

"EIBHLIN"

*by Troy Lynn Pritt*

In the churchyard of St. Bridget's Catholic Church in Hannibal, Missouri there stands a beautiful pink headstone. The marker is alone because the other graves in this section are unmarked. Here are buried the poor "shanty Irish" who died during the 1920's and 1930's.

There are adults and children planted here. In this holy ground lie the little bodily remains of over a hundred stillborn babies, infants, and toddlers who died of the cold, starvation, or illnesses. The labor troubles in the early 1920's, Depression, and drought in the 1930's had come in successive waves of poverty and misery. Mothers could not nurse their babies. They were so malnourished their bodies could not produce milk. Hundreds who left Ireland for the opportunities in America slept on the bare ground in drafty tin shacks. For them, the pain of winter's cold was barely relieved by rattling, buzzing tin walls and roofs.

In other parts of town there were houses with thick walls and fireplaces in every room. In more modest homes there were Burnside stoves and gas heaters. Among the wives and daughters of the wealthy, the current fad was to bathe in tubs filled with milk. They believed these milk baths would give them a "creamy complexion."

This beautiful pink headstone stands among the graves of the poorest. It is a lovely pink stone engraved with angels in flight. The inscription is sparse; the name "Eibhlin", and the date of death, "April 4, 1924", no surname, no date of birth.

When the sons of the wealthy came home for Spring Break, from universities in the East and in Chicago, it was traditional to have a progressive party which they had named The Pilgrimage.

At the home of each young man there was entertainment. A table was spread with food and libation. Prohibition had been in effect for four years. It was the opinion of the young men and their parents that the Volstead Act was intended to keep the unwashed and ignorant people from spending their time and money in taverns and then getting into fights afterward. People of their own class could enjoy a few drinks and still exercise self-control.

Sean Caldwell's father, an Ulster man, owned a large fleet of trucks. He bragged that he could beat any of his employees in fisticuffs and that they all knew it. Sean had arranged for a trumpet player from Memphis to entertain them with music in the style of Louis Armstrong. The "bowls" of finger foods on the table were large toy trucks.

Eduardo Perez was the son of a Cuban who owned the local cigar factory. He was proud that he had been able to teach Irish girls to roll cigars just like Cuban girls rolled them in Havana. Eduardo had brought a jazz band from New Orleans which played in the new style called Creole Jazz. The finest cigars from his father's factory were laid out there for his pals.

Donnie Armstrong's father owned a dozen packet boats plying the Mississippi River. Donnie had engaged the chorus line from one of the smaller theaters in St. Louis. The surprise came at the end of their show when the whole chorus line faced a dancer dressed like a flapper. She proceeded to "shimmy", a new dance in which the dancer's feet stood still as she danced with only her body motions. When she finished the young men spontaneously began to sing, "I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate."

Ronald Sampson was the son of "Ripsaw" Sampson who owned the sawmill and lumber company west of town. Their home was on top of a hill and was large enough to qualify as a mansion. The young men were entertained at Ronald's house by a man who sang the popular songs of the day and accompanied himself at the piano. He sang in the high pitched voice that

was the fashion for male singers. The refreshments were laid out on a table between two high, wide windows framed by ornate drapes, gold ropes, and valances. There were no servants present. Mr. Sampson recognized that a house so large needed help to maintain it, but he said, "Healthy people don't need to be waited on. If you can't pour your own drinks, dipper your own soup, and tear off a hunk of bread to sop it up with, you belong in the hospital, not at a party."

The last stop on this year's Pilgrimage was at the home of Eugene Crawford. Ian Crawford, another Ulster man, was Hannibal's mayor. Ian Crawford was giving a speech that night in St. Louis, so neither he nor his wife were home.

The young men were getting tired. It was beginning to snow. Without saying anything among themselves, the unanimous intent was to stay at Eugene's just long enough to be polite, and then leave.

Eugene knew that his parents would be gone, and he wanted to have some entertainment that would "knock 'em dead", or breathless at least. He had hired two prostitutes from a local brothel to perform a "strip tease" to the "altogether." He had not told his parents of his risqué plan. However, there is not much that escapes the attention of a good mayor and his chief of police. The owner of the brothel was threatened with dire consequences if any prostitute showed up at the mayor's house.

Eugene did not know about his father's intervention. When he arrived at his house, Eugene learned that the whores had not arrived. Time passed, and they still did not arrive. The guests were sated with merrymaking and being amused. They were eager to grasp onto any excuse to call it an evening.

An angry Eugene called for Eibhlin, a 15-year old servant girl. When she appeared, he told her that his entertainment, two striptease dancers, had not arrived. He demanded that she do a striptease for his guests.

"Oh, no sir! I could never, would never do such a wicked thing."

"You can, and you will, or I will do it for you." Turning to his friends he said, "Gentlemen, our little Irish wench is going to display her wretched body for our amusement and pleasure."

Holding her arm tightly, he slowly and methodically tore off every bit of her clothing. She screamed and struggled, but he continued even with her undergarments. His friends grew embarrassed and one by one they left the house. With each guest's departure, his fury mounted. Soon none of his friends remained. Cursing the terrified colleen, he used her own clothes as a whip and drove her out into the snow and bitter cold. Closing and locking the door, he sat down in front of the fire and drank a warming toddy of brandy.

Eibhlin stumbled through the snow, falling down more than once in the black night and whirling snow. She made her way around to the rear of the house, where she banged on the door of the servants' entrance. The cook threw a blanket around her, and helped her to her cot. The next morning she had a high fever, and her feet had severe frostbite. She cried in pain and delirium. Her cries were in Gaelic. Only the cook knew that she was crying for her mother, and calling to the Virgin Mary. A physician was called to the house, and he left medicine for her.

Eugene told his parents that she must have been sneaking drinks from the hospitality table. All at once, she had started acting crazy, ran outside, and tore off all her clothes. Knowing what his plans for entertainment had been, his father guessed the truth, which was soon confirmed by the parents of his friends.

In a few days, Eibhlin died. Mrs. Crawford had hired her through an agency in New York. They didn't keep records and didn't even know her last name. Both parents were ashamed of their son's actions. It was a blot on their name in the community. They arranged for a funeral mass at St. Bridget's, and bought a beautiful pink headstone to mark her grave. It was all they knew to do.