

Day After Day - December 1938

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Attends a dinner in honor of Raissa Maritain and takes her to a jazz club in Harlem. Compares the Mott Street neighborhood to a village with small shops, sweet smells, generosity, troubles, pets. Asks if someone can send a hedgehog to her daughter. (DDLW #338).

One night last month a group met at a dinner in honor of Madame Raissa Maritain, who was returning to France the next day after a short visit to New York and the Middle West. Harry McNeil, who is the chairman of our Tuesday night forums, Dr. Ruth Byrnes, Dr. William O'Meara, Harry Binsse and his wife, Mrs. Maritain's sister, and Emmanuel Chapman were there and the conversation proceeded in French and English. Thanks to Dr. McNeil, who is as much at home in conversational French as he is in English, it was a most pleasant dinner for me, who speak no French. The others confessed they were more at ease discussing philosophy in French than the trade union movement, for instance, in which Madame Maritain was deeply interested.

Madame Maritain warmly recommended Borne and Henry's book, "The Philosophy of Work," and said she and her husband were well acquainted with the authors, who were students of his in Paris.

Theresa Neuman

The conversation shifted to Therese Neuman, about whom rumors are circulating just now—rumors of her death, rumors that she is confined to a concentration camp. Nobody had any definite information. Maritain himself had visited the mystic and had been present during two of her ecstasies and had been profoundly impressed. He had not had conversation with her.

Both Maritain and his wife have a warm love for America and consider that there are infinite possibilities here of working towards that pluralist state which the philosopher has outlined in his first essay, in "Freedom and the Modern World."

Madame Maritain expressed a deep interest in the Negro in this country and the evening ended with a half hour visit to Harlem where we sat in the Savoy and watched the dancers and listened to swing music. Being a musician herself, Madame Maritain wished to hear first hand one of those bands so publicized in European journals.

I was glad it was one of the big public dance halls we went to because it was a place where workers gather after long hours of backbreaking manual labor, where women who work as chambermaids, houseworkers, clerks can go and forget their oppression in a few hours of lighthearted dance. Some of the dancing was grotesque and even humorous, some was most sedate. There was none that was objectionable as I had been afraid it might be.

Winter Is Here

Finally we have taken to fires after a long and warm fall. All the women in the House of Hospitality go out collecting wood from the neighborhood around and the back yard rings with the sound of hatchets against not only wood but concrete. Not so good for the hatchets.

The neighbors generously bring us all the grape crates after their wine-making and the back yard was stacked for a couple of days. In the morning, the cold penetrates and the men on the breadline have started building fires to warm themselves. Mostly it is the trash in the street that they are burning up. This morning, on the Feast of the Presentation, there was a delicately joyous sunrise as though in honor of the Blessed Mother. All pink, blue, pale lavender and gold and fleecy clouds against a deep blue sky. Nothing somber nor magnificent as there is so often in sunsets, but a display as though for a little girl of three, dancing up the Temple steps as she was brought for the first time to be put under instruction.

Neighborhood Crabs

After Mass, I stopped at a little dairy store around the corner of Hester street and found them busily engaged in making cheese, stirring it in a huge wooden bowl with a wooden ladle. The cheeses are pressed and put in little wicker baskets. When you buy the cheese you don't get the basket. Sometimes they press them into the shape of fat pigs, graceful deer and horses. These are nice to put on the mantelpiece. They harden and they do not smell.

Next door to the cheese store is a little bakery with the good smell of bread and rolls perfuming the morning air. Between the hot bakery smells and the rich smell of coffee from St. Joseph's House on a fall morning, the early hours are often cheerful ones. Especially right now to us who are beginning little by little, to pay off some of our bills. We don't have to wonder desperately whether we are going to be able to keep up the bread line, whether we are going to have to turn away those expectant faces, looking to us so hopefully for hospitality in the morning. "The best coffee ever served," they all say, and we agree with them as we breakfast with a steaming cup of it and a roll.

Thank God for the little joys that come of a moment with a glimpse of a sunrise shining down the canyons between the cliffs of tenements; with the cup of hot coffee and the smell and the taste of good bread.

Friendly Baker

We visited one friendly baker down the street who has been giving us whole gunny sacks of left-over bread. Down a steep flight of steps into a white-washed cellar he has his one-man shop. The baker is owner, boss and worker. He hires one man, a driver of a horse and wagon to deliver the bread. The boss goes to work at nine in the evening and works until eleven the next morning, mixing, kneading and baking the crusty loaves in a long oven built in the end of the cellar.

The oven is heated with a little coal fire in one corner, and there is an electric light inside so that you can see the long browning loaves of bread which he dexterously slides in, turns and removes with a long paddle and a twist of the wrist.

He is a Seventh Day Adventist and has texts hanging around the wall and a package of tracts which he gives out to his customers. He has nothing against the Catholics, he said. We should all love one another and that is why he wishes to give us bread every day. He will teach us, too, how to make bread, any night some of us want to come in, and he will even go down to the farm at Easton to show us how to construct a big oven.

It is like a village, this neighborhood. There is a warmth and friendliness, there are homes where people are born and live long years until marriage, where they come back to feast and mourn, and from which they are eventually buried.

But there are the ugly and sordid aspects only too evident always. Overcrowded rooms, rat-ridden tenements, vermin against which one must always fight, drink and drugs and vice, side by side with warm and guarded homes.

Not long since there was a murder around on Mulberry street and when the extras were shouted through the streets "Murder on Mott street," our neighbors were insulted and would not buy the paper. The murder was on Mulberry.

But, even so, when the shot was fired women rushed from their homes, thinking of their husbands, sons and brothers. The man who was killed had just been released from Sing Sing after serving a ten-year sentence. One of the neighbors said sadly, "Almost every house on this street has a boy in jail."

Pets

John Mella just came in while Teresa was doing her homework with a big box containing a very dirty rabbit. He was white but much bedraggled and his sad plight appealed to her immediately. A boy in the neighborhood wanted to find a home for him and ours was to be it. After all, what was St. Joseph's house but a house of hospitality! We have other rodents, not pets, so why not a rabbit? He would go well with the two white mice. So now while Teresa does her homework, the rabbit is exploring his new box. He can get out whenever he wants to, but let us hope he does not get into bed at night. He smells pretty strong at present but let us hope that when he cleans himself up he will be a sweeter companion.

An hour later. Much to my relief three little Italian boys rushed in just now and reclaimed their pet.

“What I really want,” said Teresa, “is a hedgehog. They are little and not at all prickly if you train them, and they are very bad for cockroaches. But they like to curl up in garbage cans so you are liable to throw them out if you are not careful.”

Has anybody a hedgehog to send in to the **Catholic Worker**?