IRISH EYES

by . . . Kathleen Norris

SYNOPSIS

Sheila Carscadden, blue-eyed, reddish-haired and 21, loses her job in New York by offering useful but unwelcome suggestions to her boss. Typically feminine, she chooses that time to show her "new" purse—which she bought at a second-hand store, to her cousin, Cecilia Moore. The purse revives memories of a boy she had met the previous summer—a boy whose first name, all she remembered, was Peter. At home that evening, waiting for her, are her mother; Joe, her brother, and Angela, her crippled sister. Joe, too, has lost his job.

CHAPTER II

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"What!" Joe exclaimed. Their mother looked up, with her ready tut-tutting noise.

"It's a terrible winter; there's many worse off than ourselves," Mrs. Carscadden said, vaguely moralizing.

"We're going to be bad enough off," Joe told his mother, darkly, going on with his meal.

"Sheila, they never fired you!" Angela's grieved, sweet little voice said sadly.

"Indeed they did, then. He said I was too fresh."

Mrs. Carscadden was pouring tea in her turn. She looked at her daughter patiently.

"You'd be saucy to the boss," she observed mildly.

"Oh, well, this is only Wednesday, and I'm there till Saturday," Sheila said lazily.

"There's hard times coming to this city that you don't know the meaning of," Joe observed, without looking up.

"But you'll get another job, Joe," Angela said, anxiously.

"Oh, sure I will!" he answered, glancing up with an effort. "But it gripes me," he added resentfully, "to have Sheila here act as if it was all a joke."

"Well, it is," Sheila assured him, good-naturedly.

She was relaxed and lazy, her senses dulled by the food and warmth and leisure into a pleasant sort of torpor.

Joe looked at her, and her blue-and-cream-and-copper beauty blazed back at him like a star. There was a faint stain of color in her cheeks now, her eyes smoldered with smoky sapphire shadows, the film of silky hair was sprayed once more across her forehead.

"Sure, I'll get a job, all right," Joe grumbled, mollified. He was secretly proud of Sheila and even comforted, deep in his heart, by the spirit she showed. But he was tired, angry jobless, young and in love. He thought of Cecilia.

As if she read his thoughts—indeed, she often seemed to do so—Sheila's next words were of Cecilia.

"We came home together, Cecilia and I."

"None of you'll ever know the har'rd times I've known," the mother's voice said, dreamily.

"I'm going down to see her, now."

"Going to tell her, Joe?"

"Ford," Joe said, brooding, "asked me would I take a steward's job on a fruit boat. A swell chance!"

"Oh, heavens, what fun!" Sheila exclaimed, her eyes dancing.

"Forty a month," he muttered.

"But all your expenses, Joe!"

"I turned it down. I'm going to get forty a week, or nothing," he said stubbornly.

"Eight pound a month would be big money, at home," Mrs. Carscadden mused.

"Mrs. Carscadden, me dear'r," said a gentle voice at the door. A neighbor had unceremoniously opened it. "Mrs. Bur'rke—" she announced apologetically.

"Oh, God help the poor soul—and me ating me supper!" the other woman exclaimed, instantly rising. Immediately she was gone, and Joe had disappeared, too, leaping downstairs on his long legs, to see his Cecilia.

Sheila and Angela finished their tea peacefully, cleared the kitchen and then sat on lazily, chatting, laughing.

"Oh, wait until I show you my new purse, Angela!"

Sheila went to get it. She returned to the kitchen and put it into her sister's hands, and Angela turned the dark smooth beauty of the leather back and forth admiringly.

"Guess what I paid for it. Ten cents."

"You didn't!"

"I did. At the rummage sale at St. Leo's. I went in there at noon."

"Ten cents!"

"It has initials on it—they're inside. That's why it was cheap. But what do I care about that? I'll bet it cost a lot, once."

Angela opened the flap, looked at the three initials.

"G. C. K.," she read aloud, and then a number on East Eighty-eighth Street.

"Sheila, what do you suppose it feels like?"

"To be rich?"

"Well. To have everything."

"Here's what I was thinking," Sheila said, and hesitated again. "I was thinking," she pursued, "that—that there must be something—something in some girls that makes them different from the others—that lifts them out—out of it."

"Out of what?" Angela asked intently.

"Well, everything. Poverty, hard work—this," Sheila answered, with a gesture that included the kitchen, and the poor apartment, and the house that contained them. "Lots of the women who are rich today were poor once; they were office girls once," she explained. "What I want to know is, what got them out of it, what changed things?"

"Prayer," Angela answered instantly.

"Oh, prayer! I might have known you'd say prayer!" Sheila exclaimed, disappointed. Tears stood in her laughing eyes. "But I mean something else than prayer," she explained.

"There is nothing else but prayer," Angela stated solemnly.

"You can't tell me that all the rich women whose pictures are in the society sections on Sundays got there by prayer!"

"Oh, no, Sheila, of course not. But what have they got, after all? How much does the honor and glory of God—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Sheila interrupted. And suddenly covering her face with her hands, she was crying.

Angela knew these tears. The stormy, brilliant older sister gave way to them almost as readily as to laughter, if less often. But they always wrung Angela's heart, nevertheless.

Presently Sheila stopped crying as abruptly as she had begun and, straightening up, dried her eyes firmly, sniffed, gulped, and smiled at her sister.

"This girl," she said, touching the blue purse and speaking in a voice made rich and thick from tears, "this girl probably spends three months in the country every year. If she meets a man, all she has to do is ask him to come to dinner. Chicken, ice cream, clean tablecloth—she has 'em every day. If I meet a man I like, what break do I get? I don't even know his last name!"

"You mean Peter?" Angela asked, timidly.

"Peter—what?" Sheila said, blowing her nose again, looking defiantly at her sister, with a reddened nose and wet eyes. "I met him my last night of vacation, at a barbecue. I had to leave next morning. There are seven million people in this city; there are five hundred thousand women working. A swell chance I have of ever finding him again!"

Angela's expression was one of infinite distress. But she spoke courageously.

"God could do it."

"Well, then, why doesn't He?" the other girl demanded. "I walk up a different street every day at noon. I look at every boy I see in the subway. I've never seen him."

"Maybe you do too much," Angela suggested unexpectedly. "Maybe you ought to just—trust."

"And then he'd open the door of the kitchen and put his head in?"

"It mightn't—happen that way."

"How would it happen?"

"In some way we couldn't see coming, Sheila." Angela was very serious. Sheila stared at her: spoke impulsively.

"Well, will you pray about it, Angela, if I stop?"

"I am praying about it!" Angela said, her cheeks red.

"What, now?"

"Right now. And I'm remembering," said Angela, "that without this kitchen door opening—without anyone coming in—it could begin."

There was a pause. "It's one minute to nine," Sheila said, then yawning and smiling and stretching, "and when the clock strikes, I'm going to bed."

The kitchen door did not open; there was no telephone to ring; the radio was still. Yet, before the clock struck, the beginning of the miracle was upon them, and the current of Sheila Carscadden's life had changed forever. Long afterward, she was to look back upon this quiet evening with Angela, look back upon the rebellious, copper-headed girl who had been laughing and crying in the chair opposite Angela, and ask herself, if she could call back that too-potent prayer from her innocent little sister, whether she would do so or no.

The seconds ticked by. Angela was handling the blue morocco purse.

"There was a blue coat for twelve," Sheila said. She yawned again, made a movement toward rising.

"Sheila!" Angela said. "Look!"

In her fingers were green bills; she spread them on the table. Two twenties and a ten.

"Where—what—?" Sheila stammered, stupefied.

"They were in the purse—right here, in this little inside pocket, folded tight."

"They weren't!"

"But they were."

"Heavenly day!" Sheila said, sitting down again.

"Your coat!" Angela exclaimed with an exultant laugh.

"Oh, and everything—Oh, Angela, what luck! Angela, fifty dollars—for ten cents!"

They were still rejoicing and marveling, still spreading and inspecting and handling the money, five minutes later, when their mother came back.

Mrs. Carscadden looked tired, as indeed she well might; she was pale, her hair and gown disordered, her face wet with sweat. But her eyes shone with the mystic light of the priestess who has been officiating at the oldest of earth's mysteries.

"Well, the Bur-rkes've got their boy!" she observed, sitting down heavily, and wiping her forehead. "Now maybe they'll make a little fuss over their ger'rls. Light the kettle there, Sheila—I've been weak for a cup of tay this hour gone."

The girls spread their treasure before her amazed eyes; her look tightened.

"It's well you have their street number there, that you can take it back to them and not l'ave anny of the rummage sale ger'rls forget to retur'rn it," she observed instantly.

"Mamma, it's hers!"

Mrs. Carscadden's brow clouded.

"You'll take it back, of course, Sheila," she said.

"Listen, Mamma—"

Ponderously, Mrs. Carscadden returned from the stove with the new boiling kettle, poured the hot water upon the cool tea leaves in the empty pot.

"Save your breath, Sheila," she directed. "We'll have no stealin' here, thanks be to the glory of God!"

She stirred her tea, took a heartening sip, and pushed the hair from her wet forehead with a great clumsy hand that was like a caricature of Sheila's fine, square, young one.

"If there's annything cud make widowhood light to ye, it'd be seein' a ger'rl in that fix!" she muttered.

Immediately she perceived that there was small sympathy in the

"Prayer," Angela answered instantly.

air, and reverted to the moment's problem again.

"What's that street number there, Angela?"

Angela reluctantly consulted the purse, read out the number.

"Is that annywheres near where you work, Sheila?"

"No, ma'am," Sheila answered respectfully, but with bitterness in her tone. "It's way up on the East Side."

"But you cud get up there tomorrow, dear?"

"Sheila was silent for a full minute, during which she looked down at her own fingers, twisting the purse.

"Listen, Mamma, I bought this!" she burst out presently.

"Now, that's no way to talk, Sheila," her mother murmured, unruffled.

"But Mamma, I bought it. If a girl is such a fool that she gives away a purse with money in it, doesn't she give away the money as well as the purse? Doesn't she, Ma?"

"Doesn't she?" Angela echoed eagerly.

"That's the devil timptin' ye," Mrs. Carscadden said, inflexibly, but gently, as to a persistent child. "That's no way to talk."

"It's a perfectly sensible way to talk," Sheila muttered, under her breath.

"No, dear, it's her money. It's not yours."

"Mamma, how many people do you suppose would take it back?"

This kind of sophistry got nowhere with Mrs. Carscadden. She had never read a book of philosophy or theology, but she was sure of her ground here.

"That has nothing to do with it, lovey."

"Mamma, listen. They're probably rich people—this came from Tiffany's. She's forgotten it a hundred times."

Silence. Sheila opened, shut, snapped, reopened the bag, before adding:

"If Joe says it's all right, can I keep it? Listen, Mamma, I'll not waste it, honest I won't. There was a coat at the rummage today that would save money.—I'd wear it two years, I'd wear it three years—"

The mother did not speak. She looked up from her tea, looked down again.

"No wonder we're poor!" Sheila said angrily, "if we can throw money away like this!"

"Mother," Angela said earnestly, her hands clasped imploringly, her flower-like face pale with emotion. "Mightn't God intend Sheila to have it?"

"No, dear. He'd never intind anyone should have stolen goods."

"Stolen!" Sheila said hotly, and was still.

Joe came in; they consulted Joe. And Joe said of course the fifty had to go back. Sheila sat on the arm of his chair, and wept, but she knew there was no gainsaying Joe's decision. They were all "said" by Joe; even Neely and Marg'ret, married and gone, still came back sometimes to ask advice of wise, gentle, clever Joe.

"Because, look here, Sheila," Joe reasoned, "suppose it had been a diamond ring?"

"Well, it isn't, Joe."

"No, I know it isn't. But suppose it had been a diamond ring in that same little pocket, what then?"

"I'd think lucky her that had a diamond to lose!" Sheila persisted stubbornly. But she was beaten, and she knew it. "It makes me cry, thinking of my blue coat!" she said.

"Let me buy your coat for you."

"You, Joe!" She kissed the rough hard young face. "You that have lost your job, and want to marry Cecilia!" she mourned, rubbing her cheek against his.

"Celie's been crying, too," he said, in his good-humored patient way. "It's your turn, Ma."

"There was weeks I fed the lot of ye on syrup and oatmale," Mrs. Carscadden observed, unalarmed "I guess the bad times won't come to that."

"Why, no, because we have each other!" Angela exclaimed, in her soft, ecstatic voice.

On the morning after the eventful day of the lost jobs and the discovered money, they all breakfasted together, and once again Sheila returned to the attack.

"Listen, Ma, supposing I go to this Eighty-eighth Street place, say, Saturday afternoon. It'll be my last morning at the office, and I'll be free after one. And supposing that some butler or somebody won't let me in to see this "G. C. K.," whoever she is, and suppose they're nasty to me. Then am I to hand it over to somebody who'll pocket it themselves?"

"It'd be no sin on your soul if they did," Mrs. Carscadden answered readily.

"I'll tell you what!" Sheila suddenly exclaimed. "I'll get myself up—well, you wait!"

Her eyes were dancing.

"I'll fix 'em I'll bet I get my blue coat!" she said.

"Sheila, how?" Angela demanded, eagerly. But Sheila would only laugh, and made no answer.

That evening, immediately after dinner, when Joe and Angela and Mrs. Carscadden were lingering over the remains of the meal, Sheila suddenly appeared in the bedroom door. Or rather, someone appeared who must be Sheila, but who was not instantly identified even by her mother, brother and sister.

She had strained her hair back from her always rather pale face, which was devoid of powder or lip red, and looked young and pathetic. She wore an old black dress of Angela's that was scanty and tight on her more generous figure.

"Me mamma and papa is dead, and I wor'rks for a lady that bates me," she said, in the soft, pathetic accents of County Mayo. "I found the little purse, and sure I t'ought at fir'rst I cud pay me doctor's bills wit' it. But thin I rimimbered that there'd be no blessin' whatsoiver on that—"

The appreciative laughter of Joe and Angela interrupted the pitiful story. Even Mrs. Carscadden laughed. But immediately her face sobered into a sort of scandalized pride in this prodigy who was her child, her rebellious daughter.

CHAPTER III

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"You're not goin' there like that?"

"I am, too!"

"They'll give you another fifty, you big liar," Joe grinned.

"No, but honestly, do you see how they can help handing it all back to me?" Sheila asked complacently. "Oh, Mrs. Carscadden, dear'r," she parodied, sitting down at the table, and fixing her mother with tragic young eyes, "it's a har'rd winter on the poor'r—it is, indade. Me man has been home it's t'ree weeks now, wit' his fut swelled up the size of a gourd, and me bad luck is that another little one is comin'—"

"I'll take you over my knee, and learn you a little more, since you know all that," Mrs. Carscadden said with outraged dignity. But her mouth twitched.

And as her only further comment after a general inspection of Sheila's costume was a reluctantly admiring "You're a holy terror, and I wouldn't wonder did the police take you up!" Sheila was free to escape, with one more burst of laughter, into the winter streets, to follow up the invitation to adventure.

She descended through the house quietly enough—the few returning workers who were coming in, tired and grimy, at half past six, were not interested in the girl who slipped by them so unobtrusively—and once in the street she aroused no interest at all.

She took a downtown train, and came to the surface again only a few blocks east of her destination. The neighborhood into which she ascended was rather like her own home environment in the Bronx, but as she walked westward the street improved, with that abruptness characteristic of the biggest city, and the brownstone house before which she finally stopped was not only handsome in an old-fashioned way, but decorously set in a line of similar homes, and close to the white winter park.

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There Was a Way, And Lass Knew It!

TWO people were walking along a road together. One was a young woman, the other a handsome farm lad. The farm lad was carrying a large pail on his back, holding a chicken in one hand, a cane in the other, and leading a goat. They came to a dark lane.

Said the girl: "I'm afraid to walk here with you. You might try to kiss me."

Said the farm lad: "You need not be afraid. How could I kiss you with all this I'm carrying?"

"Well, you might stick the cane in the ground, tie the goat to it, and put the chicken under the pail," was the ready reply.