

What Girls Are For

For years I couldn't see what God intended girls for at all. They struck me as the most useless articles and a real nightmare in the home. The way they went on about their old frocks and their silly dolls disgusted me. There was my sister, Biddy, for instance. She was more than a year younger than I was. Nothing worried her. She mandered round the house like a half-idiot, humming to herself, having forgotten whatever it was she was looking for.

You couldn't send her on a message because she forgot what it was the moment she was outside the door, and a quarter of an hour afterwards you found her playing down the avenue with the money in the pocket of her pinafore and the hair hanging down over her right eye. Then she would brush back the hair as if it was the cobweb on her brain and say: 'Oh, I forgot.'

Sometimes I thought that she wasn't half the fool she let on to be. Because, of course, I came in for most of the errands. I had to pay for having a head on me. As if I hadn't responsibilities enough as Chief Gang Leader!

She couldn't even understand why I should be Chief Gang Leader. According to her, there was no necessity for it, and no honour in having the job. To her the avenue where she played hopscotch with the Daly kids was only just an avenue like any other, but to me, the bend in it was no man's land, a place I had to approach carefully, and the corner by the gas lamp the frontier of our gang territory and the scene of endless desperate battles with the Tram Terrace kids, who were kept out of the avenue at all only by dread of our Corner Patrol.

While I worried myself sick about how I was to keep up the Corner Patrol, she went home and reported that I was playing with the Hendrick children. Of course, I wasn't playing with them; I didn't even like them. But what could you do with mothers and fathers that kept their sons in at night to do homework instead of letting them out on patrol? If the patrol broke down, little chance the Dalys or Biddy would have had of playing hopscotch in the avenue. The Tram Terrace kids—a ferocious gang!—would have seen to that.

I broke her of the spying by getting the whole gang to torture her one night. She went screeching to father—she had a special screech for father's benefit that he could hear from the end of the avenue—and I got a good hiding, but after that she left the gang alone. As I told her: 'A torture is worse than a good hiding any day.'

She had no idea—nobody who hasn't been in the position himself could have any idea—of the worry and expense of being Chief Gang Leader. We got a penny a week—twopence if we were lucky—and any Chief Gang Leader will tell you that you can't run a gang on that.

You had to arm chaps that had no guns—and the ones you couldn't over-awe by exceptional strength or daring, you had to give things to. I often thought if only I had a shilling a week instead of a penny I could have bought over sufficient forces to clear not only the avenue but the whole road, and make our territory impregnable from the seafront to Tram Terrace.

That was really why I used to make what I called Viking raids and Biddy called stealing. It wasn't stealing really; it was all for the gang funds. She had endless places she used to hide her money in, but sometimes I found it even then, and she went screeching to father. 'He took my penny—boo-hoo-hoo!'

It was disgusting. Though she knew better than to tell mother when I made Viking raids on the housekeeping money, she used to be always at me in a low, blood-curdling voice, following me round like an old witch. 'You'll be caught yet, Willie Jackson. The police will be up to you. You took three shillings out of mummy's purse. God sees you.' Sometimes she drove me so wild that I went mad and twisted her arm or

pulled her hair or made smithereens of her old dolls, and then she went off, screeching again, and I got clouted. I got more cloutings through her than through anything else. I hated her.

It was while I was worrying about the gang that we had a baby. Frankie was small and fat and nearly always in good humour, and whenever he saw Biddy or me he laughed himself sick. He always thought when you covered him up that he was losing his toes and would start looking to see what had happened to them.

‘Toes, Frankie!’ I’d say, and first he’d look at his hands and give them a chew to see that they were the real article, and then he’d begin working his arms and legs, cross-eyed with excitement till he had the last stitch of clothes off him and could see his toes again.

I was allowed to lift him when he had wind, but Biddy wasn’t, because she was still too small. Yet, in spite of that, she was the one he liked best. It was a bit of a disappointment to me. He knew her very step on the path, and he’d try to lift himself, and then make a queer coughing little noise that he used only to draw our attention. It was different from the way he coughed when he was hungry, because then he was usually cross, but this other cough was all a joke. Biddy came up then and coughed back, and they went at it till he was exhausted. After that he shook his head at her, and that was a signal for her to waggle her pigtails at him. When she shook her head they danced from shoulder to shoulder. Frankie goggled, trying to follow them, till he ended up with his two eyes looking different ways.

But when he grew a little older, it became a nuisance. He wouldn’t even take a bottle except from her, and when she wasn’t around and we couldn’t get her, he kicked up a terrible row. In the end, if Biddy wanted to do anything or go anywhere, she had to take off her shoes and whisper, and even then he could sometimes recognize the whisper and you’d hear him in the bedroom, beginning to cough....

Then he got a bad cold—it was looking for his toes when there was nobody around that brought it on—and, one night, Biddy woke me and whispered fiercely into my ear.

‘Willie,’ she said, ‘our Frankie is ill. I hope he’s not going to die.’

‘How do you know he’s ill?’ I asked.

‘That’s not a right scream at all,’ she said. ‘Listen to it!’

I listened and, sure enough, it frightened me. I got up and went to the door of mother’s room.

‘Is Frankie ill, Mummy?’ I asked.

‘I think he’s got a bit of a cold,’ said mother lightly. ‘Run back to bed now or you’ll be getting another. Frankie will be better in the morning.’

He wasn’t better in the morning. He was all hot and choking and his face was very red. Miss Regan, the health visitor, was called in, and she thought it better to send for the doctor. Biddy and I stayed for a while with him in the big bedroom, but he wouldn’t play with us at all. Biddy tossed her pigtails and just once he smiled and made a little motion of his head, but all at once he began to wail, and you could almost hear him telling you that he was too sick to play. When mother tried to give him a drink he screamed and pushed it away, and it was from Biddy he took it at last. We had to go to school, and I went in misery, wondering if he’d be dead before I got back. Life without that baby seemed impossible.

The doctor came in the afternoon, and I knew from the way he spoke to mother that Frankie was very bad.

I didn’t know what to do with myself. It was terrible watching him trying to get his breath, coughing and choking and terrified out of his wits, and not to be able to do anything for him. Mother went into town to get the medicine the doctor ordered.

I went out to play, but every five or ten minutes I went mooching back with a sense of guilt on me until at last Miss Regan shouted at me not to be all the time opening the bedroom door. Then I went to the front door and started to cry all to myself. The road was almost empty and there was no one to watch my tears. I realized then the hollowness of being Chief Gang Leader.

Miss Regan came out to see if my mother was coming and saw me crying. ‘What are you crying for?’ she asked brusquely.

‘Frankie’s going to die,’ I said and I was so babyish with grief that I turned and put my head in her skirt and my arms about her legs.

‘God is good, child,’ she said, patting me on the head, but that did not comfort me. I never yet heard anyone say that God was good unless they meant that He’d need to be. And when she went in again I made the sacrifice of my life and promised Him that if only Frankie didn’t die I’d give up the Viking raids and hand over the position of Chief Gang Leader to Ernie Thompson.

I felt a fellow couldn’t do more. If God didn’t pay attention to that, He’d never pay attention to anyone.

Then my mother came in from town with a bottle and a jar with a spout. I heard her and Miss Regan discussing the way you should use it. They put medicine and boiling water in the jar and put the spout to Frankie’s lips, but the moment they did, it started him coughing, and he went black in the face, screaming and waving his arms.

‘Let me try him,’ said Miss Regan quietly, and she took Frankie herself, but he only got worse. Bidy was sitting, watching them and saying nothing.

‘You’re only chocking him, Miss Regan,’ she said all at once. ‘If you’d give him to me, I’ll have a try,’ said Bidy.

‘Silly girl! What could you do more than the rest of us?’ replied Miss Regan.

‘She’s very good with him all the same,’ said my mother. ‘He’ll do things for her he wouldn’t do for me.’

‘I suppose it’ll do no harm, anyway,’ said Miss Regan.

She put Frankie on Bidy’s knee, and Bidy took the spout of the jar in her own mouth and began coughing like mad.

Frankie gave her a look. The poor kid seemed to think he was missing something special.

‘Frankie try now!’ she said, and she put the spout of the jar in his mouth again, but again he choked and began to wail.

‘It’s no good,’ said my mother distractedly. ‘The poor child would be safer in bed.’

‘Let her alone now, ma’am,’ said Miss Regan, watching Bidy with a smile, and I saw that she really thought Bidy was being quite clever with him.

Bidy didn’t wait for any orders. The moment Frankie began to cry, she put the jar back in her own mouth and coughed again, and Frankie turned round and looked up at her. He couldn’t make out for the life of him what fun she got out of it, but he felt that there must be something in it for him. Next time he coughed, Bidy coughed louder, and this time he didn’t cry. It was extraordinary the way she got him quietly sucking away at the jar.

‘Pon my soul,’ said Miss Regan with amusement, ‘you’d think he knew what she was saying. Do you know, Mrs. Jackson, if I were you I’d light a fire in her room and leave him along with her tonight.’

“And supposing he got a bad turn?”

‘You’d hear him just the same,’ said Miss Regan. ‘I think he might rest easier with her around.’

That night our room felt grand with the big, roaring fire that father stoked down and the candle lighted by Bidly’s bed. But it wasn’t so grand when I tried to get to sleep. Frankie was getting worse all the time. Every five or ten minutes he had his fits of choking and screaming, and several times they were so bad that either father or mother came in to see how he was. I was a very heavy sleeper and it took a lot to wake me, but that did it, and somehow, when I woke, I was too sleepy to be sorry for him or for anyone, only myself, and I wished that God would make up His mind quickly about whether He wanted me to be Chief Gang Leader or not.

Bidly didn’t seem to mind so much; she wasn’t such a heavy sleeper, and she seemed to hear every sound. It was nearly morning when I woke and saw her sitting by the fire in her nightdress with Frankie on her lap, turning his head to see where the candlelight was coming from. She was giving him his inhalation; although mother had told her to knock on the wall, she had boiled the kettle herself.

Then father came in with a dressing-gown wrapped round him, and he just stood and nodded at her two or three times.

‘Shall I get you the boiling water for his inhaler?’ he asked in a meek little voice that didn’t sound like daddy’s at all.

‘I got it myself, Daddy,’ she said, and, to my astonishment, he only nodded again.

‘Good girl!’ he said. ‘I’ll put him back in the cradle for you now.’

‘No, Daddy,’ she said, ‘I’ll bring him into my own bed. He won’t get so frightened there.’

‘You might be right,’ said my father thoughtfully. ‘I’ll put a bottle in for you.’

And away with her across the room with Frankie in her arms and father not saying a word to her. The girl was breaking every rule and, instead of being ticked off, she had everyone waiting on her hand and foot, and only dying to get more orders from her.

Even the next day when the doctor came she had to be in the room with him for fear Frankie would get frightened, and I noticed that he gave his instruction first to her and then to mother. As he went out, he said to mother: ‘That’s a smart little girl of yours, but I wouldn’t let her tire herself too much.’

Mother put her to bed, but once she went, Frankie kicked up a row again. Whenever mother or Miss Regan went near him he only screeched. The child was mad with rage, and they were afraid to cross him for fear of putting him into convulsions.

Bidly heard him even in her sleep, and while Miss Regan and mother were both singing songs to him, trying to keep him quiet, the door opened and in came Bidly with her hair over her eyes and her lids glued together with sleep.

You could see she didn’t know where she was, but she couldn’t keep away from the child. I was full of pride in her then and really sorry about smashing up her old dolls. I suppose it was on them really that she practised it.

That night was the worst of all. Whatever the doctor had told her, Bidly made up her mind not to take her eyes off Frankie, she just sat up in bed with her hands round her knees or lay back, trying to look at a couple of comics my father had bought her. He was in a couple of times to stoke the fire and see if there was

anything she wanted, and then I fell off asleep. Suddenly she woke me. Again it was coming on to morning, for the dawn was just peeping in the window.

‘Willie!’ she whispered, ‘Willie, wake up! Frankie’s better.’

‘All right,’ I groaned. ‘Let me alone.’ I was still half asleep.

‘But listen, can’t you? Listen!’ And then she gave a small cough, and I heard an answering cough from the cradle.

At that, I got up at once. Bidy was sitting by the cradle, just looking at the baby. She had a peculiar soft look on her face. I thought maybe she was still half asleep like I was. Then she wagged her head and began to toss her hair from side to side.

Frankie smiled and tossed his own head three or four times. You could see the kid was better. The first thought in my mind was: I’m not Chief Gang Leader any more, and just for the moment I felt a bit sorry for myself, but then I realized that I wasn’t really sorry at all, and the thought went to my head.

‘I’m going to tell mummy,’ I shouted and made for the door.

‘No, no!’ Bidy said, starting to whine. ‘You mean, dirty thing. I should tell her.’

But she spoke too late, for I had dashed into the big bedroom, and at my first words my father leaped out of bed and came thumping after me.

‘What’s up, Bidy?’ he asked.

‘That mean thing,’ Bidy said, pointing at me with one hand, while she rubbed her eyes with the other. ‘He went in and told you, and he wouldn’t let me tell you, and it was I made Frankie better, and he never did anything at all. Boo-hoo-hoo!’

‘I did do anything at all,’ I shouted, wild with the injustice of it. ‘I promised God to give up the gang if he made Frankie better.’

‘You little puppy!’ my father said angrily. ‘Couldn’t you let the child come in herself?’

‘I only wanted to tell you quick,’ I said, and threw myself on the other bed and began to cry, too.

‘Of all the families!’ said my mother, raising her hands to heaven. ‘Aren’t you ever done squabbling? And none of you caring whether the child is better or not.’

But it was all just like old times, and I saw that, Chief Gang Leader or no Chief Gang Leader, I would still be persecuted by that girl for the rest of my days. That, I suppose, is mainly what girls are for.

(1951)