# House of Hospitality

Dorothy Day

## Chapter Two

*Summary: Vignettes about a mentally ill woman disturbing the neighborhood and the good luck and hard work life of a friend. Describes their struggles with food, lack of money, heated discussions, children's play, "little miracles," selling the paper at a nearby church, and the constant interruptions. Notes two kinds of materialism. (DDLW #437).*

A FEW nights ago, Sarah Harding who was living two flights upstairs went insane.

It was three o'clock in the morning when it all began and when the neighbors discovered the cause of the shrieks which echoed up and down the block, they laughed grimly, shut down their windows, covered up their ears with their blankets and went back to sleep. They were pushing off the horror from themselves.

When the screaming began they heard it in their sleep for a moment, separated it from the occasional night howlings of dog or cat, recognized it for what it was, and awoke.

Windows were pushed up, lights were turned on. What was it all about?

"Perhaps someone is having a baby," Mrs. Bloch who lived across the hall said. We were both peering out of our doors. "I remember when I had mine."

Every woman in every apartment thought of those appalling minutes of agony, those last interminable minutes. They thought of their own animal cries, abstractly, and suddenly remembered how quickly they had forgotten them. How suddenly, as the new life was catapulted into the world, they had felt relieved and joyous.

But not many babies are born at home any more. At the first suggestion of pain, there is that comfortable sense that now the months of waiting are over with, now something definite is about to take place. For the poor the hospitals are cheap. A baby can be brought into the world for thirty dollars in the big wards of any of the hospitals, and for nothing at Bellevue. And oh, the pleasant days of rest afterwards, the neat wards, the relief from all household cares, the children, the shopping, the three meals a day.

It was of these things that all the women in the tenement thought, stirring in their beds restlessly at the continued rasping cries. They thought too, that some woman's husband was being made to pay. Let him suffer a little too! Let him be tormented, shocked, horrified! Let him see his woman becoming an animal, a tortured beast. It is this he has put upon her. This is her share of the business of life and love. And if there are other children in the family–how will they react to this agonizing business? How will they react to the sight of their mother, an abstract, twitching bundle of nerves and flesh, each nerve being probed by agony.

But soon it became obvious that something more was occurring, that these cries were not just the cries of a woman in labor. No woman in childbirth is going to stand in her window and shriek curses, and talk, talk, talk in this fearful fashion. When will she become hoarse? Her throat will be torn out. It will bleed from the knife-like quality of those cries.

To the listeners nearer at hand, no movement, no bustle, came from the apartment where the woman stood wailing at the window. There was no evidence that any normal business of life was being carried on.

One man put his head out the window and shouted, "Aw shut up, you drunken slut!" (He probably was the man who threw milk bottles into the paved yard in back to emphasize his disapproval of the Petroffs who played and sang after midnight.)

His reproof started a new train of conjecture. Perhaps a drunken rout was going on and everyone else had passed out except this woman. Perhaps it was poison liquor. Why didn't someone find out?

"Nobody likes to interfere," Mrs. Bloch whispered. "Perhaps a husband and wife were fighting and he's gone away and left her."

Oh the basic cowardice and inhumanity of man! I remembered how when I was a little girl, another child and I had once been chased around our doll carriages by a fierce dog, and caught at and nipped until our dresses had been torn to ribbons. And I remembered how people witnessing this miserable sight, in their own fear, had not come out to help. We welcomed the policeman who rescued us and I could have kissed his hands with gratitude–those hands guilty perhaps in their turn of other brutalities.

Why didn't someone call the police now? Why didn't somebody do something? Where was the woman? In which apartment? What were her immediate neighbors doing?

The shrieks were continuing. It had been an hour now since they had started.

Then two of our friends began calling to the woman from another window, talking to her, kindly questioning her. Her words came clearer through her cries. There was something about a door being locked, something about a horror issuing from the radio. She was being torn to pieces by her ghastly emotions.

"They are getting an ambulance," someone shouted.

The French people upstairs, now that they knew something definite was being done, banged down their windows, laughing. Some other tenant laughed too. "She'll break my eardrums," he said.

There was the clang of an ambulance on the street. And then the cries died away. Everywhere windows were being banged down. It was five o'clock, still time for a little sleep for those who were calloused by the duration of the turmoil to the thought of this other human being's suffering. They only thought, "We can get another couple of hours' sleep," and sank into oblivion.

In the morning we found out that the woman's name was Sarah Harding, that she was thirty-five years old, was living alone and that a search was being made for someone belonging to her.

She had been taken to Bellevue, and her neighbors who had long been too afraid of her wild despairing glance to speak to her, breathed sighs of relief. It was just an incident in the crowded life of the tenement on East Fifteenth Street.

## 2

We are an international household. Yesterday afternoon Peter brought in his Armenian friend, Mr. Minas, and asked if he could put up a bed for him. We have the apartment next door as well now, so we got a camp cot to put up in the kitchen after the meetings are over in the evening Teresa and I each had two blankets, so I took one off each bed for him–one for under and one for over–since a camp cot has no mattress. Now we sit down to table, American, French, Irish, Polish, Jew, Lithuanian, Italian and American.

As for the meetings held every night now, there are all nationalities there too– Ukrainian, Spanish, Italian, German, Belgian, Swiss, English, Scotch, Irish, Russian, Negro, French, Lithuanian, Jew, and now–Armenian. I do not know what Mr. Minas' religion is. I have not asked him. Peter says he was educated in a Jesuit school in Egypt and writes poetry.

Right now he is sitting down in the kitchen getting quotations–the pronouncements of various priests against Fascism. He is also going to distribute our daily supplement through the streets.

Last night Frank took the supplement around to various taverns in the neighborhood, most of which are run by Catholics and one of which down by Tompkins Square is frequented by Russians. At this, the last place he visited, he said they were all in a most affable mood, and after reading the sheet gravely, registered their approval by singing: "Proschai, proschai."

Eileen went over to Sheed and Ward's last night to their monthly disputation and distributed papers there. She says that cars and chauffeurs were lined up in

front of the door. Their employers should have invited them inside to partake of Catholic culture.

It is hard to put over the idea of Catholic culture because people are afraid of the word culture in America.

They think at once of Shakespeare clubs and Browning societies and they are repelled.

Speaking of Mr. Sheed, one of the things he said when speaking before our group the other night was this:

"The Christians in Russia–and there are Christians in Russia who are allowed to practice their religion after a fashion–say: 'Do not try to save us from the Bolsheviks. They are materialists with material aims, ignoring and denying God–and they say so. But the Western Christians are also materialists with material aims denying God–but they don't say so. Leave us alone and perhaps a new Christianity will arise in Russia."

## 3

Margaret, our Lithuanian friend who comes down from the House of Hospitality to help us every day, is full of stories.

About how she found ten dollars:

"I had been walking about the city for three days," she said, "and not eating very much, so I was hungry. I don't think I'd had anything to eat the day before at all because I was trying to save my last ten cents for carfare. I'd been staying at a rooming house on 57th Street, and then she sold out and I had to go because I was behind in my rent anyway. I went to my cousin's, but her husband doesn't like me, so it was hard to stay there. There was no extra bed, so I slept on my coat in the hallway. I had to get out of the house before he got up, so I didn't get any meals there. So I was hungry.

"I walked around and walked around and, finally, I went into the Paulist Church. I said a prayer there to the Little Flower–I sat there for a while–and then I went out again. Right next door there is a restaurant, I used to go in there when I had a job. So I had a sandwich and a cup of coffee and I said to Jim at the cash register when I went out: 'That's my last dime.' And then I went out and I walked and walked. And suddenly, right up against a building I saw a folded up bill. I didn't know whether it was a dollar bill or not, I got so weak and faint. I was hot and sick from seeing it. I picked it up, but I was scared to pick it up for fear some one would see me and take it from me. I was so scared I shook. I picked it up and held it in my hand tight and walked away fast. I didn't dare to look at it. I walked from 59th Street all the way down to Tenth, but I didn't wait that long to look and see what it was. I opened it and there was two five dollar bills, not just one. I was scared. Nothing like that ever happened to me before. I

was afraid it was counterfeit and I would get arrested and they wouldn't believe me that I found it. Well, anyway, I met a girl friend of mine and she was hungry too–staying at the Rivington Street place for a quarter a night–so we went and ate finally. And I had enough to pay for room rent again for a few weeks.

"Nothing like that ever happened to me before. I mean like finding money. But other things happened.

"I was thirteen when I started to work. I didn't want to go to school anyway, and my father and brothers were working in the mines and they thought I might as well be working too.

"My father and mother were Lithuanians and were living down below Wilkes Barre in a little mining town.

I was born in a company shack, and the shacks were awful. There were so many of them and they were just made of boards, and to keep warm you had to line them with newspapers.

"Well, I went to work in a silk mill when I was thirteen, and pretty soon after a few months or so, I got sick and had to go to the hospital. I was in the hospital two months. And then I did housework for a doctor's wife and then for another family.

"I didn't go home after that. I worked in another silk mill for a few years, and I held lots of other jobs. I even worked in a saloon in Scranton. That was when I was seventeen.

"Then I came up to New York and worked over in Williamsburg in a factory where they made casings for sausages. We had to wear rubber boots up to our knees and big rubber aprons and tie our heads up, but the smell got into our skins. I had to take a bath every night, and then it didn't help.

"I worked there until my hands swelled up till they were like hams, from keeping them in the water with the chemicals all the time. I had to quit and wait until my hands got better and lay off work for a while.

"So then I worked in another silk mill over in Astoria. I had four looms and I got to work at a quarter of seven and laid off at five-thirty at night. I was very fast and I earned a lot of money.

"You couldn't sit down on the job. You had to go walking around and around and around. If you stopped the threads would break and that slowed you up. Some of the girls were slow and could only handle one loom, and that meant they didn't earn much money. Some tended more looms than I did.

"The pay kept going down and down and finally they laid us all off and started making plush. The factory is closed down now.

"Then I worked for a drug supply house and for the Beechnut Gum people and for the Royal Gelatine people. Making boxes. That was hard work too.

"And, oh, yes, I was a chambermaid and a waitress. Two of the places I worked in—a Greek place and a Polish place–they never threw anything out. They put back what was left over on the plates into the stew. I never could eat nothing.

"I was thin, but not as thin as I was when I worked in the silk mill. I looked then as if I was falling apart.

"And I worked too in a tobacco plant up in Connecticut. Hanging up tobacco on poles to dry. There were lots of children working in that place, seven, eight and nine years old. They came to work with their mothers and helped around the place, carrying baskets and running errands and helping around.

"Yes, I've had lots of jobs, I can't remember how many.

"I wish I had a job again."

## 4

One night I went up to the Mothers' Club at St. Barnabas to talk to the women who all live in snug warm houses with their husbands and children around them, their time filled and their life sweetened by the good works their concerted means permit them to do.

They had contributed before ($34.00)–to the work of the House of Hospitality and they took up a collection again of ten dollars.

This morning a contrast. Margaret came in to find a letter from her mother in Pennsylvania saying that her six-year-old child was going to be committed to an institution. Her mother is running a boarding house for miners, and she neglected to watch over or care for the child. The grandmother cannot read or write English, so it was the thirteen-year-old brother's duty to write this piece of news to Margaret. He said she made water in the streets where people could see her, and went around begging in peoples' houses.

We were considering what we could do in the way of keeping the child out of the institution when Mrs. Carleton Hayes called up and told us she was sending a check for twenty dollars which she had collected from among her friends. This would about cover the trip down. We shall see what can be done.

Little duties pile up. I get up at seven-thirty, go to eight o'clock Mass, prepare breakfast for Peter, Mr. Minas, Teresa and myself; go through the mail, do bookkeeping, hand the orders over to Frank and put the letters aside to be answered; read some of the Office of the day and write the daily page to be mimeographed. All the while there are interruptions, people coming in and the telephone. Frank and Eileen come in about ten or eleven o'clock. Peter and Mr. Minas go out. Margaret comes in. Teresa and Freddy play about. Sometimes Teresa does her arithmetic by playing with the money in the cash box and sometimes in the big graphic arithmetic book I bought her. I am keeping her home from school as she has not been well. She reads about a page and a

half a day, also some prayers. The rest of the time she plays outside these warm spring days.

This morning at eleven Jimmie Lafki came in to play with the typewriter for an hour. He is sixteen and looks twelve, has not made his first Communion yet and is just out of a state institution where he has been for two years. He was committed up-state, his guardian tells us. It looks to me more as though his aunt wanted to get rid of him. She is a huge, dirty woman weighing over two hundred pounds, whose dirty flannel nightgown always protrudes above her other clothes which she has piled on her in layers. With all that fat to keep her warm you would not think she needed so many clothes. She had come in to us for clothes, sheets and blankets for the boy, and, overcome by his beaten look, I had suggested that the boy come in every day at eleven, just to occupy himself since he was under parole and not attending school.

Jimmy practiced typing, watched how the mimeograph machine worked, had lunch, ran off five hundred copies for us and then sped away with a bundle of books under his arm, including a Catechism.

Then the Home Relief worker, wanting a Confirmation outfit for a twelve-year-old girl; then Charlie Rich, to type some of his spiritual writings. Then Tessa with her dialectic materialism and her baby who is baptized a Catholic, but who she insists is going to grow up a 'Daily Worker' and not a 'Catholic Worker.'

Mr. Minas returns to take out the papers. A "Fascist" drops in to try to whip up hatred for the Jews amongst us.

Then Ade Bethune in with some of her lovely drawings of Don Bosco, St. Catherine of Sienna and the second Corporal Work of Mercy. She stayed to make an impression on the stencil of Don Bosco for the Italians in the neighborhood for Easter Monday, the day after his canonization.

## 5

A long day full of difficulties. A priest called up and said he was sending over a young woman who had threatened to kill herself. She had already made one attempt, he said she told him, and she was without work and without shelter, having been put out of her room early that morning. We talked to her, gave her breakfast, some clothes and sent her up to the House of Hospitality. . . . Then another telephone call came for a friend down on 11th Street who was ill and needed a doctor, so we called Dr. Koiransky of Willard Parker, who has volunteered his services for the poor of the neighborhood, and he assured us of his immediate attention. We went down there ourselves and the job from then on was one of feeding the baby, changing him (and he squirmed like an eel), shopping, cooking, washing diapers and such duties until five o'clock came, when someone else could take a turn at caring for the sick girl, who could not move from her bed, but was not sick enough to go to the hospital. Two editors

demonstrated their willingness to be both workers and scholars at this job, but it took almost more dexterity than they possessed to change the kid.

Mr. John Erit, who spoke at the third meeting of the Workers' School came in this evening at supper time and showed us how to make Italian spaghetti. There are many kinds of spaghetti, but this was the simplest kind, called Castle of San Angelo, because when the soldiers were being besieged there they lived for weeks on it.

Our guest chef worked under disabilities. The pots were not big enough, the fire was slow, but as usual around, *The Catholic Worker* office, a little miracle was performed in that twelve people were fed with neatness and dispatch.

On fast days, *The Catholic Worker* staff is fed on Jewish cooking. Mrs. Gottlieb around the comer makes up a pile of potato pancakes or fish, and her cooperation saves the editors a great deal of time and effort.

A Spanish friend threatens to bring in some stewed octopus with ink sauce, but the diners are not very enthusiastic about the prospect.

And speaking of food, Peter Maurin arrived in from the country after an absence of four weeks. Discussing economics, he displayed his grocery and newspaper bills for the month–$9.

Peter is in favor of a big pot on the stove and a continual supply of vegetable soup, constantly renewed from day to day–an idea shared by both Don Bosco and the I.W.W.'s.

After supper we went out to the pushcart market and bought a large pot for 79 cents, a ten-quart one, and while the Workers' School is in session, we shall dine on soup.

A rather monotonous diet, but at the writing, Mr. John Brunini of the Commonweal staff offers to come down soon and cook up a meal.

## 6

This evening Freddy and Teresa helped count the money in the cash box which had been empty for quite a few days.

"*The Catholic Worker* is rich," Teresa kept chortling, forgetting her theory that it is bourgeois to be rich. She immediately wanted to misappropriate some of the funds.

"My birthday is this month–St. Joseph's month," she said, "and I am going to think of all the things I want St. Joseph to ask God to send me."

And she ruminated about a baby goat, a sheep, a pet hen and a few other things which she thought would contribute to her happiness.

We begged her, however, not to ask St. Joseph for them, for if he sent them along, what with his love for animals, we might find them somewhat in the way and not be grateful as we should.

There's a cat, now–a most dilapidated cat, who sat and yawned rudely during a lecture by Father Parsons, the other night. It's a dirty cat, thin-tailed and ungainly.

"But I love him because he is so soff", Teresa said, clutching him to her bosom.

Yes, we are rich this month, and feel ourselves well provided for. And we ask for no greater blessing of St. Joseph during this, his month, than for hearts which become increasingly "soff", as Teresa says, with the love of God.

## 7

For some time now we have had Adelson with us. Lately he has been staying here in the office at night sitting up at the table with a blanket around his shoulders–sleeping and writing. Mr. Minas has gotten a room for himself so that he can sleep mornings and recover from the life about here. Adelson sometimes works around the office and then suddenly he will start talking and not stop for hours. Right now as I write he is talking to Frank who is always very patient with him.

"There was one time in my life when I was happy. That was when I was cultivating the garden of my soul. The day was not long enough. I studied. I worked until I had money. I worked on the day shift and the night shift and I slept for two hours and worked again. And when I had saved some money I studied. I got up at six and I worked all day until night and worked at night until midnight. My soul was a fresh garden.

"And now my garden is laid waste. Now the pigs are rooting in it, it is a shambles. I am an outcast and a pauper, despised of men. I am a man whose heart is broken.

"Once I was as gay as a child. I worked with my two hands for everything. When there was no work I went from factory to factory. When there was a sign on the door 'No Help Wanted' I went in anyway.

"This went on for years. I had a friend who wanted to help me go to school and he came to me and said: 'Are you tired of the struggle? Are you beaten yet?'

"Now I am beaten. I am a soul in anguish. My mind is gone. I know that my mind is crooked. And what can I do about it?

"If I had not been so impatient, if I had not been so proud and eager, I would have been a great political leader. The world would not have been in the condition that it is today. It is all my fault."

When once he begins talking about his responsibility for world conditions, he becomes very incoherent and it is impossible to follow him.

## 8

We sold *The Catholic Worker* after all the Masses over at the Immaculate Conception Church this morning. I went to the ten o'clock and as I sat in the kitchen before leaving, Peter was holding forth on the necessity of meetings for Harlem every night, hiring a hall, getting professors and drawing large crowds. I told him he was always too optimistic as to the response he would get and that he had much better confine himself to the street meetings. He looked at me meekly and said, "Just as you think best." I mentioned the fact that the professors had enough work on their hands and after giving up their time to our Workers' School here for three months they were due to have a rest. "Oh, rest, rest!" he exclaimed sadly. So I reminded him of their day lectures, books to write, examinations to prepare, their families to watch over, etc. Peter would have everyone give up every activity and go straight to the workers.

Grace and her two children came in to lunch. They are two and four years old and their father hopes that they will grow up to be "good little atheists". The conversation at lunch was between Peter and Charles Rich, who with his Jewish blood is ardent in defense of the faith. The existence of God, St. Thomas Aquinas, intuitive knowledge, St. Augustine–these were the matters discussed, and the children listened spellbound by the vehemence, if not by the content of the speeches. They are often hellions at table but this time they were angels and Grace herself was able to eat her lunch in peace. She was thankful for the conversation despite the subject, but if her husband had been here, he would have snatched the children away by the hair.

Charlie worked in Child's Restaurant for twelve years and was influenced in his conversion by a cook he knew who gave him The Divine Comedy to read.

Now he visits his friends, a cook, a porter and a bus boy, and they have sent in a contribution by him and are coming down to see us.

## 9

"Even if only one person were served and helped by the House of Hospitality, *The Catholic Worker* would be repaid and could feel that its labors were not in vain," said one of the editors during the month, when a bit of wrangling was going on at the apartment.

It was early in the year, when the February blues had taken possession of everyone. The cold permeated, vitality was low, the winter seemed interminable. There was a fuss because one girl likes plenty of fresh air and an other one thought she had enough of it during the day, tramping the streets looking for work and wanted a snug airlessness at night. There was a fuss about whether there should be a sign in the bathroom saying: "Wash out the tub."

The editors, too, felt that their strength was not enough to keep up with the duties of each day. Getting out a paper seemed a simple task compared to the

innumerable things which came up every day in regard to the ten girls housed down the street; the feeding of the staff and of the countless visitors who came in; the getting ready for *The Catholic Worker*s' School; the doling out of clothes contributed and solicited by willing friends of the paper and needy neighbors respectively.

Yes, life seemed too complicated just a week or so ago. One day there was one problem after another. Minutes and hours and days were taken up with doing everything else in the world except getting out a paper and answering letters in connection with that paper.

And then–it is the way life goes–all difficulties seemed to resolve themselves. Matters were adjusted and now everything runs smoothly again.

During the month about twenty-five women were cared for, some left to take jobs, three were sent away to a rest house for several weeks. The beds were always occupied and yet we never had to turn any girl away. Always, when a new one came in, another, providentially, was leaving for a job,

Sometimes during the month some of the girls dropped into the office to discuss their problems with us, stayed for lunch and remained to clear up the dishes. One of them has offered her services in our common kitchen, God be praised, and now the editors' tasks are lightened by this volunteer help. It is a reward, we are sure, sent as a result of an action of our latest cooperator, Eileen, who, when she came to the office to join the staff, seized pail, ammonia and window rags and went to the House of Hospitality to clean windows, as the first task to be performed for the paper.

The situation of our kitchen helper is dire in the extreme–a baby expected, no husband, no funds, only the shelter afforded her by the House of Hospitality and the food and clothing that she receives from us–yet she thought not of herself on the opening night of the school, but of the workers' school.

"When I listen to Peter Maurin talk," she said, "I feel tears come to my eyes. I was praying all evening that everything would go all right."