On Pilgrimage - April 1947

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: The story of Peter Maurin's mysterious four-day disappearance and return from the Worker in New York in the late winter/early spring of 1947. (DDLW #453).

Statesmen journey around the world in search of peace – headlines scream at us from the newsstands and we are heedless. We hurry home, we do not buy a paper because there are more important things to do – there is Peter's supper to get; and there's the question as to whether little Mary has gained back the ounces she has lost since birth. There is peace at home (for us it is 115 Mott St.), and the need to nourish and protect, to guard and guide, is a divinely appointed duty. There are still three meals a day to get; and the welfare, of those around us who depend on us, to see to. Our job is to make an oasis of peace wherever we happen to be.

Spring

There is a haze in the air today and the sunlight is like golden dust. It is over forty outside and there is no need of any heat in the house since we are still wearing our wool clothing. Across the street the playground officially opened and there is a game of ball going on there. The street is lined with baby carriages, in addition to trucks, push carts, horses and wagons, and human beings who live on the street in these neighborhoods. We relax in peace, conscious of our peace because we have had such a hectic week of anxiety. We have realized life and death recently - we have been on the verge of each.

On the one hand, little Mary Hughes, now two weeks old, arrived on the scene, and she is unbelievably quiet and beautiful. We sit and look at her placid content with awe. There is nothing quite like it in the world. Johanna and Tommie may riot around – thank God the house is sound – but she smiles amiably through it all. Everyone is running in and out to see whether she wakes up long enough to eat, whether she hadn't cried a little through the night. An occasional squawk brings a crowd of fond friends and relatives to admire the strength of her lungs.

And Peter

And Peter gave us a great scare this month. He had been spending the winter in Rochester, in the warmth and comfort of Teresa Weider's home, and in order that he might spend the last half of Lent in town, I went up to fetch him in the middle of the month. He stood the trip well, visited the Newburgh farm, arrived in New York safely, and then after a day at Mott Street disappeared! Friday

night we always have meetings, with Dan Sullivan of Fordham as the chairman, and after supper we asked Peter if he didn't want to come down to the meeting. At eight he was not in his room, nor in the meeting down stairs; he was visiting the Currans, someone said, and so we didn't start looking for him until eleven. By that time it was learned that he was not there, nor had been.

Everyone began scattering in all directions looking for him. Cabot sat up in the office all night, hoping for a call; the police were notified; Gallivan and Rocco made a tour along the Bowery, visiting the "horse markets" and some of the lodging houses; and we all sat and conjectured and worried. Could he have visited some former friends? His memory was failing him often, and he used to refer to Easton as Kingston, where he had lived and worked before he met me. Could he have gone to Kingston by bus? Could he have gone to Easton?

When we had notified the police, the cloistered Maryknoll Sisters, the Carmelites of Newport, and Abbot Dunn of the Trappist Monastery at Gethsemene, begging them to start offering up prayers for his safe return, we had done all we could.

War of the Sexes

Where could he have gone? Could it be that he tired of being cared for? Miss Weiss had written to him constantly and was always sending him presents. Mother Weider had surrounded him with loving care all winter. And now I was complacently gathering together salad greens and fruits and bringing him meals on a tray, and taking that peculiar feminine delight in having somebody helpless to wait upon. Maybe he had had too much of a good thing. Maybe he rebelled against this softness and had decided he would go back on the Bowery to end his days in solitude and poverty, in the midst of those in whom we try to see Christ in his most degraded guise. It was cold too, those days he was gone, and Rocco spoke mournfully of the wolves on the Bowery who wouldn't hesitate to knock an old man down and steal his coat. And did he have any money in his pocket when he left? Or marks of identification? We knew that there must be letters and that Miss Weiss always sent him a dollar when she wrote. He might have had a complete lapse of memory and, while his money lasted, be taking a thirty-cent room on the Bowery these nights. Indeed, they were warmer than Mott Street many a time.

We slept uneasily. We dreamed of hearing his footsteps on the stair, of hearing his cough, of his call. "Dorrity," he always called me. But there was no sign of him. His accent was so thick, and had become thicker these recent years, so if he did ask directions, falteringly, would people take the trouble to wait patiently until they understood him, and answer him? Or would he be too independent to inquire? There are strong streaks of the anarchist in Peter.

Yes, Peter is bearing his cross now, not being able to use the mind in which he used to take such keen delight. "I can no longer think," he says now and then, sadly. Because he has thought so clearly and so well in the past, we do what

no journal has done before. We keep reprinting his little essays from month to month. There are always new readers, always those whose eyes are more opened now to read and understand. Only this month Fr. Daberto wrote and said that when the sisters in his parish in the Philippines first read Peter's essay "Pie in the Sky," they laughed, but then they began to see what was in it.

Yes, Peter is bearing his cross, just as Fr. Roy is bearing his. But the spirit of independence is there too, and perhaps all too human he had gone away because we were taking too good care of him. I looked at the bundles of parsley hanging in my room, at the salad waiting for him on the window sill, and I grieved.

Home Again

But then, suddenly one noon, after he had been gone four days, he returned. He was thinner, but his color was better. He had been lost he said, and he was smiling happily to be back. He had been riding on buses up to the Bronx and down to South Ferry. He had stopped in coffee houses and had soup or coffee, nothing else. He had slept in those same coffee houses until he had been moved on. Half a dozen times the police (those same police who had been notified) asked him why he was hanging around, loitering; they told him to move along. If he had not had an accent; if his clothes had not been so crushed and dusty; if his shirt had not been so dirty from his travels – in other words, if he had not been a shabby old foreigner, to whose queries no one would be patient and listen to, he would not have wandered as he did for four days and nights. He had thought he was in Rochester part of the time, he said. He knew if he could just get the right bus he could get home. No, he had not asked the way – it was all his own fault.

What the human frame can endure in the way of fatigue and hunger! Strangely enough, Peter looks all the better for his adventure. After two days in bed, he now says he feels fine, instead of the usual "all right," with which he answers your question. He will get up this afternoon and put on Gerry Griffin's clothes, since his own are in the cleaners, and sit down in the office for a while. And just to see that he does not get lost again, we will put notes in all his pockets. "I am Peter Maurin, founder of the Catholic Worker movement." That is the way Miss Weiss addresses all her letters to him. "I live at 115 Mott Street, half a block north of Canal." And we ask any of our friends and readers, if they see him wandering ever, to bring him home. At the end of Lent, we will have his room fixed for him at Maryfarm, Newburgh, and he can sit on the porch in the sun and watch John spreading manure over the fields ready for plowing.