

Janey Mary

by

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When Janey Mary turned the corner into Nicholas Street that morning, she leaned wearily against a shop-front to rest. Her small head was bowed and the hair which was so nondescript and unclean covered her face. Her small hands gripped one another for warmth across the faded bodice of her frock. Around the corner lay Canning Cottages with their tiny, frost-gleaming gardens, and gates that were noisy and freezing to touch. She had tried each of them in turn. Her timid knock was well known to the people who lived in Canning Cottages. That morning some of them said: "It's that little 'Carthy one, never mind opening. Twice in the last week she's been around - it's too much of a good thing." Those who did answer her had been dour. They poked cross and harassed faces around half-open doors. Tell her mammy, they said, it's at school she should have her, and not out worrying poor people the likes of them. They had the mouths of their own to feed and the bellies of their own to fill, and God knows that took doing.

The school was in Nicholas Street and children with satchels were already passing. Occasionally Janey Mary could see a few paper books peeping from an open flap, and beside them a child's lunch and a bottle of milk. In the schoolroom was a scrawled and incomprehensible blackboard, and rows of staring faces which sniggered when Janey Mary was stupid in her answers.

Sometimes Father Benedict would visit the school. He asked questions in Catechism and gave the children sweets. He was a huge man who had more intuition than intellect, more genuine affection for children than for learning. One day he found Janey Mary sitting by herself in the back desk. She felt him, giant-like above her, bending over her. Some wrapped sweets were put on her desk.

"And what's your name, little girl?"

"Janey Mary 'Carthy, Father."

"I'm Father Benedict of the Augustinians Where do you live?"

Father Benedict had pushed his way and shoved his way until he was sitting in the desk beside her, Quite suddenly Janey Mary had felt safe and warm. She said easily,

"I lives In Canning Cottages."

He talked to her while the teacher continued self-consciously with her lesson.

"So, your daddy works in the meat factory?"

"No, Father, my daddy's dead."

Father Benedict nodded and patted her shoulder.

"You and I must be better friends, Janey," he said.

"We must tell your mammy to send you to school more often."

"Yes, Father."

"Because we must see more of one another, mustn't we?"

"Yes, Father."

"Would you always come?"

"I'd like to come, Father."

Father Benedict had talked with her for some time like that, the pair of them crushed clumsily in the desk and their heads close together. When he was leaving he gave her more sweets. Later the teacher took them from her as a punishment and gave them out again as little prizes for neatness.

She thought of Father Benedict until an old beggar who was passing said to her: "Are you whingin', child? Is there anything up with you?"

She lifted her head and looked stupidly at him, her mouth open and her eyes quite dry. He was a humpbacked man with broken boots and a bulbous nose. The street about him was a moving forest of feet; the stolid tread of workmen and the pious shuffle of middle-aged women on their way from Mass. "You look a bit shook, kid," he said. "Are you after taking a turn?"

"No, mister," she said, wondering. "I'm only going for to look for bread at St. Nicholas's. My mammy told me."

"Your mammy left it a bit late. They'll be going in for to pray." As though awakened by his words, the bell of the Augustinian Friary rang three times. It rang out with long, resounding strokes across the quivering street, and people paused to uncover their heads and to bless themselves.

Janey Mary looked up quickly. The steeple of the church rose clear and gleaming above the tall houses, and the golden slimness of its cross raced swiftly against the blue and gold of the sky.

Her mother had said: "Look till you find, my lady, and you won't lose your labour. This is the day of the Blessed Bread and

if you get it nowhere else they'll be giving it out at St. Nicholas's."

She turned suddenly and ran quickly up the length of the street. But when she reached the priory the doors were closed and the waiting queue had broken into small knots. She stopped uncertainly and stared for some time.

The priests, the people said, had gone in to pray. They would be back in an hour.

She was glad to turn homewards. She was tired and her bare feet moved reluctantly on the ice-cold pavement. Johnny might have been given some bread on his round with the sticks, or her mother might have had some hidden away. Her mother sometimes did that so that Janey Mary would try very hard to get some.

Picking her way amongst the debris-littered wasteland upon which houses had once stood, she watched her shadow bobbing and growing with the uneven rippling of the ground. The light of the wintry sun rested wanly on everything and the sky was dizzily blue and fluffed a little with white cloud. There were rust-eaten tin-cans lying neglected on the waste, and fragments of coloured delf which she could have gathered to play chaneys had she had the time. The children often went there to play shop; they marked out their pitches with a file of pebbles in the form of an open square. When Janey Mary stood in one of the squares for a moment she was no longer Janey Mary. The waste-land became a busy street and the tracery of pebbles glittering stores. Her face would grow grave. It was that serene gravity of a child at play. But when she stepped out of the magic square she was again Janey Mary, a Janey Mary who was cold and hungry and whose mother was waiting impatiently for bread that had not: been found.

"There was none," she said, looking up at her mother's face.

"Nobody would give it and the man said the priests wouldn't be back for an hour." She looked around hopefully as she spoke, but there were only a few crumbs on the table. They littered its grease-fouled and flower-patterned covering. An enamel jug stood in the centre and about it the slopped ugliness of used cups. Now that she was home she realised how endless the morning's trudging had been. She realised how every door had been closed against her. Her mother's voice rose.

"Then you can do without. Are you after looking at all, you little trollop? Two hours to go the length of the street and around to the holy priests, and us all in a wakeness with the

hunger. And Johnny going out with the sticks and him famished but for the little bit I had left away. Are you after looking at all?"

The enamel of the jug was broken in three places. The breaks were spidery, like the blobs of ink which used to fall so dishearteningly on her copy-books. Down the side of each cup clung the yellow residue of dribbled tea. The whole table shifted suddenly and went back again, and her mother's voice seemed far away. Janey Mary wanted to sit down.

"Gallivanting," her mother said, "off gallivanting with your pals. I'll gallivant you. But you can go back again. There's nothing in the house. Back with you to the priests house and wait like any Christian for what's going. And take the bag with you. You don't do a hand's turn till you do that."

Janey Mary stood with her hands clasped in front of her and looked up at her mother. The thought of going back again filled her with misery.

"I asked," she said. "I asked everywhere."
"Then you can ask again," said her mother. "You can ask till you find," and swung away.

Janey Mary went wearily to the corner to fetch the bag. The kitchen trembled and became dark when she bent to pick it up. As she went out of the door her mother said :
"Put a bit of hurry on yourself and don't be slinging. It's certain you'll never die with the beating of your heart. The world and its wife would get something and mine'd be left."

Once more she was out in the ancient crookedness of streets, picking her way amidst the trundling of wheels and the countless feet. Tiny and lost beneath the steepness of houses, she went slowly, her bare feet dragging and dirty. At this hour the shops in Nicholas Street were crowded with women who haggled over halfpennies. White-coated assistants leaned quickly over marble-topped counters with heads cocked to one side and pencils raised in readiness, or dashed from counters to shelves and back again, banging things on the scales and then licking pencil stubs while they frowned over figures. Sometimes Janey Mary used to stand and watch them, but now she went by without interest. When a tram went grinding past her, her lips trembled, and though the rails after it and before it gleamed in the sunlight, it was a pale cold gleaming. There was no friendly heat in the sunlight. There was nothing friendly. There were only trundling trams and the tramp of feet, and once again the

slim cross on the spire of St. Nicholas's.

On the Feast of the Blessed Bread it was the custom of the priests to erect a wooden counter on the high steps before the door of the priory. Here two of the brothers stood to watch the forming of the queue. Janey Mary looked hard through the veil which blurred occasionally in front of her eyes, but could catch no sign of Father Benedict. No bread had yet appeared though the queue was growing. She took her place and kept close to the wall. In near the wall she found it easier to hold her position. It was very cold at first, but after a while more people came and the air grew warmer. They came, as she had known they would, with baskets and shawls, with torn shopping bags and ragged coats, and gathered thickly about her. There were men there too, old pensioners and men who had not worked for years.

"There won't be much going," they said. "There was a shocking crowd here this morning."

"Take your bloody hour," they said. "Who d'you think you're pushing ? "

"Aisy, aisy, mind the chisler."

They talked like that for a long time. At first they argued furiously with one another. But later they became dour with impatience. They shuffled uncomfortably. They spat frequently and heaved long sighs.

After a while it became frightening to be in there so close to the wall, to be so small that everyone towered over you. Janey Mary felt weak and wanted to Set out. When she glanced sideways or ahead of her she could see nothing but tightly packed bodies, and when she looked down there were feet, but no ground. She tried to look upwards, but could not. An hour passed before Father Benedict appeared on the steps.

"Father Benedict, God bless him," they said. "It'll be coming soon when he's here."

Janey Mary was lifted clear off the ground by the movement of the crowd and lost her place. Now she was behind a stoop-backed man with a threadbare coat and heavily nailed boots. His collar was flaked and greasy with dandruff and his coat was foul smelling, but it was the boots which held Janey Mary's attention. They clattered unsteadily on the pavement very close to her bare feet. There were diamond-shaped nails in double

rings about the heels of them. She bent to keep her eyes fixed on the boots and wriggled to avoid them. Her attention became fixed on them. To a man near her she said, "I want to get out, mister, let me let out," but even if he had heard her he could not have helped her now. She tried to attract attention, but they had forgotten her. They kept telling one another over and over again what each of them already knew.

"It's coming," they said, pressing forward, "it's coming." And after a while the murmuring changed and the queue surged.

"Look," they shouted, "it's here."

Any Mary was lifted once more. Once more her feet were clear of the ground and her breathing stifled by the pressure of those around her. She was in danger now and clawed whimpering at the dandruff-flaked collar. Through a whirl of arms and shoulders she had a view of Father Benedict, his broad shoulders tall and firm above the press of bodies. She tried to call out to him.

"The chisler," someone said, noticing. "For God's sake quit pushing. Look at the chisler." A man threw out his hand to grip her, but a movement of the crowd twisted him suddenly aside. She saw his hand grabbing futilely to her left. As the crowd parted she began to slip.

"Father Benedict," she called faintly, "Father Benedict."

Then the man in front stumbled and the nailed boots crushed heavily on her feet.

When her eyes opened again she was on the sofa in the visitors parlour. Father Benedict and one of the lay brothers were bending over her. Someone had put a rug about her. An electric fire glowed warmly against the opposite wall, and over it hung a gold-framed picture of the Sacred Heart. Her feet felt numb and heavy and the picture swam before her eyes. But it was warm in the parlour and the morning's searching was over. Then she remembered the bread and her mother's words. She moved suddenly, but when she tried to speak her ears were filled with noise.

The lay brother had turned to Father Benedict.

"You were very quick," he was saying. "Is she badly hurt?"

Father Benedict, answering him, said in a strange voice:
"Only her feetYou can see the print of the nails...."