

Shadows of the Workhouse

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Extract

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Part I

WORKHOUSE CHILDREN

NONNATUS HOUSE

Nonnatus House was both a convent and the working base for the nursing and midwifery services of the Sisters of St Raymund Nonnatus.* The house was situated in the heart of the London Docklands and the practice covered Poplar, the Isle of Dogs, Stepney, Limehouse, Millwall, Bow, Mile End and parts of Whitechapel. I worked with the Sisters in the 1950s. It was a time, shortly after the Second World War, when the scars of the devastated city could be seen everywhere – bomb sites, blown-out shops, closed streets and roofless houses (often inhabited). It was a time when the docks were fully operational, and millions of tons of cargo poured in and out every day. Huge merchant vessels sailed up the Thames, to be piloted into the wharves through a complex system of canals, locks and basins. It was not unusual to pass along a road within a few feet of the towering hulk of a merchant ship. Even in the 1950s about sixty per cent of all cargo was unloaded manually, and the ports teemed with labourers. Most of them lived with their families in the little houses and tenements around the docks.

Families were large, sometimes huge, and living conditions cramped. In fact, by today's standards, the living conditions would be considered Dickensian. Most dwellings had running cold water, but no hot water. About half had an indoor lavatory, but for the other half the lavatory was outside, usually shared with other families. Very few homes had a bathroom. A bath was taken

* The Midwives of St Raymund Nonnatus is a pseudonym. I have taken the name from St Raymund Nonnatus, the patron saint of midwives, obstetricians, pregnant women, childbirth and newborn babies. He was delivered by Caesarean section ('*non natus*' is the Latin for "not born") in Catalonia, Spain, in 1204. His mother, not surprisingly, died at his birth. He became a priest and died in 1240.

in a tin bath placed on the floor of the kitchen or living room, though public bath houses were also frequently used. Most houses had electric light, but gaslight was still common, and I have delivered many a baby by this flickering light, as well as by torchlight or hurricane lamp.

It was a time just before the social revolution of 'the Pill', and women tended to have many children. A colleague of mine delivered an eighteenth baby to one woman and I delivered a twenty-fourth! Admittedly these were extreme cases, but ten babies was quite common. Although the fashion for hospitalisation for a birth was fast gaining ground, this "fashion" had not affected the Poplar women, who were slow to change, and a home birth was still preferred. Earlier in the century, even as little as twenty or thirty years previously, women were still delivering each other's babies as they had done in earlier centuries, but by the 1950s, with the advent of the National Health Service, all pregnancies and births were attended by trained midwives.

I worked with the Sisters of St Raymund Nonnatus, a religious order of Anglican nuns with a history dating back to the 1840s. This was also a nursing order pioneered at a time when nurses were commonly regarded as the dregs of female society. The Sisters, bound for life by the monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, had been in Poplar since the 1870s. They started their work at a time when there was virtually no medical help for the poorest of the poor, and a woman and her baby survived or died unattended. The Sisters lived a life of ceaseless dedication to their religion and to the people whom they felt were in their care. At the time when I worked at Nonnatus House, Sister Julienne was Sister-in-Charge.

Convents tend to attract within their portals ladies of middle years who are unable to cope with life in one way or another. These ladies are always single, widowed or divorced, and lonely. They are nearly always gentle, timid and shy, with an immense yearning for the goodness which they see in the convent but

cannot find in the harsh world outside. Usually they are very devout in points of religious observance and have an unrealistic or romanticised idea of monastic life and long to be part of it. However, they often do not have a true vocation that would enable them to take the life vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Nor, I suspect would they possess the strength of character necessary to live within these vows. So they hover on the fringe, neither fully within the world, nor withdrawn from it.

Such a lady was Jane. She was probably around forty-five when I met her, but she looked much older. She was, tall, thin, aristocratic in appearance, with delicate bone structure, beautifully sculpted features, and refined manners. In another context she would have been an outstanding beauty, but her excessive dowdiness made her look plain and nondescript. It was almost as if she did it on purpose. Her soft grey hair could have curled prettily around her face, but she cut it herself, so that it was jagged and shapeless. Her height, which should have rendered her distinguished, she reduced by bending her shoulders, so that her carriage and walk were stooped and cringing. Her large, expressive eyes were filled with nameless anxiety and surrounded by worry lines. Her speech was so soft that it sounded like a far-off twitter, and her laugh a nervous giggle.

In fact, nervousness was her chief characteristic. She seemed frightened of everything. I noticed that, even at meals, she did not dare to pick up her knife and fork until everyone else had done so, and when she did, her hands frequently shook so much that she would drop something. Then she had to apologise profusely to everyone, especially to Sister Julianne, who was always at the head of the table.

Jane had lived at Nonnatus House for many years and fulfilled a role that was neither nurse, nor domestic servant, but a mixture of the two. I had the impression she was a highly intelligent woman who could easily have trained as a nurse, and been very good at it, but something must have prevented her. No doubt it was her chronic nervousness, for she could never have taken the

responsibility that is a daily part of any nurse's life. So Sister Julienne sent her out to do simple jobs, like blanket baths, or enemas, or delivering various things to patients. In doing these little jobs, Jane was all of a twitter with anxiety, going over and over her bag obsessively, muttering to herself such things as, "Soap, towels. Have I got everything? Is it all there?" Consequently it took her two or three hours to do a job that any competent nurse could have achieved in twenty minutes. When she had finished, she was pathetically eager for recognition, her eyes almost pleading for someone to say that she had done well. Sister Julienne always praised her small achievements, but I could see that it was a strain for her to be so constantly alert to Jane's craving for praise.

Jane also helped the nurses and midwives in the clinical room in small ways, such as cleaning instruments, packing bags and so on, and again she was irritatingly eager to please. Asked for a syringe, she would rush off and get three. Asked for some cotton-wool swabs for one baby, she would bring enough for twenty and then almost grovel as she handed over the item with a nervous giggle. This craven urge to please brought her no rest, no comfort.

It was all very disconcerting, especially as she was old enough to be my mother, and as it generally took her about three times as long as it took me to do a job, I refrained from asking. But she intrigued me, and I watched her.

Jane spent most of her time in the house, so one of her jobs was to take telephone messages, which she did with meticulous, and needless, over-attention to detail. She also helped Mrs B in the kitchen. This led to many a rumpus, because Mrs B was a quick and efficient cook, and Jane's dithering nearly drove her to distraction. She shouted at Jane to "put a move on", and then poor Jane would be paralysed with terror, faltering, "Oh dear, yes, of course, yes, quickly, of course." But her limbs wouldn't move, and she just stood stock-still, whimpering.

Once I heard Mrs B tell Jane to peel the potatoes and cut them in half for roasting. Later, when she wanted to put the

potatoes in the oven, she found that Jane had cut every potato into about twenty pieces. She had been so desperately anxious to please by cutting them into exact halves that she couldn't stop and every half had been cut in half again, and so on until all that was left was a mound of tiny pieces. When Mrs B exploded, Jane fell back against the wall, pleading for forgiveness, shaking all over and white with terror. Fortunately, Sister Julienne came into the kitchen at that moment, saw the situation, and rescued Jane. "Never mind, Mrs B, we'll have mash today. They are just the right size for steaming. Jane, come with me, will you, please? The laundry has just come back and needs checking."

Poor Jane's eyes said it all – her fears, her grief, her gratitude and her love. I watched her go, and wondered what had happened to make her so fragile. Despite the kindness always shown to her by the Sisters, she seemed to live in a world of unfathomable loneliness.

She was very devout and attended Mass every day. She also attended most of the five monastic offices of the nuns. I had seen her in chapel, her fingers counting her rosary, her eyes earnestly fixed on the altar, half-intoning the words "Jesus loves me, Jesus loves me," over and over again, a hundred times or more. It is easy to scoff at such devotion. Women like Jane can be seen everywhere and they are always fair game for a cheap laugh.

I was with Jane on one occasion in Chrisp Street Market. It was just before Christmas and the stalls were laden with knick-knacks and curios – obvious Christmas presents. We approached one of these stalls. Lying in the centre was a small wooden object, about five or six inches long. It was nearly, but not quite, round and smooth, with a slight ridge running up the under side towards a pronounced rim. The tip was rounded, smooth and polished, with a small hole in the centre.

Jane picked up the object and held it between thumb and forefinger for everyone to see.

"Oh, what's this?" she said enquiringly.

Everyone fell silent and stared at Jane and the object. No one laughed.

The stall-holder was a fast-talking, street-wise coster of about fifty, who had been selling bric-a-brac most of his life. With a theatrical gesture he pushed his cap to the back of his head, took the fag out of his mouth and stubbed it out slowly on the edge of his stall. He glanced at his audience and opened his eyes wide with surprised innocence before answering: “Wha’ is it, lady? Wha’ is it? Why, lady, haven’ chew seen one o’ these fings afore?”

Jane shook her head.

“Why, it’s a honey-stirrer. Vat’s what it is, lady. An ’oney-stirrer, for stirrin’ ’oney.”

“Really? How interesting!” murmured Jane.

“Well, yes, very interestin’, it is. They’re old, you know, lady. Been around a long time, they ’ave. I’m surprised you ain’t come across one ’afore now.”

“No, never. You learn something new every day, don’t you? How do you use it?”

“How do you use it? Ah, well now, allow me to show you, lady, if you don’ mind.”

He leaned forward and took the object from Jane’s outstretched hand. The crowd, which had grown considerably, pressed forward, eager not to miss a word.

“Let me show you, lady. You sticks vis ’ere ’oney-stirrer in yer ’oney pot, and you stirs yer ’oney like vis” – he made a slight movement of the wrist – “an the ’oney, it catches on vis ’ere rim – you see vis ’rim ’ere, lady?” (He rubbed his fingers around it appreciatively.) “Well, ve honey, it catches on the rim, an’ drips off, like.”

“Really?” said Jane, “how fascinating. I would never have thought of it. I suppose it must be used a lot by country people who keep bees.”

“Oh, yes, country people, vey use it all the time, wha’ wiv all ’em birds an’ bees an’ all.”

“Well, I’m sure it must be very useful. Sister Julienne likes

honey. I think I will buy this for her as a Christmas present. I am sure she would appreciate it.”

“Oh yes. Sister Julienne will appreciate it all right, not ’arf she won’t. If you asks my opinion, lady, you couldn’t get Sister Julienne a Christmas present as wha’ she’d appreciate more. Now, I was askin’ four shillins for vis ’ere remarkable honey-stirrer, but seem’ as how it’s you, lady, wot’s buyin’ it for Sister Julienne for Christmas, I’ll let you ’ave it for two shillin’ and sixpence, an’ you got a real bargain, I can tell you.”

The coster beamed benignly.

“That’s very good of you,” exclaimed Jane as she handed over the money. “I must say I’m delighted, and I’m sure Sister will be delighted when she sees it.”

“No doubt abaht it. No doubt at all. It’s bin a pleasure doin’ business wiv you, madam, an’ I must say you’ve made my day, you ’ave.”

“Have I really?” said Jane with a sweet, sad smile. “I can’t think how, but I’m so glad. It’s always nice to give pleasure to someone, isn’t it?”

Christmas Day arrived. We returned from morning church and prepared the dining room for Christmas lunch. A tableau of angels adorned the table centre. Our presents were exchanged at lunch time and were placed on the dining table beside each person’s plate. I found it hard to take my eyes off a small box, wrapped in silver paper, decorated with a red ribbon, resting beside Sister Julienne’s plate. What was going to happen?

We were fourteen to lunch that Christmas Day, including two visiting nuns from North Africa, beautiful in their white habits. Grace was said, with a special remembrance for the gifts of the Magi, then we all sat down to open our presents. A chorus of “oohs” and “ahs” and little squeaks and giggles arose from the table, as kisses were exchanged between the ladies. Sister Julienne picked up the silver box, saying, “Now what can this be?” and my heart stood still. She removed the paper and opened the box. Just the flicker of an eyebrow, instantaneous and then gone, was

all that betrayed her. She carefully put the lid back on the box and turned to Jane with a radiant smile, her eyes alight with pleasure.

“How very kind. A most charming thought, Jane. It is just what I have always wanted, and I am truly grateful. I will treasure it always.”

Jane leaned forward eagerly. “It’s a honey-stirrer. They are very old.”

“Oh yes, I know. I saw that at once. A delightful gift and so like you, Jane, to be so thoughtful.”

Sister Julianne kissed her gently and quietly tucked the box away beneath her scapular.

To all appearances Jane was a bit of a dimwit. It was her reading that gave me the clue that she was, in fact, exactly the opposite. She was a voracious, almost obsessive reader. Books were her only self-indulgence, and she handled them with loving care. I took to spying on her authors: Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Russell, Kierkegaard. I was astonished. Predictably, she had a daily discipline of Bible-reading, but beyond the Old and New Testaments her devotional reading was formidable: St Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, St John of the Cross. I looked at her with new eyes. Aquinas for recreation! This was no dimwit.

Yet if anyone came into the room whilst she was reading she would jump up, all of a dither, and throw down her book guiltily, saying something like: “Do you want anything? Can I get you anything?” or, on one occasion: “I was just about to lay the table for breakfast. I haven’t been idle, really I haven’t.” This did not seem like the behaviour of an intelligent woman.

Later I discovered that Jane had spent twenty years in domestic service. She had been put into service at the age of fourteen, when life for a humble servant girl was very hard indeed. She had to be up at about 4 a.m. to fetch the wood and coal, clear the grates and light the fires. Then it would be a day of constant heavy work, at the beck and call of the mistress of the house,

until ten or eleven at night, when she would finally be allowed to go to bed.

Jane had been hopeless at the job. However hard she tried she could never master the skills of simple housework. Consequently the mistress was always cross with her. She became increasingly nervous, breaking things, bungling things. She lived in a state of sheer terror that she would do something wrong, which she always did, so she was continually getting the sack and having to find another position – where the cycle started all over again.

Few domestic servants can have been less suited to the job than Jane. Her incompetence was monumental, although it is not uncommon for highly intellectual people to be baffled by the practicalities of everyday life.

Poor Jane! I once saw her trying to light a gas mantle. It took her forty minutes. First she spilled the matches all over the floor, and by the end she had broken the mantle, broken the glass shade, cut herself, set fire to a tea towel and scorched the wallpaper. No wonder she was always getting the sack.

I remember another occasion at Nonnatus House when Jane spilled a drop of milk on the floor. She trembled and whimpered, “I’ll clean it up. I’ll clean it up. I’ll do it.”

She then proceeded to wash the entire kitchen floor, including moving all the tables and chairs. No one could stop her. She insisted on doing the whole kitchen. I asked Sister Julienne why she behaved in this way.

“Jane was utterly crushed as a child,” explained Sister; “she will never get over it.”

Jane very seldom went out, and never left Nonnatus House for a night. The only person she was ever known to visit was Peggy, who lived on the Isle of Dogs with her brother Frank.

No one could describe Peggy as plump. Voluptuous would be a better description. Her softly rounded curves spoke eloquently of ease and comfort. Her large grey eyes, fringed with dark curling lashes, had a sensuous quality in their dreamy depths. Her

smooth, clear skin glowed with radiance and every time she smiled, which was often, dimples enhanced her beauty, making you want to look upon her all the more. “Allure” might well have been her middle name.

Yet Peggy was not an idle lady of leisure, preserving her beauty with creams and lotions, or toying with men for her own amusement. Peggy was a charwoman. What with office cleaning in the early hours of the morning, her “ladies” in Bloomsbury and Knightsbridge, and restaurants and banks each afternoon, she was always busy.

Peggy cleaned at Nonnatus House three mornings a week and the house always smelled sweetly of wax polish and carbolic soap when she left. Everyone liked her. Her beauty was refreshing, and her smile raised the spirits. Furthermore, she sang quietly to herself as she polished and scrubbed. She had a pretty voice, and sang in tune. Her repertoire consisted of old-fashioned folk songs and hymns, the sort that children used to learn in schools and Sunday schools; it was a delight to listen to her. Her speaking voice was equally charming.

She was kind to everyone, and never seemed to get ruffled. I recall once when I had been out half the night (in my memory, babies always seem to have been born in the middle of the night, especially when it was raining!) and came in wet and muddy. I had been obliged to wait in Manchester Road for forty minutes, whilst the swing bridge was opened for cargo boats, and consequently was tired and ill-tempered. I crossed the hallway leading to the Clinical Room, not even conscious that I was leaving wet, muddy footmarks all over the fine Victorian tiles that Peggy had just buffed up to a glow. Something made me turn at the top of the stairs and I saw the mess I had made of her hard work.

“Oh, gosh – sorry!” I said, feebly.

Her eyes sparkled with laughter, and she was down on her knees in a trice. “Don’t give it another thought,” she said, affably.

Peggy was a good deal older than she looked. Her beautiful skin, in which the only wrinkles were laughter lines around her

eyes, made her look about thirty, but in fact she too was approaching forty-five. Her supple body was as agile as that of a young girl and she was graceful in all her movements. Many women of forty-five would wish to look as youthful, so what was her secret, I wondered? Was it a sort of inner glow, a secret joy that irradiated her features?

Although they were around the same age, Peggy looked at least twenty years younger than Jane. Her softly rounded curves contrasted with Jane's stiff, angular bones; her clear, youthful skin with the other's dried-out wrinkles; her pretty blonde hair with Jane's ill-cut greyness. Her easy-going laughter was infectious, whilst Jane's nervous giggle was irritating. Yet Peggy treated the tall, angular woman with great tenderness, making allowances for her nervous twitter and general silliness, and often making her laugh in a way that no one else could. Jane seemed more relaxed when Peggy was in the house; she smiled more readily and seemed, if possible, less apprehensive.

Peggy's brother Frank was a fishmonger, known to all as "Frank the Fish". By common consent he kept the best wet-fish stall in Chrisp Street Market. Whether his ability to sell his fish was due to the excellence of the fish, the ebullience of his personality, or his commitment to hard work was not known. Probably his success was due to a combination of all three.

He slept little, and rose about three o'clock each morning to go to Billingsgate Fish Market. He had to push his barrow along the quiet streets, as very few working men had a van in those days. At Billingsgate he personally selected all his fish, having an encyclopedic knowledge of his customers' likes and dislikes, and he was back at Chrisp Street by 8 a.m. to set up his stall.

He was an effervescent bundle of energy and he loved his work. He brought fun and laughter to hundreds of people, and many dockers were served kippers for tea, simply because their good wives couldn't resist the bantering flirtation that fell from

his lips as he slid the slippery fish into their outstretched hands, always with a wink and a squeeze.

He shut up the stall at 2 p.m. every day, and started on his delivery round. He kept no books, but carried in his head a detailed knowledge of his customers' daily requirements. He never made a mistake. He called at Nonnatus House twice every week and he and Mrs B, who was not a great admirer of men, were best of friends.

Frank was a bachelor and, because he was comparatively well off and always good-natured, half the ladies of Poplar were after him – but he just wasn't interested. "E's wedded to 'is fish," they grumbled.

Frank seemed an unlikely friend for Jane, who was pathologically shy of men. If the plumber or the baker called at the house and Jane opened the door, she would go to pieces. She would chirrup and twitter around them, trying to be pleasant, but merely succeeding in being ridiculous. But with Frank she was different somehow. His ready banter and Cockney wit were tempered by gentleness and consideration, to which Jane responded with a shy, sweet smile and eyes filled with gratitude. Or was it love, my colleagues Cynthia and Trixie wondered. Did repressed, dried-up Jane also harbour a secret passion for the extrovert fishmonger?

"Could be," reflected Cynthia. "How romantic! And how tragic for poor Jane! He's wedded to his fish."

"Not a chance," said Trixie, the pragmatist. "If it were a case of unrequited love, she would go to pieces with him even more than she does with other men."

Once, after Jane had been to visit Peggy and Frank, she said wistfully, "If only I had a brother. I would be happy if I had a brother." Later, Trixie said, acerbically, "It's a lover she needs, not a brother." We all had a good laugh at Jane's expense.

It was only later that I learned the sad stories that brought these three people together. Jane, Peggy, and Frank had been brought

up in the workhouse. The two girls were nearly the same age, Frank was four years older. Jane and Peggy had become best friends and shared everything. They had slept in adjacent beds in a dormitory of seventy girls. They had sat next to each other in the refectory, where meals for three hundred girls were taken. They had gone to the same school. They had shared the same household chores. Above all, they had shared each other's thoughts and feelings and sufferings, as well as their small joys. Today, workhouses may seem like a distant memory, but for children such as Jane, Peggy, and Frank the impact of having spent their formative years in such an institution was almost unimaginable.