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District Nurse

Written by Patricia Jordan

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District Nurse

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Chapter One

As I knocked, a piece of flaking paint fell from the door, a dog yelped, and a woman's voice screamed, 'Come round to the bloomin' back, and shut yer bloomin' gob, will yer.' Since I hadn't spoken I wasn't sure whether either remark was directed at me. I knocked again. The voice, nearer this time, said, 'Ruddy deaf are yer, I told yer, come round the bloomin' back.' With my heavy delivery bag in my left hand and the black leather case containing the gas and air apparatus tucked under my left arm, I opened the latch of a side gate with a frozen finger, took an uncertain pace into the dark alley ahead of me, missed a step, and stumbled into a bicycle which fell to the ground with me and my equipment on top of it.

Not a very good beginning to my first assignment as a relief district midwife. There had been enough swearing in a short space of time, so I bit my tongue as I rubbed my shins through torn stockings. I tried remembering that the patient's needs must remain uppermost in my mind. I picked up the bicycle, put it against the wall, grabbed my bag and case and resumed my inky journey.

As I approached what I thought must be the back door, it swung open and from a shaft of light the same raucous voice called, 'Charlie won't be goin' ter t' whippets tonight. 'e's doin' a 'alf turn'; then the door slammed.

I began to think I'd been given the wrong address; by the way this woman spoke she didn't sound as if she was in labour, and surely Charlie, whom I presumed was her husband, wouldn't be doing an extra half shift at work if she was. At least she would be able to tell me where Mrs Caine, my patient, lived, so very gingerly I knocked with my knuckles on the door. A sharp-faced, dark-haired woman of about thirty-five, but looking older, opened it.

'Ah told yer . . .' she began, then peering at me said, 'Oh it's you – the nurse – well, don't just stand there, come in, it's ruddy cold.'

'Mrs Caine?' I queried.

'Ah'm not Mrs Caine, my name's Farmer – Alma Farmer. There's no Mrs Caine in this 'ouse. It's our Pearl you want. She's in t' parlour.' She crooked her thumb over her shoulder and sniffed, 'Mrs bloomin' Caine indeed. She's a ruddy tart, that's what she is, and what my Charlie's goin' to say when 'e gets 'ome and finds 'er 'ere I dread to think. 'e can be very awkward can my Charlie. 'e made me swear last time never to let 'er in again. This'll be the third time she's laid down in this 'ouse, and 'e ain't goin' to like it one little bit, so you'd better look out.'

'Who is Pearl then?' my voice quavered.

'Me bloomin' sister, worse luck, she's me flesh and blood, so I can't turn 'er away, can I?'

I didn't think it much good her looking to me for support, still it cost me nothing to give it at the moment, so I nodded in agreement.

'Well, 'adn't you better go in and see Pearl then?' she said aggrievedly, as if ashamed at having asked my opinion. 'You'll find 'er on t' sofa.'

'Isn't there a bed . . .' I began.

'What! Our Charlie would go bloomin' mad if she 'ad it in ours, and she ain't usin' the kids' room. 'ell, I'd forgotten them.' She opened the door. 'Azel, where yer at?' she shouted.

'Ere, our mam,' a voice replied.

'Where's our Mark? If you've let 'im play in that ruddy water again, I'll kill yer. Get yerself in 'ere and bring 'im with yer.'

I felt it was time to make myself scarce, so I picked up my equipment and went into the parlour. I took a quick glance round. It was, I thought, a squalid little room, though I've seen worse since. The floor was covered in chipped brown lino, there was a piano against one of the walls, the only table was piled with papers and magazines, the tattered, grimy curtains were held together with a clothes peg, there were two rexine chairs, and a matching two-seater sofa; this had been drawn up in front of a coal fire. On the sofa, from where I was standing, I could see a dank head of hair lolling on one side, a skinny arm was

thrown over the back, two knees were sticking out over the other side and in the middle protruded a very pregnant abdomen. Groans and muttered curses came from this unattractive form.

‘Good evening,’ I said. ‘I’m the district midwife.’

She half turned her head, ‘What’s so muckin’ good about it? Ah’ve not known many worse. Come on in then, and shut the bloomin’ door after yer, there’s a draught.’

I walked to the other side of the sofa to get a proper look at her. She was lying on a grubby sheet, under which was an old dirty mackintosh. Although she was streaming with sweat, as much from the heat of the fire as from the labour pains and, despite the fact that she no longer had any makeup on, she was attractive in a savage sort of way. ‘Ah’m Pearl,’ she announced sullenly, more to her bulging belly than to me. Suddenly the whole situation struck me as ludicrous. No name could have been less fitting under the circumstances and in the surroundings. The tune ‘What Girls Do for Pearls’ started strumming in my head. I pulled myself to my five-foot-two height. ‘It’s what you’ve got to do for Pearl that matters now,’ I thought.

I looked around for somewhere to put my nursing bag, my coat and the gas and air equipment. ‘Never leave these things on an unclean surface,’ I’d been taught in my midwifery training. ‘If circumstances in the home prevent the use of a sheet or a towel, newspapers can be used.’ But dare I ask Alma for any of these things?

I put my nursing bag on top of the piano, and alongside

it I stood the gas and air machine. I folded my coat and lay it on one of the armchairs; it was later that I discovered it was covered in dog's hairs. As I moved to examine Pearl, Alma came into the room. 'Ow's she doin'? Is she gonna be long? My Charlie'll be back soon. It should be easy enough, she's 'ad two others. I ask yer, nurse, fancy making the same mistake three times. She must be soft in t'ead.'

'Buzz off,' came the reply, from the form on the sofa.

'Charmin' ain't she, and grateful after me givin' 'er shelter, tellin' me that, in me own 'ouse.'

I saw no point in getting involved, so I began my examination and asked Pearl to stretch her legs out so that I could have a proper look at her tummy. It sounded a bit incongruous to call it that, but it was the way obstetricians and midwives had referred to it during my training.

As I helped Pearl stretch herself out I thought of that training, of the conditions under which I learned to deliver babies, and of the other tummies I'd seen in the past. They had varied greatly in size, and had always been poised on couches in ante-natal clinics, in spotlessly clean and well-equipped surroundings. On the left of each couch had stood a table or glass trolley, on which were laid out a sphygmomanometer (for measuring blood pressure), a stethoscope, foetal stethoscope, rubber gloves, obstetrical cream, and a variety of kidney-shaped dishes. On the floor there had been an enamel pail to receive the used gloves. The snow-white covers of the couch were always changed between examinations.

Then later, I had seen these tummies in the labour ward, pointing towards the ceiling from the hard firm surface of the labour bed. I had learnt to treat them with deference. I'd patted them affectionately and cuddled them close to my ear as I counted the foetal heartbeats, which I checked at regular and increasing intervals as labour progressed. By the time these tummies had reached the labour ward they were hard and rigid through the hefty contractions of the muscular and highly vascular uteruses underneath. They moved spasmodically, sometimes in strong, jumpy jerks as the foetuses struggled gallantly to escape from their humid surroundings into the light.

Within easy reach of the bed, yet far enough away for it not to be contaminated by even the slightest touch of anything that was not aseptic, was a double-shelved glass trolley, draped with a green sterile towel. Under this towel were stainless steel bowls, more kidney-shaped dishes, two small ointment pots, ligatures to tie the umbilical cord, two Spencer Wells clamps and specially blunted umbilical scissors. On the bottom shelf were a sterile syringe and needles, an ampoule of Ergometrine (a drug given after delivery to stimulate the contractions of the uterus and so, it was hoped, prevent a post partum haemorrhage), a bottle of Savlon, another of sterile water and finally two identity bracelets to attach to the left leg and arm of the new baby. When the baby's arrival was imminent, the midwife in charge (we called her the 'scrubbed nurse') would remove the drape from the trolley, while an unscrubbed nurse,

without touching the trolley, would fill one of the large bowls with Savlon and one of the ointment pots with sterile water, which were to be used to bathe the baby's eyes.

When the infant arrived, it was held upside down, given the usual smack on the bottom to make it cry, and placed by the 'scrubbed nurse' on a sterile bath towel near at hand. A Spencer Wells clamp was attached to the mother's end of the umbilical cord, another to the baby's end and the cord was cut. This brand new and independent human being was now taken over by the unscrubbed nurse, who extracted any excess mucus from its lungs, and placed it in a cot or an incubator, according to its condition. Meanwhile the 'scrubbed nurse' performed the third stage of labour, and, when the placenta had been completely expelled from the mother, started kneading her tummy like a piece of dough, in this way stimulating the contraction of the womb, until the empty uterus could be felt like a small hard football. Always around had been extra pairs of hands ready to make the mother as comfortable as possible, and a resident doctor was on instant call should any difficulties be experienced.

Alma's 'Well, aren't yer goin' to do summat', and a muttered curse from Pearl, brought me back from my dream world to the stark, wretched reality of a situation I'd not been trained to expect. I found my hands and my knees were trembling. 'I suppose yer know what yer at, I take it you've brought a baby before, 'aven't yer,' Alma half sneered. It was what I needed to goad me into action.

I knelt with my back to the fire at the front of the sofa, and began my examination.

I patted Pearl's tummy, as I'd patted many others. I dug my palms into the flesh to try to find which side the baby was lying in. Despite Pearl's awkward position I was successful – it was on the left. I then groped for the tennisball feel of the foetal head, but it had gone through the brim of Pearl's pelvis; this was good, it was well fixed in position. Cuddling her tummy I placed the foetal stethoscope on the left side of it, and with my watch counted the loud and regular lub-dubs of the tiny heart. All the time I was conscious that Alma's critical eyes were on what I was doing. I also suddenly became aware of a smell of scorching, and of a searing pain in my back. I jumped to my feet. I thought my clothes were alight. 'Feelin' a bit 'ot, eh?' was Alma's unhelpful comment, but she did have the courtesy to help me push the sofa away from the fire.

I knew that a vaginal examination was now necessary, but before I could do it I had to have some hot water and a towel to get as near as I could to being a 'scrubbed nurse'. I plucked up courage and asked Alma for them. She responded and soon reappeared with a large blue polythene bowl which she placed on the seat of the remaining rexine chair, and over the back slung a ragged, but reasonably clean, towel. Stuck to the bottom of the bowl was a piece of red carbolic soap. Things were looking up. I took a scrub brush from my nursing bag and plunged my hands into near boiling water. It was my turn to swear,

but resisting the temptation I brusquely asked for some cold water. When this was brought I did as good a job as possible to make my hands and arms aseptic. I slipped on my rubber gloves and moved in to start my examination. I leant over the arm of the sofa; as I touched her, Pearl gave an almighty scream, drew her right knee up, hitting me under the chin and knocking me sideways. This got a chuckle from Alma. 'You wouldn't think she'd got the strength in them skinny legs, would yer?' she leered. When I'd recovered my balance and my courage, I began again. My 'Now, Pearl, it's not really hurting you' was met with a string of obscenities, and by the time the examination was finished I was astonished at how many prefixes can be attached to the word 'off'.

Alma by now had got into the spirit of the thing, and at every expletive from Pearl would jeer, 'Serves yer ruddy right.' Since at last I felt I was commanding some sort of respect, I mentioned that we should be preparing a cot for the baby. 'Yer didn't bring no cot with yer, did yer, Pearl?' said Alma. Since Pearl offered no reply I ventured that possibly we might have the one Alma had used for her children. It was a grave error of judgement. 'What! Use our cot for Pearl's little bastard, not bloomin' likely! My Charlie would 'alf kill me if we did.' This started Pearl off, and the two women went at each other hammer and tongs, with venom and hatred multiplied by expletives. When eventually I was able to get a word in edgeways, I suggested that a laundry basket and pillow would be

adequate. I also beseeched Alma, for the child's sake, to find what she could in the way of clothing and nappies. Her face looked set for an obstinate refusal. I played what I thought must be my last card, 'Even baby Jesus had a better birth than this one's likely to get.' It worked. There was a moment of absolute silence, Alma's face changed, she sniffed and left the room, eventually to return with a laundry basket and cushion, two worn baby vests and gowns, and four ragged nappies.

'The best I can do,' she said, as she spread them on the hearth in front of the fire. 'I would've lent 'er the cot only I know Charlie would crucify me,' she almost apologized.

Flushed with my success I now asked for a large pan to boil my bowls and instruments in.

'Gawd, what'll yer want next? I 'aven't got one, but I'll ask around,' she added quickly.

A neighbour must have obliged for she was back with what I needed in ten minutes. I took it to the kitchen, packed the pan with the instruments and bowls, filled it with water, and lit the gas.

My examination had shown that Pearl's cervix was two fingers dilated and that if things went by the book it would be at least an hour or two before I needed the instruments, but I was determined to get things prepared; after all Charlie would be back soon and I might need time to cope with him.

My thought must have fathered his arrival, for at that moment the Burrowdale Town Hall clock struck eight, the

back door opened and I heard Charlie, as he went into the living room, call, 'Oo's a bonnie lass then, come and give us a kiss.' This was not what I'd expected to hear when he greeted Alma, and I conveyed my astonishment to Pearl. 'It's not 'er 'e's talkin' to, yer fool, it's 'is ruddy whippet. Thinks more of that bloomin' dog than any 'uman, the ignorant bastard. Baby Doll, 'e calls 'er. You'll 'ear what 'e calls our Alma when 'e discovers I'm 'ere.' I did, for Charlie, moving into the kitchen to find out what was cooking for his dinner, saw my instruments, which I hoped had now come to the boil.

'Alma, what the bloomin' 'ell are these, what's goin' on around 'ere?' he shouted.

To describe the row that followed as Alma attempted to explain things to him would be like reciting a wall of graffiti. By now the whole street must have known what was going on. The gas under my instruments was turned off. 'Ah'm payin' naught in gas bills for that tart,' he cried as he did it, 'and there's no more muckin' coal going into t' parlour.' That didn't worry me, it was already quite hot enough in the house. I could tell by the way Alma shouted back that she was scared out of her wits. I sat on the side of the sofa, holding Pearl's hand – more, I'm ashamed to say, to receive comfort rather than give it. Pearl was the only one who seemed unconcerned, which was astonishing as Charlie kept threatening to come into the parlour and 'sort out yon filth good and proper'.

'Don't worry, nurse, 'e's all talk,' said Pearl, and then

shouted, 'Shurruup yer loud-mouthed swine.' This started a slanging match through the wall.

I could stand it no longer. I rushed into the living room and confronted Charlie: 'Be quiet! Have you no sense of decency or respect? There's a woman in there in pain, I don't care what she is or what she's done, she's suffering and I'm here to help her through it. There's a baby being born, who'll meet evil soon enough. Keep it away from it this night, for God's sake.'

Charlie's big hulk sank into a chair. Baby Doll jumped on to his lap; he stroked her tentatively muttering, 'Oo's a bonnie lass then?' Then he looked at me, 'All right, nurse, we'll shut up, and you can get on with yer job, only don't be too long about it, understand?'

When I rejoined Pearl she looked at me almost with respect, 'That's tellin' 'im, nurse. You put 'im in 'is place proper, bloomin' bully, that's all 'e is. Now we can get on with t'job.'

It was as if throughout the turmoil Pearl had become immune to pain. She soon made up for lost time, for the contractions became stronger and were occurring at regular intervals of a quarter of an hour. With each recurrent pain she began screaming, drawing up her legs, kicking the arms of the sofa, swearing and blaspheming loudly. I took a syringe from my bag and filled it from an ampoule of pethidine. When she saw what I was at Pearl said, 'And what do yer think yer goin' to do with that thing?' I explained that I was about to inject her with it.

'Not on yer Nelly; yer not stickin' that thing into me.'

'All right,' I soothed her, 'I'll put it down here for the time being,' and I laid it on a towel near the hearth. 'Just turn over on your side for a moment,' I said, and helped her move. I then made a quick grab for the syringe, found the muscle in her bottom, stuck the needle firmly in and was discharging its contents when Pearl flung her arms out and with a 'Yer bloomin' bitch yer' tried to get at the needle. She was too late. 'There you are, it didn't hurt much,' I said as I backed away, just in case she kicked out at me. But things were now happening too fast for her to consider revenge. I looked round for somewhere to put the gas and air machine, for she was nearing the stage when she would be in need of its soothing fumes. I wouldn't have minded a few puffs of it myself!

Since one chair was occupied by the polythene bowl and would also be required for my instruments, I threw my coat on the floor, pulled that chair to the head of the sofa, and opening the case drew the snake-like rubber tube attached to the cylinder from it, bringing it and the face mask over Pearl's right shoulder. She was obviously familiar with this bit of equipment for she made no comment as I did it, and, when I told her that as she felt the next pain in her back she was to take the mask and breathe deeply from it, she replied sullenly, 'I know what to do, it isn't me first, yer know.' I then turned on the mixture of nitrous oxide gas and oxygen.

It was now that I realized I was in danger of breaking

yet another midwife's rule, for when this gas is administered during a home confinement a third person has to be in the room with the patient. Not because of any danger, but to safeguard the nurse, in case she is later accused of stealing something while the patient is in a drowsy state. I decided to get Alma. I tapped on the living-room door. Charlie's 'Come on in' sounded as if he was spoiling for a fight. He was alone, except for Baby Doll, who slipped off his lap and made towards me, sniffing suspiciously.

'Alma's upstairs with t'kids,' he volunteered, before I could ask. 'Anythin' I can do?' I shuddered at the thought.

'No thank you,' I replied. As I stood there, feeling like a spare part, I looked down at the whippet, with its tail between its legs. 'You look like I feel,' I thought, and in sympathy I stooped down to stroke it. The dog seemed to like me, for she put her paws on my shoulder and began licking my cheeks. Charlie's face lit up, 'Ee, that's rare, that's very rare. She don't do that to many. She's taken to you 'as Baby Doll.'

'This is my breakthrough,' I thought, and decided to capitalize on it. I asked how old she was, about her pedigree, whether she'd won any races and pretended a knowledge I didn't have. It didn't matter, Charlie was only too anxious to do the talking. Eventually, when Alma returned, he put his arm round my shoulder and said, 'She's a good 'un, this 'un, understands about dogs, and they understand 'er. So you can get 'er a cup of tea, luv.' I remarked that I must be returning to my patient. 'That

no-good tart, she's rubbish, she's not worth yer trouble,' he was back to his old self again. I must have looked concerned. 'Oh I'm not blamin' you for what she's done.' That, I thought drily, was a comfort. 'All right, you go on in, and Alma will bring t' tea to yer.'

Cheered by Charlie's change of attitude towards me, Alma brought a cup for Pearl as well. She helped her sit up while she drank it. I then asked if she would stay with me while Pearl was taking the gas. 'No,' she replied, 'I'm better in there, keepin' 'im 'appy while the goin's good.' I was sure she was right; together we helped Pearl to lie down, and then she went. Pearl was now getting very drowsy and from time to time dropped off to sleep, snoring and swearing alternately. I checked her pulse and the foetal heartbeat, then leant back against the sofa to rest. It had been a very exhausting few hours.

My mind went back over my childhood. What would Sister Benedict, my headmistress, say if she could see me now? I remembered how, as a fifth former, she had warned me of the big, bad, wicked world that lay outside the convent walls, and of the iniquities of the people in that world. Was my present situation the kind of thing she was trying to tell me about? How would she, with her gentleness and naivety, have responded to Pearl, Alma or Charlie? Come to think of it, when I'd expressed an interest in nursing she'd played down the virtues of Florence Nightingale. As a Dominican, the order of teachers, she had rather extolled the merits of that profession, which

was probably why I chose neither at the time, but became a secretary to a stockbroker, a Mr Isaacs, a quiet, likeable, pipe-smoking man, whose bottom I got to know better than his face, for he always spoke or dictated with his back to me. When he reprimanded me with his 'Vot have I done to deserve this?', it was from the same position, and when I told him of my decision to leave to follow nursing as a career, his 'Vi you do this to me?' came from over his shoulder. 'Yes, Mr Isaacs,' I now thought, 'Vot have I done to deserve this?' and 'Vi should I do this to myself?'

Then I thought of my home and my parents. It was, I suppose, a home of love, but it was the love of God that predominated, and the affection of my parents was given almost grudgingly, as if in fear that it might be allied with sin. I remembered one evening, I must have been nineteen at the time, I was filling the teapot and accidentally poured boiling water on my feet and blamed 'the bloody kettle'. My mother's face paled, she crossed herself and ordered me to confession immediately. When she reported the incident to my father, he spoke of getting a bishop to the house because a member of his family had used 'some terrible bad talk'. My thoughts returned to my present surroundings. This place, it seemed, would need a platoon of popes to edify it.

Then I thought of the reason for my sudden decision to become a nurse. It had been no vocational calling, but had been caused by a dark-haired, sullenly handsome, Irish boy, Paul Mulholland, storming out of our tennis

club one evening, vowing never to see me again. The Irish troubles had started for me many years before they became everyday news. Paul, like myself, was a Catholic; we became friendly as children, cycling to school together. Our affection for each other had grown over the years, and it was assumed by everyone who knew us that we would eventually get married. There was one shadow that occasionally fell between us: he was a staunch Republican; his father, who died when he was young, had been in prison as a political prisoner during the 1916 rebellion. I, on the other hand, hated violence. One day a policeman, a neighbour of ours, was shot and killed, leaving a wife and six children. Paul was triumphant about this, called the gunman a hero, and when I protested he sneered at me. A row began in which things were said that could never be taken back, and although I felt my cause was just, my sense of bereavement when he walked out was as great as the constable's widow's. There seemed no alternative but for me to leave Belfast, and Ireland, and start a new life. 'I suppose, Paul, if you could see me now,' I thought, 'you would say it serves me right.'

An oath from Pearl brought me back to reality. She was wriggling and grunting her way to the edge of the sofa. I went over and saw that the sheet on which she was lying was soaked with amniotic fluid, so I knew that the membranes of the sac in which she was carrying her baby had now ruptured. Once again I scrubbed my hands and arms in the basin, slipped on my rubber gloves and

began a further examination. This showed that the cervix, the neck of the womb, had been completely taken up and was fully dilated. I traced the sutures, the soft, fibrous tissue which separates the bones of the foetal skull, with the forefinger of my right hand, while Pearl continued to grunt and swear.

Now, Paul, my parents and the convent nuns were forgotten, and so were the second thoughts I'd had on my choice of career. This was my life's purpose – Pearl and her baby needed me. So what if the conditions were appalling? Didn't that make it more of a challenge?

I was in a kind of ecstasy. I bounded out of the room and kicked open the living-room door, 'Charlie, get the fire made up, and put the kettle on the stove; and hurry. Alma, clean sheets please, then come and hold Pearl's right leg high out of my way.' They moved, and moved fast, without questioning. They seemed to catch the urgency of my mood. I took the pan containing my instruments from the gas, drained it and returned to the parlour. I put on a mask and the shapeless delivery gown, knelt on the floor, and with Alma holding Pearl's leg in the air, got hold of the soft slippery crown of the baby's head with my right hand, but at the end of the last big contraction it slipped back.

'Gawd, bloomin' hurry will yer. I can't stand much more,' Pearl cried.

'Don't speak to me like that,' I shouted back at her.

The whole house seemed to take on a stillness. Charlie,

back in the living room, must have taken my remark personally, for the silence was broken by an almost embarrassed 'Oo's a bonnie lass then?' as if he was seeking comfort from his whippet.

So a baby boy was born, in a peace which had seemed impossible a couple of hours ago. Even Pearl seemed to sense the occasion, for she recovered without swearing, and then asked the usual questions that the mothers in aseptic labour wards put to me – 'What is it? Is he all right?' and the inevitable 'How much does he weigh?' as if all new babies arrived with a pair of scales around their necks. I made Pearl as comfortable as circumstances would allow, bathed the baby, dressed him in his second-hand clothing and placed him snugly in the laundry basket. Alma leaned over it and said, to nobody in particular, 'Poor li'le lad.' 'E didn't ask to be born, did 'e?' Then almost as if she was pleased, 'E's a bit like our Mark when 'e was a baby.' She lifted the corner of her apron, wiped her eyes and announced, 'Ah'll brew up, we could all do with a drink after that little lot.'

I followed her into the scullery, for there was a deal of cleaning up to be done. I noticed that Charlie kept hovering in the passage, as if he felt he should do something, but was uncertain what. I thought I knew the reason: he wanted to see the result of all the fuss. When I asked him if he would like to take a look at the baby, his face lit up, 'Aye, ah would that, if it's alreet by you like.' He stepped into the parlour, carefully keeping his back towards Pearl,

and haunched down by the laundry basket. He made a few clicking noises with his tongue and said, 'What a downright ruddy shame. Poor little bastard.' Then, as if ashamed of his words and mood, he grasped a tiny little fist.

'Oo's a bonnie lad then?' he queried.