

The Eleventh Virgin

Part III, Chapter II =====

By Dorothy Day

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CHAPTER II.

"How many times have you fallen in love?" June asked her sister suddenly. The two of them were walking slowly from the wards to the nurses' home. It was eight o'clock and very dark and still in the big park which surrounded the hospital. They came to one of the old ladies' benches and sat down. It was a dim spot. June felt that she could phrase the tumult within her in the properly ridiculous phrases and not betray herself. Walking a little further they would have to enter the glaring hall of the nurses' home and Adele's sharp eyes could see that her face was flushed and her hands unsteady.

"Just three times," Adele told her. "You know, I told you about that boy when I was thirteen and then when I was fourteen and then again just a year ago."

"I've heard you hint about that last 'affair'," June commented. "But if you're perfectly frank with me, I'll be perfectly frank with you. I want your advice."

"Not my advice. You probably just want to get something off your chest."

"Well, leave it that way, then. Anyway, did you always fall in love at first sight?"

"Of course."

"It seems so impossible to do a thing like that when you think of it coldly and soberly, but I've gone and done it."

"Oh, June! Who!" And Adele squeezed her sister's arm.

June disregarded her question and went on. "It seems so unreasonable. If you grew up with a person or had known him for a long time and suddenly began to realize that you wanted to kiss his eyelids, there might be some sense in it. There'd be something in back of an insane desire like that. But to see a man for the first time and want to—I'm actually ashamed of myself."

"Yes, I can see how foolish it seems. You wouldn't be a bit surprised if you had fallen in love with Hugh Brace or Daniel or Kenneth. Just casually fallen in love while you were living there all summer with them."

"Sure," June agreed. "And then in a case like that I shouldn't have had the slightest hesitation about kissing them. But wouldn't they have been surprised," she chortled, "if I announced suddenly, 'oh, by the way, when I woke up this morning I discovered that I was in love with you. It must have been growing on me.'"

"I don't believe that it does just grow on you," Adele said stoutly. "I think it always comes suddenly. As soon as you see the man, you know right away. Why, when I saw King walking down the street with Ann (fortunately it was a girl I knew) I realized immediately I was in love. Of course it's hopeless but it's nice being in love anyway . . . All three of them had amber eyes," she ended incoherently.

"It seems ridiculous, but I can't laugh about it. Do you know what it was that made me fall in love right away, Adele? It was this man's broken nose. It looked just exactly like Amenemhat's. You know how his is broken, sort of hacked off so that it looks as though it were pushed to one side. I told him right away that he looked like Amenemhat III, and he said, 'who in hell is he?' and then he apologized and asked me if I would have my eggs scrambled or poached."

"You don't mean to say that you've fallen in love with a patient! Was he delirious?"

"No, of course not a patient. He was a kitchen man in ward seventy-two and now he's an orderly."

As long as June's was what Adele would term a hopeless passion, she could not feel shocked. But as the weeks passed and she noticed the look of suppressed excitement in her sister's eyes, she felt that she had to take it more seriously. Especially when she learned more about Dick Wemys.

He was not an ordinary orderly although you could hardly use that adjective in connection with any of the orderlies of the Central Hospital. A good many of them were formerly professional men, doctors and lawyers, college graduates who had never fitted themselves for any work and drank steadily until they found themselves in the city hospital either with some illness or with delirium tremens. If, after they had recovered, they were offered some position in the hospital, they usually took it. The pay was good, and so was the food. Their quarters were almost as comfortable as those of the nurses. Moreover, they were out of the way of temptation. It was generally understood that once a month they would disappear with their pay envelopes, but they usually returned two days later, yellow about the eyes and anxious to be taken back. And since intelligent orderlies were scarce, they were allowed to return to work without comment.

June was glad to assure her sister that Dick Wemys had not been brought into the hospital with delirium tremens. He had been working as a camera man with a moving picture outfit in Caracas and had worked his passage on a freighter back to New York in order to save money.

"I always flattered myself that I was hard-boiled enough to take care of myself," he told June, "but the trick those dirty Mexican sailors pulled on me was the simplest ever. Dropped into a saloon with them on Furman Street and didn't know a thing until I came to in the hospital here a week afterward. An overdose of knock-out drops, and they took all my money. As if that wasn't enough, they chucked me under an archway at the foot of Montague Street and left me to freeze to death. Unfortunately I didn't have but a few glasses of liquor in me so I got pneumonia.

"This job isn't so bad and I want to save enough to get out to the harvest fields. That's the life for you. I usually get out there every summer and wander from state to state with the harvest, ending up in Canada. Lumber camps are all right, too. Then you can winter in Seattle or down in Frisco. Either loaf or find a newspaper job. I was woman's editor of a Frisco paper several winters ago."

The strange wooing began immediately, of course. Dick Wemys was that sort of a man. He wouldn't have remained in the hospital if it hadn't been for June. It was another adventure for him, but he would not have enjoyed it if he had not

had June to enjoy it with. And the fact that it was another adventure for her, too, made it easier. Adventurous souls were rare, he argued. People liked to regard something that just happened to them, and which took an hour or so to happen, as an adventure. Real adventurers were those that could enjoy a long drawn out adventure, one that entailed hard work and days of depression as well as those uplifted moments that come so seldom and are remembered ever after. You have to get outside yourself June agreed—stand afar off and watch yourself running up and down the ward with glasses of egg nogg, tying patients in bed, undressing filthy longshoremen, watch yourself being scolded at by head nurses and superintendents or nurses who always insisted upon your doing the most unnecessary things at the most critical moments when it seemed absolutely essential to do something else. Dick had to share all this with June now.

There was the incident of the dirty feet, not so indelicate as it sounds. Dr. Weiss, that tiddy-nosed old flitterbottom as June called him, was examining a patient with rheumatism in his ankles. He was the sort of doctor who always insisted that the head nurse accompany him on his rounds. No ordinary blue and white striped nurse would do. And he not only needed a white gowned nurse, he needed an orderly to wheel around a dressing tray. He just had to have it. It added to his importance.

The man with rheumatism in his ankles had been a sailor all his life, used to scuffing about the docks barefooted, and the feet in their uniform brownness, thick and calloused on the soles, stubbled as to toe nails, did not correspond in whiteness with his thighs. There was tar on them too, but as June protested, if she stopped to scrape the tar from the feet of the sailors who came into ward seventy-two they would have to do without not only their medicines but their egg noggs.

Dr. Weiss came to the old sailor and the head nurse drew the immaculate bed linen from his feet. The movement was delicate. You could almost see the little finger of her hand upturned. She handled the sheets as Miss Daly had handled the bones in the anatomy class. The whiteness of the sheets and the smallness of her hands accentuated the grotesqueness of the huge wide-spread toes which were exposed.

The doctor turned away in disgust."Did he just enter the hospital this morning?" He looked at the patient's chart. "No, he has been here a week. I shall examine him another time."

"Miss Henreddy!" It was the prim voice of the head nurse. "I shall examine the feet of every patient in the ward at eight o'clock tomorrow morning."

Behind her back, Dick and June exchanged glances.

It was a day during the influenza epidemic when patients were brought in one after another on stretchers, and died very often before they could be put to bed and had to be carried away again.

"Believe me, those sailors won't thank you for getting the callouses off their feet," Dick laughed afterward. But nevertheless at six that evening when there was no danger of an inspection from head nurses, he and June informed the ward of what was before it.

"I'm taking charge of this," Dick said briskly. And the patients who liked June

and helped her whenever they could, offered their cooperation. In a minute, the two huge bath tubs at the end of the ward were full of warm water and liquid green soap, and all those patients who were able to walk or be assisted, tottered to the end of the ward and sat in a circle around the edge of the tubs. The job was taken hilariously and finished in an hour.

There was danger in it of course. Not two days before, one of the patients had taken advantage of the nurse's absence to try to get out of bed to reach the lavatory and had dropped dead. Weakness of the heart was common in the influenza wards. But Dick claimed that the patients were so fond of June that they would risk dropping dead to save her trouble and that their mentally agreeable state would prevent any such disaster happening.

Mr. Liscinderella was another hard customer. He was brought in on a busy morning, raving fiercely and demanding liquor. June and Dick wrestled with him, strapping him into bed but their combined strength was hardly enough. He broke away from them again and again. Dick snarled at him viciously and June used the conciliatory tones proper to a nurse. Perhaps the two treatments neutralized each other. At any rate, it was a full hour before he was properly restrained. Several times June approached him with a hypodermic full of morphine which the doctor had ordered. But each time he leaped under the touch of her hand and either broke the needle or separated it from its glass cylinder.

"I know it doesn't hurt him," June said. "The first time I ever gave a hypo I know my hand trembled so that I must have bungled the job. After that I gave myself one with sterile water and as you don't mind pain inflicted by yourself, my hand didn't tremble at all and I couldn't even feel the needle going in. All you have to do is keep a supply of fresh, sharp needles. Seeing as we have to buy our own, some of the nurses are stingy about it and use the same ones over and over."

But even the morphine when it was finally administered failed to soothe the delirious man. In the middle of the afternoon he wrenched loose the sheet from around his shoulders and sat up in bed suddenly.

"Line up, everybody," he called out. "My treat." And one feeble longshoreman from the other side wandered vaguely into the middle of the ward with his nightshirt flapping around him and died upon being put back into bed.

It was only when an interne ordered whiskey three times a day for Liscinderella that he subsided and the ward again became quiet.

There was a sort of ghastly excitement and joy in the ward among the convalescing patients when the sicker ones were obstreperous.

"Gee, ain't this a hell house," June heard one of them remark complacently. "You'd think the old black bottle was being passed around." For the legend that hospitals did away with superfluous patients by draughts from the black bottle was still current among the lowest of the lower classes.

They rather enjoyed believing it.

It was an exciting play that they were all taking part in. It was a battle in which one grim spirit passed by, casting a spell over some and shrieking through their mouths obscenities on life.

June and Dick were the only healthy young things in the entire ward. As long as some of the patients could help the nurse by washing their own faces and keeping their beds smoothed and the tables cleared by their sides, they felt that they partook of a little of her energetic health. They could watch the struggle going on in the long room with a grim humor.

On one occasion when the ward slept and June was off duty, a delirious patient who had been so quiet that it had not seemed necessary to fasten him in bed with restraining sheets, quietly got up, tied his blanket around his waist to hide his bare legs and sneaked down the stairs and away.

June came on the ward at seven to find the night nurse weeping hysterically. "You can't turn your back to feed one patient his medicine without another getting into some devilment. Now I'll be kicked out."

Dick took part in the search. Patients had been known to have escaped to the roof, to the benches in the park around the hospital buildings. This one was not to be found on the grounds. It wasn't until noon that he was discovered, minus the blanket, sitting on the curbing of a street that ran through two deserted lots, holding an imaginary fishing pole and pointing to what he thought was a trout in a large puddle before him. The short nightshirt was open down the back and disclosed a long curved spinal column and shoulder blades which, Dick said, seemed to flap as he flung his line. His toes were meditatively wriggling in the dirt of the gutter.

Dick was triumphant as he brought him in and June was triumphant that she kept him alive all that day. He continued to live too, and was the admiration of the other patients in the ward when they heard of his nocturnal wanderings.

It was these things which drew Dick and June closer together. They looked on the work with the same eyes and the same clear-headed enthusiasm. Other long winter afternoons when the ward was quiet and no patients were ill enough to demand continual attention, they shared a feeling of languorous tiredness. They seemed to have wandered through a nightmare hand in hand, to have passed through it into a half stupor. June felt the sensuousness of her mood even before Dick voiced it.

"Two lines of a poem have been running through my head these last few days," he told her while they were making egg noggs in the kitchen:

*"Here, where the world is quiet,
Here, where all trouble seems
Dead winds' and spent waves' riot
In doubtful dreams of dreams."*

"After the strain we've been through this last month everything seems the shadow of a dream."

And because they both were so tired, and it was the quietest time of the afternoon when no one was stirring in the ward, she leaned against him with her head on his shoulder and they rested that way a few moments.

"You tempt me," he told her one time. (It was a month later.) "You are a most intoxicating temptation. And who was it that said that temptations were made to be succumbed to?"

Neither of them could remember, but they were sure that it was a poet. (A year

later he thought he remembered and woke her up in the night to tell her that it was Oscar Wilde.)

But they weren't thinking much in terms of poetry those early days. June was too desperately determined that he shouldn't go away from her as he kept saying he would. He gave himself three months to stay in the hospital. June gave him three months in which to seduce her.

"I've got to have you," she told him. "I love you. I do love you. It's a fatal passion." She smiled, but her lips were trembling.

"You should wait for some nice young man who will marry you and buy you a rubber plant and give you babies."

"I don't give a damn about marriage. And you only talk about nice young men and rubber plants because you really want me, even though you don't want to marry me."

"Better look out! You'll persuade me yet," he laughed at her. And then, "But you know you love babies. And if you had one I'd leave you."

"I don't want anyone but you," June protested stubbornly. "When women are really in love they don't want babies. They only want them when they aren't satisfied with the man they have and feel the need of something else. Or if they are jealous. Then they could feel, I suppose, that they were bringing another edition of their lovers into the world—an edition that wouldn't stay out late nights and neglect them."

"But I should never be satisfied with a substitute. I'll take what I can get out of you and if I can't get enough of you I suppose I shall just have to break my heart over it. I wouldn't compromise . . ."

"But it just seems as though a hunger were gnawing at me continually. And I know what it is like to be hungry too. One doesn't forget days like those I spent down in jail in Washington. It's a continual pain."

"You ungrateful little wretch, you. After the wonderful breakfasts I've given you on the ward—and which I've seen you eat."

"Oh, I can eat your breakfasts all right. I eat with the same appetite. I can't say that I'm unhappy during the day. I'm too excited to be unhappy, when I can see you a good part of the time. It's at night that I suffer so. I sleep, of course I sleep. I'm exhausted when I go off the ward at night. But I dream of you all the time. I don't need to be a psychoanalyst either, to know what the dreams mean."

"Last night I was dreaming of the docks—it wasn't the East Side docks. I know them pretty well. It was in Brooklyn and the surroundings were strange to me. It must have been down around Furman Street you've told me about. I was sitting on the edge of a pier with you. We were throwing daggers at each other and we were only a couple of yards apart so they always hit. We played leisurely as though it was a game. It was a hideous game. I kept trying not to start so as not to show that I was hit."

"My poor darling," the words were playful but his arms around her were tender and there was passion in the touch of his lips on her face and neck.

"I am becoming a common little slut," June maintained. "I slink out at night without telling anyone where I am going and meet you on deserted streets,

and we have so little time together that I catch myself scheming. Scheming to get you into back rooms of saloons—desolate, out of the way saloons, where the bartenders are always sleepy and there are never any customers so that I can look at you and you make love to me. Can't coordinate when you put your arm around me on the street,—my knees wobble and I step on your feet."

"You do seem to be strangely clumsy," he mused. "And to think I fell in love with you because you held your hands like Mrs. Vernon Castle!"

"Oh dearest, you can say nice things!"

"Yes, I want to become sentimental when you put your hand on my face. They are luring. I want to quote Laurence Hope."

"You should, if you want to. I'd love it."

"That's my weakness—sentiment. I could quote reams of poetry to you but I always stop myself in time."

"No," and she liked to argue with him. "You are an accomplished flirt. You merely suggest a sentiment. But you are hard. I fell in love with you because you are hard."

"It was my broken nose"—in mock disappointment. "It was because I looked like the chipped and degenerate statue of Amenemhat."

"That's true, but he was hard. He looks as though he were above the weakness of falling in love. He was probably skilful in his love-making and he victimized women. Women love to be victims." But Dick maintained she was basing her knowledge on an O. Henry story. "Women don't mind being beaten. They'll endure anything as long as they can persuade the man that he has the upper hand and they know all the while that they get their own way in the end. It's true that Mrs. O'Grady or whatever her name was, was the envy of Mrs. Sullivan. But that was because although Mr. O'Grady beat up his wife periodically, she was always the winner. Didn't he take her to Coney Island and buy her presents? Whereas Mr. Sullivan didn't beat his wife and didn't take her out or buy her anything. That's why she tried to make him beat her."

"I'll have to give you Schopenhauer's essay on women to read. That old bird had the right idea of gals."

June read it, but she was unconvinced. She insisted that it was only another of Dick's fascinations that he could persuade women (with authorities) that they were the base, wily, and subtle heart breakers that they would like to be.

"Infatuated woman," he called her, and pretended to be pleased.

"I have never had a virgin," he ruminated cruelly another time and looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

She did not flinch. "Nothing you can say will hurt me. Nothing will persuade me to give you up. You're mine, I know it."

He disregarded her. "They are probably stupid little things that weep and are unnaturally unemotional. Accomplished women of the world have a more decided appeal."

"And yet—I've always thought some day it would be nice to find a complete virgin. Not that I think I'll ever discover one A completely unsophisticated young girl who has never heard of Freud or birth control and has never talked

sex. Someone who is full of inhibitions and suppressions. I'm sure that there aren't any such unless you catch them very young. And God! Look where that train of thought leads. I find myself convicted of moron tendencies."

June admitted that she was a demi-vierge.

"You could call me that at the age of six," she said rashly.

"I don't doubt it," Dick told her. "But that, too, adds to the decadent flavor which is one of your chief charms."

June felt as though they were talking in circles.

When she arrived on the ward one morning she found Dick flitting up and down between the beds of patients holding a sheet high above his head which waved out behind him as he sang blithely, "Good-bye, boys, I'm through." He stopped his carolling as he saw her enter the door and tying the sheet around his waist and taking up a towel, came toward her in mock servility and asked her what she would have for breakfast.

There was a frightened look in her eyes and a sickened feeling at the pit of her stomach which did not lessen when he came close to her and said, "Poor child, I'm going to leave you."

"No, you aren't," her voice was grim. "Come on out in the kitchen."

And when he followed her into that retreat of theirs, she closed the door after them, disregarding the fact that the head nurse was liable to come on the ward at any minute. He thoughtfully put some bread and milk on the table near her so that if anyone did open the door suddenly it might appear as though she was breaking one of the minor rules of the hospital in eating on the ward. Then he took her in his arms.

"How can I leave you?" he said softly. "You seem to be a part of my heart now after these months—just a little part," he teased her. "But it's hard to cut it away. And I'm going to."

"You won't."

"But I've got to. What in hell would I do with a woman around?"

"I don't care. I'm just going to tag around after you from now on. If you go away I'll go too. I can't live without you and I don't intend to stay here and suffer. You can run away all you want to, but I'll just run after you, all over, wherever you go."

"Silly little thing. What would you do in a lumber camp or harvest field? You wouldn't last a minute. You can only endure the work here because of your morbid interest in it."

June ignored the last part of his speech. "Where are you going? To the wheat fields? Oh God, I couldn't stand your going away." And her eyelashes were wet with the tears she pressed back.

"My sweetheart! Do you suppose I could go as far away as that? No I shall have to get out of your clutches gradually."

"Where are you going then?"

"Me and my old side kick, who's still down in Caracas, have an apartment together here in New York which we subrented when we went away. The tenants are getting out now and I've found a respectable job acting the part of a drunkard

in a play which is going on in a couple of weeks, and I've saved enough money from the job here to live for as long as that. Hip hip! I can loaf for a while." All that day she fought hard to keep from showing the bitter sorrow that was in her heart. It had to turn out right, she kept telling herself. It would turn out all right. She had to have him. She kept her head bent to hide her red-rimmed eyes. But she found herself dropping tears in the glasses of medicines on her tray. Later in the day, Dick came into the linen room where she was hunting for sheets and while her hands were full took her face between his hands and kissed her and looked at her for a long time. "I know—you *are* mine. It was meant that I should love you so it's no use fighting." He slipped a little card down the bosom of her dress. "I find I can get off now, before supper, so I'm leaving. That's my address that I'm giving you. Let your conscience be your guide." And he kissed her again, a hard kiss and went away humming.

The time came for a consultation with the family. Not that Mr. Henreddy was called in to give his opinion or that the two brothers that June had not seen for such a long time were written to and asked for advice. It was a woman's affair, June thought. Even young Glubb, who was now called James because he went to school, was left out of it. It is true that Adele and June installed a modern educational system in the household for his benefit and insisted that at the age of four he should be told how the buttercup family grew, at six, how the fishes produced their young and at seven, how men and women cohabited. He had now finished the course of biology recommended for little ones by Margaret Sanger, but nevertheless he occasionally came to his mother and asked her what certain words meant. So it was considered that he was still too young to be included in this family secret.

That was what it became—a secret, between Mother Grace and Adele and June. It was easy enough to tell Adele about it. She was a serious and receptive young person and though not without a certain dry sense of humor, she was willing to take people and their intentions seriously. She might not approve of what one was about to do. But she would give it her most earnest consideration and the heartfelt hope that it would turn out for the best.

"You know . . . Dick . . . I'm going to live with him," June announced rather jerkily that night after the weekly lecture on dietetics. The two had been comparing the notes they had taken and Adele had already concluded from the pages missing in June's note-book that her attention in class had wavered often. "June! You don't really mean it, do you? I know you've always said you would live with a man rather than marry him, but I don't know—it's kind of a shock."

"Yes, I'm going to leave tomorrow morning. I didn't know before or I would have told you. Dick just told me he was going this morning. So I'm going too."

"I'm not going to tell you or mother our address for fear you might have a conscience-stricken impulse suddenly to come and urge Dick to make an honest woman of me and all that sort of thing. As a matter of fact, he's not seducing me, I'm seducing him. So there wouldn't be much point to mother making objections to him."

"He'll probably say, 'You're perfectly right, Mrs. Henreddy,'" she continued her line of thought later. "I did all I could to persuade your daughter that the step

she is about to take is a foolish one, but she's willful and wayward and she's too much for me. I'm taking the line of least resistance.' "

"But every time he pushed me away from him," her thought was resentful, "he pulled me to him twice as close."

That same evening, they heard Mother Grace was ill. The doctor didn't know whether she had diphtheritic sore throat, or diphtheria or just plain sore throat. At any rate she had to stay in bed for a while and June got leave of absence from the hospital in order to take care of her.

"Suppose," she kept thinking to herself, "Suppose he gets tired of waiting for me and goes out west. From the way I talked he must have thought that I would be there immediately the next day. Oh, what shall I do?"

She could not blame her mother for being ill. It was the first time she had indulged in the luxury of staying in bed since Glubb was born. She kept saying what a pleasure it was for her to have a "morning toilet" and "evening toilet" and alcohol rub and meals on a tray—those things she had paid for in a hospital. "I think I just got sick because I had a couple of nurses in the family to take care of me," she declared.

Meanwhile June made tea and toast and became sentimental over the egg noggs which Mother Grace drank, all unsuspecting of the emotions they evoked in her daughter.

It turned out to be an ordinary sore throat, but the doctor told her it was just as well that she had stayed in bed, considering that there were several cases of the disease in the neighborhood and when Mother Grace put on her black silk kimona with embroidered storks (it was a new one) and sat in the library, sewing, June broke the news to her.

"What?" asked her mother, looking up from her work with a very startled face. "What did you say?"

June repeated that she was about to begin to live with someone.

"Live with someone! What do you mean?"

"With a man of course. I've fallen in love—terribly in love and he doesn't want to marry me—he's not half crazy about me as I am about him, so I'm just going to live with him. You needn't worry about me. I'm not at all worried. I can take care of myself. You know I've always told you that I didn't think marriage was so important"

June tried to keep talking—tried to fill up the gaps which Mother Grace left in what should have been a conversation. What could she say when her mother wouldn't make any reply or pay any attention. "You don't mind, do you? I really can't help it. I've had a hell of a time for the last couple of months, knowing that I'd have to tell you this pretty soon."

"When are you going to start doing this?" her mother asked in a rather faint voice.

"I'd made up my mind to leave the hospital the next day on that very night when the doctor telephoned to the hospital for me. So I had to put it off. Oh, why are you sick at such a time, mother, when it's so hard for me?"

Mother Grace ignored the obvious selfishness of this appeal and saw beneath it. Again she tried to ask calmly when June wanted to go.

June blushed and paled and then blurted out, "As soon as possible. I'd like to go tonight. I'm sure he's waiting for me. I should have been there with him a week ago and I haven't written to him or anything to tell him why I'm not there . . .

"Can I go tonight?"

"What use is there for me to stop you when I'd only make you miserable? Oh, why ask me what to do? You know you'll only do just what you think best for yourself and pay no attention to me anyway. It's after five. Leave me alone to think. I can't say anything that I know isn't absolutely futile."

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