The Eleventh Virgin

Dorothy Day

Part One, Chapter 3

It was a gloomy Sunday. The Henreddy family had just finished dinner and Sunday dinner was a dark spot in the uniformly grey week. Mr. Henreddy must hate his children, June often thought. As long as she could remember, the only time they ever sat at the table with him was on Sunday at the midday meal. Even when the boys had started to work nights as telegraphers, getting up at ten when he also arose, he would not eat breakfast with them but insisted that Mother Grace serve his meals separately. He wished, twenty meals a week, to eat with Mother Grace alone. If he wanted to read in the parlor, he sent his sons and daughters into the dining-room, although they were no longer prattling children. It didn't matter if the dining-room fire was out and the room cold and draughty. They had to allow him "to read in peace."

Sunday noon, however, he insisted on a family meal. No engagement was important enough to keep anyone away. It was a solemn institution in the family life.

None spoke; all ate in gloomy silence. They could hear each other swallow and the strain to eat quietly was so great that by the time the dessert was brought on, appetites had fled.

June used to sit and look at her father eating in this curious, abject way and feel sorry for him. Did he feel as shy and embarrassed and miserable as they did? She was sure of it, and her self-consciousness and resultant anger relaxed and she gulped less. At moments like these she felt a curious sympathy for him. She suddenly realized that she and her father looked very much alike—their eyes and the shape of their mouths. The same blood ran in their veins and probably the same feelings in their hearts.

All father wanted was mother, and here was a group of children sitting around the table, restrained and uncomfortable. Where did they all come from? They were his. Well, he had performed a family duty by dining with them on Sunday . . . His meals for a week hence would be with mother . . . Damn it! He always wanted to be alone with her, and here were five children come between them . . .

These, it seemed to June, must have been his thoughts.

Adele and June found it unpleasant duty after dinner to wash the dishes. They could not sing while they worked as they usually did, because Mr. Henreddy would send Mother Grace out to silence them.

While Adele cleared the table, June piled the dishes in neat stacks in the kitchen. And sometimes they forgot to maintain their enforced silence and as soon as the doors were closed between the two rooms, they burst into soft song.

One hymn was June's favorite:

"In that cou-untry—

To which I jour-er-ny

My Redeemer, my Redeemer

Is its King.

There is no sorrow

Nor any si-ighing

Nor any tears there,

Nor any cry-y-ing.

I'm a pilgrim,

I'm a stra-anger,

I can tarry, I can tarry

But an hour."

"Huh," Adele said. "Feeling religious?"

"Is that a nice way to talk?"

"Just because you went to church this morning, you get holy!"

"Jesus, Lover of my soul,

Let me to Thy bosom fly—"

"Hypercrite! Singing songs like that when you're in love with a married man." It seemed Adele had been reading her sister's diary.

"You're a liar," June told her trembling.

" 'He who calleth his brother or sister a fool or a liar is in danger of hell fire.' " It was her turn.

"Now don't *you* get holy. Besides you're quoting wrong."

"I'm not trying to be holy. You're the one. You're always pretending to mother that you've got religion. You're always spouting the Bible to the boys and me. I don't pretend to be religious the way you do." All this with a self-righteous air, in spite of which June felt that she was right.

After that fervent summer, fall had come drearily. Lessons were dull and unprofitable, and although for a time the Virgil class was made interesting by a boy in the next row whose Irish eyes were blue-lidded and strangely appealing, that charm faded soon. For he came to school one day with his hair cut too short and the visible scalp off-set the appeal of his eyelids.

There were no teachers offering opportunities for distant worship and, at first, no girl in the class sufficiently attractive to write notes to.

Then a new boy appeared in the choir of the little church and offered a sufficient reason for being baptized and confirmed, taking communion and attending church regularly.

It was a fragile and ephemeral attachment, hardly enduring till Monday morning. But part of its charm lay in its contrast to the fervid emotions of the summer, and the boy's ascetic and rather tubercular face gave to the music a sad charm.

June read the Bible with interest, but exaltation was obtained only through the sermons of Wesley and the little books of Jonathan Edwards and Thomas á Kempis. The Church of England prayer book had a quaintness and beauty about it. Diligent translation of a Greek New Testament, attractively dog-eared and ancient (one hundred and fifty years old) and picked up in a second-hand book-shop for ten cents, served, if not to increase her religious zeal, to gain for her a high mark in Greek for the term.

Then came Henrietta, June's first intimate friend. Her sincere and wholesomely cheerful piety gave a vigor to religion which it had lacked before, and also provided reasons for scrubbing the bathroom, say, Wednesday instead of putting it off till Thursday; reasons for not slapping Adele; reasons for looking for happiness in life instead of rebelling against it.

Though it is true Henrietta's attitude toward life was self-conscious and she dramatized her sins and her virtues, her emotions were far more healthy than those of June. Her mother and two older sisters shared her religious convictions. They went to church together, sang hymns together, visited hospitals, and strove to outdo each other in self-sacrifice to help needy neighbors and friends.

On the other hand, June's family, although really no more self-centered than Henrietta's, was entirely worldly.

On three occasions, to June's remembrance and to her mother's despair, Mr. Henreddy had brought home friends who needed help—once a broken-down newspaper man, then an actor and his wife, and finally one poor wreck who had just served a few years in the penitentiary (for being a "promoter" June gathered) and kept them for visits of weeks at a time.

Mother Grace, in spite of occasional bitter asides to June that charity began at home and that she was tired of skimping and saving and going without things—always kept her delightful air of pleased hostess.

Mr. Henreddy and Mother Grace had no Christ-like attitude about such things. One came across an old friend, or a friend of an old friend in distress, and it was a matter of course to help him out.

June had little consciousness either of these guests of her parents' magnanimity. They ate their meals with Mr. Henreddy and Mother Grace and were away all day just as Mr. Henreddy was. They were looking for "openings."

So naturally June's religion took a morbid and secretive tinge. Because of it she was scoffed at by her brothers and Adele. Mother Grace had no sympathy with church-going, regarding it as an easy way of avoiding the elaborate preparation of the formal Sunday meal, and rather a disagreeable pose on the part of June. Of course it was a pose. June would admit it. But didn't everyone have poses, and why was one more objectionable than another?

There was another aspect of her religion which June caught a glimpse of once after long and consecutive thought on the subject. She had been reading of early Christian saints and took note of the fact that most of them indulged in trances. Not that she put it that way. It was hours of meditation, fasting, prayer and vigil, on which emphasis was laid, not only in the lives of the saints, but in the exhortations of á Kempis, and Wesley. And it occurred to June that some English poet had tried to induce the same ecstasy, according to some essay she had read, by sitting on a hilltop and trying either to think of nothing or to concentrate on a bluebell (she could not remember which). But she did remember that the poet quoted Indian philosophers as inspiration to his endeavor. Further reading discovered to her sages sitting on the banks of streams, grass growing from their toes, baked and wedged and stiffened into a perpetual pose, by the sun, the wind and the rain.

(With no early knowledge of Indian philosophers, had not June and Adele tried to outdo each other in seeing who could pray the longest, and had not stubbornness and cramp given way to a drowsy pleasure and feeling of blessedness—which was dispelled when they awoke hours later still and cold?)

It was after long ruminations to the above effect that June, startled, had a sudden thought, as she lay in bed one night.

"It's all because we are too small to know how to be happy. Some people take whiskey to be happy—father usually has the smell of it about him, and then there are Mother Grace's highballs when she's feeling low. It's because they want to escape from reality. Religion, or whiskey, or dope . . .

"I suppose I'm always worrying about my unhappiness because I'm introspective." (It was a new word to June and she liked it.) "To be happy you've got to be retrospective and quit worrying about your relation to things.

"Somehow, I believe that Fabre is happy." With this sudden leap from the general to the specific, she fell asleep.

And then, with the coming of Henrietta, she forgot about her conclusions, and religion became more of a pose than ever.

That Sunday afternoon, by the time the dishes were washed and dried and put away, and Adele had brushed out the dining-room to equalize her share of the work with that of June who had the pots and pans to wash and dry, June was looking forward with pleasurable anticipation to her Sunday religious letter to Henrietta which the two girls had pledged themselves to write.

She had forgotten about Adele and her accusations and smooth sounding phrases were rolling in the mind when Adele burst out.

"I don't care, I want some fudge! Mother Grace always makes the Sunday desserts for father, regardless of what *we* like, so I don't see why we can't make fudge."

"If we ask her, she'll just say no. She can't say yes in front of father. He'd just begin to talk about pampering."

June finished the last pan and stood considering. Fudge was extremely desirable that stormy afternoon.

"There's two doors in between the kitchen and the library, so I don't see how she can smell it," she declared. "Let's make it anyway!"

With great daring, they started to make the candy, extravagantly using two cups of sugar. This was one of the periods of skimp and save in the Henreddy household. After it had boiled for a few minutes, and the smell began to permeate the house and fill the girls with apprehension, Mother Grace came out, clad in the loose, yet tidy negligee which she affected around the house, and asked them coldly what they were doing. She seemed, on Sundays and the mornings Mr. Henreddy was home, infected by his formal attitude towards his offspring; or perhaps she was afraid of incurring his wrath against her and them, by her usual show of affection. (For instance, if she drew Dan's bath for him in the morning, she was accused of spoiling her son, and Dan, in turn, was accused of being spoiled and selfish).

"Making fudge," June answered her, rather brazenly, considering her usual Sunday piety. "We didn't like the dessert we had for dinner anyway, and we wanted something sweet."

Mother Grace surveyed them with the stony look of displeasure in her eyes which the girls detested. "You can stop making that candy right now and go upstairs to your room." And with that she sailed away, leaving a faint odor of lavender and violets behind her.

Adele and June looked at each other blankly. Whenever things went smoothly in the house they were inclined to quarrel. But whenever Mother Grace leagued herself against them on the side of Mr. Henreddy they immediately were drawn together.

As soon as she left the room, they took as much of the soft candy as they could carry on a plate and went upstairs.

The grate fire was burning downstairs, and it was warm and cozy there. The bedroom was cold and there was nothing to read but the Bible. The soft candy

would have been good and comforting if Mother Grace had allowed them to finish it. June's writing materials were in the room, however, and her diary in which she had continued to write all winter.

Curling up in her bathrobe by the window, she began her letter to Henrietta. Adele took the Bible and the plate of fudge and crouched against the pillows on the bed.

"We went to the amusement park Friday after school," the letter began, "and Adele and I went on every ride. We each had fifty cents and it was with regret that I saw the money go. It seemed a shameless waste, but then I realized that there was more for God's children and it will come to them when they need it. 'Be careful for nothing.' 'Take no thought for the morrow.' So I just spent it with the others and enjoyed myself very much. Today Dan gave me fifty cents to go downtown with. I shall go to the library and the second-hand book-store, some day next week after school.

"Yesterday afternoon I rode home on the lake boat from downtown and afterwards had to take the baby to the park. Glubb was sweet and good and the sky was dark, deep blue, all flecked with purplish clouds. The trees were rustling and the sun flickered on my book. I was happy, but not in the right way. I did not have the spiritual happiness that I crave, only a wicked thrilly feeling at my heart . . .

"But I couldn't give way to my sinful thoughts because Glubb yelled for candy, soda, sandwich, and to see the animals and my thoughts were taken away from myself. It's a good thing. Such a foolish unhappiness and such foolish pining. I forgot all about 'Bog's silent messengers, the winged thoughts of love,' and just wanted to think of my troubles. How weak I am! My pride forbids me to write this and to put it down on paper makes me blush, but all the old love comes back to me. It is a lust of the flesh and I know that unless I forsake all sin, I will not gain the kingdom of heaven."

(June had confessed her summer passion to her friend and was the recipient of similar confidences.)

"Adele and I have been following an exciting serial in the movies and father usually lets us go on Sunday afternoon, but not any other time during the week. My ideas have changed about Sunday. I have learned that it is rather hypocritical to be so strict on the Sabbath and not on every other day. Every day belongs to God and every day we are to serve him, doing his pleasure. And as 'every good thing is prepared for them that love God' and my moving pictures are a good thing, if you stop to think of the educational advantages of them, therefore I can see no wrong in going to the show and pleasing Adele (for she cannot go alone) and incidentally myself.

"This afternoon it took two hours to do the dishes and now that they're done I suppose I'll have to take the baby for a long walk in the park. How I love the park in winter! So solitary and awful in the truest meaning of the word. God is there. Of course He is everywhere, but under the trees and looking over the

wide expanse of lake, He communicates himself to me and fills me with a deep quiet peace. I need those hours alone in the afternoon with Glubb, and I feel as though the troubles of life are lifted until I return to the house and it comes back to me.

"Maybe if I stayed out more and kept away from the books I am reading this restlessness would pass. Last night I sat up late over Dostoievsky and today my soul is like lead. During the last few weeks I've read all of Ibsen but he doesn't make me sad. His plays are less depressing and the unhappiness that comes afterward is nothing more than a pleasant melancholy.

"I am sitting in my bedroom in my comfortable chair by the window. The wind is cold and seeps in through the glass so that I have to wrap my bathrobe about me while I write. I should be reading my Bible because it is Sunday afternoon, but I don't want to. I'd rather write. I'm still in 'Acts.' I never went over it so thoroughly before and now I find much more in it. Isn't it queer how the same verse will strike you at different times? 'We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.' How true that is! Only after a hard, bitter struggle with sin and only after we have overcome it, do we experience blessed joy and peace. The tears come to my eyes when I think how often I have gone through the bitter struggles and then succumbed to some small sin while peace was in sight. And after I fell, how far away it fled. Poor weak creatures we are, yet God is our Father and God is love, ever-present, ready to enfold us and comfort us and hold us up."

June paused here having reached a climax of righteousness and looked at Adele apprehensively. She didn't care to have her sister read over her shoulder or jump suddenly and snatch what she had been writing as she sometimes did. Gripping the paper tightly, June went on.

"I have so much work to do to overcome my sins. I am working always—always on guard, praying without ceasing to overcome all physical sensations and be purely spiritual.

"It is wrong to think so much about human love. All those feeling and craving that come to us are sexual desires. We are prone to have them at this age, I suppose. But I think that they are impure. It is sensual and God is spiritual. We must harden ourselves to these feelings, for God is love and God is all, so the only love is of God and is spiritual without taint of earthliness. I am afraid I have never really experienced this love or I would never desire the sensual love or the thrill that comes with the meeting of lips.

"I know it seems foolish to try to be so Christ-like—but God says we can—why else His command, 'Be ye therefore perfect.'

"Oh, it surely is a continual strife and my spirit is weary."

Finger cramp at this point put a check to the enthusiasm of self-expression, and June paused to survey a line of roofs whose dirty covering of snow was being

replaced by a blue-white layer of fresh flakes, sifting slowly from a soft sky which hung low over the houses.

As she watched the scene, a desolate one and lifeless, as it seems the backs of houses always are on Sunday afternoons—lifeless save for the animation of the falling snow, June reflected how dingy is the back-yard aspect of things. Dimly, for she wasn't able to reason about all her feelings as she had tried to do in figuring out the need for religion, she felt that her attitude in the letter to Henrietta was a back-yard and dingy attitude, strangely lacking in beauty.

She could not have put it in words, but she realized that the conviction of sin which is so vital a part of religious feeling, was ignoble, and that it was far worse to spend an hour on one's knees in contemplation and repentance of one moment's [text missing] her, for instance) than there was in that moment, which had to the girl's budding womanhood the aesthetic value of a symphony or a beautiful poem.

What June could have put in words and what she did think was that it was really better for the soul to bask in the sun on a warm spring day, or walk in a snowy park when the twilight made deep blue shadows behind the trees, or to read beautiful poetry than to go to church.

And when she thought of poetry she thought of Swinburne's "Tristram" which she had been reading and which was hidden back of the bookcase for safe keeping.

With the thought she picked up her diary and defiantly wrote:

"I should like to lie on the grass in the woods with a lover all night just like Tristram and Iseult. And I expect Adele feels the same way, so if she snoops for my diary and reads this, I don't care. And I know she was in love all last summer, just as I was, otherwise why did she suddenly stop writing a diary after keeping one for two years, and then start again in the fall, unless she was afraid I'd find out about it?"

This protest against suppressions, suppressions which led only to an increase in her desire for beauty and excitement, satisfied her far more than her previous attempt at self-expression.

And so content both with the plate of fudge which she and Adele had consumed and with the temporary solution of her problems, she jumped up briskly.

"Come on, Adele," she said, "I'm sick and tired of religion. I promise not to lecture you any more, nor make you go to Wednesday night prayer-meetings. I'm going to the movies down the street and we've got to climb out the window over the shed. I begged the money from Dave. Mother'd have a fit rather than let us go. Glubb is so cranky to-day she'll want us to take care of him when he wakes up from his nap. Wanna come?"

Adele hesitated a moment. Then she came over and hugged June tightly. "I'm glad you're through with it. If you really meant it, it would have been all right,

but you were playing a game and it made me so mad, we could only fight. Come on, let's go. What do we care if we get a scolding when we get back?"