thief. “Punishing her won’t do any good,” she kept saying. “You’ve got to be kind to kids. You’ve got to love them. That’s the only way to do anything with them.” But the girls could be horribly crude and coarse too.

Before I had merely read about prison life and had agreed with Tolstoi that such punishment of criminals was futile when we were guilty for permitting such a system as ours to exist and that we, too, should bear the penalty for the crimes committed by those unfortunate ones. We all formed part of one body, a social body, and how could any limb of that body commit a crime alone?

We were photographed and finger-printed and finally taken to the morals court. Before we were placed in the detention pen we were examined for venereal diseases. When men are arrested during a red raid the police can express their brutality with rubber hoses and blackjacks. They can show their scorn and contempt for those who are trying to “undermine” our present system by kicking and beating them until their victims are a degraded mass of quivering flesh. They show more gallantry in regard to the women. They have a more subtle way of affronting their sensibilities. They can charge them with being prostitutes, make them submit to degrading physical examinations, and throw them into the company of those whom they feel should degrade them. But I felt more horror of the police and that police matron during this experience than I did of the women. The women did not disgust me, it was their profession that disgusted me. They themselves may have been superior, as human beings go, to their captors. There was no pride or hypocrisy among them.

Fortunately, in the courtroom where we were brought before the judge, who, of course, was convinced of our guilt and made us feel it, I met a reporter whom I knew. The girls had offered us their own lawyers and offered to see to it that we got bail. It was not without gratitude that I refused this help. I felt I could not use the cheaper methods of the law to extricate myself and yet in the long run it didn’t make any difference. My newspaper friend had to see a judge whom he knew to sign a release for us, so I still felt angry for having to get myself out in this way. I would have preferred to spend the ten days at Lawndale Hospital and take any sentence they chose to inflict. What right did I have to avail myself of the friendship of those in power?

There was still another day in jail before we could get out as it was Saturday and the judge was out playing golf. The girls with whom we had spent the last few days in jail tried to leave us some money as they departed gaily, and it was hard not to offend them by refusing.

We assured them that we would be out almost immediately. For a few hours we had to sit in the detention pen until all of the prisoners, male and female, had appeared before the judge. We had the choice of going either to Lawndale Hospital where women prisoners were sent for ten days, as though they were in quarantine, or to the county jail. When they finally took us out to the police wagon in company with some men prisoners who were handcuffed and bloody, I encountered a Communist friend in front of the county building. He was horrified to see me being put into the police wagon, and he spent the rest of the day trying to start the machinery to get me out.

We were taken out to the county jail and were once more stripped and examined by the police matron. Then we were given prison clothes and cells which formed a block around a central recreation room. The windows of the cells themselves opened on the street, and one could look out the window and greet friends below in the street. I had often noticed that sad block and on one occasion I saw a woman standing on the curb with tears running down her face waving to a man in a cell two flights up.

The woman in the cell next to mine was a drug addict who screamed and howled all that long summer afternoon begging to be put out of her misery. She kept beating her head against the cell wall until they had to put her in a straight jacket, but no attempt was made to give her medical treatment.

The system there was to alternate two hours of confinement with two hours of freedom in the recreation hall and the women sat around reading and playing cards and making themselves tea on a little gas burner which was provided, using their own supplies to supplement the early evening meal. By this time the drug addict had quieted herself sufficiently to come out for supper. Although she was a nervous, quivering wretch when they released her, within fifteen minutes after her door was unlocked she had become perfectly normal. My companion Anne pointed out that there were always drugs among the prisoners and that someone had taken pity on her and given her some.

Finally word came to us that we were released, and the prison matron returned our clothes and we went out in the streets free once more. We felt that for years we had been separated from normal, human intercourse and that ages had elapsed since our arrest a few nights before. The efforts of my radical friend, I found out later, had been useless. It was the kind offices of the newspaper man whom I knew which had effected our release.

For a while in Chicago I worked with Robert Minor on the *Liberator*. Minor was a former I. W. W. who had become converted to the Communist cause after a long summer of reading and research. His former wife told me it had been a hard experience for him, making up his mind to leave one organization to which he had pledged his allegiance and enter another. It is difficult for outsiders to realize the bitterness with which Trotskyites, Communists, Socialists, I. W. W.'s, and Anarchists regard each other. Their animosity towards their fellow radicals is often more extreme than that towards those whom they consider the bourgeois and the capitalist classes. Lenin, in advocating a popular front, had often warned against this bitterness, pointing out that as long as the different groups recognized their fundamental philosophical disagreements, they should strive to work together towards immediate social aims in order to win the masses.

I had first heard of Bob Minor when he was working on the Mooney case in California. He had long been a popular cartoonist whose work was well paid for by the capitalist papers. He had sacrificed a good living and his own personal comfort for the cause of the worker. When I had been on the old *Masses*, Max Eastman used to write to him again and again begging for cartoons,****but he gave up all his own work in trying to fight the frame-up against Mooney.

My sister was staying with me at that time in Chicago and in midwinter we decided for personal reasons to go down to New Orleans and work there for the winter. We lived on St. Peter Street across the street from the cabildo and the Cathedral. I found work on a morning newspaper, *The Item*, and that winter I was occupied in straight newspaper work, writing interviews and feature stories. Many evenings I had assignments, but when there were none, and I heard the Cathedral bells ringing for evening devotions, I used to go to church. It was the first time I had been present at Benediction and it made a profound impression on me. The very physical attitude of devotion of those about me made me bow my head. But did I feel the Presence there? I do not know. But I remembered those lines from the Imitation:

“Who, humbly approaching to the fountain of sweetness, doth not carry thence some little sweetness?”

“Who, standing by a copious fire, doth not derive therefrom some little heat?”

Book 4, Chapter 4

I wanted to know what the Benediction hymns were and I bought a little manual of prayers at a religious goods store down the street. I read the Mass. I had to be at the office by seven in the morning and Sunday mornings I was too lazy to get up. But I learned a great deal from that little book. I did not know a single Catholic in New Orleans. If any of my associates were nominally Catholic, they did not let me know of it. There was no one for me to talk to. But my devotion was sincere and I continued to make “visits.”

Another girl, who is now secretary of the Communist affiliate, the League for Spanish Democracy in Chicago, was living with my sister and me. That Christmas she good-heartedly gave me a rosary for a present and I learned to say it at the evening services in the Cathedral. She was a Russian Jew and did not understand my interest in Catholicism. She just wanted to give me something she thought I'd like. I have not seen this friend since that winter but I shall always remember her with gratitude and love.

That spring there occurred a reversal in my fortunes which brought about a very deep change in my life. During one of these crowded years I wrote a book, a very bad book, which one of the moving picture companies bought on publication. I haven't the slightest idea why they bought it since they never produced it. It was probably just one of many they extravagantly purchased to keep some other moving picture company from producing it. They paid, to them a very small sum,****which to me was the very large sum of five thousand dollars, two thousand of which went to my publishers.

My reaction was that of many other radicals—now I could at last have a home of my own and a quiet spot off in the country where there would be time for study and writing and that

small measure of security necessary for that work. Practically all my friends had succumbed to this temptation to private property. Max Eastman and Floyd Dell both had little homes up in Croton, New York. Jack Reed had had a place of his own. Most of the others on the staff of the *Masses* had bought old farms. Mike Gold and Manuel Granich bought a place later, near mine on the beach, and those who could not afford to buy usually rented little places outside of New York or Chicago and spent their summers or week-ends there. Neither New Jersey nor Long Island appealed to me. But I wanted to be by the water, so I bought a small bungalow with a plot of ground twenty by eighty feet on Raritan Bay on Staten Island.

When I was a child, my sister and I used to keep notebooks in the publishers' dummies we occasionally got hold of. Recording happiness made it last longer, we felt, and recording sorrow dramatized it and took away its bitterness; and often we settled some problem which beset us even while we wrote about it.

Those early diaries had been lost long since, some of them destroyed. But when I moved down to the country and some months later entered into a common law marriage, my peace and happiness were such that I once again took to keeping a notebook.

It was a peace, curiously enough, divided against itself. I was happy but my very happiness made me know that there was a greater happiness to be obtained from life than any I had ever known. I began to read and think and ponder, and I notice from my notebooks that it was at this time that I began to pray more earnestly.

Because I feel that this period of my conversion is so joyous and lovely, I wish to write at length, giving the flavor, the atmosphere, the mood of those days.

So I continue from those notebooks that I filled so copiously, especially during the long first winters of the few years I spent in the country.