

Francie
on the Run

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY

Hilda van Stockum



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*To my brother
Willem,
who kindly helped
Francie
on his way home*

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1. In the Hospital

IN THE kitchen of the Orthopedic Hospital in Dublin the cook stirred the stew in the huge pot. She was an ample person, Mrs. Byrne, though she often wondered why. “Sorra a bit I ever eat,” she would say with a hearty laugh. “It must be the smell that fattens me!”

After she had stirred the pot she sank down into a chair and folded her hands in her apron. When she shut her eyes she could imagine herself back in the kitchen of her old home in County Cork, and there was no big range beside her but a sweet, low turf fire with a kettle swinging over it. She could even smell the seawind and hear the scratch, scratch of the hens as they tripped through the doorway and wandered under the table in search of crumbs.

“Please, ma’am,” piped a voice by her elbow. With a shock Mrs. Byrne opened her eyes. A little fellow with tousled blond hair looked up at her; he had a bandaged foot, so he must be one of those poor little creatures from the children’s ward.

“An’ what might you be doing here?” Mrs. Byrne asked, giving the intruder a friendly glance, for she never got angry in a hurry. The boy peeped at her from under black lashes.

“Please, ma’am, they sent me to ask ye could ye make us something else for dessert today? It’s sick and tired we all are of milk puddings an’ prunes an’ milk puddings an’ prunes. . . .”

Mrs. Byrne raised her eyebrows.

“Indeed,” she said, “*they* sent ye? Who are ‘they,’ might I ask?”

“Oh, Tommy Fagan an’ Chris Donaghy an’ wee Andy—all of them,” explained the boy.

“An’ what was it ye had in mind, then, instead of milk puddings?” asked Mrs. Byrne. The boy appeared to think intently with the aid of a wrinkle over his stubby nose.

“Me mother, she made us pies an’ cakes,” he suggested at last, hopefully. Mrs. Byrne’s heart warmed to the music of his Cork accent, and she rummaged in one of her spacious cupboards until she found a slab of fruitcake.

“Will this satisfy your appetite?” she asked. But the boy shook his head.

“One piece isn’t enough,” he protested loyally. “There’s fourteen of us.” Mrs. Byrne sat down and laughed.

“Well,” she sighed, “I never saw the likes of you before, not in all the years I’ve been here. So one piece isn’t enough, is it?”

“It is not,” said the boy firmly. “Sure, there’d be nothing left of it if we divided that. It’s a whole cake we’ll be needing every day an’ no more puddings an’ prunes!”

“Anything else?” asked Mrs. Byrne. A smile tiptoed over the boy’s rosy face.

“Ye couldn’t make it ice cream once in a while, could ye now?” he coaxed.

“Deary me!” cried Mrs. Byrne, raising her hands at this audacious request. “What will ye be asking me for next! The hospital isn’t made of money, ye know.” The boy nodded.

“Maybe we’d better offer up the ice cream, so,” he conceded. Then he looked wistfully about the kitchen. “Ye wouldn’t let me stay here awhile, would ye?”

“Indeed I would,” said Mrs. Byrne. “But won’t they miss ye up in the ward?” The boy climbed onto a chair.

“Arra, let them miss me for a while,” he said calmly. “Haven’t they got me ’most all the time? Sure, it’s lonesome I am for a kitchen.”

“Och, God bless an’ protect ye, me lamb!” cried Mrs. Byrne, her motherly heart running over. “Is it so long since ye left home?”

The boy counted it out on his fingers.

“I was here Christmas, an’ Saint Patrick’s day, an’ Easter—’deed there wasn’t a bit of fun I didn’t miss!”

“And your parents, don’t they visit ye?” The boy sent Mrs. Byrne a pitying glance.

“An’ they over in Glengarriff,” he said. “Sure, it’s too far entirely for them to come!”

“What might your name be, then?” asked Mrs. Byrne curiously.

“Francie O’Sullivan.” Mrs. Byrne looked at him with fresh interest. So this was the laddie the nurses were always talking about when they came down for a sup of tea. She had heard tales of how bright he was and how he had all the other children in the ward doing as he pleased. “And he is the pluckiest boy we ever had,” one of the nurses had told her. “Doctor Casey was obliged to operate twice on his foot, and the poor little fellow suffered quite a bit, but he never let out a whimper. The doctor thinks the world of him.”

“So you’re Francie,” said Mrs. Byrne slowly, nodding her head. “It’s a pleasure to meet ye, indeed it is. I’ve heard ye are no coward.” Francie looked surprised.

“Why would I be a coward?” he asked. Mrs. Byrne sniffed.

“Ye’d be surprised how many people lose their courage in a hospital,” she said. “I’ve seen men as brave as bulls an’ they shakin’ like jellyfish as soon as they set eyes on a doctor’s coat. It’s a funny world, so it is.” Mrs. Byrne got up and lifted the kettle off the range. She poured out two cups of tea and pushed one toward Francie, who went to sit at the table to drink it.

“I mind one boy,” the cook continued, “an’ he howled so loud the men could hear it over at the Bank of Ireland, an’ they had to stuff the paper money in their ears to keep out the noise. That’s the truth.”

“Well,” cried Francie, “an’ him an Irish boy!”

“It’s a fact,” said Mrs. Byrne.

“It’s not from County Cork he was, was he?” Francie asked anxiously.

“Is it likely he’d be? No, he was a Dublin boy.” Francie gave a sigh of relief.

“Maybe he couldn’t help it so,” he said generously. “Dublin boys aren’t the same, are they?”

“Indeed they’re not, the creatures,” agreed Mrs. Byrne, sipping her tea. Francie leaned forward confidentially and whispered:

“There’s a boy up in our ward an’ him a Protestant!”

“No!” said Mrs. Byrne.

“It’s the truth, but he keeps it secret. He doesn’t want the other fellows to know. I taught him the ‘Hail Mary’ an’ he says it as well as any.”

“Is that so?” and Mrs. Byrne looked properly impressed.

“There’s all sorts of boys up in our ward,” continued Francie. “One great big fellow called Tom is forever bossing the little ones. Sure, wasn’t he the mean one for hitting wee Andy an’ knocking him down, an’ Andy with his whole leg in a splint!”

“An’ what did the nurse do?” asked Mrs. Byrne.

“Oh, she wasn’t there, but I grabbed Tommy meself an’ fetched him a clout on his head. When the nurse came back she locked us both up.”



“She shouldn’t have locked yerself up so.”

“Well, I wasn’t telling on Tommy,” said Francie. “How was she to know?”

“Are the nurses kind to ye?”

“’Deed they are, then, the way ye’d think I was a babby. But I do be lonesome all the same,” Francie confessed.

“Have ye no friends amongst the boys?” asked Mrs. Byrne, who had Francie well tucked into her heart by now.

“The boys are all right,” Francie conceded, “only there’s not a one of ’em like Liam.”

“And who might Liam be?” asked Mrs. Byrne, getting up to give another stir to the stew.

“Liam is me twin brother,” said Francie. “He is the grandest boy in County Cork an’ no mistake. He and I used to be always together till I came here. Och, it’s himself I do be missing,” and Francie let out a sigh that came from the soles of his feet. “Look!” and he pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket. “Here’s the letter he wrote me himself!” Mrs. Byrne had to hunt for her spectacles, and then she went to the window and unfolded the piece of paper Francie had handed her.

The boy watched her with pride as she read:

“DEER FRANSIE WE ARE WELL PLEASE COME BAK SOON I AM SAD WEN U ARE AWAY MIKEL AND BRIGID SEND KISSES I AM RESPEKFULLY LIAM. PADDY CAM ON A WISIT AN BROUT ME A WISTLE ONLY BRAN SWALLOWED IT HE IS SAD TOO LIAM.”

Mrs. Byrne had to go over it twice before she could make it all out.

“Glory be to God!” she cried. “It’s a wonderful letter, so it is. And what might Liam’s age be now?”

“The same as me own; we’re six years old.”

“And who are Michael and Brigid?”

“They’re me elder brother an’ sister.”

“An’ Bran, is he another brother?” Francie went into peals of laughter.

“He is not!” he squealed. “He is our dog!” At that moment the door of the kitchen squeaked open and a whitecapped nurse looked in.

“Francie!” she cried, “what are you doing here? We’ve been hunting for you everywhere!”

Francie glanced up reproachfully. “Well, what harm? Can’t a fellow have a bit of fun?” he asked. The nurse went over to him and knelt down to feel his foot.

“Walking down those stairs!” she grumbled. “The doctor will be good and angry with you. Can’t you be patient a little while? Soon you’ll be able to go home and play like other boys.” Francie sighed.