The Eleventh Virgin

Dorothy Day

Part Three, Chapter 3

And then June discovered that she was about to become a mother.

There were a few days of uncertainty—"Could I have miscalculated?" and then she lay crying and sobbing on the bed. She was caught!

"Don't get caught!" her mother had said. "Whatever you do, don't get caught."

Well—she had.

Hideous phrases flashed through her mind. The first was supposed to be a humorous one and she had heard it many times in burlesque shows. People would always laugh at the tragedies that had happened to them in the past, it would seem. She lay there and gulped as she thought about it.

Where had she heard the second phrase? It must have been at Miss Prince's home. To the girls up there, nothing was so bad as being knocked up.

"About to become—" That was an idiotic phrase anyway. Just as though it happened instantaneously. One realized that one was about to become and then one became. It followed right after. But it didn't. There was the long wait of nine months. Plenty of time to worry and fret.

In the first place, Dick would never consent to have one. He had impressed that on her mind many times. If she insisted on having it, he would leave her—leave her as soon as it began to show. Then, how could she go ahead and have it?

She thought of Dis-audrey and the long story she had told in the saloon down on the water front. There were homes, it seems, where you could wait for babies to arrive. Of course—there was Miss Prince's home. Lots of babies were born there. But to go to Miss Prince and say, "I have fallen. I'm going to have a baby. Will you take me in?" and feign repentance. That was impossible. She was repentant. She was not sorry she had fallen. Only sorry that she was going to have a baby. Sorry because she had been caught.

But a home was the only way open to her if she was going to have one. She could not go to her mother.

"You were willing enough to live with the man. What are you crying about now?"

"Whatever disasters my actions lead me into, I'll have to take the consequences. I'll be the one who will suffer, so don't worry about me." She had made that remark herself to Mother Grace a few years before. And now should she go whimpering home and ask her mother to share the consequences of what she had insisted on doing?

She could not sacrifice her pride and go to a home to have a baby. She could sacrifice every vestige of pride—throw it all into the flames to keep her love burning. Her love for a man. But not her love for the child that was beginning to form in her.

She could not go to her mother for either help or sympathy. She had to stand alone. The same pride kept her from doing that.

Why should she expect any help from Dick anyway? He hadn't wanted to love her or live with her. She had started the whole thing. She had told him she loved his broken nose. That he looked like Amenemhat III. That she was going to live with him no matter how much he protested. That she would follow him all over the world so that he couldn't get away from her.

God knows he hadn't wanted to live with her. She had clung to him knowing that sooner or later the affair (as he himself called it) would have to come to an end.

She continued excusing him for the brutality she expected he would show her in the near future.

She loved him for his irresponsibility—for the happy-go-lucky way he slid through life. The way he "got out from under." So there was no use expecting him to accept responsibility now.

It was all her fault anyway. Day after day, those long summer afternoons, she had sat in the window and watched the two little girls from the floor above, playing in the yard. One was two years old and the other five. The elder held up her skirts and pointed her toe at the lilac bush and sang the Missouri Waltz falteringly. The littlest one toddled around and got the seat of her pants filthy and ate dirt from a tablespoon that her mother had given her to play with. She was cross-eyed and chuckled ecstatically when you spoke to her. And every now and then she'd sit perfectly still and lifting up her little round face to the sky, fall into a perfect trance of happiness.

They never cried, they never fretted their mother at all. They just were alive and chortling and gleeful.

It was all their fault. It was because of them that she had found herself stopping by the side of baby buggies in the grocery store and beaming at the occupants.

Damn this mother instinct anyway.

Maybe she just wanted what she couldn't have. That was human nature. Dick had told her that she would want a husband and babies some day and she had denied it vehemently.

Her theory had been that women only wanted children when they weren't satisfied with their lovers. That a perfect love precluded the idea of children. She had said that she wanted only him and that she would not be satisfied with a substitute no matter how little happiness came to her through her love for him.

No, she wanted only Dick, she decided, and what was at the bottom of her desire for a child was the desire to bind Dick to her. As if that was any way to do it!

It was not a baby that she wanted. She wanted more of Dick. And she would lose Dick altogether unless she went to a doctor immediately and said nothing at all to him about it.

The thought of Mrs. Wittle flashed into her mind with her breakfast talk of operations so many years ago. If the Chicago paper had not carried detailed accounts of the investigations then being carried on into illegal operations, June would not know so much about it now. Mrs. Wittle had certainly given her detailed information too. She almost screamed as she thought of it. She jerked her mind away from the subject. It was as bad to think of as the dentist's grinding machine which always set her mentally on edge days before she made an appointment with him and days afterward.

"Why in the world don't you have it, June?" Billy was saying. Billy was the only one June could talk to in her hour of trouble.

"Because I'd lose Dick if I did, and because we couldn't support it if I didn't lose him. (But I know I would.) And because Dick and I aren't married. He's never once suggested it. Oh, for lots of reasons. Anyway, don't let's talk about it. What I want to know is, can you lend me any money and do you know the name of any doctor I can go to?"

"June, you are a fool, in every way. First because you're so damn virtuous; then because when you do lose your virtue you pick out such a man. The last man in the world to fall for so seriously. Men like that are made for light affairs. I'm surprised that it's lasted as long as it has.

"And gee, I'd give anything in the world to have a baby, but I can't. I'm not made that way. I'm the most incapable sort of a person."

"It's the height of selfishness to bring children into the world anyway unless they're going to have a fair chance at happiness," June said seriously. "What do you want anyway? Just some helpless thing to share your misfortunes. You manage to have a good enough time, but the kid wouldn't. Kids are the most conventional thing in the world anyway. We don't mind not having a husband, but they'd probably mind not having a father. Why, I remember when I was seven years old and we were living in an awful hole in one of the worst neighborhoods in Chicago—and when I walked home from school with one of the girls who lived on a decent street over by the lake, I'd always walk by the saloon—we lived above it—and pretend that I didn't live there. There was a nice apartment house down the street and I'd always go in there as though I lived there, and wait in the hallway until my friends passed by. And it made me mad that we

were always moving around from one place to another so that we never had any friends. I thought it would be wonderful if we could live in one house all our lives the way most of the children of the neighborhood did. And I wanted to go to dancing school when I got older, and I wanted to go to the school dances and wear pretty clothes. Children aren't born with a radical scorn for the bourgeois class and the bourgeois things of life."

It was four months later. June lay on a single cot bed in the home of Dr. Jane Pringle, a six-room flat in a huge apartment house on the upper East Side. Pretty soon it would be all over with. It ought not to take but a few hours more the doctor had said. Just to lie there and endure. Three hours seemed an eternity, but the minutes sped by very fast. One pain every three minutes. How fast they came! It seemed that the moments of respite could be counted in seconds. The pain came in a huge wave and she lay there writhing and tortured under it. Just when she thought she could endure it no longer, the wave passed and she could gather up her strength to endure the next one.

The door of the little hall bedroom where June lay was closed. Just before nine o'clock she heard the doctor's small boy stamp past on his way to school. It was because of him that Dr. Pringle accepted such patients as she. She had lost her husband when he was a baby and her practice brought in very little money. Occasionally she took the case of a friend or the friend of a friend she told June.

The small boy was gone and now her door was open to the silent flat. Dr. Pringle was gone too to make several morning calls. She would be home at noon to see how June was and to make lunch for her son. Until then, June had the flat to herself. She could lie there and groan. It helped a great deal to groan every now and then. After twelve she must keep very quiet for the small boy would be back then.

There was an old sing-song clock ticking in the next room, the living-room. There was a parrot there, too, and every now and then he called in to June, "Stop that noise!" and sometimes, "Poor dear, poor dear!" It took June a long time to recognize the remarks flung in at her.

A fat old bull terrier waddled into the room occasionally to look at her sympathetically. Downstairs in a room on the airshaft some one was practicing "Mimi, tu piu," on the piano, playing it over and over again.

"A nice set for the last act," June thought wryly. "I'm being given a chance to dramatize my misery."

In the next interval she noticed a thick book on the table by the side of her, the story of some doctor in China. She would read that, she thought, when she got through with the business on hand. For the last couple of nights she had dreamed that she was a nurse back in the hospital again. She would have to go back there, she thought, and the idea was not disagreeable to her.

Dick was going away at the end of the week. It did not matter. Nothing mattered. Twelve hours of work a day, and no time to think, no time to be unhappy. Adele

was there, in her last year now. She would have to hold open the doors for her and let her pass through first. Little Adele! She even might be head nurse on whatever ward to which June was assigned and give June orders to do this and that.

Mother Grace had arranged it so that June could go back any time. The hospital authorities thought that she had gone west to help take care of a delicate aunt. Mother Grace and Adele and June had fixed up the story between them. Without saying anything about it, it was tacitly understood that June would return to her work some day.

No use making any fuss about Dick's going away. No use trying to follow him wherever he went. Ridiculous idea! Where would she get the money? It had been hard enough to raise money for the doctor. Dick was out of work. That was why he was going away. She was too tired to fight for him, tired of being precariously poised on the edge of an abyss of unhappiness. She had fallen into that abyss now. No one had reached out a hand to keep her from falling.

She stopped thinking then because a deep unconsciousness had overtaken her. She was sleeping the complete and dreamless sleep of exhaustion.

It had been agreed between them that Dick would call for her the following night and take her home. For she had not been able to keep her ordeal a secret after all. She would have, had it not been for the fact that Dick casually announced his departure one morning, showing her a telegram from a firm offering to pay his expenses back to Caracas. That had been a week ago and he had planned to leave at once. It had been a concession for him when he offered to remain with her two weeks longer.

"Dearest little sweetheart," he had comforted her and had held her close and rocked her back and forth in his arms as though she were a child. And the moment had been a very bitter one for June. He could be tender to her; and she wept at the thought of the child she could not have.

She no longer thought of the child. That was over and done with. Although it was amazing how weak she was, she felt curiously clear and lighthearted. Whatever happened to her, she could stand alone and face it now.

Eight o'clock came and she was dressed and ready for Dick. Dr. Pringle had gone to a moving picture show with her son and had left June alone in the flat. In the front room was a lounge and she lay there, tired with her effort at dressing, her heart beating with expectancy. Perhaps that was his step on the stair! But it passed the door and went quickly up another flight and upstairs she heard a door open and shut.

Every now and then a taxi slowed up in front of the house, and June rushed to the window to watch for Dick to step out. But strange people descended and entered the apartment house or one of the neighboring flat buildings; or other strange people came out of the house and entered the taxi.

She got tired of jumping up to go to the window to look out. Soon the clock struck nine.

The telephone always gave a preliminary buzz before it began to ring. She had become acquainted with it while she had been lying in the little hall bedroom. She listened for it now with straining ears. Twice when it rang, the rush of hope almost suffocated her, but it was only patients calling for Dr. Pringle.

When the clock struck ten, she gave up hope, and putting on the scarf and hat, she left the house and waited on the corner for a taxi. She would rather go home alone than have Dr. Pringle find out that Dick had not called for her. If anyone pitied her, she would find it very easy to begin pitying herself. She could keep from being miserable as long as she was not sorry for herself.

"I suppose I should pin this on the pincushion," the note which she found read, "but unfortunately you haven't any pincushion. Why didn't you have a pincushion for me? I go away with a grievance against you.

"I received another telegram yesterday telling me that if I wanted the job I would have to start out immediately. And to tell the truth, I was glad to do so. I have entirely too much imagination anyway. By nine o'clock yesterday morning, I was suffering the torments of the damned—losing my perspective completely. After all, you are only one of God knows how many millions of women who go through the same thing, and why I should so far forget myself as to suffer the commonplace emotion of a man who is about to become a father, I don't see. It is entirely against my principles and you would not respect me if I did not live up to my principles.

"When I return, and I hope it won't be for several years, I shall expect to see you comfortably married to a rich man. It will be one of your patients, I suppose, if you stick to your noble resolution and go back into the hospital. And be sure it is a rich one, for it is quite likely that I shall want to borrow money from you.

"Romantic adventures must come to an end or they would not be romantic adventures.

"If you dream of me every night as you threaten to do, you will probably haunt me as you say you would like to. In all likelihood you will anyway. Habit is a strong thing, and I shall awake in the night and miss you from my arms.

"In thinking it all over, this is as good a time as any to split up. I should probably detect subconscious resentments in your attitude toward me which would build up serious counter-resentments in me.

"We could not have continued living on nothing anyway.

"Before I left I committed a last little crime. I cashed a check on a bank where I had no account for the money you will find in the enclosed envelope. This is the case where you must not let your conscience be your guide. I have spent at least five times as much in the saloon where I cashed the check, and they are

acquainted with me only through the theatre where I worked last summer. The money will take care of you for a couple of weeks until you return to the hospital.

"Child, don't be unhappy. Who knows. Perhaps my heart, scarred with the shackles of a hopeless passion will creep back some day like a frightened convict to the scene of its serfdom. Bleeding, torn from contact with an unsympathetic world, it may ask, who knows, that it be permitted once more to take its place in that least anchoritic of cells which you have provided it.

"But don't build up any hopes. It is best, in fact, that you forget me.

"Your ever devoted swain."

The next morning a final note came—the last she received from him. It was mailed from the boat.

"When you were here and I was there,

The world did not a feather care,

Now you are there and I am here,

The world is just as cavalier.

"Ah, I had thought the world would fly

Apart, if either you or I

Had left the other; yet it sticks

As though all hearts were made of bricks.

"Strange world, yet I had also thought

That when to each we were as naught,

It would have torn its poles apart,

To mold us in a single heart.

"It didn't then, it doesn't now;

The world in fact, I must allow

Is so impervious to us

You'd think it didn't give a cuss."

"These thought are very helpful, dearest one. Good-bye."