

% Dorothy Day

1939, Chapter Eleven, pp. 191 - 204.

Summary: Bucolic description of the antics of Bessie the calf. Much of the chapter describes her visit to the sit-down strike in Flint, Michigan, against General Motors and their tactics. Says labor in the U.S. needs a long range program of education about cooperatives, credit unions, and a philosophy of labor. Quotes from a leaflet distributed to the men on the breadline inviting them to attend a parish mission. After a talk to a women's club in Florida she observes that the rich who deny Christ in His poor "are atheists indeed." (DDLW #446).

1

NOW that the strike is over, there is a lull in the work and a good opportunity for a few days at the farm.

The February sun is pouring into the kitchen and dining-room of the farm. The temperature is thirty—yesterday it was twelve at this time in the morning, and the house is perfectly comfortable with wood fires going in the two rooms. The rest of the house is, of course, like an ice box. We take hot bricks to bed at night. It is one of the thrills of a lifetime to feel one's warmth gradually permeating the icy sheets and one's breath making a corner warm for one's nose. A pleasure the inhabitants of steam-heated apartments can never know. A cup of hot coffee never tastes so good as when coming out of an ice cold room into a warm kitchen.

An interruption to go out in the kitchen and admire the butter. Rosie is giving about nineteen quarts of milk a day now and there is butter-making every other day. This morning it took only twenty minutes to churn and I have just finished sampling the bits off the wooden paddles of the churn. There are two quarts of buttermilk which will be used for pudding and biscuits today.

Bessie, the calf, will be three months old the 10th of February and she is still the most beautiful thing on the farm. She must weigh about 150 pounds by now, and it is the most graceful 150 pounds you ever saw. John Filliger and I took her out for a walk this morning and her walks are adventures. First you have to see that Rosie is properly secured in her stall. Once when her offspring was out she broke the rope that secured her, knocked down the barn door and with cries of anguish rushed up the hill after John and the calf. She leaped and kicked and tossed her head, expressing her fears as to her young one's safety. She doesn't want to lose this, her latest born.

This morning she mooed like a fog horn a few minutes as we took Bessie out with a chain about her neck, but otherwise she was quiet. Bessie has sprouting horns now and a set of teeth, and she is weaned, but passing through Rosie's stall, she made a dive for her. A little more breakfast wouldn't come amiss, she

indicated. But she's off milk altogether now, so we heartlessly dragged her away and out into the fields around the house.

It was a good thing it was not icy out. Snorting with enjoyment she leaped and then started to run, pulling at the chain which John had wrapped around his hand. They raced down the hill together almost to the kitchen door, and then she pulled up prancing. Her small hoofs sounded hollow on the frozen ground and she danced a few steps gracefully, tossing her head. The dogs, Paprika and Kaiser, barked with excitement, not wanting to be out of anything that goes on.

Bessie likes the small world she has come into and went around sniffing appreciatively at the wood-pile and the table under the trees where the washing is done, and she left the print of her wet nose on every rock and log. The ax and saw she smelt and tossed her head at them. Then she was off again, this time up the hill, bounding madly in the cold sweet air. She is just as clean and white as when she was born.

The four black pigs are growing stout and lusty. When John goes out to pour the skim milk into their trough they dive madly into it, feet and all. One of them is Teresa's, a present from Mr. Breen, purchased with a check from a *Commonweal* review. She can't tell the pigs apart, however, and each time she comes to the farm on a holiday she has to pick one out all over again. "It's the one with the straight tail", she will say, and then the unaccommodating pig curls his tail up scornfully.

2

Part of the House of Hospitality has moved down to Easton. As we keep explaining, our idea of hospitality means that everyone with a home should have a guest room. Two women who help us with the paper and who are interested in our ideals, have moved into tenement apartments on Mott Street and use their spare rooms for those in need of hospitality. One of the striking stewardesses is staying in one apartment, and another woman temporarily out of employment is staying with our friend in the other.

Loretta O'Donnell has two of the girls from the House of Hospitality with her; during the day they work over in the Easton office on South Fourth Street, where the business office is now. There are two babies, and two guests whom we cannot really consider guests, since they have become part of our community during these past two years.

Lying on the couch while the chestnut logs snapped warmly in the big stove, I read Kagawa's *Brotherhood Economics*, which is one of the best and simplest accounts of the co-operative movement I have come across. Peter says he links up the idea of communitarianism and co-operatives very well, and I enjoyed reading his brief account of the mutual aid movement among the early Christians and communities of monks. It is a short book, and a simple book, surveying economics from an entirely fresh angle.

3

In Flint, Michigan. St. Antonino, who was Archbishop of Florence in the fourteenth century, anticipated Marx when he said that all value depends upon labor, whether of hand or head. He was a man who was called upon to pass judgment on many of the vexed economic problems of his day.

I was thinking of St. Antonino and labor's place in the scheme of things as I came up from Cincinnati, where I had been invited to visit Archbishop McNicholas. I was thinking that, now again, industrialists, bankers, merchants and labor leaders were looking to churchmen to make pronouncements on the moral aspects of our economic problems.

It was the moral aspect of the sit-down strike that was bothering the general public and since the general public gets only what the newspapers and radio present to them, and since neither churchmen, nor the general public can climb in windows of barricaded struck plants to talk to strikers and get a picture of the situation, I had to try to get that picture.

At present writing there are thirty major strikes going on all over the country. Last month, the General Motors strike and the sit-down tactics used at Flint were headline news. A picture of one sit-down strike will be more or less representative.

Flint, Michigan, is a small town about an hour and a half north of Detroit by bus. The main streets are paved, but most of the side streets are dirt roads. The houses are, for the most part, small and poor.

The two Fisher Body plants stretch for blocks and blocks. I could not get near the Chevrolet plant, which was held by the strikers, because the National Guard, 4,000 of them, guarded the entrances of all the streets that led to that plant. At some streets machine guns were set up. At all the streets the guardsmen came at you with shining bayonets if you approached. Most of the boys were young, school boys or factory workers, many of them unorganized workers themselves.

George Torr, who had been an auto worker for ten years, was driving me around. He was a paint sprayer, and went to work at seven every morning and worked until four or five in the afternoon. He felt the effects of the paint, he said. He and his fellow workers had to stand with arms uplifted, spraying headlights on cars, and when he asked the boss to get the workers a platform so that they would not have to stand in a torturing position all day, his request was disregarded. Six weeks passed and they asked again. A third request would have cost them their jobs.

It was the speedup which bothered the men most. The workers packed tightly around the cars, with not a second off to get a drink of water or go to the toilet. It was only recently that they got five minutes off, morning and afternoon. The more money men made on the piecework plan, the more the speedup, in order to cut down the wages.

“When I get home nights, I can only eat and fall into bed,” Torr said, “Eight o’clock was my usual bedtime. Eat, sleep and work that’s all my life is.”

Torr is a young man—his mother is only 45—and he has two children, eight years old and twenty months. His job during the strike was on transportation duty, driving organizers and strikers around.

It was around 11 o’clock when we drove up to Fisher Body No. 1, where the strike started. Only one end of the long plant was occupied by the four or five hundred men. The plant stretches a long way down the street and the front is faced with a strip of lawn, but no riot fences. The whole length of the building is open, so there were strikers standing guard at every window. A wooden box had been built up as a platform at one window so that it was possible to clamber up to the window and climb in more or less as one would straddle a fence. Half a dozen guards were here to examine the visitors’ credentials. Only those newspaper reporters were allowed in who possessed Newspaper Guild cards (a new tactic with strikers who are not afraid to antagonize the press since they believe it is on the side of capital anyway).

**

The Catholic Worker is generally recognized as a labor paper, as well as a religious one. Many of the men were familiar with the paper, so it was easy to get permission to go into the plant.

Inasmuch as the sit-down strike has been used as a non-violent tactic to prevent scabs from taking the jobs of the workers’ and to prevent the employer from removing the machinery and thus depriving the worker of his right to work and earn a living, we of *The Catholic Worker* have upheld it. Objection has been made that the men wreck the plants they occupy, but I went all over the Fisher Body plant and saw no evidence of deliberate injury.

Of course the men slept on piles of upholstery and seat cushions which they made into beds, and so without doubt some materials were damaged. But the law against smoking on the main floors of the plant was upheld and the men smoked only in the cafeteria in the basement.

Another small depredation was the use the men made of a bolt of unbleached muslin from which they tore hundreds of strips to use as scarfs.

“That’s in case of tear gas attack,” Henry Van Nocker, secretary of Local 156 of the union told me. “The gas is soluble in water and the men wet the scarfs and use them so they can keep up the fight.

The men were divided into shifts and there were hundreds of them sleeping in different parts of the plant. The building being open to the street, and a warrant out for the arrest of the sit-downers, the men expected an attack at any time, and they were ready for it.

Though the sit-down strike is a non-violent tactic, the****men were ready to repel efforts to evict them, and during the forty-one days of their siege, they had

fashioned themselves clubs which hung at their belts, and there were boxes of heavy hinges and bolts ready to be used as missiles.

These were their arms, and their preparations seemed pitifully inadequate to me in view of the machine guns and riot guns of the militia and the guards of the companies.

I talked with many of the men in the plant and their determination to hold out for recognition of their union and mitigation of the speedup was unanimous. Most of them were Americans, many of them Southerners, I was interested to hear of the square dances they went in for, introduced from the South. There were not a great many Catholics among them. There were**some Hungarians, and Poles, however, and these were Catholics.

That night I attended a strike meeting in the hall of the Pengelly Building, a rickety old two-story frame block which the strikers had rented. Downstairs there was a restaurant, upstairs union offices, and above that the hall which held about a thousand workers.

The meeting had been going on from seven-thirty and now it was almost eleven. There were young and old men, women and children. There were babies in arms and little ones sitting around the edge of the platform, thrilled at being out so late. They crowded the chairs, sat on the window sills and packed the doors.

Josephine Herbst was one of the speakers, a pro-communist writer, who came to report the strike; there was Adolph Germer, organizer and officer of the United Mine Workers' Union, of which John L. Lewis is president in addition to being leader of the Committee on Industrial Organization. After the meeting broke up, small***groups remained in different parts of the hall talking and one group stayed to sing.

These were the people, these family groups, against whom the National Guard was called. I stopped in the publicity department downstairs and found Carl Haessler, one of the editors of the Federated Press in charge of the department. I had known him as a Socialist years ago and knew him to be thoroughly Marxist now in his philosophy. Students from the universities at Lansing, Michigan, and Madison, Wisconsin, were**there assisting him, getting their first taste of actual strike work.

One young fellow, blond, wide-eyed, said that he majored in philosophy. "A good foundation," I commented, "for labor work."

"Oh, do you think so?" he said eagerly. "But I didn't get any Marx and Engels in college," he added regretfully, "no real modern philosophers except the aesthetes." I asked him if he had ever heard of Gilson and Maritain, but they were only names to him. He was interested that they were teaching scholastic philosophy in Chicago University and at Harvard.

These college students regard Marxism as a philosophy of life. Haessler also taught philosophy at the University of Illinois where I had gone years ago.

My reflections as I came away from Flint had to do with the future of labor in the United States. Not only the necessity for organization but the necessity for a long range program of action, for an educational program which would deal not only with co-operatives and credit unions but also a philosophy of labor. The C.I.O. is a trade union****movement, and nobody wastes any time wondering whether John L. Lewis or John Brophy are Reds. The public in general knows that they are not. They are working to organize the industrial workers, those hitherto unorganized ones who make up the great masses of workers in this country. But what of the college students, the editors, the writers, the propagandists who take advantage of every labor struggle to get into it, inject the Marxist philosophy of life, and seek to sway the workers, and prepare them for the "final class struggle"?

Communism is a way of life and it is as a philosophy of life that it must be met. There was plenty of Communist literature, such as the *Daily Worker* and the *New Masses*, sold not only at the union headquarters, but also sent into the struck plants for the sit-downers to read and ponder over during the forty-one days they had interned themselves.

We point the need to Catholic students, not only of philosophy, but of journalism and of history, and of going to volunteer as apostles of labor and taking advantage as the Communist does of the opportunities each strike offers to reach the masses, to learn from them and to teach them.

4

Mott Street. There's no time now to have conversation with the men who come in for coffee and bread and cheese with us in the morning from six to nine. The store is packed full, the line extends down the block almost to Canal Street. They stand there in the rain and cold sometimes for half an hour before they reach the store.

This month there was a mission over on Baxter Street and we closed the store from nine to nine forty-five so that those who wished to, could go to Mass. Sometimes there were seventy-five who went and sometimes only twenty. "You can't preach the Gospel to men with empty stomachs," Abbe Lugan said.

We put out a little leaflet to distribute to the men. We said:

"We are not running this coffee line like a mission. We have no religious services. We are just trying to give you hot coffee and something to eat every morning. We hope you all will take copies of *The Catholic Worker* and read it and find out what we are trying to do here and in other cities where we have groups working.

"Naturally, we would like to have you get to Mass and make the Mission, those of you who are Catholics, and who might like to get to church for half an hour or so every morning this week. We'd like to urge those who are not Catholics to go, too.

"We want you to go because Christ, our Brother, is present there in the Blessed Sacrament. Christ Himself was a Worker, while He lived here on earth. St. Joseph, to whose care He was confided while on this earth, was a poor carpenter. They always lived in poverty, and Our Lord said of Himself:

"'The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air their nests, but The Son of Man has no place to lay his head.'

"Our Lord has a special love for each one of you, and they say that He is always more ready to give than we are to receive. So we do feel that we should urge you to go over to the church on Baxter Street, just to be in His Presence for a little while each morning.

"We want to ask you, too, to please pray for us all, and ask St. Joseph to continue his help, which makes our coffee line possible."

around the first of December when the line was just beginning, I remember one conversation a group of us had while we were having breakfast. It was a Sunday morning after Mass and the line had thinned down. There were a steeplejack, a sand-hog, a carpenter, a restaurant worker, and a mechanic talking and the subject was our industrial civilization, the machine and unemployment, the land and co-operatives. The wage system can be discussed thus with the unemployed, although you get only a half dozen or so at a time. Still, those you do reach, go out and talk to others. One of them spoke of large scale farming. He had picked cotton in the southwest at one cent a pound. You had to feed yourself, too. In the wheat fields it used to be seven dollars a day and board and now it is two dollars a day and feed yourself. jobs are hard to get in the southwest now because of Japanese and Mexican labor, and the labor of all those migrating from the dust-bowl area.

5

I find a little paragraph in my note book, "Michael Martin, porter, idle for five years, brought in \$2."

It was a thanksgiving offering, he explained, and he wanted to give it to some of our children in honor of his daughter in Ireland.

And I remembered how I spoke down in Palm Beach last month before the Four Arts Club, on the invitation of a convert. They told me, when I had finished, "You know we never pay speakers," and another woman said, with a tremor, "Miss Day, I hope you can convey to your readers and listeners, that we would give our very souls to help the poor, if we saw any constructive way of doing it," and still another told me, "The workers come to my husband's mill and beg him with tears in their eyes to save them from unions. I hope you don't mind my saying so, but I think you are all wrong when it comes to unions."

They all were deeply moved, they told me, by the picture of conditions in Arkansas and the steel districts and the coal mining districts, but, "You can't

do anything with them, you know, these poor people. It seems to me the best remedy is birth control and sterilization.”

We are told always to keep a just attitude toward the rich, and we try. But as I thought of our breakfast line, our crowded house with people sleeping on the floor, when I thought of cold tenement apartments around us, and the lean gaunt faces of the men who come to us for help, desperation in their eyes, it was impossible not to hate, with a hearty hatred and with a strong anger, the injustices of this world.

St. Thomas says that anger is not a sin, provided there is no undue desire for revenge. We want no revolution, we want the brotherhood of men. We want men to love one another. We want all men to have sufficient for their needs. But when we meet people who deny Christ in His poor, we feel, “Here are atheists indeed.”

At the same time that I put down these melancholy thoughts, I am thinking of Michael Martin, porter, and the hosts of readers and friends *The Catholic Worker* has who have spread the work far and wide, who not only help us to keep the coffee line going, but who on their***own account are performing countless works of mercy. And my heart swells with love and gratitude to the great mass of human beings who are one with their fellows, who love Our Lord and try to serve Him and show their love to His poor.

Our pastor said recently that sixty million of our one hundred and thirty million here in the United States professed no religion, and I thought with grief that it was the fault of those professing Christians who repelled the others. They turned first from Christ crucified because He was a poor worker, buffeted and spat upon and beaten. And now—strange thought—the devil has so maneuvered that the people turn from Him because those who profess Him are clothed in soft raiment and sit at well-spread tables and deny the poor.