

MY WILD IRISH Mother

By Mary Higgins Clark

In 1967, when she was 80, I tossed a birthday party for Mother. There were over 70 people present; my generation and hers; friends and cousins; our children; cronies from way-back years. The party started at three in the afternoon because I was sure that Mother and the other old girls would get tired early. I should have known better. Twelve hours later, my contemporaries and I sat limply in the den while Mother and her peers stood around the piano lustily singing "Sweet Molly Malone."

That night I marveled at Mother. Wearing her best beige lace dress, her silver hair framing her almost unlined face and bright blue eyes, she was obviously having the time of her life. Before that party finally ended, she had cast her cane aside, locked arms with the remaining "Bungalow Girls"—Rockaway Beach circa 1912—and led a spirited rendition of an Irish polka.

My mother, Nora, the first generation of her family to be American born, was the second child of Bridget Kennedy Durkin and Thomas Durkin, a pair of youngsters newly arrived from County Sligo. All her life she was to personify the best of her Irish heritage—a generous heart, faith in her God, unswerving allegiance to the Democratic party, resiliency in trouble and always, always, an unquenchable sense of humor.

By the time she was 13, seven more children had arrived to fill the parlor-floor-and-basement apartment on East 79th Street and she went off to work. Her first job at McCreery's department store paid three dollars for a 48-hour week. She walked the two miles back and forth each day to save the nickel carfare and at nights went to high school and later to Hunter College. She worked her way up from messenger girl at McCreery's to buyer at Altman's.

She was determined that when she married she would be able to give her

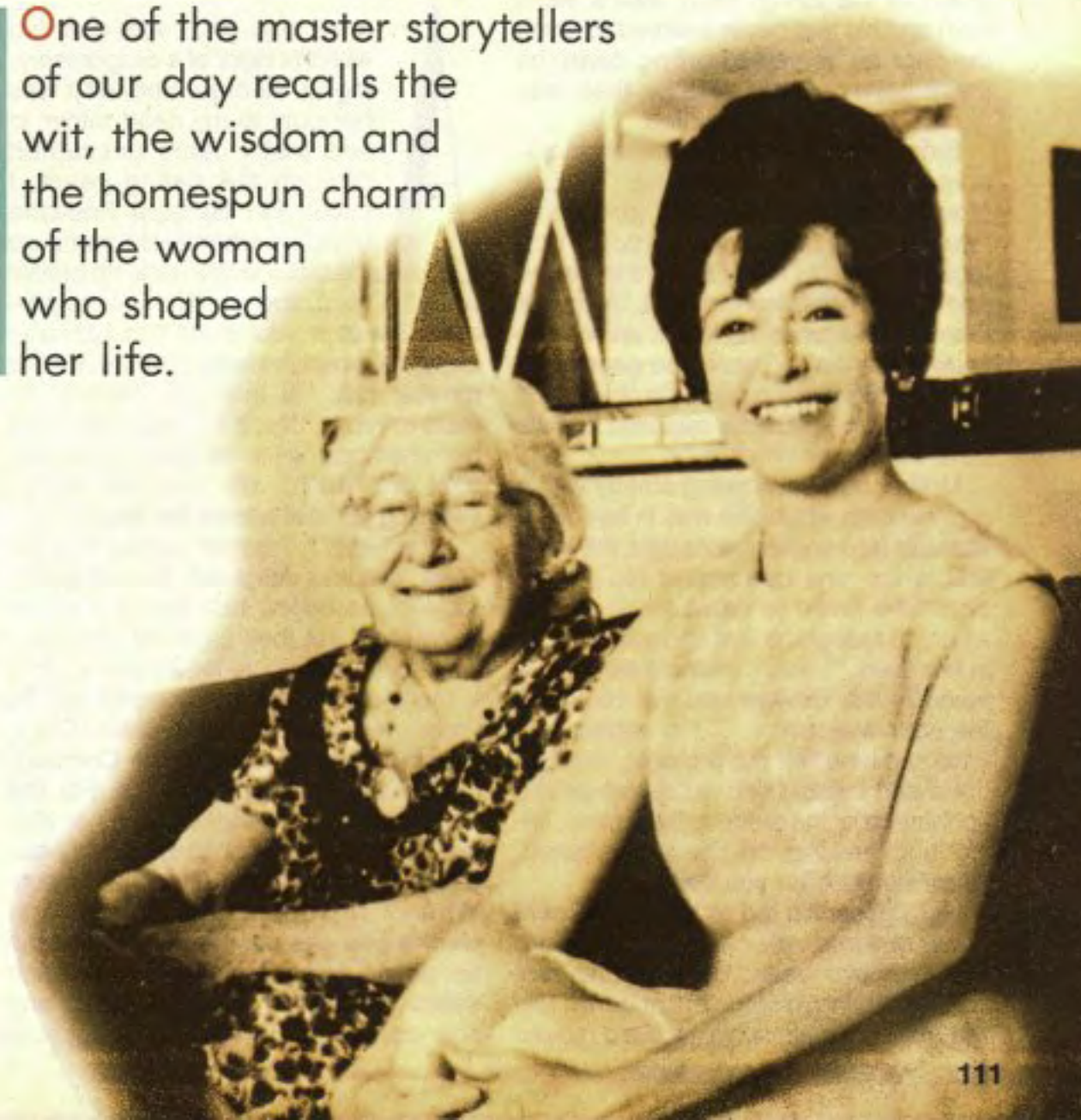
children everything and would have enough money saved for lifelong security. Hers was a typical Irish courtship. She and my father "kept company" for seven years and were nearly 40 when they exchanged vows.

She promptly produced three children. The firstborn was Joseph. I, Mary, was next. When my younger brother arrived a few years later the doctor came into her room, looked at the baby nestled in her arms and the rosary entwined in her fingers and sighed, "I assume this

one is Jesus."

All her life, Mother had dreamed of owning a home of her own, and she and my father bought one a few years after they were married. To Mother, Buckingham Palace, the Taj Mahal and Shangri-la were all wrapped up in that six-room, brick, semidetached dwelling in the Bronx. But then the depression years set in. My father's once-flourishing Irish pub began to lose money. Their stocks were lost; their savings dwindled to nothing. My (continued on page 112)

One of the master storytellers of our day recalls the wit, the wisdom and the homespun charm of the woman who shaped her life.



father let one of the bartenders go and began working 20-hour days. One morning he didn't wake up, and at age 51 Mother was left with the three of us and a mortgaged house.

It was impossible to get a job. So she put her "thinking cap" on and came up with a solution. A sign, "Furnished Rooms, Kitchen Privileges," was tacked over the doorbell. The neighbors demurred. They didn't mind "Furnished Rooms," but "Kitchen Privileges" stuck in their craw. Always agreeable, Mother snipped off the bottom half, thanking the Lord she hadn't wasted money on a metal sign.

And then began the parade of people who were to be woven into the fabric of our lives for the next five years.

There was Miss Mills, the schoolteacher who tried valiantly to teach me the piano. I never got past "Drifting."

There were Mr. and Mrs. Fields, who took the big, front bedroom for five dollars a week with the garage thrown in. They asked Mother if they could bring their dog, Buck. No dog lover, Mother asked doubtfully how big he was. Mrs. Fields made a little cupping move with her hands, suitable to describe a toy poodle, and reluctantly Mother agreed.

Buck was a wild-eyed boxer. He had the instincts of an attack dog, and we huddled behind closed doors in the dining room when Eddy Fields brought him down for his airing. Eddy was a slight man and his feet never seemed to touch the floor as he came hurtling down the stairs behind Buck, who by then was frenzied to relieve himself.

Before any new tenant came in, Mother gave what we called her "palace guard" speech. "Yes," she would say, "we're blessed with excellent police protection. There's Officer Potters to the left and Officer Ahlis on the right. Sergeant Garrigan is across the street and directly opposite him—" here she paused so the full weight of her *pièce de résistance* could sink in—"directly opposite him we have *Inspector Whelan*."

Mother had been going steady with a moving man when she was in her twenties and had somehow caught the virus that is the *sine qua non* of his profession. She *loved* to move furniture. We all got to recognize that speculative look in her eyes. "I was thinking if we put the piano at the window and the couch on the stair wall and . . ." No matter how loud and heartfelt our protests, Joe and John and I would find ourselves on the lighter end of the piece to be moved, lifting and hauling as she admonished, "Now don't strain yourself."

Her peccadillo led to the entrapment of her one and only paying-guest failure who was two weeks behind in his rent and was trying to tiptoe out at dawn. Unfortunately for his scheme, we'd moved

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the furniture the night before and he tripped over a lamp that had been freshly placed at the bottom of the staircase. Mother rushed out to find him sprawled on the floor, his feet entangled in the lamp cord.

She sighed. "If you didn't have the money to pay, all you had to do was to tell me," she said. "God knows I can understand that." When he left, he had two dollars pressed in his hand. He'd claimed he'd been promised a job in New Jersey. It would be nice to say that our departing roomer never forgot the kindness and returned the gift a thousandfold, but unfortunately that was not the case. He was a deadbeat.

In spite of all our concerted efforts, Mother couldn't keep up the mortgage payments and lost the house. Our next stop was a three-room apartment and into it she moved the full contents of the six rooms, sure that someday our fortunes would change and we'd get the house back. We never did, and whenever she returned from visiting the old neighborhood, her eyes would shine with unshed tears as she remarked how beautifully her roses had grown.

As the only girl, I was guarded with the vigor of a dragon-slaying St. George. She felt it was her duty to my dead father to see that I came unscathed through the dating years. I called her Barbara Frietchie because whenever I came up the block with a date, no matter what the hour, she would be at the window. Shoot if you must this old gray head, I'd groan inwardly and wait for the familiar call, "Is that you, Mary?" I'd want to reply, "No, it's Gunga Din." But her methods were effective. No date ever got "fresh" with that alert sentry dangling 20 feet above his head.

When at 21 I began dating Warren Clark, she was delighted. So very good-looking, so bright, half the girls in the parish had set their caps for him. How had he stayed single for 29 years? And a more respected family could not be found. His mother, Alma Claire Clark, was the national head of the Companions of the Forest of America. For the first time Mother withdrew from her window perch and went to bed early because I was safe with Mrs. Clark's son. When I remarked that dating Mrs. Clark's son was not precisely the same as dating Mrs. Clark, the insinuation sailed completely over her head and she continued to slumber blissfully

away, while in between kissing him goodnight, I would hiss, "Warren, you know better than that!"

My mother's occupation and hobby, vocation and avocation was Motherhood. A Jewish mother looks into the cradle and sees a possible Messiah. It's equally true that an Irish mother gazes at her firstborn son and sees the Christ-child. Joseph was a premature baby weighing only four pounds when he was born. She fed him with an eyedropper that first year and never left him for an instant. I found a diary she kept and in it she wrote, "I was so afraid he'd slip away. He was such a beautiful baby. The other two had allergies."

Growing up, Joseph justified her pride in him. He won the General Excellence medal all eight years of grammar school. He won a scholarship to Fordham Prep. He was the captain of every team, the lead in every school play. He had the newspaper route, and every penny he earned he brought home to her, turning his pockets inside out to make sure he didn't forget a dime. Then they shared their own special treat, a half-pint of ice cream.

At 13, Joe contracted osteomyelitis. Mother was told that an operation to remove the hipbone was necessary to save his life. Widowed only a few months, she made the stunning decision not to operate. She wouldn't make a cripple of Joseph and she knew God wouldn't take him from her. It was Christmas. He was on the critical list and the doctors held no hope for his recovery. Mother and John and I carried all his presents to the hospital. His main gift was a hockey stick. "You'll use it next year," she promised him. He did.

Joe graduated from high school in 1944. Mother could have claimed him as her sole support and kept him out of service. Instead she let him enlist in the navy with his friends. Six months later she took the only long trip of her life, a plane ride to California to be at Joe's deathbed in the Long Beach Naval Hospital. To the people who fumbled for words of sympathy she said, "It is God's will. I couldn't let Joseph go when he was sick the other time, but now God wants him even more than I do."

That June when I graduated from Villa Maria Academy, Mother threw a party for me that held no hint of sadness. It was my day and nothing was going to spoil it. Johnny graduated from grammar school a few weeks later and he too had all the aunts and uncles and cousins and friends there to celebrate. She bought a black and white print dress to wear to both occasions. She felt her black mourning dress was out of place.

Her pride in all of us was enormous. We were never simply doing well in school. We were "taking all the honors." I

