

The Ass

By Denis Fahey

The boys sat contentedly in the hollow of a ditch, that backed on to the High Road at Carnahalla, before them spread the whole vista of the Golden Vale. They gazed at the evening sky. The sun had long since lost its power and was confined to a burning yellow streak on the south western horizon. Stars began to twinkle slowly into existence.

“Did you know that the stars up there are thousands of miles away from us, Davey?”

“Is that so, Packie?”

“Yeah, thousands of miles.”

“Brother Ryan says the heavens are like a curtain and the stars are holes in it, through which God shines his flash lamp.”

“That couldn’t be right,” Packie, somewhat indignantly, replied.

“Still though, who knows?” Davey countered.

“Sure everybody knows he’s a dotty oul’ eejit. Didn’t he say another time that the sun was a Silvermint. My dad says some of the stars are as big as the earth but because they are so far away they appear small.”

Davey began to ponder how far thousands of miles was. He knew Ardagh was three miles away and that was a fair old trot, if you had to walk it.

Meanwhile, Packie struggled with how a curtain could be that big or where you could find a flash lamp that big to shine through it. The biggest lamp he knew was the one Ollie the Poacher used for lamping rabbits and even that wasn't that big. No, Brother Ryan was definitely an eejit. It would be great, though, if the sun was a Silvermint. Maybe someday a big chunk of it might fall to the ground and he wouldn't have to scrounge Silvermints off Mongey Murphy, the shopkeeper's son, the miserable little fecker.

Just then, in the midst of their reveries, it happened. A strange scrunching sound came from the other side of the ditch. Packie immediately signalled to Davey, forefinger to his mouth, to be quiet and then whispered, "It could be a fox or a badger."

Trepidation immediately embellished Davey's face with a white hue. Slowly the two of them rose to peer over the ditch to find the source of the noise. Two big ears and two big eyes looked back at them. 'Twas an ass. How it had got there neither boy had a clue but there it was a big strapping ass.

"Whose ass is it?" Davey asked.

"Well, it is not John Joe Mahoney's, his ass has a black streak down his back. Nor is it Bill Crowe's."

"How do you know that, Packie?"

"There's a bit missing off one of his ears."

"Oh yeah, that's right. I wonder whose ass is it, then."

After a cursory glance down the front of the animal in the dimming light, Packie stated with authority, "It's a stray."

"How the hell can you tell? Davey, mystified, enquired.

"Look at its hooves."

The animal's hooves, sadly, had overgrown to the extent that it was limping and walking for it was a torture.

"Poor ould devil. He is really hobbled, isn't he? Is there anything we could do for him?"

"Shoot him, maybe, to put him out of his misery."

"Ah shit, we couldn't do that." Davey was horrified at the prospect and, after some profound thinking, he came up with an idea. "What if we got Paddy the Smith to put a set of shoes on him?"

"And who's going to pay Paddy the Smith, Davey?"

"I have thruppence saved up for Xmas."

"That should put one stud in one of the shoes." Packie shattered Davey's initial enthusiasm with his cost assessment.

"How much do you think it would cost, Packie, to have him shod?"

"About ten bob, I reckon."

"Feck, that's a lot, Packie! Are you sure?"

“Well, it won’t be cheap anyway. Of that, I’m sure.”

“Did you know Dan Brien has a couple of sets of donkey shoes and winkers left in one of his outhouses. He doesn’t use them anymore since he got the horse for the ploughing.”

“What are you thinking, Davey?”

“Well, sure, he’d hardly miss them.”

“But we’d still have the problem of Paddy the Smith.”

“Maybe we could do a deal with him.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, his smithy is always cluttered and all over the place. Maybe we could help him tidy it up and it certainly could do with a coat of whitewash.”

“I hate fecking whitewashing.”

“I was just thinking, if we got this ass up and running, we could enter him in the Donkey Derby on Corpus Christi. He might be in with a shout. He’s a good, strong-looking animal - apart from the limp - and there might be few bob in the bank for us, if we won it.”

“Yeah, I heard Tim Delaney got a pound note when he won last year.”

“Janey, that wouldn’t be half bad, Packie.”

“Yeah, but where will we keep him until we get him to Paddy the Smith?”

“What about Sarah Quirke’s?”

“It’s as good a place as any, I suppose. But there’d be no bedding there.”

“I’d say I could nick a bale of straw from my father’s barn, he’d hardly miss it, and I could bring a rope and blinkers with me as well.”

“Yeah, sure there’s a fine big room in the front of that old house and we can block the door to keep him from straying.”

“Well, we’d better get cracking before it gets too dark.”

“Hold on a minute. Maybe if we catch him by the forelock, we mightn’t need the blinkers to get him up to Sarah Quirke’s.”

Sure enough, the ass responded to being led by the forelock. This was a good sign as it meant he was comfortable with being led by people.

“He’s a big ass isn’t he, Davey?” Packie observed.

“Yeah, Paddy Coffey had one like him a few years back.”

“But that was a mule, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, maybe it was.”

“What should we call him?”

“What do you mean, Davey?”

“I mean if we are going to enter him in the Donkey Derby, he’ll have to have a name.”

Packie thought for a moment, “What about Big Mickey?”

“Big Mickey?” Davey laughed.

“Yeah! Can you imagine it, Davey? Willie Burke on the loud speaker, ‘And here comes Big Mickey up the final straight. He is really tearing the arse out of it. Yes! Big Mickey is going to do it. Big Mickey has won the Derby.’ Can you picture the look on the ould canon’s face? ‘Mrs Rainsford, what is the name of that donkey again?’ ‘Big Mickey, Father.’”

Davey could not contain his laughter. “I think we’d better call him something else other than that otherwise we probably won’t be allowed to run him,” he just about managed to say when he had stopped laughing.

“What about Carnahalla Prince or King or somethin’? After all, we found him in Carnahalla.”

“King sounds good to me, Packie. It’s a strong name, isn’t it? Carnahalla King.”

“Carnahalla King it is then. I’m OK with that,” Packie agreed.

Sarah Quirke’s presented a stark new residence for the ass. It was an abandoned house, with the roof still intact and most of

the windows had glass. It had a plot of ground at the back and was a long way from the road. Which made it an ideal place for hiding something you wouldn't want people to know about, like a stray ass. Whereas it wasn't exactly a palace for an ass with kingly aspirations, it nevertheless could be made comfortable. The boys immediately set about doing just that.

A working brush left in an outhouse was procured and the floor in the front room was swept clear of rubbish. A large, old skillet pot was cleaned of dust and filled with drinking water, while Davey went off to get a bale of straw for bedding. In the interim, Packie managed to drag an old mattress and some blankets and fallen curtains downstairs. After a good shaking and beating the dust off them, they made a pleasant resting place for his highness's royal rump, rather than the bare slabs of the floor. Initial mission accomplished, the two boys boarded up the door and abandoned Carnahalla King to what they hoped would be a restful night in his new abode.

"How will we approach Paddy the Smith, Packie?"

"I suppose we'll just tell him the truth, Davey. He'll know we didn't buy the feckin' ass anyway."

"And the shoes and the winkers?"

"Well, anyone could have given us them."

"Do you think Danny Brien will miss them?"

"Sure he hardly ever goes into that shed, Packie."

"How do you know?"

“I give him a hand sometimes bringing in the cows and straining the milk.”

“Oh I see. Well, if you think you can get them, go for it. We’ll need them to keep our spending with Paddy the Smith as cheap as possible.”

“What will we do with Carnahalla King tomorrow?”

“We could let him out into the paddock at the back. There’s a big gap in the corner into Ned Farney’s field but there is a hay feeder we could roll into the gap to block it.”

“Will we be able to lift the feckin’ thing onto its side?”

“Ah, we should. They’re not that heavy.”

As it happened, the feeder turned out to be an ideal fit for the gap and the boys were happy Carnahalla King wouldn’t stray too far. He had plenty of grazing in the paddock as well, as the grass hadn’t been touched in a long time.

“Tomorrow. we’ll let him out into the paddock before we go to school. Then, on Saturday, we will take him to Paddy the Smiths. I’ll get the shoes and the winkers in the meantime.”

“Sounds like a plan to me, Davey. See you tomorrow.”

“See you, Packie. Carnahalla King for the Derby.”

“You betcha, Davey!”

The two boys parted company, dreams of future glory and money firmly entrenched in their minds. They now had a new goal: winning the Derby on Corpus Christi.

In the morning, the two of them met early at Sarah Quirke's. The peaceful night they hoped Carnahalla King would have hadn't quite materialised as he had taken to neighing at the top of his decibel range.

"What the fuck is up with him, Davey? Half the country will know we have an ass up here."

"I'm not sure, Packie. He's probably just lonely."

Fortunately, sweet apples Davey had stolen from someone else's orchard and carrots from Tom Bradshaw's garden distracted him from his lonesome cries. After, they quietly grabbed him by the forelock and led him to the paddock to while away his day in the luscious grass. Later, they would return after school to check on him.

They couldn't wait for school to finish and the bell to sound to get back to their new hero, Carnahalla King. Neither could they restrain themselves from talking about the ass to each other, whenever they got a chance. Here, they had to be extremely careful as they didn't want the other boys in on their subterfuge. They would probably want a cut of the action or interfere in some unwanted way.

When they finally got to the paddock, they found Carnahalla King resting contentedly on a nice growth of tall grass. As they approached, he did a belly roll on his back, either to relieve an itch on his back or out of sheer exuberance. Packie noticed

some blood sucking ticks, locally called crabs, on the underside of the ass's head. They were swollen with blood. A vet had told him to remove the heads as well, when removing them from an animal. So a tweezers was found in Packie's mother's make-up bag and King's red bites copiously daubed with TCP. Nothing but the best would do for his royal highness. Further investigation revealed at least half a dozen more ticks on various parts of his body.

Saturday came and the two boys made their way to Paddy the Smith. Davey had come straight with Dan Brien and had secured the shoes and the winkers in return for helping him with some chores around the farm. All in all, most of the people around were quite decent when it came to giving things away or helping others. Nevertheless, it was with trepidation that they approached Paddy the Smith, as he was not a man renowned for his charm and social graces. Years of haggling with tight-fisted farmers had made him rough and churlish. Packie and Davey knew he wouldn't endure free-loaders easily. Dressed to the chest in his leather apron and nearly as wide as a pike of hay, all six-foot-four of him made an imposing, if not frightening, sight to the two boys.

"What do you two sparrow farts want?" he growled at them as he brought a lump-hammer down on red metal with arms the size of tree-trunks.

"We have an ass, Paddy, and he's lame."

"I can see that and what do you expect me to do?"

"We were hoping maybe you could fix him up."

“Were you now, and who’s paying?”

“Well, we were hoping maybe we could do a deal.”

“I have thruppence,” Davey blurted out before Packie could continue.

Paddy stopped what he was doing and gave the two boys the silent, vacant look, like they had landed from another planet.

“Of course, that would only be a deposit. We would whitewash the forge for you, trim the ditch at the side and cut the nettles to make it easier to walk round the back and tidy up all your tools and put the scrap-metal at the front into the one vat and tidy up anything else that needs doing.”

“We could also give you a hand during the summer holidays,” Davey added, pleadingly.

“Let me have a look at that ass.” Paddy lifted the front hoof of Carnahalla King and then set it down gently. “Jakers, he’s a big fecker, isn’t he? Are you sure he’s an ass?”

“Of course, what else could he be?” Davey stated emphatically, as if he was an expert on the genealogy of asses.

“When will you start the whitewashing?”

“Today,” Davey answered before Packie could open his mouth.

“I have the lime. Have you got buckets and brushes?”

“Yes,” Davey replied without hesitation.

Packie said nothing as he knew Davey sometimes had a miraculous way of producing things he didn't have. As it was, Tom Bradshaw's drills of carrots were looking distinctly sparse in places and he wouldn't always continue to blame rabbits.

Shortly afterwards, the boys returned to the forge armed with a hedge-clippers, billhook, brushes and buckets. Packie started on the weeds and moss on the walls, while Davey tackled the briars, nettles and thistles that obstructed movement round the back. Later, Paddy's wife called with tea, curnie buns and jam. The buns and jam went down well, but Paddy liked his tea strong and you could trot an elephant across it never mind a mouse.

Slowly, the forge began to glisten like a white pearl as the whitewash went on. And the gutters, too, were cleaned so they didn't spew water over the side any more. All in all, Paddy was quite pleased with the boys and their work. Carnahalla King was reshod and with his repaired blinkers on he looked - if not distinctly regal - at least the way an ass should look. Even more important, he had now lost his limp and was ready for the Derby.

"Do you mind if we leave payment until after the Donkey Derby on Corpus Christi, Paddy?" Davey ventured to ask Paddy once they had completed their jobs round the forge.

"I suppose I can wait. I'm not in the poor-house yet," Paddy replied. "So you plan to win the Derby, eh?"

"Yes, that's the plan," the boys replied in unison.

“Have you ridden him yet?”

“No.”

“Well, you had better get started. Methinks he is a feisty bit of a devil, so be careful.”

The boys acted on Paddy’s advice and took Carnahalla King to a field at the back of Davey’s farm. It was a long wide field and would give Carnahalla King ample room to stretch his legs. Packie, being the taller of the two, was elected as the rider. Getting on board a saddleless Carnahalla King proved to be a bit of a challenge, even with Davey holding the winkers tightly. Carnahalla King didn’t seem at all comfortable with somebody wanting to sit on his back. Once Packie was mounted, Davey let go of the winkers and Carnahalla King shot off like a bat out of hell. Speed was not going to be an issue as he seemed built for it. The problem was: would Packie be able to control him? He shied at a lone clump of nettles in the middle of the field sending Packie airborne, over his head, and just about avoiding a right ould stinging.

Davey rushed up the field to check on his partner, “Are you alright, Packie?”

“I’m grand,” came the winded reply.

Packie had just about held onto the reins and let go when Davey took charge of the winkers. Davey reached over and gave him a hand up.

“No wonder whoever owned him got rid of him. He’s as mad as a brush!”

“Maybe we can calm him.” Davey patted Carnahalla King along the jaw-line and produced another one of Tom Bradshaw’s carrots to reassure him. “Do you want to have another shot at trying to ride him?”

“OK, I will. But don’t let go of the winkers until I tell you.”

“I won’t. Don’t worry.”

Eventually, the two boys decided to walk Carnahalla King round the field with Davey holding the winkers in an attempt to get him used to Packie on his back. After a while, it seemed to work. But, when Davey let go of the winkers, Carnahalla King once again took off like a rocket. This time, Packie managed to stop him. Albeit his dismount was hasty and lacked finesse, to put it mildly. Nevertheless, there was light at the end of the tunnel and King, as the boys now began to call him, might not run away with them on Corpus Christi. So went their training sessions until the big day of the Donkey Derby itself.

Packie felt he had achieved moderate, if not complete, control of King. Things might not go too bad on the day and, one thing was for sure, King was fast. Corpus Christi, the day of destiny, had arrived at last. The two boys, after the procession was over, made a beeline for the field at the back of the Community Centre, where they had tethered King to a tree. That morning, he had received the royal treatment befitting his noble rank. Tom Bradshaw’s carrots went down well, as did some apples from various orchards. A good brush down, a check for any last minute ticks and King, with his refurbished winkers, was ready to go.

“Do you think we should just call him King instead of Carnahalla King, Davey?”

“I think so, Packie. Willie Burke might not be able to spell Carnahalla anyway.”

“Yeah, he’s a bit of a thick, isn’t he?” Both boys laughed and, King untethered, they made their way to the sports field where the great race would take place.

A smallish crowd had gathered, which no doubt would get larger when the opening ceremonies and bullshit speeches would start proceedings. Both boys noticed that King got a bit more edgy when he saw the crowd but they tried to keep him as calm as they could. They hit on the idea of just registering King and taking him up to the starting post at the last minute. Willie Burke didn’t even ask for King to be brought to the starting line, where a motley band of donkeys had now begun to congregate. He merely looked at the ass in the distance and registered its name and rider for the race.

Davey, with a lot of stress and strain, eventually got King to the starting line. When the race started, King took off in his usual manner; like he wanted to get this race over with and get out of there fast. He took a very wide circuit. So wide, in fact, some of them moved back a little, out of fear.

Packie was behind on account of taking such a wide sweep of the course. But on the final straight leg of the course, King - for reasons known only to himself - took the inside channel and belted up the field to pip the other donkeys with a yard or two to spare. Davey was ecstatic but it took Packie another two hundred yards or so to stop King. He awaited the

announcement on the loudspeaker of the winner and riders of the first three donkeys. The committee on the podium seemed to be taking a while to establish who they were.

“Congratulations,” Willie Burke announced, “to Tim Delaney on winning the Derby on Apple Blossom for the second year in a row.”

In an equally loud response, Davey, exasperated, shouted, "But that's wrong! Our donkey, King, won the race."

For a moment, Willie Burke was stopped in his tracks but continued, “The second place...”

“But the child’s donkey won the race.”

This time, it wasn’t the voice of a disgruntled child but the gravel bellow of Paddy the Smith. Willie stopped immediately and returned to the committee for a consultation. Paddy the Smith, while not being in the foremost echelons of the local community, was nevertheless a well-respected man. The angry, disappointed look of the crowd hadn’t gone unnoticed either by the committee. After a conflagration, Willie returned to the microphone.

“It has been deemed by the committee that Packie O’Brien, the jockey on King, was not in full control of his mount and ran outside the boundaries of the course...”

“Where are the markers for the boundaries?” Paddy the Smith boomed again and Willie hastily returned to the committee.

After a long conflagration, somebody from the crowd shouted, "Give the child his money!" which was followed by a positive heckle.

Willie hastily returned to the microphone. "It has been decided by the committee, in the interests of fairness, that Apple Blossom, Tim Delaney's mount, and King, Packie O'Brien's mount, be deemed co-winners of the Donkey Derby and each receive the prize money of one pound."

There followed an enthusiastic cheer.

Packie, having tied King to the tree they had tethered him to that morning, had returned to his friend in the crowd near the podium. "Feckin' hell, Davey! Ten bob each, we're millionaires."

"I don't think I ever had a ten bob note in my life, Packie."

"We still have to settle with Paddy the Smith. I suppose we'll be lucky to come out with a half crown each. Still, it's better than nothing."

The two boys approached Paddy the Smith carefully as he stood with his wife, waiting to watch one of his daughters in the egg and spoon race. He had noticed the two boys' approach from the corner of his eye and turned to them. Paddy had the type of look and physique that made dogs cower and grown men lose their bottle.

"I suppose you two sparrow farts have come back to fix up."

"That's right, Paddy."

But before Davey could ask how much they owed, Paddy continued, "I hope you two buckos don't think you can fleece a poor ould blacksmith like me."

"Oh God, no, Paddy, we wouldn't do that, would we, Davey?"

"Definitely not, Paddy."

"Let's see, now. Ye whitewashed the forge, cleared the drains, cut the briars and nettles back and tidied up the metal and tools and everything. I shod the ass and mended the winkers."

Paddy thought deeply or pretended to do so. "Supposing we just call it quits."

Davey, with his hand on the ten bob note in his pocket, had momentary lockjaw and was only able to mumble the word, "quits," at his astonishment at being able to keep the note. Packie was so delighted he could have hugged Paddy, but that definitely would not have been appropriate. The two boys, exultant in their win, enjoyed the rest of the day feasting on ice cream and sweets. King even enjoyed a sweet apple, for once, legally purchased.

King would never run again in the Derby, for when the boys' mothers got wind of their escapades and the dangers involved, they put a stop to any further outings. But he lived out a good life in Sarah Quirke's plot, well looked-after by the boys and local farmers. And where the boys, now grown men, buried him with a simple cross with his name, King, on it.

Now, as I stand by the cross, I think of King's intrepid rider, my friend Packie, who now lies in a graveyard not too far away, along with Paddy the Smith and others who loved King. And I

think of the day when fairness prevailed and the goodness of human spirit stood forth, and we won the Derby.