

Complains of Organized Charity, Cops

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, February 1939, 1, 4.

Summary: Describes the ordeal of trying to find a bed for a two and a half year old child on a cold Winter night and the indignity they faced at the hands of the police. Finally, she gives her and her daughter Tamar's beds to the boy and his father. (DDLW #340).

Day After Day

It was nineteen above zero and Herbert Joyce had just hitch-hiked from West Virginia. Herbert is two and a half years old. With him was his father, twenty-five, a glass blower. His mother had deserted him when he was six months old.

Herbert was looking for a bed for the night. He had a woolen overall suit on, and no sweater underneath, and tiny galoshes on his tired feet. When he arrived at the Catholic Worker office at supper time he was very hungry indeed.

Nobody knew what to do about the baby and I was out at a meeting and didn't get back until after eight. By the time I came home he was fast asleep on his father's shoulder. They were just waiting.

The top floor front at 115 Mott Street was full to the doors. Ten men slept there and there was no room for a father and child. The rear house was full, every bed taken and every room as full as could be. There was the dining room table of course, but he might roll off that. There were the offices, but one office already had a bed put up in that and there were no other beds to put up in the other offices, nor any blankets. And it was nineteen above. Not as cold as it was to get, but still cold enough.

Crowded or not crowded, Mott Street is scarcely a place for a baby two and a half years old. Unheated at night, oil stoves during the day, no hot water, no bath, no privacy. The two top floors were occupied by women, some of them nervously incapable of work, physically shattered by hardship and insecurity. Not fit company for a baby. And one certainly didn't want to put him in with a lot of men, unemployed, of all ages.

Organized Agencies

So first we tried the McMahon Temporary Shelter for Children. No, that was filled up and besides it was quarantined for scarlet fever. There was the St. Barnabas Shelter over on

Mulberry Street, also temporary, so we tried them and the matron there told us there was a bed. We walked the ten or twelve blocks to get there and found that there had been a mistake. They were quarantined there too, with dysentery. We should try the Foundling, they said.

During this time there had been a policeman who had been assisting us in our search, very friendly and sympathetic, anxious to help us though he assured us that New York wanted no transients, least of all transients with babies.

Foundling Hospital

Once before the Founding Hospital had helped us when Margaret, an old friend of **The Catholic Worker**, had gone to the hospital with arthritis. The hospital had taken in the baby and afterwards boarded it out. So we went with confidence to the Foundling Hospital. There was a subway right at the door of St. Barnabas which let us out practically at the door of the Foundling, so the journey was not so bad. But once there we had to wait and be questioned. By this time it was after nine.

The nurse in charge took our names, the details in regard to the baby, the father, the mother, our interest in the case.

“How long would we wish the baby kept,” she asked.

“A few weeks, until we could find a place to board the baby so the father could find work,” we told her. **The Catholic Worker** could put up the father, but it was the baby that needed special care.

The nurse left to speak to the sister in charge and came back with word that we were to go around the corner to the police station on 67th Street. I don’t remember what she said, but my understanding was that this was a formality to be gone through, and being quite used to the ways of charity organizations and the efficiency which demanded that the recipient of charity be made to go through as many inquiries and as much red tape as possible regardless of the immediate need, we remained patient. After all the baby was asleep. The father might be tired of carrying the sleeping young one—all the way from West Virginia where he should have remained, of course, and lived on the ten dollars a month the relief allowed him, but he had to put up with it. Everyone was only too happy the baby was not awake and crying.

Police Courtesy

So we went to the station house, bare, drab and inhospitable. It was some time before the desk sergeant could give us any attention. He had to talk to a landlord who was having trouble with drain pipes or something. A man of property worthy of attention. He had to talk to another policeman about getting a woman drug addict over to Bellevue. He seemed to be stalling, meditating over our case for a while when he had finished these two cases. Finally he called the Foundling. We heard his end of the conversation but not the other.

“What do you want me to do about it?” he wanted to know. “Oh, you want me to investigate! Well I don’t blame you, they look fishy to me.”

This was hard to understand. Mr. Joyce might have looked fishy and so might I, but after all, it was hard to see what there was fishy about the baby who needed a bed

We were questioned some more. We were taken upstairs and questioned some more. We sat in a room with a detective who was fingerprinting some men, next to a room were some women being held, and the questions went on. Perhaps we were not technically being held by the police, but in effect we were. We were questioned separately and together.

It was suggested that I had been wandering around the country with Mr. Joyce and the baby. This contribution to the case was made by the detective who alternately sneered at us and at the Catholic Charities who had not taken care of the case though he donated his money to them. He remarked on this many times.

What had complicated the whole case was that Bernard had come to us in California, to our Los Angeles headquarters when his wife had deserted him. Thereafter much red tape which took days the baby was taken care of for a time and finally Bernard was sent back to West Virginia.

Ugly Distortion

The fact that we had been concerned in his case before made the police confident that we were partners in his delinquency in running away from his ten-dollar a month allowance in West Virginia. They distorted the story in their ugly imaginations and insinuations until it looked as though the charges were to be made against us of vagrancy, adultery, kidnapping and a few other sins and crimes. During the long hours we sat in the police station – and we were there until after midnight, – the only response to the problem presented Lieutenant Walsh was sneers and suspicion. The detective upstairs was even worse.

Finally after hours of pondering on the part of Lieutenant Walsh an ambulance doctor walked in, much to our surprise. He picked up the sleeping child, much to our alarm and astonishment, examined the baby who refused to wake up, and then handed him back to us. “Nothing wrong with that baby,” he said. We knew that before.

The interne was from the Flower Hospital, and being just a plain man he had a simple solution. “I’ll say the baby is an undiagnosed case and bring him over to the hospital,” he said. “He’ll at least have a bed for the night.”

“Then I’ll have to arrest the father for vagrancy just to see that he doesn’t desert him,” the police decided. “And tomorrow the case will come up in the courts and they’ll both be shipped back to West Virginia. We have enough problems of our own.”

But this didn’t seem any solution for us, so this idea was abandoned.

And then finally, after these hours of pondering, the great police department of the City of New York gave up. We had to take the baby back to Mott Street to find a bed for him there. The only contribution to our problem was that we were escorted back in the patrol wagon,

and I am not yet decided whether we had this escort out of a desire for our comfort or in order that the police might find out whether we really had a House of Hospitality.

In the wagon, our escort policeman was most sympathetic.

“It’s a hard, cruel world,” he said sadly.

We agreed.

“You’ve done wrong, young man, but still I can sympathize with your wanting to keep the child with you.”

We were glad for his sympathy.

He was a kindly man and he gave Bernard a dollar for the baby.

He helped us out, carefully escorted us to the rear tenement which we call home, and even insisted upon going upstairs. By this time I had decided on a solution. It would have saved us lots of time and worry if I had decided on it before.

We put the baby and the young father in my room where there are two single beds, and we woke up Teresa, aged twelve, and she and I went to a neighbor’s apartment to sleep on the floor. (Our friend had one blanket on her bed that night and we had two, one under and one over us.) The next day we sent Bernard and Herbert, the baby, down to the farm at Easton to save them from being shipped back to West Virginia.

“I’m not a bum,” Bernard had said sadly that evening. “I worked for three years in West Virginia until I got laid off, and when I went to California I went because I had a job there which lasted a year. This last summer I worked six months, and I’m looking for work now. But I want to keep my baby.”