

The Strange Voice

By Dora Sigerson Shorter

Eileen sat very silent amongst the group that gathered around the turf fire in the low thatched cottage.

“What has come to your light heart?” one said to her. “You are that quiet, I keep forgetting Eileen Murphy is with us at all.”

But the head of the old grandmother nodded slowly, and it was she who answered for Eileen.

“I’m afeard,” she said, “the boy is gone. It is seven days since he walked from that door, and not a word or sight of him since. I’m afeard the boy is gone.”

Eileen drew her bare feet from the fire, as though a spark had fallen upon them. She shrank further into the shadow.

“I met him that night outside your door,” the neighbour said, knocking the ashes from his pipe upon the stone hearth. “He borrowed a match from me, to light his pipe. He told me he was to be married as soon as the banns were called. He seemed very light-hearted.” The man glanced pitifully at the girl’s figure hiding in the shadow. “I never seen or heard of him since.

“He said he had business to do when he left us, and that a lamb of his had strayed, that he must look for before morning; but it was not dark, and the lamb was there next day, but he had gone.”

The girl’s little sister drew her chair to the fire, looking fearfully behind her. “Maybe he walked on the sleeping grass,” she whispered, thinking of the fairies, but nobody heeded her.

“Maybe he ran from the wedding,” a bold young voice giggled from near the door. “Maybe he’s off to Dublin, and some of the grand ladies have caught hold of him.”

“Shame upon you! Kathleen O’ Grady.” The girl’s mother spied into the darkness where her daughter sat so quiet. “Well you know he was after Eileen since they were children together.”

“And he is going to give her the jackdaw you wanted, Kathleen,” the girl’s sister said, with childish triumph. “He said he was teaching it to speak.”

“I remember them well,” the old grandmother said, “the two children; and with him it was, ‘Follow me, Eileen,’ and she was after him wherever he went.”

A faint giggle from Kathleen and a whispered “She was” drew the stern eye of the neighbour upon her face. She flushed, and said “I mean no harm; sure the boy is all right.”

“ ‘Follow me, Eileen,’ ” the old woman muttered. “I seem to hear his voice; only a few weeks ago he came to the door and cried to her, then ran like a child, jumping the heather before her.”

“It was his way of getting her to himself,” the mother said. “God be with him, wherever he is!”

The girl threw her chest out with a long breath, but stifled the sob before it was heard.

“He was for selling every stick and beast about his place,” Kathleen said in a hard voice. She once fancied that he cared for her, and the mistake still stabbed her. “Yesterday the bargain was to have come off. Did he tell ye?”

“That’s true,” the neighbour said, filling his pipe and crushing the tobacco in with his finger. “Mike Doherty told me he paid him good money that evening. He was going to take his bride to America, and he was right; there is more chance there for a man than here.”

“It’s to Dublin he’s gone,” Kathleen muttered, “and forgotten ye all; he was always a rag on every bush.”

The girl in the shadow clenched her hands, but did not speak.

“He promised to send for me,” the old grandmother muttered, “in a year; but I’ll be buried by that, glory be to God!”

“I’m told America’s a great place for the poor,” the mother said, looking round the dim cabin it would have broken her heart to leave; “a great place entirely.”

“And Eileen will be a grand lady there,” the grandmother continued, breaking into a cackle of laughter. “For it’s over the sea with O’Rouark she is going. ‘Follow me, Eileen, he said.’”

Kathleen sprang to her feet.

“My God!” she cried; “did you hear that?”

There was a sudden rustling in the cabin of startled people settling into silence, then the quiet of listening. Outside the door a voice was heard, loud and distinct,—

“Follow me, Eileen.”

Then came a burst of joyous clatter in the room.

“Open the door for him!”

“He’s right welcome!”

Eileen stood up in her corner, the hot blood rushing back to her heart, suffocating her.

Kathleen opened the door with a sullen face; she would not be glad to see him. She opened the door wide, and all faces were turned to the darkness outside; but no one entered.

There was a moment’s silence, and then from a distance the voice again,—

“Follow me, Eileen.”

Kathleen sprang towards the group at the fire, hiding her face amongst them.

“Lord have mercy upon us! It’s his ghost I’m after seeing.”

The little child began to scream, and the women made the sign of the cross upon themselves.

“Holy Mother, protect us!” they said; but the neighbour shook the ashes from his pipe and stood up.

“You’re a fool, Kathleen O’Grady!” he said, and he went outside.

Eileen laid her hands upon her heart. “He wants me,” she whispered, “but I cannot stir; I am too glad—too glad!”

The neighbour re-entered; he closed the door behind him, and, as though unintentionally, slipped the bar across it.

“There’s nothing there, sure enough,” he said, and pulled his chair closer to the fire.

Again came the cry, “Follow me, Eileen,” and the bar fell with a clatter from the door.

The women rose with a shriek, which ended in a hysterical laugh.

“It’s only Eileen,” Kathleen said; “she slipped out.”

“Holy Mother and the saints, preserve her!” the mother said. She put a lighted candle in the window. “She will see it when she is tired of her foolishness.”

They sat down in silence and waited.

But Eileen ran out into the night, listening for the voice she loved, for in the dark she heard it again,—

“Follow me, Eileen.”

“I am coming,” she answered; “wait for me: I cannot see you.” She ran fast along the rough mountain road, till her breath failed her.

“Oh! wait for me!” she gasped; “it is so dark.”

“Follow me, Eileen.” The voice was close beside her—amongst the few fir trees that clustered together beside a murmuring brook.

She sprang from the road with a laugh, and bounded amongst the deep fern and pricking gorse. The briars caught her dress and tore it, they clung about her ankles, leaving red marks of their

caresses. She stretched her arms wide, to hold the beloved. "Follow me, Eileen." The voice was far away. She struggled back to the road, sobbing and crying, "Ah, you are cruel; I will follow you no more."

"Follow me, Eileen." The voice had a plaintive note now. She stretched her hands towards it, but did not answer. She crouched by the wayside, and hid her face. Surely he was playing with her, to treat her so; and yet—she raised her head to listen.

"Follow me, Eileen." The voice grew fainter, further off. She sprang to her feet and ran, afraid to lose the sound. Once again she thought she had come upon him. The Voice seemed only a few feet away from her. She opened her arms with a glad cry:—

"Ah! I have found you at last."

Then a crushing blow upon the forehead knocked her to the earth. She had run against a tree in the darkness. She drew herself up beneath it and moaned. Far away she could hear the voice again, "Follow me, Eileen."

A great terror came to her; she shivered, and hid her bruised face in her hands. He was dead—oh, yes! dead; it was his ghost who was calling to her, and flying before her like a false marsh-light. She shuddered with the fear of death upon her. He was near, she felt him; in a moment he would put his cold, dead hands upon her. She shrieked, "Don't touch me!" and heard his voice far away calling to her pitifully,—

"Follow me, Eileen."

She sprang up, all her love awake for him.

"Living or dead, I will follow you." She cast her fear from her.

"Where are you, Alanna?"

All around her came the singing of grasshoppers amongst the rough grass and heather. The sound seemed to her like the turning of fairy spinning wheels. She imagined the tiny figures sitting there among the ferns spinning. Whiz! whiz! whiz! What were they spinning? Over her face came spiders' webs, blown by the wind,—fine silk, floating from place to place in the breeze—lying on her nervous, bruised forehead like ropes. She brushed them aside.

"You will not bind me," she said; "spin as you may, I will follow him for ever."

She started running again; and ran gasping and stumbling after the strange voice for hours. Her dress was torn half away, her hands and feet red with her rough travelling, her brain was hot and mad with weariness and despair, her breath came in harsh sobs through the quiet of the night.

Now she would say, "I hate you; you are cruel." And again, "I love you; wait for me; I love you."

Suddenly again, close beside her, came the "Follow me, Eileen."

"I follow you till death." She staggered off the little foot-track across the bog. In a moment she felt herself caught; something cool, and soft, and strong was dragging her down.

"Is it you, Alanna?" she gasped but got no answer, and was too tired to wonder. She was benumbed and foolish with weariness, yet surely she was in his arms.

"You are so cold," she muttered, yet thought it should be so, seeing he was dead. "I do not care if you are living or dead, now I have found you." She felt the cold chill of his soft clasp move upward, now to her waist, now to her shoulders. She struggled a moment, then was quiet—she sank lower. "I am in the bog," she shrieked. Then again, "I am so tired; kiss me, Alanna!" And for a moment the kiss was bitter on her lips, then the bog closed above her soft hair, and she slept.

But still in the little village they tell the story of Eileen and her lover, and bar the door and draw near the fire in the telling; for though one old man always believed it was the jackdaw's voice that frightened them that night, calling as its lost master had taught it, he was always a foolish old man, and he is dead now, and his story forgotten. The others, and especially the young folk, will tell you it was the ghost of Eileen's lover who called her forth, and Kathleen O'Grady saw him with her two eyes standing before the door beckoning and calling.