THE NUN'S VISIT

B A Gray

LIFE WAS wonderful as a child growing in my younger days. We lived in an old thatched house with no running water or central heating. Mother, who was a great worker and a wonderful house wife, could make a meal out of so little. All the food was grown on the land and the only things that were bought was a ten stone bag of flour for the baking, salt, maybe an odd loaf and when she bought a 2lb pot of jam it was a great treat. She never forgot the children and we all got a lucky bag from town. Mother did her shopping on a Saturday when she sold eggs, fifty dozen a week she sold, so needless to say we had quite a few hens and chickens. The cock chicken were killed for dinner and the rest were expected to lay at least one egg every day. If they didn't they soon ended up in the soup pot as well. It was our job to keep a check on the number of hens, in case the fox was talking them. No hens meant no eggs to sell and no lucky bags.

Life was pretty normal then, cow milked in the morning and in the evening, the pigs fed (one of which was killed for bacon once a year), calves, hens and the horse all fed and looked after. My father ploughed and mowed with the horse for hire and this helped in rearing us.

Bringing in the hay was a great day for us as all the neighbours came to help out. The old men had their own particular jobs at the making of the reek. Myself and my brother had the job of 'snigging' the cocks of hay from the meadow to the men building the reek. There was another gathering of neighbours for the threshing. Michael Campbell always looked after the bags of oats. My brother sat on the thresher cutting the bands of the sheaves of oats.

My younger brother and myself and our little terrier dog spent most of the time trying to catch the mice as they scurried out from the stacks of oats. We were warned to get out of the way and to bring that 'mutt' with us. There was no getting us shifted as there plenty of mice and the dog needed the practice for the bigger challenge that lay ahead. He would soon be used for fox hunting and it was his job to get the foxes out of the den.

Of course my poor mother would have to cook for all the men. She had prepared roast beef, gravy, a large pot of big flowery spuds and cabbage. She always fried the cabbage on the pan with few slices of bacon to give it a nice flavour. This was the first time I ever saw brown sauce.

My first day of school was certainly memorable-new wellies, new socks with garters made from knicker elastic that my mother made.

School came as quite a shock to the system. Seeing so many children together, I didn't want to stay at all as I thought that I would get mixed with them and might never get home again.

I wouldn't let go of my mother's hand, making sure she wouldn't go without me. The poor woman patiently sat all day with me but the next morning I was sent off with my older brother and had to face it alone that day. I never looked back and my school day soon became part of the routine.

Life around the house was normal until word came that the nuns were coming home. Now most people had the station mass in the country house and that meant the house was turned upside-down. But the coming of the nuns meant that our home was not just turned upside down but also inside out. The whitewashing would be the first job on the agenda and this meant a trip to the 'limekiln', which was an experience I always remember with great fondness. It was about two miles away and I set off on the bicycle with the bag for the lime. The limekiln was a large hole, about six foot deep and four foot wide with a huge steel grate in the bottom, like the bin that people used for burning rubbish before the advent of the bin lorry.

There was a large fire burning and the limestone was put in on top and as it burned, it came out mad hot at the bottom as a white powder. When it cooled down it was sold off as lime at a shilling a stone. It took about a stone to whitewash the house and the out houses. The lime was mixed with water for use and if it got on your hand then it burnt the skin and you had to be very careful not to get it splattered in your eyes or they would get sore and red for the rest of the day.

My mother did the whitewashing because she wouldn't trust us because

we'd have more on ourselves than on the walls. It was an awful messy job but when it was for the nuns, what about the mess? It would be all cleaned up by the time they got here. The whitewashing brush could never be found after the last time it was used, so that meant a trip to town to get a new brush which cost one shilling and six pence. The boss had something to say about that, "If it was left where I put it in the shed, there be no need to spend money on a new one".

It was now time for the papering to start. My father did the papering at night after he came home from work. Everything would be ready for him. My mother had the edges trimmed of all the paper and the paste mixed from flour and water with clean cloths left ready. Which ever one of us was let stay up late to help would get tea and bread with jam, when the work was done. Next day we started cleaning the pictures and ornaments that were taken down for the decorating.

My sister was washing the Infant Child of Prague when the colour came off his face. My mother won him at a Bazaar and was so pleased with this fine statue that we couldn't let her see him without the colour. Kathleen got out the make up and put a good dab of pan stick on his face and a bit of lipstick on his lips. He looked a treat. We were worried that the nuns would take a close look at the statue and notice the make up. My mother would have killed the lot of us. She always told us to be careful when washing the two vases that were on the mantle piece in the parlour. "Your father bought them the year we got married at the auction along with the kitchen chairs and don't break that globe on the Sacred Heart lamp, lassies" she would say as we chatted among ourselves about the make up.

The day before the reverend mothers were due to come, the horse was tackled and my mother and father set off for town. They got ham, tomatoes, lettuce and mustard for the tea. They also got a packet of marrowfat peas and a roast of beef for the dinner and jelly and custard for after the dinner. The chance of her remembering lucky bags was slim. That night the jelly was set, the peas soaked and the good china taken out, that wasn't used since they were there three years ago. We were never let wash them, they were too precious and beautiful. My two aunts brought them to mother from England.

On the morning of their arrival we dressed in our finery and all the old clothes and wellies were dispatched to the barn. You wouldn't find a stitch of old clothes in the house. Even the hens were fed in the early hours of the morning to make sure they wouldn't shit in the freshly swept yard or around the door.

Finally the hired car out of town would arrive and the two nuns stepped out. The kissing and hugging began and mother was so pleased to see them. They always brought some goodies to us. They were led up to the parlour by my father and there they would sit round the open fire that was lit from early morning. We were allowed up till the food started. Then we were sent to the kitchen. Even my mother ate in the kitchen when she had them fed and watered. We were longing for the day to end and see the hired car coming back to collect them, hoping they hadn't eaten all the cake and the goodies.

It was the storm before the calm and everything went back to normal for another three years and we were glad to see the back of them.

A SOUND MAN FOR THE COUNCIL

Garreth Byrne

Balloons bubble from the car convoy
gear-shifting and blaring away
along main street, into side lane
and straight down back row. Cheers and waves,
Intermittent dissonance of klaxon toots
disrupt the mediocre silence of the town:
a made-up carnival of revelled hoots.

In the lead car the moment man,
Murph 'The Pier', just elected,
gesticulates and beams in conquest mode.
From the footpath gawk two votes
that sent him to the Council. Nod,
shout thanks, See youse in The Wharf,
veer into the new estate, déan stad

The convoy comandeers the suburb street,
Every footpath mounted, car grabbed,
as supporters rouse the neighbourhood.
From door Nine Murph outspreads his arms
episcopally warm and embraces
happy Nell, the boys, oblates Number 1
poster high, vaunting shirt and blue braces.

Out to the clatter neighbours come,
draw over to the gate, press hands,
slap shoulders, share the smiling joy
and instant festive local mood.
The first count was good, but second
and third transfers took the tally
to the quota. The Council seat beckoned.

The campaign for the pier, the old pothole
story beyond Drumdaun, and deep concern
about the school hall deftly swung the vote.
Nell a district nurse, and himself well in
with Coillte, his brother teacher around
in the Tech. Good connected family,
decent, helpful, thoroughly sound.

So let this little neighbourhood rejoice
and bask in radiant victory.
The Council's in safe hands, be sure –
no fret about lamps or waste disposal.
National politics can go its way,
no worry. Drains, pensions, farm grants,
incentive schemes hold local sway.