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Written by Maeve Binchy

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The Copper Beech

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For Gordon, who has made my life so good and happy,
with all my gratitude and love.

SHANCARRIG SCHOOL

Father Gunn knew that their housekeeper Mrs Kennedy could have done it all much better than he would do it. Mrs Kennedy would have done *everything* better in fact, heard Confessions, forgiven sins, sung the *Tantum Ergo* at Benediction, buried the dead. Mrs Kennedy would have looked the part too, tall and angular like the Bishop, not round and small like Father Gunn. Mrs Kennedy's eyes were soulful and looked as if they understood the sadness of the world.

Most of the time he was very happy in Shancarrig, a peaceful place in the midlands. Most people only knew it because of the huge rock that stood high on a hill over Barna Woods. There had once been great speculation about this rock. Had it been part of something greater? Was it of great geological interest? But experts had come and decided while there may well have been a house built around it once all traces must have been washed away with the rains and storms of centuries. It had never been mentioned in any history book. All that was there was one great rock. And since Carrig was the Irish word for rock that was how the place was named – Shancarrig, the Old Rock.

Life was good at the Church of the Holy Redeemer in Shancarrig. The parish priest, Monsignor O'Toole, was a courteous, frail man who let the curate run things his own way. Father Gunn wished that more could be done for the people of the parish so that they didn't have to stand

at the railway station waving goodbye to sons and daughters emigrating to England and America. He wished that there were fewer damp cottages where tuberculosis could flourish, filling the graveyard with people too young to die. He wished that tired women did not have to bear so many children, children for whom there was often scant living. But he knew that all the young men who had been in the seminary with him were in similar parishes wishing the same thing. He didn't think he was a man who could change the world. For one thing he didn't *look* like a man who could change the world. Father Gunn's eyes were like two currants in a bun.

There had been a Mr Kennedy long ago, long before Father Gunn's time, but he had died of pneumonia. Every year he was prayed for at mass on the anniversary of his death, and every year Mrs Kennedy's sad face achieved what seemed to be an impossible feat, which was a still more sorrowful appearance. But even though it was nowhere near her late husband's anniversary now she was pretty gloomy, and it was all to do with Shancarrig school.

Mrs Kennedy would have thought since it was a question of a visit from the Bishop that *she*, as the priests' housekeeper, should have been in charge of everything. She didn't want to impose, she said many a time, but really had Father Gunn got it quite clear? Was it really expected that those teachers, those lay teachers above at the schoolhouse and the children that were taught in it, were really in charge of the ceremony?

'They're not used to bishops,' said Mrs Kennedy, implying that she had her breakfast, dinner and tea with the higher orders.

But Father Gunn had been adamant. The occasion was the dedication of the school, a bishop's blessing, a

ceremony to add to the legion of ceremonies for Holy Year, but it was to involve the children, the teachers. It wasn't something run by the presbytery.

'But Monsignor O'Toole is the manager,' Mrs Kennedy protested. The elderly frail parish priest played little part in the events of the parish, it was all done by his bustling energetic curate, Father Gunn.

In many ways, of course, it would have been much easier to let Mrs Kennedy take charge, to have allowed her to get her machine into motion and organise the tired sponge cases, the heavy pastries, the big pots of tea that characterised so many church functions. But Father Gunn had stood firm. This event was for the school and the school would run it.

Thinking of Mrs Kennedy standing there hatted and gloved and sorrowfully disapproving, he asked God to let the thing be done right, to inspire young Jim and Nora Kelly, the teachers, to set it up properly. And to keep that mob of young savages that they taught in some kind of control.

After all, God had an interest in the whole thing too, and making the Holy Year meaningful in the parish was important. God must want it to be a success, not just to impress the Bishop but so that the children would remember their school and all the values they learned there. He was very fond of the school, the little stone building under the huge copper beech. He loved going up there on visits and watching the little heads bent over their copy books.

'Procrastination is the thief of time' they copied diligently.

'What does that mean, do you think?' he had asked once.

'We don't know what it means, Father. We only have to copy it out,' explained one of the children helpfully.

They weren't too bad really, the children of Shancarrig – he heard their Confessions regularly. The most terrible sin, and the one for which he had to remember to apportion a heavy penance, was scutting on the back of a lorry. As far as Father Gunn could work out this was holding on to the back of a moving vehicle and being borne along without the driver's knowledge. It not unnaturally drew huge rage and disapproval from parents and passers-by, so he had to reflect the evilness of it by a decade of the Rosary, which was almost unheard of in the canon of children's penances. But scutting apart they were good children, weren't they? They'd do the school and Shancarrig credit when the Bishop came, wouldn't they?

The children talked of little else all term. The teachers told them over and over what an honour it was. The Bishop didn't normally go to small schools like this. They would have the chance to see him on their own ground, unlike so many children in the country who had never seen him until they were confirmed in the big town.

They had spent days cleaning the place up. The windows had been painted, and the door. The bicycle shed had been tidied so that you wouldn't recognise it. The classrooms had been polished till they gleamed. Perhaps His Grace would tour the school. It wasn't certain, but every eventuality had to be allowed for.

Long trestle tables would be arranged under the copper beech tree which dominated the school yard. Clean white sheets would cover them and Mrs Barton, the local dressmaker, had embroidered some lovely edging so that they wouldn't look like sheets. There would be jars of flowers, bunches of lilac and the wonderful purple orchids that grow wild in Barna Woods in the month of June.

A special table with Holy Water and a really good white

cloth would be there so that His Grace could take the silver spoon and sprinkle the Water, dedicating the school again to God. The children would sing 'Faith of Our Fathers', and because it was near to the Feast of Corpus Christi they would also sing 'Sweet Sacrament Divine'. They rehearsed it every single day, they were word perfect now.

Whether or not the children were going to be allowed to partake of the feast itself was a somewhat grey area. Some of the braver ones had inquired but the answers were always unsatisfactory.

'We'll see,' Mrs Kelly had said.

'Don't always think of your bellies,' Mr Kelly had said.

It didn't look terribly hopeful.

Even though it was all going to take place at the school they knew that it wasn't really centred around the children. It was for the parish.

There would be something, of course, they knew that. But only when the grown-ups were properly served. There might be just plain bits of bread and butter with a little scraping of sandwich paste on them, or the duller biscuits when all the iced and chocolate-sided ones had gone.

The feast was going to be a communal effort from Shancarrig and so they each knew some aspect of it. There was hardly a household that wouldn't be contributing.

'There are going to be bowls of jelly and cream with strawberries on top,' Nessa Ryan was able to tell.

'That's for grown-ups!' Eddie Barton felt this was unfair.

'Well, my mother is making the jellies and giving the cream. Mrs Kelly said it would be whipped in the school and the decorations put on at the last moment in case they ran.'

'And chocolate cake. Two whole ones,' Leo Murphy said.

It seemed very unfair that this should all be for the Bishop and priests and great crowds of multifarious adults in front of whom they had all been instructed, or ordered, to behave well.

Sergeant Keane would be there, they had been told, as if he was about to take them all personally to the gaol in the big town if there was a word astray.

'They'll have to give some to us,' Maura Brennan said. 'It wouldn't be fair otherwise.'

Father Gunn heard her say this and marvelled at the innocence of children. For a child like young Maura, daughter of Paudie who drank every penny that came his way, to believe still in fairness was touching.

'There'll be bound to be *something* left over for you and your friends, Maura,' he said to her, hoping to spread comfort, but Maura's face reddened. It was bad to be overheard by the priest wanting food on a holy occasion. She hung back and let her hair fall over her face.

But Father Gunn had other worries.

The Bishop was a thin silent man. He didn't walk to places but was more inclined to glide. Under his long soutane or his regal-style vestments he might well have had wheels rather than feet. He had already said he would like to process rather than drive from the railway station to the school. Very nice if you were a gliding person and it was a cool day. Not so good however if it was a hot day, and the Bishop would notice the unattractive features of Shancarrig.

Like Johnny Finn's pub where Johnny had said that out of deference to the occasion he would close his doors but he was not going to dislodge the sitters.

'They'll sing. They'll be disrespectful,' Father Gunn had pleaded.

'Think what they'd be like if they were out on the streets, Father.' The publican had been firm.

So much was spoken about the day and so much was made of the numbers that would attend that the children grew increasingly nervous.

'There's no proof at all that we'll get *any* jelly and cream,' Niall Hayes said.

'I heard no talk of special bowls or plates or forks.'

'And if they let people like Nellie Dunne loose they'll eat all before them.' Nessa Ryan bit her lip with anxiety.

'We'll help ourselves,' said Foxy Dunne.

They looked at him round-eyed. Everything would be counted, they'd be murdered, he must be mad.

'I'll sort it out on the day,' he said.

Father Gunn was not sleeping well for the days preceding the ceremony. It was a great kindness that he hadn't heard Foxy's plans.

Mrs Kennedy said that she would have some basic emergency supplies ready in the kitchen of the presbytery, just in case. Just in case. She said it several times.

Father Gunn would not give her the satisfaction of asking just in case *what.* He knew only too well. She meant in case his foolish confidence in allowing lay people up at a small schoolhouse to run a huge public religious ceremony was misplaced. She shook her head and dressed in black from head to foot, in honour of the occasion.

There had been three days of volunteer work trying to beautify the station. No money had been allotted by CIE, the railways company, for repainting. The stationmaster, Jack Kerr, had been most unwilling to allow a party of amateur painters loose on it. His instructions did not

include playing fast and loose with company property, painting it all the colours of the rainbow.

'We'll paint it grey,' Father Gunn had begged.

But no. Jack Kerr wouldn't hear of it, and he was greatly insulted at the weeding and slashing down of dandelions that took place.

'The Bishop likes flowers,' Father Gunn said sadly.

'Let him bring his own bunch of them to wear with his frock then,' said Mattie the postman, the one man in Shancarrig foolhardy enough to say publicly that he did not believe in God and wouldn't therefore be hypocritical enough to attend mass, or the sacraments.

'Mattie, this is not the time to get me into a theological discussion,' implored Father Gunn.

'We'll have it whenever you're feeling yourself again, Father.' Mattie was unfailingly courteous and rather too patronising for Father Gunn's liking.

But he had a good heart. He transported clumps of flowers from Barna Woods and planted them in the station beds. 'Tell Jack they grew when the earth was disturbed,' he advised. He had correctly judged the stationmaster to be unsound about nature and uninterested in gardening.

'I think the place is perfectly all right,' Jack Kerr was heard to grumble as they all stood waiting for the Bishop's train. He looked around his transformed railway station and saw nothing different.

The Bishop emerged from the train gracefully. He was shaped like an S hook, Father Gunn thought sadly. He was graceful, straightening or bending as he talked to each person. He was extraordinarily gracious, he didn't fuss or fumble, he remembered everyone's name, unlike Father Gunn who had immediately forgotten the names of the two self-important clerics who accompanied the Bishop.

*

Some of the younger children, dressed in the little white surplices of altar boys, stood ready to lead the procession up the town.

The sun shone mercilessly. Father Gunn had prayed unsuccessfully for one of the wet summer days they had been having recently. Even that would be better than this oppressive heat.

The Bishop seemed interested in everything he saw. They left the station and walked the narrow road to what might be called the centre of town had Shancarrig been a larger place. They paused at the Church of the Holy Redeemer for His Grace to say a silent prayer at the foot of the altar. Then they walked past the bus stop, the little line of shops, Ryan's Commercial Hotel and The Terrace where the doctor, the solicitor and other people of importance lived.

The Bishop seemed to nod approvingly when places looked well, and to frown slightly as he passed the poorer cottages. But perhaps that was all in Father Gunn's mind. Maybe His Grace was unaware of his surroundings and was merely saying his prayers. As they walked along Father Gunn was only too conscious of the smell from the River Grane, low and muddy. As they crossed the bridge he saw out of the corner of his eye a few faces at the window of Johnny Finn Noted for Best Drinks. He prayed they wouldn't find it necessary to open the window.

Mattie the postman sat laconically on an upturned barrel. He was one of the only spectators since almost every other citizen of Shancarrig was waiting at the school.

The Bishop stretched out his hand very slightly as if offering his ring to be kissed.

Mattie inclined his head very slightly and touched his cap. The gesture was not offensive, but neither was it exactly respectful. If the Bishop understood it he said

nothing. He smiled to the right and the left, his thin aristocratic face impervious to the heat. Father Gunn's face was a red round puddle of sweat.

The first sign of the schoolhouse was the huge ancient beech tree, a copper beech that shaded the playground. Then you saw the little stone schoolhouse that had been built at the turn of the century. The dedication ceremony had been carefully written out in advance and scrutinised by these bureaucratic clerics who seemed to swarm around the Bishop. They had checked every word in case Father Gunn might have included a major heresy or sacrilege. The purpose of it all was to consecrate the school, and the future of all the young people it would educate, to God in this Holy Year. Father Gunn failed to understand why this should be considered some kind of doctrinal minefield. All he was trying to do was to involve the community at the right level, to make them see that their children were their hope and their future.

For almost three months the event had been heralded from the altar at mass. And the pious hope expressed that the whole village would be present for the prayers and the dedication. The prayers, hymns and short discourse should take forty-five minutes, and then there would be an hour for tea.

As they plodded up the hill Father Gunn saw that everything was in place.

A crowd of almost two hundred people stood around the school yard. Some of the men leaned against the school walls but the women stood chatting to each other. They were dressed in their Sunday best. The group would part to let the little procession through and then the Bishop would see the children of Shancarrig.

All neat and shining – he had been on a tour of inspection already this morning. There wasn't a hair out

of place, a dirty nose or a bare foot to be seen. Even the Brennans and the Dunnes had been made respectable. They stood, all forty-eight of them, outside the school. They were in six rows of eight; those at the back were on benches so that they could be seen. They looked like little angels, Father Gunn thought. It was always a great surprise the difference a little cleaning and polishing could make.

Father Gunn relaxed, they were nearly there. Only a few more moments then the ceremony would begin. It would be all right after all.

The school looked magnificent. Not even Mrs Kennedy could have complained about its appearance, Father Gunn thought. And the tables were arranged under the spreading shade of the copper beech.

The master and the mistress had the children beautifully arranged, great emphasis having been laid on looking neat and tidy. Father Gunn began to relax a little. This was as fine a gathering as the Bishop would find anywhere in the diocese.

The ceremony went like clockwork. The chair for Monsignor O'Toole, the elderly parish priest, was discreetly placed. The singing, if not strictly tuneful, was at least in the right area. No huge discordancies were evident.

It was almost time for tea – the most splendid tea that had ever been served in Shancarrig. All the eatables were kept inside the school building, out of the heat and away from the flies. When the last notes of the last hymn died away Mr and Mrs Kelly withdrew indoors.

There was something about the set line of Mrs Kennedy's face that made Father Gunn decide to go and help them. He couldn't bear it if a tray of sandwiches fell to the ground or the cream slid from the top of a trifle. Quietly he moved in, to find a scene of total confusion.

Mr and Mrs Kelly and Mrs Barton, who had offered to help with carrying plates to tables, stood frozen in a tableau, their faces expressing different degrees of horror.

'What is it?' he asked, barely able to speak.

'Every single queen cake!' Mrs Kelly held up what looked from the top a perfectly acceptable tea cake with white icing on it, but underneath the sign of tooth marks showed that the innards had been eaten away.

'And the chocolate cake!' gasped Una Barton, who was white as a sheet. The front of the big cake as you saw it looked delectable, but the back had been propped up with a piece of bark, a good third of the cake having been eaten away.

'It's the same with the apple tarts!' Mrs Kelly's tears were now openly flowing down her cheeks. 'Some of the children, I suppose.'

'That Foxy Dunne and his gang! I should have known. I should have bloody known.' Jim Kelly's face was working itself into a terrible anger.

'How did he get in?'

'The little bastard said he'd help with the chairs, brought a whole gang in with him. I said to him, "All those cakes are counted very carefully." And I did bloody count them when they went out.'

'Stop saying bloody and bastard to Father Gunn,' said Nora Kelly.

'I think it's called for.' Father Gunn was grim.

'If only they could have just eaten half a dozen. They've wrecked the whole thing.'

'Maybe I shouldn't have gone on about counting them.' Jim Kelly's big face was full of regret.

'It's all ruined,' Mrs Barton said. 'It's ruined.' Her voice held the high tinge of hysteria that Father Gunn needed to bring him to his senses.

'Of course it's not ruined. Mrs Barton, get the teapots out, call Mrs Kennedy to help you. She's wonderful at pouring tea and she'd like to be invited. Get Conor Ryan from the hotel to start pouring the lemonade and send Dr Jims in here to me quick as lightning.'

His words were so firm that Mrs Barton was out the door in a flash. Through the small window he saw the tea pouring begin and Conor Ryan happy to be doing something he was familiar with, pouring the lemonade.

The doctor arrived, worried in case someone had been taken ill.

'It's your surgical skills we need, Doctor. You take one knife, I'll take another and we'll cut up all these cakes and put out a small selection.'

'In the name of God, Father Gunn, what do you want to do that for?' asked the doctor.

'Because these lighting devils that go by the wrong name of innocent children have torn most of the cakes apart with their teeth,' said Father Gunn.

Triumphantly they arrived out with the plates full of cake selections.

'Plenty more where that came from!' Father Gunn beamed as he pressed the assortments into their hands. Since most people might not have felt bold enough to choose such a wide selection they were pleased rather than distressed to see so much coming their way.

Out of the corner of his mouth Father Gunn kept asking Mr Kelly, the master, for the names of those likely to have been involved. He kept repeating them to himself, as someone might repeat the names of tribal leaders who had brought havoc and destruction on his ancestors. Smiling as he served people and bustled to and fro, he repeated as an incantation – 'Leo Murphy, Eddie Barton,

Niall Hayes, Maura Brennan, Nessa Ryan, and Foxy Bloody Dunne.'

He saw that Mattie the postman had consented to join the gathering, and was dangerously near the Bishop.

'Willing to eat the food of the Opium of the People, I see,' he hissed out of the corner of his mouth.

'That's a bit harsh from you, Father,' Mattie said, halfway through a plate of cake.

'Speak to the Bishop on any subject whatsoever and you'll never deliver a letter in this parish again,' Father Gunn warned.

The gathering was nearing its end. Soon it would be time to return to the station.

This time the journey would be made by car. Dr Jims and Mr Hayes, the solicitor, would drive the Bishop and the two clerics, whose names had never been ascertained.

Father Gunn assembled the criminals together in the school. 'Correct me if I have made an error in identifying any of the most evil people it has ever been my misfortune to meet,' he said in a terrible tone.

Their faces told him that his information had been mainly correct.

'Well?' he thundered.

'Niall wasn't in on it,' Leo Murphy said. She was a small wiry ten-year-old with red hair. She came from The Glen, the big house on the hill. She could have had cake for tea seven days a week.

'I did have a bit, though,' Niall Hayes said.

'Mr Kelly is a man with large hands. He has declared his intention of using them to break your necks, one after the other. I told him that I would check with the Vatican, but I was sure he would get absolution. Maybe even a *medal.*' Father Gunn roared the last word. They all jumped

back in fright. 'However, I told Mr Kelly not to waste the Holy Father's time with all these dispensations and pardons, instead I would handle it. I told him that you had all volunteered to wash every dish and plate and cup and glass. That it was your contribution. That you would pick up every single piece of litter that has fallen around the school. That you would come to report to Mr and Mrs Kelly when it is all completed.'

They looked at each other in dismay. This was a long job. This was something that the ladies of the parish might have been expected to do.

'What about people like Mrs Kennedy? Wouldn't they want to...?' Foxy began.

'No, they wouldn't want to, and people like Mrs Kennedy are *delighted* to know that you volunteered to do this. Because those kinds of people haven't seen into your black souls.'

There was silence.

'This day will never be forgotten. I want you to know that. When other bad deeds are hard to remember this one will always be to the forefront of the mind. This June day in 1950 will be etched there for ever.' He could see that Eddie Barton's and Maura Brennan's faces were beginning to pucker; he mustn't frighten them to death. 'So now. You will join the guard of honour to say farewell to the Bishop, to wave goodbye with your hypocritical hearts to His Grace whose visit you did your best to undermine and destroy. *Out.*' He glared at them. '*Out* this minute.'

Outside, the Bishop's party was about to depart. Gracefully he was moving from person to person, thanking them, praising them, admiring the lovely rural part of Ireland they lived in, saying that it did the heart good to get out to see God's beautiful nature from time to

time rather than being always in a bishop's palace in a city.

'What a wonderful tree this is, and what great shade it gave us today.' He looked up at the copper beech as if to thank it, although it was obvious that he was the kind of man who could stand for hours in the Sahara desert without noticing anything amiss in the climate. It was the boiling Father Gunn who owed thanks to the leafy shade.

'And what's all this writing on the trunk?' He peered at it, his face alive with its well-bred interest and curiosity. Father Gunn heard the Kellys' intake of breath. This was the tree where the children always inscribed their initials, complete with hearts and messages saying who was loved by whom. Too secular, too racy, too sexual to be admired by a bishop. Possibly even a hint of vandalism about it.

But no.

The Bishop seemed by some miracle to be admiring it.

'It's good to see the children mark their being here and leaving here,' he said to the group who stood around straining for his last words. 'Like this tree has been here for decades, maybe even centuries back, so will there always be a school in Shancarrig to open the minds of its children and to send them out into the world.'

He looked back lingeringly at the little stone schoolhouse and the huge tree as the car swept him down the hill and towards the station.

As Father Gunn got into the second car to follow him and make the final farewells at the station he turned to look once more at the criminals. Because his heart was big and the day hadn't been ruined he gave them half a smile. They didn't dare to believe it.