

The Eleventh Virgin

Dorothy Day

Part One, Chapter 4

After the loneliness which preceded her early love affair, and love affair June still thought it, and after her strife with things religious, she attained a state of happy melancholy. Life was unexciting, it is true. Henrietta passed out of it to attend business college, and so far, June's friendships had not been serious enough for her to go out of her way either to make new ones or continue old ones which had been interrupted. There was a feeling of dependence, more household duties on account of Mother Grace's ill health, the distaste for which was a large extent mitigated by the intensity they imparted to every-day pleasures.

There were the early morning hours which gradually became pleasant through their very hardship. Glubb, that little imp with the dimple in one cheek, and a devil in his eye, felt that since he was always put to bed just when the clatter of the supper dishes reminded him of how much fun it was to play with the pans and potatoes and apples (it was easier to bite the potatoes which were pleasantly gritty—his teeth slid on the apples) and took his revenge by awakening before the birds. And in winter this was very early. For a while he would lie there, content to make earthquake changes in the mountains and valleys of his bedclothes. Toes were fascinating if he could extricate them from the jungle and there were mouth noises to make at the flicker of the street lamp on the ceiling and the corner brass knob on his crib. Steadfast gaze at the knob reminded him that here was another noise, and in making his way down the crib in pursuit of his object, there was always the discovery, new every morning it would seem from the surprised way he stopped, of a sing-song creaking of the spring. For a moment there were a few little songs to make by jumping up and down, songs interspersed with delicious chuckles and crowings—it was easy to chuckle but it was harder to crow. You had to stop, throw back your chin, clench your fists, draw in a deep breath and hold it back in your throat to gurgle with. Quite a strain on the chest, but a great accomplishment. The creaking of the spring was only temporarily satisfying, however. With a last dash to attain his original object, Glubb reached the loose post with the brass knob.

Here was real bliss, to be enjoyed only for a moment. So instead of beginning softly and leading up to a climax of banging, as he could do in the daytime when put in his crib for safe-keeping, Glubb put aside artistic finish and threw into his work all the energy he could.

As always happened, the girl in the bed sighed, stirred, turned over, and before she could put her warm feet out into the cold, there was time for another loud rattle of the bed-post. It was a lovely clamor.

As always, the girl lifted him up, in spite of protesting legs kept in the sitting posture, flattened him out, tucking firmly the while to keep him in that position, and to forestall the usual whimper, gave him a rubber thing to play with. Rubber toys offended his aesthetic taste in daylight hours, but they were comforting to feel and chew on when the gloom of dawn hid their ugliness.

Well, he could get even with the girl in the bed at any time by lifting his voice in a howl, and the crib was warm. He might as well be good a little longer, especially since it was chilly downstairs and June fussed over him before she gave him the bottle of warm milk.

He remembered it was time for the outside noises to begin and began summoning them with peeps in different degrees of loudness. He could imitate the birds but not the noise of the milk wagon. That rattle over the cobbles of the alley, the clink of footsteps, punctuated by a metallic sound of depositing bottles, gradually coming nearer, and humanly interspersed with calls of the milkman to his horse—these noises were hailed with delight by Glubb. The answering peep of birds outside was as nothing, and after so intense a joy, it was too insufferably dull to remain an instant longer in bed. When there were possibilities in life for such noise and stir, how impossible to remain tucked in!

Glubb never could understand why his loudest clatter during the day among pantry pans made so little racket in the scheme of things. It was seldom rewarded even by a reprimand from his mother. He had yet to learn the value of contrast.

With the noise of the milkman dying out, the diminuendo not nearly so enjoyable as the crescendo, protests began.

There was a first quavering cry. Glubb knew how pathetic it was, knew its sufficiency. There was a more determined hopping out of bed from the other side of the room and June was awake.

The transition from the languorous drowsiness of the bed, where she too under Glubb's tutelage was beginning to enjoy the first sounds of the day, to the chill in a large house where the fires are low, was equally hard every winter morning.

Every morning when she peered at the alarm clock by the light of the street lamp—no dawn yet—it was four o'clock. Catching her clothes under one arm, Glubb under the other, she made her way down the stairs. And if by any chance she could see from the turning a tiny gleam of the grate fire, she felt an anticipatory warmth steal over her. She always banked it carefully the night before, but the draught was too strong. Most often she found only black coals which were still too hot to touch.

But once out of bed and her duties under way, it was an easy matter to start the blaze again—to tip out the ashes, scoop them up, lay the crumpled balls of paper, then wood, cinders and soft coal. That done, a match applied and the blower adjusted, the cheerful roar began immediately. It was another noise that Glubb enjoyed.

To heat his milk and leave him ensconced in warm dryness, while she made coffee and found some breakfast for herself—these things took but little time. She was left free to snuggle her own toes against the fire and over a history or Latin book to sip her coffee. June often

thought that these early morning breakfasts with Glubb were the most tasty she had ever eaten.

Glubb was quite willing to play in the morning and leave her to her Virgil and Xenophon. And when it was time to call Adele for school and the boys, who had turned to working in the daytime, Glubb had fallen to sleep and her lessons were done.

The consciousness of virtue, the result of work well done, always carried her through the preparation for breakfast, a task which up to the arrival of Glubb had been despised and slightly accomplished.

Now it was more carefully prepared and although perhaps Dave and Dan took no notice, June herself appreciated the improvement—the smooth linen and a little pot of fern placed in the center of the table. On it, the boiled eggs, sliced oranges and toast made an attractive color scheme.

In retrospect, the school day beginning at nine and ending at two-thirty, passed quickly if the lessons were well prepared—slowly if they were not. No period stood out, save the lunch period or two study periods when June could read and chew unobtrusively on a piece of candy which was not too scrunchy, yet lasted a long time. It occasionally surprised her when she realized how little she knew of her school fellows who sat together at lunch and giggled and gossiped, or passed notes during other periods. But books, usually romances, continued to absorb her and to play more vital a part in her life than the talk of the boys and girls around her.

Then duties began again at three when she arrived home an hour earlier than Adele, who was still in grammar school. Mother Grace was glad to be relieved of Glubb. Six hours of his alternating exuberance and complainings were a strain on her nerves and two hours were always needed for her recovery. So on clear days there were long walks in the park or an exploration of side and back streets; or if it were too cold and stormy a short brisk walk. Then with red noses and cold hands, in before the fire to make chocolate with melted marshmallows on top—a treat which made Adele and June spend the afternoon in pleasant intercourse. All that remained of the day was supper which Adele helped prepare while June put Glubb to bed; and dishwashing—Adele assisted even though she did make beds and run errands after school. Dishwashing was nice on winter nights because the hot water with the opalescent tints was so comfortable to cold hands.

Best of all were the long evenings curled up on the sofa while the hands of the clock neared twelve, reading Poe, or Stevenson or Rider Haggard, any author whose imagination carried her on strange adventures; and then the hurried going to bed, up the stairs through the library, peering down into the room she had just left where things haunted the corners and the fire glowed quietly; the cold bedroom with its immense windows, rattling in the winter wind; the bed with the sheets so icy that she could never stretch out but had to curl up in a warm ball. So passed each day of her last winter at home.