

# NOTHING TO PAWN BUT HER BODY; POLICE TAKE THAT

Dorothy Day

*New York Call* Tuesday, February 27, 1917, page 1

Annie Miller of Blackwells island is starving for the sight of her 2-year-old boy. He is her only child and she has not seen him for six months. Every day the walls of the workhouse seem thicker and more impenetrable to her. Every day her sick husband and baby seem further and further away.

Six months ago – it was last September – on a hot, dry day, there was nothing in the house to eat. Her husband was lying on the bed by the window, coughing, coughing, almost fainting with pain and with weakness. He was too far gone in consumption to work.

Jim Miller wanted to work. But every time he lifted his head, dizziness and weakness overcame him. It was hard enough to lift a cup of broth to his lips; even his slice of toast that he had had the morning before seemed heavy to him.

He could not lift a pencil in his hand, let alone a spade. And all the while he lay weakly in bed the thoughts of his hungry wife and baby tortured him.

## *Only an Orange*

Annie knew that Jim was wasting with these thoughts. The same thoughts were gnawing at her. If she only had an orange to give him. It was so hot. If she only had some thin, fresh bread and some cool butter.

And the baby! Milk; one potato; a bowl of mush. But there was nothing in the house. There was nothing to eat and nothing to pawn. Nothing to pawn but her body.

She went out that night and when she came in she had something to eat. She smiled bravely and told of a friend that she had not known was in the city – a friend who had loaned her some money.

She went out the next night and the next. Then she was accosted by a detective.

She is in the workhouse now. For six months she has served as a nurse in the hospital section. As soon as the gong wakes her at 6, she hastens out of bed, quickly, so that her hungry imagination will not conjure up the sight of the warm little body that used to press against her side; so that she will not hear the cooing little voice that mimicked the birds on the window sill outside.

All day long, as she hastens past barred windows, her heart tells her that her baby is hungry. There are no newspapers on Blackwells island. Annie does not know that mothers and babies

swarmed to City Hall to ask for food. She does not know that Madison square was overrun with little toddlers last week. She does not know that the Waldorf-Astoria had to call the police to protect them from hungry women and children. But she does know that Jim and the baby are going hungry. And the workhouse hash and bread and tea choke her. She gulps over every meal.

### ***Six Months to Two Years***

Annie Miller was sentenced to an indeterminate sentence on Blackwells island for soliciting. An indeterminate sentence means from six months to two years. And women who are quiet and sober and steady are very much desired by wardens and wardens' wives as servants and cooks and nurses. It means less work for the officials. So when a capable woman like Annie Miller is sent in on an indeterminate sentence, there is small hope of her release.

Mrs. Miller told her story to Ethel Byrne when the latter was hunger striking for her freedom and birth control on Blackwells island three weeks ago. She had cared for her; she had carried her in her strong, motherly arms to the hospital when Mrs. Byrne was too weak to endure the hard workhouse bed. And she had sobbed out confidences when others were not around.

Mrs. Byrne is working now to get Mrs. Miller her freedom. All she knows is the few bare facts which she gave to me yesterday.