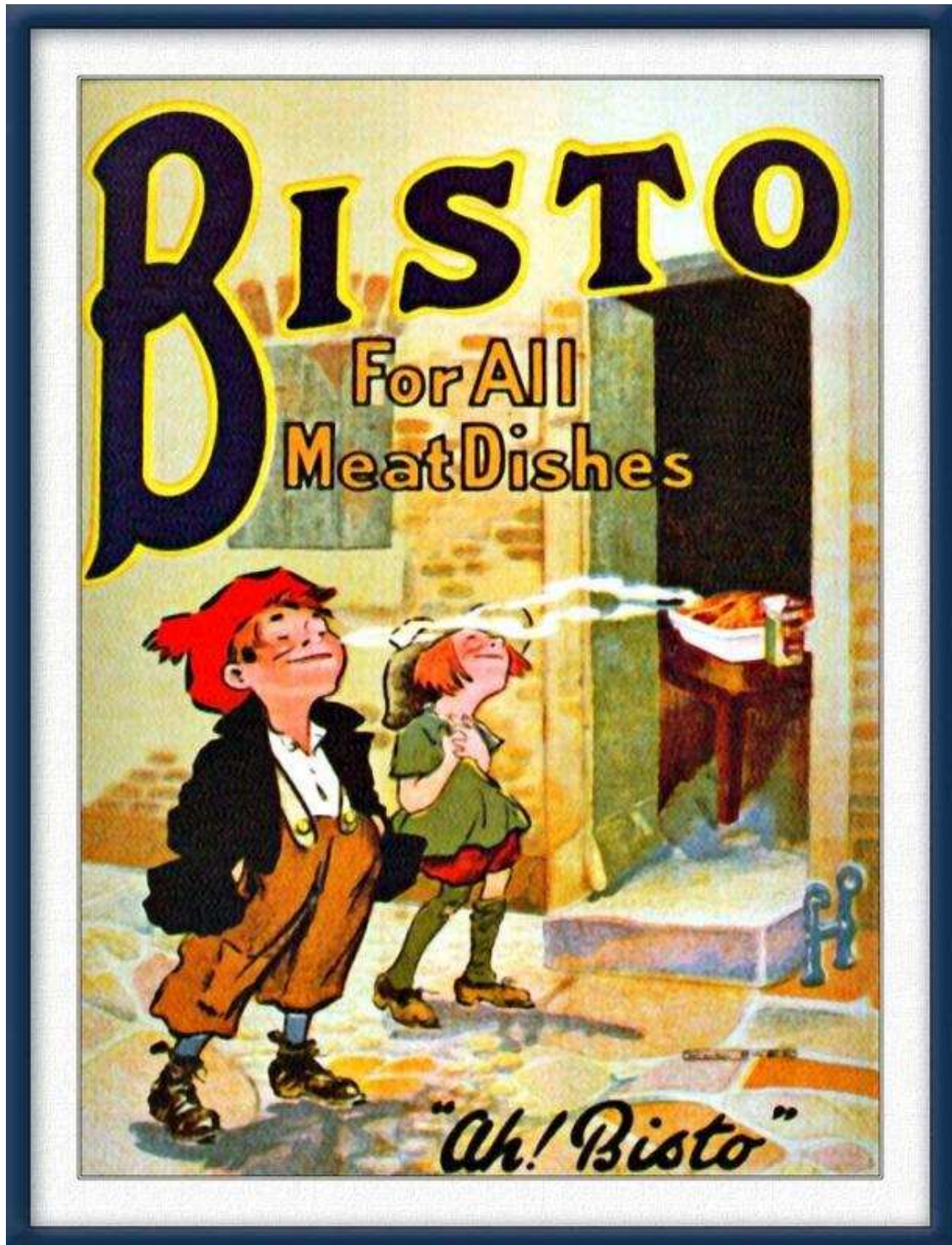


The Bisto Kid

by
Jamie Cameron



Lucky was pregnant again. Paul always knew first. He stroked her and felt her distended belly. "Mum, Lucky's having kittens again." He was always right. He wondered if she should be neutered. He wasn't quite sure what 'neutered' meant but he knew it would put an end to the endless cycle of birth and death by drowning. He'd overheard his mother in the Steamie.

It was amazing how women ignored you. You were invisible to them. They laughed, they gossiped, tidied each other's lipstick, shared fags, hitched their bras, straightened their stockings, pulled at the crotch in their knickers, and you might not as well have been there. Women together were rude, crude and raucous. Only when a man came on the scene, and there were few men in the Steamie, did their voices drop, as their eyes, expressionless, intimidating eyes, saw the intruder off the premises. But a boy could sit unnoticed and unregarded as long as he remained expressionless. The least hint of interest in the conversation brought a quick rebuke and summary dismissal: "Hey, cloth ears, what are you hingin' about here fur? Awa ye go and have a bath. Here's thruppence. Share it wi' anither lad. It's a sin to waste watter."

Attached to the Steamie was the Lochee Public Baths and Swimming Pool. There were ten cubicles, each held a huge cast-iron bath that took fifteen minutes to fill. Plenty of room for a couple of boys. Rumour had it that the O'Donnells sneaked in five of their brats at a time, three boys and two girls, including the popular Mary O'Donnell. Rumour had it that Mary would share with any boy who had a spare thruppence. God forgive the Catholic Irish; the strait-laced po-faced Presbyterian Scots never would.

"Spayed? No, I'd never do that to her. Lucky deserves a bit of fun out of life."

Paul's ears tingled. They were talking about his cat.

"You're richt. We had Blackie neutered; she's never been the same since."

"Blackie? I thought Blackie was a tom," said his mother.

"So he is. That's why he's never been the same."

A burst of laughter.

"Awa ye go, ye daft bugger." That was his mother. Although she did not put on airs, she did not often slip into broad Locheese. Paul risked a smile.

"Whut are you sittin' doon there for? Hav' you got nuthin' tae dae? Do you want thruppence for a bath?" That was Mary Doherty, his mother's Steamie partner.

"Leave him for now, Mary," interrupted his mother. "We're nearly done. He can help feed the sheets into the mangle. Anyway, Lucky's his cat. I don't think he'd like it if the vet turned her into a big fat lump."

"I've already got my grannie," chirped Paul. Dangerous, but he got away with it that time.

"And he helps drown the kittens," said his mother.

"Cathie Bosquet, dinnae tell me you're still droonin' the kittens?" Mary Doherty protested. "You're a hard-hearted wuman."

"I am not," said his mother briskly. "It's the humane thing to do. The pet shop doesn't want them. The vet charges a tanner a time to put them to sleep. I'm not going to stick them in a bag and dump them in the bins. The council can get you for that. So I drown them. And Jean-Paul helps. Don't you, son."

He did help. He never liked drowning the kittens, but it had to be done. The bucket was filled with water. He lured Lucky into the bedroom and shut her in. She knew what was happening. She meowed and mourned, and squealed and screamed, and clawed and scratched at the door. He brought the kittens to his mother, one by one, nipping the scruff of the neck to carry them so that no fragile bones were broken. He dropped each one into the bucket, and his mother pushed them under with a forked stick. She let him help.

The kittens bobbed around, meowing pathetically, only their heads above the water. He forked a kitten's neck and pushed it under. He held it under and watched little bubbles rise to the surface and burst. Sixty seconds did most of them, but there was one that had lasted nearly two minutes. He was proud of that one. Then the kittens, like drookit rags, were retrieved from the bucket and tenderly wrapped in newspaper. The bundle was wrapped in a carrier bag, then dropped in a half full dustbin. A load of warm ashes completed the funeral ceremonies.

Lucky, released from the bedroom, ran frantically around the living room, poking into every cranny. She circled Paul's legs, brushing her body against them. Then she disappeared

under the settee and lay there crooning for a couple of hours. Towards evening a dish of Kit-e-Kat tempted her back into public, and by eight o'clock, she was out the window and off for a night on the tiles.

"Have yu nivir kept eny o' the wee mites?" asked Madame Doherty.

"Only once," said his mother. "Only once."

Paul jerked himself up from the damp step. "I'm going to find Joe," he said. "He'll still be in the pool. I'm going to watch from the gallery." He knew his mother would tell Madame Doherty about the kitten. They'd have a laugh at his expense. He minded that, but not too much. He deserved it. But he didn't want to be reminded of the story; only he knew everything that had happened, and he didn't want to be reminded of that. Though it was already too late.

Lucky always had her kittens in the same place. The wardrobe in the 'boysroom'. Paul padded out a corner with a soft pillow. For a few days after the birthing he placed warmed milk and a saucer of fresh Kit-E-Kat at the door. Lucky would slip out and eat, then slide like a shadow back into the dark warmth of the wardrobe.

At intervals she would carry out her kittens and deposit them in the catbox. Their business done, she'd nip them around the back of the neck and transport them back to the wardrobe. Joe protested the room stank; it did, but his protests went unheeded. Nobody was allowed to open the door and peek inside until the cat emerged to wander the house again. The boys bet on the colour and markings of the kittens. Lucky herself was sooty black with a white flash on her chest, three white paws, one black. This was rarely a guide to her kittens. She roamed far and wide, selected mates indifferently, and dropped kittens who ranged from fluffy grey to tiger stripes.

Once, when the mother-to-be was upset, Paul skipped afternoon school. "To help Lucky," he explained. "And did you watch her having her kittens?" his mother asked. "Some of them," Paul blushed. "Good, now you know where babies come from," his mother said; if he'd known the word 'laconic', he might have used it to describe the delivery of her remark.

Was it from this litter that Paul 'stole' a kitten? It was certainly from a litter whose father was peculiarly handsome. Even Madame Bosquet paused before shrugging, "No, they've got to go, we can't keep them. No. Do I have to say it twice? Joseph, take your sister to see your grandmother. Paul, get Lucky out. I'll fill the bucket."

Paul got Lucky out, but then slid out of the bedroom window with a kitten stuffed up his pullover. He made for the air raid shelters and deposited the kitten in an orange crate lined with two old pillows. He climbed back in through the window and helped his mother do what had to be done.

Lucky, distracted and demented, ran along the window sill, throwing herself up to try and pull the window down. It was snibbed shut on her. The sodden little bodies, securely wrapped in an 'Evening Telegraph' and carrier bag, were dumped in the bins. On went the ashes. Lucky was allowed in. History completed its predictable cycle. Birth, death, and an extra helping of Kit-E-Kat. Paul prayed, after all he was an altar boy, for divine collusion until he could smuggle Lucky to the air raid shelter and unite her with Bisto.

The Lord was in a listening mood. Bisto survived.

The next three weeks were fraught with danger. Lucky, despite lectures severe and several, insisted on returning her kitten to the wardrobe; Paul insisted on returning the kitten to the air raid shelter. Here be rats, might well be the case, but Bisto's chances of survival would not be improved by an unprepared encounter with Madame Bosquet.

Paul made his preparations. He was polite. He paid attention to what people at home said to him. He took his sister to the Rialto twice without coercion - "making up for Bessie," it was assumed. He raked the ashes and set the fire on time. He stopped reading and came to the table at first asking. He did extra early morning Masses (that was for Father Bone). He kept his hands above the blanket (that was for God). He did his homework on time (that was for Miss Watt). Conscientiously he went to the toilet, outside, upstairs and in the dark, every night before going to bed and peed on his brother only twice in three weeks (that was a record). He couldn't think of anything else he could do except give up the Wizard, but there is a limit to any sacrifice.

Bisto was handsome. He had his mother's dark coat slashed with a grey that could only

have come from a prince among tomcats. He was lively, independent, curious, and wilful. He would grow into a king among cats unless he was a she in which case some revision would be needed. Whichever he was, he couldn't stay in the air raid shelter forever. It was now or never.

It was never.

"I know you took a kitten," said his mother. "I'm only a weaver but I can count. We were wondering what you were doing in the air raid shelter."

"Maybe he was with Mary O'Donnell," laughed Joe.

"You shut up. Jist you shut up."

"Joseph."

"Yes, mum."

"That's enough."

"Yes, mum."

"Let Paul keep it, mum. It's a lovely wee kitten. It won't do any harm." Bisto was ripping lines down the rexine of the settee. Kathleen ignored reality. Her mother blew clusters of smoke and ignored Kathleen.

"You've got two days to find someone in Whorterbank who really wants a kitten. If you haven't found anyone by Saturday one o'clock, you will take the kitten down to the RSPCA and hand it in. Hand him in. He's a tom. I've checked. He's a good-looking beast, somebody will want him."

"Where's the RSPCA?"

"In Dock Street."

"Dock Street, Dundee?"

"There is only one Dock Street, and it is in Dundee. Don't look so worried. You can take the bus. You're going to be travelling back and forwards across Dundee twice a day when you go to the Harris. You might as well start getting used to it."

"Eh'm no goin' ti the Harris. They're a' bampots there."

"Are you arguing with me?"

"No," slid ungraciously out.

"Then you're going to the Harris next year, and you're going to Dock Street on Saturday unless you can find a home for that ... Bisto! Stop it." The kitten was clawing its way vigorously up the table cloth; it hung there for a few moments while Lucky circled anxiously below. Joe jerked the table cloth. Bisto lost his grip and fell, hitting his mother squarely on the head. Lucky grabbed her kitten by the scruff of the neck and hauled him protesting under the settee.

"Who's for a game of cards?" asked Joe.

"Get my purse," said Madame Bosquet.

"Can I deal?" asked Paul.

"You always cheat," said Kathleen.

The bus lumbered to a halt at the bottom of Gray's Lane. Paul swung himself and the basket on board. For a moment he was tempted to bundle the basket up the narrow stairs to the top deck, but drivers often ramm'd on the brakes at the junction of Loons Road and Muirton Road. He knew how to swing himself safely round the grab-rail, but the basket was awkward and he heard Bisto protest indignantly about the roughness of the ride. He settled for a seat inside and edged open the basket. A paw, claws unsheathed, flashed at him. He snapped the basket shut.

"Terminus, please."

He stuffed his ticket in his back pocket and leaned against the window to enjoy the ride. The view was not spectacular from the lower deck but it was still a thrill to go to Dundee alone. He had no worries about getting lost. The bus terminated, like so many of her sisters, behind the Caird Hall. The docks were directly opposite. His mother had given him directions to Dock Street but he hadn't paid much attention. If he found the docks, and he could hardly miss them, someone would show him Dock Street and the RSPCA.

As his mother predicted, no one had wanted a kitten. Whorterbank swarmed with enough cats to make a Pied Piper redundant, and people spent more time getting rid of their own

rather than taking on another little hungry mouth to feed.

The bus swung into Reform Street, crossed the Overgate, and barrelled down Commercial Street into the terminus where thirty-odd busses disgorged their cargo. Paul held the basket tightly, jumped down from the platform and gazed around him. The Royal Arch gave him his bearings.

The Royal Arch was just that and only that. A huge dirty-brown arch set down and abandoned by a giant's hand. It led into the docks and the harbour but was entirely disconnected from everything else around. Paul side-stepped two or three double-deckers and crossed the road to the harbour. He knew from a class project Dundee had once been a centre of the whaling industry. In time that had given way to the ships which hauled in the raw jute from India; jute that sustained the mills and the workers of Dundee. He wondered if similar ships brought in the oranges and newsprint that fed the city's other industries of note: jam and journalism.

He reached the docks and looked up river, past the steam ships that lolled like idle beasts in the silvery-grey waters of the Tay. He saw the rail bridge that spanned the river; he'd crossed it twice, and, head hanging out of a carriage door, shuddered at the stone stumps of the first rail bridge that had collapsed on a stormy December night ... He struggled to remember the year. 1878. No. 1879. And seventy five souls, passengers and crew, gone down into the deep, dark waters of the river.

Paul was frightened of water. He hated the swimming pool at the Lochee Baths, and not only because Joe and his pals threw him in, laughed and told him to swim for it. He was not able to swim; he didn't imagine he ever would be.

In summer he loved the warm sands at Broughty Ferry beach, but he hated the water. There was something impermanent, insubstantial, insecure about water; it clung to him with a familiarity he found disgusting; it lapped and slapped; it bleached his pale skin; it caressed and sucked at him obscenely; it was false of face, pretending to bear him up but always ready to drag him down, to wrestle him under, to clog his mouth and nose until even the exercises Dr Heinrich taught him would fail. Above all else, Paul feared death by drowning.

He wandered downriver. Clouds blotted the sun. The silver of the Tay turned to grey. The submarine pens had been in these docks; the submarines were long gone. What had his father been like? The dark, thin-faced, sleek-haired, sailor-suited young man from France who had sailed his submarine up the North Sea to the safety Dundee harbour.

He'd seen photographs. The man, his mother's husband, looked like his brother Joseph, but remained a stranger, an intruder. He, too, was Joseph, but he had no right to be part of them; in death he had forfeited his rights. How could his mother have married this deeply stupid man? Deeply stupid, he had allowed himself to die even as the war ended. Deeply selfish, he had left behind children who would never know him. And Paul burned to know him. Burned to have a father. Most of his friends had fathers; they, too, had foreign names like Labessa and Dissell and Maronski; they spoke forms of English unintelligible outside Dundee. But they were there. His father was not, and he could not forgive his mother for that.

Sourness filled Paul's mouth. As if he'd crammed too many raspberries down his throat and felt them bubble back like bile. His breathing shortened into bursts and he leaned back against the damp wall of Shed 31. Not an attack, not here, not now. A rustling in the basket reminded him he was not alone. Bisto meowed and reminded him he was not alone. He slid the catch, reached in, and pulled the little bundle of life to his heaving chest. Was it Bisto's heart or his he felt throbbing against his fingers?

He lifted the small bundle to his face. The bright eyes. The pointy ears. The twitching whiskers. The tiny lips curling into a smiling bow. He loved the kitten so much it hurt. And yet ... and yet ...

The small body soared through the air, curved in an arc, and was falling, falling, falling into the dark oily rainbow-stained mirror that lapped against the brickwork of the dock.

There was hardly a splash.

For a moment the kitten disappeared, then resurfaced, scrabbling frantically at the treacherous surface that gave no hold. The kitten was looking directly at him. Did he look the same when he surfaced from the blue-green waters of the Lochee Public Baths, scrabbling frantically at the surface, looking for help that only came when hope was gone?

Why didn't anyone appear? Someone. Anyone. To grab him and shout in his face, "You bastard, you rotten wee bastard? What did you dae that fir?" Why wasn't he being held to account for an act that should have filled him with horror, but only left him with an aching void.

Where was the God that suffered when a single sparrow fell, yet ignored a tiny kitten bobbing in the slimy waters of Dundee docks? Where was the God that ignored him when he suffered, when His own son suffered?

"O, father, father, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Paul turned, kicked the basket away, and headed briskly for the Royal Arch, the bus terminus, and home.