

The Number 44: The Cookery Class

by [Paul Martin Freeman](#) (February 2022)



A School for Boys and Girls, Jan Steen, 1670

Now this is a tale of a cookery class;

It happened in Battersea early one March.

The teacher was Jane who though barely thirteen

Already sought fame as a culinary queen.

Our Jane had decided, supported by Mum,

To ask all her friends and their siblings to come.
The children would bring the ingredients required,
And never did chef ever feel more inspired.

Her plan was to get all the children to cook,
And Jane had got ready her recipe book.
They'd bake themselves cakes or a chocolate surprise,
Awarding the finest their very own prize.

And so they appeared on the day she'd appointed,
But straightaway things were becoming disjointed.
For Gail had brought garlic and Cassidy custard,
While little Aurora arrived bearing mustard.

And then there was Hetty whose plate of spaghetti
Was knocked from her hands and sent flying by Betty.
Some flour and eggs had been bought by Simone,
But in her excitement she'd left them at home.

The boys' contributions alas proved no better:
Emile came with eggplant, Felipe with feta.
Osvaldo had opted for offal to offer—

The others reacted by howling in horror!

Besides them was Don who donated some doughnuts,

And Piet who provided a packet of peanuts.

A Filet-0-Fish was the offering of Freddy,

While two-year-old Timothy brought along Teddy.

But luckily Jane had acquired all they needed;

Her class would begin with such trifles unheeded.

Today would the children, whatever took place,

The glorious arts of the kitchen embrace.

She started by calling her students to order,

Expressing her confidence all would support her.

No matter the trials before them that day,

Their pride of accomplishment all would repay.

And so like a general marshalling troops

Our Jane now divided them up into groups.

The boys would compete with the girls she decided,

And hastily parcelled out what she'd provided.

Explaining today, to keep everything easy,
The girls would attempt something chocolate and creamy.
The boys for their part for their culinary plunge
Would challenge the girls with a wonderful sponge.

The little ones seemed not to like being controlled,
Ignoring the things they were helpfully told.
So Jane left Aurora and Timothy there
To play as they wanted without any care.

The others though having received their instructions
Now all set about their delicious productions.
And Jane, proudly clutching her recipe book,
Was savouring her role as a superstar cook.

Yet rarely in life do things go as intended,
And soon into chaos the kitchen descended.
For sadly Jane's efforts that day were to fail,
The telling of which forms the rest of our tale.

She first turned to offer her help to the boys,
But found it impossible due to the noise.

For Freddy was bossing the others around,
A practice with Piet that was proving unsound.

Their baking assignment of interest no more,
The pair were pursuing their points on the floor.
A jumble of arms, writhing bodies and legs,
They'd found their own use for the flour and eggs!

Poor Jane (who'd imagined that *she* was the boss)
Was staring in horror and quite at loss.
This wasn't *at all* in her recipe book
Nor happened to any celebrity cook!

So close to despair she returned to the girls
Where Betty was tugging at Cassidy's curls,
And Gail was gorging herself on the chocolate,
The packaging poking from out of her pocket.

And then she saw Hetty all covered in cream—
By now our poor teacher was ready to scream!
Simone though, alas, was *already* in tears,
Her party dress plastered with all kinds of smears!

But here Jane remembered the cake she'd prepared;
With this might the damage all yet be repaired.
She turned on the oven and went to the larder,
Returning with same and revitalised ardour.

But somehow a sense told her all was not well:
The kitchen was filled with a curious smell.
It came, it appeared, from the oven's direction,
The smoke indicating a likely connection.

The smell was of mustard and various fibres,
Or so was recalled by the various survivors.
For suddenly everything burst into flame,
As for the insurance wrote Mum on the claim.

In all of this Jane could hear Timothy bawling:
The desperate toddler for Teddy was calling.
But Jane was now ringing the Fire Brigade,
The blazing inferno requiring more aid.

The firemen came promptly and put out the fire,

The damage though done to Mum's kitchen was dire.
But luckily none of the children were hurt,
All thanks to the fact that our Jane stayed alert.

She didn't quite finish her cookery class,
And after that day would give cooking a pass.
A different career had she now in her sights,
Preferring the prospect of other delights.

Young Timothy never saw Teddy again,
A fact which in manhood would cause him much pain.
For Teddy had vanished like Will-o'-the-wisp—
All covered in mustard and burnt to a crisp!

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Paul Freeman is an art dealer in London. The poem is from an unpublished work, *The Bus Poems*.

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