

Janie's Good Deed

BY BIANCA BRADBURY

Illustrated by Albert D. Jousset



Stevie was taking an un-catlike interest in her present. He nosed and scratched.

SHE could see his worried face, but she couldn't see what it was that he held in his arms. The mass of young shoulders pressing around the improvised coffee and doughnut counter was too thick. He was the only one of the group of selectees who stayed aloof, and Janie couldn't help wondering. Ordinarily, to a man, the new soldiers leaving at the station crowded around the counter, where Janie, with her pretty cohorts, dispensed coffee and smiles for a send-off.

"There seems to be a lone waif leaning against that post," said Janie to her friend, Betty Lou. "I'd like to investigate."

"More likely a lone wolf," answered Betty Lou. "Watch out, Janie."

But Jane was gone. She worked her way through the station, a trim slim girl in a volunteer's uniform, an overseas cap set provocatively on red curls. Many heads turned to look, but the exclusive and lonely figure by the post ignored her. He hunched over the thing he carried in his arms.

"Hi, soldier," Janie greeted him. "Anything I can do to help?"

He turned his brooding gaze upon her, and she saw what it was that he carried. It was an enormous grey tabby. It was not an ordinary cat. It was huge, and billowed in his arms, and over his shoulder its head was draped. It leered at Janie.

She was startled. "Where did you get that thing?" she asked.

He looked extremely young and defenseless, as he stared at her with a sort of frustrated animosity against the world. "It is not a thing," he said darkly. "It is all I own in the world."

"Well, you can't take it with you," advised Janie.

"You can't take it with you!" he mimicked. "The train man tells me that. I don't need any red-haired female in a fancy uniform to tell me!"

Janie drew back. "Why don't you leave it with your mother?" she asked. "Or with your sister or an aunt or something?"

"I haven't got a mother," he flared, "or a sister or a cousin or an aunt. Not even a landlady, now."

The loud speaker broke into the recital of his family deficiencies. "All aboard," it boomed. "All aboard!"

Terror leaped into the young man's eyes. The crowd of selectees was moving towards the platform exit. He thrust the bundle of fur into Janie's hands, and started away.

"Hey, you can't do that!" she cried.

"His name is Steve," he yelled. "Short for Stevedore." The crowd was pushing him on. Janie stared after him, her mouth wide open. Then he turned again.

"What's your name?" he howled.

"Jane Barry!"

"Where do you live?"

"36 Orchard Drive!" People turned to

laugh. She stood baffled and furious, and the big cat struggled and floundered. By the time she had assembled him and got him under control, his late master had entirely disappeared, and the station was deserted. Betty Lou strolled over.

"Where did you get that thing?" she inquired.

"It's not a thing—it's a cat," snapped Jane. "And if I ever see its owner again, I shall throttle him with my bare hands."

"Don't say I didn't warn you, darling," said Betty Lou. "And the way you flung your address at him was shameless. You'll have the entire United States army writing to you. You could hear your name clear to Kalama-zoo."

Janie stalked off. She found herself in the street. Stevedore was a fighting grey bunch of fury. There was a huge and inviting ash-can by the curb, and she considered it longingly. A policeman guessed her intentions.

"You can't do that, lady," he advised.

"Don't you start telling me what I can and can't do!" she barked.

But a taxi drawing up saved her from further entanglement with the law. She tossed the cat into it. "Home," she groaned. "36 Orchard Drive." She sank back into the seat, and closed her eyes. Stevedore bounded about the interior of the cab like a caged lion, growling and spitting and clawing. She gathered him in.

"Just casualties of the war," she muttered into his thick fur. "That's us, Stevie."

The cab drew up before the neat white bungalow of the Barrys. As luck would have it, the whole family was assembled in the living-room. She had hoped to break Stevedore to them gently.

Her mother started up, appalled, and dropped her knitting. Her father looked over his newspaper with an expression of profound disbelief. She couldn't blame him. When she set Steve down on the floor and

took her first good look at him, she couldn't believe it, either.

He switched an enormous tail, and glared about him. His eyes held a jungle glitter. His face was out of kilter, for at some time in a checkered career he had survived a broken jaw. The jaw was set at a cynical angle, so that his teeth were perpetually bared, like an old-fashioned movie villain.

"Jeepers!" said her small brother Tommy, and scrambled up from his funny paper.

"Where did you get that thing?" "I won him in a raffle!" said Janie. "He's the Barrys' good deed for the duration." To the accompaniment of a profound silence, she gathered up her good deed, and bundled it off to her room.

Time did not render Stevedore a kindlier welcome in the Barry domicile. The family tolerated him, because a soldier's cat was a soldier's cat. But the trouble was, that Steve wouldn't put himself out. He made himself obnoxiously at home. He appropriated to himself the most comfortable chairs. If anyone saw fit to remonstrate with him, he leered. He was as fussy as a visiting rich uncle about his food. He hovered around the icebox all the time.

"Jeepers, Bricktop," said Tommy. "Why do you have to be there when the army is handing around souvenirs? The whole Barry family is paying for your good deeds. I hope they don't start giving away boa constrictors."

The only one for whom Steve showed even a perfunctory affection was Janie. She was away most of the day, busy with a job and her volunteer duties. But whenever she came in, he was at the door to meet her. He posed on the newel post, and royally permitted her to scratch his ears. She began to feel a sneaking fondness for the big fellow. She did, that is, until one day when she found a letter waiting for her. It was short, and not very sweet:

DEAR MISS BARRY:

Thank you so much for your gracious acceptance of Stevedore. I didn't have time to tell you about his diet. He has oatmeal for breakfast, with cream preferred. For dinner he likes a bit of steak, but can do with a lamb chop. It was a relief to leave him in your gentle hands. I would write more, but I have an urgent date with some potatoes and a paring knife.

Sincerely yours,
PRIVATE WILLIAM O'ROURKE.

Janie didn't show the letter to her family. She was too furious. Before the war took all the available males, Janie had been Janie the belle. Now, she didn't want the family to know how low she had fallen. Janie the belle was now Janie the zoo-keeper, receiving from the army orders, not requests but orders, for the care of the army's orphan cats.

It was not in a patriotic mood that she sat down to answer the letter. The sun was streaming across the desk and tangled in her flaming hair.

DEAR PRIVATE O'ROURKE [she wrote]:

I did not accept your cat, he was thrust upon me. As for his food, you had better write him and explain that there is a war on. The Barrys are eating liverwurst and loving it. If your cat gets a smell he is lucky. On the day that the peace is signed, if you do not appear to claim your property, you may dig for him in the nearest well.

Sincerely,
JANE BARRY.

When the letter was sent, however, she began to cool off. After all, Private William O'Rourke was fighting for his country. And when, coming in one evening, she found Stevie in his accustomed place, and a package waiting on the hall table, her heart softened even further.

She carried the package off to her room to open it. Perhaps it was a bit of army insignia. She noticed that Stevie also was taking an un-catlike interest in her present. He nosed and scratched at the package.

"Poor Puss," she said. "You smell your master, don't you?"

Inside the paper was a box. Inside the box was another box, and it was done up in

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